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Contested Knowledge

Political Dimensions of European Ethnology and Folklore Studies in Post-War Europe

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Introduction

Political Dimensions of Ethnological Knowledge in Post-War Europe*

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Ethnological knowledge has always played an important role in the shaping of the political history of Europe. In fact, ethnological knowledge and political thought have been entangled with each other since the earliest days of ethnological research. Folklorists and ethnologists alike have contributed to the production of such ethnological knowledge, stabilizing it through, for instance, field research and archival investigations, and subsequently embedding it within broader social contexts. However, its previously rather inconspicuous and taken-for-granted political dimensions became particularly noticeable as the subject of critical discussions in the years following the Second World War.

The war had brutally shaken the world and left much of Europe in ruins. Previous certainties were placed in doubt. Its immediate aftermath was characterised by a sense of disorientation, but it was also a new beginning. Amid all of this upheaval, the ways in which the ethnological disciplines saw themselves began to change profoundly. Not only did the ethnological disciplines—despite their at times divergent disciplinary genealogies—begin to engage in closer cooperation between folklore studies and ethnology; they also overcame divisions concerning methodological approaches and epistemological orientations.

Ethnological knowledge in its broadest sense continued to play a crucial but ever more complex and contradictory role in the search for new orientations in a post-war Europe overshadowed by the emerging Cold War. It continued to wield influence in the realm of science but also provided political and cultural reassurances while dealing with the lasting impact of the war.

Produced by ethnologists and folklorists working on culture as an academic practice while also actively constituting it, ethnological knowledge proved to be ambiguous and polyvalent in its application. On the one hand, it was utilised to bolster assertions of ethnic uniformity and cultural superiority or to legitimise nation states and political

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systems (see Anttonen 2005). On the other hand, it has always carried the explosive power to destabilise such notions of cultural homogeneity, due to its closeness to the nuanced life realities of diverse milieus; producing knowledge as messy as everyday life itself that does not lend itself easily to one-dimensional political instrumentalisation.

The ethnological disciplines in Europe underwent a transformation process after the war that was somewhat uneven. Its course depended on differing local circumstances and national histories as well as on international connections to researchers in other countries (see, e.g., Kuhn and Puchberger 2021). It also mattered on which side of the Iron Curtain an ethnology or folklore studies department found itself after the war. However, in spite of these variables, there is a shared difficult intellectual history in all of the ethnological disciplines; always present, smouldering under the surface, it can be ignored only with difficulty. In some national contexts, addressing the difficult aspects of their disciplinary history succeeded better. In others, the rehabilitation process was more precarious. A complex and sometimes difficult process of change within ethnological and folklore scientific organisations, along with fundamental shifts of epistemological perspectives and methodological innovations, was necessary to position the ethnological disciplines where they are today.

Some did frame this complex, non-simultaneous, and fundamentally open-ended process as a 'disciplinary reform', which began sometime around the early 1960s. A lot has been written about this move in European ethnology towards contemporary social sciences, the concomitant methodological advancements, and the simultaneous politicisation of the subject's topographies of relevance (see, e.g., Bausinger 1986; Bendix & Hasan-Rokem 2012; Bula & Laime 2017; Eggmann, Johler, Kuhn and Puchberger 2019). However, a closer look at the different national developments in Europe reveals more nuanced narratives. This wealth in nuances is particularly true for the close yet consistently conflict-ridden relationships between ethnological knowledge, politics, and propaganda in post-Socialist states in Central and Eastern Europe (see, e.g., Ķencis 2023; Hann, Sárkány and Skalník 2005; Mihăilescu, Iliev and Naumović 2008; Ķencis, Bronner and Seljamaa 2023).

The post-war years in Europe as a context for ethnological research were in many ways unprecedented. In Germany, the discipline of *Volkskunde*, previously an important provider of impulses particular to ethnologists in the Nordic countries, was compromised because of its collaboration with the racial ideology and (self-) integration into scientific organisations of the National Socialist regime. Previously existing transnational ties between ethnologists in different European countries had been severed and had to be re-established. On a larger societal level, new political divisions and tensions flared up, in particular between the East and the West. The Cold War loomed on the horizon. In addition, the years immediately after the Second World War were characterised by scarcity, masses of displaced persons, severe political persecutions, and deportations in the countries occupied by the Soviet Union. All of this created a highly volatile situation, making a challenging starting point for new beginnings in the ethnological sciences. Nevertheless, ethnology and folklore studies survived, even if not entirely unscathed. The monumental challenge of finding a new direction and a critical self-investigation of the interrelations between ethnological research and harmful political ideologies awaited, a process of rehabilitation that many later commentators found to be lacking.

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The case of German *Volkskunde* – which despite its strong influence also on ethnologists and folklorists in other European countries is not addressed article in this edited volume – illustrates this well. The post-war situation of the ethnological sciences has received scientific attention, especially in the German-speaking countries (see, e.g., Moser et al. 2015; Eggmann et al. 2019). This literature does address the instrumentalisation of ethnological knowledge and the cooperation of ethnologists with the National Socialist regime in Hitler's Germany. After the war, Heinz Maus' famous essay (1946) even demanded that *Volkskunde* be entirely abolished. Yet, others like Will-Erich Peuckert, the first post-war professor of *Volkskunde* at the University of Göttingen, worked tirelessly towards a rehabilitation of the discipline (Peuckert 1988). Extensive and profound argumentative efforts were necessary to stabilise the situation of the ethnological disciplines and to achieve scientific relevancy. In this context, the post-war work of Swiss ethnologists also had a pacifying and stabilising function, because it made it possible to continue ethnological work on a 'neutral ground' (see Kuhn 2017).

In many cases, however, the beginning of this rehabilitation did not go hand in hand with personal consequences for the implicated ethnologists or even represent a genuine new beginning. In fact, there were numerous instances of personal and thematic continuities in the German context in the years following the Second World War. It took until well into the 1960s before the droning silence about National Socialist entanglements was addressed in any meaningful manner.

At the same time, Finnish *kansatiede*, traditionally strongly oriented toward the German-speaking research landscape and with most pre-war publications and dissertations published in German, appeared to quietly detach itself from the previous scientific instigator of *Volkskunde* right after the Second World War and started to look both inward and for new role models among its Nordic neighbors and across the Atlantic. In the 1960s, relations with German ethnologists slowly picked up again, but at first research visits were organized solely between Finland and the GDR, not the FRG. Hereby, Finnish ethnology somewhat detached itself not only from a now spoiled previously dominant provider of scientific impulses but also from the fruits of the slowly beginning post-war reform processes in *Volkskunde*, which is why *kansatiede* remained fairly traditional up until the 1980s with research often still focusing on the analysis of examples rural material culture while a more critical orientation in terms of methodology, theoretical foundation, and the choice of research topics became common in the German-speaking context as the post-war years progressed.

In the context of the German rehabilitation process, some ethnologists even expressed the view that their ethnological work was inherently unpolitical in character. One example was the German ethnologist John Meier, whose career as an academic began in the Weimar Republic and continued seemingly unimpaired by the 'Third Reich' and also after the liberation of Germany in 1945. He stated in a public lecture in 1954 that the discipline of *Volkskunde* had, regardless of the severe political turmoil and crisis of the preceding decades, always continued its scientific work unperturbed. Meier further explained that he saw distancing from any form of political ideology and organisations as an absolute necessity to safeguard academic freedom and the integrity of research, a world that in his view follows its own laws and must not be contaminated by any kind of political interference, no matter from which direction such political influences may come (Kaschuba 2012, 79–80).

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No matter what it was that John Meier had hoped to achieve with his insistence on the allegedly unpolitical character of ethnological research then, the contributions of this edited volume show clearly that the work done by ethnologists and folklorists can never be fully detached from its historical and political contexts. While relying predominantly on national case studies, it is our aim to combine them in a transnational perspective that will provide readers with a broad horizon of contemporaneous developments in both ethnology as well as folklore studies in different European countries after the Second World War. As the chapters selected for this edited volume will show, ethnology and folklore – despite their national perspectives – had already re-established transnational networks and connections soon after the Second World War. These ties existed in the personal biographies of scholars in exile, research cooperation across national borders, or the re-activating of international ethnology and folklore associations, as Bjarne Rogan's research on the post-war history of the *Commission Internationale des Arts et Traditions Populaires* CIAP and of the *Société Internationale d'Ethnologie et de Folklore* SIEF has explored in detail (Rogan 2015).

It is the intention of this edited volume to gather articles that shed empirical light on the interplay of the personal agency of ethnologists and folklorists after the Second World War and the different political ideologies and contexts inherent in ethnological research. These persist, for instance, in the shape of the lingering remnants of nineteenth-century nationalistic-romantic thought but also as an external, highly tangible force curtailing or steering research conducted under the mantle of ethnology and folklore studies.

One aspect that already became evident early in the work on this edited volume was a certain ambivalence also with regards to some heavily charged and difficult – yet undoubtedly also central – terminology. This includes challenging concepts like nationalism, which, as some of the contributors from the post-Soviet countries had pointed out in our discussions, can take on a different connotation if considered in the context of Cold War Eastern Europe; other participants also rightly pointed out the problems and dangers associated with this perilous concept. This example picked from the discussions surrounding the formation of this edited volume indicates the value the contributions can bring to discussions about the intellectual history of the ethnological sciences. After all, it is of central importance also for contemporary ethnologists and folklorists to be aware of the long-lasting, difficult ideological legacy the ethnological disciplines carry. These scholars will be the custodians of this intellectual history, and it is their responsibility to engage with it actively, critically, and with great care.

The chapters are divided into three categories. The first section *Individual Choices* presents the varying ways in which individual ethnologists from the Baltic countries negotiated the restrictions placed upon them by the Soviet Union. While some made the choice to continue their research in exile, others stayed and tried to create niches for themselves within the Soviet fabric, so as to be able to pursue their research. The section *Constructed Nationalisms* comprises three chapters that explore the role of different nationalisms within ethnological knowledge production, for instance, in the shape of competing nationalisms, as a concept in research, or in the context of funding for ethnological research. In this way, the articles cover examples from a broad geographical framework spanning Turkey, Croatia, and Finland.

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The last section *Changing Paradigms* presents two chapters that offer a perspective on the changes that occurred in ethnological research and in folklore studies after the Second World War, both in terms of the creation of new perspectives within the research conducted and in the context of the discipline's entanglement with day-to-day politics and history. Dealing with academic institutions in the Nordic countries as well as with the interconnection between society and folklore studies in post-war Italy, the articles in this section show the close relatedness of ethnological knowledge and societal issues.

The common theme lingering in the background of the chapters presented in this edited volume is the question of what it is that facilitates the political appropriation of folklore studies and ethnology by political regimes. Is it the focus on empirical material combined with a positivistic approach? Or is the reason to be found in the intellectual history of the disciplines and remnants of national romanticism? Or is it because the disciplines since their inception were focused on investigating the life-worlds, practices, and beliefs of the common folk, the masses, be they rural peasants or urban working-class populations, the non-bourgeois segments of the general public that in history often have been the main audience for the mobilisation efforts of political movements. It follows here that ethnological knowledge lends itself to be appropriated in these contexts for two main reasons. First, the ethnological disciplines – if the research was indeed conducted diligently – provide crucial information for political movements on the perspectives and values of the general public, which is pivotal in the effort to win people over to a political cause. Secondly, it could also critically be asked how and if ethnological and folklore research has contributed to the construction of sociopolitical milieus in producing easily appropriated ideologically infused imagery as a revanchist opportunity for identification for those segments of the population that see themselves as disenfranchised.

Thus, it follows that it remains a central responsibility for everyone engaged in ethnological and folklore research, as professional custodians of a problematic intellectual history containing difficult and repeatedly misappropriated terminology, to remain aware of the perilous and easily weaponised knowledge that ethnologists – both then and now – work with on a day-to-day basis. This is ever more important in these contemporary times of renewed uncertainty characterised by a resurgence of fascist movements and by renewed ethnicisation within nationalist concepts. Particularly in light of this perilous present, it is vital to better understand from a historical perspective the intimate connections between political instrumentalisation, co-opting, and the ideological underpinnings of the ethnological disciplines. At the same time, acts of (often silent) resistance, responsibility, and a striving for ethical integrity have always been present, offering grounds for hope. This may, perhaps, also help to chart a path towards a brighter future.

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Individual Choices

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Between Political Ideology and Personal Professional Interests

Ethnology in Soviet Latvia

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Introduction: Soviet Ethnographic Practice in the Latvian SSR

This chapter studies the history of ethnography in Soviet Latvia, that is, the Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic (LSSR). In the Soviet Union, the term 'ethnography' was used to describe the academic field dealing with the origins and development of ethnic communities, their material and spiritual culture, and so forth. While 'ethnography' in the Soviet sense was roughly analogous to the understanding of 'ethnology' in Europe at that time or the American field of 'sociocultural anthropology', 'ethnology' was described in the Soviet Union as a 'bourgeois science', in order to distinguish it from the Marxist-Leninist theoretical basis of ethnography, and the term 'anthropology' was restricted to biological and physical anthropology (Kuhn and Puchberger 2021, 61; Hirsch 2005, 10). A type of qualitative holistic social and cultural field research that corresponded to ethnology was practised by Soviet ethnographers. Still, that term was not used to describe their approach.

The main focus of this chapter is the relationship between the State and the researcher through the analysis of ethnographers' publications and archive documents from between 1956 and 1969, with the following aims: 1) to understand the politically administrative planning-control system, which determined the activities of Soviet ethnographers and which was coordinated from the central government institutions of the Soviet Union in Moscow; and 2) to understand the strategies of individual researchers for studying particular topics and for preparing publications.

The second half of the 1950s and the 1960s marked the Thaw after the exposure of the Stalin cult. Soon in Latvia, however, the turn of the decade was marked by the defeat of the National Communists in 1959–1961 (Bleiere 2022, 89–111) and the intensification of political and ideological tensions. A new generation of ethnographers announced themselves in the field and later formed its core. All had obtained their degrees in Latvia during the Soviet occupation, and most were graduates of the Faculty of History at Latvian State University. This period was the richest in the ethnographers' publications, mainly in two scientific periodicals of the Latvian SSR, reflecting the results of ethnographic research in Soviet Latvia: *LPSR ZA Vēstis* ('Bulletin of the Academy of Sciences of the Latvian SSR'), dating from 1947, and the series of scientific papers *Arheoloģija un etnogrāfija* ('Archaeology and Ethnography'), whose first volume was published in 1957. In 1969, the collective monograph *Latviešu etnogrāfija* ('The Latvian Ethnography') was published, a compilation of 15 years of work (Strods et al. 1969).

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