Is Urban Life in the Countryside Good? The Central Settlements of Collective Farms in the Estonian SSR

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Summary

Abstract: This is a study of the elimination of the opposition of city and countryside in the situation of the transformation to industrial large-scale production in the collectivised agriculture of the Estonian SSR, from the 1960s to the 1980s. A totally new pattern of settlement was introduced, with almost 200 semi-urban central settlements built by economically successful kolkhozes and sovkhozes. The rest of the villages in Estonia were allowed to fade away. The article contemplates the development of the spatial and functional structure of central settlements and the lifestyle practised there. The most hybrid life-style was when inhabitants of apartment houses continued to keep animals. Always erected next to a central settlement was a cluster of family houses for the technocratic elite of kolkhozes and sovkhozes, showing how the communist urban utopia ended up as a petit-bourgeois garden-city.

In a post-industrial society, the polarity of country and city life is no longer important, but this used to be a source of considerable concern in industrial societies. Industrialisation in Western and Northern Europe resulted in people moving away from the countryside, and agricultural production became concentrated in fewer and larger farms, so that traditional villages and their infrastructure mostly vanished during the second half of the 20th century. However, in the Soviet Union, where they had experienced problems connected with ensuring food supplies ever since collectivisation, they tried to improve the production of food products not only by industrialising agriculture, but also by introducing an urban lifestyle in the countryside. An apartment building with all the modern conveniences was supposed to make country people happy. But, in spite of the fact that apartment buildings sprang up in villages and beside fields, muddy roads, poverty, alcoholism and a sense of hopelessness continued to characterise country life in the Soviet Union. This situation could be found in Estonian villages as well, but Estonian agriculturalists cleverly managed to take advantage of the bottomless character of the Russian market and to survive as best they could by testing the limits of the economic model forced upon them. As a result, by the 1970s, living conditions in the countryside were already generally much better than in the city. Little by little, small, well-structured centres developed all around the country. Throughout the entire USSR, the architecture of these central settlements in Estonian collectives was considered to be outstanding. This was a new pattern of settlement in Estonia and it is interesting to see how the characteristics of urban and rural life started to become increasingly mixed. But, to what extent were the people who had moved from the farmhouses to the apartment buildings of these new settlements the fortunate recipients of progress, and to what extent is it possible to consider them the victims of the extermination process that was so characteristic of the occupying Soviet regime? This text will try to answer these questions, while combining architectural history with social and cultural history, a perspective that is also similar to

the study of inhabited landscapes in cultural geography.

Collective farming and the story of the kolkhozes form a chapter in history that Estonians today are not particularly interested in, because Estonian society is now dominated by neoliberalism and national discourse.[1] Even though there exists a nostalgic discourse, propagated and defended by former agricultural figures,[2] there is a lack of in-depth fundamental research that facilitates an impartial overview.[3] In the ongoing process of eliminating all remnants of the Soviet occupation, it seems preferable to erase this unpleasant memory, even though thousands of people still live in the environment that the kolkhozes created.

In the 'Manifesto of the Communist Party' (1848), Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels prescribed 'the unification of agriculture and industry, thus helping to eliminate the opposition of city and country life'[4] as one of the means for building a classless society. Thanks to collectivisation, capitalist production disappeared from agriculture in the Soviet Union. Often when speaking of collective farming, the Russian abbreviation *kolkhoz*, based on the first syllables of *коллективное хозяйство* (collective household), is used. In Estonian it was adopted as *kolhoos*. The new, third programme of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, taken into use in the period of Khrushchev's leadership in 1961, stipulated that 'Kolkhoz settlements will gradually develop into large city-like settlements, with residential buildings in good condition, public buildings, services and cultural as well as health facilities. [---] Erasing the socio-economic, cultural and vernacular differences between city and country will become one of the most important results of advancing communism.'[5] Communism, which was supposed to be the bright future of all humanity, wasn't achieved within the 20 years that the party's programme had prescribed for it – it wasn't achieved later either. However, these city-like settlements were quite developed. They became possible thanks to reforms that favoured agriculture and that were set in motion in the Khrushchev era, because starvation forced the country to re-evaluate its dominant opinion, which considered the proletariat important, but farmers not.

Before the Soviet Union annexed Estonia in 1940, it already had a completely developed and functioning system of capitalist farms (140,000). The authorities only managed to get Estonian country people to consider collective farms after 29,000 people were deported to Siberia in March 1949.[6] After this, 2,500 collective farms were created. From then on, collective farms were amalgamated, so that by 1975 there were only 188. State farms (*Sovkhoz*, *советское хозяйство* = Soviet household) were also established alongside the collective farms, but

1 For example, 'The History of Estonian Agriculture', published by the Estonian University of Life Sciences, deals thoroughly with the first period of Estonian independence, 1919–1940 (pages 150–215), but the section covering the Soviet period, lasting from 1940–1991, is much more superficial (pages 216–234): R. Lillak, Eesti põllumajanduse ajalugu. Tartu: Eesti Põllumajandusülikool, 2003.

2 Eesti põllumajandus XX sajandil [Estonian 20th Century Agriculture]. II köide. Ülevaade põllumajanduse loost okupatsioonide ajal. Aastad 1940–1990. I osa. Inimene ja ühiskond. Tallinn: Eesti Vabariigi Põllumajandusministeerium, 2007.

3 L. Vahtre, Stagnatsioon ja venestuskampaania. – Eesti ajalugu VI. Peatoim. S. Vahtre. Tartu: Ilmamaa, 2005, pp. 314–317.

4 K. Marx, F. Engels, Manifest der Kommunistischen Partei. – Deutsche Geschichtsphilosophie. Ausgewählte Texte von Lessing bis Jaspers. München: DTV, 1969, p. 281.

5 Nõukogude Liidu Kommunistliku Partei Programm. Projekt. Tallinn: Eesti Riiklik Kirjastus, 1961, p. 78.

6 See lists of deportees: http://www.okupatsioon.ee/english/lists/index.html.

to a lesser extent. These were mostly created from former town and state manors – for example, seed-growing or stud farms.

Intensive large-scale production began in the late 1960s. While the economy of the USSR generally stagnated in the 1970s, the collective farms based on collective ownership had more economic independence and Estonian kolkhozes were able to make the most of this. The Soviet production plans assigned the role of meat and dairy producer to the Estonian SSR. This extraction of agricultural produce from Estonia cannot strictly be called colonialism. In part, it was just an expansion of a more successful economic unit into a neighbouring market.

The period from 1962 to 1967 saw the creation of long-term plans for all regions (15 in all) of the Estonian SSR[7] and, in terms of the breadth and complexity of the work, this was really a huge step forward in territorial planning. The average size of collective farms was now set at 8,000 ha, which meant that they were forced to merge to form larger units, because in the 1960s the average size of kolkhozes or sovkhozes was only 3,300 ha.

These regional plans selected 650 potential settlements out of more than 2,000 existing villages. Of these, 315 were supposed to become central settlements for collective farms and to accommodate approximately 800–1200 people, and a further 335 villages were to be auxiliary settlements of about 300–600 inhabitants. The auxiliary settlements were usually existing villages that may have previously served as centres for older and smaller kolkhozes, and so something had already been built there but, after the amalgamation into larger collective farms had taken place, these became auxiliary settlements.

Collective farm centres developed on the basis of existing villages and their existing infrastructure. Central collective farm settlements were not built overnight – this process lasted from the end of the 1950s to the beginning of the 1990s, when the kolkhozes and sovkhozes ultimately collapsed. The concentric development in those settlements can often still be seen – older and smaller buildings are in the middle and increasingly larger buildings towards the outer edges. This, of course, can best be seen in residential buildings.[8] In contrast to the everyday urban quality of the apartment buildings, the groups of detached family dwellings were usually, to emphasise their eliteness, positioned in a beautiful location on the edge of a manor park or even outside the settlement, on the banks of a river or lake. But, despite the enormous residential buildings in the central kolkhoz settlements, most country people kept living on their farms. The general pattern was such that young people moved into the new settlements and older people stayed on the farm.

It was believed that one of the main advantages of an urban development was its conveniences. The animal sheds were outside the settlement, there was no cattle odour and it was much easier to keep the village clean. However, real comforts only appeared slowly in the apartment buildings. Since the first standard designs for apartment buildings had truly small – *Existenzminimum* – apartments, the empty bathroom was often used as a pantry.

Another advantage for an inhabitant of such a settlement was the proximity of all

7 A. Käsper, Perspektiivplaneerimisest Eesti NSV-s. – Ehitus ja arhitektuur 1967, nr. 4, pp. 11–14.

8 See the typology of residential buildings: M. Karu, Kus pidi kolhoosnik elama? Kolhooside tüüpelamuehitus Eestis kuni 1980. aastateni. Bakalaureusetöö. Tallinn: Eesti Kunstiakadeemia, 2005. Manuscript at the Institute of Art History of Estonian Academy of Arts.

the necessary services. The kolkhoz office was often combined with the club, because the large hall used by the kolkhoz for general meetings could also be used at other times by choirs and theatre groups for rehearsals. The school and kindergarten were also close. Kolkhozes and sovkhozes also built canteens where everybody could have their lunch.

Inhabitants of central settlements were also permitted to keep animals. Outside the settlement, there was a separate village made up of small sheds and barns. It seems comical that a person living in an apartment, who for example may have worked in the kolkhoz dairy farm, also had to tend their own cows, sheep, pigs, rabbits and chickens, but this was an opportunity to save on food, which was bought from the shop, and they were also able to eat better because the shop counter was usually empty.

The residents of the apartment blocks in the central settlements can be viewed as the estate labourers of the Soviet period – people without roots who had the mentality of wage earners and did not have a sense of ownership of the collective kolkhoz property.

However, it seems that, during the 1960s, the urban euphoria prescribed in the party's programme died out, and the urban concept metamorphosed into that of the garden city. As the economic situation improved, they could afford more. Standard designs were created in Tallinn that took their inspiration from Scandinavian models and, in the 1970s and 1980s, kolkhozes used these designs to build new residential buildings adjacent to the core of the settlement. These private houses were usually given to the technocratic elite of the kolkhoz – the success of the collective farm depended on their work, and they had to be rewarded with concessions and privileges. A private house was a powerful and important instrument for rewarding the best workers. But since the average central settlement of a collective farm had about one hundred flats in apartment buildings and about 10–20 new family houses, one can say that happiness wasn't really uniformly shared in Estonian kolkhozes.

The kolkhoz and sovkhoz centres combined elements of urban and rural life and the happiest were those lucky people who belonged to the technocratic elite and could live in a private house. In this way, the noble image of happiness in the communist ideology took on a relatively petit-bourgeois form.

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