

“THE NEEDS OF THE CONSUMERS OBLIGE”: DAILY PROBLEMS AND CRITICISM OF THE SYSTEM IN PUBLIC LETTERS IN THE 1960S AND 1980S

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ABSTRACT

This article* examines public letters as an expression of everyday household problems and practices. The sources used are those letters from among the archival materials of the Tartu Retail Trade Association and the Tallinn Markets Administration that have survived from the 1960s and 1980s. Using qualitative thematic analysis, I examine the points of criticism that have arisen in connection with retail trade and the (deficit) reality behind it, along with specific behavioural practices. In addition, my aim is to show the relations between individuals and the state, and their dynamics, by presenting criticism with the help of discourse analysis.

KEYWORDS: public letters • mature socialism • practices of everyday life • system of commerce • goods in short supply

INTRODUCTION

As in to other socialist countries, Soviet Estonia had a supply-based, planned, economy in which, from the consumer's standpoint, the planning, production and distribution of consumer goods were often based on rather strange logic. In socialist economies, there was the requirement to satisfy the people's basic needs (slogan: "to each according to his needs"). This was accompanied by a requirement to improve living conditions, which was just as important – here it would be worth recalling the unfulfilled promise made by Khrushchev in 1961 that true Communism would be attained by 1980. The presentation of consumption as a right also made it a politicised concept. Anthropologist John Borneman has pointed out that the distinctive feature of socialism in comparison to capitalism, is the relationship between desire and goods. If, in capitalism, a desire is created (by the advertising industry) for a specific product, and at the same time the supply is provided, in socialism the desire is created, but it is left unfocussed and unsatisfied (Verdery 1996: 28). An example of this is the exhibitions of consumer goods that were organised to introduce the progress being made by

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the national economy, or the fashion shows staged by the Tallinn Fashion House that were broadcast by Estonian Television, where goods were shown that were supposed to be locally manufactured but which were very seldom, if ever, available in the shops. The satisfaction of ever-increasing need was an important part of socialist ideology and therefore stimulated consumer/citizen demand for retail trade and consumer goods in a period when one encountered a series of articles, such as: *The Needs of the Consumers Oblige* (*Edasi*, 28th December 1956), *Consumer Goods in the Interests of the Consumer* (*Edasi*, 20th January 1973), *Better and Nicer Looking Consumer Goods* (*Edasi*, 22nd January 1977), *Bottlenecks Must Be Eliminated (in Answer to a Question Asked at the Political Day¹)* (*Õhtuleht*, 13th March 1980), etc. However, one must not forget that demand is comprehensible primarily as a 'reasonable demand' that corresponds to the possibilities of the society as a whole, to the production level achieved at a given period in history, and based on the general economic development of society. Based on the last point, the State Planning Committee (Gosplan) worked out rational consumption rates, i.e. the quantitative need per person for specific goods. Therefore, for instance, the 1985 consumption rate, which was also the basis for the production plan, specified the following annual production rates per person in the USSR: 3.8 square metres of woollen fabric, 4.0 pieces of outdoor clothing made of tricot, 8.3 pairs of stockings/socks, and 3.6 pairs of leather footwear (Kaal 1985: 6). Although quality and assortment requirements were also prescribed in the planned economy, the fulfilment of the output plan in unchanged fixed prices was in practice the most important and minor; often mutually contradicting plans were subordinated to it, for example, the marketability, costs, quality or technological standards of the produce (cf. Kornai 1992: 310; Nove 1992: 366–367, 390; Berend 1996: 74–76).

Anthropologist Katherine Verdery has considered this type of politicisation of consumption to be an additional factor that made people challenge the official definitions of their needs and motivated them to participate in the informal economy by procuring Western goods: wearing a pair of jeans signified that you could get something the system said you didn't need and shouldn't have (Verdery 1996: 28–29). A similar opinion has been expressed by Judd Stitzel regarding the German Democratic Republic:

The meaninglessness of citizens' votes at the ballot box heightened the political meaning of purchases: consumers' decisions to buy or reject GDR-manufactured goods or to shop in West Berlin served as a indirect plebiscite on the GDR's economic system and the regime's promises and policies that were inextricably intertwined with it. (Stitzel 2005: 19–20)

Those in power were also aware of the politicised nature of consumption, and therefore, the retail trade was a field of activity that had to be monitored – on the one hand empty shelves and poor-quality goods were the most visible symbol of the non-functioning of the economy, as well as of the gap between the promises of the Party and reality; on the other hand, setbacks in the steel industry had significantly less impact on the mood of the people than the lack of suitable footwear in the shops. A cautionary example of the latter was the Uprising of 1953 in East Germany (cf. Pence 2007).

Viewed from the position of the population, the gaps in retail trade and goods in short supply² were just a part of the reality of everyday Soviet life, which one had to take into account. Depending on desire, various behavioural strategies were possible –

'combing' the shops, hoarding, do-it-yourself (especially in the case of clothes), usage of acquaintanceships, and also the writing of petitions. In this article, I examine the latter. For research material, I used the public letters that are to be found among the archival materials of the Tartu Retail Trade Association³ and the Tallinn Markets Administration, which have survived from 1960, 1964–1972 and 1987–1989. In the analysis, I approached the letters in two ways. On the one hand, I examined the problems that are raised by the letters and the reality (of deficits) and behavioural practices that are revealed by the letters. On the other hand, I examined the letters as an expression of the relations between the state and private individuals and tried to discover their dynamics.

Firstly, a few words about the period being analysed: the period between the mid-1950s and mid-1980s is primarily viewed as a so-called stable Soviet period, which, depending on the researcher, has been called 'late socialism' (cf. Yurchak 2006) or 'mature Soviet society' (cf. Kharkhordin 1999) – although the latter limits the mature era to the period from the 1960s to the 1980s. The period I examine is characterised by the rooting of double standards – "(S)he performed according to one set of rules in official collectivist gatherings; (s)he followed another set of rules in informal public and private settings" (Zdravomyslova, Voronkov 2002). In everyday behaviour, the informal public realm, with its 'habitual' behavioural rules, dominated (for example, the widespread use of acquaintanceships to manage one's affairs), which is the most typical characteristic of mature socialism (cf. Jõesalu 2008). In the case of the letters being analysed, the 1960s are classified as a period of mature socialism, while the end of the 1980s already belongs to a transition period, and therefore, these two periods are not comparable one-to-one. At the same time, if we think about Gorbachev's reforms, changes in everyday life primarily manifested themselves as opportunities for free expression (glasnost) and in the political activation of society. Naturally, there were also innovations in economic life (perestroika), such as the possibility, as of 1987, to create joint ventures with foreign partners, and to establish co-operatives as of 1988. However, for the so-called average person nothing changed significantly. He or she still faced increased shortages of goods due to the failure of Gorbachev's reforms, which ended with the (re)introduction of coupons.⁴ In everyday behaviour, this meant the intensification rather than lessening of habitual behavioural practices (for example, the usage of acquaintanceships, standing in line, undertaking buying trips, etc.). Therefore, based on the behavioural practices that I am examining, the second half of the 1960s and the second half of the 1980s are similar, as well as dissimilar, decades. I cover this in more detail in the next section of the analysis.

PUBLIC (SOVIET) LETTERS AS A RESEARCH SOURCE

Reading the letters from a temporal distance, their personal nature creates the temptation to see the writings of these people as a spontaneous expression of opinion. However this is not true, even in the case of private letters. At this time, "letter-writing is seen to be part of an individual's attempt to establish the meaning of their life (rather than just reflect or communicate existing truths)" (Dobson 2009: 60), since the letter is always written to someone and therefore letters always include the conceivable expectations of the recipient of the letter, as well as the conventions of letter-writing (cf. Stowe

2002). This is especially obvious in the case of public letters sent to the authorities or newspaper editors, which are orientated toward the achievement of some objective. Illustratively, if private letters among friends and family can be written just because one wants to provide information about one's life (activities, health, local gossip, etc.), then the focus of a public letter written to an institution is generally⁵ a specific question, be it in the form of a complaint, praise, or expression of opinion. In this case, the letter writer is reflecting not only his or her place in the group, but also his or her role in the wider world; through the act of writing, the author establishes his or her status as a citizen, inscribing him- or herself into the political system he or she inhabits (Dobson 2009: 64).

The Soviet authorities encouraged its citizens to write both to local authorities and newspaper editors, both about national as well as local issues. And it was done, even to the extent that allows the response to be called public graphomania.⁶ Several reasons can be seen behind favouring this right of letter writing, which in practice was reduced mainly to the right of complaint, with the most important reason possibly being related to the right of complaint as part of participatory democracy in the official rhetoric (Zatlin 1997: 902, 912–914; Dobson 2009: 64). The number of letters was viewed as an indicator of the rate of participation and also affirmation of the legitimacy of the system.⁷ Another reason for favouring public letter writing may be the function of letters as information media reflecting the people's views, particularly so in the early years of Soviet rule when the network of informants had not been fully developed (Fitzpatrick 1997: 149; Lenoe 1999: 142–143; Dobson 2009: 64). Summaries of the topics of the letters as indicators of people's mentality were made and sent to the Communist Party throughout the entire Soviet period⁸ because direct questions about major political and social issues were not allowed in sociological surveys (Shlapentokh 2001: 127–128). In addition, Jonathan Zatlin has drawn parallels between favouring the writing of letters of complaint as an official form of communication with the authorities, and the tradition of writing petitions to the Tsar in the Russian Empire, a practice that the Bolsheviks took over (Zatlin 1997: 916). Instead of the Tsar, the Communist Party became the almighty problem-solver and guardian of each and every individual. Viewed from the standpoint of the people, the writing of official letters of complaint was one of the few legal means of channelling one's dissatisfaction and criticising the system, albeit only in a restrained manner due to the risk of potential repressions. Functioning as a kind of a relief valve for expressing displeasure, the individual right of complaint also prevented people with similar problems from joining together into system-critical forces.

The political system where people resided in the case of the letters being analysed for this article, was the Estonian SSR and the powers that be, to whom these letters were written, were part of the Soviet power structure along with its very specific political rhetoric and the observance of a context-independent ideological form (cf. Yurchak 2003: 481). Keeping in mind the principle of double standards that existed, and the division of public space into formal and informal public realms along with specific behavioural rules, writing to the authorities was undoubtedly an activity in the formal public realm, in which one had to follow a written set of rules. Therefore, depending on the expectations assigned to the letter's recipient and the wish to get a positive resolution to one's problems, letters from Soviet people were clearly shaped by the textual world they inhabited⁹ (cf. Lenoe 1999: 144–148, 163; Fitzpatrick 2005: 164–176). This

is undoubtedly one additional source-critical aspect, which must be considered when analysing public letters written in Soviet society. On the other hand, it demonstrates people's skill at using official discursive practises, or as Stephen Kotkin has termed it so incisively, the strategy of "speaking Bolshevik" (cf. Kotkin 1997: 215–225) by utilising the system's rules of the game for one's personal purposes. Therefore, although the public letters do not provide a direct view of the author's worldview, they are a direct window on the everyday functioning of Soviet society by showing relations between the state and private individuals in addition to everyday practices, along with the related expectations (and frustrations). In this case, this window comes from the example of all Soviet retail trade.

The sources for this research are the letters that have survived in the collection of the Tartu Retail Trade Association and the Tallinn Markets Administration series of the collection of the Executive Committee of the Tallinn City Soviet of Working People's Deputies. More exactly, they are the archival documents in the collection of the Retail Trade Association of the Executive Committee of Tartu City Soviet of Working People's Deputies. They are stored under EAA.T-13 series 27 of the Estonian Historical Archives, entitled Correspondence, Explanatory Letters, Citizens' Complaints, and they deal with "citizens' complaints and statements and correspondence regarding their resolution", and have survived with gaps from 1960, 1966–1969, and 1971–1972. The volumes of the archival documents vary from 17 pages to 63, with a total volume of 210 pages. The second source is the letters in the collection of the Executive Committee of Tallinn City Soviet of Working People's Deputies. These are stored under the TLA.R-1.11 series of the Markets Administration of the Executive Committee of the Tallinn City Soviet of Working People's Deputies, in the Tallinn City Archives, a few examples of which have survived from years 1964–1966, with the main portion from the years 1987–1989. The Tallinn Markets Administration series includes 190 sheets of citizen's correspondence that have survived from the years 1964–1966, and which are quite equally distributed among the years. The three sets of archival documents from 1987 to 1989 included 154, 199 and 238 pages respectively, for a total of 591 pages. However, the volumes of 154 and 238 pages of correspondence comprise only two and three months' worth of correspondence. In addition, in the same series we can find sources similar to the letters from 1981–1985, entitled, Correspondence and Plans Regarding Measures for the Organisation of the Retail Trade Network and the Improvement of Service in Retail Trading; Answers to Questions at Political Days, with a total volume of 374 pages, and Statements, Correspondence, and Summaries of the Development of Retail Trade in Tallinn, from 1986 (42 pages). The materials in the last two archival documents focus primarily on the internal issues of the Tallinn Markets Administration. Correspondence from other years has not survived in either case.¹⁰

The specific archival documents comprise both the letters and the respective answers. In the case of complaints regarding the service culture, the worker's own explanation is sometimes included, or in the case of shortage, the draft of the answer compiled by the department manager for the respective group of goods. As a rule, the answers to complaints are signed by the director of the Trade Administration, or his or her deputy. Also found in the archive documents are laconically worded questions sent by the Secretary of the City's Executive Committee and satirical newspaper clippings, to which answers were sent. Newspaper clippings were also sometimes included with the letters

of complaint when the complainer apparently wished to set his or her criticism into the context of general interest. The materials of the Tallinn Markets Administration from 1988 also include a large-scale internal investigation relating to the Moskva department store, where there was a suspicion of theft and disputes among the workers (cf. TLA.R-1.11.1368: 88–119, 149–180).

The surviving letters are generally grammatically correct and the author's name and address are included.¹¹ The length of the letters extends from a few lines to a few pages, although the most typical are one-page letters. Of the petitions made to the Tartu Retail Trade Association, only one was in Russian; at the Tallinn Markets Administration about half were in Estonian and half in Russian.¹²

I did not add up the total number of letters, since a statistical overview would have been reduced to explaining details and exceptions. For instance, one petition might include two letters – the letter that was written initially but not sent, and if the problem persisted, the sending of the initial as well as a new letter. In the case of letters sent to the press, the original letters have not always survived, since the editorial offices of newspaper sometimes asked for the letters back, although the retail trade administrations could ignore these requests. At the same time, even in the cases where the original letter is missing, the thematic content of the letter is visible in the answer to the letter, and that is what interests me. In terms of the topics that have arisen, I have also taken into consideration the transmission of the questions that have been presented at Political Days, although they are not classed as public letters. Therefore, when using qualitative thematic analysis as the research method that corresponds to the research questions that have been posed, a statistical overview does not have any direct added value. The distinctive feature of thematic analysis is that the topics of general interest (for example, the reason for the criticism) are defined at the beginning of the analysis, but the specific research categories are left open, these are “induced” from the data (Ezzy 2002: 88). This open coding creates the possibility for the emergence of new research topics, which are important when dealing with such new fields of activity, which public letters regarding the retail trade undoubtedly are. The points of analysis to be encountered hereafter in this article developed based on the topics that arose from the letters. In the discourse analysis, I have remained on the level of action and social conditions, where the use of language is seen as reflecting external condition, relations and social patterns (Alveson, Sköldberg 2000: 208–209). When examining the manner of criticism, as a reflection of the relations between the state and private individuals, the letters are the only research object, while even in this case, the centre of interest is still the general tone of the letters, not the frequency of the occurrence of specific mentions or the mapping of the context of their occurrence.

Concerning how the petitions arrived at the retail trade administrations, the ratio is approximately 60:40, where 60 per cent were sent directly by the writers and 40 per cent were forwarded,¹³ mostly through the press. An exception is the correspondence that has survived in the Tallinn Markets Administration series from 1964–1966, where there is not a single letter that was sent directly, only those that were forwarded. There were also cases where the letters had several addressees – a maximum of five (cf. EAA.T-13.2.540: 55–56). Sheila Fitzpatrick has pointed out – although for the USSR in the 1930s – that the function of the newspapers was to forward the letters sent to them to the proper authorities, rather than to publish them (Fitzpatrick 2005: 156).

As Soviet society had no institutions dealing with consumer protection, this role was actually to a large degree assumed by the media, which for the more active people (non-party members) was the only, at least somewhat effective, way to express their dissatisfaction. The media were subjected to censorship, yet depending on the newspaper and the period, there also remained some space to a larger (in the 1960s) or lesser (in the 1970s) extent for topical articles, and their choice of themes often sprang from the readers' letters received (interview with Sulev Uus, 2nd December 2010). Criticism was also acceptable as far as it concerned a specific "individual bottleneck" and no generalisations were made, which was inadmissible (*ibid.*).

Partially for just this reason, and also to give the content of the letters a broader social dimension, in the analysis of the letters of complaint, I take into account the articles on retail trade that appeared in the press at the time, without explicitly referring to them. These are primarily from the newspaper *Edasi*,¹⁴ from which I have examined the articles for the same period, i.e. 1960–1989¹⁵ from the bibliographical list entitled Chronicle of Articles and Reviews marked with the key word 'retail trade'.

DYNAMICS OF THE TONALITY OF LETTERS OF COMPLAINT

When I began the analysis of the letters, one of the first questions was undoubtedly how large a portion the surviving letters represent all the letters received by the retail trade administrations. An answer can probably never be found to the question regarding the proportion of written to surviving letters, although one can state that there was a trend for an increased number of letters at the time, which probably started in the mid-1980s (for comparative information on East Germany, see Zatlin 1997: 915; Schröder 2001: 64–68, 87–89). This was both a reaction to the reforms initiated by Gorbachev and the freer atmosphere of expression that appeared as a result of the changes, as well as to the collapse of the Soviet economic system itself – in many cases the 'temporary difficulties' that people had to overcome reached a critical limit, and they were compelled to express their opinions. In the case of the letters, this is expressed primarily by their tonality. Therefore, the word usage in the letters from the 1960s is more reserved, as well as being more personal and focused on specific problems. In the letters from the 1980s, there is a greater tendency, resulting from general frustration, to reduce personal shortage problems to a part of the non-functioning of the system and to smoothly progress to (ironic) criticism of Soviet society as a whole in a relatively sharp tone, together with making one's own proposals for improvements. Keeping in mind the planned economy that was in effect, where all the companies belonged to the state, there is also nothing surprising in the development of such criticism (Zatlin 1997: 909). As an illustration, when there was no soap or laundry detergent for sale, there was no point in criticising the production association Flora, which as a state company depended on the plan assigned to it and the raw materials provided for its fulfilment, but rather the state system itself, as the creator of the problem. Still, it is important to note that even at the end of the 1980s, in the transition society, criticism remained at the level of pejorative emotional assessments regarding economic incompetence; improper remarks were not directed at the Estonian Communist Party.

The following are two examples to compare the 1960s and 1980s:

[To the editors of *Edasi*, reg. 23rd March 1962]¹⁶ I think that *Edasi* could help to improve some things, or at least explain them. It is understandable that I should raise issues that have done me harm.

I have been a happy (or unhappy?) owner of a Moskvich for more than 10 years. This car, like all others, rides on tyres. Ten years ago, it was very difficult to obtain tyres officially. Some people got them from somewhere and resold them at about twice the price. Then there was a period when tyres were quite freely available. And now there is a shortage again.

On 9th March, tyres became available at the Tartu Dünamo store. They were sold out in less than an hour. I heard about it by chance on the evening of the same day, but the result would have been exactly the same even if I had heard about it two weeks earlier – there were some tyres, and now there aren't.

This raises a whole series of questions:

1) I cannot go to the store every day because I work. Or should I take a leave from work for a quarter? (The answer you get in the shops is always that something should arrive within the quarter. A separate question is how to pick the right half-hour.)

2) Usually there are about 4–5 people looking for or purchasing car parts in the Dünamo store, sometimes more, sometimes less. How can you explain the fact that on the morning of 9th March an unusually large number of people looking for Moskvich tyres gathered there? Does information move along the wrong channels? The expanded sales of clothing, cakes, etc. are advertised; why is no notice given on the time that tyres will become available? If this is the way things are organised, a portion of these tyres will end up in the hands of speculators.¹⁷ That is where I will probably get my tyres. But why?

[...] [3. proposal regarding the introduction of a pre-ordering system for tyres.] (EAA.T-13.2.656: 1)

[To the Markets Administration of the Tallinn City Soviet of Working People's Deputies, reg. 6th July 1989] I am applying immediately for the sale of soap and detergent based on coupons. I cannot wait until the end of August in the hope that the situation will improve. Besides, I no longer believe in the promises of Homo Sovieticus. We have hit bottom, and this system will no longer bring us out. For more than two months (May, June, and now July which has just begun) I have not been able to buy any detergent. I arrive at the store after work at 6 or 7 p.m. At that time, even the most elementary food products (I basically mean dairy products) have been sold out, not to mention detergent or soap. Since my job is located far away (beyond the Mustamäe trolley bus stop), it is not possible to roam around town during working hours or lunchtime and to depend on chance for purchasing necessities. Besides, my health prevents me from standing in long lines. My dirty laundry is piling up. It has not been washed for two months. I have somehow washed some very necessary items with the shampoo I have at home. But this is just making a mockery of elementary standards of hygiene. An army of bedbugs and cockroaches have made a rapid invasion of Estonia from the east. And the lice are not far off. I remember how during the war and afterwards, lots of lice existed across the front due to the lack of detergents. By the way, the assortment of lice

was especially plentiful even 12 years after the war (at least until 1957, but maybe even today) in Russia in the villages of the Leningrad Oblast. I know this latter fact from personal experience. [...] [A description of working at kolkhozes as a student at Leningrad State University] I think with horror about helping at the kolkhozes in that area.

I would gladly drink some real coffee and sometimes I would enjoy eating a slice of sausage (even the expensive kind), but if I can't, I can't. But I have to do something about the lack of elementary hygiene products. Let's send a request to help to wealthier countries. Some developing countries could send us laundry detergent in exchange for our military equipment (Iran, Syria, etc.) Maybe the International Red Cross can help us? The republic could apply for help from them. Yes, I am a pensioner, and not young any longer, but I do not wish to die in squalor.

[...] [Demand for coupons to be introduced for buying alcohol, since it is almost impossible to buy vodka, which she needs to increase her blood pressure.]

Please tell me what you plan to do to resolve the given problem. [Name], working pensioner 4th July 1989. P. S. I also have acquaintances abroad. To date, I have managed not to humiliate myself by having them send soap and laundry detergent. How has this perestroika wagon flown into a ravine with such a clatter! (TLA.R-1.11.1339: 22–22r)

In order to more clearly point out the differences in tonality, both of these letters are purposely chosen since they were purer in style and more eloquent than the average. Naturally, not all letters from the 1960s were as calm in tone, while, even when Bolshevik terminology and/or promises were used in an ironic context, the focus of the criticism was still the specific merchandise. The second example includes criticism of the economic system either explicitly (“We have hit bottom...”; “How has this perestroika wagon...”) or implicitly by criticising the development of heavy industry at the expense of light industry (“Some developing countries...”) and by referring to the rich assortment of lice in the Leningrad Oblast, demonstrating that nothing good can be expected from Russia. On the other hand, although the economic system generates plenty of criticism, the threat to ask foreign friends to send soap seems to indicate that the writer considers herself to part of the Soviet system, not its victim. Otherwise making the request would not seem so embarrassing. Being embarrassed to ask is partially related to one's personality traits, but the main difficulty seems to be the fact that one had to ask for the most basic consumer goods – “Even Africans wash themselves and their children with soap and they don't have to worry that soap will not be available. However, we have now arrived at a situation where the issue of soap and laundry detergent is issue no. 1.” (TLA.R-1.11.1339: 39; cf. Stitzel 2005: 158–159).

In addition, if the wording of the letters sent at the end of the 1980s clearly exudes exasperation caused by the gap between what is said or promised officially, and everyday reality,¹⁸ the letters from the end of the 1960s indicate a degree of humility. In the case of shortage, information is asked about places where the goods will be available rather than demanding that one or another item be immediately put on sale. The word please is often used in the letters sent in the 1960s, while it is encountered very seldom in letters from the 1980s. In the following second example, the word please is present although it functions as more of a formality.

[To the Trade Association of the Executive Committee of the Tartu City Soviet of Working People's Deputies, reg. 4th April 1969] Please, why has **cinnamon** not been on sale for years, either in powdered form or in sticks, along with other spices? When will you release them from the warehouse so they can be purchased in the shops? 2nd April 1969 [Name]. (EAA.T-13.2.567: 19–19r)

[To the Executive Committee of the Tallinn City Soviet of Working People's Deputies, to the editors of *Õhtuleht* newspaper, reg. 12th August 1989] I urge you to stop the authorities at the retail trade department from mocking people! For years, they have provided information on the radio and in the newspapers about how much more coffee, meat, sausage, and other very deficit goods we will get this year compared to the last. Now, we have arrived at soap and detergent. These numbers do not interest me at all, or I believe most other normal people in Tallinn. The only thing that is interesting is whether they are on sale in the shops or not.

I am simply **demanding** that it be possible to buy a piece of soap and package of detergent (without connections) in Tallinn during the first days of August. How and where the coupons are printed and how they are distributed is the business of the retail trade authorities, and should have been resolved a long time ago. [...] (TLA.R-1.11.1339: 142–142r)

Keeping in mind the fact that people are shaped by the (textual) world they inhabit, the different tonality of the letters from the 1960s and 1980s refers to the differences in social discursive practices. Therefore, there is noticeably more Soviet-style sloganeering in the letters from the 1980s – for example, expressions such as “making a mockery of elementary standards of hygiene” or “stop mocking people”.¹⁹ These are not used knowingly in an ironic context in order to remind the authorities of their promises or to put them in their place, *à la* “Are torch bulbs such a deficit in this era of atoms and rockets that one is not able to procure them” (EAA.T-13.2.207: 9), in which one can actually see the system's success in developing ‘Soviet people’. Of course, one can also assume that the person who was posing the question about the purchase of cinnamon was a person from the ‘Estonian period’²⁰ from a generation that generally was not yet used to making demands.

As long as the criticism stayed within the bounds of Soviet-style journalistic word usage, it functioned in a way as a system stabiliser – each use of official discourse meant its reproduction, with the limits of criticism also contained therein (Stitzel 2005: 159–160). The ability of the Soviet system to regulate certain spheres of life was put in doubt, but Soviet order itself was not (cf. Shlapentokh 2001: 129–130).

‘INDIVIDUAL BOTTLENECKS’ ARE REFLECTED IN THE LETTERS

Generalising somewhat, the majority of the petitions received by the trade administrations can be divided in two categories: grievances about the service culture or organisation of sales, and grievances about shortages. These topics are actually quite evenly balanced, both in the 1960s and the second half of the 1980s.

In the case of goods in short supply, one can point out that in both periods the complaints generally concern the lack of ordinary goods for sale, relating to so-called ‘rea-

sonable basic needs', goods which the system has promised to guarantee. Of course, the emphasis according to periods is somewhat different. The goods that are repeatedly mentioned in the letters sent in the second half of the 1960s include men's formal shirts in larger sizes, men's shoes, children's footwear, audio tape, handkerchiefs, umbrellas, torch bulbs, fresh vegetables, spices (cardamom, cinnamon, vanilla, cloves), and vinegar. In the letters from the second half of the 1980s, the problematic goods include coffee, soap or laundry detergent, toothpaste, toilet paper, sports equipment and track-suits, fresh vegetables, children's clothing and footwear, scissors and smoked sausage. Christina Schröder, who has studied the petitions related to consumption sent in East Germany in the second half of the 1980s, has pointed out the following centres of grievances, based on the frequency of their occurrence: cars, phone connections, fashionable clothes, fresh fruits and vegetables, as well fruit and vegetable juices and canned goods (cf. Schröder 2001: 57–64). This coincides to a great extent with local problems²¹ and also demonstrates the structural similarity of the shortage problem in different socialist countries.

Based on the letters of complaint, one can also notice a trend toward increasing shortages in basic commodities (audio tape vs. soap). Undoubtedly, the list of goods in short supply was changing over time and also the standard of living in the 1980s was higher than in the 1960s, but so were the people's expectations of what they were allowed. On the one hand, by the 1980s people had learned to live in the Soviet planned economic society and to cope with its drawbacks (cf. 'forced substitution' purchasing behaviour – Kornai 1992: 230–231), yet the economic stagnation that started in mid-1970s and the decrease of imports caused by the fall in crude oil and gold prices in the international market led to a situation, at the end of the 1980s, in which the offer of domestic and imported commodity goods was able to satisfy only 40–70 per cent of the total demand (Moskoff 1993: 55). While, according to the plan, the Soviet citizen should have consumed 70 kg of meat per year at the end of the 12th Five Year Plan in 1990, the actual meat consumption per person in 1989 was 40 kg at best (ibid.: 29–30). What I mean is that, if in the 1960s the motivation for writing petitions was specialised goods, such as audio tape, which is used by only a few people, but in the 1980s there were even problems with widely used basic commodities like soap, then against this background the lack of audio tape seemed to be a pseudo-problem. Or to paraphrase the excerpt above, one could not proceed from the principle of "if I can't I can't" in the case of soap as one could in the case of cinnamon. Here is an example of a letter writer who sees the deepening of the shortage problem, and, based on the comments of his relatives, calls into question the popular belief of Estonia as the Soviet West, or the relative wealth of Estonia compared to the other Soviet Socialist Republics. Seeing the vivid description of the situation in 1970, at the time the comparison of Estonia with the West could have held true for a newcomer from Central Russia.

[To the General Department for Organisational-Legal Questions of the Executive Committee of the Tallinn City Soviet of Working People's Deputies, reg. 21st October 1987] I have lived in Estonia since 1963 and in Tallinn since 1970. We can all see how our city is growing. Living conditions are improving; the service sphere is developing.²² **But there is no development** in the quality of retail trade and service, in public catering and the supply of foodstuffs, especially in regard to meat and dairy products.

I remember that in the 1970s 17 kinds of sausage were sold in the Tallinn shops: smoked, semi-smoked, and various cooked sausage (e.g. bologna, game, etc.). Now we cannot always buy even one kind of cooked sausage. However, if we were to go by the information on the production of meat and dairy products, they are of course increasing. Production and retail trade does not sufficiently consider the small details. Often many things disappear from the sales counters: there is not even toothpaste in perfume shops or department stores; there is no toilet paper in shops for manufactured goods. True, recently a paper called "Tualetnaya" appeared in the ABC-7 shop [in Mustamäe], but this was just a mockery (rough, small sheets of paper). [...]

During the first years, (1960s) when I visited the city of Neya in Kostroma Oblast, I always thought of Tallinn as an example in many respects. Now the situation in Tallinn is similar in many ways to the situation in Neya (Kostroma Oblast). Recently, I had some visitors from Chelyabinsk who immediately announced that Tallinn is no better than Chelyabinsk. [...] Generally, perestroika is not visible in terms of these issues, but the opposite should be true. Respectfully [Name]. (TLA.R-1.11.1339: 28–29)

Two central issues repeatedly arise in the complaints about the service culture and organisation of sales – the sale of beer and alcohol in food shops and the number of drunks that therefore congregate around the shops, and impolite service. These are followed by problems with the shops running out of dairy products halfway through the sales day, and the uneven distribution of the assortment of goods among the city's shops.

One must recognise that in the 1960s, the writers describe their negative purchasing experiences (conflicts with salespeople) in somewhat more detail. This could be for two different reasons. One is probably that by the end of the 1980s there were many self-service supermarkets, where contact between the seller and the buyer was limited to the cashier at the checkout. However, the freer atmosphere of expression of the end of the 1980s, as mentioned above, and the oppositional public opinion that developed within it, is of equal importance, and therefore also the people's courage to criticise the organisation of society and to present demands in one's own name, without fear of repression (cf. Lauristin, Vihalemm 1997). Therefore, the criticism shifts from the salesperson personally (for example, lashing out, under-the-counter sales to acquaintances) to the general organisation of sales, to the prevailing apathy. It is quite unlikely that the second letter here could have been written in the same form in the 1960s. It is also an interesting letter for the fact that although it contains relatively harsh criticism, the system's own language is, more or less consciously, used to express it.

[To the Director of the Trade Association of the Executive Committee of Tartu City Soviet of Working People's Deputies, reg. 20th February 1968] I direct your attention to the butcher's on Võru St. When large quantities of popular items, like fish or delicatessen products, come on sale, they are not even put on the shelves; rather everything disappears to friends from under the counter. All they do is wink their eyes. And the senior salesperson, [Name], doesn't do anything but sell to her friends through the back door. And another ugly story is the fact that if you ask [Name] or the middle-aged brunette woman anything, then you should be quick

to jump back; otherwise, they'll bite your nose off. But the older sales woman and the smaller younger salesperson are both quite respectable and totally acceptable. If you check you will find this to be true. [Name]. (EAA.T-13.2.540: 15)

[To the daily *Õhtuleht*, reg. 19th June 1989] [...] [complaint that it is not possible to buy fresh vegetables in Pelgulinna district] The kiosk where *koas* is sold has been constantly closed lately. The shop manager said that she [the kiosk seller] is a drunkard and would not come to work. You could also buy ice cream there. I offered I could take the job, because I am not working, and the employment card was filled in, but they did not employ me. They said another candidate would be taken. In my opinion Interfront²³ works in that Laine shop, they do not want to employ Estonians. [...] The police are needed at the Minsk shop from 14–21, so that the drunken men and women (mainly unemployed aliens, I suppose) would not damage drink machines and litter the surroundings of the shop. I am very much interested in where these drunkards work. In the morning when they return bottles they are already drunk and form a line behind the door. It is most awful for mothers with children to come to the shop. Children can only see drinking, scolding in Russian and littering. How can we grow our sons and daughters into decent people, the decent, hard-working and honest citizens of a state of the rule of law? Already Mayakovsky said, "My militiaman is guarding me", but I have not yet experienced it, living in Kalinin district. I hope that IME [Self-Sufficient Estonia] manages to make these drunkards work or send them to Russian SFSR to build roads. With regards, resident of Tallinn [Name]. (TLA.R.1.11.1399: 58–60)

BEHAVIOURAL PRACTICES ARE REFLECTED IN THE LETTERS

When reading the letters, one can see that although they are addressed to the public and there are references to general problems in retail trading, the letters still centre on personal practices – be it standing in line for car tyres for several quarters and still finally buying from speculators; roaming the stores for months in order to buy a bar of soap or toothpaste; or reconciling oneself to the salesperson's apathy, impudence, and selling to acquaintances under the counter. Of course, a separate question is the extent of these practices, since letters of complaint are a specific genre in which a specific problem provides the motivation for writing, and therefore, they express the purchase experience primarily as the "result of a no longer postponable utilitarian necessity" (Stitzel 2005: 152). It was actually difficult to even accomplish this.

In the case of these practices, two characteristic moments can be pointed out that appear directly or indirectly in the letters. Writing contemporaneously very clearly introduces the concept of time – how much time did it actually take to buy one or other item. It seems that already in the 1960s, when there still was economic growth (especially in the second half of the decade) it was normal to look for children's shoes in the appropriate size for six months and then still to have to write an inquiry to the trade administration to get a recommendation for a point of sale (cf. EAA.T-13.2.540: 29). The other characteristic moment is indirectly deducible from the points of concern described in the letters and by examining the signatures of the letter writers²⁴ – namely these were women's practices, which is not surprising considering the gender-based

division of labour (cf. Pence 2007). For instance, being the mother of several children and taking into account that there were shortages in almost all children's articles, it is logical to conclude that in order not to spend all of one's free time after work in shops it was desirable to have access to the world of under-the-counter trading – to use one's acquaintances either to procure goods or to get information about their movement and thereby to contribute to the strengthening of the rules of habitual behaviour.

If we examine letter writing itself as a practice, the writers received no direct benefit, at least from a shopping standpoint. They received answers to the letters, but these contained generalised phrases of Bolshevik rhetoric. The answers to the complaints regarding the service culture show that, if necessary, the parties concerned were reprimanded or forced to publicly apologise to the complainants. Apparently in some cases related to complaints about the sale of vodka, the complaints bore some fruit because salespeople were instructed not to sell to drunken individuals. On the other hand, if we examine the examples, with the exception of the wish to buy cinnamon, it is typical that the writer sets his or her own problems into the broader social context, referring to this directly in some cases (“[...] me or I believe most other normal people in Tallinn [...]). In this case, the writing of complaint letters is not so much a practice for getting something as it is an attempt to start a dialogue with the powers that be. Based on the genre-related nature of the complaint letters, the act of writing them already strengthened the paternal relationship between the individual and the state, since the act of writing recognised the state authority as the resolver of one's problems (Stitzel 2005: 160).

If we try to summarise the various behavioural practices and their productiveness, then it seems to have been more useful in Soviet society to be involved with unofficial behavioural practices (acquaintances who put goods aside for you or at least informed you that the goods would come on sale that afternoon) or if this was not possible, at least to display the fastidiousness of reasonable demand, as was appropriate for a Soviet citizen. Just as in the following letter and its accompanying explanatory letter.

[To the Trade Association of the Executive Committee of Tartu City Soviet of Working People's Deputies, reg. 16th December 1967] Statement. In the summer of 1966, when I wished to buy a pair of imported [sports] shoes from the women's shoe store on Riia [Riga] St., they wouldn't sell them to me or to others. The salesperson said that didn't have any. However, since I knew they were supposed to have them, I demanded to see the bill of delivery. At first they would not show it to me, but after a war of nerves that lasted a few hours, they packed a pair of shoes for me. Why are the salespeople concealing merchandise? Where do they plan to display this concealed merchandise?

Second incident at the same store on 27th January 1967. A van arrived with merchandise including imported rubber boots selling for 11 roubles. The salesperson pushed the people out of the shop, only 8–10 people were left inside. A pair of boots was sold to each of them and when the door was opened again, it was announced that there were no more rubber boots. When we started to demand that we be shown the bill of delivery, so we could see how many pairs of boots had arrived, she would not show it to us. The salesperson said she had 8 more pairs of rubber boots that were **reserved**. After a great dispute, one pair of boots was packed up for me. I left and don't know what happened afterwards. 10th February 1967. [Name.] (EAA.T-13.2.507: 6)

[Explanatory letter to the director of the Mood shop, 21st February 1967] Explanation. On 27th January 1967 on bill of delivery no.12/73, we got 50 pairs of women's rubber boots (Czech) for 11 roubles per pair from the warehouse. Apparently people already knew about it because people were standing in the shop waiting for the goods to arrive from 12 o'clock. When the goods arrived at 3:30 p.m., the shop was crowded with people. We put the boots on sale as soon as they arrived. Forty-six pairs. Each of the saleswomen bought a pair for themselves and one cleaner bought one pair. It was not possible for the citizen who wrote the complaint to count how many pairs of boots were sold because she was standing behind the door and later when she got into the shop, the boots were already sold. Three pairs of the boots were reserved by the buyers who did not have the money with them at the moment. One of the buyers did not come to pick up her boots on time, and therefore, the saleswoman was forced to sell that pair to the writer of the complaint. This citizen generally behaved very badly, insulting the saleswomen with vulgar words and continually affirming that she **must** get a pair of boots and she has previously received the items she wants in this way. As far as the people who gave their signatures, these were given much later and were arranged by the complainant. We believe that these boots were sold totally fairly and honestly. I have no other explanation. [Name.] (EAA.T-13.2.507: 7)

CONCLUSION

Public letters had an important place in Soviet society – viewed both from the standpoints of the authorities and the citizens. If for the former it was more of a formal matter, the apparent functioning mechanism of 'participatory democracy', then for the people, writing letters of complaint was one of the few legal ways to criticise the system and this opportunity was utilised.

In this case, the focus of the research was the petitions received by the Tartu Retail Trade Association and Tallinn Markets Administration in the 1960s and 1980s. It should be recognised that when reading the letters, one can continually see that, to a greater or lesser degree, they are letters directed specifically at an official Soviet authority during the Soviet period. This is evident not from the dates or the sometimes tragicomic content of the letters, for example, a request to get a certificate from a flower shop that "on 11th June 1966 there was nothing besides cacti on sale in the flower shop" (EAA.T-13.2.474: 4), but primarily from the language that is used. Using the discourse analysis approach, I have tried to convey the tonality of the letters as a reflection of social reality. On the one hand, the practice of 'speaking Bolshevik' is a conscious effort to give one's complaint greater legitimacy, or to put the system in its place. On the other hand, as time goes on, the less conscious use of official rhetoric becomes both a sign of the habitualisation, which causes a somewhat paradoxical situation in the letters from the 1980s. Being frustrated by the ever-increasing gap between what is official promised or said about and everyday experiences, and therefore being estranged from the authorities, one's criticism moves from one's specific problems to a criticism of the system generally, and yet remains true to the rhetoric of the system that is being criticised. Therefore, the criticism itself remains relatively harmless to the powers that be. In addition, the

act of writing functioned as a way of strengthening the paternal relations between the individual and the state.

Using the qualitative thematic analysis method, I have pointed out the characteristic points of criticism in the letters, which for instance do not focus on compiling as complete a list of goods in short supply as possible. It is logical that the petitions would focus on complaints regarding the fact that one or other item is not on sale, but it was surprising to see how many complaints there were about sales culture and the organisation of sales, and this especially in connection with alcohol sales. Based on genre, the petitions primarily reflect buying experiences or attempts to achieve them, and reflect the functioning official public reality, yet they also contain references to informal behavioural practices, although they only tend to confirm rather than reveal the relational schemes behind them.

One could say that the letters of complaint provide interesting source materials, which are able to speak in many ways about the everyday reality of the time. On the one hand, they include abundant descriptions of behavioural practices, since the problems that were at the root of the complaints had to be contextualised. Having developed immediately in the centre of the events, such descriptions of behavioural practices characteristically provide a specific temporal dimension – the complaint may have been motivated by yesterday's occurrence (for example, a long line at the shop) or the opposite, the fact that despite two months of effort nothing has happened (for example, tedious combing of the shops). On the other hand, the 'voice' or tonality of the letters themselves – which became more irritated, louder, and more bombastic with time – is a reflection of the surroundings, of the dominant mood and of a combined embodiment of discursive practices.

NOTES

1 The so called Political Days (*poliitpäev*) were held about once a month at the places of work in order to introduce the communist ideology to the labouring class. Higher party leaders of the rayon and/or the city along with the functionaries responsible for the concrete lecture came to meet the employees. In addition to explaining the communist order of the society it was a possibility to pose thematic questions and address problematic issues of everyday life.

2 It may be said that the cause of the shortage economy was the planned economy system as a whole, because due to the absence of market factors in this system, companies were independent in terms of their costs and product quality. They focused primarily on the performance of such planning indicators that were the most important and rewarding, for example the output plan in roubles. In addition, the rate of wage increase exceeding that of labour productivity, and subsidised state retail trade created a situation in which there was significantly more money in circulation than goods. As the quantity of money developed, this in turn caused shortages of goods, or deficits.

3 In order to reduce the repetition of cumbersome word combinations, I have used the more colloquial names of the agencies; hereafter when speaking about the Tartu Retail Trade Association and Tallinn Markets Administration together, I use the analytical combined term retail trade administration(s). In fact the name of the Tartu Retail Trade Association between 1958–1987 was the Trade Association of the Executive Committee of the Tartu City Soviet of Working People's Deputies and the name of the Tallinn Markets Administration between 1957–1965 was the Mar-

kets Administration of the Executive Committee of the Tallinn City Soviet of Working People's Deputies.

4 The first coupon product in 1988 was sugar, of which a great deficit shortage occurred due to the making of homemade liquor. This practice was caused by the reduced alcohol production that resulted from Gorbachev's anti-drinking campaign.

5 Here, I am not referring to chronic letter writers, who had, and still do have, the habit of showering agencies with correspondence about all kinds of problems. It seems that there was a person like this in the letters of complaint that I analysed – only two letters from this person have survived, but they include references to previous correspondence (cf. TLA.R-1.11.1368: 123–123r, 238).

6 Some examples: Sheila Fitzpatrick has pointed out that in 1938 the USSR newspaper *Krest'ianskaia gazeta* received an estimated total of 120,000 letters from readers (Fitzpatrick 1997: 150). It is also estimated for the USSR that from 1981–1983 the Central Committees received 2 million letters and local party committees 10 million. Millions of letters came to newspaper: *Pravda* alone received more than half a million each year (Shlapentokh 1989: 102). Jonathan Zatlin supposes that in East Germany a total of at least 500,000 letters per year were written to different state agencies in the 1980s (Zatlin 1997: 906). Unfortunately there are no comparative data for Estonia. However, Tiiu Põld in her diploma thesis wrote that in the 1970s, the *Rahva Hääli* newspaper received 5,000–8,000 letters and contributions a year, depending on the year, about a third of them were contributions ordered by the editors (Põld 1981: 42, 59). The number of letters and contributions was bigger during the first half of the decade, and among the unsolicited letters, according to their manner of writing, about three-quarters were contributions and a quarter were complaints-statements (ibid.: 92). Journalist Helve Võsamäe, in her memoirs, wrote that in the 1960s an average of 120 letters were received by the letters department of the Estonian Radio (including congratulations and requests for pieces of music for the daily *Concert à la carte*), but there were days when more than 200 letters were received (Võsamäe 2006: 323). Sulev Uus recalled that from 1966 to 1982 “numerous” letters were sent to the *Edasi* newspaper. At the same time, the number of letters sent per year also depended on the general tone of the paper and the topics that were dealt with – in the middle of the 1970s, when censorship became much stricter and the contents of the paper became more Communist Party-oriented, the amount of correspondence received from the readers decreased considerably (interview with Sulev Uus, 2nd December 2010).

7 For example, there was a requirement established for newspapers that the authors' fees fund was to be divided among all contributors in the ratio 40:60, in which 40 per cent was for professional journalists and 60 per cent for non-staff authors and correspondents, or the so-called external active group (Uus 1998: 9). In addition, the number and publication percentage of received readers' letters and contributions was one of the criteria for evaluating the efficiency of the editorial office (interview with Sulev Uus, 2nd December 2010).

8 In the major daily newspapers of Estonia a card system was used to keep statistical records of readers' letters from mid-1960s. Such cards included information about the date of receipt of the letter, the author's field of occupation, geography, length of letter, contents, form and purpose of the contribution, etc. Statistics were summarised at the end of month or year, or quarterly or semi-annually (Põld 1981: 42–44). In the second half of the 1980s, KGB agents came to the *Edasi* newspaper office to inspect the letters once a year (Härm 1998: 27). There was an order to send them anti-Soviet letters, but according to Helvi Võsamäe's memoirs, for example, it was not done in the Estonian Radio in the 1960s and at the beginning of the 1970s (Võsamäe 2006: 323), Sulev Uus claimed the same for *Edasi* (interview with Sulev Uus, 2nd December 2010).

9 Of course, the formative influence of the dominant discursive practices in a society affects textual creation in every society. As a unique feature of Soviet society, Alexei Yurchak has pointed out the fact that the copying of textual forms from one context to the next was almost refined to

perfection: ideological forms were duplicated word-for-word and could mean anything. In addition, this was a total practice that could be implemented in areas of life (for example, architecture). (Yurchak 2003: 481)

10 The given statement is true of the specific agency. Since all the letters were not received directly by the Tartu Retail Trade Association or the Tallinn Markets Administration but forwarded to them, one can assume that there are also letters related to retail trade among the materials in the various departments of the cities' executive committees and in the editorial offices of newspapers. Although, for example, in the *Edasi* newspaper, letters were maintained for 1–3 years, depending on the period, and were thereafter destroyed by burning (Härm 1998: 23; interview with Sulev Uus, 2nd December 2010). Letters by well-known people were an exception: these were sent to the Estonian Literary Museum due to their possible cultural-historical value (Härm 1998: 27).

11 The reason obviously lies in the fact that one had to identify oneself to achieve a solution to the problem, and also the newspapers generally did not forward anonymous letters (cf. Härm 1998: 56).

12 Letters written in both languages have been used for analysis without differentiations between them based on language.

13 When processing the complaints, the principle that applied was that if the resolution of the question raised was not within the competence of the recipient of the petition (for example, editorial offices of a newspaper), the petition had to be forwarded within 5 days to the corresponding agency (for example, retail trade administration) and the presenter also notified thereof (cf. clause 4 of the Eesti NSV MN määrus... 1968). Therefore, based on the established procedure, all complaints related to retail trade should have finally arrived at the retail trade association regardless of the initial addressee. Exactly the same procedure applied to the answering of critical articles and satires that appeared in the press as did for petitions that were sent directly by private individuals.

14 In Soviet Estonia, there were two national daily newspapers, *Rahva Häääl* (People's Voice), which belonged officially to the Communist Party, and *Noorte Häääl* (Youth's Voice), which belonged officially to the League of Young Communists. The first paper was quite rigidly controlled by the Communist Party and censored. *Noorte Häääl* was less controlled, but still more so than the third daily *Edasi* (Forward). Although *Edasi* was distributed throughout Estonia, it was officially considered a local newspaper, being the daily for the second-largest town, Tartu, and its region, and so it was allowed to follow the local censorship system (Harro 2000: 82). It was weaker censorship and the opportunity to crawl behind the banner of 'only a city or regional newspaper' that made *Edasi* more steelier and sharper in tone in the selection of topics than the large dailies, which is why I also favour *Edasi*. In addition, *Edasi* was one of the most popular newspapers with readers throughout Estonia.

15 From the viewpoint of carrying out research, the processing of the archival material was preceded by prior familiarisation with newspaper articles related to the topic of retail trade. Therefore, the quantity of the articles that were read about retail trade includes the entire post-war period of the Estonian SSR, i.e. 1944–1991, although the examination based on the source materials covers a narrower period in this article.

16 When presenting letters here and hereafter, the addressee will be listed first, followed by the date of receipt registered by the Trade Administration. If necessary, the grammar of the letters has been corrected. My comments are inserted in brackets [] and [...] is used to indicate an omitted part of the letter. The writer's own emphasis, which was usually underlined (in colour) in the original has been set off in bold type.

17 There was a popular suspicion that salespeople were selling the majority of the lots of shortage merchandise that arrived at the stores to their friends, who later resold the merchandise at a profit (cf. Luuk 1973: 2). This was an ideologically reprehensible phenomenon and was criminally punishable.

18 Esta Härm has analysed the readers' letters published in the *Edasi* newspaper between the years 1986–1991 and found that the dominant part (about 70 per cent) of the letters were written in a critical tone, while readers' letters in a discursive-argumentative style became predominant only in the period from 1994–1996 (Härm 1998: 30–44). Service and consumer protection were also the most popular topics in the years 1986–1992, and particularly so between 1986–1987, when more than a half of the published readers' letters were written on this topic (ibid.: 50).

19 In Estonian *irovitamine elementaarsete hügieeninõuete üle and lõpetada inimeste mõnitamine*.

20 The 'Estonian period' was the period of Republic of Estonia from 1918–1940. The fact that the author was a member of the older generation is evident from the Estonian-language original letter, in which she used 'older' vocabulary in the context of the Soviet period – for instance the word *äri* to mean shop, instead of *kauplus*.

21 The distribution of car buying permits and telephone subscriptions were not under the jurisdiction of the retail trade associations, which is why there was no sense writing to them. At the same time, a dozen requests for car buying permits were found among the archival materials of the Tallinn Markets Administration, which had been forwarded to them by various means. It was typical that almost all the requests were from men and privileged Soviet citizens who were already entitled to special benefits, such as personal pensioners and invalids of the Great Patriotic War. From the accompanying correspondence, one can see that in at least three cases, car buying permits were issued.

22 Sentences like "We can all see how our city is growing. Living conditions are improving; the service sphere is developing" are viewed here as conscious strategy of using official rhetoric, whereby, by recognising the achievements that have been made, one demonstrates that one is a loyal citizen who wishes to improve the system through criticism.

23 Interfront (*Interrinne*) is the popular name for the International Movement of the Workers of the Estonian SSR, initiated by KGB and CPSU in 1988. This Russian empire-minded movement united the forces that opposed the independence of Estonia.

24 Of course, the question of the 'typicality' of the letter writers remains open, since based only on a name and address it is not possible to determine whether the person was more pretentious than average or belonged to a certain social group. At the same time, correct grammar could indicate that the writer had at least a secondary (professional) education.

SOURCES

Archival sources

EAA – Estonian Historical Archives.

EAA.T-13 – Fonds of the Retail Trade Association of the Executive Committee of the Tartu City Soviet of Working People's Deputies.

TLA – Tallinn City Archives.

TLA.R-1. – Fonds of the Executive Committee of the Tallinn City Soviet of Working People's Deputies.

Interviews

Interview with Sulev Uus (2nd December 2010, the interview is in the author's possession). Sulev Uus (b. 1935) was the Deputy Editor of the *Edasi* newspaper in 1966–1982, he supervised the departments of industry, agriculture and letters in the editorial office.

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