

## Brigitta Davidjants. *J.M.K.E.'s To the Cold Land*. 33 1/3 Europe, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2025, 141 lk.

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Brigitta Davidjants's *J.M.K.E.'s To the Cold Land*, published in Bloomsbury's *33 1/3 Europe* series in 2025, is an essential addition to Estonian popular music studies. As with all the books in the series, *J.M.K.E.'s To the Cold Land* analyses a single album within the frame of an artist's career and uses that album to interpret its historical moment. Davidjants's album is *Külmale maale (To the Cold Land)* by the Estonian punk band J.M.K.E.<sup>1</sup> *To the Cold Land* was J.M.K.E.'s first studio album, recorded at Shabby Road Studios in Helsinki, Finland and released in 1989. The album is a natural choice for the first book on Estonian music in the *33 1/3 Europe* series: Estonian music critics voted it the best Estonian album of all time in 2014.

Davidjants's approach in *J.M.K.E.'s To the Cold Land* blends lyrical and musical analysis, (auto-) ethnographic research with artists and fans, and memory-studies-informed historiography. She focuses on the threads of historical memory and dramatic social and political changes that braided together in 1985–1989 when *To the Cold Land's* songs were written, letting us appreciate the monumentality of the album with newfound richness. Davidjants convincingly positions the album as a punk expression of the sweep of Estonian history filtered through the 'no future' malaise that Villu Tamme and his J.M.K.E. bandmates lived through in the stagnant 1980s. J.M.K.E.'s album echoes Eduard Vilde's 1896 novel of the same name (*To the Cold Land*), which inscribed experiences of violent displacement to the 'cold land' of Siberia in Estonian cultural memory. It connects 1980s Estonian youth culture to the generational traumas of the Soviet deportations that sent tens of thousands to the 'cold land'. And it gives Estonian punk expression to a moment of Cold War dread and the horrific

prospect of the 'cold land' of a post-apocalyptic nuclear winter.

Davidjants's book is the product of her expert listening to J.M.K.E.'s work, the local and regional meanings of punk in 1980s Estonia, and the voices of her interlocutors, chiefly among them J.M.K.E. frontman Villu Tamme. *J.M.K.E.'s To the Cold Land* brings us to the moment in the perestroika-era Estonian punk scene that anthropologist Alexei Yurchak describes in *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*: punk was neither the 'experimental sound of Western rock bands' that became 'compatible with the future-oriented ethos of communist imaginations' nor the 'predictable realism of "light music" performed by state-authorized Soviet orchestras and pop groups' (2006: 289). Its lyrical acerbity, vocal irony, and musical aggression undermined the 'authoritative discourse' (Yurchak 2006) aimed at continually reproducing Soviet reality. 'Thanks to this,' Davidjants writes, 'Estonian punk musicians could be seen as the first to predict the idea that the life may not continue as it had for almost fifty years in the Estonian SSR' (p. 5).

Through her careful analyses, Davidjants offers readers musical points of entry into the experience of life in late-Soviet Estonia: immutable, interminable social malaise (distilled into the punk motto 'no future'); cultural erasure at the hands of intensifying Russification and censorship; the specter of environmental catastrophe wrought by Soviet extractive industries; the historical trauma of occupation, population losses, and dehumanization; and the fear of nuclear annihilation. In documenting how J.M.K.E. expressed multi-generational experiences with lyrical and musical force, Davidjants makes a number of important contributions to the transdisciplinary

<sup>1</sup> From 'Jeesus Maria, Karjatas Eit' or 'Jesus Mary, Shrieked the Hag', a phrase from Jaroslav Hašek's novel *The Good Soldier Švejk* (first published in 1921–1923).

scholarship on late-Soviet culture and politics, popular music studies, and postcolonial memory studies.

First, Davidjants positions punks at the forefront of Singing Revolution activism in Estonia by being some of the first to connect patriotic expression to their disregard for attempts to control society. When the Singing Revolution was still an inchoate movement in 1987–1988, punks sang patriotic songs publicly, defying the militia: ‘It is said that such singing was initiated by punks—a social group which dared to deviate from the Soviet order’ (p. 4). Second, she reminds us that punk was one of the most important perestroika-era subcultures alongside subcultural religious and folklore movements. Third, Davidjants highlights an important distinction in late-Soviet Estonian music culture between punk’s defiant nihilism and professional Estonian composers’ ‘escapist creative strategies that allowed them to hide symbolically from power’ (p. 24). Fourth, Davidjants takes care to ideologically distinguish anti-Soviet Estonian punk from anti-capitalist punk movements beyond the Iron Curtain. Finally, unlike a popular music studies approach that ascribes fixed meanings to musical styles as they circulate, Davidjants listens with decolonial ears to show how styles filtering into Soviet Estonia via pirate radio stations and Finnish television took on novel forms and functions. ‘Local musicians picked up pieces of global phenomena,’ Davidjants writes, ‘filling in the information gaps and adapting them to their own environment’ (p. 29).

*J.M.K.E.’s To the Cold Land* begins with a chapter introducing readers to J.M.K.E. (Villu Tamme on vocals and guitar, Lembit Krull on bass, and Venno Vanamölder on drums), the emergence of Estonian punk in the late 1970s, and J.M.K.E.’s role in perestroika-era Estonia. Davidjants emphasizes that the very existence of *To the Cold Land* is evidence of the changing conditions of censorship and collective memory the album explores—a poetic narrative which leads from Stalinism to perestroika’ (p. 6). The album is also an artifact of the second-hand memories of historical events that J.M.K.E. members had not directly experienced. Davidjants discusses her decision to organise the album’s twelve songs both chronologically and ideologically into the book’s four central chapters, each of which deals with a dis-

tinct period of Soviet Estonian history and memory.

Chapter 2 elaborates on punk’s prehistories in the Estonian *sovetskii zapad* (‘Soviet West’). In the 1950s, Teddy Boys (*lõngused*) appeared on the streets of Tallinn, and in the late 1960s, hippies accessed trends from abroad via Finnish television and pirate radio. Both of these subcultures fed into the emergence of Estonian punk in the late 1970s, most notably with the band Propeller. The Soviet regime attempted to suppress punk through censorship, involuntary psychiatric interventions, and tariffications—classifications assigned by the Ministry of Culture that determined what was materially and financially available to a band. J.M.K.E. failed their tariffication in 1986, denying them official opportunities to perform publicly. Davidjants focuses on the track ‘Censor’ in connection with this period. In it, Tamme’s distorted voice sings from the perspective of a Soviet censor, ironically pronouncing the names of Estonian dissidents and promising psychiatric treatment for those of their ilk. True to the moment of *To the Cold Land*, however, was the reality that Tamme recalled to Davidjants: ‘It was already possible to sing about censorship without there being censorship’ (p. 33).

Chapter 3 turns to songs on the album responding to the calamitous conditions of the early 1980s: economic recession, escalating censorship, and intensifying Russification. ‘My Grandfather Was a Deserter’ harkens back to the wartime mobilization of Estonian men into the German and/or Soviet armies to celebrate escape—rather than masculine militarism—as a noble form of protest, then and in the 1980s. The centerpiece of the chapter, and one of Davidjants’s most nuanced analyses in the book, comes with the song ‘Beria Is Still Alive’. Lavrenty Beria (1899–1953) was head of Stalin’s NKVD, the state organ responsible for political purges, extrajudicial executions, and the Gulag system of forced labor. Written 35 years after Beria’s death, ‘Beria Is Still Alive’ is tinged with clashing major/minor chords, pronounced tritones and augmented fifths, and minor-second melodic clusters in Krull’s and Tamme’s guitar lines. Tamme’s breathy, growling vocal delivery never settles on pitches for long, tumbling ahead of Vanamölder’s beat through ironic lyrical references to a well-known

Estonian children's song about goslings trapped in their barn after a snowfall. In the song's dismal chorus, Tamme exclaims:

Beria is still alive  
Like dysentery his breath torments the vast country  
The bloody dynasty of Beria is still alive  
The incurable illness called the KGB

The message, as Davidjants tells us, is this: 'if you want to ignore power, you have no future in the Soviet Union' (p. 55).

Chapter 4 listens to J.M.K.E. songs connecting to Estonian folklore, anarcho-pacifism during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and environmental activism during the Phosphorite War. Flying creatures figure prominently in this chapter. In 'Summer of the White Butterfly', the traditional Estonian belief that if the first spring butterfly one sees is white, then a difficult summer awaits is translated by J.M.K.E. to the white clouds of an atomic bomb: white butterflies swarm in the springtime, portending a 'winter of a thousand years'. And in 'Hands Up, Virumaa', a track about planned phosphorite mining in northeastern Estonia that would bring devastating environmental consequences, the cuckoo, a 'bird of evil omen' (p. 82) in Estonian folk religion, enters lyrically into the song's soundworld, 'predicting a hundred years of misfortune' in the opening verse. At the end of the song, Tamme invokes a raven, the black harbinger of death in Estonian folk religion, who cries atop a birch tree about the pyrrhic victory of environmentally ruinous phosphorite extraction: 'You got it, you got it—but didn't get anything at all!'

In Chapter 5, we arrive at the title track—'To the Cold Land'—and to J.M.K.E.'s most popular song—'Hello Perestroika', the iconic punk sound of the Singing Revolution. Both express what

Davidjants calls 'perestroika skepticism': the idea that Stalinist terror is a structural part of the Soviet system, and sure to return. Tamme snarls 'What's that Gorby smiling at? / But Gorby's got a plan / After the parade's over' in the opening verse of 'To the Cold Land', perhaps the album's most aggressive, most hardcore track. Similarly, in the last chorus of 'Hello Perestroika', it's 'Hello perestroika, happy homeland / I'll say hello to you as long as I get you'. Davidjants hears 'Hello Perestroika' as a mocking take on Soviet Pioneer songs, which promised a hyperbolically bright future, with its singable, major-key chorus rubbing up against minor-key verses and militaristic snare figures. Both songs, with their brazen lyrics and antagonistic, noise-tinged vocals and instrumentals are enactments of the expressive freedoms they tout (and doubt). Tamme shared with Davidjants that 'Then it already seemed that everything was really free. Not as free as later on, but certainly compared to before' (p. 90).

Davidjants closes *J.M.K.E.'s To the Cold Land* by turning to the album's afterlives across generations of Estonians since the 1980s. Through her conversations with Tamme in writing the book and through fan testimony solicited through social media, Davidjants shows how the album was a punk history of the present for the generation coming of age in the 1980s and a historical primer for Estonian youth today. *To the Cold Land's* musical, lyrical, and production qualities mean that J.M.K.E. will maintain an essential place in Estonian popular music history, and Davidjants's book is essential in helping us understand why. The reality *To the Cold Land* confronts is not soon to change: the evils of totalitarianism, ecocide, and the ideology-driven sacrifice of human life. Crucially, though, the album offers a foothold on that reality, voicing 'our changing sense of who we are and who we were' (p. 119).

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## References

Yurchak, Alexei 2006. *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.