

How to Sovietise Jazz? The Beginnings of the Anti-Jazz Campaign in Soviet Estonia in the Early Autumn of 1946

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The Soviet regime, which returned to Estonia in the autumn of 1944, launched an extensive process of Sovietisation that affected all spheres of life in society. Decisions regarding ideology that were adopted in Moscow in the summer of 1946 (regarding literary periodicals, theatre and cinema; see Artizov, Naumov 1999: 587–596, 598–602, 630–634) played a key role in Sovietising cultural life. Taken together, these decisions marked a decisive tipping point in the political muzzling of intellectual life in the Soviet Union as a whole as well as in the Soviet republics. The foreign policy background in the form of the development of confrontation between the great powers – the Cold War – affected the adoption of these decisions.

Ideological conditions changed rapidly, and they left their mark on all spheres of cultural life. One of the casualties was jazz music, which also fell out of favour. An anti-jazz campaign was launched in the Estonian SSR in September and October of 1946 in the press of the time, where articles in the cultural weekly *Sirp ja Vasar* penned by the music critic Serafim Milovski (Milovski 1946a, b), who was exceedingly loyal to the regime, set the tone. Yet the attacks on jazz were not limited to the press alone. Against the background of the public ‘discussion’ that took place in the press, the question of jazz – how to Sovietise jazz? – also appeared on the agenda at the level of the power elite of the Estonian SSR. A letter¹ dated 28 September 1946 from Johannes Semper, the head of the Estonian SSR Arts Administration, to Nikolai Karotamm, the leader of the Estonian Communist Party, confirms this. The letter outlines the power elite’s shared understanding regarding jazz music, which influenced the Soviet regime’s subsequent steps in guiding this sphere of activity towards a Soviet path. The repertoire of the Estonian SSR State Philharmonic Jazz Orchestra was hurriedly Sovietised and a new performance programme based on the ‘idea of international friendship’ was put together for it.² The orchestra’s leader Vladimir Sapozhnin was also subjected to criticism.

Thus, the authorities began systematically to force jazz music out of Soviet society. Although jazz was not yet liquidated once and for all in 1946, such an ultimate solution was only a matter of time. The process launched in the early autumn of 1946 culminated in 1948 when, after the Kremlin’s decision regarding Vano Muradeli’s opera *The Great Friendship*, the entire sphere of music was subjected to all-encompassing ideological control. This put an end to jazz once and for all, also at an official level. The last performance of the former Estonian SSR State Philharmonic Jazz Orchestra took place in November of 1948. The return of jazz became possible in the altered political conditions of the thaw that began only after Joseph Stalin’s death.

¹ RA, ERAF.1.81.14 s. 30.

² RA, ERAF.1.81.14, s. 31–32.