Abstract

This article aims to provide insight into interpreting in Estonia from 1944 to 1991, during the years when it was part of the Soviet Union. The author worked with Estonian archival film and photo collections in order to establish the use of interpreting in Estonia after World War II. The earliest footage of simultaneous interpretation discovered is from an Estonia-related event in Moscow in August 1940. The visual proof collected and interviews with interpreters allow the author to conclude that interpretation was used to facilitate communication between Russian- and Estonian-speaking communities.

Keywords

Simultaneous interpreting, history of interpreting in Estonia, photographic analysis, film footage analysis, Estonian archives.

Introduction

The objective of the author's study, in addition to mapping the evolution of conference interpretation in Estonia, is to help preserve the fast disappearing oral heritage of that interpretation. To paraphrase the UNESCO concept of intangible cultural heritage, living heritage is very fragile, and this part of our cultural history could disappear unless it is researched and preserved. Preparations for
Estonia’s accession to the European Union (2004) carried with it a renewed interest in interpreting as a profession. Before that, the first surge of knowledgeable interest in interpreting in Estonia appeared in the late 1970s during the preparations for the Tallinn Olympic Yachting Regatta, which was held as part of the 1980 Summer Olympics in Moscow. That being said, the history of interpretation in Estonia dates much further back. Similar to the history of the country itself, it can be divided into three periods: the Republic of Estonia (1918-1940), Soviet-occupied Estonia (1944-1991) and regained independence (since 1991). As a conference and diplomatic interpreter herself, the author has undertaken pioneering research into the history of interpretation in Estonia. She has analysed the period from 1918 to 1940 in several articles (Sibul 2012), with a stress on diplomatic interpreting (Sibul 2014a, 2014b, 2015b).

The novelty of the article lies in finding and examining factual material (film footage and photos) to establish whether interpretation between Estonian and Russian was used in Soviet Estonia, when the country was under the Soviet occupation. After presenting the linguistic and demographic context of the period under review, the author moves on to discuss interpreting and interpreters from 1944 to 1991. Interpretation in post-war Soviet Estonia is examined from two angles: interpreting from and into Estonian and Russian, and interpreting from and into Estonian and other foreign languages. Apart from covering the different uses of interpretation, the author’s aim was also to identify interpreters in order to determine the approximate size of the interpreter community during this period, filling a gap in the history of interpreting between Estonian and Russian. The author’s starting hypothesis was that interpretation was introduced to facilitate communication between Russian- and Estonian-speaking communities. This was a direct result of the fact that when Russian was introduced as the language of international communication in Estonia in 1944, there was an immediate influx of Russian-speaking Soviet party and government officials.

1. Demographic context

After World War II not only the political order but also the linguistic environment changed in Estonia, and Russian was introduced as a language of international communication (Kasekamp 2010; Lagerspetz 1996; Lauristin et al. 1997; Mole 2012). The share of Estonian-speakers dropped from 94% in 1945 to 76% in 1950 (Raun 1991: 182). Between the two World Wars Estonia was considered the most homogeneous of the three Baltic countries (Zetterberg 2011: 400), with Estonians making up about 90% of the country’s population in the 1930s (Raun 1991); this shrank to 61.5% by 1989 (Vare 1999). The conservative estimate of population loss from 1940 to 1945 is a minimum of 200,000 people (Raun 1991: 181). The influx of Russian-speakers (about 180,000 from 1945 to 1953) meant that about every fifth person was an immigrant in Estonia (Raun 1991: 182). According to Rein Taagepera (2008: 80), the total loss of population while Estonia was a Soviet republic was the largest since the Great Northern War in the early 18th century. Unlike Central European countries (Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovenia,
Hungary), Estonia lost its monoethnicity, as industrialisation was carried out by importing a Russian-speaking working class and collectivisation was preceded by mass deportation (Aarelaid 2008: 73). The share of Russians in Estonia leaped from 8.2% in 1934 to 20% by 1959 according to that year’s census, and to 30.3% by the time of the 1989 census (Vare 1999).

2. Linguistic context

When Estonia was occupied by the Soviet Union, the spread of Russian began to permeate the entire country. Immigrants to Estonia had no reason to learn the local language, as Russian was used as an ideological tool to enhance the socio-political cohesion of Soviet society. Regardless of their mother tongue, immigrant children usually attended schools in which Russian was the language of instruction, whereas Estonian children attended Estonian-speaking schools. The 1989 census revealed that 78% of Jews, 63% of Poles and 56% of Germans living in Estonia considered Russian their mother tongue (Vare 1999: 77). Mandatory Russian classes were introduced not only in primary school but also at Tartu University. Despite the steps taken to introduce a changeover to Russian, in the 1960s “the Estonian intelligentsia began to reassert itself” and a kind of “renaissance [took] place in cultural life” (Raun 1991: 189). Although the party governance style was foreign to them, locals learned to live with Soviet peculiarities (Aarelaid 2008: 74). Culture, however, remained a field in which Russian dominance had difficulty asserting itself (Taagepera 1993: 85).

Political history is often the history of occupation, with changes “imposed on a speech community by the occupying power in order to secure the position of the new regime by inflicting a new (loyal) way of thinking on the oppressed population” (Raag 2010: 106). Language can be used both to persuade and manipulate. A newspaper article from that period, for example, condemned the popular Estonian attitude of considering Russian a foreign language: “Russian is closer to us than any foreign language. We cannot consider Russian a foreign language, as this is a language of communication between all nations in the Soviet Union; it is the language of the world’s first socialist state. [...] Estonians have to know it as well as their mother tongue” (Feldbach 1948).

In the Estonian Communist Party many of the top positions were reserved for monolingual Russians, who could not participate in events held in Estonian without interpretation. In one article its author regretted that “the Estonian language does not have such rich vocabulary as the great Russian language” (Simberg 1950) and stated that instead of using English or German names, companies should have translated their names into Estonian the way Lenin translated them into Russian (ibid.). There were also articles, however, that stressed that the Estonian language was rich enough “to express the finest emotional nuances” (Peegel 1952).

Language has always been a mark of national prestige, and to curb this prestige, the USSR Council of Ministers passed a secret decree in 1978 on learning and teaching Russian in Soviet republics, with its primary aims to limit the use of Estonian in public settings and to enforce the Russian language on Estonians.
The 1982 Education Act of Estonia stipulated in §24 that the Soviet people had voluntarily accepted Russian as the language of international communication (Education Act 1982). The usage of the Estonian language survived, however, as did Estonian culture (Taagepera 2008).

3. Methods and materials

The sources used for this article primarily comprised non-textual artefacts (photos and newsreels) and to a limited extent textual sources (interviews, memoirs and newspaper articles). Written data about the use of interpreting is extremely fragmented; thus, written sources were mostly uninformative, occasionally indicating the use of interpretation with a single word.

Although Franz Pöchhacker (2006: 64) states that “basic techniques for data collection might be summarised as watch, ask and record”, he mentions that documentary material is also used when researching interpretation. In his words, this “can be viewed as an indirect and unobtrusive observational technique and is of obvious relevance to the product-oriented study of interpreting”. David Silverman (2006: 68) agrees: “ethnographers today do not always ‘observe’, at least directly. They may work with cultural artefacts like written texts”.

The author conducted 65 open semi-structured interviews for her research: 33 with interpreters and 32 with people who recruited interpreters or occasionally used interpreters from the 1950s to the 1990s. None of the 33 interviewed interpreters were professionals if the criterion for professionalism was training or full-time employment as an interpreter, except for two, who worked full time at two drama theatres and interpreted performances from Estonian into Russian. The pool of interpreters included speakers of various foreign languages – English, Finnish, French, German, Polish, Russian, Spanish and Swedish – who were all fluent in Estonian. They represent two different target and source language groups: Russian (20) and other (13).

The author searched the National Archives of Estonia and the Tartu University Photo Collection for historic facts and data to confirm or refute recollections that came from interviews. To the author’s knowledge these sources have not previously been examined from the point of view of interpreting. The aim was to find images depicting either the audience using headphones to confirm simultaneous interpretation or an interpreter providing consecutive interpretation, the objective being to also find potential early events for which simultaneous interpretation was used. The author or other interpreters recognized several interpreters standing next to the speaker, treating this as conclusive evidence of consecutive interpretation being performed. In translation studies the visual “is only just beginning to attract detailed attention” (Wolf/Fernández-Ocampo 2014: 2), but it offers a lead since factual material about interpreting is scarce.

Parts of the National Archives’ collections are accessible electronically. Research into those collections was confused somewhat by the fact that in Estonian the verbs to translate and to interpret are expressed using the same word, tõlkima. Indeed, the words tõlk and tõlkija were used both for interpreters and translators.
until the late 1980s. Recently a clearer distinction has been introduced in the terminology: tõlk is becoming the established word for interpreter and tõlkija that for translator. Nevertheless, this distinction has not yet become common in the everyday use of the words. As both tõlk and tõlkija have long been used interchangeably, it is not possible to distinguish between the terms when reading memoirs and archive materials, which also makes electronic searches more complicated.

The author searched the Film Archive Online Database to find relevant newsreels from its Movie and Sound Collection. Each entry in the database comes with a brief description of the footage, allowing researchers to carry out an electronic search by using key words (such as anniversary, jubilee, revolution, conference, congress, etc.). Searching for the term synchronised (meaning that the image and sound are synchronised) helped the author discover newsreels with authentic sound (651), which, in addition to footage relevant for this specific research, also included footage of interviews, concerts, etc. The author watched all relevant footage from 1944 to 1991. Searching for interpreter/translator yielded 26 results, seven of which portrayed an interpreter. In all, the author analysed 114 clips of footage, finding 87 instances of interpretation from and into Russian and 27 instances of interpretation from and into languages other than Russian.

The Digitised Photo Database was also searched for photos depicting the use of interpreting. Searching for Estonian SSR Supreme Council yielded 6,160 digitised photos, of which 189 depicted simultaneous interpretation. This turned out to be the most useful word combination to search for, as it yielded not only photographs of parliamentary sessions, but also of various other events the Chairman of the Supreme Council (i.e., the Soviet-era president) attended or participated in. Several clips of footage and photos led to inconclusive conclusions, portraying only standing audiences in the midst of applauding, or only speakers, or were of poor quality (too dark or slightly blurred).

The author also searched for photos depicting the use of interpreting in the Tartu University Photo Collection, which contains a comprehensive collection of negatives (1948-1998) from the university photo laboratory. The outcome of this research was fascinating; the author discovered what are presumably the only existing images of simultaneous interpreters at work and of a rare headset, the so-called ‘soapbox’.

The Bibliography Department of the Archival Library at the Estonian Literary Museum has compiled a database, Tartu University (since 1940). Each bibliography file card in the database features a brief summary of an article published in Estonian newspapers. Going through these yielded several rare pieces of information, helping to locate two articles from 1961 and 1964. The author has not discovered any documents referring to interpretation in the Soviet-era parliament.


4.1 Russian

When designing her research, the author decided to focus on interpreting from and into Estonian and Russian at the Supreme Council of the Estonian Soviet So-
cialist Republic (ESSR), the Soviet-era parliament, hereinafter referred to as the parliament, as this was one of the potential venues where interpreting might have been used.

In the collections of the National Archives the author discovered 87 clips of footage covering the period from 1944 to 1991, which depict simultaneous interpretation from and into Estonian and Russian. Specifically, these clips came from 36 of those 47 years. The three years with the most clips were 1957 (7), 1955 (6) and 1960 (6), although no special events took place. Looking at this by decade, the 1950s lead with 39 clips covering a diverse range of interpreted events. For the six Soviet years in the 1940s, 14 such instances were found, and another 14 were found for the 1960s. In the 1970s and 1980s there were fewer instances, with eleven and eight cases respectively; those clips portrayed interpreting either at parliamentary sessions or party congresses. Only one interpreted event was shown in the 1990s, with the Republic of Estonia having regained its independence in 1991.

The 1950s witnessed a change in the linguistic-demographic situation in Estonia: the inflow of Russian-speaking Soviets from all parts of the Soviet Union continued (Raun 1991). As the years from 1951 to 1960 are those with the most depictions of interpreting in newsreel clips, the need for simultaneous interpretation between Estonian and Russian during those years was examined. The 39 clips from the 1950s displayed events organised by: the communist party (13), the parliament (11), creative associations (6), the young communist league (4), and others (5). If we break this down by subject matter there are seven categories: the communist party (10), parliamentary sessions (9), agriculture (7), peace and friendship (4), jubilees (4), specific professions (4) and sport (1). By type of convention, there are four groups: conferences/meetings (16), anniversaries/jubilees/ceremonies (11), parliamentary sessions (9) and congresses (3), The conventions were aimed at diverse target groups, such as rural doctors, teachers, firemen, composers, women, rural youth and chairmen of collective farms.

The 87 clips of footage allow us to conclude that the majority of events (68) were conferences, congresses and meetings, primarily organised either by the parliament or the communist party. Addressed to a wider public, they usually involved both Estonian- and Russian-speaking audiences with interpretation provided into the respective language. Nineteen clips covered events targeting a more specific, mostly Estonian audience (teachers, doctors, composers, writers); as a rule, the guest speakers at these events were from elsewhere in the Soviet Union or were monolingual Russian-speaking high-level party officials whose speeches were interpreted into Estonian and for whom speeches in Estonian were interpreted into Russian.

An analysis of the footage reveals the direct impact of the 1978 decree to limit the use of Estonian. For the period from 1979 to 1988, clips from only two years (1986 and 1988) were found in which headphones were used. By the 1980s overall knowledge of Russian had increased as well, which could also explain the decreased use of interpretation.

One of the most remarkable discoveries unearthed was a newsreel from 1972, dedicated to the 50th anniversary of the Soviet Union. It contained footage from Moscow in 1940 and covered Estonia’s incorporation into the Soviet Union. The
entire audience in Moscow used headphones to listen to the speech by Estonia’s representative; he must therefore have spoken Estonian. Similar footage is dated 1944, and shows the chairman of Soviet Estonia’s parliament delivering a speech at a session of the parliament of the Soviet Union in Moscow; in it, the audience is again using headphones. This was a breakthrough in the author’s research, as she thus unearthed the earliest evidence of simultaneous interpretation from Estonian being used.

The author was able to draw up a list of a large variety of interpreted events, based on interviews with twenty interpreters who worked from Estonian into Russian and from Russian into Estonian. These events can be grouped as follows: events organised by parliament, government and the party; events organised by youth organisations; and events organised by creative associations (of composers, writers, etc.). Looking at this breakdown by topic reveals a yearly cycle of significant dates (the anniversary of the October Revolution, Lenin’s birthday, etc.); other topics included agriculture, peace and friendship. Two interviewees mentioned that Russian-Estonian interpreting was sometimes used at party congresses, parliamentary sessions and collective farmers’ conventions in Moscow. The only conclusive archival evidence the author was able to discover were two clips from 1940 and 1944, showing parliamentary interpreting in Moscow.

An electronic search of the Digitised Photo Database resulted in 10,535 relevant digitised photos, though only 343 depicted headphones. 134 show headphones in use at parliamentary sessions, 20 at other parliament-related events, and 189 at various congresses and conventions. The author thus gathered overwhelmingly convincing visual evidence that interpretation from and into Estonian and Russian was used during the Soviet years. This outcome, however, was still slightly discouraging since a mere 3% of the total photos depicted headphones.

By far the largest category covered by film footage is that of parliamentary interpretation. Twenty-eight video clips and 134 photos from 59 sessions (out of 103) held by twelve sitting parliaments (1944-1991) include shots of headphones, confirming that simultaneous interpretation was extensively used – specifically, in 57% of sessions in total. In the period under review in this article, Estonia was no longer independent. It was, however, one of the three Soviet republics that employed parliamentary interpreting, allowing speakers to use their mother tongue. The interpreters, by ensuring the official use of Estonian in the Soviet-era parliament, could unintentionally be associated with the so-called resistance to the total domination of Russian. Interpreters assume a responsibility to interpret unambiguously, and use their linguistic capabilities, thesaurus and professionalism to do so. The author has discussed parliamentary interpreting in greater detail in another article (Sibul 2015a).

In the interviews carried out by the author, it emerged that there was an active team of 6-7 interpreters in the 1970s and 1980s who worked together and promoted each other, competing with one another in a friendly manner and occasionally even giving awards to the best interpreter of the team. Indeed, colleagues’ praise was highly valued. Descriptions of interpreting attitudes in the interviews led to the author dividing interpreters into two groups: interpreter-philosophers and interpreter-officials, as several interviewees referred to them. The philosophers
were willing to spend hours discussing minute details of terminology in search of the best possible option; they would have made excellent translators. While interpreting they lagged far behind the speaker. Those who used interpreters often preferred interpreter-officials, who were able to keep up with the speakers even if they sometimes had to cut corners. They never stumbled and successfully jumped hurdles. In analysing what was said during the interviews, the author divided up the types of interpreters in another way, as well: those who aimed at a maximum of preciseness, interpreting word for word and providing translation into Russian at breakneck speed, and those who focused on the quality of performance and kept a regular pace. Inexperienced interpreters unable to keep up in simultaneous mode and who attempted to switch to consecutive interpretation while on mic were deemed to fail, as the trailing echo of their interpretation after the speaker had finished was easily heard in the audience.

Thus far the author has discovered two books of memoirs that briefly mention interpreting. In the first, a budding actor was asked to interpret between a Russian film director and Estonian actors at the filming of the first Estonian feature film in 1955 (Tammer 2004). In the second, an Estonian conscript to the Soviet army was sent to serve on an Estonian island to facilitate communication between locals and Russian border guards. The conscript was thought to be fluent in Russian, as he had been deported to Siberia as a child (Männiksoo 2013).

Film footage (87 clips) and photos (323) provide sufficient evidence to confirm that interpretation, both simultaneous and consecutive, was extensively used when Estonia was part of the Soviet Union. The parliament was by far the most active user of simultaneous interpretation, as shown in 30 clips of footage and 134 photos that depict the use of headphones. Party conventions and meetings follow: 38 clips and 87 photos. Communist party and young communist league events are shown exclusively in film, while eight photos also depict the founding of three other parties. The remaining 19 clips and 102 photos demonstrate that interpretation was used at congresses organised by creative associations, by trade unions and by specific professions (teachers, farmers, inventors, lifeguards, etc.). All creative associations are represented (writers, artists, composers, architects, journalists and filmmakers), as are the choral and performing arts associations.

4.2 Foreign languages

During the period under review, Estonian society was politically imprisoned, the links to the free world having been severed. Visits by foreign guests were extremely rare. The author’s research in the Film Archives yielded 27 newsreels portraying interpretation between Estonian or Russian and a foreign language other than Russian. Five of these were of simultaneous interpretation, from 1957, 1958 and 1979. The largest number of clips found from any one year was from 1956, in which five events that made use of consecutive interpretation were portrayed. 1957 and 1983 followed, with three cases of simultaneous and three cases of consecutive interpretation respectively. For 1966, 1989, 1990 and 1991, two clips from each year were found that show consecutive interpretation, and
footage from 1958 portrayed both simultaneous and consecutive interpretation. Twenty-seven clips of footage can be broken down into eight groups by field: friendship (6), culture (6), politics (5), sport (5), foreign relations (2), trade unions (2), and church (1).

By language, German is represented in six clips; Swedish in four; Finnish, Hungarian and English in three each; and Chinese, French, Japanese, Korean, Portuguese and Spanish in one each. In one case it was not possible to determine the language. Searching for interpreter/translator yielded 409 photos, 32 of which showed interpreters working consecutively with foreign languages other than Russian. The interpreters were mostly from Estonia (19), whereas 13 were from other countries: Russia (7), Finland (2), France and Germany (1 each) and travelled with the delegation; in two cases the name of the interpreter was not mentioned. If we look at the source and target languages the picture is more diverse. Out of a total of eleven languages, English leads with seven cases, followed by Finnish and German (5 each), Hungarian and Swedish (3), French (2), and Czech, Italian, Japanese, Slovak and Spanish (one each). In two cases the language was not mentioned. The newsreels and photos both portray interpretation using eleven languages, eight of which overlap; this therefore leaves a total of 14 languages that were used. As for Estonian, it was used when interpreting from and into seven languages (English, Finnish, French, German, Hungarian, Italian and Swedish).

The Tartu University photo collection yielded another 27 photos of foreign delegations visiting the university accompanied by interpreters, all of whom were Estonian and either students or faculty staff at the university; this adds Arabic to the above list of languages.

In conclusion, the author’s research yielded few images of interpretation with foreign languages (86): just 27 clips of footage and 59 photos. Those discovered were mostly of consecutive interpreting. The more frequently represented languages were English as a conference language (17 cases), German and Finnish (16 each) as languages of an Eastern bloc country and of a close neighbour, respectively.

4.3 Interpreters

The early post-war years also marked a period of isolation from the rest of the world. Russian thus emerged as the prevailing source and target language of interpreting in Estonia. Twenty out of 33 interviewed interpreters had Estonian and Russian as their A-B language pair. Ten of them had been deported to Siberia as children. The remaining 13 interviewees had English, Finnish, French, German, Polish, Russian, Spanish and Swedish as their B language. All interpreters had an undergraduate degree, except for three Russian-Estonian interpreters who had only received secondary education. Those with degrees included twelve who had studied other languages and one who had studied history; they worked from and into foreign languages. Eleven had degrees in Russian, four in history, one in mathematics and one in English; they all had Russian as their A or B language. Twenty-five had Estonian as their mother tongue, seven had Russian and one had Polish.
Three interviewees with German and English B languages who occasionally interpreted in the 1960s and 1970s mentioned that their continuing education took them to advanced English courses in Leningrad (now Saint Petersburg) or Moscow University, as well as at the Maurice Thorez Institute of Foreign Languages in Moscow. There they saw for the first time how simultaneous interpreters were trained. (The leading professor of interpreting studies at the Institute was Ghelly Chernov.) Two interpreters with Russian as their A and B languages, respectively, had been to the Institute in the late 1970s. This was a one-off experience, however, that did not lead to any training in simultaneous interpreting. A Russian-Estonian-Russian interpreter who had a degree in history and who also learned Arabic and Turkish at Moscow University (but never interpreted from or into either) had received some training, but primarily in consecutive interpretation. Just 0.18% of the interviewees had had some slight contact with simultaneous interpretation, therefore, but still no training. The other interviewees had never received any interpreter training or even seen simultaneous interpretation being used. These facts demonstrate that interpreters in Estonia during the years under review were not professionals.

One of the questions asked of the interviewees was why they had started interpreting. A typical answer was that Estonian students majoring in Russian were simply asked to come and “help out” with their knowledge of Russian. This was also the case with students learning Finnish (Raig 2012: 18) and other languages. Upon graduation there was no such profession as interpreter that students studying languages could go into. Almost everybody became a teacher. Until the early 1990s, interpreting was a “side-job” or hobby, usually for university lecturers or teachers. The first interpreters had no special preparation and were multi-professionals.

Interpreters from Moscow or Leningrad accompanied the majority of foreign delegations visiting Estonia. Quite often the host institution or company in Estonia would recruit a local interpreter to interpret from or into Estonian (instead of the Russian the accompanying interpreters would have used). Most of these local interpreters were from Intourist, the leading travel agency in the Soviet Union. The Tallinn branch of Intourist had about 50 guide-interpreters on its payroll and also employed about 150-160 freelance guide-interpreters, a figure confirmed by former Intourist employees who were interviewed. Being a guide-interpreter involved leading sightseeing tours in Tallinn and Estonia for foreign tour groups as well as interpreting during field trips and visits (to collective and state farms, factories, kindergartens, schools, Pioneer Palaces, etc.). They also interpreted sightseeing tours for Estonian tourist groups abroad. The 50 guide-interpreters included about 25 people who spoke Finnish, about ten who spoke English, and another ten who spoke German. There were also one or two who spoke French, Norwegian, Polish and Swedish.

Six out of the 59 images of interpreters discovered in the archives were of full-time Intourist guide-interpreters; considering the socio-political circumstances, however, that number is not that small. Twenty-seven pictures portray interpreters accompanying delegations to Tartu University; the university was located in a town to which restricted access to foreigners was granted by the Soviets. Out
of 32 images showing interpreted events in Tallinn, the capital, 19 were of local Estonian interpreters and a third of those 19 (6) were Intourist employees.

Interpreters at the time were clearly lay or natural interpreters; that is, “bilinguals without special training for the task” (Pöchhacker 2006: 22). The Intourist guide-interpreters were an exception. Their diverse work experience, combined with exposure to actually listening and speaking to native-speaking foreigners, gradually made them good professionals. Indeed, they were regarded as such, thus validating Pöchhacker’s (2006: 22) observation that “historically, it is of course difficult to clearly separate professional interpreting from what we might call lay interpreting or natural interpreting”.

Although the author had thus far discovered photographic evidence of the audience listening to simultaneous interpreting, no images of the interpreters themselves had been found. Research in the Tartu University photo collection, however, led to an intriguing discovery: two photos taken in 1978 were found that portrayed simultaneous interpreters at work (see figure 1). This outcome was slightly discouraging. It did suggest, however, that interpreting was (and often still is) considered a trivial activity and that photos of interpreters were (and are) not taken. Nonetheless, the photos represented a breakthrough, for they show the listener’s headset. The simultaneous interpreting equipment portrayed was an example of the university engineers’ craftsmanship, having been designed and made at Tartu University. Several interviewees had referred to the listener’s device, which functioned as a radio receiver, as ‘a soapbox’. Not a single device was thought to have survived. It turns out, however, that the University of Tartu’s History Museum contained a damaged ‘soapbox’, which was on display as “a wire-tapping device” (see figure 2). It had not been associated with simultane-

![Figure 1: An interpreter 1978, Tartu University Museum Photo Collection.](image-url)
ous interpreting and had therefore not been identified as an early example of a headset. As a result of the author’s research, this headset has since been relabelled correctly. It is the only ‘soapbox’ known to have survived.

The research carried out by the author in the Digitised Photo Database yielded just one photograph of a parliament interpreter from 1990. It is the only photo that portrays an interpreter who worked between Estonian and Russian. In the photo the interpreter is not actually interpreting, however, but rather is acting as a reporter and airing a radio broadcast, with a caption that notes his profession. Interpreting was the reporter’s side job, as the interpreter confirmed during the interview.

The only two newspaper articles found that mention interpreting during the period under review both focused on interpreters. The Tartu University newspaper (Saksilannadest 1961) interviewed a fifth-year student studying German who acted as an interpreter for an East German basketball team, although the interview was rather uninformative. The second article was from a regional daily (Va-
jakas 1964), and mentions difficulties an interpreter had when translating from Finnish into Estonian: “The young interpreter was at a loss for words, unable to quickly find suitable words”.

5. Conclusion

Searching for factual documentary evidence to prove the use of interpretation from 1944 to 1991, the author worked with Estonian archival film and photo collections in order to establish an interpreting narrative in Estonia after World War II; this was a time when Europe had undergone geopolitical changes and a new political order was enforced in what had been the independent Republic of Estonia before World War II. The earliest footage discovered depicting the use of simultaneous interpretation is from August 1940 and March 1944, albeit in Moscow.

Interpretation in Estonia during this time period falls into two groups of target and source languages: Russian and other foreign languages. Although Russian is a foreign language like any other to Estonians, it is expedient to discuss the two groups separately as Russian was enforced in Estonia as a language of international communication, with the covert aim of limiting the use of Estonian (as per the 1978 decree).

The author’s research has helped to make the fragmented narrative of interpretation in Estonia more complete. In all, she conducted 65 interviews and uncovered 114 clips of footage, as well as 402 photos. The visual proof collected, in contrast to the extremely scarce written evidence, allowed the author to confirm her hypothesis. The author established that the interpreter community was comprised of two groups: interpreters interpreting from and into Russian and those working from and into other languages. She interviewed twenty interpreters who worked with Russian. This represents quite a sizable community, thus demonstrating the need for interpretation during the Soviet years. Interpretation between Estonian and other foreign languages was more sporadic. The Intourist guide-interpreters did most of the work and they could be considered semi-professionals: although they had no training they had extensive daily practice.

The fact that Soviet authorities allowed interpretation while covertly enforcing Russian as the language of international communication, may have been an indirect indication of a camouflaged Soviet attempt to demonstrate support for small nations, as well as adherence to the international practice of providing interpretation at multilingual events. The use of simultaneous interpreting from Estonian into Russian allowed Estonian to be used at public events at a time when Russian was enforced. Indeed, interpretation can be seen as a contributing factor to maintaining the use of Estonian in an environment in which a foreign language dominated. Interpreting as an activity was inseparable from the efficient functioning of the parliament, helping to invisibly negotiate boundaries for the use of Estonian in other public spaces under Soviet control.
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