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To the reader,

I was unfortunately unable to visit the archives as planned, so the article is far from finished. The moment of analysis has yet to occur and now the text is more of an account of analysable moments in the diaries. KL

The alloy of art and ideology in Aino Kallas' writing

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Katarina Leppänen, PhD History of Ideas, Uppsala University, Sweden,
katarina.leppanen@idehist.uu.se (17000-28000 tecken inkl blank)

Studying women writers in the geopolitically instable area around the Gulf of Finland in the early 1900s encourages equations between life and politics. Was there any topic, field or art form that was *not* part of establishing the new nations, the states, the communities? Writing about hardworking peasants, workers, women, men, society, alcoholism and disease can always be read as political interventions. A political dimension was expected in Finnish literature, Erkki Sevänen writes, and therefore a leading ingredient in literary quarrels between 1870 until the 1960s was “what content should be given to concepts such as ‘national’, ‘image of the nation’ and ‘nationalist’ in Finland and what kind of relationship should literature have to nationalist politics and ‘national education’”.¹ These expectations are, however, not only held by the elite, the educationalists, critics and authors, but also by the “reading masses” (ibid).

Such a wide definition of the political dimensions of art can of course be applied and, as Sevänen shows, it has historical legitimacy. In the following article I will, however, delimit the meaning of the political to a specific instances of intermingling between art and politics during Aino Kallas' reading tours in the USA and Canada in the first months of 1926. In the case of Aino Kallas, on the one hand, the political ideology of nation building can only partly be distinguished from her literary production. At least such a division appears forced when it comes to her short stories with Estonian plots. On the other hand, she never wrote *explicitly* political texts, not novels, short stories or articles. Rauhala points out that Kallas refrained from taking part in the party politics but that politics was by necessity an important factor in her life considering the times. Anyhow, Rauhala concludes, politics are not an important theme in Kallas diaries, but found other forum for that. Novels were one of those forums, talks another.

I borrow the term alloy from metallurgy in an attempt to characterize how I understand the relationship between political ideology and literary writing in the case presented below. Composed of two or more elements, of which one is a metal, an alloy is created because it has enhanced properties compared to the individual elements. Some properties stay the same (often physical properties such as density and reactivity), while other properties may differ substantially (engineering properties such as strength). The point of activating the term alloy

¹ niissä käytiin usein kamppailua erityisesti siitä, millainen sisältö käsitteille “kansallinen”, “kansankuva” ja “isänmaallinen” tulisi Suomessa antaa ja millainen suhde kirjallisuudella tulee olla kansallisuuspolitiikkaan ja kansanvalistukseen (Sevänen, 395)

Något om denna? Alasuutari, Pertti (1999) Taidepolitiikka ja kansankuva, i red. Koistinen, Tero et al, *Kaksi tietä nykyisyyteen*, Helsinki: SKS

for my purposes is to allude to the character of Kallas' political texts as something very different from simply historical fiction mixed with political message. The two elements together, I would like to argue, create something different, which has a strength and an intensity of its own. This is different from arguing that all literature is always political in Fredric Jameson's terms, on the one hand, or, on the other hand a certain kind of idealist position according to which the political tarnishes the literary qualities of a text (*l'art pour l'art*).

Creative writing versus performed politics

Aino Kallas

Aino Kallas (nec Krohn 1878-1956) was born in Finland and married the Estonian Oskar Kallas. In literary introductions and surveys she is described alternately as a Finnish and an Estonian author. Kallas wrote primarily in Finnish, but also in dialect and archaic language. Her style can be placed in the realistic and neo-romantic literary tradition. During the early 1900s the couple lived in Estonia and Aino Kallas became active in the group Noor-Eesti [Young Estonia], a literary group that sought to formulate an Estonian identity free from extraneous influences. Through her husband she was also closely associated with the conservative nationalist group around the newspaper *Postimees*, a "rivalling" organization. The couple lived in St. Petersburg, Helsinki and London, where the husband worked as an ambassador to Estonia. They returned to Estonia in 193X when Oscar Kallas retired. In 1941 the family fled to Sweden and lived there intermittently until 1953 when Aino Kallas (now a widow) moved permanently to Finland and regained her Finnish nationality.²

Kallas purposefully used her position as a diplomat's wife to further her career as a writer internationally. Her social position opened the doors to literary clubs and societies and the gain was mutual as her name gave lustre to gatherings. She was a member of the Pen Club, took part in the work of the International Council of Women etc. But having roots in a nationalist independence movement also meant that Kallas viewed the diplomatic representatives of other nations with some animosity. The previous occupation forces of Estonia, the Soviet Union/Russia and Germany, were explicitly former enemies and now "their natural opponents!" (IV, 79), and the diplomatic relations were strained. In her diaries Kallas makes snide remarks and delighted comments about the failures of their diplomatic representatives. Her relationship to the Finnish ambassador was also complicated because he represented the Swedish side in the Finnish language movement whereas the Kallas and her birth family (Krohn) associated with the Finnish side. But she did want to keep the relationship neutral (IV, 66).

Befriending the elite of the literary circles also led to the publication of a selection of short stories with an introduction by John Galsworthy, a good friend of Kallas. The book, called *The White Ship: Estonian Tales*, collects 16 stories from the time of serfdom and two from the revolution in 1905.

Lecture tours

Kallas' literary production gained an added political dimension when performed live during public readings in the UK and the USA. Touring, Kallas acknowledges, was a way of gaining financial stability and reputation as an author: "My goal is independence —that is why I would like to earn money. To be independent of Finland and Estonia, party [political]

² Her works were translated into Estonian, English, French, Dutch, Swedish, German, Italian, Danish, and Hungarian.

jealousy, and those seeking positions” (VI, 203)³. And she was well aware of the importance public visibility had for spreading information about Estonia, “I act here as an Estonian citizen, all my activities count as Estonian propaganda, even my short stories pass as such” (IV, 66). The self-assigned task of promoting Estonia was not always understood back home where several critical articles were written about Aino Kallas’ activities both as an official representative of the Estonian state and about her lectures and readings. The criticism seems rather petty, based on Estonia’s “sense of democracy – and partly jealousy” (IV, 138), Kallas writes.

Kallas favoured writing stories where the plot was placed in historical time. Inspired by chronicles and old tales Kallas activated stories of oppression of the Estonian men and women. She was brought up and inspired by the tradition of folklore as a means of national awakening also from the academic perspective through her family (Julius Krohn, her father and prof of Finnish language and literature and brother Kaarle Krohn prof folkloristics, Oskar Kallas had a PhD in folkloristics). Serfdom, violence, sexual abuse, and exploitation, are ever-present, while the stories equally depict the greatness, stamina and bravery of the people.⁴

Considering the nationalist dimension of her work it is not surprising that her texts became the subject of controversy. She expected that “the revolutionary tone” regarding the land question may even have scared off English publishers (IV, 97). The criticism was voiced partly through official channels such as newspaper comments, but also in conversations adjacent to the readings where only Kallas’ own reflections remain.

Aino Kallas’ held 25 readings (in English, Estonian and Finnish, (KLa 36)) in literary and social clubs the US and Canada, booked mainly through her New York agent.⁵ The size of the audience varied but it was not uncommon that it counted over 500 (up to 800). Her performances consisted of two parts and the agent pushed her to perform without breaks and to keep the historical facts to a minimum because they were not expected to interest the audience (IV, 208-9). In the first part she talked about Estonia and Estonian history with titles such as “Estonia and her daughters” and “The People of Estonia”⁶ and in the second part she would recite one of her short stories, for example *Bernhard Riives*, which she had learned by heart.

Bernhard Riives was an excellent story to illustrate the main ingredient of any national(ist) narrative. Bernhard Riives is a peasant with some basic schooling who has taken it upon himself to lead the rebellion against the landowning class, against serfdom and the privileges of the Baltic German. He stands before the court and refuses to be whipped — he would rather be sentenced to death than accept the subordination and humiliation of previous generations. The narrator voice is that of the reluctant Russian administrator who sees Riive’s greatness and pride, and is tired of the bloodshed in the name of punishment and revenge. He

³ See also Maarit Leskelä for a further discussion about the purpose of the tours.

In her diaries Kallas writes dialogue and puts quotation marks on both her own and others’ “lines”. I have omitted them because they are obviously not direct quotations but reproductions in Kallas’ words of conversations from memory. Often written down weeks after the actual conversation.

⁴ Kallas also wrote stories with other types of topics which are not discussed in this article.

⁵ Adding the readings held in other countries they amount to approximately 150, KLa 36.

⁶ An analysis of these will be added.

concludes: “But my opinion is: that in this peasant, in this Bernhard Riives, the back of seven hundred years of serfdom (slavery) was straightened” (408, Valitut teokset)

A basic lesson in Estonian history was paramount for understanding the political aspects of *Bernhard Riives*. In the upheavals 1905, the year of the general strike in Finland, and the revolution in Russia, the Estonian peasants burned over 100 mansions owned by the Baltic German upper class. Russian soldiers were sent in on revenge raids against the villagers. In the raids approximately 300 Estonians were killed and 168 were sentenced to death in field court-martials (kenttäoikeus).⁷

Criticism & Questions

In Kallas diaries the diplomatic circles become representations of antagonisms between nations. Personal reactions to criticism can be followed in the diaries. On several occasions she comments on the arrangements (or coincidences) where old enemies suddenly find themselves at the same table, to everyone’s discomfort. The diplomatic corps of London become a miniature theatre where people represent not only their country officially but also embody ideologies, national characteristics and conflicts. The problems of such projections should have been clear to Kallas who often found that she was understood as *not* truly representing the Estonians due to her Finnish background. Kallas comments for example on an incident at a Cuban dinner party: The Finnish, Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian ministers end up at the same table and form “The perfect Baltic union — without Poland” (IV, 275). The Finnish minister grew all the more restrained and became stiff as a “bear made of granite”. Then the German minister “turned up on the stage and started eyeing the group. Geography like on a map — Germany and the Baltic nations! That was too much for Saastamoinen [the Finn], who got up and walked — straight in to the arms of Germany!”

Kallas had obvious trouble dealing with the Germans and they were also perceptive of the potentially sensitive political message in Kallas’ talks in the US and Canada. Clara Ratzka Wendler, a well-known author and the wife of a German diplomat, explicitly made a request on behalf of the embassy, “that you would not use the word Germans in your novels in America. It has provoked so much disdain” (IV, 201-2). The Germans, with their peripheral position in world politics in the post first world war world did not want to be associated with the Baltic Germans who played the role of villain in of many of Kallas’ stories. But her attitude was not altogether negative, German speaking minorities are “are the victims of historical necessity” Ruth Rulen, who had spent five years in Lithuania argued, and Kallas agreed (IV, 255-6).

Relations with the Soviet Union and Russia was of course even more complicated. The former Russian imperial power had been replaced by the Bolshevik Soviet. London, as most of Europe, hosted millions of Russian refugees, from peasants to royalty. Kallas avoided attending benefits and dances in aid of the Russians, or the refugee princesses (IV, 44). “And there we sat next to each other, a member of a conquered power, and the wife of the representative of new democratic state”, she writes about Nina Romanoff (IV, 36). The Russian empire that once oppressed the Estonians had crumbled. Instead the Soviet Union and the Bolshevik regime became the country’s easternmost neighbour and the relationship between Estonia and the Soviet interested and puzzled North Americans. “What is Estonia’s relationship to Bolshevik Russia?” Kallas’ diplomatic answer was “...Estonia seeks to uphold

⁷ Sevänen 399, Raun.

peace with all her neighbours” (IV, 218).⁸ Interestingly, the question was put by her friend and host Mr Ely, with an obvious intent to let Kallas show (off) her diplomatic position in front of the audience. (This can also be interpreted as a way of neutralising the political content of the lecture on Estonian history and the reading of Bernhard Riives because it clearly situates the conflict in the past and promotes peace for the future).

She encountered similar situations and a particular one that shows how different interpretations compete in the social circles in North America. Aino Kallas gained access to many important families through contacts and recommendations, she visited Mrs. Rockefeller’s in their private apartment, for example, but she was of course far from the only one touring North America with stories from Europe.⁹ “Mrs. Loomis told me [the hostess Mrs Warren) that she had been visited by ‘your Estonian Barons’ [...] and they had recounted how they have lost their land and property and their houses have been burned“. I explained matters as well as I could but I felt uneasiness in the atmosphere. The host Mr. Warren hardly spoke a word to me. The daughter Mrs. Wilberforce, asked me thoroughly about our relationship to Soviet Russia and communism” (IV, 250). The problem for Kallas is that she takes it all personally and cannot take it as a “delightful experience” (ibid).

If being confronted by the interests of the Estonian barons (the Baltic Germans) was difficult, meeting criticism from the contemporary Estonian political establishment was even more difficult. The Kallas family and their branch of the nationalist movement came into political opposition in Estonian internal politics. Oskar Kallas appointment to the prestigious position of diplomat in London was questioned early in his “career”. Therefore it is difficult to distinguish between direct criticism of Aino Kallas, and indirect ways of getting at Oskar Kallas through his wife. In March 1926, while the tour was still going, an article appeared in the *Vaba Maa* [Free Country] paper in Estonia criticising Kallas activities. This leads to an official request from the foreign ministry of Estonia to the New York consulate, but Kallas was making a counter move by asking the Estonians in the US to write to the minister in her defence (IV, 255, 261).

*

The political and nationalist turmoil followed Kallas through her literary career. She took active part in the nationalist movement and was inspired by it in her own writing. But nationalist and political aspects are also at the centre of criticism aimed at her. Her visibility in the public eye was obviously provocative and negative aspects were often assigned to her foreignness, her Finnishness. It is however obvious that she was not only of the wrong nation but that she did not act as an Estonian *woman* was expected to act. Women’s visibility in art as well as in politics has been problematic. Certainly literary history and political history have been focused on men, some men more than others. Oskar Kallas is for example not mentioned in Toivi Raun’s *Estonia and the Estonians*, from prehistory to the post-Stalinist era.

*

Aino Kallas played with high stakes. She writes:

⁸ “Mikä on viron suhde bolshevistiseen venäjään?” “...viro haluaisi ylläpitää rauhan kaikkien naapureidenska kanssa”.

⁹ More on this. For example Helmi Krohn, Kallas’ sister, and the socialist Aino Malmberg toured the UK and the US (?) Ritva Hapuli, *Ulkomailla* (2005).

“I have a bit of a gambler in me. I sometimes look at my forty letters of recommendation like a hand that has been dealt me. I have to play them, and play them well” (IV, 209). She not only played her cards well but also used her pen to defend her and the family (IV, 266).

Conflict between writing and meeting the audience. After a reading in Montreal in front of 700 people she declares: “I felt that I had found something new in myself or became aware of a new quality. There is a strange appeal in controlling people. And it hides a danger! A danger foremost to my writing.” (IV, 213)