

The School for Democracy: Co-operation and the Authoritarian State in 1930s Estonia

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Abstract. This article explores the complex relationship between the co-operative movement and the authoritarian state in Estonia from 1934 to 1940. It analyses the dynamics, connections, and tensions that emerged between the co-operative movement – traditionally seen as a grassroots initiative – and the organic-statist, centralising corporatist model promoted by authoritarian regimes across Europe during the interwar period. To begin, the article provides a comprehensive overview of the general shifts in the autonomy of the co-operative movement in Estonia following the introduction of authoritarian rule. Additionally, it analyses the role of the co-operative movement as a potential platform for democratic opposition during the authoritarian period of the 1930s. Finally, the article highlights the fluidity of boundaries between the co-operative from-below and organic-statist corporative models, exemplified through a case study of the Chamber of Co-operative Societies launched in the mid-1930s, an initiative originating from co-operative activists themselves.

Keywords: co-operative movement, corporatism, Päts' regime (1934–1940), The Rochdale Principles

INTRODUCTION

Mary Hilson, whose research centres on Nordic co-operation models, offers a useful definition of co-operation. Acknowledging the historical

intricacies and ambiguity surrounding the concept, she suggests that “since the early nineteenth century, the term has been used more specifically to refer to economic organisations that variously process and sell agricultural products, supply banking and credit, manufacture different commodities and distribute essential goods to consumers”.¹ However, co-operation transcends being merely an economic platform. It has also served as a significant model for social and political organisation in the 19th and 20th centuries, also functioning as a social, political, cultural, and education platform and imagery.²

The foundations of modern co-operation theories are complex and diverse, stemming from sources such as mid-19th-century liberalism, socialism, anarchism,³ and evolutionary theories emphasising solidaristic collaboration while opposing the Social Darwinist concept of competition,⁴ among others. Movements and organisations identifying with the co-operative framework have also displayed diversity.

Despite this complexity, modern co-operators have commonly shared certain premises, notably the concept of voluntary associations as a counterbalance to state intervention. Central to the co-operation theory is the idea of solidarity and social cohesion nurtured through voluntary associationism.⁵ Core principles of co-operation include democracy, egalitarianism, political neutrality and political pluralism.⁶

The Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers, a consumer co-operative established in Rochdale near Manchester in 1844, presented an influential early model embodying these principles. Since the mid-19th century, the tale of forward-thinking men coming together and

- 1 M. Hilson. *The International Co-operative Alliance and the Consumer Co-operative Movement in Northern Europe, c. 1860–1939*. Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2018, 1.
- 2 E.g., M. Hilson. *The International Co-operative Alliance*, 1–2; M. Hilson et al. *Introduction: Co-operatives and the Social Question. – Co-operatives and the Social Question: The Co-operative Movement in Northern and Eastern Europe, c. 1880–1950*. Ed. by M. Hilson, P. Markkola, A.-C. Östman. Welsh Academic Press, Cardiff, 2012, 3–6.
- 3 See more, for example, M. Hilson. *Popular Movements and the Fragility of the Nordic Democracies During the First Half of the Twentieth Century*. – *Journal of Modern European History*, 2019, 17, 4, 469–485; B. Trencsényi et al. *A History of Modern Political Thought in East Central Europe. Vol. II: Negotiating Modernity in the ‘Short Twentieth Century’ and Beyond, Part I: 1918–1968*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2018, 485–486.
- 4 K. S. Vincent. *Visions of Stateless Society. – The Cambridge History of Nineteenth-Century Political Thought*. Ed. by G. S. Jones, G. Claeys. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2011, 472; K. Kalling. *Darwin Haeckeli varjus: Evolutsiooniõpetuse retseptioonist Eestis. – Ajalooline Ajakiri*, 2012, 3/4, 141/142, 287–308.
- 5 M. Hilson. *Popular Movements*, 473.
- 6 For example, D. Freire, J. D. Pereira. *Consumer Co-operatives in Portugal: Debates and Experiences from the Nineteenth to the Twentieth Century. – A Global History of Consumer Co-operation since 1850. Movements and Businesses*. Ed. by M. Hilson, S. Neunsinger, G. Patmore, 296–325. Brill, Leiden, 2017, 322; M. Hilson. *Popular Movements*; A. M. Kõll. *Peasants in the World Market: Dairy Cooperatives in Estonia 1908–1936. – Journal of European Economic History*, 1994, 23, 3, 506.

constituting a successful consumer society as well as their principal values, known as the Rochdale Principles, have inspired co-operative movements globally. John Stuart Mill, a key figure in British liberalism, praised the Rochdale Pioneers in his 1848 work *Principles of Political Economy*,⁷ and they gained worldwide recognition through George Holyoake's 1858 publication about the Pioneers.⁸

The Rochdale Principles emphasised a democratic mindset, egalitarian participation, and political and religious neutrality. Notably, their principle of one member, one vote has evolved into a virtual slogan for the international co-operative movement.⁹ The International Co-Operative Alliance (ICA) was established in 1895, and in 1937 adopted an adapted version of these principles.¹⁰ Even today, co-operative societies operate based on these principles. The ICA currently emphasises the following as their core values: “self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity, and solidarity”.¹¹

These democratic and anti-statist ideals strongly resonated with Estonian co-operation activists and early national leaders. By the turn of the 20th century, voluntary associations, co-operative associations among them, developed into centres of emerging Estonian-speaking political activism.¹² The associations quickly spread across the country and encouraged the predominantly rural Estonian-speaking population to participate in civil society. Andres Kasekamp describes these voluntary associations and co-operatives specifically as the “multipliers of the national movement”.¹³

Similarly to Scandinavian co-operators,¹⁴ early Estonian co-operation activists found inspiration in another influential model advocated by German co-operative theorists and activists Hermann Schulze-Delitzsch and Friedrich Wilhelm Raiffeisen.¹⁵ Practical examples

7 J. S. Mill. *Principles Of Political Economy*. D. Appleton, New York, 1885 [1848], 606–610.

8 M. Hilson. *The International Co-operative Alliance*, 35; M. Hilson. *Rochdale and Beyond: Consumer Co-operation in Britain Before 1945*. – *A Global History of Consumer Co-operation Since 1850*, 62.

9 For example, M. Hilson. *Popular Movements*; M. Hilson. *Rochdale and Beyond*, 7; S. Neunsinger. *Challenges to Democracy – State Intervention: Introduction to Section 2*. – *A Global History of Consumer Co-operation Since 1850*, 229.

10 M. Hilson. *The International Co-operative Alliance*, 2, 8, 165.

11 *Cooperative Identity, Values & Principles*. – International Cooperative Alliance. <https://www.ica.coop/en/cooperatives/cooperative-identity> (06/03/2024).

12 J. Eellend. *Cultivating the Rural Citizen: Modernity, Agrarianism and Citizenship in Late Tsarist Estonia*. Stockholm University, Stockholm, 2007; E. Jansen. *Kultuuriline murrang*. – *Eesti ajalugu V: Pärissorjuse kaotamisest Vabadussõjani*. Ilmamaa, Tartu, 2010, 390; T. Karjahärm. 1905. aasta revolutsioon. – *Eesti ajalugu V*, 349.

13 A. Kasekamp. *A History of the Baltic States*. Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2010, 79.

14 M. Hilson et al. *Introduction: Co-operatives and the Social Question*, 3.

15 A. Eckbaum. *Ühistegevus ja põllumeeste majanduslikud asutised*. – *Eesti põllumeeste poliitika: Ülevaade Eesti põllumeeste liikumisest 1917–1955*. Toim. O. Viirsoo. *Eesti Põllumeeste Kogude esindus paguluses*, Lund, 1956, 237.

also played a crucial role in shaping their ideas. Co-operative networks in Denmark and Germany stood out as the most significant models, with Finland serving as a notable example in the immediate region.¹⁶ In the early 20th century, prominent Estonian national leaders and co-operation enthusiasts Jaan Tõnisson and Konstantin Päts both cited Pellervo, a central organisation of Finnish co-operation, as an exemplary model to be emulated in Estonia.¹⁷ Founded in 1899, the Pellervo Society not only promoted co-operative ideas and coordinated the Finnish co-operative network's activities but also became a significant centre in the national movement against russification campaigns.¹⁸

While Hilson suggests that "Co-operation has certainly become a part of the national 'story' of the four Nordic nations",¹⁹ this assertion cannot be made with the same certainty for co-operative movements in Estonia. Compared to the Scandinavian models, the history of co-operation in Estonia, especially after gaining independence, has still attracted relatively modest scholarly attention from historians. In addition, most scholarly works approach co-operation from a social or economic historical perspective, and primarily take interest in the earlier decades.²⁰

The ambivalent relationship between the authoritarian state and the co-operative movement during authoritarian rule, how it was understood, framed, and enacted by both the co-operators at the time as well as the political elites still requires systematic study. A substantial number of sources are available on the subject, including numerous newspapers, journals, yearbooks, and other publications released by co-operative associations. Additionally, institutional documents are accessible; for example, this article will make use of the documents related to the establishment of the Chamber of Co-operative Societies. Furthermore, the publisher Ilmamaa has, since 1995, released collections

16 J. Eellend. *Cultivating the Rural Citizen, 195–196.*

17 K. Päts. *Tulevasest laulupidust [1903].* – Eesti riik I. Koost. T. Karjahärm. Ilmamaa, Tartu, 1999, 350; K. Päts. *Ühistegevus rahvalagustamise väljal [1904].* – Eesti riik I, 237; J. Tõnisson. *Ühistegevuse algus meie rahva keskel [1901].* – Ülestõusmine. Koost. H. Runnel. Ilmamaa, Tartu, 2021, 32.

18 A.-C. Östman. *Civilising and Mobilising the Peasantry: Co-operative Organisation and Understanding of Progress and Gender in Finland c. 1899–1918.* – *Co-operatives and the Social Question*, 121–122.

19 M. Hilson. *The International Co-operative Alliance*, 12.

20 For example, J. Eellend. *Cultivating the Rural Citizen*; J. Eellend, J. 'The Butter Republic': *Co-operative Organizations and Corporative Structures in Estonia 1890–1934.* – *Co-operatives and the Social Question*, 167–184; A. M. Köll, *Peasants in the World Market*; V. Krinal. *Rahvusliku ühistegevuse algus.* – *Ühistegevuse arengust Eestis.* Koost. V. Krinal, K. Krimm, E. Tomson. Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus, Tartu, 1996; J. Leetsaar. *Maamajanduslik ühistegevus. Õpik kõgkoolidele.* Eesti Maaülikool, Tartu, 2012; Ü. Mallene. *Jaan Tõnisson ja ühistegevus Eestis.* SE&JS, Tallinn, 2014.

of sources on Estonian intellectual history under the *Eesti mõttelugu* series. In recent years, two volumes dedicated specifically to ideas of co-operation have been published,²¹ indicating a growing interest in, and the rich potential of, the subject.

Despite the emphasis of co-operative theorists and activists on autonomy, freedom from state intervention, and grassroots activism, implementation of these principle in real life has not always been a straightforward task. Tension and conflict within co-operative networks and associations are also evident, stemming from the necessity to centralise the movement.²² Maintaining grassroots ideals has proven particularly challenging in undemocratic settings. The disintegration of democracy and the transition to authoritarianism led to diverse outcomes for national co-operative movements. Neusinger summarises how in some instances, co-operative networks were fully integrated into organic-statist regimes and essentially abolished; in others, they might have become politically inactive but were allowed to continue to exist as purely economic networks; and there are instances of co-operative associations becoming platforms for resistance against the same regimes.²³

With these varied dynamics in mind, this article aims to analyse co-operation in the context of authoritarian rule in 1930s Estonia, focusing on three key themes. Firstly, it will investigate the effect on the co-operative movement following the establishment of the authoritarian regime in 1934, especially considering the regime's efforts to reorganise the political system along corporatist lines and to centralise and rationalise the economic system. Secondly, the article will explore the ways in which the co-operative movement potentially served as a platform for the democratic opposition in the 1930s during the authoritarian regime, with a specific focus on Jaan Tõnisson, the first professor of co-operation at the University of Tartu. Lastly, the article will explore the flexibility in distinguishing between the co-operation movement and organic-statist corporative models. This will be illustrated through the case of the Chamber of Co-operative Societies established in the mid-1930s as part of the new organic-statist, functional system of representation enforced by the state. Nevertheless, I will demonstrate that the idea of the specific chamber itself originated from within the co-operative circles.

Studying the connections and tensions between the co-operation movement, the authoritarian regime, and the organic-statist models will

²¹ J. Tõnisson. *Ülestõusmine*; A. Horm. *Ühistegevus kutsub*. Ilmamaa, Tartu, 2023.

²² On Scandinavian examples, see M. Hilson, *Popular Movements*.

²³ S. Neusinger. *Challenges to Democracy*, 229, 236.

give us a better understanding of the specific methods through which Estonian political elites aimed to promote the principles of democracy and civil society. Furthermore, it will also help to shed new light on how the authoritarian state and its structures were constructed in Estonia.

CO-OPERATION IN INDEPENDENT ESTONIA UP TO 1934

The co-operative movement continued to play a crucial role after the establishment of the independent state in 1918. In the following years, a notable expansion of the co-operative network occurred. For example, there was a remarkable increase in co-operatives, with the number of dairy co-operatives surpassing 300 by the mid-1920s. One contributing factor to this growth was the radical land reform enacted in 1919.²⁴ Before 1919, close to half of the land had been owned by large land owners, predominantly Baltic Germans. During the War of Independence, both these and church lands were requisitioned with the aim of redistributing them, mainly to the landless population.²⁵

Moreover, further institutionalisation and a degree of centralisation of co-operation followed during these years. In 1919, the Estonian Co-operative Association (Eesti Ühistegeline Liit, hereafter EÜL) was established. Among its responsibilities were assisting in the development of the Estonian co-operative network, particularly in the initial years, providing co-operative education and training, publishing periodicals and other texts, and organising audits of individual co-operative societies.²⁶

Another central institution was the Audit Association of Agricultural Co-operative Societies (Põllumajanduslike Ühistute Revisjoniliit), later renamed the Agricultural Co-operative Central Association (Põllumajandusliku Ühistegevuse Keskliit, hereafter PÜK), established in 1926. The PÜK has been characterised as the second ideological centre of co-operation in Estonia. The Agricultural Co-operative Central Association also held the authority to conduct compulsory audits.²⁷ As I will show later, there was significant rivalry between these two organisations.

²⁴ J. Eellend, 'The Butter Republic', 172–174; A. M. Köll, *Peasants in the World Market*.

²⁵ A. Kasekamp, *A History of the Baltic States*, 113.

²⁶ V. Krinal, *Ühistegevuse keskasutused. – Ühistegevuse arengust Eestis*, 55–56.

²⁷ V. Krinal, *Ühistegevuse keskasutused*, 57; A. Eckbaum, *Ühistegevus ja põllumeeste majanduslikud asutised*, 231.

The Academic Co-operative Society, established in the University of Tartu in 1922, is another organisation that deserves to be highlighted. This organisation primarily concentrated on academic research related to co-operation as well as organising lectures and discussion rounds.²⁸ I will come back to this organisation in the later sections of this article.

The legal framework also underwent minor revisions. Co-operators in the early Estonian Republic continued to rely on the law of co-operative societies and their associations, ratified by the Provisional Government of Russia in March 1917, which largely mirrored their German equivalents. In December 1919, the legal framework was supplemented by additional articles on external auditing. According to a leading co-operative activist, Aleksander Kask, this addition was inspired by co-operative movements in Western Europe.²⁹ Another law amending the co-operative law was adopted in 1926, notably including compulsory auditing once every two years. Specifically, from this point on every co-operative society had to belong under the authority of an auditing association.³⁰ The co-operative law reflected the liberal origins of the co-operative movement. For instance, Article 4 stated that the establishment of co-operatives does not require state authorisation. In line with the co-operative tradition, Article 2 emphasised that, in addition to economic endeavour, co-operative societies could engage in other activities such as publishing as well as various initiatives and institutions that contribute to the general well-being of their members.³¹ Despite some degree of centralisation within the system, the co-operative movement remained relatively autonomous until the 1930s.

THE INTRODUCTION OF THE CORPORATIST SYSTEM AND THE INCORPORATION OF CO-OPERATION

In March 1934, state elder Konstantin Päts carried out a coup d'état, establishing an authoritarian regime. Shortly after the coup, Päts began advocating the reorganisation of all social forces on the new basis and the creation of a new, “well-ordered” state.³² In January 1935, he delivered a

28 V. Krinal. Ühistegevuse keskasutused, 59–60.

29 A. Kask. Ühistegevus Eestis. Tartu, 1926, 20; Riigi Teataja, 1919, 110/111.

30 A. Kask. Ühistegevus Eestis, 20; Riigi Teataja, 1926, 32.

31 Ühistegevusseadus. Eesti Ühistegelise Liidu kirjastus, 1926.

32 L. Veski. Towards Stronger National Unity: Statist Ideas in Estonian Nationalism During the “Era of Silence” (1934–1940). – *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 2024, 55, 1, 173–195.

programmatic speech to the political elite of the state, along with local authorities from the regions, gathered in the grand hall of the Estonia Theatre in Tallinn.³³

In this speech, Päts introduced an idea for political reform. He suggested that the former system based on political parties had proven itself to function poorly. Therefore, it was time to find a new way to organise political and social life. Päts proposed that a new system based on professional chambers could be a good alternative to the former liberal parliamentary model. Firstly, it would be more just than liberal democracy, as it would encompass all professional groups under the Estonian state, ensuring equal rights for all institutions and professions. Päts depicted institutions and local governments as cogwheels within the state machine, emphasising that if one cog broke, the entire machine could cease to function. All parts of the machine served vital roles.³⁴

Päts briefly addressed the co-operative movement, making a reference to internal conflicts within its circles. He delivered a clear message: if they failed to unite under the same roof and resolve their internal issues, the government would intervene, using a “firm hand” if needed.³⁵ The disputes that prompted this threat will be discussed below.

Under Päts’ initiative, two chambers – the Chamber of Commerce and Industry (1925) and the Chamber of Agriculture (1931) – were established during the democratic period. In the years 1934 to 1936, however, an additional 15 corporative chambers were created. These chambers became a central element in the authoritarian regime’s ambitious project to reform the state and “re-organize” social forces.³⁶

The turn to corporatism was of course not unique to Estonia. From the late 1920s onwards, and particularly in the 1930s, corporatist theories and models gained widespread popularity across Europe. Influential interwar models included Italy, Portugal, and Austria.³⁷ Juan Linz talks about “organic or corporative democracy”, which posits that representatives should be elected in primary social groups where people know each other and share common interests, thereby eliminating the need for political parties.³⁸ António Costa Pinto builds on Linz’s theories and defines political corporatism as “a system of political representation

33 Asutav Kogu kutsutakse kokku. – Postimees, 17.01.1935.

34 Riigivanema kõne seltskonna ümberkasvatamisest. – Postimees, 18.01.1935.

35 Ibid.

36 A. Kasekamp. *Corporatism and Fascism in the Baltics: Päts’ Estonia in Comparison. – Corporatism and Fascism: The Corporatist Wave in Europe*. Ed. by A. C. Pinto. Routledge, London, 2017; L. Veski. *Towards Stronger National Unity*.

37 See more in *Corporatism and Fascism*.

38 J. Linz. *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes*. Lynne Rienner, Boulder, 2000, 59.

based on an ‘organic-statist’ view of society in which its organic units replace the individual-centered electoral model of representation and parliamentary legitimacy, becoming the primary and/or complementary legislative or advisory body of the ruler’s executive.” He argues that in the interwar period, corporatism gained popularity as a significant alternative, both ideologically and institutionally, to liberal democracy, which was undergoing a crisis.³⁹

Corporatism therefore proved to be an appealing model for authoritarian leaders such as Konstantin Päts, who were exploring alternative organic-statist centralising political models. This reinforcement of corporatism had implications for the co-operative movement as well.

Anu Mai Kõll argues that the political shift in the 1930s led to a significant level of state intervention in the economy.⁴⁰ These changes, naturally, had an impact on the co-operative movement, which had previously enjoyed relative freedom in organising its activities. The fate of the butter co-operatives serves as an illustrative example. Dairy products, particularly butter, were crucial exports for Estonia, with more than half of the exported butter sent to Britain.⁴¹

On April 6, 1936, an act on the organisation of butter export was issued, bearing the signatures of Päts and the Minister of Agriculture, Nikolai Talts. This act led to the establishment of a state monopoly called the Butter Export Central Union of Dairy Associations (*Piimaühingute Keskliit “Võiekспорт”*). This central organisation was granted the monopoly right to export butter and to sell butter in the capital, Tallinn. Consequently, all dairy producers and cooperatives who wished to export their products had to become part of the state-controlled system. Former associations and unions that had united co-operative dairy societies were abolished.⁴² In 1937, similar organisations, namely Estonian Meat Export (*Eesti Libaeksport*) and Estonian Egg Export (*Eesti Munaeksport*), were established, taking over all export activities in their respective fields.⁴³

Anu Mai Kõll concludes: “The introduction of political authoritarianism and economic corporatism reduce the Estonian peasant cooperatives from independent actors to subordinates of the Ministry

39 A. C. Pinto. Corporatism and ‘Organic Representation’ in European Dictatorships. – Corporatism and Fascism, 3, 5.

40 A. M. Kõll. Economy and Ethnicity in the Hands of the State: Economic Change and the National Question in Twentieth-century Estonia. – Economic Change and the National Question in Twentieth-Century Europe. Ed. by A. Teichova, H. Matis, J. Pátek. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2004, 366–367.

41 A. M. Kõll. Peasants in the World Market.

42 Riigi Teataja 1936, 30; A. M. Kõll. Peasants in the World Market, 532–539.

43 Eesti: 20 aastat iseseisvust sõnas ja pildis. Konjunkturiinstituut, Tallinn, 1938, 105.

of Agriculture.”⁴⁴ She argues that while market dynamics and the need for rationalisation played a role, particularly for a small newcomer to world markets such as Estonia, these tendencies were also driven by the new corporatist and deeply interventionist ideology promoted by the government.⁴⁵ In addition to the Minister of Agriculture, Kõll emphasises the significant role played by the Minister of Economy in these processes.⁴⁶

At first glance, one might conclude that the 1930s can be characterised as the era when co-operation had to give way to corporatism. However, an alternative argument can be made, i.e. co-operation gained new meaning and momentum during the 1930s’ shift to authoritarianism across Europe.

As emphasised before, scholars suggest that the relationship between authoritarian regimes and co-operative movements was ambiguous: while there were attempts to integrate these systems into statist regimes, we can also find examples of co-operative associations becoming the platform for resistance against the same regimes.⁴⁷ On the one hand, the corporatist system of Portugal developed into a model that was followed across Europe.⁴⁸ Freire and Pereira argue that “the violent reconfiguration of popular associations”, including co-operatives, particularly affected agricultural producer co-operatives. These were firmly subordinated to the new corporatist system and became a tool of the authoritarian state and its ideology. On the other hand, consumer co-operatives in Portugal retained a certain degree of autonomy. This autonomy allowed figures from various branches of political opposition to collaborate around these societies and use their infrastructure for “civic participation at a grassroots level”.⁴⁹

Similarly, Mary Hilson argues that although Scandinavian co-operative systems had always been “implicitly” supportive of democratic institutions and cultivated their members’ democratic outlook, after Hitler’s rise to power, the idea of co-operative associations

44 A. M. Kõll. *Peasants in the World Market*, 539.

45 A. M. Kõll. *Peasants in the World Market*; A. M. Kõll. *Economy and Ethnicity in the Hands of the State*, 367

46 A. M. Kõll. *Economy and Ethnicity in the Hands of the State*, 367.

47 M. Hilson et al. *A Global History of Consumer Co-operation since 1850: Introduction*, 15; S. Neunsinger. *Challenges to Democracy*.

48 A. C. Pinto. *Corporatism and ‘Organic Representation’ in European Dictatorships*; J. R. Santos. *Self-fashioning of a Conservative Revolutionary: Salazar’s Integral Corporatism and the International Networks of the 1930s. – Authoritarianism and Corporatism in Europe and Latin America Crossing Borders*. Ed. by A. C. Pinto, F. Finchelstein. Routledge, London, 2019.

49 D. Freire, J. D. Pereira. *Consumer Co-operatives in Portugal*, 304–305, 322.

as the “school for democracy” became more “explicit”.⁵⁰ In the following section, I will discuss similar tendencies in Estonia. Here, I would highlight the role of liberal politician Jaan Tõnisson and his circles.

PLATFORM FOR RESISTANCE

Tõnisson was a national liberal politician and a prominent co-operator from the late 19th century. He later reminisced that he started taking an interest in the co-operative movement in his youth, specifically in the year 1893.⁵¹ On May 20, 1935, Tõnisson was elected the first (and so far only) professor of co-operation at the University of Tartu.⁵² In his texts about co-operation, it is clear that Tõnisson felt a responsibility as professor of co-operation to introduce the history and core principles of the co-operative movement to the general public. In addition to various articles on co-operation and public lectures, his university lectures were published in two volumes. There he introduced the Rochdale Principles and discussed the ideas of Western theorists and activists, particularly those of Robert Owen, George Holyoake, Otto von Gierke, Hermann Schulze-Delitzsch, Charles Gide, and others.⁵³

On September 28, 1935, Tõnisson delivered his inaugural lecture to an audience of almost 500 people at the assembly hall of the University of Tartu.⁵⁴ The lecture notes were published in the prominent co-operative newspaper, *Ühistegelised Uudised*. The focus of the lecture was the potential for societal innovation inherent in co-operation. The first half of the lecture was dedicated to the tradition of 19th-century British co-operation. Here, Tõnisson introduced the Rochdale Pioneers and their principles as well as highlighting the role of influential co-operative theorists Robert Owen and William King. Tõnisson framed British co-operators as the inspiration for social innovation for co-operatives everywhere. He admitted that co-operation shared certain common principles with socialism, highlighting the aim to fundamentally reform the current social and economic system. However, he believed that this was where the similarities ended. He insisted that co-operators did not expect support from the state; quite the opposite, what co-operators

50 M. Hilson. *Popular Movements*, 483.

51 J. Tõnisson. *Eesti ühistegelise liikumise algus [1927]*. – *Ülestõusmine*, 42.

52 E.g., Ü. Mallene. *Jaan Tõnisson ja ühistegevus Eestis*, 179.

53 J. Tõnisson. *Ühistegevuse üldkursus I osa: Ühistegevuse ajalugu*. Tartu, 1936; J. Tõnisson. *Ühistegevuse üldkursus II osa: Ühistegevuse teooria ja ühistegelik käitumismajandusõpetus*, Tartu, 1936.

54 Prof. Jaan Tõnisson pidas Tartus esiloengu. – *Ühistegelised Uudised*, 04.10.1935.

primarily wished for was freedom of action and non-intervention by the state. The basis of co-operation was an “active attitude towards life” and the pursuit of general wellbeing. Another leading principle was goodwill, which, Tõnisson believed, was a path to social justice.⁵⁵

This idea led him to the second half of the lecture, where he dedicated his discussion to French co-operation theorist Charles Gide and his Nimes School. In the early 20th century, Gide gained worldwide renown for his theories, combining consumer co-operative principles with the theory of solidarism. He believed that consumer co-operatives and co-operative models, in general, could be a pathway to social innovation, fostering more just and egalitarian societies. Gide was also an internationalist, supporting global co-operative networks, especially ICA, which he believed could contribute to global peace.⁵⁶

Tõnisson argued that the model presented by Gide offered an alternative approach to solving the social question, in contrast to socialism. Drawing from Gide’s solidarism theories, Tõnisson asserted that achieving a balance between justice and freedom, attainable through voluntary associationism, was the key.⁵⁷

Tõnisson also referenced the early French socialist thinker Charles Fourier, who believed that associationism could harmonise interests, ultimately eroding animosity and fostering love. Concluding his lecture, Tõnisson emphasised that in addition to meeting immediate needs co-operation harbours far-reaching goals aimed at the future. He expressed optimism that the “divine spark of the idea of social innovation” inherent in cooperation would endure and, grounded in solidarity, had the potential to transcend social conflicts and differences in interests.⁵⁸

Therefore, in his inaugural lecture, Tõnisson positioned himself as a follower of British 19th-century liberal co-operation and the French solidaristic approach. It is also crucial to highlight Tõnisson’s fundamental implication: that co-operation goes beyond the practicalities of production and trade; it entails significant potential to transform societies positively and eventually transform the whole of humankind.

In December 1936, Tõnisson was elected as the first (and only) Estonian member to the International Institute of Co-operative Studies

55 J. Tõnisson. Ühistegevuse sotsiaalsed lähtekohad ja sotsiaaluenduslikud sihid. – Ühistegelised Uudised, 04.10.1935.

56 A. Labigne, R. List. Gide, Charles. – International Encyclopedia of Civil Society. Ed. by H. K. Anheier, S. Toepler, R. List. Springer, New York, 2009, 755; J. E. S. Hayward. The Official Social Philosophy of the French Third Republic: Leon Bourgeois and Solidarism. – International Review of Social History, 1961, 6, 1, 39, 42.

57 J. Tõnisson. Ühistegevuse sotsiaalsed lähtekohad ja sotsiaaluenduslikud sihid II. – Ühistegelised Uudised, 11.10.1935.

58 Ibid.

(*Institut International d'Études Coopératives*), established by Gide in 1931.⁵⁹ Tõnisson's solidaristic ideas still need to be analysed in more detail in future studies as he increasingly began to turn to French solidarism as a source of ideas as well as political arguments towards the end of the 1930s.⁶⁰

Charles Gide served as a significant inspiration for democratic co-operators worldwide. As noted by Freire and Pereira, in Portugal, democratic opposition consolidated around consumer co-operative circles, particularly around the journal *Seara Nova* (New Harvest). In 1937, Charles Gide's co-operative program was published in the journal, featuring a foreword by António Sérgio, a prominent co-operative activist and a political opponent of Salazar's regime.⁶¹

From the mid-1930s, Tõnisson, too, emerged as a leading figure in democratic opposition to authoritarian rule. Given the de facto censorship in force at the time, his role as a professor of co-operation may have provided him with certain additional freedoms in his political activities. Krista Aru notes that it was more challenging to ban those of Tõnisson's lectures and speeches that focused on co-operative themes, given his honourable title as a professor of co-operation at the University of Tartu.⁶² But in discussing co-operation, one could simultaneously explore and promote themes of democracy, individual initiative and autonomy, and freedom from state intervention at a time of increasing statism. Co-operation, with its democratic ideals and specialised language, served as a platform for Tõnisson to express his political ideas too. And he made use of it.

In the yearbook of co-operation 1936, Tõnisson authored an article addressing the challenges posed by authoritarian regimes in his contemporary Europe to the co-operation movement. He argued that the modern co-operative movement originated in the unique context of modern liberalism, and as a result, its core principles differed markedly from the medieval guild system. According to Tõnisson, the primary focus of the modern co-operative movement was the protection of individual interests, albeit in harmony with the community's interests. He argued: "Yet there can be no co-operative success without free initiative and self-determination."⁶³ He also believed that it is not a

59 Prof. Jaan Tõnisson Rahvusvahelise Ühistegevuse-instituudi liikmeks. – Postimees, 09.12.1936; A. Labigne, R. List. Gide, Charles.

60 See, for example, J. Tõnisson. Ühistegevus ja solidarismi mõte. – Ühiskaubandus, 1939, 3, 92–96.

61 D. Freire, J. D. Pereira. Consumer Co-operatives in Portugal, 305.

62 K. Aru. Jaan Tõnisson – rahvajuht ja riigivanem, 2. osa. Rahvusarhiiv, Tartu 2019, 799.

63 J. Tõnisson. Ühistegevuse tulevikuvaated autoritaarse riikluse olustikus. – Aasta VIII:

coincidence that co-operation had a democratic basis. His conclusion was that there were deep and irreconcilable discrepancies between the totalitarian-authoritarian political systems and the modern co-operative movement.⁶⁴ The reference to the medieval guild system could have been a snub against the new system of corporative chambers in Estonia, as Tõnisson was openly critical of corporatism.⁶⁵

Regardless of his emphasis on the autonomy of individuals, he stopped short of promoting absolute individualism. People had to be able to come together and find ways to leave their ideological and religious differences aside to collaborate for mutual benefit. And this is why, he argued, co-operation was not only an economic organisation, but also a cultural platform. In several of his writings and speeches Tõnisson framed co-operation as a school for tolerance, for self-government, and for democracy.⁶⁶ The idea of the co-operation movement as a “school” was popular all over Europe.⁶⁷

Tõnisson believed that co-operation as a “school” provided a platform to continue civic education and embrace individuality, which would help the democratic mindset and civil society to outlive the authoritarian period. He believed authoritarianism to be contrary to the evolution of history and therefore temporary. “Spring is breaking its way into the yard and the meadow”, as he poetically and hopefully concluded the 1936 article on the challenges posed by authoritarian regimes to co-operation.⁶⁸

Tõnisson’s texts serve as an illustration of how the language of co-operation functioned as a framework to continue promoting democracy and criticising heightened state intervention in civil society throughout the 1930s. In addition to publications, there were also other platforms to distribute ideas or bring together democratically minded individuals. An interesting case is the Academic Co-operative Society, based at the University of Tartu. In the evening before Tartu co-operation day in December 1938, the Academic Co-operative Society organised a meeting and invited Minister of Economic Affairs Leo Sepp to deliver a lecture to a smaller circle at the meeting. Apparently, during the discussion after the speech, Professor of International Law Ants Piip used the occasion to criticise the government for significantly

Koguteos ühistegelastele. Koost. J. Mõttus. Toimetaja väljaanne, Tallinn, 1936, 55.

64 Ibid., 51.

65 Ibid., 64.

66 For example, J. Tõnisson. Ühistegevus kui kultuuri-tegur [1939]. – Ülestõusmine, 233; J. Tõnisson. Poliitilise erapooletuse põhimõte ühistegevuses [1935]. – Ülestõusmine, 272.

67 For example, M. Hilson. Popular Movements.

68 J. Tõnisson. Ühistegevuse tulevikuvaated autoritaarse riikluse olustikus, 55

reducing the University of Tartu's autonomy. Jaan Tõnisson and some other democratically minded members of the Society, mainly University of Tartu professors, helped to endorse Piip's allegations. The consequences could have been harsh. Eduard Poom, the dean of the Faculty of Economics, took the matter to the university administration and an investigation was started. Poom demanded Piip be punished for disrespectful behaviour. Moreover, the case was sent to the government, the Chancellor of Justice, and even the President, although ultimately Piip was not sanctioned.⁶⁹ However, this case shows that criticism of the government was unwelcome. It is likely that the Academic Co-operative Society served as a place for like-minded figures to meet and have relatively free discussions. In the following section, I will analyse another example of the critical discussions at a Society's event, this time directly related to the theme of state intervention in co-operation autonomy.

In January 1939, upon turning 70 at the end of 1938, Tõnisson received a notice signed by Eduard Poom saying that he had to withdraw from the professorship due to his age. Tõnisson first asked for an extension and then the right to get an emeritus title to continue teaching in a smaller capacity. He was granted neither. His position had been funded by EÜL,⁷⁰ who was willing to continue to finance the position. After some discussions, the University's administration remained steadfast in their decision arguing that he would not get the right to the emeritus position because his position was externally funded. The case was discussed at the highest possible level, although this did not change the outcome. Tõnisson had to leave the University before the end of the 1938/1939 academic year.⁷¹

69 Kirjavahetus Tartu Ülikooli, Vabariigi Valitsuse ja õiguskantsleriga prof. A. Piipi sõnavõtu asjus Akadeemilise Ühistegevuse Seltsi koosolekul, 30.12.1938–24.01.1939: Rahvusarhiiv (National Archives of Estonia, hereafter RA), Tallinn, ERA.1108.1.987.

70 Riigivanema otsus dr. jur. J. Tõnissoni Eesti Ühistegelise Liidu poolt Tartu Ülikooli juures ülalpeetava ühistegevuse õppetooli professoriks kinnitamise kohta, 26.06.1935: RA, ERA.31.3.14583, 3.

71 Jaan Tõnissoni õppejõutoimik: RA, EAA.2100.2.1272, 26–40; EÜL juhatuse koosoleku protokoll nr 4, 6.05.1939: RA, ERA.1191.1.4, 207; EÜL juhatuse koosoleku protokoll nr 5, 26.05.1939: RA, ERA.1191.1.4, 208.

THE CURIOUS CASE OF THE
CHAMBER OF CO-OPERATIVE
SOCIETIES: EXPERIMENTS WITH
CORPORATISM FROM BELOW

The previous section explored instances where co-operative ideas and frameworks served as a foundation for the ongoing advocacy of democratic participation, pluralism, and civil society. However, in this section, I will argue that the boundaries between co-operation, traditionally perceived as a grass-roots movement, and corporatism as a system centrally organised from the top down by the state were not always straightforward.

The Chamber of Co-operative Societies in Estonia exemplifies this fluidity of boundaries. As one of the 15 corporative chambers established during the authoritarian shift, it was intended to serve as the primary centre for all co-operative activities. However, it is noteworthy that two existing organisations, EÜL and PÜK, were already perceived as central entities in the realm of co-operation. Sources indicate a rivalry between these centres, a competition that was characterised as a troublesome source of crisis since the coup.⁷² In the process of the promotion of chambers, both central organisations began discussions of the overall feasibility and potential structure of a chamber that could bring together co-operative societies.

Previous studies show limited scholarly interest in the complexities of the establishment process and the discussions surrounding the Chamber of Co-operative Societies. The prevailing view in the literature tends to depict the co-operative chamber as yet another instance of the authoritarian state taking control of the co-operative movement, incorporating it into its new chamber system in a top-down fashion.⁷³ However, this perspective oversimplifies the actual events, which were far more nuanced. Sources indicate that the impetus to create the chamber originated from within the ranks of co-operators themselves. Moreover, an intense conflict unfolded between the two co-operative centres regarding the necessity and nature of the chamber.

Artur Eckbaum, who served as a board member of PÜK, was actively involved in the process of setting up the chamber, and later became its Secretary General, offers some context to understand the

⁷² For example, V. Krinal. Ühistegevuse keskasutused, 57.

⁷³ For example, A. Ruusmann. Eesti Vabariik 1920–1940: Sisepoliitiline areng. TPÜ kirjastus, Tallinn, 1997, 124.

dispute. On the one hand, his line of argumentation largely mirrors the official rhetoric of the era, suggesting that co-operators were driven by the goal of overcoming persistent conflicts and aimed to establish a truce. At the same time, he also admits that originally the two central organisations began a competition over two very different ideas of how to integrate co-operation into the new system of chambers,⁷⁴ with sources revealing that in the end, one of the projects emerged as the winner.

As early as December 31, 1934, the EÜL, with the signatures of Juhan Nihtig and Karl Aleksander Reinmann (later Reinaste), submitted a draft act for the future chamber of co-operation to the Minister of Economic Affairs, Karl Selter. In the short cover letter, they explained that they had come to the understanding that for the coordination of co-operative activities, a central organisation under public law needed to be established. Within this general framework, all individual branches of co-operation would maintain their freedom to develop their own field “more or less independently”.⁷⁵ The chamber would be composed of six sections: co-operative banking, co-insurance, co-operative trade, co-operative industry, co-operative production, and a general section.⁷⁶

Selter, for his part, said that he fully agreed that co-operation should have a public organisation in the form of the chamber and that co-operation should indeed fall under the authority of the Ministry of Economic Affairs.⁷⁷ On January 21, 1935, the co-operators sent the project to the Minister of Agriculture, Nikolai Talts. This time they added a longer cover letter to explain in more detail why a separate chamber needed to be established.

Relying on the rhetoric reinforced by the government, they explained that the current co-operation system was unhealthy: it was fragmented and filled with unnecessary conflict and tension between various organisations. Co-operation needed to be “healed”, and the first way to do this was to create the Chamber of Co-operative Societies under public law (*avalikõiguslikul alusel*). On the other hand, they argued that when bringing co-operation under the same roof, “the self-initiative, self-action, and self-governance that are essential for co-operation would be maintained.” This would be achieved by establishing individual sections within the Chamber. The sections would be granted “full

74 A. Eckbaum. Ühistegevus ja põllumeeste majanduslikud asutised, 232–233.

75 EÜL kiri majandusministrile, 31.12.1934: RA, ERA.969.1.253, 1.

76 Ibid., 4.

77 Ibid., 1.

self-governance” (*täieline omavalitsus*), but their activities would be coordinated using guidelines approved by the government.⁷⁸

This rhetoric reflects the rationalisation rhetoric of the well-ordered state and the medical language promoted by Päts.⁷⁹ On the other hand, with their references to self-initiative and self-governance, most notably, the EÜL circles also emphasised the importance of the democratic principles of co-operation discussed in the previous section.

The project was forwarded to other interested parties. Reactions were mixed. On the one hand, the chairman of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Joakim Puhk, was generally supportive of the idea but criticised the way the Chamber was structured into sections. Puhk proposed four sections instead: co-operative banking, co-insurance, co-operative trade, and co-operative industry.⁸⁰

However, the response from the Chamber of Agriculture on February 28, 1935, was highly critical. They argued that establishing such a chamber would be inadvisable and provided several reasons for their stance. Firstly, they claimed that co-operation is not a profession; on the contrary, all professions utilise co-operation. Therefore, it was impossible to separate agricultural co-operation from the broader field of agriculture, as agricultural work and agricultural co-operation were organically united. This unity was mirrored in other fields with their respective co-operative activities. Their decision was that agricultural co-operation, especially the auditing of such co-operative societies, had to remain under the authority of the Chamber of Agriculture. However, if a separate co-operative chamber was deemed unavoidable, two separate chambers ought to be established: one for producers and one for consumers. The letter was signed by Jaan Hünerson, as the director of the Chamber of Agriculture.⁸¹ Hünerson had enough reason to remain critical of the project presented by the EÜL. Notably, although he signed this letter on behalf of the Chamber of Agriculture, he also served as the long-term head of the PÜK.⁸²

As explained earlier, the conflicts and rivalries mentioned in various sources, which the proposed Chamber was intended to resolve, seemed to have arisen between two central co-operative organisations. Hünerson’s right-hand man, Artur Eckbaum, who later went into

78 EÜL kiri põllutöoministrile, 21.01.1935; RA, ERA.969.1.253, 13–13p.

79 See more in L. Veski. *Towards Stronger National Unity*.

80 Kaubandus-Tööstuskoja kiri majandusministeeriumile, 14.02.1935; RA, ERA.969.1.253, 37–40.

81 Põllutöökaja kiri majandusministrile, 28.02.1935; RA, ERA.969.1.253, 48–50.

82 A. Eckbaum. Ühistegevus ja põllumeeste majanduslikud asutised, 231, 237.

exile during the Second World War and helped to establish the Toronto Estonian bank co-operative in Canada, reminisced in 1956 about the details of the clash between the two organisations and their plans for the co-operation network. In Eckbaum's view, the primary source of conflict was the fact that the EÜL promoted consumer co-operative ideology and did not wish to admit that the co-operative network in Estonia relied primarily on the farmer and was also largely organised in accordance with agricultural co-operative ideology. Eckbaum also criticised many co-operators for forgetting that the Law of Co-operative Societies and their Associations was based on Russian law, which was largely inspired by similar German laws. Importantly, he highlighted how the German laws were influenced not by the ideas of the Rochdale Pioneers but rather by leading German co-operation theorists Schulze-Delitzsch and Raiffeisen.⁸³ Therefore, according to Eckbaum, a clash between agricultural circles and all other co-operators was at the root of the conflict. It seems that this perspective echoes Hünerson's arguments.

The PÜK project, signed by Hünerson, was sent to the Ministry of Economic Affairs on January 8, 1935, about a week after the arrival of the EÜL's initial project. The PÜK agreed that reorganisation was necessary. However, Hünerson argued that the co-operative network had to be divided into separate central organisations along the lines of interests. In the project, Hünerson talked about groups of common interests (*huvikonnad*). He distinguished three potential groups:

- 1 Producers, i.e. agricultural co-operatives
- 2 Consumers, i.e. entrepreneurs, merchants, homeowners
- 3 Other consumers, i.e. workers and other wage-earners in co-operation⁸⁴

In terms of the second and third groups, he admitted that they were not fully developed. However, he believed that their interests were divergent enough to justify grouping them into separate organisations eventually.⁸⁵

Nevertheless, his focus lay with the first group, and therefore he did not pay much further attention to the internal structure of what he regarded as consumer co-operative associations. His argument was that co-operation in Estonia was primarily agricultural. Yet, it was not guided by agricultural circles, and agriculture did not even benefit much from the co-operative movement. If the principle of groups of common interest was applied, all producer co-operatives would be grouped

83 Ibid., 237.

84 Põllumajandusliikude Ühisuste Revisjoniliidu kiri riigivanemale, o8.01.1935: RA, ERA.969.1.253, 58.

85 Ibid., 58p.

around the PÜK, and all consumer co-operatives around the EÜL. More central organisations would not be necessary at this stage, as consumer co-operation was not yet sufficiently developed. He proposed that both parties would have a lot to gain from economic interaction via well-organised special organisations without any facilitators. He concluded: “But it is entirely unnecessary to unite producers and users under a single organisation with common management.”⁸⁶

The two special organisations would essentially be the former main co-operative associations, whose responsibilities would entail monitoring, ideological guidance, supervision, and management of co-operative societies. Societies would be divided between the two based strictly on interest. In this way, Hünerson explained, the reorganisation of co-operation would not need to be a significant upheaval, and bureaucratisation would be avoided, meaning that these associations would unify their respective societies organically. Hünerson suggested that the two organisations could just as well be called the “auditing chambers” (*revisjonikojad*) as they would also be responsible for auditing co-operative societies.⁸⁷

Hünerson strengthened his argument with references to various theorists and international examples of co-operative networks. For instance, he cited Russian economic theorist Alexander Chayanov’s notion that we should not discuss the co-operative movement in singular terms but rather talk about co-operative movements in plural. He emphasised that co-operation could not be separated from its social foundations. Owing to differences in the social, or economic, bases of co-operative branches, the nature of various co-operative movements also varied. Additionally, he quoted the German co-operator Engelbert Mülhaupt’s idea that “Whenever peace is committed between the countryside and the city, it is an armed peace.”⁸⁸

In his argumentation, Hünerson, too, relied on a stark opposition between the city and the countryside. He protested that agriculture had become a servant led by strangers. He explained that this had occurred because, at the beginning of the independence period, there were not that many co-operative figures among farmers. However, there were many in the city, including optants – Estonians in Russia who resettled in Estonia in the early 1920s. These individuals began to organise central co-operative organisations. Farmers were relatively

86 Ibid.

87 Ibid., 58p, 63.

88 Ibid., 59p.

passive and did not have much experience leading larger organisations, so co-operative associations were led by urban circles. He mentioned a few names specifically, starting with EÜL chairman Aleksander Kask. Hünerson stated that these men quickly gained control over all consumer co-operatives, co-operative financial institutions, and most insurance undertakings. He insisted that co-operation needed to be freed from the influence of the urban circles, and this could only be achieved with the decisive interference of the government. If the EÜL's project for the chamber was successful, farmer's interests would be underrepresented, and most sections would be guided by the city.⁸⁹

Yet, curiously, in Hünerson's plans, there was still space for a unified co-operative chamber. This would be a central organisation that brought together representatives of co-operative interest groups. On the one hand, they would work together with the state regarding various acts and regulations related to co-operation. But the chamber would also be a platform to coordinate activities, especially auditing and monitoring, between the central organisations. Importantly, Hünerson argued that one core issue that linked co-operators from various professional fields was collaboration against the predominance of the private capital (for example, private merchants), which leads to exploitation. The chamber would help to coordinate actions against the "speculative capital", both nationally and internationally.⁹⁰

In short, Hünerson was not deeply committed to the integrity of the co-operative field. For him, it was more important to maintain connections between agricultural co-operators and other agricultural organisations. This is why he employed the city versus countryside opposition, cultivating an image of an uninformed farmer deceived and enslaved by cunning city folks. However, with the EÜL, he shared the notion of building a well-organised system and the idea of autonomy within their respective fields. His specific emphasis on the fight against private capital sets the PÜK's project apart from that of the EÜL.

The EÜL initiated their counteraction by sending a delegation to meet with Päts twice in the spring 1935, on March 5 and April 9.⁹¹ The delegations also signed and sent memoranda to Päts and Selter. They reiterated that one of the reasons for submitting the project in the first place was the emergence of parallel structures among several

89 Ibid., 62–62p.

90 Ibid., 59, 63.

91 Riigivanema jutulesoovijate nimestik, 05.03.1935: RA, ERA.31.5.498, l 62; EÜL märgukiri riigivanemale, 09.04.1935: RA, ERA.969.1.253, 70–71p; Ühistegeline Liit nõuab ühte ühistegevuse koda. – Vaba Maa, 09.04.1935.

central organisations in the same field. This fragmentation led to lasting antagonisms. Before submitting the original project in November 1934, the EÜL had reportedly contacted Päts, who had expressed support for the idea. They also reminded Selter of his earlier support.⁹²

They then presented the main arguments and countered some of the claims made by the PÜK. One argument was that co-operation had a long history and its own traditions, making it significant enough to have the right to govern itself through its own central organisations. In addition, they insisted that in everything related to co-operation, co-operative activists were the ones most competent. If co-operation became a mere section under another chamber, such as the Chamber of Agriculture, it would not be able to secure co-operative interests. Moreover, responding to the PÜK's idea that co-operational fields needed to be organically linked with their respective professional fields, they replied that, quite the opposite, sections had to be divided up based on the nature of the activity, not according to professional fields. They cited an example of insurance co-operatives in which all members had similar interests regardless of their professional backgrounds.⁹³

On April 9, 1935, following the EÜL's general meeting the day before, a delegation met with Päts and presented another memorandum summarising the resolutions of the general meeting. Its main message was that co-operation's development had to be continued based on the principles of free self-governance and initiative. The Chamber of Co-operative Societies would serve as a public legal entity and a unified centre for co-operation, but branches of co-operation would maintain the freedom to pursue their own interests in sections, leading to collaboration within various sections of society and ensuring the political neutrality of co-operation. In the last sentence, the delegation expressed hope that this approach to co-operation aligned with the principles of "healing" the political and social life promoted by Päts himself.⁹⁴

Despite their differences, the EÜL and PÜK shared certain common premises in their projects and in their rhetoric: the imperative of rationalisation and reorganisation of the movement, coupled with the preservation of co-operation's inherent autonomy for free development and self-governance. (Of course, different conclusions were drawn for practical applications.) In these discussions, we see a mix of the traditional co-operative language (for example, self-governance, taking

92 EÜL nõukogu esindajate kiri majandusministrile, 05.03.1935: RA, ERA.31.5.498, 52.

93 Ibid., 52p–53.

94 EÜL märgukiri riigivanemale, 09.04.1935: RA, ERA.969.1.253, 70–71p.

the initiative, ideological and political neutrality) as well as references to the new, more state-centred approach to co-operation and the rhetoric of the authoritarian period (for example, putting an end to antagonisms, healing the system). The language of self-governance is particularly intriguing as it resonates with both the historical co-operative discourse, emphasising grassroots initiatives, and the contemporary narrative surrounding the new system of chambers that were framed as institutions of professional self-government.⁹⁵ And it is likely that the primary motivation of co-operation circles was to take the initiative and preserve the highest possible degree of autonomy during a period of significant social and political upheaval. This also meant a moment that provided new opportunities to be taken advantage of. This motivation seems to have intersected with the struggle for resources between the two central associations.

OTHER CRITICAL REACTIONS FROM WITHIN

There were, of course, critical voices within the co-operative community. At the Academic Co-operative Society, several presentations were conducted on the subject. One of the most forthright and outspoken papers was delivered by the co-operator and former state elder Juhan Kukk on March 6, 1935. Kukk asserted boldly: “The state should not interfere too much in co-operation, as it can only harm viable co-operation. Bureaucratic rules, after all, cannot promote our co-operation.” He also criticised the PÜK’s proposal, arguing that projects that aimed to subordinate co-operation to the full authority of the state are harmful. Nevertheless, Kukk did support the idea of the Chamber because, without it, co-operation could become a mere section under the Chamber of Agriculture. When a member of the audience, Karl Inno, expressed support for the idea of co-operation becoming a section under the Chamber of Agriculture, Kukk admitted that he was not even a proponent of chambers at all. However, if the Co-operative Chamber were indeed established, it had to include three sections: producers, consumers, and credit co-operatives.⁹⁶

⁹⁵ See, for example, Constitution of the Republic of Estonia, 1937, Ch. 12.

⁹⁶ Ühistegevuse ja riigi vahekordadest. – Ühistegelised Uudised, 18.04.1935; Akadeemilise Ühistegevuse Seltsi 1934./35. a. tegevusaruanne: RA, EAA.5117.1.16.

Naturally, Tõnisson was among the more vocal opponents. During the co-operation day held in Tartu on October 20, 1935, a representative of the Ministry of Economic Affairs, H. Visman, presented the project of the soon-to-be-approved Act of the Chamber of Co-operative Societies. The co-operative newspaper *Ühistegelised Uudised* gave a summary: “Some (Prof J. Tõnisson) expressed concern that the Chamber might inhibit the free initiative of co-operation, while others noted that the act of the chamber is essentially a framework act, within the limits of which initiative can freely take place. The future of the Chamber will depend on the content that the co-operators themselves are able to give it.”⁹⁷ Therefore, the message that the Chamber would help the co-operators maintain autonomy within the system was yet again repeated.

However, it appears that there might have been a change of heart. In December 1936, as the Chamber was about to come to life, Tõnisson presented his somewhat altered views. He reiterated his argument that the foundation of modern co-operation was free initiative. Nevertheless, he acknowledged that the future of co-operation in Estonia depended on the extent to which the government sought to influence co-operative societies through the Chamber of Co-operation. Tõnisson explained that in democratic systems, co-operation could easily defend itself against state intervention with the support of public opinion and parliamentary circles. “However, when there is a shadow of an authoritarian system in power, attempts to regulate collective action from behind the green table will not go unheeded.” Such restrictions would lead to a loss of motivation and enthusiasm for co-operation.⁹⁸

This line of argumentation aligns with Tõnisson’s usual rhetoric. However, he then added something new. Specifically, he echoed the EÜL’s narrative and admitted that the initial motivation behind the chamber was the belief that as a public entity and a centre for co-operators, it would help to end fragmentation and conflict within co-operation, and coordinate activities between societies in order to enhance co-operative activity. Tõnisson suggested that he would have preferred alternative methods to achieve these goals, such as public outreach and competition between ideas for educational purposes. However, he acknowledged that disputes over principles should not hinder progress at this point. Tõnisson was willing to make the best use of the given opportunities: “If the existence of a public co-operative body offers the prospect of greater co-ordination and more systematic operationalisation of our

97 Ühistegevuse koja põhilaused. – Ühistegelised Uudised, 25.10.1935.

98 Ühistegevuskaja eeldustest. – Ühistegelised Uudised, 08.01.1937.

co-operative network, it must be carefully utilised.” Given the scarcity of resources, he agreed that rationalisation was essential. He concluded: “If public authority is used not to galvanise co-operative forces according to political considerations, but to mobilise forces rationally in the spirit of co-operative action and to remove obstacles to the development of co-operative action, then the application of the public law principle to our co-operative activities will be an interesting experiment in practice as well as in principle.”⁹⁹ For whatever reason, here Tõnisson aligned himself more closely with the initial rationale presented in the EÜL project and memoranda. It is possible that his objective was to make the best of the dire situation.

“SOCIETY’S CO-OPERATIVE CONSCIENCE”: DISCUSSIONS ON THE EÜL’S ROLE

In summary, the Chamber of Co-operative Societies Act was adopted on November 22, 1935. The first elections took place on June 4, 1936. Each cooperative (with a few exceptions) was entitled to one vote, which they exercised through a representative. The chamber comprised 60 members elected for a four-year term.¹⁰⁰ The candidate lists and the results reflected the lingering tensions between the two central organisations, yet the EÜL emerged as the more popular choice.¹⁰¹ The chamber’s structure and legislation were primarily derived from the EÜL’s proposal. At the first general meeting on September 10, 1936, EÜL leader Aleksander Kask was unanimously voted to be the Chamber’s chairman.¹⁰²

Nevertheless, the EÜL and the PÜK continued their existence. The question of the nature and future of the chamber, particularly in relation to the associations, especially the EÜL, arose on various occasions. In the *Co-operative Yearbook 1936 (Ühistegevuse aastaraamat 1936)*, Karl Kornel, Director of the Estonian Telegraph Agency, discussed whether the Chamber’s assumption of many functions from other organisations would make the latter redundant. Kornel criticised this attitude, emphasising the cultural and intellectual dimensions of co-operation, particularly co-operative journalism, a field that should not be neglected. Kornel warned that the process of centralisation always carried a threat

99 Ibid.

100 Ühistegevuskoja seadus. – Riigi Teataja, 1935, 103, 2386–2387.

101 Ühistegevuskoda ja tema süünd. – Ühistegelised Uudised, 11.09.1936.

102 Ibid.; Ühistegevuskoja esimeheks valiti A. Kask. – Ühistegelised Uudised, 11.09.1936.

of “bureaucratism”, which endangered the creative spirit. He suggested that the original central associations could play a role in countering this threat. With the Chamber taking over many former functions, the associations could evolve into the “society’s co-operative conscience”, providing warnings against or assistance in eliminating bureaucratism.¹⁰³

In April 1937, the annual general meeting of the EÜL took place at the Estonia Theatre. One of the speakers was Aleksander Kask, the chairman of the Chamber of Co-operation and long-term head of the EÜL (he was re-elected to this position at this meeting). Kask, too, emphasised that the EÜL retained a number of functions, mainly co-operative education and the promotion of co-operative ideology, including funding the professorship at the University of Tartu, providing co-operation training, and publishing the *Ühistegelised Uudised* newspaper.¹⁰⁴

However, in the years until the Chamber was disbanded by the new Soviet authorities in the summer of 1940,¹⁰⁵ the process of centralisation persisted. By the conclusion of the 1930s, the Chamber had effectively assumed most of the functions previously held by the central associations. Following Jaan Tõnisson’s mandatory retirement from the professorship in the spring of 1939, discussions arose concerning the future of co-operative higher education at the University of Tartu. The minutes of the EÜL board meeting of October 1939 reference the potential establishment of a co-operation department within the Faculty of Agriculture, aligning with plans outlined by the dean of the Faculty. The board of the EÜL chose not to make a decision on the matter, deferring it to the Chamber.¹⁰⁶ It may be noteworthy that, at that point, the board predominantly consisted of individuals who were already leading members of the Chamber, with Kask the most prominent example.¹⁰⁷ This arrangement highlights the level of centralisation achieved since the establishment of the Chamber.

103 K. Kornel. Tööpuudust pole karta. – Aasta VIII: Koguteos ühistegelastele, 56–57.

104 Eesti Ühist. Liidu peakoosolekult. – Ühistegelised Uudised, 23.04.1937.

105 Ühistegevuskaja likvideerimise toimik, 01.08.1940–20.08.1940: RA, ERA.969.1.560a.

106 EÜL juhatuse koosoleku protokoll nr 8, 19.10.1939: RA, ERA.1191.1.4, 210.

107 Ühistegelikud vaimsed keskasutised. – Ühistegevuse aastaraamat I 1937, 294–301. Ühistegevuskoda, Tallinn, 1939, 295.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This article analysed the co-operative landscape in 1930s Estonia against the backdrop of authoritarian rule. On the one hand, the co-operative movement in Estonia became integrated into the new organic statist systems, notably through the establishment of state monopoly organisations on trade and the Chamber of Co-operative Societies. However, the case of the Chamber revealed a more nuanced process than previously acknowledged. Crucially, the Chamber was perceived as a mechanism to preserve the autonomy of the co-operative field by co-operators while making co-operation more efficient through centralisation. This case raises important questions about the nature of the establishment of authoritarian structures more broadly. Was the story of the Chamber of Co-operative Societies unique, specific to the co-operative movement, or did similar initiatives and disputes also emerge in the establishment of other chambers? The latter seems to be more plausible. The case of the Chamber also illustrates that co-operation and corporatism were not as distinctly separable at the time as some co-operators might have preferred to believe.

One interesting finding of this study is that the rhetoric justifying the Chamber represented a blend of concepts from the tradition of co-operation and the statist organicist ideology promoted by the authoritarian state – a fusion of self-governance and individual initiative with rationalisation, centralisation, and healing. This article did not explore the functioning of the Chamber, which should be studied in the future. Did the initial co-operators' rhetoric about the Chamber preserving the autonomy of co-operation materialise in practice? Furthermore, this case raises a question about the grassroots origins of the authoritarian state and its structures more broadly.

However, this article has also highlighted the role of co-operation as a platform for expressing democratic ideals and cherishing civil society during a period of democratic backsliding outside of the structures established by the state. Co-operation, as a theory, platform, and movement, had the potential to be utilised by the democratic opposition to critique the authoritarian state in a time of de facto censorship. Future studies should take a more detailed look at how Tõnisson's co-operative ideas evolved during the 1930s. His reception of Charles Gide's co-operative solidarism, especially in comparison to the conservative

reception of solidarism, which was gaining prominence during the same period,¹⁰⁸ would be a particularly promising topic to explore.

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DEMOKRAATIA KOOL: ÜHISTEGEVUS JA AUTORITAARNE RIIK 1930. AASTATE EESTIS

Liisi Veski

Artikkel uurib ühistegevusliikumist ja -mõtet Eestis 1930. aastate autoritaarsel perioodil. Fookuses on küsimus, kuidas muutus ühistegevus autoritaarse võimukorra tingimustes.

Artikkel jaotub kolme alateema vahel. Alustuseks antakse ülevaade ühistegevuse autonoomia vähenemisest majandussüsteemi tsentraliseerimise ja ratsionaliseerimise tagajärjel, muu hulgas riigimonopolifirmade asutamise kaudu põllumajandussaaduste ekspordiks. Teiseks uuritakse, kas ja mil moel toimis liberaalsete ideeliste juurtega ühistegevusliikumine 1930. aastate autoritaarse režiimi tingimustes demokraatliku opositsiooni platvormina. See teema on eriti huvipakkuv, arvestades, et mitmes tolle-aegses autoritaarses riigis, nt Portugalis, hakkasid just ühistegevuse võrgustikud koondama demokraatlikke ringkondi. Keskendutakse eelkõige Jaan Tõnissonile, Tartu Ülikooli esimesele ühistegevusprofessorile. Viimase suurema teemana uuritakse Ühistegevuskoda, mis loodi 1935. aastal osana uuest kutsekodade süsteemist.

Artiklis näidatakse, et mõned liberaalsed ühistegevuses kaasalööjad, eesotsas Jaan Tõnissoniga, kasutasid tööpoolest autoritaarsel perioodil ühistegevusliikumist kui platvormi, et jätkuvalt propageerida demokraatlikke ideaale ja indiviidide vaba algatust. Sel teel leidsid ühistegeglased ka võimalusi kritiseerida autoritaarseid režiime *de facto* tsensuuri tingimustes. 1930. aastate teisel poolel tegeles Jaan Tõnisson

108 See more in L. Veski. Interwar Transnational Authoritarianism and the Case of “Social Solidarity.” – *Peripheral Histories?*, 20.03.2023. <https://www.peripheralhistories.co.uk/post/interwar-transnational-authoritarianism-and-the-case-of-social-solidarity> (06.03.2024).

innukalt Prantsuse ühistegevuse aktivisti ja solidarismiteoreetiku Charles Gide'i ideede tutvustamisega. Gide'i teoseid lugesid ja tõlkisid sel ajal demokraatlikud ringkonnad ka teistes Euroopa riikides.

Kuigi historiograafias on jäänud levima arvamus, et Ühistegevuskoja idee oli riigi poolt peale surutud ja selle loomise ajend oli puhtalt ühistegevuse allutamine riigi kontrollile, oli tegelik areng märksa keerulisem. Arhiiviallikate toel näidatakse, et iseseisva ühistegevuse kutsekoja asutamise idee pärines just ühistegevuse ringkondadest. Koja loomisele eelnes tuline vaidlus kahe konkureeriva ühistegevuse keskasutuse, Eesti Ühistegelise Liidu (EÜL) ja Põllumajandusliku Ühistegevuse Keskliidu (PÜK) vahel. Mõlema asutuse juhttegelastel oli oma ettekujutus ühistegevuse tulevikust loodavas kutsekodade süsteemis.

EÜL esitas oma ettepaneku esimesena. Nende hinnangul oli Ühistegevuskoda vaja selleks, et ühistegevus saaks säilitada autonoomia ja kaitsta oma huve, kuid toimuks siiski teatav tsentraliseerimine: üks-teist dubleerivate ja rivaalitsevate revisjoniliitude asemele tekiks ühtne avalik-õiguslikul alusel tegutsev kutsekoda, mis koondaks enda alla kogu valdkonna. Koda omakorda jaguneks sektsioonideks. Oma põhjendustes ministeeriumidele ja riigivanemale kombineeriti ühistegevuse traditsioonilist liberaalset keelt, viidates sellistele põhimõtetele nagu vaba algatus, poliitiline neutraalsus, enesemääramine ning kasutati autoritaarse režiimi sõnavara, nagu ühistegevuse tervendamine, tülide lõpetamine ja ratsionaliseerimine.

PÜK juhttegelane Jaan Hünerson reageeris vastukavandi esitamisele. Ta toetas ühistegevuse valdkonna üleminekut 1931. aastal asutatud Põllutöökoja vastutuse alla. Juhtumisi oli Hünerson ise ka selle direktor. Hünersoni põhiargument oli, et ühistegevus jaotub selgelt kaheks valdkonnaks – tootjateks ja tarbijateks, mis on põhimõtteliselt erinevad „huvikonnad“. Tema hinnangul olid põllumehed kui tootjad jäänud ühistegevuse alal liiga tugevalt tarbijate (kindlustus, kaubandus, pangandus jm) mõju alla. Hünerson jäi seega EÜL-i pakutud ühtse Ühistegevuskoja mudeli suhtes kriitiliseks, kuna tema hinnangul oli kindla valdkonna ühistegevusel vastava tegevusala või kutsega rohkem ühist kui teiste ühistegevuse valdkondadega. Seega kui põllumajanduse ühistegevus jääks Põllutöökoja alla, oleksid põllumeeste huvid paremini kaitstud kui näiteks linnameestest pangandustegelaste juhtimisel.

1935. aasta novembris loodi riigivanema dekreediga siiski ühine Ühistegevuskoda. Koja seadus tugines suuresti EÜL-i kavandile. Erinevalt iseseisvatest revisjoniliitudest kuulus koda majandusministeeriumi haldusalasse. Koja kõrval jäid edasi tegutsema ka endised liidud, kuid

nüüd juba pigem kultuuriliste, ühistegevusmõtet tutvustavate asutustena. Aja jooksul tsentraliseerimine jätkus ning koda võttis üle üha uusi seni revisjoniliitudele kuulunud ülesandeid.

Kokkuvõttes võib öelda, et autoritaarse võimukorra tingimustes toimus tõepoolest ühistegevuse tsentraliseerimine ja senisest suurem allutamine riigile. Samas ei olnud tegu siiski ühesuunalise protsessiga. Näiteks võib järeldada, et Ühistegevuskoja abil püüdis osa ühistegevuslikke ringkondi säilitada uutes oludes oma valdkonnas võimalikult suurt autonoomiat.