‘We Lay Claim to Him!’ Berlin, Rothko, Eisenstein, and the Reorientation of Latvian National Identity

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Since the late 1990s, Latvia has increasingly made claim on the intellectual and cultural heritage of Sir Isaiah Berlin, Mark Rothko, and Sergei Eisenstein. This article adopts a social constructivist approach in comparing and contrasting the role of intellectuals in framing nineteenth-century national identities and their contemporary instrumentalization as tools in the construction of national identity. The article then considers the “seizure” of Berlin, Rothko, and Eisenstein as “Latvians,” arguing that this process has been undertaken for both international and domestic purposes—to socialize and integrate Latvia with the West, and to promote domestic value change.

Keywords: Latvia; Social Constructivism; National Identity; Intellectuals; Isaiah Berlin; Mark Rothko; Sergei Eisenstein

Introduction

In June 2009 the University of Latvia hosted a week-long conference marking the centenary of the birth of the noted Oxford University scholar Sir Isaiah Berlin. In her introductory remarks, former president Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga (2009) remarked that Berlin was a “son of Riga . . . who does belong to this city and was shaped by his stay in Riga.” She went on to state that Berlin had finally “returned home” to Latvia and that “although he did not live here long, we [Latvians] lay claim to him.” Following Vīķe-Freiberga, Mārcis Auziņš (2009), the Rector of the University of Latvia, referred to Berlin “as a great son of Latvia” This theme was continued in a news reportage later that evening, which stated that Berlin “has finally returned to the homeland [dzimtene] that he was forced to leave” (Vīksne, 2009).

However, there is no clear evidence of Berlin himself ever acknowledging this Latvian heritage. At the same 2009 conference, Berlin’s biographer, Henry Hardy, showed a clip of a 1981 television interview with Berlin in which the only reference the philosopher made to his Latvian past was the statement: “the Baltic, where I come from” (Levin, 1981). Moreover, in a recent volume on Berlin, a chapter entitled “In search of Isaiah Berlin” (Zimroth, 2009) discussed only Berlin’s Jewishness and Anglophilia, entirely ignoring any connection with the geographic place of his birth.

This article unpacks this disconnect and considers who, how, and why is posthumously “claiming” Berlin and two contemporaries, American abstract artist Mark Rothko and Soviet film-maker Sergei Eisenstein, as Latvian. All three were born on what is now (but was not then) Latvian territory and shared a similar middle-class Jewish childhood before achieving international recognition in their respective fields elsewhere. All three have been claimed, albeit with different levels of
enthusiasm, by Latvia in recent years. The first section begins with a theoretical
discussion of the role and place given to cultural intellectuals in framing national
identity, and connects these ideas to contemporary social constructivist approaches
to national identity building. The second empirical section begins with a discussion
of the Latvian backgrounds of Berlin, Rothko, and Eisenstein, and moves on to
consider and compare the construction of Berlin, Rothko, and Eisenstein as Latvian.
The conclusion argues that the attempted “capture” of Berlin and Rothko (and the
more half-hearted approach to Eisenstein) is best understood as a part of the Latvian
state’s post-Soviet reorientation from East to West. However, this “shortcut” to a
Western model of intellectual respectability also reflects the weakness of existing
cultural links to the West as well as an ongoing intellectual insecurity, perhaps even
feelings of inferiority, in regard to its cultural inheritance.

**Nationalism and Constructivism: Creating a “Useable Past”**

Intellectuals play a key role in the construction of national identities. In the
nineteenth century, East European intellectuals developed nationalist ideas in
response to their ethnically motivated exclusion from positions of elite influence in
colonial societies (Kedourie, 1986, Smith, 1991), or their own perceived (relative)
failure in not achieving the offices or rewards they had expected (Breuilly, 1982). In
this first stage of national identity building, intellectuals developed and constructed
the images of an ideal state and an ideal society that served to eventually mobilize
citizens for the nationalist movement (Breuilly, 1982, p. 329). They thus provided
“the cultural meat for the nationalist meal” through the codification of languages,
histories, and local traditions (Spencer & Wollman, 2006, p. 74), the construction
and promotion of national icons and heroes (Hobsbawm, 1983b), and, by packaging
together these disparate elements, generated composite nationalist ideologies (Smith,
1991). Moreover, much of this nationalist construction is “imagined” and, as such,
“can be reshaped to meet new challenges and needs” as and when the situation
demands (Miller, 1993, p. 9). As a result, nations and national identities can be seen
as Janus-faced, looking to (an occasionally fictive) past to mobilize the present
generation for the future (Hutchinson, 2001, p. 75). Indeed, as late as 1918 the
American literary critic Van Wyck Brooks called on the American intellectual elite to
create a “useable past” that focused on the elements of history that served the needs
of contemporary society, and discarded that which contradicted the narrative under
construction (Brooks, 1918). Thus intellectuals create a complex narrative that
acknowledges and justifies the existence of a nation and lays the basis for a national
identity.

However, the literature also recognizes that nationalisms have developed in
different ways at different times, largely dependent on whether the emerging nation
was sovereign or subject. John Plamenatz (1973) drew a controversially sharp line
between Western and Eastern nationalisms, arguing that all states were at a
comparative disadvantage to the early nations of France and Britain, which had
set the initial cultural standards—the rules of the game—by which the value of a
nation was to be judged. Moreover, while the nations of Western Europe were
economically and culturally equipped to rapidly catch up with Britain and France,
the newer economically and culturally underdeveloped nations of Eastern Europe
were less prepared to tackle this process. Nevertheless, in order to construct
themselves as legitimate nations, according to the established rules of the game, they had little choice but to adopt these alien standards. This, it has been argued, left the Eastern nations at a chronic and permanent disadvantage, playing a never-ending game of national “catch-up.” This in turn resulted in the nations of the region suffering from “a feeling of inferiority or inadequacy” (Plamenatz, 1973, p. 29) which was often compensated by over-emphasis and overconfidence (Kohn, 1945, p. 330), ultimately leading to the radical and exclusionary forms of nationalism that developed in Eastern Europe in the period between the two World Wars.

Thus the nation is a construct that is instrumentalized and manipulated for political or economic gain by national elites (Anderson, 1991). Contemporary social constructivism theorists share a similar approach, although much of the literature discusses “state” rather than “national” identity, encompassing models of political and welfare systems in addition to the “nation” inhabiting the territory of the state (see, e.g., Katzenstein, 1996). Constructivists see both the broader state identity and the narrower national identity—who we are—as something essentially unanchored that can be consciously changed, adapted, or manipulated in order to reach some strategic aim. While constructivist scholars in the international relations field have focused on the external manifestations of the state, particularly how states respond to changes in the international system, the state also projects itself internally and thus shapes national identity. Thus the national “imagined community” operates at two levels—the domestic and international—opening up the possibility for the construction of different, even competing, identities of the same nation.

Language plays a central role in this process. (see, e.g., Fierke, 2002). Within certain constraints (such as geography), language allows a state to manipulate its identity. Constructivists argue that language changes through the international socialization within which states interact and communicate, pooling norms, rules, and identities (Schimmelfennig 1999; Alderson, 2001; Howard, 2004). Peter Howard (2004) argued that this process has been particularly salient in post-cold war Europe where east and west have integrated through NATO and the European Union (EU) and other international organizations. However, as with the construction of nations in the nineteenth century, this is not a coming together of equals. Ikenberry and Kupchan (1990), p. 283) convincingly argued that international socialization is an asymmetrical process, with a hegemon (which can be a single state such as the USA or a group of states combining in an international organization such as the EU) creating norms, laws, and a language that “elites in secondary states buy into and internalize.” Thus European integration can be seen as a relationship between teacher (the hegemonic West) and pupil (the East) (Schimmelfennig, 2000). “Secondary” states can only be integrated into the international organizations, or some other broader grouping of states (such as “the West”) when they have taken on board and internalized these norms, although Peter Howard (2004), pp. 6–7) sharply criticized this approach, arguing that it is impossible to measure internalized beliefs (leaving “a researcher with an impossible burden of proof”) and, in any case, states are corporate actors that “have no belief or mindset to change.” As a result, while states can institutionalize norms, rules, and identities, they cannot internalize beliefs, and international socialization is best understood as a shared language containing four ongoing non-linear processes: learning a language, using it, institutionalizing it, and (eventually) a shift in state identity. This requires a superficial rather than a substantial internalized change, because only the language is being adopted.
This certainly seems to have been the case in post-cold war Europe where integration was asymmetrical, in that the East European accession states were expected to adopt established Western norms. This called for the adoption of a whole new language—in the case of the EU, *acquis communitaire*, the community method, consensus, etc.—as well as new forms of sub-regional, regional, and international cooperation. Although some scholars have argued that the concept of European identity was recast and widened to specifically include the Baltic States and exclude other post-Soviet states (Wennersten, 1999), this process would still require a domestic reconstruction of Baltic identities, posing “a serious challenge to more traditional narratives and their constituent elements, giving rise to a full scale identity crisis” (Mads, 2003, pp. 183–184).

Thus there are strong parallels between social constructivist and older nationalist theoretical perspectives on the construction of national and state identities. Both view identity as something consciously assembled, and they stress the unequal relationship between West and East (or those that have created the identity and those seeking to emulate it). The major difference is agency. While nationalism theorists focused on the role of intellectuals, constructivism considers political elites and state actors as central to this process. However, intellectuals do still have a role to play in contemporary processes of identity construction, albeit not as the constructors of national identity, but rather as *instruments* of national identity. The work of internationally renowned writers, artists, and distinguished scholars can build bonds between different nations and states. Paradoxically, this means that intellectuals are now no longer engaged in elaborating the uniqueness of one nation from another (through the construction of a “usable past”), but are rather used as tools that minimize apparent differences with other states and nations, and thus provide a shortcut to respectability.

What is a state to do when it does not have these intellectual resources to call upon? Contemporary Latvia has no major cultural figures—public intellectuals, politicians, musicians, writers, artists or sportmen—that project themselves far beyond the borders of the state or, in some cases, a narrow international audience. As Walter C. Clemens astutely observed of the Baltic States in 1994, the indigenous population is small and “repressed by fifty years of Communist repression and stagnation” and thus tempted “to mimic” rather than innovate. One short-cut to international recognition and acceptance as a “Western” state is the capture of established international cultural-intellectual figures, and their reconstruction as Latvians. The following section considers the “Latvianization” of Isaiah Berlin, Mark Rothko, and Sergei Eisenstein.

**Were Berlin, Rothko, and Eisenstein Latvian?**

Isaiah Berlin, Mark Rothko, and Sergei Eisenstein were all born into middle-class Russian-speaking Jewish families at the turn of the twentieth century, when the Latvian lands were still an integral part of the Russian empire. However, all three spent only part of their childhoods there, before moving abroad to find international success and fame in their different fields.

Berlin was born into a prosperous middle-class merchant family in Riga, then already a thriving cosmopolitan metropolis. He spent the first six years of his life living in a gracious 12-room apartment on the exclusive Alberta Street (in a building...
designed by Mikhail Eisenstein, father of Sergey Eisenstein). Berlin’s biographer Michael Ignatieff (1998, p. 21) relates how the Berlin family, possibly motivated by rising anti-Semitism in the Baltic region and to avoid the vicious warfare on the eastern front of World War I, moved to Russia proper in 1915. The family remained in Russia (first Andreapol, a small Russian town where the Berlin’s kept a summer home, and then later Petrograd) until 1920, when they returned to Riga. Their return to Riga by train, as described by Mendel Berlin, Isaiah’s father, was marked by an argument between Berlin’s mother and some Latvian passengers who had made anti-Semitic comments. The family then had to pay a bribe to Latvian police after arriving at the Riga train station (Ignatieff, 1988). The following year the Berlins migrated to London, where Isaiah attended St Paul’s School and Corpus Christi College at Oxford University where he forged an outstanding academic career. Berlin’s BBC obituary stated that he was “thought by many to be the dominant scholar of his generation” (BBC News, 1997). His life and career were shaped by his Jewish identity as well as his childhood in Russia, and his life in Britain (Zimroth, 2009). Indeed, Berlin acknowledged as much in his 1979 autobiographical essay “The three strands of my life,” agreeing that his character and identity had been shaped by three traditions—Russian, British, and Jewish (Berlin, 2011), although Michael Ignatieff argued that “he remained in character a Russian Jew of the last century” (Ignatieff, 1997). His life does not appear to have been directly influenced by Latvia.

Mark Rothko was born Marcus Rothkowitz into an orthodox Jewish middle-class family (his father was a pharmacist) in the eastern Latvian city of Daugavpils (then named Dvinsk), in 1903. At the time of his birth Daugavpils was a cosmopolitan town with a majority Jewish-Russian population that had little connection with the burgeoning Latvian nationalist movement in the western part of what is now Latvia. Rothko attended Jewish schools and spoke Yiddish and Russian. Ten years after his birth, amid rising ethnic tensions and following the bankruptcy of his father’s pharmacy, his family followed his father to Portland, Oregon in the USA (Breslin, 1993, p. 21). Rothko later studied liberal arts at Yale before moving to New York where he emerged as one of the most talented artists of his generation, and a leading member of the abstract expressionist movement. When his 1950 painting “White Center (yellow, pink and lavender on rose)” sold for $72.8 million at auction in 2007, it became the most expensive contemporary art work in the world (Booth, 2007). Having established himself as a major artist in America, it is unsurprising, as J.E.B. Breslin (1993, p. 17) writes, that “Rothko seldom reminisced, in paint or words, about his boyhood, his native town, its Jewish community.” Indeed, in a 2006 interview with the Baltic Times, Rothko’s daughter argued that he “saw himself as coming from the larger Czarist Empire” rather than a specific Latvia (Morton, 2006).

Sergei Eisenstein was born in Riga and his father was the architect and engineer Mikhail Osipovich Eisenstein, famous in Latvia for the art nouveau buildings he designed and built in the last decades of the Czarist era. Sergei Eisenstein left Latvia in 1905, although, in contrast to Berlin and Rothko, he returned and even briefly attended secondary school in Riga (Gillespie, 2000). This also seems to have made him more aware of his birthplace, and he occasionally referred to himself as a “boy from Riga” (Taylor, 2003, p. 25). Nevertheless, after leaving Riga in 1915, he settled in Russia and, despite travelling to Western Europe and the USA in the 1920s and
1930s, never returned to Latvia. Eisenstein also differs from Berlin and Rothko in that he achieved fame in the East—the Soviet Union—rather than in the West. Indeed, he has been described as an enthusiastic and active supporter of both the Soviet revolution and the subsequent state (Taylor, 2003, p. 33). This inevitably complicated his relationship with the Latvian state. On the one hand, he is the most celebrated Soviet filmmaker of his era whose most famous films—Strike, Battleship Potemkin, October, and Ivan the Terrible—remain iconic many decades after their production. On the other hand, he was a keen supporter of the communist state that occupied Latvia for almost a half-century. Moreover, as someone identified with the “East,” he does not quite fit in with the Western orientation that Latvia has adopted since 1991, and that the other two cultural figures provide. This is certainly reflected in the more cautious use that has been made of his connection to Riga and Latvia.

Thus all three cultural figures are linked to Latvia by birth. However, they left Latvian territory before the formation of the independent state at the end of World War I, and none spoke Latvian or appear to have been directly influenced by Latvia in their work. However, this is not say that their birthplace has absolutely no influence over them. Berlin’s work was clearly affected by two totalitarianisms—his brief experiences in the Soviet Union after World War I and later as a British government official during World War II, as well as the Nazi holocaust in Latvia which directly touched his wider family. Similarly, Rothko’s biographer J.E.B. Breslin (1993, p. 22) wrote that the painter “resented his forced migration,” and never felt fully at home in the USA. Indeed, Breslin argues that this sense of displacement, as well as the unique light of Northern Europe where he spent his early years, heavily influenced the style of Rothko’s work. Nevertheless, these are indirect, albeit important, influences. None of the three ever directly identified themselves as being Latvian, nor, after moving abroad, did they express any great affection for their common place of birth.

How to explain this lack of connection? Henry Hardy (2011) identified three reasons for Sir Isaiah Berlin’s lack of affinity with Latvia. First, Hardy reported that Berlin did not like small children, believing that they only became human beings from the age of seven. Thus having left Riga at the age of six, Berlin may have considered his early years spent in the city as being of no major consequence. While this point is rather specific to Berlin’s personality, Hardy’s other two arguments have more relevance for Rothko and Eisenstein. First, the Riga Berlin experienced was not the least bit Latvian. It was dominated by Baltic Germans, Russians, and Jews, and Latvians were largely separated, socially, culturally, and geographically, from the other ethnic groups that dominated the political, economic and cultural life of the city. Thus Berlin had no sense of Latvia and the Latvians. Eisenstein’s experience would have been very similar. Likewise, Rothko’s connection was with Daugavpils, dominated by Jews and Russians, and with very few resident ethnic Latvians. The second argument concerns the Holocaust in Latvia. Berlin lost many relatives and family friends to the Holocaust in Latvia and thus Riga came to have a negative association to Berlin. In the same way, Breslin recounts that Rothko’s major memories and recollections of Daugavpils were concerned with violence, often against Jews (Breslin, 1993, p. 25). Eisenstein, as a prominent member of the Soviet elite, would inevitably have been more secular than Berlin and Eisenstein, but
may well have lost distant relatives to the Holocaust and experienced some anti-Semitism.

As a result of this lack of affinity with Latvia, as well as Latvians’ limited information of what went on in the West during the Soviet era, Latvians have tended to be rather ambivalent about all three. Writing about Rothko and Eisenstein, Aldis Purs (2005, p. 148) noted that:

These artists and many others do not fit easily into the standard Latvian cultural world, and their works seem far removed from Latvian influences... Latvians still struggle with whether to accept and incorporate these artists into their long cultural tradition, or whether to ignore them altogether.

This relationship is further complicated by an ethnic conception of nationality as well as a latent anti-Semitism that is still found in Latvian society and politics. Latvian passports still list both citizenship (which is Latvian) and nationality (which can be Latvian, Russian, Jewish, etc.), thus drawing a line between citizenship (belonging to the state) and nationality (belonging to a nation). Thus those individuals holding Latvian citizenship, but from a different ethnic background, are not held to be authentically Latvian. This is particularly the case with Latvia’s Jews, who have been criticized by both mainstream and radical right populist parties and individual politicians. For example, in advance of the 2010 parliamentary election a member of the radical right populist National Alliance party (which entered the government coalition in October 2011) argued that there was a place for “intelligent anti-Semitism” (something he was unable to explain in detail) in the public discourse (see Auers & Kasekamp, 2012). While there may well continue to be some ignorance and reluctance in recognizing the three as Latvian with the general public in Latvia, Latvia’s Western-oriented elite has attempted to capture and utilize their cultural legacy for foreign and domestic political as well as economic gain.

Who, Why and How?

The paper now turns to consider three key questions: who is claiming Berlin, Rothko, and Eisenstein as Latvian, why is this process being undertaken, and how is it operationalized?

First, who is doing the claiming? Rather than being a concerted and harmonized effort, this is better understood as an ad-hoc process involving multiple actors that can be divided into four categories: state, local, international, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The major state actors are those involved in the foreign policy-making process—the President and the Foreign Ministry. These are also the primary political institutions that have supported Latvia’s integration with the West, which has been contested by radical nationalists, populists (inward looking), and pro-Russian speaking (thus Eastward looking) organizations and parties. However, none of these groups have ever gained control of the Latvian presidency or foreign ministry, thus Latvia has enjoyed a continuous pro-Western foreign policy. Second, the Riga and Daugavpils municipal authorities, which have ties to Berlin, Rothko, and Eisenstein as the cities of their birth, have also actively seized upon their legacies. Third, international actors such as the European Commission, UK, US, and Netherlands embassies have provided material support for various events that have
re-introduced these personalities to Latvia. Finally, NGOs as well as liberally inclined individuals such as the former *Economist* magazine journalist Robert Cottrell (resident in Riga since 2008), the Isaiah Berlin Association, and the Soros Foundation in Latvia, have actively supported efforts to popularize Isaiah Berlin, in particular, in Latvia.

Why have Berlin, Rothko, and Eisenstein been instrumentalized? To explain this process, the actors discussed above can be divided into two further categories. The first two groups of actors—state and local—utilize Berlin, Rothko, and Eisenstein in order to project a certain external image of Latvia, and the two cities for largely political but also, particularly in the latter case, economic gain. In contrast, the international and NGO actors utilize these figures in order to promote domestic value change.

Thus in the first case these cultural figures are used as instruments of external legitimacy. This is particularly the case in terms of bilateral relations with the USA and Israel. They emphasize Latvia’s multi-cultural past and long-standing Jewish community and thus also downplay the shame of the Holocaust in Latvia. They project a civic conception of Latvian identity that is actually very different to the ethnically oriented reality. Second, they are also used to construct a contemporary national identity that portrays Latvia as not just a consumer, but as a generator, of the type of international culture (books, art, and films) that frames a legitimate contemporary Western nation and state.

Two speeches given by then President Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga reflect this first instrumental utilization of Berlin, Rothko, and Eisenstein as tools of foreign policy. Speaking to the American Jewish Committee, an influential Washington, DC interest group in May 2007, Vīķe-Freiberga made reference to the contributions that Jews have made to humanity “including the Latvian-born painter Mark Rothko and the Riga-born philosopher Isaiah Berlin” (Vīķe-Freiberga, 2007). Vīķe-Freiberga also made reference to both figures in speeches at state dinners with the Israeli president in Riga in 2005 and Jerusalem in 2006 (and additionally made reference to Sergei Eisenstein in the Riga speech). In the Riga speech she stated that “these men are famous around the world. They make up part of the rich cultural inheritance that united the Latvian and Jewish nations” (Vīķe-Freiberga, 2005). Their Jewish backgrounds are also important in building up Latvia’s image as a modern cosmopolitan democracy, particularly in light of the negative international attention that Latvia has received for having a 20% share of the population with no Latvian citizenship.

These figures have also been used to polish Latvia’s international standing. Latvia has no internationally recognizable founding father or key figure that can be used as a form of external identity. Moreover, since 1991 Latvia has achieved only minimal economic success, particularly when compared to neighbouring, and competing, “E-stonia” (Estonia), which has used the development of the internet telephone software Skype within its borders, as well as the first use of internet voting in parliamentary elections to project its image as a dynamic producer and consumer of modern technology. In contrast, Latvia only avoids the status of poorest state in the EU thanks to the 2007 accession of Romania and Bulgaria, and suffered the deepest recession of any state in the world between 2008 and 2010 (losing 25% of its annual gross domestic product (GDP) in two years). These international figures present a short-cut to international cultural recognition and respectability. Thus the National
Museum of Art in Riga celebrated Rothko’s centenary in 2003 with a two-month exhibit of 21 pieces of Rothko’s art, on loan from the National Gallery in Washington, DC, and partially funded by the US Embassy in Latvia (LETA, 2003). The exhibit then went on to travel to St Petersburg where it was on display at the Hermitage Museum. There are regular film festivals and retrospectives focusing on the work of Eisenstein. In 2008 the Riga film museum featured an exhibit entitled “Sergey Eisenstein: The boy from Riga” that analyzed the impact of his childhood in Riga on his subsequent body of work. However, it is clear that Eisenstein’s connections to the Soviet Union and his Eastern orientation means that he is used far more sparingly than the other two in domestic discourses.

Berlin, in contrast, has been utilized in light of the current European focus on tertiary education, research, and innovation. In 2009, the centenary of his birth, he was granted an honorary doctorate by the University of Latvia (which had rejected granting him this honour in the 1990s), had a major auditorium at the University’s faculty of Social Sciences named after him, the house on Alberta Street where he grew up was given a plaque marking the event, and a week-long international conference marked the centenary of his birth. The subsequent annual Isaiah Berlin Day has brought many distinguished liberal scholars and intellectuals such as Timothy Garton-Ash, Anne Applebaum, and Ian Buruma to Riga.

Similarly, there were a whole host of events to mark the centenary of the birth of Mark Rothko in 2003. The Daugavpils municipality was particularly active in utilizing the centenary as a rare opportunity to advertise itself on the international stage. This included a conference on Rothko in Daugavpils, the opening of a permanent display of Rothko reproductions (co-financed by the US Embassy and the Rothko family) in a Daugavpils gallery as well as the opening of a plaque in downtown Daugavpils marking the centenary of his birth. In 2005 the Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs arranged an exhibition of Rothko paintings in the Russian city of Vitebsk to mark Latvia’s Independence Day (Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2005). Moreover, the Daugavpils municipality (with state and European Union co-financing) undertook the construction of a large Mark Rothko Arts Centre and has negotiated, with the Rothko family, a rotating exhibit of at least four to six Rothko art works for the Centre (Kalnina, 2010). The Daugavpils municipality states that this center is essential to developing the Daugavpils “city brand” and attracting tourists to the region (Daugavpils Municipality, 2009). Berlin and Eisenstein are also celebrated in public monuments in Riga. In addition to the Berlin auditorium at the University of Latvia, Eisenstein has a major street named after him (albeit outside the center of Riga), while there are plaques marking the buildings on Alberta Street where Berlin and Eisenstein were born. Moreover, there are plans for the state to buy the apartment where Berlin was born in order to construct a small museum celebrating his life and work.

All three personalities are important tools of international socialization in representing that Latvia has not just superficially adopted the language of liberalism or modern culture, but has actually played a role in shaping them. Thus the narrative claims that Berlin’s political liberalism, Rothko’s innovative abstract art, and Eisenstein’s groundbreaking movies were all somehow influenced by their childhood in Latvia (albeit a Latvia that did not politically exist at that time). Thus the liberal agenda that has marked Latvia’s post-1991 integration with the EU, NATO, and other Western international organizations is not merely a foreign construct that
Latvia blindly follows, but is actually also partially created by “Latvians.” In this sense, it legitimizes the broader post-Soviet narrative of Latvia “returning to the West,” presenting the process as one of a logical historical continuity. Latvia is presented as being part of the mainstream of European thought and culture not just in the present, but over the course of the previous century when Latvia was occupied and prevented from taking up a place in the Western group of nations. Now that it was free, how could it be denied a place among the nations of the West?

There is also a domestic dimension to the instrumentalization of the three figures. The same week-long conference celebrating Berlin’s centenary was also explicitly designed to encourage the debate of liberal values in Latvia. Indeed, the non-profit Isaiah Berlin Association that organizes the annual Isaiah Berlin Day in Riga, has in its statutes the aim of promoting “the ideas and values of Sir Isaiah Berlin in Latvia.” Just as important as the subject of the debate is the principle of having a debate. Indeed, two of the three first Isaiah Berlin Days (2009–2011) have featured Oxford-style debates. Thus NGOs, as well as Latvia’s international partners such as the UK or USA, utilize these figures to promote, in the case of Berlin, liberal values. However, this also points to the limitations of this domestic discourse—it is a case of contemporary liberal intellectuals in Latvia (many of whom, such as former president Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga, are émigrés) promoting the ideas of intellectuals, who themselves actually have only weak links to Latvia, to a small audience of liberal intellectuals and foreign diplomats. As a result, this internal dimension has far less resonance than the external discourse.

There is also a domestic economic dimension, particularly in the way in which Rothko is used by the Daugavpils municipality. Daugavpils is in the distant and poor eastern part of Latvia, close to the Russian border. It attracts few tourists and much less investment than other parts of Latvia. Thus Daugavpils has seized on its most famous son, and uses Rothko to brand the city as an attractive destination for tourism and investment. The city organizes an annual international “Mark Rothko plenary” that brings together young Latvian and international artists and attempts to promote the city as a regional cultural center in northern Europe. The 2010 plenary featured 14 artists from 11 different countries. Indeed, the Rothko family has also invested in Daugavpils, financing the reconstruction of the Daugavpils synagogue (LETA. 2006).

The cultural legacies of Berlin, Rothko, and Eisenstein are used for both international and domestic purposes—as instruments of socialization and integration with the West, and to promote domestic value change in the state. Internationally, they are used to convey the message that Latvia is not just a consumer or imitator of Western cultural norms, but is also a creator and producer. Thus the upheavals since 1991 should not be seen as Latvia changing its identity, but rather rediscovering its past. However, the domestic dimension is rather more disputed, with Latvians failing to acknowledge Berlin, Rothko, and Eisenstein as genuinely Latvian, partially because they left Latvia when young and are seen as more British, American, and Soviet than Latvian, but also because the narrow ethnic conception of Latvian nationality makes it difficult for a Jew to be considered as a “real” Latvian.

Conclusions

Intellectuals were central to the nineteenth-century construction of national identities, building national images and narratives that bound together disparate elements of fledgling nations. In the contemporary world, intellectual and cultural figures still play a role in constructing national identities, albeit as instruments, rather than authors, of that identity, and with a largely international rather than domestic target audience (although they are used by domestic NGOs and Western international actors to promote liberal values at the domestic level). Berlin, Rothko, and Eisenstein are major figures of what Ernest Gellner (1983) referred to as a “high culture” that contributes to binding Latvia with the West. Indeed, the construction of this intellectual inheritance is a crucial part of the wider integration process that Latvia has undergone since regaining its independence in 1991.

By claiming Berlin, Rothko, and Eisenstein as Latvian, the state reminds the West that Latvia has long been a tolerant, multicultural state. More importantly, it stakes a claim for Latvia being not just a consumer but also a producer of Western culture. In this way Latvia partially negates the impact of the Soviet Union and reorients its identity to that of it being a natural and integral part of the West, something that is still disputed by groups both within (radical nationalists and Russian-speakers) and outside (the Russian Federation) Latvia.

However, this is a superficial form of integration with the West. These cultural figures are utilized for external political and economic purposes, and, despite the efforts of the afore-mentioned NGOs and international actors, appear only marginally in domestic discourses. The annual Isaiah Berlin Day and the Mark Rothko plenaries are sparsely attended and only marginally impinge on the Latvian consciousness. Indeed, the Latvian ethnic conception of nationality means that the very classification of these figures as “Latvian” is internally disputed.

Notes

1. An intellectual is here understood as an individual engaged ‘in academic study or critical evaluation of ideas and issues’ (New dictionary of cultural literacy, 2005).
2. The Czech scholar Miroslav Hroch (1985, p. 23), conceptualized three development phases: “Phase A (the period of scholarly interest), Phase B (the period of patriotic agitation) and Phase C (the rise of a mass national movement).” Although Latvia was the only Baltic State that did not merit a separate chapter in Hroch’s volume, Toivo Raun and Andrejs Plakans (1990) find the Hroch model to be broadly applicable to the development of national movements in all three Baltic States.
3. The latter encompassing Africa, Asia, and Latin America, as well as Eastern Europe.
4. This is particularly relevant in the case of Latvia, which is one of the three numerically smallest nations in the world to have developed its own indigenous “high culture” (Taagepera, 2011, p. 126).
5. Peter Howard (2004) provides a detailed case study of the Estonian military learning and mastering the use of a new military language in the run-up to joining NATO.
6. Several contemporary classical musicians—for example the conductors Maris Jansons and Andris Nelsons—are noted in their respective fields, although are largely unknown to wider audiences. Moreover, both have achieved recognition abroad and are no longer resident in Latvia.
7. Although passport applicants can now decline to have their nationality listed in the passport.
Daugavpils is located in the eastern and most economically depressed region in Latvia. It is not served by an airport or a rapid rail link, instead relying on a notoriously narrow pothole-ridden road to link it with Riga.

References


