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Colonialism, Resistance and (Anti-)Nationalism in Andrus Kivirähk's *The Man Who Spoke Snakish*

Koloniālisms, pretošanās un (anti)nacionālisms Andrusa Kivirehka romānā "Vīrs, kas zināja čūskuvārdus"

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Summary This article examines the role of the fictional Snakish language as a form of resistance in Estonian author Andrus Kivirähk's 2007 historical fantasy novel *The Man Who Spoke Snakish*. I begin by discussing the processes of colonization and Christianization in the novel, and how these might be seen as parallels for more recent experiences in Estonia's history, including Soviet colonialism and post-Soviet transitions. I then consider how the Snakish language functions as a form of resistance against the Crusaders' violence and against the Christian worldview. Finally, I examine the fantastical language in the context of contemporary Estonian nationalism, and I consider how the crueller and more destructive uses of Snakish in the novel may have parallels with the potentially destructive power of nationalism.

Kopsavilkums Šis raksts analizē to, kā igauņu rakstnieka Andrusa Kivirehka vēsturiskajā fantāzijas romānā "Vīrs, kas zināja čūskuvārdus" aprakstītā iedomātā čūsku valoda funkcionē kā pretošanās līdzeklis. Vispirms es aplūkoju romānā attēlotos kolonizācijas un kristianizācijas procesus un to iespējamās paralēles ar nesenākiem Igaunijas vēstures notikumiem, tādiem kā padomju koloniālisms un pēcpadomju pārejas procesi, bet pēc tam – čūsku valodu kā pretošanās formu pret krustnešu vardarbību un kristīgo pasauluzskatu. Visbeidzot šī izfantazētā valoda tiek skatīta mūsdienu igauņu nacionālisma kontekstā – pievēršot uzmanību tam, kā čūsku valodas nežēlīgākie un destruktīvākie pielietojuma veidi, iespējams, sasaucas ar nacionālisma potenciāli postošo varu.

Andrus Kivirähk's 2007 historical fantasy novel *The Man Who Spoke Snakish* (Estonian title: *Mees, kes teadis ussisõnu*) is set in 13th-century Estonia, during the Northern Crusades. In Estonian history, this period saw the arrival of Christian colonizers from Western Europe and the forced Christianization of the native inhabitants. In Kivirähk's novel, it is also the time when humans are forgetting the ancient language of Snakish. Snakish, in the novel, is a magical language taught to humans by snakes many generations ago, and it gives humans the power to control most animals of the forest. It also facilitates dialogue, friendship and even sometimes cohabitation between humans and snakes. However, as humans are migrating from the forest to Christian villages, they are abandoning the ancient language, and by the end of the novel, the protagonist Leemet is the last human who speaks Snakish.

In this article, I examine the role of the Snakish language as a form of resistance against the Crusaders' violence and oppression in the novel. I begin by discussing the processes of colonization and Christianization in the novel and how these might be seen as parallels for more recent experiences in Estonia's history, including Soviet colonialism and post-Soviet transitions, before turning to the role of Snakish as resistance. Finally, I discuss the fantastical language in the context of contemporary Estonian nationalism, and I consider how the crueller and more destructive uses of Snakish in the novel may have parallels with the potentially destructive power of nationalism. The characters of the Primates offer a more peaceful, tolerant alternative to this violence, suggesting a hopeful possibility for a coexistence between the old and new worlds in the novel. Ultimately, however, the Primates and their way of life die out, leaving a zone of hatred, violence and warfare between the old and new worlds.

Crusaders and colonialism

The Livonian Crusade of 1198–1227, proclaimed by Pope Innocent III, has been described by Liina Lukas as the beginning of "German colonial history" (Lukas 2015: 67). Lukas quotes the Christian chronicler Henry of Livonia, who describes how his own people "burned and devastated everything, killed all the males, captured the women and children, and drove off their horses and many flocks" (Henry of Livonia, quoted in Lukas 2015: 70). This brutal invasion of Livonia (the land that is now Estonia and Latvia) led to a long period of rule by the Baltic German aristocracy. Epp Annus notes that, though the land was repeatedly invaded by various European powers throughout the following centuries,

"the German ruling class, initially composed of the crusading knights, kept its privileged position", while members of this class used the word 'colony' to describe their situation from the 18th century onwards (Annus 2018: 144–145). *The Man Who Spoke Snakish* is set at the beginning of this period of German colonialism in the Baltics, with knights and monks using force to bring the word of God to the Estonian people.

The Germanic invaders are shown to be a force of violence and oppression in Kivirähk's novel, but the Estonian villagers happily accept their authority.[1] When Leemet travels to the nearest village, he hears a group of local boys cheerfully discussing the fact that, as simple peasants, they must always doff their caps when a knight rides by, lest they receive "a good walloping" from the knight (349).[2] When Leemet expresses amazement, they mock him for being ignorant of this "famous old foreign custom" (349). Leemet is also surprised to learn that the village boys aspire to become servants and that it is "the custom in foreign lands for important men" to sleep with their serving boys (218). Combined with a popular desire to become castrati so as to sing better, this adds a sexual, emasculatory element to the villagers' willing submission to the Germanic colonizers. Piret Peiker notes that, "[w]hile the novel is generally sexually free-spirited, its only pervasive fear and taboo is that of being unmanned by the decadent Europeans" (Peiker 2016: 125). However, the sexual element of the colonizers' domination of the Estonians is also exhibited by the rape of the female character Magdaleena, the young daughter of village elder Johannes, who joyfully recounts to Leemet how a German knight "pulled [her] onto his horse's back and carried [her] straight to his castle", where he slept with her and "made a child inside" her (331). Despite the fact that Magdaleena is only a child herself, her father is also "terribly glad" that this has happened, believing that Magdaleena's child "will go out into the wide world and become a famous man" (333). Both the male and female Estonians who embrace Christianity appear to accept that powerful foreigners have the right to sexually dominate them without seeking consent, and indeed they actively celebrate this fact, much to Leemet's confusion and disgust.

Lukas describes the Livonian Crusade as an example of "Christian imperialism – the conviction that Europeans (read: Christians) are in possession of the absolute

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1 The Northern Crusades took place several centuries before the formation of the German state, but the Crusaders are regularly referred to as Germans in both the English and Estonian versions of the novel, for example, "*päris ehtne sakslane*" (189, Kivirähk's original Estonian), "a genuine German" (221, Moseley's English translation). Similarly, the villagers refer to themselves as "*eestlased*" (24, original Estonian) or "Estonians" (25, English translation).

2 Unless otherwise stated, page numbers in brackets refer to Christopher Moseley's 2015 English translation of Kivirähk's novel.

and ultimate religious truth to which all people have to submit and for which they must instantly abandon their own religion" (Lukas 2015: 70). In Kivirähk's novel, the villagers have indeed abandoned their old pagan ways for the new religion, while those who resist the change are treated with violence by the Christians. The first time that a monk appears in the story, he steals a ring from Leemet and assaults the boy, after checking that there is no one else around to witness it. While the ring was admittedly stolen before Leemet obtained it (see below), Leemet also notices that the monk puts the ring into his mouth, "apparently to hide and defend a precious thing from others" (59), indicating a purely selfish motivation. Additionally, Christianity motivates the villagers to act violently towards snakes whom Leemet and the forest-dwellers view as their friends. On an earlier visit to the village, Leemet arrives with his friend Ints the adder and, upon seeing the snake, Johannes tries to kill Ints with a stick because, he claims, "[t]he snake is the right hand of Satan, and it is the duty of people of the cross to beat down these abominable creatures" (113–114). Later, the villagers burn a whole nest of snakes, along with Leemet's mother who had been hibernating with them. The belief that snakes are agents of the devil, which derives from the Christian teachings introduced by the Crusaders, motivates the villagers to carry out needless violence against snakes and against forest-dwellers like Leemet's family. Lukas notes that Henry of Livonia at one point describes the pagan natives as a "brood of vipers" (Lukas 2015: 72), and the massacred adders in Kivirähk's novel can perhaps be seen as a metaphor for the Estonian rebels who refused to submit to the doctrine of the Christian imperialists.

The attitudes of the Estonian villagers that Kivirähk presents in the novel also have parallels with features of the Baltic German colonialism that followed the Northern Crusades. Though many Estonians resented their Baltic German overlords throughout the centuries of their rule, many of the values and cultural practices of the German aristocracy were imitated by Estonians during the National Awakening of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Annus notes that, for example, Estonian poetry and singing were often based on German rather than Baltic traditions; Estonian civic associations were modelled on those of the Baltic Germans; and even "the search for an archaic, precolonial past and the growing interest in folk culture" had German roots, while the inspiration for the Awakening came at least in part from "progressive Baltic German thinkers, such as Garlieb Merkel, who declared the equal rights and abilities of all nations" (Annus 2018: 147–148).[3] Similarly, the Estonian villagers in Kivirähk's novel copy the values and practices of the Germans in an effort to further their own national interest. Upon learning that Leemet's family still live in the forest, Johannes laments:

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3 Ivars Ijabs (Ijabs 2014) discusses this further in the Latvian context.

> It's pathetic to think of those poor people who still carry on a miserable existence in caves, while others are living in castles and palaces! Why do our folk have to be the last? We want to enjoy the same pleasures that other folk do! (24).

Comparing the lives of his fellow Estonians to those of the colonizing Germans, Johannes is saddened by the unbalanced situation. However, rather than seeing any value in the traditional way of life, he desires that his own people abandon their old lives and copy the Germans, seeking equality only through imitation.

In addition to the links with Baltic German colonialism, there are also multiple parallels between Kivirähk's story and a more recent experience in Estonia's history: the era of Soviet rule. In both cases, the land of Estonia is being invaded and settled by European foreigners: Germans in the novel and Russians in the Soviet era. In both cases, the foreigners bring with them a new ideology: the Germans bring hierarchical Christianity, and the Russians bring Leninism. And in both cases, an ancient native language is under threat: Snakish is dying out in the novel, and Estonian is suppressed by the Soviet authorities.[4] Many scholars have justifiably analyzed post-Soviet Estonia and the other Baltic nations as postcolonial states. Violeta Kelertas, for example, points out that inhabitants of these countries were not "merely opposed to the *form* of government" imposed by Moscow but also to the fact that they were being ruled by a foreign power (Kelertas 2006: 2, emphasis in the original). Discussing these countries' experiences specifically after gaining independence, David Chioni Moore argues that:

> the term "postcolonial", and everything that goes with it – language, economy, politics, resistance, liberation and its hangover – might reasonably be applied to the formerly Russo- and Soviet-controlled regions post-1989 and -1991, just as it has been applied to South Asia post-1947 or Africa post-1958 (Moore 2006: 17).

More recently, Annus has distinguished between the *process* of colon*ization* and the *system* of colon*ialism*, arguing that, "even though the Soviet Union occupied rather than colonized the Baltic States, the period of occupation nevertheless developed into a period of colonial rule" (Annus 2012: 37). The colonial situation in Kivirähk's novel, then, may be an allegory for this more recent experience of colonialism in Estonia.

However, there are clearly differences between these two colonial situations. Firstly, the worldview of the Christians is quite different from Marxism-Leninism: the villagers are devoutly religious, in contrast to the state atheism of the Soviet Union, and they enthusiastically accept social hierarchies, such as the superiority of knights over peasants. Secondly, even though Christians like Johannes celebrate the decline

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4 For a discussion of the parallels between Snakish and Estonian, see for example Niitra 2011: 56–57; Ehala 2007; Rooste 2007; Howard and Nelson 2024.

of Snakish and happily enact violence against snakes, the language itself is not being actively suppressed by the colonial authorities in the novel. In fact, most people outside of the forest seem to be unaware of its existence. Similarly, although the villagers persistently try to persuade Leemet to join them, the forest-dwellers are not being forced to abandon their way of life. Indeed, the villagers themselves appear to be mostly Estonian families who have voluntarily decided to move out of the forest. These things are, of course, in contrast to the deliberate language suppression and forced relocation of people carried out by the Soviet authorities in Estonia and elsewhere.

In fact, there are perhaps clearer parallels between the novel and the *post*-Soviet era in Estonia. Rather than being forcibly incorporated into a multinational empire under threat of destruction, the Estonians in Kivirähk's novel are voluntarily deciding to abandon their traditional lifestyle in favour of a new socioeconomic system that is more integrated with Western Europe. Johannes, who was born in the forest but has now embraced Christianity, boasts of having seen "the glory and splendor" of "the holy city of Rome" (197), and the village boys compare Snakish unfavourably to Latin, telling Leemet that "if you knew Latin well, [..] you'd sing hymns and you'd get all the women into bed" (217). The boys also lament their ignorance of German, since, "German is [..] what the knights speak. If you understand German, some knight might take you as his servant" (217). Magdaleena even imagines that her child, as the offspring of a knight, will "start speaking German right from childhood like his father" (332).[5] It is worth noting that modern English is a Germanic language with a large amount of Latin influence, largely via Norman French. As the dominant language of both the United States and the United Kingdom, English is the main lingua franca of international capitalism in Europe and North America – and incidentally, of course, the language of this article on Estonian literature. Kivirähk has observed in an interview that "everyone who lives [in Estonia today] speaks English to each other. Or I-don't-know-what language" (Rooste 2007, my translation).[6] The villagers' abandonment of

5 It is interesting to compare this strange conception of Germanness with that expressed in "The Wound", a 1988 short story by Estonian author Jaan Kross. In Kross's story, set in 1939, the narrator Peeter learns that his ex-lover Flora and her family plan to take up Hitler's offer of repatriation for Germans living in Estonia and Latvia – despite the fact that they are not really German. Seeing Flora for the last time before her planned departure, Peeter contemplates her "newly German" hand and the fact that "[her] legs are German now" (Kross 1995: 20–21). Like Leemet, Peeter is scathing of the Estonian family's rush to Germanify themselves. His sarcastic observations highlight how artificial German identity is, in contrast to Magdaleena, who believes that Germanness – including even German language skills – is inborn.

6 Original Estonian: "*Kõik, kes siin elavad, räägivad omavahel inglise keelt. Või maeiteamiskeelt*". I am grateful to Piret Peiker for directing me to this interview.

Snakish in favour of German and Latin, then, may represent the neglect of Estonian in favour of supposedly more useful international languages like English.

In the context of post-Soviet Estonia, it is interesting to consider an article titled "The Estonian Economic Miracle" by Mart Laar, Prime Minister of Estonia from 1992 to 1994 and from 1999 to 2002. This article was published by *The Heritage Foundation*, a conservative American think tank, in 2007 – the same year that Kivirähk's novel was first published. In the article, Laar describes how the radical economic reforms of his post-independence government led Estonia out of the "backward" underdevelopment and high inflation of the Soviet period and set the country on track to "[catch] up to the average European living standard" (Laar 2007). There are similarities here with the attitudes of the villagers in Kivirähk's novel: Western (i.e. not post-Soviet) Europe is seen as a model to strive towards, while Estonia's own past is dismissed as backward and impoverished. As before, a foreign ideology is also being followed – in this case, a conservative neoliberalism similar to that which had been pursued in the preceding decade by Thatcher in Britain and Reagan in the US. Laar proudly describes how his government pursued international integration by reducing tariffs and other barriers to international trade while cheerfully disregarding the "furious opposition, demonstrations, and petitions 'to protect strategic parts of the economy' or 'defend local producers'" (Laar 2007). Parallels can even be drawn between Johannes's joy at the decline of the supposedly satanic Snakish and Laar's cheerful report that Estonia's flat-rate income tax successfully "suppressed the gray [informal] economy" (Laar 2007). Like Snakish, the informal economy can potentially provide opportunities and livelihoods for many people,[7] but since, like Snakish, it exists "outside the framework of official institutions" (Hart 1985: 54), those official institutions have a vested interest in its decline, even if they do not actually take steps to violently suppress it.

Discussing the work of another Estonian writer, Jaan Kaplinski, Thomas Salumets writes:

> In the course of their 700-year colonizing process, as Kaplinski sees it unfold, Estonians find their culture wanting, particularly during the period of national awakening in the 1860s and 1870s. Estonia was perceived to be lacking in what Europe's centres took for granted: stone buildings, churches, palaces, poetry with end rhymes, manor houses, cities, abstract words, a Protestant ethic, a national epic, song festivals, fraternities, operas, the devil, a standard literary language, a single God, and other manifestations of the mentality associated with the cultures of the colonizers. In the 21st century, the lack is associated with globalization – a new economic form of colonization. Among the contemporary colonizers who

7 This is not to say that an informal economy is necessarily good; it often allows for greater exploitation of workers than a formal economy.

> threaten the cultures of smaller surviving units, according to Kaplinski, are Time-Warner, Microsoft and Walt Disney (Salumets 2006: 435).

Here, as in *The Man Who Spoke Snakish*, Christianity, feudalism and European culture are attributes of historical colonizers that are envied by Estonians and seen as essential for Estonia to become a "proper" (European) country. In the post-Soviet era, these are replaced by the culture and technology of the Western (European and American) world, which the people of Estonia again seek to imitate. Indeed, Salumets identifies Kaplinski as an Estonian who is critical of his people's "self-colonization" and laments "that the Estonian people themselves drove away their souls and cut down their sacred trees" (Salumets 2006: 436), similar to Leemet's frustration with the villagers' voluntary abandonment of Snakish and forest life. Leemet's refusal to abandon Snakish, then, can be seen as an act of anti-globalization, a refusal to accept the "Western" order – whether that be feudalism or neoliberalism.

Snakish as resistance

The Snakish language acts as a form of resistance against the Crusaders in a number of ways. Firstly, it resists the transition to agriculture by making hunting-gathering in the forest a more feasible alternative. While the Christians view the forest-dwellers as "benighted" fools living a "miserable existence" (24), their lives are shown in many ways to be poorer than those of the forest-dwellers. While the villagers live mainly off bread and porridge and only eat meat on holy days, Leemet's family routinely has an abundance of meat and other protein-rich foods such as owl's eggs. On one occasion, Leemet's mother cooks "a whole goat" for the family's evening meal (121). Leemet explains that, using "Snakish words, [..] you can force a goat to submit within one minute" and kill the animal easily, whereas the villagers, who do not speak Snakish, can only obtain goat meat through "a hunt lasting hours" (202). Remembering a deer hunt that he once witnessed, Leemet reflects:

> The villagers didn't know Snakish, and therefore couldn't summon the deer to them, so they hunted it across the country and fired little sticks into the air. This stick caused the deer outrageous pain, but didn't kill it, and so the poor animal rushed with bloodshot eyes through the forest, shrieking and thumping everything in its path, until Uncle Vootele calmed it with Snakish words and cut the animal's throat, to release it from its suffering (114).

As far as Leemet is concerned, the abandonment of Snakish is not progress but regress. Not only does it impoverish the villagers by denying them meat, but it also results in crueller methods of obtaining that meat. Similarly, when Johannes tries to "heal" a cow using a treatment taught to him by a German stable boy, the process involves a series of tortuous procedures which eventually kill the cow (221).

Snakish also resists the Crusaders by defying Christian dogma. For the Christian villagers, "[t]he snake is the right hand of Satan" (113) and the cause of original sin. When Leemet tries to tell the village elder Johannes about Snakish, Johannes declares that "[n]owhere on earth do they talk to snakes" and celebrates the fact that the Estonians are gradually forgetting the language, because "God doesn't want us to talk to snakes, for a snake is his enemy" (195). Snakish, indeed, can be seen as a synecdoche for the forest-dwellers' whole way of life, which is dismissed as backward and savage by the Christianized villagers. Like this way of life, Snakish is dying out, but Leemet's defiant speaking of the language is an act of anticolonial resistance. Indeed, the Snakish language in Kivirähk's novel blurs the very boundary between humans and snakes. Leemet's Uncle Vootele vows to "teach Leemet the Snakish words so well that he won't know anymore whether he's a human or a snake" (31). Snakish not only allows humans to communicate with snakes; it leads them down a path of physically becoming more like snakes. This is exemplified by Leemet's grandfather, a fluent Snakish speaker who has snakelike "fangs" and crawls around "like some hairy adder" (249–250). The Snakish language not only facilitates dialogue between humans and the supposedly satanic snakes; it also subverts the boundary between human and animal, which is central to the villagers' worldview.

It seems likely that Kivirähk's novel was influenced by a similarly titled children's story, *Jutt mehest, kes teadis ussisõnu* ("A Tale about a Man Who Spoke Snakish", or "The Tale of the Man Who Knew Snake-Words") (Sõrmus 2015: 44). This short tale, attributed to Jüri Parijõgi and published in a 1977 collection of the same title edited by Andres Jaaksoo, tells the story of Leeli Märt, a man who uses snake-words (*ussisõnu*) to command the local snakes and prevent them from biting people.[8] However, while Leeli Märt uses words to control and command snakes, Leemet interacts with snakes on much more egalitarian terms. Throughout the novel, he maintains a close friendship with the adder Ints after saving her from a hedgehog, and his whole family even spends one winter hibernating with the adders. Indeed, the close relationships between forest-dwelling humans and snakes in the novel may suggest the influence of another folktale: the tale of the snake's wife, in which a human woman marries a snake. Many variants or this story exist across the Baltic

8 I am grateful to Virve Vihman for her help with translating this story. It seems reasonable to suggest that the name "Leeli Märt" may be an inspiration for the name of Kivirähk's protagonist. Another possible inspiration is Lembit (also known as Lembitu), a historical figure who led the Estonians in resistance against the Crusaders. Mari Niitra (Niitra 2011: 56) also notes that elements of another story told by Parijõgi, *Kuidas mees ussikoopast õnne leidis* (How a Man Found His Fortune in a Snake-cave), can be seen in Kivirähk's novel.

region, perhaps most famously the Lithuanian story of Eglė the Queen of Serpents, in which the reptile husband is none other than the king of the snakes – a title that also exists in Kivirähk's novel. In *The Man Who Spoke Snakish*, snake-words are not a means for humans to control snakes: instead, they form the language of an entire Snakish culture.[9]

Another way in which Snakish acts as a form of resistance is through its power to awake the legendary Frog of the North. This strange creature is a further example of a folkloric influence in Kivirähk's novel.[10] *Põhja konn*, as he is known in Estonian, appears in a story collected by the 19th-century Estonian writer and folklorist Friedrich Reinhold Kreutzwald, published in English as "The Northern Frog". In this story, the creature is described as a monster with the body of "an enormous ox", frog's legs and "a chain-long tail of a snake", his body "armoured with scales [..] stronger than stone or iron" (Kreutzwald 1985: 206). He travels around in giant leaps, devouring people and animals and desolating huge swathes of land, until he is finally defeated by a young hero. In Kivirähk's novel, however, the Frog of the North has quite a different role: he is an ally of the Estonians, having helped them to fight against the Crusaders in the past. Leemet seeks to find the Frog using a ring given to him by the mysterious character Meeme, and a ring also plays a role in Kreutzwald's story: the young hero uses a magical ring that once belonged to King Solomon to defeat the Frog. In Kivirähk's novel, however, Meeme eventually reveals that the bag in which the ring is carried is the key to finding the Frog, and that the ring itself is "a useless trinket, pulled off the finger of some foreigner who was killed" that only functions "as a weight, to keep the bag in place" (436). Kivirähk subverts Kreutzwald's story not only by presenting the monstrous Frog as a saviour, but also by relegating Solomon's ring – a Christian relic of sacred importance and magical power – to a comically worthless item.

In Kivirähk's novel, however, the Frog has gone to sleep for many years and can only be woken by ten thousand men speaking Snakish together. As Vootele laments at the start of the novel, the forest-dwellers "can't even get ten [men] together" to speak Snakish anymore, never mind ten thousand (7). The decline in speakers of Snakish has caused the language itself to tangibly lose power, since it can no longer

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9 For an English translation of the tale of Eglė, see Kuncaitis 1996. For an Estonian version of the story, also translated into English, see Päär, Türnpu 2005: 60–63. In this version, it is the woman, not the snake, who has a royal background. For an analysis of the subversion of the nature/culture distinction in Kivirähk's novel, see Sõrmus 2015; Howard and Nelson 2024. For a broader contemporary discussion of environmental humanities in the related Baltic context of Latvia, see Zariņa et al. 2022.

10 For a discussion of folkloristics in the Soviet and post-Soviet Baltic area, see Ķencis, Ūdre 2021.

be used to call the Estonians' most powerful ally. Martin Ehala (Ehala 2007) compares this lost power of Snakish with the Singing Revolution, a coordinated vocalization of collective will through which the Baltic nations gained independence from the Soviet Union: the Frog represents the collective will of the Estonian people, while Snakish is the language through which that will can (or could formerly) be realized. Snakish, then, can be seen to embody the form of anticolonial, liberatory nationalism expressed through the Singing Revolution, empowering the Estonian people to determine their own future.

Nationalism and violence Kivirähk's novel, however, also suggests how the nationalism of anticolonial resistance can contain xenophobic and violent elements. Although they defy the religiously sanctioned hierarchies of the colonizers, Snakish speakers also construct their own hierarchical view of non-human life, with snakes at the apex as "the brothers of humans" (14). Although bears are intelligent and capable of speech, Leemet still sees Snakish-speaking humans as bears' "superiors", and he believes that bears' "culture" derives from "their dealings with men and snakes" (15); when the snakes die and the humans leave the forest, that culture vanishes. Below bears are animals like goats and deer, who can understand and obey Snakish commands but cannot participate in dialogue with humans or snakes. At the base of the hierarchy are animals that cannot speak or understand Snakish, such as hedgehogs and insects, whom Leemet and the snakes hold in complete contempt. Leemet explains that hedgehogs are "the stupidest of all animals" having "never learned Snakish", while insects have "brains [that are] too small for that sort of wisdom, no bigger than a speck of dust" (35). As Peiker puts it, "[t]he hierarchy of all the creatures is based upon and expressed through Snakish" (Peiker 2016: 124). While this hierarchy places Snakish-speaking humans and snakes as superior to all other creatures, the hierarchy also exists within humanity, with those who speak fluent Snakish superior to those who are ignorant of the snake-words. For example, when a snake bites Magdaleena, Leemet asks the snake why it bit a human, and the snake replies that the girl "doesn't know Snakish", implying that humans in this category do not deserve to be elevated to the same status as snakes and Snakish-speaking humans (191). As the snake-king himself explains, "a human who has gone to live in the village and no longer understands Snakish words [..] is like a hedgehog or an insect and we don't pity him" (39).

This language-based hierarchy is particularly significant in the context of Snakish as a metaphor for the Estonian language. After Estonia regained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, any resident of Estonia who had not been a citizen –

or who was not descended from someone who had been a citizen – before the Soviet occupation had to apply for citizenship, which required them to demonstrate proficiency in the Estonian language (Estonian Citizenship Act 1995). This has led to a situation where many people born to Russian-speaking families in Estonia do not have citizenship, despite having always lived in the country (Avgerinos 2006). In the same way, the villagers' ignorance of Snakish excludes them, in the eyes of the snakes, from the rights ascribed to Snakish-speaking humans. In both cases, those being victimized are residents of Estonian land who are not directly responsible for the oppression and violence inflicted on their fellow countrymen.

Indeed, Snakish itself is also a force of violence in the novel. Let us recall, for example, that one of the main uses of Snakish for Leemet and his family is making it easier to obtain meat. While Snakish may defy the Christians' philosophical separation of human and animal, the language still facilitates violence against non-human animals, such as goats and deer, by "forc[ing] [them] to submit" to human hunters (202). Indeed, it is worth noting that the English title of the novel is not a literal translation of the Estonian. "*Mees, kes teadis ussisõnu*" literally translates as "The Man Who Knew Snake-Words", with *ussisõnu* being a compound of *uss* ("snake", "worm") and *sõnu* (partitive plural form of *sõna*, "word"). The title of the English translation presents "Snakish" as a language that Leemet speaks, whereas in the Estonian original it is simply words that he knows, presented as a set of useful tools rather than a full non-human language. Peiker argues that, for most animals other than the snakes themselves, "Snakish simply works as a magic spell the orders in which they must – quietly – obey" (Peiker 2016: 124). Although characters like Leemet who are fluent in Snakish can use the language to have full conversations with snakes, when it comes to other animals, the "snake-words" are almost exclusively used to force the animal to submit to the will of the speaker.

Leemet also uses Snakish to inflict violence upon his fellow humans. Towards the end of the novel, Leemet and his grandfather embark on a vengeful, destructive war against the rest of humanity, a "crusade" against the Crusaders and the Estonian villagers (399). The two Snakish-speakers attack randomly, massacring villagers and turning their skulls into drinking cups for no reason other than revenge, after the villagers kill Leemet's mother in the snake nest (see above) and attempt to execute Leemet himself. Leemet acknowledges the madness of the fight, reflecting: "We were warring only for our own pleasure and because we couldn't do anything else in the new world" (399). In one particularly violent passage, Leemet uses Snakish words to command a group of bears to massacre the lords and ladies with whom the bears share a fortress. Although the bears protest that they "love and admire" the humans and "don't want to kill anyone at all", Leemet's Snakish "[takes]

away the bears' free will and awaken[s] their wild desire to kill" (405–406), forcing them to massacre the humans. Many bears also die, and after the bloodbath the two surviving bears weep and grieve for the dead humans, while Leemet and his grandfather are totally unsympathetic towards them. The whole fight seems to achieve only destruction and suffering.

Although Leemet is the protagonist and narrator of the novel, his actions in the later chapters are, arguably, just as horrifying as those committed by the villagers against the forest-dwellers. Peiker notes that "the overall value structure of the novel does not support the narrator's [Leemet's] account and judgement fully, but leaves space for paradoxes and ironies" (Peiker 2016: 124). Kivirähk has described himself as a "peaceful and pacifistic person", stating that he has no desire to see a real-world version of Leemet's rampage played out in contemporary Estonia (Rooste 2007, my translation). Indeed, the closing chapters of the novel can be read as Kivirähk critiquing a form of Estonian nationalism that is not liberatory and anti-colonial but instead reactionary and oppressive: a nationalism that violently targets immigrants and other minoritized groups rather than oppressive systems of power.[11] The fact that hedgehogs specifically are mentioned as stupid creatures can also be seen as a subversion of Estonian nationalist narratives. In the Estonian national epic *Kalevipoeg*, a hedgehog gives wise advice to the eponymous hero in a scene that is famous in Estonia; folklorist Ülo Valk writes that "even those [Estonians] who have never held the epic in their hands know about the hedgehog's advice 'Edgewise, edgewise!'" (Valk 2011: 515). For the snakes in Kivirähk's novel, however, the spiny mammals are "[c]oarse, wooden-headed creatures" (38), "as stupid as pinecones and tussocks" (36), undermining the national image of the wise hedgehog. Mari Niitra observes that the novel similarly mocks the national image of ancient Estonians as "hardworking peasants, for whom bread has always been something sacred" (Niitra 2011: 54), with bread inducing physical sickness for the forest-dwellers. Kivirähk also seems critical of the specifically anti-German sentiments expressed by Leemet in the novel, having suggested in a 2021 interview that "everything good about Estonia has been taken from the Germans" (Vaino 2021). The author's own views, in other words, stand in stark contrast to the outlook embraced by his protagonist towards the end of the novel.

Prior to Leemet's vengeful rampage, this reactionary, xenophobic form of nationalist violence is represented by Ülgas, an old sage of the forest, and his devoted

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11 In addition to the parallels with citizenship laws mentioned above, Kivirähk suggests in his interview with Rooste that a similar kind of violence to the one presented in his novel could be – and perhaps already is being – inflicted on immigrant groups, particularly Muslims, throughout Europe (Rooste 2007).

follower Tambet. Ülgas regularly demands sacrifices on behalf of vengeful "sprites", and he eventually decides that Tambet's daughter Hiie must be sacrificed to "make the world as it was" before people started moving to the village (232). Tambet, who resents Leemet's family for having previously lived in the village before returning to the forest, agrees that it is much better for his daughter "to be sacrificed to the sprites and in that way save the old way of life than to start living with a traitor born in the village [i.e. Leemet, the only young man still living in the forest]" (233). Ülgas and Tambet's hatred for foreigners and the changing world motivates them to try and kill Hiie, Tambet's own daughter and the only child left in the forest aside from Leemet and his sister Salme – and indeed, it is one of Tambet's wolves that does eventually kill Hiie, ending any prospect of a future generation of forest dwellers. Ülgas later murders Magdaleena and her son, whom Leemet had been planning to teach Snakish, and Leemet then kills Ülgas in revenge. Ülgas and Tambet's violent attempts to preserve the old way of life, in a tragic irony, contribute to the destruction of that way of life. Their religion is presented as absurd and destructive, much like the invaders' Christianity. Linda Kaljundi describes it as a "sickening" cult "marked by rabbit blood, torturing wolves and scaring children" (Kaljundi 2007, my translation), while Niitra notes that "fundamentalism", whether Christian or pagan, is criticized throughout the text and that "[n]either progress nor traditionalism is shown as redeeming and each is potentially limiting" (Niitra 2011: 57–58).

The reactionary, purist approach exemplified by Ülgas and Tambet is further ridiculed by the Primates, a pair of ape-like forest-dwellers named Pirre and Rääk who are "human, though hairier than any of us" and who believe that the fall of humanity "hadn't started with moving to the village or eating bread, but with putting on alien creatures' skins and adopting iron tools stolen from ships" (63). The Primates refuse to wear animal skins or any other sort of clothing, and they use stone tools rather than "foreign iron", claiming that, "[i]n the olden days, with these stone axes you did all the work; you were in a good mood and nobody got upset" (64). They eat meat half cooked, and later they start living on a tree branch, since "even living in a cave seem[s] senselessly modern to them" (180). The Primates want to reverse not only Christianization and farming but (aside from speech) essentially the entire process of human evolution, highlighting the arbitrariness of the attempts by Ülgas and Tambet – and later Leemet – to change the world back to the "old ways", when those ways are in fact modern by evolutionary standards.

The Primates also highlight the unnecessary cruelty and intolerance of Ülgas and Tambet:

> Unlike Tambet, who also held sacred the ways of his ancestors and tried steadfastly to walk their well-worn paths, Pirre and Rääk were very mild. They didn't demand

> anything of anyone. They didn't want other people to bare their bottoms, and they never quarreled when they saw someone with a knife in their belt or a brooch on their jacket. If anyone had visited Tambet carrying a piece of bread, he might have set his wolves on that person as punishment for their impertinence, or at least cursed such a village lickspittle in the strongest terms. Pirre and Rääk, on the other hand, never spoke ill of anybody. They were friendly and hospitable, and were not offended even when a visitor declined to eat the half-cooked hunk of meat they offered them (64).

In their kindness towards the other people of the forest despite their different values and lifestyles, the Primates demonstrate a tolerant approach that forms the basis for peaceful coexistence between old and new, between local and foreign. They also speak Snakish but, unlike Leemet, they "pronounce Snakish in the old Primate way" (66), allowing them to command lice, which they breed and keep as pets. Although they are willing to use violence, they do so in a far more restrained and defensive fashion than Leemet does,[12] and their ability to communicate with lice disrupts Leemet's view of insects as "born idiots" (66). While Leemet's words have no effect on the lice, the Primates' superior Snakish skills demonstrate the practical value (in addition to the implied moral value) of their lifestyle – a lifestyle that is rooted in the distant past but also open to change and difference. At the end of the novel, however, the Primates die, still sitting on their tree branch, turning into "little white furry snowdrifts" in winter (441). Leemet tells the reader that the Primates' cave, in which they and their ancestors created rock art to record their history, "has now collapsed shut", sealing their visual records away in the earth (134). It seems that there is no place for the Primates' peaceful tolerance – or for their records of the ancient past – in the violent conflict between old and new that engulfs the world of Kivirähk's novel.

Conclusion

The themes of colonialism and resistance in *The Man Who Spoke Snakish* have relevance throughout Estonia's history: in the context of the Northern Crusades, during which the novel is set; in the context of the subsequent period of Baltic German colonialism; in the context of the Soviet era; and in the context of post-Soviet transitions. The Snakish language empowers Estonians like Leemet to resist the colonial violence of the Crusaders, enabling them to continue living a hunter- gatherer lifestyle while defying the religious dogma of the colonizers. However, Snakish also establishes its own systems of violence and oppression – against both humans and non-human animals. This can be seen as a metaphor for

12 The Primates use Snakish words to save Leemet from torture and death at the hands of a group of Crusaders, killing the Crusaders and their own pet lice in the process (416–420).

Estonian nationalism, which similarly has the power to be radical and liberatory, but also the power to be reactionary and unjust. While the characters of the Primates offer some hope that it may be possible to live a life that is rooted in the past while still being open-minded and striving for peace, their way of life ultimately dies out, and their history is sealed off from the violent world of conflict between the old and new worlds in the novel.

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