

**‘We lay claim to him!’
Isaiah Berlin, Mark Rothko, Sergei Eisenstein
and the construction of a modern Latvian national identity**

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Introduction

In June 2009 the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Latvia hosted the opening session of a week-long conference marking the centenary of the birth of the noted Oxford University scholar Isaiah Berlin. In her introductory remarks, Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga (2009), the former President of Latvia (1999-2007), 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’ (TV3 News 2009).

However, there is no clear evidence of Berlin himself ever acknowledging or embracing his Latvian heritage. At the same 2009 conference Berlin’s biographer Henry Hardy demonstrated a documentary clip of a television interview with Berlin from 1981 in which the only reference the philosopher made to his Latvian past is 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 paper attempts to unpack and understand this disconnect. It considers who, how and why Latvia is posthumously ‘claiming’ Berlin and other cultural figures of international standing with little more than a tenuous connection to Latvia. This is done through case studies of Isaiah Berlin and his contemporaries, the American abstract artist Mark Rothko and Soviet film-maker Sergei Eisenstein. All three were born on what is now (but was not then) Latvian territory and shared a similar middle-class Jewish childhood before their paths began to diverge and they achieved international recognition in their respective fields elsewhere. All have been claimed, albeit with different levels of enthusiasm, by Latvia in recent years. The paper begins with a theoretical discussion of the role and place given to cultural intellectuals in framing nationalist ideologies and national identity, and connects these ideas to contemporary social constructivist approaches to the construction of national identities. The second empirical part begins with a discussion of the Latvian backgrounds of Berlin, Rothko and Eisenstein, and then moves on to consider and compare who, how and why has attempted to reconstruct and claim them as Latvian.

Nationalism and Constructivism: Creating a ‘useable past’

Intellectuals have a central position in the theoretical literature on the construction of nations and nationalism.¹ They initially develop 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 expect (Breuille 1982). During this first stage of national identity building intellectuals develop and construct the ‘images of an ideal state and an ideal society’ that serve to mobilize citizens for the nationalist movement (Breuille 1982, p.329).² This then provides ‘the cultural meat for the nationalist meal’ through the codification of languages, histories and local traditions (Spencer and Wollman 2006, p.74), the construction and promotion of national icons and heroes (Hobsbawm 1983b) and, by packaging together these disparate elements, generating composite nationalist ideologies (Smith 1991). These ‘imaginary elements in national identity... can be reshaped to meet new challenges and needs’ (Miller 1993, p.9). These constructed nationalist ideologies give an important role to ‘invented tradition [which] is taken to mean a set of practices... which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition... [that] normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitably historic past’ (Hobsbawm 1983a, p.1). Thus nations are Janus-faced, looking to the past (albeit an occasionally fictive past), to mobilize the present generation for the cause of the future nation (Hutchinson 2001, p.75). This can be an unconscious or conscious process, although the latter is more likely for late developing nations or those seeking to recast or redirect their identity. Thus, as late as 1918 the American literary critic Van Wyck Brooks called for American writers to create a ‘useable past’ that focused on the elements of history that served the needs of contemporary society, while discarding that which contradicted the narrative that was being constructed (Brooks 1918). In this way intellectuals create a complex narrative that acknowledges and seeks to justify the political existence of the nation.

However, the literature also recognizes that nationalisms have developed in different ways, largely dependent on whether the emerging nation was sovereign or subject. John Plamenatz (1973) drew a controversially sharp line between Western and Eastern

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.

nationalisms.³ He argued that all states were at a comparative national 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 suitably equipped to rapidly catch up with Britain and France, the newer and less economically and culturally developed nations of Eastern Europe were less prepared to tackle this process.⁴ Nevertheless, in order to construct themselves as legitimate nations, according to these rules of the game, they had little choice but to adopt these alien western values and ideas. This, it has been argued, left these 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) and ultimately led to the radical and exclusionary forms of nationalism that developed in Central and Eastern Europe in the period between the two world wars.

Thus the nation can be seen as 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 in their focus on state identity (see e.g. Katzenstein 1996). Constructivists see state identity – ‘who we are’ – as something essentially unanchored. As a result, it can be consciously changed, adapted or manipulated in order to reach some strategic aim. Taking this argument further, it is then logical to assume that a study of the way in which a state projects itself can help to identify a state’s ambitions or plans (Herman 1996). Following on from this, 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. At the same time, however, the state also projects itself internally. For example, the behaviour and language of a democracy is starkly different to that of a non-democratic regime, as is that in a social-democratic versus economically liberal regime.

Language has a particularly central place in constructivist theory (see e.g. Fierke 2002). Within certain constraints (e.g. geography), language allows a state to change and manipulate its identity. Constructivists then go on to argue that the source of change in the language utilized by states is the process of international socialization through which 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).

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 in the Euro-Atlantic political institutions, most pertinently NATO and the European Union. However, similarly to the construction of nations in the eighteenth 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 weaker east) (Schimmelfennig 2000). States can only be integrated into the international organizations, or some other broader grouping of states (e.g. ‘the West’) when they have taken on board and internalized these norms. However, Peter Howard (2004, p.6) sharply criticized this approach, arguing that it is impossible to measure internalized beliefs, leaving ‘a researcher with an impossible burden of proof’. Moreover, states are corporate actors that ‘have no belief or mindset to change’ (Ibid. p.7) and, as a result, while states can institutionalize norms, rules and identities, they cannot internalize beliefs. Howard argued for a move away from understanding international socialization as internalization but rather as a procedural frame of a shared language. He understood this as four ongoing non-linear processes: learning a language, using it, institutionalizing it, and (eventually) an altered state identity. However, this requires only a superficial rather than substantial (internalized) change (although it does not remove the possibility of considerable change in the future), 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 communautaire*, the community method, qualified majority voting etc. – as well as new forms of sub-regional, regional and international cooperation.⁵ This caused something of an identity crisis in the Baltic States. 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 call for a domestic reconstruction of Baltic identities. This ‘posed a serious challenge to more

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.

traditional narratives and their constituent elements, giving rise to a full scale identity crisis' (Made 2003, p.183). Writing about Estonia, Vahur Made stated that the challenge of integrating with western society led to Estonia seeking out 'suitable narratives connecting Estonia to Europe' (Ibid, p.184). This was also the case for contemporary Latvia and Lithuania, where narratives had to be constructed in the absence of any substantive linkages.

Thus there are strong parallels between social constructivist and nationalist theoretical perspectives on the construction of national and state identities. Both view identity as something consciously assembled, and stress the unequal relationship between east and west (or those that have created the identity and those seeking to emulate it). The major difference is agency. While nationalism focuses on the role of intellectuals, constructivism places 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 state identity, but rather as *instruments* of state identity. Paradoxically, this means that intellectuals are now no longer engaged in differentiating the nation or the state from others (through the construction of a 'usable past'), but are rather used as tools that minimize apparent differences with other states and nations, and thus providing 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 sportsmen – that project themselves far beyond the borders of the state or, in some cases, a narrow international audience.⁶ 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. The media follows Latvian musicians competing at the Eurovision song festival, politicians campaigning for major international political office (no matter how hopeless their chances), and reports extensively on what other country's newspapers write about Latvia. 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. This is the focus of the following section, which considers the 'Latvianization' of Isaiah Berlin, Mark Rothko and Sergei Eisenstein.

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.

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 Latvia was a part of the Russian empire. However, they 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.⁷ Berlin spent the first six years of his life living in a gracious 12 room apartment building on the exclusive Alberta Street (in a building designed by Mikhail Eisenstein, the architect 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 as well as to avoid the vicious warfare on the eastern front of the First World War, 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 the family 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 (Ibid). Perhaps it is not surprising that in the following year the Berlins migrated to London, where Isaiah attended St Pauls School and Corpus Christi College at Oxford University. After his death in 1997 the BBC published an obituary that stated that Berlin was 'thought by many to be the dominant scholar of his generation' (BBC News 1997). In his documentary film of Isaiah Berlin, Michael Ignatieff stated that 'he remained in character a Russian Jew of the last century' (Ignatieff 1997). Berlin was shaped by his Jewish identity as well as his childhood in Russia and his life in Britain (Zimroth 2009). Indeed, in his 1979 autobiographical essay 'the three strands of my life' Berlin agreed that his character and identity had been shaped by three traditions – Russian, British and Jewish (Berlin 1979). There was no mention of Latvia.

Mark Rothko was born Marcus Rothkowitz into a middle-class family (his father was a pharmacist) in the eastern Latvian city of Daugavpils (then named Dvinsk). At the time of his birth Daugavpils was a cosmopolitan town populated by Jews and ethnic Russians and 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

⁷ The plaque on the house where Berlin lived on Albert Street in Riga describes him as the 'British philosopher Sir Isaiah Berlin.'

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). Apparently it wasn't much of a wrench to leave, because his family at that time already had more relatives in the USA than it had in Daugavpils (Ibid). He went on to study liberal arts at Yale before moving to New York. Rothko emerged as one of the most talented artists of his generation, and a leading member of the abstract expressionist movement, and 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 (Booth 2007). Having established himself as a major artist in America, it is unsurprising, as James E. Breslin (1993) 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 to 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 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 the Soviet Union and, despite travelling to Western Europe and the USA in the 1920s and 1930s, never returned to Latvia. Eisenstein also differs to Berlin and Rothko in that his family lived in St. Petersburg and he achieved fame in the Soviet Union. 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 has 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 an enthusiastic 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 sparing use that has been made of his connection to Riga.

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 the First World War, and none spoke Latvian or appear to have been directly influenced by Latvia in their work.

However, this is not say that his birthplace has absolutely no influence over them. Berlin's work was clearly influenced by two totalitarianisms – his brief experiences in the Soviet Union as well as the Nazi holocaust in Latvia which touched his family. Similarly, Rothko's biographer James E.B. Breslin wrote that Rothko 'resented his forced migration' (Breslin 1993, p.22) and never felt fully at home in the USA. Moreover, 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 argument is specific to Berlin's personality, Hardy's other two arguments have more relevance for Rothko and Eisenstein. The first of the latter two arguments is that 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 these 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 also been affected by the holocaust in Latvia.

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) argued 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.’ While there may well continue to be some ignorance about all three with the general public in Latvia, their cultural legacy has been seized and utilized for foreign and domestic political as well as economic gain.

Who, Why and How?

The paper now turns to consider three key questions: Who, why and how are Berlin, Rothko and Eisenstein being claimed?

First, who is doing the “seizing”? Rather than being a concerted and harmonized effort, there are multiple actors involved in an ad-hoc process. These actors can be divided into four categories: State, local, international, and non-governmental (NGO). The major state actors are those involved in the foreign policy 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 both radical nationalists and pro-Russian speaking organizations and parties. However, neither of these groups has gained control of the presidency or the foreign ministry, thus ensuring a continuous pro-western foreign policy. Second, the Riga and Daugavpils city local 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 Embassy, US Embassy, and the Netherlands Embassy have provided material support for various events that have re-introduced these personalities to Latvia. Finally, NGOs as well as liberal individuals such as the former Economist magazine journalist Robert Cottrell (who is now resident in Riga), 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, 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 personalities 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. Second, they are also used to

construct a contemporary national identity that portrays Latvia as not just a consumer, but a generator, of the type of international culture (books, art and films) that frames a legitimate contemporary Western 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.’ 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 25% 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 polish 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 more than 25% of its annual 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 D.C., 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.

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, and brought many distinguished 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. The Daugavpils city authority was particularly active in utilizing the centenary as a rare opportunity to advertise itself on the international stage.⁸ 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 provincial gallery in Daugavpils as well as the opening of a plaque in 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 local authority (with state and European Union co-financing) the construction of a large Mark Rothko Arts Centre and has negotiated, with the Rothko family, a rotating exhibit of at least 4-6 Rothko art works. (Kalnina 2010). The Daugavpils municipality states that this centre 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 already mentioned, Eisenstein has a major street named after him (albeit outside the centre of Riga), while there are plaques marking the buildings 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 that would celebrate his life and work.

Thus all three personalities are important tools of international socialization in that they indicate that Latvia has not just superficially adopted the language of cultural liberalism or even internalized it, but has actually played a role in shaping these norms. 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

⁸ Daugavpils is located in the eastern and most economically region of Latvia. It is not served by an airport or a rapid rail link, instead relying on a notoriously pothole ridden road to link it with Riga.

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 legitimates the wider post-Soviet narrative of Latvia 'returning to the west', presenting the process as one of a logical historical continuity (Miller 1999). 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 long excluded from taking up a place in the western group of nations. How can it now be denied a place among the nations of the West?

There is also a domestic dimension to the instrumentalization of the three. 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'.⁹ Thus just as important as the subject of the debate is the actual concept of having a debate. Indeed, two of the last three Isaiah Berlin days have featured "Oxford-style debates". Thus NGOs, as well as Latvia's international partners such as the UK or the USA, utilize these figures to promote value change.

There is also an 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 in attempting to brand the city as an attractive destination for tourism and investment. Daugavpils 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 centre in northern Europe. The 2010 plenary featured fourteen artists from eleven different countries. Indeed, the Rothko family has also invested in Daugavpils, financing the reconstruction of the Daugavpils synagogue (LETA 2006).

Thus 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,

⁹ See www.isaiahberlin.org . Last accessed June 2, 2011.

but a creator and producer. Thus the upheavals since 1991 should not be seen as Latvia changing its identity, but rather rediscovering its past.

Conclusions

Intellectuals are central to the construction of national identities, constructing national images and narratives that bind together the disparate elements of the fledgling nation. This paper argued that the intellectual cultural figures it has considered – Isaiah Berlin, Mark Rothko and Sergei Eisenstein – have played a role in constructing contemporary Latvian national identity, albeit as instruments, rather than authors, of that identity, and with a largely international rather than domestic target audience. All three are major figures of what Ernest Gellner (1983) referred to as the ‘high culture’ that binds Latvia with the west. Indeed, the construction of this intellectual inheritance can be seen as 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 country reminds the USA (important to NATO accession) and the more liberal Europe that Latvia has long been a multicultural state, and that it once had a large Jewish community. More importantly, it stakes a claim for Latvia being not just a consumer but also a producer of the international western type of culture associated with successful states. In this way Latvia could partially negate the impact of the Soviet Union and reorient its state identity to that of Latvia 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 state) Latvia. In this way, the process is also different to the nation building of the nineteenth century, because the three intellectuals are instrumentalized in order for Latvia to be assimilated rather than made distinct. At the same time, the three intellectuals also have their internal uses. They are used by domestic NGOs and western international actors to promote the liberal values that still remain quite weak in contemporary Latvian society.

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 aforementioned NGOs and international actors, appear only marginally in domestic discourses, and then in primarily elite circles. Indeed, internally they are not really seen as being ‘Latvian’. Their appearance in Latvia is not indicative of a substantive change – internalization – of liberal ideas and culture in Latvia, but rather indicates that this is still an ongoing process.

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"â€˜We Lay Claim to Him!â€™™ Berlin, Rothko, Eisenstein, and the Reorientation of Latvian National Identity." National Identities 15, no. 2 (June 2013): 125-137. 3 TateShots. â€œMark Rothko at Tate Modern .â€ YouTube, YouTube, 15 Oct. 2008, . TERM Spring '14. PROFESSOR Laura Amussen. TAGS Mark Rothko. Share this link with a friend