The City of K. (Königsberg/Kaliningrad) as a Cultural Phenomenon: Cultural Memory, the Myth and Identity of the City

Abstract: Kaliningrad—previously known as Königsberg—was the centre of East Prussia for centuries. After World War II the city was annexed by the USSR and has since become a Russian exclave. Renamed Kaliningrad, its German population was deported, and the empty district was repopulated with Soviet citizens. The new residents, lacking any connection to their new environs, lived in a Soviet settlement built on the ruins of the historic city, whose memorials were destroyed and replaced with ideologically-designed Soviet architecture. This breaking of historic continuity resulted in Kaliningrad's conflict between official and unofficial collective memory and an atmosphere of isolation. Today's Kaliningrad is an 'isolated continent', a unique historical and cultural entity on the boundary of the former Soviet ideological sphere and (post)modern Europe. Contemporary texts by Yury Buida, Zinovy Zinik and others reflect the city's palimpsestic cultural memory and rootlessness. The city created by these narratives, which I call the 'City of K.', has an undefined present and a past that has not been dealt with.

Kaliningrad is a creation of the Soviet regime. Almost the entire city that was known as Königsberg was erased in order to build a new, prototypical socialist city. Thanks to applied Soviet ideology, Königsberg started to disappear after the Second World War, although after the collapse of the USSR, especially in the last decade, representation of its traumas and reactions to the socialist process of erasing or rewriting history has become the main theme in the reconstruction of Kaliningrad's identity. This study illustrates how motifs of silence, dependence, void and vacuity, as well as the rootlessness and marginalization that have become the essential features of this territory, also appear in contemporary literary tendencies. My argument is that the case of the City of K. is unique; for this reason it has turned into a particular cultural phenomenon, but it also has a symptomatic cultural character common among post-Soviet territories' reconstructed identities. In this article I will demonstrate that this analytical approach is not arbitrary, using two examples of what I call the ‘Narrative of the City of K.’: the cycle of short stories titled The Prussian Bride by Yury Buida, and the personal essay My Father’s Leg by Zinovy Zinik.

2 For the concept of the void in postcommunist and postcolonial discourse see the chapter by Bogdan Ștefănescu in this volume.
In the first part of this chapter I discuss out how the former Prussian city of Königsberg was transformed into Kaliningrad by Soviet ideology following the Second World War and describe the traumatic consequences of the violent identity-forming processes. Next, I briefly review the history of the city and its environs, and sketch in the results of the Soviet ideological transformation of the city. The second part of the article is devoted to the literary texts mentioned above, as imprints of the Soviet era. These works of art interpret past traumas, which can be read through the concepts of cultural memory (or amnesia), representations of the past, and the imitation or simulation of reality, all concepts which have been prevalent in cultural studies in the last few decades of the 20th and the first years of the 21st century, especially where theories of the ‘post-’ (postmodern, postcommunist and postcolonial discourse) intersect.

Historical Background: the ‘European City’ of Königsberg
Königsberg was founded in 1255 by the Teutonic Knights on territory near the Baltic Sea, and over the centuries it served as the cultural centre of its region. In the 14th century the city joined the Hanseatic League, after which it developed into an important port on the Baltic Sea. Königsberg became a crucible of cultural, economic, and scientific influences and movements.\textsuperscript{3} It was the birthplace of the world-famous writer E. T. A. Hoffmann (1776) as well as the birthplace and home of, Immanuel Kant (1726). Especially after the foundation of the Albertina University (1544), the city developed into an important German cultural, intellectual, and educational centre. In addition, it had a unique scientific milieu, thanks to the mathematical puzzle of the seven bridges of Königsberg, which was solved by the Swiss mathematician Leonard Euler and led to the mathematical branches of topology and graph theory.

Due to its economic and cultural status, Königsberg took significant part in European trade and partook in the circulation of culture and philosophy.\textsuperscript{4} In other words, Königsberg was an essential part of the so-called ‘motherland’ of Europe. However, this situation changed three times during the 20th century: first, when as a part of Germany, Königsberg and East Prussia were separated from the rest of the Weimar Republic by the Polish
