

CEUS 320 Old Barny, the Czar's Madman and Estonian survival

Second eight-weeks

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The course will explore the unique culture of Estonia by asking: what has helped a small nation to survive centuries under foreign rule and oppressive power to become one of the most dynamic modern states of the European Union? What are the narratives, images and symbols important in this culture? Who are the heroes of this Finno-Ugric-speaking people on the Baltic Sea?

We will see that the sword-wielding giant Kalevipoeg of the 19th century national epic is not a typical warrior hero. As a survivor figure, he is offered strong competition by smart peasants and trickster barn-keepers, who know how to handle goblins, speak to the snakes and deal with the devil. Other improbable heroes are a Baltic German nobleman who is considered crazy as he married an Estonian woman and dares to tell the Czar how to run the country, a booze-loving village bell-ringer who insists of telling the truth against all odds, and a wandering medieval knight and his fair lady who travel the silver screen in 1960s hairdos seeking freedom and truth for themselves and their people, and inspiring the audiences under Brezhnev's Soviet regime. These characters have an important place in the nation's consciousness alongside with the educators, writers and activists.

The course provides an overview of Estonia's history, most important cultural developments and an understanding of how the past informs and shapes the present in Estonia.

Readings include original texts from folklore, poetry, rock lyrics and modern fiction as well as writings on ethnography, history and literature. We will watch feature films and animation.

The Estonian example will also serve to highlight the issues a small nation faces in trying to preserve its cultural identity.