

Kristel Kotta

**Why Was
The Mahtra War
Never Filmed?
A Banned Project**

In the summer of 1958, the Estonian SSR held grandiose celebrations to commemorate the centennial of the peasant uprising at the Mahtra estate.¹ The celebrations presented a strong communist-ideological colouring to the public: the peasant uprising was shown as an unsuccessful prelude to the working class revolution. Yet the importance of the celebration was mostly local—a fact vividly illustrated by the discontinuation of a film project on the subject of the revolt, once the ideological censorship had revealed that the historical facts concerning the events at Mahtra could not be reconciled with views currently propagated by the socialist regime.

The following paper will take a closer look at issues related to *The Mahtra War* film project, focusing on the questions of why this thematic film, commissioned by the Ministry of Culture of the Estonian SSR from Tallinn Film Studio (Tallinna Kinostudio; from 1961 Tallinnfilm), for the centennial of the historic uprising at Mahtra, was never released, despite various efforts, and why the screenplay by Paul Rummo², kept in the Estonian State Archive, is equivocally marked as ‘unused’.

‘THE MOST IMPORTANT ART FORM’

The value of a film as a cultural landmark largely rests on its ability to store and transmit information. In the framework of Soviet propaganda, the over-stressed and over-exploited notion of the *importance* of cinema merely lay in the aforementioned potential for spreading ideas that the Communist Party discovered and controlled in the aftermath of the October Revolution. Communist ideology, which not only attempted to erase but also replace the national-traditional version of history (Annuk 2003: 13), laid down inflexible restrictions on creative work, the adherence to which was monitored by the censorship and security apparatus. The specific nature of cinema and its conscious exploitation brought about the strictest ideological coercion and supervision among the arts. The art of cinema in the Soviet republics was directly managed by the central authorities in Moscow and, during the production process, films were shaped into products of collective correction.

The re-emergence of national cinema in the Estonian SSR, after it had been destroyed in the war, can be traced back to the beginning of the 1960s (Orav 2003: 21). This is linked to young Estonian directors, educated at the All-Union State Institute of Cinematography (Всесоюзный государственный институт кинематографии, VGIK), joining the studio in Tallinn. An alternative to ideological direction in local cinema, which is often directly connected with the arrival of those newly-educated young film-makers, came from adapting classical literature or historical subjects (Valton 2005). As both of these options were difficult to control, i.e. subdue to ideology, these subject matters were in natural disfavour with the higher authorities who decided on the permitted repertory.

The fact that Estonian writers made consistent, yet unsuccessful, attempts to adapt for the screen stories from Estonian pre-Soviet history and classical literature as early as the second half of the 1950s, thus directly following the beginning of the political change of direction, has hitherto gone unnoticed. These uncompleted film projects, including Rummo’s *The Mahtra War* (1955–1959) tell a story of attempts to provide alternatives. Acknowledging this will help in creating distance from the ‘winners’ history’ and in realising that the defeat was not completely ignoble.

SOURCES

Available information on *The Mahtra War* film project is retained in the Estonian State Archives

1 Editors’ note: the peasant insurgency at the Mahtra estate (now in Rapla County), also known as the Mahtra War, took place in May–July 1858. The Governorate of Estonia (then part of the Russian Empire) had abolished serfdom in 1816, yet the peasants were still deprived of the right to own property and *corvée* labour was preserved. Although a 1856 manifesto of Tsar Alexander II promised further agrarian reforms, the implementation was slow and this caused protests, including the revolt at Mahtra. In Mahtra, the uprising was violently suppressed by the army and the rebellious peasants were exiled to Siberia. Nevertheless, these events influenced the process of emancipating the serfs in the Russian Empire to a considerable extent.

2 Paul Rummo (1909–1981) was an Estonian poet, publicist, writer and playwright, who, in 1952, was awarded the Soviet Meritorious Writer title. In 1945 he published a stage play based on Eduard Vilde’s novel *The Mahtra War* (*Mahtra sõda*, 1902) (see Rummo 1945).

(Eesti Riigiarhiiv (ERA), f. R-1707). The archives contain three script versions in Estonian submitted to the studio by Paul Rummo,³ a consulted script by Epp Kaidu (aka Leida Ird) from the Tartu Vanemuine Theatre, who was initially designated to direct the film, and approximately 100 pages of documentation recording the project's progress.⁴ No doubt, this available information does not provide an extensive overview of this project, which had been ongoing for three years, yet was eventually banned. Nevertheless, despite a number of gaps, the censorship process and viewpoints of the parties to the conflict (author and studio) can generally be followed.

The strictly censored professional printed media provided almost no coverage of film production requirements in the Estonian SSR. Thus, in order to construct an adequate background, it is necessary to turn, in addition to the 'public sources', to private sources (by these I mean the memoirs of people related to film production at Tallinnfilm beginning in the 1960s). Results gathered from a study conducted by the author in 2005 have been utilised in this paper.

Eduard Vilde (1865–1933), considered to be the father of critical realism in Estonian literature, was one of the few well-known Estonian writers not only declared a Soviet classic in 1951 but placed in a central position among such writers. This honour bestowed on Vilde was largely justified by his leftist views and by 'convenient' biographical facts; the writer's work was primarily interpreted in a communist key. One of Eduard Vilde's most popular works is his historical novel *The Mahtra War* (*Mahtra sõda*, 1902), the events of which take place during the 1858 peasant uprising against estate holders. The script for the screen version of *The Mahtra War* commissioned from the Tallinn Film Studio was to be based on motifs of Eduard Vilde's novel. In the long-term (10–15 years), the studio was planning to adapt the whole of Vilde's historical trilogy (*The Mahtra War*, *When the Anija Men Went to Tallinn* (*Kui Anija mehed Tallinnas käisid*, 1903), and *The Prophet Maltsvet* (*Prohvet Maltsvet*, 1908)).⁵ The archives hold two versions of the script for *The Prophet Maltsvet*. Nevertheless, none of the three novels in Eduard Vilde's trilogy ever found their way to the screen.

THE MAHTRA WAR: THE LIBRETTO BATTLE AND MORE

The documentation on *The Mahtra War* film project at the Estonian State Archives does not provide any information as to when negotiations concerning the writing of a script based on Vilde's novel between Paul Rummo and representatives of the Ministry of Culture of the Estonian SSR were started, or in which form they were held. A copy of a written reply by Paul Rummo, in which he explains his initial working plan with great enthusiasm, dates from January 15, 1955. *The Mahtra War* was his first film project and cooperation with the studio promised to provide a creative challenge.

In addition to confirming his agreement, Rummo, a well-known writer and Vilde scholar, stated his conviction that an adaptation of a classic such as this relevant novel, available and familiar to everyone, did not require a traditional libretto. A libretto, or creative statement, was required as an addendum to the contract of employment and was to specify the central idea and storyline, as well as the nature of characters in the script; failure to submit a libretto or discrepancies in the finished script in comparison with the libretto could result in the studio terminating the entire agreement. Considering that films could be approved for the studio's production plans based on the libretto alone, and knowing that the production plans were also discussed by authorities outside of the studio, as high as the Ministry of Culture in Moscow, the libretto can be seen as an important element of ideological control. By refusing to compile a libretto, Paul Rummo started his first conflict with the studio. Rummo did submit the general principles which he intended to adhere to when writing the script.

The script agreement itself does not have a date on it, being an appendix to the USSR Minister of Culture's directive no. 94. The directive was issued in Moscow on February 22, 1956. Aleksander Ansberg, the Minister of Culture of the Estonian SSR, initiated the Mahtra uprising centennial celebrations program in August 1956. Item six of his directive no. 346 ordered the local Board of Cinematography to ensure the release of a feature film based on the uprising within two years.

Paul Rummo finished the first version of his script by November 12, 1956. The studio found a number of substantive shortcomings in the script and asked the author to revise it. The second version of the script was completed on March 15, 1957. Rummo had not made any essential changes and the script was rejected once more. His third script for *The Mahtra War* arrived at the studio by June 1, 1957. The meeting of the studio's Artistic Council on June 28 approved the script as 'acceptable, with strong reservations'.⁶ The studio's management demanded four requirements, which the author only learned of during a later review of the meeting's minutes. The requirements were as follows:

1. the storylines related to the peasants (the protagonists Miina and Päärn) and to the Mahtra uprising must intertwine;
2. the portrayal of the social gap between the Baltic barons and the Estonian peasants must be strengthened;
3. Päärn must be portrayed as the leader of the uprising, surrounded by a group of followers;
4. the author must fully clarify the question of the uprising and how it was suppressed.

The Council's decision again called for extensive changes, which were to be implemented in the next stage of adjusting the director's script so that it would meet the requirements, because the studio had already sent the script back for revision twice and the contract did not make allowance for more changes. The scheduled production period was set from July 20, 1957 to May 1, 1958.

LOOSE OR CLOSE ADAPTATION?

Following the course of the project from the author's perspective, the following fact deserves attention: the more heated the debate on how close to the original the script should be, the more Paul Rummo started to emphasise the need for a one-to-one adaptation of the novel.

Yet Rummo's interpretation substantially diverged from the original: the parties to the

historic conflict in his screenplays are contrasted in terms of nationality. The Germans (estate holders, clergy and townspeople) were portrayed negatively, Estonians (peasants) were idealised, and Russians (representatives of the tsarist state) were controversial: the Tsar was a crusher of the uprising against the state and a punisher; the common soldiers, on the other hand, had human strengths and weaknesses and were merely following orders. Naturally, these opposing sides already existed in the novel, yet with a less defined choosing of sides and with deeper psychological motivation.

While the novel's central motif indeed focus on the injustice of the estate owners towards the peasants—at first, a stubborn serf with a sense of integrity stands against such discrimination, leading to a general rebellion later on—Eduard Vilde did not put as much stress on the clarity and inevitability of the progress to the climax of the process, and in his novel the uprising remained spontaneous, to a large extent. Paul Rummo's peasants, on the contrary, are transformed into an unwavering collective force that first abandons the church and then attacks the manor. In his third version of the script, Rummo distorted the reasons behind the uprising, referring to the rebellion as a result of a secret deal among the barons, who purposely translate the new agrarian legislation from Russian into Estonian incorrectly, so as to be able to demand the same *corvée* from the peasants as before.

Just as Eduard Vilde, mostly through the young baron Herbert, demonstrates a more positive attitude on the part of the barons, he does not straightforwardly glorify the peasants'

3 ERA, f. R-1707, n. 1, s. 211 (version I of Paul Rummo's screenplay for *The Mahtra War*, 1956); ERA, f. R-1707, n. 1, s. 332 (version II of Paul Rummo's screenplay for *The Mahtra War*, 1957); ERA, f. R-1707, n. 1, s. 334 (version III of Paul Rummo's screenplay for *The Mahtra War*, 1957).

4 ERA, f. R-1707, n. 1, s. 212 (documents related to *The Mahtra War* screenplay, 1955–1958).

5 ERA, f. R-1707, n. 1, s. 281, l. 62–63 (the minutes from a Tallinn Film Studio meeting on screen releases, June 13, 1957).

6 ERA, f. R-1707, n. 1, s. 281 (the minutes of the Artistic Council, 1957).

decision-making abilities. On the contrary, he allows the whole village community to run away to the woods twice, shows both sides of this 'economic war' (stealing from the manor house), places traitors among the brothers-in-arms and adds another vice to the lower class: he attributes their courage to drunkenness and their cowardice to sobriety (Vilde 1958: 12–13, 269, 290, 305, 347–348, 366, 372–373). The scripts absolved the peasants of such dark traits. Idealism replaced realism. In the screenplays, only the estate owners, having had their worst fears come to pass in the Mahtra uprising, and the soldiers, unable to protect themselves from the crowd invading the manor house, run.

The most controversial link in the nationality-based relationship triangle in the screenplays is that of the Russians. Eduard Vilde repeatedly stressed the fact that the agrarian reforms in the Baltic provinces were backed by the Tsar and the government, both as initiators of the innovations and as mobilisers of the local knighthood to implement the new legislation. Additionally, in Vilde's representation, the peasants consider the new law to be the Tsar's law, although the estate owners highlight their own altruistic role in dealing with the peasants, and Tertsius, the stockbreeder at Mahtra, adopts it as his mission to locate the Russian original of the legislative document so as to compare it to the Estonian version. The latter detail is not mentioned in the screenplays: the Tsar, whose kindness the peasants are counting on, stands at an unreachable distance, while the estate owners' arbitrariness forms the real conditions of their existence; the local nature of the issue is also stressed by the fact that the estate owners are afraid of the peasant rebellion rising from below rather than the Tsar's inclination towards innovation. Eduard Vilde suggests that the peasants, victimised by false beliefs, were court-martialled and punished because the estate owners made them look like 'culpable enemies of the state'; but in the screenplays the rebellion is crushed in a punitive operation by troops sent from the province's capital Tallinn, and at least the higher-ranking officers of the army cooperate closely with the estate owners. The fact that the most important arrests (e.g. in the case of the protagonist Päärn) are conducted

by Cossacks rather than Russians is undoubtedly significant. The punishment accorded to the rebels by the court martial appears to be the natural course of events in the scripts; it represents another injustice carried out by Russian soldiers on the manor grounds, with the obvious consent of the estate owners. Yet, these events connote more than merely the estate owners' vigilantism. Based on a one-sentence announcement of the Tsar pardoning 50 men condemned to death in the novel (Vilde 1958: 402), Paul Rummo created a scene where Tsar Alexander II utters the following lines: 'So you propose I pardon the men condemned to death? Mmh?! Perhaps... It would indeed benefit the authority of the crown. Yes, I'm sure 1000 cane strokes and a trip to Siberia will be perfect for cooling down the rebel fever. [...] We do not wish for the blood of our beloved subjects.'¹⁷ Tellingly, the trial of the peasants takes place with the Tsar's portrait in the background. Thus, in this case, the Tsar does not offer significant protection to the peasants, but indeed punishes them for 'treason'. At the same time, it is rather noteworthy how, following the requests of the studio, each of Rummo's succeeding scripts rehabilitated and individualised common Russian soldiers to a greater degree.

The last essential digressions from the novel appear in the finale of the story. In the novel, the battle between stagnation and innovation is decisively won by the latter. Describing the situation after the rebellion, Vilde concludes on a fairly positive note: in the long run, the resolution adopted by the *ad hoc* Land Council after the uprising indeed improves the legal climate for the peasants; upon the departure of the governess Juliette Marchand, the young baron Herbert begins to work hard to improve life on his manor estate; and Päärn, who was never arrested, uses his compensation money to buy a farm in a neighbouring county and marries the manor servant Miina. In the screenplay, on the other hand, perhaps in order to lay more emphasis on the suppression of the uprising, Paul Rummo decided to portray Päärn's arrest, his imprisonment and suffering through one of the harshest punishments: after receiving a gauntlet beating, Päärn is sentenced to forced labour and exile in Siberia. Two of the

first screenplays reserve the final scenes for the barons and show Päärn prior to that on his journey to Siberia, with the hand of a mounted soldier, leading a group of shackled forced labourers in rags, waving a whip over his head. However, taking its lead from Epp Kaidu's consulted script, Paul Rummo's third screenplay discards the scene with the baron, and ends instead with the condemned men starting their arduous journey, thus lending this event more weight and a different kind of interpretation: Päärn's undefeated expression shows that the battle is not yet over.

OMINOUS REACTION

Copies of the screenplay approved by the studio's Artistic Council were sent for revision to the Central Committee of the Estonian Communist Party and the Ministry of Culture of the Estonian SSR. The latter presumably sent the scripts to Moscow, as the studio soon received an alarmed response from the State Directorate for Cinema in Moscow, saying that they 'do not recommend' including Paul Rummo's *The Mahtra War* in the studio's thematic plan of 1958. The response was based on the sense that the struggle between the Russian army and the rebelling Estonian peasants in the screenplay 'diverges from the central idea in Eduard Vilde's novel', the essence of which remained unspecified in the response, and 'acquires an unnecessary political ambiguity'. The letter mentioned in a rather threatening tone that the studio would be deprived of the right to cooperate further with Paul Rummo unless the author agreed to incorporate some 'essential amendments' into the script. The director of the studio in Tallinn was warned that the Ministry of Culture in Moscow could not come to a decision about the inclusion of adaptations of classical novels in the studio's working plan based merely on a short libretto; they had to first study the relevant work more thoroughly.

Production of the film was now in serious doubt. The project started to drag on. Paul Rummo sent a number of protest letters to the studio, asking for a final ruling and payment of his fees.

On September 17, 1957 the scriptwriter Mikhail Bleiman, appointed to supervise

Rummo's work, stated his opinion on the screenplay, which once more did not prove encouraging; namely, he seriously doubted the importance of the whole subject matter and questioned whether the issues presented would appeal to Soviet audiences on a broader scale.

According to Paul Rummo, he submitted, outside of his legal contractual duties, a fourth version of the screenplay to the studio in September or October 1957; this screenplay, however, has not been preserved in the archives. It is entirely possible that the author's unwillingness to accept the uncertain situation, and his direct and, to a large extent, indisputable pronouncements substantially helped to temporarily revive the project, which nevertheless began to hopelessly slip away. A meeting was finally held in the Estonian Ministry of Culture on January 14, 1958, where a decision was made to approve Epp Kaidu as the director of the film, and another revised version of the screenplay was commissioned by May 15 (this fifth version of the script has not been preserved either). The production was scheduled to begin in September or October 1958 and the premier was set for mid-summer 1959. The studio placed its last hopes in the director-consultant.

However, suddenly in August 1958, *The Mahtra War* was struck from the studio's production plan without any notification to the author. This was probably caused by an undocumented incident during the celebrations of the centennial of the uprising in mid-summer of the same year. Yet, in October, despite cancelling the project in August, the studio was still waiting for the director's script that was to be completed in cooperation between Rummo and Kaidu.

This screenplay was probably never submitted, as in the autumn of 1959 the higher authorities again confirmed the 'inadvisability' of filming Paul Rummo's script. The list of individuals against the project presented to the Estonian Minister of Culture by the studio's director included the same persons who had presented ideological arguments against the screenplay in the summer of 1957. The project was conclusively cancelled in January 1959 and

the scriptwriters were paid the fees provided for in their contracts.⁸

Although the director of the Tallinn Film Studio, Nikolai Danilovitch, failed, as a member of the working committee for the preparation of the centennial celebrations of the Mahtra uprising,⁹ to guarantee the production of a relevant film by the summer of 1958 and despite continued efforts such attempts failed later as well, the film studio still managed to perform at least part of its duties concerning the centennial: simultaneously with Paul Rummo's project, a black and white documentary by Reet Kasesalu, *For Truth, Justice and Freedom (100 Years since the Mahtra War)* (*Tõe, õiguse ja vabaduse eest (100 aastat Mahtra sõjast)*) had been included in the studio's plans.¹⁰

Paul Rummo was told that the project was cancelled due to its non-contemporary, and thus irrelevant, nature. This statement is not fully convincing without further elaboration, although it contains a strong ideological argument. Particularly in the light of the grandiose celebration programme dedicated to the uprising, the actual significance of the subject matter could not have been in any doubt. The propagandistic layers added to the peasant rebellion provide an interesting example of how communist ideology essentially depended on re-interpreting the past.

Thus, it seems more likely that, in a closer observation of the circumstances of the uprising, the historical facts that did not match the desired interpretation could not be overlooked or adjusted. Indeed, the response from the State Directorate for Cinema in Moscow mentioned these facts and based its rejection of the planned project on them. Notably, however, attempts had been made earlier, on the local level, to adopt preventive measures (see item four of the Artistic Council's decision above), as the subject of tsarism came up during the Council's meeting.

From the perspective of the general ideology, showcasing a conflict between the Tsar's army and peasants would have been quite acceptable, as socialism was generally opposed to tsarism; yet questions surfaced in this particular case on the basis of national issues. In this context, it would have been impossible to show a situation where the Tsar's army—representing

the Russian nation—suppressed an Estonian peasant uprising against German estate owners.

CONCLUSION

Paul Rummo's attempt at cooperation with the Tallinn Film Studio did not prove a pleasant experience for the writer. The representation of the historical events proved to be the greatest hindrance; no criticism was addressed to the technical aspects of the screenplay. In summary, the banning of *The Mahtra War* project was first and foremost the result of its lack of compliance with ideological tenets, of the fact that ideologically unacceptable representations of national relations could not be ignored.

The case of *The Mahtra War* proves that adaptations of literary classics and historical subjects were deeply disfavoured by the central authorities. Moreover, Paul Rummo's experience provided further impetus to writers' distrust of the local film studio, where complaints of a shortage or 'drought' of scriptwriters remained a permanent matter in the coming decades. It is also important to stress that the ban on *The Mahtra War* project, at the time when the centennial celebrations of the Mahtra uprising were in full swing, clearly indicates poor integration of the cinematic domain with the rest of the cultural life in Estonia; the general orientation of film production towards an all-Union scale is significant. Thus, in the local framework, film remained in the status of a 'great loner' (Meri 1968).

8 ERA, f. R-1707, n. 1, s. 38.

9 Eduard Vilde Muuseum (EVM), 1244 / Ar. 988.

10 EVM, 713 / Ar. 631.

REFERENCES

An n u k, Eve 2003. Totalitarismi ja/või kolonialismi pained: miks ja kuidas uurida nõukogude aega?—*Võim & kultuur*. Eds. Arvo Krikmann, Sirje Olesk. Tartu: Eesti Kirjandusmuuseum, Eesti kultuuriloo ja folkloristika keskus, pp. 13–39

M e r i, Lennart 1968. Suur üksiklane.—*Sirp ja Vasar*, February 9

O r a v, Õie 2003. *Tallinnfilm. I, Mängufilmid 1947–1976*. Tallinn: Eesti Entsüklopeediakirjastus

R u m m o, Paul 1945. *Mahtra sõda. Dramatiseering kuues pildis*. Tallinn: Ilukirjandus ja Kunst

V a l t o n, Arvo 2005. Author's interview, January 29

V i l d e, Eduard 1958. *Mahtra sõda*. Tallinn: Eesti Riiklik Kirjastus