




RESEARCH ARTICLE

‘Dance is a disease for us’: dancing through the night as a threat to moral order in urbanizing Estonia

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Abstract

This article explores social dancing as the setting for moral struggles related to the urban night. Based on analysis of Estonian-language newspapers, I look at the historical context and expressed viewpoints linked with nocturnal public dance events in Estonian cities from 1880 to 1940. The established moral order was endangered by those staying out dancing late into the night. In the context of the multinationalism of urban areas and the national emancipation movement of the ethnic Estonian population, I investigate the transgressions and hazards that night dancing was perceived to bring, most significantly, threat to productivity, health and virtue.

Introduction

The contested relationship between people and darkness serves as a complex stage for modern urban life. Nocturnal cities are shaped by public debates over what should and should not happen in certain areas at night.¹ I explore the background to such debates in Estonia’s cities by focusing on regular social dance events that took place at night in the period from 1880 to 1940, and by examining dance-related transgressions documented in Estonian newspapers.

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the area that is today Estonia was part of the Russian Empire and was ruled by a traditional Baltic German elite. It was a moment when the movement for Estonian emancipation gained momentum simultaneously with the transformative processes of urbanization and industrialization. The impact on the ethnic Estonian population, which had been largely rural, was dramatic. Hence, the 1880s are a pertinent point of departure from which to explore Estonian nocturnal city life. The majority of my research focuses on this little-studied period preceding independence. I explore how the culturally and socially influential Estonian-language media portrayed the urban night and night dancing in the framework of this nation-building process. The influence of modern urban culture became increasingly

¹R. Williams, ‘Night spaces: darkness, deterritorialization and social control’, *Space and Culture*, 11 (2008), 514–32.

prominent during the subsequent independence era of 1918–40.² Because the Republic of Estonia between the two world wars has been thoroughly examined, I add my observations to this period in a more conclusive manner.³ The article concludes with the Soviet occupation in 1940 during World War II when the steady development that reflected societal trends in Western Europe was abruptly interrupted.

This research unveils socio-cultural attitudes and tensions surrounding night activities throughout Eastern Europe as it underwent urbanization. Dancing was a significant site for moral disputes in the urban night, a struggle that continues to this day. While innovative and experimental music and dance culture has historically thrived at night, such cultural manifestations have generally only been recognized and supported when they have ventured out into the daylight and left their nocturnal legacy behind. In order to grasp the cultural and creative value of activities in the urban night, it is necessary to understand the history, dynamics and impact of nocturnal spaces and activities. By examining urbanization dynamics, social control and cultural transformation in the context of night dancing, the article aims to enrich the understanding of the complexities and tensions surrounding urban nightlife culture, while also shedding light on the historical significance of nocturnal activities and their socio-cultural implications. It adds to the growing body of academic scholarship on the history of nocturnal cities. In the last decades, researchers have increasingly focused on the urban night as a time–space with a distinct character and social impact, one of the reasons being that the urban population has come to use the night as a field of action with unprecedented intensity during the modern era.⁴

In his influential 1978 essay ‘Night as a frontier’, Murray Melbin compares the process of expansion into the night to the westward expansion in the United States in the nineteenth century.⁵ He regards night as a frontier: human extension into the dark hours shows that time, like space, can be conquered. A. Roger Ekirch and Craig Koslofsky explore how early modern people in Western society experienced and shaped life at night.⁶ Emphasizing the significance of sensory experiences beyond sight at night, these dimensions of the pre-industrial night have been studied by David Garrioch, who explores the sounds of early modern European cities, and by Julia Rombough who explores the sounds and smells of late Renaissance Florence.⁷ In his research, Robert Shaw argues that while pre-industrial night was by no means a time of inactivity for humans, it was still a tightly regulated time–space of radically reduced activity. He investigates the transformation, alteration and shaping of night in response to urbanization.⁸

²E.-M. Talivee, ‘Kuidas kirjutada linna. Eesti proosa linnamaastik aastail 1877–1903’, Tallinn University Ph.D. thesis, 2017, 10; E. Jansen, *Eestlane muutuv asjas. Seisühistonnast kodanikuühiskonda* (Tartu, 2007).

³Estonian inter-war restaurant and nightlife culture is examined by K. Hovi, *Kuld Lõwi ja Kultase ajal. Tallinna restoranikultuuri ajalugu 1918–1940* (Tallinn, 2017).

⁴N. Gonlin and A. Nowell (eds.), *Archaeology of the Night: Life after Dark in the Ancient World* (Boulder, 2017).

⁵M. Melbin, ‘Night as a frontier’, *American Sociological Review*, 43 (1978), 3–22.

⁶A.R. Ekirch, *At Day’s Close. A History of Nighttime* (London, 2006); C. Koslofsky, *Evening’s Empire: A History of the Night in Early Modern Europe* (New York, 2011).

⁷D. Garrioch, ‘Sounds of the city: the soundscape of early modern European towns’, *Urban History*, 30 (2003), 5–25; J. Rombough, ‘Regulating sense and space in late Renaissance Florence’, *Urban History*, 50 (2021), 1–20.

⁸R. Shaw, *The Nocturnal City* (London, 2018), 29.

Significant scholarly research has explored the diverse and conflicting meanings attributed to the urban night during the rapid urban transformation in the nineteenth century across the United States and Europe. Wolfgang Schivelbusch's well-known 1998 *Disenchanted Night* explores the profound transformation of nocturnal cities during the industrial revolution. Through a comprehensive analysis of the social, political and cultural ramifications, Schivelbusch highlights how the advent of artificial lighting in the nineteenth century played a pivotal role in reshaping the nocturnal urban landscape into what we now recognize it to be.⁹ In his book *Nights in the Big City: Paris, Berlin, London 1840–1930*, Joachim Schlör stresses the existence of diverse and conflicting perceptions of the night, including its association with pleasure, moral transgressions, individual freedom and opposition to mainstream norms.¹⁰ Peter C. Baldwin's 2012 book *In the Watches of the Night: Life in the Nocturnal City, 1820–1930* offers a thorough understanding of many facets of American nocturnal cities as they transition from gloomy, uninhabited and fearsome settings to vibrant and diverse ones while maintaining their transgressive nature.¹¹ In *Cultures of Darkness: Night Travels in the Histories of Transgression*, Bryan D. Palmer also emphasizes the contrasts found in relation to the night. His exploration spans continents and centuries, from the imagined nights of medieval witches to transgressive activities in the twentieth century, including dance and music. Palmer asserts the existence of different night worlds connected to sexuality, crime, power, pleasure, freedom, alterity and opposition to societal norms.¹² In a similar vein to this scholarship, I showcase how contested attitudes towards the night unfolded in the emerging Estonian-language press.

Because modernizing Estonia followed societal processes and technological development in a delayed but somewhat comparable way to other Western countries, various features of life in Estonian nocturnal cities can be evaluated using existing research about this era of modernization. Although my research focuses on events in and discussions around nocturnal cities in Estonia, its findings can also encompass the wider geographic area of the Baltic states (especially Latvia), Russia and northern Europe, which have not been well studied in terms of the history of nocturnal cities in the modern era. There is academic work that discusses features of Estonian cities at night, such as medieval celebrations, the history of restaurant culture between 1918 and 1940 and twentieth- and twenty-first-century music-based subcultures.¹³ However, the night has largely served as a backdrop, a setting taken for granted, rather than as a time-space of significant impact on people's experiences or a topic of

⁹W. Schivelbusch, *Disenchanted Night: Industrialization of Light in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley, 1998).

¹⁰J. Schlör, *Nights in the Big City: Paris, Berlin, London 1840–1930* (Berlin, 1998).

¹¹P.C. Baldwin, *In the Watches of the Night: Life in the Nocturnal City, 1820–1930* (Chicago, 2012).

¹²B.D. Palmer, *Cultures of Darkness: Night Travels in the Histories of Transgression* (New York, 2000).

¹³I. Põltsam-Jürjo, *Viin, vein ja vesi: joogikultuur Eestis kesk- ja varauusaajal* (Tallinn, 2020); A. Mänd, *Pidustused keskaegse Liivimaa linnades 1350–1550* (Tallinn, 2012); Hovi, *Kuld Lõvi ja Kultase ajal; V. Ojakäär, Sirp ja saksofon* (Tallinn, 2008); A. Ventsel, 'Soviet West: Estonian estrada in the Soviet Union', *Euxeinos*, 8 (2018), 94–106; A.-A. Allaste (ed.), *Subkultuurid: Elustiilide uurimused* (Tallinn, 2013); P.-M. Mikk, 'Otsingute aeg kultuurikorralduses: 1990. aastate Tartu alternatiivse klubikultuuri teke ja arengud', University of Tartu MA thesis, 2012; B. Vaher, 'Subkultuuri võimalikkusest Eestis', in S. Helme and J. Saar (eds.), *Nosy Nineties. Problems, Themes and Meanings in Estonian Art in 1990s* (Tallinn, 2001), 53–66; H. Reimann, 'Jazz in Soviet Estonia from 1944 to 1953: meanings, spaces and paradoxes', University of Helsinki Ph.D. thesis, 2015.

extensive moral debate. Exceptions to this are research on ordinary citizens' nocturnal experiences and uses of time in the medieval Estonian night as well as the creative urban night that emerged as part of the local club culture in the 1990s and contemporary nightlife in the city of Tartu.¹⁴

Tracing the nights of Estonia's past

This article is based on an examination of digitized Estonian-language media texts from 1880 to 1940, which I obtained through the DIGAR newspaper archives.¹⁵ In addition to analysing media discourse, I have examined prints, illustrations and artefacts found in the Estonian Museums Public Portal, which helped identify practical and aesthetic aspects of dance events such as musical instruments, dance styles and the night milieu in general.¹⁶ The research draws mainly on the principal daily newspapers that had readership in rural and urban areas alike and played an essential role in the backdrop of national emancipation – *Postimees* (established in 1857, still published today), *Sakala* (established in 1878, still published today) and *Päevaleht* (1905–40). Other, less extensively distributed publications that I relied on for research included *Saarlane*, *Olewik*, *Tallinna Teataja*, *Maaliit* and *Ühistegelised Uudised*, which provide general information and typically contain a consistent moral discourse on nocturnal cities.

Altogether, I examined around 8,000 titles and thoroughly read around 500 written news articles. My focus was mainly on Tallinn and Tartu – the former a capital city and the economic centre of Estonia and the latter a university town with a high concentration of students and intellectuals. The most relevant information surfaced through clear-cut keyword research such as 'dancing' (*tantsimine*) and 'dance' (*tants*, *tantsima*). These rapidly demonstrated that social dancing was indeed a regular late night to early morning pastime in the era under exploration. In addition, many important articles were found through keywords such as 'night' (*öö*), 'at night' (*öösel*, *öösi*) and 'nocturnal' (*öine*, *öösiine*). Such phrases were generally associated with news about illegal, tragic, deviant and morally ambiguous events as well as general information regarding weather, work and transportation at night.

It is important to acknowledge the biases and fragmentary character of the newspaper sources. In the case of emerging Estonian-language journalism, the newspapers present an incomplete perspective that reflects the ideologies of publishers, many of whom were devoted to promoting national conservative values. In my analyses of newspapers across the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it became clear that the diverse voices and experiences surrounding the night and night dancing culture that were complex transformations in the urban landscape were in fact oversimplified by the press. Baldwin touches upon the influence of journalists in reporting on nocturnal activities and refers to their tendency to amplify the dramatic,

¹⁴I. Põltsam-Jürjo, 'Kellele kuulub öö? Elust pimedal ajal 13.–16. sajandi Liivimaal', *TUNA*, 4 (2014), 14–32; K. Leivategija, 'Club culture in post-Soviet Estonia: the emergence and challenges of a creative urban night', *INCS Proceedings, 1: International Conference on Night Studies* (Lisbon, 2020), 139–53; M. Ott, 'Tartu ööelu kogemustekaart ja prototüüp. Magistriprojekt', University of Tartu MA project, 2021.

¹⁵www.digar.ee/arhiiv/en/info/digar, accessed 13 Aug. 2022. 'The National Library of Estonia's digital archive DIGAR stores online publications, print files and digitized copies of publications. DIGAR contains books, newspapers, journals and magazines, maps, sheet music, photos and postcards.'

¹⁶www.muis.ee/, accessed 14 Aug. 2022.

violent and exotic aspects of the urban night. This emphasis by journalists has contributed to the negative perception of night in the popular imagination and influenced the utilization of urban space.¹⁷ Such tendencies towards sensationalism were present in Estonian newspapers, as evident from the excerpts in this article.

However, the newspaper sources do make a contribution to a comprehensive understanding of the topic within its historical context. Schlör argues that discussions surrounding the 'moral' situation of the city not only document normative behavioural patterns during a specific era but also refer to the groups within the city that challenged these values.¹⁸ While this article primarily focuses on the media-driven concept of the night, the data clearly indicate the presence of groups and individuals who held the night as a significant and meaningful time-space, and shaped and embraced it through their own experiences and contributions. Despite biases and one-sided perceptions in the press, this article strives to understand both prevailing publicly expressed attitudes and contrasting viewpoints that remain hidden, not explicitly expressed, but accessible through condemnatory writings.

City nights contrasted to rural life

Long-standing conventions and habits broke down as modern urban lifestyles and morals along with new social strata evolved during the time period under investigation.¹⁹ In the 1880s, despite being a part of the Russian Empire, Estonia was governed by Baltic Germans who were traditionally a significant portion of the ruling class and dominated the local Estonian population.²⁰ Yet at the same time, a number of complex processes simultaneously took place. The Baltic states became the Russian Empire's most advanced industrial region. The pace of modernization accelerated dramatically. It brought a radical shift in the power dynamics between ethnic groups, the urbanization of ethnic Estonians who had previously been primarily rural, the development of an Estonian national agenda and the advent of Estonian-language journalism. A national movement of 'awakening' and collective identity powerfully shaped new cultural norms and intellectual horizons.

Estonia's population reached 1 million around the beginning of the twentieth century. There was a rapid influx of newcomers in urban areas that continued until the start of World War I.²¹ In the second half of the nineteenth century, the population of cities tripled from 5 to 15 per cent of the overall Estonian population. Ethnic Estonians replaced the Baltic Germans as the major portion of the urban population.²² By 1934, around 30 per cent of the Estonian population lived in cities.²³ For example,

¹⁷Baldwin, *In the Watches of the Night*, 115.

¹⁸Schlör, *Nights in the Big City*, 167.

¹⁹K. Hallas, 'Eestlane ja suurlinn', *Kunstiteaduslikke uurimusi/Studies on Art and Architecture*, 8 (1995), 91.

²⁰Estonia was part of the Russian Empire from 1710 to 1917.

²¹R. Pullat, *Tallinnast ja tallinnastest: nihked elanikkonna sotsiaalses koosseisus* (Tallinn, 1966), 26.

²²L. Leppik, 'Balti provintside õigus ja valitsemine', in K. Ligi and S. Runnel (eds.), *Eesti ajalugu V* (Tartu, 2010), 52; R. Pullat, *Eesti linnad ja linlased: XVIII sajandi lõpust 1917. aastani* (Tallinn, 1977), 60. Tallinn had a modest population of 100,000, still making it a metropolis by the standards of the time. In comparison, around the turn of the century, Berlin had a population of 2 million, Paris 3 million and London 5 million. Pullat, *Tallinnast ja tallinnastest*, 26. Tartu's population grew from nearly 30,000 in 1881 to nearly 60,000 in 1934: www.stat.ee/et/rahvastik-maakondades-ja-linnades-1881, accessed 13 Jan. 2023.

²³www.stat.ee/et/rahvastik-maakondades-ja-linnades-1934, accessed 13 Jan. 2023.

Estonians increased their ownership of real estate and outnumbered Baltic Germans and Russians on the Tallinn City Council, where, in 1907, the first Estonian-nationality mayor was elected.²⁴ The balance of power among the various ethnicities and social classes was in constant flux. Former peasants became the majority of urban inhabitants. They generally took jobs in the newly established industries. Additionally, there were proprietors of small businesses and merchants, tavern keepers and property owners among ethnic Estonians.²⁵ The city was a transformative environment that influenced the economic, political and cultural expressions of its population.²⁶

The national emancipation process elicited a bevy of new Estonian cultural, recreational, educational and occupational societies known as *seltsid* (*selts* in the singular) or voluntary associations. Together with journalism, they were significant tools for nation-building. These collective societies attracted workers, intellectuals and entrepreneurs equally, and regarded an 'independent, critically thinking and society-serving' individual as the ideal.²⁷ The rise of such societies demonstrated the Estonian people's desire to actively and publicly engage in the realms of education, culture and art. Estonians founded and funded these organizations, along with the construction of various society buildings.²⁸ The *seltsid* played a vital role in shaping modern Estonian society and empowering native Estonians to progress independently from the influence of Russians or Baltic Germans.²⁹ Through such societies, people were engaged with a public life led by a small developing elite of intellectuals, economists, doctors and creative intelligentsia.³⁰

By the end of the nineteenth century, such collective societies were widespread and their buildings were constructed all over the country, in urban and rural areas alike. The buildings varied in architectural style, ranging from simple wooden dwellings built at the end of the nineteenth century to extravagant new national buildings built in the first decades of the twentieth century. Most buildings featured a central hall equipped with a stage for performances, a café, artist studios, music rehearsal spaces and a library.³¹

Prior to their establishment, there were only limited venues for Estonians to come together for collective social activities. Churches and schools prohibited such events on their grounds, and in 1900, the Russian emperor's decree resulted in the closure of most taverns. Society buildings as new public spaces allowed Estonians to make independent decisions on how and when to spend their intellectual, social and leisure time, such as participating in choir singing, theatre, art and dance, using a library, discussing the issues of local communities, holding lectures and speech meetings, and also partying.³²

As cities grew, these collective societies contributed to the diversification of urban experiences and reflected the shift toward new forms of urban modernity. They

²⁴K. Hallas-Murula, 'Diffusion of European modern city planning around 1910: transferring and implementation of international knowledge in Tallinn, Estonia', *Journal of Urban History*, 43 (2017), 615–24.

²⁵Hallas, 'Eestlane ja suurlinn', 60–116.

²⁶T. Rosenberg, 'Tööliskonna olukord ja tööliikumine', in Ligi and Runnel (eds.), *Eesti ajalugu V*, 176.

²⁷T. Rosenberg, 'Eesti seltsiliikumise ja selle ajaloo uurimisseisust', in T. Tannberg (ed.), *Õpetatud Eesti Seltsi Aastaraamat 2015* (Tartu, 2016), 120.

²⁸E. Kulbok-Lattik, K. Paulus and L. Suurmaa, *Igal vallal oma ooper. Eesti rahvamajade lugu* (Tallinn, 2023), 32.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 6.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 30.

³¹*Ibid.*, 44.

³²*Ibid.*, 42.



Figure 1. Night in Tartu in 1913.
Source: Tartu City Museum.

provided spaces for public and intellectual engagement, and the exchange of ideas. They contributed to the formation of civil society and empowered individuals to actively participate in public life. Overall, these trends showcased the transformative power of the *seltsid* as collective organizations in shaping urban culture and promoting modern progress in Estonia (Figure 1).

The *seltsid* also played a vital role in initiating regular nightlife culture, which was a key feature of urban modernity. Societies offered regular evening entertainment for the public such as theatre, concerts and games. These occasions were typically followed by dancing, which frequently went on well into the night or even early the next morning (Figure 2). For instance, in September 1892, the Tartu Estonian Craftsmen's Aid Society had its annual celebration, which featured theatrical performances, singing, music, a celebratory meal and a 'later dance'. The Society of Estonian Literati's rooms served as the venue for the celebration, which started at 8 p.m.³³ In 1900, *Postimees* advertised three Easter parties in Tallinn, all taking place on the same April evening. These parties featured singing, theatrical plays and dancing until late at night and were organized by three different societies: the 'Lootus' (meaning 'hope') Society and the Estonia Song and Dance Society, both dedicated to promoting national choir music, dance and theatre, and the Tallinn Merchants' Society.³⁴

Dancing was highly valued by the participants and served as the primary source of income for the collective societies.³⁵ The increasing nocturnal activity was however not favoured by some Estonian intellectuals, who felt that the crumbling of traditional society diminished social control and national identity. The more established first

³³*Postimees* (PM), 3 Sep. 1892, 3.

³⁴PM, 6 Apr. 1900, 4.

³⁵PM, 2 Nov. 1898, 3.



Figure 2. A poster for the Estonian Professional Wrestlers’ Society’s party in Tallinn in 1924. The event lasted from half past eight in the evening to three in the morning. ‘Dance’ (tants) is placed visibly on the poster. Source: Estonian Sports and Olympic Museum.

generation of Estonian intelligentsia set rural culture as the centre of national life. They were involved in the movement for national independence, with many of them being newspaper editors. As editors, they enjoyed considerable status among the audience who were traditionally mainly peasants with a village school education. With rapid urbanization, the audience became more diverse as the general educational level increased.³⁶ The advent of national, Estonian-language newspapers and journals contributed to the widespread belief that public opinion, rather than official

³⁶E. Lauk and A. Pallas, ‘Early development of Estonian journalism as a profession (from late 19th century to 1940)’, *Acta Historica Tallinnensia*, 13 (2008), 51.

institutions, should influence and regulate public life. Journalism became a powerful tool for developing and shaping public opinion.³⁷

Through journalists' reports, citizens' opinions, advertisements, local notices and news stories, newspapers portrayed and reported on different issues relating to urban society, including nocturnal activities. The majority of the writing did not have an identifiable author. The tone of the newspaper pieces shifted between anonymous observer, health and societal expert, learned individual, worried citizen and neutral news reporter. However, representations of the urban night were for the most part consistent, simplistic and primarily critical in the late nineteenth century while seeking more balance and diversity in the twentieth.

Jaan Tõnisson, the owner and lead editor of *Postimees* between 1896 and 1930, who later served as prime minister, published several articles in which he described the horrors of the city – high mortality, immorality, alcoholism.³⁸ The future statesman set rural folk life as the ideal and considered modern urban culture dangerous. Tõnisson saw youth as responsible for advancing Estonian life rather than '[stumbling] down the city streets at night with yellowed features and sapless lips, before reviving at two in the morning on the dance floor'.³⁹

As noted by Schlör, the debate surrounding urban night was characterized by the conflict between the desire for freedom and the desire for order.⁴⁰ For many new urban dwellers, the nocturnal city offered a sense of freedom and anonymity that fundamentally differed from their previous rural experiences. This was a period of political, social and cultural turmoil, characterized by tensions between different ethnic groups, but also within the Estonian intelligentsia over the rupture between urban progress and rural traditions. Many among the younger generation of intellectuals – such as the Young Estonia literary group – had an optimistic perspective on city life, viewing it as a focal point for intellectual and cultural pursuits.⁴¹ The perception of the nature and objective of modernization, progress and national emancipation varied significantly among the different avant-garde movements.

Night anxieties

Across different cultural, historical and geographical contexts, access to nocturnal activities was influenced by a multitude of factors, including the limitations of light, cultural and social norms, regulatory restrictions and safety concerns. Collectively, they shaped the extent to which people engaged in life at night. Advancements in technology and urban development in the later part of the nineteenth century, such as street improvements and street lighting as well as new forms of collective life and new social venues, paved the way for more active urban nightlife. This was a novel phenomenon that was shaped and influenced by complex social dynamics, and marked by tensions that were prominently reflected in newspaper coverage of urban nights.

³⁷E. Jansen, 'Trükisõna, seltsid ja kodanikuavalikkuse kujunemine', in Ligi and Runnel (eds.), *Eesti Ajalugu V*, 302.

³⁸Hallas, 'Eestlane ja suurlinn', 97.

³⁹*PM*, 19 Mar. 1907, 1.

⁴⁰Schlör, *Nights in the Big City*, 23.

⁴¹Hallas, 'Eestlane ja suurlinn', 94.

The arrival of modern urban forms contributed to anxieties surrounding disorder under the veil of darkness where traditional norms and moral codes were believed to be more easily violated. The physical darkness of the night was firmly associated with moral darkness and disorder.⁴² Chris Nottingham asserts that time and moral order were closely related as evidenced by the intrinsic division between day and night.⁴³ Time, as a framework that offered stability and structure while also designating boundaries and rhythms of existence, played a significant part in a culture's social organization.⁴⁴ Within the context of changing perceptions of time and an emerging regular nightlife, the division between day and night became a symbolic ground for fears and aspirations in the city environment. Nottingham claims that while anxieties about nocturnal disorders are timeless, the emergence of industrial civilization gave them greater precision. Night pleasures both accompanied and disrupted this new order: "Early to bed, early to rise" was the only route to health, wealth and happiness. The failing individual could be identified by a profligate "spending" of time and, in particular, an inability to resist the pleasures of the night.⁴⁵

In the context of Estonia, an additional layer of anxiety emerged concerning the impact of city nightlife because of its stark difference from what was seen as traditional rural living. Newspapers criticized city nightlife, contrasting it unfavourably with the idealized life in the rural village. One example is an article by Nikolai Sõrd, a medical student, published in *Sakala* in 1884 that expressed concerns about the unnatural and tainted nature of urban nightlife and emphasized the naturalness of rural nocturnal activities.⁴⁶

When we pass through a village at midnight, we find deep peace, we do not see any windows lit...Here, people and animals sleep, and only predators are guarding to catch prey, as nature has determined them to guard at night. But when we pass through a city at that same midnight, then we find sleeping animals everywhere, but people are awake: drinking here, dancing there; here, a diligent father works for his family; there, a learned man is working on his books and letters. In many wealthy houses, life only begins at midnight and steers until morning, when night rioters rest until noon to then prepare themselves for another night.⁴⁷

Similarly, in 1885 a displeased author in a rural newspaper wrote:

Night in the village is peaceful, besides the faithful dog and the rooster no one makes a sound. In the cities, however, thousands of lights are shining, the dancing, brawling, playing and drinking last long after midnight. Only when morning arrives, the partygoers tire...You, who have again wasted a day without doing good, look back at the hours that have passed – what advantage

⁴²C. Nottingham, "What time do you call this?" Change and continuity in the politics of the city night', in L. Brunt and B. Steger (eds.), *Night-Time and Sleep in Asia and the West: Exploring the Dark Side of Life* (London, 2003), 191.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 193.

⁴⁴J. Frykman and O. Lofgren, *Kultuurne inimene* (Tallinn, 2015), 25.

⁴⁵Nottingham, "What time do you call this?", 192.

⁴⁶Nikolai Sõrd was among the first Estonian intellectuals. Between 1880 and 1885, he studied medicine at the University of Tartu and later became a doctor in the town of Viljandi.

⁴⁷*Sakala*, 21 Apr. 1884, 5. All excerpts from the historical sources have been translated by myself.

have you gained and what have you earned?? Compare yourself with the farmer, whom you despise!...Be ashamed of yourself!...Learn about your duty from the man below you, whom you despise. Look at the sleeping farmer: how beautiful is his soul, how peaceful his heart.⁴⁸

These two extracts suggest how some individuals understood and maintained the dichotomy between rural and urban life and how they perceived the novel transgressions of the urban night. The villager was seen as holding the moral high ground, sleeping at night in order to be self-sufficient, productive and useful during the day.⁴⁹ Worries about social life at night were evident also in rural life, but exacerbated in the city, where a modern nightlife heavily influenced by Western capitals was adapted to the local context.

‘Finally dance’

The new ethnically Estonian working class acquired regular free time, some of which was spent on leisure and pleasure activities available in the city at night. Night dancing culture thrived and became a regular practice among an increasing number of Estonian urban dwellers. The events took place in *selts* buildings, as well as taverns and open-air facilities that were often decorated and lit in a festive manner. For dancing, musicians played the bagpipes, harmonica, violin or accordion and sometimes a small ensemble of wind instruments was hired (Figure 3). The audience, which became younger as the dance night progressed, danced the polka, waltz, polonaise, cotillon and other increasingly varied dances (Figure 4).⁵⁰ These activities were organized by and intended for Estonians, reflecting the reality that Estonians, Germans and Russians in the city stayed socially and culturally separated. While Estonian social class boundaries were not well established, there was a nightlife hierarchy mirroring the class development process. Most urban night dancers were initially workers, but the crowd diversified as more people became educated, women were accepted to university and Estonians found success as entrepreneurs. Some dance events in city centres drew ‘high society’ at sumptuous new urban cultural institutions. Their construction was initiated by national music and theatre societies such as the Vanemuine Cultural Society that built the Vanemuine Theatre in Tartu in 1906, and the Estonia Song and Dance Society that built the Estonia Theatre in Tallinn in 1913 (Figure 5). Other dancing events took place in simpler *selts* buildings and taverns often at the city margins, and were mainly enjoyed by workers and lower-income families.

Emerging nightlife culture attracted the attention of urban observers and prompted discussion in newspapers. At first, news pieces and articles were primarily informational and impartial, if at times favourable, as the new phenomenon initially peeked curiosity. However, the newspapers swiftly began to point out the excessive

⁴⁸Saarlane, 15 Jul. 1885, 3.

⁴⁹The reality of a peaceful and moral rural night is debatable, as a number of articles about and from rural life expressed resentment about the nocturnal wanderings of rural youth, and drinking and dancing in village taverns and other rural spaces.

⁵⁰See for example a dance card from the beginning of the twentieth century: www.muis.ee/museaalview/1078390, accessed 5 Dec. 2022.



Figure 3. Studio photo of a music ensemble in the beginning of the twentieth century.
Source: Estonian National Museum.

and wearing nature of dance events. In 1898, *Postimees* published an opinion piece on a night dancing party in Tartu:

In the 'New Theatre' in Karlowa Street, a 'fun night with theatre play' was arranged by the Book Printers' Assistance Society, but dance was seen as the principal fun...A large crowd of young people began to 'spin' already before midnight and didn't get bored before six in the morning, so that many tiny-feet missies probably jumped half a hundred *verst*.⁵¹ As the event took place for charity purposes, one would not want to speak particularly harshly against such

⁵¹1 *verst* is equal to around 1 kilometre.



Figure 4. A dance card from the opening celebrations of Estonia Theatre in Tallinn in 1913. Source: Tallinn City Museum.

‘spinning’, but we believe that the book printers would benefit if they... arranged such evening parties that didn’t shock the body.⁵²

As indicated by many overviews in newspapers about *selts* events, dancing usually ended late at night or early in the morning. A programme section for these nighttime entertainments began to appear in the press. With few exceptions among countless numbers, these programme descriptions ended with ‘finally dance’ or ‘at the end there is dance’.⁵³ This conclusion became so common that the newspapers began mocking the phrase: ‘this party is a rare one, because there is no “finally dance”’; ‘strange how we do not already have “finally dance” written under our church concert

⁵²*PM*, 2 Nov. 1898, 3.

⁵³*Lõppeks tants*. See for example *Olewik*, 4 May 1882, 4.



Figure 5. A post card of Vanemuine Theatre in Tartu at night in 1907.
Source: Tartu City Museum.

advertisements'; 'the party finished early, already around five in the evening, because "finally dance" was missing, which is frankly a very pleasant occasion'.⁵⁴ The newspapers entered into a discussion about the rational use of one's time, pointing out that many people were rejecting the new order of regular intervals for work, sleep and leisure, and were robbing the night of its rightful place. Social entertainment was to be exercised sparingly.

Sociologist Chris Jenks asserts that transgression breaks through the confines of rational, daily behaviour, which is governed by profit, productivity and concerns about self-preservation.⁵⁵ The notions of rational behaviour during the day and irrational behaviour at night, as well as the division between productivity and unproductivity, are fluid and can be shaped and interpreted not only by people in positions of power but also by different societies and cultural contexts.⁵⁶ Transgressive acts can be individual or ritualized group celebrations such as nocturnal dance events.⁵⁷ Dancing in particular has long been associated with the idea of nocturnal

⁵⁴PM, 13 Jan. 1899, 3; *Eesti Postimees ehk Näddalaleht: Ma- ja Linnarahvale (EP)*, 17 Feb. 1900, 2; *Päewaleht (PL)*, 30 Sep. 1908, 2.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 2.

⁵⁶Different religions have seen the role and essence of night differently. For example, in Christian societies, supernatural forces were believed to gain strength under cover of darkness, while decent, God-fearing folk took refuge inside the home, as described in Baldwin, *In the Watches of the Night*, 7. In some non-Western societies, the boundaries between what are considered normal diurnal and nocturnal activities can be blurred. In Islam, night is associated with reflection and with the divine, as is elaborated in A. Amid, 'Mashad, Iran: challenging the concept of a twenty-four-hour city', in J. Nofre and A. Eldridge (eds.), *Exploring Nightlife: Space, Society & Governance* (London, 2018), 85–98.

⁵⁷G. Bataille, 'La notion de dépense', *La Critique Sociale*, 7 (1933), 302–20, in Susan Suleiman, *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics and the Avante-Garde* (Cambridge, MA, 1990).

transgressions in the West. In Estonia, initial curiosity was replaced by condemnation. Dancing late into the night began to be perceived as transgression – a violation of social norms and overstepping of permissible boundaries bringing with it disorder and various moral and health afflictions.⁵⁸ Dancing at social events was perceived as a source of depravity, which gave rise to measures to safeguard youth, with many believing that dancing led to drug use, violence, sexual relationships and disease.⁵⁹

Dance as a degenerative disease

Night was associated with disease; there was even a belief that the night air itself carried diseases.⁶⁰ Concerns about disease transmission in this way further contributed to the negative perception of nocturnal activities as it reinforced the notion that venturing out during the night could expose people to health risks. Poor conditions prevailing in venues where dance took place as well as people's carousing behaviour strengthened the narrative of the night as a time of and catalyst for sickness. The physical illnesses associated with night dancing were interpreted as manifestations of moral sickness.

Aligning with these perceptions, in 1895, *Postimees* attributed nighttime dancing to cause people to become sweaty, dizzy and even seasick. Some health advantages of dance for the body were mentioned, but the threat of contaminated air from lights, flowers and breathing, as well as staying up late at night and abruptly leaving a warm dance hall for the cold air outdoors, posed a major health risk.⁶¹ Some press articles mentioned weakened nerves and exhaustion, which excessive, bad or incorrect dancing, specifically at night, could induce.⁶² Dancing could even end fatally for some young people according to journalists: 'There are two pleasures that are especially enjoyable for people in our times: excessive vodka drinking and the joy of dancing. A reasonable amount of dancing [is not to be criticized], but excessive jumping...has brought untimely death to some youth.'⁶³

Because the overall ethnic Estonian population was quite small, leaders of the national movement for independence were anxious about the viability of emancipation and feared 'degeneration' among the population, especially in the cities.⁶⁴ Eugenics and abstinence movements therefore gained ground among intellectuals. Newspaper contributors yearned for the tranquil and highly cultivated rural life and strategically demonized the burgeoning night culture as an illness, warning that moral laxity would flow from the cities to rural areas.⁶⁵ Dancing at night was deemed an affliction that had 'infected' the young and old, workers and intellectuals:

⁵⁸C. Jenks, *Transgression* (London, 2003), 2.

⁵⁹N. Fransson, 'Dance under control – illegal dancing in the Nordic countries', *Müürileht* (2014). Web edition: www.muurileht.ee/dance-under-control-illegal-dancing-in-the-nordic-countries/, accessed 28 May 2023.

⁶⁰Baldwin, *In the Watches of the Night*, 7.

⁶¹*PM*, 28 Jul. 1895, 1.

⁶²*PM*, 26 Feb. 1910, 1; *Saarlane*, 24 Jan. 1909, 1.

⁶³*Sakala*, 1 Jun. 1899, 4.

⁶⁴K. Kalling, 'The application of eugenics in Estonia 1918–1940', in *Baltic Eugenics* (Leiden, 2013), 50.

⁶⁵W. Reiman, *Eesti Kultura 4* (Tartu, 1914), 19.

Dance is a disease for us and if it is missing in a party, then partygoers are missing as well. There is a total dance influenza in our cities. To find a cure for this disease is simple: the societies should get together and determine limits to dancing...Especially in those societies and other party places where working people go, change must come soon enough. If they danced half as much as they do now, it would be a major step forward.⁶⁶

[It is a] disease of spinning that was birthed by *bacillus leg spin*...All have been infected by it. Even the doctors and their ladies are dancing. Hence, there is no hope to be expected from there. But really, we do not want to deny enjoyment of life to our youth. Sometimes, occasionally. Why not?! But here we are dealing with a disease, and it is a disease that faces us with something horrible, foul.⁶⁷

Despite the moral concerns and negative perceptions associated with night dancing, the volume of newspaper coverage can be interpreted as evidencing a shared desire among individuals from various social strata to participate in this form of entertainment and cultural expression. The allure and enjoyment of nocturnal activities transcended social boundaries and challenged the prevailing notions of order and control associated with the night.

Dark instincts

Sexual expression, akin to dancing and drinking, often unfolded under the cover of night, as it provided people with a sense of privacy, liberation and the freedom to explore their desires.⁶⁸ According to Nottingham, night produces mental conditions that enable intentional disregard for self-control, while the promise of anonymity renders people less inclined to bend to reason.⁶⁹ Newspapers portrayed the loss of control during the night as unintentional and inevitable, as people unknowingly allowed their 'darker instincts' to take over. An article from 1904 about the danger of syphilis implied that the night was fundamentally to blame for unrestrained sexual behaviour:

As the willpower and intellect is naturally less active at night, then natural urges particularly take over under the blanket of night. At night, the mind's ability for consideration ends, the moral ability to feel shame dies away, the enslaving instinct takes the lead. And if the ability to reason and to feel shame still remains strong, then these are poured over with dazing alcohol – and then have sexual desires become the masters.⁷⁰

The general concern surrounding relationships between men and women who engaged in night dancing was primarily centred around the behaviour of women. The moral issue with women out at night is a ubiquitous theme in urban history. Historically, the night has belonged to men, with women absent or seen as sex objects

⁶⁶EP, 17 Feb. 1900, 2.

⁶⁷Maaliit: Eesti Maarahva Liidu Häälkandja (ML), 12 Mar. 1919, 3.

⁶⁸Baldwin, *In the Watches of the Night*, 74.

⁶⁹Nottingham, "What time do you call this?", 194.

⁷⁰PM, 29 Jun. 1904, 1.

in nocturnal cities.⁷¹ Typically, the night was associated with prostitution. Newspapers expressed concern about some of the ‘suspicious’ ladies, or ‘night butterflies’, involved in sex work.⁷² Women who attended dance events were mainly workers, wives in the burgeoning middle class and later also students.⁷³ But even these women enjoying a night out dancing were in danger. A moralistic story appeared in *Postimees* in 1902, which shed light on a tragic fate that could happen to any woman who engaged in excessive dancing with different partners.

[In the cemetery], my eyes fall upon a fresh burial mound next to a path, and I read from the cross: ‘Eewa N.’ I am startled. Eewa N? Isn’t she the same human blossom, that butterfly, whom I used to see fluttering across the hall at the society building every evening when there was ‘finally dance’? And now, she’s already here? ‘Born in 1880, died in 1901’ ... I remember now, I haven’t seen her for a year at the society building – she, the sought-after dancer, who effortlessly and gracefully danced, passed from one partner to another.⁷⁴

The story subtly implies that Eewa N’s carefree lifestyle and frequent changes of dance partners could have potentially exposed her to the risks of disease, ultimately leading to her untimely death. The metaphorical comparison of the woman to a ‘butterfly’ and the mention of her being passed from one partner to another suggest that the author of the story viewed her as potentially promiscuous. This moralistic narrative was a reminder to readers of the potential risks and hazards, particularly for women, that accompany the choices they make at night.

Schlör has documented how descriptions of women in historical texts related to the night were written primarily by men.⁷⁵ Written from the male perspective, the portrayal of women in newspapers as active at night expressed anxiety about the demise of respectable young ladies, and once again emphasized the urban–rural divide. Articles conveyed how young rural women who moved to the city would soon acquire the ways of modern urban society, and how within a year they would be wearing exquisite clothing and frequenting dance nights.⁷⁶ These dance nights were seen to end with women in the arms of new acquaintances, only to be released when their virginity had gone.⁷⁷ Nights of dancing in urban settings that were difficult to control resulted in exacerbated fears in newspapers about women failing to fulfil their traditional duties. In Estonia, the national emancipation agenda had little room for a modern woman or the emerging movement for women’s rights. A woman’s role within the home and family was tied directly to the viability of Estonian ethnicity and the Estonian nation. A eugenics argument crept into press accounts. Estonian psychiatrist Juhan Luiga who consistently contributed through his writings to *Postimees* considered cultural developments such as urbanization and female emancipation a threat to the ‘purity of the nation’.⁷⁸

⁷¹Baldwin, *In the Watches of the Night*, 83.

⁷²*Tallinna Teataja*, 30 Aug. 1916, 3.

⁷³Women were officially allowed to study at the University of Tartu in 1915.

⁷⁴*PM*, 21 Mar. 1902, 2.

⁷⁵Schlör, *Nights in the Big City*, 166.

⁷⁶*Perno Postimees ehk Näddalileht*, 12 May 1878, 153.

⁷⁷*PM*, 29 Nov. 1900, 2.

⁷⁸Kalling, ‘The application of eugenics in Estonia 1918–1940’, 19.

Bringing the ‘finally dance’ dance problem ‘into the light’

The dancing craze was thought to be so extensive that one journalist stated that it would not be surprising if funerals began to have dance at the end.⁷⁹ Some journalists offered praise when the duration of dancing was limited in some *seltsid* and rejoiced when few people participated in dancing at an event.⁸⁰ The calls for change were directed at the ‘finally dance’ problem with pleas for the negative aspects of parties to be ‘brought into the light’.⁸¹ There were numerous demands in newspapers to end the dancing earlier or altogether put a stop to this ‘finally dance’ problem in all of the Estonian collective societies. Conservative journalists called for gatherings to become more sophisticated and subtle.⁸² A tighter grip was sought on women who were ‘acting suspiciously’.⁸³

Some collective societies were in agreement with the calls to apply stronger regulation to the extent and nature of dancing at social events. The Youth Education Society began organizing daily parties and some organizations considered banning dance from their events altogether.⁸⁴ No general ban was applied. But according to a 1916 agreement between the ‘Lootus’ Society, the ‘Valvaja’ (meaning guardian) Temperance Society, a craft society, a society of lathes and a number of other Tallinn *seltsid*, only people with a recommendation from a society member could participate in dance events. The ticket to the dance party could only be acquired in conjunction with a ticket to the complete event programme, ticket sales terminated when the dance event began and dancing had to conclude at 2 a.m. at the latest.⁸⁵

The imposition of regulations on night dancing exemplified the enduring pattern of subjecting the night to regulation and control. According to Robert Williams, the perceived risks associated with darkness and uncontrolled spaces contributed to the social mediation and construction of nocturnal environments. He emphasizes that night spaces are shaped by social relationships and efforts to appropriate and govern the darkness.⁸⁶ The anticipated regulation of night dancing against the agency of individuals created a contested situation that shaped urban nightlife. Although conservative journalists criticized leisure and pleasure culture and augured for its control, night dancing thrived and defied the societal norms and expectations expressed in newspapers.

Night dancing in independent Estonia 1918–40

Amid these discussions and debates, a dynamic nocturnal society had emerged in Estonia’s cities and was well established by the inter-war period of Estonian independence. The news-related anxieties and calls for regulation on dance nights did not have much effect, especially once the *seltsid* lost much of their initial relevance. By the 1920s and 1930s, other nocturnal spaces, mainly restaurants and designated dance clubs, came to dominate the urban night. As the country embraced Western influence and

⁷⁹*ML*, 12 Mar. 1919, 3.

⁸⁰*Sakala*, 4 Feb. 1903, 3; *PM*, 31 Dec. 1904, 3.

⁸¹*PM*, 3 Nov. 1904, 3; *PM*, 20 Sep. 1908, 2.

⁸²*PL*, 26 Nov. 1908, 1.

⁸³*PL*, 20 Aug. 1916, 3.

⁸⁴*PM*, 2 May 1912, 2.

⁸⁵*PL*, 25 Aug. 1916, 3.

⁸⁶Williams, ‘Night spaces’, 514.

sought to align itself with contemporary cultural developments, dancing became a way to demonstrate cosmopolitanism and keep pace with global trends.⁸⁷ Estonians followed Western dance trends as well as the latest ballgown fashions, so it was a busy time for dance instructors and seamstresses alike.⁸⁸ As mentioned in newspaper advertisements for dance lessons, people danced the Shimmy, the Charleston, Ragtime and Foxtrot in addition to numerous dancing crazes. Crowds partied in simple taverns and stylish restaurants, some of which had foreign names such as Mon Repos, Dancing Paris, Europa, and Gloria Dancing Palace. Lavish dance halls had nightly programmes featuring international dance companies, cabaret and theatre. Dance orchestras or jazz bands were hired to play music all night. These had fashionable English-language names such as ‘The Murphy Band’, ‘Red Hot Ramblers’, ‘The Estonian Dance Orchestra’ and ‘The Six-Boys Band’ (Figure 6).⁸⁹ Electric illumination began to dominate city lighting and the dance halls were adorned with lights and decorations. At times, gramophones began to be employed alongside orchestras to play dance music. Special dance music programmes took place on the radio at night, some lasting as late as 3 a.m.⁹⁰ They delivered nocturnal dance music from European radio stations to every home as Estonians acquired the new electronic marvel. It furthered the strong relationship between dance, music and the night. Dancing at night had become part of urban culture and therefore criticism in the newspapers had little standing among news stories and articles on urban nightlife. As the number of overviews of dances and dance costumes, concerts and musicians, dancing courses and restaurants rose, the visibility of moralistic essays and critical pieces in newspapers declined.

Nevertheless, certain themes, particularly those concerning women and sexuality, which had previously been addressed in a more subtle fashion, were depicted more blatantly. The emergence of yellow journalism added to this sensationalist style. A 1931 article ‘The Babel of the sinful. Pictures from Tallinn’s nightlife’ published in *Abieluleht* (Marriage Newspaper) described all of the couples’ eyes on a restaurant’s dance floor as brimming with lust and passion, mature married women dancing with someone other than their husbands, while young ladies who visited the dance restaurants every night were tightly held by eager strangers before they suspiciously disappeared into the night: ‘The capital city at night is a true Babel of sin where everything is sacrificed to the God of Fun: one’s health, fortune, and happiness.’⁹¹

Published in 1924, the book *Lõbukultuurist* (About Pleasure Culture) listed the most prevalent elements of pleasure culture – alcohol, women, music, singing, gambling, dance, outings, sport, eating well, sweets, art, cinema, science. While the book implied that such activities were not accessible for everyone, and were partly beneficial or at least harmless when practised in limited amounts, it still raised concerns about ‘bad’ pleasure culture becoming widespread when indulged in without control. City enterprises were blamed for commercializing dancing culture, which in turn made dancing a potentially dangerous activity especially with the increased potential for sexual activity, alcohol abuse and, as a result, decline in health and morality.⁹² Limited entertainment was thought harmless, but dancing until dawn

⁸⁷Hovi, *Kuld Lõwi ja Kultase ajal*, 99–102.

⁸⁸*Ühistegelised Uudised*, 11 Nov. 1933, 4.

⁸⁹Hovi, *Kuld Lõwi ja Kultase ajal*, 189.

⁹⁰*Oma Maa*, 3 Mar. 1931, 4.

⁹¹*Abieluleht*, 22 Feb. 1931, 5.

⁹²J. Vilms, *Lõbukultuurist* (Tartu, 1924), 36.



Figure 6. A crowded dance event in Estonia Theatre in Tallinn in the 1930s.
 Source: Estonian Theatre and Music Museum.

remained a major concern, as expressed in 1925 by a *Postimees* journalist in his writing titled ‘Tartu is dancing. Dance non-stop’:

The season has started. Tartu is once again dancing... At every step, we come across dancing parties, spring parties, spring garden parties, flower parties and so on. Her Majesty the Dance is the primary character everywhere... We cannot reproach, young people consume fun, they need company, they need to get out of the business day frenzy at least once a week. Another question is, do they need to dance? To dance from evening until early morning to then go with sweaty skin and tired feet (but often also with a tired head) back to work? Look, I don't believe so. Time and money spent, dust floating up to the ceiling, a draughty wind, alcohol, tobacco smoke... This is how our youth have fun.⁹³

Aside from dance-related pieces, night itself appeared as a key theme in several newspapers, drawing attention to the hazardous, immoral, mysterious, as well as unique and joyful aspects of the city at night. Perspectives on the night in opinion pieces and reports became more diverse, but the underlying tone was still one of apprehension and moral judgment. Official government restrictions on night activity grew more regular (and inconsistent) throughout the independence years of the 1920s and 1930s. These restrictions mainly concerned the selling of alcohol, operating licences, taxes and opening hours for places of leisure and culture. The most far-reaching, nationwide impact came from ‘life reform’. It was announced during the rule of controversial President Konstantin Päts and went into effect in 1939. The regulations were meant to permeate the lives of all Estonians and establish

⁹³*PM*, 18 Sep. 1925, 2.

authoritative control over the young democracy.⁹⁴ To deal with the immoral nature of nightlife, 'life reform' limited the hours of operation for all nocturnal establishments. Night dancing had to be completed by 3 a.m., thereby ending the age of dancing till dawn. A journalist in support of this change pointed out that it finally solved an issue that had long plagued nocturnal cities: 'an excess in the practice of nightlife culture'.⁹⁵

The new reforms could have resulted in significant changes in nocturnal life in cities, but it had little time to take effect because World War II and the Soviet occupation brought about a total disruption to Estonian society. Soviet ideologies and repression had a profound effect on nocturnal culture as well as every other area of daytime and nighttime life. Naturally, in an altered form, nocturnal culture continued to exist and develop, but the distinct 'finally dance' period of Estonian city nightlife had come to an end.

Conclusion

This article focuses on the media-driven discussions that stemmed from nocturnal social dancing in Estonian cities in the 1880–1940 period. In the decades surrounding the turn of the twentieth century, urbanizing Estonians danced regularly at night, initiating a modern nightlife culture. It was a period of emancipation for ethnic Estonians and a strong collective society movement developed as the basis for modern urban cultural practices. The numerous events organized by the *seltsid* usually ended with dancing, which often lasted until the early hours of the morning.

The rise of the *seltsid*, or collective societies, in Estonia reflected the desire of the Estonian people to actively engage in education, culture and art, and provided them with opportunities for public participation in a new civic domain. These played a vital role in shaping modern Estonian society and contributed to the diversification of leisure activities, and the overall transformation of urban culture. Furthermore, they initiated a vibrant nightlife culture, with regular evening entertainment events followed by dancing that often extended into the late hours.

As rural Estonians moved to the city and became factory workers, the use of their time was something that could be evaluated on moral grounds. Dancing the night away was perceived as an activity that exceeded the bounds of rational behaviour. The anonymity offered by the night and the diversity of city life did not allow for effective social control. Night was perceived as a distinct and contrasting realm, often considered an alternative or opposite space to day. It was associated with various negative connotations in the press, such as the spread of disease, moral decay, societal decline and obstacles to Estonian national emancipation. Nightlife was viewed as a potential impediment to progress, but also an undesired departure from rural traditions, which some intellectuals considered the foundation of Estonian culture. Though strongly criticized in newspapers, night dancing held significant importance and popularity across different social strata. For many, the night became a vibrant field of activity intertwined with the process of urbanization. Diverse segments of society recognized the night as an important domain for social engagement, leisure and self-expression.

⁹⁴H. Kalso, 'Kadrioru aednik. Konstantin Päts ja autoritaarne karakter', *Vikerkaar*, 3 (2021), 42–104.

⁹⁵*Uus Eesti*, 3 Jan. 1939, 4.

Anxieties regarding night were often a mix of real and imagined problems, the latter possibly having a stronger effect on people's thoughts and behaviours. As historian Bryan Palmer contends, 'more often than not, night's transgression did not produce this ominous, sometimes deadly clash of politically uncompromising human agents but sustained more quietly clandestine histories: times, places, spaces, where human expression was not as easily subjected to the surveillance of high noon or blinded by the light of day'.⁹⁶ Such opportunities for self-expression have significantly contributed to the music and dance culture of the Western world and have historically been inherently linked with night. The night offered opportunities for liberation, socialization and a temporary escape from the constraints of the day while existing in a constant and complex relationship with shifting societal norms.

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⁹⁶Palmer, *Cultures of Darkness*, 19.

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