Benedikts Kalnačs
(Liepāja University)

THE GREAT WAR, INDEPENDENCE, AND LATVIAN LITERATURE

INTRODUCTION: THE GREAT WAR AND THE BALTIC COUNTRIES

This article focuses on the ways in which the events of the Great War and the subsequent proclamation of the independent Republic of Latvia on November 18, 1918 are represented in Latvian literature. The declaration of independence that followed in the immediate aftermath of the war cannot be understood and interpreted properly without taking into account the developments that preceded it.

The Great War marked a major watershed in the history of civilization. The race for power of European empires, mostly carried out outside of Europe up till then, for the first time in history had a direct effect of such scale on the European population. When considered from a contemporary perspective, the Great War reveals an unprecedented crisis of human ability to act reasonably.

The areas of East-Central Europe that fully or partially belonged to the Russian Empire were deeply affected by the atrocities carried out by the conflicting sides (predominantly the Russian and German military formations). At the same time, these events stimulated the rise of the idea of self-determination among the local population constantly subjected to political pressures, threats from foreign military powers, and various conflicting ideologies. Changing perspectives marked a decisive transformation in public opinion from the idea of political autonomy within the Russian Empire towards aspirations to create independent nation states. As a result of the war and the fall of the Russian, German, and Austro-Hungarian Empires, the state sovereignty of Poland and Lithuania was restored, and new states were established, among them Finland, Estonia, and Latvia, along with some other independent territories such as Ukraine, Belarus, Georgia, etc. that at this point could only secure a short-lived existence.

Even if the same pattern of events stimulated the rise of all independence movements, each of the mentioned nations proclaimed its political sovereignty under different conditions. The Latvian case shows considerable parallels to the situation in Estonia, but even there we observe processes that differ from each other significantly.

The most important historical parallel between the ethnic territories of Latvia and Estonia was determined by the centuries-long presence of the Baltic German

upper class. It had gradually established its dominance in society from the middle ages and kept it intact in the larger part of the respective lands even when the Baltic littoral politically became part of Sweden (in the 17th century) and was later incorporated into the Russian Empire (from the 18th century on). This situation resulted, on the one hand, in close cooperation between the imperial administration and local political leaders. However, by the end of the 19th century, the tensions between Baltic Germans and Russians were also growing, being provoked by the processes of Russification among other causes. In addition, the rising Latvian and Estonian intellectual elites were looking for closer cooperation with the imperial administration hoping to weaken the position of the local German upper class. A relatively late result of this complicated constellation was the growing anti-German sentiment stimulated by the Russian propaganda in the wake of the Great War. The local elites also used these tensions for their own purposes. One of the most important moves occurred thanks to the well-coordinated protests of Estonians in March 1917 against the traditional borders of the Russian provinces that forced the newly established Russian Provisional Government in Petrograd "to dismantle the archaic governing institutions of the Baltic German nobility and to merge the northern half of Livland with the province of Estland, creating a single administrative unit which corresponded to the ethnographic distribution of Estonians."[1]

The major difference in the situation of the two ethnic territories was provided by the fact that while the events of the war had an early and direct impact on the Latvian territories, Estonia was not directly torn apart during the conflict. It remained under Russian political control up to February 1918, and in the brief timespan between the retreat of the Russian forces and the advance of the German troops declared political independence on February 24. Contrary to the Latvian Riflemen, who at later stages of the war had split political sympathies resulting from the disastrous devastation due to often unsound decisions by the commanders of the Russian army, the Estonian forces remained undivided. This allowed well-coordinated military operations against the advance of the German troops in spring of 1919, with decisive battles carried out near Cēsis (Wenden) in the ethnic Latvian areas. This successful resistance to a considerable extent determined the fate of the whole Baltic littoral in the period when the Great War had already turned into wars of independence.

At the same time, on the level of everyday life Estonians indisputably felt the lasting impact of major military confrontation. The rising costs of military production, which at the end was one of the main causes of the collapse of the Russian Empire, resulted in a lack of products for consumption and a worsening of everyday conditions of the local population in Estonia. The situation of being situated between the great powers involved in the battles also had a psychological impact. This can be easily seen in the experience of Estonians living abroad who, for example, when studying at German universities were considered political subjects of the Russian Empire and at times felt a double burden of abuse. The literary scholar Katre Talviste refers to the diary of an Estonian girl Ellen Koppel, who in 1914 and 1915 was in Potsdam, Germany, studying gardening:

[1] Andres Kasekamp, *A History of the Baltic States* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 95–6.

The diarist doesn't show a particularly well-developed sense of Estonian national identity, but she opposes herself increasingly to both Germans and Russians, and is repelled by the inhumanity and aggressive mentality the war brings out in people around her, no matter at whom the aggression is directed. As a Russian subject living in Germany, she also faces increasing suspicion and control from the authorities, and has to tackle the dilemma of returning home or remaining in Germany.[2]

In her further discussion of the Estonian literature during the war and post-war period, Talviste points out the tragic sense of loss and insecurity that penetrates modern Estonian letters. Interestingly enough, one of the major influences on Estonian (and Latvian) literature is provided by German expressionism. This demonstrates the shared suffering of different nations: "[T]he builders of that modern Estonian culture had also experienced, with the rest of Europe, the great shock the war caused – the loss of faith in civilization, in humanity, in the ideas that had originally inspired them."[3]

The experience of a large-scale disaster in Latvia was strengthened by the specific aspects of the historical situation. Almost from the onset of the Great War, ethnically Latvian areas were subjected to military operations. The advance of the German troops in the summer of 1915 caused a massive rush of refugees, forcing people from the western province of Courland to leave their homes and to seek shelter elsewhere. According to the historian Ādolfs Šilde, the number of refugees from Courland amounted to more than 400,000 people. In addition, as the capital of the province of Livland, Riga, was also threatened by the German military, the facilities of local factories were evacuated to mainland Russia, and, during the war (Riga was eventually overrun by the Germans in September, 1917), more than 300,000 inhabitants left the city.[4] The front line along the river Daugava was established already in the summer of 1915, and, during a period of about two years, all surrounding infrastructure was almost completely demolished, the houses and landscapes being changed beyond recognition. Ginta Gerharde-Upeniece enumerates that part of Latvia's cultural heritage that was lost forever in the Great War, "the manors, castles, churches, interiors, art collections, libraries and painting collections. Also destroyed was an intellectual space along with an intellectual history."[5] In the latter half of 1917 and 1918, military activities continued in the northern part of Latvia, with the German invasion eventually leading to the occupation of the whole country.

Under such circumstances, it is hardly surprising that the impact of Bolshevik ideology was for a certain period relatively strong among the Latvian population. According to Andres Kasekamp, "[s]everal factors account for the popularity of Bolshevism among Latvians: the high degree of industrialization; the intensity of the revolution of 1905 and its bitter legacy; the intertwining of class and ethnic conflict, and the dislocation by the war of hundreds of thousands of Latvians."[6]

---

[2] Katre Talviste, "World War I in Estonian Literature," in *Der erste Weltkrieg in der Literatur und Kunst: Eine europäische Perspektive*, eds. Jeanne E. Glesener, Oliver Kohns (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2017), 91–106, here 95.

[3] Ibidem, 106.

[4] Ādolfs Šilde, *Latvijas vēsture 1914–1940: valsts tapšana un suverēnā valsts* (Stockholm: Daugava, 1976), 42. lpp. All translations from Latvian are by the author of the article.

[5] Ginta Gerharde-Upeniece, "1914. The Genealogy and Resonance of a Conflict," in *1914*, ed. Ginta Gerharde-Upeniece (Riga: The National Museum of Latvia, 2014), 15–9, here 16.

[6] Kasekamp, *A History of the Baltic States*, 97.

Alongside this path of radicalization, however, national organizations continued to play an important role and expressed different opinions. Still, it is important to keep in mind that the Soviet rule, established after the occupation of the independent Baltic countries in 1940, constructed an ideological interpretation of the importance of communists at the end of the Great War, when they temporarily seized a large amount of the territories of the Baltic littoral and determined the reception of these events for half a century.

The state independence of Latvia was declared on November 18, 1918, in Riga, a city at that time still under the control of the German military. The Bolshevik takeover followed almost immediately in January 1919, and the borders of the new state were secured only in a complicated course of events that included the advance of the national military forces in the summer of 1919 and the battles for independence taking place in Riga in November 1919. The final move leading toward state sovereignty was linked to the battles in the easternmost province of Latvia, Latgale, taking place in 1920.

An important role in these events was played by the units of the Latvian Riflemen considered both as a national symbol and a real fighting force in the Great War. Being created in July 1915, on the pattern already established by other nationalities, Armenians and Poles, that were allowed to form separate units within the Russian military even earlier,[7] the Latvian Riflemen retained a significant role throughout the war and the battles for independence even if their political sympathies split in the aftermath of the Bolshevik uprising in the Russian Empire in October 1917. During 1915 and 1916, when military battles took place in the very heart of ethnic Latvian territories, the riflemen's task was to defend their own land. An extremely close link to the local population was thus preserved throughout this period that established close emotional ties.[8] The riflemen suffered major losses in military operations badly coordinated by the Russian commanders. An especially disastrous attack was undertaken in January 1917 (traditionally called the Christmas battles while the Russian orthodox calendar was still in force) in a failed attempt to break the German siege. This event had a lasting impact on the changing political affiliations of the riflemen to whom the Bolshevik promises of an immediate peace quite understandably appeared appealing.

Among the Latvian Riflemen there were writers and artists who, despite being involved on the battlefield relatively seldom, left important first-hand testimonies of their experience. Many of them, especially writers, slightly later were also involved in the political build-up of the independent state.

An important aspect of war representation in Latvian art was linked to the fact that there was no substantial tradition accumulated by war paintings of earlier generations. The painters were keen to rely on smaller art forms such as drawings, representing direct experience and existential suffering. For example, the art historian Edvarda Šmite refers to the portrayal of soldiers' wives based on close-up observations and tellingly focusing on the imprints of war on the human psyche.[9]

---

[7] Ēriks Jēkabsons, "The Latvian Rifle Units of 1915–1918," in *1914*, ed. Ginta Gerharde-Upeniece, 33.

[8] Edvarda Šmite, "Medaļas otra puse: kara ikdienas skati. Strēlnieku leģenda vēl taps," in *Civilizāciju karš? Pirmais pasaules karš ideoloģijās, mākslās un atmiņās. Latvijas versijas*, eds. Pauls Daija, Deniss Hanovs, Ilze Jansone (Rīga: Zinātne, 2015), 127–47. lpp., here 127.

[9] Ibidem, 129.

However, psychologically detailed representations were only a step along the way that led toward the patterns of classical modernism. According to the art historian Dace Lamberga, Jāzeps Grosvalds (1891–1920), one of the most important painters of the period, created "a pan-human monument, both specific and at the same time generalized, to the riflemen who lost their lives," while Jēkabs Kazaks (1895–1920), another major personality of the time, "continued on an ambitious scale to reveal the fate of the nation."[10] Even though many of the most important representations were created during or in the immediate aftermath of the Great War and independence battles, the tradition continued well into the period of independent state and beyond. Thus, the film historian Inga Pērkone detects a number of plots linked to the legends and stories of the Latvian Riflemen that continued even during the Soviet era though these carried an ideologically opposite message,[11] and there are similar examples from the other Baltic countries stretching into the twenty-first century.[12] These representations belong to the founding myths of national independence.

The role of writers was extremely important as ideologues of the nation due to the publications of their texts as well as their participation in political structures. Of special importance for the Latvian case was the creation of the Provisional National Council, active in the northernmost part of the country, Valka, in the fall of 1917 and in 1918, when the rest of ethnic Latvian territories were controlled by German political and military rulers. Among the most prominent of the writers who participated in the activities of the council was Jānis Akuraters (1876–1937), who later became the first minister of culture of the independent Republic of Latvia. The reception and documentation of the war at the time is mirrored not only by the literary oeuvre and personal notes of those authors who were direct witnesses of the events, but also by those who stayed in forced exile. Thus, the Latvian national poet Rainis (1865–1929) wrote a number of poems and plays in response to the tragic fate of his country.

Literature and art of the second decade of the twentieth century already created a pattern of representation that focuses on the unreality of war and its impact on the human psyche that took especially devastating forms through the use of new tools of mass destruction. This was closely linked to the reality of the position war when military attacks employing traditional methods appeared to be unsuccessful.[13]

In the twenty-first century, the Latvian writer and critic Guntis Berelis (b. 1961) created an almost apocalyptic vision of a battlefield with dead bodies of the soldiers due to a gas attack, placing this scene at the end of his novel *Vārdiem nebija vietas* [Words had no place, 2015] that covers the period of the Great War. This pattern of representation corresponds to the imprint of war on those who had first-hand experience of these tragic events.

---

[10] Dace Lamberga, "The First World War and the Birth of Latvian Classical Modernism," in *1914*, ed. Ginta Gerharde-Upeniece, 95–6, here 95.

[11] Inga Pērkone, "Pirmais pasaules karš Latvijas filmās", in *Civilizāciju karš*, eds. Pauls Daija, Deniss Hanovs, Ilze Jansone, 174–91. lpp.

[12] Talviste, "World War I in Estonian Literature," 93.

[13] Ēriks Jēkabsons, "The First World War and Its Major Consequences for Central and Eastern Europe," in *1914*, ed. Ginta Gerharde-Upeniece, 27–31, here 28.

18 (2014) BY PAULS BANKOVSKIS: A HISTORICAL RETROSPECTIVE

The above novel by Guntis Berelis is one of the contributions to the immensely successful series of novels *We. Latvia, the 20th century*, published between 2014 and 2018 as a retrospective on the formative events in the history of Latvia. One of the most fascinating novels in the series is *18* by Pauls Bankovskis that directly focuses on the representation of the year 1918 and its reception in Latvian cultural memory.[14]

The novel explicitly combines two different periods, as it deals with the events shortly before and after 1918 in the form of a diary belonging to one of the protagonists, which a contemporary narrator reflects on. The interrelatedness of the events is established not only in diachronic perspective with the two principal narratives separated by a gap of almost one hundred years; they are also synchronized by the topographical affinities of the experience of the two protagonists, which tends to cover similar locations within the borders of contemporary Latvia. Through the experience of space, an intriguing interplay between remembering and forgetting is established. On the one hand, events linked to the war and independence battles are seen to have had their effects on people, the flow of time and partially on the landscape; on the other hand, through the act of remembering not only are lost threads of individual lives being recovered, but this process evolves in the same locations, thus bringing together different layers of experience. As pointed out by Aleida Assmann, "what time has made invisible through removal and destruction is still mysteriously retained by place."[15] It is exactly this perspective which is provided by Pauls Bankovskis, who ascribes a particular and symbolic value to the landscape in his novel:

> Although populated, cultivated, ruined, and transformed, the basic scenery of Latvia is considerably more ancient than we – any generation of us – are and, in all likelihood, it must have influenced us much more thoroughly than the other way around. [...] Since one part of the events I describe were remote and out of reach, it was important for me to balance this lack of knowledge by something solid, something available to my senses, something I know and have been acquainted with. For that reason, all the landscapes described in the novel are – as much as possible – real and can be found on a map – what they reflect is based on my observations or on oral or written accounts of others.[16]

This is a characteristic feature that can be applied to other novels in the series as well. In the texts that cover different periods of the twentieth century, we encounter a detailed description of places familiar to the narrators that bear traces of their personal experience. Bankovskis refers to his walking along the same route as was undertaken by the protagonist of his novel during the Great War. The result was not only a greater familiarity with the environment encountered by the fictional hero, but also an awareness of the stability of locations as opposed

---

[14] Pauls Bankovskis, *18* (Rīga: Dienas Grāmata, 2015).

[15] Aleida Assman, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization. Functions, Media, Archives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 294.

[16] Bankovskis, *18*, 173–4. Each novel in the series is supplemented by an afterword written by the author, which is also rendered in English. This quote is from the English translation by Aija Uzulēna.

to the changing habits in the perception of time that was considerably slowed down during Bankovskis's trip. The insecurity of the experience of time becomes one of the major issues in the representation of 1918, as the author explicitly comments on the impossibility of capturing the sentiments of the bygone events in a persuasive way. What remains are subjective interpretations and visions that create a frame for the representation of individual feelings. Therefore, the author attempts to foster a dialogue between his own perception and that of the generation that directly experienced the formation of the independent state.

1918 IN LATVIAN LITERATURE: A DIVERSITY OF INTERPRETATIONS

In his book, Pauls Bankovskis explicitly refers to some of the earlier sources, inspirational for his work. Among those are documentary notes and fictional texts by Sergejs Staprāns, Mariss Vētra, Aleksandrs Grīns, and Anna Brigadere, created in the aftermath of the Great War. Let us take a closer look at the representation of war events in these texts, paying special attention to their commonalities and differences.

One of the features certainly shared by all authors is the depiction of individual insecurity created by the war. There are different strategies to overcome these feelings that for the sake of convenience we may divide between predominantly picaresque, heroic, and anecdotal descriptions. Interestingly enough, even if the historical period covered by these representations is broader, most of the authors use the act of proclamation of the independent state as one of the focal points of their narratives.

The most specific case is provided by Sergejs Staprāns (1896–1951) in his memoirs, *Caur Krievijas tumsu pie Latvijas saules* [Through the darkness of Russia to the sun of Latvia], published in 1928. Staprāns can certainly be called an adventurer, but he also played a crucial role throughout the period of uprisings in Russia, when he was a member of an anti-communist fraction of the Latvian Riflemen, as well as during the independence battles in 1919. These later activities were linked to a secret crossing of the border of occupied Latvia. Pauls Bankovskis explicitly states that the personality of Staprāns provided one of the most important emotional stimuli for the creation of the historical part of the narrative, and he also uses the topic of secret border crossings as one of the elements in his plot. Without being directly involved in the proclamation of independence, Staprāns perceives this as one of the defining events for his activities. Throughout the book, he is critical of the chaos created by the Bolshevik uprising that has a devastating effect on the troops, and soon turns out to be the source of the increasing violence. The book is subdivided into several chapters that emphasize the importance of global moves in the process of self-determination of the Latvian nation. It begins with the events before the 1917 Bolshevik uprising, when the story is still told along general lines, before turning to the period of November 1917 to January 1919, which is characterized by a colorful experience of different locations where the protagonist happens to be. The last three parts of the narrative deal with the independence battles of 1919, which only gradually acquire a more structured

nature. The general impression is one of a hardly predictable chain of events that reveals the impossibility of grasping the broader meaning of these events, while at the same time constantly being under the impression of participating in a phenomenon taking place on a world scale. To a greater or lesser extent, this combined perspective on minute observations and broad historical contexts is an implied message of all the texts under consideration.

Aleksandrs Grīns (1895–1941) is one of the few recognized creators of historical narratives in Latvian literature. The experience of the Latvian Riflemen, of which Grīns had direct knowledge, is one of the most important topics in his oeuvre, and his novel *Dvēseļu putenis* [Storm of souls] (1933–1934) is generally recognized as one of the paradigmatic representations of the events leading up to the fulfillment of the national aspirations in 1918. The novel is being turned into a movie, scheduled to be released winter 2019/2020. However, Grīns's early stories that already tackle the theme of the riflemen create a phantasmagoric atmosphere that links the living and the dead. In one of these stories, "Augšāmcelšanās" [Resurrection] (1919), explicitly referred to by Bankovskis, the protagonist happens to be at the entrance of the theater building (the Riga Russian Theater turned into the Latvian National Theater in 1919) on the evening of November 18, 1918, at the very moment when the proclamation of the independent Republic of Latvia is taking place indoors. In his vision, among the bulky giants shouldering the weight of the theater balcony there suddenly appears someone without a shadow who approaches the protagonist, creating a strange mix of bewilderment and shuddering, and increasing the sense of the inability of grasping the mysterious content of events. Bankovskis (in the afterword to his novel) comments:

> Our assumptions about events of that fall tend to differ radically from the atmosphere created by Grīns. [...] Every year on November 18, we unfold the flags of Latvia; official jubilee ceremonies are held as well as, probably, less somber, while a good deal warmer festivities take place in the circles of friends and families. Therefore, it is a small wonder that, today, the far removed November 18, 1918 may seem to have been a day of large and expansively celebrated fete of the birth of state Latvia. And it seldom occurs to anyone that there would not have been all that many people to celebrate it. Frequently, we ascribe expansiveness to the facts quite in retrospect and perceive some suggestive details only when actual events have been long since over.[17]

This description also fits the memories of the tenor Mariss Vētra (1901–1965), told in his book of memoirs *Rīga toreiz* [Riga at that time] (1955), another source of inspiration for the contemporary novelist. Vētra, as a young student, happens to experience the state proclamation, being pressed into the corner of one of the theater boxes from where he is able to follow the events on stage as well as to observe the expressions of those who are gathered in the audience. He is disappointed by the indifference of many of those present on the occasion. Once the ceremony is over, there are no greater celebrations until Vētra and his friend, who remain on the street nearby, start to salute politicians coming out of the building. This amounts to a minor festivity that is still far from the impression of a big occasion that will be awarded such importance by the posterity. These direct observations differ greatly from later interpretations of the ceremony of state

[17] Ibidem, 171. Afterword translated by Aija Uzulēna.

proclamation. In historical perspective, however, this event indisputably marks a turning point in identity formation.

This impression is also conveyed by the previously mentioned story by Aleksandrs Grīns. The ghostly figure of the rifleman who appears on the theater threshold on this fateful night stresses his own will and that of his fellow fighters in rising from their graves and helping their homeland in case the living will hesitate to fulfil this task. The symbolic meaning is thus never completely lost from the eyes of the narrators. Mariss Vētra also recognizes the importance of this event as an entrance into the life of an independent Republic of Latvia that he devotes the most space to in his memoirs.

The impression of historical crossroads of the Latvian nation is also conveyed by diaries and wartime notes of other prominent Latvian writers. Among the most celebrated texts are *Dzelzs dūre* [Iron fist] (1921 by Anna Brigadere, *Mazās piezīmes* [Small notes] (1920) by Kārlis Skalbe, and *Izpostītā Latvija* [Ruined Latvia] (1918) by Edvarts Virza. All three authors have chosen different strategies in their interpretation of events that primarily refer to the period between 1917 and 1919. In these cases, the importance of direct observations and the depiction of scenes of everyday life remain a constitutive element of the narrative.

Anna Brigadere (1861–1933) portrays life in Riga from May 1917 on. She describes the famine that has a growing impact on the city after its takeover by the German military in September, 1917. The takeover is also followed by the robbery of private property, this being a constant companion of the change of political might, experienced by local people with pesky frequency from both conflicting sides. Brigadere tells about her experience in the first-person narrative that allows for a direct approach to her readers.

Edvarts Virza (1883–1940) uses more pathos in his style and directs his accusations straightforwardly against the Germans. Sigita Kušnere in this context emphasizes the role of anti-German war propaganda spread in the Russian Empire.[18] In the case of Virza, an additional motivation might be provided by his affection for French culture, of which he became one of the most important translators.

Kārlis Skalbe (1879–1945) is especially famous for a deeply personal style in conveying his thoughts and impressions. He continued with his "small notes" after the publication of the first edition in 1920, and left a series of documents stretching into another devastating experience, World War II, at the end of which he was forced to seek shelter in Sweden crossing the stormy sea in a fisherman's boat, a fate he shared with hundreds of his compatriots who did not want to emigrate to Germany.

The focus of the national narrative is generally directed against the violence and human suffering that is spread by the warfare. Only relatively seldom and as a by-product do direct accusations of other nationalities enter the texts. For example, Brigadere at times highlights the relative prosperity accumulated by the Jewish population as the result of successful trade during the war. Most of these observations remain on the level of everyday experience that affects particular people.

[18] Sigita Kušnere, "Kara pārvērstā pasaule Edvarta Virzas dzejā un tēlojumos," in *Civilizāciju karš*, eds. Pauls Daija, Deniss Hanovs, Ilze Jansone, 69–84. lpp., here 79.

The sense of the disastrous psychological impact of the war remains a constant topic in post-war literature. A characteristic example in this context is provided by the novellas written by Kārlis Zariņš (1889–1978). Zariņš already suffered his first personal shock during the uprising of 1905 when he was arrested and tortured due to a minor involvement in the events. The disaster of the Great War contributed to the rise of modernist style in his literary output that was influenced by expressionist trends.[19]

All the texts mentioned taken together testify to the rise of national consciousness that marks a direct response to the sufferings of the compatriots and is constructed amidst the feelings of irreparable loss of lives and cultural values. However, the developments in Latvia are inseparable from broader contexts of the Great War and revolutionary changes in the Russian Empire,[20] the events that had a lasting impact on the lives of a great number of nationalities that inhibited the affected territories.

1918 IN OTHER LANGUAGE SOURCES: A MARGINALIZED PERSPECTIVE

To a considerable extent, the disaster of the Great War affected all national groups in Latvia. Even if they did not necessarily recognize this publicly, their fate was inextricably linked to the history of the country and its cultural heritage. The art historian Imants Lancmanis has devoted his lifetime work to the preservation of the manor culture in Latvia and reflected on the devastating scale of its destruction during the warfare. Unfortunately, the war marked a continuation and fulfillment of the disastrous effects of the 1905 uprising when the anger of peasants was directed toward the local Baltic German landlords. As Lancmanis points out, historically manors were at the core of the lifestyle "in rural Latvia, where the landscape and conditions of life had been shaped by a manorial system developed over the centuries. The manors were at the heart of the rural economy, providing the basis for cultural values to develop. Almost every manor had a small museum, archive and library."[21]

During the evolving military conflict of the two empires, the Baltic German population was increasingly looked upon as hostile by Latvian society. This attitude marked the process of national stereotyping. In their structural position, however, the Baltic Germans were caught between the advancing German imperial military, the growing unrest of the Latvians, and the repressive measures of the Russian administration.

Ideological motivation was behind a number of proclamations that frequently supported the German military cause and actions that were undertaken. In this context, a characteristic example is also provided by art exhibitions held in Germany. The art historian Zane Grigoroviča mentions the presence of paintings

[19] Benita Smilktiņa, *Novele. Stili virzieni, personības latviešu novelē (līdz 1945. gadam)* (Rīga: Zinātne, 1999), 142. lpp.

[20] Ieva Kalniņa, "Karš un modernisms Kārļa Zariņa īsprozā," in *Civilizāciju karš*, eds. Pauls Daija, Deniss Hanovs, Ilze Jansone, 111–26. lpp., here 115.

[21] Imants Lancmanis, "The Damage to Latvia's Cultural Heritage during the First World War," in *1914*, ed. Ginta Gerharde-Upeniece, 79–91, here 79.

by Janis Rozentāls (1866–1916), one of the major Latvian artists of the early twentieth century, at the exhibitions in Stuttgart in November 1917, and Berlin, June 1918, where they had to testify to the Baltic littoral as a territory influenced by German cultural traditions. Paradoxically enough, on other occasions the same paintings had been chosen as examples that foster the national pride of the Latvian population.[22] In 2018, Rozentāls's oeuvre became an important part of a milestone exhibition of symbolist art of the Baltic countries, held at the Musée d'Orsay in Paris.

Despite the ideological connotations of a number of publications, the most important and lively testimonies of the feelings of the Baltic German population are provided by memories that preserve their individual wartime experience.

Among the most interesting examples of this kind are memories left by the Baltic German author Gertrud von den Brincken (1892–1982). In her auto-biographical novel, *Land unter* [The sunken land] (1977) she recalls with remarkable clarity the executions carried out during the period of Soviet terror in the first half of 1919. These repressions affected all nationalities, even if von den Brincken more closely comments on those that directly interfere in the lives of people of her own circle. She also explicitly refers to the independence celebrations on November 18, 1919, exactly a year after the Republic of Latvia had been proclaimed. The feelings of peace that start to acquire more stable contours following the wartime turbulence exist alongside the psychological and social insecurity with regard to the role Baltic Germans might be ascribed in the newly born nation-state. These doubts turned out to be well-grounded as the agrarian policies of independent Latvia were not favorable to the landowners, and the expropriation of land was not met with the approval of the aristocratic families.

As the Latvian researcher Māra Grudule points out, the Baltic German community was an important part of society in Latvia with an intimate relation to the country. Taking into account historically and socially marked borders, the Baltic Germans still shared true love for their motherland with other local people, and an affectionate relation toward their place of origin.[23]

CONCLUSION: A TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY VISION

The representation of the year 1918 in Latvian literature and culture is inseparably linked to the events and consequences of the Great War. But it also resonates in contemporary society and reflects a number of popular sentiments.

An important part of Pauls Bankovskis's novel *18* is devoted to an evaluation of the historical events from a twenty-first century perspective. The author also looks for different links that unite the "then" and "now" through the representation of particular aspects and colorful details of daily life.

---

[22] Zane Grigoroviča, "Latvijas mākslas funkcijas kara apstākļos," in *Civilizāciju karš*, eds. Pauls Daija, Deniss Hanovs, Ilze Jansone, 148–73. lpp., here 166–7.

[23] Māra Grudule, "Vācbaltiešu literatūra (1890–1939)," in *Vācu literatūra un Latvija, 1890–1945*, ed. Benedikts Kalnačs (Rīga: Zinātne, 2005), 411–555. lpp.

In one of the episodes of the novel, a passionate quarrel between friends breaks out about the place of Russians in contemporary society in Latvia. The narrator does not agree with the opinion about the threat posed by the so-called Russian-speaking community. Historically, we may recall the sad aftermath of the expulsion of most of the Baltic Germans who were forced to leave the country as a result of the Soviet-Nazi pact of 1939. This agreement not only determined the fate of a number of independent states in East-Central Europe, but due to the forced repatriation of the Baltic German community it left a void in the place where the fathers and forefathers of Baltic Germans had lived and worked. The lost traces of belonging and the wound of leaving Latvia in 1939 has never been fully healed. The impact of this departure is still present in the configuration of society in Latvia that historically consisted of different national groups, all of whom contributed to the image and the growth of the country. Mutual understanding and close cooperation remain necessary preconditions of future development. Therefore, the representation of the year 1918 in Latvia and discussions about it need to become even more inclusive in order to remain relevant for all groups in society amidst the centenary celebrations of the independent state.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Assman, Aleida. *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization. Functions, Media, Archives*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

Bankovskis, Pauls. *18*. Rīga: Dienas Grāmata, 2015.

Gerharde-Upeniece, Ginta. "1914. The Genealogy and Resonance of a Conflict." In *1914*, edited by Ginta Gerharde-Upeniece, 15–19. Riga: The National Museum of Latvia, 2014.

Grigoroviča, Zane. "Latvijas mākslas funkcijas kara apstākļos." In *Civilizāciju karš. Pirmais pasaules karš ideoloģijās, mākslās un atmiņās. Latvijas versijas*, edited by Pauls Daija, Deniss Hanovs, Ilze Jansone, 148–73. Rīga: Zinātne, 2015.

Grudule, Māra. "Vācbaltiešu literatūra (1890–1939)." In *Vācu literatūra un Latvija, 1890–1945*, edited by Benedikts Kalnačs, 411–555. Rīga: Zinātne, 2005.

Jēkabsons, Ēriks. "The First World War and Its Major Consequences for Central and Eastern Europe." In *1914*, edited by Ginta Gerharde-Upeniece, 27–31. Riga: The National Museum of Latvia, 2014.

Jēkabsons, Ēriks. "The Latvian Rifle Units of 1915–1918." In *1914*, edited by Ginta Gerharde-Upeniece, 33. Riga: The National Museum of Latvia, 2014.

Kalniņa, Ieva. "Karš un modernisms Kārļa Zariņa īsprozā." In *Civilizāciju karš. Pirmais pasaules karš ideoloģijās, mākslās un atmiņās. Latvijas versijas*, edited by Pauls Daija, Deniss Hanovs, Ilze Jansone, 111–26. Rīga: Zinātne 2015.

Kasekamp, Andres. *A History of the Baltic States*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

Kušnere, Sigita. "Kara pārvērstā pasaule Edvarta Virzas dzejā un tēlojumos." In *Civilizāciju karš. Pirmais pasaules karš ideoloģijās, mākslās un atmiņās. Latvijas versijas*, edited by Pauls Daija, Deniss Hanovs, Ilze Jansone, 69–84. Rīga: Zinātne, 2015.

Lamberga, Dace. "The First World War and the Birth of Latvian Classical Modernism." In *1914*, edited by Ginta Gerharde-Upeniece, 95–96. Riga: The National Museum of Latvia 2014.

Lancmanis, Imants. "The Damage to Latvia's Cultural Heritage during the First World War." In *1914*, edited by Ginta Gerharde-Upeniece, 79–91. Riga: The National Museum of Latvia, 2014.

Pērkone, Inga. “Pirmais pasaules karš Latvijas filmās.” In *Civilizāciju karš. Pirmais pasaules karš ideoloģijās, mākslās un atmiņās. Latvijas versijas*, edited by Pauls Daija, Deniss Hanovs, Ilze Jansone, 174–91. Rīga: Zinātne, 2015.

Smilktiņa, Benita. *Novele. Stili virzieni, personības latviešu novelē (līdz 1945. gadam)*. Rīga: Zinātne, 1999.

Šilde, Ādolfs. *Latvijas vēsture 1914–1940: valsts tapšana un suverēnā valsts*. Stockholm: Daugava, 1976.

Šmite, Edvarda. “Medaļas otra puse: kara ikdienas skati. Strēlnieku leģenda vēl taps.” In *Civilizāciju karš. Pirmais pasaules karš ideoloģijās, mākslās un atmiņās. Latvijas versijas*, edited by Pauls Daija, Deniss Hanovs, Ilze Jansone, 127–47. Rīga: Zinātne, 2015.

Talviste, Katre. “World War I in Estonian Literature.” In *Der erste Weltkrieg in der Literatur und Kunst: Eine europäische Perspektive*, edited by Jeanne E. Glesener, Oliver Kohns, 91–106. Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2017.

THE GREAT WAR, INDEPENDENCE, AND LATVIAN LITERATURE

Summary

The article focuses on the representation of the year 1918 in Latvian literature. On November 18, the independent Republic of Latvia was proclaimed, and in the years to come international recognition of the state’s sovereignty followed. In retrospect, this event stimulated a number of salutary descriptions and interpretations and certainly provides a milestone in the history of the Latvian nation. It is, however, also important to discuss the proclamation of independence in the context of the Great War that brought a lot of suffering to the inhabitants of Latvia. Therefore, a critical evaluation of the events preceding the year 1918 is certainly worthy of discussion. The article first sketches the historical and geopolitical contexts of the period immediately before and during the Great War as well as the changed situation in its aftermath. This introduction is followed by a discussion of the novel *18* (2014) by the contemporary Latvian author Pauls Bankovskis (b. 1973) that provides a critical retrospective of the events leading to the proclamation of the nation state from a twenty-first century perspective. Bankovskis employs an intertextual approach, engaging with a number of earlier publications dealing with the same topic. Among the authors included are Anna Brigadere, Aleksandrs Grīns, Sergejs Staprāns, Mariss Vētra, and others. The paper contextualizes the contribution of these writers within the larger historical picture of the Great War and the formation of the nation states and speculates on the contemporary relevance of the representation of direct experience, and the use of written sources related to these events.

Adj. Izabela Ślusarek