PRZEGLĄD HUMANISTYCZNY 4, 2018

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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]

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[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]

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[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.

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[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.