

THE 20th CENTURY WORLD WARS IN THE LATVIAN WAR NOVEL: AUTHORS, CHARACTERS, IDEOLOGIES

Ausma Cimdīņa

University of Latvia, Raiņa bulv. 19, Riga, LV-1586, Latvia

Abstract

The objective of the article is to provide an overview of the coverage of the 20th century world wars in the Latvian 20th century war novel, thus raising global questions through local issues. Although the theme of war makes itself heard in Latvian literature with periodic regularity and takes a prominent place in both the general picture of the Latvian novel-writing and the creative biographies of individual authors, broader research on the Latvian war novel has not yet been undertaken. As a result, the article is an innovative study, first at the national level, while holding a significant potential for broader science communication.

The Latvian war novel of the 20th century emerges as a multi-vocal and conflicting narrative of the past encouraging a dialogue between people and nations with different historical and life experiences. Both World War I and World War II novels have a distinctly multi-national set of characters; however, at the heart of the narrative there is the image of a Latvian soldier – a Latvian Rifleman or a Latvian Legionnaire. High-ranking political and military figures are involved in the novels' plot implicitly, appearing mainly in dialogues and reflections by characters, but their mention carries a very strong message. Most of the texts examined correspond to the type of anti-war novel, except those created in the spirit of national romanticism or revolutionary romanticism, imparting to them a heroic pathos. By combining the two main principles of classification – by subject and by the genre poetics – the Latvian war novel uses different genre codes – the biographical novel, the coming-of-age novel, the existential novel, the family novel, the thriller, and the love story novel.

Keywords: war fiction, totalitarian art, Soviet modernism, genre boundaries, perception, statehood

1. INTRODUCTION

History is once again back in vogue – this should be said about tendencies in the Latvian literary scene over the past couple of decades, and it also stimulates interest in historical narratives that have emerged in the past. The Latvian war novel of the 20th century, and presumably a modern war novel in general, is particularly compelling in the comparative alignment of art for art's sake theories and ideology doctrines, because war is not only a military collision of antagonistic forces, but also an ideological struggle. In the light of contemporary literary theories, the exploration of war fiction narrative could be particularly productive from the perspective of two ideologies – the national ideology and the gender ideology. However, in the case of Latvian literature, it should be seen from the perspective of the ideology of a national state rather than a national ideology, since as a result of the 20th century world wars, the Latvian nation is undergoing particularly significant historical upheavals in the expectations concerning its statehood. Regarding the specific historical experience, it should be recalled that at the moment when World War I broke out, the name of Latvia was non-existent on the maps of political history or geographical ones, namely, its territorial components (Kurzeme, Vidzeme, Zemgale, Latgale) form a part of the Russian Empire. However, the term “Latvia” had appeared much earlier in Latvian literature and culture. World War I results in the emergence of several new states, including Latvia, while World War II leads to Latvia losing its statehood. When treating the creation of new states as an outcome of war, it should be borne in mind that the wars themselves are, as such, the result of some deeper historical, political, economic, social and similar causal links.

Latvia is drawn into both World War I and World War II in the most direct manner: the territory of Latvia is criss-crossed by frontlines, with active hostilities ongoing and causing significant economic damage and painful loss of human lives. The gravity of human tragedy is exacerbated by the fact that during

those wars Latvians are mobilised into military formations of other countries (Germany, Russia, the Soviet Union) and often forced against their own will to fight on the opposite sides of the frontline. While the corpus of Latvian literary texts, which we can define as a war novel, specifically as a 20th-century war novel, is not very vast, the horrors, brutality and ravages of war, as well as military and patriotic aspirations manifest themselves in those works to the full. The narratives of war are traditionally dominated by a masculine code, and this is also the case with the Latvian 20th century war novel, focusing on the image of a man – a Latvian rifleman in World War I, and both a Latvian rifleman and a Latvian legionnaire in World War II. Humankind and war, war and sexuality, a woman and war, a woman's vulnerability, physical and emotional violence targeting her could be singled out as a separate field for research and reflexion. The theme of war, unless presented in a parody or the adventure genre, is an emotionally overwhelming read, and there will not be many readers prepared to expose themselves to that experience. The present article could also aim at introducing a wider academic community to the Latvian 20th century fictional war narratives and its cultural context to inspire the development of transnational comparative studies of this field.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The focus of this article is on the most remarkable fictional narratives devoted to the theme of war, created by the most distinguished Latvian male authors, professionals in their field, who are also well-known for their works beyond war-related topics. The authors and their works are considered in a chronological order so as to highlight what is common and different in an artistic representation of war by three different generations of writers; at the same time, they also appear as three different time periods in Latvia's socio-political history and Latvian literature.

For the literary representation of World War I, the article examines Kārlis Štrāls' novel "War" (1922–1926) and Aleksandrs Grīns' novel "The Blizzard of Souls" (1933–1934), written and published during the first period of Latvia's independence. The narrative about World War II highlights samples of the totalitarian art of socialist realism: Vilis Lācis' novels "Storm" (1946–1948) and "To the New Shore" (1952), as well as modernism in Soviet prose that disrupted the code of socialist realism. As a reminder of emigration and a branch of Latvian literature that evolved in exile after World War II, there follows an insight to Anslavs Eglītis' novel "I Was Not a Hero" (1955) written and released in the United States, and novels by Gunars Janovskis "Sōla" (1963) and "To No Return" (1973), created and published in England. The following data have been used to produce the overview: thematic threads of the novels, the protagonists, the sociocultural context affecting the authors' biographies and creation of novels, as well as special features of the narrative type.

All the novels listed above have seen several recurrent publications in the book format, with most of them previously appearing in periodicals, at least in part. Given in the brackets are the years of the novels' first publications as books, and two-year numbers have been specified in cases where the novel was issued in several volumes with a gap of one year or more.

The identification of the Latvian war novel brings to the fore the definition of the war novel by Eric Solomon, which he devised by analysing Stephen Crane's novel "The Red Badge of Courage". Solomon calls this work by Crane "a touchstone for modern war fiction", which "gave the war novel its classic form" (Solomon 1965, p. 68) [1] largely relating it to the devoiding of a war narrative of parody and cheap heroic pathos. The literary analysis of the Latvian war novel is based on the approach of new historicism, revealing the ways whereby a literary text is shaped by the cultural context in which it is produced. Since the war novels in question have an autobiographical character, the traditional biographical method has also been used. Due to the national nature of literary characters, attention is drawn to imagology, which emphasizes the productivity of this approach in studies on a war narrative because, "in the times of political tension, conflicts or war, these images rise up or are called upon from an unconscious inventory of images and generalized prejudice about the other". (Beller, Leerssen 2007, p. 11) [2] From the aspect of war ideology, the paper touches upon separate points of reference in the just war theory, rooted in Classical Roman and biblical Hebraic culture and containing both religious and secular elements. (Just War Theory 2024) [3]

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. *World War I*

The first novel in question sees the light shortly after World War I, and the pragmatics behind its title, “War,” suggests it was created in the vein of the just war military narrative, in which relatively little space is assigned to an individual’s autonomy and to the personal. The novel’s title also suggests that the writer aspires towards a philosophical generalisation in his narrative – which is actually the case; still, it is basically the most straightforward story of experience, dominated not by an event but by co-experience and reflexion. There is enough momentum for such a perspective on war both in the life course of the writer, Kārlis Štrāls (1884–1970), and in his literary experience before the novel was created.

After finishing the local Orthodox parish school in Pļaviņas, a village in Latvia, Štrāls stays on his father’s homestead, self-educates himself, works as a raftsmen and ferry operator on the Daugava river, and makes his first literary and publishing attempts. Subject to general conscription in Russia, he spends his term of military service (1902–1905) in Poland, returns to his native place, only to settle down in Riga soon after, where he pursues his passion for literature and art and finds himself in the grip of decadence ideas. He is among the founders of the “Dzelme” decadent magazine, becomes its editor and a co-author of the Latvian decadence manifesto, “Our Art Motifs” (1906). Around that time, Štrāls has published rather gloomy poetry imbued with solitary self-analysis and erotica motifs, as well as beginning his work as a translator. As World War I starts, Štrāls is mobilized as a reserve officer into the army of Tsarist Russia, sent to the Galician front, where he is appointed as company commander and gets seriously injured. His wounds, sustained on the battlefield, are treated in a field hospital in a small West Ukrainian town of Brody and several medical facilities in Moscow: Zander’s private clinic, a merchant society hospital and Tsarina Alexandra Feodorovna’s military hospital in the Kremlin. In 1920, Štrāls returns to Latvia, settling permanently in his native county, but his experience of the Galician front and military hospitals seeks to transform itself into a literary work. In the introduction to the novel, the writer shares his doubts and thoughts about how to write about war, and equates war to “the nightmares felt by the Earth when it is sick, and its brain – the humankind – deeply unconscious, succumbing to idols, creating for itself a reality out of the non-existent, and being blind to what is direct and tangible,” (Štrāls 1957, p. 5) [4] and he invites the reader not to seek out in his “stammering tale” any principal character other than war – “My protagonist will be war, the way it has embodied itself in the destinies of a handful of people”. (Štrāls 1957, p. 7) [4] As Štrāls sees it, war is a human drama, and his writing is free of any heroic pathos, its intonations echoing those of Erich Maria Remarque’s novel “All Quiet on the Eastern Front”, published a few years later (1929).

The writer traces the course of the war since the very first days of mobilization, shows close-ups of soldiers’ daily routine, military friendships, soldiers deployed to combat positions, and basically does so in a realistic manner. Also, in the graphic descriptions of death and fields strewn with the dead bodies of the fallen (following the principle – the author names it, the reader imagines); however, at times the emotional expressiveness of the narrative is enhanced by the narrator’s philosophical digressions into the metaphysics of life and death, and the images of glorious natural scenery alongside the explosions and fires of war visually captured through the senses of the deadly injured soldiers. Among the few central characters embodying human destinies are the Latvian reserve officer Stēģis, fighting in Galicia and the Carpathians, and the rank-and-file Latvian soldier Draudiņš, who fights on the East Prussian front, amid a largely multi-national array of characters. Russian army officers and rank soldiers, warmly affectionate Russian women, doctors and nurses in field and rear hospitals, the atmosphere of civilian life in Riga, St. Petersburg and Moscow during World War I also stand out in this kaleidoscopic range of ethnic characters; however, one might say there is not any human character personifying the enemy.

The first two parts of Štrāls’ novel, “War” have been published, and the storyline of their plot falls within a strict chronological framework – those are the first two years of the war (1914–1915), which the writer himself spent on the battlefield of the Galician front. The manuscript of the third volume was lost during the Nazi occupation of Riga in World War II. During the Soviet era, there were attempts to reconstruct the third part of the novel and partially publish it in a periodical; it was also recently issued in a book format, but its authenticity is questionable. It should be noted that the volume, the scope of content,

composition and type of narrative of the first two parts of the novel allow it to be perceived as a sovereign work of lasting literary value, and it is also considered to be the most significant original piece in Štrāls' creative biography. "War" is also his last original work (although he lived for another three decades after its publication): he followed his calling as a translator, and the works of Swedish (Selma Lagerlöf), Russian (Alexander Pushkin, Saltykov-Shchedrin, Ivan Turgenev, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Maxim Gorky), German (Thomas Mann) and other classic authors appeared in his translation into Latvian.

Unlike Kārlis Štrāls, for whom the war is undeniably a vivid, yet only an episode in his creative biography, and in the Latvian literary history, he is also known as the author of a single novel, the spectrum of literary and socio-political activity by Aleksandrs Grīns' (1895–1941) is considerably broader. Grīns was born to a family of Latvian farmers in Zemgale region, received a pretty good secondary education and was preparing to enter university. But as World War I breaks out, he enrolls at the Alexeev Military School in Moscow and, after gaining the rank of Praporshchik in late 1915, is sent to the Galician front as part of the Russian Army; later, he is decorated with the order of St. Stanislaus after fighting the Austrians. When the front line stabilizes in the territory of Latvia, the Latvian riflemen battalions are being formed, and Grīns is transferred to the Latvian Rifle Regiment to fight on the Riga region front. He is badly wounded in the summer of 1917 and demobilised from the Russian Army in the final phase of the war.

The timespan, formally beyond the chronological framework of World War I, when in fact military conflicts in the territory of Latvia are still underway, having transformed themselves into the Latvian War of Independence – the war of the newly-established Latvian state against the invasion of Soviet Russia – is quite turbulent in the future author's biography. He takes up medical studies at Tartu University and history studies at the University of Latvia in Riga but is drafted into the Soviet Red Army in March 1919. He deserts from the military, ends up at the Latvian Army Headquarters in Riga, where he becomes a war censor, works in a printing house of the recently-established Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Latvia and soon after, becomes deputy editor-in-chief of the "Latvijas Kareivis" (Latvian Soldier) newspaper (1920–1940). Around this time, Grīns' first publications also appear giving an account of the Latvia's freedom struggles and providing him with a reputation of a patriotic and national-minded author. A zesty episode in Grīns' biography is the fact (not of common knowledge) that he becomes editor of the "Bachelor" humour magazine (1925–1926), a popular periodical of the day, yet quite offensive to social norms. According to the opinion of Andrejs Upīts, a writer and a shrewd literary critic, about the magazine: "This is where cynicism seems to have reached its record heights, the extreme limit beyond the point of no return. As for the issue number nine I happened to buy, even the paper was blushing." (Upīts, p. 72) [5]

At the same time, Grīns follows developments of the post-war literary scene in Western Europe, and in 1929, Remarque's novel "All Quiet on the Western Front" is published in his translation into Latvian. Grīns' first novel, "Ring of Namejs" (1932), which tells the legend of the Semigallian (*Zemgaļi*) people in the 17th century when Poland and Sweden fought for dominance of the Latvian territory. In the novel, Poles and Swedes meet with fearless resistance of the descendants of the 13th-century Semigallian tribal leader, Namejs, who have inherited Namejs' legacy and his ring. With this work, Grīns comes to the fore as the greatest battle scene writer in Latvian literature, and while his writing "still has too much of mystical horror, danger, blood and torment" (Ērmanis 1933, p. 147) [6], overall, its plot is imbued with a strong heroic pathos and national romanticism. Under the influence of the novel and its title, the name has been given to a piece of Latvian ethnic-style silver jewellery, the Namejs ring, a Latvian cultural hallmark worldwide, especially in exile after World War II. History becomes Grīns' creative platform, and his next novel, "The Blizzard of Souls" is an artistic take on World War I, treated in the history of Latvian literature as "a monument to the Latvian freedom battles in the apotheosis of an independent state" (Johansons 1953, p. 312) [7] and "a heroic legend about Latvian Riflemen" (LRB 2003, p. 221) [8], and the like.

The novel "The Blizzard of Souls" spotlights World War I in the territory of Latvia, focusing on the Latvian rifleman – both in mass scenes and in the manifestations of individual destinies. The personal and individual perspective, which we can associate with the history of a soldier's feelings and emotions, is amplified through a first-person narrative in the first and the third parts of the novel, where the narrator

is an active participant of actual events. The narrative of the first part of the novel is initiated by a sixteen-year-old young man, overwhelmed by feelings for his first love and visions of a bright future: "I'm wandering the streets of Riga deaf to the rumble of the war chariots there [...] I'm sixteen and I kissed a woman for the first time today. To tell the truth, she was not quite a woman, just a grammar schoolgirl, and the kisser was rather her than me. [...] I'm intoxicated with the fragrances of early spring breathed out by the soft April air, being at the same time full of glee, of self-confidence never felt before. [...] I let my boyish dreams flow along with clouds. (Grīns 1989, p. 31) [9]

This boyish sentiment is ruthlessly interrupted, and he is thrown into a different reality by a message from his brother Edgars that German troops have entered the territory of Latvia, that their father's home is now behind the front line, their mother has been murdered on the grounds of suspicion, the boys' friends and acquaintances have fallen victim to German brutality. The first part of the novel also features the hasty and stressful evacuation of Riga and the streams of refugees; still, both brothers and their father have a stronger motivation to remain in Latvia. The agonizing pain of loss over their devastated family nest transforms in them into a burning hatred for German invaders; eager to fight for their home and, in a broader sense, for their fatherland, the brothers and their father join the army as volunteers. Volunteering is emphasised repeatedly, with one of the brothers wishing to enter a military school in Moscow, the younger one asking his father's permission to join the ranks, which he otherwise would not be eligible for due to his age. The fact that the narrator is very young, actually a teenager who has not taken a step far beyond the threshold of his father's home, imparts to the novel's narrative a distinctive note of naivety and the feel of a coming-of-age story.

In the second part of the novel, as the description of hostilities in Latvia expands, the writer moves to the third person narrative, and although the author's point of views here too, it feels to be based on deeper experience and offers a more comprehensive outlook. The course of the war is presented chronologically and topographically in so accurate a manner that the novel's text could serve as a guidance for the re-enactment of those battles, and the description given by Grīns in his novel is largely in tune with what was recorded in academic historical studies of Latvian riflemen. (LSV 1970) [10]

The Latvian riflemen communicate with each other in the Latvian language, while addressing Russian soldiers and the commander-in-chief in Russian, thus a considerable layer of military slang enters the novel's vocabulary. Both the soldiers' dialogues and the author's position reinforce a conviction that Latvian Rifles regiments are much more combat-capable and fight more selflessly than Russian soldiers. A critical note also plays out in the direction of the Russian army and its command, with the division commander being characterised as follows: "He does not concern himself with soldiers, but saves ammunition, being fully aware that for the Tsar's state a couple of dozen gun grenades have more value than an infantry battalion." (Grīns 1989, p. 298) It is with graphic naturalism that Grīns depicts the battlefield events in which the Latvian Rifles suffered the largest number of fatalities. For example, the Russian army offensive in the Riga section of the frontline at the end of 1916, recorded and referred to as Christmas Battles in the history of the Latvian war of independence. Due to the massive fatalities, the riflemen named the place the Death Island, and this fearsome battlefield epithet has gained the status of an official toponym, Death Island (*Nāves sala*) marked on the map of Latvia – like to an item of traditional Latvian jewellery acquiring the name of Namejs Ring after the title of the novel.

When German troops have occupied the entire territory of Latvia, Latvian riflemen, together with other units of the Russian army, retreat to inland Russia, where, in the wake of the Russian Revolution and Civil War, they end up in the military formations of both "the Reds" (Bolsheviks) and "the White Guard" (supporters of restoration of the Russian Empire). Admittedly, the writer contradicts himself in his depiction of the Latvian riflemen's mission in the German-Russian war, the German-Latvian war, the Latvian-Russian war. A part of the same riflemen who fought fearlessly in Latvia's freedom battles, upon returning to their home country, get engaged in horrific Red Terror campaigns to intimidate people and achieve their loyalty and support for the Bolshevik regime.

In the third and concluding part of the novel, the writer returns to the first-person narrative, using either the singular or plural form. According to the tradition of the military-patriotic genre, the story must have a happy ending. After losing his older brother and father in the war, the narrator returns to his native home with a girl he loves, and the final paragraph of the novel plays resonates with nostalgic yet life-

affirming intonations: “Nothing is left, nothing at all, my father’s home welcomed me infinitely desolate [...] Mother’s lilac bush is in blossom by the window, swaying in the evening breeze, and the panicles of its flowers exhale a dizzying, confusing sweetness [...] and everything is light in my heart.” (Grīns 1989, p. 778–779) [9] Despite the naturalism and brutality of the battle scenes, the metaphor of the blizzard of souls in the title of the novel and its entire narrative carry the code of humane soulfulness, deep regard for the fallen Latvian riflemen and a prayer for their souls. Due to the genre’s literary conventions, a naturalist depiction of the ambient atmosphere, and an emotionally expressive form of narrative, “The Blizzard of Souls” can be incorporated into the literary stream of the Latvian “magical realism”. (Cimdina 2006) [11]

On the eve of World War II, praising the writer’s contribution to the military and patriotic genre, a literary and cultural reviewer writes: “Aleksandrs Grīns alone has slain more men than all other Latvian writers combined.” (Lapiņš 1939, p. 686) [12] As a work of a military patriotic genre, Grīns’ novel “Blizzard of Souls” has once been excessively praised, attributing to the Latvian riflemen the ideological motifs that are not apparent from the novel’s text; for the same reason – from opposing ideological positions, the novel has been over-criticised. Unlike Štrāls, who was not subject to Soviet political repression – his novel “War” saw repeated editions in both Soviet Latvia, Riga, and by Latvian publishers in Minneapolis, the United States – Grīns and his literary legacy fall into disfavour. Adhering to the tactics of President of Latvia Kārlis Ulmanis, in 1939, Grīns supports the establishment of Soviet military bases in Latvia and attempts to placate society with the idea that Moscow will respect the independence of the Baltic States. However, as the Soviet Army invades Latvia, Grīns is arrested, deported to the Astrakhan prison, where he is tried, given a death penalty by shooting, and then executed in December 1941. His novel “Touched by Eternity” lands on the list of the works strictly forbidden by Soviet censorship, and a repeat edition of the novel only sees the light of day in Latvia in 1989, upon the collapse of the Soviet empire.

3.2. *World War II*

3.2.1. *Totalitarian art*

The novels “Storm” (1946–1948) and “To the New Shore” (1952) by Vilis Lācis, which belong to the most powerful grand narratives in Latvian literature, are well-suited for the characterization of distinctive features in the Latvian fictional narratives about World War II. Vilis Lācis is born and raised in Riga in the family of a harbour worker. During World War I, he with his parents is evacuated to the Altai region in Russia, where he attends the Barnaul Teachers Seminary (1917–1918), then moves to Bijsk, where he works as secretary of the village council (1919–1921) until his return to Latvia in the autumn of 1921. In the early years after his return, Lācis is a port worker in Riga and then, as a stoker on a cargo ship, he travels to the ports of England and France (1923–1924) until being drafted into the military service of the Latvian Army (1925–1926). After demobilisation, he goes to sea again as a steamship stoker (visiting the ports of Germany, Belgium, England, and Denmark), learns the basics of literary writing by self-study and devotes himself to serious literary work. Lācis has been involved in the activities of the Communist underground, and in June 1940, when Soviet troops enter Riga, he is appointed as Minister of Interior of the People’s Government, in August he becomes Chairman of the Council of People’s Commissars of the Latvian SSR. After Nazi Germany’s invasion of the Soviet Union in the summer of 1941, he is evacuated to Moscow, and immerses himself in public, political and literary work. At the end of the war, Lācis returns to Latvia and takes up the post of Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Latvian SSR (1946–1959) for the period of all the post-war turmoil, brutal sovietisation of all areas of life, and ruthless political repression.

Eight of Lācis’ novels predate “Storm” and “To the New Shore”, the novels to be analysed here, and he is undeniably one of the widest-read and popular Latvian writers of the time. His novel “Fisherman’s Son” (1939), masterfully recounting the life of fishermen, has become hugely popular, it is translated into Estonian, Lithuanian, Russian, English, Ukrainian, Polish, Hungarian, Norwegian and other languages; the first Latvian full-length feature “Fisherman’s Son” has also been produced based on that novel. (1939)

If elsewhere in the Soviet Union, socialist realism was seen as outmoded, at least partly, then in a recent accessor, the Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic (Latvian SSR), the late 1940s and 1950s are the heyday of socialist realism. Lācis as an author lacks neither literary erudition nor adequate ideological toughness to pen model texts conforming with the doctrine of socialist realism. It is also a time when the Cold War's ideological confrontation escalates between two hostile socio-political systems, capitalism and communism and the literary scene in Latvia becomes an arena for a fierce ideological struggle in that context. This confrontation focuses on the Great Patriotic War (the term by which World War II was referred to in Soviet historiography), which is interpreted as the antifascist struggle by the heroic Soviet people for the sake of the entire progressive humanity. As a result, the Great Patriotic War as the supreme testament to Soviet patriotism is one of the pillars supporting the contents aspect of socialist realism. The symbol and metaphor of the storm (associated with revolutionary processes in society) has played a prominent role in the Russian Soviet literature, and it is noteworthy that the title of Lācis' work coincides with that of Ilya Ehrenburg's novel "Storm" (1946–1947), the ideological platform of both novels also being uniform. Besides, the Ehrenburg's biography is related to Latvia.

In contrast to Grīns' "The Blizzard of Souls", in Lācis' novel "Storm", the war, the invasion of Latvia by the Red Army does not come as a surprise or cause confusion to the narrator: on the contrary – it is an expected result facilitated by his own efforts. To demonstrate that, "Storm" places war in a broader chronological framework, depicting life in both pre- and post-war Latvia. In the novel, the time of direct action covers the period from the late 1930s to the late 1940s, about a decade, and its narrative is structured into three relatively self-contained parts. Strictly speaking, only the second part of the novel could be defined as a war novel due to its chronological outline. But to help the reader navigate the war-time processes, and to not only exonerate but also extoll the invasion of Latvia by the Red Army, it is necessary for the writer to put it in a broader context following a principle of on the path from the grim past of the nation to a bright future, the end justifies the means.

The first part paints in the darkest colours the social contrasts of Latvian society – on the one hand, cruelty, greed, wastefulness and moral degradation of the moneyed classes, on the other hand – the destitution, poverty, unemployment and sufferings of the working people, and those are two mutually hostile and unreconcilable worlds. To advance the concept of the socialist revolution, the communist underground is depicted against this backdrop, portraying the characters of communists with great positivity, highlighting their excellent human qualities and the constancy and steadfastness of their ideological creed. The historical fact of repatriation of Baltic Germans has been presented to label some of the characters of Latvian ethnic origin leaving with them as Latvian bourgeois nationalists and Latvian fascists.

Thus, from the very first pages, the novel's imagery system is dominated by the principle of a black-and-white contrast, juxtaposing two large groups of individuals – ardent fighters for Soviet power, and its enemies. In the second part of the novel, the activities of Soviet patriots take two main directions: first, the formation of a Latvian riflemen division to join the Red Army, its subsequent deployment outside the territory of Latvia, including to fight near Moscow and Staraya Rusa. The group of military characters is distinctly multinational, while the events focus on the Latvian Communist underground fighters, Silenieks, Žuburs, Rubenis and others, who have now become exemplary commanders in the Red Army. The second plot line deals with people's daily lives and political movements in the German-occupied Latvia, focusing on the Soviet partisan movement and underground warfare, and Gestapo operations in Latvia; the author also turns spotlight on Jews being robbed of their possessions and on the mass killings of Jews, and the depiction of those events abound in atrocities and bloody brutality.

The writer also entwines with this plot line the theme raised in the novel's first part – the repatriation of "Latvian fascists" together with the Baltic Germans. According to him, under the Nazi occupation, Latvian repatriates return to Latvia to serve in the Gestapo, where they cruelly torture and murder people. The brutality of the Soviet patriots portrayed in the novel matches that of their enemy, following an eye for an eye principle. Such a position by the author is fully respected, and it must be said, even welcomed by the Soviet literary criticism, thereby also programming the reader as its ally, by means of encouragement and assertion simultaneously. For example, concerning an episode in which Soviet partisans decide to hold a Lynch court over two Latvian returnees, the critic writes: "It is with satisfaction

that the reader welcomes the deaths of Osvalds Lanka and Kristaps Ponte following a fair trial exercised by the partisans.” (LLV 1962, p. 421) [13]

The third part of the novel “Storm” depicts post-war time in Soviet Latvia, when the presence of the past war is still actively felt there and then. The fierce conflict of counterforces continues, and from the writer’s perspective, it is a battle for a new happy life for the people under the guidance of the Communist Party. With the aim of incorporating the drama of the Great Patriotic War in broader historical contexts, the chronology of the storyline in Lācis’ next novel, “To the New Shore” covers the time since the early 20th century, spinning a story about the revolutionary past of the Latvian people and their rapport with communist ideas across generations. To bring those ideas to the reader in a more humane way, Lācis opts for the model of a family novel that he has masterfully realised in his fiction before. The plot of the novel unravels in a rural environment that is close and understandable to Latvian society, with three dynamic families of different social strata being placed at the centre of events – wealthy farmers, medium-sized farmers and rural proletariat.

Presenting the life-a-death battle of ideas through individual characters predestined to life and love, through human destinies, the narrative of “To the New Shore” provokes a powerful co-experience in the reader, thus achieving an effect typical of a thriller. For their reflection of the Great Patriotic War and the post-war reconstruction of Soviet life in the light of communist ideals, the two major works by Lācis were awarded the Stalin Prize (later renamed into the State Prize of the USSR): “Storm” receives it in 1949 and “To the New Shore”, in 1952. Both novels have also been screened – “To the New Shore” in 1955, and “Storm” in 1960, thus influencing and guiding a part of Latvian society, especially younger generations, in the direction of communist ideology. Lācis belongs to the authors who rewrote their most remarkable works created before Soviet era, adapting them to the requirements of the ideological platforms of socialist realism.

3.2.2. Soviet modernism and exile

A radical twist in terms of the theme, content and form of the Soviet war novel is brought by Visvaldis Lāms’ novel “In the Glow of Northern Lights” with its focus on humanan, the life of his consciousness, his destiny, the demoralising nature of the war and its devastating impact on man and society, he initiates the de-heroization of World War II in the Latvian novel. (Cimdiņa 2023) [14] Visvaldis Lāms (1923–1992) was born into the family of a harbour worker in Riga and was drafted straight from a school desk into the Latvian Legion during the Nazi occupation (1943–1945). As the war ended, he was sent to a filtration camp of the USSR’s Commissariat of Interior Affairs, to be released in 1946. After settling down in Latvia, Lāms was employed in many different manual jobs such as a road worker, bricklayer, painter, locksmith, plumber, and others, while also trying his hand in creative writing. His first novel, “Journey Through Life”, appears in 1956, and that same year Lāms is welcomed into the Writers’ Union of the Soviet Latvia. The first two parts of the novel “In the Glow of Northern Lights” are published in 1958 in a socio-political journal of literature and art, “Karogs”, but the publication of the novel’s third part in a serialised form is banned. The novel’s first publication in the book format does not appear until 1989, including the third part forbidden by censorship, and according to the author, it is based on the original 1950s manuscript, with no change.

First, Lāms renounces the epic scale in terms of time and space of the 1950s Soviet novel-writing. The plot of the novel “In the Glow of Northern Lights” is concentrated into a two-year span – it begins at the training camp of the newly-drafted legionnaires in Bolderāja in May 1943 and closes in May 1945 near Liepāja following the capitulation of Courland Pocket. Time is brought to a standstill to thoroughly explore Latvia in the final phase of the Nazi occupation, revealing a largely heterogeneous world scene unconventional for the Soviet war novel. Second, there is a radical shift in the viewpoint of the narrator and the author’s position. An author (narrator) producing a Soviet war novel possesses ironclad ideological motivation, and he knows which the “right” side and which side of the front line to stand on, thus assuming an unequivocal position as author in the treatment of characters and events played out in the novel ever since they have been selected. The narrator of the Lāms’ novel is in suspense, confused, and the question asked in the introduction to the novel – “Against what, for what, why?” (Lāms 1989, p. 6) [15] remains unanswered in the conclusion.

Events in Latvia are seen through the eyes of a character with a biography like that of Lāms, a young man drafted into the Legion, and in the depiction of his existential experience, war becomes something deeply personal. Alongside the voice of the narrator, the events of war and an individual's situation are described from the perspective of two, fundamentally different persons. One of them is Arvis Augstkalns, a philosophy student immersed in the search for the meaning of life and has begun putting his thoughts on paper, while the war has steered him onto a travelling salesman's path; the other, a guerrilla fighter Laimonis, who believes that "people do not want to join Hitler's gang" (Lāms 1989, p. 308) [15], thinks the Russians will return and "the Latvian nation can only exist in Latvia". (Lāms 1989, p. 309) [15]

The specific features of the chosen character, as well as change in the polyphony of the author's voice and his viewpoint, reveal a very profound and contradictory picture of Latvia's history, challenging the distinctly unequivocal position established in Soviet literature about people, events, popular sentiment and motives for action, especially in the final phase of the war. The writer sheds light on the myth that the Legion was created on the basis of volunteering, he reveals that, in fact, most of the potential conscripts tried to avoid draft, and this happened by bribing doctors, fleeing, and buying off German authorities. Visvaldis Lāms recalls that "a popular expression of the day was: 'My son doesn't have to go to war, I've sent a pig instead.'" (Lāms 1989, p. 35) [15] What Lāms writes about the mobilization into the Latvian Legion being mostly coercive, is corroborated by latest academic research, reminding the reader that after World War II, some 7 million soldiers of the German army, also around 25 400 Latvian nationals, ended up as prisoners of Western allies. The absolute majority of them had been forcibly mobilised, only one fifth of Latvians in German units could have joined the army voluntarily. (Kaprāns, Tomaševskis 2023, p. 129) [16]

To explore the dilemma of the Latvians and Latvian nation and the related emotional, social and psychological tensions, the writer has purposefully chosen a pivotal year of in the history of World War II, recalling that the events of 1943 brought about a discernible change in the situation that has stabilised itself in Latvia so far. "The anti-Hitlerite underground became stronger, and a rift appeared even in the circles which had held firm with Germans since the war began." (Lāms 1989, p. 58) [15] From a political point of view, the novel highlights certain choices: to side with the Germans, to support the Russians, namely the Red Army, or else stick together for themselves in the name of the idea of independence in hope for support from the West. To Gunārs Veldre and his companions, the first two options mean treachery against their country and people, but the third seems increasingly hopeless as the war draws to a close: "Nonsense about those Kurelians. Their leader is the same warmed-up corpse as Bangerskis" (Lāms 1989, p. 366) [15] "It soon became clear to everyone how naive their reliance and Bangerskis' proclamation of had been." (Lāms 1989, p. 435) [15] Real historical figures have not been portrayed in Lāms' "In the Glow of Northern Lights", and not in other novels covered by this article either, they are mostly alluded to in dialogues between character and their reflections, but whenever that happens the mention carries powerful message. [17]

Following in Lāms' footsteps, a close-up at the situation of the time of the Nazi occupation in Latvia, without simplifying the relationship between a human being and political power, is taken in a novel by Egons Līvs, "The Velnakauls Twins" (1966), Bruno Saulītis' novel "The Ash Alley" (1970), Vladimirs Kaijaks' novel "Fear" (1977), and others. World War II also enters the Latvian exile literature of the 1950s through the subject of Latvian legionnaires, and Anšlavs Eglītis' novel "I Was Not a Hero" offers a similar position to that of "In the Glow of Northern Lights" as regards the attitude to the chances of the Latvian people in this war: "I didn't have it in me to be a hero. [...] It was not our war, it was doomed to be lost, and no guts and heroism would have helped us." (Eglītis 1955, p. 317) [18] While Eglītis' "I Was Not a Hero" (as opposed to Lāms' almost autobiographical narrative) is a free fantasy on the subjects of World War II and the author asks readers not to seek out well-known personas or correct data in the events described, in their attitude to the heroisation of war, the positions of the two writers are related: "The beauty of battles, or at least their grandeur, may be contemplated in their imaginations by marshals and generals, pushing armies and corps across maps, but for the rank-and-file soldier trodden down in the mud, war only emerges as a never-ending and incoherent series of preposterous, nightmarish, brutal occurrences. [...] What ideals could survive under the sham banners of communists

and national socialists stained with dirt and blood, or under the sign of self-interest raised by Western democracies?" (Eglītis 1955, pp. 5–6) [18]

Not unlike the literary process in Soviet Latvia, the subject of legionnaires brings a new tonality onto the Latvian novel-writing scene in exile in the 1960s–70s. Around this time war is perceived as a trauma that has shaken the very core of the human being, changing its identity and perception of the world through the confrontation and irreconcilability of the former and the present 'me', and its most vivid representative is Gunars Janovskis (1916–2000). He flees to Germany in 1944, later settles down in the United Kingdom and begins his literary activities there, and his first novel, "Sōla," sees the light in a Latvian emigration monthly ("Londonas Avīze" 1961), while its first publication as a book appears in New York in 1963. The novel "Sōla" is the first work in a series about the life and perceptions of former Latvian legionnaires in exile, and its characters, subject matter and problem are further developed in the novels "Fog is Rising Over the Trent" (1966) and "Voices Beyond the Darkness" (1972). Janovskis' novel "To No Return" (1973) about the Latvian and Baltic German communities in Riga in the late 1930s and the German repatriation also attracts attention in the light of the human factor, putting at the heart of the novel the love story of a Latvian youth and a German girl, who is to leave Latvia along with her parents.

The Latvian Legion, from the perspective of both domestic and foreign policy, is one of the most sensitive issues in the history of Latvia in the 20th century, and thus in history-related fictional narratives. Indeed, at the beginning of World War II, soldiers from other Germanic lands joined the Waffen SS troops and, as the war wore on, several "non-Germanic" nations were involved in the formation of SS units in the Nazi-occupied territories – French, Walloon, Italian, Hungarian, Croatian, Russian, Ukrainian, Estonian, and other military units, estimating that in 1944 around 57% of the SS troops were not Third Reich Germans. (Lumsden 1997, p. 207) [19]

In a broader international historical context, the issue of Latvian legionnaires is raised by the Swedish writer Paul Enqvist in his documentary novel, "The Legionnaires" (1968), specifying in the introduction: "I have had no intention of erecting a monument to the tragedy of the Balts. All I wanted was to describe the Swedish dilemma with a great attention to detail." (Enquist 1993, p. 4) [20] The narrative of the Latvian Legion as a historical dilemma, the formation and loss of Latvian statehood, as well as the human tragedy of legionnaires takes an important place not only in the narrative of the Latvian military and political history, but still in the consciousness of Latvian society, and an insight into literary and cultural heritage can make a significant contribution to throwing the light on the subject from a modern perspective.

Continued research into the rendition of 20th century world wars in Latvian literature would have to focus on the fourth generation of military fiction writers and processes in the 21st century Latvian literature, and thereby on new literary and cultural theories that are consciously or unconsciously embraced by the authors of this generation. The focal point here would be works in a series of historical novels created under the Fostering of National Identity programme of the Latvian Culture Capital Fund, "We. Latvia, the 20th Century" – "Words Had No Place" (2015) by Guntis Berelis, about World War I and "The Taste of Lead" (2015) by Maris Bērziņš about World War II. The authors of those works are writers whose empirical experience does not include war; therefore, their message is based on their perceptions of collective memory and studies of historical sources.

REFERENCES

1. Solomon, E 1969, *From Parody to Realism*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts.
2. Beller, M, Leerssen, JT 2007, "Perception, Image, Imagology", *Imagology: The Cultural Construction and Literary Representation of National Characters*, Rodopi, Amsterdam.
3. Just War Theory 2024, *Encyclopedia Britannica*, viewed 20 July 2024, <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/just-war>>.
4. Štrāls, K 1957, *Karš*, Latvijas Valsts izdevniecība, Rīga.

5. Upīts, A 1926, “Ar ušņu duramo. Lubas un puslubas”, *Domas*, no. 1, pp. 70–73.
6. Ērmanis P 1933, “Rakstniecības gads”, *Daugavas Gada Grāmata*, p. 147.
7. Johansons, A 1953, *Latviešu literatūra*, Apgāds Trīs Zvaigznes, Stokholma.
8. LRB 2003, *Latviešu rakstniecība biogrāfijās*, Zinātne, Rīga.
9. Grīns, A 1989, *Dvēseļu putenis*, Liesma, Rīga.
10. LSV 1970, *Latviešu strēlnieku vēsture (1915–1920)*, Zinātne, Rīga.
11. Cimdiņa, A 2006, “Vēstures heroīns un maģiskais reālists Aleksandrs Grīns”, *Republika*, no. 22, pp. 32–33.
12. Lapiņš, J 1939, “Latviešu romāna un stāsta problēma”, *Sējējs*, no. 7, pp. 684–686.
13. LLV 1962, *Latviešu literatūras vēsture*, Latvijas PSR Zinātņu Akadēmijas izdevniecība, Rīga.
14. Cimdiņa, A 2023, “Padomju kara romāna apokalipse Visvaža Lāma romānā “Kāvu blāzmā””, *Letonica*, no. 53, pp. 94–107.
15. Lāms, V, 1989, *Kāvu blāzmā*. Liesma, Rīga.
16. Kaprāns, M, Tomaševskis, J 2023, “Latviešu karagūstekņi Zedelgemā: vēsture, atmiņa, konflikts”, *Letonica*, no. 53, pp. 108–137.
17. For example, Rūdolfs Bangerskis (1878–1958), referred to in this episode, is one of the most prominent figures in the Latvian military history, born in Taurupe parish in Latvia, died and buried in Oldenburg, the Federal Republic of Germany. In 1995, as a Latvian general, he was buried in the Riga Brothers cemetery. Educated at the St. Petersburg Junker Infantry School (1899–1901) and the Imperial Nicolas Military Academy in St. Petersburg (1912–1914), he participated in the Russo-Japanese war (1904–1905). When World War I broke out, Bangerskis returned to Latvia and was appointed commander of a Latvian Rifle Battalion in 1915, later promoted to Colonel. In 1920, Bangerskis retired from service and returned to Latvia in 1921. In April 1943, Bangerskis was appointed Inspector General of the Latvian Legion in the rank of SS Gruppenführer by the German occupation authorities. Bangerskis was in held as a POW by the British after the war and settled in Oldenburg after his release. The Kurelians is a military formation named after General Jānis Kurelis of the Latvian Army (born in 1882 in the Ērgeme Parish, Latvia – died in 1954 in Chicago, the United States). The Kurelians’ unit was established during the final phase of the Nazi occupation, in December 1944, from the Aizsargi (a paramilitary organisation, lit. ‘Defenders’) serving at the Riga District police station; they set as their goal the restoration of Latvia’s sovereignty during the brief timespan when German troops would have left the territory of Latvia, but the Soviet Army would not have taken it over yet.
18. Eglītis, A 1955, *Es nebiju varonis*. Grāmatu Draugs, New York.
19. Lumsden, R 1997, *Himmler’s Black Order 1923–45*, Sutton Publishing, London.
20. Enquist, PU 1993 [Enkvists, PU] 1993, *Leģionāri. Romāns par baltiešu izdošanu*, Liesma, Rīga.