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Soviet Colonial Modernity and the Everyday in Twenty-First Century Latvian Literature

BENEDIKTS KALNAČS

Abstract. This paper intends to discuss the case of Latvia in comparison with other European postcolonial situations and to trace the problems which determine the complexity of self-consciousness of the inhabitants of the country from postcolonial and post-Soviet perspective. The focus of this investigation is on the series of novels which deal with twentieth-century history and memory in Latvia. Due to the fact that the chosen texts attempt an evaluation of the Soviet past, an attention is paid to those aspects of representation of the everyday which considerably distinguish contemporary fiction from literary works created during the period of socialist realist dominance. The importance of history and of different everyday practices in forming specific features of national identity is also seen in the context of the attempts of contemporary authors to discover and define themselves as part of today's global community as they try to position themselves within world literature. In this perspective, the contemporary as well as the historical experience of the Baltic nations testifies to the common roots of European society helping to build bridges between different ethnic and social groups and their members.

Keywords: coloniality; Latvian novel; memory; modernity; national identity; postcolonial discourse

Introduction

Twenty-first century Latvian fiction provides a fascinating blend of different perspectives on contemporary society as well as on cultural memory and the experience of the past. The latter trend is especially noticeable in the growing popularity of the historical novel, and, more specifically, in the novel series *Mēs. Latvija, XX gadsimts* (We. Latvia, the 20th Century), initiated in 2014. I take these series as a starting point in my inquiry about the representation of everyday life during the Soviet rule in the Baltic littoral. The methodology of postcolonial studies helps to investigate the relationships between coloniality and decoloniality under the Soviet rule and to carry out a discussion of Soviet

colonial modernity. It also encourages an attempt to sketch the shifting boundaries between the colonizer and the colonized during the second half of the twentieth century as well as provides a more thorough insight into the ethnic relations during the Soviet era. The structure of this paper is organized so as to discuss these four sets of questions, linked to the case studies of particular novels. It begins with a brief introduction of the scope and aim of the series in the context of Latvian literature.

Novel Series *Mēs. Latvija, XX gadsimts* (We. Latvia, the 20th century)

In the afterword to the recently published collective monograph *Novels, Histories, Novel Nations: Historical Fiction and Cultural Memory in Finland and Estonia*, edited by Linda Kaljundi, Eneken Laanes and Ilona Pikkanen, Ann Rigney makes several important points of relevance to the present study. She explicitly comments on the extraordinary importance and constant presence of the historical themes generally, and the historical novels more specifically, in the identity formation of the two nations, the Estonians and the Finns, constantly being under threat from foreign invaders. (Rigney 2015: 324) The same trend is certainly observable in other societies that have constantly been at the historical crossroads and were in the period of nation building, from the nineteenth century onwards, looking for relevant historical symbols in the process of national identity formation has been relevant. Even if grand historical narratives might be losing strength with the advent of postmodernism, their presence is still crucial in cultures trying to recover their suppressed subaltern voices after having experienced different traumas, including the trauma of coloniality. This is one of the motivating forces behind the initiative to create a series of twenty-first century novels which explore different decades of the twentieth century and their specific features in the history and memory of the Latvian nation. However, there are also substantial differences when compared to earlier periods. For example, the representation of history in the late 1930s, in the period of the authoritarian regime in Latvia, or the efforts of the Latvian exile community to preserve memories of the country and its history intact during the second half of the twentieth century, have been much more conservative in their approach. All earlier representations had been marked by a willingness to provide a heroic portrayal of specific events which might strengthen the pride in the history of the nation. The novels created in the second decade of the twenty-first century take instead a rather sceptical look at an individual's ability to influence the course of events. Rather than portraying

grand personalities and creating magnificent historical narratives, the works of contemporary fiction are more focused on the depiction of the everyday and historical situations are represented as seen through the perspective of ordinary people in daily circumstances. The dominating perspective is that of marginality while at the same time the value of each particular individual is constantly in the focus of attention. Thus, a fascinating and complex picture of the everyday life of ordinary people is created, the larger historical framework providing a valuable context for each particular novel and for the series as a whole.

The series of novels on twentieth-century experience in Latvia has been initiated and executed by a group of authors born in the 1960s and 1970s. Generationally, this might include one dominating perspective, but it should be noted that all texts are based on thorough studies of historical records, on conversations with people, and on collecting their stories, which are then integrated into the narrative. The mastermind behind this undertaking has been the writer Gundega Repše (b. 1960), who previously had already carried out several important attempts to document the perspective of contemporary authors on the twentieth and twenty-first century realities. Apart from her own publications, which portray personalities who played an important role in the history of Latvia, Repše prepared two volumes of interviews with contemporary authors. The volume published in 1999 was called *Gadsimta beigu skatiens* (A Look from the End of a Century) and included thirty-one interviews. This publication was later followed by the volume called *Rakstnieki ir. Gadsimta sākuma skatiens* (The Writers Are There. A Look from the Beginning of a Century, 2012) which consisted of fourteen in-depth interviews. Among the participants, there were five contributors to the novel series discussed in this paper. In 2011, Repše also compiled a volume of short stories, *Mēs, XX gadsimts* (We, the 20th Century) by twelve women writers, and again five of the participants are among the authors of the novel series. The concept of the series of historical novels is based on an idea that, by roughly covering a particular decade in each of the intended works, the focus should ultimately be on particularly important turning points in twentieth-century history, which constitute a substantial part of the collective memory and should be remembered in that way.

The full list of texts includes thirteen novels. Listed chronologically in the order of described events, these novels are:

Osvalds Zebris, *Gaiļu kalna ēnā* (In the Shadow of Rooster Hill, 2014);
Guntis Berelis, *Vārdiem nebija vietas* (Words Had No Place, 2015);

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- Pauls Bankovskis, *18* (2014);
 Inga Gaile, *Stikli* (The Glass Shards, 2016);
 Gundega Repše, *Bogene* (2016);
 Māris Bērziņš, *Svina garša* (Taste of Lead, 2015);
 Inga Ābele, *Duna* (Drone, 2017);
 Andris Akmentiņš, *Skolotāji* (Teachers, 2018);
 Nora Ikstena, *Mātes piens* (Mother's Milk, 2015);
 Andra Manfelde, *Virsnieku sievas* (Officers' Wives, 2017);
 Kristīne Ulberga, *Tur* (There, 2017);
 Laima Kota, *Istaba* (The Room, 2016);
 Arno Jundze, *Sarkanais dzīvsudrabs* (Red Mercury, 2017).

The specific dates and events (rather than decades), tackled by the authors, cover the uprising of 1905 in the Russian empire, the events of the Great War, the creation of the independent republic of Latvia in 1918, the authoritarian regime of the second half of the 1930s, the Soviet occupation in 1940, almost immediately followed by mass deportations of the local population, and the ascent of Nazi rule in 1941. Several texts, which will provide the focus of this paper, deal with the traumatic post-war events and the period of Soviet rule in the second half of the twentieth century. While the first novels in the series provided a fascinating retrospection of the period of rise and fall of an independent country, proclaimed in 1918, these have been followed by the contributions of prominent authors (Inga Ābele, Nora Ikstena, Laima Kota, and Andra Manfelde, among others), who recover the issues of agency and the everyday in the time period from the late 1940s onward. Of crucial importance for this undertaking is the fact that, while being born during the Soviet era, all authors have experienced the transition from one regime to another, and are able to provide a critical evaluation of both previous and current (post-Soviet and neo-colonial) reality.

It would be fair to remark that in the second decade of the twenty-first century there is again a considerable increase of texts which deal with the experience of the Soviet period. Such a trend was explicit after the re-establishment of independence in 1991, and it also coincided with the attention paid to the new trends in history writing. In this context, Larry Wolff emphasizes that “the recent and remarkable historiographic literature on Eastern Europe, works published a full decade after the end of the Cold War, have pointed the way toward new problems and paradigms for historical research and political reflection.” (Wolff 2006: 118) During the 1990s, most attention was paid to the experience of those people, who were deported in the aftermath of World War II, and forced to spend years and even decades of their life in distant parts of the

Soviet Union, most often in Siberia. Not all of them returned, as the number of casualties there was relatively large, and even after it gradually became possible to return home following the death of the leading Soviet politician Joseph Stalin in the 1950s, part of the deported people did not risk a comeback, which was also connected with different restrictions as to the places where those who came back were allowed to settle. A great majority of them had also lost their homes by that time. This painful experience is directly tackled by Gundega Repše in her novel *Bogene*, and the memories of deportation as well as exile to the West play a substantial role in the series.

Thus, contemporary texts still relatively often focus on traumatic experiences, and trauma is one of the driving forces in re-appreciation of the passing time. The question should, however, be raised how and in what ways do contemporary interpretations of Soviet reality in Latvian literature challenge and transform earlier representations of everyday life. Uncovering previously hidden levels of the ‘othering’ of local population, characteristic of the Soviet ideological discourse, this paper intends to foster a discussion about the possibilities that postcolonial studies open up in the context of global coloniality and decoloniality. The issue of agency occupies a prominent place in literary texts under discussion. Partly written against the grain of Soviet period publications, which closely followed the ideology of socialist realism, these novels provide a fascinating research field for the discussion of coloniality, decoloniality, and agency under the Soviet (colonial) conditions.

Coloniality and Decoloniality in Contemporary Fiction.

Inga Ābele. *Duna*

Colonialism in East-Central European contexts might be broadly considered as “the project of dominating a nation or a region through the concerted effort of transforming the cultural forms as well as political institutions,” according to Martha Lampland. (Lampland 2000: 211) This description marks an approach to colonialism as a specific socio-historical configuration. Coloniality, in its turn, refers to the more abstract ‘matrix of power’, as defined by a number of theorists, including Walter Mignolo and Madina Tlostanova.

The application of a broader notion of the colonial matrix of power enables the critic to detect a set of colonial practices while studying the relations of Soviet era. Colonial, anticolonial and decolonial discourses continuously challenge each other throughout the second half of the twentieth century. This description places the Soviet era as well as its post-Soviet aftermath in the context of global decoloniality, which comprises “the dispute of the colonial

matrix of power and the coming into being of strong actors, around the world, in the spheres of the state, of knowledge, and of political society” (Mignolo 2001: 52), paying attention to the events as they develop at the grass-roots level.

The texts in the novel series that tackle different decades of the Soviet period demonstrate how more or less familiar local space, which has been substantially transformed during the colonial rule, is being painfully re-discovered in the aftermath of the independence of Latvia, which had been regained in 1991. A recurrent motif in a number of literary texts is that of the travel back in time and space in order to find the link between contemporary situation and past experience.

How gradual the process of decolonization in Soviet and post-Soviet sphere really is might be well documented by one of the recent novels, *Duna* by Inga Ābele (b. 1972). Here the author provides a contemporary reflection of the first post-war decade which demonstrates how fragile the Soviet power at that time still was, simultaneously, however, revealing its menacing manifestations in the decade following World War II.

The late 1940s was still a problematic period in the Baltic littoral when “Soviet power was concentrated in the major centres and had great difficulties reaching out from there” (Annus 2012: 35). This led to tough internal security measures. Ābele as a contemporary novelist was facing great difficulties while writing her work because “[t]he Stalin’s time described in this novel was characterized also by paranoid secrecy – it is difficult to find photographs, the relevant maps of Riga, and only few town cartography plans have survived.” (Ābele 2017: 420) The author tried to rely on personal testimonies instead. “I often fall in love with the spoken word – not with its correctness, but just the opposite: with its originality, with unique style of expression. This is precisely how numerous pages of this novel evolved – I listened to eyewitness accounts and carried over to paper what I was told with minimal corrections. Time is an entity thick as a tapestry, and, sewing its layers one on another, it is possible to achieve a dimension of depth.” (Ābele 2017: 417)

The plot of the novel is constructed around the meeting of the narrator with an old man. She is interested in re-discovering some historical events relevant to his life story and indirectly related to her own biography as well. The post-war reality is thus contrasted with a subtle portrayal of the contemporary relationship between the two people trying both to tell and to understand the story. Through the changing narrative perspectives the author is partially undertaking the role of an ethnologist, excavating the almost lost traces of the past.

One of the characteristic features of the post-war period was the fact that local population was estranged from the environment it has been previously accustomed to. In *Duna*, this is exemplified by the portrayal of Riga in the aftermath of World War II when the city partly lies in ruins and is in addition full of strange and unfamiliar people. Such an example of estranged environment is provided through a long walk of the protagonist in the old town of Riga on his way back to a temporary lodging in the heart of the city. This episode is put at the beginning of the novel and sets the tone of the whole text.

One of the principal metaphors in the novel is that of horses, and the Riga race course, where the protagonists of the novel work, becomes one of the main places of action. The transformations of this environment, which happen with the arrival of new officials, including KGB officers, demonstrate the painful destruction of established social and moral norms. Even many decades later, as shown by the novel, people involuntarily involved in these events cannot come to terms with the trauma of history.

Soviet Colonial Modernity. Nora Ikstena. *Mātes piens*

The concept of modernity, enormously influential in Western society and theoretically present at least from the Age of Enlightenment, encompasses the idea of progress alongside which the existential uncertainty of many agents of history also remains visible. Thus, the imperial imagery interacts with what Walter Mignolo has labelled the other, darker side of Western modernity (Mignolo 2011).

An interesting role is played in this context by Soviet modernity. In relation to Western examples, as Madina Tlostanova has stated, Russia and the Soviet Union suffer from an inferiority complex and can be labelled a “paradigmatic second-class empire” with an explicit inferiority complex and politics which “reflect and distort the Western originals” (Tlostanova 2012: 135–136). This uncertainty influences the relations of the imperial centre with its different peripheries, where the attempts to demonstrate the advantages of the civilizing mission collide with the local heritage of modern twentieth-century nation states, occupied by the Soviet Union during World War II.

Tlostanova aptly stresses that “modernity in the 20th century was implemented in two forms – the liberal/capitalist and the socialist/statist one” (Tlostanova 2012: 137). The workings of the Soviet colonial system with its planned economy and rules imposed from the outside of respective territories form a parallel to imperialism in its liberal/capitalist form.

The gradual consolidation of Soviet power in the Baltic littoral manifested itself through the loosening of certain aspects of dominance on everyday level, while at the same time providing characteristic repetitive patterns that were constantly present throughout the second half of the twentieth century.

This dynamic is well represented by Nora Ikstena's (b. 1969) novel *Mātes piens*. Here the plot is organized around the juxtaposition of two different female voices, that of a mother and her daughter. The mother is born in 1944, and, while her own mother (the grandmother of the main protagonist) hides herself and her small daughter to escape the Soviet soldiers inspecting their house, the father of the family is caught and immediately sent to Siberia from where he returns many years later as a mentally ruined man. The family's life is thus distorted and the feeling of betrayal constantly haunts the young girl as she grows up during the post-war decades. She attempts to become a doctor and devotes herself to experimental medicine but almost immediately experiences the limits of what was permitted, as was the case in many other areas of activity during the Soviet times, from children's games to history writing. The Estonian scholar Jaan Undusk aptly points out that the morals of Soviet history writing were standardized on an official level. "You could find and work through huge masses of new empirical data in the archives [...] still your general conclusions could not be changed. [...] And it is precisely this fact that had an immoral influence, and created an impression of unhistory." (Undusk 2006: 130) The same rules were applied to other disciplines, including genetics, where it was not allowed to make serious scientific research. Ikstena describes in this context the paradoxical situation that one of the patients, who is diagnosed with a breast cancer, is fully capable to sticking to her optimistic worldview, while the doctor, who is exposed to what amounts to a witch hunt due to her professional aspirations, suffers from an incurable mental disorder.

The issue of real or fake mental illnesses was a recurrent theme of the Soviet reality. Quite often young men voluntarily entered mental hospitals in order to escape Soviet military service. On the other hand, psychic disorders quite often were stimulated by the constant uncertainty of everyday life, especially in cases where the traumatic experience was already part of the family history or personal experience. One such case is provided by Ikstena's novel, where the mother can never escape the initial trauma of her father being deported, the feeling of fear later being further stimulated by the interference of the KGB into her work.

The context of the novel series provides an extremely telling parallel between this story and the reality of the late 1930s in the authoritarian state, as discussed in the novel *Stikli* by Inga Gaile (b. 1976). In *Stikli*, the events unfold

in independent Latvia in the late 1930s, the period usually remembered as one of economic prosperity and population growth. However, Gaile takes a close look at the darker side of this reality. One of the important locations in *Stikli* is that of a psychiatric hospital, and the conflict between two different methods of healing, one based on an extensive use of medicine, and the other, where psychologically sensitive treatment of patients is considered more appropriate and humane, is elaborated. The comparison of two texts in the same series reveal that the feeling of insecurity, usually ascribed to the Soviet regime, loses its aura of uniqueness and becomes part of a larger pattern of twentieth-century history.

In Ikstena's novel, the integrity of personality is partially preserved due to the religious belief of the woman who suffers from physical illness. This is another very important aspect in the description of Soviet everyday reality as one possibility of escape, which, however, also demanded a strong mental involvement, while religion in all its manifestations was constantly discriminated against by the Soviet ideology.

The story of the daughter, who is born in the late 1960s, introduces personal motifs into the novel *Mātes piens*, which are more or less present in all the novels under discussion. The birthday of the daughter in the novel, October 15, 1969, coincides with that of the author, who relatively openly introduces the context of her own biography into the book. The relationship between mother and daughter is also visible in other works by Ikstena, including her celebrated first novel, *Dzīves svinēšana* (The Celebration of Life, 1998). The life story of the daughter in *Mātes piens* is explicitly linked to the necessity to live her own life, and at the same time to stabilize that of her mother. Ikstena builds up scenes which point to parallels in the experience of the mother and the daughter, and is able to show that, despite apparent social changes, many mechanisms of colonial rule are still intact during the 1970s and 1980s. On the level of everyday experience, this is represented with a remarkable clarity in the school trip to St. Petersburg, after which the teacher, who wants to introduce his pupils to the history of Western art, is fired, and an inquiry by the KGB follows. The young girl is thus involved in a similar situation as the one to which her mother was once exposed.

The events represented in the novel give a thorough insight into the contradictory experience of coming to terms with the new reality. In her afterword to the novel, literary critic Ilva Skulte notes that the so-called developed socialism appears to be "a moral vacuum" with no stable criteria (Skulte 2015: 174). This evaluation corresponds to the proposal of the Romanian scholar Bogdan Ștefănescu, who in a recent article introduced the concept of a 'void'

as paradigmatically characteristic of the dilemmas of post-communist and postcolonial societies (Ștefănescu 2015). Soviet rule creates a strange and paradoxical world order, where the flow of events points to the absurdity of the dominating mechanisms of social life; however, as Skulte rightly notes, all that happens “evolves exactly in accord with the principles of logical precision and technical efficiency, and empties the humans out from within turning them into living corpses” (Skulte 2015: 175). It is another facet of the problematic dichotomy of progress *vs* humanity that is at the core of Western modernity’s narrative of progress.

In the given circumstances, it is difficult to come to terms with the existing regime. As Inga Ābele, the author of *Duna*, suggests: “Of course, there were those who threw themselves enthusiastically into the construction of new, happy Soviet life. The rest did not have much choice. If the most existential basis of human existence, freedom and homeland, have been taken away, the struggle becomes meaningless and the only remaining option is to try to adapt to power.” (Ābele 2015: 418) This corresponds to the observation expressed by Epp Annus with regard to the eventually inevitable adaptation to the new order (Annus 2012: 36), while escape is sought in everyday joys.

Individual experience, however, still remains important for creating one’s own personal space. Nora Ikstena in her novel does not provide the main characters with individual personal names; however, in her portrayal “the mode of emergence of their unique, individual, autonomous perspectives, is situational, located in seemingly accidental points of coincidence between families and generations”. (Skulte 2015: 176) Rather accidentally the area, where most of the action in *Mātes piens* takes place, is the same part of Riga that was described in the novel by Ābele. Thus, the reader can compare the late 1940s to the 1970s and 80s when most events in Ikstena’s novel unfold.

The tendency of mapping the individual territory of the protagonists is very important. Characteristically enough, in the novels by Ikstena and Ābele, and also in the novel *I8* by Pauls Bankovskis (b. 1973), there is a clear attempt to claim certain territory and to confirm the belonging to both the country and the city that is defined by the trajectories of the main protagonists. Bankovskis 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.” (Bankovskis 2014: 173)

The novels which discuss the first half of the twentieth century mostly focus on rural milieus and familiar landscapes, while the texts that predominantly

tackle the experience of the Soviet period also add detailed descriptions of urban milieu, which in a similar manner may become familiar and foreign at the same time.

The Shifting Boundaries of the Colonizer and the Colonized.

Andra Manfelde. *Virsnieku sievas*

At the initial stages of postcolonial theory, the relations between the colonizer and the colonized were interpreted as binary oppositions. This is clearly and strongly reflected by Albert Memmi in his classical study *Portrait du colonisé, précédé par Portrait du colonisateur* (The Colonizer and the Colonized, 1957, English edition 1965). Even if the author explicitly reflects on the complexity of his own personal position as an involuntary representative of a higher social class, while working as a colonial administrator in Tunis, strong oppositions remain intact. Contemporary research predominantly tends to see these constructed roles as structural positions. According to the Romanian scholar Bogdan Ștefănescu, “an ideological description of post-imperialist identities, whether postcolonial or post-communist, should, therefore, look for structural relationships between colonizer and colonized, rather than to the particulars of colonization”. (Ștefănescu 2013: 39) This is a general marker of a larger tendency of comparative evaluations, as documented, for example, by the critical approach to inter-imperial structural relationships. “The inter-imperial approach examines the interviewing of macropolitical fields and intersubjective or intimate actions.” (Doyle 2015: 338) A similar approach is also at the core of the concept of ‘multidirectional memory’ as discussed by Michael Rothberg (Rothberg 2009). The novels in the series pay attention to the responsibility of particular individuals in the events, which took place in the respective territories, including the Holocaust as discussed in *Svina garša* by Māris Bērziņš (b. 1962). They also openly discuss the problematic position of the representatives of the ruling elite in an alien territory, including large numbers of Soviet officials, military personnel and their family members, who either deliberately came or were ordered to serve in Latvia under Soviet rule.

In her novel *Virsnieku sievas*, Andra Manfelde succeeds at a metaphorical representation of the divided spaces, occupied by completely different social and ethnic groups.

The location, where the events of the novel unfold, is a closed military town, situated at the outskirts of Liepāja in the westernmost part of Latvia. In regard to her approach to this place, Manfelde stresses that “almost like marks on a human body, time has left its inscription here, all the ruthless, juvenile

chaos of the tsarist and Soviet eras, and the nineteen nineties' turmoil alike". (Manfelde 2017: 246) The inhabitants of this place during the second half of the twentieth century seemingly live their own lives totally segregated from the town of Liepāja. There is also a physical marker of this separation in the widely elaborated image of a drawbridge.

The novel has an affinity to other texts in its relevance to personal experiences of the author. Manfelde's first visit to the location, later chosen for her novel, dates from 1995. There have been many subsequent meetings with people she encountered there, even though the author maintains that a number of her acquaintances were not mentioned in the book. "Adapted for the styles of my characters, the stories of the rest of the people I met in the Liepāja Karosta are found in my book. My storytellers have been so numerous!" (Manfelde 2017: 247)

Due to these thorough inquiries, the book comes close to an ethnographic description in its attempt to discover lost traces of the past. The main focus of the novel is on the everyday reality of the 'military town'. "The washed-out five storey buildings looked like survivors of some battle, peeling and grey." (Manfelde 2017: 245) In contrast, there is the magnificent building of the early twentieth-century Russian Orthodox Church with its cathedral spires, "not adorned by crosses during the seventies, but rather by a faded Soviet flag". (Manfelde 2017: 248) Initially built as part of the fortifications during the late tsarist era, this religious building was turned into 'officers' club' during Soviet times, even though the eyes of the saints still haunt the attendants, suddenly appearing through the pale paint on the walls.

Another facet of the novel is provided by sporadic visits of officers and their wives to Liepāja. On the rare occasions when the inhabitants of the military town happen to be there, they observe local people with 'imperial eyes', as defined by Mary Louise Pratt. (Pratt 2008)

The experience of the locals, on the contrary, for the most part remains unarticulated and hidden, as they belong to the category of the 'subaltern'. These people are seemingly happy to get a rare possibility to do some shopping in the Karosta, which is better off in terms of supplies. Another shopping route for the local people is to the neighbouring Lithuania. A dramatic episode occurs after the return home from such a trip of one of the Latvian women when her communal flat neighbour appears to have stolen one of the two geese she had bought, and the resulting dissatisfaction almost amounts to an existential crisis.

The divide between the two opposite groups of people remains preserved throughout the text, while, on the other hand, its innovative potential is provided by the focus of the narrator, concentrating on the experiences of

'officers' wives' who remain alien to the local people, even if at the same time they experience their own personal dramas.

Ethnic Relations and the Everyday. Laima Kota. *Istaba*

The literary critic Ieva Kalniņa has aptly noted that the representation of reality in Latvian literature during the Soviet era often created an impression that there were no ethnic tensions in society and other nationalities living side by side with the Latvians were strongly underrepresented. (Kalniņa 1991) The fact that the everyday reality was in fact completely different is demonstrated by the majority of the novels in the new series. However, even in this context *Istaba* by Laima Kota (b. 1962) stands apart, for the co-existence of different nationalities in the late 1980s is one of the principal topics of her book.

The protagonist of the novel, a young girl of artistic aspirations, Margrieta, only formally provides the focal point of the plot. The focus of the novel is on the daily experience of the inhabitants of a communal flat which consists of eight different rooms and is shared by people of very different social and ethnic backgrounds (Latvians, Russians and Jews). Contrary to the widespread belief (and often reality) that the living conditions of the local Latvian population were consciously made worse by Soviet authorities, if compared to migrants from other parts of the Soviet Union, the novel shows an equal level of suffering from everybody sharing the same living space. In their attempts to adapt to the changing conditions of the late Soviet era, when some kind of private initiative was allowed but which tended to get out of control, the experience of protagonists is shown in a tragicomic light, reminiscent of the Soviet movies as well as satirical novels of that era.

The reader of the book recognizes a lot of details of the period, including the war in Afghanistan, where the Soviet Union participated with a number of troops, soldiers from the Baltic littoral being recruited in relatively large numbers; the explosion of the atomic reactor in Chernobyl, about which there was no information for several days, while people were sent to participate in the rescue works without clear orders and having no idea how dangerous the whole undertaking really was; the funeral of the political leader of the Soviet Union, Leonid Brezhnev, which later turned out to be only the first act in a series of similar events that marked the grotesque end of the Soviet Empire; and resounding but often ill-advised reforms of the last Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, including his extensive campaign against the use of alcohol, which also resulted in an absurd clearance of wine fields in one of the Soviet republics, Moldova. Many of these events have left an impression in the memory of

ordinary Soviet citizens, but their real importance was often grasped only retrospectively, the fact that also mirrors the general lack of information about these events.

At the same time, the great variety of characters squeezed into one room points toward a conscious effort by the author to provide a catalogue of important details from late Soviet reality. In order to collect different experiences and memories, Laima Kota had numerous conversations with her friends about their impressions from the 1980s. “I started to assemble my materials. I talked to my friends. Everyone I asked questions like “Do you remember anything about perestroika?” started to smile. Yes, just really simple like that, they were recalling the time when their kitchens and garden sheds heard their personal versions of moonshine bubbling inside.” (Kota 2017: 315–316) These detailed stories, which have undergone a careful elaboration by the author before they reappear in the book, help to provide a lively picture of rather typical everyday reality, which was not only shared by so many Soviet citizens, but which has also turned into an indistinguishable part of their personal memories.

Conclusion

The publications in the series of novels *Mēs. Latvija, XX gadsimts* reveal multifaceted realities of the Soviet era which certainly deserve thorough investigation on the level of the representation of the everyday as well as in the context of postcolonial studies more generally. Structural mechanisms, which have determined life in the Soviet Baltic littoral in the second half of the twentieth century, have many parallels in the experience of other East-Central European nations before and after the fall of communism.

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