

Re-visiting History and Culture in Latvian Literature: An Introduction

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As part of culture, literature is closely linked with humans; it is man-made, envisaged for people, and reflects the inner world of man and different stages of human life. At the same time, it is a reflection of reality and a construct that is formed and exists according to its own laws, which differ at various stages of development. Thus, literary texts are related to the time and space in which they are created.

The development of Latvian literature is inextricably linked with the history of Latvia and the development of culture. The history of the Latvian state is a striking example of the constant interaction of different cultures. In various epochs of the formation and development of Latvian culture, it has been influenced by the cultures of bigger nations (German, Swedish, Polish, Russian etc.). The impacts have been determined by the long periods of dependence, namely, Latvia has been subjected to other countries since the thirteenth century, and up to 1918, and then, after a short period of independence, it was occupied again (Kacane and Romanovska 224-226).

The history of Latvian culture is usually considered in two stages—until and after the middle of the nineteenth century. The First Latvian National Awakening (1850-1880) is considered to be the dividing line; it was the time when the national movement “Young Latvians” firmly established itself by starting the formation of the national ideology and the development of the national culture after a long period of Latvian culture being led by other peoples. The national movement started by the Young Latvians determined the further development of the Latvians, creating and spreading the idea that the Latvians are a united nation with a common language, origin and experience, which has developed in a particular territory and is able to shape their culture independently without being subordinated to German or Russian cultures (Apals).

However, it should be noted that although the idea of nationalism was announced and developed in the middle of the nineteenth century, the formation of Latvian culture was a result of the interaction of different cultures both before and after First Latvian National Awakening, as ethnic minorities formed and influenced the development of the national culture. Even today, Latvia is considered to be a multicultural country. According to the census data of 1897, there were 1.929 million people living in the territory of Latvia at that time, 68% of the total population were Latvians. The second largest ethnic community was Russians (12% of the total population), whereas the third largest—Jews (7.4%). The proportions of Germans and Poles were also significant (6.2% and 3.4%, respectively). The results of the 2018 census also are indicative of the situation of multiculturalism: 62% of Latvians, 25% of Russians, 3% of Belarusians, Poles, Ukrainians and other nationalities are also present (“Oficiālās statistikas portāls”).

In today’s humanities and social sciences in Latvia, much attention is being paid to the interaction of cultures; attempts are being made to form an analytical and neutral view. Intercultural communication has been one of the most pressing, complex and controversial topics over the centuries. Cultural migration/ mobility, as viewed from different perspectives and situations, is treated both positively (as a mutually enriching process) and negatively (as the suppression of culture). Foreign culture tends to be both intimidating (as natural for a human to be afraid of the unknown) and attractive (for the unknown arouses interest) (Romanovska 75).

Interaction of cultures has been described using various theories and their key notions. One of the most relevant notions, which characterises the interaction of cultures in a neutral way and denotes the equal coexistence of many cultures, is multiculturalism. “[M]ulticulturalism refers to the existence of difference and uneven power relations among populations in terms of racial, ethnic, religious, geographical distinctions and other cultural markers that deviate from dominant, often racialized, ‘norms.’ Based upon an acknowledgement of diversity, multiculturalism also refers to formal recognition and incorporation of those defined by such differences through policies and discourses that acknowledge the rights and needs of minoritized groups within the public realm, but which also control the terms of such integration” (Clayton 212). Notwithstanding the seemingly neutral nature of multiculturalism, in everyday life there are situations that make one discern threats: there appear questions about the democracy and efficiency of the governance system of a multicultural society, respect for the group and individual rights, dangers of assimilation, etc. For instance, the former Minister of Culture of the Republic of Latvia Helena Demakova pointed out that multiculturalism is in stark contrast to the idea of a national

state. However, the future of Latvia is possible only if based on the uniting ideas—the Latvian language and national symbols (Demakova). There is also a positive assessment of multiculturalism, and, for example, Ilga Apine et al. (12-36) claim that democratic intercultural communication is the most successful political solution. With reference to Michel de Montaigne, Stephen Greenblatt, in “Cultural Mobility: An Introduction” (1-24), considers cultural migration a process enriching national cultures; in turn, cultures that do not experience it are stable and develop slowly and dully.

Interaction of cultures may lead to the hybridity of culture and identity. As a complementary and non-exclusionary phenomenon, a hybrid identity may consist of but is not limited to (1) a national identity, (2) a national minority identity existing and developing alongside the national one, (3) European, and (4) global/globalised identity, the latter being often seen as “identification with all of humanity” (McFarland, Webb, and Brown). One of the most influential researchers of cultural hybridity is Peter Burke. In the afterword of Latvian translation of Burke’s *Cultural Hybridity*, Dennis Hanov aptly defines his idea as follows: “Cultural hybridity is characteristic of every modern society and is not a sign of negative development or ‘decay,’ but rather a feature of a long-lasting, enduring cultural process that over the last 20 years is simply building momentum owing to the spectrum of new, technologically advanced distributors” (Hanovs 132).

The articles included in this issue of the journal *Forum for World Literature Studies* on Latvian culture and literature were conducted at the Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences at Daugavpils University (Latvia). The studies have been carried out within the framework of various projects, where the focus is on the interaction of cultures and the formation of identities. Within the framework of all the projects, a special place was given to the research on the peculiarities of the culture of the Latgale region.

Latgale is a cultural and historical region in the eastern part of Latvia. The territorial identity of today’s Latgale is traced back to the Principality of Jersika at the turn of the thirteenth century, which in the Latin texts is referred to as Lethia, and as Lotigola in the Old Russian records. In the thirteenth century, Latgalian lands occupied the territory of modern Latgale and the eastern part of Vidzeme. The territory Lethia inhabited by Latgalians gave the name for the country of Latvia. After the Livonian War (1558-1583), the Latgalian lands became part of the Polish-Lithuanian State. In 1629, after the Polish-Swedish War (1600-1629), the Truce of Altmark was signed. According to the treaty, Latgale (Województwo inflanckie [the Inflanty Voivodeship]) was separated from Vidzeme, which remained under Swedish rule. In

1772, after the first partition of Poland, Latgale became part of the Russian Empire (Romanovska 46-47). “Latgale was part of other governorates unlike Vidzeme and Kurzeme, and it was not perceived as a truly Latvian territory by people of Vidzeme and Kurzeme up to 1905-1906” (Kursīte 17). This increased the gap between Latgale and other regions of Latvia, and it was only in 1917 when the decision to unite the territories was made. However, the administrative isolation of Latgale, which had lasted for almost 300 years, determined the peculiar economic, social, and cultural development of the region, which still differs from the other parts of Latvia.

In 2020-2021, a project financed by the Latvian Council of Science “The Baltic Germans of Latgale in the Context of Socio-ethnic Relations from the 17th till the Beginning of the 20th Century” was implemented. The project’s focus was on the multicultural society of the Latgale region, one of the historical, ethnic monuments of which is the Baltic Germans. Until now, the cultural heritage and identity of this minority in the region of Latgale has not been thoroughly studied. The six researchers involved in the project analysed the different ways in which German and Latvian cultures interact, paying particular attention to the issues of reception. Three facets of perception have been considered: the Germans through the eyes of the Germans themselves, the Germans as viewed by other ethnic groups and other ethnic groups as viewed by the Germans.

The influence of German culture on Latvian culture appeared at the earliest, starting with the arrival of the Crusaders in the territory of Latvia in the twelfth century. Researchers have studied its manifestations in various humanities and social sciences disciplines in Latvia and abroad. By segmenting the influence into the German, Baltic German and that of the German state (Cerūzis, Malahovska), multifaceted impact on Latvia’s history and culture has been observed.

In Latvian historiography, the influence of other cultures is often denoted by the notion of “factor.” This concept and its significance in the history of Latvia was discussed by several researchers in a round table discussion in 1998 (Krievu-vācu... 1998), as well as considered in their publications. In history studies, the dominant opinion is that the Baltic Germans as a socio-linguistic group of the population formed in the territory of modern Latvia in the nineteenth century, at the same time as the Latvian nation (“Vācbaltieši”). The influence of Baltic German culture diminished significantly at the end of 1939 with the emigration of most people of the Baltic German minority.

The chronological framework of the project was from the seventeenth century till the early twentieth century. That was when the state of Latvia had not yet been formed, and the territory was under the rule of different states—the Polish-Lithu-

anian Commonwealth and then the Russian Empire. However, that was also when the prerequisites for the future national state were formed and the time of the most intense interethnic communication.

As a result of the project, attempts were made to determine the place of the German community in the multicultural environment of Latgale in a diachronic and synchronic perspective based on certain methodological principles, analysis of various sources (legislative enactments, set of laws, ego-documents, folklore materials, etc.) and by introducing new diverse sources into the scientific circulation. The project emphasises the level of perception. The results of the project are diverse and envisaged for both the scientific community and the general public: a summer school was organised, a tourist route was created, a collective monograph was published, and several articles, including the one (presented below) by Tatjana Kuznecova on the image of the Baltic Germans in Latvian anecdotes, were published.

In 2021, another research in the field of culture was supported by Daugavpils University by allocating funding for the development of publications and participation in conferences. The project “Cultural Memory and Identities of Latvia’s Future: Crosspoints of Literature, History and Religion III” was implemented in 2021 and is a continuation of the projects of the previous two years. The research aimed to analyse the current processes in Latvian literature and religion in a unified view from a comparative and interdisciplinary perspective, defining the peculiarities of Latvian cultural identity through the prism of collective memory. The topicality of the research in the scientific aspect is related to the current situation in the world culture, i.e., under the conditions of globalisation, a collective and individual identity crisis is observable, hybrid/ multiple identities appear. This is due to the changes in the system of values and social processes, the development of various forms of communication, the openness of the world, problems of integration of past and future and so on. The research on identity is crucial; such studies allow for the definition and preservation of cultural values and peculiarities of collective and individual identities and outline the perspectives of further development.

The topicality and importance of the research in the context of Latvian culture and science is related to the priorities of Latvian cultural policy defined in important policy documents (“Sustainable Development Strategy of Latvia until 2030,” “The National Development Plan of Latvia 2014-2020,” etc.). The preservation of cultural legacy and national identity is one of the most significant points in ensuring the existence and security of a country. Therefore, one of the essential emphases in the research is national identity and the role of ethnic, religious, and regional identities in its formation.

The results of the research carried out within the framework of the project have been disseminated both to the general public at science promotion events and to the scientific community in the form of publications and conference presentations, including the publications presented below and developed by Alina Romanovska (on the binary opposition “rural”—“urban” in the Latvian literature of the early twentieth century and Antons Austriņš’ (1884-1934) prose fiction in particular), Žans Badins (on the laughter situations in Leonid Dobychin’s (1894-1936) novel *The Town of N*, published in 1935), and Ilze Kacane (on aesthetic cosmopolitanism and detachment of art from life under the conditions of the heightened ideologisation of art in the 1940 and the 1950s).

Some articles included in this issue are devoted to the exploration of festive traditions in Latvian literature and have been written within the frame of Daugavpils University research project “Festivity Culture in the Colonial and Postcolonial Latvia: Celebration and Transformation”, which was implemented in 2021. The project aimed to provide an interdisciplinary characterisation of several Latvian national, religious, ethnic, family festivities (holidays) and show their transformations in the cultural-historical (including religious), literary and educational aspects by carrying out the analysis of collective and individual memories, traumas and experience of totalitarianism within the context of a 100-year-long changeable power and discontinuity: the period of independent Latvia, Soviet-German-Soviet occupation, Soviet period, and the post-Soviet period—the period of a renewed independence of Latvia. Festivities—a dynamic manifestation of spiritual culture—include both those stable cultural-historical values and traditions that reveal the world view of the present society and transformations caused by the past epochs. Handing down traditions from generation to generation is based on the assumption that a human himself is also subject to change, and that to remain alive a tradition must transform, which implies that throughout decades, centuries and millenniums the Latvian festive culture has changed too. The basis of the Latvian lexeme “svētki” is the Indo-European root “sv-”, which within the frame of the opposition “the festive—the mundane” reveals the meaning of festivity as being a moment of enlightening: “During festivities, people must gain spiritual enlightenment, strength for living during the many coming mundane days which won’t have much of that light” (Kursīte).

The geopolitical transformations of the 1940 and events of WWII resulted in losing the national independence and Soviet colonialism (1940-1941; 1944/5-1991) oriented towards a systematic splitting/disrupting the national identity and culture. Thus, the development of independent Latvia, which since the foundation of the state (1918) had been recognised as one of the most rapidly growing European

states and cultures, was now brutally halted. De-Sovietization of the calendar in the 1990s is a manifestation of creating a new spatiotemporal reality and the replacement of imposed Soviet holidays by the holidays which were swept away in the 1940s; it included restoration of festivities from the pre-Soviet period and recovery of the national holidays and a religious component of the ritual year (Bule). Cultural and sociological studies reveal that although the continuity of national and religious holidays in Latvia has been preserved to this day, the festive culture has been greatly affected by half a century long Russification and secularism, which is observed in today's cultural processes and testified to by the data of qualitative and quantitative research (Kovzele 2020), as well as by the literary works under analysis.

The articles related to transformations of festivities and cultural hybridity included in this issue of the journal *Forum for World Literature Studies* present the creative work of both widely known Latvian writers and authors whose works have not been so extensively studied and have even been banned during the Soviet period. These articles also add to the research of the above-mentioned project on de-ideologisation of school textbooks (with the focus on traditional/religious festivities) and evolution of festive traditions (with the focus on Old Believer wedding rites in different time periods), which are published in *Proceedings of 13th annual International Conference on Education and New Learning Technologies—EDULEARN21* (Kacane and Kovzele) and in *Journal of Ethnology and Folkloristics* (Korolova et al.).

In her article “Semantics of Religious Festivals in Latvian Childhood Memories in the 20th Century”, Anita Stašulāne analyses the autobiographical prose of writers representing different historical periods of the previous century (Jānis Jaunsudrabiņš (1877-1962), Anna Brigadere (1861-1933), Jānis Klīdzējs (1914-2000), Vizma Belševica (1931-2005)) and the semantic fields of religious festivals, which thus allows retracing the transformations of the semiotics of childhood memories dictated by the epoch. The article “Representation of Christmas in Childhood Memory Narratives: Reflecting and Revisiting the Past” by Ilze Kacane and Oksana Kovzele (forthcoming in *Forum for World Literature Studies*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2022) analyses Latvian writer Diāna Skaidrīte Varslavāne's (1932) two childhood memory narratives—*Cilvēks spēlējās ar lāčiem* [Human Plays with Bears] (1975) and *Dzērvinīki* [Cold and Red Feet] (2001), which by depicting World War II and first post-war years, as well as by re-visiting the final years of independence period in the south-eastern part of Latvia—the Latgale region (“the golden epoch”), allow tracing changes in celebrating religious holidays and Christmas in particular, one of today's highest-ranked holidays in the region (Stasulane 2021), and discover strategies for

maintaining one's "self," including religiosity and spirituality in unfavourable historical circumstances and post-traumatic situations. By reflecting on the individual and collective history, the author reveals a crucial place of memory in human's life as memory is "a key to personal, social, and cultural identity" (Kenny 420). The article "The 'Alien' within 'One's Own' in the Twenty-first Century Latvian Literature (on the Material of Dace Rukšāne's Novel *Russian Skin*) by Oksana Kovzele and Ilze Kacane focuses on the transformation of woman's identity under the impact of political and social changes. The theme of festivities in the novel published in 2020 helps reveal relationships between "one's own" and "the alien" and is significant for depicting emotional identification with "others" and delving into self-identification processes. Although the literary work by a contemporary Latvian writer Dace Rukšāne (1969) demonstrates a reconstructed view of the social reality and reveals controversy over "history" and "cultural wars," it also offers the present-day understanding of identity as a changeable social phenomenon and inner expression.

We would like to express our gratitude to the editors of the journal *Forum for World Literature Studies* for the opportunity to present some of our findings in this special issue and hope they will provide a more profound conception of the development tendencies of Latvian culture and literature.

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