CHAPTER 5

Depiction of a Heroic People, a New Source from the Imaginary Landscape Created in Latvian Art

After a long period of confinement to the representation of nature and scenes of everyday life, or ‘genre painting’, Latvian culture could now find inspiration in war, with new themes for expression in both literature and art. The artists often had personal experience of the fighting, of the transmigration of large sections of the population, or of the epic hardships of refugee life.¹ They had witnessed these events at first hand and wished to express their experiences.

A The Representation of Battles

The wartime exploits of the Latvian Riflemen were seared into the Latvians’ collective memory for several decades, and their representation in the country’s visual art doubtless played a crucial part in ensuring this strong and durable presence.

A major study of the role of artists in the visibility of the new Latvian state was recently carried out in a collective bilingual work (Latvian/English), richly illustrated with photographs and documents from the time, entitled Latvijai topot māksla un laikmets – No de facto lidz de iure – The birth of Latvia. Art and the age. Published in November 2008 to accompany an exhibition held at the National Latvian Museum of Art (or LNMM) marking the 90th anniversary of the proclamation of independence, it included various contributions from the Latvian historical archives and the collections of the National Museum. With these artefacts it highlighted the participation of artists in the war and their active contribution to the Latvian political project.

1 Artists’ involvement

The works produced by Latvian artists formed an artistic and patriotic corpus that was broadly displayed and reproduced in many of the wartime era’s magazines and newspapers. These publications emphasized the national dimension of the war, with images of the Latvian Riflemen and of peasants taking refuge

in exile. As was the case in other countries involved in the war, this military – or even militarist – propaganda was matched by a current of national patriotism, as will be explained below.

From 1915 onwards, postcards produced to boost the recruitment of future riflemen, and sold for the benefit of these regiments, were designed by mainstream graphic artists such as Rihards Zariņš, Jānis Tillbergs and Janis Rozentāls. This phenomenon of art deployed in support of the Latvian Riflemen fighting in the Russian army will be further dealt with at the end of this chapter in a section on representation in the form of postcards.

In marked contrast was the work produced by Kārlis Baltgailis. Unreceptive to Bolshevik ideas, this artist joined the Imanta regiment formed in Vladivostok in November 1918, returning to Latvia in 1920 after the long journey referred to above. During the time he spent on the French vessel Gweneth, Baltgailis illustrated the ship’s hand-written newspaper Kaija. This publication provides a glimpse of life on board the vessel for these Latvian soldiers and an insight into the military cooperation of the French nationals tasked with keeping these riflemen from joining the Bolshevik forces. A few years after his return, Baltgailis produced Ložmetējkalns and Nāves sala, two sets of paintings dealing with the themes of the riflemen that, while non-realist in nature, were particularly dramatic, based upon sketches made on the battlefield.

This movement also included Jāzeps Grosvalds and Jēkabs Kazāks, two artists viewed with considerable respect in Latvia. The second of these was strongly influenced by his experience of refugee life, a theme that recurred in his artistic output, as will be explained in a subsequent section.

2  **Jāzeps Grosvalds** — Artist and Soldier

Although his life was short (he died of Spanish influenza in Paris in 1920 aged just 29), the talented Jāzeps Grosvalds had a profound impact upon the Latvian art of his era. His life history was very typical of his generation: having joined the army in 1916, he spent time in the trenches, fighting as a rifleman and experiencing ‘trial by fire’. In spite of the dangers he faced, he tirelessly sketched scenes of life in the trenches in pads and notebooks that have been kept for posterity. During periods away from the front lines, he reworked his sketches as gouaches or watercolours. Unlike many illustrators – in the Russian press for

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2 The Machine-gun Hill and Island of Death.
3 1891–1920.
4 Although he did not serve on the front line, since he was often needed for translation duties.
5 In Riga’s National Latvian Museum of Art.