

Lithuanian Literature of the Soviet Period: Phenomena and Concepts

With the end of Soviet censorship in Lithuania, it seemed that a new history of Lithuanian literature—the one that everyone “knew” and that had been suppressed, distorted, represented in terms of class struggle, written according to “the one true method,” and planted full of *perkūnsargiai*¹—would be written immediately. It did not seem like such a difficult task.

Fulfilling this expectation, a collection of articles titled *XX amžiaus lietuvių literatūra* (Twentieth century Lithuanian literature) appeared in 1994. This collection explores Lithuanian literature, including that of the Soviet period, from multiple angles, dealing with questions such as resistance and conformity, and generational shifts. Vytautas Kubilius’s controversial *XX amžiaus literatūra* (Literature of the twentieth century, 1995) appeared one year later. There were even complaints that literary history contains too much history and not enough literature—that it is preoccupied with social and ideological contexts rather than aesthetic assessments. We can now see, however, that Lithuanian literary scholars’ concern with social issues in their analyses of Soviet-era works has only intensified in subsequent years. But it is also evident that the longing for a “correct” literary history has remained unfulfilled. This was

¹ During the Soviet period, the word *perkūnsargis* [lightning-rod] referred to the inclusion of a text (a preface to a book, or a poem at the beginning of a collection) which included quotes from Marx and Lenin or spoke about the Party or Lenin in order to showcase a “correct” ideological viewpoint.

not the anticipated account of the Soviet period, and it was hoped that more people would be willing to do the job. This stage was, to some degree, completed by the appearance of the *Lietuvių literatūros enciklopedija* (Encyclopedia of Lithuanian literature) in 2001.

Eventually, expectations for a qualitatively new history of Lithuanian literature of the Soviet period seemed to have subsided. Or perhaps it was understood that empirical “knowledge” is not enough and that new theoretical approaches are necessary if a fresh perspective on a fairly recent period is to be achieved, and that there is also a need for many smaller research projects that would fundamentally re-think the functioning of the literary field as a whole, and re-evaluate key authors and canonical works. As a result, a good number of individual monographs and studies, analyses of how literature was controlled during the Soviet period, and numerous recollections of and discussions about Soviet-era Lithuanian literature, were published. Historians such as Vilius Ivanauskas, Aurimas Švedas, and Mindaugas Tamošaitis have analysed literary turning points in their works. Although yet another collection of articles—*Tarp estetikos ir politikos: lietuvių literatūra sovietmečiu* (Between aesthetics and politics: Lithuanian literature of the Soviet period, 2015)—was published, there still remains a feeling that, as a whole, the literature of the Soviet period—its complexity and its contradictions—is yet to be fully grasped.

This publication by the Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore is not, of course, a new history of Lithuanian literature of the Soviet period, but rather the beginning of such work. It is an encyclopedia and a history, and combines the genres of collective monograph and collection of articles. This volume applies historical, sociological, political science, aesthetics, and other approaches to Lithuanian literature of the Soviet period. Things that would be merely stated in an encyclopedia are here discussed more broadly, though not necessarily unambiguously,

and without avoiding problematic aspects of the topic. Because some of the themes discussed here have not yet been extensively researched, authors did not so much need to summarize previous studies as carry out new ones. In general, the project was born out of the long-term work of the Lithuanian Literature and Folklore's Department of Contemporary Literature and such long-standing research programs as "Historical Studies of the Soviet Period Literature (2012-2016)," "Literature as a Witness of Sociability: Aesthetics, Memory and Mentality in the Late Soviet Period (from 2017)," individual research studies, seminars about the Soviet period, local and international conferences, research trips, archival work, and the collection and interpretation of oral history.

The work *Lithuanian Literature of the Soviet Period: Phenomena and Concepts* is intended for both the academic community and those who are studying or want to become familiar with Lithuanian culture of the Soviet period. At the same time, it is a summary of all the work done by Lithuanian sovietologists, and seeks to answer the questions: what were the most important phenomena of the period and what are the key concepts related to it? Most of these phenomena and concepts are not, of course characteristic only of the Soviet period; it is possible to discuss humour, the grotesque, or gender relations in the literature of any other epoch or region. But in this particular work we are interested in how these things functioned under the ideological conditions of the Soviet period and to what extent they were determined by ideology and political circumstances. We do not, therefore, attempt to provide definitions of monosemantic notions (social realism, grotesque, humour, myth, Aesopian language), but, rather, plunge into the phenomena themselves, i.e. the context of Lithuanian literature in the Soviet period.

To some degree Lithuanian literature is reviewed in the context of broader cultural processes. We focus on the reception and functioning of literature in order help readers understand

the situation of literary texts, the codes for reading them that prevailed in the society of the time, and the methods used to ideologically rewrite history and manipulate facts. Summaries are made not necessarily after everything is done—when all the aspects of Soviet-era literary research are covered and its most important issues presented—but rather in preparation for a new stage of research; in turn, the summaries provide new research directions. In the current publication, this has been done using new archival material and theoretical approaches.

The first chapter of this book, “Periods,” seeks to provide a coherent rethinking of the chronological stages of Lithuanian literature, an analysis of writers’ stances under different political conditions, as well as an examination of institutional networks, the creation of the Socialist Realism canon, and the development of alternatives to it. Summaries are made taking the analysis of individual cases into account. We focus on the establishment of the Soviet literary field, its formation, and deviations from the canon, as well as the emergence of alternatives and subsystems within it.

What we refer to as “the Soviet period” was not a solid, monolithic cultural stage; it consists of very different epochs, each of which dictated distinct terms to literature, not to mention the fact that literature itself had a different place and power in society during that period. This publication deals with literature between 1945 and 1990: the Stalinist period (until 1953), the Khrushchev Thaw (from the late 1950s to the early 1960s), the Brezhnev stagnation years (from the end of the 1970s to the mid-1980s) and the Reform movement (from roughly 1985). The process of literature’s increasing independence, its separation from politics, and the decreasing use of ideological clichés is evident throughout the Soviet period. We would find more similarities than differences between the periods of 1945–46 and 1988–89. On the other hand, the Soviet period’s cultural politics did not follow a smooth path of liberalization and free-

dom. Each stage contained its own thaws and stagnations, and literary works which probably should not have been published were published, or vice versa; some works were attacked, criticized, and blocked, even though today it is practically impossible to explain the reasons behind this simply by examining the texts themselves. However, the general guidelines of the epoch—these were determined during Communist Party congresses and handed down to lower institutions for implementation—always carried weight; they were manipulated in order to control writers and generated the “Newspeak” of the time (some events, such as the decisions about the magazines *Zvezda* and *Leningrad*, in 1946, are treated by several articles in this volume). Therefore, by examining the key cultural policies of each stage, the articles here also present certain isolated cases which illustrate that the fate and assessment of literature and separate works were determined not only by high level Communist Party edicts, but also by lower-level institutional decisions, as the result of private human relations, and sometimes even through unexplained coincidences.

It is therefore clear that government is not a fully coordinated system that functions undivided, and without contradictions, and ensures the smooth functioning of culture like a factory that never produced defects. Even at the institutional level, there were duplications of functions, unwritten rules, telephone laws, struggles for influence, personal ambitions, and grievances. A single complaint, or an official who was motivated to react to it, was enough to cause many things to change—an individual could be arrested, their book blocked, a theatrical production cancelled, and so on. Many government officials simply wanted to carry out their work in a diligent and exemplary way—they wanted to further their careers and were looking for opportunities to distinguish themselves.

For these reasons, the separation of the chapters “Guidelines” and “Alternatives and Mimicries” is more complicated.

One of the first concepts and phenomena encountered by readers interested in the Soviet period is censorship, restriction of individual freedoms, various prohibitions, and taboos. We therefore wanted to talk about the demands (directives) made upon literature and how they were circumvented, and the alternatives to formal aesthetics and cultural policies that existed. Of course, even before we started thinking about this structure, it was clear that the culture of the Soviet period was a hybrid one and that the colours black and white could only be seen from a distance (as, for example, Lithuanian deportees to Siberia assessed developments in Lithuania, such as the stance of Vincas Mykolaitis-Putinas). But from closer up, those who had to live and operate within this field had to think more about complex and intertwined forms of culture action, compromise, and reservations. Thus, officially, only guidelines and mimicries functioned within the literary field, while the true alternatives—for example, the literature of partisans and deportees—only appeared publicly during the years of the Reform movement. As already mentioned, phenomena and concepts in this publication are analysed primarily within a broad context. There was practically no real alternative in Soviet Lithuania, and nor do we really have any manuscripts that were “written into the drawer” during that time.

In such a society, literary works usually had to balance between guidelines and alternatives. The clever use of Aesopian language could turn an ideologically acceptable topic around; critique of the church could provide opportunities for speaking about national sentiments; positioned at the beginning of a collection, a poem dedicated to the party could secure peace for other texts. Although most writers saw and understood this hybridity within Soviet culture, their viewpoints and evaluations of differed. Some accepted the inevitability of a situation one had to adapt to; for others, this forced embrace of hybridity was like trying to follow God and the devil at the same time.

However, the absolute majority of writers lived in a grey area marked by neither disillusionment nor conformism. Thus, at least within the literary field, “guidelines” and “alternatives” were theoretical rather than practical notions. For example, the poet Tomas Venclova saw hybridity as a matter of adaptability and compromise—that, when it came to Soviet ideology, it was not acceptable to write in a way that could at once be read favourably and critically by the regime. And yet, by emigrating, Venclova himself proved that it was practically impossible to create without compromise and at the same time earn money while living in the Soviet system. Further, no artwork is ever monosemantic—without the possibility of different readings, it can hardly be seen as literature. Writers tried to make use of that as well.

The management of literature also involved mechanisms of ideological supervision and control, including compulsory topics and tasks imposed by the Party. In order for a modern reader to understand how literature resisted and tried to avoid compromises, we must return to the key topic of compromise. This publication offers a fresh look at Socialist Realism topics that could only have been discussed in the Soviet period: “Lenin and Stalin in Lithuanian Literature,” “Atheist propaganda in literature,” and “Work, industrialization and literature.” The article “Socialist Realism” further explores the application of Socialist Realism in literature. These Socialist Realism topics are crucial to any general re-evaluation of the period’s cultural politics, prevailing canons, or attempt to identify the most modern literary phenomena in that context.

Soviet-era Lithuanian literature was shaped not only by ideological directives but also by new forms of language and connotations, and the manipulation of consciousness by a new jargon (the article “Newspeak and Taboo”), which in turn shaped journalism, literature, and literary reception. Indeed, the Orwellian process of language transformation became standard practice.

As Aušra Jurgutienė writes, “this Newspeak’s incantatory manipulation of clichés would so hypnotize human consciousness that people would understand and evaluate the reality according to the Party’s unverifiable instructions, so that eventually one simply began to believe in them. For example, when the phrase “rotting capitalism” is constantly repeated, one starts to think that capitalism must indeed be living its last days; and when someone habitually writes about the “achievements of socialism,” it seems that the system will flourish and prosper forever, despite the fact that there is no way of substantiating or verifying such abstract statements.” The large-scale spread and entrenchment of this new discourse in the public sphere were powerful tools for constructing the new Soviet individual.

In this context, the mere avoidance of compulsory topics or socialist realist newspeak were ways of resisting the Sovietization of culture. Articles such as “Reflections of the Past in Soviet-Era Literature” (Praeities refleksijos sovietmečio literatūroje), “The Theme of the Holocaust” (Holokausto tema), “Folklore in the Soviet Period” (Tautosaka sovietmečiu), “Humour” (Humoras), “Country Life” (Kaimo tema), “Representation of the Intelligentsia” (Intelligentijos vaizdavimas), “Myth in the Soviet-Era Literature” (Mitas sovietmečio literatūroje) and “The Grotesque” (Groteskas) present both the official viewpoint—the “correct” treatment of these subjects—and attempts to turn them around, to “turn Socialist Realism inside out.”

In addition to directives and taboos related to Soviet ideology, articles in this volume also explore the liberalization and modernization of Lithuanian literature and the establishment of a “realism without shores.” The authors Icchokas Meras, Justinas Marcinkevičius, Romualdas Granauskas, Judita Vaičiūnaitė, Sigitas Geda, Juozas Aputis, and Saulius Tomas Kondrotas are mentioned often and their works briefly contextualized; but because greater attention is paid to the rules of the game governing the literary field, these authors’ aesthetic innovations are

not discussed either separately or extensively. When reading all the texts, new highlights within Lithuanian literary history emerge. We also return to names that continue to be relevant—authors Salomėja Nėris, Juozas Baltušis, Kostas Kubilinskas, and Justinas Marcinkevičius. However, because our main focus is the general functioning of the literary field, authors who had difficulty adapting to the classics and real writers find their place here as well (for example, Aldona Liobytė is mentioned frequently and deservedly).

Additional discussions examine the institutions that shaped and controlled the literary field, as well as literary prizes, censorship, and other tools of cultural politics. Although institutions that shape the literary field are important in any political system, in the Soviet period they almost completely determined processes within the literary world. If one did not have official status as a writer (this involved belonging to the Writers' Union), it was practically impossible to write, publish, or participate in public literary life; the unofficial literary scene, on the other hand, was important not in terms of writing, but rather communication and the exchange of ideas and books. These articles do not only present dry facts, lists of institutions, prizes, and other instruments of literary control, but attempt to explain how they affected the literary field's daily practices: its implied rules, dangerous topics, psychological pressures, editing practices, writers' self-censorship, and even personal tensions. Censorship had an impact well beyond the list of forbidden topics or images. It could be said that even the public stance of an author was censored. The practicing of religious faith, public expressions of pessimism, and interest in Western culture could result in accusations or setbacks in a person's cultural activities or work. The KGB even collected material about artists' moods and attitudes, and such material could serve as serious justification for various sanctions. Censorship decisions often depended on a specific censor—their general humanity,

their good or bad will. Since it is virtually impossible to prove the existence of subtexts, it was possible to attract attention (or not) to a particular passage in a text and interpret it in one way or another.

The last chapter of the book—“Field”—is dedicated to the most personal aspects of how literature functions, in particular writers’ groups, generations, individual cultural stances, moral choices, cultural networks, contacts within the literary field, and the literature of exile. A writer’s (or their relatives’) political biographies frequently determined the course of their creative career or their fate in general. In the absence of alternative institutions, generational affiliations and personal connections within the Soviet bureaucratic system had a somewhat different meaning than their equivalents today; a separate discussion is therefore dedicated to this phenomenon. The title of this chapter is, of course, a reference to Pierre Bourdieu’s theory, according to which the literary field is an aspect of the social sphere, and one in which the economic and political fields are the most significant and influential. However, to some degree each field is independent and autonomous. This means that the rules of the game apply to that field and are specific to it. The field loses its autonomy if the rules of another field take over; for example, if the rules of politics come into force within the literary field.

The field concept was formulated in Bourdieu’s book *The Rules of Art* (1992). Several authors of the current volume have applied Bourdieu’s sociological theory in their research, so a chapter on the “rules of the game” in Soviet-era literature naturally emerged; it explores how these rules changed, how literature gradually became autonomous, and how it struggled for consolidation and self-legitimation.

A writer’s stance or attitude was also determined by when they made their debut—the political situation and the autonomy of the literary field during a specific period. Different strategies reflect the different possibilities that existed within the lit-

erary field at a specific time. The post-war period, for example, saw the persecution of “silent” authors who avoided publishing their work publicly after the establishment of communist rule. In the 1970s, for example, the poet Rimas Burokas created a legend around himself without having published a single book or even poem, though this did not prevent the Soviet authorities from dealing with the disobedient young man.

Particular attention is paid to the generations of writers born in the 1920s and 1930s, whose struggle for influence during the Thaw period determined literary practices and the maintenance of a consensus with the authorities through almost the entire Soviet period. In addition to stance or attitude, a writer’s gender is important in assessing their ability to act within a literary field. Thinking about the relative liberalization of society and culture that occurred with the beginning of the last epochal change, it is paradoxical that Lithuanian literature saw the most conservative and anti-feminist views during the final years of the Soviet period. Catholic tradition dictated the stereotypical view of woman as devoted mother and submissive wife; during the Soviet period she became a poorly paid worker; while neoliberal convention has introduced the theme of woman as sex object.

Soviet-era culture continues to be an important aspect of contemporary Lithuanian cultural identity, and one that is painfully and ambiguously examined. It is hoped that this volume will lead to new readings and more varied interpretations of Soviet-era culture, the rejection of dichotomous evaluations, and more nuanced reception of the Soviet period involving greater attention to contexts and factors.