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Artists' role in Latvian culture of remembrance. The case study of painter Kārlis Baltgailis (1893–1979) (Dissertation: Kārlis Baltgailis (1893–1979). Life and art)

The dissertation will be a monographic study about Latvian artist and teacher Kārlis Baltgailis (1893–1979), whose life and work was strongly influenced by World War I events, his experience in Latvian rifle regiments and the rise of classical modernism in Latvian art. Baltgailis work was considerably determined by ideas of two crucial figures in the scene of Latvian classical modernism: Jāzevs Grosvalds (1891–1920) and Jēkabs Kazaks (1895–1920). They introduced in Latvian visual art the imagery of rifleman but died young, leaving Baltgailis as the only artist who, in the course of his long career, followed their artistic ideas and focused on themes of riflemen. In this regard Baltgailis is a unique figure within the overall Latvian art scene, especially in military art. The proposed theme for this presentation aims to represent significant aspects of Kārlis Baltgailis' oeuvre in the formation of collective memory of Latvia and role in new culture of remembrance.

The place of Latvian Riflemen in the Latvian collective memory is very essential. As one of the memory sites (*lieux de mémoire*)¹ when talking about World War I, it provides an opportunity to demonstrate the heroic spirit of the nation, because it has a strong relation to establishment of Latvia as an independent country and “it shows not only the genesis of the understanding of historicity, but also – how local and foreign political elites have manipulated this historicity.”²

The retrospective imagery of Latvian Riflemen in visual art began to form after 1920. Baltgailis, after his military service during World War I in the territory of Latvia and later in Siberia ended up in Vladivostok, from where he returned to Latvia in 1920 together with Imanta Regiment. At that time, he started his way as an independent artist and since then themes of riflemen constituted his most important thematic arsenal presenting a number of iconographical variations.

¹ French historian Pierre Nora defines sites of memory as sites in the collective memory, where memory crystallizes and brings up issues. Memory sites can also be imaginary sites, persons, biographies, events, legends, myths, literature, works of art, compositions and all other productions of the human spirit that evidently exist in our collective memory.

² Zellis K. World War I and Latvian riflemen in the collective memory of Latvia // Latvijas Vēstures Institūta Žurnāls. – 2017. – Nr. 3 (104) – 88.–121. lpp.

During his most active years in the 1930s Baltgailis created his most famous paintings representing riflemen imagery. His life thereafter was connected with teaching and he was one of the initiators of the society of artists, writers, actors and musicians “Zaļā vārņa” (*The Green Crow*), whose activities attracted a great attention because of music, poetry, improvisations, dances and other entertainments. As a result of Soviet repressions, In 1940s the subject of Riflemen was tabooed up until the 1950s, this topic together with works of Latvian modernists like Jāzeps Grosvalds disappeared from the active art scene and also Baltgailis focused on other topics in his art. Mostly because he was excluded from the Artists’ Union and dismissed from the teacher position in Jelgava Teachers’ Institute for the participation in the so-called white rifle regiment in Soviet Russia.

In the mid-1950s after the Khrushchev “thaw”, when happened slight weakening of the totalitarian regime, the myth of the Latvian Riflemen started to become stronger, eventually turning into the central element of the political memory of Soviet Latvia. That was the time when Baltgailis returned to this topic, although mainly those were recreations of artworks lost in a fire in 1944, during air raids in the end of World War II. Even though in these late works he never used any iconographical references to the so-called Red Riflemen, his imagery became an essential source of inspiration for younger Soviet artists, representatives of the so-called Severe Style, who combined conforming to ideological requirements with implicit national undertones.

Since the late 1980s started the rewriting and different understanding of the past. The main focus of representations of the past was on the processes of World War II ignoring other sites of memory. When contemporary witnesses pass away, museums, memorials and historical anniversaries gain particular importance as forums of commemorative culture. Right now it is possible to observe an increasing interest in personal memories, stories, archives which have given an important thematic basis for different celebrations and other events. Yet it is unknown how and whether the remembrance of riflemen will be transferred and reevaluated amongst the next generations. Therefore it is necessary to examine this subject matter from the perspective of various representations (visual art, literature, film, theatre, etc.) and find new ways to pass this past experiences to a nations’ collective memory.