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One field, many plots of land

The Literary Field under Communist Rule, edited by Aušra Jurgutienė & Dalia Satkauskytė, Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2018. Series: “Lithuanian Studies without Borders”. ISBN: 9781618119773 (hardcover); ISBN 9781618119780 (electronic); 258 pp.

A series of introductory remarks must be made, in order to clarify the status of the conference proceeding *The Literary Field under Communist Rule* in the broader context of the Soviet culture studies. Let us start by describing specific events, persons and institutions that contributed to the publishing of this volume.

In October 2015, the international conference “Literary Field under the Communist Regime: structure, functions, *illusio*” took place in Vilnius (Lithuania), at the Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore¹. Papers presented during this conference were published in 2018 in the collection *The Literary Field under Communist Rule* by Academic Studies Press in Boston, USA. This book was reviewed by Violeta Davoliūtė in “Lithuanian Historical Studies” (vol. 23, 2019, pp. 244–246) and by Yulia Kozitskaya (Юлия Козицкая) in “Ab imperio” (4/2019, pp. 238–242). Also, a record of the concluding discussion of the conference was published separately in the journal “Colloquia” (vol. 35, 2015, pp. 148–162) as “A Discussion on Methodology for Researching Soviet Literary Space”.²

Both the conference and its proceedings are part of the long-term research project “Literature as Witness to Sociality” carried out by the Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore in Vilnius.³ Editors of the book Aušra Jurgutienė and Dalia Satkauskytė, as well as three Lithuanian contributors

1 Online: [http://www.llti.lt/failai/Congress_programa2015%2009%2029_5\(3\).pdf](http://www.llti.lt/failai/Congress_programa2015%2009%2029_5(3).pdf) [accessed January 16, 2020].

2 „A Discussion on Methodology for Researching Soviet Literary Space“, *Colloquia*, 35, 2015, pp. 148–162. Online: http://www.llti.lt/failai/Colloquia35_internetui_148-162.pdf [accessed January 16, 2020].

3 Online: <http://www.llti.lt/en/witness/> [accessed January 16, 2020].

(Solveiga Daugirdaitė, Loreta Mačianskaitė and Donata Mitaitė), work at the Department of Contemporary Literature of ILLF.

These facts show clearly that *The Literary Field under Communist Rule* is both formally and intellectually interconnected with research activities coordinated by the Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore. Thus, this book requires a reader with previous knowledge of these research activities: for example, the reader must be familiar with a significant counterpart to this collection of papers – the collective Lithuanian monograph *Sovietmečio lietuvių literatūra: reiškiniai ir sąvokos* [Lithuanian Literature of the Soviet Period. Phenomena and Concepts], published in Vilnius in 2019.⁴ This monograph was compiled by the Department of Contemporary Literature of the ILLF and shares several contributors with *The Literary Field under Communist Rule* (namely, Aušra Jurgutienė, Dalia Satkauskytė, Solveiga Daugirdaitė, Donata Mitaitė and Loreta Mačianskaitė). The English collection of articles and the Lithuanian collective monograph complement each other. Also, given that all contributors to the collection are well-known authorities in the field of Soviet literature, it is an absolute necessity for the reader to get acquainted with their recent works and theoretical background. The methodological proposals that Evgeny Dobrenko, Dalia Satkauskytė, Aušra Jurgutienė and other contributors make in this book take on polemical sharpness only through their relation to the previous research carried out by these scholars.

Technical aspects of the publication are also of interest to the attentive reader. The conference proceeding was published in English by Academic Studies Press in Boston (Massachusetts, USA), in the series “Lithuanian Studies without Borders”. ASP is a scholarly publisher devoted to advancing knowledge and understanding of the humanities and social sciences, with an emphasis on Jewish Studies and Slavic Studies,⁵ while “Lithuanian Studies without Borders” is a series created by the ASP and designed for all authors in the fields of Lithuanian history, political science, anthropology, linguistics, literary studies, ethnology and sociology.⁶

4 *Sovietmečio lietuvių literatūra: reiškiniai ir sąvokos* (kolektyvinė monografija), sudarė Algis Kalėda, Rimantas Kmita, Dalia Satkauskytė, Vilnius: Lietuvių literatūros ir tautosakos institutas, 2019.

5 Quoted from <https://www.academicstudiespress.com/asp-blog/ku2020pressrelease> [accessed April 10, 2020].

6 Quoted from <https://www.academicstudiespress.com/lithuanianstudies> [accessed April 10, 2020].

Thus, by taking into account all the aspects mentioned above, we can precisely locate the book in the broad field of intellectual and institutional relations within the Soviet cultural research: the English collection *The Literary Field under Communist Rule* represents the effort of Lithuanian scholars (namely of ILLF) to present their long-term research on the international scale; while its counterpart, the Lithuanian monograph *Sovietmečio lietuvių literatūra. Reiškinių ir sąvokos*, aim at the specific market of Lithuanian-speaking experts. It is intriguing to contemplate the question whether this transition from the domestic to the international recipient was successful or not: we hope to answer this question in this review.

The conceptual design of *The Literary Field under Communist Rule* seeks an innovative approach to the Soviet literature(s): both the conference and its proceedings strove to conceive the Soviet literature as a specific supra-national phenomenon bigger than a single national literature. This concept can be seen clearly in the first and the last (third) chapter of the collection: the first chapter deals with the general methodology of the Soviet literature research and the third one analyses specific Ukrainian, Russian, Latvian and Estonian literary phenomena. The second chapter consists of specific Lithuanian case studies. Thus, the macro-composition of the conference proceeding reflects the difficulties the editors had to overcome: they tried to counterweight the obvious gravitation of the discourse towards the dominant Lithuanian problematics (with the majority of contributors hailing from Lithuania) by introducing universal methods of analysis as well as by including proceedings on works of literature other than Lithuanian.

The most significant contribution to the problematics of the supra-national Soviet literature is delivered by Evgeny Dobrenko, who argues for a new analytical approach to this multinational phenomenon. The majority of the proceedings, however, belong to the separate “ethnic plots of land” of the Soviet literary field: each of them attempts to break the ethnic frame of its object in one way or another, but in general, there is little attention paid to the supra-national features of the Soviet literature. However, this “failure” of the initial descriptive concept reveals an important aspect of the object in question, perhaps much more so than a positively fulfilled interpretation would have done. Let us take a closer look, then, at the goings-on in the research in Soviet literature in Vilnius in 2015 and 2018.

The central notion that defines the collection of papers as a whole is that of the literary field, forged and introduced by Pierre Bourdieu. Dalia Satkauskytė proposes to use Bourdieu's concept because of its universalist character, hoping that it will provide the initial instrumental frame to grasp the phenomenon of the Soviet literature, since powers and agents participating in the creation of the Soviet literary field should be of the same type all over USSR.

The paper by Evgeny Dobrenko "Soviet Multinational Literature" is the only one that directly analyses the methodological aspects of Soviet literature as a supra-national entity. The scholar formulates two significant postulates: "Soviet literature did, in fact, evolve into a genuinely unique, multinational phenomenon encompassing no fewer than seventy-eight different national literatures" (p. 5); "Even today, a quarter of a century after the Soviet Union's collapse, there is no scholarly work available where the phenomenon of these literatures is considered in its complexity as a part of the Soviet ideological and institutional imperial undertaking" (p. 4). Evgeny Dobrenko also proposes the diachronic division of the multinational Soviet literature (p. 6), and comments on specific features of each period proposed (pp. 6–8).

On the one hand, the idea of the multinational Soviet literature and the struggle to encompass it as a coherent whole is legitimate and intriguing; indeed, in literature, structural hierarchies can never be made to work by simply stacking smaller parts on top of each other and thus building a bigger structure. Furthermore, one can only agree with Dobrenko's exclamation that "the history of multinational Soviet literature from the early 1930s to the 1980s has remained a terra incognita for Western scholars" (p. 5). On the other hand, the question what specific features this supra-national literature possesses that distinguish it from the simple collage of national Soviet literatures remains unresolved. The paper does not provide a clear answer. Although Dobrenko works with examples of Soviet folklore from the Caucasian and Asian regions of USSR, it is clear that the processes he describes and the diachronic divisions he proposes do not apply to the European part of the Communist empire. Here are two examples: "It was precisely through works of literature that the status of national languages was established with the majority of these languages simultaneously receiving their writing systems, often based on the Cyrillic alphabet" (p. 3); "The chief issue for 'national' developments nowadays consists of how to get rid of the 'provincial' complex which formed in the Stalin era [...]" (p. 7). Neither of

this is true of Estonian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Belorussian, Ukrainian, Moldovan, Georgian or Armenian literature. Dobrenko is perfectly aware, of course, that there are differences between the European and Asian part of the USSR, but what possible solution could we suggest, in order to overcome this discrepancy? In the discussion on the methodology of the research of the Soviet literary space, Dobrenko expresses the opinion that the methodology chosen would be crucial in this case.⁷ The conference proceedings offer a rather large scale of descriptive methods: Bourdieu's literary sociology, comparative studies, Lacanian psychoanalysis, the concept of literary generations, Yuri Lotman's cultural semiotics; in the concluding discussion, the post-colonial literary studies and structuralism were mentioned as well. One can wonder why yet another new methodology is needed to approach Soviet literature. Difficulties in describing it as a coherent phenomenon do not necessarily mean the lack (or weakness) of a method; they can also signal that the postulate of the cohesiveness of the multinational literature itself might be doubtful.

Dalia Satkauskytė, in her paper "The Role of Aesopian Language in the Literary Field", addresses the specific type of aesthetic communication under censorship. The author applies basic concepts of Bourdieu's method: the intersection of fields of power, the degree of autonomy of literary discourse and the specific *illusio* as the symbolic capital powering the dynamics of the literary field. Another theoretical frame used in this paper is that of structuralism: the author describes the disturbances of the linguistic functions of literature under censorship. The paper is well-composed and captivating. It reveals some general characteristics of the Soviet Aesopian language (such as utter dependence on the communicative situation and rather simple instrumental basis, p. 19), but the most intriguing conclusions are based on Lithuanian examples. That is the "inability to achieve a complete internalization of censorship" (p. 27)⁸ and the central role of the Aesopian writing while gathering the symbolic capital of the

7 „A Discussion on Methodology for Researching Soviet Literary Space“, *Colloquia*, 35, 2015, p. 149. http://www.ilti.lt/failai/Colloquia35_internetui_148-162.pdf [accessed January 16, 2020].

8 „Even those who were the most conformist, regardless of whether it was conscious or not, could not be guaranteed that they would manage to keep pace with the political situation, that they would absorb the ever-changing variations of external rules.“ Dalia Satkauskytė, „The Role of Aesopian Language in the Literary Field“, in: *The Literary Field under Communist Rule*, p. 27.

literary field, where the question “who will deceive the censor” turns out to be the distinctive element shaping literary hierarchies as to “who is worth reading”.

Vilius Ivanauskas’s paper “Between Universalism and Localism” serves as a counterpart to Evgeny Dobrenko’s concept of cohesive Soviet literature: in his paper, Ivanauskas shows the dynamics between the superimposed unifying Soviet ideology and ethnic Lithuanian particularism. Ivanauskas notices that it was always the local cultural and ethnic horizon that defined and dominated the mentality of Lithuanian writers. They opted for different attitudes to collaboration with Communist authorities at the local and Union level (the Union-oriented Mieželaitis vs. local specifics-oriented Marcinkevičius). Complicated manoeuvrings of Lithuanian writers make it plain that Lithuanian literature was mostly concerned with strengthening local identity (albeit in socialist disguise) and cared little about multinational issues of the Soviet literature. Thus, while Dobrenko argues for a cohesive picture of the imperial literary field, Ivanauskas depicts the continuous presence of disruptive national identities in the Soviet literary field.

The second chapter “Contradictions in Lithuanian Literary Field” consists of papers describing specific cases of Lithuanian literature of the Soviet period. Nerija Putinaitė provides a concise description of atheist autobiographies in Lithuania. Her paper includes information on specific political decisions that legitimated and promoted this genre of Soviet literature, as well as the description of canonical features of atheist autobiography. Jonas Ragauskas’s book *Ite, missa est!* plays a central role in this process. Putinaitė concludes that Communist ideologists considered the atheist autobiographies to be non-doctrinal texts. These autobiographies mostly told stories of personal conversion, depicting an individual effort to break one’s relation with the church and the faith not with the help of the arguments of the Marxist materialism, but rather by means of psychological or social causes. Putinaitė explains that autobiography was accepted by Communist authorities barely as an additional tool to increase the efficiency of the ideological indoctrination, especially in view of their ineffective attempts to directly impose the Marxist doctrine through mass education. At the same time, Putinaitė reveals the typical *modus operandi* of the socialist literature, when genre, once canonized, undergoes massive textual multiplication, where the certified plot is mechanically repeated with little attention to other aspects of the literary text.

Solveiga Daugirdaitė, in her paper “Sartre and de Beauvoir Encounter the Pensive Christ”, returns to the topic that she examined in detail in her Lithuanian monograph *Švystelėjo kaip meteoras: 1965-ieji su Simone de Beauvoir ir Jeanu Pauliu Sartrėu* (2015).⁹ Here, the author depicted the cultural and personal turbulences caused by the visit of two famous French philosophers in Lithuania in the summer of 1965. This paper is an excellent example of the complexity of intrinsic and external elements triggering the dynamics of the literary field. The attitude of Lithuanian writers towards this visit changed radically from the initial excitement about the famous guests and the “honour” that Lithuania can derive from it – to the disappointment about how little Sartre and de Beauvoir (in this case representing the Western civilization in general) know about Lithuania. This change was also precipitated by political issues, since Moscow imposed a taboo over Sartre after he criticized the occupation of Czechoslovakia by the Soviet army in 1968. On the other hand, Lithuanian writers (Marcinkevičius prominent among them) developed an inferiority complex towards the West at this time, being unable to acquire the cultural codes needed for communication with Western audiences (see the scene with Marcinkevičius dining with Sartre, pp. 91–94).

Loreta Mačianskaitė, in her paper “The Production of Eimuntas Nekrošius’s *Kvadratas*”, delivers a detailed and insightful analysis of the iconic Lithuanian play directed by Eimuntas Nekrošius. This play was staged in the Youth Theatre in Vilnius in 1980 and was performed for over a decade. It has the merit of the work of art that revealed the essence of the Soviet system when it came to its treatment of people: the system based on violence, imprisonment and punishment. Loreta Mačianskaitė describes the prehistory of Nekrošius’s play (i.e. the relation with its formal sources – Valentina Yeliseyeva’s *Tak ono bylo* and *Kvadratik neba sinego* by Alexander Stein) as well as the generative path of its actual meaning. Nekrošius managed to recycle the Russian sources of the play into a message with totally opposite semantics. The analysis Mačianskaitė provides is highly convincing. To those readers who are unacquainted with the theatrical life under the Communist regime, it provides a sound analytic frame, enabling a deep understanding of the dynamics of the late-Soviet literary field. To those who personally attended Nekrošius’s performances, it allows reliving the emotional intensity of the theatre

9 Solveiga Daugirdaitė, *Švystelėjo kaip meteoras: 1965-ieji su Simone de Beauvoir ir Jeanu Pauliu Sartrėu*, Vilnius: Lietuvių literatūros ir tautosakos institutas, 2015.

under occupation. Speaking in terms of the intellectual intrigue, the reader will probably acknowledge the analysis of the second layer of the Aesopic message of the play stemming from non-verbal semiotics (such as musical citations) and revealing specific Lithuanian trauma, caused by the epistemic violence Lithuanian mentality experienced in contact with the Russian “culture of *katorga*” (see the chapter “Beyond Words”, pp. 109–111).

The paper by Donata Mitaitė, “The Experiences of One Generation of Soviet Poets”, examines the faith of three Lithuanian writers: Alfonsas Maldonis, Algimantas Baltakis and Justinas Marcinkevičius. The paper stands out thanks to its stylistic values: the way Donata Mitaitė describes the three poets (whom all she knew in person and was an eye-witness to their literary careers) makes it clear that she approaches this issue from the point of view of ethics, she does not merely attempt to fulfil an analytic objective. Mitaitė reveals the human drama behind Maldonis’s, Baltakis’s and Marcinkevičius’s choices to conform and publish under the Soviet occupation. It was never a black-and-white situation with a clear distinction between good and evil: Mitaitė examines archival sources, interviews with poets and their literary works revealing their fears, doubts and uncertainty, but also ambitions and the desire for fame. Mitaitė’s paper teaches the reader not to simplify the picture of the Soviet past and to remember that in the poetry of all three authors, there also are numerous texts of significant literary value that does not evaporate in the literary field of independent Lithuania.

Aušra Jurgutienė’s paper “The Art of Compromise in Literary Criticism” deciphers the peculiarities of the Soviet literary-critical discourse by analysing texts by Ričardas Pakalniškis and Albertas Zalatorius. Both scholars were major personalities in the Lithuanian literary field and both contributed to the modernization of literature in terms of its critical approval. Jurgutienė describes their efforts to cope with the dogmatism of the Soviet literature: Pakalniškis being rather loyal to the doctrinal realism and Zalatorius representing a much more rebellious position. He avoided a direct conflict with the doctrine but sought to promote new literary trends and techniques. Jurgutienė’s analysis exposes intriguing semantic acrobatics on the meta-meta-literary (sic) level Soviet critics had to engage in, in order to circumvent the doctrinal rigidness. The paper also introduces different degrees of doctrinal conformity in the literary field, while opposing the simplified binary model “collaboration vs. rebellion”, replacing it with the triangle “collaboration – conformism – rebellion”.

The third chapter “Hermeneutics of Truth and Compromise in Literatures of Other Soviet Republics” encompasses four papers on the Ukrainian, Russian, Latvian and Estonian literatures. As we mentioned above, this chapter is meant to counterbalance the Lithuanian gravitational force of the volume. Each of the four texts in this chapter presents an intriguing subject, but together they have little in common in terms of methodological background. It is difficult to conclude whether this diversity of interpretative discourse(s) should be considered a vice or a virtue; suffice it to say that there is always something suspicious about methodologically disciplined books and collections. As far as these four papers are concerned, the reader will probably welcome their diversity rather than regretting it.

Valentyna Kharkhun’s paper “Ukrainian Literature of the Late Soviet Period” depicts three literary generations on the foreground of the political changes and the process of modernization of Ukrainian literature. Vasyl’ Symonenko and Vasyl’ Stus are two writers the author pays special attention to, presenting them as sacralised figures of Ukrainian culture. The paper also presents quite an extensive list of other Ukrainian writers divided into three generations and can serve as an introduction to Soviet Ukrainian literature for readers not acquainted with the subject.

It is noteworthy that the concept of a literary generation reappears in *The Literary Field under Communist Rule* several times (see also Mitaitė’s and Mihkelev’s contributions). An attentive reader has the opportunity to notice slight differences in its use: Lithuanian and Estonian papers seem to use the term somewhat cautiously, not deriving any strong similarities between writers they discuss (individual traits are more visible than unifying features). In contrast, the Ukrainian scholar uses the generation as a primary descriptive tool (with the unifying features being more visible than the individual ones). This observation certainly might be just a coincidence, but can also indicate a difference in the approach: perhaps the Lithuanian (and probably Latvian and Estonian) philological discourse is somewhat wary of keen macro-systematics of the literary process? Whereas the Ukrainian and Russian discourse, in contrast, tends to note the systemic overall dynamics of it? One should not make hasty conclusions, but in this book, it is quite apparent that Russian and Ukrainian proceedings give an epic picture of the object in question, while Lithuanian, Latvian and Estonian ones deliver in-depth analyses of individual cases.

This inkling only grows stronger after reading Pavel Arsenev's paper "State of Emergency Literature", where he discusses Varlam Shalamov's postulates on the pragmatics of literature. The paper goes back to famous attempts of Russian formalists (Viktor Shklovsky) to overcome the literary nature of the literature through the "pragmatic poetics" (Vladimir Mayakovsky) and continues with the philosophical analysis of Shalamov's contradictory statements. What fascinates the author is the paradox of the literature without literature.¹⁰ Shalamov refused to call his writing literature or art in a series of dramatic manifests, where he declared the need of the writing equivalent to the life itself. Arsenev writes about this tangled dance of proclamations in a captivating way. There is something very Russian in this paper: a heady mix of pure analytics and an artistic fever, sober descriptive passages and almost avant-garde stanzas.¹¹ Very impressive. After reading this paper, one is so excited that one must think about Georgy Sviridov's "Snowstorm", where it is difficult to discern what matters more – the precise composition or the head-rush. However, the rural pragmatics of the Lithuanian reviewer still lurk in the depth of his mind, asking the question: is all this needed to describe Shalamov's essence? What else could he declare about literature after fifteen years in Kolyma? One must witness and record. That is the only thing left that makes sense in the Soviet Samsara of violence and pain. Thus, the autoreferential function of the language must be shut down together with all aesthetics: a trauma is contradictory to the catharsis.

Eva Eglāja-Kristsonsone brings us back to the local scale of the Soviet literary processes: in her paper "Reading Literary History through the Archives", an almost detective plot unfolds around the archive of the Latvian literary journal *Karogs* (The Flag). Archival records of the editorial board of this journal conceal valuable information on how the censored and controlled literary field was operating in Latvia. The Soviet governmental system could not work efficiently without archives, but at the same time, there was always the fear that one day,

10 Those who prefer multimedia over paper can watch an interesting interview with Pavel Arsenev where he discusses this question: <https://vimeo.com/160343063> [accessed May 15, 2020].

11 „When pondered, reducing the camp experience to a metaphor of the cognitive processes going on during the creative act can turn out to be no less radical than wishing to acquaint the world with the horrors of the Stalinist labor camps“, Pavel Arsenev, „State of Emergency Literature“, in: *The Literary Field under Communist Rule*, p. 198.

the archives will reveal all the crimes committed. This applies to *Karogs*, too. No wonder that after the fall of the Communist rule, significant parts of its archives disappeared. Eva Eglāja-Kristšone describes the loss and demonstrates how much such sources would have been helpful to clarify circumstances of the persecution of Latvian writers Visvaldis Lāms (Eglons) and Ēvalds Vilks.

Anneli Mihkelev's paper "Hamlet and Folklore as Elements of the Resistance Movement in Estonian Literature" describes particular manifestations of modernization in Estonian literature in the 20th century: from the surrealist attempts in the exile (Ilmar Laaban), through the return to the folklore (Hando Runnel) to the re-shaping of the Hamletian symbols (Paul-Eerik Rummo, Veljo Tormis, Jaan Kross). Those with some experience with the literary history in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania will notice that processes described in the paper partly coincide in all three countries: for example, the wave of the neo-folkloric movement in the 1960s had a similar impact on all three literatures; as well as the break-through of formal and poetic innovations in the literature in the 1970s. The re-shaping of Hamletian symbols, however, is an Estonian specific. The paper offers both general methodological passages (Bourdieu, Lacan) and analyses of the chosen literary texts; it gives a high quality overview of Estonian literature at its peak in the 20th century. An intriguing feature of Anneli Mihkelev's text is the relatively little attention she pays to the doctrinal control and its mechanisms in the period described. Compared to Lithuanian, Latvian and Ukrainian papers, Estonian writers are depicted as more-or-less victorious in their fight against censorship, and the Estonian literature has the merit of straight-forward modernism, compared, for example, with the super-sophisticated hide-and-seek games in Lithuanian modernism described by Aušra Jurgutienė.

As a conclusion, we can state that the conference proceeding *The Literary Field under Communist Rule* is an extraordinary and intriguing read. The kind that engages and provokes. However, this is only true when the reader possesses adequate qualification: this book runs a highly sophisticated theoretical discourse and only provides intellectual pleasure for elite readers. To put it simply, this collection of papers is exciting but by no means popular, and thus fitting neatly in the plan of Academic Studies Press to publish only the highest quality research.

The overall composition of this publication shows a marked effort to overcome the particularistic approach to Soviet literature: Bourdieu'ian terminology seems to offer a favourable methodological frame to encompass

processes larger than national literatures. On the other hand, almost all papers work within the frame of a specific national literature, which provokes the question: what is the substantial weight of the supra-national Soviet literature? The volume does not and cannot aspire to describe the literary field of the entire USSR; Lithuanian specifics are clearly dominant. Nevertheless, having read this book, the reader will appreciate this irregularity. All the mentioned differences and asymmetries paint a picture of a vivid, dynamic intellectual life in and around this field of research. The most endearing aspects of the book are the unconscious narrative intersections on metalinguistic and epistemic levels, as well as the different tonalities of the descriptive discourse. Well done.