

# Writing the Art History of the Vanished States: Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in the 1940s

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This article aims to show the importance of research on the art of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania during the first Soviet occupation in 1940–1941 and World War II. Firstly, the article presents a short overview of the current state of research on the art of this particular period in the three Baltic countries. Secondly, it concentrates on the need to unite and combine research done in each country in order to identify and analyse those features and processes that were common to all three Baltic countries at that time.

This article discusses the current state of research regarding one narrow period of art history in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania; namely, the first Soviet occupation during 1940–1941 and World War II. It attempts to show the necessity of distancing from the prevailing model of national art history and moving towards regional studies that are not limited by individual state borders.

Why choose this particular period? Between 1940 and 1944 all three Baltic states were stripped of their political autonomy and each experienced three successive occupations: first Soviet, then Nazi and then a second Soviet occupation that continued until the reestablishment of national independence in 1991.

Having first attained independent statehood in 1918, all three countries disappeared from the political map of Europe in June 1940 when they were annexed by the Soviet Union. Following this, Soviet ideologists and their local followers immediately set about forcing all cultural activities, including the visual arts, to serve the establishment of Soviet ideology throughout each of the newly occupied territories. Political annexation was followed by a carefully planned project of cultural assimilation of the three neighbouring countries, though each had distinct cultural traditions. The process of this political and ideological transformation was halted in the summer of 1941 when Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia were occupied by Nazi Germany. Together with

parts of Belarus, Ukrainian Polese and Smolensk, the three Baltic states were included in the territorial unit of Reichskommissariat Ostland, with Riga as its main administrative centre and four regional centres (*Generalbezirk*) in Tallinn, Riga, Kaunas and Minsk. Hitler's totalitarian regime replaced Stalin's totalitarian regime. Whereas Stalin's cultural policy in the Baltic states was similar to the rest of the Soviet Union, controlling all aspects of culture, the Nazi German authorities were more interested in regulating the institutional forms of cultural life, and thus left some opportunities, albeit minimal, for a return to the local traditions and developments in artistic processes that had been interrupted by the previous Soviet occupation.

### More on chronology

In order to introduce a new perspective on the history of art of the mid-twentieth century in the Baltic states, it is necessary to reconsider the established chronological framework. Usually, the art of the Baltic countries is categorised in accordance with major political changes: art of the independence period, 1918–1940; art during the first Soviet occupation, 1940–1941; art during World War II, 1941–1944 (1945); art during the following Soviet period, 1945–1991.<sup>1</sup>

As we can see, this art-historical chronology is based on the political history of the Baltic states. However, in regard to World War II period, such categorisation is also dependent on the Soviet-period historical narrative of the Great Patriotic War dated from 1941 to 1945.<sup>2</sup> In Soviet Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian historiography the use of the term 'Great Patriotic War' not only located the history of these countries into the all-Soviet narrative but it also served to erase certain events from the chronology of World War II in the Baltic states. The Great Patriotic War began on 22 June 1941 with the German attack on the Soviet Union, but Nazi German military ambitions had directly impacted upon Lithuania already before World War II started – on 22 March 1939 when the port of Klaipėda (Memel in German) was annexed. In Latvia and Estonia, by then already incorporated into the USSR, the armed conflict indeed began in the summer of 1941. However, the so-called mutual-assistance treaties with the Soviet Union whereby all three Baltic states agreed to the establishment of Soviet military bases in their territory were signed in autumn 1939, resulting directly from the Soviet–German struggle over the division of their spheres of influence.

How did these events, with the war already having started in Europe, influence the art and culture of the three Baltic states? With the Baltic states being brought into the Soviet sphere of influence, the repatriation of Baltic German residents began in October 1939. This had a considerable impact on cultural life in Estonia and Latvia,

1 This division is used in academic art history as well as in teaching programmes in all three countries; it is also evident in museum exhibitions.

2 The term 'Great Patriotic War' (translated from the Russian *Великая Отечественная война*) was used during the Soviet period in the (art-)historical narratives of all three Baltic countries. While general historians have already addressed this subject, in studies of art – at least in Lithuania – it has not yet been adequately discussed. Therefore, it is important to emphasise that the term 'World War II', as it is understood today, is not identical to the concept that dominated Soviet historiography and was for several decades used by historians and art historians in all three Baltic countries.

and to a lesser degree in Lithuania.<sup>3</sup> Most artists, art collectors and sponsors of Baltic German origin left the region, taking with them valuable artefacts, many of which were considered objects of local cultural heritage, and in spite of legislation that restricted the removal of artworks from the country. Baltic German art circles and exhibitions ceased to exist. In addition, those country estates that had been left in the ownership of Baltic Germans following the establishment of the national republics in 1918 had in some cases (in Lithuania, at least) been functioning as centres of local cultural life.<sup>4</sup> After the repatriation of 1939, they no longer fulfilled that role.<sup>5</sup>

How did the emigration of the Baltic Germans affect the local art life? The question has remained primarily a rhetorical one because, at least in Lithuanian case, it has not resulted in systematic research. It is well known, of course, that several artists who had been active during the inter-war period did take the opportunity to leave for Germany but how exactly the emigration of one of the minority community affected local art life has not been considered in detail.

When considering the development of art and art practices during the first Soviet and the Nazi occupation, it is necessary to be very precise and to take into account even very small changes in the structure and relations of power. For example, the capital of Lithuania changed hands five times from 1939 to 1944.<sup>6</sup> These political changes caused significant changes in artistic life, and not only in Vilnius, but in the whole of Lithuania. The political events affected the development of art institutions and the fates of individual artists. They also caused the disruption of the activities of the community of Polish artists and the Polish audience in Vilnius, due to the restrictions imposed on the citizens of Slavic origin. Moreover, following the end of the war, in accordance with the Yalta agreements, the Vilnius area belonged to Soviet Lithuania, and so Polish artists as the former Polish citizens were all forcibly repatriated and dispersed throughout various Polish towns.

Another example provides a useful illustration of the links between the chronology and the various issues related to studies of art and art history: during a period of just one-and-a-half months, from the loss of political autonomy in June until their incor-

3 The list of resettled Latvian citizens of German ethnicity (*Izceļojušo vīcu tautības pilsoņu saraksts. Oficiāls izdevums; ziņas par personām, kas izceļojušas saskaņā ar līgumu par vācu tautības Latvijas pilsoņu pārvietošanu uz Vāciju*. Rīga: Iekšlietu Ministrijas Administratīvā Dep., 1940) gives personal data of 52,589 resettled people. A similar Estonian publication (O. Angelus, *Eestist Saksamaale ümberasunute nimestik / Verzeichniss der aus Estland nach Deutschland Umgesiedelten*. Tallinn: O. Angelus, 1939) registered more than 17,500 persons. The German community in Lithuania was much smaller (except Klaipėda-Memel) and its role in public life was not so significant.

4 Regarding Lithuania, a good example of this is the activity of the Šiauliai Ethnographical Society and Šiauliai Aušra Museum, which with the support of local landlords organised several exhibitions of loaned objects (paintings, art objects, old books, etc.) from the collections of local estates (see G. Jankevičiūtė, *Dailė ir valstybė: dailės gyvenimas Lietuvos Respublikoje 1918–1940* [Art and state: artistic life in Lithuanian Republic 1918–1940]. Kaunas: Nacionalinis M. K. Čiurlionio dailės muziejus, 2003, pp. 154–155.)

5 See, for example, O. Daugelis, *Senovės sala permainų epochoje: Pakruojo dvaras* [Island of the past in the epoch of changes: the manor of Pakruojis]. – *Dvaras modernėjančioje Lietuvoje: XIX a. antra pusė – XX a. pirmą pusę* [Manor in modernising Lithuania: second half of the 19th – first half of the 20th century]. Eds. G. Jankevičiūtė, D. Mačiulis. Vilnius: E. Karpavičiaus leidykla, 2005, pp. 143–159.

6 On 19 September 1939, Soviet troops marched into the city following the invasion of Eastern Poland (Vilnius belonged to Poland at that time); in October of the same year, the Soviet Union turned Vilnius over to Lithuania; on 15 June 1940, Vilnius was taken by the Soviet army (leading to Lithuania's incorporation into the USSR on 3 August 1940); on 22 June 1941, the German army entered Lithuania; and finally, on 13 July 1944, the Soviet army regained control of Vilnius.



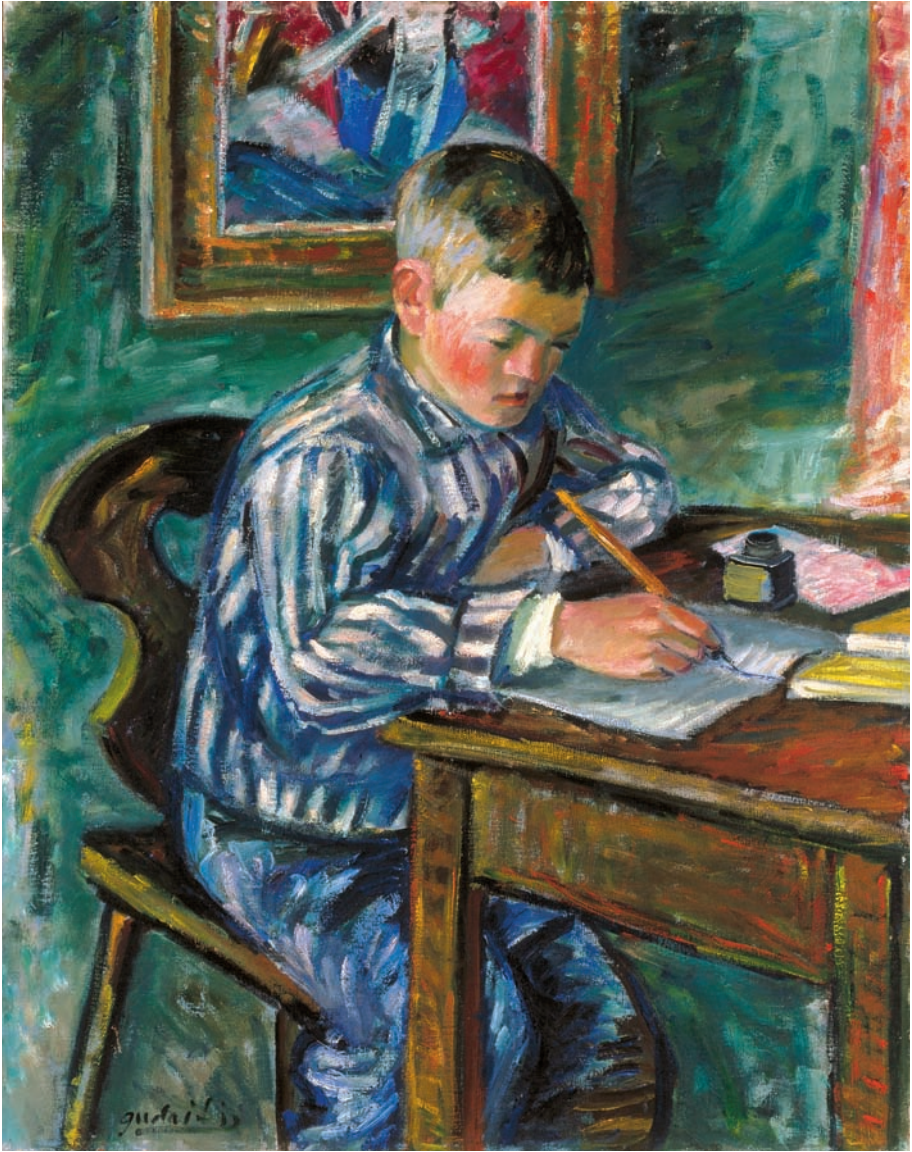
1. Antanas Gudaitis, *View to St. Michael Church from the window of the Viktoras Vizgirda studio (Vilniaus vaizdas pro Viktoro Vizgirdos studijos langą)* (1943). Oil on cardboard. Photo: courtesy of Lithuanian Art Museum, Vilnius.



2. Viktoras Vizgirda, *View to the Missionaries' Church (Misionierių bažnyčia)* (1943). Oil on canvas. Edmundas Armoška's private collection. Photo: Arūnas Baltėnas.



3. Vytautas Kasiulis, *Running out of Firewood (Self-portrait) (Malkų pristigis (Autoportretas))* (1942). Oil on canvas. M. K. Čiurlionis National Art Museum, Kaunas. Photo: Arūnas Baltėnas.



4. Antanas Gudaitis, *Writing Boy (Berniukas rašo)* (1943). Oil on canvas.  
Photo: courtesy of Lithuanian Art Museum, Vilnius.



5. Juozas Mikėnas, *The Repose (Poilsis)* (1943). Terra cotta bas relief.  
Photo: courtesy of Lithuanian Art Museum, Vilnius.



6. Photo depicting the demonstration in the occasion of International Workers' Day on 1 May 1941 in Kaunas.  
Photo: courtesy of Vytautas Magnus War Museum, Kaunas.



7. Lithuanian artists creating the portraits of Stalin: the painter Vaclovas Kosciuška on the right and the sculptor Bronius Pundzius on the left. Photo from the daily newspaper *Tiesa (Truth)*, 28 August 1940.



8. Bilingual (Lithuanian-Polish) propaganda poster *The German soldier fights for you – work for him!*, designed by Juozas Olinardas Pencyla (1942). Lithuanian National Press Archive. Photo: Arūnas Baltėnas.





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Gražina Matulaitytė-Rannit admires the unframed etching by Eduard Wiiralt in the sitting room of Rannit family apartment decorated with works by Wiiralt. The photo was taken in 1942 or 1943 when the solo exhibitions of Estonian artist were held in Kaunas and Vilnius. Photo: courtesy of Lozoraitis' family.

poration into the Soviet Union in August<sup>7</sup>, the national symbols of political autonomy in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania were all progressively removed. First, they disappeared from public view, and later from private spaces too. All were to be replaced with the new signs and symbols that represented membership of the Soviet Union. The 'gallery' of honoured persons was also modified – the portraits of figures who represented national independence (including army leaders, politicians, clergymen, businessmen and artists) were all removed from both the public and private sphere. The emptied spaces were then filled with the images of theoreticians and practitioners of Marxism and communism.

It is impossible to study these changes in the representative signs of power by employing the traditional tools of art-historical research. Moreover, this period requires that art historians go beyond studies of painting, sculpture and printmaking, and expand the traditional field of objects of study, to embrace the methods of visual studies generally. In order to assess the effectiveness of the new visual ideology, and understand how it affected the identity of various social groups, one must consider not only examples from the visual arts in the strictest sense, but also examples of visual culture in general. The latter includes both the 'high' arts, i.e. the works of fine art and architecture, and the images that were produced and distributed *en masse* and with the participation of artists: reproductions of ideologically significant paintings and sculptures, newspaper illustrations, posters and other works of applied graphic art (stationery, lottery tickets, postage stamps), decorations of festive events and state symbols (e.g. coats of arms and flags). A complex reconstruction of such images and additional research in this field would serve to deepen our knowledge of the relations between art and politics, of the history of everyday life and help us to better understand the wider context of cultural life in general. In turn, this is also important for the analysis of art processes, i.e. the influence of censorship on the creation and dissemination of art, the iconography of art, the social status of artists and other themes related to the functioning of art in society during that period.

## The current state of research

Before proposing new issues and subjects for investigation, let us first see what has already been done in researching the visual arts of the mid-twentieth century in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

Most of the studies in this field of research are published only in the local national language and they are only rarely accessible to readers who do not understand that particular language – whether it is Estonian, Lithuanian or Latvian. Publications in English or some other widely read language, papers given at international conferences, and articles in journals and collections published by 'third' countries, present some of the rare occasions making possible to become acquainted with the works of colleagues from other countries. Consequently, it is very difficult to get a clear picture

<sup>7</sup> The three Baltic states were formally incorporated in the Soviet Union almost simultaneously: Lithuania on 3 August, Latvia on 5 August, and Estonia on 6 August.

of the current state of such research. The exchange of information is partially facilitated by English-language (or, less frequently, German-language) summaries that some monographs include.

Latvian scholar Jānis Kalnačs's book *Fine Arts in Latvia under Nazi German Occupation* has become widely known among historians outside Latvia and, apart from the increasing interest in the history of World War II, this is due to an extensive summary in English and a large bibliography.<sup>8</sup> Kalnačs also gives an overview of the research on the period conducted by other Latvian scholars. We learn, for example, that his colleagues Mārīte Lapiņa, Velta Lapacinska and Guntis Švītiņš have studied different aspects of fine arts in Nazi-occupied Latvia and that the historian Kārlis Kangeris has explored the cultural policy of the Nazi civil government. Unfortunately, it remains difficult to become more closely acquainted with their respective studies, again because of the language barrier. In any case, it is evident that the history of art in Latvia during the Nazi occupation has become a relevant subject for research.

What about research that analyses the role of art in the process of Sovietisation in Latvia during the first Soviet year? Are there studies of this kind in Estonia and Lithuania? To my knowledge, there have so far been no in-depth studies dedicated to Estonian art and artistic life in 1940–1941, and the situation in Lithuania appears very similar.<sup>9</sup> Naturally, the first Soviet year was researched during the Soviet era and treated separately in general art histories. Despite their different outlook, the first post-Soviet survey histories often follow the same structure. In Estonia, a 1965 article by Ene Lamp<sup>10</sup> is still commonly referred to by contemporary researchers; but more recently, increasing interest in this period is indicated by short studies and exhibition catalogue essays.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, it remains very difficult for non-Estonian scholars to position these studies within the general context of research. How should one, for example, interpret an article by Ingrid Raudsepp, 'The role of the Estonian Communist Party in integrating the Estonian art scene into the nationwide Soviet system during the first year of occupation'?<sup>12</sup> Although it is available in summary form for non-Estonian readers, it is unclear whether it is part of a larger project or whether it is a single narrow

8 J. Kalnačs, *Tēlotājas mākslas dzīve nacistiskās Vācijas okupētajā Latvijā 1941–1945* [Fine arts in Latvia under Nazi German occupation, 1941–1945]. Rīga: Neputns, 2005.

9 Little has been done in Lithuania in this regard. In fact, only two publications are worth mentioning: an article by historian Danutė Blažytė-Baužienė, which deals with the preparation of Lithuanian artists for participation in the Moscow 'decade' (D. Blažytė-Baužienė, 1941 m. lietuvių meno dekados sovietinis projektas tautinės kultūros naikinimo kontekste [The Soviet project for the 10-day 1941 Lithuanian art exhibition in the context of the destruction of the national culture]. – Lietuvos istorijos metraštis / The Year-book of Lithuanian History 2, 2006. Vilnius, 2007, pp. 113–134); and an article by Giedrė Jankevičiūtė (G. Jankevičiūtė, Facing the New Myths: on Lithuanian Art in 1940–1941. – Meno istorija ir kritika / Art History & Criticism 3. Menas ir politika: Rytų Europos atvejai / Art and Politics: Case-studies from Eastern Europe. Kaunas: Vytautas Magnus University, 2007, pp. 26–35).

10 E. Lamp, *Eesti kunstielu esimesel nõukogude aastal* [Estonian art life during the first Soviet year]. – Kunst 1965, no. 2/3, pp. 12–17.

11 The following catalogues have contributed towards the study of socialist realism and early Soviet art life in Estonia: R. Mark, *Kunstipoliitika esimesel okupatsiooniaastal* [Politics of art during the first year of occupation]. – *Sotsialistliku realismi võidukäik? Eestis* [The triumph? of socialist realism in Estonia]. Ex. cat. Tartu: Tartu Kunstimuuseum, 2003, pp. 49–54; *Punaste lippude all / Under the Red Banners*. Ex. cat. Ed. M. Haltia. Turku: Turku Art Museum, 2008. In addition, several BA and MA theses in art history deal with the early Soviet period, but so far they remain unpublished. – *Editor's comment*.

12 I. Raudsepp, *Eestimaa Kommunistliku Partei osast Eesti kunstielu esimesel nõukogude aastal (1940–1941)* [The role of the Estonian Communist Party in integrating the Estonian art scene into the nationwide Soviet system during the first year of occupation (1940–1941)]. – *Kunstiteaduslikke Uurimusi* 2005, vol. 14 (1), pp. 51–67.

study that has yet to be properly developed, but it has nonetheless given its author an opportunity to publish a large amount of interesting data from various sources.

Of the Estonian publications dedicated to studying art during the Nazi occupation, Kaalu Kirme's book *The Muses Did Not Remain Silent: Art in Estonia During the War Years* is worth noting.<sup>13</sup> Unfortunately, the book does not contain even a short summary in English, German or French, and so the non-Estonian scholar is left in the dark as to its content: to what extent and in what way does Kirme show the reality of art life in that period? on what principles does he base his analysis of the material? A reader who does not understand Estonian can only guess at the content of the book from its evocative title, which is – interestingly – very close to the title of a book on Lithuanian literature during Nazi occupation that was published by influential historian of literature Vytautas Kubilius: *The Muse Who Could Not Be Brought Down on Her Knees* (2001).<sup>14</sup> Both scholars, who belong to the same generation, emphasised the following idea: the artists and poets of Estonia and Lithuania continued making art or writing poetry during the Nazi occupation and this fact alone as well as, more directly, concrete works can be interpreted as acts of resistance – as an act of standing up against the fate of the nation state and to the tragedy of the destruction of countless individual lives.

Kubilius's book should probably be considered as part of the process of re-evaluating the history of the Soviet and Nazi occupations in the Baltic states. This 'project', which involves rewriting the history of the Baltic countries from the mid-twentieth century onwards, is often shaped by the kind of narrative of memory. Of course, this is hardly surprising, since the early post-Soviet rewriting of local history set out as a reaction against Soviet censorship and ideological models, and was strongly influenced by an intense desire to establish the historical truth of the repressed nations. On the other hand, the lack of studies on art life during the Nazi occupation is typical, not only of Baltic art history but also of other European cultures; and systematic study of art production during Nazi occupation has begun only very recently.<sup>15</sup>

13 K. Kirme, *Muusad ei vaikinud. Kunst Eestis sõja-aastail 1941–1944* [The muses did not remain silent: art in Estonia during the war years, 1941–1944]. Tallinn: Kunst, 2007.

14 V. Kubilius, *Neparklūpyta mūza. Lietuvių literatūra vokiečių* [The muse who could not be brought down on her knees: Lithuanian literature during the German occupation]. Vilnius: Lietuvių literatūros ir tautosakos institutas, 2001.

15 Studies in France, particularly books by Laurence Bertrand Dorléac, are an exception. The various editions of her monographs, dedicated to French visual art under the Nazi occupation, echo the changes in the prevailing discourse. Cf. L. Bertrand Dorléac, *Histoire de l'art, Paris 1940–1944: ordre national, traditions et modernités*. Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1986; L. Bertrand Dorléac, *L'Art de la défaite 1940–1944*. Paris: Seuil, 1993; English edition: L. Bertrand Dorléac, *Art of the Defeat: France, 1940–1944*. Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2008).

### **Art during the war – in context**

The difficulties of interpreting the problematic heritage of the visual art of the middle of the twentieth century, and of presenting it to the wider public, are clearly evident in the permanent exhibitions of the national art museums in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Let us take the two recently opened museums – Kumu Art Museum in Tallinn and National Gallery of Art in Vilnius – as examples. In Tallinn, the artworks of the war period (mostly paintings) constitute a distinct chronological section of the overall exhibition and the selection of works appears to be based solely on the date of their execution. In that exhibition, the first Soviet year is not indicated separately. In Vilnius, examples of painting, graphic art and sculpture from 1940 to 1944 are presented as part of the exhibition showing art produced during the inter-war independent republic. Therefore, in several halls of the exhibition, artworks produced during the war are shown together with works from the inter-war period (paintings or graphic art from the first Soviet occupation are not exhibited).

It is significant that in both Tallinn and Vilnius, the year 1944 has been chosen to draw a line between the evolution of the nation's art prior to the Soviet occupation and the art that followed it. Of course, regarding the National Gallery's decision not to separate artworks produced during World War II, it may be argued that the period from 1940 to 1944 is too short to warrant attempting to identify it specifically. However, even while we might accept such an argument, the viewer is still left with an impression that the museum curators may have tried to avoid presenting works from the Nazi occupation because it is not clear how they would be interpreted. Maybe the curators were afraid to disappoint the viewer who, it is assumed, wants to be presented with a visual story of suffering and resistance that the existing artworks do not support. In Lithuania, at least, visual art produced during the war did not incite any kind of armed rebellion against the occupying forces, nor did it attempt to depict the ongoing slaughtering and suffering. Is it therefore less valuable? Does the escapist position adopted by the artists of that time tell us less about the reality of the wartime experience than a symbolic call for struggle might have done? Without going into the theoretical issues, I will present some examples of Lithuanian art and try to suggest possibilities for asking new research questions.

During the war, many artists particularly chose to depict landscapes. Some of these landscapes are still considered to be among the 'golden heritage' of twentieth-century Lithuanian art. The most valued among these depictions – which also happen to be exhibited in the National Gallery exhibition – are the Vilnius Old Town landscapes painted by Antanas Gudaitis and Viktoras Vizgirda (figs. 1, 2), and prints by Mečislovas Bulaka and Jonas Kuzminskis. The latter depict the most famous architectural monuments of Vilnius: the churches of St. Anne, the Bernardines and St. Nicholas, the bridges of the river Vilnia, the cathedral, and panoramic views with the towers of the church of the Missionaries in the background. Usually these works have been interpreted as symbolising the recovery of the historical capital following the years of Polish rule (1920–1939) – an effort by the younger generation of Lithuanian-origin artists to appropriate Vilnius as a cultural space. However, according to Vizgirda's own memoirs, these images were also produced as a consequence of the German civil government's

prohibition on drawing and painting outdoors. For that reason, the professors of Vilnius Academy of Arts chose to depict the objects they could see from the windows of the academy, or from the windows of their colleagues who were living in the neighbourhood. This is why the subject of the artworks is repeated, and why the depicted objects appear fragmented – i.e. they are shown as they appeared through a window.

Further research may also provide evidence to prove a link between these artworks and photographic images by, for example, the Vilnius school of photography; in particular those by the prominent photographer of Polish origin Jan Bułhak, who lived in Vilnius from his birth until the end of World War II when he was forced to relocate to Poland. During the period in which Vilnius belonged to Poland, Bułhak's photographs, reproduced in illustrated magazines and newspapers in Lithuania, formed the image of Vilnius for the citizens of Lithuanian Republic while they were refused permission to cross the Polish border to visit their historical capital.

The history of portraiture may offer another perspective that could help us to understand everyday reality of the war years. During the Nazi occupation, some of the best and most expressive portraits by sculptor Petras Aleksandravičius were produced in the chilly studios of the Academy of Arts: the portraits of painter Viktoras Vizgirda and printmaker Jonas Kuzminskis who at that time were both professors at the Academy.<sup>16</sup> As part of a turn towards the de-romanticisation of art, the painters of the new generation produced many realistic and witty portraits of their fellow artists and family members. One of the most expressive examples is an ironic self-portrait by Vytautas Kasiulis entitled *Running out of Firewood (Malkų pristigus)*, which depicts the author with his head wrapped in a warm, thick scarf as if desperate to stay warm (fig. 3). Antanas Gudaitis painted his wife and children in ordinary everyday situations: for example, the portrait of his son, *Writing Boy (Berniukas rašo)*, where the boy is depicted doing school homework and wearing a striped shirt or pyjamas (fig. 4); and the portrait of his wife, *Sewing (Siuvanti)*, where she is shown wearing spectacles and concentrating on her needlework.

Relatively few paintings of the period directly or symbolically represent the war-time atmosphere in Lithuania. Most of the works distance themselves from the surrounding tragedy and from the greyness of everyday life and misery; instead they are mostly quiet still-life paintings, images of natural beauty, and idyllic agricultural scenes (fig. 5).

Of particular interest in this respect is the artistic heritage of the so-called father of Vilnius neo-classicism, the painter Ludomir Sleńdziński. His works seem even more impressive knowing that as a Pole he was excluded from public artistic life in 1940 when the city of Vilnius became part of Lithuanian state territory and the Stefan Batory University – where he had been the dean of the Faculty of Fine Arts for many years – was closed. During the Nazi occupation he lost both his apartment and his workshop, and lived in the estate of his benefactor and colleague Władysław Oskierka on the outskirts of the city. It was there that Sleńdziński painted the portraits of the people closest to him, and carved and coloured with tempera his wooden bas-reliefs

16 See Pasaulis be tamsos: Petro Aleksandravičiaus (1906–1997) kūryba [World without darkness: the works by Petras Aleksandravičius (1906–1997)]. Ex. cat. Ed. G. Jankevičiūtė. Vilnius: Lietuvos Dailės Muziejus, 2006.

showing allegorical female figures. While living at the estate he also painted the fantastic cycle *The Day of a Princess* (*Karalaitės diena*), which he dedicated to his teenage daughter. In 1944, he painted *Carnival* (*Karnavalas*), with a baroque staircase, ladies wearing crinoline dresses and various characters from *commedia dell'arte* to decorate his daughter's room.<sup>17</sup>

Such escapist themes were characteristic of the wartime works by Sleñdziński and many other artists and were welcomed by critics. For example, the Lithuanian painter and critic Vidas Vijeikis favoured hedonistic works by an important figure of the national school of painting, the author of monumental history paintings, Jonas Mackevičius: 'In the exhibition of Dailė [meaning 'art' in Lithuanian] gallery, one cannot help noticing the vividly coloured landscapes. In many of them, one sees blossoming flowers, and even in the images of winter there is plenty of sunlight and a clear sky. These paintings are by Jonas Mackevičius. All of the images are given freshness by the light blue colours. Airy clouds traverse the light blue sky. The riverside is vivid green. The painter does not like to depict gloomy images of nature.'<sup>18</sup> It is not surprising, he adds, that the narrow, well-trodden path that led to the painter's house in Kaunas was often walked by local art lovers wanting to buy a lovely landscape, and also by German soldiers who wished to send something nice home to their mothers and fiancées.<sup>19</sup>

## Artists and the new powers

An investigation of the social status of the artist should form another important part of the study of wartime art life. From the point of view of an art-historical narrative that relies upon a national canon of 'great' artists and 'great' works, many difficult questions arise: where artists collaborated with the new occupation powers, was this triggered by the desire of individual artists to further their own career or otherwise benefit from the system, or was it considered necessary for survival under the new regime? The study of the social status of the artists is also related to the history of everyday life and requires a close study of the conditions in which creative work was done, as well as of the economic situation.

In the case of Lithuania (and it is likely that same may be said of Latvia and Estonia), one of the important factors that may have persuaded artists to conform to the demands of state sponsorship – be it in independent Lithuania, Lithuanian SSR or Nazi-occupied Lithuania – was the absence of viable alternatives. In contrast with many other European countries, the young Baltic states of the 1920s and 1930s did not have a well-developed art market and there were few private patrons. As a result, artists were used to being dependent on state commissions and scholarships. In the case of

17 I. Suchocka, *Spokój i harmonia. Twórczość Ludomira Sleñdzińskiego na przykładzie dzieł z kolekcji Galerii im. Sleñdzińskich* [Peace and harmony: art of Ludomir Sleñdziński based on the collection of the Sleñdziński Gallery]. Białystok: Galeria im. Sleñdzińskich, 2004, p. 53.

18 V. Vijeikis, *Žydriųjų debesų tapytojas* [The painter of light blue clouds]. – *Savaitė* 25 July 1942, p. 109.

19 'Now the painter lives in the most romantic place in Kaunas, next to the castle. He often receives visits from German soldiers and members of the civilian government, who have sent their families in Germany many landscapes by Jonas Mackevičius', Vijeikis explained to the readers of *Savaitė* (*The Week*) (V. Vijeikis, *Žydriųjų debesų tapytojas*, p. 109).

Lithuania, one should also examine the role of the Catholic Church as a commissioner of artworks, but this is yet another issue awaiting research.

The adaptation of artists to the new political situation and corresponding policies on art manifested itself in different ways. The history of inter-war art in the Baltic countries has so far been written with an emphasis on modern art and the links to artistic practices in Western Europe and particularly Paris. However, immediately after the Soviet occupation, some local artists, too, began to represent the ideology of the new political order as if having completely forgotten their previous search for a national modernist style. The first pro-Soviet mass rallies and elections, held in the summer of 1940 in all three Baltic countries, were replete with Soviet symbols, portraits of Communist ideologists and leaders of the Soviet Union (figs. 6, 7). How is one to explain the fact that just one year of Soviet rule had been sufficient for a number of artists in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia to embrace the requirements of socialist realism so readily that they had already produced large-scale historical canvases, and designed and illustrated books and posters in accordance with the Soviet dogma?

The historiography of art in the Baltic countries has tended to approach the issue of attitudes towards socialist realism and its appropriation by local artists as mostly related to the second episode of Soviet rule. However, the same issues are equally relevant to the study of art produced during the first Soviet year. In her book *National and Modern Femininities in Estonian Art*,<sup>20</sup> Estonian art historian Katrin Kivimaa has briefly discussed the connections between local tradition of realism and the new requirements of Soviet socialist realism in early Soviet Estonian painting – both during 1940–1941 and first years of the second occupation. She referred to the 1945 criticism voiced by the Estonian writer and critic Johannes Semper who lamented that looking at early examples of Soviet Estonian art, ‘it was difficult to see what differentiated a contemporary work of art [in 1945], such as the representation of a harvest, from equivalent representations ten years before’.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, many Estonian artists continued, especially during the early years of Soviet rule, to produce idealised depictions of traditional rural labour and the village environment that had also been favoured during the independent republic.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, in order to ascertain to what extent and how it was possible for some Estonian painters to realise – and for others to fail to realise – the principles of socialist realism, it is necessary to analyse the links between the inter-war artistic heritage and socialist realism. The same may be said of Latvia and Lithuania.

We can also easily find Estonian, Lithuanian and Latvian examples that demonstrate similarities between the models of Soviet or Nazi art and some of the movements within the local artistic canon created during the 1920s and 1930s. The career of Juozas Mikėnas, the neo-classicist Lithuanian sculptor, is a good example. He acquired his skills in the neo-traditional art environment of Paris during the 1920s and 1930s. His subsequent struggles to adapt to the requirements of independent Lithuania, combined with his sympathy for leftist views and fascination with the Soviet cultural

20 K. Kivimaa, *Rahvuslik ja modernne naiselikkus eesti kunstis 1850–2000* [National and modern femininities in Estonian art, 1850–2000]. Tallinn, Tartu: Tartu Ülikooli kirjastus, 2009.

21 K. Kivimaa, *Rahvuslik ja modernne naiselikkus...*, p. 189. See J. Semper, *Eesti nõukogude kunst sotsialistliku realismi teel* [Soviet Estonian art on the way to socialist realism]. – *Sirp* ja *Vasar* 26 May 1945.

22 K. Kivimaa, *Rahvuslik ja modernne naiselikkus...*, p. 189.



policy (or rather with the public attention and privileges being lavished on artists), were determining factors in Mikėnas's immediate adjustment to the demands imposed by the new political order in Lithuania.<sup>23</sup> The case of Mikėnas also points to the limitations of the established national art-historical narrative that has related inter-war national art primarily to modernist developments and paid relatively little attention to neo-traditionalist and neo-classicist trends.

While assessing the position of artists vis-à-vis the state, one must be careful not to erase the specificity of the local context by the application of approaches and models that have been formulated for the study of very different contexts. I would argue that the patterns of totalitarianism that have been formulated on the basis of studies of cultural policies in the Soviet Union and the Third Reich, are applicable to the Baltic countries with respect to the Soviet occupation, but not with respect to the Nazi occupation. While the Soviet ideologists tried to integrate the Baltic countries into the Soviet Union in all aspects of life, the position of German authorities was different: they tried to control the Lithuanian (as well as Estonian and Latvian) cultural life while at the same time permitting art a limited autonomy, and maintained the distance that separated them from the locals.

In Lithuanian case, there is evidence that some local artists would have liked to cooperate even more closely with the Germans and receive commissions for works of art, but the Germans were not interested in their services. In Lithuanian art history, there exist only a few works that were commissioned by the German civil government. Among them are propaganda paintings and sculptures that were intended to illustrate the atrocities committed by the Soviets in 1941 and were produced for inclusion in the *Red Terror Exhibition (Raudonojo teroro paroda)*, which toured most of the larger towns in Lithuania. A poster by Juozas Penčyla with both Lithuanian and Polish text 'The German soldier fights for you – work for him!' (1942) is a rare example of commissioned propaganda (fig. 8). Most of such works (predominantly posters) were imported to Lithuania from the German Reich, or from the administrative centre of Ostland, Riga. The propaganda films that circulated throughout all of Ostland were also produced in Riga.<sup>24</sup> These examples prompt us to inquire about the cultural links and exchanges between the three Baltic countries of Ostland.

Naturally, studies of cultural exchange between the Baltic states during the war go beyond the production and circulation of propagandistic works of art and films. Let us take a closer look at one example. The possible motivations behind the organisation of two large exhibitions in Lithuania of the best-known Estonian printmaker of the time, Eduard Wiiralt, are intriguing, particularly if we consider the financial restrictions, the difficulty of the travel arrangements and other aggravating circumstances of wartime. His exhibitions in Vilnius and Kaunas were well received and provoked

23 See Klasikos ilgesys: Juozo Mikėno kūryba tarp Paryžiaus ir Lietuvos [A longing for the classics: the art of Juozas Mikėnas between Paris and Kaunas]. Ex. cat. Eds. G. Jankevičiūtė, E. Lubytė. Vilnius: Lietuvos Dailės Muziejus, 2001.

24 Did these films feature only Latvian actors, or did Lithuanian and Estonian actors take part as well? This is difficult to answer because, so far, only one such propaganda fiction film has been found in the Lithuanian archives. The film *Swinish Misfortune* (1942) shows the adventures of food smugglers and their resulting punishment. The Latvian actors were dubbed in Lithuanian by actors of Panevėžys Drama Theatre (they may well have been chosen as the professional actors closest to Riga). Another well-known propaganda film – the documentary *Your Hands* (1943) promoting Reich's Labour Service – was made in Riga and dubbed in Lithuanian as well.

considerable discussion, which was partly reflected by Lithuanian press of the time. However, to what extent were contemporaries in Estonia aware of these exhibitions and the responses of Lithuanian critics and audiences? Wiiralt's exhibitions in Lithuania were initiated by Estonian-born poet and journalist Alexis Rannit, who had been living in Kaunas since the late 1930s, having married Gražina Matulaitytė, a well-known opera singer and member of the cultural elite of the independent Lithuania (fig. 9). Were these exhibitions simply the fruit of a friendship between the Estonian artist and the poet, or do they exemplify a more systematic process of cultural exchange? The answers to such cases might reveal interesting new aspects of the cultural history of the period.

### Concluding remarks

The understanding, which has prevailed until now, of the history of fine arts and art institutions from 1940 to 1944 in all three Baltic countries no longer corresponds to our changing views of the period. Its reassessment has had to take into consideration the research developments in other countries that have a similar political history.<sup>25</sup> Until recently, the dominant interpretation of the period has been a product of both Soviet historiography and the revisionist history writing that was characteristic of the years immediately following the return to independence in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. In rethinking the heritage of the period, the study of art and artistic life in each country should be balanced with the awareness that the occupying regimes regarded them as constituting a single region. Each of those regimes introduced new measures to define the role of art and the structure of art institutions in all three countries, and in a similar way. The 'stick' – political measures, such as censorship and repression – was applied alongside the 'carrot' – financial incentives, such as the commission and purchasing of art.

Of course, the artistic practices of each Baltic state were regulated with subtle variations on the same model, but research at the local level should not obscure the need to identify, name and evaluate the common features of those processes. Those common art histories may force upon us a change of perspective – a retreat from the habit of writing national art histories that are delimited by linguistic, geographical and state borders. We need to find a balance between the common and local features that will enable us to write a history of art and artistic life of the region in the twentieth century, and which will be read not only in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, but will also resonate with readers in other Eastern and also Western European countries, as interest in the fate of art and artists under the occupation regimes continues to grow. The history of

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, the fifth volume of Czech academic art history, covering also the fine arts of the middle of the twentieth century: *Dějiny českého výtvarného umění* [History of Czech painting and fine arts]. Vol. 5, 1939–1958. Eds. R. Švácha, M. Platovská. Prague: Academia, 2005. According to one of the authors of this volume, art historian Vojtěch Lahoda, the contributors to this part of the volume later decided to rewrite the chapters on Czech art history during the Nazi occupation and the period of the Soviet influence, because the interpretations given in the 2005 edition were outdated and no longer corresponded to the current perception of the period; moreover, the larger resources of data that are now available were not taken into account in the volume (from the private conversation with Lahoda in Vilnius, 17 June 2009).

art in the middle of the twentieth century in the three Baltic countries has been an integral part of not only the cultural history but also the political history of Europe, and should be understood and interpreted as such.