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Patriotic Rhetoric and the Grim Realities of the First World War in Latvian Art: The Case of Jāzeps Grosvalds

Keywords: Grosvalds, First World War, patriotic rhetoric, grim realities, war landscape, expressive motifs.

The aim of this article is to analyse Jāzeps Grosvalds' work, indicating its socially engaged content and his non-committal responses to the realities of the First World War.

As is well known, the area covered by present-day Latvia was an important battlefield in the First World War. The German army invaded Kurzeme (the western part of Latvia) in 1915, and was only stopped when it was close to Riga. The ravages caused by the invasion, and the subsequent wartime regime established on both sides of the front line, were enormous. Many Latvians from Kurzeme were forced to leave their homes, and became refugees. Latvian historians estimate that approximately half the Latvian population were forcibly displaced,¹ many fled their homeland, frightened of possible atrocities by the German invaders. The war crushed the flourishing prewar economy. Industrial enterprises were evacuated, the machinery in the large factories was plundered, and agriculture was badly damaged by military operations and frequent requisitions. The main front line divided Latvia into two parts, and this division, on the whole, remained unchanged until September 1917. The long positional war was interrupted by fierce battles. In 1915, the Imperial Russian government permitted the formation of battalions of Latvian riflemen, in order to exploit Latvian patriotism. The historically rooted hatred of the German upper class in the Baltic was channelled into the emotional motivation of the fighters. During the war, Latvian

¹ 20. *gadsimta Latvijas vēsture* (The 20th-Century History of Latvia), I. Rīga, 2000, p. 867.



1. Jāzevs Grosvalds. 1916

riflemen became a significant military force, and excelled in the famous 'July Battles' and the 'Christmas Battles' of 1916.

Some Latvian artists were also conscripted, and were able to depict the warfare directly. The best achievement was undoubtedly the Riflemen series by Jāzevs Grosvalds (1891–1920)² (Fig. 1) between 1915 and 1917. They were preceded by his Refugees series (1914–1916), which showed the grim fate of displaced people, and which in fact was the beginning of his First World War theme. The Riflemen series was the next and more diversified stage in his work. These scenes became a kind of paradigm for his followers, including late Socialist Realism painters. True, the interpretation of them changed according to the prevailing ideological tendencies of each period. In the 1930s, Grosvalds was glorified as an 'initiator of the national epic', and his Riflemen series

² In Latvian art history, Jāzevs Grosvalds (1891–1920) is regarded as the founder of the local Classical Modernism. He studied art in Munich and Paris in private art schools, absorbing different influences from Old Masters, Post-Impressionists, Fauvists, Cubists and old Chinese paintings. His main paradigm became the art of André Derain. He returned to Riga in 1914, and, together with some young Latvian artists, organised the 'Green Flower' group, which was later transformed into the 'Riga Artists Group', the core of Latvian modernism. Grosvalds served as an officer in the Latvian Riflemen's Battalion on the Riga front line in 1916, and later on the Main Artillery Board in Petrograd. His best-known Refugees and Riflemen series were painted during the war (1914–1917). Escaping from the post-revolutionary chaos, he managed to get sent on a mission to the Western Front in 1917, and in 1918 he joined the British army. He served in a regiment which operated in the Middle East and the Caucasus. His best works, the watercolour series Persian Pictures, were made during this expedition. Grosvalds returned to London in 1919, left the army, and became a secretary at the Latvian legation in Paris, which represented the newly independent state of Latvia. Grosvalds died prematurely, a victim of the second epidemic of Spanish flu. The main collections of his works are held in the Latvian National Museum of Art in Riga and in the Värmland Museum in Karlstad.

was even held up as a depiction of the struggle for political independence (Boris s Vipers).³ In fact, in 1915 and 1916, Latvian riflemen became a potential force in the forthcoming fight for independence. Nevertheless, this was an exaggeration: Grosvalds recorded the so-called struggle for freedom in only a few works in 1919, when he served as a secretary in the Latvian embassy in Paris. His heroic riflemen were also praised (omitting the national attribute) in the art history of the late Soviet period, when his paintings were partly ‘rehabilitated’ (Skaidrīte Cielava).⁴

It should be admitted that patriotic rhetoric motivated the emergence of some of Grosvalds’ images, including the most iconic and well known. This is understandable, because the artist hoped that some of his drawings would be reproduced in contemporary periodicals with patriotic writing. The initial impulse probably did come from this area, and several of his drawings appeared in the journal *Varavīksne* in 1916. Patriotic rhetoric motivated thematic content and compositional devices, as well as his verbal commentaries written on the back of his works and indicating their titles. He offered quite a simple interpretation of the theme. For instance, in the watercolour *Guards of the Fatherland* (1916, VM), he painted a view of countryside with a farm between two riflemen in the foreground. In another watercolour called *Rainbow* (1916, VM), he again placed static and monumental riflemen and their horses in the foreground, in front of a local landscape in all its variety and richness. It is no wonder that we can encounter similar, albeit hyperbolised, static foreground riflemen in the patriotic art of the 1930s and the work of late Socialist Realism painters and sculptors. Another of Grosvalds’ themes was wounded but also monumental heroes: one or two erect figures fill the whole foreground, they are handsome, and their disorderly attire is a sign of their bravery (*Heroes of Kalnciems*, 1916, VM). Grosvalds also presented a Latvian rifleman as a dying hero, raising the scene to a reference to the traditional Pietà, and imparting the status of the Madonna, with

³ B. Vipers, *Jāzeps Grosvalds*, Rīga, 1938, p. 48.

⁴ S. Cielava, *Latviešu glezniecība buržuāziski demokrātisko revolūciju posmā (1900–1917)* (Latvian Painting in the Period of Bourgeois-Democratic Revolutions, 1900–1917), Rīga, 1973, pp. 159–160.



2. Jāzeps Grosvalds. *Dying Soldier*. 1917

her typical kerchief, to a mournful medical nurse (*Dying Soldier*, 1917, Fig. 2). A visual report, a temporary graveyard, with a green wreath with a medal ribbon, enclosed within a decorative fence made from wooden poles and barbed wire, is called *A Hero's Grave* (1916, VM). Grosvalds even used an allegorical image of a Latvian Nemesis, a flying woman in national dress with a sword: she accompanied Latvian riflemen in their just war against the invaders, and later for political freedom (*Latvian Soldiers in a Riga Street*, 1919, LNMA). These works were not simply a response to the political situation of the time. First of all, Grosvalds was genuinely fascinated by riflemen, and he tried to express his admiration for them. For instance, commenting on his 'heroes of Kalnciems', he wrote:

'They were excellent, those tall, blond, dashing chaps who, covered in blood, strode into dressing stations with their heads held high and smiling nonchalantly.'⁵ The simple and direct messages of all these works were in accordance with his political convictions, but he was also keenly aware of the clear political functions of such works, and did not strive to be elitist in cases when a picture had to be like a poster.

Nevertheless, Grosvalds was a sophisticated modernist artist, and could not confine himself solely to patriotic needs. While he was serving in the army, he willingly accepted the role of a war artist, and aimed to

⁵ J. Grosvalds, unpublished text in French, a draft for an article, 1917, manuscript in the LNMA.

surpass the established specialists in the genre, whose conventional output was reproduced in periodicals of the time: sensational episodes of politically important battles, invented scenes of dynamic clashes, and hand-to-hand combat depicted in the old-fashioned style of the 19th-century academies. The Russian war artists had been trained at the Academy of Art in St Petersburg, where there was a special class for them. Ādams Alksnis, a Latvian artist of the previous generation, had studied in this class, and Grosvalds certainly knew his drawings (some of them were preserved in Grosvalds' archive, now in the LNMA). Grosvalds described ironically and rejected this tradition, and put forward his own concept of the theme in the unpublished article *The War and Representational Art* (1916, LNMA). In his opinion, an artist should depict the reality of the new technological war, when fighting proceeds at a great distance, where huge armies are hidden in trenches, and the main genre becomes 'war landscapes'. He carried out his idea in full using his direct impressions of the Riga front line, where he served as an officer in 1916, and witnessed not only positional warfare but also the tragic July Battles, when his battalion lost about 70 per cent of its ranks, and the no less tragic Christmas Battles. He made sketches and also completed works in watercolour and gouache on the spot. Using the same sources, in Riga and Petrograd he later painted some larger compositions in tempera and oils. Grosvalds limited himself to the images and subjects that impressed him the most. He did not even try to tell heroic or captivating stories. The main body of his work is the range of expressive motifs, and they reveal the grim everyday realities of this new technological war: the transformed landscape, with its labyrinth of trenches, broken trees, ruins, dug-outs and fortifications, peopled by riflemen, the bombardments, wounded soldiers and graves, poisonous gas attacks, and so on. They were certainly not detailed visual documents. In accordance with his concept of 'synthesis', cherished in the years he studied in Paris, Grosvalds indicated only the properties of reality that seemed important to him. The synthesis grew out of the portrayal of objects, and at the same time out of the formal organisation of a piece of art. In this respect, his laconic style was quite functional.

3. Jazeps Grosvalds. *Trenches*. 1916



4. Jazeps Grosvalds. *Fortifications under Fire*. 1916–1917





5. Jāzeps Grosvalds. *Five Hundred Paces from the Germans*. 1916

His generalisations and simplifications of the objects depicted were in accordance with the harsh content of his compositions.

The positional war was shown full scale in some views of forests, river banks and sides of meadows. One example shows dark land with infinite curves of trenches and broken trees, with the lonely light of a rocket in the narrow strip of sky (*Trenches*, 1916, Fig. 3). There were also more inhabited and dynamic versions of this theme: stable fortifications peopled with excited figures, the night sky filled with the flashes of explosions and the shine of dangerously attractive red and white rockets (*Fortifications under Fire*, 1916–1917, Fig. 4). The hidden tragedy of everyday positional warfare becomes particularly evident in close-ups, for instance, in a picture representing a fortified hill, with logs, slits for firing from, and riflemen in the background, and with the foreground filled only with broken trees, an entanglement of barbed wire, wet sand and a puddle reflecting the grey sky (*Five Hundred Paces from the Germans*, 1916, Fig. 5). In another composition with a closed space, the battle is

already in progress (there is an explosion in the background), and trenches run into a central bunker with figures in the openings (*Battalion Headquarters*, 1916, VM). Other close-ups also represent the seemingly quiet existence of soldiers in trenches: they are waiting, hiding, watching the enemy through slits, and leading a passive existence in fortified shelters and narrow passages enclosed by piles of sand or snow (*On the First Line*, 1916–1917, VM, LNMA). Nevertheless, this peace is also transient, and the static figures alternate with dynamic ones, as in a scene where two soldiers hurry with an empty stretcher (*Explosion of a Grenade in a Passageway*, 1916, VM), or in another one where a rifleman wades in a trench full of water (*Sandbags in a Flooded Passageway*, 1916, VM). Another group of varied motifs shows the riflemen's quarters not far from the front line. Here, the everyday brutality of war is compensated for by a temporary, almost idyllic peace, by compositional stability and ornamentalism. Gently curved sandy or snowy hills over dug-outs fill the space, the circular ends of logs and rectangular entrances provide a primitive and firm pattern, the dark background and the verticals of pine trees are crossed by the parallel diagonals of small whirls of smoke; here the riflemen's activities are businesslike (*Dug-Outs in Winter*, 1916, National Museum, Stockholm). At night, groups of riflemen get together by the fireside, their idyllic life is concentrated around the fire, while the setting, the blue-black sky with the columns of broken trees, looks like a mysteriously threatening space (*Riflemen by the Fireside*, 1916, LNMA). The peace is certainly also transient during a night bombardment (*Night Fight*, 1916, VM). Then, wounded riflemen were an everyday reality of the front line. The war landscape and its buildings are peopled with soldiers with bandaged arms, legs and heads. Sometimes, Grosvalds shows first aid given at a dressing station, as in his watercolour *Medical Bunker* (1916, VM). Here, the centred light rectangle of the doctor's room is flanked by the figures of two riflemen with a stretcher, forming part of the geometrical structure of the composition. It has an air of static solemnity, both the stretcher-bearers appear like guards by a tunnel leading to either salvation or death. In another version of the theme, painted in monochrome grey and called *The Avenue of Horror* (1916–1917, VM,

National Museum, Stockholm, LNMA, Fig. 6), figures of riflemen with white bandages appear like ghosts on a foggy road in a forest. The image of this 'avenue' came from direct impressions in the course of the July Battles (Grosvalds recorded these impressions in writing for an article⁶). The graves of riflemen were also an essential element of the war landscape. For instance, four green hillocks with typical white crosses can be seen in the distance, thus becoming part of a gloomy autumnal landscape (*Graves*, 1916, VM). Graves are stressed by compositional means and tonality in his oil painting *Three Crosses (White Crosses)* (1917, Fig. 7). Here, they are placed on a hill in the centre of the picture against the black sky, and over some riflemen and a two-wheel cart in the foreground, thus imparting to the scene the solemn and tragic *memento mori* message. As was mentioned earlier, Grosvalds painted some works on the theme of gas attacks. He was certainly familiar with their horrifying effects, and left several very eloquent pieces of writing on the subject in his diaries ('... a scene of awful, immense disaster ... infernal!'⁷). In one watercolour, soldiers are wearing gas masks and simply waiting (*Waiting for a Gas Attack*, 1916, VM). In another composition, a wide landscape is covered by yellowish-pink, white and greenish smoke, released from clusters of gas canisters; they are operated by calm, matter-of-fact soldiers in gas masks (*Gas Attack*, 1916, Fig. 8). More expressive is the watercolour showing two silhouettes of soldiers using the same weapons against a background of yellow smoke, and appearing like menacing monsters (*Gas Attack*, 1916, VM). In the iconography of Grosvalds' works, one of the most important motifs was a ruin, which obviously represented the devastation of war. The ruins of farmsteads or countryside churches were usually depicted in his refugee series, and they were inevitably necessary elements of his 'war landscape' in the riflemen series. A ruin could be the central and sole motif of a composition, acquiring an almost symbolic significance (*Devastated Kurzeme*, 1916, VM). In other examples, ruins become almost 'natural' settings for riflemen (*After an Attack*, 1916–

⁶ J. Grosvalds. *Kara ainas. 3. jūlija uzbrukums* (War Scenes. 3 July Attack), *Lidums*, 18/31 July 1916.

⁷ Grosvalds' diary entry for 10 June 1917, LNMA.

6. Jazeps Grosvalds. *The Avenue of Horror*. 1916



7. Jazeps Grosvalds. *Three Crosses (White Crosses)*. 1917

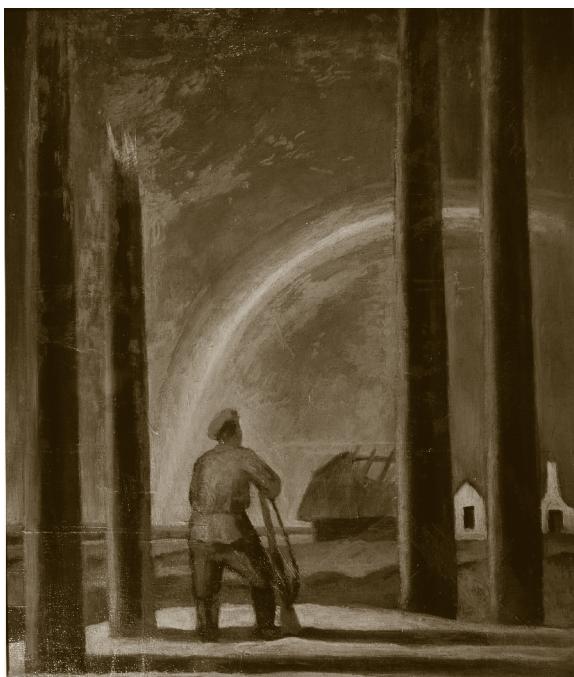




8. Jāzeps Grosvalds. *Gas Attack*. 1916

1917, VM, *Autumn*, 1916, National Museum, Stockholm). Maybe the most personal ‘war landscape’ was painted in 1917 in Petrograd, when Grosvalds was suffering from depression, expecting the worst future for his country, his people and himself (*Rainbow*, 1917, Fig. 9). Here, a lonely rifleman between broken pine trees, with his back to the viewer, looks at a view of the native land with the ruins of a farm, and a peaceful sky with a multicoloured rainbow. The rifleman becomes a contemplator, like the lovers of nature in the famous landscapes by Caspar David Friedrich. A pantheistic feeling is mixed with melancholic meditation on the subject of Grosvalds’ devastated and lost land.

The grim realities of the war in Grosvalds’ work could be regarded as an outcome of his individual concept of art. Notwithstanding his expressive compositional abilities, his vision was rather objective. It might be better understood when it is compared with examples of interpretation of the war in the work of his peers. The Parisian modernists were



9. Jāzeps Grosvalds. *Rainbow*. 1917

his prewar milieu, and therefore the closest analogies should be looked for in their output. As is stated by Kenneth Silver in his study on the subject, some Parisian modernists, under pressure from French chauvinists, escaped into the primitivism of the patriotically safe, so-called Epinal tradition⁸ (an old folk art production centred on Epinal, a town in eastern France). Grosvalds' style seems to be similar to that of some of the works by Raoul Dufy or Pablo Picasso published by Kenneth Silver.⁹ Nevertheless, Grosvalds certainly did not know them, and his images are not primitivistically stylised. The forcefully dramatised war scenes of the

⁸ K.E Silver, *Esprit de Corps: The Art of Parisian Avant-Garde and the First World War 1914–1925*, Princeton, 1989, pp. 38–42.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 39, 40, 42.



10. Kārlis Baltgailis. *The Island of Death*. 1935

German Expressionists are even more distant analogies. The war landscapes painted by the famous English interpreter of the subject Paul Nash are nearer, being of the same genre. For all that, Grosvalds' views lack those horrifying, almost Surrealist effects created by Nash.

It should be added that the tragic aspect of the First World War remained an essential part of the iconography of the war in the work of some of Grosvalds' followers (Jēkabs Kazaks, Niklāvs Strunke, Kārlis Baltgailis). Kazaks' main subject was refugees, interpreted in a more expressive, dramatic and harsh style (*Refugees*, 1917, LNMA). Niklāvs Strunke, who was Grosvalds' comrade on the front line, made some battle scenes in watercolours (*By the Heavy Machine-Gun*, 1916, LNMA), and later made some illustrations on the subject of Latvian riflemen. They became the

main subject of the oeuvre of Kārlis Baltgailis, who untiringly interpreted the theme during all his life (even into the Soviet period). His scenes are more narrative than Grosvalds' (*The Island of Death*, 1935, Fig. 10), but sometimes he achieved (in more laconic cases) the expressive force of his precursor (*Spring in Tīrelis Swamp*, 1935, LNMA).

In conclusion, it is possible to state that patriotic rhetoric could not conceal the atrocities of this irrationally senseless war. The scale of the devastation and the number of victims were so extreme that sensitive artists could not ignore them or try to interpret them as an inevitable supplement to heroic deeds. It should also be recalled that all the mentioned artists, and, especially Grosvalds, were brought up in an atmosphere of pre-war aesthetics, which postulated that individual reflections and autonomous formal devices are only valid within 'free' modern art. The horrors of war forced them to become more socially engaged. Nevertheless, personal emotional reactions motivated them to respond directly to the realities of war, and enclose their reactions in an adequately expressive form.

Abbreviations

VM – Värmland Museum, Karlstad

LNMA – Latvian National Museum of Art, Riga

Patriotinė retorika ir žiauri tikrovė Pirmojo pasaulinio karo Latvijos dailėje: Jāzeps Grosvalds

Santrauka

Latvijos dailininkai vaizdavo Pirmojo pasaulinio karo sugriovimus bei karines operacijas karo metais ir vėliau. Be abejonės, iškiliausi šios tematikos kūriniai priklauso Jāzepui Grosvaldui, kuris 1915–1917 m. sukūrė šaunius vaizduojančią kūrinių seriją. Šie paveikslai tapo savotiška paradigma vėlesniems jo pasekėjams, įskaitant ir socialistinio realizmo tapytojus. Ketvirtąjį dešimtmetį Grosvaldą aukštino kaip „nacionalinio epo pradininką“, o jo šaunlių serijas Boriss Vipers net vadino kovų už politinę nepriklausomybę vaizdais. Kai vėlyvojo sovietmečio dailės istorijoje Grosvaldo paveikslus dalinai reabilitavo Skaidrite Cielava, herojiški jo šauliai buvo giriami, praleidžiant nacionalinius atributus. Reikia sutikti su nuomone, kad patriotinė retorika lėmė kai kurių ikoniškiausių Grosvaldo įvaizdžių atsiradimą. Tačiau vis dėlto jo kūryba pirmiausia atspindi naujo technologinio karo kasdieninę tikrovę, transformuotus peizažus su apkasų labirintais, nulaužtus medžius, griuvėsius, sprogimų duobes, fortifikacijas, prigrūstas šaunlių, bombardavimų sprogimus, sužeistus kareivius ir kapus, nuodingų dujų atakas ir t. t. Grosvalds tarnavo karininku Rygos fronto linijoje 1916 m., tad tiesioginius įspūdžius prieš eskizuose, taip pat vietoje tapė scenas akvarelės ir guašo technika. Naudodamas tuos pačius motyvus, jis nutapė kelias didesnes kompozicijas tempera ir aliejiniais dažais. Grosvalds atmetė tradicinį rusų karo dailininkų stilių, vaizduojantį politiškai svarbių mūšių scenas ar dinamiškas priešų grumtynes, nutapytas XIX a. akademinė maniera. Jis nepasakojo tokių istorijų, jį traukė charakteringi ekspresyvūs motyvai ir jų deriniai. Šiuo požiūriu jo lakoniškas stilius buvo funkcionalus. Grosvaldo požiūris į formą bendraja prasme atitinka jo „sintezės“ koncepciją, kurią jis išsiugdė studijų Paryžiuje metais. Dailininkas pabrėžė tik tas realybės puses, kurios jam atrodė svarbios, naudojo griežtas linijas, redukuotų spalvų dėmes, supaprastintą chiaroscuro ir vieningą kompozicinę ritmiką. Jo vaizdų savitumas išryškėja palyginus su kai kuriais artimais Vakarų Europos dailės pavyzdžiais: karo temos interpretacija Paryžiaus modernistų kūriniuose, kurie naudojo primityvistinę Epinalio tradiciją; stipriai dramatinėmis vokiečių ekspresionistų karo scenomis ar siurrealistškai baugiais karo peizažais, sukurtais anglų dailininko Paulo Nasho. Tragiškasis Pirmojo pasaulinio karo aspektas tapo esminiu karo ikonografijos bruožu Grosvaldo pasekėjų (Niklāvs Strunke, Jēkabs Kazaks, Kārlis Baltgailis) darbuose.