

**Introduction:
Shifting Literary Culture since Stagnation
in the Brezhnev Era: The Baltic Paradigm**

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The term ‘the Stagnation period’ (denoting the years 1964–1982 in the history of the Soviet Union) offers an encapsulation of the era that began during the leadership of Leonid Brezhnev and extended until the advent of Mikhail Gorbachev in 1985. Daina Bleiere, a noted Latvian historian, has underscored the imperative for contemporary historians and scholars in humanities and social sciences to delve deeper into the controversial issues of that period. She calls for a rigorous exploration of themes like the transformation of the societal value system under Soviet influence, the intricate dynamics between specific societal factions and the Soviet administration, and the extent to which the general populace could influence the Soviet regime (Bleiere 2015: 33).

Adding a further nuance to this discourse, Lithuanian scholar Vilius Ivanauskas highlights the significant role Soviet intellectuals played in endorsing the regime through indoctrination practices – in the post-Stalin era, the impact of destalinization allowed Soviet intellectuals to engage in a more vibrant exchange of ideas and expressions. Exploring the Soviet peripheries, crucial in the decline of the USSR, and identifying comparable occurrences in those regions is essential (Ivanauskas 2018: 1).

This perspective aligns with the insights of historian Dina Fainberg and political scientist Artemy M. Kalinovsky, who have observed that discussions about this historical juncture often revolve around themes of being either “pre-crisis” or on the cusp of “pre-renewal” (Fainberg, Kalinovsky 2016: xiv). In the aftermath of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, which happened despite Gorbachev’s genuine efforts at reform and modernisation, the narrative of “stagnation” emerged as the predominant explanation why the Soviet socialist project eventually came to a downfall. Such inquiries and explanations are pivotal in order to understand the era, and can shed light on the complexities of human experience during the Stagnation period.

This era, characterised by its political and cultural nuances, has been the subject of various academic studies. Estonian scholar Epp Annus has posited that national rituals, such as music festivals, established an emotional connection between

individuals and the concept of nationhood, yet they alone did not instigate change. Meanwhile, literary works played a role in providing a basis for dissenting ideas, offering tangible concepts and exemplary models. Annus refers to the passionate response given to the historical dramas of the Lithuanian writer Justinas Marcinkevičius, with verses chanted by the chorus and by theatre audiences simultaneously (Annus 2019: 159). It may suggest that, throughout the Soviet epoch, the significance of the text often overshadowed the individual author's identity. Yet, the Stagnation period saw a transformative shift whereby the author's individuality, personal decisions, and distinctiveness began to shine through more prominently.

The Baltic nations, renowned for their complex history and rich cultural legacy, have demonstrated an intense scholarly interest in the period spanning from the 1940s to the 1980s. This scholarly pursuit is prominently reflected in biennial international symposiums convened by Baltic literary scholars. A notable event in this sequence was its 7th conference held in Riga in 2007, entitled *Back to Baltic Memory: Lost and Found in Literature 1940–1968*. Organized by the Institute of Literature, Folklore, and Art of the University of Latvia (ILFA), this conference provided an in-depth exploration of the multifarious dimensions of Socialist Realism, with a particular focus on the transformative dynamics of the Thaw period. The insights and scholarly dialogues arisen at this conference were subsequently accumulated into a meticulously compiled anthology *Back to Baltic Memory: Lost and Found in Literature 1940–1968* (2008), under the editorship of Eva Eglāja-Kristsons and Benedikts Kalnačs.

Furthering this academic dialogue, the 13th conference which was held in 2021 in Riga again, was aptly titled *Shifting Literary Culture since Stagnation in the Brezhnev Era: The Baltic Paradigm*. This conference was seen as an academic sequel to the 2007 event, illuminating various nuances of the Stagnation period and setting it apart as a unique chapter within the overarching narrative of Soviet history. This symposium welcomed diverse academic papers, fostering a holistic exploration of the intricate relationship between literary culture, societal dynamics, and the changing narratives from and beyond the Stagnation period. The profound cultural and societal impacts of the Brezhnev Era have left indelible marks on the contemporary Baltic literary and artistic scene. This lingering influence is hardly a surprise, considering that many present-day writers, irrespective of whether they were adults, teens, or mere children during that period, underwent the cultural metamorphoses of the era. Even the younger generation, though not direct witnesses, have engaged with this era through the tales and experiences of their predecessors.

The scope of discussions was broad, touching upon such topics as the ideological shifts in literature, visual and performing arts after the Khrushchev's Thaw. The researchers also delved into the complex relationship between Baltic societies and

the occupying powers, examining collaboration and passive resistance. Other themes included the evolution and reinterpretation of literary history and the landscape of literary translations and publishing, with an emphasis on cultural journals. Additionally, the scholars analyzed mobility, tourism, and the creation of cultural bridges, along with discussing collaborative cultural and political initiatives within the Baltic context. One of the standout discussions revolved around the modern 'cancel culture', investigating its possible antecedents in Baltic history. All these rigorous academic pursuits deepened our comprehension and admiration of the Baltic cultural chronicles and the distinct literary and artistic trajectory of this region.

In the upcoming issues No. 51 and No. 52 of *Letonica*, readers can expect an intellectually stimulating treat. While the above-mentioned conference already set the stage for a comprehensive dialogue on the Baltic literary and cultural evolution, both issues containing the proceedings of the conference promise to delve even deeper into this field. The authors have taken this opportunity to elucidate further the themes discussed, providing a more detailed insight.

These extended articles by both esteemed and early-career researchers not only build upon the foundational discussions initiated at the conference but also venture into uncharted territories. They present fresh perspectives and thematic directions, looking into previously unexplored facets. By doing so, they contribute to the existing narrative and add new layers of depth and nuance to our understanding of the Baltic literary culture and history.

The current issue, *Letonica* No. 51, presents articles on such topics as history of literature, poetry, prose, translation, performative arts, artwriting, and libraries. Each section delves into specific aspects of the cultural and intellectual landscape of the Baltic region during the Soviet era, providing insights into literature, arts, and societal influences.

Māra Grudule and Benedikts Kalnačs (Institute of Literature, Folklore and Art of the University of Latvia) discuss the challenges and compromises of writing the history of Latvian literature during the Soviet period, with a focus on the political and ideological influences (Grudule, Kalnačs 2023, this issue). Aušra Jurgutienė (Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore) explores the impact of the Cold War on national literary histories, particularly in Lithuania, examining internal hostilities and the preservation of national memory (Jurgutienė 2023, this issue).

Gintarė Bernotienė (Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore) analyzes the metaphysical treatment of flora in the poetry of Sigitas Geda, Leonardas Gutauskas, and Jonas Juškaitis during the Stagnation period (Bernotienė 2023, this issue). Donata Mitaitė (Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore) examines the concept of space in Soviet Lithuanian poetry, considering the works of Alfonsas

Maldonis, Judita Vaičiūnaite, and Antanas A. Jonynas (Mitaitė 2023, this issue). Akvilė Rėklaitytė (Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore) investigates changes of poetic meanings in late Soviet Lithuania, particularly focusing on the significance of national poetic images and their response to Soviet ideology (Rėklaitytė 2023, this issue).

Deniss Hanovs (Art Academy of Latvia) reflects on the portrayal of Baltic nations in Sergei Dovlatov's novel *The Compromise*, analyzing the narrator's in-between status and the "orientalization" of Estonians and Latvians (Hanovs 2023, this issue). Zanda Gūtmane and Sigita Ignatjeva (Liepāja University) explore the reception and translations of Western modernist literature in Latvia during the Brezhnev Era, emphasizing the hybrid nature of culture (Gūtmane, Ignatjeva 2023, this issue).

Heili Einasto (Baltic Film, Communication, and Arts Institute, Tallinn University; Tallinn Music and Ballet School) discusses censorship in ballet, using the case study of Mai Murdmaa's ballet adaptation of Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* in the Estonia Theater Ballet Company during the late Soviet era (Einasto 2023, this issue). Stella Pelše (Art Academy of Latvia Institute of Art History) examines the "open" phase of Socialist Realism in Latvian artwriting during the Stagnation period, analyzing the ways it combined Soviet viewpoints with Latvian cultural examples (Pelše 2023, this issue). Sandra Cīrule (Faculty of Social Sciences of the University of Latvia) focuses on the link between books, libraries, and readers in the Soviet Union during the 1970s, highlighting the deliberate strengthening of this connection and the diverse content available in public libraries at that time (Cīrule 2023, this issue).

The approach exemplified by these researchers and their work proves that *Letonica* is dedicated to nurturing a vibrant academic milieu, characterized by the presentation, elaboration, critique, and re-conceptualization of ideas. Readers will encounter a collection of intellectually stimulating articles that foster introspection and discourse, thereby deepening our understanding of the distinctive literary terrain of the Baltic region.

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