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At the Threshold of Stagnation: Reflections on Soviet Reality of the Late 1960s in the Novels of Alberts Bels

Pie stagnācijas sliekšņa: refleksijas par padomju realitāti Alberta Bela romānos 20. gadsimta 60. gadu beigās

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Summary The aim of this paper is to provide a contextual insight in the story of two novels written by Alberts Bels in the late 1960s: *Izmeklētājs* (The Investigator) published in 1966, and *Bezmiegs* (Insomnia), which was written in 1967 but denied publication by Latvian SSR officials. Analysis of the situation in the Latvian SSR at the time in question allows us to understand the reception of Bels's published novel by the literary critics of that time, as well as the conditions that prevented the publication of his second novel. Instead of providing a textual analysis of the novels' poetic and stylistic qualities, my intention is to look at these literary texts as indicators of the cultural and political situation of that period.

Kopsavilkums Raksta mērķis ir sniegt kontekstuālu ieskatu notikumos, kas saistīti ar latviešu rakstnieka Alberta Bela 20. gadsimta 60. gadu beigās radītajiem romāniem *Izmeklētājs* (publicēts 1966. gadā) un *Bezmiegs* (uzrakstīts 1967. gadā, padomju cenzūra aizliedza romāna publikāciju). Izpētot tālaika padomju kultūrpolitiku Latvijas PSR, varam gūt priekšstatu par Bela romāna *Izmeklētājs* vērtējumu literatūras kritikā un apstākļiem, kas kavēja *Bezmiega* izdošanu līdz pat 1986. gadam. Atstājot ārpus raksta ietvariem minēto literāro tekstu poētisko un stilistisko analīzi, pievērsta uzmanība to lomai apskatāmā laikmeta kultūras un politiskās situācijas izpratnei.

Latvian literature during the period of Soviet occupation (1945–1991) has been the object of studies for about the last thirty years in Latvia and even longer in the West, by literary scholars in the Latvian exile community (Ekmanis 1978). The historiography of Latvian literature, as explored recently by Māra Grudule and Benedikts Kalnačs (Grudule, Kalnačs 2019; 2023), focuses on the reception of literary texts and the methodology used in writing literary history. Regarding the period of Soviet occupation in Latvia, the ideological aspects affecting the literary process are of particular interest because of the totalitarian and post-totalitarian conditions shaping the cultural milieu in the Latvian SSR.

1968 in the Soviet Union initiated the so-called Stagnation era. The concept of Stagnation – which denotes the period of slow decay and weakening of the USSR in social, economic and political terms – was coined much later (after 1985) for the sake of the current political agenda, and is widely used by historians, political scientists, and other scholars working on various topics of Soviet history from the mid-1960s to mid-1980s (Lane 1992: 35–37; Rutland 2009: 218–225; Bacon, Sandle 2002: 165–187). However, when using the term 'stagnation' to refer to this period of more than twenty years in Soviet history – from October 1964 (the removing of Nikita Khrushchev from the office) to March 1985 (the approval of Mikhail Gorbachev in the office) – one should be aware of the ambiguity of the term. In fact, the term has been criticized as being too simple when it comes to explaining social and cultural practices in the Soviet Union during the period in question. The complicated interplay between state officials and the intelligentsia in the Soviet Union was represented in the field of literary production both supported and controlled by these state officials, where the authors tried to overcome the ideological and aesthetic limitations set for the Soviet literary culture.

Apart from the Prague Spring and its suppression in 1968–1969, the situation within the USSR in the late 1960s, when the 50th anniversary of the 'Great October Revolution of 1917' was celebrated, also displayed a number of inner strains and tensions. The Brezhnev Era had just begun, and officials still held aloft the banner of 'collective government'. Yet new challenges for the Soviet regime emerged on both the international and domestic levels. The years from 1965 to 1969 were marked by attempts to reshape the previously closed Soviet society according to some standards of modernization while leaving the political system unscathed (Zubok 2009: 76–86), belated as it was when viewed from the contemporary Western perspective. Testing the borders of the allowable 'inner opposition' in the USSR was also typical for this period.

In this context, the two novels written by the then-young Latvian author Alberts Bels – *Izmeklētājs* (The Investigator), published in 1966–1967, and *Bezmiegs* (Insomnia), completed in 1967 and 'put on hold' by Soviet censorship for ideological reasons until 1986 – reflect the threshold between two periods in Soviet history. These texts mark the line between the recent past of Stalinism (formally condemned by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) back in 1956 and especially in 1961), and the upcoming Stagnation era. Yet the process that created the conditions leading to the Stagnation era was gradual. During the 1960s, there were ideological clashes between the 'neo-Stalinists' and the 'liberal wing' of the CPSU which took place in Moscow; these events were also echoed in the Latvian SSR. In the vague space between the formally closed past and the everlasting 'present continuous' waiting for the once promised Communism utopia to become a reality, the two novels depict social processes taking place in Soviet society in general, as well as the particularities of the Latvian SSR in the late 1960s. Both *The Investigator* and *Insomnia* were written in a period of time when hopes for a 'socialism with a human face' were still present in Soviet society, though those hopes would fade in the following few years. Therefore, it is worth looking at the two novels as 'diagnostic' texts for that period.

The first cut is the deepest

Alberts Bels (formerly known as Jānis Cīrulis, born 1938) started his literary career in 1964 as a popular author of short stories. That period in the Soviet Union was the end of the so-called Thaw in the Soviet Union.[1] His first novel, *The Investigator*, was written between November 1965 and May 1966 (Beinerte 2013). The plot proceeds as an autobiography of a young sculptor who has decided to destroy his own works because they do not fit the moral conclusions he has come to about his life and the society he lives in. The novel includes the protagonist's reflections on the experiences of his generation and the moral dilemmas of the 1940s related to surviving during the Stalinist regime. *The Investigator* provides a portrayal of the author's contemporaries and some reflections on the society that was becoming more approving of the consumerism formally rejected by Soviet propaganda. For this reason, *The Investigator* was praised by Soviet literature propaganda agents in a biographic manual published for distribution in the West: "The novel clearly shows the ability of Bels to analyze the mutual relations of persons and present the readers with views and reflections on one's sense of duty, fight against stagnation [sic!], monotony, and lack of principles" (Anerauds 1973: 55).

1 For the biography of Alberts Bels see: Rožkalne 2009.

There is an aphorism dating back to the 19th century, saying that a poet in Russia is more than just a poet – meaning that professional literary activities provide a substitute for a lack of political participation. One might rephrase it to apply it to the situation in the Soviet Union. Literary criticism from the late 1950s onwards served as a kind of metaphoric agora where it was possible to discuss social and political issues otherwise excluded from the debate and intellectual communication allowed in the public sphere. On the other hand, since the early days of Socialist Realism in the 1930s literary criticism was a significant part of the ideological arsenal of the CPSU, used against ideological enemies and/or heretics (Dobrenko, Tihanov 2011: 145–248). This double-edged sword could cut well and reach the heart of one's personal life and career. As with many other public rituals created during the totalitarian stage of the Soviet Union, the practice of literary or aesthetic criticism with a political lining also survived the death of Joseph Stalin and the subsequent changes in Soviet cultural policy. It was based on a certain hierarchical structure and followed distinct principles of agency, prescribing who ought to criticize whom or what, and defining in what way criticism is to be displayed. This is actually why it is worth looking more closely at what literary critics said about Alberts Bels's novel *The Investigator*, as these reflections had certain political insights and even consequences.

"The beauty of *Izmeklētājs*, a rather strange combination of socio-psychological novel and detective fiction, lies both in *what* he narrates and in *how* he does it" (Ekmanis 1978: 321–322). This conclusion was reached by Rolfs Ekmanis (1929–2017), a notable Latvian literary scholar in exile, about ten years after publication of *The Investigator*. It points to those qualities of Bels's novel that were discussed among critics both in Soviet Latvia and in the West. Created in a form related to the modernist stream of consciousness, with a disrupted chronology of events and the inner monologues of the protagonist and other characters, the novel was perceived as a new and astonishing piece of art in the contemporary Latvian literature. While the novel is short, the text is filled with metaphors, paradoxes, and associations linked to the rather realistic threads that frame the story. Nevertheless, the contents of the plot caused similar discussions on whether the novel should be classified as psychological, intellectual, or philosophical prose.

In Latvia the first review of *The Investigator* appeared in March 1967, just a few months after its publication in the periodical *Zvaigzne* (The Star). As noted by reviewer Arvīds Grigulis (1906–1989), an author and literary critic representing the 'orthodox' conception of Socialist Realism, it was not a common practice to publish a review article on a literary work before that work was issued in book form. Publications in periodicals were considered a kind of raw material from the aesthetic point of view; presuming that there might be some difference between the text published in a

literary magazine or other periodical and the later, hard-cover edition. A bigger surprise was the discovery that Grigulis praised *The Investigator* for being a brave and well-grounded literary experiment or a 'search' (*meklējums*) that the young and obviously gifted author had performed with some serious intentions for the future. Grigulis was also the first critic to call this novel 'intellectual', highlighting the rarity of works of this kind in our literature (Grigulis 1967: 3). Thus Grigulis initiated a discussion that lasted for two years and was somewhat halted due to Alberts Bels's clash with the political censorship of the Latvian SSR.

There is no need to provide detailed insight into every review of *The Investigator* published in the late 1960s and early 1970s, yet the number of these reviews is unusually large indeed. Until the publication of his next novel *Būris* (The Cage) in book form (Bels 1972), there were twelve reviews published in Soviet Latvia and six in Latvian and English periodicals in the West, as well as one in Moscow. These texts shared some common traits regarding style, structure, and poetics. As for the literary critics in Latvian SSR, Arvīds Grigulis was soon followed by his colleagues who also debated about the possible classification of Bels's novel: whether it is an example of psychological (Ezera 1967; Krauliņš 1967: 145; Plēsuma 1968: 121), intellectual (Sokolova 1968; Eisule 1972), or philosophical prose (Broks 1967: 117; Tabūns 1968). While most of the critics tended to acknowledge the positive contribution of Alberts Bels's first novel to Latvian literature, there were also reproaches. Some considered the structure of the narrative too complicated, and claimed that the novelist's self-sufficient intentions demonstrate a style inappropriate for good Soviet literature (Bauģis 1967: 114; Vilsons 1967: 132). Some critics, like *Dr. philol.* Kārlis Krauliņš (1904–1981), also believed that Bels was trying too hard to follow the influence of James Joyce, causing a lot of unnecessary indents in the text. These voices were opposed by Harijs Hiršs (1937–2007), who argued that the composition of a novel should be left to the author alone (Hiršs 1967: 142). We will come back to the issue of aesthetic criticism in the Soviet Union later, after a few words on the reception of Alberts Bels's novel in the West.

Many young Latvian authors in exile read the literary magazine *Jaunā Gaita* (The New Course), published in the USA since 1955, and were genuinely interested in the development of national literature in the Latvian SSR. Therefore *The Investigator* was approached in good faith and without any of the preconceptions typically held by some exile political organizations towards cultural activities in the occupied homeland. The first one to write about Bels's novel in 1968 was Latvian painter and essayist Tālivaldis Ķiķauka (1929–2000) who lived in Canada. He seemed to be impressed with "the fresh, globalist style of the novel, as if the author himself came from the Western world" (T. Ķ. 1968). A somewhat similar but deeper analysis was

undertaken by literary critic and academic Ojārs Krātiņš (born 1934) from Berkeley, California: first in a short review (Krātiņš 1969), then in an article in the academic quarterly *Books Abroad* (Kratins 1973: 679–680). The reviewer's attitude was a critical one, though he nevertheless praised the author for his originality and capability to reflect on the social and historical contingencies opposed to the ethical imperatives Bels's protagonists coped with in their daily lives in the Soviet Latvia.

The Investigator was reviewed positively by Juris Silenieks (1925–2016), another Latvian literary theorist and critic in exile, in his review *Alberts Bels: In Search of Man*:

> Although there are interesting allusions to political events, the focal point of this *Bildungsroman* is the investigation of artistic sensibility and the artist's interaction with his fellow men [..]. With rhapsodic misanthropy, he recognizes the importance of human interdependence which defines man, including the superior individual [..]. A shameful stamp of sameness and lack of self-consciousness obliterates modern man. And although the sculptor, being a privileged man graced with special gifts, is only a spectator in the face of the befooling of the modern man, his aloofness likewise lacks merit and authenticity (Silenieks 1974: 37).

This statement can be supplemented by the conclusion drawn by Zanda Gūtmane on the particularity of the situation that the 'modern man' has experienced in the Soviet Union:

> Of course, complexity is the essential feature of the 20th century person in general; however, the complexity of the Soviet person is a special topic. Since the Soviet individual has been in the double moral situation for a long time, forgetting and even denying his own historical past, ignoring his conscience and complying with ideological pressure, he has clearly been formed into a split individual (Gūtmane 2008: 100).

Needless to say, this was no secret to the Soviet officials either; this is why qualities like 'complexity', ascribed to the composition of the novel or to its plot, were far more than mere statements about the aesthetic characteristics of the text in question. In Soviet tradition, these qualifications always indicated a political subtext evaluating the ideological reliability of a particular work of art.

However, not every literary critic representing Latvian literature scholars in exile accepted *The Investigator* as stunning art – for reasons involving both its formal qualities and, so to say, the ideological background that the reviewer decided to find in the text. For example, literary scholar, critic, and editor Jānis Rudzītis (1909–1970) in one of his final essays warned against overestimating the quality of Bels's first novel, noting that it was only path-breaking according to the conditions of the Soviet-occupied Latvia but not in the context of existentialist prose produced by Latvian authors in exile (Rudzītis 1969). In a few years, this thesis was revisited by Ojārs Krātiņš who deliberately compared Bels's work to the novels of Ilze Šķipsna (1928–1981), the most influential representative of modernist literature among Latvian authors in exile (Kratins 1973), noting both stylistic and structural parallels in texts created by the authors in question.

There was also a particular ideological discontent expressed by famous Latvian author and essayist Anšlavs Eglītis (1906–1993), who frequently wrote reviews on various subjects related to Latvian literature. In 1981 Eglītis published an essay devoted to novels of two contemporary Soviet Estonian authors, Enn Vetemaa and Paul Kuusberg, that were translated into Latvian and published in Riga. The reviewer praised the two Estonian colleagues for being far more brave and self-confident in their attitude towards the Soviet occupation regime than any of their Latvian counterparts had ever been (Eglītis 1981). The essay was distributed with different titles but nearly the same content in several Latvian periodicals published in the US, Western Europe, and Australia. However, the same period in Latvian literature was perceived differently by Rolfs Ekmanis:

> The atmosphere since the mid-1960s has been relatively lively and rebellious. Although the official Party restrictions continued virtually to define the subject or manner of writing [..] one part of the creative output, mainly dating back to the late 1960s and early 1970s, reveals that at least some writers in Latvia found it possible to deal in one way or another, with subjects and themes that had been forbidden during the first ten or fifteen postwar years (Ekmanis 1978: 308).

Alberts Bels certainly was among these authors mentioned by Rolfs Ekmanis. Strange enough that Eglītis, usually so careful in catching every small hint about anti-Soviet sentiment in texts printed in Latvia, paid no attention to novels by Alberts Bels which dealt with the same subjects as those in Vetemaa's and Kuusberg's works. Considering that in Soviet Latvia the boundary between collaboration and opposition was often quite diffuse (Bleiere 2018: 629), one could understand the dislike Eglītis expressed about what he labeled the willingness of Latvian authors to cooperate with the Soviet system. However, one should remember that during the Thaw Baltic literature was still strictly controlled and subject to multi-stage censorship. This, in turn, led to a literary practice where "any phenomenon is depicted in the light of half-truth according to the spirit of the particular age" (Gūtmane 2008: 96–97). As for the role that the Soviet censorship played in the development of Estonian literature, Eglītis presumed that it was not as harsh as in Latvia (Eglītis 1981: 147). Yet a study by George Kurman, conducted in the late 1970s (Kurman 1977: 10–12), shows no particular differences between the situation in these neighboring countries at the time.

The Estonian interlude

The comparison between some Latvian and Estonian novels of the 1960s and 1970s, as suggested by Anšlavs Eglītis, still makes sense considering the similar but not identical conditions of their provenance. As stated by George Kurman, in Estonia:

> The 1960s witnessed the debut of a younger generation of prose writers who were equipped – and were permitted – to depart significantly from the somewhat orthodox and dreary style, themes, and attitudes of their elders (Kurman 2018: 260).

The Investigator was written similarly to the short novel *The Monument* (1964) by Estonian author Enn Vetemaa (1936–2017)[2], published in 1965. This author was the first to introduce this kind of prose to Baltic literature (Gūtmane 2008: 98–99). Both short novels shared some similar traits *pro forma* and in terms of philosophic reflection on the moral issues that artists in the Soviet Union had to cope with. In both novels the plot is built through the inner monologue of a sculptor finding himself in a situation where he must choose between his artistic freedom and the possibility to make a compromise and come to a "politically correct" decision to create a monument according to the standards of Socialist Realism art. Yet there is a difference: Vetemaa's work shows an experienced artist who is ready to build his career at any cost, using political demagogy typical for the Soviet period as a tool in making his way to fortune. Meanwhile Bels focuses on a young man coming to terms with moral dilemmas set for him in the course of his recent life events. Thus *The Investigator* was in a way more suited for publication, although Bels managed to put into the text some episodes related to the ethnic-based Stalinist terror of the 1930s and the deportations of civilians from Latvia in the course of the collectivization campaign of 1949.

In contrast to Alberts Bels's experience with his first novel, *The Monument* was denied publication at first due to its being too critical towards Soviet ideology. Upon its publication, the novel won a prize. It is worth mentioning here that Russian translations of Vetemaa's novel appeared in the Soviet literary magazine *Druzhba narodov* (The Friendship of Nations) in the summer of 1966 (Vetemaa 1966), before Bels finished the manuscript of his first novel. *The Investigator* was published in the biweekly magazine *Zvaigzne* from September to December in issues No. 18–23. The Latvian translation of Vetemaa's novel[3] first appeared in early 1967 in the Latvian Communist Youth Association's (Komsomol) newspaper *Padomju Jaunatne* (Soviet Youth), No. 21–39. Thus the readers could get acquainted with both novels almost simultaneously. Since *The Monument* was still under fire for political reasons, its publication in the Latvian magazine was in a way supported by a short introduction written by the most respectable Soviet Estonian author of that time, Juhan Smuul (1922–1971)

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2 For the biography of Enn Vetemaa see: Org 2009.

3 Translation seems to be made from the publication in Russian since it follows particular stylistic trends recognizable in the text printed in *Druzhba narodov* and different from the second Latvian publication of *The Monument* translated from Estonian by Tamāra Vilsone (Vetemā 1979: 5–80). Moreover, the illustrations added to the text printed in *Padomju Jaunatne* were taken from the publication in *Druzhba narodov*.

who described it as "a brave, gifted, and ideologically correct masterpiece" (Vetemā 1967), to avoid any accusations that the text might harm the reader's perception of the surrounding Soviet reality.

This kind of political precaution certainly made sense because "since the mid-sixties, the advocates of de-Stalinization have encountered strong opposition" (Clarke 1981: 246). This trend against the de-Stalinization process was clearly demonstrated in the field of literature by Soviet officials in 1965 and 1966, as they launched a propaganda campaign ending with the trial of two authors, Yuli Daniel (1925–1988) and Andrei Synavsky (1925–1997), for publishing their literary works outside the Soviet Union (Zubok 2009: 88–89). This context shaped an atmosphere with a mixture of hopes for further de-Stalinization of the political system and fears that the current minor attempts to 'humanize Soviet socialism' would soon end. Although there is validity in the opinion that Estonia had experienced ongoing political liberalization since the 1960s (Bennich-Björkman 2022: 226), the situation was different for people living at the end of this decade amidst the turmoil caused by the split between the 'reformist' and 'orthodox' wings of the CPSU and their subsequent infighting. Estonians were forced to wait and see what the next turn in Soviet policy would bring.

The main ideological message shared by Soviet internal propaganda in the 1960s focused on the construction of the new socialist/communist society and on how the new Soviet person ought to overcome capitalism and the West in the future. However, the need to attain the living standards of the latter was more and more obvious. The contrast between work for the construction of socialism and one's right to enjoy leisure as a somewhat-tolerated individual practice was notable. By the late 1960s, this contrast gradually started causing reflections uncomfortable for the Soviet regime about the very nature of the socialist society that the citizens were being called to build. Yet the situation in general was far from any kind of mass resistance or even mass discontent about the Communist regime. On the contrary, a specific tactic of survival was chosen by the majority of Soviet society: "In the 1960s, when the middle class of Soviet society had already emerged, a "double consciousness" developed: inward cynicism / outward hypocrisy, private freedom / official loyalty" (Eglāja-Kristsone 2021: 224).

Thus both Vetemaa and Bels wrote about society already from a position of stagnation; a society different from the image created in Soviet media of that time. It was a society of conformism, with one's self-interest put above the socialist ideals that everyone seemed to be accepting only externally. The somewhat exaggerated pathos of anti-consumerism present in *The Investigator* as well as in *Insomnia* reflects the spirit of the age quite precisely, and echoes the intonations of the short novel *Things: A Story of the Sixties* by French contemporary author Georges Perec

(1936–1982), published by *Editions Julliard* in 1965. A Russian translation of Perec's novel, edited in Moscow, was available to the Soviet audience in 1967; a Latvian translation from the French[4] followed some years later (Pereks 1970) and probably influenced Bels's third novel, *The Cage*, which addressed similar issues of Soviet-style consumerism that imitated the Western example of welfare society and covered up the conformist everyday practices of Soviet citizens within the existing political regime.[5]

The trouble with *Insomnia* The existentialist motifs already present in *The Investigator* and noted by some critics were made even stronger in Alberts Bels's second novel, *Insomnia* (Bels 2019). Although the story was combined with a kind of 'historical fiction' about the age of the Baltic Crusade in the 13th century, the focus was set on sharp criticism of the contemporary Soviet Latvian society. Bels finished the manuscript of the novel in 1967, the same year when *The Investigator* was published in book edition, and tried to publish the manuscript at various Latvian publishing houses for two years without success. After a provocative interlude in 1970 with quite strange attempts by some occasional Latvian emigrés to smuggle the manuscript to the West, a criminal case against the author was initiated in 1971. The case relied on conclusions made by an expert commission which checked the text from an ideological point of view. Conclusions drawn by the experts were extensive in form yet clear in contents: the novel allegedly lacked any kind of artistic value while the author was shamelessly expressing his deliberate anti-Soviet political intentions here (Bels 2003: 11–18). It is worth noting that one of the experts in this commission was Kārlis Krauliņš who previously wrote about *The Investigator* in the context of contemporary Latvian literature.

This was a turning point in Alberts Bels's professional career and living conditions. Considering that Article No. 65 in the Criminal Code of the Latvian SSR, dealing with the so-called 'Anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda activities', prescribed detention from six months up to seven years (Latvijas PSR Tieslietu ministrija

4 The usual practice for translations of Western authors in the Soviet Union was to follow a specific hierarchy: publication of these translations in non-Russian languages was allowed only after the text was published in Russian at first. Thus in many cases Russian edition was used as an intermediary tool when creating the Latvian translation, although it was mostly labeled as translated from the original edition. In fact, this could be the case of Perec's novel as well, since there is no subtitle in the French edition of 1965 in contrast to the Russian edition.

5 On consumerism emerging in the Soviet Union since the second half of the 1960s see: Chernyshova 2013: 17–42 especially.

1971: 65), there was no doubt about the serious consequences that might arise. Activities described in Article No. 65 belonged to the category of especially dangerous crimes against the state. These activities included, among others, "distribution of false statements disparaging the Soviet state" as well as the distribution, creation or storing of literary texts with such content. Although the investigation against Bels was halted in summer 1971 and the novel *Insomnia* was never prohibited from publication officially, given the fact that its manuscript was already rejected by all the possible editors, the author was soon visited by two persons incognito who explained in detail what 'might actually happen' to him and his family members in case he nevertheless decided to distribute the text in samizdat or some other illegal format (Bels 2003: 8–9).

One of practices typical for the Soviet cultural policy at that time, inherited from the period of Thaw, was linked to the understanding that Soviet literature needed new authors to enter the field (Lygo 2006). Some particular circumstances in Latvia were supporting a sense of cautious optimism around 1966 – due to the takeover or the so-called 'palace revolution' that took place during the 5th Congress of the Latvian Soviet Writers' Union (LSWU) in December 14th–16th, 1965. The youngest generation of writers then rejected the candidates approved by the Central Committee of the Latvian Communist Party and elected a new board of the Writers' Union. This "provided a second chance for a Thaw atmosphere in Latvian literature, expressing a more free and even revolutionary spirit, first of all, among the literati themselves" (Eversone 2017a). Among these revolutionary expressions were also objections against the power of ideological censorship. The borders were set at social and political criticism of the so-called actually existing socialism (Swain, Swain 1998: 94–125) – freedom of speech was not unlimited. This was clearly confirmed in the case of *Insomnia*. Alberts Bels post-factum explained his perspective of the situation in a newspaper interview:

> The novel was not written so foolishly that it would be destroyed at once, but it was written frankly enough to be denied publication. Nobody spoke about censorship openly, but I was advised in a personal conversation to put the manuscript on a quiet shelf and not to dare spread it in public, otherwise there would be serious consequences for me and my family [..]. Actually, for me it was an impulse to write the novel *The Cage*, dealing with the issue of individual freedom in our Soviet situation (Beinerte 2013).

Insomnia was first published in its censored version in the Writers' Union magazine *Karogs* in 1986, the cuts in the text being agreed upon with the author (Bels 1986). What was the explanation for these cuts and how Bels accepted them? It seems that Bels decided to take the chance, as censorship had been somewhat reduced due to the *glasnost* policy declared in the USSR around that time, to publish the previously forbidden text. A part of a work is more than nothing, even when a

high cost is paid for it. In 1985, when Bels reshaped *Insomnia* for legal publication, it was still hard to imagine that serious changes would take place and the Soviet regime was going to collapse in few years. As Bels has stated, summing up a writer's aspirations: "You have to be visible, so that the words you say can be heard" (Beinerte 2013). Staying in the grey zone of samizdat was a hard choice to make, and even harder when it was clear that there would be no publication at all.

The uncut Latvian text of *Insomnia* with the author's comments was published in 2003, and later an English translation by Jayde Will (Bels 2019). The novel became very popular among the Latvian literary scholars of the middle generation, presuming that *Insomnia* already exposed all the evil of the Soviet colonial policies carried out in Latvia (Lūse 2008: 341–342). Since it turned out that there were few texts representing Latvian literature in the Soviet period that were either prohibited or appeared in samizdat (Bleiere 2022: 60), the question of collaboration emerged once again, pointing to distinguished members of Soviet Latvian intelligentsia. The discourse of Soviet colonialism in the Baltics and colonial relationships among nations in the USSR has been a subject of investigation for decades (Annus 2020), with researchers discovering various perspectives applicable to this issue. According to Bels's opinion, writing about the Nazi occupation of Latvia (1941–1944/45) was an instrument to speak about the actual Soviet dominance instead, and this was the real cause of *Insomnia's* denied publication (Bels 2003: 7).

Dealing with censorship

The first troubles with the manuscript of *Insomnia* did not prevent Bels from speaking about the abolishment of censorship in Soviet Latvia on December 9, 1968, at the meeting of the Latvian Soviet Writers' Union board in Riga. There were several conditions due to which his performance had political consequences. Firstly, the political atmosphere in the Latvian SSR, as well as in the Soviet Union in general, was rather tense in 1968, as the Soviet regime and the CPSU tried to cope with the challenge of the Prague Spring events. Thus, following Moscow's hard line towards stronger ideological control over intellectuals and legal opponents, corresponding activities were undertaken in Riga as well (Latvijas Valsts arhīvs 2009). This was also the reason for organizing such a meeting at the LSWU with Jurijs Rubenis (1925–2005), a secretary of the Central Committee of the Latvian Communist Party since 1966, who gave a speech about the development of the contemporary Soviet Latvian literature. Indoctrination of the literati about the terms and conditions set by Communist Party ideologists included praises and criticism to particular authors for their publications, as well as blaming

others for the political situation in general – for instance, accusing Western imperialism for trying to blow up the socialist bloc from within (Rubenis 1968: 2). As noted by Rolfs Ekmanis, this speech, delivered by a high-ranking Party official, "reflected the official desire to impose more control over all sectors of the country's intellectual, cultural, and spiritual life" (Ekmanis 1978: 297).

Considering this, the fact that Bels explicitly mentioned the recent Soviet invasion in Czechoslovakia (which was only vaguely addressed by Rubenis) was a heresy, and not the only one. Bels also shared his view that writers in Soviet Latvia were hindered by professional limitations arousing from two preconditions. The first was false and biased information about actual events: the only information available to Soviet citizens came from the press and other public media. There was only one institution that held correct data about the society and its mood in Soviet Latvia – that institution, the State Security Committee (KGB), shared its data with the Central Committee but not with writers, said Bels. The second precondition was "the one we avoid talking about, even among ourselves" – namely, censorship. Bels compared the censorship to the institution of serfdom that existed in the Russian Empire up to 1861. In the Baltics, then a part of that empire, this "harmful and detrimental institution" was abolished some forty years earlier than in Russia itself. Bels concluded that "the state [i.e. the Soviet Union] would not be endangered if this time the abolishment of censorship [also] started with the Baltic Republics" (Niedre 1996; Latvijas Valsts arhīvs 2009).

These statements had an explosive effect on the audience of about 500 people (Gorjaeva 1995: 50), who were also triggered by the tense atmosphere caused by the Soviet policy towards the Prague Spring and by the restrictions that Jurijs Rubenis had himself communicated in his regulative instructions for intellectuals. Rubenis used rhetorical questions in his speech, imploring LSWU board members not to get involved too deeply with criticism of the Soviet state:

> It is no secret that sometimes the publishers, editorial boards and the Press Committee conflict with the writer about particular texts. These conflicts are usually associated with the identification of the various problems in these texts. Some writers raise a question at times: but can't one write about it? This is a false statement. It is clear, however, that literature cannot avoid the contradictions that arise in our life [..], everything that prevents moving along the path set by the party. Criticism of shortcomings is valid and necessary. But we are against the cases when [..], one sinks into barren criticism and denigration of life and of the socialist political system. Will such criticism give us anything? I doubt it. What is important is that criticism always represents certain positions. And it is already [..] a political issue. A malicious, vile criticism which distorts the truth of life and creates a misconception of our reality usually goes hand in hand with a criticism under which our enemy would be willing to sign (Rubenis 1968: 3).

While considering that Soviet ideological censorship of the culture in Latvia was more pronounced than in Estonia and in Lithuania (Bleiere 2018: 629), any hint about the existence of censorship was regarded as a threat by state officials. However, Alberts Bels was not alone in his attitude towards censorship in the Soviet Union – in 1967, Alexander Solzhenitsyn (1918–2008) asked in his letter to the Writers' Union of Moscow to stop censorship (Gūtmane 2008: 97). The scent of freedom was still in the air, although the political climate in the Soviet Union was changing in front of one's eyes. Yet the momentum of de-Stalinization process started by Nikita Khrushchev had survived his deposition in 1964 for at least some years, until the end of the Prague Spring, given that the abolition of censorship was among the tasks set by some Czechoslovak reform communists (Williams 1997: 14–28). Since in the annexed Baltic States the lasting influence of the Thaw was to be observed also in the prose of the late 1960s (Gūtmane 2008: 95), and "until 1968 the possibilities offered by a reformed communism tailored to national peculiarities seemed real" (Swain 2021: 154), the case of Alberts Bels's speaking in late 1968 about the necessity of canceling political censorship in the Latvian SSR for the sake of Soviet socialism itself may not seem as naïve as it does from the distance of the present day.

In fact, it was the second time when Bels had expressed in public his negative opinion about Soviet censorship. The first occasion was in May 1965, when he was invited to speak on a Latvian Television live broadcast program devoted to literary issues. Bels revealed that among other obstacles hindering the development of young authors in Soviet Latvia there was a problem caused by censorship, namely the institution called *Glavlit*[6], constantly intervening into literary activities. Of course, this sort of 'occasion' was to be noted and remembered by *Glavlit* officials of the Latvian SSR, and the second time Bels crossed the red line was even more astonishing for them, so to say, from the moral point of view. Thus Valentin Agafonov (1926–1981), head of the *Glavlit* in Riga, made particular complaints about this in his report to Moscow on December 25, 1968: "[T]he cynical and defamatory statements Bels has made about censorship are particularly unacceptable because censorship has never interfered in any of his literary compositions" (Bljum, Volovnikov 2004: 432–433). The predictable events unfolded in the following months, according to the logic of the bureaucratic mechanism of the Party. Information provided in Agafonov's report was almost precisely repeated in the next report of January 16, 1969, sent to officials at the Central Committee of CPSU by Pavel Romanov, head of the *Glavlit* of the USSR

6 Acronym of the term denoting the censorship institution in Russian: *Glavnoe upravlenie po ohrane gosudratvennykh i voennykh tajn v pechati* (General Directorate for the Protection of State and Military Secrets in the Press), subjected to the Council of Ministers of the USSR in general and to the corresponding institutions on the level of particular Soviet Socialist Republics.

(Gorjaeva 1995: 50–52), and from there certain activities took place for the so-called organizing conclusions to be made at the local level in Riga again. The case ended with a decision made at the Bureau of the Central Committee of the Latvian Communist Party on March 4, 1969, demanding to "(1) consider A. Bels's speech as politically damaging, directed against the party's leadership in literature and art; (2) consider it impossible to allow A. Bels to continue his education at the Higher Courses of screenwriters and film directors of the Cinematography Committee of the Council of Ministers of the USSR due to his political immaturity; (3) to issue a reprimand to be entered in the personal card of Alberts Jansons, First Secretary of the Latvian Soviet Writers' Union and a member of the CPSU since 1943, who spoke in an unprincipled manner at the meeting of the writers of the republic, in which he did not give any counterweight to the politically harmful speech of A. Bels [..]" (Latvijas Valsts arhīvs 2009).

Although the summary of the meeting at the LSWU, published in the Latvian Communist Party's official periodical *Cīņa* (The Struggle), did not mention Alberts Bels's presence at the meeting (LTA 1968), there is no particular surprise that after these activities the quality of his writing was criticized more sharply than before. But in this case more sophisticated tactics were used – given the altogether positive attitude towards Bels's publications shared by the most prominent literary critics prior to December 1968, it was perhaps difficult to find a convincing way for them to change their collective opinion so sharply. A solution was found in using a somewhat-indirect form of criticism expressed by a quasi-reference to sociological research materials. Academic philosopher and theorist of aesthetics Pēteris Zeile (1928–2020) quoted some "young person who referred to himself as journalist R." allegedly explaining his opinion to Zeile in a conversation as follows: "Everybody is praising the novel *The Investigator* by A. Bels now. But I am not so excited about this novel at all. To me it seems overly constructed, a bit stilted, you know. There isn't much space for imagination in the text, because you have to concentrate on following the storyline all the time [..]. Personally, I am more fond of those modern authors who write their sentences clearly, like [Jack] London, [Theodore] Dreiser, [Ernest] Hemingway, [Konstantin] Paustovsky" (Zeile 1969: 122).

Disregarding the strange classification of the so-called 'modern' authors in the sentence quoted above, this opinion illustrates how things were arranged to express a certain discontent about somebody's work by seemingly using a kind of aesthetic argumentation only. However, the political subtext of such a criticism was clear to the contemporaries, because blaming any writer for being a 'formalist' – i.e. writing in a way too complicated to understand even for a reader with some intellectual background, as was the case with the anonymous "young journalist R." here – in the Soviet tradition was just the first step towards saying that this writer lacks an

understanding of the ideological issues that every Soviet citizen should both observe and cherish. In fact, Zeile only repeated the same complaints about Bels's novel already expressed by Jurijs Rubenis in his speech six months ago: "Sometimes the writer, carried away by sophisticated techniques, forgetting the mass interests of readers, makes his work difficult to perceive and understand. For example, A. Bels's novel *The Investigator* is too complicated in some places, and it does not always help to discover writer's intentions" (Rubenis 1968: 3).

This kind of political criticism of Bels was also clear to Zeile's colleagues. Likely for this reason did Voldemārs Melnis (also Meļinovskis, 1910–1997), who had authority as a literary critic and CPSU veteran with a particular political influence among Party members, decide to fire back in late 1969. He argued that *The Investigator* comprised bold, intellectual substance and attempted to provide philosophical analysis of the contemporary situation (Melnis 1969: 5). The consequences of events that took place from December 1968 to March 1969 were decisive enough to cancel any chance for Bels's second novel *Insomnia* to appear in print. The Soviet administration was particularly suspicious and cautious towards any possible influence that the Prague Spring events might have upon society in the USSR (Wojnowski 2018). This fear of rising political opposition was present among the officials in Latvian SSR as well – in 1968, nearly every case recorded by the *Glavlit* regarding expressions of discontent with the Soviet regime and its Russification policy in everyday life was immediately attributed to Western influence allegedly coming through the impact of the so-called "Czechoslovak events" (Latvijas Valsts arhīvs 2009; Eversone 2017b). It was a situation when even the support *Insomnia* gained from Aleksandrs Drīzulis (1920–2006), secretary for ideological issues at the Central Committee of the Latvian Communist Party in 1971 (Bels 2003: 8), was not enough to change the course set by the bodies responsible for political censorship in the Latvian SSR.

Conclusion

The first novels written by Alberts Bels expressed the essence of the early Stagnation period in Soviet Latvia. *The Investigator* toyed with the boundaries of allowable content, while *Insomnia* took one step further and was banned from publication. The latter only appeared in print twenty years later and in a censored version. All the problems and complexities surrounding the creation and publication of these literary works reflect the situation of the late 1960s and early 1970s, having traits characteristic of the Soviet Union as well as some elements specific to the Latvian SSR. Description of the atrocities experienced in Latvia during the Soviet and Nazi occupation in both novels, approximate as it was, turned out to be more than a

rhetorical gesture in the late 1960s. In Latvia, the additional factor shaping citizens' attitudes towards the Stalin period and the Soviet regime in general was the sense of the lost independence of the country and the colonial situation of Latvia since 1945, and it was discussed indirectly through literature. A closer look at these episodes of literary history provides a possibility to understand the mutual, three-edged relationship between political power, ideological censorship, and individual creativity in a historical context. To understand the interplay of the three elements mentioned above means to understand the mechanism of power controlling the circulation of information, ideas, and concepts in the society ruled by the Communist regime of the Soviet Union. The first two novels written by Alberts Bels in the second half of the 1960s represent an attempt to overcome both the political and aesthetic limitations set by the Soviet occupation regime. However, since *Insomnia* was denied of publication, Bels continued to courageously go in the same direction with his novels during the early 1970s, notably *Būris* (The Cage, published in 1972) and *Saucēja balss* (The Voice of One Calling, 1973). This was also noticed by Latvian literary critics in the exile (Nollendorfs 1975) who regarded Bels's literary activities as a rare example of intellectual resistance combined with some existentialist trend so important for the Latvian cultural milieu in the period of Soviet dominance.

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