

# Art

and

# the State

in Modern Central Europe  
(18th – 21st Century)

EDITED BY:

**Josipa Alviž**  
**Dragan Damjanović**  
**Jasmina Nestić**  
**Jeremy F. Walton**

Zagreb, 2024.

# Art and the State in Modern Central Europe (18th – 21st Century)

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## TORN BETWEEN TWO STATES: LEFTIST LATVIAN ARTISTS IN LATVIA IN THE 1920S AND 1930S\*

### Abstract

*In my paper I bring to light the leftist artists in independent Latvia in the interwar period and their struggle to express their beliefs. As representatives of the working class, they were fertile soil for banned Bolshevik ideology during the Great Depression. Being involved in the illegal Bolshevik party, they took risks and used their skills to illustrate and design forbidden newspapers and magazines, or to create decorations and slogans, which led to multiple arrests and imprisonments. Radical artists such as Ernests Kālis and Samuils Haskins were forced to emigrate to Soviet Russia, where they had to comply with themes based on the art commissioning policies of the USSR. Their freedom didn't last, as both were arrested by the secret police and accused of high treason during the Great Purge of 1937, which led to Kālis' death in a prison hospital and to Haskins' sentence to five years in a corrective labour camp.*

**Keywords:** leftist art,  
censorship, Bolshevik  
ideology, illegal periodicals,  
imprisonment, interwar  
Latvian art

### INTRODUCTION

The most significant consequences of World War I for the Latvian region were the new-born states of Latvia and Soviet Russia, which also specifically impacted the fate of Latvian artists. As offspring of the generation of the 1905 Revolution, they had additional reasons to feel a strong attraction to socialistic ideals, which became more intense after military experience in WWI and the Russian Revolution. This led to a difficult choice – they had to redefine their relationship to socialism and nationalism, dividing society into two principal camps. In this paper, I bring to light the leftist artists in independent Latvia and their struggle to express their beliefs. The most important sources about this subject were created in Soviet Latvia, in particular the summary of historical testimony in *Cīņas balsis: Apcerējumu un atmiņu krājums par revolucionāro presi latviešu nacionālistiskās buržuāzijas kundzības laikā 1920.–1940.* [Voices of Fight: A Collection of Reflections and Memories About the Revolutionary Press During the Rule of the Latvian Nationalist Bourgeoisie, 1959],<sup>1</sup> while the wider context in the field of arts being provided in two graduation papers from the Latvian Academy of Art: *Rīgas Tautas augstskolas tēlotājas mākslas studija* [The Fine Arts

\* This publication is supported by the State Culture Capital Foundation and Art Academy of Latvia, Institute of Art History.

<sup>1</sup> *Cīņas Balsis: Apcerējumu un atmiņu krājums par revolucionāro presi latviešu nacionālistiskās buržuāzijas kundzības laikā 1920.–1940.* [Voices of Fight: A Collection of Reflections and Memories About the Revolutionary Press During the Rule of the Latvian Nationalist Bourgeoisie 1920–1940], comp. Jūlijs Ķipers (Rīga: Latvijas Valsts izdevniecība, 1959).

Studio of Riga Peoples' University 1920–1940, 1966]<sup>2</sup> and *Proletāriskās cīņas tēlojums latviešu grafikā 20. un 30. Gados* [Portrayal of the Proletarian Struggle in Latvian Graphics in the 1920s and 1930s, 1975].<sup>3</sup> Archives and periodicals from the time were used to supplement missing information and to fill in any gaps. To avoid the theme's unpleasant connotations with the Soviet period and examine its new dimensions, I use a combined methodology: sociological, historical and iconographical.

The founders of leftist art in Latvia are considered to be Ernests Kālis (1904–1939) and Samuils Haskins (1909–1974). In a family of five people, Kālis was the second child of Jānis, a worker at the Riga metallurgy locomotive, railway wagon and machine factory, Feniks.<sup>4</sup> For his part, Haskins had to work for a living. During his fragile teenage years, at the age of 15, he witnessed a horrific scene in which logs rolled on top of a woodworker, crippling him and leaving him without the means to provide for his family.<sup>5</sup> As representatives of the working class, Kālis and Haskins were fertile soil for banned Bolshevik ideology during the Great Depression. They were instructed by the Communist Party, which subsequently involved many students, to take an advisory role in the drawing and painting workshop of the Rīgas Tautas Augstskola (Riga Peoples' University).<sup>6</sup>

The platforms used by Latvian leftist artists were both legal and illegal publications of the leftist labour movement – newspapers and magazines, information stands on Labour Day events, wall newspapers in workers' clubs and trade unions, flyers for rallies and election posters, as well as productions in workers' theatres. These were commissioned by leftist trade unions and workers' culture associations as well as underground organs of the Communist Party, although the artists did not always receive pay for their work.<sup>7</sup>

For several years after independence, Latvia functioned according to the norms established in the legislation of Tsarist Russia, according to which participants in the 1905 Russian Revolution had been harshly punished.<sup>8</sup> In the reality of interwar Latvia, leftist artists were among the radicals who believed in communist ideology and sacrificed their health, private life and even authorship

2 Ilga Straume, "Rīgas Tautas augstskolas tēlotājas mākslas studija" [The Fine Arts Studio of the Riga Peoples' University] (Master's thesis, The Art Academy of Latvia, 1966).

3 Inta Rudzīte, "Proletāriskās cīņas tēlojums latviešu grafikā 20. un 30. Gados" [Portrayal of the Proletarian Struggle in Latvian Graphics in the 1920s and 1930s] (Master's thesis, The Art Academy of Latvia, 1975).

4 K. Sakne [Kārlis Ozoliņš], "Sirdsapziņa krāsās" [Conscience in Colours], *Zvaigzne*, June 1, 1956, 16.

5 Zamuels Haskins, "Revolucionārā grafika Buržuāziskajā Latvijā" [Revolutionary Graphic Art in Bourgeois Latvia], in *Cīņas Balsis*, comp. Ķipers, 408. In Soviet times his name was 'Latvianised' to Zamuels, but in contemporary history he is referred to as Samuils.

6 Straume, "Rīgas Tautas augstskolas tēlotājas mākslas studija," 115.

7 Andrejs Balodis, "Ar dedzīgu sirdi" [With a Burning Heart], in *Cīņas Balsis*, comp. Ķipers, 324.

8 "Social discontent in cities was expressed in regular workers' strikes and ethnic antagonism persisted in society. The culmination of social and national antagonisms was the Revolution of 1905 during which general strikes, meetings and demonstrations were followed by the mass burning of manors in the countryside, armed battles, repressive punitive expeditions and the actions of the so-called Forest Brothers." Eduards Kļaviņš, "Introduction," in *Art History of Latvia IV: Period of Neo-romanticist, Modernism 1890–1915*, eds. Edaards Kļaviņš and Kristiāna Ābele, trans. Stella Peļše and Valdis Bērziņš (Rīga: Institute of Art History of the Latvian Academy of Art, Art History Research Support Foundation, 2014), 27.

because they functioned outside the law. Following Kārlis Ulmanis' *coup d'état* and in the context of growing regime repression, the Political Directorate arrested and handed over to the court artists such as Kārlis Bušs (1912–1987) and Augusts Pupa (1907–1945), who were sentenced to three years in a correctional institution, including forced labour at the Kalnciems stone quarry of the Riga Central Prison.<sup>9</sup> As became clearer later, their fate was luckier than that of Haskins and Kālis. After the Soviet occupation of Latvia in 1940 they were released from jail and suddenly they could work legally and even hold an official position in the new born Soviet art institutions such as the Artists Union, etc.<sup>10</sup>

Censorship in interwar Latvia was similar to that which existed elsewhere in Europe,<sup>11</sup> except for one important difference – here it reflected the grim experience of the Latvian Socialist Soviet Republic of 1919, whose short existence included mobilisation, terror, famine, the division of residents into categories and agrarian reform.<sup>12</sup> The stabilisation of state power after the Latvian War of Independence was followed by the outlawing of the Communist Party. It was directed not only towards the preservation of the nation state, but also against this recent past.

## CENSORED PUBLISHING

Under these harsh circumstances, leftist artists developed a number of tricks to deal with censorship and the authorities. One illegal daily newspaper, *Darbs un Maize* (Work and Bread), regularly published contentious articles and political caricatures. They were mostly drawn by Haskins, Kālis' follower and pupil, whom he met at *Rīgas Centrālais Arodbiedrību Birojs* (Riga Central Labour Union Office; hereafter RCL). From time to time, copies of the newspaper were confiscated because of the critical language of its cartoons or for insulting the state.<sup>13</sup> As Haskins remembered, he was once arrested and accused of being the author of the critical cartoons. Haskins denied any guilt but was kept under arrest to see what would happen with the cartoons in the newspaper.<sup>14</sup> The next issue surprised not only one of the inspectors, but also the artist himself:

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9 Tiesas sprieduma izraksts Augusta Teodora Pupas cietuma lietā [Extract of the Court Verdict in the Prison Case of Augusts Teodors Pupa], August 5, 1936, Description 1, Case 9045, Collection 3273, Latvian State Historical Archive (hereafter cited as LSHA), Riga.

10 In 1940 and 1941, Kārlis Bušs became the Deputy Chairman of the Artists Union's Organizing Committee and the Director of the Museum of Western European Art. Latvijas PSR mākslinieku savienība "Kārlis Bušs", *Literatūra un Māksla*, October 2, 1987, 14.

11 Aldis Purs, "Latvia," in *Censorship: A World Encyclopedia*, Volume 3, ed. Derek Jones (London & Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 2001), 1380–1382.

12 Šiliņš Jānis, *Padomju Latvija 1918–1919* [Soviet Latvia 1918–1919] (Rīga: Vēstures izpētes un popularizēšanas biedrība, 2013), 224.

13 The Christmas issue number 43 depicted three pastors of different denominations with malicious joy celebrating their success over foolish believers, resulting in the issue being confiscated. Arnolds Deglavs, "Darbs un Maize" [Work and Bread], in *Cīņas Balsis*, comp. Ķipers, 377.

As we can read in the published notification, the official reason for the confiscation of No. 43 was insulting the state. See "Vai slēgs arodnieku laikrakstu 'Darbs un Maize'?" [Is the Tradesmen's Newspaper Work and Bread going to Be Shut Down?], *Jaunais Rīts*, December 31, 1928, 1.

14 Haskins, *Revolucionārā grafika*, 416.



Fig. 1. Samuils Haskins, *It's Not the End, It's Only Beginning / We Will Start the New Fight Against You!* [L. Paegle], 1929, in: *Darbs un Maize*, no. 59 (1929), National Library of Latvia, Riga (hereafter cited as NLA).

No. 56 featured another cartoon, signed with his pseudonym “Ha-ha”.<sup>15</sup> After his arrest, the editorial staff wanted to protect Haskins, so they asked Kālis to draw new cartoons and sign them with the former’s pseudonym. The plan worked, because they were close colleagues and knew each other’s style,<sup>16</sup> but it couldn’t change the newspaper’s fate – it was shut down in mid-January 1929, after a court decision and the public prosecutor’s recommendation.<sup>17</sup>

The political opposition was used to such an approach and, after one newspaper had been shut down, they decided to open another – *Strādnieku Darbs un Maize* (Labourers’ Work and Bread) – which ran from February to April 1929 and kept the reference to the previous newspaper in its title. They also included cartoons by Haskins to underline this connection. In its pages, the newspaper criticized the Bolsheviks’ rival, the Social Democrat Party, and the unfair treatment of the working class and political prisoners. Haskins depicted prisoners as exhausted creatures (fig. 1), while workers were powerful giants confronted by ugly-looking Social Democrats or representatives of the Latvian government. On the first page of one of the confiscated issues, No. 42, *Labourers’ Work and Bread* published an article about the torture of political prisoner Irbe, who was crippled during questioning. The next day the managing

15 Deglavs, “Darbs un Maize,” 378.

16 Haskins, *Revolucionārā grafika*, 416.

17 “‘Darbs un Maize’ apturēta” [“Work and Bread” suspended], *Lauku Darbs*, January 17, 1929, 3.



editor Ernests Mieziš was summoned by the court to be tried for sedition and spreading rumours.<sup>18</sup> Controversial exaggeration was a method that could influence workers and other poorly paid or undereducated people. In addition to easily understandable pictures deriding political opponents, there were examples of cultural references, such as quotes from song lyrics or historical personalities. By placing the figure of Marie Antoinette on the skyline of Old Riga and quoting her infamous phrase, ‘Let them eat cake!’, Haskins found a way of linking oppressed workers in Latvia with the French Revolution. This approach stressed the significance and wider context of their fight.

## ALTERNATIVE PLATFORMS OF POLITICAL ART

Another place where leftist artists could express themselves was the walls of the workers’ club. The most popular type of wall newspaper in Latvia was the placard newspaper, where artists’ illustrations and layouts played a significant role.<sup>19</sup> Wall newspapers in Latvia were associated with the propaganda of illegal leftist movements and were frequently confiscated. In order to limit the spread of wall newspapers, even the 1933 guide book *Plakāts un sienas avīze* (Wall Newspaper and Poster) was forbidden despite only including practical advice for the making of wall newspapers.<sup>20</sup> In the selected example, Haskins uses his caricaturist’s talent to transform clergymen into creatures from Hell (fig. 2). Accomplished cartoons are combined with documentary pictures and



**Fig. 2.** Leftist Legal Workers “Organisations” wall newspaper with the slogan *Against religion – for Marxism!*, caricatures drawn by Samuils Haskins, 1929, photograph by the Political Directorate, Latvian State Archive of Audiovisual Documents, Riga (hereafter cited as LSAAD).

18 Tiesā. Rīgā konfiscēts “Darbs un maize” [Court. Work and Bread confiscated in Riga], *Latvijas Kareivis*, March 27, 1929, 3.

19 Arnolds Serdants, *Plakāts un sienas avīze* [Poster and Wall Newspaper] (Rīga: Latvijas ārpuskolas izglītības padome, 1933), 40.

20 *Aizliegto grāmatu, brošūru un citu Latvijā iespiesto poligrāfisko ražojumu saraksts* [List of Prohibited Books, Brochures and Other Polygraphic Products Printed in Latvia], comp. Roberts Lapsiņš (Rīga: Jāņa Rozes apgāds, 1939), 169.

articles – everything on the subject against religion. Cartoons are likewise used as an emotional tool in the described periodicals. The aforementioned workers organisation was lucky; instead of reproduced artworks, it had the originals of the wall newspaper. A good cartoonist was a real trophy in the ideological war – in his memoirs, Haskin recalls one episode when he was tempted by social democrats to illustrate their issues, but refused.<sup>21</sup> It is clear that there was not a united attitude towards collaboration between the social democratic leftist organization and Communist Party members at that time, contrary to the Latvian Communist Party's official effort.<sup>22</sup> This might explain why Haskins drew pictures for the legal workers organization. Earlier historians stated that Kālis also contributed to RCL wall newspapers with well-thought-out photo collages and montages. During this research I was unable to find any photographic evidence to confirm this, but we must take into account the fact that very often wall newspapers were destroyed on the spot.<sup>23</sup>

Facing official restrictions, artists had to work with very limited resources – for graphic prints they used a Boston printing press, an idea initiated by the Bolshevik Party.<sup>24</sup> One such press belonged to Bušs, allowing artists to reproduce posters, slogans and drawings in linocut.<sup>25</sup> Linocut prints were affordable even for workers and became the main technique for leftist artists during this period. Another etching press, smaller in size, belonged to the artist Bernhards Dannerhiršs, who developed palm-sized art illustrations.<sup>26</sup> The images were limited not only by the printing technique, but, as Bušs remembers, the need to appropriate different styles of drawing to avoid being accused of making illustrations for illegal posters.<sup>27</sup> Anonymous, unsigned posters and illustrations were a Communist Party tactic – ideology and safety were more important than artistic recognition. As a result of this strategy, there are artworks whose creators still remain unknown.

Temporary arrests by the Political Directorate also affected artists without party affiliation whose personal or professional lives were connected to the leftist movement. The fact that they had taken commissions for election posters from specific parties was sufficient. For example, election posters of the Leftist Workers List in Riga in 1931 featured a screaming worker couple who are demanding bread, work and a sufficient salary – it was drawn by modernist painter Jānis Liepiņš (1894–1964) (**fig. 3**). He was arrested in 1931 on suspicion of belonging to an illegal communist organisation for which he

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21 Haskins, *Revolucionārā grafika*, 416–417.

22 Niedre Ojārs, Daugmalis Viktors, *Slepenais karš pret Latviju: Komunistiskās partijas darbība 1920.–1940. gadā: arhīvi apstādž* [The Secret War Against Latvia: The Activity of the Communist Party in 1920–1940: Archives Accuse] (Rīga: Totalitārisma seku dokumentēšanas centrs, 1999), 66.

23 Haskins, *Revolucionārā grafika*, 411.

24 J. Bērziņš, “Pirmo pamatu likšana” [Laying the First Foundations], *Rīgas Balss*, April 20, 1981, 5.

25 Kārlis Bušs, “Atmiņas par revolucionāro mākslinieku darbību” [Memories of the Work of Revolutionary Artists], comp. Skaidrīte Cielava, in *Latviešu Padomju māksla* (Rīga: Liesma, 1977), 104.

26 Ibid., 106.

27 Ibid., 109.

**Fig. 3.** Jānis Liepiņš, Leftist Workers List No. 26 posters for Riga City Council elections, 1931, photograph by the Political Directorate, LSAAD.



had made this election poster and other drawings.<sup>28</sup> Presumably Liepiņš took the commission because his first wife Ernestīne Niedre was a member of the Communist Party. Judging from the fact that, after his divorce from Niedre, he no longer undertook works commissioned by the Communist Party, Liepiņš' involvement was more financially motivated.<sup>29</sup>

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## THE MOST GLARING CASE OF CENSORSHIP IN THE VISUAL ARTS

The seriousness of censorship during the interwar period is revealed by the case concerning the album *Laikmeta seja* (The Face of the Epoch), which was purely visual, without any tendentious articles. It was released at the beginning of 1933 and contained a short preface and 43 critical prints made by an artist group including Alfrēds Žurgins, Voldemārs Siliņš, Verners Piesis, Haskins, Pupa, Bušs, and J. Tenders (a pseudonym of Haskins). The gloomy life of toiling people (**fig. 4**) and exaggerated bourgeois vices were the main themes of these prints. As their creators came from the working class, they knew this struggle first-hand, and invoked their right to advocate for the oppressed. Even today we could agree that the dock worker has a hard and unhealthy job, but in those days expressing solidarity with workers was used as a political instrument. As artists illustrated the role of the victim in their images of workers – their heads are bowed and bodies hunched, giving the appearance of creatures without

<sup>28</sup> Politiskās pārvaldes Rīgas rajona pārzinis, Dienesta atzīme [Official Report], March 26, 1931, Description 2, Case 4634, Collection 3235, LSHA, Riga.

<sup>29</sup> This interpretation is also advocated by the author of a monograph on Jānis Liepiņš, Sigita Daugule: "Evidently, Liepiņš created political posters under the influence of his wife, carrying out work commissioned by the party." Sigita Daugule, *Jānis Liepiņš* (Rīga: Neputns, 2015), 51.





Fig. 4. Samuils Haskins, *The Street*, from album of prints *The Face of Epoch* (Riga, 1933), 57, NLA.

any rights – they brought out the important message of the Bolshevik Party which stood for them. This is key to why the album was confiscated at the printing house on February 13, 1933, even if the reason given by the public prosecutor – the depiction of a pastor permitting himself to touch a woman’s breasts – was “blasphemy of religion.”<sup>30</sup>

Only 100 copies of the album were printed and few have survived, because, following the courts’ decision, all of the confiscated copies were burned, giving political opponents the opportunity to compare the action of the Latvian government to Hitler’s regime in Germany.<sup>31</sup> Both censored artworks and burned books. A representative of the Workers and Peasants’ Faction, Fricis Bergs, pointed out that it was the second official case of censorship in the whole of Europe after George Grosz published his drawing *Christ with a Gas Mask*, resulting in a lengthy trial.<sup>32</sup> Bergs tried to refute the accusations and spent a great deal of time in a working session of the Latvian parliament, the Saeima, to explain almost every picture in this album. Judging from the comments of the other members of the Saeima, no one disputed the unjustness of the workers’ position in comparison to the factory owner, depicted as a fat, self-satisfied man who does not care about anyone’s problems.

As the artist Bušs remembered, *The Face of the Epoch* was funded by an advance payment (and official announcements in the 1932 newspaper *Informators* [The Informant] prove this), but the Latvian government

accused the publishers of accepting money from the Communist Party. In spite of that, pictures were made voluntarily for no financial return.<sup>33</sup> To help the artists, the Workers and Peasants Faction deputy Arnolds Deglavs suggested that his party buy the originals and make an exhibition, thereby saving those prints for the future.<sup>34</sup>

30 “Latvijas Republikas IV Saeimas V sesijas 7. sēde 1933. gada 21. februārī” [*Republic of Latvia 4th Saeima, 5th session 7th meeting on February 21, 1933*], in *Latvijas Republikas IV Saeimas Stenogrammas Nr.1.*, comp. Hugo Kārklīšs (Rīga: Latvijas Republikas Saeima, 1933), 251<sup>st</sup> column.

31 “Latvijas Republikas IV Saeimas V sesijas 9. sēde 1933. gada 7. martā” [*Republic of Latvia 4th Saeima, 5th session 9 meeting on March 7, 1933*], 352<sup>nd</sup> column.

32 “Latvijas Republikas IV Saeimas VII sesijas 2. sēde 1933. gada 20. oktobrī” [*Republic of Latvia 4th Saeima, 7th session 2nd meeting on October 20, 1933*], in *Latvijas Republikas IV Saeimas Stenogrammas Nr.3.*, comp. Hugo Kārklīšs (Rīga: Latvijas Republikas Saeima, 1933), 179<sup>th</sup> column.

33 Bušs, *Atmiņas par revolucionāro*, 106.

34 Fricis Bergs, “Saeimas deputāts” [Member of the Saeima], *Dzimtenes Balss*, November 29, 1979, 5.



## POLITICAL INVOLVEMENT

Artists' works were measured by their political purpose, while they remained unknown, their work unwelcome in Latvian society, because of their communist ideology. From the opposite perspective, we can examine the artists' political careers and trajectories. Kālis' political career (he joined the Communist Party in 1927) started almost at the same time as his artistic path – from 1925 until 1929 he studied art at Riga People's University. In 1929, he became a member of a party cell and began to write articles for the banned press, providing information about revolutionary movements abroad. As a political activist he had the chance to travel to Berlin in March 1929, taking part in the First International Anti-Fascist Congress and spending four days of his life in this cultural capital.<sup>35</sup> He also made slogans for political events and politically related organizations (fig. 5). From 1930 until 1931, he was a Communist Party organizer in Riga's 4th District, and in 1931 he took a position in the Committee of Inquiry. In addition to the aforementioned works, in 1931 he became the head of the propaganda department of the Riga organization. In his

party file, another member describes Kālis' political duties as undermined by his interest in painting; he clearly divided his energy between the two fields.<sup>36</sup> Because of his involvement in the outlawed Communist Party, he was twice sentenced to imprisonment – from February 1932 until June 1933 and from November 1933 until February 1935. In addition to approximately ten arrests, he spent two years and three months in prison and fell ill with tuberculosis, requiring surgery on his reproductive organs at the age of 29.

During Kālis' time in prison, he expressed his attitude towards the ruling system by going on a hunger strike (on the International Workers' Day<sup>37</sup> or



Fig. 5. Ernests Kālis, *About Working Life Report and Read in Your Press*, late 1920s, postcard, NLA.

<sup>35</sup> Ernests Kālis, Partijas biedra anketa [Party Membership Form], September 13, 1935, Description 1, Case 4176, Collection PA-54, Latvian State Archive (hereafter cited as LSA), Riga.

<sup>36</sup> Bergmans, Nenosaukta atsauksme par partijas biedru Ernestu Kāli [Untitled. Reference regarding Party Member Ernests Kālis], September 13, 1935, Description 1, Case 4176, Collection PA-54, LSA, Riga.

<sup>37</sup> Ernesta Kāļa Rīgas Centrālcietauma disciplinārsoda lapa [Ernests Kālis disciplinary penalty sheet of Riga Central Prison], May 22, 1934, Description 2, Case 6686, Collection 3273, LSHA, Riga.



**Fig. 6.** Wedding photograph of Milda and Ernests Kālis, 1928, private collection.

against the war<sup>38</sup>), by refusing to offer the usual response to the prison guards' greeting at the regular evening count<sup>39</sup> or by refusing to take a bath.<sup>40</sup> Prisoners' contacts with the outside world were organised by Sarkanās palīdzības biedrība (the Red Assistance Society), which followed the initiative of the Communist Party in taking care of political prisoners, distributing illegal literature, and, in the years 1927–1933, being engaged in the organization of the political prisoners' hunger strikes.<sup>41</sup> This organization was responsible for disseminating materials about Latvian prisoners abroad and rescuing some political activists by sending them to other countries, for example France or Sweden.<sup>42</sup>

Normal family life for Kālis was impossible, and the upbringing of his two young children lay on the shoulders of the artist's wife, doctor Milda Kāle (1902–1944). She was the offspring of the 1905 revolutionary Jānis Pogiņš and supported her husband with unimaginable dedication (**fig. 6**). Nonetheless Milda's letter to her husband reveals her doubts: "... Why should a person suffer so immensely? Where is the limit of this patience? Sometimes it is even difficult to understand how it will all end. None of your old friends have visited..."<sup>43</sup>

38 Rīgas centrālcietuma priekšnieka paziņojuma noraksts Rīgas apgabaltiesas prokuroram par E.Kāļa piedalīšanos bada streikā [Transcript of a statement from the Governor of Riga Central Prison to the Riga Regional Court Prosecutor regarding Ernests Kālis' participation in a hunger strike], August 3, 1934, Description 2, Case 6686, Collection 3273, LSHA, Riga.

39 Bez datējuma. Arestēto pieņemšanas lapa [Undated. Arrested persons' admission sheet], case initiated on February 20, 1932, Description 2, Case 6686, Collection 3273, LSHA, Riga.

40 Bez datējuma. Arestēto pieņemšanas lapa [Undated. Arrested persons' admission sheet], case initiated on November 16, 1933, Description 1, Case 6685, Collection 3273, LSHA, Riga.

41 Boriss Hiršfelds, "Cietumi nelīdzēja. Atceroties Sarkanās palīdzības nodibināšanas 50. gadadienu", [Prisons Didn't Help. Remembering the 50th Anniversary of the Founding of Red Aid], *Cīņa*, March 18, 1975, 4.

42 Zāra Gureviča, "Latvijas Sarkanā palīdzība" [Latvian Red Assistance], in *Revolucionārā Rīga pagrūdes cīņā*, eds. E. Ankupe, P. Bondarevs, A. Hofrāte, I. Kapeniece, E. Ūpis & E. Žagars (Rīga: Avots, 1983), 111.

43 Milda Kāle, Nedatēta un nenosaukta vēstule vīram Ernestam Kālim uz sava fotoportreta otrās puses [Undated and Untitled Letter to Her Husband Ernests Kālis on the Back of Her Photo Portrait], 1933, private archive, Rīga. Translated by Valts Miķelsons.



## ADVANTAGES OF POLITICAL IMPRISONMENT

Despite a troubled private life and serious health problems, Kālis managed to make use of his time in the prison. Besides learning and reading books,



Fig. 7. Ernests Kālis, *Carrying Coffee*, 1932, drybrush and watercolour on paper, Latvian War Museum, Riga. Photograph by Valters Lācis.

he produced drawings using very primitive means, such as ink and naturally available pigments for colouring. Some of his works were given to his wife Milda and brought into the open and publicized. For a while this system worked on a very sophisticated level, and he even took a commission from a Latvian publishing house in Moscow, Prometejs (Prometheus). For example, on 26 January 1933 he drew a sketch for the cover of poet Andrejs Grants' book *Plakātains vējš* (Postery Wind), and already on 19 April it was published and advertised as the latest release in Latvian literature.<sup>44</sup> In this collaboration, a large role was probably played by Kālis' fellow writer, Linards Laicens, who at that time had moved to Moscow and headed the Starptautisko revolucionārās rakstnieku apvienības Latvijas komisiju (the Latvian Commission of the International Revolutionary Writers Union). One of the missions of this institution was to help

revolutionary authors in Latvia.<sup>45</sup> Leftist writers, poets and actors were also arrested and imprisoned, to such an extent that it became quite a widespread feature and familiar theme in works of art. For example, Leons Paegle's banned collection of poems published in 1923 *Prisons Don't Help* romanticised the revolutionary-prisoner, relating to the experience of the 1905–1907 uprisings.

Notwithstanding the considerable restrictions and censorship, the experience of politically imprisoned artists and authors travelled across borders. For example, in 1933 an international exhibition of works by political prisoners was organised at the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow, gathering materials from Latvia, Poland, Germany and Belarus, which emphasised the need for "... secrecy and illegal means of preparation and consignment..."<sup>46</sup> Belonging to the Communist Party and living under another regime meant overcoming extreme conditions. Prisoners in this situation tried to soften the experience of imprisonment through heroism and everyday illustrations of the kind that can also



Fig. 8. Ernests Kālis, *Washing*, 1932, drybrush and watercolour on paper, Latvian War Museum, Riga. Photograph by Valters Lācis.

44 Sludinājumi un paziņojumi [Advertisements and Announcements], *Komunāru Cīņa*, April 29, 1933, 4.

45 Latinform [Latvian Information Agency], "Paliek, kas turpina mani" [Remains That Keep Me Going], *Padomju Jaunatne*, November 16, 1983, 1.

46 Demens [Augustus Mende], "Politieslodzīto darbu izstāde Tretyakova galerijā – lielnieciskā māksla" [An Exhibition of Works by Political Prisoners at the Tretyakov Gallery – Bolshevik Art], *Celtne*, no. 2 (1933): 184.

be found in the archive of works left by Kālis. He sketched ordinary scenes from prison (**fig. 7, fig. 8**), documenting this specific way of life and its typical routine: a walk in the courtyard, receiving a meal or washing. The artist's imprisonment gave him the opportunity to again make art and immortalize his every day struggle in these particular circumstances.

## LATVIANS IN SOVIET RUSSIA

Following its establishment in 1917, many thousand Latvians remained living in Soviet Russia, including Latvian refugees, participants of the Bolshevik Coup and the Russian Civil War, who, despite the internationalist mindset, took active part in maintaining national cultural life. Alongside determined communists, more neutrally-minded members were also active in the Latvian diaspora, having stayed for family reasons or better career or academic opportunities.<sup>47</sup> By developing the production of cultural goods, the Prometheus Association earned money that allowed it to publish Latvian books and periodicals, as well as to promote the establishment of various sections, including the visual arts.<sup>48</sup> But in the early 1930s it also oversaw the Latvian section of the International Bureau of Revolutionary Artists whose aim was to improve international cooperation and promote contacts with Latvia. Thus graphic works by leftist Latvian artists were sent to the International Bureau and exhibited at the International Revolutionary Artists' Exhibition in the Museum of Modern Western Art in Moscow in a separate display case, which also contained Haskins linocuts.<sup>49</sup>

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Haskins fell seriously ill in June 1934 and requested the party's permission to make an official visit to the Soviet Union for his recovery. However, the arrangement of exit permits took many months, and party urged him to accept Soviet nationality, a proposition, that as a Nansenist, he refused to take.<sup>50</sup> Nonetheless, due to the threat of being imprisoned once again, Haskins was forced to flee and to cross the border illegally in April 1935.<sup>51</sup> He also faced challenges during his stay in Moscow, as he complained to the Latvian Bolshevik Party representative, Salna: "Since August 1, 1935, International Red Aid (hereafter cited as IRA) has not been covering my accommodation

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47 For more on this topic, see Vitālijs Šalda, *Latvieši Maskavā 1923–1938* [Latvians in Moscow 1923–1938] (Daugavpils: Daugavpils Universitātes akadēmiskais apgāds "Saule", 2010).

48 Dzintra Vīksna, "Latviešu kultūras un izglītības biedrība 'Prometejs' Padomju Savienībā" [The Latvian cultural and educational society in Soviet Russia *Prometejs*], *Latvijas PSR Zinātņu akadēmijas vēstis*, no. 9 (1966): 3–11.

49 For more on this topic, see Sniedze Kāle, "Latviešu kreisās mākslas uzliesmojumi Latvijā un padomju Krievijā 20.gs. 20.–30. gados" [Flashes of Latvian Leftist Art in Latvia and soviet Russia during the 1920s and 30s], in *Mākslas vēsture un teorija*, ed. Elita Grosmane (Rīga: Latvijas Mākslas akadēmijas Mākslas vēstures institūts; Mākslas vēstures pētījumu atbalsta fonds, 2021), 39–53.

50 Salna, *Haskina lietā* [In the Haskins Case], December 25, 1934, Description 1, Case 9656, Collection PA–54, LSA, Rīga.

51 Latvijas Komunistiskās partijas Centrālās komitejas sēžu protokols par Haskina S. atjaunošanu Partijas biedru sastāvā [Latvian Communist Party Central Committee meeting minutes regarding Samuels Haskins' restoration to the ranks of Party members], case dated May 4–21, 1957, Description 20, Case 25, Collection PA–101, LSA, Rīga.

expenses, and I am residing in an unpaid room. [...] As a foreigner, I cannot get a room. [...] I feel like a complete invalid. I was asking for support with treatment, but IRA sent me away, saying, 'Go to your department and ask them to send you to us, and we will help.' [...] I'm at a dead end."<sup>52</sup>

Prison conditions affected Kālis' health and, like Haskins, he emigrated to Soviet Russia in September 1935 to undergo treatment and escape another imprisonment. As one can read in my publication about the most radical leftist Latvian artists' activities, in Soviet Russia's Latvian circles Haskins and Kālis were considered to be misfits, that is, artists from Latvia.<sup>53</sup> As far as the party was concerned, their work in a territory yet to be conquered was advantageous, because it helped to prepare the soil for future occupation. Paradoxically, they were not wanted in the Soviet Union either. In documents from Kālis' party file from early 1937, it is written that his and his wife's return to Latvia was to be encouraged.<sup>54</sup> Instead of Soviet benefits, both artists encountered the directives of Socialist Realism and were arrested as Latvian spies and anti-Soviet agitators. They were accused of high treason during the Great Purge, which led to Kālis' death in a prison hospital at Таганская тюрьма (Taganka Prison) on June 1, 1939. Haskins was more fortunate: he survived and, after two years of imprisonment, he wrote a submission to Executive Committee of the Communist International, trying to persuade them that he was innocent: "In the last two years, I perceive what has happened to me as an undeserved and unjust punishment for a crime I have never committed. I see it as a childhood punishment from my beloved parents – for misdeeds I had not committed."<sup>55</sup> After spending five years in a corrective labour camp and returning home, Haskins witnessed not only his rehabilitation, but also his reinstatement as a member of the Communist Party of Socialist Latvia in 1956. More generally, leftist authors and artists were rehabilitated following the Khrushchev Thaw, but thorough research on this subject has been hindered by the destructive campaigns of the Great Terror and the dogmatic perspective of Socialist Realism, which concentrated on a representational formal language. It can be said that up until the 2014 monograph by American book collector and researcher James Howard Fraser,<sup>56</sup> the legacy of leftist authors could not be properly evaluated due to historical prejudice and the traumatic experience of the Soviet occupation.

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52 Хаскин С., Недатированное письмо из Москвы. [Undated Letter from Moscow], case dated December 25, 1934 – March 25, 1940, Description 1, Case 9656, Collection PA–54, LSA, Riga.

53 Sniedze Kāle, "Latviešu kreisās," 50–51.

54 Rūdolfs Salna, Latvijas Komunistiskās Partijas Centrālkomitejas slēdziens [Conclusion of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Latvia], July 25, 1936, Description 1, Case 4176, Collection PA–54, LSA, Riga.

55 Хаскин С., Копия Заявления Исполкому Коминтерна [Copy of the Submission to the Executive Committee of the Comintern], January 2, 1940, Description 1, Case 9656, Collection PA–54, LSA, Riga.

## CONCLUSION

During the inter-war period, Latvia's leftist artists worked in unenviable conditions. Regular imprisonment and prison sentences disrupted their normal family lives, while professional work was difficult – they were forced to hide or deny their authorship and to work with limited resources, as well as to witness the destruction of their works. At the same time, as a result of their illegal activity, the security services collected materials that are now available for research and make it possible to piece together the kind of information that is not available about other artists, such as Kālis' reading habits in prison. It could be argued that certain compensations were available in the form of the party's ability to provide benefits such as a trip to Berlin, a feeling of belonging to the global proletariat, arranging commissions while in prison, or sending artists on tours of the Soviet Union to help them regain their health. However, these privileges were only available as long as the artists in question were part of the plan to undermine the power of the Latvian State.