

Early encounters with the world of Islam in Latvian literary culture

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INTRODUCTION

In the discussions about different Orientalism(s), Latvia occupies a rather peripheral place. Neither it nor its short-lived predecessor states or political unities have been involved in the processes of colonization, apart from a brief episode of possession of the Caribbean island of Tobago, and Gambia in West Africa, under the flag of the Duchy of Courland and Semigallia (Kurzemes un Zemgales hercogiste) in the 17th century (Andersons 1970). This experience, and in particular the story of the overseas colony in Tobago, has been preserved in collective memory and at times also used to boost self-awareness of the Latvian nation. Despite this, there are no substantial traces of colonial conquests determining the identity construction of contemporary society.

On the other hand, for the greater part of its history the Baltic littoral has been subjected to the political dominance of different imperial powers. From the late 18th century and up to the establishment of a nation-state in 1918, the present-day territory of Latvia was divided among several provinces of the Russian empire, while intellectual and social life was to a considerable extent still determined by the Baltic German upper-class, the descendants of those people who had settled in the area from the late 12th century onward. The quick rise of ethnic Latvian literacy during the 18th and 19th centuries echoed Western intellectual trends but was also impregnated by the Russian imperial ideology. The historical conditions therefore played a substantial role in the perception of Oriental “Others”.

The aim of this paper is to trace different representations of the encounters with the world of Islam in Latvian literary culture of the 19th and early 20th century. This was a time period when Latvian national identity gradually obtained its modern-day contours, including a substantial enlargement of knowledge, of themselves and of the others, the latter to a growing extent being acquired via first-hand experience. The perception of other ethnicities and cultures was, however, filtered through the prism of either Western or Russian “imperial eyes” (Pratt 2008). Other nations, and especially those with different religious beliefs and practices, were either encountered with an incredulity characteristic to Western attitudes toward the Orient, or with the inevitability of direct confrontation in the cases of military conflicts involving the Russian empire and its political antagonists. At the same time, such encounters,

especially those that occurred on the borders and in geographically peripheral areas of Russia, often led to unexpected revelations bringing about an understanding of the fate shared with other, relatively distant societies. Through these encounters, new and unexpected “contact zones” emerged. This refers to the experiences acquired during the 19th century warfare between the Russian and the Ottoman empires. Another substantial segment of the encounters with the world of Islam was provided by gradually growing numbers of travel notes and reports, especially from the trips to the south of Europe, the Maghreb, and the Near East. The migration of ethnic Latvian peasants to distant parts of Russia in the second half of the 19th century in search of new lands, and later the refugee race to the Caucasus before and during the First World War, also contributed to the representation of Oriental “Others”.



Georg Wilhelm Timm. *Album with sketches (Algerian)*, 1845, pencil and sepia on paper, 23 x 31,3 cm, VMM Z/Ā-2954/4

Our paper investigates the representation of these different encounters with the Orient in late 19th- and early 20th-century Latvian literature, travel writing and art, also taking into account examples provided by Baltic German media. We demonstrate that these experiences not only played a substantial role in establishing first-hand contacts with relatively distant cultures but also contributed to the identity formation of the Latvian nation. We first provide theoretical reflections of the topic that position the Orientalist representations discussed here within broader contexts of Orientalism, as introduced by Edward Said, and point to the differences between the classical Orientalism and “frontier Orientalism” of close and immediate contacts, as proposed by Andre Gingrich. In the following, we focus on different images and stereotypes characteristic of early Orientalist representations in Latvian literary culture.

FRONTIER ORIENTALISM AND OTHER FORMS OF ENCOUNTERS WITH THE WORLD OF ISLAM

In his discussion of various facets of Orientalism, Andre Gingrich makes a valuable distinction between different forms of encounters between the Christian and the Muslim worlds. He points out that there are classic colonial empires with most of their controlled territories, including those of predominantly Muslim population, being located overseas. Then there are colonial powers who have acquired adjacent territories of the Muslim periphery. The third group is made up by those European countries who never had any noteworthy influence in the Muslim world. They either had colonial possessions elsewhere, or are countries with almost no colonial past, themselves being subjects of other (non-Muslim) powers. Finally, to the fourth group of European countries belong those with a substantial Muslim population, predominantly as the outcome of an inverse colonial past in the south of Europe (1998, 100–101). Gingrich develops his ideas further, making a distinction between the classical colonialism overseas and of what he terms “frontier Orientalism” that “functions first with the image of a contested, nearby border, and constructs secondly an eternal ‘we’ that is in direct, close confrontation with the ‘Oriental’.” Thirdly, the standard representation of this Oriental is the Turk and, more broadly, the Muslim” (2015, 61). While the Habsburg Monarchy is taken as the principal example of this kind of frontier Orientalism, Gingrich finds historical parallels in at least two other examples, Russia with regard to the Caucasus and Central Asia and Spain vis-à-vis Northwest Africa (63).

Within this model, there is also a corresponding place for the Baltic littoral that from the 18th century was an integral part of the Russian empire, and thus inevitably reflected a number of ideological positions promoted by the imperial center. It therefore should not come as a surprise that the Latvian reception of the world of Islam in the 19th century was to a great extent affected by Russian models (Tlostanova 2000). However, at the same time some characteristic stereotypes of the perception of “the Other” were abandoned or transformed, especially due to the gradually acquired first-hand knowledge of the world of Islam.

Western Orientalism also left its mark in the descriptions of geographically more distant lands that became available for visits with the improved financial means of the travelers and the change of the political situation. This process mirrored a broader 19th-century interest in Oriental lifestyles rising across the European continent. An important aspect is revealed by the different degrees of involvement with foreign experience characteristic to these representations. In *Orientalism*, Edward Said distinguishes among three different approaches that have determined the perception of the Orient through the eyes of Europeans. First, it is a detached (“scientific”) perspective that takes as its starting point the already established archive of Orientalist knowledge and patterns of representation. Second, there are authors who through their first-hand observations want to keep a certain level of eccentricity and style of individual consciousness. And, finally, there are representations provided by those writers, “for whom a real or metaphorical trip to the Orient is the fulfillment of some deeply felt and urgent project” (2003, 157–158).

We can trace similar patterns in the examples discussed in this paper where we propose a subdivision of different kinds of Orientalism in Latvian literary culture. They include representations of potentially “bad” Muslims, perceived as a real or imagined threat to the community; travel notes and personal impressions in the vein of classical Orientalism but with a considerably greater degree of involvement if compared to the above case; and, finally, subjective portrayals of domesticated or “good” Orientals who embody a number of admirable features as they share their lives with the Christian community within the Russian empire. The first case deals predominantly with the Turks, who are involved in warfare with the Russian imperial forces; the second features both imagined and first-hand experience of exotic lands with the presence of Muslim culture, legends, tales and historical monuments (encountered, for example, on the visits to Spain and the Maghreb); the third is predominantly focused on the Caucasus, a peripheral region of the empire previously less familiar through direct encounters but already brought into the focus of attention of Latvian readers by Russian romanticists and other travelers.



Jāzepe Grosvalds. *Three Women (Baghdad Street)*, 1918, tempera on paper, 27,5 x 22,7 cm, VMM-Z8666

FRONTIERS AND CONFRONTATIONS

When defining the imagery of frontier Orientalism that involves an emphasis on confrontations and contested borders, Andre Gingrich notes that the threat that “our” community (in his case, the Habsburg Monarchy) faces, relies on a stereotyped image of the Oriental “Other”. He goes on to elaborate on this in the context of 17th century history:

The subject of the “Turkish Wars” is a central element of the obligatory school curriculum in Austria, and it is much more than that: village chronicles in all of eastern and southern Austria record the wars, popular songs and idioms allude to them, town names and public monuments refer to them, the entire map of Vienna is replete with more or less obviously mythologized symbols of the public memory of them. The entirety of the chronicles, legends, school textbooks, songs, monuments, museum artifacts, imprecations, and idioms constitute the mythological structure of “frontier orientalism” (2015, 62).

For the Latvian population, most of the memories of the clashes between the Russian and the Ottoman military are of a considerably later origin. However, the 19th-century warfare resounded loudly throughout Russia, and news from the front provided a source of information that enlarged the scope of previously acquired knowledge of the world.

Even before the rise of Latvian press in the second quarter of the 19th century, information about the imperial frontiers of Russia was shared on an informal basis. One of the reasons that fed this interest was the growing involvement of ethnic Latvians in the Russian military. In most cases it was involuntary. The Russian empire started to recruit soldiers from the Baltic provinces in the 1790s, and this process lasted till 1874, when the practice was abandoned and an obligatory military service established. In Latvian folksongs, collected in the 19th century, one of the meanings of the word ‘Russians’ (*krievi*) is linked to the recruits serving in the imperial forces who might be of different nationalities (Rozenbergs 2005, 126). These songs reflect on the events that occasionally led soldiers far away from their native places. In the 19th century there was already a wide network of opportunities as to how this experience was dealt with that included informal talks in market places and taverns, in addition to the official information about the advances of the Russian military announced during church services.

The level of awareness was to a great extent increased by press reports, especially after the first Latvian-language newspaper, *Latviešu Avīzes* (Latvian Newspaper), started to appear in Jelgava (Mitau), the capital of the Baltic province of Courland (Kurzeme), in 1822. Before that time, ethnic Latvians had to rely on information provided by the Baltic German press, and the accessibility of newspapers was also limited due to their relatively high prices as well as a language barrier even if there already was a considerable number of Latvians, especially those working in towns and in the Baltic German manors, who were among the potential readers (Johansons 2011, 81). The Baltic German press gradually started to flourish in the 18th century, after recovering from the devastating impact of the Great Northern War that ended in 1721. Information about life in Riga, the largest city of the Baltic littoral, was provided by the German language newspaper, *Rigische Anzeigen*. Due to its focus on local matters,

a new initiative, approved by legal authorities, set as its goal the publication of a newspaper that would concentrate on international politics. This task was brought to life by the *Rigische politische Zeitung*, a newspaper established in 1777 and published till 1797, when it was renamed as *Rigische Zeitung* and continued its run under that name till 1913 (Blumbergs 2008, 73). It reflected on the French Revolution, including the publication of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*, approved in 1789, and wrote about a number of other topical international issues. The knowledge about foreign lands, however, still remained the privilege of the upper class.

This situation was challenged by the appearance of the first Latvian language newspapers, *Latviešu Avīzes* and *Tas Latviešu Draugs* (The Friend of Latvians, 1832–1846). This was an important step in spreading political and geographical knowledge among Latvians. The first newspaper in Latvian to a considerable extent relied on earlier patterns. The first editor of *Latviešu Avīzes*, K. F. Watson (1777–1826), was a son of the editor of the most important German language newspaper in the capital of Courland, *Mitauische Zeitung*. Parts of the German literati continued to express doubts, whether information about distant lands in vernacular was appropriate or whether it might provide an unwelcome challenge and a potential threat to the privileges of the upper class in terms of information access. As late as 1864, the pastor Rudolph Schultz (1807–1866) intended to create a newspaper for Latvians in German that would provide information on world politics for the local population. His undertaking, *Volksblatt für Stadt und Land der baltischen Provinzen*, however, appeared to be relatively short-lived and, due to the lack of readership, only existed for two years (1864–1865), as there was already a sufficient amount of information available in Latvian. Another (and earlier) testimony of the battle of information was provided by the decision of the legal authorities to ban the Estonian-language newspaper, *Tartomaa rahva Näddali-Leht* (Tartu Weekly for Peasants), in 1806, on the grounds that it contained sensitive information about the Napoleonic wars otherwise exclusively available to readers of German (Zelče 2009, 102).

Latviešu Avīzes and *Tas Latviešu Draugs* were important early sources of information about foreign lands and people, and became especially attractive during the periods of warfare between the Russian and the Ottoman empires. The published information was still mostly borrowed from the local German press and thus substantially delayed. In addition, most of the news appeared filtered through the ideology of the Russian empire as well as that of the German upper class. This combination contributed to Orientalizing representations of the military opponents that were constantly recycled during the periods of conflict in 1828 and 1829, the Crimean war in 1855 and 1856, and, at a later stage of warfare, in 1877 and 1878.

In the late 1820s, *Latviešu Avīzes* did not yet publish news in the present-day sense but rather relied on the reports of the Russian administration as to the political developments (Zelče 2009, 132). This led to the creation of an archetypal “Other” on the battlefield, the embodiment of this principal enemy being a stereotyped Turk, an image that was preserved in Latvian popular imagination throughout the 19th century (133). In the article “No turkiem un viņu būšanas” (About the Turks), published on June 6, 1829, the author states (all translations from Latvian are by the authors of the paper):

There is hardly anybody among our readers who wouldn't have heard about the Turks; but we seldom know how exactly they are, and what should we expect of them. Some consider them to be pagans, some think that they are monsters who eat other people, and still others imagine them as being especially strong, like giants from the tales. But everybody is afraid of the Turks (2).

When describing important monuments of great men in history, *Latviešu Avīzes* mentions those constructed to honor well-known Russian generals who successfully resisted the Turks. Such monuments have been built in St. Petersburg and other places, and “in Riga there are also great decorated pillars” (“No Jelgavas” 1825, 1).

The image of the Turk as a threatening “Other” was instrumentalized in the descriptions of various parts of the world where they were again juxtaposed to Christian communities. Thus, while writing about Jerusalem, a city that in the 19th century was under Ottoman rule, a contributor to *Latviešu Avīzes* states that there is a growing number of pilgrims interested in visiting holy places but “the Turks demand a payment from every Christian who wants to enter these places and squeeze out a lot of money” (“No Jeruzalemes pilsāta” 1823, 26).

Only gradually was this type of stereotyping challenged by first-hand reports of people who encountered foreigners in real life, complicating the established binary oppositions and providing a more nuanced insight into the everyday life of Muslims.

It was noticeable that during periods of warfare the number of copies of early Latvian language newspapers was constantly on the rise. In the 1850s, there was an attempt to use the complicated political situation in order to establish another newspaper, *Mājas Viesis* (Home Visitor). The permission was granted with a considerable delay, and the first issue in 1856 opened with a celebration of peace. *Mājas Viesis* continued to inform its readers about distant lands, gradually bringing in more personal reflections instead of repeating news already published elsewhere.

First-hand information about the frontier areas of the Russian empire was in particular based on the experience in the imperial military. The participation in imperial troops in the second half of the 19th century in most cases meant a serious and unwelcome change in life. It lasted for 25 years, and the youngest sons of Latvian peasant families were recruited against their will. As a result of this process, in the latter half of the 19th century, when these soldiers started to return home, they had different kinds of experiences, often returning as war invalids. Their stories about distant lands and strange events provided a source of attraction for local peasants who possessed relatively little knowledge about the world beyond their farms and were linked to restricted daily routines. Many of these narratives, at first circulating in an oral form, later entered Latvian literature, predominantly through the childhood memoirs of prominent Latvian authors of the late 19th and early 20th century. In the manner these stories were told, certain parallels between life in distant places and that of Latvian peasants also came to the fore. Above all, this opened up one of the channels to notice and evaluate similarities and differences stretching beyond the immediate local environment, and to do so on the basis of direct experience in various contact zones that became an integral part of the identity-building process.

An interesting case is provided by the poet Andrejs Pumpurs (1841–1902) and his travelogue *No Daugavas līdz Donavai* (From Daugava to Danube, 1896). Pumpurs is claimed to be one of the Latvian national poets of the second half of the 19th century, who, with a passion typical of the time period, constantly praised his land and people in his texts. His major achievement is the epic poem *Lāčplēsis* (Bearslayer) that was published in 1888 and soon acquired the status of a national epic (Rudzītis 1988, 13).

Pumpurs's travel notes, written and published in 1896, reveal a different facet of his activities. These notes are based on the experience of the author, who, as a volunteer in the Russian military services, is going to Serbia to fight in the war between the Serbs and the Turks in the 1870s. His travel covers the period between August 6, 1876, and February 10, 1877, and describes experiences in, among other locations, Moscow, Kishinev, Iasi, and Belgrade. Perhaps the most striking episode occurs after the ceasefire is being announced. Pumpurs is then unexpectedly confronted with the request to join Montenegrin forces and, in an almost parallel move, the Turkish military, both proposals based on more or less similar financial conditions. The latter proposal is even followed by an attempt to kidnap him, unexpectedly inspired by one of his fellow Russian volunteers. One of the reasons why Pumpurs is addressed is due to the fact that he is not a Russian national. In the conversation with a Turkish dealer, however, Pumpurs announces that he feels himself to be a citizen of Russia, and therefore cannot simply switch sides in this war. Contacts with various nationalities, nevertheless, form a substantial part of his everyday experience during these travels, even more so because Pumpurs never enters a real battlefield. Later on, he remained in the military services of the tsarist state and served as an officer in the Russian army even while writing his national poem. Personal reflections provided by Pumpurs's travelogue indicate the possibility of overcoming a routinely Orientalist discourse based on binary oppositions.

The above observations indicate that the majority of 19th-century encounters with the Turks as Oriental "Others" was either linked to the service of ethnic Latvians in the Russian military, or occurred only indirectly through the news published in the German and Latvian language press. Under such conditions, it was almost inevitable that this reception predominantly focused on differences, and was based on stereotypes shaped by the Russian imperial ideology. However, especially toward late 19th century, direct experience gradually started to play a more substantial role in the perception of similarities and differences with other ethnicities.

A growing presence of personal observations was also noticeable in the representations of the south of Europe and the Near East that appeared in both Baltic German and Latvian language documentations in the 19th and early 20th century.

EXPANDING FRONTIERS

The rise of economic prosperity and cultural demands in the Baltic littoral gradually provided the educated upper and middle class with an access to intellectual trends topical elsewhere in Europe. Those who had the possibility to study at foreign universities often considered travel as a substantial part of their education. This development partially overlapped with the rise of interest in Oriental cultures.

During the 19th century there was an emerging and developing trend of Orientalism all over Europe. In a wider sense this included the passion of the members of Western society – artists, writers, scholars, diplomats, etc. – for Oriental cultures and an intention to get acquainted with, to study, to describe and to depict these cultures. This interest contributed to the specific needs of certain professions as well as to the growing awareness of cultural specificity of other territories that were often discussed in a form of travel notes, diaries etc. Travelers from the Baltic littoral also contributed to this trend, bringing home a considerable amount of knowledge about the traditions and everyday practices of different cultures including first-hand experience of such territories as Spain, the Maghreb, Turkey, and the Near East, substantially influenced by Islam. These reflections gradually became more present on the pages of German as well as Latvian-language newspapers.

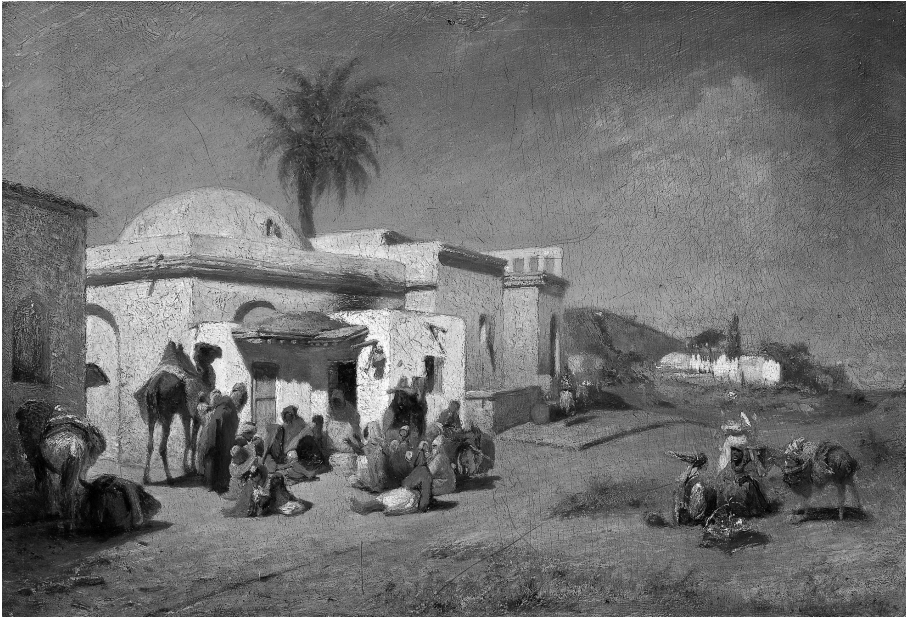
The possibilities of travel were also rising due to the political changes in the world. Algeria was from 1830 ruled by France, and Spain extended its influence in Morocco from the 1860s onward. This meant that a number of territories containing important monuments of Islamic art were more easily accessible to European travelers. The willingness to acquire new impressions was closely linked to the appropriation of the imagery of Romanticism that had already paid great attention to seemingly primitive and exotic locations as opposed to the growing industrialization of Europe.

The territories of Spain and the Maghreb were among the most beloved as they were relatively near and accessible. Many European artists toured these countries and left their testimonies in different forms leading to the rise of Orientalist representations in academic painting and graphic art. Other scholars and travelers expressed their admiration in written form, publishing exciting and informative descriptions of their experience.

The curiosity about the Orient also found its echo in Latvia. The surviving testimonies open up a space for fascinating and manifold investigations as the authors paid special attention to architectural monuments and everyday traditions of the local people.

In the Baltic littoral, one of the initiators of the interest in Oriental countries was the Baltic German painter Georg Wilhelm Timm (1820–1895), who traveled to Algeria as early as 1845. He carried out his trip together with the French painter and Orientalist Émile Jean-Horace Vernet (1789–1863), who had been to Algeria several times before and thus was an excellent companion for Timm. Vernet's style of travel has been described as follows: "His journeys – many to Algeria, and to Morocco, Egypt, Syria, Palestine, Turkey and the Crimea – were not always made in great style. Indeed, he took any means of transport available, boat, wagon, sledge, horse, camel, mule, camping in tents or even in the open air" (Thornton 1994, 174).

In Algeria and afterward, Timm made a large number of watercolors, drawings and oil paintings depicting architecture, decorative facades, nature and landscapes, traditional lifestyle, native people, etc. He did not leave any written memories, but there are numerous descriptions of the Maghreb published in 19th-century Baltic German and Latvian press. They provide a fascinating perception of the Islamic architecture and culture as well as of local society. These textual representations together



Georg Wilhelm Timm. *Oriental Street (Algeria)*, 1845–1846, oil on wood, 20,5 x 46,3 cm, VMM GL-3548 / ĀMM GL-1686

with the published images created an idea about North Africa, at that time an almost unknown and undiscovered territory with completely different traditions and ways of life. The readers of these stories got acquainted with mosques, cupolas, story-tellers, donkeys, turbans, etc. It is interesting to discuss some of these representations in order to provide an idea of how the Maghreb was interpreted in the 19th century, and what general understanding of the region was formed at that time.

Several drawings by Timm reflect on the tradition of story-telling that becomes much clearer when discussed in the context of the testimonies left by other travelers. An article, published in *Tas Latviešu Draugs* in 1845, states that the Arabs

highly appreciate sharing stories of the deeds of their fathers and forefathers. Every financially situated person has its own story-teller. All friends gather around a tent, or sit on the flat roof of a house, and listen to such stories every night, even if the story goes on for so long as sixty or one hundred nights. They tell their stories very clearly and quickly, and give an impression as if it were a European reading from a book (D. E. 1845).

Travelers often provide detailed descriptions of everyday practices of the local inhabitants:

Local people often share lodgings with their livestock. Camels are from very early on taught and trained to work hard and to bring heavy burdens. They are demanded to walk a lot and given little food. There was a man who one day left Mogador early in the morning and headed to another town about 20 miles away. He just wanted to bring a couple of fresh oranges to his fiancée, and was back home by late night, covering about 40 miles within a day (D. E. 1845).

Travel notes published in 1849 in *Rigische Zeitung* describe Algiers, the capital of Algeria, paying attention not only to the historical but also to the modern face of the city:



Georg Wilhelm Timm. *Two Scenes from Algerian Street*, 1846, watercolor and gouache on paper, 21,5 x 15 cm, VMM Z/Ā-1528

I made a couple of pleasant walks in the city and became even more satisfied with my travel impressions. From Place Royal there begin the two largest streets that divide Algiers from north to south – Bab-el-Oued and Bab-Azoun. The look from Place Royal goes toward the sea, and to the small port of Algiers that is beautiful and lively. There is an active social life going on throughout the day. It is worth to spend some time there for everyone who enjoys passersby in a fashionably colorful dress. The lower part of the town is contemporary and European in appearance with a strong French influence. The streets, almost all of which have arcades, are rather narrow, but the Arabs, whose traditional lodgings often face each other in the upper parts, seem to be satisfied with their width (Aus 1849).

Other Eastern territories are also mentioned in the press. Alongside this publicity, there are frequent public lectures which reflect on travel experiences. In 1869, *Mājas Viesis* advertised a series of lectures by a pilgrim who would held a talk on Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Hebron, Bethany, and Jordan on October 19, and on Nazareth, Mount Tabor, and Damascus on October 26, in the house of the New Guild in Riga (Par 1869). There were also reports by the schoolteacher at the Riga Dome, Hackmann, who visited Alexandria, Constantinople, Jerusalem, Cairo, and other Oriental cities (1857a; 1857b).

Newspaper publications were often supplemented by illustrations. In 1895, the newly established *Mājas Viesā Mēnešraksts* (Home Visitor's Monthly) printed an engraving depicting Cairo from a typically Orientalist perspective. A crowded street with houses on both sides opens up a view toward the mosque of Al-Azhar with one of its luxurious minarets. This engraving was attached to the article devoted to the

travel of the Russian czar Nicholas II (1868–1918) to the Near East. With regard to Egypt, the article stresses that “there is seldom a part of the world that is capable of capturing our attention more than this corner of the earth so full of the magic of tales and stories, a bright star in the darkness of old times” (Vinters 1895, 179). This publication touches upon the local traditions and lifestyles of the Egyptians, their cultural and art heritage, including detailed descriptions of important architectural objects, such as, for example, the Mosque of Amr (1895, 182).

In 1899, we also find the publication of memories of the devoted Russian Orientalist, and a travel companion to Nicholas II, Esper Ukhtomsky (1861–1921), in the Latvian press. It includes several illustrations, also featuring one of the most important Islamic buildings of Cairo, the 14th-century Mosque-Madrasa of Sultan Hassan (Uhtomskis 1899, 47).

A principal turn in the description of the Orient was in the late 19th century marked by the rising number of reports by ethnically Latvian authors. This was due to the growing interest in Oriental countries and the relative prosperity of the Latvian middle class.

One of those travelers was the economist, financier and theologian Kārlis Balodis (1864–1931). In 1895, he published an article on Turkey, with one of the illustrations showing a panoramic view of Constantinople across the Bosphorus. High above the



Freijs in Bedouin Dress. Image from *Zeme, kur Jēzus staigāja*. Rīga: J. A. Freijs, 1895

city there are the characteristic round cupolas of mosques and stretched out minarets. Balodis (1895, 131) writes:

Constantinople is located in a very beautiful place where the strait of Bosphorus meets the Sea of Marmara. Constantinople and its surroundings are demarcated by hills and mountains that are covered by nice gardens and beautiful trees, where there are summer houses of the Turks and noble palaces, among which the residence of the sultan stands out in its luxury. The special beauty of the prosperous Turkish houses becomes visible in the garden of the house and indoors, where one finds impressive stone-decorated yards, beautiful fountains, and richly ornamented rooms with expensive carpets.

Oriental themes were widely represented in the publications of the Latvian Baptist priest, author and publisher Jānis Aleksandrs Freijs (1863–1950) in which he focused on the depiction of Biblical lands (Treija 2008). In several of his books, printed in 1895, the author refers to his experiences in Egypt, Asia Minor, Greece, and Italy, thus bringing together diverse traditions and cultures. These publications were widely read and discussed in the contemporary press. The monthly *Austrums* (The East) wrote on one of these books that it contained 476 pages and included a great number of illustrations, drawings and photographs (J. E. 1895, 748). The visual material (predominantly taken from foreign sources without specifying them) is very diverse, including a photograph of the author in a Bedouin dress riding a horse, panoramic views of several cities with mosques and minarets, important architectural sites (for example, mosques from Jerusalem, Constantinople, Damascus, etc.) as well as daily-life scenes in towns and in the countryside. The second edition of *Zeme, kur Jēzus staigāja* (The Land where Jesus walked) was published in 1910 and contained additional photographs and engravings (Freijs 1910).

A paradigmatic example of a modern and cultivated Latvian traveler might have been set by the painter Jāzevs Grosvalds (1891–1920). His father, Frīdrihs Grosvalds, studied law at the Universities of Tartu and St. Petersburg, and later became a successful solicitor and a rich proprietor. He was one of the leading figures of the Latvian



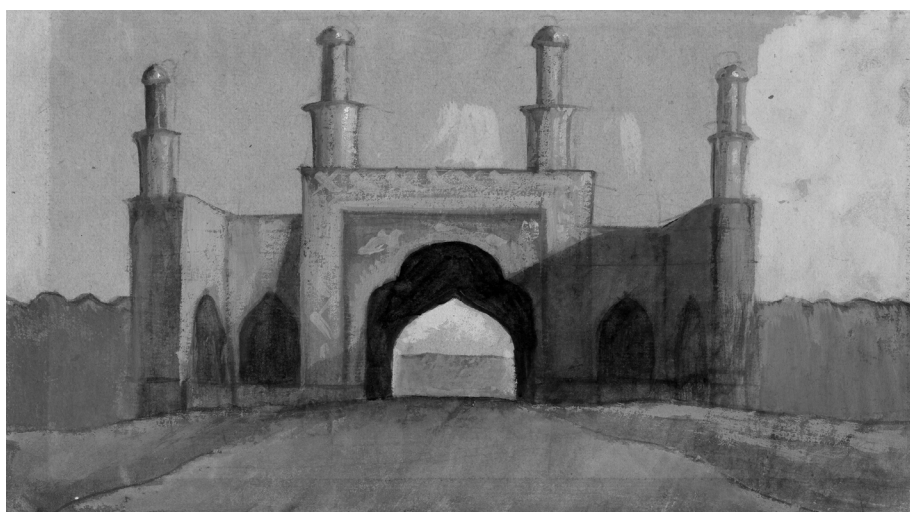
Jāzevs Grosvalds. *In the East*, 1904–1909, Indian ink on paper, 18,1 x 13,3 cm, VMM JGM–411

national movement in the second half of the 19th century and also made a political career. The education he could provide his five children with was comparable to high European standards. Jāzeps Grosvalds, apart from his academic studies in painting, was an ardent reader, displayed an interest in music, and spoke several languages, including a bit of Persian acquired during his later travels.

Grosvalds's earliest drawing on Oriental themes was made between 1904 and 1909. It was called *Austrumos* (In the East), and depicted three men in characteristic Eastern dress at the moment of rest. There is also a string musical instrument, a vase, and a small dish of snacks. Even if Grosvalds hadn't yet seen Eastern lands at this point, he was able to capture the atmosphere of an Oriental scene based on his knowledge and imagination. The first travel where the painter got directly acquainted with important examples of Islamic art was to Spain in 1913. Being already well-prepared, Grosvalds's

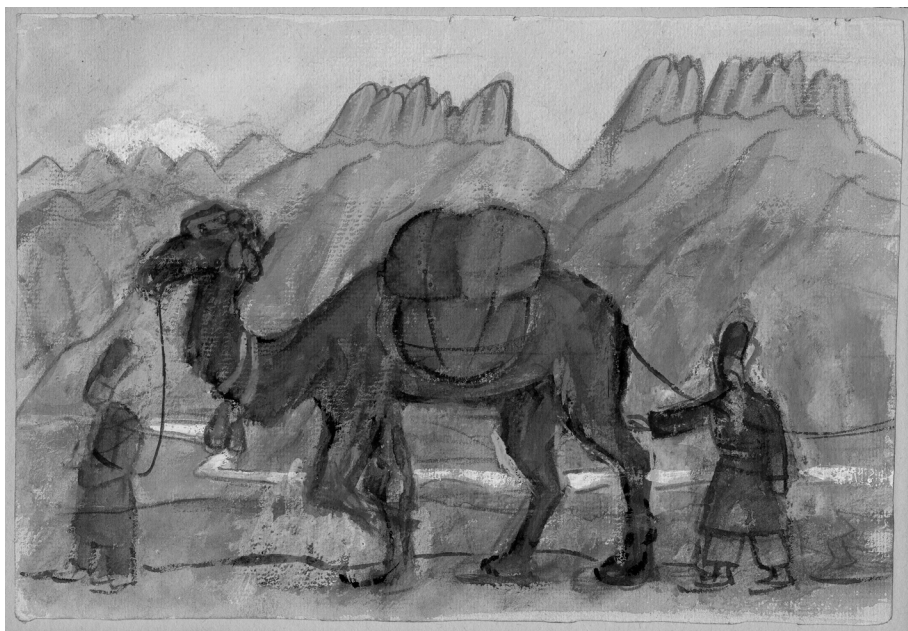
encounter with a culture having Oriental and Arabic elements, and with distinctive southern landscapes, where harsh deserts are combined with tropical vibrancy, strengthened his neoromantic inclinations, fully realized later, during his journey to Persia. [...] Jāzeps saw Spain (its people, landscapes, cities, and gardens) in colours and through the prism of his Oriental enthusiasm, mixed with reminiscences of art history and literature (Kļaviņš 2006, 322).

During his travels, here and later, Grosvalds constantly kept a diary where he carefully documented different impressions, people, traditions, and architectural monuments. The impact of the Oriental art and scenery was later strengthened during his stay in Persia, Egypt, and Turkey. Grosvalds not only made a number of paintings and drawings but also worked on a literary documentation of his experiences, *Tableaux Persans*, published posthumously in both the original French and in Latvian translation (Grosvalds 1978). The text was completed almost immediately after the return from his travel.



Jāzeps Grosvalds. *Blue Gate in Qazvin*, 1918, tempera on paper, 16 x 23 cm, VMM Z-8664

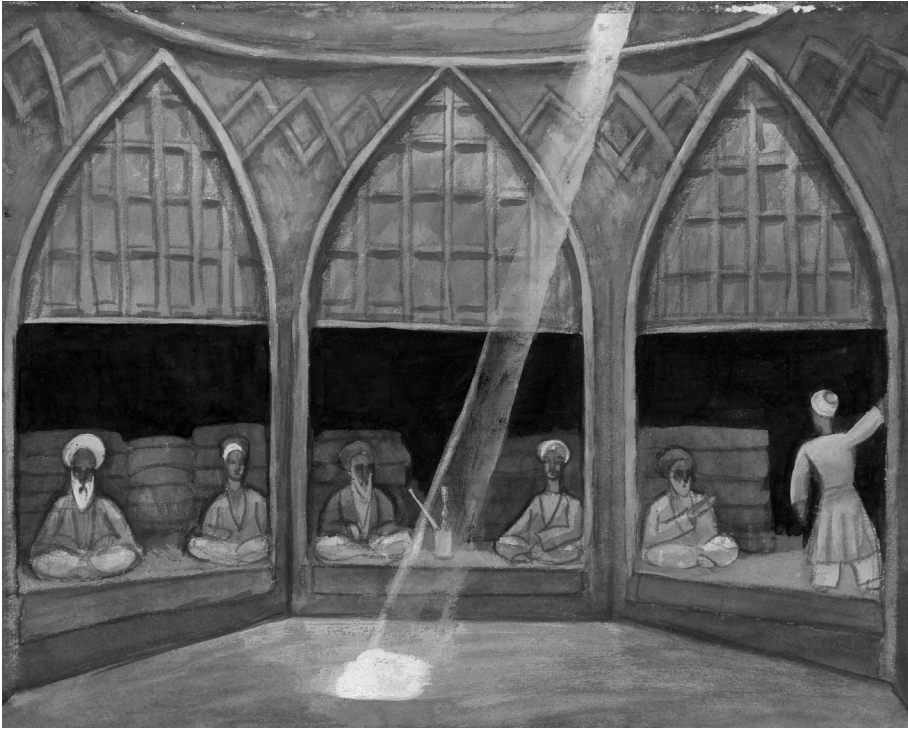
The circumstances of Grosvalds's trip to the Near East were rather complicated. He was mobilized into the Russian military during the Great War but together with other officers happened to be in London in the fall of 1917. In an uncertain situation caused by the turbulences of the revolution in Russia, he subscribed to an operation in Mesopotamia as a member of a special section of the British military. Following a rather complicated tour via Egypt, the Red Sea, and the Indian Ocean, Grosvalds reached Persia by early March 1918. He devoted as much time as possible to the observations of local life, and made different kinds of paintings and drawings.



Jāzeps Grosvalds. *Camel*, 1918, tempera on paper, 16 x 23,3 cm, VMM Z-8655

Despite encountering a lot of people whose life was greatly affected by the war, and to whom he also paid serious attention, Grosvalds was fascinated by his discovery of the world he had dreamed of while reading the tales of *The Thousand and One Nights* and other sources that stimulated his interest in the Near East. Grosvalds's drawings and paintings cover various facets of his experience in Persia, including ethno- and topographic observations, sceneries enlivened by palm woods and “boats of Sindbad”, scenes from everyday life on the streets, tea houses (*chai kanes*), and the Rembrandtesque twilight of the Orient (Kļaviņš 2006, 343–345). The painter often supplements his drawings with inscriptions in the Persian language, being fascinated by the visual beauty of written letters.

In his *Tableaux Persans*, Grosvalds does not pay much attention to the chronology of his travels but rather focuses on personal observations that in their literary form match those documented in his art. Especially extensive are the sections devoted to those regions of Iran predominantly inhabited by the Kurds. These were among the most exotic areas encountered during his travels. Here is how he describes the Kurds in Chahroban: “The livestock on the slopes of the hills is looked after by shepherds,



Jāzepts Grosvalds. *Bazaar in Qazvin*, 1918, tempera on paper, 16 x 23 cm, VMM Z-4395

sons of these mountains, whose great height is made especially impressive by their strange hats. Their brownish and savage faces have certain aristocratic features, and, after meeting the Semitic Arabs, these people look much more European” (Grosvalds 1978, 7).

In all of Grosvalds’s descriptions, there appears a noticeable tension in confrontation with the strange and unfamiliar local people, who, on a closer look, start to appear charming and friendly despite various tricks constantly applied in their communication with a foreigner (12). He also refers to the Kurds as “robbers by profession”, and even compares them to “large black devils” that are heavily armed (18). Such remarks should perhaps not be taken at their face value, as it important to keep in mind that Grosvalds undertakes his trip as a member of the British imperial troops. Still, he never loses his considerable compassion, that testifies to an individual perception of specific individuals met on his way as well as an understanding of the difficult circumstances in which local people live (8–9):

Women on the streets, all dressed in black, hide their pale faces with ebony eyes and eyelids under the chadras, while men gather in tea houses (*chai kanes*), dirty huts with low roofs that have scenes of lions hunting deer, a favorite motif of Persian painters, on their walls. Noisy and hungry crowds fill up local “restaurants”, small huts blackened by smoke where there are copper boilers on the fire with dubious food being prepared. These people are ready to eat anything that might be available. Children, whose brown skin is pulled up on their weak bones, look after everything that we might leave on the road, in the hope to diminish their hunger at least to a certain extent.



Jāzeps Grosvalds. *Kurds on the Roof*, 1918, watercolor on paper, 23,3 x 16 cm, VMM Z-8654

These personal encounters with the Near East help him to move beyond stereotypes and generalizations, and add a new facet to the representations of the world of Islam in Latvian literary culture. It is certainly important to notice that, while traveling in the Near East, Grosvalds could draw on an important archive of knowledge that was available for a young and aspiring early 20th-century Latvian intellectual. Alongside information achieved through the Baltic German and Latvian press, another important channel of knowledge was provided by the translations from Oriental languages. Among many other sources, the interest in Oriental texts was due to a considerable extent to the massive impact of Goethe's concept of *Weltliteratur*, primarily inspired by foreign cultures, which stimulated translations into Latvian. With regard to Oriental themes, it is especially important to mention the tales of *The Thousand and One Nights* that in the 19th century already had an established tradition of translations into major European languages (Naddaff 2014, 488–491). Grosvalds

refers to these tales as important for his inspiration; and, at the beginning of the 20th century, several of these tales were translated into Latvian. In 1912 and 1914, there appeared two small volumes in a translation by Linards Laicens (1883–1937), and, between 1923 and 1929, four volumes in translations of Laicens and Roberts Kroders (1892–1956) were published. The attractiveness of this later edition was considerably increased by its colorful illustrations, the work of Aleksandrs Apsītis (1880–1943; for the first three volumes) and Niklāvs Strunke (1894–1966). By the first quarter of the 20th century the Latvian public was not only relatively well-informed about various lands dominated by the culture of Islam but also had an opportunity to read translations and follow personal reflections of the Orient.

The experience of the Baltic German and Latvian travelers to the Maghreb, Persia, Egypt, and other territories in the Near East was shaped by patterns that were close



Niklāvs Strunke. Illustration for *The Thousand and One Nights*. Image from *The Thousand and One Nights*, IV. Rīga: Leta, 1929

to classical Western Orientalism. These trips were accomplished by members of the educated upper class who undertook their travels for the purposes of study and leisure. The acquired impressions contributed to the expression of personal experience and allowed for a documentation of first-hand observations. At the same time, certain prejudices about the Orient remained in place, and the “Othering” of local population was discursively present. To some extent, an overlap with the Russian imperial imagery is also noticeable, for example, when the reception was shaped by the context of military expeditions as was partially the case with Jāzeps Grosvalds’s travels.

FRONTIERS AS CONTACT ZONES

Besides those described above, there were other routes leading Latvians to various encounters with other ethnicities in different “contact zones”. In the course of the 19th century, larger groups of Latvian peasants made attempts to move into internal Russia in a search for a more fertile land. This was a difficult undertaking, plagued by constant setbacks. Many did not find appropriate conditions to earn their living, even when, as in the case promoted by Krišjānis Valdemārs (1825–1891), one of the leaders of the national movement, the initiative came from ardent supporters of economic prosperity of the Latvian people. Another major wave of emigration occurred before and during the Great War when one of the most characteristic refugee routes led to the Caucasus.

Occasionally, there had been earlier visits from the Baltic littoral to this distant region of the Russian empire. Thus the painter Georg Wilhelm Timm traveled not only to Algeria but, in the late 1840s and early 1850s, participated in Russian military operations in the Caucasus as a battalion painter. He also documented cultural monuments and places of interest, and among his paintings there was one depicting a Tatar cemetery near the Caspian Sea. Jāzeps Grosvalds, in the aftermath of his stay in the Near East, also received orders to move to the Caucasus, where he spent some months in late 1918 and early 1919 (Kļaviņš 2006, 342). The largest Latvian émigré community to the Caucasus before and during the Great War was concentrated in the city of Baku and its surroundings in Azerbaijan, a place marked by relative prosperity due to its production of oil. Living there meant new encounters with different ethnic groups, both Christians and Muslims, giving new insights into the habits of these people.

In her book, *Imperial Knowledge: Russian Literature and Colonialism*, Ewa M. Thompson (2000, 53) convincingly argues that the discourse of the Caucasus in the imperial imagination was first shaped by 19th-century Russian romanticists:

Literary representations of Caucasus natives contained in these writings entered the canon of Russian literature, contributed to Russian self-perception, and influenced attitudes toward the Caucasus dwellers. The Romanticizing of colonialism in the works of Pushkin and Lermontov had its parallels in Orientalist literature of Western Europe.

These early encounters coincided with the historical period when the Russian Empire was promoting its political interests in the area, and, after the war with Persia that lasted from 1804 to 1813, secured its colonial presence in the Caucasus. The attitudes expressed by various kinds of imperial discourses are comparable to the

rhetoric that accompanied later confrontations with the Turks, and thus established a certain pattern of “Othering”.

However, by the late 19th and early 20th century, when more Latvian settlers established themselves in the Caucasus, the political tensions had temporarily calmed down. Especially at the beginning of the Great War a certain consensus of a shared fate spread among different nationalities of the Russian empire, as is also made visible by the texts of Latvian authors. Instead of critical remarks with regard to the political struggles of various ethnic groups of the area, which were recycled in a superficial form by the 19th-century Latvian press, thus resounding the ideology of the imperial center (Zelče 2009, 280), newly acquired first-hand observations were much more careful and sympathetic. This was also due to the fact that these personal impressions were made especially vivid in literary works of some of the most fascinating Latvian writers of the time.

Among the first Latvians to settle in the Caucasus was the writer Ernests Birznieks-Upītis (1871–1960). As a private tutor, who accompanied the family of his principal, he made the move already in 1893. He first spent some years near the border with Persia, later worked in Dagestan (1895–1898), stayed in Balahan till 1914, and afterward lived near the city of Baku until his return to Latvia in 1921.

Birznieks-Upītis’s careful observations of people in the Caucasus started to appear in the early 20th century (from 1903), and he was interested in the topic almost until the end of his life (one of the last stories being published as late as in 1948). The majority of the texts based on the scenes encountered in the Caucasus were published in his story collections *Kaukāza kalnos* (In the Mountains of the Caucasus, 1924) and *Kaukāza stāsti* (Stories from the Caucasus, 1927). They cover almost every aspect of the life of the author, starting from his arrival and first months spent in the region that are vividly portrayed in the story *Manas pirmās Lieldienas svešumā* (My first Easter in Distant Lands). It includes the description of a milieu with Orthodox churches, where Easter is celebrated, and Muslim minarets peacefully existing side by side, while children from families of different religious backgrounds are peacefully playing together (Birznieks Upītis 1927b, 15). As these stories reveal, Birznieks-Upītis was a passionate observer of local industrial facilities but especially fond of natural phenomena which he always carefully linked to the portrayal of local people. Thus, for example, his story *Aizā* (In the Gorge) details a touching visit of a family member to his native village. After being acquainted with daily routines as well as with the heart-felt relation of all the family members to their son, we are then led to the experience of sudden and devastating floods that completely destroy the village and bring death to almost all of the characters who had been introduced to the readers a moment before (1927a, 96–104). The focus of Upītis’s narrative is always on human beings, regardless of how different people who inhabit this area might seem to a stranger or what the differences among various ethnicities of the Caucasus are.

Birznieks-Upītis not only wrote stories and memoirs but also helped a number of his compatriots to settle in the region during the peak of emigration which coincided with the Great War, when battles were being fought on the territory of Latvia. Among these compatriots was the writer Jānis Jaunsudrabiņš (1877–1962) who lived

in the Caucasus from 1915 to 1918. His first impressions, titled *Vēstules no Kaukāza* (Letters from the Caucasus), appeared in a serialized form in the newspaper *Baltija* (The Baltics) from May 1916 onward. Jaunsudrabiņš later collected his stories in the volume *Kaukāzs* (The Caucasus, 1920), while the events of his first novel, *Nāves deļa* (The Dance of Death, 1924), also unfold in Baku.

The description of the initial encounters with the local people and their customs displays a great deal of curiosity and amazement on the part of the writer. But as soon as he gets more familiar with his new milieu, he highly appreciates the friendly attitudes of the people around him: “Thus I have to say that, despite even not being able to converse, we were met with a lot of sympathy and friendship in this distant land” (Jaunsudrabiņš 1981a, 79). One of their first hosts in Baku likes to spend time in the rooms of the writer’s family, simply observing their activities, or even falling asleep from time to time. Jaunsudrabiņš is especially moved when “on Christmas day our host arrived early in the morning, and there was a big orange laying in his palm for our daughter. He was indeed very kind to us” (77).

Jaunsudrabiņš left a number of colorful descriptions of local inhabitants, sometimes drawn in a humorous tone. Many of his observations testify that he encountered people with a completely different mentality who behaved in such a manner that he himself would never do. As he experiences a noisy crowd during the performance of an operetta, he notes that on any other occasion he would have felt an irresistible desire to leave immediately. However, in this particular case he was so interested in the observation of local people that he carefully followed the loud conversations of those who had not met each other for some time and now tried to communicate even during the performance despite their places being located quite far apart from each other (82–83).

The tone set by Jaunsudrabiņš is most reliably explained by the sense of a shared fate with the people he encounters. They are all part of the Russian Empire, and their fate is influenced by war, as his own living is. In all their difference, they appear to be friendly “Others”, who inhabit a kind of a borderland between the familiar and the strange. In this case it is legitimate to speak of the representations of the majority of local people as “good” Muslims who might be different (as Gingrich describes in the case of Austria) but as citizens of the same country they do not raise feelings of danger.

On a number of occasions, the writer still recognizes that he feels more comfortable among people with whom he shares his religious faith. Upon meeting a woman from Moscow who is together with her six year old daughter, they immediately decide to help each other to find lodgings and keep contacts at least during the first weeks of their stay (100). At the same time, however, there is a growing compassion with regard to the local population and an understanding of the hardships of their lives. The author is surprised by the level of mutual understanding that can be reached without being able to speak each other’s language, or even, as with many Muslims, to communicate in Russian (163).

In his novel, *Nāves deļa*, this kind of compassion amounts to an almost apocalyptic vision of the devastating impact of war and famine on the people of the Caucasus.

Even if the narrative focuses on a Latvian émigré, Vilis Vītols, it provides a great deal of information about different ethnic groups in the Caucasus who, despite their potential mutual disagreements, are equally affected by the turbulent state of affairs. Among the most sympathetic characters in the novel is a local man whom the protagonist encounters on the very first evening upon his arrival. When Vilis Vītols tells the man that he does not have any means to buy food or secure an overnight stay, he is taken to the house of the stranger, given a meal and offered a room (1981b, 163). This kind of impression is very characteristic of the way how the Latvian refugees learn to know the good-heartedness of the inhabitants of the Caucasus.

The portrayal of the Caucasus, as encountered by Latvian writers during the first quarter of the 20th century, does not contain elaborate descriptions of historical monuments. The focus is rather on daily life in the streets of towns and in the countryside, on industrial facilities and on characteristic rural landscapes. The feeling of a shared fate provides these observations with a great deal of sympathy and first-hand experience which testifies to a friendly co-existence of different ethnicities in the region. A certain amount of exoticism is still preserved in these stories that helps to appreciate the persistence of traditions characteristic to the ways of life of the inhabitants of the Caucasus.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of texts and images we encounter in Latvian literary culture during the 19th and early 20th century, an archive made up of stories, travel notes, memoirs, and visual representations, reveals different varieties of the representation of Oriental “Others”. To some extent these representations correspond to well-known patterns and stereotypes of the traditional Orientalist imagery but they also display specific features.

It is important to take into account that there have been two major patterns that shaped the representations of early encounters with the world of Islam in Latvian literary culture. First, there was the Russian imperial imagery that, due to the lasting military conflicts in the 19th century and constant political interests in the borderlands, had a special focus on the “Othering” of the military opponents of the empire. Thus especially the Turks were portrayed as a paradigmatic example of the Oriental “Other”, a tradition that has also had a long-lasting imprint in the collective memory of the Latvian society, especially widely circulated through the stories of those peasants who had been recruited as soldiers into the Russian troops.

Another trend that was close to classical Western Orientalism was represented by the experience of the upper class travelers to the Maghreb, Persia, Egypt, and other places in the Near East. Stimulated by the interest in exotic lands that was widespread in 19th-century Europe, these people documented their first-hand experience of different locations, people, and historical monuments. Discursively, this experience was shaped by Orientalist attitudes even if these might remain deeply unconscious. However, travel notes and visual impressions reveal the curiosity of the observers and also amount in detail. With the growing number of travelers of ethnic Latvian origin, traditional Orientalist perspectives are relativized and subjected to more intimate observations shared with the compatriots back home.

The third approach is characterized by early 20th-century images of the life in the Caucasus that display a rising level of compassion and feeling of a shared fate with the local inhabitants, even if elements of exoticism also remain in place. The images of domesticated Muslims, characteristic to the experience in the Caucasus during the Great War, are based on an appreciation of the multi-ethnic structure of the Russian empire that allows for close and mutually trustful encounters between Christians and Muslims.

Our investigation has helped to determine different models applicable to the early representations of the encounters with the world of Islam in Latvian (and Baltic German) literary culture. However, valuable as this classification is, it is not less important to keep in mind that in reality there are no clear-cut borders between different types of representations. Thus we notice that the “Othering” of the Turks as archetypical “Others” was not only characteristic to the Russian imperial discourse but its origins are to be looked for in Western Europe, and especially in the narratives circulating in the lands of the Habsburg Monarchy as discussed by Andre Gingrich. Similarly, the impressions revealed by a number of 19th-century Western travelers were in a somewhat comparable manner also integrated into literary texts of Russian romanticists. In this context it is interesting to note that in the life stories of Georg Wilhelm Timm and Jāzeps Grosvalds, the experience of individual travel, a characteristic feature of Western Orientalism, co-existed with the encounters with the world of Islam as a part of military operations that on other occasions had also tended to determine more explicit processes of “Othering”. Thus there is a constant overlap of different models of representation.

The specific features of the representation of the world of Islam in Latvian literary culture are also determined by the fact that the Muslim communities have historically never presented a real threat to the ethnic Latvian society. Direct encounters in rather distant border zones point toward a certain exoticism of perception but, by getting closer on specific occasions, strangers also raise a considerable curiosity that often amounts to sympathy. Historically it has always remained more stimulating than threatening for Latvians to look for the possibilities of acquiring first-hand knowledge of the world of Islam.

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Frontier Orientalism. Latvian literary culture. The world of Islam. Travel notes. Literary representations.

The aim of this paper is to trace different representations of the encounters with the world of Islam in Latvian literary culture of the 19th and early 20th century. The Latvian case is contextualized within trends in 19th-century Orientalist representations shaped by the Western European and Russian imperial imagination. Other nations, and especially those with different religious beliefs and practices, have characteristically been perceived either with an incredulity characteristic to Western attitudes toward the Orient, or with the inevitability of direct confrontation and “Othering” in the cases of military conflicts involving the imperial forces of Russian empire and their political antagonists. At the same time, personal encounters that occurred in geographically peripheral areas of Russia as well as beyond the state borders, often led to unexpected revelations, bringing about an understanding of the fate shared with other, relatively distant societies and cultures. In our paper we demonstrate that these experiences played a substantial role not only in establishing first-hand contacts with other cultures but also contributed to the identity formation of the Latvian nation. We first provide theoretical reflections of the topic that position the discussed representations within broader contexts of Orientalism, as introduced by Edward Said, and point to the differences between the classical Orientalism and “frontier Orientalism” of close and immediate contacts, as proposed by Andre Gingrich. In the following, we focus on different images and stereotypes characteristic to the Orientalist representations in Latvian literary culture and propose a subdivision of different kinds of Orientalism. They include representations of potentially “bad” Muslims, perceived as a real or imaginary threat; travel notes and personal impressions in the vein of classical Orientalism but with a considerably greater degree of involvement if compared to the above case; and, finally, subjective portrayals of domesticated or “good” Orientals who embody a number of admirable features as they share their lives with the Christian community within the Russian empire. The first case deals predominantly with the Turks, who are involved in warfare with the Russian imperial forces; the second features both imagined and first-hand experience of exotic lands with a substantial presence of Muslim culture, legends, tales and historical monuments; the third is focused on the life in the Caucasus before and during the Great War.

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