

GALICIA AS A THEATRE OF WORLD WAR I IN AUSTRIAN LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

Imaginations of Galicia in Austrian cultural perception were mostly based on topographical and colonial perspectives. Compared to what was considered as “one’s own”, the reality of life in Galicia seemed to be alien and exotic. Measured against the values of Habsburgian central ideology, Galicia appears as the most remote. Soldiers came on duty to defend the outer borders and to bring forward territorial expansion - combined with cultural missions of civilisation. These borders also represented the borders of one’s own identity. Throughout the war, the almost stereotypical patterns of perception were armed from “exotic” to “hostile”. The First World War marked the end of any assured identity. In cultural memory, of which Austrian literature forms a main part, Galicia is highly present as a Theatre of War. Following the generation of this topos in Austrian literature is the major aim of this dissertation project.

METHODS

The understanding of what can be taken as „literature“ or „text“ has changed dramatically over the last decades. More and more, literary studies have become the science of decoding cultural texts. Not only canonised literary texts are worthy of attention, but also the accounts of „mass-literature“. These, as well, bear witness to complex cultural relations. The „spatial turn“ in cultural sciences has emphasised the importance of topographical connections in history. In literature the exploration, conquest and realisation of space is accomplished through language. Hence literature is part of the system of communications and relations, expressing the liveliness and dynamics of a specific reality: socio-historical, post-colonial and transpersonal methods and insights have to be taken into account. As the observer can not be separated from the subject of his observation and research, scientific methodology must be aware of its motivation in appreciating the reality of historical cultural experience.

LITERATURE AT WAR

Galicia was present in pre-war Austrian literature mainly in terms of certain stereotypes of periphery, underdevelopment and dirt. „Galicia“ only half-belonged to the Habsburg-Empire. With the beginning of the war many books, poems or essays engaging with the issue of war spontaneously emerged. During the war the census exercised a strict control. There is a general tendency in the war-poetry, especially dealing with the Eastern front and Galicia. It tends to bring out stereotypical schemata of the supremacy of „German and Germano-Austrian“ values, showing that the cultural perception was polarised. More and more the German-national ideas became the main ideology.

Another very important source for the process of disintegration during war in Galicia are the numerous accounts of soldiers as diaries, written under a less filtered experience of war, showing the frantic attempts to regain a model for identity. The memories of former belligerents and witnesses are of interest for this research, too, as narratives under the signs of memory and oblivion. These accounts also make obvious that World War I and II are linked. In the inter-war period former officers tried to verbalise their experience of the war.



WORLD WAR I IN GALICIA

The First World War in Galicia was the result of long lasting cultural, political, social and economic processes leading to an initial situation of identity loss, culturally described as „catatonic throe“ (“Agonie”), which can also be found as „Götterdämmerung“ (Twilight of the Gods) in the literature before 1914. The „apocalypse“ of War brought about collective trauma, which coincided with the downfall of the Habsburg-Empire. War as cultural experience could be described as acceleration and destruction of traditional relations and their rearrangement under conditions of conflict. Violent confrontations in this sense correspond with spatial extension.

Galicia as a theatre of war is characterised by some special features which mark its retention as a topos in Austrian literature. In Galicia, many lines of conflict have always run along national, cultural and social borders, some of which were fought out in violent eruptions. Because of its mobility, the war in Galicia flooded the region as a whole, so that common antithetical pairs like front vs. hinterland or military vs. civil sphere must be abandoned. The resulting involvement of great parts of the Galician population brought wide streams of refugees, a high rate of civilian casualties and an increase of military hardship. It should be taken into consideration that the Habsburg-Empire confronted its “arch-enemy” Russia at the Eastern front and Galicia became the venue for the „everlasting war“ of the „German spirit“ against „Asiatic hordes“. The war in this field evolved within a short time and led to attrition warfare at the cost of great numbers of lives. The symbolic analogy for the war in Galicia are the events around the fortress of Przemyśl. Its siege and loss was a political and moral debacle and a substantial military defeat for Austria. The importance of these events becomes even more evident because the Habsburg-Empire led most of its campaigns (e.g. the catastrophic Carpathian-expedition) with a view to relieving Przemyśl, which was of moral rather than military necessity.

LITERATURE ENGAGING WITH THE WAR

Literature was also important in the propaganda war. The LKPQ, the „Kriegspressequartier“, intended to use writers to influence public opinion through a range of literary forms, postcards, almanacs and articles. A famous example of this is Hugo von Hofmannsthal, who looks at Galicia with redundant perception, recognising only abstract facts, not people. Karl Hans Strobl, Ludwig Ganghofer, Franz Blei, Franz Theodor Csokor and Alfred Polgar are other famous names on the list of state-paid “correspondents”.

On the other hand, Karl Kraus strengthened the anti-war opinion in their writings, revealing the general and political abuse of language. The poem „Grodek“ by Georg Trakl, written before his death in Galicia, also raises the question of how the reality of war had an impact on his writing. The lyricist Theodor Kramer wrote poems about his experiences at the Eastern front. Furthermore, Galicia and the Great War are present in the novels of Manés Sperber. Joseph Roth is mainly responsible for creating a highly mythological image of Galicia. Many of his writings deal with the subject of Galicia and war as the central experience, motivating him to construct a nostalgic remembrance of a lost world. The death of the army-officer Carl Joseph Trotta in *Radetzky-marsch* can be considered a hint in this respect.

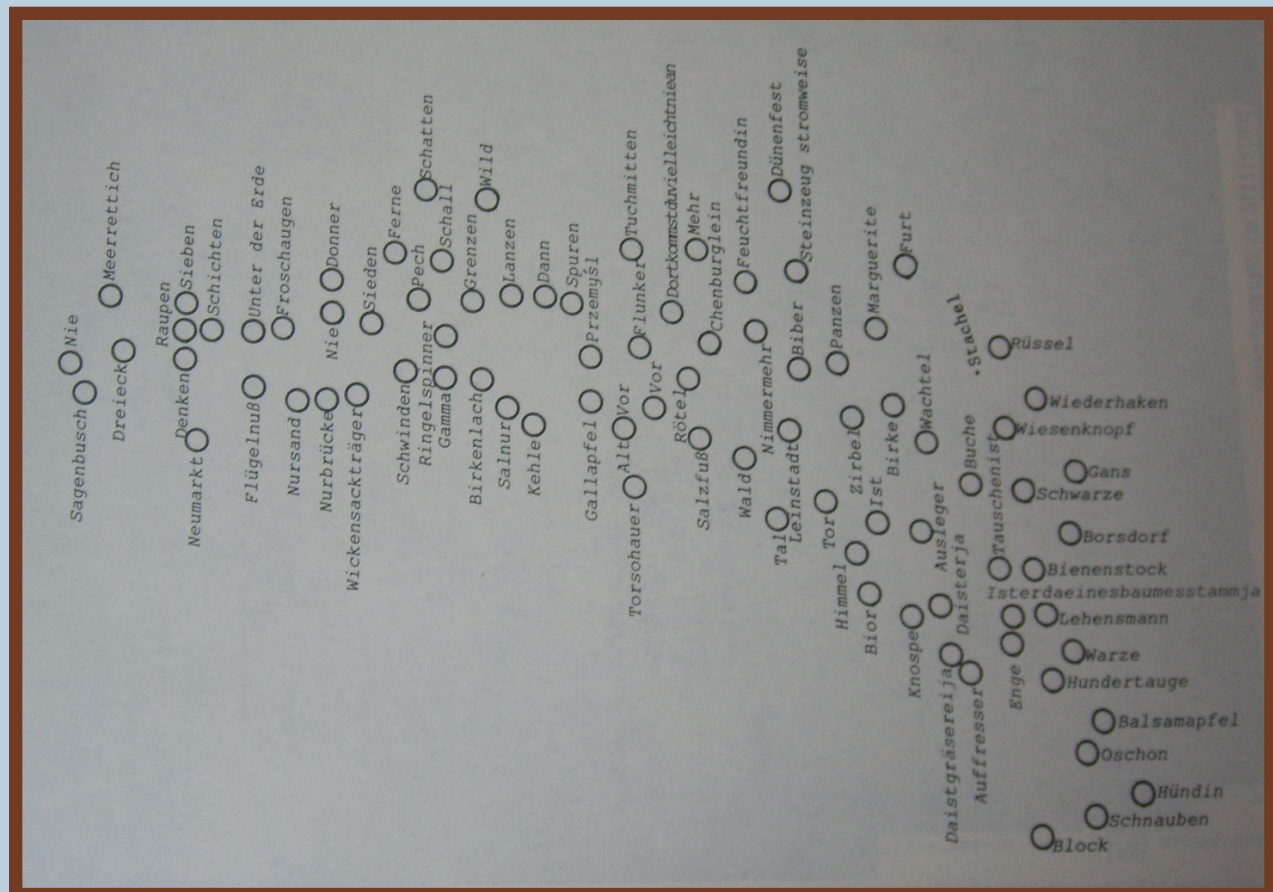
MARIANNE FRITZ AND THE NEW STANDARD

Marianne Fritz is a figure of contemporary Austrian literature, whose lifework remains - even after her early death in 2007 - widely unexplored. Her work is of huge dimensions and an increasing complexity. On the other hand, it is the most ambitious and consequent attempt to put the narration of Austrian history on a new basis.

The author worked with a large archive and resolutely destroys the signum of the so-called Habsburgian Mythos in Austrian Literature. Fritz’ main works, *Dessen Sprache du nicht verstehst* as well as *Naturgemäß I + II* are situated in Galicia, largely around and within World War I. Original sources, documents and maps are mounted into the text, but the facts are put into motion. Her aim could be described as narrating space in its history or reactivating historical experience. Maybe I work, says the author, on what „gewisse Formulare, Dokumente, kartemäßig erfasste Lebensläufe ausgrenzen [...] wahrscheinlich, denkbar ist es gewiß, >mache< ich gewisse >Lebensläufe< wieder zum Erlebnis?“ In this project annihilated stories re-surface and language itself is at war. Even the possibility of narrating history is called into question. Endless offers for sense are provided to the reader. The written words themselves become maps. The strictly formally orientated writing-process of Fritz allows one to follow her strategies of topography, language and historical conceptualisation. Historical space and mental topography, outer facts and inner realities coincide, diachronical order is suspended. It is Marianne Fritz’ merit to have brought the Galicia-discourse in Austrian Literature to a new level.



Marianne Fritz: *Naturgemäß*. Galicia as Visual Correspondence



COMPARATIVE DIMENSION

While not appropriately received, many signs of the War in Galicia are traced in the books of the Jewish writer Soma Morgenstern. Henry William Katz also has to be mentioned in this context. Comparative dimensions can be found in the works of Jozef Wittlin, former colleague of Joseph Roth and strongly informed by Austrian Galicia. Another example is Andrzej Kusniewicz, who intended to reconstruct elements of the Habsburgian world of the wartime out of specific Polish circumstances. Ukrainian literature contributes new perspectives to the subject, especially the works in the surroundings of the “Ukrainische Schützen”, for example Bohdan Lepkyj.

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