

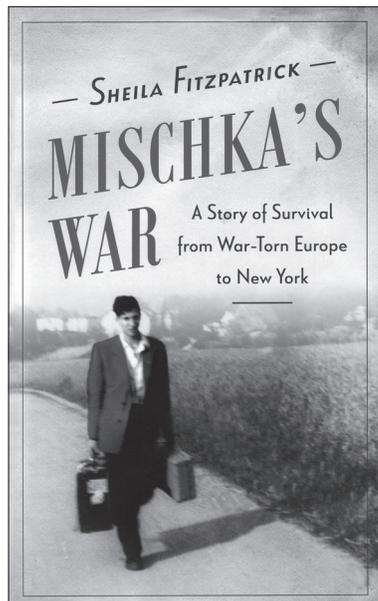
pēc vienkāršiem skaidrojumiem, lineāras vēstures, pēc patriotisma pārcukurotiem varoņstāstiem un svešu varu represiju upuru tēlojumiem. Pavisam noteikti tā ir netradicionāla – šī vārda labākajā nozīmē.

Dažādās zinātņu nozares pārstāvošo autoru izmantotās metodoloģijas ir atšķirīgas, kas prasa no lasītāja papildus piepūli iedziļināties dažādu zinātņu teorijās un metodoloģiskajās īpatnībās un kas neļauj grāmatu uztvert kā vienotu, monolītu vēstījumu, tomēr tas netraucē saskatīt kopīgo vienojošo – skatu uz Latvijas vēstures problēmjautājumiem ārpus ierastā lielā vēstures stāsta. Lielākā grāmatas vērtība ir tā, ka tajā atklātā problemātika un starpdisciplinārā metodoloģija rosina domāt – ne tikai par atsevišķās nodaļās aplūkotajiem tematiem, bet arī kopumā – domāt par Latvijas vēsturi kā daudzšķautņainu dārgakmeni, atklājot arvien jaunas un jaunas savstarpēji mijiedarbojošos faktoru šķautnes, domāt par pagātnes uztveres un šodienas caurvišanos un savstarpēju papildināšanos, domāt ārpus rāmja.

*Edgars Engīzers*

Sheila Fitzpatrick. *Mischka's War: A Story of Survival from War-Torn Europe to New York*. London; New York: I. B. Tauris, 2017. 313 pp.: ill. ISBN 978-1-78831-022-2

Sheila Fitzpatrick is one of those figures that loom larger than life in the historiography of the Soviet Union. Her works have inspired and shaped the perceptions of the Soviet past for a generation of historians, myself included. As an undergraduate, her standard



text on the *Russian Revolution*<sup>1</sup> was as influential for shaping my understanding of the events of 1917 and had as great an impact on me as the much more extensive monograph by Richard Pipes on the same subject.<sup>2</sup> Her works on the NEP period and Stalinism were also important for informing my understanding of how the Soviet system functioned and developed. Thus, it was with a mix of anticipation and apprehension that I approached her most recent book, *Mischka's War*, a biography of her late husband, the Riga-born physicist Michael Danos, also known as "Mischka" *alias* Miķelis Danos(s).

The anticipation stemmed from the fact that here Fitzpatrick was entering into my own professional territory, namely the history of twentieth century Latvia and how this country's people struggled to cope with the catastrophic events during the Second World War. I was very interested to see how she would apply her proven skills as a critical historian to such a story. At the same time, I was uneasy, as I also know she has no previous deeper knowledge of Latvia's society and history, nor does she have proficiency in Latvian, an essential local language. This did not bode well for even a capable and respected historian like Fitzpatrick to be able to negotiate the twists and turns of Latvia's wartime history – especially about the Holocaust – based mainly on sources in English, Russian, or German.

Almost immediately, my worst fears were confirmed. Fitzpatrick not only admits that she generally did not consult the sources – whether primary, or secondary – in Latvian, she makes a virtue of this. Out of hand, she repeatedly dismisses Latvian historical literature as ideologically subjective or otherwise unreliable. Information derived from the book, *History of Latvia: The 20th Century*,<sup>3</sup> an English translation of the collective monograph on recent Latvian history by a team of prominent historians from Latvia, is qualified as being "according to Latvian nationalist sources" (p. 12). In quoting demo-

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<sup>1</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick (1994). *The Russian Revolution*, 2nd rev. ed. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Pipes (1990). *The Russian Revolution*. New York: Knopf.

<sup>3</sup> Daina Bleiere et al. (2006). *History of Latvia: The 20th Century*. Riga: Jumava.

graphic statistics on the ethnic composition of the territory of Latvia in the early twentieth century, she says the figures of 8% Russians, 7% Germans, and 6% Jews, being “from Latvian sources, may err on the low side” (p. 7), suggesting an attempt by historians in Latvia to make the country more ethnically homogenous than was actually the case. In fact, these figures correspond to the official data for the 1897 Census for the Russian Empire, and there is little reason to accuse the tsarist authorities of falsifying statistics to favour Latvian ethnonationalism.

A similar dismissal of the state of research occurs when Fitzpatrick is discussing the Soviet mass deportations of 13–14 June 1941. Fitzpatrick first presents the “official” version that the deportations were planned in advance, and that they targeted particular social groups and categories. Many years after the fact, however, Michael Danos recalled for Fitzpatrick that the victims of the deportations seemed to be chosen quite arbitrarily, in that all groups were hit, even Communist Party members; “democratic to the hilt” was his assessment (pp. 44–45). Fitzpatrick, an historian of Stalinism of the revisionist school, warns readers that “Historians should never be too trusting of bureaucratic documents, which in general tend to say that what happened was supposed to happen” (p. 46). The reason for her scepticism is that she refers to the fact that some of the published documents regarding the June 1941 deportations may be dubious as proof – apparently referring to the draft decree by Merkulov from mid-May 1941, but perhaps also confusing it with the more problematic so-called “Serov Instruction”, since she refers to issues of dating. Falling victim to her own preconceived notions of what types of sources to trust, she dismisses the “official record” (i.e. the central planning documents produced by the upper levels of the state security and Communist Party apparatus) that set out target groups, and wants to believe more in the speculative description of events offered by Danos. In fact, the Latvian State Archives have compiled detailed lists and statistics about the deportations, based on the thousands of case files of the deportees, and the results actually confirm the “official version” which Fitzpatrick is so keen to

reject.<sup>4</sup> Had she not been eager to dismiss recent historical research from Latvia as nationalistic rubbish, she may have avoided giving too much credence to the memories of Danos in cases such as this.

Indeed, one of the main problems with the book is the heavy reliance on the memories of Danos, collected by the author over many years, as a substitute for delving into the increasingly rich and varied historiography of Latvia before and during the Second World War. Had Fitzpatrick done so, she would not need to speculate whether the Swedish intelligence services had contacts in Soviet-controlled Latvia in the immediate post-war years (p. 147), since it is long established that they did, already during the war, in fact.<sup>5</sup> Nor would she make such a terrible gaffe as to take at face value the recollection that “in contrast to the Soviets, they [the Germans] didn’t change the street names or even write them in German” (p. 57). A familiarity with either of the recent books by Jānis Šiliņš<sup>6</sup> or Mark Hatlie<sup>7</sup> would also have raised critical questions about whether it was possible to celebrate a Catholic wedding in the style of an “enemy of the people” (sic) in Riga on 19 May 1919 (p. 15) – that is, during the raging battle to wrest the city from the control of Stučka’s Bolsheviks and during an intense phase of the so-called Red Terror.

Fitzpatrick repeatedly demonstrates a lack of critical distance, not only in her reliance on information from sources originating with Michael Danos or his mother, Olga (whose letters and diaries are also used extensively). This attitude is also expressed in how Fitzpatrick nearly always gives Michael and Olga the benefit of the doubt, while other people often receive harsh, judgemental treatment. That Olga and Michael’s father, Arpad, did well for themselves out of the Bolshevik period in 1919, by taking over a vacated apartment and speculating with the moveable goods left by gentry fearing repressions, is

<sup>4</sup> See: Ainārs Bambals et al. (2001). *Aizvestie: 1941. gada 14. jūnijs*. Rīga: Latvijas Valsts arhīvs; Nordik.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example: Dzintars Ērglis (2003). *Latvijas Centrālās padomes vēstures nezināmās lappuses*. Rīga: Latvijas vēstures institūts.

<sup>6</sup> Jānis Šiliņš (2013). *Padomju Latvija 1918–1919*. Rīga: Vēstures izpētes un popularizēšanas biedrība.

<sup>7</sup> Mark R. Hatlie (2014). *Riga at War: War and Wartime Experience in a Multi-Ethnic Metropolis*. Marburg: Herder-Institut.

presented quite matter-of-factly (p. 15). That Latvians in interwar Latvia got swept up with nationalism – something to which Michael's brother, Arpad Jr., was also not immune – is portrayed negatively by Fitzpatrick. Yet, when Michael joins a Baltic German sporting club in the 1930s, the admission by Michael in this context that, "I learnt to understand comradeship and became more and more German" (p. 24) raises no warning flags at all for Fitzpatrick. At this time, Baltic German youth organisations were increasingly under the sway of pro-Nazi groups like Erhard Kroeger's *Bewegung*, such that it should come as no surprise that joining a Baltic German sports club would lead to a greater sense of German identity and masculine camaraderie. In Fitzpatrick's account of interwar Latvia, however, the siren's song of fascism only affects ethnic Latvians.

Similar indulgence is shown toward Michael's mother, Olga Danos, *née* Viksne. Olga was first a singer (which is how she met Michael's father), then a clothier and owner of a fashion boutique, and finally an artist. During the Nazi occupation, Olga tried to keep her sewing workshop going. She did so by fulfilling contracts for the Germans using Jewish labourers. She also cultivated a close friendship with Paul Seeliger, presented by Michael, Olga, and thus Fitzpatrick as a low-ranking German bureaucrat who was also an anti-Nazi that tried to save as many Jews as he could (pp. 64–66). This is not the picture of Seeliger one can find in the scholarship on the Holocaust in Latvia, where Seeliger figures as a leading, and pro-active, official of the Labour Office with responsibility for the deployment of Jewish workers from the Riga Ghetto.<sup>8</sup> Did Olga Danos, through her actions, save Jews during the Holocaust? The answer may not be as clear-cut as Fitzpatrick makes it seem. Furthermore, Olga was not a completely marginalised player in the fashion scene of German-controlled Latvia, as she published in the main women's magazine of the time, *Mana Māja*, writing about how to keep fashionable during war-time conditions.<sup>9</sup> It should also be noted that Olga Danos was the

<sup>8</sup> For example in: Andrej Angrick and Peter Klein (2006). *Die "Endlösung" in Riga: Ausbeutung und Vernichtung, 1941–1944*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.

<sup>9</sup> *Mana Māja*, No. 22 (1942) and No. 1 (1943).

head of the fashion artel “Modeļu centrāle” during the Soviet period in 1940–41, when she is quoted as striving to “shake off the blind imitation of foreign designs and create fashions suited to the interests and demands of the citizens of a socialist state”.<sup>10</sup> This suggests more of an ideological and moral pliability than the disinterested, apolitical figure sketched out in Fitzpatrick’s book.

One might think that the foregoing critique is overly harsh. After all, most people who write biographical works on persons to whom they have a close relationship have difficulties keeping critical distance. It is natural to give the benefit of the doubt to someone you know and love when presenting their story. Indeed, if Fitzpatrick had simply stated that this is a biography based primarily on Michael’s and Olga’s own words, with all the subjectivity that this entails, then the reader could also indulge her the inevitable distortions of facts that such writing includes by its nature.

Yet from the outset, Fitzpatrick wants us to read this book differently. In the introduction, she clearly explains:

“This is a *historian’s book*, not a memoir, but it’s also a wife’s book about her husband. There are tensions between those two purposes, sometimes commented upon. I hope they turn out to be the kind of tensions that make thing more interesting, rather than the spoiling kind. Appropriately for a wife’s book, I draw on my own memories, and with the things Misha told me about his life, but *I behave like a historian* in dealing with documents and the memories of those who knew him in the 1940s.” (Emphasis mine – *M.K.*)

Thus, if she insists that this is a book written by a historian, the readers must hold her to the standards of historical writing. And in her lack of corroboration of the statements and facts presented in the egodocuments she consults, and well as her very unscholarly dismissal of the historiography of Latvia for its presumed nationalist bias, Fitzpatrick fails significantly as an historian.

This is a pity, because the story of Michael Danos – a DP physicist and amateur athlete of mixed Latvian–Hungarian (perhaps also Jewish) heritage, who drifted with relative ease between the German,

<sup>10</sup> I. L. (1941). “Kā ģērbsimies pavasarī”. *Darba Sieviete*, 1941. g. 15. marts.

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Latvian, Russian, and Anglophone cultural worlds – is a fascinating one that deserved to be told. Once one has caught sight of him, one can see the traces he has left in the historical records, for example, in Latvia's press from the 1930s and '40s, and in the postwar Latvian émigré press. However, as with Mark Kurzem's treatment of his father's story in *The Mascot*,<sup>11</sup> the glaring historical errors, which could have been avoided with relatively simple background research, degrade both the value of the story and the reputation of its author. It is an act of hubris to not only embark on writing a book about Latvia without having a sufficient grasp of the language and history, but, as Fitzpatrick does, to actually make a virtue of rejecting what fellow historians from Latvia (and elsewhere) have written on the relevant subjects. Unfortunately, with *Mischka's War*, my confidence in Fitzpatrick as a scholar has been irreparably undermined. The sloppiness as a researcher that she displayed here will affect negatively the way in which I read her other publications from now on.

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<sup>11</sup> Mark Kurzem (2007). *The Mascot: The Extraordinary Story of a Young Jewish Boy and an SS Extermination Squad*. London: Rider.