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## **The rewriting of Latvian history – an overview of the educational journal *Soviet Latvian School***

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The education system is an effective tool for the development and transmission of a sense of national identity. Scholars generally agree that history has a significant role in defining national identity, but different types of society place importance on differing values, ideas, and even events. What is the focus of the teaching of history under authoritarian regimes and what is the ultimate effect on a nation's sense of identity?

This paper is the result of initial research on the effect of the teaching of history on social identity among students. In this paper I examine Latvia as a case study and focus on the effect of authoritarianism on the teaching of history. I conduct content and discourse analyses of history textbooks and teaching methodology during the inter war period, the Soviet occupation, and since renewed independence. I will analyze the evolution of Latvian historiography through these three periods. This will show how the various types of authoritarianism – nationalistic during the inter war period and Soviet after WWII – influenced the teaching of history, particularly in relation to national issues, patriotism, and power. I began my research with the post-WWII period of Soviet occupation.

The aim of this paper is to show that the Soviet occupiers of Latvia attempted to change Latvians' view of history, and ultimately of themselves, by rewriting history from a professed Soviet, but in reality, Russian perspective. This view extended to all aspects of curriculum including history, literature, language, and pedagogical methodology in general. The official line stressed Russian predominance in all aspects of culture, language, and history, and tied any achievements in Latvian culture, language, and history to Latvia's pre-revolutionary ties to Czarist Russia and the Russian educational system. These educational policies and attitudes are described in detail in the educational journal, *Padomju Latvijas Skola (PLS) – Soviet Latvian School*.

*PLS* was first published in 1940 and 1941 shortly after the initial occupation of Latvia by the Soviet Union. After an interruption due to German occupation, *PLS* resumed publication in 1945 after the second Soviet occupation. I will focus on the discussion of the teaching of history and use of history textbooks as well as the political and cultural aspects of learning language, literature, and pedagogical methodology from 1940 to 1954.

During the 1930s Stalin created a new master-narrative for history textbooks, because earlier propaganda campaigns had failed to mobilize popular support. This new narrative linked Soviet identity to Russia's national past. The sudden shift from a Latvian nationalist education system to a Soviet system, explicitly socio-centric in its bias towards the proletariat and ethnocentric in its devaluation of other cultures, rendered textbooks used in independent Latvia useless. The government used this educational journal as a source of information on pedagogical methodology and to provide lessons on the correct interpretation of history. *PLS* introduced the Latvian teacher to the Soviet curriculum.

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*PLS* encompassed everything every teacher in Latvia needed to know about teaching in the 'newly liberated and rejoined to the Soviet Fatherland' Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic. Most of the articles in the journal were methodological in nature and included conference overviews, literature reviews, and sections dealing specifically with school life, teaching practices, book reviews, and official notices. Articles focused not only on the practicalities of education but the formality of pedagogical practice and theory as dictated by Stalinist historiography. History as a topic of education and propaganda tool figures prominently in the discourse of *PLS*.

I will focus on three generally dominant themes that appear in *PLS*: first, the change in methodology and content focusing on an explicitly proletarian view of events; second, the USSR's criticism of Latvia's years of independence; and finally, the explicit bias toward Russian culture and language.

The methodological principles followed in Soviet schools are clear – all subjects are taught following Marxist-Leninist dogma and for the express purpose of instilling Soviet nationalism. Love for the homeland is strengthened by using Soviet methods.

The importance of teaching in terms of class struggle is particularly visible in the history curriculum (*Piezīmes par vēstures mācību*, 1940, 1), which was intended to bring the new nation's students to a Marxist interpretation of history. Modern history was divided into three distinct categories - the period from the French revolution in 1789 to the Prussian War of 1870; the Paris Commune of 1871 to the October 1917 revolution, and from the October revolution on. The final period is described as 'a new era in human history' because 'the USSR revolution broke all chains and freed all nations from all forms of exploitation' (p. 39). Schoolbooks were an essential component for communist education and Soviet patriotism, and fortunately, Latvian schools will be able to adopt ready-made educational textbooks and methodology which the great fatherland, the USSR, had spent 20 years developing. Books used in independent 'bourgeois' Latvia not only did not reflect a true vision of historical events, but also were remiss in teaching proper patriotism because they failed to teach students practical lessons for everyday life. Jakovļevs (1948, 2) states that schoolbooks are not just a compilation of systemized facts, but also define methodology and are a definitive ideological and theoretical tool for a large army of teachers and the most important tool for the education of Soviet youth. However, these same books appeared to encourage lack of success in Soviet Latvia.

Straždiņš, the People's Commissar for Education, published several articles reprimanding teachers on their poor performance. He observed that the biggest problem was 'formalism' whereby students are taught basic facts, but not a deeper understanding of the meaning. Teachers were at fault because they were not yet fully convinced of the undeniable socialist victory and did not have the required burning desire to become defenders of the socialist system (1945, 6). This also indicated that they had not embraced socialist thought, the communist education system, and Soviet patriotism. Teachers needed to be motivated because the lesson was the heart of the education system and every lesson must develop in each student a Marxist way of thinking and Marxist world view (1948, 2). Straževs stated that history can not be taught by one who does not have the deepest world view of communism, but teachers had not internalized this world view as was apparent in their lessons which consisted of isolated examples of

the Russian people's battle for freedom against several invaders during the last century (1947, 2).

Strazdiņš did admit, however, that teaching the curriculum in Russian may be too difficult. While a lack of books complicated the matter, it is apparent that teachers were not involved in professional development, had poor knowledge of Russian, and did not know how to teach it. Strazdiņš stated that it was each individual school's responsibility to take steps to correct such problems and fulfil the educational plan (1948, 1). He also blamed poorly-trained teachers, over 2000 of them, for high numbers of held-back students (1948, 2).

The new Soviet Latvia had few Russian-speaking teachers. To assist in administering this new curriculum, the Ministry of Education issued directive number A – 2477 on 9 August 1940 allowing anyone who had received any type of teacher training prior to the revolution, to teach Russian without proving their ability to do so (1940, 1). Strazdiņš stated that Soviet literature was important but that there was little of it in the libraries and teachers did not read enough. Without Soviet literature, there was no Soviet education and a radical change was needed (1948, 2).

The Ministry of Education issued general directive number 179 on 23 December 1948 focusing specifically on the inadequacies of the teaching of history (1949, 2). All members of the education system were given specific instructions and timelines on how to improve the teaching of history. *PLS* was instructed to include more articles on Latvian history. However, *PLS* published only one article about Latvian history in the next issue and none again until issue 5 in 1950. Strazdiņš made it clear that the educational program was failing due to the teachers and the poor education they received under the previous regime.

*PLS* published several articles on the deficiencies of the education system and pedagogical practices of the previous regime. Niedra noted the main deficiency of Latvian bourgeois history of literature was that it did not sufficiently reflect the basis of the author's social position, historical development of economic conditions, and the connection between the soul and material goods (1941, 6). Nāburgs was also highly critical of children's reading material because they lacked sufficient translations of 'European' literature. He claimed this indefensible chauvinism did not serve the Latvian nation, but that it forced disassociation from the rest of Europe and encouraged regression in children (1941, 1). Communist education should include negative examples of which there are many in Latvian literature and life and teachers must instil disgust in the youth towards these types (M. Dušina, 1946, 3). A correct Marxist interpretation of Latvian history would instil in the students Soviet patriotism and proper explanations by teachers would help completely wipe out the harmful and anti-scientific views taught during the bourgeois regime (Dubins, 1948, 3). The bourgeois reactionary nationalists actively tried to separate Latvians from their easterly neighbours and deny the influence Russia had over Latvia's cultural and economic achievements (M. Šacs-Aniņš, 1952, 1).

Articles about specific historic events often distorted facts and frequently used inflammatory language. Miške claimed that his article on the description of preparations for the October revolution in Latvia could not be published in bourgeois Latvia since it revealed Bolshevism's deep roots in Latvia as well as the similarities between the German barons and Latvian bourgeoisie in their oppression of the landless peasants and

workers (1946, 10). Kauliņš ignored the declaration of independence in November 1918 as well as other facts relating to the founding of the Latvian state (1949, 1).

Soviet criticism of independent Latvia and the Ulmanis regime in particular was not restricted to educational matters. Strazdiņš stated that the nationalist, capitalist culture of the previous regime did not allow the masses to develop their own culture (1945, 2). The goal of the German *Ostland* policy was to annihilate the Latvian nation and Ulmanis' racial and 'people-hater' ideologies were twins of Hitler's policies (1945, 7). Upītis described those Latvians who fled overseas or to other zones as traitors (1947, 3). Baltiškis proffered patriot status to communists because they fought against Hitler (1945, 9). This classifies all the nations - Latvians, Lithuanians, Estonians, Ukrainians, Poles - who fought on the side of Germany against the Soviets in the unenviable and dangerous category of non-patriot.

The most popular topics, by far, were Russians, the Russian language and Russian culture. Even the Soviet Latvian anthem glorified ties with Russia '...only in comradeship with the glorious Russian nation we became a force that defeated our enemy...' (1945, 9). First and foremost was the importance of the Russian proletariat in the building of the Soviet Union and the role of Russia and the Russian proletariat in the development of Latvia and Latvian culture. Learning Russian language was also stressed, and the reader is constantly reminded that it is the only language in which Russian culture, history, and the principles of Marxism-Leninism could be fully appreciated. According to several authors, this in turn would improve Latvian culture.

Learning Russian was necessary not only to be able to access great works of literature, but also because history textbooks would not be translated into other languages for the non-Russian speaking population (Pētersons, 1941, 6). Strazdiņš stated that teachers' most important task was to learn Russian. Only by learning from other cultures would Latvians be able to improve their own culture and learn about socialist culture. This culture was available to Latvians in Russian, and he added, '...nowadays it is hard to view one as cultural if one does not speak Russian...' (1945, .1, p 12). Lack of knowledge of Russian as an indicator of cultural deficiency was a recurring theme. Egle (1945, 1) stated that while the ruling elite taught Russian for the purpose of exploitation of the masses during the Czarist era, Russian had now become a language of liberation. Smaller nations could now become acquainted with the significant works that had been created in Russian thereby raising the overall worth of their national culture. It was also clear to Egle that although not everyone spoke Russian, non-speakers wished to learn the language because they wanted to be closer to the Russian nation and utilize its sources in Russian.

Vilks stresses the importance of language and literature instruction in both Latvian and Russian. The teacher shortage in these subjects was and the educational value of these languages and their literature was 'more significant than learning a foreign language' (1945, 1, 28). This was an important indicator that in 1945, Russian was no longer considered a foreign language. Several articles on correct Russian language usage also indicate this. *PLS* 1945 (9 and 10) published official notifications issued by the language commission on the proper writing of people's names in the Russian tradition, including patronymics, and proper writing of Latvian place names in both Latvian and Russian using Cyrillic for Russian translations. Learning Russian also became increasingly important if readers of *PLS* wanted to read all the articles. One article written in Russian

appeared in 1953, and by 1954, a total of nine entries were published in Russian. Although a great number of articles stress the importance of learning Russian as a means of access to world, e.g. Russian literature, it is apparent that learning Russian did not occur as smoothly or as thoroughly as hoped.

Ūsiņš lamented the deficiencies of Russian language education (1948, 3) and noted that although Russian language instruction had improved over the past two years, there were several areas in which improvement was still required. He highlighted proper Russian pronunciation, improving Russian language teacher qualifications, and the inability of students to formulate simple sentences in Russian. He suggested the creation of special language exercises which were appropriate for the current, maybe even unique situation in Latvia. Ūsiņš did not, however, specify what this unique situation was.

Language was also used to show the similarities between Russian and Latvian culture. Funks stated that the Russian people had formulated a truly objective view on what is beautiful and that the Latvians had reached a similar conclusion - things of beauty were compared to the sun or are 'sunny'. Proof of this was in the expression used by both Russians and Latvians: 'Stalin – our sun' (1948, 6). This type of article stressing the similarities between Latvian and Russian culture was not unique and *PLS* published many articles describing the cultural and historical ties between Latvians and Russians emphasizing the mentoring role played by Russia.

*PLS* published several synopses on educational conferences held both in Riga and in Moscow. Moscow conferences stressed the value of history as a tool for instilling Soviet patriotism by teaching about the glorious Russian past. Conflation of Soviet and Russian identity was a consistent element as authors referred to the 1934 Soviet directive on the teaching of history. Latvian conferences stressed the positive influence of association with Russia and Russians in comparison to the negativity associated with the Germans. Kadeks reviewed the lecture on the Russian influence on Latvian art given by Professor Pelše. Pelše stressed the fact that Latvians were educated outside Latvia, primarily in Russia and that this influence needed to be researched more thoroughly in order to end false rumours circulated by Germans (1945, 7). In another article, Kadeks described how under German domination, educated Latvians became Germanized and were lost to the Latvian nation (1946, 4). When the Czar abolished serfdom, the Russian doors to higher education were opened and the active members of the National Awakening were educated outside Latvia. He claimed that the leaders of this movement exhibited no ill will towards Russians and that some, in fact, stressed the linguistic ties between the Latvian and Lithuanian languages and Russian. A. Upītis also claimed that the Latvian nation had never felt anger towards the Russian language during Czarist times (1947, 3). He explained that everyone understood that Russian was necessary not only in everyday usage, but also for access to scientific materials and literature in general. Cultural and trade relations had existed between these two nations for centuries, and the 'barbaric' methods used by the Czars to Russify Latvians did not create animosity between Latvians and Russians. Miške took this one step further in his description of the preparations for the October revolution (1946, 10). He claimed true freedom for Latvians came from the east. Through many decades of bloody battles, the Latvian worker and farmer, along with the progressive intelligentsia had gone hand in hand with the revolutionary Russian proletariat and Soviet nation. This conflation of nationalism with socio-centrism was apparent not only in articles about Latvian history but also in the overview of the history curriculum.

The projected Latvian history curriculum for Grade 7 encompassed all periods of Latvian history and many of the units were titled in terms of class struggle, reactions to feudalism, and the growth of capitalism, but more prevalent was the focus on Russia and Russians (1945, 7). Each unit listed subsections that focused specifically on positive relations with Slavic tribes in the beginning, and more specifically with Russians in later periods. The relationship with German Teutonic knights was couched in virulent terms as illustrated by the title of a subsection on the Middle Ages – ‘German Teutonic rule – Worse than Tatar rule’. Russian conquests of the area were described as re-establishing supposed pre-existing rights to the territory and stressed the significance for Latvia in joining the Russian empire. In the final sections, the declaration of an independent Latvia on November 18, 1918 was not mentioned, only the USSR’s recognition of a Soviet Latvia in 1919. This omission is noteworthy because neglecting to mention the date of the declaration of ‘bourgeois’ Latvia’s independence, negates the significance of this historic event. Perhaps the hope was that in time, the event would also cease to be a reality for the colonized and Russified Latvian nation once those who remembered it had died. Another indication of this policy appears in 1953 where readers are informed that part one of the Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic’s history has been published in Russian (Draudiņš, 1953, 3). The reviewer reports that the Latvian edition is scheduled to be published sometime during the first half of that year.

It is clear that the purpose of *PLS* was to inform Latvian educators of the new Soviet order which placed Russia squarely first among the many nations of the USSR, and that the time and effort used to distort, suppress, and reinvent Latvia’s history, particularly its ties with Russia, was in the interest of legitimizing Russian domination. Although Stalin died in 1953, his influence on Soviet historiography is felt to this day. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to analyse Latvian’s current views about their own history, recent public discussion of the teaching of Latvian history as a separate subject and discussion of sensitive historic events themselves testify to the mixed feelings and inadequate knowledge Latvians have about their own history. This not only affects Latvians views on the history of Latvia, but also of the large minority of Russians and other Russian-speakers for whom a Russo-centric version of history continues to resonate. Latvian as the language of instruction in schools is also a contentious topic. Many Russian-speakers consider obligatory use of Latvian a threat to their right to receive an education in Russian – a right established during Soviet occupation and afforded only to the Russian minority in Latvia. These examples are but a few that illustrate the effectiveness of Soviet educational policy to Russify not only the Latvian nation, but also other minorities of the former Soviet Union.

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