



# Effects of authoritarianism on the teaching of national history: the case of Latvia

Aija Abens

To cite this article: Aija Abens (2015) Effects of authoritarianism on the teaching of national history: the case of Latvia, *Paedagogica Historica*, 51:1-2, 166-180, DOI: [10.1080/00309230.2014.997749](https://doi.org/10.1080/00309230.2014.997749)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00309230.2014.997749>



Published online: 22 Jan 2015.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 491



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 1 View citing articles [↗](#)

## **Effects of authoritarianism on the teaching of national history: the case of Latvia**

Aija Abens\*

*Faculty of Psychology, Department of Pedagogy and Art, Riga, Latvia*

*(Received 6 December 2013; accepted 11 July 2014)*

Recent research on history teaching has begun to focus on political motivation. This paper is the result of the author's dissertation, which investigates Latvian history teaching under the authoritarian regimes of Ulmanis and Stalin. It reveals the effects of authoritarianism on goals, curriculum, teaching materials and methods, and the teacher's position in the classroom. The research undertaken attempts to discern how authoritarian political rule manipulates the teaching of national history to further its political goals, and the resulting effects. The article focuses on the teaching of Latvian history under the Soviet authoritarian regime in Latvia (1934–1940, 1940–1941/1944–1991), but includes discussion of the Nazi occupation and periods of democracy in Latvian history as a source of comparison in order to analyse the teaching of Latvian history in democratic and authoritarian societies and define the traits characteristic to authoritarian regimes. Authoritarian traits are revealed through comparisons of the purpose of history teaching as determined by the ruling order, the goal of history teaching, curriculum, methodology and materials, and teacher status under authoritarian regimes and democratic regimes. Results indicate that goals of history teaching become contrived under authoritarianism – politicised curriculum marginalises some groups, textbook authorship and choice is limited, and teachers become transmitters of the regime's agenda resulting in marginalisation. This study deduces that two cultures of history teaching emerge – official history in school and unofficial history acquisition that helps maintain a sense of national identity.

**Keywords:** authoritarianism; history teaching; power; Latvia

### **Introduction**

School has traditionally been viewed as an instrument of socialisation. However, political regimes influence and regulate society, and, thus, determine the content and form in which this content is presented. Modern society increasingly requires understanding not only regarding the status of each individual within society, but also the definition and substantiation of each individual's status within society, and education facilitates the development of a sense of identity and belonging. History teaching takes on an important role – not only does teaching history help develop social integration, but how history is taught can also determine how one assesses historic events and reveals whether history teaching facilitates assessment of historic events or rather the memorisation of immutable facts.

---

\*Email: [aijaabens@gmail.com](mailto:aijaabens@gmail.com)

Political agendas of the ruling elite have traditionally affected this subject and reveal the belief system and ideals of the regime, as well as associated methods. Totalitarian regimes have often rewritten history to validate their worldview, and this tendency is particularly notable in the Latvian context. Latvia experienced democracy, authoritarian, and totalitarian regimes during the course of the twentieth century, which have ultimately affected modern Latvian views on history.

Much has been researched and published concerning the totalitarian regimes of the century, particularly regarding Stalin and Hitler's worldview and social ideals, but little has been written about the effect of these nationalist dictatorships on those most affected by the education system – teachers and pupils. In addition, sociological research on the effects of totalitarianism on both teachers and students is rare.

There has been much discussion on history teaching in Latvia since it regained independence in 1991. Thus an understanding of the history of history teaching in Latvia is important for two reasons. The first is to address issues of social change due to political upheaval and the undeniable effects on a resulting sense of identity that is important not only for the individual, but also for society and the nation as a whole. The second focuses on the current teaching of history and how it reveals the norms and priorities of authoritarian regimes, and how identification of the traits of authoritarianism is beneficial to research on history teaching in all societies.

This paper is part of research completed for my dissertation and attempts to discern how authoritarian political rule manipulates the teaching of national history to further its political goals, and what are the resulting effects. I focus on the teaching of Latvian history under authoritarian regimes in Latvia (1934–1940, 1940–1991), but also include detailed discussion of periods of democracy in Latvian history as a source of comparison.

The theoretical basis includes the work of classic Latvian pedagogical thinkers and other authors' work on the significance of history teaching in the development of democratic and civic educational ideals, and modern critical theorists' work on power, language, gender equity, and other issues, and how these aspects relate to the individual, society, and the nation in the process of teaching history.

The major primary sources include Ministry of Education documents; university meeting minutes; history books, curriculum, and history-teaching didactics; and history books written and published in various historic timeframes.

In addition, interviews with 20 teachers and 27 former pupils of history in structured and semi-structured interviews gave insight into the actual effects of authoritarianism during Soviet totalitarian rule. Qualitative analysis of the interviews supports the theory that the characteristics of authoritarian teaching methods are often more efficiently revealed through discussion with those who taught and learned under those circumstances, rather than by reading texts created at that time.

### **Political regimes and the teaching of history**

Throughout history, concrete individuals, as directed by the ruling order, have determined the choice of historical facts and their interpretation as the basis for history teaching. Taylor classifies three political systems that have exhibited quite different approaches to choosing facts and interpretations used to teach history in schools: totalitarian, paternalistic democracies, and pluralistic democracies. History books published by these political regimes reflect the most desired societal values.

Democracies transmit societal values as determined by society through elected representatives. Paternalistic democracies and totalitarian regimes are more direct in determining which societal values are acceptable, but the rigid nature of indoctrination, characteristic of totalitarian regimes, only succeeds in creating a social order mistrusted by the members of society themselves. The longer totalitarian order rules, the more difficult it becomes for citizens to be capable of finding their own voices within the system. This also ultimately affects the way in which history is presented and perceived.<sup>1</sup> The range from democratic principles to totalitarian traits can be witnessed in the history of teaching history in Latvia in the twentieth century.

### **History teaching in independent Latvia under parliamentary rule (1918–1934)**

The development of a national education system was an exercise in the creation of a completely new entity in which Latvians were, for the first time, the masters of their own fate. The country was in economic ruin as invading armies marched back and forth across the territory removing or destroying the infrastructure and forcing people to flee.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, the nationalist government that came to power on 18 November 1918, when Latvia declared its independence, took steps to establish some semblance of order, despite the hostilities that ceased only in 1921 when the USSR signed a non-aggression treaty with Latvia.

The founding of the new Latvian state necessitated the creation of a Latvian education and history-teaching programme, which was nationalistic in orientation and harked back to the call by Latvian intellectuals of the mid and late nineteenth century for a Latvian interpretation of Latvian history. Latvia discontinued using the Russian unified education model, and the 1919 education reform laws encouraged experimentation in the search for a national education model.<sup>3</sup> The goal of the education system in independent Latvia was not only to raise the overall education level of the nation, but to also develop a sense of national and civic duty. Patriotism was an essential component of upbringing.

History teaching was an important part of the curriculum, and history textbook content was of prime concern to educators and government officials. While history teaching was meant to inspire patriotic and nationalistic sentiment, and despite the very recent memory of foreign rule, Latvian historiography did not purposefully denigrate Germans or Russians. Creative teaching methods were encouraged, and the nation as a whole was encouraged to play a part in the creation of a Latvian interpretation of Latvian history.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Tony Taylor, "The Past, Present and Future of History Teaching in Schools," in *Routledge International Companion to Education*, ed. Ben-Miriam Peretz, Bob Moon and Sally Brown (London: Routledge, 2000), 843–54.

<sup>2</sup>The mass evacuation of people from Latvian territory during the First World War, mostly to the interior of Russia, is estimated between 760,000 and 800,000 (Andrejs Plakans, *The Latvians – A Short History* [Stanford: Hoover Press, 1995], 115; Andres Kasekamp, *A History of the Baltic States* [London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010], 94), or about one-third of the total Latvian population.

<sup>3</sup>Iveta Kēstere, *Pedagoģijas vēsture* [The history of pedagogy] (Rīga: Zvaigzne ABC, n.d.), 77.

<sup>4</sup>"Uzaicinājums skolotājiem" [Call for teachers], *Izglītības Ministrijas Mēnešraksts (IMM)* [Education Ministry Monthly] 11 (1920): 493–95.

The most acute problem in education facing the new nation was a shortage of qualified teachers<sup>5</sup> and materials. Progressive Education (*Reformpādagogik*) was popular throughout Europe at this time, which supported the teacher-experimenter movement that encouraged the use and discussion of new experimental methods. The new teachers were educated in an era of “innovative” curriculum and methodology inquiry, and they searched for the appropriate educational model for the newly independent country. However, this was not so easily attained.

The newly formed country’s democratic principles also extended to the education system. This led to differing views (many of which were expressed in the pedagogic journal published monthly by the Ministry of Education – *Izglītības Ministrijas Mēnešraksts – IMM*) on the education system and its purposes, resulting in party politics and infighting.<sup>6</sup> These issues focused on language use,<sup>7</sup> as well as social issues.<sup>8</sup> However, all agreed that creating a Latvian perspective of Latvian history was a priority.

History textbooks and descriptions of teaching methods reveal that the focus of Latvian history research was the recognition and collection of Latvian cultural heritage. Historians and textbooks authors glorified long-lost heroes and highlighted national achievements. Nevertheless, minutes of meetings held by the Ministry of Education committee in charge of textbook review reveal criticism of books which included exaggerated patriotic historical interpretations that placed the blame of the fate of the Latvian people on others.<sup>9</sup> In addition to a close reading of these books for properly supported research, the committee also paid special attention to the age-appropriate language and developmental level of these texts, as they were considered the most effective tools for a patriotic upbringing. Conflation of homeland and history education occurred regularly and was considered to be an optimal and “progressive” approach to education in general.<sup>10</sup>

The egalitarian school system that had previously been recognised for its inclusive minority school system began to falter in 1932 when Latvian history and geography were required to be taught in Latvian,<sup>11</sup> and the Minister of Education adopted a more conservative stance, most notably by opposing innovative and liberal teaching methods.<sup>12</sup>

Despite the initial euphoria that characterised the foundation of the nation and educational system, the road to more progressive teacher practice was dogged by old-fashioned dogmatic teaching stereotypes among teachers that continued to inhibit student independence and pedagogical developments. In addition, a rise in

<sup>5</sup>Krišs Melnalksnis, “Skolotāju sapulce 1921. gada vasarā” [Teacher conference, summer 1921], *IMM* 2 (1922): 256–70.

<sup>6</sup>Irēna Saleniece, *Latvijas Republikas skolu politika 1918–1934* [Education politics in the Republic of Latvia 1918–1934] (Daugavpils, Latvia: Saule, 2002).

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>8</sup>Jānis Lapiņš, “Nacionāli īpatnējais” [The nationally unique], *IMM* 6 (1922): 561–72.

<sup>9</sup>Ministry of Education meeting minutes, LVVA [Latvian State historic archives], f.6637, a.1, l.651.

<sup>10</sup>Pēteris Dreimanis, “Latvijas pamatskolu programma vesturē” [Latvian primary school history curriculum], *IMM* 1 (1921): 101–4; “Skolotāju sagatavošanas kursu programma” [Teacher preparation course programme], *IMM* 2 (1921): 158–74.

<sup>11</sup>Saleniece, *Latvijas Republikas skolu politika*, 111.

<sup>12</sup>Aida Krūze, “Augusts Tentelis – izglītības ministrs” [Augusts Tentelis – Minister of Education], in *Professors Dr. honoris causa Augusts Tentelis* (Rīga: LU Akadēmiskais apgāds, 2009), 103.

nationalistic tendencies throughout Europe began to permeate the educational system as more aggressive nationalistic policies were adopted.

### History teaching in independent Latvia under authoritarianism (1934–1940)

Prime Minister Kārlis Ulmanis seized power in a bloodless *coup d'état* in 1934 as a pre-emptive measure against more radical groups and developed state corporative institutions that regulated many aspects of Latvian affairs.<sup>13</sup> Education was one of the first things to be directly affected by the coup. The next several years saw changes and additions to the education system that reinforced nationalistic principles. Authoritarian decrees disbanded the Student Council at the University of Latvia, the Teachers' Association, and many other organisations, both political and non-political. The arts, literature, and the press began to suffer under forced and exaggerated glorification of everything Latvian and, particularly, Ulmanis as the nation's father and hero figure. Nevertheless, strong economic growth provided education, and culture in general, with tremendous financial support developing aspects of culture and education that had not existed when the nation was created 16 years earlier.

Education under the Ulmanis regime continued to be strongly nationally based, but democratic principles were eroded. The goal of history teaching continued to be the creation of a Latvian interpretation of Latvia's history as a means to instil patriotism and a sense of pride in the Latvian nation. The historic novel gained importance and one-third of prose published during the Ulmanis regime was historic novels that categorized Latvian national identity through aspirations of nationhood within a designated territory and with a unique culture and history.<sup>14</sup> This literary movement reflected the style of textbooks adopted for use in history lessons.

Interpretations of Latvian history were the domain of a new generation of historians of whom only a few were selected to write history textbooks that focused on the accomplishments of great personalities in Latvian history. The teacher-experimenter movement was abandoned, and teachers reverted to a more traditional role of transmitter of information.<sup>15</sup> A series of articles published in *IMM* legitimised the authoritative nature of history teaching. The leader displaced the people as the symbol of the nation and nationalism. History content and teaching materials, including history textbooks, focused on the accomplishments of great personalities in Latvian history.

The Cabinet of Ministers founded the Institute of Latvian History on 14 January 1936 expressly to support and encourage the study of Latvian history, and at its 11 May 1936 conference, members of the Institute of Latvian History discussed the need for all archival materials to be studied and reviewed by Latvians.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup>Stanley G. Payne, *A History of Fascism, 1914–1945* (London: UCL Press, 1995), 324–25.

<sup>14</sup>Baiba Metuzāle-Kangere, "Political Identity and Nationalism, Literature under the Ulmanis Regime," in *The Ethnic Dimension in Politics and Culture in the Baltic Countries, 1920–1945*, ed. Baiba Metuzāle-Kangere (Stockholm: Södertöns högskola, 2004), 141–54.

<sup>15</sup>Nikolajs Vīksniņš, "Ievada stunda vēsturē ģimnazijas V kl." [Introductory lesson to history for gymnasium grade 5 class], *IMM* 2 (1936): 227–32.

<sup>16</sup>Latvijas vēstures instituta konference [Institute of Latvian History Conference], *IMM* 5/6 (1936): 596.

Minutes of meetings located in the Latvian State History Archives discuss textbooks and reveal that, despite the overtly nationalist sentiment and hero worship prevalent in history textbook writing, the regime did not support glorification of everything Latvian at the expense of other nations or ethnic groups. They were read closely for appropriately expressed nationalistic ideas, national heroes were glorified, and the accomplishments of the Latvian nation were stressed, all the while sanitising texts so that Latvians appeared less like victims of history.<sup>17</sup> Even though the number of textbooks authors was dramatically reduced, they continued to represent the value system accepted by society in general and experienced great academic freedom, albeit not as great as under democracy.

Consistent with the goals of history teaching, teachers' practice came under closer scrutiny, including their teaching methods. The authoritarian regime freed itself of the "messiness"<sup>18</sup> of democratic practices, particularly the freedom that characterised education politics. Methods that encouraged pupil participation were abandoned for more traditional ones. However, it must be noted that these changes were not unique to this authoritarian regime, but were rather reflective of changes in pedagogy taking place throughout Europe.

While it was clear that Ulmanis took on the role of father or protector of the nation, it is equally clear that the resulting leadership cult was not a personal goal, but rather a means to a different goal: the raising of the self-awareness of the Latvian people and the creation of a Latvian sense of identity.

### **History teaching under totalitarian regimes (1940–1991)**

I omit a detailed description of the Nazi occupation of Latvia, because this occupation and its effects on education were relatively short-term. After the first year of Soviet occupation (June 1940–July 1941), known as the "Year of Terror", many local Latvians greeted the Germans with joy, thinking they would be liberated, but the Nazi occupation would prove differently. People hoped education would return to the pre-war system, but almost immediately changes were made reflecting the new occupation. German rhetoric entered the public and educational spheres, and the historic role of Germany in the creation of intellectual Latvians was stressed.<sup>19</sup> However, this occupation was the basis for many recriminations by the Soviet Union after the re-occupation of Latvia by the Red Army in 1944, and a rich source of materials was used to condemn Nazism and its Latvian "collaborators" and glorify the victorious Russian nation.

### ***History teaching in Soviet Latvia***

The Red Army marched into Latvia in June 1940, and rigged elections in July 1940 brought about the creation of the Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic (LSSR). Over 500 teachers experienced repression, another 1500 were fired or resigned voluntarily, and approximately 6000 teachers were moved to different schools,

<sup>17</sup>Ministry of Education meeting minutes, LVVA, f.6637, a.1, l.651.

<sup>18</sup>Eduards Pētersons, *Autoritāte un brīvība atjaunotās Latvijas skolās* [Authority and freedom in renewed Latvian schools], *IMM* 2 (1936): 124–38.

<sup>19</sup>Juris Pavlovičs, "Latvijas skolas 1941–1944. gadā" [Latvian schools 1941–1944], *Latvijas vēsture institūta žurnāls* [Institute of Latvian History journal] 1 (2004): 99–113.



affecting two-thirds of the total number of teachers in Latvia.<sup>20</sup> Not only did the mass transfer of teachers affect the education system, but 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 glorification of Russian culture, while simultaneously devaluating other cultures, rendered useless many of the materials, particularly many textbooks used in independent Latvia. Mass deportation of Latvian citizens to Siberia, including teachers, took place on 14 June 1941, and shortly after this, on 1 July, the German army invaded Latvia, forcing the Soviet forces and government to flee. The Red Army reoccupied Latvia in 1944/1945, and the reforms initiated in 1940 were reinstated.

These historic events would result in, as Readings describes, a clash between the metanarrative of a unitary state claiming to embody universal values and local communities of minority groups that appeared either reactionary or progressive. The central state imposed a notion of abstract citizenship in the name of a narrative of the progressive realisation of national destiny, erasing the specificity of local practices.<sup>21</sup> In addition, not only did official Communist Party rhetoric claim that he who commands the present also controls the past, but, also, Soviet historiography suggested that he who controls the record of the past legitimises his authority to command the present and to define the future<sup>22</sup> – the informal function of Soviet historiography, which was not openly described in published articles and books, but remained as the core of the Soviet system. This assumption did not bode well for any of the national minorities within the USSR as Stalin pursued a narrow and distinctly Russian interpretation of Soviet history.

Education under Soviet occupation was based on strict political and ideological principles. Research in general education practices, as well as the teaching and content of history lessons, was initially based solely on Stalin's interpretations and directions. The goal of history teaching was to create a Soviet interpretation of Latvia's history as a means to instil Soviet patriotism. The purpose of history teaching was to gain knowledge of Soviet history from a Marxist/Leninist perspective. This process excluded the participation of teachers, students, and the public at large who were discouraged from participating actively in the process of history education and national historic awareness.

The period immediately following the Second World War was a period of Russian self-adulation and reduction of all other nationalities. Discussion of local history was dangerous as charges of bourgeois nationalism were indiscriminately levelled at anyone working on local history in 1946 and 1947.<sup>23</sup> A conspicuous break with previous acknowledgements that Russia was a culturally backward and illiterate country took place, with the new line stressing that Russians had always been innovators and failures were only due to the tsarist regime's obscurantism.<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 99.

<sup>21</sup>Bill Readings, "Pagans, Perverts or Primitives? Experimental Justice in the Empire of Capital," in *Posthumanism*, ed. Neil Badmington (New York: Palgrave, 2000), 113.

<sup>22</sup>Nancy Whittier Heer, *Politics and History in the Soviet Union* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), vii.

<sup>23</sup>David Brandenberger, *National Bolshevism – Stalinist Mass Culture and the Formation of Modern Russian National Identity, 1931–1956* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 190.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 203.



And, similarly to the 1930s, teachers resorted to populism and Russo-centric explanations of a national Bolshevik line diluting the political theories of Marxism/Leninism and dialectic materialism that were just too hard to grasp and exacerbated by teacher and curriculum deficiencies.<sup>25</sup>

The gaps created by this sudden change in narrative were filled by the publication of an educational journal *Padomju Latvijas Skola (PLS)* (Soviet Latvian School) that would aid in the transition from a “reactionary” Latvian historic narrative to a “progressive” Soviet one. This journal also had to fill the vacuum created by the complete banishment of foreign, non-Soviet pedagogical literature. The creation of a history curriculum and methodology was problematic, and a special ban was placed on work by Latvian pedagogues who had fled into exile. Latvians who had been living in Soviet Russia during the interwar period were actively repatriated to the Latvian SSR and they wrote on the subject of history teaching. Their strict adherence to Marxist/Leninist ideology directly influenced the future teachers of Soviet Latvia,<sup>26</sup> but their work was insufficient to fill the void, and a large part of the literature was translated from Russian into Latvian and published in the new educational journal. This was to be the basis for the new Soviet Latvian educational system.

Strazdiņš defined the main tasks for educationists in the “liberated” Soviet Latvia, published while the war was still being fought on Latvian soil. They included renewal of school buildings destroyed during the war, giving new substance to the curriculum, books, and the educational system itself, upbringing in the Soviet spirit, developing national culture, and, finally, the political education and upbringing of the masses.<sup>27</sup> The Soviet regime also wasted no time in its criticism of independent Latvia’s education system and textbooks.

Schoolbooks were an essential component for communist education and Soviet patriotism, as determined by Stalin in the changes in history teaching during the 1930s. Latvian books were highly criticised, and several authors pointed out the negative features of “bourgeois” Latvian textbooks. Pre-war books were criticised because they were insufficient in their reflections of the basis of the authors’ social positions, historic development of economic conditions, and the connection between the soul and material goods.<sup>28</sup> Part of communist education required negative examples of behaviour, and there were many in Latvian literature and life: hundreds of these negative portraits could be found in Latvia during the German occupation of Latvia, and teachers were encouraged to engender disgust in the youth towards these “traitors”.<sup>29</sup> The nationalist, capitalist culture of the previous regime did not allow the masses to develop their own culture, and this type of development could only occur through internationalism.<sup>30</sup> These sentiments also extended to former

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 212.

<sup>26</sup>Oskars Zīds, “Ievads” [Introduction], in *Pedagoģiskā doma Latvijā no 1940. gada līdz mūsu dienām* [Pedagogical thought in Latvia from 1940 to the present], ed. Alfrēds Staris (Rīga: Puse, 1998), 8.

<sup>27</sup>Kārlis Strazdiņš, “Izglītības darbinieka uzdevumi atbrīvotajā Padomju Latvijā” [Tasks for educational workers in liberated Soviet Latvia], *Padomju Latvijas Skola (PLS)* [Soviet Latvian school] 1 (1945a): 7–14.

<sup>28</sup>Jānis Niedra, “Latviešu literatūra” [Latvian literature], *PLS* 6 (1941): 11–17.

<sup>29</sup>M. Dušina, “Daži komūnistiskās audzināšanas principi” [Several principles on communist upbringing], *PLS* 3 (1946): 55–8.

<sup>30</sup>Kārlis Strazdiņš, “Par nacionālismu un internacionālismu” [On nationalism and internationalism], *PLS* 2 (1945b): 10–29.

history books, and a correct Marxist interpretation of Latvian history would implant in the students Soviet patriotism, and proper explanations by teachers would help wipe out completely the harmful and anti-scientific views taught during the bourgeois regime.<sup>31</sup>

The clear Russian bias exhibited by the ruling order towards Latvian history negated Latvian accomplishments achieved during the previous era of independence – both parliamentary and authoritarian periods. Textbooks for Latvian history did not exist until 1956 when *Latvian SSR History*, a very dense book clearly not suitable for younger students, was published. Interviewed teachers testified to the additional burden to create materials for Latvian history classes or the avoidance of the subject altogether.

### Teacher reflections

Soviet historiography took place at the elite level, and the average teacher was relegated to the position of passive recipient and transmitter of the officially sanctioned curriculum. History, specifically Communist Party of the Soviet Union history, had become the most political of the sciences; the sole arbiter of historic interpretation became the position of deeds, not documents, and this affected historiography for 50 years.<sup>32</sup> In their interviews, teachers discussed the formalist approach in modern history and Latvian history classes where memorisation of dates and personalities took place using defined language forms, so that these facts could be recited precisely in oral or written exams. Language use as an assertion of knowledge, rather than playing an active role in the creation of knowledge, is a means of manipulating society by creating fixed and normalised forms of language that have lost their substantive meaning.<sup>33</sup> This was a key aspect to teaching and learning the correct version of history.

Devaluation of Latvian history had happened by default through institutionalised glorification of the ruling minority and fear associated with such a politically sensitive topic. Fear was a significant factor for older teachers, but this element declined over the years. The Communist Party's interpretation of history was most apparent in twentieth-century history, resulting in a particularly formalist approach to the teaching of this period of history. The lack of desire to teach Latvian history was due also, in part, to this formalism, but also to the lack of verifiable and believable materials supporting the Soviet interpretation of Latvian history. Doubts as to the historical reliability of these facts resulted in mistrust of the Communist Party in pupils and teachers, thus delegitimising the symbols and rituals of the CPSU. Teacher compliance with the system was achieved through fear and strict control, which, in turn, limited teacher activity and creativity in the teaching process. This resulted in what the ruling order considered to be poor performance, particularly in acquisition of modern history.

<sup>31</sup>H. Dubins, "Latvijas PSR vēsture PSRS vēstures stundās" [Latvian SSR history in USSR history lessons], *PLS* 3 (1948): 66–67.

<sup>32</sup>Roger D. Markwick, *Rewriting History in Soviet Russia: The Politics of Revisionist Historiography, 1956–1974* (New York: Palgrave, 2001).

<sup>33</sup>Detine L. Bowers, "When Outsiders Encounter Insiders in Speaking: Oppressed Collectives on the Defensive," *Journal of Black Studies* 26 (1996): 490–503; Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

In the immediate years following the end of the war, Minister of Education Strazdiņš published several articles in *PLS* reprimanding teachers for their poor performance. He observed that the biggest problem was “formalism” whereby students were taught basic facts, but not an understanding of the deeper meaning. Teachers had not yet fully become convinced of the undeniable socialist victory and did not have the required burning desire to become defenders of the socialist system.<sup>34</sup> This indicates that teachers 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 every student a Marxist way of thinking and Marxist worldview.<sup>35</sup> My interviews with teachers also indicate that the Soviet worldview and interpretation of history was not as easily instilled in students, as the ruling order would have hoped.

Several of the teachers noted that rote learning was common in a system where form was stressed over content, and students would often memorise standard phrases to include in written compositions or repeat upon request. One teacher noted that teachers on opposite sides of the Soviet Union could assign a topic regarding a historical event in history to their students, and the results would be virtually identical. Soviet language was hegemonic and constituted the only true representation of reality that was shared by all Soviet people, and from an audience perspective, language had only one function – to describe reality and state facts about the world. This authoritative discourse was immutable and therefore unquestionable.<sup>36</sup> Several teachers spoke of bright students who would use Marxist/Leninist/Stalinist arguments to highlight flaws or inconsistencies in their discussion of the progression of history. The teachers could only remain silent.

All the teachers told of frequent questions by students regarding the occupation of Latvia by the Soviet Union where the teachers either remained silent or toed the party line. All the teachers spoke of using politically correct language and one teacher recalled having to speak to a parent of a student who openly and frequently questioned the Soviet version of history. He did so not to reprimand the student, but rather to protect the student from repercussions. Most of the teachers apparently had a very good rapport with their students, and while the students may have openly challenged the information their teachers presented in class, they would not do so if the teacher was being observed. All the older teachers reported open conversations with their students but were quick to add that they knew who these students were and their family background. Several did, however, report being reprimanded for politically incorrect comments made in class.

Some of the teachers related how misquotes made by pupils sometimes became comical in content, but this was not so if the lesson was being observed by functionaries. One told of her secondary students who repeated the description of events in Latvia in 1940. The textbook noted that the Latvian nation experienced a socialist revolution and then the Red Army tanks came in. However, some of her secondary students switched these two sentences around, resulting in a completely different interpretation of history. She noted that the students were messing about in

<sup>34</sup>Strazdiņš, “Mācību gadu sākot” [Starting the new school year], *PLS* 6 (1945): 10–16.

<sup>35</sup>Strazdiņš, “Par mācību un audzināšanas darba uzlabošanu skolā” [On improving teaching and upbringing at school], *PLS* 2 (1948): 3–9.

<sup>36</sup>Yurchak, *Everything was Forever*, 14–15.

class in this way, but she warned them not to do so in public. While those secondary school students were purposefully confusing sentence order, students in younger grades were not so politically aware.

Another teacher described how this rote learning of facts and memorisation of text led to disaster in an observed lesson when a Grade 4 pupil, also relating the events of the Second World War, confused the order of the sentences and stated that Soviet tanks came to Latvia and brought Soviet rule. By her account, the uproar was considerable. The pupil's confusion serves to illustrate the poor results of learning by rote with little understanding of the material. It also illustrates the sensitive nature of a seemingly innocent statement that resulted in the incorrect interpretation of the Soviet version of Latvian history and the resulting repercussions experienced by the teacher.

Another issue teachers mentioned was the frequent observations by various functionaries who checked the competence of the teacher through the way in which content was presented. Education and Communist Party functionaries would observe lessons and comment on the use of methodology and the interaction between students and teacher, as well as level of knowledge of the students. Because history was regarded as an ideological subject, lessons were regularly monitored. There was little consistency in who did the observations. In some cases it was the director of the school, in others the head of methodology, or the school's Communist Party secretary. Teachers expressed frustration at the frequent observations, as one never knew who would be observing: One observer would complain that the lesson did not sufficiently stress patriotism, another claimed a lesson did not have sufficient anti-religious education, and yet another would note a lack of discussion of Soviet work principles. These comments indicate that Soviet upbringing was the most important role of history teachers.

One of the most important, yet least discussed aspects of teaching during the Stalinist era is the fear felt by teachers. Family history was most frequently cited as a constant source of stress for older teachers who taught immediately after the Second World War. While this may be considered a private matter for citizens who live in democracies, family pedigree was a cornerstone to career building in the Soviet Union. Fear was a visibly significant factor for many of the older teachers. The teachers often spoke of being called in for discussions with the director of the school or some party official and would immediately assume that some politically unfavourable aspect of their family past would be the topic.

One teacher spoke of her experience as a student when a bright and capable colleague failed to graduate from the Teacher Institute because of her family history, while other teacher candidates, who got miserable marks, graduated – again because of their politically correct pedigree. A Communist Party official actively discouraged one teacher from marrying the girl he loved because her parents had been deported by the Soviets to Siberia, and that would look bad on his CV. Several teachers spoke of the amount of land their parents had once owned that categorised them as descendants of kulaks – a crime punishable by deportation to Siberia during the Stalinist era.

History education in Soviet-occupied Latvia had adopted a foreign and seemingly artificial interpretation of history based on class struggle and with an overtly and omnipresent focus on Russia's exaggerated role in Latvian history. Keruss describes the teaching of history and university faculty activity during the Stalinist totalitarian regime as distinctly politicised and dominated by power

struggles in the search for enemies.<sup>37</sup> Civil human relationships had become warped during the Stalinist era and this was reflected in the heavy price paid by academics in their research that suffered due to ideologisation and systematisation.<sup>38</sup> This ideologisation and systematisation transferred to teacher preparation and also succeeded in making history, particularly modern and Latvian history, a boring and even dangerous subject to teach.

While the older generation of teachers had a basis in Latvian identity through initial childhood experiences and contacts with teachers who were also firmly rooted in the experience of independent Latvia, the younger teachers did not. Yurchak notes that the younger generation of Soviet citizens born after the 1950s had not experienced the major transformations of the Soviet system, so they were particularly skilled in the performative production of authoritative discourse.<sup>39</sup> The relationship between personal narrative and the socio-cultural narrative the older teachers encountered, particularly between the public and the private spheres, such as school and family, was clearly full of tension and conflict.

Readings in school textbooks during the Soviet era were a source of this tension in which Latvian fiction and poetry were, by and large, excluded and replaced by a new form of Soviet content that focused on exemplary performance, rather than the tensions and contradictions of life. Soviet values were highlighted, collective grandeur and military themes extolled, and values assigned to exemplary people and behaviour, rather than interaction between people and their environment. Rather than guiding behaviour, these portrayals served to amplify the conflict between the glorified model and actuality,<sup>40</sup> resulting in conflict as a recurring theme in the teachers' narratives.

Conformity and obedience was part of the status quo and of utmost importance, if one wanted to survive in the totalitarian Soviet regime. Obedience is a unifying factor in all the recollections by the teachers. For older teachers, this obedience was clearly inspired by fear, but in the younger teachers, it was already an internalised way of life. In real terms, the Twentieth Communist Party Congress and Khrushchev's condemnation of the Stalin cult ended ideological certainty and the situation of permanent revolution, and pragmatic politics began. Continuity was assured without the terror associated with the hero cult.<sup>41</sup>

Although older teachers expressed feelings of powerlessness on a regular basis, younger teachers also described such incidents. For older teachers it was associated primarily with their Latvian identity, and family history in particular. Many of the younger teachers had no personal knowledge of the incidents in their family histories, but were clearly aware that Latvians were second-class citizens through

<sup>37</sup>Jānis Keruss, "Sovjetizācija (1944–1956)" [Sovietization], in *Latvijas Universitātes Vēstures un filozofijas fakultātes vēsture padomju laikā: personības, struktūras, idejas (1944–1991)* [University of Latvia Faculty of History and Philosophy during the Soviet era: personalities, structures, ideas (1944–1991)], ed. Jānis Keruss (Riga: Latvijas Universitāte Akadēmiskais apgāds, 2010), 111.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>39</sup>Yurchak, *Everything was Forever*, 32.

<sup>40</sup>Vieda Skultans, *The Testimony of Lives: Narrative and Memory in post-Soviet Latvia* (London: Routledge, 1998), 155–56.

<sup>41</sup>Sigrid Meuschel, "Theories of Totalitarianism and Modern Dictatorship: A Tentative Approach," *Thesis Eleven* 61 (2000): 93–94, <http://the.sagepub.com/content/61/1/87> (accessed June 29, 2014).

societal relationships. The lack of disobedience on the part of the teachers, thus could be attributed to feelings of powerlessness, whether admitted or internalised.

Discussing the consequences of this experience is not a simple matter. The narratives described by the teachers share problems experienced by all victims of state-perpetrated violence in that these types of narrative do not lend themselves well to story-telling. The raw data of their past experiences may create the need to transcribe this in the form of a narrative, but narratives seek connections so that listeners and readers can recognise coherence, which is all about belonging.<sup>42</sup> Discussion of this topic is sensitive and it is difficult to create coherence if people are unwilling to share. Custodianship of history by the state makes personal testimony all the more important in discussions of the effects of living in totalitarian societies.

By the end of the 1980s, the Soviet unified and centralised system had been thoroughly entrenched, and while the political and ideological façade was still intact, belief in the validity of the system had disappeared. Interviewed teachers noted that not only teachers, but also society in general, for the most part, would disregard the Communist Party and smirk at its validity, and while the majority played the political game, no one truly believed any more. Jokes about the Soviet Union, socialism, and politics, as well as endemic corruption, were rampant. However, it is a teacher's description regarding her final exam in history in secondary school that summarises the bankrupt and trivialised nature of the unified and centralised Soviet system and the devaluation of Marxism/Leninism as a political philosophy:

I still remember how at my final history exam in my last year [of secondary school], someone from the commission asked me which historic personality I would want to be like. I replied, "The first cosmonaut Gagarin, because he was truly brave". Everyone started to laugh and [my history teacher] said that at my university entrance exams I should, for safety's sake, say "Like Lenin". Another member of the commission called out, "Brezhnev, better like Brezhnev!".

### **History teaching in post-Soviet independent democratic Latvia**

Since the regaining of independence in 1991, Latvians have been faced with the task of reviewing and rewriting their history for the third time over the course of a century. History teaching in the post-Soviet period of Latvian independence reflects various views of history ranging from internalised Soviet axioms and historical interpretations adopted from the interwar period to currently accepted modern views. Latvian historians have understood that certain periods of history, in particular, are contentious in nature because of conflicting political agendas, which have led to vastly different historiographies. Some attempts have been made to address this situation on a teaching level by several historians and teachers, as well as government officials.

The fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 required the adoption of democratic methodological practices with which history teachers were unfamiliar. History teaching has been addressed at local conferences<sup>43</sup> and also through publications

---

<sup>42</sup>Skultans, *The Testimony of Lives*, xii–xiii.

<sup>43</sup>An example can be found in the collection of conference papers: Irēna Saleniece, Ilze Šēnberga and Dmitrijs Oļehnovičs, eds., *Vēstures mācību aktualitātes skolā – DU vēstures katedras II–IV metodiskās konferences rakstu krājums* [Developments in history teaching in schools – DU History Department II–IV Methodology conference papers] (Daugavpils: Daugavpils Universitāte, 2001).

on history teaching didactics, specifically in the daily newspaper *Latvijas Avīze* in 2009, but an organised, systematic public discussion has yet to take place. History textbook authors in Latvia have adopted a writing style used in many democratic societies. Most notably they had moved away from the blatant nationalism characteristic of both the Soviet totalitarian and the Ulmanis' authoritarian regime, so much so that Latvian history was no longer taught as a separate subject (as it was during the Soviet era), but was incorporated into the general World History course. The debate about teaching Latvian history as a separate subject still continues.

### **Concluding comments**

The Latvian experience over the course of the twentieth century reveals that periods of extreme political change are often accompanied by the revision of history, which is reflected in history teaching in schools. The history curriculum changed to reflect the shift in power resulting in the marginalisation, vilification, or deletion of the previous regime's heroes, myths, etc. Under the new regime, history includes the criticism and denigration of the previous regime, and a new, official history with new heroes and new interpretations is created. Under authoritarian rule, teachers and pupils are clearly told who represents "the self" and "the other". Totalitarian rule can create two cultures in history teaching – official and unofficial. Official history taught in schools offers the ideologically acceptable and abbreviated interpretation of history in which heroes are politicians/political leaders and/or representatives of foreign cultures. Unofficial history, heard in the private sphere, resulted in the "folklorisation" of Latvian history, which allowed many Latvians to maintain their sense of national identity under foreign totalitarian rule.

The goals of history teaching under authoritarianism are essentially dehumanised and designed to strengthen the power of the ruling order at the expense of the interests and ideals of the individual citizen:

- (1) The first goal is the development of patriotism or nationalism with the assistance of history. Officially this means obedience to the state, led by the authoritarian leader, the "father" of the nation.
- (2) The second goal is to create a worldview based on a unified system – one nation, one leader, one history (one correct version of history) grounded in one correct theory.
- (3) The final goal supports the purpose of the propaganda of the existing regime through the legitimisation and glorification of its order.

The role of the teacher under authoritarianism is primarily as passive mediator between the ruling order and pupils, parents, and others, and transmitter of the officially sanctioned and ideologically correct version of history. The more authoritarian the regime, the narrower the scope and choice of history textbooks and the narrower the authorship of these books. Under Soviet totalitarianism, the learning process centred on one officially accepted textbook for each grade and each subject, including history.

While curriculum and textbooks were strictly controlled under authoritarianism, teachers had relative freedom with regard to teaching methods. During the Soviet occupation, history as a subject was uniform, and teachers had virtually no access to



materials created during the interwar period or foreign sources. Inspired teachers who taught general history strove to find materials and methods that would make lessons more interesting for the pupils, resulting in methodological developments within Latvia.

The consequences of authoritarian rule and associated control and threats clearly changed teachers' perspectives, leading to lasting detrimental effects on teacher self-esteem, even after the establishment of democracy.

#### **Notes on contributor**

Aija Abens received her Doctorate in Pedagogy at the University of Latvia. She received her MEd and BEd at York University in Toronto and her BA at SUNY College at Purchase. She is currently working as an independent researcher focusing on historical perspectives of issues of power and memory in the teaching of history.