



Local History Studies within the Context of National Historiography: the Case of the Historiography of Latgale

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Nowadays, special attention to local and regional identity is one of the major trends in modern historiography. In local history studies, the latest methodological approaches and advanced research methods are widely used, such as the methodology of the so-called “new (social) history” (*The New History* 1982; Stone 1987; Himelfarb 2004), a complex approach in historical source studies, the research methods developed within the so-called “everyday history” and “micro-history”, computer-based technologies, mathematical methods, etc.¹ These methods and approaches are employed in the studies bearing a historical aspect; in regional (local) history research their advantages are especially evident and convincing.

In its turn, regional history per se might be considered as one of the most advanced methodological approaches in historical research since it appropiates, adapts, specifies and develops general approaches and research techniques at local scale. Moreover, due to the regional approach an ideal of historical research – comprehensive and multi-dimensional reconstruction of the past – can be achieved: the image of the history of a region embraces both global and local events reflecting not only local but also nation-wide (and even global) developments and at the same time preserving specific, individual features of regional identity (see also: Ivanovs 2009, 2013).

It can be stated that local history research is based on relatively independent approaches which are, in the main, developed within the framework of the general methodology of historical research. At the same time, in local history studies, paramount importance is attached to the so-called cultural and historical monuments, i.e. the relics of the past (see in detail in Ivanovs, Somms 2002). Yet in the

¹ See in detail in the works published by the author of this paper: Ivanovs, Somms 1999, 2001; Ivanovs 2000^b, 2011, 2012; Varfolomejev, Somms, Ivanovs 2008; Varfolomejev, Ivanovs 2009, 2010; Ivanovs, Varfolomejev 2014^a, 2014^b; etc.

1930s, the concept of cultural and historical monuments was defined as follows: “<...> all cultural artifacts and phenomena, which have historical, archaeological, ethnographic or folklore value, can be called monuments, e.g., documents, stone axes, coins, plaids, folk songs, etc. Figuratively nature specimens can be also called monuments” (*LKV* 1937–1938, 32054). Thus, cultural and historical monuments embrace archaeological artifacts, household objects, architectural monuments, written historical sources, folklore, ethnographic objects and even nature specimens. At first glance these monuments do not differ from traditional historical sources. However, the value of the monuments and that of historical sources is to be assessed within different contexts. The value of historical sources is predetermined by their informational potential that can be revealed in the course of historical research, whereas the value of the monuments should not be limited to their informational potential: they form an integral part of the national historical consciousness and collective memory since they preserve cultural and historical heritage and transfer it from generation to generation. Thus, the monuments actually perform the functions that are ascribed to the so-called “sites of memory” (*N o r a* 1989). In this respect, it should be noted that for historical sources this function – to preserve and transfer cultural heritage of a nation – is not of utmost importance. Historical sources are used pragmatically taking into consideration the amount, range, reliability and the level of objectivity and subjectivity of their information (evidences) as well as relevance of the information to the tasks of a definite research. As a result many cultural and historical monuments never become historical sources because, in the opinion of historians, their information is not so “valuable” and it can be easily substituted by data provided by other historical sources.

It means that the concept “cultural and historical monument” has a broader meaning than the concept “historical source”: as relics of the past all historical sources are cultural and historical monuments; meanwhile, only certain (it seems, quite a few) monuments become and are used as historical sources. The number of monuments significantly exceeds the quantity of historical sources so it is impossible to use all of them in historical research. On the contrary, in regional studies that involves not only professional researchers but also amateurs, all of the relics of the past related to a certain region might gain adequate attention and be used in local history studies (*I v a n o v s* 2000^a, 13). At the same time, for any local community historical and cultural monuments embody and symbolize the past as well as cultural patterns of a region therefore these relics become an essential part of cultural and historical heritage that is carefully preserved, propagated and used to create the image of a region.

This approach towards the monuments of the past predetermines some other features of the methodology of regional history studies. Firstly, it is a complex approach to the relics of the past (*I v a n o v s, S o m s* 1999, 2001). The principal aim of the complex research is to create a dynamic retrospective model of a region

(I v a n o v s 2001, 2002); this model embraces diverse historical facts that are reconstructed on the basis of direct and indirect evidences provided by cultural and historical monuments. Secondly, in regional studies, a special attention to “local” historical facts and developments within relatively small areas should not be considered to be an end in itself because such an approach results in fragmentation of the overall image of the past. In order to preserve the integrity of the image, local historical facts should be related to historical events at nation-wide and even global level. Therefore, an important component of the methodology of regional studies is the case studies approach, which reveals global developments and trends through local facts (see S t a k e 1995; G e r r i n g 2007; T h o m a s 2011). Just in the historiography of Latgale², this vision of the methodology of regional studies appears comprehensive.

It should be noted that regional research in Latgale is focused, first and foremost, on the problems of regional identity (I v a n o v s 2000^b, 2006; S o m s, I v a n o v s 2002; I v a n o v s, S o m s 2008). Within the system that embraces diverse manifestations of regional identity, paramount importance is attached to the features related to the collective identity of the indigenous population of Latgale – Latgale’s Latvians (the Latgalians), namely: regional dialect, Latgalian literary tradition, Catholicism and its impact on cultural developments, manifestations of the so-called “Latgalian mentality” in everyday life, etc. (e.g., see Z e i l e 1997). Moreover, the residents of Latgale sometimes intentionally display their identity that differentiates them from their compatriots in such fields as language, lifestyle and cultural patterns thus detaching themselves from other Latvians. Some features of regional identity are associated with economic developments in Latgale; most of them denote negative trends such as stagnation, depression, etc. Some distinct features characterize the political history of Latgale and its controversial role in the Latvian political life in the 20th century. The idea of Latgale’s identity is supported by the majority of local inhabitants: in the public opinion, Latgale is really perceived as a relatively separate historical region within Latvia. To a certain extent, this opinion strengthens regional identity and causes its further development.

The above mentioned features of regional identity directly correlate with a number of “external” historical factors that have influenced and actually shaped these features and thus have always had a considerable impact on historical developments in Latgale. Therefore, since the 1990s, the interplay between the collective identity (or even ethnic identity) of Latgale’s Latvians and the “external” factors has become an object of an in-depth research in the historiography of Latgale (Z e i l e 1996). Among the factors that have exerted considerable influence on the collective identity of the indigenous population cultural patterns, traditions, mode of life and languages of other ethnic groups (minorities), which represent the neighboring countries and regions, are usually mentioned. In historical discourse, the interaction between the Latvians of Latgale and other ethnic groups is described as follows: while external, more often than not hostile, influence has been aimed

² Latgale is a historical region of Latvia located in the eastern part of the country.

at weakening the identity of Latgale's indigenous population, Latgalians' ethnic consciousness has developed a definite "support pattern" that preserves their collective identity.³ It should be noted that in historical perspective the "external" influence was supported by the neighbouring states and alien powers. Thus, the system of mutual relations between the Latgalians and their neighbours is represented in terms of struggle for survival of the Latgalians. This struggle began in the Middle Ages, when the ancestors of the Latgalians had formed proto-states of their own, and lasted until the end of the 20th century.

It can be argued that just these conceptual frameworks make local history studies in Latgale different (to a certain extent) from the historiography of Latvia. It means that the historiography of Latgale is a relatively independent constituent part of the Latvian national historiography. Since the 18th–19th century, the historiography of Latgale has accumulated rather vast historiographic material (see historiographic overviews: I v a n o v s et al. 2003; I v a n o v s, Š t e i m a n s 1999); moreover, Latgalian Studies are supported by the research infrastructure that embraces a number of research centers: Regional Studies Centre (the Research Institute of Latgale, see *LPI*) of the Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences at Daugavpils University; Centre of Oral History at Daugavpils University (MVC); Research Institute for Regional Studies (REGI) at Rēzekne Higher Education Institution; researchers' society "Latgola", Publishing House of Latgalian Culture Centre (LKC); etc. Research into the history of Latgale is also supported by conferences including the annual conferences "The Past, Present and Future of Latgale" organized by the Research Institute of Latgale since 1991 and the International Scientific Readings (working group "History: Sources and People") held by the Faculty of Humanities of Daugavpils University. In addition, periodicals (e.g., "Reģionālais Ziņojums" published by Daugavpils University and "Via Latgalica" published by *REGI*) as well as continued publications ("Acta Latgalica" published by *LPI*) also form an essential component of the research infrastructure. Since 1994, vast information about Latgale region is available on the Web (see *L a t g a l e s D a t i*). It should be also noted that almost all Latvian historians are involved in research into the history of the region since the history of Latgale is an integral part of the history of Latvia.

The historiography of Latgale forms a persistent and rather definite system that has three interconnected levels: academic (professional) historical research, studies made by unprofessional researchers who represent the local community, and evaluations and notions about the history of Latgale that shape the historical consciousness of the local population (see in detail I v a n o v s 2009, 72–73). It seems that just a close interconnection between the professional research and amateur studies is a unique feature of the historiography of Latgale since on a nation-wide scale – in the historiography of Latvia at large – such a close

³ The "support pattern" concept was substantiated in the 1970s (*Nationality Group Survival* 1977; see also: I v a n o v s 2009, 2013).

interconnection does not exist. Due to the cooperation between the professionals and amateurs the historiography of Latgale might effectively perform its social function: to disseminate historical knowledge, shape common values based on local identity and support maintenance of historical and cultural heritage.

However, this feature of the historiography of Latgale has a double-sided impact on the development of local history studies. On the one hand, the flourishing and broadening of the unprofessional historical research in Latgale since restoration of Latvia's independence (I v a n o v s, Š t e i m a n s 1999, 99–162) has facilitated progress in Latgalian Studies on the whole: new knowledge (vast factual data) of the history of the region has been acquired, new historical sources have been introduced in scientific circulation and new research topics have appeared.

On the other hand, in the opinion of many professional historians, local history research conducted by amateurs (*novadpētniecība* – in Latvian; *kraevedenie* – in Russian) is of minor importance; meanwhile, the term “*novadpētniecība*” as such has acquired quite a negative connotation. It should be noted that in Latvia this term was introduced at the very beginning of the Soviet occupation (see in detail I v a n o v s 2006);⁴ therefore, for a long time, the field of unprofessional historical research called “*novadpētniecība*” was closely connected with Soviet ideology and was used to indoctrinate local communities and individuals involved in local history studies.⁵ The Soviet Latvian Encyclopedia defines local history studies (“*novadpētniecība*”) as follows: “Local [history] study <...> is a many-sided investigation of a region, city, town, village, etc. made by local population. <...> Local [history] studies have great social and political as well as culturally educational importance, also in learning and upbringing process <...>” (*LPE* 1986, 237). The Soviet model of local history research was implemented to the full in Latvia; as a result, the local history research assumed a number of negative features.

Unfortunately, these characteristic features have had a long-term impact and, therefore, up to now cause rather a negative attitude towards unprofessional research into the history of Latvia's regions.⁶ The first feature is an expressed

⁴ In the 1920s–1930s in Latvia, the term “*novadpētniecība*” did not exist – it cannot be found in lexicographical sources. At schools, there was a subject “Fatherland Teaching” – “*Dzimtenes mācība*” (*LKV* 1929–1930, 6387). To a certain extent, it resembles unprofessional studies in local history made after World War II.

⁵ The history of unprofessional local studies in the USSR and in Russia is reflected in the works written by Russian scholars. Just in the late 1920s – early 1930s, local history research was totally distorted, brought under the absolute control of the Soviet ideological apparatus, and used as a tool of the Soviet internal policy (S h m i d t 1997, 153–166). The ideological nature of local history studies vividly appears in various manuals for amateurs and teachers as well as in textbooks for schools (see, e.g., *Metodika* 1982, 3–5).

⁶ Sometimes, in the opinion of professional historians, the combination of words “local history studies” is rather an evaluation (usually negative) than a designation of a definite field of historical research (see S t r o d s 2000).

dilettantism: more often than not the authors of numerous essays on the history of their native regions, districts, parishes, etc. lack knowledge of and appropriate skills in scholarly research work. The second feature is the second-rate quality of publications since there predominantly popular works are used, to a lesser extent – published research papers, and quite seldom – historical sources. Moreover, some amateurs do not make a distinction between sources and literature. The third feature is an unbalanced nature of historical narratives: the closest attention is devoted to recent developments; consequently, the historical past as such is pushed aside. The fourth feature is provincialism, i.e. separation from the modern tendencies in local history studies. Since the early 1990s, attempts have been made to repudiate Soviet “heritage” in the field local history research (I v a n o v s, Š t e i m a n s 1999, 107–115). Consequently, a number of indications that unprofessional local studies are regaining their niche within the historiography of Latgale can be mentioned: the number of publications steadily is increasing, their methodological level is gradually growing, and the interest of Latgale’s population in the past of the region is being expressed more definitely. It should be also noted that in the 1990s–early of the 21st century the process of revival of Latgalian Studies was based on the ideas and approaches that had been worked out by the Latvian national historiography in the 1920s–1930s as well as by Latvian émigrés in the 1950s–1980s. Nevertheless, up to now, the methodological level of unprofessional research in Latgale does not conform to the standards of academic research. Therefore, it is desirable to substantiate (and then implement) an ideal model of local history research in Latgale in order to draw unprofessional studies nearer to academic research (see in detail I v a n o v s 2000^a, 2006; compare with S h m i d t 1997, 153–166).

Looking into the future of local history research in Latgale, two alternatives are possible: either the unprofessional research will be radically transformed in order to raise its professional level or the studies made by amateurs will be totally replaced by scholarly research into the history of Latgale. The second eventuality means that the most important feature of local history studies – i.e. local studies as a social phenomenon and manifestation of local identity (I v a n o v s 2009) – cannot be preserved. It is desirable to maintain the ties between academic researchers and the local community; therefore, a close cooperation between professional historians and amateurs should be promoted.⁷

In conclusion, it can be argued that within a nation-state that comprises various historical regions the progress of local history studies can considerably stimulate the development of the national historiography: just in local history studies, new research problems emerge and modern research methods, techniques and approaches are being introduced. Moreover, involving representatives of local

⁷ A good pattern of such cooperation has been set by the above-mentioned annual conferences “The Past, Present, and Future of Latgale” organized by the Research Institute of Latgale (Daugavpils University).

communities in research work, local history studies might bridge the gap between society and academic historical research represented by professional historians.

In Latgale, local history research provides a good example for the community of professional historians in Latvia (and, possibly, abroad) since the key feature of the present-day historiography of Latgale is involvement of amateurs in historical research. The flowering of Latgalian Studies made by both professional and unprofessional researchers provides evidences that the modern historiography of Latgale has been little by little exceeding the limits of academic research and has become a specific mode of manifestation of conformity to the standards.

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Vietos istorijas tyrimai nacionālās istoriografijas tyrimu kontekstē: Latgalas istoriografijas atvejis

S a n t r a u k a

Pagrindinās sa vokos: *vietos istorija, reģions, vietos istorijas tyrimai, istoriografija, Latgala, Latvija, reģioninā tapatybē.*

Straipsnyje atskleidziamā vietos istorijas tyrimu ūtaka nacionālās istoriografijas rai dai. Galima diskutuoti, ar valstybēje, kuriā sudaro ūvairūs istoriniai reģioni, vietos istorijas tyrimai gali paskatinti nacionālās istoriografijas raidā: vietos istorijas tyrimai atskleidz ia naujas tyrimu problēmas, leidz ia pasinaudoti ūiuolaikiniai tyrimu metodai ir požiūriai. Be to, ū vietos istorijas tyrimus ūtraukiamā vietos bendruomenē, tokiu būdu visuomenē priartēja prie profesionaliū istorikū atliekamū akadēminiū tyrimū.

Siekiant pagrjsti ūiuos teiginius, buvo atlikti Latgalos (istorinio rytinio Latvijos reģio no) istoriografijos ūtakos tyrimai ūiuolaikinei Latvijos istoriografijos raidai. ūiuolaikinē Latgalos istoriografija atgijo atkūrus Latvijos nepriklausomybē 1991 m. Latgalos istorijos tyrimai remiasi idējomis ir požiūriais, kuriuos suformavo Latvijos nacionālā istoriogra fija 1920–1930 m. ir Latvijos emigrantai 1950–1980 m. Latgalos istoriografijos tyrimū objektas – klausimai, susijē su Latgalos reģiono vietos gyventojū (Latgalos latviū) etninēs tapatybē problemomis ir ūvairiais etninēs istorijos aspektais. ūiandien išskirtinis Latga los istoriografijos bruožas – mēgējū ūsitraukimas ū istorijos tyrimus. Latgalos studijū raida rodo, kad Latgalos istoriografija pamažu perzengia akadēminiū tyrimū ribas ir tampa ūpa tinga priemone reģioninei savimonei atskleisti.

Aleksandrs Ivanovs

**Local History Studies within the Context of National Historiography: the
Case of the Historiography of Latgale**

S u m m a r y

Keywords: *local history, region, local history research, historiography, Latgale, Latvia, regional identity.*

The paper reveals both an actual and potential impact of local history studies on the development of national historiography. It can be argued that within a nation-state that comprises various historical regions the progress of local history studies can considerably stimulate the development of the national historiography: in local history studies, new research problems emerge and modern research methods, techniques and approaches are being introduced. Moreover, involving representatives of local communities in research work, local history studies might bridge the gap between society and academic historical research represented by professional historians.

In order to substantiate the theses mentioned above the impact of the historiography of Latgale (a historical region of Latvia located in the eastern part of the country) on the development of the modern Latvian historiography has been studied. The modern historiography of Latgale has come into being due to the restoration of independence of the Republic of Latvia in 1991. The revival process of Latgalian studies was based on the ideas and approaches that had been worked out by the Latvian national historiography in the 1920s–1930s as well as by Latvian émigrés in the 1950s–1980s. In the focus of attention of the historiography of Latgale there are problems related to ethnic identity of the indigenous population of Latgale (Latgale's Latvians) as well as different aspects of their ethnic history. A specific feature of the present-day historiography of Latgale is involvement of amateurs in historical research. The progress of Latgalian Studies provides evidences that the historiography of Latgale has been little by little exceeding the limits of academic research and has become a specific mode of manifestation of regional self-awareness.

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