

IEVADS / INTRODUCTION

<https://doi.org/10.22364/lviz.120.01>
pp. 5–9

LATVIJAS VĒSTURES
INSTITŪTA ŽURNĀLS

Speciālizlaidums (120) 2024

RESEARCHING THE BALTIC QUEER HISTORY

There are many reasons why research on the queer subcultures of Soviet Latvia is a challenge to a historian. As several authors of the articles in this issue argue, queer memory still has not become a part of the shared collective memory in Latvia. Queerness is something that people would love to forget in their memories or, if ever remembered, it is perceived as a strange phenomenon that needs to be discussed in private, among close friends, rather than made available for public discussions and representations. Surprisingly, even though more than thirty years have passed since the fall of the Soviet Union and following decriminalisation of male homosexuality, the presence of queer memory in the public discourse and public space is still low. It seems that a worldview informed by discourses of pathologisation and criminalisation of homosexuality is still shared among the older generations.

Contemporary European understanding of statehood and its values is connected to non-marginalisation of previously discriminated groups on a political level, as well as identification and inclusion of the narratives of these groups in the state history narrative. The need to research the past of queer people is determined by social and historiographic reasons. Firstly, marginalisation of queer people in contemporary Latvia possibly can be minimised, by showcasing same-sex loving people as powerful agents in their subcultures and their interactions with Soviet state authorities. It would allow the group to recognise its place in history, and to strengthen its social identity in the narrative of Latvia's statehood and history. It would furthermore allow the society to recognise the group's complex existence in the Soviet past. Secondly, in Latvia's historiography, no research has been done on the problematics of interaction

between queer people and the Soviet state, however, identification of this interaction is a prerequisite for democratisation of Latvia's historic metanarrative. What is important, the socio-political context and conceptual frames for such studies in Latvia can be provided by studies already published on Soviet Russia.

Research on the history of homosexuality in the Soviet Union has begun and continues examining its socio-political contexts and different discourses of Soviet Russia.¹ In recent years, the historiography on homosexuality in Soviet Russia has been significantly broadened through research on homosexual subjectivity. The early Soviet and early post-Stalinist homosexuals have been analysed through their correspondence and a diary written for 18 months in 1955–1956.² The late Soviet homosexual subjectivities have been researched through in-depth interviews suggesting that they were characterised by shared laughter, language, solidarity, and internalisation of self-censorship in Russia and Georgia.³ Soviet Russian history of gay lives and “aversion therapy” has been studied thanks to new historical sources – the autobiographies and diaries of Soviet Russian sexologist Jan Goland's patients analysed by Rustam Alexander.⁴ The existent historiography has even laid the ground for a narrative about the hidden history of gay oppression in the Soviet Russia, however, generalising it to the entire Soviet Union.⁵

-
- 1 For thorough analysis of the historiography see: Healey, Dan; Stella, Francesca (2021). Sexual and Gender Dissent in the USSR and Post-Soviet Space. *Cahiers du Monde russe*, 62 (2–3), pp. 225–250.
 - 2 Healey, Dan (2018). *Russian Homophobia from Stalin to Sochi*. London: Bloomsbury, 73–89; Roldugina, Irina (2019). “Why Are We the People We Are?” Early Soviet Homosexuals from the First-Person Perspective: New Sources on the History of Homosexual Identities in Russia. *Soviet and Post-Soviet Sexualities*. Ed. by Richard Mole. London: Routledge, pp. 2–22.
 - 3 Clech, Arthur (2019). Between the Labor Camp and the Clinic: Tema or the Shared Forms of Late Soviet Homosexual Subjectivities. *Soviet and Post-Soviet Sexualities*. Ed. by Richard Mole. London: Routledge, pp. 32–55; Clech, Arthur (2021). An inconspicuous sexual dissident in the Georgian Soviet republic: Subjectification, social classes and the culture of suspicion in the late Soviet period. *Cahiers du monde russe*, 62 (2–3), pp. 367–390.
 - 4 Alexander, Rustam (2023). *Gay Lives and 'Aversion therapy' in Brezhnev's Russia, 1964–1982*. Basingstoke: PalgraveMacmillan.
 - 5 Alexander, Rustam (2023). *Red Closet: The Hidden History of Gay Oppression in the USSR*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

To avoid such a generalisation of the past of one (out of fifteen) republics to the alleged experience of the entire Soviet Union, the academics should provide the studies of the queer Soviet past in the states that once were occupied by or incorporated into the Soviet Union. However, it is hindered by the political regimes and everyday homophobia in the countries that regained their independence or established it after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Even in Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia, only since the beginning of the 2020s, the field of history of queer sexualities has begun to emerge gradually.⁶ The research work was facilitated by the international scholarly seminary “Researching, reworking and representing Soviet LGBT histories – Queer Between Surveillance and Non-Interference of State Authorities under Soviet System: The Practices and the Discourses”, organised by the Institute of Latvian History of the University of Latvia on 2 June 2023. The event was sponsored by the research grant of the Latvian Council of Science, “Between Surveillance and Non-Interference of State Authorities: The Practices of Same-Sex Sexual Subcultures in Soviet Latvia, 1954–1991” (Izp-2021/1-0167). Sixteen scholars took part in the seminary delivering papers on different issues of the queer history of the period of late socialism in the occupied Baltic states and the USSR.⁷

The research published in the current issue which is mostly based on hitherto unused historical sources include a diary by the Latvian film director Gunārs Piesis (by Jānis Ozoliņš⁸), as well as the advanced research of an already

6 Lipša, Ineta (2021). Documenting the Queer Self: Kaspars Aleksandrs Irbe (1906–1996) inbetween Unofficial Sexual Knowledge and Medical-Legal Regulation in Soviet Latvia. *Cahiers du monde russe*, 62 (2–3), pp. 415–442; Lipša, Ineta (2022). Observing and Performing Male Same-sex Desire: Appropriation of Public Space in Latvia during the Second World War and Late Stalinism (1940–1953). *Latvijas Vēstures Institūta Žurnāls*, 1 (115), 86.–118. lpp.; Pöldsam, Rebeka; Arumetsa, Sara (2023). Emergence of LGBT Movements in Late Soviet and Post-Soviet Estonia. *NORA – Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, DOI: 10.1080/08038740.2023.2195207; Pöldsam, Rebeka (2023). “Why are we still abnormal?!” *History of discourses on non-normative sex-gender subjects in Estonia*. Dissertations Ethnologiae Universitatis Tartuensis, 15. Tartu: Department of Ethnology, Institute of Cultural Research, University of Tartu; Navickaite, Rasa (2023). In the Name of Love? Sexuality, Gender, and Communist Morality in the Late Soviet Baltic Republics. *Themenportal Europäische Geschichte*. Accessible at: www.europa.clío-online.de/essay/id/fdae-116915 (viewed 28.02.2024).

7 Accessible at: https://www.lvi.lu.lv/fileadmin/user_upload/lu_portal/lvi.lu.lv/Zinu_atteli/2023/Riga_Seminar_Program.pdf (viewed 28.02.2024).

8 Ozoliņš, Jānis (2024). Accumulating Negative Affects: The Diary of the Soviet Latvian Film Director Gunārs Piesis. *Latvijas Vēstures Institūta Žurnāls*, Speciālizlaidums (120), pp. 81–102.

known diary by an employee of the Soviet People's Court Kaspars Aleksandrs Irbe (1906–1996) (by Andrei Vazyanau⁹). The second group of sources are criminal files and judgements on sodomy charges by people's courts of Vilnius, as well as the criminal file by the Soviet Lithuanian KGB (by Tomas Vaiseta¹⁰ and Rasa Navickaite¹¹). These legal documents were created within a short distance from the events described by the accused insiders of male same-sex loving subculture, forcibly answering questions by Soviet lawyers. What they said was influenced by self-censorship to avoid criminal liability. The third group of sources are in-depth and semi-structured interviews with same-sex loving men, same-sex loving women, and non-homosexual individuals who were directly or indirectly informed about same-sex loving people's lives. The researchers created the oral history sources themselves (Kārlis Vērdiņš,¹² Brigitta Davidjants,¹³ Kaspars Zellis¹⁴ and Elizabete Vizgunova-Vikmane¹⁵) forty to sixty years after the reality under research took place. Interviews with people born from the 1930s to the early 1970s, the oldest generation who experienced the Soviet period, provided information on the experiences of same-sex subcultures from the perspective of both insiders and outsiders.

-
- 9 Vazyanau, Andrei (2024). Queer and Ethnicity in Minsk, 1952: Belarusian Reading of Kaspars Irbe's Diary. *Latvijas Vēstures Institūta Žurnāls, Speciālizlaidums* (120), pp. 59–80.
 - 10 Vaiseta, Tomas (2024). Investigating the History of Homosexuality in Soviet Lithuania: Deconstructing Court Verdicts. *Latvijas Vēstures Institūta Žurnāls, Speciālizlaidums* (120), pp. 10–31.
 - 11 Navickaite, Rasa (2024). Political Homophobia in Soviet Lithuania Revisited: The Case of the Dissident Viktoras Petkus. *Latvijas Vēstures Institūta Žurnāls, Speciālizlaidums* (120), pp. 32–58.
 - 12 Vērdiņš, Kārlis (2024). Two Peters: Queer Domestic Space and Artist's Sensibility in Soviet Latvia. *Latvijas Vēstures Institūta Žurnāls, Speciālizlaidums* (120), pp. 103–121.
 - 13 Davidjants, Brigitta (2024). Between Women: Narratives of Estonian Lesbians and Bisexual During the Transition from Soviet Times. *Latvijas Vēstures Institūta Žurnāls, Speciālizlaidums* (120), pp. 143–164.
 - 14 Zellis, Kaspars (2024). Presence of Queer Sexuality in Memories of Latvian Non-Homosexuals of the Soviet Era. *Latvijas Vēstures Institūta Žurnāls, Speciālizlaidums* (120), pp. 165–186.
 - 15 Vizgunova-Vikmane, Elizabete (2024). Lesbian Lives in Soviet Latvia: The Narratives. *Latvijas Vēstures Institūta Žurnāls, Speciālizlaidums* (120), pp. 122–142.

This issue is a significant contribution to the queer history of the Soviet period. Several authors deal with subjects that have been underresearched or totally neglected before. The geographic span of the research includes mostly Latvia and its neighbouring countries. However, we believe that the conclusions our contributors make will expand the understanding of the 20th century queer history for everybody interested in the field.

Guest editors
Dr. hist. *Ineta Lipša*
PhD *Kārlis Vērdiņš*

Acknowledgements / Pateicības

This article has been written within the framework of the Latvian Council of Science Grant Izp-2021/1-0167.

© 2024 Ineta Lipša, Kārlis Vērdiņš, Latvijas Universitāte
Raksts publicēts brīvpieejā saskaņā ar Creative Commons
Attiecinājuma-Nekomerciāls 4.0 Starptautisko licenci (CC BY-NC 4.0)
This is an open access article licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0
International License (CC BY-NC 4.0) (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).