

## QUEER AND ETHNICITY IN MINSK, 1952: BELARUSIAN READING OF KASPARS IRBE'S DIARY

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This article proposes an intersectional approach to studying non-Russian queer experiences in the Soviet empire. While earlier applications of intersectionality focused on race, gender, and class, other regional perspectives may highlight ethnicity, citizenship, and language. The text approaches non-Russian queer subjects in the USSR as a heterogeneous multiplicity via a contextualised reading of a diary fragment written by the Latvian Kaspars Irbe in Minsk in 1952. It highlights the prominence of communication between queers and people from the “centre” but also notes the hindrance of immediate contact between ethnicised subalterns due to Soviet social engineering. Tracing contingencies of Belarusian history, the article reveals how national identity and queer emancipation projects can evolve together.

*Keywords:* queer subaltern, decolonisation, Belarus, Latvia, nationalism

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### Introduction

The text is an intersectional analysis of a diary fragment of Kaspars Irbe, a Latvian gay man, during his stay in Minsk in 1952, in the context of his travels around the Soviet Union. Irbe's diary has become iconic among researchers studying the Soviet occupation of Latvia and the USSR. Since its discovery in 2016, it has been repeatedly examined due to the impressive volume of written material left behind.<sup>1</sup> Following others but taking a different perspective, I will

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<sup>1</sup> There are a few works that either focus on the diary or use it among other data. See, for example, Lipša 2021; Gricmanis 2019; Gerhardt 2023.

analyse intersections of ethnicity and queerness in Irbe's social navigation, focusing on his relations with Russians and non-Russians in Minsk. The intersectional approach reveals how ethnicity and queerness contribute jointly to the construction of subaltern subjectivities outside the empire's<sup>2</sup> centre.

In 1952, Irbe visited Minsk for almost three months, from October to December, apparently to attend extension courses in law. He describes his weeks of living in the city in eleven pages of the diary. The source provides insights into his daily social and cultural experiences while staying in the dormitory, visiting public venues, and walking on the streets. Along with ethnographically precise descriptions, it features Irbe's self-reflection on his stay in Minsk. In this way, Irbe's diary is a valuable resource for researchers in many aspects. It offers a novel account of post-war Minsk, insight into the geographies of homosexuals' life in the city, and provides an account of the educational infrastructure and Soviet legal culture in the USSR, among other topics. For a scholar interested in Belarus, this document's fragment provides unique evidence of queer life in the Belarusian capital city from the perspective of a Latvian, offering a distinctive glimpse into one national Soviet republic from another. In this article, I focus on the intersections of ethnicity, subalternity, and sexuality in Irbe's travels. Particularly, I take into account the presence of people from Moscow and Leningrad (now Saint Petersburg) in Irbe's entries, as well as his intercultural contacts. As I will show, contacts with individuals from the imperial centre held greater prominence than immediate contacts between Belarusians and Latvians.

At the beginning of the text, I discuss the regional specifics of the intersectional approach in studying LGBT lives. Then, I provide a brief summary of the scarce Belarusian queer history. Finally, I analyse Irbe's diary entries from his trips to Minsk, Kyiv, Leningrad, Tallinn, and Vilnius. Such reading will provide valuable insights for understanding some contingencies and recurrent phenomena of Belarusian queer persons' lives.

As noted by Feruza Aripova<sup>3</sup>, Western queer and LGBT scholars have paid the most attention to Russia compared to other post-Soviet countries. The representatives and scholars of other countries had the prerogative to write their own history, as Aripova mentions in her literature review.<sup>4</sup> Such asymmetry is an echo of colonial subalternity, a geopolitically conditioned exclusion of populations

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2 For a view of the USSR as an empire on a multiethnic basis, see Hirsch 2018.

3 Aripova 2023, 20.

4 Ibid., 28.

from power hierarchies,<sup>5</sup> contributing to political oppression and silencing.<sup>6</sup> After analysing subalternity in a South Asian setting, it was also identified in post-Soviet Central Asia<sup>7</sup> and in Ukraine.<sup>8</sup> Importantly for this text, subalternity exists beyond the public domain in intimate sexual interactions.<sup>9</sup> An example of a decolonial approach to queer critique is the collective monograph *Decolonizing Queer Experience* focusing on LGBT people from Caucasus, Central Asia, and Baltic countries.<sup>10</sup> This article, too, aims to construct and promote subaltern queer narratives as valuable entities. This is particularly relevant during the war in Ukraine and the state-sponsored Kremlin-backed mass repressions in Belarus, both fueled by the notion that Ukrainian and Belarusian cultures, languages, and states should not exist.

Although Irbe's diary gained attention due to the author's non-normative sexuality, this paper uses an intersectional approach to explore the effects of his multiple identities rather than one particular. Irbe's various identities as a lawyer, an urbanite, and a Latvian all intersected with his sexuality and affected his socialisation during the trip. In this reading, I am particularly interested in the meaning of Irbe's ethnicised background, which, along with ethnic identity, includes his ideas of others, as well as linguistic practice and practices of self-representation and networking.

## Intersectionality and ethnicity

Kimberlé Crenshaw introduced the term 'intersectionality' to underscore the "multidimensionality" of marginalised subjects' lived experiences.<sup>11</sup> The intersection of multiple social positions shapes their experiences. In early applications of the term, the intersections of gender with race and class were one of the most important,<sup>12</sup> reflecting the history of segregation and income-based stratification in North America. Different intersections may come to the fore in other contexts, such as ethnicity, citizenship, and language. The reasons for this are historical in Eastern and Central-Eastern Europe, as well as the Baltic states. Ethnocentric

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5 Mignolo 2005.

6 Spivak 1988, 79.

7 Tloustanova 2015.

8 Törnquist-Plewa, Yurchuk 2019.

9 Khanna 2018.

10 Aripova et al. 2020.

11 Crenshaw 1989, 139.

12 Ferguson 2004.

national state here developed as a dominant model of statehood. Many countries situated between Russia and Western Europe experienced occupation more than once. Although the Soviet Union declared the equality of nations, Stalinism tended to promote Soviet and Russian ethnocentrism.<sup>13</sup> Despite the fact that the Soviet Constitution declared the equality of all nations (ethnicities, *narody*), ethnicity was often accounted for in social mobility, education, career, and other spheres of social life. During the Soviet period, different ethnic populations had varying degrees of self-determination. Some succeeded in establishing sovereign nation states before the Soviet period and were recognised as socialist republics during it. Other groups had the status of “autonomous republics”, while some did not have any of these options. During the 1930s–1950s, forced deportations were more prevalent among non-Russian populations, indicating a higher degree of vulnerability for these groups. Additionally, the use of language played a significant role in creating hierarchies of scale, where individuals who spoke a particular language, such as Latvian, were marked as “others”, whereas Russian was considered a “universal” and international language.<sup>14</sup>

Ethnicity is important in the analysis of Soviet queer lives for several reasons. In the USA, in the late 1970s, the homosexual part of the population was much more institutionally developed than the vast majority of ethnic groups.<sup>15</sup> In the USSR, LGBTQ individuals lacked institutional representation or establishment, unlike ethnic groups.<sup>16</sup> Thus, ethnicity more commonly served as an identity resource. Particular ethnicities made homosexuality especially shamed. Armenian and Azeri gays would be condemned as “men from the Caucasus”, and an ethnic Georgian in Moscow would use the same idea to choose an active role in sexual encounters.<sup>17</sup>

When studying non-Russian Soviet queers, it is important to acknowledge the diversity of their positions, as well as the “history of multiple ‘colonisations’ of different parts of Eastern Europe”.<sup>18</sup> During the Soviet period, a gender hierarchy was imposed on ethnic populations, in which the roles of men and women were determined according to the perceived needs of the communist state.<sup>19</sup> Ideas of LGBTQ rights were present in the Soviet republics’ movements

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13 Martin 1998.

14 Karklins 1994, 17.

15 Schluter 2002, 31–32, cited in Valodzin 2016.

16 On the diversity of ways in which ethnicity was promoted and institutionalised in the USSR, see Slezkine 1994.

17 Clech 2017.

18 Ousmanova 2020, 142.

19 Mole 2011, 550.

for regaining independence.<sup>20</sup> Later, it became possible to observe antagonism between conservative nationalist groups, denying the rights and even belonging of queer people to the nation<sup>21</sup> and those moving towards gender equality, women's rights and LGBT rights as a way to "become like the West" or "become real Europe".<sup>22</sup> Struggles for independence in countries with a background of imperial oppression often reinforced gendered social roles, presenting heroism as exclusively masculine.<sup>23</sup> This implies that queer desire can be both anticolonial and anti-imperialist yet still condemned by conservative others who also claim their credit for decolonisation.

How can we differentiate between non-Russian Soviet queers, who are a heterogeneous group? Should they be classified as colonial subjects? Are they queer subalterns in a similar manner to Phillipino queers as described by Duque – surviving periods of forced assimilation by Spain and the USA, having to mimic their colonial "fathers" to prove themselves capable of autonomy, feminised by the empire's familial rhetoric, and still often feeling ashamed of their ethnicity,<sup>24</sup> considering how "Philippines are structurally queer to the United States"<sup>25</sup>? Speaking of the multinational gay environment of the USSR, Arthur Clech proposes a notion of supranational identity to show how the experiences of homosexuals could be affected by their experiences of being Caucasian, Central Asian, or Soviet.<sup>26</sup> Clech notes that LGBT individuals from the Baltic states, who had gained independence before being occupied by the Soviet Union, felt a particular sense of otherness.<sup>27</sup>

Almira Ousmanova has noticed that in the Baltic states the notion of occupation is used as preferable to the one of colonisation.<sup>28</sup> In the Latvian context, the colonisation of the Soviet years was discussed rather as a cultural development rather than a political realm.<sup>29</sup> At the same time, the latter is classified via the above-mentioned category of *occupation*. When executing colonisation,

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20 Põldsama, Arumetsa 2023; Vērđiņš, Ozoliņš 2020. See also Davidjants and Zellis in this issue.

21 For the Armenian perspective, see Sargsyan 2021. On ethnonationalism and gender identity in Kyrgyzstan, see Buelow 2017. In the Latvian case, see also Mole 2011.

22 Serdyukova et al. 2022.

23 Wingfield, Bucur 2006.

24 Duque 2014.

25 Ponce 2012, 26.

26 Clech 2017.

27 Ibid.

28 Ousmanova 2020.

29 Riekstiņš 2015; Ozols 2023.

empires aspire not only to control colonised subjects but also to *remake* their identity.<sup>30</sup> For instance, the myth of the triunity of Eastern Slavic nations is repeatedly used by the Kremlin to justify the violent Russification of Belarusians and Ukrainians, including the LGBTQ+ people. The decolonial approach has been present in Belarusian scholarship since the early 2000s. For instance, Andrei Gornykh translated Spivak's text "Can the Subaltern Speak",<sup>31</sup> Ousmanova used Spivak's approach to analyse gendered stereotypes in post-Soviet cultures.<sup>32</sup> At the same time, Ihar Babkoŭ explored Russification as a form and manifestation of colonisation.<sup>33</sup> Recently, the decolonial approach regained the attention of Belarusian intellectuals, becoming a subject of conferences, interviews, and writing contests.

Given this complex nature of the subaltern experiences in the Soviet Union, it is important to note the discrepancies between the positions of a queer person from the centre of the empire and those from the peripheries, keeping in mind that the latter group is a heterogeneous multiplicity in itself.

Queer scholars use the intersectional approach to highlight the additional positionalities and vulnerabilities of the groups they study. For example, Clech discovered that the invisibility of homosexual relations made them less affected by interethnic stereotypes and taboos on mixed alliances.<sup>34</sup> For those concerned with national history, the intersectional approach is a way to recognise the often invisible subjects in the narratives of anti-imperial resistance and national liberation.

Ethnicity and homosexuality are not the only formative categories in Irbe's experience on trips. For instance, his occupation as a bailiff in people's courts and education might also be important, as well as the fact that he was raised in an urban environment instead of a rural one. Still, regarding Irbe's mobility, Latvianness might be essential to understanding how he experienced other Soviet republics. The fact that Irbe identified his sexual contacts mainly according to outward appearances and most often according to their ethnic origins<sup>35</sup> can be a starting point for this reading.

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30 Platt 2013, 133.

31 Spivak 2001 was translated by Andrei Gornykh.

32 Ousmanova 2001.

33 Babkou 2005.

34 Clech 2017.

35 Lipša 2021, 423.

## Irbe and materiality of Minsk

This passage draws from research conducted by Uladzimir Valodzin for our joint presentation at the seminar on Soviet queer history in Riga in June 2023. Valodzin reconstructed the geography of Irbe's movements in and around Minsk. Our thematic coding of the text focused on two layers: Irbe's social encounters and the socio-demographic markers he used, as well as the urban topography of his daily life. Also, Uladzimir reconstructed the topography of Irbe's movements in the city. I am summarising the main conclusions from his analysis to provide a context for Irbe's social life during his stay in Belorussian SSR. During Stalin's era, there was a general retreat in the direction of social conservatism and traditional values, while the immediate postwar years also meant the suppression of nationalism.<sup>36</sup> In these conditions, some of Irbe's records serve as hints more than documental evidence to be taken at face value. Therefore, this should be considered in the interpretation of the diary entries.

In 1952, Belarus looked unattractive from the window of the train: Irbe saw "ugly stations, unsightly landscapes, poor huts, wretched herds of breedless cattle".<sup>37</sup> The territory of present-day Belarus has suffered greatly in terms of population loss and the destruction of industrial and agrarian complexes.<sup>38</sup> Poverty and ugliness of the Belarusian countryside are also mentioned in Irbe's entries from 1964 – when he took part in a bus excursion to Kyiv in the Ukrainian SSR. Cities had deteriorated as well. Around 80% of buildings were destroyed in Minsk during the Second World War. Later, many buildings from previous historical epochs were demolished according to Soviet architectural plans. Only a very few survived, but these were scattered around and not presenting a contiguous part of the city.

Minsk was not Irbe's love at first sight. He frequently expresses his feelings of disgust related to the details of his everyday life, especially the condition of toilets. He also looks forward to leaving Minsk during most of his stay. So, the temporality of his stay is framed by his longing to "go back to the environment of a better culture and living life in accordance with own views".<sup>39</sup>

Irbe mentions extensively unpleasant living conditions of his dwelling – including hygienic conditions, the temperature on premises, and noise, as well

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36 Mitsuyoshi 2004, 29. For the studies on gender and nationality, see Massel 1974; Northrop 2001; Michaels, 2001.

37 "[n]eglitās piestātnes, neglītos dabasskatus, nabadzīgās būdas, slikto bezšķirnes lopu pūlišus". Irbe 01.11.1952.

38 Snyder 2023.

39 Irbe 01.11.1952.

as bad-tasting food. His accounts expose stark discrepancies between the “exemplary” public image and the poorly maintained semi-private space. The facades of Minsk streets presented a mix of temporary housing for workers, called *baraki*, and newly built Stalinist architecture. Although Belarusian SSR was intended to be one of the showcases of socialism, both the city and the country were still recovering from the aftermath of the Second World War. Minsk, being a model Stalinist city, illustrated this profound contradiction particularly well. The poor living conditions were visible to residents rather than tourists, and Irbe was not a tourist.

Irbe’s diary entries mention Moscow’s symbolic and cultural presence in Minsk. For example, a concert from Moscow was broadcast on the radio. Similarly, there is a monument to Belarusian poet Janka Kupala with his verses glorifying Moscow. However, there is no indication in the diary whether Irbe knew the context. In the 1920s, having created *Tutejšyja*, an anti-colonial play with a critique of both Polish and Russian dominance over Belarusians, Kupala maintained relations with Belarusian nationalists in emigration. The Soviets later forced him to write a letter of repentance, presumably from dictation.<sup>40</sup> The invisibility of Belarusian history and the prominence of Russian/Moscowite signs for Irbe in Minsk is meaningful in itself – as it displays the Soviet centre spreading its influence and culture across formerly heterogeneous space.

### Irbe navigating Minsker public

Irbe led an active social life in Minsk, but his social curiosity was by no means limited to homosexuals. Irbe does not describe relations other than sexual intercourse with those whom he met on *pleshki* (places in the cities used for cruising by homosexuals). He socialised in multiple social circles, such as peers at university (the study process appears several times on the pages), Latvians at the dormitory, theatre visitors, and men from *pleshki*. Some of these circles did not overlap. Irbe’s contacts with Latvians in Minsk, who are also studying there and waiting to return to Riga, are quite autonomous. Right after arrival, he meets “sisters in the misfortune having arrived from Latvia [to Minsk]” [*no Latvijas atbraukušās bēdu māsas*]<sup>41</sup> and shares with them his longing to go home.

Speaking of other men, Irbe utilised a complex system of coordinates that, if not explicated, was likely intuitive. In the diary, he described the appearance, manners, age, and clothing of the people he met, which is expected for a queer

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40 Hnilamiodau 1995, 161.

41 Irbe 01.11.1952.



account of sexual and romantic encounters. However, he also mentions the statuses, languages, and ethnicities of those around him. To us, readers, this provides insight into Minsk as a socially diverse, layered, and stratified social space.

During the post-war decades, there was a rapid change in the population structure of Minsk. The Jewish population, which had previously made up half of Minsk's inhabitants, decreased while ethnic Belarusians resettled here in large numbers from rural areas. The population of Minsk grew enormously in the 1950s, going from 273,6 k to 403 k between 1950 and 1955.<sup>42</sup> However, Minsk did not seem to display a distinct Belarusianness for Irbe. Instead, it functioned as a melting pot where the Russian language was commonly used as *lingua franca* with larger Russification processes in the background. The Belarusian language was only mentioned once in the text as the language of a newspaper Irbe's roommate read. Often, it is difficult to determine the ethnicity of a particular Irbe's partner because many non-Russians in the USSR spoke Russian. The Soviet census, similar to the post-Soviet ones in Belarus, relied on self-identification criteria to identify ethnicity. While ethnic Russians comprised only 20% of the city of Minsk in 1959, the rate of Russian-speaking people was much higher as Russian, unlike Belarusian and Latvian, was used for interethnic communication.

Irbe's neighbourhood in the dormitory is not the most pleasant one for him: he is surrounded by "people who are not bad but of low culture ([characterised] by indecent behaviour, dirtiness, laziness)."<sup>43</sup> In this regard, Minsk turns out to be a rather proletarian place of noisy conversations and cramped living space. Irbe does not seem to make friends among this social layer of the city; instead, choosing to go to venues of leisure with higher social status, like the theatre.

Opera and ballet served as places of aesthetic impressions not only from music and dances but also from the scenery and a place to observe other members of the subculture. Some may be in the audience, others on the scene or in the orchestra pit, and sometimes, it would be possible to enter a conversation with them and even schedule a date. There, he also observes an ethnic difference in the biographical strategies of Soviet queers, as "almost all Russians get married and continue their other [homosexual] life".<sup>44</sup>

In the sphere of high culture in Minsk, typically Russian surnames such as Mironov, Maslennikova, and Nikolayeva dominate, at least on the pages of Irbe's account. In many cases, they are evidently invited from Moscow or Leningrad. During one of Irbe's last days in Minsk, he meets a person from Leningrad with

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42 Govorushko 2021, 22.

43 Irbe 01.12.1952.

44 Irbe 21.12.1952.

whom they share a mutual liking. Leningrader can even recite a verse by Latvian poet Jānis Rainis. Both dislike Minsk, expressing this attitude in Russian, as they find it to be an ahistorical space devoid of comparable potential for both of them. At the end of his stay, Irbe mentions “a few others”<sup>45</sup> (*dažus citus*) whom he regrets not being able to meet again after leaving Minsk, but the only one particular person from the theatre is mentioned, whose surname is Glinskih and he is Russian.<sup>46</sup>

During his time in Minsk, another social milieu Irbe contacts is the military. At least one of Irbe's lovers was an officer. Importantly, the military and their families were not only economically privileged and mobile (even though their occupation conditioned the latter). Additionally, their children who attended schools in different Soviet republics were exempt from learning the local language – a free pass that many used after coming to Minsk.<sup>47</sup>

It was, thus, education, language, and milieu that separated Irbe from many ethnic Belarusians. During the 1950s, the use of the Belarusian language was firmly associated with the absence of urban identity; the city, the high culture, and the education required to master Russian, even though ethnic Russians constituted only 8% of the population of the Belorussian SSR in 1959.<sup>48</sup>

It seems that Irbe, based on his diary, did not make meaningful connections with people of the Minsker or Belarusian identities in Minsk. This fact indicates the social fabric in the empire wherein contacts between peripheries are to be maintained via the centre. Wherever they are, the people from the centre prioritise having proper positions and resources, such as the Russian language to facilitate making contacts and expressing their opinions. Irbe does not consciously seek a Russian as a partner instead, he is attracted to people's traits such as cultural knowledge, art expertise, and travel experiences that in Soviet conditions come with elements of Russianness, such as education or work in Moscow, or fluency in the imperial language, pre-conditioned by Russian ethnicity and name.

Architectural heritage, distributed unevenly between the territories of the USSR, adds to the social attractiveness of some places and turns other places

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45 Irbe 11.01.1953.

46 Surnames ending with -ih are considered particularly foreign to Belarus. An example of discussion is available in *Nasha Niva* newspaper <https://nashaniva.com/?c=ar&i=221921>.

47 The exemption from studying the local language for children of the Russian military is a recurrent motive in Belarusian media and in oral conversations with people born in the 1970s or earlier. Here is a forum page where users mention the corresponding waiver both in Byelorussian and Ukrainian SSR. <https://www.tanzpol.org/2015/02/t90949--ukrainskij-jazyk-v-ssr.html>.

48 Uroven' 1959, 14.

into less “interesting”. Both Riga and Minsk suffered demographic losses during the war. However, Minsk was a very provincial town that gained the status of the capital of the Belorussian SSR. On the one hand, there were lower buildings that were not fully reconstructed by 1952 and only 400,000 inhabitants, with a large part of rural newcomers.<sup>49</sup> Riga was a bustling, culturally rich, post-imperial harbour town with six-storey buildings, beautiful parks, and boulevards. During late Stalinism, it served as a regional capital whose territory of attraction extended beyond the borders of Latvia. Being a queer person, Irbe is also affected by that matrix. He practices his identity as a homosexual by meeting other gay people in Minsk. However, Irbe, as a Rigan or Latvian, relates more to Russian and Latvian persons who happened to be there.

It is unclear from the fragment to what extent Irbe was aware and critical of the nature of social engineering of the Soviets, particularly their ethnic policy. Stalinist atrocities emerge on the margins of Irbe’s writing, to the extent he believed it was safe to mention them. Once, the 1933 famine in Belarus<sup>50</sup> emerged as a topic of students’ conversations. On another occasion, Irbe noted that the examiner had been an “old colonel, the head of the military tribunal”.<sup>51</sup> The general lack of references to repressions and programmed cultural inequalities in the diary may have been due to the risks of such writing in the Soviet Union. Furthermore, the language of anti-colonial critique was hardly available to the author at that time. However, with its uneven, ethnicised and spatial distribution of social capital, the city was not an easy place to criticise. Along with hardships, it offered pleasures, and its injustices were less explicit when compared to many other adversities in the Soviet Union, such as deportations, imprisonments, and forced slave work. Irbe admits some sympathy to the city in the last days before departure – or at least a pity that he was not going to come back.

Living a non-normative sexual life, Irbe was one of those actors who explored urban space beyond the usual conventions. His diary shows that his peers in Minsk were quite successful in creating this “lived space” in the categories of Henri Lefebvre.<sup>52</sup> However, Irbe, as a Latvian urbanite, was a stranger in Minsk in multiple senses, which opens up the possibility for a decolonial reading of his text. The context in which Irbe, with his multiple identities, navigated was characterised not only by institutionalised homophobia but also by the imperial relationship between the Russo-centric metropole and ethnicised peripheries.

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49 Bohn 2008.

50 Ramanava 2003.

51 Irbe 16.12.1952.

52 Lefebvre 2014.

## Irbe as a queer Latvian traveller across the USSR

Irbe's diary contains entries of his travels to different parts of the USSR. Apart from Belorussian SSR, he travelled to RSFSR, as well as to Ukrainian, Estonian, and Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republics. In the 1960s, Irbe visited Leningrad, which impressed him with its Westernness, architecture playing a vital role in that. In a way, Leningrad is antithetical to Minsk: a city with preserved architectural heritage and a pronounced Western vibe contrasts with the Belarusian capital, which was destroyed almost entirely and reconstructed according to the dominating ideology of the time. Irbe mentions historical buildings in the city centre and sightseeing opportunities in the suburban area of Peterhof, which contrast with ordinary residential areas. In the city centre, he can "feel the culture" (*[J]ūtama kultūra*)<sup>53</sup>, enjoys an interesting excursion led by a Jewish guide, and repeatedly mentions encountering many tourists from different countries. Residents of Leningrad, for Irbe, are different "from ordinary Russians"<sup>54</sup> (*no parastajiem krieviem*). It is also Leningrad, a monument on Marsovo field, that evokes negative emotions towards Nazi Germans in Irbe. Despite all reservations, this indicates his affinity to Soviet culture. At the same time, Irbe was pleased to hear the Latvian language spoken by strangers on Nevsky Avenue. Irbe also mentions that many people in Leningrad perceived him as a foreigner, which he probably experienced himself.

Speaking of Irbe's national consciousness, examining his trips to Lithuania and Estonia is particularly interesting. In 1952, while on his way to Riga, Irbe passed by Vilnius and described it as "less beautiful but more interesting than Minsk".<sup>55</sup> However, in 1965, when Irbe revisited Vilnius, his impression was very different. This time, he noticed the Lithuanian language's remarkable presence in signage and street conversations.<sup>56</sup> Moreover, Irbe writes that he could comprehend most of the written and spoken Lithuanian, and was understood when speaking Latvian. He also reflected on the sisterhood between the Latvian and Lithuanian nations, mentioning Prussians as the third sister in the triad of Baltic nations.<sup>57</sup>

Although his notes from Tallinn in 1970 were short, they, too, mention the dominance of the Estonian language in the streets and on street signs.<sup>58</sup>

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53 Irbe 12.08.1960.

54 Ibid.

55 Irbe 11.01.1953.

56 Irbe 13.10.1965.

57 Ibid.

58 Irbe 17.09.1970.

In both Tallinn and Vilnius, Irbe opposed what he saw in Riga, where he felt a prevalent presence of Russians or Russian speakers. During these trips, Irbe identified himself not only as gay but also as a “foreigner”, a compatriot, and a person from a brotherly nation without reducing himself to Sovietness or sexuality. However, despite the variety of places, topics, and situations that Irbe encountered, the importance of the Latvian language for his construction of self remained inviolable.

### Value of Irbe's diary for Belarusian queer history

Irbe's diary entries from the 1950s about Belarus are of great significance, for they provide a rare insight into the scarce body of Belarusian queer and LGBT history. There is no academic research in Belarusian history on non-normative sexualities similar to the work by Lipša<sup>59</sup> on the interwar period, which was a time of independence for Latvia.<sup>60</sup> The 1950s was a period of intensive Russification in Belarus, which happened between the resurgence and “peaks” of the Belarusian national revival movements.<sup>61</sup>

Analysing parallels between now and the early 1950s can hardly be relevant for Latvian scholarship. However, it is pertinent from the Belarusian perspective, currently the country undergoing the most massive government repression in Europe since the break-up of the USSR. Many aspects present in Minsk during Irbe's 1952 visit are returning to Minsk in the 2020s. Homophobic rhetoric on the political level is returning in the context where the Russian language dominates every sphere of social life. Belarusian territory is used according to the needs of stakeholders from Moscow, and Russian ethnic identity can be expressed freely in a Belarusian city, contrary to both queer and Belarusian ones. This oppression is happening, again, despite only 8% of the Belarusian population declaring themselves Russians during the Belarusian population census 2019 (the same percentage as in 1959). There are also differences: the Belarusian language is avoided not because of its association with non-prestigious provincialism but because it is a sign of dissent and using it may lead to repression.<sup>62</sup> Here, we can

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59 Lipša 2014, Chapter 4.

60 Search in Polish and English also did not bring up texts that would shed light on LGBT and queer in Western Belarus, which was part of Poland in 1921–1939.

61 Zaprudnik 1993.

62 For example, Alina Nahornaja, in her book *Mova 404*, collected more than a hundred persons' stories of being bullied, insulted, fired, or imprisoned for the use of Belarusian in Belarus.

only speculate on how different the degree of change is in comparison to 1952 when it comes to ethnicity and sexual orientation.

Valodzin undertook the first attempt to write Belarusian queer history;<sup>63</sup> most available accounts of Belarusian queer lives date back to the post-Soviet period. Belarusian queer subjectivity was perhaps inhabited relatively late; moreover, it was probably emerging in parallel with the national subjectivity of Belarusians, similarly characterised by lateness. In the early 1980s, Dančyk (full name – Bahdan Andrusišyn), an openly gay singer from American emigration, was used as a cultural symbol in important accounts of Belarusian national revival (*Adradžennie*),<sup>64</sup> but with no mention of his sexuality. Interestingly, the book also features a story of a Belarusian-speaking student minority speaking publicly to defend a female student assaulted by a male peer – thus attracting new allies to their community.

Belarusian national project is often described as having failed due to the establishment of a dictatorship, the reinstatement of Russian as a state language in 1995 (along with Belarusian, but dominating), and continued maintenance and strengthening of ties with Russia. Belarusian LGBT also found themselves among the readership of the Russian gay journal *Tema*, published since 1990.<sup>65</sup> A reader of Belarusian newspaper *Perspektiva* “expressed the hope that “someone brave enough will create a society of sexual minorities, similar to those in Moscow, Riga and St. Petersburg, here, in Hrodna”.<sup>66</sup> This perspective is seen as a sign of double backwardness, as it is a backlash from both the West (Riga) and the centre (Moscow, Leningrad). Later, LGBT-themed magazines emerged featuring materials in Belarusian,<sup>67</sup> which is significant to note because Belarusophone content is consensually considered part of Belarusian culture. At the same time, the status of Belarusians’ Russophone texts is repeatedly debated. Belarusophone gay prose<sup>68</sup> and queer poetry<sup>69</sup> followed. In 2015, the Makeout initiative organised a discussion on “Gender and Nation” during the Meta Festival that featured three days of screening of LGBT-themed cinema with subtitles in Belarusian.

Belarusian national project is often considered the least successful compared to others, which, virtually is true compared to the Latvian project. Still, Irbe’s Latvian perspective on supposedly more “national” capital cities of Estonia

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63 Valodzin 2016.

64 Dubavets 2012.

65 Valodzin 2016, 45.

66 Ibid.

67 E.g., Lambda started by Eduard Tarletski, with the associated website *Apagay* (apparently, a word play between *apahej* (Belarusian word for apogee) and “gay”)

68 Consider *Piesni traleibusnych rahuliou* by Uladzislau Harbacki (Harbacki 2016).

69 E.g., by Artur Kamarouski (Kamarouski 2020).

and Lithuania has parallels with how Belarusians view Ukraine throughout the post-Soviet decades, especially regarding linguistic situations.

As compared to 1952, the asymmetry between Latvian and Belarusian homosexuals has increased in terms of the rights and travel opportunities secured in their respective home countries. A queer traveller from Belarus cannot enter Latvia unless for business or humanitarian reasons due to a visa ban on Belarusian citizens since 2022 Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. At the same time, a queer traveller from Latvia can, as of early 2024, travel to Belarus visa free, but probably they may opt for other destinations.

However, a transformation is evident in the way Belarusianness is present in Belarusian queer activities, both in emigration and inside the country, especially after the events of 2020, such as rigged elections, mass protests, and mass repressions. It is not possible to reveal all the LGBT initiatives and grassroots activists in Belarus due to security reasons. However, the Belarusian LGBT community actively uses the Belarusian language on social media and their literature. In addition, the decolonial debate is a topic of discussion in queer-writing workshops, and the rainbow flag was present during the 2020 protests, while the white-red-white flag was present at Vilnius Pride. Vika Biran and Toni Lashden, in their 2023 books published abroad, presented accounts of mass repressions and forced exodus that LGBT Belarusians have been facing since 2020.<sup>70</sup> Also, in the same year, an anthology of Belarusian gay writing was published in Great Britain.<sup>71</sup> As of 2023, it is virtually impossible to imagine that such publications will exist in Belarus due to both state homophobia and discrimination against the Belarusian language and culture. This discrimination has intensified since 2020 and is accompanied by the expansion of Russian ideology.<sup>72</sup> This body of works and activities centred around the use of the Belarusian language allows us to speak about the ethnonational consciousness among Belarusian LGBT individuals, even if they face persecution from the state for both national and sexual identities. Given the absence of support from the state, it is noteworthy that in Belarus, the only political force consistently supporting LGBT is the anarchist movement.<sup>73</sup>

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70 Biran 2023; Lashden 2023.

71 Harbacki, Ivanou 2023.

72 Notably, the only piece of the anthology (Ivanou, Harbacky 2023) in the Russian language is Zmicier Aliaksandrovich's fiction piece in the form of a letter to the newspaper *Sovietskaya Byelorussia* (Soviet Belarus) from a reader of Russian descent who exhibits both Belarusophobic and homophobic views. The text is available online <https://queerion.com/4580-pismo-v-sovetskuju-belorussiju.html>.

73 Valodzin 2016, 49.



In November 2023, the Russian government announced a new law recognising “the LGBT movement” as extremist. In response, the editorial board of *Nasha Niva*, the first Belarusian newspaper, which is a widely read Belarusophone media, published a comment stating: “This [homophobic legislation] only reinforces our moral imperative to treat LGBT people as equals. They are part of our society, part of the Belarusian nation, one of us.”<sup>74</sup> The publication gathered significantly more likes than dislikes – given the nationalist and conservative image of the media and its audience during previous decades. This is happening almost simultaneously with the legalisation of same-sex partnerships in Latvia in November 2023, which could be more evidence that relations between queerness and Belarusian national project are also changing.

## Conclusion

Irbe’s diary allows multiple readings depending on the reader’s interest and positionality. However, there are limitations given the context of writing, such as the repressive Soviet occupation and the context of reading conducted and interpreted by a non-Latvian and non-historian scholar during the period of aggressive Russian expansion in the region. In the diary, non-heterosexual inhabitants actively explored and used Minsk’s urban space during the 1950s. It implies that the almost unresearched “black box” of queer life in Soviet Belarus might contain more discoveries than previously thought. Also, diversity – and unequal status – of sexual habits were intertwined with other heterogeneities, constituted by class, education, cultural consumption, and ethnicity, among other factors. In one of the possible readings, this paper proposes that, to some extent, the social capital for interethnic romantic encounters in post Second World War Soviet Minsk was formed by assets primarily available to individuals of Russian origin and socialisation. The avenues for further research, however, are not limited and related to the historical past alone but also to its echoes in the contemporary world. One area important to explore is whether subaltern queer subjects will succeed in building channels of communication and a sense of solidarity that circumvent imperially constructed images and views of each other.

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74 “Гэта толькі ўзмацняе нашу маральную патрэбу ставіцца да ЛГБТ як да роўных. Яны частка нашага грамадства, частка беларускай нацыі, адны з нас” <https://nashaniva.com/331291>.



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## KVĪRS UN ETNISKĀ PIEDERĪBA MINSKĀ 1952. GADĀ: KASPARA ALEKSANDRA IRBES DIENASGRĀMATAS BALTKRIEVU LASĪJUMS

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Zinātniskās intereses: masu represijas Baltkrievijā 21. gadsimta 20. gados, mīlestības kritiskās studijas

Raksts piedāvā intersekcionalo pieeju padomju impērijā dzīvojošo nekrievu homoseksuāļu pieredzes izpētei. Agrāko intersekcionalo pētījumu uzmanības centrā bija rase, dzimums un sociālais slānis, savukārt citu reģionu kontekstā priekšplānā var izvirzīties etniskā piederība, pilsonība un valoda. Izmantojot kontekstualizēta lasījuma pieeju, latvieša Kaspara Irbes 1952. gadā Minskā veikto dienasgrāmatas ierakstu izpētē, raksts aplūko nekrievu homoseksuālos subjektus Padomju Savienībā kā neviendabīgu un daudzveidīgu grupu. Pētījumā arī parādīts, kā notika homoseksuāļu komunikācija ar cilvēkiem no “centra”, padomju sociālajai sistēmai kavējot tiešos kontaktus starp konkrētām etniskām grupām piederošiem pakļauto nāciju pārstāvjiem. Pētot attiecīgās situācijas Baltkrievijas vēsturē, autors arī atklāj, kā savstarpējo kontaktu ceļā var attīstīties nacionālās identitātes un homoseksuāļu emancipācijas projekti.

*Atslēgas vārdi:* pakļautie kvīri, dekolonizācija, Baltkrievija, Latvija, nacionālisms

### Kopsavilkums

Raksts piedāvā intersekcionalo pieeju padomju impērijā dzīvojošo nekrievu homoseksuāļu pieredzes izpētei. Agrāko intersekcionalo pētījumu uzmanības centrā bija rase, dzimums un sociālais slānis, bet citu reģionu kontekstā priekšplānā var izvirzīties etniskā piederība, pilsonība un valoda. Kontekstualizēti pētot latvieša Kaspara Irbes 1952. gadā Minskā veiktos dienasgrāmatas ierakstus, raksts aplūko nekrievu homoseksuālos PSRS pavalstniekus kā neviendabīgu un daudzveidīgu grupu. Pētījumā arī parādīts, kā priekšplānā izvirzījās kvīru komunikācija ar cilvēkiem no “centra”, padomju sociālajai sistēmai kavējot tiešos kontaktus starp konkrētām etniskām grupām piederošiem pakļauto nāciju pārstāvjiem. Pētot attiecīgās situācijas Baltkrievijas vēsturē, autors arī atklāj, kā savstarpējo kontaktu ceļā var attīstīties nacionālās identitātes un kvīru emancipācijas projekti.

Raksta pirmajā daļā tiek aplūkota intersekcionalās pieejas LGBT+ dzīves izpētei reģionālā specifika. Tiek pamatota etniskās piederības nozīme, analizējot kvīru dzīvi padomju un pēcpadomju periodā. Tālāk sniegts baltkrievu kvīru maz pētītās vēstures pārskats. Pārējā teksta daļa ir veltīta Irbes dienasgrāmatas ierakstiem, kas veikti, viņam

viesojoties Minskā, Kijevā, Ļeņingradā, Tallinā un Viļņā. Noslēgumā ir dažas piezīmes par Irbes dienasgrāmatas lasījuma nozīmi no 21. gadsimta 20. gadu baltkrievu skatījuma.

Irbe Minskā viesojās gandrīz trīs mēnešus – no 1952. gada oktobra līdz decembrim, lai apmeklētu kvalifikācijas celšanas kursus tieslietās. Šajā pilsētā pavadītajām nedēļām viņa dienasgrāmatā ir atvēlētas 11 lappuses. Avotā sniegts ieskats ikdienas dzīves sociālajā un kultūras pieredzēs, ko Irbe piedzīvoja kopmītnē, publiskajās vietās un ielās. Līdzās aprakstiem, kas reizēm izceļas ar etnogrāfisku precizitāti, dienasgrāmatā pierakstīta arī ar uzturēšanos Minskā saistītā pašrefleksija. Tādējādi Irbes dienasgrāmata ir vērtīga pētniekiem daudzos aspektos – kā unikāls pēckara Minskas apskats, kā ieskats homoseksuāļu dzīves ģeogrāfijā šajā pilsētā, kā stāstījums par PSRS izglītības infrastruktūru, padomju tieslietu kultūru utt. Pētniekam, kas interesējas par Baltkrieviju, šī dokumenta fragments ir unikāla liecība par kvīru dzīvi Baltkrievijas galvaspilsētā latvieša skatījumā; citiem vārdiem sakot, tas sniedz īpašu viena nacionālās padomju republikas pārstāvja redzējumu par citu republiku. Raksta uzmanības centrā ir Irbes ceļojumu etniskās piederības, pakļautības un seksualitātes aspektu krustpunkti. Īpaša uzmanība pievērsta Maskavas un Ļeņingradas iedzīvotāju klātbūtnes minējumiem Irbes ierakstos, kā arī viņa kontaktiem ar citu kultūru pārstāvjiem. Attiecības ar cilvēkiem no impērijas centra bija redzamākas nekā tiešie kontakti starp baltkrieviem un latviešiem.

Irbes dienasgrāmatai ir iespējami daudzi lasījumi, atkarībā no lasītāja intereses un pozīcijas. Vienlaikus interpretācijas process uzliek arī ierobežojumus, ko diktē rakstīšanas konteksts – represīvā padomju okupācija, kā arī lasījuma konteksts – avotu analizē nelatvietis un nevēsturnieks un pētījums tiek veikts laikā, kad notiek agresīva Krievijas ekspansija reģionā. Minskas 20. gadsimta 50. gadu pilsētvide dienasgrāmatā atklājas kā tās neheteroseksuālo iedzīvotāju aktīvi izzināta un lietota. Tas vedina domāt, ka vismazāk pētītajā padomju Baltkrievijas homoseksuāļu dzīves “melnajā kastē” varētu slēpties vairāk atklājumu, nekā tika iepriekš domāts. Turklāt seksuālo paradumu dažādība – un nevienlīdzīgais statuss – savijās ar citiem daudzveidības veidiem, ko cita starpā nosaka sociālais slānis, izglītība, kultūras patēriņš un etniskā piederība. Saskaņā ar vienu no daudzajiem iespējamajiem lasījumiem sociālo kapitālu romantiskiem kontaktiem dažādu etnisko pārstāvju vidū pēckara padomju Minskā vismaz kaut kādā mērā radīja priekšrocības, kādas bija galvenokārt pieejamas krievu izcelsmes un krievu aprindās socializējamiem cilvēkiem.

Tālākās izpētes virzieni tomēr ir saistīti ne tikai ar vēsturisko pagātņi kā tādu, bet ar tās atbalsīm mūsdienu pasaulē – cik sekmīgi homoseksuāļiem kā bijušajiem pakļautajiem izdosies veidot tādu komunikāciju un solidaritāti, kas apietu impēriju radītos priekšstatus citam par citu?

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