

# The question of the content of school history course in the publications of historians-methodologists in the 1920s and 1930s

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*Abstract.* The article is the continuation of the publication *The issue of social functions of history in the periodicals of Latvia in the 1920s and 1930s* which was published in *Istorija* (2016, Vol. 102, No. 2). The article considers the views of teachers-historians about the principles of selection of historical material, its organization in the lower secondary school, their vision of the place of national history in school history education and its proportion with world history in the school curriculum.

*Keywords:* national history, world history, principles of selection of teaching material, school course content.

*Anotacija.* Šis straipsnis yra *Istorijoje* (2016, t. 102, Nr. 2) jau skelbto straipsnio *Socialinių istorijos funkcijų klausimas Latvijos periodiniuose leidiniuose XX a. 3–4 deš. tęsinys*. Straipsnyje aptariamos mokytojų istorikų nuomonės apie istorinės medžiagos pasirinkimo principus, jos išdėstymą pagrindinėje mokykloje bei jų įžvalgos apie nacionalinės istorijos vietą istorijos mokymo procese ir jos santykį su pasaulio istorija mokyklos programoje.

*Esminiai žodžiai:* nacionalinė istorija, pasaulio istorija, mokymo medžiagos pasirinkimo principai, mokyklos kurso turinys.

## Introduction

As it was marked in the publication *The issue of social functions of history in the periodicals of Latvia in the 1920s and 1930s*<sup>1</sup>, both teachers and the general public across Europe paid considerable attention to the school subject of history in the 1920s and the 1930s. Due to the existing historical situation (the formation of a new democratic state) in Latvia, the question of the content of school course occupied a special place; it was primarily the question about the place of national history in the process of teaching and its proportion with world history. However, the solution to this issue was associated with a number of problems. Whereas there was some previous experience in connection with the teaching of world history in schools, the Latvian history course was created from scratch, though it occupied a significant place in the school curriculum. The situation was complicated by the fact that the actual research of the Latvian history began only after the state won its independence. There are reporting materials of the Society of History Teachers of Latvia<sup>2</sup> and the articles of history teachers in such periodicals as *Monthly Magazine of the Ministry of Education (Izglītības Ministrijas Mēnešraksts)*, *Educator (Audzinātājs)*, *Our Future (Mūsu Nākotne)*, which can serve as a confirmation of the above mentioned fact. In this connection, the basic question was concerned with the materials which historical science could give for the development of school history course and for school books. Thus, at the beginning of the 1920s, Zalitis wrote in the introduction to the school book *Latvian history for schools and self-education*<sup>3</sup> published in 1921 that the time of writing a systematic course of Latvian history meeting the requirements of scientific criticism had not come yet as many questions were not sufficiently studied. In 1922, Shvabe, speaking about the difficulties of writing an acceptable school book, remarked that *there was no scientifically based historical terminology; the conventional division of Latvian history into periods was not presented*<sup>4</sup>. Zalitis' and Shvabe's idea was expressed by other historians, such as Pommers<sup>5</sup>, Stochmanis<sup>6</sup>, Adamovichs<sup>7</sup>, throughout the period under review, in different variants and different years. The materials of the periodicals *Monthly Magazine of the Ministry of Education (Izglītības Ministrijas Mēnešraksts)*, *Educator (Audzinātājs)*, *Our Future (Mūsu Nākotne)* help to get an idea about the activity of pedagogical community in the discussion of the question of the content of the school subject of history. The range of issues which were considered in the

<sup>1</sup> ŠENBERGA, Ilze. The issue of social functions of history in the periodicals of Latvia in the 1920s and 1930s. *Istorija*, 2016, t. 102, Nr. 2, p. 105.

<sup>2</sup> *Pagātne un tagadne*. Rīga: Vēstures skolotāju biedrība, 1938, krāj. 2.

<sup>3</sup> ZĀLĪTIS, Frīdis. *Latvijas vēsture skolām un pašmācībai*. Rīga: Valters un Rapa, 1921, p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> ŠVABE, Arveds. *Latvijas vēsture II*. Rīga: Valters un Rapa, 1921, p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> POMMERS, Andrejs. *Latvijas vēsture*. Rīga: Valters un Rapa, 1930, p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> STOKMANIS, A. *Latvijas vēstures pirmavotu izlase*. Rīga: Valters un Rapa, 1928, p. 4.

<sup>7</sup> ADAMOVIČ, Ludvigs. *Pamatskolu Latvijas vēstures programma un mācības grāmatas*. *Audzinātājs*, 1937, nr. 3. p. 83.

publications covered all the aspects of school education; an important place was given to the questions concerned with the content of the school course of history, such as the principles of the selection of historic material, its presentation in the school course, the place of national history in the school curriculum and its ratio with world history. We can say that this question was relevant throughout the period under review; it was the general tendency of that time, and it concerned not only this subject.

## About the principles of selection of teaching material and the demands for its content

The content of school history course was one of the questions addressed in the publications of pedagogical periodicals and the introductions to school books. It involved the definition of the principles of the selection of educational material and its volume and the formulation of the requirements for its presentation and design. It is necessary to note that the interest in the question of the principles of the selection of material on the pages of the above mentioned periodicals remained throughout the 1920s and 1930s, and the so called principles were not practically changed. The fact of such continuity itself can testify to the intensive search for the content of the educational material of the history course meeting the requirements of methodologists-theorists and corresponding to the actual situation of teaching history in schools.

The question about the potential volume of material in the curriculum was discussed by the authors of the publications throughout the whole period under review (in 1923 the question was considered in the congress of teachers of secondary schools where the necessity to avoid the overwork of pupils was especially underlined<sup>8</sup>). It was only in the second half of the 1930s that the interest in this question decreased. A number of authors noted that it was possible to get a reasonable volume of the educational material by providing for a number of requirements and taking into account the characteristics associated to pupils' age and the level of their development. It was offered to refuse the oversaturation of facts *leaving only the dominating ones, those which had a value in the period under review (especially if they marked the beginning of a significant process in the life of the nation<sup>9</sup>)*, by leaving aside the small changes or chronological dates which were of no value in understanding the events<sup>10</sup>. It was underlined that it was necessary to consider *the most basic questions, not a mass of disconnected facts<sup>11</sup>*, and those facts had

<sup>8</sup> Vidusskolu skolotāju kongress. *Audzinātājs*, 1924, nr. 3, p. 11.

<sup>9</sup> DREIMANIS, Pēteris. *Vielas izvēles principi vēsturē. Audzinātājs*, 1933, nr. 1, p. 11.

<sup>10</sup> BERZIŅŠ, Jānis. *Darba principi vēstures stundās. Izglītības Ministrijas mēnešraksts*, 1924, nr. 3.

<sup>11</sup> LIEKSNIS, Jānis. *Dažas piezīmes vēstures mācībā. Mūsu nākotne*, 1931, nr. 1, p. 6.

to be critically revised and *meet scientific ideas*<sup>12</sup>. It was remarked that it was necessary to speak about specific things with specific illustrations<sup>13</sup>.

To be understood by pupils, the educational material must be presented properly, i.e. attention should be paid to the language of the text<sup>14</sup>, its structure<sup>15</sup> and form. The form is often mentioned in the introductions to some school books<sup>16</sup> when speaking about the first years of teaching history in schools. According to some authors, it is the teacher's choice to put accents during the presentation of the educational material directly in each lesson<sup>17</sup>.

In addition to the methodological requirements for the content of educational material, a significant place in the discussion on the content of school history education was given to the question about the historical material making the content of the history course. It was already in 1921 that in the introduction to his school book *History of Latvia* (Part 1) Švabe mentioned two perspectives which in his opinion were basic in writing history programs and school books in the light of the new historical circumstances. He noted that in the lower secondary school history *must be presented from the perspective of the Latvian nation only* and only for the sake of the contrast it is able to render *about those who conquered Latvia and governed it*. Herewith, it was noted that the actual course of the historical process in Latvia *made... to learn at school not the history of rulers but the history of the nation*<sup>18</sup>. In the author's opinion, it represented certain difficulties at the initial stage of studying history in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade, and the selection of the educational material had to be based on the cultural-historical approach, whereas political history had to be left for the following years.

In this case, it is necessary *to raise pupils' understanding of the essence of the teaching material*<sup>19</sup> and, in the opinion of the authors of a number of publications, it is only possible if the training material offered to pupils and its volume correspond to the characteristics associated to the age of pupils and the level of their development. Thus, in this connection, Berzinšs sees the specificity of the historical material in the idea that the task of the history course does not generally correspond to the logic of the child's development: the child faces such events which he or she does not understand because of his age in every period of history being studied. Therefore, as noted by Dreimanis, it is necessary *to regulate the mental processes of pupils* and to select the learning material which must be presented in such a way *that children could learn it for a shorter term and*

<sup>12</sup> DREIMANIS, Pēteris. *Vielas izvēles principi vēsturē. Audzinātājs*, 1933, nr. 1, p. 11.

<sup>13</sup> SAULIŅŠ, Jānis. *Vienpusības un ekstrīmi. Audzinātājs*, 1933, nr. 4, p. 159.

<sup>14</sup> BERZIŅŠ, Jānis. *Darba principi vēstures stundās. Izglītības Ministrijas mēnešraksts*, 1924, nr. 3, p. 157.

<sup>15</sup> VIKSNIŅŠ, Nikolais. *Modernās vēstures metodikas pamatprincipi*. In: *Pagātne un tagadne*. Rīga: Vēstures skolotāju biedrība, 1938, krāj. 2, p. 140.

<sup>16</sup> MELNALKSNIS, Krišs. *Īsa vispārēja vēsture*. Valmiera–Cēsis: K. Dūnis, 1920, p. 4.

<sup>17</sup> VENTMALNIEKS, Alfrēds. *Latvijas vēsture*. Valmiera–Cēsis: K. Dūnis, 1923, p. 3.

<sup>18</sup> ŠVABE, Arveds. *Latvijas vēsture*. Rīga: Valters un Rapa, 1921, p. 3.

<sup>19</sup> BERZIŅŠ, Jānis. *Darba principi vēstures stundās. Izglītības Ministrijas mēnešraksts*, 1924, nr. 3.

without difficulty and get as much as possible for themselves.<sup>20</sup> In this case, the depth of consideration will depend on the abilities of learners<sup>21</sup>, because the volume and character of the learning material define the mental development of pupils<sup>22</sup>.

The specific feature of the content in different grades of the lower secondary school was one of the topics discussed in a number of journal publications. It was noted that in the 3<sup>rd</sup>–4<sup>th</sup> grade (and their curriculum accordingly) pupils must be acquainted with the brightest episodes and events from the past of the Latvian nation. In these grades (from 1925 in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade only) it was offered to focus on *the typical events associated with the phenomena of everyday life*<sup>23</sup>, as children up to ten years *easily mix centuries and historical personalities*<sup>24</sup>, but in general they concentrate on the events directly. It was considered possible to study the regular Latvian history course and to speak about the causations starting from the 5<sup>th</sup> grade only, as it already corresponded to the characteristics of pupils' age.

It was supposed that it was necessary to expand *the circle of the historical events being studied*<sup>25</sup>. According to the authors of publications, the volume of reported facts and events grows even more in the secondary school, and more attention is paid to the causal relations and chronology<sup>26</sup>. It was emphasised that those facts should be considered in the world history course of the lower secondary school which help *to fully characterise the development of society*, that is to give an idea about its economic, political, social, religious, intellectual development<sup>27</sup>, describe the life of the people in any period and show all the achievements<sup>28</sup>, help to find out what value *at each individual location and century the geographical position, climate, natural data, the character of people, etc.*<sup>29</sup>, which tell the story of cultural development (about the results of human activity)<sup>30</sup>, give an idea about the life of outstanding people, introduce the development of European democracies and typical scenes from the life of other people in the past, have<sup>31</sup>.

In 1937 L. Adamovichs, speaking about the history program and school books, noted that in order to strengthen the national identity of Latvians, it is more important to know not how difficult it was to be a Latvian in different periods of their lives, but what

<sup>20</sup> DREIMANIS, Pēteris. Vēstures skolotāja darbs pamatskolā. *Mūsu nākotne*, 1924, nr. 9, p. 259.

<sup>21</sup> BERZIŅŠ, Jānis. Darba principi vēstures stundās. *Izglītības Ministrijas mēnešraksts*, 1924, nr. 3.

<sup>22</sup> DREIMANIS, Pēteris. Vēstures skolotāja darbs pamatskolā. *Mūsu nākotne*, 1924, nr. 9, p. 259.

<sup>23</sup> DREIMANIS, Pēteris. Vienas izvēles principi vēsturē. *Audzinātājs*, 1933, nr. 1, p. 11.

<sup>24</sup> BERZIŅŠ, Jānis. Darba principi vēstures stundās. *Izglītības Ministrijas mēnešraksts*, 1924, nr. 3.

<sup>25</sup> LIEKSNIS, Jānis. Pirmās stundas vēsture. *Mūsu nākotne*, 1932, nr. 2, p. 135; DREIMANIS, Pēteris. Vēstures pasniegšana pamatskolas V. klase. *Audzinātājs*, 1929, nr. 9, p. 204.

<sup>26</sup> DREIMANIS, Pēteris. Vēstures skolotāja darbs pamatskolā. *Mūsu nākotne*, 1924, nr. 9, p. 259.

<sup>27</sup> DREIMANIS, Pēteris. Vienas izvēles principi vēsturē. *Audzinātājs*, 1933, nr. 1, p. 11.

<sup>28</sup> POMMERS, Antonijs. *Seno laiku vēsture*. Rīga: Valters un Rapa, 1930, p. 3.

<sup>29</sup> DREIMANIS, Pēteris. Vēstures pasniegšana pamatskolas V. klase. *Audzinātājs*, 1929, nr. 9, p. 204.

<sup>30</sup> LIEKSNIS, Jānis. Piezīmes vēstures stundām. *Mūsu nākotne*, 1933, nr. 5, p. 370.

<sup>31</sup> DREIMANIS, Pēteris. Vēstures mācību mērķis un raksturs vidusskolā. *Pagātne un tagadne*. Rīga: Vēstures skolotāju biedrība, 1938, krāj. 2, p. 168.

their culture, which they saved and cared for despite of all the difficult circumstances in life, was<sup>32</sup>.

## About the ratio of Latvian history and world history in the curriculum of the lower secondary school

It should be noted that in the discussion of the content of the history course in the lower secondary school during the reporting period the question about the place of national history in the process of teaching was constantly raised (it can be stated on the basis of the foregoing). This, in turn, determined the special interest in the question of the ratio of the Latvian history course and world history. The programs of history teaching adopted in different years indicated in which forms one or another history should be studied or which of these courses should be given precedence, but in this case the mechanism of their ratio and connection within one form and one studying period was not stipulated. The question about the proportion of Latvian history and world history was solved only in 1934 when, after the new program was adopted, the ratio of these courses was finally determined in favour of Latvian history. The volume of global history was practically minimised. However, this did not eliminate the question of their correlation, because the new situation entailed the formulation of a new variant of work organization during history lessons.

This question was considered in a number of publications, but authors generally concentrated on the volume of history courses and the substantiation of their approach in the selection of the educational material. In this case, it is necessary to note that practically all authors of school books and articles spoke about the studying of Latvian history, but Dreimanis was the only one to declare the necessity of studying it in the context of world history. He noted that the understanding of Latvian history was impossible without the knowledge of world history<sup>33</sup>. The author continued to speak about this in his publications even after the adoption of the new programme in 1934, in which world history was given the applied role in relation to national history. Thus, in the publication of 1936 Dreimanis already assigned a secondary role to world history. He indicated the necessity to select *the most typical, edifying and dominating interrelated facts of world history having a certain value at this time and in Latvian history*<sup>34</sup>. According to the author, the typical events in the world history course must be considered in a certain place and at a certain time by avoiding details and unnecessary dates which do not promote the *understanding of*

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<sup>32</sup> ADAMOVIČ, Ludvigs. Pamatskolu Latvijas vēstures programma un mācības grāmatas. *Audzinātājs*, 1937, nr. 9, p. 83.

<sup>33</sup> DREIMANIS, Pēteris. *Latvijas vēsture ainas un atsevišķi tēlojumi no vispārējās vēstures*. Rīga: A. Gulbis, 1924, p. 3.

<sup>34</sup> DREIMANIS, Pēteris. *Vielas izvēles principi vēsturē*. *Audzinātājs*, 1933, nr. 1, p. 11; DREIMANIS, Pēteris. *Piezīmes par vēstures mācīšanu*. *Audzinātājs*, 1936, nr. 11, p. 668.



*the corresponding events in history of the native country of Latvia.* That is, Latvia and its history must be in the spotlight<sup>35</sup>.

It is necessary to note that despite the active discussion of the question about the proportion of Latvian history and world history on the pages of different publications, the question of their connection remained relevant for 14 years after the beginning of the school reform. In 1931, in the introduction to the school book *Latvian history* for grades 5 and 6 of the lower secondary school<sup>36</sup> Dreimanis offered his version of the solution to this problem. According to the author, a certain period of Latvian history must be taught synchronously after the relevant period of world history; it is necessary to focus on the most typical facts and events of each period of Latvian history, and the events of world history must be considered as if having a place in national history (as indicated by Berzinšs<sup>37</sup>). But as you can see from Lieksnis' publication, for two years the solution to this problem (though it is a very difficult task which implies a high level of knowledge) was laid completely on teacher's shoulders<sup>38</sup>.

From the beginning of 1934 the question about the volume of the educational material of history in Latvia was no longer raised. Adamovičs' article, published in 1938, makes an exception; in connection with the review of the school books of history, it mentions Grins' school book, where the pedagogical function of national history comes first by selecting and presenting the material at the expense of objectivity and by poeticising the content<sup>39</sup>.

## Conclusions

In summary, it should be noted that the possible discussion about the content of the school subject of history on the pages of the periodicals was practically reduced to the naming of authors' proposals for the necessary actions without any critical approach to the developing situation.

By analysing the publications and school history programs we can say that the educational and instructional goals highlighted in the 1920s and 1930s affected the content of secondary school programmes. The cornerstone of the education system in general was the education of the citizen of the new national state; thus, most attention was paid to national history.

<sup>35</sup> DREIMANIS, Pēteris. Piezīmes par vēstures mācīšanu Piezīmes par vēstures mācīšanu. *Audzinātājs*, 1936, nr. 12, p. 724.

<sup>36</sup> DREIMANIS, Pēteris. *Latvijas vēsture*. Rīga: Valters un Rapa, 1931, p. 4.

<sup>37</sup> BERZIŅŠ, Jānis. Darba principi vēstures stundās. *Izglītības Ministrijas mēnešraksts*, 1924, nr. 3, p. 394; DREIMANIS, Pēteris. Vēstures mācību mērķis un raksturs vidusskolā. In: *Pagātne un tagadne*. Rīga: Vēstures skolotāju biedrība, 1938, krāj. 2. p. 168.

<sup>38</sup> LIEKSNIS, Jānis. Piezīmes vēstures stundām. *Mūsu nākotne*, 1933, nr. 5, p. 370; DREIMANIS, Pēteris. Vēstures pasniegšana pamatskolas V. klasē. *Izglītības Ministrijas mēnešraksts*, 1927, nr. 10, p. 235.

<sup>39</sup> ADAMOVIČ, Ludvigs. Pamatskolu Latvijas vēstures programma un mācības grāmatas. *Audzinātājs*, 1937, nr. 9, p. 80.

This ambition was implemented in the programmes of history: the proportions of universal history and Latvian history changed for the advantage of the latter and reached a critical point in 1935. The unity of the processes of world history was difficult to comprehend since the course of world history taught in individual detached episodes was reduced to the minimum. The course was considered a supplement helping to develop a better understanding of the course on Latvian history. The consistency of learning changed as well – priority was given to Latvian history; courses of world history were taught afterwards. Such a system affected the developed system of knowledge. The ineffectiveness of such an approach is indirectly testified by a shift to the 1928 programme in 1940, which featured a more balanced proportion between the history of Latvia and world history.

It should be noted that the ideas of the authors of the publications on the organization/presentation of educational material were implemented through a specific presentation of teaching material in the programmes and textbooks: episodic narratives which prevailed during the first years of school history teaching and were partially preserved in the upper grades of the lower secondary school; the dating of events was refused in both the lower secondary school and the secondary school; individual topics of world history, which contributed to the increased understanding of historical processes, were unreasonably rejected; individual topics of Latvian history were often exaggerated in the lower secondary school and the secondary school.

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## Bendrojo lavinimo mokyklos istorijos kurso turinio klausimas istorikų metodininkų publikacijose XX a. 3–4 deš.

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### Santrauka

Straipsnis *Bendrojo lavinimo mokyklos istorijos kurso turinio klausimas istorikų metodininkų publikacijose XX a. 3–4 deš.* remiasi XX a. 3–4 deš. įvairiuose Latvijos žurnaluose spausdintomis publikacijomis ir yra straipsnio *Socialinių istorijos funkcijų klausimas Latvijos periodiniuose leidiniuose XX a. 3–4 deš.* tęsinys. Autorė daugiausia dėmesio skiria mokytojų istorikų aptartiems mokykloje dėstomo istorijos dalyko turinio klausimams, svarbiausios mokomosios medžiagos pasirinkimo principams, istorinės medžiagos turinio reikalavimams mokyklos programoje bei nagrinėja, kaip ji buvo perteikiama konkrečiuose vadovėliuose. Straipsnyje daugiausia dėmesio skiriama mokytojų bendruomenės požiūriui į Latvijos istorijos vaidmenį, jos vietą mokykliniame istorijos kurse, aptariami požiūriai, koks turėtų būti pasaulio istorijos ir Latvijos istorijos santykis mokyklos programoje.

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