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Latvian Research Libraries from the 1980s to the Present

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Abstract: This article explores the evolution of Latvia's leading research libraries from the final decade of Soviet occupation to the present day. After the Soviet time, libraries have undergone great changes and have become modern, multifunctional cultural, educational, and research centres responding to the needs and expectations of society. The article focuses on the National Library of Latvia, centre of the Latvian library system since its foundation in 1919. The State Unified Library Information System has modernised the entire network of publicly accessible libraries. Twelve major libraries have been involved in developing the electronic catalogue. Work on the Latvian National Digital Library has been ongoing since 2006. The Latvian Government's decision in 2002 to build a new National Library (opened in 2014) has also spurred on the renovation or construction of many other libraries in Latvia.

Keywords: Latvian library system; Soviet occupation; censorship; de-Sovietisation of libraries; National Library of Latvia; University Library of Latvia; Academic Library of the University of Latvia

Lettische Forschungsbibliotheken von den 1980er-Jahren bis heute

Zusammenfassung: Der Artikel untersucht die Aktivitäten der führenden Forschungsbibliotheken Lettlands von den 1980er-Jahren bis heute. Nach der Sowjetzeit haben sich Bibliotheken stark verändert und sind zu modernen, multifunktionalen Kultur-, Bildungs- und Forschungszentren geworden, die den Bedürfnissen und Erwartungen der Gesellschaft entsprechen. Der Artikel konzentriert sich auf die Nationalbibliothek Lettlands (NLL), die seit ihrer Gründung im Jahr 1919 das Zentrum des lettischen Bibliothekssystems darstellt. Das „Staatliche Einheitliche Bibliotheksinformationssystem“ hat das gesamte Netzwerk öffentlich zugänglicher Bibliotheken modernisiert. Zwölf große Bibliotheken waren beteiligt. Seit 2006 wird an der „Lettischen Nationalen Digitalen Bibliothek“ gearbeitet. Die Entscheidung der lettischen Regierung im Jahr 2002, eine neue National-

bibliothek zu bauen (eröffnet 2014), hat auch die Renovierung oder den Neubau vieler anderer Bibliotheken in Lettland beschleunigt.

Schlüsselwörter: Lettisches Bibliothekssystem; sowjetische Besatzung; Zensur; Entsowjetisierung von Bibliotheken; Nationalbibliothek Lettlands; Universitätsbibliothek Lettlands; Akademische Bibliothek der Universität Lettlands

1 Introduction

Latvia presently enjoys a relatively extensive and well-distributed network of research libraries. Central to this network is the National Library of Latvia (NLL), which holds a unique position due to its functional role. The network also includes libraries from 49 higher education institutions and several research institutes.¹ The focus of this article is the NLL – not only because according to the historical “Law on the State Library” (1922, valid until the Soviet occupation, which began on 17 June 1940) and later the “Law on the National Library” (1992), it is at the centre of the development of the state library system, but the author, Andris Vilks, while managing the NLL from April 1989 to August 2024, was one of the architects of strategic change in the sector, a participant in major events, and involved in the development, discussion, and implementation of various large-scale projects.

Information is also provided on other major research libraries, mainly the Library of the University of Latvia (LUL) and the Academic Library of the University of Latvia (AL UL), to the extent that their activities are reflected in publications.² The activities of libraries during the last decade of the Soviet occupation have not been studied extensively, but the author of this article has devoted several academic articles to the activities of the NLL and changes in the library sector during the post-communist era, which have been published both abroad and in Latvia.³

¹ Latvijas Nacionālā bibliotēka (2024).

² Latvijas Akadēmiskā bibliotēka (2004), Šmite (2002), Misiņa bibliotēka (1995), Some (2022).

³ Vilks and Dreimane (2014), Vilks (2009), Vilks (2006), Auziņa-Smith and Vilks (2001).

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During the era of Soviet occupation, the research libraries discussed in the article were the most prestigious in the sector: since they served the research and student community, unlike the so-called (public) libraries for the masses, they had the right to preserve most of their extensive historical collection and to supplement it with important cultural values by consolidating publications that were considered “harmful” by the authorities in departments of restricted collections known as “specfondi”. These libraries were permitted to order literature from abroad, including the so-called capitalist countries, and to establish book-exchange connections with foreign research institutions. In addition, they were allocated resources for bibliographical, research and “instructional” projects and for the publication of relevant literature. With their considerable capacity, valuable cultural heritage, and participation in national and international projects, they continue to play a leading role in Latvia’s library system. However, during the Soviet occupation, these libraries cooperated with each other in only a few areas, such as promoting book history and compiling bibliographic indexes, primarily because they were under the jurisdiction of different ministries (e. g., Education, Culture). Although an Inter-Ministerial Council of Libraries was established in the 1960s, it was largely formal and had little impact on the sector.

The opening of the new NLL building ten years ago in 2014, the rapid development and integration of information technologies into people’s daily lives, the ever-increasing amount of digitally created data files containing information and the digitisation of historical resources have changed the way the public views libraries, with new requirements and additional tasks given to them. This article outlines the major challenges for the sector facing the future modernization of libraries.

2 The Early 1980s – The Decline of Soviet Rule

The beginning of the 1980s in the historiography of the Soviet occupation period is often referred to as a period of stagnation and stability of the regime.

However, in reality, it marked the beginning of the decline of Soviet power, as evidenced by the economic downturn and the increasing inefficiency of key elements of the regime, including communist ideology, party dictatorship, a centralised planned economy and a repressive system: “More and more niches sprouted,” says historian Daina Bleiere, “where citizens could escape the intrusive

control of the state.”⁴ Ideology became a mere formality, and the Soviet republics began to gain more autonomy in shaping their cultural policies. However, it is still unclear what this policy was in the Latvian SSR (LSSR) in the 1980s, up to the time the country regained its independence. Li Bennich-Björkman, a political scientist at Uppsala University, argues that there was less resistance to the occupying power in Latvia during the post-Stalinist period (following Stalin’s death in 1953) than in Estonia and Lithuania,⁵ which can be explained by the victory of the pro-Moscow wing of the Latvian Communist Party (LCP) in 1959 and the repression of so-called national communists who tried to defend Latvian interests in Riga in the second half of the 1950s. Li Bennich-Björkman points out that the Environmental Protection Club, the first collective organisation to become an opposition in Latvia, was only founded in 1986, when Mikhail Gorbachev (1931–2022), General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, had already announced the “reconstruction” that initiated the rapid processes of change in the Soviet Union. However, the de-ideologization of libraries in Latvia began several years before the adoption of the Declaration of Independence of the Republic of Latvia on 4 May 1990. The rapid restoration of the country’s independence would not have been possible without broader public resistance or defiance of the Soviet occupying power. It is noteworthy that some national communists from the late 1950s onwards held leading positions in cultural institutions and pursued a policy to preserve Latvian culture as much as it was possible. For example, the LSSR State Library (the name of the NLL during the Soviet occupation; from 1966 to 1989 was supplemented with the name of the writer and collaborator Vilis Lācis (1904–1966), hereafter – SL), was headed from 1959 to 1982 by the national communist Aina Deglava (1909–1992). “The content of the work during this period is not so much determined by the prohibitions of censorship and respect for them, as by the precise awareness of the permissible limits and the full utilization of this limited freedom,” emphasises Ināra Klekere, a former employee of the NLL and long-time head of the Rare Books and Manuscripts Department.⁶ In this vein, she points out, were such achievements as publishing of the SL “Zinātniskie Raksti” (Proceedings) (since 1964), publishing of a retrospective index of articles in periodicals titled “Latviešu zinātne un literatūra” (Latvian Science and Literature, in six volumes from 1963 to 1989), the establishing of a specialised Letonica department in 1979, which concentrated on literature

⁴ Bleiere (2012) 37.

⁵ Bennich-Björkman (2007) 66.

⁶ Klekere (1998) 101.

on Latvia, active research and popularisation of the history of national book publishing with the creation of a permanent museum exhibition on the “History of Latvian Book” (1964). The collecting and processing of personal archives of cultural and educational workers was organised, and contacts with colleagues in Estonia and Lithuania were strengthened by holding seminar camps “LiLaEst”. The Library recruited qualified professionals who had themselves been – or whose relatives had been – politically persecuted. The staff was supplemented by P. Stučka Latvian State University students. The Library’s documentation was also mostly in Latvian, although Russian was the dominant language in official communication in Latvia. The areas of work established under Deglava’s leadership, such as research into the history of book publishing, the development of a retrospective bibliography, and the collection of an informal history or folk archive, still largely shape the identity of the NLL today.

Despite the achievements, there were many unresolved problems in the SL. The most pressing one was the very poor state of the premises. At the beginning of the 1980s, the vast collection of more than five million items⁷ was housed in 12 buildings in Riga, as well as in the Ikšķile Evangelical Lutheran Church which had been renovated to serve as a depository.⁸ None of the buildings were suitable for storing books, and many had conditions detrimental to human health. In addition to the mandatory LSSR copy, the Library had also been receiving compulsory USSR paid for copies since the beginning of the second Soviet occupation, which added more strain on the overcrowded premises. In 1984, for example, more than 200 000 new acquisitions were received.⁹ In the second half of the 1980s, therefore, one and a half million items were packed away in storage and inaccessible to readers.¹⁰

The same rapid growth of the collection was evident at the P. Stučka Scientific Library of the Latvian State University (SL LSU, today – LUL), which received literature mainly from the Central book pool of research libraries in Moscow. The library was supplemented by about 80 000 items every year. By 1982, the SL LSU already had two million items. The collection of the Fundamental Library of the Academy of Sciences (FL AS, today AL UL) was also extensive: in 1980, it contained almost 2.5 million items, and in the AS library system as a whole (16 libraries) – almost 3 million items. The FL AS was the only research library in the LSSR for which

a new 14-storey building was built in Riga during the Soviet occupation in 1979.¹¹

The influx of compulsory USSR paid for copies into Latvia’s largest research libraries significantly contributed to the ideologization and Russification of their collections.

The Soviet era was characterised by the dual ownership of libraries. For example, the SL was subordinate to the Ministry of Culture of the LSSR (from August 1988 to November 1989, the State Committee for Culture), but it also had to respect the instructions of the Ministry of Culture of the USSR and the V. I. Lenin State Library. The department responsible for the restricted collection (for literature deemed unwanted by the regime) was maintained from the SL budget, but its operational instructions were received from the main censorship body, the Main Administration for the Protection of State Secrets in the Press of the LSSR Council of Ministers (Glavlit). Along with the LSSR State Security Committee (KGB), it controlled the activities of the restricted collections and copying facilities, in accordance with the censorship guidelines.¹² This subordination also extended to other restricted collections, such as those in FL AS, which housed the largest repository of banned literature in the LSSR, containing over 200 000 items by the late 1980s.

During the final decade of Soviet occupation, a significant discrepancy emerged between the officially sanctioned information and the content that was actually disseminated among the public. The authorities’ stance on various categories of prohibited literature grew increasingly ambivalent and contradictory. This situation is exemplified by the treatment of literature produced by Latvian political refugees residing in capitalist countries. Since most exile publications were considered anti-Soviet by the USSR Glavlit, they were classified as “top secret” from 1972 onwards. Only the Department of the restricted collection at the FL AS had the exclusive right to keep these materials.¹³ All other collections of exile literature housed in the Jānis Misiņš Latvian Literature Department at the FL AS (formerly the Misiņš Library), the SL, and the SL LSU were to be handed over to it.¹⁴ One of the basic functions of the SL was thus severely limited: the acquisition and the bibliographic documentation of the most comprehensive collection of Letonica. However, the FL AS Department for the restricted collection did not have priority in receiving exile literature; twice as many publications were received by the Central Committee of the LCP from the mail intercepted at the postal censor-

7 Miķelsons et al. (1986) 16.

8 Zaļuma (2019) 142 f.

9 Miķelsons et al. (1986) 16.

10 Didiča and Novikova (1994) 97.

11 Zinkina (1984) 30.

12 Dreimane (2017) 149.

13 Dreimane (2020a) 56.

14 Ibid. 56 f.

ship point, and the KGB also obtained a significant portion. Both organisations, along with Glavlit, formed a triad of censorship authorities, which sought to control the public's spiritual life and access to information, while dictating Soviet propaganda.¹⁵ To access “top secret” information in the FL AS restricted collections, permission was required from the highest authorities, specifically the heads of the External Relations Department or the Propaganda and Agitation Department of the LCP Central Committee; only KGB personnel were exempt from this requirement. This created an absurd situation characteristic of the communist regime in Latvia: officially, Latvian exile literature was classified as “top secret”, as if it did not exist at all. However, in private, liberal magazines such as “Jaunā Gaita” and various books circulated discreetly from hand to hand, and it was possible to listen to foreign Latvian radio broadcasts and buy recordings of exile Latvian music.

Despite this, an attempt was made in the mid-1980s to impose even tighter constraints by designating the newly established restricted library collection at the Party History Institute of the LCP Central Committee as the sole repository for Latvian exile literature, further narrowing its readership compared to that of the FL AS. Nevertheless, with the approval of the LCP Central Committee, the first copies of exile publications were permitted to remain in the FL AS. Interestingly, in 1986, several books by exiled linguists were declassified (marked with a triangle seal at the postal censorship point) and transferred to the general collections.

Since the main category of readers for FL AS was researchers, it had the most funding for the acquisition of foreign literature and the widest opportunities for cooperation with capitalist countries. Thus, in 1970, FL AS received 338 journal titles from 18 countries for foreign currency, more than two-thirds coming from the USA, the UK, and the Federal Republic of Germany. Even more impressive were the book exchanges: nearly 500 partners in 21 countries.¹⁶ The capacity of other research libraries to acquire foreign publications, especially from capitalist countries, was much more modest. In 1984, the SL had only 116 book exchange partners in 28 countries.¹⁷ The acquisition of publications from Western countries was practically impossible. The SL was allocated 300 so-called currency roubles, only enough to subscribe to one journal.

Although some foreign literature, particularly in the technical sciences, had been exempt from Glavlit inspections since the so-called “Khrushchev thaw”, staff were

always required to verify that newly received books did not contain harmful information before they were transferred to the general collections. During the Soviet occupation, there were restrictions not only on accessing ‘harmful’ literature but also on other extensive collections in the library (such as maps, ‘harmless’ publications from the period of the independent Republic of Latvia, limited editions, etc.).¹⁸ These were only included in internal or working catalogues, thus remaining largely unknown to the general public. Special permission was also necessary to access rare books and manuscripts.

Contacts with foreign visitors and colleagues were strictly controlled. Only an officially approved circle of people, including the administration, heads of departments and certain key specialists, were allowed to communicate with them. Controlled communication was allowed only with so-called “socialist” countries with which the USSR had friendly relations. As the foreign policy situation changed, this eventually included Yugoslavia, Romania, Albania, and the People's Republic of China. One example: only twice was the Director of the SL, A. Deglava, allowed to participate in excursions of USSR library staff to cities where IFLA was being held at that time.

Libraries did not have the authority to establish their own classification systems or cataloguing rules. Unified state standards known as “GOST” were implemented throughout the Soviet Union, including in Latvia. Libraries were required to integrate elements of the mono-ideological Library and Bibliographic Classification (Bibliotekno-bibliograficheskaya klassifikatsiya, BBK) into their Universal Decimal Classification (UDC) systems. When some libraries resisted a complete transition to the BBK, the USSR Ministry of Culture issued an order in October 1985 mandating the adoption of the BBK in the so-called republican libraries,¹⁹ to which the SL belonged.²⁰ Some staff at the SL still sought ways to opt out of the BBK, but they were informed that the order was mandatory. In 1989, the SL prepared and published an “instructional” guide for public libraries titled “Organisation of the Systematic Catalogue according to the BBK” (Sistemātiskā kataloga organizācija pēc BBK), even though most public libraries had already rejected the imposed classification. It was only on 29 January 1990, that the SL officially abandoned the BBK and reverted to the UDC. It should be noted that the SL LSU had been voluntarily incorporating BBK elements since the late 1970s.

¹⁵ Daukšts (2011).

¹⁶ Latvijas PSR Zinātņu akadēmijas Fundamentālā bibliotēka (1973) 65–68.

¹⁷ Miķelsons et al. (1986) 16.

¹⁸ Sardiko (1994) 85 ff.

¹⁹ Respublikanskiye biblioteki – term for libraries of national importance in the Soviet Socialist Republics.

²⁰ Dreimane (2003) 39.

3 The Turn to Freedom of Information: 1986–1989

The relaxation of Soviet censorship brought about tangible changes in the libraries. In 1986, after a long hiatus, the press was able to discuss the work of banned exiled authors, such as the writer Zenta Mauriņa (1897–1978).²¹ In 1987, when compiling a bibliographical index dedicated to the great Latvian folk song collector Krišjānis Barons (1835–1923), the SL decided to include publications from the independent Republic of Latvia and Latvian exiles, even though these were still officially classified.²² In September, an interdisciplinary restricted collections evaluation commission was set up in Latvia; unfortunately, it worked extremely slowly, as it analysed each individual work, and only a third of the evaluated publications were accepted for general circulation.

In 1988, the first large consignments of exile literature began to arrive for the J. Misiņš Latvian Literature Department and the SL, which had to begin the collection of foreign Latvian publications almost from scratch.²³ As information about the previous restrictions on the circulation of exile literature and requests for help in collecting it spread, the support of the exile community for Latvian libraries grew rapidly. For example, in autumn 1989, the Uppsala Latvian Society donated its book collection (900 volumes) to the SL, thus providing the foundation for its collection of exile literature.²⁴ On 31 October 1989, the SL opened the exhibition “Exile Book”, where visitors were not only allowed to look at the publications, but also to read them.

On 6 September 1989, in order to speed up access to the restricted collections, and on the initiative of the SL, the LSSR State Committee for Culture issued an order for the transfer of the SL’s restricted collection to the competence of the Director and the right of the Library to decide independently on the storage and use of Letonica literature. In 1989, the SL also dropped the name Vilis Lācis and restored its historical name – the State Library of Latvia.

The order to eradicate the restricted collection and transfer the literature they contained to the general collection was issued by the SL Director on 1 December 1989. This marked the end of Soviet censorship in the SL. However, the last closed door to the repository of banned literature, the restricted collection of the FL AS, was opened to the public in 1990.

The need for the design and construction of a new SL building was also raised. In 1988, a design competition was

arranged, but none of the designs submitted met the requirements. In December 1988, Gunārs Birkerts (1925–2017), an eminent Latvian architect living in the USA, who had experience in designing museums and libraries, was invited to design the library. In his view, architecture should be like a bridge across time – based on the past tradition and looking to the future. The conceptual idea for the library was drawn from a folk tale about three sons of a father who try to climb a glass mountain in order to awaken the king’s daughter, who is asleep at the top. Later, the concept was transformed and linked to a fable about the people’s storehouse of wisdom, the “Castle of Light”, which had sunk during captivity and would rise again when the people regained their freedom. Despite the symbolic concentration of the project, it took twenty-five years from the first sketch to the opening of the new building.

One of the most ardent agents of change was the Library Association of Latvia (LAL, founded in 1923, dissolved during the first Soviet occupation in 1940), which was re-established on 5 May 1989. As a non-governmental organisation, the LAL provided a wide range of non-hierarchical opportunities for expression and cooperation, contributing to the liberation of librarians from the conformism inculcated during the Soviet years.

As early as 1989, the LAL declared major problems in the sector, including the disastrous state of library premises, the politicisation of library collections and working methods, the limited options for providing readers with interesting literature and the low prestige of the profession.²⁵ One of the LAL’s most important tasks: to re-establish professional links with international institutions abroad, as the exchange of professional information and experience was needed. In July 1989, the LAL rejoined the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA). In August 1989, Aldis Ābele, the first President of the reconstituted LAL and Deputy Director of the SL, attended the 55th IFLA General Conference in Paris. A year later, thanks to the support of the Swedish Association of Research Libraries and Swedish Latvians, a group of eleven librarians represented Latvia at the IFLA General Conference in Stockholm.²⁶

4 The 1990s – The De-Sovietisation of Libraries

With the restoration of independence, changes took place in all sectors, including libraries. The extent and great variety

²¹ Samsons (1986).

²² LPSR Valsts bibliotēka (1987).

²³ Dreimane (2020a) 62.

²⁴ Dreimane (2020b) 221.

²⁵ Piķe (2023) 112 f.

²⁶ Ibid. 178.

and scope of the changes are even difficult to comprehend, this paper deals with the most important ones.

In March 1991, the SL was renamed the National Library of Latvia and, by a special law, regained the role and responsibility of a central depository library for the development of a normal national bibliography, which had been artificially removed during the Soviet occupation. In 1940, and again in 1944, following the Soviet Russian model, the normal bibliographic units were separated from the SL, forming the LSSR Book Chamber (initially part of the SL, since 1959 an independent institution), which compiled the bibliography of the press and book production of occupied Latvia. In 1993, the Latvian Institute of Bibliography from 1989 was reintegrated into the NLL.

One of the most important tasks of the NLL was the creation of a complete and universally accessible collection of Latvian books and periodicals, in which the Latvians living abroad provided the greatest support. In 1991–1993, the NLL received more than 21 000 items of exile literature.²⁷ In 1994, the integration of the restricted collection into the general collection was completed.

In the course of the sector's de-Sovietisation, most public libraries, in accordance with the Law on Local Government, became the responsibility of local municipalities (formerly they reported to the Ministry of Culture), and so the NLL was relieved of its control function. As a centre for the sector's development, the NLL provides information and advisory support to libraries by identifying, collecting, and circulating the latest and most relevant professional information. From 2003 to 2012, the NLL published the journal "Bibliotēku Pasaule" (Library World), which extensively covered events in both Latvian and foreign libraries. Since 2007, the Latvian Library Portal *biblioteka.lv*, which collects data on the library system, the regulatory framework, and other aspects of the sector, has served as a platform for communication between professionals. The portal includes professional literature reviews, a video library, and other materials.

The function that the NLL has continued from the Soviet times is the production of library statistics, but nowadays it has a broader coverage of the sector: it collects data not only on public libraries, but also on research, special and school libraries.²⁸

In 1992, the sixteen libraries of the Latvian Academy of Sciences' institutes, for which the FL had previously provided centralised acquisition and processing, were separated from the FL AS.²⁹ In 1992, it became independent

and acquired a new name – the Academic Library of Latvia (ALL); and the J. Misiņš Latvian Literature Department was renamed the Misiņš Library, although remaining part of the ALL.³⁰ In 1992, due to the overcrowding and deterioration of the Misiņš Library premises, it was given the newly built archive building of the Party History Institute on Rūpniecības Street.³¹

As libraries moved from a centrally planned economy to a free market economy, they found it increasingly difficult to find the funds to buy literature. The changing geopolitical situation meant that the exchange of printed materials, which had been the main source of foreign literature during the Soviet period, lost its importance. There was an objective reason for this: postal tariffs were rising sharply, so the usefulness of shipments had to be carefully weighed. Moreover, foreign institutions were able to purchase Latvian publications without going through libraries.

As state subsidies for the book trade declined, the price of new books and newspapers rose sharply. New ways had to be found to replenish the book stock. The German Rectors' Conference was a great help in 1991 when it awarded 4.5 million German marks to eight Baltic libraries for the purchase of literature in various fields of science. The NLL, LUL, and ALL received 1.5 million German marks.³²

By freeing the collections of communist literature and other ideology-laden publications accumulated during the long years of occupation, research libraries saw their collections decrease. Within a few years, the NLL had discarded some two million copies.³³ In 1997, it held only 4.4 million items.³⁴

Through cooperation between the NLL and the LAL, the Latvian "Library Law", the legal basis for the sector, was steadily developed and adopted by the Saeima in 1998. It defined the functions of libraries, the basic principles of their operation, and the rights and obligations of libraries and their users. In order to ensure a uniform level of library services, the law includes a requirement for the accreditation of libraries maintained by state and local municipalities.

Despite financial difficulties, library research continued enthusiastically, even more vigorously than during the occupation. The NLL and the LAL, with the support of various international organisations, arranged a series of interdisciplinary conferences on little researched but topical cultural issues. These included the IFLA seminar "Library

²⁷ Latvijas Nacionālā bibliotēka (1994) 11.

²⁸ Latvijas Nacionālā bibliotēka (2024).

²⁹ Sardiko (1998) 44.

³⁰ Stradiņš (1998) 460.

³¹ Ibid. 320.

³² Gavare (2020).

³³ Vilks (2006) 332.

³⁴ Sardiko (1998) 46.

services in a multicultural environment – East and West” (1991), the IFLA symposium “Baltic library history” (1992), the conferences “Terminology of library science” (1993), “Library, book science, ideology during World War II, 1939–1945” (1996), “Freedom of expression, censorship, libraries” (1998), “Latvian book and library: 1525–2000” (2000), and so on. The proceedings of almost all conferences have been published, thus documenting the level of research on the topics, and revealing new research perspectives. The NLL continues its research on the history of Latvian book and the bibliography of early books. In 1999, the comprehensive catalogue “Seniespiedumi latviešu valodā, 1525–1855” (Early Prints in Latvian, 1525–1855) was published, containing extensive bibliographic information on more than 2500 printed works published in Latvia and abroad over a period of 330 years. An important part of the heritage of book publishing in Latvia comprises printed works in German, Russian, Polish, and other languages, which is why in 1991 the compilation of another extensive bibliographical index “Latvijas citvalodu seniespiedumu kopkatalogs, 1588–1830” (The union catalogue of foreign language ancient prints in Latvia, 1588–1830) was launched, its first volume was available to readers in 2013.

One of the ALL achievements is the publication of the collection of drawings and descriptions “Sammlung verschiedener Liefländischer Monumente, Prospecte, Wapen, etc.” by Johann Christoph Brotze (1742–1823), a documentarian of Vidzeme life in the 18th century and a teacher at the Riga Lyceum. During Brotze’s lifetime, the voluminous manuscript (ten volumes) was purchased by the Riga municipality and kept in Riga City Library, along with other Brotze materials. The manuscript was one of the Library’s treasures, which was saved from destruction in a fire in June 1941, when almost the entire collection of Riga City Library, which had been accumulated for more than four centuries, burnt down. After the Second World War, the FL AS took over the saved part of Riga City Library and started preparing the Brotze manuscript for publication. However, the works of the outstanding pedagogue and ethnographer under the title “Zīmējumi un apraksti” (Drawings and Descriptions) could only be published in several volumes after the restoration of state independence in 1992.³⁵

Information technology was rapidly introduced. The NLL purchased its first two IBM computers in 1989, but it took at least another decade before computers became a daily feature of the NLL and other Latvian libraries. In 1993, the NLL received a donation of one million Swedish kroner for the purchase of the VTLS integrated library system and the latest periodicals. The ALL’s first reader’s workstation

for CD-ROM databases was set up in 1992,³⁶ and a year later, the Internet was introduced.

In 1992, the University of Latvia started the development of a national integrated library system “ALISE”, which was initially used by the NLL to create a national bibliography. In 1994, with the support of the Soros Foundation, other university libraries began to automate their libraries, but the introduction of targeted library information systems became possible only with the participation of the state. The “LATLIBNET” (Latvian Library Information Network) project planned to create an electronic catalogue involving the eight largest research libraries in Latvia. Along with the State Investment Programme, half of the necessary funding was allocated by the US financier, the Andrew Mellon Foundation. In 1998, the ExLibris Group’s integrated BIS ALEPH500 was purchased to accommodate the needs of the shared catalogue. Gradually, the State Unified Library Information System (SULIS) or the “Lightnet” was extended to include municipal public libraries; and it received an impressive level of funding from both the state and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. In 2007–2009, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation allocated \$18.2 million for computerisation the public library network, the Internet, and the training of librarians. It also received a donation of software from Microsoft worth \$7.9 million. All public libraries, even in the most remote corners of the country, are now part of a single system, and ten regional training centres have been set up as part of the project.

In the second half of the 1990s, with the support of the State Culture Capital Foundation (SCCF) and foreign funds, the digitisation of library resources began, with the primary aim of preserving valuable, in demand but fragile material from physical deterioration. ALL received a grant from the Soros Foundation Latvia and the Open Society Institute in Budapest for the restoration and digitisation of the previously mentioned Brotze manuscript (3130 pages): “Sammlung verschiedener Liefländischer Monumente, Prospecte, Wapen, etc.” In 1999, with the support of the Soros Foundation Latvia and the SCCF, the NLL started digitising deteriorated newspapers printed on poor quality paper. A hundred titles were digitised by the “Heritage-1: Preservation of Latvian Periodicals (1822–1940)” project. With funding from the SCCF, the NLL continued the digitisation of posters and 16th–18th century maps.

³⁵ Kocere and Karnītis (1994) 14.

³⁶ Ebd.

5 The Beginning of the 21st Century – Achievements and Challenges

Today, formal responsibility for the library sector as a whole lie with the Archives, Libraries, and Museums Division of the Ministry of Culture. Technological solutions such as integrated library systems (ILS) are the responsibility of the Culture Information Systems Centre (CISC) of the Ministry of Culture.

Academic (university) libraries form the core of the research library network (30 university and 19 college libraries). In 2009, ALL was incorporated into the University of Latvia as a core unit alongside LUL, but the process of integrating LUL and ALL is now under way. There are still 21 special libraries, most prominently the Patent Office Library (former Patent and Technology Library of Latvia). Their leading functions are managed by the Ministry of Education and Science, but they also have links to other ministries (Health, Agriculture, etc.). The law highlights four main universities (UL, Riga Technical University, Riga Stradiņš University and the Latvia University of Life Sciences and Technologies), which also have libraries of national importance within their structures. The research libraries system includes two joint universities and public libraries (Ventspils Library and Valmiera Joint Library).

The early 21st century is marked by collaboration among museums, libraries, and archives to build digital collections. From 2003 to 2005, the SCCF funded the programme “Support for Library, Archive and Museum Cooperation Projects in the Digital Environment”, in which 42 projects were implemented for 189 095 lats. One of the most successful projects was a joint project “Jāzeps Vītols” between the NLL, the Museum of the History of Riga, and Navigation, the Museum of Literature and Music, and the Jāzeps Vītols Latvian Academy of Music, which digitised and published online more than 1 000 testimonies of the life and work of this outstanding Latvian composer.³⁷

In 2006, the Digital Library of Latvia (DLL) became widely accessible to the public.³⁸ In addition to the Latvian periodical collection *periodika.lv*, it also includes books, images, maps, sound recordings, and manuscripts. The current task of the DLL is to create a single integrated national digital cultural platform, gradually involving all memory institutions.

The circle of the national union catalogue contributors has expanded to twelve libraries: the NLL, the Fundamen-

tal Library of the Latvia University of Life Sciences and Technology, the Library of Riga Stradiņš University, LUL, AL UL, the Scientific Library of Riga Technical University, the Library of the Latvian Academy of Culture, the Library of the RTU Latvian Maritime Academy, the Library of Riga International School of Economics and Business Administration (RISEBA), the Library of the Riga Graduate School of Law, the Library of the Jāzeps Vītols Latvian Academy of Music, and the Library of the National Art Museum of Latvia. The ALEPH500 system is also used by the State Education and Content Centre (VISC). The Association of Latvian Academic Libraries (LATABA), founded in 1994 to promote cooperation and more visibility for academic and special libraries, currently has 25 members, including the NLL.

The NLL operates under the Ministry of Culture and is recognized as one of the four national data centres of significant importance. In 2024, the NLL assumed responsibility for managing databases previously handled by the Central Information Systems Center (CISC). Additionally, the NLL is accredited as both a research and educational institution. These two functions are overseen by the Ministry of Education and Science (MoES).

The NLL actively participates in national research programmes, working on projects that explore issues of culture, identity, and heritage in wider society and reveal the potential of newly acquired or little-known library collections for use in academic research. For instance, from 2018 to 2021, the NLL carried out “The Significance of Documentary Heritage in Creating Synergies Between Research and Society” project, which received over half a million euros in funding. This project featured four major exhibitions on Latvian book history, three volumes of NLL “Zinātniskie Raksti” and three collective monographs.

One notable publication from this project is the “Catalogue of the Riga Jesuit College Book Collection (1583–1621): history and reconstruction of the collection” (2021). This work, produced by an international team of researchers, focuses on the Jesuit College of Riga’s library – a highly valuable collection taken as war booty. Following the directives of King Gustav Adolf II of Sweden, the collection was transported to Uppsala in 1621 along with other institutional assets. The publication offers a comprehensive account of the College’s history, the library’s journey to Sweden, the provenance of individual items, and their subsequent fate. It includes bibliographical details on all identified items from the library, most of which are now held in Uppsala University Library.

Looking to the future of libraries, we are optimistic about the rapid and positive changes since independence, which reflect the sector’s resilience and adaptability. Over the past 35 years, Latvian libraries have successfully over-

³⁷ Latvijas Nacionālā bibliotēka (2023).

³⁸ <https://digitalabiblioteka.lv/>.

come the consequences of the occupation: collections have been freed from books steeped in communist ideology, there is self-determination for collecting and other areas of work, and openness to new services and modern ways of cooperation and communication.

A significant milestone was the implementation of SULIS, which unified libraries of all types and from across all regions. Despite financial challenges and some public scepticism, the construction of the new NLL building was completed. This development has significantly boosted the modernization of library infrastructure throughout Latvia.

A characteristic feature of modern Latvian libraries is their multifunctionality, which is prominently showcased in the activities of the NLL. The new building offers excellent book storage conditions, a refined and comfortable setting for both visitors and staff, and a wide range of open access collections in all fields – in a sense, a symbolic testimony to the return of Latvian libraries to the world of free information.

About a quarter of the building is designated as public space, accessible even to those without library cards. This area features the “Book in Latvia” exhibition, concert halls, a conference centre, classrooms, exhibition halls, a restaurant, seating areas, and alcoves. The expansive public space enables the library to host various national and international events. The construction project considered a wide range of public interests, including opportunities for relaxation, internet use, music listening, fiction reading, attending exhibitions, concerts, film screenings, book launches, seminars, and conferences, most of them free or low cost. Additionally, specialized reading rooms are available for in depth research.

A distinctive aspect of the Library, setting it apart from other European national libraries, is the Children’s Literature Centre, which provide a collection of children’s literature and appealing spaces for relaxation and reading. The new environment offers enhanced opportunities for promoting reading. Since 2001, the Children, Young People, and Parents Jury Programme has been in place, engaging the public, especially children, in evaluating the collection of the latest literature each year.

Over the years, extensive cooperation has developed with organizations and colleagues in the sector from other countries. For example, the NLL is a member of 23 international organizations. Each membership corresponds to a specific activity, such as representing Latvian libraries internationally, adopting foreign practices and standards, engaging in joint digitization projects, promoting open access, addressing copyright issues at the EU level, and collaborating on research publications. The NLL also functions as the national agency for ISBN, ISMN, and ISSN. In line with the

“Legal Deposit Law”, the NLL collects and archives online publications.

A notable achievement is the integration of the editorial office of the Latvian National Encyclopaedia (Nacionālā enciklopēdija, LNE) into the NLL’s structure in 2014. In 2018, the volume “Latvija” (Latvia) was published to mark the centenary of the Republic of Latvia. The LNE editorial office provides accessible, up-to-date, research-based content on a wide range of topics, including references and illustrative material mostly housed in the NLL, thereby enhancing the Library’s visibility and resource utilization.³⁹

In contemporary Latvia, libraries are leaders among memory institutions, spearheading digitization projects and coordinating collaborative platforms like DLL. They often serve as regional customer service centres and focus on digital humanities, open science, open and linked data, and building e-repositories. They are involved in research data management and advocate for the reuse of research data.

However, there are concerns about the heavy reliance of Latvian politicians on EU projects without stable baseline funding for the sector. There is currently no unified database management system, which the NLL would undertake in cooperation with a consortium of academic libraries. Public libraries, as well as many university and research libraries, still use the ALISE system, which is incompatible with ALEPH500. A new, unified system that all libraries can use is needed.

Academic and special libraries are heavily dependent on their “parent” institutions, leading to varying financial and staff capacities due to differing levels of interest from management. The ongoing reorganization (e. g., merging faculties and universities, merging of faculties, merging of small universities with large ones, merging of LUL and AL UL) is expected to impact library structures and funding, potentially shrinking resources, and hindering staff development. Conversely, some libraries may benefit from technological support from university data centres. Libraries, such as LUL, are trying to work with open data, open science, and are setting up an e-resource repository.

These libraries have seen a generational change, starting with the heads of the institutions, some of whom have been in charge for nearly 30 years. The investment in SULIS has been exhausted, and it is very difficult to see the next consolidated investment in the sector. Current hopes are pinned on EU initiatives, such as the Recovery and Resilience Mechanism, etc., which promises new “injections” in certain segments of the sector.

³⁹ <https://enciklopedija.lv>.

Recruiting specialists, particularly in IT (e. g., systems librarians, programmers, database technicians), is difficult due to uncompetitive salaries. Although a continuing professional training system exists, it is generally rather weak, as a number of training programmes, particularly those based on IT, do not have sufficiently qualified teaching staff. The continuing training system also lacks coherence.

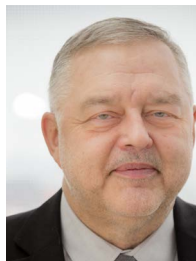
While a national digital library platform with a common aggregator has been established under the NLL's leadership, the planned integration of financial, human, and informational resources of memory institutions is still pending.

The NLL has developed its own heritage conservation and rescue plan, but – drawing on the Ukrainian experience – there is no certainty that libraries' infrastructures would be prepared for emergencies.

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