

History of education and the struggle for intellectual liberation in post-Soviet Baltic space after the fall of the Berlin Wall

Iveta Kestere

University of Latvia

E mail: iveta.kestere@lu.lv

Summary

This study on a “new” history of education is written from the perspective of a participant in the process of discarding Soviet intellectual and physical boundaries. The falling of the Berlin Wall became in post-Soviet societies a continuous process during the last two decades when the now liberated historians of education were faced with a new challenge, namely integration into the newly opened world. The only allowed theory, Marxism-Leninism, reduced historians of education to superficial methodology and its trivialization. However, the collapse of the USSR did not immediately result in new theoretical concepts, because historians were busy in discovering fresh facts in newly accessed archives and libraries. Soon, topics on the history of education were being addressed by social scientists, who had succeeded in learning the latest theories, enabling them to present historic material to the general public in a global context. “Acts-and-facts history” slowly lost its place in university courses. Similar to the Revisionists of the 1960s in the West, today historians of education in the Baltics look to the common narratives and borrow theories from the social sciences. Current research in Latvia focuses on the Soviet legacy, internationalization of education and the stories of those “whose voices have not yet been heard.”¹

Keywords: history of education in post-Soviet Baltic space, Soviet heritage in the history of education, methodology of research in the history of education, history of education in Latvia

Introduction

Let’s start with a simple truth – it is easier to demolish a physical wall than one that surrounds the mind. Taking down the Berlin Wall in post-Soviet society has been a continual process during the last two decades when the liberated are faced with a new challenge,

¹ Richard Aldrich, *Lessons from History of Education. The selected works of Richard Aldrich* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 18.

namely what to do with the newfound freedom? How to integrate into the newly opened world? And – is the wall actually down?

Those doubts and intellectual challenges are reflected in the comparatively small post-Soviet community, which is that of the historians of education. I am one of them: born in the Soviet Union where I received my education in history and doctorate in pedagogy. It is important to position myself as a researcher, because my personal history inevitably colours my story.² While fully aware of the many risks of subjectivity, I would stress the advantages of first-hand experience. To truly understand the Soviet era, the skills of a historian are insufficient, for knowing the secret codes for deciphering the information is equally important. Nothing was as it seemed to be in the Soviet era and things could be so absurd that it is difficult for a person raised in a democratic society to truly believe them.

I do not claim to speak on behalf of the entire community of historians of education from the former Soviet Union. Quite paradoxically, we currently know more about the history of education in the USA, Great Britain and Germany than the activities of our neighbours. We continue to be divided by a language barrier because while Russian now is viewed negatively, knowledge of other foreign languages continues to be a problem. Therefore, I will speak mainly about the country I truly know, my homeland Latvia, which shared its fate with other Baltic States – Lithuania and Estonia.

Soviet heritage in the history of education

The rewriting of the history of education to fit Soviet political requirements began immediately after World War Two, when the Baltic States were forcibly incorporated into the Soviet Union. The treatment of the history of education was based upon a strict scenario previously piloted in other Soviet republics. Like any proper colonizer, the USSR secured itself by means of familiar institutions.³ Official scientific research was concentrated on two

² See Kim Etherington, “Reflexivity: using our ‘selves’ in narrative research”, in *Narrative Research on Learning: comparative and international perspective*, ed. Sheila Trahar (Oxford: Symposium Books, 2009), 77–92.

³ Gary McCulloch and Roy Lowe, “Introduction: centre and periphery – networks, space and geography in the history of education,” *History of Education* 32 (2003): 457–459.

levels: the top, or “most scientific”⁴ research took place in institutes of science, while professors at universities mainly had to teach students. The Department of Pedagogy was established at the Latvian State University in 1944; an institution specifically for studies in education, the Scientific Research Institute on Schools, was opened in 1952. Studies on history of education took place at both.⁵ Initially scholars were imported from Soviet Russia, who with missionary zeal, steered local research onto the “correct” ideological path.⁶ The next generation of researchers had been educated in the Soviet system and, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, formed the group that had to find a “new” history of education.

After World War Two in the USSR and East European countries within its sphere of influence, special attention was paid to history and studies in pedagogy, and both became instruments of propaganda designed to inculcate society in Soviet ideology.⁷ As a result, the

⁴ Michael Grüttner, “Concluding Reflections: Universities and Dictatorships”, in *Universities under Dictatorship*, ed. John Connely and Michael Grüttner (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), 288.

⁵ *Otcjot naucno-issledovatelskovo instituta pedagogiki Ministerstva prosvescenija Latvijas SSR o naucno-issledovatelskoi rabote za 1979 god* [Report on Research in 1979 at the Institute of Pedagogical Research, Ministry of Education of the Latvian SSR] (Latvijas Universitātes Pedagoģijas muzejs, Index 02-3); *Otcjot naucno-issledovatelskovo instituta pedagogiki Ministerstva narodnovo obrazovanija Latvijas SSR o naucno-issledovatelskoi rabote za 1989 god* [A Report on Research in 1989 at the Institute of Pedagogical Research of the Ministry of People’s Education of the Latvian SSR], (Latvijas Universitātes Pedagoģijas muzejs, Index 02-3).

⁶ See curriculum documents in pedagogy and history of education at the University of Latvia from 1945/1946 created by Roberts Miķelsons who were educated in the Soviet Union and arrived in Latvia immediately after the Soviet occupation in 1941. *Latvijas Vēstures Arhīvs* [Latvian State History Archives], F. 464, A. 1, L. 108, 128, 194.

⁷ See Natalia Tsvetkova, *Transforming German Universities during the Cold War: The Failure of American and Soviet Cultural Imperialism* (Doctoral thesis, Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, 2011); Aija Abens, *Effects of Authoritarianism on the Teaching of Latvian History* (Doctoral thesis, University of Latvia, 2011); Jānis Keruss, “Sovjetizācija (1944 – 1956)” [Sovietization (1944 – 1945)] in *Latvijas Universitātes Vēstures un filozofijas fakultātes vēsture padomju laikā: personības, struktūras, idejas (1944 – 1991)* [History of

history of education had a dual purpose – not only should it inform about the history of education, but as described in the introduction of all textbooks, it should “research the development of the theories of Marx, Engels and Stalin on up-bringing”.⁸

The most important Soviet change with the longest-lasting consequences was the introduction of a completely new history canon, in which society was viewed as a continuous antagonism between various forces: exploited vs. exploiters, workers vs. bourgeoisie, farmers vs. kulaks, revolution vs. counter-revolution, and socialism vs. capitalism. An important place in the Soviet narrative was given to the fate of the oppressed, including workers, women, and blacks,⁹ which was caused by capitalism. This formula described the world in simplistic terms¹⁰ and reduced the Soviet history of education to such a trivialized matrix, that it was even hard to recognize Marxist theory in the work of the rank and file historians.¹¹

The only acceptable theory for interpretation of history led to statement of facts without interpretation. While many historians were not confident in using Marxism with which they were not very familiar, others refused to bow to political dictates in research and found an intellectual escape in treated history as a chronological list.

Nevertheless, a section on methodology was required in all research, and that led to the insertion of standardized phrases without explanation of the meaning and, possibly, also

Faculty of History at the University of Latvia during the Soviet times: Personalities, structures, ideas (1944 – 1991)], ed. Jānis Keruss et al. (Rīga: LU Akadēmiskais apgāds, 2010); Sorin Antohi, Balázs Trencsényi, and Péter Apor, eds., *Narratives Unbound: Historical Studies in Post-Communist Eastern Europe* (Budapest: CEU Press, 2007).

⁸ Šoloms I. Gaņeļins un Jevgeņijs J. Golants, *Pedagoģijas vēsture* [History of Education], translation from Russian (Rīga: Latvijas Valsts izdevniecība, 1947).

⁹ Charles W. Mills, “Alternative Epistemologies”, in *Epistemology: The Big Questions*, ed. Linda Martin Alcoff (Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 396–397.

¹⁰ Bernard Russel, *Education and the Social Order* (London, New York: Routledge, 1932/1993), 122.

¹¹ A collection of articles on the history of education published in the Soviet era included such titles as *Education – The Privilege of the Rich* or *The Bourgeois School – Educator of Reactionary Ideology*. See *Tautas izglītība Latvijā agrāk un tagad. Dokumentu un materiālu krājums* [Education of the people in Latvia then and now. A collection of documents and materials] (Rīga: Liesma, 1966).

understanding. A typical example can be found in a book on the history of pedagogic thought: “The author bases the research on the works of Marx, Engels and Lenin that include shining examples of the application of revolutionary dialectics in the explanation of upbringing and of education processes, revealing the organic ties between these processes and the development of society.”¹² Indeed, “Revolutionary dialectics” is the theoretic focus of the study, but it is not discussed further.

Simplification of theory resulted in simplified reading lists. The history of education syllabus consisted mostly of descriptions of work by Marx and Engels, literature written by Lenin, Krupskaya and Makarenko and textbooks written by Soviet authors.¹³ As a result, historians were not interested in reading theoretical literature, and no one really expected them to do.

However, on the other side of the Berlin Wall, we see that the development of the history of education in the teacher training institutes, until the 1960s, did not differ all that much from the USSR; “acts-and-facts history”¹⁴ was popular everywhere. Campbell and Sherington describe the history of education between the 1880s and 1950s as the “history of propaganda”, in order to legitimize the current system of education as a triumph, “to celebrate, justify and explain the present” and to provide heroes in the field of pedagogy.¹⁵

In the Soviet Union, the celebration of presence developed into an orgy that degraded the history of education to the status of a propaganda tool.¹⁶ The story about social justice –

¹² *Marksistsko-ljeninskaja pedagogiceskaja mislj v Latviji, 1898 – 1917* [Marxist–Leninist Pedagogy in Latvia, 1898 – 1917] (Riga: Zinatne, 1979), 6–7.

¹³ Latvijas Vēstures Arhīvs [Latvian State History Archives], F. 464, A. 1, L. 194.

¹⁴ Marc Depaepe, “History of education anno 1992: ‘A tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing’?”, *History of Education* 22 (1993): 5.

¹⁵ Craig Campbell and Geoffrey Sherington, “The History of Education: The possibility of survival,” *Change: Transformations in Education* 5, no. 1 (2002): 50–52.

¹⁶ Marc Depaepe has written on the utilitarian history of education. E.g., “Some Statements about the nature of the history of education” in *Why should we teach history of education*, ed. Kadria Salimova and Erwin V. Johanningmeier (Moscow: The Library of International Academy of Self-Improvement, 1993), 31–36; “Nenožīmības īpatnības. Pedagoģijas vēsture skolotāju izglītībā” [Qualities of Irrelevance. History of Education in the Training of

universal access to education brought about by the Soviet regime – ranked high. The cult of submissive thankfulness was an important part of Soviet ideology. Even today, the myth about excellent and universally accessible schooling throughout the Soviet Union is alive and well.¹⁷

Paradoxically, the history of education in the USSR was cut off from the democratic world, specifically because of the turn in the West towards the history of education in social and political contexts.¹⁸ Revisionist authors such as Brian Simon, Bernard Bailyn, Lawrence Cremin and Pierre Bourdieu revealed in many ways the same thing that Soviet historians were describing since the founding of the USSR: in capitalist society, education serves as a tool to split society into classes by measuring and codifying. This revisionism, however, did not reach Soviet Latvia and most likely also not any of the other Soviet republics. The main reason was fear that theories of education as reproducers of social structures would be entirely applicable to Soviet lands where, just as in other parts of the world, universities were attended predominantly by children from the intelligentsia, while the children of workers mainly learned a trade in vocational schools.

Revisionism in the West during the 1960s and early 1970s resulted in “socialization” of the history of education offering diverse theories for interpretation of facts.¹⁹ The Soviet Union remained isolated from this. The head of the Department of Pedagogy and Psychology,

Teachers] in *ATEE Spring University. Teacher of the 21st Century: Quality Education for Quality Teaching* (Riga: Latvijas Universitāte, 2008), 14–24.

¹⁷ Iveta Kestere, “A Few Aspects of the Soviet School System” in *ATEE Spring University Decade of reform: Achievements, Challenges, Problems 3* (2002): 237–248.

¹⁸ On revisionism see Marc Depaepe “A Professionally Relevant History of Education for Teachers: Does it Exist? Reply to Jurgen Herbst’s State of the Art Article”, *Paedagogica Historica* 37 (2001): 631-640; Marc Depaepe, “What Kind of History of Education May We Expect for the Twenty–first Century? Some Comments on Four Recent Readers in the Field”, *Paedagogica Historica*, 39 (2003): 187–199.

¹⁹ Thomas Mergel, “Geschichte und Soziologie” in *Geschichte. Ein Grundkurs*, Hrg. Hans-Jürgen Goertz (Rowohlts Enzyklopädie, 1998), 621–651; Kathleen A. Mahoney, “New Times, New Questions,” *Educational Researcher*, 29 (2000):18–19; Marc Depaepe, “It’s a long way to ... an international social history of education: in search of Brian Simon’s legacy in today’s educational historiography”, *History of Education* 33 (2004): 536.

one of the Soviet “missionaries”, warned a colleague in 1956: “It is not necessary to analyze the various branches of bourgeois pedagogy; ... As regards up-bringing theories, work more with Makarenko and less with representative of bourgeois pedagogy, because we have different circumstances.”²⁰

Soviet rule brought with it not only intellectual, but also physical boundaries. Historians, like all members of Soviet society, were sorted by levels of access to information. Access to archives and special library collections required permission. Contact with colleagues from the West was almost impossible. Imagine my surprise when I discovered that ISCHE had taken place at the doorstep of the Baltics, namely Warsaw (1980) and Budapest (1982). This begs the question if researchers from the USSR did participate, and if so, who were they and along which criteria they were chosen? According to Lüth, there was a plan to organize ISCHE in Moscow in 1982, which did not come to fruition.²¹ However, I have not been able to discover more information about the activities of Soviet researchers in ISCHE before the fall of the Berlin Wall.

The Soviet Union’s restrictions on time and space, however, resulted only in the opposite effect: in Latvia, the “Promised Land” became both the West and the period of Latvian independence during the 1920s and 1930s, in Latvian collective memory “...the biblical garden in the incarnation of the nation.”²²

Despite this description of a theoretically and contextually sparse history of education landscape, Baltic historians were not a sad, cowed group of people during the Soviet era. On the contrary, they were energetic individuals who initiated active cooperation between Baltic universities during the 1970s. This networking eventually culminated in the founding of the *Baltic Association of Historians of Pedagogy* (BAHP) in 1999.²³ In 2013, ISCHE was hosted in Riga by BAHP and the University of Latvia.

²⁰ Latvijas Vēstures Arhīvs [Latvian State History Archives], F. 1340, A. 23, L. 19, p. 19.

²¹ Christoph Lüth, *International Standing Conference for the History of Education (ISCHE), 1979 – 2000*. Institut Français de L'éducation <<http://www.inrp.fr/she/> (accessed May 15, 2014)>.

²² Thomas S. Popkewitz, “Curriculum history, schooling and the history of present”, *History of Education* 40 (2011): 5.

²³ Leonards Žukovs, “Introduction”, in *History of Education and Pedagogical Thought in the Baltic Countries up to 1940: an Overview*, ed. Aīda Krūze et al. (Riga: RaKa, 2009), 6–8.

When the Berlin Wall fell and the USSR collapsed, a well-organized group of Baltic historians of education, who had learned to honestly research history within the time and space defined by Soviet power was in place, although isolated from processes outside.

‘Overnight changes’ and the fatal attraction by “new” sources

While the organization of the history of education behind the Berlin Wall after World War Two was a well-prepared performance, the exit to freedom was chaotic and full of happenstance. Researchers, now able to breathe more freely, continued on projects already begun, but University academic staff were left in an awkward position. The Soviet system, along with its clearly defined rules had collapsed, but students still needed to be taught. Officially accepted curricula no longer satisfied them, or their teachers.

It is unlikely that professors of the history of education realized the importance, or even the solemnity of creating, by hand, a new curriculum – overnight.²⁴ Review of those programs today clearly indicates that the goal of this effort was not the construction of a modern history of education. History remained as utilitarian in nature as it was during the Soviet era, but now the task was to unveil the nature of totalitarianism and celebrate democracy. Students were required to learn a new characterization of the Soviet era: “Deformation of up-bringing and education as a result of state administration and ideological imperative” or “Alienation of teachers from national culture and the opportunity to freely choose their pedagogical position.”²⁵ That interpretation of the history of education was also the individual historian’s personal demonstration of loyalty to the independence of the country.

Historians spent the first years following independence by studying newly-opened archives and libraries that offered riches that any proper historian should dream about: a vast

²⁴ Initial post-soviet curriculum documents are not easily accessible, as they were either not published or as a very small print run. Currently, three of them are available at the Museum of Pedagogy: Maija Pļaveniece and Iveta Ķestere *Pedagoģija* [Pedagogy] (manuscript, 1990); Jānis Anspaks, *Darba programma pedagoģijas vēsturē* [History of Education program] (Rīga: Latvijas Universitāte, 1992); Ludvigs Grudulis, *Pasaules pedagoģiskās domas attīstība* [Development of world pedagogical thought] (manuscript, 1993/94).

²⁵ Jānis Anspaks, *Darba programma pedagoģijas vēsturē* [History of Education program] (Rīga: Latvijas Universitāte, 1992), 20.

number of previously un-researched files. Indeed, historians had reached a privileged situation, for while social scientists anxiously had to search for new theories to replace or supplement Marxism, historians could, based on the sources they did find in the newly opened archives, give some information to society about the “Promised Land” of independent interwar Latvia, finally available after a 50-year Soviet ban. Initially, the fresh facts revealed by historians created immense interest. However, this popularity was short-lived and the Soviet legacy of superficial attention paid to interpretations soon led to negative consequences.²⁶

Looking for a new identity of the history of education

My first international conference was ISCHE 2002 in Paris where I discovered a very simple truth: our national history is not “convertible”, if it is not put in the context of the world’s common narratives of cultures or politics.²⁷

However, the “great narratives” are the monopoly of western education historians – Westerners have had the necessary tools for research for a long time through diverse and systematic education, language skills, travel and publication opportunities, and the possibility to present new concepts to an open professional network, not to mention finances because they are the smallest problem. However, is it worth worrying about and suffering over this permanent comparison – “us and them”? I do not think so. If this large world with its education gurus seems too harsh and unattainable, then each individual researcher has the right to remain in his or her safe enclave, speak his or her own language and be recognized for the work done in researching national history that will not be researched by any of the world’s “great leaders”.

However, if we decide to enter the world, then, in my opinion, Latvia has three great stories to use to its advantage. The first is our educational experience in the Soviet context.²⁸

²⁶ Depaepe noted the lack of conceptual constructs among post-Soviet historians of education already in the 1990s. See Marc Depaepe, “History of education anno 1992”, 5–6.

²⁷ For discussion on the relationship between local and international history, see Roy Lowe, “Do we still need history of education: is it central or peripheral?” *History of Education* 31 (2002): 491–504; Thomas Bender, *A Nation Among Nations: America's Place in World History* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2006).

It is true that apart from historians of education, this field has a number of other highly qualified players, including social scientists, oral historians and educational philosophers, who are much better grounded in theory. We also must take into consideration that an international audience requires points of reference, some of which could be occupation, dictatorship, Sovietization²⁹ and colonization.³⁰

Secondly, national history stories can be told through internationalization – interactions in the education field and the transference of pedagogic ideas across borders. Here, global meeting points can possibly be found through the study of the biographies of great pedagogues³¹ and the development of pedagogy as a scientific discipline³².

The third “great” story is the “average” person’s story. Richard Aldrich invites us to raise from oblivion the narratives of those whose “voices have not yet been heard.”³³ I believe that Latvia could become a strong leader here, as biographies of 140 pedagogues have

²⁸ The publication by the Baltic historians of pedagogy was an excellent exercise in team building, and contextually is meant for ourselves, as “airing” and rewriting national history is unavoidable after drastic political changes. See *History of Pedagogy and Educational Sciences in the Baltic Countries from 1940 to 1990: an Overview*, ed. Iveta Ķestere and Aīda Krūze (Riga: RaKa, 2013).

²⁹ See Erwin Oberländer, “Instruments of Sovietization in 1939/1940 and after 1944/45”, in *The Soviet Occupation Regime in the Baltic States 1944 – 1959: Policies and their Consequences. Materials of an International Conference, 13-14 June, 2002, Riga*, ed. Andris Caune et al. (Rīga: Latvijas vēstures institūta apgāds, 2007), 50-58.

³⁰ Kalertas states that the story of occupation and colonialization is not popular among the Balts, as being occupied or colonized is not befitting a European. See Violeta Kelertas, “Baltic Postcolonialism and Its Critics” in *Baltic Postcolonialism*, ed. Violeta Kalertas (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), 1–9.

³¹ See: Alīda Zigmunde, *Hugo Gaudig* (Riga: RTU Verlag, 2010); Alīda Zigmunde, *Die Beziehungen Johann Heinrich Pestalozzis zu Lettland* (Riga: RTU Verlag, 2010).

³² See Iveta Ozola, *Pedagoģijas zinātnes ģenēze Latvijā no 20.gs. 20.gadiem līdz 60.gadu sākumam* [Genesis of the pedagogy as a scientific discipline in Latvia from 1920s till the beginning of 1960s] (Doctoral thesis, University of Latvia, 2014).

³³ Richard Aldrich, *Lessons from History of Education. The selected works of Richard Aldrich* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 18.

already been published in 14 volumes.³⁴ The autobiographical genre is rising in Latvia; school memoirs are being told publicly by artists, engineers and bureaucrats, teachers and scientists. Wieder has fully understood this and described “need to tell” in his studies on post-apartheid society in South Africa.³⁵ Memoirs are, until now a rather neglected historical source in studies on school culture, image of the teacher, education ideology, etc.

Yet, each story must be told in a language that the rest of the world can understand. In other words, one must be able to explain national history through globally recognized theories using generally accepted terminology. And here, unfortunately, researchers in other fields of the social sciences have surpassed education historians over the last 20 years, by diligently learning theories and applying them to topics that have traditionally been associated with the history of education.³⁶

Historians’ obsessions with newfound facts have also negatively influenced history of education studies in universities. The need to include history in teacher education programs has been questioned and replaced with supposedly practical study courses. Having knowledge of the history of education immediately after World War Two in the West, a feeling of *déjà vu* comes over me. However, there is no need to panic. The world is open, and the slightly bruised and well-worn revisionism of the 1960s now also is slowly entering the Baltic States.

³⁴ *Laikmets un personība* [Era and Personalities], Vol. 1 – 14, ed. Aīda Krūze (Rīga: RaKa, 2000 – 2014).

³⁵ Alan Wieder, “Testimony as Oral History: Lessons from South Africa”, *Educational Research* 33 (2004): 23-28.

³⁶ E.g., University of Latvia social scientists published papers on the history of textbooks in 2005. See: Laura Lapiņa, “Mācību grāmatas kā skolēnu sovetizācijas instruments staļinisma periodā” [Textbooks as instruments of pupil Sovietization during the Stalin era]; Marija Krilova, “Ķermeņa disciplinēšana: Mācību grāmatas skolotājiem analīze” [Disciplining the body: an analysis of textbook teacher guides] in *Agora 3: pēckara Latvijas cilvēklaitelpa ≠ staļinisms* [Agora 3: Post-war Latvian space ≠ Stalinism], ed. Inta Brikše et al. (Rīga: LU Akadēmiskais apgāds, 2005), 174–200; 277–290.