

THE REBELLIOUS REPUBLIC: THE 1958 EDUCATION REFORM AND SOVIET LATVIA

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In 1958, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev attempted to reform the Soviet education system. The reform effectively proposed making studies of the titular language in schools in each Soviet Republic voluntary. This was not, however, the Stalin era. The Latvian national communists considered the reform as a linguistic Russification campaign and took advantage of the circumstances of Khrushchev's de-Stalinisation programme to vociferously oppose Moscow's imposition of the reform, drawing on public support in a uniquely free and unfettered debate in Latvia. This article examines the national communist challenge towards the reform and explores the impact of this resistance on the centre–periphery relationship.

Key words: Thesis 19, Khrushchev, education reform, national communism, Latvian politics.

Relations between Soviet General Secretary Nikita Khrushchev and the Latvian national communists were convivial after 1956.¹ Khrushchev's denunciation of Joseph Stalin's cult of personality at a closed session of the 20th CPSU Congress in February 1956 encouraged local leaders in the Soviet Republics to carry Khrushchev's de-Stalinisation campaign to the Soviet periphery. Khrushchev accepted, or at least did not obstruct, national

communist initiatives, considering them to be in the spirit of the 20th Party Congress's decisions. Yet, despite Khrushchev's initiatives to limitedly decentralise the Soviet system, he was not explicit about the extent to which leaders in the Soviet Republics could pursue reforms. The geniality between Khrushchev and the national communists was severely strained when the national communists opposed Khrushchev's flagship education reform in late 1958. The republics were still expected to submit to the Centre's will.

We can view the struggle between Latvia and Moscow, the national communists and Khrushchev, as a centre–periphery tug of war. A microcosm of the wider Khrushchev Thaw experience, Moscow tolerated a remarkably free and unfettered debate about the education reform both in government and among the general public but eventually the Centre forced the reform through despite opposition. This article seeks to show how the struggle over the education reform delimited the acceptable bounds for local-decision making and reflected the limits of liberalisation in Khrushchev's USSR. The national communists' aim to redress the balance of centre–periphery relations in favour of greater local autonomy involved resisting central initiatives such as the education reform. Their stark challenge to the Centre over the education reform, which was fundamentally about language policy, exposed the disquieting reality that despite de-Stalinisation, Moscow was still prepared to run roughshod over local sensibilities and risk actively reverting to pre-1953 linguistic Russification.

There has been some dedicated scholarly attention towards the issue of the 1958 Soviet education reform in articles and book chapters in both the Soviet and post-Soviet periods. Yaroslav Bilinsky's 1962 article "The Soviet Education Laws" and R. Schlesinger's 1959 article "The Educational Reform" both published in *Soviet Studies* represent the standout English language historiography of the Soviet period on this topic. Both these studies broadly examined the subject of the education reforms

but did not specifically focus on the impact of the reforms upon Latvia and Latvia's role in resisting them. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, historiographical discussion on the subject has been revived. In the West, this was namely by Jeremy Smith's 2003 article "Republican Authority and Khrushchev's Education Reform in Estonia and Latvia 1958–1959", which appeared as a book chapter in Olaf Mertelsmann's edited volume *The Sovietisation of the Baltic States 1940–1956*. In Latvia, Daina Bleiere provides a significant historiographical contribution to this topic, which focuses on the effects of the reform in Latvia. In 2004, Bleiere published an article entitled "Nacionālkomunisms Latvijā un 1959. gada Latvijas PSR izglītības likums" (National communism in Latvia and the 1959 Latvian SSR Education Act) in issue number 1 of *Latvijas Vēstures Institūta Žurnāls* (Journal of the Institute of Latvian History). Bleiere revised her conclusions in two further articles for *Latvijas Vēstures Institūta Žurnāls* in issues one and three in 2013, entitled "Vispārējās izglītības sovetizācija Latvijā: padomju cilvēka veidošana mācību procesā (1944–1964)" (The sovietisation of general education in Latvia: The formation of the Soviet man in the learning process) and "Nikitas Hruščova izglītības reformas un vispārējās izglītības sovetizācija Latvijā" (Nikita Khrushchev's education reforms and the sovietisation of general education in Latvia).

Khrushchev unveiled his so-called Thesis 19 to the CPSU CC on 12 November 1958 as a component of a general restructuring of secondary and higher education.² The reform was debated at the USSR Supreme Soviet in December 1958. Khrushchev's reform was designed to modernise and standardise the USSR's education system, with an increased emphasis on practical work experience. One component of the reform was related to language instruction. The bone of contention in Thesis 19 was the proposal to allow parents to decide whether a student in the Soviet Republics (excluding the Russian Republic) studied the local nationality's language or not. Under Stalin, it had been mandatory for all students in the Soviet Republics to study three

languages: Russian, the titular nationality's language, and one foreign language. Introducing parental choice, the theses stated, "would be more democratic and would eliminate excessive overburdening of pupils studying languages".³ This was essentially, however, an attack on the primary status of the titular language in each republic.

The rationale behind instituting optional secondary language training was to reduce the course load on students in the republics already overburdened by the additional course requirements imposed by the reform. Across their education, students studied Latvian for 2–3 hours a week totalling 700 hours of study (the equivalent of almost a school year).⁴ Supporters of the policy welcomed it as a democratic reform; parents could choose the language in which their children would be taught.⁵ While greater choice in the education system would ordinarily have received public support, Thesis 19 instead provoked vehement opposition among the non-Russian republics' titular nationalities. These non-Russian nationalities feared that Russian students' parents would prevent their children from learning the local language. In theory, studying the Russian language also became voluntary. Yet, as the USSR's lingua franca, knowledge of Russian was necessary for career advancement. Fluency in Russian was a requirement for attendance at universities and practically a prerequisite for professional development. Michael Widmer notes that even if some non-Russian schools took advantage of their option not to offer Russian, many parents decided to send their children to Russian schools.⁶ Therefore, students of all Soviet nationalities had no realistic option but to study Russian.

The provisions of Thesis 19 triggered widespread opposition across the USSR but the most virulent resistance came from Latvia and Azerbaijan. A conflict had been brewing for several years as pressure built for a universal education system that reflected the Russian language's dominance. The issue surfaced in October 1956 at the Inter-republic Academic Conference on "Questions of Improving Russian Language Instruction in

National Schools". The struggle between Moscow and Latvia over Thesis 19's implementation represented the most concerted attempt by any republic to test and redraw the limits of the Soviet Republics' authority vis-à-vis the Centre in the new era of centre-periphery relations ushered in by the 20th Party Congress.

In 1958, knowledge of Latvian among the younger Russian generation was dismal. That year Russian language schools, attended mainly by Russian children, introduced a Latvian language exam. On 3 July, *Skolotāju Avīze* (The Teacher's Newspaper) evaluated the results of this examination and determined low comprehension levels in grammar and reading. A significant number of Russian students were unable to name historical Latvian figures.⁷ In 1956, the national communists had launched an ambitious language initiative designed to redress Stalinist Russification policies by combating ignorance of the Latvian language. In an effort to restore the primacy of the Latvian language, the national communists enacted a law making knowledge of Latvian and Russian mandatory for Communist Party employees, government functionaries and service sector personnel. The education reform threatened to undermine the national communists' language initiative just as the two-year deadline set by the law for gaining competency in both Russian and Latvian was approaching.

Pārsla Eglīte and Ilmārs Mežs estimate that between 1946 and 1955, Latvia experienced net migration of 328 400 people, primarily from Russia, Ukraine, and Belorussia.⁸ After the influx of so many Slavs, the national communists were sensitive to Latvians' perception of Soviet rule because they wanted to improve the Party's image in order to increase the proportion of Latvian membership within the Party, and thus solidify the new Latvian grip on the republic's leadership. Thesis 19 threatened this aim because it was tantamount to extending further privileges to Russians at the expense of the status of the Latvian language. As William Prigge puts it, "if the local language was not mandatory, then it almost certainly would be marginalised".⁹

Fearful of stoking local resentment, the national communists were hesitant to enact the reform. The national communists considered Thesis 19 a display of cavalier Russian chauvinism, evidence of Russians' unwillingness to learn indigenous languages, an attempt by Moscow to undermine local languages, and ultimately linguistic Russification because, in practice, Latvians still had to learn Russian.¹⁰

There was another reason why the national communists preferred the status quo. In 1952, Russian schools in Latvia transitioned to a 10-year system but Latvian schools preserved the tradition of an extra, 11th year of schooling. This meant that Latvians and Estonians were generally better educated than local Russians, and consequently, often had access to superior employment.¹¹ The national communists defended 11-year schooling long before Thesis 19 appeared. In July 1956, national communist Education Minister Vilis Samsons reinforced the national communists' commitment to Latvia's school system in a speech to the Latvian Supreme Soviet. He declared that if Latvian schools were to transition to 10-year schooling it would "be a step backwards".¹² Yet, Thesis 19 envisioned a universal 10-year education system throughout the USSR.

THE DEBATE IN LATVIA

At a meeting of the Riga Party *aktiv* on 22 November 1958, the ostensibly neutral Council of Ministers Chairman Vilis Lācis took the lead in challenging the implementation of Thesis 19 and ignited the debate on the subject. He questioned the logic of making second language study optional because "knowledge of both Russian and the republics' languages was necessary for working in Latvia and other Soviet Republics", and for continuation of one's education outside the RSFSR. Therefore, the law was "somewhat difficult to realise practically". Lācis found that the termination of compulsory language study would "hardly promote the strengthening of peoples' friendship" and he

considered it “advisable to hear the opinion of teachers and the general public on this issue”, encouraging them to join the debate and “speak out”.¹³ Over the next month, the Party press were inundated with letters criticising Thesis 19 and supporting Latvian proposals for extended schooling and continued obligatory Russian and Latvian courses.

Historians are struck by the debate’s remarkably forthright tone. Prigge believes the national communists encouraged a wide public debate on the education reform, harnessing the power of public opinion in order to galvanise support for their resistance to Thesis 19. “The Latvian public,” he wrote, “which for over a year had become accustomed to being consulted, was mobilised by Lācis’s call”.¹⁴ Yaroslav Bilinsky supports this notion. According to Bilinsky, the education reform did not follow the usual pattern of universal endorsements from a spectrum of parents, teachers, school administrators, and Party officials, officially sanctioned rallying of public opinion, a controlled discussion, and the “Supreme Soviets affixing their rubber stamps after a brief and perfunctory debate”. Instead, there was a “comparatively free expression of real differences of opinion among party officials, educators and parents. (...) The most striking challenge to the central government, however, was provided by Latvia”.¹⁵ According to Jeremy Smith, the reason for the extraordinarily unrestrained debate on Thesis 19 stemmed from Khrushchev’s activist regime, which “sought reform in a number of areas, and called publicly for regional input into policy-making as well as implementation of policy”.¹⁶

At the 22nd November meeting, others echoed Lācis’s sentiments. Deputy Education Minister Erna Purvinska insisted that “the unburdening of pupils should not be at the expense of language”. Purvinska viewed competency in Russian and Latvian as equal:

Can I refuse to allow the study of Russian in Latvian schools, the language, which is a powerful means of international communication and familiarises people with the riches of

Russian culture? – I think no! Can Russian schools abandon the study of Latvian to children who in the future will live and work in Latvia, who will continue to study at universities in Latvia? – Just the same, I do not think so!¹⁷

National communist Milda Vernere, Director of Riga Secondary School No. 49, followed Purvinska's speech, pouring scorn on the reform's voluntary principle in language study:

I join the teachers and a great majority of parents who think that democracy in relation to language learning in school is irrelevant (...) If we do not establish a strict order in language learning, then there will be irresponsible parents who want their children to learn only one language. (...) I believe that every citizen should know both languages, because otherwise we will have a situation where no one can talk in institutions without an interpreter.

Vernere went on to blame the situation of overburdened students "borrowing the programme of Russian Republic schools instead of aligning [our curriculum] with [Latvia's] peculiarities". She went so far as to urge Latvia's leaders to suggest to Moscow that Thesis 19 should be abandoned.¹⁸ Her zeal in opposing Thesis 19 likely played a part in her dismissal in 1962 during the purge of the Latvian national communists. At a teachers' meeting at the Academy of Sciences on 1 December, there was a lively debate between members of the school parents' committee. Mokrinska, Director of Riga Secondary School No. 22, announced that there was a consensus among teachers that 11-year schooling should continue following consultation on the reform because Russians needed to learn Latvian and after school many graduates remained in Latvia or attended the republics' higher education institutions.¹⁹

While spokespeople from the Baltic Republics and the Caucasus advocated continuance of the status quo, they understood that this might put the republics' school graduates at a disadvantage against Russian school graduates in the RSFSR. In those schools, only two languages were required (Russian and

one foreign language) compared to three in the Union Republics. Therefore, as a solution, Lācis and the national communists proposed a further year of schooling (12 years in total) to ensure that students were not overburdened. In addition to Russian and Latvian language study, Samsons wrote in December 1958 that “it is necessary to provide at least basic information on the history, literature and geography of Latvia, and the traditional subjects of our republic (e.g. singing)”. Samsons estimated that the assimilation of all this knowledge would require over 900 hours, totalling almost another school year. Consequently, Samsons suggested some primary education could be transferred to secondary education to reduce the load on younger students.²⁰ Ivan Kairov, President of the USSR Academy of Pedagogical Sciences, opposed extending obligatory education by two years because it would strain resources, which were already fully exhausted by the suggested one-year extension, and would delay entrance into the workforce and higher education.²¹

The impassioned responses of the Latvian public to the law were matched only by the extraordinary frankness of the debate. Discussions took place at workers’ meetings in factories and *kolkhozy* (collective farms), Party cells, open Party meetings, teachers’ meetings, parents’ conferences in schools, and especially in the press. This was because in the context of the Thaw, Moscow initially encouraged a genuine discussion in the republics and the presentation of realistic proposals.²² The national communists recognised this. Samsons wrote in the journal *Kommunist Sovetskoi Latvii* (Communist of Soviet Latvia), “the CPSU CC is not afraid to disregard the usual views on education, looking for creative new ways for its further development in consultation with the broad masses of the people”.²³ The national communists used the lenient circumstances provided by the Thaw to their advantage by appealing for public support to provide them with greater leverage to amend the law.

In the press, there was a flood of articles supporting Lācis and Samsons in their proposals to extend schooling to 12 years

in order to retain instruction in three languages. Some articles were from concerned officials in the republics' education departments. M. Kalniņš, Head of Liepāja Education Board, wrote in the Russian language daily newspaper *Sovetskaia Latvīia* (Soviet Latvia) that “the question of the length of secondary education in our republic should be solved on the basis of local conditions. Eight-year training is insufficient. I believe that our republic requires nine-year compulsory [secondary] schooling”.²⁴ On 19 December, national communist Jānis Ģībietis, Head of Riga City Education Department, wrote to the newspaper *Trud* (Labour) in support of an extra secondary school year. A survey of readers' letters published in *Sovetskaia Latvīia* indicated that most respondents favoured a continuation of the existing arrangement for compulsory second language study.²⁵ A significant portion of the discussion was devoted to the necessity for children to acquire knowledge of Latvian history and geography. In defiance of Thesis 19, the national communists requested that the Latvian school curriculum be revised to allow more hours to study Latvia's geography, history, language, and literature.²⁶ In 1958, the Education Ministry developed its own curriculum, focusing on Latvian history and other subjects related to Latvia.²⁷

The other side of the education debate, however, was ignored. Daina Bleiere notes that the republic's press gave a one-sided presentation of the discussion.²⁸ Yet, there was support for the All-Union law in Latvia. Doctoral candidate P. Kunin from the Latvian State University's Theoretical Physics Department complained in the newspaper *Sovetskaia molodezh'* (Soviet Youth) that 12-year schooling would be “contrary to national interests”.²⁹ The Chairman of Daugavpils Pedagogical Institute reviewed letters sent to *Sovetskaia Latvīia*. A number of letters argued in favour of “the principle of voluntary participation in the study of languages”. Pensioner F. Perezhilo wrote, “Let the parents decide the language of instruction of their children and whether they need to learn an additional language. No doubt, the majority of parents will solve this issue correctly”. There was some support

for Latvian language learning but usually with the proviso of changing the methodological approach to teaching spoken Latvian rather than grammar. Many letters expressed the idea that “there cannot be a cultured person in the Soviet Union who does not speak Russian”. The head teacher of Talsi Secondary School E. Veisbergs wrote, “the Russian language is our second native language”, and insisted that only permanent residents of Latvia should have to learn Latvian. Likewise, Fedoriak, a worker in Riga’s Electrometallurgy Factory, wrote that children only temporarily residing in Latvia should be exempt from learning Latvian.³⁰ This point was particularly contentious. At a meeting of teachers and education staff on 1 December, Stogova, a spokeswoman for parents of Russian school students, argued that because there was considerable turnover in migration to Latvia, it was unnecessary for children to learn Latvian if they would be leaving Latvia for the RSFSR or another republic in a few years.³¹

THE SUPREME SOVIET

Between 22 and 25 December 1958, the USSR Supreme Soviet in Moscow convened to debate the education reform. Representatives from all three Baltic Republics insisted that non-Russian languages remained a required subject in all schools.³² On 24 December, it was the turn of Latvia’s representatives to speak and they took the lead in opposing the reform. National communist leader Eduards Berklavs made an impassioned speech in defence of 11-year schooling and the need to preserve mandatory Russian and Latvian language learning. He was characteristically outspoken and uncompromising, declaring that “our republic’s eight-grade [primary] school absolutely requires the continuation of traditional classes in three languages – Latvian, Russian, and one foreign language”. He argued that “to solve the problem of overburdening students, without lowering the level of knowledge, seems hardly possible to us”. Berklavs said it was necessary to study each republic’s peculiarities and demanded

that the republics' Supreme Soviets be granted the right to prolong the education period by one year.³³ This was a call for greater decision-making for the republics in the sensitive sphere of education, which was deemed essential by Soviet authorities for inculcating the country's youth with Soviet values.

One of the most striking aspects of the struggle between the national communists and Moscow over the education reform was the support the national communists found from the most unlikely of individuals, Arvīds Pelše, a leading Stalinist ideologue and the national communists' chief adversary on the Bureau of the CC LCP. He presented a united front with his archenemy Berklavs in opposition (at least outwardly) to Thesis 19 when he spoke at the Supreme Soviet. It is unclear why Pelše supported the national communists on this occasion, especially because defying Moscow was anathema to him. It seems Pelše's opposition to Thesis 19 was merely a charade. He used Berklavs' opposition to the reform as a charge against him during the purge of the national communists in July 1959 but deftly sidestepped accusations of his own opposition. Furthermore, after Berklavs' removal it took only one month to bring Latvia into line with All-Union legislation thereby demonstrating Pelše's willingness to implement the reform. The explanation for Pelše's unlikely support at the Supreme Soviet was probably due to his political weakness at the time. The Pelše faction was at its nadir in late 1958. Facing political oblivion, Pelše may have considered it prudent to temporarily support the national communists on this issue to avoid a confrontation on the LCP Bureau, which was dominated by the national communists, while he built his case against the national communists. Prigge believes strong public support for the Latvian government's position may also have affected Pelše's decision.³⁴

In his speech, Pelše focused on the popularity of the current system amongst the public and specifically referenced the debate on the reform in Latvia. "Latvia's working people," he declared, "at parents' meetings, have unanimously spoken in favour of the

need to preserve the study of Latvian and Russian in our schools (...) It would be inadvisable to abolish this fine tradition". Pelše aped national communist rhetoric in his speech, stating: "Each national republic has its own historically formed peculiarities which are taken into account by the Party and Union government (...) It is necessary to consider these peculiarities in the school reform's execution". Furthermore, he echoed Berklavs in his comment that the republics should retain the authority to amend the draft law before its ratification. He protected himself by adding that "the knowledge of both languages helps to strengthen the historical friendship between the Latvian and Russian peoples. In our day, Russian is a powerful instrument of communication among all Soviet peoples; it offers access to the wealth of Russian and world culture". On the subject of students' workload, Pelše noted that the study of three languages, Latvian and Russian literature, and Latvian history and geography, would place them under more pressure than students in the RSFSR, who studied only two languages. Under the circumstances Pelše believed it was "extremely advisable" to have schools with an extra year in Latvia, but "for pedagogical and political considerations" *both* Latvian and Russian schools should have an extra year, which would eliminate the existing bias in favour of Latvians.³⁵

Other Soviet Republics also opposed the education reforms. According to Schlesinger, "opinions divided" in Georgia and to some extent in Kazakhstan while Moldavia's delegate at the Supreme Soviet meeting reputedly held the same opinion as the Baltic Republics' representatives.³⁶ According to Bleiere, Estonia and Lithuania supported proposals to extend schooling to 12 years and both republics hoped that the Soviet leadership would listen to them about the need to retain three-language teaching, but they did not press for the same level of decision-making autonomy as Latvia.³⁷ In the long term, in contrast to Latvia, as Smith puts it "tactful handling by the Estonian leadership, while it did not achieve all it set out to do, resulted in a freer hand than in Latvia".³⁸

In the draft memorandum on the education reform circulated on 21 September 1958, Khrushchev preferred standardised schooling, though proposed that the extra year in question be left to the discretion of each republic. In the law proposed at the Supreme Soviet in December, however, 10-year standardised schooling was taken for granted.³⁹ According to Vilis Krūmiņš, a national communist and the LCP's Second Secretary, during the Supreme Soviet session, CPSU CC Presidium member Otto Kuusinen informed him that contrary to the CPSU CC leadership's views, including Khrushchev's, Ukrainian deputies announced they would vote against the draft law because of the provision shortening schooling from 11 to 10 years of study. Other republics, including Latvia, supported Ukraine.⁴⁰ Latvia had sewn the seeds of rebellion among the republics. It was due largely to obstinacy that the Supreme Soviet was unable to make Thesis 19 All-Union law. The central authorities compromised and permitted each republic to decide whether to pass or reject the proposal, as Berklavs had suggested.⁴¹

LATVIA RESISTS

Due to widespread resistance, the skeleton education law passed by the USSR Supreme Soviet on 24 December 1958 contained no regulations pertaining to the language issue. This version of the law provided only a general framework and offered the republics the possibility of different approaches to its implementation through republic level legislation and administration. Moscow, however, was unsatisfied and individually pressured each republic's leadership into accepting the law's original provisions outlined in November 1958. In March and April 1959, 12 Soviet Republics' Supreme Soviets ratified statutes that contained the regulations of Thesis 19 essentially unrevised. Azerbaijan and Latvia were the only recalcitrant republics to pass their education laws with no regulations pertaining to the language issue.⁴²

The Latvian Supreme Soviet convened on 16–17 March 1959 to debate the education law and draft appropriate legislation.

Berklavs gave the keynote speech, announcing that Latvia's draft law took into account Latvia's conditions, including the special requirements and traditions of Latvia's schools. He stated in unequivocal terms that "it was absolutely necessary to continue the tradition of schooling in three languages". Numerous speakers reinforced this, among them Jānis Brodelis, Head of the LSSR Council of Ministers Main Administration for Vocational Training, who made it clear that Latvia's peculiarities included knowledge of Latvian, which was necessary for working in Latvia. In his defence of an extra year of schooling, Berklavs said that it would "prepare students mentally and physically to be more mature young people who will be better prepared to immediately join the workforce". He went further by pledging to provide free textbooks for grades one to eight from 1962. This was designed to combat the perennial problem of a lack of printing resources for publishing houses, which resulted in an insufficient number of textbooks for students. The situation with Latvian language and literature textbooks in Russian language schools was especially poor. A Riga *gorkom* (Party organisation) report from late 1956 noted that schools were provided with textbooks that were inadequately translated into Latvian. There was a lack of Latvian language textbooks for the third and seventh grade, no grammar textbooks for the eighth grade, and no textbooks at all for the sixth grade.⁴³ Berklavs conceded that learning three languages would inevitably lead to overburdening of students in comparison to those in other republics who studied only two languages. To reduce the burden, Berklavs announced that Russian and foreign language teaching was to be streamlined to focus on the practical use of the language, developing students' speaking ability over grammar. This was in line with the National Congress of Teachers' recommendations from March 1957, which suggested a major overhaul of the curriculum. Furthermore, Samsons, in his speech, reaffirmed that the curriculum for some subjects would be reduced and transferred to the secondary school stage to lighten the load. In accordance with Pelše's suggestion from

December 1958, both Latvian and Russian schools would include the extra year of study, “because the curriculum will be one and the same”.⁴⁴

Here the national communists had an ulterior motive. They wanted to expand the time in Russian schools devoted to studying Latvian subjects. As late as on 12 March 1959, the national communists maintained the need for 12-year schooling to allow for the continued study of three languages. This was the most significant aspect of the law, yet, in Berklavs’ speech there was a conspicuous absence of any mention of Thesis 19. Widmer believes that the national communists avoided dealing with Thesis 19 by ignoring it altogether.⁴⁵ According to Bilinsky, as far as Berklavs was concerned, the republics received the right to decide on the reform’s implementation in December 1958 and Latvia alone chose not to include Thesis 19 in its legislation. “Latvian government leaders declared in no uncertain terms that Thesis 19 had been weighed and found wanting,” writes Bilinsky.⁴⁶ In the law passed on 17 March, however, the national communists abandoned their proposal for a further (12th) year of study; Latvia would instead preserve its 11-year programme but not transition to the 10-year system as in the RSFSR. The national communists hoped that Moscow would be satisfied with this partial concession. The other obstinate republic, Azerbaijan, took its cue from the Latvians. After the Latvian law was published in *Sovetskaiā Latvīa* on 20 March, the Azerbaijanis adapted the Latvian law to Azerbaijani conditions in their new law, which the Azerbaijani Supreme Soviet ratified on 26 March. This made teaching of Russian and Azerbaijani compulsory. Jamil Hasanli explains that “the Latvians went furthest of all. This added to the Azerbaijani leadership’s confidence that the language problem could be solved in a similar way”.⁴⁷

The national communists felt that they had done enough by meeting the letter of Khrushchev’s proposals and nominally introducing parental choice.⁴⁸ Yet, Smith notes the Latvians brazenly insisted that this meant nothing in practice because they intended to obfuscate the law and perpetuate the existing system.⁴⁹

The national communists realised that outright subversion would incur Moscow's wrath, so they changed tack by tacitly accepting the reform and then, as other republics did, quietly failing to implement it.

CONCLUSION

The March 1959 education law passed in Latvia was unacceptable to Moscow. After vacillating, Moscow finally rejected Latvia's proposals for an extra year of schooling on 17 March, the day the Latvian law was ratified, but the Latvian Supreme Soviet session continued. Bleiere believes that the national communists still hoped it would be possible to extend the period of study in secondary schools by one year, so the clause remained in the law to directly test Moscow's reaction and the limits of the republics' authority. According to Bleiere, Moscow only made a final decision in late March or April, as Estonia's Education Act was adopted on 23 April and the Estonians abandoned all previous proposals including mandatory three-language teaching and 12-year education.⁵⁰ Once Moscow made its decision, the national communists encountered sustained pressure to bring their law into line with All-Union legislation. On 12 May, the Latvian leadership was forced to completely back down and make changes to the law in determining the period of study. Samsons conceded that while everyone agreed retaining the teaching of Latvian and Russian as a second language was desirable, making it compulsory would be "management by decree".⁵¹

Smith describes the national communists' resistance to the education law as merely a "relatively mild show of defiance", though he suggests their brazenness provoked further reaction from the Centre.⁵² In May 1959, a commission from Moscow investigated charges of nationalism against leading Latvian national communists. The commission's report criticised Latvia's deviation from the All-Union education law and demands for 12-year

education, and reprimanded the Latvians for privileging the Latvian language by pledging to offer free textbooks. CPSU CC Inspector K. Lebedev scolded the Latvian leadership, remarking that despite “the sovereignty in each republic in matters of public education (...) a republic cannot be in a special position compared to others”.⁵³ Pelše reiterated this criticism when he orchestrated Berkļavs’s dismissal between June and July 1959. In his defence, Berkļavs explained that there had been unanimous support for 12-year schooling amongst the Latvian leadership including Pelše, and widespread backing from the populace.⁵⁴ The education reform featured heavily among the charges levelled at the national communists as the purge began. On 20 June, Pelše reported to Moscow that he had prepared amendments to the law, which eliminated all remaining discrepancies with the All-Union legislation. The 4th July Bureau meeting recorded that “individual senior leaders are inclined towards national isolation on the issues of school reorganisation. Latvia decided on [an extra year of] schooling and free textbooks, which privileges Latvia’s students compared to other republics. Contrary to the All-Union law, some leaders demanded a 12-year education period”.⁵⁵ Under pressure, many national communists abandoned their convictions. Jānis Vanags, Rector of the Agricultural Academy, said he had spoken to Samsons during the July plenum, but he was now “[hiding] in the ‘bushes’, disavowing [his former position on 12-year education]”.⁵⁶ Council of Ministers Chairman Lācis was removed in November 1959, partially because of his high profile defence of the Latvian education system.

Resistance towards the implementation of Thesis 19 played an important role in Pelše’s portrayal of the national communists as nationalists. In September 1959, Pelše wrote in *Kommunist Sovetskoi Latvii*, “Some people began to howl that by studying the Russian language and culture, young Latvians would forget the national particularities of their own culture, traditions and customs. Such reasoning can only harm Latvian young people. Such a view is nothing but a manifestation of bourgeois nationa-

lism”.⁵⁷ Pelše waited to enact the new law until after the purge began and he was the clear victor. The Chairman of the Presidium of the Latvian Supreme Soviet, Kārlis Ozoliņš, was keen to distance himself from his defeated national communist colleagues and on 11 August 1959 signed into law the education reform entitled “Concerning some issues in the Latvian SSR’s Educational System”. The new law gave parents the right to decide the language of instruction for their child at school, and crucially, repealed the March 1959 law’s clauses about compulsory education in both languages. Finally, the new law officially abolished Latvia’s extra school year, bringing Latvia into line with the 10-year system observed elsewhere.⁵⁸

At a CPSU CC plenum, on 24–29 June 1959, Khrushchev demonstrated his frustration over Azerbaijani and Latvian defiance. He spoke out against Latvia’s eight-year primary education law with its provision of free textbooks because there were “insufficient material conditions to do it across the whole country” and opined that it could not be a case of one rule for one republic and another for the rest.⁵⁹ Both Smith and Widmer postulate that one of the major causes of the purge was Latvia’s rejection of Khrushchev’s education law. Widmer remarks, “the Latvian leadership’s position on this issue must have been an important factor which prompted Moscow to purge the Berklavs group”.⁶⁰ Bilinsky agrees, noting that “Moscow promptly took up the challenge from Baku and Riga” and that “both Latvia and Azerbaijan were finally brought into line after far-reaching changes in their leadership[s]”.⁶¹ Gerhard Simon also subscribes to this notion, considering that the education law “signalled a change in the overall thrust of nationalities policy” and resulted in the rapid spread of purges to nearly all Union Republics.⁶² Understandably, these historians assumed Khrushchev had already determined to cleanse Latvia’s leadership of the national communists and used the education reform as a pretext.

Widmer, Bilinsky, Simon, and Smith, however, exaggerate its contribution as a root cause of the Latvian purge. The national

communists' amendments to their education law in May 1959 were a tactical retreat in the face of intense scrutiny designed to placate Moscow. Though the education reform undoubtedly contributed to the Latvian purge by unsettling Moscow and facilitating the national communists' depiction as nationalists, it was overshadowed by numerous other developments in Latvia, which gave conservatives in Moscow and Riga greater cause for concern. The experience of the education reform demonstrated that Khrushchev's call for input from the republics in the formulation of the education law was an impractical half-measure because the inflexible Soviet system could not consider local conditions without decentralising real political power to the republics, which the Soviet leadership proved unwilling to relinquish.

The long-term effects of the education reform proved counterproductive for Khrushchev, the quality of education in Latvia and Latvia's integration into the USSR. In November 1959, Ilūkste District Secretary Dakšs complained that students voluntarily learning Latvian or Russian were failing, but still passed onto the next grade.⁶³ In 1962, nearly 5000 students in Riga were forced to repeat the school year because of poor Russian.⁶⁴ The introduction of bilingual schools, where parallel classes were taught in Russian and Latvian, was designed to expand the use of Russian and undo the work of the national communists. The number of these schools increased dramatically, even in regions with marginal Russian populations. By July 1963, there were 240 such schools in Latvia.⁶⁵ According to Bruno Kalniņš, this increased Latvian perceptions of Russification.⁶⁶

After the reform was implemented, the number of hours allotted for teaching Latvian in Russian schools gradually decreased while the teaching hours for Russian in Latvian schools increased. In 1964–1965, in Latvian schools, the total hours per week across all grades in language and literature were 72.5 hours of Latvian language and literature classes and 38.5 hours of Russian classes. This compares to 79 hours of Russian and just 26 hours of Latvian in Russian schools.⁶⁷

Ultimately, the education law was a failure. In August 1964, it was repealed throughout the USSR. Latvia's schools lost their extra year, cutting courses in local history, geography, literature and language. In September 1965, the Baltic Republics protested, and after Khrushchev was ousted as Soviet leader, they were specially permitted to retain 11-year schooling. Latvian schools regained their 11-year schooling but Russian schools still transitioned to the 10-year system.⁶⁸ Latvia's preservation of 11-year schooling is often interpreted as a concession towards national sensibilities. It appeared that the extra year would allow more time for the inclusion of subjects of Latvian significance. Yet, Juris Dreifelds explains that nearly all of the extra time in Latvian schools was used for studying Russian language and literature. This contributed to the persistent problem of poor Latvian language competency among Russians. A growing "language gap" favouring Russian is evident from the 1970 census results. Just 18% of all Russians in Latvia spoke Latvian, but 75.8% of 20–29-year-old Latvians, the generation that grew up with the education reform changes, had knowledge of Russian.⁶⁹

Bleiere considers the education reform one of Khrushchev's least popular policies, "significantly undermining his prestige at all levels of society".⁷⁰ The education reform serves as an example of how Khrushchev mishandled his reforms and ended up provoking the republics. Conservative hardliners in the Kremlin considered that Khrushchev's initiatives transferred an unsettling amount of decision-making control to the republics evidenced by resistance to the education reform. The purge of the national communists between 1959 and 1962 demonstrated that the period of concessions was over and Moscow was reasserting control, recentralising the Union following the failure of decentralisation. This process was formalised in the 1961 Party Programme, which comprehensively rebuffed local aspirations and represented the Centre's diminished tolerance towards localism.

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Glossary

CC	Central Committee
CPSU CC	Communist Party of the Soviet Union
LCP	Latvian Communist Party
RSFSR	Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

DUMPĪGĀ REPUBLIKA: 1958. GADA IZGLĪTĪBAS REFORMA UN PADOMJU LATVIJA

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Pētnieciskās intereses: Padomju Latvija, nacionālā politika un etniskās attiecības PSRS, “augstā politika” Padomju Savienībā. Pašreizējā pētījumu tēma: Latvijas staļinista portrets: Arvīda Pelšes karjera. Notiek darbs pie monogrāfijas, kuras pagaidu nosaukums *Hruščova atkusnis Padomju Latvijā: nacionālā politika, 1953–1961*.

1958. gadā Padomju Savienības Komunistiskās partijas pirmais sekretārs un valdības vadītājs Ņikita Hruščovs mēģināja reformēt padomju izglītības sistēmu. Reforma faktiski paredzēja padarīt katras padomju republikas

pamatvalodas mācīšanos skolās par brīvprātīgu izvēli. Tomēr tie vairs nebija Staļina laiki. Latviešu nacionāļkomunisti uzskatīja reformu par lingvistiskas rusifikācijas kampaņu un izmantoja Hruščova deštalīnizācijas kampaņas radītos apstākļus, lai pretotos Maskavas uzspiestajai reformai, iegūstot tai Latvijā publisku atbalstu neparasti brīvā un neierobežotā diskusijā. Rakstā aplūkots nacionāļkomunistu mēģinājums apturēt reformu un pētīta šīs pretestības ietekme uz centra un perifērijas attiecībām.

Atslēgas vārdi: 19. pants, Hruščovs, izglītības reforma, nacionāļkomunisms, Latvijas politika.

Kopsavilkums

Attiecības starp Padomju Savienības valdības vadītāju Ņikitu Hruščovu un latviešu nacionāļkomunistiem veicināja Hruščova deštalīnizācijas kampaņa, kas sākās Padomju Savienības Komunistiskās partijas 20. kongresā 1956. gadā. Hruščovs uzskatīja nacionāļkomunistus par noderīgiem sabiedrotajiem, kas ar entuziasmu novadīs deštalīnizāciju uz Padomju Savienības perifēriju. Attiecības pasliktinājās pēc tam, kad Hruščovs 1958. gadā pasludināja jauno padomju republiku izglītības reformu. Šīs reformas priekšlikumu 19. pants paredzēja dot vecākiem tiesības izlemt, vai viņu bērniem skolā ir jāmācās republikas pamatvaloda. Latvijā nacionāļkomunisti to saprata kā uzbrukumu latviešu valodai un lingvistisku rusifikāciju, jo tas nozīmēja, ka krievu skolēni iepriekšparedzami nemācīsies latviešu valodu, bet latviešu skolēniem joprojām nāksies mācīties krievu valodu, jo tā bija Padomju Savienības sazināšanās valoda.

Nacionāļkomunisti nevis pieņēma reformu, bet gan izmantoja Hruščova “atkušņa” mazāk saspringto gaisotni, lai veicinātu brīvu un atklātu skolotāju, vecāku un preses publisku diskusiju par reformu. Šī neiegrožotā sabiedriskā diskusija bija unikāla 50. gados Padomju Savienībā. Diskusija ļāva nacionāļkomunistiem mobilizēt sabiedrisko domu pret reformu un nodrošināja viņiem atbalstu, lai iestātos pret reformas realizāciju. Nacionāļkomunisti ierosināja pagarināt apmācību skolās par vienu gadu (pavisam 12 gadi), lai skolēni varētu tikt galā ar grūtībām, kuras radīja nepieciešamība mācīties kā krievu un latviešu valodu, tā arī latviešu literatūru un Latvijas vēsturi. Spēcīga pretestība reformai bija vairākās padomju republikās, to skaitā visās trijās Baltijas republikās un Azerbaidžānā. Latvijas vadība vadīja opozīciju izglītības likumam PSRS Augstākajā padomē 1958. gada no-

vembrī, piespiežot Maskavu atļaut atsevišķām republikām pašām izlemt, vai iekļaut likumā pantu par valodu mācīšanos. Tas faktiski mazināja likuma nozīmi un nozīmēja centra sakāvi. Tomēr 1959. gada martā Maskava nolēma uzspiest šo likuma pantu padomju republikām. Nacionāļkomunisti pretojās un neiekļāva 19. panta noteikumus likuma Latvijas variantā, tomēr viņi atteicās no priekšlikuma par 12 gadu izglītības sistēmu, lai nomierinātu Maskavu.

Tas bija nacionāļkomunistu tiešs uzbrukums Maskavas autoritātei. Hruščovs bija iedrošinājis ierobežotu atsevišķu lēmumu pieņemšanas decentralizāciju padomju republikās savas destalinizācijas programmas ietvaros. Ignorējot 19. pantu 1959. gada marta Latvijas izglītības likuma versijā, nacionāļkomunisti pakļāva pārbaudei savas jauniegūtās autonomijas robežas un mēģināja pamatos pārskatīt centra un perifērijas attiecības. 1959. gada maijā Maskava piespieda nacionāļkomunistus padoties un pārskatīt likumu, iekļaujot tajā vecāku tiesības izvēlēties apmācības valodu un izslēdzot papildus apmācības gadu, un tādējādi novienādojot ar Vissavienības 10 gadu apmācības sistēmu.

Izglītības reforma parādīja Hruščova “atkušņa” patiesās robežas. Nacionāļkomunisti pārkāpa tām pāri un tika par to sodīti. Lai gan vairāki vēsturnieki norāda, ka tas nebija noteicošais faktors, kas izraisīja nacionāļkomunistu “tīrīšanu” 1959. gada jūlijā, Latvijas nepakļaušanās izglītības reformas jautājumā deva iespēju stingrās līnijas piekritēju aliansei Rīgā un Maskavā sekmīgi klasificēt nacionāļkomunistus kā nacionālistus, kuru nodoms ir vest Latviju uz autarķiju un noslēgtību. Tas beidzās ar “tīrīšanu”, kas iznīcināja latviešu nacionāļkomunismu, atceļot no amatiem tā pārstāvjus Latvijas pārvaldē un sabiedrībā. Šis gadījums pārliecināja Hruščovu, ka padomju republikām nevar uzticēt reālu politisku varu. Viņš ļāva sevi pārliecināt sākt valsts recentralizāciju, kas tika noformēta 1961. gadā partijas programmā. Turklāt reforma mazināja atbalstu Hruščovam padomju republikās, to vairs neizdevās atjaunot, un tā veicināja uzskatu, ka Hruščova vadība ir haotiska. Pēc Hruščova paša atcelšanas no amata – 1965. gadā Kremļa jaunā vadība atteicās no reformas, atļaujot Latvijai saglabāt 11 gadu apmācību, taču “valodu plaīsa” tikai turpināja palielināties, jo latviešiem krievu valodas zināšanas uzlabojās, bet krieviem latviešu valodas zināšanas neuzlabojās.