

## PRESENCE OF QUEER SEXUALITY IN MEMORIES OF LATVIAN NON-HOMOSEXUALS OF THE SOVIET ERA

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The research aims to analyse oral history interviews of heterosexual people about their experience with homosexuals during the Soviet times. Eight interviews were selected for the analysis based on two criteria – the research participant belongs to the Soviet generation, and he/she has personally known homosexuals during the Soviet times. The paper presents interviews as a primary source, illuminating several challenges with obtaining the interviews and their interpretation. In addition, common narratives of communicative memories' evidence and their influence on current views of homosexuals in Latvian society, including its historical metanarrative and historical record, which relies on the nation's victimisation during the Soviet times, are analysed.

*Keywords:* oral history, queers, Soviet Latvia, memory, common narratives

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### Introduction

Society is a total network of relationships between people, wrote Arnold Toynbee; therefore, “the components of society are thus not human beings but relations between them”.<sup>1</sup> It is impossible to comprehend queer lives and experiences without accounting for the societal norms and arrangements concerning the “different” sexuality. According to anthropologist Johannes Fabian, recognising the “other” in society does not mean accepting the “other”, therefore,

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<sup>1</sup> Toynbee 1961, 271.

when describing “other”, we unwittingly distance and subjugate the other.<sup>2</sup> Also, the challenge is the necessity to share the past between the actors because it is the only way to consciously witness each other’s existence in the present and accept the differences.<sup>3</sup> Heterosexuals’ narratives about homosexuals who lived alongside them during the Soviet times could illuminate how society perceived and distanced the “other” from its everyday lived experience.

The attitude of the Soviet authorities towards homosexuality is documented in numerous scholarly writings, mainly reviewing the attitude towards homosexuality within the context of repressive practices<sup>4</sup> of Soviet authoritarianism and its consequences for different sexualities in the former Soviet republics.<sup>5</sup> This topic has gained urgency since, in 2013, the Russian government started campaigning to fortify “the traditional values” and fight against “LGBTQ+ propaganda”. In addition, the development of LGBTQ+ movements in the former Soviet sphere, the struggles for LGBTQ+ justice in the former republics of the USSR and the countries of Eastern Europe, as well as the homophobic discourse of radical conservatives amplify the urgency of this theme.

In Latvia, the history of homosexuals has been researched by Ineta Lipša, offering both an overall review of LGBTQ+ historical narratives as well as separate investigations of the topic, using autobiographical and criminal case materials.<sup>6</sup> Based on three criminal cases from the 1970s and one from the mid-1980s, Feruza Aripova has mapped clandestine representations of queer lives and existing private and alternative networks.<sup>7</sup> Kārlis Vērdiņš and Jānis Ozoliņš have analysed never before researched queer experiences outside urban setting in the countryside.<sup>8</sup> More broadly known, Rita Ruduša’s project “Forced Underground. Homosexuals in Soviet Latvia”<sup>9</sup> offers narratives derived from her interviewing of homosexual people. The project plays a crucial role in contextualising

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2 Fabian 2006, 140.

3 Fabian 1983, 92.

4 In the Soviet Latvia, until 1961, the legal framework of the Criminal Code of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) was enforced, which prosecuted men for “pederasty”, which carried a punishment of 3–5 years imprisonment. The Criminal Code of Latvian SSR replaced this punishment with imprisonment of up to 5 years. Over 300 men were prosecuted under this law between 1945 and 1989. Homosexuality was decriminalised after Latvia regained independence in 1992 (Lipša 2018).

5 Healey 2001; Mole 2019; Alexander 2021.

6 Lipša 2021; Lipša 2022.

7 Aripova 2020.

8 Vērdiņš 2015; Vērdiņš, Ozoliņš 2020.

9 Ruduša 2014.

the history of the LGBTQ+ community by introducing the experiences of its members. However, it should be considered a popular publication rather than a scholarly research project.

The research question of my article is what non-homosexuals knew and what attitudes they developed towards their contemporaries with different sexualities. Research in this paper is based on an analysis of interviews with non-homosexual persons. The interviews illuminate knowledge about relationships between state authorities and homosexuals and how widespread this knowledge was in society. The study of the interviews yields a reconstruction of the respondents' (and overall – society's) attitude toward other sexualities. The paper, therefore, offers never researched fresh insights into the attitudes of specific groups of society, coexistence, and interactions during the Soviet period.

### **Memories of the different sexualities as a source**

The researchers highly value history's social role in writing about the identities of society's discriminated groups. They consider the role instrumental in minimising inequity for the groups by providing historical places or including them in the metanarratives of the past. In addition, the members of these communities themselves try to create a narrative about their past. Such self-constructed histories, however, might lack criticality towards the community itself, or the stories of their past could be removed from the actors themselves.<sup>10</sup> Another challenge is a generational disconnect. In Latvia, the LGBTQ+ community has been unable to integrate the generation of Soviet homosexuals.<sup>11</sup> Some researchers state that, following the homo-nationalism paradigm, we attempt to incorporate the subcultures of sexual identities within the existing recognised groups,<sup>12</sup> resulting in LGBTQ+ identities becoming acceptable for right wing politics and thus accepted for fortifying the nation. These are, however, contemporary challenges which nevertheless influence the representation of the past. Each specific social group's

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10 Manion 2014; Thomson 2008.

11 Latvia's LGBTQ+ activists are a younger generation, the older members of which have experienced the Soviet times during their childhood. Their connection with the older LGBTQ+ generation is weak. When trying to reach out to potential interviewees through the community, attempts were unproductive. In addition, some homosexuals of the Soviet generation feel disconnected from the community and reluctantly observe the LGBTQ+ community's activities, for example, events promoting homosexual visibility.

12 Çetin, Voß 2016; Vogler 2022.

historical narrative will be one-sided if it does not include the perspectives of related social groups, institutions or power structures. Therefore, in this paper, dedicated to homosexuals' lives during the Soviet times, other actors' – non-homosexuals' perspectives, revealed in the contemporaries' memories and contemplations, are analysed.

Since the fall of communism, the specifics of Soviet daily life have been forgotten even by those who experienced them, often yielding binary, over-simplified matrices of perception lacking factual validity about life during the Soviet times. Currently, experiences of the Soviet times and everyday lives are often oversimplified or generalised, categorising them within the ideological assumptions of the Cold War's Homo Sovieticus as the product of the Soviet system. It is characterised as submissive, opportunistic, able to comply, with a monistic worldview, etc. Even though researchers reject such a simplified view,<sup>13</sup> this term is employed as a convincing argument in public discourses, blaming the Soviet generation for many of the realities of today.<sup>14</sup>

One of this paper's tasks is to analyse heterosexuals' memories as the primary source and to reveal their knowledge of and relationships with queers specifically. Memories are analysed based on Alistair Thomson's thesis that people continuously either adjust or suppress painful or unsafe memories because they are risky if they do not conform with the public opinion about the past. Even though memories are a private process of composing, their retelling is exposed to the public. We form memories in a publicly acceptable way.<sup>15</sup> In this paper, I will reveal the components that tie in with memories about the 'other' during circumstances when attitudes towards homosexuality are both more accepting and normalising and, at the same time, turned into the weapon of political battles used to mobilise both liberal and conservative voters.

In this paper, I will identify the evidence that characterises the Soviet generation's communicative memory's common narratives about homosexuals. This memory is acquired due to generational experiences, and if its elements are not absorbed by cultural memory or not amplified by metanarratives, it will disappear within the lifetime of the next three to four generations.<sup>16</sup> It is important to note that these narratives are not part of the interviewees' biographical memories. Some of the research participants were interviewed about their life history; however, during those interviews, their relationships with homosexuals were not

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13 Zakharova 2013; Sharafutdinova 2019.

14 Zellis 2022, 53–54.

15 Thomson 2013, 14–15.

16 Assman 2013, 50–52; Welzer 2008.

articulated. The heterosexual respondents recalling homosexuals can be defined as episodic memory, which the interviewer actualised by asking questions about homosexuals of the Soviet times.

Family and kin memory is an integral part of communicative memory from which the inconvenient homosexuals are excluded. Families and kinfolk memories in Latvia are essential in forming the individual's self-identity. Therefore, family memory is a noteworthy instrument for forwarding historical experiences. The family's communicative memory is more significant than mere communication – the narratives help form our identities, make sense of the world, and mobilise community action.<sup>17</sup> It is, however, essential to remember that a family's history offers idiosyncratic historical fiction, the retelling of which is not consistent and is prone to unravelling, even more so if there are inconvenient questions<sup>18</sup> that are deemed to be forgotten or misinterpreted. In the University of Latvia Philosophy and Sociology Institute's Latvia's National Oral History Archive, which holds more than 4500 life histories, homosexuality is not mentioned.<sup>19</sup> Even if there were homosexuals in the families, it was formulated as “the person did not have a family” and “he lived on his own”, avoiding interrogation of the causes of such circumstances. In truth, the gatherers of the life histories did not ask those questions, focusing on the individual's narrative and prompting or asking clarifying questions about their lives. Also, the families avoided “seeing” their relative's other sexuality. As one of the queer narrators noted, his mother had more trouble with his heterosexual brother, who changed his female partners, rather than him, who lived without women.<sup>20</sup>

For this research, eight interviews have been analysed that have been acquired during 2022–2023. The interviewees were born in the 20th century between the end of the 1930s and the beginning of the 1960s. Their formative years, upbringing and career started during the Post Stalin era. This so-called “Soviet” generation was raised in the spirit of Soviet ideology during the normalisation of the occupying regime. This generation had to develop a strategy of social integration within completely new circumstances that differed from that of their parents, who had gained experience during the years of the independent Republic of

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17 Žilinskienė 2020, 158.

18 Welzer et al. 2010, 21.

19 Describing the biographical narratives of Estonians, Ene Koresaar writes about historical ruptures, “there has emerged a strongly defined ethnic-cultural repertoire. For the life story writer, central concerns are symbols, morality, and national unity. The main markers of “own” and “other” in Estonians' ethnic identification are also articulated in terms of interruptions.” (Koresaar 2005, 210).

20 SBK07.

Latvia (1919–1940) and clashed with the official Soviet discourses.<sup>21</sup> Interviewees' narratives focused on experiences that occurred between the 1960s–1980s. The women and men interviewed are primarily ethnic Latvians and one Jew. The geography of their experiences includes the former Soviet republics; however, most of the narratives take place in Latvia, mainly in Riga. The length of the interviews is from half an hour to two hours. The interviews focus on how people learned about other sexualities and how their relationships with people who were homosexual were formed. The research participants belong to various groups of intelligentsia who, during the Soviet times, were either family members, friends or colleagues of homosexuals. The respondents either agreed to or were persuaded to share their memories. It is challenging to find acquaintances and relatives of homosexuals of the Soviet times. Perhaps the reason for that is that even recently, in 2020, 62% of Latvia's population, regardless of their age, did not know a homosexual person, but among older generations, the percentage is even higher – exceeding 75%.<sup>22</sup> Perhaps this is one of the reasons why the assumptions that historically there have not been homosexuals among Latvians, that belonging to the LGBTQ+ community is a novelty which resulted from the expansion of the Western culture during the 1990s, and that it is fashionable for youth to turn to homosexuality, find a willing audience.

On the one hand, this could cause confusion; how is it possible in a society where male homosexual intercourse was criminalised not to notice the “other”? An anonymous Latvian queer interviewed by the sociologist Gordon Waitt has explained to him that during the Soviet times, it was easier for homosexuals to remain invisible because of the shortage of apartments. It was expected and acceptable that two men live together, in this context, without fear of being outed as homosexuals.<sup>23</sup> At the same time, during conversations with the potential respondents, they noted that many episodes that currently could be interpreted as queer, they recognised as such only in retrospect – after the collapse of the USSR. In addition, they did not know or had just heard that sodomy was punishable by a prison sentence.

A few interviewees, who did not personally know of a homosexual person but had heard hearsay stories about them, thus formed their experiences using “prosthetic” or inauthentic memories,<sup>24</sup> which would not be possible to use for creating representations of the past. These memories were excluded from the analysis.

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21 Zellis 2022, 57, 76.

22 SDKS, *Mozaika* 2020, 16.

23 Waitt 2005, 174.

24 Landsberg 2004; Sutton 2022.

Similarly, several potential respondents refused to share their memories about homosexuals' lives during the Soviet times, stating that either they would not discuss "such matters (of sexuality)" or they did not have the right to talk about this because the secret, trusted by their deceased homosexual friend should be kept. In their opinion, the outing of the dead friend will put to shame their honour and respect. A few times, the potential respondents argued that since currently, the political leaders' reaction to the LGBTQ+ movement is "politically correct", they declined the interview because of their opposing (negative) experience; they did not want to talk about this.<sup>25</sup> At the core of this refusal is fear of being misunderstood by the "majority" or sometimes fear of "gay revenge" because gays currently "are in the position of power". The listed reasons for refusal are evidence that memories of homosexuals cause discomfort for their non-homosexual contemporaries of the Soviet times. The memories are also uncomfortable for the homosexuals of the Soviet times, who either refused to share them or, if sharing their stories, chose to remain anonymous. Therefore, in Latvia, due to lack of experience, not only queers feel threatened and unsafe, but also heterosexuals. Such idiosyncratic silence undermines the gathering of memories. I put forth three reasons that promote such silence, characteristic of both heterosexuals and homosexuals of the Soviet times.

First, it is the close-minded and unaccepting attitude of homosexuality both during the Soviet times and currently. The milieu of Soviet sexuality was conservative; however, many things that the population did not advertise – contraception, sex before marriage, extramarital relationships, etc., during the Soviet times provided and offered the people a certain sense of freedom and autonomy within the authoritarian society. The historian Nataliia Lebina recommends defining Soviet sexuality using the term "intimate", which could be interpreted as something hidden from the surrounding world and deeply personal.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, the Soviet generation considers conversations about sexuality inappropriate or, at best, uncomfortable. After completing the interviews, a few respondents acknowledged that it was difficult to discuss sexuality, even if it was the sexuality of other people.

With the collapse of communism, the prejudices against sexuality have not ended and, even more specifically, against homosexuality. This causes a significant hindrance to memory sharing. Even though research shows that attitude towards the LGBTQ+ community is improving, it is still alarming within the European

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25 This situation can also be explained by the biases dealt with in the last chapter of the article.

26 Lebina 2019, 171–188; Ilic 2013, 13.

Union, showing one of the lowest approval indicators.<sup>27</sup> In September 2021, Latvian Television completed a small series of short films, “Outside”<sup>28</sup>, that reviews the sexualities of the contemporary youth. Upon wrapping the project, the director, Ieva Ozoliņa, noted that due to ignorance, stereotypes about sexualities have a stronghold on society. Therefore, sexuality is a challenging topic which youth refuse to discuss.<sup>29</sup> Also, the government’s vague position towards the regulation of the civil union between [same-sex] partners and inconsequential attitude towards homophobic hate crime,<sup>30</sup> as well as instances of hate speech against LGBTQ+ people,<sup>31</sup> undermine the reduction of prejudices against the community.

The second reason for the silence is caused by the traumatic cultural, political, and social experiences of the Soviet times. After regaining independence, the paradigm of the nation’s victimisation took hold in Latvia, turning the nation into the central and exclusive victim of the Soviet regime.<sup>32</sup> In this paradigm, there are only two roles – that of the victim or the collaborator. If that helped with the interpretation of postwar Stalinism, then dividing the nation into two positions did not foster comprehension of the period of late socialism. This has resulted in the silencing of past experiences, reduction of the abuser into the KGB<sup>33</sup> or its informers, or cumulative heroisation when the person formulates their collaboration with the ruling power using a narrative of victimhood or a hero.<sup>34</sup> If a person has difficulty discussing their experiences of the post-Stalinism period, then perhaps discussing sexuality and, even more so, homosexuality is more challenging.

To formulate their experiences about a particular problem, the interviewees use language containing the experiences’ dominant hierarchies, closely tied to the leading historical discourses. Reducing the Soviet time in public discourses to a simplified, binarised construct complicates comprehension of the Soviet past and understanding of the self during that past. A few publications about homosexuality during the Soviet times<sup>35</sup> and a variety of either domestic or foreign cultural products have not been able to create an adequate space for experiences

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27 EU FRA 2020.

28 LTV\_16plus (Director). (2021, July 13). *ĀRĀ. DOKUMENTĀLIE STĀSTI. INTRO*. Accessible at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9kPtUl64jP4> (viewed 26.02.2024).

29 Melberga 2001.

30 Rozentāle 2021.

31 Tumule, Milovs 2022.

32 Bleiere 2012, 33–34; Davoliūtē 2022, 265–267.

33 Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti, in English – Committee for State Security.

34 Welzer et al. 2010, 64.

35 Ruduša 2014; Lipša 2018; Lipša 2021b.



and discourses that would liberate people from the urge to stigmatise homosexuals and would offer examples of how to discuss this phenomenon. To use Astrid Erll's concept – the potential for memory travelling is not secured in the nation's cultural memory.<sup>36</sup>

Estonian researchers Rebeka Põldsam and Sara Arumetsa attempted to explain the space of discourse using the semiotic model of explosion developed by the semiotician Yuri Lotman.<sup>37</sup> They wrote that in the 1990s, human rights activists split into believers of social diversity and guardians of national rights. The latter became heteronormative and started loudly marginalising the rights of the minorities.<sup>38</sup>

In essence, the situation in Latvia is very similar; people could interpret the national freedom narrative at the end of the 1980s in many ways. For some, it was freedom from the Soviet Union. Others defined it much broader by including liberal liberties, such as democracy, individual and political freedom, human rights, freedom of speech, etc. A potential research participant, when asked to share her memories about the situation in the 1980s, in our correspondence replied that the subcultures of homosexuals were not an urgent problem, even more so during the Singing Revolution,<sup>39</sup> because it was “the struggle for something greater” which “of course, also included the liberation of sexual orientations”.<sup>40</sup> We can use the previously mentioned Lotman's model or any of the theories of poststructural cultural hegemony or collective memory to describe the obvious – namely, the LGBTQ+ history was not written into the national memory narrative. During the pluralisation of national history in the 2000s, accounts of several ethnic groups were included. However, the main narrative preserved its “heterosexual hegemony”.<sup>41</sup> The grand narrative of the nation's memory offered space for the victimised Latvian nation, in which sexuality reveals itself exclusively through the lens of the heterosexual family. This has resulted in the Russian speaking LGBTQ+ community experiencing double discrimination, even though feeling secure but unsafe.<sup>42</sup> The findings in sociology questionnaires reveal that in Russian-speaking families, the negative attitude towards homosexuality is nearly

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36 Erll 2011.

37 Lotman, Grishakova, Clark 2009.

38 Põldsam, Arumetsa 2023, 11.

39 A series of events that led to the collapse of the communist regime in Latvia and the restoration of independence from June 1987 – August 1991.

40 Correspondence with L., 19 January 2023 (author's archive).

41 Butler 2002.

42 Tkačenko 2023.

twice as prevalent as in Latvian-speaking families.<sup>43</sup> It would be essential for this research project to gather the Russian-speaking population's memories. However, several factors undermine this – the war in Ukraine, which has created dissonance within the Russian-speaking population, which has not been researched yet, and the shared historical experience and attitude towards the Soviet time.<sup>44</sup>

The third reason for the Soviet generation's silence is the challenge to secure complete anonymity, which in small social groups, such as artist or writer communities, is more difficult to achieve. Assurances about the confidentiality of academic research, which is based on a mutual agreement of anonymity, did not always convince the potential participants that they would not be recognised. This includes potential homosexual and heterosexual participants who declined to be interviewed. Researchers who are outsiders and do not belong to the local community could guarantee more secure participants' anonymity.<sup>45</sup> At the same time, implementing such an approach would be limited by several factors – lack of fluency in the language and local sociopolitical contexts, among others.

Regardless of these challenges, the interviews accumulated and in the following two sections, I analyse the themes that appear in the heterosexuals' narratives.

## Main narrative threads

In this section, I look at narratives similar to the analysed interviews and offer the theme that could be defined as – the Soviet generation's memory. Previous generations' communicative memory, cultural memory, and the current social environment influence this generation's stories. The stories display similar patterns, interpretations, experiences and attitudes that allow for synthesising the Soviet generation's common narrative.

Most of the respondents gained knowledge about homosexuality in childhood and teenage years. Most often, such knowledge was not acquired from direct interaction with homosexuals, which was extremely rare and random, but rather from the available literature. The literary works were published during the Soviet period and before the Second World War and kept in the family libraries. One of the respondents mentioned that he found out about homosexuality from the book *Across the River and Into the Trees*<sup>46</sup> by Ernest Hemingway, published

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43 Spundiņa 2023.

44 Zellis 2017.

45 Taavetti 2019, 214.

46 Hemingvejs, Ernests (1963). *Pāri upei, koku paēnā*. Rīga: LVI.

in Latvian in the 1960s. The respondent liked the novel very much. He mentioned that the author identified one of the characters in Italian as *pederaste* without any further clarification. The respondent then reached for the dictionary, published during first Latvia's independence,<sup>47</sup> in his parent's bookcase and learned the meaning of pederasty.<sup>48</sup>

The second means of obtaining knowledge was gossip spread in various social groups about homosexually inclined people.

To quote the respondent: "Our neighbours were a family of a director, and his wife often visited to borrow sugar or other stuff. The visit would drag on for several hours. With careful eavesdropping, I could hear various stories about artists and their personal lives through the wall. In the midst of it, I could vaguely make out something about it. I didn't understand much about [homosexuality], but I comprehended that it was something unusual and not very nice." "However," the respondent immediately adds to her story, this "information was not judgmental, but rather sensational".<sup>49</sup>

Another respondent revealed that she found out about different sexuality – in her words, most likely about a "hermaphrodite" – while in the countryside. She explains: "And then I heard for the first time – half man – half woman" (...) And then I simply imagined – yes, she was always wearing pants and a man's jacket. And worked somewhere – perhaps, as a stable hand. But it was not meant to be an attitude. Simply put, it is how it is – somebody is a drinker, another person is a lousy neighbour, yet another is a hermaphrodite."<sup>50</sup>

In several interviews, different visual appearance, such as a masculine woman or a feminine man, was mentioned as one of the indicators to identify homosexuals, which in some instances turned out to be incorrect.

It is important to note that several research participants when asked when they first encountered a homosexual person, reduced their experiences to instances of paedophilia, when during their teenage years they experienced sexual advances, or when some of their educators were caught for indecent behaviour. People of this generation assume that paedophilia and homosexuality, if not synonyms, are closely linked concepts, as indicated in their narratives. The two concepts are viewed as the same, corresponding with the legal interpretation

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47 1920–1940. See *History of Latvia: A brief synopsis*. (n. d.). Accessible at: <https://www2.mfa.gov.lv/en/usa/culture/history-of-latvia-a-brief-synopsis> (viewed 26.02.2024).

48 SBK02.

49 SBK06.

50 SBK017.

during the Soviet times, where homosexual relationships were defined as “pederasty”.<sup>51</sup> Also, the prewar and Soviet publications etymologically define pederasty as the love for boys and male youth.<sup>52</sup> For the Soviet generation, this interpretation might have formed an associative link that pederasty and paedophilia are identical concepts. Latvian sexologist Jānis Zālītis wrote that pederasts are actual homosexuals, which are dangerous and criminal because they do not give up their desires even after a marriage to a woman. They are extremely dangerous to boys during puberty.<sup>53</sup>

The respondents talk about both – homosexuality of men and women. They discuss gay homosexuality more frequently, however, women’s same-sex relationships they talk about less often and less judgemental (and in more neutral terms). Overall, the respondents’ attitudes towards homosexuality range from extremely negative to reserved neutral. The interviewees used indefinite pronouns such as “they” or “them” to avoid using the person’s name. That could be explained in many ways: on the one hand, it is a strategy to avoid causing discomfort to themselves and the person they are talking about by the information derived from their narrative. However, perhaps it could be unconscious depersonalisation at the core of homosexuals’ marginalisation. At the same time, the interviewees similarly reflected on homosexuality in general, avoiding as much as possible this term. For the Soviet generation, the words “homosexual”, “gay”, “lesbian”, etc. seem inappropriate and obscene, which are to be avoided by using the terms “they” or the metaphors such as “two faced”, “player of the opposite team”, “the representative of that Internationale”.

The analysis of the narratives also presents homosexuals in the role of seducers. Usually, the predator seduces a heterosexual male youth to become homosexual, using their charm or the position of power in a particular social group. Another narrative explains that homosexuality “in our weird world is a question of advancing one’s career”.<sup>54</sup> Circulation of such revelations promotes the established myths about the role of LGBTQ+ in the current state’s governing system and homosexuals as seducers of heterosexuals.

The interviewees explain that a person becomes a homosexual due to historical circumstances. When analysing a colleague’s homosexuality, the respondent contemplates that he likely became like that during his rehabilitation in

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51 Alexander 2018, 31–35.

52 Švābe u. c. 1937, 30358.

53 Zālītis 1982, 80. About Zālītis writing on homosexuality in the book *In the Name of Love* see the article by Ineta Lipša (Lipša 2022, 110–113).

54 SBK02.

a sanatorium, where he was forced to stay in the company of young men.<sup>55</sup> Therefore, becoming a homosexual is explained as a social adaptation to outside circumstances (the homosocial environment of the sanatorium), and hardly ever contemplated that a person could be born that way. In addition, homosexuality is characterised as a “misfortune” or “ailment”, and the person is “tormented” by their sexuality and suffered from it. Often these narratives create a peculiar binary scene, where genuine happiness equals traditional family, whereas homosexuality is misery and misfortune.<sup>56</sup> Perhaps such comparisons are inherited from the Soviet reference literature where “homosexuality” is defined as “tragedy”.<sup>57</sup>

### **Between the urban legends and conspiracy theories**

Urban legends are formed when people attempt to comprehend and simplify a complicated reality. During such attempts, the legends fill the information vacuum that develops due to various objective and subjective circumstances. These legends contain sentimental charges that can trigger different emotions and fulfil specific social communication functions. The Soviet urban legends can usually be interpreted as a reaction to the state’s economic, social and political ventures’ side effects;<sup>58</sup> however, it appears they existed about homosexuals as well.

Several narrators reveal the link between homosexuals and the Soviet nomenclature. One could contemplate why distinguished and known homosexuals were not repressed by Soviet authorities or repressed only after repeated reporting delivered by militia.<sup>59</sup> The explanation for that is revealed in the speculation that even in the upper echelons of the Soviet power, there were homosexuals who had created a secret network. These stories are enriched by secretive deaths of homosexuals, which are tied to breaking the code of silence or mysterious circumstances of their death, directly or indirectly linking them to nomenclature or the KGB.

If there is some uncertainty about homosexuals’ influence on the Soviet nomenclature, it is replaced by assumptions that they are a tight-knit and closed community in which everyone supports each other, “just like Jews”.<sup>60</sup> Even though none of the research participants could be considered antisemitic,

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55 SBK02.

56 SBK03.

57 Zālītis 1982, 79.

58 Kalmre 2013; Arkhipova, Kirziuk 2020.

59 SBK03.

60 SBK05.

the structure of such a narrative echoes the traditional antisemitic conspiracy theories. While everywhere else in the world it is possible to draw direct and well-founded parallels between radical conservatives' discourses and their attitude towards the LGBTQ+ community,<sup>61</sup> in Latvia it is not noticeable either in the public space or in the interviews. Hypothetically, this could be explained as an archetypal atavism, on which basis most of the conspiracy theories are built. Much the same as the stories about homosexuals as seducers, it is possible to draw similarities with how Jews were rendered as immoral and promiscuous. However, these are fragmentary speculations that do not create the structural basis for the story, which could be recognisable in some conspiracy narratives.

While there is no concrete evidence for the stories about homosexuality in the Communist party nomenclature, they sometimes appear in the field of memoirs, stating that the Second Secretary of the Latvian Communist Party's Central Committee (LCP CC), Valentin Dmitriev,<sup>62</sup> was homosexual. Also, in some interviews, the same is mentioned about the First Secretary of the LCP CC Augusts Voss.<sup>63</sup> Whether it is true or just hearsay, one could only guess. The historian Saulius Grybkauskas, in his monograph about the institution of the Second Secretaries in the USSR, points out the political tandem of Dmitriev and Voss and the overall formal reasons for their dismissal.<sup>64</sup>

Situation is slightly different with the engagement of homosexuals with the KGB. After the publication of the KGB archives,<sup>65</sup> several Latvian homosexuals were disclosed [as informants or agents], who refrained from publicly explaining their possible collaboration with the KGB.<sup>66</sup> The narratives also reveal suspicion that colleagues or friends might have had ties with the KGB since the aforementioned could be blackmailed for their sexual orientation. However, the threat of criminal prosecution was a serious argument to force a homosexual to become an informer or an agent for the KGB. Perhaps imagining such a scenario is one of the reasons why the collapse of the USSR prohibited the inclusion of the LGBTQ+ community in the narrative of the victimised nation.<sup>67</sup>

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61 Kerl 2022; Heinemann 2022.

62 Valentin Dmitriev (1927–2020) – the Second Secretary of LCP CC (1980–86).

63 Augusts Voss (1919–1994) – the First Secretary of LCP CC (1966–84); SBK04, SBK019.

64 Gribkauskas 2020, 232–234.

65 Latvian SSR KGB Archive <https://kgb.arhivi.lv/>

66 A series of publications “Bags are open” (Maisi vaļā) developed by journalists of Delfi.lv <https://www.delfi.lv/delfi-tv-ar-jani-domburu/kolekcijas/maisi-vala/>

67 It must be noted that during the interview with a homosexual of the Soviet time it was revealed that there had been an attempt to recruit him for the KGB. The respondent, however, denied that his sexual orientation was used as a blackmail (SBK06).

One of the research participants talks about the gay provocateurs sent by the KGB to protests in 1987 and 1988. She admitted that somebody “more informed” had told her that they were “pidrillas”,<sup>68</sup> but she indeed remembers vividly an outgoing, flamboyant, well-dressed man wearing high heels (SBK17). Perhaps such a viewpoint could have been formed based on the attitude of the Soviet authorities, which did not attempt to prosecute all the identified homosexuals criminally but instead just placed them under surveillance, making them the target of various manipulations.<sup>69</sup>

Of course, we can debate whether these assumptions were legends or mere gossip. If we deduce that gossip lacks narrative structures, which the legends have, then in my opinion, the social significance of these stories lacks proper critical appreciation. Stories about homosexuals’ connection with the Soviet nomenclature and the KGB have not ended after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The maintainers of the discourses of radical conservatism sometimes use these parallels by creating narratives about homosexuals at the upper echelons of power and their attempts, through the seduction of heterosexuals, to destroy gender roles and the institution of family. It is more likely random; however, one could contemplate if the Soviet authoritarianism’s practice of using sexuality as a manipulative instrument against itself could be comprehended in contemporary contexts. It is worth investigating further to which degree these narratives are the legacy of the experiences in the Soviet time and to which degree they were fed by the Russian propaganda<sup>70</sup> or the churches and global conspiracy theories.

## Conclusion

Memory about homosexuals in Soviet Latvia exists only at the communicative level, and more so, during its last years, due to the lack of a process of the travelling of these memories. Homosexuals of the Soviet times could not often disclose their sexuality to their families, or they would not mention it publicly because it was an indiscreet topic. Also, the families attempted to either ignore or hide their relatives’ other sexuality. Therefore, it is essential that the memories and testimonies about the lived experiences would be documented by both homosexuals and heterosexuals, securing their formation with the proper tools of cultural memory. Memories about homosexuals are episodic and not articulated

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68 Jargon for pederast or pedophile.

69 Lipša 2023.

70 Moriss 2023.

within non-homosexual persons' biographical memories. And even more so, access to these memories is restricted by the Soviet generation's prejudice against discussing sexuality, specifically homosexuality, during the Soviet times and in the present day. The fear of being recognised, which is the problem of anonymity, hinders storytelling.

A significant obstacle in sharing memories about homosexuals, as well as homosexuals' memories, is a lack of support by the metanarratives, which often serve as matrices when a person forms their life history. The narrative of homosexuals' oppression by the Soviet regime would fit seemingly well into the account of Latvia's victimised metanarrative. Such inclusion, however, has not happened after the collapse of the USSR when the national narrative developed, or currently. I believe this could be linked to the oversimplified binarity of this historical narrative, an overall conservative attitude toward it, and the sign, as recognised in the stories, indicating the possible, even though coerced, collaboration of homosexuals with the Soviet militia and the KGB.

The memory narratives offer knowledge about heterosexuals' comprehension and prejudice, as well as attitudes toward Soviet queers, as well as specific events in LGBTQ+ history. Recording these memories and analysis are crucial in learning about the social relationships that prevailed during the Soviet authoritarian years, specifically within the specific group of people whose difference was their sexual orientation. Evidence from the interviews reveals that the people knew about homosexuality – the knowledge was acquired from literature, gossip, and observation of the “other” people in an everyday environment. The research participants have formed a prejudice against their homosexual contemporaries. However, the degree of the judgement varied from regarding homosexuality as a perversion, illness, or misfortune to reducing homosexuality to an “idiosyncrasy”. The narratives directly or indirectly reveal contemporaries' marginalisation of homosexuals. However, the reason for distancing from them is not only their different sexuality but also rumours and hearsay circulated about homosexuals' ties with the power elites and the KGB.

The research findings were based on interviews with ethnic Latvians, which revealed views of only one side of the Soviet society. To broaden perspective, interviews with the Russian-speaking population should be conducted. Their historical narrative, as well as attitudes toward homosexuality, are different, which is evident in sociological questionnaires as more judgmental than Latvians'. I hope that this paper will serve as a launch of the narrative about society's attitude toward different sexualities during the Soviet times.

Translated from Latvian by *Anna Romanovska*



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Interview	Year of birth	Gender
SBK02	1948	m
SBK03	1931	m
SBK04	1943	f
SBK05	1944	f
SBK06	1953	f
SBK17	1955	f
SBK18	1942	f
SBK19	1942	m
SBK07	1943	m /queer

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## KVĪRU SEKSUALITĀTES KLĀTBŪTNE PADOMJU LAIKA LATVIEŠU NEHOMOSEKSUĀĻU ATMIŅĀ

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Zinātniskās intereses: propagandas vēsture, Latvijas 20. gadsimta vēsture, mutvārdu vēsture, kolektīvā un individuālā atmiņa

Rakstā ir analizētas heteroseksuālu cilvēku mutvārdu vēstures intervijas par viņu pieredzi ar homoseksuāļiem padomju laikos. Pētījuma mērķis ir paplašināt kvīru vēstures stāstu, lai tajā būtu ne tikai viņu vai varas struktūru perspektīva, bet tiktu parādīta arī citu laikabiedru pieredze. Raksta uzdevums ir analizēt gan šīs atmiņas kā avotu grupu, gan atklāt to vēstījumu specifiku par zināšanām un attiecībām ar kvīriem. Analīzei tika izvēlētas astoņas intervijas, balstoties uz diviem kritērijiem: a) intervējamie bija dzimuši 20. gadsimta 30. gadu beigās – 60. gadu sākumā, tādējādi viņu pieredze var tikt uzskatīta par padomju paaudzi raksturojošu; b) stāstītājiem bija personīgi pazīstami homoseksuāļi – draugi, paziņas, kolēģi vai radnieki – padomju laikā. Raksturojot šīs intervijas kā avotu, norādīts uz virkni problēmu gan interviju iegūšanā, gan interpretācijā. Tāpat ir analizētas komunikatīvās atmiņas kopīgo stāstījumu iezīmes intervijās, kā arī to ietekme uz šodienas homoseksuāļu uztveri Latvijas sabiedrībā un tajā skaitā tās vēstures meta-naratīvā, kas balstās uz nācijas viktimizāciju padomju gados.

*Atslēgas vārdi:* mutvārdu vēsture, kvīri, padomju Latvija, atmiņa, kopīgie stāsti (*common narratives*)

### Kopsavilkums

2022. gadā, uzsākot projektu “Starp valsts iestāžu uzraudzību un neiejaukšanos: viendzimuma seksuālo subkultūru prakses Padomju Latvijā, 1954–1991”, viens no uzdevumiem bija apzināt arī homoseksuālu cilvēku laikabiedru liecības. Šis raksts balstās uz daļu projekta laikā savāktu interviju, un tās tiek izmantotas kā primārais avots, izgaismojot vairākas problēmas saistībā ar interviju iegūšanu un to interpretāciju. To analīzei lietotas mutvārdu vēstures metodes. Pieredzes par kvīru esamību padomju laikā Latvijā pastāv tikai komunikatīvās atmiņas līmenī, piedevām tās norietā, jo netiek nodrošināts šo atmiņu pārnese/ceļošanas process, vispirms jau caur ģimenes atmiņu. Padomju laika homoseksuāļiem bieži nācās savu seksualitāti no ģimenes slēpt, vai par to viņi nerunāja publiski, jo tā bija neērta tēma. Arī ģimenes centās savu radnieku citādo seksualitāti ignorēt vai slēpt. Tādējādi ir būtiski, lai atmiņas un liecības arī par šīm praksēm gan no nehomoseksuāļu, gan homoseksuāļu puses tiktu fiksētas, kas ļautu nodrošināt to

“ceļošanas” procesu jau ar kultūras atmiņas instrumentiem. Atmiņas par homoseksuāļiem ir epizodiskas un nav artikulētas nehomoseksuāļu biogrāfiskajā atmiņā. Turklāt šķērsli pētnieku piekļūšanai šīm atmiņām rada padomju paaudzes aizspriedumi pret runāšanu par seksualitāti kopumā un īpaši pret homoseksualitāti kā padomju laikā, tā šodien. Dalīšanos stāstos apgrūtina arī anonimitātes problēmas nelielā sabiedrībā, bailes tikt atpazītam.

Būtisks traucēklis stāstu dalīšanās praksēs ir tas, ka atmiņas par homoseksuāļiem, tāpat kā homoseksuāļu atmiņas nerod pastiprinājumu metanaratīvos, kas bieži kalpo kā matricas, cilvēkam veidojot savu pieredzes stāstu. Latvijas vēstures viktimizācijas metanaratīvā šķietami labi iekļautos arī stāsts par homoseksuāļu vajāšanām no padomju režīma puses, tomēr šāda iekļaušana nav notikusi – nedz laikā, kad pēc PSRS sabrukuma tika veidots šis nācijas stāsts, nedz šodien. Manuprāt, to var saistīt gan ar paša vēstures stāsta vienkāršoto binaritāti, gan visumā konservatīvo attieksmi pret šo stāstu, gan arī iezīmi, kas nojaušama stāstos, proti, par homoseksuāļu iespējamo, lai arī piespiesto kolaborāciju ar padomju milicijas un valsts drošības iestādēm.

Atmiņu stāsti sniedz informāciju par nehomoseksuāļu zināšanām un aizspriedumiem, kā arī attieksmēm pret padomju laika kvīriem, tāpat par noteiktiem notikumiem LGBT+ vēsturē. Šo atmiņu fiksācija un analīze ir nepieciešama, lai mēs spētu pietuvoties tām sociālo attiecību praksēm, kas valdīja padomju autoritārisma gados šķietami vienas sabiedrības locekļu vidū, kuru atšķirība bija to seksuālā orientācija. Intervijas liecina, ka zināšanas par homoseksualitāti cilvēkiem bija – tās tika iegūtas gan ar literatūras palīdzību, gan ar baumām, gan arī saskaroties ar citādiem cilvēkiem ikdienā. Intervējamo paustās attieksmes pret homoseksuālajiem laikabiedriem bija aizspriedumainas, tomēr to gamma variējās atkarībā no stāstītāja – sākot ar uzskatiem par homoseksualitāti kā izvirtību, slimību, nelaimi un beidzot ar tās reducēšanu līdz “divainībai”. Stāsti gan tiešā, gan netiešā veidā norāda uz homoseksuāļu marginalizāciju no laikabiedru puses. Tomēr šīs distancēšanās iemesls ir ne tikai citādā seksualitāte, bet arī tā laika sabiedrībā pastāvošās baumas un nostāsti par homoseksuāļu saistību ar varas elitēm vai Valsts drošības komiteju.

Tomēr jāuzsver, ka rakstā ir analizēta tikai latviešu sabiedrības perspektīva, tajā netiek atsegti krievvalodīgo pagātnes stāsti, kuri, kā liecina kvantitatīvās aptaujas, ir aizspriedumaināki pret homoseksuāļiem nekā latviešiem, bet piekļuvi šiem stāstiem apgrūtina virkne objektīvu un subjektīvu faktoru.

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