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Literature, Libraries, Society: Memories of the 1970s

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Summary

In the 1970s the link “book–library–reader” was deliberately strengthened in the Soviet Union, because of the opinion that the ideal Soviet person must have a broad view and diverse interests. The library was an active agent in these processes. Both methodological materials and library statistics show active, targeted work with literature and readers.

The collections of public libraries at that time were diverse in terms of content. The collections contained many translations of classical and popular literature from Russian and other languages, original Latvian literature, professional and sectoral literature, books of popular series, periodicals.

Social political literature competed for readers’ attention with fiction, as well as literature on arts and sports, natural sciences, history and geography. The research of reading practises and interviews with former librarians confirm that readers were interested in topics such as love, ancient times, history and world travel.

Formally, libraries were one of the institutions supporting Soviet ideology, but interviews with former librarians show that the atmosphere in each particular library depended on the local government and the librarian’s own personality.

Kopsavilkums

20. gadsimta 70. gados Padomju Savienībā tika apzināti nostiprināta saikne “grāmata–bibliotēka–lasītājs”, uzskatot, ka ideālajam padomju cilvēkam jābūt ar plašu skatījumu un daudzveidīgām interesēm. Bibliotēka bija aktīva aģente šajos procesos. Gan metodiskie materiāli, gan bibliotēku statistika liecina par aktīvu, mērķtiecīgu darbu ar literatūru un lasītājiem.

Publisko bibliotēku krājumi tolaik bija saturiski daudzveidīgi. Krājumos bija daudz klasiskās un populārās literatūras tulkojumu no krievu un citām valodām, latviešu oriģinālliteratūra, profesionālā un nozaru literatūra, populāru sēriju grāmatas, preses izdevumi.

Sabiedriski politiskā literatūra par lasītāju uzmanību sacentās ar daiļliteratūru, mākslas, sporta, dabaszinātņu, vēstures un ģeogrāfijas literatūru. Lasīšanas pētījumu rezultāti un intervijas ar bijušajiem bibliotekāriem apliecina, ka lasītājus interesēja tādas tēmas kā mīlestība, senie laiki, vēsture un pasaules ceļojumi.

Formāli bibliotēkas bija viena no padomju ideoloģiju atbalstošajām institūcijām, taču intervijas ar bijušajiem bibliotekāriem liecina, ka atmosfēra katrā konkrētajā bibliotēkā bija atkarīga no pašvaldības un paša bibliotekāra personības.

Introduction

The library as an official institution, as well as the work carried out in it, are subject to the requirements of the period, and influenced by governments and ideologies. This study discusses the public libraries of the Latvian SSR – or, as they were then called, mass libraries – their work with readers, whether and how the activity of libraries and librarians was influenced by the ideological atmosphere of that time, and whether this influence was reflected in readers' literary interests or their demand for literature. The author of the study chose the 1970s as the conditional middle point and peak time of the Brezhnev Era.

At all times there has been an ongoing link “book–library–reader,” and the 1970s are no exception. On the contrary, this link was then deliberately strengthened, because the ideal Soviet person had to have a broad view, diverse interests, and a desire to learn, and the library was considered to be an active agent in these processes. Almost any book officially issued in the Latvian SSR at that time went to a library that was one of the connections between society and literature, and it should be noted that in the early 1970s, 24.6% of the population regularly visited public libraries (Grāmata 1978: 41).

Aim, methodology and sources of the study

The aim of the study was to find out what the content of library collections and the collection-use statistics were, what kind of literature was popular among readers at that time, and how former librarians now interpret the activities of public libraries of that time. Data obtained in this study particularly illustrate the accents of the practical activity of public libraries in the 1970s.

Two methods were chosen for obtaining the data used in the study: document analysis and semi-structured interviews, as it allows to look at the research question from the perspective of both quantitative and qualitative data.

This study uses compilations of official library statistics, methodological materials of public library work, articles devoted to library work, and results of reading studies carried out at the time. Eight librarians and library managers who worked in public libraries in the 1970s in different places around Latvia were interviewed.

Among the respondents were four employees of district central libraries, one of whom is a former central library manager; two were heads of the acquisition department, and one was a librarian (a specialist of local studies). Two respondents represent small-town libraries, while two were heads of rural libraries.

Four respondents were still working at their workplaces at the time of the interview, reaching 46 to 51 years of work experience. One respondent had retired shortly before the interview. Therefore, their opinion is based not only on memories, but also on comparable work experience gained in different time periods and contexts.

The public library and ideology

People have always used texts that provide information about things that are important to them, so the content of reading shows the interests of a particular society or an era. As the functioning of libraries has been documented, this is one of the ways to study public sentiment and informative needs over a certain period of time.

In the post-Soviet library science, articles and studies often show that libraries during the Soviet period were one of the most important active agents in the propaganda and indoctrination of Soviet ideologies: for example, “libraries were given absurd and unethical tasks, transforming them into essential components of the Soviet propaganda system” (Kreicbergs 2010: 163), and “[.] in spite of the small funding, high-quality ‘librarian techniques’ [..]” expanded and convincing literature propaganda [in libraries – SC] had to encourage the acceptance of Soviet ideology in the minds of the population [..]” (Dreimane 2004: 21).

On the other hand, interviews with former library staff show that there were two levels of activity, the official level and the informal, daily level of work. The first of these levels ensured that job planning, reporting, and testing activities were appropriate, while the other depended on the personality and understanding of the librarian and was aimed at providing the reader with the best and most interesting literature from what was available, which was also confirmed by the interviews, for example:

“I didn’t feel it [ideology – SC], but maybe it was somewhere in another library [..]. We needed those files and communist education ingredients, had plans, but the paper endures everything, why not write it? Sit and write. We suggested what he [the reader – SC] wanted. We imposed nothing on anyone. That was their choice” (Respondent MC).

“[E]verything depended on what the State Library, the Ministry of Culture, the party committee and the district executive committee [..] required, but readers probably weren’t affected by that, [..] they took what they were interested in” (Respondent AL).

The same idea is expressed by other former employees who have been interviewed:

“[M]aybe it was different in the city [..] but it [ideology – SC] was not such a thing in the countryside. When we suggested something to the reader, we didn’t think

about that ideology. It must have been a little here in the day, but imposed [...] no” (Respondent RD).

“They tried to make it [library – SC] into such [ideology instrument – SC], but in fact it was not” (Respondent MK).

The term “propaganda” is often used in the methodological materials and reports of Soviet time libraries, which, in a historical context, leads to negative associations about the intrusive presence of an ideology. Looking at the collection of methodological materials and articles of that time, it appears that this concept in the library sector (and not only there) is used freely in a narrower sense without a particular ideological hue, labelling what is today known as the promotion of resources of literature and library or even advertising, such as “Literature propaganda is closely associated with the use of information sources, a variety of informative resources. Radio, TV, newspapers and magazines have gained more popularity in this area than libraries” (Eglīte 1974: 49), or “Library employees have paid a great deal of attention to improving reader service and literature propaganda” (Latvijas 1982: 14).

Statistical review of the work of public libraries in the 1970s

What literature came to the public in libraries and what was the intensity of its use? What can the total statistics of Latvian SSR libraries tell us about the topics of the literature offered and about the interests of readers? We cannot be entirely convinced of the truth of statistics, but the trends are visible.

Figures summarized in the tables (see Tables 1, 2) show the activity of readers, the average annual number of document loan and the average number of books per reader in both district central libraries (cities) and rural libraries, comparing the statistics of the beginning, middle and end of the 1970s.

Table 1, 2. Basic mass (public) library indicators (Latvijas 1972–1981)

		1971	1975	1980
Average library readership (thousands)	District central libraries	1868	1982	2431
	Rural libraries	255	256	279
Average number of visits per year for a reader	District central libraries	8,8	8,7	7,7
	Rural libraries	6,5	6,8	7,3

		1971	1975	1980
Average loan per library (thousands)	District central libraries	60804	68928	82146
	Rural libraries	4768	5213	6169
Average readability (how many books loan per year per reader)	District central libraries	32,5	34,8	33,8
	Rural libraries	18,6	20,4	22,1
Books per reader	District central libraries	21,2	20,7	20,9
	Rural libraries	25,5	27,5	30,6

Interestingly, in district libraries in the 1970s, the number of readers and loan are rising while the average number of reader visits and the number of books per reader is falling. On the other hand, in rural (village) libraries at the same time, all indicators show a steady rise.

Next statistical compilation (see Table 3) shows the composition of public or mass library collections of the time by sector, showing the five genres most represented in percentage terms. The bulk of the collections – about half – consisted of fiction. Social political literature ranks second or third, but does not exceed 21% and peaks in 1980. They represent on average only 15% of the collections during the period of research. Arts, sports, medicine, geography, and natural sciences literature also played an important part in the collections. In the late 1970s, children's literature appeared separately on this list.

Table 3. Breakdown of collections by genre (Latvijas 1972–1981)

	1971	1975	1980
Library collections by genre (%)	1. Fiction 56% 2. Social political literature 15,4% 3. Other literature 9,5% 4. Art, sports 5% 5. Natural sciences 5,4%	1. Fiction 56,3% 2. Other literature 15,5% 3. Social political literature 12,3% 4. Art, sports 5,7% 5. Natural sciences 5,1%	1. Fiction 48% 2. Social political literature 20,9% 3. Children's literature 7,6% 4. Science, medicine, geography 6,8% 5. Art, sports 6,6%

Next (see Table 4) statistics show which genres of literature were most loaned to readers. Social political literature takes second and third places, mostly in the 1970s, not exceeding 12% of the total, but here we need to take into account some nuances. Quite a large part of the books of readers' favorite series and topics were classified so that in library statistics they belong to social political literature – history, social events, biographies of distinguished people, philosophy, history of religion and national traditions, as well as travel and similar topics. Consequently, the borrowing of this literature also raised the percentage of the borrowing of social political literature in statistics. Children's literature, arts, sports, natural sciences, and technical literature were also requested by readers.

Table 4. Loan of literature by genre (Latvijas 1972–1981)

	1971	1975	1980
Loan of literature by genre (%)	1. Fiction 54,2% 2. Other literature 15,4% 3. Social political literature 11,9% 4. Art, sports 5,8% 5. Technology 5,4%	1. Fiction 53,5% 2. Other literature 15,5% 3. Social political literature 12,3% 4. Art, sports 5,7% 5. Technology 5,6%	1. Fiction 45,3% 2. Social political literature 21,1% 3. Children's literature 7,9% 4. Natural sciences, medicine, geography 7,6% 5. Art, sports 6,6%

The following table (see Table 5) shows the intensity of usage of the literature from the collections within individual subjects, expressed by a specific factor. The higher the ratio, the more intense the "movement" of publications in these genres. It is interesting that here the genres are sorted in a different order – those that have had the largest part of collection and the largest loan are at the bottom of the list. Fiction is only in the fourth or fifth place, but social political literature has even fallen out of the top five in the mid-1970s. The most used are the collections of literature on technology, arts, sports, and other industries. These figures could indicate not only dissonance in statistics, but also too large and inactive collections in fiction and social political sciences, as well as the practical interests of society. But the ratio for any of the genres listed in the table appears to be above "1," which is considered to be a good enough indicator of collection movement.

Table 5. Circulation of collections of public libraries (Latvijas 1972–1981)

	1971	1975	1980
Average circulation of collections by genre (coef.)	1. Other literature 2,1 2. Technology 1,5 3. Art, sports 1,4 4. Fiction and natural sciences 1,2 5. Social political literature 1,0	1. Other literature 2,1 2. Engineering 1,8 3. Art, sports 1,5 4. Natural sciences 1,4 5. Fiction 1,3 * * 6. Social political literature 1,1	1. Technical literature 1,9 2. Art, sports 1,6 3. Nature sciences, medicine, geography 1,5 4. Social political and children's literature 1,4 5. Fiction 1,3

Contents of library collections and the interests of readers

In 1974, Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union issued the decision on increasing the role of libraries in the Communist encouragement of workers' scientific and technical progress. This led to the centralization of the library system; the collections of libraries from that time was limited to centralized advice (one of the respondents who at that time led the acquisition department of a library mentioned the type plan and thematic publishers' plans (Respondent ZT)).

The content of library collections was rather diverse in the 1970s. Fiction dominated and allowed widespread choices: there was Latvian original literature available, Russian classics, both Russian Soviet authors and authors from other Soviet republics, and the works of the best writers from abroad.

One of the studies carried out in the field of Latvian SSR libraries is "Building Readers' Demand in Libraries" (*"Lasītāju pieprasījums un tā veidošana bibliotēkā"*) conducted between 1978 and 1980. An introduction to this study shows that "readers' requests are extremely diverse" (Lasītāju 1982: 3). Here is also an indication of the factors that influenced readers' demand and choice at the time: 1. people working with readers (librarians, booksellers, teachers); 2. relatives, friends, acquaintances, colleagues at work; 3. library literature propaganda tools (e.g. free-access collection, bibliography, literature exhibitions and other literature-related events); 4. mass media and book ads and 5. the book itself and its presentation (Lasītāju 1982: 3).

Respondents in the interviews recall that the tendency to create private libraries had also been ongoing in the 1970s (in this regard, the Latvian SSR was in second

place in the Soviet Union (Grāmata 1978: 42)) and that the greatest trust in reading-material choices was placed in people familiar to the readers, as readers were somewhat cautious about librarians' recommendations. When interviewees were asked which books were most popular among library readers in the 1970s, the books and other reading materials named by respondents, especially those written by Latvian and foreign authors, were not entirely compliant with the expectations of Soviet ideology.

It is surprising that the most frequently mentioned popular periodicals in respondents' memories are in Russian, but these periodicals told the reader about the world, life and art beyond the borders of the USSR and also provided entertainment. These are: *Vokrug sveta* (Around the World), *Zarubeznij detektiv* (Foreign Detective), *Novij mir* (The New World), and *Inostrannaja literatura* (Foreign Literature). Regarding the last two, the scholar Zanda Gūtmane writes: "These magazines were in great demand in Latvia – they could be found in libraries and subscribed to. Because the publications were so popular, readers even had to wait their turn for half a year" (Gūtmane 2021: 142). The only periodical in Latvian highlighted in interviews was the literary magazine *Karogs* (The Flag).

Books with popular scientific content were also popular. During the interviews, the most often mentioned book series titles were *Apvārsnis* (Horizon), *Stāsti par vēsturi* (Stories of History), *Stāsti par dabu* (Stories of Nature), and *Ievērojamu cilvēku dzīve* (The Lives of Famous People). In addition, these reading materials were popular with both men and women of a wide variety of age and socio-occupational groups.

In interviews, respondents were asked which authors and which fiction books they remember as being particularly popular. Many authors and works were named. The list of Latvian authors and their works was plentiful, among them there were both pre-Soviet and Soviet Latvian authors. The most frequently named: Jaunsudrabiņš, Lācis, Indrāne, Ezerā, Zigmonte, Skujiņš, Dripe, Bels. Many poets were also named, for example: Vāciētis, Ziedonis, Čaklais, Zālīte, Ļūdēns, Lisovska, Elksne. It is not surprising, because libraries were actively involved in promoting Latvian literature – this occurred not only in the advising of readers, but also in compiling materials on local writers and artists and inviting Latvian writers to participate in library events, which they gladly did. One of the respondents highlighted the poet Imants Ziedonis in particular, calling the 1970s the "Ziedonis Era" (Respondent LO). The poetry of Latvian authors (and poetry in general) was most popular among women.

The naming of authors of Russian and Soviet fiction caused difficulties for respondents, as well as the most inaccuracies in the names of authors and works; sometimes respondents apologized for not remembering. It is surprising that only one Russian classic, Dostoyevsky, was named. Bulgakov, Zadornov, and a couple of

lesser-known authors today were also mentioned. Authors from Lithuania, Estonia, Belarus, and Ukraine were also popular, for example, Rannamaa, Avyžius, Baltušis, Žemaite, Shamjakin.

The authors of the other nations of the USSR, particularly from the republics of the southern part of the country, were not popular, with a few exceptions such as Aitmatov and Gamzatov. One of the respondents used the term “sleeping part of the collection” (Respondent ZT), which refers to the works of authors of the peoples of the USSR not requested but issued and stored, thus forming a massive, inactive part of the fiction collection in libraries that influenced its circulation performance in statistics.

Translations of foreign authors' books were very popular, from classical works to entertaining literature. During the 1970s, a lot of foreign authors' works were issued in good translation, offering a valuable choice to the readers. There were many authors from different countries and nations in the respondents' memory: Zola, Rolland, Scott, Dumas, Cronin, Bronte, Dickens, Hemingway, Undset, Sand, Hugo, Verne, Dreiser, Hamsun, Remarque, du Maurier and others. Regarding the named foreign authors, respondents said that “they were never on the shelf” (Respondent LO).

At that time, readers' favorite reading topics, such as travel, current events in the world, nature and animals, as well as household and horticulture, was mentioned by a researcher already in 1974, adding that science and technology were most commonly sought by men and fiction was most often chosen by women (Aišpure 1974). Research of the reading practices of that time highlighted that humor and satire, as well as works of historical content, and domestic topics were the topics closest to men, while for women, domestic topics came first, then humor and poetry (Grāmata 1978: 77). Respondents mentioned the same topics in interviews, but in addition they also mentioned military topics, theater and actors, crime novels and adventure novels, hobby literature (artwork, fishing, etc.) and, of course, the “eternal subject” (as defined Respondent LO) – love. The most frequently required for study purposes was medical, psychological, literary criticism, agricultural and technical literature.

Final reflections and conclusions

When drawing conclusions on the choice and interests of readers of that time, we can ask: where and when were they reading the social political literature? Respondents replied that printed materials on topics such as Marxism-Leninism, Lenin and the Communist Party, stories of the heroism in World War II, and similar literature were often posted at exhibitions for special public events, delivered to schools, collective farms, workshops and other

manufacturing units, meetings, polling stations, and the like (Respondent VT), including artistic groups. Literature of other topics was also delivered within the framework of out-of-library services (Respondent RD). Respondents remembered that rural topics (i.e. regarding collective farms) were read quite frequently, as well as books written by Leonid Brezhnev, the leader of the USSR at that time (*The Minor Land and Rebirth*, e.g.). Witty methods helped to keep up the loaning of social political literature, such as providing requested fiction only together with unsolicited books. This technique, among librarians themselves, was called “love with a tractor” (Respondent LO).

The work of promoting fiction or propaganda was highly focused. The 1970s were also the era of the boom of the library’s working aspect, such as “reading management,” understood as “[T]he deliberate actions of reading leaders in cleaning up reading content and reading culture, using different forms and methods of literature propaganda [...] taking into account both the personal subjective and unbiased reading interests and the needs of society as a whole” (Lasītāju 1982: 4).

Even though this method is seen in the post-Soviet period as a violation of readers’ privacy and a limitation of their choices – for example, “[r]eading management was transformed into an active aggressive library operation in which a certain range of books was imposed on the reader [...]” (Kreicbergs 2010: 164) –, respondents denied it and claimed that they used this reading management method to take care of the quality of the service of readers on a personal level: to provide them with information about the latest literature and to recommend reading materials according to the interests of each reader. As regards the reading management method as a breach of reader privacy, one of the respondents commented it briefly but subtly: “The same privacy violation as Google now” (Respondent MK).

Almost all respondents note that “there were things that simply needed to be done” (Respondent MK) – e. g. atheism propaganda, reports in Russian, family file index, Marxist–Leninism literature propaganda, etc. –, pointing out that “at that time, we [librarians – SC] had to be more diplomatic than today” (Respondent LP). Several respondents pointed out various absurd duties and working situations both then and now, because the absurdity appears in context.

If it is assumed that the ideology of libraries was provided by an appropriately [i.e. in accordance with the cultural policy at the time – SC] completed collection in tandem with active propaganda work (Kreicbergs 2010: 165), then statistics and memory stories show a situation where both of these components have actually been used to create libraries as cultural, literary, and local study centers, as well as to promote reading and to improve the quality of reader service using all resources available at the time. This is also evidenced by the considerable amount of press

publications of that time (on the website *www.periodika.lv*, describing the operation of public libraries in district centers, cities, and rural areas).

Despite the use of statistics, this study has a subjective background, since the mechanism for statistical production and the work with readers and literature in each particular location depended on the personal attitudes, views, and actions of the people - librarians and managers of libraries in the municipality.

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