Aija Abens
Doctoral Candidate, University of Latvia

Teaching History in the Soviet Union - memories of the intrusion of power

Life stories have taken on an important role in the interpretation of historical facts. Campbell states, "… we cannot talk about memory without discussing the social power that authority over the past secures…".

This social power comes from "relational remembering" in that three participants are involved – the one who speaks, the one who listens, and all the others who contribute to the meaning of the words the speaker uses. Sharing is how we learn to remember, how we come to form a sense of self and how that influences the way we create relationships with others. However, if we are guarded about our memories and do not articulate them, we break the natural habit of sharing the past. Creating a usable past is necessary to create coherent individual and group identities, but separating the idea of individual memory from the collective memory can cause individual members of society to lose a sense of their part in the relationships that actively make a difference on how they remember their past. This study of memory is particularly important in a society such as Latvian society that has experienced and continues to experience identity trauma, and in a field of study, the teaching of history, that is universally

accepted as being a significant determiner of a society's identity.

This paper is part of research for my doctoral dissertation on the effect of authoritarianism on the teaching of history in Latvia and involved interviewing former teachers of history during the Soviet regime. I view these interviews on two levels as far power and memory studies are concerned.

On the first level I am concerned with the teacher's testimony about the intrusion of Soviet power in the teaching of history and the second level comprises of the relationship between me as the interviewer and teachers as the subjects of my interviews.

I conducted 10 semi-structured interviews. Four of the teachers interviewed worked in schools at some point during the Stalinist period from 1944 until 1956 when Stalin and many of his policies were denounced. Three made up the middle-aged group of teachers and the remaining four the youngest who taught primarily during the 1980s.

The testimony given by these teachers is virtually identical with regard to teaching practices, observations, and professional development requirements, but the older the teacher, the more issues regarding fear and power were mentioned. The totalitarian nature of the Soviet system, particularly during the Stalin era, controlled all aspects of education.

The power associated with the regime was visible in four aspects of teacher education and practice as described by the teachers interviewed – curriculum, evaluation, interactions with students, and finally family history as a determiner of success. I will begin by discussing teacher education and **curriculum**.

The Soviet education system was highly centralized and had a unified curriculum, teaching materials, and methodological requirements. The older

teachers expressed negative attitudes towards the teacher education system. During the early years of the Stalin era, many of the teachers had not learned to read Russian very well, but were forced to study curriculum and methodology from Russian books. One teacher stated that he was ill-prepared for teaching, as he had not been sufficiently acquainted with the school curriculum. He described didactical lessons as highly theoretical, which explained how to organize a lesson, and he was quite positive in his assessment of the theory in these pedagogical courses. Theory was highly regarded, but much of this did not relate to the teachers' lived experience. The teachers were also quite cognizant of the politicized nature of their studies but pragmatic in their reflections about the realities they faced as students. Politicized courses of study, such as the history of the Communist Party, were not described as being particularly educational, but rather a necessary evil. When discussing history, all the teachers noted that Marxism-Leninism was a required course, but specifically separated that content from other history courses. Many of the teachers who were entrusted with this subject were Latvians repatriated from Russia for the purpose of inculcating the 'local' Latvians with proper Soviet ideology, because they were undeniably more reliable than the local teachers who were viewed with suspicion.

This changes with the middle-age group of teachers and the younger teachers whose teacher education is described in different terms. Teachers in the middle age group also expressed some frustration about their pedagogical education, which was driven more by ideology and less by fear. One teacher expressed frustration at the requirement that each lesson have specified educational as well as up-bringing outcomes, and found them difficult to compose and relate to the subject matter. One of the younger

teachers, on the other hand, found history a particularly easy subject with which to fulfill those requirements, and had no trouble creating outcomes for love of the fatherland, patriotism, collectivism, and other ideologically based requirements. Other younger teachers described their pedagogic experience in terms of methodology – how to write summaries, present lessons, how to analyze the lessons, and practical knowledge such as how to divide the curriculum and fill out school-related documents. History methodology courses consisted of lessons on systematization of historical knowledge. Lessons were ideological in nature, but the younger teachers had internalized the ideology rendering it invisible.

The lack of power the teachers had in their professional lives can also be noted in the material that they were required to teach. Teachers enjoyed teaching ancient and medieval history, as they were interesting and relatively "safe", politically speaking. Teachers experienced greater difficulties with more modern history and Marxist/Leninist historiography. Soviet history was also highly politicized and consistently slanted towards Russians as first among equals among the many ethnic groups making up the USSR. Some of the respondents admitted that they were quite relieved not to have had to teach Latvian history because of the highly politicized content. Many of the older teachers said they had to lie when discussing recent history that they themselves had witnessed. Another teacher reported being warned by higher-ups for teaching too much Latvian history after Russian-speaking students complained. Most teaching materials were translated from existing Russian texts, and foreign sources or books from the interwar period were banned and read by teachers only in secret.

Evaluation

The second way teachers were held accountable were the frequent

visitations by education and Communist party functionaries who would observe lessons and comment on the use of methodology, the interaction between students and teacher, as well as level of knowledge of the students. Because history was regarded as an ideological subject, lessons were regularly monitored. There was little consistency in who did the observations; in some cases it was the director of the school, the head of methodology, or sometimes the school's Communist party secretary. One teacher, who taught in a larger city, expressed frustration at the frequent observations as one never knew who would be observing – one observer would complain that the lesson did not sufficiently stress patriotism, another claimed a lesson did not have sufficient anti-religious education, and yet another would note a lack of discussion of Soviet work principles. Older teachers also spoke of peer observations – visiting teachers would observe how well the teacher led the lesson, how engaged the students were, how much they knew, and how well students answered questions, as well as student independent work skills and use of original documents, such as they were at the time.

Teachers in turn had to monitor student achievement in a system where form was stressed over content. Several of the teachers noted that rote learning was common, and students would often memorize standard phrases to include in written compositions or repeat upon request. One teacher noted that teachers on opposite sides of the Soviet Union could assign a topic about a historical event history to their students, and the results would be virtually identical. Soviet language was hegemonic and constituted the only true representation of reality that was shared by all Soviet people, and from an audience perspective, language had only one function – to describe reality and state facts about the world. Some of the teachers related how these

misquotes sometimes became comical in content, but this was not so if the lesson was being observed by functionaries. One told of her secondary students who repeated the description of events in Latvia in 1940. The textbook noted that the Latvian nation experienced a socialist revolution and then the Red Army tanks came in. However, some of her secondary students switched these two sentences around resulting in a completely different interpretation of history. She noted that the students were messing about in class this way, but she warned them not to do so in public. While those secondary school students were purposefully confusing sentence order, students in younger grades were not so politically aware. Another teacher described how this rote learning of facts and memorization of text led to disaster in an observed lesson when a Grade 4 pupil, also relating the events of World War II, confused the order of the sentences and stated that Soviet tanks came to Latvia and brought Soviet rule. By her account, the uproar was considerable.

The pupils' confusion serves to illustrate the poor results of learning by rote with little understanding of the material. It also illustrates the sensitive nature of a seemingly innocent statement that resulted in the incorrect interpretation of the Soviet version of Latvian history and the resulting repercussions experienced by the teacher.

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Interactions with students

The third source and clearly the most frustrating aspect of control over which the teachers had no power, were interactions with students. Several teachers spoke of bright students who would use Marxist/Leninist/Stalinist arguments to highlight flaws or inconsistencies in their discussion of the progression of history. The teachers could only remain silent. All the

teachers told of frequent questions by students regarding the occupation of Latvia by the Soviet Union where the teachers either remained silent or towed the party line. All the teachers spoke of using politically correct language and one teacher recalled having to speak to a parent of a student who openly and frequently questioned the Soviet version of history. He did so not to reprimand the student, but to protect the student from repercussions. Most of the teachers apparently had a very good rapport with their students and while the students may have openly challenged the information their teachers presented in class, they would not do so if the teacher was being observed. All the older teachers reported open conversations with their students but were quick to add that they knew who these students were and their family background. Several did, however, report being reprimanded for politically incorrect comments made in class.

Family history as a determiner of success

Lastly, family history was a constant source of stress for many of the older teachers. While this may be considered a private matter for citizens who live in democracies, family pedigree was a cornerstone to career building in the Soviet Union. Fear is a visibly significant factor for many of the older teachers. The teachers often spoke of being called in for discussions with the director of the school or some party official and would immediately assume that some politically unfavourable aspect of their family past would be the topic. One teacher spoke of her experience as a student when a bright and capable colleague failed to graduate from the Teacher Institute because of her family history, while other teacher candidates who got miserable marks graduated, again because of their politically-correct pedigree. A Communist party official actively discouraged one teacher against marrying the girl he loved because her parents had been

deported to Siberia, and that wouldn't look good on his CV. Several teachers spoke of the amount of land their parents had once owned that categorized them as descendants of kulaks – a crime once punishable by deportation to Siberia. The youngest respondent, too, mentioned being called in by her school's director to discuss why an official from the Ministry of Education would ask about her political leanings. This preoccupation with elements of fear appears in the recollections of the teachers who witnessed the occupation of Latvia, but not in those of younger teachers. This leads me to discussion of the second level of power I discovered in my research – the relationship between the interviewer and interviewee.

My interaction with the teachers was varied. While most of the teachers were quite willing to speak with me, some were very guarded about certain topics. Latvia is small and the centralized nature of teacher education during the Soviet era facilitated a close-knit teaching community. While this was my most effective method of finding teachers to interview, it also facilitated pieces of inside knowledge I might never have obtained through the questions I had prepared. An example of this was an interview conducted with a teacher in a small town who was quite recalcitrant and initially offered only short answers to my questions. When asked about repercussions, she adamantly denied experiencing any, and downplayed these statements claiming that it has become fashionable to talk about Soviet oppression. Another teacher who knows this teacher told me that she had married a Russian after the war, and, therefore, would not say anything negative about Russians or Russification policies. In my search for former history teachers, some refused to speak to me claiming old age, infirmity, or that they had nothing to offer.

In the debate on cultural memory, Connerton addresses the popular

conception that while remembering is considered to be a virtue, forgetting is a failing. He offers several types of forgetting as shapers of social memory. I observed three types of forgetting that Connerton views as agents of the state and civil society. The first is repressive erasure – this type of forgetting is most frequently used to both deny the fact of a historical rupture or to bring about the same. Repressive erasure is a constant theme throughout the interviews as all the teachers mentioned having to lie or remain silent in class about historical facts and also about their own personal histories. This silence was also required to legitimize the Soviet regime.

Fifty years of repressive erasure has led to the second type of forgetting – prescriptive forgetting which differs from repressive erasure because it is believed to be in the interest of all participants of the previous dispute and therefore can be publicly acknowledged, also known as forgiving and forgetting. This becomes slightly more problematic as this prescriptive forgetting is required of Latvians, and my interviewees, not just once, but twice. First they were required to forget their interwar past in order to fit into the new Soviet society, and today the are required to forgive and forget the wrongs committed during the Soviet era.

While repressive erasure and prescriptive forgetting are considered agents of the state, the last, forgetting as humiliated silence is most commonly associated with civil society. Connerton notes that some might considered it paradoxical to speak of this as a form of forgetting because humiliation is often more difficult to forget than physical pain. However, "… few things are more eloquent than a massive silence." This silence may be brought about by collective shame or a desire to bury things that are beyond expression. While these are types of repression, they can also be a form of survival. Survival is a clear element in the discussions with the teachers I

interviewed, but those teachers who were unwilling to speak with me, too, indicated this.

In conclusion, the similarities noted in the testimony given by these teachers, particularly with regard to teaching methods indicates the highly centralized nature of the state and control mechanisms set in placed to ensure conformity. Little room was allowed for innovative teaching methods. Textbooks did not reflect the reality of recent history as known to both teachers and students. The older teachers often compared incidents with possible repercussions as would have happened in the Stalinist period. But the most common phrase was variations on the theme of helplessness – but what could we do? Aspects of this legacy continue to this day within the education system of Latvia.

References:

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