



Detlef Henning, *Geschichte der lettischen Geschichtsschreibung. Vom 19. Jahrhundert bis zur Gegenwart* (Veröffentlichungen des Nordost-Instituts, Bd. 25), Harrassowitz Verlag, Wiesbaden 2025, ss. 312, ISBN 978-3-447-12341-9.

[Detlef Henning, *History of Latvian Historiography: From the Nineteenth Century to the Present* (Publications of the Nordost Institute, vol. 25), Harrassowitz Verlag, Wiesbaden 2025, 312 pp., ISBN 978-3-447-12341-9]

At a time when the Russian president questions the existence of nation-states on the western periphery of the former Russian-Soviet Empire, it is all the more important to examine how these nations were constructed. History plays a central role in Kremlin propaganda, which is why the historiography of these nations is heavily politicised and all the more important to be scrutinised.

In his dissertation, defended at Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, Detlef Henning traces the emergence and development of Latvian historiography over the past 150 years, addressing a crucial point in the construction of Latvian national identity. Since Latvia was independent only during the interwar period and again after 1991, this development is closely intertwined with political history, marked by detours and ruptures, which Henning reconstructs chronologically in eight chapters. After describing the rise of the Latvian national movement in the nineteenth century and the first historiographical works and the invention of the term *vēsture* (history) itself before the First World War, he turns to the interwar period, which is presented as the reference point for Latvian historiography. This short but fertile era ended abruptly with the Second World War, though it produced lasting institutions such as the Latvian Institute of History, which has existed until today. Subsequently, historians had to adjust to Soviet ideological demands, and only after 1991 did historiography regain academic freedom.

One of the book's major strengths lies in its treatment of less well-known chapters of historiography, such as Soviet-Latvian historiography written for the roughly 200,000 Latvians who remained in the Soviet Union after the Russian Civil War. Their writings became the basis of later Soviet-Latvian historiography after the Second World War. Likewise, exiled Latvian authors such as Andrew Ezergailis and Andrew Plakans or Uldis Ģermanis provided important impulses during the Cold War era for the development of Latvian historiography after 1991 by linking Latvian scholarship to Western research. At the same time in exile, the Daugava exile publishing house produced with Edgars Dunsdorfs as main editor the 'unsurpassed opus magnum of Latvian historiography' with leading historians of the exile community participating and whose conception went back again to interwar ideas and conceptions. Even the largely unknown historiography under German occupation during the Second World War is covered in about ten pages by Henning. The study concludes with a critical yet fair assessment of developments after 1991 up to the present day, accompanied

by concise final remarks. Notably, it is only in this last section that especially female historians such as Vita Zelče and Ineta Lipša emerge prominently as significant figures, advocating for a thematic opening of Latvian historiography beyond national confines and conservative approaches, which is highly approved by Henning.

In each chapter, Henning considers not only the authors but also the political and institutional frameworks and thematic foci, which makes the study highly readable and allows for comparisons across periods. Particularly interesting is the fact that some protagonists outlasted historiographical upheavals, raising questions about their adaptability to different political systems. This was especially evident in the transition from *Perestroika* to independent Latvia, since most historians ('Children of the Awakening', *Atmodas bērni*) were still trained and started their careers in the Soviet system and were replaced in independent Latvia by younger scholars only gradually and quite late. Henning rightly notes that this biographical perspective invites further research, for example, on figures like Arvēds Svābe, Jānis Zutis, Aleksandrs Drīzulis, or Vilis Samsons, whose careers spanned multiple regimes. Teodors Zeids even managed to work during the Ulmanis era, the German occupation, and Soviet rule, covering the widest possible ideological spectrum, which became possible only due to his field of expertise being the medieval and early modern period, seemingly of lesser importance to contemporary political currents. Beyond adaptation, the biographical approach is also important because some historians were politically active themselves, directly shaping history. Authors such as Robert Vipper, Vasilij Dorošenko, Peter Krupnikov, and Leo Dribins demonstrate that Henning adopts a broad definition of 'Latvian historiography', one that includes minority voices and works in Russian or German. He deliberately avoids offering a rigid definition. While Russian and Jewish authors are included, Baltic German historiography is not considered part of Latvian historiography, as it functioned more as a contrasting backdrop from which Latvian historiography sought to emancipate itself. Exceptions are Leonid Arbusow Jr. and Erich Diehl, who are included due to their institutional roles during the interwar period.

Henning's account is usually descriptive and cautious in its judgments. Only in his concluding remarks does he describe Latvian historiography as 'positivist apologetics vis-à-vis postmodern Western observers on the one hand and revisionist Russians on the other', coupled with 'resilience against theory and a refusal of contextualization'. This rather harsh assessment is well-founded, yet it raises the question of the comparative framework. The implicit use of a Western cultural-scientific model as a standard risks a colonial perspective that frames Latvian historiography as deficient – a problem reinforced given that the publication at hand is written in German, which itself bears a problematic history in the Latvian context.

Remarkably, this dissertation is rather unusually not the beginning but rather the culmination of a scholarly career: it is the *opus magnum* of a historian deeply familiar with Latvian historiography over decades. This contributes greatly to the work's quality. The breadth of literature examined is impressive and adds to its value. It is no coincidence that the renowned Latvian historian and second reviewer Ilgvars Misāns has recommended a Latvian translation. Although Latvia is a small country, this overview of 150 years of historiography between national conservatism, socialist ideology, Western emigration, and Russian revisionism offers a prime example of the 'age

of extremes' and provides impulses far beyond the Latvian case. It is thus highly recommended even for readers without prior expertise on Latvia.

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