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Belarusian education in General District Latvia (1941–1945)

Zarys treści: Artykuł traktuje o szkolnictwie białoruskim na Łotwie pod okupacją niemiecką. Bialorusini należeli do najliczniejszej mniejszości na Łotwie zarówno w okresie międzywojennym, jak i w czasie II wojny światowej. W okupowanej przez Niemców Łotwie narodowość białoruską podało blisko 50 tys. ludzi. Ze względów politycznych władz okupacyjne zezwoliły na funkcjonowanie szkolnictwa białoruskiego w regionach zamieszkałych przez ludność białoruską. W wyniku otwarto 35 szkół podstawowych, dwa gimnazja i jedną średnią szkołę rolniczą, w których pracowało ok. 100 nauczycieli. Do szkół białoruskich uczęszczało kilka tysięcy uczniów, większość których stanowili dzieci małorolnych i bezrolnych chłopów. Szkolnictwo białoruskie borykało się z wieloma problemami natury materialnej.

Content outline: The article deals with the Belarusian school system in Latvia under German occupation. Belarusians were one of the most numerous minorities in that country, both in the inter-war period and during World War Two. In German-occupied Latvia, Belarusian nationality was declared by more than 50,000 people. For political reasons, the occupation authorities allowed Belarusian schools to operate in areas with significant Belarusian population. As a result, thirty-five primary schools, two middle schools, and one secondary agricultural school, employing about a hundred teachers in total, were opened. These schools were attended by a few thousand pupils, the majority of which were children of petty and landless peasants. The Belarusian school system struggled because of numerous material issues.

Słowa kluczowe: Łotwa, Białorusini, szkolnictwo, II wojna światowa, okupacja niemiecka

Keywords: Latvia, Belarusians, education, World War II, German occupation

The Republic of Latvia, which gained independence in 1918, was a multinational state. A considerable percentage of Latvia's inhabitants was formed by nationalities other than Latvian. The Belarusians could be reckoned among the most numerous of these. In the inter-war period, the number of Belarusians in Latvia fluctuated

between 26,867 (1.38%) in 1925 and 38,010 (2.06%) in 1935.[1] The largest clusters of the Belarusian population in Latvia were found in the south-eastern part of the country, Latgale (former Polish Livonia or *Inflanty*). In that region, Belarusians accounted for 4.1% of all inhabitants. In 1930, broken down by county, the figures were as follows: Daugavpils County 13,500 (6.7%), Ludza County 4,800 (5.3%), Rēzekne County 2,700 (1.8%), Jaunlatgale County 1,300 (1.2%).[2] The majority of Latvian Belarusians were landless and petty peasants, notorious for a considerable illiteracy rate. Nevertheless, the minuscule but very active intelligentsia took efforts to develop organisational, cultural, and educational life. In a relatively short time, a number of Belarusian social, cultural, educational, sport-related, and political associations sprang up. The Belarusians also published their own press and opened schools. At the zenith of Belarusian schooling campaign in Latvia, there were almost fifty Belarusian primary schools and two middle schools.[3] The situation of Latvian Belarusians was directly affected by the 1934 coup. The authoritarian regime of Kārlis Ulmanis set about to unify the state on various levels. The cultural and political influences of national minorities began to be suppressed. Changes in educational legislation abolished autonomous schools run by national minorities, including the Belarusians.[4] Most minority communities reacted to the change in state policy towards non-Latvians with apathy and passiveness. It cannot be said, however, that after 1934 the Belarusian minority in Latvia was wholly deprived of all opportunity to engage in its enterprises. Belarusian associations continued to operate, although their influence and scope of activities were greatly limited. When Latvia was incorporated into the USSR in 1940, Latvian citizens of Belarusian origin shared in the fate of their country. The Belarusian community was also subject to Soviet oppression, although to a smaller degree than Latvians or Poles. Under Soviet occupation, Belarusian cultural and educational life stagnated.[5]

When war broke out between the Third Reich and Soviet Union and Latvia was occupied by German troops, the situation of the Belarusian minority changed. In Soviet historiography, this stage of Belarusian life in Latvia was suppressed for ideological reasons. Only in recent years several valuable scholarly studies have

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[1] J. Albin, *Polski ruch narodowy na Łotwie w latach 1919–1940,* Wrocław, 1994, p. 12.

[2] P. Eberhardt, "Problematyka narodowościowa Łotwy," *Zeszyty IGiPZ*, 54 (1998), p. 25.

[3] Matters related to the Belarusian minority in Latvia have been studied by Latvian historians. A notable work is I. Apine, *Baltkrievi Latvijā*, Riga, 1995. The publications of Ēriks Jēkabsons, who was the first to treat the issues of Belarusian minority in Latvia during the interbellum in scholarly terms, are worthy of particular attention. Cf. Э. Екабсонс, "Белорусы в Латвии в 1918–1940 годах," in: *Беларуская дыяспара як пасярэдніца ў дыялогу цывілізацый. Матэрыялы III Міжнароднага кангрэса беларусістаў*, Мінск, 2001, pp. 76–93.

[4] P. Łossowski, *Kraje bałtyckie na drodze od demokracji parlamentarnej do dyktatury: 1918–1934*, Wrocław, 1972, pp. 253–254, 261–263.

[5] Ē. Jēkabsons, "Padomju represijas pret Latvijas poliem, lietuviešiem, un baltkrieviem 1940. – 1941 gadā," in: *Totalitārie režīmi in to represijas Latvijā 1940. – 1956. gada*, Riga, 2007, pp. 51–70.

appeared to deal with specific dimensions of Belarusian presence in Latvia during the Second World War.[6] Nevertheless, numerous aspects of these issues still require further research. Among topics which have not been carefully studied is the situation of the Belarusian school system in Latvia during the German occupation (1941–1945).

In most of Latvia (except for Courland), German occupation lasted until the summer and autumn of 1944. Shortly after the Wehrmacht moved in, the General District of Latvia (*Generalbezirk Latvia*) was established, administratively subordinated to Reichskommissariat Ostland, whose authorities had their seat in Riga. The post of general commissioner for Latvia was entrusted to Otto-Heinrich Drechsler. Some Latvian activists clung to the hope that Germany would allow Latvia to restore its independence lost in 1940, and accordingly a significant percentage of the Latvian society began to collaborate with the occupying forces. The Germans set up middle- and lower-level administration which was staffed by locals. Latvian youths joined the ranks of auxiliary police and other military and police formations. Latvia's hopes were dashed as Third Reich leaders had no intention to set up even a puppet government (as in Slovakia) or a protectorate (as in Bohemia and Moravia) there. It was not until Germany suffered military setbacks that Berlin agreed to some concessions towards Latvian activists. In March 1942, a General Directorate (*Generaldirektoren*), headed by General Oskars Dankers, was established. The new body consisted of Latvians and acted as a sort of local self-government but was subject to the occupiers and treated as an extension of civil administration.

In terms of nationalities, occupied Latvia remained an ethnic patchwork. In February 1943, a census held in General District Latvia revealed that 48,601 (2.76%) of its inhabitants declared Belarusian nationality. The majority consisted of natives of Latgale, although some of those hailed from Poland, having come to Latvia before the war as seasonal workers.[7] The German occupying authorities had to take the ethnic diversity in conquered areas into account. The attitude of Germans towards specific nationalities was dependent on both ideological and racial factors and the military and economic situation of the Third Reich. Nazi Germany leaders viewed the Baltic states as an area to be transformed into a living space (*Lebensraum*) for the German nation after the war. It was believed that due to centuries-long ties of the region with German culture, it would be annexed into the Reich, the local population assimilated or resettled. According to this idea, Estonians and some Latvians were destined for assimilation, while local Slavic populations were to be expelled further east. Consequently, Berlin planners believed

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[6] Э. Екабсонс, "Беларусы ў Латвіі ў часы савецкай і нямецка-фашысцкай акупацыі (1940–1945)," *Беларускі Гістарычны Агляд*, 13 (2006), сш. 2б, pp. 199–233; id., "Białorusini na Łotwie w okresie okupacji hitlerowskiej (1941–1945)," *Studia Interkulturowe Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej*, 7 (2014), pp. 13–26.

[7] Екабсонс, Беларусы ў Латвіі, p. 204.

it imperative to prevent "the mixing of blood" between more and less racially worthy elements. The decree of the Reichskommissariat Ostland Commissioner of 27 July 1942 on ethnic policy in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania says, among others: "Russians and Belarusians are not to be assimilated, because: 1) this will spoil the blood of nations to be brought into the Reich; 2) it is expected that Belarusians from Baltic states will be resettled to Belarus proper […] There is a danger in assimilating Russians and Belarusians as racially worthless elements who may then penetrate the German nation […] For this reason, ethnic policy is not to be left to the national administration of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, but retained firmly in German hands.[8]"

The ethnic policy of the occupiers in Latvia was also affected by the general military situation. While the German army was heavily engaged on the Eastern front, the Third Reich authorities attempted to thoroughly exploit the human and economic resources of the conquered areas. In order to simplify the management of subjugated populations, the "divide and conquer" policy was used. Local separatisms were fanned, and national groups opposed and antagonised. Attempts were made to split the already numerous groups, which might prove a threat to German interests, into smaller ones. In practice, the occupiers were willing to make some concessions to local Russians and Belarusians to counterbalance the influence of Poles and Latvians. It was assumed that such concessions would help improve pro-German sentiments among these nations, while turning a blind eye to their interests would make them feel wronged and susceptible to Soviet propaganda.[9] According to directives of the Reich Ministry for the Occupied Eastern Territories, local Belarusians and Russians were to be protected against assimilation efforts exerted by Latvians through schools, churches, and state authorities. Accordingly, autonomous schools for Belarusians and Russians were planned to be introduced. However, this did not entail any political privileges for those nationalities. Autonomous schools were treated solely as a method to "identify and isolate racially undesirable elements."[10] The German architects of this policy believed that granting some measure of autonomy to the Belarusians and Russians would not outrage the Latvians, because the latter were accustomed to traditions of autonomy for national minorities in the interbellum.[11]

In order to put the above schemes into practice, it was planned to establish bodies representing the interests of the Belarusian and Russian population. Reichskommissariat Ostland Commissioner Hinrich Lohse believed that Belarusians in Latvia should be treated on a par with their compatriots in General Region Belarus. He also stated that they should be induced to collaborate with the

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[8] Central Archives of Modern Records in Warsaw (hereinafter: AAN), call no. T-454, 88/001057–58.
[9] AAN, call no. T-454, 88/001057–58.
[10] Bundesarchiv, Berlin-Lichterfelde Ost (hereinafter: BA), R6/173, p. 14, 19–20.
[11] BA, R 92/159, pp. 59–60.

Germans. This view was shared by Alfred Rosenberg, who, having consulted this with General Commissioner of General Region Belarus Wilhelm Kube, thought it necessary to establish a Belarusian committee in Latvia, provided that it would be entirely subordinate to the Germans.[12] The German dignitaries agreed that Belarusians ranked among the least organised national groups among the ethnicities living west of the Urals. German politicians believed that Belarusians, due to their low level of national awareness, were no threat to German interests.[13]

The outbreak of war between Germany and the Soviet Union revitalised the efforts of Belarusian national activists in Latvia. Efforts started to be made to rebuild the organisational structures. The turning point was the arrival to Riga of Father Wincent Godlewski, an emissary of the Belarusian Self-Help Committee in Berlin. On 10 August 1941, members of Belarusian intelligentsia met in Riga to set up an initiative with a view to establishing the Belarusian National Committee in Latvia. The board consisted of: Piotr Miranowicz (chairman), Jakub Kastyluk (secretary), Stefan Sićko, Lucja Tetar and Jazep Kamarżynski.[14] On 26 September 1941, a group of Belarusian activists addressed a memorandum to the general commissioner of Latvia. The document briefly outlined the situation of the Belarusian minority in Latvia between the wars. The repressive character of the policy of Latvian authorities towards Belarusians was emphasised (including the court trial of leaders of the Belarusian movement in 1925, school closures and outlawing cultural and educational associations after 1934). The authors then affirmed that: "today the Belarusian population of the former free Latvian state believes that, under the care of the invincible German Wehrmacht and its leaders, Belarusian children will again have the opportunity to attend their own Belarusian schools, Belarusians teachers will no longer be persecuted for national activism, and Belarusian peasants will be able to use the new conditions to pursue their agricultural activities for the general good."[15] Ultimately, the following demands were laid before the general commissioner: 1) to permit the establishment of a "National Belarusian Self-Help Committee" that would represent the Belarusian minority and care for the cultural and material needs of Belarusians, 2) to retain the existing Belarusian schools in Riga and in other parts of the country and open new ones in municipalities inhabited by Belarusians, 3) to open a Belarusian middle school in Indra, 4) to appoint teacher Jazep Kamarżynski to the post of inspector of Belarusian schools, 5) to permit teacher courses to be initiated in Riga and Daugavpils, 6) to appoint Belarusians as municipal clerks and self-defence commanders in Latgale municipalities where Belarusians formed the majority of population.[16] In October

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[12] ЭЕкабсонс, Беларусы ў Латвіі, pp. 206–207.

[13] BA, R 6/159, p. 4.

[14] "Беларусы ў Латвіі," *Раніца* (20 November 1941), p. 3.

[15] BA, R 92/101. pp. 59-63; Нацыянальны архіў Рэспублікі Беларусь (hereinafter: НАРБ), ф. 458, воп. 1, спр. 59, л. 1–5.

[16] BA, R 92/101, pp. 59–63.

1941, the self-same memorandum was submitted to the local Gebietskommissar by a group of Belarusian activists in Daugavpils.[17]

The occupying authorities met the expectations of Belarusian activists halfway. The Belarusian National Committee (BNC) was registered as the official representative body of Belarusians in Latvia. The organisation's seat was located in Riga. In 1941 and 1942, branch offices were founded in Riga, Daugavpils, Kraslava, Pasiene, Indra, and Zilupe. In March 1942, its name was changed to the Belarusian Association in General District Latvia. The core of the organisation consisted of teachers. Its revenue came from member fees, donations, and proceeds from sales of books.[18] The activities of the Belarusian Association were subject to supervision by German authorities. On behalf of the Reichskommissariat Ostland, the organisation was supervised by Dr Schmidt, and on behalf of SD by a certain Lange.[19] The Association united mostly those who participated in the public life during the interbellum. There was also no shortage of members who signed up for a quick profit and actually never identified with the Belarusian nation.[20] Leaders and the most active members of the organisation included Kanstancin Jezawitau (chairman), Andrej Jakubiecki, Siarhiej Sacharau, Aliaksandr Machnouski and Piotr Miranowicz. Especially noteworthy is the role of Jezawitau, who exerted the most influence on the Association's activities. His role as the leader of Latvian Belarusians has to be duly acknowledged. Based on available sources, it can be concluded that leading Belarusian activists in Latvia, like their peers in other countries, put their stakes on Germany, hoping to achieve political advantages. Pro-German sentiments were common among Belarusians prior to and in the early stages of World War Two. In a letter to his friend, Jezawitau says: "I fully understand why the Russian tsars and the Bolsheviks attempted to destroy the Belarusians. I also understand the causes of Polish, Latvian, and Lithuanian aggressive policies. But I am sure that the political interests of the German state are unlike Russian, Polish, Latvian, and Lithuanian ones, and local German authorities will, insofar as possible in this hour, support the Belarusians in furthering interests common to the two nations."[21] In another letter, the Association's chairman expressed the belief that "the Belarusians did nothing to spoil their relationship with Germany. It is, however, obvious that in wartime not everything will go as rapidly as smoothly as we would like to."[22] At the same time, the leader of Latvian Belarusians thought that German backing was not enough for his people to "get off their knees." He was convinced

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[17] "Беларускае жыцьцё ў Латвіі," *Раніца* (15 February 1942), p. 4.

[18] Екабсонс, Беларусы ў Латвіі, p. 207.

[19] А. Соловьев, *Белорусская центральная рада: создание, деятельность, крах,* Минск, 1995, p. 155.

[20] Latvijas Nacionālā arhīva Latvijas Valsts vēstures arhīvs (hereinafter: LVVA), P-712 f., 1 apr., 5 lieta, 9 lp.

[21] Quoted in: Э. Екабсонс, "Беларусы ў Латвіі," c. 2, p. 206.

[22] НАРБ, ф. 458, воп. 1, спр. 23, л. 7.

that the Belarusian movement would flourish under German occupation only if the Belarusians themselves demonstrated their resolve and desire to self-organise.[23]

According to the BNC bylaws, the task of the Belarusian Association was to "unite all Belarusians living on the territory of the former Latvian state in order to engage in joint efforts promoting cultural and material development."[24] There is no doubt, however, that one of the priorities of Belarusian activists in Latvia was setting up schools.[25] Already on 20 October 1941, the BNC leaders submitted to the general commissioner a project of opening the first nine Belarusian schools.[26] The occupation authorities took a positive view of Belarusian efforts. It was assumed that Belarusian children should not attend Latvian schools or vice versa. On 22 October 1941, the general commissioner of Latvia issued a regulation ordering for Belarusian schools to be established. A letter of 26 November 1941 sent by the Department of Education and Culture of the Reich Ministry for Occupied Eastern Territories reads: "Once the Latvian schools are opened again, it will also be necessary to open popular schools for Russian and Belarusian nationalities in Latvia. Based on submitted reports, the Latvian education board in the Reichskommissariat Ostland is pursuing a disadvantageous policy of Latvianisation of Russians and Belarusians. If Russian and Belarusian schools are opened again, attention should be paid that so far only Latvian schools were found in many localities where Russian and Belarusian population predominates. They will be replaced by Russian and possibly Belarusian schools. In Russian schools, education will last for three years (ages 8–11) and in Belarusian schools, for four years (ages 8–12). Whenever Latvian schools for Russian and Belarusian children exist, they are to be transformed into Russian and Belarusian ones. In mixed language environments, decisions will be made in favour of Belarusian schools."[27]

Matters related to organising schools were managed by the education and culture administrator for General District Latvia, Franz Adolphi. In cooperation with the BNC leaders, he designated emissaries who were to commence the registration of pupils. BNC activists sought to have Belarusian schools opened primarily in those localities where Belarusian education was present during the interbellum. In order to register pupils, Mikałaj Dziamidau and Jazep Kamarżyński visited Daugavpils County,[28] while Siarhiej Sacharau and Symon Maciejeuski toured Ludza County.[29] On 24 October 1941, Dziamidau was officially appointed a plenipotentiary in matters of organising Belarusian schools in the Daugavpils region.[30] His activities

[23] НАРБ, ф. 458, воп. 1, спр. 22, л. 1.
[24] "Статут Беларускага аб'яднаньня (у ген. кам. Латвіі)," *Раніца*, 14 June 1942, pp. 2–3.
[25] BA, R 92/101, pp. 59–63.
[26] BA, R 92/102, pp. 57–58.
[27] BA, R 92/102, p. 7.
[28] BA, R 92/101, p. 70.
[29] BA, R 92/102, p. 70.
[30] BA, R 92/101, p. 156.

may be considered overwhelmingly successful. In Indra Municipality, almost 1,000 pupils managed to be registered. In Daugavpils, the registration was handled by Machnouski, who collected 540 requests of parents wishing to have their children sent to a Belarusian school. The registration of pupils was completed in mid-November 1941. The BNC leaders then notified Adolphi on the possibilities of establishing Belarusian schools in Daugavpils, Ludza, and Ilūkste counties.[31]

The Belarusian school system in Latvia had to comply with the conditions imposed in the territories of the occupied Baltic states. Three types of schools were envisaged there. The most common were popular primary schools (*Volkschulen*) with either five or seven grades. Graduates of those schools could continue their education in middle schools (*Mittelschulen*) with four grades. In addition, there were also vocational schools (*Berufsschulen*, *Fachschulen*) with two or three grades, teaching crafts, trade, agriculture, and administration.[32]

In order to facilitate school management, an inspector of Belarusian schools in Latgale and Semigalia was appointed.[33] On 1 December 1941, this post was taken by Mikałaj Dziamidau. After he left Daugavpils in February 1942, he was succeeded by Machnouski, who retained this position until the end of the German occupation. The inspector of Belarusian schools was subordinated to Rolf Winberg, the education and culture administrator in the regional commissioner administration in Daugavpils. On 1 January 1942, the General Directorate of Education and Culture appointed Piotr Miranowicz to the post of administrator of Belarusian schools.[34] The prime responsibility for organising Belarusian schools in Latvia was laid on the shoulders of the inspector, the administrator, and the leaders of the BNC (later the Belarusian Association).[35] The administrator of Belarusian school system had the most authority as regards the organisation and running of schools. He was subordinated directly to the general director and reported to him; he was appointed and recalled by the general director in agreement with the general commissioner. The administrator was entitled to recommend his candidate for the post of inspector of Belarusian schools to the general director. The Latvian school inspection was authorised to visit Belarusian schools but could not interfere with internal matters and issue official regulations to school principals. All critical comments were passed to the administrator of Belarusian schools, who had to take relevant steps in order to resolve potential issues or abuses.[36]

A permit to open schools was issued by the general director of education and culture on the request of the administrator of Belarusian schools. According

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[31] BA, R 92/102, pp. 83–85.
[32] BA, R 6/402, pp. 13–16.
[33] LVVA, P-712 f., 1 apr., 6 lieta, 5 lp.
[34] "Беларускае жыцьцё ў Латвіі," *Раніца* (22 February 1942), pp. 3–4; Э. Екабсонс, "Беларусы ў Латвіі," pp. 210–211.
[35] НАРБ, ф. 458, воп. 1, спр. 21, л. 1.
[36] BA, R 92/102, p. 43.

to a regulation of the administrator of schools in Daugavpils, Belarusian schools could be opened in localities with at least 45 pupils. If there were fewer applicants, Belarusian forms could be set up in Latvian or Russian schools.[37] During the first year of German occupation of Latvia, 32 primary Belarusian schools with about 3,000 pupils were opened. In the following year, the number of schools increased to 35. In the school year 1942/1943, Belarusian popular schools in Latgale and Semigalia were attended by 3,432 pupils, of which 1,802 were boys and 1,630 girls.[38] The majority of schools was found in Daugavpils and Ludza counties, an area with the largest recorded percentage of Belarusian population. The school action registered its best result in Daugavpils County, where the drive to organise schools proceeded at full speed already in December 1941. In the school year 1942/1943, there were nineteen Belarusian popular schools in the county, the majority in Indra and Pustiņas municipalities.[39] In total, 2,178 pupils attended Belarusian schools in Daugavpils County.[40] In Ludza County, the organisation of Belarusian schools was slightly delayed compared to Daugavpils. In March 1942, M. Dziamidau[41] was dispatched to Ludza and managed to have six popular schools opened by September that year.[42]

The Belarusian school action also spread to Ilūkste County in Semigalia. In early 1942, P. Miranowicz paid a visit to the Gebietskommisar in Liepaja and obtained consent to organise schools around Ilūkste. In February 1942, a group of Belarusian teachers – Uładzimir Husarewicz, Jury Drasiecki, Sabina Husarewicz, Jazep Kamarżynski and Julia Jakubouskaja – left for Ilūkste.[43] In April 1942, Ilūkste was visited by A. Machnouwski, who, having inspected the schools, concluded that the teachers had not advanced the cause of Belarusian schools at all.[44] Nevertheless, during that year, Belarusians in the county managed to open seven popular schools with 523 pupils.[45] In the school year 1942/1943, these schools produced only six graduates.[46]

Belarusian activists also attempted to extend the school action to Rēzekne County in Latgale. For this purpose, in the spring of 1942, the BNC leaders initiated the opening of the first schools in that county. A plenipotentiary in matters of organising Belarusian schools, P. Jurkiewicz, was appointed.[47] The consent of the Germans to open Belarusian schools in that county was not obtained, however.

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[37] BA, R 92/102, p. 101.
[38] BA, R 92/102, pp. 231–232.
[39] Екабсонс, Беларусы ў Латвіі, pp. 226–232.
[40] BA, R 92/102, p. 231.
[41] "Беларускае жыцьцё ў Латвіі," *Раніца* (29 March–5 April 1943), p. 5.
[42] BA, R 92/102, p. 156.
[43] BA, R 92/102, p. 15.
[44] НАРБ, ф. 458, воп. 1, спр. 40, л. 9 зв.
[45] BA, R 92/102, p. 232.
[46] LVVA, P-712 f., 1 apr., 4 lieta, 25 lp.
[47] LVVA, P-712 f., 1 apr., 6 lieta, 3 lp.

In addition to Latgale and Semigalia, Belarusian schools existed in Latvia's capital: in the school year 1941/1942, there were three Belarusian primary schools in Riga, including one with evening classes (for adults).[48] The Riga schools were found in working class quarters: Maskavas Forštate and Sarkandaugava.[49]

The establishment of two middle schools should be recognised as an achievement on the part of local Belarusian activists. The first Belarusian middle school (headed by Siarhej Sacharau, and later by A. Rodźka) was established in Indra in December 1941. In the school year 1941/1942, two forms for younger children (with 74 pupils) were opened.[50] The school was paired with a dormitory with 30 beds for pupils coming from distant villages. The other Belarusian middle school (headed by S. Sacharau) was founded in Zilupe in the school year 1942/1943.[51] Leaders of the Belarusian Association intended to give access to those middle schools not only to children of Latvian Belarusians, but also to their compatriots from the neighbouring Russian town of Sebezh.[52] Due to their brief existence, neither middle school managed to organise final exams. In Indra, the graduation form did not start until the year 1943/1944, which proved to be the last for the school. The Zilupe school, meanwhile, planned to open a graduation form in the school year 1944/1945, but these plans did not materialise.[53] Attempts were also made to open Belarusian middle schools in Daugavpils and Pasiene. This did not bring the expected results, however. Nevertheless, in 1942 an agricultural middle school, in which 102 pupils were enrolled, started in Pasiene.[54] The first graduates received their diplomas on 6 April 1944.[55]

Even though the political climate was favourable to Belarusians, the work of Belarusian schools was hampered by certain obstacles. Belarusian ventures sparked the ire of many Latvians. The attitude of the Latvian administration towards the Belarusian school action was one of distrust, or even hostility. On occasion, Latvian school inspectors refused to register some Belarusian schools. On 8 October 1941, a Belarusian delegation consisting of P. Miranowicz and J. Kastyluk filed a complaint with F. Adolphi, accusing a Latvian school inspector of partiality and questioning the need to open Belarusian schools in Daugavpils, Piedruja, and Pustiņas municipalities. Belarusian activists argued that the Latvians, excusing themselves by the alleged lack of guidelines from the Germans, purposely delayed the opening of Belarusian schools. Accordingly, the Belarusian party asked for a regulation that would force the Latvian inspector to open Belarusian schools in lieu of former

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[48] BA, R 92/102, p. 91.
[49] BA, R 92/107, p. 75; "Беларускае жыцьцё ў Латвіі," *Раніца* (28 June 1942) p. 3.
[50] НАРБ, ф. 458, воп. 1, спр. 35, л. 40.
[51] НАРБ, ф. 458, воп. 1, спр. 17, л. 23.
[52] НАРБ, ф. 458, воп. 1, спр. 23, л. 21.
[53] "Беларускае жыцьцё ў Латвіі," *Раніца* (21 February 1943), p. 3.
[54] BA, R 92/102, p. 175.
[55] "Беларускае жыцьцё ў Латвіі," *Раніца* (21 May 1944), p. 3.

Russian-language Soviet schools. In addition, the Belarusian delegation asked the Germans to stop the wave of dismissals of Belarusian teachers.[56] Belarusian and Latvian activists were divided over the ethnic composition of Latgale. From the Belarusian point of view, a number of municipalities in Daugavpils and Ludza counties formed part of the Belarusian-dominated ethnographic area. Belarusian sources argued that Belarusians accounted for up to 90% of inhabitants there. Opening Belarusian schools in these municipalities was thus viewed as an act of justice towards Belarusians and a compensation of sorts for the suppression of Belarusian education after 1934. This belief was not shared by the Latvians. For some Latvian intellectual elites, the Belarusians were "Slavicised Latvians" who had to be brought back into the Latvian fold. The Latvian school inspectorate blamed Belarusian activists for spreading confusion and anxiety in Latgale areas with mixed ethnic makeup. Charges of abuse and sloppiness in organising the school system were levied. Dziamidau in particular incurred the wrath of Latvians. A loudly resonating incident took place in November 1941 in Indra, a town in which a Latvian school already existed but a Belarusian one, with Dziamidau as principal, was soon opened. The Latvian school inspectorate informed on Dziamudau to Adolphi. Latvians believed that the Belarusian activist had resorted to intimidation and threats to force parents to send their children to his own school. It was claimed that on 3 November 1941 Dziamidau had appeared at the Latvian school and announced his intention to replace it with a Belarusian one. He allegedly also threatened parents that if they refused to send their children there, they would be punished. At a meeting with parents, the Belarusian activist reportedly said that the local Latvians would be resettled to Courland and Livonia, and that "Belarus will reach up to Daugavpils." For this reason, all local children were to be enrolled into a Belarusian school if they were to avoid resettlement.[57]

The head of the General Directorate took the position that Dziamidau's disorderly behaviour was unacceptable, undermining the authority of the Germans and the trust the population placed in them. Accordingly, he believed that the following steps should be taken to rein in the Belarusians and prevent similar incidents in the future:

1) In the municipalities where Belarusians wanted to open their schools, mixed commissions consisting of Latvian, Belarusian and German members should be established. The purpose of these commissions would be to examine the ethnic situation. Parents should submit written statements declaring the ethnicity of their children. Based on these declarations, the commission would decide where to assign individual pupils.
2) Parents should be referred to a regulation of the school administrator of General District Latvia on the organisation of schools for each nationality.

[56] BA, R 92/102, p. 69.
[57] BA, R 92/102, p. 77.

Commissions should make sure that parents do not confuse nationality with confession.

3) Belarusian schools should employ solely teachers with Belarusian nationality, and Latvian ones only Latvians.[58]

The Latvian school administration tried to close down Belarusian schools on numerous occasions.[59] In October 1942, the Skaista municipality board demanded that the Daugavpils school inspectorate close down the Kalnieši village school. The Latvians argued that the school should not operate because the Belarusians misled everyone by producing a list of fictitious pupils and then started to campaign among peasants, inducing them to send their own children to the Belarusian school. Similar occurrences took place in many localities in which Latvian and Belarusian schools existed side by side. This mood of unhealthy competition can be discerned in letters exchanged between Belarusian activists. In June 1942, the principal of a Belarusian school in Ludza County wrote to the head of the Belarusian Association: "I struggled with the Latvians, who moved heaven and earth to have our school closed down, but the struggle ended in failure. I had the upper hand in this fight, however. Now I'm waiting until the Latvian school goes in free fall. […] The outcome of my registration efforts was very good: 94 pupils registered against just 58 in the last year, […] while the headcount in the Latvian school is as follows: 4 first-graders and a total of 21 pupils, of which 18 are Russians and the remainder Latvians."[60]

The above altercations reflected wider-ranging issues that had plagued Letgale before. Latvian and Belarusian activists strove to rule the souls of the local population. While the indigenous peasants spoke Belarusian dialects at home, their national identification was in flux. Often, they declared their allegiance to one nation or another depending on the political situation. In the early years of Latvia's independence, state authorities treated these people as Belarusians in order to neutralise and weaken the local Poles. From the standpoint of the Latvian state, it was better to support the Belarusians, less organised and weak in economic and political terms, than the Poles, who were fully aware of their goals and claims.[61] Considering the above, it was in the interest of the Latvian authorities to recognise the peasants who "spoke Belarusian, but prayed in Polish" as Belarusians and not Poles. At that time, the efforts of the Belarusian intelligentsia to organise its own school system were supported by the state. Over the years, the situation changed, because the authorities in Riga began to perceive separatist tendencies among the local Belarusians who intended to secede some parts of Letgale from

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[58] BA, R 92/102, p. 79.

[59] НАРБ, ф. 458, воп. 1, спр. 31, л. 3-4 зв.

[60] НАРБ, ф. 458, воп. 1, спр. 33, л. 28.

[61] J. Gierowska-Kałłaur, "Stosunek państwa łotewskiego do miejscowych Polaków i Białorusinów w początkach niepodległości łotewskiej," *Studia z Dziejów Rosji i Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej*, 46 (2011), p. 194.

Latvia at some point in the future.[62] Only after 1934 did the Latvians manage to obtain a majority in south Letgale local administration bodies. With the coming of the Germans, the tide again swung in favour of the Belarusians, who were given an opportunity to resume their national activity in the area. The Latvians, on the other hand, obviously began to be concerned about losing their standing, for which they had arduously contended during the 1930s.[63]

Belarusian activity sparked Latvian concerns about the territorial integrity of their country. The anxiety of the Latvians was not unjustified, because the Belarusian leaders in Latvia were hoping that after the war the Germans would decide to incorporate the "Belarusian" municipalities of Letgale into Belarus. They believed that the current political situation gave them a chance to strengthen their position at the expense of the Latvians. Both Belarusian and Latvian activists were aware that the ethnic situation in Latgale might have a direct impact on which state this region would be handed over to. Accordingly, both sides zealously collected the signatures of parents undertaking to send their children to national schools. In fact, setting up Belarusian schools entailed the abolition of some Latvian facilities. Belarusian activists did not hesitate to take over individual Latvian schools and convert them into Belarusian ones. Schools were thus treated not merely as educational facilities, but also bridgeheads in the struggle to absorb ethnically mixed regions. Jezawitau, the head of the BNC, had no doubts that localities with Belarusian schools would end up within the borders of Belarus, which he believed could happen in the fairly near future.[64] The moods prevailing among Belarusian activists can be summed in Jezawitau's letter sent in October 1941 to the BNC leaders who resided in Daugavpils: "We should not make a step back, in fact we must not do so, as this would be an act of cowardice. It may happen that we will be forced to take over all schools in some municipalities. What then? Will we be playing diplomats? For the sake of our nation's interests, we must show no hesitation. Let us learn from the Latvians and the Germans. They used to oppress us because we were too conciliatory."[65]

The tensions were growing and neither party was pulling any punches. Both the Latvians and the Belarusians pursued their interests by using a policy of *faits accomplis*. One of these means was denouncing their rivals to the Germans. Each party tried to cast its adversaries in the worst light possible. In May 1942, Jezawitau addressed a memorandum to Adolphi, enumerating the wrongs which the Belarusians suffered at the hands of Latvian administration and police. In the Belarusian press published in Berlin and Minsk, the head of the Belarusian

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[62] J. Grzybowski, "Stosunki polsko-białoruskie na Łotwie w latach 1920-1940," in: *Dialog kultur czy zarzewie konfliktów? Problematyka mniejszości narodowych i etnicznych w Europie*, ed. T. Gajownik, P. Pietnoczek, K. Sidorkiewicz, Olsztyn, 2017, pp. 33–48.

[63] Екабсонс, Беларусы ў Латвіі, p. 212.

[64] НАРБ, ф. 458, воп. 1, спр. 16, л. 2.

[65] НАРБ, ф. 458, воп. 1, спр. 16, л. 2.

Association inveighed against the Latvians, charging them with the intention to assimilate the Belarusian population of Letgale. The author wrote about "daydreaming about the status of a great power that dates back to the times of the mason Ulmanis," which he believed was characteristic of the majority of the Latvian society. Undoubtedly, such statements were unfair towards the Latvians. On the other hand, a perusal of Latvian denunciations shows that their authors portrayed the Belarusians as fervent and systematic supporters of communism.[66] Some authors went even further, trying to prove that there were no Belarusians in Latvia and denying them the right to organise their own schools. Andris Luta, a municipality head in the Daugavpils County, suggested that in the late nineteenth century most of the inhabitants were Latvians who "partly forgot their native language and spoke various Russian dialects; being receptive to the whispers of certain agitators, they masqueraded as Belarusians."[67]

The records of the Department of Culture and Education of General District Latvia contain a note titled *Are there Belarusians in Latvia?*, which reads as follows: "Formerly, Belarusians were hardly taken into account either under the Russian or Latvian government, and no one in Latvia realised that such a nation existed, because the 'Belarusians' knew no better than to consider themselves Russians, Latvians, or Poles. They were 'discovered' here only in 1925, and that by the social democrat and communist members of the Latvian parliament. At that time, Soviet Russia granted autonomy to Belarus, and the Minsk communists asked their comrades from Riga to come up with Belarusians in Latvia as well. The Belarusians were taken under the wing of that arch-Marxist poet Jānis 'Rainis' Pliekšāns who, as the minister of education, allowed the first Belarusian schools (with Russian as language of instruction) to be opened. The Russians welcomed the 'Belarusian movement' too because it was actually a Russian movement. Catholic Belarusians attended Latvian schools and loathed Russian ones, because they teemed with Orthodox and Old Believer children, unlike in the Latvian schools in Letgale, where such children were considered Catholic. The newly founded 'Belarusian schools' were therefore both Russian and Catholic and could attract Catholic children and Russify them. When the communists came to power in 1940, a great many new Belarusian schools were opened. The Belarusian movement in Latvia is actually Russian and imperial, with a strong communist bent. It had always been backed from Moscow and almost all Belarusian activists in Latvia, teachers included, were communists. The 'Belarusian minority' in Latvia was viewed as completely 'red,' as were the Jews. Even today the local self-aware 'Belarusians' should be considered the vanguard of Moscow and communism. Because communists cannot come here frequently, they try to masquerade in nationalist disguise. Political uncertainty in the country has increased, especially in the Russia-bordering Latgale. Culturally,

[66] BA, R 92/102, pp. 77–79.
[67] Quoted in Екабсонс, Беларусы ў Латвіі, pp. 219–220.

this would mean Russification and a shift towards Russia, which would of course go against the idea of Great Germany. The reappearance of the 'Belarusian questions' poked the Latvian nation with a hot iron. After all, we have been engaged in a historic struggle against a barbaric foe. The Russians murdered and deported 30,000 Latvians, hundreds of thousands of Germans in Russia, and still a stronghold of Moscow and Slavism is being erected in Latvia. The whole of Belarus was once inhabited by Baltic and German peoples that became Russified over thousands of years. And now, the core Latvian lands are becoming a bridgehead of Russification, inching ever farther to the west."[68]

The words were followed by deeds. History serves us numerous examples of Belarusian teachers persecuted by the civil administration and auxiliary police. Some of them were included in deportations to labour camps – such was the fate of at least a dozen. Some of them were detained more than once. Blackmail and intimidation were employed to force them to give up working in Belarusian schools. Often, Belarusians were victimised for their alleged sympathies for the Soviet state. They were charged with collaboration with communists after Latvia was incorporated into the USSR. The General Directorate of Education noted that Belarusian schools employed teachers who were regarded as discredited on account of their collaboration with Soviet authorities. Accordingly, it was demanded that those with debatable background be dismissed.[69] It is a fact that some Belarusian teachers sympathised with the communists. There are no grounds, however, to suppose that they formed a sizeable group. Some Belarusian activists were indeed involved in working with the Soviet authorities in 1940, which was viewed by the Latvians as betrayal and an act of disloyalty to the Latvian state. It should be noted, however, that Belarusians and Latvians differed in their approach to collaboration with the Soviets. From the Belarusian point of view, the primary goal was to preserve the nation and to maintain and foster its own culture in the country where it lived rather than strive for independence.

In 1942–1943, the leaders of the Belarusian Association together with the Belarusian school inspectorate petitioned the Germans on several occasions to release arrested or detained Belarusian teachers. In most cases, these interventions proved successful. In early 1943, a Belarusian delegation paid a visit to the head of the General Directorate. The head of the Belarusian Association reassured the teachers and asked them not to cave in to Latvian demands. One letter of Jezawitau to inspector Machnnouski includes the following passage: "We must understand that all these intimidating moves are a feature of psychological war waged by those who would like to eat Belarusians raw, but the times of Ulmanis are gone for ever […] in the East (i.e. in Reichskommissariat Ostland – J.G.) the Belarusians are now the principal force of the population and must be respected; in addition, the

[68] BA, R 92/102, pp. 93–96.
[69] BA, R 92/102, p. 102.

German authorities do not wish to see Belarusians assimilated, which means that our enemies will soon get a sound thrashing […] I tell you sincerely that these incidents were very opportune indeed, because the Germans will see that all the allegations are groundless, and that the Latvians have barely changed."[70]

Local Russian activists also took a hostile stance towards the Belarusian school action. It should be noted that relations between Belarusians and Russians in Latvia were never very positive. The Russians were the most numerous national minority in Latvia. Russian intelligentsia demonstrated anti-communist sentiments, and consequently the Third Reich authorities granted the Russian minority the right to organise their autonomous schools.[71] The target of national campaigning of both Russian and Belarusian activists was the Latgale countryside, where various dialects of Slavic languages were spoken. Because the local population had no definite feeling of national awareness, it was susceptible to both Russian and Belarusian propaganda campaigns. Both national camps tried to incorporate as many people as possible in their school actions, regardless of their nationality and religion. Belarusian and Russian activists differed in their views on the ethnic situation of Latgale. The Belarusians considered everyone who spoke a Belarusian dialect at home as Belarusian. On the other hand, Russian activists embraced the traditional view that considered Belarusians an offshoot of the Russian nation. The bone of contention were the Old Believers, who formed a relatively numerous group in Latgale. Leaders of the Belarusian movement tried to contact Old Believer elites to gain their support for the Belarusian school action. In November 1941, Jezawitau made an offer of cooperation with the Belarusian movement to a leader of the Old Believers, Maria Famina. He argued that the Old Believers should abandon their Russian heritage and start to declare themselves Belarusians. Otherwise, he insisted, they risked deportation to Russia in the near future.[72] The Belarusian activist believed that the majority of Latgale Old Believers were "Russified Belarusians."[73] The appeal of the BNC chairman did not meet with a positive response of the Old Believers community. Nevertheless, we know of individual cases of Old Believers joining the Belarusian ranks. For instance, in the autumn of 1941, a teacher called Kupałow approached the BNC branch in Daugavpils, wishing to become a member. Considering this proposal, the BNC chairman Jezawitau, on 10 November 1941, wrote to the leaders of the Daugavpils branch: "You should immediately ask him to declare that he considers himself a Belarusian and wishes to take part in the Belarusian national struggle […] The [Old Believer – J.G.] peasants should declare that they consider themselves Belarusians and wish to send their children to Belarusian schools. A teacher of Belarusian should be dispatched to the school,

[70] LVVA, P-712 f., 1 apr., 6 lieta, 17 lp.
[71] BA, R 92/103, pp. 70–71, 178–179.
[72] LVVA, P-712 f., 1 apr., 6 lieta, 1–2 lp.
[73] LVVA, P-712 f., 1 apr., 6 lieta, 4 lp.

and Kupałow himself should immediately start learning the language. It would be easier for pupils and teachers alike to learn Belarusian rather than Latvian."[74]

In Latgale, Russian and Belarusian activists engaged in a heated rivalry to capture the minds and souls of the local youth. Russian schools sprang up at the same time and in the same areas as Belarusian ones. The letters exchanged by Belarusian activists with German authorities show that the Belarusians questioned the rationale for opening Russian schools in localities where the Belarusians predominated. In one of his letters to Adolphi, on 20 November 1941, the BNC chairman wrote among others: "I consider it my duty to point your attention to the fact that many principals of Russian schools in Riga and Daugavpils have been enrolling pupils whose parents are Belarusian, as confirmed by documents showing that they have come from Belarusian guberniyas. These pupils and their parents are undoubtedly Belarusians and, therefore, should not be enrolled in Russian schools. To disregard nationality and sow confusion, Great Russians call their schools 'Russian' and are willing to admit everyone: Great Russians, Belarusians, and Ukrainians. Latvian school boards follow the steps of the Great Russians, calling Great Russian schools Russian, which leads to ambiguity. Therefore I ask you to ensure that Great Russian schools are not called Russian, but Great Russian, and that Belarusians are not enrolled in them. It should also be noted that in the Ilūkste, Daugavpils and Ludza counties there is virtually no Great Russian population, and the indigenous inhabitants are Latgalians and Belarusians, while Great Russians and Poles are a tiny minority which appeared there owing to Russian rule, the presence of Polish landowners, and the activity of Great Russian Orthodox clergy and some Catholic clergy originating from Poland."[75]

All the while, the province was witness to a veritable tug-of-war between principals of individual schools. The principal of the Belarusian school in Kraslava, Jauhien Kraśniewicz, notified the BNC leaders that a Russian school had been opened in his town and that about thirty Belarusian pupils were enrolled in it. Kraśniewicz argued that the enrolment was based on declarations of Russian nationality made by their parents. In the opinion of the activist, these declarations were false, because those pupils were of the Catholic faith and spoke Belarusian at home.[76] This rivalry between Russians and Belarusians persisted throughout the period when Russian and Belarusian schools existed in Latvia. In June 1943, Jezawitau appealed to inspector Machnouski that efforts to neutralise Russian canvassing among the Belarusian population should be intensified.[77]

Latgale was also a region with clusters of Polish population. Nevertheless, the Poles had it much worse than the Russians and the Belarusians. Unlike these

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[74] LVVA, P-712 f., 1 apr., 6 lieta, 4 lp.
[75] BA, R 92/102, p. 85.
[76] НАРБ, ф. 458, воп. 1, спр. 32, л. 12.
[77] НАРБ, ф. 458, воп. 1, спр. 16, л. 9.

two nations, their schools were not granted autonomy. As a consequence, a large majority of Latgale and Ilūkste county inhabitants who declared themselves Polish before the war registered as Belarusian during the German occupation. The police chief in Ilūkste, Peteris Pupolis, noted that in some localities Poles were the dominant group, but when the Germans came almost all of them declared Belarusian nationality.[78] It should be noted that the activists of the young Belarusian movement themselves insisted that there were no Polish peasants in Latvia. It was assumed that they were "Polonised Belarusians" who should reclaim their true national identity. According to this view, Polishness in these areas was represented solely by landowners and some Catholic clergymen. As a result, Belarusian activists did not hide their satisfaction with the fact that some Poles joined the Belarusian school movement, considering this as the "return" of Polonised Belarusians into the fold of their own culture.[79] The problem, however, was much more complex than those activists had suspected. It is a fact that some Polish parents decided to send their children to Belarusian schools, but they did so for opportunistic rather than national reasons. As Poles had no schools of their own, some of them were forced to enrol children in schools of other nationalities. In this case, the primary motive was to ensure that they receive an education. In addition, as already noted, many Latgalian Catholics were unsure of how to define their national identity, and their nationality declarations varied depending on the current political situation, which under the occupation was by and large favourable to the Belarusians. Therefore, Belarusian schools were filled not only with self-aware Poles, but also peasants whose national identities were in flux. It is known that the Belarusian school system employed teachers who were regarded as Poles between the wars. Belarusian activists treated them with limited confidence, however: the leaders of the Belarusian Association regarded this group of people with suspicion and distrust, considering them surreptitious supporters of the Polish cause. An example of this may be the case of Professor Bolesław Brežgo, who as a well-qualified educator was considered for appointment as the principal of the Belarusian middle school in Indra. His candidature was soon rejected, however, because he was considered a "Polish agent." The BNC chairman, Jezawitau, expressed his anxiety, fearing that Brežgo may have been a "Trojan horse" of the Poles, and that the middle school could be marred by Polishness should he be appointed to the post of the principal.[80]

Staff management in Belarusian schools was supervised by the occupiers. Schools employed individuals who had completed two-year educational courses.[81]

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[78] Екабсонс, Беларусы ў Латвіі, pp. 204–205.

[79] The aforesaid Kraśniewicz reported on the situation in the following terms: "Some Belarusians, who formerly considered themselves Poles, have already recognised that they are Belarusians and that, influenced by various factors, they had remained ignorant of their true nationality." НАРБ, ф. 458, воп. 1, спр. 32, л. 13 зв.-14.

[80] LVVA, P-712 f., 1 apr., 6 lieta, 5 lp.

[81] "Аб беларускім школьніцтве," *Раніца* (25 December 1942), s. 4.

As previously noted, school principals were appointed by the General Directorate of Education and Culture on the request of the administrator of Belarusian schools. The candidate needed to be of good repute; to verify this, school inspectors consulted the matters of employment with the commissioner of the district in which the candidate resided.[82] Measures were taken to make sure that people of questionable repute should not be employed. In particular, attention was paid to the attitude taken by the candidate during the Soviet occupation. Nevertheless, a consultative meeting of school inspectors held in Riga in 1941 opined that even highly qualified educators should not be admitted to work in schools if they had collaborated with the Soviets during the Soviet occupation. "The red witch hunt" often took the form of personal vendettas. One such example was the rejection by the Germans of the candidature of Jezawitau to the post of the chief inspector of Belarusian schools in the autumn of 1941, which was based on an anonymous denunciation.[83]

Throughout its entire existence, the Belarusian school system struggled with the shortage of qualified teachers. The pace at which schools sprang up during the first months of German occupation often left no time to verify the professional qualifications of teachers in detail. This problem was caused by the fact that, after 1934, the network of Belarusian schools in Latvia ceased to exist. After the country was incorporated into the Soviet Union in 1940, some educators were transferred to other Soviet republics, some went into retirement or died.[84] In 1942/1943, Belarusian schools employed only 93 teachers (not including religion teachers).[85] In order to improve the situation, courses to enhance professional qualifications were organised. In March 1942, the BNC leader wrote to the leadership of the Daugavpils branch, proposing that teacher courses be put in place. The following events were planned: 1) preparatory courses for new teachers, 2) courses enhancing the qualification level for those already qualified to teach in schools, and 3) courses of Belarusian language and culture for all teachers.[86] The Belarusian Association leaders also launched the initiative of establishing a four-year Belarusian teachers' college. This project did not, however, find favour with the German authorities, who offered to set up a Belarusian group in the Rēzekne college instead.[87] Once again, the diverging interests of the Germans and the Belarusians became apparent. The Belarusians had far-fetched plans to extend their school system. The Germans, meanwhile, intended to concede to Belarusian school system in Latvia only until the end of the war and saw no need to extend it any further. In order to enhance the qualifications of teachers, four-week courses were launched in Riga in May 1944.[88]

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[82] BA, R 92/102, p. 43.
[83] BA, R 92/102, p. 116.
[84] BA, R 92/101 p. 89.
[85] BA, R 92/102, pp. 231–232.
[86] LVVA, P-712 f., 1 apr., 5 lieta, 9 lp.
[87] BA, R 92/102, p. 153.
[88] "Беларускае жыцьцё ў Латвіі," *Раніца* (21 May 1944), p. 3.

The leaders of the Belarusian movement tried to solve the shortage of teaching personnel by bringing staff from Belarus and Lithuania. On the invitation of the BNC, a few teachers of mixed Belarusian-Latvian heritage who graduated from the Vitebsk Educational Institute came to Latvia. In early 1942, the Belarusian press issued in Berlin and Vilnius published an announcement offering work for teachers in Belarusian schools in Latvia.[89] Despite the expectations of Latvian Belarusians, the appeal was of no avail.[90] The matter floundered because of formal obstacles, such as the requirement to obtain the consent of German authorities to change one's residence.[91] The leaders of the Belarusian Association did not cease to appeal to their compatriots abroad to find suitable candidates. Chairman Jezawitau produced a desperate flurry of letters to his friends in Minsk, Vilnius, and Kaunas, begging for support. In one of his letters to the deputy chairman of the Belarussian Central Council, Mikałaj Szkialonek, which he sent in May 1944, he wrote: "There are only few old-time employees and teachers who are still with us; in the three Riga schools, we have just three older teachers (the principals), the rest are youths and women. We are painfully short of new resources, especially in middle schools. We once had a group of people from Minsk who agreed to come here, but the scheme was dropped because they did not obtain permits […]. The situation is especially challenging in the middle school: the pupils are flocking in and their numbers go up with each year, we have the money, we have more forms, but we were short of teachers already in 1943, and this autumn we expect this will all turn for the worse as two new forms are about to be set up. We beg you, send us two Belarusian language teachers who have obtained their degrees, preferably not from the Soviet Union, as the Latvians do not recognise these, and also two German teachers and one biology teacher. There are job openings for these posts in Zilupe and Indra. Salaries are good, and so are the living conditions."[92] The appeals, however, fell on deaf ears. Moreover, it did happen that Belarusian teachers left Latvia for General District Belarus. This was particularly the case of the Bratslav district, where Belarusian schools were also being formed, which naturally entailed demand for teachers.[93]

The leaders of the Belarusian movement in Latvia had high expectations concerning teachers, who were supposed to spread Belarusian national awareness among non-aware peasants. This is clearly seen in the slogan proposed by the BNC chairman: "each Belarusian teacher is a Belarusian activist."[94] In practice, however, not all educators were able to fulfil that role, and their morale varied. Only a small group of teachers, recruited from educators and graduates of pre-war

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[89] "Беларускае жыцьцё ў Латвіі," *Раніца* (15 February 1942), p. 4.
[90] НАРБ, ф. 458, воп. 1, спр. 39, л. 11.
[91] BA, R92/101 p. 30; НАРБ, ф. 458, воп. 1, спр. 12, л. 21.
[92] НАРБ, ф. 458, воп. 1, спр. 18, л. 15.
[93] НАРБ, ф. 458, воп. 1, спр. 33, л. 10.
[94] LVVA, P-712 f., 1 apr., 6 lieta, 18–19 lp.

Belarusian middle schools, was fully conscious of their nationality. Those people were full of zeal and aware of their goals. Conversely, the loyalty and patriotism of the remainder was often put in doubt by the leading activists of the Belarusian movement. It is certain that some of them were not fluent in Belarusian. The Latvian school inspection set alarm bells ringing because in some Belarusian schools the classes, despite instructions of German authorities, were held in Russian rather than Belarusian. In addition, religion classes for pupils who were Catholics were in most cases conducted in Polish. In November 1941, Jezawitau noted that a great many teachers were socially inert. The BNC leader wrote: "Our teachers are very passive. They chat, but they do very little. There is no zeal, initiative or understanding of the situation. Everyone is waiting for the executive to make a move. We need to work every day to enhance our national awareness."[95] A very critical assessment of the majority of teachers came from the head of the Belarusian Association branch in Daugavipils, A. Jakubiecki. He argued that teachers in Belarusian schools were for the most part tainted by foreign culture and upbringing. Accordingly, he was in favour of removing such people from the school system. Inspector Machnouski fully shared the view that a large part of teachers did little to identify themselves with Belarusian national values, although he explained the lack of patriotism and poor fluency in Belarusian by the fact that they had long been deprived of contacts with Belarusian organisations and remained susceptible to foreign influences. The inspector was not willing to censure them, bearing in mind that there were no other suitable replacements. At the same time, he emphasised the need for intense and long-term work with those teachers to enhance their national awareness.[96] Guided by the intention to propagate national awareness among Belarusian teachers, leaders of the Belarusian Association distributed Belarusian press issued in Riga, Minsk, Vilnius, Berlin, and Białystok to them. Teachers were sent individual issues and encouraged to subscribe to and read Belarusian newspapers. Promotion of patriotism was also the goal of cultural activity. The school buildings hosted numerous performances, events, concerts, and exhibitions. Celebrations of Belarusian national feasts, including signing of patriotic and folk songs, were also organised there. Some schools had pupil choirs and artistic ensembles. In these activities, the leading part was played by students from Belarusian middle schools.[97]

A major hindrance in the educational process in Belarusian schools was the lack of textbooks and literature. In particular, there was demand for textbooks on Belarusian grammar, history, geography, arithmetic, and German.[98] Often, teachers had to finance the purchase of necessary books from their own means.

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[95] LVVA, P-712 f., 1 apr., 6 lieta, 7 lp.
[96] LVVA, P-712 f., 1 apr., 5 lieta, 23 lp.
[97] НАРБ, ф. 458, воп. 1, спр. 35, л. 21.
[98] НАРБ, ф. 458, воп. 1, спр. 35, л. 16.

School principals contacted the Belarusian Association board, asking for textbooks. Thus, for example, on 23 January 1942, S. Kryłowicz, the principal of a school in Niewlany (Pustiņas Municipality), notified Jezawitau that the school library had no books in the Belarusian language while Latvian literature was all over the place.[99] Belarusian activists had to ensure that schools were provided with at least some of the necessary literature. Jezawitau, as the head of the Belarusian Association, launched a campaign to collect pre-war textbooks. By the spring of 1942, textbooks were supplied to all junior forms, but senior ones still lacked them.[100] Search for books started outside Latvia, in Vilnius, Minsk, Berlin, and Białystok. Thanks to Jezawitau's far-reaching contacts with various centres of Belarusian intelligentsia, the Association managed to acquire a number of textbooks. In the summer of 1942, Jan Stankiewicz sent to Latvia 200 copies of his books *Kryvia-Belarus in the Past* (Minsk 1942). The same author dispatched a number of textbook manuscripts to Riga, proposing that they should be published in print in Latvia.[101] Considerable support for the Belarusian school system in Latvia came in the form of books sent by Jan Biekisz, a Belarusian activist from Vilnius.[102] At the same time Mikałaj Abramczyk, head of the Belarusian Self-Help Committee in Berlin, sent part of the print run of his *History of Belarus in Maps* (published in Berlin in 1942) to his compatriots in Latvia.[103]

The lack of textbooks forced local Belarusian activists to step up their work on launching their publishing ventures. On the initiative of Jezawitau, in mid-1942, funds to set up a publishing company began to be raised among teachers. For this purpose, each teacher contributed one of his monthly salaries per year.[104] The inspectorate of Belarusian schools in Latgale and Semigalia was also involved in the fundraising.[105] On occasion, sizeable sums were collected. On 13 June 1943, inspector Machnouski notified the head of the Belarusian Association that he had managed to collect 1,550 marks from teachers in Daugavpils County.[106] The effects were not long to appear and, in mid-1943, the *Belarusian School* textbook written by Jezawitau (3rd edition) was published with a run of 3,000 copies. The book proved very helpful during Belarusian language classes, although it was not free from editorial and technical shortcomings. The typescript was set for printing by Latvian editors who did not know Belarusian, and the final edition was replete with errors and typos.[107] Jezawitau planned to follow up with other textbooks and

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[99] НАРБ, ф. 458, воп. 1, спр. 32, л. 5.

[100] "Беларускае жыцьцё ў Латвіі," *Раніца* (29 March–5 April 1943), p. 5.

[101] "Лісты Янкі Станкевіча да Кастуся Езавітава (1939–1942)," *Спадчына*, 1999, no. 5-6, p. 63.

[102] НАРБ, ф. 458, воп. 1, спр. 13, л. 10.

[103] НАРБ, ф. 458, воп. 1, спр. 12, л. 8.

[104] Ю. Туронак, "Беларуская кніга пад нямецкім кантролем," in: id., *Мадэрная гісторыя Беларусі,* Вільня, 2006, p. 342.

[105] НАРБ, ф. 458, воп. 1, спр. 16, л. 5.

[106] LVVA, P-712 f., 1 apr., 5 lieta, 18 lp.

[107] LVVA, P-712 f., 1 apr., 4 lieta, 36 lp.

literature needed by Belarusian schools in Latvia. These plans did not come to fruition, however. For example, the typescripts of the *Our Class* reading primer and textbook by Zofia Dobrzyńska never saw the light of day, neither did her arithmetic textbook, which resulted from lack of funds.[108]

It should be remembered that teaching in Belarusian schools under German occupation was considerably affected by the circumstances. We can cite as an example the history and geography curricula that featured content perfectly in line with the political and ideological interests of the Third Reich. The textbooks stressed the ties between Belarusians and Germans and German culture. Considerable space was devoted to connections between Belarusian lands and Germany in the Middle Ages. In particular, emphasis was put on trade relations between Polotsk and the Livonian Order and on German influences on the culture of the ancestors of Belarusians. At the same time, Belarusian's neighbours, the Poles and the Russians, were cast in a very bad light. Second form Belarusian history classes featured topics such as: "The struggle of Belarusians against Polonisation," "The Belarusian nation under the Polish yoke," "The resistance of the Belarusian countryside against collectivisation," "Belarusian national movement under Polish and Russian dominance," "The breakdown of Poland and the USSR," "The victorious struggle of European nations against plutocratic and Communist International oppression." Geography classes, in turn, discussed "Greater Germany and its role in the life of Central Europe."[109]

Most schools managed to overcome material difficulties. In war-time conditions, school buildings were occasionally requisitioned by the Wehrmacht. Due to lack of other facilities, the five-form school in Gryve village was moved to the former synagogue in Daugavpils in November 1942. A similar situation occurred in the cases of Indra and Zilupe middle schools, as their buildings were seized by the army in 1943. As a result, the Indra middle school was first (from February 1943 to February 1944) relocated to a building belonging to the local Belarusian primary school, and later to a residential building. In Zilupe, the pupils and teachers had to move twice in 1943.[110] In the autumn of 1942, the Pustiņas school did not yet inaugurate the school year due to the lack of a suitable building.[111] Similarly, pupils from the school in Demene shared their premises with Latvian pupils: the Belarusians were assigned only one room, while the Latvians used four. Deplorable conditions prevailed in the school in Garavaja, where lack of rooms forced principal Ignacy Błażewicz to sleep in his own office together with pupils from distant villages.[112] The Pustiņas school also found itself in dire straits, as evidenced by a letter of its principal Antoni Kłagisz to the head of the Belarusian Association,

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[108] Туронак, op. cit., pp. 342–344.
[109] BA, R 92/91, p. 15.
[110] Екабсонс, Беларусы ў Латвіі, p. 215.
[111] НАРБ, ф. 458, воп. 1, спр. 15, л. 10.
[112] BA, R 92/102, p. 203.

which reads: "unless we are granted consent to hold classes in the school building or in the afternoons in the Latvian school, the Belarusians are going to have a bad time. The Latvians are mocking us that we can have a Belarusian school in the countryside, but not in Pustiņas; they hope to get rid of us etc. […] the rooms we received from the company leader do not meet the basic requirements, while parents, witnessing how helpless we are, hold back from sending children to our school."[113] The circumstances of pupils of some Belarusian schools, who often lacked clothing and footwear, left much to be desired. This in turn led to low attendance in class. Inspector Machnouski put the blame for this on the municipal administration that was guilty of considerable negligence. In March 1943, the inspector helped the school in Garavaja to be granted 500 ration coupons to obtain clothing.[114]

Safety conditions in most schools raised no concerns. Nevertheless, they were partly located in areas threatened by Soviet guerrilla formations, who raided some of them in 1942/1943, which resulted in several closures as the school buildings were destroyed by the attackers.[115] In 1943, a new problem arose. Some pupils were drafted into the Latvian Legion of the SS.[116] The circumstances were so adverse that classes could not be held due to extremely low attendance. On 25 October 1943, administrator Miranowicz warned that the conscription of pupils prevented senior forms from being formed in the Indra middle school. Instances are known of pupils and teachers voluntarily joining the Latvian Legion. A case in point is the principal of the Aizupe school, Wiktor Zawisza, who volunteered in the spring of 1943. We also know of some Belarusian pupils who served and died in combat as soldiers of Latvian armed formations under German command.[117]

Regardless of these issues, the Belarusian school system continued to operate. The number of pupils who graduated from the Belarusian primary schools ranged from 150 to 180 per year.[118] The school year 1943/1944 was the final year of Belarusian schools in Latvia. Following the offensive of Soviet troops carried out in the summer of 1944, Latgale was occupied by the Red Army. The post-war fates of the Belarusians who had been involved in the Belarusian school system under German occupation varied greatly. Some, such as Dziamidau, Machnouski, and Miranowicz, retreated with the Germans and ended up outside their homeland.

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113 НАРБ, ф. 458, воп. 1, спр. 32, л. 9.

114 BA, R 92/102, p. 241.

115 Екабсонс, Беларусы ў Латвіі, p. 215.

116 НАРБ, ф. 458, воп. 1, спр. 35, л. 32 зв.

117 Henryk Błażewicz, who attended the Belarusian middle school in Indra as a fourth grader, was conscripted into the Latvian Legion in November 1943. In the spring of 1944, he was killed in combat. Екабсонс, Беларусы ў Латвіі, p. 218.

118 "Беларускае жыцьцё ў Латвіі," *Раніца* (28 June 1942), p. 3; К. Езавітаў, "Аб беларускім школьніцтве," *Раніца* (25 December 1942), p. 3; "Беларускае жыцьцё ў Латвіі," *Раніца* (21 May 1944), p. 3.

Others, like Sacharau, stayed in Latvia and went through the hell of Soviet gulags. The whereabouts of others are impossible to determine due to the wartime havoc. The post-war vicissitudes of Belarusian activists in Latvia require a separate study, however.

To summarize, it should be concluded that the Belarusian national movement in Latvia under German occupation enjoyed something of a renaissance. This was possible thanks to the occupiers' attitude towards individual ethnic groups in the subjugated areas. One of the factors guiding German policy towards ethnic minorities in Latvia was their willingness to counterbalance the activity of Latvians and Poles. Paradoxically, it was under German occupation that the Belarusians had the opportunity to engage in a wider range of cultural and educational activities than before the war. In 1941–1945, there were thirty-five Belarusian primary schools and three secondary schools (two middle schools and an agricultural school), employing about a hundred teachers.[119] In terms of scale, this was a throwback to the early 1920s, when almost fifty Belarusian schools were founded in Latvia. It is difficult to form clear-cut judgments concerning the cooperation between Belarusian activists and Germans with regard to the establishment of Belarusian schools in Latvia. It is equally difficult to evaluate the outcomes of the school action. Without doubt, local Belarusian activists were guided by cold political calculations; they clearly intended to take advantage of the international situation to achieve their own primary objective, namely, to raise the national awareness of the Belarusian-speaking population of Latgale. Despite their expectations, their activity did not produce substantial results. In the throes of war and occupation, running the schools was beset with numerous hindrances, and the quality of teaching was a far cry from regular standards. It would be no exaggeration to say that those actions merely laid the foundations for Belarusian schools in Latvia. But even that meagre achievement was wiped out when Latvia was regained by the Red Army: the country was thus left without schools with Belarusian as the language of instruction.

Abstract

The Belarusians were one of the largest ethnic groups in Latvia in the inter-war period. The main clusters of Belarusian population were located in the south-eastern part of the country, Latgale (former Polish Livonia). The inter-war Latvian state was one of the main centres of the Belarusian movement outside Belarus, with active Belarusian cultural, educational, and political organisations, as well as a school network and newspapers. In the summer of 1941, Latvia came to be occupied by the Wehrmacht, and an occupation regime was established. The German authorities in occupied Latvia, abiding by the principle of "divide and conquer," were willing to grant the Belarusians a certain degree of cultural and educational autonomy. In 1941, the Belarusian National Committee (later, beginning with the spring of 1942, known as the

[119] "Беларускае жыцьцё ў Латвіі," *Раніца* (28 February 1943), p. 3.

Belarusian Association) was established in Riga and Daugavpils. The BNC gave priority to the establishment of Belarusian schools under German occupation. In the school years 1941/1942 and 1942/1943, thirty-five primary schools, two middle schools, and one agricultural secondary school were opened. Belarusian schools had to deal with numerous material difficulties, including the lack of school buildings and textbooks. In addition, schools suffered from a shortage of qualified teachers. The Latvians did not look favourably upon the Belarusian school action, seeing it as a threat to themselves. Despite these difficulties, Belarusian schools in Latvia continued to operate until the end of the German occupation.

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