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Libraries and Neutrality, the Librarian and Loyalty. What are Our Responsibilities in War and Peace?

I was born in 1983 when Latvia was still under the Soviet occupation. But very soon, only 8 years later, in 1991, Latvia fully restored its independence. It seems that I grew up in a transitional stage, where in kindergarten my generation listened to fairy tales about the “good uncle Lenin”, but during school time we already sang the Latvian national anthem freely and proudly.

I remember very clearly my Russian language teacher and Russian lessons in the 7th grade at school. Latvia had already been free for several years, but I remember like today, how the teacher excitedly told us how rich, powerful, great and beautiful the Russian language is – like no other in the world! We quoted Pushkin and believed everything the teacher told us. I don't remember a single time when any teachers would have said the same about our Latvian language and literature. Or about English and German, which we also learned at school. Colonial imperialism did its dirty work well by infiltrating our minds with its imperialist belief system. And it still does.

Since 2022, we, Latvian librarians, have discussed a lot about whether libraries can be neutral during war and what is our role and responsibility in strengthening the resilience of society. Opinions about these problems differ, and at such moments I often remember my school days and “inspiring” Russian lessons.

In the short time allotted to me, I will try to briefly outline only one significant factor of these discussions: collection development policy.

To start, it is important to emphasize that The Latvian library network is a unified system, which faces similar problems and challenges, but there are also challenges that are more pronounced in specific regions and cities in Latvia. In the context of war in Ukraine and Russian propaganda, these problems are most visible in regions where the ethnic composition of the population consists of a significant number of Russians. Like Salaspils, for example. During the Soviet occupation, a significant amount of labor from the former Soviet Union, mostly Russians, was poured into Salaspils to build the Riga hydroelectric power station. And they stayed here for life. Today, more than 30 years after regaining independence, In the public space of Salaspils, despite the fact that the official state language is Latvian, Russian is heard by a depressing majority. Russification did its job and consequences are still felt in our town and in other similar places in Latvia. The language hierarchy established during the Russification period has still not been adequately changed in Latvia, and it is a threat to our national security and continues to maintain a divided society.

What does this have to do with libraries, you may ask? Let's take a look!

If you walk among the bookshelves of our libraries, an interesting scene can be observed in some of them: on the bookshelves, sometimes there are still 3 such signs next to each other: Fiction in Latvian, Fiction in Russian, Fiction in foreign languages. Our library used to have such signs too, we replaced them only 2 years ago. In discussions with librarians, I have sometimes encountered confusion: "So what? What is so wrong with those signs?" Very simple. The Russian language in Latvia currently has the same status as any other foreign language, therefore the tradition of highlighting books published in Russian on separate shelves is nothing more than a remnant of the occupation period when the Russian language was declared as the main language of communication in the Soviet Union. It is surprising that we still, more than 30 years after regaining independence, do not see these manifestations of soft power in our library shelves. But It's quite easy to change the signs on the shelves, much harder is to change our daily habits and worldview, which in many cases has been shaped by our shared collective historical experience.

Since 2022, we have had many discussions in the libraries about whether the collection should contain literature in Russian and Russian literature at all, whether we should evaluate the content of the existing books, or whether we should continue to buy books from the aggressor countries. Since 2022 many libraries have written-off a lot of outdated books in Russian and revised their collections. There are some libraries that stopped buying any literature in Russian. But it is important to emphasize that these are mostly libraries located in regions where the majority of the population is Latvian, and in them, for the most part, there is no demand for such literature at all.

In cities as Salaspils it is much more difficult to make such decisions – many librarians and library managers are still afraid of the possible dissatisfaction of the Russian-speaking part of society. In our library, it took two years to make official changes to our [collection development policy](#). It required a lot of discussions, arguments and also overcoming one's inner fears. As a result, since 2024, we no longer subscribe to newspapers in Russian and do not buy new books published in aggressor countries. We do not discriminate against the Russian language, but we have significantly reduced its representation on our bookshelves.

We are well aware that these issues are highly sensitive and not everyone wants to talk about them publicly, so in 2024 we conducted an anonymous survey in which 163 librarians from all regions of Latvia answered various open-ended questions about the work of libraries since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia. I will quote some answers that were related to the collection development policy:

"What will be solved by the fact that there will be fewer books in Russian on our shelves? If it ended the war in Ukraine, I would write off all these books without hesitation, but I don't, because I don't think it affects anything."

"I don't think our library collection should be blamed for Russia's behavior."

"We do not plan to change anything in the work of our library - 70% of our readers are Russian speakers."

"In order to maintain the number of readers and the good statistics of the library, we do not change anything. We do not want to change the approach to collection development policy so as not to lose our Russian-speaking patrons."

"It is difficult to change anything because there are colleagues in my library who are putinists."

“I agree that we should have fewer Russian books in our collection, but... if we only theoretically imagine that Latvia could be occupied again in a couple of years - then those who write-off Russian books will definitely be on Russia's blacklists.”

As you see, we are still in the process of rethinking our daily work and business as usual. And we still have to face challenges and some fear – in most cases, these challenges are not caused by external forces, but are present in ourselves. We can relate these fears and refusal to act to the concept of learned helplessness – a psychological condition when a person or a group of people does not act according to their interests or needs, because they do not believe in the possibility of influencing, controlling or changing what is happening. This condition is often associated with the consequences of totalitarian regimes on people. We have long since regained our independence, but these patterns of behavior are still alive and sometimes still guide us unconsciously.

There are libraries in Latvia that operate similarly to our Salaspils county library, but there are still enough libraries who buy the newest books published in Russia without hesitation. Not to mention the rich representation of “good old Russian classics” on our bookshelves. We have to rely on the initiative and courage of individual libraries and librarians in these matters. And even if we act responsibly, we often don't want to talk about it publicly.

There are more than 700 public libraries in Latvia. 29 of them – Regional libraries. Analyzing publicly available documents and collection development policies of these 29 libraries, only two of them have publicly documented the fact that they do not buy books published in aggressor countries during the war.

Why do I think it is important not only to act, but also to express our position publicly and officially? Because that's how we make our position clear, that's how we encourage even those who are afraid to make unpopular decisions alone, and that's how we demonstrate that libraries are united and have real power.

This week The Library Association of Latvia association [published a call to all Latvian libraries and Latvian booksellers](#) to stop buying and selling any books published in aggressor country. We hope it will serve as an example and encouragement. We all know that Russian literature, culture and language have been a factor of Russia's ideological influence for centuries, but somehow, we have turned a blind eye to it and now we have to deal with the consequences.

Latvian Libraries, the Latvian Librarians' Association supports Ukraine and Ukrainian libraries in various ways. We organize activities and implement cooperation projects that promote our communities' resilience. We do our best to strengthen democracy, media literacy and the ability to recognize disinformation. We do a lot, indeed. But sometimes I ask myself – have we librarians done enough to prevent war before it even started?

Language, culture and libraries are never neutral. We, librarians, do a lot. But we can do better, to promote peace before war.