

**DAUGAVPILS UNIVERSITĀTE
DAUGAVPILS UNIVERSITY**

**VĒSTURE:
AVOTI UN CILVĒKI**

XXVII

**HISTORY:
SOURCES AND PEOPLE**

**DAUGAVPILS UNIVERSITĀTE
AKADĒMISKAIS APGĀDS "SAULE"**

2024

Saleniece, I., atb. red. *Vēsture: avoti un cilvēki. XXVII*. Daugavpils: Daugavpils Universitātes Akadēmiskais apgāds "Saule", 2024. 190 lpp.

Daugavpils Universitātes zinātnisko rakstu krājums "Vēsture: avoti un cilvēki" ir anonīmi recenzēts periodisks izdevums ar starptautisku zinātniskās redakcijas kolēģiju. Tā mērķis ir prezentēt aktuālo pētījumu rezultātus vēstures zinātnes, kā arī historiogrāfijas un vēstures palīdzinātņu jomā. Rakstu krājums iznāk vienu reizi gadā latviešu, angļu un krievu valodā.

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Makets:

SIA "AR Drukātava"

Iekļauts EBSCO datubāzē.

ISSN 978-9934-39-021-0

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Saleniece, I., ed. *History: Sources and People. XXVII*. Daugavpils: Daugavpils University Academic Press "Saule", 2024. 190 p.

The collection of articles "History: Sources and People" of Daugavpils University is a double-blind peer-reviewed periodical with the international editorial board. It publishes articles aimed at presenting the research findings in the field of history, as well as historiography and auxiliary historical disciplines. It is published once a year in Latvian, English, and Russian.

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RA Drukātava Ltd

Included in EBSCO database.

ISSN 978-9934-39-021-0

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Audronė Janužytė

Becoming a Dissident: The cases of Aleksandras Štromas and Tomas Venclova

Key words: dissident, Aleksandras Štromas, Tomas Venclova, dissidence, Soviet society, collaborator, conformist

Summary

The article discloses features of dissidence manifested in Lithuania during the Soviet regime in the 1960–1980s through the analysis of dissident activities of Aleksandras Štromas (1931–1999) and Tomas Venclova (b. 1937). The analysis presented in the article yields several conclusions. Firstly, the main reasons for dissident activities of Štromas and Venclova targeted against the Soviet regime were the occupation of the Baltic states and undergoing repressions, deportations, illegal arrests, violations of human rights, and aggressive policy of the USSR in suppressing the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 by military force. Secondly, with no illusions regarding the Soviet political system, Štromas and Venclova gradually got involved in the dissident activities. At first, they formed unofficial circles of self-education, established connections with Russian dissidents, contributed to underground press, and founded and supported the Lithuanian Helsinki group. Later their criticism of the regime led Štromas and Venclova to forced emigration to the West where they actively continued intellectual struggle against the Soviet occupation of the Baltic states and Sovietization of the Baltic people. Thirdly, depending on their daily political behaviour, people of the occupied Baltic states, in view of Štromas, could be divided into three groups: 1) unconditional conformists (collaborators) consisting of those who served the Soviet authorities without reservations with rather simple objectives, i.e., to satisfy their basic needs, ensure personal safety, and rise to the highest possible ranks in their party and professional career; 2) conservationists (partial conformists) who perfectly adjusted to the Soviet rule, conscientiously worked on its behalf, or participated in the official life in other ways, but made every effort to preserve the nation's identity and integrity, historic memory, native language, traditional culture and monuments; and 3) active “extra-structural” dissidents who simply refused to adjust to the Soviet order and found themselves outside the Communist control system. Finally, the majority of societies in the occupied Baltic states were conformists and their behaviour was determined by the perception that political regimes are subject to change. Štromas believed that the Baltic people were ready

to progress to free and independent existence on the first favourable occasion. His insights were confirmed by the restoration of independence of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia in the 1990s.

Introduction

From the very first days of the war started by the Russian Federation against the Republic of Ukraine in 2022, the people and state leaders of the Baltic states were pro-active: they condemned, protested against the military aggression of Russia, imposed or supported sanctions on the aggressor, its legal entities and natural persons, organised various civic campaigns in solidarity with Ukrainians, provided military ammunition, medical supplies and financial aid, went to treat the wounded, or joined the fight for independence of Ukraine as volunteers. Such attitude has been prompted by the established principle that independence should always be defended underlying the modern societies of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, which had in turn been affected by the collective memory related to the loss of statehood when the Soviet occupation began in the 1940s. Under such circumstances, a decision had to be taken: to become political refugees and seek a safe asylum in the West or collaborate and help to establish the Soviet regime in the country and perhaps assume a conformist position with the hope of political changes, or stay and fight for independence. Currently, in the context of the struggle of Ukrainians for the territorial integrity and sovereignty of their country, it becomes relevant to study the reasons of dissident movements in the USSR in the years of the Cold War. The article aims to disclose features of dissidence manifested in Lithuania during the Soviet regime in the 1960–1980s through the analysis of dissident activities of Aleksandras Štomas (1931–1999) and Tomas Venclova (b. 1937). The article examines three issues: 1) the reasons prompting them to get involved in the dissidence; 2) the directions of their dissident activities; 3) the way Štomas determined the Soviet society, and the specific features identified by him. The sources and literature for examining the defined purpose and issues can be divided into two groups. The first encompasses memoirs, speeches, and interviews of Štomas and Venclova about their personal involvement in dissident activities. The second group consists of articles and studies on issues of Sovietisation of the Lithuanian society as seen by Štomas.

1. Reasons of involvement in dissident activities

Author and poet Tomas Venclova and lawyer Aleksandras Štomas were among the most prominent dissidents from the academic circles in Soviet Lithuania. In their early youth, both of them had been members of the Komsomol,

followed Marxist ideology, and advocated for it. In one of his interviews, Venclova maintained that he was raised in the family of a renowned and earnest communist. His father Antanas Venclova¹ was a representative of the so-called People's Seimas in 1940 and participated in the delegation for the illegal admission of Lithuania to the USSR (Mitaitė). In early youth, Tomas Venclova showed interest in Marxism and believed that Nikita Khrushchev's rule would bring liberalization and humanization to the regime. But he lost all hope in November of 1956 after the suppression of the Hungarian Revolution (Venclova, 2000b, 8).

The turning-point in Štromas' worldview occurred a little earlier. Due to their Jewish origin, his family had a tragic fate during World War II. His father Jurgis Štromas was killed in the "Lietūkis" garage massacre in Kaunas on 27 June 1941. His mother Eugenija Kozin-Štromienė had committed suicide three weeks before the prisoners of Stutthof concentration camp were liberated. After the war, the family of Antanas Sniečkus, the first secretary of the Central Committee of the Lithuanian Communist Party, were his guardians² (Štromas 2001c, 585–586). An interviewer once asked Štromas how he had turned into a dissident who was prominent not only in the Lithuanian SSR but also in the rest of the Soviet Union despite having grown up in the famous at that time Lithuanian communist family. Štromas answered that he had become an expert and a supporter of Marxism-Leninism after a few years with Sniečkus. He even said, "I believed in Lenin, Stalin, and Sniečkus and shared the then common belief that Stalin is today's Lenin" (Štromas 2001c, 586). However, the public admission of the Soviet government made on 4 April 1953 and stating that the Russian doctors arrested under Stalin's rule were innocent and had to be released from prison caused, as he put it, an ideological shock. It became clear that the Soviet political system in general rather than in terms of its individual implementers was to blame for the injustice, deprivation, and repressions. According to Štromas, this concept turned a 22-year-old man into the enemy of the authority (Štromas 2001a, 647; Štromas 2001c, 589; Štromas 2001g, 524–525). When any illusions regarding the Soviet order had been dispelled, Štromas (like Venclova) gradually got involved in the dissident activities.

¹ He was member of the Central Committee of the Lithuanian Communist Party in 1952–64, a deputy of the Supreme Council of the Lithuanian SSR in 1940–47, 1955–59 and 1963–71, a deputy of the Supreme Council of the USSR in 1941–63, and the chairman of the Writers' Union of the Lithuanian SSR in 1954–59 (Mitaitė).

² In 1941–43, he was imprisoned in Vilijampolė Ghetto (a concentration camp near Kaunas) but managed to escape on 16 November 1943. At first, he was harboured by Marija and Antanas Macenavičiai but later was sheltered by Antanas Sniečkus and his wife Mira Bordonaitė who were well-acquainted with his parents. Štromas claims that he had perfect conditions to live and study with the Sniečkus family.

2. Directions of dissident activities

We can find some similarities comparing dissident activities of Štromas and Venclova.

At first, they formed and participated in unofficial circles of self-education at Vilnius University. In 1960, Venclova founded a group which listed 12 members, Štromas among them. They held discussions about the Communist regimes in the Central and East Europe, the Hungarian Revolution, and possible ways to start eroding the Soviet regime in Lithuania (Venclova 2001, 14). The activities of the group were reported to the KGB. Following the interrogation, Venclova left for Moscow in 1961 and returned to Vilnius only in 1965³ (Štromas 2001b, 302).

Also, they established contacts with Russian dissidents and contributed to underground press. In 1955–1959, during his post-graduate studies at the University of Moscow, Štromas got involved in political anti-Soviet activities⁴. Štromas' ideological friends and mentors were Moscow intellectuals, namely former political prisoners Grigory Pomerants, a philosopher and scholar of Oriental cultures, and Leonid Pinsky, a scholar of Renaissance literature and Shakespeare, and such dissidents as Andrei Sakharov, Alexander Ginzburg, Elena Bonner, Andrei Sin-yavsky, Vladimir Bukovsky, Alexander Galich, and others (Venclova 2001, 15). In 1956, Štromas published his first *samizdat*⁵ work written under a Russian

³ In 1966–73, Venclova worked as a lecturer of the modern history of Western literature at Vilnius University. He was the head of the Department of Literature at Šiauliai Drama Theatre in 1972–76, and he also lectured at Tartu University and worked in the Academy of Sciences of the Lithuanian SSR in 1974–76. After World War II, he was the first to translate into his native Lithuanian language and publish parts of James Joyce's novel *Ulysses* in the Soviet Union (in 1968), he also translated works by Franz Kafka and Vsevolod Meyerhold. However, gradually Venclova realized that he had no future living and working in the Soviet Lithuania as he had lost his job at the university, was denied membership in the Writers' Union of the Lithuanian SSR, and could only continue working as a translator as it was impossible to support oneself on the writing inconvenient for the political conjuncture (Štromas 2001b, 302; Satkauskytė).

⁴ In 1947, Štromas studied at the Faculty of Law at Vilnius University but switched to the same faculty at Moscow University in 1948 and was awarded the diploma with honours in 1952. Mikhail Gorbachev was among his fellow-students though a few years younger. After graduation he worked as a defence lawyer in various Lithuanian towns and as a part-time lecturer in various higher education institutions, each year making attempts to enter post-graduate studies at Vilnius University. Even though Štromas would pass the entrance exams with the highest score, he was not allowed to study. In consideration of the recommendations and guarantee of employment in Lithuania obtained from Kazys Preikšas, the Deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers and member of the Lithuanian Communist Party, in 1955, Štromas was eventually allowed to enter post-graduate studies in the University of Moscow despite his Jewish origins, and graduated from it in 1959 (Venclova 2001, 11; Štromas 2001g, 523).

⁵ *Samizdat* (from Russian *sam*, "self" and *izdatelstvo*, "publishing") was underground publications secretly written, copied, and circulated in the Soviet Union and former Communist countries such as Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary, and the Democratic Republic of Germany in 1953–90.

pseudonym of Foma Znakov. According to him, “a career of a dissident or a conscious revisionist started” (Štomas 2001g, 523–524). After making the acquaintance with Alexander Ginzburg, Štomas started editing the first unofficial literary journal in the Soviet Union titled *Syntaksis* [Syntax]. The journal intended to publish apolitical poems contradicting the dogma of socialist realism (Venclova 2001, 15). The publication of the journal led to arrests of dissidents all over the USSR in 1961. Štomas was accused of being a dissident ideologist but the KGB failed to prove the allegations and he was released. He believed that his discharge was directly related to Nikita Khrushchev’s declaration that “political criminals do not and cannot exist in the Soviet Union” and the attempts to incriminate him in a criminal offence failed (Štomas 2001c, 589). In the 1960–1970s, Štomas acted as a disseminator of oppositional ideas and book smuggler between Moscow and Vilnius⁶ (Venclova 2001, 12).

Moreover, Venclova became one of the initiators of the Lithuanian Helsinki Group in 1975. The main tasks of the Group were to record cases of human rights violations related to the freedom of faith, speech, association and emigration, and to disseminate the information about the Soviet occupation of Lithuania in the West. One of the most significant events was the Moscow conference held on the 40th anniversary of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and discussing its additional secret protocols on 23 August 1979. The conference adopted a joint declaration of 45 representatives from the Baltic countries and renowned Moscow dissidents, including Victor Nekipelov, Tatiana Velikanova, Andrei Sakharov, Arina Ginzburg, and others. The declaration demanded to respect human rights and release political prisoners from the Baltic countries, and recognized restoration of the Baltic countries’ right to independence (Štomas 2001e, 95–96). According to Štomas, the year of 1979 can be considered a new stage in the dissident movement in the Lithuanian SSR (Štomas 2001f, 248). By the end of 1981, the Lithuanian Helsinki Group had issued around 30 documents, 22 of which reached the West (Anušauskas, Burauskaitė 2003, 39).

Furthermore, the criticism of the Soviet political system led them to forced emigration to the West. It should be noted that the politics of the USSR towards

Underground publications usually criticized many aspects of official Soviet policies and activities such as ideology, culture, law, economic policy and violations of rights of religious and ethnic minorities (Samizdat; Jaseliūnas).

⁶ In 1959–73, he worked as a research fellow initially in the Research Institute of Forensic Science in Vilnius and later, due to KGB persecutions, was forced to relocate to Russia, to the cities of Ivanovo and Moscow where he worked in various positions of legal research and educational institutions (Aleksandras Štomas).

dissidents underwent certain changes in the 1970s, i.e., dissidents were allowed to emigrate. It was expected that being unable to find work in their profession they would be ruined in emigration. Also, the Communist Party authorities of the Soviet Union hoped to evade strict protests of the West regarding the persecution of dissidents in the country. Štormas emigrated to the UK in 1973 (Aleksandras Štormas). After two years, Venclova wrote an open letter to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Lithuanian SSR asking for permission to emigrate. In his letter, Venclova stated that the Communist ideology was incorrect and harmful to the society as informational restrictions and repressions against those expressing different opinions drive the society as well as the country to stagnation and backwardness. Being unable to change the situation and disapproving of the Communist ideology, he asked for permission to emigrate together with his family to the West (Mitaitė 2002, 89–90). It should be noted that Venclova's involvement into the activity of the Lithuanian Helsinki Group opened the doors for his emigration in 1977.

In addition, they continued in emigration intellectual struggle against the Soviet occupation of the Baltic states and Sovietization of the Baltic people. Venclova lived and worked as a representative of the Lithuanian Helsinki Group (Venclova 2000a, 276). On 24 February 1977, he gave evidence (testified) on the human rights situation in the Lithuanian SSR to an US Congress Commission. Venclova was deprived of the USSR citizenship for the activities denigrating the image of the Soviet citizen by the decree of 14 June 1977. As a consequence, Tomas Venclova's name was banned from the Soviet press, and his books from larger libraries were removed to special library funds (*spetsfonds*) whereas those kept in smaller libraries were pocketed by faithful readers, thus saving them from destruction (Mitaitė 2002, 97–99, 121)⁷. Štormas became a professor in political science⁸ and published more than 300 research papers and articles on the Soviet occupation of Lithuania, Sovietization of the Lithuanian society, proposed specific political actions regarding the occupied homeland, and developed political schemes for

⁷ Venclova taught semiotics at Berkely University (California) in 1977, and later at Ohio University and California University in Los Angeles. He was the vice chair of the Lithuanian Writers' Union in 1979–82. He taught Slavic literature at Yale University since 1980, became the professor (1985), and then emeritus (2013). Venclova was the chair of the Association for the Advancement of Baltic Studies in 1989–91. He has been living in Lithuania since 2018 (Satkauskytė).

⁸ In emigration, Štormas worked as a professor at several universities: taught at Bradford and Salford universities in the United Kingdom in 1974–89. In 1989–2003, he worked as Professor of Political Science at Hillsdale College in Michigan and gave lectures at the University of Chicago, Boston College, Assumption College and Hoover Institution at Stanford University as a visiting professor (Aleksandras Štormas).

the restoration of Lithuania's statehood.

3. An individual in Soviet society

Štomas analysed the impact of the Soviet ideology on the individual and society in his research studies and articles. According to him, there was not a single "Lithuanian or even non-Lithuanian left [...] who would ideologically support the existing political system and believe in Soviet and Communist ideals" (Štomas 2001f, 218). In Štomas' opinion, this breeds political resignation, apoliticality, and social autism, which result in moral cynicism and escapism. People would retire into themselves or withdraw to the narrow circle of their family, organize informal groups of friends based on friendship or common interests such as literature, cinema, or sports or try to escape the absurd of reality and remorse by means of alcohol. The society would gradually lose respect to all commonly accepted values such as public property and people would get involved into the plunder of public property and "shadow economy" (Štomas 2001f, 219–220).

Depending on their daily political behaviour, people of the occupied Baltic states, according to Štomas, could be classified into three groups. The first group, which he called unconditional conformists (collaborators), consisted of those who without reservations served the Soviet authorities with rather simple objectives, i.e., to satisfy their basic needs, ensure personal safety, and rise to the highest possible ranks in their party and professional career. Such individuals were not numerous, and formed a minority among Lithuanians, Latvians, and Estonians. The majority of them formed the second group, i.e., conservationists (partial conformists). They were perfectly adjusted to the Soviet rule, conscientiously worked on its behalf or participated in the official life in other ways. But at the same time, they made every effort to preserve the nation's identity and integrity, historical memory, native language, traditional culture and monuments as well as conserve the country's nature and strengthen its economy. Their behaviour was determined by the perception that political regimes are subject to change, yet the restoration of statehood requires sustained integrity of the nation. In principle, it can be called "infrastructural" dissidence. The third group consisted of active dissidents who, just as the unconditional conformists ("extra-structural" dissidents), were in absolute minority among Lithuanians, Latvians, and Estonians. They simply refused to adjust to the Soviet rule and found themselves outside the official system. They became "extra-structural" dissidents who were persecuted, dismissed from work, deprived of social status and means of support but were also recognized in their homeland and abroad. Štomas believed that the minority of "extra-structural" dissidents was inseparable from the conservationist

group (partial conformists or “infrastructural” dissidents) (Štromas 2001d, 190–191; 2001e, 93–95; 2001f, 245–252). According to Štromas, although the majority of people in the occupied Baltic states became conformists, the demographic situation of the Baltic people and their political-psychological attitude were such that in principle they were ready to progress to free and independent existence on the first favourable occasion (Štromas 2001e, 95).

We can agree with Leonidas Donskis’ affirmation that Štromas could be rightly attributed to the most prominent critics of totalitarianism and Communist ideology such as Hannah Arendt, Karl Jaspers, Karl R. Popper, Raymond Aron, Leszek Kołakowski, and Ernest Gellner who took an academic and theoretical approach to the ideas that Yevgeny Zamyatin, George Orwell, Czesław Miłosz, Milan Kundera, and Tomas Venclova expressed in their works of fiction, literary critique, and political essays (Donskis 2005, 108).

Conclusion

To summarize, it could be claimed that the main reasons which prompted Štromas and Venclova to oppose the Soviet regime were the occupation of the Baltic states, and undergoing repressions, deportations, illegal arrests, violations of human rights, and aggressive policy of the USSR in suppressing the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 by military force. Having lost any illusions regarding the Soviet political system, they gradually got involved in dissident activities. At first, they formed unofficial circles of self-education, established connections with Russian dissidents, contributed to underground press, and founded and supported the Lithuanian Helsinki group. Later their criticism of the regime led Štromas and Venclova to forced emigration to the West where they actively continued intellectual struggle against the Soviet occupation of the Baltic states and Sovietization of the Baltic people.

Štromas’ research and publications were focusing on the effects of the Soviet ideology on the person and the society. In his view, depending on their daily political behaviour, people of the occupied Baltic states could be divided into three categories: 1) unconditional conformists (collaborators) who served the Soviet authorities without reservations with simple objectives, i.e., to satisfy their basic needs, ensure personal safety, and rise to the highest ranks in their party and professional career; 2) conservationists (partial conformists) who were perfectly adjusted to the Soviet rule, conscientiously worked on its behalf, or participated in the official life in other ways, but made every effort to preserve the nation’s identity and integrity, historic memory, native language, traditional culture, and monuments; and 3) active “extra-structural” dissidents who simply refused to ad-

just to the Soviet order and found themselves cast outside the Communist control system. The majority of people in the occupied Baltic states were conformists, and their behaviour was determined by the perception that political regimes are subject to change. Štomas believed that the Baltic peoples were ready to progress to free and independent existence on the first favourable occasion. His insights were confirmed by the restoration of independence of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia in the 1990s.

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Klūstot par disidentu: Aleksandra Štoma un Toma Venclovas piemērs

Atslēgas vārdi: disidents, Aleksandrs Štoms (*Aleksandras Štomas*), Toms Venclova (*Tomas Venclova*), disidentisms, padomju sabiedrība, kolaborants, konformists

Kopsavilkums

Rakstā, analizējot disidentu Aleksandra Štoma (1931–1999) un Toma

Venclovas (dz. 1937) darbību, tika atklātas padomju režīma laikā 1960.–1980. gados disidentisma iezīmju izpausmes Lietuvā. Rakstā analizētais materiāls ļauj secināt: 1. Štoma un Venclovas pret padomju režīmu vērsto disidentu darbību galvenie iemesli bija Baltijas valstu okupācija un represijas, deportācijas, nelikumīgie aresti, cilvēktiesību pārkāpumi, PSRS agresīvā politika, apspiežot Ungārijas 1956. gada revolūciju ar militāru spēku. 2. Nelolojot ilūzijas par padomju politisko sistēmu, Štoms un Venclova pamazām iesaistījās disidentu darbībā. Sākumā viņi veidoja neformālos pašizglītības pulciņus, nodibināja sakarus ar krievu disidentiem, publicējās pagrīdes presē, nodibināja un atbalstīja Lietuvas Helsinku grupu. Vēlāk režīma kritika noveda Štomu un Venclovu līdz piespiedu emigrācijai uz Rietumiem, kur viņi aktīvi turpināja intelektuālo cīņu pret Baltijas valstu padomju okupāciju un baltiešu sovietizāciju. 3. Štoma skatījumā okupēto Baltijas valstu iedzīvotājus atkarībā no ikdienas politiskās uzvedības varēja iedalīt trīs grupās: 1) beznosacījuma konformistu (kolaborantu) grupai viņš pieskaitīja tos, kuri bez ierunām kalpoja padomju varai ar diezgan vienkāršiem mērķiem – lai apmierinātu savas pamatvajadzības, nostiprinātu personīgo drošību un savā partijas un profesionālajā karjerā paceltos pēc iespējas augstākos līmeņos; 2) konservatīvie (daļēji konformisti), kuri lieliski pielāgojās padomju varai, apzinīgi strādāja tās labā vai kā citādi piedalījās varas akceptētajā dzīvē, bet pielika visas pūles, lai saglabātu tautas identitāti un integritāti, vēsturisko atmiņu, dzimto valodu, tradicionālo kultūru un pieminēkļus; 3) aktīvie “ārpusstrukturālie” disidenti, kuri vienkārši atteicās pielāgoties padomju iekārtai un atradās ārpus komunistu kontrolētās sistēmas. 4. Okupēto Baltijas valstu sabiedrību lielākā daļa bija konformisti un viņu uzvedību noteica uzskats, ka politiskie režīmi mēdz mainīties. Štoms ticēja, ka baltieši pie pirmā labvēlīgā gadījuma ir gatavi sekmēt brīvību un neatkarību. Viņa atziņas apstiprināja Lietuvas, Latvijas un Igaunijas neatkarības atjaunošana 20. gs. 90. gados.