The Riga Manifesto: Strengthening Society Through Reading

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#Freiraum26

Photo by Kristians Luhaers

The Latvian Book Fair at the National Library of Latvia, 2025. Photo by Kristians Luhaers

Der kürzeste Krimi der Welt über das Buch

Beteiligte Personen

Martin Luther, deutscher Mönch aus Wittenberg
Buchdrucker (wahrscheinlich in Wittenberg)
Johannes Brandes – Lübecker Domherr
Der damalige katholische Stadtrat von Lübeck
Bücherschmuggler, Seekaufleute
Fässer mit versteckten Büchern

An einem kalten, dunklen Tag im Jahr 1525, am 8. November, wurde das erste lettische Buch mit dem „Tod" bestraft – es war dazu verdammt, in den Flammen eines Scheiterhaufen aufzugehen.

Ja, liebe Leserinnen und Leser, das war vor 500 Jahren – als Johannes Brandes, wie immer bevor er zu Bett ging, die Ereignisse des Tages niederschrieb. Der Lübecker Rat muss an diesem berühmt-berüchtigten Tag aufgrund eines Tipps etwas geahnt haben, oder die Kaufleute im Lübecker Hafen verdächtig gelächelt haben, als sie ihre Ladung präsentierten. Aber so hat es sich zugetragen – die versteckten Fässer mit den ersten gedruckten Büchern in lettischer, estnischer und niederdeutcher Sprache wurden entdeckt.

Achtung, Achtung - die Bücher wurden offiziell „beschlagnahmt", schrieb Brandes. Überdies gab es noch eine Gerichtsverhandlung, weil sie für die katholische Kirche bedenkliche Inhalte enthielten - eine Beschreibung des lutherischen Gottesdienstes. Und doch bestand die große Neuerung darin, dass der Text in den Sprachen der livländischen Völker verfasst war!

Das Urteil war klar und eindeutig: **Verbrennen!**
(Allerdings mit dem Vorbehalt, dass ein Exemplar des Buches als Beweismittel in den Archiven verbleiben sollte.)

20 Generationen von Lesern später ist die Geschichte noch nicht zu Ende – ein Exemplar des Buches befindet sich möglicherweise noch irgendwo auf der Welt!

Context of the Riga Manifesto

- ***500 Years of Latvian Books*** programme

- **Research** on the history of reading and contemporary reading habits https://dom.lndb.lv/data/obj/1605108.html
  - *Reading Habits in Latvia*
  - *Leisure-Time Reading Habits*
  - In-depth interviews with 15 young people aged 13–22

- Exhibition ***Is a Library a Birthright?***

Exhibition *Is a Library a Birthright?*, 2025
Photo by Madara Kuplā

“In an information-rich world, the wealth of information means a dearth of something else: a scarcity of whatever it is that information consumes. What information consumes is rather obvious: it consumes the attention of its recipients. Hence a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention and a need to allocate that attention efficiently among the overabundance of information sources that might consume it.” (Herbert A. Simon)

“Today we live in the age of technological acceleration. Centuries passed before books became a widely accessible technology. Newspapers, radio, and television reached mass audiences in decades. The internet achieved this in less than ten years, and artificial intelligence reached millions of users in just a few months. Digital technologies offer both opportunities and risks in daily life, notably the swift transformation of reading habits within our society.” (Riga Manifesto)

The National Library of Latvia as the initiator of the Riga Manifesto – uniting a broad, interdisciplinary group of stakeholders.

The working group included representatives from:

- Publishers
- The printing industry
- Libraries
- Educators
- Plain language specialists
- Latvian diaspora
- Business community
- Reading families
- Ministry of Culture
- Ministry of Education and Science
- The National Artificial Intelligence Centre
- UNESCO Latvian National Commission

Symposium ***The Right to Read: The Riga Manifesto*****, 24.10.2025.** Photo by Kristians Luhaers

The civic participation platform *ManaBalss.lv* (*MyVoice*)

- Over 800 verified signatures
- Secure authentication via the most widely used Latvian online banks
- Pathway to submitting the Manifesto to the Parliament of the Republic of Latvia

Riga Manifesto

Will Latvia’s future be in the hands of a society that reads and thinks critically?

Riga Manifesto
– A *national* manifesto.
– Emphasises **reading as the foundation of language, democracy and societal resilience**.
– Highlights the **right to read in Latvian** as a cultural and security imperative.

Riga Manifesto: Key Messages (1)

- **Language and Identity**
  Reading in Latvian as the foundation of identity, culture, and long-term sustainability.
- **Accessibility and Inclusion**
  Equal rights to reading for everyone. Libraries and public spaces as anchors of visible and accessible reading culture.
- **Higher-Level Reading and Critical Thinking**
  Deep reading skills as the basis for reflection, empathy, and navigating an information-saturated world.

Riga Manifesto: Key Messages (2)

- **Reading and Security**
  Reading literacy as a pillar of national security and democratic resilience; reduced reading increases vulnerability to manipulation.
- **Reading as the Basis of Capability and Development**
  Reading drives a knowledge society, creativity, innovation, education, culture, and a people-centred digital future.

Three levels

- [Personal] Responsibility for shaping reading habits and promoting book culture.
- [Public sector] Encouragement for state and non-governmental organisations to act — and in discussions, resolutions, and development planning documents for every sector — to uphold and strengthen the right of everyone in Latvia to read and have access to books, and to boost the number of people reading fluently and proficiently in Latvian.
- [Private sector] Call on businesses and institutions to demonstrate support for reading culture by creating small libraries or reading spaces and supporting reading during work breaks.

Discussion questions

- How can reading be part of everyday life outside the library environment? Are there any examples of good practices you observe in daily life?
- Do you think something like the Riga Reading Manifesto could be applicable in Germany?
  Will it be needed in the future?
  What should the focus of a German manifesto be then?
- How do you envision libraries in 5 years or in 500 years?

Input from the audience

For a German manifesto: Judgement not allowed! / Enjoying reading!

- Reading is a goal and a gift and there shouldn’t be judgement for reading choices or judgement for non-readers.

About the concerning numbers of illiteracy:

- There is a reading program for schools in Hamburg, were in every class time is set aside for reading https://www.hamburg.de/politik-und-verwaltung/behoerden/bsfb/veroeffentlichungen/pressemeldungen/2023-09-04-bsb-erfolgreiches-lesetraining-wird-ausgeweitet-522598

Last comment: In the National Library of Latvia the Riga Manifesto is applied as well: Before the meeting start there is a small time set aside for reading (15 minutes) and the effects are noticeable! Meetings aren’t seen as so stressful then before.

- German example - reading program “Lesestart”. More information: https://www.lesestart.de/en/