

THE FIRST LATVIAN NATIONAL ROAD NETWORK (1918 – 1938)

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INTRODUCTION

The 20th century is particularly significant in Latvian history, because during this period unquestionable progress was made in the development of society, major transformations took place in various fields and the political and economic conditions of the Latvian nation changed several times. Initially it was a fight for survival, intertwined with an effort to preserve the Latvian nation as a community, as well as its culture. The three most significant dates of the 20th century for Latvia were 1918, 1940 and 1991, marking the creation, destruction and renewal of an independent state.

The period from 1918 – 1940 was the period of Latvia's initial independence and was a sharp turning point in Latvia's historical development, which had previously taken place under the rule of foreign powers. During these 20 years the Latvian people, who had previously been subdued and enslaved, were able to achieve excellent results in the prosperity of their country – through the development of agriculture and industry, as well as the promotion of culture and education.

With the development of the economy and increase in trade the number of motor cars also increased, resulting in an urgent need for the re-organisation of road traffic and improvement in the road infrastructure, because the existing one had aged and no longer responded to the growing requirements of society. The work that Latvians invested in the consolidation of their nation and the organisation of their road network will be looked at in more detail in this lecture. This theme will be explored within the context of the historical situation that had developed in Latvia at the time.

1. HISTORICALLY DEVELOPED ROAD NETWORK IN LATVIA BEFORE 1918

1.1. Beginning of traffic development in Latvia

Although Latvia's gravel roads were already mentioned in 13th century literature and at the time already served as a means of communication for trade [11], the actual date for the beginning of a regular public communications system on Latvian territory can be considered as 1632, when a postal exchange was established between Riga and Klaipeda, for government and private use. The peasants were also obliged to keep the roads in good condition as part of their road duty. [6]

During the time of Swedish rule (17th century) a relatively dense road network had already been established, which is why in 1646 a special law was passed concerning the maintenance of roads. This law was the first of its type in Latvia and it stipulated that military routes and major roads had to be maintained by the landlords, in proportion with the size of their estate. In 1671 an instruction was added to the law. The instruction established the main

body of supervision in the field of road maintenance –“cobblestone courts” in each district. It also established the profession of certified surveyor, contained detailed regulations concerning the width of roads, construction of bridges, establishment of crossings, road strengthening with gravel and grading of gravel, cutting of bushes and trees on the roadsides, mounting of road posts, etc. Clearly, in the 17th century there were already strict regulations concerning the maintenance of roads, which ensured satisfactory traffic conditions for the requirements of the time. These regulations remained unchanged and in force for more than 200 years and remnants can still be found in Latvia’s current road maintenance system. [6]

1.2 Latvia’s status in the road policy of Tzar’s Russia

In the beginning of the 20th century Latvia still remained as a part of the Russian empire. The Russian Empire in the mid 19th century constructed its strategic roads from St. Petersburg to Warsaw through the Latvian towns of Rēzekne and Daugavpils. [1] For the next 100 years, communications in Russia began to develop more, Latvia as a part of Russia benefited from the various new forms of transport for public and economic purposes. The benefits were not negligible, but they only appeared in Latvia in so far as Russian transport policies were interested in Latvia as a transit territory with access to ports or for military operations. Up to the beginning of the 20th century the major railway lines that were constructed from Russia to Latvia’s ports – Rīga, Liepāja and Ventspils, provided a powerful impetus for the development of trade, industry and transit activity for these towns, but were completely dependent on Russian economic policies. [6]

Russia’s traffic policies could not be expected to play a significant role in Latvia’s specific interests. The Russian government had, with great difficulty, managed to set up the most urgently needed traffic network on its vast territory, but even up to the 1st World War lagging far behind the requirements that in other European countries had long since been implemented, was not able to focus on the specific needs of the regions. Nor could the government be expected to do more for its provinces that differed in nationality, religion and culture, as was the case with Latvia, than in Russia itself, where communications were still only beginning to develop. As a result, the roads and railway lines established on Latvian territory up to 1918 only partially satisfied its needs. [15]

1.3 Latvian road network situation in 1918

A road network linking the main economic centres did not exist and this role was carried out instead by the gravel roads repaired by the peasants themselves. The total length of these roads (highways and cobbled roads) was only about 700 km (of a total of ~ 20 000 km), which is equivalent to 1,23 km for every 100 km² of land, while in England and France, for example, there were more than 100 km for every 100 km² of territory.

The rail network was also deficient and unprofitable for agriculture. In many areas the distance to the nearest railway station was so great (50 – 60 km and more) that it was no longer possible for farmers to profit from rail traffic as a more convenient way of transporting their products to the markets. Most of the railway lines were built purely with Russia’s transit or military interests in mind, ignoring the economic needs of Latvia and were not capable of carrying out their most important task – as an aid to economic development, which requires a cheap and convenient communications system. [6]

During the period of Tsarist Russia the roads on Latvian territory were maintained by various institutions. The principal highways leading through Latvian territory were maintained by the Russian Transport Ministry, using public funds. The more recently built supply roads, paved roads and bridges in Vidzeme were maintained by the local land council and in Kurzeme, by a special provincial council committee using local resources. The remaining gravel roads on Latvian territory were maintained by rural real estate owners. In addition to this the peasants supplied the gravel, built smaller-sized bridges and carried out road maintenance work, while the estate owners provided the necessary materials for bridge construction and employed a construction manager. [13] The Latvian road network in 1918 is shown in Figure 1 [11].

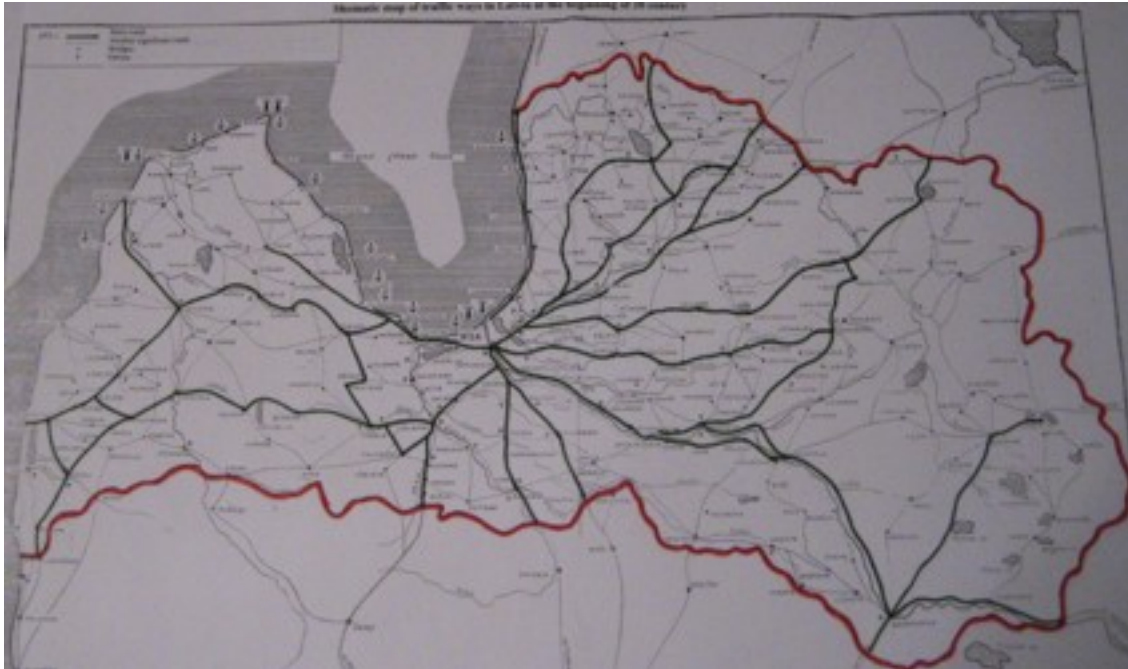


Figure 1. State road network in Latvia in 1918

2. POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC CONDITIONS IN LATVIA THAT DETERMINED THE NECESSITY TO CONSTRUCT NEW ROADS

2.1 Changes in rural areas

With the freedom that came with the abolishment of serfdom in 1817 – 1861 peasants had the opportunity to buy land from the landowners and become fully fledged landowners themselves. Agriculture developed very rapidly, a fact that was influenced by the geographical position of Latvia and its close ties with Western European countries. However, the development of agriculture continued to grow on two different socio-economic levels – the noble landowners and the peasants. A number of peasants went to live in the towns, where workers were needed in the newly created factories, others became railroad and road constructors, however, Latvia still remained agricultural country [15]. Most of the taxes collected by the state for use of the land came from the peasant classes and the latter were

also the main group subjected to road duty – the local roads were repaired mostly by them. [7]

2.2 Industrial development

In the 2nd half of the 19th century major changes occurred in industrial development. The industrial revolution, taking place at the time in many countries all over the world, affected the lives of Latvia's inhabitants. Large-scale industry rapidly developed in Latvian towns. Riga developed as the largest industrial city not just of Latvia but the entire Baltic region. [7] In 1861 the first railroad line (Riga – Daugavpils) [14] was opened and in 1896 the first automobile – a vehicle run with a petroleum-fuelled motor – in Latvia was bought from the French manufacturers “Panhard-Levassor” [9]. In Latvia's other major towns such as Liepāja, Jelgava and Ventspils, where metalwork and machinery construction were the most rapidly developing fields, production was also concentrated within large-scale enterprises. The most popular form of industrial enterprise was the joint-stock company with foreign capital investment. [7]

The importance of the Latvian ports – Rīga, Liepāja and Ventspils – on the scale of the entire Russian Empire, increased significantly when railroad construction on Latvian territory expanded. A significant part of Russian goods – grain, butter, flax and timber products, were exported through Latvian ports and items such as machinery, metals, coal and fish imported. [7] In terms of product turnover Riga was the largest port of Tsarist Russia. Riga's position as a transit town and gateway for the very active West – East economic trade route, an intelligent workforce and the dominant position of the Baltic Germans in provincial administration were all factors that played a significant role in the development of industry in Latvia. [14]

2.3. Socio-political changes

Liberated peasants required diverse forms of knowledge to help them work and run the land independently. The wealth of the peasant classes increased and they gained the possibility to educate their children in good schools. [7].

A new, educated Latvian intelligentsia emerged on the Latvian socio-political scene, who expressed national views in their own newspaper and at meetings. A widespread national movement was launched, known as the period of re-awakening. The members of the movement awakened Latvian national consciousness and promoted the development of national political organisation. Its objectives steered the development of Latvian history in the direction of democracy. [2]

2.4. Establishment of an independent Latvian nation

Significant impetus was provided to the national and political efforts of the Latvian nation by the Russian revolution of February 1917, following which several new Latvian political parties were established [3].

The military failures of the Russian army during World War I dashed any hopes of victory and consolidated the opinion amongst Latvians that internal collapse was imminent for the country as opposed to prosperity. [15]

In 1918 the war wasn't yet over in Latvia, however, it contributed to the proclamation of an independent and democratic state on November 18, 1918, when for the first time in its history the Latvian people had their own state. [7]

3. PROBLEMS AND RESULTS OF TRAFFIC POLICY OF THE NEW LATVIAN STATE

3.1. Establishment of Road Department and adoption of laws

With the establishment of Latvia as an independent state a new phase began in the field of national communications. The policies and economic and social structures of the new state meant the advancement of new challenges and obligations, which differed greatly to the ones the country had lived under previously. Necessity arose to transform and expand the existing road network, as well as, to create new basis for road use and maintenance [6]

The establishment of the Republic of Latvia created an urgent need for the laws on and institutions responsible for the supervision and organisation of road issues. Initially procedures were defined according to which all gravel roads had to be repaired by land owners as a form of road duty. The supervision of the repair and maintenance work was the responsibility of the municipal department of the Interior Ministry. The financing of repairs of all roads with an artificially fortified covering, highways and cobbled routes, bridges situated on them, as well as larger bridges and roads to be repaired as part of road duty, was taken over by the state. [10] On August 1st, 1919, the Highway and Gravel Road Council was established, whose task was to implement and supervise the work, and can be considered as the beginning of the unified Latvian road service. At the time, the council had 703 km of highways and cobbled roads under its supervision. [1]

Major changes were introduced to the area of road repair and supervision by the 1925 'Law on gravel roads', following which responsibility for all categories of roads was taken over by the Highway and Gravel Road Department. [10] The Law divided roads administratively and technically into 4 categories:

Category 1 – roads built and maintained by the state;

Category 2 – roads repaired by peasants as part of road duty, but with the involvement of the state;

Category 3 – roads used and repaired as part of road duty by several households or, which joined two higher category roads;

Category 4 – roads leading to dwellings and repaired by the owners.

The Law stipulated that every year a certain number of roads were to be added to the 1st category and taken over by the state. [1]

3.2. Creation of transport system in the country

3.2.1. *Improvement of transport roads*

After the end of military activity and the signing of the Latvian – Russian Peace Treaty, the necessary work in transport field could begin. To begin with the damage created by the war had to be repaired, as practically all communications had been more or less paralysed. The many roads that for five years had been used for military operations and, with the

advancement of front-lines deliberately destroyed, were in a state of collapse. Technical equipment, buildings and means of transport had been destroyed or removed. The renewal of the transport system required a great deal of time, work and money, which meant that five years passed before regular transport facilities were once again established. [16]

Latvia was an agrarian land, which meant that the weight of its economy rested on the rural areas. This fact was reinforced by the introduction of the agrarian reform in 1920, as a result of which the size of farmable arable land increased from 1,730 million hectares before the 1st World War to 2,113 million hectares in 1936. At the time almost 70 000 new farmsteads were established. [6]

In order to avoid the migration of rural inhabitants to the towns, the government's policies had to use whatever means it could to improve the standard of living in rural areas and make sure that the progress of culture was the same in the countryside as in the towns. This is why in Latvia's traffic policies priority was given to the interests and needs of rural households and to try and provide the entire country with a dense enough communications network to satisfy the transport needs and communication exchange of the inhabitants, as well as the transportation of rural products to the markets. The increase in agricultural productivity and success in the development of animal farming was to a large extent dependent on the efficiency and costs of the transport system. [16]

In accordance with the 1925 Law, peasants still fulfilled their obligations concerning the roads in the form of road duty, but they had the right to pay off this 'debt' with a sum of money determined by the regional council. This system was in fact the beginning of a gradual transition from physical duty to a tax system. [6] From 1925 to 1938 the length of roads to be maintained through road duty varied in the different parts of Latvia – 1.35 – 14.46 m for property worth 100 LVL. The main tasks involved were roadside ditch cleaning and gravel removal or transportation. Aware of the heavy burden placed on the people having to carry out road duty, in 1928 the Highway and Gravel Road department began a 2-year programme during which it took over the responsibility of 5000 of these roads – and every following year no less than 500 km a year. [1]

Statistical data regarding the development of the road network in Latvia from 1918 – 1938 can be seen in diagram No 1. The figures given indicate the expansion of the highway network, to what extent state involvement in road maintenance increased and how the road network needing regular repair has grown in Latvia. As you may see the total length of road network in 20 years increased by 55%, but the length of 1st class roads – by 150%.

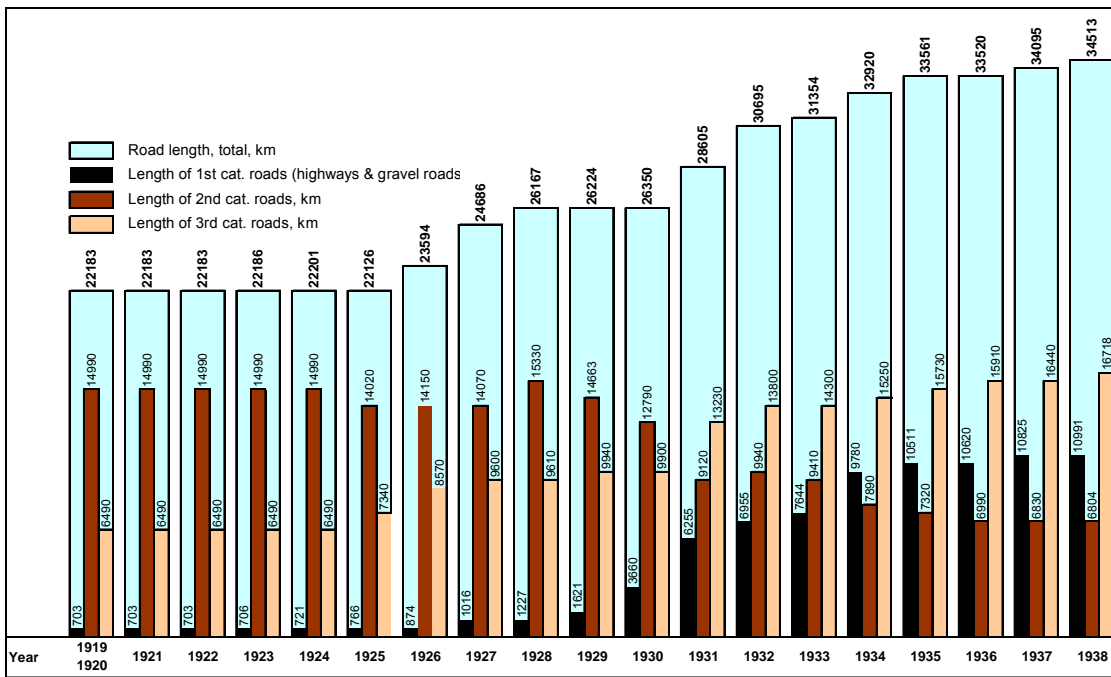


Diagram No. 1. Road network development in Latvia in 1920 - 1938

Figure 2 shows the Latvian road network in 1938. [16]



Figure 2. State road network in Latvia in 1938

Every year two principal tasks concerning the field of road traffic figured in government policies – the securing of durable road coverings for existing major roads and the gradual establishment of a highway network. [6]

Together with the improvement of roads, the situation of bridges also improved from year to year. During the first years of independence mainly wooden bridges, small bridges and even culverts were built, but in later years concrete and reinforced concrete were used more and more often. [10]

In 1928, in order to provide a solid financial base for the many tasks to be implemented in the field of road traffic, the Road Foundation was created, into which income from a specific tax on alcoholic beverages was paid, as well as taxes collected for the registration of mechanical means of communication and various other taxes related to road use. However, the Road Foundation could only cover a very small amount of its total expenditures from the aforementioned taxes and until it acquired other sources of income from, for example, customs and excise duties on motor cars, petrol, oil, etc, government expenditures for road requirements continued to be a dominant factor in the balancing of the budget. [6] The resources spent by the government on road construction and maintenance can be seen in diagram 2. [16]

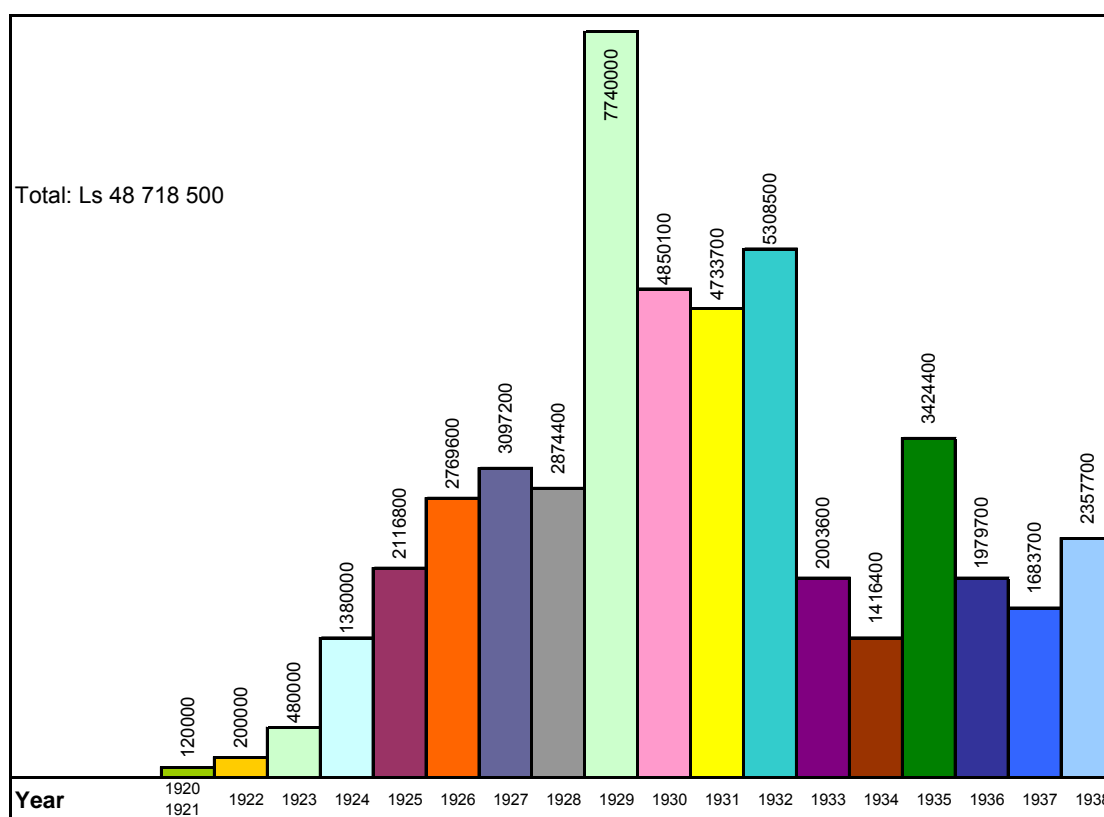


Diagram No. 2. Expenditures for road construction and maintenance (1920 – 1938)

A conclusion may be made that the state expenditures for road construction and maintenance increased every year with the peak in 1929. After the economic crisis in 1932 - 1934 expenditures for roads started to increase again.

3.2.2. Increase of motorised traffic and its impact on road condition

Motorised traffic in Latvia used mostly gravel roads. Road re-enforcement and maintenance to a level appropriate for traffic was a particularly important task, because prior to this these roads had mainly been used for horse and cart transport, which did not, of course, put the same amount of pressure on the roads as mechanical forms of transport. The gravel roads were carefully levelled and smoothed out by machines but their durability was limited, particularly during the more humid times of year. These roads satisfied the needs of everyday rural traffic, but in the areas where weight and intensity of movement exceeded the defined norm, they quickly deteriorated and the movement of traffic on them was inconvenienced. With the development of the general economy in Latvia, the intensity of traffic increased constantly. [6] The volume of means of transport increased, as did that of transportable goods, which in some places exceeded 2000 t per 24 hrs. Latvia's gravel roads were not capable of bearing this type of load and had to be replaced with asphalt or cement covering, which put a considerable burden on the budget of the recently formed state. [10] Initially, the work was carried out around and between the most populated areas and towns, where the intensity of movement was the greatest. [6] In 1925 Latvia started building the first roads with a tarmac covering. [16] The length of the highway network (including cobbled and concrete roads) during the initial period of Latvia's independence grew from 700 to 1700 km, but this was just a proportion of what was actually needed, because the number of motorised vehicles was constantly on the increase and the demand for them was very high, in towns as well as in the rural areas. [6]

In 1921 the first Law applying to motor car traffic was passed, entitled 'Instruction concerning travel by motor car on state territory'. [8]

The increase in numbers of motorised vehicles is indicated in diagram No 3 [16]

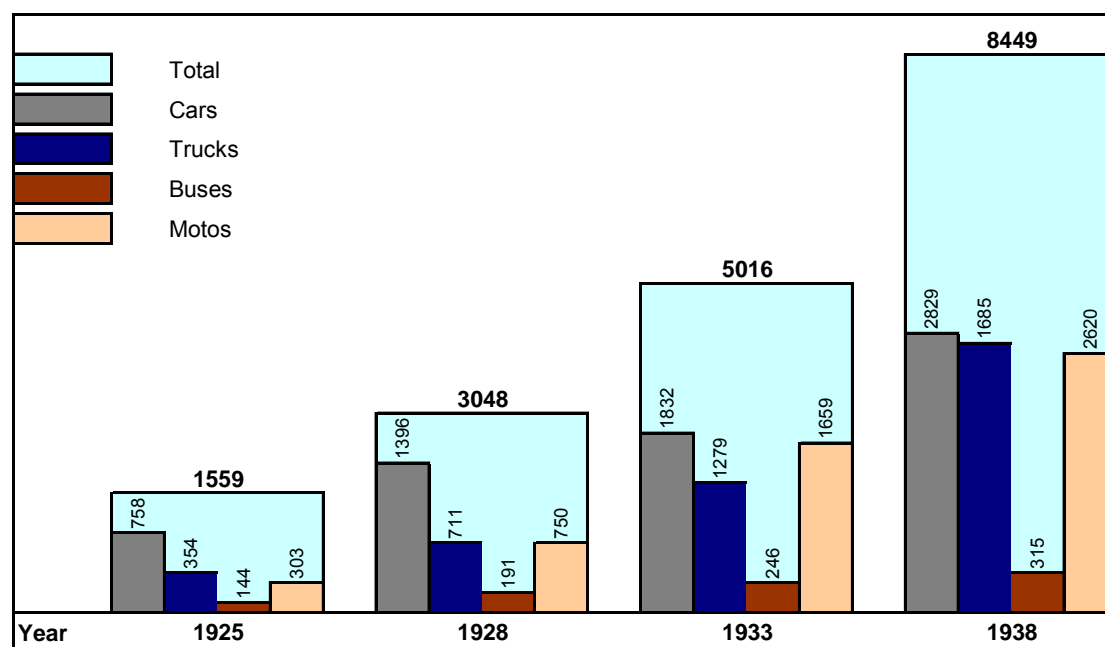


Diagram No. 3. Number of road motor vehicles in Latvia (1925 – 1938)

3.2.3 *Development of railway traffic*

Alongside the re-structuring of roads within Latvia's borders, certain tasks needed to be carried out because of the country's geographical position and its relationship with other countries. Latvia's position on the Baltic Sea and the advantages of its ports meant that several major railway lines were built from Russia to these ports. This traffic already began working on April 1st, 1921. Existing railway lines also ensured safe traffic links with Latvia's other neighbours – Estonia, Poland and Lithuania – and all other European countries beyond them, and Latvia had signed a whole number of agreements for their maintenance. [6]

Before the 1st World War, in 1914, Latvia had 1941 km of railway lines, to which 211 km of lines used for military purposes were added during the war years. As a result, when the independence of Latvia was proclaimed in 1918, the total length of the national rail network was 2152 km. With the expansion that took place due to demand this figure eventually increased to 2807 km in 1938. [10]

The new lines played an important role in the improvement of the local economy. Government tariff policies took into account the interests of the more remote regions, as well as agricultural and industrial requirements. For transportation to the more remote areas a considerable reduction in price was anticipated.

The volume of transportation by rail is reflected in diagram No 4 [6].

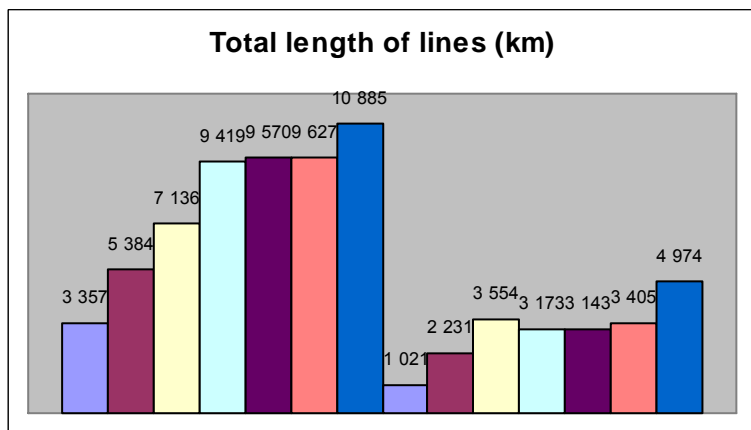
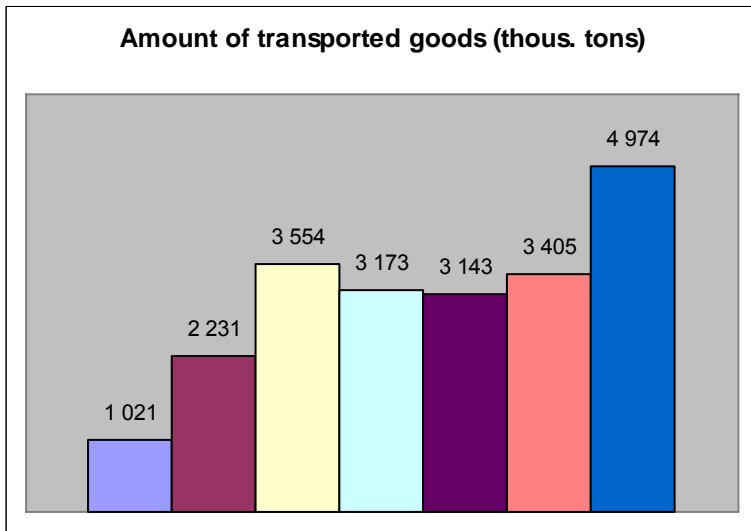
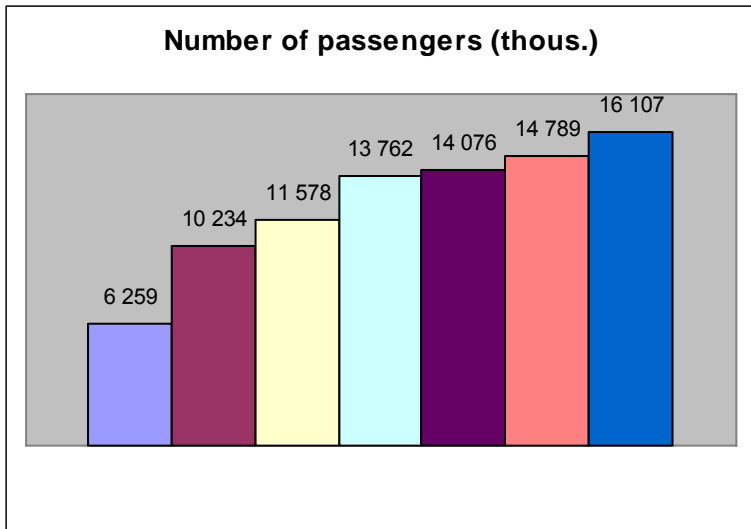


Diagram No. 4. Railway development (1920-1938)

This data indicates a considerable increase of goods and passenger transportation, which can be explained by two principal factors that also influence one another – the development of the economy and the social activities of the inhabitants and the gradual development of rail traffic in accordance with these needs. [16]

The development of the railway system and the expansion of the postal service were also influenced by the development of motor car and bus traffic on Latvian territory. [6]

3.2.4 Creation of bus traffic

The first rural bus lines were established around 1923 and despite its many deficiencies the service rapidly became very popular with passengers. The development of this rural bus traffic can be seen in diagram No. 5. [16]

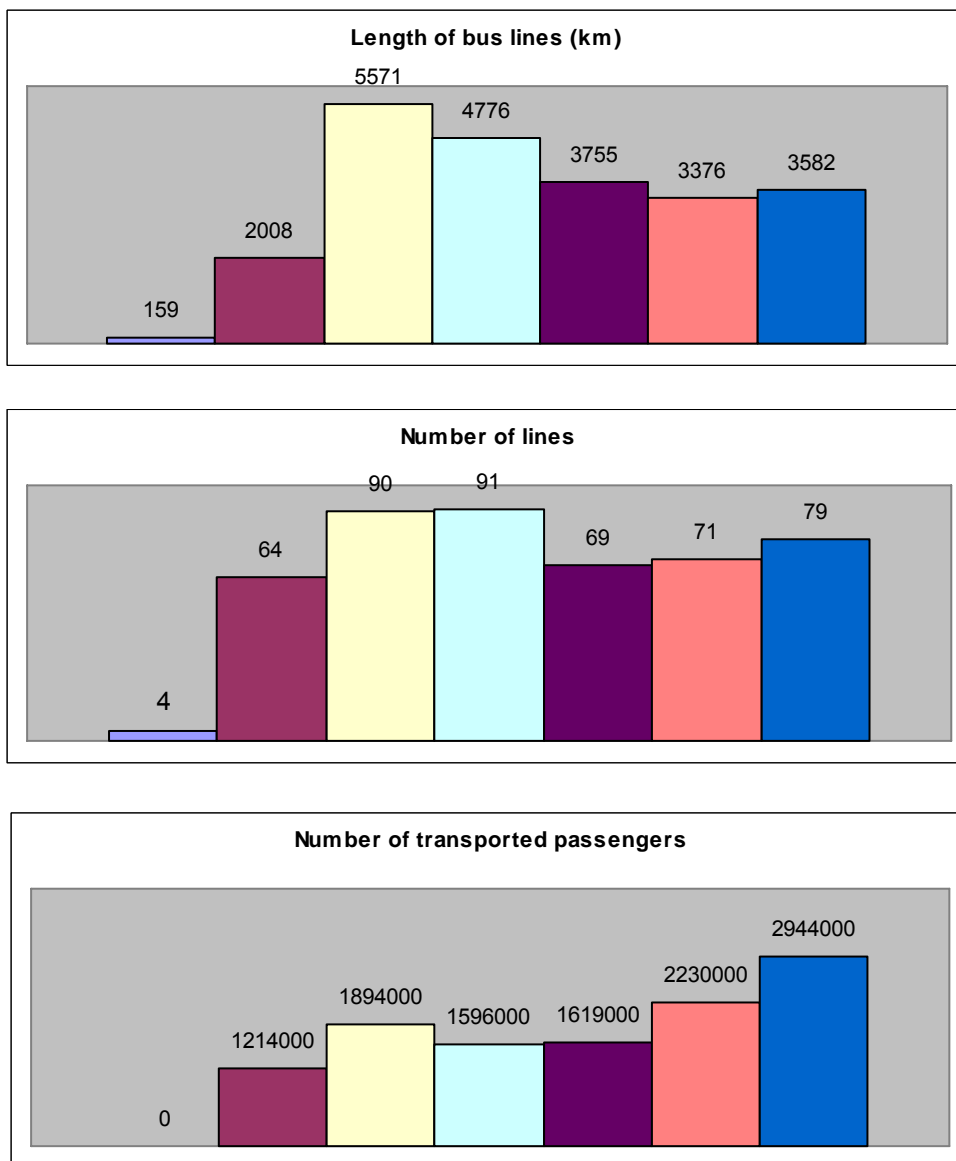


Diagram No.5. Development of rural bus transportation (1923-1938)

The decrease in the number of bus lines in 1932 can be explained both by the economic crisis of the time and the abolishment of the lines running parallel to the railway lines. [8]

Thanks to the construction of new roads and improvement of existing ones, it was also possible to establish bus lines in the regions that were relatively far from the railways and major traffic highways, thus improving the standard of living of the people living further away from the larger towns.

CONCLUSION

In the period of Latvian independent state (1918- 1938) significant achievements were made in the development of state transport system. The country recovered after the World War I comparatively quickly and successfully and different social and economic sectors flourished. In the 30-ties of the 20th century the growth in agriculture and export was significant and it greatly contributed to the development of road transport system. New transport policy of the Republic of Latvia and development of traffic infrastructure in turn contributed to further development of national economy and this allowed Latvia to become a part of Europe and meet the standards of other European countries.

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