

Finnish-Estonian History Dialogue

Report

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Historians
without Borders



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Abstract

On October 4th and 5th 2023, Historians without Borders (HWB) in Finland organised a History Dialogue meeting between five Finnish and five Estonian historians at the University of Tallinn in Estonia. The purpose of the meeting was to identify and discuss differences and similarities in the interpretation of history between the two neighbouring countries. The dialogue mainly focused on 20th-century history and explored new perspectives to look at the shared and differing histories of the two nations as well as developments in historiography.

The four dialogue sessions led by a moderator followed pre-agreed topics, which were: research cooperation between Estonia and Finland, the state of historical research and historians in Estonian and Finnish societies, tendencies in the management of the past in both countries, historiography and cross-border perspectives on history, and possible future cooperation. These topics were identified in a remote meeting beforehand.

The History Dialogue was cordial and fruitful according to the participants. Between Finnish and Estonian historians, this method proved to be an effective tool for exploring fresh perspectives and new research topics. It was helpful to discuss important national topics in detail and cover all nuances: for Finnish historians, for example, the Civil War and Finlandization, and for Estonian historians, collaboration, the Second World War and Soviet monuments.

Through the implementation of this method, participating historians felt they had a unique opportunity to concentrate on listening, learning, and generating new ideas together, as opposed to the typical academic seminar format which emphasises presentations. The absence of conflict and the close relationship between Finland and Estonia fostered a confidential atmosphere, leading to more profound academic and methodological discussions on history itself. The History Dialogue was an excellent example of how crucial it is to understand both our own and shared history. This approach can enhance our understanding of ourselves and others, creating common ground that helps to prevent the misuse of history and conflicts.

Since the first dialogue meeting included only four sessions with broad topics, the discussion could not be in-depth. Participants strongly supported continuing the dialogue and involving more historians to deepen our understanding of history, its methodology, and politics.

What is a History Dialogue?

A History Dialogue is a conversation with the aim of opening new perspectives on the past and to help look at history from differing points of view. The purpose is to increase the participants' knowledge and understanding of the themes of the dialogue. The History Dialogue method can be applied to various contexts: for transnational discussions, for discussions among or between different demographic groups within societies or for academics or for citizens. It can be used as a tool to mediate conflicts as well as for educational purposes to raise awareness of the multitudes of perspectives concerning the past.

The purpose of the History Dialogue is not to create confrontation or a juxtaposition between the participants or to bring participants with different viewpoints around a table to argue. The aim is to bring together a diverse group which, in addition to presenting their own viewpoints, is willing to listen and seeks to understand other participants' opinions. The content and aims of the History Dialogue often become refined as the dialogue develops and proceeds. Outcomes of the process can later be used in developing possible reconciliation processes, if needed, while during the dialogue, the group might recognise areas where further academic research would be needed.

Background to the project and the course of the dialogue meeting

Historians without Borders (HWB) in Finland organised a Finnish-Estonian History Dialogue for the first time in autumn 2023. The purpose of the dialogue was to bring together Finnish and Estonian historians to discuss similar and different understandings of the history of Finland and Estonia, as well as the interpretation of historical research. The project aimed to examine recent history from various perspectives that both unite and divide the two countries. The Finnish-Estonian Culture Foundation provided a grant of €10,000 for the implementation of the project. The dialogue meeting was held at Tallinn University from October 4th to October 5th 2023.

Prior to the face-to-face meeting, the participants took part in a remote discussion to outline their preferences regarding the course of the dialogue and the topics to be covered. The participants were professional historians or academics working with history-related topics (later: participants or historians) who all shared a mutual interest in the history of Estonia and Finland.

The meeting in Tallinn was attended by five historians from Finland and five historians from Estonia, along with the moderator Professor Karsten Brüggemann from the University of Tallinn, Chairman of the Board of HWB, Erkki Tuomioja, the Secretary general of HWB, Heta Hedman, the writer of this report, Reetta Kallanne, and, as observers, the Head of Strategy and Development Department Beata Dzazga from European Network Remembrance and Solidarity (ENRS) and, on the first day, the Finnish Ambassador to Estonia, Vesa Vasara. The meeting followed Chatham House Rules¹ to encourage open dialogue. For this reason, remarks by participants are not personified in this report.

The session titles and topics to be covered provided a starting point for discussion, but the moderator allowed the conversation to move on to the most relevant themes. During the Dialogue, Finnish and Estonian historians identified several research themes, perspectives, and topics that they considered important for the common history of their countries. During the discussion, the participants covered not only thematic perspectives but also historiographical themes. Participants also discussed topics that they felt should be explored further.

The meeting began with a short introduction to the Historians without Borders initiative and the History Dialogue Method. Each participant then introduced themselves and briefly talked about their research. Under the moderator's guidance, the group discussed Finnish and Estonian history, research cooperation and a cross-border perspective on history. In the evening, the Finnish Ambassador to Estonia, Vesa Vasara, hosted a reception for the participants at the Finnish Embassy.

On the second day, there were three sessions dedicated to discussion. The first session was centred on the role of historians in society, including how to present research findings to the public and the specific challenges of conducting historical research in linguistically small countries. The second session focused on the difficult history in the societies, Soviet memorials and remembrance, the use of history, and collaboration, as well as new approaches to historiography. Finally, in the third session, the participants talked about the similarities and differences between countries from the perspective of historical research and discussed future forms of cooperation.

1 Chatham House Rules: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/about-us/chatham-house-rule>

The current state of Finnish-Estonian research cooperation

At the beginning of the discussion, regarding historical research between Finland and Estonia, the main goal was to identify the already existing cooperation. The participants found that cooperation between Finnish and Estonian historians primarily operates on a personal level rather than through formal networks. Personal relationships were deemed highly important and the need for formal cooperation structures was not always seen as necessary. The historians noted that contact through channels such as email is now easily accessible.

While informal contact between the two small neighbouring countries can be useful, the historians agreed that formal agreements such as the Erasmus cooperation are also crucial. For instance, an Erasmus agreement between the universities of Helsinki and Tartu could be beneficial in the future.² European networks may not always be the best fit for learning for neighbouring countries because there may already be teachers and researchers working on similar topics on both countries.

Finnish historians noted that formal research cooperation between Finland and Estonia is low, in contrast to, for example, the existing Nordic research networks. Formal networks can promote cooperation by offering funding opportunities for research. In Finland, funding from the Nordic context is important, while in Estonia, European funding is more significant. Institutionalized funding is more stable and ensures continuous research.

When discussing the current state of Finnish-Estonian research cooperation, the issue of how language affects cooperation came up. A good example of this is the meeting being conducted in English instead of the language of the participants. Only a few Finns publish in the leading Estonian historical journal “*Ajalooline ajakiri*” or Estonians in the Finnish “*Historiallinen Aikakauskirja*”. As one participant noted, holding this kind of meeting in Estonian and Finnish would be “a utopic hope”.

As Estonian historians mentioned, for the older generation of historians, the link from Estonia to Finland was often first established through language, based on language skills learned from Finnish television. In contrast, Finnish researchers interested in Estonia have all discovered Estonia through different paths. In addition, there is an increasing number of students in Finland with Estonian or transnational backgrounds.

History is heavily influenced by language and culture. English is the dominant language in academic publications, making it difficult for researchers to publish their work in an additional language. This leads to very few people researching the history of other countries and publishing in other languages. Seppo Zetterberg, a Finn, was mentioned to be an exception to this trend. There are very few researchers in Estonia who conduct research on the history of other countries. According to Estonian historians, this is also because Estonia is a smaller country than Finland with fewer historians and fewer published books on its history.

However, the focus on the history of one's own country is not only a feature of research between Finland and Estonia. Finns do not write about Swedish history nor do Estonians write about Latvian history. A good example of the latter is the way in which, for example, research on the historical area of Livonia, which crosses modern borders, tends to focus on the researcher's country of origin.

However, between Finland and Estonia, research on each other's history is still more common, on both sides, than research on any other neighbouring countries. Historical research

2 At present, there exists an Erasmus agreement solely between the universities of Helsinki and Tallinn.

on Estonia is carried out in Finland, especially at the Master's level but is less popular at the doctoral level. Among Finnish historians, there is currently a new wave of research interest in Estonian history.

The participants agreed that an interesting phenomenon has been the emergence of research that considers the history of both countries. When analysing historical events, historians 'take a step back' and look at them from a broader perspective. For instance, Henrik Meinander's book 1944 discusses what was happening in Estonia during the same period. Heino Arumäe, an Estonian author, also takes a transnational approach in his book *Eesti ja Soome sõjast sõjani* which won the Estonian History Book of the Year Award in 2018.

Managing the past

The role of history and historians in society

There was a consensus among the participants that historians are active agents in both societies. Estonia has a strong tradition of historians holding important positions in politics before and after independence. Some participants believed that historians should not use their expertise to express their political views, while others welcomed the expertise of historians into the field of politics. It is crucial for historians to acknowledge the limitations of historical knowledge and understand that history cannot provide direct answers to questions about the past or predict the future for politicians.

The participants agreed that historians are responsible for establishing factual accounts of past events. However, these facts are often vulnerable to being manipulated and used to construct false narratives. For instance, Russian President Vladimir Putin employs factual accounts to create the Russian narrative. Historians in Finland and Estonia are leading the way in fighting against the misuse of history in our societies. The role of a historian in society is more significant than merely uncovering facts; it includes upholding professionalism and the ethical use of historical knowledge.

Non-government organizations (NGOs) were considered by the participants to be a crucial platform for exerting influence in both countries. It was mentioned how they are frequently invited to showcase their research findings at various organizational events. NGOs rely on historians to develop their identity and provide a historical background to their work and values. An illustration of this can be seen in the current demand for queer history among civil society organizations.

The participating historians agreed that, in addition to conducting research and working in organizations, it is important to popularise research. This can be achieved by using platforms such as Wikipedia. Unfortunately, media attention is often focused on a small number of scholars and research topics, such as military history, which is popular in Finland. As a result, some scholars may receive more visibility than others, leading to a skewed perception of the field.

Historical research also attracts a large audience through newspapers, TV, and books. Examples of history-focused media include the weekend editions of Estonian Postimees, where up to 25% of content covers history, and YLE's popular history documentary series. One participant brought up that it was typical in the 1980s and 1990s for journalists in Finland to be historians by background. This ensured easier access to the media space, but today the competition for research visibility is fiercer. During the discussion, it was agreed that visibility in media is also important as it leads to more funding.

The social and academic debate was agreed to be relatively richer in Estonia than in Finland. In the Soviet Union and occupation era, cultural debate was allowed and funded. In Estonia, for example, the debate is conducted in the newspapers like Sirp, Vikerkaar, Edasi, Määrileht and Värsked rõhk. Finnish historians pointed out that the Finnish magazines Kana and Suomen Kuvalehti are not quite comparable to their Estonian counterparts.

During the discussion, the local language was seen as a very important factor when communicating to the general public. The academic scoring system encourages publication in English, but in Finland, for example, especially the older generation of researchers also publishes books in Finnish. Academic publications in Finnish have not had a problem receiving articles in Finnish and in historical research, Finnish publications remain relatively high compared to, for example, social sciences.

The interest of the general public is often a surprisingly strong driver of the kind of history that is presented to the public. Interest in curiosities, local history, i.e., history that builds people's identity, is high, while transnational history is more difficult to perceive. This may, to some extent, lead to simplified views. During the discussion, the historians agreed that they play a crucial role in explaining what historical knowledge can and cannot reveal, as well as the appropriate context for presenting research findings.

Dealing with a challenging past

In both countries, the past has been dealt with by state-led projects. In Finland, there is currently a state-funded project on the fates of Finns in Russia between 1917 and 1964 and research on the events of the Civil War began as early as the 1960s. In addition to academic research, culture and literature also played a crucial role. For instance, the writer Väinö Linna's works addressed the Civil War and the Second World War. In the 1990s, the Casualties of Finnish Wars research project ("Sotasurmat-projekti") was launched initially to investigate the events of the Civil War. The government-funded project has sought to establish the number of casualties, and provide accurate information thereof, in both the Civil War and the Second World War.

In Estonia, a commission led by Finnish diplomat Max Jacobson investigated the history of the Second World War and collaboration in the 1990s. It was not, by definition, a truth commission according to the process established in South Africa because the aim was not reconciliation; the Commission conducted an independent inquiry into the history of the occupations.

Historians often compare past management projects around the world to those in Germany, where the concept originated. As one historian mentioned, the current social situation and the rise of extremist politics have sparked debates about what these major projects have achieved. Despite the great efforts made, many problems and divisions still exist in German society. This raises questions about the motivation for historians to work as part of past management and whether anything is actually learned from history. As one historian stated, while the German model of past management is often praised, it is important to note that it may not be directly applicable to other countries.

In Finnish society and international discussion, the Finnish Civil War is often referenced when discussing how Finland has addressed its past. The resurgence of Civil War history in Finland in the 1990s and the reason for it was even debated among Finnish historians during a dialogue session. As a result of the debate, it was not seen as directly related to the collapse of the Soviet Union. Instead, the revival of a neo-patriotic historical culture in the 1990s brought the term "War of Independence" back to the forefront of interpretations about the war. A major change in foreign policy, such as the collapse of the Soviet Union, gave way to new, broader ways of interpreting the war. The new aim was to deal with the war in a neutral way by means of academic historiography. In the past, the debate in Finnish society on the Civil War had been more strongly linked to politics, for example in the name given to the war, and in the 1990s, the aim was to break away from this background.

Societal differences influence historical research. Finland was seen as a more consensus-oriented society by Finnish historians, while according to Estonian historians, in Estonia, people are more willing to discuss and debate. This also affects the demands made of historians. Finnish participants noted that the Civil War is the only historical event for which there is absolutely no consensus in Finnish society, even on the name. In Finnish society, the Civil War has become a concept in which different interpretations live on – quite peacefully – as part of today's social debate and political positions. Even in this dialogue

between historians, it was a very difficult task for Finnish historians to explain the Finnish Civil War debate, with all its nuances, to scholars from outside the Finnish historical circle.

The participants pointed out that public debate about history often comes many years, if not decades, after academic research. Social debate on difficult issues and a challenging past is made easier if those affected at the time are already dead. On the other hand, remembering keeps the past alive and the experiences of future generations are still linked to the time and memories of past generations.

Contemporary perspectives on the history of the Second World War

When it comes to discussing the Second World War, the differences between Finland and Estonia become more apparent. In Finland, military history has been given a lot of focus from a national perspective to the extent that, as one Finnish historian mentioned, until the 1990s, some Finns still believed that Finland emerged victorious in the Second World War. In Estonia, the events of the Second World War, particularly those relating to the victims, have instead “faded away”. According to Estonian historians, this is because Estonia was an occupied state and had not been perceived as equally responsible for what happened on its territory. On the other hand, German scholars have taken a keen interest in studying their version of ‘their own’ history of what happened during the German occupation of the Baltic States.

The treatment of the Second World War in historical research serves as an excellent example of its role. The purpose of history and what it entails is a frequently asked question. One participant mentioned that during the Second World War, court-martials were in many cases legal, but should a historian explore agency beyond legality? Historians possess the ‘superpower’ of contextualization, allowing them to delve deeper into events and explain them in more detail.

During the session, Finnish and Estonian historians discussed at length about collaboration and profiteering. When talking about the occupied state, collaboration was seen as an unsuitable term because it describes a voluntary attitude towards the other party. As was mentioned, the term ‘co-habitation’ used originally in Denmark might be more descriptive and also less politically loaded. If a person continues in a previous position after occupation and thus benefits the occupier, is this collaboration? It was also mentioned that it is easier to make accusations when you were not living during that period.

In a way, all of us benefit from the society in which we live. One historian noted that term “getting by” is a good description of how you survived in the circumstances in which you had to live, and this term was agreed on by others. Everyone has a right and a human desire to survive. Thomas Hobbes’ concept of self-preservation is descriptive in this context.³

Estonian historians noted that collaboration has a more precise definition when it comes to the law. In Estonia, membership of the Communist Party is considered voluntary if the person joined it after 1954. This means that after this date, individuals had more control over their choices. The severity of collaboration sometimes depends on whether the person’s actions caused harm to others. If the actions did cause harm, then the collaboration is considered more serious.

Historians discussed how the way we view transnational events, such as the Second World War, is influenced by our own relationship with the nation-state. New generations have a different perspective on the role of the nation-state and the relevance of “our” history has

³ In *Leviathan*, Thomas Hobbes argues that an individual’s natural state is chaos and self-preservation requires the surrender of individual rights to a sovereign.

changed. Young people are now questioning why this history should affect their lives, particularly in terms of shared guilt. This phenomenon might change the role of war history in the future also in Finnish and Estonian societies.

Cold War and Soviet monuments

The dialogue session on the commemoration of the Soviet Union focused on the role of Soviet monuments in Finland and Estonia. Soviet monuments have been removed in Estonia but also in Finland following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. During the discussion, historians agreed that recent political events, such as the war in Ukraine, can drastically alter the way we commemorate by shifting power relations.

The significance of memorials has always been subject to change and will continue to be in the future. It is difficult to predict how we in Estonia and Finland will perceive them in the coming years. For instance, the perception of Second World War graves has evolved significantly since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. In the past, Estonia respected the Russian-speaking minority's opinions about them, but now, they are being disregarded.

The role of Soviet monuments is not only a matter of how a country views its own past. Since the 2000s, the Russian Embassy in Tallinn has been renovating and preserving historical monuments to promote Russia's political interests. Russia has effectively utilized these monuments for political purposes. Historians are aware that this has been done systematically in other countries too.

The past and present are tightly intertwined, and this relationship extends to statues, monuments, and art. These works exist in the present and take on different meanings, often depending on cultural and societal context. Monuments from both Nazi and Soviet regimes are regarded as controversial in terms of the cultural and social space of remembrance. One historian gave an example of how, in today's context, Nazi German era art or a German army cemetery are more tolerated in Estonia if they lack swastikas. Symbols are seen as more problematic. Additionally, problematic cultural figures who collaborated with Soviet authorities are more easily remembered and tolerated in Estonia, simply because of their cultural significance. However, as one historian noted, it is important to avoid valuing artistic values over the feelings of the victims. The participants agreed that societies must balance different values and this process should be reflected in the treatment of monuments and art created under the Soviet regime.

During the dialogue, some of the historians were motivated by a desire to uncover historical truths about the monuments and their past, rather than settling only for a relativist approach. Research into certain events in recent history, such as the Bronze Soldier dispute of 2007, is still limited due to decades of classified material being restricted. This means that historical research can provide more and better information in the future. As one historian noted, when studying political issues in recent history, historians often have to use more interpretations due to a lack of sources, which can lead to flawed research. In addition, it is important to note that researchers are not necessarily 'neutral': an art historian, for example, may have a vested interest in seeing a statue in its original setting.

Estonian historians noted that as late as the 1990s, it was thought in Estonia that the removal of the Bronze Soldier, for example, was pointless as the veteran generation would soon be gone and the whole monument would be forgotten. However, this was not the case because commemoration is also institutional, not just personal.

In Finland, statues have a different history from those in occupied Estonia. Historians have played an important role in pointing out that, in Finland, the statue of Lenin and its history are not related to the war in Ukraine. As Finnish history professor Henrik Meinander wrote

in Helsingin Sanomat, President Putin hates Lenin.⁴ Rather, Lenin statues are monuments to Finlandization, erected voluntarily, not built by occupiers. Despite that, Finnish historians noted that it is natural for politics and the past to have a dialogue, giving statues different meanings in this era.

Finnish historians also noted that the term 'Finlandization' carries a lot of negative connotations and is not considered a neutral term in Finland. One historian noted that Finlandization has had a collective impact on the Finnish mentality towards dealing with aggressors. It has been much more than just a foreign policy strategy or a way to take care of Finland's own interests. There is still a lot of research that needs to be done on Finlandization, particularly regarding politicians' interactions with Moscow during the 1970s and 1980s, the benefits of Finlandization for politicians, and the role of the media in shaping the perception of the Soviet Union among the general public.

The participants noted that the term Finlandization has recently been used politically as a kind of model for states living alongside a superpower. Georgia is seen as a modern-day Finlandized state and Ukraine has been offered the same as a survival model. However, using Finlandization as a model for other states in our era was seen as wrong by historians, and even dangerous. It is the duty of historians to caution against the straightforward repetition of historical strategies and politics – even once successful – in current politics.

Contradicting memory cultures

The discussion on contradicting memory cultures focused mostly on Russian-speaking minorities. It is important to notice that there are also many other minorities in Estonia and Finland whose memories and memory cultures differ significantly from the mainstream. It would be beneficial to have a broader discussion on this topic at a later date.

Historians have observed that the memory of statues and memorials has been linked to power relations and majority-minority relations, especially since February 2022. In the 2000s, Russia had already begun to actively promote Soviet Second World War memory culture, which was soon embraced by younger Russian-speaking youth too. The way Russia commemorates, for example, Second World War veterans reflects its perspective on its role in European history as a 'liberator'. During the meeting, the participants discussed the relationship between memory culture and politics.

As an Estonian historian mentioned, memory culture is also influenced by family background. In Estonia, Estonian families' own memories survived the Soviet occupation as oral tradition and filtered down to their children. While the Soviet truth was taught in schools, at home there was another truth. It is important to notice that, for the Russian-speaking minority, the gap between these two truths might not have been so wide. If personal memories fit the official Soviet truth better, families could speak more openly about their family history. In these cases, personal memories were integrated into the official Soviet truth and were kept alive even after the collapse of the Soviet regime. These differences in personal memories and how they are positioned relative to the Soviet past have led to contradictions and memory conflicts in the way the Soviet Union is remembered today.

As one historian stated, personal and family memories have a stronger impact on people than academic research. The memories of those who served in the Soviet army, for instance, continue to be shared within families across generations. The lived past is a way for grandparents' memories to be remembered more vividly than any research could ever convey. It is essential to respect everyone's right to preserve family memories and import-

4 Meinander, Henrik, 2023. "Itseään kunnioittava kansakunta ei siivoa historiaansa katukuvasta", Helsingin Sanomat 9.9.2023.

ant to find ways to separate personal family memories from the political memory culture of Russia to prevent the potential misuse of history.

The participants agreed that it is crucial to be aware of contradicting memory culture. The denial of Soviet era remembrance has led to conflicts in many European countries, including Estonia. These conflicts will continue if memory cultures are not allowed to form and thrive. Despite the current political climate, one participant suggested a new initiative or project to identify the positions and views of the Russian-speaking minority. This could get their perspectives heard and help to work towards creating more inclusive societies.

Historiography

New ways to look at history

Since Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022, historians focused on Russian history have been assessing how much they need to de-colonise their thinking. Scholars often view objects of study from a central perspective, altering the perception of the periphery. Research on Eastern Europe and Russia, for example, has previously looked at the subject mainly from the Russian perspective or in terms of Russia.

Should such a self-assessment also be carried out by Estonian and Finnish historians? During the discussion, one participant suggested that it is possible to focus on peripheral aspects directly without the need to compare everything through the lens of centrality. As one example given, the Baltic states have often been framed in Western studies as “colonised” in recent times, although this does not correspond to the self-understanding and historical perceptions of these states.

The participants discussed new perspectives and views on history at length. Historical research on Finland and Estonia cannot be done without also considering the centre-periphery relationship. For example, Soviet-era history is often linked in surprising ways to the central power and to the networks and even informal connections that operated throughout the Soviet Union. If local history is written solely from a national perspective, it lacks important context.

It was agreed that when studying the history of Finland and Estonia, adopting the periphery-periphery approach could be useful. Instead of focusing on the central power, it might be better to examine the interconnections between regions further from the centre. Although many links between these two countries were established through the centres in various periods of history, there were also active links from other regions.

Colonial processes in historical research

Before the meeting, colonialism was listed as a thematic topic, but the conversation shifted towards historiography. As one historian noted in their feedback, the discussion on colonialism could have been too vague. Colonialism is a popular research topic and there was a focus on clearly defining the term before delving into any thematic discussions.

Overall, the participants considered colonialism a useful concept to examine the phenomenon and as a tool in historical research for identifying a specific pattern of action and hierarchy. It is also a study of power relations. The process of colonisation is a widespread phenomenon that leads to the subjugation and domination of other people and societies. Some of the historians made a point that the term can also be over-used in historical research, and that a more effective approach involves studying colonial processes and reserving the term ‘colonialism’ for instances where already occupied land is taken over.

The portrayal of colonialism in Estonia has been a topic of debate in research and society. Some argue that if the colonial power provided education, freedom, or a better understanding of one’s own culture, then was colonialism inherently bad? As one participant stated, Baltic Germans are considered colonisers even though they may have been living in some areas longer than other populations in Estonia.

The label of colonialism can be attached to a wide range of actions based on personal preference. One participant stated that historians are also at risk of distorting interpre-

tation by only focusing on minorities and disregarding the larger context. This position is part of a wider methodological discussion about whether the 'broader picture' is lost when history is represented from the minority's point of view.

The participants agreed that Finland and Estonia are examples of both beneficiaries and targets of colonialism in the Western world. The 'burden' of European colonialism is borne by everyone who is part of the European system. As was mentioned, one cannot externalise oneself from colonialism. The process of colonialism and racism share similarities in terms of research. Both reveal social structures that may not be apparent without the correct frame of reference. The goal is to make power relations and structures more visible.

As an Estonian historian noted, colonialism as a term is stigmatized, especially in Estonia, by the fact that during the Soviet era, 'coloniser' was a political term used to describe an upper-owning class. In the 1920s, Russian 'anti-colonialism' involved taking over a region to implement socialism, but it was not a voluntary process. The phenomenon of colonialism in Russia and the Soviet Union, although different from Western colonialism, is still significant. A Finnish historian gave an example of the Red Finns embarking on building Soviet Karelia: they established their own system with little consideration for the local people. The Finnish language was the ideal, and they benefited from it to some extent.

Transnational multidisciplinary vs. methodological nationalism

How can the history of Finland and Estonia be presented in a way that goes beyond national boundaries and explores history from a broader perspective? The main objective of history was traditionally to establish the nation-state. Even so, history itself is international and if not presented as such, it lacks important context.

During their discussion, the participants made an important note that current links between Finland and Estonia are also often described in historical terms. Finnish historians noted that although Finland has close links with Sweden, it is not common to use similar terms to describe the relationship. It would be worth examining the concepts of brotherhood, Pan-Finno-Ugric nationalist ideology ('heimoaate'), and the 'Bridge of Finland' ('Soomesild') through research in the future. Estonia and Finland are, in some perspectives, considered to be two of the most similar countries in the world with many things in common. In their discussion, the participants agreed that using the 'brother nations' rhetoric in research can be a little dangerous because it can obscure separating factors. It is crucial to understand that there may not always be unifying factors present in every situation.

It was mentioned how, throughout history, there have been discussions about the possibility of a single state comprising of both Finland and Estonia. Although the idea of a common currency did not come to fruition in the way it was thought 100 years ago, it did eventually with common European integration and the Euro. Despite the close cultural relations, the two countries were not very close politically in the late 1930s. In the Soviet occupation period, President Kekkonen's visit to Estonia led to the establishment of a ferry connection which played a significant role in restoring the relationship between the two countries.

The relationship between Finland and Estonia has often been defined by their relationship with Russia, which has, in many cases, been the third wheel in their relations. Finland also has a special relationship with Sweden whose interest has always been in a sovereign Finland. Estonia, as Estonian historians noted, has never had a country with the opportunity and interest to help them in such a way in times of war. Sweden, however, has a special place in the Estonian 'good old Swedish days' rhetoric, as many reforms were introduced during that era.

In the international context, the history of Estonia has often been intertwined with that of other Baltic countries. This has been mainly because international authors tend to consider Estonia too small to have ample sources of its history and publishing houses prefer to produce works about larger entities. As one historian noted, for example, Andres Kasekamp's *A History of the Baltic States* emerged from a publisher's demand for broader historical coverage beyond Estonia.

The study of international phenomena, such as the Holocaust, often leads to external judgments and generalizations. Foreign scholars have struggled to understand the Holocaust in the Baltics due to the varying contexts, events, and scales of it in the three countries. The participants agreed that it is important to note that historical events cannot be defined by current geographical boundaries. When multiple countries are grouped together time after time, it reinforces the idea that they belong together as a reference group.

The study of Eastern Europe has often been approached with an exotic and orientalist perspective which prioritises preconceived notions over actual observations and facts. As Estonian historians noted, one example of this is the treatment of the Russian-speaking minority in Estonia, which has been a target of interest for foreign researchers. However, this has led to a situation where the perception of minority status may be based on outdated research that no longer reflects the current situation. One historian mentioned that the number of people with 'undetermined citizenship' in Estonia has decreased considerably since its ascension into the European Union.

Estonian historians brought up that the lens through which Estonian history has been viewed, especially by outsiders, has often been that of suffering. This has caused Estonia to be seen as a victim of its own past. To conduct research on a subject, one must show respect by avoiding the imposition of personal preconceptions. The media is often in search of fascinating stories, which can sometimes distort perceptions, like the belief that everyone in the Soviet Union was subjected to violent treatment.

The language skills of researchers also influence the research setting. Estonian historians were concerned by the fact that research on the Baltic countries has been carried out by researchers who may only speak English and Russian rather than the local languages. This may lead to the neglect of important events or perspectives expressed only in the smaller national languages.

The participants also talked about 'research tourism', which can often be observed in research conducted by outsiders. This happens when a researcher from a different country applies a research model and theory that they have already developed to a new country, such as Estonia or the Baltic States. This approach can sometimes result in a lack of understanding of the real context, which is especially problematic for smaller countries. As one historian noted, the researcher then collects data from the periphery but interprets it using a theory developed in the centre. As a result, the history of a small country is always viewed in relation to the larger one rather than being appreciated as a unique entity on its own.

Several historians were contemplating what sets them apart from 'research tourists'. While it is possible to learn about the history of other countries, it requires a professional approach and a connection to the state's own historiography. At its best, this can lead to fresh perspectives and new research that adds value to national research. During the discussion, participants agreed that the attitude of attempting to redo everything with the aim of doing it better is flawed and can be seen as arrogant.

Future research cooperation

Those who provided feedback on the dialogue meeting noted that it was not a mere debate but an exchange of ideas. As such, the meeting was considered highly productive. Since the first dialogue meeting included only four sessions with broad topics, the discussion could not be in-depth. Participants strongly supported continuing the dialogue and involving more historians to deepen our understanding of history, its methodology, and politics. There are various ways to continue the dialogue to achieve a very positive outcome.

The participants felt they had a great level of mutual understanding which made the discussion even more fruitful. The History Dialogue meeting proved to be valuable in creating new research connections and gaining insights into the various ways history can be interpreted. In their written feedback, the importance of continuing research cooperation in the future was emphasised.

Several topics that should be further researched or discussed were noted. First, Finland and Estonia have distinct cultures when it comes to remembrance and secondly, there has been a considerable amount of movement between the two countries in the past and present. These topics offer interesting potential for a joint seminar, especially as the Gulf of Finland forms a border area where security, tourism, geography, and migration intersect.

In Estonia, further research is required to fully understand its national traumas. For instance, while the history of deportees typically ends with their return home, it marks the start of a new and challenging chapter. Much of the historiography on the transition of power was also written during the Soviet occupation and is therefore heavily ambiguous. Additional research and analysis are crucial to understand the perspectives of the era. The restitution of property and the current relationship with Russia are also relevant topics that would need further research as well as the question of collaboration.

In Finland, research on the history of the Sámi people is still in its early stages. Historically, more attention has been given to researching the history of refugees, such as the Ingrian Finns and their repatriation to the Soviet Union. However, ongoing research will challenge the notion that Finns have a unique connection with nature. Historians are actively studying nature-related themes, emotions, and experiences, as well as exploring new areas of research such as cultural memories and the relationship between history and remembrance.

The participants agreed that to gain the most benefit from the cooperation, research must delve deeper than this first History Dialogue. As highlighted in the feedback, the closeness between the two parties can also be used for more intense debates or interesting and beneficial further research. To an outsider, it might even be impossible to see the small differences that are very relevant and interesting to Estonian and Finnish historians in their research. By examining those differences, as well as similarities, there is a unique possibility to understand how historical knowledge and different interpretations are formed.

Attachments

Schedule of dialogue meetings

Wednesday 4th October 2023:

First dialogue session:

- Introduction of Historians without Borders and the History Dialogue Method
- Introduction of the program and practicalities
- Introduction of participants
- Discussion on research cooperation between Estonia and Finland

Thursday 5th October 2023:

Second Dialogue Session:

- State of historical research and historians in Estonian and Finnish societies
 - Are historians taking part in discussion about the use of history in contemporary society and politics?
 - Do they express their views concerning public history: school history, the role of historical knowledge in education etc.?
 - Are historians' voices heard in the media and by politicians?
- Tendencies in the management of the past in both countries and the role of historians concerning topics such as:
 - Interwar period, World War II issues and Cold War era issues
 - Traumas, burdens, and silencing related to wars and occupation, collaboration, power struggles in politics etc.
 - Estonians and Finns as both colonised and colonisers
 - Histories of the historical minorities (ethnic, linguistic, religious etc.) and recent immigrants (refugees, labour-based immigrants etc.)

Third Dialogue Session:

- Historiography
 - Which topics are currently widely discussed and/or studied by historians?
 - Are there topics that should be addressed but not a part of the mainstream and for what reasons?
 - Questions of methodological nationalism and multidisciplinary transnationalism

Fourth Dialogue Session:

- How does Finnish historical research seem from an Estonian perspective and Estonian historical research from a Finnish perspective?
 - Are there topics or perspectives that Estonian historians think should be discussed in Finnish historical research, or vice versa?
- Conclusion: need for future cooperation and research
- End of the dialogue meeting



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