

History in Exile:

Dialogues on Russian History and Memory Politics

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Organized by Historians without Borders in Finland

Supported by the Nordic Council of Ministers

Project realization: September 2024 - September 2025

Partners: The Swedish Historical Society, Estonian History and Civics Teachers' Association, Aleksanteri Institute (University of Helsinki), EuroClio – European Association of History Educators

Locations: Helsinki, Stockholm, Tallinn (hybrid format: onsite and online)

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SUMMARY

The History in Exile project was launched in response to the urgent challenges historical research, education and memory politics are facing after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

History has increasingly become a political tool utilised by the Kremlin to justify the war against Ukraine, to question the statehood of the neighbouring countries, and to silence independent domestic voices. In Russia, many historians and educators have lost access to archives, faced censorship, or been forced into exile. This project was created to provide a space for dialogue, sustain the continuity of historical work, and strengthen resilience against the misuse of historical memory. Furthermore, it also sought to examine how official Russian memory politics affect neighbouring societies, particularly in the Nordic and Baltic states.

From September 2024 to September 2025, a series of events took place in Helsinki, Stockholm, and Tallinn, in a hybrid format with both onsite and online participation, bringing together historians, teachers, journalists, and civil society actors. These seminars combined open discussions with focused professional exchanges, encouraging debates and the sharing of experiences across borders. Moreover, the project also helped to maintain Russian-language professional exchanges among displaced historians, creating opportunities for cooperation and peer support.

Key insights

- **Memory politics as a tool of control:** Russian state narratives turn history into a political tool, narrowing space for independent research and discussion. Furthermore, silenced discussions about the past in democratic societies can generate risks of simplification.
- **Exile as a state of both rupture and renewal:** Historians in exile face precarious conditions, and yet, they have established new peer networks, digitisation initiatives, and transnational research projects.
- **Postcolonial/decolonial and pluralistic approaches:** Scholars are re-examining inherited frameworks, including marginalised voices, and questioning imperial assumptions, frameworks and narratives.
- **Reaching younger audiences:** New storytelling formats, such as podcasts, online and multimedia exhibitions, as well as social media, are essential for fostering historical literacy in the digital age. Particular attention is needed for Russian-speaking youth in the Nordics, Baltics, and wider European contexts who often encounter conflicting historical narratives across languages and media.
- **Education under pressure:** Independent educators are developing cross-border, multilingual resources that help students in Nordic and Baltic countries distinguish between sustainable historical knowledge and propaganda and engage with diverse, at times conflicting memories.

The project raised awareness of the dangers of manipulating history and laid the groundwork for future initiatives. Through dialogue, mutual support, and building new forms of cooperation, the *History in Exile* project has demonstrated that historical knowledge and understanding can continue to be interactive, critical, and meaningful even under the pressures of war and repression.

Contact: Historians without Borders in Finland hix@hwb.fi

Website: <https://historianswithoutborders.fi/en/history-in-exile-project>

REPORT

The *History in Exile* project was launched in response to the use of history as a political tool by the Russian state and the pressures faced by historians and educators following the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. These propagandistic practices predate 2022, but they have intensified and gained a more central role since the full-scale invasion. In Russia, history has been turned into a tool of state ideology: textbooks, commemorations, and media are used to legitimise repression at home, justify the war against Ukraine, and question the sovereignty of neighbouring states, including the Baltics[1]. These narratives have become a popular tool of Russian foreign policy in an attempt to shape, or confuse, foreign publics' perceptions of Russia's full-scale war of aggression against Ukraine[2].

In Russia, independent historians and educators face censorship, severe restrictions, closure of archives, and the criminalisation of their work. Many have been forced into exile or relocation, and numerous individuals are confronted with a precarious legal and employment status, a lack of recognition of their credentials, a loss of access to professional resources and networks, and the challenge of maintaining their professional work in new academic and cultural environments.

The project set out to provide opportunities for dialogue and knowledge exchange across the Nordic and Baltic regions, co-creating knowledge through history dialogues and, helping public audiences to understand how history can be manipulated for political ends and how rigorous, well-informed historical knowledge can be defended.

Between September 2024 and September 2025, seminars in Helsinki, Stockholm, and Tallinn were organised in a hybrid format with participation both onsite and online. In addition to the seminars, structured professional discussions for Russian-speaking historians were arranged, providing space for in-depth debates and the sharing of experiences.

These encounters enabled displaced Russian-speaking historians to connect with one another and with their Nordic and Baltic colleagues, as well as to share their insights with wider audiences. The continuation of professional exchange and mutual support among historians in exile was an important outcome of the project.

The project provided more than temporary support: it highlighted the changing conditions of professional and public historical work under authoritarian rule, the dilemmas and adjustments faced in exile, and the importance of strengthening resilience against the misuse of history in democratic societies as well. These outcomes were realised through close collaboration with our partners: the Swedish Historical Society, the Estonian History and Civics Teachers' Association, the Aleksanteri Institute at the University of Helsinki, and EuroClio – European Association of History Educators.

Key findings

New forms of agency and public engagement

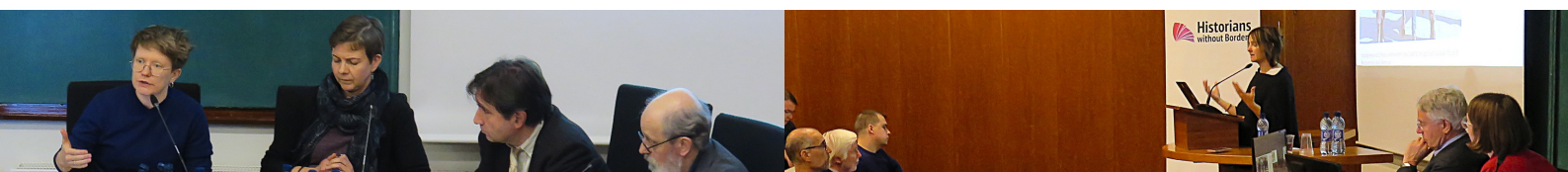
Despite the difficult circumstances, many historians are developing ways to continue their work and career. Initiatives include digitising archival materials, cross-border collaboration, and creating new teaching platforms such as Smolny Beyond Borders[3]. Civic memory practices have also continued in exile, a striking example of which is 'Returning the Names', the annual reading of the names of Gulag victims, which has grown into an international commemorative event[4].

1 McGlynn 2023; Bækken 2023; Kuposov 2018; Mäklsoo 2015

2 Becker 2020; McGlynn & Đureinović 2023

3 <https://smolnybeyondborders.org>

4 <https://memohrc.org/en/projects/returning-names>



The pictures in the report are from the first seminar of the project, *Politics of History in Russia – Controlled and Contested Memories*, which was held in Helsinki on 28th November 2024. The keynote speaker of the seminar was Alexandra Polivanova, representing Memorial, the 2022 Nobel Peace Prize laureate. The other panelists were Katerina Suverina, Kati Parpei, Kirill Levinson, Ilya Solomeshch, Mikhail Nakonechnyi and Jukka Korpela. Pictures: Pertti Grönholm.

These initiatives sustain intellectual continuity and civic responsibility in a context where official narratives on the past are tightly controlled.

Participants acknowledged the need to reconsider how historical knowledge is communicated. Traditional formats, such as books and lectures, reach only limited audiences. Younger generations increasingly engage with history through digital media rather than by sitting in classrooms or reading through books. Historians, therefore, emphasised the importance of more engaging and participatory storytelling, such as interactive exhibitions, workshops, podcasts, and history clubs. However, reaching broader and especially younger audiences requires adapting to the formats they use every day, including animation, video games, vlogs, short-form videos (reels), and even memes. Propaganda already makes extensive use of these formats to influence young people, which underscores the importance of historians using them responsibly for educational purposes.

Ethics, security, and archives

Security concerns complicate historical work in exile. Participants spoke about the risks involved in continuing research and the ethical dilemmas that arise, particularly when cooperating with colleagues still located in Russia. These situations require careful consideration and a constant balance between responsibility and safety.

Access to archives was identified as another major concern. Collections in Russia and Belarus are becoming increasingly restricted, particularly those dealing with political repression and the security services. Following the liquidation of Memorial in the Russian Federation, access to sensitive materials has narrowed further[5]. At the same time, alternative initiatives have been established in other countries of the former Soviet Union, where archives and other memory institutions continue digitisation despite difficult conditions and projects expand access to Soviet-era holdings. Informal strategies, such as personal digitisation and document sharing, have also become more common. Together, these efforts point to a shift towards decentralised and transnational infrastructure for memory work. At the same time, tightening control on online information environments, including restrictions on online libraries and on messaging and social media platforms, complicate access to digital sources and professional communication, underscoring the need to archive at-risk online materials while they remain accessible.

Methodological reflection and adaptation

Exile has encouraged critical self-examination. Many historians reported that their awareness of colonial narratives and imperial assumptions embedded in their training had increased. They described revising syllabi to include more women scholars and perspectives beyond imperial centres, especially those of non-Russian peoples, minorities, and regions long subordinated to them, questioning inherited terminology, and reframing research questions. And thus, decolonisation is perceived as an ongoing methodological adjustment rather than a fixed doctrine[6].

Professional survival often required improvisation. Some displaced historians took non-academic jobs in tutoring, translation, or editing, while sustaining their research through informal collectives. Reading groups, online seminars, and collaborative writing projects provided intellectual continuity. Research agenda shifted towards oral histories with émigré communities, comparative regional studies drawing on sources outside Russia, and experimentation in digital humanities and visual studies. Flexibility and adaptation became essential strategies.

These experiences have also highlighted broader structural issues in knowledge production. Academic hierarchies and disciplinary traditions often undervalue collaborative or experimental work. Yet peer networks, reflexive approaches, and cross-border cooperation have proved vital for maintaining historical research under conditions of displacement. Exile, although challenging, has created opportunities to reconsider academic ethics, knowledge circulation, and the criteria for legitimacy in scholarship.

5 <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2022-03-03/liquidation-memorial>; <https://globalfreedomofexpression.columbia.edu/cases/suprun-v-russia/>; Haskins 2023.

6 In this report, decolonisation does not refer to political independence but to scholarly and pedagogical practices that critically re-examine inherited frameworks privileging imperial or metropolitan perspectives, and that deliberately include previously marginalised voices and sources (Mälksoo 2023; Bekus 2022; Tlostanova 2018).

Engaging with difficult pasts

While authoritarian control of history was a central theme, participants also noted that democracies are not immune to similar pressures. When societies avoid uncomfortable subjects, such as imperial legacies, collaboration, or minority perspectives, it may result in a subtle narrowing of historical debate. Such omissions risk reinforcing exclusion and shaping adversarial identities. The project emphasised that historical pluralism depends not only on freedom of expression but also on the willingness to confront difficult pasts head on.

Impact and outlook

The project created spaces where historians in exile could share experiences, build professional networks, and reflect on how to sustain their work. It documented the erosion of academic freedom in Russia and the ethical dilemmas of displacement, while highlighting practical responses. Professional exchanges enabled displaced historians to establish contacts with Nordic and Baltic colleagues, test new collaborative formats, and identify common challenges. This provided a degree of continuity in academic life and a channel through which their expertise could contribute to debates on memory politics in the Nordic and Baltic countries.

The project generated several key influences, namely:

- **Professional exchange and continuity:** The project brought displaced historians and their Nordic and Baltic colleagues into direct dialogue, leading to collaborations and mutual support through professional information sharing. These exchanges created opportunities to maintain research activity and public engagement even under precarious conditions.
- **Ethical and safe research.** Participants compared strategies for protecting interviewees and colleagues, discussed the risks associated with digital tools, and explored ways to manage sensitive archives responsibly. These exchanges not only strengthened the integrity of the scholarship in exile but also offered Nordic institutions practical insights into hosting and supporting scholars at risk.
- **Public-facing history and youth engagement.** The project highlighted formats that resonate with younger audiences, such as podcasts, interactive workshops, and short-form digital content. These approaches were discussed as ways to strengthen critical historical literacy and to engage Russian-speaking youth in the Nordic and Baltic countries, who often encounter conflicting narratives across languages and platforms.
- **Public visibility and public history outreach.** The project has begun to raise the visibility of historians in exile through open online events, public talks, and public history content in online media (**op-eds, features, and interviews**) and via **Historians without Borders' social media channels (Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube)** to share evidence-based historical analysis with wider Nordic and Baltic audiences.

Looking ahead, several priorities have surfaced among the discussions. Short-term emergency measures should give way to long-term support through stable fellowships, institutional affiliations, and reliable access to digital resources. The preservation of endangered archives and the active archiving of born-digital sources require investment in digitisation and in digital preservation capacity. This means building the skills, practices and infrastructure that ensure long-term, secure storage and reliable access. In practice, this requires timely web archiving of online sources liable to removal or blocking, and the use of mirrored repositories to preserve access. Educational and public history initiatives should focus on strengthening critical historical literacy, providing multilingual materials, and engaging younger audiences through their preferred formats. Above all, dialogue platforms must be sustained so that historians can continue to share perspectives and build knowledge across borders.

The History in Exile project demonstrates that even under conditions of repression and displacement, historical work can remain resilient, critical, and relevant. By combining professional reflection with public engagement, the project has laid foundations for deeper cross-border cooperation and for strengthening resistance to the politicisation of history: a tool the Russian state is likely to continue using in the years ahead.

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History in Exile: Dialogue on Russian Memory and History Politics in the Nordic and Baltic Countries

The project, supported by the Nordic Council of Ministers, promotes dialogue between historians and history teachers in the Nordic and Baltic countries as well as the public on Russian memory and history politics and its implications for historical research in Russian society.

The *History in Exile* project also aims to highlight the experiences of historians and history teachers of Russian background on the challenges of researching and teaching history in Russia. The project contributes to networking among all historians and history teachers in the Nordic and Baltic countries working at the intersection of history, memory, policy-making and Russian and Eastern European studies.



The keynote speaker of the seminar *Politics of History in Russia – Controlled and Contested Memories*, Alexandra Polivanova, representing Memorial, the 2022 Nobel Peace Prize laureate. Picture: Pertti Grönholm.

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