

History in Exile:

Dialogues on Russian History and Memory Politics 2024-2026

HWB REPORT 9, 9/2026

Organised by Historians without Borders in Finland

Supported by the Nordic Council of Ministers

Project period: September 2024 - September 2026

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, Potsdam/Berlin (hybrid format: onsite and online)

Event partner in Berlin: Institute for Cultural Diplomacy

Published by Historians without Borders in Finland, 2026

The History in Exile project was launched after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 in response to two developments: the growing political use of history by the Russian state and the displacement of historians, educators, journalists, and cultural workers from Russia. These developments were connected: as history became more central to state ideology and the justification of the war, the space for independent historical work inside Russia narrowed.

The Russian state has used history to justify the war and advance imperial claims, while censorship, archival restrictions, and political pressure have made independent research and teaching increasingly difficult and, for some, unsafe. Many historians and teachers left Russia after 2022, while others had already been working abroad. Although their expertise remained, the war often disrupted the institutional ties and established audiences on which their professional standing depended.

The HiX project brought displaced professionals together for dialogue, supported the continuation of independent historical work, and connected these discussions to wider public debates about the political use of history. It also examined how Russian official memory politics affects history education and public debate in Nordic and Baltic societies, including within Russian-speaking communities, and considered the implications for democratic resilience.

Over the two project years, History in Exile organised public events, workshops, and focused professional discussions in Helsinki, Stockholm, Tallinn, and Potsdam/Berlin, with both onsite and online participation. Public seminars brought these questions to wider audiences; smaller discussions gave participants a protected setting to address professional and ethical issues without pressure to reach consensus.

The project produced three main outcomes. First, it helped build **an informal professional network among historians and public history practitioners in exile.** Its communication channel has around 40 members and is used to share vacancies, grant opportunities, teaching resources, archive contacts, and practical advice.

Second, participants developed **six small public history initiatives** on Russian memory politics, marginalised histories, and Soviet and post-Soviet legacies. The initiatives are intended for wider audiences and will be shared through different platforms.

Third, the project **brought participants' expertise into wider public debate** through seminars and panel discussions. The public history initiatives, including a podcast, were designed for audiences outside academia. The focus remained on participants' work **as researchers and public historians**, rather than primarily on their experiences of repression or displacement.

Key insights

- **Memory politics as a tool of war and control:** The Russian state uses history to justify its war against Ukraine and advance imperial claims, while narrowing the space for independent historical work and public debate. The project examined how this political use of history operates through state institutions and official narratives.
- **Exile as professional disruption:** For many participants, exile meant losing the professional infrastructure on which their work had depended: access to archives, institutional affiliation, recognition of their credentials, and established audiences. Those with existing international contacts were often better able to continue their work; others had to build new networks in unfamiliar academic and public environments.
- **Protected dialogue as a professional format:** Some questions raised by the project could not be addressed fully in public events. Smaller facilitated meetings allowed participants to speak from professional experience and discuss risks, responsibilities, and disagreements without being expected to act as political commentators. In this setting, difficult issues could be explored without pressure to produce public positions or formal conclusions.
- **Public history as a form of historical work:** The six initiatives showed that **public history involves more than adapting academic research for a wider audience**. Historians worked in different formats and languages, taking on roles as editors, interviewers, scriptwriters, and moderators. In some initiatives, members of the public also took part in developing the material.
- **Russian-speaking youth as an important audience:** Project participants repeatedly identified the need for accessible, source-based historical materials for Russian-speaking youth in Nordic and Baltic countries and elsewhere in Europe. These young people come from different national and migration backgrounds. Many encounter conflicting accounts of the past at school, in their families, and in Russian-language media. Existing educational formats rarely address these tensions or the role of Russian state propaganda in shaping historical narratives.
- **Pluralising Russian and Soviet history:** The project highlighted **the limits of state-centred and Russocentric frameworks** for studying and teaching Russian and Soviet history. It drew attention to histories often pushed to the margins, including Indigenous and minority histories, religious and gendered perspectives, and diasporic experiences. It also considered Russian and Soviet history from the perspectives of non-Russian peoples and societies. This raised questions about whether inherited categories remain adequate for describing these histories.
- **A practical network for professional exchange:** Historians and public history practitioners in exile need more than occasional contacts. The project helped build an informal professional network, supported by a communication channel with around 40 members. Through the channel, participants share practical information and expertise and develop public history ideas. They can also use the network to find collaborators for research and educational projects.

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.

PROJECT AT A GLANCE

2

PROJECT YEARS

4

PUBLIC EVENTS
IN 4 COUNTRIES

≈ 40

NETWORK PARTICIPANTS

6

PUBLIC HISTORY INITIATIVES

COORDINATED BY

Historians without Borders in Finland

PROJECT PARTNERS

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

SUPPORTED BY

Nordic Council of Ministers

EVENT PARTNERS

Tallinn University • ICD Academy for
Cultural Diplomacy

Background

In Russia, history has become increasingly intertwined with state ideology, public mobilisation, and foreign policy. School textbooks, commemorative practices, state-funded media, and public institutions present the past through themes of national unity, sacrifice, external threat, and imperial continuity. This narrows the space for critical debate and makes independent historical work more vulnerable.

For historians and educators connected to Russia, the consequences have been practical as well as intellectual, and in some cases personal and political. Many have faced censorship, archive restrictions, loss of employment, closure of institutional spaces, pressure to align with official narratives, or direct persecution because of their professional or public positions. Some left Russia after 2022 because staying had become unsafe or professionally impossible; others were already working abroad, but the war changed the conditions and risks of their work. Under these conditions, many had to rebuild their professional lives without stable affiliation, reliable funding, recognised credentials, or access to familiar archives and professional networks.

These pressures affect more than individual careers. They also change how the past can be researched and taught, as well as how historical knowledge can be shared and trusted. As archives become inaccessible, institutions are closed, and public debate is restricted, historians need ways to preserve sources, continue research and teaching, and remain connected to wider publics. This creates a need for more than emergency support. It also requires professional exchange and practical forms of cooperation across institutions and borders.

The project was designed with the Nordic and Baltic regions in mind. Russian memory politics matters in the region because narratives about Russia, the Soviet past, and the war in Ukraine circulate across borders, languages, and communities. In the Baltic countries and the Nordic region, these narratives intersect with debates over Soviet occupation, war memory, minority perspectives, and Russian-speaking communities. Historical disinformation complicates these debates, with consequences for education, media literacy, public trust, and social cohesion.

For this reason, the project did not treat historians in exile only as a professional group in need of support. It also saw them as professionals whose expertise could inform public and educational discussions about Russian memory politics and its implications for Nordic and Baltic societies. Their knowledge and experience of displacement can help audiences understand how historical narratives are constructed, how propaganda shapes perceptions of the past as well as the present, and why these questions matter in the region.

The project therefore had two connected purposes: **to create space for dialogue and professional continuity among displaced Russian-speaking historians**, and to **connect their expertise with Nordic and Baltic discussions on history education, public history, democratic resilience, and difficult pasts**. Over two years, it developed both as a support framework for historians in exile and as a contribution to wider regional debate.

Project Approach

The project was structured around two linked formats: public seminars and focused Russian-language professional dialogues. The public seminars opened the discussion to wider audiences, while the smaller professional dialogues gave historians in exile space to discuss their own work and circumstances.

Over the project's two years, public events were organised in Helsinki, Stockholm, Tallinn, and Potsdam/Berlin in cooperation with local partners. They were held in a hybrid format and brought together historians, educators, journalists, representatives of civil society organisations, and members of the public. The first-year seminars focused on how history and memory are used politically in Russia, the teaching of Russian and Soviet history, and the challenges of public memory in democratic societies. In the second year, the Potsdam event, organised with the Institute for Cultural Diplomacy, placed these questions in a wider European and comparative context. It addressed memory politics in Russia and Germany, *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (coming to terms with the past) as a global challenge, and the role of Historians without Borders as a platform for dialogue.

The public events gave the professional dialogues a wider context. The two formats addressed different questions: the smaller meetings focused on participants' professional risks and needs, points of disagreement, and possible forms of cooperation.

In the facilitated professional meetings, participants spoke from their own experience and listened to one another. They discussed shared problems without pressure to reach agreement or formulate a public position. Using Russian as the working language allowed participants to discuss sensitive professional and ethical questions with precision and nuance, including the personal implications of displacement, uncertainty, and risk. It also meant that they did not have to translate or adapt what they said for an external audience. Participants differed in country of residence, professional status, public visibility, and exposure to risk. These differences remained part of the discussion as participants compared experiences and identified practical needs.

In the second project year, the work expanded to include the development of public history initiatives. A workshop on public history materials brought together selected participants working on these initiatives and invited experts in media, education, art, and youth engagement. The workshop helped participants draw on their research and the questions raised in the dialogues as they developed their projects for wider audiences.

Historical Work under Conditions of Displacement

The professional dialogues showed that **displacement changes what historians can do, not just where they work**. Participants spoke about losing access to familiar institutions and archives, and about the difficulty of continuing their research and teaching in new academic, cultural, and linguistic environments. Previous affiliations and credentials did not always carry the same weight in new settings, and established research agendas could be difficult to continue. Those who already had professional contacts outside Russia were often better placed to find temporary positions, institutional support, and practical guidance, while others had to build such networks from scratch. Emergency fellowships and short-term positions provided crucial support, but rarely offered long-term stability. **Professional continuity depended on more than individual effort**. It also required access to institutions, funding, peer networks, and public platforms.

Access to archives emerged as one of the central concerns. Many collections in Russia and Belarus have become increasingly difficult to access, especially those dealing with political repression, state security institutions, and other politically sensitive subjects. At the same time, historians have turned to archives and memory institutions in other former Soviet republics, digitised collections, personal archives, and cross-border exchanges of source materials. These practices suggest that, for many participants, historical research can continue without relying entirely on institutions and archives located in Russia. Such work, however, requires trust, technical skills, and careful attention to security.

The dialogues also highlighted ethical and practical questions that have become more acute since 2022. Participants discussed how to cooperate with colleagues who remain in Russia, how to protect interviewees and research contacts, and how to decide what can be shared publicly. They also discussed professional relationships with Ukrainian and Belarusian colleagues and the challenges of becoming established in the academic communities of their countries of residence. These questions have no single answer. What is possible depends on changing risks, institutional contexts, and each researcher's circumstances.

Participants also reflected on the public role of historians in exile. They discussed the pressure to respond to current events and to explain Russia, the war, and Soviet legacies to international audiences. This role can be important, but it can also limit how their expertise is understood. The challenge is to contribute their historical expertise to public debate **without treating them primarily as witnesses to repression and displacement or as political commentators**.

Displacement has also led historians to adapt their work. Some research agendas have shifted towards oral history work with émigré communities, comparative regional studies, digital humanities, and work with visual materials. Historians have also relied on public engagement, sources outside Russia, and informal peer support. Exile has disrupted historical work and changed how historians conduct research, use sources, and collaborate.

The dialogues showed that displacement changes where historical knowledge is produced, how professional communities stay connected, and which kinds of expertise become more visible in public life. They also highlighted the importance of professional environments in which historians can continue research, exchange ideas, and reach wider audiences.

Professional Exchange and Cooperation

One of the clearest outcomes was a more active network for professional exchange among historians working across countries and institutions. The project did not create a formal organisation, but it did establish a channel through which historians in exile could share information, ask for advice, exchange contacts, and identify collaborators. Over time, the channel became a practical tool. With around 40 participants, it is now used to share vacancies, funding and publication opportunities, information about archives, teaching resources, professional contacts, and practical advice.

Russian remains important as a working language within the network because it allows participants to discuss sources, historiography, terminology, and professional dilemmas with precision. It also supports a form of peer exchange that is harder to reproduce in public English-language settings, where participants often first have to explain the broader political context.

One practical idea that emerged from the dialogues was an exchange of skills and expertise. Participants explored ways of sharing expertise, skills, and resources already present within the community without creating a new organisation. This could include academic knowledge as well as practical know-how: how to locate and access historical sources while working outside Russia, prepare funding applications, navigate different academic systems, find institutional contacts, develop public history formats, and work across languages. The discussions made clear that historians in exile have expertise, but do not always have a structure for using it collectively.

The discussions also raised the question of what kind of structure could sustain this exchange. Participants considered several models, including a new association, cooperation through existing organisations, smaller project-based groups, and the continued use of the existing informal communication channel. No particular model was agreed upon. The discussions suggested, however, that a highly formalised structure would be premature, while an exchange relying entirely on voluntary effort would remain fragile.

Professional exchange became one of the project's main outcomes: a way to make existing expertise more visible, connect people across countries, and support small-scale collaboration. The next question is whether this exchange can be sustained with a modest amount of coordination.

Public History Initiatives

The public history initiatives were among the main outputs of the second project year. They grew out of the professional dialogues and were designed to bring research-based historical work to audiences outside academic and specialist circles.

Participants in the professional dialogues developed **six initiatives**. They differed in format, theme, and audience, but shared a common aim: **to make complex historical questions accessible without oversimplifying them**. They used digital, audiovisual, place-based, and educational formats, including multilingual materials.

The themes reflected the range of questions explored during the project, including Russian memory politics and history education, marginalised histories, the memory of forced labour, and Soviet and post-Soviet legacies. Several initiatives also addressed Indigenous, minority, queer, and religious histories that are often marginalised in accounts of Russia and the Soviet Union. The choice of format shaped how each initiative approached its subject and audience. People often encounter history outside academic texts, so participants had to consider accessibility, language, and trust.

This work was also relevant to Russian-speaking youth in Nordic and Baltic countries and elsewhere in Europe. Many young people encounter conflicting accounts of the past at school, in their families, and through media in different languages. They do not always have clear ways to distinguish historical analysis from propaganda, oversimplification, or inherited stereotypes. The initiatives pointed to the need for accessible, source-based materials in several languages that help young people critically assess historical claims without stigmatising Russian-speaking communities.

In developing the initiatives, historians worked **not only as researchers but also as editors, translators, interviewers, scriptwriters, moderators, and media producers**. This did not replace scholarly work, but it showed how academic expertise could be used differently when institutional support was limited.

The initiatives were modest in scale, but they turned discussions within the network into work intended for wider audiences. They also offered historians in exile ways to contribute to public debate and cooperate with schools, cultural institutions, media, and civil society organisations.

Outcomes and Future Development

The project produced results in three connected areas: public events and discussion of Russian memory politics in Nordic and Baltic countries and elsewhere in Europe, professional exchange among historians in exile, and six public history initiatives developed during the second project year.

One of the clearest lessons was that dialogue matters when trust, language, and awareness of risk shape what can be said. The focused professional dialogues created space to address the professional consequences of displacement, cooperation with colleagues still in Russia, difficulties with archival access, and questions of public visibility and safety. The dialogues allowed participants to share their experiences and clarify what kinds of support were actually useful.

The project also made clear that **short-term fellowships and other temporary opportunities, while important, do not solve the problem of professional continuity**. Historians in exile need help finding longer-term positions or host institutions that can provide a more stable affiliation. Professional networks can support this transition by sharing information and contacts and by helping participants find publication opportunities and reach wider audiences.

The discussions also highlighted two practical questions for follow-up work: how historians in exile could contribute to public debate while protecting people still exposed to risk, and how cooperation could be sustained without creating a formal structure too soon. The discussions did not point to a single organisational model. **A flexible arrangement with modest coordination nevertheless appeared to be the most realistic next step**. It would allow different levels of visibility and participation, depending on the risks faced by participants and their contacts.

In practice, this would mean continuing to moderate the communication channel and creating opportunities for participants to share skills and expertise. Work with partner organisations could continue without first creating a new association. Historians without Borders could remain a useful partner, offering professional contacts and support for future funding applications or publications while giving greater visibility to participants' work.

A follow-up publication based on the project, with contributions from participants, is already being prepared. **No funding or institutional base has yet been secured for work beyond this publication**. Further development would require either a small coordination grant or a partner institution willing to host the work. Project-based working groups could then carry forward specific initiatives.

The main priorities are to sustain professional exchange among historians in exile and develop multilingual, source-based public history materials for wider audiences. This work will require cooperation with educational, cultural, and media organisations and modest resources for coordination. Without this support, participants can remain in contact, but the network and its public history work are unlikely to develop much further.

Conclusion

From the outset, History in Exile combined public events in Nordic, Baltic, and wider European contexts with focused Russian-language professional dialogues among historians whose work had been affected by war, repression, and displacement. During the second year, participants drew on these discussions and the professional connections they had made through the project to develop public history work.

The project showed that historians in exile face more than the loss of workplaces, access to archives, or institutional affiliation. They also have to rebuild the conditions needed for their work to circulate and reach audiences, and for them to maintain their professional standing. At the same time, participants developed new ways of working in response to displacement, including peer exchange, public history initiatives, methodological reflection, and cross-border collaboration.

The project also made the work and expertise of historians in exile more visible in public debate. Participants contributed as researchers and public historians, without being treated primarily as witnesses to repression or displacement or expected to act as commentators on current events. Their knowledge matters for understanding Russian memory politics and can also inform debates in Nordic and Baltic societies and elsewhere in Europe about history education, the role of propaganda, the inclusion of minority perspectives, and public engagement with difficult pasts.

The public history initiatives developed during the second project year were designed to reach audiences beyond academia and will be shared through different platforms.

The next stage should focus on maintaining professional exchange and developing public history materials in cooperation with partner organisations. Continuing this work would not require a new formal organisation at this stage, but it would require modest resources for coordination.

History in Exile showed that **historical work under conditions of repression and displacement cannot be sustained by individual effort alone. The project's most tangible legacy is the informal professional network it helped build.** The communication channel and working relationships established among participants provide a basis for continued research, professional exchange, and public history work.

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ISBN 978-952-65844-2-3 (print)

ISBN 978-952-65844-3-0 (PDF)

ISSN 2984-0988

The History in Exile project is supported by
the Nordic Council of Ministers



Funded by the
Nordic Council
of Ministers

Project partners



The Swedish Historical
Society



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