Historians without Borders

METHOD BRIEF

HISTORY DIALOGUE

Engaging with difficult and contested pasts

History Dialogue can contribute to conflict prevention, reconciliation and peacebuilding.

Developed by Historians without Borders in Finland



PHOTO: MIKAEL KINANEN, 2026

WHAT IS HISTORY DIALOGUE?

Difficult pasts rarely remain in the past. Competing interpretations of history continue to shape identities, political claims and relationships within and between communities.

WHAT THE METHOD BRINGS TOGETHER

History Dialogue is a structured, facilitated method for engaging with difficult or contested pasts. It brings historical research, collective memories, lived experience and different interpretations into the same conversation.

Memories and narratives convey experience and meaning, but the factual claims they contain remain open to source criticism. Historical research rests on sources, transparent argument and critical scrutiny. Listening to different perspectives does not mean treating every interpretation as equally well founded.

UNDERSTANDING, NOT AGREEMENT

The aim is not to decide which narrative wins. It is to understand why narratives differ, what they mean to the people and communities concerned and how they continue to shape the present.

History Dialogue does not replace negotiation or decision-making. It can help researchers, communities and decision-makers clarify what is known, what remains disputed and why the past still matters. This can inform research, policy and further cooperation.

Understanding another narrative does not mean agreeing with it.

NOT A DEBATE. NOT A NEGOTIATION. A DIALOGUE.

WHEN CAN IT HELP?

History Dialogue can be useful when interpretations of the past continue to shape present-day relationships, public debate or conflict.

SITUATION	WHAT DIALOGUE CAN CONTRIBUTE
CONFLICTING MEMORIES	Bring different narratives into view and examine why they remain divisive.
POLITICAL OR POLARISED USES OF HISTORY	Examine the evidence behind historical claims, how narratives are framed and the purposes they may serve.
HISTORICAL ROOTS OF CONFLICT	Explore how past injustices, decisions and experiences continue to shape present-day relationships.
RELATIONS BETWEEN COMMUNITIES	Build mutual understanding without requiring agreement on a single account of the past.
COMMEMORATION OR EDUCATION	Ask whose experiences are included, whose are absent and how the past is presented.

KEY MESSAGE

History Dialogue does not resolve conflict on its own. By making historical barriers to cooperation visible and open to discussion, it can contribute to conflict prevention, reconciliation and peacebuilding.

HOW DOES IT WORK?

History Dialogue is not a fixed script. Each process must be adapted to its local, national or cross-border context. The method is summarised here in five connected elements.

1 Identify the question

Begin with a question that matters to the people involved.

Identify the narratives, sources, experiences and disagreements that need to be explored. Be clear about the purpose of the dialogue and how the discussion may be documented or used.

2 Bring together different perspectives

A group of 8-15 participants is usually small enough for everyone to speak and broad enough to include different perspectives.

Seek diversity in background, experience and relevant knowledge. Do not divide the group into opposing camps or assign participants fixed representative roles.

3 Prepare the facilitation and build trust

Choose a facilitator who is properly prepared, understands both the subject and the participating groups, and is trusted by the participants.

The facilitator needs enough subject knowledge to recognise what is at stake, but should not dominate as the leading expert. The role is to keep the process open, focused and fair.

Acknowledge differences in status and power from the outset. Allow at least several hours; difficult issues may require a full day or a series of meetings.

LISTEN. QUESTION. COMPARE. REFLECT.

4 Listen, question and compare

Listen without interruption and, where useful, summarise what you have heard before responding.

Treat narratives as starting points for inquiry, not as conclusions. Compare them with one another and, where appropriate, with historical research and sources. Claims about the past remain open to questioning and assessment against the best available evidence.

Explore how evidence, lived experience and meanings attached to the past relate to one another. Historical empathy helps participants understand circumstances and choices; it does not excuse harmful actions or poorly supported claims.

5 Reflect and document what has changed

Close the dialogue by asking:
1. Was I mainly trying to prove that my own narrative was right or stronger than others?
2. What changed - or became more complex - in my own understanding?

Success is not the same as consensus. A useful dialogue may clarify what is known, what remains disputed and why the disagreement matters.

If a report is produced, participants should review how their contributions are represented. The report records perspectives and insights; it is not a research finding, an expert verdict or a mandate from a wider community.

Agreement may emerge, but it should not be forced. No vote decides which narrative has "won".

WHAT SHOULD BE CONSIDERED?

History Dialogue requires time, trust and careful preparation.

TRUST, EQUALITY & SAFETY

Power and status do not disappear around a table. Make room for every voice. Agree in advance how contributions will be recorded, attributed and reported, and ensure that they cannot be used to cause harm.

EVIDENCE & MEMORY

Memory is indispensable for understanding experience and meaning. Like other sources, it must be read in context and assessed critically. Open listening does not make all historical claims equally well founded.

EMPATHY, NOT EXONERATION

Historical empathy asks how people understood their circumstances and choices. It helps explain actions; it does not excuse harm or suspend ethical judgement.

DIALOGUE HAS LIMITS

Dialogue cannot replace research, negotiation, political decisions, or legal, economic and reparative measures. It can help us understand why divisions persist and where further action may become possible.

A GROWING BODY OF PRACTICE

SELECTED HISTORY DIALOGUE PROCESSES, 2017-2026

History Dialogue has been developed through community, national and cross-border processes. Practice - including difficult and incomplete processes - is part of how the method is tested, refined and made more responsible.

- **2017** — Ukrainian and Russian historians
- **2018** — Citizen panels on memories of the Finnish Civil War; diaspora groups originating from the former Yugoslavia
- **2020** — Nordic and Belarusian historians
- **2021-22** — Pilot dialogue involving members of Finland's Roma community and the majority population
- **2023** — Finnish and Estonian historians
- **2024-26** — History in Exile: Russian history and memory politics in the Nordic and Baltic countries



History in Exile workshop, 2026. Photo: Mikael Kinanen.

Historians without Borders

FORTHCOMING PUBLICATION

THE HISTORY DIALOGUE GUIDE

FINNISH EDITION 2027 · ENGLISH EDITION TO FOLLOW

Authors: Pertti Grönholm · Sirkka Ahonen · Jan Löfström

The guide brings together the conceptual foundations of History Dialogue, practical guidance and lessons learned from earlier dialogues.

ABOUT US

Historians without Borders in Finland brings historical research into public discussion and promotes the responsible and constructive use of historical knowledge where interpretations of the past shape identities, politics and conflict.

History Dialogue was developed by Historians without Borders in Finland. It draws on the principles and tools of Timeout, developed by Sitra, the Finnish Innovation Fund, together with organisations and experts.

CONTACT

Historians without Borders in Finland
info@hwb.fi · historianswithoutborders.fi
Vellamonkatu 30 B, 3rd floor · 00550 Helsinki · Finland

VISIT OUR WEBSITE