

ANALYZE THE PAST, THINK OF THE FUTURE...

P. S. TO DIALOGUE OF RUSSIAN
AND ESTONIAN HISTORIANS

Tallinn hosted the International scientific conference "Russia and Baltic Region in XVIII-XX Centuries. Problems of Mutual Understanding in the Changing World." It was organized by the General History Institute at the Russian Academy of Sciences and the History Institute at the Tallinn University. The first Russian-Estonian conference of

historians organized after Estonia regained independence was held in Tallinn in 2009. The second one was hosted by Moscow and the International Amber Bridge Association participated in it. The latest third conference in the same format continued to discuss key issues in the history of relationship between Baltic countries and Russia.

The first of the six sessions of the conference opened with a report Baltic Germans on the Diplomatic Service to the Russian Empire. Director of the Historic and Documentary department of the Russian foreign ministry Alexander Kuznetsov analyzed the issue on the basis of valuable archive materials and focused on important practical aspects for the history of Russian diplomacy. There were numerous questions to the lecturer, in particular, about the outstanding role of ethnic Russian diplomats born in Baltic provinces. He answered: "We speak about professional capabilities and qualities of then representatives of diplomatic corps. Attempts to distinguish anyone from outstanding diplomats by ethnic origin or religion are fruitless because in contrast to current trends supported by some or many people they were not considered as criteria in the Russian Empire."

SOCIETY WITH CONFLICTING MEMORY IS UNSUSTAINABLE

Senior staffer of the History Institute of Tallinn University Magnus Ilmarv addressed the conference with Hitler's Rise to Power in Germany - USSR and Baltic countries in 1933. Actually the sphere of his scientific interests and research is much broader.

According to Professor Ilmarv, disputes about history remain one of the main obstacles for Estonia in creating a single political nation. The scholar believes the problem can be resolved by shifting the focus of research of modern Estonian historians.

— Quo vadis – where are you going? – according to the legend the question was referred by Apostle Peter to Jesus Christ. It inspired many creative people. Polish writer

Henryk Sienkiewicz (the first Russian winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature) even wrote a historic novel with such a title. I would like to re-phrase the question: where is Estonia going in its understanding of the past and historic memory?

The 1939-1945 developments in Baltic countries offer a historic issue which still remain in the focus of attention and impedes normalization of relations between the Baltic countries and Russia. As for our country, the Estonian past related to the 1939-1940 developments greatly determines our perceptions of the present and ourselves, Ilmarv said. Simply speaking I believe one of the basic narratives of our culture is the perception of the struggle for the independence of Estonian people.

This basic Estonian narrative moves conflicts to the foreground and leaves successful cooperation experi-

ence with eastern neighbors in the background. Besides, the approach focuses on concrete events in political history and pays little attention in historic research to gradual positive evolution in Estonian social and cultural history.

For example, preconditions for Estonian independence were created in the XVI century.

In the XVIII century the Estonian territory was included into multinational Russian Empire where Estonians enjoyed privileges granted by Russian authorities. In early XIX century, fifty years earlier than in Russia, Estonia abolished serfdom and eliminated feudal vestiges.

In the second half of the XIX century national literature, press, national school of arts appeared in Estonia. Understanding of history, traditions, national culture emerged. All that happened while Estonia was within the Russian Empire, the scholar said. The flourishing of national literature was also a result of Russification reform carried out in the Russian Empire.

The historian believes Russification helped Estonians get higher education in the

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best Russian universities. Russian-speaking Estonians and Latvians enjoyed a possibility to occupy state and municipal positions. In early XX century after the first Russian revolution Estonians and Latvians could have seats in the State Duma and participate in the governance of the Russian Empire.



The knowledge of the Russian language raised the educational level of Estonian population which, in turn, promoted the proclamation of Estonian independence in 1918.

After World War Two the independence was lost, the scholar reminded. However there were always people in Baltic republics who believe it is possible to go back to 1939 which they perceive as paradise. The people are still portraying the period between the wars as decades of general welfare for Estonia, Ilmjarv said.

In this connection he made it clear there were actually two Soviet Unions: the first one existed up to 1956 and the second one was more vegetarian and emerged after the XX congress of the Communist Party. The scholar

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believes Estonian historians pay little attention to Estonian stay in the second Soviet Union and the social history of the period.

The professor said Estonia currently has two memory communities. On the one hand, it is the Russian-speaking community whose historic memory is formed by the narrative about the Soviet victory over Nazism in the Great Patriotic War. On the other hand, there is the dominating Estonian community whose

historic memory is formed by the narrative about endless liberation struggle of the small Estonian nation for independence.

Society with confronting historical experience and different perceptions of history cannot be socially sustainable, Ilmjarv believes. It is necessary to look for points of coincidence also in history to reconcile two memory communities on certain issues. History will always influence modern times however historians can at least refrain from

fanning up passions and rather look for common reconciliation issues.

He believes a way out for Estonia is the rejection of the absolute domination of political history which studies wars and revolutions and a shift of the focus towards social and cultural history that mostly reconciles rather than divides memory communities.

WAS SOVIET EMPIRE DOOMED

Historians who analyze the developments of the second half of the '80s of the past century which led to regained independence of the Baltic republics still have no common opinion. Many Russian and western scholars believe that under certain circumstances

history could have developed differently and there would have been another outcome. Their opponents insist that everything was predetermined historically and there could be no other turn of develop-

ments. Tallinn University Professor Rein Ruutsoo believes nothing can be predetermined in history as it is always accidental.

"Why did I headline my speech as Regaining Independence by Baltic Countries and Restitution Project 1987-1991? Why did I call it restitution project? That is because it is the implication of all developments. They began with manifestations of young radicals and continued at the plenum of united creative unions.



The project of regained independence became nearly an accomplished fact in just one year. Perestroika supporters were uncomfortable with it and the reform drive lost momentum.

There was intense political gambling as the new draft Constitution was ready. In contrast to neighbors Estonians from the very beginning aimed at seceding from the Soviet Union. The 1991 coup attempt in August only accelerated the natural course of developments and changed the situation: regaining of independence acquired different contents which reserved no cautious looks at what Moscow and western countries think of it.

THE BROADER THE WORLDVIEW, THE MORE YOU CAN UNDERSTAND....

PhD History Alexander Sytin who represented the Russian Strategic Research Institute at the conference began his report Basic Traits

of Estonian-Russian Relations in 1993-2003 with the following words: "I arbitrarily chose the mentioned chronological framework because it is difficult to substantiate it from the point of view of history science. Nevertheless, I believe the decade is interesting from the point of view of relations of the two countries which built on post-Soviet collapse realities." During the break between sessions I asked what was the most unexpected in the research of the issue. Alexander Sytin replied:

"The biggest surprise was the reaction of colleagues-historians to my research and conclusions. It turned out that the issue which I thought was purely academic triggered major and acute interest. Anyway, everything related to the collapse of the huge country is painfully perceived today.

I was always interested in the correlation of the national and ethnic factors, Sytin continued. Modern history science and sociology do not like to study it for unknown reason. Each time I try to speak about it they always respond

it is not a scientific approach. But I believe it is the scientific approach to interesting problems. I believe the actions of early Popular Fronts and even further actions of Baltic governments were clearly affected by it. Until we do not see the social implication in the nationalities policy of some and national struggle of others we shall hardly understand everything to the end.

– From my point of view history is tough and cynical science. However it happens only if a historian is not emotionally linked to realities. It is impossible to imagine a person emotionally unrelated to any realities. However if a historian is heavily engaged his research will always be one-sided and his viewpoint will actually become a source of history. That



The scholar admitted that he welcomes the path traversed by the Baltic countries in the past years. He believes it has not been fully researched and perceived. All the developments in the past twenty years are covered by endless talk about national minorities, occupation, and removal of monument, on the one hand, and compensation for occupation and restoration of monument, on the other. It is understandable but unrelated to history. For history it is important how the situation affected the aspects which we distinguish in researching Russian-Estonian relationship, i.e. what happened in reality. The issue of the monument - where it stood, where it was removed, where it currently stands and how it is treated - is important but only for public opinion.

– *We are unlikely to judge the processes objectively until the events remain vital, i.e. until eye witnesses live. I mean until the developments become history.*

means when we speak about ideological, political, social and even economic crisis we see the background which enters our worldview system. The broader it is the more you can see.

Lecturers also focused on issues related to historic memory, the role of Baltic Germans and Estonians in the cultural and political life of the Russian Empire, the history of Orthodoxy in Estonia, Estonian-Soviet relations in 1920-1940, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and other important problems for the development of history science. The issues discussed at the conference are definitely of interest for broad public as they are both rooted in the past and relatively recent past and closely related to modern realities.

Inga Lumi,
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