

THE BALTIC STATES: HISTORY AND HISTORY EDUCATION

The Internationale Gesellschaft für Geschichtsdidaktik (International Society for History Didactics) met at the European Academy at Leck, Germany, September 9-12, 1991, for a conference on history and history education in the Baltic region. Scholars from Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Russia, Poland, Germany (including former East Germany), The Netherlands, and the United States participated. When plans had been laid for the conference more than a year earlier, no one could have foreseen the timeliness of the conference. During the August coup in what was then still the USSR, conference organizers wondered whether their Soviet colleagues on the program would be able to attend. Not only were they able to do so, but in the wake of the coup all resistance to the independence of the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania withered, and the participants were able to toast the freedom of all the states surrounding the Baltic.

A high point of the conference was the presentation by Dr. Silvia Oispuu, printed below. Her paper, which I edited for publication here, had a freshness and optimism appropriate for an historian and history teacher who, as she said, could celebrate that she "no longer had to teach lies." Some other participants raised questions in the discussion periods about whether the vigorous nationalism so evident in her paper would have to be modified in the long run, as Estonians realize that they will have to share their small country with citizens of other ethnic backgrounds. My own contribution to the conference, also printed below in an edited form, pointed out that American textbooks too often fall short of giving their readers the insights necessary for an appropriate treatment of this subject.

The Internationale Gesellschaft für Geschichtsdidaktik was founded more than a decade ago by Western Europeans interested in history education in its broadest sense. Over the years it has expanded to Eastern Europe and the Americas, and it has added several members from Asia and Africa. The papers below raise some interesting questions about what we learn from history and how we learn it. Dr. Oispuu's paper points out that the Soviet Union did everything possible to destroy the concept of an Estonian national history. Yet, given the opportunity, the distortions and outright lies of the old Soviet-dominated history have been swept aside, and historians, teachers, and students, are now studying the national history of the Estonian people. As we Americans enter the post-Cold War world, we would do well to ponder the significance of the questions raised here.

Editorial Note by Gordon R. Mork, Purdue University