

TEACHING HISTORY IN ESTONIA, YESTERDAY AND TODAY

Silvia Oispuu

Head of the Department of Educational Research
Tallinn Teachers' Training Institute
Tallinn, Estonia

Introduction

As you know, Estonian history, and therefore history teaching in Estonia, is very complicated. Estonians often have had to fight against foreign authorities even while these foreign invaders fought over Estonia among themselves. Estonia, or some part of it, was once governed by medieval orders of Germanic knights, by the kings of Denmark, Sweden, and Poland, by the Russian czars, and by both the Nazi and the Soviet governments. An independent Estonian Republic existed only from 1918 to 1940. According to the Peace Treaty of Tartu of February 2, 1920, Soviet Russia recognized Estonia as a *de jure* independent state and renounced voluntarily and forever all rights of sovereignty formerly held by Russia over the Estonian people and territory.

Unfortunately, as we know, historical events developed in another way.

Already more than half a century has passed since the catastrophe that befell the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. For foreigners it is difficult to understand the magnitude of this catastrophe. The exact number of those deported by Soviet power is still not accurately known, but it is difficult to find a family whose relatives the deportations did not touch.

Our situation was so tragic that for almost fifty years we were not publicly permitted to call Estonia our homeland. Even in our elementary school textbooks the official line was "our native country--the USSR." We had to ignore everything national, virtually eliminating the word "Estonia." Only in the song festivals, especially at the end of a festival, could the Estonian people express their national feelings. At the end of the official finale of a festival, after the official anthems of the Soviet Union and the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic were presented by the choir, the people stood and sang together with the choir the song "My Native Land Is My Love." The author of the words was the poet of the era of Estonian national awakening in the nineteenth century, Lydia Koidula, and the composer of the melody was the most popular choir conductor during the last half of the century, Gustav Ernesaks. Almost all the people would be in tears.

With this background, the outbreak of our "singing revolution" of 1988 becomes understandable. It proclaimed the beginning of the new era of national awakening. Again we began to sing the Estonian national anthem and other national songs. Quickly new national songs were composed. One of the most popular songs was composed by two young men, Alo Mattisen and Jueri Leesment. It begins "I am an Estonian, I will remain an Estonian, because I was created an Estonian."

Our national flag, three horizontal stripes of blue, black, and white, had long been banned. But on the evening of February 23, 1989, the flag of Soviet

Estonia was lowered from the tower of Pikk Herman Castle in our capital, and, on February 24, the national flag was raised.

Now that Estonia has declared its independence, there remain a great many economic, political, and cultural problems to be resolved. Every field of society, including education, needs reorganization. I shall describe the teaching of history to 1988 and then turn to our work in reorganizing the teaching of history in Estonia today.

The Teaching of History to 1988

During the period of independence before 1940, both world history and the history of Estonia were taught in our schools. Great emphasis was placed upon the history of our native country. Our schools inspired a love for their native country in the children. According to the last curriculum guidelines of the Estonian Republic issued before the Soviet takeover, there were three main objectives:

1. To promote in the students an acquaintance with the past and an understanding of the present; to excite an interest in history; to familiarize the students with the political and cultural history of their own nation and of other nations.
2. To develop historical thinking; to shape the will to participate in constructive work both in political and in cultural life.
3. To implant into the students a more profound understanding and appreciation of cultural values of our own nation and of mankind, as well as feelings of both national and international solidarity.

When the Soviet Union took power in Estonia in 1940, radical changes took place in the teaching of history. History teaching in Estonia became similar to that in the USSR. After the Second World War the course in Estonian history vanished. Two history courses were taught, the history of the Soviet Union (really it was Russian history) and the history of foreign countries. The history of our own republic was taught only very superficially. Officially it was called "questions on the history of Estonia in the course of the history of the Soviet Union." These "questions" had to be taught within the framework of Soviet history. All guidelines for history teaching and all history textbooks were compiled in Moscow, and we were obliged to translate them word for word. There were textbooks and programs on Estonian history that were prepared in Estonia, but their contents had to be analyzed in Moscow.

All courses in the social studies had to be based only on the ideology of the Communist party. The leading concept of the national policy of the Soviet Union was the formulation of a historically new human society, "the Soviet nation." History had to be presented as a predetermined sequence of events. A great deal of attention was paid to class relationships and class struggle. Revolutionary

violence was presented in an elevated manner. We had to teach Estonian history too on the basis of such a scheme. In Estonia, Soviet historians revised Estonian history, with the result that the history of the independent Estonian Republic became a history of class struggle. The War of Independence of 1918-1920 was considered a civil war and a class war. The period of the republic was called "Estonia in the period of bourgeois dictatorship." The period from March 1934 to 1940 was called "Estonia in the period of fascist dictatorship." Our students did not get to know about the economic and cultural achievements of the independent Estonian Republic.

Our achievements by 1940 were similar to those of our neighbor Finland. Therefore, we would presume that if our life had proceeded in a normal way, we would be living today very much as people do in Finland. But you know only too well what the situation in Estonia and the other Baltic states really has been. For that reason Estonians are especially indignant. We lost fifty years in our development.

Now I want to make one admission. Inevitably I had to describe the situation that occurred with the teaching of history in Estonia and with the life of the Estonians during the Soviet occupation and the part played by the officials in Moscow. We know that many people are now supporting democracy in Russia. There were progressive thinkers in Russia among the historians as well. In the All-Union Pedagogical Academy in Moscow many research workers were most supportive of the representatives from the Baltic republics. Though we criticize the Soviet system, we do not wish to insult these good friends.

Reorganization of the Teaching of History since 1988

Our active reorganization of the Estonian education system, including the teaching of history, actually began in 1987. In that year the Congress of Estonian Teachers began some very intensive discussion on how to transform both our educational system and the content of the education. In 1988 we already had teams working out programs for all subjects. (Directly translated, we called them the "bees of thought.") As a result of the work of the history curriculum group, the preliminary conception and programs were published in 1990 and from 1990/91 onward history teaching has been based on these three programs.

Our most important task was to reform the content of historical education and to decide which structure was best fitted for the purpose. The teachers, students, parents, and community did not want us to continue teaching falsified history in our schools. Old textbooks were thrown out and new ones were demanded.

According to our conception, the teaching of history occurs (a) by the systematic learning to know the life of a society that most characterizes the corresponding era and (b) by understanding the problems of contemporary society and making them meaningful. We formulated objectives for the study of history

under three headings: knowledge, skills, and attitudes. (Actually, I have my doubts that the three can be strictly separated.)

With these objectives we have accentuated the following:

1. students should have an all-around understanding of the major stages of the historical evolution of humankind and a systematic understanding of Estonian history from ancient times to the present day.

2. students should have enough knowledge to analyze human culture and the reality that surrounds us in order to find their way within the flood of information dealing with the evolution of the life of society. They should be able to adapt themselves to the ever-changing world, to maintain a critical attitude toward the phenomena of social life, and to contribute actively to the development of the society.

We have a twelve-year school system. According to our present program, history is taught in grades six through twelve as a single world history course (from ancient history to the twentieth century, including Estonian history and the history of the present day Soviet Republics). In the eleventh grade of secondary school a systematic course on Estonian history is taught.

The content of history teaching has been changed thoroughly. I will cite below some examples from the course of Estonian history. Most falsified was the history of the twentieth century, but many falsifications occurred in the history of the earlier period too. Working out the content of history teaching for the twentieth century was very difficult. As I have said above, all of Estonian history had been revised on the basis of the Soviet model. Therefore, absolutely all history books compiled and published by Estonian historians between 1940 and 1988 were falsified.

Only progressive-minded historians participated in our curriculum group. With the help of these scholars we worked out new programs. But much more difficult was compiling new textbooks. Especially necessary was getting quickly a new textbook for the study of Estonian history. In the school year 1989/90 we decided to begin teaching a systematic course on the history of our native country. In 1989 I called together eighteen historians and we compiled the new textbook. A genuine miracle occurred under these conditions: After half a year the book was compiled and published. At the same time the Ministry of Education advertised a competition for another new textbook on Estonian history. In the coming school year this textbook will be published. But the previous textbook was revised and will now be published not as a school textbook but as a trade book for sale to the general public.

All of the new textbooks for world history are now compiled; some will be published in 1991, some later. Our teachers are in a very difficult situation now, because there is a serious shortage of textbooks. But Estonia as a whole is in a very difficult situation and must survive this transition period. There is no other way out.

Now I will turn to some examples of the differences between the treatment of Estonian history under the Soviets and the new treatment.

One of the differences concerns the treatment of earlier history, particularly the treatment of czarist Russia as a colonial empire, similar to other empires, that conquered Estonia. For example, in the Soviet textbook it was written that uniting Estonia with Russia in 1710 had a very great and progressive importance. Nothing was mentioned about the ravaging of Estonia by the Russian army. Now in the new textbook there will be a description of the events of the war, and the way things really were. On Estonian territory foreign forces fought each other. From the standpoint of Estonia, all these forces were conquerors, including the Russian forces. And as a matter of fact, the ravages of the Russian army were the most terrible. Especially brutal was Field Marshall Sheremetjev (naturally at the command of Peter I). Conscientiously he reported to Peter I what kind of territory was ravaged. In January 1702 the whole district of Tartu was ravaged. In August 1703 the towns of Rakvere, Paide, Viljandi and other Estonian district towns were conquered and burned. In July 1708 Tartu was fully destroyed. No house was left.

The time of the Great Northern War, 1700-1721, was one of the hardest periods in Estonian history. As a result of the war itself and the accompanying plague two-thirds of the Estonians were destroyed. The Estonians were in danger of dying out. The previous textbooks did not speak about all of that. Instead, they emphasized the positive importance of the results of the Great Northern War in the life of the Estonian people.

There are very great differences between the previous and the new textbooks concerning the history of the independent Republic of Estonia, 1918-1940. Now students have the possibility of getting acquainted thoroughly with the evolution of economic, political, and cultural life of this period.

The events of 1939 and 1940, and the Soviet period, are now treated quite differently. While earlier textbooks said nothing about the secret protocols of the so-called Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, now the text of this document will be presented in the textbook. The students may now know that the fate of sovereign, independent peoples was decided between the two dictators.

In the previous textbook it was written that the bourgeois dictatorship in Estonia was overthrown by working people and that Estonia voluntarily joined the Soviet Union. In that book there were descriptions of the construction of socialism in the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic in sympathy with the Soviet system. Although in the textbooks of the more recent past (under the Soviets) there was some mention of shortcomings during the Soviet period, there were no doubts expressed about the rightness of the socialist choice.

Now the new textbook gives a true survey of the events in 1940. On June 16, 1940, Estonia received from the USSR an ultimatum that required an answer within eight and one-half hours. The ultimatum demanded, among other things, the reorganization of the Estonian government. The Soviet Union broke all its contractual pledges with respect to Estonian sovereignty and its obligation to abstain from interference in Estonian internal affairs. The Red Army occupied

Estonia during the night of June 17-18, 1940. On June 19 the representative of the Soviet Union, Andrei Zhdanov, arrived in the capital, Tallinn, to direct the incorporation of Estonia into the Soviet Union.

In this essay I have insufficient space to describe all the events of 1940. In our new textbook these events will be dealt with thoroughly. I will say only that both the president, Konstantin Päts, and the armed forces chief, Johan Laidoner, were arrested and deported with their families to the Soviet Union already in July 1940, before Estonia was officially incorporated into the USSR on August 6, 1940.

In our new textbooks the process of sovietization of life in Estonia will be described. I will say only the following: It began with the destruction of life at every level.

1. The destruction of social life: It began immediately with the destruction of all free organizations and institutions in the service of society at every level. All the cultural, social, educational, economic, and other institutions and organizations were destined for the same fate. The expressive example of the result of this destruction was the lack of ability to think independently.

2. The destruction of economic life: the nationalization of industry and the revaluation of the Estonian currency. Estonia was completely isolated from normal economic intercourse and relations with the free world. The land was expropriated from those who cultivated it. Within a short time there was a frightening drop in the standard of living.

3. The destruction of cultural life: A beginning was immediately made in the field of education. The demolition of the Estonian educational system was begun, including the universities. The fate of the libraries at every level was dismal. The works published during the period of the Estonian Republic were destined for removal and destruction. The books were hacked into pieces with axes.

The higher spiritual life was equally savaged. Religion became a chief target. All free creativity was paralyzed.

I have confined myself to the examples above, although more consideration ought to be given to the special problem of the deportations of the Estonian people.

The changes in the content of teaching Estonian history and world history are very great. In contrast to our old programs, now the histories of all the states of the Baltic Sea area are studied in our schools.

We consider it very important that learning the circumstances of historical events ought not to create negative attitudes toward one or another nation. The students must understand that a nation as a whole is not guilty. But inevitably the historical events of one or another period influence people's attitudes. In other times these attitudes have been different. But we have no solid sociological studies concerning this problem, and we have no studies about the earlier period at all.

Therefore, in all my official presentations I simply say that one cannot tell about attitudes. In the minds of the Estonians both sympathies and antipathies exist. And to all people they are well known.

The Perspective for the Future

Parallel with the first step of reorganization of our educational system and the content of that education (including history education), we have begun a second step. The Education Research Institute of Tallinn Teacher's Training Institute is investigating the content of education. We are working out conceptions and programs for all the subjects.

The second stage of reorganization of our educational system and the contents of education will be done thoroughly. We are most interested in the experience of other countries. For my research group this means: (a) We want to familiarize ourselves with the conceptions and teaching methods of the social studies in other countries; and (b) we would like to find out which research methods are being used to investigate both content and methods of teaching. But it is not easy at all.

I finished writing my presentation in the middle of August 1991. At the end of the presentation was the following sentence: "The Baltic states never voluntarily joined the Soviet Union, so they do not need to secede, they just need the occupation to end and their independence restored. I call upon you to support us in our endeavors to restore our independence. We want to rejoin the free nations of Europe."

I am very happy that now already [September 1991] many countries have recognized the independence of the Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian Republics. We are convinced of this: The Baltic states will be peaceful and friendly states toward all other countries, including the Soviet Union.

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