

## Learning about the Baltic States:

### A Council of Europe seminar held in Tallinn

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by Leonard Grech

It is surely not an everyday experience to be among forty foreign participants coming from eleven different countries discussing such a controversial topic as the Baltic States during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.



Vytautas Landsbergis

The memory of great personalities such as Vytautas Landsbergis of Lithuania, and significant events that took place during 1988 and 1989, came to mind when I attended a Council of Europe seminar held in Tallinn last September.

I distinctly remember how in 1988 around 300,000 Estonians gathered in Tallinn (the capital city situated in the north of Estonia) to sing forbidden national songs. This became known as the ‘Singing Revolution’.

I also recall how in August 1989, around two million people from

Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania formed a human chain on the Tallinn-Vilnius road and demanded freedom from the Soviet Union.



The Council of Europe gives great importance to the teaching and learning of history. It is a common belief that we can learn from the past, and through education we can strengthen the democratic system and guarantee freedom from totalitarian types of government.

I was particularly satisfied with the seminar mentioned above because I had the opportunity (even if informally with colleagues during coffee breaks or lunch) to discuss issues such as:

- (a) What was the attitude of Lenin regarding the independence of the Baltic countries after the First World War? Was his attitude influenced by the unstable situation in Russia itself?
- (b) Why did Latvia and Estonia refrain from helping Lithuania when Poland invaded Vilna in 1920? Why is it that the League of Nations accepted such an occupation?
- (c) Why is it that the Baltic States do not have a history of co-operation among them? Is it because the very term 'Baltic States' is in itself very artificial?
- (d) How far is it correct to say that the talks between Britain and Russia in 1938 broke down because of Stalin's demands to send troops into Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania?
- (e) Can we explain Russia's interest in the Baltic States simply because they have access to the Baltic Sea?
- (f) Is it out of place to compare the British 'occupation' of Ireland with the Russian 'occupation' of the Baltic countries?
- (g) Is Russia still considered to be a threat to the Baltic States especially to Estonia?

I found particular sessions especially interesting. This was the case with the lecture given by Professor Aviars Stranga of Riga University. Among other things he pointed out the historical, geographical, ethnic, religious and linguistic differences that exist among the three Baltic nations. To start with, Lithuania was an independent state in the Middle Ages whereas Latvia and Estonia became independent for the first time only in 1918. The two latter States are largely Lutheran while Lithuania is largely Catholic. There are also linguistic differences. Lithuanian and Latvian belong to the Indo-European family of languages while Estonian belongs to the Finno-Ugric family. In spite of such differences (and this must always be stressed with students) co-operation and partnerships have to be strengthened, especially considering the fact that the three countries are now members of the European Union. This is in the spirit of the principles upheld by the Council of Europe, that is, the celebration of differences and the principle of unity in diversity. Considering the presence of a large Russian minority in Latvia and Estonia, this principle assumes significant importance. The Baltic States have to come to terms with the period they refer to as ‘the occupation period’, that is the time when they formed part of the Soviet Union (1940-1990). However there may be problems involved in such endeavours.

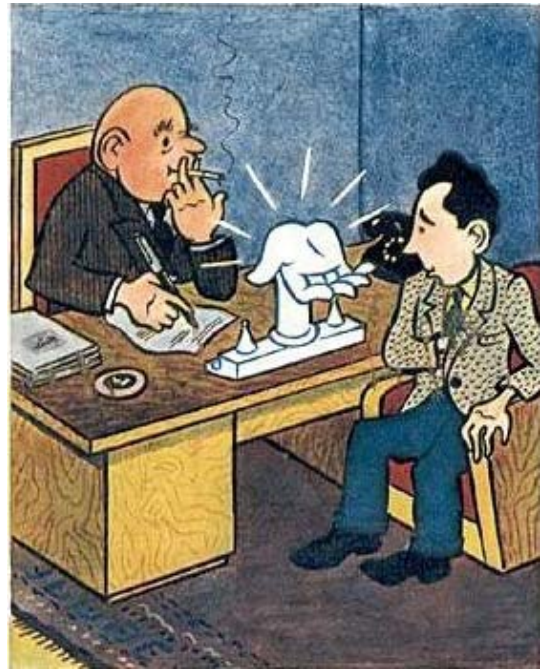
During the seminar I made it a point to share experiences with Estonian teachers who attended the seminar and with participants coming from other countries. I discussed with them what I consider to be a crucial aspect of pedagogy, namely how to avoid any bias when teaching such recent history to students. We agreed that it is quite difficult to detach oneself from the recent past. There might be, in fact, the danger of instigating fear, hate, and other negative feelings and emotions towards those who dominated the nation and who were responsible for serious atrocities. This is why the

teaching and learning of history is a very serious issue. We have to be extremely careful not to use it for propaganda purposes, and we have to differentiate between history and present day politics. While in Tallinn I got the feeling that a number of participants are, understandably, biased in their views towards what happened. They do not seem to be in an ideal position to view what happened in an objective way. Obviously, for them this 'history' is too recent, and they are therefore not yet willing 'to forgive and forget' or at least 'forgive and accept'. But that is exactly what we should do if we want to build a European Community based on understanding, friendship, co-operation and democracy. It is of course important for our children to know what has happened, but it is also crucial for them to accept it as part of their country's **past**. Otherwise we run the risk of remaining eternally haunted by such events. Indeed "the past has a way of walking around in the present, behaving as if it is alive" (Anatol Lieven (1994) *The Baltic Revolution*).

Mr Evaldes Bakonis started his presentation during the third day of the seminar with the above quote. It was a very revealing presentation followed by a workshop which proved to be very challenging. During this workshop Ms Danguole Bylaite presented the participants (who were supposed to be playing the part of students) with cartoons dating back to the 1953–1985 era. The objective of the session was twofold (a) to present different aspects of the daily life of the citizens and (b) to encourage students to give their own interpretation to the cartoons. In fact, we, as 'students' were asked to analyse these cartoons which were selected from a magazine entitled 'Sluota' (The Broom). Very revealing was the fact that this magazine had the official backing of the Government. We came to the conclusion that the cartoons criticised, for example,

the corruption on the part of Government officials who might ask for financial rewards in return for a service.

One should realise that the criticism was directed towards the individual (that is the employee) and in no way towards the System per se. The Government was, in fact, criticising its own people for abusing their position.



The workshop involving the analysis of the cartoons was very well planned, and it was also a good example of formative assessment. I believe that if history lessons were to be conducted in such a manner we may rest assured that education would move forward at a faster rate. Moreover we would be developing important skills in our students, such as the skill of detecting bias and propaganda. The development of such a skill would prepare learners to participate more and more in the democratic process. I found that many participants shared the view that ‘democracy’ cannot exist without education. The history content of the curriculum should contribute in the preparation of students towards democracy. If we want this to happen, however, we cannot present history as a compilation of facts. Apart from mere knowledge, we have to give importance to the teaching and learning of skills. At times during the seminar, I felt that this important aspect was being marginalized.

All in all the seminar was a great success because it was well organised and professionally conducted. However, it was very unfortunate that the designated

Russian participant did not attend. Taking into consideration the situation, his or her participation would have been greatly beneficial.

As has been mentioned above, the seminar was held in Tallinn, the capital of Estonia. One is immediately captivated by the beauty of the Old Town with its strong medieval fortifications, mighty towers, Gothic church spires and cobbled streets that lead to the Town Hall Square, where, incidentally, there is the oldest pharmacy in Europe.



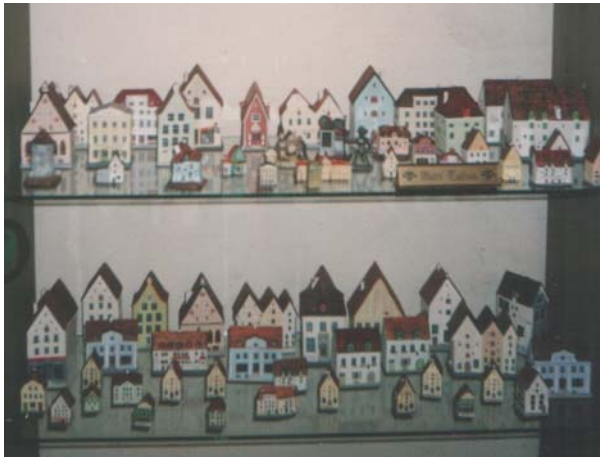
Fine views from the belvedere in the Old Town



An old scene of Tallinn's Old Town

Tallinn's Town Hall (Tallinna Raekoda) is a medieval pearl. The limestone hall has been standing for over 700 years and it is the oldest surviving Town Hall of Gothic style in Northern Europe. The houses are also of great architectural value and give one the impression of being in some fairyland. It is indeed no wonder that the Old Town is on the UNESCO World Heritage list.

From all aspects the Tallinn seminar was a great experience.



Buildings of the Old Town in miniature

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