

Report
Estonian History Competition 10th Round
My Estonia

The topic of the 10th competition ending today was 'My Estonia', which was announced on September 1st, 2008. The idea for the topic was offered in the round-table discussion that took place after the 9th competition. The history teachers supported the idea and it was finally worded during the summer days of the Estonian History Teachers' Association that took place in August 2008. In September, an information booklet was published with the terms and conditions of participating in the contest. This booklet was sent to all Estonian schools. Also, there is information available on the web-page of the Estonian History Teacher's Associations. On the same web-page there is some guiding material available about how to write a research paper. These were the requirements the jury adopted as the basis of assessing the competition entries.

On October 1st, 2008 there was an information seminar organised in Tartu for the participants and tutors of the competition. There were 83 participants (47 teachers and 36 students). During the information seminar the general topic of the competition was explained, and recommendations for finding a topic for the research papers were given. Historians, museum and archive employees, and history teachers who are experienced in supervising the papers all spoke at the seminar, giving advice.

139 research papers from 162 students were sent to the competition. In the basic school level there were 54, and in the secondary school level 85 competition entries. 63 basic school students and 98 secondary school students participated in the competition. Out of the 161 participants, 116 girls and 45 boys took part. 51 schools were represented, there were 20 group papers. 79 basic school, secondary school and special interest classes teachers supervised the papers.

In the 10 competitions, there have been altogether 1.401 students participating with 1095 research papers.

This year, family and personal histories dominated similarly to earlier years (about 1/3 of both basic and secondary school entries). This is one of the most essential factors in awakening the students' interest in history and deepening it. I would like to quote the opinion of one of the authors: *I got the idea that a history textbook could be compared to a skeleton – we can learn about the facts, figures and dates from a textbook, but it seem a bit lifeless. If we add even the most modest story of any Estonian or any Estonian family to that skeleton we get history as a whole.*

The second place in popularity after personal histories was taken by research papers dealing with education and village life. Besides those topics, also many other fascinating topics were written about: Sawmill of Punapargi, Kalev chocolate, participation in the Afghan War, the aftermath of the sinking of Estonia, refugees in Estonia, just naming a few. What was striking was that whereas 10 years ago when we started the competition, there were a lot of papers dealing with the issues of repressions and sufferings against the people of Estonia, then now these topics are not so prominent any longer.

The choice of the topic was most influenced by having interesting sources (including oral sources). For example, a very old photo triggered one of the author's investigation into how the people in the photo were related to the cultural history of their home village. On many occasions, the interest to delve deeper into some topics was created in a history class.

A clear topic formulation and presentation of problems is the backbone of any research paper. Unfortunately, however, not enough reason was given to one's research topic and how it related to the general topic; also, seeing the problem and formulating it could have been done better in many cases. The aim of the research was often explained through the wish to record the life of the loved ones, to strengthen the ties between generations or to make a topic known. If the topic was interesting for the student and they managed to see and dissect problems, the outcome was good. In the winning papers the aims, the ways of reaching these aims and the problems were all very well formulated.

1. Choice of materials and sources

Similarly to earlier years this year, too, **oral sources** were most widely used sources. They were used in the majority of papers, and to quite a large extent. As a new trait we saw the circle of interviewees widen from people the interviewer knew to people who the interviewer was not familiar with, and who were looked up just for the purpose of finding the necessary information for a certain question. Whereas finding oral sources was quite easy, retrieving information from them on many occasions caused difficulties according to the authors, probably because young researchers do not have the sufficient skills and experience in communicating and making contact with different people.

Besides using oral sources, the use of **written sources** that come from various national archives (Estonian State Archive, Võru Regional Archive, Valga Regional Archive) and from museums (Estonian Post Museum, Archival museum of Estonian Pedagogy, and others) has also gained ground. One of the authors even accessed sources from the museum he had founded and is running himself. Many papers were based on documents found in the homes of the authors. It is quite surprising the kind of rare documents have been preserved through decades in Estonian homes, including for example Stalinist sowing plans and tax notices. It is also praiseworthy that students have presented copies of these documents in the appendices of their papers, therefore giving the opportunity for future researchers to use them. Although adding original documents to papers should be avoided, it still occurred.

Among written sources there were many exceptional diaries of various generations (including one written in verse), some dating back to WWI. On quite a few occasions the principles of keeping a diary were intended to clarify.

This year, there was also an ample use of visual sources – mainly photographs, but also even paintings were used. There are many fascinating findings of visual sources in the papers, a good example of such could be the photos taken by a man who participated in the Afghan War. The author writes that although taking photographs there was strictly prohibited, some Estonian men still did it and brought the film rolls secretly over the border.

Structure and interpretation

The general discrepancies in problem formulation also led to difficulties in the structure of the papers. For example, the structure of the papers investigating personal and family histories often followed the various life stages of these people. However, the authors of the papers that were awarded had a very good understanding of the topic and their ideas were nicely and relevantly developed.

Source criticism, however, continues to be a problem in research papers. Even sources that at first glance seem to be reliable such as the information given in interviews or memoirs must be viewed with a critical eye, and such information should be compared and contrasted to other sources and literature.

Interpreting oral sources seemed to cause the most difficulties. There were occasions where the oral sources were trusted without any scrutiny of the statements given, even with regard to generally well-known facts. It seems that the emotions of the oral sources quite often influenced the stand of the author. However, it is also delightful that this year there were more papers than in the earlier years that dealt with discussing the essence of oral sources in general. At times, the authors tried to contemplate various points of view: there were statements made about how the point of view of an individual is dependant of gender, age, many also pointed out that everyone has their own truth.

Many good examples can be given about the **use of written sources** such as analyses of documents, for example comparing and contrasting school report cards. In many papers, the text was made livelier by added photos with appropriate titles and explanations. Many clever ways of retrieving and interpreting information from sources must be pointed out. In one occasion, the author could see that old candy and chocolate wrappers also have value in the eyes of history, telling a story about the fashion, taste and altering styles of the bygone times.

Although generally there is a lot of room for growth when it comes to using historical literature, many papers in their references listed even some very recent doctoral studies. In general, the papers based on internet sources were the most report-like.

Conclusions were often the most problematic places of the papers and they were often too unspecific and general. In awarded papers the authors could give good reason about the outcomes of their research, clearly showing what the stance or perception of the author was before and after doing the research, pointing out the outcomes, what was surprising about them and why, etc. Careless of the scientific significance of the conclusions and findings of some papers, it must be said that all authors accomplished something very important – they gained new knowledge and skills.

The final conference took place on June 9 2009 in Tartu. From the greeting of the President of the Republic of Estonia:

‘It will not be easy. As you well know, writing a research paper is a long and time-consuming process, which includes both the joys of discovery and setbacks. It is easy to propose simple solutions and these are almost always popular. However, historical research must never be a search for simple solutions and popularity, since the goal is finding the truth, and the truth may not always be easy.

I wish to thank you for this enterprise and for your interesting papers. With your research papers, you have broadened your own as well as our all history knowledge. Your research will be preserved and perhaps it will be the starting point for new history research. Therefore, you have contributed to our history and our cultural history. Most importantly, however, it is you who have become wiser and better by doing this research.

I wish to thank the good supervisors, without the help of whom many would not have started the journey or they would have not finished it. Similarly, I would like to thank the members of the jury, and the organisers of the event who care for the future of Estonian and European history research.’

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