

Results of the 9th History Competition in Estonia 2007/08

'Estonia in Europe'

Introduction

The topic of the 9th Estonian history competition was 'Estonia in Europe'. It was announced on 2 September 2007. The idea for the topic was offered in the round-table discussion that took place after the 8th competition. The history teachers supported the idea and it was finally worded during the summer seminar for the Estonian History Teachers' Association that took place in August 2007. In September, an information booklet was published with the terms and conditions of how to participate in the contest. This booklet was sent to all Estonian schools. There is more information available on the website of the Estonian History Teacher's Associations. On the website 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.

Information seminar in Tartu

On 29 and 30 October 2007 there was an information seminar organised in Tartu for the participants and tutors of the competition. 96 students and teachers took part in it. In March 2007 we wrote an application to the Open Estonia Foundation for funding the seminar, and it was granted. The activities of the two-day seminar were organised trying to combine practical activity with theoretical training. On the first day the work was carried out in three different groups: in the Estonian National Museum, the Estonian Museum of Literature and in the Estonian National Archive. During the first day of the seminar, each participant could learn about the activity of all the three institutions, and also carry out a practical task on the spot.

The second day of the seminar was purely practical: 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, history teachers experienced in supervising the papers spoke at the seminar, giving advice.

During the study days the basics of writing a research paper, working with different sources, compiling questionnaires, and using the computer were introduced. It was also discussed how the integration between subjects can be used in a history research paper.

The problem turned out to be that there were more people applying for the seminar than it was possible for us to accept. We had planned the seminar for 80 people, and unfortunately we had to turn down quite a few of them.

We are grateful to the Open Estonia Foundation without the help of whom it would not have been possible to carry out the two-day information seminar, and we also hope for this cooperation to continue in the future.

Competition

94 research papers from 120 students were handed in. On the basic school level there were 24, whereas on the secondary school level 70 competition entries. 36 basic school students and 84 secondary school students participated in the competition. 79 girls and 41 boys took part. 41 schools were represented, there were 17 group papers. 62 teachers supervised these papers.

The number of participants fluctuates every round: in the years of the republican Olympiad, there are fewer participants in the history competition – this is what happened this year. Since the first Estonian history competition, there participated 1.240 students with 956 research papers.

The choice of the topic

This year's general topic „Estonia in Europe” was difficult. Apparently it is quite wide and all-permitting, but in order to write it into something interesting demands a lot of thought. Similar to previous years, this year did not lack personal histories. Some of them dealt with Estonians active in Europe such as Toomas Savi or Tiina Tamman. Others were tied to the European theme in the style of „This and that – a pathfinder into Europe” or someone's studies and work in Europe. Once we found out the tutors after making our conclusions, it also became clear which of the teachers best guided their students into the general topic. Now, the course of writing the paper showed whether an appropriate topic also became accompanied by an essentially well written research paper. In contrast, the third type of papers posed the life story of someone with the goal to *know more about their life and activity*. This too is tremendous and appreciable work, although one would wish to see more problems and connections in a history research paper. Next to biographical papers there were also many **family histories**.

Another popular area were the „**friendship ties**” where the foreign relationships of a place, a region or a school were taken under inspection.

In many papers **working and studying in Europe** was looked into; also the **projects of the EU** and their effect on a region, but also the **impact of joining the EU on Estonia**.

Traditionally, the object of research were **repressions**, although less topical themes such as **riots, human trade, minorities** or areas like **painting, hunting or tourism** were dealt with in the European perspective. What struck the eye, were papers dealing with the **Estonian Youth Brigade's foreign group, Estonia's participation in foreign missions** and the **development of companies**.

It has to be admitted that a number of papers were too loosely related to the overall topic – there were quite interesting descriptions of manor houses, the history of a place or a congregation, but there was no reachable European aspect to them. A set of separate problems were papers that were hard to classify as history researches, since the approach was more of a sociological, media or environmental one. In the case of some quite interesting papers, it seemed as if they had been written for a different purpose or for a different competition. Sometimes it would have been sufficient just to make minor changes in the proportions and the emphasis to make the paper considerably more appropriate for the topic of this competition. The jury did not set these papers aside, however, the papers respectively received less points.

The choice of materials and sources

The work of a historian is based on sources, and without them it is impossible to research and write history. The more sources there are, and the more versatile they are, the more hope there is of getting closer to understanding the happenings and history. The use of sources in each specific case depends on many circumstances. However, while choosing a topic, one should already think, if and what kind of sources could be found about it.

Out of the materials used, the typically most popular were **oral sources** that were applied in the majority of papers. Most of all, the people known and close to the author were interviewed. It was quite common to use questionnaires conducted among school students. However, it should always be thought of how the questionnaire would support the rest of the paper. In some cases the idea of including a questionnaire only seemed to exist to introduce original material.

The dominant written sources were documents from a **family archive, manuscripts of memories**. Besides these, to a lesser extent materials from the **National Archive, local archives and museums** were used.

Photographic material was richly used in the papers. For the future, it would be advisable to relate the images even more to the research paper's main part, to comment them.

Structure and interpretation

In personal and family histories the dominating structure was chronological, following the life stages of people, and the different generations. Among them there were very detailed papers and in the best ones the life stories of people was related to a wider historical background.

Being critical about sources has a central position in history research. Here, even professional historians might run into problems, no wonder that young beginners who have little experience and knowledge do. Most of the problems were related to oral sources – to using memories. Obviously, it is no surprise, since they were the most numerous used and there is no reason to suspect your close ones of lying. All the more valuable was the aspiration of some of the students towards a critical approach, the intention to shed light to contradictions, contrasting documents and memories, etc. Often, however, the sources were presented with no criticism, nor could the authors distance themselves from the sources, although the use of /was quite less frequent than a couple of years ago. Verbatim presentation of memories however was not an exception.

The outcome cannot be good, if the author is not able to express his thoughts. In that respect the overall level was uneven, so that good problem positioning and coherent text did not always go hand in hand. However, rewriting memories is far easier a task than creating your original and logical text.

Generally, the ordering of the papers was good, and the good lay-out of many can be mentioned. It certainly influenced the evaluation of the paper, although no direct extra points were given.

Conclusion

It would be extremely useful if we could make a two-day seminar for the participants and tutors of our contest a tradition. The other important thing is continuing cooperation with the Open Estonia Foundation.

And at last but not least, it was extremely pleasant to listen to and see the presentations of the winners at the final conference.

The only drawback was that only 24 papers participated on the basic school level. In the coming future we have to decide on a topic that would also suit for junior students.

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