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E-mail interview with Olaf Mertelsmann, Associate Professor in Contemporary History, University of Tartu, June 2011

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E-mail interview with Olaf Mertelsmann¹, Associate Professor in Contemporary History, University of Tartu, Estonia, conducted in June 2011

di Vanessa Voisin

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Outline

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The History of War in the Baltic Societies Today

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Editor's notes

Pipss.org is grateful to Kevin Roberts who edited this interview

The Archives and the Historiography of the Second World War

PIPSS.ORG - First, the editorial board is grateful to you for agreeing to answer a few questions about the state of war historiography in the Baltic states. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the archives of the newly independent states became accessible to researchers, as well as central archives in Moscow. However the declassification of documents was subject to a political agenda and may not be consistent or complete. How would you characterize the present accessibility of historical documents about the war, both in Estonia (and the two other Baltic states, if possible) and in Moscow? Are some topics especially sensitive and hard to investigate?

Olaf Mertelsmann: The archives in the Baltic states are, with very few exceptions, easily accessible and the archivists are extremely helpful. One cannot complain. In Moscow it is a bit more difficult, because the process of declassification is much slower and sensitive topics' such as national defense or state security might remain classified. Nevertheless, it seems to me that it is more the lack of funding than the continuation of the state's love with secrecy that hampers quick declassification in Russia. The legal framework of Russia's archival legislation could serve as a model, only that some institutions like the FSB seem to ignore the laws. Concerning World War II not only Russian and Baltic archives are important but also German ones. However some researchers are working on the history of the German occupation without using Baltic sources due to a lack of familiarity with local languages. Overlooking the Baltic archives limits the scope and depth of academic research. The same problem occurs for the Soviet period when only documents in Russian are consulted.

PIPSS.ORG - The Soviet period did not foster serious research on sensitive issues such as collaboration in the Soviet territories, the involvement of locals in Nazi extermination policy, and the link between these events and Soviet annexations in 1940 and 1944-45. What is the place of these topics in recent historiography? Which aspects need further investigation?

Olaf Mertelsmann: In recent years a wealth of research has been conducted whether by the history commissions in the three Baltic states² or by independent researchers in the East and West. Our knowledge

of the German occupation and local collaboration has increased greatly. It seems clear that we cannot understand the welcoming of German troops as liberators in the summer of 1941, or later, the widespread collaboration without taking into account the history of the first year of Soviet rule, which resulted in mass terror. The same needs to be said regarding the attitude of the population to the Soviet state in 1944-1945, where without understanding the history of German rule developments are difficult to understand. In general, the methodology used to deal with this period needs to be further developed. For example, there are different possible approaches towards the interpretation of repressions. Moreover, while we know a lot about crimes, politics and military history, the social and economic history of the period has been largely neglected.

The History of War in the Baltic Societies Today

PIPSS.ORG - What is the impact of the post-1991 debate on the Sovietization of the Baltic States on the history of the Second World War in the Baltic States? Does it hinder research on other historical aspects of the war and the way most of the population experienced it? What are the most recent trends in the historiography of the war?

Olaf Mertelsmann: Since 1991 there has been a pronounced change in the historiography of the war. Beginning from a sheer victim's discourse an enormous amount of empirical work has been conducted over the past twenty years. Until the late 1990s the German occupation was a taboo topic until this policy was changed by the so-called presidential commissions. Of course, there are many reasons to criticize those commissions but they played an important role in making a broader historiographic discussion of the war possible. The debate on Sovietization did not influence the history of World War II. Stalinism was definitely the first topic to be dealt with and only then came the war. Concerning population losses and the fate of ethnic Balts it seems clear that Stalinism will remain the most important topic in contemporary Baltic history and that the Holocaust will play only a secondary or tertiary role.

PIPSS.ORG - There is always a gap between academic research and education programs in high schools. How would you characterize this gap in Estonia? With the debate on the Soviet period in mind, do you observe any confusion between history and memory? How would you characterize the level of knowledge of the students after high school on the war issue?

Olaf Mertelsmann: The gap between the findings of research and teaching at schools is, of course, ever present. However, in smaller countries it is actually possible to change school curricula or introduce new textbooks more rapidly than in larger countries. In that regard I would dare to say that in France, Britain or Germany the gap is larger. In Estonia for example a new program for contemporary history was introduced in the school year 2010-2011 and some of the leading experts spoke at specially organized seminars with schoolteachers about how to deal with one or the other topic. Research on World War II in the Baltic states has produced an enormous number of publications though the findings of this research may not have reached the general public. There seems to be a lack of public discussion.

New Structures for the advancement of Knowledge on World War II

PIPSS.ORG – Could you tell us more about Baltic national commissions and civil organizations? How are they contributing to better understanding and promoting war history?

Olaf Mertelsmann: There are three national history commissions – the Estonian one has already turned into an Institute of Historical Memory – and national war museums, they all contribute to war history. Their problem is that they are state funded and thus not independent. There also exist a number of other foundations and commissions that contribute to a greater or lesser extent to the historiography of the war. Second World War civil society organizations present us with mixed results. For instance German and

Soviet veterans organizations rarely communicate with each other. Further, some of those associations tend to play down their own activities during the war.

PIPSS.ORG - What do you think about the Russian Commission Against Falsification of History and its influence on the history of the war? Do similar commissions exist in Estonia, Latvia or Lithuania?

Olaf Mertelsmann: The Russian commission is a joke. It consists mainly of apparatchiks without historical training and reminds me a bit of initiatives to present colonial history as being highly beneficial to the colonized. As a historian I am against state control over our findings. Apparently this type of commission is not unique to Russia. In Lithuania the denial of the Soviet occupation could also be punished alongside the wearing of Nazi or Soviet symbols. I fear that some Russian colleagues might adopt self-censorship in order to avoid conflict with this commission.

PIPSS.ORG - In Russia, civil organizations promoting Second World War history have appeared as well. For example, the current issue of PIPSS.ORG interviewed a representative of the foundation "Historical Memory"³ which was created in 2009. This institute is an independent non-state sponsored foundation, which was created by young historians under the patronage of a number of established Russian historians. Preoccupied by the uninformed debates developing in society on sensitive aspects of Soviet and Second World War history, they attempt to foster academic cooperation between Russian researchers and European ones in order to increase Russian public awareness of the progress of historiography on these subjects. Are you aware of these efforts? What do you think about what seems to be a civic initiative?

Olaf Mertelsmann: Since I am not a Moscow insider, I am unable to judge how "independent" this institute is. In any event, somebody has to pay the bill for their activities and nowhere is it indicated who might be the sponsor(s). Judging by the content of their publications and website, the "independent" foundation seems to be very near to the official views on contemporary history. I recently noticed an increase in their activities but neither my colleagues nor I have ever received an invitation to participate in the work of the Foundation. Obviously we are not suitable for them, though judging from their publications we did not miss much.

PIPSS.ORG - The founders of the "Historical Memory Foundation"⁴ have written a considerable number of publications pertaining to the Baltic states. As a specialist in this field of research, do you think these publications make a valuable contribution to the historiography of the region?

Olaf Mertelsmann: The quality of those books is usually extremely poor. The authors, including Diukov, do not know the historiography of their topics and lack the requisite language skills. The only contribution of these publications can be found in the release of some previously unpublished sources which "normal" historians are not entitled to view in the archives. In essence many of these books continue the Soviet tradition of misinformation. You mix some authentic material with nonsense and lies claiming that Soviet terror was much smaller than those "illiterate" Baltic historians state etc. Due to the possibility of free download on the Internet, the so-called "History Foundation" hinders research rather than contributing to it. Obviously this foundation serves as a front organization in the struggle over the shaping of historical discourse in neighboring countries. The "historians" involved rarely respond to calls for papers and rarely attend conferences. They generally organize their own events and do not appear to care for academic history.

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Notes

1. Dr Olaf Mertelsmann is a leading specialist on contemporary Estonian history. From 2004 to 2008 he headed the Centre for the Study of Soviet History at the University of Tartu, where he is currently an Associate Professor in Contemporary History.

2. In Lithuania, the commission is named « The International Commission for the Evaluation of the Crimes of the Nazi and Soviet Occupation Regimes in Lithuania ». It was created by a presidential decree of 7 September 1998. See <http://www.komisija.lt/en/body.php?&m=1150456073>. In Latvia, the History Commission was formed in the same way, on 13 November 1998: <http://www.mfa.gov.lv/en/policy/4641/4661/4664/>. For Estonia, see below, and: Estonian Institute of Historical Memory, <http://www.mnemosyne.ee/lang/en-us>.

3. Cf. in the issue, the interview with Olesya Orlenko, <http://pipss.revues.org/3892>.

4. <http://historyfoundation.ru/>.

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