How should the Past be Treated in Estonian Schools?
Constructions of History Teaching in an Estonian Teachers’ Newspaper
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HOW SHOULD THE PAST BE TREATED IN ESTONIAN SCHOOLS? CONSTRUCTIONS OF HISTORY TEACHING IN AN ESTONIAN TEACHERS’ NEWSPAPER

Katrin Kello and Halliki Harro-Loit

In the context of pluralization, globalization, and developments in pedagogy and academic history, ideas about the functions and objectives of history teaching (HT) have significantly diversified. Though traditional conceptions still prevail among the broader public, in professional circles traditional ideas about HT are accompanied by deconstructionist and multi-perspective approaches, deriving from the notion that history should not be regarded as true and unambiguous. The objective of this study is to discern the variety of representations of HT in Estonia, as reflected in an Estonian teachers’ weekly newspaper, an “interface” between the broader public and narrower professional spheres and discussions.

Keywords: collective memory; constructions of school subject; history teaching; niche media; media representations; Estonia

1. Introduction: Ideologies of History Teaching

History teaching (HT) is a school subject that attracts high public and political interest: at least implicitly, issues of history education are omnipresent within “[i]ssues of identity, heritage, and citizenship, all rooted in competing conceptions of the past” (Osborne 2003, 585). In many countries, competing ideas about how history should be taught and what it should attempt to do have led to broad, public debate (see, e.g., Clark 2009; Klišans 2011; Nakou and Barca 2010b; Osborne 2003; Parkes 2007; Symcox 2002; Symcox and Wilschut 2009). Traditionally, HT has tended to be “neither conceived nor accepted except as the reproduction of a closed national ‘historical’ narrative,” and its content may be “passionately protected” (Nakou and...
Barca 2010a, 8). “Politicians and bureaucrats – and probably much of the lay public if they give it a thought – tend to view history education as justifying itself by providing a form of social cement” (Lee 2010, xi). Concurrently, within professional circles of history educators, there is a variety of alternative understandings, reflecting generic educational trends and changes in educational psychology, as well as conceptual and epistemological developments in academic research. For example, “disciplinary” approaches aim to provide students with the tools of historiography and criteria for deciding on the validity of historical accounts (Seixas 2000). Related “multi-perspectival” approaches stress the need to abandon mono-centric teaching on disciplinary as well as pedagogical grounds (e.g., Stradling 2003). Various global history teaching approaches have been proposed as alternatives to those centered on national or regional history (e.g., Popp 2002). Also, it is possible to see the subject as simply a way of developing generic and instrumental skills such as functional literacy and self-expression, deriving from general curricular objectives rather than disciplinary currents. The issue is thus not just about which canon should be taught, and how, but equally about how knowledge about the past should be related to various values, skills or competencies.

Carretero (2011) outlines conflicts inherent to current understandings of nature of academic historiography, the nation state, and HT at school. On the one hand, “up until now, the transmission of history at school has embraced the goal of forming the citizens’ national identity, and has been formulated based on the idea of agreement and consensus.” This consensus is already assumed in the concept of nation, which is an inherently ontological and teleological category, “and constructs a triumphant and unfinished narrative of the group where the students have their own place assigned.” On the other hand, “recent histories remit to conflict and disaggregation, bringing forth the historic (and finite) character of the national state […] These histories evidently have problems to reach the school, because schooling is based on the same principles they demolish” (Carretero 2011, 100). Such a contradiction is caused not only by new critical narratives and perspectives, developed within current historiography, but also by epistemologies that claim that one coherent narrative cannot be regarded as the singular true and appropriate account of any past event. Instead, a multitude of perspectives and a critical (self)reflexivity are prerequisites of any professional dealing with the past. However, there is no principal consensus on whether academic historiography or “collective memory” is the more legitimate basis for HT, and struggles about legitimation are fought tentatively, on the local level.

One example of such a struggle recently took place in Latvia. There, HT has been the object of several parties’ election campaigns and has thus received media attention for over a decade (Klišāns 2011). Referring to an alleged lack of factual knowledge among the pupils, nationalist politicians have supported mandating Latvian history as a separate subject, apart from European and world history. History teachers have been divided on the issue, but their representatives in the Latvian History Teachers’ Association have supported maintaining an undivided subject “History,” enabling a more integrated teaching of Latvian and world history. Nevertheless, in 2010, the Latvian Government mandated that world and Latvian history should be taught as
separate subjects, and assigned more teaching time to the latter (Latvian Government 2010, 2011).

Unlike Latvia, there has been no broad public discussion on the topic of HT in Estonia, although the issue of “true history” was publicly elaborated upon while the state regained political independence in the early 1990s. However, among researchers of HT, Estonia seems to be a quite well-known case of the broad importance attributed to re-interpretation of national history within the school curriculum as part of the post-Soviet transition (Ahonen 1992, 1997, 2001; Carretero 2011).

Also, many scholarly publications have been written on the conflict between the Soviet official history versus ethnic Estonian truths and the present conflict between the collective memory of ethnic Estonians and the “Estonian Russian-speaking” community (see for example the special issues of Journal of Baltic Studies (JoBS) 2008, 4, and 2010, 3). This conflict derives from the communities’ different collective experiences with the Soviet system, together with Estonian and Soviet/Russian past and present identity politics (including HT). Both factors have shaped the communities’ history-representations in partly opposite directions, particularly with regard to questions related to Estonian independence and the Soviet period (see e.g., Brüggemann and Kasekamp 2008; Mertelsmann 2008). The “mnemonic division” is perceived as so important that the different understandings of history between ethnic Russians and Estonians have even been seen as indications of “parallel societies with conflicting memories of the communist past” (Kattago 2009, 162).

These conspicuous divergences have caused some public concern also about Russian-speaking teachers’ notions and ways of teaching the Estonian past (e.g., Golubeva 2010). There is concern that Russian-speaking pupils do not acquire the “correct” (i.e., mainstream, official, or “Estonian”) knowledge about the Estonian past. Many believe that the gap between what is taught in history class and what is learned and/or believed by the pupils is particularly large in Russian-language schools (e.g., Tamm 2007; Golubeva 2010). On the other hand, the concern that Estonian history textbooks may be too Estonia(ns)-centered for Russian-speakers has been repeatedly expressed by teachers.

Still, the Estonian public’s attention has been largely focused on the past itself, rather than HT. There has been no broad public discussion about possible functions of HT, except for some polemics on textbook content that are focused on interpretations of the recent past rather than HT as such. Also, unlike in Latvia, HT has not been an explicit object of party politics. Rather, HT has been left for the educators – teachers and public servants, as well as textbook authors, publishers, and teacher trainers. Unlike more universal questions which are often debated in generic dailies, such as schools’ ratings based on national final examinations, teachers’ salaries, or bullying, subject content finds little attention in the general media.

Within the educational circles and national curricula, several “layers” of discourse about HT coexist, due to various historical changes and transitions in the 20th century (i.e., the period of Estonian national independence from between 1918 and 1940, the forceful incorporation into the Soviet Union in 1940 and 1944, and the re-establishment of independence in 1987–1991). During the first period of independence, nation-centered principles in HT, according to which the aim of HT was to enhance national feelings and patriotism, were shaped (Tamm 2008). During the Soviet period,
this process was reversed; HT’s purpose was to transmit historic constructions that justified and supported the Soviet system and ideology, and avoid any support of the pupils’ ethnic identity (Ahonen 1992; Raudsepp 2005). In the end of the 1980s and early 1990s, history teaching became embedded in the nation’s generic aspiration to reassert “Estonia as a historical community through disclosing its story of the past as seen from the perspective of nation-building” (Ahonen 1997, 54–55). Over the 1990s, this trend was combined with increasing influences from the history teaching communities of western Europe. Two organizations were of particular significance: the European Association of History Educators (Eurocho) and the Council of Europe disseminated ideas about multi-perspective and constructivist history teaching via learning and teaching materials, teachers’ training, national curricula, and national final examinations. However, teaching methods rather than content were influenced by such measures (cf. Ahonen 2001), and the influences were filtered, as with any imported innovation, through local interpretations and individual teachers’ understandings of what was possible and appropriate (cf. Stevick 2007). As a result, the national curricula for history have not been ideologically consistent. In the introductory sections of the curricula, a constructivist view of learning and history is emphasized. Pupils are depicted as creators of their own images of the past, who are led to work with different sources and introduced to “different concepts of history as well, without imposing any of them” (Estonian Government 1996, cf. 2002, 2010a, 2010b). Concurrently, the content syllabi (lists of topics) reference traditional images of HT, directing teachers toward transmitting predefined bodies of facts (cf. Ahonen 1992). In terms of content, there has been an attempt to find a balance between (Eurocentrically conceived) “world history” and Estonian national history. However, in terms of national history teaching, Ahonen’s claim (2001, 183) that narratives about the Estonian past tend to describe “a long line of development, as a predetermined path to a nation state” in which no minority narrative can be recognized as having equal worth, remains accurate (cf. Pääbo 2011).

It can be concluded that both internationally and in Estonia, there is an increasing polyphony of lay and expert conceptions together with less and less clarity about whose conceptions – for example, whose expectations towards general education schools – are more legitimate. Based on a broader societal trend (e.g., Duveen 2000), there is an ever growing number of groups and institutions that expect to be considered with regard to education in schools. There are no straightforward answers to, for example, where an appropriate “compromise” lies between the expectations of various social groups, between a curriculum, a textbook and pupils’ interests and abilities, or what should be the subject’s functions on an individual or social level. Indeed, even a written curriculum is a generic document, an “illusion of consensus” (Simpson and Halse 2006), that needs to be interpreted in practice, presupposing interpretative frames and emphases that come from elsewhere. This rather conditional consensus may collide with either the teacher’s or other relevant groups’ convictions. At the same time, a lack of open discussion about teachers’ conceptions and positions due to the emotionality and politicization of related topics has hindered the formation of common professional convictions in Estonia.

Unlike lay circles in the broader public, it can be assumed that most history educators are aware of the diversity of existing conceptions and the concurrent
difficulties with clarifying them. However, those who are directly involved in HT – teachers and public servants dealing with the subject – rarely express their ideas on the subject in the mass media. Communication that concerns the subject of HT is carried out by “niche” channels: various mediums (electronic networking, meetings, etc.) of the Estonian History Teachers’ Association, and the only Estonian teachers’ weekly paper, Õpetajate Leht [Teachers’ Newspaper]. Thus, such semi-professional forums are a valuable object of study, in order to gain insight into the relevant discourses.

At least in the last decades, the Teachers’ Newspaper has included articles of more generic interest and the editorial board has been inviting authors from a broad range of fields. In 2006, the newspaper had about 26,000 readers (SAAR POLL 2006). According to an estimate by the editorial board (personal communication, August 2013), up to a third of the paper’s readers might be non-teachers. The newspaper has had a free online version since 2000, and is available at most newspaper stands and supermarkets. Including schools and libraries, the newspaper has about 2100 subscribers and a print-run of 2600–2700. Thus, the paper is easily available to all sectors of the public and can be regarded as an interface between the broader public and narrower professional spheres and discussions.

In the present study, we ask how ideologies of HT appear in the latter semi-professional public forum, analyzing representations of HT in the Teachers’ Newspaper between 1999 and 2008. In the field of HT, this decade followed the adoption and application of a new constructivist curriculum (Estonian Government 1996), and included its revision in 2002, and discussions about several versions of revised drafts, which were officially adopted in 2010. The first revision brought about almost no changes to the history curriculum, whereas the revision process between 2003 and 2010 included more substantial discussions resulting in some changes to the relative weights of skills and knowledge. During the revision process, the attempt was to emphasize the procedural objectives of HT, enhancing methodological and epistemological skills and understandings, as opposed to the traditional topic-centered content lists. From the perspective of history teachers, the national final examinations that began in 1996 and which introduced analytical and essay-based questions in addition to fact-centred ones were the more influential, and probably brought about more changes to actual teaching practice than any curriculum possibly could have (cf. Oja 2004).

In the fields of social memory and history politics, the decade included a period of “calm-down” and certain liberalization of past-related thinking since the second half of the 1990s, as well as new politization of history-related issues since about 2004 (e.g., Brüggemann 2006; Brüggemann and Kasekamp 2008), culminating in the April 2007 events related to the removal of the “Bronze Soldier” monument by the Estonian Government (see, for example, the special issues of JoBS 2008, 4, and 2010, 3).

We will consider representations of HT in the weekly newspaper as related to memory and identity politics. Since the development of HT conceptions in transition societies has been to a considerable extent imported or even forced from outside, Estonia is also an example of how such discourses have been interpreted in post-authoritarian transition countries.

The newspaper is Estonia’s only weekly targeting teachers as well as the general public interested in educational matters, and thus the main public and periodical forum to publish news and discussions related to school subjects. At the same time, the weekly newspaper
reflects and is affected by the broader discourses in the Estonian general media. Besides professional representations to be found only in educational forums (such as the Teachers’ Newspaper), the weekly newspaper includes a condensed version of the representations of history teaching to be found in the Estonian public space — we know it as everyday Estonian media consumers. Indeed, as Estonian newspaper readers we can say that we have not seen any qualitatively different representations there which were not present in the weekly. Therefore, the weekly newspaper enables insights into the variety of conceptions in Estonia more broadly as well, reflecting those few representations of HT to be found in the Estonian public space.

2. Data and Method

2.1. Selection of Articles

Based on an overview of the types and topics of articles which could contribute to images of either the past or HT in the Teachers’ Newspaper, we decided on the following selection criteria: the article addresses history teachers (e.g., news about the national curriculum or national final examinations for history, events connected to the Estonian History Teachers’ Association) and does not necessarily explicitly mention the school subject of “history,” or the article explicitly mentions HT for some indirect reason (e.g., mentioning the subject in a piece which focuses on the activities of a museum, or opinion pieces about history or collective memory, if HT was mentioned). Even longer textbook advertisements were included, if they were written analytically, and with explicit mentions of HT’s aims. On the other hand, we excluded articles dealing with past-related extra-curricular activities that did not have a direct connection with HT or history teachers (e.g., pieces on pupils’ research about local history or the activities of young tour guides, which were organized by institutions other than the history teachers’ association). In sum, a total of 167 articles were included in the sample.

2.2. Analysis and Presentation of Findings

The description and analysis of the selected articles proceeded inductively, but keeping in mind different possible approaches to HT, as described above. In the findings section, we first give a quantitative overview of the selected articles in terms of their topics/foci and author groups, so as to elucidate the role of factors specific to journalistic discourse in constructing an “aggregate representation” of history teaching in the Teachers’ Newspaper. Subsequently we describe ways of representing HT inductively and qualitatively, observing how different approaches to the subject might be related to either their topics or author positions.

3. Findings

3.1. Thematic Groups and Authors of the Articles

Generally, the articles can be divided into “scheduled” (Jaworski, Fitzgerald, and Morris 2003, 34) and “non-routine” (Table 1). Routine news about national examinations and announcements of pupil or teacher competitions give a certain amount of stability to the representation of HT in the Teachers’ Newspaper by reiterating short
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thematic group</th>
<th>“Non-routine” articles (n = 111)</th>
<th>“Scheduled” articles (n = 56)</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Assessment of the pupils’ learning outcomes (n = 37)</strong></td>
<td>Seventeen articles that introduce, discuss or defend the purpose and content of the national final examinations; written by members of the exams’ councils, teachers, a parent, and a university historian as representative of the university as an institution profiting from the exams; one article by a history teacher to propose pupil research as content of the lower secondary school elective exam, one article on the outcomes of 6th grade history achievement test by a member of the test’s council.</td>
<td>Eighteen articles from 2002 to 2007 that introduce the requirements of the forthcoming test or describe the outcomes of the latest national final examinations of the upper and/or lower secondary schools by members of the exams’ councils.</td>
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<td><strong>Recent activities of the national council on HT (n = 6)</strong></td>
<td>Six articles on the activities of the national council of the subject history (e.g., assessing textbooks and preparing final exams and pupil competitions) by a member of the council in 1999 and 2000.</td>
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<td><strong>The purpose or essence of history, past and history education (incl. memory-political problems) in the society, and/or problems related to the subject (n = 33)</strong></td>
<td>Five articles on the subject’s conception in the draft history curriculum by members of the new curriculum’s council and a teacher; twenty eight articles on the essence, content, purposes, problems and/or influencing factors of HT or on the knowledge and remembering of the past outside the school mostly by academic historians, history teachers and journalists.</td>
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<td><strong>Textbook or other learning material, or some way to enrich the HT (n=24)</strong></td>
<td>Fourteen reviews, critiques or promotion articles on textbooks or other learning materials, news articles on events connected to the appearance of a new material by journalists, academic reviewers, teachers, authors themselves, and a representative of the publishing house; seven articles to introduce history-as-subject related activities or possibilities of some out-of-school memory institution (museum, archive, NGO) by a representative of the institution or a teacher; three articles connected to some other methodical idea by an academic researcher, a publicist and a civil servant dealing with HT.</td>
<td>Twenty-three news articles, from 2000 to the present, on the so-called President’s research competitions, and seven articles about a forthcoming and/or a recently happened all-Estonian history contest by members of the organizing councils.</td>
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<td><strong>The pupils’ extra-curricular research and competitions, organized and supervised by history teachers (n = 38)</strong></td>
<td>Three articles on the Eustory International Summer Academies, connected to the pupil research competitions by teachers connected to the competition; one article by a history teacher to praise the pupils’ historical research generally; one anniversary article on the history (development) of the all-Estonian history contests, two critiques connected to the contest and one response to one of the critiques by a member of the organizing council.</td>
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<td><strong>History teachers’ out-of-school activities, connected to the Estonian History Teachers’ Association (n = 17)</strong></td>
<td>Nine articles on the activities of the Estonian History Teachers’ Association and/or out-of-school activities of the history teachers (e.g., conference trips, in-service training events) connected to the association.</td>
<td>Eight articles since 2005 on a forthcoming and/or a recently happened all-Estonian history teachers’ competition on teaching materials.</td>
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<td>Thematic group</td>
<td>“Non-routine” articles (n = 111)</td>
<td>“Scheduled” articles (n = 56)</td>
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<td>Other (n = 12)</td>
<td>One article on the Baltic Assembly’s Declaration on Civic Education (2000), partly addressed by history teachers.</td>
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<td>One statistical overview about the qualifications of the Estonian history teachers, by a civil servant.</td>
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<td>One interview with a civil servant, dealing with HT and working as a history teacher herself.</td>
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<td>One interview with a young history teacher.</td>
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<td>One feature about a history teacher, decorated with a state honor medal.</td>
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<td>One well-known history teacher’s answer to the editorial staff’s question “What are your experiences with teaching history and social studies with the help of computers?”</td>
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<td>One overview of the results of a survey among history teachers by a civil servant dealing with HT.</td>
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<td>One article containing praise of the essay writing and some tips on teaching methods by a history teacher as a member of the final exams’ council.</td>
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<td>One description of the impressions of a history teacher on HT in the US after some lesson visits.</td>
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<td>Two articles on the activities of the representatives of history teachers’ local associations.</td>
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<td>One announcement of a pupil essay competition about the European Union.</td>
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accounts of the subject’s content, functions, or related activities. While the “scheduled” articles were written by only 11 authors (including nine members of the exam or competition councils), the 111 non-routine opinions and other pieces were written by 76 authors (including co-authors and those who also wrote about scheduled events). Among the non-routine pieces, there were 15 apparently self-initiated opinion articles by history teachers about textbooks, exams, methods, and HT curricula. Academic historians and textbook authors wrote 23 articles, often initiated by the editorial board. Journalists (including editorial staff) wrote 10 articles: four interviews, three news items, two features and one opinion piece. Table 1 presents an overview of the articles’ thematic categories and motives (as evident from the topic), and refers to types of authors who wrote them. Some articles could have been categorized into more than one thematic group, making the numbers in the table somewhat relative.

Only a few articles in our sample deliberately set out to describe HT: six articles explicitly discussed the purposes of HT at school, and 11 included an explicit statement about an important or essential function of HT. These included articles on the HT’s conception in the draft curriculum, and some articles connected to societal identity problems. Examples of more en passant representations are the articles that set out to introduce the requirements of the forthcoming examinations test, or report on the outcomes of the latest exam; they predominantly represented the measurable knowledge and skills component of HT. Similarly, the seven articles on museums, archives, and other institutions outside the school represented HT as a subject where knowledge about a certain topic, era, or region was acquired. Except for a certain accumulation just after the aforementioned 2007 April events, related to the removal of the “Bronze Soldier”, and several opinions on national final examinations, there was no sequence of articles that could be termed a discussion. For a short period after the events in April 2007, conflicting collective memories, including the schools’ (citizenship and history education’s) responsibilities in such a situation, were discussed quite intensively among the Estonian public. These discussions centered on whether and how to present the Estonian past to Russian-speaking pupils in a way that could reconcile their identities and their families’ and community memories (e.g., Eslas 2007; Liik 2007; Raud 2007; Tamm 2007). These discussions were reflected in the Teachers’ Newspaper, but abated shortly thereafter.

Below is our attempt to describe representations of HT in the weekly, according to different aspects or components of the subject: identity-related and geographic foci of HT; pupils’ skills and competencies as aims of HT; less common approaches (multi-perspective and history-culture-focused HT).

3.2. Identities and Geographic Foci

Transmitting knowledge about the past and enhancing collective identity are the most widespread expectations of HT. The field has traditionally been spatially concentric; the most detailed picture is painted of one’s own nation, followed by regions that are most clearly connected. The rest of the world is considered should time and willingness remain (e.g., Oswalt 2006). The belief that HT should shape “a group identity defined by common experience and belief” (Seixas 2000, 21–23), has been supported by the principle that teaching should start from what is familiar and spatially closer to
the pupils (e.g., Gies 2004, 116–17; cf. Kello and Masso 2012). Therefore, the traditional spatial focus (meaning that Europeans should, first and foremost, learn about European history, and/or that HT in general should start with what is close to the pupils, i.e., local history) grows from a traditional conception of the contents of the subject. However, teaching such content need not be methodically “traditional,” and can be dealt with critically, using interactive, pupil-centered methods, too. Still, now that broad realms of knowledge are shared transnationally and even globally, the traditional pedagogical principle that what can be found in a pupil’s physical proximity is also more familiar, is less convincing. This belief could be regarded as a traditional conception of pupils’ everyday worlds whereas modern information technologies may have extended pupils’ realm of experience beyond that of their teachers (Kello and Masso 2012).

In the sample articles, the traditional geographical focus of HT was explicitly questioned only once, in an article by a university student promoting evening lectures on world culture. He criticized the subject’s focus on both Estonian and European pasts, and defended a globally oriented HT, calling for a more balanced presentation of world history and culture. In doing so, he represented contemporary HT as Eurocentric:

The current history and culture education provided at schools can be compared to a person who only listens to his/her own opinion about himself, and pays no attention to others. Almost from beginning to end, our current history course talks about European cultural history. Even those few chapters that enlighten the rest of the world are more often than not skipped by teachers because they do not feel themselves confident enough outside the West, and these things will not be asked at national examinations either. [...] It is about the time to move from West-centric history to world-centric history, society, and culture studies in school education. (Kiik 2007)

Rather, some dangers to a coherent collective memory were pointed out, such as young people’s indifference towards the past and orientation towards the present, the disappearance of common representations of history within the community, and Russian-speaking pupils’ identification with a Russian, rather than with an Estonian, perspective towards the past. Still, only three articles (Raudkivi 2003; Vahtrre 2004; Helme 2007) took the importance of a nation-centered approach to HT as their main focus. These were written by an academic historian who drew attention to the importance of historical consciousness in young people and present-day society, a right-wing textbook author defending Estonians’ national and ethnocentric perspective on HT at schools, and a writer and essayist who analyzed the feasibility of compiling a common European history textbook. The textbook author was quite explicit about his support for both nation and ethnocentric HT, illustrating the overlap of the perspectives of the titular ethnicity and “the nation” in a traditional approach:

It is natural that today, when we are still at the stage of restoration of our nation state and integration to Europe at the same time, while looking for common topics for conversation with thousands of immigrants (this way holding out the
hope to build up, step by step, a coherent society), history textbooks primarily tell us how the Estonian people lived, suffered and struggled; how they carried on the idea of their autonomy throughout centuries; and how they finally shaped it into independent statehood. There is no point in arguing that nation-centric angle is wrong or one-sided. If it were, then each and every approach would be wrong and one-sided. (Vahtrre 2004)

Several less politically involved academic historians represented a more ambivalent position, offering no clear-cut solutions to the presented discrepancy between, on the one hand, valuing the knowledge acquired by the pupils and, on the other hand, the inherently undefinable nature of historical knowledge (Vseviov 2002, 2004; Kivimäe 2004; Arjakas 2005; Ruutsoo 2005; cf. Ruutsoo 2007). Thus, in comparison to other authors who had a similar distance from the practical aspects of HT, the academic historians were able to bring forth dilemmas and contradictions deriving from the essence of historical knowledge:

A system of knowledge is necessary for teaching and learning, but it is risky to bring an order into the “jungle of the past”, since it will result in exposing or interpreting the past within our own present and from our own retrospect. There are many interpretations, they are individual and constantly changing [...]. (Kivimäe 2004)

Several academic historians referred to the contradiction between the teacher’s position as provider of “truths” to be learned, and the analytical and multifaceted nature of knowledge about the past: “while a researcher may afford long discussions that often run into a dead end, the person standing in front of a full classroom of pupils needs facts and brief summaries of complicated events and processes that do not have a single explanation” (Kala 2002). The teacher of history, unlike a science teacher, can perform no experiments to justify his or her statements; s/he must be “believed and trusted” (Vseviov 2002).

A specific group of articles touched upon a topic that might be called “the problem of Estonian-Russian pupils.” This was the motive or main focus of 10 articles, and was also mentioned in a few other pieces. Seven of these articles were published as contributions to the public discussions following the events in April 2007. In some of these articles, the popular desire that the pupils agree with the dominant interpretations of Estonia’s recent past was described as problematic. One author suggested that HT should give up the attempt to transmit the same Estonian history narratives to ethnic and Russian-speaking Estonians:

I think that it is not reasonable to expect that one day all Russian young people would be filled with sentiment about the same historic events which swell up the chest of Estonian schoolchildren. It is much more important that Russian school-agers would acknowledge the public interpretation of history of the country they were born in, and accept its Constitution and political regime. [...] It might be much more effective if young people finishing Russian-language schools, who are Russians in terms of their cultural identity, would be Estonians in terms of their political identity, i.e. loyal to the Estonian state. (Tamm 2007)
Other articles were based on the assumption of the desirability of this goal (that Estonian history should be taught the same regardless of the pupils), but pointed to obstacles related to pupils’ identity and Russian identity politics:

Given that there is no objective history and the curricula are already overwhelming – perhaps we should waive teaching recent history once and for all? For the sake of integration we are actually giving up celebrating Christmas and Easter [...]. Another option might be to simply slide over any dangerous topics, thereby risking, however, doing a disservice to patriotic education, and leaving Russian children within the sphere of influence of only the Moscow-minded and Russian-language media. This process is already going on: its initial result is, for example, waverering attitude towards deportations [...] as well as the fact that year by year, the proportion of those among the population of Estonia who believe that the Estonian state voluntarily joined the Soviet Union is growing. (Kello 2008)

The ethnic and mnemonic division of Estonian society was not defended as a possible resource to be used in history lessons in order to get pupils interested and to foster more understanding of the diversity of interpretations of the past. However, a civil servant responsible for HT pointed in several articles to a source-based and multi-perspective way of teaching as a solution to the “problem” of the pupils’ heterogeneity (Järve 2003; Oja 2007). The following excerpt is her answer to the weekly’s editors’ question of how ethnic Estonians and ethnic Russians might overcome potentially incompatible understandings of history:

The easiest answer would be that the cause of these events is wrong history education. I would [however] not reduce this to a problem of history education, as the roots are far deeper. This does not mean that history has not been presented from another viewpoint [KK: i.e., a viewpoint deviating from the dominating one] in the classroom in some cases. At the same time, HT indeed does not pursue one single truth; the aim is to present pupils different approaches in order to arrive, through these approaches, at the most objective interpretation possible. (Oja 2007)

Although to some extent in the sample articles the perspectives of both main mnemonic communities were expressed, the “Russian-speaking perspective” was marginally present, featuring mostly as a negation by authors expressing mainstream views. Thus, some articles mentioned the non-ethnic Estonian perspective in passing, and one Russian-speaking teacher expressed “Estonian Russian” views on the Estonian/Soviet past (Kalakauskas 2007a, 2007b). The less “cautious” of his two articles, published exactly at the time of the April 2007 riots (appearing on the day after the main riot night), was structured as a juxtaposition of two kinds of educational documentaries about the past, illustrating the point that an objective history-account was difficult to achieve. On the one hand, he evaluated a set of short films on the Holocaust, designed for use in history classes, as thought-provoking accounts of the past that touched his pupils emotionally, while including no apparent bias or mis-representation. On the other hand, he criticized a US-produced documentary called Singing Revolution – a romanticized overview of the Estonian popular movement at the end of the 1980s against the historical backdrop of the period – as a biased (ethnic
Estonian) perspective on the Soviet past, influenced by “ideological dogmas and false beliefs” and aimed at convincing viewers of the filmmakers’ position. For example, the film did not mention any of the Estonian Russian-speakers who supported Estonian independence between 1985 and 1991 (Kalakauskas 2007a).

In the same newspaper issue, the teacher’s article was “corrected” by an Estonian-speaking historian and political scientist, writing on request from the editorial staff (Ruutsoo 2007), as well as by a member of the editorial staff in the section “Weekly Comment” (Helme 2007).

The editor expressed regret that the Russian-speaking author/teacher works as a history teacher at a school and thus reproduces a skewed conception of history: “He is not a simple worker […] but a teacher who influences the world-image of tens of young people” (Helme 2007).

The political scientist (Ruutsoo 2007) provided a more academic perspective on the topic, offering some analysis of the ideological backgrounds of the Russian-speaking teacher’s statements. However, he did so from the position of an ethnic Estonian. Thus, on the one hand, the scientist opposed the “Soviet view” expressed by the teacher, to a “democratic world view.” He also saw a problem in the history teacher’s inability to differentiate between Soviets and Russians, as well as Nazis and Germans. On the other hand, the scientist argued that the Soviet regime could only be acceptably evaluated as “criminal”:

In the context of such an emphasis on Nazi atrocities the statement that “the authors have knowingly or unknowingly bypassed issues that could have caused a modicum of sympathy for the Soviet regime in the viewers” has a clear ideological purpose. The phrase reflects that people in Estonia can be living in startlingly different worlds, and how difficult a dialogue can therefore be. […] No kind of waking or demanding of “sympathy” for either of the regimes is acceptable. […] there can be no doubt with regard to the basic conception that both regimes were criminal. […] Understanding and explaining to the pupils the extremely complicated nature of murderous regimes is a question of teacher professionalism. If it has failed, it is just sad. (Ruutsoo 2007)

The view that the Nazi and Soviet regimes can be equated in terms of criminality is shared by many ethnic Estonians, both lay and academic (cf. Brüggemann and Kasekamp 2008; Stevick, 2007). Nonetheless, stressing this perspective in the response article expresses little desire for dialogue with a member of a community for whom such a difference is crucial. Rather, the scientist’s article seems to have functioned as the editorial staff’s attempt to restore some “balance” to the point of view of the ethnic Estonians. Indeed, though he noted that “a dialogue that crosses the borders of communities should continue,” he refused to view the teacher’s article as an expression of an individual teacher’s perceptions, presenting it instead as a form of ideological war from Estonian Russians: “The fact that the discontent of the Russian-language school regarding HT has reached also Estonian-language newspapers is part of a/the consolidation [process] of an/the alternative history-image, to which public support is being sought” (Ruutsoo 2007).

In addition to the aforementioned “problem of Russian-speaking pupils,” a more generic concern about the media’s influence on students’ ideas about the past was
expressed in several opinion pieces from academic historians. These articles expose the contemporary diversification process of history-representations within the information space, as well as among pupils (Ant 2004; Arjakas 2005; Hiio 2007; Kivimäe 2004; Laur 2004). Authors expressed concern regarding the factual adequacy and coherence of pupils’ impressions of history, the possible disappearance of common historical knowledge among the pupils, and the job of history teachers becoming increasingly difficult. Similar to the articles on the “problem of Estonian Russian pupils,” these opinion pieces offered no solutions to the issue at hand (i.e., how HT could help pupils to manage the situation). Though the question remained largely unanswered, a few of the pieces underlined the importance of providing pupils with adequate factual frameworks.

In most articles, the unquestioned assumption that national or ethnic history “has an important role in the development of a young person’s world-view, including how one sees and defines oneself and the others” (Grichin 2003) remained implicit. For example, the nation-centeredness of HT was reflected in the lists of exam topics on Estonian national final examinations. Thus, Estonia was often depicted as the first-order collective memory/identity level, with Europe acting as a possible secondary conglomerate of collective identity groups. Within all the article groups that were distinguished in Table 1, there were articles that demonstrated consistency with the national history curriculum by mentioning topics of European history. Thus it can be concluded that Estonia and Europe (not the rest of the world) were represented as the prototypical contents of HT.

3.3. Skills and Competencies

Another aspect of HT that prevailed in the weekly’s representation was learning of generic and instrumental skills such as argumentation, generalization and comparison, expressing one’s opinion, and working with maps and schemes. This aspect prevailed thanks to the large body of articles on national examinations. Usually, the skills and competencies were mentioned beside knowledge (factual recall) as competencies assessed in the exams. The articles which discussed exam tasks and objectives often did so with the aim of justifying the importance of the relevant skills. Thus, the argumentation referred to generic pedagogical principles rather than historical thinking or research ability.

Given that the new curriculum has placed more emphasis than before on analysis, discussion, ability to draw connections […], the same principles should also be reflected in the examination test under preparation. (Aiaots et al. 2000)

The only texts that referred to the historical discipline as the desirable source of activities in HT were two articles by representatives of a work-group that addressed the new national history curriculum, which introduced the concept of the draft curriculum (Kello 2006; Tamm and Kõiv 2007).

[… the curriculum relies on the understanding of contemporary history didactics that history education should be similar to the work of a historian. (Kello 2006)
Another form of representation of HT as a disciplinary subject was offered by the articles mentioning pupils’ historical research outside school. Although a very small proportion of pupils take part in research competitions, such an activity is related to the school subject and led by history teachers. Thus these articles contributed to the representation of HT as connected to historical research. Some articles claimed that these student competitions can be seen as “maintaining the bond and continuity between generations” (e.g., Rohtla and Ojala 2005). Other identity-related aims were also mentioned:

This year the European Union celebrates its 50th anniversary. […] Estonia has been affiliated to Europe for centuries, having acted as a bridge between East and West, North and South. […] We want to live in a sustainable and friendly Europe where the individual in his daily activity as well as the culture and history of native peoples are valued. (Rohtla and Ojala 2007)

3.4. Less Traditional Approaches

3.4.1. An Emergent Representation of a Multiperspective Subject? In Europe, one of the prominent alternatives to traditional single-perspective HT is multi-perspective HT, which is promoted by the Council of Europe (2001) and the European Association of History Educators (Euroclio). This approach attempts to help students “look beyond their own point of view or the point of view of their social, cultural or ethnic group, gender or nationality” (Stradling 2001, 150), and frames “historical events, personalities, developments, cultures and societies from different perspectives through drawing on procedures and processes which are fundamental to history as a discipline” (Stradling 2003, 14). The approach can be defined as a disciplinary history teaching method, differing from lay persons’ approaches to thinking about the past (e.g., Bertram 2012; Seixas 2000). In our sample articles from the weekly, a small group of statements defending the multi-perspective approach in HT were present in “non-routine” articles. The authors (or people quoted in articles written by a journalist) represented those aspects of the national curriculum ideology that were based on ideological positions of the aforementioned institutions (Järve 2000, 2003; Oja 2005a, 2005b, 2007). For example, two of the articles reported on the publication of a teacher’s book (source collection), based on the Council of Europe approach:

The handbook […] offers opposing possibilities of historical approaches and evokes various visions in pupils. […] Tracing the words in the same book in the same classroom with one’s finger year after year does not contribute to development of analytic thinking. […] Rather than learning by heart and reciting the material, the pupil, with the help of the handbook and under the guidance of the teacher, will arrive at the truth on his own. (Järve 2000)

We do not attempt to offer right solutions or approaches through our collection; rather we wish to show that history has always been understood in multiple ways, it has not been black-and-white. […] The main goal is to support the development of pupils’ abilities to analyze, development of their seeing different positions, understanding and discussion skills. (Oja 2005b)
An academic historian presented an opposing perspective in an article that criticized source-based and multi-perspective assessment tasks (T. Kala 2002), as did another authored by a group of history teachers (K. Kala, Kuldna, and Parktal 2003). Both pieces shed doubt on the average pupil’s ability to form valid opinions in the case of academically challenging questions, based on their limited resources (i.e., lesson materials) and knowledge. In other words, these authors questioned the expectation that, based on the source extracts and multiple perspectives offered by any given teacher and textbook, within discussions taking place within a limited period of time (i.e., history class), a pupil could construct an adequately informed opinion:

Often a justified personal opinion is required by all means from pupils in the case of rather problematic topics. […] [But] a pupil is not a scholar of history but, so to say, a decathlete for whom history is just one subject out of many. […] There are also problems with analysis of sources. First of all, why does one think that it should be accomplishable for secondary-school graduates? This is a field of research for scholars of history. […] there is not enough time and opportunities at school for teaching source analysis, and most pupils lack the necessary reading. It would be good if pupils could acquire generally accepted positions and judgments; but in order to become able to orientate oneself amongst various opinions, the number of history lessons should at least be doubled. For such work with sources as it is required [in the exam tasks], the content of textbooks is far from sufficient. (Kala, Kuldna, and Parktal 2003)

Additionally, a politically conservative historian cautioned against a multi-perspective approach to HT, arguing that it would result in too much uncertainty and relativity (Vahtre 2005). He depicted defenders of multi-perspective approaches in HT as incoherent postmodernists who object to the existence of one “Historical Truth.” He maintained that “doubt can never form the main or single content of human awareness; this can still only be the knowledge – to which doubt will only be added thereafter.” Though conceding, rhetorically, that opposing positions could be introduced to the pupils, and they could be “trained to look at events from the perspectives of different parties,” he defended a positivist conception of historical knowledge and (more implicitly, as by referring to the “ancient freedom fight of Estonians”) a nation and ethnocentric approach in HT:

[…] the postmodernist viewpoint is vehemently against any statement about history. At best they would tolerate the statement “World War I began in 1914,” but definitely not the statement “in their ancient fight for freedom, Estonians fought against crusaders, defending their freedom.” In their opinion, instead of such an (allegedly) black-and-white, one-sided and misleading approach, opposing positions should be presented to pupils, leaving it up to them to decide whether it was a fight for freedom, a crusade, or something else. Or whether there was anything at all. […] In their view […] [history should be taught] fragmentally, by discrete problems, by arguing about conflicting first sources, by presenting arguments for and against a particular issue, and by leaving the right to make up their mind to the pupil. (Vahtre 2005)
3.4.2. Another Almost Missing Approach: History-Culture-Focused HT. An approach to HT that is gaining popularity is focusing on how various past-related practices and contents are currently present in a society. This approach acknowledges the various ways that students encounter the past through the media, games, and tourism materials. Thus, they should be taught “how different groups organize the past into histories and how their rhetorical and narratological strategies serve present-day purposes” (Seixas 2000, 20–21; cf. Borries 2007; Pandel 2005). The aim is to enable students to engage critically with historical sources and with present ways of utilizing the past. A few mentions of classroom discussions or exam tasks that addressed current representations and interpretations of the past could be found in our sample from the Teachers’ Newspaper (Räis 2005; Oja 2005a, 2005b; Tamm and Kõiv 2007). Similar to defenses of a skills-centered and multi-perspective HT, these mentions originated only from more or less official sources presenting an ideal view of HT. For example, an article on a draft of the new history curriculum declared that a student should be taught to “orient oneself in the information flow, taking a critical stance towards various information sources and comprehending the inevitable subjectivity and national, political and cultural conditioning of the historiography” (Tamm and Kõiv 2007), i.e., a critical stance toward sources of information and the ability to position historical research within the “bigger picture.” Another example is a foreign expert (representing Euroclio) giving suggestions for possible exam tasks:

Contemporary tourist-targeted materials and posters to introduce the country focus on raising the tourists’ interest. When introducing Estonia to tourists, what kind of elements or images could we use to attract their interest? Please discuss whether such posters would strengthen or break stereotypical opinions on Estonia. (Oja 2005a)

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The fragments of discourses discussed throughout this paper, and represented in the articles of the Teachers’ Newspaper, give us a glimpse into the discursive variety that exists related to history education in Estonia. While many articles represented HT implicitly or in passing, there were also conscious attempts to influence the public’s attitudes toward the subject. These articles were ideological in nature, arguing for or against a “national identity approach” to HT, or defending an approach centered on the development of student skills and thinking. The pro-national identity approaches relied rather obviously on the most traditional social representation of HT, whereas a “skills and thinking” conception expressed a curricular ideology, and did not necessarily express the author’s personal belief. Thus, in broad terms, the representations differed according to the positions (i.e., lay or professional, private opinions or official views) of the authors. Private opinions tended to represent engrained, traditional representations (i.e., knowledge-centered and ethnocentric representations), whereas official views took newer and/or politically correct, skills-centered and multi-perspective approaches.

Teachers, who can be seen as experts in practice, but not necessarily experts in terms of curricular ideology, presented diverse viewpoints related to their positions as
practitioners (e.g., either in defence or opposition to curricular policies and/or national final examinations). Their representations depended on the more particular positions they wrote from, e.g., as members of the national final examination board, the competition board, or as individuals writing on their own initiative. Not surprisingly, the most traditional teacher perspectives were offered by the latter, whereas the “skills and thinking” conception was more represented from an official position even in the case of articles authored by teachers. Hence, based on the weekly newspaper, it could be hypothesized that curricular ideologies are more accepted by teachers closer to “power” – or the more active “core” of teachers, e.g., exam and competition organizers.

However, both the lack of time and habit evidently prevented teachers from a public discussion of such questions. Estonia’s size may also have been influential in this regard, since many participants would likely know each other to some degree, making it more likely that doubts, critiques, and problems would be discussed directly face to face. Also, the resources required (time, motivation, skills, and habits) to write such articles are available to different degrees for groups of authors. Teachers who could have provided a practitioners’ perspective on these issues were probably at a disadvantage in terms of these resources.

At the same time, professional discussions have little effect on the broader public’s conceptions of HT. The latter could be more influenced by authors (i.e., academic scholars, politicians, and journalists) who, having relatively more time and skill, wrote articles which were centered on problems of a more general interest, but represented more traditional conceptions of the subject. In other words, problem-based discussions which could have been interesting to the broader public, thus influencing widespread representations of HT (rather than just within the teachers’ professional community), were usually written by “lay people” (including, in this context, academic scholars) who presented a more traditional point of view.

Those authors who represented official perspectives were evidently, ex officio, less interested in public debate. Hence, experts did not often utilize the forum to confront alternative conceptions of HT; the potential of expert representations to effect change in dominating construction of a social phenomenon within the forum was not utilized entirely. Indeed, at least from a professional perspective, there may be grounds for not discussing alternative conceptions of HT too thoroughly in public, in the attempt to shield professional discourses from lay superficiality and national interest groups (cf. Seixas 2010, 19). According to Nakou and Barca (2010a, 3), in countries where “history education is publicly conceived as immediately relating to national history, national memory and identity, any historical or educational idea, proposal or state attempt to reform history education […] does appeal to the passionate reactions of the public, which cannot conceive history education except as means to cultivate national identity.”

Additionally, Estonian and Russian identity politics, variously perceived by different groups, present a context to any discussions related to memory construction. Depending on how a group or an individual is positioned towards the identity politics, they invoke reactions and sensitivities that render many memory-related issues difficult to discuss openly and rationally. For instance, the perceived or actual animosity of
Russian memory politics makes alternative interpretations of the Estonian past seem all the more dangerous to both the public and experts.

The weekly newspaper editors’ role was rather passive in terms of initiating and sustaining discussion, though they supported the ethnic Estonians’ (i.e., the journalists’ own and most of their readership’s) position and representations of history. This illustrates that “while contemporary public spheres expand the scope of encounters between knowledge and open up new spheres of visibility and debate, they also point to the problem of how power differentials shape the status and recognition of different knowledge systems” (Jovchelovitch 2008, 24). The ethnic-Estonian perspective can be clearly seen when one looks at the journalists’ own articles and the editorial board’s choice of authors.

Further, our sample articles exemplified a lack of dialogue between the two mnemonic communities. A good example was the editor’s response to the Russian-speaking teacher who represented a group needing “structural encouragement.” In this case, a lack of effort in initiating true dialogue could be seen more clearly from some of the representatives of the ethnic Estonian community, although the Russian teacher’s article also employed some irony towards the other perspective, by using quotations on the term “occupation” for the Soviet period. In comparison to the self-evidence and domination of opposing positions by ethnic Estonians, the “Estonian” reaction indicates their continuing sensitivity towards alternative interpretations of their nation’s past, particularly after the April 2007 events.

To conclude, different author positions are connected to different notions of HT. The sample articles revealed some of the motives behind, and aspects of, representations of HT. Although two main dimensions (knowledge and skills) of HT emerged, a variety of ideas about HT were expressed at least fleetingly. Our findings show a gap between authors (politicians, journalists, and some academic historians) who represent a broader, i.e., more traditional and ethnocentric, position on general interest problems, and authors representing curricular ideologies, whose intended audience is mainly history teachers. While the spring of 2007 contributed to an emergent discussion about HT, encouraging “laypeople” to write about HT, the events did not lead to any real dialogue about different approaches. At the same time, interests related to national identity and memory politics were reflected in the articles. The editorial board’s reactions illustrate the difficulty of avoiding bias in such discussions.

On the one hand, the identity and memory-political interests reflected in the articles point to the possible sensitivity of such discussions. HT at school has never been a purely academic enterprise. On the other hand, there were some anchor points for more “progressive” discussions on HT in the Teachers’ Newspaper. For example, multi-perspective and history-culture-focused approaches may provide solutions to the “problem” of “mnemonic heterogeneity” in history classrooms. If the purposes of HT are understood in a traditional way, i.e., if HT is seen as a vehicle for socializing pupils into a homogeneous ethnic-national memory community and enhancing a corresponding identity, the existence of several memory communities in a country looks like a difficult challenge for history teaching. However the same situation of living in a country with several contrasting memory communities, as well as pupils from different memory communities in the classroom, might be an excellent resource for a more open, critical, and multi-perspective HT.
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