

Report of Plenary Session III
Northern Research Forum
Veliky Novgorod, Russia
September 19-22, 2002

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Applying the Lessons of History

Today at lunch we witnessed at the Novgorod Kremlin a vivid reminder that history is indeed important, not just to academics, but more importantly to the public. The type of history displayed there – with incarnations of famous men paraded before their statue – is the traditional kind, tied to great events and great men, and told in a narrative progression from past to present.

This traditional kind of history is particularly powerful because, as Nils Blomkvist pointed out in his presentation, it serves as a basis for creating a common, shared identity. But in his presentation, he also warned that putting too much faith in this form of historical narrative—which can be utilized as a tool to justify inequality, aggression, and other differential power relationships—can be dangerous. By suggesting a natural state of things, an orderly progression from the past to the present, this type of history suppresses all the other stories to make one history. He illustrated this point with an overview of the relationship between Russia and Sweden, which has traditionally been assumed to be “natural enemies.” He instead pointed out that the relationship had once been very friendly, and only changed when a prince decided to marry his daughter to a German instead of a Swede. There is then no historical imperative demanding Sweden and Russia cannot be very cooperative neighbors.

The other presenters at the session suggested alternative, less traditional, approaches to history that allow history to still be meaningful. Anatoly Kirpichnikov suggested archaeological investigations can yield surprising pieces of evidence that make us question the old, traditional history. His excavations around Lake Ladoga of Viking Age sites there has revealed evidence of those often overlooked in historical narratives: the everyday lives of people, especially women. This evidence has the potential to generate new visions about the past. For instance, finds at his site of artifacts with Islamic writing on them clearly illustrate that the Islamic and Christian worlds have, in the past, had much closer and friendlier relationships than are seen today. Many of these prehistoric relationships were built on complex economic links, and thus a study of economic transactions must be incorporated into our view of history.

Thomas Ingi Ulrich suggested that another discipline, environmental science, must be brought to bear if we are to learn anything from history. Rather than looking at

the overall history of battles or great men, we can look instead at the human-environmental relationship as it has developed in certain regions at certain times. Such an analysis can provide information about how to develop healthy, sustainable human-environmental relationships. He provided examples from Iceland and Greenland. One Icelandic example of the harvesting of eggs from around Lake Myvatn was seen as especially worthy of emulation. Archaeological excavations have revealed that from the settlement period to the present, locals in the area have been sure to only take the eggs of certain species that are very abundant, and never to take more than one or two eggs from each nest. The example from Greenland, where the Norse failed to adapt new techniques in the face of a changing climate, was suggested as a strong example of the importance of flexibility. Several of the open comments from the floor emphasized how urgent and essential it is that we today try to harvest whatever information we can about sustainable relationships in order to preserve our fragile environment.

Finally, Tuulikki Karjalainen offered a third approach to history. The Arts — music, dance, theatre — all existed in the past, and by re-enacting these traditional art forms, we keep the past alive and teach people alternative ways of viewing the world. She described one such endeavor: a chamber music festival in southeastern Finland that she has been involved in. The remarkable commercial success of this endeavor clearly illustrates that the past is of very real interest to people today: they are willing to pay to learn about it. She also pointed out that the origin of this chamber music festival is from the mind, heart, and dedication of one individual. She summarized her comments at the end of the session by saying, “One person really does make a difference.”

This last idea of individual agency is indeed a fourth approach to history, to see it as a series of individual decisions rather than a grand progression of time, as if pre-ordained or destined. Several of the participants on the floor commented on this idea, on history as a complex system of random decisions, and of the need to recognize the haphazard nature of history. Only systems theories and complex modeling could truly portray the nature of historic change, which is sometimes very rapid, and other times very slow. The role of the private individual must be recognized as a player in this system.

More specifically, comments also focused on the need for history to be inclusive of minorities and women if they are to be trusted. Ester Combs illustrated this point from the floor with an example from Alaska, where school children simply no longer believe the stories taught to their parents by Westerners about how their ancestors used to live.

I drew from the papers and the discussion that indeed history can teach us a great deal, but only if we can trust the history that is told to us. As Niels Einarson said, the creation of history is too important to be left in the hands of the few and we should work to engender a broader historic perspective in as many people as might want to learn about it. Thomas Ingi Ulrich suggested technology was important in making this a reality. Tuulika suggested that cultural programs were another way to make people more interested in the past.

Other proposals focused on the next forum, including a possible session seeking to understand which features of northern culture and society are shared by all, and which are more locally derived. The panel organizer, Andrei, also proposed that the next forum could present dioramas or computer programs which demonstrate several alternative approaches to history, such as taking a single event from many points of view.

But perhaps Nils Blomkvist summed it up best that we can only learn from history if we add historical examples into our decision making process.