

HISTORIANS WITHOUT BORDERS: THE USE AND ABUSE OF HISTORY IN CONFLICTS

In today's world we should be increasingly concerned about both ignorance and the abuse of history in politics, as well as of the consequences of these to international relations. Ignorance fosters abuse and abuse fosters conflicts. Historical myths are used to create and sustain enemy images and justify aggressive policies. Different views and interpretations of history and historical events often contribute to the perpetuation of conflicts.

But historians can also contribute to mediation and conflict resolution. International organisations and governments should welcome and support independent and international research. They should foster contacts between historians from all countries, and encourage them to work together in defusing conflicts involving facts and interpretations of historical events. Historians can build cross-border understanding by bringing together different parties' perceptions and interpretations of such events.

The time has come for independent historians in all countries to come together and place their knowledge and experience at the service of efforts to prevent and solve internal and external conflicts, and post-conflict management. Historians can and should be used as experts in helping mediation by bringing the views of opposing parties closer to each other.

As a response to these challenges, Historians without Borders in Finland (HWB) was founded on 17th June 2015 in Helsinki at the initiative of Mr. Erkki Tuomioja, former Minister for Foreign Affairs of Finland. Among the founders were almost all prominent Finnish historians as well as diplomats with mediation experience. The founding meeting was also addressed by Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, President Martti Ahtisaari, who recalled the numerous times during his career when additional knowledge about history would have aided a conflict-resolution process. There is a clear need for making such information more visible and easily accessible.

Representatives of our organisation have already had meetings and extensive correspondence with historians and other interested actors in many countries with the aim of establishing an international network of Historians without Borders. The response to our initiative has been overwhelmingly positive.

We are now pleased to announce the date for the Historians without Borders: The Use and Abuse of History in Conflict, International Conference in Helsinki, 19th-20th May 2016.

The two-day Conference will begin with a welcome reception on Wednesday evening 18th May 2016 and the Conference will be opened on Thursday morning at the University of Helsinki with addresses by Mr. Erkki Tuomioja, President of Historians without Borders in Finland, and Nobel Peace prize laureate, President Martti Ahtisaari.

The venue will be the University of Helsinki at the centre of the city. Historians without Borders in Finland is responsible for the Conference with the cooperation of and input from the University of Helsinki, the Ministry for Foreign Affairs in Finland and the Finnish Institute for International Affairs.

The Conference will work in four plenary sessions with keynote speakers and panellists. The themes of the Conference will be explored in six separate, partly parallel workshop sessions with the possibility of analysing closely the role, use and abuse of history in specific ongoing or potential conflicts. At the closing plenary a decision will be taken on how to continue the work for creating an international network of Historians without Borders.

The conference fee will be 100 euros and will include the conference materials and invitations to the receptions and the Friday lunch hosted by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs. As this is not a scientific conference we are not issuing a call for papers, but we are grateful for all contributions on themes related to the initiative and conference which will be printed and distributed to the conference participants provided we receive them by May 1st 2016. We have made reservations for conference participants in hotels in central Helsinki.

Historians without borders in Finland was founded on June 17th 2015 and according to its charter seeks to address the role of history in conflicts and to bridge the gap between the academia and policy-makers. In particular, HWB aims to

- promote and deepen general and comprehensive knowledge and understanding of history;
- promote open and free access to historical material and archives;
- promote interactive dialogue between different views and interpretations of history to bring closer diverging views of the course of historical events;
- support efforts to impede the abuse of history to foster conflicts or to sustain enemy images and distorted myths, and to contribute to the use of history in defusing and resolving conflicts.