

## The peaks and troughs of Russian-Estonian relations

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# BOOK REVIEW

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## THE PEAKS AND TROUGHS OF RUSSIAN-ESTONIAN RELATIONS

Review of the book: Tambi, S. A. *Estonia: the history of relations and the modern era. On the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations* [Estoniya: istoriya vzaimootnosheniy i sovremennost. K 100-letiyu so vremeni ustanovleniya diplomaticheskikh otnosheniy]. St. Petersburg : Piter, 2021.

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The world is witnessing the most profound changes of recent decades: a severe economic crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, and the bitter confrontation between Russia and the West, to name a few. At the core of Russia's foreign policy is indubitably the conflict with the West, centred around Ukraine. The member states of the EU and NATO that share a border with Russia adopted the most hard-line position, and Russia's relations with its western neighbours have always been strained. A important role is played in these tensions by the ideological component, namely the different and often conflicting interpretations of historical events. Since the disputed events took place in the recent past, and some of the participants are still alive, these differences are sharp and acute. It would be erroneous to say that no attempts have been made to discuss the contentious issues and reconcile the differences. Bilateral commissions were set up bringing together historians from Russia and Poland, Lithuania and Latvia. They provided solid groundwork and prepared a series of documents and studies for publication. Estonia, however, has always been a special case: in the absence of government-supported structures, scholars from the two countries have conducted intensive research into the history of Soviet—Estonian and Russian—Estonian relations. Being far from exhausted, this research agenda continues to attract scholarly attention.

Sergey Tambi is a young researcher holding a bachelor's degree from Saint Petersburg State University, School of International Relations, and a master's degree from MGIMO University. His work is a showcase of the achievements attained by Russia's two major centres of academic excellence in international relations. Tambi authored a book dedicated to the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Russia and Estonia, which is captivating in terms of content and original in terms of genre. A substantial part of the

book is documents from the Archive of Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation, reprints of reports from the Soviet, Russian and Estonian media and some other sources earlier unknown or familiar to a very narrow group of specialists in the field. Introducing these materials into scholarly discourse makes it possible to analyse the key trends in the evolution of bilateral relations and highlights earlier obscure details. It is only to be expected that Tambi, an acting diplomat with experience of working in Estonia, pays particular attention to the history of Soviet and Russian diplomatic missions in Tallinn and the Estonian embassy in Moscow. Comprehensive accounts of these topics have never appeared in the literature, with only several pages of this history thoroughly explored. Yet, the role of embassies in foreign policy decision-making is substantial as they both provide their governments with information and are involved in the practical implementation of the decisions made. Reports from the media of the 1920s—1930s and the recent decades envelops the reader in the atmosphere of those periods, giving an insight into the public attitudes prevailing at the time. Probably, this fine book would have benefited from the inclusion of excerpts from the memoirs of prominent politicians and diplomats. Although the utilisation of such narratives as a primary source has its deficiencies, they could play a useful role when researching the history of international relations, those between Russia and Estonia being no exception here.

Tambi adopts the official position of Russian diplomacy but refrains from involvement in the debate between Russian and Estonian historians, who have very different views and rely on disparate approaches. He focuses on the analysis of the documents rather than the events that led to their production. In the book under review, this approach is tenable since the documents and media reports studied by the authors do not contain any facts questioning the established perspectives and concepts. Nevertheless, Tambi scrutinises a number of narratives revealing the complexity and ambiguity of the processes considered.

He believes the peace treaty signed in Tartu (1920) by Soviet Russia and Estonia to have become void in 1940 when Estonia was incorporated into the Soviet Union. At the same time, he demonstrates that the conclusion of the treaty was of enormous significance for both countries as it provided a framework for the further development of bilateral relations and strengthened the international standing of Soviet Russia and Estonia. This is an important conclusion since Soviet historiography used to underplay the role of the Treaty of Tartu, which was usually mentioned in passing as a minor event or completely disregarded. Unfortunately, this approach survived into the present, being observable in the works of some Russian experts on the history of international relations. Yet, the 1920 treaty with Estonia was not only a landmark in bilateral relations, but also created the first legal channel by means of which Soviet Russia could forge political and economic ties with the outer world.

Naturally, the socio-political systems of the USSR and Estonia were not only different: they were precise opposites. Although this imposed serious limitations on the development of relations across all spheres, the search for ways towards mutual understanding remained possible. In this respect, Tambi draws the read-

er's attention to several remarkable episodes. For instance, in 1921, when large areas of European Russia were stricken by famine, the government of Estonia and the Estonian Red Cross provided humanitarian aid to Soviet Russia. A special train carrying foodstuffs and medicines arrived in Moscow, from where they were delivered to Kazan, Samara, Simbirsk, Ufa and other cities. In his letter of gratitude to Estonia's Minister of Foreign Affairs Otto Strandman, one of the top officials of Soviet Russia Lev Kamenev called the aid the first gift his country had received from its western neighbours. Although Tambi writes about the difficult Soviet—Estonian relations in the military sphere, there is a photograph in the book (p. 143) of the Marshal of the Soviet Union Aleksandr Egorov taken during his visit to Tallinn in 1937. Probably, this event deserves closer attention: the way Egorov was received in Estonia (it is the only known case when the Day of the Red Army was celebrated in a foreign state in the 1920s—1930s), his negotiation with the Estonian leadership and the reactions of the Soviet and Estonian media to the visit seem to require further research.

The section dedicated to the history of Russian—Estonian relations in the past three decades, i. e. after the disintegration of the USSR, concentrates on political, economic and interregional ties, as well as those in the fields of science, education, culture, arts, etc. The information provided is vast but often resembles excerpts from a reference book. More details on these connections and concrete, first of all, humanitarian projects could be a worthy addition to the book. The experience in the area was positive and valuable.

Today, there is a serious confrontation between Russia and the West, and much of the positive legacy of the past decades has been lost. However, the question of normalising the relations will one day be on the agenda again. Of course, the future efforts will focus on not recreating the past but finding answers to new questions and rising to new challenges. Then, an objective analysis will be indispensable of what caused the past strategies to fail, what requires entirely different approaches and what can still be utilised. In such a case, the materials presented in Tambi's book will be even more relevant than they are today.

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