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Introduction to the Theme Issue: Expectations and Uncertainties: Post-Cold War Experiences in Finland and the North-East Baltic

The turn of the 1990s marked a period of profound political, social, and economic upheaval in the Baltic Sea region. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the fall of the Berlin Wall ushered in a unique interregnum – an era defined by uncertainty, ambiguity, and a sense of both excitement and possibility. Despite widespread economic hardship and social dislocation, the immediate post-Cold War years opened an unexpected window of opportunity. This liminal period was characterized by transformative change, as individuals and communities grappled with emerging political realities, renegotiated cultural identities, and sought to redefine their place within a rapidly shifting global order. Considering current geopolitical tensions – particularly Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and NATO's enlargement – scholarly interest in the history of the immediate post-Cold War Baltic region has been notably renewed.

The notion of the "end of history" – the anticipated triumph of liberal democracy – shaped the worldview of contemporary politicians and intellectuals, its proponents and critics. In a world presumed to be finished, what unique direction could history still take?[1] Yet such high-level reflections obscure the lived realities of ordinary citizens. In Finland, many who lost their jobs during the 1990s depression also lost faith in the future; neither the past nor the present offered solace. For others, however, European integration opened new horizons. In the Baltic countries, the end of history signalled not closure but a beginning: the dawn of renewed freedom and the reclamation of national narratives. Meanwhile, in Finland, the past gained new value through the public veneration of the war generation, which had by then entered retirement.

While most research has traditionally focused on "high" geopolitics, there is growing interest in grassroots and minority experiences of the early 1990s,

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and the role these experiences played in redefining past futures. Within cultural memory studies and the politics of memory, the post-socialist reconfiguration of identities and memories in the Baltic countries has received sustained attention.[2] In the Nordic context, shifts in identity, emerging forms of cooperation, and regionalisms began to attract scholarly interest in the early 2000s, as political scientists examined the implications of European integration and economic transformation in Norden.[3] While cultural and social scientists have long engaged with grassroots phenomena of the era, historians are now turning in earnest to these developments, delving into archival sources. Conceptual and comparative studies on the rise of neoliberalism and the principles of New Public Management from the 1970s to the 1990s, alongside contemporary debates on European integration, are being enriched by research into the grassroots history of Finland's 1990s depression,[4] cross-border cooperation, and the history and memory of immigration, among other emerging fields.[5]

The early 1990s witnessed the emergence of grassroots transnationalism, as local movements and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) increasingly forged cross-border connections for example in heritage cooperation across the Finnish–Russian border and between Estonian and Finnish heritage organizations. These initiatives gained prominence by facilitating dialogue, fostering cooperation, and advocating for democratic reform. In doing so, they played a pivotal role in reshaping the political, social, and cultural landscapes of the Baltic Sea region during a time of profound transformation.

For example, Finnish Heimat tourists visiting their ancestral homeland in former Finnish Karelia – ceded to the Soviet Union in 1944 – responded so swiftly to the easier border crossing between Finland and the Soviet Union/Russia that both Soviet/Russian and Finnish authorities initially struggled to coordinate or supervise the surge in tourism and grassroots cooperation. The spontaneity of these cross-border activities caught officials unprepared. Similarly, as Aapo Roselius writes in this issue, the launch of the repatriation of the remains of missing soldiers from the Second World War – between the Soviet Union/Russian Federation and former Axis countries, including Finland – brought together NGOs, private citizens, and state actors in a complex web of collaboration.

In the north-eastern Baltic Sea region, the post-Cold War transition manifested geographically, for instance, in the renewed cooperation between Finland and the Baltic countries. Civil society relations between Finland and

Estonia recovered rapidly at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s, to such an extent that contemporaries felt as though the 50-year hiatus had vanished from collective memory. Linguistic kinship resonated particularly with early memory activists.[6] This sentiment was also evident in the early stages of the return migration of Ingrian Finns. Around the same time, "ethnic kinship attachment," which had quieted during the Cold War, re-emerged, especially among memory activist circles. As return migration progressed, Ingrian Finns came to realize that general Finnish awareness of their existence in the Soviet Union was far less widespread than ceremonial speeches had suggested. The return migration of the Ingrian Finns formed part of a broader phenomenon, in which ethnic Germans, Jews, and Pontic Greeks also migrated to Germany, Israel and Greece from the former Soviet Union.[7]

Western orientation, neo-patriotism and "diluted nationalism"

From a Finnish perspective, the early 1990s – an era marked by Westernizing narratives and emotionally charged discussions about Finland's place in Europe – culminated in EU membership in 1995,[8] the parliamentary debates surrounding which are examined by Kati Katajisto and Matti La Mela in this issue. Interestingly, this Western orientation also expanded Finland's mental geography eastward and southward. The collapse of lucrative bilateral trade with the Soviet Union was offset by new cultural and social engagements: Karelian Heimat and war tourism, immigration from Russia, including ethnic Ingrian Finns and Russians, and the surge of Finnish mass travel to Tallinn.

Concurrently, the rise of neo-patriotism and nationalism played a significant role in shaping collective memory and the reinterpretation of historical narratives across the region. The convergence of grassroots activism, patriotic and nationalist sentiment, and European integration influenced evolving debates on national identity, memory, and history politics, ultimately shaping the narratives of this transformative era.

In Finland, the 1990s and the early years of the new millennium have often been described as a neo-patriotic era.[9] The social and economic upheavals following the end of the Cold War sparked similar waves of patriotic sentiment across Europe. This phenomenon was closely tied to the reshaping of identities amid intensified globalization and European integration, as populist nationalist movements gained traction in countries such as Italy. In part,

neo-patriotism involved a redefinition of traditional patriotic values – an effort to defend and reframe them in response to political populism by integrating nationalist sentiments into a renewed European identity.[10] The implementation of the Maastricht Treaty in 1993 accelerated European integration, prompting widespread re-examination of national identities and historical narratives throughout the Nordic countries and Western Europe. This period of national introspection also extended to minorities and autonomous regions such as Åland, whose position and identity within Norden, the Baltic Sea region, and broader Europe required renegotiation, as Hasan Akintug writes in his article in this issue.

Finnish neo-patriotism can be characterized as an ideological movement particularly anchored in the remembrance of the Second World War, a theme that resonated across social strata, uniting both elites and the lower social classes. While it exhibited populist features, the post-Soviet context gave rise to a broad societal embrace of the war generation's legacy. This appeal extended notably to the youth of the time, who did not necessarily view patriotism and Europeanism as conflicting identities, despite what contemporary debates often suggested.[11] While the term "neo-patriotism" is commonly, albeit somewhat pejoratively, used today to describe the patriotic atmosphere of the 1990s, it is worth noting that it was not widely used in Finland at the time; the strengthening of nationalist sentiment was more commonly described as "neo-nationalism."[12] This trend was also linked to the resurgence of ethnic and potentially violent nationalism that filled the power vacuum in Eastern Europe – a development both anticipated and realized, with the wars in Yugoslavia and the Caucasus serving as its most visible manifestations. In Finland, violent nationalism in the 1990s was associated with neo-Nazi and skinhead attacks that primarily targeted Somali asylum seekers and reception centres. However, everyday racism in the face of the quickly rising number of asylum seekers and immigrants was much more widespread than far-right aggression.[13]

However, neo-patriotism can be conceptually distinguished from neo-nationalism. The form of neo-patriotism discussed here can be understood as a phenomenon emerging within established Western societies, including Finland. It aligns with Michael Billig's notion of banal or "cool" nationalism, or the nationalism of the "unwaved flag". In this mode, the nation is reproduced through everyday practices rather than through explicit or "hot" acts of "flagging the nation," which are more typical of societies engaged in active

nation-building.[14] In Finland during the early 1990s, however, the nation became a subject of active public debate, resulting in a blend of banal and "hot" nationalism. This hybrid form may be described as "diluted nationalism," in which national identity becomes a topic of public negotiation and reinterpretation, yet without strong mobilization of the population.[15]

At the same time, the newly independent Baltic countries actively embarked on nation-building, where patriotically defined values and symbols were perceived as youthful and progressive – far from the banal, self-evident truths of established national cultures. It is important to note that the countries and societies of the Baltic Sea region experienced different phases of nationalism during the 1990s. This divergence added a distinctive dimension to the shared sense of temporal rupture between a familiar past and an uncertain future. The encounters between these differing experiential worlds may have shaped the atmosphere of the time in ways that remain underexplored. The wartime past, for instance, offered Finland and Estonia markedly different resources for history culture. Despite promises of European integration and an emphasis on a Westernizing narrative, Finland's experience of the early 1990s can be described as a mental paralysis caused by unemployment that seemed to suspend the flow of time. Although neo-patriotism rarely offered the unemployed a basis for identity, as Ville Yliaska observes in his article in this issue, the broader societal atmosphere was reinforced by memories of Second World War heroism and narratives of overcoming hardship. In contrast, most Estonians were unwilling to exchange the chaotic early years of independence for a return to the Soviet era. The future, however uncertain, remained hopeful.

Experiencing and narrating the 1990s depression

In Finland, the 1990s have often been discussed, both within and beyond academia, primarily through the lens of the depression and the economy, to the extent that other perspectives may have been overlooked. Experiences and ambiguities surrounding changing identities in a globalizing world, for instance, preceded the economic downturn and deserve closer attention.[16] The 1990s, of course, are a decade that lends itself to narrativization (and moralization): the economic boom of the 1980s was followed by a deep slump and mass unemployment, which in turn gave way to recovery and the IT boom.[17]

The decade was also punctuated by symbolic moments, such as Finland's first ice hockey World Championship win in 1995, an event that boosted collective self-confidence at a time marked by high unemployment and the country's recent accession to the EU. This is reflected in collected reminiscences: for many, including those who did not follow the sport, the championship has come to symbolize the end of the depression.[18]

Despite the turmoil – or perhaps because of it – the 1990s have become a source of nostalgia for middle-aged Finns who were young at the time. This is reflected in a wide array of cultural expressions, including fiction, theatre, podcasts, and modern folklore.[19] At the same time, the depression has become an object of collective memory, with its "lessons" frequently invoked in the face of contemporary social challenges. The 1990s depression now serves as a crisis reference point, almost comparable to the Second World War. Surviving it, even with painful budget cuts, has come to exemplify Finnish resilience and perhaps offers a recurring justification for austerity. It is as if adversity refines the Finnish character.[20]

While the 1990s may now be viewed with nostalgia, the effects of the recession were profound and long-lasting. This was especially true for the long-term unemployed, debtors, and youth who grew up in families affected by job loss or who entered the job market during the depression. The structural transformation that had already begun before the downturn of the early 1990s permanently reshaped Finnish society, introducing shifts in the values that underpin the welfare state. As a result, income inequalities have widened significantly since the 1980s and 1990s, a trend also observed for instance in Sweden. This development was closely tied to the rise of neoliberal economic policies that gained momentum during that period. Moreover, these policies promoted individual choice, openness to perpetual competition, and personal responsibility in adapting to a changing working life.[21] Although the economy rebounded rapidly after the depression and overall prosperity increased, this growth was more uneven than during the post-Second World War golden age of Nordic welfare societies. For example, by the time of the 2008–2009 financial crisis, childhood poverty in Finland had tripled since 1995.[22] Towards the end of the millennium, media attitudes towards private wealth accumulation began to shift, with increasing acceptance of it as a sign of personal success and a benefit to society as a whole.[23]

The 1990s recession in Finland was notably deeper than in other comparable countries, such as Sweden. This shaped – or "Finnicized" – the broader

narrative of Western structural change, as Finnish experiences of the early 1990s gave the transformation a distinctly national character. Yet these transformations would likely have occurred regardless, driven by the pressures of an increasingly networked world, even without what was, at the time, the deepest recession ever recorded among OECD countries.[24] The near-full employment figures of the late 1980s ceased to be a realistic aspiration in public discourse. Economic language and the authority of economists gained prominence in explaining and guiding societal developments, even though contemporary experts did not agree on the causes of the depression.[25]

For many ordinary Finns, the depression meant a loss or weakening of trust in society, as the prevailing perception was that the government had unilaterally terminated the social contract established before the crisis. The long-term consequences of the recession were, at the turn of the millennium, often overshadowed in politics and everyday life by the euphoria of the economic boom, which also brought in tax revenues to sustain the welfare state. Despite these economic successes, growing inequality became gradually visible – geographically, for instance, in the rising attractiveness of southern cities at the expense of provincial towns and rural areas.[26]

The articles of this thematic section are based on a selection of papers presented at a workshop titled "Expectations and Uncertainties: Liminal Experiences in the Baltic Sea Region in the Early 1990s" held at Tampere University on 23 November 2023. The workshop was part of the Research Council of Finland project *A Dim Light of Dawn: Finnish Post-Cold War Experiences between East and West, 1989–1995* (2021–2025) active in the Research Council of Finland Centre of Excellence in the History of Experience (HEX, 2018–2025).

In the first article, Ville Yliaska examines how ordinary Finns narrated the economic crisis of the early 1990s by analysing citizen letters addressed to cabinet ministers. The article pays particular attention to temporality, or the way people placed their present distress within long narratives of Finnish history and nationhood. By studying these letters alongside parliamentary group minutes and National Economic Council records, Yliaska traces the emotional and temporal vocabularies that writers used to navigate their lives through Finland's deepest postwar recession. The letters demonstrate how private loss was reframed through narratives of Finnish history and then turned into requests addressed to the government, and how moral economies were, for example, articulated as a critique of austerity. They also show

how future-oriented hopes coexisted with fear and anger. The argument is that the recession was experienced and voiced as a national experience, in which personal suffering was interpreted as harm to the nation and used to claim protection for its moral economy and security.

Aapo Roselius explores the emergence of a neo-patriotic memory regime centred on the Second World War in Finland at the turn of the 1990s. He focuses on the repatriation of missing Finnish soldiers and the recovery and commemoration of abandoned war graves in former Finnish Karelia. This phenomenon is situated within a broader European post–Cold War "dead body politics" context, in which the formerly forgotten war dead were resurrected as symbolic and moral anchors of a new era. Amid the upheaval of the collapsing Soviet empire and newly opened borders, Roselius demonstrates how the search for missing soldiers brought together grassroots memory activists and state authorities both in Finland and post-communist Russia – serving even as a foundation for renewed relations between the two neighbouring countries.

Hasan Akintug investigates Åland's positioning within the Nordic and European spheres during the transitional period of the early 1990s. During the Cold War, Åland's participation in the Nordic Council had granted the autonomous territory symbolic parity with the Nordic states and enabled forms of paradiplomacy. The geopolitical realignment of the early 1990s – culminating in Sweden's and Finland's accession to the EU – raised concerns about the future of Nordic cooperation. Adopting a constructivist approach, Akintug analyses how Ålandic representatives interpreted and responded to these shifts within Nordic Council sessions, advocating for continued Nordic collaboration and promoting the "Åland example" as a model of peaceful conflict resolution.

The final article in this theme issue explores the Finnish parliamentary debate surrounding Finland's EU membership in 1994. Kati Katajisto and Matti La Mela examine how members of parliament – both proponents and opponents of accession – strategically employed emotionally framed arguments. Drawing on William Reddy's concept of "emotional regime", the authors analyse how the EU was linked to threats, fears, and hopes, shaping divergent interpretations of the past and influencing perceptions of the present and future. Their research highlights the central role of emotional discourse in the debate, revealing how emotion and reason were often positioned in op-

position. Yet even the so-called "rational" arguments were deeply rooted in emotionally charged evidence.

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8 Browning 2002, 47–72; Moisio 2003, 165–206; Uutela 2025, 64–79.
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11 Virrankoski 1994; Apo 1996, 26; Ahonen 1998, 74–89, 120–123, 171–172; Tepora 2021; Tepora 2023, 215–238; Tepora & Yliaska 2024, 417, 423; Marti 2025, 42–43.
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19 Recent examples, for instance podcast *Ysärin lapset* (2025); theatre play *Uuteen nousuun* (2024) premiered at Q-teatteri, Helsinki; many novels and non-fiction books.
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