

Baltic Conferences on History of Science: Documenting the History of Science of the Baltic Countries in 1958–2019

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Abstract: The first attempt to bring together the historians of science from the Baltic States took place in Riga in 1958. Prof. Pauls Stradiņš (1896–1958) initiated and organised a joint meeting for historians of science from Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania under the supervision of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR. A program for future joint activities was developed, and the tradition of joint conferences—the Baltic Conference on History of Science (BCHS)—in each country followed. In 1991, the Baltic Association of the History and Philosophy of Science (BAHPS), uniting historians and philosophers of science of independent Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, took over organising the BCHS. The article aims to present an overview of the published results of the conference, which is partly based on the annotated bibliography (1958–1985) of the conference. The authors analyse the subject, dissemination and tradition of the BCHS, and discuss the role of academic institutions in organising the events. Since the overview was inspired by a decision to gather a complete set of books of conference abstracts, it also resulted in recommendations for conference organisers.

Between 1958 and 2019, twenty-nine conferences were organised and 2,880 papers were presented. The next conference will take place in Finland in 2022.

The main ideas of the article were presented at the 26th International Congress on History and Philosophy of Science in Prague in 2021.

Keywords: BAHPS, BCHS, conferences, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania

Introduction

The older generation of scientists in the Baltic States have witnessed the Second World War and several periods of occupation. These people were usually unable to make a difference in politics, but they understood one particularly important fact: by fostering interest in history of science, at least the historical and national self-awareness and humanitarian culture of the Baltic peoples could be preserved. It was an opportunity to build a bridge to a deeper and not so distant past for our peoples. We can see those efforts as an expansion of the horizons of thought, as a strengthening of national self-awareness. At the same time, they were a form of resistance to the regime, which consisted in preserving national intellectual identity and common scientific ideas.

In the new global world, historians of science still face challenges. While sharing his impressions on surviving in a global world, Prof. Juozas Algimantas Krikštopaitis (1931–2018), former president of the Lithuanian Association of the History and Philosophy of Science, pointed out that those small countries which are on the verge of globalisation are in danger of dissolving, and their existence faces no less challenges than after the Second World War. “While investigating the history and philosophy of science, and in particular the analysis of historical and political experience, one can and must help realise some very important things: one has to learn not only how to survive, but also how to act in a whirlpool of global emergencies” (Zemlickas, 2010, p. 4).

The transferability of tradition is an indispensable factor in growing a generation of young science historians. Unfortunately, with the institutional framework gone, it is very difficult to attract young people. History of science so far has mainly remained the activity of enthusiasts and seniors who no longer need to publish an article in a prestigious journal.

The Baltic Conference on History of Science (BCHS), which proclaims the tradition and development of scientific ideas and their interaction across borders, remains very important. The Baltic States, if they decide to be a source of historical identity (and not an endangered role model) for Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, can only contribute to the European cultural legacy if they remain a link between scientists from different countries and generations.

An overview of books of abstracts on the BCHS reveals the history, personal and institutional participation and the input to history of science in the northern part of Europe through almost six decades.

We understand the importance of preserving the repository of Baltic research on history of science, which documents not only the fields of research, but also the history of cooperation between institutions and individuals. This study encouraged an attempt to bibliographically record the heritage of the BCHS.

Historical background

There are many common features in the past development of scientific ideas in the Baltic States. Societies brought together enthusiasts of random and personally-inspired research. The very first scientific society in Estonia was the Society of Estonian Literati¹ (founded in 1872), in Latvia—the Knowledge Commission of Riga Latvian Society² (founded in 1869), and in Lithuania—the Lithuanian Science Society³ (founded in 1907). Over time, these societies became the nuclei of the academies of science in these countries. In Estonia, the academy of sciences was established in 1938 (Kalling & Tammiksaar, 2008), while in Latvia “projects of such an academy developed too slowly and were not implemented until the annexation of the Republic of Latvia in 1940” (Stradiņš, 1998, p. 681). In Lithuania attempts to establish the academy of sciences were interrupted by the Second World War.

At the beginning of the Second World War, during the first occupation of Soviet Russia, the activities of educational and scientific institutions and societies were suspended in the Baltic States, but their long-standing scientific work did not disappear without a trace. Judging by the scholarly activity, the Estonian Academy of Sciences was closed in 1940 but was restored by the Soviet Estonian government and the Communist Party in 1945 under the name of the Academy of Sciences of Estonian SSR (Kalling & Tammiksaar, 2008, p. 73). Academies of sciences were established in 1941 in Lithuania (*Lietuvos...*, 2001, p. 11) and in 1946 in Latvia (Stradiņš, 1998, p. 681). History of science was one of many areas of research coordinated by the USSR Academy of Sciences, mainly by the Institute of Natural Sciences and Technical History of the USSR Academy of Sciences⁴ (founded in 1932). The history of the institute itself involves a dramatic period: in 1938, the institute was closed after being declared to be

¹ Est. *Eesti Kirjameeste Selts*.

² Latv. *Rīgas Latviešu biedrības Zinību komisija*.

³ Lith. *Lietuvių mokslo draugija*.

⁴ Rus. *Institut istorii estestvoznaniia i tekhniki AN SSSR*.

the “center of anti-Soviet activities” (Lebedeva, n.d.). The institute resumed its activities in 1944.

At the General Meeting of the USSR Academy of Sciences on 11 January 1949, a resolution was issued to publish monographs on history of science, which would result in a multi-volume publication on the history of various scientific and technical fields from the ancient to modern times (LCVA, 1949). The resolution had a strong impact on the activities of institutes of history all over the USSR. Branches of the Soviet National Union for the History and Philosophy of Science and Technology⁵ (founded in 1950) were established in all Soviet republics since 1964 (*Institut...*, n.d.).

The Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian academies of sciences, although similar in composition and structure to the USSR Academy of Sciences, were able to maintain relatively strong independence. This was primarily determined by the research topic, but will not be discussed in further detail in this article. The institutes of history of the Academy of Sciences included history of science in their programmes, organised events for the popularisation of science, and published journals.

Behind the Iron Curtain

Back in 1957, the science historians of the Baltic States began planning joint activities. Prof. Pauls Stradiņš (1896–1958) deserves major credit for organising a joint conference in this field. The internationally acclaimed Latvian surgeon, clinician and oncologist Pauls Stradiņš was also known as an excellent organiser of the medical system. One of his achievements was the establishment of the Museum of Medical History in Riga. He also paid considerable attention to the history of medicine and science in general (*Akadēmīķis...*, 1959).

The laurels of the initiative of Baltic cooperation were awarded to the USSR Academy of Sciences, which made it possible to organise the first meeting of the Baltic republics to study the problems of the history of natural sciences and medical science. The meeting issued a resolution listing 14 rulings. Several of them were particularly important for further collaboration between researchers:

⁵ Rus. *Sovetskoe natsional'noe ob'edinenie istorii i filosofii nauki i tekhniki*.

- Establishing an inter-publication research commission on natural sciences and medicine in the Baltic States;
- Coordinating research on the basis of an operational plan and a list of priority topics;
- Holding regular meetings of the commission in Riga, Vilnius, Tartu, and Kaunas;
- Taking care of and participating as much as possible in preserving the personal archives of researchers, scientific institutions, and societies [...];
- Organising the publication of bibliographic indexes of printed and archival sources in the Baltic countries;
- Ensuring that the holdings of libraries and archives of the Baltic countries are made available to historians of science and others. (LCVA, 1958)

The study of the history of technology in all three Baltic States was identified as a particularly important issue.

Only six months later (on January 20, 1959), a conference of the Baltic history of science took place in Tartu, Estonia, under the name of the Conference of History of Science of the Baltic Republics. A decision was made to hold conferences on a rotational basis every four years in a different Baltic country.

To plan and organise the conferences, experience was drawn from research institutes, professional societies and individual enthusiasts of the history of science. In addition to the national academies of sciences, the Soviet National Association of History and Philosophy of Natural Sciences and Technology, other research institutes, universities and professional societies were reported among the conference's organisers.

The Baltic Conference on History of Science was one of the most important forms of academic cooperation between the three republics. Representatives from Moscow, Leningrad (now St. Petersburg), and other cities of USSR (Krikštopaitis & Stradiņš, 1991, p. 5) were invited to the conferences. This gave the conferences more weight, and also made it easier get a permission to organise the events.

In the 1960s–1970s, participation in the Baltic conferences became prestigious for the European part the USSR, and also in Georgia and Armenia. The conferences gained a Union-wide status, welcoming participants also from Poland, Bulgaria, Germany, Finland, and Sweden (in 1970). While the working language of the

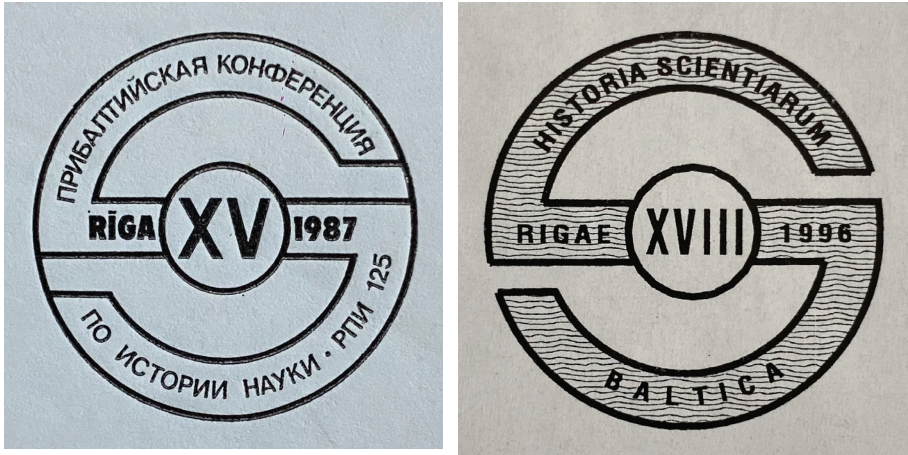


Figure 1. Ex-libris for the Baltic Conference on History of Science 1985 and 1996.

conference was Russian, foreign guests delivered their papers in other languages (Siilvask, 2001).

Lithuanian historians of science, like their fellows in Latvia and Estonia, proposed to secede from the dependency of the USSR Society of History of Science. In 1987, the leaders of the Baltic associations of history of science met informally and agreed to quit the membership at the Soviet National Association of History and Philosophy of Natural Science and Technology, which until then had also coordinated the activities of the Baltic societies for history of science. Independent associations of the history and philosophy of science, also the Coordinating Council of Baltic Historians of Science, were established in 1987. Those organisations opened the path to independent scientific research. On February 11, 1988, owing to the efforts of Jānis Stradiņš (1933–2019), the Coordinating Council was approved by the president's office of the Latvian Academy of Sciences, and a while later—by the Estonian and Lithuanian academies of sciences.

Gediminas Zemlickas, a journalist who chronicles the history of science, reminisces:

Only the final step had to be taken. On May 19, 1988, scientists and academicians gathered for the plenum of the Soviet National Union of the Historians of Science and Technology in Moscow. As he was given the floor to speak, J. Stradiņš announced that based on the decisions of the three Baltic academies of science, the Baltic Coordinating Council for Science Historians

would henceforth be in charge of managing the activity of the science historians of each respective Baltic state, and maintain traditional relations with science historians of other Soviet republics (Zemlickas, 2016, p. 162).

As Zemlickas recalls, “these forums had become places of free thought back in the Soviet times and even—although it is difficult to believe!—a place for the expression of national self-awareness” (Zemlickas, 2016, p. 162).

The organisation of international conferences on history of science in the Baltic States became the most important challenge for the association members of the hosting Baltic country, and also started a new era in the activities of Baltic historians and philosophers of science.

Europe and the global world

Having embarked on the path of independent states, the Baltic countries returned to the community of independent European states. Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian scientists still faced serious challenges: to create an internationally competitive intellectual product, while preserving the unique ethnic cultures of the Baltic States. Science historians could only address these challenges if they critically assessed the research already carried out on the scientific heritage, selected priority topics and decided on the decentralisation of future research. These tasks became the cornerstone of the Association of the History and Philosophy of Sciences of the Baltic States (later, the name was changed to the Baltic Association of the History and Philosophy of Science, or BAHPS)⁶. It was established on October 29, 1990 (Stradiņš, 2011, p. 13). Jānis Stradiņš (Latvia) became the organisation’s first president and Juozas Algimantas Krikštopaitis (Lithuania) and Karl Siilivask (Estonia) its first vice presidents.

In 1991, preparations for the 15th conference took place in a whirlwind of drastic political and economic events: all the three Baltic States went on the path to independence under an economic moratorium and political pressure. The Lithuanian Association of the History and Philosophy of Science, who organised the conference, suffered a painful loss: the founder of the association, the grand old man of history of science, Academician Prof. P. Slavėnas passed away. Organisational affairs of the conference were complicated by inflation,

⁶ Even later, the name was changed once more to the Baltic Association for the History and Philosophy of Science (BAHPS).

the occupying army's arbitrary seizure of the printing house and confiscation of paper stocks ('Ižanginis žodis', 1991, p. 4). These circumstances had an impact on the organisation and spread of the conference.

1993 was a year of international recognition for the BAHPS: At the 19th International Congress of History of Science in Saragossa, the BAHPS, a joint organisation of three independent countries, was accepted to the International Union of the History and Philosophy of Science (IUHPS) as a Baltic States National Member (Stradiņš, 2011, p. 13).

The international recognition made the BCHS more visible for becoming recognised among historians of science in the world. Among others, plenary papers were given by Dietrich v. Engelhardt (Lübeck University); Christian Hünemörder (Hamburg University, 2001), Robert Bud (Science Museum in London, 2006), Claude Debru (Ecole Normale Supérieure, 2006, 2010), Joseph Agassi (University of Tel Aviv), Heini Hakosalo (Academy of Finland), Eberhard Knobloch (Berlin University of Technology, 2014), Felix Unger (European Academy of Sciences and Arts, 2015), Philippe Taquet (French Academy of Sciences, Société d'Emulation de Montbéliard); Ursula Klein (Max Planck Institute for the History of Science); Eberhard Knobloch (Berlin University of Technology/Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences, 2017), and others.

The BCHS expanded its geographical conception and became international, welcoming global participants. In 2012, during the conference in Vilnius, a generous proposal of the Finnish Society for the History of Science was announced—to host a BCHS alternately with the Baltic States. A BCHS was organised in Helsinki in 2017; the next conference will take place in Finland in 2022.

Contents of the conference

The conference format has become established over the years. The papers have been divided under sections according to discipline. The wishes of specific scientists, event or local organisers have been taken into account. Life has also dictated its own agenda, as section names have been changed, and sections have been dedicated to anniversaries or other important events. For example, several conferences have been dedicated to the anniversaries of universities: the 400th anniversary of Vilnius University (1979), 350 years of University of Tartu

(1982), 250 years of Vilnius Old Astronomical Observatory, and 200 years of Riga Chemical-Pharmaceutical Society (2003), 200 years of the first Lithuanian public museum, 150 years of Riga Technical University, and 90 years of the University of Lithuania in Kaunas (2012), 200 years of the Courland Society of Literature and Arts, which might be regarded as the first regional academy of sciences (learned society) in the Baltic region (2015), 250 years of George Friedrich Parrot, first rector of the University of Tartu (2017), etc.

The conferences brought together a wide range of scientific disciplines and increased the number of interdisciplinary presentations. Ideological conflict could have been more easily avoided in medicine, natural sciences, and history of technical studies, which explains the gap between these fields and the presentations of humanities and social sciences at the conferences. The topics of the papers were regulated by “paying homage” to the obligatory themes glorifying the contribution of the working class in the Soviet period, and accordingly minimising the merits of the capitalist state and the history of that period in science. The organisers of the conference demonstrated experience and the highest level of political correctness: presentations were made on the preservation of national self-consciousness, the history and contribution of national science centers, even though several topics remained “unpublishable”—the repression of scientists and the “regulation of science” by the Communist Party, research on the history of scientific institutions and societies before the Second World War, the merits of scientists who had emigrated to the West, etc. To avoid censorship, the titles of the papers included ideological keywords such as “the role of the working class”, “the Socialist order”, etc.

Fragments of the history of individual personal biographies and those of collectives constituted only part of the papers, other studies were devoted to the issues of scientific philosophy, sociology, and science on science research. The papers covered the impact of the history of science on science policies, formation of the scientist’s personality, and the ethics of research.

In addition to the history of pure sciences, sections were held on the organisation of scientific history and methodology, discussing complex issues of science and education, memory institutions, science museums, and specialised periodicals. The title of the 10th conference (held in 1975) included the term “science on science” (LZA, 1975).

The sections of the conference changed over the years, but a tradition for certain section names was preserved: Philosophy, sociology, humanities; Medicine;

History of Institutions; Natural Sciences, Technology and Engineering; Museums; etc.

A scientific analysis of papers presented during the whole history of the BCHS was published in 1985 (for papers delivered in 1958–1982) and in 2001 (for papers delivered in 1958–2001), resulting in an annotated list of conference abstracts and activities (Vasilev *et al.*, 1986).

History of medicine remains the most prolific discipline in the BCHS. We could explain the activity of medical historians primarily by the unrivalled authority of the giant in Latvian science—physician and pioneer of clinical oncology, Professor P. Stradiņš in fostering and publishing research on the history of medicine. Perhaps it is no coincidence that the very first conference in 1958, held in Riga, was titled ‘Meeting on the history of medicine and natural sciences of the Soviet republics’⁷. Starting with the third conference (held in Vilnius, 1959), papers were given in separate sections, and a stand-alone section was devoted to medical history. It should be noted that due to the large number of papers, individual books of abstracts were published for the medical section at conferences held in 1977, 1979, 1982 and 1991.

A General Assembly of the Baltic Association of the History and Philosophy of Science is scheduled for each BCHS, where the organiser of the next BCHS is announced, and presidency is given over to the Baltic country that will organise the next BCHS.

The books of abstracts of each conference differ significantly in shape, print and publishing quality. The conferences also varied in size: 17 conferences released one volume, 7 conferences issued two volumes, and 3 conferences issued three volumes of abstracts. The conference abstracts for the years 1982, 2017, and 2019 are freely available online.⁸

Responsible discussions and thematic planning have made the conferences popular and promising. Between 1958 and 2019, twenty-nine conferences were organised and 2,880 papers were presented.

⁷ Rus. *Mezhrespublikanskoe soveshchanie po probleme izucheniia istorii estestvennykh nauk i meditsiny Pribaltiki*.

⁸ A complete set of conferences is held exclusively at the Wroblewski Library of the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences in Vilnius.

Dissemination

The Latvian Academy of Sciences made a special effort to disseminate the results of the conferences: multi-volume editions on the history of natural sciences and technology in Latvia were published (LZA, 1959–1964; 1968–1991), the articles were based on conference papers.

A particularly important resource for the history of the conference is the memories of J. Stradiņš, the long-time president of the Association of History and Philosophy of Science of Latvia (Stradiņš, 2011).

The contribution of *Mokslo Lietuva* ('Scientific Lithuania'), the only scholarly newspaper published in Vilnius, is that it advocates for science in Lithuania. *Mokslo Lietuva* also documents and publishes the experience of the Baltic history of science. Interviews with conference participants, presidents of the Baltic Association on History and Philosophy of Science have been published during several conferences. Fortunately, the newspaper continues to maintain friendly relations with historians of science in Lithuania.

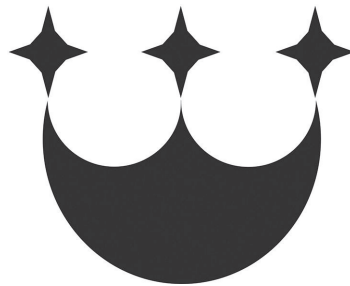


Figure 2. Emblem of the Baltic Association for History and Philosophy of Science 1991, by J. A. Krikštopaitis.

In 1991, the emblem of the BAHPS was created by Professor J. A. Krikštopaitis. The emblem, which decorated the booklet of the 1996 conference, is no longer used, but the Latin name of the conference proposed in it remained *Historia⁹ Scientiarum Baltica*—History of Baltic Science.

In 2013, the scholarly journal *Acta Baltica Historiae et Philosophiae Scientiarum* was established. The journal was the result of joint activities of the historians and

⁹ In the 1996 title, the first word was misspelled and the error was repeated in several later publications. The correct form is 'Historiae'.

philosophers of science communities in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, including at Tallinn University of Technology. Prof. Dr. Peeter Mürsepp is the initiator and editor-in-chief of the publication (by the way, in 2002 he defended his doctoral thesis in philosophy at Vilnius University). The aim of the journal is to publish articles prepared on the basis of papers approved by Baltic historians of science. *Acta Baltica* is an open-access journal and is available at <http://www.bahps.org/acta-baltica>.

Further information on the conferences organised by the Baltic Association of Science History and Philosophy can be found at <http://www.bahps.org/>.

Conclusions

Historians of science from the three small countries put their efforts together to find a format for a peaceful struggle for their national survival during the years of occupation. It was not easy, as the administration of science of the occupying regime kept a close eye on the research agenda. The BCHS is an example of the preservation of Baltic unity, of solidarity between small countries, and of mutual assistance. Three decades of independent research are evidence of the reliability of this policy, emphasising:

Openness. Since the very first BCHS, the conference has been attended by participants from all three Baltic States, welcoming also contributions from scholars from Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, etc. After the declaration of independence in these countries, BCHS became international. This openness was very important, ensured a high academic level of the conference, continuity and, at the same time, expanded the geography of the reporting contexts.

Collegiality. The purpose of the conference was to form specialised research groups of participants from several countries, as well as to explore common topics together. The books of abstracts provide material for collaborative and joint projects.

Ongoing value—*publications.* Books of abstracts have been published since the 3rd conference (1959). A book of abstracts presents new knowledge succinctly and informs about emerging new areas in the field, providing the research recognition among a relevant emotional community.

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Annex 1: BALTIC CONFERENCES ON THE HISTORY OF SCIENCE

- 29th Conference – Vilnius, 19–21 September 2019
28th Conference – Tartu, 18–20 May 2017
27th Conference – Riga, Jelgava, 1–2 October 2015
26th Conference – Helsinki, 21–22 August 2014
25th Conference – Vilnius, 4–6 October 2012
24th Conference – Tallinn, 8–9 October 2010
23rd Conference – Riga, 9–10 October 2008
22nd Conference – Vilnius, Kaunas, 5–6 October 2006
21st Conference – Riga, 13–15 October 2003
20th Conference – Tartu, 30–31 January 2001
19th Conference – Vilnius, Kaunas, 15–17 January 1999
18th Conference – Riga, 17–19 January 1996
17th Conference – Tartu, 4–6 October 1993
16th Conference – Vilnius, 4–6 October 1991
15th Conference – Riga, 29 September – 1 October 1987
14th Conference – Jurmala, Riga, 25–28 February 1985
13th Conference – Tartu, 17–19 November 1982
12th Conference – Vilnius, 23–26 October 1979
11th Conference – Tallinn, Tartu, 18–21 October 1977
10th Conference – Riga, Jelgava, 21–23 April 1975
9th Conference – Vilnius, 2–4 November 1972
8th Conference – Tartu, 1–3 July 1970
7th Conference – Riga, 11–13 December 1968
6th Conference – Vilnius, 26–27 October 1965
5th Conference – Tartu, 18–21 June 1964
4th Conference – Riga, 27–29 November 1962
3rd Conference – Vilnius, Kaunas, 30 November – 2 December 1959
2nd Conference – Tartu, 20–21 January 1959
1st Conference – Riga, 6–7 June 1958

Annex 2: TITLES OF BOOKS OF ABSTRACTS IN THE ORDER OF PUBLICATION

III межреспубликанская конференция по вопросам истории естествознания и техники в Прибалтике: тезисы докладов / Академия наук Литовской ССР. Комиссия по истории естествознания и техники. – Вильнюс: Газетно-журнальное издательство, 1959. – 106 p.

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