

THE PROCRUSTEAN BED OF THE NATIONAL HISTORY SYLLABUS

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Nation-states and national history

The nation-state was a purely European phenomenon which had profound implications for the subsequent development of both Europe and the rest of the world. After its emergence in the fifteenth century, the number of independent political units in Europe was whittled down from some 500 in 1500 to only twenty-five by 1900. According to E.L. Jones, this new political organisation was finally 'exported to parts of the world that had hitherto known only tribalism' and is also crucial 'to explaining the pattern of the industrial world that emerged in the nineteenth century.' (1) This pattern has contained many other features which have been embraced by a rapidly-developing world, including for example, mass communications, competitive games and compulsory education. Another important, but relatively minor, consequence of the development of these nation-states concerned the teaching of history in their schools.

The experience of the French provides a very good illustration of how the emergence of one large nation-state gave birth eventually to a national education system which emphasised very strongly the need to develop their children's national consciousness through the teaching of history as well as the French language and other subjects, such as geography, singing and gymnastics. Because traditional regional loyalties were still very strong in France in the later 19th century, Eugen Weber has argued that the principal role for the free public elementary schools was to inculcate patriotism. 'Patriotic feelings on the national level, far from instinctive, had to be learned. They were learned at different speeds in different places, mostly through the latter part of the nineteenth century.' In addition, 'there were no better instruments of indoctrination and patriotic conditioning than French history and geography, especially history, which "when properly taught [is] the only means of maintaining patriotism in the generations we are bringing up."' (2) At the time most elementary school teachers knew very little history, but it was not difficult for them to teach their pupils patriotic stories from French history which were then becoming very popular. And the children in their turn were fascinated by tales of former French glories involving such heroes as Bertrand Du Guesclin, Jeanne d'Arc and Henri IV that were added to the better known ones about Napoleon and his contemporaries from the time of the Revolution. Together these tales fostered juvenile love of the French fatherland and helped sustain an image of France that was naturally strong and powerful.

At the same time school history in England was developed very successfully along similar lines as 'Our Island Story', starting from the time when this small and insignificant island was virtually discovered by Julius Caesar and ending in the 19th century with its transformation into the world's greatest imperial power. This outline story was illustrated, explained and justified by a whole series of exciting incidents that introduced to the children heroes like King Alfred, Francis Drake and Admiral Nelson and delivered an unambiguous and very reassuring message from their collective past about the superior innate qualities of the English people. Accounts of Britain's relationships with other countries usually employed crude racial stereotypes and turned these initial attempts to inculcate patriotic sentiments into preaching overt racial supremacy. Such selectivity ensured that normally 'the principal events described were famous victories in war, the annexation of new territories, the bravery of the British under fire and siege. Against this background, we read of the "savagery" of Indians and Africans, the "craftiness" of the Boers, the "perfidious" nature of the Chinese, and for good measure, the "laziness" of the West Indians.' (3)

France and England were not unique in wanting to develop a sense of national pride and patriotic fervour in their children. Especially during the period of intensified national rivalry that culminated in the scramble for Africa and the Great War of 1914-19, all independent European countries ensured that their future citizens were exposed to equally gripping versions of the history of their own nation. Normally these history syllabuses were fashioned to reflect the cultural, political and religious values of the nation's ruling elite or dominant ethnic group and when a country had been recently formed by a policy of unification or had won its independence from a dominant neighbour, the opportunity was readily seized to educate (or perhaps indoctrinate) their children with a detailed account of their successful 'March to Nationhood'. The earlier periods were often remoulded to suggest that the nation had existed in its modern form for much longer than was justified by events, with the Holy Roman Empire, for example, being presented as an early episode in the history of the German nation. In addition those countries which had ceased to play a prominent role on the world stage were naturally tempted to place a much greater emphasis on those periods when they had been formerly most powerful. Thus the traditional role for school history teaching has been to help consolidate the nation-state by encouraging in its youth a strong sense of national identity at the expense of divisive regional or sectional loyalties.

There was usually one important difference, however, between the history taught in large and small countries. 'In the history curriculum of most big

countries there is no difference between national and world history because they are more or less identical' and so are 'often very self-sufficiently concentrated on their own national history' and tend to view other nations or areas of the world exclusively from their own myopic or imperialistic point of view. (4) By contrast, in smaller countries an outline of world history could not normally be subsumed within the narrow confines of their own national history so that their pupils often encountered the major themes of world development divorced from their national story.

The unacceptable face of European nationalism

By 1945 much of Europe was devastated by the shattering experience of two successive world wars that had dominated ten adult years of all those aged over fifty. Many who survived were determined to prevent, if at all possible, a similar outbreak from engulfing Europe again and so they placed great hope in the establishment of institutions for fostering international cooperation at political, financial, economic and cultural levels, notably through the United Nations. Some others also appreciated that a saner and more stable world could not be created without a major overhaul of the school history taught to most children in most countries.

This movement for the reform of school history teaching was launched in the ruins of a defeated and occupied Germany and concentrated mainly upon the content of their school textbooks. In the last year of Nazi Germany the sole history textbook that had been approved for use in secondary schools was 'The Road to the Reich', which presented Adolf Hitler's Third Reich as the inevitable culmination of German history. However, the textbooks in the earlier Weimar period had been hardly less reticent in asserting the superiority of the German race and its claims to dominate Europe and in shunning all blame for the outbreak of war in 1914. According to E.H.Dance, during the Weimar Republic the textbooks taught that 'today every informed person inside and outside Germany knows that Germany is absolutely innocent with regard to the outbreak of war, and that Russia, France and England wanted the war and unleashed it.' (5) And so in 1945, 'all history books for school were banned, and to begin with no history lessons were given in the reopened schools' (6). The new textbooks that were written hastily to fill this vacuum conformed to the agreed policies of the allied powers' military governments that in future German schools should promote democratic ideals and neither glorify militarism nor encourage extreme nationalism. Soon the campaign was so successful that many of the new books were praised as models of objectivity and one English reviewer even concluded that 'if the pupils who study them should in the future turn to false gods, it will not be the fault of the history books they studied in school.' (7)

Professor Eckert of Brunswick, who had played a leading role in the revision of German textbooks, also took the initiative in promoting exchanges and conferences between teachers in Germany, France, Britain and many other countries with the express purpose of removing bias from national history books. These flourished during the 1950s, often under the aegis of UNESCO or the Council of Europe, and eventually had a major impact on the way in which other nationalities were depicted in most European textbooks and on the removal of the most obvious biases. (8) But otherwise this post-war movement for textbook reform has had little effect on the teaching of history, even though it did not confine itself to the elimination of bias but also proceeded to devise and advocate alternative frameworks to conventional national history syllabuses with both European and world perspectives. However, even after the formation of the EEC, the argument that 'as Europeans we have an outlook and a culture all our own, and it ought to figure in the history books as prominently as our own national cultures' (9) has carried little weight relative to the persisting assumption that 'history teaching is concerned with fostering the national identity of the people, no matter how small the nation is.' (10) And so the myopic approach of the national history syllabus continues to ensure that most pupils in Europe learn very little about the past of other nations and eastern people still 'appear in Western textbooks not because of what they have done for themselves, but because of what they have done to or for Europeans.' (11)

A method of enquiry

In England during the 1960s the arguments in favour of placing school history teaching into a world context were much more influential than those for a European one so that 20th century world history became one of the two most popular courses taught to pupils in the last two years of compulsory schooling. In an education system where subject syllabuses are determined independently by each school, one cannot describe reliably what is taught nationwide. Nevertheless, very few schools which introduced a world perspective for the history studied by their 14-16 year-olds also adopted a similar framework for their younger children. Normally this retained the traditional approach of 'Our Island Story', but without much reference to the growth of the British Empire.

However, strong and widespread dissatisfaction with this traditional English syllabus increased among secondary and primary teachers for various reasons so that, during the last decade or so, many abandoned any attempt at covering an outline national history syllabus and replaced it not with one based on a wider geographical framework, but on alternative pedagogical principles. The Schools Council History 13-16 Project played a leading role in this development by fostering the idea that children should not learn historical

information for its own sake, but should study instead the methodology or nature of the subject. This, it was argued, involved introducing pupils to the idea that 'the study of history involves detective work and a search for evidence and clues about people in the past' (12) as well as the ability to detect bias or conflict in the evidence and to draw valid conclusions from it. And so a definition of history which implied that content was immaterial and almost reduced the study of the subject to the use of evidence and the practice of skills was patently inadequate, but for many teachers the tyranny of the established outline national history syllabus had become so great that they keenly embraced this false doctrine as their only possible route of escape. (13)

This recent acceptance of history as a method of enquiry generated an inevitable reaction that has become subsumed within the government's proposals to impose a nationally-agreed curriculum upon schools. In this debate, the current Education Secretary has expressed particular concern about what pupils are taught in history. In his opinion they are leaving school 'without an adequate mental map of those things which have led us to where we are now and without ... some feeling for the flow of events that have led to where we are, how our present political and social fabric and attitudes have their roots in the English Reformation, the Reform Bills, the Tolpuddle Martyrs and the Suffragette Movement, and how our national security, our place in the world, was shaped by Waterloo and El Alamein.' (14) Such views triggered off a very sympathetic response within the higher echelons of the Historical Association, which responded with a draft proposal for outline syllabuses in national and world history for all 7-16 year-olds. These were supported with the claim that the restoration of British National History to English schools would give pupils a 'sense of belonging to the community' and an understanding of 'those major political and social institutions which influence the lives of all citizens.' (15)

If such an outcome emerged from the current debate it would be an anathema for those child-centred teachers whose approach to teaching history stems from their educational objectives. They are convinced that a history syllabus prescribed mainly in terms of content set in a chronological framework would inevitably revive the meaningless learning of scraps of ill-digested historical information that was the hallmark of the recently-abandoned outline national syllabus and that this would only be exacerbated by the addition of some topics from world history. Therefore the current problems and inadequacies of history teaching should not be resolved by returning to the proven failings of the past but rather by recognising the principal achievements of the present and by building upon them.

The outmoded national history syllabus

This debate has been conducted so far in almost total isolation from serious comparison with the practice and philosophy of history teaching in other countries. Nevertheless it still raises issues of universal concern that would benefit from a broader perspective and a wider airing. Since the elimination of the worst excesses of most nationalist history teaching, however, interest in what is taught in other countries appears to have waned in Europe despite its perennial importance. And so western Europe should undertake urgently a discussion on whether the national syllabus still provides the most acceptable framework for school history in a late 20th century world that has been shrunk so rapidly by technological and economic developments.

Historically the national history syllabus emerged at a time when it was the most effective means of developing a strong national consciousness among a nation's youth and in a form that could be imparted by teachers with little or no specialist historical knowledge. Since then this situation has been altered radically. Deprived of its overt patriotic appeal, a staple diet of national history fed regularly to pupils at school adds little to their developing sense of national identity, compared with the impact of modern mass communications. Now children's sense of national consciousness derives mainly from national television networks and instinctive support for national sporting teams and heroes as well as from their parents, their language and their whole national education system. The modern mass media's awesome power to generate instant patriotism was demonstrated in Britain, for example, six years ago when most Britons, who until then had little knowledge of, or interest in, the Falkland Islands, were coaxed in a few short weeks into giving enthusiastic endorsement for a military campaign to retrieve those islands from their newly-created national enemies: the 'Argies'.

At the same time there has been a profound change in how members of advanced societies apprehend the past. The well-intentioned attempts of the heritage industry and of television to bring the past alive with buildings and artefacts that are preserved, restored and presented in specially-created time ghettos and with actors who portray scenes from the past with immaculately-researched costumes and props, merely emphasise the huge gulf that separates then from now. In addition the study of archaeology, social and economic history, for example, has further emphasised the differences between the present and all but the recent past. This growing sense of collective anachronism is further strengthened by the swift and substantial changes which occur continually to the large urban areas which most people inhabit and also by the memories of a rapidly-ageing population in which more and more people can

recall how different various crucial aspects of life once were. By comparison, the remote past, which no one alive has experienced or even known anyone who has experienced it, is now apprehended increasingly by those who are not professional historians through the cultural relics that have survived and been publicised rather than through stories about national leaders and heroes who were assumed to have lived in a past that was not greatly unlike the present. And so the remote past appears less in the form of a progression leading inexorably to the present and more as an exotic foreign country to be sampled in short exciting visits and then contrasted directly with the present. (16)

If no account is taken of this relatively new trend to separate the familiar and essentially recent past from the exotic and remote, then the history that is taught in schools will become increasingly divorced from the basic perceptions of the pupils' parents and of their teachers who are not trained historians. Acceptance of these developments, however, can also provide a very promising approach for devising alternatives to the traditional outline national history syllabus. The political and social changes which have engulfed western Europe in the 20th century formed a broadly common framework for most individuals' lives in which national differences were reduced to little more than regional variations in the common and increasingly interdependent European experience. And so any attempt to isolate national history from its wider 20th century context must undermine its validity. In a similar way, selections from the more popular aspects of the west's cultural heritage will reflect many shared features of our inheritance from the more remote past that were rarely peculiar to one country as well as providing a broader setting for the emergence of a particular nation-state and for stories about its national heroes and events of national significance.

If it is accepted that outline national history syllabuses stretching back before the 15th-19th centuries (depending on the country) inevitably distort reality and that from the later 19th century onwards they become indefensibly myopic, then the case for attempting to redesign the framework for teaching history in schools becomes as strong on academic as on pedagogic grounds. This issue is potentially of equal significance for all teachers of history in Europe, but history itself appears to suggest that however desirable such an outcome may be, inertia will probably prevail until some cataclysmic *deus ex machina* descends and that regrettably the next major reappraisal of European history teaching will probably have to wait for another world war. Certainly, the current debate on the revision of school history in England suffers severely from the lack of an existing proven alternative to history as a method of enquiry apart from the widely-rejected outline national story and it would have

benefitted enormously if a reappraisal of the philosophy and content of national history teaching had been undertaken already on a European scale.

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NOTES

1. E.L.Jones, *The European Miracle*, Cambridge U.P., 1981, pp. 127 & 104.
2. Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen*, Chatto & Windus, 1979, pp. 114 & 333.
3. F.A.Glendenning, 'School History Textbooks and Racial Attitudes, 1804-1969', *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, V,2, July 1973, p. 34.
4. Matti Castrén, 'The Aims of History Teaching', *International Society for History Didactics: Communications*, 8,1, 1987, p. 25.
5. E.H.Dance, *History the Betrayer*, Hutchinson, 1960, p. 62.
6. Otto-Ernst Schüddekopf, *History Teaching and History Textbook Revision*, Council of Europe, 1967, p. 23.
7. E.H.Dance, *History the Betrayer*, p. 32.
8. Vincent Greaney, 'Nationalism in textbooks', *EUDISED R & D Bulletin*, 28/6734, 1987.
9. E.H.Dance, 'Bias in History Teaching and Textbooks' in O.-E.Schüddekopf et al., *History Teaching and History Textbook Revision*, Council of Europe, 1967, p. 83.
10. Ritsu Ijuin, 'The Aims of History Teaching', *International Society for History Didactics: Communications*, 8,1, 1987, p. 26.
11. E.H.Dance, 'Bias in History Teaching and Textbooks', p. 77.
12. Schools Council History 13-16 Project, *What is History? Teachers' Guide*, Holmes McDougall, 1976, p.4.
13. T.Arkill, 'History's role in the school curriculum', *Journal of Education Policy*, 3,1, 1988 (forthcoming) describes and discusses these developments in much greater detail.
14. Kenneth Baker, Speech on the School Curriculum, Society of Education Officers' Conference, 23 January 1987, para 19.
15. *Proposals for a Core-Curriculum in History*, Historical Association, circulated with 'Teaching History' No 47, February 1987.
16. For a much more detailed discussion of the arguments contained in this paragraph, see in particular David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, Cambridge U.P., 1985, pp. 231-259.