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Kerkrade 1981: a landmark for History-Didactics

In the afternoon of Monday November 2, 1981 in the old buildings of the Abbey of Rolduc near Maastricht in the Netherlands one lady (Doky Verhagen) and three gentlemen (Nico Bakker, Piet Fontaine and Joop Toebes) welcomed more than forty history-didacticians from fifteen countries who arrived there successively to attend the first International Historical-Didactical Conference ever held in the Netherlands.

Of course, the chairman of the organizing committee, the internationally well-known Piet Fontaine, was proud to open the conference (in Latin!) in the evening of that day. He was happy to welcome participants coming from so many countries. Moreover he was proud that this conference was the first organized under the patronage of the International Society for History Didactics, founded in 1980. National and international confidence in the value of this conference appeared to be evident from the moral and financial support of the Council of Europe, the Dutch Ministry of Education and the Dutch Society of History Teachers (V.G.N.). This confidence proved to be justified: all participants I spoke to during the Conference and afterwards were enthusiastic about its organization, the program, the housing and the amiable, informal atmosphere.

This conference was dedicated to 'the place and significance of contemporary history in textbook and secondary education'. After a long time in which the teaching of history had been mainly concerned with times which were very considerably separated from the present, now - since the sixties - much more interest in contemporary history has arisen. This is an important development; yet its consequences for the teaching of history in secondary education have not been studied sufficiently. However, in this respect the situation can vary in the different countries. The aim of this conference was to increase international communication in contributing to a better definition of the problems of contemporary history in secondary education.

As far as the programme is concerned: of course there were speeches, but - alarmed by boring aspects in some previous conferences where too many speeches were held - the organizing committee found it better to give more variety in the programme by adding films and group-sessions. Didacticians felt that they should give a good example of organizing a teaching-situation this being a conference of a particular nature... Moreover there was a break on Wednesday-afternoon: the 'schoolclass' went by bus to Maastricht to have a guided tour round the old city and to enjoy a reception offered by the Governor of the Province of Limburg. Although the weather was rather bad, everybody was happy with this trip, Maastricht being a

very interesting town. In the evening there was another tour, now round the Abbey of Rolduc, mostly consisting of 18th century buildings but with a remarkable Romanesque church from the 11th century.

The burden of making the first speech had been laid on my shoulders, talking about 'Contemporary History: Problems and Possibilities in Secondary Education'. I started with some remarks about 'Hollanditis' as an example of Dutch involvement with current events. The speech ended as follows:

"Dealing with contemporary history - especially current events - has its boundaries and dangers. History-teachers should be aware of them. Most important is the danger of being too deeply involved. But a true historian has learnt to avoid this pitfall. Let us first and foremost make use of the possibilities we have. This can only be done if we could develop a new view of the teaching of history. In my opinion it is our duty to create a subject with an important task for our time. This task is not in the first place to transmit our cultural heritage or a quantity of irrelevant knowledge but to help creating a generation which will consist of responsible, well-informed, independently thinking members of society, who are conscious of the fact that this society has its roots in the past."

For the main lines of my speech the reader is referred to the appendix.

Later on there were speeches by Prof.Dr. Karl Jeismann, director of the Georg Eckert Institut für Schulbuchforschung (Schulbuch-Institut) at Brunswick (F.R.G.) and by Prof.Dr. Herman von der Dunk, State University of Utrecht, Netherlands.

The former spoke on "The treatment of contemporary history in its didactical aspects" in which he made - as the Council of Europe asked us - a link between this Council's Resolution 743 ('to combat fascist propaganda and its racist aspects') and the didactical problems of teaching contemporary history.

Starting from five different ways of dealing with history:

- the need for participation (empathy);
- the need for doctrine (exemplum);
- the need for justification (argument);
- the need for security (identification);
- the need for identity and guidance (historical consciousness),

Jeismann stated that the teaching of neo-fascism in schools should take the following issues as central themes:

1. Motivation of the theme should derive from current events.
2. The potential danger of neo-fascism should be related to the openness of contemporary history.
3. The abuse of history in treating neo-fascism as a political instrument.
4. Neo-fascist thinking and practice must be related to its consequence for the

actual victims.

5. What powers establish the counter-balance to fascism?
6. Political, social and economic pre-conditions of fascism.
7. Prevention of neo-fascism in stable democratic institutions offering the opportunity for young people for identification.

Von der Dunk spoke on "The treatment of contemporary history in its scientific aspects". After pointing out that contemporary history cannot be clearly distinguished from 'normal' history, Von der Dunk stated that its role and function form an integral part with those of history as such. The teacher of history bears, according to the speaker, a special responsibility: he has to introduce young people to society. This is impossible without referring to ideals, moral standards and ideological conceptions. History education reproduces the traditions that dominated societies in the past, e.g. nationalism in the 19th century and in 20th century pre-war times. After the Second World War the liberal-democratic ideals were stressed. Von der Dunk did agree to emphasizing these ideals. He held the view that neither the audio-visual media nor quantitative documents are sufficient to ensure the continuity of the democratic tradition. Only written history can prepare the mind for a critical attitude towards history, avoiding illfounded emotional arguments.

Not everybody seemed content of course with the remarks on audio-visual materials, the impact of these media on modern life being so important. The use of these materials in the classroom is, according to many members of the conference, very important. In showing films and T.V.-productions pupils can also learn what the dangers are of these media.

Dangers and possibilities of audio-visual materials in c.h. played a big part in the discussions about the films that were shown at the conference:

"Triumph des Willens", a film by Leni Riefenstahl in 1934 as nazi-propaganda of the Third Reich.

"Crying loudly in the dark", a documentary film about the decolonization of Zimbabwe/Rhodesia, made by H. Keller of Dutch Television (VPRO).

"... ein voller Erfolg der Luftwaffe; Guernica-Zerstörung einer Legende", a film made by Walter Bittermann and Klaus Figge in 1977, broadcast on German Television (SWF Baden-Baden).

The second film was the starting-point for the preparation of one or more lessons about Zimbabwe/Rhodesia, decolonization or any subject that might be suitable with the material at hand. In this way the history-didacticians could show their didactical skills and abilities. After some resistance from colleagues who were more interested in (theoretical) discussions, everyone joined in. The presentation of the results on 'flap-overs' caused much laughter.

The discussions about the national situation concerning contemporary history in the secondary schools of the various countries was very interesting. These talks - in small groups - were based on the questionnaire, given in 'Informations' 2 (1981), 2. In this report there is no room for the result of these discussions. Some of them might be found however in the conclusions, I drew at the end of the conference, which follow now. Of course this is a more or less personal account.

### Conclusions

A recurring issue in the discussions had been the needs of the pupils, especially mentioned by the Anglo-Saxon participants. It had been brought to notice that these needs were very often opposed to the scientific requirements of history as a discipline. Although these needs had not been worked out in detail, it was felt that there was a discrepancy between the form of presentation of contemporary history in textbooks and the potential abilities of the pupils. The conviction had been advanced that history education would be more effective if it would come to terms with the interests of the pupils in such way as to promote motivation, also of the less intellectually inclined pupils.

Another subject for debate had been the relation between history and the social sciences. When one of the participants proposed to use the film "Triumph des Willens" as an example of mass-hysteria in the investigation of social psychology, it had stirred the emotions of many of those present who felt that this limited usage of historical context did somehow not give credit to the inherent diversity of history itself, and could even be dangerous in some ways.

This suggestion partly derived from the dissatisfaction about the tendency to overrate the political factors in historical development. Although most members of the conference agreed on the desirability of the socio-economical approach to history, there had been no conclusions on how to realise this intention. A related problem was the reluctance on the part of the teachers to actualize the integration of cognate subjects, which could be partly blamed on deficient teachers' training.

Furthermore, there had been the question of the educational aims or objectives. In my opinion dealing with contemporary history, reference to the aims of history teaching in general is indispensable. At the conference at least there had been concord on one of the aims: the preparation and introduction of pupils to modern society. But opinions differed on how to bring it into practice. The question was raised if pupils were to be presented with the main themes of twentieth century history, or if a start should be made from present-day situations and problems in their historical background. In this respect I noticed as my personal view that too little attention was paid to the comparative approach.

The best way to realise the above mentioned aim had been considered the teaching and learning of specially adapted skills (e.g. how to select and appreciate historical data), or differently put: the acquisition of competence. The emphasis on skills, as had been advanced by a somewhat troubled participant, should not eclipse the importance of content. For talking about historical institutions without referring to their origins and developments, would make little sense and would not contribute to a better understanding of the present.

Much time had been spent on the definition of contemporary history and 'real' history. Despite the feeling that there was a difference, it had not been clear where to draw the line. The starting-point of contemporary history was explained as an important caesura in the national history of a country. The location of this turning-point seemed to be based on the historical awareness of each country, depending on the arbitrarily defined relevance of the past to the present. In accordance with this view the statement was heard that "all history is contemporary history".

This led to the problem of the periodization of contemporary history. As the starting-point of contemporary history many dates were given: 1616, 1789, 1870, 1917 and 1945. More important than the dates themselves, were the criteria for the choice of a particular date. The criteria seemed to hinge on the 'sensitive issues', which were decisive for the historical development of a country.

The matter of involvement and detachment had been raised throughout the conference. From the discussions it appeared that the problem was applicable both to teachers and pupils. To what degree, however, were teachers allowed to show their feelings and take a personal stand? Despite the conformity of opinion on the desirability of involvement, it had generally been assumed that pupils had to be confronted not only with emotions, but also with both sides of a historical problem. As my personal view I wondered if detachment was at all possible in the discussion of 'hot' political affairs (current events) and mentioned in connection with this the problem of 'empathy' in relation to oral history.

Finally, there had been the subject of audio-visual material. It was characterized as a very important and widely used medium. Special reference was made to the use of film and television broadcasts, within as well as outside the educational framework. There had been unanimous agreement on the two-fold effect of film. On the one hand the great effectiveness of visual representation of historical phenomena was stressed, on the other the attending danger of indoctrination. Notwithstanding this danger, audio-visual material and especially film was seen as an important instrument to increase the motivation and involvement of pupils. With regards to possible indoctrination allusions were made to the resurgence of fascism among the young!

I could conclude my survey by expressing my contentment in finding many of the issues referred to in my theses, discussed at the conference...

### Resolution

After stating these conclusions I had the honour to submit a resolution to the participants, which was unanimously adopted. The resolution had been drawn up by the organizing committee of the conference in the spirit of the Council of Europe's preoccupation with the perils of neo-fascism.

In its discussion of the treatment of contemporary history in textbooks and secondary education, this conference has paid special attention to two sub-themes, both mentioned in Resolution 743-1980 of the Assembly of the Council of Europe, and supports its appeal to combat resurgent fascism and racial discrimination.

This conference concluded that the principal aim of teaching contemporary history in particular is to prepare pupils in a modern industrial, urbanized and pluriform society as democratic, responsible and tolerant citizens.

The conference ended with speeches from various sides. Most rightly one was particularly grateful to Piet Fontaine, who - with support of others - conducted this conference in such a brilliant way.

Appendix

Theses regarding Mr. Toebes' lecture on "Contemporary History: Problems and Possibilities in Secondary Education".

1. Contemporary history is indispensable for the understanding of our time. It deserves an important place in history teaching. But exclusive attention to it leads to short-sightedness.
2. To ban contemporary history from schools because there is not sufficient distance in time is not correct. Education deals not only with certainties but also with problems.
3. Regarding all periods of history, but especially contemporary history, teachers of history should try to find a balance between distance and involvement.
4. Dealing with contemporary history should not lead to a condemnation of the faults of previous generations nor to a plea favouring those generations.
5. Teachers of history should be more aware of the fact that events and situations which they lived through themselves and by which they were moved, are for pupils things of the past: history.
6. Paying attention to current events in history-lessons is useful, because in this way, the stream of news from mass-media can to some extent be selected and arranged; the background of the events can be explained as well. The teacher should avoid running after current events in such a way that he himself and the pupils will be short of breath.
7. Dealing with contemporary history should not be restricted to political history; there should also be room for economic, technical, social and cultural history.
8. One should be aware that if contemporary history receives much attention -as in the Netherlands in the highest forms of secondary schools- there is much danger of losing oneself in details, which have to be memorized as "learnable" subject-matter. Collecting encyclopedic knowledge -even in contemporary history- is of little value.
9. The collection of subject-matter should be based on the fundamental structural changes of the twentieth century (Barracrough). The use of case studies or examples would be preferable.
10. Contemporary history is pre-eminently useful as a means of combining history with subjects like geography, the social sciences and civics, which relate almost exclusively to current events. But also during history-classes teachers should orientate themselves with respect to the issues and concepts of the social sciences.
11. 'Oral history' the form of inquiry about the recent past by interviewing contemporaries, is also valuable for secondary education, as it stimulates the pupils' involvement with the times of their grandparents.
12. In contemporary history -and especially with respect to 'current events'- the outcome is not yet known in most cases. Therefore it would be better to make clear to pupils that in the distant past, as much as in the present, every human action is a choice between several possibilities.