

Report on presentations and discussions

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Under the general theme of the conference, "Changes in the political situation in Europe, and their consequences for history education, in international comparison" this section focused on the German question, particularly as seen from outside of Germany (Walter Fuernrohr presiding, Gordon Mork, reporter).

The fall of the Soviet empire in Eastern Europe, the end of the Cold War, and the reunification of Germany are all currently being addressed in history classes throughout the world. At this particular conference, views on the German questions from several countries were presented, especially Poland (Barbara Kubis, Opole, and Rulka, Thorn), Switzerland (Peter Ziegler, Zürich), France (Nicole Tutiaux-Guillon, Paris), Sweden (Göran Behre, Göteborg), and the United States (Lawrence Beaber, Princeton NJ, Frank Huyette, Auburn CA, and Gordon Mork, Lafayette IN).

Recognizing the growth in ethnic nationalism in some parts of Europe in recent years, and the change in the overall balance of power with the demise of the Soviet Union and the reunification of Germany, one might anticipate that historical interpretations might exhibit a concern about the rise of German power. The presenters indicated that some of the popular authors and the new classroom materials showed some indications of this concern, though the concern was limited to the economic and political spheres, because no one saw the new Germany as a military threat. For example, a Polish news magazine had discovered a published map in Germany which combined a western border of Poland from the 1930's with its eastern border from the 1950's, creating a falsely truncated Polish state. In western Europe some materials hinted at a desire to see two Germanies rather than a single reunited one, and concern about German economic domination of the European Union was expressed. From America came a new book by a young scholar which appeared to resurrect an old argument about national character and a "collective guilt" of the German people for World War II and the Holocaust. And from the Baltic region came interpretations which suggest that with the end of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact, and the independence of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, a new power vacuum is being created, which may well be filled by Germany.

However, the preponderance of evidence from all of these areas indicates that the end of the Soviet empire and the reunification of Germany is being interpreted as a positive development. In much of the teaching material the liberal-democratic and free-market aspects of the Federal Republic of Germany is being contrasted with the repressive, inefficient, and militaristic aspects of the Eastern European regimes prior to 1989. Though criticism of certain aspects of the social, political, and economic realities in the Federal Republic remain within the teaching (just as critiques of policies and problems are seen when addressing Britain, France, the United States, etc.), the new Germany is seen as a peaceful and democratic good neighbor, and indeed as an instrument for economic progress throughout Europe and the world. The relations between West Germany and France during the 1950's and 1960's are seen as a model which can be followed by neighboring countries in eastern Europe as well. The European Union, even with all its problems, is an attractive magnet for countries which, prior to 1989 could not or would not participate. Even in Switzerland, which has long prospered with its independence and neutrality,

there has been some pressure to join the EU.

With the end of the Warsaw Pact, one might have expected NATO to have gone out of business as well, its mission of protecting western Europe from a perceived threat from Soviet communism having been accomplished. However, NATO has enjoyed a rebirth and has proven attractive to countries in east-central Europe. This fact has pointed to another factor in the overall balance within the new Europe. Many Europeans want to see the United States remain heavily involved in diplomatic and military politics in Europe. Though Russia currently seems to be in democratic and non-aggressive hands, they see the situation there as uncertain and potentially dangerous in the future. The newly reunited Germany they see as clearly in the hands of democratically elected leaders with no aggressive intentions toward their neighbors. In the long run, however, they want to see continuing American participation in peace-keeping roles in Europe, so that an economically powerful Germany will not, by default, gain hegemony.

In practice, many schools in many countries are very cautious about teaching the history of the most recent period. Time is short for addressing new historical topics. Guidelines of interpretation and assessment have not yet been clearly established. Many teachers are disinclined to get into controversial topics. They prefer to teach "just the facts," such as geographical information or lists of names and dates. Nevertheless, argued the presenters, teachers and their students must learn to see history as process, and to work through the very important events of the most recent decade. In doing so, the stereotypes of nationalistic loves and hates can and must be set aside. Surveys in Poland, for example, now show rather favorable attitudes among Polish school children regarding Germany, in spite of the terrors of World War II and the generation of anti-western teaching under the communist regime.

Generally, then, the participants agreed on a rather optimistic outlook. New documentary materials, greater freedom for discussion and interpretation, and removal of Cold War tensions, have provided the opportunity for greater historical understanding at every level of history didactics, from the elementary school through popular history in the mass media. In that context, the new Germany emerges as a positive force, and it is widely recognized as such.