

Council of Europe: Symposium on History Teaching in the New Europe: Challenges, Problems and Opportunities.

Bruges, Belgium, December 10th - 13th, 1991.

In the same week as the European political leaders were meeting and signing agreements at Maastricht, the Council for Cultural Cooperation (CDCC) of the Council of Europe sponsored in Bruges this symposium on the state of history teaching across the continent. As Maitland Stobart, the deputy director, said in an opening address, a new interest in history has spread across Europe since 1989. Reaching back into the past is one way to orient ourselves in a rapidly changing world, both to affirm old identities and in the attempt to create new ones. These pressures are placing new demands on history teachers in many countries. The development of both the idea and the institutions of Europe generate interest in a broader regional history, at the same time as there is a growing attachment to both local and national identities. How to balance national and European perspectives was a recurring issue throughout the conference. The task of the working groups which met each day was to define the main problems and opportunities, to generate practical proposals, and to let the Council know of projects which might provide case studies and ideas for history teachers across the continent.

It seemed to me that the International Society for History Didactics should be represented at such a conference, particularly because I hope the Society will promote the development of a scheme for history teachers-in-training to visit training institutions and schools in other European countries as part of their training. The purpose would be to exchange perspectives on history teaching, especially teaching about Europe, with their peers in another part of Europe. Such visits need not be exchanges, but the scheme requires a network of those institutions which will accept visitors available on an accessible database, and the establishment of some funds to provide for travel expenses. There are examples in other subject areas: medical students have well-established routes for spending an 'elective' period of their training in medical institutions of other countries. Even quite brief visits can be of great value at this stage of life, and I raised this possibility at the conference, since I think there is no provision for this sort of exchange. Existing projects are for practising teachers, and for schools and pupils.

This report is a personal perspective on the symposium. There were common lectures but several working groups. Before I arrived I had re-read a document written by Piet Fontaine some years ago (before 1980), on what he saw as the purposes of the International Society for History Didactics. A great deal of what he said there on the need for international exchanges, comparisons and perspectives for those involved in history education is a part of the new initiatives of the Council of Europe. The symposium was intended to generate energy with which to develop new projects, conferences, publications, exchanges of teachers and pupils, and a sharing of information about resources and curriculum initiatives across the continent. The new initiatives are a direct result of the accelerating pace of change in Europe which led the Standing Conference of European Ministers of Education at their 17th session in Vienna in October 1991 to adopt new resolutions. In essence these resolutions are to support new programmes in Central

and Eastern Europe, develop teaching about Europe in all curriculum areas, stimulate the further development of classroom materials and resources, and increase school links, twinnings and exchanges across Europe.

The Bruges symposium provided an opportunity to learn more about these initiatives. But I was interested, as with the International Society for History Didactics, to get outside my own British world and discover how history in school and history didactics were viewed by others. It was reassuring to discover that there was much common ground amongst the teachers, students, trainers, inspectors and professors of history from the many countries gathered together at Bruges. An initial summary of reports from 30 countries covered familiar issues: the problems of motivating pupils, the balance between traditional and newer, more active, forms of learning, how to select content and use resources.

This report also raised clearly the central issue: "Europe appears to occupy both a considerable and a small amount of space in all the present curricula. The coverage is considerable in that all young Europeans are invited to discover the evolution of other regions and countries than their own. On the other hand, the history of the European Idea and the building of Europe does not seem to receive close attention, except in civic education...There is thus a risk of merely juxtaposing national histories, often with special reference to certain periods of conflict, without developing an awareness of those elements of convergence and difference in the European historical heritage. There is a need to re-think our approach to the history of Europe and its peoples in history teaching. This process should take account of an important social fact: the increasing mobility of the population, particularly of young people."¹

The Council of Europe has a long tradition of work on history teaching. The new initiative builds on this earlier work, especially the analysis of textbooks by the George Eckert Institute in Brunswick, and many conferences and publications covering a wide range of issues on history teaching. Many of these publications are interesting to history educators and ought to reach a wider audience. The budget of the Council is limited, publications are only in French and English, and distribution is via governments. I discovered at Bruges very interesting reports² which I had not previously known about, and I will now try to see that my university library acquires these reports so that they can be more widely known.

Two other initiatives are already underway:

The European Cultural Routes Project puts greater historical depth into tourism, tourist publications, the use of museums and sites, and holiday tours such as the pilgrim route to Santiago de Compostella, the old silk route, or Viking, Celtic and Baltic routes. This material may be very useful also for schools and teachers.

The European Local and Regional History Project is based on the exchange of work about their home locality by primary school pupils. A class with its teacher will produce a history of themselves and their community. The work produced can be translated and exchanged with another class in another part of Europe. Ultimately it is hoped to produce a history of children in different parts of Europe.

The conference provided opportunities through lectures and conversations to learn in detail about other situations from experts. It is particularly difficult to find written accounts about the state of history in the countries newly liberated from communist orthodoxies. There was an excellent talk about history in Poland. It was reassuring to discover that in the face of dogma "real history descended under the desks". In practise it was a many-layered activity, with the official history, alternative versions circulated underground or from abroad, while communist underground material was deliberately published to confuse the issue. People lived with dual views, public and private, the latter sustained by tradition, the Church, and families. The end of censorship and a free market in textbooks produces new problems, funds are short and honest text-books may not be the ones which sell. From conversations it became clear that in other newly independent countries nationalism and the desire to reinforce new identities is a powerful pressure towards creating new orthodoxies in schools. There is a great shortage of useful teaching materials and resources.

It was clear from a paper by Henrik Nielson from Denmark, presenting a Nordic view that this is the area of Europe where there has already been much trans-national exchange about history teaching. A programme of Baltic Routes has been developed. All of these countries have national curricula although in practice some, such as Denmark, are much more de-centralised than others. Equally the ways in which European history occurs are varied although it is most often taught in relation to national history rather than within an overall concept of European history as a whole. This paper also raised the concept of historical consciousness as a dynamic process of inter-action between the past and the present. If history is constantly being re-written then it is not a fixed packet of knowledge contained in a textbook. Politicians and others may need to be persuaded to reconsider their views of what useful history is like, otherwise we will only convey to the young an outdated and irrelevant "grandfather consciousness" about the past.

An Italian representative discussed experimental schemes to teach "civic literacy" with history. The Council of Europe is concerned with the teaching of human rights and democratic values which involve the teaching of basic political concepts. The Italians suggested that much of this may be much better taught in conjunction with history and from an international perspective, for instance by looking at Parliamentary systems comparatively rather than only nationally.

A Hungarian student, representing the newly formed International Students of History Association (ISHA), spoke with clarity about the boredom of many history texts and the ignorance of most history students about Europe, but especially that western students were very ignorant about the history of eastern and central Europe. Inter-cultural, inter-disciplinary history was again seen as a remedy, together with far more exchanges of pupils and teachers, and perhaps an international European centre for the training of history teachers. Whether this ever materialises, the creation of a European Association of History Teachers was announced based in Belgium. Next year there will also be a new International Yearbook of History Education edited by a group at the London Institute of Education. The theme of the first issue will be on centralisation and de-centralisation of the history curriculum, for which papers are invited. Meanwhile the publisher Cassell have a special series in English on European issues,

and will publish a book by Professor John Slater of London next year on Teaching European History.²

There was broad discussion of European history throughout the conference and especially in the working groups. Attempts to define it provoked argument and exasperation. Perhaps there were many "Europes". Perspectives could certainly vary depending on where you started from: for instance to the Greeks the French revolution is the pre-cursor of the Greek revolution. The first school textbook on the History of Europe is about to be published by Hachette, (eventually in 12 languages although not English), and with authors from 8 different countries. The general opinion in my group was that one text of this kind would never be satisfactory, and more were needed, even though it is a formidable publishing task to produce such a text. There were requests that the Council of Europe should assist and promote the production of classroom materials, and create a data-base of information about resources and documents on important European topics such as medieval cities, the Industrial Revolution, or fascism in all its forms. Attention was also drawn to the great value of exchanges and of the analysis of each others' textbooks. As the final report said, Europe was thought of as both an area and an idea.

On the final day a long list of ideas, projects, definitions, requests and recommendations had been collected. An important proposition was that there should be a Charter for History Teachers. The purpose of this would be to protect teachers and to make clear the distinctions between genuine history teaching and propaganda and indoctrination. Participation in many of the proposed activities such as mutual scrutiny of textbooks or even a group of European inspectors, together with school and teacher exchanges might reinforce the value of such a Charter. The concluding summary suggested that the conference marked a step forward towards a wider co-ordination of history teaching across the whole of Europe. Every symposium, such as this one at Bruges, increases the network of trans-national contacts spreading now to include many newly established nations.

Notes

1. Preliminary analysis of national reports by M. Michel Charriere, General Rapporteur. Bruges 1991.
2.
 - i. Asia in the European Classroom. Council for Cultural Cooperation. Strasbourg 1986.
 - ii. Training Teachers in Inter-cultural education? Council for Cultural Cooperation. Strasbourg 1986.
 - iii. Symposium on: Museums and the European heritage: treasures as tools? General Report. Salzburg, Austria 1990. Council for Cultural Cooperation. School and Out of School Education Section. Strasbourg 1991.
 - iv. Action to combat intolerance and xenophobia. Council for Cultural Cooperation. Strasbourg 1991.
3. Cassell: Council of Europe series e.g.

Margaret Stennan: Teaching about Europe.

Hugh Stankey (ed): The Challenge of Human Rights Education.

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