

The Politicisation of History Teaching in Europe

**Exploiting the past to promote
contemporary concerns**



A briefing from MCC Brussels

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Executive summary

History conveys a sense of national identity and values. For this reason, history teaching is more contested than other school subjects; it is a topic for public debate and political scrutiny. History teaching has been a concern of the Council of Europe for over seven decades.

This report examines the changing nature of the Council's work in this area and considers the impact it has upon classroom practice. We show how the European Dimension in History Teaching has moved beyond its initial concern with maintaining objectivity and eliminating prejudice to become a far more political promotion of values that transcend and often implicitly criticise nations and borders. We identify a number of common features of history teaching in Europe's schools today:

1. Instrumentalising the past

History is primarily considered a means of deepening pupils' understanding of the current challenges facing society. This promotes an instrumental approach, with the past valued only to the extent that it provides illustrations for contemporary concerns.

2. Diminishing historical knowledge

When the starting point for history teaching is the present, historical knowledge risks being deprioritised and the subject left virtually indistinguishable from civics or citizenship classes. This paves the way for politicisation.

3. Promoting values

History is frequently used as a vehicle for teaching skills and promoting attitudes. Values such as diversity, equity, inclusion and sustainability are often specified and cultivated under the guise of more neutral sounding 'competences'.

4. Beyond the nation

The Council of Europe has consistently promoted moves away from patriotic approaches to history teaching that involved children being told a national story, often chronologically, and with a focus on major events and notable figures. Teachers have long been encouraged to focus on the history of other countries and show how nations impact upon each other.

5. The end of 'great men'

History has been further broadened to

encompass the experiences of diverse groups within the nation, at first in response to growing immigration and most recently, through highlighting the experiences of people with disabilities, transgender and queer people.

6. Confronting the sins of the past

A shift away from patriotic history was originally intended to promote a positive European outlook and identity based on shared cultural values. More recently, triumphalist notions of what it means to be European have also been challenged. Rather than pupils being encouraged to take pride in a shared cultural legacy or past achievements, common identity emerges through collective shame in relation to past sins, such as empire, colonialism and, most especially, the Atlantic slave trade. The popular movement to decolonise history reinforces a focus on using history to confront past wrongs. A balanced approach to history demands pupils are taught the negative impacts of their own country's actions. But when children are taught history solely to condemn their nation, they are left estranged from the past and alienated from the present.

7. Approved interpretations

From its early work on textbooks, the Council of Europe has been focused upon eradicating bias and prejudice in history teaching. Most recently, this has taken the form of challenging 'disinformation' and 'misinformation'. This is presented as a core skill pupils are expected to develop through the course of studying history. But not only is it another distraction from teaching about the past, it is also a further means of introducing politics into the classroom.

8. The EU as saviour

If the past was sinful, and the present corrupted with misinformation, there is only one institution that can be relied upon: the European Union. The post-World War Two drive to promote peace and stability through European unity readily morphed into the promotion of political union and respect for the EU and its many off-shoots.

9. History as an empty vessel

When history teaching is no longer concerned with developing pupils' knowledge of the past as an end in itself, and is unable to promote either a national story or a positive narrative about Europe,

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the subject risks becoming reduced to simplistic moral lessons. Children taught only what is bad about the past are left alienated from their nation, distanced from older generations who do not buy into such national self-loathing, and estranged from a broader understanding of European culture and enlightenment values. The undermining of national history leaves children with neither a foundation in the past or a stake in the future.

To tackle this, we offer a number of recommendations:

1. Put the past back into history teaching.

Teachers need to focus on what is most significant about the past that should be passed onto future generations.

2. Put knowledge back into history.

Reducing history to a tool for promoting skills or values trivialises the subject.

3. Put the nation back into history.

All children should have chronological knowledge of their national story. History should give children a sense of continuity between the past and the present.

4. Put academic expertise back into history.

History specialists, not the Council of Europe, should lead national conversations about what children should learn about the past.

5. Put balance back into history.

Children should learn about past acts of barbarism and crimes against humanity. But, for balance, they should also be taught about humanity's past achievements.

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INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Knowledge of history makes us aware of life before the present. In connecting us to previous generations, history gives us a sense of continuity; we learn that society predates us, that the present is a product of more than just our own immediate experiences, and that humanity will continue without us. Knowing that we are intrinsically linked to people who lived before we existed gives us a sense of belonging, of group identity, and of affinity with our nation. History helps us make sense of the present and engenders a commitment to the future.

History is powerful. In constructing a narrative of past events, teachers, academics and authors shape our understanding of the time before we existed, determine whether we feel attachment or distance from those who preceded us and pride or shame in our nation. School teachers, introducing children to the story of their past for the very first time, play a particularly important role in cultivating connections with and attitudes towards previous generations.

We can see that teaching history has moved beyond objectivity to become a more political promotion of values.

For this reason, history teaching has been a key concern of the Council of Europe since its inception in the aftermath of World War Two. It was assumed that shared objectives would promote understanding between nations that had previously been pitched against one another. The idea of a European-wide approach to history teaching, whereby schools share, if not a common curriculum and textbook then, at very least, a common set of objectives, has driven policy-makers and educationalists ever since. To this end, over the course of seven decades, the Council of Europe has held numerous conferences, established research projects and published policy documents offering guidance to history teachers in member countries. The language may change over time but key themes recur: the Council of Europe sees history teaching as central to maintaining democracy, combating misinformation and promoting intra-European co-operation.

Although the Council of Europe does not determine national school curricula directly,

its work on history teaching is worth studying for two key reasons. First, in holding conferences on history teaching and producing meta-analyses of history textbooks, the Council of Europe's reports reflect thinking about the nature of the subject and how it is taught at particular points in time. As the Council's early work in this area dates back to the middle of the previous century, it forms an important record of the changes in attitudes and approaches to teaching history that have occurred over time. Second, in bringing together history teachers from EU member states and beyond, and through part-funding membership organisations such as EuroClio, the Council of Europe is able to promote new ideas, amplify what Council members consider to be best practice and, in coalescing a community of practitioners, affirm a consensus viewpoint. In this way, although there is no direct relationship between the Council of Europe's work and national curricula, there is informal, indirect influence over what is taught.

History is powerful. In constructing a narrative of past events, teachers, academics and authors shape our understanding of the time before we existed, determine whether we feel attachment or distance from those who preceded us and pride or shame in our nation.

This report sets out the changing motivations driving the Council of Europe's work on history teaching. It considers how such goals shape classroom practice in three EU member states: Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands. In examining changes over time, we can see how what has become known as the 'European Dimension in History Teaching' has moved beyond its initial concern with maintaining objectivity and eliminating prejudice from textbooks. The European Dimension has become a far more political promotion of values and identities that transcend and implicitly criticise nations and borders. The Council of Europe and the European Union share the same fundamental values - 'human rights,

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democracy and the rule of law' - but are 'separate entities which perform different, yet complementary, roles'.¹ The Council's work often promotes EU institutions as a means of safeguarding values both share, such as diversity, inclusivity and sustainability.

This report is in three parts. Part One traces developments in the Council of Europe's approach to history teaching over seven decades. Part Two considers how the notion of a European Dimension in History Teaching is put into practice in three different EU countries - Germany, Belgium and Holland. Part Three looks at how history teaching as advocated by the Council of Europe has developed in relation to three key topics: empire, the two world wars and the Holocaust.

We end with an outline and critique of some of the key features of history teaching in Europe's schools today.

PART ONE

THE EUROPEAN DIMENSION IN HISTORY TEACHING

The European Dimension

In the aftermath of the Second World War, the point at which the Council launched its first work on education, history teaching chiefly promoted a national story, an often patriotic telling of past exploits that contributed to the forging of national identity. Belgian researchers Karel Van Nieuwenhuysse and Marjolein Wilke note that in the 1950s, the aim of history teaching remained what it had been since the establishment of the nation in 1830, 'to foster Belgian patriotism and support a Belgian identity construction process'. Pupils would become familiar with a 'pantheon of alleged Belgian heroes' chosen to exemplify qualities deemed desirable in the future population.² The Council of Europe's early involvement in history teaching seems driven by concern with the consequences of overt displays of patriotism.

At first, it recognised each country had its own distinctive history – but soon the 'shared history' came to dominate.

That there should be a distinct European dimension to history teaching was first set out in the Council of Europe History Conference, held in Germany in 1953. Many conferences, projects and publications have subsequently followed with different priorities emerging over time. Most participants in Council of Europe events are funded by their national governments. In return, these participants formulate recommendations addressed to their ministers of education, school inspectorates, local education authorities, educational administrators and teachers. In this way, the Council of Europe is able to exert influence over national curricula and classroom practice.

Ending bias and prejudice

A key principle to emerge from the 1953 gathering was that, 'All Contracting Parties undertake to encourage the study, by their nationals, of the history of the other Contracting Parties.'³ It was recognised that each country had its own distinctive history but it was hoped that extending study to encompass nations other than the students' own would foster greater international understanding. Yet just the following year, the 1954 European Cultural Convention placed less emphasis on the different histories of individual nations and more on

the shared history of the continent of Europe. It was considered important for future generations to know the history of Europe as a whole in order to safeguard peace across the continent.

From the outset, then, two distinct approaches emerged to history teaching in Europe: one emphasised the history of individual nations and the other emphasised teaching the shared history of a continent. Points of agreement were the importance placed upon upholding common standards in teaching, including the aspiration for objectivity, and the goal of teaching beyond the borders of the students' own nation. This consensus was echoed by the Council of Europe that argued history teaching played a vital role 'in establishing mutual understanding and confidence between the peoples of Europe'⁴ while also being clear 'that it is not the duty/work of history to act or provide propaganda for European unity or find solutions to political problems.'⁵

At the time, the Council insisted against providing propaganda for European unity – this was not to last.

Throughout the 1950s, the Council of Europe regularly reviewed the history textbooks most commonly used in each member nation's schools. *Against Bias and Prejudice*, an overview of work undertaken during this period, notes that 'between 1953-58, the Council of Europe organised six major international conferences on the way in which European history was presented in about 900 of the 2000 textbooks then in use in schools in member States.'⁶ This work was driven by a determination to eliminate national bias and a desire to promote a less prejudiced view of history. The aim was not to challenge the dominance of national history on school curricula but to improve the quality of the resources available to teachers.

The Council reiterated that history teaching was not to have explicitly political goals. The purpose of reviewing textbooks was 'not to use history as propaganda for European unity but to try and eliminate the traditional mistakes and prejudices and to establish the facts.'⁷ It is interesting to note the Council's repeated declarations against providing propaganda for European unity. There was a need at this time to tread

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carefully and not undermine national sovereignty. Significantly however, a precedent was set that the Council of Europe had a role to play in commenting on history as it was currently taught and making recommendations for future practice.

One criticism levelled at the authors of history textbooks was that they said too little about other nations.

But by the fifth international conference, questions were being asked of this approach. Some participants maintained the need for 'an interpretation of history without the dominance and influence of political thoughts and practices'⁸ while others argued that history teaching should demonstrate a clear commitment to 'establishing peace and stability amongst European countries'. Despite previous agreement not to propagandise for European unity, one common criticism participants levelled at the authors of textbooks was that they had a tendency to say too much about their 'own nations and too little about others.'⁹ A compromise was to promote 'a combination of education in humanism with an education in consciousness of European community'.¹⁰ Over time, wariness about not undermining national sovereignty gradually lessened.

In the 1960s and 1970s the Council of Europe's concern shifted to the place of history within the secondary school curriculum. There was a drive to ensure that history was prioritised at a point when patriotic narratives were being called into question but there was little consensus as to what should take their place. Discussions taking place in Belgium in the 1970s seem typical of the period. Critics argued that history lessons were antiquated and irrelevant, 'as they were not sufficiently oriented towards global history, and towards explaining the present-day world and encouraging societal responsibility-taking.'¹¹ One suggestion was to replace history as a subject with a broader 'social studies' programme. Ultimately, history education continued but the time given over to it was reduced and the content was oriented more towards contemporary issues and concerns.

Such discussions continued into the 1980s as patriotic approaches to history teaching

were increasingly rejected. We see in Belgium, Holland and Germany that there was a growing tendency to consider the history of other countries. Van Nieuwenhuysse and Wilke note that, 'this evolution coincided with an increasing labor migration from North Africa (particularly Morocco) and Turkey, as a result of which, certainly in several big cities and coal-pit regions in Belgium, the classrooms' composition became more and more multicultural.'¹² However, references to Africa and Asia were made primarily in the context of lessons on colonialism and imperialism and far greater attention was paid to other countries in Western Europe. There was a concerted effort to promote not a national identity but a European identity. Some critiqued this Eurocentrism and argued it 'attributed agency almost solely to European and Western people, presenting indigenous Africans and Asians as passive objects'. In this way, the West appeared to be 'the example to follow' while, 'the traditions and achievements of non-Western peoples' were ignored.

The European Dimension in History Teaching

Although the notion of a 'European Dimension' to education had been discussed for the previous two decades, the specific label was not formally applied until the 1977 Community Policy Statement, *Towards a European Education Policy*, where 'it referred to the promotion of closer relations between educational systems of different European countries'.¹³ European Dimension in History Teaching (EDiHT) first appeared in the European Commission Resolution of the Council of Ministers of Education in May 1988.

Patriotic approaches to history teaching were increasingly rejected.

The action programme of this Resolution committed members 'to include the ED in their school curricula in all appropriate disciplines, for example, literature, languages, history' in order to 'strengthen young people's sense of European identity and make clear to them the value of European civilisation by improving their historical, cultural, economic and social knowledge of Europe (European Commission, 1988)'. By 1988, it seems that concerns about providing propaganda for European unity had been jettisoned and

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worries about promoting a singular political interpretation of the past were also far less evident. As the Cold War was coming to an end, the view of European identity to be taught, and the value of European civilization to be promoted, were both unashamedly positive.

The New Europe

Towards the end of the 1980s, discussion increasingly focused on what counts as history. In 1990, England's Secretary of State for Education, Kenneth Clarke, declared that history teaching should stop in 1960. He argued that the most recent thirty years fell under the domain of 'civics'. However, Clarke was out of kilter with the Council of Europe. Delegates to the Council's history teaching conferences consistently argued that pupils could only 'understand present-day societies by studying them in their historical context of change through time'.¹⁴ There was also increasing recognition that Europe itself was changing with the opening up of Eastern Europe combined with migration from Africa and Asia changing demographics within nation states.

There was hope that history teaching about the New Europe could serve as a source of commonality.

The phrase 'New Europe' was coined at a Council of Europe symposia held in Bruges in December 1991.¹⁵ A key concern was that Europe was becoming increasingly divided. Eastern expansion meant more differences between countries while migration was creating differences within countries. There was hope that history teaching about the New Europe could serve as a source of commonality, a means of linking together diverse populations through a shared past. But whereas an older, more patriotic version of history may have united citizens of a nation irrespective of their personal identity, European history struggled to play the same role because far fewer people saw themselves as citizens of Europe.¹⁶ The promotion of the 'New Europe' encouraged a focus on multiculturalism and recognition of groups that had been previously underrepresented or unacknowledged in history teaching. It also demanded a focus on European integration. We can see how this was put into practice in the curriculum for schools in

Saxony, Germany.

'In view of the current and future importance of European integration for the everyday life of the pupils, history lessons focus on the roots and perspectives of European history, to which selected contents of world, national and regional history are assigned. Reflecting on the past in the classroom requires [...] the integration of aspects of political history, economic and social history, intellectual and cultural history as well as the history of mentality, everyday life and gender'.¹⁷

European history becomes the starting point, with national history serving as one example of broader international trends.

Since the late 1980s, references to the European Dimension in Education have referred to promoting closer integration and co-operation between the countries of Europe. This project was lent urgency by the perceived challenges to the European Community posed by the end to the Cold War and the reunification of Europe. The European Association of History Educators (EuroClio) was established in 1992 at the request of the Council of Europe in order 'to build bridges between history education professionals from all parts of the then recently reunited Europe'.¹⁸ In this way, education became central to the European project.

Education has been encouraged to promote closer European integration.

The signing of the Maastricht Treaty that same year lent further weight - and, importantly, money - to the project of a European Dimension in History Teaching. Documents produced by the Council of Europe and the EU at this time define the European Dimension as 'a dynamic, evolving and multi-faceted concept and an approach to education which aims at preparing young generations for the purposes of work, study and leisure in the wider community of Europe.' Europe was to become a focal point of all aspects of education through learning languages; promoting student and teacher mobility; promoting co-operation between teaching establishments; and developing exchanges of information, experiences and educators.¹⁹ History teaching was presented as one of the educational domains most appropriate

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for forging an explicitly European identity and developing notions of European citizenship.

At the Vienna Summit Declaration in 1993, the heads of member states of the Council of Europe declared that the Council's work should particularly focus on 'strengthening programmes aimed at eliminating prejudice in the teaching of history by emphasising positive mutual influence between different countries, religions and ideas in the historical development of Europe.'²⁰ The European Dimension in History Teaching (EDiHT) was considered a useful defence against overtly nationalistic and biased historical narratives but also, more explicitly, a means 'to combat resurgent fascist propaganda and its racist aspects'.²¹ The mission of EDiHT became to promote European unity and eliminate nationalism, prejudice and biased narratives. This led to an emphasis on multiculturalism in both the choice of topics teachers were expected to cover and the lessons pupils were expected to draw. For example, 'the historical causes and effects of migration' became a popular topic at this time.

History teaching was considered more a useful tool against nationalism, fascism and racism than a source of knowledge.

At this point in the early 1990s, the goal of the EDiHT was still to promote a positive idea of European history and identity, as well as European attitudes, through teaching the history of distinct nations. However, the focus on multiculturalism in the curriculum emphasised difference, rather than a shared European identity. From the mid-1990s onwards, EDiHT began to become concerned with avoiding the promotion of Eurocentric attitudes. Indeed, the Committee of Ministers recommended that schools encourage pupils to see themselves as 'citizens not only of their own region and country but also as citizens of Europe and of the wider world.'²²

The focus on European integration shows how history had become a vehicle for contemporary concerns. Indeed, by the mid-1990s, arguments for a more up to date focus in history had largely been won: history teaching in the New Europe would provide pupils with a context for current events. As can be seen in the curriculum for

Saxony (above) when history is mined in response to current events, there are few limits on what might be considered relevant. The focus of identity, for example, shifts from the nation to groups based on race, gender, sexuality, disability etc. with each group demanding recognition through the curriculum. Rather than history teachers being guided by a sense of chronology to select topics from one national history, they are tasked with selecting from multiple group histories played out on a global scale.

The focus on multiculturalism emphasised difference, rather than a shared European identity.

By the end of the 1990s teachers from many countries were growing concerned that the history curriculum was becoming overcrowded. We can see how this played out in practice in the Netherlands in Part Two of this paper. Jonathan Slater, writing in *Teaching History in the New Europe* notes that,

*'In a multicultural Europe and an interdependent world, it is easier to add to the list of key topics and periods than to remove them. Resulting syllabuses soon bulge with importance and suffocate with priorities. They may well attempt to satisfy a range of national and cultural interests, but they will be unteachable.'*²³

The problem facing history teachers as they entered the new millennium, then, was one of selection:

*'To envisage school history syllabuses encompassing the totality of all Europe would be impractical. We need an initial framework for selection ... the European idea is too elusive, geographical Europe too vast and unmanageable; a common European past too partial and limited; European 'culture', heritage and tradition too lacking in definition, ambiguous and values-laden.'*²⁴

The factor motivating selection was again one of purpose. The Council of Europe maintained that history should focus on providing pupils with the context, knowledge and understanding to make sense of the present. Policy documents from this time make reference to 'a critical approach to historical and present day events'; 'the present in the context of the

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past'; 'the present [with] expectations for the future', and of the 'processes in the contemporary world' which enable 'pupils to understand the historical context of the society in which they live', and of the 'origins of contemporary economic and political systems'.²⁵ Similarly, the EuroClio inquiries of 2003, 2006 and 2009 note the primary aims for history teaching in Europe as being: education for democracy and citizenship, helping pupils understand the world they live in, enhancing critical thinking skills and also, interestingly, developing a sense of belonging to the nation state.²⁶ These goals were evident in the title of the Council of Europe's major project launched in 2016: Educating for diversity and democracy: teaching history in contemporary Europe.²⁷

Teachers were expected to promote a common European experience but also focus on diversity and minority groups.

What's the point?

There was, at this time, still a stated aspiration towards scholarship and objectivity in the teaching of history with teachers reminded of the need to give students both sides of an argument and present multiple perspectives. The aim was to protect history teaching and teachers from the perceived 'political manipulation' that might emerge within their own national context. A 1997 Council of Europe document suggested that 'history teaching in schools can, and should, make an important contribution to education in general and, in particular, to education for democratic citizenship' by 'developing learners' basic attitudes of intellectual honesty and rigour, independent and critical judgement, open-mindedness, curiosity, civil courage, and tolerance.'²⁸ Contradictions soon began to emerge. Teachers were expected to promote a common European experience but also focus on diversity and minority groups. They were expected to emphasise objectivity while promoting a particular approach to citizenship.

These tensions began to be resolved at the turn of the millennium when the commitment to viewpoint diversity was replaced by a more specific promotion of particular knowledge and values. The Lisbon Treaty of 2000 saw a new type of soft

governance emerge.²⁹ A 2001 recommendation from the Committee of Ministers of the Member States of the Council of Europe on History Teaching in Twenty-First Century Europe, noted education was for tolerance, mutual understanding, human rights, and democratic citizenship.³⁰ These shared values were thought necessary not just to peace, stability and democracy in Europe but also to the creation of a 'European [historical] consciousness'. We might note that a European consciousness does not carry the same positive aspirations previously associated with the promotion of a European identity.

Meanwhile, national history curriculums and textbooks were increasingly seen as an obstacle to promoting EDiHT. Stradling (2001) notes that 'the current curriculum framework for teaching history prescribed by the national or local education authority ... can constrain innovation... a content-rich syllabus focused on national history, as many chronological surveys tend to be, will leave little scope for coverage of what happened elsewhere in Europe.'³¹

Ultimately, the very fact that there is a European Dimension in History Teaching, enshrined in policy, represents a move away from linking history teaching to the promotion of a national story. Indeed, the specific European values teachers are expected to promote relativise national identity as just one identity among many - and one that often runs counter to more diverse and inclusive values. To confirm this direction, in 2011 the Committee of Ministers adopted a Recommendation on intercultural dialogue and the image of the other in history teaching.³²

The specific European values teachers are expected to promote relativise national identity as just one identity among many.

Education was included in the agenda of the European Heads of State meeting in November 2017, suggesting it was now considered central to European governance. Education was perceived to be the solution to cultural diversity problems facing member nations and also as central to economic and financial solutions to the period post the Global Financial Crisis.

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Current policy

The establishment of the Observatory on History Teaching in Europe (OHTe) in 2020 within the organisational structure of the Council of Europe is an important development displaying the current European perspective on history teaching encapsulated in the Council of Europe's 2018 paper, *Quality History Education in the 21st century, Principles and Guidelines*. This document is significant in that it provides the clearest and most up to date statement of what might be considered the Council of Europe's view on best practice in history teaching. No specific authors are named; instead, the paper is badged simply as emanating from the Council of Europe and, as the title suggests, in setting out principles and guidelines, the work is intended to shape classroom practice. For these reasons, *Quality History Education* is worthy of detailed analysis.

Recent pronouncements represent a move away from what students should know to how students should be.

Central to this paper is a particular outlook or set of principles that the authors think students must develop and that they consider history, as a subject, is able to cultivate. These are listed as: valuing human dignity and human rights; valuing cultural diversity; and valuing democracy, justice, fairness, equality and the rule of law. In addition, the document also lists a set of attitudes history students should demonstrate: openness to cultural otherness and to other beliefs, world views and practices; respect; civic-mindedness; responsibility; self-efficacy; and tolerance of ambiguity. This formulation of desirable principles and attitudes marks a distinct shift in previous approaches to EDiHT. It represents a move away from what students should know to how students should be. *Quality History Education* focuses less on the nature of historical knowledge and more on appropriate responses to the past.

Clearly, past iterations of history teaching were not value neutral. Students might have been expected to gain a respect for truth and the pursuit of objectivity or, more politically, pride in their nation's past and its historical development in relation to other countries. More recent is a sense that

particular values need to be stated and taught explicitly rather than being engendered from increased knowledge. This explicit promotion of attitudes and values diminishes the significance of knowledge about the past to history teaching. Knowledge of the past - be it the study of particular periods or themes - no longer determines pedagogy or, potentially, shapes students' character and values. Instead, the starting point becomes values and historical knowledge becomes useful only in terms of its capacity to support the process of inculcation. In this way, knowledge of the past comes to be seen as having little intrinsic worth and only an extrinsic use.

There is now a sense that particular values need to be stated and taught explicitly rather than being engendered from increased knowledge.

This foregrounding of values rather than knowledge is made clear in the Council's statement that:

'History education has an important role to play in confronting the current political, cultural and social challenges facing Europe; in particular, those posed by the increasingly diverse nature of societies, the integration of migrants and refugees into Europe, and by attacks on democracy and democratic values'.³³

When EDiHT is linked to current challenges in this way, the history curriculum risks becoming politicised. There may be little democratic consensus about 'the current political, cultural and social challenges facing Europe' nor agreement about how best such challenges can be confronted in the classroom. The history curriculum must bend to whatever Members of the Council of Europe deem to be the current challenges facing Europe.

History is considered the ideal vehicle for delivering a particular vision of Europe because it,

'Offers insights into the complexities and diversity of past human behaviour; it fosters the ability to interrogate differing, even conflicting, narratives; it requires that arguments are supported by an understanding of wide-ranging evidence'.³⁴

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Indeed it does. But, in previous eras, such skills were honed as a by-product of knowledge and understanding not as a by-product of imbibing specified values. In diminishing the importance of knowledge of the past, history - which once had a distinct epistemology and pedagogy - becomes indistinguishable from civics or citizenship classes. Far from being a cause for concern, this blurring of the boundaries between history and citizenship is welcomed: 'historical critical knowledge and understanding of political, social, cultural, and economical systems intersects with the democratic culture necessary for active citizenship.' But rather than a democratic notion of citizenship intrinsically linked to membership of a nation state, the Council's conception of 'active citizenship' stands above popular mandates.

According to the Council of Europe, citizenship is not a birthright or status, but a set of skills to be mastered.

'Active citizenship' is not a birthright or a status achieved through democratic participation but a particular set of skills to be mastered. *Quality History Education* specifies three primary 'competences for democratic culture'. They are: democracy, diversity and inclusivity. Again, we see how historical knowledge is viewed instrumentally as a means of facilitating the acquisition of particular 'competences':

'The critical understanding of historical phenomena facilitates the process of acquiring the competences for democratic culture (CDC) and the intersection of school history and citizenship education is evident. History education can gain from including and adapting the CDC pedagogical approaches to create a classroom climate where young people can actively explore historical questions to experience and learn about, through and for democratic culture'.³⁵

The focus on competences also suggests a different approach to pedagogy. Previous documents on EDiHT stressed the importance of objectivity and emphasised the need for teachers to show students a range of different perspectives in order for them to think critically and draw their own conclusions. But when competences are to be 'acquired' then it is not only unnecessary for students to think critically, but doing so

may stand in the way of them 'acquiring a set of behaviours'. The role of the teacher is not to impart subject knowledge, nor to encourage critical engagement, but to nurture and monitor the presence of desired 'behaviours'.

The values associated with competences for democratic culture are democracy, diversity and inclusivity. These principles are intended to do far more than help students make sense of history: they are to shape 'the way that lives are conducted'. The authors of *Quality History Education* are clear: 'Building the capacity of teachers and teacher educators to help students acquire democratic values [...] should be viewed as being as important as developing their capacity to convey subject knowledge and develop cognitive skills.'

The particular competences are specified as:

- Valuing human dignity and human rights
- Valuing cultural diversity
- Openness to cultural otherness and other beliefs and world views
- Empathy
- Flexibility and adaptability
- Knowledge and critical understanding of the self
- Knowledge and critical understanding of the world: human rights, cultures, religions, and history

This list makes clear how values and opinions that can be contested are being redefined as skills that cannot be challenged but only demonstrated.

The blurring of the boundaries between history and citizenship is welcomed.

In the list of competences, the 'world' is cited twice but no reference is made to the nation. This suggests not just that there is little room for national history amid the focus on competences but that an emphasis on national history would actually be in conflict with the concept of global citizenship being promoted. Students are to be taught that a majoritarian approach to democracy that privileges national citizenship runs counter to a broader understanding of human rights. A focus on the 'experiences of minority groups and migrants' rather than a 'monocultural' approach to history reinforces negative associations with the nation state.

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Presentism

In terms of curricular content, *Quality History Education* stresses the importance recorded experiences of citizens in the past has a part to play in the development of active citizenship.' When knowledge is viewed instrumentally in this way, history falls prey to presentism; the past is viewed through the concerns of the present. For example, the emphasis placed on the 'experiences of minority groups and migrants' reflects current preoccupations, not necessarily the concerns of citizens or historians in previous eras.

It was assumed that history as a subject was potentially offensive to minority groups.

The document stresses:

'A curriculum reflecting only the history and culture of the dominant group in society constrains students outside that majority to engage with it. They may perceive it to be personally meaningless, irrelevant and at times offensive. The hidden practices and messages of the curriculum need to be addressed'.³⁶

Here we see an assumption that history as a subject has a 'hidden' agenda that makes it potentially offensive to minority groups. These 'messages' - presumably a positive portrayal of elite figures, the glorification of military battles, imperial conquest and national pride - must be tempered not in the pursuit of objectivity but in order to appear relevant and sensitive to the feelings of people from minority groups. This assumes that people from non-dominant communities are unable to identify with the nation and find pride in the past.

The vision of Europe promoted by *Quality History Education* is one that is dominated by diversity. 'A characteristic of Europe is its ethnic, linguistic, cultural and religious diversity,' the report's authors note. 'The presence of minority groups pre-dates the establishment of the modern territorial boundaries. Culturally, politically, socially and in other ways the history of most of Europe is one of long interaction between diverse groups of people.' Clearly, it is important for students to know the distinct history of minority groups. Yet there is a risk that minority groups are themselves exploited by those promoting global

citizenship, in order to call into question the authority of the nation state. The idea of a 'mono-cultural curriculum' is criticised because it 'viewed difference as dangerous and divisive'. Thinking globally is presented as a positive contrast to acting at the level of a potentially prejudiced nation.

Identity

Quality History Education suggests that history is misused to promote a particular type of identity. Teachers are warned to select resources with care so as to avoid 'othering' or 'stereotyping'. To counteract this, they are advised that lessons should provide an opportunity to discuss 'covert stereotyping based on gender, ethnicity, language, social status, or as a consequence of being a recent arrival in the group'.

The language of 'othering' paves the way for only one analytical approach to historical issues.

Othering is defined as,

'a form of stereotyping where we perceive ourselves as part of a united and undifferentiated group of people, as us or we; and those outside the group as fundamentally different - as them or 'the other' - inferior or weaker, even possibly dangerous, and hence we as stronger or better [e.g. othering for justifying colonialism or enslavement]'.³⁷

Historical processes of 'othering' are to be addressed in order to help young people understand that:

- *Justifications for othering commonly employ myths and traditions about racial purity or national uniqueness regardless of their spurious validity.*
- *Differences between peoples can become acute when one identity becomes dominant.*

While history teaching should clearly cover the oppression of particular groups and the appalling and even deadly consequences this has had, the language of 'othering' paves the way for only one analytical approach to such issues.

This sense of there being one correct analytical approach is further evident when it comes to 'teaching with regard to people's multiple identities'. The term identity is

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defined as, 'a person's sense of who they are and the self-descriptions to which they attribute significance and value'. In relation to 'multiple identities', the authors of *Quality History Education* note that, 'Most people use a range of different identities to describe themselves, including both personal and social identities'. This understanding of identity as self-definition is unhelpful in making sense of a past when people simply did not see themselves in this way. This further challenges a concept of history linked to the nation.

Scholarship used to mean careful study of sources. It appears today that it is assumed in advance what is true and what is an illegitimate source.

Quality History Education informs readers that, 'A growing number of individuals, especially young people, have multiple cultural affiliations to enjoy, but also to manage, on a daily basis. Their composite identity can no longer be restricted to a collective identity related to a particular ethnic or religious group.' This portrays identity as an ongoing project to be actively negotiated and constructed rather than simply a given according to birth, geography or social class. It again reads the concerns of the present back into an analysis of the past. History has, arguably, always been political in terms of whose stories and which narratives are emphasised and which are ignored. But the early years of EDiHT stressed a concern with challenging bias and prejudice and striving for truth and objectivity. By 2018, it seems that this aspiration has been replaced with a notion of balance that involves 'correcting' past narratives through recognition that objectivity is impossible and non-dominant narratives should be taught instead. This risks further politicising history teaching by turning it into a mechanism for promoting the interests of some groups over others.

Misinformation

The potential for politicisation through foregrounding present concerns is further evident in *Quality History Education's* emphasis on the importance of history teachers challenging 'misinformation'. Misinformation is defined in the document as 'rumours and fabricated content' which

has become 'information pollution at a global scale'. Teachers are told to beware of:

'a complex web of motivations for creating disseminating and consuming these 'polluted' messages; a myriad of content types and techniques for amplifying content; innumerable platforms hosting and reproducing this content; and breakneck speeds of communication between trusted peers'.³⁸

Once, scholarly striving for truth and objectivity in history would have meant careful scrutiny of sources. Today, there appears to be an assumption that what is 'true' and what is 'polluted' can be known in advance. And rather than students learning from the process of scrutinising evidence they need to be inoculated against harmful messages. History, the 2018 document informs readers, 'develops critical thinking and provides analytical tools for unpacking mechanisms of manipulation'. The fact of manipulation has been determined in advance: students are to be taught how the process works, particularly in the online world, but this is very different to developing a capacity for critical thinking grounded in historical knowledge and understanding.

Empathy

There was previously an assumption that to teach objectively, students need to be presented with multiple sides to an argument. The goal of exposing misinformation rules some sides of an argument as invalid before they are ever heard. Yet the challenge to the pursuit of objectivity continues with *Quality History Education* making the case for 'the importance of emotion in response to historical events'.

The challenge to the pursuit of objectivity continues with the principles of the document 'Quality History Education'.

Empathy and relevance become central to pedagogy. Empathy, *Quality History Education* notes, is important for enhancing students' understanding of diversity, inclusivity, and democracy: 'Empathy is important as a pedagogical strategy, as a necessary instrument in the historian's

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toolkit and for enabling students to contribute to life in diverse democratic societies.’ At the same time, ‘To be relevant, history education should allow for learning experiences that are either directly applicable to the personal aspirations, interests, or cultural experiences of students (personal relevance) or that are connected in some way to real-world issues, problems, and contexts (life relevance).’ This focus on empathy and relevance does students a disservice by restricting them to their current preoccupations. It does history a disservice by replacing a search for facts that may be open to interpretation with prompting emotions in order to engender a pre-determined response.

Summary

To sum up, the Council of Europe comments upon and seeks to influence school history teaching. Over the course of seven decades, its work in this area has both expanded and changed direction. An initial goal of challenging what were perceived to be biased and prejudiced patriotic national histories moved from a focus on objectivity to viewpoint diversity, before encompassing broader social justice goals such as an emphasis on equity, empathy and identity. At the same time, the Council of Europe has pushed for history teaching to move beyond relaying a national story. It has pushed this through a focus first on other countries in Europe, then through the promotion of a distinct European identity, and finally through a sense of Europe, as home to multiple transnational identity groups, in relation to the world.

PART TWO

TEACHING HISTORY IN PRACTICE

Teaching history in practice

Teaching within nations

We can see how the European Dimension in History Teaching is put into practice when we consider the national or regional curricula set by EU member states. These are often openly accessible documents, compiled by public bodies that are often substantially government-funded, and made up of academics, former teachers or school inspectors, and other subject specialists or educationalists. Here, we consider history curricula for secondary schools in three EU member states: Germany, Belgium and Holland.³⁹ We can see how, to varying degrees, national curricula correspond to the objectives put forward by supranational bodies such as the Council of Europe and EuroClio.

Germany

Germany's education system is decentralized and the structure and content of education fall under the remit of 16 Länder or federal states. Each Länder produces guidance relating to the history curriculum but the specific content, the level of detail and the legal status of such documents vary considerably. However, since 2004 the German government has set national standards and assessments for all primary and secondary schools. In addition, the bodies established to oversee education by the individual Länder are also often members of the same national and supranational organisations. This means that there are many commonalities in terms of content, pedagogy and values underpinning the curriculum. Here we consider three documents detailing history curricula for different school types and in different Länder:

- lower secondary schools in North Rhine-Westphalia⁴⁰
- upper secondary schools in Brandenburg⁴¹
- upper secondary schools in Saxony⁴²

In each case, documents were accessed online and machine translated.

North Rhine-Westphalia

The curriculum guidance issued by North Rhine-Westphalia sets out the technical skills and knowledge students are expected to master through the study of history. Decisions about pedagogy are left to individual schools and teachers. Freedom in relation to how to teach is set against greater prescription of what to teach than is the case in other Länder considered here. North Rhine-Westphalia specifies a number of 'content fields' or topics students are to cover in their study of history, set out chronologically, ranging from 'Content field 1: Early high cultures and ancient worlds':

'Based on the interdependence of humans and the environment, this content field addresses central characteristics of an early high culture, taking Egypt as an example. In addition, ancient Athens is discussed in contrast to ancient Rome. Life in the polis and the emergence of a new model of rule and society, democracy is covered, as well as the interrelationship between expansion and system change in society and politics.'

Through to 'Content field 9: International ties and developments in Germany since 1989':

'The effects of the reforms initiated by Gorbachev in the Soviet Union and what was then the Eastern bloc, in particular what was then the GDR, and ultimately the process of reunification, are discussed here. The steps of the "peaceful revolution" since autumn 1989 in the process of reunification are examined with regard to their German sponsors and international actors. The content field closes with the treatment of the ongoing social transformation processes in reunified Germany.'

Despite documentation stressing the need for teachers to 'focus on verifiable technical knowledge and skills', value judgments in what to emphasise within the content field have clearly been made. For example, the focus on 'interdependence of humans and the environment' in content field 1 and on 'how women and men of different faiths were integrated into their living environments' in content field 2 bring a current preoccupation with sustainability into an interpretation of the past.

Alongside specifying content, the curriculum emphasises 'competencies' or skills. A key competency students are to develop is 'reflective historical awareness'. This is defined as 'the development of skills and

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abilities that initiate, accompany and structure historical thinking'. In other words, students are to learn how to think like historians. Whereas this understanding could develop as a by-product of subject knowledge, here it is specified as a particular skill to be honed.

'Expertise' is developed through:

'perceiving past circumstances, developments and life stories from sources and representations, presenting synchronous connections and diachronic developments and questioning existing contextualisations, interpretations and descriptions with regard to their prerequisites and intentions'.

A focus on competencies suggests that students stand at a distance from subject knowledge; rather than having a reasoned attachment to particular (disputed) interpretations of the past they must demonstrate competence through a detached acknowledgement of a range of interpretations. Even passing judgment becomes 'judgmental competence'.

In using the present to understand the past, history becomes reduced to evidence for current concerns.

Judgmental competence is divided between 'the ability to formulate and argue for factual judgments and value judgments':

'Criteria for factual judgments are above all factual appropriateness, internal coherence and sufficient cogency of arguments. In the case of value judgments, current values based on the norms of the free democratic basic order are also taken into account, applied to historical facts and disclosed. The value judgment is reflected when one's own standards are reconsidered and their time-relatedness is taken into account. The ability to identify and accept different perspectives is part of the ability to judge'.

Getting students to relate events in the past to their own personal present is seen as a way for them to develop a connection between historical knowledge and current challenges. Just as in the Council of Europe's Quality History Teaching document, we see a risk of history being reduced to evidence for current concerns. Nonetheless, the focus on historical

knowledge in North Rhine-Westphalia's history curriculum does potentially provide students and teachers with a solid foundation for analysis.

Brandenburg

The history curriculum for upper secondary schools in Brandenburg, in contrast, places far less emphasis on content to be covered. Teachers are provided with a list of topics but with few details and little guidance as to which aspects of a particular topic should be emphasised. For example:

The early modern state:

Revolutions

- *Bourgeois revolutions since the 17th century, deepened with an example (England, USA, France or 1848/1849)*
- *Industrial Revolution*

The Age of Enlightenment

- *Political and scientific thinking in the context of the Enlightenment*
- *Forms of communication of the Enlightenment*

Brandenburg shares with North Rhine-Westphalia an explicit focus on competencies and the importance of getting students to relate history to present concerns:

'The accelerated change of a world shaped by globalization requires a dynamic model of competence acquisition, which is geared towards lifelong learning and overcoming diverse challenges in everyday and professional life'.

History, reduced to a set of skills or competencies, becomes distanced from knowledge of the past. Topics are seemingly arbitrary, selected on the opportunistic basis of the potential skills or issues to which they give rise.

History, reduced to a set of skills and competencies, becomes distanced from real knowledge of the past.

Brandenburg's curriculum is more explicit than North Rhine-Westphalia in naming what are perceived to be the current 'challenges' facing society. This imposes not just a particular reading of history on students and teachers, but also a particular analysis of the present.

The emphasis on current challenges plays

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out in the selection of curricula knowledge particularly in relation to more recent eras:

Compulsory electives for the advanced course

- *Federal Republic of Germany as a country of immigration: social change as a challenge; historical-cultural interpretations of gender relations*
- *Family in transition*
- *Women: emancipation between aspiration and reality and chance*
- *Foreigners in the GDR*

The focus on immigrants and gender tells students and teachers which people's experiences are important to study in order to make sense of the past. In addition, the Brandenburg curriculum specifies which values students are expected to acquire:

'Awareness of history is indispensable for competent participation in social, political and cultural life in a democratic, pluralistic society and in a world that is becoming networked. The central task of history lessons is therefore to promote the development of a reflected historical awareness among schoolchildren. Historical consciousness means the interpretive interweaving of the perception of the past with orientation in the present and expectations for the future.'

The focus on 'reflected historical awareness' and relating the past to present concerns echoes the curriculum of North Rhine-Westphalia. However, the additional focus on 'participation' in a 'pluralistic society' paves the way for the promotion of equality, diversity and inclusion through the history curriculum.

So-called inclusive history tells students and teachers which people's experiences are important to study in order to make sense of the past.

This is apparent in directives such as:

'The integration of gender-specific perspectives in the classroom ... supports the realization of equal opportunities. Pupils are encouraged to make decisions about their professional and personal life planning independently of traditional role definitions.'

The final sentence makes clear the extent to which the values accrued from studying

history are expected to shape not just students' understanding of the subject but their lives more broadly. The Brandenburg curriculum makes this point explicit: 'Value judgments are useful when they help students to orient themselves in the present and the future and to develop personal identity.'

Although the Brandenburg curriculum provides only a cursory list of topics to be covered, it does begin to connote a particular epistemology. Teachers are told that,

'When learning, each individual constructs a picture of reality that is meaningful to him/herself on the basis of his/her individual knowledge and skills as well as his/her experiences and attitudes.'

Studying history is supposed to shape not just students' understanding but their lives more broadly.

The idea that pupils will each construct their own reality derived from their individual knowledge suggests a move away not just from the possibility of an objective account of history but also from broad theoretical approaches to interpretation. The curriculum specifies that:

'In history lessons, students examine the validity of individual interpretations of the past. The debate about these interpretations is based on dialogue, is determined by reason, is method-based and characterized by the idea of tolerance. ... The central goal is to promote multi-perspective thinking and critical judgment in schoolchildren.'

The emphasis on multi-perspective thinking and critical judgment is to be welcomed, but without a strong foundation in historical content and reasoning, individual interpretations risk being derived from little more than 'lived experience'.

Saxony

The history curriculum for upper secondary schools in Saxony was drawn up by teachers in co-operation with the Saxon State Institute for Education and School Development and the Comenius Institute, 'a Christian educational institute'. This curriculum shares much with the documents produced by North Rhine-Westphalia and

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Brandenburg. The stated goal of the curriculum is 'ensuring the acquisition of knowledge and the development of skills as well as value orientation'. The Saxon curriculum introduces a new focus on political education:

'Political education is anchored in the Saxon school law as an overarching educational goal of the secondary school and must be given appropriate attention in all subjects. ... Particular importance is attached to political education as an active contribution to the empowerment of young people and to strengthening civil society. The focus is on the ability and willingness to actively participate in free democracy against the background of democratic options for action.'

We can situate the focus on political education within Germany's response to World War II and the Holocaust in particular. As will be discussed later in this paper, across Europe but especially in Germany, education came to be seen as a means of safeguarding against the possibility of a return to the horrors of war and the evil of the concentration camps. This extends far beyond history teaching to encompass all areas of the curriculum and all aspects of school life. The focus on participation in a free democracy and strengthening civil society suggests that education can be used almost as a form of inoculation against dictatorship.

Education is to be used almost as a form of inoculation against dictatorship.

With this focus on political education, the history curriculum is designed to provide students with the knowledge and skills needed for future democratic citizenship:

'In high school, students acquire knowledge that enables them to explore the essential areas of society and culture in order to meet the requirements of school and future adult life.'

However, just as in Saxony, we see that the curriculum rapidly shifts from a focus on democracy and civil society to the individual student:

'In dealing with people and problems, the students develop their sensitivity, intelligence and creativity. They become

aware of their individual strengths and weaknesses and learn to deal with them.'

Yet again we see a move away from historical knowledge towards personal development and individual understandings. This suggests not just a particular epistemological understanding of history but an approach to pedagogy:

'Starting from their own environment, including their experiences with the diversity and uniqueness of nature, the students increasingly deal with local, regional and global developments.'

Rather than specific topics or fields of content to be covered, teachers are to ensure that, 'students develop an understanding of the historically grown coexistence of people as well as concepts of time and the course of time.' By focusing on 'coexistence' in this way, values of diversity, equity and inclusivity are promoted by default, with a particular emphasis on individuals and identity.

For all the emphasis on individuals, the policies are prescriptive, serving up sustainability.

Skills, political education and individual interpretations come together in areas such as sustainable development and 'dealing with media'. For the latter, students are to 'recognize in themselves and others that the media and their own media activities influence ideas, feelings and behaviour.' In this way, history teachers select content in order to drive forward lessons about and opportunities for 'democratic participation' rather than interpretation being derived from and grounded in historical knowledge. Yet for all the emphasis on individuals, solutions proffered to social problems are prescriptive: 'solutions must enable sustainable development and thus stimulate future-oriented thinking and action.'

Belgium

Belgium's education system is highly decentralised with the federal government playing only a minimal and indirect role in relation to schools through, for example, providing funds to the three regions (or linguistic communities), 10 provinces and 581 communes that comprise the nation state. Responsibility for education is devolved to the three regions – Dutch,

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French and German-speaking - and then further devolved to provinces, communes and cities. Within this structure, there are three broad school types: schools under direct control of a province; schools under control of a commune (though financially subsidised and supported by a province); free schools affiliated to independent organisations such as the Catholic Church (though again subsidised and supported by provinces and communes). The latter comprises by far the largest group of schools within Belgium.⁴³

This structure means that, as in Germany, there is no overarching national curriculum that all Belgian schools must follow, although the considerable role played by the Catholic Church in relation to education means there are commonalities that transcend communes and provinces. The Catholic Church provides the curricula guidance that a substantial proportion of Belgian schools follow. Although education itself is secular, Catholic schools 'serve as centres of Catholic identity and Catholic religious education for the youth in their care'.⁴⁴

Teaching has become a tool for providing students with the right forms of identity.

Here we consider one curricula document related to the teaching of history in the first stage of secondary education in Catholic Dialogue Schools (CDS).⁴⁵ However, what is most notable about this subject guidance is how little specific focus there is upon historical knowledge in even the most general sense. History, as a subject, is almost entirely subsumed under a broader notion of 'social education'. Rather than the history curriculum being presented as a unique document, it is scattered subsections within a larger social education specification. As the authors indicate, 'In this curriculum we strive for an integration of social education, social and historical education and economic education.'

Social education is largely focused on concerns considered immediately and directly relevant to individual students and their personal development. In relation to the curriculum, this translates into a focus on 'identity'. For example, a key aim of social education is 'personal development in connection with others and insight into identity'. Teaching comes to be understood

as a means to 'approach and support students in their search for identity in relation to and with others, and in finding their place in society,' with teachers encouraging students 'to have an eye for the vulnerability and uniqueness of themselves and others.'

Rather than historical knowledge broadening students' horizons through deepening their understanding of how people lived collectively in different eras, students are instead confined to what are assumed to be their personal current preoccupations and in seeking to counteract a 'great man' theory of history, students are left only with the individual weaknesses of themselves and others. In part, this focus on personal development and move away from rigorously demarcated subject boundaries stems from the distinct ethos of the CDS which places considerable emphasis on the holistic development of 'the entire person' including in relation to 'the expectations of society'. But it is also a response to the problematising of history teaching in Belgium and, in particular, a desire to avoid appearing to celebrate and risk students drawing erroneous conclusions from more negative episodes in the nation's past, as will be discussed in Part Three of this paper.

Instead of broadening knowledge of the past, students are confined to what educators assume are their personal preoccupations in the here and now.

Belgium's social education curriculum reveals a close alignment between the 'progressive' or 'woke' values that have come to dominate school systems in other western nations and the broadly Christian values promoted within CDS. The curriculum guidance notes that,

'Biblical intuitions, such as sustainability and justice, colour the new curricula in terms of content. Sustainability strongly emphasizes the intrinsic connectedness of all things and people.'

The document specifies that sustainability 'concerns the importance of biodiversity, sustainable use of technology, a people-oriented economy with attention to ecology and a sustainable lifestyle.' Justice,

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meanwhile, 'stimulates students to think about how they can work towards a more just existence in their own world and in society.' By identifying sustainability and justice as core 'Biblical intuitions', Catholic education aligns not just with secular schooling but also with the approach to the curriculum encouraged by the Council of Europe such as in *Quality History Education*.

Subject specific historical knowledge becomes reduced to a series of learning goals within a broader curriculum. For example, learning goal 34 states that students will be expected to, 'situate people, places and events in time and space on a given timeline, on a globe and on a relevant map' and learning goal 35 states that students should be able to 'recognize some given characteristics for each historical period political, economic, cultural or social level.' Such objectives mean that students may develop a very general sense of the huge changes that have occurred over centuries while remaining ignorant of more specific details.

There is a risk that students develop either cynicism about the past or relativism – no perspective is better than any other.

As is the case in German schools, and as set out in the Council of Europe's Quality History Teaching, Belgium's CDS guidance on social education emphasises the importance of students developing skills or competences through the study of history. Again, we see that 'media literacy' is considered a key skill for students to acquire. For example, one recommended task is for students to 'compare sources about the same historical phenomenon taking into account the context of the creator(s) and the audience for which the source is intended'. The instruction to teachers is clear: 'You tell students that the picture of the past is always incomplete. Resources are missing, lost, damaged or destroyed.' It is clearly important that students learn about the potential unreliability of historic documents and the need to contextualise sources. However, when such awareness is to be cultivated without prior historical knowledge, there is a risk that students develop either cynicism about the past (nothing can be trusted or even really known) or relativism (sources

reflect one perspective and no perspective is more valid than any other).

The aim of the lesson seems less about history than about the present and less about skills than about politics.

The prioritizing of skills over knowledge continues with learning goal 38 which states that students will be able to 'explain with an example that myth-building around historical phenomena distorts historical imagery'. The use of 'an example' suggests that any past period or incident is as good as another at driving students to the main point - the wrongness of 'myth-building'. Teachers are told that, 'When discussing sources, the distinction between myth and history becomes clear by comparing reality with the sources.' But when 'the picture of the past is always incomplete' and students lack sufficient historical knowledge to explain their reasoning, who can claim to discern 'reality'? Advice is forthcoming:

'In myth-making, a historical phenomenon is attributed with properties or qualities that cannot be substantiated by historical sources or that imply a very one-sided interpretation. ... You can start from comics (Asterix and Obelix), video games, historical films, board games'.

The aim of the lesson seems less about history than about the present and less about skills than about politics: students are to be taught to be wary of one-sided interpretations. Presumably, one-sided interpretations about the importance of sustainability and social justice are exempted.

The Netherlands

There is currently no national curriculum in Dutch schools. A freedom of education principle guaranteeing the right of parents to have their children educated in accordance with their religious and other views is enshrined within the Dutch constitution. However, a loosely defined Dutch historical and cultural canon is followed in almost all primary and secondary schools and this means that history teaching has long been the subject of national debate.

Concerns that young people lacked fundamental historical knowledge and a

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basic sense of chronology led to the establishment of the De Rooy Committee in 1999 to review the history curriculum. The Committee devised a curriculum divided into ten chronological periods, each with a distinctive label and image. The intention was for the ten periods, collectively, to define a core of historical knowledge. Students would cover this curriculum at least three times over the course of their education, going into additional depth or exploring new details with each iteration. The emphasis on chronology was important; the De Rooy Committee wanted students to have a sense of when key events occurred and the order in which they happened.⁴⁶

Progressive critics immediately began to attack the attempt to strengthen national identity through better understanding of Dutch history.

The Committee also recommended particular 'events' within each of the ten periods that students should be taught. In total, 49 broad events such as 'the industrial revolution', 'imperialism' and 'the Cold War' were listed, while the choice of specific facts and illustrative examples within each event was left to schools and teachers, as were the methods of analysis or interpretation teachers should employ. Academics, educationalists and commentators criticised the choice of 49 events for providing a narrow focus on the Netherlands and Western Europe and exclusion of the experiences of women, immigrants and minority groups.

In response, a new committee was established in 2006, led by Frits van Oostrom and comprising 'a number of specialists in consultation with the Dutch general public' with the goal of reviewing and updating the history curriculum.⁴⁷ The key question driving the committee was: 'what basic knowledge of Dutch history and culture should be passed onto future generations?'⁴⁸ The inclusion of members of the public in the committee, and in answering this fundamental question, was considered vital by van Oostrom who explains in the preface to the canon that:

'The democratic process behind the volume is reminiscent of the way in which the

Netherlands has succeeded for centuries at collective craftsmanship, and says as much about the Netherlands as does the outcome of the opinions voiced.'

The work of the Oostrom Committee resulted in the existing division of history into ten chronological periods being maintained but supplemented with a list of 50 'windows', with each window representing a different subject, object, person or theme. Together, these 50 windows and ten periods are known as 'the cultural canon of the Netherlands' which is promoted beyond schools, for example, in museums, libraries and websites.⁴⁹ The 50 windows or topics range widely through Dutch culture and history, 'varying from the megalithic tombs in the province of Drenthe and Willem of Orange to the Dutch constitution and the vast natural gas field in the province of Groningen.' Van Oostrom's goal was that, 'The canon should lead to further understanding and deepening of our knowledge of our past and act as an inspirational source for pupils, students and the public at large.' The primary aim of the new curriculum was 'to strengthen national identity and to further the integration of minorities by creating a shared knowledge of Dutch history and culture'.⁵⁰

Van Oostrom's committee presented a revised version of the history curriculum to the Dutch government in October 2007 and in October 2008 it was agreed that the new canon would become part of the school curriculum by August 2009. Criticisms began to emerge almost immediately. Unlike de Rooy's curriculum, Oostrom's canon specified particular facts students were expected to know and this selection of facts was contested. Critics pointed to what they saw as an 'old-fashioned representation of history' and 'the neglect of new fields of research such as gender history and post-colonial critique.' Some critics argued that the emphasis on Dutch history 'would alienate students whose backgrounds were not Dutch'.⁵¹

More immediately problematic for teachers was that Oostrom had essentially added to, but not superseded, de Rooy's work and the 50 new canon 'windows' did not directly match on to the 49 'events' previously specified. For some events, there were several windows to be covered while other events had no windows and some windows fell outside of all the listed events.⁵² The upshot was that new revisions were called for almost immediately. Yet another

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committee was launched in 2019 and it presented a new version of the curriculum to the government in June 2020. Ten windows were replaced, parts of the canon rewritten and other changes made to increase diversity and accessibility. The fifty windows are now divided between fourteen, rather than ten, periods and posters displaying the topics show a line waving back and forth, rather than a straight line that could be interpreted as portraying progress.⁵³

The latest iteration of the canon includes seven new 'categories' that bring the fifty windows (and 14 periods) together. Whereas de Rooy's initially specified ten periods emerged from a chronological understanding of key historical events, the new organising categories are issue-based: Social (in)Equality (who counts?); Politics and Society (who leads?); Language, Culture, and the Arts; Below Sea-level (living in a vulnerable delta); Philosophy and Meaning in Life (what "creates" meaning?); Knowledge, Science, and Innovation (what do we know?); and World Economy (global connections). Both the sense of narrative and the focus on the nation disappear with this issue-based approach.

Recent policies have been welcomed as making Dutch history more diverse and less "Holland".

The changes have been presented by the 2019 committee as 'maintenance', simply a matter of updating language in keeping with changing times. However, many of the choices that have been made seem more focused on appeasing politically-motivated critics rather than giving an objective account of Dutch history. Out of the Dutch canon has gone Charles V, the Dutch Republic, Amsterdam's Canals, De Stijl, Willem Drees, Multicultural Holland, and the Natural Gas Reserves. In came Mary of Burgundy, Johan van Oldenbarnevelt, Sara Burgerhart, Anton de Kom, Migrant Workers and the national colour Orange. This latest iteration has been welcomed as providing a platform for 'more women, more colour, more voices' and 'more diversity, less "Holland"'.⁵⁴

The rationale for the changes made is evident in the particular topics children are

expected to study. The canon was assumed to need more women. This has led to decisions such as dropping Willem Drees, the 'father' of the welfare state and replacing him with Marga Klompé, a catholic woman who became the first female minister in 1956 and helped to solidify the foundations of the welfare state throughout the 1960s. Likewise, Charles V was replaced by Mary of Burgundy, the woman whose marriage to Maximilian I of Austria initiated the shift from the Burgundian to the Habsburg Empire.⁵⁵ In order to move away from a focus on Holland, Limburg's coal industry has been included alongside Groningen Natural Gas Reserves and the iconoclasm of 1566 has been expanded to cover the entire revolt against the Spaniards. The slave trade remains and the window for Suriname and the Dutch Antilles has been expanded to represent the Caribbean region as a whole. The window for Multicultural Holland has been replaced by one focused on Migrant Workers. Alongside this, Anton de Kom, an anti-colonial author, activist, and hero who died in the German concentration camp Neuengamme, becomes the first person of Surinamese descent in the Canon.

PART THREE

A EUROPEAN HISTORY ACROSS COMMON THEMES

Teaching across common themes

Building a common approach to education has been a key goal of the Council of Europe since its inception for reasons that extend far beyond education as an end in itself. An intergovernmental Council of Europe project completed in 2014, *Shared Histories for a Europe without Dividing Lines*, makes clear that,

'education should bring people together and motivate them to overcome existing dividing lines without creating new ones, one of the essential conditions for stable peace and security'.⁵⁶

The Council of Europe's position is that history must transcend national borders in order to promote a democratic culture.

The Council of Europe recognises that an understanding of the past shapes how people make sense of the present and imagine the future. A collective historical narrative, promoted in schools, is aimed at eradicating prejudices and celebrating diversity within nations while cultivating a positive disposition towards Europe and its supranational institutions. This is made clear in *Shared Histories*:

'Historical knowledge can help young people feel that they are not only citizens of their own country, but also Europeans and citizens of the world. These are important elements of the culture of democracy.'

The Council of Europe's position is that history must transcend national borders in order to promote a democratic culture. This fundamentally contradicts a more established notion of democracy as intrinsically connected to national sovereignty.

The Council of Europe resolves such tensions by referring not to democracy per se but instead to a 'culture of democracy' which is defined in relation to minority rights, social inclusion and diversity. As set out above, the details of history curricula in Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands illustrate how history teaching in three European nations has altered in order to meet such objectives.

In each case we see a trend towards de-emphasising national history through a focus on:

- The more localised experiences of different identity groups such as women, migrants or the LGBTQ+ community.
- The history between (rather than within) nations, particularly the enduring legacy of empire and colonialism.
- A thematic (rather than chronological) approach to history that considers issues that transcend national borders.

Here, we consider Council of Europe recommendations in relation to the teaching of three broad historical topics: empire, world war, and the Holocaust. These areas are still covered on national and regional curricula despite a general move away from chronological approaches to history and the emergence of thematic interpretations that focus more on identity groups rather than events.

Empire

Views on the teaching of colonialism and empire have changed over time. The Council of Europe's 1995 study of history textbooks in common usage in European schools over the previous four decades notes references to 'voyages of discovery' and the 'Portuguese voyagers'. In the 1950s and 1960s, it would not be unusual to find textbooks that discussed empire in terms of the courage of individual 'voyagers' or explorers and portrayed a sense of national pride in their discoveries. The 1995 study points out that teachers were often expected to present a 'balanced' view, noting both the advantages and disadvantages of colonialism.⁵⁷ However, the very fact that this is remarked upon suggests attitudes were changing.

The Council of Europe's 2018 document, *Quality History Education in the 21st Century*, states that, 'People in different times and in different societies at the same time have had systems of values and distinct moral codes by which to judge individual actions' before continuing:

'Nonetheless, there have been crimes against humanity that go beyond the ethical limits not only of their own time but of all times. Despite the potential dangers of expressing ethical judgements on past actions, it is important for teachers to develop a coherent and multilayered framework of interpretations, and to facilitate classroom debates on the ethical and moral dimensions of history'.⁵⁸

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That the Council of Europe views colonialism as going beyond the ethical limits of all times is made clear in its 2014 publication, *Shared Histories for a Europe Without Dividing Lines*. The section on *Encounters between Europe and the World* sets the tone for subsequent discussion on empire and gives explicit instruction to teachers on how this topic should be broached.

Documents insist that an objective account of colonialism should be taught to students but this is not pursued consistently.

A section entitled 'The founding of a colony', advises trainee teachers of the importance of 'learning about accuracy, the limitations of historical research and the danger of generalisations.' Key aspects to be covered are:

- The importance of the geographical location of a colony.
- The authorities of the colony: political, administrative and religious.
- The outside factors that influence the development of a colony.
- The establishment of laws and regulations in a colony.

There is a particular focus on the question: 'In what ways did European colonisation shape the world as it is today?' This guidance suggests an objective account of colonialism should be taught to students but subsequent sections, particularly where the past is brought into discussions of the present, are somewhat less neutral. For example, the section on 'Avoiding Stereotypes: An African Perspective', asks trainee teachers to consider:

- Stories as a means of raising awareness of stereotypes and prejudices.
- Stories as a means of deconstructing colonial misrepresentations, misconceptions and misinterpretations (of colonisers and colonised).
- Stories as a means of understanding the many pieces that form a national identity.
- Understanding the dangers of a single story/perspective.
- The role of history education in fostering a mental framework in which critical thinking is predominant.

The focus on critical thinking here is to be welcomed, as is the proviso about the dangers of understanding only a single story or perspective. However, the risk is of relativism (there are many interpretations, no one better than another) or judging past actions by contemporary ethical standards.

Writing in *Education in Europe*, the British educationalist Tom Fedges notes,

*'Despite the fact that throughout the ages many different peoples have reached the Americas, it was mainly the journey of Christopher Columbus in 1492 that marks a change. From then on the nations of the European continent started to systematically engage in colonising newly discovered territories to expand their sphere of influence and to exploit the riches of the East and West (Bayly, 2004). By that time Europe can be seen as defining itself against the 'Other', the non-European counterpart, perceived as primitive, inferior or even evil...'*⁵⁹

North Rhine-Westphalia illustrates how such thinking translates into school curricula.

Content field 3 for lower secondary schools covers:

*'... modern voyages of discovery and conquests of Europeans on other continents for multicausal motives and with universal consequences. The ambivalence of economic and cultural progress in contrast to new existential destruction in the conquered countries at that time (slavery, economic exploitation, destruction of indigenous peoples cultures).'*⁶⁰

A focus on 'existential destruction' at the hands of western colonisers who successfully 'othered' non-Europeans shows how teaching about empire serves to alienate children from all positive associations with their country's past. Far from the 'balanced' approach that teachers were encouraged to strive for in the 1990s, today's curricula offer pupils a largely one-sided interpretation of colonialism. There is a relentless focus on the damages wrought by Europeans with no mention of the benefits accrued by colonised regions, such as the economic development that led to improved infrastructure, housing and sanitation, access to healthcare and education. The global dissemination of scientific knowledge and the mutual sharing of art and culture could also be seen as positive legacies of empire.

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Focusing exclusively on harms inflicted by western nations is in keeping with the moral imperative to view the past neither objectively, nor through the dominant ethical frameworks of the time, but in ways that hold true for 'all times'. The obvious problem here is that any attempt to set out 'ethical limits of all times' ends up simply reflecting the values of the present. Encouraging teachers to 'facilitate classroom debates on the ethical and moral dimensions of history'⁶¹ means children are taught to view history as a series of moral failings worthy only of shame.

World Wars

The Council of Europe has published reviews of history textbooks, case studies of how history is taught in particular regions and how this has changed over time and 'topic guides' on selected historical events. It is notable that neither the First nor Second World War are covered as topics in their own right but are either subsumed within broader studies or separated into more focused units of study. For example, as we will discuss next, one such guide focuses exclusively on the Holocaust.

A pan-European focus on homosexuality during war time challenges national stories and the more usual focus on battles or the experience of combat.

Just one Council of Europe guide to World War Two has been published in the past decade, *Queer in Europe During the Second World War* which explores the experiences of LGBTQ+ people during war time.⁶² The focus is not exclusively on Nazi Germany or the concentration camps but on the lives of ordinary people. As the editor notes, 'There is an abundance of literature nowadays on the persecution of homosexuals under the Third Reich. But much less is known about the daily lives in those times of the millions of homosexual men and women all over Europe living in Axis, Allied or even neutral countries, in the heart or on the fringes of the war.' In terms of promoting unity through a common history, this pan-European focus on homosexuality during war time challenges national stories and the more usual focus on battles or the experience of combat.

Queer in Europe During the Second World War is presented as a 'new history': 'It is a "new history" because of its scale, deliberately embracing the whole European continent, approaching the subject from every angle, including gender.' In this way, it is a deliberate attempt to produce an historical narrative that centres previously under-represented people and events.

'It is a "new history" also because in addition to international relations, exchanges between states, population movements, and cultural, technological or other types of exchanges and transfers, we want to consider relations from a sexual standpoint, movements in terms of gender, transfers in the private sphere.'

The new focus on homosexuality and queer theory risks making it seem as if the experience of war was an exciting opportunity for sexual experimentation.

This allows for the introduction of new methodological approaches. The history of homosexualities, 'lies at the intersection of the history of sexualities and the history of genders, in that it concerns both the masculine, the feminine and the intrinsic hierarchies of each gender.' A focus on queer history allows all these approaches to be used in the classroom.

In this way, we can see how the very fact of getting students to consider the Second World War in terms of sexuality, gender and the private sphere is a shift away from an analysis of heroic or villainous war time leaders, ideology and military battles and concerns intrinsically connected to the nation state. What's more, the focus on homosexuality moves history away from the dominance of men and masculinity and allows queer theory and feminism to enter the history curriculum. The editor notes:

'Thus far, research into the effects of the war on people's private lives has focused mainly on heterosexual relations. It was important, therefore, to extend the focus to include homosexuality. What happens at a time when the usual social context, the peacetime environment, is altered, when circumstances increasingly throw men together and many people are tempted to

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seek escape from deathly reality and shun Thanatos for Eros?’

The move away from a focus on military battles and on to homosexuality through the lens of queer theory risks making it seem as if the experience of war was an exciting opportunity for sexual experimentation. Yet this narrative continues:

‘Between 1939 and 1945, millions of Europeans were drawn to having pre-marital and extra-marital sexual encounters, shifting their own moral boundaries and experiencing relationships that would have been quite simply impossible and unimaginable in times of peace (Herzog 2011: 98). Some historians claim that the Second World War, more so than the First World War, created new erotic situations that facilitated homosexual practices and encouraged the development of gay and lesbian identities after the war. (D’Emilio 1990).’

The aim of ‘new history’ it seems is less to do with the past and more to do with the concerns of the present. A focus on homosexuality during the Second World War allows ‘us to understand, in the end, why our continent is today a forerunner in the fight against homophobia and discrimination.’ The political motivation is made explicit: ‘The historiography of homosexuals during the Second World War therefore has a political dimension, in that it constitutes a dynamic process permitting a social group that had long been kept silent to speak out and become visible.’

The aim of ‘new history’ it seems is less to do with the past and more to do with the concerns of the present.

The Holocaust

In 2011, the Committee of Ministers to the Council of Europe adopted a recommendation to member states on ‘intercultural dialogue and the image of the other in history teaching’.⁶³ The recommendation contributes towards the Council’s work ‘to achieve a greater unity between its members’ through, among other goals, ‘recalling the importance of the historical dimension’ in ‘work on teaching about the Holocaust and the prevention of crimes against humanity, combating hate speech and all forms of discrimination,

interfaith dialogue and heritage education’.⁶⁴

In this document we see that the Holocaust is one issue among many, with the primary objective being not historical facts about what happened, when, where, how and why, but current concerns with democratic citizenship and, more especially, cultural diversity. The Holocaust is less a specific event with its own social, political and economic context and more an historical example of why members of the Council of Europe consider values such as inclusion and diversity to be important. As the recommendation makes clear, such values transcend national histories and allow for ‘the shared histories that stem from historical interactions, exchanges, encounters and convergences’ to emerge.

The Holocaust becomes less a specific event with its own context and more an historical example of why members of the Council consider values such as inclusion and diversity to be important.

Seven years later, the 2018 *Quality History Education* paper makes just one specific reference to the Holocaust. It notes that, ‘students may find difficulty in identifying with people in the past *en masse*’ and that:

‘It is one thing to learn about slavery, the slaughter in the First World War or the extermination of millions of Jews in the Holocaust, it is another and more powerful learning experience to trace what happened to an individual enslaved person, a named soldier, or a single Jewish family.’

This focus on individuals is a response to the emphasis placed on promoting empathy and ‘teaching empathetic awareness’ as a means of developing students’ understanding of the past. Again, we see that knowledge about the Holocaust is not an end in itself, it is a means for students to develop the more abstract competence of ‘empathetic awareness’.⁶⁵

More specific reference to the Holocaust is made in a recommendation by members of the Council of Europe on remembrance of the Holocaust and preventing crimes

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against humanity which was adopted by the Committee of Ministers in March 2022.⁶⁶ This recommendation has a broader focus than education although much of the guidance is clearly intended for schools and history teachers in particular. The recommendation begins by:

'Condemning the denialist, revisionist and relativist tendencies seeking, inter alia, to erase, downplay and distort remembrance of the Holocaust and the crimes committed by the Nazis and to pardon or even rehabilitate perpetrators, local collaborators and accomplices of the Nazi regime; especially at a time when anti-Semitism is regaining momentum and attacks against Jews and Holocaust remembrance are once again a concern in and outside Europe.'

This is a clear and welcome statement although it does perhaps overlook the 'relativist tendencies' of previous Council of Europe recommendations.

The drive to turn the past into a moral lesson for the present drives forward a particular interpretation of the Holocaust.

Yet, despite this warning against revisionism and relativism, we see that the drive to turn the past into a moral lesson for the present drives forward a particular interpretation of the Holocaust and most especially the events that led up to it. The act of remembering 'Nazi crimes' becomes, in itself, a key part of 'Europe's humanist, democratic consciousness, underpinning a European desire for harmonious coexistence.' In this way, people today are simultaneously distanced from the past (Nazi crimes) but morally improved from its legacy (Europe's humanist consciousness). It is the act of remembrance, or, in other words, our actions in the present, that become crucial to avoiding 'further crimes against humanity'.

The Council of Europe's primary concern is acts of Holocaust remembrance rather than the history of Holocaust itself. The recommendation recognises that, 'remembrance is a political act entailing collective management of memories and the promotion of citizenship education, with the pedagogical aim, based on scientific knowledge, of reinforcing social cohesion'.

The concern of the document's authors is not to deny the political nature of managing memories, then, but to set out the process and goals of such management. As the recommendation states:

'The work of remembrance, based on rigorous historical knowledge, may be regarded as a tool for passing on values designed to protect society from the dangerous tendencies to which it may be prey, by educating people to become responsible citizens.'

Perhaps the most significant lesson students are expected to draw is that, 'in times of crisis' people can end up 'stigmatising segments of their population' and 'legitimising patterns of hatred, discrimination and exclusion'. Engaging in public acts of remembrance becomes a means of inoculating people against racism, xenophobia and intolerance in the present.

Ironically, this desire to enforce 'respect for the lives of others' can itself become intolerant. One way this occurs is through the drive to 'counter disinformation and misinformation'. The risk is that interpretations of the past that do not correspond with Council of Europe values in the present are censored as 'disinformation'.

There is a further danger that in appearing to present a direct line between failing to respect the lives of others and the Holocaust, the impact of what have come to be termed 'microaggressions' is overstated while the seriousness of the Holocaust is relativised.

Engaging in public acts of remembrance becomes a means of inoculating people against racism.

The 2022 Recommendation offers specific advice to schools and history teachers. It suggests that one particular challenge is 'highlighting the unique nature of the event, without neglecting the link between the Holocaust and the other crimes of genocide and crimes against humanity.' While there is emphasis on the specific history and treatment of the Jewish people ('consider the Jews' two-thousand-year-old roots in European society, particularly through the Council of Europe's European Route of Jewish Heritage) teachers are also urged to

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address 'remembrance of all the other categories of victims of Nazism or of more distant or recent atrocities'.⁶⁷

Ultimately, we return to political goals relating to life in the present. Teachers should, 'encourage pupils and students to think about the dangers of ideological radicalisation that can turn ordinary individuals into killers or enablers.' The message the Council of Europe seeks to promote is that ideas considered morally or politically unacceptable are not simply words that can be challenged through open debate, but powerful weapons that can have potentially dangerous consequences. This risks legitimising censorship as a means of preventing future harms.

CONCLUSIONS

Conclusions

Over the course of seven decades, the Council of Europe's various working groups and projects on history teaching have shaped pedagogical practice across different countries. A common 'European Dimension in History Teaching' is identifiable within school curricula despite national priorities and regional variations in specific content. Here, we outline some of the key features of history teaching in Europe's schools today.

1. Instrumentalising the past

Since at least the 1980s, the Council of Europe has viewed history as important primarily because of its capacity to provide context to contemporary issues. It is assumed that, in schools, historical knowledge will deepen pupils' understanding of the current challenges facing society. This promotes an instrumental approach to curriculum planning where history is valued only to the extent that it provides illustrations that meet present needs. In specifying current concerns, the Council of Europe shapes the priorities that drive curricula selection at a national and regional level.

2. Diminishing historical knowledge

When the starting point for history teaching is the present, historical knowledge risks being deprioritised from the curriculum. For example, the 2009 EuroClio publication, co-funded by the European Union, *Teaching History and Social Studies for Multicultural Europe*, notes that, 'a vital aim' of history education is, 'to develop among young people a sense of civil responsibility and a passion for active involvement in society'.⁶⁸ This fundamentally alters the nature of history and makes it virtually indistinguishable from civics or citizenship classes. History scholars have always disagreed about which past events or notable figures were most significant and more worthy of study. But such disagreements have traditionally been academic in nature. When the starting point for history becomes the needs of the present, the value of knowing about the past is diminished and the selection of topics for the curriculum becomes more explicitly political.

3. Promoting values

Van Nieuwenhuyse and Wilke criticise the history standards published by the Flemish parliament in 1996 for barely prescribing any specific historical content that pupils are expected to learn. The focus 'was rather

on skills and attitudes.'⁶⁹ The collocation of 'skills' and 'attitudes' appears frequently in educational policy documents from the mid-1990s onwards.⁷⁰ As noted in Part One of this paper, by 2018 the Council of Europe has combined skills and attitudes together with knowledge and settled upon the term 'competences'. *Quality History Education* presents the goal of teaching as enabling children to develop a range of competences including: 'valuing cultural diversity', 'openness to cultural otherness and other beliefs and world views' and 'empathy'. What begins with the blurring of skills and attitudes ends up with values such as diversity, equity, inclusion and sustainability being specified and cultivated under the guise of the more neutral sounding 'competences'.

4. Beyond the nation

Since its inception, the Council of Europe has consistently promoted moves away from what were deemed to be traditional or patriotic approaches to history teaching that involved children being told a national story, often chronologically, and with a focus on major events and notable figures. It has been particularly keen to temper triumphalism in relation to national history. This is the area in which the Council of Europe has been most successful. There are numerous ways in which patriotic approaches to history teaching have been called into question. Teachers have been encouraged to look beyond their own national perspective and to teach the history of other countries. When considering their own nation, the Council recommends that teachers look at the relationships between countries and the impact past actions have had on people elsewhere in the world.

5. The end of 'great men'

The Council of Europe has long aimed to move away from triumphalist narratives of national history. This has been achieved through looking beyond the nation while also broadening out groups considered suitable for study within the nation, a goal which gained ground with the promotion of multiculturalism in the 1980s in response to higher levels of immigration and increased movement between western European countries. More recently, there has been a renewed focus on increasing diversity through highlighting the experiences of people with disabilities, transgender and queer people. This corresponds with the

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drive to promote inclusivity and diversity as key values but it further alters the purpose of history teaching towards using the past as a source of identity affirmation in the present rather than a focus on historical knowledge as an end in itself.

6. Confronting the sins of the past

A shift away from patriotic history was originally intended to promote a common European outlook and identity. This was initially considered important in the aftermath of the two world wars that had devastated the continent. It was assumed that a focus on what Europeans shared in common - high culture, Enlightenment values - could help promote international unity and peace. The promotion of a common European outlook has persisted throughout the decades although the reasons motivating it have changed over time. In the early 1990s the intention was to help integrate new countries from the East into the 'new Europe'.

By 2011, the Council of Europe's recommendation to member states notes that teachers should encourage pupils to become, 'in their daily lives within the institution they attend and their environment, ambassadors for European values, based on knowledge of their heritage, awareness of their European identity and, consequently, respect for others and openness to other cultures'.⁷¹ Being an ambassador for European values is not about pride so much as it is a matter of intercultural awareness, empathy and openness to other cultures. Cultivating a European identity now competes with a drive for history to look beyond the borders of Europe and focus on the continent's relationship to the world. It is no longer just patriotic national histories that are called into question but triumphalist notions of what it means to be European. History teaching focuses on empire, colonialism and, most especially, the Atlantic slave trade.

These seemingly contradictory views come together in a new understanding of what it means to identify as European. Rather than pupils being encouraged to take pride in a shared cultural legacy or past achievements, shared identity and common values now emerge primarily through collective guilt in relation to past sins. The Council of Europe's 2014 paper, *Shared Histories for a Europe Without Dividing Lines*, reminds teachers that:

'Much of what has become an integral part of European life, like coffee, tea, cocoa (in Europe all often taken with sugar), tobacco, potatoes, tomatoes, maize or paprika, that reached Hungary from the New World via Turkey, originally is not European. Many things associated with non-European countries e.g. pampas with their gauchos and cattle in case of Argentina or wine in that of Chile actually are European'.⁷²

European identity is reduced to a shopping list of products - most of which are not actually European at all but were stolen from other countries. The movement to decolonise history, popular with history teachers in many countries, reinforces this focus on using history to confront past wrongs. Clearly, a balanced approach to history demands pupils are taught negative impacts of their own country's actions. But when children are taught history solely to condemn their nation they are left estranged from the past and alienated from the present.

7. Approved interpretations

From its very first work on textbooks, the Council of Europe has been focused upon eradicating bias and prejudice in history teaching. Most recently, this has taken the form of challenging 'disinformation' and 'misinformation'. Whereas the onus was on teachers to moderate textbooks in advance of presenting them to pupils who would then simply be taught history, the focus now is on teaching pupils themselves how to identify dis/misinformation, consider why it may have been produced and the problems with it. This is presented as yet another core skill pupils are expected to develop through the course of studying history. But not only is it another distraction from teaching about the past, it is also a further means of introducing politics into the classroom.

The EuroClio website notes that since its foundation in 1993, the organisation has viewed 'balanced history' as key to the education of 'responsible national and global citizens' in a way that 'strengthens peace, stability, democracy and critical thinking'.⁷³ Critical thinking is clearly important but coming after peace, stability and democracy, and with an overarching goal of promoting responsibility, criticality seems only to be encouraged in one direction. The focus on disinformation alongside an emphasis on the present suggests that there are 'correct' understandings and

Conclusions

interpretations of what is occurring in the world that the Council of Europe has 'approved' as legitimate. This risks introducing a censoriousness into the classroom that is anathema to education.

8. The EU as saviour

If the past was sinful, and the present corrupted with misinformation, there is only one institution that can be relied upon: the European Union. The post-World War Two drive to promote peace and stability through European unity readily morphed into the promotion of political union and respect for the EU and its many off-shoots. From 2010 - 2014, the Council of Europe ran a project *Shared Histories for a Europe without Dividing Lines*. Part of this project involved compiling suggestions for history teachers. One section recommends upper secondary pupils look at topics including:

- *Passports as evidence of dividing lines; as instruments of freedom of movement; as symbols of sovereignty;*
- *The role of visas in reinforcement of sovereignty;*
- *Who needs visas to enter the EU;*
- *Fortress Europe: the issues of immigration and human trafficking; and*
- *Learning from others and teaching others through travelling.*⁷⁴

This seems less like the contents of a history lesson and more like the index for an EU handbook on cross-border travel.

The promotion of EU membership plays out in the national curricula of member states. In the Netherlands, the history curriculum includes the following reference to the EU:

*'No more war tearing Europe apart. That is the main motive for a cooperation that eventually leads to the European Union (EU). A large majority of the Dutch support membership of the EU. Others wonder: how far should this cooperation go?'*⁷⁵

The assumption seems to be that only the EU can save citizens from repeating past sins and prevent the outbreak of war.

9. History as an empty vessel

When history teaching is no longer concerned with developing pupils' knowledge of the past as an end in itself, and is unable to promote either a national story or a positive narrative about Europe, the subject becomes hollowed out. The aim

of history teaching has repeatedly been confirmed as being, 'to transmit certain values and to develop special dispositions among their students, which are beneficial for society'.⁷⁶ All that is to be decided is with which skills, attitudes, values and propaganda the empty vessel marked 'history' is to be filled. History as a subject becomes a ready home for fashionable political causes.

Many values are specified within Council of Europe-backed policy documents. History must promote, 'democratic values, competences and dispositions ... mutual respect, tolerance and anti-extremist education'.⁷⁷ As the 2009 *Teaching History and Social Studies for Multicultural Europe* notes, 'In almost all European countries addressing equality, human rights, gender and sustainable development and environment have entered the school curricula'.⁷⁸ Making the past subservient to fashionable lists of values risks not only trivialising such values but reducing history itself to simplistic moral lessons.

The document goes on to add that:

*'Talking with young generations about the past therefore means addressing positive issues like democracy, tolerance, respect for human rights, mutual understanding, solidarity, freedom, courage, equal opportunities, responsibility but also love and friendship. However it can also not avoid reflecting on negative concepts such as stereotyping, prejudice, bias, xenophobia, racism, violence.'*⁷⁹

Many of these values stem from a seemingly worthwhile desire to promote democracy - but democracy only makes sense in the context of the nation state. At the same time as speaking the language of democracy, history is being used to distance children from a sense of national identity and affinity with the nation that makes democracy meaningful in practice.

Children taught only what is bad about the nation and Europe are left alienated from their nation, distanced from older generations who do not buy into such national self-loathing, and estranged from a broader understanding of European culture and enlightenment values. The undermining of national history leaves children with neither a foundation in the past or a stake in the future.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Put the past back into history teaching.

Rather than starting from political problems in the present, teachers need to focus on what is most significant about the past that should be passed onto future generations.

2. Put knowledge back into history.

Reducing history to a tool for promoting skills or values trivialises the subject.

3. Put the nation back into history.

All children should have access to knowledge of their national story.

4. Put academic expertise back into history.

History specialists need to lead national conversations about what children should learn about the past. It should not be the place of the Council of Europe to shape such discussions.

5. Put balance back into history.

It is important that children learn about past acts of barbarism and crimes against humanity. But, for balance, children should also be taught about humanity's past achievements. Europe is not only united by the experience of war and a legacy of colonialism but, as Slater notes:

'From Greece and Rome, there is an inheritance which is part of, if not a pan-European idea, at least a western European idea. To Greece, it can be argued, we owe our traditions of liberty and democracy; to the Romans, our concept of citizenship, urban order and law; the roots of our intellectual development are Greco-Roman; our spiritual unity stems from Catholic Rome and was maintained through the universal language of Latin'.⁸⁰

History should give children a sense of continuity between the past and the present.

Finally, this paper very much represents a scoping study. A useful follow up paper would take into account practice in a wider range of countries and interview teachers and subject specialists in order to better ascertain how policies are implemented in practice.

About

About the author

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Joanna Williams began her career teaching English in secondary schools before joining the University of Kent as lecturer in Higher Education and Academic Practice in 2007. She was the director of the University's Centre for the Study of Higher Education until 2016. Joanna left academia to become Head of Education and Culture at Policy Exchange. Most recently, she has set up her own think tank, Cieo, which has a particular focus on democracy, education and citizenship.

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Notes

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