

History teaching in conflict and post-conflict areas

‘Sometimes, textbooks need to be locked in the cupboard’

Says Cecilia Keaveney, author of a recommendation approved unanimously by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe urging heads of government and scholars to abandon single interpretation of events and exclusive reliance on political history.

Report by **Graciela Iglesias Rogers**,
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It is rare for members of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, an organization which comprises 47-nations,¹ including some troubled and troublesome neighbours such as Russia and Georgia, Armenia and Turkey, to approve a motion unanimously. A bit of a stir was caused, therefore, when in their third annual meeting the whole House decided to give their endorsement to a report urging heads of government and scholars to focus history teaching ‘more on socio-economic, cultural, artistic and heritage elements and less on politics’ and to adopt a ‘multiple-perspective approach, rather than a single interpretation of events to encourage pupils to respect diversity and cultural differences.’

The author of the report, entitled *History teaching in conflict and post-conflict areas*,² was Senator Cecilia Keaveney. She is a teacher of history as well as member of the Irish political party *Fianna Fail* and the *Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe* (ALDE). The debate of her report was preceded a few days earlier by a speech delivered in the Strasbourg hemicycle by the president of Ireland, Mary McAleese. The Irish head of State jokingly denied that the positive outcome of peace negotiations in Northern Ireland had turned every Irish citizen into an expert in conflict resolution, yet she pointed out that ‘the story has changed in this generation, the most educated and problem-solving of all generations.’ McAleese also called on Europeans to follow her country in the difficult task of ‘no longer making of history’s edited highlights an armoury to be ransacked for weapons to hurl at the other.’

This was very much in line with the work of her compatriot, Senator Keaveney, who has been an active contributor to the Council of Europe’s three-

¹ The Council of Europe member countries are Albania, Andorra, Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Moldova, Monaco, Montenegro, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russian Federation, San Marino, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Turkey, Ukraine, United Kingdom. More information at www.coe.int

² Read the complete report at http://assembly.coe.int/ASP/Doc/ATListingDetails_E.asp?ATID=11101

year project *The Image of the Other in History Teaching* which, since 2007, has resulted in the preparation of manuals for teachers and general guidelines for teaching history in multicultural contexts such as in Greek and Turkish Cyprus, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bosnia Herzegovina and the Russian Federation.³ Her recommendations are largely based on experiences gathered so far by scholars, students, teachers' trade unions and politicians involved in the project. She noted, for example, that relying heavily upon curricula that are excessively long tends to keep alive the version of the past learnt by the children's parents. 'History teachers will teach what is contained in the curriculum. The wider the choice available the more certain is that 'sides' will choose their favoured topics and avoid the difficult ones. Keeping a curriculum to a manageable size will maximise the impact on the student cohort,' she suggested in her parliamentary report.

In dialogue with JOUHS, Senator Keaveney advanced the view that, 'sometimes, textbooks need to be locked in the cupboard. Contrary to teacher's beliefs, students are crying out for the 'bigger picture' to be drawn for them in class. By reaching into the community that the child lives in for the point of departure of the history class, the teacher captures the imagination of students and, perhaps diverts negative attention from their families. Gradually moving from the uncontroversial to add in newer topics can stretch boundaries that need to be challenged. In too many cases, however, because this is not the history we are comfortable with, we avoid it. In so doing we exhibit a sense of intolerance and/or sectarianism that we must question in ourselves.'

Keaveney stressed the need to draw lessons from gender differences in the way children approach history in conflict areas. She pointed to a study carried out in Northern Ireland,⁴ which showed that, when students were asked what events they saw as significant in history, girls focused on themes of 'remembrance, cooperation and inequality' while boys were more aware of 'community conflict or the political and demographic origins of the state.'

The latter tendency, she reckoned, could result from the many years the teaching of history has been confined to the study of nation states and to the 'little incentive to reach out beyond that area.'

'New strategies are needed to help us look to our past and so to determine our future; to value other peoples' histories and how varied religions live together. History teaching should be aimed, first and foremost, at strengthening the

³ For more information, visit the project's web page at

http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/education/historyteaching/projects/image/imageintro_EN.asp

⁴ Keith Barton and Alan McCully, 'History, identity, and the school curriculum in Northern Ireland: an empirical study of secondary students' ideas and perspective', *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 37/1 (2004), pp. 85-116.

reconciliation process, promoting principles of mutual respect, and opening additional doors for co-operation.'

In this respect, the senator called on teachers to go 'beyond political history to the cultural, economic, social and everyday history that will then present the full picture for the student and open up the idea of peace and engagement with others. Psychologists confirmed that by concentrating mainly on political issues, particularly on conflicts, one could provoke hostility and violence in pupils.'

'We must challenge ourselves to look for real change, real tolerance and real progress in respecting diversity and embracing difference. This is the only path to peace in the generations to come. Indeed, given the statistics in relation to the age profile of European History teachers (60% will be retiring in the next decade) this may prove to be a very opportune time to reach out to new methods of subject delivery. We must take opportunity of changing political times and of the arrival of a new cohort of student teachers,' she added.

Keaveney defined the thorny issue of teaching standards' in history as, 'who should be considered *in* and who *out*, in terms of personalities, events, and interpretations.' Her report suggests that the setting of teaching standards should involve 'both those who set the standards and the practising teacher' and that they should 'determine, above all, the character and level of reasoning, modelling and creative activity of students rather than the actual content of history curricula.'

'Who writes the history is also vital in these times as we watch the instant television reportage of current events. It is essential that historians write history and students then gain the insights from primary and secondary sources including historical novels, films, internet sites, engagement through technology with students of other countries, visiting high quality facilities such as the *Museum of the Warsaw Uprising*, and engaging with the humour of the text messages,' she said.

Following similar guidelines, the Georgian ministry of Education started work in 1997 on a supplementary textbook entitled *A History of the Caucasus*, supported by scholars from Armenia, Azerbaijan and the Russian Federation. In November 2008, a joint Russian and Ukrainian commission led by the academician Alexander Chubarayan completed a comprehensive history of their respective countries and each book has been translated into the language of the other country. More recently, the Council of Europe sponsored the publication of a second edition of a trilingual publication (English, Greek and Turkish) on *The Use of Sources in Teaching and Learning History* to be used by teachers in Cyprus.

During the debate on Keaveney's report,⁵ Russian MP Oleg Pantelev (from the ruling party *United Russia*) said, 'We can only proceed ahead if we take lessons

⁵ A fuller account of this debate is available at <http://assembly.coe.int/Main.asp?link=/Documents/Records/2009/E/0906261000E.htm>

from the past. Each country has the right to promote its own position in the world. However, there is a need to consider our shared history. History too often has a tendency towards the nationalistic, to become selective in too many respects.'

Regarding the writing of history, Panteleev warned, 'whoever controls the past will control the present and the future. Therefore, we need to employ honest and impartial researchers who work on the basis of primary sources.'

For his colleague from Armenia, Zaruhi Postanjyan (*Heritage Faction*), 'the first lesson to learn in history is that there is no single truth, yet not all views should be endorsed either. Because it is not difficult to see that, the rejection of a single truth can be used to give a triumph to historical revisionists and sham scholars who use that sentence almost verbatim to corrupt reality itself, to deny tragic facts of the past. The oft-stated lack of a single truth does not relieve the Council of Europe of its responsibility to speak honestly and boldly about our common history. The truth is not only the first principle of morality but it is the first principle of conflict resolution. If peace is to last, it must be built not on compromise on historical facts, which must be brokered again and again with each generation, but on the firmest, most enduring foundation of all: the steady and sacred truth.'

The Swedish MP Kerstin Lundgren (*Centre Party*) thought that the report not only had conflict and post-conflict applications, but also the potential to prevent new conflicts.

'In that regard, we must be aware that attempts have always been made to rewrite history in order to suit the new rulers and impose a new truth on their people. We should be very cautious about such situations. History is often the history of the victors – it is less often the history of the victims. It is the history of the rulers, not of the ruled; of the majority, not of minorities; of men, not women; of countries, not of people. It is often a quarrel about views – part of the truth is not seen or heard, so fights arise. I hope that we can use the report to open people's eyes and to challenge their own history,' she said.

The Irish *rapporteur* heartily agreed. 'In my country, words were weapons. They had the potential to solve the problem and to create a problem. I understand the deeply mistrustful feeling that people have of the other side. We are all probably too old to change our views in some respects, and it will take generations for many conflicts to evolve to a situation where there is not that sense of innate reaction as soon as we hear the other side mentioned.'

Nonetheless, Keaveney invited her colleagues not to leave everything in the hands of teachers and to personally get involved in changing perceptions about the

past. 'It is harder to hate someone you can put a face on than someone you never meet – and we can meet each other through history teaching.'

The Council of Europe's History Education Division has adopted this approach for many of its projects, including those entitled *The image of the Other in History*,⁶ which highlighted the need to reflect on the increasing cultural and religious diversity of the European classroom, and *Shared Histories for a Europe without dividing Lines*, aimed at the rather ambitious task of defining both 'the content and skills essential for a sound understanding of common trends in European history within a global context'.⁷

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⁶ More details in the following Council of Europe's web page

http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/education/historyteaching/Projects/Image/ImageIntro_en.asp#TopOfPage

⁷ Read their full statement of objectives in the following Council of Europe's web page

http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/education/historyteaching/Projects/SharedHistories/OSLO2010intro_en.asp