

The crisis of history as discipline?

In a 1795 publication, the last before his untimely death, the French philosopher A-N. Condorcet noted:

(P)hilosophy and the sciences are necessarily neglected in all countries where there is an honourable occupation leading to wealth and position that is open to anyone who has a natural inclination for study.¹

This accounts partially for the state of history as discipline at South African universities at the end of the twentieth century. More and more university students prefer taking subjects which offer the prospects of immediate employment and economic independence after graduation. On undergraduate level the subject has lost somewhat of its glitter of late.² In many departments a cavalier effort is made to boost student numbers by promoting postgraduate research. In others an acute cynicism is the order of the day.

The apparent 'crisis' of the discipline is perhaps the result of the fact that too little attention was given to the propagation of history as a way of thinking which many people - as readers of books and lovers of the past for the past's sake - might find interesting. The shortsighted goal of merely training prospective history teachers on undergraduate level to secure high enrolment numbers, has finally started taking its toll.

The task of the professional historical fraternity in South Africa is to be ambassadors and practitioners of one of the most comprehensive cultural disciplines in the humanities. It is now necessary for historians, to look in a sober manner at the present crisis, knowing there is indeed - as Nietzsche observed in the nineteenth century - something beyond good and evil.³

The War - A century later

Historians have started preparing themselves for the centenary commemoration of the Anglo Boer War/South African War which starts in October 1999. Up to May 2002 we shall publish some of the latest research findings in order to keep our readers informed in a field which appears to have attracted a lot of interest in recent months.

For those who are interested in matters of military history a veritable reading feast is in the offing.

1 A-N. CONDORCET, *Sketch for a historical picture of the progress of the human mind* (Translated from the French by J. Barraclough. Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1955, p. 59.

2 For the latest trends see the Annual newsletter of the South African Historical Society for 1998.

3 With apology to F. NIETZSCHE, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse* (1886).

The 20th century in historical perspective

There is also something for those interested in the *fin de siècle* phenomenon. We have asked participants in two electronic discussion groups on South African history to list the major events in the fields of society, economics and politics in the twentieth century.

Although it may not be the most comprehensive list, the events and dates tell us (and hopefully also a future generation) about the way in which people with an historical inclination contemplated the passing of a memorable century.

To shed light on another perspective, we take note of how the recorder of visual impressions - the news photographer - Jan Hamman of the Johannesburg Afrikaans daily *Beeld* saw the 1990's through the lens of his camera.