

## SOME PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS FOR DEALING WITH THE PROBLEMS CREATED BY DIFFERENT INTERPRETATIONS OF SCHOOL HISTORIES

### *Introduction*

Of conferences there is no end: we let off steam and then sink back in complacency, and in the end nothing is done. It is easier to talk than to act. The passing of resolutions is only the initial step. A great deal of hard work lies ahead of us.

As I see it history should not be used to promote better understanding between groups or nations; history should not be used to serve any political ends no matter how lofty our motives may be; but history should be taught in such a way that misunderstandings do not arise and so that old prejudices are not reinforced and so that new prejudices are not created.

### *Previous efforts*

To encourage and guide us we have the examples of many efforts made in other parts of the world to improve history teaching and textbooks in order to remove causes of misunderstanding between nations and groups of people. The successes they have achieved should be a source of encouragement to us.

UNESCO has published accounts of the efforts of different organizations which seek to remove from history teaching all causes of strife. Many multilateral and bilateral agreements have been made between countries, and we have much to learn from their achievements.

Here are a few examples of what has been done elsewhere:

1. An international seminar was held in Brussels in 1950 with a view to improving textbooks as an aid to international understanding.
2. Canada and the United States undertook a study of their national textbooks used in the schools of Canada and the U.S. Their purpose was to determine: (a) To what extent textbooks help the people to know and understand each other. (b) To offer recommendations for improvements so that books will become instruments of goodwill.
3. UNESCO sponsored a most interesting study of: (a) The treatment of the West in textbooks and teaching materials of South and East Asia. (b) The treatment of Asia in Western textbooks and teaching materials.
4. The Nordic countries (Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland and Iceland) have undertaken the mutual revision of textbooks used in these countries.

A most valuable development has been the establishment of the International Textbook Institute at Brunswick in West Germany. This was founded in 1950. Another similar institution was established at Delhi in 1955. Textbook Research Institute.

The aims and purposes of the German institute are: (a) To undertake research for improving means of instruction and methods of instruction with special emphasis on the teaching of history and allied subjects. (b) The ultimate object of the institute is to overcome the many resentments that condition the minds of men. The division of the world into two antagonistic camps is a painful reality and it has a harmful influence on the life of every nation. The ultimate object is therefore to develop a feeling of internationalism i.e. to lay the foundations of "one world".

*What solutions are there for us in South Africa?*

1. *Lectures or courses on interpretations in history* for teachers and students in training. Our teachers and students need to be *reorientated*: they need to be made more ware of the existence of bias and prejudice, to understand the nature of bias and to recognize the forms bias assumes.

Our ultimate aim should be to reach the adults: there is great value not merely in removing group prejudices from school books but in persuading public opinion that corrections are needed in books, that group prejudices do exist largely due to the books in use and that if they are not now abandoned, they will grow and be perpetuated.

This first solution is already being adopted: many articles have been written on bias, lectures have been given and this study group "Kleio" in its two meetings has helped to make us more aware of interpretations in history. People do not always recognize the prejudices they have towards each other. There is more involved in textbook revision than the simple removal of passages which cause offence: improvements of this kind are important but we need to remember that defects in textbooks may be due *not* to deliberate misrepresentations or omissions: they may have their roots in different cultural traditions and this can hardly be removed by a single text operation. We need to understand how interpretations arise from the circumstances and the age in which the historian lives and writes.

In this way the right *climate* will be created for the discussion of problems in history — this is more valuable than the correction of minor errors.

2.

in history will never be corrected as much as we may desire. More important is the effect of this criticism of books published after criticisms have been made. So much has already been said about what is wrong with our textbooks that teachers are becoming alive to the dangers lurking in textbooks. We need to encourage all teachers to handle the textbooks with greater caution.

3. Would it be possible to include in our syllabuses for seniors a *course on interpretations in history* so that they will become aware of the difference between *fact and interpretations* and between *fact and opinion*. The object should be to make our pupils more aware of the existence of bias and in this way to foster a more *critical* attitude. At the moment most of our pupils have a mistaken idea of the nature of historical discipline. To them history is a matter of memorising factual data for purposes of an examination.

#### 4. *The use of documents*

It has often been suggested that history should be taught through the use of sources, or at least that greater use should be made of selected documents, especially those dealing with controversial issues.

Dr Davenport of U.C.T. at the recent history conference at Wits suggested that a book of documents should be compiled for use at university level, and that copies of some of the documents should be made available to the schools. Perhaps this study group could cooperate in the project.

One thing is certain — documents will not be widely used in history teaching unless there is a change in the form of the matric examination paper.

#### 5. *Revision of textbooks*

School books need to be continually revised. Two reasons for this are: (a) New discoveries and interpretations concerning historical events. (b) The prevention of misunderstanding and creation of prejudices.

We need to provide facilities for the analysis and revision of textbooks. We should arrange the exchange and mutual checking of textbooks. This has been done overseas by bilateral agreements between nations e.g. Germany and Denmark, Britain and Germany, France and Germany. It should be possible to set up some machinery for the continuous improvement of textbooks in this country.

Nevertheless the revision of textbooks will present many difficulties e.g.

(a) Can we proceed to discuss amendments to textbooks without the cooperation of authors and publishers? Is this meeting representative of all our authors? It will be necessary to convince authors and publishers of the necessity and desirability of revising textbooks.

(b) Publishers cannot be expected to make changes every time some criticism is offered. It is a costly business to alter whole pages or

chapters. Publishers may be unwilling to change texts until existing stocks have been sold out.

(c) There is the danger of the criticism leading to ill-feeling. Unfortunately **most critics are no less biased than authors.** Criticisms are as liable as the books themselves to subjective prejudices.

We must strive to introduce a *friendly* and *constructive* note in our criticisms. We must endeavour to create an intellectual climate without which an objective approach to history will remain impossible.

The difficulties which confront us are "*human inertia, slavery to habits of thought, outmoded national ego, and pure and simple vested interest.*"

These are formidable enemies to overcome, but they must be faced.

Where no agreement can be reached, both points of view should be presented side by side: teachers and pupils should be encouraged to make comparisons and arrive at independent judgments. The object of the textbooks should be to stimulate thought on the subject. I am opposed to the idea of a single and uniform textbook which contains ideas, *interpretations* and *judgments* neatly sorted out ready for *instant consumption and regurgitation.* Therefore, if agreement cannot be reached about a debateable point then a fair statement of each point of view should be given. This could be done by publishing footnotes expressing the opposing points of view.

#### 6. *Workshops of teachers*

These should be formed to achieve all we have in mind. Conferences and sporadic meetings which pass resolutions binding nobody have a limited value. How can we achieve something constructive and permanent?

Teachers organized in regional groups could get together to study history. Their findings and recommendations could be reported. A newsletter could be circulated.

7. Textbooks are a useful educational tool, but a book is only one of many tools. There are other tools e.g. audio-visual aids which influence teaching. There is also the *teacher's influence.* Improvement in textbooks will only be effective if it is accompanied by an improvement in the character and use of other teaching aids and above all only if the teacher's knowledge of the subject matter is improved. Few teachers have the time to do research, but historians, writers of textbooks and teachers should be encouraged to produce *joint theses* on controversial questions. These theses could be published and circulated cheaply either as booklets or monographs. For example Britain and Germany produced joint theses on the questions that led to the crises in Anglo-German relations prior to 1914.

This sort of publication would give us easier access to the results of the latest research. Then the instruction given to our classes will be in accordance with the results of latest research.

The International Textbook Institute published an *international year book* for the teaching of history. The essays contributed contain expert opinions on controversial historical interpretations. Teachers are able to use these articles as a guide in their work. The Historical Society in England also publishes at intervals a little booklet entitled "Common Errors in History".

On many questions there may be no agreement; therefore if joint-treatment of disputed questions is impossible, parallel accounts could be given.

Could we not initiate or sponsor a publication, *Disputed questions in South African History?*

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