

Remembering and Commemorating History

**EuroClio Conference and General Assembly,
Lisbon, 22nd -26th March 2000**

by Mary Ó Dubháin, President, History Teachers' Association of Ireland

The annual conference of EuroClio (the European Association of History Teachers) took place in Lisbon and was hosted by the Portuguese History Teachers' Association. Over one hundred foreign delegates attended, representing history teachers, from right across Europe. Local teachers also attended some of the lectures and workshops. However, in line with Council of Europe policy, many of the delegates came from Eastern Europe.

All lectures and workshops took place in The Gulbenkian Foundation, which had excellent conference facilities. The working languages were Portuguese, French or English. Each lecture was followed by group discussions, which afforded the participants an opportunity to share their individual national perspectives on the issues raised by the speakers. A choice of workshops was also available each day. Topics included:

Project on the Learning and Teaching of 20 Century History in Europe

European Schoolnet- educational projects

Peace in Europe

Analysis of the Spanish commemorations since 1992

Field study trips, connected with the theme of the conference and some school visits were also organised.

Ana Benevente, Secretary of State of Education, opened the conference. Luis Filipe Santos, President of the Portuguese History Teachers' Association, welcomed the delegates on behalf of the Association. The conference lectures focused on certain key themes, such as how societies remember and commemorate; the link between history and national identity and the changing interpretations of major national historical events by societies and historians.

Keynote Address

In the keynote lecture, Commemorating the Everyday: opportunities and constraints in commemorations, António Hespanha of the New University of Lisbon examined the changing analysis of Portuguese colonisation and the consequent debate which had ensued among historians about their proper role in recent

commemorations. In the 1940's, there was a clear consensus on the value of colonisation; a map of Portuguese colonies was superimposed on a Map of Europe with the slogan, 'Portugal is not a small country'. There was universal acceptance that the Portuguese enterprise, differing from the harsher regimes of the British and the Dutch had been largely to the benefit of the colonised. Boxer's more detached and critical work on the Discoveries was consequently banned in Portugal for several years.

However, in 1989 the Indian government refused to officially co-operate with the Portuguese commemorations of the Vasco da Gama voyages, because they perceived these voyages as part of 'Europe's wounding of Indian society and culture'. For the Indians, instead of being a hero and trader, da Gama had 'practised terrorism of the seas'. With this in mind, the Portuguese commission which had been set up to advise on commemorative events and composed of politicians and historians, set out to ensure a balance in their programme. They sought to acknowledge and explore the existence of other cultures in the East, prior to da Gama's arrival. Both Indian and Portuguese historians were invited to present different interpretations of the impact of these significant events. However, this even-handedness aroused a good deal of public hostility in Portugal, as it was felt that taxpayers' money was being used to criticise the country, instead of celebrating outstanding bravery and achievement.

Hespanha then explored the issue of the responsibility and role of the historian in any form of public commemoration. Opinions vary significantly. The isolationist position maintains that historians should stand aloof, lest they be seen as reconstructing the past on present political concerns. Others argue that the involvement of historians by definition, acts as a guarantor that every voice be heard. In general, he concluded that the historian's only duty is to provide the contextual framework, not to act as judge of historical events. Only the citizen has that right. Likewise, by showing the complexity of multicultural history, however uncomfortable for the 'Mother country', the

historian can contribute to an increased acceptance of cultural difference in to-day's society.

Other lectures similarly explored the relationship between historical memory and the formation of national identity; the distinction between history and collective memory.

Teaching Colonial History

Isabel Joao of the Ministry of Education's Working Group for the Commemorations on the Portuguese Discoveries, outlined the evolution of teaching colonial history in her lecture, Commemorating the Brazil - now and then. Among other aspects, she identified how the depiction of 'native populations' had changed in Portuguese school textbooks over the years. Initially portrayed as prehistoric savages, the imagery changed to show a grateful people, simultaneously receiving Catholicism and civilisation and subsequently thriving on European values. In latter years, a more balanced and comparative view of both cultures has been evident in textbooks in Portugal and Brazil: issues such as slavery and exploitation are now being addressed. At present, history teachers from both countries are discussing common curricular issues and textbook reforms.

In her lecture, How Societies Remember, Lucette Valensi, School on High Studies in Social Sciences, Paris, examined the Algerian war and its impact on French society and identity. This was a conflict (the word war was not used until 1990's) that was followed by a long silence, a period of denial. It was impossible to celebrate: it had no hero; no objectives were realised; there were no major battles. War did not lead to a ritual end, which could lead to reconciliation. As she stated, 'remembering policy was invaded by bad memories'. Such was the divisive effect on French society that even to the present day, historians found it difficult to deal with the topic. To that end, she felt that they had not played their full part in facilitating public debate.

Pierre Léglise-Costa, University of Paris VIII, examined how competing political ideologies used commemorations as public policy: Commemorating strategies: a comparison of authoritarian and democratic approaches.

Group Discussions

During the group discussions which followed, participants described national public commemorations, their role and function. For forty years, those in the former Soviet bloc had been forced to 'celebrate' public holidays; therefore there was little remembering in society. Nowadays, all Communist dates are forgotten, instead certain religious holidays and significant national events from the distant past are observed. The Russian delegates stated that their former celebrations had been part of foreign policy, an instrument of manipulation; regional and

local festivities have replaced them. In Estonia, a fear that their language is disappearing is reflected in the celebration of Mother Tongue Day on the 14th March. Former colonial countries such as Austria are trying to find a multiperspectivity in their celebrations, which acknowledges the culture of their sizeable Muslim population.

European Schoolnet was one of the most relevant and practical workshops to classroom teachers. Angela Andersson displayed the online educational projects, which encourage collaboration between European schools and is of interest to history teachers. The site also includes a Virtual School for the use of teachers. It is found at www.en.eun.org. History projects run by different European schools are presented in the History classroom, which is part of the Virtual School. www.en.eun.org/menu/vs/vs-set.html.

The General Assembly of EuroClio took place on the last day. Delegates from affiliated History Associations discussed issues of common interest, including the revision of the statutes to allow the greater involvement of teachers from the emerging democratic states of the former Soviet Bloc.

Informal talks took place between the delegates of the 'Celtic fringe' and it is hoped to arrange closer contacts in the coming year. Scotland, Wales and Ireland have had recent revisions of their curricula. From our discussions, it became obvious that there is much to be learnt from each other on a regional basis. Members of HTAI will be kept informed of these and other EuroClio events which are planned, in our forthcoming newsletters.

This was an excellent conference on many levels: stimulating and challenging lectures, practical workshops, but above all else, an opportunity to meet colleagues from widely varying societies and educational systems.

Mary Ó Dubháin