

“EUROPEAN CHARTER FOR HISTORY TEACHING”

The Council of Europe became concerned with the teaching of History in Europe soon after its founding in 1948. Since the early 1950s, well before the emergence of the New History in the United Kingdom and later in West Germany, the Council made provision for experts to discuss History textbook resources, the formative themes and periods of European History and their implications for the whole History curriculum as well as for interdisciplinary courses of study. Those inquiries and colloquia kept History at the forefront of the Council of Europe's educational agenda, especially in the eighties.

From these discussions two ideas emerged: a project entitled *History teaching in the New Europe* and the idea of developing *A European Charter for History Teaching*. The first project produced the Stradling Report in 1995 on *The European Content of the School History Curriculum*. (Published by the Council of Europe, Strassbourg, 1995). At the first summit conference of the enlarged Council of Europe in October 1993, which included the new members from the former Eastern bloc, the Vienna Declaration was adopted which called for a five point Action Plan to promote a European consciousness. One of the five points dealt with the teaching of history. It noted that “History teaching can contribute significantly towards mutual understanding, confidence and tolerance among peoples when concentrating on the positive mutual influences that countries, religions and ideas had on the historical development of Europe”.

The Report edited by Robert Stradling contained the following theses:

1. History education in Europe concentrates mostly on national and not continental history. National History dominates the curricula and is not taught in its European context.
2. This approach prevents an appreciation of effects that historical events in neighbouring countries have or do not have on each other. Very few Western European syllabuses and schoolbooks cover the effects of an epoch across the borders of their own country, Belgium being one of the few exceptions where at secondary school level such perspectives are being taught.
3. The history of foreign European countries are presented in a very abbreviated way. Syllabuses of member states of the European Union restrict international events before the middle of the century mainly to England, France and Germany and after that to the USA, USSR, China and Japan.
4. The syllabuses of the Western European countries contain little on the history of Central and Eastern Europe relevant to the period under discussion.
5. A variety of European themes are taught in the secondary schools of Western Europe ranging from Ancient Greek history right through to political and economic co-operation in the post-war period.
6. Modern European history receives different treatment in the syllabuses from national history. The relation between economic and political developments, and between the dissemination of ideas and technological trends, are second to the politics of international relations and the establishment of supranational institutions. Because these institutions are presented rather unimaginative and ahistorical, the presentation is not of much educational significance.
7. Most Western European syllabuses follow a chronological approach from either pre-history or antiquity through to the 20th century. This causes significant omissions in several periods and others are treated from a purely national point of view.
8. The balance between national, European and global history varies from country to country. The small countries tend to accentuate the history of their important and powerful neighbours.
9. European pupils spend usually less time on local history than on national history while the syllabus leaves little room for studying the interaction of national and supranational history as well the study of world history.
10. The chronological approach tends to concentrate on the study of ever shorter periods of twentieth

century history, to the disadvantage of an understanding of the long term developments.

11. The didactic approach in syllabuses and text books which defines European identity as having its roots solely in Europe's mutual historical heritage, creates the image that European civilisation developed directly from philosophical and cultural traditions on the continent. It omits those parts of Europe which were hardly touched by such elements during important periods in their history. It also does not consider the fact that these traditions were lost in large parts of Europe only to find its way back through Moorish Spain and Norman Sicily when later discovered by Arabian scientists.
12. External influences on European culture, philosophy and science receive too little attention and social and commercial history is not properly taken into account. The reason may probably be the fear that these dimensions may reveal the differences more than the similarities in Europe's past.
13. Syllabuses for religious history has large loopholes. The Middle Ages and the 16th century receive the most attention, modern periods lesser and after 1914 practical none.
14. European syllabuses and text books barely take notice of the existence of minority groups in their own or other countries.

Since the publication of the Stradling Report the

Council has been actively involved in a series of seminars and discussions to develop the idea of the *unity and diversity of our cultural identity*. Several conferences has been organised to exchange ideas on promoting European consciousness in historical and political education. The most important point of consensus that emerged from these conferences is that it is not the quantity of study material about Europe that counts, but how the subject is studied and taught. There was general agreement that the European aspect should be accentuated through comparative studies based on a multi-perspective approach and a transnational frame of reference.

The drafting of a European Charter to be adopted in 1997 is aimed at finding the right balance between the contradicting elements in European identity, *unity* and *diversity*. How is it possible to cultivate the idea that Europe is or is becoming a union of states or regions, marked by a plurality of identities? It is believed that a European Charter can provide guidelines for measuring national syllabuses. The idea is not the development of a Pan-European history syllabus that will dictate to national educational authorities or to text books writers, or to create a uniform and standardised version of European history. One of the thorniest issues to be dealt with in the Charter is the minority question. The Charter will have to provide practical guidelines for dealing with this sensitive issue. The Vienna Summit has refused to endorse the concept of group rights for minorities.

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