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Joint Programme of co-operation between the European  
Commission and the Council of Europe to strengthen  
democratic stability in North Caucasus

Seminar on

“Interpretation of historical facts when teaching history in  
secondary schools”

Elista, the Republic of Kalmikiya, Russian Federation,

26 – 27 April 2002

Strasbourg



Seminar on

**“Interpretation of historical facts when teaching history  
in secondary schools”**

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Russian Federation,

26 – 27 April 2002

**Report by**

**Dr Michael RILEY  
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The opinions expressed in this work are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy of the Council of Europe.

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## **I. INTRODUCTION**

The Elista Seminar was organised jointly by the Council of Europe, the Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation and the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Kalmikiya. This was the third seminar of the Joint Programme of Co-operation between the European Commission and the Council of Europe to strengthen democratic stability in North Caucasus.

The aims of the seminar were to:

- ❑ develop a shared understanding of the ways in which history is open to different interpretations;
- ❑ consider the ways in which textbooks can develop an understanding of different interpretations of history;
- ❑ develop approaches to teaching and learning which promote critical thinking and understanding.

On the first day of the Seminar, experts presented papers on different aspects of teaching about interpretations of history. These were followed by questions, open discussion and two working group sessions. On the second day of the Seminar, participants visited the Lyceum in Elista and held discussions with pupils on the main theme of the Seminar. Working group sessions then continued and were followed by a final plenary.

Elista provided an excellent venue for the Seminar. Participants greatly appreciated the rich cultural heritage of the Republic of Kalmikiya and the generous hospitality of its people.

## **II. OPENING PRESENTATIONS**

### **1) Mr Kirsan Ilumjinov, President of the Republic of Kalmikiya (represented by the Deputy-President)**

The president welcomed the support of the Council of Europe in reforming history teaching in North Caucasus.

The role and importance of history in schools is great. The knowledge which history provides is essential in developing an understanding of the modern world. History, however, can never be definitive, and it is important that in teaching the subject we open pupils' minds to different interpretations of events, people and situations in the past.

**2) Dr Vladimir Batsyn, Deputy Head of the Department of Regional Policies, Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation**

Dr Batsyn placed the seminar in context by outlining the long-standing co-operation between the Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation and the Council of Europe in reforming the teaching of history.

The focus of the Elista seminar on different interpretations of history is vitally important. Facts are sacred; once a moment in time has passed, it will never be repeated. Facts, however, are open to a range of different interpretations and this is what makes history an essentially subjective discipline. Textbook authors should strive to produce objective accounts of history, but it is important to remember that textbooks are, in themselves, interpretations of past events.

Teachers of history have an enormous responsibility compared to teachers of other subjects. Teaching history is about helping young people to see themselves as individuals and as members of society. What pupils learn in history can influence their decisions about personal choices, attitudes and values. That is why teaching about different interpretations of history is such a vital part of a young person's education.

**3) Ms Tatiana Milko, Programme Officer, Council of Europe**

Ms Milko explained that the Council of Europe views history teaching as a crucial element in the promotion of human rights. History teaching in schools presents real examples of human rights issues in different historical contexts. School history, therefore, promotes a deeper understanding of human rights.

In 1996, the Council of Europe formulated the main principles of history teaching across Europe. In 2001, when these aims were re-formulated, there was an important shift of emphasis. An important priority is now to develop identity and a respect for different cultures. History should teach pupils to respect diversity and otherness. It should promote mutual understanding. Crucially, it should teach pupils to formulate their own opinions and to respect the views of others. We should promote a more balanced history, placing more emphasis on social and cultural dimensions which have often been neglected in the past.

An important area of debate is the extent to which controversial issues should be studied in the history classroom. It is the view of the Council of Europe that teaching about controversial issues is an essential part of education in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. These issues are covered in the popular media; history teachers are able to provide a respect for evidence and consideration of different viewpoints which is sometimes lacking in the world beyond the classroom.

History in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century should unite people. The bridge, the chosen image for the euro, is an important metaphor, both for the work of the Council of Europe and the work of history teachers.

**4) Dr Alexander Soloviev, Minister, Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kalmikiya**

Dr Soloviev welcomed participants to the Republic of Kalmikiya. He provided details of the schools and teachers of the Republic and emphasised the importance of the continued professional development of teachers. History is an essential part of a young person's education and it is vitally important that history teaching opens pupils' minds to different interpretations of the past.

**III. PLENARY PRESENTATIONS**

**1) Dr Ludmila Alexashkina, Institute of General and Secondary Education, Russian Academy of Education, Moscow**

**“New approaches in interpretation of historical facts in present-day history textbooks: an overview of an author”**

In recent years, there has been a distinct shift in the focus of school history textbooks. In the 1970s and 80s, the main focus of history teaching was to equip pupils with a detailed knowledge of the past. Over the last 10 years, however, the purposes of history education have changed. Facts have now been freed from the dictatorship of dogmatic ideas and there is a recognition that facts are not only for pupils to learn, but are also for pupils to evaluate critically. Pupils now have the opportunity to select information and to make up their own minds about historical issues. However, this process of selection and evaluation raises three important issues:

1. Historical facts are unique and will never be repeated. Facts belong to particular historical contexts and the development of contextual knowledge is, therefore, important. Developing an understanding of attitudes of people at the time should be a very important aspect of school history.

2. Historical facts happened within a rich cultural context. Pupils should be taught the cultural complexity of past situations. The new textbooks on local and regional history have a particularly important role to play in developing an understanding of this cultural complexity.
3. It is important to help pupils look at facts from different angles. Teaching pupils that neither witnesses to past events, nor contemporary historians, are free from subjectivity, is an essential part of history education.

**2) Dr Alexander Soloviev, Minister of Education and Science of the Republic of Kalmikiya**

**“New approaches in teaching history in present day secondary schools: examples of good practice in the Republic of Kalmikiya”**

The challenge of history education is how to combine an objective approach to the study of the past with the human emotion which is part of the historian's make-up. The subjective element plays such an important role in history, particularly because of the connection between history and ideology. In the Russian Federation, we have seen an important transformation from communist mythology to a more rational and balanced history. However, an important question remains: should we feel proud of our history or guilty about our past? Despite tragic turning points in our history, surely we should feel proud of our contribution to human development.

There are some important challenges ahead of us. In an age of mass media and freedom of speech, history is open to a range of potential distortions. The powerful force of information and communications technology can lead to a confusion, in teenagers' minds, between reality and virtual reality. It can also lead to a widening generation gap in which young people place little value on the experiences of their elders.

In Kalmykiya, the Ministry of Education and Science pays special attention to history education. A number of teachers are working on new and exciting teaching methodologies which seek to develop more active learning strategies. New textbooks have also been developed to emphasise regional history. This is very important in developing an understanding of the diversity and complexity of the past. The new textbooks have led to a re-interpretation of Kalmikiyan history. For example, during the Soviet period, 19<sup>th</sup> Century Kalmikiya was often represented as backward; now there is a recognition of the unique environment of the steppe and the diverse ways in which the Kalmikiyan people adapted to this environment. Equally, whereas in older textbooks emigration after the Civil War was often presented in negative terms, there is now an emphasis on trying to understand the motivation for emigration

Several problems remain:

1. The dissemination of new methodologies to the majority of history teachers;
2. The tendency of textbooks to focus on the history of Russia;
3. Inadequate professional development for history teachers, particularly in rural areas.

**3) Dr Michael Riley, Senior Lecturer in History Education, Bath Spa University College, United Kingdom**

**“The teaching of interpretations of history in secondary schools in the United Kingdom”**

Dr Riley began by outlining some of the reasons why interpretations of history matter so much. He cited examples of the different ways in which the past can be distorted to serve the needs of the present. An understanding of the ways in which the past is mediated for the purposes of the present is a vital part of every young person’s education. By teaching pupils about interpretations of history, we are countering ideologically driven attempts to restrict pluralism and democracy.

In England, teaching about interpretations of history is a requirement of the national curriculum and of all examination specifications. An interpretation of history can usefully be defined as “a conscious reflection on the past which normally draws together different sources of information”. Pupils study a wide range of historical interpretations; academic, educational, fictional and popular.

Dr Riley shared three examples of classroom approaches to teaching about interpretations of history with pupils of different ages. The examples emphasise the important learning point that the validity of an interpretation does not depend on the type of interpretation: academic history can be just as problematic as Hollywood films. Helping pupils to understand that interpretations of history differ because of the nature of the evidence, the different values placed on evidence or the nature of various audiences for history, are challenging, but rewarding aims for history teachers in open and democratic societies.

**4) Ms Mette Molland, Gyldenhal Publishing House, Norway**

**“Interpretation of facts when teaching history in present-day secondary schools in Norway: an overview of a publisher”**

Ms Molland explained the challenges in producing new history textbooks for Norwegian schools. Her main task is in developing a new concept of history textbook which tries to change the way of presenting history, by emphasising

different aspects of history and by introducing the idea of the textbook being an interpretation of history in itself. The main dilemma for her Publishing House is that it is difficult to persuade teachers to buy radically different history books, as they are forced to rethink their way of teaching and, in some cases, their interpretation of historical facts.

In Norway, discussion about interpretations of history depends on ideology. Two crucial debates centre on the presentation of Norway as a nation and the representation of Western Europe as the world's main source of progress and development. Ms Molland illustrated this by detailing recent debates about the significance of the European Renaissance as a turning point in history and the myth of the Viking hero. These competing interpretations feed directly into current debates about whether or not Norway should be part of the European Union.

Over the next few years, as a new generation of young teachers begin their careers, we are likely to see a greater emphasis on challenging entrenched interpretations with a particular focus on global perspectives. This will hopefully bring a closer correlation between what teachers want to focus on, what pupils find interesting and what historians occupy themselves with.

#### **IV. REPORTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF WORKING GROUPS**

##### **Report of Working Group N° 1**

During the discussions, the participants of this working group reached the following conclusions:

1. History teachers and pupils in present-day secondary schools have the possibility of analysing different interpretations of historical facts thanks to variety of history textbooks available, as well as to the flexibility of the new curricula.
2. The present-day situation in history teaching in the Russian Federation is favourable for the development of new approaches. The process of the destruction of old stereotypes has already started and it is important now not to create new ones.
3. Among stereotypes which are still present in history textbooks, the following should be pointed out:
  - i. the idea about the exceptional role of Russian history in the context of world history;

- ii. the idea that the history of Russia was always linked to a fight for its independence;
  - iii. the absence of a balance in teaching political, social and cultural history, the main amount of information is still connected to political history.
4. In present-day history textbooks, the links between national and world historical processes are not analysed.
  5. History textbooks are still overloaded with facts and events.
  6. The process of exclusion of stereotypes from history textbooks will strengthen mutual understanding and promote common values.

### **Recommendations:**

1. When preparing new history textbooks authors should respect a balance in teaching:
  - i. local, regional, national and world history;
  - ii. political, social and cultural history.
2. Textbooks on national history should reflect the diversity of histories and cultures of peoples living in the Russian Federation;
3. When interpreting historical facts, authors of textbooks should take into account the age of pupils; the text should not be too complicated and should awaken the interest of pupils.
4. It is important to include different points of view in history textbooks, as this helps to remove stereotypes and develop such pupils' skills as independence of thinking.

### **Report of Working Group N° 2**

1. All the participants of the working group agreed that during the period of democratic transition, history teaching has played an important role. The seminar organised by the Council of Europe raised important questions about the interpretation of historical facts.
2. The participants of the working group stressed that the authors' point of view as well as the points of view of history teachers play a crucial role in the development of pupils' views on history. When interpreting

facts, authors and teachers should be aware of their responsibility forwards pupils.

3. It was emphasised that authors of the recent history textbooks in Russia have made more efforts to present history from different perspectives.
4. The participants pointed out, as a positive factor, the development of alternative history textbooks, but, at the same time, they noticed that rather there are often a lot of contradictions in interpretations of the same facts and events; this creates a lot of complications for practising teachers.
5. As a positive factor, it was stressed that teachers in present-day secondary schools are trying to develop interactive methods of teaching and learning. These include involving pupils in dialogue and debate which help them to develop independent thinking, the ability to defend their points of view and to challenge the views of others.
6. It was stressed that present-day history textbooks still contain such stereotypes as:
  - i. the exaggeration of the role of Russia in the development of such regions and countries as the Caucasus, Poland, Finland;
  - ii. a lack of information about the history of the national minorities.
7. The participants stressed that, in a multicultural state such as the Russian Federation, when preparing history textbooks, it is crucial to reflect cultural and historical diversity. This will help to develop such skills as tolerance and mutual understanding. It is important for the younger generation to realise the richness of cultural diversity and to be brought up in a spirit of respect for difference.

### **Recommendations:**

1. All the participants were of the opinion that the Council of Europe should continue its activities on the reform of history teaching in the Russian Federation. The seminars provide an extraordinary opportunity to exchange views between specialists from the Russian Federation as well as from Western Europe on important issues. It was proposed that the Council of Europe should organise a seminar on new approaches in teaching history in a regional context.

2. It was suggested that the Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation should:

- i. invest more efforts in the reform of in-service teacher training, providing increased professional development for history teachers. This is especially important for teachers from the distant regions of the Russian Federation;
- ii. control the prices of history textbooks some of which are high and do not correspond to the income of the average family.

3. It was proposed that authors of history textbooks should:

- i. use facts based on historical sources. If there are different points of view, it is essential to present historical sources which should explain to pupils where these different points of view are coming from;
- ii. present the evaluation of historical facts on the basis of common values such as tolerance;
- iii. try to avoid stereotypes;
- iv. use more illustrations and historical sources in history textbooks;
- v. emphasise the development of pupils' skills in history when writing textbooks;
- vi. respect the balance between local, regional, national and world history.

4. It was suggested that history teachers should:

- i. develop more interactive methods in teaching history where pupils and teachers can play the role of equal partners;
- ii. use, where possible, new technologies and other teaching materials which will help pupils to understand history in its full diversity and complexity.

## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1: Programme of the Seminar

#### Thursday 25 April 2002

Preparatory Meeting for the Seminar with the specialists and the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kalmikiya

#### Friday 26 April 2002

##### 09.30 - 11.00      **Plenary Session**

Chair: Ms Nataliya KUNISTYNA, Vice Prime-Minister of the Republic of Kalmikiya.

Opening of the Seminar by:

- i. Mr Valeriy BOGDANOV, Vice-President of the Republic of Kalmikiya;
- ii. Dr Vladimir BATSYN, Deputy Head of the Department of the Regional Policies, Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation;
- iii. Ms Tatiana MILKO, Programme Officer, Council of Europe;
- iv. Dr Alexander SOLOVIEV, Minister, Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kalmikiya.

##### 11.00 - 11.30      Break

##### 11.30 - 13.00      **Plenary Session**

Chair: Dr Alexander SOLOVIEV, Minister of Education and Science of the Republic of Kalmikiya.

Presentation on “New approaches in interpretation of historical facts in present-day history textbooks: an overview of an author” by Dr Ludmila ALEXASHKINA, Institute of General and Secondary Education, Russian Academy of Education, Moscow.

Presentation on “New approaches in teaching history in present-day secondary schools: examples of good practice in the Republic of Kalmikiya”, Mr Alexander SOLOVIEV, Minister of Education and Science of the Republic of Kalmikiya.

Presentation on “Interpretation of historical facts in new history textbooks”, by Mr Anatoliy PROKHOROV, Chief Editor, “Teaching history in secondary schools”, Moscow.

Discussion with all the participants.

13.00 - 14.30

Lunch

14.30 - 16.00

### **Plenary Session**

Chair: Mr Alexander SOLOVIEV, Minister of Education and Science of the Republic of Kalmikiya.

Presentation on “The teaching of interpretations of history in United Kingdom secondary schools”, by Dr Michael RILEY, United Kingdom.

Presentation on: “The interpretation of facts when teaching history in present-day secondary schools in Norway: an overview of a publisher”, by Ms Mette MOLLAND, Gyldendal Publishing House, Norway.

Discussions with all the participants.

16.00 – 16.30

Break

16.30 – 18.00

**Working Group Session**

**Working Group N°1**

Chair: Professor Elena DORDJIEVA, State University of the Republic of Kalmikiya.

Rapporteur: Dr Marina USALKO, History teacher, School N° 12, Elista.

Resource person: Dr Michael RILEY, United Kingdom.

**Working Group N°2**

Chair: Professor Alexander KOMANDJAEV, State University of the Republic of Kalmikiya.

Rapporteur: Ms Nina BADMINOVA, Head of the Department of General Education, Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kalmikiya.

Resource person: Ms Mette MOLLAND, Gyldendal Publishing House, Norway.

20.00

Official dinner

**Saturday 27 April 2002**

09.30 – 11.00

**Visit to a Lyceum in Elista: discussions with pupils on the main themes of the Seminar**

11.00 – 11.30

Break

11.30 – 13.00

**Continuation of the Working Group Session**

13.00 - 14.30

Lunch

14.30 - 15.30

**Continuation of the Working Group Session**

15.30 - 16.00

Break

16.00 – 17.00                      The rapporteurs should report to the General Rapporteur and the Secretariat on the conclusions and recommendations of the round tables. They should all prepare their texts in writing and submit a copy to the Secretariat. These texts will be included in the report of the Seminar.

17.00 – 18.30                      **Plenary Session**

Chair: Mr Alexander SOLOVIEV, Minister of Education and Science of the Republic of Kalmikiya.

- i.      Presentation of the conclusions and recommendations by the rapporteurs of the working groups;
- ii.     Presentation of the overall conclusions and recommendations of the Seminar by the General Rapporteur.

Comments by the participants.

**Closing speeches :**

- i.      Ms Tatiana MILKO, Programme Officer, Council of Europe;
- ii.     Dr Vladimir BATSYN, Deputy Head of the Department of the Regional Policies, Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation;
- iii.    Dr Alexander SOLOVIEV, Minister, Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kalmikiya.

19.30                                  Dinner

**Sunday 28 April 2002**

Departure of the participants

### **Working Group N°1**

Chair: Dr Elena DORDJIEVA, Professor of the State University of the Republic of Kalmikiya.

Rapporteur: Dr Marina USALKO, History teacher, School N° 12, Elista.

Resource person: Dr Michael RILEY, United Kingdom.

- i. What does “interpretation of historical facts” mean from the point of view of authors of textbooks and practising teachers?
- ii. Are there differences between interpretation of the same facts given in history textbooks by authors and presented by teachers in a classroom? Give examples.
- iii. What stereotypes from your point of view still exist in textbooks on world, national and regional history for secondary schools in the Russian Federation?
- iv. What kind of stereotypes should be avoided when teaching history in secondary schools in order to strengthen reconciliation, mutual understanding and tolerance in present-day society?
- v. How should historical sources be presented in history textbooks and what kind of teaching methods could be used to awaken pupils’ interest to work with historical sources?

## **Working Group N°2**

Chair: Professor Alexander KOMANDJAEV, State University of the Republic of Kalmikiya.

Rapporteur: Ms Nina BADMINOVA, Head of the Department of General Education, Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kalmikiya.

Resource person: Ms Mette MOLLAND, Gyldendal Publishing House, Norway.

- i. Are there differences between interpretation of the same facts given in history textbooks by authors and presented by teachers in a classroom? Give examples.
- ii. What is the role of alternative history textbooks in teaching history in present-day secondary schools?
- iii. What kind of stereotypes should be avoided when teaching history in secondary schools in order to strengthen reconciliation, mutual understanding and tolerance in present-day society?
- iv. What approaches should be used in teaching history in present-day secondary schools to avoid stereotypes?
- iv. What is the pupils' role in the interpretation of facts when learning history and how should three levels of interpretation of facts (authors – teachers – pupils) be coordinated to help pupils to develop such skills as critical thinking, open-mindedness, ability to defend their point of view, etc.?

## **Appendix 2: List of participants**

### **GENERAL RAPPORTEUR**

Dr Michael RILEY, 15 Abbey Cottages, Montacute, Somerset TA15 6XJ, United Kingdom

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### **SPEAKERS**

Dr Ludmila ALEXASHKINA, Head of the Laboratory of History, Institute of General and Secondary Education, Russian Academy of Education, 8, Pogodinskaya pl., 199005 MOSCOW, Russian Federation

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Mr Anatoliy PROKHOROV, Chief Editor, “Teaching history in secondary schools”, Moscow.

Dr Alexander SOLOVIEV, Minister, Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kalmikiya.

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### **THE REPUBLIC OF ADIGEYA**

Dr Alexander CHIRG, Director, Institute of the Humanities

Dr Kazbek AGLIZ, History teacher, Director of the Pedagogical college

## **THE REPUBLIC OF DAGESTAN**

Ms Zukhra ABASHOVA, Deputy Head Teacher, Secondary school N° 34, Mahachkala

Ms Satlava MYKYSHOVA, History teacher, Secondary school N° 34, Mahachkala

## **THE REPUBLIC OF INGUSHETIYA**

Dr Musa SHYSHKHANOV, Dean of the Historical faculty, the State Ingushetiya University

## **THE REPUBLIC OF CHECHNYA**

Dr Sarpuddyn AHMADOV, Author of history textbooks

Mr Vaha ASTALOV, Author of history textbooks, Chechnya State University

## **KRASNODAR REGION**

Mr Yury BONDARCHUK, History teacher, Secondary school N° 75, Krasnodar

Ms Larisa LATKYNA, Methodologist, Institute for In-service Training, Krasnodar

## **ROSTOV ON DON REGION**

Ms Maya ROZINA, History teacher, Secondary school N° 34, Rostov-on Don

Ms Irina KLYMKINA, History teacher, Secondary school N° 34, Rostov-on Don

## **STAVROPOUL REGION**

Dr Alexei KRUGOV, Stavropoul State University

Ms Ludmila KOROVENKO, History teacher, Lyceum “Ecos”, Novoalexandrovsk

### **THE REPUBLIC OF KARACHAEVO CHERKESSIYA**

Ms Galina KLYMENKO, Head teacher, Secondary school N° 6, Cherkessk

Ms Madyna SALPAGAROVA, History teacher, Secondary school N° 9, Cherkessk

### **THE REPUBLIK OF NORTH OSETIYA-ALANYIA**

Ms Valentina FOMYNIH, History teacher, Secondary school N° 22, Vladikavkaz

Ms Raisa DOBTEVICH, History teacher, Secondary school N° 2, Vladikavkaz

### **THE REPUBLIC OF KABARDINO–BALKARIYA**

Ms Maya KARDANOVA, Institute for in-service training, Nalchik

Ms Margarita LYKHOVA, History teacher, Lyceum N° 2, Nalchik

### **THE REPUBLIC OF KALMYKIYA**

Ms Galyna BOYKO, History teacher, School N° 2, Sarpynskiy region

Mr Sergeyu YAKHYN, History teacher, Secondary school N° 2, Maloderbetovskiy region

Ms Tatiana MUKHARAEVA, History teacher, Ustinskiy region

Ms Galyna SHANKIYEVA, History teacher, Chernozemelskiy region

Mr Alexander MOYSEEV, History teacher, Chernozemelskiy region

Ms Svetlana OPUEVA, History teacher, Secondary school N° 2, Yashkulskiy region

Ms Valentina CHUDAKOVA, History teacher, Secondary school N° 2, Gorodovkovskiy region

Ms Batnush BATYREVA, History teacher, Ketchenerovskiy region

Ms Galyna RYABUKHINA, History teacher, Secondary school N° 1, Octabrskiy region

Ms Danara BOLDYREVA, History teacher, Laganskiy region

Mr Sergey DMYTRENKO, History teacher, Yashaltinskiy region

Ms Nina BADMINOVA, Head of the Department of General Education,  
Ministry of Education

Professor Alexander KOMANDJAEV, State University of the Republic of  
Kalmikiya

Dr Elena DORDJIEVA, Professor of the State University of the Republic of  
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Dr Marina USALKO, History teacher, School N° 12, Elista.

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### **Appendix 3: Full texts of presentations**

#### **Teaching about Interpretations of History in English Schools**

##### **Dr Michael Riley**

Can I say, first of all, what a privilege it is to be invited to take part in this important seminar. Each time I visit the Russian Federation I return to my own country with many new ideas and perspectives. I am delighted that we have, in Elista, a further opportunity to learn from each other.

The focus of my contribution is the teaching of interpretations of history in English schools. I want to consider three aspects to this subject. First of all, I shall explore some of the reasons why learning about different interpretations of history is such a vital part of a young person's education; why do historical interpretations matter so much? Secondly, I shall consider what exactly we mean by interpretations of history; in particular, how do we define historical interpretations in the context of school history in England? Finally, I hope to share some effective classroom strategies for developing pupils' understanding of different interpretations of history.

##### **Why do historical interpretations matter?**

Let me begin with a story. In my last school, I taught a course on the British Empire to a group of 14 year olds. As part of the course we studied the British slave trade during the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. The pupils found out about the organisation of this shocking trade in human lives. They studied the ways in which British merchants obtained African slaves, the terrible conditions on the slave ships and the brutality of life on the sugar plantations of the West Indies. The pupils were shocked by the inhumanity of the system and by the involvement of British people in such a terrible trade.

One evening, after school, I went to the supermarket to do some shopping. I bought a packet of sugar and noticed, next to the shelves, a box of leaflets with the title "The History of Cane Sugar". The leaflets were produced by a major British sugar company. I picked up the leaflet, and was angered by what I read. The text described the growth of the European sugar trade from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. It detailed the technical advances in sugar production, and explained how sugar was brought to Europe from plantations in the Americas. The leaflet made no mention of the fact that the European sugar trade was based on slave labour. History had been sweetened for the taste of 21<sup>st</sup> Century supermarket shoppers. I showed the leaflet to my students; they were outraged and wrote to the company to complain. The company did not reply.

The past is often plundered and distorted for the purposes of the present. In all kinds of ways, history is made more palatable for modern tastes. Museums and historic sites often clean up the past for their visitors. Hollywood producers frequently distort the past for the pleasure of cinema audiences. Writers of historical fiction sometimes depart from the historical truth in order to make a better story and to make more money for their publishers. In these, and in many other ways, history has become a big playground for present preoccupations.

But sometimes, the abuse of the past is more serious. Historians write books denying the Holocaust. Governments make memorials to false heroes. Whole ethnic groups are written out of history. The school curriculum denies children an understanding of their own cultural identity. Interpretations of history are vitally important because history is not just about the past; it is a mixture of past, present and future. An understanding of the ways in which the past is mediated for the purposes of the present, is surely a vital part of every young person's education. Pupils should come to understand that there are no monopolies of the truth. They should recognise that good historians are fair to the past, but that well-intentioned historians, as well as less scrupulous politicians and artists, can produce different versions of the past. By teaching pupils about interpretations of history, we are countering ideologically driven attempts to restrict pluralism and democracy.

### **How do we define 'interpretations of history' in English schools?**

A National Curriculum for History was introduced in England in 1991 and, since that time, there have been two main revisions. The National Curriculum defines the knowledge, understanding and skills which pupils should develop between the ages of 5 and 14. One of the most innovative aspects of the history curriculum is the requirement to teach pupils about interpretations of history. Politicians and educators are aware of the dangers of ideologically slanted school history. They are concerned about the vulnerability of the past to those people who seek to impose their own view of society through a particular interpretation of history. The teaching of different interpretations of history is therefore intended as a defence against the political abuse of school history. By insisting that teachers present different interpretations of controversial topics, it is hoped to encourage pluralism and democratic values.

One of the most important dimensions to interpretations of history in English schools is the belief that teachers should introduce pupils to the work of academic historians. For older pupils, this can mean studying extracts from the works of different historians. Younger pupils too, can be introduced to the controversies which underpin the study of historical people, events and situations: Did the Industrial Revolution improve people's lives? Why did 19<sup>th</sup> Century historians think that King John was wicked, but today historians

say that he was an effective king? Why do historians disagree about the causes of the Second World War?

However, a limited diet of historiographical interpretations is likely to be dull and difficult for many pupils. A narrow view of interpretations, which is restricted to the writings of historians, can easily be broadened. In England, teachers are encouraged to consider a variety of interpretations: films, novels, web-sites, museum displays and many others. This summary chart is a useful way to see the different possibilities for introducing a wide range of interpretations into history lessons:

### Types of historical interpretation

Types of interpretation	Examples
<b>Academic</b>	Books and articles by professional historians. Lectures Excavation reports
<b>Educational</b>	<b>Textbooks</b> Web-sites Museums TV documentaries Artists' impressions
<b>Fictional</b>	Novels Films TV dramas Plays
<b>Popular</b>	Folk wisdom about the past Theme parks Advertising
<b>Personal</b>	Personal reflection

So, if we accept this broad view of the different interpretations which can inform and enrich the study of history in our schools, can we provide a precise definition of an interpretation of history? I think that this sentence represents a useful working definition:

An interpretation of history is a conscious reflection on the past, which normally draws together different sources of information.

### **Classroom strategies for work on interpretations of history**

Let us now focus on some of the ways in which teachers have approached the study of historical interpretations with their pupils. I will share three examples of work in English schools which illustrate a range of approaches. The examples cover work with pupils of different ages, and focus on different types of historical interpretation.

#### **Example 1**

In this first example, 7-8 year old pupils are studying Roman Britain. They have found out about the resistance to Roman rule and have made a special study of Queen Boudicca's revolt against the Romans in AD 61. Now the teacher shows them a selection of artists' interpretations of Queen Boudicca. She asks her pupils to mark each picture out of ten for accuracy: 10 being very accurate and 1 being not very accurate. The teacher then gives the pupils this written description of Boudicca, by the Roman writers Tacitus and Dio. She asks the pupils if they want to change their marks.

"She was huge ...with a harsh voice. A great mass of bright red hair fell to her knees. She wore a great twisted torc and a tunic of many colours, over which was a thick mantle, fastened by a brooch"

Dio

"Boudicca drove round in a chariot, her daughters with her. As she reached each tribe she said that Britons were used to being led into battle by women."

Tacitus

In this example, then, young pupils are taught that artists and illustrators interpret people from the past in different ways. They learn that we can evaluate a particular interpretation using contemporary evidence.

#### **Example 2**

In our second example, 14 year old pupils are studying the First World War. They use a variety of historical sources to find out about The Battle of the Somme. Pupils watch a silent film, shown in British cinemas in 1916.

They then look at newspaper accounts of the battle, photographs, diaries, memoirs, interviews and letters.

Finally, the teachers present his/her pupils with a modern interpretation of the Battle of the Somme, an extract from the novel 'Birdsong' by Sebastian Faulks.

The pupils are asked to consider the strengths and weaknesses of the novel as an interpretation of the Battle of the Somme. Experience in England has shown that the analysis of interpretations is likely to be effective if it is part of a wider study. Having built up a level of contextual knowledge about a topic, pupils are better placed to make a judgment about the validity of a particular interpretation.

### Example 3

In our final example, a group of 17 year old students are studying Lenin. Their teacher has introduced them to the controversial issue of whether Lenin was a democrat or a dictator. She gives the students extracts from the work of different historians, and asks them to study the texts at home. When they return to class, the teacher has erected a 'washing line' across the classroom. At one end of the line is the word 'democrat', at the other end the word 'dictator'. The teacher asks the students to justify the right point on the line at which to peg up their extract. In this way, students are forced to analyse, for themselves, various academic interpretations of Lenin's rule. The teacher then gives them background information about the historians and asks the students to consider the reasons why their interpretations of Lenin differ. In other words, rather than rushing to a judgment about the quality of interpretations, pupils can be asked to think about the processes of forming an interpretation.

These examples demonstrate that teaching about different interpretations of history can be achieved with pupils of all ages and abilities. The use of artists' reconstructions, historical fiction and academic texts are just three equally valid ways through which to develop pupils' understanding of interpretations of history. Indeed, an important learning point must surely be that the validity of an interpretation does not depend on the type of interpretation. Academic historians with particular ideological positions, can be just as problematic as Hollywood producers with dollars in their eyes. Helping pupils to understand that interpretations of history differ because of the nature of the evidence, the different values placed on evidence or the nature of the various audiences for history, are challenging, but rewarding aims for history teachers. If our history courses instil a respect for evidence, open pupils' minds to different views and

train them in critical evaluation, we are surely providing valuable learning experiences for citizens in open and democratic societies.

## **Interpretation of historical facts in history textbooks in Norway**

**Ms Mette MOLLAND**

I very much appreciate being invited here. I find it very interesting. Norway is a small country on the outskirts of Europe, and without really knowing I will guess there are quite a lot of differences between my country and your country Kalmikiya. On the other hand, I fully understand the approach to the problem of historical interpretation as it is presented in the invitation to this seminar, and I consequently feel that these questions are relevant to all who work with history, which is what we all have in common here at this seminar.

In my invitation I am asked to comment on “*Interpretation of historical facts in history textbooks for present-day secondary schools in Norway: The overview of a publisher*”. Well, I am a historian and an editor in Gyldendal, Norway’s largest publishing house, and I have for more or less 15 years been working mainly with textbooks in history and social studies for the upper secondary level. My main task now is to develop a new concept of history textbooks for this school level, where we will try to change the way of presenting history, both by emphasising different parts of history - other historical facts - than what tradition “dictates” to us, but also by bringing a certain historiographical perspective into it, by letting the author’s - the historian’s - voice be heard. This is a way of telling the pupils - and maybe the teachers - that history *is* interpretation, someone is actually there, choosing what to write.

I work in a private publishing company, and our strategy has two aims. We want to make textbooks of high quality, not only in design and equipment, but also in content, which means how we present history and how it is put into a good pedagogical context. We also want to contribute to the renewal of textbooks, and in this way bring further history as a school subject. But at the same time we have to sell books, because this is essential for a publisher. And here lies our dilemma; if we make books that are too similar to what already is out there, nobody will find any reason to change, and, if our books are too different, it is hard to make teachers buy them, because then they have to rethink their way of teaching and what they have believed for many years. - In other words: They have to rethink their interpretation of historical facts.

So what has this to do with “interpretation of historical facts”? A lot I would say. There exist some “historical facts” in Norwegian tradition that have a great significance on how history has been written in my country. Norway has no recent history of violent conflicts or civil war. Our culture has been developing in a context of peace, growing wealth and growing democracy. Openness and participation are two important sides of our society, and in this political climate there has been little need of either manipulating historical facts or denying them. There is one exception from this general picture, and I will come to that

at the end of my presentation. The discussion of the interpretation of historical facts when it comes to my country is a discussion about how these may be used to promote certain ideologies, how they have been used to present Norway and Norwegians as a nation, and, in the school context, also how the Western European region has been emphasised as the world's main source of progress and development, and the supplier of civilization to the rest of the world. A bit later I will give you some examples of this kind of interpretation.

First I will draw attention to what is typical of the situation of history in Norwegian upper secondary schools today. History suffers from a lack of motivation, which grows as new groups of pupils enter school, often with a great deal of skills in using electronic equipment. Young people today, in Norway as in other countries, live in a world becoming more and more globalized, and they don't feel any particular need of defining their national roots and traditions. Norway has been an independent national state for nearly 100 years, with - as I said - a rather peaceful history both before and after our independence. The need of identification for children and young people in my country today often lies elsewhere, and I believe that the main task for history textbooks now is to explain relations, structures and continuity and how the world has developed into what we experience today through television, newspapers and the Internet.

The way in which history is taught in Norway today, I believe makes it appear as a closed room that the pupils are allowed to look into before it is shut and put behind. Very few find that history concerns them, and this is strongly enhanced by the fact that an increasing number of pupils in upper secondary school in Norway have their background from outside Europe.

The teachers have a rather high average age; most of them have worked as teachers for nearly 30 years. These teachers bring into the classroom textbooks written more than 20 years ago by other teachers who were then young and progressive. In my country, there is actually one set of textbooks, which has dominated the market since the early 80s. These textbooks have more or less defined the standard of history teaching for nearly a generation in Norway. The books present history chronologically from pre-history until today, with a rather heavy focus on national history, and "spiced" with anecdotes and details. It is difficult to find a general idea that may be traced through systematic historical lines and perspectives, and these books are characterised by the fact that they are written not by professional historians, but by people who were students in the 70s and who present the historical facts they studied and were lectured on then. These books do not promote the idea that the way you present or interpret historical facts is connected to what you want to say with history. If you want to emphasise national history, the interpretation of facts will be different than if you want to focus on global history. To choose *not* to mention certain facts at all is also a kind of interpretation that has to be understood in the present context.

And here I return to my dilemma as a publishing editor. I find myself stuck between on the one side the historians who are actually working on history as a science and who definitely are the best to present historical lines, structures and continuity, and on the other side the teachers, who often studied history long ago with a different focus, and who very often believe that what they *then* learnt were essential historical facts, and remain so forever. We may end up in a situation where teachers believe that what we present is “wrong”, because they may not find what they expect.

I will give you a quite recent example: in my work with the developing of a new set of history textbooks, I have chosen professional historians as writers. To give them corrective, I have picked out some experienced and qualified teachers as consultants. One of these authors is now writing about the period from the end of the middle ages to modern times. One of the main aims of this project is to present Norway as a part of Europe, and Europe as a part of the rest of the world. We want to bring a much more global perspective into history than traditionally. And everybody in my project agrees to that - at least in theory. A few weeks ago, we sent some 50 new written pages to the consultants, covering the period from the 14<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> Century. One of them returned it quickly, with the message that he didn't know how to read it, “Because the Renaissance is missing”. For him, the importance of the European Renaissance in the development of world history is a historical fact beyond any discussion. If it is not presented in the way it has always been, the text has no meaning for him. This is a big problem, and an example of how difficult it is not to provoke teachers who believe in what they once learnt, and at the same time supporting historians, who work with these questions and whose main aim is developing and finding new perspectives in history.

In this case, my author claims that The Renaissance in Europe as a new school of art and a new way of thinking concerned only a few privileged people in the period, and that it has been given too much significance in Western history writing. He means that the main impact the Renaissance had on society was on the development of military strategic thinking and the way of organising military units - because at the same time West Europe was turning into a state of war and as a result of that a new - more modern - way of organising societies. What he really finds important in the period, in a global perspective and in our concept, is when Europeans leave Europe and meet other civilizations. To focus on The Renaissance instead is rather Eurocentric and not a part of our concept.

I agree with my author, but at the same time I realise that our main challenge is to present our ideas to the teachers before launching the books, and to have the discussion before and not after. This is an example of a rather current conflict about the interpretation of historical facts - and I can give you more. There is one “icon” in Norwegian history, and that is the history of the Vikings. To talk

about “Norwegian Vikings” is in itself a problem, since they ravaged parts of Europe long before the concept of “Norway” or “Sweden” had any meaning. But the historical fact of the Vikings is so important in our national image, and over centuries they have become historical “heroes”, a unique part of our history of the period. Pupils on all levels learn about them, they find traces of local Viking heroes where they live, the more advanced learn how to build Viking ships from interactive tools on the Internet, school classes visit a museum containing two Viking ships found a little more than 100 years ago - and which today are a quite central aim for all tourists who visit Norway. Abroad Norwegians are still identified with the Vikings. The Viking period is an indisputable historical fact, but what about the interpretation of it?

In our new history textbook, one of our concepts is presenting our national history as a part of European history. In this context, the impact of the Vikings changes. They lived in a period when Germanic tribes acted violently like this all over Europe. There is little difference between continental European tribes on horseback, or other tribes of this violent period; they used whatever conveyance they had, and for the Nordic tribes boats were most convenient. Our “Viking King” Sigurd from the 11<sup>th</sup> Century went to Istanbul, and, in Norwegian history tradition, this fact is interpreted as an enormously important event. In local sources, he is hardly mentioned at all. The problem with this change of focus is that we may upset people who wish to believe that Norway as a nation was a power in history and that we represent - both historically and virtually - the utmost strength and courage, but the realities tell us that Norway during the Middle Ages turned into a Scandinavian outskirts, and for a long time was a Danish colony. During the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, nationalism was growing, and historians were looking for a new Norwegian identity. The myth of the proud Viking was reborn, and turned into another historical icon: *The proud farmer*. In Norway - as in many parts of Europe I believe, there has been a strong focus on the farmer as a central actor in history, a representative of independence and high moral standards, and a carrier of national identity and superior values from the Middle Ages up to our times. In this context, the farmer has been interpreted as a dominating historical force, but this interpretation has mainly a clear political aim.

This brings me to the only *real* political conflict in modern Norway, twice dividing the population into two by referendum: the question of being part of the European Union. Norway today is almost the only European country outside the European Union, and this is clearly linked to the image of the strong, independent Norwegian, who is better off without political or commercial influence from the continent. And as long as this is the dominating interpretation, and as long as 51% of our population identifies himself/herself with this, we will stay outside. And I am afraid these kinds of historical interpretations will survive in textbooks in school as long as they dominate our national self-apprehension.

But I believe we are approaching a change of times. During the next years, we will see a change of generations among history teachers. As I have said, there is a significant gap between the scientific subject of history at universities and the school subject. But the new and young teachers are educated in a history tradition that puts Norway into a different context than what is common today, and with a different focus on structures and global perspectives. They will find the present textbooks old-fashioned, both in their contents and interpretations, and in the way they focus on certain historical facts. I hope this will bring us a stronger correlation between what teachers want to focus on, what pupils find interesting, and what historians occupy themselves with in their research. We hope that our textbooks may close the gap a little, and contribute to bringing the school subject of history a bit further.

**Appendix 4: Letter of the President of the Republic of Kalmikiya  
to the participants of the Seminar**



*Приветственный  
адрес*

ЭЛИСТА

*Участниками*

*Международного семинара Совета Европы  
по реформе преподавания истории в школах  
Российской Федерации*

*Уважаемые участники и гости семинара,  
дамы и господа!*

Сердечно приветствую Вас в связи с открытием собравшегося в Калмыкии представительного форума, желаю Вам успешной работы, а также искренне благодарю Генерального секретаря Совета Европы господина Фредерика Майоля за его решение провести семинар в столице нашей республики - городе Элисте.

Калмыкия - тот регион, в котором радикальные социально-экономические, общественно-политические преобразования происходят на основе глубокого осмысления истории калмыцкого народа и других народов многонационального сообщества. Они пережили трагические, полные драматизма исторические события и испытания, и на рубеже веков являют собой пример твердости духа, мужества, взаимопонимания и великодушия.

В системе образования Калмыкии учителя и учащиеся активно вовлекаются в подготовку учебников по истории и культуре родного края. Преподавание истории становится частью исследовательской и поисковой деятельности педагогов и учащихся. В настоящее время разрабатывается уникальный учебник по истории Калмыкии, начиная с древнейших времен до наших дней.

Концептуальной основой преподавания истории в школах республики является формирование личности, осознающей себя не только представителем этноса, региона, страны, но и гражданином Европы и мира.

С позиции демократических ценностей и идей толерантности история в школе не может быть заменена никакой другой дисциплиной. Ее роль и значение колоссальны. Исторические знания готовят молодежь к самостоятельной жизни в современном противоречивом мире, формируют умение принимать вызовы времени и адекватно действовать.

История не должна восприниматься догматически. Прошлое никогда не может быть воспроизведено с абсолютной точностью, и изучение истории никогда не прекратится.

Мы поддерживаем усилия Совета Европы в области образования и, прежде всего, в признании уникальности истории как предмета, приветствуем новую инициативу Генерального секретаря Совета Европы, которая легла в основу проведения нынешнего семинара, посвященного изучению вопросов интерпретации исторических событий и явлений, истории народов в процессе обучения учащихся.

Уверен в положительных результатах Вашей работы, в том, что семинар поможет делу превращения истории в школе в один из важнейших факторов воспитания новых поколений.

Желаю Вам больших профессиональных успехов, здоровья и благополучия!

Президент  
Республики Калмыкия



С.Илюмжинов

Elista, 25 April 2002

Dear Participants and Guests of the Seminar,

I would like to welcome you to the Republic of Kalmikiya and wish you successful work. I would like also to express my gratitude to the Secretary General of the Council of Europe for his decision to organise the Seminar on “Interpretation of historical facts when teaching history in secondary schools” in Elista.

Kalmikiya is the Republic where economic and social reforms include as an important component education, and, in particular, history education. The population of Kalmikiya who went through a tragic period in its history at the beginning of 21<sup>st</sup> Century and it provides a good example of spiritual strength, mutual understanding and open-mindedness.

Kalmyk teachers are actively involved in the process of writing of new textbooks on local history. A first textbook on Kalmyk history beginning from the early period until our days is under the preparation. The process of learning history is becoming a kind of a research work for pupils.

One of the aims in teaching history in present-day secondary schools is to help the young generation to realise themselves not only as representatives of their republic or country but as Europeans and citizens of the world as well.

From the point of view of the development of such skills as the understanding of the democratic values and first of all tolerance, history plays an extremely important role and cannot be replaced by any other subjects. History should also help young people to find their place in the present-day world and to enable them to respond to the new challenges.

History should not be taught in a dogmatic way. It is a subject which always will be always in the process of development.

We greatly support the initiative of the Council of Europe to organise this Seminar as well as the importance that this Organisation gives to history teaching.

I am sure that the Seminar will provide its input into history teaching in present-day secondary schools and will stress once more the significance of this subject in the preparation of the future citizens.

I wish everybody professional success, good health and prosperity.

With best wishes,

**Kirsan ILUMJINOV**  
President of the Republic of Kalmikiya



