



OBSERVATORY  
ON HISTORY TEACHING  
IN EUROPE

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# TEACHING HISTORY TEACHING PEACE?

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ROOM 9, PALAIS DE L'EUROPE

## CONFERENCE REPORT

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# #HistoryAtHeart





The 3<sup>rd</sup> Annual Conference of the Observatory on History Teaching in Europe (OHTe), held from 30 November to 1 December 2023, took place against a backdrop that underscored its significance. In the context of recent and ongoing events, we could only welcome the choice of theme for the Conference: **"Teaching history, teaching peace?"**. The resurgence of conflicts in regions where we thought historical turmoil was over, coupled with the escalation of sometimes fratricidal wars where control of historical narratives is a major issue, emphasizes the vital role of history teaching in shaping the understanding of future generations. These generations are at the forefront, with temptations of nationalism, amnesia, or distractions of digital technology in increasingly polarized classrooms, each presenting a significant challenge. Teaching history, teaching peace, seems to be self-evident. The role of history teaching has constantly evolved over the decades, from the glorification of national heroes to molding generations of citizens, and today it plays a pivotal role in shaping our societies. History serves as a shield for young people to protect themselves from propaganda, to develop critical thinking and preserve their intellectual freedom. *Volia*, or freedom in Ukraine, will be at the heart of the debates.

OHTe's first general report, presented on the occasion of the Conference, gives an overview of the state of history teaching in the OHTe's 16 member states. It highlights challenges, strengths, and summarises the immense work undertaken since its creation in 2020. The Annual Conference also celebrated a milestone for the OHTe and its enlargement with Ukraine and Switzerland announcing that they would be joining the Observatory from 2024. The two-day conference was also an opportunity for speakers to reflect on the role history education has in preserving democracy, and to commend the Observatory and its positive dynamic. The diverse array of speakers, both in terms of their profiles and institutions represented, made it possible to deconstruct the subject from a multitude of perspectives; the presence of major European and international institutions, foremost among them the EU and the OSCE, lent credibility to the work carried out during these debates.



## #HistoryAtHeart? Young at heart!

Giving a voice to young people is a maxim that resonates like a mantra in the ears of conference participants. Teaching history to young people means confronting them with historical realities, enabling them to better understand scientifically verified facts. After 70 years of peace on the European continent, young people witnessed the outbreak of conflict in Ukraine in February 2022. Despite prevailing



tensions, they found refuge under the canopy of the European home, ensuring a degree of stability. The context of relative peace in Europe poses challenges to teaching about historical and contemporary conflicts and it is the historian's job is to convey the reality of the conflicts while ensuring "*moments of peace in the classroom*", as Jolan Remcsak, a history teacher in Mayotte, points out. Through history lessons, pupils should be encouraged to engage in dialogue and ask questions about the issues facing the world around them. The relationship between education and democracy is not to be underestimated: how can education, and the teaching of history, cultivate democratic values in young people? Arthur Chapman, Professor of History Education at the Institute of Education, University College London, gave some ideas on how to answer this question during his **OHTE Talk**: "*Young people must be included in democracy through history, they must be given the means to understand their institutions, their countries and develop critical thinking skills so that they become enlightened and responsible citizens*". Similarly, Lauren Pray, co-ordinator of the European Students' Union youth panel, stressed that young people "*want to be involved in democratic debates in their own countries and in Europe*". Under no circumstances should their voice be denied.

## Teaching history as a shield against ideologies and totalitarianism

**Ideology, propaganda, totalitarianism:** merely learning the definitions of these words does not imply understanding of their meaning. According to Stéphane Lévesque, Vice-Dean of Research and Professional Development at the Faculty of Education in Ottawa, Canada, "*History has now become a weapon for deploying political agendas and justifying oppression.*" The proliferation of *fake news* poses a significant risk for young people who are susceptible to manipulation. Deconstructing *fake news* encourages multiperspectivity and combats the fabrication of alternative facts and it was in this context that Matjaz Gruden, Director of Democratic Participation at the Council of Europe, evoked Yoda's well-known quote: "*In a dark place we find ourselves, and a little more knowledge lights our way*". There are absolute and verified facts, they are unique, singular and cannot be interpreted in multiple ways. It is essential that students maintain a necessary distance from media narratives to become well-informed citizens. Russia, for example, is creating a narrative of an alternative history through various channels such as television, social networks, and school textbooks. Oleksandra Romantsova, Executive Director of the Centre for Civil Liberties in Kyiv, Ukraine, also reminded us of the importance of scrutinizing the discourse emanating from Moscow, stressing that it should be questioned by the West just as critically as it is by the Russian population.



## Historical sites and testimonies at the centre of attention

**History sites and testimonies** have a profound influence on our vision of the past and its teaching. Although this aspect only receives partial addressing in the first general report on history teaching, the depth of debates over the two days significantly enriched the report.

Timothy Garton Ash, Professor of European Studies, strongly encouraged young people to "*Experience*" by immersing themselves in stories, letters and artefacts. It is through such experiences that history becomes more tangible and it is through the individual narratives, told by first-hand witnesses, that elevate history from 'h' to 'H'. To illustrate this, Timothy Garton Ash reminded the audience of his father's accounts of the Second World War, which vividly depicted the hell experienced by soldiers. Similarly, historical sites that bore witness to the horrors, now offer a tangible dimension to learning, exemplifying multiperspectivity in practice.

## Over and above the issues of substance, there is the question of form: pedagogy is an essential part of teaching history

**The role of teachers** quickly emerged at the heart of the debate. Their role is both difficult and crucial, as they grapple with various issues in relation to their students, such as an obsession with marks, the sensitivity of certain subjects, and parental absence. Steven Stegers, Executive Director of EuroClio, stressed the importance of pedagogy and professional ethics to avoid authoritarianism in the classroom. During the debates, the responsibility of governments in shaping educational systems was also raised, especially in relation to the lack of resources for teachers, teacher training, regular and politically-motivated changes to curricula and, most seriously of all, the abandonment of teachers in dramatic cases such as those of Professors Paty and Bernard. Jolan Remcsak, a history teacher from Mayotte, France, revealed that "Every lesson is a miracle" - a case that is certainly unique but also highlights the abandonment to which teachers are subjected. According to Steven Stegers, history teachers must "arouse students' curiosity and answer their questions", and Alan McCully, Researcher in Education in the United Kingdom, history teachers should "subscribe to democratic values". Ana Radakovic, a doctoral student in history teaching, also stressed the need for history teachers to exchange ideas, so that they do not remain in a bubble. Looking to the future, Ana Radakovic advocated going beyond formal programmes, encouraging genuine historical reflection, making ourselves accessible to teachers and asking them what they need.

## At the heart of teaching is the question of textbooks

During the conference, it was revealed that **80% of teachers use a textbook** as part of their history teaching practice. This significant statistic suggests that we should not underestimate the importance of textbooks in studies carried out by the OHTE. However, this brings a significant number of challenges issue, starting



with the question of political orientation of publishing houses. Dilek Latif, a member of the OHTE expert group, highlighted the use of textbooks to transmit nationalist perceptions, describing them as "*weapons of mass destruction*". The critical elements and unbiased language provided by textbooks are nonetheless essential, and Dilek Latif welcomed the fact that the majority of OHTE member states make them an important source of teaching. Then there is the question of the digital divide: is the paper format suitable for a hyper-connected generation? François Da Rocha, Vice-Chairman of the French History and Geography Teachers' Association, hopes that paper will endure, but the popularity of digital sources seems to be jeopardising this hope. Sarah Costa Feio, a Portuguese student and representative on the youth panel, pointed out that "*there are other ways of learning: we now need to know how to look for relevant information online*". These new ways of learning go beyond textbooks and broaden the scope of historical analysis among young people. Finally, Igor Kakolewski, a Polish history teacher, highlighted the diverse nature of classrooms, advocating for textbook adaptation to accommodate this reality. Two examples were used: the inclusion of religious topics and the need for transnational teaching to reflect different societies; and the issue of regional history, in particular in areas that have been influenced by different cultures and languages. Additionally, the heterogeneous nature of classrooms also raises the question of how to integrate minorities into textbooks and teaching in general. Irina Krasnicka, Head of the OSCE Documentation Centre, articulated this point perfectly in her final speech.



## Teaching history is first and foremost a relationship with the truth

In his address, His Excellency Pap Ndiaye, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of France to the Council of Europe, stressed that the link between **history and peace** was not always obvious. History is a relationship

with reality, and its teaching does not inherently ensure peace. In this respect, His Excellency Pap Ndiaye referred to the importance of the truth and the challenges it faces from populist political forces and authoritarian regimes, which both have a problematic relationship with reality, citing the example of Katyn and its manipulation. As a guardian of history, the Observatory's mission is therefore to defend a system of truth. While clearly dissociating the teaching of history from that of peace, His Excellency Pap Ndiaye concluded by suggesting that a truthful approach to history is paramount to achieving peace. This raised the question of whether certain subjects that use war, particularly in the context of nationalism, should be taught, resulting in the speakers' advocacy for seeing history as a discipline free from ideological discourse, promulgating the relationship between history and truth. Timothy Garton Ash, Professor of European Studies, warned against the temptation for academics to politicise history, reaffirming that the historian's job is to seek the truth.

## Is teaching history the same thing as teaching peace?

**Teaching history is not just about teaching peace.** However, history must be used as a tool to achieve lasting peace and this subtle nuance is crucial. Therefore, if students were solely taught the history of peace,

they would simply not be studying history. The Observatory's work, aimed at presenting factual insights, therefore takes on its full meaning. It therefore transcends mere report production as its purpose is to help all of those involved in education on the European continent cultivate enlightened citizens who comprehend the world through the lens of history. The intentions of Switzerland and Ukraine to join the Observatory from January 2024 attest to its commendable efforts and relevance. These additional memberships promise highly constructive exchanges with new perspectives in OHTE's scientific work. According to the Ambassador of Georgia, Her Excellency Tamar Taliashvili, *"The very essence of history is to be found in our vision, in our current attitudes and in our relationship with the future."* The representatives of the European Union, national diplomats, and international organisations such as the OECD and UNESCO, also expressed strong support for Observatory during the closing panel. Their speeches underlined the enthusiasm for the Observatory's initiatives and the high expectations placed on future scientific debates and reports.

