



OBSERVATORY
ON HISTORY TEACHING
IN EUROPE



HISTORY IN CRISISES?

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HISTORY, A SUBJECT IN DANGER

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In recent decades, the Humanities have often been cast aside as disciplines that are 'trivial' or have become 'economically irrelevant' and, therefore, do not serve society as practically as the sciences, law or engineering.¹ Already in the 1960s, J.H. Plumb in his book *Crisis in the Humanities* highlighted that the disciplines in the Humanities, such as History, are presented as being of little use to our science and technology-based society.² While studying History may be less impactful than the sciences, law and engineering, it is still critical to the basic functioning of society. This short essay will analyse why History, as a discipline, is still relevant to society and why it should be given importance in the basic school curriculum. This will be done by focusing on two areas, the first being the modern-day realities of teaching the discipline, and the second, being my own experiences of studying and working in the sphere of the historical discipline.

In his dissertation, 'Is History Learning in Danger in Secondary Schools? Teaching Strategies to Enhance the Popularity of History amongst Secondary School Students', Stephen Briffa highlights the extent to which the study of History in Maltese secondary schools has declined since the early 1990s, with some Maltese schools having no students choosing to study History and others having between four to six students only.³ This is not to say that attempts were not made to simulate History's importance in the Maltese school curriculum before the 1990s, with Simone Azzopardi and Emanuel Buttigieg highlighting the prominence given to History in Maltese schools after the Second World War. However, they also note that the method of teaching used in the 1960s was more to make children aware of their past, rather than analysing it through critical thinking.⁴ An example of implementing critical thinking and analyses comes from attempts made by local educators like Michael A. Sant, who tried to emphasise the importance of learning these skills through historical study within school curricula in the 1980s. This method and line of thinking was well ahead of its time when compared to the European standard, however, the exclusion of History as an examinable subject at the Junior Lyceum⁵ in the mid-1980s classified History as an unimportant subject in the eyes of parents and students alike, undoing a lot of the work done by educators like Sant.⁶ This ultimately backs the argument put forward by Briffa of the decline of students choosing the subject, both then and now, thereby endangering the subject.

Briffa continues to underline that the Maltese education system is not the only country within Europe to feel the impact of fewer and fewer students taking History, with the United Kingdom also noting a similar situation in secondary schools. Briffa cites a study by W. Stewart which points out that in the UK, after the age of 14, the rate at which History is chosen as a subject has dropped to one in three students.⁷ This drastic fall is because students feel that History, as a discipline, is irrelevant in developing the skills they need for their lives. In their 1975 book, Brit and Nichol claim that the study of History is seen to be "unconnected with the needs of the pupils and, almost by definition, as being of limited value".⁸ This could not be further from the truth! The study of the past and the skills learned when studying History are some of the key skills needed in one's professional life and, contrary to such claims, are a key benefit to society.

¹ David Arndt, *The Two Cultures and the Crisis in the Humanities*, (Ankara, The forum of Public Policy, 2006), 1-2.

² J.H. Plumb, *Crisis in the Humanities*, (London, Pelican, 1964). Arndt, 2006, 1-3.

³ Stephen Briffa, *Is History Learning in Danger in Secondary Schools? Teaching Strategies to Enhance the Popularity of History amongst Secondary School Students*, (Unpublished dissertation, University of Malta, 2011), 1-2.

⁴ Simone Azzopardi & Emanuel Buttigieg, 'Outlines of Maltese History and Grajjet Malta: An Analysis of Representations of Colonialism in Maltese History Textbooks', *Melita Historica*, XVII, 1 (2016), 113-114.

⁵ Traditionally the more elite, government-run secondary schools.

⁶ Azzopardi & Buttigieg, 2016, 114-116.

⁷ Briffa, 2011, 2-3.

⁸ *ibid*, 2011, 9-10. David Brit & Jon Nichol, *Games and Simulations in History*, (London, Longman, 1975).



An outreach slogan that the Department of History at the University of Malta likes to use is 'History takes you places'. The department takes pride in showing how far many of its graduates have gone in their careers over the years after studying History, with graduates going on to work in tourism, media, diplomacy, research, journalism and government agencies like The Superintendence of Cultural Heritage and Heritage Malta.⁹ This is how my journey within the historical discipline unfolded over the last few years; I am now employed with Heritage Malta. While I am still at the beginning of my career, it took me quite a while to reach my goal because of the education system in Malta. Starting in secondary school nearly 12 years ago I was not allowed to choose History as one of my specialisations as I was the only student at Stella Maris College to select the subject in the 2010/2011 academic year. Here, one can see the thought process of pursuing History as an academic subject as irrelevant. Instead of being encouraged to pursue the subject I was denied outright because there were not enough people to make the teaching of the subject economically viable. This outcome ultimately set me back nearly nine/ten years in my desire to study History, as I spent that time jumping through various courses at the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST). It was only when I turned 23 in 2020, that I was able to apply as a mature student at the University of Malta to study for my undergraduate degree in European and Global History, eventually graduating in November 2023. I am now pursuing my Master's degree in European and Global History, through which I continue to improve on these skills. This has not only helped me academically but has also been crucial in many other ways. Perhaps the most important skills I developed were my writing, research and interpreting skills, which I have applied in many other aspects of my life. One tends to think that studying History is all about remembering dates, important people and events, but learning how to critically analyse a historical document opens up new ways of looking at everyday situations.¹⁰ These skills have been useful in my work with Heritage Malta, which involves running many museums and conducting tours of these sites for the general public. While my current work as part of the Visitors' Services Department is not directly tied to my degree, it is clear that the skills learnt during my undergraduate years studying History can be applied to other avenues of life. Studying History is very relevant to society.

It is this last point that we must emphasize, mainly, that History, as a discipline and a subject, is very relevant in the modern day. One must not classify the subject as irrelevant because it does not fit into the description of the 'economic norm' that society is built on today, that being a capitalist society. While disciplines like the sciences, law and engineering are important pillars of our society, our culture and heritage are just as important. In learning to analyse historical documents, ranging from law, medicine, religious texts, accounts, etc, one can transfer those skills to the modern world. Hence, this is why History, as a discipline, should not be cast aside as 'extra' or 'irrelevant', because it truly is not.

⁹ *Studying History - We were not born yesterday*, (Msida, University of Malta, 2024). Retrieved on 13th June 2024 from <https://www.um.edu.mt/arts/History/study/>.

¹⁰ Azzopardi & Buttigieg, 2016, 115-116.



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Luke Gauci is a graduate of the Department of History at the University of Malta, where he read for his undergraduate degree, BA(Hons.) European and Global History with Archaeology, between 2020 and 2023. While reading for his degree, he also worked with AIS Archaeology, conducting archaeological and historical research for Head Archaeologist Mr Vincenzo Cherubini on sites, such as, the Royal Navy Hospital in Mtarfa, Malta. Luke is also very active with the Malta University Historical Society and currently serves as their Events Coordinator. He is currently reading for his MA in European and Global History (by Research) at the University of Malta, where he continues to work on medieval and crusading history under the supervision of Mr Charles Dalli. He currently works for Heritage Malta, as part of the Visitors' Services Department, where among other duties, he conducts tours of the various Roman, Medieval and Early-Modern sites such as Fort St Angelo, the Inquisitor's Palace, St Paul's Catacombs, the Domus Romana, Abbatija Tad-Dejr and others. Luke is also very interested in antiquity, particularly Greek, Roman, and Punic cultures, as well as early modern Mediterranean corsairing conducted by the Maltese and Hospitallers, British railway history and medieval monastic communities.



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