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Austrian Chairmanship
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Strasbourg, 7 April 2014

Conference

“Shared histories for a Europe without dividing lines”

Vienna, 9-10 April 2014

Conference organised in co-operation with Vienna University
in the framework of the Austrian Chairmanship
of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe

Media Briefing

Document prepared by the Secretariat

1. What does this Conference aim to achieve?

This conference is being held to promote and take forward the results of the Council of Europe's four-year, inter-governmental project; 'Sharing histories for a Europe without dividing lines' (2010-14).

It aims to raise awareness of the importance of including this particular type of European history – 'shared histories' – in the national curriculum for all European countries.

This is essential at a time when many European countries are scaling down or threatening to cut the teaching of European history.

Such cuts, in the name of austerity measures, are short-sighted. History education that is reduced to national history can become an instrument of ideological manipulation, propaganda or be used to promote ultra-nationalist, xenophobic or racist ideas. It can help fuel nationalism and ultimately conflict and violence, the financial costs of which alone far outweigh the costs of education. More worrying still is the potential human cost of any conflict.

At a time of economic crisis and insecurity, intercultural dialogue and understanding taught through 'shared histories' are more important than ever.

Key players in education across Europe are taking part in this conference, who will be able to ensure its conclusions are widely disseminated and implemented.

2. What are 'shared histories'?

There are two key elements to shared histories:

- Countries teach and learn about each other's national histories, so students learn that there are many perspectives to history.
- Shared histories also focus on aspects of history that have had an impact across the continent – Europe's common heritage – particularly at points where the various national histories converge, run in parallel and/or conflict.

This teaching approach uses multiple perspectives to reveal history in all its complexity. It avoids prejudices and stereotypes and does not label people from other countries and cultures as 'the other', or, more dangerously, 'the enemy'. It enables young people to see history through a wider prism, which goes beyond national or group interests.

The idea behind shared histories is that this way of teaching European history is essential to enable us to see how other people view the world, to create understanding and avoid conflict.

3. What are the benefits of studying ‘shared’ European histories?

Studying ‘shared’ European histories creates a space for intercultural dialogue and contributes to a culture of co-operation. It shows that Europeans are different; they have different points of view, but share values, traditions, customs, a common geographical space and climate, lifestyle and habits. Looking at history in this way strengthens mutual respect and understanding, social cohesion and responsibility and solidarity. It can help bring peace in a multicultural world.

In particular, it helps students and pupils:

- To understand present-day political and social processes
- To develop inter-cultural communications tools: critical thinking, open-mindedness, tolerance and the abilities to see from another’s viewpoint and to reach independent conclusions – all key transferable skills
- To see through political and other forms of manipulation
- To find their place in multicultural societies and feel they are citizens of Europe and the world
- To contribute to reconciliation, peace building and conflict prevention.

4. What are the results of the ‘sharing histories’ project?

The main outcome of the ‘Shared Histories’ project is a 900-page inter-active **e-book**, a comprehensive European history teaching tool for teachers, teacher trainers, and curricula designers, pupils and their families.

To be launched on 5 May – ‘Europe Day’ – the e-book covers the four themes of the ‘Shared Histories’ project, each selected as being both well-documented and of concern across Europe:

- The Impact of the Industrial Revolution
- The Development of Education
- Human Rights as Reflected in the History of Art
- Europe and the World.

The e-book includes high-speed navigational tools which can be viewed on any device: tablet, phone or computer. It has been produced by an expert team of historians, curriculum designers, authors of teaching materials, history teacher trainers, teachers, museum specialists and representatives of non-governmental organisations.

For each theme, the e-book provides teaching materials, teaching strategies and techniques, academic papers, case studies, background information, source material and links to external sources. Each theme looks at exchanges between countries, parallel developments and conflicts/tensions and is explored through topics such as:

- The study of passports and visas
- How belief systems work
- The legacy of the 1960s today
- How people kept track of time before clocks and watches
- Why totalitarian regimes have tried to control the visual arts.

There are teaching units for pupils aged 8-12, 11-14 and 15-18 as well as for trainee teachers.

It will be available free – on <http://shared-histories.coe.int> – in English, with certain elements in French. Governments are invited to fund the translation of the e-book into their national languages.

It will be also be used for the European Parliament’s House of European History, to be opened in January 2015.

5. Why the timing of this Conference is important

This conference comes at an important moment. 2014 is both the 100th anniversary of the outbreak of the First World War and the 60th anniversary of the Council of Europe’s European Cultural Convention.

It is a time to think about the millions of people who died in WW1 and the reasons why. It is a moment to learn from history. Significantly, the First World War turned out not to be the war ‘to end all wars’ as had been hoped; it was instead followed by atrocities of even greater magnitude a few years later. The widely-held conviction that this must never happen again led to the creation of the Council of Europe in 1949 and paved the way, in 1954, for the European Cultural Convention.

The European Cultural Convention aims to ensure peace across the continent, recognising that the road to peace passes through education and culture. It stresses the importance in particular of the teaching of history and languages. It recognises the power and potential dangers which lurk in feeding people a diet of exclusively national history.

6. What happens next?

The Council of Europe’s next project on history education will deal with the provision of high-quality teacher training for history teachers, in recognition of the importance of their role. It will focus on the development of democratic competences and social responsibilities.

7. How do ‘shared histories’ help tackle future challenges?

A key challenge today is how to stop the misuse, appropriation and nationalisation of history. The teaching of shared histories helps, by preventing ignorance and giving pupils and students both the knowledge and analytical tools they need to see through manipulation.

As European societies become increasingly multicultural, complex and mobile, another challenge for education is to ensure students and pupils acquire the competences they need to handle cultural diversity and to be able to respect and understand people from different cultures.

The teaching of shared histories plays a crucial role in building and maintaining Europe’s democratic culture.

8. Can you teach shared histories in countries which have recently experienced or which are experiencing conflict?

This is of course a challenge for teachers, but does not need to be an obstacle. The whole point of teaching shared histories is to bring people together and overcome division. Disagreement may, in fact, be productive for understanding the past.

The Council of Europe pays particular attention to post-conflict areas, working on the need to overcome stereotypes and to build a shared narrative, which includes different perspectives. For example, within the ‘Shared Histories’ project, teaching materials on Cypriot history have been prepared by educators working across the divide for the first time: *A Look at our Past*.

9. Given that 2014 is the centenary of the outbreak of WW1, why hasn’t WW1 been selected as one of the four project themes?

The e-book does not cover WW1, but does look at an aspect of WW2, the art work and lives of Jewish children living in the Terezin ghetto and concentration camp.

However, history, especially national history, can sometimes be limited to the study of wars, conflicts and political events, which can give young people the message that this is what history *is* or that only these events are important.

It is essential to define history widely, to include social, cultural, economic and scientific history, which the Council of Europe has done in this project and its e-book.

It is also important to include different groups of people, including marginalised groups, such as minority groups and migrants. For example, history has frequently been reduced to the study of the exploits, usually battles won, of ‘great men’.

The e-book therefore looks at the consequences of the industrial revolution for women and children, for example, and the art work of Jewish children in Terzin.

10. Key Council of Europe documents

- 2001 Committee of Ministers Recommendation: *History teaching in twenty-first-century Europe*
- 2011 Committee of Ministers Recommendation: *Intercultural dialogue and the image of the other in history teaching.*
- 1996 and 2009, Parliamentary Assembly Recommendations: *History and the learning of history in Europe* and *History teaching in conflict and post-conflict areas.*

These documents reflect the changes which have taken place in Europe since the late 1990s, beginning with the fall of the Berlin Wall. They also reflect the effects of the on-going process of globalisation, which in all the Council of Europe's 47 Member States made it increasingly important to understand the role of education in managing diversity democratically.

They emphasise that history teaching in the new millennium should:

- Unite people rather than divide them
- Be a tool to support peace, reconciliation, tolerance and understanding when dealing with migration and immigration
- Reflect the historical picture in its full complexity, without creating images of an enemy
- Use multiperspectivity and present different points of view
- Eliminate prejudice and stereotypes
- Use innovative methods based on dialogue
- Play a vital role in the training of responsible and active citizens and in developing respect for all types of differences within a democratic society
- Help the young generation develop their intellectual ability and resistance to manipulation, to analyse and interpret information critically and responsibly, especially when dealing with controversial and sensitive issues
- Encourage people of different cultural backgrounds to co-operate and thereby build mutual understanding, confidence and trust.