

# DOSSIER - WAR AND PEACE. TEACHING HISTORY IN THE LIGHT OF TWENTIETH CENTURY TRAGEDIES

## Introduction. Teaching history and learning to think critically

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The century which has just finished was marked by intense and continuous global violence. The century's progress was associated with wars which altered the way populations developed and turned individual and collective lives upside down<sup>1</sup>. This bloodstained century was also the backdrop to a major rethink on the use of violence which led to discussions on many subjects. Education and its effects has an important place in these discussions<sup>2</sup>. Indeed, until recently, educational practice, especially in schools, had much more than a secondary role to play in the acceptance of violence as an inevitable factor of living in a community. It was used to reinforce one's awareness of nationality, one's sense of identification with the homeland and inevitably led to the perception that, on a scale of values, the homeland occupied a higher position than all other nations. Taught history was particularly susceptible to political ideologies and served, along with geography, to build a collective consciousness that required a lot of certainty and little (or no) critical sensibility.

Is school a place where you can be taught to think? Or is it still at risk of being, as it has been for centuries, a place of preparation and adjustment to a context which has already been clearly set out in its entirety? The history of teaching clearly demonstrates that if the national-patriotic (or ideological-political) aims of education prevail they can only do so at the expense of thought and of learning to reason<sup>3</sup>. Ambiguous and dangerous concepts then emerge. The first of these concepts was race; this started circulating in schools in late nineteenth century Europe. The ideological argument gained substance from

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Robert Conquest, *Reflections on a Ravaged Century*, New York and London, Norton, 2001; Marcello Flores, *Tutta la violenza di un secolo*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 2005; Gabriel Jackson, *Civilization and Barbarity in 20th Century Europe*, Amherst, Humanity Books, 1999.

<sup>2</sup> Consider, for example, the work of Maria Montessori (*Peace and Education* by Maria Montessori, Geneva, International Bureau of Education, 1932).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Giuliano Procacci, *Carte d'identità: revisionismi, nazionalismi e fondamentalismi nei manuali di storia*, Roma, Carocci, 2005.

historical, geographical, cultural and, increasingly, from biological factors which established it as being immutable and undeniable<sup>4</sup>.

Using careful selection, a smooth, uniform history (and geography) were thus constructed. There were no ambiguities: everything was black or white, whether in school textbooks or hanging on the classroom wall with all the power of cartography's supposed objectivity<sup>5</sup>. Whenever politics becomes involved in teaching history, schoolbook writers leave out the most controversial parts (sometimes simply to avoid any possible problems). They adopt a politically correct, smooth and non-disruptive narrative which, above all, is not open to conflicting interpretations and not considered potentially dangerous. This is particularly true when we are dealing with the pain and suffering of the recent past and experiences which are still in the generational memory. History which is made by or with the witnesses is not free from interpretation and ambiguity; it may even involve censorship and self-censorship.

This means that in all these cases school acts as a "transmission chain", passing on behaviours and attitudes, rather than acting as a place for cultural development. However, it also means something more, something very important: there is an inherent difficulty in studying history which cannot be easily "purified" and rendered objective through an established method or with a theoretical alternative. We must accept the challenge posed when the historian, and likewise the teacher, is fully involved in a path of historical construction which brings emotional and abstract forces into play as well, both on a personal and a community level. A historical dialogue and real debate between the different points of view is possible if it takes place, with logical and argumentative rigour, around such methodological pillars as the verification of reports, a comparison of the sources and the use of multiple of source types.

Although taught history (and the teaching of history) were quite obviously involved in ideological pressure, it should not be thought that academic history was an exception. In fact, there have always been some controversial aspects of the link between political issues and historical research. These become apparent in some historical periods (e.g. during dictatorships) but in reality they are always present. Academic history's undeniable advantage is

<sup>4</sup> Cf. for example, Gianfranco Bandini (eds), *Manuali, sussidi e didattica della geografia. Una prospettiva storica*, Florence, Florence University Press, 2012; Denis Blondin, *The apprenticeship of racism in the school manuals*, Montreal, Agence D'Arc, 1990; Alessandro Burgio, *L'invenzione delle razze. Studi su razzismo e revisionismo storico*, Rome, Manifestolibri, 1998; Alessandro Burgio, (ed), *Nel nome della razza. Il razzismo nella storia d'Italia 1870-1945*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2000; Gerard Giordano, *Twentieth Century Textbook Wars. A History of Advocacy and Opposition*, New York, Peter Lang, 2003.

<sup>5</sup> Edoardo Boria, *Cartografia e potere. Segni e rappresentazioni negli atlanti italiani del Novecento*, Torino, UTET, Università, 2007; Id., *Carte come armi. Geopolitica, cartografia, comunicazione*, Roma, Edizioni Nuova Cultura, 2012; Mark Monmonier, *How to Lie with Maps*, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 1996, second edition.

- and although not an exclusive one it is extremely relevant - the established international dimension<sup>6</sup>. The following pages also bear witness to this. It is the international dimension, composed of contacts between academics and scientific communities, which allows us to focus on history as a network of relationships between stories and to emphasize its essential plurality. It allows us to understand the close relationship which exists between history and learning to think<sup>7</sup>.

This *monographic Dossier* brings together some speeches that were presented at the 2<sup>nd</sup> IRAHSSE Conference, *International Research Association for History and Social Sciences Education*, which took place in Switzerland in 2014 (University of Freiburg, 1-14 September 2014). This was an extremely interesting meeting between scholars of different nationalities which produced many original studies. The association is indeed strongly committed to supporting the debate around the social sciences and never forgets the teaching and educational dimension. This leads to continuous reflection on many aspects of research; in particular, on the relationship between the past and the present and the public use of history and also on the importance of making a history of our time<sup>8</sup>.

The articles examine in depth some aspects of specific contexts with characteristics which the historian must, of course, analyse in their particular context. However, there are common aspects relating to the representation of the past, especially when issues connected to national identity are brought into play. Snježana Koren (University of Zagreb), for example, analyses the complicated relationship of Croatian politics with twentieth century history teaching, starting from the 1941-1945 war in Yugoslavia. The model structure of the school textbook, which she presented, had indeed a very broad and general application and is offered as a transnational model:

*“Lessons about the war are primarily used as a tool of promoting patriotism through strong and emotional language, detailed descriptions of battles and military victories, and portraits of war heroes that are offered to students as role-models.”*

The analysis of Maguelone Nouvel-Kirschleger (Paul-Valéry University, Montpellier) and Steffn Sammler (Georg-Eckert Institute, Braunschweig) focuses on a somewhat similar theme: memory and history of the First World War in school textbooks on both sides of the Rhine. An event which, through

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Futao Huang, Martin J. Finkelstein, Michele Rostan (eds.), *The Internationalization of the Academy: Changes, Realities and Prospects*, New York - London, Springer, 2013; Ilaria Porciani, Lutz Raphael (eds.), *Atlas of European historiography: the making of a profession, 1800-2005*, Basingstoke, Palgrave MacMillan, 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Piero Bevilacqua, *Sull'utilità della storia: per l'avvenire delle nostre scuole*, Rome, Donzelli, 2000.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. François Bédarida, *Le temps présent et l'historiographie contemporaine*, “Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire” 1/2001 (n. 69), pp. 153-160; Catherine Nicault (ed.), *Dossier: Histoire du temps présent*, “La revue pour l'histoire du CNRS”, 9, November 2003.

its stages and its difficulties, shows the consensus method being overcome (in use since the beginning of the experiment, in 1951) *“in favour of a discussion of divergent points of view between historians and encouraging new practices of teaching in the classroom”*. The emphasis is therefore placed not so much on achieving a history shared by all but on learning activities which emphasise, instead of political and general aspects, the harshness of existence, the spread of violence and the effect that the suffering had on the population.

Research by Marc Van Berkel (Erasmus University, Rotterdam) addresses the issue of representations of the Holocaust within Dutch schools through a thorough analysis (from 1960 to 2010). The picture which emerges is of a teaching profession struggling to find the words and especially the pictures for communication with the students. In some cases, the actual linguistic choices, such as the use of the passive voice, hides both the suffering of the victims and the responsibility of those who caused it:

*“In relation to responsibility for the persecution of the Jews in the Netherlands, the used language in the textbooks is often passive: Jews were isolated, they were forced to wear the yellow star of David, they were expelled from public life”*.

Stefano Oliviero (University of Florence) moves away from textbooks to address a neglected issue: the presence of partisans in Italian classrooms, acting as eyewitnesses of the liberation war and its key narrators. The research, using oral sources, allows us to get an insight into the ex-combatant community, of their role as teachers and their communication styles and of the historical interpretation which emerges from their work. This often has a political connotation.

Finally, the essay by Paolo Bianchini (University of Turin) shifts the focus onto a subject which appears to be different from those previously examined but, in reality, goes hand in glove with the pressures of politics, ideology and the needs of *nation building*. It tackles, in fact, the issue of migration and how it is described in school textbooks. Non-European nations are constantly presented to young people as “conquered lands”: that is, they are presented as a business opportunity or the reason for war, two aspects that share the same logic of domination and which are indeed bound together in the violent events of colonisation.

In conclusion, the contents of the essays, which are only briefly mentioned here, may constitute an exercise in reflection useful not only for analysing the past but also for a critical assessment of the present; something teaching must always be able to do.