History at the mercy of politicians and ideologies: Germany, England, and the Netherlands in the 19th and 20th centuries

ARIE H. J. WILSCHUT

The paper analyses and compares developments in history teaching in Germany, England, and the Netherlands in the 19th and 20th centuries. The development of history teaching in the three countries shows striking similarities. National politics have always used history education for purposes which did not necessarily tally with distanced critical thinking, carefully balanced judgements, and a striving for unbiased interpretations. In the two centuries described here, only the decades of the 1960s and 1970s have been different. Then politics and society scorned a subject which was so clearly unfit for a ‘modern age’. Attempts were made to eliminate history from the school curriculum. As a consequence, history educators adopted a defensive position and a new type of history teaching emerged, which put critical and distanced thinking at the centre. Because politics had turned its back on history, it was possible to develop a vision of history teaching which did not serve any preconceived political aim but took historical thinking as such as its point of departure. During the 1980s and 1990s, the old recipe of forging nations was revived and traditional curricula were once more brought to life.

Keywords: citizenship; educational history; history instruction; national curriculum; national standards

Introduction

The nation’s past played an important role in the creation and self-conscious positioning of the new nation-states of the 19th century, and the rise of history as an academic study has been closely related to the growth of nation-states (Kocka 1977: 15, Marsden 1989, Grever 2007a). As a consequence, history entered the school curricula of European states with very specific purposes. Political education and ideology were predominant in almost...
every case, as will be illustrated by the following discussion of developments in Germany, England, and the Netherlands.

A comparison across three European nations enables us to distinguish similarities and differences, and thus to determine whether developments in history education have been specific to a nation or part of a universal development. These three countries have been selected because in Germany, as well as in England (and the English-speaking world in general), there is a well-developed academic discipline of ‘history education’. However, the two academic communities developed more or less independently without much knowledge of the other.\(^1\) The Netherlands was influenced from the English as well as from the German side and can therefore be seen as a bridge between the two worlds.

**Developments until the 1960s**

**Germany**

In the German case, formal, government-regulated history emerged at an early stage in the formation of the school systems—in Prussia entering the curriculum of city elementary schools in 1763. The motives seem to have been moral and enlightened rather than nationalistic: history was to strive for ‘the understanding of things which belong to the beatitude of human society’ (Ebeling 1965: 19–20; my translation). However, when the course of history led to the French Revolution, the Prussian authorities did not consider this a suitable topic for teaching. There was the danger that revolutionary ideas about general rights of man would be discussed in schools (Toebes 1976: 211). The common man should stay in his own life-circle; history teaching had to be limited to the fatherland’s past and pursue no other aim than love and devotion for the home country and its rulers (Ebeling 1965: 20). In this way, the tone was set which was to resound countless times during the 19th century in ever more pregnant forms.

After the foundation of the German Empire in 1871, its citizens had to be educated as ‘good’ Germans. In a methodology book published in 1889, the author (G. Rusch [1889]; quoted in Ebeling 1965: 16) saw the value of history as consisting of its contribution to insight into human nature and into moral education, its encouragement of noble deeds, its enrichment of life experience and judgement, and above all to the creation of a patriotic spirit. Rootless (‘fatherlandless’) social democrats, said Rusch, unscrupulously trifled with the pillars of civilization and culture. History education could do something about that by building public spirit, the readiness to sacrifice, loyalty to friends, respect for the ruler and for tradition, and by planting the virtues of the German people into the hearts of the young. Periods of growth should be discussed more extensively than periods of decline; and crimes, the names of which were barely known to pupils, should not be discussed at all. Emperor Wilhelm II himself expressed his views on history education in a Supreme Order issued in 1889 (quoted in Ebeling 1965: 20): schools had to teach children that the social democratic doctrine was not only contrary to divine commandments and Christian morals, but in reality also inoperable

Downloaded By: [Universiteit Utrecht] At: 12:06 29 October 2009
and pernicious in its consequences. Only the power of the state was capable of protecting the individual’s family, freedom, and rights. Young people had to learn how Prussia’s kings had been involved in this from the reforms of Frederick the Great to the present.

In 19th-century German writings, e.g. in Rusch’s text, as well as such nationalistic and political-ideological aims, we can identify concerns with insight into human nature and the creation of ethically acting humans. This preoccupation reflected a long tradition in history education, dating back to the Renaissance, a period which stressed history’s importance. Comenius for instance described history as:

> the most beautiful part of education, because it entertains the senses, stimulates imagination, ornaments education, enriches language, improves judgement and silently educates comprehension. (quoted in Toebes 1976: 205; my translation).

Aims of this kind continued to play a role through the 19th century, but they were more and more supplanted by nationalist ideology. Nationalism culminated in the period around the First World War. As a 1914 methodology book (A. Rude; quoted in Glöckel 1973: 17) puts it: ‘In the first place, history education should strive for a real, decidedly German spirit. If this is not achieved, it has failed its most splendid goal’ (my translation). There had to be tales of the triumphs of the German people in the past and of German heroes and statesmen, four of whom were mentioned by name: Siegfried, Frederick the Great, Blücher, and Bismarck. Many important inventions, such as printing and the telephone, were the work of Germans. The fact that the legendary hero Siegfried was mentioned next to actual historical personalities and that it is at least debatable whether the invention of the telephone should be attributed to a German, illustrates how wide a gap nationalistic thinking could create between history teaching and historical scholarship.

The Weimar Republic attempted to portray greater respect for historical scholarship (Ebeling 1965: 21). Nevertheless, political aims were still present, albeit now republican aims pursuing republican values. In practice, these were achieved to a much lesser extent than the published school curricula suggest (Huhn 1975). Most textbooks were anti-republican and most teachers were conservative, so the treatment of ‘the great, the heroic, the excellent’ remained strong. Progressive teachers tried to create a kind of education that took the child as its point of departure, based on ‘modern’ psychological and pedagogical findings (‘Reformpädagogik’). Respect for historical scholarship, however, also resulted in overburdening curricula with factual information. This meant that there was little opportunity for a modern pedagogical approach and that most history lessons amounted to rote learning of political facts.  

As is to be expected, during the national-socialist period history education became completely dominated by politics and ideology:

> The German people have to be educated from childhood with the exclusive recognition of the rights of their own national character and children’s hearts should not be poisoned by the curse of our ‘objectivity’ … For one doesn’t learn history only to know what has occurred in the past, but one learns history to find in her a master for the future and for the continued existence of one’s
own national character. This is the aim, and history teaching is just an instrument to achieve it. (Adolf Hitler; quoted in Glöckel 1973: 19; my translation)

Such opinions might seem extreme because they are Hitler’s, but in fact they do not differ essentially from opinions about history teaching we have been reviewing up to this point. They are outspoken that ideological and formative aims are central, even if this is at the expense of what is considered ‘true’ and ‘factual’ in historical scholarship. Rude’s book from 1914 was not very different in this respect.

In post-war Germany, education in the Soviet Zone and later in the German Democratic Republic was a vehicle for the inculcation of communist ideology (Ebeling 1965: 24–27, Glöckel 1973: 20–21), while West Germany faced the task of designing a history education suitable for a free and democratic nation. Ebeling’s description, which up to this point has had the character of a historical retrospective, now turns into a programme embodying what he considers to be desirable (Ebeling 1965: 28–40). He mentions a shift from German history towards universal and world history, in which the German people are granted only its ‘logical position’. Second, he mentions a ‘return to logos’, meaning the introduction of critical and objective thinking which puts historical data into perspective. And third, there were the moral and civic obligations that history education had to meet. It appears to be clear to Ebeling that there could be some tension between ‘logos’ and the aims mentioned as the third category, but he talks himself speedily out of that problem. ‘A return to logos at the same time means a renewed clear moral consciousness’, implying that an orderly human civilization has to confront and defeat the chaos of the world and that values such as truth, righteousness, freedom, human dignity, social responsibility, tolerance, and love are unconditionally valid.

In his treatment of post-war West Germany, Toebes (1981: 38–41, 1987) describes a climate characterized by desperation and a secret hope that history teachers, who had obviously been serving the wrong causes so often, would be silent until further notice. Then he observes, after the allied occupying powers had agreed to a restart of history education in 1949, the appearance of reprints of textbooks from the Weimar period (full of facts and dates, mainly from political history), but also an escape from political history towards culture and anthropology. Both had mainly moral aims, such as we have seen formulated by Ebeling. The study of inspiring examples of people from the past (no heroes and statesmen, but artists, scientists, philosophers, or ‘common people’) was expected to instil in students such virtues as obedience, sacrifice, love, loyalty, truth, careful judgement, and diligence.

The high-minded objectives associated with this new and democratic history education, however, did not prevent a serious crisis in German academic history and history teaching around 1960. German historians observed a feeling of ‘loss of history’, of ‘history weariness’, and of ‘being without history’ (Heuss 1959). This was caused partly by developments which also occurred in other western countries, such as the perception that the social sciences could perhaps provide other, possibly more valuable, options for explaining the world than could history. Historians and
philosophers of history wrote about a world changing so rapidly—that a meaningful relation between past and present seemed ever more difficult to establish. More specific to Germany was the relation to the recent past, a past which was not easy to deal with, especially by the generation then populating the schools. This generation had played no role in what had happened before 1945, but was nevertheless confronted with the question of their guilt in the crimes of nazism. This could result in a turning away from history, as was shown in the results of surveys of secondary school students around 1970 (Wiesemüller 1972). Students came up with remarks like 'I don't care about the old times any more. We are in a different time now' (my translation). A few publications about history education from this period, with titles like ‘History education without a future?’, indicate a similar tendency (Süssmuth 1972). The time allocated to history in the curricula of various German states was reduced to make room for social sciences, and in some cases history was completely absorbed by social studies (Kocka 1977: 11–12). Academic history and history teaching were in a state of crisis.

**England**

In England the introduction of history into school curricula was stimulated by the creation of ‘schools’ of history at the universities of Oxford (1872) and Cambridge (1874). The university schools were not primarily meant to train teachers, but nevertheless provided a steady supply of enthusiastic specialists who could play a role in education (Toebes 1981: 161; Little 1990: 320). As in Germany, history was taught with the purpose, on the one hand, of creating moral and responsible human beings but also, on the other hand, of serving national-political and civic aims. During the enlightened 18th century, the traditional humanistic goals of history teaching were accentuated. In 1763 for instance, a history textbook was published by J. Newbery for his ‘young friends’ in order that they might become ‘wise and happy’ by the example of others, ‘which is the true end of history’. A few years later, William Mavor wrote a collection of biographies for young readers in which he encouraged them to enter ‘the temple of honour by the path of industry and perseverance’ through the study of the lives of exemplary people (Reeves 1980: 2–3). Aims of this type continued to be formulated during the 19th century (Toebes 1981: 161).

Education in England was for a long time controlled by the church and private institutions. Government interference was comparatively late. In 1870 an Elementary Education Act was introduced to provide for schooling of all children in England and Wales over the age of 5 and under 13. This Act, however, concentrated on reading, writing, and arithmetic, not on history. So the inclusion of history in the curriculum had to be fought for and justified—in the words of S. S. Laurie in 1867:

> History is an abuse of time if not used to bring to the schoolboy knowledge of wonderful deeds done in the discharge of patriotism and duty. History could bring us in bold relief the grand characters who through their heroic struggles for right and freedom had gained the privileges we now enjoy and by their great
discoveries had made it possible for England to grow into a mighty empire.
(quoted by Marsden 1989: 513–514)

Patriotism, the good example of noble deeds, and the special role of Britain as a mighty empire—the arguments for history were set.

By 1900, the subject had gained a stable position in the curricula. The Board of Education stated in 1905 that ‘there are strong reasons why an important place should be given to history in the curriculum of every school’ (Sylvester 1994: 9). These strong reasons amounted to insights into the rights and duties of British citizens, an understanding of national character and identity, and a record of the influence for good or for evil exercised by great personalities. Attention was almost completely limited to British, or rather English history, and Scotland and Wales remained out of sight most of the time. In the years around the First World War more and more traits of patriotism, heroism, and even racism became recognizable as a result of imperial developments and social Darwinism (Phillips 1998: 13–14). The horrors of the First World War created some reaction to an exaggerated nationalism, but anglocentrism and patriotism continued to dominate the curriculum: ‘The notion still prevailed that patriotism and imperialism, so long as they were of British variety, were the keys to world understanding’ (Marsden 1989: 522). The traditional aims—‘the instilling of morality or patriotism’—remained virtually intact until the 1960s (Little 1990: 321–322).

Some different trends were also distinguishable. First there was an attempt to promote international citizenship by the League of Nations Union, formed in 1918 under the presidency of Lord Grey, the former British Foreign Secretary. The Union promoted history lessons emphasizing peace and co-operation between nations instead of nationalistic ideals. In the 1930s, however, the influence of the Union declined (Phillips 1998: 13; Aldrich 2006: 164–165). More important from the point of view of the theory of history teaching was M. W. Keatinge’s Studies in the Teaching of History published in 1910 and reprinted in 1913, 1921, and 1927. Keatinge wanted to introduce students to the research methods of the historian and confront them with ‘problems’ to be solved (Aldrich 2006: 160). To put this into practice, he published A History of England for Schools with Documents, Problems and Exercises in 1911 (Keatinge and Frazer 1911). The example of Keatinge was followed in 1927 by F. C. Happold, when he published his pamphlet The Study of History in Schools: as a Training in the Art of Thought.³ History teaching in schools ought to be involved:

[in] the ability to collect, examine and correlate facts and to express the result in clear and vivid form, freedom from bias and irrational prejudices, the ability to think and argue logically and to form an independent judgement supported by the evidence which is available, and, at the same time, the realization that every conclusion must be regarded as a working hypothesis to be modified or rejected in the light of fresh evidence. (quoted by Aldrich 2006: 161)

Other reformers tried to pay attention to social history and diachronic themes such as living, clothing, or transport through the centuries. This was inspired by ‘pedagogical’ motives, as is illustrated by the fact that these curricula were considered mainly suitable for the ‘less able’ (Toebes 1981: 163).
The attempts to modernize history teaching in the period between the two world wars led Aldrich (2006: 165) to contend that the ‘new history’ in the 1970s was not so new: it had all been attempted before. The high-minded ideals of someone like Happold, however, were already being criticized during the 1930s. According to F. R. Worts, headmaster of the City of Leeds School, the Perse School where Happold had conducted his experiments ‘could not be accepted as a normal standard for the average secondary school’ (Aldrich 2006: 163). Instead of a critical study of documents, Wort pleaded for ‘stimulating interest, adding colour and infusing the sense of action and reality’ into history education (Aldrich 2006: 164). The reformers of the inter-war period thus remained exceptions. The mainstream of history teaching continued to concentrate on educating citizens of the UK by means of chronologically-ordered, political English history. The recent past was usually omitted, not only because it was considered ‘not yet real history’, but also because history teaching simply did not serve the purpose of understanding the present, but only to pass on a national heritage (Toebes 1981: 165–166).

As in Germany, history as an academic discipline and as a school subject ran into difficulties during the 1960s. The German book *Verlust der Geschichte* by Heuss (1959) seemed to be echoed by Plumb’s (1970) *The Death of the Past*, although Plumb’s message was subtly different from the German one: ‘The past used to dictate what a man should do or believe; this history cannot do’ (p. 15). Modern historical scholarship, being the rational kind of activity that it is, made people more aware of the strangeness and ‘otherness’ of the past rather than the ties that connect them with their forebears. The ‘lessons’ from the past were less clear than they used to be. ‘Bygone feats, he predicted, would soon cease to justify tyrannous authority, to affirm self-serving manifest destinies, to incite citizens to voice malign vainglory’ (Lowenthal 1998: 90).

So the role of history in society and education had to change, but how? New questions arose about the use of history as a school subject. According to Price (1968) in a frequently quoted paper, its position as a school subject was even endangered. She quoted an enquiry made by the English Schools Council in 1966 which showed that many English students considered history ‘useless and boring’. Not only was the position of the subject in the curriculum in danger, but also its place in the hearts and minds of the students. Many teachers, said Price (1968), were in a state of ‘perplexity and pessimism’ about the status of their subject. The consequences became clear by 1980. A government-sponsored survey showed that history was ‘seriously under-represented’ in primary education and that its position in secondary education was endangered by the rise of ‘integrated humanities courses’. More than half of the English students did not study any history after the age of 14 (Little 1990: 320). In spite of the fact that the roles of the two countries had been opposed during the recent past, utterances by English students were remarkably similar to those of their German counterparts:

> With change proceeding in a nightmare geometrical progression, of what use to me is the experience of people born before the Second World War?
How can anything before the Space Age teach me to cope with it? (Reeves 1980: 3)

Circumstances and arguments in Germany and England were not the same (in Britain for instance, the dissolution of the British Empire played a role in the evermore troublesome message about Britain’s ‘greatness’ (Ward 2004)), but the crises in history and history teaching were comparable.

**The Netherlands**

As in the cases of Germany and England, the influence of the humanistic tradition and the Enlightenment was important in the first stages of history teaching in the Netherlands. In 1799 the Society for the Common Good (Maatschappij tot Nut van het Algemeen) held a competition for the writing of a comprehensible book about ‘fatherland history’ for students. In 1800, a book by Hendrik Wester, a schoolmaster from the northern province of Groningen, was awarded the prize (Wester 1801).

Wester’s textbook was written in the form of a dialogue between a father and his inquisitive children. Human virtues and human experience played a key role. Thus his son, Dorus, reacts to the story of the sufferings of the inhabitants of Leyden during the siege by the Spanish in 1574 by saying: ‘Our little sister Betje is in tears, father! Myself I am also moved by it’. The father replies:

Yes, my dear children. These were the hardships and costs at which the Dutch acquired their liberation from the Spanish yoke! However, they stood firm. We can learn from this how much one can achieve by courage and patience, under God’s blessing. (Wester 1801: 47; my translation)

In the 1857 law on primary education, history was mentioned as an optional subject. The explanatory memorandum mentioned as a goal of history: ‘Arousal of warm patriotism as an element of national education’ (my translation). The explanatory statement to the 1878 education law, which made history a compulsory subject in primary education, treated the subject more extensively:

A complete treatment of fatherland history cannot take place in the primary schools. It is sufficient if children know in which country they live and to which people they belong. Instilling of dates and names which will be forgotten soon after the child leaves school has no use. Only the part of national history that can provide the students with a comprehensible survey of the rise of the Dutch State and make them familiar with the great deeds of their ancestors, by whose perseverance our independent existence was founded under the leadership of Orange, deserves to be treated at large. (quoted in de Jong 1977: 10; my translation)

The national spirit was the main driving force behind the introduction of history as a mandatory subject in the schools in the Netherlands, as it was elsewhere. In addition, the traditional humanistic and enlightened aims remained important: ‘To be happy for themselves and useful for others ..., to be content and grateful’ (Toebes 1976: 207; my translation).
In secondary education, history took its position as a result of the 1863 Education Act, which led to the foundation of the Hogere Burger School (HBS; Higher Burgher School) alongside the already-existing Gymnasium (Toebes 1976: 208, Amsing 2002: 315–316). The history curricula in the Gymnasium and HBS were comparable. In secondary education international ‘general’ history was always part of the curriculum next to national ‘fatherland’ history—as opposed to primary education which only dealt with national history. International history concentrated mainly on political developments in Europe. The objectives were the development of ‘general civilization’, civic education, and an understanding of the present world. Kollewijn, for instance, an influential author of history textbooks meant for use in the HBS, wrote in 1889:

> to be a true human being, to be able to fulfil one’s social and political duties, to live as happily as possible—which is indeed what everyone strives for—one has to understand a minimum of the complicated social and political circumstances of today ... To understand the present to a certain extent, one has to know how it has developed from the past, and yes, there is only one subject that can teach us this: history. (quoted in Amsing 2002: 277–278; my translation)

Moral education was also important, said Kollewijn. Students had to be confronted with abuses as well as with highly elevated moral examples. Students’ exclamations such as ‘That was plucky!’ or ‘That was mean!’ could prove ‘that you have been able to strike the chords of moral consciousness in the minds of the youngsters’ (quoted in Amsing 2002: 279; my translation). Kollewijn had a liberal background.6

Jan Woltjer, a Protestant professor at Amsterdam’s Free University, wrote a collection of ‘essays on gymnasium learning subjects’, where the essay on history (written 1895) expressed slightly different views. It pointed out to the teacher that he should arouse and reinforce ‘hate and disgust, enthusiasm and admiration, courage and confidence, patriotism and love of liberty’ with his students (quoted in Toebes 1976: 229; my translation). Although understanding of the present world seems to have been a more clear-cut aim in Dutch history education than in Germany and England, no more attention was devoted to the most recent past. Recent periods were either not reached in a chronologically-ordered curriculum, or not covered purposefully because they were considered to be not ‘real history’ but more akin to journalism (Toebes 1976: 219–220, Amsing 2002: 259).

In the first four decades of the 20th century there appeared a few would-be reformers of history teaching, such as C. te Lintum, A. de Vletter, and M. O. Albers (Toebes 1976). They felt that the ability of students to comprehend the past should play a more important role in the shaping of history education. The pre-eminence of political history had to be challenged and more attention had to be paid to social and economic history and to the history of ‘the common people’. There was even a plea for the development of critical thinking (by Albers). These attempts at reform, however, were checked by tradition and by straightforward resistance of conservative teachers, mainly those in Protestant and Catholic education (Toebes 1976: 233).
Traditional history education lingered on until crisis struck in the Netherlands, again in the 1960s. A new education act, adopted by parliament in 1963 and taking effect in 1968, implied that history would become an optional subject in senior-secondary education. In junior-secondary education (up to 15) it would remain mandatory, but the number of lessons devoted to it would be considerably decreased. Social studies appeared as a new compulsory subject in senior-secondary education. Pieter Geyl, a professor at Utrecht University, wrote an alarmed article about these developments in a Dutch weekly, stating that the Secretary-General of the Department of Education had told him that ‘he could not attribute too much value any more to a subject like history in a dynamic age like ours’ (quoted in Toebes 1981: 251; my translation). A number of lecturers in history education contritely searched their own consciences. In 1963, they directed a ‘Memorandum concerning present-day practices in history education’ to the Secretary of State for Education, in an effort to undo the changes in history teaching proposed in the new education act: ‘Public opinion, press, commentators on radio and television and official authorities do not always have a favourable opinion about history teaching’. And for good reason. History teaching was inflexible, conservative, and showed an antiquarian interest. The results of all the efforts of teachers were minimal, and besides: most of the knowledge taught was useless ballast (Memorandum 1963). The memorandum continued with the description of a series of new and hopeful developments in ‘modern’ history education, which could make it a useful subject after all. These new approaches could only be realized if there remained a sufficient number of history lessons in the school curricula. This is what the authors wanted to achieve, but they could not undo the proposed changes in the curricula.

Conclusions

The developments in history teaching in England, Germany, and the Netherlands during the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century show a striking similarity, even though their historical circumstances differed. History education invariably served the purpose of creating strong moral personalities and responsibly acting people. The creation of a national spirit was also an important goal in all cases, though nationalism was distinctly less powerful in the Netherlands than in England and Germany, especially in secondary education. In each of the three countries there were pedagogically inspired attempts at reform of history education in the period between the two world wars (German teachers adhering to Reformpädagogik; Keatinge and Happold in Britain; Te Lintum, De Vletter, and Albers in the Netherlands). In each case however the critics remained voices crying in a wilderness of curricula full of factual political history, the names and events of which were memorized.

In each of the three countries, a crisis struck history education during the 1960s. The past did not seem to relate any longer to a modern world changing at an unprecedented speed; the social sciences seemed to yield more than
history in terms of explaining human society (and producing the tools to change it); and the way in which history was traditionally taught no longer appealed to young people. The different experiences during the Second World War did not have a decisive influence on the way the crisis developed in the three countries. Traditional historiography had supported nationalist claims and provided a basis for moral and political education in schools. However, modern scholarship no longer allowed this, as Plumb indicated in his *The Death of the Past*. The demands of humanistic-moral and political education were more and more at odds with the results of modern historical research (Grever 2007a: 57):

It was the purpose of teaching history to produce subjects, later on loyal and responsible citizens, who would absorb—through the study of a highly selective system of historical knowledge—the ideology of history or ‘the’ image of history of the state. Thus history teaching ended up in an objective contradiction with historical scholarship, which boasted freedom to choose its objectives and objectivity as its regulatory ideas. (Bergmann 1976: 3; my translation)

The idea that history ought to be objective and scholarly was uttered now and then, but the discrepancy with the generally pursued aims in education was swiftly downplayed in such cases—at least until the 1960s.

**Responses to the crisis of the 1960s**

In 1970, the Forum of the annual German *Historikertag* (Historian’s day/congress) was devoted to the topic ‘Wozu noch Geschichte?’ (Why history still?). During the winter of 1975–1976 the Gesamthochschule Paderborn organized a series of lectures on the same theme (Oelmüller 1977). Kocka’s (1977) contribution to this series was to examine the functions history could (still) have in a modern society. His starting point was to define the characteristics of a scholarly history such as could flourish in a free democratic society. History suffered losses under dictatorships and authoritarian regimes, said Kocka. Inversely, its contribution to a liberal, free society was essential. It was a contribution that history could only abandon at the expense of its essential self-given task (‘um den Preis ihrer eigenen Selbstaufgabe’; Kocka 1977: 22). Thus, ‘real’ history not only takes advantage of a free society, a free society also takes advantage of ‘real’ history. Real history and a free society are interdependent, so to speak. Kocka tried to derive from the characteristics of scholarly history, such as it essentially is or ought to be in a free society, the functions that it fulfills in such a society. That was an approach fundamentally different from imposing aims on the subject, as had been the custom in the humanistic-educational and nationalist traditions. As we have seen, these objectives were more often than not completely contradictory to the essence of what historical scholarship aims at. The attitude taken up by Kocka foreshadowed the remarkable course history teaching would take during the 1960s and 1970s.
Germany

The functions of history in a free society that Kocka (1977: 24–31) described have to do with the kinds of understanding that only ‘real’ history can produce:

- An understanding of present-day phenomena by means of their origins and development in the past.
- The awareness that there have been many more patterns of human existence than the present pattern, which implies that one’s experience can be broadened enormously through the study of analogous or precisely contradictory situations and developments.
- Critical appraisal of the role played by traditions and myths in society.
- An understanding of the changeability and variability of human societies (including contemporary society), but at the same time an insight into the power of the status quo, implying that changes cannot be made easily.
- The understanding of human nature provided by the study of human societies other than one’s own, societies that have existed in the past.
- The understanding of the complicated connections among all kinds of dissimilar factors in a historical process, unique circumstances playing a role sometimes, but also the role of multi-causality and contingency.
- The understanding of a ‘complete’ image of human activities (other subjects usually only study an aspect of human life).

Why and how these seven functions are essential to a free and democratic society can be imagined without too much effort as we reflect on them. Historical thinking not only shows that things could be different, but also that developments might have taken a different course. Both of these insights enable us to take a more distanced position towards things as they are. In this way, historical thinking opens up options for critical thinking about present conditions and thinking about alternatives, both important for a free and democratic society. History shows that the things people believe in and their values are changeable and relative. People may change their minds; people have thought about things in very different ways, and will continue to do so. This means that present-day views should also be considered as more tentative than they are within the framework of historical thinking. This attitude is essential for an open debate in a democratic society. Kocka deliberately renounced mentioning the shaping of identity as a function of history, precisely because the critical views yielded by a scholarly history are more likely to produce distance from than a feeling of alliance with ancestors from the past.

In this way in Germany, for the first time, the discipline of history itself was taken as the point of departure to arrive at its aims as a school subject—instead of starting with the aspirations of politics and society, even if they were at odds with scholarly history. The aims which were to be pursued in German history education from the 1970s onward were summed up in the concept of Geschichtsbewusstsein (historical consciousness) (Jeismann 1988, Rüsen 1994: 3). In 1974 this concept was defined as follows:
Historical consciousness means the permanent presence of knowing that man and all institutions and types of societies created by him exist in time, which implies that they have an origin and a future, that they therefore do not represent anything stable, unchangeable and without conditions. (Schieder 1974: 78; my translation)

This definition was to be cited by German authors well into the 1990s. It is largely compatible with the functions of history described by Kocka.

German history teaching based on the development of historical consciousness (see, e.g. Kocka 1977, Rüsen 1994), concentrated on selecting content that would be suitable to illustrate the functions of history in a free society. Topics would demonstrate changeability and the power of the status quo; others would show complicated causalities or contingencies; others would make comparisons and/or show analogies and differences. The selection of content was to be no longer a matter of tradition and the transmission of heritage.

*England*

The ‘reform’ of history teaching was oriented around what was called ‘new history’. The ‘new’ history in education tried to pay attention to contents that were not to be found in the traditional political historiography: social history, economic history, local history, world history, summed up in big trends and structures, the daily life of common people, described using categories and concepts from the social sciences.

The ‘new history’ in England was influenced by developments in the US. When, in 1957, Soviet Russia launched its Sputnik satellite, the western world experienced a shock. How could an allegedly backward nation like the Soviets have beaten the richest and most developed nation on earth in the space race? Had they been spying on the Americans? Soon a theory emerged which took up a leading role in the debate: the Soviets beat the US because they had better schools. The weekly *US News and World Report* (24 January 1958) published an interview with historian Arthur Bestor Jr. entitled ‘What went wrong with US schools’:

> We have wasted an appalling part of the time of our young people on trivialities. The Russians have had sense enough not to do so. That’s why the first satellite bears the label ‘Made in Russia’. (quoted in Bracey 2007: 120)

Whether or not there were solid grounds for this assumption, it led to a boost in the efforts to ‘improve’ education. One of the ways to achieve better results in schools seemed to be to consider systematically differentiated objectives for teaching at different levels. By establishing a hierarchy of lower and higher attainment targets, a logically structured curriculum could be designed. Thus, not entirely surprisingly, the Sputnik incident greatly stimulated interest in the Bloom’s (1956) *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives*:

> Federal and private initiatives to the Soviet Union’s ‘first in space’ Sputnik I satellite in 1957 … created a climate of intense national interest in educational objectives and outcomes … Bloom’s *Taxonomy* … filled a gap in the professional literature during these pivotal discussions. (Levin 1999: 47)
In addition to ‘knowledge’ as an outcome of education, Bloom’s Taxonomy distinguished five other, ‘higher’ categories: comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, evaluation. Bruner (1960), another influential educationalist at this time, contended that ‘any subject can be taught effectively in some intellectually honest form to any child at any stage of development’, provided that students were confronted with basic principles and procedures of a subject in an early stage (p. 33). The ‘basic themes that give form to life and literature are as simple as they are powerful’ (pp. 12–13). To use them effectively students were to be confronted with them over and over again in progressively more complex forms. The basics should be returned to on an ever higher level by means of a so called ‘spiral curriculum’ (pp. 52–54).

Bloom’s Taxonomy and Bruner’s precepts confronted history teachers and educators with questions they did not have ready answers to. If ‘knowledge’ was only the first, and lowest, stage in objectives of teaching, after which there were five other categories of objectives to be achieved, what were the implications for history teaching? How could there be a higher level in history other than by memorizing ever more complicated and extensive collections of facts? How could a ‘spiral curriculum’ in history be conceived? What were the basic principles and procedures of history that would have to be learned at an early stage and returned to over and over again at increasingly higher levels? Was such a thing compatible with a chronologically-ordered curriculum, in which constantly changing factual circumstances were discussed?

In the US, as in other western countries during this period, social studies gradually took the place of history, or history was integrated into social studies. In the ‘new social studies’ memorizing of facts could no longer be the main point, if only because this knowledge would soon become obsolete in a rapidly-changing society (Fenton 1967: 15–19). Social studies responds to the idea of a rapidly changing modern world in which history could have little relevance. In order for history to be integrated into the ‘new social studies’, it had to become a social study. Central to the ‘new social studies’ was a set of skills that would enable students to shape their own image of social realities. These skills could be applied to an ever-changing content, even after students graduated from school. Learning how to ‘inquire’ into social realities rather than memorizing knowledge about them was to become the most important goal.

The influence of these developments in US educational theory and social studies was soon noticeable in England in the attempts to ‘save’ history. A definition of the objectives of teaching history was developed by Coltham and Fines (1971) that clearly reflected Bloom’s and Bruner’s ideas as well as the thoughts about the ‘mode of inquiry’ from the new US social studies: The four main headings were ‘Attitudes towards the study of history’, ‘Nature of the discipline’, ‘Skills and abilities’, and ‘Educational outcomes of study’. Of these, the second and third describe what the authors considered to be the nucleus of history. In ‘Nature of the discipline’ there are objectives which deal exclusively with working with the evidence found in historical sources: history was an information-processing subject, and not a subject that represented a special way of thinking in terms of time. In ‘Skills
and abilities’, the general categories of Bloom’s *Taxonomy* are applied to handling historical evidence. There is hardly any attention to ‘historical consciousness’ and thinking historically as these were being described by the Germans. History was mainly conceived of as a social science in which students made inquiries into social realities of the past—just as they made them into social realities of the present.

Another influential example of this new approach to history teaching was the English Schools Council History Project. It needed some persuasion by advocates of history for the Council to approve of a project that would concentrate on the reform of history curricula and methods. The outcome was the *Schools Council History 13–16 Project* (SCHP) which, after the dissolution of the Schools Council in 1984, continued as the *Schools History Project* (Schools Council History Project 1976a, Sylvester 1994: 14–15).

SCHP rejected the traditional, chronologically-ordered curriculum concentrated on British national history. History was not to be regarded as a chronologically-ordered body of knowledge, but as an infinite quantity of rather poorly-structured data about what people did in the past. ‘History was a method of inquiry that aimed to investigate the past’ (Schools Council History Project 1976a: 16–17). A curriculum should be based on this disciplinary way of thinking and inquiry. Another major criterion for the development of a curriculum was the needs of students. Taking the questioning student as a point of departure instead of the past ‘itself’ was a revolution in curriculum thinking. The result of such starting points was a proposal for a curriculum consisting of ‘a modern world study’ (enabling students to understand their world), an ‘in-depth study’ of a selected theme that would enable students to really understand people of another time, a study of a long-term development that would enable students to understand continuity and change in history and to develop insight into historical causation, and a study of ‘history around us’, that could serve as a preparation for historical leisure-time activities (Schools Council History Project 1976a: 19–20). The four main ingredients of the curriculum could be taught by using many different examples of subject matter, reflecting SCHP’s viewpoint on the selection of concrete facts, names, and dates as matters of secondary importance.

The nucleus of the SCHP curriculum was not to consist of a body of historical facts but of the basic concepts of historical thinking, e.g. evidence, continuity and change, causation, and empathy. History had its own mode of inquiry in which historical evidence played a crucial role. By putting the basic principles and procedures of historical inquiry and historical thinking at the heart of the curriculum, higher levels of objectives—such as those proposed in Bloom’s *Taxonomy*—could be attained. A spiral curriculum could be designed which made it possible to return to the same basic principles and procedures over and over again, at increasingly higher levels. The concrete examples of historical topics, which could serve as the context in which the basic principles of history were studied, were less important. Consequently, selection of ‘the right subject-matter’ has not been a main issue in SCHP. Quite a few of the examples of ‘new history teaching’ used content from the traditional British curriculum to which the modern approaches were applied (Sylvester 1994: 19): one could observe English
students studying contrasting interpretations of Henry VIII and his six wives, or a collection of source material on Elizabethan England. 

Opinions differ as to the amount of influence that SCHP has had on the actual practice in history teaching in England (Sylvester 1994: 17, Phillips 1998: 18), but it is agreed that it stimulated the development of an educational science centred on the teaching of history (‘history didactics’). A body of research has been published, and continues to be published, about working with evidence as well as working with concepts such as causation, continuity and change, interpretation, and empathy. 

The introduction of the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) during the 1980s also had a major influence on the practice of history teaching. In the criteria for history, skills and concepts—of the kind introduced by SCHP—were given a central role (Department of Education and Science [DES] 1985). Again, there was a focus on studying evidence, as is illustrated by the section ‘Improve your grade’ in Hindsight, the students’ magazine for GCSE History. Most of the issues concentrated on studying evidence to establish facts or compare interpretations. A much smaller number treated concepts such as causation, or continuity and change; and in the discussions of these concepts almost invariably confronted students with source fragments.

The Netherlands

In the Netherlands, history teachers organized the Association of History Teachers in the Netherlands (VGN) in 1958 and initiated the journal Kleio. Like its English counterpart Teaching History founded 10 years later, Kleio aimed at producing a more professional history teaching. An important subject in its first volumes was the discussion of the objectives of history teaching, not entirely surprising in a time in which the traditional aims had ceased to be self-evident (van der Werff 1973).

The objectives debate had a laborious start. In 1967, a VGN commission published a ‘Report on objectives’, in which the main general trends in education were reflected and applied to history (Rapport 1967). One of the conclusions, for instance, was that it was important to promote students’ independent activity in thinking, feeling, and acting, and that ‘the old school’ put too much emphasis on acquiring knowledge and conveying views and opinions. Students should, instead, develop the skills needed to acquire knowledge and develop opinions independently (Rapport 1967: 164–165, 168–169). However, in the section of the text which treated the specific objectives of history teaching, conveying knowledge was discussed at length. The report stated that detailed knowledge of events, persons, and specific phenomena did not have primary importance, but stressed the significance of ‘structures and processes’. This knowledge of history on a more generalized level could provide the background to which the specific details could be understood and given a meaning (Rapport 1967: 170–174). Nine general skills were examined to assess their significance for teaching history: work-planning, co-operating, listening carefully, skills for acquiring information, critical reading of texts, organizing knowledge, judgement, formulating
questions, and building up an argument. Only in the case of critical reading and judgement were skills specific to history mentioned. Critical reading and comparing texts could produce the insight that history is a construction made by scholars, and not to be confused with the reality of the past (Rapport 1967: 179). When formulating judgements, students were to take into account the changeability of values and historical circumstances, and they had to be aware of the relativity of every representation of history.

In hindsight, the report does not seem very revolutionary. There was no trace of Bloom, Bruner, or any other international examples. Nevertheless, the discussion of the report caused one teacher to lament: ‘Couldn’t we just do our job and get on with teaching?’ (Verschoor 1967: 306; my translation). Ten or so years later, in a short booklet about objectives of teaching history (Fontaine 1979), the first three chapters treated, respectively, the necessity of objectives, the resistance to objectives, and the advantages of objectives. Apparently, something seemingly self-evident had to be defended as a novelty. On the other hand, this situation would seem to indicate how self-evident the implicit aims of history teaching must have continued to seem—so self-evident, that one wasn’t even aware of pursuing some specific goal.

The main trend in the debate about objectives in the 1960s in the Netherlands was an increasing agreement that history teaching ought to give students a chance of orienting themselves independently in the present, in this world—not the world of the past. 14

In 1965, new criteria for the national examinations were adopted, which turned things upside down completely. Only ‘the last 50 years’ were to be part of the examination programme (in practice this was to become European political history since 1917). In addition, some special themes from earlier history were to be selected by schools or history teachers themselves. In the paragraph about ‘the last 50 years’ it was stipulated that students had to be ‘familiar with dealing with historical documents’ (text of the examination programme; quoted by Fontaine 1982: 411), but no special skills were mentioned.

During the 1970s, history education in the Netherlands began to change further. In 1971, Dalhuisen published a pamphlet in which he promoted the ‘method of inquiry’ (Dalhuisen and Korevaar 1971) in an almost literal adaptation of what Fenton (1966, 1967) in the US had been propagating as the ‘new social studies’. Dalhuisen was an influential editor of a textbook, Geschiedenis op school [History at school], for would-be history teachers (Dalhuisen et al. 1976, 1982). In the 1976 edition, there was a separate chapter, written by Dalhuisen, about ‘the method of inquiry’, while the chapter about objectives, also by Dalhuisen, clearly showed the influence of Bloom and Bruner and the ‘new social studies’ in the US.15 The use of evidence was a key theme.

The new Education Act, which took effect in 1968, also stipulated that a national written examination in history had to be introduced, as had been the case for other school subjects. Many teachers doubted its feasibility, and the Secretary of Education decided that a series of experiments had to be conducted and established a Commission on Experiments in Final Examinations in History (CEGES), which started its work in 1971 (CEGES 1978). After years of experiments, the Commission found that a national
written examination was feasible. The examination was introduced in 1981 and was centred around two topics, changing annually, from history after 1917. The themes in history before 1917, chosen by schools or teachers, were to be assessed in a school-level examination. The assessment of skills from the higher categories of Bloom’s *Taxonomy* was not included in the programme, because—the Commission concluded—one ‘meets limits’ here when it comes to teaching history. For example: it depended on what had been dealt with specifically in lessons of various schools whether a question would belong to the category ‘reproduction of knowledge’ or ‘application of knowledge’ (CEGES 1978: 45).<sup>16</sup>

In this later commission, the Werkgroep Implementatie Eindexamen Geschiedenis (Werkgroep 1993), which began its work in 1984 studying the revision of the final examinations, Dalhuisen played a prominent role. Not surprisingly, the set of (inquiry) skills and concepts of history he introduced in the 1970s was given a key position in the revised programme. After extensive experiments, the new programme took effect starting in 1993. The two annually-changing examination topics were no longer to be chosen only from the period after 1917. As a consequence of this, a wide variety of topics were selected. This implied that—like in the English SCHP—selection of ‘the right subject matter’ seemed not particularly important, that is, since each generation of school students studied totally different topics, the topics themselves could not be too important. The concepts and skills, especially those involved in using historical evidence, were the only constant part in the programme.

National attainment targets for junior-secondary education were set in 1993. These contained a section on ‘historical skills’ and ‘approaches to history’ which reflected, on a more elementary level, what had been introduced in the revised examination programme. In other words, by the early-1990s, history education had been altered fundamentally as a result of the crisis which had started in the 1960s. The chronologically-ordered survey of political history had been replaced by a much more loosely organized curriculum of topics, more or less chronologically-ordered themes in junior-secondary education and a very loose selection of topics in senior-secondary education. In both instances, skills of inquiry had been introduced as an important element of the curriculum.

**Conclusions**

The reforms which fundamentally changed the appearance of school history originated from a crisis in the 1960s, during which politics and society turned their backs on a subject which was so obviously ‘useless’ for the modern world. This produced two kinds of responses. One was to reflect on history ‘itself’ and its functions in society, independent of any political aims or pressures. The other was the attempt to prove that history was useful after all, if only it took the shape of a social study which made its own inquiries, using documents and evidence, into social realities.

In Germany history was contemplated in its (essential) role in a free society. What exactly is historical consciousness? It turned out that historical
thinking about time was an important element. The special way of thinking about social reality which we call ‘historical’ implied that topics for a curriculum had to be selected which could best illustrate this awareness of historical time. Historical thinking was considered essential for a free and democratic society. Topics had to be chosen which could provide answers for questions to history asked by people today.

In England and the Netherlands, the US influence was crucial. In the US, the renewal of ‘social studies’ implied a concentration on skills of inquiry. The fact that social studies—not especially history—were involved implied that not so much reflection was done on the essence of historical thinking. The general skills of inquiry into social realities, i.e. methods and skills derived from the social sciences, took the lead. Questions like ‘How do I formulate a good question or hypothesis?’, ‘How do I assess the reliability and representativeness of my sources?’, ‘How do I handle bias in my information?’, ‘What can I accept as a fact?’, and ‘Is it possible to be objective?’ were central to this way of thinking (Fenton 1967: 15–16). Although this approach obviously made history a far more ‘useful’ subject, it did not make clear why history was to be preferred to (other) social sciences. The German approach dealt exclusively with the functions history, and history alone, could fulfil.

The new history teaching meant that the old and familiar chronologically-ordered (national) political histories disappeared from the scene. The content of the history curriculum in the English and Dutch cases became arbitrary. The guidelines of the English SCHP as well as the criteria for the revised Dutch history examination made a wide range of topics possible. Students started to leave school without the old familiar package of historical knowledge of older generations.

Renewed interest in history teaching in politics and society

Over time, these developments from the 1960s were to lead to feelings of unease, and in the 1990s to alarm among opinion leaders in England (Philips 1998), the Netherlands (Buskop 1998), and in a range of other countries. At the same time governments were seeking to reinforce their grip on schooling by way of curricula and/or standards. The discussions about the history curriculum represented in these new government-initiated ‘learning standards’ were to be fiercer than the debates on schooling in general, or about the standards for other school subjects.

This was the outcome of developments in the 1990s and the first decade of the 21st century; the nation-state was ever less recognizable as the self-evident context in which people live. The revolution in communication due to the internet and other innovations together with the increasing internationalization of economic developments transcended national boundaries. Migration on a mass scale substantially exacerbated trends in the creation of multi-ethnic and multicultural societies. In Europe, integration in the EU intensified. The 9/11 attacks in 2001 were a symptom of growing tensions between Islam and the western world. All these developments caused something like a crisis of identity in western countries.
In the meantime, developments in historiography put history at a greater
distance from national contexts. Research concentrated on cultural and
social history instead of national political history. The ‘linguistic turn’ in the
post-modern theory of history, which stressed the fact that history exists only
as a collection of representations in words, was important: the only meaning
history can have is the kind that a narrative imagination gives to it (see e.g.
White 1987). This relativist trend was hardly suitable for those who searched
for the certainty of a clear-cut national identity in the midst of a quickly
changing world.

The debate about history standards often took the shape of a struggle
between ‘progressives’ who advocated curricula that would fully acknowled-
gle the new ‘realities’—global, multicultural, multi-perspectival—and
‘traditionalists’, who wanted to return to the ‘old’ history teaching, which
had existed before the 1960s (Nash et al. 1997, Phillips 1998, Symcox
2002). The traditionalists argued that national history could serve as a
binding agent in ever-more diversifying societies in which it was difficult to
create national citizenship, loyalty, and coherence. National culture and
history, it was hoped, could also serve as an instrument to integrate newcom-
ers into western societies (Grever 2007b).

The ‘nation-building’ which was pursued by politicians in this period
was somewhat comparable to the nation-building in the 19th century. Not
surprisingly, similar tools were employed. History teaching was forced back
to its earlier politically- and ideologically-inspired place. This was true for
both the traditionalist and progressive points of view in the standards
debates. Whether one wanted to educate students as responsible citizens of
a nation-state and bearers of a national culture, or as global citizens and
multicultural and tolerant fellow human-beings—in either instance, an
ideological-political motive is foremost. The debate often seemed to bypass
the results of the reform of history education in the 1960s and 1970s.
Educators drawing inspiration from that source were more often than not
bystanders in the national standards discussions.

Germany

Although the foundation in 1987 of a Museum of German History (Deutsches
Historisches Museum) in Berlin, and in 1989 of a House of the History of the
Federal Republic (Haus der Geschichte der Bundesrepublik) in Bonn dem-on-
strated a lively political interest in national history, there has not yet been
noticeable political pressure to alter the history curriculum in schools. The
debate created by the national alarm about the PISA results, however, did
spark discussions about national standards. Education in Germany is a
responsibility of the state governments (Länder), each of which makes the
decisions about its own curriculum. However, there is also a Conference of
Ministers of Education (Kultusministerkonferenz, KMK) which can formulate
recommendations for a national approach on educational issues. In the
KMK, a debate has emerged about a ‘national canon’ of the things every
student should study. History has not yet been involved in this debate
(Pandel 2005: 69), but certain tendencies can be discerned which indicate
that this might change. A private foundation with the aim of enhancing history teaching in schools (Henning-von-Burgdorff-Stiftung) sponsored the publication of two books ‘comprehensible for young readers’ on the recent German past, subtitled ‘How we became what we are’ (Alter et al. 2006, Hachtmann et al. 2002). The books try to say something about German identity, but also stress the fact that German history is ‘complicated’ and that the nation-state is not a self-evident result of historical developments:

More than 60 years after the end of the war, German history attracts our attention again. The changeability of its course with its errors and glories shows: the nation-state is not a natural result of historical conditions, but an invention. (Pieper and Wiegrefe 2007: 14; my translation)

The national standards that have been formulated for history to this point are a proposal by the national association of German history teachers. In the introduction to the Standards, nine contributions of history to general education are identified (Verband der Geschichtslehrer Deutschlands 2006: 9–12):

1. ‘Cultural memory’: history represents what we remember as a community, which is important to understand present conditions.
2. Clarification of the present: present conditions are not just coincidences or the result of fashion, but have originated historically.
3. Orientation towards the future: future developments will evolve as a result of (sometimes long-term) historical developments.
4. The educative value of former periods: people have lived in different conditions from ours, and it is instructive to know how they dealt with these conditions.
5. The value of experiencing something strange: history confronts us with incomprehensible situations at first sight. It is useful to try to understand these; it will, e.g. enhance tolerance.
6. Multi-perspectivity: history is a discipline which deals with information from many backgrounds and perspectives.
7. Deepened general education: so many historical views, words, and remains have entered our cultural world that it is necessary to have some knowledge of them.
8. Interdisciplinary approach: history considers humankind in its totality, not just in one aspect, as most other subjects do.
9. Identity: The identity of a person is shaped by his or her personal history. Likewise, the identity of communities—of which individuals are members, so that a personal history is bound to those of the communities the individual belongs to—is shaped by their history.

This list is still clearly influenced by the functions of history identified by Kocka (1977) and the subsequent German writings about historical consciousness. The issue of identity, individual and national, is treated with utmost care. The proposed standards themselves—although very thorough and traditional in terms of the factual content to be dealt with—show no signs of a return to a national German history. There is special attention given to Germany only in the 19th and 20th centuries: the German Empire since 1871, the Weimar Republic, National-Socialist Germany, and the
A. H. J. Wilschut

development of Germany since 1945. These topics are placed within the general European and world context of Imperialism, the World Wars, the Cold War, and European unification.

England

In England a vehement debate emerged around history in the new National Curriculum. An interesting aspect of the debate is the role of politics as it was seen by participants—and because this element is crucial to the point I am trying to make in this essay, it needs special attention. Thus, Phillips (1998: 31) identifies four authors who laid the foundations for what he calls the ‘derision’ of history teaching as it evolved during the 1970s and 1980s: Alan Beattie, Geoffrey Partington, Helen Kedourie, and Stewart Deuchar. Partington (1986) contrasted the ‘mild socialist consensus’ on history teaching in the 1950s and 1960s with what was (in his view) the strongly politicized curriculum of the 1970s. In the 1980s history had been ‘hi-jacked by neo-marxists’, apparently the denominator under which Partington chose to bring in the renovators of the history curriculum in the 1970s and 1980s, such as the protagonists of the SCHP. According to Beattie (1987), the new history was ‘no proper history at all’ but rather a ‘watered-down contemporary history’ or ‘current affairs’; he too thought it was politicized. Kedourie (1988) expressed the view that history had become ‘distorted’, and Deuchar (1987) deplored the ‘wilfully perverse dismissal of historical content and facts’ which was inspired by a ‘fundamental loss of faith in our civilization’. Partington (1986) discerned a campaign ‘to preach contempt and hatred for the central political and cultural traditions both of Britain and the western civilization of which it is part’ (quoted in Phillips 1998: 32–33). These views on politicization are diametrically opposed to what I have been arguing, viz. that history teaching has always been politicized, except in the 1970s and 1980s.

How can this be explained? Apparently, the national-political character of history education was so much taken for granted that its absence was felt as something ‘political’. This is not entirely surprising: history had been introduced into the curriculum with the aim of national education, and had always served this purpose. In England, direct political interference had not even been necessary to achieve this goal:

It was not as though central government felt obliged to promote, through the history classroom, a sense of citizenship rooted in English Protestantism. Essentially, history teachers in England did it for them. (Phillips 1998: 14)

The strong terms with which new history teaching was ridiculed by critics in England were chosen because they wanted to conduct the debate not in the professional, but in the public domain. Every stage in the development of the National Curriculum for history was accompanied by fierce comments in the press, sometimes with shrieking headlines (Little 1990: 320; Jones 2000). A typical comment ran as follows:

Certainly the Government’s own education advisors treat Conservative values with contempt. They have drawn up a history curriculum for schools in which
crucial events in British history are—disgracefully—treated as optional extras. Instead, young people would be exposed to a ‘correct’ approach with an emphasis on gender and ethnic perspectives. In this fashionable lunacy it would be possible for a pupil to grow up knowing next to nothing about the Gunpowder Plot, Trafalgar, Waterloo, or Winston Churchill. And everything about the experiences of black peoples in the Americas or the lifestyle of the Ancient Egyptians. ([London] Daily Mail, 5 May 1994; quoted by Crawford 1995: 442)

The critics scrutinized two issues in every version of the proposed National Curriculum for history: (1) Is there enough factual knowledge? and (2) Is there a sufficient proportion of ‘British’ history? (Crawford 1995: 440). Teachers maintained the view that an attainment target in knowledge was not possible, because different levels of attainment in knowledge could not be distinguished. Ancient history—although taught at an earlier age than modern—could not be described as an ‘easier level’ (Phillips 1998: 78). So attainment targets had to refer only to historical reasoning and thinking, skills, and concepts, in which different levels of attainment could be identified. The question of British history was largely settled in the end by giving due attention to British as well as European and world history in a balanced way.

The Netherlands

In the Netherlands the public debate started somewhat later than in England and the US, but earlier than in Germany. The first generation of attainment targets for junior-secondary education and the criteria for national examinations in the renewed senior-secondary education in the 1990s were formulated virtually without pressure from politics or public opinion. In 1997, however, the Secretary of State for Education established a Commission on History Teaching to undertake an inquiry into the expectations in society and higher education for history teaching in secondary schools. The launching of this Commission was the result of growing public anxiety, suggesting that history teaching did not fulfil public expectations. One of the conclusions of the Commission was ‘that an estrangement seems to have been created between public opinion about history and that which is generally considered important within history teaching’ (Commissie Geschiedenisonderwijs 1998: 12; my translation). Expectations seemingly existed, as opposed to the situation in the 1960s and 1970s. These expectations generally tended towards a restoration of old-style history teaching: more facts, more chronology. For the first time, the word ‘canon’ was used. However, at this point there was no sign of a striving for more national history.

After the publication of the report of the Commission on History Teaching in 1998 (Commissie Geschiedenisonderwijs 1998), the Secretary of State for Education established another commission which had to translate the findings of the first commission into reformed programmes of attainment targets for primary and junior-secondary education and new criteria for national examinations. It was the first time in the development of history teaching in the Netherlands that such a unified effort was made
to change the whole of history education at once, from primary through senior-secondary schools.

The new commission, the Commission on History and Social Sciences (CHSS), was generally expected to produce lists of names and dates ‘which everyone should know’. In the journal *Kleio* for instance, an inquiry was made among the readers into which historical facts and persons they thought would have to be listed (van Boxtel 1999a, b). The CHSS, however, did not produce the expected list. Inspired by the German discussions of the 1970s, the Commission put forward the idea that historical consciousness should be the main objective of history teaching. This objective could be achieved by studying historical skills and concepts as well as the framework knowledge of eras needed to be able to ‘orient oneself in time’. Some understanding of chronology and the characteristics of different eras could be helpful in this respect (CHSS 2001: 15–16) and the Commission came up with the proposal to enhance students’ chronological understanding by means of a framework of 10 ‘easy-to-remember eras’ with ‘simple, associative names’ (CHSS 2001: 20). Any selection of concrete names and dates would be an arbitrary one, said the CHSS, and could not be prescribed on a national level; only the main characteristics of the eras had to be indicated. The choice of concrete examples of persons, events, etc. with which the general characteristics of the eras could be explained should be left to the discretion of schools, students, and teachers (CHSS 2001: 23). In this way, a general framework for western history was created consisting of the characteristics of 10 eras. The framework was to be implemented on all levels of education, from primary through senior-secondary. The framework and the skills and concepts of historical thinking were to be the new criteria for national examinations and the annual change of topics for examinations should be abolished (CHSS 2001: 115).

The work of the CHSS could be regarded as a result of the developments of the 1960s and 1970s. The chronological framework was designed to enhance historical consciousness and historical thinking—not the rote learning of political facts, let alone national history—for no names and dates were mentioned and there were no national events or heroes. This was not what an alarmed public opinion had aimed for and what the Secretary of State had meant by establishing the two commissions. In the media, interest in (national) history was thriving, e.g. in the form of a National History Quiz on television, and the election of ‘The Greatest Dutchman of All Times’, following the example of the election of ‘The Greatest Briton’ on the other side of the North Sea. The killings of politician Pim Fortuyn in 2002 and movie-maker Theo van Gogh by a fundamentalist Muslim in 2004 deepened the societal tensions which had developed since 9/11 in 2001—as well as intensifying the demand for the identification with ‘national heritage’ which had to be conveyed to non-western immigrants in order to make them ‘integrate better into Dutch society’. The Education Council advised in 2005 that a national ‘canon’ could possibly enhance national identity, and once again a commission was installed. The report by this commission (van Oostrom 2007) did at last come up with the long-awaited list: 50 persons and events that ‘every Dutchman should know’. The new ‘canon’ was generally applauded in the press and by public opinion. As a result, the
Minister of Education, Culture, and Sciences announced that the list would be made mandatory in primary and junior-secondary education, in addition to the already existing 10-era system which represented a quite different philosophy.27

Conclusions

Generally speaking, we can distinguish three factors influencing the content and form of history curricula: politics and society; pedagogical and psychological considerations; and academic history itself. The debates of the inter-war period about a new approach to history teaching were based mainly on pedagogical and psychological considerations: traditional history teaching with rote learning of facts from political history simply did not appeal to children and adolescents; it was not compatible with their personal and intellectual development; and it was therefore doomed to fail. However sensible it seems to take pedagogical and psychological considerations and insights concerning the developing child into account, they cannot be decisive when it comes to the formulation of general aims of history teaching. The course history teaching should take can only be directed by politics and society, which will have to decide whether or not to respect the standards of scholarly history. The demands of politics and society are often at odds with those standards; during two centuries of history teaching, disregard of scholarly standards of history has usually prevailed. Thus, in her general characterization of the way history is practised, Jordanova (2000: 7) argues straightforwardly that history teaching is ‘the purveyor of governmental and general ideological values’ and that it responds to ‘political imperatives’. Yet, the real demands of politics and society in free and democratic nations actually come down to respecting the standards of scholarly history, as Kocka (1977) has argued. This contradiction has dominated the debate about history teaching almost throughout its existence.

An exception was the—relatively short, as we can see with hindsight—intermezzo of the 1960s and 1970s in which politics and society scorned the ‘useless’ school subject of history. This created an opportunity to consider the aims of history teaching independently from societal concerns. The result was slightly different in the German- and English-speaking worlds. The Germans focused on the essence of historical thinking and historical consciousness, and concluded that a special awareness of time, such as cultivated by historians, produces a way of thinking without which a free and democratic society cannot flourish. The English-speaking area was greatly influenced by the thinking about taxonomies of objectives for education in general and by developments in the ‘new social studies’ in the US. As a result, a ‘method of inquiry’ was developed, which concentrated on the independent use of historical evidence by students. By means of using sources, it was expected that students could build their own image and interpretation of the past. In the Netherlands, the influence of the Anglo-American reforms has been strongest, especially because concepts and skills were introduced into the national criteria for examinations which were clearly derived from US and English developments. Only the recent creation of the framework of
10 eras to enhance historical thinking about time was inspired indirectly by developments in Germany.

During the 1980s and 1990s, politics and society resumed their traditional attitude towards history education. Politically and ideologically inspired aims were once more imposed on the school subject, whether the well-known and traditional ‘national citizenship’ or novel ones like ‘world citizenship’ and ‘multi-perspectivity in multi-ethnic and multicultural societies’. The consideration that an independent and scholarly history with its specific orientation in time is not only the product of a free and democratic society, but also an essential ingredient of its thinking, was generally overlooked, although not so much (yet?) in Germany as in the other cases. The politicization of the late-20th century debate on the history curriculum is most clearly visible in England, and has hardly begun in Germany. The Netherlands—in accordance with its geographical position—takes a position somewhere in the middle.

Notes

1. Probably due to language problems; in German-language works, not many English titles are cited and in English-language works virtually no German titles.
2. The Prussian curriculum of 1921 and the Bavarian curriculum of 1926, as quoted by Glöckel (1973: 17–18), confirm these impressions.
3. This essay was based on his experiments in teaching history at Perse School, Cambridge. In 1928 Happold published his *The Approach to History* in which he explained his views on history teaching with active students, projects, and problems.
4. Wester’s book was reprinted many times in the first half of the 19th century, the period in which history still remained an optional subject in primary education (de Jong 1977: 11).
5. The Gymnasium provided secondary education preparing for a university study, with Latin and Greek as important elements of its curriculum. The new HBS was intended to provide a more practical secondary education preparing for a position in the evolving industrial society. Latin and Greek did not appear in the HBS curriculum. Instead, more attention was paid to modern languages, mathematics, and sciences.
6. The Dutch education system was split into three independent networks: Protestant, Catholic, and ‘neutral’ (which was mainly liberal and/or social-democrat). The Protestants and Catholics schools tended to be more ideological than the neutral ones. Thus, the Protestants and Catholics were less inclined to take the interests of the child as a point of departure, because they tended to have ideologically inspired views on education.
7. An example of an influential series of textbooks for students, which was first published in 1974, was the series *Fragen an die Geschichte* (Questioning history; Schmid 1974). The title showed how contemporary issues were to provide criteria for the selection of content, in order that history could play its essential role in a free society.
8. Himmelfarb (1987: 13–32) used a famous quote by Trevelyan (1942) to describe the contents of the new history—which she deplored: ‘the history of a people with the politics left out’. In 1969 the Historical Association launched a new journal *Teaching History*, meant for teachers of history as professionals.
9. The Schools Council, founded in 1964 to promote new educational methods, initially favoured integrated social studies and the abolition of formal history teaching.
10. The last curriculum item most clearly reflected the needs of students as a selective criterion.
11. For a ‘long-term development’ for instance, the choice was ‘a history of medicine’, but it might just as well have been ‘a history of women in society’ or ‘a history of education’.
12. To enable students to learn the basic principles at an early stage of their history education an introductory series of units was designed, entitled *What Is History?* (Schools Council
History at the Mercy of Politicians and Ideologies

History Project 1976b). As this series demonstrates, considerable attention was paid to the study of historical evidence. Three out of the five booklets of *What Is History?* are devoted to the study of evidence, one to asking questions. The remaining booklet, entitled ‘People in the past’, was a single sheet of paper (while the other booklets contained 25–40 pages) explaining something about time, timelines, and chronology. Clearly, the handling of historical time was not considered a major problem for students by SCHP. Rather, history was all about the study of evidence.


14. The fact that most history teaching at that time did not proceed any further than the year 1918 was not very helpful in achieving this goal (van der Werff 1973: 435).

15. To the chapter about objectives for instance, a sample lesson was added about ‘Hungary 1956’ in which students had to decide independently about ‘the facts’ using contradictory statements about the crisis in Hungary by a Russian and a US eyewitness. This example had been translated literally from a textbook by Fenton (1966: 159–164, 182–183).

16. The first history exams in the Netherlands were rather different from the English GCSE exams, which were also introduced in the 1980s. Progressive Dutch history teachers were dissatisfied with the new examination and sought revision as soon as it was introduced. Remarkably, a revision process was soon set up by the Secretary of Education, involving a new commission, the Werkgroep Implementatie Eindexamen Geschiedenis, and a series of experiments.

17. e.g. in the US, Nash *et al.* (1997); in Canada, Granatstein (1998); in Australia, Windschuttle (1994).

18. In England, the National Curriculum was introduced. In the Netherlands, a National Curriculum was introduced in 1993 with the creation of ‘basisvorming’ (basic education) in junior-secondary schools: national attainment targets were formulated for all school subjects. In 1999, new criteria were developed for the ‘tweede fase’ (second stage), i.e. senior-secondary education. In Germany, the results of the PISA inquiries in 2000 and 2003 caused alarm because the German results were at best average, not excellent. This sparked off a discussion about National Standards for school subjects throughout Germany, including history, although the PISA-tests were limited to mathematics, science, and reading competence (Pandel 2005). In the US, a 1983 report concluded that the nation was ‘at risk’ because school results were inferior to those in other developed countries in nearly all respects (National Commission on Excellence in Education 1983). During the 1990s, national standards for school subjects, including history, were developed in the US, as a consequence of the ‘Goals 2000’ programme introduced in 1994 by the Clinton administration.

19. Another recent book bears the same subtitle (Pieper and Wiegrefe 2007).

20. The course of events has been discussed in detail by Phillips (1998) in his *History Teaching, Nationhood and the State*.


22. A similar feeling of the self-evident quality of aims could be detected in the Dutch teacher’s lament—‘Couldn’t we just do our job and get on with teaching?’ (Verschoor 1967: 306)—when discussions were opened about the aims of teaching history. History teachers just acted as they always did, without being aware of serving some political purpose.

23. The fact that discussions about the curriculum were conducted in a public forum shows that the debate was highly politicized. Another fact that points in the same direction is the constant interference by politicians in the work on the National Curriculum (Crawford 1995: 449–451, Phillips 1998).

24. Also known as the ‘De Rooij-commission’ after its president, Piet de Rooij of Amsterdam University.

25. e.g. the ‘era of monks and knights’ for the early Middle Ages, the ‘era of discoverers and reformers’ for the 16th century, and ‘era of steam engines and citizens’ for the 19th century.

26. Such as feudalism, the rise of Christianity and Islam for the early Middle Ages (‘era of monks and knights’), absolutism, the rise of early capitalism, and the scientific revolution.
for the 17th century (‘era of regents and princes’), and industrialization, democratization, citizenship, and imperialism for the 19th century (‘era of steam engines and citizens’).

27. The Dutch parliament has yet to vote on this proposal. If it is accepted, political pressure in the Netherlands will have created an awkward, hybrid situation in history teaching.

References


Grever, M. (2007a) *De natiestaat als pedagogische onderneming* [The nation-state as a pedagogical enterprise]. In M. Grever and K. Ribbens (eds), *Nationale Identiteit en Meervoudig Verleden* [National Identity and Multiple Pasts]. (The Hague/Amsterdam: WRR/Amsterdam University Press), 35–60.


Happold, F. C. (1927) *The Study of History in Schools: as a Training in the Art of Thought*, Historical Association Leaflet, No. 69 (London: Historical Association/G. Bell and Sons, Ltd.).


Wester, H. (1801) *Schoolboek over de geschiedenissen van ons vaderland* [School book of the histories of our fatherland]. (Leyden, the Netherlands: Du Mortier & Zn).

