Coordinating History Books

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THE AVERAGE GERMAN probably knows very little about the history of the United States. When he went to school, the history of such a young nation was dealt with summarily on a few pages of his textbook. What he remembers is even less, and that not necessarily correct. He cannot be blamed, however. His textbook was not necessarily correct either, and his teacher looked at the history of other nations from the viewpoint of his own.

To put it tersely: The average German knows, for instance, that the United States of America was founded around the end of the 18th century under the leadership of one George Washington, and that it obtained its independence through a revolutionary war against England. After a sizeable blank in the chronological course of American history, his memory picks up the name of James Monroe as the initiator of a doctrine which, if his political vocabulary is up to date, he perhaps mistakes for "isolationism."

He is almost sure to know that there was a war between the states in the 1860’s. But he holds that this was simply a matter of pro-slavery versus anti-slavery, and he probably refers to "Uncle Tom’s Cabin" to substantiate this knowledge. The rise of US industrial power is, in the eyes of a German, somehow connected with the Spanish-American War, without knowing exactly whether it was the evidence or the cause of this rise.

IN MORE RECENT history, Germans are inclined to regard as unsettled political arguments what historians have meanwhile come to acknowledge as solid truth. Most of them are unable to say, for instance, whether President Wilson adhered to his 14-Point pledge when the 1918 armistice turned out other than the German government had expected. That President Roosevelt does not rate exclusive credit for the idea of demanding Germany’s unconditional surrender in World War II, is another fact that American historians feel should be brought home in Germany. On the other hand, a German is likely to be surprised not to find American historians turn red with protest at the sound of the phrase “American imperialism.”

Asked about their own nation’s impact on United States history, most Germans cite the names of Carl Schurz and Frederick von Steuben as the two outstanding immigrants of German descent. American historians, however, like to point out that the votes of German farmers in one Illinois county saved Abraham Lincoln from losing the 1860 presidential election. The consequences of this German vote are of infinitely greater historical importance than the life of any single man could be, they say. Only, it is hardly known in Germany.

Referring to American culture, the historians complain that too many Germans can sum up their knowledge in the single word "Jazz," conceding though, that the name of Mark Twain may strike a note with them. At least before 1945, other American writers, artists, composers and philosophers were little known in Germany. Even today still missing is a determined effort to eliminate the perverted impressions left by western movies and gangster stories.

IT DOES NOT require a historian to say that this is not enough knowledge by which to judge a nation of 150,000,000 persons. Yet for many years the German people, including many leaders, have based their judgment on just that. Said a German foreign service officer when translating an American history textbook: "Of special interest was the chapter on the United States’ participation in World War I. The book demonstrates strikingly the very decisive military, and above all economic, contributions America made to the Allied victory. Our leaders of 1933 could have been spared many errors and follies if they had closely studied these pages."

How much of that misinformation or lack of information must be blamed on history teaching in German schools and on biased textbooks? American historians feel strongly about it. They urge more space in German curricula to be given to American history, and for a representative presentation of the American story. The real America, they point out, is not confined to New York skyscrapers and Detroit assembly lines, as many Germans seem to think. The textbooks miss a positive understanding of freedom and responsibility as elements of American democracy. Emphasis on the great number of racial, cultural and religious groups living together in the United States could illustrate America more clearly, the American historians believe.
LOOKING AT THE opposite direction, however, the Germans have a bill of their own to present. American history-teaching, they say, follows exactly the same method which the European nations are struggling to get away from: it sees history in terms of "outstanding personalities." The three outstanding Germans of the last five centuries were Frederick the Great, Bismarck and Hitler, according to the way German history professors interpret American textbooks. At least they are the three whose life stories are described in every detail, while many others of equally important historical rank are not even named.

In addition to over-emphasizing the personal significance of these three, the German critics fear that this suggests a historical relationship among Frederick, Bismarck and Hitler, which research has shown to be unjustified. In one American textbook Hitler's biography was found to take as much space as the entire history of the Weimar republic.

The development of democratic ideas in Germany is generally only a stepchild to American history writers, the Germans say. Kant's philosophy of the society and the liberal reforms of Karl vom Stein in the early 19th century are overlooked, while the 1848 democratic revolution is simply registered as a failure. Similarly, the democratic socialist movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries is neglected. As a consequence, the 1918 revolution comes as a surprise to the reader, who is naturally inclined to consider it rather a consequence of defeat than an assertion of long-held ideals.

The history of the Weimar republic, in American textbooks, seems to the German historians to be identified with that of the Nazi Party, climaxing by another "failure" of democracy in Germany. The resistance movement against Hitler vanishes in the limelight of the outrages committed in his name, and after 1945 democracy seems to spring up again from nowhere. After that, the German critics say, a student undoubtedly believes democracy is essentially foreign to a German, and the history of the country is an uninterrupted story of conquest and militarism.

ON THE CULTURAL side, too, the Germans have complaints. While due recognition is usually given to famous painters and composers, Friedrich Nietzsche is almost certain to be the one dominating the philosophical picture, and nationalist exaggerations in German education are likely to be placed at the feet of historian Heinrich von Treitschke. Establishing the order of importance attributed to Germans in an American history textbook, a German professor found that even the country's great genius, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, was passed over in ten lines of print, comparing unfavorably with the 35 lines given to industrialist and arms-producer Alfred Krupp.

These are but some of the major points which American and German historians find objectionable in the history teaching of the other nation. Yet they refer only to two countries with no common border. Among adjacent nations in Europe, nationalistic resentments, rooted in centuries of repeated wars, add even more to the potential sources of historical inaccuracy. During and immediately after wars, in fact, history teaching in Europe — notably Germany and France — has been so full of resentments that only after several years have historians realized these methods had to be revised.

In scientific historical research, the tendency toward a more objective presentation of history has been encouraged since the third quarter of the 19th century. But it found little expression in textbooks and in the history teaching in public schools. Strong nationalistic and even chauvinistic interpretations continued in use, resulting in a too favorable presentation of the author's own nation and the discredit of others.

SINCE WARS BEGIN in the minds of men, the historians believe that this influence of nationalistically prejudiced textbooks has been one of the factors causing wars. The problem was first taken up at the World Peace Conference in 1899, when peace groups from most European countries passed a resolution demanding that history textbooks be revised, giving less space to military affairs and wars. At subsequent conferences, these organizations repeatedly demanded that students in all countries should be told the truth about the causes of past wars.

World War I interrupted international peace cooperation and temporarily stopped the history revision movement. However, when the historians began to ponder the events which led to the outbreak of hostilities, they realized that a good deal of the national hatred and lack of mutual understanding could be traced back to chauvinistic history textbooks. Not long after the war, therefore, new and more determined efforts toward an objective and balanced presentation of history were made in all of the former belligerent countries. By 1919, the French teachers organization protested against "education to hatred," while in Germany a group called the "Federation of Determined School Reformers" set out for a thorough revision of history teaching.

French, British and Japanese educational groups were the first — in 1920 — to appeal to the League of Nations for an expansion of its work to include the control of textbooks. An international committee on Intellectual Cooperation was set up and, in 1926, adopted a resolution calling on all member countries to eliminate from their school textbooks any passages objected to by

An article "Germany: Today and Tomorrow" by Henry J. Kellermann is printed in the Department of State Bulletin, Part I appearing in the issue of May 26. The article is based on an address he delivered before the Carl Schurz Memorial Foundation in Philadelphia on May 5. Mr. Kellermann is director of the Office of German Public Affairs of the Department of State and in this position has been concerned with the policy and operational direction of the Department of State to the Office of the US High Commissioner and its public affairs activities in Germany.
other nations. Between 1926 and 1930, however, this procedure was applied only three times, and only in one case resulted in an actual textbook revision. A later draft of an international convention on history teaching was turned down by the major powers, because their constitutions did not allow them to enforce the provisions of the agreement.

NOTWITHSTANDING, PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATION in many countries carried on. The Scandinavian countries founded the Nordenbund, the oldest of the now existing organizations in this field. While the Nordenbund, with good success, adopted a system supplementing the history books of its member countries by summaries written by historians of other nations, Germany and France tried to reach a comprehensive agreement on the doubtful points in their historical relations. A conference of German and French educators in 1935 approved 40 “theses,” designed to iron out controversies on events of the last two centuries. Though many points remained unsettled and the agreement merely said that in such cases the views of both nations should be presented, participating historians believed that they had made a decisive contribution to lasting peace between the two nations. But while the convention was published in France as agreed, the Hitler government in Germany first delayed and later prevented its publication, so that the contract, in effect, did not achieve the importance originally predicted for it.

A few years later, World War II repeated the experience of the first war: it stopped the work temporarily. But this again caused a more determined renewal of efforts after the cessation of hostilities. Germany and France held the first bi-national history conference in 1948, followed by later annual meetings at which the 1935 convention was revised, this time attaining the full agreement of both delegations. One year later British and German educators met for the first time and arranged for a mutual exchange of textbooks and ideas. Today, the British-German workshop meetings have also become a regular institution.

INDEPENDENT FROM SUCH bilateral contacts, UNESCO resumed the work of the League of Nations committee, promulgating a comprehensive long-term program of advice and assistance. A UNESCO-sponsored international historical seminar in Brussels in 1950 brought together 60 historians from 25 nations. In six weeks of concentrated work they mapped out a skeleton world history which every citizen of every country should know, realizing that the time had not yet come to write an international, universal history.

American participation in European textbook revision work started after World War II, though within the United States the American Association for Peace Education and the National Council for the Prevention of War had already been active in this field for 25 years. Having sent observers to some of the bi-national European workshop conferences, the National Council for Social Studies voted in November, 1950, to take up similar relations with its German, professional counterpart organization, the Arbeitsgemeinschaft Deutscher Lehrerverbände (Association of German Teacher Organizations). Textbook revision work was begun by these two groups in the summer of 1951, and recently, yielded its first result: a new German textbook on the “History of the Weimar Republic,” screened and verified by an American and a French historian.

LAST MONTH WITNESSED the first American-German workshop meeting. Under the joint chairmanship of Dr. Robert LaFollette of Ball State Teachers College, Muncie, Indiana, and Dr. Georg Eckert of Kant Teacher Training College, Brunswick, Germany, professional delegations of the two countries met in Brunswick to discuss some 20 outstanding German and American history textbooks previously reviewed by individual delegates. Both organizations being determined “not to achieve agreements at the expense of other countries,” as Dr. LaFollette said, nine western European countries were invited to send prominent historians to participate. For 12 days the flags of the individual nations flew alongside that of the United Nations over Brunswick’s Kant-Hochschule, as symbolic of the undertaking.

The delegates found that their task would involve more than just getting the historical facts straight. Some of the methods of teaching came under critical scrutiny. While the German historians generally praised the make-up and illustration of American books, they thought that pictures taken from historical motion pictures had no place in a school book, and vigorously objected to such learning aids as this problem: “As a political opponent of Hitler, write a secret letter during the 1939 election campaign, in which you tell your American relatives about your treatment at the hands of the SA.” The Americans, on the other hand, felt that many German textbooks were written rather for the teacher than for the pupil, and raised the question whether his ignoring of the student could not subconsciously promote an „Ohne mich“ (count me out) attitude toward society.

Since in modern schools textbooks are only one of several teaching aids, the conference also considered educational broadcasts and school films, in the presence of representatives of all German broadcasting stations and films producers. Particularly, the German delegation was enthusiastic about American educational films on racial problems.

THE AMERICAN SUGGESTIONS for more textbooks space and a better presentation of the American way of life were fully accepted by the German delegates. Acknowledging their American colleagues as authorities on their own history, they also agreed to revise their teaching of United States history and eliminate what American historians point to as obvious errors, such as the “anti-slavery” Civil War, the “American” unconditional surrender idea and many others. The Americans, on the other hand, consented

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