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Introduction

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Simone Lässig

Introduction

The Georg Eckert Institute for international Textbook Research appeared to be the most appropriate place to organise and host this workshop, which is documented in the following papers, because the very origins of our institute's work were connected to a central phenomenon under discussion, namely, the hyper-nationalism that led to the First World War, --. In the aftermath of what has been called the "great seminal catastrophe of the twentieth century", individuals, foundations and institutions like the League of Nations were under the impression that conveying stereotypes or prejudices and creating enemies in school textbooks might be instrumental in inspiring mistrust and hatred between states and societies. Indeed, textbooks are aimed to influence the cultural identity of the next generation by defining relevant topics, establishing patterns of interpretation and offering social values and norms. They shape concepts of the self and the "other" which are crucial for defining identities, and thus contribute towards forming and separating social, ethnic or religious groups.

History textbooks in particular have played (and still play) a specific role in processes of nation building. They have frequently been used to demonise opponents and, in some periods and regions, even served as "weapons of mass instruction" (Charles Ingrao). It was against this background that the League of Nations and other stakeholders in the interwar period became convinced that international textbook revision would be an effective and sustainable method of promoting international understanding and sustaining peace.

In the collective shock left behind by the Second World War and the Holocaust, the German historian Georg Eckert was among those scholars who gave particular impetus to these efforts. Strongly supported by the British occupying forces, he organised textbook conferences with Germany's neighbours and especially with its previous "enemies" such as France or Great Britain and, in 1951, founded a small institute explicitly dedicated to textbook analysis and textbook revision.

One year after Eckert's death in 1974, the parliament (Landtag) of Lower Saxony passed a law to establish an institute that would continue and build upon what Georg Eckert had begun more than twenty years earlier. Highlights of this period certainly included the bilateral textbook commissions with Poland and Israel. By the end of the Cold War the institute extended its interest to post-conflict and transformation societies. The regional focus was on central Europe, eastern Europe and south eastern Europe, and later also on the Middle East.

What made and makes the Georg Eckert Institute rather special is the fact that it has never focused on research alone, but also on knowledge transfer and on connecting people or institutions in the very diverse field of textbook related research. We are especially proud of our unique library

with more than 170,000 (mainly history, civics and geography) textbooks from 159 countries. This fine collection has become a magnet for scholars from all over the world and the heart of our international network.

Today, the GEI is therefore a modern academic institution and, as such, was recently admitted as a member of the German Leibniz Association. Over the last few years it has defined its research focus more sharply and established four research areas. Their focus is on:

1. Europe and Europeanness in textbooks,
2. The relationship between textbooks and conflict,
3. Images of the self and the other - symbolic boundaries in contexts of globalisation,
4. History, theories and methods of educational media (research).

Changing and competing memory cultures, mutual perceptions, and means of constructing seemingly legitimate and approved knowledge are at the core of our work in all these research areas. We are interested in nationally and socially preferred concepts of identity, in patterns of inclusion and exclusion conveyed by or in educational media, and in conflicts of memory and recognition that are caused, promoted or diffused by textbooks. However, we have also extended our understanding of textbook research, and are increasingly exploring the relationship between interpretations conveyed in textbooks and concepts of identity offered by other (educational) media. We are conducting empirical research on processes of reception and on impacts of textbooks. And we have finally started historical research on textbooks and educational media, a field which – despite the institute's outstanding collection of German history textbooks dating from the eighteenth century onwards – has been neglected for decades.

In light of the development of research at the institute, I was delighted that the workshop provided an opportunity to develop genuinely historical perspectives, and to do so with regard to an issue which evokes synergies with some of the main fields of research mentioned above. All of these topics, whether representations of the self and the other and symbolic boundary drawing, images of Europe in historical and contemporary textbooks, or patterns of conflict conveyed by history textbooks, are of importance when comparing representations and the reception of the Crusades, especially in France and Germany, and when discussing their role in processes of nation building in nineteenth century Europe. The Crusades have sustainably influenced perceptions of the "Christian Occident" and the "Islamic Orient". The nineteenth century marked an important phase in the emergence and transformation of European memory patterns with regard to the Crusades. They were interpreted in a way that made it possible to draw symbolic boundaries between a seemingly cultivated "Europe" and morally and intellectually inferior "non-European others". There is now sufficient research which shows how strongly western concepts of the "Orient" were influenced by Crusader narratives. The workshop was therefore less interested in the picture of the Orient that was painted by scholars, textbook authors or artists, than in how the "self" was defined via constructions of the "other" in the context of Crusader discourses.

Our aim was to investigate how collective identities were shaped and

which patterns of identity were drawn in the process. Our first results pointed towards an interesting ambivalence. Representations of the Crusades ascribed greater meaning to Europe as well as national discourses of superiority expressing colonial interests. On the one hand they were seen and conveyed as a genuinely European phenomenon; an event that created cohesion in Christian (Catholic) Europe and which could therefore be seen as a prominent icon of Europeaness and shared European history. On the other hand the Crusades became an emblem of national superiority, a means by which symbolic boundaries could be drawn between states and societies within Europe. They played a crucial part in the traditions which modern nation states sought to invent and to implement in order to shape national identities. In other words, the Crusades became a significant component of nationbuilding and of national dissociation from European neighbours.

It was firstly and mainly this ambivalence that sparked our interest when we devised this project. Since the discursive tension outlined above has not been addressed in detail in historical scholarship, we wanted to analyse the persistence and change of Crusader narratives in relation to the emergence of the modern nation-state. Did the European narrative decline just as exclusively national narratives gained increasing importance? Or were both narratives interconnected? Did they coexist and sustain or exclude each other? Were there national, regional, and confessional differences, and were there commonalities, peculiarities and transfers between scholarly interpretations and textbook narratives?

In order to find answers to these and similar questions we did not focus primarily on emerging historiographical research. Instead we concentrated on perceptions which were often seen as trivial, concise and superficial, but which might have influenced generations of ordinary people. From this perspective school textbooks proved to be a particularly valuable source. Schools are one of the most central institutions of the nation-state, and they have the potential to raise loyal and patriotic citizens. School textbooks were conceptualised to carry out and to translate this mission. Once schooling had been made compulsory for all children, they became the most widespread media in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. And since they also conveyed their contents and interpretations in a condensed and authoritative form, they probably had a greater influence than scholarly history books over the images of history sustained in the minds of the population at large. It is, however, appealing to analyse whether and how textbooks reflected scholarly discourses, or whether they conveyed and perpetuated specific narratives. This is why we did not only compare national narratives, but also looked for moments of transfer when knowledge and interpretations were interconnected, either between Germany and France or between different historically effective medial arenas.

The workshop, which is in part documented by the following papers, offered a valuable opportunity to place the preliminary findings on school textbooks revealed in our project "Myths of the Crusades" in a wider historical and historiographical context – for example, by focusing on different media that have influenced memory cultures and the invention of national traditions, or by referring to new findings about the history of historiography, education, media or nationalism. The participants explored to what extent French and German representations of the Crusades

differed, and identified contingencies, shifts and consistencies. However they did not have the opportunity to discuss or even determine the impact which different narratives might have had on the formation of national, European, Christian or secular identities. We therefore hope to continue scholarly debate and to explore adequate methods which facilitate in-depth analyses of intermedia transfers and translations. Both of these questions were frequently discussed in the project, which came to an end in September 2011, and at the workshop, and they will certainly continue to provoke further debate. All scholars doing research in this particular field or in related fields are therefore cordially invited and encouraged to discuss the findings presented in the following dossier and to submit further contributions.