

Negotiated history? Bilateral historical commissions in twentieth-century Europe

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This chapter sets out to describe the various processes and circumstances which led to the establishment of bilateral historical commissions characterised by the participation of historians from two different countries, and to outline their general typology.¹ Because of the limited interest researchers have shown in the matter up until now, we are unable here to deal with the vast case-history involving this type of historical commission. However, we still think it is worth making a start, and bringing a historiographical perspective to bear on this neglected (though far from unimportant) aspect of the organisation of historical knowledge, in which different national traditions come face to face and where the relationship between history and politics is crucial. A nation and its history are inextricably bound together, and this bond can be anything but unproblematic. There is nothing new about the problems bound up with the various national sensibilities: they had already been recognised in the mid-nineteenth century by one of the first great historians to make scientific research on themes of international history. In fact, when publication of his *Englische Geschichte* was about to begin in 1859, the German historian Leopold von Ranke stated cryptically that since he was writing the history of a nation which was not his own, he could not claim to have written a national history, since ‘that would be a contradiction in itself’.²

Bilateral commissions composed of representatives of historians from two countries with various aims, came into being because of the awareness of the strong national roots of historiographical practice, and in this sense, can be seen as a kind of attempt to redress the balance. At the same time, they were part of a general trend towards the institutionalising of historiographical activity which started in the second half of the nineteenth century. At the multilateral level, the most obvious sign of this process are the international congresses of the historical sciences which began to take place from 1900 onwards (Paris) and the setting up in Geneva of the International Committee

of Historical Sciences (ICHS) in 1926.³ At the national level too, the 'corporation' of historians gradually began to organise itself into one or more associations and around certain 'standard' historical journals, tacitly regarded as being 'canonical' of the different national historiographical traditions.

The early years of intellectual co-operation (1919–1938)

The first bilateral historical commissions were established in the 1920s and 1930s, almost concurrently with the publication of impressive editions of contemporary historical sources connected with the outbreak of the First World War, so that those years can be seen as witnessing the beginning of contemporary history as an independent sub-discipline in the field of historical science.⁴ At the multilateral level, a decisive role in the setting up of these commissions was initially played by the League of Nations, in the shape of its Commission Internationale de Coopération Intellectuelle, and various organisations and institutions such as the International Bureau of Education (Geneva), the World Federation of Education Associations (San Francisco), the International Federation of Teachers' Associations (Paris) and above all, the International Institute of Intellectual Co-operation (Paris).⁵ The common aim of these institutions was a teaching of history and geography informed by the values of pacifism, antimilitarism and antichauvinism which could go beyond 'a history of struggles and battles' and arrive at a 'reconstruction of historical facts from the perspective of the development of a single human civilisation'.⁶

The main aim of the bilateral historical commissions was to work together on revising the history textbooks used in the schools of the countries involved, and eliminate statements based on nationalistic and chauvinistic prejudices. More than any other kind of historical writing, textbooks are forced to drastically simplify historiographical data, and condense the historical and political awareness of a given society, its relationship with the international context and how this context is perceived. For this reason, international conferences on textbooks moved in a kind of intellectual no-man's land between aims of a scientific, educational and political nature which were often conflicting.⁷

One of the most active bilateral commissions of the inter-war years was the Franco-Germanic one, established in 1935 by the two countries' respective teachers' associations, with the aim of 'resolving certain contradictions in the historical picture in the textbooks of our two nations'.⁸ The commission convened in Paris in November 1935 and drew up a list of thirty-nine articles with suggestions for revising various judgments expressed in the school textbooks of the two countries. However the outcome was only seemingly positive, since in many cases, the French and German historians simply put

forward their own conflicting thesis. The document was published in 1937 and got a favourable reception in France.⁹ Although it actually stated that 'the sources do not allow us to attribute to any government or people in 1914 any conscious wish [to start] a European war', it was poorly received in Nazi Germany and got limited circulation.¹⁰ The journal *Vergangenheit und Gegenwart* (the official publication of the national association of German history teachers), was highly critical of the document and the full text was published only in its Berlin edition.¹¹

In 1928, the first German-Soviet meeting took place in Leningrad, still in the mood of the 'spirit of Rapallo'.¹² In 1936, two years after the signing of the German-Polish pact of non-aggression, the first German-Polish commission was established for the revision of textbooks, and it met twice, in Breslau and Warsaw.¹³ A third meeting was due to take place in Berlin in the spring of 1938, but was cancelled because of the rapidly worsening relations between the two countries.

Reconsideration of national pasts in a European perspective since 1945

The years following the Second World War saw a return to forms of co-operation and communication between historians from countries previously at war with other. These kinds of co-operation were fostered and encouraged in particular by UNESCO and by the Council of Europe. Already at the first sitting of the general conference of UNESCO in Paris in 1946, it was decided to collect documentation regarding history textbooks in general use. In particular, UNESCO wished to encourage bilateral agreements among its member states regarding school textbooks. In the following years, the initiative passed to the national commissions' sub-groups for textbooks, which gave rise to various bilateral meetings, and produced a rich harvest of publications.¹⁴ These initiatives were unofficial in nature and did not involve political representatives of the states concerned. During the Cold War, UNESCO also became the privileged go-between for cultural exchange between the countries belonging to the two opposing blocks.

Contacts were re-established between German and French historians, the point of departure being the thirty-nine articles of 1935, republished in 1949 for the first meeting in Speyer.¹⁵ There were two meetings, one in Paris and one in Mainz at the Institut für Europäische Geschichte attended by historians, teachers and representatives from the Internationales Schulbuchinstitut of Braunschweig. The meetings were able to benefit from the enthusiastic participation of Gerhard Ritter, Hans Herzfeld, Pierre Renouvin and Jacques Droz, who took upon themselves the task of reformulating the recommendations of 1935. Gerhard Ritter had an extremely favourable impression of the experience; even with regard to the most delicate subjects, the discussion had

stayed objective: 'There is no better way of understanding the other nation's point of view' than bringing together experts rooted in the national tradition of their own country, he concluded. He added, however, that it would be wrong to exaggerate the significance of these experiences: in fact, conflicts between peoples are determined much more by historical myths than by scientific evaluation. To be realistic, Ritter concluded, an enormous effort would be needed to destroy those myths, but the initiative of the French and German historians could be seen as a beginning. On the other hand, the initiative was frowned upon by Ernst Engelberg, the leading light among East Germany's Communist historiographers, who saw it simply as a manipulative measure designed to eliminate possible causes of friction in the process of integrating Federal Germany into Western Europe.¹⁶

By 1948, Georg Eckert had made the initial contacts for a negotiated revision of textbooks between those parts of Germany occupied by the Western Allies, and other European countries. Eckert had been born in Berlin in 1912, into a family of Social Democrats. In 1933, he had to leave Berlin because of his involvement in the socialist student organisation. He took up his studies again in Bonn, and obtained a doctorate in ethnology in 1935. During the Second World War, he served in the Navy; continuing his research into ancient American civilisations, he obtained his *Habilitation* in 1943. While stationed in Greece, he founded the 'Freies Deutschland' committee for Macedonia and together with his soldiers, surrendered to British troops.¹⁷ In 1946 he became a teacher at the Kant-Hochschule at Braunschweig, and by 1948, had turned his attention once again to revising school textbooks, becoming president of the history teaching commission of the *Arbeitsgemeinschaft deutscher Lehrerverbände*. His wartime role in the military resistance gave him the contacts he needed with the occupying forces, and in 1951 he was able to found the Internationales Schulbuchinstitut in Braunschweig, which was to become the most important centre for studying and revising school textbooks.¹⁸ In the year of its foundation, the institute drew up a plan for collaboration between the association of French history teachers and its German counterpart on the theme of their respective school textbooks, and the immediate result was two initial bilateral conferences, the first in Braunschweig in 1952 and the second in Paris in 1953.¹⁹ From then on, there were regular meetings until 1967, leading to the preparation of a number of 'recommendations' on how to deal with a series of controversial themes. Similar agreements were signed between the *Arbeitsgemeinschaft deutscher Lehrerverbände* and the British Historical Association, as well as between the National Council for Social Studies in Washington and the Internationales Schulbuchinstitut in Braunschweig.²⁰ The co-operation with the British Historical Association goes all the way back to the war years, when the association of British historians informed the government of the

need for a radical revision of German history textbooks. The work undertaken by the British historians with German teachers is therefore to be seen as part of the 're-education' programme mentioned in the final document of the Potsdam Conference.

Alongside the initiatives undertaken by teachers' associations with the enthusiastic support of UNESCO, there were also projects to revise each other's textbooks undertaken in the context of cultural agreements between the different countries. Again, it is worth mentioning the Franco-German agreement of 1954, as well as the Anglo-German one. Article 13 of the Franco-German agreement refers to a mutual commitment to represent events connected to the other country as objectively as possible, and to eliminate from history textbooks value judgments that might encourage negative feelings that threatened neighbourly relationships between the two countries. In 1958, relationships between French and German historiography got a further boost with the founding in Paris of the Centre Allemand de Recherches Historiques, which in 1964 became the Deutsches Historisches Institut. From 1967 to 1980, the activity of the Franco-German commission came to a complete halt, until it was re-launched in 1981, with the explicit aim of picking up again from the work done between 1950 and 1967.²¹ This time, analysis of the textbooks of the two countries failed to bring to light evident examples of chauvinism but rather different points of focus and certain omissions. For example, the German textbooks made hardly any mention of the Third Republic, while French textbooks focused almost exclusively on the period of Nazi rule and left out the Republic of Weimar. The results of the Franco-German commission's work were published in 1989 with a conference in Bonn and in 1990 with another conference at the Sorbonne in Paris.²² In conclusion, in the years immediately following the Second World War, the most intense exchanges with regard to bilateral revision of history textbooks were those between France and Germany, thanks to initiatives undertaken at various levels and supported by various bodies, all of which testify to a strong desire on both sides to go beyond the 'historical enemy' archetype.

Between 1951 and 1953 there were also three meetings between French and Italian historians, organised on the French side by its commission to UNESCO and on the Italian side by a group of historians. A revision of French and Italian history books was agreed upon using the following four criteria: 1) Factual errors; 2) slips, or rather the relative importance given to events in the period studied; 3) biased interpretations; and 4) unfortunate expressions ('mots malheureux') to be eliminated. In 1953, the first Italo-German historical conference took place in Braunschweig.²³

Historiographical negotiations between the two blocs (1960–1989)

In the early years of its existence, the activity of the Braunschweig institute was limited to the countries of the Western bloc. Between 1961 and 1963, one of the acute phases of the Cold War, the Internationales Schulbuchinstitut came under bitter attack from the Deutsches Pädagogisches Zentralinstitut in East Berlin and the Polish Western Press Agency. Basically, the institute was accused of wanting to impose an official truth in the textbooks in use in Western Europe. In the 1950s, Georg Eckert had managed to establish contact with Polish historians in exile and formulate some recommendations published in 1956 on how German-Polish relations were presented in schoolbooks.²⁴ A lively discussion ensued between West German historians and Polish historians, both those in exile and those working in Communist Poland. While the attitude of official historians in East Germany remained completely negative, it turned out to be easier to re-establish contact with Yugoslav historians. In fact, the first conference between West Germany and Yugoslavia was held in Braunschweig in 1953, organised by the Internationales Schulbuchinstitut in collaboration with the German and Yugoslav teachers' associations.²⁵ More than twenty years later, a bilateral Austro-Yugoslav historical commission was set up which held two conferences (1976 at Gösing and 1984 at Otrocec); although the outcome was not particularly significant from the scientific point of view, it did make it possible to keep discussions going between the participants.²⁶

In 1964, as president of the West German commission to UNESCO, the indefatigable Georg Eckert presided over the establishment of regular contacts with the historical commissions of the Communist bloc countries; in 1965, a delegation from the West German commission travelled to Warsaw with the aim of continuing talks on textbooks and looking into setting up bilateral historical conferences. Talks resumed in 1969, coinciding with the start of Willy Brandt's *Ostpolitik*, and in Berlin, the pastor Günter Berndt organised a conference entitled 'Poland in the teaching in schools.' Three more conferences followed, one of which was held in Poznan, at the Institute for Research on the Western territories, where Wladislaw Markiewicz was director at the time.²⁷ Finally, in 1972, the first West German-Polish conference on school textbooks took place in Warsaw, under the patronage of UNESCO, and the bilateral West German-Polish historical commission was set up on that occasion. These meetings were undoubtedly facilitated (if not actually made possible) by the signing of the treaty on 7 December 1970, regulating relations between West Germany and Poland.²⁸

In 1972, a second UNESCO conference took place in Braunschweig which proposed a series of first 'recommendations' regarding the school textbooks of both countries. At a subsequent meeting, again in Braunschweig,

it was decided that a commission of historians from the two delegations would meet twice a year to scrutinise the school textbooks in use in West Germany and Poland. Moreover, the commission was also to look at the years following 1945, and deal with 'general historical problems and historiographical themes of particular significance for the historiography of both countries'.²⁹ The work of the commission received further stimulus from the positive conclusion of the work of the Conference for Security and Co-operation in Europe (Helsinki Act, 1975). At the Warsaw conference in October 1975, the commission began to examine the period from 1944 to 1974, which was when there were the most serious differences in interpretation between the historians of the two countries. However, the consensus of opinion over how to assess the crimes committed by the Nazis in Poland during World War II represented a good starting point on which to base further encounters. A series of 'recommendations' was also drawn up in the field of contemporary history.³⁰ Altogether, from February 1972 to October 1975, eight conferences took place alternately in Warsaw and Braunschweig on the subject of the revision of history textbooks, conferences aimed at formulating the usual 'recommendations'. With the publication of the recommendations in German and Polish, decided at the ninth conference, the first phase of the commission's work was completed.³¹ The antagonism between the two blocs to which Poland and West Germany respectively belonged did not represent an obstacle; very wisely, the members of the commission simply took it as a given. For this very reason, the 'recommendations' were basically the result of 'historiographical negotiations', which showed all too clearly just how limited was the Polish historians' room for manoeuvre. There was no mention of the August 1939 pact between Hitler and Stalin, the German occupation of Poland was aimed exclusively at eliminating Polish intelligence, and there was no reference to the Holocaust or the Jews, who were only mentioned indirectly in relation to the Warsaw ghetto uprising. The tricky question of the expulsion of the German population after the war was dealt with using terminology resembling the diplomatic language of art. XIII of the Potsdam Declaration ('Orderly Transfers of German Populations'), thereby managing to avoid the current German term 'Vertreibung'. Conveniently forgotten were also the forced transfers of the Polish population from the old Eastern territories occupied by the Soviet Union to the new Western territories seized from Germany. In West Germany, the commission's twenty-six recommendations came in for some very harsh criticism,³² and in the course of the next seventeen conferences, until 1994, this commission sifted through and reconsidered the 1976 recommendations.³³

In the context of a general conference of UNESCO in 1956 in Delhi, a first tentative approach took place between West German and Soviet historians. The initiative was taken by the famous historian Arkadi Jerussalimski,

who after a discussion on how to set up a modern universal history, made the following remark to an astonished Karl Dietrich Erdmann: 'It's time the historians of the Soviet Union and West Germany make contact with each other.'³⁴ In 1965, to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the victory in the Great Patriotic War, four West German historians were invited to the USSR by the Soviet Academy of Sciences. Informal contacts were made on the sidelines of the international congress of historians held in Moscow in 1970, sometimes by rather unexpected means: once, after a diplomatic reception, the West German historian Karl Otmar Freiherr von Aretin found a message in his pocket asking him to meet a group of Soviet researchers who were obviously dissidents; but these efforts generally came to nothing.³⁵ However, after the signing of the treaty of Moscow between West Germany and the Soviet Union on 12 August 1970, it was the committee of Soviet historians to take the initiative and propose a conference with their West German colleagues. In June 1972, Karl Dietrich Erdmann, as representative of the ICHS, and von Aretin, representing the Institut für Europäische Geschichte in Mainz, went to Moscow and drew up detailed plans for the organisation of a colloquium in Germany on the history of Germany and Russia in the age of capitalism, 1871–1917. Although the Soviet proposal did not meet with Erdmann's wholehearted approval, the first meeting between West German and Soviet historians took place in 1973 at the Academy of Sciences in Mainz. The conference received a lot of attention in the German press, and was to remain the most productive of all the conferences which followed. In a climate of studied courtesy, the historians from the two delegations debated intensely for four days.³⁶ There was also a brilliant display of diplomacy, when Werner Conze, president of the association of West German historians, Erdmann and von Aretin drew up a final declaration with three Soviet colleagues, in which it was agreed to exchange school textbooks and continue the colloquiums in the future, as well as to publish the proceedings and open up each other's archives to fellow historians from the other country. At the moment of signing, however, under pressure from the Communist commissar present, the head of the Soviet delegation said he could not sign the closing declaration because the expression under Conze's name, 'Verband der Historiker Deutschlands', would offend the historians of East Germany. A compromise was reached by agreeing to leave out the institutional affiliation below the name of each of the signatories.³⁷

The next congress, which took place in Leningrad in 1975, examined the period following the Bolshevik revolution in Russia and the Weimar Republic in Germany. Since the papers presented were now touching on questions to do with the period after the October Revolution, the debate was more heated. It was impossible to reach an agreement on Stalin's assessment of German Social Democrats or on the interpretation of the Treaty of

Rapallo, which for the Soviets represented a way to peace and independence, while on the German side, Andreas Hillgruber stressed the collaboration between the Red Army and the Reichswehr.³⁸ In the concluding speeches, it was decided that the scholars should have easier access to each other's archives and that there should be consensual revision of textbooks. The two purposes had few practical effects: the access to each other's records came up against the brick wall represented by the Soviet archives, while the agreement about textbooks ran into the impossibility for the German historians to issue any binding directives.

For the following meeting, the Soviet delegation suggested analysing relations between the two nations from 1969 onwards. While this time leap enabled the Soviets to avoid dealing with the insurmountable problem posed by the secret protocol signed by Hitler and Stalin on 23 August 1939, not all the West German historians were keen to take on the question of East Germany. At the international congress of historians in San Francisco in 1975, von Aretin managed to put together an alternative programme, with a theoretical section dedicated to historicism, and a historiographical section, on the period from 1797 to 1815. The third West German-Soviet colloquium took place in Munich in March 1978, and although the Soviet delegation was less prestigious, the discussions were fruitful.³⁹

On the other hand, the attempt to organise an international symposium to mark the centenary of the 1878 Congress of Berlin with participants from the Soviet bloc countries, under the auspices of the Association internationale d'histoire contemporaine de l'Europe, was a fiasco. Since together with the programme, there was an exhibition by a foundation called Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Moscow boycotted the initiative and also forbade historians from other Warsaw Pact countries to participate.⁴⁰ The incident had repercussions on the fourth meeting between German and Soviet historians held in Moscow in October 1981, when relations were still strained because of the boycotting of the Moscow Olympics in 1980, which West Germany had also adhered to. The theme of the congress had to do with the Enlightenment, and aroused little interest in the participants, and perhaps this extinguished any enthusiasm for continuing the meetings.

Establishing historiographical orthodoxy in the Soviet bloc (1955–1989)

The greatest number of bilateral historical commissions were set up in the late 1950s between the various countries of the Soviet bloc, where a dense network of commissions came into being, putting historians from practically every socialist country in touch with each other. First, there were those historical commissions consisting of the Soviet Union on one side and Warsaw Pact country on the other. When the East German-

Soviet commission was set up in 1957, it was seen as a key factor to the success of East German historiography, given the competitive relationship felt by the SED from the very beginning towards the historiography of West Germany.⁴¹ Thanks especially to the work of Martin Sabrow we have a careful reconstruction of the stages by which the SED built a historiography of regime practically from nothing, programmatically subordinated to political power.⁴² Contrary to the expectations of the East German historians, who would have liked initially to keep talking to their colleagues from West Germany and perhaps even persuade them of the superiority of the Marxist historical method, they were ordered not to have anything to do with them or take part in their congresses, and to leave the *Verband der Historiker Deutschlands*. The break was completed in 1958, with the founding of the *Deutsche Historiker Gesellschaft* as the official association of East German historians.⁴³ As mentioned above, the East German-Soviet commission came into being on 5 February 1957, at the initiative of the central committees of the two Communist parties involved. The commission was supposed to make the historians of East Germany party to the experiences accumulated by the Soviet historians and place them in a commanding position in that great mission which consisted of building socialism and struggling against imperialism.⁴⁴ The protocol of the first meeting defined its aims as follows: 'encourage historians from one country to participate in the scientific meetings, congresses and conferences of the historians of the other country and organise scientific conferences together on questions of mutual interest', 'encourage the co-publication of materials from archives and other sources, and mutual consultation and exchange of views on single chapters and sections of important scientific publications', 'organise the co-operation of German and Soviet historians in the struggle against reactionary history and define their priority tasks', 'formulate proposals for the common treatment of contemporary questions of particular importance', 'propose the translation of research contributions', 'encourage particularly close ties between the scientific institutions and individual researchers of the two countries.'⁴⁵ As far as actual contents were concerned, the same set of minutes proposed carrying out 'common research into the history of Germany, the history of the Soviet Union, the economic, political and cultural relations between the two countries, as well as other problems deemed of interest to researchers from our two countries.' Among the research priorities listed were the events leading up to the two world wars, the unmasking of imperialist policy and ideology and the analysis of the progressive traditions of the peoples of the Soviet Union and Germany. Among these, of central importance was the history of the struggle of the working classes of the two countries against imperialism and war. Looking back years later (in 1976), Horst Bartel remarked that dealing with all the various manifestations of bourgeois ideology had been

one of most important tasks of the East German-Soviet commission. The attention for the historiography of West Germany, like the almost obsessive treatment of German imperialism and the continuity of Germany's war aims in the First and Second World Wars, can in all likelihood be explained by the reaction of the Communist bloc countries to West Germany's admission to entered NATO.⁴⁶ By no mere coincidence, a paper published in 1959 refers to the historians of West Germany as 'NATO-Historiker'.⁴⁷

In the opinion of Walter Schmidt, the author of a detailed, if rather partisan, reconstruction of the gradual independence of East German historiography from the scientific and representative structures of pre-existing German historiography, the aim of the commissions was to give a programmatic dimension to co-operation between the historiographies of the Communist bloc countries. Thanks to this, there was a consequent improvement in the quality of the international co-operation of East Germany's historiography with 'international Marxist-Leninist historical science'. In 1961, the East German-Soviet commission organised a conference on the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union.⁴⁸ In 1964, a meeting of the commission in Moscow analysed the tendencies of West German historiography and its divergences with East German historiography. In 1971, a congress was held on the influence of Engels' thought on the German and international workers' movement.

Of particular interest is the activity of the Polish-East German commission, set up in 1956 in Warsaw with the task of 'preparing contributions which give an account of the progressive and friendly element in the relations between Germans and Poles, in order to explain to the people of the GDR how the history of the Polish people developed'.⁴⁹ To do this, it was necessary to make a systematic analysis of the distortion and manipulation of Polish history and German-Polish relations by the forces of German reaction and its ideological accomplices, activities 'pursued today in the West German imperialist state'. The aim of this commission, similarly to that of the East German-Czechoslovakian commission already in existence,⁵⁰ was to 'lend a hand in making socialist historians more effective and co-ordinated'.⁵¹ This commission too listed among its aims the co-compilation of textbooks for the two countries. Special attention was paid to the history of the border territories such as Silesia and Pomerania, for which special sub-commissions were instituted. The recommendations published that same year by the Internationales Schulbuchinstitut about relations between the two populations and their representation in school textbooks were given a very hostile reception.⁵² There was worried talk of attempts to 'stir up trouble between Poles and Russians in the past and between the people's Poland and the Soviet Union in the present day'. One might even be tempted to suggest that the founding of the commission as early as 1956 might have come about as a reaction to the initiative of the Braunschweig institute. The second

conference, held in Berlin, again in 1956, tackled the highly sensitive issue of the 'peace border' along the Oder-Neiße. The task of the historians of Poland and East Germany was summed up as building a common front against the 'revanchists' in Bonn.

In 1959, a weighty volume of 1,000 pages was published on Poland, Germany and the Oder-Neiße line, edited by the Institut für Zeitgeschichte of East Berlin in collaboration with the East German-Polish commission.⁵³ The following year, the conference was held in Leipzig and was actually accompanied by a joint declaration by the two governments about the urgent need for a historical treatment of the countries giving onto the Baltic Sea. A general outline was drawn up for a study of the history of Pomerania, which was entrusted to a group of historians from the two countries. The Poznan conference of 1958 dealt with the theme of the Polish revolts which had broken out repeatedly in Silesia between 1918 and 1921 with the aim of having the region assigned to Poland.

In Krakow, again in 1958, the theme discussed and subjected to considerable criticism was the *Ostforschung*. To celebrate the tenth anniversary of the founding of the GDR in 1959 and the jubilee of the founding of the Polish state, an itinerant exhibition was organised entitled 'Science at the service of the Drang nach Osten'. The speaker stressed that the exhibition had already been to several Polish cities, reinforcing the idea among the general public that the German *Ostforschung* was a form of shock troops from aggressive German imperialism. The following year, in 1960, at Wrocław, the theme was 'Poland and Germany before and during the Second World War', where it was emphasised that the Nazi policy towards Poland was being continued by the 'ultras from Bonn'. Later the same year, in Dresden, there was a conference on the rise of popular democracies in both countries, seen as part of the epoch-making transition from capitalism to communism. In 1961, in Danzig, the theme of the conference was the treaties of Versailles, Rapallo and Locarno. The speaker, Gerhard Schilfert, was very pleased to announce that on this difficult theme too, the historians of the two countries had reached a common conclusion, facilitated by the common aim of the struggle for socialism. The Rostock conference of 1962 was completely devoted to analysing and rejecting the recommendations of West German historiography about Polish-German relations. The work concluded with congratulations all round for the historiographical results achieved by throwing into relief the friendly relations between the two peoples and the close collaboration between the historians of the two countries. Finally, in Posnan in 1963, there was an interesting debate on the cultural relationships between the two historiographies during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁵⁴

East Germany also set up bilateral historical commissions with Hungary⁵⁵ and Bulgaria.⁵⁶ The Polish-Soviet commission tackled the themes of compar-

ative social history, such as the role of the city in the development of Poland and Russia, the history of the rural sections of society, the structure of villages, of peasant communities and of the struggles against feudalism.⁵⁷ It would seem that the ideological control over the work of the commissions became much less strict in the 1980s, and it also appears that in 2001, ten years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, a new Polish-Russian commission was set up for the revision of textbooks of history, geography and literature.⁵⁸ Co-operation between Soviet and Hungarian historians began as early as 1949, while a mixed historical commission was formed in 1968. In this case too, problems to do with comparative social history prevailed, with a certain amount of attention paid to the relationship between history and ethnology and to questions of historical method.⁵⁹ Further evidence of the existence of a variety of commissions between Communist countries can be found for the Czechoslovakian case with bilateral commissions with the Soviet Union,⁶⁰ Bulgaria,⁶¹ Hungary,⁶² Yugoslavia⁶³ and Poland.⁶⁴

This list does not aim to be exhaustive with respect to the themes dealt with by the bilateral commissions within the Soviet bloc. However, even these few, incomplete examples give an idea of the vast selection of themes discussed at the commissions' periodic conferences, themes ranging from the workers' movement to international politics, to the history of social classes, to problems connected with Marxist historiography and to the relationship between history and other disciplines. The main emphasis, however, was on the history of the Communist parties and the 'antifascist movement', on polemic against Western historiography (especially that West Germany) and also on the relations between the various countries.

The enormous efforts made within the socialist bloc to organise this impressive network of commissions shows once again how much importance was attributed to the historical sciences by the Soviet Union and the other Warsaw Pact countries. Historical materialism was the philosophical basis of Marxism, and was endowed with the capacity to predict the future course of history by starting with an analysis of the 'class struggle' in the past. The bilateral structure of the commissions made sure that the Soviet Communist Party could exercise control more easily (every country had a bilateral historical commission in partnership with the Soviet Union) and at the same time, reinforce an awareness of the historical ties uniting the socialist countries. This task was made all the more urgent by the fact that until the pacifying intervention of the Soviet superpower, these countries had shown profound hostility towards each other, mainly because of disputes over borders and over the treatment of minorities. Another priority was to create a historiographical tradition which could compete effectively with that of the West. Interestingly, only the historians of the two Germanies were forbidden to have any scientific relations with each other, obviously because

to maintain the previous communications network with colleagues from West Germany would mean jeopardising the creation of a Communist historiography. Contact with historians from other Western countries was not actively discouraged, while invitations to speak at international conferences were seen as opportunities for doing some effective propaganda. However, any contact with West German historians was always subject to careful control by the authorities.⁶⁵

From the data available, the picture that emerges is one of an alternative European history, in which the Warsaw Pact countries represent the culmination of a long historical process. This is the idea behind the mandate, repeated continuously to Communist bloc historians, to scrutinize the past for examples of relationships between the countries involved based on friendship, co-operation and cultural exchange, reserving particular attention to the recent phenomenon of the fight against fascism in the Second World War.

However, these considerations need to be supported by systematic archive work to look closer at the aims of the Soviets at the time when the bilateral commissions were first set up (late 1950s and 1960s) and trace the possible adjustments made over time with regard to the objectives laid down for the commissions themselves. As things stand, we have also been unable to formulate an opinion on the scientific level of the conferences: while some contributions were obviously propagandistic in nature, we cannot exclude the possibility that there were useful and fruitful exchanges of views between historians from the countries involved which led to advancements in the historical knowledge of the themes discussed. In any case, we are sure that this opens up a fascinating area of study into the political uses of history in the Communist bloc countries and the relationship between the various national historiographies and Soviet historiography.

Liquidating controversial pasts in preparation for European enlargement

The fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War not only brought about profound changes in the geopolitical map of Europe, but also put an end to the ideological conflicts between the two blocs; we have already seen what a strong influence these conflicts had on historiography. In the wake of political transformation and with astonishing celerity, new bilateral initiatives were launched in 1990 between Germany and Czechoslovakia and between Italy and Yugoslavia to remove the obstacles of a controversial past which the Cold War had for so long made it impossible to deal with. Commissions involving countries from the two opposing blocs which were still functioning (such as the West German-Polish commission), saw their efforts melt away after years of exhausting discussions to try to decide on versions of textbooks which would be politically acceptable for both sides.

One of the biggest political issues which had long weighed upon German-Polish relations was finally resolved on 14 November 1990, with the signing of the treaty which established the permanent nature of the border between the two countries. In spite of this, there were still numerous other problems that needed solving, including the claims of the German refugees, restitution of property and claims for damages for slave labour. On the scientific front, relations between German and Polish historians were relaunched with the opening of the Deutsches Historisches Institut in Warsaw in 1993, which has since organised numerous events.⁶⁶ In May 1994, the XXVI German-Polish conference on textbooks was held in Bautzen, and the bilateral work which had extended over seventeen conferences subsequent to the famous 'Recommendations' of 1976 finally drew to a close. For the first time, it was possible to talk about the GDR, tackling issues 'without prejudice and in a mutually free dialogue.'⁶⁷ The time of 'recommendations' being negotiated like international treaties was over, as was the time of 'exegesis' of the recommendations, in which historians of the two countries involved cautiously developed their own historiographical points of view. After the end of strict political censorship in Poland, which had long imposed an embarrassed silence on questions such as the secret protocol between Hitler and Stalin, Katyn, and the forced transfer, not only of the German population but also of the Eastern Poles, and of the Białorusians and the Ukrainians from the territories newly acquired by Poland after the Second World War, the work of the German-Polish commission was resumed and organised on a new, pluralistic basis.⁶⁸ Instead of the 'recommendations', members either proposed texts which summarised the various issues, and included considerations of a pedagogical nature and a rich variety of sources, or else simply the conference proceedings.⁶⁹

Unlike the situation with Poland, no bilateral historical commission existed between West Germany and Czechoslovakia prior to the fall of the Berlin Wall. At the initiative of the foreign ministers of the two countries, Hans-Dietrich Genscher and Jirí Dienstbier, a commission was set up and formally instituted in Prague on 16 June 1990.⁷⁰ After the separation of the Czech republic from the Slovak one in 1992, the commission was split for juridical purposes into a German-Czech commission and a German-Slovak one. Its aim is to study and evaluate the common history of the three peoples, principally in the twentieth century, placing this in its wider context of co-existence between Czechs, Slovaks, Germans and Jews. As well as on the tragic events connected with the years 1938–1945, the emphasis is on the elements that actually unite these people. On 29 April 1995, on the fiftieth anniversary of World War II, the commission published a six-point declaration touching on a whole series of sore points. Despite the presence of both presidents, Václav Havel and Roman Herzog, at one session of the

commission (Dresden, October 1995), the enormous difficulties experienced in drawing up a joint declaration in order to sign the good neighbour treaty in 1992 showed to what extent the past continued to weigh upon German-Czech relations. In 1996, this situation led the commission to publish a brief summary of its work, or rather work in progress,⁷¹ and its decision was praised in the declaration of 21 January 1997.⁷² The commission acts independently of political directives and makes its findings public, for example in conferences such as the one on memory held in Brünn in 2001.⁷³ However, there have been instances of political pressure, for example during the 2002 Berlin conference, when Christoph Zöpel, Secretary of State at the German Foreign Ministry, made the politicians' interest in the so-called 'Benes-decrees' very clear.

The breaking-up of Yugoslavia and the founding of the new independent states created new border relations, especially between Slovenia and the EU countries Austria and Italy. With the creation of bilateral commissions, Slovenia was seeking historiographical links with Europe. Initiatives for a bilateral commission had already been taken in September 1990 by the city council of Trieste, which voted unanimously in favour of setting up a bilateral Italo-Yugoslav commission, entrusted with the task of throwing light on the violence perpetrated against Italians in the border areas of Venezia Giulia in the years 1943–48, a theme which the four Italo-Yugoslav conferences held in the 1960s had not dealt with.⁷⁴ The Italian government began talks with the Yugoslav government, which were then suspended after the dissolution of Yugoslavia and resumed in parallel with the new governments of Slovenia and Croatia. In October 1993, the respective foreign ministries instituted two bilateral historico-cultural commissions, one Italo-Slovenian and one Italo-Croatian, each made up of 'seven experts renowned in their own specific field'. In the joint declaration, the two governments emphasised their desire 'to reinforce and extend their friendly bilateral relations on the basis of enhanced mutual understanding and spirit of collaboration' and they gave the commissions the task of 'carrying out an exhaustive study of all the important aspects of bilateral political and cultural relations in the course of this century'. After a first meeting, the Italo-Croatian commission lost momentum and failed to meet again. The Italo-Slovenian commission handed in its final report in July 2000, and this was approved unanimously by its respective foreign ministries. Various factors having to do with political expediency delayed publication of the report, until a series of disclosures in the Slovenian press led to the publication in the daily newspapers of the region concerned of an unofficial version of the text different from the version agreed upon by the commission. Subsequently, the text agreed upon appeared in an unofficial version with an introduction by the Slovenian foreign minister Dimitrij Rupel, and it also appeared in Italy in some journals of contemporary history.⁷⁵

With Austria, on the other hand, Slovenia set up an Austro-Slovenian group of historians and legal experts. Presently it is expected that the commission will publish a bilingual collection of essays.

Conclusions

In view of the vast panorama presented here, it seems reasonable to say that bilateral historical commissions were (as indeed they still are) an important instrument for overcoming an exclusively national vision of historiographical problems, especially on the field of political history. Or rather, the bilateral commissions did help to bring about that 'brotherhood of historians' which often turns out to be more a normative ideal than a culturally operational reality.

On the other hand, they were set up for very specific reasons, in the course of very special political moments in time, with aims and expectations of an extra-scientific nature. Sometimes the political mandate was made more explicit, sometimes less, but it was never completely absent. For this reason, the question of the political mandate of these commissions cannot be reduced to 'free' commissions as opposed to commissions which were mere emanations of governments. It was all about graduality in the relationship between political expectations and free historiographical confrontation. They operated in extremely varied circumstances, in a situation where the forces at play comprised national traditions, 'ecumenical' aspirations and the political and/or civil expectations of their home institutions. As a phenomenon, they are to be placed in the context of other supranational institutions for intellectual co-operation, such as the League of Nations' Commission Internationale de Coopération Intellectuelle or the International Institute of Intellectual Co-operation, which led to the founding in 1945/46 of UNESCO. As regards the importance of what they actually did, this was greater in those periods of transition in the course of which pre-existing historiography was subjected to some kind of trauma and the need was felt for a new *Meistererzählung*. This manifested itself in more drastic terms for the historiography of the Communist bloc countries, which not only had to adhere to the orthodox Marxist-Leninist viewpoint, but was also subordinated to political expediency to a degree unheard of in Western countries. However, after the two world wars, bilateral historical commissions were instituted between European countries which had been at war with each other, with the aim of going beyond historiographical points of view still too coloured by a national perspective. Clearly, although these aims are very laudable in themselves, the risk is that of a trivialisation of history, of adopting a 'compensatory' perspective with historical reconstruction in which historians are tempted to tone down what were

real atrocities committed by one side against the other and emphasise the instances of good neighbourliness, sometimes regardless of their true historical relevance. Furthermore, the bilateral work lead in many instances to recommendations for school textbooks where the argumentation was often surreptitious, showing the difficulties of the intellectual exchanges, especially between countries on both sides of the iron curtain. At the same time, as the Western German-Polish paradigmatically shows, the intellectual exchanges were confined practically only to the field of common recommendations for textbooks. Still, even if the countries were not obligated to adopt these recommendations, they created consciousness for open historiographical questions on the bilateral and multilateral level.

In any case, it is surely no coincidence that bilateral historical commissions were particularly active after the two World Wars, and that with the dissolution of the Communist bloc, there has been a mushrooming of bilateral initiatives for the negotiated and consensual rewriting of the history of relations between the countries of Europe in the 'short' twentieth century (1914–89).

Notes

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