

# TEACHING SENSITIVE AND CONTROVERSIAL HISTORY

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## Introduction

This chapter focuses on possibly a unique aspect of history as a school subject: – subject matter or content which could be described as sensitive or controversial. The focus for these particular ‘histories’ could for example confront pupils with some of the worst examples of inhumanity, in the United Kingdom this often involves teaching about the Holocaust or the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. Whilst the horror of these episodes of history has an almost universal element of fascination, there is a risk that teaching about the Holocaust or Slavery becomes nothing more than a catalogue of atrocities. Teachers need to be clear about their objectives. Why are they teaching these topics and what do they hope their pupils will gain from lessons about the Holocaust or the Slave Trade.

History can be controversial in other ways and another focus of this chapter explores, from a British perspective, how the diverse and changing nature of society requires history teachers to approach topics such as the Crusades or the history of Islam from a more informed and sympathetic perspective.

Finally the chapter considers the role of the teacher in delivering this sensitive or controversial history. This is more complex and draws from the experience of history teachers working in multi cultural settings and from teachers in Northern Ireland who have worked with the problem of teaching contested and controversial histories.

## Why History Is Different From Other Subjects

One of the greatest problems all history teachers face is trying to prove to others how important or relevant their subject is. It might be seen as less important, other vocational subjects might be thought to be more relevant to working and living in the modern world. Others might see it as a backward looking subject which simply dwells on issues that are either no longer relevant or are perhaps, best forgotten. One thing history teachers have to be

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very good at therefore is being able to justify their role, status and position in the school curriculum. In the UK this is a discussion which history teachers from Universities to Primary Schools are still having. In 2007 the Head of the Curriculum and Qualifications Authority (the government agency concerned with curriculum development) Mick Waters, was trying to 'sell' the new curriculum to teachers, and to the wider world outside education, his vision of a 21<sup>st</sup> century curriculum was one where subjects might be less important but where schools would need to demonstrate that they were preparing children for the new century. He came up with these headlines which outlined what a modern curriculum should do:

- address difficult issues
- affect the person and society
- not shrink from controversy.
- deal with emotions and relationships.
- help young people face fears
- see things from different view points.
- be diverse

Usually this kind of rhetoric is forgotten immediately after it is delivered but these bullet points have become embedded in official documents as part of the overall aims and objectives of the current school curriculum in England. It is possible to take these ideas and turn them into a short paragraph which explains exactly why history deserves its place in a modern curriculum

"History is a subject which can **address difficult issues** which **affect** the individual **person and society** as a whole. History is a subject which should **not shrink from controversy**. Some topics such as the Holocaust or the slave trade **deal with emotions and relationships**. If history is taught well it can **help young people face fears** and develop a more informed and deeper understanding. Significantly history can also help young people to **see things from different view points**. Society today is very different and it is more important than ever before that young people have a real understanding of the **diverse** society we now live in."

Immediately history become a relevant subject. History can focus, legitimately, on controversial issues, it can help young people make sense of a complex and challenging world and equip them with the intellectual tools to examine contradictory points of view in a balanced and dispassionate way. This itself may seem a difficult and a controversial issue, it suggests that the responsibilities of history teachers are more wide ranging than simply helping pupils to understand the events of the past. That somehow their teaching of

particular topics, or the very way that they teach might be considered to be dangerous, partisan and very political. Clearly an important aspect of dealing with emotive or sensitive issues is the role of the teacher but first it might be a good idea to try and define what might be meant by emotive or sensitive or controversial history.

In March 2007 the Historical Association produced a report for the Department for Education and Schools (DfES) with the appropriately enigmatic acronym *TEACH: A Report from The Historical Association on the Challenges and Opportunities for Teaching Emotive and Controversial History* 3–19. (<http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RW100.pdf>)<sup>1</sup> The report is well worth reading and provides a number of case studies which illustrate how history teachers in a range of schools in England tackle some of these issues. The Teach Report's definition of emotive and controversial history is not necessarily comprehensive and takes a very particular perspective.

The study of history can be emotive and controversial where there is actual or perceived unfairness to people by another individual or group in the past. This may also be the case where there are disparities between what is taught in school history, family/community histories and other histories. Such issues and disparities create a strong resonance with students in particular educational settings. (HA, 2007: 3)

Several things become clear on reading the report; it highlights why and how some history might be considered difficult to teach. The report's definition, however, is also limiting, and again this can be picked up in terms of the nature of the historical topics which are the focus of discussion. Issues are emotive and controversial when students are forced to confront brutality, inhumanity and injustice: obvious examples are the Holocaust and the trans-Atlantic slave trade. History becomes emotive and controversial when past events have a resonance with current problems faced by society, such as racism, terrorism and Islamophobia. Some topics, such as the Holocaust or the Atlantic Slave Trade might be challenging because children are forced to confront examples of human brutality and this, understandably can be upsetting and distressing. There are other issues which are less easy to address where the subject matter is controversial because it links to contemporary social problems or challenges contemporary views and ideas. In the UK terrorism has, and still is a difficult and a controversial topic. In the 1980s and 1990s pupils following the Schools History Project GCSE course were able to follow a modern studies unit which examined the historical roots of contemporary issues. Whilst it was possible to study China, or the growth of

the European Union the majority of schools chose more controversial topics: the roots of the Arab – Israeli dispute or the Troubles in N Ireland. With both of these modules, Chris Culpin, the director of the SHP found himself under frequent attack from the right wing press having to defend teaching children about terrorism or for using IRA propaganda.

In recent years the SHP has introduced other history modules which are equally controversial. One course has a very specific focus on Terrorism and enables history teachers, and their pupils to examine in an objective way a topic which has real relevance to the modern world. Despite trying to answer childrens' questions and help them to develop an informed understanding of the nature and causes of terrorism the SHP still finds itself under attack from the same conservative press for filling children's minds with Al Quaida propaganda<sup>2</sup> The criticism directed at the former Director of the Schools History Project, Chris Culpin, is interesting for a number of reasons. The Daily Mail is an influential right wing or conservative newspaper; it has inflexible ideas about what topics should be taught to English pupils in English secondary schools and it is not surprising that British History and British heroes feature strongly. Teaching about al Qaida is seen one level as being unpatriotic but on another level reveals much about the attitudes of the Daily Mail which is convinced that some / most / all history teachers are left wing and probably subversive. It is highly probable that such conservative views of history and of history teachers are typical of many societies, in the UK much of the anger is relatively restrained, in part because 'our' history is relatively uncontested or uncontroversial. We are quite used to revisionist historians challenging national myths as this article demonstrates:

The Battle of Britain was not won by the RAF but by the Royal Navy, military historians have concluded, provoking outrage among the war's surviving fighter Challenging the "myth" that Spitfires and Hurricanes held off the German invaders in 1940, the monthly magazine History Today has concluded that it was the might of the Navy that stood between Britain and Nazi occupation.

Daily Telegraph 24 August 2006<sup>3</sup>

The newspaper article had picked up a story from a respected academic journal History Today which had critically examined the role of the Royal Navy in the period of the Battle of Britain. The article made a good story, there were a number of letters to the paper and then the story disappeared. In other nations where history is still controversial, is still contested the threat to historical objectivity and by implication the threat to the historian's freedom to research to think and to write are threatened as this article demonstrates:

Eminent British historian Orlando Figes yesterday accused the Russian authorities of trying to 'rehabilitate the Stalinist regime' after armed police seized an entire archive last week detailing repression in the Soviet Union. Figes, professor of history at Birkbeck, a London University college, condemned the raid on Memorial, a Russian human rights organisation. He said that the police had also taken material used in his latest book, *The Whisperers*, which details family life in Stalin's Russia.

The Observer 7 December 2008<sup>4</sup>

Even where history is less controversial, where particular standpoints are not contested history teachers are still faced with problems which other subject teachers While mathematics teachers might be expected to demonstrate how and where their Programme of Study might coincidentally, accidentally or in a totally contrived manner address all society' problems, you can see where the difficulties lie for you as history teachers. The TEACH report was accompanied by a short piece in the *Guardian* which best sums up one of the elements identified by the authors of the report as problematic. The article was headlined 'Schools drop Holocaust lessons' and went on to discuss how the sensitivities, or prejudices, of local communities might affect the way that schools dealt with some topics in the history curriculum. A link to this article can be found on the companion website. It would be worth downloading and reading this article as a starting point for your thoughts on this topic

### **Barriers to Teaching: Subject Knowledge and Teacher Confidence**

In the U.K. there are a number of sensitive and controversial subjects which have been part of the curriculum since 2000, however the latest changes to the history curriculum introduced from 2008 have meant that there is far more emphasis on content which might be considered sensitive or controversial, for example the Holocaust, aspects of Islamic history – the Crusades in particular and Black History. In the UK teaching Islamic history is clearly complex and challenging, especially in a post 9/11 world. In some parts of the UK where there is a large Muslim population, teachers might feel uncomfortable or ill prepared to teach about Islam, equally they might feel that they do not want to offend or upset the wider community by teaching about Islam in: 'the wrong way'. Some of these issues were highlighted in *The Teach Report*<sup>5</sup> (Teaching Emotive And Controversial History) published by the Historical Association in 2007. Some newspapers reported the publication of the report which identified some of these problems in the following way: 'Schools drop Holocaust lessons' and explained how the sensitivities, or prejudices, of local communities might affect the way that schools dealt with some topics in the history curriculum. In

these circumstances it is clear that one of the first problems is the confidence of history teachers to tackle such controversial topics.

Instead of simply stating that history teachers should feel confident to teach controversial issues, it might be worth considering what history teachers hope to get out of such teaching controversial issues, or approaching history in a controversial way. The professional journal *Teaching History* devoted an entire edition to the challenges and the opportunities facing teachers who try to teach sensitive or controversial issues. The 'Diversity and Divisions' issue of *Teaching History* is a valuable starting point for exploring some of these issues which focus on the nature and the integrity of the historical enquiry or activity. Teaching Islamic history in the UK can be complex and an article by Nicholas Kinloch<sup>6</sup> contains a timely health warning: 'The understandable attempts – made by many schools in the days and weeks after 11 September – to give students a crash course in Middle Eastern current affairs risked presenting Islam simply as that which opposes and is opposed by, the West' (Kinloch, 2005: 26) In some respects this illustrates both the opportunities that history offers for helping pupils to make sense of their contemporary world. At the same time it demonstrates how simplistic explanations might sometimes raise even more challenges. There are clearly different challenges in different schools. In almost exclusively white areas history teachers could well be faced with challenging stereotypical views which might be Islamophobic, racist or both. In schools with significant numbers of Muslim students the issues might relate to feelings of isolation or persecution. There might also be an issue which was raised in the *Guardian* article, where one school deciding not to teach the Crusades because it conflicted with the view of events presented by a local mosque. This is a challenge and history teachers might rightly feel apprehensive about tackling such a difficult area, but such issues can be taught in a very direct way. From the same *Teaching History* issue, Alison Stephen<sup>7</sup> (2005), who teaches at Abraham Moss School in Manchester, describes how she teaches the Arab–Israeli conflict in Year 11. Abraham Moss School is ethnically very diverse and, significantly, 60 per cent of the school population is Muslim. The department's approach to teaching history emphasizes the importance of the students' own roots and traditions, but also aims to develop their students' understanding of the opinions and beliefs of others (Stephen, 2005: 5). Conventional wisdom might suggest that studying the Arab–Israeli dispute in the current climate is decidedly risky, however, a number of comments by students referred to in Stephen's article provide useful anecdotal evidence: for example;

'the crisis is still going on today ... you need to know the background before talking about it in the future'

and

‘I now feel confident to join in a conversation about the conflict’.

(Stephen, 2005: 5)

The comments are valuable, demonstrating as they do the ability of good history teaching to empower students, who felt that their history lessons were enabling them to develop their own understanding of issues which had a relevance to them. This article also demonstrates that the perceptions of adults and students can sometimes differ in ways which are unexpected. Conventional wisdom would identify the influx of Jewish immigrants to Palestine in the 1930s as a factor in the rise of hostility between the different communities; however, Alison Stephen’s observation is valuable:

‘I encountered some interesting attitudes. For example, there was shock at the Arab fears about Jewish immigration. Most students saw immigration as a positive thing, and found it hard to understand Arab fears of possible economic or political threats’ (Stephen, 2005: 6).

It might be hard to understand what was going on in these lessons about the Arab–Israeli conflict but perhaps another article in the same issue of *Teaching History* has something to offer in the way of explanations. Over a number of years Alan McCully has been researching the differing attitudes of young people in Northern Ireland to the Troubles. Community history is partisan and Catholic and Protestant communities in N Ireland have very different histories, but it is the attitude to school history which might be relevant to what was happening in a multi-ethnic school in Manchester: The majority of students also demonstrated an awareness that the history they encountered in popular representations, especially in the community, was often partial and fragmented, and frequently politically motivated. In contrast school history was almost universally recognised as different, more comprehensive, objective and multi-perspective. Students valued school history and consciously and explicitly expected it to provide a more balanced alternative to community influences. Particularly they sought formal study that related directly to an increased understanding of contemporary issues. (Kitson and McCully, 2005: 32) The significance of some of these issues will be considered later because there is another side to the equation. Kitson and McCully’s article goes beyond examining students’ opinions and attempts to identify how students have come to express their views in such a forthright way. It is down to teaching – or to a particular kind of teaching. The article identifies a range of attitudes among history teachers which they characterize as avoiders, containers and risk-takers<sup>8</sup> (Table 1.2)

**Table 1.2** The Avoider The Container The Risk Taker (Kitson and McCully 2005)

<b>Avoiders</b>	<b>Containers</b>	<b>Risk-takers</b>
Avoids teaching topics that might be controversial	Controversial issues are taught, but contained through the historical process	Fully embraces the social utility of history teaching
Purpose of teaching history is to make pupils better at history	Pupils not encouraged actively to engage in the root of the controversy	Consciously links past and present
Does not agree that history teachers have a wider contribution to make	Might teach parallel topics that are not too close to home	Seizes opportunities to tackle controversial issues
		Not afraid to push the boundaries

This classification is exceptionally useful if you are considering teaching a controversial topic like Islamic history. You might initially feel that such a topic is difficult to teach or too controversial to tackle but if you read the summary of students' views from Northern Ireland with the ideas in Figure 10.1 you might understand how and why Alison Stephen was able to tackle such a controversial topic in inner-city Manchester.

These issues, real and perceived, are undoubtedly barriers to effective teaching but they are not necessarily insurmountable and in the following discussion it might be useful to consider how some of the points under consideration link to these barriers to effective teaching. Kinloch's article, referred to earlier, begins by considering the wisdom of using Islamic history as a lens to understand current events in the Middle East. The remainder of the article appears to dwell on obstacles which experienced history teachers are likely to encounter. While Kinloch is ultimately optimistic in his exploration of Islamic historiography there is one huge caveat in the discussion which could cast a degree of uncertainty in the minds of teachers about the 'correct' way to approach Islamic history. Western teachers ought to feel confident that they can undertake the teaching of Islamic history; they need only bring to it the same respect that they would bring to any form of historical enquiry, and a willingness to obtain guidance, where necessary, from Muslim authorities as well as Western ones. They need confidence in themselves as teachers; they have the expertise to help their students make sense of this aspect of the past. (Kinloch, 2005: 28) Equally, history teachers might make too much of the perceived difficulties of understanding Islamic historiography and are perhaps either worrying unduly or being oversensitive. History written from different perspectives is important, but this observation by Carole Hillenbrand



is important in restoring a sense of balance: It is vital to avoid viewing Islamic history exclusively from the western perspective. Even Orientalists (have) often been rightly criticised in the past for having a colonialist agenda and for being unable to represent the views of the indigenous peoples of the Middle East. Thus it might be argued that the writing of the Islamic view of the Crusades should be left on the whole to Muslim scholars themselves. This is, of course a reasonable point of view but it is a sad fact that the best Muslim historians have, as it happens, specialised in other areas.<sup>9</sup> (Hillenbrand, 2006: 4)

The alternative perspectives are out there and they are accessible. The other significant barrier to the effective teaching of Islamic history is uncertainty or unfamiliarity with the subject matter itself. There are a number of preconceptions or misconceptions which are worth exploring. One of these is the assumption that Islamic history inevitably means a study of the Crusades. In some schools it is the case that the only Islamic history students might undertake is tangential or coincidental to a study of the Crusades. This without doubt reinforces the idea that the history curriculum is Eurocentric and the emphasis is on the impact of the Western crusading armies on the Muslim inhabitants of the Middle East. Another difficulty is the accessibility of suitable resources. Again this is not an insurmountable problem but the QCA Scheme of Work for the topic is decidedly thin. The suggested activities might be placed firmly in the 'worthy but dull' category.

A new text by Byrom, Counsell and Riley in the Longman Pearson series might provide some useful ideas. The example referred to in the Kinloch article is also useful in that it demonstrates the scope and range of Islamic history: the Ottoman Empire played a significant part in European history certainly from the fifteenth through to the twentieth centuries, but again we tend to view it from a series of Western perspectives, from the Bulgarian atrocities to the 'Sick Man of Europe'. It is quite reasonable to argue that one popular view – a Western interpretation of the Crusades – was a product of a growing antipathy to the Ottoman Empire combined with a romantic Gothic view of the Crusaders. The illustrations of Gustave Doré might be said to typify this mid-nineteenth-century attitude, available on the companion website, [www.sagepub.co.uk/secondary](http://www.sagepub.co.uk/secondary). It is not the purpose of this chapter to offer advice on how to teach particular topics but to help you reflect on issues of principle which ought to influence your approach to teaching. Again it might be useful to revisit the Kitson and McCully article (2005). One key to the effective teaching of controversial topics was the sense of relevance to students and their developing sense of identity but the important factor is the willingness of teachers to be risk-takers. In the context of teaching Islamic history, perhaps the risk comes from challenging perceptions. We also tend to like our history neat and tidy; divided up, compartmentalized. History begins

and ends at determined points; 1485 to 1603 for example. Our histories are also histories of regions and areas. But history is not always well behaved and it is the fuzziness, the blurred edges, which offer opportunities to challenge our preconceptions and the way we might package the history we present to students. A typical history of the Crusades might, then, make assumptions about 'the Holy Land' just as we make assumptions about the Middle East today. It was then, what is now Islamic. The truth is clearly different; Damascus was, and still is, home to one of the oldest Christian communities in the world. Society in the Middle East was very diverse. Muslims, Jews and Christians lived together in a state of reasonable toleration. Even more unusual is the fact that the different Christian churches more or less tolerated each other, but then the Roman Catholics were not represented at the end of the eleventh century. This level of complexity still exists as the following press release, concerning the visit of the Archbishop of Canterbury to the Middle East in October 2007 demonstrates:

"In Syria and Lebanon the Archbishop spent time with other Church leaders, including the Patriarchs of Antioch and All the East for the Greek Orthodox, HB Ignatius IV, the Syrian Orthodox, HH Zakka I, the Maronites, HB Cardinal Sfeir, and the Melkite Greek Catholics, HB Gregorios III, as well as the Armenian Catholicos of Cilicia, HH Aram I. These encounters enabled the Archbishop and those accompanying him, to develop a deeper understanding of the challenges facing these communities."  
([www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/releases/071005a.htm](http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/releases/071005a.htm))

## ENDNOTES

- 1 *TEACH: A Report from The Historical Association on the Challenges and Opportunities for Teaching Emotive and Controversial History* 3–19
- 2 <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-433776/14-year-olds-studying-al-Qaeda-propaganda-school.html>
- 3 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/1527068/Battle-of-Britain-was-won-at-sea-Discuss.html>
- 4 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/dec/07/russian-police-seize-archive-repression>
- 5
- 6 Kinloch, N. (2005) 'A need to know: Islamic history and the school curriculum', *Teaching History*, 120: 25–31.
- 7 Stephen, A. (2005) 'Why can't they just live together happily Miss? Unravelling the complexities of the Arab-Israeli conflict at GCSE', *Teaching History*, 120: 5–10.
- 8 Kitson, A. and McCully, A. (2005) "'You hear about it for real in school.' Avoiding, containing and risk-taking in the history classroom', *Teaching History*, 120: 32–7.
- 9 Hillenbrand, C. (2006) *The Crusades: Islamic Perspectives*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.