

University of Nottingham Teaching Workshop: ‘Using History to Communicate Difficult Topics’

24th November 2012

Report

The workshop started with an introduction to the research project ‘Population Displacement, State Practice and Social Experience in the USSR and Eastern Europe, 1930-1950s’ that had formed the basis for the creation of a set of resource packs for teachers by academics at the University of Manchester and University of Nottingham.

Peter Gatrell, University of Manchester, began by outlining the research undertaken as part of the initial project, focussing in particular on wartime and postwar displacement in the region of Eastern Europe. This research, Professor Gatrell explained, had included archival investigations in Russia, Ukraine, UK and USA; a close reading of material such as contemporary newspaper accounts found in a number of libraries across the globe; and interviews with people who had been involved in the events of the time, above all members of the Society of Friends who had been active in the Displaced Persons camps set up at the War’s close. As a result, a wealth of original source material had been uncovered conveying the experiences of the millions of refugees, or Displaced Persons, of many different nationalities, who found themselves far from home at the end of the War, and of the members of the governmental and humanitarian organisations attempting to assist and care for them. The research team from Manchester and Nottingham had selected a number of these photographs, film clips and documents to be reproduced and included in teachers’ packs aimed at engaging teachers and pupils with the history of refugees, the creation of the postwar world and issues of humanitarianism and human rights. These packs would be distributed in the course of the workshop for the PGCE students and qualified teachers attending to take away and use in the classroom.

Further background on the findings generated by the original research project was provided by Jennifer Carson, University of Nottingham, and Nick Baron and Siobhan Peeling, University of Nottingham. Dr Carson highlighted the manifold stories that can be revealed by her interviews filmed with people who had been present in the Displaced Persons camps or images of objects used or made in the Displaced Persons camps. These stories embrace such topics as the overcrowded living conditions in the camps, the work and cultural activities undertaken by Displaced Persons (DPs), and the concerns and personalities of the relief workers and their interactions with the DPs. Dr Baron then explored the fate of the majority of DPs who left the camps in 1945-6 and were repatriated back to the USSR or Eastern European states they had left behind. He described in detail the screening process, or ‘filtration’, whereby those returning to the Soviet Union underwent interrogation by the Soviet political police or military intelligence and had their identity documents checked in order to establish not just who they were but also the nature of their wartime activities and their current attitude to the Soviet regime. The results of these checks would determine if they would be sent back to their former homes or, in some cases, face imprisonment, forced labour or even the death sentence. The nature of this identification process,

how it was carried out, the meaning it had for all involved, and what was expected of those returning could all be seen, Dr Baron demonstrated, in the individual identification cards and questionnaires filled out by the Soviet authorities and now deposited in the region's archives. The tale of those who were allowed to return to their former homes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe was picked up by Dr Peeling, who focussed on the difficulties attending the reintegration of Displaced Persons into their previous communities. As the sources illustrate, the hold-ups and discomforts of the journey back, the widespread destruction of housing in the region, the death or disappearance of loved ones during the war, and the targeting of postwar migrants as sources of disease or trouble-making, all combined to make homecoming a far from straightforward process. Peter Gatrell then provided a sketch of the fates and treatment of the DPs who were recruited to work and resettle in new countries, including Great Britain, and of the 'hard-core' who languished in the camps for many years to come, to bring this session to a close.

At this juncture, Jennifer Carson distributed the teachers' resource packs to all those attending and talked through how the pack, especially the twenty resource cards of images from primary sources and the accompanying DVD, could be accessed, adapted and presented in the classroom. She also screened a number of the film clips provided on the DVD, such as *Answer for Anne*, an American production from 1949 in which a schoolgirl asks a number of local figures whether DPs should come to their town or not.

Following the distribution of the packs, Amanda Ahern, University of Manchester, provided an overview of other resources available to teachers embarking on the teaching of controversial subjects, in particular those concerned with conflict, human rights and humanitarianism. All participants were invited to play a 'Model United Nations' refugee game designed for use in the classroom. The game put those playing in the position of a group of refugees fleeing armed conflict and asked them to make a series of decisions on the complex dilemmas faced by this group, each of which impacted on how many of the group, if any, survived the journey. Players were required to balance the survival of the majority of the group against the needs of individuals, while under pressure from time constraints. The experience of playing the game generated lively discussion among workshop participants about the ethical dilemmas posed within it, and also about how this game would work in a classroom situation. Questions such as how much time should be devoted to setting up this type of activity, how it might be adapted to different year groups and learning abilities, and how the sensitive issues involved should be further addressed by the teacher, were raised and deliberated.

The first session of the afternoon was led by Jackie Ould from the Ahmed Iqbal Ullah Education Trust. Drawing on her vast reservoir of experience, she moved the focus of the workshop on to issues surrounding teaching pupils from certain backgrounds, in particular those from refugee families. She highlighted possible pitfalls to be avoided when teaching young refugees, stressing the importance of not making any assumptions based on the child's refugee status. Each refugee, even from the same country, will have had differing experiences and hold differing views about their situation, and, indeed, a child may not even identify themselves as a refugee at all. The important thing is to listen to the stories that these pupils wish to share about themselves. The session concluded with a lively discussion about the tools at the

disposal of teachers to counter the web of negative myths surrounding refugees and other stigmatised groups that often inform the responses of others to them.

Gary Mills, University of Nottingham, concluded the workshop with a presentation on how to teach traumatic histories. Emphasising the difficulty of teaching subjects such as the Holocaust or the Rwandan genocide in a way that really engaged pupils, he made a number of suggestions about how teachers can link personal stories with events on a larger scale in order to retain interest and bring home the significance of what occurred in these episodes of history. In this session, participants tried out an exercise designed for the classroom by a former University of Nottingham PGCE student, in which pupils are asked to consider one specific moment in the Second World War, the mass shooting of a group of Jews, in the light of successive primary sources, re-evaluating their conclusions about the motives of the men carrying out the shootings after each batch of evidence was revealed. This activity, and the session more generally, provoked a great deal of debate among those attending the workshop on how teachers should balance the promotion of empathy with people of the past with more analytical historical enquiry and also on the extent to which pupils might be either upset or untouched by the content of these types of lessons.