



PAPER

HISTORY TEACHING ISSUES IN EUROPEAN SCHOOLS, 1920–1940: NATIONAL IDEOLOGIES, INTERNATIONAL REFORMS, AND POLITICAL PRESSURES

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Abstract

The interwar period (1920–1940) witnessed profound transformations in European history education, shaped by the aftermath of World War I, the rise of totalitarian regimes, and efforts to foster international peace through the League of Nations. This article examines key issues in history teaching across major European countries, including textbook biases, the tension between national patriotism and internationalism, ideological indoctrination in authoritarian states, and pacifist influences in democratic contexts. Drawing on systematic analysis of scholarly literature, it highlights the League of Nations' unsuccessful attempts to create an “international mind” via textbook revisions and teacher retraining, contrasted with radical curriculum overhauls in Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy that weaponized history for propaganda.

Key words: Interwar Europe, history teaching, textbook revision, League of Nations, international mind, Nazi education, Fascist Italy school reform, moral disarmament, pacifism in education, national ideology.

INTRODUCTION

The years 1920–1940, often termed the “interwar period,” represented a turbulent era in European history marked by fragile peace treaties, economic crises, and the ascent of authoritarian regimes. History teaching in schools emerged as a critical

battleground for shaping young minds, serving not merely as an academic subject but as a tool for nation-building, ideological control, and—ambitiously—international reconciliation. Post-World War I, educators and policymakers recognized that pre-war curricula had fueled

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aggressive nationalism and militarism, leading to calls for reform. The League of Nations, established in 1920, positioned education as essential for long-term stability, arguing that public opinion, molded in classrooms, would sustain collective security.

Central issues included the dominance of national narratives that glorified war and portrayed neighbors as enemies, the exclusion of social and economic history in favor of political and military events, and the integration of history with emerging ideologies such as fascism and Nazism. In democratic states like France and Britain, pacifist movements influenced curricula toward “moral disarmament,” yet traditional patriotic content endured. In contrast, totalitarian regimes in Germany and Italy transformed history into propaganda, emphasizing racial superiority or imperial revival. Bilateral and multilateral textbook revision projects under the League’s International Committee on Intellectual Cooperation (ICIC) and Institute of Intellectual Cooperation (IIC, founded 1925) sought to purge biases but faced insurmountable national resistance.

This article addresses the core research problem: How did political contexts in 1920–1940 shape the content, methods, and objectives of history teaching in European schools, and what were the implications for peace and identity formation? Objectives include: (1) analyzing international reform efforts; (2) comparing national implementations in key countries; (3) evaluating pedagogical and ideological challenges; and (4) deriving lessons for modern education. The significance lies in its relevance to today’s debates on global citizenship versus national curricula amid rising populism. By synthesizing scholarly sources, the study contributes to historiography on education and interwar politics, revealing education’s vulnerability to state power.

METHODS

This study employs a systematic literature review (SLR) methodology, aligned with IMRAD standards for scholarly rigor. Sources were selected from peer-reviewed journals, monographs, encyclopedic entries, and open-access PDFs identified via targeted searches on platforms equivalent to Google Scholar, JSTOR, and specialized databases

(e.g., EHNE – Encyclopédie d’histoire numérique de l’Europe). Search terms included “League of Nations history textbook revision interwar,” “Nazi Germany history curriculum,” “Fascist Italy Gentile reform education,” “France interwar history teaching pacifism,” and “interwar European history education.”

RESULTS

The League of Nations’ ICIC (1922) and IIC (1925) spearheaded history reform to cultivate an “international mind”—a mindset tempering nationalism with global cooperation without erasing national identity. As Osborne explains, the League recognized that “its long-term success depended in part on supportive public opinion,” viewing education as key to countering pre-war biases that instilled “aggressive nationalism and bellicosity.” Reforms targeted nine areas: purging textbooks of nationalist superiority, emphasizing shared civilizations, prioritizing social over military history, avoiding war glorification, incorporating League studies, and retraining teachers via experiential methods[2].

Key initiatives included the 1926 Casarès resolution for voluntary bilateral/multilateral revisions (factual corrections only, avoiding interpretation). Carnegie Endowment surveys (1923, 1927) exposed biases in European texts. Northern European (Nordic) associations achieved concrete amendments through manuscript exchanges. Franco-German talks and Polish-Romanian efforts were attempted but faltered. The Subcommittee of Experts on Textbook Revision (1932) and moral disarmament committee (1932) promoted “healthy nationalism and reasonable internationalism”[4]

Challenges mounted in the 1930s: Germany, Japan, and Italy withdrew; disarmament failures eroded credibility. National governments resisted sovereignty infringement, limiting reforms to superficial League mentions in curricula. By 1937, committees were renamed to focus on “international cooperation principles.” Outcomes were modest—debates opened but no unified European textbook emerged, and rising tensions halted progress.

In Germany, the transition from Weimar

pluralism to Nazi totalitarianism (1933 onward) radicalized history teaching. Bernhard Rust, Reich Minister of Education, centralized control, declaring education's goal as character formation for the Volk. Hitler's vision—"Your child belongs to us already"—underpinned reforms emphasizing race as the lens for all subjects. History curricula shifted from objective past study to "use it as a guide for the future and for the preservation of one's own people." Textbooks by Paul Brohmer integrated racial biology, teaching Aryan superiority and Jewish identification via physical traits (noses, lips). Antisemitic content dehumanized minorities; war was glorified as racial struggle. Methods abandoned "intellectualism" for "Erlebnis" (lived experience): daily "Heil Hitler!" salutes, Hitler Youth integration, films, posters, and labor camps. The National Socialist Teachers' League (NSLB) mandated indoctrination training; by 1939, 97% compliance. The 1934 Civil Service Act and 1938–1942 laws purged Jewish and dissenting educators[4].

Hitler Youth (compulsory 1939) reinforced lessons through oaths, paramilitary drills, and farm labor, with enrollment reaching 82%. Personal accounts reveal mixed impacts: some youth embraced social acceptance, others resisted at home. Reforms affected elementary levels most, reducing academic rigor for physical and ideological fitness. By 1942, wartime disruptions slowed changes, but the system produced generations loyal to the Führer[5]. Italy's 1923 Gentile Reform, led by philosopher Giovanni Gentile (Minister of Education), centralized schooling under "actual idealism," prioritizing classical secondary education (Liceo Classico) with historical-linguistic approaches. History fostered creativity and national spirit, incorporating Catholicism post-1929 Lateran Pacts. By 1934, all teaching aligned with Fascist ideals, adding military culture.

The 1939 Bottai School Charter expanded mass education, differentiating by achievement while ensuring political homogeneity. Textbooks were revised to emphasize Roman Empire glory, Mussolini's leadership, and nationalism. History indoctrinated the "New Man"—patriotic, loyal, prepared for regime service—via schoolbooks blending tradition and totalitarianism.

Extracurricular organizations (ONB, GIL) integrated history with sports and civic training. Gentile's philosophy viewed the state as ethical, shaping youth through imagination and dialect/religion in elementary levels. Outcomes: Centralized control perpetuated fascism; revisions created regime-aligned manuals. Challenges included resistance from traditional educators, but by 1943, the system had molded generations for imperial ambitions[2]. France maintained republican traditions but infused pacifism post-1918. Teachers' unions advocated "moral disarmament," softening war depictions and promoting cooperation. Siegel's analysis shows educators balancing patriotism with internationalism, stressing democracy and League ideals in history lessons[1].

Curricula retained national focus (Revolution, Napoleon) but incorporated League studies and reduced xenophobia via ICIC collaborations. Franco-German textbook talks aimed at balanced "war guilt" narratives but achieved little. Elementary teachers drove grassroots changes through associations. Challenges: Political instability (Popular Front) and rising threats limited depth. By 1939, pacifism waned amid rearmament, yet the period fostered debates on education's role in preventing hatred.

Britain's decentralized system preserved imperial-focused history with minimal reform. Hadow Reports (1920s) emphasized secondary expansion via IQ testing, but content remained traditional—emphasizing British exceptionalism. League ideas influenced some teacher training, yet no radical overhaul occurred. In new states (e.g., Baltic nations), national identity dominated; Czechoslovakia integrated civic elements. Overall, Western democracies showed incremental internationalism, while Central/Eastern Europe leaned nationalist.

Common challenges: Teacher shortages/resistance, limited resources, and gender-differentiated curricula (girls' domestic focus). Experiential methods (League) clashed with rote learning in dictatorships.

DISCUSSION

Results demonstrate history teaching as a mirror and instrument of interwar politics. League efforts, visionary in promoting the “international mind,” failed due to sovereignty concerns and geopolitical realities—“governments were not prepared to endorse a program that might threaten their control of education.” Authoritarian states succeeded in politicization: Nazi racial history and Fascist imperial narratives directly fueled aggression. Democratic states achieved partial moral disarmament but insufficiently countered extremism[1].

Comparatively, “negative” revisions (purging bias) contrasted totalitarian “positive” indoctrination. Legacy: Post-1945 UNESCO built on interwar foundations. Limitations: Gender/ethnic perspectives underexplored; archival gaps persist. Future research: Digital analysis of surviving textbooks. Practical implications: Contemporary curricula must resist ideological capture, integrating critical global history while honoring diversity.

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