

History without Borders

Does nationality matter when it comes to writing history, or do all the countries in the world have the same understanding of history? Halla Gunnarsdóttir spoke with Ann-Katherine Isaacs and Guðmundur Hálfðanarson, leaders of a joint European research project, about walls between nations and their relation to the writing of history.

On a calm and frosty Friday in December, 160 persons, from 31 countries, met in Reykjavík. It wasn't the Christmas lights or the Northern Lights or the candle lights that lured all these people to Iceland during Advent – it was their common interest in history and the writing of history. This was the second general conference within a research project that goes by the name “Cliohres,” in which 180 persons from 45 universities in 31 countries are taking part. The project, now in its second year (out of five), is funded by a grant from the European Union. The coordinators of Cliohres are Ann-Katherine Isaacs, professor of history at the University of Pisa in Italy, and Guðmundur Hálfðanarson, professor of history at the University of Iceland. Both are convinced of the importance of breaking down walls between nations in reaching a new understanding of European history. The project had its origins at the end of the 1980s, when European universities were beginning to develop common networks in the humanities. “This is the first time that we are working specifically on research. Until now there have been projects devoted to teaching. Of course it is difficult on the university level to separate teaching from research and scholarship, and most universities do not make the attempt,” explains Guðmundur. Historians engaged in this project work in groups, all of which study similar questions from different points of view. By now eight books have been published in a variety of languages, based on last year's topic, citizenship.

Beyond Borders

This year's topic is migration, and it is being studied from various angles such as culture, state power, gender and religion. Participants in this conference come from nearly all the countries of Europe, and the project extends also to Russia, Turkey and South Africa. “People often think that they are studying the same history because they know the names of the same well-known historians. But when we look deeper we see that whole educational systems and universities concentrate on just a few issues, those that are considered important for the country and the people under discussion,” says Isaacs, mentioning by way of examples that in some places the focus is on a certain war, or agriculture, or communism or something else that had a decisive effect on the situation in that country. “It's also amusing that when historians from different countries come together, their first thought is that their colleagues are a bit strange,” says Isaac and laughs. “The first step in building up an understanding of how history has developed and how a critical understanding can be formed is to meet and share their points of view.

Guðmundur pointed to the fact that the writing of history is usually given its character by the land or the region in which the historian works. Thus the instruction of history in Iceland is in most cases based on certain events or experiences which are unknown to people in other countries. “We tend to think that the history we have been taught is the truth about the past. And yet someone in a nearby country might have a completely different idea. By creating a forum in which people from different countries can share their ideas we are recognizing that there are a variety of ways to

study the past. You might say that our goal is to break out of our own compartments – it is urgent that history be constantly re-examined.”

Turkey is not the Ottoman Empire

Guðmundur says that the effects of barriers between nations are often striking, taking an example from one of the Cliohres seminars in which a Hungarian doctoral student discussed events from the sixteenth century, when Turkey was largely under the Ottoman Empire. “In her lecture she spoke constantly of Turks when she referred to the Ottomans. A Turkish professor in the group pointed out that it was incorrect to refer to Turkey, which did not exist at that time; in addition, the Ottoman Empire covered a much larger area than modern Turkey, so that soldiers who invaded Hungary might have come from Bulgaria, or Serbia or Egypt. This revealed how mistaken it can be to use modern names for countries when talking about events from the sixteenth century. There was no Turkey at that time, and to use the national differences which exist today is to place events in the wrong context,” explains Guðmundur. Isaacs adds, “And we see the effect of this on modern politics, in discussions of whether Turkey should be admitted to the European Union. East-Europeans regard Turkey as their enemy, because of the history of the Ottoman Empire.” Isaacs emphasizes that this example can seem fairly obvious to us, since these countries are far away. “It can be much harder for us to open our eyes to how our own history was written, and this is precisely why it is so important for people from different countries to come together. In this way historians gain a new view of their own research,” says Isaacs. Around 90 doctoral students are taking part in the project.

The Center of the World

As an example, Isaacs points out that once people talked of an Austrian view of history. “Austrian history treated the way that Austria came into existence within the Roman Empire, and later expanded and contracted by turns until it finally collapsed. Now what about all the people who either belonged to the empire or not, depending on the political situation?” asks Isaacs. “Serbian history is another example. Serbia originated in the Middle Ages and disappeared when it became subject to the Ottoman Empire, and remained subject until suddenly it became Serbia again. But people were there all the time and defined each other one way or another.” Guðmundur adds: “Iceland is another example. History here deals most of all with the settlement of the country and the first centuries after that. But then Iceland came under “foreign” kings. Those who wrote our history at the beginning of the twentieth century were very taken by the struggle for independence, but after the nation became independent once again, historians looked back at the early centuries. In literary history the medieval sagas were singled out for praise, and what was written over roughly six centuries was largely ignored, with the exception of Hallgrímur Pétursson and possibly Jónas Hallgrímsson. Nothing else seemed to count,” explains Guðmundur.

Guðmundur says that a project of this nature can have a profound effect on how historians approach their subject. “You have to take account of how history has been practiced in your own country in order to understand what took place in another country. One always thinks of himself as being somewhere in the center of the world,” he says, smiling, and adds that he felt this very much at a meeting in Slovakia. “Bratislava was east of the Iron Curtain, and I had never looked at the city as the

center of Europe. But this was once an extremely important place, which then fell, in certain respect, into oblivion. The Iron Curtain had a dramatic effect on European twentieth-century history, and we have to remind ourselves that it only lasted for a short while.” Isaacs adds that one of the great benefits of this project is the participation of Central and Eastern European countries, which have been marginalized for all too long.

“All History is Wrong”

Isaacs says that her greatest interest is in studying not just history as it exists on the surface, but also what lies beneath the surface. “Politicians, for example, have often used history to manipulate people, using concepts like ‘we’ and ‘the others’ to define the enemy. Such concepts have a limited foundation in reality and can be plainly wrong. In fact we might say that all history is wrong,” says Isaacs and goes on smilingly: “Not in the sense of a bold lie, but it does happen that one part of the truth is held up as gospel, while another part is not. We would like to bring about an awareness that people’s nationality is something invented, sometimes not even based on facts, or based only on selected facts. We do not need to reject nationality but perhaps we should not let it build walls between us,” says Isaacs, and adds that she is thinking of the discussion about immigrants. “It is sometimes made to seem as if immigration is the most terrible problem in the world, causing everything to go to the dogs, just because there are dark-haired people on the streets in addition to light-haired ones. And then there are political parties which use immigration to advance themselves. But if you have studied history you know that people have been moving from one place to another from time immemorial, and then you are perhaps not so ready to swallow such generalizations. The Italians, for example, often talk about immigrants as a problem, and yet they themselves have migrated all over the world,” Isaacs says, smiling.

Guðmundur and Isaacs agree that a deeper understanding of European history can make a difference, both for cooperation between nations and for the common people in the nations of the continent. It is often forgotten that Europe has not one history, but many. “We are of course not so conceited as to plan to write a universal history,” says Guðmundur, laughing. “At the same time we are not trying to insist that Europeans are a homogenous group – we are hoping to point out how variegated the continent is, and yet how its inhabitants have managed to live together over the course of the centuries.”