

INTER-OFFICE CORRESPONDENCE

911
Program and Policy

FROM: CBF

DATE: February 1, 1950

TO:

CIB		SAW

COMMENTS:

Xels H - P. P. History
Taha, C. B.

FEB 8 1950

MAY 22 1963

SUBJECT: History in RF Humanities Program (Second tentative draft)

Historical writing is, to us, one of the means through which humane values are conserved, recreated, created, integrated, and experienced. We can hope to increase the value of history to human welfare through direct aid to the creative writing of history, through aid to criticism of historical writing which will make both writing and experience through historical reading more relevant, or through aid to the more widespread appreciation of historical writing, a more meaningful role for history; for example, in general education. First, however, we should clarify why we think it important to have history at all.

The history we read is only one factor in the structuring of our concepts of human affairs. It is hardly possible to measure quantitatively its influence relative to that of other factors. The importance which we conceive it to have can, however, be suggested by a few examples of cases in which biased historical emphases or lack of adequate history seem to us to have had unfortunate results. Treitschke and other German nationalist historians certainly contributed to the domineering attitude which culminated in Hitler and the Second World War. The communists have systematically used

Hegel and the materialist interpretation of history to win converts to the inevitability of communism. Our own teaching of "American" history in a form which normally brings our neighbors, Canada, Mexico, and Cuba into the picture only in connection with our various wars certainly contributes to our difficulties in developing closer inter-American relations. One suspects that the present deep demoralization in France is in part the result of history teaching which has over-emphasized the role of France as the cultural leader of the world and so offers no conceptual encouragement to Frenchmen to look ahead enthusiastically to a Western European or World culture in which France would play a more modest though still important role. How can we achieve adequate concern for population problems when there are no writers on modern world history who pay attention to the population growth of the last century and the results it has brought with it? How can Filipinos achieve a stable and rational concept of themselves and of their position as an independent country when historical writing is almost totally lacking on the half century of American control, the three and a half centuries of Spanish control, or the many centuries in which their peoples, culture, and destinies merged with those of the surrounding countries?

History can add invaluable insight to our understanding of human behavior and the human problems of today and tomorrow or it can intensify our prejudices. History can broaden our vision so that we can see the world in perspective or it can narrow it so that everything beyond our own country, religion, color, or caste is out of focus. It can be sound education for mature and active policy or a temptation to escape to

the romantic and imaginary. History to be valuable must neither ignore nor distort the best available knowledge of the past. But the past is too vast to be comprehended whole: selection and interpretation are the essence of the problem of historical writing. The significance of historical writing lies in its relevance to contemporary problems, the contribution which it can make to contemporary thought, not in the importance of an event at the time it occurred. This is why the discipline of history as we are concerned with it belongs with the creative arts, not with the sciences.

To the extent that we give direct aid to the writing of history, what should the criteria be? Criteria we must have, for there are probably more historians in the world now than ever before; their publications are so numerous that even the professionals cannot know what has been written; printing has deluged us with source materials; and historical topics are in effect infinite. Competent research, sound interpretation, and good literary style are minimum requirements almost to be taken for granted, since there are many historians in many countries who achieve them. But they are not enough.

First, the social value of history, and the justification for our concern with it, depends on its reaching consumers beyond the historical profession. History which has no effect beyond the limited circle of historians has no place in RF program however interesting, learned, novel,

monumental, or definitive it may be. This does not mean that we should never support "basic research". In some cases, particularly in parts of the world such as the Near East and Southeast Asia where historical research is nearly non-existent, it will be necessary to aid the production of raw materials and intermediaries - and even "tooling up" through the training of historians - in order to achieve the end product, the consumable history which is urgently needed. However, in the United States, England, France, Japan, and other countries where there is a flourishing historical profession - at present largely concerned with the production of raw materials and intermediate products for consumption within the profession - support for anything but interpretative writing for the educated public should be highly exceptional. In any case, the more remote a project is from the non-historian reader the more questionable it is.

The second major basis for selection is the importance of the contemporary problem to an understanding of which the proposed historical study will contribute. This is of necessity a relative consideration - some justification can be found for almost any historical project. There are differences in the magnitude of the problems, the relevance of the particular research, and the availability of other relevant historical studies. We expect to find our greatest opportunities in two major areas. The first is the writing of history across national lines. We need new formulations of world history which can provide an internationally acceptable concept of the role which all peoples have played in the development of our

present interlocking world society. We also need regional histories - e.g. for Western Europe, Southeast Asia, and the Americas - which can help us to understand common regional problems and to cooperate towards their solution. The second major area of need is for histories of the last seventy-five years which can help us see in better perspective the tremendous processes now at work - population growth, mass communications, mass education, rapid transportation, science, large-scale production, new sources of power; expansion of the functions of government. While these two types of historical writing- recent and across national lines - seem to us most generally in urgent need we would not wish to rule out entirely other types. In some places others may have equal justification in terms of social needs: possible examples are in Iraq history showing the overriding importance of efficient irrigation in national development, in Japan archaeological work which would destroy the foundations of nationalistic mythology, and in India and Pakistan research on the contributions which Hindu and Muslim thought have made to each other. In the countries concerned, these topics, of evident relevance to contemporary thought and problems, have hardly been touched by historians. It would be difficult to argue similar justification for a new project on the French Revolution, Elizabethan England, the Risorgimento in Italy, the Declaration of Independence, or the conquest of Mexico by Cortez.

The historical profession is so large, and historical research now supported by society so extensive, that the projects which we can

directly support will inevitably play but a small role. At least as much more might be accomplished through aid to criticism of historical writing with special emphasis on the problem of significance for contemporary thought. If the sharpening of such criticism led to even a slight increase in the percentage of the present historical output having important relevance, the investment by the Foundation would be amply justified. At present, unfortunately, it is rare to find either a work in history or a book review which states why the book was needed or why anyone should read it - aside from the largely irrelevant statement that it fills a gap or is about a topic heretofore neglected. Aid to critical thinking about historical research should be an important part of our program because of its potential strategic influence on the selection of topics of research.

Criticism may also have a useful influence on the ability of the reader who is not a professional historian to select more intelligently the books which he should read. This influence and the role which we believe history should play in general education belong with our general concern with the extension of the opportunities for significant experience in the field of humane values.

What has been said above applies also to biography, which we consider a part of history. Biography, like other types of history, can help us understand the large human problems with which we are faced, but biography has a special contribution to make to the understanding of

individual development, potentialities, failures, and influence.

To avoid misunderstanding it should be pointed out that some projects which would not clearly deserve high priority under the criteria discussed here may nevertheless find justification in Humanities program because of their relevance to the understanding of specific foreign cultures under the separate category of "intercultural understanding."

CPO