

Transnational Comparison

How is the concept of Empire taught in different countries?

Empire is an important concept in history. There are very few countries that have neither had an empire of their own, or at some point been a part of another country's empire (Stephen Howe, *Empire: a very short introduction*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002). All the countries involved in the EHISTO Project have at some time either had an empire or been part of someone else's empire. One important question is how experiences of empire should be taught to young people. In the recent past, teachers in England and France have been told by the government that they should teach a 'positive' story of their nation's imperial record. Worldwide, there are major differences in the way that empire has been taught to students. In some cases, a very honest admission has been made that mistakes were made and crimes committed against subject peoples who were part of an empire, in other cases, even up to the present day, there has been a reluctance to acknowledge that the history of national empire had some 'dark pages'.

Popular history magazines can be a very helpful way of exploring these issues, given that in most countries (and certainly the countries involved in the EHISTO Project), the views of different historians, who have differing views on these questions, can be accessed. In the case of the British Empire, BBC History Magazines has featured articles by Judd, who is very critical of the record of the British Empire, and Ferguson, who argues that overall, the British Empire was 'a good thing', both for Britain, and for the countries who were part of the empire. It is an important part of

understanding history that people understand that more than one story can be constructed by the past, and that there is no single definitive version of the past that is completely accurate and correct. The following quote by Irish Republican politician Gerry Adams is a good example of the sophistication of thinking in understanding this point:

‘I am an Irish republican. British government involvement in Irish affairs and the partition of my country is, in my view, the core of the problem; but I recognise that others, for example unionists, have a different view and their own sense of truth. There will be those in the British system who also have a different analysis. There are many differing perspectives on the causes of the conflict, what happened and who was responsible; all have their own truth. There is no single voice for victims: some want truth; some want judicial processes. We need to respect all these narratives.’

Quoted in ‘When the law aids killers’, *The Guardian*, 22 November 2013: 50.