Learning Old European History – Is it a bore?
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What is history? This question came to my mind yet again after a recent experience I had when I tried to help my daughter with her history homework. This experience indicates very clearly how one event in history can be presented in entirely different ways, depending on one's purpose, point of view, and educational approach.

My daughter (in Class IX) was recently given the homework of finding information and writing a paper on the Unification of Germany and the Unification of Italy. This was a topic which the teacher felt had to be included in the syllabus, even though the new NCERT textbook they were using did not mention it. That was why she was asking the students to find information at home.

Not knowing much about that period of European history myself, I helped my daughter find information in whatever books we happened to have at home. She ended up using two sources, the book, 'A People's History of the World', by Chris Harmon, and the Encarta Encyclopaedia on a computer CD. We read parts of these together, while she took notes.

I was somewhat surprised to find that these were quite interesting and important topics, although I had initially thought they would be quite boring. We kept asking each other questions as we read, and we found that we had to keep going back to previous events and more basic concepts in order to answer our own questions and understand what was happening.

I helped my daughter make a basic outline, suggesting that she could first give some necessary background (to point out that both the unifications were related to each other and to certain events throughout Europe), and then she could discuss each of the unifications separately. Finally, I left her to write the paper based on the outline and her notes. Here is what she wrote:

The Unification of Germany and the Unification of Italy

The unification of these countries was the combination of feudal monarchies to form larger nations which were constitutional monarchies. The unification of Germany and the unification of Italy occurred in the nineteenth century. These were not independent events, as at the time unifications were occurring throughout Europe, having begun in France and England.

In the early 1800's, Europe was fragmented into small and large feudal kingdoms. The industrial revolution was beginning. In Germany it was catching up with that of Britain even though it was 60 years later. A technological change occurred in railways, iron and steel production, coal mining, steam powered machines, collieries, the chemical industry (synthetic dyes), etc. With the industrial revolution, capitalism began to set in, and with these two factors, the emergence of the proletarian (working) class and the bourgeoisie (the middle class) occurred.

At this stage, the bourgeoisie wanted to overthrow the feudal system. The bourgeoisie, or those of the middle and educated class, were owners of factories, employers, bankers, intellectuals, etc. They wanted to establish power for themselves, and wanted capitalism to replace feudalism, by the concentration of the means of production and property in a few hands.

Meanwhile, the proletariats emerged as a distinctive class of people. They were the industrial workers, who emerged with the advent of capitalism, which in turn emerged with the advent of the industrial revolution. The problems of the proletariats included alienation, or their not receiving the products of their own labour, and bad working and living conditions. They

realised that their problems were very similar. Due to the concentration of the means of production (e.g. large factories) they unified among each other and shared a common dislike for the monarchy and aristocracy, who did not realise the worker's rights, or improve their status or condition.

The proletariats, thus joined the bourgeoisie in their revolution against the monarchy. However, the bourgeoisie soon became afraid of the proletariats, because they would demand better living conditions, which would mean decreased profits for the bourgeoisie.

The led the bourgeoisie to unite back with the monarchy. Several revolutions in 1848 failed, but the monarchy found themselves in an endangered position, and were forced to form constitutional governments and republics. The limited democracy was also only for the participation of the male, middle class, with some aristocrats and few, if any, proletariats. However, there was an end to serfdom.

Germany

In the early 1800's Germany was divided into 39 states (monarchies). In 1830 and 1848, uprisings took place, and although the proletariats did not succeed in overthrowing the monarchies, they were forced to initiate a parliamentary form of government. Prussia was one of the largest such monarchies, in which Otto von Bismarck became Chief Minister of King William I.

Bismarck (with the bourgeousie) fought wars against Denmark, Austria, and France, and formed a new, unified German empire, which became the most powerful state in western Europe.

Bismarck encouraged industrial developments and crushed internal threats to the supremacy of the German state. He took many steps to stop the spread of socialism.

Thus, the bourgeousie had lost the political struggle, but had won the economic struggle. After attaining power, Bismarck also wanted to abolish the constitution, but he was dismissed by the new emperor.

Italy

Italy was divided into monarchies, all speaking different languages. Most people could not understand the Tuscan dialect, which would later become the national language of Italy.

The Risorgimento was at the time occurring in Italy: a growing people's movement for national unity and independence (a reorganisation of the nation). The revolution started in early 1848. Among the people, there was enormous bitterness against the King of Naples and the Austrian rulers of Lombardy. The Austrian crown ruled over Venice and Milan.

In the late 1850's, Cavour, the minister of the King of Piedmont, took advantage of this situation and made dealings with the radical nationalist, Mazzani, the republican revolutionary Garibaldi, and the governments of Britain and France. Garibaldi organised Redshirts (revolutionaries) in Sicily who raised the island in a successful revolt. They progressed north, finally defeating the King of Naples, with the help of the army of Piedmont. Afterwards Cavour and the King of Piedmont turned against Garibaldi's troops and forced him into exile. In this, they had reluctant backing from the aristocracy of southern Italy, who said, "Things have to change if they are to remain the same." (In other words, the conservative aristocracy had to allow a few changes in order to preserve their supremacy and prevent socialists from uprooting the entire system.)

Meanwhile, French forces ensured the withdrawal of Austrians from Lombardy. The kings of Piedmont then began ruling unified Italy.

However, northern Italy was more prosperous, while southern Italy consisted more of farmland, and landowners still continued to treat the peasants badly. By mid 1871, Rome became the capital of unified Italy.

Conclusion

Unification occurred in these countries, after a number of revolts and wars between kingdoms, basically so that capitalism could flourish. At the same time, the population became less scattered and more centred in cities. Industrialisation increased. A political centralisation occurred. Production became centralised, as well as the ownership of property. Independent provinces were united into a single nation with a single code of law, national class interest, and system of taxation. Thus, unification also occurred to stop the advent of socialism.

My daughter submitted this paper to her teacher, who soon returned it with large ticks on each paragraph and a 'Very Good' and the end.

The teacher then selected two pages that some other students had written on the Unifications and gave photocopies of them to each student, so that all students would have enough of the same information.

Here are the students' papers she photocopied:

The Unification of Germany

In the early 1860's, a conflict about army reforms caused a constitutional crisis in Prussia. The Prussian king, Wilhelm I, appointed Otto von Bismarck prime minister in 1862. Bismarck hoped he could resolve the constitutional crisis with foreign triumphs. He also wanted to establish Prussia as the leading German power. Between 1864 and 1870, Bismarck had the German states fight three short, victorious wars. In the first, Austria and Prussia, in the name of the German Confederation, took the duchies of Schleswig and Holstein from Denmark. In 1866, Bismarck picked a quarrel with Austria. His army easily defeated Austria at Koniggratz in what was called the Seven Weeks' War. Bismarck then dissolved the German Confederation, annexed some territory to Prussia, and established the North German Confederation under Prussian leadership. The four German states south of the Main River remained independent, but made military alliances with Prussia. Austria's defeat left it greatly weakened. In 1867, the Austrian emperor was forced to give equal status to his Hungarian holdings, creating the Dual Monarchy of Austria-Hungary. Austria was never again a power in Germany. To complete the unification of Germany, Bismarck knew that he needed to overcome the opposition of France. In 1870, he encouraged a Hohenzollern prince to accept the throne of Spain. As Bismarck expected, France objected. Although the prince withdrew as a candidate, Bismarck used the dispute to start the Franco-Prussian War. This conflict pitted France against the North German Confederation and its south German allies. After several battles, the Germans defeated the main French armies at Sedan in September 1870. The German army captured Paris in January 1871. Under the peace treaty, France gave up almost all of Alsace and part of Lorraine. During the Franco-Prussian War, the four south German states agreed to join a united German nation under Prussian leadership. On Jan. 18, 1871, Wilhelm I was crowned the first kaiser (emperor) of the new German Empire. Wilhelm appointed Bismarck chancellor and head of government.

The Unification of Italy (1850s to the 1870s)

In 1670, Muratori, Alfieri and Genoveai ignited the fire of revolution. A year later Milan was occupied by French Napolean who founded the Cisapadance Republic. Some time later Pope submitted to Bonaparte. In 1700's there were many uprisings in Verona against French. In 1798, Roman Republic was declared and

Rome is later taken by French. 1799, saw Milan taken by French, Turin by Austria and Naples to Bourbons. 1801, was occupied by Napolean and Cisapadane Republic since was known as the Italian Republic. By 1806, Parma, Venezia, Piacenza was under Napolean. Joachin Murat then becomes king of Naples. In 1814, Napolean was defeated and exiled to Elba. 1821, saw Italy in revolts. In 1831, there is revolution in Papal states, King Albert becomes king of Sardinia and 'Young Italy' is formed. In 1845 Pius becomes the Pope. 1848, more Italian states are in revolt. In 1850, Cavour becomes prime minister of Sardinia, Napolean Emperor of France. In 1860, more revolts broke out in Italy after meeting of Cavour and Napolean III. 1861-1866, Sicily, Naples joined proclaimed kingdom of Italy. Italy then joined Prussia in war against Austria. In 1870, Italian troops occupy Rome from France which is later made capital of Italy in 1871.

A comparison of the report I helped my daughter to write and the two later reports is very interesting. At first glance, they hardly even appear to be about the same event in History!

Of course there are a number of errors that appear in all of three of these reports. In all cases, many of the phrases and sentences have been copied from a book or some other source, sometimes out of context. However, what is more interesting is the difference in approach.

I think they are a good illustration of two different approaches that can be taken to learn history in schools. In one approach we are concerned with getting a basic understanding of what happened, why it happened, and how it connects to events in other times and places. In the other approach we get a list of dates, wars, and names of rulers.

Students find first approach better because it is difficult to remember all those names and dates, and their relevance to the student's lives is usually not apparent. You can see for yourself which approach you find more interesting. Which one makes you feel inspired and interested in discussing and arguing and asking more questions? If you want to bore your students, choose the second approach.

The first approach is more from the point of view of the people, while the second is more from the point of view of the rulers. If you think rulers are more important and it is dangerous to see the people's point of view, you may want to avoid the first approach.

I have reproduced these reports in full so that you can evaluate them for yourself. What do you think? Which approach would you like to use in teaching history? Would a combination of approaches make sense, or would that be too complicated and confusing? Is there some justification for choosing one approach over the other, or should each teacher or textbook writer just continue with the same old approach that they have grown accustomed to?

I would like to hear your impressions. (haydock@gmail.com)