

MAKERS OF THE MODERN WORLD:  
A COMPARATIVE APPROACH TO THE INTRODUCTORY HISTORY COURSE

Joe P. Dunn  
Converse College

One of the significant issues within history departments today is the nature of the introductory course. In a few cases, the debate is over American history or western civilization survey. But for an increasing number of colleges, the question is whether to retain the traditional western civilization (or a European history derivative, often modern European survey) or to attempt some form of world history. This debate becomes even more important as institutions re-examine and restructure their general education requirements. Two recent conferences and resultant publications addressed the question of western civilization or world history and the problems inherent with either decision.<sup>1</sup> Western civilization proponents insist upon first learning one's own cultural heritage and stress the undeniable difficulties in attempting a more global approach: the overwhelming mass of material that exacerbates the coverage dilemma; limited faculty expertise in non-Western societies; the necessity of a new level of generalization; and the hybrid courses, based upon questionable assumptions, that will inevitably emerge.<sup>2</sup> World history advocates counter with the reality of a global world, Americans' appalling ignorance of non-Western societies, and the ethnocentric arrogance of our narrow approach to historic experience.<sup>3</sup>

Although I acknowledge that the philosophic issue is the more important one, I intend to circumvent the issue rather than speak to it directly. Whatever approach we take, the salient fact is that historical study today is not thriving. Students come to college with minimal backgrounds, and the discipline is not flourishing at most colleges. The present vocationally-oriented educational environment makes history a difficult major to sell. The introductory course is likely to be the last history course that a student will take. This makes the course even more important in the scope of the college's mission as it attempts to graduate students who are broadly educated for national and global citizenship.<sup>4</sup> If the introductory history course is to serve this mission and be competitive for minds and bodies, it must be attractive and appear "relevant" to the contemporary student.

Conferences and journals are full of innovative approaches and alternatives to teaching the introductory course, and I offer another here, "Comparative History--Makers of the Modern World," as part of the ongoing dialogue. What works for one professor or at a particular institution may be entirely irrelevant for another; but the greater the diversity of proposed alternatives, the more stimulation for historians to think about their introductory course, and the more attention given to the question of western civilization vs. world history, the more likely we will achieve competitive success as history teachers.

To put my remarks in context, Converse College is a small women's liberal arts college of approximately 750 undergraduates, almost all residential students. Although drawn from throughout the South, the student body has a high degree of socio-economic, and to a lesser extent intellectual, homogeneity. We suffer from all the same careerist pressures as do most colleges today; in fact, it could be argued that women students may be even more careerist now than their male counterparts.

Our general education program does not require a history course, although the revision soon to go into effect will include a mandatory interdisciplinary core course in western culture, the exact nature of which

is still being worked out. The introductory history course, History 100: Major Topics in Modern European History (roughly French Revolution to the present), is one of the options under distributional requirements in the humanities disciplines. The course is largely a chronological survey with the different instructors free to emphasize varying topics. Since college freshmen are more familiar with the term history than with other options under Humanities, such as philosophy, religion, or interdisciplinary humanities, History 100 attracts good enrollments. The course, limited to 25 students per section, is generally well-taught, with both the course and most of the instructors getting high student evaluations. However, this has not translated into large upper-division enrollments or numbers of history majors.

My interest in a new introductory course stemmed from the desire for a more "attractive" entry-level option, and, more importantly, from the exclusively western orientation of our program. All members of the department are either Americanists or Europeanists, and we have only one non-western course in the history curriculum, an upper-level survey of Japanese and Chinese history from antiquity through the present, taught by a Europeanist with no Asian training. The politics program, part of a joint department of history and politics, mitigates against this proclivity some with advanced courses on Islamic and Middle East politics, the Vietnam war (with strong focus upon southeast Asian society), and a freshman-level international relations course that includes considerable non-western material.

While I hoped naturally that "Makers of the Modern World" would generate new history majors, the primary orientation was that of a true general education course, a first and probably last course for students who eventually would choose a wide spectrum of majors. The ability to think comparatively over time and cultures and to have an appreciation for concerns, problems, and accomplishments of other societies are essential elements for anyone who would claim a liberal education. Admittedly, the time span of the course was limited, focusing on the twentieth century; the emphasis was predominantly political; treatment of non-western societies was exclusively in terms of their relationship with the West; and attention to women was insufficient. But the geographic scope was broad as it touched America, Europe, Africa, and various regions of Asia; and the approach required careful comparative analysis.

History 140 was offered for the first time in fall 1985 as an option alongside several sections of the regular History 100. All my comments stem from that initial experience. The course was structured around two interrelated themes: individuals who have shaped our contemporary world and the revolutions that each led. The approach was heavily biographical but also analytical and comparative. After a generation when biography did not have high standing as an historical approach, it is now making a comeback. I applaud this since I have always found biography a useful tool, and my students have generally reacted positively to it.

We began the course with a discussion of the organizing elements. First, I introduced the "Great Man Debate," a theme we would pursue throughout the term. Is history the story of the notable individuals who have shaped the past, or do larger socio-economic-political forces dictate events? Although the very design of the course and the readings would appear to favor the former interpretation, my lectures offered a counterpoint. For example, on Nazism the students read a book that stressed the singular role of Adolf Hitler, while my lectures, drawn from William S.

Allen's The Nazi Seizure of Power (expanded edition, 1984), emphasized the grassroots nature of the triumph of Nazism and implied that Hitler himself was relatively unimportant in the Nazis gaining political power. At all points, I was less interested in which perspective the students chose than that they understood the arguments and the implications of each position.

After an overview of the nature, anatomy, typography, and structural elements of revolutions (à la Crane Brinton), we were ready for the case studies. I chose six revolutions and the "men" who shaped them. Although I did not focus upon any women, a sub-theme through the course was the role of, and impact upon, women in each revolution. Let me hasten to note at this point that as a generalist with speciality in recent American diplomatic and political history, I am not an expert on any of these topics. The topics were:

- I. THE FOUNDING FATHERS AND THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION: The Western Democratic Republic
- II. MARX, LENIN, STALIN AND THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION: The Marxist Totalitarian Order
- III. ADOLF HITLER AND THE NAZI REVOLUTION: The Fascist Totalitarian State
- IV. MAHATMA GANDHI AND THE SATYAGRAHA REVOLUTION: The Third World Triumph over Colonialism
- V. MAO ZEDONG AND THE CHINESE REVOLUTION: The Emergence of the Third World
- VI. AYATOLLAH KHOMEINI AND THE IRANIAN REVOLUTION: Militant Islam

Through lectures and films, readings, discussion, and writing projects, we drew comparisons between leaders, movements, ideologies, revolutions, and their results. As the course progressed, I was impressed with the students' growing ability to make these comparisons. The readings were the heart of the course. Primarily I relied upon biographies of reasonable length that were readable and straightforward for the novice. However, I had mixed success in my book choices, and the students considered the reading load rather heavy. Indeed, after seeing the books in the bookstore, six enrollees withdrew prior to the first class meeting.

Besides the five paperbacks, which I will elaborate upon below, I used several films from the "Leaders of the Twentieth Century" series.<sup>5</sup> This fine series, now available on inexpensive video cassettes, consists of 26 half-hour films on the primary world leaders of this century. The segments draw almost exclusively upon original film documentary sources with expert narrative by New York Times world correspondents. I was able to purchase the video cassettes needed for the course, and the college later purchased the entire series. I used the films on Gandhi, Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi of Iran, and the two-volume sets on Stalin, Hitler, and Mao. All proved popular and valuable sources.

Turning to the actual content of the course, we approached the American Revolution as an example of the successful development of a new political order. The basic question was whether or not a revolution occurred, and if not, why we use the term revolution. I was also concerned with the issue of leadership. Certainly the American experience did not center upon one

leader. For the reading, I chose Richard B. Morris, Seven Who Shaped Our Destiny: The Founding Fathers As Revolutionaries (1973), a classic collection of vignettes that addressed both the nature of the revolution and the leaders. The book is eminently readable, students liked it, and it spurred good discussions about the various leaders; however, it provided little depth on the lives and political thought of the Founding Fathers. In the future, I will focus more intensely upon the two prime intellectual forces of the revolution and founding period, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, and employ a book such as Merrill D. Peterson, Adams and Jefferson: A Revolutionary Dialogue (1976), Edmund S. Morgan, The Meaning of Independence (1976), or possibly Morton Borden, Parties and Politics in the Early Republic, 1789-1815 (1967).

Very likely, I will restructure the whole unit. The French Revolution needs to be included in this course, and I did give a brief overview even though it was not one of my case studies. Possibly I might try a comparative assessment of the two revolutions as a unit entitled "Enlightenment Revolutions" and counterpose Napoleon versus the American Founding Fathers.

Returning to the case studies, Unit II was the broadest in scope as the background of the Industrial Revolution, nineteenth-century political ideas, and the rise of Marxism were necessary to set the stage for the Russian Revolution. Since I needed a book that treated the revolution in wide scope both before and after 1917, I deviated from the biography emphasis and chose Sheila Fitzpatrick, The Russian Revolution, 1917-1932 (1984), an outstanding brief account written for the survey market. The book combines necessary detail with a sophisticated interpretation. For this unit, the lectures provided biographic assessments of Lenin and Stalin. If I decide to have biographical readings in the future, I will consider Harold Shukman, Lenin and the Russian Revolution (1977), or the abridged edition of David Shub, Lenin (1966), both of which are short and comprehensive but difficult for the novice. The biographies of Stalin are all too long to consider, as unfortunately is Bertram Wolfe's massive Three Who Made a Revolution (1948).

Unit III was one of the easier ones, and it inspired some of the best discussion of the course. Comparisons between Marxist and Fascist totalitarianism and among leaders such as Lenin, Stalin, Mussolini, and Hitler were natural issues. After several lectures on the nature of fascism and its European variants between the wars (particularly Mussolini and Italian fascism and Franco's authoritarian regime), the bulk of the time was given to Hitler and German Nazism. From the excellent, exhaustive literature available, I chose Sebastian Haffner, The Meaning of Hitler (1979), which places great emphasis upon the unique role of the Führer. The book is brief, readable, forcefully argued, and students reacted enthusiastically to it. As earlier explained, I countered the interpretation with William S. Allen's perspective.

The final three units on non-western leaders for me were the most important portion of the course. Probably influenced by the Academy Award-winning movie Gandhi, students were particularly interested in the Indian peace leader, and Louis Fischer, Gandhi: His Life and Message for the World (1954), was the most popular book in the course. I showed the Gandhi movie, which was a great success. Even those who had seen it previously found it much more meaningful after reading Fischer. Mao provided an excellent contrast to Gandhi. Ross Terrill, Mao: A Biography (1980), was the longest book in the course and the portrait may be romanticized, but it provided delightful reading, and it was a good source for one of the required papers

in the course--a discussion of the differences between Gandhi's and Mao's philosophies, tactics, achievements, and failures. The papers proved insightful, as did class discussions that compared the two Asian revolutionaries with their western counterparts.

We ended the course with the most difficult component, the Iranian Revolution and the rise of militant Islam. Unfortunately, the time left was too brief to give this unit the emphasis necessary. Under the best of circumstances, the diversity and complexity of Islamic politics present a monumental challenge. Islam evokes considerable myths, stereotypes, and hostility, and individuals such as Colonel Khaddafy or the Ayatollah Khomeini do not help the image. The Ayatollah makes any attempt to gain appreciation for the faith of nearly 900 million people or any understanding of the historical plight of Shi'ah Muslims a formidable undertaking. And Khaddafy does not enhance Americans' respect for Arabs.

In any case, lectures on the origins of Islam, the Sunni-Shi'ah split, the primacy of Shi'ah Islam in Iran, and the origins and history of the Pahlavi dynasty provided background for treatment of the revolution. The Iranian Revolution followed a classic Crane Brinton model and thus provided good comparisons with earlier revolutions discussed. The ability to bring the past forward into a contemporary situation ended the course with a perfect illustration of the value of historical study for interpreting the world in which we presently live. Since the reading list was already extensive and current books on the Iranian Revolution did not seem appropriate, I did not assign a book on this topic.

While an analysis of the Iranian Revolution served one of my goals for this unit, I was not satisfied with the Ayatollah as my sole representative of a Middle East revolutionary. In the future, I intend to treat Gamal Abdel Nasser as well. The two very different charismatic revolutionaries, one a secular-oriented, pan-Arabist Sunni, and the other a radical fundamentalist, Persian, pan-Islamic Shi'ah, provide a wide array of comparisons. Although motivated by different visions, both challenged and mocked the great powers with impunity and established themselves as "makers of the new world." The "Leaders of the Twentieth Century" series has an excellent film on Nasser, and the literature is adequate as well.

Obviously, the course has many omissions. One of the most apparent is no treatment of a Latin American revolution. The Mexican Revolution, Fidel Castro and the Cuban Revolution, or the Sandinistas and the Nicaraguan Revolution would be obvious topics. However, the course is already overly ambitious and barely manageable now, even before the suggested additions I have noted above, not to mention the other limitations discussed earlier.

Despite all the criticism that could be made, the fact is that the course was a success. Student evaluations were very good, with many references to how participants had come to appreciate similarities and differences in various disparate revolutionary situations. Almost all participants commented that they had been forced to think deeply and that their analytical skills had been tested and enhanced. Virtually all said that they would highly recommend the course to others, and many planned to take another history course. In fact, several enrolled in courses the next term. Since writing most of this article, the course has evolved further, the most recent change is in the title to "Comparative History: Modern Revolutions and Leaders." I hope to improve upon the model in future offerings.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>"World Civilization and Western Civilization," Missouri Valley History Conference, Omaha, NE, March 1985, with the three papers published in abridged form, excerpts from audience discussion, and two other articles on teaching a global perspective in Teaching History: A Journal of Methods, 10 (1985); and Josef W. Konvitz, ed., What Americans Should Know: Western Civilization on World History (Proceedings of a Conference at Michigan State University, April 1985, funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities), a collection of eighteen articles (Lansing, MI, 1985), 270 pp. See also the entire issue of The History Teacher, 18 (1985), devoted to the teaching of world history with interesting articles by Ross E. Dunn, William H. McNeill, Edward L. Farmer, Joe Gowaskie, David L. Levering, and Lawrence J. Chase; and Kevin Reilly, William H. McNeill, L.S. Stavrianos, Philip Curtin, and Immanuel Wallerstein, "What Is an Attainable Global Perspective for Undergraduates in History?" The History Teacher, 18 (1985), 501-535. For earlier discussion of these issues, see Karen J. Winkler, "World History Contest with 'Western Civ' as Colleges Debate Role of Survey Courses," Chronicle of Higher Education (January 27, 1982), and "Textbooks: The Decline and Rise of Western Civilization," Chronicle of Higher Education (December 1, 1982); Major Joe C. Dixon and Captain Neil D. Martin, eds., 1982 World History Teaching Conference (Colorado Springs, CO, 1983); and Gilbert Allardyce, "The Rise and Fall of the Western Civilization Course," American Historical Review, 87 (1982), 695-725; "Comments," 726-738; "Reply," 739-743.

<sup>2</sup>For most eloquent advocacies of the traditional Western Civilization course, see Lewis W. Spitz, "Periodication and Chronological Coverage in a Western Civilization Survey," and J.H. Hexter, "Introductory College Course in Non-American History: An Ethnocentric View," in What Americans Should Know, 141-154, 179-197. Among the several articles that emphasize problems with world history, see Bullitt Lowry, "World Civilization: Instructors and Organization," and the summary of audience participation, Teaching History, 10 (1985), 53-62; and Richard E. Sullivan, "Summary Statement," in What Americans Should Know, 257-270, especially 262-263.

<sup>3</sup>See Donald C. Holsinger, "Revitalizing Liberal Education: A Global History Approach," Teaching History, 10 (1985), 63-70; Lynda Norene Shaffer, "Medieval History with a Global Perspective: Suggestions Regarding Why and How," and Ross E. Dunn, "Periodizing and Chronological Coverage in a World History Survey," in What Americans Should Know, 107-128, 129-140; Joe Gowaskie, "The Teaching of World History: A Status Report," The History Teacher, 18 (1985), 366-375; and Dixon and Martin, eds., 1982 World History Teaching Conference.

<sup>4</sup>That is if the student is ever exposed to history. A National Endowment for the Humanities "Study Group on the State of Learning in the Humanities in Higher Education" found that a student can graduate from 75% of all American colleges and universities without having studied European history; from 72% without having studied American literature or history; and from 86% without having studied the civilizations of classical Greece and Rome. Reported by William J. Bennett, Chairman of NEH, "To Reclaim a Legacy: A Report on the Humanities in Higher Education," Washington, NEH, November 1985.

<sup>5</sup>Learning Corporation of America, 108 Wilmot Road, Deerfield, IL, 60015.