Teaching Vichy and the Occupation: ASMCF-funded workshop for teachers

The Vichy regime and the German Occupation of France in the Second World War is a mainstay of A-Level curricula for French. Whether taught in the form of a set text or as a stand-alone module or topic, the Occupation is one of the few constants across examination boards. The one-day workshop, ‘Teaching Vichy and the Occupation’, organised by Dr David Lees (Warwick) and Dr Brian Sudlow (Aston) and held on the 18 July 2019 was designed to support the teaching of this period at A-Level. The event brought together teachers of French at secondary and tertiary levels to share challenges, experiences, resources and ideas for future collaborations. The workshop was attended by six teachers of French at A-Level and 12 Higher Education practitioners, though more teachers had registered for the event but were unable to attend. It is regrettable that teachers who could not make the event did so because their schools could not afford to enable them to attend a Continual Professional Development meeting; indeed, this affirms the organisers’ desire to support embattled teachers of French at secondary level. Nonetheless, those teachers and academics who attended enjoyed a productive, mutually supportive environment in which ideas and resources were widely shared.

The day began with a welcome from the organisers, gratefully acknowledging the support of the Association and reiterating the aims and ambitions of the Association, before a fascinating keynote address by Dr Steve Wharton (Bath) on ‘The Occupation as occupation: Reflections on Teaching and Learning the Second World War in France.’ Dr Wharton, who is also Honorary Vice-Secretary of the Association, drew on his extensive experience of teaching this period to emphasise the importance of contextualisation for teachers and students. Dr Wharton argued that teachers should seek to engage students in looking for the ‘grey’ of the Vichy period, rather than permitting students to see the events of the Occupation through the lens of a Manichean struggle. Dr Wharton shifted from a focus on the context of the Vichy period, to textual responses and audiovisual representations.

Following Dr Wharton’s inspirational keynote, a panel of HE practitioners discussed their reflections on their teaching, including Dr Karine Varley (Strathcylde) who talked about the importance of teaching and learning the Italian Occupation of France in the Second World War, Dr Nina Wardleworth (Leeds) who discussed her experiences of teaching a short representation of the Occupation-era experiences of young men from the Antilles and Dr Edward Boothroyd (Birmingham) who reflected on his experiences of integrating cultural aspects of the Occupation into the re-designed second-year core module at Birmingham.

After lunch, teachers of secondary French shared their experiences of teaching this period, discussed their existing resources and some of the challenges they face when teaching Vichy and the Occupation. In a round table discussion, colleagues shared perspectives, resources and ideas for overcoming some of these challenges, most notably the limitations placed on teachers by examination boards in terms of assessment and the limited time and resource available to teachers in preparation for teaching such a complex topic. HE colleagues presented some resources that they had brought along in preparation for the discussion and there was opportunity for sharing common experiences and ways of preparing students for engaging with the Occupation. The final session was a plenary discussion in which participants discussed future developments in this fledgling network of likeminded colleagues and teachers. The event concluded with thanking the Association and with plans to share resources through an online portal that will be developed over summer 2019.

*Dr David Lees and Dr Brian Sudlow, July 2019.*