

Columbus as popular historical character

The image of Columbus in popular historical magazines

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Basic information

Columbus' life and deeds is an important part of Western historiography. His role as an historical adventurer and explorer is a part of our contemporary historical culture. His journey to America and its consequences can undoubtedly be seen as one of the important parts of our historical development; a significant contribution to changing power relationships, economy, but also suffering in the world.

Columbus in the Swedish curriculum

The syllabi of history in Sweden do not mention Columbus by name. What is considered to be important are historical eras and to be able to discuss how historical epochs are constructed. The syllabi also stress the understanding of change historical processes, events and people in the grading criteria.

Chronologically, Columbus can be placed in the historical era the syllabus calls the Renaissance. Columbus can be described as a central figure in the transition from the Middle Ages to the Early Modern Era. He is used as an example from the era of discoveries. The different perspectives on Columbus offer an opportunity to problematize the construction of time periods and timelines in history.

For instance: What does it mean to be modern? Is he a Renaissance man (or are his actions more "medieval")? If he is a discoverer, what, then, did he discover (considering that people already lived in what we call the Americas)?

The central content of the syllabus it also stresses the importance of Colonialism and the study of changing power relationships, its historical explanations, and to be able to do this from different perspectives

It is evident that the time in which Columbus lived was time of important changes. But what significance did the Western hemisphere's dominance on the oceans of the world have in the historical development? How did it come to be that Europe became dominant in world politics?.

Further syllabi stress how history teaching should highlight different views on human values based on, for instance, ethnicity and gender. The European explorers' meeting with people from other continents should be a good example of highlighting and discussing issues concerning human values and ethnicity.

Learning goals

The aim of the information presented on these pages is two-fold; to increase students' media-critical skills and their ability to appreciate different historical perspectives, so called multiperspectivity. The idea is that the material and information should serve as a basis for critical assessment of texts and images in general and with regard to popular history in particular.

By assessing and comparing popular historical magazines and textbooks, you can learn to deal with different ways of presenting a historical topic and learn to notice differences in more or less scientific styles of portraying and using history. The pros and cons of popularization become visible. By comparing magazines from different countries different perspectives become evident.

As mentioned above, Columbus's life and deeds can be connected to many of the curricular objectives. Processes of historical change, historical culture and critical thinking can be highlighted, encouraged and developed by using this material about Columbus.

Columbus in Swedish textbooks

Columbus' role in history can be discussed from many different perspectives. For instance, textbooks describe and deal with Columbus in different ways. His role in history is in one textbook entitled "Europe discovers the world" while his life and deeds in another book is described as part of "the early modern era".

Descriptions of Columbus as a person are for obvious reasons (such as limited space) not particularly detailed. In general, there is no critical approach to Columbus' deeds in history textbooks. But undeniably he is also depicted as a part of a negative development with the suffering of the people that were colonized by the Europeans.