

National Identity and The Educational System: The Trajectory of Europe's Unified Geographical Space into Nations and Its Reunification (1789-2025)

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doi: <https://doi.org/10.37745/bje.2013/vol14n14357>

Published January 31, 2026

Citation: Karaoulas A. (2026) National Identity and The Educational System: The Trajectory of Europe's Unified Geographical Space into Nations and Its Reunification (1789-2025), *British Journal of Education*, 14 (1), 43-57

Abstract: *The current paper analyses the historical path of European education and its essential contribution to the development of national identities, the reinforcement of the national features and the modern construction of a European identity. Since the French Revolution, education ceased to be the privilege of the elite and became a system of developing national consciousness and popular integration. By utilizing the analytical examination of the history of the development of the educational systems in the countries of central Europe, including Prussia, France, Britain and Italy, the study shows that education served as the strongest tool of creating the national identity in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As the wider geographical space of Europe was unified by the formation of the European Union and the working out of the European integration programs, the direction of education was shifted to the creation of the supranational European identity, and the continuation of the historical traditions of Greek philosophy and the Roman law, along with the Christian system of ethical and humanist values. The work has a longue durée historical approach to understanding education as a cultural phenomenon, and the construction of national identity, by focusing on the historical circumstances, the value system, and the cultural changes that informed it. It seeks to explore the importance of education as a dynamic agent towards political awareness and communal identity, both on the national and on the European level.*

Keywords: national identity, European consciousness, European education system, Europe's common heritage, national education, European education

INTRODUCTION

Europe as a geographical and cultural locale was created in the antiquity and the Middle Ages around common philosophical, institutional, and ethical systems which had their roots in both ancient Greek thinking, the Roman tradition of administration and Christian theory. This historical continuity was broken in the late eighteenth and, in most cases, in the nineteenth century when the modern nation-state and industrialization were formed and national identities emerge. It was education which decisively entered the game, and which as a main society-forming, as a main cultural differentiating mechanism (Gellner, 1983). This dialectical process, which the current research investigates, is the shift toward a unified cultural space to national and identities, and then, the modern reunification in a supranational system, which does not destroy the legacy of a common cultural tradition.

The French Revolution of 1789 is an event that marks a turning point in the correlation between education and national identity. The unification of values like equality, popular sovereignty, and political participation

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demanded a radical change of an educational model of that period that was controlled by the Church and aristocratic elites. The conditions created by this historical moment gave education a different role than it had had previously as a privilege of high social classes, but defined it as one of the primary social tools that does not only serve the process of knowledge dispensation, but also the production of national citizens and the development of national consciousness (Anderson, 1991).

One of the most significant sources of theoretical reference to the issue of nationalism and education is the works of Ernest Gellner and Benedict Anderson, who did not perceive the nation as a self-evident and timeless entity but as a historical product of certain social and cultural circumstances. Gellner associated the emergence of nationalism with the shift to industrial society and noted that new modes of production demanded a shared language, standardized skills and at least some level of cultural homogeneity (Gellner, 1983). In contrast to pre-industrial societies, in which cultural diversity could coexist without undermining cohesion, the conditions of industrial production created a need for a unified cultural framework, which found institutional expression in the nation-state. In the same direction, albeit from a different starting point, Anderson described the nation as an “imagined community,” constituted through shared narratives, symbols, and practices of communication. From this perspective, education does not function merely as a means of transmitting knowledge, but as a key site for the production and reproduction of shared reference points that make the formation of national collectivity possible (Gellner, 1983; Anderson, 1991).

The trajectory of European education from the late eighteenth century to the present may be divided into five historical stages, which illuminate the development of the relationship between education and national identity. During the years of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution (1789-1815), education was unbound from the hierarchical control of the Church and elites and began to be viewed as a right of all citizens. With industrialization and the national unifications of the nineteenth century (1815-1900), education became a central means of constructing national identity, as new states, especially Germany and Italy, established compulsory public education systems to secure social cohesion. In the early twentieth century (1900-1945), national educational systems consolidated and were often used to strengthen aggressive nationalist and imperial ideologies. After the Second World War (1945-1980), education became a field of reflection and reconstruction, contributing to European cooperation and the cultivation of shared values. From the late twentieth century to the present (1980-present), education has linked individual national identities to a broader European framework, strengthening the formation of a supranational cultural community without eliminating local differences (Green, 1990).

This study argues that education is not limited to the transfer of knowledge; it has constituted a decisive instrument for shaping collective identities and organizing social life. During the period of nationalization, each state, for instance Prussia through the Generallandschulreglement of 1763, France through the Jules Ferry laws of 1881-1882, and Britain through the Forster Act of 1870, developed centralized educational systems with a common curriculum, a standardized form of the national language used in teaching, and a clear politico-moral mission, thereby promoting the formation of homogeneous national communities and social cohesion.

In the contemporary context of European integration, education has been redefined with the aim of forming citizens who recognize not only their national identities but also their European identities. Education continues to play an active role in the construction of collective consciousness, and at the same time maintains and reinforces the characteristics of national identities, programs like Erasmus+, processes like the Bologna Process, which is aimed at harmonizing the study programs of universities in Europe (European Commission, 2025).

This method of historiography is important in that those very issues that face the European challenges today, be it the emergence of nationalism or the problem of European identity, are unable to be comprehended without the consideration of the central theme of education. The purpose of the analysis is a critical retrospective, which helps to comprehend the mechanisms under the influence of which European identity is created and how education helps to preserve, reinforce, or change it (Weber, 1976).

THE UNIFIED GEOGRAPHICAL SPACE OF EUROPE: ANCIENT ROOTS AND MEDIEVAL COHESION

In the history of European thought, the domain of ancient Greek thought provides the most profound historical and philosophical foundation of European education, in which a systematic and philosophically based conception of education as a social and political institution was first formulated. Education in Greek antiquity was not a process of neutral imparting of knowledge or a vocational training, but the process of the human being made into a citizen who could engage in the political life and make his or her contribution to the unity of the political community. Education was interpreted as the process by which the political community molds its members by developing moral and intellectual preconditions of active engagement in political life. In this sense, *paideia* is not limited to individual cultivation; it functions as a process of social integration and civic formation, making possible the collective self-awareness and institutional stability of the polis.

Plato, particularly in the *Republic*, endowed education with a normative and political character, linking it directly to the organization of a just polity and to the formation of civic virtue. *Paideia* functions as a mechanism of selection, formation, and harmonization of members of society, securing its moral and political stability. Virtue is not conceived as an innate characteristic of the human being, but as a quality that can be taught and systematically cultivated. Education thus assumes the task of transmitting virtue not only at the individual level, but as a collective process concerned with the constitution and long-term stability of the political community (Plato, 1908).

Greek education, however, was not formed as a single unified system nor under central political supervision. Each city-state developed different educational models that reflected its constitutional values and social priorities. Spartan upbringing, as described by Xenophon, constitutes a characteristic example of state-controlled education with a strong military and collectivist orientation, aiming at the formation of citizens fully integrated into the body of the polis. By contrast, in Athens, education was oriented toward the multifaceted cultivation of the individual, combining music, physical training, grammar, and philosophy, elements necessary for participation in democratic life (Xenophon, 1890).

Despite this, the Greek experience helped in creating a common educational horizon in which education served as a core agency of cultural unity. A substantial Greek cultural space that could be identified outside the borders of the city-states was comprised of philosophical schools, rhetoric, and the dissemination of shared ideas about virtue, reason, and political participation. Isocrates made this point truly clear when he wrote that the term "Hellenes" is not one of racial origin but a practice of a common *paideia* and education. This point of view demonstrates that education in antiquity was used as the source of shared identity, which could overcome the barriers of politics and institutions (Isocrates, 1928).

Incorporating the Greek culture in a creative manner, the Roman Empire brought its educational conceptions into a large institutional and administrative context. The Romans had a different focus in education, as they focused on rhetoric, law, and administration, i.e., knowledge and skills required to rule and unify a multi-ethnic empire. Quintilian made education a tool of constructively molding the citizens to be politically competent and morally upright enough to serve the state and its institutions efficiently (Quintilian, 1920).

This was an especially sophisticated and well-organized legal system of the Roman Empire that became the main instrument of government, social control, and political unification on a large and culturally diverse territory. Roman law was not only a useful tool in dispute resolution, but also a guide to the establishment of political authority and training of the administrative and legal elites in the Empire. The disciplined development of rhetoric and legal study helped to create a common administrative culture that overcame local customs and generated the feeling of continuity.

As the center of gravity of the Empire moved gradually westward, the Eastern Roman Empire came to oversee keeping and restructuring the Roman legal tradition. The codification of law under Justinian through the *Corpus*

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Juris Civilis did not constitute a rupture with the past but a conscious effort to systematize and restore the classical Roman legal tradition, adapted to the needs of a Christian and administratively centralized empire. This project formed part of a broader effort to maintain legal cohesion and constitutional continuity of the Roman tradition during a period of political and administrative transformation. The codification of law was not aimed solely at the practical regulation of governance; it also expressed a deliberate concern to preserve Roman institutional identity under new historical conditions (Justinian I, 1932).

The importance of Corpus Juris Civilis did not rest in the Eastern Roman Empire only. Since the end of the Middle Ages, its progressive rediscovery in Western Europe and its incorporation into the instruction of law schools helped to create a common vocabulary of law and a system of institutional thought. With the help of this long path, the Roman legal tradition, through the mediation of the Eastern imperial one, was restored to the European educational and political sphere, serving as a reference point to the formation of the institutions and the culture of the administrative state.

With the emergence of Christianity, a new and final dimension in the process of shaping European education was created. From the fourth century onward, education began to be interpreted through the lens of Christian ethics, without rejecting the classical heritage. Church Fathers such as Jerome integrated Greek and Roman learning within a Christian framework of moral formation, granting education a role of spiritual and social guidance (Jerome, 1893).

During the Middle Ages, the Church assumed the role of the primary agent for preserving and disseminating education. Monastic schools and, later, the universities of Western Europe constituted a supranational academic space with a common language, curriculum, and educational standards. As Charles Homer Haskins observed, medieval universities functioned as crucial institutions for the formation of a pan-European intellectual elite. Even though their social influence was limited, they played a decisive role in the formation of a common cultural substratum in which the national educational policies of modern Europe would be constructed in the future (Haskins, 1957).

THE FRAGMENTATION INTO NATIONS (1789-1871)*The Enlightenment and the French Revolution: The Transformative Idea of Public Education*

The French Revolution initiated a new era in the history of Europe, which significantly changed not only the political and social order but also the perception of education as a source of forming the citizen. As early as the eighteenth century, the sciences, universities, and academies had started to separate themselves under the exclusive dominion of the Church, and knowledge became an independent and social good. During the Enlightenment, education became intricately linked to freedom and democracy, as it was regarded as the foundation of social and moral progress (Weber, 1976).

Enlightenment thinkers such as Condorcet and Rousseau highlighted the need for an education accessible to all people, regardless of social or economic status. Condorcet argued that education is a fundamental right and an indispensable instrument for equality and societal progress. Rousseau, in *Emile* and *Du Contrat Social* (1762), articulated a view radical for his time: that education is neither a privilege of the wealthy nor a means of maintaining social hierarchy, but the right of every human being and a necessary condition for political freedom. Education, as a process of forming the individual, was now recognized as the instrument through which society cultivates citizens' capacities so that they can participate consciously and responsibly in public life (Condorcet, 1955; Rousseau, 1968; Rousseau, 1979).

Thus, education ceased to be a simple transmission of knowledge or a mere preservation of tradition and became a continuous practice of intellectual and moral cultivation. The educated person was no longer prepared only to work or serve the state, but also to participate actively in public life and contribute to social welfare. With this new understanding, the Enlightenment established the foundations upon which the idea of the modern citizen and the vision of a society grounded in knowledge, equality, and reason were built.

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During the French Revolution, the Enlightenment's theoretical principles took political form and were transformed into a programme of action. In 1793, the Jacobin leaders Robespierre and Saint-Just proposed the creation of a system of public education that would be compulsory, free, and organized by the state. Although these ambitious plans were not fully implemented, they laid the groundwork for a new conception: the state was now recognized as the institutional guarantor of education. Public education acquired the character of social transformation and political unity. From a means of intellectual cultivation, it developed into a mechanism for forming a uniform body of citizens with a shared identity, cultivating common values, historical consciousness, and linguistic and cultural identity, so that they could function as a unified whole with shared interests, rights, and obligations toward the state. This new view of the formation of citizens and state would have a decisive influence on both theoretical understanding and the practical implementation of education throughout Europe during the nineteenth century (Doyle, 2002).

Nevertheless, the institutional impact of the French Revolution was initially limited. The vision of popular education assumed substantial form only in the Napoleonic era, when Napoleon recognized the strategic significance of education as a means of consolidating the state and unifying its subjects. With the establishment of the Université Impériale (1806), the introduction of unified curricula, and the institutional control of teaching, Napoleon created the first genuinely national and organized educational system on the European continent. Although the system he implemented was centralized and authoritarian, it introduced principles of meritocracy, rational administration, and state responsibility for citizens' education, laying the foundations for the formation of a unified national education (Aulard, 1911).

Thus, education ceased to be a matter of individual initiative or ecclesiastical care and became a state-centered institution. It became an instrument for cultivating a shared patriotic sentiment and shaping national identity. Through schooling, nineteenth-century France cultivated the model of the "citizen-student", an individual who belongs to a unified state, uses the same language, and participates consciously and collectively in service of the nation. The French educational model pursued a dual aim: the education of citizens and the formation of their political and national consciousness. This combination of education and political consciousness constituted the foundation upon which the national school of modern Europe was built.

PRUSSIA AND THE SYSTEMATISATION OF EDUCATION AS AN INSTRUMENT OF NATION-BUILDING

If France was the birthplace of the ideology of public education, Prussia was the place where this idea acquired a stable institutional form and historical duration. It was the first European state to organize a coherent and fully state-controlled system of schooling, a system that exercised a profound influence on the formation of German national identity and served as a model for the entire continent.

As early as 1763, long before the French Revolution, Frederick the Great issued the Generallandschulreglement, which established compulsory elementary education for all children aged five to thirteen (Frederick II of Prussia, 1763). Frederick's decree, shaped both by Enlightenment influence and by the absolutist logic of the Prussian state, introduced the principle that education constitutes an administrative responsibility of the polity. Frederick did not believe in popular sovereignty. In a letter he noted that "only in this way will we have good people and more soldiers and taxpayers." For him, education was a tool of social discipline and productivity. Nevertheless, his initiative established a crucial principle: that the state possesses not only the right, but also the duty, to organize, supervise, and finance public education (Frederick II of Prussia, 2015).

Over the following decades, a unified network of schools developed under direct state administration. State inspection was introduced, teachers were certified, and their training was organized through specialized academies, with the result that teaching acquired the character of public service. Prussian education was marked by strict discipline and rational control, features that reflected the administrative and military structure of the state.

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After Prussia's crushing defeat at Jena in 1806 by Napoleon, reformist innovations were not abandoned; rather, they were integrated into a new vision of reconstruction. During the crucial period of national self-questioning that then ensued Wilhelm von Humboldt took over the new Education Section in 1809 and made a radical restructuring of the educational machine. Inspired by Enlightenment ideals and German idealism, Humboldt placed at the center of his vision the concept of *Bildung*, education understood as a process of inner cultivation and spiritual completion of the human being (Humboldt, 1960).

For Humboldt, the purpose of education was not simply social utility, but the full development of all human capacities, so that the person may become a free and responsible being. Education, however, could not remain an exclusively private matter; it had to take place within an organized and unified framework, so that the state could ensure its universality and quality. Under his guidance, the Prussian educational system took the form of a three-tier network: the Volksschule for basic education, the Realschule for technical and practical preparation, and the Gymnasium, which provided classical and philosophical education, preparing the educated elite of the period (Humboldt, 1960).

The German language, history, and literature formed the core of the curriculum, contributing decisively to the unification of a divided state. Through an education that balanced intellectual cultivation with disciplined civic formation, Prussia constructed the educational model of the nineteenth century. The system aimed to shape the individual of the new era, the scientist, the soldier, and the citizen, who would embody German identity and contribute actively to Europe's progress.

FRENCH UNIFICATION AND THE JULES FERRY LAWS

In the late nineteenth century, France confronted the problem of cultural heterogeneity and the linguistic differences that persisted between the capital and the rest of the country. Despite the early formation of a centralized state, after the Napoleonic Wars the country remained a multilingual and socially heterogeneous whole. The French language, state institutions, and secular education had limited diffusion beyond Paris and the major urban centers (Weber, 1976; Comte, 1853). In the provinces, local languages and dialects prevailed, Breton, Provençal, Basque, and Catalan, which functioned as cultural identities oriented more toward local community and the Church than toward the central idea of the nation (Ozouf, 2007).

The prolonged dominance of the clergy in education, together with concerns about the political divisions it might foster, generated strong demands for secularization and for the emancipation of schooling from religious influence. The positivist philosophy of Auguste Comte exercised major influence on French elites. Comte argued that human history progresses through three stages, the theological, the metaphysical, and the positive, and that the "positive age" of science would replace religion as the basis of social cohesion (Comte, 1842). His "religion of humanity" provided an ideological background for the secularization (laïcisation) of the school, in which moral formation passed from the clergy to the state (Boudon, 2012).

The Jules Ferry laws (1881-1882) laid the foundation of the modern French educational system and expressed in practice positivist ideals of progress, rationalism, and secularization. In 1881, free primary education (Gratuité) was introduced; in 1882, schooling was made compulsory (Obligation) and, at the same time, secular for all children aged six to thirteen. The clergy were excluded from public teaching; religious instruction was removed from the curriculum and replaced with "moral and civic instruction" (Loi du 16 juin 1881, 1881; Loi du 28 mars 1882, 1882). Teachers were appointed, examined, and trained under the supervision of the Ministry of Public Instruction. The curriculum included reading, grammar, arithmetic, geography, history, natural sciences, and exercises in moral and civic formation (Prost, 2004).

Beyond their legislative framework, the Ferry laws functioned as an instrument of national unification. The elevation of History and Geography to central pillars of the curriculum was not incidental; it aimed at forging a unified French consciousness. Through the imagery of school maps and the celebrations of the Republic, the

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educational system cultivated an everyday patriotic culture in which learning became an act of national inclusion (Nora, 1984).

Behind this legislative reform, a profound cultural transformation was underway. As Eugen Weber documented, the school functioned as the catalyst that homogenized the French space, gradually turning “peasants into French” (Weber, 1976). Gustave Lanson, and later Mona Ozouf, emphasized that these reforms did not aim merely at modernizing knowledge, but at rallying citizens’ moral life around a new ideal, the Republic. Through school, civic morality was reoriented, making democratic values the central pillar of social cohesion. In this way, the democratic school of the Third Republic constructed a new form of political religion: the secular religion of the Homeland (Ozouf, 2007).

Primary-school teachers, the so-called hussards noirs de la République (“Black Hussars of the Republic”), served this mission, carrying the message of secularization to every corner of the country (Ozouf & Ozouf, 1992). Through the establishment of a common national language, the use of school readers with strongly patriotic content (lectures patriotiques), and participation in national ceremonies, the state transformed France from a mosaic of local communities into a unified political and cultural body (Bruno, 1877). The school functioned as the “crucible of the Republic” (creuset républicain), as education ceased to serve the interests of individual families and assumed as its primary mission the reproduction of national unity (Weber, 1976).

ITALIAN UNIFICATION AND EDUCATION

Whereas late nineteenth-century France sought to complete its secularization and unify an already established state, Italy faced a different challenge. It had to lay the foundations of state institutions and national unity in a space characterized by political and cultural fragmentation. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Italian peninsula remained divided into kingdoms, duchies, papal territories, and independent cities, each with its own dialects, distinct institutions, and different historical memories. The Risorgimento, that is, the Italian “rebirth” and political unification (1815-1871), was not merely a military or diplomatic undertaking, but a cultural and educational movement (Riall, 1994).

Giuseppe Mazzini, one of the emblematic figures of the Risorgimento, argued that without the educational regeneration of the people there could be no Homeland. Education, he insisted, must inspire “faith in a shared mission and responsibility,” cultivating the citizen’s consciousness as a bearer of moral duty and collective accountability. As historian Lucy Riall notes, education was understood by Risorgimento ideologues as the principal force of “spiritual unification,” the intellectual lever through which Italian identity could be forged and mature prior to its final political completion (Riall, 1994).

Beyond its political and military dimension, the Risorgimento was constituted from the outset as a movement of moral awakening that required the individual’s full emotional identification with the national vision. As Alberto Mario Banti has shown, the ideal of Italian unification rested on a new “morality of the Homeland,” in which family, honor, and sacrifice were elevated to fundamental values of national consciousness. Within this framework, education was not limited to the transmission of knowledge; it functioned as a means of moral and cultural formation, integrating students into a community bound by emotion, responsibility, and the ideal of contributing to the collective (Banti, 2020).

With the coronation of Vittorio Emanuele II as the first king of a unified Italy (1871), political unification had to be transformed into social and cultural cohesion. The Casati Law of 1859, initially introduced in the Kingdom of Sardinia and extended to the whole country after 1870, established a public, compulsory, and state-organized educational system (Smith, 1968). The model was centralized and inspired by the French and Prussian examples: it unified educational administration under the Ministry of Education, defined a common curriculum, and provided for official certification of teachers. This reform as John A. Davis notes, was a pillar of state consolidation, and the unification of education is linked to the process of state making in Italy (Davis, 2000).

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A significant role in this process was played by the Italian language. The school was tasked with eliminating the fragmentation of local dialects, Neapolitan, Sicilian, Venetian, and others, and with establishing Tuscan as the common national language. History and Geography acquired a ritual dimension, presenting the nation's trajectory as an uninterrupted continuity from Roman antiquity and the Renaissance to the Risorgimento. As Banti underlines, unification did not mean only political union; it required the reconstruction of a shared memory and a coherent narrative (Banti, 2020).

The school undertook to unite Italians not only socially but also morally. As Silvana Patriarca explains, education was used to "shape" national character, teaching that industriousness, discipline, and an honest life were necessary for national progress. Despite limited resources and widespread illiteracy, the new Italian state invested in the public school, viewing it as the principal means through which citizens could be integrated into society and learn to love their Homeland (Patriarca, 2010).

In this way, the nineteenth-century Italian school was not simply a place where children learned basic literacy. It functioned as a laboratory for the construction of national identity. Through the teaching of a common language, history, and norms of conduct, the school shaped the citizens of a nation who first had to feel that they belonged somewhere, even before the state acquired its definitive borders. This is precisely what the famous phrase of the period meant, "to make Italians" (*fare gli italiani*): to create a people with a shared consciousness for a state that had only just been born (Davis, 2000).

BRITAIN AND THE GRADUAL DEMOCRATISATION OF EDUCATION

Britain, the only major Western European power with a stable constitutional tradition and without abrupt political ruptures, followed in education a slow but steady trajectory of reforms, in contrast to the revolutionary reorganizations of France or Prussia. Despite the absence of intense political conflict, the social pressure produced by the Industrial Revolution and rapid urban growth made clear that education could no longer rely on philanthropy or remain primarily an affair of the Church.

The new social classes, especially the emerging bourgeoisies and the large working class, formed the backbone of industrial transformation, yet remained to a significant extent illiterate and politically excluded. As David Vincent notes, in pre-Victorian England education functioned as a social privilege rather than as a right or as a condition for political participation and social mobility: "*education contributed to the preservation and strengthening of social hierarchies, rather than challenging them*" (Vincent, 1989, p. 67). The need for a system that would provide elementary education to all children, regardless of social origin, became the moral and political point of departure for nineteenth-century reforms.

The decisive reform in the history of British education came with the Forster Education Act (1870). Liberal politician William Edward Forster proposed the creation of board schools operating under local boards and funded jointly by the state and local authorities, thereby establishing the principle of shared responsibility in public education. Although the new system preserved Britain's traditional decentralization, without the centralization characteristic of French and Prussian models, it effectively marked the birth of public education in Britain. For the first time, the Act established state responsibility toward the child as a future citizen, even if implementation depended on local communities (Simon, 1965).

Subsequent legislation complemented the framework laid in the previous decade. The Elementary Education Act (1880) introduced compulsory attendance for children aged five to ten, while the Free Education Act (1891) abolished fees in public schools. This reform path was secured by the Education Act (1902) that centralized the administration of education by placing it under the management of the local education authorities. By 30 years Britain had passed on a system of charitable schools to one of a network of highly efficient, secular, and organized state education (King & Tomkins, 2003).

The new social ideal slowly emerged behind these changes in institutions. It also led to the recognition of education as a source of social promotion and political involvement. The school attributed the values of work,

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moral self-reliance, and trust in institutions to personal responsibility, which defined the Victorian citizen. Simultaneously, universal education was an effective tool in developing an Anglo-Saxon national identity that was based on language, literary tradition and the Protestant social ethic that prefigured the law-abiding citizen (Vincent, 1989).

The British experience demonstrated that the way to democratic education does not necessarily have to be revolutionary but can also be gradual, by consensus and social maturing. With the development of the educational system education was no longer a charity, it became a basic right of the citizens and one of the main mechanisms to ensure national unity.

THE STATE CONSOLIDATION OF NATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS AND THE INSTRUMENTALIZATION OF EDUCATION (1871-1945)

The period following the German and Italian state unifications up to the end of World War II marked the full dominance of the nation-state as Europe's sole framework of political legitimacy and cultural reference. Education, which until then had been viewed primarily as a means of transmitting knowledge, gradually became an ideological instrument of the state aimed at unifying populations and shaping a shared national consciousness (Green, 1990). As theories of nationalism have shown, industrial modernity required a culturally homogeneous population, and public education thus emerged as a central mechanism of state modernization and national cohesion (Gellner, 1983).

In France, the Third Republic (1870-1940) pursued a strategy of national homogenization with complete consistency. Drawing on the institutional legacy of educational reform, the school became the primary mechanism of linguistic and cultural unification, enforcing the dominance of the French language over local dialects. The educational program aimed to transform rural populations in the provinces into nationally conscious French citizens (Weber, 1976). Through the teaching of History and Geography, the school shaped a shared collective memory and a sense of belonging in which individual and local identities receded before the supreme value of the Homeland (Anderson, 1991).

In the newly founded German Reich, public education was organized with a clear political and ideological orientation, functioning as a fundamental pillar of state formation. Under the chancellorship of Bismarck and later Wilhelm II, the school system prioritized the cultivation of discipline and absolute loyalty to the imperial regime. The curriculum attempted to connect classical Greek education with German Romanticism, presenting the German spirit as the authentic successor of the ancient world. This connection gave a justification point of the superiority of the German nation in terms of culture (Lamberti, 1989). It was a process that was defined by Eric Hobsbawm as an invention of tradition since the state relied on historical narrative and the educational role to justify its power and guarantee social cohesion within the state (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983).

The complete instrumentalization of education was the feature of the interwar period. In Fascist Italy as well as in Nazi Germany, the school had been turned into a machine of political indoctrination and racial socialization and no longer served as a place of study. The curriculum was completely safeguarded to the state propaganda, and any form of skepticism and humanistic education was removed (Koon, 1985). Nevertheless, this ethnocentric inclination was not unique to totalitarian governments. Education, even in liberal democracies, was still national in nature and tended to replicate stereotypes which created mistrust of other peoples of Europe. This, as historical experience demonstrated, in the most tragic manner, when education is cut off its humanistic and universal values, it becomes a tool of hatred and division (Mazower, 1998).

INSTITUTIONAL RECONSTRUCTION AND THE CREATION OF A UNIFIED EUROPEAN EDUCATION AREA (1945-2025)

The radical change in the policy of European education ended with the war. The post-traumatic events of World War II provided the realization that the nationalist competition resulted in the dead end and required the new

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pedagogical focus on unity and reconciliation. Education ceased to be an ideological tool of the state and became a way of developing mutual understanding and unity between the people of the continent (Bitsch, 2004).

The establishment of the Council of Europe (1949) and the establishment of the European Communities provided the foundation on which education would be given a wider European identity. In this new institutional set up, education was no longer a national affair, but it was acknowledged as that element that was needed to democratically rebuild the continent. Meanwhile, the school also engaged in the task of emphasizing the common cultural identity of Europe, creatively connecting the great traditions of thought that formed it, humanism, rationalism, and adherence to the rule of law (Feyen & Krzaklewska, 2013).

The momentum of change in the educational history of Europe came in 1987 when the Erasmus program was initiated and introduced a new epoch of mass mobility of students and teachers (European Commission, 2014). This institution was not just a structure of academic interactions, but it became a significant mechanism of socialization for a generation of young citizens. The firsthand experience of living and studying in a foreign country reinforced the implications of otherness and encouraged multilingualism along with fostering a sense of familiarity with a certain culture in European space. The findings of the European Commission revealed that the involvement in such programs decreased the national stereotypes and played a decisive role in the creation of a common European consciousness (Reinalda, 2005).

The way to education unification became institutional with the Bologna Declaration of 1999 and the establishment of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The reform was to align the study programs and the degrees including the mechanisms of comparability and transparency like the ECTS system, degree cycles, and quality assurance regulations. The universities of Europe were turned into centers of a system of increased production of knowledge and innovation, restoring, under new circumstances, the universal mission of the medieval Studium Generale. Education was thereby made a sphere of institutional convergence and common cultural advancement where academic excellence is coupled with social cohesion (Corbett, 2005).

Today, the European Union's institutional vision is expressed in the "Education and Training 2030" framework, which focuses on cultivating shared European values, democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. Integrating these values into national curricula does not negate each country's national particularities and cultural characteristics but situates them within a broader European reference framework. The contemporary student is called to view their cultural heritage not as an opposition to others, but as a complement to European identity, shaping a multilayered and intercultural consciousness (European Parliament, 2021; Keating, 2014).

After a long historical cycle dominated by nationalist conceptions and state transformations, education has emerged as the most dynamic driver of European integration. From postwar reconstruction to the formation of today's unified knowledge area, the educational system has functioned as a true laboratory of democracy and cultural coexistence, confirming that education is the most stable foundation of the European project.

THE SYNTHESIS OF A UNIFIED EUROPEAN CHARACTER AND CULTURAL CONVERGENCE

The long historical trajectory of education and culture in Europe has led to the formation of a distinctive character that transcends narrow national boundaries. It is a cultural identity that imaginatively combines personal national traditions without the need to introduce uniformity and eliminate specifics. European unity today is manifested as peaceful coexistence of diversity, which finds its integrity in common intellectual sources: Greek reason, Roman law, Christian love. European identity is based on the consciousness of the common spiritual past that transcends the state and linguistic boundaries, as observed by Paul Valéry (Valéry, 1956).

Education is the key protector of European memory and intercultural discourse. By the study of the old literature, philosophy, and art, the young in Europe are introduced into a single intellectual world which starts with the Parthenon and Plato and continues through the Cathedral of Chartres, Dante, and Goethe (Habermas & Derrida, 2003). In his work, George Steiner stresses the fact that Europe is unlike other civilizations in the sense that it is overloaded with its history (Steiner, 2004). All streets, all squares, all cafes are named and remembered in

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such a way that the continent is a vast memory site, a site of memory, in the meaning of Pierre Nora (Nora, 1989). Within such a setting, education is given the responsibility of preserving dialogue between generations and passing on the humanistic tradition which identifies the human being as the main subject of history.

One of the basic characteristics of modern European culture is the ability to reflect and have critical self-awareness, which is developed during philosophical and civic education. Having learned a bitter lesson of totalitarianism and nationalist extremism, Europe made tolerance, pluralism, and respect of human rights the fundamental values of its identity (Habermas & Derrida, 2003). The role of education as a student of citizens is not drained by the law and school instruction. Instead, it is more profound, as it develops a moral position among the youths based on responsibility and active solidarity to the entirety. It seeks to form citizens capable of participating actively in democratic life and coexisting creatively in a multicultural society (Delors et al., 1996).

The political and economic unification of the continent gradually shaped a communal living space in which different cultures do not simply coexist but interact dynamically. In this environment, education assumes the critical role of preparing the citizen by providing not only linguistic resources, but above all the judgment and maturity required to live with difference. Contemporary European identity is not a fixed state but an ongoing development. Through its continuous trajectory, the foundational values of European culture, Greek philosophical inquiry, Roman law, and Christian altruism, acquire renewed relevance and give added content to modern democracy. In this way, 21st-century Europe builds unity without erasing its people's distinct traditions, transforming them into a source of richness and creativity (Gadamer, 1989).

CONCLUSIONS

The historical course of education in Europe reveals a continuous tension between unity and diversity, between the heritage of the past and major historical change, and between the autonomy of individual states and broader trends of convergence. From the medieval *Respublica Christiana* and *Respublica Litteraria* to the formation of nation-states in the 19th century, education functioned as the principal space in which collective identities and political values were built.

In the transition from the Middle Ages to the modern era, education gained ever greater importance for organizing social and political life. School was not simply a mirror of the social conditions prevailing in those days, but it was a moving machine which comprised the nation. The state also enforced a common language, developed a shared historical memory, and passed across moral standards that it believed were needed to mold citizens, through the processes of education. Through this, education played a decisive role in the building of a sense of "we" and separation of "we" and "the other" which reinforced national cohesion (Gellner, 1983).

The perception of cultural cohesion as a fundamental precondition to political power was concentrated in modern education. With the help of knowledge and schooling, modern-day states tried to transcend the historical, linguistic, and social distinctions, which defined their populations. The school therefore became the main arena where collective identity was developed, which could facilitate the operations of the state and its legitimacy.

Education in such countries as Prussia, France, and Italy, was structured on the principle of forming the citizen: an individual who perceives him as belonging to one political community, sharing a common language and a common historical referent, and sharing common values. Schooling did not just serve to impart knowledge, but had a wider pedagogical function, and helped to form attitudes, behaviors, and types of collective consciousness.

Education helped in the establishment of a common moral system through the curriculum, learning history and the regulations of school life. Students did not just learn what to know, but how to become a part of the social whole, how to make sense of their role in it, how to tolerate rules of collective organization, how to have common sense of social experience. By doing so, the school served as an important national unifying and political socializing tool.

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Having undergone the devastating effects of totalitarianism and extreme nationalist wars, post war Europe was in transition to a significant redefinition of the role of education. Education slowly stopped being perceived as a practice of discipline and imposition to the nation and started being viewed as a platform of conversation, reconciliation and developing democratic consciousness. The new historical context that developed called upon education to not only bring about the transfer of knowledge but also to produce citizens who would be able to reflect critically on the past as well as live in a pluralistic world.

The establishment of European institutions, from the Council of Europe and the preliminary stages of European economic cooperation, to the European Union and the Bologna Process was a new direction in supranational education. Education was linked once again to humanism that has traditionally defined the intellectual tradition of Europe and was also integrated into a common institutional and value system where diversity and collaboration between states was seen as significant (Morin, 1987).

Programs like the Erasmus program and the establishment of the European Higher Education Area put this new direction into practice. The concept of the European becoming was developed through student and faculty mobility, recognition of degrees across national borders as well as the enhancement of cross-border academic collaboration, which does not eradicate national identities but places them in a context of a wider culture. Through this, education helped in the development of a new form of patriotism, but this time, grounded not in exclusionary and confrontational practices, but on historical experience, exchange, and mutual understanding.

The modern European identity is not created in contrast to the national identity, nor does it aim at substituting the latter. Rather, it emerges as a reference level that redefines and supplements national identities by placing them in a more generalized historical and cultural context. The European experience does not negate different collective memories, on the contrary, it introduces them into a dialogue, revealing common historical paths, affinities of values and institutional convergent.

The 21st century citizens construct their identity at multiple levels of reference, local, national, and European, without contradicting each other, but activated under different social and political circumstances, which are multidimensional and flexible sense of belonging. This multilayered construction of the citizen is reinforced by the experience of mobility, intercultural contact, and involvement in supranational institutions, which increases identity to be open, dynamic, and reflective.

Education is an important aspect in this process as the mediating space between tradition and innovation, collective memory, and progressive change of values. In education, history is taught, school and university life are experienced, and thus it has a role in forming citizens who can recognize the historicity of their identities and who are able to adopt a critical view towards the present.

In this regard, Europe is not a unified and de facto cultural plan, but a continuous test in social democratization and cultural interiorization. One of the key spaces where this experiment receives content is education, which determines the circumstances of the coexistence of diversity and the pursuit of common values-based and institutional reference points (Nussbaum, 1997).

Education in the current European Union is not only a means of supranational collaboration, but a living witness to the continuity of European societies in history and institutions, proving their capacity to change without destroying their cultural and historical identity. Democratic education and the experience of the common culture today reform the cultural heritage of Greece, Rome, and Christianity in providing a model of interpreting European identity. European unification, in this regard, cannot be reduced to economic or institutional levels, since it is a process of long duration, an educational process, which will form judgment, reinforce self-knowledge, and maintain the continuity of values of the continent.

Europe is not merely a geographical place, therefore, but a historical and a spiritual becoming, in an unceasing dialogue with its past. In this discourse, education is the most indestructible and final institution, which through

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which societies of Europe learn to know themselves in “the other” and continue, together, the long historical path of the old continent.

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