

Clipping for the Commission

Creating Digital Educational Tools about the Global History of Religious Toleration

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ABSTRACT: This Report from the Field discusses the methodology of “clipping history” developed by the European Union-funded research initiative RETOPEA (Religious Toleration and Peace). This project, launched in 2018, uses the history of religious toleration to stimulate educational and policy-related reflection on contemporary religious coexistence. The article discusses the initial doubts about doing public history within conditions pre-set by the European Commission; the difficulties faced by the academically trained researchers in handling the educational and digital ambitions of the project; and the eventual strategies that the researchers followed to produce sufficiently contextualized “clippings,”—short pieces of historical information that European teenagers could use to reflect on the topic of religious coexistence.

KEY WORDS: history education, primary sources, religion, toleration, digital tools

In May 2018, the RETOPEA (Religious Toleration and Peace) project formally launched during a kick-off meeting at the Leibniz Institute of European History in Mainz, Germany. Funded by the European Commission through its Horizon 2020 program, the project members (nine academic institutions and two NGOs from eight different countries) gathered on the banks of Rhine to discuss their research. Following policymakers’ concerns about mounting religious tensions within the European Union (EU), especially among youngsters, the goal of RETOPEA was (and is) to “address the issue of religious diversity” in Europe by relying on “active learning from history.” The project organizers wanted to achieve this through the development of an educational package aimed at teenagers between twelve and eighteen years old. In both formal (schools) and informal (sport clubs, youth organizations, and similar organizations) learning contexts, the package would help this target audience to “think about living together with people with different religious and ideological backgrounds and beliefs . . . making them

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resilient against simplistic propaganda.”¹ In practical terms, RETOPEA wanted to offer European teenagers inspiration from the past in order to encourage them to film “docutubes” (short online movies) about their experiences with religious diversity. The RETOPEA members would conduct research on how historical religious-based conflicts had been settled and on the contemporary representation of religious cohabitation, transforming their research results into so-called “clippings” (small pieces of information) that would appear in an online exhibition and that the teenagers could use as a point of departure for their docutubes.²

At the kick-off meeting in Mainz I had a double task. As assistant to the coordinating Principal Investigator (PI), I aided in shaping the cooperation between the various RETOPEA stakeholders and helped to ensure that the “work packages” (the research steps that were promised to the Commission) remained properly aligned. This task primarily required assisting the team and the coordinator in developing a functional workflow; creating a digital environment that met both the needs of the researchers and the end users; and reporting correctly and frequently to the representatives of the European Commission.³ At the same time, as a postdoctoral researcher I was part of the group of historians that would dig into the past in order to create the mentioned clippings on religious coexistence and that would engage with ongoing scholarly discussions about public and applied history. As such, I had the opportunity to gain both a “top-down” and a “bottom-up” view of RETOPEA, implementing as a researcher the plans that earlier on I had helped the coordinating PI and the senior team members formulate.

Starting from my own double perspective, this report discusses the RETOPEA method of “clipping history,” by talking about the challenges, dilemmas, and opportunities I experienced while working for the project. Condensing historical information into bitesize pieces is something that is frequently done in the context of historical education and exposition design, but the way RETOPEA approached this process offers new insights as some constituent elements of the project prevented the researchers from handling the clippings as a traditional educational tool.⁴ Such elements included the requirement to make connections between

1 “Religious Toleration and Peace: fact sheet,” <https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/770309>. The project members are the KU Leuven, the University of Helsinki, the Ss. Cyril and Methodius University (UKIM), the University of Granada, the Open University in London, the Leibniz Institute of European History, the University of Warsaw, the University of Tartu, the Macedonian Centre for Intercultural Cooperation (MCIC), the Spanish Euro-Arab Foundation and the Belgian Le Foyer vzw.

2 RETOPEA is ongoing and has already made around four hundred clippings available on its project website, www.retopea.eu.

3 On this topic see Andrew Hurley, “Chasing the Frontiers of Digital Technology,” *The Public Historian* 38, no. 1 (February 2016): 69–88. For a more general (albeit older) overview, see Frédéric Clavert and Serge Noiret, eds., *L’histoire contemporaine à l’ère numérique/Contemporary History in the Digital Age* (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2013).

4 Karel Van Nieuwenhuyse, Hanne Roose, Fien Depaep, Lieven Verschaffel, and Kaat Wils, “Reasoning with and/or about Sources? The Use of Primary Sources in Flemish Secondary School History Education,” *Historical Encounters* 4, no. 2 (2017): 48–70; Karel Van Nieuwenhuyse,

widely varying historical events and periods (ranging from India in the 3rd century BCE to Europe in 2009); the digital environment in which the clippings would be featured; and the fact that the educational package would be presented to a European instead of a national audience. The influence of these elements is explored in this article, which focuses on how the organization of the project demanded that the team members develop their own clipping strategy. In doing so, the Report from the Field also describes some of the preconditions that historians have to accept when working on behalf of the European Commission, as well as some of the intellectual challenges that can arise from such applied history research.

RETOPEA's Origins

RETOPEA is funded under the Horizon 2020 framework program for research and innovation of the European Commission (EC). Running from 2014 to 2020, this program entailed a significant budget increase compared to preceding EU research stimuli and contained an increased focus on the social sciences and humanities.⁵ A large part of the Horizon 2020 budget was allocated via open calls that identified specific societal issues that the European Commission hoped applicants would examine.⁶ In contrast to researcher-driven grant systems, whereby scholars can pose their own research questions and set their own targets, this call-based model allowed the European Commission to determine in quite some detail the types of research it would fund.⁷ Academics who wished to obtain Horizon 2020 funding could decide how they would organize their research, but not what they would be studying nor with what aim they would do so.

Within this framework the RETOPEA research consortium responded to a call titled “Understanding Europe—Promoting the European Public and Cultural Space,” and then more specifically to a topic labelled “Religious diversity in Europe—past, present and future.”⁸ The EC hoped that addressing this issue would allow Europeans to “understand better the new landscape of religions, secularism and spirituality in Europe,” while also analyzing “both the roots of radicalization

“Reasoning with and/or about Sources on the Cold War? The Use of Primary Sources in English and French History Textbooks for Upper Secondary Education,” *International Journal for History and Social Sciences Education* 1, no. 1 (2016): 19–51.

5 Krzysztof Kania, Catherine Lemaire, and Lena Swinnen, *Integration of Social Sciences and Humanities in Horizon 2020: Participants, Budget and Disciplines: 4th Monitoring Report on SSH Flagged Projects Funded in 2017 under the Societal Challenges and Industrial Leadership Priorities* (Luxembourg: EU Publications Office, 2019).

6 See Morgane Le Boulay, “EU Research Policy as a Transnational Memory Policy Instrument? The Framework Programmes and the Production of Competing Visions of Europe,” *Memory Studies*, online publication (February 15, 2021): 2.

7 Angela Schindler-Daniels, “Shaping the Horizon: Social Sciences and Humanities in the EU Framework Programme ‘Horizon 2020’/“Den Horizont gestalten: Sozial- und Geisteswissenschaften im EU-Rahmenprogramm ‘Horizont 2020,’” *Zeitschrift für Erziehungswissenschaft* 17, no. 6 (2014): 183–84, 188.

8 “Religious Diversity in Europe—Past, Present and Future,” https://cordis.europa.eu/programme/id/H2020_CULT-COOP-05-2017.

and religious intolerance and peaceful coexistence and dialogue in Europe, in order to support the values and practices of peaceful co-existence and rationality.” The Commission also determined that the research should be broad in historical and geographical perspective; should be multidisciplinary; should pay attention to the present and the future; should deal with the social and gender aspects of religious coexistence; should take a comparative perspective on the historical roots of religious tolerance and intolerance; and should include attention to the experiences of the countries that joined the EU after the fall of the Iron Curtain. In terms of impact, the EC expected that the research would “enable European citizens to better grasp the conditions needed for religious and non-religious coexistence in Europe,” something that the grantees needed to achieve via innovative educational tools and via concrete policy recommendations. Finally, the Commission also clarified the wider context in which the research was supposedly situated, stating that “religious beliefs and affiliation to religious groups and communities were historically the cornerstones of the functioning of societal relations in Europe,” adding that there existed a “rich tradition of the coexistence of diverse religions” and a “strong commitment to the freedom of religion” in Europe.⁹

Given these requirements RETOPEA can rightfully be considered part of the applied history projects that emerged in the latter half of the 2010s.¹⁰ What sets this group of initiatives apart from the broader field of public history is their open endorsement of the term applied history, which until recently was considered an outdated synonym for public history, and, more importantly, their emphasis on specific questions or problems.¹¹ The set-up of RETOPEA is indeed based on an understanding between the EC and the research consortium that the project should help to address a concrete issue in the present, namely the perceived lack of popular understanding of religious tolerance and the consequences of this deficit for religious tensions, extremism, and radicalization. The EC expected the historians involved to apply their specific expertise to a contemporary situation that the Commission had itself defined as problematic, asking the academic community to contribute to the desired improvement of this situation. Consequently, RETOPEA identified itself as “a specific form of applied history,” mixing several problem-oriented methodologies in the combined contexts of education and policymaking.¹²

9 In a recent book volume presenting other aspects of RETOPEA, Patrick Pasture and Christophe Schellekens argued that this notion of European religious tolerance and coexistence is often highly overstated. Patrick Pasture and Christophe Schellekens, “Religious Diversity in Europe: The Challenges of Past and Present,” in *Religious Diversity in Europe: Mediating the Past to the Young*, ed. Riho Altnurme, Elena Arigata, and Patrick Pasture (London: Bloomsbury, 2022), 34–71.

10 See Jacqueline Niesser and Juliane Tomann, “Public and Applied History in Germany: Just Another Brick in the Wall of the Academic Ivory Tower?” *The Public Historian* 40, no. 2 (May 2018): 11–27, as well as the rest of the roundtable on applied history in this volume; Bram De Ridder, “And What Do You Do, Exactly? Comparing Contemporary Definitions and Practices of Applied History,” *International Public History* 5, no. 1 (June 2022).

11 Thomas Cauvin, *Public History: A Textbook of Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 13.

12 Le Boulay, “EU Research Policy”: 2–3, 11; “Periodic Reporting for period 2—RETOPEA (Religious Toleration and Peace),” CORDIS, <https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/770309/reporting>.

This background exposed the RETOPEA researchers to criticism from some of their colleagues, despite longstanding efforts to make public and applied history more visible within universities worldwide.¹³ At conferences, some scholars implied that the RETOPEA members wasted their talents by not doing “proper” academic history, with most of these comments being more commiserative than critical. For example, at one conference a well-meaning scholar lamented that funding bodies now “forced such excellent academics to do research for teenagers”; at another a senior academic declared that historians “should not force themselves to be relevant,” adding that the current public debate is “too debased anyways” for academics to participate in.¹⁴ Other commentators expressed concern regarding the origins of the project. They mentioned that the problem-oriented language of the EC could be used to misconstrue RETOPEA as counterterrorism project, which in the context of 2017–18 could suggest a positive or negative research bias towards Islam. Likewise, the framing of the call by the EC was sometimes used to suggest that RETOPEA would “solve” the problem identified by European policymakers, whereas (applied) historians are usually more comfortable with “helping address” an issue. Finally, some academics feared that project participants would fit their research to a pre-determined political narrative, thereby becoming a promotional venture for the European Union’s supranational ambitions.¹⁵

It is therefore critical to stress that the primary place where these concerns were discussed and addressed was within the RETOPEA consortium itself. At all stages of the project and involving all stakeholders, including representatives from the European Commission and independent reviewers, RETOPEA carefully weighed its own position vis-à-vis the initial call and considered the risks that could emerge from participating in call-based research. This is certainly not to say that the initial views of the Commission exerted no influence at all or that no dissenting opinions remained, but to note that the researchers were highly aware of the potential influence of presentist interests, openly discussed them, and actively worked towards a research process that prevented, as much as possible, distortions in and of their work.¹⁶ Additionally, the fact that the EC determined the preconditions for the project did not mean that it involved itself with the actual research process.¹⁷

¹³ Thomas Cauvin, “The Rise of Public History: An International Perspective,” *Historia Crítica* 68 (April 2018): 3–26.

¹⁴ 22nd Belgian & Dutch Colloquium of History of Law, Liège, June 14–15, 2019; XXVth Annual Forum of Young Legal Historians: Identity, Citizenship and Legal History, Brussels, June 5–8, 2019 (author’s own notes).

¹⁵ See Stanley M. Hordes, “Does He Who Pays the Piper Call the Tune? Historians, Ethics, and the Community,” *The Public Historian* 8, no. 1 (Winter 1986): 53–54; Le Boulay, “EU research policy,” 12, 16.

¹⁶ See here David Hackett Fischer, *Historians’ Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 135–40.

¹⁷ Albert L. Hurtado, “Historians and Their Employers: A Perspective on Professional Ethics,” *The Public Historian* 8, no. 1 (Winter 1986): 46–51.

Although EC representatives monitored the progress of the project quite closely in terms of timing and “deliverables” (formal proof of progress towards the anticipated goals), they kept themselves entirely out of the general research approach and never commented on the individual choices made by the team members. On the contrary, from the beginning the EC representatives openly encouraged the researchers to avoid pleasing policymakers, including at the EU level, and actively organized an independent peer review.¹⁸

Moving from Call to Clippings

Following the kick-off in Mainz the RETOPEA members quickly set about making their history-informed educational package. The project followed a relatively straightforward research process whereby a multidisciplinary team of academics first conducted research on the history of the resolution of religious conflict and on the representation of religious coexistence today. Although the historians, sociologists, anthropologists, and other scholars involved in RETOPEA often conducted their research in fairly monodisciplinary contexts, the historical and the contemporary research lines reinforced each other by combining the history of ideas (i.e. the history of “tolerance”) with a view of present issues that relied on such ideas. On the part of the historians this meant using a method labelled “transtemporal historical contextualism,” drawing inspiration from the writings of David Armitage.¹⁹

Following their initial academic research, the members involved with the first work packages were expected to produce the aforementioned clippings, which would thereafter be reviewed by the entire multidisciplinary team. The members of a subsequent work package would then use the approved clippings to stimulate teenagers to create their own “docutubes.” This planning order placed a lot of the initial weight of the project on the shoulders of the researchers drafting the clippings, who had to analyze twenty-one instances of historical “treaties” or “settlements” involving religious toleration.²⁰ These cases had been selected during the initial response to the EC call by assessing a combination of their “foundational value” and their geographical and religious coverage. A primary consideration in this regard was to maintain a focus on Europe but complement it with selected global cases offering a different perspective.²¹

18 On the need for critical public history, see John Tosh, *Why History Matters* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 22–24; Ludmilla Jordanova, *History in Practice*, 2nd ed. (London: Hodder Arnold, 2006), 149.

19 David Armitage, “What’s the Big Idea? Intellectual History and the *longue durée*,” *History of European Ideas* 38, no. 4 (2012): 493–507.

20 For this section I rely primarily on my own notes about the project, on the internal progress reports written for the EC, and on conversations with the key researchers involved, who also reviewed the first draft of this article.

21 Le Boulay, “EU Research Policy,” 8. The idea to start with such key texts also relates to the tendency in (Flemish) education to teach teenagers by letting them work with historical sources directly: See Van Nieuwenhuyse et al., “Reasoning,” 48–70. Part of this European focus in EU

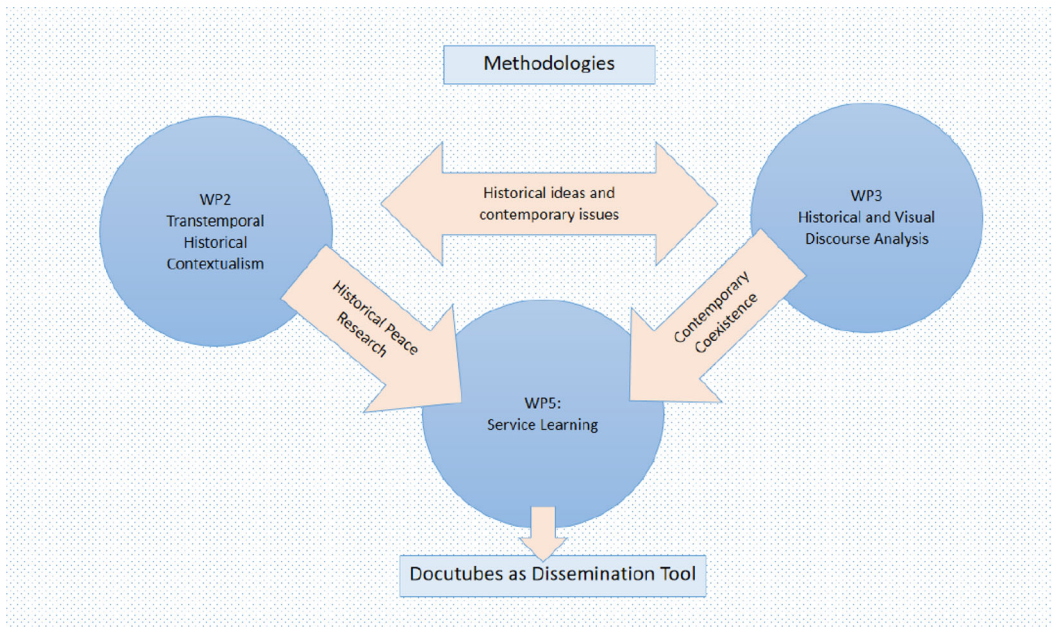


Figure 1. A visual summary of the RETOPEA research plan submitted to the EC

At the Mainz kick-off meeting these twenty-one settlements were divided among five researchers, all of whom had their primary background in academia.²² Given the extreme temporal, geographical, and contextual distance between the selected settlements, this necessarily resulted in the assignment of several cases to nonspecialists. For example, as a historian of conflict settlement in the early modern Low Countries I was assigned the Ashoka Edicts (3rd century BCE, Indian Subcontinent, involving mainly Buddhism and Hinduism); the Constitution of Medina (Arabian Peninsula, 7th century, mainly Islam and Judaism); the Pact of Umar (Arabian Peninsula, 7th century, mainly Islam, Christianity and Judaism); Akbar’s Legislation (16th century, Indian Subcontinent, mainly Islam and Buddhism); the First Amendment to the US Constitution (18th century, North America, mainly Christianity); and the Congress of Vienna (19th century, Europe, mainly Christianity and Judaism).

Another immediate issue facing the researchers was the strict time limit for the first phase of the project, set at around twelve months. This deadline significantly increased the speed with which the historical cases needed to be studied, internalized, and turned into clippings. The RETOPEA timeframe allowed researchers less

projects is possibly also related to the political discomfort regarding colonialism; see Aline Sierp, “EU Memory Politics and Europe’s Forgotten Colonial Past,” *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 22, no. 6 (2020): 686–702; Patrick Pasture, “The EC/EU between the Art of Forgetting and the Palimpsest of Empire,” *European Review* 26, no. 3 (2018): 545–81.

²² They were Professor John Wolfe, Dr. Henning Jürgens, Dr. Christophe Schellekens, Drs. Naum Trajanovski, and myself.

The Ashoka Edicts (3 ^e century BCE)	The Religionsvrede in the Low Countries (1578)	Vienna Congress (1815)
The Constitution of Medina (622)	The Edict of Nantes (1598)	Paris Peace Treaties (1919-1920)
The Pact of Umar (640's)	The Peace of Westphalia (1648)	League of Nations Minority Protection (1919)
The Peace of Augsburg (1555)	The Charter of Rhode Island (1663)	The European Convention on Human Rights (1950)
Akbar's legislation (ca.1560's)	The First Amendment (1789)	The Belfast agreement (1998)
The Edict of Saint-Germain (1562)	Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (1789)	The Ohrid Framework (2001)
The Warsaw Confederation (1573)	The Sultan's Decree (1870)	EU Charter of Fundamental Rights (2009)

Figure 2. The twenty-one historical settlements of RETOPEA as presented to the European Commission

than two months for each assigned case, a window that everyone expected to be strictly kept because a backlog in the production of the clippings would snowball into delays for the subsequent steps of the project. Moreover, any delays needed to be reported and explained to the representatives of the EC, whose approval was needed for the extension of deadlines. When problems emerged the EC certainly accepted workarounds, but not delivering on what was promised in the grant agreement was to be avoided at all costs, putting a lot of time-related pressure on all team members.

The historians involved in RETOPEA therefore quickly realized that there was no option to study their cases at the in-depth level that most of their academic colleagues would prefer. The strict timing allowed only for a basic study of the source documents involved (i.e. the actual settlement documents) and a glancing read of the related historiography. Although in certain cases contact with academics with more direct expertise offered an alternative path to information, the required deadline could only be met by staying close to the existing academic consensus (or debate) on a particular case and by immediately reducing the complexity of the historical events. This was an uncomfortable position for most team members and resulted in several changes to the clippings later in the project. Reviewing the clippings could result in a sometimes long-winded back and forth between junior- and senior-RETOPEA researchers and external reviewers, with some previously approved clippings being removed or altered after their first online publication.

The fact that several choices could only be made along the way further steepened the team's learning curve. In the first months of the project different strategies for designing the clippings were considered, but these could only be tested by

preparing some early draft versions, again increasing the speed with which the relevant historiography needed to be processed. While working on these draft clippings, the issue the historians (unsurprisingly) found most difficult proved to be contextualization, as the settlements required careful handling to be presented in a historically adequate manner. At the same time the actual space for presenting contextual background turned out to be much more restricted than anticipated. Upon the appearance of the first test-clippings, the educational specialists involved in the project made several suggestions, stressing that the researchers should strike a better balance between visual and textual content; that any text included should be limited to around 150 words; that the level of writing should be appropriate for the target audience (which implied striking another balance between writing for twelve-year-olds and for eighteen-year-olds, as learning capacities vary widely at these ages); and that the clippings should be understandable for adolescents in the context of their own language and educational curricula.

These educational requirements, largely resulting from the fact that the clippings needed to be useful for producing digital docutubes, further demanded a significant decontextualization of the historical cases, something which initially pushed the historians far beyond their level of comfort. For example, the researchers emphasized that many historical images are not intelligible without textual explanation. The first images selected indeed turned out to be incomprehensible without significant amounts of background information, with some pictures potentially leading to controversy as they were, historically speaking, part of religious and political propaganda. Similarly, the first textual clippings contained on average double the amount of words allowed, with reading tests revealing that they were, again on average, written at the level of Ivy League undergraduates. It moreover proved problematic to include direct excerpts from the sources, mainly because their historical (and often legalistic) jargon could not be simplified without significant distortions. Those parts of the source documents that could be turned into individual clippings moreover suffered from the fact that, when read in isolation, they threatened to overshadow the complexities and (im)balances contained in the overall settlement. Luckily, the challenges created by the translational requirements and the place of the clippings within the national curricula were less pronounced, as an efficient system for translation was put in place and the partnerships with the national education systems would be effectively handled during a later stage of the project.

The team agreed on a triple strategy to address the main issue of contextualization. First, the researchers decided to write a “contextual clipping” for each case. This would be a clipping in its own right that would contain a brief explanation of the core elements of a particular historical settlement. That same contextual information would then appear at the bottom of each clipping related to the settlement, thereby repeating the wider historical background. A second strategy was to use the clippings as context for each other: the researchers were asked to ensure that the clippings related to a particular settlement offered enough contrasting viewpoints,

Religion on the job

In 1962, the US Supreme Court sided with Adell Sherbert, a Protestant who had started legal proceedings after being fired by her employer. The reason for her dismissal was that she had refused a new schedule that forced her to come to her work on the Holy Day of Sabbath (every Saturday). She tried to find a new job, but none of the companies she contacted could guarantee her a working schedule that avoided working on Saturday. Therefore, she instead wanted to receive unemployment benefits from the government of South Carolina. The government refused this request, arguing that she had avoided work offered to her. After other courts agreed with South Carolina, Adell eventually found the support of the Supreme Court. The Court in the United States ruled that the government had forced Adell to choose between her religion and her income, going so far as to state that it was almost as if South Carolina had fined Adell for observing her religion.

Context:

The First Amendment to the US Constitution promises freedom of religion and freedom of speech to American citizens. Although it contains only 45 words, it was part of a much larger document, called the Bill of Rights. This document was mainly drafted by James Madison, a famous 'founding father' of the United States. The Bill of Rights was needed because some politicians, who were called Anti-Federalists, believed that the Constitution did not do enough to protect the rights of individual people. The United States Congress approved the Bill on 25 September 1789. It was ratified two years later, and the Congress turned parts of the Bill into amendments. This means that the new rules of the Bill of Rights were not a part of the Constitution itself, but were added as separate regulations to it. Since its creation the First Amendment has been used in several legal cases to defend religious freedom. Although not all judges and courts have the same interpretation of what religious freedom means, it has served to protect the religious beliefs and actions of countless people who felt persecuted or discriminated against. It has even been used to defend atheists. Many lawyers have therefore debated what a religion exactly is, precisely because it offers a person such broad protection. For example, does a religion need a god or is it sufficient to belief in something else? Or is a religion something you do together or something that you can have on your own?

Title	^
Religion on the job	
Description	^
This clipping contains information on a Supreme Court case about religion and work.	
Questions	^
When you have a job, should your employer take measures if your religion requires something special? If your employer does not want to help you observe religious practices, should the government intervene?	
Temporal Coverage	v
Spatial Coverage	v
Relation	v
Subject	v
Is Referenced By	v
Source	v
Bibliographic Citation	v
Audience	v
Creator	v
Collections	v

Figure 3. A draft clipping as it appeared on the RETOPEA website. Top left the actual clipping; bottom left the copy of the contextual clipping; and right the representation of the metadata and the educational questions.

thus bringing into view multiple perspectives via multiple clippings. The intention was that by seeing all of the clippings related to a historical settlement a viewer would grasp at least part of the complexity of that case, as one clipping would be contrasted by the next. The impact of this strategy was somewhat limited by the fact that there would be only around ten clippings per historical case (an amount set to prevent informational overload for the teenagers), significantly reducing the options for revealing contrasts via clipping-linking. In response, the educational experts proposed a third strategy, which was to place one or two educational questions alongside the individual clippings. This way the teenagers would not be required to interpret the clipping entirely by themselves, but they could use the questions of the researcher to approach that information from a particular angle.

Another important decision was to associate each clipping with one of twelve key topics. This association was a requirement on the technical end of the project, as without such categories the clippings would be randomly entered into the exhibition software and thus appear in a chaotic manner on the website. Although

Gender and Sexuality	Migration, trade and travel	Propaganda, stereotyping and communication
Discrimination and being different	Ideas about toleration	Peace and conflict resolution
Memory and Heritage	Law, police and public order	Places and buildings
Religious practice	Clothing and dress	Family life

Figure 4. The twelve RETOPEA categories for clippings

the team initially wanted to present the clippings under the labels of the twenty-one cases, this strategy was deemed too unappealing for the target audience—a category named “Ohrid Framework,” for example, would have meant little to nothing to most teenagers in Europe. Therefore, the researchers had to connect each of their clippings to one of the above twelve labels, concluded upon after a complex multidisciplinary discussion within the overall team.

This requirement initially seemed to have the benefit of offering more options for contextualization, as the inclusion of a clipping in a particular category again suggested a particular reading. Moreover, it allowed the researchers to contrast their information with clippings from other settlements falling under the same category, a cross-temporal comparison that could be used to further stimulate critical reflection on the part of the teenagers. But although this cross-referencing within categories effectively increased the contextuality of the overall set of clippings, the disadvantage was that it demanded the essentialization of the individual bits of historical information: each clipping had to be located within one of twelve categories, irrespective of the specific historical context of the settlement and the potential complexity it contained. To mitigate this situation, the researchers were allowed to associate the clipping with two additional subcategories, but these would not appear prominently in the virtual exhibit. This meant that the clippings were often pre-selected to fit within one of the twelve categories, or that they were given a label that revealed only part of their content. The creation of the twelve categories thus helped the team members to better structure their clippings, but at the cost of pushing the historical material into a preselected mold.

Six Core Principles

If these circumstances have so far been described in a critical fashion, that is because the sections above aimed to capture the culture shock that the academic historians of RETOPEA initially experienced. Most of them had positions at a postdoctoral level or higher, meaning that their core business had been the writing of research articles, academic books, and, perhaps, teaching material for

university undergraduates. If the strategies mentioned come across as harsh restrictions and the required reduction in historical complexity as a real problem, that is because the historians involved in RETOPEA also saw them in this light during their first few months. The sense of shock, however, was soon enough replaced by a sense of academic challenge, as it turned out that the RETOPEA framework demanded a lot of intellectual creativity, first and foremost through the application of rigorous selection and design criteria while working on the clippings. This challenge proved to be a highly stimulating one, as the shift from an audience of academics to an audience of teenagers necessitated a well thought through adaptation of the academic historian's usual techniques.

In my own case, this meant thinking a lot about the balance between complexity and clarity, which is of course a core issue for most applied history. In the case of RETOPEA the need for complexity not only existed because the team wanted to do right by the historical context, but also because we had been tasked with helping the teenagers to think critically about the preconditions for religious coexistence and about how tolerance is shaped through asymmetrical power relations.²³ Moreover, if complexity was reduced too far, the team risked upsetting one or more faiths or nationalities, as people might have felt stereotyped by the abbreviation of their history. Still, clarity was needed to attract the teenagers' attention and to make sure that they would understand what the clippings were saying, a requirement complicated by RETOPEA's European scale. Given the widely varying national, cultural, religious, and educational backgrounds of the target audience, we could not assume a fixed frame of historical reference in which to place our clippings, nor a shared collective memory that we could build on.²⁴

To address these concerns, I established six principles for designing my clippings. These were in part discussed with the team during another meeting in Mainz but otherwise remained an individually developed and applied strategy. First, I would select clippings on the basis of a central narrative that would tie the information on a particular settlement together. That core narrative would be based on one key academic description of that settlement and therefore be true to the

23 Here, Eric Hobsbawm's 1993 lecture at the Central European University formed an inspiration, as it was cited as the opening statement to the RETOPEA project proposal: "I used to think that the profession of history, unlike that of, say, nuclear physics, could at least do no harm. Now I know it can. Our studies can turn into bomb factories like the workshops in which the IRA has learned to transform chemical fertilizer into an explosive. This state of affairs affects us in two ways. We have a responsibility to historical facts in general, and for criticizing the politico-ideological abuse of history in particular." Eric Hobsbawm, "The New Threat of History," *New York Review of Books* 40, no. 21 (December 16, 1993): 62–64. See also Jonathan Gorman, "Historians and their Duties: Historians and Ethics," *History and Theory* 43, no. 4 (2004): 103–17.

24 This is especially so given the bond between national identity construction and history education, although in certain cases such as Flanders an overarching European frame has begun to emerge. See Karel Van Nieuwenhuysse and Bernd Stieners, "The National Past According to Flemish Secondary School History Teachers: Representations of Belgian History in the Context of a Nation State in Decline," *International Journal of Research on History Didactics, History Education, and Historical Culture* 4, no. 1 (2018): 114–15.

historiographical consensus (or debate) about that historical period and event, yet it would forego other angles that I deemed to be less relevant for the target audience. The benefit of this strategy was that the narratives selected would immediately highlight the differences between the six historical settlements: the key narrative of, for example, the Ashoka edicts would not be similar to that of the Pact of Umar, conveying the message that there is not just one historical definition of religious tolerance nor one model of religious coexistence existing across time and space.

If the application of one core angle per settlement offered the required clarity, the individual clippings then needed to make that narrative as rich and complex as possible within the allowed space of 10x150 words. The strategy was thus to select a dominant narrative for each settlement in step one and then to scrutinize those narratives through the individual clippings in step two, offering the teenagers both a central guideline and suggesting potential gaps within it to explore. Although the overall narrative needed to be present (but not necessarily visible) in all ten clippings, I wanted to ensure that it could be critically questioned through the information offered in each separate clipping. Importantly, this critical conversation between overall narrative and individual clippings also included the positions of historians themselves: following the suggestion of the educational experts, the team members had jointly decided to be quite open about the process that formed the basis for the clippings, allowing the teenagers to question the motives and methods of the historians involved.²⁵

A third principle I used when clipping history was to make maximum use of the combination of the information in the clipping itself, in the contextual clipping, and in the educational questions. By allowing for a lot of interplay between these three elements I could further enhance my capacity to simultaneously construct and deconstruct my own narrative. So whereas some of my clippings appeared to include quite one-sided statements regarding the historical events they describe, the related contextual clipping and/or the educational questions next to them then offered another view of those statements. Through this approach I could further teach the youngsters to not take information at face value and actively help them search for other perspectives, in line with the stated objectives of the project.

Although the initial call of the European Commission might have suggested otherwise, I also decided along with the rest of the team to not compromise on the strong historical and historiographical connection between religious tolerance and religious conflict. Given the fact that several if not most of the twenty-one cases had their origins in violent conflict (hence their identification as “peace settlements”), the team members carefully considered how to explain this relationship, especially because teenagers are generally aware of these confrontational elements.²⁶ There was a chance that by clipping the history of religious tolerance

25 Hilda Kean, “People, Historians, and Public History: Demystifying the Process of History Making,” *The Public Historian* 32, no. 3 (August 2010): 25–28.

26 Maria Grever and Karel Van Nieuwenhuyse, “Popular Uses of Violent Pasts and Historical Thinking,” *Journal for the Study of Education and Development* 43, no. 3 (2020): 483–502.

the project would also end up clipping the history of religious intolerance, creating the risk of opening up traumatic historical wounds.²⁷ This potential risk was not a problem for the representatives of the EC (although it did worry some of the EC-appointed academic reviewers), but the tension between peace and violence was noticeable when at conferences some academic commentators suggested leaving aside some of the potentially hurtful aspects of the history we described.²⁸ The team however judged that such painful elements could not be excluded without a significant distortion of the historical context, and that it would be better to include them as a tool for stimulating critical thought rather than presenting the teenagers with a utopian version of religious coexistence in the past.²⁹

A fifth consideration was the “interest value” of the clippings for the target audience. Again following the advice of the educational experts, the team decided to focus on historical material that would stay as close as possible to the contemporary experiences of European teenagers. This simple ambition was of course complicated by the fact that those experiences vary widely across the continent and that what makes a clipping interesting to one youngster might make it boring or even repulsive to another, but on the whole an attempt was made to connect with the thinking of twelve- to sixteen-year-olds (which for the average team member meant trying to relate with someone less than half their age). In line with the applied nature of the project, I here added for myself the criterion that where possible the clippings should have some (implicit) connection to a wider present reality, which meant not only considering the experiences of the teenagers at an individual level, but also at the collective. That is, in line with the applied purposes of the EC call, I considered it important to select clippings with historical content relevant to debates in the present and not merely those relevant to debates in the past.

Lastly there remained the issue of potential conflict between the clippings and the self-representation of particular faiths and/or nationalities. The EC call loftily spoke of “the values and practices of peaceful co-existence and rationality” in Europe, but this ignored (at minimum) the fact that religious beliefs are a highly emotional matter, and that some viewpoints can be perceived as personally or collectively hurtful, especially if there is a prior history of conflict. As stated above, both during nonacademic and academic presentations of RETOPEA (but again not at meetings with the EC representatives) the team members were sometimes

²⁷ See in this regard Jörn Rüsen, “The Wounds of History: About the Historical Dealing with Traumatic Experiences,” in *Social Trauma—An Interdisciplinary Textbook*, ed. Andreas Hamburger, Camellia Hancheva, and Vamik D. Volkan (Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2020), 43–51.

²⁸ *Toleration and Religious Freedom in the Early Modern and Contemporary World*, Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities, University of Cambridge, March 26–27, 2019 (author’s own notes).

²⁹ A similar choice was made by the project partner IEG Mainz in this digital mapping project: en.ieg-differences.eu.

accused of providing a “wrong” version of history or of (un)consciously selecting material that framed one or more groups in a particular light.³⁰

The only fair way to deal with this situation, I felt, was to apply something which I eventually came to label the GEM-standard, which stands for “Gets Everybody Mad.”³¹ The idea was that, when considered as whole, every faith and every nationality mentioned in my clippings should be able to find at least one reason to be upset: all of them would be treated as equals in the sense that some clippings would, respectfully, push against their preferred self-representation. The goal was of course not to purposely offend people, but to clearly illustrate that history is never a fairytale in which one’s in-group is a perfect society or where an out-group can be turned into a clear villain; history offers many possible interpretations, thus so should clippings about the past. Although certainly not perfect, the GEM-standard indeed helped me to avoid the overall involuntary discriminatory treatment of certain groups, while it also allowed me to fall in line with the original ambitions of the EC and with the self-assigned role of historians as societal critics. Admittedly, in a limited number of clippings the application of the GEM-standard led me to push too hard against certain sensitivities or distorted some historical elements too much, leading to the eventual correction or withdrawal of these clippings by other team members.

Some Choices Made Explicit

To make all of the above less abstract, the final part of this Report from the Field will discuss my handling of three settlements—the Congress of Vienna, the Constitution of Medina, and the Ashoka edicts. For the sake of brevity, I will not go into every detail of the clipping process, but I will focus on the implementation of the mentioned key principles. I will also mention concrete examples of clippings to illustrate my choices, but as all clippings were designed for a dynamic digital environment and not for a static journal article, some aspects cannot be fully represented.

Although most of the work on the six cases was done simultaneously, the first settlement I really focused on was the Congress of Vienna, as I figured that this case would be the easiest to process given my background in studying early modern European diplomacy. This meeting was an attempt to reestablish some form of traditional order in Europe in the wake of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars. As such, the royals and diplomats gathered in Vienna also confronted

³⁰ This particularly happened in regard to the cases relating to Islam, given contemporary debates that ill reflect historical complexities. An example of where some members of the audience deemed the clippings regarding Islam too positive was the Antwerp Book fair of 2018, while the inverse observation was made by an EC academic reviewer in 2021. On those historical complexities in the context of RETOPEA, see Pasture and Schellekens, “Religious Diversity in Europe,” 38–39, 42.

³¹ Here again Eric Hobsbawm comes to mind: “We must resist the formation of national, ethnic, and other myths, as they are being formed. It will not make us popular.” Hobsbawm, “The New Threat,” 64.

the topic of religious rights for minorities, sorting out the patchwork of Ancien Régime arrangements that had been thoroughly upset by revolutionary ideas. An additional element supporting my choice to tackle this topic first was the extensive historiography on the Congress, which allowed me to spend most of my time processing academic literature rather than searching for it. The main narrative that I selected for this settlement was based on the social interactions between the officials attending the Congress, following a historiographical line that describes the event as a social as much as a political meeting.³² Working with this angle offered the advantage that I could include elements that would (hopefully) connect with teenagers today: rather than duly explaining the diplomatic content of the Congress, by focusing on the diplomats and their entourage I could present people of flesh and blood. One clipping for example included the famous image *The Congress Dances*, showing the Orthodox Tsar Alexander, the Catholic Austrian Emperor, and the Protestant Prussian King dancing together in a rather unflattering manner.³³ Another clipping described the Protestant English diplomat Castlereagh trading religious jokes with the Catholic Cardinal Consalvi, mimicking the (sometimes hurtful) jokes that can be heard on school playgrounds.³⁴

The focus on social interactions also allowed me to avoid the trap of presenting a “big men” account of the negotiations, and to bring in gender aspects via the contemporary salon culture in which women of different faiths played an active role. An example of this process was the group of women who organized religious excursions for their friends of other faiths and thereby offered commentaries on other religions. Conforming to the GEM-standard, I stressed that such learning experiences could sometimes be quite painful: one clipping cited a Protestant woman describing a Catholic convent as a prison, and I mentioned that religious coexistence could also lead to conversions—still a sore issue in many interreligious exchanges.³⁵ Another clipping stressed the contrast between Caroline von Humboldt, who loved to visit the salons organized by Jewish hosts but firmly believed in their overall inferiority, and her husband Wilhelm, who despised being in the presence of Jews but championed their emancipation during the actual negotiations.³⁶

After this first experience, drafting the clippings for the Constitution of Medina proved to be much more challenging. Despite its name, this settlement is not a constitution but a series of agreements between the different tribes of Medina,

32 Brian E. Vick, *The Congress of Vienna: Power and Politics After Napoleon* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014).

33 “Religions Dancing,” Retopea.eu, <http://www.retopea.eu/s/en/item/2587>; Forceval, *Le Congrès, 1815* (hand-coloured paper etching), The British Museum, London, https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=705784&partId=1&people=101906&peoA=101906-1-9&page=1.

34 “Welcome to the Salon,” Retopea.eu, <http://www.retopea.eu/s/en/item/2590>; Vick, *The Congress*, 133.

35 “Converting your Friends,” Retopea.eu, <http://www.retopea.eu/s/en/item/2593>.

36 “Fanny Hosts the Salon,” Retopea.eu, <http://www.retopea.eu/s/en/item/2599>.

then known as Yathrib, and the Muslims fleeing Mecca under the leadership of Muhammed. In total the arrangement involves eight different documents, several of which are supplements dealing with highly specific circumstances.³⁷ Here, my background as a nonexpert on Muslim history initially proved to be an advantage. Because it proved challenging for me to understand the meaning and composition of the Arabian tribal system in 622CE, I was sure that (non-Muslim) teenagers would struggle even more to understand the historical context of the Medina arrangement. The triangular relationship between the Muslims as newcomers in Yathrib, the originally dominant non-Muslim tribes in the city, and the tribes' Jewish allies proved especially difficult to grasp, forcing me to think hard about how to present this situation to a younger audience in a sufficiently clear manner.

Moreover, the language and content of the original documents proved much too difficult for the targeted age group and rewriting them into a version that did meet the language test demanded too much creative interpretation on my part. A serious problem was that several existing text editions of the Medina settlement have been heavily influenced by later theology, and thus present an already edited version of the arrangement. In effect, the Medina agreement dealt with a very local situation following the customs of the time and was only much later reinterpreted as an early form of constitution, so I decided to include clippings that made this contrast between their original and their contemporary meaning explicit. In practice this meant that whereas the contextual clipping to the Constitution of Medina stated that it was not a constitution in the modern sense, another clipping showed a contemporary person saying that the tolerance included in the agreement should be seen as equal or better than the tolerance specified in the US Constitution.³⁸

Another element that needed to be made explicit by the Medina clippings was the lack of sources from the early seventh century CE, a situation complicated by the fact the existing material has been thoroughly transformed by centuries of historical and theological reflection. Crucially, the Constitution of Medina is the only one of the twenty-one RETOPEA settlements that touches on the core of a particular religion, as it still has direct religious meaning to Muslims individually and to Islam as a whole. Here my Catholic and nonspecialist background turned into a profound disadvantage, as I found myself in a position that was roughly the equivalent of, say, a nonspecialist scholar with a Muslim background clipping the history of tolerance portrayed by Jesus and his Apostles while having to cite historically uncertain controversies that are mentioned in the Bible. Although this situation was less than ideal, and my work was indeed criticized by at least one

37 Robert B. Serjeant, "The 'Sunnah Jami'ah,' Pacts with the Yathrib Jews, and the 'Tahrim' of Yathrib: Analysis and Translation of the Documents Comprised in the So-Called 'Constitution of Medina,'" *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 41, no. 1 (1978): 1-42; Paul Lawrence Rose, "Muhammad, The Jews and the Constitution of Medina: Retrieving the Historical Kernel," *Der Islam* 86, no. 1 (2011): 1-29.

38 "A Constitution under Muhammed," Retopea.eu, <http://www.retopea.eu/s/en/item/2446>; "Medina vs. the US," Retopea.eu, <http://www.retopea.eu/s/en/item/2473>.

academic EC reviewer, it was mitigated by the fact that the RETOPEA team counted several specialists on Islamic history who could offer additional checks.

Still, the lack of direct historical sources severely limited my options for creating clippings about the Medina texts. Therefore, my main narrative for the Constitution became exactly this uncertainty, showcasing the fact that a lack of historical evidence usually allows for quite different interpretations. Of particular interest here were the clippings dealing with the expulsion of the Jewish tribes from Yathrib, something which happened a few years after the drafting of the Constitution. Both Muslims and Jews have their own interpretation of why this happened, with both sides presenting arguments as to why the other side, in their view, broke the Constitution first. Ignoring this fact would have portrayed a much too rose-tinted view of the Medina agreement, so my strategy for handling this sensitive issue was to create a clipping that clearly stated that the sources do not allow us to make a definitive choice between the two versions.³⁹ I highlighted in the clippings that several explanations exist, some of which put a negative light on the Muslims of Yathrib while others blamed the Jews in the city. In line with this core narrative and following the GEM-standard, other examples revealed that the tolerance of the Constitution was sometimes effective and sometimes not; that the agreement was not only about Jews and Muslims but other religions as well; that people sometimes behaved (in)tolerantly and sometimes not; and, crucially, that what people know about this settlement is influenced by centuries of (re)interpretation, including by historians. I specifically included a clipping that questioned whether a Christian European scholar writing in the 1970s from a prestigious university, and who moreover had a military background in the Middle East, should be considered an objective source of information about Early Islamic tolerance.⁴⁰

Lastly, the case of the Ashoka edicts proved more straightforward. These edicts (declarations of a legal, religious, and philosophical nature) were spread via inscriptions on columns and large rocks throughout the Indian subcontinent in the third century BCE. This made them the earliest case included in the RETOPEA project, and so I again encountered a lack of direct source material as well as a historical context that most European teenagers have no frame of reference for. Luckily, in this instance there was not a direct link with the life of a key religious figure and this drastically reduced the contemporary sensitivity of the clippings (although the conversion of Ashoka from Hinduism to Buddhism still holds some potential for controversy, as does the location of a so-called “rock edict” of an important “Indian” Emperor inside what is now Pakistani territory).⁴¹

The pronounced lack of historical sources again complicated the search for a central narrative—even longtime scholars of the Ashoka Edicts note that there is little to go on in terms of context, again creating a lot of uncertainty and opening

39 “Expulsion from Medina,” Retopea.eu, <http://www.retopea.eu/s/en/item/2461>.

40 “Being Objective about Religion,” Retopea.eu, <http://www.retopea.eu/s/en/item/2470>.

41 N.A. Nikam and R. McKeon, *The Edicts of Ashoka* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1962).

up multiple interpretations.⁴² The (edited) texts of the edicts, however, turned out to be much easier to understand than those of the Constitution of Medina, which offered me the option of staying closer to the core documents than I had been able to do for the other settlements. The educational questions proved particularly useful, as they helped me in further clarifying the (possible) meaning of Ashoka's edicts. For example, one clipping simply quoted Rock Edict XII in saying "The faiths of others all deserve to be honored for one reason or another. By honoring them, one exalts one's own faith and at the same time performs a service to the faith of others. By acting otherwise, one injures one's own faith and also does disservice to that of others. For if a man praises his own faith and belittles another because of devotion to his own and because he wants to glorify it, he seriously injures his own faith." To this I could add the simple question, "Do you agree with Ashoka that mocking a person with another religion is an insult to your own religion?"⁴³ So although the clipping itself could still be difficult for teenagers to understand, the question encouraged them to engage directly with Ashoka's message.

Finally, this discussion of different ideas about tolerance was also included in the clippings that did not cite directly from the Edicts. Here I tried to make maximal use of the fact that the vast majority of European teenagers have never heard of Ashoka and the Maurya Empire; indeed, this case had been included in RETOPEA in order to counter the project's dominant attention to Christian, Islamic, and Judaic coexistence. Still, that same feature of BCE India as the least knowable case in RETOPEA brought with it the risk of portraying the Mauryas in an Orientalist fashion, as exotic and somewhat outside of the main focus of the project. This risk was again addressed by staying close to the original texts, letting Ashoka speak in his own words, but also through a specific piece of information: one clipping seemed to start from an Orientalist vantage point, with the trailer for a BBC documentary about Ashoka, yet it immediately questioned the documentary's argument that the Emperor had created an "Empire of the Spirit."⁴⁴ In effect, by using the educational questions I tried to reveal exactly such stereotypes in many contemporary accounts of Indian religion.

Conclusions

This Report from the Field stressed two things I learned while working for RETOPEA. First, I found that problem-oriented, call-based research does not automatically lead to biased outcomes. Although one can certainly imagine circumstances in which a funder directly shapes both research approaches and research outcomes, this was not the case when I was clipping for the Commission. RETOPEA's

⁴² Rajeev Bhargava, "Beyond Toleration: Civility and Principled Coexistence in Ashokan Edicts," in *Boundaries of toleration*, ed. Alfred Stepan and Charles Taylor (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 193–95.

⁴³ "Ashoka Insults No One," Retopea.eu, <http://www.retopea.eu/s/en/item/2428>.

⁴⁴ "Ashoka's Edicts Filmed," Retopea.eu, <http://www.retopea.eu/s/en/item/2443>.

research team had to concede that they had no say over the place of the research within the wider societal (and political) framework set by the European Union, yet the EC never overstepped any boundaries, meaning that beyond the call and the selection of the consortium it did not influence either the research process or the research outcomes. In fact, RETOPEA's final results pushed back against the initial claim of the EC that Europe has a longstanding tradition of religious toleration, as the project highlighted that it also has a strong tradition of religious violence.

On the contrary, it can be argued that the call-based funding process made both the EC representatives and the team members highly aware of the back-and-forth influences between policymakers and researchers, a reflection that I now feel is lacking in many other types of funding. While other funding systems claim to allow for purely independent research, the choices made are still shaped by either the implicit interests of the funder or by the implicit expectations of the wider academic community. "Implicit" is indeed the key word here, as the call-based system has at least the advantage that it immediately discloses the interests and expectations underpinning the research effort, thus allowing everyone involved to actively work around these influences. Many non-call-based systems do not include such public disclosures and keep silent about the wider societal context to which all historical research inevitably relates. In my view this suggests that problem-oriented and commissioned research can be as much, if not more, transparent than many other types of funded research.

Finally, my experiences with the RETOPEA consortium suggest that the intellectual challenges posed by public history research deserve upfront (and wider) acknowledgement in the academic community. As described above, both within and outside of RETOPEA there existed serious doubts about the idea of clipping history, as this methodology at first sight seems to be far removed from the regular academic standards for handling the past. Yet, in reality clipping the global history of religious toleration proved to be an extremely demanding exercise in processing historical information. This conclusion will not come as a surprise to many public historians, but it still serves as a good reminder that academic publications are not the absolute summit of historical writing. There is as much challenge in searching the archives for historical context as there is in compressing that context in order to make the past more understandable for nonspecialists. Personally, I now feel that thinking about a proper methodology for creating clippings can stand on par with thinking about any of the methodologies I've used for archival research, and my eventual contentment with the final (albeit naturally imperfect) clippings outweigh any concerns about not reaching the traditional academic standards. In this sense, the value of RETOPEA does not only lie in its impact on education and policy-making, but in its contribution to methodological reflection on applied history in a European, educational, and digital context.

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