

THE INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS OF HISTORICAL SCIENCES

by Jean-Claude Robert, Secretary General of ICHS

The 21st International Congress of Historical Sciences will be held in Amsterdam, 22-28 August 2010. The International Committee of Historical Sciences (ICHS), in French Comité International des Sciences Historiques (CISH), is behind the organization. Back in 1900, European historians began to hold an International Congress every few years, and created an ad hoc committee to put it up. The First World War stopped this. In 1923, an International Congress was called in Brussels. At that time, it was thought that a more permanent structure should be created to ensure continuity of the congresses. The ICHS was created in 1926 and is incorporated in Lausanne, Switzerland. Its foundation is linked to the aftermath of the First World War, when some historians became concerned with the role history played in the development of imperialism and national hatred that led to the war. Its objectives are to promote international cooperation in history by bringing together historians from all countries for a periodical congress and to promote the comparative approach. The Second World War almost destroyed the International Committee, but it was revived in 1948 and since 1950, quinquennial congresses are held without interruption.

ICHS has three peculiarities. First, it has no individual members, second, it has a generalist bias and third, it has a quinquennial cycle of life. Every five years, the International Congress is held and on this occasion, its board (13 members from across the world) is elected by a General Assembly and stays in office until the next congress. The organization rests on a two-tier structure: the National Committees (NC) represents historians on basis of countries and the Affiliated International Organizations (AIO) regroups them according to their research field. There were, in May 2010, 54 National Committees and 29 Affiliated International Organizations. Annual dues paid by its members fund ICHS, which is completely independent.

The Canadian Historical Association joined ICHS as National Committee in 1929 and is a long-standing member. However, in the past, for CHA members, interest in CISH was not very high. On the one hand, it was considered to be of interest for Europeanists only, and on the other hand, before the fall of the Iron curtain, it seemed a place for East-West confrontation. In addition, the structure of the congress was not very dynamic, consisting of seemingly interminable sessions dominated by some aged colleagues talking on a not very actual subject.

The International Congress meets for seven days (Sunday to Saturday). The program can be divided in two parts. The local organizing committee, in close relation with the Bureau (Board) and the General Assembly, organizes the first one; the second is composed of the combined and partly simultaneous meetings of all the 29 International Affiliated Organizations. Each is entitled

to three half-day and is responsible for the contents of its meetings (business and academic).

In 1990, the CHA invited the 1995 Congress to Canada (Montréal). At the time, there was a flurry of interest, but nowadays, it seems to be on the wane. This could be due to a lack of information because the structure of ICHS is somewhat complex and to the five-year cycle which is misleading. While it is too late to be on the program of the coming congress, the next one is slated for 2015 and the preparation work for the program will begin at the end of 2011. At that time, member associations will be canvassed to theme proposals, which will be discussed and adopted during the General Assembly of ICHS in 2012. After, a call for session organizers and discussants will be made. It is essential to note that all communications are channeled through the CHA representative to ICHS.

Members of the CHA can be involved in many ways. Firstly, some proposals from Canada should be made. Of course, not all proposals will be adopted – generally around 250 proposals are made. Secondly, colleagues could be nominated as session organizers or discussants. Thirdly, when the call for paper is sent, somewhere in early 2013, it will be the time to propose individual papers. The names of organizers are posted on the congress web site with their email address. On the other hand, many colleagues are members of one of the 29 Affiliated International Organizations, like the International Economic History Association or the International Federation of research on Women History. They can use the channel of their organization to be on the program.

It is important for the CHA be proactive at the moment when the call for themes is issued, generally toward the end of the year after the Congress (i.e.: in late 2011, early 2012). There is room for Canadian input. When organizers and discussants are chosen, the CHA representative can help to arouse interest and convince some Canadian scholars to send paper proposals directly to the organizers. The web site of ICHS is at <http://cish.org>.