“European History in 50 Years”
By Gerhard Weinberg

At last year’s luncheon meeting professor Tooley asked me to speculate on the developments in the study of European history over the next 50 years, and explained that this was to be done in ten minutes. Historians predict the past, not the future, but I promised Hunt to try since you, not I, will be around to see whether any of these predictions turns out to be correct. Furthermore, the implications of these changes, if they indeed occur, for the European Section of the Southern are even more difficult to imagine, so I will barely engage in that possible speculation.

It seems to me likely that the decline in British, French, and Russian history enrollments of recent years is likely to continue with obvious implications for hiring by colleges and universities. Because of the drastic reduction of US forces in Germany, the swelling of enrollments in German history by those who had spent part of their lives in the Federal Republic when a father or mother was stationed there during the Cold War, is in the process of being reversed.
On the other hand, there is likely to be an increasing interest in issues relating to European unification, whether or not it moves forward. The work pioneered by such individuals from this organization like the late Carl Pegg that looks at the advances, setbacks, and problems of European institutions, the Common Market, the European Union, etc. will be of continuing and growing interest. This trend is likely to affect employment opportunities and hence concerns of the European Section.

The study of European history in the future is almost certainly going to be influenced by two demographic trends. As all of you know, demography is a subordinate branch of astrology. There are, however, two demographic rules that can be accepted as true, and these will influence the way European history is studied in the years to come. Rule one: Children who are not born are not going to have children themselves. Since Europeans are having fewer and fewer children, they have to import more and more workers along with their families from elsewhere. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, the populations of cities in Europe were primarily replenished from the countryside. That is no longer possible, so the new recruits come from the outside. Since a high proportion of them are Muslims, the countries of Europe, beginning
with France, are likely to become ever more Islamic in their orientation. This will bring a shift of European history studies toward an increasing focus on the earlier as well as the current inter-action of Europeans with the Muslim world. This trend will surely have implications for the job market and with that, attendance at the European History Section.

Rule 2: Children once born are pretty certain to grow a year older at twelve month intervals. What has this to do with the study of European history? It means that the increasing proportion of young people in the United States who are of Hispanic origin will very likely lead to an increase in interest in and study of Spain, its history, and its expansion into the Western Hemisphere. The history of Spain, once a relatively small portion of the course offerings in American colleges and universities, is rather likely headed for an upswing with further implications for the job market and for the European Section.

One further comment. The growing role of China, India, and the Middle East in world affairs and in the concerns of Americans seems to me almost certain to have one additional impact on the role of European history in colleges and universities, even if an indirect one. With the very probable addition of faculty positions in these areas of study, the
proportion of department members whose concentration is one or another six week period of United States history is likely to shrink somewhat over time. In other words, the role of Europeanists in history departments will be within a proportionately larger contingent of non-Americanists than has hitherto generally been the case. It may well be that such a development could lead to a restructuring of the European Section so that in addition to the Latin American portion of the Southern there will be either an extension of the European Section to include other portions of the globe or a still further diversification of the SHA’s program and structure.

The changes likely to take place will call for responses from the Section on the personal all well as organizational side. The membership is likely to have more diverse interests, and it may be more difficult to develop programs for the annual meeting that appeal to a substantial number of members. On the other hand, the use of email and of conference calls is making communication between meetings a lot easier than it was fifty years ago, and that should help to offset any new problems associated with the changes just mentioned.
I will not be around to see these things happen, but many of you will,
and I wish you the very best of luck in the process.