

CENTER FOR DEMOCRACY AND RECONCILIATION
IN SOUTHEAST EUROPE
SOUTHEAST EUROPEAN JOINT HISTORY PROJECT
History Education Committee

TEACHING
THE HISTORY
OF SOUTHEASTERN
EUROPE

Edited by
CHRISTINA KOULOURI

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Contents

| | |
|---|---------|
| <i>Preface</i> by Costa Carras, JHP rapporteur | 9 - 13 |
| <i>Introduction: The Tyranny of History</i> by Christina Koulouri, chair of the HEC Democritus University of Thrace | 15 - 25 |
| <i>History Textbooks and the Creation of National Identity</i> by Dubravka Stojanovic, vice-chair of the HEC University of Belgrade | 27 - 32 |
| <i>The Culture of Dialogue</i> by Neven Budak University of Zagreb | 33 - 35 |
| <i>The Persistence of Ethnocentric School History</i> by Thalia Dragonas and Anna Frangoudaki University of Athens | 37 - 47 |
| <i>The History of Albanians and their Neighbors in Albanian Textbooks</i> by Valentina Duka University of Tirana | 49 - 53 |
| <i>The Reflection of Balkan History in the Bulgarian School Textbooks</i> by Alexei Kalionski University of Sofia | 55 - 59 |

© Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe
Krispou 9, Ano Poli, 546 34 Thessaloniki, Greece
tel.: +30-31-960820, fax: +30-31-960822

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| | |
|---|-----------|
| <i>Workshops for the Future</i> by Vera Katz Institute of History, Sarajevo | 61 - 67 |
| <i>History Textbooks and Nationalism</i> by Niyazi Kizilyurek University of Cyprus | 69 - 73 |
| <i>Boring History, Bored Pupils: The Role of History Teachers</i> by Snjezana Koren Osnovna skola Eugena Kumicica, Velika Gorica, Croatia | 75 - 79 |
| <i>Suggestions for the Teaching of a Non-Conflictual History</i> by Mirela-Luminita Murgescu University of Bucharest | 81 - 87 |
| <i>The Situation Regarding History Textbooks in SEE</i> by Bozo Repe University of Ljubljana | 89 - 92 |
| <i>Beyond National Narratives. The Role of History Textbooks</i> by Hanna Schissler Georg Eckert Institute for International Textbook Research, Braunschweig | 93 - 96 |
| <i>General Problems in the History Textbooks of the Balkans</i> by Emilija Simoska Institute for Sociological, Political and Legal Research, Center for Ethnic Relations, Skopje | 97 - 102 |
| <i>Appendix</i> | 103 - 111 |

Preface

Even before the official foundation of the Center for Democracy & Reconciliation in Southeast Europe, its Greek associate, the Association for Democracy in the Balkans, had organized a conference in July 1997 under the title “Culture and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe”, which included a session on textbooks. Later that year, our Chairman, Matt Nimetz, made the suggestion we follow up on this conference by initiating a “Southeast European Joint History Project” (hereafter JHP), which would be the Center’s first programme. By autumn 1998, mainly as a result of inspired work by Professor Maria Todorova, who had agreed to chair its Academic Committee, the first outline plan had been prepared. Meanwhile, I had been asked by the Board to act as Rapporteur and oversee the JHP’s development, which I continue to do.

The first important event was the Halki Conference of June 1999 where, once again, Maria Todorova was responsible for the academic planning. The conference was noteworthy for its high quality. At Halki, the leadership of the other JHP Committee, namely that of the Textbook Committee, now renamed the History Education Committee, was elected by those participants at the Conference who had an interest in this area of work. Professor Christina Koulouri was elected as chair, with Dubravka Stojanovic as vice-chair. Soon, Professor Halil Berktaş, who had not been in Halki, became a second vice-chair, and within a short period of time every country in the region was represented by at least one member on the Committee. Some

more were elected at the Committee's second full meeting in September 2000, and there is now a total of seventeen. Collaboration between members has been marked by a genuine sense of a shared enterprise aiming to give expression to a common interest and common ideals of people in all the countries of the region.

The fifth textbook workshop, in two connected parts, was held in September in Istanbul, and the interest of television stations and newspapers was a clear proof that public opinion well beyond the Center has become aware of the significance of our work. There was also a Board Meeting in Istanbul, which decided to extend the Joint History Project into a third phase. This will involve the formation of committees in each country to argue for the adoption of those changes in approach, whether in textbooks or in teaching methods, that the History Education Committee will be proposing by the end of 2001, when it hopes to have completed its programme of seven textbook and seven teacher training workshops.

Also in Istanbul, the History Education Committee itself decided to produce both this Interim Report, and a Final Report, after the first phase has been brought to a successful conclusion by the completion of the one textbook workshop that remains outstanding. The contributions that follow, and above all that of Professor Christina Koulouri, who has coordinated the whole effort with an admirable combination of personal warmth, diplomatic skill and wide knowledge of the history of history textbooks, speak for themselves.

As the Board Member who has had the privilege of presenting the project on a number of occasions but also of answering some criticisms, I feel this is a good opportunity to write something about the JHP's overall aims. The JHP is not about replacing an accurate picture of the past with one

that is less accurate but more friendly to traditional adversaries. Nor is it about replacing an inaccurate picture of the past hostile to other countries with an equally inaccurate picture of the past friendly to them. In short, it is not an exercise in "prettifying history" (the phrase is Professor Berktaý's). The commitment to truth comes above all else but it is combined with an acknowledgement that whereas particular events may be established or disproven, there will always be room for differences in the interpretation of whatever has in fact occurred. Hence, to learn historical method, one must acquire both a respect for the rigour necessary to establish truth and the combination of sympathy and subtlety required to appreciate but also critically to evaluate differing interpretations of events.

Most of the textbooks and history teaching in the region, as elsewhere, have been developed as part of the massive enterprise of creating nation states. It is not surprising therefore that there has been a tendency to include what is admirable in one's own country's history, but to lay less stress on or to exclude altogether elements of which one is less proud. Where others are concerned, particularly those "others" over and against whom one's own national group has defined itself, there has also inevitably been a tendency to include what is less admirable and to exclude a certain amount of what has been creative. The result of such a process of double exclusion and selective inclusion is, of course, the phenomenon of national stereotyping which then remains as a major influence on grown-ups' judgement throughout their lives as active citizens.

In order to get away from such stereotyping, it is first an increase, not a decrease, in accuracy that must be sought; second, an inclusion of information about one's own people's past that we are less than proud of; third, a correction of those seemingly less admirable features ascribed to oth-

ers that are in fact the result of stereotyping; and, above all, an inclusion of creative elements in their histories. Here cultural history is particularly important. The overall result will certainly not be to omit ugly episodes from future accounts of the past, nor to abolish all sense of a difference in historical development and in character of particular ethnic or religious groups. It will certainly however never be less accurate and usually far more so. In addition, it is likely to indicate that more, though not all, of whatever offends us in the historical record, can be ascribed to factors stemming from our common humanity than from particular national or religious traditions.

This however does not close the discussion. Though rigorous in excluding falsehood, the historical enterprise is open and ongoing: pupils and students should learn how it is possible, within the limits set by a respect for accuracy, to see events from different points of view and also to appreciate how such different points of view have evolved and may continue to do so in the future.

Finally, there is the issue of the dominance of “nation-state” history in itself. Since the nation represents such an important focus of identity in our region, and indeed in most of today’s world, it would be both undesirable and unrealistic to try and deprive it of its place as the centre of the history curriculum. There is no reason that it should not be balanced however by the teaching of histories focused on other potential focuses of identity. One obvious possibility would be local histories, particularly valuable where peoples of different language and religion live together in a comparatively small area. Another would be the history of the region of Southeast Europe as a whole and one of the Center’s initiatives has been precisely to support such an initiative. A third would be even more radical: a history of such institutions and concepts as citizenship, the rule of

law, liberty and democracy, which would no longer be geographically focused but would bring together communities of differing time and place which remain however part of one intelligible “story”. Radical though this may seem, it is not so different from what many histories of religion must do already.

In the new mood of hope in Southeast Europe, it is important to remember that our task is not an easy one. It will require years, if not decades, of dedicated work to combat the damage done by historical stereotyping, to establish the values of democracy, tolerance and open-minded historical enquiry, and to achieve reconciliation in those places where today hostility and misunderstanding prevail. The Center is committed to this work, and we can at least say with confidence that on the basis of the achievements both of the Academic and the History Education Committees to date, that work has begun more energetically, enthusiastically and effectively than we could ever have anticipated.

COSTA CARRAS
JHP rapporteur