
The Common Past of a Divided Region

Teaching Balkan History

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I. Introduction

In different and distant regions of the globe we have been witnessing conflicts between neighbours -often with arms-, nationalist outbursts, projects of ethnic cleansing, hatred, fear or mistrust towards a real or imagined enemy. In order to understand the extend of this universal and however not homogeneous phenomenon, it is enough to mention the cases of Israelis and Palestinians, of Ireland, of Islamic fundamentalist terrorism, of Greece and Turkey, of Japan and China, etc. Moreover, the 20th century, “age of extremes” according to Eric Hobsbawm’s famous book¹, has shown the limits of human cruelty and human suffering. In societies traumatized or threatened by nationalism, historians face the challenge of how to practice history and how to deal with distortions and manipulations; they face moral dilemmas and they are called upon to decide about their public responsibility.

In this paper, I would like to present a research project conducted by a group of historians in the Balkans, a region that has been described by Western historians and journalists as synonymous to brutality, violence and bloodshed². I will try to describe the aims, the values and the method of this experiment to teach a common history in a divided region. Coming from Southeastern Europe to Eastern Asia, I am expecting to identify similarities and analogies in history teaching, to learn from other peoples’ experiences and to build a mutual understanding also during this conference.

I.1. Key-questions

Two key-questions could be considered as the starting point for the project:

- Is history responsible for conflicts and hatred between peoples?
- Is history able to promote reconciliation and good relations between neighbors?

As a matter of fact, since the wars in Yugoslavia, political analysts and researchers have tried to identify the different causes of recent interethnic conflicts and violence in the Balkans. The recognition and description of the causes could lead, in this point of view, to design means of conflict prevention and stabilization of the region. School history textbooks have been identified as one of the potential causes for intolerance between different nations or ethnic

1 Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes. The Short Twentieth Century 1914-1991*, London: Michael Joseph, 1994.

2 About Western perceptions of the Balkans and ‘Balkanism’ see Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997. Cf. also Vesna Goldsworthy, *Inventing Ruritania. The imperialism of imagination*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998.

communities and, consequently, as a reason for conflict³.

1.2. Why history textbooks?

Already in the 1920s and then in the 1940s schoolbooks were judged and largely found 'guilty' of the wars in the 20th century⁴. Negative stereotypes against neighbours, which were included especially in history textbooks, were identified as one of the causes of world wars. School was found equally responsible for the war. It was thus deemed necessary to revise schoolbooks to eradicate negative stereotypes and prejudice against other peoples, and many efforts were made to this end in Europe (e.g. between France and Germany, Germany and Poland, etc.)⁵. The results are visible in Western European textbooks.

Despite the shared European past as to the ideological use of history⁶ – school history, in particular – Balkan textbooks seem to be thought of as more 'guilty' of stereotypes and nationalism, judging from the results, one would say. The upsurge of violence and nationalism has rekindled in the last fifteen years the old Western stereotype of the Balkans' cultural singularity, which was thought to be reflected in schoolbooks. Of course, the comment about the Western-oriented way of treating Balkan textbooks does not alter the fact: Balkan

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- 3 Many research projects and dissertations on history textbooks analysis have been conducted in different Balkan countries and languages in the last decade. I am citing here a small number of publications in English language: Wolfgang Höpken (ed.), *Oil on Fire? Textbooks, Ethnic Stereotypes and Violence in South-Eastern Europe* (Hannover 1996); *The image of the Other. Analysis of the high-school textbooks in History from the Balkan countries* (1998), study by the Balkan Colleges Foundation, Sofia; *Improvement of Balkan history textbooks. Project reports*, The Economic and Social History Foundation of Turkey, Istanbul 2002; *Minorities in textbooks: South-East Europe*, Internationale Schulbuchforschung 23/2 (2001). Besides, conferences were held by local and international organisations on the same topic: For example by the Council of Europe, Symposium on "History Teaching and European Awareness", Delphi (Greece), 11-14 May 1994; by UNESCO "Disarming history. International Conference on Combating Stereotypes and Prejudice in History Textbooks of South-East Europe", Visby, Gotland (Sweden), 23-25 September 1999; conference on "History education and 'others' in history", Istanbul, Bogazici University, 1995.
 - 4 After the First World War, in 1925 the League of Nations recommended comparative analysis and revision of textbooks, while in 1937 twenty-six states signed a "Declaration regarding the teaching of history (revision of school textbooks)". After the Second World War, in 1946 UNESCO developed a "Programme for the improvement of textbooks and teaching materials as aids in developing international understanding" and in 1949 it published "A handbook for the improvement of textbooks and teaching materials as aids to international understanding". See Falk Pingel, *UNESCO Guidebook on Textbook Research and Textbook Revision*, Hannover: Verlag Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 1999, p. 9-17. The Council of Europe has also worked in the same direction since 1953. See *Against bias and prejudice: the Council of Europe's work on history teaching and history textbooks*, Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 1986; Maitland Stobart, "Fifty years of European co-operation on history textbooks: The role and contribution of the Council of Europe", *Internationale Schulbuchforschung* 21 (1999), p. 147-161. Finally, the Georg Eckert Institute for International Textbook Research, founded in 1951, set as goal textbook analysis and revision and cooperated with UNESCO and the Council of Europe. In its newsletter, *Internationale Schulbuchforschung*, a lot of information on textbook research can be found.

textbooks on history (as well as geography books and readers) still contain ethnocentric accounts of the collective past and occasionally regress to nationalistic expressions and negative stereotypes about the neighbouring peoples.

Events in Balkan history have two opposite facets, one for each of the parties involved. Thus one side's «liberators» are the other side's «conquerors», «invasion» becomes «liberation», «victory» becomes «devastation», and so on. There are many “couples” of this kind in Balkan national histories: Serbs and Croats, Greeks and Turks, Bulgarians and Romanians, Albanians and Serbs are the major ones⁷.

In most textbooks in Southeast Europe we may find expressions and phrases that could generate negative or hostile attitudes towards neighbours. Consequently, one could think that there is some connection – more or less direct – between the content of textbooks and the escalation of nationalism, whose extreme manifestation is armed conflict.

I.3. Who is responsible?

Of course, textbooks alone are not responsible for national stereotypes and their revision cannot automatically eliminate ethnocentric or nationalistic interpretations of the past. Nevertheless, the content of textbooks and the dominant ideology, as far as the view of the past is concerned, coincide to a considerable extent. Textbooks cannot be innovative especially when the system of their production is state-centered as is the case in most Balkan countries. Nor can textbooks be innovative, even when their content is stereotype-free, if they are not in the hands of adequately trained teachers. Conversely, old traditional textbooks can prove to be innovative tools in the hands of capable teachers and with the use of innovative teaching methods.

It is rather clear that with very few exceptions the ministries of education play a crucial role in the production of textbooks and that consequently the state is responsible for the contents of school history.

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- 5 In the 70s, French and German history teachers took the initiative to discuss the content of their respective history textbooks, while a similar procedure was followed between German and Polish teachers. See *Gemeinsame Deutsch-polnische Schulbuchkommission: Empfehlungen für die Schulbücher der Geschichte und Geographie in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland und in der Volksrepublik Polen*, Braunschweig 1995 (Schriftenreihe des Georg-Eckert-Instituts für Internationale Schulbuchforschung, vol.22/XV). Recently, many bilateral and multilateral projects were developed especially in the so-called “European countries in democratic transition” (ex-communist countries).
 - 6 There is a long literature about the ideological and political uses of history. See, among others, the famous studies of M.I. Finley and Marc Ferro: M.I. Finley, *The Use and Abuse of History*, London: Penguin, 1990 (first edition 1971); Marc Ferro, *Comment on raconte l'Histoire aux enfants à travers le monde entier* [How History is narrated to children all over the world], Paris: Payot, 1983.
 - 7 See Christina Koulouri (ed.), *Clio in the Balkans. The Politics of History Education*, Thessaloniki: CDRSEE, 2002.

I.4. Strategies of change

Recent research projects and publications in the Balkan region have tried to investigate the possibilities of eliminating «conflict-producing» national stereotypes from textbooks. The underlying assumption behind this activity is that a change in the teaching methods of history may have a long-term effect on the way neighbouring peoples see one another. An improvement of school textbooks may function as a long duration Confidence Building Measure – a tool for reconciliation⁸. Consequently, the ultimate goal of this concept of writing and teaching history is to promote democratic citizenship, tolerance and mutual understanding.

After the recent «Balkan wars», the necessity of changing the content of history textbooks has been seen as more imperative. This change should consist in eliminating negative stereotypes and in stressing on common elements in Balkan history. School should prepare citizens of democratic states who would live together peacefully and not potential soldiers of rival nations.

Achieving a reform of history teaching is however much more complicated than it seems at first sight. Actually, such a reform should include many agents whose interplay defines school history (curricula, textbooks, teachers, ministries). Changing the contents of curricula and textbooks requires the collaboration of the governments and the consent of societies, while changing the active teaching in the classrooms requires teachers' readiness and training.

The Joint History Project (JHP) that I am going to present in more detail here has been an initiative of civil society, aiming at a change that would take into account the limits imposed by the governments' jurisdiction in school history and the reality of educational systems. Therefore, the strategy of change suggested has been both realistic and optimistic.

II. The Joint History Project

II.1. The main concept

In the last decade, the concept of a new Balkan community emerged as a counter-weight to new aggressive and defensive nationalisms. The consequent idea to stress on a common history of the region was also launched in political and intellectual environments. The Joint History Project (JHP), inaugurated in 1998 by an NGO -the Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe (CDRSEE), aimed mainly at investigating the possibility of writing and teaching a common history for all Southeast European countries, from

⁸ See Evangelos Kofos, «Long Duration CBMs in the Balkans: Re-assessment of the Role of History and Geography School Textbooks», in *Culture and Reconciliation in Southeastern Europe* (International Conference, Thessaloniki, Greece, June 26-29, 1997), Association for Democracy in the Balkans, Thessaloniki: Paratiritis, pp.85-97.

Slovenia to Cyprus.

In our point of view, we should of course stress on a common history of the region but this new history should not be a new construction which would replace the national histories. It would rather be a new interpretation of the national pasts based on a common Balkan cultural and institutional heritage. Besides, we were aware of the fact that national history would continue to be taught in all Balkan countries and that it would be utopian to try to abolish its teaching. Consequently, any innovative attempt should integrate national history or at least be compatible with it. This kind of innovation means that changes in content should be paralleled by changes in method. As a matter of fact, revision of textbooks does not mean -at least exclusively- change of content but development of new skills, abilities, applied knowledge etc.

II.2. The project's context

The implementation of the different phases of the JHP was informed by various ongoing activities in history teaching and by main trends in European historiography. Namely, three major axes were taken into account:

1. The revision of history teaching in Europe (both Western and Eastern);
2. The renewal of European history as regional history (especially after 1989);
3. The rewriting of Balkan national histories after 1989.

In the last decade, the revision of history teaching has been promoted through bilateral, multilateral/regional and international projects. These projects aimed at eliminating stereotypes and hostile attitudes vis-à-vis neighbors, and included textbooks analysis, teacher training and compilation of teaching materials. They were initiated either by NGOs or by international organizations, such as UNESCO and the Council of Europe, which collaborated with governments and could eventually influence education policies.

The rewriting of European history has been related to the definition of European identity and has been dictated by the dramatic changes produced by the end of Cold War. The question “what is Europe?” has been also suggesting a certain interpretation of Europe’s past. Besides, the answer to this question has not been obvious. While before the 90s European history was “exclusive” and referred only to the western part of the continent, since the 90s it has been “inclusive” trying to integrate both Western and Eastern Europe into a historical continuum⁹. However, the tension between East and West has not totally disappeared and we may still detect, in Western discourses, a hidden under-evaluation of East European cultural “achievements”.

⁹ Cf. Attila Pok, Jörk Rüsen, Jutta Scherrer (eds.), *European History: Challenge for a Common Future*, Körber-Stiftung, Hamburg 2002.

In the ex-communist Balkan countries, the revision of historiography after 1989 has been targeting the “de-ideologization” of history, i.e. the procedure of eliminating Marxist interpretation and putting the communist period into a parenthesis of oblivion or rejection. Revision of Balkan national histories is not consistent but follows multiple and contradictory paths: from the post-modern questioning of the validity and objectivity of historical writing to the narcissistic confidence and dogmatism of nationalistic history¹⁰.

II.3. The History Education Committee (HEC)

The Joint History Project has been conducted by a body of Balkan historians, the History Education Committee, whose I am honoured to be the chair. Actually the HEC includes 17 members, mostly history teachers at all three levels of education and representing all SE European countries¹¹.

II.4. Workshops

a. Analysis of textbooks and curricula

From December 1999 to December 2000 a series of seven workshops were held under the title «Teaching sensitive and controversial issues in the history of South-East Europe». The issues dealt with were sensitive regional questions emerging from current controversies and having an impact on the interpretation of the past and on the teaching of history¹².

The main aim of the workshops was to record the situation in history teaching in all Balkan countries: textbooks and curricula were analyzed following thematic questionnaires. Papers on historiography, other school subjects apart from history, media, the process of nation-building and of construction of national identities were also presented.

¹⁰ Cf. Ulf Brunnbauer (ed.), *(Re) Writing History: Historiography in Southeast Europe after Socialism*, Münster: LIT Verlag, 2004.

¹¹ Members of the History Education Committee: Christina Koulouri (chair), Halil Berktaş (vice-chair), Dubravka Stojanović (vice-chair), Neven Budak, Thalia Dragonas, Valentina Duka, Anna Frangoudaki, Alexei Kalionski, Vera Katz, Niyazi Kizilyürek, Valery Kolev, Snjezana Koren, Mirela-Luminita Murgescu, Mutlu Öztürk, Bozo Repe, Emilija Simoska, Wolfgang Höpken.

¹² Workshop I (Budapest, 17-18 December 1999): «Hungarian Legacy in Southeast Europe»; Workshop II (Pyla, Cyprus, 28-29 February 2000): «Teaching Cyprus: in search of tolerance and understanding»; Workshop III (Skopje, 16-18 April 2000): «The Macedonian Identity: complementarities, conflicts, denials»; Workshop IV (Athens, 15-16 June 2000): «Albanians and their neighbors: the future's past»; Workshop V (Istanbul, 20-23 September 2000): Part A, «Greeks and Turks: the Janus of a Common History,» and Part B, «The Balkan Empires: common heritage, different heirs»; Workshop VI (Ljubljana, 2-5 November 2000): «Yugoslavia: a look in the broken mirror – Who is the ‘Other’»; Workshop VII (Thessaloniki, 10-12 March 2001): «Religious Education and the view of the ‘Others’».

b. Teacher training

The second phase of the JHP aimed at teacher training. From December 2000 to February 2002 five regional workshops of teacher training were held dealing with common historical issues in all curricula such as the Balkan Wars, the First World War, the Second World War, the Decline of the Ottoman Empire and the Creation of the Nation-States. During these workshops two procedures were followed:

1. Historians of different SEE countries taught the same historical question to a group of history teachers from a different country, as for instance, at the 4th workshop in Tirana where educators from Albania, Greece, Bulgaria, Croatia and Turkey presented the «Balkan Wars and the Creation of the Albanian State» to a group of 15 Albanian history teachers, ministry officials and people involved in the production of Albanian history textbooks.
2. Multilateral discussions: groups of Southeast European history teachers from different countries were taught sensitive historical questions simultaneously. This was the case in all other four workshops where educators and teachers came all from the same countries. For example at the 1st workshop in Thessaloniki dealing with the Balkan Wars, there were educators (2 per country) and history teachers (5 per country) from Bulgaria, Greece and Turkey.

c. Conclusions

The JHP workshops were useful and fruitful in many aspects.

1. They have been an occasion to communicate and to exchange information on the Balkan educational systems, the authorization and distribution of textbooks and the degree of state control.
2. They have contributed to mobilize human potential in the region and to create a network of regional historians especially of the young generation.
3. The papers which were presented and the discussions which followed -all of a very high academic level- helped a lot to understand the specific problems in each case and to compare situations.
4. All participants were critical of the textbooks in use and recognized the need to revise textbooks contents and teaching methods and to produce alternative teaching materials. It's worth mentioning that critique addressed not only issues of nationalism but also of the quality of textbooks.

Besides, the JHP workshops helped us to realize two things: 1) that the results of the textbooks analysis should be propagated in all SEE countries, especially to decision-makers in the field of history teaching; 2) that history teachers are more important than textbooks in disseminating stereotypes and biased interpretations of history and that we should include them if we really want to make significant changes in history teaching.

II.5. Publications

Two publications were the product of the first series of workshops, presenting the conclusions of textbooks analysis. A third publication of four volumes was also created through a new project producing alternative educational material for history teaching.

a. Textbooks and historiography

• **Teaching the History of Southeastern Europe (2001)**

This is a kind of first report of the JHP workshops where all the members of the HEC expose their personal remarks and conclusions regarding history education in the region and make suggestions for the improvement of the present situation. This first edition helped to make known and propagate our work while it was still in process.

• **Clio in the Balkans. The Politics of History Education (2002)**

This book includes a selection of papers delivered from December 1999 to December 2000 at seven workshops. 48 authors from all SEE countries and Western Europe are the contributors of this volume. The papers touch upon different aspects of history education and use a variety of methods and approaches.

Contents

1. First, there are texts offering information on educational systems in the Balkan countries. They focus on the system of textbook authorization and production and the position of history in the syllabus –teaching hours, the subject matter taught in each grade, the proportions of national, Balkan, European and international history, the subject's compulsory or optional status.
2. Second, most of the papers are analyzing history textbooks and history curricula. The analysis is based on a standard questionnaire different for each workshop according to its particular subject -for example we had workshops on Albania, Cyprus, religious identities etc.
3. Third, there are papers presenting other aspects of national historiography and identity formation. These papers show us the links between academic history and school history and unveil stereotypes which are not an exclusivity of schoolbooks. They remind us that sometimes we are too critical of textbooks ignoring their references, namely academic national historiographies. The relation between academic and school history may be more or less close, but it undoubtedly exists: on the one hand, academic history supplies historical knowledge as the raw material for school history; on the other hand, many

academic historians are themselves authors of school textbooks or members of the committees which draft curricula or approve textbooks.

4. Fourth, a few papers present the findings of sociological research and oral history about beliefs of students (in Bulgarian secondary schools for example) or the relation between memory and history in divided societies (as the case of the Turkish-Cypriot community for example).

The book includes three chapters:

The first chapter, «Common Past, Shared History», refers to these common pasts which can form the basis of a shared history, namely the two Balkan empires, Byzantine and Ottoman, the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Former Yugoslavia.

The second chapter, «National and Religious Identities Co-existing or Conflicting?», investigates firstly the example of Macedonia as an issue of division for the national histories of the countries which include (or used to include) some part of it. Secondly, the papers on religious identities become doubly topical as they deal with issues of correlating religious differences with ethnic conflicts and religious education with tolerance.

The third chapter, «The Past in the Mirror of the Present», deals with the two issues in SE Europe which remained open, at least at the time this publication was in print. Firstly, the case of Cyprus where the division of the island translates into a deep rupture in historical narrative. Secondly, the case of Albania and Albanian populations outside the national state.

These two publications introduced to the final phase of the JHP which, in my opinion, has been the most important of the whole project; it integrated the experience gained in the two previous phases and produced alternative teaching material that may be used in schools in all Southeast European countries. While carrying out the two first phases of the Joint History Project, we had not in mind writing a common Balkan history. In our case, although there is a common historical past, such an attempt is more difficult because in Southeast Europe there are many linguistic and religious differences –much more than in other regions of Europe (10 languages and at least three major religious faiths).

However, we decided not to confine ourselves to an academic analysis of curricula and textbooks but to suggest a very concrete method for the teaching of history in the perspective of reconciliation and regional stabilization. The four Workbooks that we produced under the title “Teaching Modern Southeast European History” may be assessed as a significant example of how history can be taught in divided societies.

b. Alternative educational material

• Innovation with realism

The creation of the four workbooks took into account the curricula and the educational systems in all SE European countries as well as the wish of teachers to have access to alternative teaching materials, complementary to textbooks. We shared the view that it is not possible to compile a uniform, homogenising history of Southeast Europe in a single textbook which could be used in all countries¹³. This was the main reason why we decided to publish thematic books of sources and not classical textbooks with continuous narration. Sources are contextualized and the reader is guided through introductions, explanatory notes, footnotes and questions. Besides, we chose four historical periods that are included in all curricula of the region.

- The Ottoman Empire
- Nations and States
- Balkan Wars
- World War II

All four topics belong to modern and contemporary history, a period when the peoples of the region followed a more or less common fate, through co-existence and conflicts. A similar approach could be applied to ancient and medieval history; our aim has been however to focus on specific subjects and suggest a new method of teaching them and not to cover all historical periods.

Although the workbooks are collections of sources and not historical narratives, they contain a “history” both as content and as method. I could mention the main elements of this “history”:

1. Teaching Balkan history is integrated into the framework of a wider revision of European history and historiography as a whole. Balkan history is conceived as part of European and world history. For example, Workbook 2 (*Nations and States in Southeast Europe*) and Workbook 4 (*The Second World War*) cannot be taught unless they are put into the context of European and world history.
2. Fighting stereotypes and discrimination is one of the main goals of teaching Balkan history. There are at least two kinds of stereotypes we are targeting: stereotypes that each Balkan people holds vis-à-vis its neighbours, and stereotypes about the Balkans that Western Europe (and the West in general) has.
3. History is not taught from an ethnocentric perspective but through a comparative and multi-perspective approach. Therefore, sources are not classified per country or per nation but are integrated in larger thematic units regardless their origin. In most cases it

¹³ The coordinators of the project were: Christina Koulouri (general coordinator), Halil Berktaç, Kresimir Erdelja, Valery Kolev, Bogdan Murgescu, Mirela-Luminita Murgescu.

is difficult to guess from which country a text comes unless we know the exact reference, and this is an exercise per se.

4. Regional history is not conceived as a harmonious linear process but as a synthesis of co-existence and conflicts. We have tried of course to show the common historical experiences shared by different peoples in the region. Workbook 1 (*The Ottoman Empire*) and Workbook 3 (*The Balkan Wars*) refer exactly to two opposed common experiences: the Ottoman Empire refers to a (not necessarily harmonious and peaceful) coexistence during five centuries while the Balkan Wars refer to a regional war that changed the map of the region and tore apart Balkan peoples. Therefore, our main challenge is not to teach what unites but also what divides us. This is the main reason why the subject of two Workbooks is the war: The Balkan Wars and the Second World War.

• Workbooks in the classroom

There is a long way from the printing house to the classroom. Actually, these workbooks will be assessed first in their present form –as a project for the renewal of history teaching, and second in school practice –if and how teachers can use them. There are some practical constraints to overcome before this alternative educational material is integrated into history teaching: the ministries’ official consent and approval, teachers’ adequacy at the level both of content and of method, the commercial interest of publishing houses. Besides, teachers are facing the challenge of triggering their pupils’ interest in history (a subject matter that is not very popular nowadays) and of dealing with classrooms of increased cultural diversity.

We may distinguish three cases in the classroom (according to each country’s particular situation): 1. Classes including pupils of indigenous minorities; 2. Classes including immigrant pupils; 3. Classes ethnically more or less homogeneous but holding strong stereotypes against neighbouring peoples. In all cases, multiperspectivity has been suggested as an appropriate method for history teaching. However, what multiperspectivity is and how it can be applied in the classroom is not very clear. Moreover, we may trace a theoretical plea for multiperspectivity in curricula and pedagogical essays, which does not find any echo in school practice.

The four workbooks aspire to multiperspectivity in practice: to think historically by analysing and synthesising evidence, to exercise empathy by being into the other’s shoes, to compare not only different sources but also different interpretations of the sources. The ultimate goal of this approach should be to integrate the “other” into the collective subject of historical narration and to stop teaching an ethnocentric exclusive history.

The political, social and moral importance of the change of history teaching is, for us, historians, self-evident. To repeat the phrase of a famous French historian, Marc Bloch, “the ignorance of the past does not limit itself to obstructing the knowledge of the present, but compromises action in the present as well.”¹⁴

14 Marc Bloch, *Apologie pour l’histoire ou métier d’historien*, Paris: Armand Colin 1974, p.45.