

---

## Balkan History Workbooks – Consequences and Experiences

---

Dubravka Stojanovic

History and the manner in which it has been taught have often been appropriated as tools for the perpetuation of nationalistic sentiments, based on an account of the past presented as the one limited and narrow “truth.” This is specially truth for the region of Southeast Europe where the stereotypes are reinforced and ignorance or even hate of “the other,” of the neighbor, is installed in the students. History and history teaching played a destructive role in the wars of the 90s in the Balkans and it still has an important role in creating national identity<sup>1</sup>. In the formation of nation states in the Balkans after the Communist period national histories were created to define national identities and legitimize them. This created the urgent need to understand different perspectives, especially when dealing with the past.

Those were the motives that encouraged the Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe from Thessaloniki, Greece to initiate Joint History Project in 1998, thus acknowledging the important and sometimes destructive role history can play in societies. CDRSEE is a regional Civil Society Organization founded in 1998 by private citizens from within the Southeast European region, but also from Western Europe and North America, with the broad aim of fostering democratic, pluralist and peaceful societies in SEE <sup>2</sup>. The goal of the Joint History Project was to encourage the debate and to revise ethnocentric school history teaching by avoiding the production of stereotypes, by suggesting alternative teaching methods and promoting the idea of the multiple interpretations of one historical event. In the first phase of our work, in year 2000, we carried out 7 regional workshops on which we made a comparative analyses of history textbooks from all 11 countries of the region. In the second year of the project we organized 7 workshops for history teachers from the region on which teachers coming from different countries, mostly those which had recent conflicts dealt with controversial and sensitive issues. Having completed two years of original research on historytextbooks and teaching, the members of History Education Committee coming from all 11 countries, have the necessary knowledge, preparation and experience to create four workbooks of additional teaching materials for secondary schools.

The four History Workbooks have the following four sensitive and controversial themes: The Ottoman Empire, Nations and States in Southeast Europe, The Balkan Wars, and The Second World War. The books contain original source material from the eleven countries. The materials were first translated into English, compiled, and then evaluated by about 70 teachers during four assessment workshops. The creation of the workbooks was a robust process, involving 6 editors, 14 contributors who collected sources, almost 70 teachers and 5 expert reviewers.

The overall objectives of the whole project were the following:

1. To improve history education, highlighting the importance of multiperspective history lessons in order to reduce the misuse of history for political ends.
2. To contribute to conflict resolution and conflict prevention through fostering the emergence of a new generation with the skills to participate in democratic societies
3. To empower teachers to participate in the democratic process and contribute educational policy.

In order to achieve those goals, three main methodological principles were introduced in those books: comparative approach, multiperspectivity and prevalence of social instead of political history. Until now books were produced in English, Serbian, Greek, Croatian, Bosnian, Macedonian and Albanian language. They are supposed to be used in all the countries of the region, but also for the education of minorities. The second phase of the project has successfully completed its first round of implementation in Serbia where 1 training of Trainers and 4 local Teacher Training Workshop took place in 2006/2007. With 93% of participants showing a definite willing to use the material in their classes and 100% noting that the Workbooks had a lot of positive aspects, the workshops was heralded as a success.

Soon after the publication of these books in Serbia and Greece, vicious attacks began. Attacks came from different sectors of the public: in Greece, from the right-wing or mainstream press, “patriotic” NGOs, or various web sites; while in Serbia, they came from the professionals, mostly from historians who were at the same time textbook authors, and from the Director of the Bureau for Publishing Textbooks, which is still the only publisher of the history textbooks for schools. The attacks in Greece were openly political, while in Serbia they have been formulated as expert discussions, even though their basis was political disagreement with the project’s basic ideas. That is why the tone, discourse, and rhetoric of the attacks in two countries were different. Criticisms in Greece were expressed in almost brutal language of personal insults and open accusations, while the debate in Serbian press retained more or less balanced academic tone, which was supposed to present, through this balance, that there were serious factual and historiographic remarks at stake. Despite these differences, these textbooks did not suffer the political consequences in Greece, while the whole affair in Serbia had severe political consequences: the director and the editor-in-chief of the publishing house that published them was sacked (as the publishing house was part of the Ministry of Education), and the Ministry of Education withdrew its support to the organization of the seminar for teachers, which brought us to a situation where we had to continue training teachers almost in secret, on weekends, without letting education authorities or schools’ directors about it, and with incredible personal courage of teachers, whose identity we had to keep secret.

Even though the attacks in Serbia and Greece came from different structures, and were formulated differently, a comparative analysis shows that they actually started from identical

ideological premises. When comparing the content of the textbooks, one could see that the attacks were provoked by the essential ideas and methodological foundations of the project, and that the attacks were, regardless of whether they originated from political or professional circles, directed at key premises of the project, and not at factual disagreements, as it was claimed in the Serbian case. With all the differences, the attacks in Serbia and Greece were focused on three key issues: possibility of collaboration between historians from the Balkan region; comparative approach; and multiperspectivity.

1. The first thing that connects the attacks in two countries is the fact that the very collaboration of historians caused suspicion of the critics. Reactions ranged from diminishing the very possibility of any collaboration (for example, by placing quotation marks, exclamation points, or question marks, by the term *mutual cooperation*), to accusations of alleged conspiracy, with various political motifs. Such reactions point to the essence of the problem, for these books prove that the collaboration of all countries, even the ones that were recently at war with each other, is possible. This destroys one of the most important theses of this project's critics, according to whom the Balkan region is pressed by fatality of conflicts as a destiny which cannot be avoided by individuals. This is an ideal context, reflected in all the countries of the region, and important for strengthening ethnocentric position of various interest groups. Therefore, to demonstrate possibilities of collaboration and dialog, goes into the very essence of these political assumptions, and destroys the xenophobic closeness, as the necessary frame for retaining those political concepts. This is revealed in a sentence from a popular Greek mainstream newspaper: "How is it possible for someone to construct a joint history book in the region dripping with the blood of nationalist aspirations"<sup>3</sup>.

Concerning collaborators on the project, critics found it necessary to immediately stress that among the authors, the smallest number is of representatives of their own nation, or that even, as put by critics in Serbia, "there were no Serbs among authors"<sup>4</sup>. This is, of course, untrue, as during the project conception, the particular care was taken to have approximately equal number of representatives from each individual country. Then critics also found necessary to discredit the participants, so it has been remarked in Serbia that "when concerning Serbs, the choice of participants was bad,"<sup>5</sup> or, in Greece, that "of the 60 textbook authors, Greeks were represented only by four women"<sup>6</sup> which displayed a tendency to diminish potential quality of the contributions through a misogynist discourse. This tendency is more obvious when it was noted in Greek press, on several occasions, that one of the members of the CDRSEE is "an American Jew,"<sup>7</sup> which also promoted anti-Semitism in denying the project.

A possibility to successfully complete a common regional project was in all attacks accused as a result of the supra-national conspiracy, whose aim is creation or restoration of former multinational states that existed in the Balkans. In Croatia, there was immediately fear that

this should lead to restoration of Yugoslavia; in Serbia, that this will mean an imposition of the “brotherhood and unity”; while in Greece, there was a fear that this should bring the restoration of the Ottoman Empire, so the whole project was mockingly referred to *pax ottomana*<sup>8</sup>. All of this displayed narrowly political anxieties of the critics, who interpreted everything in terms of the restoration of former supra-national creations.

2. The second issue which drew attention of critics is the comparative approach used in books. The attacks proved that Hungarian author Gyorgy Conrad was right, when he wrote that “nationalists see in comparativists ruthless guys.” The very idea that “our nation” could be compared with another one, especially with the “enemy,” destroys the basic principle of a “special case,” “different way,” as Germans would put it, *sonderweg*, or the concept of a “chosen people,” which lies at the foundation of every nationalism. Only the idea of the “uniqueness of one’s own nation” provides further, in the nationalist concept, special rights for one’s own nation, rights that follow from its superiority, which easily leads to *Ethnic Darwinism*. The comparative approach is understood as a part of the globalization process, or, as put forth in the attacks in the Greek press, “weakening of the importance of the nation,”<sup>9</sup> which “threatens our national identity,”<sup>10</sup> and as a way “towards cultural homogenization,” so that these books were declared as a “genocide on memory,” or “crime of peace”<sup>11</sup>...

With these reactions to comparative approach, critics clearly displayed through their arguments that, when methodologically deprived from the central position to one’s own nation, and when she is put into the comparative relation to others, it is perceived as a loss and defeat. Ethnocentric way of thinking proved itself so strong in these polemics, so that it almost blinded participants in the debates. All the critics first and foremost dealt with **counting sources from their own country**, as well as their length, trying to prove that it is their country which was represented the worst, even though during the creation of these books, the space given to different nations was calculated with mathematical precision, and it was strictly taken care of the proportional representation of sources from all 11 countries. By counting texts and comparing lengths of the ones representing their people, project critics often reached opposite conclusions: Serb critics claimed that “it is without any doubt that Serbs were the worst off,”<sup>12</sup> that books were, probably because of the ethnic origin of the chief editor, Christina Koulouri, “Helenocentric,” and that more space was dedicated to Greece than to any other country, while the Greek critics complained that the books have only a “few Greek sources”<sup>13</sup>.

Critics’ ethnocentrism was obvious on different examples measuring the space dedicated to different “our” and “their” events. Both Greek and Serbian critics noted on several occasions that certain events from their national histories were far more important than some from “others’” histories, but received inadequate coverage and space. Thus, one of the arguments in Serbia was that the First Serbian Uprising of 1804 received too little space, even though, as

a critic claimed in complete ethnocentric blindness, “that was the most important event in the 19th century Balkans”<sup>14</sup>. This demonstrates a sincere view of one’s own history as more important than other histories, which is part of the already mentioned feeling of superiority, as the basis of nationalism.

Critics from all countries agree in one thing: that the selection of sources was tendentious. They even agree on its diagnosis. The reason for this was, according to them, to humiliate a people, and to prove that it is, in comparison with its neighbors, a people with a negative historical role. The only problem was that all the critics — whether Serbs, Croats, or Greeks — saw exactly their nation as the project’s intended “bad guys.” Hence, all the attacks have a common denominator, that books were malicious only towards “us.” This proves the incapacity to fully grasp the comparative approach, and objectively note that history in these textbooks is presented critically, so that all the peoples went through the same methodological setup. Only injustice towards “us” was perceived, emphasizing that “our suffering” had been minimized, and “others’ suffering” amplified, that negative examples were drawn only from our past, while others have positive examples chosen from theirs, which led critics to the conclusion that these textbooks falsify history, that they are “injustice,” propaganda writing, partial selected presentation.

3. The third issue is the one of multiperspectivity. The relation of project critics towards this methodological approach reveals that they subscribe to an authoritarian approach, according to which there is a single truth, which essentially, does not allow for a debate or plurality, and is essentially anti-scientific. This was the point on which critics in Serbia insisted in particular, showing that the multiperspective approach thoroughly shook their ethnocentric view of the world. In several places, critics remarked that “the truth is one, indivisible, and firm,” that many historical sources “do not correspond to historical truth, the true and indivisible one,” without explaining how something that is an authentic historical source could not correspond to the truth. The farthest in representing this authoritarian pattern went the Director of the Bureau for Publishing Textbooks, when in one his attacks he noted that multiperspectivity is the wrong approach, as “the truth is one, just like the god is one”<sup>15</sup>.

These claims show an ideological matrix that determines that way of historical and national consciousness, which is essentially anti-plural, authoritarian, ethnocentric, frightened of everything foreign and different, wary of “the other,” especially if “the other” is a neighbor. This is the image of an autistic, ethnocentric, closed world, that retreats into a peaceful image of the past, in order to avoid a creative relation to the future, and responsible relation towards the present. This is a parochial relation towards the integration processes, which provokes fear of comparison with others, as well as of competitiveness, as one of the movements of the modern society. That is the reason why reactions to this project were so strong, and even

hysterical. At stake was a defense of a whole pre-modern and pre-democratic value system, which, with good reasons, saw in the CDRSEE project basic premises, a danger for its very foundations. That is why I suggest to the CDRSEE that the next project be an analysis of the reactions to these books in all the countries of the region, because I believe that in such a way we can better familiarize ourselves with and theoretically analyze the matrix of the mainstream discourse.

- 
- 1 Ch. Koulouri (ed.), *Clio in the Balkans. The politics of History Education*, Thessaloniki 2002.
  - 2 <http://www.cdsee.org/>
  - 3 P. Georgiadis, “They are turning us into Turks”, *To Thema*, February 11<sup>th</sup> 2007.
  - 4 K. Nikolic, S. Rajic, “Balkan History with oxford Accent”, *NIN*, December 15<sup>th</sup> 2005.
  - 5 Ibid.
  - 6 P. Georgiadis, *ibid.*
  - 7 “Against History; The New History Books”, event organized by the Political Association for Democracy and the Homeland (Ομιλος για τη Δημοκρατία και την Πατρίδα), Thessaloniki, 12/02/2007, Makedonia Palace Hotel, Alexandros Hall.
  - 8 Ibid.
  - 9 “They are rewriting our History! An anti-Hellenic propaganda tentacle is hitting us from everywhere!”, *To Paron*, November 12<sup>th</sup> 2006.
  - 10 Ibid.
  - 11 M. Lygeros at: “Against History; The New History Books”.
  - 12 K. Nikolic, S. Rajic, “Balkan History with oxford Accent”, *NIN*, December 15<sup>th</sup> 2005.
  - 13 A. Zafraka, at: “Against History; The New History Books”.
  - 14 K. Nikolic, S. Rajic, “Balkan History with oxford Accent”, *NIN*, December 15<sup>th</sup> 2005.
  - 15 L. Valter, “Desarming History”, in: *Danas*, 21–22. januar 2006.