

To avoid 'us vs. them' in Balkans, rewrite history

A group of historians from Croatia to Turkey are trying to encourage reconciliation.

By Nicole Itano | Correspondent of The Christian Science Monitor

ATHENS

The year was 1453. Ottoman troops under Sultan Mehmed II captured the Byzantine city of Constantinople – present-day Istanbul – and changed the region forever.

Ask a Greek student of history, and you'll likely hear of the event as the tragic fall of a great Christian city. Ask a Turk, and you'll probably hear of the glorious conquest for a rising Muslim empire.

In this still-fragile region, history is often served up as a nationalistic tale that highlights the wrongs perpetrated by others. Now a group of historians from across the region is trying to change the way the past is taught in southeast Europe – from Croatia to Turkey – in an effort to encourage reconciliation rather than division.

"History plays an important role in shaping national identity," said Christina Koulouri, the editor of a series of new history textbooks and a professor of history at the University of the Peloponnese in Greece. "We want to change history teaching because we are concerned about the joint future of the Balkans and we think mutual understanding can be promoted through better history teaching."

More than 60 scholars and teachers from around the Balkans have joined to create a new series of history books that tackle some of the most controversial periods in the region. The books, which are being translated into 10 regional languages, present history from various perspectives and excerpt historical documents to challenge interpretations of key events like the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople.

Most students, Ms. Koulouri says, know little about their neighbors, despite the region's intertwined past and the relative youth of most of the countries that exist today. Schools typically use government-issued texts in which wars – and there have been many in the region over the centuries – are portrayed in "us versus them" terms with ancient wrongs visited again and again.

The Joint History Project, run by the Greek-based Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe (CDRSEE), has translated the books into Greek, Serbian, and Albanian, and has begun training teachers how to use them.

Dubravka Stojanovic, a professor of history at the University of Belgrade, has witnessed first hand how history is used for political means. Under Slobodan Milosevic, the country's textbooks were changed in 1993, during the Bosnian war.

"The aim of that change was to show that the peoples in ex-Yugoslavia lived in constant conflict since the 12th century or so," she says. "The intention was to show that the war was something normal; that it was the normal state of things for Serbians and Croats to hate each other."

Now, says Dr. Stojanovic, who is editor of the Serbian editions of the series and who helped organize some of the first teacher-training efforts in Serbia, the texts are being changed again, this time to vilify communists.

Government support withdrawn

The Serbian government originally supported the CDRSEE's books, and the minister of education appeared at their national launch. But after critics accused the books – and their editor – of being anti-Serbian, the government withdrew its support.

Stojanovic and others are now waiting to see what will happen when a new government is formed, a process that

has stalled as political parties negotiate new coalitions in the wake of recent elections.

For organizers, though, the project is not just a matter of putting better books into teachers' hands. It requires them to begin teaching in an entirely new way.

Across much of the region, history is taught largely as a series of facts that students are expected to memorize and regurgitate. The joint history project wants students to analyze the past for themselves. With its focus on cultural and social history, it tries to humanize groups who may have often been thought of as enemies.

"We also like to include children and women in history, not just soldiers and politicians and big men," explains Koulouri. "We try to show that these experiences are not exclusive to one nation."

Not everyone is ready to listen to that perspective. In Greece, a debate is raging over a new history textbook for 12-year-olds, which some groups accuse of softening the atrocities of the Ottoman Empire. The powerful Greek Orthodox Church and nationalist groups want the book removed and say that the CDRSEE's books – which have been approved but are not the official curriculum – are guilty of the same sins.

Waning interest in region hurts funding

One of the project's biggest barriers is finding funding to complete translation into the region's remaining languages and providing enough training. Nenad Sebek, CDRSEE's director, estimates that it needs an additional \$1 million in funding. But, she says, donors are losing interest in the region, even though many of its conflicts still simmer: Cyprus remains divided; Kosovo's final status is still uncertain; and tensions occasionally flare between Greece and Turkey, who are both members of NATO but share a land-mined border.

"The international interest, specifically the American interest, has shifted elsewhere," he says. "It's too early for the donors to pull out.... All you need to do is look at Kosovo, or even Bosnia."

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