INTRODUCTION

The Tyranny of History

by CHRISTINA KOULOURI
Chair of the History Education Committee
Democritus University of Thrace

When discussing the impact of the teaching of history on interethnic conflicts, there is a tendency to take into account only school curricula or textbooks. It seems that some think that the content of textbooks is directly infused into children’s minds and immediately transformed into historical consciousness. Were that the case, a change in textbooks’ contents could easily lead to a change of the way pupils think of their national past. We all know of course that things are not so simple. Textbooks alone are not responsible for national stereotypes and their revision cannot 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. In fact, all agents of school history-curricula, textbooks and teachers-are complementary and the real content of school history is defined
by their interplay. In this brief text I will attempt to illustrate, using the experience acquired in six workshops, the condition of history teaching in Southeastern Europe focusing on the educational system, the contents of textbooks and the teaching methods. Then I will try to formulate some general suggestions regarding how to improve the situation and to indicate possible areas of intervention.

The educational system
The system of production, authorization and distribution of textbooks is very different from one Balkan country to the other. There are very centralized systems where textbooks are produced and distributed by the Ministry of Education (Yugoslavia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Greece, Albania, Cyprus) and less centralized systems where the free market of textbooks prevails and the Ministry of Education publishes curricula and authorizes textbooks (Croatia, FY Republic of Macedonia, Slovenia, Romania, Bulgaria, Turkey). This reality is not dichotomous: state control can be stricter in the second case if curricula are very detailed and if textbooks writers are obliged to observe them closely in order to get the authorization. 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. This is the reason why every attempt to revise textbooks should involve—at least in an ultimate phase—the ministries of education.

The content: a “neutral” school history
The analysis of the contents of school history is a delicate job. A superficial analysis may persuade us that Balkan textbooks include few negative or hostile attitudes towards neighboring peoples. Most of the writers want to be “politically correct” and avoid negative adjectives or explicitly hostile phrases. In many countries, history textbooks are factual descriptive accounts of political and military events without any evaluation or value judgements. Nevertheless, there are underlying ethnocentric stereotypes that cannot be detected at first sight but which can prove to be more effective and thus dangerous. These stereotypes lie in the very structure of the historical narrative, in historical concepts, in periodization, in vocabulary and terminology.

These elements do not belong exclusively to school history but are closely related to historiographical tradition, academic history and research. Chronology and terminology are not innovations of school history; they observe long-lived historiographical canons. Some terms that have been imposed for the description of historical events or historical periods reflect negative attitudes. This is the case of the terms “Ottoman yoke” or “Ottoman occupation”—gradually disappearing from textbooks—but also of many other terms that can not be discussed here. Furthermore, the input of academic history in school history could fertilize the latter, particularly when historical research brings new perspectives in the interpretation of the past and relativizes historical “truths”.

The other face of “neutral” school history is that of omissions and silences. Rather than present negative images, textbooks choose to be silent. The result of silence is poor knowledge and ignorance of the others’ history. Balkan textbooks include very little Balkan history whereas there is considerable coverage of national and of Western history. In all Balkan countries, national history covers more than 50% of school history. In curricula and textbooks where there is an attempt to reduce the percentage of national
history, the counterweight is offered by Western European and World history. Pupils are asked to learn about the American and the French Revolution, about China and Japan but they are taught almost nothing about the Balkans or even their close neighbors. In fact, the knowledge about the neighbor's history is filtered through the ethnocentric vision of the past. The neighbor's history belongs to one's national history since the neighbors exist only when they "meet" with one's nation, most of the times in a conflictual situation of crisis or war. We can understand the impression created by this introverted, "presbyopic" view of history where the close "others" appear rarely and when they do appear they bear the mask of an enemy. Of course, this general impression is not found in all history textbooks or in all countries. Many differences can be detected from one country to the other but also between the textbooks of the same country even under a state-centered system (as in the Greek case).

Nevertheless most of the differences are superficial. The national narrative veiled by history textbooks is structured on the same matrix. This was one of the main common elements in the Balkans that textbooks analysis has unveiled. This matrix consists of a superiority/inferiority complex and of a tendency of victimization of one's people. The ethnocentric narration of the past implies national superiority that can be proved implicitly or explicitly through military or cultural exploits. This twofold process is found particularly in Turkish and Greek textbooks respectively. Turkish textbooks insist on a victorious military advance through the centuries while Greek textbooks emphasize cultural continuity and cultural achievements. Victimization is most obvious in the Serbian case, although many countries' textbooks contain an underlying feeling of historical "injustices".

A second common element to be found in Balkan textbooks concerns the ambivalent attitude towards the West. It has already been pointed out that Western history occupies a considerable percentage of school history in all Balkan countries at the expense of regional history (only in FYR of Macedonia's textbooks is Balkan history presented on an equal basis). There is no doubt that the West is a political and cultural model to be followed and imitated especially for the countries in democratic transition. The wish to be part of (Western) Europe influences the way national past is looked upon. The process of rewriting national history after 1989 implies the westernization of the national past. We are confronted here with the "future's past" - a phrase used as the title of the fourth workshop and inspired by Reinhart Koselleck's famous book on historical time. History is written again under a very different perspective and the past is re-interpreted according to the planning of the future. The future more than the present is defining the past and the vision of the national past is modelled by the vision of the national future, as is the case in Albanian textbooks.

This "new" history which is produced and propagated by textbooks published after 1989 is mostly anti-communist and pro-western. Western civilization and political system are highly esteemed while communist past is entirely rejected or silenced. Nevertheless it is very difficult to annihilate all vestiges of an official historical culture which has been anti-western for decades. Such vestiges cannot always be found in textbooks but they can be transmitted by teachers especially of the older generation. On the other hand, anti-western attitudes exist hidden or not in most Balkan societies as a reaction to the presence of conflicting foreign policies in the region for the last two centuries. The ambivalent attitudes towards the West are comprised of admi-
ration, fear, feelings of discrimination and of manipulation, a quest of legitimization in glorious periods of the national past. Consequently, the use of European or World history as a tool to reduce ethnocentrism in school history can prove to be inadequate and ineffective.

A third common element that can be revealed in history textbooks is the concept of national territory. In fact the narration of the national past is located within a national space with more or less clearly determined borders. The point of reference is mainly the present nation-state but there is a tendency to identify as “ours” territories that are not included within state borders. In most cases, the nation is presented as larger than the state. Respectively, the endurance of the nation is proved through continuity of statehood (all contemporary nation-states are seeking for predecessors in ancient, medieval or modern times). It is obvious that the description of national territory as larger than state territory can generate irredentist tendencies and territorial claims on neighboring countries. This evolution can be reasonably expected in an area where state borders have been redefined recently. Perhaps this is another facet of the “future’s past” narrated in Balkan schools.

The comparative analysis of textbooks has also proved that national histories are based on opposing or mutually rejected national myths. The same events are described and interpreted in a very different way and with a very different vocabulary depending on the “center” of the narration. In this respect, the Greeks and other Christian Balkan peoples use the term “fall of Constantinople” while the Turks use the term “conquest of Istanbul”. In other cases, the same heroes, sometimes under different names, belong to different national histories (as is the case of Iancu de Hunedoara for the Romanians or Hunyady Janos for the Hungarians). This history, paradoxically shared and at the same time exclusive, is the real common history of the region. It comprises the fragments of a “broken mirror” – the title that we used for the sixth workshop dealing with the former Yugoslavia. In this latter case, as in the case of Cyprus, recent traumatic experiences which are translated into emotional teaching (by textbooks or by teachers) undermine attempts of approachment.

The teaching of history assumes the duty of translatating memory into history. Because of the trauma of the recent war and of the fear of a new one, in some Balkan countries this duty seems to be as much urgent as impossible (Bosnia could be a good example in this respect). The experience of Second World War could help us to understand how much time it takes to integrate traumatic historical events into historiography and school history. After a fifty years period, we are still questioning the contents and the methods of teaching the Holocaust. That’s why we have to be realistic and accept the limits of textbooks’ revision in some cases. The focus of innovation has to be kept on the general concept of the goals and of the methods of school history and to take into account the readiness of history teachers. 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.

The strategies of change

How then can we change history teaching in order to promote democratic citizenship and tolerance and eliminate conflict-producing stereotypes? Are we ready and capable of such a change and what are the strategies that we have to follow? It is obvious that a panacea does not exist. Balkan countries are in different stages of economic, political and social development and have different recent experiences that vary between authoritarian political systems, par-
lementarism, dictatorships, wars, migrations etc. Aside from the differences, there are of course similarities and analogies which allow us to contemplate common strategies.

Let me summarize the proposals that have been formulated during the workshops:

- Contrary to traditional national history which tries to teach homogeneity—not only of "us" but also of the "others", school history should try to teach diversity. Teaching diversity means teaching how to live together in the multi-ethnic and multi-cultural societies characteristic of today's Europe. The appropriate teaching method for such an approach could be comparative history.

- The teaching of history should challenge the strong belief that history is "objective" i.e. that "our" history is objective and that there is only one truth, "our" truth. The deconstruction of historical "truth" can be achieved by presenting the others' "truth" i.e. the point of view of the other, that of the "enemy" on the same event. This approach might be an appropriate method to teach conflict issues.

- The "new" history (Balkan or just national) should not be a fictitious and illusive construction of a harmonious past. The old construction is not to be replaced by a new construction. On the contrary, conflicts should be dealt with and not silenced because ignorance generates stereotypes. Presenting the conflicts not only with the "others" but also within the nation furthermore helps to undermine the idea of national homogeneity which is the hard core of ethnocentric history.

- Political and military history which prevail in textbooks of most Balkan countries should be reduced to the benefit of economic, social and cultural history. History of everyday life instead of epic heroic accounts might also be more interesting for children.

- Cultural history is a field where common historical experiences can be described and analyzed even for periods of conflicts and crisis. For example the experience of war is something that people share in their everyday lives, a common feature that can be integrated into an alternative teaching of history. It is also a field where interdisciplinary approach can be applied.

- Local history could also be an alternative method of teaching history both for historical and pedagogical reasons. The pupil's village or town could be a more attractive and efficient field for studying multicultural societies and for deconstructing strong and persistent national myths.

- The teaching of history should also try to make history a more interesting school subject by introducing new teaching materials and innovative new methods. As a rule, pupils think that history is boring and old-fashioned. Consequently, if we are to revise the contents of school history, we also have to revise teaching methods in order to create a history lesson which is interesting, stimulating and which attracts the attention of students.

- Contents and methods are to a considerable extent dependent on the general concepts determining the goals of history teaching. Why do we learn and teach history? "To inspire patriotism", would be the most common answer in the region (but also in most European countries). It seems though that the goals of history teaching should be redefined and focus primarily on the development of critical thinking, of comprehensive understanding of the past and of tolerance to the others.

* This publication includes brief papers written spontaneously which reflect thoughts, preliminary conclusions and eventual suggestions on the status of history teaching
in Southeastern Europe. The authors come from throughout the region, from Slovenia to Cyprus and from Romania to Albania. They belong to the new generation of academics-researchers and university teachers, and are mostly historians. Two contributors are school history teachers. Some, such as Neven Budak, Snjezana Koren and Bozo Repe, are already authors of history textbooks. Others have worked on curricula development or on the authorization of history textbooks. They are all members of the History Education Committee of the Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe and have been carrying out a series of regional workshops dealing with the teaching of sensitive and controversial issues in the history of the region.

The workshops aimed to address more practical and immediate problems of history and history teaching in primary and secondary schools and to investigate the possibilities of eliminating “conflict-producing” national stereotypes from textbooks. Each workshop was organized as follows: a questionnaire was distributed to participants and filled out prior to the meeting*; a report was produced which provided a description of the situation in each country, a general survey and, when possible, conclusions were drawn regarding possibilities of change and improvement. Apart from the answers to the questionnaire participants also presented papers dealing with issues of national identity formation, historical concepts, literature stereotypes, historiography and historical research etc.

The first six workshops 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. The papers presented and the discussions which followed contributed considerably to an understanding of the specific problems and established the necessary framework for comparison. All participants were critical of the textbooks in use and recognized the need to revise textbook contents, teaching methods and to produce alternative teaching materials.

This publication is the product of serious textbook and curricula analysis which was conceived of not as an academic exercise but as the documented basis for more active intervention in the field of school history. What truly unites the members of the History Education Committee is not just common scientific jargon but the willingness to be active citizens in the Balkans.

* All questionnaires are published here in the Appendix (pp. 109-111).