

“Clio in the Balkans. The Politics of History Education,”
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Balkans
Historiography and Nationalism
The Teaching of History in Countries of the Balkan Peninsula

By EVANGELOS KOFOS

A 549-page volume comes to stir the waters, the usually stagnant and polluted waters, of the most arduous procedure in the relations of the Balkan peoples: the theorization and teaching of their history. With an invocation to the Muse of History, Clio, scientists from all Southeast European countries, along with Cyprus, Slovenia, and Hungary, attempt a critical introspection, to the extent that this is possible, of the content and the way in which they teach their national history, especially in relation to “others”, who are usually their neighbours. The relatively closed circle of the 14 “workshop”-meetings, with the participation of almost exclusively Balkan historians and educators, chosen on the basis of their specified studies and experience, allowed for a fertile submission of penetrative analyses, testimonies and proposals, regarding the content of history school books and the teaching of history in general. In several cases there was significant, although not subversive, self-criticism, while in others there were evident difficulties in overcoming stereotypical views.

This large volume records only 10% of the proposals and proceedings of the meetings organized during the 2000-2001 period. Nonetheless, the reader gains a unique wealth of information and questions that transcend the boundaries of historiography and education, and compose a useful resource even for political analysts, sociologists, and diplomats. However, this is not your typical publication of the findings and proposals of a scientific meeting. In essence, this volume constitutes the completion of the first stage of a multilevel programme for the history of Southeast Europe, which is under the auspices of the international non-governmental organisation “Center for Democracy and Reconciliation of Southeast Europe”, seated in Thessaloniki. In this first stage, the programme began by studying and evaluating the material in the school books of all Balkan countries. Then, history teacher-professor “workshop”-seminars were organised, concerning the way certain crucial and controversial issues of Balkan history are presented, before an intervention with state, social and scientific bodies of all involved countries followed, aiming at adopting concrete and documented proposals.

The study of school history, geography and related books, undoubtedly offered the prime and raw material for deep thought, as it happened repeatedly in the past. It is well known that before and after the Second World War the way history was taught in European countries is considered one of the main reasons for the cultivation of the animosity inciting conflict between European peoples. In the 1990s, the ending of bipolarity and the crisis in Yugoslavia, shifted the core of this traditionally European problem to the Balkan region. International organisations, such as the Council of Europe, UNESCO, and many non-governmental organisations (NGOs), rushed to the region to offer their consultative services, as if this was a singularly “Balkan” phenomenon. What is revealed from the study of this volume, however,

is that the organizers of the “Joint History Project” rushed to “debalkanise” their work, incorporating it into the framework of a more general review and revision of European history and historiography as a whole.

In their long and extremely penetrative and informative introduction, the Head of the Programme, and editor of the volume, Christina Koulouri, Associate Professor at Democritus University of Thrace, correctly sets the problems of European historiography with a broader time, geographical and cultural context. She underlines that just like Balkan countries need to assimilate the basic principles of history as a modern science, Western Europe must “visit” and accept Eastern Europe, incorporating it, historically and historiographically, into a united Europe. Furthermore, Europe cannot ignore the fact that apart from Western European ideals and pillars of its identity – Christianity, rationalism, liberalism – there are other elements as well – Orthodoxy, Islam, Byzantium and the Ottoman Empire, the world of Russia and Turkey – which cannot be excluded from the concept of the European identity, if, finally, such a thing exists. In brief, we may say that the findings promoted in *Clio in the Balkans*, as an English speaking Balkan voice, may be the most effective channel through which to send the necessary messages both to the directly involved residents of the Balkans, as well as their Western neighbours.

The analysis of schoolbook contents used an interesting approach, through both macro-history, and local micro-history. The selection of the three common areas – Byzantium, the Ottoman Empire, the communist system – which are the cause of many national stereotypes and rivalry throughout the Balkans was rather inventive. “Native” historians and educators analyse historical and modern problems, where diametrically opposing views on bilateral military confrontations, common territorial claims and cultural monopolies are recorded, in pairs, on a micro-scale. In some cases, this bipolar confrontation involved more than two leading actors. Such as, for example, the case of the Turkish Historiography School, which records the insurrections of its Christian subjects as unjust and ungrateful, while the relative historiography of almost all their former subject peoples, boasts of their respective national liberation.

The more modern “open” problems are of much greater interest to Greek readers. Researchers Yasemin Soysal and Vasilia Antoniou, came to a truly original discovery in their joint study of the way the heritage of Byzantium and the Ottoman Empire are presented in Greek and Turkish schoolbooks. They found that the Turkish historical identity was formed as “state related”, with emphasis on the “national place”, while the Greek appears as a cultural identity, with its main emphasis on “national time” (page 36). In the text by FYROM historian, Nikola Jordanovski, a rare critical approach towards the stereotypical nationalistic appreciation of “macedonianism” is attempted, where the local (slavo)macedonian identity is characterised as a “completely modern product” and as a classical case of “self-definition through exclusion”. The editor of the volume correctly points out that the case of Macedonia may be the most dividing problem in the national history of the countries that possess or used to possess parts of the Macedonian region. In fact this was ascertained by two Bulgarian researchers, Alexei Kalionski and Tzvetan Tzvetanski, in a survey they carried out among secondary school students and first year university students throughout their country.

The case of Cyprus was the topic of a separate workshop, with the participation of Greeks and Turks, mainly Cypriots. Both sides found that the problem may be the most “traumatic” case, since the division of the island opened a deep rift in historiographic production, and attached the Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot identities to the Greek and Turkish identities respectively. The study of the role of religion and its teaching in school is a special experience for analysts, since Christianity, with its often conflicting relationship between Orthodoxy and

Catholicism, and Islam, which is in conflict with both Christian societies and Muslim Secular Turkey, are interwoven in Southeast Europe. At the same time, a mainly critical study of the way Judaism is presented or silenced in the text books of Eastern European countries as a whole, was included, although the author strays from the issue of religion, in order to criticise the views of European school historiography on question of the Middle East.

At the same time as the school historiography analysis phase, the Joint History Project moved to its second phase with the organization of seven training seminar-“workshops” for primary and secondary education teachers. Their aim was to “visit” specific contradictory issues and look at the way they were taught. These include the Balkan Wars, WWI and the founding of Yugoslavia, WWII and the phenomenon of “the resistance” and “the traitors”, the founding of the Albanian state, the Ottoman Empire and the birth of national states, and, finally, the common history of the Republic of Cyprus.

In her conclusions Prof. Koulouri eloquently reviews the essence of the two rounds of work: these meetings, she underlined, proved that getting to know the “other” is just as important as the scientific word recorded in this volume. She affirmed that the dynamics of human contact is far more powerful than scientific evidence. That is why she believes that “any changes to the teaching of history will most probably be due to sensitised teachers, rather than impersonal state bodies”. Teacher meetings affirmed that there is a critical mass of people in the Balkans today, with the same problems, questions and visions, who, despite their different perceptions, which are indeed present, and their lingual differences, “can speak the same language, the Balkan “Koine”, which is none other than the scientific language of history”(page 17).

All that remains is the Programme’s third phase, which will be put into action immediately after the volume is published. It is, in fact, an unusual kind of lobbying. Translated into local languages, the main conclusions, along with related questionnaires, will be sent to state, scientific and educational bodies, in general, so that they do not remain just dead words. They should incite broader social circles to think and lead to more substantial intervention, far from the dogmatism of extreme nationalistic notions and the extremism of post modern questioning of the importance of historiography. Because, what it all comes down to is that necessary reforms in the teaching of history, build long-lasting measures of trust where military, ideological and cultural conflicts used to be nurtured and cultivated. The road ahead is long, but worth taking.

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