

International Society for History Didactics  
ISHD  
University of Tallinn  
27-30 September 2006

Historical Consciousness Historical Culture

**Politics questions history education  
Debates on Greek History Textbooks**

Paper presented to the International Conference of ISHD in Tallinn

Maria REPOUSSI  
School of Education  
Aristotelian University of Thessaloniki  
marrep@eled.auth.gr

Debates on History and/or Social Studies Textbooks constitute a global historical phenomenon in contemporary world. To cite the well-known phrase of Henri Moniot, the textbook, witness for what happening in teaching practice<sup>1</sup> is in the same time the "result of political, economic and cultural activities, battles, and compromises"<sup>2</sup>. These debates are viewed as cultural wars and they manifested in many countries, in Japan, Korea, India, USA, etc. If there is a common feature in these cultural wars is the relationship between politics and History education.

In Greece as in many other countries school history textbooks trigger intense reactions and controversies. In order to comprehend the physiognomy of these debates, we must visit the context of these textbooks, the curricula aspects of the context of History Education in Greece.

### **I. The History Curriculum**

In Greece, History Education is under a regime of strict supervision by the state, 'a status of a hostage'<sup>3</sup>. Some sides of this status are the following:

1. School history is required to follow a **centrally planned and detailed Curriculum**, obligatory for all the schools in the country. This programme is almost exclusively oriented on Greek history and on the celebration of events that highlight the glorious Greek past. What is involved is essentially a genealogy of the nation.

---

<sup>1</sup> 'Image la plus directe et la plus tangible de la réalité scolaire', Moniot H., *Didactique de l'histoire*, Paris, Nathan, 1993, p. 199-200

<sup>2</sup> Apple M. & Smith C. (1991), *The Politics of the Textbook*, Routledge, New York and London, 1991, pp. 1-2

<sup>3</sup> For the expression see Mitafidis T., "The hostage status of school history in a regime of state supervision", in Repousi M., "History Textbooks: Arguments and Counterarguments", *Contemporary Education* 125 (2002), pp. 77-89 (in Greek)

The children's exposure to history starts<sup>4</sup> from the age of nine through Ancient Times History which is essentially Greek ancient history with a little Roman history. In the fifth class Byzantine history, which is taught as Mediaeval Greek History. In the sixth class Modern and Contemporary Greek history (see table 1)<sup>5</sup>, which is also Greek History ( see in table 2) <sup>6</sup>. The same cycle is repeated almost exactly in the junior high school and with some minor deviations in senior high school, where the children also have the option of being taught European history. They are given no option whatsoever of studying -independently of Greek History- world history and in the compulsory education syllabus there are only allusions to European or World history. This totally Hellenocentric model also informs the writing of the school textbook for each class which is distributed at the behest of, and the

<sup>4</sup> The History Curriculum considers that the first exposure of children is in the age of eight through mythology.

<sup>5</sup> Table 1

<b>classes</b>	<b>content</b>
Third class of primary school [8-9 years old]	[Greek] mythology
Forth class [9-10 years old]	[Greek] Ancient History
Fifth class[10-11 years old]	Medieval -Byzantine- History
Sixth class[11-12 years old]	Modern & Contemporary [Greek] History
First class of junior high school 12-13 years old	Ancient <b>Greek</b> & Roman History
Second class [13-14 years old]	Medieval [Greek] -Byzantine- History

<sup>6</sup> Table 2

Europe	<u>4 lessons/chapters/hours</u> Renaissance & Reformation, Great Discoveries, Enlightenment, French revolution
Ottoman occupation	<b>10 hours</b>
Greek National Revolution	<b>14 hours</b>
Modern Greek State	<b>7 hours</b>
Greece in 20th century	<b>15 hours</b>

expense of, the State. Any and every attempt to alter the above model will meet with resistance from some politicians, political groups or parties, and increasingly in recent years the Greek Church. This stance is shared and defended by a section of public opinion. Supporters of the reform of History Education are accused of seeking de-Hellenization, historical forgetfulness, subordination to the agenda of globalization and foreign decision-making centres, loss of Greek identity.

## **2. The unique textbook**

School history is allowed to use only one textbook per class, leaving educators no margin for individual choice. This phenomenon has serious consequences for the character of the lesson, as its basic tool, the school textbook, on the one hand is not subject to competition and so has no reason to be competitive and on the other hand is identified with true, and the ONLY true, knowledge<sup>7</sup>. Until recently this book was written to order for the ministry bearing the title National Education and Religion. Recently this state of affairs has changed and the writing of school textbooks is opened to competition. Sample chapters are submitted to outside assessors and on the basis of this assessment the writing of the textbooks is assigned to specific authors. The new school textbooks resulting from this selection procedure, which are present in the schools from September of this year, are subjected to close scrutiny by public officials, politicians and the Church for the purpose of ascertaining whether they faithfully follow the ethnocentric mode of exposition or deviate from it. To the extent they deviate they become a subject for public criticism with a view to having them revised or withdrawn from circulation.

This is the case for the new history textbook, with accompanying educational material, for the 6<sup>th</sup> class of primary school, *Modern and Contemporary Times*, which is being taught in the primary schools from the beginning of September 2006<sup>8</sup>. This textbook attempts to come to grips in a creative way with the Hellenocentrism of the History Curriculum and to transcend its ethnocentrism. It does not regurgitate nationalistic stereotypes. It presents itself as a tool for historical literacy and historical culture, introducing methodological norms into teaching and learning in history.

## **II. The controversies**

### **1. The national past**

Approaching the related controversy<sup>9</sup> we see that at the heart of the criticisms that are being made is a fear of abandonment of national self-determination as the prime element in human identity and in the shaping of the polity. Let us

---

<sup>7</sup> Koulouri C, "The battle over school textbooks", in Repousi M., "History Textbooks: Arguments and Counterarguments", *Contemporary Education* 125 (2002), pp. 94-96 (in Greek)

<sup>8</sup> Repousi M., Andreadou C., Poutachidis A. and Tsivas A, "In Later and Contemporary Years", Ministry of Education and Religion, Pedagogical Institute, Schoolbook Publishing Organization, Athens 2006. (in Greek)

<sup>9</sup> ETHNOS, 15/9/2006, ELEFTHEROTYPIA, 15/9/2006, TA NEA, 12/09/2006, 17/09/2006 and 18/09/2006, ETHNOS 19 and 20/03/2006

examine more closely the objections that are being raised. The book is accused of:

1. downplaying the role of the Church in national awakening and the Greek Revolution. "In the History book for 6<sup>th</sup> grade of the primary school", said the Archbishop of Athens and all Greece in the official ceremony for an award of highest distinction to the Rector of the University of Athens, "there is no mention of the contribution of the Church to the success of the Revolution of 1821. Is that fair? Eleven patriarchs, one hundred bishops and six thousand priests written off with a stroke of the pen when they have given their lives? We intend to lodge an official protest and we would like to emphasize this. But why should such things occur to a people like ours, who are proud of the distinction we have acquired in History?"

"There is a need", he adds, "for Hellenism and for men and women of education and of the Church in our country to rally in defence of the vital flame by which our fathers lived, which was created in this place by them and now has become the object of ridicule and renunciation through the apostasy of those who in the name of so-called "modernization" try to remove from the character of this people the transcendental principles and values on the basis of which this nation found its feet. Today we live in an era when faith is renounced, national symbols are ridiculed and an attempt is underway to break down the defences of the believer and of the citizen."<sup>10</sup>

2. concealing the historical truth by painting a rosy picture of the coexistence of Greek-speaking and Turkish-speaking populations under the Ottoman Empire<sup>11</sup>

3. belittling military and political events in which the self-sacrifice and heroism of the fighters of 1821 is conspicuous

4. overrating the role of women and underrating the role of national heroes<sup>12</sup>

5. deliberately emphasizing the dark side of history such as civil wars and internecine conflicts<sup>13</sup>.

6. Serving foreign interests<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> [http://www.ecclesia.gr/greek/holysynod/holysynod.asp?id=721&what\\_sub=d\\_typou](http://www.ecclesia.gr/greek/holysynod/holysynod.asp?id=721&what_sub=d_typou)

<sup>11</sup> "The period of Turkish rule is 'rationalised' and 'idealised'. Reading the relevant chapters one derives the impression that Turks and Greeks co-existed most harmoniously. Massacres, crimes, looting, humiliation, forced conversions to Islam, abduction of children, all this is passed over in silence. Under the worst slavery known to human beings in 'modern history', the Nation was apparently more or less on a picnic. ", [http://www.antibaro.gr/society/natsios\\_biblia.php](http://www.antibaro.gr/society/natsios_biblia.php) & <http://www.e-grammes.gr/article.php?id=2239>, 3/9/2006. Also see SIMERINI 19/08/2006 & 20/08/2006

<sup>12</sup> "For those who have not yet understood, political correctness on the one hand dictates that one should devalue the role of the armed guerrilla leaders and over-estimate the role of women...." <http://www.styx.gr/index.cfm?Action=TDY&TDiD=310>, 26/02/2006

<sup>13</sup> "And strange to say there is an entire chapter on internecine conflicts. The reason is simple. Pupils must not be allowed to feel too proud of their ancestors. That amounts to ethnocentrism. A dishonouring of heroism, then, and projection of insignificant incidents from the Struggle which serve to undermine the sense of national unity. "

<sup>14</sup> "In the unit 'Independent state of Hellas' there is the most provocative absence of a special chapter on the Struggle for Macedonia. This deliberate exclusion becomes all the more suspicious when it occurs in a period of most intense questioning of our national name by the Skopjeans. A very minor reference, as a sub-sub-heading, to the Macedonian Question, leaves unanswered the question of who Macedonia belongs to. There is emphasis on the multicultural character of the Macedonia of that time.

7. Seeking to impose de-Hellenization, Ottoman-style servility and subordination to the political conjuncture dictated by Greek-Turkish détente<sup>15</sup>

Some of these arguments are also present in the criticism already being directed against the textbooks on the Balkans<sup>16</sup>, which is expected to intensify with release of the Greek translation. These books have been published in the framework of the Joint History Project<sup>17</sup> of the Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe and cover a total of eleven Southeast European countries. They attempt to introduce a breach into the separate nationalistic historical narratives of the countries of this region, incorporating the alternative viewpoint and highlighting the manner in which the other nationalities perceived or experienced the events.

In the recent past, objections on the national past presented on History textbooks led to direct interventions of the ministry of education. This is a tactic that has been implemented successfully during the 1980's when the socialist government of PASOK has been changed the textbooks of History<sup>18</sup>.

In the mid-1980 reactions by unofficial church organizations and denunciations of "attempts at dechristianization and undermining of the foundations of Hellenic civilization" in the book by Lefteris Stavrianos "*History of the Human Race*" led to parliamentary questions from spokespersons for the conservative side of politics. They were followed by teachers' organizations' declaring that they would defend "the foundations of education, that is to say "the nation" and "Orthodoxy", votes being taken in the Parliament, condemnations of the textbook at conferences of theologians. On that occasion the controversial issue was adoption of the theories of Darwin on the evolution of human race. The book was finally withdrawn

---

Its Greek identity, instead of being clearly demonstrated, is relegated to a footnote. When they examine our official historiography, the Skopjeans will be quite right to ridicule it. And they will use it as an unanswerable argument. The aim of the writers, proxies of the New Order, is crystal clear. Prepare the generation who will accept the surrender of the name." ELEFTHEROTYPIA 02/03/2006

<sup>15</sup> "...for the pertinent fact of the Genocide of the Hellenism of Asia Minor, in particular the Black Sea Greeks. Let the Black Sea Greeks learn, then, that according to the 'new' school history, the history that will be taught to Greek children from this September onwards, there was no genocide, merely a peaceful exchange of populations. Nowhere is there any mention of the words genocide or massacre or crime. Murderers and victims all lumped together. The Trojan Horse is already inside the city, and we reproach the Turks for not recognizing massacres, while further down there is emphasis on the Holocaust of the Jews." (The column challenges and invites mayors, citizens' organizations, associations of Black Sea Greeks, to react decisively so that these books stay out of the hands of the children. They are dangerous and products of ignorance.)

See *Ardin* 58 (2006), pp. 30-42

<sup>16</sup> Four History Workbooks edited by Christina Coulouri, *The Ottoman Empire, Nations and States in Southeast Europe, The Balkan Wars and, The Second World War*

<sup>17</sup> "The project aims to create and sustain a network of scholars to counterbalance nationalist ideology, to evaluate history textbooks currently used in schools, in particular, bringing to light the way that other ethnicities are portrayed in the textbooks. The JHP aims in the long-term to revise ethnocentric school history teaching by avoiding the production of stereotypes, by identifying attitudes that encourage conflict, by suggesting alternative teaching methods, and by promoting the idea of multiple interpretations of one event. History that instils values of academic rigor and critical analysis would serve as a solid basis for democracy, reconciliation and tolerance in Southeast Europe," See [http://www.see-jhp.org/about\\_project.html](http://www.see-jhp.org/about_project.html) & *Balkan Horizons* 6 (2001)

<sup>18</sup> Mavroskoufis D., *School history in secondary education (1975-1995). The post-dictatorship version of the Myth of Sisyphus*, Athens, Kyriakidis editions, 1997, pp.103-108. (in Greek)

from circulation. In 1989 the same author's "History of the Modern Greek State" met a similar fate. Both books were withdrawn by the Socialist PASOK government, following intense reactions, national and religious in content. In that period the school textbook was so closely identified with the governmental authority from which it emanated that not only did the parliamentary Opposition regard it as more or less the creation of the Education Minister but the government intervened to alter the content of specific chapters without any consultation with the author. This happened with the Later and Contemporary History of B. Kremmydas for the third year of junior high school. On the plea of strengthening Greek history the Education Ministry cut the chapters of the book dealing with postwar Greece and contemporary events. The book was finally withdrawn in 1991 following detection of "ideological one-sidedness", with an accompanying proposal for its replacement with another book "placing greater emphasis on Greek history" and "more appropriate for use in teaching".

## 2. The Cypriot past

In 2002, with the official justification of a typographical error, the same fate was reserved for the *History of the Modern and Contemporary World, 1815-2000*<sup>19</sup> In this instance the starting point for the controversy<sup>20</sup> was a question by a prominent Opposition parliamentarian concerning the national liberation struggle in Cyprus and the character of the national liberation organization EOKA B. The controversial sentence, which was seen as insulting the struggle of the Cypriots, was the following:

"At a time when the Third World was being shaken by radical anti-colonial movements according priority not only to national liberation but also to social progress, in Cyprus the EOKA organization of General Grivas was promoting a socially ultra-conservative nationalism." "

The parliamentary question is worth a closer examination. The text of the question raised the following issues<sup>21</sup>:

1. It linked the proper approach to national issues "with precise and comprehensive knowledge of the facts" because "history is the guide for shaping the present and planning the future of a nation".
2. It considered that the controversial sentence on the character of EOKA constituted a "provocative misrepresentation of historical truth" and that because "the entirety of the Hellenism of Cyprus, with the Church at its head, was struggling to free itself from the English occupation, demanding "'Enosis' with mother Greece". "Does the writer not know," demanded the deputy, "that at the altar of that holy struggle the blood was shed of the heroes whose memory all honour today?"
3. It accused the Education Ministry of deviation from the principle of historical truth, of undermining the cohesion of the nation and strengthening

---

<sup>19</sup> By Kokkinos G., Alexaki E., Vatouyiou S., Gatsotis P., Kavoura Th., Kontogiorgis E., Kostoglou Sp., Marketos Sp., Papatheodorou G., Prousalis E., Raptis K. & Syriatou A.

<sup>20</sup> See M. Repousi., "Chronicle", in Repousi M. "History Textbooks: Arguments and Counterarguments", *Contemporary Education* 125 (2002), pp.79-89 (in Greek)

<sup>21</sup> Hellenic Parliament, Directorate of Parliamentary Regulation, Article 7404, 26.04.2002

enemy propaganda, and demanded it that it should intervene to rectify the situation.

4. It lent its support to the Cypriot educators declaring that they would not teach the book in question.

The next day the position of the Greek Minister of Education Petros Efthimiou was communicated to the daily press<sup>22</sup>. The minister had already requested removal of the paragraph in question. The same positions had been expressed by his Cypriot counterpart<sup>23</sup>, with whom he had agreed on reformulation of the relevant passage in textbooks to be used in Greek schools. In his statement, he emphasized that "reference to the national liberation struggle of Cyprus in schoolbooks is an act of recognition both of historical truth and of the national faith of the younger generation, since the heroes of the Cypriot national independence struggle...are models and examples for the Greek nation". .

The official reactions of the Education Ministry moved within the same framework of reference as those of the opposition. In addition they raised a new and serious question, openly exposing the power of the Education Ministry to censor a textbook that had been evaluated by its committees with the relevant jurisdiction, approved by the Pedagogical Institute and printed by the Greek School Book Organization. In short, the officials of the Ministry of Education had linked history to the inculcation of national loyalties in young people, had considered that historical truth had been distorted by the writers and had unceremoniously ordered corrective measures to be carried out for purposes of "rectification".

### III. Parliamentary Questions

On the basis of all the above, it is obvious that school history is subject to political scrutiny and political intervention. There is no other schoolteaching issue that interests that Greek parliament other than history. Questions from parliamentarians in the period from 1974 to the present testify to this. A study of the relevant documents leads to the conclusion that the greater part of the questions on these subjects have something specific in common: they defend the national chronicle of events of the heroic past as the only element that is worthy of being the subject of teaching in Greek schools. Parliamentarians use history as an election tool. They profess interest in social matters and protest vigorously against any reduction of school hours devoted to national history. Then there is the past at the local level. Parliamentarians ask the government questions on the history of the area in which they are elected and take note of any silences or distortions. Here the characteristic feature is intense localism and desire for the approval of their electoral clientele, taking care to underline the historical contribution that has been made by their locality. Emphasis on the battles that have been fought there, underlining of the point of a particular

---

<sup>22</sup> "History in Parliament. Speech by Efthimiou to rectify references to EOKA", Eleftheros Typos 30/04/2002. "Historic change. Following speech by A. Lykourezos extract on EOKA to be removed from teaching material, *Apogevmatini* 30/04/02 (in Greek)

<sup>23</sup> "Reference to ultraconservative nationalism of EOKA placed outside history", *To Vima* 30/04/02. Also see the *Enthemata* of *Avghi* newspaper, 2/6/02 (in Greek)

hero's origins. These are typical of the questions asked by Greek parliamentarians. They frequently resort to a discourse of "falsification" of history. They regard themselves as experts in the defence of historical truth, with which they are familiar from a position above, and outside of, historiography. In Greece, as in other countries, historical education is in the final analysis a public and political matter. This is evident from the political practice of the Greek parliament and the cultural wars that are observable all over the world in relation to history.

#### **IV. As a conclusion<sup>24</sup>**

Ethnocentric History and its options for ordering the past have for a century now hindered the cultivation of historical judgement by the citizens, men and women, of Greece. The nation's past, uniform, shared and one-dimensional, has for many years been the object of a single and unique idealized reading of school textbooks written until recently by writers – whether historians or not – who have been in agreement with the above logic. Teacher training, syllabuses, directives to teachers and students, have all reinforced the unquestionable character of our nation's truth. These options, which in the 19<sup>th</sup> century past were also supported by historiographical investigations in a similar vein, are today in conflict with the basic social function of History, which is to shape critically thinking people who understand the present and practise self-determination in a complex and in many ways contradictory reality. They are conducive to one-dimensional reading of the present and the past and thus downgrade children's capacity to think and to reach conclusions. And this is neither pedagogically sound nor, if I may say so, 'patriotic'. By contrast, what the ethnocentric history that children are taught in the schools did not prevent is the emergence of national crises. Many of these national crises have indeed ended up passing into the Greek collective memory as national failures. The Asia Minor Disaster, the territory of Eastern Thrace, the agreements for the exchange of populations and their property, the fate of the Greeks of Constantinople, the problem of Cyprus in general and in its changing specifics, are all examples of 'national failures', which moreover remain unexplained for the children who learn history in Greek schools. Unexplained, unless there is an intervention by a *deus ex machina* who in our case is none other than the responsibility and the culpability of the Foreign Powers and the enemies – mostly external but occasionally internal also – of the Nation. 'We' and 'You' are the two camps and the dividing line between them is justice. Justice without vested interests: class, gender, politics, is our homogeneous national bloc which, when it loses, has been divided, deceived, betrayed, coerced. The abovementioned edifice of national Greek school history, the perpetuation of the division between the just claims of Hellenism and its fortunes, or misfortunes, the attribution of responsibility to others, the erasure of events and information that deviate from the official

---

<sup>24</sup> The conclusion is part of a text published during the Cypriot Past debate. See the critique by Repousi M., "Do we want historically literate citizens?". TA NEA 13/6/2002

national narrative, the ultimately inexplicable fate of the just national claims, today is subject to serious questioning and well-documented criticism. For among much else, it devalues historical studies, generating negative attitudes among children to the study of history. It downgrades Greek school students, both boys and girls, because it fails to cultivate their historical thought and judgement. This downgrading amounts to a form of discrimination if considered in relation to the history education imparted in other member countries of the European Union and with the prospect of a genuinely integrated internal market. It lowers the status of teachers of history, turning them into cogs in a machine for the transmission of messages, shaping a problematic social profile for members of a recipient community for economic refugees with whom it desires to coexist harmoniously. It is associated with a problematic national identity that defines people one-dimensionally, preventing them from seeing themselves as part of other social, non-national structures. It leads to problematic relations with neighbouring states and with the Western world. For all the above reasons the authorities have attempted in recent years to introduce some modifications. One of them is for the writing of school history textbooks, also establishing adjudicating committees to evaluate them. But this open procedure for school textbook writing possesses a destabilizing potential for the national narrative that is taught in the schools.

The issue is interesting from a number of viewpoints, touching on questions of censorship, propriety and credibility and, ultimately, exposing the contradictions of a history education which, while remaining deeply ethnocentric, attempts to effect changes which it cannot sustain. But the changes are necessary if we want school pupils, boys and girls, to be historically literate. Many such changes are needed, among them a historically and pedagogically repatriated history teaching that can touch upon the sensitive areas of the national Greek history and implement a more contemporarily relevant reading. And this is not something that can go unobserved. It elicits reactions. Reactions not only from "hyper-patriotic" politicians but also reactions from educators who feel offended by revaluations of their nation's History. And others as well. Not all reactions are the same. The critical question that is relevant to all of them is nevertheless whether, and if so to what extent, we want history education that can contribute to the shaping of responsible, critically thinking and historically cultivated citizens. If the answer is in the affirmative, we should agree that this cannot occur through our continuing to dispense a once-and-for-all historical truth. Which truths should be supplemented, which interpretations superseded and how, are questions that will need to be answered many times on the basis of historically documented positions and applying the criterion of development of all children studying in schools. And this is something that is naturally of interest to many people, above all the history-teaching community and the educational community generally. Because apart from their opinions, educators in history also have the knowledge required for answering these questions. This knowledge should be respected by politics

