

Greek Church attacks history book

By Malcolm Brabant
BBC News, Athens

Controversy is raging in Greece over a new school history book, which critics say is designed to improve relations with Greece's ancient rival, Turkey.

Leading opposition is the Orthodox church, which says the book waters down the severity of Turkish brutality towards Greece over the centuries.

Critics say children's understanding of Greece's history will be corrupted.

But the book's authors and supporters say it is essential to soften language used to describe modern Greek history.

Once a year Greeks gather to celebrate independence. The ceremonies mark the day in 1821 when the war of liberation began and Greeks rose up against their rulers, the Turkish Ottoman empire.

It is a day of oral history for the young participants, when the country's elders recount details of Greek heroism and Turkish barbarity.

But the new text book, which is devoid of animosity towards the Turks and omits stories of violence, takes a different approach.

Public controversy

This is obvious especially when it refers to the war of independence and what the Greeks call the great catastrophe of 1922 when they were driven out of western Turkey.

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the bitter memories**
George Mustakis, theologian

"There won't be any clear identity of what the Greek fights were all about and why did we want to rebel against the Turks," Jeni Tutsis, a teacher, told the BBC.

The Orthodox church calls the book shameful because its role in the resistance movement and the shaping of the nation is also downplayed.

But theologian George Mustakis says it's essential to sto remove bigotry and extreme nationalism from accounts of the country's recent history.

"The book tries to eliminate the words which challenge and brings in front of us the bitter memories. It's a good thing, but we are not mature (enough) to accept such a book", George Mustakis said.

The government is refusing to withdraw the book from circulation but there may be some editorial changes.

This week the prime minister, Costas Karamanlis, made some interesting comments which some people interpreted as criticism of the text book.

He said that it was essential to study history in order to make sure that the mistakes of the past were not repeated.

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