



# Educational pretext for ideological attack

Academic Marla Repousi, head of the group that wrote the contentious primary school history textbook, talks to Kathimerini

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**W**hat will become of the primary school history textbook that has sparked such opposition? Education Minister Marietta Giannakou made it clear last week that "nobody is talking about withdrawing it. The Education Ministry's policy is formulated by its leadership."

The authors will make some changes in line with an Athens Academy report and proposals by teachers. But there is still significant opposition from some segments of the public, political parties and the Church, which want the book withdrawn.

They claim, variously, that the book distorts

history, conceals historical events, uses unscientific methodology and underrates the role of the Church in the 1821 struggle for independence.

The Holy Synod even claimed that the book contravenes Article 3 of the Constitution, which states that the Education Ministry must see to the national and religious education of Greek children. "This particular book contravenes the

Greek Constitution and attempts to manipulate the minds of young Greek pupils," the Synod stated.

Marla Repousi, assistant professor of history at Thessaloniki University and head of the authorial team, spoke to Kathimerini about the fate of the book in the coming school year, the changes to be made and the criticism she has received.

## Book to retain its structure

**Which parts of the book will the authors change?**  
It's too early to say exactly. We are at the stage of studying the comments. The writers have to be prudent because the idea is to move forward, not backward to where the scaremongering and undemocratic tactics want to take us.

**Where else in the book will there be changes?**

At this stage the changes mainly concern the introductions to the texts, because the attention and comments have focused on them.

The structure of the book, the overall methodological and scientific basis, will not change. The ratio of text to historical sources will not change, for instance. We are open to such changes, but they will emerge from an assessment of the "teachability" of the book. If teachers have difficulty managing the new method, we will take it seriously into account and work with the Pedagogical Institute on finding ways to rectify it. That will not be in the coming school year but the one after.

**In that case, should we expect a new, completely different book?**

We should expect an even better book. That is our goal and we hope teachers will help us with that and refuse to see the book through the eyes of its critics. They must stick to their own opinion and not get caught up in partisan pettiness.

In my view, the biggest problem for the book is not what is being said in public and on television but the echoes of that shouting in schools.

The book will be taught from the start of the school year in all Greek and Greek-Cypriot schools, and it is an incredible act of political irresponsibility to run down a book that the state and the competent authorities have deemed suitable for schools. Besides, this book is already in all schoolbags. Has anyone who makes their career on television wondered how children feel about being taught this book? How much their relation to history, knowledge, school and the state has been destabilized?

## Learning by discussion rather than absorption

**Apart from the comments in the Athens Academy report, what else will be taken into account in any changes to the book?**

All the observations we have received. We will study them with due attention and to the extent that they are compatible with the detailed syllabus and the stipulations for the writing of new textbooks and their entire philosophy, we will include them in the revised version. We hope that all this debate among the public, the team of writers, the community of historians and the state will benefit the book. I hope the same for our history education and culture in general.

**Do you think the book will be absorbed by pupils in the fifth grade on the basis of their knowledge and the teaching method applied in the first five classes of primary school?**

We don't want them to absorb it. We want to support a learning environment in which children study, discuss, think, draw conclusions and in that way learn history. Otherwise there would be no need for a change. We could have the previous books and claim yet another world record, that of

keeping the same schoolbooks for 20 years. Another record we can claim is for writing books or criticizing existing ones without having bothered to see what they are replacing or looking at their counterparts in other European countries.

**What are history books like in other European countries?**

They are far more oriented to European and world history than our books. There is more than one and they are written by teams of academics, historians and teachers who are specialists in their subject.

They set the children questions and organize the material in such a way that the questions can be answered. Their basic material combines text with historical sources in such a balance as to undermine the primacy of the text. They include different forms of textual and visual material. And this is because they follow contemporary approaches to teaching history.

**To what extent and the size of the book restrict the detailed presentation of historical figures?**

The text book has no size limitation; it has a disproportionately large amount of ma-

terial. How big should a book be for a child of 11 or 12 who has history lessons twice a week?

Other European states use shorter textbooks with fewer pages, or a larger book that is for the first three years of primary school.

The problem is the vast amount of material the book must cover. And that was not the choice of the team of writers. It complied with the demands of the syllabus. This is something that must change so our books, our teachers and, above all, our children can breathe.

As for historical figures, our



**The biggest problem for the book (right) is not what is being said in public and on television but the echoes of that shouting in schools,' said Marla Repousi, assistant professor of history at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, and head of the team that wrote the history textbook.**



perceptions that all people are historical figures, historical subjects, given that by our actions, thoughts and initiatives

we influence events, and we have an effect on developments. This perception is not absent from the book. Nor are

national heroes absent. What is absent is the identification of historical figures with national heroes.

### Eminent historians have faced criticism in the past

**What do you think are the main reasons behind the attacks on the book? Are they political or scientific and educational?**  
History in Greece has taught us that the reasons for disputes over textbooks are always ideological and political. Other educational and scientific reasons are added along the way that would not have emerged had the schoolbook not become the target of ideological attacks.

In 1984, for instance, the textbook for the third year of junior high school, written by Vasilis Kremmydas, one of the

most distinguished historians and professors of history in Greece, which was criticized for its ideological content, was eventually branded "anti-historical" and anti-educational because of its methodology and language.

In 1985, Lefteris Stavrianos's book "History of the Human Race," which was condemned for "atheism" and for overturning "the foundation of Greek civilization," ended up being judged "historically unfounded" and "educationally deficient." Remember that Stavrianos

(1914-2004), a professor at the University of Chicago, was also an eminent historian and the "father" of global history.

We keep seeing that the scientific and educational argument becomes an alibi for holding history education hostage to notions from the past so as to subvert any development and upgrading of history education for the children and the future citizens of Greece. I believe that this time we can and must handle it differently. We shouldn't let them take away another good schoolbook.