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TEACHING ON THE "BALKAN EXPRESS"

A Collaborative Attempt to Write History for Reconciliation

In the bitter winter of 1992, Sarajevo residents were under siege. While war raged in Yugoslavia, a group of historians sensed that nationalist histories were a danger to the future of a multi-ethnic Balkan Peninsula.
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IN THE 1980s, while still a student in Athens, I visited Sofia, the capital of Bulgaria, a country that at the time belonged to the so-called Eastern Bloc. Our guide took us to the Georgi Dimitrov Mausoleum. It was built in 1949, in the style of Lenin's Mausoleum in Moscow, to house the embalmed body of the Bulgarian Communist leader. In vain did I search for it during my recent visit there. It had been demolished in 1999, so that there would be no material *topos* of the previous Communist regime around which those yearning for its return could rally. In Tirana, the capital of Albania, a country that had decreed atheism compulsory in 1967, an imposing mosque has been built at the town center, within walking distance of the standing Catholic and Greek Orthodox cathedrals. Grim is the image of Sarajevo, the once-cosmopolitan Yugoslav metropolis, still bearing signs of its devastating siege during the Bosnian War, which lasted from April 5, 1992, to February 29, 1996.

Throughout these "stations" of what may be thought of metaphorically as the "Balkan Express"—after the legendary Paris-to-Istanbul Orient Express—one comes across the painful and dramatic effects of historical change, its vivid memory but also its concealment, the trauma of transition, the politics of memory, and the difficulties associated with coming to terms with the past. Here, the past is caustic, toxic, and ambivalent, the present haunted by post-traumatic stories that erode historical memory.

Historians in southeast Europe have been at the forefront of reflecting on these issues, in order to manage presentist readings of the past. The teaching of history is often part of a hegemonic narrative that emanates from central authorities. It may be tightly controlled by state agencies, such as ministries of education—but there may also be room for off-center voices and alternative readings. Educators have to learn how to teach a controversial and sensitive past in multi-ethnic classes whose students bear memories of the conflict. It is crucial that history teaching transcend ethnocentric education in countries where nationalist rivalries are resurrected ad infinitum.

Before attempting to respond to these challenges, let us define which region of Europe we are talking about and the conventions of historical education within it. The "Balkans" have—as does "Europe"—unclear boundaries, especially when the word is used not as a simple geographical term but as a reference to identity. If we see the Balkans as a "historical region," they comprise the entire Balkan Peninsula, from Istanbul and Athens to Ljubljana and Bucharest. This region, sometimes known by the neutral term southeast Europe, has a common past, stretching back centuries. Its history includes cohabitation, in the context of the multi-ethnic Byzantine and Ottoman Empires, and conflict, be it the Balkan Wars of 1912–13, the First and Second World Wars, or, more recently, the divisions of the Cold War.

Particularly traumatic were the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s. The massive destruction of towns and monuments, hundreds of thousands of dead, ethnic cleansing, and displacement of millions—all reminded us that the repulsive face of war has reappeared many times in 20th-century Europe. For Balkan historians, alarm bells rang as soon as war enveloped the region. Even as the Yugoslav Wars were raging, Croat and Serbian historians launched "Dialogues of Historians," a series of 10 international gatherings under the auspices of the Friedrich Naumann Foundation, which, between 1998 and 2005, brought together 165 scholars from the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, the Republic of Croatia, the Federal Republic of Germany, and the United States. In 1999, on the initiative of the Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe (CDRSEE), the Joint History Project (JHP) also got underway. Its aim was to record the state of affairs on the teaching of history across the Balkans, and then to propose changes in curricula through the publication of alternative educational materials for high school students.

The CDRSEE was an NGO founded in 1998 in Greece by businessmen and diplomats of southeast European countries to promote reconciliation, democracy, and economic development in a region still ravaged by the war. They made history education one of their top priorities and invited historians from the region to develop projects for revising textbooks and curricula. A group of more than 30 historians representing all the countries in the region, mainly academics who were experts in contemporary history and history education, responded to the challenge and formed the History Education Committee, which carried out the JHP.

Such initiatives were grounded in the certainty that continuing to teach the nationalistic history of the sort that dominated not only the classroom but the public sphere would undermine any prospect of peaceful coexistence and would do little to prevent the outbreak of new wars. Nationalistic histories, furthermore, propped up the widespread discourse of nationalism and populism, helping to enable the rise of far-right rhetoric and threatening the cohesion of all Balkan societies, within and without the former Yugoslavia.

The JHP's plan to revise the teaching of history through civil society stakeholders was certainly utopian. In this region, the educational system operates under the rigid

control of government agencies; textbooks are approved by departments of education on the basis of rigid curricular requirements, and teachers enjoy precious little autonomy. In Greece, for example, there is one textbook per subject and per class, approved and produced by the Ministry of Education and distributed free of charge to public schools, that dominates teaching. But even in countries where free-market reform allowed multiple school textbooks after years of state monopoly, and where pedagogical methods and new technologies (including computers, internet access, and digital documents) were modernized, the gist of teaching is still purely ethnocentric: national, European, and, to a lesser extent, world history are taught, yet the narrative is structured around the national "we." "History wars" regularly break out with the appearance of new textbooks—a phenomenon that is not exclusive to the Balkans, of course, but that still highlights the direct link between the teaching of history and issues of national identity.

I coordinated the JHP from the very beginning. Working constructively with a large group of academic historians and high school teachers, we attempted to offer a sound alternative to the way history is taught.[1] We had three principal aims: to strengthen students' historical consciousness and critical-thinking skills through a narrative showing multiple perspectives on historical developments in the Balkans from the 14th century to 2008; to challenge the self-contained, self-absorbed, and inward-looking narrative of national histories that selectively exclude neighbors and marginalize "others"; and to offer a paradigm of collaboration for historians coming from countries that until very recently were at war with each other, and where history was deployed to make war seem legitimate and just.

The means we employed were traditional. We published six workbooks, titled *Teaching Modern and Contemporary Southeast European History: Alternative Educational Materials* (2005 and 2016). Compendia of textual and visual sources on aspects of political and military history, as well as social, economic, and cultural history, they are available as both electronic and print publications. (Many educators in the Balkans have no access to computers in the classroom and must work with photocopies.) While we were writing them, we made sure to incorporate the views of educators with experience in the classroom. From what they told us, we concluded that they would prefer to have a set of templates to work with (and on). In high schools across the Balkans, educators cannot dedicate more than a few teaching hours to history. Besides, all need training to become proficient in using a wide array of new and unfamiliar sources. For this reason, following initial publication in English, all of the JHP's workbooks were translated into the various languages of the Balkans. Then, where the pertinent state authorities granted us permission, we organized a number of teacher-training seminars.

Reception of the workbooks among the public and state authorities ranged from constructive enthusiasm to outward hostility. Still, conspiracy theories were invented to account for what was castigated as an attempt to rewrite history, and contributors were targeted as instruments of unspecified global agencies seeking to destroy national identity. Inflammatory articles in the press and social media, as well as verbal abuse on TV outlets, confirm that the workbooks were innovative and, indeed, a meaningful and substantial contribution to historical education. The response of state agencies across the Balkans could probably be described as off-putting. Yet there was some success: in the republics of Albania, Serbia, Croatia, Montenegro, and Northern Macedonia, officials occasionally did authorize distribution of the workbooks in schools and teacher training in using them. More importantly, however, the comments of some 10,000 teachers who took part in the training seminars show that they considered the enterprise to be worthwhile. Unsurprisingly, they did not fail to point to a number of difficulties they came across, due principally to the opposition of their students' parents.

Fourteen years after their first appearance, the workbooks continue to be the subject of discussions not only in the Balkans but also internationally, where they are considered an instructive example of transformative pedagogy for peace-building.[2] Most importantly, however, they continue to be tested in the classroom, seen for what they are: an innovative endeavor in the possibilities of the teaching of history.

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NOTES

1. For editors, source committee members, and contributors, http://cdrsee.org/projects/education-projects/joint-history-project/editors-source-committee-members-contributors; to download the workbooks, http://cdrsee.org/publications/education.

2. For example, see *History Education and Post-Conflict Reconciliation: Reconsidering Joint Textbook Projects*, ed. K.V. Korostelina and S. Lässig (2013), 69–89.