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Teaching 'Victims': History and Memory in the Classroom

Introduction

On February 17th, 2008, while declaring the independence of Kosovo, the president of the local assembly said: " […] from today Balkan history is changing." This phrase reveals the sense of rapid and dramatic change that the Balkan region had experienced in the last twenty years and the feeling of actively participating in the making of history. In fact, in the Balkans, the relation with history seems very important: first, there is a widespread sense that here history is 'thick'; second, history has constantly been rewritten following the emergence of new nations and the proliferation of new states. Although at first glance this situation benefits historiography, in actual fact it undermines sober history writing and teaching. The most difficult task undertaken by historians in a region experiencing new nationalisms, dramatic economic and social change and even armed conflicts is to confront the dogmatic, powerful national narrative; in other words, to confront the myths of national histories.

Since 1989, Southeast Europe has gone through an unstable transitional period stigmatized by the wars in Yugoslavia. The rewriting of national histories in the light of contemporary developments has been part of this transition. The old myths have been replaced either by new ones or by even older ones from the time when the Balkan national states were established. At the same time, the mythology about the past has been broadcast and converted into a political instrument. The dominance of myths in the way the past is described and perceived has served as a foundation for ethnocentrism and lack of tolerance.

National myths furnish global and categorical interpretations of the past, address the emotions and contribute to national unity. They replace historical truth in the case of sensitive or traumatic events whose recalling could undermine social solidarity and challenge the positive self-representation of the nation. In his famous speech "Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?" (What is a nation?) Ernest Renan points out that historical truth can harm the very existence of the nation; therefore, oblivion (and even historical fallacy) and myth-making are equally important as remembrance for the creation of a nation.

The comparative analysis of textbooks in all countries of Southeast Europe in the early 90s proved that national histories were based on opposing or mutually rejected national myths. The same events were described and interpreted very differently and with a completely different vocabulary depending on the "center" of the narration.[1] In a way, wars that occurred in the past have become the object of new 'wars' between national histories. Therefore, the term 'Balkan wars' can be used metaphorically to signify the conflict over history teaching in different Balkan societies regarding controversial historical issues and memories.

However, history wars are not exclusively Balkan; they have been a global phenomenon in recent years, expanding from the U.S. to Japan and from France to Australia. Parliaments have passed legislation recognising genocides and penalising their negation. Historians have been accused for their work and taken to court. Textbook authors have become targets of so-called 'memory groups' or nationalists who think that school history is a repository for national identity. In the U.S., for example, in the 1980s and 1990s history teaching (or rather the lack of history teaching) was accused of being responsible for 'moral decline' and for undermining national identity – and if national identity was in danger, so would be American global hegemony. Neo-conservatives were accusing American historians of not being patriotic enough. Today, despite Obama's election, the New Right is claiming to rewrite American history in the light of Christian fundamentalism, Republican values and racial discrimination.

In this paper I will reflect on the relation between school history and public history, on the 'history wars' provoked by attempts to reform history teaching under the pressure of so-called 'memory groups', and on the challenges of teaching about traumatic experiences and controversial events.

Public history and school history

In recent years we have been witnessing an 'explosion' of public history: historical documentaries, TV shows and newspaper articles, new national days, an increase in commemorative events and popular editions on historical issues, a proliferation of monuments, the emergence of internet websites and blogs offering historical information and insights, or various debates on history textbooks. In an increasingly globalised world, everybody may intervene in the construction of knowledge in 'Wikipedia style'. Historical knowledge is also being constructed in a way that challenges the hegemonic

1 Cf. Christina Koulouri (ed.), Clio in the Balkans. The Politics of History Education. Thessaloniki: CDRSEE 2002.

discourse of historians. Everyone is entitled to create his or her own "virtual museum", through a personalised look upon the past rivalling the official discourse of museums and public institutions.[2]

Opposed interpretations of the past, expressed by different social and political groups, have been fighting over 'official' national history, over the canon of national narrative which is usually codified in school history. Interestingly, these 'history wars' have been an internal affair, dividing societies rather than neighbouring countries. Of course, 'civil history wars' usually contain a reference to external agents since the question at stake is national identity, which is considered to be threatened. Most wars are about the subject of history in school, a subject that has been assigned the task to cement national identity since the nineteenth century. It is noteworthy that although romantic historiography has vanished in academia, it is still present in various guises at school.

Although the situation is different in each case, some common elements characterize controversies over history as a subject in school: first, it is considered essential in fostering national identity; second, various social groups aspire to control the content of history teaching and to be represented in the national historical canon; third, historians' authority is disputed as not being the only legitimate source to narrate the past. Rival interpretations of the past supported by memory groups challenge academic historians and the 'historian's craft'. The post-modernist critique of historians' 'objectivity' has opened the path to a wide variety of subjectivities which claim their own memory as equivalent to the historical discipline. According to Nicola Gallerano, "the public use of history refers to everything that develops outside the places devoted to scientific research *stricto sensu*. Among them, cultural associations, political parties, ethnic or cultural groups who aim at promoting a more or less polemic lecture of the past challenging historical or historiographical common sense, based on the memory of their own group."[3]

However, not all memory groups question national narrative. Despite an apparent rivalry between memory and history, most memory groups aspire to be integrated into national history or to mould national history on their own model. The "tyranny of memory," in Pierre Nora's words, does not necessarily mean that memory should be substituted for history but, on the contrary, that marginal memories should be transformed into dominant national narrative. Consequently, the so-called 'memory groups' aim at being recognized and integrated into a new but equally normative history.

2 Pascal Blanchard, Isabelle Veyrat-Masson (eds.), Les guerres de mémoires. La France et son histoire. Paris: La Découverte 2010, p. 19.

3 Theodora Cavoura, L'histoire scolaire face à une mémoire douloureuse et polémique. In: History Teaching in the Crossfire of Political Interests: Yearbook of the International Society for the Didactics of History 2008/09, p. 92.

The reason why textbook controversies and conflicts over history seem to be conducted so fanatically is that they refer to identity and self-determination. As Antonis Liakos puts it, "in history wars the apple of discord is the use of the past as a constitutive element of the self and the culture we live in. History wars happen not in cognitive but in cultural fields."[4] In fact, despite the selective and mediated nature of both memory and history, on the epistemological and practical levels memory refers to the construction of identity while history seeks for truth.[5] Therefore, memory is subjective and self-assertive and influences collective self-definition at different levels – community, region, nation. The politics of memory, practised by various pressure groups, aims at a moral recompense via history. By achieving to transform their 'small history' into 'Big History,' memory groups feel relieved and comforted. In all cases, they consider themselves victims of history and put emphasis on collective suffering.

"Heroes" and "victims"

If "heroes" play a central role in history, "victims" are the central figures for memory. From Japan to South Africa and from Northern Ireland to Latin America, the traumatic memories of both victims and perpetrators have been haunting the contemporary world. Most perpetrators choose a strategy of "organised oblivion"[6] and silence so that history does not include disturbing memories and events that could generate feelings of guilt or shame in their descendants. Regimes which were responsible for genocide, massacres or ethnic cleansing have systematically destroyed or falsified historical traces, effectively or not.

Victims, on the other hand, claim the duty to remember, because keeping memory alive contributes to their own survival and, at a certain point, to their legitimization in the present. Citing the examples of English "structural amnesia" and Irish "hypertrophied memory", Peter Burke argues that history is forgotten by the victors but not by the vanquished. He also observes that uprooted peoples, such as the Polish, seem "obsessed by their past."[7] In Cyprus, too, the two communities equally claim "I won't

4 Antonis Liakos, History Wars: Notes from the field. In: History Teaching in the Crossfire of Political Interests: Yearbook of the International Society for the Didactics of History, 2008/09, p. 71f.

5 According to Alessandro Cavalli. Cf. Giorgos Kokkinos, Elli Lemonidou, Vlassis Agtzidis, To trauma kai o politikes tis mnimis. Endeiktikes opseis ton symbolikon polemon gia tin historia kai ti Mnimi [The Trauma and the Politics of Memory. Selective aspects of symbolic wars about History and Memory]. Athens 2010, p. 43.

6 Paul Connerton, How societies remember. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1989. Marc Ferro uses the term 'taboo' to describe silences that are particularly due to 'fear or shame': Marc Ferro, Les taboos de l'Histoire, translated into Greek by Aglaïa Galanopoulou. Athens: Metaichmio 2003.

7 Peter Burke, Varieties of Cultural History. Cambridge: Polity Press 1997, p. 53f.

forget" status for themselves, both thus exploiting memory to represent themselves as 'victims'.[8]

Besides, the role of victim in history secures a permanent moral and political privilege that can be 'redeemed' in the present, either in the context of international relations or as a means of social cohesion within state borders. We actually observe a "world championship of victims, " in the words of Amos Oz, where everybody wants to be recognised as the group that has suffered most in history. The entire Holocaust debate and whether or not other historical experiences can be compared to, put on the same level as or outweigh the Jewish genocide forms part of this quest for victimization: other genocides seek recognition through comparison with the Holocaust. However, the same debate on the uniqueness of the Holocaust has also been utilised by negationism aiming at exculpating perpetrators. In many cases, perpetrators have been presented as 'victims of history' in attempts by their political heirs to clear their reputation and change the verdict of history. Interestingly, their acquittal for past crimes is not sought through historical research but through court verdicts.[9]

It is noteworthy that, as Tzvetan Todorov has argued, everybody wants to have been a victim without being one any longer: "everybody is longing for *the place* of the victim."[10] In fact, the place of the victim could have a dual result: first, the moral benefit entailed to descendants, permanently compelling perpetrators to discharge their symbolic debt; second, present violence committed by the 'victims' may be justified in the name of past suffering. In this context, Pierre Nora has been warning about the danger inherent in the "generalised victimisation of the past" and the deliberate, excessive manipulation of memory at the expense of history.[11]

The problem of manipulation is closely related to the process of constructing an 'official memory' controlled by the state or by other institutions. Although social scientists are fighting for the democratisation of social memory, it continues to be a tool and an objective of power, open to manipulation. "Controlling memory and oblivion has been one of the major concerns of classes, groups and individuals who dominated and dominate societies in the historical era," according to Jacques Le Goff.[12] Therefore, collective

8 Niyazi Kizilyurek, National Memory and Turkish-Cypriot Textbooks. In: Koulouri (ed.), Clio in the Balkans, pp. 431-442.

9 The penalisation of Holocaust denial, the laws on memory in France from 1990 to 2005, the resolution of the Council of Europe on "Combating Racism and Xenophobia" in 2007 have called forth sharp reactions by historians who claim that parliaments and courts cannot decide upon 'historical truth'. Cf. also the website Liberté pour l'histoire – www.lph-asso.fr.

10 Tzvetan Todorov, Les abus de la mémoire, transl. into Greek. In: Odette Varon-Vassard (ed.), Evraiki historia kai mnimi [Jewish history and memory]. Athens 1998, p. 192.

11 Nora is the chairman of the association "Liberté pour l'histoire" – www.lph-asso.fr. Cf. also Pierre Nora, Françoise Chandernagor, Liberté pour l'histoire. Paris: CNRS 2008.

12 Jacques Le Goff, Histoire et mémoire. Paris: Gallimard 1988, p. 109.

memory is sometimes nothing more than a 'regulated heritage of learned memories' – frequently through school but also without school or despite school.[13]

Teaching memory

School is one of the places where memory is conserved and transmitted. Since the nineteenth century, nation states have been utilising the monopoly of education[14] to socialise national subjects. A centralised education system has systematically been used to foster national identity, to homogenise the members of the nation state beyond existing differences of class, gender, religion, language, etc., and to ascertain their loyalty to state power. History teaching has been recognised as a major factor in this process. Through school history, certain memories have been dismissed while others have been made official as a nation's grand narrative. Historical personalities and events which could generate controversial perceptions of the past have been eliminated as inappropriate for history and civic education.

Of course, this process should not be conceived only in the context of national homogenisation. School history, more than academic history, has been aspiring to 'objectivity' and 'universalism'. Aiming at the political socialisation of an age group, history textbooks try to balance and synthesize controversial memories by creating a common interpretation of the collective past. "Freezing" of controversial, "warm" experiences is realised "through the mediation" of textbooks.[15]

Although the history curriculum deliberately suggests a multi-perspective approach to the past, it simultaneously wants to contribute to a harmonious co-existence in the *polis*. Therefore, a rather delicate balance between 'histories' and 'history' has to be achieved so that plurality does not compromise unity. It is obvious that school history can neither be "a simple juxtaposition of particular histories"[16] nor include all conflicting memories. Many examples of 'memory activists' and their particular histories' impact on history teaching can be cited.

In France the so-called 'memory laws' but also the political and historiographical debate over communism and colonialism influenced history textbooks until they eventually, in 2000, changed their contents regarding slavery, the independence of Algeria and

13 Henri Moniot (ed.), Enseigner l'histoire. Des manuels à la mémoire. Bern-Frankfurt-Nancy-New York: Peter Lang 1984, p. 7.

14 Ernest Gellner, Nations and Nationalism, transl. into Greek by Dora Lafazani. Athens 1992, p. 70; Elie Kedourie, Nationalism, transl. into Greek by Sp. Marketos. Athens 1999, pp. 126-128.

15 Benoît Falaize, Françoise Lantheaume, Entre pacification et reconnaissance: les manuels scolaires et la concurrence des mémoires. In: Blanchard/Veyrat-Masson (eds.), Les guerres de mémoires, p. 182.

16 Falaize/Lantheaume, Entre pacification et reconnaissance, p. 186.

the Armenian genocide. Students started visiting sites of memory and museums regularly in order to 'feel' history and to better understand traumatic historical events like the Holocaust. For many teachers, a visit to a Second World War concentration camp or a lesson about genocide is a 'moral mission' or 'moral duty' vis-à-vis the victims.

Besides, the advent of oral history as a method of researching and teaching the past paralleled the proliferation of memory communities. In the 1970s, the social sciences were influenced by social movements like feminism, civil rights, the gay and lesbian movement, etc. claiming 'visibility' and recognition. The democratisation of history in effect meant that 'anonymous' protagonists and marginal groups challenged 'heroes' and 'great men' in the pages of history books and school textbooks. 'Ordinary people' were thus invited to the classroom to talk about their own experiences and memories in their capacity as 'witnesses' of history.

In most cases, 'witnesses' are also 'victims', addressing emotions through their testimonies. As a result, students identify with the victims and the history lesson becomes an emotional experience. Although it is obvious that teaching about traumatic events can neither pretend to be 'neutral' nor easily be 'politically correct' when dealing with 'unspeakable' experiences, historians and pedagogues need to find a suitable teaching method. An extended bibliography tries to answer a series of sensitive questions: How can we write the history of a massacre? How is the historiography of a massacre interwoven with the social memory of atrocities?[17] How is it possible that traumatic memory is transformed into a teaching subject? What are the didactic goals, the historical sources and the teaching methods of such a subject?

Most of these questions have been dealt with in the context of Holocaust education, where different methods and goals have been set. International practice wavers between the comparative method and the autonomous, unique teaching unit. In the first case, comparison offers a deeper comprehension of the event, while the second approach aims at emphasizing the uniqueness of the Holocaust. In any event, the goals of teaching about the Holocaust, genocide and atrocities harmonize with the goals of citizenship education, history teaching and human rights education. The main goal is to understand the others and, consequently, ourselves and Western civilisation, where we belong. Besides, such teaching forms part of our general education because it influences our *Weltanschauung* (how we see the world) and the values we transmit to younger generations.

As far as the teaching method is concerned, school history should be used as a forum where students debate and reflect on traumatic memories and controversial issues, through empathy, in order to better understand the experiences of the victims and the

17 Cf. David El Kenz (ed.), Le massacre objet d'histoire. Paris: Gallimard 2005.

defeated. If the classroom functions as a 'workshop of historical knowledge', history teaching can help students to develop critical thinking, tolerance and a pluralistic historical identity.[18] In fact, "controversial issues are a useful means of helping students to understand the fundamental nature of history as a discipline: that almost every historical event and development is open to different interpretations."[19]

However, addressing emotions and using empathy as a teaching method is a rather delicate enterprise. There is a danger if teaching concentrates only on victims' stories and turns into martyrology, neglecting other aspects of the society the victims belonged to. In the case of the Holocaust, we may enumerate at least two other aspects to be emphasized through teaching: first, acts of solidarity towards 'victims' by non-Jewish members of the society, and second, complicity in the crimes committed and culpability (by those who knew but did not react). Taking this into account, we face the challenge how to transform didactic principles into teaching practices. As an example, I would like to present the four workbooks published by the Centre for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe under the title "Teaching Modern Southeast European History. Alternative Educational Materials" and particularly the fourth volume on the Second World War[20] to show how war crimes and atrocities can be taught in the classroom by using a concrete lesson plan.[21]

How to teach about atrocities

The first choice made for the workbooks was to try not to teach only about the harmonious aspects of co-existence through history but also to teach about conflicts and wars in Southeast Europe. It is not fortuitous that two of the workbooks have war as their

18 According to James Percoco, Divided we stand. Teaching about conflict in U.S. history, Portsmouth: NH Heinemann 2001; cited by Giorgos Kokkinos and Panagiotis Gatsotis, To scholeio apenanti sto epimacho historiko gegonos kai to trauma [The school in front of the controversial historical event and trauma]. In: Giorgos Kokkinos, Dimitris Mavroskoufis, Panagiotis Gatsotis, Elli Lemonidou, Ta sygkrousiaka themata sti didaskalia tes historias [Controversial issues in history teaching]. Athens 2010, pp. 57–69.

19 Robert Stradling, Teaching 20th-Century European History. Council of Europe 2001, p. 100.

20 The topics of the four books belong to modern and contemporary history (15th-20th centuries): The Ottoman Empire (Workbook 1); Nations and States in Southeast Europe (Workbook 2); The Balkan Wars (Workbook 3); The Second World War (Workbook 4). Thessaloniki: CDRSEE 2005 (editor of the 4th volume: Kresimir Erdelja; series editor: Christina Koulouri). All four workbooks may be downloaded at: www.cdrsee.org

21 For a presentation of the project see Christina Koulouri, History Teaching and Peace Education in Southeast Europe. In: Hitotsubashi Journal of Arts and Sciences 50/1 (December 2009), pp. 53–63; The common past of a divided region: Teaching Balkan history. In: European Studies 5 (2006), University of Tokyo: Zentrum für Deutschland- und Europastudien, pp. 17–27; The Joint History Project books: an alternative to national history? In: Oliver Rathkolb (ed.), How to (Re)Write European History. History and Text Book Projects in Retrospect. Innsbruck-Wien: Studienverlag 2010, pp. 131–149.

main subject: the Balkan Wars (Workbook 2) and the Second World War (Workbook 4). As is stated in the general introduction:

> "This choice was based on the fact that wars constitute an important element of the teaching of history in all Balkan countries, and on our belief that keeping silent on past conflicts is not the most appropriate way to promote future peace. For the peoples of Southeast Europe wars make up a sizeable part of their joint historical experience, and it would be a mistake to leave them out of a project aimed at promoting their collective self-knowledge. Whether in its true, tragic aspect or in its idealised, heroic image, war was indeed a core event in the 20th century and haunted the memories of all generations."[22]

During the Second World War, the experience of suffering in war became commonplace all over Europe. War became more familiar and accepted as a 'natural' part of political and social life. Workbook 4 demonstrates the common experiences of Southeast, Central and Western Europe and puts in perspective the "peculiarity" of Balkan "brutality". It comprises five chapters: "Policies", "Life in time of war", "War horrors", "Human solidarity" and "Consequences". The Holocaust is one of the three subchapters of "War horrors". As we can easily conclude, the history of the Second World War is not only a series of battles and diplomatic events but encompasses the everyday life of soldiers at the front lines and of women and children behind the front, cultural history (the echo of the war in literature, cinema and art in general), social and economic history. Teaching about the Second World War, according to this workbook, should not emphasize just the negative but also the positive aspects of historical experience, the one found in human moments of friendship, solidarity and fun. At the same time, however, the dark sides of each nation's history and the deliberate silences on the past are being unveiled in order to overcome the ethnocentric epic according to which one's nation has never committed any crimes and has been an eternal victim. Three main axes respond to the above-mentioned prerequisites:

- **Suffering.** The countries of Southeast Europe did not escape the dark side of the "total war", as is shown in the documentation: racist measures against Jews, deportation and extermination, concentration camps, destroyed villages, famine and fear, massacres and horrors are recorded in the Workbook through a large variety of historical sources.
- **Solidarity.** Special chapters about acts of humanity and solidarity in times of war are included; many documents show examples of human solidarity despite religious, political and national differences. Individual or collective acts of aiding fellow human beings during a war, at a time of difficult moral dilemmas and of a harsh struggle for survival are highlighted.

22 Christina Koulouri, General Introduction. In: The Ottoman Empire (Workbook 1), Teaching Modern Southeast European History. Alternative Educational Materials. Thessaloniki: CDRSEE 22009, p. 11.

- **Resistance.** For educational reasons, the Workbook emphasises the resistance to the totalitarian ideology and brutality of Nazism, mainly through the resistance movements which were organised in Balkan countries on a more or less massive scale.

Therefore, the method chosen in the Workbook was neither to keep silent about violence and conflict nor to overemphasize suffering and victimization. Despite distortions of World War II memories through the lenses of Cold War enmities and despite the fact that the Second World War is still a living memory for millions of people in Europe, this workbook suggests an alternative writing and teaching of this period. Of course, divisive and hostile attitudes continue to exist in the minds of people; they take their roots in education and, particularly, in history teaching and they are propagated through mass media and communication. This is the reason why especially in this region due to more recent traumatic war memories history teaching can play a crucial role in peace education. Peace education cannot be founded, however, on a 'beautified' image of the past which conceals friction and violence. On the contrary, the real challenge is how to teach peace while teaching about war. History teaching can be convincing and effective only if it integrates traumatic memories and responds to experiences of conflict, too; but also only if it teaches about atrocities without victimizing students.