

THE TEACHING OF HISTORY IN A MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY: THE DEBATE OVER THE REVISION OF THE HISTORY BOOKS

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The nature and purpose of History has been the subject of both intellectual and political debate for decades. A careful study of historiography indicates the changing interpretations and approaches to History and to historical methodology. States and politicians have seen the importance of History and how it can be used to achieve ethnic/national or even political/party objectives.

Even though there are differences in the approaches to History it can be said that there is a general consensus that History is a subject that should be taught at all levels of education from kindergarten to university. Its importance lies in the fact that it relates to and affects important aspects of any nation's identity and sense of ethnic preservation. It is for this reason that the recent debate on the revision of the History books has become so heated and the subject of controversial arguments by people from all walks of life: politicians, journalists, teachers, academics as well as many ordinary people. The mass media consider this issue as a good 'selling' item and tend to promote it through sensational approaches. Political parties as well as politicians get involved because they see 'political benefits' from the stance they take. Over the last few months many people have written on the issue of the revision of the history books and the surprising thing is that hardly any one of them is either actually a historian or has taught history. Even certain academics who have got involved in the debate and support either one side or the other, are not specialists in the field of History but come from a general background of the Social Sciences.

The opponents of the revision of the history textbooks argue that any changes along the lines suggested by the 'revisionists' will affect the national identity of the Greek Cypriot youth and this is considered anti-nationalist and dangerous

in the present circumstances when a sizable part of Cyprus' land is under occupation. How is the memory of the occupied areas be maintained and how will the desire for a free and united Cyprus be kept alive? The advocates of this approach see History as the tool through which Greek-Cypriot youth will learn about the history of their country and thus develop an attachment to the characteristics, tradition and values that have kept 'hellenism' alive on the island.

The supporters of the revision of the textbooks argue that the continuation of nationalistic content in the textbooks can only lead to further antagonism between the two communities and this would ultimately mean the partition of the island. They further argue that 'nationalistic propaganda' on both sides has been the major cause for the growth of extreme nationalism/chauvinism that lies at the root of the inter-communal conflict over the last sixty years or so. They further make frequent reference to the 'revision' of the History textbooks in the occupied part of Cyprus. This is often used to indicate how our Turkish-Cypriot compatriots have moved ahead on this road to reconciliation. The revision of the textbooks by the Turkish-Cypriots is of course most welcome but this on its own is not enough. What is the meaning and effect of this 'new approach' when Turkish-Cypriot youth (and Greek-Cypriot youth for that matter) face daily the one-kilometer-long Turkish flag on Pendadaktylos mountain range? What is the effect of the inscription that accompanies the flag? Have the Turkish-Cypriot educators been trained in the use of the 'revised' textbooks? The teachers are the key to any innovation in education and unless they are won over and trained in the use of the new material not much will change.

The above is not mentioned in order to support the present state of affairs. We need to change our approach to the teaching of History but this does not mean simply changing history books. Any change must be placed within a wider context of other parallel changes or developments if it is to be successful. The teachers must not only be trained but must also be let free from political interference and control in order to promote new ideas that will lead the youth

of this country forward to a more democratic, tolerant and broad-minded society.

So what is the way forward now that inter-communal talks are going on with the stated objective of finding a solution on the basis of a bicomunal, bizonal federation? What can be done in this more constructive climate that appears to be prevailing at present?

No doubt if the two communities are to get closer together a more 'moderate' approach to history is required. In this sense a revision of the textbooks can be envisaged, however this is subject to a number of other things happening. The most important factor that would facilitate this process is a fair solution to the Cyprus problem. This will enable the 'revisionists' and their supporters to speak from strength and promote the way to reconciliation. What has been wrong in this debate on the revision of the textbooks is that this is being advocated and pushed at a time when injustice, unfairness and violation of human rights by Turkey are continuing.

Reconciliation is desirable because Cyprus is too small to be divided and a united Cyprus can only bring benefits to all its inhabitants: Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots. But for this to be achieved a process of 'catharsis' is necessary. A fair settlement will enable both sides to look at the turbulent past less passionately. It is only then that the healing process can begin. This is the road that was followed by Germany and France as well as by South Africa. The process of reconciliation began once restitution of 'fairness' and 'justice' was achieved. Once this process starts in Cyprus then it will be easier to set up committees of experts to study the books, revise them accordingly and even, when necessary, write new ones. However this does not mean changing history. Any attempt to distort the past will bring a counter-reaction on both sides and is not a viable option. What has to be done is to state the facts in a way that can maintain accuracy but also promote an understanding of the other side. Once such a balance is achieved it is also important to train the teachers at all levels on how to use the material available. Revision or re-

writing of the books will not achieve much on its own if it is not accompanied by the support of educators who are trained to teach history in a diverse, multicultural society. The presence of other ethnic groups is another reality that has to be addressed by our educational system. Cyprus has been undergoing demographic changes over the last decades and new educational policies have to be developed if we are to avoid the building up social tensions that are causing so many problems in other countries. History is not only about heroes and politics. It can be used to cultivate and promote transferable skills that will better equip young people to face the challenges of modern society and join the workforce with better prospects for a successful career.

We have a long way to go before we create a society that is tolerant, inclusive and politically ready to accept the others as 'equal'.

But we owe it to our country to keep trying.