

Methodologies of using history as a tool for conciliation (across time, across groups) by stressing multiperspectivity, inclusion, critical thinking and comparison

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HISTORY EDUCATION AND THE PROCESS OF CONCILIATION

Post-conflict societies are striving to heal wounds of violent conflict in multiple ways. Documentation is gathered on events and acts committed, perpetrators are identified and responsibility for action attributed. Often, commissions and tribunals are set up to establish the “historical truth” and lead the process of transitional justice. What is the place and role of history education in the process of coming to terms with the past? How can history education assist in transition towards opening and deepening of democratic systems?



Truth, Justice, and Peace triangle

Transitioning societies, particularly those recovering from violent conflict, are “muddling through” three major processes aimed towards post-conflict conciliation at the same time: process seeking to uncover and document the “truth” – taking stock of the events that took place, collecting documents, researching, archiving, publicizing evidence... The second process strives to see justice being served – identifying perpetrators, bringing them in front of a tribunal or a commission, establishing mechanisms for compensation of victims and survivors, etc. The third process is devoted to build foundations for a long-lasting peace, rebuilding broken relations, healing mistrust, overcoming stereotypes and resentment... Very often these three elements do not complement each other easily, but quite the contrary. Documenting “who did what to whom” and “who started it” usually does not automatically contribute towards building bridges between communities in conflict. The process of justice is selective

and symbolic and does not seek to establish full truth. It may foster a more peaceful future, but often it may also foster resentment and alienation in parts of the population that seek vengeance. All three processes are needed and beneficial in their own right, but finding a balance between them is often tricky.

The Present in the Past

Historiography is traditionally seen as closest to the “truth” element within the triangle: as an objective endeavor to document the past events in as much detail as possible. In practice, however, the way history is written and particularly how history is taught in schools is influenced by political agendas and interests. The recorded past is to represent heritage of a nation or a group, the roots in which national identities are based. In its selectiveness and purposefulness, history education in many countries strives to shape and mould collective memory of the people rather than offer objective multilayered inquiry into the past events.

Collective memory’s goal is to unite, to differentiate ‘us’ from ‘them’, gloss over the unflattering parts, and exaggerate and mystify the positive ones. Thus it is an entirely different “animal” from the actual past, which historiography strives to uncover. “Its relationship to the past is like an embrace... ultimately emotional, not intellectual”, said American historian Bailyn (In: Blight, 2002). Blight describes academic history as a secular exercise, striving to achieve maximum objectivity, while collective memory is like a church, where the nation and great stories about its heroism and suffering are put on a pedestal and worshiped as deities (Ibid.). Collective memory serves as a tool for personification of an ethnic community, a proof of its existence for its members and leaders. When some elements of the past are not entirely convenient, reliance on historical facts is replaced with reliance on imagination and myths, or some elements are overemphasized and missing facts are filled in with speculations in order to complete the narrative of the group’s mission and purpose and to tug on emotional strings.

Transitioning societies are especially prone to use lens of the present times to look at the past. There are unfortunately too many instances of political leaders intervening in historiography and history education, establishing rules, selecting authors and topics that can and cannot be covered and how, Russia being among the most recent and extreme examples of this when, after continuous mounting

pressure, a presidential commission "for counteracting attempts to falsify history to the detriment of Russia's interests" was created by the Russian lawmakers (Dolgin, 2009).

Public opinion research shows how significantly what we learn in school and from public debates impacts our attitudes towards others. In Slovakia, recent public opinion poll shows that children soak in statements from the top political leaders. A recent survey of ninth grade students carried out by the Center for Research on Ethnicity and Culture ("Školy budú učiť tolerancii", 2008) shows increased racism towards the Roma and increased negative attitudes towards the ethnic Hungarians. The latter engender the most negative attitudes – surpassing the negative attitudes towards the Roma for the first time. This trend, according to the authors, is a direct result of the increased nationalism in public debate at the top political level, directly using the quotes floated by political leaders and charged with strong negative emotions. Furthermore, surveys show how big the impact of what is taught in history lessons and how is on public attitudes. When studying inter-ethnic relations, it is obvious that attitudes towards others often come with strong emotions. These are usually rooted in the perceived injustices and wrongdoings by the other in the past, highlighting a largely black and white vision of the world offered by traditional history education. Surveys among students about heroes and shameful eras in Slovakia (and likely elsewhere as well) show that students repeat quite directly the events covered in their history lessons, knowing very little to nothing about any other nation's history or about different interpretation to the same historical events they are familiar with (Kusa 2009).

Can history and peace coexist?

When evaluating a situation anywhere, one must look not only to the top of the pyramid, but also to the lower levels. There are more and more efforts in Europe to put forth a more complex history, researched and written in collaboration of people from different sides of ethnic or religious divide, even if the governments are usually not ecstatic to see such efforts.

The EUROCLIO annual questionnaires distributed among the educators from the member history teachers' associations support general trends observed within the European Union space: reforms taking place in European educational systems are largely positive in terms of methodology. They recognize the importance of teaching skills of critical thinking and variety of sources and tools used in the classrooms. At the same time, many countries are grappling with shrinking time devoted to history lessons in the curricula and with increase in requirements set forth by curricula. The political leaders on

national level are however often the last ones to recognize the need for multiperspectivity, outward-looking orientation and introspection on the basis of comparison and broader context. (van der Leeuw-Roord, J.: 2, 3)

The common Slovak-Hungarian textbook efforts are a living showcase of how the education authorities often lag behind the developments in the field. The Slovak and Hungarian historians came together to write a 15 chapter book on topics from common history from both perspectives. The Slovak Minister of Education Ján Mikolaj expressed his dislike of the book including two perspectives on the same event: "I can't quite imagine how we will transform this kind of a book that has two differing opinions on the same historical era into a textbook... We cannot put two different interpretations into schools. I don't see any purpose in that." ("Spoločný dejepis sa nepíše, bude to len monografia"). The year 2009 is the European Year of Innovation and Creativity, where education plays an important role, which is increasingly recognized in various EU documents and policies – particularly following from the Lisbon Strategy. The next decade will be the Decade of Education, as outlined most recently in the European Council on Education, Youth and Culture's Conclusions on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training ("ET 2020") where one of the strategic objectives is „promoting democratic values, social cohesion, active citizenship, and intercultural dialogue...” emphasizing delivery of skills and competencies and broader learning communities and innovative and creative approaches to education. Skills of critical thinking, comparative analysis, establishing causation and values of inclusive citizenship and openness towards other cultures simply cannot be achieved through requiring memorization of one-sided chronological lists of events, kings, victories and losses.

Until the national education policy makers do not grasp the importance of these ideas or are ignorant of them, it will be challenging to translate them into practice – since their practice very much depends on the decisions of the national governments.

History in Action: Planning for the Future

EUROCLIO – the European Association of History Educators - has been implementing these principles into practice since its creation in 1993. During this time it has initiated over 25 international project that bring together history educators from diverse settings to collaborate together on improving the quality of history education in their countries. Among the best examples of history education that fosters

cooperation is the EUROCLIO project *History in Action: Planning for the Future* in which history educators from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Serbia collaborated together for the first time since the civil war. The team of authors and experts from the three countries came together in 2003 to start the process of working together on a common textbook on the ordinary life in former Yugoslavia in the second half of the twentieth century.

This process took three projects (sponsored by the Danish and the Dutch governments) to complete. The first one focused on network building, establishing history teachers associations in the participating countries and identifying the right people to participate. 55 authors and experts have been trained and cooperated intensely on the publication in various roles over those years. It was not an easy process – a number of the participating experts experienced the war first-hand and stood on the opposing sides of the conflict. All have been directly touched by the war which is still very fresh in people's memory. Sitting behind the same table has been challenging and thus the first two years trust and team building were essential parts of the process.

In the second year, the team focused on the themes and topics they could cover together, and settled on exploring the ordinary life, consciously staying away from the more sensitive topics. The materials were developed in 2006-2007, utilizing the experience and input from experts from previous EUROCLIO projects in Macedonia, Montenegro, Russia, Ukraine, and elsewhere.

The resource book ***Ordinary People in an Extraordinary Country. Every Day Life in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Serbia between East and West 1945-1990*** is a result of this long-term project. Examples of different workshops connected to three topics – ideology, standards of living and mass culture - can be found in the book. Each workshop begins with a short introduction followed by the aims of the workshop and the organization of the lesson. Different sources are included and several teaching methods and approaches are proposed. At the end of each section of the workshop, the reader can find questions for analyzing the specific sources and how to evaluate them.

Conciliation sometimes happens not only between countries, but within them. ***Retelling the History*** was a joint effort of AHRM (the Association of Historians of Republic of Macedonia) and EUROCLIO attempting to stop the centrifugal forces that seem to be pushing the majority Macedonian and ethnic Albanian history education away from each other. The project team there was comprised of 11 historians from Macedonia of different profiles, elementary and secondary school teachers and

scientists. They had set for themselves the task to elaborate an alternative history education program history that treated also the recent period of history of Macedonia, especially the period between 1990 and 2000, having in mind that with the previous programs it was almost excluded. Considering that the existent history programs are burdened with political and military history, greater importance is dedicated to the social and the cultural dimension, and especially again to the everyday life of common people. The publication is an example of a neutral and non-favoring approach of historical events. At the same time the publication and accompanying program indicate and encourage different aspects of teaching, such as the development of historical skills, critical thinking, building of own attitudes, and a multi-perspective approach towards historical sources.

After six years of involvement in the Balkan region, there is a team of authors and experts that is closely connected and trusting to the extend that they are ready to approach the most sensitive and the most controversial elements in the common past of the former Yugoslav countries together. In a planned project *History that Connects: How to Teach Sensitive Issues in the Countries of Former Yugoslavia*, the educators will tackle the impact of the wars of the twentieth century on the lives of the citizens of Yugoslavia together. Having a team of trained experts with the previous experience and high level of trust in each other, such endeavor is possible.

Learning from the process here, it is clear that quality history education is an ongoing process rather than a set of (however enlightened) rules, regulations and guidelines. This process has to invest into the educators and their personal development just as much as in the development of the contents and the methodology. In the future, EUROCLIO will be paying even more attention to this aspect of the work in post-conflict setting, guiding educators to learn in an experiential way about their identities and values that are attached to them that they carry with them in order to approach the process of development of educational materials with the understanding of such large issues and their place in history and history education.

BUILDING UP SOCIAL COHESION AND INCLUSIVE DIVERSITY

Since the Fall of the Berlin Wall, the focus of European history education experts, like other non-governmental actors, had their eye mostly trained on aiding the former Soviet Bloc countries to learn to

come to terms with the past. It is becoming increasingly apparent that Western Europe has many issues to deal with as well. Especially since 9/11 and violent events in Britain, France, the Netherlands, Spain that followed in the years since, there seems to be a growing tension within the Western societies. Immigrants and their descendents often grapple with suspicion, feel alienated and secluded from the mainstream of the societies.

Human beings are social creatures, hardwired to connect. They yearn for recognition and respect from others and feel the need to belong. Violation of recognition or of respect leads to feeling of humiliation, alienation, and in extreme cases may result in violent reactions.

Humiliation and human dignity studies are relative newcomer to social sciences. Combining social sciences with brain research and behavioral studies, it offers a fresh (if common-sense) look at the dynamic side of human relationships – whether of individuals or between groups. Part of these studies have shown the overlap between social and physical pain – our brains process both in the same exact spot in our brains. Humiliation was thus dubbed as a social pain by some of the experts, having some of the same consequences as physical pain.

It is prudent to avoid reductionism of complex human interactions and cognition into a set of biological functions. The lessons learned from this literature is the highlighted importance of inclusion and acknowledgement of human dignity. Humiliation may lend its own “rationality” to violence. Prevention of such extremes can be done through sincere connections across the divides among us. Here, history education can and should play a key role as well.

Understanding the “Big History” from the “Small Histories”

“What connects us across the canyon of time is the small history of human life, marked by birth and by death. It, too, is full of turning historical events, struggles, aggressions and coups, victims and treasons, victories and losses, altogether events that shine so glamorously in history books. Only we don't explain them as results of artificial abstractions in small history, but as results of impulses that forever accompany human life, love and hate, faith and hopelessness, modesty and pride, ambitions and weakness, and of all that that magnificently stands out in human stories that are preserved and that we tell again and again” ~Milan Šimečka.

Amsterdam is a city where over 60% of school-going population is foreign born or descendants of immigrants. Visiting schools in Amsterdam 2007 during the *Municipal Experts Meeting on Social Cohesion* organized by the International Center for Conciliation and the Amsterdam City Hall, we spoke to several students after their history lessons. The general feeling was that “they are not in it”, that they are learning somebody else’s history while their own story of migration and stories important to their communities are not heard and are not invited to be heard anywhere either. Talking to history educators and docents at the House of the Wannsee Conference in Berlin one year later, it was also apparent that stories that are deemed crucial within the European history are increasingly difficult to teach as well. Teaching the lessons from the Holocaust, for example, can nowadays be a combustible topic despite the best intentions. History educators are in the vast majority not equipped to face the complex issues of identities in the increasingly diverse Europe. Facing the expansion of the European Union and its diversification, often accompanied with reactive inward-looking sentiments and growing demands on delivery of skills and amount of knowledge to the students places extraordinary pressure on present-day teacher. EUROCLIO is investing into exploring alternative and innovative approaches towards inclusive narratives of communities that enrich both understanding of local history as well as understanding of connections to and impact of the “big history” on the lives of ordinary Europeans.

In cooperation with education stakeholders like Facing History and Ourselves and others who have similarly realized the challenges that history education is facing in the EU, EUROCLIO is developing a project in the European big cities, focusing on capturing the oral histories of migrants as well as of the urban communities and changes within them – the multifaceted migrant history of Europe. The pilot projects in various European cities will result in developing case studies and educational resource material available for use and for replication in other settings.

Such approaches are not only necessary for fostering social cohesion in large European cities, but also for understanding the depth and the meaning of European identity. Finding common themes in the past of the European countries and exploring them across the borders and divides assists in defining and understanding of European identity and of our place in it. European history is sometimes looked at skeptically and with mistrust from individual national leaders and citizens. However it is not exclusive to a deeper understanding of national histories, quite the opposite. By seeking the connections and wider contexts, we learn more about ourselves. EUROCLIO has endeavored to use its wide network of history educators towards this goal in the project *Connecting Europe through History*, conducted together with

Europeana, bringing together 21 countries to explore one common theme in the past of the European countries – the trajectory of human rights development. There, history educators from most European countries explored the history of human rights movement in a comparative perspective, but also discussed in depth the connection between history education and human rights – right to be educated, equality in access, safeguarding democracy, and shared best practices and methodology for approaching such topics in classrooms. In the future, other topics that are predominant in all societies will be explored – migration, gender, modernization, and others. These efforts contribute towards development of modules on European history and heritage for teachers that EUROCLIO together with a large network of top stakeholders in history education seeks to develop for a comprehensive website portal in the future.

The past in the present

Academic historians at a recent UNESCO conference on transnational history in Cambridge, UK, spent a quite some time contemplating whether the contents of global history should be approached chronologically, topically or regionally – pondering the pluses and minuses of the different foci. In their previous work, UNESCO published 52 volumes of books on transnational history. Unfortunately, it is not a widely known or a widely used resource, being both expensive and largely inaccessible.

It is not to say that books are already obsolete, but when approaching such large and complex topics as the European or transnational history, online technology that is nowadays available promises to deliver far more useful results. The debate on the priority focus is no longer necessary as the technology solves the dilemma easily for us – all foci are possible at the same time.

With the growing complexity and demands on history education, the approaches have to adapt to the changing situation. When focusing on delivering the grasp of key concepts and skills to the learners, we can at the same time bestow confidence in their abilities to work with the provided materials, navigate through them according to their immediate needs and priorities. In the instant gratification society of today, the approach is shifting from an author-centered to a learner-centered approach, flexible in terms of contents as well as of situation and needs. The role of the teacher is shifting. The necessity to hold all information needed for the job in one's head is diminishing with the available technology. However, it is more crucial than ever before to teach the skills of navigating, evaluating, comparing the

immense amount of information, think critically, analyze and to learn through inquiry from a multitude of sources and narratives.

History education that fosters peace and social cohesion goes across boundaries, divides, generations, sources and disciplines and helps to understand connections between the intimate, personal identity of people and the big history of nations and of Europe as an emerging social entity. It is a challenging and fluid process, a dialogue in which students, teachers, and societies learn from each other.

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