

Chapter extracted from Justin Marozzi's *The Man Who Invented History: Travels with Herodotus*, John Murray, London, 2008

History on the Front Line

Happy is the country which has no history.
Attributed to Montesquieu

Nenad Sebek is sitting in his office eyrie, high on a hill in the old quarter of Thessaloniki, holding forth on history. He is director of the Centre for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe, an organisation with a mission that sounds challenging, to say the least. Perhaps this is why he smokes with such a controlled intensity, lighting cigarettes back to back in neat, practised movements as though only a constant intake of tobacco can help him bring peace and prosperity to this feuding corner of the continent. The ashtray is fighting a desperate battle, overwhelmed by the frontal assault of stubs. His office is on the first floor of one of the freshly restored old Turkish houses tucked away among the spider-web streets of labyrinthine Ano Polis, the Upper City, separated and protected from the downtown bustle by the massive ramparts erected by Emperor Theodosius in 390. It is smart for an NGO, with high ceilings, wooden flooring and black and white portraits of needy people, just the right side of elegant without being over the top. Sebek's style, like that of his office, is NGO chic, a brown suede waistcoat thrown over a checked shirt and a pair of dark jeans. A pair of glasses magnifies an animated pair of almond eyes beneath an ordered nest of dark hair. An atmosphere of brisk sincerity hovers in the room. It is noon and he has a five o' clock shadow.

"Herodotus, hey?" he begins. Lips curl around a cigarette into a smile "You know, Atatürk said that history writing is as important as historical events. It probably was in Herodotus' time, too. How he wrote about the Persian Wars, how he described Greece's neighbour and enemy, how he preserved all those important events in the *Histories*. It certainly is today in this region with all these old adversaries sharing so many borders. Serbia-Croatia, Greece-Turkey, Bosnia-Serbia and so on."

He talks as fluently and passionately as he smokes, outlining a brave new world of Balkan history amid room-filling clouds of nicotine. The monologue pours forth. Questions

and attempted interruptions are brushed away with the impatient flick of an extended hand clutching a cigarette.

Sebek's Joint History Project is an astonishing initiative intended to combat Balkan nationalism in the region's school history books. It offers an alternative version of the past, a more balanced portrayal, shorn of ethnocentric stereotypes and nationalist ideology, of the seven centuries from the emergence of the Ottoman Empire to the cataclysm of the Second World War.

It is history on the front line. Herodotus unbound. Taken out of the classroom and thrown onto the political stage. A story of how history can foment discord and wars, sharpen divisions, demonise neighbours, how equally it can increase understanding and tolerance, help promote peace and reconciliation. For once, it is history as an active force, with a message and a moral voice. Passionately dispassionate.

Thessaloniki, or Salonica, as the city is known more romantically, is not strictly on our Herodotean itinerary. It was only founded a century after his death, in 315 BC, when King Cassander of Macedon named it after his wife the princess Thessalonica, a sister of Alexander the Great. But we wander in his spirit, not just his slipstream, and footsteps. I can't see Herodotus passing on the opportunity to witness history in the making?¹

The history of this history project sprang from what Sebek calls the founding fathers of the NGO, a group of Greek businessmen with an interest in rapprochement with Turkey. Its beginnings were inauspicious.

“They held a Greek-Turkish conference in Thessaloniki and it completely bombed. It ended up with them being pelted with eggs by Greek nationalists. So then they had a rethink

¹ Had he been able to visit the city, our nosy, story-collecting historian might have recorded the popular legend about a mourning mermaid said to be Thessalonica, who lived in the Aegean and was forever searching for her lost brother Alexander. Greek fishermen still repeat the story today. Whenever sailors came across the mermaid, so the story goes, she asked them, “Where is the Great Alexander?” The correct answer was, “He lives and still rules,” in which case the mermaid let the crews pass safely by. Woe betide any sailor who got the answer wrong, especially those foolish enough to suggest he was dead. The beautiful creature, with pool-like eyes and cascading dark ringlets, vacuum-packed in a magnificently hip-hugging swimsuit of shimmering gold, would summon forth a storm and the ship and crew would be hurled to their destruction.

and decided to set up their own NGO, not just another branch of a Western organisation.” The CDRSEE was born, in a Babel of impenetrable acronyms.

The Centre’s first step into history was the Joint History Project (inevitably the JHP). Before introducing a new series of textbooks for students in the region, it kicked off with a study of how the subject was taught. The result was *Clio in the Balkans*, a 550-page whopper, the only comparative study of history teaching in the Balkans.

“The thing is, everyone here teaches history from an ethnocentric perspective,” Sebek says. “We are good, everyone else is shit. We are the victims, all the others are aggressors. *Clio* shows how history has been abused, how it depicts Us versus Them, Our Country Right Or Wrong.”

Clio is impressively wide-ranging. It surveys Islamic religious education in Bosnia, ‘Otherness in the Turkish Historical Discourse’, Tyranny and Despotism in Greek Historiography, the presentation of Europe in Former Yugoslav Republic history books, multi-ethnic empires and national rivalry in those of Bulgaria, and so it goes on.

There are painstaking studies of how Greece and Turkey teach the disputed history of Cyprus; Turkish Cypriots wallow in the martyrdom of victim-heroes immortalised in the Museum of Barbarism, traditionally visited by schoolchildren during Martyrs Week, in memory of the violence of 21st December 1963 that was perpetrated by “murderous” Greeks. Greek schoolbooks indoctrinate students with the “Hellenism” of Cyprus, deploring the Turkish “massacres” of Venetians in Nicosia and Famagusta during the Ottoman conquest of the island in 1570-71 and the more recent desecration of Christian cemeteries by Turkish soldiers. Both sides use the slogan “I won’t forget” which, as one historian observes, “points to a selective memory which remembers what happened to ‘us’ and forgets what happened to the ‘others’.”²

Broadly speaking, according to *Clio*, the rewriting of history in Yugoslavia since 1989

² Greece itself has undergone a recent revolution in its history. After the civil war of 1946-49, in which the anti-communist forces triumphed, the Left’s version of the Second World War, the resistance and the civil war was simply airbrushed out. Freedom of historical thought shrunk farther with the advent of the repressive junta under the Colonels from 1967-74, when history became decidedly nationalistic and anticommunist. An alternative history returned with the socialist party PASOK’s rise to power in 1981.

has seen the suppression of those themes and forces that once unified its peoples and a fresh emphasis on those that divide them. Conflicts between them in the present are presented as unchanging throughout the past so that wars and separation are inevitable, what Christina Koulouri, series editor of the new textbooks, calls the “logic of dissolution”.

The study includes a forensic examination of the Serb vilification of Croats and the Croat denigration of “greater-Serb hegemonism”. Serbian histories proudly depict the Serbs as the most vigorous fighters of fascism during the Second World War. Brimming with a fierce sense of victimhood, they eschew restraint when outlining the atrocities of the Ustaše (“extreme nationalists, chauvinists and racists”), as in this portrait of its most infamous concentration camp:

“Jasenovac detainees were slaughtered by knives, killed with carpenters’ axes, hatches, hammers and iron bars, shot and burned in crematories, boiled in a cauldron while still alive, hanged, tortured by hunger, thirst and cold as there was neither food nor water in the camp.”

Half a century later, a Serbian historian lays the blame for the break-up of Yugoslavia squarely at the door of the Vatican and its old bugbear Croatia:

“The Catholic Church and its fanatic believers have been constantly struggling against Orthodoxy and the Serbs. The situation was almost identical to the one in 1941. The Serbian population in Croatia is being violently expelled from their territory. Serbs are being tortured, and the brutality inflicted on innocent citizens is very much alike or even the same as that of 50 years ago. Serbian villages are being plundered and burned down, Orthodox churches are being destroyed while the graves and sanctuaries are desecrated.”

Present difficulties are explained through past injustices, lodged deep in the historical memory so that national history becomes no more than a badge of victimhood.

Croatian historians, in turn, sink their knives into the war-weary corpse of Serb nationalism, dismissing the first Yugoslavia as an exercise in Croat-crushing. “Since the king was a Serb and since all central institutions of power were made out of exclusively, mostly or in majority Serbs, the Serb overbearing was obvious... They have from the very start seen the

common state, created in 1918, as a widened Serbia (i.e. the enlarged, greater Serbia) in which they have felt and acted as great-Serbs, suppressing and repressing the other nations.” Ustaše atrocities pale into feeble insignificance when compared with the vicious brutality of the Serbian Chetniks. Moving into the Nineties, Croatian historians have little doubt who bears responsibility for the wars in Yugoslavia. “Driven by the hate towards everything Croatian and Catholic, the great-Serb aggressors have tortured, killed, slaughtered and chased Croats and other non-Serbs,” writes one.

The pages of our muse *Clio* run with crude stereotyping and hatred. In secular Turkey, history books still stress the Muslim identity of Turks while presenting Christendom as essentially hostile. According to one account, “From the Crusades until the Liberation War (1922) there were attempts to push us out of Anatolia, and this will be going on by political ways. The powers which try to divide our country, those who support them or try to hinder our economic development, help to revive the spirit of the Crusaders.” The words “Crusader”, “Christians” and “Europeans” are used interchangeably throughout. Special opprobrium, of course, is reserved for the Greeks, who are accused of calling their neighbours “barbarians”, just as Herodotus referred to the Persians in the first sentence of the *Histories*, when many among his Greek audiences would have understood the word as meaning genuinely barbarous and barbaric. Coverage of the 1919-1922 Greco-Turkish War – known here as the Turkish Liberation War – quickly descends to sarcasm and satire.

“The Greek soldiers showed that they were wonderful runners. Hoping to save their own lives, they ran so fast that even our cavalry could not catch them. A coward is dangerous. While fleeing, the Greek units burned the villages and towns where they passed through. They pierced even defenseless persons with their bayonets. The Greeks, always and everywhere, describe the Turks as Barbarians. When they launched soldiers to Anatolia, they said: ‘We are providing civilisation to the Turkish Barbarians.’ But, when they left our beautiful Anatolia, they spread blood and tears, they left behind them pierced corpses of babies and women, and ruins and ruins... This is the Greek conception of humanism and civilization.”

Greek history books emphasise a serene cultural continuity from ancient Greek civilization to the present day, underlining the nation’s ancestry as founder of the civilised West and highlighting her European identity at the expense of the Balkan. They largely

exclude any positive Ottoman contribution from the fall of Constantinople in 1453. Byzantine glory is allowed to continue, however, in the teeth of “the darkness of slavery” and repression under the aggressive and uncivilized Turks. Ottoman rule is “Ottoman tyranny”, four centuries of untold suffering under barbarian “despots”, “tyrants and “warlike Turks”.³

History here is cultural and intellectual terrain, fought over by rival armies of tweedy professors, education ministries and bureaucrats with the same blinkered tenacity and aggression the armies of these fractious nation-states so recently paraded on the battlefield. History is war, religion and contested identity. Macedonia, tormented by nationalist conflict in the twentieth century, is slumped on the psychiatrist’s couch undergoing treatment for a split personality. Greek Macedonians vie with Former Yugoslav Republic Macedonians and Bulgarian Macedonians for the coveted Macedonian identity, advancing their own claims and belittling those of others. Serb historians consider Macedonia “Serbian historical land”. In Greek history texts Slav Macedonians barely exist.

So what to do about this melting pot of antagonistic, nationalist histories stirring up ideological soup for future conflicts? Replacing them isn’t an option. It’s a political impossibility.

“National history is something people are very touchy about,” Sebek says, chain-smoking away and talking a mile a minute. “Nationalism and ethnicity remain extremely deeply rooted here.” The lobes of his ears rise and fall like empires.

“You know, it’s not much better anywhere in the ‘civilised world’.” Four fingers on two hands, one pair throttling a cigarette, spring up from his desk and curl forward like rabbits’ ears to signal his inverted-commas scepticism.

³ Greeks and Turks have of course taken their historical disputes – and disputes about history - onto the internet. “The neutrality of the article is disputed,” reads a banner on Wikipedia’s entry on the Turkish War of Independence. A Greek and Turkish Wikipedians Cooperation Board has been established to help promote peaceful, scholarly impartiality, remove the “inflammatory ‘edge’” of some articles, monitor ‘nationalistic’ edits” and generally give greater prominence to positive coverage of Greco-Turkish relations. Members are asked to assume good faith and refrain from ad hominem attacks on fellow wikipedians. The motto is a white dove bearing an olive branch.

“If you think France, Britain or America are any different you’re wrong. I went through the British education system and it was incredibly Anglocentric. Everyone’s guilty of making these prejudiced assumptions about national history, a country’s neighbours and enemies etc.”

So Sebek’s organization, in recognition of these sensitivities, offers four new textbooks as an alternative history syllabus, to be used as supplementary texts in the classroom, taught alongside the more traditional, nationalist histories in those countries that wish to participate. To Sebek’s surprise, the Serbian government was the first within the region to support the project. Editions have been published in the Serbian, Greek and English languages, to be followed by versions in Albanian, Bosnian, Croatian and Macedonian. Funding has come from the US state department, USAID, the German foreign ministry and the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe. The four volumes in the series cover the Ottoman Empire, Nations and States in Southeast Europe, the Balkan Wars and the Second World War. They are intended primarily for 15-18-year-old secondary school students.

“When I learnt history at school, I was just taught this is what happened, these are the facts. That was it. In these textbooks we give original sources and provide multi perspectives. For example, in 1912 the Serbs marched into Kosovo. Was that occupation or liberation? We give both versions. We say, this is what the people wrote at the time. You have the grey matter. Figure it out. We don’t give conclusions.”

Once the final text is agreed, nothing can be removed from future editions but an extra paragraph is allowed on a particular subject if it is considered extremely sensitive. It’s history as an ongoing dialogue, not a final verdict. Thus in the Serb edition extra material has been added on the controversial Croatian Cardinal Alojsije Stepinac.

“Most Croats consider him a martyr,” says Sebek. “He was jailed by communists, died in prison, later he was beatified by Pope John Paul II. Most Serbs consider him a murderer, Croats think he’s a saint. Serbs see him as a war criminal because he did nothing to stop the massacres in the concentration camps. So in the Serb edition there is an extra paragraph which says, ok, these are the Croat sources, these are the Serb sources. Both views are presented.”

In fact, the Second World War proved the most contentious subject for the historians involved in the project.

“That war probably gave us more headaches than anything else because first of all, it was more recent, and second, the Serb versus Croat thing today is basically a continuation of the Second World War. The Serbs teach that in Croatian concentration camps it was official policy to kill one third, convert one third, and expel the rest. The Serbs believe 700,000 were killed in Jasenovac, mostly Serbs. The Croats admit to 30,000. How can you reconcile 700,000 with 30,000? The answer is you can’t.”

The volume on the Ottoman Empire proved relatively smooth, something of a surprise given the traditionally controversial, fiercely contested, historical ground.

“Turkish history says the Ottoman Empire was incredibly enlightened, a heaven of religious tolerance, a golden age for the Balkans – basically, you lot were lucky to have us. The Greek history books tell a different story. According to them, it was 500 years of rape, slavery and butchery. We’ve moved away from all that. In our Ottoman Empire workbook, for example, we’ve got a Turkish historian talking openly about the Armenian massacres.”

Sebek, a microcosm of the Balkans’ identity crisis, combines Serbian and Croatian blood with British citizenship. He seems an appropriate man to embody this new approach to history in the region. The multicultural spirit is also reflected in the assorted nationalities of his staff, who come from Bosnia, Macedonia, Germany, Greece, Ireland, the US and UK.

He says it was “a minor miracle” to get the 60 historians from 11 countries to agree on the material for the four history volumes. This in itself is a historical-cum-diplomatic triumph. There is little more contentious in life than having one’s history edited and rewritten by scholars from other – historically hostile - countries.

He lights another cigarette, summons his German assistant and asks her to fetch the quartet of books.

Herodotus would have a lot to take on board – apart from two-and-a-half millennia of history to catch up on - if he flicked through one of the workbooks. This is an intensely political concept of history. And yet some of its messages might have appealed to the man whose history calls, elegantly and explicitly, for greater understanding between rival nations and cultures.

Its stated aims are to change the teaching of history by

1. Rejecting nationalist history
2. Teaching the history of South East Europe as part of European and world history
3. Teaching students openly about differences and conflicts rather than painting “a false picture of harmony”
4. Encouraging children to develop identities beyond “the boundaries of political geography”
5. Encouraging critical thought by presenting different versions of the same event so that students understand there can be more than one truth
6. Providing an insight into the historian’s work to show a document can have different interpretations
7. Promoting an ability to evaluate human acts and make moral judgements. “The development of critical thinking cannot stop merely at raising doubts; it must help to mould responsible citizens with moral values, able to resist any attempt to manipulate them.”

Much of this sounds yawn-makingly earnest and worthy. It is, but it doesn’t mean the new, morally charged, history can’t be a lot of fun, too. Since most of the text comes from primary sources, storytelling reigns triumphant.

There are Croatian soldiers writing about lice in their underwear, the Greek Nobel laureate Odysseas Elytis describing life on the Albanian front, poems about the ideal qualities of the Ottoman Sultan (“Let him give up drinking”), children playing war games, Muslim men divorcing Christian women, Russian propaganda, Greek famines, Turkish earthquakes, Romanian plagues, Bosnian blood-brotherhood, national anthems, newspaper front covers

and reports, royal decrees, sporting contests, patriotic flag-waving, suffering animals at war, doctors' battlefield reports, outbreaks of cholera, nursing anecdotes, Red Cross missions, the burning of villages and the flight of refugees, excerpts from memoirs, letters from husbands to wives and from sons to mothers, eyewitness reports, such as Fitzroy Maclean's portrait of Tito ("It was completely new for me – to discover such confidence and self-reliance in one Communist"), music and dancing, tavern songs, religious rites and regulations, papal correspondence, apprentice contracts, agriculture and spinning mills, charters of the guilds of grocers and soap-makers ("We shall build love among us as the foundation for defeating all enemies"), the treatment of prisoners, executions, picaresque tales of travelling by camel on the *haj* to Mecca, cartoons, maps, manifestos, posters, searching questions to test the imagination as much as the intellect, the range is extraordinary. In fact, it is positively Herodotean in its freewheeling move beyond the "traditional" political and constitutional history first conceived by Thucydides.

Students are left in no doubt about the undesirability of war and the "universality of human suffering" it entails. Sometimes the human tragedies are so wrenching, the brutality of war so sickening, the misery so pervasive, you feel like slitting your wrists. This is peacenik history for a post-war generation. We have a passage from the writer Dubravka Ugresic, branded a "traitor", a "public enemy" and a "witch" for her firm stand against war and nationalism, in which she deplores the divisions and conflicts of the 1990s.

"Have I ever asked myself to what degree I am a product of the years-long work in the system I have been living in, and to what degree I am a product of my own? And now, I am NOBODY, just a number without identity, the anonymous human flesh in the hands of the warlords, am I not? For they, the warlords, decide in my name, without asking me, in which state I am going to live, which language I am going to write, which culture I am going to belong to; they decide whether they will give or take the lives of my nearest, of my friend; whether to destroy my towns; and decide about changing my street name. They are erasing my past and determining my future."

There are inspiring stories scattered throughout the text, efforts to "insert a glimpse of optimism" into the darkness of war and illustrate humanity surviving in even the most difficult conditions. So, for example, we have "sport as a way of overcoming nationalism", in which Greek Cypriots support a Turkish Cypriot football team on the brink of relegation, a

moment of battlefield solidarity between the Ustasha and Partisans, the rescue of Jewish Turks by a Turkish diplomat in Marseilles, a touching act of generosity from Romanian soldiers to Russian prisoners of war. In 1913, an observer spots a Serb soldier sharing his meagre rations with Turkish children dying from famine. “I watched from the sidelines and felt pain in my heart because I did not have a camera to take a picture of this magnificent scene of love of the Serbian soldier for the children of a defeated enemy and his compassion for their misfortune.” “Have you read about any humanitarian acts carried out by the ‘opposite side’ in your textbooks?” the new history book asks? “Do you believe that such acts of compassion are possible in times of war?” And then, before we get too swept away by these currents of idealism, “Do you think that this is a real situation or could it be a propaganda story?”

Herodotus would be thrilled to discover there’s even space for sex here, as in this delicious extract from the Ottoman Empire volume. It’s taken from the magnificently entitled *Adventures of Baron Wenceslas Wratislaw of Mitrowitz: What He Saw in the Turkish Metropolis, Constantinople, Experienced in His Captivity, and after His Happy Return to His Country, Committed to Writing in the Year of Our Lord 1599* and concerns the adultery of a married Turkish woman. “What was the author’s attitude towards the adultery?” the book asks the spotty teenagers. The story is straight out of a latter-day *Histories*.

“It is impossible for me to avoid narrating the story of a Turkish lady who had an affair with our janissary Mustafa. She was young and her face was quite pretty. Mustafa invited her for entertainment one afternoon and I supplied him with candies and the best wine. For me the wine was an especially good one because it was from Bohemia. That lady had a very old husband, who had little confidence in her. She did not know how otherwise to reach the place of assignation in good time, that is at the agreed moment just before sunset (our sergeant usually went out for his prayers at this time). So she told her husband she was going to the bath. She took also her two maid-servants, who carried her clothes, as usual, in big tubs made of copper covered with carpets, and who were walking just behind her and passing in front of our building. The beautiful women’s public bath was not far away, Ruka – the wife of the Turkish Sultan – had the bath built and entry was forbidden to men on penalty of death. The lady, while she was walking and passing by our building, notified the janissary that she would come to the assignation. The distrustful husband was walking just a little behind her and when she entered in the public bath he stayed just opposite and waited for her.

But who is able to foil the wife of a woman? She passed by our house in a green dress, but in the public bath she changed into other clothes she had brought with her and, leaving her maid-servants there, she came out and met the janissary wearing a red dress. He welcomed her and greeted her in his apartment, he entertained her excellently and after the dinner, he let her go out again from the back door. She went to the public bath for a second time, washed and went back to her house with her husband. I cannot admire the wife of that woman to the degree it deserves, and many times I and the janissary used to laugh when we recalled it.”

It beats the history I learnt at school.

Reactions to this ambitious history project have, predictably, differed wildly. Sebek has received “tons and tons of compliments”. Universities in America and Germany are using the books and the Japanese have been especially positive, buying the quartet of books as an official history of south-east Europe.

“At the same time we’ve been crucified.” A flash-of-teeth smile sparkles through the fug. Another cigarette flies into a pair of pursed lips.

The most vociferous criticism has come, not from the usual suspects Serbia, Croatia or Turkey, he says, but from within Greece, where the project has been vilified as a typical example of how the corrupt West wants to destroy traditional Greek family values.

“The best attack we’ve had is that we are a ‘Soros-inspired Anglo-American Zionist conspiracy to reinstate the Ottoman Empire in the Balkans.’”

Critics never engage directly with the content of the history books, he says, never point out any factual inaccuracies. They rely instead on name-calling, branding the project a “this or that conspiracy”.

“We knew we’d be a finger in the eye for every ethnocentric historian in the region. We knew we couldn’t survive if someone said, look, on page 57 you got this wrong or you made a mistake on page 33 or something. We had to get everything right.”

Sebek says it's too early to judge the success of this regional history programme. The new history has to settle in.

“We need to be present in schools for at least 10 years to have an effective impact on people's mentality. It's a long-term process.”

Sebek was a journalist for 27 years before he entered the jargon-rich world of the NGO. Much of his career was with Radio Belgrade and BBC World Service. As a former war correspondent who covered conflicts all over the world, he says he has witnessed firsthand the dangers of history taught irresponsibly.

“This is where you instil into the young a sense of victim mentality, a feeling that everyone around them is their adversary and that's how it's always been. I've seen the destructive elements of history on the front-line. I believe history is one of the fields where if you teach it badly you produce serious damage way ahead in the future. If you tell a 10-year-old his country has always been beaten up by its neighbour throughout its history, and then 10 years later it's war, he's wearing uniform and he's got a gun in his hands and his leaders are saying, ‘They're still slaughtering us,’ this is what he believes and he goes on the rampage. I've seen it happen.”

Sebek has another target in his sights. Now that there is a new regional history from the Ottoman Empire to the Second World War, he wants to take the story forward to cover more recent conflicts.

He shakes his head, looking down at an ashtray overflowing from his exertions.

“What's being taught now about the wars of the Nineties is graphic porn,” he says. “We're the good guys and we're innocent, everyone else are guilty bastards. It's immensely damaging and we've got to do something about it.”

For a moment there is silence. Smoke drifts towards the ceiling. The distant groan of a ship's horn filters up from the port.

“Tudjman, Milosevic, Izetbegovic, they all played a part in this. I believe this old style of history teaching - which is nationalistic, hateful and wrong - contributed enormously to the savagery of the wars in the Balkans.”