

Battles over the national past of Greeks  
The Greek History Textbook Controversy  
2006-2007

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The controversy over the History Textbook for the 6<sup>th</sup> grade was one of the intense debates which has been held from 1974<sup>1</sup> on, highlighting the fact that history became in Greece also public property. It lasted about two years coming to a peak in 2007. This article aims to present this conflict in a way to highlight the social, political and educational co-ordinates which determined the issue. For this reason and in order to make the conflict legible and understandable, we consider it opportune to first mention two historical contexts which play a decisive role in this case. The first concerns the relationship between Greeks and their past, as well as their main collective historical representations and the second, closely connected to the first, the way in which history is traditionally taught in Greece.

#### I. The Greeks and their past

The process of Greek nation-building, the creation of the Greek state in 1830, as well as the procedures of national unification during the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> <sup>2</sup> were firmly linked with history and anchored the Greeks' past from which they drew legitimacy and recognition. The Greek speaking orthodox populations of the ottoman state had to form an independent state because, according to the national rhetoric, they were the descendents of the Ancient Greeks, those who gave light to the world, who created the arts and sciences and who invented Democracy. The Greek state in the 19<sup>th</sup> century had to enlarge its spheres of influence and civilise the barbaric East as its ancestors had once done to the West. So, the West was in debt to Greece and was obliged to help.

The existence of Greek populations in the lands of the Near East made the dual attempt not only to civilise but also to liberate, since the best way to civilise the East was the reinforcement of its Greekness and ultimately the integration of the above regions in the Greek state. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the early 20<sup>th</sup>, as long as the issue of the Greek borders remained open and the irredentism was the basic national goal, the stereotype image of the Turk was formed and took root in Greek historical culture and collective memory. The Turk as the national 'other' became the violent and inhuman conqueror of the Greeks, the oppressor through four hundred years of slavery (1453-1821), trying to Islamise by force the Greek Christian population of the empire, forbidding their education –thus the school was alleged to be clandestine - threatening the national identity. Against him, according to this national mythology, stood the Orthodox Church and the Patriarchate, which managed to save both the religious and national feelings and convictions of Greeks.

The national antagonisms between the Greek state and the Ottoman Empire in the period 1830-1922 maintained and increased the stereotyped hostile and holly negative

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<sup>1</sup> July 1974: Fall of the dictatorship and re establishment of the democracy in Greece

<sup>2</sup> For this process see in English, Clogg 1986; Veremis 1989; Veremis (1990), Kitromilides 1994; Leontis, 1995; Gourgouris 1996; Liakos 2001

image of the Turks. The defeat of the Greek army in the Greek-Turkish war of 1919-1922, the eviction of the Greek populations of Asia Minor, the mutual compulsory exchange of populations which still remained as well as the Greek-Turkish quarrels in a series of matters during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, made the image of the Turks composite in the Greek national identity. The Turk was the opposite of the Greek and vice-versa. He was his bad alter ego.

## II. The teaching of History in Greece

For many years, school history served, with small variations during 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, these stereotyped hostile images for the Turks and despite its recent amelioration, it continues to cultivate a series of national myths regarding the period of Ottoman rule, the revolution of 1821, the role of the Patriarchate in that, the Asia Minor catastrophe and Greek-Turkish relationship in general<sup>3</sup>. It remained to a great extent unaffected by historiographical developments in Greece which modified the national narration drawing with more colours and shades the period of the Ottoman domination. It refused to communicate with the historiographical explosion in Greece from 1974 onwards, an explosion which led substantially to the rewriting of Greek History. It also remained hermetically sealed to new History Didactics regarding both the content and the methods to history classrooms and negative about whatever attempts at change were proposed. The system of school textbook writing reinforced the resistance to change. The teaching of history in Greece is still based on a unique compulsory textbook for each grade, written until recently by commission. The Pedagogical Institute which acts on behalf of the Ministry of Education commissioned its own teams of writers to write the school books. History remained asphyxiatingly under state control<sup>4</sup>. Thus, it served the official national memory and was fundamentally an event-based, ethno-centred narrative with many battles, dates and heroes. School History was an 'histoire-bataille' which children had to learn by heart and embrace whole-heartedly.

## III. The new school history textbook for 6<sup>th</sup> grade<sup>5</sup>

The History Textbook of 6<sup>th</sup> grade was part of a new generation of school books coming after new curricula, new directives of textbooks writing, new procedures of selecting and evaluating the textbooks<sup>6</sup> and public declarations to the direction of the Pedagogical Institute for the necessity of innovations in the curricula and the textbooks. In other words and despite the weaknesses of the new system, it represented an effort to open the previous closed circle of textbook production and it was an attempt for the modernization and democratization of Greek Education.

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<sup>3</sup> For the 19th and the beginning of 20th century, see Koulouri 1992

<sup>4</sup> See also Koulouri & Venturas 1994

<sup>5</sup> Repoussi Maria , Andreadou Chara., Poutachidis Aris. and Tsivas Armodios, "In Modern and Contemporary Times", Ministry of Education and Religion Affairs, Pedagogical Institute, Organisation for Schoolbooks Publishing, Athens 2006.

<sup>6</sup> The teams of writers was this time independent of the leadership of the Ministry of Education and had been selected by means of open and clear procedures based on extensive samples of writing. In the case of the History textbook of 6<sup>th</sup> grade, the team of writers was composed of historians and primary school teachers with many years of teaching experience and special studies in history didactics. The direction belonged to an academic historian specialised on History Didactics.

The new history textbook of the 6th grade of primary school was, according to the curriculum<sup>7</sup>, devoted to the modern and contemporary times, the hot period of history for the Greek-Turkish relationship. All the historical constructions, on which national mythology was based, were part of this period. It was so a challenge for its writers to accomplish the task following a totally different logic in comparison with the previous ones and the national mythology foundations.

Firstly, the textbook is based on a concrete theoretical framework concerning school historical knowledge as a body of declarative, procedural and conceptual knowledge<sup>8</sup>, which takes place in a history inquiry environment<sup>9</sup>, taking into consideration previous collective representations and knowledge<sup>10</sup> and depended on a sociocultural context<sup>11</sup>. According to this framework, as it is explained in the teachers' book<sup>12</sup>, history lessons have to be developed in a way to correlate historical content, competences and concepts, to relate the object of learning with the procedure to learn in order to promote history understanding. The team of writers tried consequently to support a disciplined inquiry environment of asking meaningful questions, finding information, drawing conclusions and reflecting. The complete educational material –pupil's book, teacher's book and activity book– aimed at historical consciousness or historical culture<sup>13</sup> or even historical literacy and introduced a series of innovations of both declarative and methodological/procedural nature<sup>14</sup>. At the level of content, the main innovations, were on the one hand, the absence of national myths and stereotyped images and on the other the introduction of new, for the Greek experience, historical subjects such as the history of childhood, the history of every-day life or women's history. An attempt was also made to introduce matters of European and world history as well as multiperspectivity in key moments of history<sup>15</sup>. At the level of methods, the textbook supported a laboratory-style active learning environment with diverse historical sources in which pupils had to learn history by doing history. A series of activities and exercises tried to support the critical reading of sources, analysis, comparisons and conclusions. The textbook also attempts to communicate with literacy theories and multimodality<sup>16</sup> as well as to lead to cross-curricular connections with other subjects taught in school. It also allows a lot of scope for the teacher's freedom to choose sides on the subject, sources, activities and even views of the historical past which are judged more compatible and interesting for the children in his/her class. Alongside, the teacher's book took care to support the teacher in the handling of historical themes giving him more data and suggesting

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<sup>7</sup> According to the Greek curriculum, the teaching of history in primary schools takes place in the last three grades, in the 4<sup>th</sup>, ancient times which are actually history of the Greek ancient times, in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade medieval times which is actually Byzantine history and in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade, modern and contemporary times which are 90% modern and contemporary Greek history. See, Repoussi 2008a

<sup>8</sup> Rogers, 1978; Cooper, 1988,

<sup>9</sup> Levstik & Barton, 2001; Seixas, 1993

<sup>10</sup> Seixas 2004

<sup>11</sup> Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wertsch, 1998, Stearns, Seixas & Wineburg (2000), Tutiaux-Guillon & Nourisson (2003). See also the consequent problematic for the didactics of history in Pellens, Siegfried & Susmuth (1994)

<sup>12</sup> Teacher's book, History of 6<sup>th</sup> Grade, Modern and Contemporary Times, 1<sup>st</sup> edition, p. 9-13

<sup>13</sup> For the concepts see Erdmann, 2007

<sup>14</sup> See Repoussi, 2008b

<sup>15</sup> See f. ex. the Great Discoveries chapter, p. 6-7 i

<sup>16</sup> Kress 2004; Baynham. & Prinsloo 2001; Castell, Luke & Egan (ed.),1986

additional bibliography. The same work in additional bibliography and software was also given to the children.

#### IV. The battle

The operation was from the beginning difficult and the first skirmishes took place while the book was being written. They were between the team of writers and the Pedagogical Institute which tried to keep control of the content of the textbook. Writing the book took two years and until the final approval, the texts were written and rewritten quite a few times, a procedure applied not only in this case but also in other books, mainly in history and language. At the end of this long procedure, the book made its way to the 'Organisation for Schoolbook Publishing' which is the official state publisher.

Even before the book was published and distributed to the schools, the first reactions became public. Initially, there were two circles from which reactions came. Both circles had taken part in previous battles regarding national issues and relations with the neighbouring countries and generally speaking, they are in communication with each other. The first was the Greek Church<sup>17</sup>, then under the leadership of Archbishop Christodoulos, a leader frequently intervening in politics in order to invalidate each attempt for the complete separation of the state and the church or to protect Greekness. The second circle was a nationalistic network, calling itself Network for Democracy and Homeland with a membership of influential people from a wide political spectrum, from extreme right wing to extreme left wing, active in the 'protection' of national identity and the rights of Hellenism<sup>18</sup>. The members of the network denounced the book as part of a general plan financed by foreigners, either Europeans, Americans or Turks having planned the loss of Greek national pride and identity. The conspiracy theory exploited each feeling, fear or event which could support it. A previous meeting of the Turkish foreign minister with his Greek equivalent announcing their desire for changes on history textbooks of both sides, the discussion about the entrance of Turkey into the European Union, or popular fears about globalization directives were parts of the above rhetoric. To the same rhetoric about the globalization goals against national identity was added, later, the Greek Communist Party condemning the book as an enterprise of globalisation.

The book was normally introduced into the schools in September 2006, with all the new schoolbooks and it initiated positive comments in the daily press of the country and positive presentations of the innovations it contained. During 2006, the reactions against the book were under control and quite marginal, even though an electronic site, named Antibar<sup>19</sup>, launched a large scale petition of signatures demanding its withdrawal from the schools. The publicity regarding the book created the second pole of the controversy constituted by historians, teachers, and journalists who supported the attempt either to 'historisize' school history or to change the way to teach it. 500 signatures of academic historians and teachers entered the debate on the side of the book. In the same spirit a press conference was given by representatives of the History Journals<sup>20</sup>. The creation of the second pole of the battle alimanted the campaign for

<sup>17</sup> See Brabant, BBC News, 4/4/2007; Gilson 2007, Van Gent 2007

<sup>18</sup> See the rationale of the network in [www.diktyo21.gr/](http://www.diktyo21.gr/)

<sup>19</sup> See [www.antibaro.gr](http://www.antibaro.gr)

<sup>20</sup> In Greece, Historical Association doesn't exist. The Press conference 5/3/2007 was given with the representatives of the journals Historein, Historica, Mnemon, Sygxrona Themata and Epitheorisi Politikis Epistimis. See [www.in.gr](http://www.in.gr) 6/3/2007

the withdrawal of the textbook which took on great dimensions in March 2007. It was during the national holiday of 25<sup>th</sup> of March, the anniversary of the 1821 revolution against Ottoman rule which ended with the creation of the Greek national state. It brought matters to a head both at the level of discussion but also of action as an extreme right-wing organisation, 'Chrysi Avgi', burnt the book in of Constitution Square, where the official celebration of the revolution was taking place<sup>21</sup>. The issue of the book was also in the first line of publicity and the main theme of discussion was at the time the existence or not of the clandestine [secret school] school, during the Ottoman rule<sup>22</sup>. Many generations were educated with the myth of the secret school, representing the oppression and the darkness of the period, and for the collective memory it was a scandal for the youth to be taught the opposite.

From one point on, while the book was still being taught in schools, the battle caused by the book touched on matters of overall historical culture and civilisation and revealed a huge gap between collective memory and history, at least in its scientific and academic version. Television, radio programmes, readers' letters to newspapers and magazines and personas in the windows of TV news reports fanatically supported the nationalistic stereotypes and the national myths against the historians who tried to defend history and speak in the name of historical data and sources. The game was unequal and the discourse of historians had little chance to be considered in the middle of fanatical cries.

Despite the reactions and petitions in favour of the withdrawal of the book, the Minister of Education and Religion, Marietta Giannakou, in repeated questioning in the parliament by the opposition –the Socialist party and Coalition of the radical left– against the withdrawal of the book, as well as in interviews to the press declared explicitly that she would not bow to political pressure coming from extra-institutional centres against the book. She also declared that the history textbook, as all the new school books, would be assessed through educational procedures and, if there were didactical problems, they would be improved. However, in a move of despair, she turned to the Academy of Athens, a conservative institution, asking its opinion of the book. Two academic historians, after several months of discussion, signed a statement of findings which demanded extensive changes to the philosophy of the book and some additions, because in their opinion, important events of our national history were omitted. These changes as well as the additions, which the team of writers declared under consideration<sup>23</sup>, were counted and became, in journalist-speak, the 'mistakes' of the book.

The conflict reached an even higher peak as the country entered a pre-election period. Two political parties of the extreme right wing, a newly formed one by Mr Papathelemis and an older one which nonetheless had not managed to get elected in the national elections but only in the European, hammered the government and the Minister of Education, Marieta Giannakou for not withdrawing the book 'insulting our nation' and they organised a great deal of their campaign with slogans defending the national glory. The second half of 2007, while the battle raged, a sentence was found and isolated, or rather a word which would function as evidence for the bad intentions of the team of writers to soften the dramatic aspects of Greek suffering<sup>24</sup>. Alongside this, the tabloids violated the private lives of the writers. Photographs in swimsuits,

<sup>21</sup> see in the German TV, ARD, Europamagazin, 05.05.2007

<sup>22</sup> See Economist, 15/3/2007

<sup>23</sup> See, the interview of the responsible of the team of writers in Lakassas 2007

<sup>24</sup> It was the word 'crowding' describing the mass concentration of the Greek population of Smyrna in the harbour of the city after the collapse of the Greek army and the entrance of the Turkish army.

taken without permission with long-range cameras on beaches, in country houses, details of dress or personal lives, especially for the female members of the team—needless to say, with many inaccuracies—adorned the political debate with generous amounts of sexism. In order to defeat the case of the book, it was necessary to damage the reputation of the writing team. The battle was again unequal and carried out under conditions which the academic community could not follow. The polemic against the book persuaded a large part of public opinion that the book was an anti-national instrument ordered by foreign centres and dangerous for the Greek national identity. Whatever everyone feared was claimed to be written in the book. It no longer mattered what it actually said but what it symbolised.

At the end of the electoral campaign, general elections were fixed for September 2007, and the book was a central theme in every-day discussions and political confrontations on TV. While, in the summer of 2007, Greece had faced a great wave of forest fires and the government was accused of being unable to control the environmental disaster, the temperature rose on the subject of the book. Meanwhile, the book had run out, after, an unbelievable for Greece, printing of 175000 copies and its second edition was being prepared with some corrections which the writing team decided to make in order to calm the spirits but without changes in the philosophy of the book. In a press conference, especially ordered for that reason in August 2007, the minister Marietta Giannakou, declared to the mass media that the government respected the institutions of the state and the legal procedures producing the textbooks, was not going to give into the political pressure and that a second improved, corrected, version would be ready for the start of the school year.

However, that did not happen. After the elections, the leadership of the Ministry of Education changed and the power relations changed. One of the two extreme right wing parties, the party of Popular Orthodox Rally<sup>25</sup>, [Laos], managed to get representatives elected to the national parliament and thus became a political power to be reckoned with, while the previous minister of Education, Marieta Giannakou had remained out of parliament. A week after his appointment, the new minister of Education and Religious Affairs, Euripides Stylianides, deputy of Thrace, abolished the book arbitrarily, announcing the return of the previous book, a book written by commission in the middle of the 80s.

The withdrawal of the history book became a front-page issue in newspapers and provoked a variety of reactions. These included protesters from educational and historical quarters, among which was the International Society for History Didactics, critics to the government from the Opposition, negative comments for the new minister but also congratulations from politicians, journalists and policy makers. The case of the book after its replacement in the schools calmed down but didn't subside. Every time a national subject is discussed, such as the naming of neighbouring Macedonia, or there is reference to history, there are repercussions. The book remained in history as a logo of another narrative of the national past, for some true and human but for others, I am afraid the majority, as directed and anti-national. Political correctness and light version of History are also addressed as accusations of the book because, as it is claimed, the suffering of Greek people at the hands of the Turks is not mentioned sufficiently.

The book today, together with the accompanying material is available from bookshops. The team of writers managed to publish it with the aim, as is written in the prologue of the 2nd edition, "to be able to be studied and judged, probably to be criticised, not only for what it symbolises but also for what it really is. In addition, it may be made

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<sup>25</sup> see Wikipedia, Popular Orthodox Rally

use of, even as a supplement, in the teaching of history, to resist, lastly the arbitrariness of its withdrawal and to have the right as an intellectual genre to circulate freely.

At this moment, while the official book is the old one, the history book is used, even in a supplementary way by many teachers who would like to escape from massive accounts of factual information and rote learning in the teaching of history. On the other hand, the issue of making the system of textbook writing and producing more liberal and democratic as well as abolishing the idea of one single book is raised more and more often.

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A history of Greek history textbooks. SHARE. HTML. When I read something about a controversy on a history textbook in Greece on the internet, I wanted to learn more about it. Quite impulsively I decided to improve my Modern Greek and write my Master's thesis in the field of Political History about history education in Greece. It was an excellent opportunity to combine both my interest in Greece and history education. The research concentrates on contents of textbooks 10 2 George Gilson, Battle royal over history book, Athens News ( ) [ =A12&aa=1&eidos=A, accessed ]. 12 with the underlying assumption that the way history is presented can either stir up, or prevent inter- and intrastate conflict. A history textbook for 11-year-olds that ignited the wrath of clergymen, nationalists and officials on Cyprus was at the centre of further controversy yesterday when Greece's newly re-elected government announced it would be withdrawn. Less than 10 days after their return to power, the conservatives faced withering criticism for dropping a book that had dared to question a version of history generations of Greeks have grown up with. In the run-up to the election, critics had denounced the book for playing down the suffering of Greeks at the hands of the Turks. The textbook's revision