

**Dilemmas of moving from the divided past to envisaged united future: Rewriting the
History Books in the North Cyprus**

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Abstract

The school education and textbooks on both sides in the Cyprus conflict reflect the ongoing ethnic division and suffer from ethnocentrism. The multicultural and multiethnic nature of the island has traditionally been denied in the school curricula on each side, and the history textbooks contain nationalistic themes and historical myths that enhance the conflict, cultivate fear and distrust between the two communities. As a matter of course, the ultimate goal of teaching in Cyprus is not an accurate account of history but an effective contribution to national goals and unity. By examining national memory, identity, and the transmission of the national memory through textbooks, one can vividly see how in Cyprus school education is itself an organic part of the ethnic conflict. Through school education, the Greek and Turkish Cypriot communities both legitimize their respective political positions in such a way that future citizens are prevented from developing a critical approach.

The Turkish Cypriot education system was until recently nothing but an ideological organization that aimed at the legitimization of the division of Cyprus on the basis that, “the two communities in Cyprus cannot live together.” This paper concentrates on an analysis of the educational reform and new secondary school history textbooks in North Cyprus that have been rewritten after the referenda on Annan Plan in 2004. The objective of the author is to compare the old and the new history textbooks from the prism of the reconciliatory education, evaluate the changes and present the current debates on history education amongst the Turkish Cypriots.

Education can play a positive role in bridging ethnic divisions and promoting coexistence, functioning to overcome discrimination and exclusion. It can prove instrumental in eliminating the stereotypes that often plague societies with ethnic conflicts. As such, education can be used to reconcile former “enemies” and assist in reintegrating societies. However, in the context of intractable conflicts the existence of official narratives that explain the conflict in a way to legitimize its own position and delegitimize the others serves the opposite purpose. The official narratives are generally reflected in national education systems and shape history textbooks and school curriculms. Both Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot school textbooks construct history by posing one’s own nation as the moral centre, according to which events can be judged as tragedies or victories (Papadakis, 2002). The glaring emphasis of the official narrative and the history textbooks on the struggles often give rise to the perception of the other as “historical enemy”.

In ethnically divided societies as in the case of Cyprus where conflict persists over multiple generations, children have been taught to fear, distrust and hate “the enemy”. Social mechanisms, particularly schools, play a key role in indicating “the enemy” or constructing prejudices and underlining ethnic divisions. Overall, the way history was presented and taught in schools across the divide is not helpful in creating an understanding of the ‘other’ and encouraging the peaceful co-existence of the two communities. This issue had been raised in the past by foreign peace mediators, who were questioning how any settlement would work given the nationalistic content of school history books (Cyprus Mail, August 8, 2006). During the Annan Plan negotiations, member of the Council of Europe Mr. Valt Svimer, after a meeting between the two

parties to consider the Council's contribution to the settlement of the Cyprus issue stated that "the Council would take initiatives in promoting the revision of history books by both communities so as to wipe out any allusion to hatred or any misinformation with respect to either sides" (Cyprus Mirror, 8 July, 2003). The revision of school textbooks in the North of the island in essence was a major attempt to 'change' the policy and narrative of the history books used. This paper provides a comparative study of this 'change', undertakes a comparative analysis of the textbooks before and after the revision and portrays the current debates on history education amongst the Turkish Cypriots.

Underlying Factors of the Change

Since 2004 a visible change has taken place in the education system in the north side of the Island. The first visible change involved re-writing of Cyprus history textbooks used in secondary schools. This decision was not free from the political debate. At the time, the majority of Turkish Cypriot's began to react against the former President Denktaş's policy of a no solution to the "Cyprus problem" and actively become involved in a mass movement to bring peace to Cyprus. Civil society organizations such as 'This Country is Ours Platform' and the 'Common Vision' challenged the old regime and demanded an immediate solution to the Cyprus conflict. The role of the teachers unions (KTÖS: Turkish Cypriot Teachers' Union; and, KTOEÖS: Turkish Cypriot Secondary School Teachers' Union) in this process was of great importance. During the Annan Plan negotiations, the teachers' unions played a major role as promoters of non-violent mass demonstrations. They also have played an active role in promoting a new curriculum.

Concern on how we teach history, how we make linkages between past and present, and how we connect past and present in history teaching, deepened during the

peace process. This concern enabled the new administration to make substantial changes to the traditional history textbooks. When Republican Turkish Party (CTP) government came to power, one of its major tasks was to undertake the revision of history textbooks. The process began with the re-writing of the secondary school history textbooks. With the start of the new semester in September 2004, the new history textbooks are used in all secondary schools.

Nonetheless, it should be also noted that both Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot left wing political parties and organizations have an alternative view of the past against the dominant nationalist paradigm, which emphasize the shared homeland. They underline common past experiences and co-operation at the grass root level to prove that the two communities can peacefully co-exist. Once the major leftist party CTP won the elections in 2003, Turkish Cypriot left got the opportunity “to launch their view of history as a new official policy” (Çolak, 2006). Hence, political motivation behind this change is incontestable.

A New Paradigm: Comparison of the Old and New Textbooks

The narrative and discursive strategy of the old textbook presents how Turkish Cypriot schoolbooks were politicized and used as an instrument of propaganda before the revision. The former history textbook under the title of ‘History of Cyprus’ was written by Vehbi Zeki Serter, the President of the Cyprus Turkish History Association, and used in the secondary schools from 1971 till 2004. The textbook commences with the claim of Cyprus as a geographical extension of Anatolia. It argues that Greeks never ruled Cyprus, thus, have no historical connections with the island. The author even contends Greeks

living in Cyprus are not Greeks but relics of different nations that invaded Cyprus throughout history.

Throughout the book the author tries to substantiate the claim Cyprus is Turkish due to its Ottoman heritage. Hence, half of the book is devoted to post-Ottoman history of the island. The rest of the book foremost deals with the modern history of Cyprus; provides a detailed account of the post-1960 incidents and neglects any peaceful inter-communal relations. Thus, the textbook was evaluated to be read “like a football match between the teams of Greek and Turkish Cypriots” (Canefe, 1998, p. 16). It was also criticized to be “little more than a list of who Greek Cypriots killed during 1963-7 period and how” (Papadakis, 1995, p. 9). The discursive strategy of the textbook associated with Hollywood’s concept of “good and bad guys” (Kizilyurek, 1999, p. 393). From the very beginning until the end, the textbook deals with the Greek Cypriots as the “bad guys”. Finally, the division of the island in 1974 is described as a victory for the Turkish army in Cyprus.

The old history textbook mirrored nationalist policies with an ethnocentric perception of history and sought to justify the partition of the island by instrumentalizing the past. On the contrary, the new history books written in 2004 are far from this ethnocentric approach employed in the former. One of the most fundamental characteristics of the new textbooks is the absence of an obvious indication of a national enemy or the “other”. There is a great emphasis on social history unlike the previous, which exclusively focused on political history comprising ethnic struggles and wars throughout the history. Succinctly, the main difference between the old and the new textbooks lies in the very idea of seeing Cyprus as a mainland versus ‘Cyprus as a

geographical extension of Anatolia'. The new textbooks talk in terms of the former, whilst the old book attempted to prove the latter.

Moreover, the old textbook did not provide students with any space to think, analyze, and interpret events from different perspectives. The new books are strikingly different as they encourage students to develop critical thinking and multiperspectivity. The front cover of the textbooks illustrates an outline of the map of Cyprus in the centre without borders. The exclusion of borders on the diagram can be interpreted as an attempt to show students Cyprus as a whole. The new discursive strategy of the current textbooks is Turkish Cypriot-centric contrary to the previous ones presenting Cyprus history as part of the Turkish history. They also employ a more inclusive terminology regarding Greek Cypriots.

Current Debates and Criticisms on the Cyprus History Textbooks

After the reformation on history education, politicians, historians' and more generally media's interest towards the issue has been increased. While the pro-solution, mainly leftist circles supported this change, the right wing parties, historians and media reacted strongly against. Denktaş and his associates heavily criticized the content and approach of the textbooks and they cried out the danger on erosion of national identity and termination of national consciousness. The authors of the textbooks attacked by the nationalist media and labelled as traitors. On the other hand, educational circles greatly supported the new history textbooks regarded to be written by contemporary norms, which is replacing the culture of conflict with the culture of reconciliation.

Recently, debates on the textbooks and history education reappeared because of the general elections in April 19, 2009. The new textbooks have been part of the election

campaign by the right wing conservative parties and groups. Discussions extensively covered by the media. Before the elections the right-wing National Unity Party (UBP) announced that there are tangible mistakes in the books and if they take power their experts will review the history syllabus and make the appropriate corrections. The Democratic Party made similar explanation by saying that the new textbooks do not reflect the history of Turkish Cypriots and they turned into a textbook on culture rather than the history (Havadis daily, 2009). As covered in *Cyprus Mail*, a group called the National Struggle Council's Historical Technical Committee expressed that "the current Turkish Cypriot history textbooks attempted to present Greek and Turkish Cypriots as if they were as similar as eggs in a basket (...) The aim of the books is to divert people and turn them into Cypriots who forget their Turkishness" (Bahceli, 2009). Shortly before the elections Denктаş talked to the press again that our history books should be reviewed by patriotic, nationalist, libertarian historians. He expressed that we should not be proud of writing the history books required by European Union, because what EU wants is to cut our ties with Turkey (Kıbrıs daily, 2009).

On the other hand, centre-left parties claimed the new textbooks and argued that the change of the old books were inevitable. A strong reaction against the use of history books as an instrument of election campaign came from Şener Elcil, the Secretary General of KTÖS. Elcil said:

"The ones who based their politics for years on the blood and tears of this society are trying to come forward with their chauvinistic explanations on history textbooks and history education. The racist understanding indoctrinated young brains with hatred and prejudices rose from the grave. It is unacceptable to support going backward and teaching history with blood, tears, enmity, chauvinism and biases. It should be known that we will stand up harshly against the ones trying to prevent change" (Yenidüzen daily, 2009).

Soon after the victory of UBP in the last elections, printing of the current textbooks for the next semester is cancelled. The new governments' notion on re-revising Cyprus history textbooks is still unidentified. The former author of the Cyprus history book is assigned to improve, update and reproduce the old textbook. On the other hand teacher unions restated that their position is firm as in the past and they will resist educating the youth with chauvinistic, racist and excessively nationalistic textbooks.

In addition to the ideological debate, there also have been structural but more constructive critics of the new textbooks. The basic ones include POST-RI's report *Comparative Analysis of the Old and the New History Textbooks* (2007); Yiannis Papadakis's PRIO report entitled *History Education in divided Cyprus: A Comparison of Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot Schoolbooks on the History of Cyprus* (2008). In both cases, the revision is celebrated but ideas proposed too on how they can be developed further. Vural and Özuyanık's article *Redefining Identity in the Turkish-Cypriot School History Textbooks: A Step towards a United Federal Cyprus* (2008) can be seen as another standpoint on the revised textbooks in terms of identity politics in Cyprus towards reconciliation.

Journalist Bener Hakeri's (2009) criticism on the revised textbooks mostly comprises findings regarding the language of the books as well as some mistakes the books have, such as the grammar and misinformation with reference to few dates and names of the places. Overall, the revised textbooks are quite progressive. A number of spectators pointed out the danger of erasing the painful past for the sake of reconciliation and removing the mourning of the Turkish Cypriots thus alienating the youth from the past as a weakness. On the other hand, lack of balanced presentation of the suffering of

the two communities, particularly concerning the sensitive periods such as the 1974 war is mentioned mostly by Greek Cypriot scholars.

Conclusion

Turkish and Greek Cypriots in their long history of living together came into conflict and created “nationalist histories” in which a number of generations have been raised with fixed ideas regarding the “other”. Yet the role of education in healing divisions is far-reaching. With this approach, the pro-solution leftist Turkish Cypriot government after the endorsement of the Annan Plan’s federal solution by the great majority of the Turkish Cypriots avoided the narrative of conflict for the sake of future reunification. This perspective was reflected in the revised Cyprus history textbooks though it led to a fierce debate in the north.

The change of the Turkish-Cypriot history textbooks stimulated the debate about the revision of Greek-Cypriot history textbooks, without a major step forward. Furthermore, the latest attempt to re-revise the textbooks in the North does not leave much room for optimism as UBP was against the new textbooks on ideological level from the beginning.

However, the development of a dialogue, understanding and eventual reconciliation between the Turkish and Greek Cypriots is crucial to coexist peacefully in a multi-ethnic society. Education authorities need to promote and support the development of the history education as a tool for the building of harmony and understanding between the ethnic communities of Cyprus and abandon divisive narratives.

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