

HISTORY TEACHING IN THE BALKANS

Commentary

If there is anything Serbs and Albanians can agree on when it comes to Kosovo, it's certainly not a shared vision of history. One man's hero is another man's freedom fighter. What for one side was liberation, becomes occupation for the other.

In this secondary school in South Mitrovica, Albanian students attending the history class are learning about Balkan Wars and World War I. For Albanian historians, this is a period of national disaster, because it saw Kosovo becoming part of Serbia, instead of uniting with the then newly established Albania.

ITV Shpresa Sadiku, student from Mitrovica

The wave of injustice to the Albanians has continued since the Congress of Berlin and London Conference and also during the Versailles Conference. During the Berlin and London conference the majority of Albanians territories remained outside the newly created state at that time, the state of Albania.

Commentary

For Serbs, the Balkan Wars mean the liberation of Kosovo, after centuries of Ottoman rule. In the Albanian version, Ottoman occupation was just replaced by the Serbian one, which lasted until the recent war. After the conflict in 1999, the KLA and its leaders were seen as liberators by Albanians. But will these fighters ever be mentioned in textbooks used in Serbian schools in Kosovo?

ITV History Professor in Serb school, Gračanica

I don't know, maybe they will, but not in positive terms, because they didn't do anything for Serbs. They were kids, they were like 6 years old back in 1999, and we know this thing was in the works much earlier. Nothing positive for us Serbs.

Commentary

Differences in history teaching can become dangerous if used to fuel conflicts and divisions. A group of history professors from eleven Balkan states has been brought together by the Center for Democracy and Reconciliation from Thessaloniki to offer a new, fresh look at the history of the Balkans. This initiative has compiled documents from all of the countries involved, in order to allow teachers and pupils to look at the past from many different points of view. Series editor, Christina Koulouri presented the project to her colleagues in Kosovo.

ITV Christina Koulouri, Professor of modern History at the University of the Peloponnese

The aim of JHP was to revise history teaching in different countries and not to theorise, but to offer teachers alternative teaching material, so that different people in the Balkans would understand each other, and could see that they have some common historical experiences. These books are going to help (students) to understand conflicts.

Commentary

The four workbooks developed under this project cover sensitive periods in the history of Southeast Europe. The essence of this approach is to offer students different versions of history and to allow them to recognise shared experiences. The concept that history can be presented from many different sources, including Serb ones, is acceptable for these teachers from Kosovo.

ITV Enver Sadiku, Teacher of History, Secondary school from Prishtina

Why not. Sometimes we ought to see what others think about us and not everything to be from our point of view. I don't see any problem however when we don't agree then we will speak in front of the pupils.

Commentary

However, some believe that the domestic version of the most recent war's history must be reviewed first.

ITV Enver Sadiku, Teacher of History, Secondary school from Prishtina

"We need to change something in the history books. The whole world knows and now we need to put in the books what happened during the 1998-99 war. The pupils always ask the teachers who killed my parents. They have no opportunity to learn that in the books but in the streets. This is a bad education."

Commentary

What's "good" and what's "bad" often depends on where you come from. This is a history class in a Belgrade secondary school. The theme: Balkan Wars. Naturally, the discourse is quite different from the one in Kosovo:

Professor in a Belgrade secondary school talking to the students:

"What territory was Serbia most pressed to liberate from Turkish rule? - Kosovo. It's Kosovo and the region of Raska, or Sandzak where there was a Serbian majority..."

Commentary

Interpretations of the Balkan Wars period diverge the most sharply. This teacher uses complementary workbooks and takes the example of the battle for the city of Edirne. The Serbian military report credits the Serbian army for taking the city. However, according to the Bulgarian report, it's the Bulgarians who did it.

ITV Student 1

I still like the Serbian version more, I believe that we should feel a certain dose of national pride and that we should pay respect to our ancestors who tried to provide a future for us.

ITV Student 2

Naturally – I will take the example of the occupation of the city of Edirne– that the Serbian historian will tell you that the Serbian army had the most significant role in that liberation. However, the Bulgarian historian will say that it was the Bulgarian army that should take the main credit. We should try to be neutral and objective in examining that event.

Commentary

Another example is the population figures given in the early 20th century for the broad region of what was then called "Macedonia". Serbian figures show Serbian majorities, Bulgarian figures Bulgarian majorities, Greek figures Greek majorities.

Professor Dubravka Stojanovic, one of the editors of the workbooks, says the project is a response to mainstream national textbooks which always present their own nation as the victim of surrounding peoples or as nations who have never done any harm to others.

ITV Dubravka Stojanovic, Assistant Professor at the University of Belgrade and local project coordinator for the Serbian phase of the Joint History Project

These images gained in the earliest childhood may be very dangerous in situations of conflicts, because at the time of the wars our country has waged, these images reappeared to provide a historical justification for the war and the people on both sides of the front line believe that they are in fact repairing historical injustices, in accordance with the beliefs they were fed in their childhoods.

Commentary

The front lines of the recent Balkan wars were often extended to the classrooms.

An earlier piece of research on Balkan textbooks has shown discrepancies of dates. Well aware that it was impossible to agree on a common version, historians working on the Joint History Project, decided to present different interpretations rather than attempting to provide a single 'truth'.

A multi-perspective education is a good method but there are limitations to this project, says History Professor Marko Sujica.

ITV Marko Sujica, Professor of History, Belgrade University

The problem with these books is primarily a lack of consistency over certain themes, the possibility they provide for the relativization of certain historical phenomena, which is very dangerous, because relativization may lead to misconceptions and manipulations of history.”

Another limitation is the concrete use of the Joint History books. Without the support of Education Ministries, in Serbia and other countries, much will depend on the personal initiative of individual professors and teachers.

ITV Svetlana Jevdoksic, Professor of History

We are trying to educate people with critical views when they learn about political events. You are trying to develop critical thinking, to avoid acceptance at face value of everything they see on TV and in the newspapers. In that way you are making them think about every event in a mature way, and avoid to be manipulated.

Commentary

For ten years now, Center for Democracy and Reconciliation has been at the forefront of reconciliation efforts in South East Europe – essential to build lasting peace and truly democratic societies in the region.

The Joint History Project has been accused of favouring some ethnic groups and of politically revising history.

However, the idea that the way history is taught is important for the reconciliation process is not only specific to Southeast Europe– similar projects have been initiated between French and Germans, Japanese and South-Koreans, Israelis and Palestinians.

ITV Christina Koulouri, Professor of modern History at the University of the Peloponnese

Our aim is not teach harmonious history or to say that everything was OK during centuries – we also had some wars between each other and we need to understand why these wars happened and why we inherited hatred.

Disarming history as a potential fighting tool is key to bringing peace to the region. A region where real weapons have only recently been silenced.