

# The Balkan peoples in the history school textbooks of compulsory education in Greece

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## Abstract

The text analyzes how the Balkan peoples are presented in the History textbooks of compulsory education in Greece. Despite the recommendations of international organizations (such as the Council of Europe and UNESCO) to overcome ethnocentrism and cultivate an intercultural approach, Greek school textbooks continue to maintain an ethnocentric character. History is used as an ideological tool that projects Greek national superiority and constructs stereotypes for the "other", especially for the Turks and Bulgarians, who are often presented negatively. State intervention in the writing and approval of textbooks is intense and changes in the books are often determined by the political circumstances and the reactions of public opinion, as was seen in the example of the book by M. Repoussi. Despite the improvements after 1990, the content continues to ignore the cultural dimensions of the Balkan peoples and remains oriented towards the military-political narrative.

**Keywords:** Ethnocentrism; School History Textbooks; Balkan Peoples; Political Interventions; Greek National Identity; Intercultural Education;

## 1. Introduction

Until recently, it was a fact that history textbooks cultivate ethnocentrism in children. Given that today more and more foreign students attend Greek schools, one would expect the situation to have changed. The books of the 21st century must be potentially intercultural and take into account the recognition of otherness (Bonidis, 2004: 17).

The Council of Europe, a few years after its establishment, included in its cultural activity the revision of the school textbooks of the member states. Already during the period 1953-1958, the Council organized six conferences (in Germany, Norway, Italy, France, the Netherlands and Turkey), the subject of which were mainly school textbooks and teaching programs for the History of member states, because this lesson was considered "important because of the effect it exerts on shaping the attitudes of young people towards other countries, races and religions" (Bonidis, 2004: 26).

## 2. The School Textbooks of History

History textbooks must follow modern scientific and pedagogical developments (Vouglanis, 2020; 2023; 2024; Vouglanis & Driga, 2023; 2024; Vouglanis, & Raftopoulos, 2023; Vouglanis & Salapata, 2024). Nevertheless, as Agg points out. Palikidis (2013:8), modern history textbooks "are barely informed about the developments in the field of scientific historiography". In particular, they do not include the new epistemological understandings, remaining in an ethnocentric narrative influenced by positivist historiography (Kokkinos, 2003:122).

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In Greece, history textbooks are considered as official history and as bearers of the dominant ideology. In this way, their production and circulation is controlled by the respective Minister of Education (Palikidis, 2013: 9), with the result that political changes often affect school history.

Students are forced to learn history by memorizing textbooks. In this way, the course is undermined, its teaching becomes a mechanistic process, while at the same time the critical thinking of the students, their analytical and synthetic ability and the fruitful confrontation are degraded (Palikidis, 2013: 9-10).

In general, historical education in Greek schools does not take into account the social changes in Europe and the world. If he did, he should have adapted to the social conditions of the last years which, among other things, for our country means the increase in the number of immigrants (Koulouri, 2000: 28-30, Kavvoura, 2011: 33-37). Beyond this, the editors of school textbooks are also characterized by a selective memory regarding historical events. These occur in the context of the effort to highlight the national self and the ethnocentrism that governs the course of history (Koulouri, 2000: 28-30).

It is worth noting that after 1990, due to the criticism made by organizations such as UNESCO, Greek school textbooks have noticeable and positive changes regarding the image of the "other" (Milas, 2001). It is worth noting that in the school textbooks of the 1990s, despite being characterized by ethnocentrism, they do not contain descriptions of other peoples with strongly negative content, like the older books (Abdela, 1998).

A key factor shaping school history textbooks is not the recording of historical truth, but their use as an ideological mechanism, in order to highlight national superiority. This consists not only in projecting the self-image in an ideal way, but also in projecting others in a way that reflects the national self, many times relegating the "other" to highlight the national self (Avdela, 1998:159-160).

It is a common tactic to highlight national superiority by emphasizing the negative characteristics of other peoples. In some cases, this tactic also uses sources that lack historical reliability, such as philological sources. But these sources appear as historical events, as historical reality, causing confusion, especially for students who fail to understand the difference between fiction and historical research. This results in them considering that what is described in the fiction are historical events and have happened (Angelakos & Kokkinos, 2004: 135). The result is to create an emotional atmosphere and an emotional charge, especially with regard to the image of the Greeks, which is not only far from the objectivity that should govern the historical narrative, but instead touches the limits of the fantastic. The Greeks are the brave people that everything they have suffered in the past (disaster, defeat, etc.) is always due to the others, the "foreigners". The Greeks are the originators of civilization and all other peoples are "barbarians". In fact, the more this difference is emphasized, the better the image of the Greeks becomes (Koulouri, 1996: 143-155).

Consequently, prejudices are fostered in the course of history, because this particular course must "cultivate" national consciousness. Therefore, the characteristics of the Greeks must always be emphasized in relation to those of other peoples, in order to show their superiority and, thus, to emphasize the national feeling of the students. This results in the negative sides of the Greeks being silenced, while the other peoples and, above all, the neighbors are described in black colors, in order to emphasize this difference even more.

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### 3. Editorial status of history school textbooks

When in 1937 the Organization for the Publication of Educational Books was founded (AN.N.952/37-Government Gazette 469 A), the absolute dependence of the school textbook on the state administration was officially established, both in terms of content and the ideology that it had to project (Palikidis, 2009:48). For the professor of pedagogy Polychronopoulos (1980: 473), it is an "invisible and effective mechanism that exercises social control". In particular, the degree of centralization and authoritarianism of the government also determines the writing of school textbooks.

Based on the founding law, school textbooks are drawn up with a call for tenders. Until recently, the Ministry of Education announced a public competition, setting the conditions for the writing of the textbooks and, on the other hand, the monetary prizes for the first three books. The Supreme Council of Education judged the writings with the participation of a member of the Board of Directors of the Textbook Publishing Organization and chose the three best. These books, after the monetary prizes were paid to the authors, became the property of the Organization, which had the right to dispose of them as it saw fit. The circulation period for each textbook could not be "less than five years, and could be extended beyond that by a decision of the Minister" (Palikidis, 2009: 39).

During the period 1950-1976, these committees were formed and staffed directly by the Minister. For the years 1976-2000, the committees were initially composed and staffed by K.E.M.E. (1976-1985) and after the Pedagogical Institute (1985-2000), i.e. by institutions managed by people trusted by the Minister (Palikidis, 2009: 49).

The respective Minister of Education effectively controls the process of publishing and writing school textbooks, since he is the one who announces the competitions and selects the authors who are assigned to write the books. This is because the members of the advisory bodies and the committees for the publication and approval of textbooks are, most of the time, persons chosen by the minister himself and, consequently, are influenced by him (Noutsos, 1999: 162-163). Yes, there is a competition, but the committee that chooses the winners is under the influence of the respective minister.

Although the interventions of the Minister of Education in the work of the crisis committees and the Pedagogical Institute were few, there was always the fear that the press, public opinion and the intellectual and educational world would react negatively to the books. Fear has often been a key criterion for the selection or rejection of History textbooks in the past, mainly after 2000, but also today, as will be seen below from reactions to school textbooks (Palikidis, 2009:49-50).

Today the authors of the school textbooks are selected by the Institute of Computer Technology and Publications "DIOFANTOS" (ITIE - Diofantos) and specifically by the Directorate of Publications under Law 3966/2011.

The way the committees are chosen clearly shows the government's attempt to exert influence. Due to the specificity of the history lesson and the national consciousness it is supposed to cultivate, an effort is made to present the events in a way that will not provoke reactions from public opinion. Typical is the example of "Repoussi's book", which caused many and strong reactions, with the result that the issue even reached the Hellenic Parliament. The reaction did not focus on whether the event e.g. of the Asia Minor Catastrophe is historically correct or not, but in that it overturns the way it is recorded in the consciousness of the Greeks. The reactions were so great that the book was immediately withdrawn and Professor Io. Koliopoulos was commissioned to write a new history book, adapted to the ideology of the party that ruled the country at the time. And in this case, however, there were many reactions, the most characteristic being that of Professor Ant. Liakou, who spoke of direct party intervention on behalf of the Ministry of Education, while others characterized Mr. Koliopoulos as a historian of conservative beliefs who was chosen to act as a counterweight to the reaction caused by Ms. Repoussi's book (Papamathaiou, 2008).

From the above, it is clear that the writing of history textbooks is influenced by government policy and public opinion, which is shaped by social and political reality. The reactions of public opinion therefore exert a significant influence since they are able to even abolish a school textbook as was evident in the case of Ms. Repoussi.

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#### **4. The Previous Research on the position of the Balkan peoples in school textbooks**

The research of Nikos Achlis (1983) examines the way in which Turks and Bulgarians are presented in History textbooks. In order to achieve this goal, a content analysis was carried out in the books of the 2nd and 3rd grade of the Gymnasium and the 2nd and 3rd grade of the Lyceum taught until 1981 and 1982. His research came to the conclusion that the Turks and the Bulgarians in school books appear as hostile towards Greece, with many negative characteristics and, consequently, inferior to the Greeks, who are presented as a virtuous people. In particular, the Turks, according to the same research, appear as warmongers, as proud, as inhumane and uncivilized (Achlis, 1983:53).

Avdela's research (1998:47), which does not examine the Balkan peoples but provides important information on ethnocentrism in education, concludes that school textbooks reflect the level of ethnocentrism of educational systems, while they are a privileged field for investigating the representations of a nation. Avdela conducted her study starting with the first syllabus of 1881 and reaching up to 1977.

Flouris&Ivideli (2000) attempted to form an overall picture regarding how the Balkan peoples are presented, not only in the school textbooks of the student, but also in the teacher's book, as well as in the syllabi of the Primary School of all subjects of the period 1985-2000. The researchers concluded that both the curricula and the teacher's and student's manuals are ethnocentric, despite the increased references to the Balkan peoples. Turks and Bulgarians are mostly presented through wars and conflicts, where most of the time the Greeks are right and the "others" are wrong. Also, it was found that references to the culture and contribution of the Balkan peoples are few and sometimes negative (Flouris&Ivideli, 2000: 246-247).

The research of Angelopoulos (2000) focused on the image of Bulgarians in Greek school textbooks from 1950 onwards and found that the neighbor-Other contributed to the emergence of Greek national identity by constituting the negative

pole in key conflicting concepts such as: life or death, freedom or slavery, existence or disappearance, continuity or interruption (Angelopoulos, 2000:333).

The research of Koullapis (2000) investigated the image of the Turks and the Bulgarians in the Greek textbooks of the history of the 5th and 6th grades published in the second half of the 20th century. The research found that the image of the most important "Others" underwent various changes, presenting a more positive image, which are inextricably linked on the one hand with the interpretation of the past and, on the other hand, with Greece's relations with Bulgaria and Turkey in second half of the 20th century (Koullapis, 2000: 370).

For Millas (2001: 303), who studied school textbooks from 1834-1914, the Turks appear barbaric and wild and are considered a great threat to the Greeks. The Bulgarians are also presented as an enemy people, but only the Turks appear as eternal enemies (Millas, 2001:303). Furthermore, Greeks and Turks are trained to be competitive and adversarial. The negative image of the Turks in history textbooks is directly related to the national identity of the Greeks. According to the author, "Turkish rule is a national metaphor that has taken root in the consciousness of the Greek people. [...] It is identified with old popular traditions [...] and achieves social consensus" (Millas, 2001:393).

After 1990 and due to the pressure of international organizations, such as UNESCO, Greek textbooks have noticeable changes in relation to the image of the "other", (Millas, 2001:307). However, according to Flouris and Ivideli (2000: 246-247, Millas, 2001:308) school textbooks still present historical events from a national perspective and do not encourage the creation of a spirit of universal awareness. In short, their perspective has not been freed from racial and ethnic stereotypes.

Finally, we emphasize the significance of the internet and all digital technologies in the field of reforming the education and its content, which is highly effective and productive and facilitates and improves assessment, intervention, and educational procedures via mobile devices that bring educational activities everywhere [28-31], various ICTs applications that are the main supporters of education [32-3], and AI, STEM, and ROBOTICS that raise educational procedures to new performance levers [39-44]. Additionally, the development and integration of ICTs with theories and models of metacognition, mindfulness, meditation, and the cultivation of emotional intelligence [45-61], accelerates and improves more than educational practices and results, especially in the field of reforming the education and its content

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## 5. Conclusions

Textbook writers mainly focus on political and military history. This may also be the reason why the textbooks lack any reference to the culture of other Balkan peoples, while in various chapters mention is made to the culture, arts and letters of Greece and Europe. The most frequently mentioned peoples are the Turks, who are always presented as a threat to the independence and cultural distinctiveness and superiority of the Greeks. Next are the Bulgarians with smaller reports and last come the Serbs and the Romanians. The other Balkan peoples are not presented in the same negative way that the Turks are presented in some cases.

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## Compliance with ethical standards

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The Authors proclaim no conflict of interest.

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