IMAGINING THE FUTURE
AND REWRITING THE PAST:
THE ‘NEW’ HISTORY OF
TURKISH CYPRIOTS

As social, political and economic conditions of nations change, so national memory and national identity, will be redefined in ways that make them relevant to the new set of circumstances in which they find themselves. It is no coincidence (as in other societies) that the Turkish Cypriot community changed its history books in circumstances in which it imagined a different future for itself. Yet, how important this step will be in shaping the future for the next generation remains to be seen. Turkish Cypriots, who have been politically and economically isolated from the rest of the world for the last 30 years, recently took a very big step by returning to the classroom and by reconstructing and representing their past for a better future.

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It is easy to say I have no prejudices or I am not racist, so it has nothing to do with me. It is hard to say “I may not be to blame for what happened in the past but I want to take responsibility for making sure it doesn’t continue into the future.”

History involves the examination of individuals and unique events, as well as groups, movements, institutions, nations and eras. Official/National history programs for secondary schools, regardless of location, tend to focus on the specific history of the host nation and offer students a comprehensive overview of the development of their country, within a wider appreciation of world events. Students learn how –theoretically at least– lessons from the past can be used to make wise decisions for the future. Moreover by exploring various points of view pertaining to a single issue, and evaluating a variety of historical sources, they practice the art of attaining a balanced perspective. The study of history therefore helps prepare students to be active and responsible citizens in a complex society characterized by rapid technological, economic, political, and social change.

Official historiography in Cyprus, the authors of this article suggest, based as it is on an essentialist interpretation of history, steadfastly to take into account the wider notion that “history constitutes the totality of human actions” and insists instead on providing moral justification of deeply ingrained nationalist policies. Even though these essentialist interpretations face each other head on, and the slogans of “I will not forget” are bandied in both Greek and Turkish Cypriot communities, very little objective analysis is sought for “remembering” events other than those which conform with the existing nationalist ideologies.

There can be little surprise then that a hidden war on the divided island of Cyprus occupies, indeed dominates the intellectual life of the country. This heated debate is catalyzed by an attempt at the revision of history textbooks in either the Turkish Cypriot or Greek Cypriot community. With divisive nationalisms characterizing political rhetoric in both communities, in 2004 Turkish Cypriot authorities took an important step towards rewriting of history education to accommodate the idea that at some point in the future, a reunification might yet be possible with the Greek Cypriot community (which was now less understood than at any point since the independence of Cyprus in 1960). Such a step however was controversial and met with opposition from its inception.

This paper outlines and analyzes some of the key debates aroused by the Turkish Cypriot history textbook controversy and observes it as an ongoing cultural and political struggle. To articulate the understanding of events clearly, the authors have divided the paper into three sections: firstly a section which briefly deals

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1 Education Pact–All Different All Equal, Council of Europe, European Youth Center, 1995, p.3.
with the old Turkish Cypriot history textbooks and the use of nationalistic antagonism to legitimize the political stance of the Turkish Cypriot community in the past; secondly a discussion about the recent political changes on the island which led to the perception of the need to change history writing, and thirdly, an examination of the new history textbook written for the eighth grades. In conclusion we ask, specifically, what has changed, why and to what extent does it reflect the future aspirations of Turkish Cypriots, and what does it say about how the Turkish Cypriots wish to present their own history within a greater understanding of trans regional nationalisms at the nexus of East and West; Muslim and Christian; and recognized and unrecognized.

Robert Stradling’s declaration following his landmark study of history education in Europe provides a solid starting point:

“If one of the main aims in teaching history is to help students to understand the present and how we got to where we are now; then teaching about controversial and sensitive issues of the past is inescapable. Sometimes these issues divide groups or whole societies or neighbouring countries. Such disputes may be about what happened in the past, why it happened, who started it, who was right, who has the best case to argue, and who has been most selective with the evidence. The question is not should we teach them but how we should teach them?”

Accordingly, the South Eastern European Joint History Project: Workshop on Teaching Cyprus – in search of tolerance and understanding, held in Cyprus in 2000 was one of the first serious attempts to bring this issue of controversy to the attention of educators, teachers and academicians from Cyprus, Greece and Turkey. The aim of the workshop was to investigate: 1) how the two Cypriot communities were mutually presented in their respective history textbooks with regard to a shared and/or conflictual past; 2) how Cyprus was presented in Greek and Turkish textbooks and what place it was given within the framework of Greek-Turkish historical relations, and 3) what possibilities existed for a revised view of a common past, both for the two Cypriot communities and for the mother nations, Greece and Turkey. Two important findings emerged, the first of which observed that national identity in both the Greek Cypriot and the Turkish Cypriot communities was overshadowed (almost eclipsed) by the wider ethnic Greek and Turkish identities. The second finding identified significant similarities in the rival nationalistic discourses, each of which presented the “national self” as victim of other parties’ actions, almost devoid of any responsibility, achieved through deafening silences, ever-present omissions, and partial convenient glimpses of the past. Taking a very brief look at the similarities, presented in the papers of Turkish and Greek Cypriot scholars at the workshop, it becomes

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clear that up to the de facto division of Cyprus by the intervention/invasion of the Turkish army in 1974, the Greek Cypriot official history and narrative was little more than a legitimization of the demand for the unification of Cyprus with Greece. As such, one of the main characteristics of Greek Cypriot textbooks was the construction of the concept of the continuity of Hellenism in Cyprus since the ancient Greeks, to the virtual exclusion of all other political and cultural links with other Eastern Mediterranean countries. Additionally the term “Cypriots” were reserved exclusively for Greek Cypriots, creating impression that all Cypriots ethnically are Greeks. Space for Turkish Cypriots, in the Greek Cypriot textbooks was made solely to accommodate the intervention/invasion of the Turkish army in 1974, which led to the division of Cyprus. Since then, the official Greek Cypriot policy has been to establish a unity of state and society and to convince the international community that co-existence with Turkish Cypriots is possible. However, the state’s inability to move away from the extremist nationalist paradigm prevents the Greek Cypriot community from developing a politics of recognition and equality towards the Turkish Cypriots. In fact, the politics of denial continues. All secondary school books after 1974 even refer to the Greek origins of the Turkish Cypriots.4

The construction of national memory followed a different pattern for the Turkish Cypriot community, which seem to have been affected by wider Turkish nationalism during and after the emergence of modern Turkey since 1923. However, the gradual transformation of the Muslim community into a dynamic Turkish ethnic community on the island, that saw itself as part of the Greater Turkish Nation, is not to be understood independently of the raising of the Greek Cypriot national consciousness. There is a close relationship, perhaps a dialectical one, between ethnic antagonism and the development of a reciprocal Turkish Cypriot national identity. Although the pattern was different in the Turkish Cypriot national narrative, it had many similarities to the Greek Cypriot one. Some similar slogans chided “Cyprus is Turkish”, “Greeks never ruled Cyprus”, “Greeks living in Cyprus are not Greeks” and “Turkish Cypriots are the ones who suffered from Greek and Greek Cypriot barbarism”. As the new future, which is propounded as a national goal by Turkish nationalism in Cyprus after 1974 and even more after 1983, history served as the legitimization of this new future of partition.

Looking at the previous history textbooks of the Turkish Cypriots, we are drawn to several intriguing interpretations of events in the past. For example the popularly held notion that “after the Ottoman Rule was replaced by Great Britain, the Greek Cypriots started a campaign for the unification of the island with Greece or the belief that when the Republic of Cyprus was established in 1960, the Greeks

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prepared a genocide plan to massacre all the Turks, in order to realize Enosis” is reflected. To drive this point home the year 1963 is singled out in history as a rare example on the part of the Greek Cypriot community of almost “unrivalled barbarism.” The tone then becomes increasingly frantic when students read “In 1964, Turkey sent war planes to Cyprus causing the coward Greeks and Greek Cypriots to disappear”, “the 34 Turkish flagged war planes made the Greeks and Greek-Cypriots vomit blood”, “In 1967, Greeks and Greek-Cypriots attacked and looted two Turkish villages. The barbaric Greeks tortured and killed the Turks. Among the dead bodies, some were cut into pieces”, “As the Greeks were trying to achieve Enosis in 1974, Turkey intervened to hinder Enosis and Greeks who once resisted against the Italians by saying OXI’, tried to do the same, this time with Turks. What they had forgotten however was that in front of them, there was not an Italian but a TURK” (written in capital letters), “After the Turkish operation began, the Greeks gave examples of unique barbarism in the defenseless Turkish villages. They buried alive, without exception, the children, women, men, and elderly men.” These are direct quotes from national curriculum course for children between the ages 11-16 widely used in Turkish Cypriot schools before 2004. This horror story-like historical narrative, not only makes it difficult to develop a critical way of thinking amongst citizens, but also creates an awry kind of national identity. This is because an identity that is based on the idea of defining itself systematically against the “other” cannot be at peace with itself. At most, it creates a kind of citizen who only boasts of the “greatness” of his/her nation but at the same time believes that his/her nation is perpetually in danger.

After the workshop on Teaching Cyprus – in Search of Tolerance and Understanding (held in 2000), the political climate in Cyprus shifted radically, especially for the Turkish Cypriots who had become accustomed to a hermetically sealed enclave mentality within their Turkish supported, but unrecognized, Republic. In the years leading up to and including the Annan Plan (UN peace plan), a radical change in leadership seemed to be leading to a healthy open dialogue which in itself was generating international interest and support. When in 2003 the UN guarded borders opened allowing free access to the entire island for Greek and Turkish Cypriots, it seemed the Turkish Cypriot community was headed within the reach of Europe. A far-reaching process of social and political transformation in North Cyprus had led to the brink of reintegration and with it brought a re-imagining of political community and cultural identity. This challenged the previously prevailing Turkish nationalism and identity definition in preference for a more Cypro-centric one.

Erol Kaymak and Hannes Lacher charted the implosion of Turkish nationalism in Cyprus, and presented a periodization, whereby the previously hegemonic conception of a Turkish identity, which had been constructed and sustained in the struggles against Greek Cypriot Enosis with Greece, began to decay with the very achievement of Turkish Cypriot independence. In other words, an unlikely gradual decomposition of Turkish nationalism was experienced in the North after 1983, following the establishment of TRNC. Since 2001 it has been supplanted by an alternative Turkish Cypriot identity and a new less exclusive vision of political community. The authors pointed to the Turkish financial crisis of 2001 as a cathartic element in this process, which reduced the ability of the incumbent elites to contain discontent and forced them to envisage political alternatives through the traditional elements of patronage and clientelism. Another cathartic element in this cultural and political transformation of nationalism in the North is related to Turkey’s authoritarian presence and dominance in the fledgling Republic’s politics. As Turkish Cypriots rejected this authoritarian manner, their leaders became ever more closely aligned with the Turkish political elite, going so far as to assert that Turkey’s strategic interests over the island outweighed the interests of Turkish Cypriots themselves. It was under these circumstances that a Turkish Cypriot sense of identity finally asserted itself publicly and, crucially, became politically relevant in the form of alternative visions of political community.

Turkish Cypriots no longer automatically posit their identity with Turks in Turkey based on ethnic origins, but claim a distinctive “self” on the basis of cultural idiosyncrasies. This transformed notion of “self” now became the basis for an increasing willingness to abandon demands for formal sovereignty in exchange for a more substantial form of self-determination, even if that meant accepting the framework of a new federal state on Cyprus. With UN settlement plans offering far-reaching concessions to the Turkish Cypriots, the main obstacle to their self-determination was increasingly seen to lie in Turkey rather than with the Greek Cypriots. However Kaymak and Lacher stressed in their article that few in North Cyprus have gone so far as to embrace an identity as Cypriots pure and simple. While no longer considering themselves to be merely Turks in Cyprus, most Turkish Cypriots insist on the recognition of cultural distinctions between themselves and Greek Cypriots. This reconstruction of patterns of individual and collective identity prepared the ground for the recent electoral swing to pro-settlement parties. A vital component of such change lay in education and so the newly elected pro-European CTP (Republican Social Party) instigated a fundamental change in history textbooks, under the guidance of a commission formed from academicians. With the assistance of teachers, educators and officials from the Ministry of Education three books

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were commissioned between March-August 2004. The commission adopted the European Councils Recommendation on the main aim of history teaching in the 21st century, as a template:

“History teaching in a democratic Europe should occupy a vital place in the training of responsible and active citizens and in the developing respect for all kinds of differences, based on an understanding of national identity and on principles of tolerance”. 7

The international community, especially the European Council, watched the progress very closely, and even assisted with workshops and teacher training seminars, especially as the watershed referenda of 2004 approached. But not all factions of society were supportive and enthusiastic, in particular the right-wing nationalist newspapers which harshly criticized the books and claimed that they were designed to deliberately misguide the youth, make them forget what had really happened in the past and make them forget their real ethnic roots in order to unite them with Greek Cypriots. Authors of the books were accused of being traitors and mere puppets of a European master which sought a rapid answer to the Cyprus problem before admitting the entire island into the union later in 2004. Volume 3 of the three set curriculum covers the period between 1939-1974 (the most controversial period which explores the division of Cyprus) in detail. To make sense of it all writers were at pains to place the history of Cyprus within an international context, suggesting that far from being a regional problem, the fate of the nation had hung in the balance for years through external stimuli. For example the book starts with the Second World War which in previous text books had not been mentioned.8 The aim here was to show continuing historical relations between local, regional, national, European and global events that would inevitable trickle down to local communities. That said, it had its own political agenda supporting the Turkish Cypriot desire to be reintegrated into the European Union, via the referendum, and so reiterating the fact that this was, undoubtly where they belonged historically.

New techniques were also introduced in the form of classroom activities, which placed emphasis on reading and understanding visual archival material and photographs. To move away from the didactic, unquestioning and rote learning approach that had previously characterized the classroom in both Cyprus and Turkey, active involvement of the pupils was sought. Opinion, interpretation and analysis were drawn out with questions like:

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“What do you think is happening in this photograph? Who are the people or the objects? Roughly when do you think it was taken? What time of the year is it? Is this a natural picture or is it posed especially for the camera?”

Use of language was also different from the previous textbooks. But one of the most important achievements was to introduce the concept of multi-perspectivity, perhaps for the first time, in a shift away from a solely bi-communal, and therefore myopic, perspective. Take, for example, the following classroom activity.

“Imagine a Maronite, a Greek Cypriot, and a Turkish Cypriot soldier from the same village being POWs during the Second World War (they would have served in a British regiment). Write an imaginary conversation and make them talk about their homesickness.”

The main aim in this exercise was to make the students acknowledge the fact that Greek and Turkish Cypriots are not the only two ethnic communities for whom the island is home. The students were encouraged to think about the status of Maronites, Armenians, Arabs, and more recently Philippinos in the South, and the Eastern Anatolians in the North of the island. They were therefore led to consider whether one needed to be a Greek or a Turkish Cypriot in order to love this country. In the bigger, global picture, the concept of citizenship, community, love of one’s country – irrespective of ethnic origin, was emphasized.

Another important concept introduced was that of empathy, in order to promote fundamental/universal values such as tolerance and mutual understanding. While describing the 1974 Turkish military operation, exercises were included that made students understand that Greek Cypriots also had suffered, had had to leave their homes and their villages, and had also lost their loved ones during these years. In short, a successful military campaign can be interpreted in two ways depending on who you are.

The concept of Cypriotism was also foregrounded. Taking, for example, the strikes of 1948, where both Greek and Turkish Cypriots fought and collaborated for the same ideals, the text sought to foster an inclusive / collaborative identity. In other words, history teaching was trying to overcome modern historical/political interpretations dealing exclusively with ethnic divisions and identities, in preference for a united future through a common and a shared past. Approaches to teaching school history also responded to parallel trends in academic history, by broadening the content to include social, economic, cultural, and even

9 Stradling, 2001 p.90
10 Kıbrıs Tarihi, 3. Kitap [The History of Cyprus, Book 3], p. 7
11 Ibid, p. 126.
12 Ibid, p. 32.
intellectual categories, as well as the political and diplomatic elements. By including information about art, theatre, weddings, even food, history education for children became re-rooted in culture rather than in politics. 13 Central to this goal was also the return of specific Cypriot dialect, distinct from that of Turkey.

The new history textbooks were launched in the politically decisive year of 2004, when the Turkish Cypriot community was planning for the reunification of Cyprus and peaceful coexistence with the Greek Cypriots, with joint accession to the European Union. By the time the text books were in the final stages of editing by the commission, however, the referenda (known as the Annan Plan) had taken place and the Greek side had famously said “No”. The consequences of political rejection, despite all efforts to the contrary, and the resultant exclusion from the European Union (for the Turkish Cypriot community alone), were immediate and disappointment, combined with a sense of disillusionment, prevailed.

Conclusion

In Cyprus, there are at least two kinds of misunderstanding concerning the issue of history books. The first misunderstanding is the assumption that when the content changes, nationalistic ideas and biases will disappear. The reality is, changing history books has only a limited effect if biases and nationalistic ideas are widespread within the generation which teaches it. Changing the content of the history books is clearly not enough. Training of educators and assisting them in being able to use the materials in the new textbooks in new forms of teaching to attain new skills and societal goals must also be a priority. History books, along with history teachers and teaching techniques, construct the foundation of history education within mutual interaction. One can not operate effectively without the other. At the end of the day, students remember their teachers, not their textbooks.

Another misapprehension is that changing history books is tantamount to an attack on national identity and national consciousness. This notion is very common within both the Turkish Cypriot and Greek Cypriot communities. Moreover, this incorrect notion is also widespread in Greece and Turkey. Nationalistic writings and essentialist historiography (which is a cultural legacy of 19th century and presents history as a “fixed and sacred essence” which the nation should light its future) have inverted the role of history in a way as to deal with with the future, rather then with the past. To explain this further, let us say that the terms “past” and “history” are synonymous. History is produced from the past, but it is a narrative for the future. That is why we never say “the past will not forgive you” but preach “history will not forgive you”. History is about the future; about

13 Ibid, p. 77-79.
“the past of the future”. Therefore it is no coincidence (as in other societies) that the Turkish Cypriot community changed its history books in circumstances in which it imagined a different future for itself. Yet, how important this step will be in shaping the future for the next generation, remains to be seen.

The ongoing debate about the history school books in the Greek Cypriot community has been intensified after the elections in 2008. New Greek Cypriot leader Dimitris Christofias has already referred during his election campaign to the necessity of reviewing the school books and after his election he made the first steps towards this direction. With the instruction of president Christofias the Minister of Education has appointed a committee which will undertake the rewriting of the history books.

However an orchestrated campaign has begun under the auspices of the Orthodox Church of Cyprus which strongly refuse the idea of rewriting the history books. Archbishop Chrisostomos II went so far to announce that “he will throw through the new books in the dustbin” and criticize the government for “undermining the Greek-Orthodox values.” Nationalists groups and associations have joined the Church of Cyprus in this campaign and challenged very strongly the minister of education. For these groups any attempt towards changing the books amount to “the lost of national identity” and “distortion of the history.” Indeed the debate on history books has divided the Greek Cypriot community in to two and history education became a major political issue. Under these circumstances it remains to be seen if the government will continue to complete the task of changing the history books or will announce that “the time has not come yet” for this old and indeed urgent matter…

Cyprus is still far from memory exchange and reconciliation. However the positive steps of the Turkish Cypriot community may soon exercise a positive influence upon the Greek Cypriot community and lead to a time when history teaching lessens the mental divisions on the island which manifest themselves in the continued physical division.

National memory is, perhaps, the existential component of nations and national identity formation. National identities are social constructions and are constantly being transformed, renewed and renegotiated according to changing circumstances and interests. As social, political and economic conditions of nations change, so national memory and national identity, will be redefined in ways that make them relevant to the new set of circumstances in which they find themselves. They must adapt and evolve to respond better to the material, symbolic or affective needs of the nations’ members. But this redefinition does not only reflect the present dynamics of a given society, but also the future
intentions and desires of it. As history is not merely knowledge about the past, the conveying of such knowledge determines meaning for the present; it is constructed to give a particular direction for the future. The views or aims of those different groups, societies, and nations concerning the future become of primary importance in articulating accounts of the past. In other words, when talking of the past, one necessarily talks of the future as well. There has been growing interest –by no means universal across Europe as yet– in rewriting history textbooks and history curricula. Approaches to teaching school history have followed trends in academic history so that, while still acknowledging the importance of acquiring a body of historical knowledge, it is now recognized increasingly that students also need to adopt a critical attitude to historical facts and evidence, and to develop and apply the thinking processes essential to historical awareness and interpretation.\textsuperscript{14} Students need to study controversial and sensitive issues, which are socially divisive or divide nations – often their own. Turkish Cypriots, who have been politically and economically isolated from the rest of the world for the last 30 years, recently took a very big step by returning to the classroom and by reconstructing and representing their past for a better future.

\textsuperscript{14} Stradling (2001), p.24