

# HISTORY EDUCATION IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

*As the entire South Caucasus has been immersed in ethnically-framed conflicts since the late 1980s, an ethos of conflict has been constructed in the region. The commonly held views of the Armenian-Azerbaijani, Georgian-South Ossetian, Georgian-Abkhaz, but also Armenian-Turkish and Georgian-Russian conflicts as ancient, natural, intractable, and all-encompassing have been largely shaped by professional historians. Considering that the dynamics that sustain these ongoing conflicts are a serious impediment to democratization and socio-economic progress, we can conclude that the current state of history education whose narratives service conflicts is one of these impediments. This article's authors therefore argue that comprehensive reform of the structure and content of history education is a necessary condition for progress and development in the South Caucasus.*

Philip Gamaghelyan & Sergey Rumyansev\*



\* Philip Gamaghelyan is Co-director of the Imagine Center for Conflict Transformation and a PhD Candidate at the School for Conflict Analysis and Resolution at George Mason University in Arlington, VA, USA. Sergey Rumyansev is a Post-Doctoral Fellow of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation at the Institute for European Ethnology of Humboldt University in Berlin and a Research Fellow at the Academy of Sciences of Azerbaijan.

**I**n the introduction to his *Rethinking France: Les Lieux de Mémoire*, famous French historian Pierre Nora stresses the key role that historians play in shaping the French national consciousness.<sup>1</sup> This argument rings true with regard to the societies in the South Caucasus as well. Historians of this region, which have powerful instruments, such as mandatory history education in secondary schools and universities under their disposal; as well as media, films, and talk shows play a major role in shaping the national consciousness.

### *Issues and Traditions in Teaching History in the South Caucasus*

The institutionalization of history education in the South Caucasus has a relatively recent past, dating back to the beginning of the 20th century. By the time of collapse of the Russian Empire and the creation of the first nation-states in the South Caucasus in 1918-21 (Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia), the approach has become more systematic. At this time, history education, and education in humanities in general, served the objective of fostering a sense of collective solidarity and cultural homogeneity, contributing to the consolidation of ethno-national identities.

The nation-states in the Caucasus had a short life and became part of the Soviet Union in 1920-21; their education system became fully institutionalized and all-encompassing during Soviet times. Learning national history soon became mandatory, and all young Armenians, Azerbaijanis, and Georgians –titular groups in respective Soviet Socialist Republics (SSR)– had to grow up learning the Soviet Union’s story of the development of their respective nation, starting from its ethno-genesis. Later on, the Abkhaz and Ossetians, titular ethnicities in the respective autonomies within the Georgian SSR, received their own versions.

The importance of history education in the ideological landscape of the Soviet propaganda machine from its early days is highlighted by the personal interest accorded to it by Stalin, who personally edited certain parts of history textbooks. Many of the communist leaders of the ethno-national republics, including of Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia, also kept their history curricula under a close watch.

History education in the Soviet Union, therefore, was ideological, and aimed to serve two different motives: the interests of ethnic and cultural elites in the ethno-national republics and, at the same time, the ideological needs of the Communist Party. While ideologies changed, the trend of history education promoting narratives that suited the ideological needs of the current political order continued into the post-Soviet times. The educational institutions in the South Caucasus today still carry

<sup>1</sup> Pierre Nora, *Rethinking France: Les Lieux de Mémoire*, Volume 1: The State (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

the legacy of Soviet educational traditions. They remain highly ideological, but now are focused on forging ethno-national and cultural homogeneity of the post-Soviet successor states in the South Caucasus region.

### ***Positivism and its Critique in History Education***

This ideological approach to history education is not unique to the South Caucasus states, of course. The 19th and early 20th centuries were the time of formation of most nation-states

that had as their building blocks the construction of unified national identity with the introduction of mass education as a means to serve the ideological goals of nation-building. Education also served the economic goals in a form of mass literacy aimed at creating skilled workers for an increasingly technologically advanced economic market. The emergence of schools of professional historians and the development of formal history curricula in the South Caucasus, therefore, followed broader global trends.

The present-day historiographical tradition in the South Caucasus has its roots in the Enlightenment. In the 18th and 19th centuries, historians moved away from treating history as an art and toward seeing it as a social science, the aim of which was to remain impartial, avoiding bias and uncovering factual evidence. The initial drivers of this process were Prussian historians, who introduced such ideas as reliance on primary sources and empiricism in the study of history. The most prominent of these historians, Leopold von Ranke, is often credited for making revolutionary changes in pedagogy, including the introduction of the seminar as a method of teaching history. He argued against the production of general theories, insisting that each period of history should be understood and judged from the perspective of its own time, and not from a contemporary perspective.

His approach, therefore, was aimed at making history more scientific, distancing it from its reliance on secondary sources. The objective of this was to reclaim history from the realm of ideology and turn it into a science – understood an objective recitation of facts. This approach gradually became dominant in academia, and especially in pedagogy.

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Von Ranke's own historical writing, however, was far from non-ideological. It is very literary and well articulated, full of praise for the German monarchy. His books on Prussian history later became the reference for Prussian and German nationalism. The consequence of this attempted approach to turn history into a science was not the development of a more objective history; it remained subjective, and as ideological as ever. Yet thanks to its "scientification," it now enjoyed a greatly increased legitimacy and became an even more potent weapon of emerging nationalist regimes: a license to kill, the Bible of war.

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Starting from the middle of the 20th century, the positivist approach to history has been challenged in academic circles from a number of angles. One of the early critiques of the positivist approach came from Robin George Collingwood, who in the early 20th century argued that the investigative methods and the conceptual frame-

works of historical inquiry were significantly different from those of natural sciences.<sup>2</sup> A few decades later, Paul Ricoeur disputed the claim of positivist historians that history is similar to natural science. Such an understanding of history "(...)" suffers from the failure to take into consideration the initial distinction between a physical event which simply occurs, and an event that receives its historical status from the fact that it has been recounted in chronicles, in legendary stories, in memoirs."<sup>3</sup>

Ricoeur criticized the positivist consideration that the task of history is to uncover the facts. He argued that history is a narrative; it has a "plot" and, as such, is not very different from fiction.

Closer to the end of the 20th century, challenges to the positivist tradition rapidly grew in academia from a number of directions, but with particular force from the collective memory studies and discourse analytic perspectives. Halbwachs, the sociologist who coined the term "collective memory," argued that current social needs and concerns are of crucial importance in the construction of the memory of the past.<sup>4</sup>

2 Robin G. Collingwood, William H. Dray, and W. J. van der Dussen, *The Principles of History : And Other Writings in Philosophy of History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

3 Paul Ricoeur and John B. Thompson, *Hermeneutics and the human sciences : essays on language, action, and interpretation* (Paris: Cambridge University Press ; Editions de la Maison des Sciences de l'homme, 1981), p. 276.

4 Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1992).

Collective memory is not the remembrance of what actually happened in the past, but how what happened is reflected in memories as they were shared, passed on, and also constructed by contemporary societies. Halbwachs, and many of his followers, argued that collective memory is selective: the factual evidence of an event is only a part of a collective memory related to that event, and not necessarily the most important part. A social group “chooses to remember” parts of the common past that corresponds with the present-day interests of the group and “forgets” the rest.

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From the perspective of a discourse analyst Teun Van Dijk, this selective and interpretative “remembering” is not random; it follows a specific pattern. When describing the in-group members, the identifying markers tend to be positive. When identifying others as out-group members, these markers tend to be negative. According to Van Dijk, this pattern forms an “ideological square” in which societies:<sup>5</sup>

- Emphasize information that is positive about “us”
- Emphasize information that is negative about “them”
- Underemphasize information that is negative about “us”
- Underemphasize information that is positive about “them”

The criticism of the positivist approach to history in academia gradually also gave rise to reforms in history education in Western Europe following the World War II. This was not a simple shift of narratives; this was a paradigmatic shift, as well as an epistemological one. The understanding of the concept of knowledge itself, and the methods of acquiring it, had to change first before the important questions of what is history and how it should be taught could be tackled. Today, history is largely accepted to be an interpretation, and students learn to approach what they read critically and analytically. Alternative methods of developing historical knowledge, such as oral history with its focus on everyday life, have also been gaining acceptance.

<sup>5</sup> Teun Adrianus Van Dijk, “Politics, Ideology and Discourse,” *Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics Section Language and Politics*, 2004, [http://www.discursos.org/unpublished%20articles/Politics.%20ideology%20and%20discourse%20\(ELL\).htm](http://www.discursos.org/unpublished%20articles/Politics.%20ideology%20and%20discourse%20(ELL).htm)

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To date, however, these developments have only marginally entered the academic debate in the South Caucasus and its neighborhood, and have had no effect on applied history or history education there. The positivist take continues to dominate the field of history education and education in humanities, turning education into a propaganda machine serving nationalist and exclusivist agendas. The history texts are treated almost as scripture, as the one and only possible

truth, the text of which has to be memorized, regularly recited, and utilized as a basis for interpreting inter-group relations.

Ironically, the post-Soviet educational institutions in the South Caucasus and in its neighborhood –most notably in Turkey and Russia– remained “Prussian,” while Germany, the successor of Prussia, moved to the vanguard of history education reform.

### ***History Education in the Present Day South Caucasus***

The collapse of the Soviet Union, and the emergence of new nation-states and conflicts within and between them, constituted dramatic political events that inevitably led to the questioning and revision of history curricula. Since then, there have been several progressive developments: critiquing the ideological foundations of the Soviet School, debating methods and approaches to education in general and history education in particular, and the publication of new textbooks. While the content of education has changed, however, it has proved rather hard to overcome the institutionally and conceptually authoritarian and deeply ideological legacy of the Soviets. The critique remained on the surface and did not contain any serious attempts to offer effective alternatives to the positivist, primordialist, and essentialist approaches that characterized the Soviet tradition of history education.

As of now, we, the academic communities in the South Caucasus, have failed to ask themselves important questions such as: What are the methodological and theoretical paradigms that guide our approach to teaching history? Have we integrated large-scale, worldwide, post-WWII European experiences in history teaching and the development of textbooks? Have professional historians continued learning, developing, and familiarizing themselves with cutting-edge debates in the field, new methodologies, and conceptual approaches? Have we qualitatively reconstructed

Soviet narratives and ways of teaching? And, more importantly, have we re-evaluated the very reasons and objectives of teaching history?

Certainly, even after asking all these questions and engaging with the ideas of the last few decades, many historians could come to the conclusion that what they inherited from the Soviets' positivist approaches is still adequate. This could be the legitimate opinion of an informed academic. What we have right now, however, is the absence of any conceptual debate. Yet, we insist that in academia, the paradigms that are guiding approaches to knowledge should never be taken for granted, and that the educational system needs to be constructed through ongoing reflection, re-evaluation, the questioning of existing approaches, and by taking into consideration all forms of knowledge accumulated worldwide.

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We also need to acknowledge here that the South Caucasus countries did not all follow a similar path; some engaged in deeper soul searching and reform than others. The most dramatic institutional reforms of history education in the post-Soviet space took place in Georgia, which, as of 2004, abolished the state-centric approach, allowing for a multiplicity of history textbooks. The new textbooks were evaluated against criteria that discouraged the construction of ethnic stereotypes, enemy images and de-humanization of others, and encouraged inclusivity and multiperceptivity. Even in Georgia, however, these changes were not accompanied by the necessary conceptual debate that could forge a theoretical foundation. This led to a situation in which textbooks were changed, but the teaching system and its teachers remained the same. Despite this, Georgia has accumulated a decade of experience in education reform, and the lessons learned could be instructive for the rest of the region.

### ***Political Implications of an Ideological Approach to History***

What we make of history concerns not only future generations. It has also very practical implications for current relations within the South Caucasus and between the South Caucasus states and their neighbors. In 2009, the Turkish and Armenian governments signed protocols on the establishment of diplomatic relations between

the two countries. One of the most criticized clauses of the protocols was the agreement to establish a sub-commission to conduct an “(...) impartial scientific examination of the historical records and archives to define existing problems and formulate recommendations.” The presumed methodology of the “scientific examination” was never made public, nor, in all likelihood, was it ever agreed upon. However, the text of the protocols and the language employed by both critics and defenders of the idea of a sub-commission implied that the aim of the “examination” was assumed to be “uncovering the facts, which are buried in documents.”<sup>6</sup> The protocols were never ratified by either Parliament, and the normalization process has been subsequently “suspended.”

The Turkish-Armenian normalization process has been initiated and supported by a number of Western governments, who employed an array of practices from the field of conflict analysis and resolution, including problem solving workshops and multi-track diplomacy. However, these approaches proved inadequate when it came to addressing the central problem of Turkish-Armenian animosity: history.

Similar to the states in the Caucasus, Turkey had adapted the earlier European approach to history as an ideological endeavor, using it as an instrument of nation-building. “History,” therefore, was understood by the Armenian and Turkish sides, as well as the mediators, as a set of facts on which both sides ought to agree. Ironically, it was this very approach sustained by the political institutions of Turkey and Armenia (including Soviet Armenia) that had led to the production/formation of competing claims of truth, and resulted in the social construction of mutually exclusive identities and the “intractability” of the conflict. It is therefore not surprising that conflict resolution practices based on the assumptions that created the problem to begin with did not provide adequate answers for the resolution.

Ignoring the powerful intellectual traditions of the past half-century that had changed the very concepts of knowledge, education, and history is to remain in the Soviet past as the world moves forward. To think and act in the categories of the early to mid-20th century affects not only our educational system, but also our notion of citizenry, our politics, conflicts, and socio-economic development. Just as one would not be able to build a successful society in the 20th century based on the theological paradigms of the Middle Ages and the firm belief that the earth was flat, today also one cannot build a successful society based on the norms of the past century or two. Yet this is precisely what we are doing, and failing at it visibly too.

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6 Paul Ricoeur and John B. Thompson, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action, and Interpretation* (Paris: Cambridge University Press, Editions de la Maison des Sciences de l'homme, 1981).

Education, in humanities and social sciences specifically, creates the intellectual and spiritual basis of our society and of our future citizens; it plays a major role in shaping the individual. Yet we still discipline children and students, we teach them through memorization of texts and facts, we assert that only one discourse –the one dictated by the state– can be considered the truth. The current system we have is aimed at molding young generations into weak and controllable personalities – as obedient implementers of someone’s orders, foot soldiers who will blindly serve the interests of the elites without the means or knowledge to stand up for themselves. This education creates fertile ground for a top-down, repressive, authoritarian society – the kind we saw in abundance in the 19th and early 20th century, the kind that entered into two world wars and nearly destroyed the humanity, the kind where the needs of citizens are subordinated to the interests of the few.

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The alternatives to education and corresponding models of societal development also exist, and have been slowly but steadily advancing. These new approaches are focused on developing a citizen who is a critical thinker, who questions, doubts, and creates, and whose patriotism is of a civic nature. The social structures that a society with such values builds are more inclusive and democratic, with citizens who are politically active and socially conscious. The education –and history education in particular– that today corresponds to the needs of democratic societies is also shaped respectively. Texts are understood as an interpretation of an author and can be questioned, and analyzed as such. The approach is multiperspective, which excludes xenophobia or hate speech; the sources checked, and the existence of alternative views acknowledged. The modes of teaching also differ: students are not asked to memorize texts and repeat them mechanically. Learning takes a multiplicity of forms ranging from reading to seminars, audio-visual presentations to debates, and oral history to critical analysis.

### ***Can we Afford Reforms While in Conflict?***

The supporters of state-controlled histories all seem to share one argument. They concur that a move away from the current nationalist and dogmatic model that builds an enemy image and is taught through memorization towards a more inclusive,

interpretative model taught through the development of critical thinking will make their society less secure and unfit against an external enemy.

In light of this argument, the following questions should be considered: Were the European states safer in the first half of the 20th century, when, similar to the present day South Caucasus, they were raising militaristic societies and obedient citizen-patriots? Or are they safer today with their reformed models of interpretative and inclusive education? Are any of the present-day societies that espouse nationalist models of education—in the Caucasus, the Balkans, or the Middle East—any safer than the democratic societies? Is it only coincidental that the countries with authoritarian models of education have widespread poverty, threatening rates of intellectual out-migration, and the absence of democratic development, and that migration patterns are towards those countries that espouse inclusivity and democracy?

All this brings up an existential question: can societies that lack inclusivity, civic solidarity, and free and creative intellectual resource maintain sustainable statehoods in the modern world? The dynamics at play in the South Caucasus suggest that they cannot.