

# SECURITY ISSUE: HISTORY TEACHING IN POST-CONFLICT SOCIETIES

Dr. Pilvi Torsti's seminal work on history textbooks and uses of history in post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina entitled *Divergent Stories, Convergent Attitudes. A Study on the Presence of History, History Textbooks and the Thinking of Youth in post-War Bosnia and Herzegovina* was published in 2003. Since then, Torsti has published scientific articles in history didactics (for example in the *Journal of Curriculum Research*) and is currently finalising a submission for a peace-education volume edited by Claire McGlynn and Zwi Beckermann.

## ABSTRACT

The challenge of teaching history is always present in societies emerging from violent conflicts – in particular civil conflicts – or major societal changes. This article provides an overall analysis with a normative approach of the central questions concerning history education in post-conflict situations. Based on her experience as a scholar and project worker, Dr. Pilvi Torsti offers her conclusions as to the most important considerations when thinking about history education in a post-conflict/conflict context.

## INTRODUCTION

The challenge of teaching history is always present in societies emerging from violent conflicts – in particular civil conflicts – or major societal changes. Societies with various national or ethnic groups face complicated situations. Analyses of the changes in history education after the fall of Berlin and as part of the reconstruction processes in such places as Estonia, East Germany, Afghanistan, Iraq, Bosnia and Herzegovina or Rwanda can all provide different perspectives to the discussion on post-conflict history education, illustrating that easy solutions are never available (See for example Ahonen 1992, Spink 2005, King 2008, Vongalis-Macrow 2006, Torsti 2003).

This article attempts to provide an overall analysis of the central questions concerning history education in post-conflict situations. It is based on my previous research on history teaching and historical thinking of young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina and former Yugoslavia and on the general dilemma of post-conflict history education. My thinking was also developed through my practical involvement in the United World Colleges and International Baccalaureate Initiative which started the first multinational secondary school in Bosnia and Herzegovina after the war

(see [www.uwc-ibo.org](http://www.uwc-ibo.org)). The approach of the article is normative: I offer my conclusions as to the most important considerations when thinking about history education in a post-conflict/conflict context. I have organized the article in four sections covering fundamental questions about history education in post-conflict (and often multicultural) contexts. The first two sub-sections deal with the issue of the basic aims of history education in such situations, while the third and fourth sections cover the ways to intervene (who and how). Finally, I will briefly present one possible classroom tool as to how to approach the post-conflict and multicultural history teaching in practice.

To provide context for this article, I would refer to the recent emphasis of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), which through its mandate to coordinate international efforts in the educational sector in Bosnia and Herzegovina since 2002 has come to suggest that education should be recognized as a security issue in post-conflict and conflict contexts. According to the OSCE, segregated schooling that has been in place in Bosnia and Herzegovina since early 1990s continues to be a threat to long-term peace and stability.<sup>1</sup> In addition to stating the obvious, I believe that recognizing education as a security

issue could also help to add weight to the role of education as part of security considerations when drafting peace agreements and similar documents. Recently, Cole has noted the importance of recognizing education and particularly history education as part of efforts in the context of transitional justice, which typically has concentrated on truth commissions, trials and commemorations (Cole 2007).

## TO TEACH OR NOT TO TEACH, TO DIVIDE OR UNITE

Should history be taught in schools at all after a conflict or a change of regime if there is a danger for conflicting views within the society? This is an obvious question that many societies have faced and dealt with in different manners. In Germany after the Second World War, there was a two-year ban on history teaching. After that period, history teaching utilized mainly pure documents which were supposed "to speak for themselves". This document-based history teaching continued through most of 1950s and 1960s (Herbst 1977). In Finland, after a civil war in 1917-1918 which divided the country bitterly, history teaching of that very period became part of formal history education only in the 1960s. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the war of 1992-95 was incorporated into the textbooks immediately after the conflict, while later the Ministries of Education had history textbooks end in 1991.

In many societies, history teaching was altogether suspended immediately after the conflict, as it may take a decade or longer to reform history curricula and to reach consensus on what to teach. In such a situation, assistance from "outsiders" can be vital (Cole and Barsalou 2006).

Another related basic fundamental question together with the decision of whether or not to teach is whether the aim of education in post-conflict situation is to divide or unite. The obvious answer seems to be that of course it should unite. Such a strategy was in fact deliberately chosen in Rwandan schools after the conflict in the mid-1990s. The focus has been unity and "Rwandan" identity at the expense of various ethnic identities that were part of the war reality. The model has been described as "unity in homogeneity" instead of "unity in diversity". The possible problem with this model is the attempt to legislate unity, when it must rather grow organically. As far as history teaching is concerned, this approach did not leave room for unity and the German approach led to a moratorium that has been in place since 1994. The risk of course is that ethnic Hutu and Tutsi identities as well as the conflicting interpretations of history are repressed and not openly dealt with (King 2008).

The Rwandan strategy to focus on unity can be compared to the approach of former Yugoslavia immediately after the Second World War. A new Yugoslav identity based

on the Partisan victory and the "brotherhood and unity" slogan was fostered. In this case and unlike in Rwanda, history teaching was not banned but played an important role in the Yugoslav identity construction. Later, in the 1960s and 1970s, the approach changed as a result of the general liberalization and federalization of Yugoslav society. Education and history teaching became the responsibility of each of the six republics and history textbooks were to transmit both the concept of the unifying Yugoslav identity which was based on the values of the system and the separate national historical identity.

After the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the most multicultural part of former Yugoslavia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, has practiced educational policies which are in turn very divisive. The Dayton Peace Agreement in 1995 regulated many structures of the country aiming at a functional multicultural society. Unfortunately, education was not part of the Dayton regulations and as a result the general national segregation and divisive history teaching in primary and secondary schools has remained almost unchanged since the war years when education was divided into three curricula – Serb, Croat and Bosnian – based on the frontlines. Education has not united people, neither in homogeneity nor in diversity. Instead, education has divided people. As a result, the educational practices have not been fully in accordance with the laws of the country, nor did the country meet the requirements that concern it through international treaties and agreements (for example the membership in Council of Europe). The Open Society Institute has singled out four principles from the local laws as the aims of education, questioning whether any of the four are actually being respected in post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina: (1) to strengthen the sense of belonging to and affiliation with BiH, (2) to promote skills for life in multicultural society, (3) to promote skills in human rights, and (4) to strengthen critical thinking skills of students (Trbic 2007).

## ROLE OF OUTSIDE HELP

One aspect mentioned in many analyses on post-conflict education is the role and nature of international funding which directly influences the nature of projects. The story appears to be very similar from Iraq to Afghanistan: various NGOs are important stakeholders when money is pouring in immediately after the conflict but their work is often not part of any common strategy and many projects are short term and donor-initiated (see for example Vongalis-Macrow 2006, Spink 2005, Cole and Barsalou 2006). Part of this funding problem is the natural emphasis on physical reconstruction of school buildings and class rooms as a priority target. In worst cases, this emphasis unfortunately leads to a situation such as

Afghanistan where children, three years after a “new era for Afghanistan”, still continued to learn ethnic hatred and intolerance from highly politicized textbooks that promoted social divisions and violence. It has been suggested that this problem was unnoticed by the international community representatives who concentrated on concrete reconstruction, which was seen as bringing about the new era (Spink 2005).

Since the war ended in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1995, international funding has been available and used for many projects in the field of history education. For example, there have been textbook checks, conferences for history teachers representing all three national groups, enforced legislation that banned teaching materials printed in other countries (Croatia and Serbia), and a development of the concept “two schools under one roof”. Unfortunately, these efforts have not been effective in addressing the basic problem of segregation and hatred-spreading teaching materials. In the case of history textbooks checks in 1999, there were many credibility problems that related to the process itself in which students and teachers were ordered to cross out entire paragraphs in their textbooks. In 2005-2007, the textbook development process was characterized by the lack of coordination of efforts between various internationally funded stakeholders (See e.g. Torsti 2003, Low-Beer 2001, Trbic 2007).

These problems have led me to propose three suggestions regarding outside help. First, education should be recognized as a long-term development issue rather than a humanitarian crisis issue. This means that from the start and also in the middle of reconstruction humanitarian efforts, educational planning should be done with a long term focus and by people with development and education rather than crisis management orientation and training. Second, the importance of evaluation and analysis on different levels should be emphasized when planning the initiatives in the education sector. The evaluation and analysis would be required at least on the local political level, on the implementation level (who implements and how) and on the coordination level. These levels require different competencies and a multi-professional approach. The third and obvious suggestion is that there should be common long term goal and vision about the development of education and history education. All international stakeholders should sign into this vision. This would lead to a coherent strategy and a more efficient use of funds as they would be targeted based on an agreed upon strategy that in turn follows the shared vision. Through this we should be able to avoid ad hoc projects and continuous change of winds in terms of priorities and funding in the education sector.

## SHOULD WE CONCENTRATE ON TEXTBOOKS, TEACHERS OR SCHOLARS?

I suggested above that the divisive nature of teaching and textbooks was not noticed by outsiders in Afghanistan. In the comparative context, many good examples of useful outside help have also been mentioned. In such cases, the focus has been on history teachers and academic historians rather than history textbooks because “social consensus must be reached to ensure approval and adoption of history textbooks that break with old myths” (Cole and Barsalou 2006, 7-8).

Who are the best agents of change of practices: textbook authors, teachers or historians? This is of course a question without a correct answer. Despite the above mentioned conclusion of many experts about the importance of working first with history teachers and historians and only then on textbooks, I would also argue that leaving textbooks untouched in a post-conflict situation can lead to a situation where problematic material circulates at schools for several years while teachers and scholars look for a “social consensus”. The history textbooks used for years in Bosnia and Herzegovina after the war serve as an example of such problematic materials: one could argue that they continued the war through other means. Clearly such materials should have been banned at the outset perhaps following the post-war German example of not teaching history for 1–2 years immediately after the war.

Nobody can argue against the importance of training teachers and scholars. However, for this to be a consistent process, national political stakeholders must also get involved. This can be difficult if the political and thereby societal situation is nationally divided and it is not in the interests of political and other stakeholders to support processes that aim at multicultural teaching and development of social consensus. This can lead to a situation where outsiders run training sessions and workshops which are useful by themselves but have no systematic effect on history teaching, historiography and thereby history textbooks. In Bosnia, teachers have often found the work of international institutions imposed and meaningless (Diegoli 2007).

## DELIBERATION VERSUS DEBATE IN THE HISTORY CLASSROOM: A PEDAGOGICAL TOOL FOR A POST-CONFLICT SITUATION

Finally, I will briefly present one possible pedagogical tool that I have developed with Professor Sirkka Ahonen, who taught history for two years for the first truly multi-ethnic secondary school history class in Bosnia and Herzegovina after the war (Torsti and Ahonen 2008). Our

concept, deliberative communication, has been deduced from the theory of deliberative democracy as developed by Jürgen Habermas (Habermas 1984, see also Englund 2006).

At the core of deliberative communication as a tool for history teaching is the principle of common schooling, which is open for all groups and thereby ensures open and regular encounters with the “others” without forced integration. We consider such open encounters as true multiculturalism, as opposed to forced integration which often seems to be the strategy of the international community (for example in Bosnia and Herzegovina). Deliberative communication in history classes stresses the right of students to ask where the historical knowledge is coming from. It also stresses the multiperspectival approach to history and the recognition of the trans-generational nature of human societies – the understanding that the decisions and acts of today will be judged tomorrow. The latter is important when dealing with recent history: it is important to understand in the classroom how different generations arrive at different interpretations of the past.

A comparison between the characteristics of a traditional debate and a deliberative process illustrates the nature of deliberative communication as a pedagogical tool and its suitability for multicultural history teaching. While a classical debate is based on the opposition between defenders and critics of a certain interpretation of history, the participants in deliberative communication do not take opposing positions. Besides bolstering their own story, they listen to the arguments of the other participants. Through active listening, they will be able to embrace each others’ stories. Deliberative communication thus spares the participants from ending up as winners and losers. Yet, even if participants do not give up the appreciation and pride of their own past, their perspectives of the past widen.

It is important to stress here that the concept of deliberative communication can serve as a way to approach history teaching not only in post-conflict but also in multicultural societies.

## CONCLUSIONS

There are of course other considerations than the ones presented when looking at history education in post-conflict societies. The considerations analyzed here have, however, appeared central in the contexts I have been involved in as a scholar and as a project worker. I hope the considerations of this article will help those working as teachers, policy-makers and development workers in various post-conflict and multicultural settings to further develop both their strategies and practices.

## FOOTNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> “Education in Bosnia and Herzegovina: A Neglected Security Issue”. Speech of Aida Premilovac, a member of the Cabinet of the Head of the OSCE Mission to BiH. OSCE annual Parliamentary Assembly meetings, September 29 to October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2007, in Portoroz, Slovenia. HYPERLINK “<http://www.oscebih.org>” November 12, 2007.

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## INTERVIEWS:

- OSI Education Coordinator Zdenana Trbic Interview, September 10, 2007, Sarajevo.

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