



**Hanna Schissler, Yasemin Nuhoglu Soysal.** *The Nation, Europe, and the world: Textbooks and Curricula in Transition.* Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2005. 258 S. \$25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-57181-550-7.



**Reviewed by** Brian Puaca (Department of History, Christopher Newport University)

**Published on** H-German (April, 2006)

## Thinking Outside the Container

History instruction in the schools has been in the service of the nation-state since the nineteenth century. Professional historians have played an important role in this process by creating and legitimizing national narratives and presenting them for popular consumption. Nowhere has this work been more apparent—and more significant—than in textbooks used in the elementary and secondary schools. Traditional narratives continued to dominate classroom instruction well into the postwar era, but they have recently been challenged by new models that recast the nation in a European framework. This volume, edited by Hanna Schissler and Yasemin Soysal, investigates the transformation of national narratives across the continent and recent attempts to move beyond the “container model” of national history.

The book itself is divided into three sections that provide a valuable examination of European history and civics textbooks. The first of these concentrates predominantly on changing presentations of national identity and Europe in German and French publications. The second and perhaps most intriguing part examines Europe as seen from the periphery and includes essays on mod-

ern Greek, Turkish, Bulgarian, Russian and Spanish textbooks. The final section is somewhat different from the first two. It consists of three essays reflecting on the integration of world history instruction into the contemporary classroom and professional concerns related to the new field.

The volume begins with a helpful introduction from Hanna Schissler that outlines major developments in the field of history textbooks in the postwar era. The reconceptualization of the nation in European textbooks has been brought about by several developments challenging traditional narratives. First, the broadening of human rights discourses since the Second World War has emphasized the universality of individual liberties and fostered a transnational framework. Second, decolonization has promoted an awareness of the rights of formerly colonized peoples and challenged their suppressors’ ideologies. Third, the social movements of the 1970s promoted a celebration of group, regional and ethnic interests and identities that both eroded and transcended traditional national models. Finally, the end of the Cold War and the changes that have followed (democratization, mod-

ernization, European integration) have prompted the advent of new historical perspectives. All of these forces have cast doubt on the legitimacy of the dominant national narrative.

The first four essays of the volume focus attention almost solely on France and Germany. The first of these, by Yasemin Soysal, Teresa Bertilotti and Sabine Mannitz, compares the different techniques used in the two countries to connect the nation to Europe. The authors argue that in German texts, the nation recedes into the background, allowing Europe more prominence. This development is by no means recent. German texts have de-emphasized the nation, nationalism and national heroes since 1945. The French, on the other hand, continue to stress the nation. French ideals and values, however, are approximated with Europe; to be a good French citizen is also to be a good European. These alternatives are, in effect, two paths to the same goal. The authors do an admirable job of highlighting both political and historical factors that have contributed to these different approaches.

Rainer Ohlinger examines the depiction of returning migrants, expellees and repatriates in French, German and Dutch history textbooks. His essay shows the troubles textbook authors faced when dealing with these groups who were both part of the national community and also a distinct group with their own identity. Ohlinger emphasizes political, social and cultural factors that influenced their depiction in postwar texts. Particularly interesting is the comparison of expellees in East and West German texts and the silences in France regarding the integration of *pieds-noirs* after 1962.

The work of Jacques E.C. Hymans offers a critical examination of “French distinctiveness” (p. 62) and argues that France has been slow to evolve toward the predominant world model of history. The first part of the essay examines several French history textbooks and concludes that they have been resistant to new transnational approaches. His assertion that French values have been re-labeled as European in many textbooks underscores the rhetorical shift highlighted in the first essay. The second part of the essay relies largely on entrance exam questions given by the *École Normale Supérieure* over the past 150 years. Hymans argues that since these questions were formulated by professors and alumni independent of bureaucratic control, they indicate a resistance to world models in history instruction on the part of French educators as well as the state. One wonders, however, whether these questions show such a dichotomy between

the state and university professors. Did the choices of these academics merely reflect the objectives of the state-determined curriculum? Phrased differently: were students being tested only on things that they were supposed to know? It is also unclear how representative Hymans’s figures are. His claims would be more convincing if he showed that the entrance questions of the *École Normale Supérieure* were similar to those used at other elite institutions of higher education elsewhere in France.

The decline of the nation in West German history texts, balanced by a re-emergence of the nation in East German books by the 1970s, is the focus of Julian Dierkes’s contribution. He argues that the new federal system in West Germany and the academic interests of teachers were responsible for the introduction of new narratives in history instruction. Furthermore, Dierkes points out that the “great men” of German history have no longer dominated history instruction after the war, while contemporary history has achieved much greater importance. This piece nicely highlights the current re-evaluation of the 1950s and 1960s as a time of social and cultural transformation in the Federal Republic. In contrast to the publications of its neighbor, postwar East German history texts embraced transnational themes related to socialism. It was only in the 1970s that education officials began to follow the Soviet shift toward a more national approach to history instruction. Thus while there were changes in reference to transnational and global trends in the two countries, there were key differences in motivation and timing.

The second section of the volume offers readers an examination of how Europe has entered the textbooks of those countries on the periphery. The most interesting essays in this section address Eastern European conceptions of Europe and their place within it. Tim Pilbrow examines the conflicted relationship of Bulgaria with Europe. He shows that there are clear differences between the presentation in school textbooks and other portrayals in public discourse. The mission of the schools is to show a solid, organic tie between Bulgaria and Europe, while broader public discussions call this relationship into question. It is this ambivalence and ambiguity, Pilbrow argues, that defines the Bulgarian national ideology. The essay devotes substantial attention to public discussions of Europe among Bulgarians and asserts that the schools must be seen “as a window onto a broader field of public discourse, rather than as a clearly demarcated and controlled setting” (p. 133). This is undoubtedly true, but it remains unclear how the ironies of the Bulgarian connection to Europe are translated in the classroom. Stu-

dents are exposed to various influences that offer a multitude of impressions of Europe and Bulgaria's place within it. If textbooks present an idealized portrait of this relationship that does not match reality, what is the response of students? The work of Pilbrow highlights the fascinating connections between the schools and society. It also underscores the need to move beyond the text and to devote attention—insofar as it is possible through the source material—to classroom experience.

The place of Russia in a new Europe and post-Cold War world is the subject of Robert Maier's contribution. This essay, more than any other, highlights the role of various individuals and groups in the construction of a new history curriculum in recent years. The demise of Communism has opened the door for private businesses, interest groups, international actors (such as George Soros) and the Church all to become involved in the production of textbooks. The result is a plethora of texts offering competing interpretations of Russian history. This is a dramatic change from the uniform narrative handed to publishers by the Communist Party in previous decades. (Yet even here, Maier challenges the idea that there was a single history conveyed to students and highlights the "maneuvering" (p. 141) of teachers during the Soviet era.) Maier's study reveals that it has been teachers and parents driving these changes, as both recognize the value of new presentations of Russian history and the country's connections with the world. Despite dramatic changes in Russian texts, they remain unable or unwilling to depict Russia as engaged with the world. Some texts are nationalistic, others Eurocentric, while still others retain a Cold War anti-Western bias. Thus, Maier presents a story that is largely unfinished.

Recent revisions in the textbooks of Greece and Turkey highlight friendlier relations between the two nations as well as the former nation's sense of security in the European Union. Vasilias Lilian Antoniou and Yasemin Soysal examine Greek and Turkish texts and delineate important differences in how the nation is conceived in both lands. For the Turks, national identity is defined territorially. This produces a "rather disjointed national history and identity with many possible and contested heritages and multiple 'others'" (p. 106). The Greeks, on the other hand, establish a continuous national narrative based on the continuity of culture over time. While both countries make claims to be part of Europe, each faces challenges to these aspirations and finds itself on the margins.

The last essay in this section looks at Europe from the

western edge of the continent. Miguel A. Pereyra and Antonio Luzon trace the depictions of Europe in twentieth century Spanish textbooks. They argue that Spanish texts have concentrated on artistic and cultural links to Europe at the expense of economic, political, and social factors. An inferiority complex in relation to Europe that dominated history instruction before entry into the European Community in 1986 has disappeared. A new narrative emphasizing Spain's European identity and connections to the continent has not yet emerged. Reconciling the multiple local, regional, national, and supranational identities of the Spanish is an issue that remains to be addressed frankly in these texts. Similar to the other essays in this section, this contribution illustrates the transitional state of history texts in contemporary Europe.

The third part of the collection offers the reader three essays targeting pedagogical and professional concerns regarding contemporary world history instruction. Michael Geyer regards the return of world history as a fact and devotes his efforts to figuring out what to do with it now that it has arrived. His essay revolves around three basic issues. First, Geyer asserts that the reason for the recurrence of world history is due to the fact that the world "has invaded almost everybody's life" (p. 194). Recent global developments, including the events of 9/11, have prompted a renewed interest in the subject. Second, he suggests several possibilities for actually bringing world history into the classroom. In light of the overwhelming content, historians must organize world history instruction into manageable subjects. Geyer discusses two such possibilities: a "history of un/settlement" and a "natural history of the human condition." Finally, historians need to come to terms with globalization as a series of human processes and experiences. Geyer's article reveals his extensive experience teaching advanced courses on world history and globalization.

Ocean maps serve as a useful metaphor in Karen Wigen's discussion of how historians might conceptualize inter-area history. In a clear, concise, and thoughtful essay, Wigen offers four models for consideration. The first of these is the "national seas" paradigm, which is the equivalent of national-focused inter-area fields such as "American diplomacy" or "Spanish colonialism." Second, there are "ocean arcs" that are compared to transnational networks. Recent diaspora scholarship is the best example of this approach. Third, Wigen examines "ocean basins" as metaphor for contact zones, frontiers, and borderlands. Finally, the "global ocean" speaks to truly global studies of flows and processes. The conclusion of Wigen's contribution raises several interesting questions

about the ramifications of global history on the profession.

The volume closes with Hanna Schissler's plea for textbooks to transcend the traditional national narrative and embrace world history. Citing a number of social, cultural, economic, and technological developments that have contributed to the need for world history, Schissler emphasizes the need to move away from the "parade of civilizations" approach that does nothing more than overwhelm students and teachers alike. Broadening students' horizons and preparing them to cope with the demands of the present are the main objectives of the subject. Only when people realize that their lives are intimately connected to an increasingly transnational world, she argues, will debates on world history fall on fertile ground.

Readers will find the collection to be a satisfying study of current European efforts to depart from traditional nation-centered historical narratives in the classroom. Nevertheless, they may find themselves with lingering questions at the end of the book. Perhaps the most challenging question one might ask is how textbook content has translated into classroom instruction. Several authors highlight the importance of the teacher as a mediator—and a variable—in this process, yet few

address this issue in any detail. A related question has to do with reception. How have students experienced these new narratives? Many of the essays point out that the schools are only one influence on students' conceptions of Europe. If there are competing visions of Europe in Bulgaria, Russia, Spain, France and Germany (and indeed there are), one wonders how students reconcile what they hear at home and what they see on television with what they encounter in textbooks. A final question has to do with the future. It is true that there is a need to come up with educational policies that will cultivate a European mentality and sense of world citizenship. What specific initiatives can be taken to achieve this goal?

This volume should appeal to a variety of interests. Obviously, specialists in the history of education will find this to be a valuable contribution to the study of history textbooks and instruction in postwar Europe. Scholars interested in European integration and its challenges will also benefit from this collection, as it addresses the fundamental questions surrounding the creation of supranational European identities. Finally, practitioners of world history will find the contributions of Kater, Wigen and Schissler most intriguing. It is a work that engages many important issues related to education, society, and the future of Europe.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

**Citation:** Brian Puaca. Review of Schissler, Hanna; Soysal, Yasemin Nuhoglu, *The Nation, Europe, and the world: Textbooks and Curricula in Transition*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. April, 2006.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11687>

Copyright © 2006 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.org](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.org).