



Continuity in history textbooks in Eastern Europe (1980-2000)

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1. Central-Eastern European history as a prelude to the Warsaw pact

As the communist regime collapsed, the educational elites of Eastern Europe declared that they wanted to follow and emulate "western patterns". In some respects they succeeded, but in others they did not.

It is well known that in recent decades American and European history textbooks have concentrated less and less on political, military, institutional and governmental history, and more on structures and long-term tendencies, on the history of culture, society and everyday life. However, most of the new textbooks published in post-Communist countries have not followed this trend. The aim of this article is to explain this phenomenon from the point of view of the intellectual history of the last few decades.

In the Communist period textbook writers had to avoid "national viewpoints" because the international political context of the time forced them, and sometimes historians as well, to avoid mentioning the conflict-ridden traditions of Polish-Russian or Hungarian-Russian historical relations. Therefore, the history textbooks had to "create" a historical "prelude" for the *existing* Warsaw Pact.

It was important to stress the common features and common interests of Eastern European countries in history. Tsarist Russia – the textbooks accepted the panslavist ideology – became the "big brother" of the Slavic peoples of the Ottoman and Habsburg empires. This was not very far from the traditional national interpretations of Bulgarian and Slovakian history – but it was very strange in the context of Polish historical knowledge, and it was problematic for Czech knowledge as well.

It was even more complicated for the Hungarians and Romanians, since they were not Slavic peoples. On the one hand, Hungarian textbooks in the 1950s tried to stress the great cultural and social influence of Slavic people in the early centuries of the Middle Ages in Hungary. On the other hand, the same textbooks described the role of German craftsmen and merchants (who were the pioneers in the creation of a middle class in our region) as "colonial".

The message of the textbooks was clear: "Slavs are good" – "Germans are bad", and "the English and Americans are bad, too". For example, between 1919 and 1922 a proto-Fascist system did exist in Hungary, and it was only the pressure of the American, British and French governments, together with their actual capital, that forced the Hungarian government (which needed the international loans) to change the regime into a conservative parliamentary system. This process was described in the textbooks of the 1950s as "the role played by American and British capital in the consolidation of Horthy *Fascism*."

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2. Central European history as the prelude of the successor states

It was not only the "Warsaw pact context" that caused problems in teaching history in the Soviet Satellite countries: the textbooks also had to "create" a historical "prelude" to the existing modern states, that is the successor states of the Habsburg, Turkish and Russian empires, with their modern borders, as well.

Yugoslavian history teaching stressed the common features of the history of Yugoslav member-states and peoples despite the fact that the various states had once belonged to different empires: Slovenia belonged to Austria, another state to the Hungarian Kingdom, though it was ruled by its own laws, and the others belonged to the Turkish Empire.

Czechoslovakian history teaching (especially before 1968) stressed "Czechoslovak history", again, despite the fact that the Czech kingdom had belonged to Austria, while Slovakia did not exist as a separate state but was an area belonging to the Hungarian Kingdom, so it was almost impossible to create a specifically "Czechoslovakian history" with its particular story.

Naturally, within the Soviet Union, history teaching in countries like Estonia or Lithuania had to stress the common features with the Russian Empire.

3. Stalinist and reform-communist nationalism

The communist authorities were disturbed by these "small nation – national feelings" not only because of the "internationalism" of Communism, but also because of the *nationalism* displayed by some Communist governments and educationalists.

Ruling Communist parties of the Stalinist type consciously used nationalistic and patriotic ideology as a means of underpinning their power. This phenomenon can be found documented in the states' national curricula up to the end of the Communist era in the region. For instance, Stalin, (himself, paradoxically, a Georgian), clearly used traditional Russian nationalism and anti-Semitism in his struggle against Trotsky and Zinoviev. "Anti-Zionism"- as anti-Jewish discrimination, for example the university "numerus clausus", was officially called – was a key element expressed in Soviet ideology in the Stalinist period and thereafter until Gorbachev came to power. Stalinism consciously used Russian patriotism and the orthodox religious tradition when extending Russia as the Soviet empire. Especially during World War II, patriotism was used as an ideology by the Red Army in the war which led to the occupation of North-East Finland and the Baltic states, and later in its campaigns against the German invasion.

At the end of 1980s fall of the Communist regimes was followed by increasingly powerful nationalism in all the countries of the region. In Eastern Germany a cult of the Prussian king, Frederick II "the Great" became the official ideology.

The state-generated conflict between the Romanian majority population and the Hungarian minority, and between the Bulgarian majority and the Turkish minority, reached significant proportions in Romania and Bulgaria respectively. The authorities curtailed both the political (regional and municipal) autonomy of the minorities and their cultural freedom (in education and publishing) as well.

Not only old-style Stalinist politicians but Reform-Communists too used nationalism as a tool in their quest for legitimised political power. In the 1980s one wing of the Hungarian Reform-Communists followed the same policy. This wing of the Party was led by Pozsgai, one of the founders of the "Hungarian Democratic Forum", the right-wing, nationalist and anti-Communist party which was to form the government from 1990 to 1994. These Communist politicians very often argued in the same way as their nationalist colleagues. In 1988-1989 they reached a compromise with the nationalist opposition to the Communist regime for two reasons: to exclude the Stalinists and to keep the Liberals out of government. In other countries in the mid 90's, ex-Communist politicians such as Milosevic or Meciar stood clearly on the nationalist side of the political scenes of Serbia and Slovakia.

The history textbooks mirrored this situation.

If one compares illustrations depicting "The Capitalist" in textbooks for Soviet pupils with those found in Nazi textbooks, they turn out to resemble each other. The same features are also to be found

in caricatures of the anti-Semitic papers of the Central European Fascist movements of the 1940s: the Hungarian Arrow Cross or the Romanian Iron Guard. The capitalist appears as a fat, ugly man with "Jewish features", clutching a sack of gold or money, or enjoying a hedonistic life-style.

In Soviet textbooks patriotism was the official ideology from the thirties onwards. The widely acknowledged scholarly consensus about Nordic influences on early Russian history was prohibited. For the Soviet Union of Stalin, the specifically Russian cultural heritage was the important value pattern. In the Soviet Union and its satellite countries Marx's famous pamphlet, "The Secret Diplomacy of the 18th Century" was not published until the late 1980s, because Marx was actually discussing the dangers of Russian expansion. Russian colonisation in Asia was dubbed "civilisation" by the textbooks, which described British and French colonisation as an infernal process. In the 1960s, when textbook agreements were signed between Hungary and the Soviet Union, the Soviets asked the Hungarians to remove Russia from the list of imperialist powers in their textbooks.

Another example comes from Poland, where the Jaruzelski regime deliberately avoided appearing as "a Communist government, based on the dictatorship of the proletariat", but took great care to position itself as "a national government" whose main aim was to save Poland from internal chaos in 1980, and, although naturally this was never openly stated, to preserve the nation from the risk of Russian and East German military attack. The Jaruzelski regime created "a cult" of Marshal Pilsudski, the hero of six decades earlier, suggesting parallels between the roles played by the Army in the 1980s and in the 1920s. The officially published history textbook put particular emphasis on Polish national feeling and stressed the role of the Polish revolutions and revolutionaries.

Evidently, it was not only Soviet, but also Central European Communist regimes that used nationalism as a legitimising ideology, especially in the teaching of history and the creation of historical knowledge via state-commissioned films and architectural designs.

Romanian and Bulgarian textbooks describe the history of their countries as being over a thousand years long. Among scholars the validity of this sort of historiography has been debated: it has been accused of being somewhat romantic, not to say mythical. However, this glorification of the country's past was declared official truth, not only in the fifties, but even more recently. The continuous history of the Dacoroman state from the 2nd century AD to the Romania of the 19th century or the "1300-year-old Great Bulgaria" were officially declared and propagated ideology, and counter arguments were more or less prohibited.

In Hungarian textbooks, especially in the fifties, the modernisation carried out by the Hapsburgs in the 18th century against the Hungarian nobility in particular was condemned as "Germanisation". All the textbooks were called "Marxist textbook". However, from both historical and literary points of view, they often ignored the classical considerations of Marxism. They were not interested in what was or was not "progressive" in social terms, with regard to the rise of the bourgeoisie, or to human rights. For example in their interpretations of the revolutions of 1848 or 1918 they labeled actors in history as "goodies or baddies" only in terms of national interests.

4. The new situation after 1990

Because of the three phenomena mentioned above – the need to legitimize the Warsaw Pact, the need to legitimize new states and new borders, and the value of nationalist argumentation as an instrument to legitimize Communist parties – the renewal the history teaching in Central Europe was a kind of national awaking after 1990. More national history, more facts, more names, more battles – we can describe the history of history-teaching in the last seventeen years with these words. Many Central and Eastern European historians believe that this is precisely how history teaching in the region should differ from Western practice.

4.1. History – teaching as the transfer between public opinion and historians

Of course, it was not only the international context – the Warsaw Pact, new states, new forms of nationalism – that conditioned the way textbook writers worked from the 50s to the 80s, but the local – national level – ideological and political context as well. Thus the local – national level – contexts also raise questions for historians and educationalists about the new spirit of history teaching after 1990.

First of all, as is well known, every Communist country was a one-textbook-system, which means that although there were debates among historians about different historical questions, only one opinion was "official": the party and ministry allowed only one version of the truth to be published in textbooks.

The new possibility – that every professional group would be able to publish its "own" textbook – became enormously exciting after 1990. The textbook is a natural way to spread different historical interpretations, and after so many decades, the historians were finally allowed to emerge from their ivory tower and explain their debates to the "people". And the "people" – after so many decades – had the right to understand the *different* interpretations of their past. The textbooks are sometimes full of facts, sometimes full of political stories – because these questions are debated by historians, and historians communicate with society through textbooks, too.

4.2. History teaching as a vehicle for party pluralism

In Communist times, the way in which textbooks dealt with certain issues was dictated by political considerations, rather than by independent historical research.

East German textbooks could not face the Nazi past, because – according to their writers – the anti-Fascist German workers' movement had been the dominant factor in modern German history. Czechoslovakian textbooks could not show a realistic picture of the democratic state created by Masaryk and Benes, because in 1948 the Communists had overthrown that political regime, and their coup needed political legitimisation. Hungarian Textbooks could not tell the truth about the 1956 revolution, or discuss its real importance – because of the role played in it by János Kádár. (In many ways the Hungarian textbooks of the seventies and eighties were the most objective publications in Eastern Europe – their interpretation of 1956 was an exception)

As the Communist regimes collapsed it became very important for the new generation, the "generation of democracy", to understand the basic facts about these untold stories. The individuals, facts, dates and locations of the suppressed events of the 1956 revolution or the 1944 uprising in Warsaw were built into the national cultural canon.

Some history textbooks – there are good examples to be found in the textbook history of Hungary in the early 1990s – present real political questions. When these books interpret the history of the rise of the bourgeoisie, the Second World War, the Holocaust, or the Communist period – they work as real political media.

The differing opinions about 20th century Hungarian history mirror not only divergences within the historical profession, but also wider ideological differences and sometimes even party-political divides.

When ideological and political groups attack a textbook which "belongs" to other ideological and political groups, they often argue that one political fact or another is *not* mentioned in the book, "a fact which would have changed the whole picture of the historical phenomenon in question". In order to avoid such criticism, writers include large quantities of political facts and chronological data in their textbooks, making them more objective but less easy to study, and less modern, less similar to Western patterns.

4.3. History teaching as the transfer of constitutional thinking

The "teaching of democracy", the teaching of "democratic values" – these were the most legitimate aims of the educational policies of the 1990s.

In many post-Communist states (as in Western states) there are school subjects with names like "citizenship" or "democratic citizenship" or "legal knowledge of citizens". The effectiveness of these subjects are open to serious doubts. Democratic institutions in the region are too young and too weak, and sometimes the actual operation of these institutions (parliament, jurisdiction, government, municipality, human rights) fails to meet the legal requirements.

The last few years of the new democracies have not offered enough examples that could support the explanation of one or another constitutional principal. Besides, the pupils, their parents and their teachers are involved emotionally, so explanations based on examples from the 1990s may not be possible, or at least not at all useful.

There is only one proper way to explain the reality of rights, law, government and so on: by linking them to appropriate historical cases. All of the modern constitutional institutions and principals were born at some point in history: the greater part of them were already a working reality USA and Western Europe in the 18-20th centuries.

We need to teach more about the constitutional institutions and principals of the USA and Western Europe and the Austro-Hungarian empire. That is the only means by which our pupils can be brought to realize what these institutions and principles meant and mean, how they worked and work and what makes them succeed or fail.

The last suggestion is also supported by most modern constitutional and political elites.

These are the historical facts which have prevented history teaching in Central Europe from following the "Western pattern".

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Sources

The most important sources are East European history textbooks, which are available, translated into Hungarian, in the collection of Dr Szabolcs, Budapest. Soviet, Ukrainian, Czechoslovak, Slovak, Yugoslavian, Romanian history textbooks are translated to Hungarian. Naturally I used some important books which mirrored the historical thinking of East European countries, and which describe the ideological processes. This text is a version of "Peter Tibor Nagy: Teaching history as teaching of pluralism. In: International Society for History Didactics, 1999. No. 1. pp.78-86."

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