

HOUSE OF EUROPEAN HISTORY

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Presentation by Costa Carras on the Joint History Project
of the Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe

The Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe was founded in 1995. In the course of our life to date we have had, first, two Chairmen from the US, Matt Nimetz and Richard Schifter; and then two from Austria, Erhard Busek and our current Chairman, Hannes Swoboda. The Joint History Project (JHP) was our very first, proposed to Matt Nimetz by me. I have followed it on behalf of the Board ever since its inception and until today: that is for over 20 years.

The first crucial event in the JHP's progress was the conference on the island of Halki, off Rhodes, in 1999. I was initially unhappy with the idea of a second Greek being chosen, this time for the leadership of our History Education Committee, but the nineteen, then mostly young, historians assembled in Halki, did precisely that. Their choice of Professor Christina Koulouri has proven the single most important, and correct, decision in our history.

Professor Koulouri has combined three great virtues: first, of working extremely effectively as coordinating leader and simultaneously as a colleague and member of a broad editorial team; second, of proving capable of picking the most crucial points out of a mass of material; third, of showing exceptional care and concern for some of those scholars involved who, less disciplined or less organised than herself, found the going tough. And for each of the six workbooks, the going has been, if in different ways, very tough indeed.

We began with a thorough study both of history textbooks and history teaching – which proved to be not at all the same thing – in all Southeastern Europe from Slovenia to Cyprus. The consequent volume of essays which appeared in 2002 was entitled “Clio in the Balkans”. We then decided to prepare a series of workbooks that might hopefully be used as supplementary material in schools throughout the region, carefully avoiding the danger of even attempting to replace national history textbooks or textbooks already used in classrooms. In 2005 the JHP's first four workbooks appeared, entitled “The Ottoman Empire”, “Nations and States”, “The Balkan Wars” and “World War II”, all edited by scholars from within the region. These workbooks have proven a great success whenever and wherever their use as supplementary classroom material has been permitted. It is noticeable this has occurred less frequently in those countries which are either already EU members or which seem currently very unlikely ever to become such, whereas they have been introduced into the classroom and have been extensively used for teacher training in seminars organised by the Center, in all those countries which aspire to EU membership but have not yet achieved it. These four workbooks have thus far been translated into all but two of the major languages used in Southeast Europe.

The JHP's first four workbooks have thus been remarkably successful, since they have been used in the schools of all the countries commonly but inaccurately described as “the Western Balkans”, as also, intermittently, in Cyprus. Given we have received letters of appreciation both from the Albanian and Serbian Ministries of Education, we presumably have done at least some things right! In one other respect, however, the reaction in Southeast Europe has been troubling: as already noted, the more confident a country is of its status in the world, the less likely it has been to welcome them, because

they are, correctly, seen as encouraging new ways of approaching history which many people in every country consider disruptive of their particular national story-line.

The best example of this came in my own country of origin, namely Greece. In 2010 Greece came within a whisker of vetoing EU funding for our most recent two workbooks, namely those covering the period from 1944 to 2008. It required the personal intervention of George Papandreou, then Prime Minister, to avert this at the very last moment. The happy result of the approval of EU funding has been another major achievement, the completion in 2016, again with editors all of whom come from within the region, of two large and impressive volumes, one covering the Cold War from 1944 to 1990, the other running from 1990 to 2008, the year of the Unilateral Declaration of Independence in Kosovo and of the onset of the long drawn out economic crisis that has tested the eurozone's very foundations.

No-one would dispute that Southeastern Europe has been a particularly problematic part of Europe in all the period after World War II – this is indeed the reason why the Center was founded. Is this however to be seen as chiefly due to history textbooks and history teaching being worse than in other parts of Europe? What do we mean when, as the striking and, from an advertising point of view, effective title of our meeting suggests, we wish to help the region “consume” its history? This is not happy phrasing, recalling as it does another challenging assertion to the effect that “the consumer society is organised against history”. This last observation is profound because, for better and for worse, the consumer societies in which we all participate, encourage us to live in and for the present and, by implication, to forget the past. Are these consumer societies themselves however, so securely based? In what form will they survive the manifold ecological crises ahead of us? Might forgetting the past make us less able to meet the challenges of the future?

I shall not answer any of these tough questions but I can state very clearly that the Center's Joint History Project is emphatically not based on asking people to “consume” their past in the sense of forgetting it. We do not, and ethically we feel we cannot, ask Bosniaks to forget Srebrenica, Armenians the Great Disaster of 1915, Jews the Holocaust. Memory is the central feature alike of our personal and collective lives, the feature which gives us a sense of continuity and much of the resilience we need to face new challenges. The JHP cannot and does not ask anyone to set aside their collective memories as a whole. Instead, we seek in the first place, to examine those memories and thus pupils' approach to history, in a critical and, where necessary, self-critical spirit, something which is certain, in some instances at least, to lead to a readjustment or a revision of memory; and in the second place, to systematically broaden our historical sympathies and sensibilities.

I shall say a little more about both of these aims. Before doing so, however I shall challenge not the detailed phrasing but the very presupposition of our question, namely the assumed distinction between “we” other Europeans and “those” in Southeast Europe who should be taught to “consume” their history, in some, undefined, sense of the word “consume”. As my accent will already have indicated, I did not learn history in a Greek but in a British school, in fact during the 1940s and 1950s. And you also certainly know, my generation of British citizens, unlike younger British citizens, voted by a large majority for Brexit. This in my view was an ethical as well as an economic error. No-one should have been surprised however that voters of my generation would find it easy to make exactly such an error. British history education in the 1940s and 1950s clearly implied that Britain's destiny lay outside Europe and that she was forced to involve herself in Europe only when some threatening ideology, such as Roman Catholicism or, more recently, Soviet Communism threatened to unite the Continent; or, alternatively, when some continental power, France and Germany being the more usual candidates,

appeared capable of overturning that balance of power which, under normal circumstances, permitted Britain to get on with its real business, which was not in Europe but in the wider world.

Hopefully this example will help us see the problem we are examining today is most certainly not confined to Southeast Europe, even if it may be more severe in Southeast Europe than in some other parts of the continent. No-one would however presume to advise the British to “consume” their history in any sense of the word, however wrong-headed their decision on Brexit, nor, in my view at least, should we do so anywhere or to anybody.

Returning therefore to the alternatives I have already outlined, namely the critical and self-critical approach to each people’s historical memory on the one hand, and the encouragement of broader historical sympathy and sensibilities on the other, I shall set out four methods of approach on which the Center’s Board and our able Editors have been in complete agreement.

First, if you wish effectively to teach reconciliation never preach reconciliation, although you can and indeed must include stories about reconciliation. And if you wish effectively to promote reconciliation never assume you can wipe the slate clean, to achieve a “tabula rasa”. You should be absolutely certain grandmother will have got there ahead of you. One example is as sad as it is both obvious and conclusive. From 1945 to 1990 there was no religious education whatever in the schools of Communist Yugoslavia. Did that mean there were no raw passions welling up from the deep recesses of religious or semi-religious prejudices to be drawn on when Communism fell? “A rhetorical question”, you will respond, whose all too obvious answer however has regrettably been ignored by all too many, too superficial, well-wishers for peace in Southeastern Europe.

Second, rather than ineffectually preaching reconciliation, it is both necessary and possible to infuse the whole process of history learning with that critical approach to evidence that makes the difference between history and myth. Myths are most usually incomplete or inaccurate to events or even wholly mistaken: they are however not necessarily false. When the illiterate Greek lady who looked after me in our London home between the ages of eight and ten, spoke to me about Turks, her account was limited to two awful episodes, the massacre of Chios, the island from which both she and I originated, in 1822, and then the destruction of Smyrna, or Izmir, very close to Chios, a hundred years later in 1922. Both are events that indeed occurred. Thus her view of the past was not false, but it was mythical in the sense that it had not been subjected to critical analysis, including examination of the historical evidence for the whole period. Of course one should not complain that an illiterate person had not attained a critical approach to history. Today however, it is urgent to ensure that every citizen and not just every historian in Europe develops a critical approach to historical evidence. Only then can we have any hope our citizen bodies as a whole will be able to take intelligent decisions for their, and our futures. For it is historical understanding or misunderstanding that interprets the present and moulds the future.

Here we have the kernel of our problem. To have effective citizens we need to have citizens with a far better understanding of the need to and means of examining historical evidence than has been considered necessary in the past in the national traditions of countries, both outside but also within Southeast Europe. This has been the challenge facing those who have edited the volumes of the JHP workbooks and in my view they have been very successful in meeting that challenge, not least when dealing with the wars of Yugoslavia’s dissolution, in pp.36-102 of our most recent two volumes.

Of course, they could not have taken into account the rapidly expanding use of the internet and the new forms of propaganda appeal connected with it: this lack however only emphasises my central point, namely that the forming of any pupil's critical faculties should be seen as the central and crucial element in historical education. It is this encouragement of a critical mind – and not the repression of memory – which can enable people to become free of the negative burdens of the past, while continuing to cherish both healthy memories of the past and to continue holding a positive appreciation of their people's historical record within that past, except where a critical approach to history and the self-criticism it can and will lead to, has dictated a necessary reinterpretation.

Third, the Joint History Project workbooks set out to paint the past historical landscape with the broadest possible brush. To teach political history properly, one must include cultural, economic, religious and social history, with emphasis on everyday life. This is what we have very consciously done, for two obvious reasons. First, that all these factors do indeed interact. Second, because whereas political developments are often specific to particular countries, cultural, economic and social developments often operate in many very different countries at the same time. The Iron Curtain for instance did not prevent the change in attitude to issues of gender or the sexual revolution occurring in both parts of a divided Europe.

To include cultural, economic, religious and social history within the record of overall political development therefore extends horizons and sensibilities: and this is the second essential element in a healthy historical education. It also, if I may suggest so, points the way forward to a more general broadening of the approach to the teaching of history throughout Europe, particularly cultural history in and after the forthcoming European Year of Cultural Heritage, to be celebrated in 2018. This is an area in which I am also interested as Senior Vice President of Europa Nostra, the federation of European cultural heritage NGOs. Allow me here to express not just the wish but the hope, therefore, that the European Year of Cultural Heritage 2018, coming at a moment when it has at last become appreciated it is not just diversity but certain powerful and common cultural streams which have marked European history and made of Europe a cultural unity, that a determined beginning be made during the coming year in teaching European cultural history as European. This would not ignore unpleasant developments or episodes in our history, but whereas there will always be sharper disagreements when the focus is on political history, there is a great deal indeed in cultural history that unites the overwhelming majority of Europeans.

Fourth, the JHP workbooks teach pupils to acknowledge that even when history is critically examined and evidential truth established through use of the critical method, there may legitimately remain differing and sometimes opposing points of view. Hence our approach includes the provision of multiple perspectives wherever necessary. This is most obvious where there are differences between countries but not only so. If you examine the volume covering the Cold War you will find two quotations, one from an eminent right-wing Greek historian, Spiros Markezinis, and the other from an eminent Marxist Greek historian, Nikos Svoronos, on Greece in the Second World War and subsequent Civil War. The facts are accurate in both accounts, the conclusions opposed. In short, historical research can take us a long way but cannot replace basic human existential choices.

*[Let me now briefly mention, after listing these four areas of strong mutual agreement between all of those involved in the JHP, three areas of creative tension.

One area of tension has been, and continues to be, the need for future revision of our work. The very principles I have enunciated, indicate that as historical research progresses, so we in the JHP, like everyone else, must reconsider some of the entries and some of the emphases we adopted, even if these were correct at the time we adopted them. For the time being, this remains an academic issue for reasons of lack of adequate funding but with every passing year, the need for revision in some respects impresses itself on me more.

A second area of creative tension concerns groups that, for one reason or another, have been poorly represented in the initial preparation of the volumes. This was a far greater problem with the first set of workbooks than it has been with the second. The Islamic element in Ottoman culture was to my mind very clearly under-represented in the workbook on the Ottoman Empire but when I pointed this out, the Turkish editor, a declared secularist, conceded only one addition, something which as Rapporteur to the Board I deeply regret. Where the second set of workbooks was concerned, I had to take my toughest ever decision as the Board's Rapporteur for the JHP in view of our initial inability to obtain sufficient input from Turkey in its present political condition. With Christina Koulouri's full support as General Editor however, and with four months' delay, this problem was in our view fully overcome. Fortunately, you will be able to judge for yourselves.

A third source of creative tension concerns the clear preference for early modern, modern and contemporary history shown by the editors. This preference is entirely natural and indeed justifiable in terms of European Union priorities since the obvious approach to take is that recent history is more relevant to the contemporary world than events further back in time.

This is not always and necessarily correct however. Two periods of European history, far more remote in time than any whose challenges have been undertaken by the JHP to date, can, I believe, demonstrate this point convincingly. What we have witnessed from the late eighteenth to the twentieth century is the reemergence of civic solidarity and loyalty based on varying interpretations of the popular will. Just as significant as the immediately preceding centuries for this development however was the emergence in the eighth to fourth centuries BCE of a first expression of civic solidarity and loyalty also based on varying interpretations of the popular will. The history of Greek and other city states in antiquity is as directly relevant to modern political history as is the Enlightenment.

Let me give a second example. Every time a group of refugees washes up on European soil the primary civic loyalty of which I have just spoken is brought into conflict with a contrasting ethic of human and not civic solidarity. This ethic is based on the Golden Rule, expressed in various forms within different cultural contexts of past history, but most powerfully expressed in the western cultural tradition by Rabbi Hillel in a negative form and by Jesus in a stronger, positive form. The process by which the Judeo-Christian tradition came to hold such a central position in popular European existential attitudes that its founders' central existential maxim as a guide to action was adopted also by secular messianic movements remain as important to us today as they ever were. So also is the ongoing tension between the ideals of civic loyalty as opposed to human solidarity in our own day, particularly if we are concerned that such tensions may become even more evident as and when future ecological crises push millions of human beings towards Europe in the coming decades.]

How would I assess the JHP overall?

The JHP has reached thousands of teachers in Southeast Europe and has entered hundreds of schools. It has been praised by Ministries of Education that have used it. It was honoured to receive the Human Rights Award of the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung in 2013. In the last twelve months the Ottoman Empire workbook has been downloaded in full almost 25,000 times and, in part, 124,000 times. The Second World War workbook, in the same twelve months has been downloaded in full over 25,000 times and, in part, 153,000 times. Even the two most recent volumes which thus far have appeared only in English have had almost 102,000 downloads and over 95,000 partial downloads. These two volumes are already certain to be translated into Albanian, Serbian and Slovene.

It is clear therefore the JHP, with its innovative approach, is meeting a real need. It is also clear that it is already a positive agent of European influence outside our continent. Apart from the languages of our region there has been a translation into Japanese, requested by and funded from that country, a recognition that what the JHP has proposed for history teaching in Southeast Europe represents the future certainly not only for Southeast Europe and not even only for the rest of Europe but also, over coming decades, for the wider world. That is sufficient consolation for 20 years of tough, coordinated and forward-looking work by so many devoted historians and by the Center as a whole.

**[...] Passage not delivered but some points came up in questions and discussion that followed.*