

Myths in South-Eastern European textbooks

Veranstalter: Georg Eckert Institute for International Textbook Research, Braunschweig; University of Tirana

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In the last two decades, an important number of studies addressing the problem of historical myths and their role in contemporary societies have been published and numerous conferences organized. All of them aimed at improving our knowledge and understanding of the role and function of historical myths. Since the fall of communism in South-eastern Europe, an increasing number of scholars from the region have joined the debate on this topic, thus improving the research on this area. Their contribution has often focused on the relationship between myths and war, and has accentuated the destabilizing and destructive potential of historical myths. The recent conference on myths in southeast European textbooks organized by the Georg Eckert Institute, in cooperation with the University of Tirana, aimed to highlight such myths and their potential to create conflict, it also sought to provide a forum for discussion regarding the role of myths in history teaching. The conference featured five panels: 1. Myths in Albanian-language history textbooks; 2. Key studies of history textbooks from Albania; 3. Myths in comparative perspectives; 4. Myths in Slavic-language history textbooks; 5. Myths in historical history textbooks.

The welcoming remarks at the official opening of the conference, which took place at the National Historical Museum in Tirana, were given by the German ambassador in Albania – His Excellency Mr. HELLMUT HOFFMANN, and by VALENTINA DUKA (Tirana) from Tirana University. Both speakers underlined the high relevance of the studies on historical myths, as well as on the improvement of history education in the region, as important elements in peace building processes. Their welcoming notes were followed by a key-note lecture from BERND FISCHER (Fort Wayne),

who addressed the question of myths in Albanian historiography, focusing on myths related to the Second World War and discussing in detail the relationship between politics and the various interpretations of Albania's date of liberation. According to Fischer, this is the result of the emergence of three politically based groups of historians whose approach to the World War Two history of Albania is influenced by their political affiliations and beliefs. For that reason, Fischer stressed the importance of approaching historical problems without seeing history from a leftist, rightist or moderate political view, and concluded that the demythification of history is a marker of a sophisticated society. His lecture was a very good introduction to the presentations (15 in total) that took place over the following two days.

The first panel presented case studies on historical myths in history textbooks from Kosovo by DURIM ABDULLAHU (Prishtina) and Albania: ASTRIT DAUTAJ (Tirana) and NDRICIM MEHMETI (Tirana). The first two presentations showed the existence of a set of historical myths in the history education in both countries and their use in support of the political objectives of Albanian political elites. The third contribution by Astrit Dautaj also addressed an important question: how to approach history teaching and whether myths can be useful in history education? Thus, a critical debate was opened regarding certain parts of the presentations that could be characterized as essentialist in their approach.

The second panel focused on key studies from textbooks by ENRIKETA PANDELEJMONI (Tirana), ENIS SULSTAROVA (Braunschweig) and DIETER NEHRING (Berlin), while the contribution of MIMOZA TELAKU (Beersheva) revealed the findings from a survey on the collective narratives of Albanians and Serbs in Kosovo. In their presentation Pandelejmoni and Sulstarova analyzed two specific myths: the myth of the leadership of Enver Hoxha and the myth of the return to Europe. Pandelejmoni's focus was on the demythologization process of the personality of Enver Hoxha following the fall of socialism, and its effect on historiography. She pointed out that Albanian post-socialist textbooks demonstrate political bias, both from

left-wing and right-wing historians, as well as problems in the interpretation of the recent past, that is the role of history in the service of politics. Her presentation was followed by a debate in which two different views on the term „traitors of the nation“, and its use in the textbooks, were confronted. Most of the questions in this panel concerned the contribution of Mimoza Telaku. It is important to emphasize the significance of her research findings, which showed how much the collective narratives of the past in Kosovo differ from those of the Albanians and Serbs. Furthermore, these results can go some way to explain the current political situation and the inter-ethnic relationship between the two communities in Kosovo, as well as in the wider region.

The focus of the third panel was again on Albanian history textbooks, but this time in a comparative perspective, that is Albanian history in comparative perspective with that of its Albanian neighbors and of Greeks and Italians. FABIO BEGO's (Rome) contribution aimed to elucidate the Vlora conflict (Second World War) and its differing presentation in Albanian and Italian historiographies. By relying on anthropological, historical and philosophical conceptual insight Bego explored the function of myths in society and history. His findings show different interpretations of the same event, indicating a variety of political motives in the process of history production. The second contribution by KONSTANTINOS GIAKOUKIS, ILIR KALEMAJ, ERIKA HAXHI and KLAUDJO KAVAJA (Tirana) investigated the role of historiographies and history textbooks in the transformation of the image of the Greek as an enemy in the context of Albania's process of building a national identity. Their methodology was to analyze sequences of positive and negative representations of, and references to, the Greeks and the changes that took place after 1990. The presented findings showed that a level of demonization and stereotyping has persisted since the period of the Albanian national awakening movement, throughout communist times to the present day.

The fourth panel focused on case studies from Albanian neighbors (in the wider sense of the word), Croatia by IGOR DESPOT (Zagreb), Macedonia by DARKO STOJANOV

and JOVAN BLIZNAKOVSKI (Skopje) and Slovenia by JOVANA MIHAJLOVIĆ TRBOVC (Ljubljana). The Croatian case study focused on the creation of mythological heroes in Croatia through the analysis of selected textbooks from the end of the nineteenth century to the present day. By examining a presentation of a sixteenth century peasant's revolt in Croatia, Despot argued that the image of the revolt derives from the social and political context in Croatia. On the other hand the contribution made by Mihajlović Trbovc and Pavasović Trost focused on the mechanisms of constructing myths used in the nation-building processes of the Yugoslav successor states. Darko Stojanov and Jovan Bliznakovski presented their interdisciplinary analysis of the myths of ancient origin that can be found in recent history textbooks from the Republic of Macedonia. Employing methods and concepts from history, archaeology and political science, they sought to understand the process of myth-making and its role in contemporary Macedonian society in general, and history education in particular. They argued that, in the last decade, the myth of *antiquitas* has taken a new form, focused on the Late Ancient period, and that, in the context of the „Name dispute“ with Greece and the inter-ethnic tensions in Macedonia, it provides meaning and impetus for a large part of the population.

The final panel returned to Albanian history education and textbooks. The first contribution by GENTIANA KERA (Tirana) analyzed two textbooks, printed in 1963 and 1985, that were influenced by the release of two substantial historical volumes in Albania. Kera focused on four topics: Emergence of communist movement in Albania; forms of resistance to Italian occupation; important meetings during the war, and the importance of the antifascist war. The analysis shows to what extent the interpretation of the four topics supported the communist elite and the level of mythification. The second presentation by VOJSAVA KUMBULLA, FLORENCA STAFJA and MAJLINDA PEZA (Tirana) addressed the influence of communist historiography. They posed some questions exploring the re-examination of Albania's interwar-era history. The opening of the archives and lib-

eralization of historical thought did not have the expected outcome and did not lead to an objective interpretation, expected to create a bipolar image of positive vs. negative events. The end of the presentation focused on several examples from the textbooks that were used to convey hatred and a psychology of violence to the students, as a means to divide the population into „good“ and „bad“ citizens and as tools for the mythologization of Enver Hoxha. The last contribution by DENIS VUKA (Berlin) continued the exploration of the myth-making process that had been tackled in the previous presentations by focusing on the construction of the myth of the national leader over the centuries, and an analysis of its depiction through the images in textbooks. Vuka used a comparative and visual analysis to understand the myth-making process and the nationalist and national communist ideology. His presentation accentuated the value of visual semantics for the field of history textbook analysis.

The final discussion addressed some of the questions and problems that had not been tackled over the two days, but more importantly, despite some different views on history events and their interpretation, the participants agreed on the importance of the debate on the negative role of history myths in history education, especially in the context of building more tolerant societies. As a result, three major conclusions were reached. First, it is certain that the question and answer sessions helped the participants to further develop their methodology and thus improve their work. Second, the conference offered the participants the opportunity to enlarge their knowledge on the topic of myth-making processes and the use of myths in textbooks from other regions, histories, and from different points of views. Ultimately, the debates during the conference showed the importance of dealing with a nationalist narrative in the historiographies. It seems that debating and addressing the question of historical mythology and education is important now as it ever was, especially because mythologized history and history education played a significant role in the recent violent conflicts in Southeastern Europe.¹

Conference Overview:

Claudia Lichnofsky (Georg-Eckert-Institut),
Official welcome

Hellmut Hoffmann (German ambassador),
Welcome address

Valentina Duka (Tirana), Introduction

Keynote lecture

Bernd Fischer (Fort Wayne, IN), Myth and Albanian history, the Case of the Second World War

Panel I: Myths in Albanian-language history textbooks

Chair: Bernd Fischer (Fort Wayne, IN)

Durim Abdullahu (Prishtina), The mythization of history in the service of identity construction in textbooks in Kosovo

Astrit Dautaj/Xhevair Lleshi (Tirana), Heroes and myths in curricula, textbooks and other educational materials

Ndricim Mehmeti (Tirana), Myths and legends in support of the political manipulation of history

Panel II: Key studies of history textbooks from Albania

Chair: Gentiana Kera (Tirana)

Enriketa Pandelejmoni (Tirana), „The Myth of a Leader“: Enver Hoxha's role during the Second World War in Albania

Enis Sulstarova (Braunschweig/Tirana), The myth of the „return to Europe“ in public discourses and textbooks in transitional Albania

Dieter Nehring (Berlin), Myths and events in history textbooks of Albanian-language areas during the First World War

Mimoza Telaku (Beersheva), Collective narratives of the interethnic conflict in Kosovo

Panel III: Myths in comparative perspectives

Chair: Enriketa Pandelejmoni (Tirana)

Fabio Bego (Rome), Ideology, history and myth: The case of the 1920 Vlora War from

¹For the Call for Papers for the next conference, please see the project homepage: <<http://albanianlanguage textbooks.wordpress.com/2014/09/24/conference-on-albanian-slavic-relations-in-skopje-3-5-june-2015/>> (13.11.2014).

a trans-Adriatic perspective

Erika Haxhi/Klaudjo Kavaja/ Ilir Kalemaj/Konstantinos Giakoumis (Tirana), Continuity and Change in perceptions of the Greek as an „enemy“ in the Albanian national identity-building process (Albanian National Movement up to 2010s)

Panel IV: Myths in Slavic-language history textbooks

Chair: Konstantinos Giakoumis (Tirana)

Darko Stojanov/Jovan Bliznakovski (Skopje), Between History and Politics: Understanding the Myth of Antiquitas in Macedonian History Textbooks

Jovana Mihajlović Trbovc (Ljubljana), Myths of statehood in post-Yugoslav textbooks

Igor Despot (Zagreb), The impact of the political context on Croatian heroic mythology

Panel V: Myths in historical history textbooks

Chair: Eckhardt Fuchs (Braunschweig)

Gentiana Kera (Tirana), The National Liberation Movement in Albanian history textbooks during the socialist period

Vojsava Kumbulla/Florenca Stafa/Majlinda Peza (Elbasan/Tirana), Mythologisation and de-mythologisation of heroes, shield of the communist system

Denis Vuka (Berlin/ Athens), Constructing the myth of the national leader over the centuries

Final discussion

Tagungsbericht *Myths in South-Eastern European textbooks*. 22.10.2014–24.10.2014, Tirana, in: H-Soz-Kult 20.11.2014.