

JUDGING, ATONING, RECONCILING

# International Textbook Revision in Europe from the Late Nineteenth Century to the Present

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## ABSTRACT

The international revision of textbooks has sparked great interest in different parts of the world in recent years, and is emblematic of a certain European expertise in cultural rapprochement within postwar contexts. It has its roots in late nineteenth-century pacifism, and gradually became established as a widely used instrument in the continent's international cultural relations. It owes its success to its malleability, as it can be used for bilateral reconciliation, the promotion of a new regional identity, or as a tool of cultural influence. It remains relevant today, having led to the publication of common, binational, and regional textbooks whose concrete effects remain to be studied in-depth.



A delegation of Japanese history teachers, members of the Teachers against War association, visiting the Georg-Eckert-Institut in 1998. Source : Archives Georg Eckert Institute.

International textbook revision as a concept covers a broad range of practices and primarily concerns the teaching of history. It refers to any international consultation whose objective is an intertwined critique of textbooks from the countries involved, with a view to proposing amendments to these works, and even developing new teaching

materials. Such consultations take the form of bilateral commissions or multilateral consultation, for example as part of the LN, and later UNESCO and the Council of Europe. In most cases initiatives for revision are based on cooperation between state actors, and actors from civil society.

## **Beginnings during the Interwar Period**

Textbook revision has been a widely used instrument in the Europe's international cultural relations. It is part of a typically European way of making peace—especially after the two world wars—and is based on a desire to pacify the relations that former belligerents have with the past, owing its success to its malleability. It can be used with a view to rapprochement and reconciliation between two countries (Franco-German reconciliation committee), as well as to promote a new regional or sub-regional identity (Benelux, Hanseatic, and Scandinavian commissions). It can also be envisioned and used as a tool for cultural influence in other countries (certain phases of the German-Polish commission during the Cold War), or in the context of education for peace (advocated by UNESCO in particular).

Its origins go back to the early twentieth century. The idea of revision had already been evoked at the Universal Peace Congress held in Paris in 1889, but was implemented for the first time in the aftermath of the Great War. The International Committee for Intellectual Cooperation attempted, through the Casarès resolution of 1925-1932, to establish a binding system for international textbook revision. The most intense exchanges were in Northern Europe, leading to concrete amendments, and serving as a model that was both admired and debated for a long time. The rise of tensions during the 1930s and the Second World War brought an end to revision projects, but international forums quickly appeared after 1945, while education moved to the forefront of international cultural relations.

## **Textbook Revision against a Cold War Backdrop**

A large majority of Western European countries initiated revision initiatives from the late 1940s to the mid-1960s. These included bilateral projects for reconciliation in which the FRG, which was central to memorial and geopolitical conflicts in Europe, played a leading role. There were also cooperation initiatives conducted as part of regional rapprochement (Council of Europe, Benelux, Nordic countries). A revision "grammar" of sorts emerged, which in matters of method emphasized the development of common recommendations for textbook authors and teachers, and in matters of discourse highlighted the contextualization of national histories within European history. For all that, East-West dialogue was hindered by Cold War tensions. The implementation of joint revision projects was of course desired, but very few initiatives emerged. In socialist Europe, while there were both bilateral commissions of historians and international cooperation between publishers, there are no traces of textbook revision forums.

Détente between the East and the West profoundly reshaped international textbook revision from the mid-1960s to the late 1970s. Many instances of dialogue in this area suddenly appeared between countries on both side of the Iron Curtain. This moment was the peak of cooperation between the continent's two parties. One could say that, paradoxically, the Cold War was when certain West European countries showed the most interest for their neighbors in the East. For example, during this period France engaged in dialogue with Poland, the Soviet Union, Hungary, and Romania, while these exchanges were not reinitiated after the fall of the Berlin Wall. This rise in revision activity between the two blocs was accompanied by a clear and sharp decline in cooperation between Western European countries. New possibilities for dialogue with countries in the socialist bloc were no longer a priority compared to projects between West European neighbors, all the more so as there had been many of them during the preceding period. At the same time, a number of forums for revision between socialist countries appeared, originating with the intensified socio-cultural cooperation advocated by the Brezhnev Doctrine of rapprochement with Eastern European countries.

## Post 1980s

During the 1980s, revision activity was once again primarily the work of Western Europeans. The renewed vitality of this practice in the Western camp was due to a variety of reasons. First, after being overshadowed for a long time, cultural relations were once again seen as an important aspect of European construction. Second, the FRG increased revision dialogue, turning it into an increasingly important instrument in its cultural foreign policy. Finally, the return of Western European dialogue was not alien to the sudden decline in bipolar revision forums, a consequence of renewed tensions between the East and the West beginning in 1979. International textbook revision in the socialist camp quickly faded over the decade, corresponding to a moment of flagging integration within the bloc. Bipolar dialogue reappeared during the late 1980s—enabled by the policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika* initiated by Gorbachev—but rapidly faded away aside from a few exceptions.

There was a gradual change of paradigm during the 1990s and 2000s, as international revision projects, which had heretofore concentrated their efforts on developing recommendations, increasingly led to the publication of common teaching materials. Binational and regional books were published, such as the French-German manual, or a series of common teaching materials for the Balkans (Teaching Modern Southeast European History project). European expertise in textbook revision within reconciliatory contexts was exported to Asia, where various initiatives bringing together China, Japan, and South Korea took interest in Europe's experiences. Throughout the history of revision, dialogue between European countries and the non-European world has been very marginal, which is why the new historic and memorial landscape created by decolonization is not at all reflected in revision activity. The 2013 publication of the textbook entitled *Méditerranée* (The Mediterranean), created by an international team of historians from the north and south shores of the sea, represents an important novelty in this respect.

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