

What history books for Europe?

From the revision to the collaborative writing of European textbooks

Steffen SAMMLER

ABSTRACT

In the late nineteenth century, textbook revision became a central concern of the European peace movement. It was a period marked by growing nationalism, in which textbooks were criticized by teachers campaigning for an education to foster peace in Europe. The beginnings of textbook revision were closely linked to the first Universal Peace Congress (1889). Throughout the twentieth century, the revision process remained faithful to this project in its procedures and productions, all while expanding its objectives to include the development of the European project. The experience of the First World War led to the first attempts to institutionalize and develop procedures for bilateral and multilateral textbook revision. This process would not bear fruit until after the Second World War, however, once the institutional, nation-state orientation of revision had made way for a transnational approach, rendering possible the development of European curricula and the collaborative writing of new textbooks.



Ryon Kwan Kim (1922-2015) (UNESCO) and Gerhard E. Neumann (CoE) (1908-1980). Copyright : Georg Eckert Institute for International Textbook Research (Braunschweig).

Actors and institutions in textbook revision during the twentieth century

Textbook revision in the late nineteenth century was primarily driven by academics and teachers affiliated with teachers' unions, professional associations, and educational and religious movements (International Moral Education Congress, World Conference on Practical Christianity). The involvement of elementary school teachers—French teachers in particular—during the interwar period, and of secondary school teachers after the Second World War, prevented the danger of an “academization” of revision and enabled the drafting of teaching recommendations and concrete suggestions for publishers.

The desire to establish a common institutional framework for revision on the European level took shape in the early 1920s with the founding of the Institute of International Intellectual Cooperation (IIIC) within the League of Nations. The interwar period saw the emergence of a somewhat orthodox approach in the methods and procedures of textbook revision, resulting from the growing wealth of experience of bi- and multilateral initiatives (France–Germany, Poland–Romania, Nordic Association).

The methods and procedures developed during the interwar period served as a model for the institutionalization of revision after the Second World War. This was marked by close cooperation between the bilateral commissions of Western European states and the initiatives of the Council of Europe (CoE), a key player in cultural and educational cooperation in Western Europe and a partner of UNESCO. The CoE coordinated revision activities in Europe, in close cooperation with the Institute for International Textbook Research (Georg Eckert Institute), while UNESCO initiated revision projects with socialist countries and the decolonized world.

From revision to collaborative writing: toward the production of European textbooks

The first goal of textbook revision in Europe was to identify and eliminate nationalist, bellicose, and xenophobic texts and images contributing to hostility between European peoples. This “negative” revision was, in the eyes of politically committed teachers, the prerequisite for reconciliation between European peoples after 1945. Beginning with the first series of conferences on history textbook revision (1953-1958), this “negative” revision was accompanied by a “positive” approach to working together on a common European history highlighting its cooperative and solidary traditions. In the 1960s this led to the development of common core curricula on the European level. The history syllabus emphasized the capacity for political, economic, and cultural cooperation in Europe and underscored the mutual inspiration for various religious and cultural communities in past and present. This perspective on European history formed a strong basis for the revision of curricula and textbooks in Central and Eastern European countries after 1989. However, the experience of mass crimes during the Yugoslav Wars in the 1990s, in addition to the recurring danger of nationalism in numerous European countries at the turn of the twenty-first century, demonstrated the need to emphasize in textbook revision the tragedies of the twentieth century and the resulting memorial conflicts.

In the history of the revision process, the desire to collectively write a European history book resurfaced as often as it was contested. Critics emphasized the incompatibility of a single textbook with a multifarious and diverse Europe, especially in the fields of culture and education. However, advocates of a European textbook were also responding to recurring requests from teachers in search of a European history canon. Examples of model projects

include *The Illustrated History of Europe*—initiated by Frédéric Delouche in the 1980s during the heyday of European cooperation and ending a few years later in the enlarged Europe of post-1989—and the electronic textbook *Shared Histories for a Europe without Dividing Lines*, published by the CoE in 2014. Their use in class remains limited, especially because they were unable to satisfy the teaching demands of the various communities of teachers in Europe. They nevertheless inspired a growing number of textbooks produced bilaterally, such as *Histoire/Geschichte* (2006-2011) and *Europa Nasza Historia/Europa Unsere Geschichte* (2016-2020), as well as multilateral educational tools such as *Teaching Modern Southeast European History* (2005), which attest to the development of a multifarious European history enriched by national and regional traditions.

Success and challenges

After 1945, the key players in history textbook revision in Western Europe succeeded in expanding the concept of revision to encompass the collaborative writing of a common history of Europe. This process was in keeping with the common core curricula for the new European textbooks, and their success was especially due to the continued commitment of teachers and publishers.

In the early twenty-first century, the growing diversity of international players involved bears witness to the continued importance of revision and the transnational production of curricula and textbooks. In the future, this work must meet the didactic challenges of European education and avoid the danger of fragmented revision initiatives that were evident on the eve of the world wars. This renders all the more urgent the implementation of new systems of academic and didactic communication on the European level, which will strengthen mediation and dialogue between these different positions as well as shared efforts toward the European project.

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