

# History teaching today in Europe: between preventive education, transitional model and renationalization

## La enseñanza de la Historia en Europa, hoy: entre la educación preventiva, el modelo historiográfico-didáctico de transición a la democracia y la renacionalización

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### Abstract

History teaching today in Europe: between preventive education, transitional model and renationalization. The teaching of history in schools is historically linked to a triple process that developed from the end of the 18th century: the construction of modern nations and, in parallel, their imaginaries, the schooling of young people by States, and the place of History as the driving force of a new regime of temporality. This teaching was centered around the nation in a heroic and finalist narrative projecting children into a national community turned towards irreversible Progress. This article discusses the transformations in history teaching that emerged in Europe at the end of the 20th century. It provides the context for this transformation with a new approach to the past focused on the victims of crimes (genocides, repression, civil war). This approach establishes a new narrative contract for societies: memorializing crimes and victims to strengthen social cohesion rather than forgetting them and preventing the repetition of these crimes by educating younger generations as tolerant citizens through the transmission of the history of these crimes. It is in this new moral injunction and prevention that the teaching of history introduces crimes such as the genocide of the Jews into its curricula and sees the development of new large-scale pedagogical practices: the visit to the sites of massacres perceived as a performative education in human rights. The text presents different cases of European countries that are experiencing this evolution.

At the same time, the fall of communism in Eastern Europe and the integration of these countries into the European Union in the 2000s led to a change in the teaching of history integrated into a transitional model. This model advocated by the EU mobilizes supranational actors (institutions, NGOs). This time, history teaching serves an education for Europe and democracy by taking into account national minorities. The third part of the article addresses a movement of renationalization of history teaching that has been underway since the 2000s through the presentation of several European cases. In conclusion, the teaching of history thus always remains at the crossroads of politics and culture, under the prism of narrative issues of societies evolving in a globalized world now marked by an uncertain temporal horizon.

Key words: Europe; transitionel model; crimes; prevention; renationalization.

### Resumen

Enseñar historia hoy en Europa: entre preventivo educación, modelo transicional y renacionalización. La enseñanza de la historia en las escuelas es históricamente vinculada a un triple proceso que desarrollado desde finales del 18e siglo: la construcción de las naciones modernas y, paralelamente, sus imaginarios, la escolarización de los jóvenes por parte de los Estados, y el lugar de la Historia como motor de un nuevo régimen de temporalidad. Esta enseñanza era centrada alrededor de la nación en una narrativa heroica y finalista que proyecta niños en una comunidad nacional transformado hacia Progreso irreversible. Este artículo analiza las transformaciones en la historia enseñanza eso surgió en Europa a finales del siglo 20e. Proporciona el contexto para esta transformación con un nuevo enfoque del pasado centrado en las víctimas de crímenes (genocidios, represión, guerra civil). Este enfoque establece un nuevo contrato narrativo para las sociedades: conmemorar los crímenes y las víctimas para fortalecer la cohesión social bastante que olvidando ellos, y prevenir la repetición de estos crímenes educando más joven generaciones tan tolerantes ciudadanos a través de la transmisión de la historia de estos crímenes. Es en este nuevo mandato y prevención moral que la enseñanza de la historia introduce crímenes como el genocidio

de los judíos en su plan de estudios y ve el desarrollo de nuevos programas a gran escala educativo prácticas: la visita a los lugares de masacres percibida como una educación performativa en derechos humanos. El texto presenta diferentes casos de países europeos que están experimentando esta evolución. Al mismo tiempo, la caída del comunismo en Europa del Este y la integración de estos países a la Unión Europea en la década de 2000 provocó un cambio en la enseñanza de la historia integrado en un modelo de transición. Este modelo defendido por la UE moviliza actores supranacionales (instituciones, ONG). Esta vez, la historia enseñanza sirve a la educación para Europa y la democracia al tomar en cuenta las minorías nacionales. La tercera parte del artículo aborda un movimiento de renacionalización de la historia enseñanza que ha estado en marcha desde la década de 2000 a través de la presentación de varios casos europeos. En conclusión, la enseñanza de la historia. de este modo siempre permanece en la encrucijada de la política y la cultura, bajo el prisma de las cuestiones narrativas de las sociedades evolucionando en un mundo globalizado ahora marcada por un horizonte temporal incierto.

Palabras clave: Europa; modelo de transición; crímenes; prevención; renacionalización.

## Introduction

The teaching of history at school is historically linked to a threefold process that developed from the end of the 18th century onwards: the construction of modern nations and, at the same time, their imaginations (Anderson 1996; Thiesse, 2001), the schooling of youth by states (Luc & Savoie, 2012), and the place of history as the driving force behind a new temporality regime (Koselleck, 1979). While history tended to become an autonomous field of scientific endeavor in the 19th century (Delacroix, Dosse & Garcia, 2007), its schooling became dependent on the nationalization of individuals - and first and foremost pupils - as part of a process of socialization and secularization: a territory, a language, a common past, but also a new common space-time.

The historical past is not only the object of a transmission of knowledge to be shared with its events and heroes, it establishes a narrative framework that inscribes children in a specific temporal condition. The events of the past are not transmitted in a providential religious interpretation that projects their existence into a present and future determined by divine salvation. They are determined by the historical existence of the nation to which they belong, which must achieve Progress. Temporal finalism - previously of a sacred character - has not disappeared from the educational project; it has been transformed by making national history a structuring element in the education of pupils.

This centrality of the nation in the teaching of history is very marked in France, particularly in elementary school (Bozec, 2018). It varies according to the federal traditions of European states (Colla, Girault & Ledoux, 2024). But this patriotic centrality tends to fade in the last quarter of the 20th century, when other educational projects assert themselves. These projects once again mobilized the teaching of history, as they concerned the transmission of the past to younger generations.

### Teaching the victims of history: a new education project

Like other regions of the world (America, the Far East), Europe experienced a turning point in remembrance in the 1980s-1990s, with political, social and cultural aspects, of which education is a major component (Ledoux, 2024b).

This shift in remembrance gives the past a new status. It is no longer seen as a bygone era distinct from the present, which society is responsible for passing on as a common heritage to young people, in order to educate them and socialize them into the nation. The past is thought of as a violent trace still active in the lives of certain individuals and the national community, a hidden trace that poses a problem for society as a whole, and which can only be resolved by transmitting it, particularly to the younger generations at school.

This new approach to the national past overturns the model for post-conflict situations (civil wars, authoritarian regimes) traditionally governed by amnesty-amnesia policies, where collective forgetting is seen as an instrument of social cohesion that brings cycles of violence to an end (Ledoux, 2024a).

The history to be passed on is first and foremost a history of crimes and victims - most often civilians - and not of the victories (military or political) or heroes that formed the narrative framework of the history taught at school. The social contract that links societies to their past is profoundly transformed, since what was supposed to form a national community was the homage paid by the living to the heroes who had defended the nation, sometimes at the sacrifice of their own lives, which the younger generations were to learn through the teaching of history. Now, what is supposed to make society is the memorialization of the victims of mass crimes in the name of human rights and tolerance, particularly towards national minorities.

This past has a propaedeutic character that is highlighted through the lessons of history. This time, the aim is not to present young people with exemplars (heroes, events) to admire and follow, for educational purposes, but to recount past violence against civil society in order to ward off its recurrence, for preventive purposes. The aim is to build democratic societies by educating young people in tolerance and avoiding the repetition of violent pasts. The past is always invested with an educational function, but it is presented as a counter-model that must not be hidden.

This omnipresence of a criminal past to be resolved for the present and future of societies is not specifically European: it is also found in Latin America, for example (Herrera & Pertuz, 2020). In Europe, it has its own national singularities. In Spain, for example, it concerns above all the country's civil war and Franco's past, which was addressed in 1977 using the traditional model of forgetting-amnesty, before undergoing a reversal of perspective, initiated by civil society, which led the Spanish Parliament to pass the so-called "Recovery of Historical Memory" law in 2007 (Aguilar Fernández, 2008). Passing on the memory of the victims of the civil war and understanding a traumatized society is seen as a democratic necessity for educating younger generations (Gaston & Layana, 2023).

Beyond these national singularities, two main criminal pasts were mobilized in most European countries after the fall of the Iron Curtain. But the European map remains split in two by a clear border: the memory of Nazi crimes against the Jews in the West, the memory of Communist crimes in the East (Mink & Neumayer, 2007; Ledoux, 2020).

In the 1980s, countries like Germany and France were deeply affected by the genocide of the Jews, which reshaped their official narratives (Rousso, 1990; Eder, 2016) and the teaching of history in the following decade (Oeser, 2010; Legris, 2010). German teachers rely on the articulation of history teaching and civic education, and on the pedagogy of emotional upheaval (*Betroffenheitspädagogik*) to teach the genocide of the Jews and educate their pupils in democracy. Identification with Jewish victims and the mobilization of emotions around the Holocaust are the common pedagogical tools used to educate young Germans from the former FRG and GDR in a uniform manner.

Beyond the case of German reunification, the democratic transition of the former communist countries of Eastern Europe and their accession to the European Union is producing a new model that is impacting on the teaching of history.

## **Between Europeanisation and Education Transition**

In this integration of the Holocaust at the heart of its reunification policy, Germany played a leading role in the 1990s, turning it into a European matrix and giving the European Union a narrative identity. The European Union then put the memory of the crimes on its public policy agenda to identify the European space with a democratic space that defends the rule of law and protects minorities (Calligaro & Foret, 2012). In 1993, the European Parliament passed a resolution to preserve Nazi concentration camps as “European historical monuments”, which would receive financial support from the EU. This decision marked the starting point for the construction of a European remembrance of Nazi crimes. On July 3, 1995, the European Parliament passed another resolution calling on all member states to introduce a Holocaust Remembrance Day in their national calendars.

While Holocaust memory is undergoing a wider process of globalization (Levy & Sznajder, 2006), it is being mobilized by European institutions both as a democratic criterion for EU candidate countries and as an instrument for the Europeanization of youth. Between 1998 and 2000, EU countries (led by Great Britain and Sweden) initiated international cooperation on Holocaust education (Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research). On October 31, 2001, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe adopted a recommendation on “Teaching European history in the 21st century”, which called for the history of the Jewish genocide to be included in national school curricula. In 2003, the Ministers of Education meeting at the Council of Europe instituted a Day of Holocaust Remembrance and Prevention of Crimes against Humanity in all schools, every January 27, the date of the liberation of the Auschwitz camp in 1945.

The victims of the Holocaust are thus at the heart of a Western European educational project: the memorialization of mass crimes with a view to prevention (warding off a repetition of the crimes that devastated Europe in the 20th century) and the defense of national minorities - in this case, the Jewish minority. This educational project is not limited to the inclusion of this historical fact in school history curricula. It is accompanied by specific pedagogical practices, such as student visits to sites of memory of the massacres. From the 1990s onwards, the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp came to symbolize this evolution, which led more and more young Europeans to visit this site to educate them in tolerance, the fight against anti-Semitism and crime prevention. The site has become a symbol of the Second World War, but also of human rights education, and is the most visited by schoolchildren, who come in their hundreds of thousands every year: 571,300 (57% of all visitors) in 2006 and 1.029 million (72% of all visitors) in 2012. Geographic expansion has continued unabated over the past thirty years, with, for example, in 2018, the arrival of students from Poland (162,061), Germany (29,603), the UK (24,222), the Czech Republic (23,840), Italy (17,610), France (17,547), Slovakia (17,034), Norway (16,958), and so on. Apart from students from the USA and Israel, the majority are European.

This practice of school visits to memory sites is also supported by the EU as an instrument for the Europeanization of young people in the democratic transition and decommunization policies pursued in Eastern European countries during the 2000s. In Romania, for example, the educational policies developed by the Institute for the Investigation of the Crimes of Communism (IICCR), set up in 2005, include site visits as part of new teaching activities. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, the 2007 textbook for Sarajevo high-school students is a response to European directives as part of a post-conflict transitional policy. It contains a folder entitled “Excursion: learning on site” with suggestions for excursions (Bessone, 2014; Milošević & Trošt, 2021).

This European educational model for the transmission of the past has thus been developed in part on the recognition of victims and minority rights, the corollary of which has been their inclusion in the teaching of history. The transmission of the criminal past is seen as

central to the education of young European citizens to be tolerant and democratic. This model is used as a democratic criterion for EU candidates from the Eastern European countries that joined in 2004, pledging to include it in their school curricula. In Romania, the country's entry into the EU in 2004 was followed by the inclusion of the history of the Jewish minority in school curricula common to all pupils (Murgescu & Avram, 2024).

More generally, the reform of education systems in European countries, in particular the recognition of victims through the teaching of history, has been perceived by European institutions as a privileged educational instrument for achieving the objectives of post-conflict reconciliation or post-communist democratic transition in its new member countries: the establishment of a state in a stabilized democracy. On the one hand, this policy is being pursued by a growing number of transnational actors, and on the other, it is based on the same pedagogical methods.

For example, the 2005 recommendations on the writing of history textbooks for primary and secondary education in Bosnia-Herzegovina come from a commission set up in 2004 by the OSCE, the Council of Europe and the Georg Eckert Institute. These recommendations emphasize the multiperspectivity<sup>1</sup> and interactivity that teachers must engage in with their students when teaching history. The pedagogical and civic objective advocated by the Council of Europe is twofold in order to get pupils more involved in this teaching: to touch pupils and develop their critical faculties, which comes close to the German didactic model (Bendick & François, 2015). Multiperspectivity and interactivity as a European educational model have also been adopted by countries such as Romania and Bulgaria in the run-up to their accession to the EU in 2007 (Constantin, 2021). This European education is reflected in the diversification of sources and interpretations in history textbooks. Such is the case of the textbook for high-school students on the history of communism in Romania, published in 2009 and designed collectively by secondary school teachers, members of the IICCR and the CPADCR (Presidential Commission for the Analysis of the Communist Dictatorship in Romania, created in 2006)<sup>2</sup>. An accompanying booklet for teachers has also been produced, featuring visits to Communist museums and places of repression in Romania (Sighet) and Bulgaria (Belene). By passing on the history of Communist repression to pupils, the document aims to educate Romanians about democracy and Europe.

We can thus observe that the Eastern European countries that joined the EU in the 2000s were laboratories for the dissemination of a European educational model developed in the West. The end of Soviet domination in Eastern Europe ushered in a period of democratization, reflected in the decommunization of memories and an education transition (Parker, 2003). Indeed, the transformation of education systems represents one of the major aspects of the post-communist transition in Eastern Europe from a Soviet model of communist education to a democratic, European model of education (see the case of Bulgaria in Satchkova, 2003). History teaching is involved in this transition, which is leading to a liberalization of the textbook market away from state control and a pluralization of national and transnational European players in the transmission of the national past. But the content of the history taught has gone through several phases, from the criminalization of the communist past to the integration of EU codes into the history taught: respect for human rights, inclusion of minorities, reconciliation, multiperspectivity. This integration is taking place with various national actors who have graduated from international careers in the associative sector and NGOs specializing in public policy (education, human rights). In Bulgaria, the NGO Sofia

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<sup>1</sup> Multiperspectivity means “integrating the point of view of ‘the other’ into one's own worldview, developing interpretations of historical events through dialogue, [...] and committing to offering students a multiplicity of possible and open interpretations of events”, Eckert Institute website.

<sup>2</sup> Stamatescu, M., Grosescu, R., Dobrinu, D., Muraru, A., Pleșa, L., et Andreescu, S. (2009). *O istorie a comunismului din România*. Polirom, 2009, see Constantin, 2021.

Platform, founded in 2013 and headed by Bulgarian Louisa Slavkova who studied at the German University of Köln, devotes its activities to the democratization of Bulgarian society by promoting education and the memory of the communist period. She develops educational programs for young Bulgarians, in collaboration with the European Council on Foreign Relations and German and American NGOs involved in civic education, as well as the Eckert Institute and the European history association Euroclio. One of the aims of history teaching in Bulgaria, as in Romania, is the construction of a “European citizen” (Szakács, 2017) through educational standards promoted by the EU and transnational players, including in the field of didactics. The educational programs of the NGO Sofia Platform, for example, mobilize pedagogical innovations to encourage student interactivity (role-playing) and the critical analysis of historical sources in history teaching.

This model of transitional education promoted by European institutions does not transmit to young Europeans a grand narrative on the history of Europe, but a grammar of (good) management of inter- or intra-state conflictual pasts, centered on the recognition and overcoming of these conflicts in a reconciliatory perspective, particularly in relations between minorities and the majority of a state. This educational grammar also contains a pedagogical dimension, with the spread of interactivity and multiperspectivity methods within the classroom, or school visits to places of repression. In Eastern Europe, the promotion of this educational model among pupils is carried out by transnational actors involved in education, democracy and transitional policies.

Despite these supranational educational policies supported by the EU, national and regional singularities remain in the teaching of history. This teaching remains strongly imbued with national perspectives, as shown by textbooks from different European countries (Chopin & Divet, 2023; Amilhat, 2023). The apparent convergence between East and West remains formal. In the end, it is more the transmission of the past in its criminal and educational dimensions (democratization, defense of minorities) that has generated a certain consensus.

This consensus around a supranational educational model of history teaching has at the same time led to a “backlash”. Indeed, the most recent period has seen the beginning of processes of renationalisation of history teaching which opposes the previous model.

## **Towards a renationalization of history teaching?**

Since the 2000s, this educational model has had to face up to nationalist offensives in certain European countries, following a more global movement that also concerns democratic countries (May & Maissen, 2021).

In Japan, for example, the state-controlled school content for decades in order to provide a historical narrative that fostered attachment to the homeland. The decades from 1980 to 1990 saw an opening up of historical knowledge in teaching practices, by integrating plural readings of conflicts with their Korean and Chinese neighbors (Nanta, 2007). It was the debate launched by the Japanese media in 1982 over the Ministry's replacement of the term “invasion” by “advance”, in connection with the Sino-Japanese war (1937-1945), that brought the issue to international attention. This led to initiatives by Japanese, Korean and Chinese historians, who decided to exchange their historical views on their respective countries, and then to write joint textbooks, modelled on the Franco-German history textbooks<sup>3</sup>. But these initiatives also provoked reactions. The association *Atarashii Kyôkasho wo Tsukurukai*, (“association for the production of new textbooks”) was created in 1995 by nationalists to oppose a counter-narrative to what they perceived as a “masochistic” or “suicidal” conception of national history.

They denounced the mention in history textbooks of the Nanking massacre and the crimes committed by the Japanese army against the “comfort women” and published a middle school textbook validated by the Ministry in 2001. Although the textbook is little used by teachers, the arrival in power of Shinzo Abe as Prime Minister in 2012 marks a turning point by recommending nationalist history textbooks.

Following the collapse of the USSR, Russia saw a liberation of textbooks in the early 1990s, which benefited the teaching of history by emancipating it from the univocal Communist narrative. After coming to power in 2000, Putin showed an interest in history textbooks, arguing that they should “instill in schoolchildren a sense of pride in their history and their country” (Amacher, 2020). In 2003, a history textbook describing the Stalinist regime as “terrorist” and evoking a 50-year Soviet “occupation” of the Baltic republics was stripped of its “recommended” status by the Ministry of Education. In 2007, new history textbooks are published, including a methodical manual for teachers. The Stalinist repressions of the 1930s are presented as inevitable “distortions” of the country's “forced modernization”, thanks to which the USSR was able to defeat Nazi Germany in the Second World War. More recently, new history textbooks for grades 1 and 12, entitled *History of Russia from 1945 to XXI century*, were published for the start of the 2023 school year. Two new chapters on the war launched against Ukraine in February 2022, entitled “The special military operation” and “Russia, the land of heroes”, were included. The textbook presents Putin as the man who prevented the end of human civilization by launching this “special operation” in Ukraine.

Poland had integrated minorities into its 2008 school curriculum, in line with European directives, following its accession to the EU. After the PIS came to power, the Polish nation was presented as strictly linked to the Catholic faith of the majority of the population, and new history curricula after 2017 led to the erasure of minorities, including the Jewish minority (Tartakowsky, 2020).

In France, nationalist projects have intervened in the teaching of history with regard to colonial history. The 2005 law on the recognition of the national contribution of Algerian repatriates during the colonial period included an article during parliamentary discussions, specifying that 'school programmes recognize in particular the positive role of the French presence overseas, notably in North Africa'. This imposed colonial narrative entered into direct conflict with a French anti-colonial current that was prevalent in the parties of the left, as well as among academics and teachers. It was quickly followed by a reaction from a number of historians demanding the abrogation of a law that imposes an official history and legalises a nationalist view. The controversial article was finally withdrawn a year later by French President Jacques Chirac. But heated debates about the teaching of history continued in the years that followed. Critics spoke out to defend 'national identity', arguing that it was threatened by this 'repentance' (crimes committed by French State against minorities like Jewish or black people concerning trade slave), which would lead inexorably to the decline of the nation. The offensive targeted the history programs, which, its promoters contended, had failed in its dual mission of transmitting to schoolchildren a love of the French nation and of its history. It regularly invoked the figure of Ernest Lavisse, with nostalgic discourse on the benefits of public schools under the Third Republic (1870-1940) presenting an idyllic image of the historical knowledge and patriotic consciousness of students in that period. Research over the past 20 years on history education in France has demonstrated that this nostalgic discourse is not based in reality (Dancel, 1996; Chanet, 1996). A survey showed that students are aware of the events and characters (Clovis, Charlemagne, Louis XIV, Napoleon) that constitute the national narrative so central to the demands of the actors in this offensive (Létourneau and Lantheaume, 2016). And yet, these offensives are having an impact on educational policies, as we can see in 2019, with the modification of high school curricula. While these new programs do include the history of the slave trade and colonial slavery, the examples chosen reveal a

narrative ambiguity. History teachers are asked to teach the slave trade through the example of Brazil, slavery through the example of the United States, and abolition through the example of France. This distribution gave France the role of abolitionist country that had for decades formed the fabric of the traditional historical narrative glorifying the French nation while concealing its slave-owning past. Protests by historians to the Ministry of Education led to changes in the history syllabus, integrating the example of the French slave ports.

## Conclusion

History teaching was the social and cultural cement of the national constructions of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This finalist teaching around a glorious past of the nation integrated the students into a specific temporal condition: the Progress accomplished by the ancestors on a timeline in which they themselves were projected. They have been integrated at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century into a model of democratic transition or plural citizenship, polarised around the victims of past crimes and the rights of minorities. This new narrative model presents the story to be taught as a preventive educational instrument. Today, history teaching finds itself embroiled in a cultural battle that is a narrative battle. But the teaching of history is also affected by other contemporary narrative matrices that present societies with a permanent risk (technological, ecological, terrorist: see Beck, 2001) or continuous testing (Martucelli, 2018). These narrative matrices indicate a profound breach in the temporal horizon that was once focused on Progress and is now marked by contingency and uncertainty. The temporal finalism of the history taught in schools from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards to the glory of nations destined for Progress is now in crisis: "the future is now embedded in a matrix of mediated anxieties and continued attempts to ameliorate them" (Levy, 2020). But is the teaching of history there to heal us? (David, 2020). On the other hand, the recent renationalization of history teaching indicates that this school narrative is becoming an instrument of individual and collective reassurance that precisely provides a response to this temporal anxiety partly linked to the ecological crisis that we are experiencing on a global scale and to the development of supranational institutions. But is history teaching there to reassure our identities?

Through these developments over the past two centuries, we see how difficult it is for States and political actors to think of teaching history in terms of knowledge about the past to be transmitted, which is detached from any function of socializing children to a collective project. Is this a consequence of the development of history teaching in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which from the outset was part of a project of socialization and political (nation) and temporal (progressive finalism) education? In any case, it is difficult to think of teaching history without a narrative model because the human condition remains anthropologically a narrative condition.





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