

Teaching ethnic history in school: experience from the West and the case of Jewish history in the Former Soviet Union. A literature review

Eugene Tartakovsky | etartakov@hotmail.com
The Bob Shapell School of Social Work,
Tel-Aviv University

Abstract

This article discusses the teaching of ethnic history in the public school system. It argues that the struggle for human rights, the ideology of multiculturalism, and concern for the psychological well-being of ethnic minorities encourage the teaching of ethnic history in many countries. At the same time, the importance of emphasizing a common identity among youth, together with the psychological difficulties of teaching different and often contradictory historical narratives, are listed as possible obstacles on the way towards a multicultural curriculum. This article reviews the results of numerous studies that demonstrate how students belonging to ethnic majorities and minorities differ in their historical knowledge, trust of teachers and texts, motivation to study history, and perception of the material. The experience of teaching Jewish history in the former Soviet Union is reviewed, and directions for further research are suggested.

Key words: ethnic history, ethnic minority, ethnic identity, intergroup relations, Jews in the former Soviet Union, Jewish history

How teaching ethnic history in school has changed over the last fifty years in Western countries

Until the 1960s, historical textbooks in the West habitually ignored the issue of ethnic minorities (Fitzgerald, 1980; Wineburg & Monte-Sano, 2008). Official historical narratives typically told the story of white men, focusing mainly on military and political leaders and industrialists (Barton, 2001a; Epstein, 1997). The curriculum concentrated on heroic episodes from the past, emphasizing stories of struggle and sacrifice leading to positive outcomes. The school curriculum tended to exclude unfavorable incidents from history, especially those that depicted society as transgressing basic human values and norms by persecuting ethnic minorities. Thus, official history presented a story that advocated consensus over controversy and ambiguity (Porat, 2004; Tulviste & Wertsch, 1994; Wineburg, 2001).

The situation changed when ethnic minorities began struggling for their rights. One of these rights, they considered, was the right to compile and teach their own history and incorporate that history into the official mainstream history canon (Wineburg & Monte-Sano, 2008). Probably the most substantial changes in this area happened in the USA, where the struggle of black Americans for their rights became both a part of the general curriculum and common historical knowledge (Fitzgerald, 1980; Wineburg & Monte-Sano, 2008). Another reason ethnic history was introduced into the program of study in schools in the developed countries was the growing immigration into these countries from all corners of the world and a switch in immigrant absorption strategy from the melting pot policy to multiculturalism (Berry & Sam, 1997). A final, “practical” consideration for introducing ethnic history into schools was based on the assumption that immersing ethnic students and immigrants in studies of their own culture would enhance their ethnic and racial pride. This, it was postulated, would improve their academic achievements and psychological well-being, as well as enable the students to affiliate with their new nation-state (Fitzgerald, 1980; Gay, 1985; Grossman, Wirt, & Davids, 1985; Phinney, 1990).

The introduction of ethnic histories into the school curriculum functioned as a sign of recognition that people have rights not only as individuals, but also as members of cultural groups, and that these groups should be represented in their society’s historical narrative. This change in the human rights paradigm instigated a transition from the melting pot approach to teaching the history of minorities to one

of multiculturalism. Because of this change in policy, the historical curriculum has been modified in most developed countries, but the changes have probably been most prominent in the USA. These changes have been both quantitative and qualitative. The multicultural component in history books increased substantially, while texts focusing exclusively on the dominant ethnic group decreased (Lerner, Nagai, & Rothman, 1995). Moreover, the evaluation of historical events, figures, and ethnic groups has been revised. The evaluation of white heroes has become more critical, while the evaluation of ethnic minority figures has become more positive (Fitzgerald, 1980; Lerner et al., 1995). Narratives have begun to stress the contribution of minorities to the nation's development, along with their sufferings and resistance to the oppression (Barton & Levstik, 1998). The "quest-for-freedom" narrative is the official doctrine that has shaped the understanding of the origin and development of the United States (Barton, 2001a); the minorities' contributions to the struggle for freedom is thus the part of their stories that are accentuated in modern historical textbooks (Wineburg & Monte-Sano, 2008).

Introducing ethnic history into the classroom has generated strong criticism, which comes from a variety of sources. The strongest censure is fueled by the fear of tribalism (Fitzgerald, 1980; Schlesinger, 1998). People in all nation-states, but especially in those that were built by immigrants (Argentina, Israel, and, to a lesser degree, the United States) fear that in teaching ethnic histories they will strengthen the ethnic identity of the minorities, which will consequently pose a threat to the common national identity (Barton, 2001b). This criticism is most often expressed by the members of dominant ethnic groups. However, for some immigrants and ethnic minorities, the possibility of merging with a common national identity is appealing, for it enables a temporary release from markers of difference and inferiority (Sutton, 2005).

The process of introducing new historical narratives transforms the history textbooks into a battlefield for conflicting political and religious agendas. Critics argue that this leads to a decrease in the shared assessment of historical events and figures and subsequently increases the risk of falsification of historical facts (Lerner et al., 1995; Tobin & Ybarra, 2008). In addition, a multitude of historical narratives may lead to "cultural equivalence," i.e., the presumption that all cultures are developed equally, all have produced significant cultural and technical achievements, and all have contributed equally to the development of humankind (Ravitch, 2004). Critics argue that an education endorsing

cultural equivalence does not provide students with the tools necessary for discriminating between what is right and what is wrong in their society.

Another criticism regarding the teaching of ethnic history in school relates to the students' difficulties in learning the subject matter. Some researchers and educators argue that students seek cohesive historical narratives. They need to know "the truth," because school trains them to seek "correct" answers to their questions and does not teach them to consider multiple perspectives (Epstein, 1998). When multiple historical narratives diverge, this puts students in a situation of "double consciousness," which substantially diminishes their ability to learn (Barton, 2001b; Carretero, Jacott, & Lopez-Manjon, 2002). Finally, some critics point out that introducing ethnic histories in school necessarily entails discussing the atrocities and injustice committed by dominant ethnic groups against these ethnic minorities. This, in turn, may be disturbing for the students and teachers who are members of the dominant ethnic group, and may cause tension between them and the students belonging to ethnic minorities (Bettis, Cooks, & Bergin, 1994).

The effect of ethnicity on studying history

Empirical studies conducted in the USA and in several European countries demonstrate that majority and minority students differ in their prior historical knowledge, trust in teachers and texts, motivation to study, and perception of the material (Barton & Levstik, 1998). Students from the majority group tend to choose the events that strengthen the positive and progressive image of their country as being most significant. In the United States, these are usually issues related to freedom, opportunities, and technical progress (Barton & Levstik, 1998; Wineburg, 2001). African-American students choose events related to black history as most significant (e.g., the history of black resistance to segregation), and they resist ascribing significance to those events that are central to "official" history, such as the Bill of Rights and the Civil War (Epstein, 1997, 1998; Levstik & Groth, 2005; Seixas, 1994). This indicates that students tend to identify with positive characters and episodes in history that are related to their ethnic group (Epstein, 1997). Learning national history makes the majority students feel prouder, consequently, while minority students feel marginalized (Carretero et al., 2002).

Ethnicity likewise affects the students' perspective on the development of history. Students belonging to the dominant ethnic group tend to view history as a progressive linear process. They are inclined to perceive negative episodes in history as short-term and as belonging to a remote past. Minority students, on the other hand, more often consider history as having a cyclic, parallel, or even backwards pattern. In addition, minority students tend to emphasize the problems that persist, such as the continuing existence of racial discrimination and the relevance of negative events in the past to the dilemmas of the present (Barton & Levstik, 1998; Epstein, 1997).

Another difference between the two groups pertains to the question of agency. Minority students are more likely to view social movements and economic factors as the primary impetuses of change, while majority students tend to see heroic figures as the major driving forces of history (Epstein, 2001). In addition, majority students tend not to see there having been any alternative to past discriminatory behavior (e.g., whites discriminated against blacks because this was the uncontested social order of those times). In contrast, minority students consider segregation to be the personal responsibility of the whites who practice it and tend to blame the out-group (in this case, contemporary whites) for their attempts to justify various events from the slavery period (Epstein, 2001). Finally, while majority students view the progress that has been made in the reduction of racial discrimination as the "giving" of rights, minority students consider the struggle for civil rights as the main catalyst for the creation of a more equitable society (Barton, 2001a; Epstein & Shiller, 2005). However, both groups see progress, and they both accept the legitimacy of dissent and protest (Epstein, 1998). In addition, both ethnic minority and majority students accept figures from ethnic minorities who struggled for equality and freedom as national heroes (Wineburg & Monte-Sano, 2008).

There are several sources of historical knowledge, among which textbooks, teachers, families, and popular culture are the most salient. It appears that popular culture is the main source of historical knowledge for children from both ethnic minorities and majorities (Seixas, 1993; Wineburg, 2001). However, while white students do not see any discontinuity between the messages transmitted in school, the media, and their family history, black students feel a conflict between the official and their vernacular histories (Epstein, 1998). When a conflict between histories arises, relatives are the most trusted source of historical knowledge for minority students, while majority students are more

likely to trust teachers and books (Barton, 2001b; Epstein & Shiller, 2005; Tulviste & Wertsch, 1994). In school, children trust the historical sources more closely associated with their own ethnic group, e.g., black children believe that black teachers have access to more accurate sources about black history than white teachers (Epstein, 1997, 1998).

Research in Western countries demonstrates that instruction in school has very little effect on children's knowledge of and attitude towards historical events, which are conceptions that they bring to school from home (Epstein, 2001; Porat, 2004). One of the reasons may be that previous knowledge functions as a cognitive filter preventing the creation of new knowledge (Epstein & Shiller, 2005). Both minority and majority children in the USA, for example, incorporate aspects of the teachers' lessons into their explanations of race and human rights issues, but they do so in ways that amplify rather than revise their pre-instructional perceptions of history (Epstein, 2001; Epstein & Shiller, 2005). Likewise, a study in Israel found that the students' view of the history of Tel-Hai and the role of Trumpeldor, a Jewish heroic figure associated with Tel-Hai, changed very little after a trial learning session (Porat, 2004). In the United States, open class discussions on sensitive issues made black children more active and less cynical, but this effect was short-lived. The teachers' own identities also affect how they teach about race and ethnicity, and thus what their students learn from them. In fact, the effect of the instructors' and students' ethnicity on the learning process are usually parallel (Epstein & Shiller, 2005).

Majority and minority groups often do not want to study each others' history, because they do not consider it personally significant (e.g., African American and Latinos are less interested in studying about the European settlement in the USA than their white peers, Epstein & Shiller, 2005). Moreover, both majority and minority groups absorb stereotypical images of each other (e.g., a "movie" image of Native Americans, Epstein & Shiller, 2005). Therefore, the main danger of multicultural instruction for the education system is most likely the creation of two systems of education: one for the majority and about the majority, and another for the minority and about the minority (Barton, 2001a; Short, 1994).

Teaching Jewish history in the FSU

Let us now consider how the Western experience in teaching ethnic history applies to the task of teaching Jewish history in the

former Soviet Union. The Jews in the FSU have several specific features that are important to note because of the ways that they may affect the teaching of their ethnic history in school. Jews in the FSU form a Diaspora group: in addition to being part of their country of residence (the Russian empire and then the USSR, which subsequently became independent republics of the FSU), they are historically, religiously, and even economically connected to their “historical motherland,” Israel (Chlenov, 2002; Chernin, 2008; Khanin & Niznik, 2008). This situation is somewhat similar to other Diasporas, such as Mexicans in the USA, Arabs in France, and Turks in Germany. The experience of teaching the ethnic history of these groups, therefore, may be relevant to that of the Jews in the FSU. Another point of cross-cultural similarity is that Jews in the FSU were a persecuted minority (Gitelman, 2001). As such, the themes of shame, anger, anxiety, and the struggle for freedom and equality are as applicable to the FSU Jews as they are to other minorities with long histories of persecution, e.g., blacks in the United States. However, in contrast to other persecuted minorities, the status of Jews in the FSU also was, and partly remains, that of a privileged minority, with disproportionately high representation in the government, sciences, arts, business, and mass media (Chlenov, 2002; Pinkus, 2008). This being so, their contribution to the history of achievements and development in the republics of the FSU has been outstanding. Bearing in mind these characteristics of the Jewish minority, this study will now consider the task of teaching Jewish history in the FSU and discuss this issue with regard to target populations – the Jewish minority and the non-Jewish majority in the republics of the FSU.

Teaching Jewish history to Jews in the FSU

Teaching Jewish history is part of the Jewish education that began to proliferate in the FSU during Perestroika (c. 1989). Unlike most other countries with Jewish Diasporas (particularly North America and Western Europe), Jewish history was not studied in schools or universities in the Soviet Union, due to the anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism of the Soviet regime. However, Jewish history was studied in underground Zionist and religious Jewish groups during this time (Chernin, 2008). Both Jews in the FSU and in international Jewish organizations considered studying Jewish history important for FSU Jewry, as a means of promoting Jewish literacy, strengthening Jewish identity, and consolidating a link to the State of Israel (Feuerstein,

2008). With these goals in mind, various Israeli and international Jewish organizations (the Israeli Ministry of Education, the Jewish Agency, The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, and Chabad), as well as private donors, have supported the teaching of Jewish history across the FSU throughout and since this period.

The curriculum of Jewish history studies varies widely among the different Jewish schools in the FSU.¹ Five main themes of Jewish history taught in Jewish schools stand out: ancient Jewish history (mainly the Biblical period), general Jewish history (from ancient to modern times), the Holocaust, the history of the Zionist movement and Israel, and local Jewish history, i.e., the history of Jews in Lithuania, Belarus, and different regions of Russia (Chernin, 2008). Most non-religious schools, which are sponsored by the Israeli Ministry of Education and the Jewish Agency (about 40% of all day schools), focus primarily on teaching Israeli history, Biblical history, and, to a lesser degree, general Jewish history (Gitelman, 2007). Religious schools, supported by Chabad, the Orthodox Union, and other religious organizations (about 60% of day schools) teach mainly the Bible (Chernin, 2008; Gitelman, 2007). Finally, some non-religious schools, mainly in the Baltic States but also in Belarus and the Ukraine, focus on the history of local Jewry (Lempertene, 2001). The Holocaust is taught in almost every Jewish school; however, it is probably emphasized more in secular than in religious schools (Gitelman, 2007).

Despite substantial differences in the curriculum, Jewish history is considered to be a universal uniting factor around which secular and religious, mono-ethnic and ethnically mixed Jewish families in the FSU may bond (Mochalova, 2004). The process of uniting through history suits the specific character of Jewish identity in the FSU, which is based mainly on shared cultural and historical roots. This structure of Jewish identity is different from the ethnic identity of Jews living in Israel and in Western countries, which is based mainly on common religious practices (Chlenov, 2002).

Does the study of Jewish history indeed strengthen Jewish identity in the FSU, as is intended? Few empirical studies have been conducted

¹ In 2005, there were about 40 Jewish day schools in the FSU; in addition, there were about 60 Sunday schools and courses where Jewish history was being taught (Gitelman, 2008). However, the number of schools, as well as that of students, has been steadily decreasing during recent years. In addition, the Israeli Ministry of Education has published no new textbooks for the FSU since 1993, and many teacher training courses have been closed.

on this issue, and all of them relate to short courses (from several days to several weeks) in informal settings (such as Jewish summer camps) conducted by non-religious organizations (mainly by the Jewish Agency). However, all of the studies reviewed found that the Jewish identity of the high-school students who participated in these courses was strengthened (Bar-Tal et al., 2006; Khanin & Niznik, 2008; Ulfsky & Elkina, 2008). In addition, at the end of these courses the participants expressed an interest in continuing to study Jewish history and to participate in activities in the Jewish community (Ulfsky & Elkina, 2008), as well as a greater interest in immigrating to Israel (Khanin & Niznik, 2008). However, it remains unclear whether the source of these changes was the study of Jewish history or the experience of being together with ethnically close fellow students.

In preparing this review, no article was found that discusses the effects of studying general or local Jewish history in the FSU. However, several articles investigate the effects of the teaching of the Holocaust. Most often, scholars claim that studying the Holocaust strengthens the ethnic identity of Jewish adolescents in the FSU (Bar-Tal et al., 2006; Ulfsky & Elkina, 2008). Others, however, warn of the possible trivialization of the Holocaust through these courses. Gitelman, for instance, concludes that “the outpouring of literature on the Shoah and the proliferation of Shoah museums, monuments and commemorations have routinized what was once an unimaginable horror ... Among some youth, constantly exposed to violence in the media, the Holocaust no longer shocks” (2007, p. 380). Israeli and American scientific literature discusses widely both the positive and negative aspects of the immersion of children and adolescents in the history of the Holocaust, including visits to the concentration camps (e.g., Doneson, 1996; Markuse, 2001; Silverman et al., 1999). However, there have not been any research or discussions published on this issue with regard to Jewish adolescents in the FSU.

Studying the history of the Holocaust induces identification with the victims (Bar-Tal et al., 2006; Markuse, 2001). The question, however, is how this process affects the ethnic identity of Jews (especially young Jews) in the FSU. Their identity is unique in its multifaceted structure. The ethnic identity of Jews in the FSU is composed of a Jewish component, as well as components relating to the dominant ethnic group in their country of residence and that of the “historic motherland” of Israel (Marom & Miller, 2008; Tartakovsky, 2008). Psychological studies of groups whose members have been persecuted or discriminated against

indicate that some of their members prefer identifying with alternative groups in order to reduce their identification with the persecuted group (Phinney, 1990; Camilleri & Malewska-Peyre, 1997; Tajfel, 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Therefore, exposure to the horrors of the Holocaust may in the long run cause Jewish adolescents in the FSU to distance themselves from the Jewish people and to identify more strongly with the majority ethnic group in their country of residence. Research conducted among American adolescents demonstrates that exposure to Holocaust studies indeed has a negative effect on the adolescents' psychological well-being (Silverman et al., 1999). It is important to study this matter further, because most ethnic minorities in the world consider their oppression at some point in history to be a core aspect of their identity formation (e.g., blacks in the USA, the Irish in the United Kingdom, Armenians all over the world, and Arabs in Israel).

Teaching Jewish history to the ethnic majority in the FSU

In 2000, Russia signed the Stockholm Forum Declaration requiring teaching the Holocaust in schools (IMFA, 2008), and the only part of Jewish history that is taught in the public school system in the FSU today is the Holocaust. The Ukraine, Belarus, and other republics of the FSU are following suit. However, despite the agreement, teaching the Holocaust is still rare in the FSU; at best, there are short courses taught mostly by local Jewish or Israeli teachers (Stolov, 2008). Several problems related to this issue are discussed in the recently published articles reviewed below (Schupac, 2008; Stolov, 2008).

The republics of the FSU aim to achieve several goals by introducing studies on the Holocaust in schools. First, teaching the Holocaust is viewed as a means of introducing democratic and humanitarian values to the post-Soviet population. A second goal is to improve the reputation of the countries in the FSU vis-à-vis the democratic countries of the EU and North America; these countries for many years in the past had been officially anti-Semitic and had persecuted Jews (Stolov, 2008). Finally, the third goal, which is especially important for the Ukraine and the Baltic States, is to use the Holocaust as a vehicle for focusing attention on the extermination of their own populations during the Soviet period, both by the Nazis and by the communist regime (Schupac, 2008).

At the same time, there are several obstacles to the teaching of the Holocaust in the FSU. The first source of resistance is related to the anti-Semitism in these countries and to the collaboration of parts of their

population with the Nazis during WWII. Another problem is connected to the fact that many Jews were members of the communist party, and as such actively participated in the atrocities conducted by Bolsheviks in the republics of the FSU (Schupac, 2008; Stolov, 2008). The third source of opposition to the study of Jewish history in public schools relates to the fact that the republics of the FSU were not independent for an extended period (Schupac, 2008). Due to this, some Ukrainian students and teachers (as well as their Russian, Belarus, and Baltic counterparts) are so preoccupied with their own tragic history that they consider teaching and studying the history of the Holocaust a distraction. Russian and Ukrainian scholars call this phenomenon “the invalid syndrome,” and claim that this negative attitude towards studying the Holocaust is a common problem for all nations that have suffered genocide in their own history (Smirnova, cited in Schupac, 2008).

To overcome the “invalid syndrome,” it is possible to study the Holocaust in the FSU not as an exclusively Jewish tragedy, but rather as an integral part of the history of Russia and Eastern Europe. Teaching the Holocaust may be presented as a case study about genocide that leaves room for respecting the history of the majority population (Schupac, 2008). To deal with the problem of anti-Semitism in the FSU, it is optimal to accentuate the issues that Jews and non-Jews have in common and to discuss the rational motives of anti-Semitism should be discussed (Stolov, 2008). In addition, it is important to teach not only the history of Jewish suffering, but also positive aspects of Jewish history and the Jewish contribution to humankind and to the national culture in the FSU republics as well as to humankind. Among the most important themes relevant to this context are the Bible, Jews and the European emancipation, and the creation of Israel (Stolov, 2008).

Conclusion

All over the world, nation-states are becoming increasingly multiethnic, mainly due to globalization and to the increasing flow of immigrants. New immigrants, ethnic minorities, and indigenous peoples desire that their own history to be studied in the public educational system. This call for a multicultural historical curriculum is a serious challenge for the public educational system. The main problems are motivating the general student population to study ethnic history and building a balanced curriculum that includes both the history of oppression and the minorities’ contributions to civilization in general

and to the nation-state in particular. The biggest challenge is to create a curriculum that will be satisfactory for both minority and majority students.

These same challenges are pertinent to the task of teaching Jewish history in the FSU. In recent years there have been extensive and generally positive experiences of teaching Jewish history in Jewish schools in the FSU. Empirical data confirms that studies of Jewish history strengthen ethnic identity and the Israeli connection among the FSU Jews. However, until now, Jewish history has not been studied in public schools in the FSU. Western experience demonstrates that teaching ethnic history in public schools is an important means of diminishing discrimination and increasing multicultural tolerance in society. Teaching Jewish history in public schools may thus be instrumental in diminishing the anti-Semitism and anti-Israeli sentiments still widespread in the FSU.

Given the long history of anti-Semitism in the FSU, the ignorance and prejudices that students bring from home, and the tradition of blaming Jews for socio-economic and political problems, this task is enormously difficult. In addition, some historical episodes have contradictory meanings for Jews and for the majority population in the FSU. For instance, Khmelnytsky, who brought the nation independence from Polish occupiers, is a national hero for Ukrainians, while for Jews he is a criminal responsible for mass killings. Another point of controversy is the role of the Nazis in the Baltic States during WWII. Alongside these controversies, however, there is a genuine interest in Jewish history among the majority population in Russia and other countries of the FSU.

The experience of Western countries demonstrates that ethnic minorities, even small ones, may successfully introduce teaching their history in public schools. Moreover, we have solid evidence that teaching ethnic history improves the relationships between ethnic groups and the majority student body. Therefore, the task of teaching Jewish history in public schools in the FSU is worth the investment of academic as well as financial resources of the organizations responsible for Jewish education in the Diaspora. It may begin with small steps, such as guest lectures, seminars and elective courses for students, training courses for teachers, and lobbying for introducing small chapters on Jewish history into general historical textbooks. Until this is attempted, it is difficult to anticipate how it might best be done. This article will hopefully stimulate discussion of these issues that will result in finding practical solutions for teaching Jewish history to the general public in the FSU.

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