

Teaching Women's History in Eastern Europe - for Rethinking

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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Pető, A. (2003). Teaching Women's History in Eastern Europe - for Rethinking. *EuroClio Bulletin*, 18, 25-27. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-90652-3>

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5. Teaching Women's History in Eastern Europe – for rethinking

Women's stories are not visible; women's stories are not told and moreover women's stories are not taught in schools, these were the sad observations of those historians who aimed to recover women's political agency in history. Most of our history books written by men, telling stories in Eastern Europe refusing to include those topics as important for national history writing as mother/daughter relationship, women's friendship, women working together, women in love with women. In the past twelve years in Eastern Europe we are witnessing a boom of publishing of new history textbooks, but very few of them were written by women, and very few of them are aiming to present differences. Also the gender sensitivity as a point of consideration is still missing from the ministerial attempts for reforming teaching of history and it is also missing from the efforts of rewriting history textbooks. No matter that due to the EU enlargement the EU Directives are suggesting the implementation of gender mainstreaming in all policy making areas, teaching history still remains unaffected. But how could we teach women's history if the research is in the starting phase, and the institutional framework is not sufficient? In this brief article I would like to share three of my teaching experiences about possibilities of teaching women's history in Eastern Europe arguing that changing the narrative frame of teaching contributes to democratization.

During the first women's history conference organised on Eastern Europe,

in Minsk, Belarus, nearly 60 women's historians from 24 Eastern European countries presented their work. The results of the conference very much proved that recovering women's past, the archaeological work, is still at the early phase after ten years of democracy in Eastern Europe. Historians working on women's and gender history are imprisoned by their institutional framework. Nearly each East European country produced a first collection of conference papers on their own, „national“ women's history. But very few of these papers had actually been developed later into a monograph, and even fewer of them are used in education. The expectations might have been too optimistic in the early 1990s when a boom in women's history writing was expected after the fall of communism, in a field crippled not only by institutional and disciplinary boundaries but also with national hegemonies and institutional frameworks of history writing.

The paradoxes of the present situation are leading us to explore possible paths into the future, like how to integrate women's history into the secondary and post-secondary educational process. The past ten years did not result in institutional innovation as far as research on the history of women and gender were concerned: neither specific research institutes on women's history, nor documentation centers with a distinctive profile were set up. As the recent by the European Council founded 5th Framework Comparative Research Project

(EWSI) proved, history as a discipline did not promote institutionalisation of women's studies in Eastern Europe. Although courses on a number of sub-themes of writing women's history are now offered as part of the teaching programs of individual faculty members in the different higher educational institutions, these do not promote the necessarily interdisciplinary character of research on gender. This tendency very much fits the description of Virginia Woolf, that women's history is present for history only as an „appendix“ to history. The transformation of the language of history writing has a long way to go as far as gender equality is concerned. One can only hope that gender analyses might bring new research material for a theoretical reconceptualisation of main issues of history writing, enabling history to address issues of difference. The „othering“ stereotypes are formed and might be changed in educational processes so introducing gender sensitivity in educational systems of the future has a strategic importance.

In the former Soviet Bloc countries secondary level history textbooks proved to be of an unchangeable character from a gender sensitivity point of view. There were several attempts to write a comprehensive gender history of Eastern Europe for educational purposes. One of these attempts was successful in producing a volume of additional teaching material (together with a teacher's manual), „Women and Men in the Past – 19. and 20. Century“, which was translated into nine languages of South-Eastern Europe and is now being used in teaching history on the secondary level of education. The research and the production was financed by the Stability Pact. By now in principle and in the higher education gender studies became a „teachable“ subject in Eastern Europe as a result of institutional lobbying by academics which raises the question how this will change the actual educational practices in the secondary level. The book is the result of a collective of historians from Turkey, Slovenia, Hungary, Romania, Macedonia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Albania, Bulgaria and Yugoslavia. With the support of the Austrian Federal Ministry of Foreign



*Council of Europe and EUROCLIO fact-finding mission to Croatia on
The Teaching and Learning of History in Croatia.*

Affairs historians were collecting sources, photos, statistics to offer material for teaching history of gender relations in South Eastern Europe. The book covers ten topics: Love and Marriage in Patriarchal Society, Body, Education, Ideal Woman, Love and Marriage in Bourgeois Society, Work of Men, Work of Women, Leisure and Beauty in Modern Times, Politics and Emancipation, Love and Marriage in Communist Society. The aim of the book was to encourage the students to seek better understanding of the others, the ones of opposite gender, of different age and nation. The book is written in English but it is translated to the eight languages of the collaborating countries with a hope that it will reach the schools and the history teachers to foster common knowledge and better understanding and co-operation of the new generations of South East Europe. I taught the chapter „Body“ at “Historical Legacies of Feminisms and Women’s Movement” at the Study Session of the Federation of Young European Greens at European Youth Centre, Strasbourg, France in 2002. After discussing the introductory narrative the students formed groups and they were reading the different sources connected to the topic and they were answering to the questions. No matter that the sources were from Eastern Europe, the participants of the study sessions were coming all over Europe, they still founded points of entry into the discussion. The text and the sources proved to be excellent sites for constructing space for discussion.

Another attempt to introduce innovative ways of education was a women’s oral history program of the Open Society Institute Network’s Women’s Program (NWP), which financed several workshops and training sessions to support innovative research and foster regional cooperation. The need to support the region’s women’s and gender research to execute women’s oral history projects was raised during the conferences organised by NWP. This demand to invest in a comprehensive oral history project has been developing gradually in the region by researchers, activists, and the NWP coordinators in the past four years and it created a team of researchers and consultants from within and outside the region. After training workshops on methodology and theories of oral history and feminist theory, a grant competition was announced and selected participants from nine countries received grants to implement their projects. In summer

schools in the summer of 2001 and 2002 the successful applicants were provided with consultation and training. Projects which addressing pressing issues such as military conflicts or religious fundamentalism and also producing a product which can be disseminated widely as additional teaching materials for history teaching, videos, and books were given priority. I was lucky to be a part of this endeavor which for me combined all the hopes we had back in the early 1990s: experts from within and outside Eastern Europe working together, constructing an epistemological space, which empowers the participants. The women who received grants to conduct research became dedicated fighters of the cause for gender equality in their country and they are making efforts to integrate women’s oral history into teaching.

The third example is the teaching experiment “Writing the lives of Foremothers, history and future of a feminist teaching tool” developed by Berteke Waaldijk, first as the ‘History Cluster’ part of the Noise Summer school in 1999 that had as its title ‘Diasporic identities and mediated Cultures’. The participants of the Summer School were undergraduates of history, languages, media studies, women’s studies from different European countries: from the “East” and from the “West”. The cluster wanted to address historical dimensions of feminist reflections on this topic with specific historical knowledge about global, national and local developments that resulted in unequal power relations and understanding how official and unofficial historical knowledge, organised memory and personal recollections, national histories and private memories interact in constructing different identities, different senses of belonging and exclusion, empowerment and marginalization.

The assignment can be also used in gender sensitivity training in Eastern European classrooms where serious resistance is expected against anything related to feminism and to women’s movements. This resistance, besides other factors, due to the epistemic character of the Cold War, can be successfully challenged through the introduction of personalized histories connected to women’s experiences. Encouraged by the experience in Utrecht I also used this assignment during my teaching in the women’s oral history project.

The three days of the teaching program

were devoted to respectively: ‘Connecting histories of women to general histories’; ‘The interaction between private memories and public narratives’ and ‘The organisation of history and memory – the feminist challenge’. Students had to prepare for the work on the foremother-assignment by finding out as much as possible about the ‘life of a woman who was alive and more or less grown-up in the year 1949’. This could be a personal relative (mother, grandmother, aunt) or a friend or a public figure. Students had to bring to class a one-page description of the life of this woman, paying attention to nationality, class, ethnicity, her education, experiences with migration, and should contain a short description of the way she lived in 1949. The one-page texts by all the students were copied and made into a booklet at the beginning of the summer school. Students were advised to protect the privacy of the women they described by changing names or dates.

For the first day (‘Connecting histories of women to general histories’) the students had to prepare for an online discussion about experiences of their ‘foremother’ with nationalism, racism, ethnic repression, migration, poverty or wealth. They were asked to think whether the life of the foremother would shed new light on ‘big histories of imperialism, dictatorship and multiculturalism’, whether there are parts of her life that were ‘famous or forgotten’ and what may have caused fame or invisibility. The next part of the assignment asked the students to compare their own life with that of their foremother, to reflect upon the sources that were available to acquire knowledge about her (either official-books, newspapers, national archives, or unofficial – personal stories, family secrets, gossip). We have asked the students to think about the ways in which the women could be part of a history: how could their life be part of a national history, could they envisage a history about all women in 1949?

For the second day (‘Interaction between private memories and public narratives’) the students had to prepare for an in-class discussion about the questions about the way their foremother related to the national state where she lived in 1949. Was she a citizen, what were her rights, was she supported in any way by the state or prosecuted? Did she have nationalist feelings, did she participate in transitions that took place. The second set of questions asked students to think about



*Celebrating 10 years of EUROCLIO during the seminar of the project **New Times, New History** in Ukraine.*

the cultural identity of their foremother: what forms of culture did she participate in (books, films, music, fashion consumer cultures, etc.) and whether these forms of culture were nationally or ethnically connotated? They were invited to collect material that might help to understand the connections between popular culture and personal memories.

The third day ('Organisation of history and memory') took place at the IIAV, the International Archive of the Women's Movement in Amsterdam (the Netherlands) and here students were invited to search for material in the rich collections of this library for information that might shed light on the life of the foremothers. Students then should discuss the way the politics of memory worked and what information should be collected to write about the histories of their foremothers.

Two optional extra assignments allowed students (1) to explore theoretical writing about history and memory and (2) to make a website about their foremother. Scanning and website building instructions and support were available.

The forms of empowerment that the assignment made possible have helped students to create their own voice vis-à-vis the 'big narratives' of European history. A history that is permeated by so much violence, dictatorship, and exploitation, needs students who feel they can tell other stories and formulate alternatives. They may thus contribute to the alternatives that have also been part of European history: protest and idealism. Analysing women's life stories is an attempt to give a voice to women's stories which does not let to be dismissed for

false generalisation of "big narratives". It also helps to define the normal situation. This methodological approach is more about understanding and opening rather than about controlling and closure.

There is a general belief about the field of writing women's history that it is something "new" that arrived to Eastern Europe from the "West" after 1989. That presents the period of Cold War as a "red carpet", which covered the society and when after 1989 it was unfolded the society has not been changed during decades of communism. Reviewing the results of different feminist research projects, such as the women's oral history project or the history textbook project I mentioned above, were initiated in the region and were executed in an international co-operation based on relationship of equals, might give a hope for developing an international feminism which is not imprisoned in an "Eastern" vs. "Western" framework.

The revision of history is a permanent process in which only the groups change, and these are the groups which are revising memories and which are making attempts to rewrite history. If women's historians are still caught in the trap of believing that they must find the "truer" history, there will always be a group of historians who are ready to produce history with the label of the "truest" history. If women's history as a field tries to revise history in the name of "women" to come up with a "truer" history, that enterprise failed from the beginning. So an archaeological excavation is not an innocent activity after all because it is aiming to answer to the question of representations but not to the ways of

construction. Changing the narrative frame and the social dimension of remembering gives a new orientation in the world, gets respect for equality and freedom. In this process teaching is our most powerful tool.

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Women and Men in the Past – 19. and 20. Century, to be downloaded from:
http://www-gewi.kfunigraz.ac.at/csbsc/download/women_men/00_angl.pdf