

## Education: History becomes weapon in bid to end mistrust Print

By Kerin Hope

Published: October 28 2008 13:33 | Last updated: October 28 2008 13:33

The images are a throwback to a 19th-century traveller's tale: a fierce Turkish warrior wields a curved sword on a book's cover, and another illustration shows a young man impaled on a pole.

Far from being a curiosity, the books are official history textbooks used by 11- and 15-year-olds in Greek Cypriot state schools. The message is that Cyprus, since ancient times, has been indissolubly part of the Greek world, and that Turks are hostile and violent.

Unsurprisingly, Greek Cypriot schoolchildren's views of Turks and Turkish Cypriots are strongly negative, according to a recent survey.

However, educators' attitudes are starting to change. While the Greek and Turkish Cypriot leaders negotiate in a renewed effort to reach a formal peace settlement, history teachers from both communities are immersed in a joint debate on how they can contribute to a reconciliation.

"The way history is taught will obviously influence how Cypriots see themselves and others in the future," says Yiannis Papadakis, associate professor of social anthropology at University of Cyprus, who recently published an analysis of Greek and Turkish Cypriot history textbooks.

The reformers face a challenging task, given the violent upheavals in Cyprus between 1963 and 1974, from inter-communal strife that led to the "ghetto-isation" of Turkish Cypriots, to a Turkish military intervention aimed at averting the union of Cyprus with Greece.

"Until now we've had the good, the bad and the ugly. The good were us, the Greeks of Cyprus, the bad were the Turks and the uglies were the western powers conspiring against Cyprus," Prof Papadakis says.

But with leftwing administrations in power on both sides of the island, nationalist views that used to hold sway are being challenged.

The Turkish Cypriot government elected in 2004 has already adopted a new set of history textbooks that take a constructive approach to inter-communal relations.

Instead of focusing on political conflict – with graphic photographs of the dead – and highlighting Turkish Cypriot ties with Turkey, "the motherland", the new textbooks emphasise co-operation between Greek and Turkish Cypriots and a shared affinity with their island.

Greek and Turkish Cypriots are described as suffering together under a burden of high taxation during British colonial rule – and fighting together during the second world war in a joint Cypriot contingent in the British Army.

Nationalism is presented as a divisive way of thinking. A cartoon illustrating the 1960s conflict shows a weeping Cyprus asking: "How has it come to this?" A list of answers includes a reference to the mistrust that emerged between Turkish and Greek Cypriots caught up in their respective ethnocentric versions of events.

Andreas Demetriou, the education minister, has pledged to reform Greek Cypriot history teaching. But his plans to set up an experts' committee to advise on the rewriting of textbooks have run into opposition from nationalists in the centrist Diko party, the junior partner in the communist-led coalition.

Mr Demetriou, an independent, also came under attack from conservative teachers and Orthodox church leaders for urging "the cultivation of a culture of peaceful co-existence, mutual respect and co-operation between Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots" in his circular to state schools at the start of the academic year.

The Association for Historical Dialogue and Research, a bi-communal group led by educators and historians, is already addressing the issue of teacher-training through seminars.

Its latest project aims at bolstering co-operation on sensitive issues by establishing an educational centre in the "Dead Zone", the buffer area of derelict buildings in central Nicosia that separates the Greek and Turkish Cypriot sections of the capital.

Professor Charis Psaltis, the association's research director, says: "We wanted somewhere for communal activity to take place in an unconstrained way. The buffer zone, which is in need of revitalising, is a good place to put it."

The centre would be the first building in the capital dedicated to multi-communal activity. It will occupy an abandoned commercial building opposite the United Nations headquarters in Nicosia, close to a checkpoint.

Grants from international donors as well as historical organisations, will cover the cost of restoring the building. It will host conferences, exhibitions and training, Prof Psaltis says.

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2008

"FT" and "Financial Times" are trademarks of the Financial Times. [Privacy policy](#) | [Terms](#)  
© Copyright [The Financial Times](#) Ltd 2008.