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Sirkka Ahonen
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Post-Conflict History Education in Finland, South Africa and Bosnia-Herzegovina¹

Sirkka Ahonen

University of Helsinki

Abstract: A post-conflict society tends to get locked in a history war. As the practice of history in its broad sense is a moral craft, representations of guilt and victimhood prevail in social memory. The representations are often bolstered by mythical references, wherefore deconstruction of myths is expected from history education for the purposes of post-conflict reconciliation. This article deals with the post-conflict uses of history in Finland, South Africa and Bosnia-Herzegovina. The three cases constitute examples of a class war, a race conflict and an ethno-religious armed clash. The memory politics and history curricula differ between the cases. Their comparison indicates, how far an imposition of one 'truth', a dialogue of two 'truths' and segregation of different memory communities are feasible strategies of post-conflict history education. The article suggests that history lessons can be an asset instead of a liability in the pursuit of reconciliation.

KEY WORDS: HISTORY EDUCATION, POST-CONFLICT SOCIETY, POST-CONFLICT RECONCILIATION

About the author. Sirkka Ahonen is professor emerita of history and social sciences education at the Department of Teacher Education, University of Helsinki. Her research interests comprise history education, the social use of history, the history of educational sciences and history of Finnish comprehensive school. She has published books on the use of history in post-communist countries and in post-conflict countries, on the development of historical thinking and historical identity among adolescents and on the history of Finnish school.

¹ The paper is based on the author's book *Coming to Terms with a Dark Past* (2012)

What is History Education, Particularly in a Post-Conflict Situation?

History education is neither a mere off-spring of academic history nor solely a political tool for those in power. As university graduates, history educators utilise the critical tools of academic history to make the students aware of how knowledge of the past is acquired and its truthfulness judged. However, from the viewpoint of society, history lessons are too valuable to be wasted on purely intellectual pondering of evidence and interpretation. As service to society, history teachers cultivate historical consciousness which facilitates the connecting of future aspirations to the understanding of the past developments. Moreover, history is essential to endow young people with elements of social identity and a capability of practising value judgment in social and political issues.

History, as representations of the past, is produced in three main fields of cultural activities: *public memory*, meaning different memorialisations of the past in the open space, *social memory*, meaning representations of history mediated by vernacular, mostly oral interaction, and, thirdly, *academic research* conducted by the academic community. History education is basically located in the field of public history, but as the three fields are connected, history education draws on both social memory and academic history.

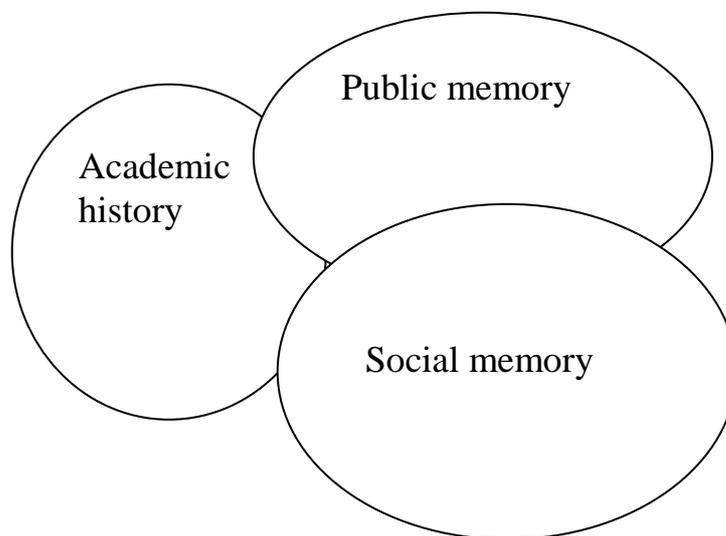


FIGURE 1.
Fields of making history

In a post-conflict situation, history often contains provoking themes. Social memory is divided into the memories of the victors and those of the defeated. The past ordeal is shared, but its representations contradict. As the representations are morally

loaded and composed as stories of guilt and victimhood, they tend to constitute history wars. History educators are among those who are expected to deal with the conflicting themes. They have basically three alternative choices:

- To choose one group, either the victors or the defeated, and defend its cause. In my study, this option was taken by educators in Bosnia-Herzegovina after the war of 1992–5.
- To make an effort to impose a unifying common story of the difficult past. This was done in the case of Finland, where school after 1918 dedicated itself to the building of a nation-state on victors' values.
- To facilitate a healing dialogue between the antagonistic memory communities. This way was pursued by educators in South Africa after the end of apartheid in 1994.

Assuming that history education can have a constructive role in post-conflict reconciliation, it is obvious that the third alternative, dialogue in the classrooms, deserves support in history didactics. The nature of historical knowledge supports the pursuit of dialogical education. Historical explanation is inevitably multiperspectival, as monocausal relationships between phenomena do not apply to human action. Moreover, as history is about past choices, a re-enactment of the intentions of past actors is necessary to fill the gaps in the historical evidence. An empathic approach is crucial for facilitating a multiperspectival account

The purpose of this study is to pursue an answer to the question about the persistence of post-conflict antagonisms through comparing the representations of the past and the strategies of dealing within them in education in the three different cases of Finland, South Africa and Bosnia-Herzegovina. After a look at the challenges poised by public memory in the three cases, the premises of dialogical history education will here be elaborated.

Post-Conflict Representations of the Past in Finland, South Africa and Bosnia-Herzegovina

The inclusion of the Finnish civil war, already three generations back in time, in my study enabled me to ask whether forgetting heals the post-conflict animosities among people. Moreover, it differs from the other two cases as to its structural constitution: it was a class war in comparison to the race conflict in South-Africa and the ethno-religious war in former Yugoslavia.

The conflicts dealt with in this article are imbedded in different historical contexts. Civil war as a class conflict in Finland took place in 1918. It was triggered by the break-down of the Russian Empire, from which Finland declared herself independent, but the main roots of the conflict were in social discord among the Finns. The parties were constituted by socialist Reds and bourgeois Whites.

Apartheid in South Africa was a race conflict, which in the armed form lasted from 1960 to 1994. The open violence started in 1960, when the Afrikaner apartheid

government banned the African resistance organisations, the leaders of which then adopted violent action, and the government responded with violent repression.

The disastrous war in Bosnia-Herzegovina was a complicated ethno-religious conflict of three parties in 1992–5. Following the break-down of multiethnic socialist Yugoslavia, Serbs, Croats and Muslims raised paramilitary armies to defend the self-proclaimed new states of Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. Bosnia-Herzegovina declared herself independent on the initiative of Muslims and was swallowed up by vicious three-partite warfare for three years.

The essential themes of the morally loaded stories of conflicts were in my material constituted by two umbrella themes, namely atrocities and betrayals. In civil wars, civilian population is exposed to atrocious acts of strategic cleansing and, secondly, to betrayals of the causes each of them holds just. Stories of past ordeals are bolstered by templates borrowed from a range of internationally travelling arch-myths of guilt and victimhood. George Shöpflin (1997) and Paul Kolstoe (2005) have found the most widely used myths based on Biblical stories of the victimhood of Israeli people and the guilt of their old foe, the Philistines, and categorised them into myths of *promised land*, *God-elected people*, *divine redemption*, *rebirth and renewal*, *David against Goliath*. Moreover, the Catholic Church fosters the myth of *antemurale christianitatis* according to which an armed defence of the Church renders the fighters a special worth. After the Second World War *genocide* and *holocaust* have become myths, expedient for communities seeking reparative justice.

A myth in this study is understood as a belief that is maintained because of its high social relevance for a community. The 'truth' of a myth does not depend on historical evidence but on the vital value of the myth for the coherence of a community. A myth loses its credibility only when losing its social purpose. Therefore myths tend to resist critical lessons provided in school.

Representations of the past were in my research project mainly derived from different appearances of public memory, among them popularised historical readers, media, monuments, museums, commemoration rituals and school textbooks. Especially in the cases of Finland and Bosnia-Herzegovina, the author also utilises published research literature, above all by the authors Ulla-Maija Peltonen, Turo Manninen, David Bruce MacDonald, Annie Coombes and Heike Karge. Ulla-Maija Peltonen, a folklorist, has studied both the oral history and the public memorialisations of the civil war. The oral history, gathered as an extensive project in the 1960s and organised as an archive in the Finnish Literary Society, consists of representations processed during two post-conflict generations, and the physical memorialisations, namely monuments, museums and commemoration rituals, expose politically conditioned layers of public memory. Turo Manninen has studied the media representations of the adversities as they were constituted during the conflict and in its immediate aftermath. The representations established the hegemonic White rhetoric for the two post-conflict decades. In regard to Bosnia-Herzegovina, David Bruce MacDonald focuses on the popular mediation of history, including political rhetoric, local press and internet sites at the eve and during the actual course of the war. In the case of South Africa, apart from Annie E. Coombes on public memory and Heike

Karge on school books, the transcripts of the hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission provide a rich resource of popular memories, many of which, thanks to the efficient media coverage of the hearings, had become canonised public memory² In all cases, I have paid special attention to school textbooks, especially their contribution to the post-conflict reconciliation

In accordance with the heterogeneous nature of the research material, which encompasses variety of the objects of public memory and school textbooks, my method of analysis is eclectic. The main method is qualitative text-analysis. I regard both written utterances and visual and physical memorialisations as texts that incorporate meanings. I have isolated the dominant meanings from the text by intertextual reading. Hermeneutically, I have used my own sensitivity in regard to the post-conflict situations to interpret the meaning of a text. The validity of the interpretation thus depends on my familiarity with the context of the material. I am personally part of the Finnish tradition and have also systematically researched Finnish social memory.³ I monitored South African developments for decades as an anti-apartheid activist in Finland and solidified my acquaintance with the country in the 2000s by two long study tours, during which I contacted educationists and observed civil society activities. In regard to Bosnia-Herzegovina, I worked there as a history teacher in 2006–8, also participating in teachers seminars, and later occasionally returned to follow up the developments.

In public memory and educational materials, the attributions of guilt and victimhood were in all three societies mutual and symmetrical. “We” were victims of atrocities and betrayals as well as “they” in their memory. “They” were guilty of same offences as “we” in their accusations. All parties used travelling arch myths to boost their moral claims.

In *Finland*, both parties, the Whites and the Reds, represented themselves as victims of same kinds of atrocities. In the aftermath of the war, the White victor’s truth being made hegemonic, the atrocities committed by the Reds were bolstered by historical myths. Vernacular lore of terror acts conducted by Russians during the Great Wrath of the early 18th century intermingled with stories of actual events in 1918. Particularly, horror stories of cruelly tortured priests, preserved in the folklore, were adapted to portray the primitive savagery of the Reds in 1918. The 18th century myths, for their part, drew on the Old Testament stories of Philistines harassing the Israeli people. The guilt of the Reds became thus an intermediate projection of the guilt of the old foe of the Israelis.⁴

On the Red side, the strikingly big number of atrocities committed by the White victors at the end of the war was attributed to the Whites as a massive guilt, which was boosted by myths of a ruthless class enemy. Historical land-owner blood-suckers were in 1918 represented as mass butchers of the Reds.⁵ Biblical imagery was common in

² Truth and Reconciliation Report Commission of South Africa Report (2003).

³ see Ahonen 1998.

⁴ Peltonen 1996, 137–148.

⁵ About atavistic hatreds see Ehrnrooth 1992 and Siltala 2009.

Red stories of White terror, as landless labourers were in the traditional rural culture regular church-goers.⁶

Likewise, the accusations of betrayal were mutual. To the Whites, the Red uprising against the young nation-state, that only recently had been declared independent, was incomprehensible and unforgivable betrayal. The Reds, for their part, experienced a betrayal by the bourgeois politicians, who in summer 1917 conspired with the Provisional Government of Russia to dissolve the Finnish Parliament where socialists had the majority. The sense of betrayal drew on a historical distrust of superiors, inherited from the traditional hierarchic society where the persons of high rank practised patriarchal control over people.

In *South Africa*, the Boers, the Afrikaners, were the most outspoken advocates of White victimhood. Referring to a historical civilising mission, they considered themselves defenders of Christian moral order against savage Africans. White victimhood was based on accusations of Black aggression in the frontier wars of the 1800s and guerrilla warfare since 1961. However, the most powerful mythical representation of Boer victimhood was derived from the memory of the Anglo-Boer war 1899–1902, where the Boer defence of their promised land had been harshly crushed by the British Empire. This ordeal, together with the victimhood stories of the Great Trek of the 1800's constituted a mythical Boer saga, according to the moral of which a divine Redemption was inevitable. Victorious elections of the 1948 and the subsequent Afrikaner hegemony were regarded by Afrikaners as the redemption. Following the logic of the Boer saga, conservative Afrikaners regarded the loss of White hegemony in 1994 as a historical betrayal, which would require a new redemption, as the divine Providence could not leave the Black terror acts of 1961–1994 unavenged.⁷

The Blacks, for whom the conflict of 1961–1994 was a liberation struggle, brought the atrocities committed by the apartheid state into daylight in the courts of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. They leaned on the myth of the historical inevitability of decolonisation: History with the capital H was on the side of the freedom fighters.⁸

In *Bosnia-Herzegovina*, the pattern of guilt and victimisation was complicated as there were three mutual adversaries. Muslims, Croats and Serbs each attributed victimhood to oneself and guilt to two 'others'. Apart from atrocities as such, a core theme of accusation was genocide, the term that was often used as a synonym for ethnic cleansing, and claimed by all parties as the ultimate victimhood. In Belgrade, the Serbian state opened during the war a Museum of Victims of Genocide, based on the analogy of Jewish Holocaust. Serbs historicised their ordeal of genocide by references to Jasenovac, the notorious concentration camp run by the Croats during the Second World War.

⁶ Peltonen 1996, 227.

⁷ About such a rhetoric, see Mandela 1995, quoting Dr. Malan, the leader of the Afrikaner National Party, in 1952.

⁸ see Ahonen 2012, 91–95.

Croats, for their part, identified themselves with the Catholic myth of *antemurale Christianitatis*, referring to centuries-long defence of the Church of Rome against infidels. Moreover, they pointed at the memory of the Second World War tragedy of Bleiburg where tens of thousands of fleeing Ustaša Croats with families were killed by Tito's partisans. For Croats, Bleiburg was a "calvary".⁹ In the war 1992–5 they regarded themselves victims of both Serb and Muslim atrocities.

Both Serbs and Croats attributed the guilt of aggressive Islamic expansionism to Bosnian *Muslims*. It was historicised by references to historical Ottoman expansion, and bolstered by international post 9/11 islamophobia¹⁰

After the war 1992–5 it was above all the Bosnian Muslims whose victimisation reached a mythical level in public memory. The Muslim genocide was memorialised in the monumental Srebrenica mausoleum and cemetery. Srebrenica became as a victimhood myth more powerful than the Jasenovac of the Serbs and the Bleiburg of the Croats.

As myths make compelling beliefs and defy the rules of academic criticism, they constitute a challenge to attempts to build an open dialogue between conflicting historical communities. As deconstruction of myths threatens group identities, it is rarely undertaken spontaneously in the aftermath of a conflict. Therefore deliberate action towards the deconstruction of myths and an opening of a dialogue can be expected from educators.

What Did History Educators Do in a Post-Conflict Situation?

The responses of history educators to a post-conflict situation can be submitted to two particular questions: how did the interplay between public memory in general and history education in particular work, and what was the role of international intervention in education. The answers contribute to the judgment of the role of history education in reconciliation.

In Finland, two post-conflict generations encountered in the public space memorialisations of only White victimhood. The pursuit of social cohesion through a hegemony of the White truth permeated school education. The young people were in school educated in the spirit of nationalism and introduced to the rules of the existing political order. Teachers were all dedicated to the project of nation-building. The civil war was called a national "freedom war", and was not tolerated to be interpreted in alternative terms in the public. The Red counter-story of "civil war" was mediated in homes and workers union halls. Interviewees later in the 1960s told of working class children's silent protests to school lessons, which were in a striking contrast to the memories of their parents.¹¹ The overall suppressive dominance of the White truth in

⁹ MacDonald 2002, 239; Hockenos 2003; Pavlakovic 2007. For references to textbooks, see Torsti 2003, 180.

¹⁰ Malcolm 1996, 239.

¹¹ Peltonen 1996, 231–6.

public memory has been studied by Aapo Roselius, who stresses the existence of strong politics of memory in the inter-war period.¹²

The struggle to open the past to a dialogue started in a changed political situation after the Second World War. Despite the time distance of more than a generation, the gap between the adverse memory communities, the White and the Red, proved to be deep. In the new political situation, often called “the second republic” because of changes in the political elite, a need to open up a dialogue between the former “Whites” and “Reds” was urgent. State and civil society took up the task. The school books were officially cleansed of hate language, and monuments for Red victims were raised and commemoration rituals assumed. However, the change, for example in school books, was rather cosmetic than substantive, as the change in domestic politics soon halted.¹³ It was two decades later in the 1960s, under the auspices of the emerging welfare state that the ethos of the society became truly reconciliatory.

The civil society and cultural actors eventually managed to change the ethos of public memory in general and school education in particular. The decisive impetus to change was given by a monumental novel, Väinö Linna’s *Under the North Star* (1959–61), which rendered the stereotype of a Red rogue obsolete, substituting it with a new stereotype a poor landless tenant fighting for social justice. Public memory became dominated by cultural products sympathetic to the Reds.¹⁴ School education followed the change; gradually since the 1970s the authors of textbooks substituted the term indicating the conflict of 1918 from “freedom war” to “civil war”.¹⁵ As the school books were state-controlled, they were part of official memory politics.

In *South Africa*, the majority rule introduced in 1994 meant a turn in memory politics. Even though the new political regime was not iconoclastic and let the most of the Boer memorials stay, the memorialisations of the forty years of Black liberation struggle soon dominated public memory. The Robben island prison, where Nelson Mandela had spent seventeen years, was musealised into an icon of the Black resistance. Equally, the District Six, a dominantly Black area in the Cape Town, that had been demolished by the apartheid regime, was endowed with a museum to memorialise the life of Black freedom fighters.

In museums, the concept of ‘South Africa’ as a historical community was reformed. The goal was to move away from a condescending anthropological view of African people as primitive tribes and present the Africans as active agents of historical change. Beginning with the ancient rock art and tracing the demographic changes throughout centuries, museums reinterpreted the role of African chiefs and king in shaping South Africa.¹⁶

¹² Roselius 2010, *passim*.

¹³ Rantala 1997, 65–7.

¹⁴ Peltonen 2003, *passim*.

¹⁵ Jalonen 1994, 72–5.

¹⁶ Coombes 2003, *passim*; Ahonen 2012, 105–111.

‘Community museums’ became the flagships of new democratic history culture. They were an offspring of the historiographical movement of ‘history from below’, developed originally by the radical History Workshop movement in Britain in the 1970s and adopted in South Africa by Black History activists. Community museums were made ‘by, of, and for people’. For example, in Cape Town, in the Black township of Lwandle, a former colony of Black male labour imported from bantustans, the Black homelands, to work in White-owned factories, was made into a community museum. In such a museum, former inhabitants could accommodate their memories and present dwellers come together to work for the improvement of the township.

In history education, the transition into majority rule was accompanied by thematic changes in the syllabus. The story of South Africa was integrated into African instead of European history. In the apartheid tradition, history textbooks had started at the landing of the Boers on the Cape peninsula in the 1600s. In the post-apartheid South Africa they would start with ancient African rock art and introduce Africa as the cradle of mankind. The 19th century frontier wars between Africans, Boers and the British were accounted for in terms of stressing initiative and valour. The history of the apartheid years, especially the Black liberation struggle were given special attention, as a reaction to the apartheid policy of excluding the post-1948 history because of its provoking potential in Black schools.¹⁷

A further requirement by the majority rule concerned the inclusion of the history written by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission since 1995. The commission had brought the memories of ordinary people into public memory. Following the movement of ‘history from below’, new textbooks encouraged the students to interview local people about the past. The pursuit was parallel to the movement of community museums.

The memory politics of the new regime did not restrict the new lessons to the Black victor’s truth. Even though the new ethos on history education was explicitly anti-colonialist and dialectical in Marxist terms, the idea of a ‘rainbow nation’ guided the educators. The colonial tradition represented by the White minority was accepted as a part of the revised canon.

The highlights of the Boer saga, the Great Trek and the victimhood of the Boers in the concentration camps of the Anglo-Boer war were reserved a place in the textbooks.¹⁸

In *Bosnia-Herzegovina*, the peace settlement of 1995, known as the Dayton Accords, left the country divided in two entities, namely the Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina and the Serb Republic. The Federation, that consisted mainly of Muslim and Croat populations, was divided further into ten cantons which were meant to be ethnically more or less homogenous. The Croat and Muslim communities were thus

¹⁷ Chernis 1990, passim; Ahonen 2012, 112–7.

¹⁸ Bam 2000; Siebörger 2006; Ahonen 2012, 112–7.

enabled to pursue their ethno-religiously idiosyncratic views of history. Schools were in most cases ethnically segregated. As the cantons, however, were in reality ethnically mixed, local history battles were immanent. The international community, having orchestrated the peace settlement, intervened into history education but the attempts of reconciliation of the communities were often rebuffed.

A symbolic battle over the past went on in all fields of public memory, including history education. While ethnically separate commemoration rituals had been prohibited in Marshal Tito's Yugoslavia, they were now revived. The Orthodox Church dedicated rituals to Serb victimhood. Jasenovac was re-interpreted as a symbol of Serb victimhood rather than an all-Yugoslavian ordeal and commemorated as a latter-day Kosovo. Croats raised monuments to Bleiburg, and Muslims organised public show-funerals to exhumed victims of ethnic cleansings. In history education, each ethnic group fostered its idiosyncratic story of the past, for example of the warfare between "Četniks", "Ustašas" and "Turks" during the Second World War.

For the three ethnic groups the idiosyncratic stories served nation-building. However, the exploitation of history for the perpetuation of ethnic divisions bothered the international community, which held itself responsible for the peace settlement. As the first measure in the domain of history education, the European Union organised a cleansing of school books of explicit hate language.¹⁹ In the continuation, the Council of Europe, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) UNICEF, UNESCO, the World Bank and EUROCLIO (European Association of History Educators) and the Georg-Eckert Institute (for international textbook research), intervened in the reform of history education, organising missions and projects to reconcile history lessons..

Even though local stakeholders, above all the educational administrators, were involved in the reform, it tended to be rebuffed by teachers. The biggest stumbling block was the war of 1992–5. In 1998, when the education minister of the canton of Sarajevo, suggested a harmonisation of history textbooks, a protest was staged by Muslims, who felt their victimhood ignored. "Do we want to teach our children how to lie? Textbooks for a new genocide," read the headlines of the newspaper *Vecernje Novine*.²⁰

The OSCE report from 2004 admitted the failure of the reform and suggested the drawing up of official common guidelines for textbook writers. The teaching of the war 1992–5 was still not required, and, according to a critical survey in 2009, the textbooks were not multiperspectival.²¹ The three contradictory truths of the recent past were let to perpetuate the ethnic divisions of the communities.

The persistence of history wars in textbooks depends on the administrative structure of the country. The individual cantons tend to remain stuck to divisions along religious default lines. Segregated schools provide segregated history lessons.

¹⁹ Torsti 2003, 154–8.

²⁰ Quoted in Pingel 2009, 271.

²¹ Karge and Batarilo 2009.

Divisions about the past are further bolstered by the exploitation of identity by politicians. People are rarely encouraged by the leaders to start an open dialogue about the past.

Bosnian-Herzegovinan people seemed at the start of the 2010s to face a future of losing one-or two generations of young people to dissonance and distrust in regard to the past. This resembled what happened in Finland did after the conflict of 1918. In Bosnia-Herzegovina the reason might be found in the faults of the peace settlement, or in the depth of historical controversy. The roots in the ethnic clashes of Second World War were still tangible. The memory politics of Marshal Tito of not allowing a dialogue about the difficult past, had left a harmful legacy to Bosnia-Herzegovina

Concluding Remarks: Towards a Dialogue in the Classroom

Among the three examples, only South Africa provides an example of a determined effort to make the citizens identify with the post-conflict settlement in terms of reconciliation. The State promoted the reconciliation of the communities through memory politics and a reform of history education.

In Finland, two generations were lost in to post-conflict social discord. That is a high price paid for the trusting forgetting as a reconciler. Only as late as since the 1960s, memory politics, including history education have pursued even-handedness in serving both White and Red identity needs. On the cultural scene of Finland in the 2000s one can see, that the civil war still haunts minds. In novels, film and drama the painful memories keep surfacing, which reveals that neither forgetting nor forgiving has happened in the depths of social memory.

Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1995, as the residual of the civil war, was left to fight a history war. Public memory remained divided and history education segregated. The country risked locking the young generation in long discord. Several surveys by international actors in the 2000s testify of a general willingness among parents and teachers to open a dialogue, but, as contradiction, occasional organised and spontaneous expressions of views tell about popular insistence in the divided memories of guilt and victimhood.²²

In a divided society, for the purposes of mental reconstruction, minds need to be opened to recognition of the reciprocity of guilt and victimhood. Dialogical history culture is in demand. For a dialogue in a classroom, at least following educational preconditions are required:

- a common arena for the dialogue. In segregated schools a dialogue is not possible,
- deconstruction of the mythical fortifications which maintain antagonistic attributions of guilt and victimhood. This requirement is met by critical and multiperspectival studies of history,

²² Ahonen 2012, 141–2.

- deliberative classroom didactics, which train students to listen to each others' views and arguments instead of locking minds into dichotomic and defensive constellations.²³

For the aspirations to be more than just pious wishes, they need to comply with the nature of historical consciousness, which as a natural human orientation means basically two capabilities. Firstly, human beings recognise themselves as actors of history. They are not only made by the past but also make the future. Secondly, they project their future aspirations to the past experience. With this orientation as an asset, people in a post-conflict society can move forward from the cul-de-sac of distrust and immobility.

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²³ About deliberation in a classroom, see Torsti and Ahonen 2009.

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