

# Settling the past, building a better future: reconciliation in history teaching in Germany and France

Pham Hong Tung\*

*Vietnam National University, Hanoi*

Received 7 November 2007

**Abstract.** In this article the author provides an overview of the reconciliation in teaching national history between Germany and France. The process was started well before the Second World War. However, it became fruitful only after the end of the Cold War thanks to the initiatives of the French and German Youth Parliament. The author highlights the role of both French and German educators and historians as well as the support of German and French Governments, particularly the German Prime Minister Gerhard Schoeder and the French President Jacques Chirac. Nevertheless, the author also points out the German and French historians and educators try to settle the disputing issues concerning their own national histories, but fully forget the reconciliation in teaching European history and colonial past of the former colonial empires.

There is no doubt that the teaching of world history and national history plays a very important role in the building of the imagination of younger generations about the world and about their own nation. The ways in which they conceive and understand the past will certainly impact the ways in which they understand the present and expect of and imagine about their future. The historical consciousness is therefore an important part of the national consciousness.

However, history is teaching in different countries in very different ways. And these differences always develop into conflicts, when the history of the same historical events or historical processes that involved the participation of more than one country, more

than one people or concerning the past of many groups or parties. So far there have been many kinds of conflicts concerning the different ways of teaching and interpreting of history around the world. The newest one was the "history textbook conflicts" between Japan and Korea. But that was surely not the first and the last ones. The "history textbook conflicts" is not only the problem of the East and Southeast Asian countries. It is also not only the problems between the former "motherlands" and former colonies. In fact it has been a problem among many countries around the world. Hence, each conflict has its own nature and characteristics, consequence and solutions.

Germany and France are the two biggest and most important countries in central Europe. Due to the strategic important role of the two countries, there were many conflicts,

---

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: 84-4-8587590.  
E-mail: tungph@vnu.edu.vmn

even bloody wars between the two peoples in the history. Therefore, world history, European history and national histories had been teaching in very different ways in the two countries. In its turn, the difference in history teaching had also become a source of hostilities between the two people for a long time in the past. However, many generations of French and German historians and educators have been aware of these and tried their best to find out the ways for reconciliation in teaching history in the two countries, so that to contribute to the reconciliation between the two peoples. Finally, a common history textbook was published in 2006 for using in both countries. This textbook is on the one hand a result of a long lasted reconciliation process. On the other hand it may be considered as a good example for reconciliation in history teaching in other countries and region. That is the reason for this study.

Like in any other social science, the existence of many different methods, approaches, interpretations, explanations, presentations, theories, ideas and opinions among historians is a quite normal and healthy fact. To ask the historians in different countries, of different times and of different cultures to think, write and speak similarly is really to require an impossible thing. This is the idea of the famous Polish historian Johann Martin Chladenius<sup>(1)</sup>. But this does not mean that it is absolutely impossible to find out the right ways to reconcile conflicts, to reduce the

differences and to overcome the gaps among historians. Certainly, that is nevertheless no simple task.

European historians, government and various social and cultural organizations as well as educators have been aware of this task quite early. According to Prof. Phillipe Alexandre, the first initiatives in revising and reconciling the difference in teaching of history in schools in European countries were started already in 1849 by the Peace Congress in Frankfurt, Germany. The Congress called upon its members in different European countries for common efforts to erase prejudices and hostilities by education of the young generation, particularly by history teaching, so that prevent the outbreak of wars in the future. Although this initiative was unsuccessfully, but for the first time, it launched out the question of reconciliation in education in Europe [2, p.2].

In 1900 the Peace Movement held a World Peace Conference in Pest (Bulgaria) which issued a famous call for revision and reconciliation in history teaching in European countries. The Conference considered this as one of most important ways to keep the peace in Europe. Thus, it event made a step further by giving four "suggestions" which can be considered as main principles for revision and reconciliation of history teaching [2, p.3-4]. However, before the First World War the initiatives and engagements for reconciliation of history teaching were mainly approached as a part of the peace movement. The participation of European educators and historians in these efforts was still really weak and no government seemed to be really engaged with the movement.

After the First World War the reconciliation effort was restarted – this time

<sup>(1)</sup> In his famous work "Allgemeine Geschichtswissenschaft", Chladenius wrote in 1752: "It is a big mistake of the ones, who required, that the historians should express their attitude like a man without religion, fatherland, family. Those people do not know, that they are requiring the impossible things" [1, p.15-16].

by the League of Nations and therefore with the participation of many European states. It was in this time that the revision of history textbooks became the focal point of all reconciliation discussions. An international conference was organized in 1924 in Lyon (France) by the League of Nation, in order to discuss about the ways to set up regulations for revision of history textbooks and to improve the history teaching in European countries. After that, there were some more conferences and initiatives trying to solve the conflicting ideas, presentations and interpretations in history textbooks using in different European countries.

The French and German historians and educators played in these efforts the most important role, because among all European countries there existed between France and Germany large gaps in teaching history. Despite of all efforts of the League of Nations and of many historians from different countries the reconciliation was finally ended without any success. The German delegates argued that the German federation government has no control power over the history teaching in different German states, while the French delegates said that the French Government wanted to guarantee the teacher with their right of free choices for textbooks. Additionally, German professors and politicians pointed out that the regulations for revisions of history textbooks laid down by the Lyon Conference were unjust and conflicting with the German constitution. In fact, all this originated from the Versailles Agreement of 1919, in which only Germany, as a defeated country, was accused for the outbreak of the First World War and was punished for that. That was exactly what the German educators and

historian considered as historical distortion by the League of Nations and could not accept in their teaching.

Perhaps the only positive outcome of all reconciliation efforts in Europe before the Second World War was the beginning of the cooperation between French and German educators and historian. Already in December 1925 the SNI (*Syndicat National des Institutrices et Instituteurs de France et des Colonies*) organized a meeting between French and German educators in Paris to discuss about the reconciling issues in history teaching in the two countries. Some principles were suggested for further reconciliation[2,p.9-10]. In 1928 French historians and German historians met together again in Oslo (Norway) by the Sixth International Conference of the Historians. Although they did not go in concrete conflicting issues concerning the First World War, but they discussed about the ways of reconciling in history teaching, in order to eliminate the hostilities between the two countries in history teaching [3,p.3]. Seven years later, in November 1935, two German professors, Herre and Reiman, went to Paris to discuss with French historians about the possible ways to settle the conflicting issues concerning the history of relations between the two countries. At the end, they put forwards "40 advises" that were to send to all history teachers and authors of history textbooks in the two countries to help them by reconciling of conflicting issues. But their "advises" were delivered widely only in France. In Germany, the situation became more and more extremely difficult for any reconciling effort, because the Hitler regime was calling for a "total war" to extend the "*Lebensraum*" (Living Room) of the arias[3,p.10].

After the Second World War, the reconciliation efforts were restarted in 1950s in Europe with the support of UNESCO. Six conferences of European historians were held in Germany and other European countries to discuss about the revision of history textbooks and reconciliation of history teaching.

At the central point of these conferences was the reconciliation of history teaching between Germany and France, the two biggest countries in European continent with so many unsolved conflicts in the history. In a conference in Freiburg (in Breigaus, Germany) in 1951 German and French historians decided to accept again the "40 advises" of the meeting in Paris in 1935 as principles for revision of the history textbooks and for the presentation of the history of the relations between the two countries [13,p.12]. In the following years, 14 other meetings between French and German historians were held, until they decided to break the conference series in 1967. In 1981, on the suggestion of the German Georg-Eckert Institute, the meeting series was restarted and seven conferences of German and French were organized until the end of the Cold War (1989).

In those two conference series the German and French historians had tried their best to settle many conflicting issues and interpretations in teaching of the history of Europe, history of the German-French relation and the geographical changes of the two countries in the history. Of course there had been certain issues that they could find no possible way for reconciliation, particularly the issues concerning the German occupation of France and the collaboration of the Vichy regime during the Second World

War. But in general, these efforts of the French and German historians and educators after the Second World War were really fruitful. They had discussed very frankly and thoroughly about the working principles, the organization of French - German history textbook commission, the topics to be examined and revised and then about the concrete "advises" for settling the conflicting issues. Step by step they put forwards their efforts, issued many valuable "advises" for history teachers and school textbook authors in the two countries, and therefore contributed greatly to reconciliation of history teaching in France and in Germany. Surely, up to now the state relation between France and Germany has not developed without conflicts. However the reconciliation of the relation between the two biggest countries in Europe has been really one of the key factors for the strengthening of the European Community.

As a result of this long reconciliation process, in 2003, on the occasion of the 40<sup>th</sup> celebration of the Elysée Agreement, the German - French Youth Parliament, which consists of 550 Upper-Secondary pupils, voted for the idea of publishing a German - French common history textbook with identical contents for using in schools in the two countries. This was a very good impetus for the reconciliation process of the two countries, concerning history teaching issues. The suggestion of the French and German "young senators" was strongly supported by the governments of the two countries and particularly by the French President Jacques Chirac and the German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder.

Based on such strong support of the two governments, a German - French project

group was established in June 2003 to discuss about the principles and conception of a common history textbook. They also set up an author group consisting of 8 historians (four Germans and four French) under the leadership of two Chief-Editors, Prof. Guillaume Le Quintrec and Prof. Peter Geiss, which was responsible for compiling of the common history textbook<sup>(2)</sup>. In March 2005 the German school textbook publishers Ernst Klett and the French edition publishers Nathan announced officially their cooperation in publishing the German - French common history textbook. It was also planned that this common textbooks consists of three volumes: the first one is entitled "Europe and the World since 1945" and will be followed by two others, "From the Hellenic Democracy until the Revolution of 1789" and "From the Changes of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century to the Second World War". While the first volume will be used for the 12<sup>th</sup> class of German schools and the *Terminal* (final class) of the French schools, the second volume will be used for the Tenth and Eleventh of German schools and the *Seconde* class of French schools. The third volume will then be used for the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> class of German schools and the *Première* class of French schools.

Three years after the meeting of the "Youth Parliament" the first volume of German - French common history textbook came to life on the 10<sup>th</sup> July 2006 under the

title: "*Histoire/Geschichte. Europa und die Welt seit 1945*". Immediately, the textbook was allowed to use in French and German schools in the school year 2006-2007. Until now there still no survey on the response of the pupils and history teachers in the two countries towards the textbooks, but on international media it has been commented very differently. While some German praised it as "*a textbook that goes beyond the borders*" [4], other author considers it "*apparently is not just Euro-centric, but also teaches a pro-European sentiment on the expense of the United States*", or even describes it as "*anti-American*" [5].

Despite of different temporal evaluations, the first Franco-German common history textbook is really a great success in the long reconciling process taken place in Europe since the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is also a handsome result of the continuous reconciling efforts of French and German historians and educators, particularly during the time after the SWW. The common textbook is also resulted from the large support given by the French and the German governments, on the other hand it reflect the reconciling atmosphere, the globalized ways of thinking and liberal political cultural orientation of the young generations of the two nations.

The Project leaders and the authors of this history textbook made a very clever decision, as they chose to the period from the end SWW to the end of the Cold War for the first published volume. That was in fact the period with few conflicting issues in the history of Franco-German relations. That means, that is the simplest period to be reconciled.

Concerning the Franco-German or European issues the authors of this common history textbook seem have been doing well

<sup>(2)</sup> The authors of the German - French common history textbook "*Histoire/Geschichte Europa und die Welt seit 1945*" are: Guillaume Le Quintrec and Peter Geiss (Chief Editor), and other 4 German co-authors: Ludwig Bernlochner (Munich), Lars Boesenberg (Ibbenbueren), Michaela Braun (Bendorf), Claus Gigl (Landshut); 4 other French co-authors: Daniel Henri (Paris), Enriquer Leon (Paris), Msthieu Lepetit (Buc) and Benedicte Toucheboeuf (Nanterre).

their reconciling job. However, concerning the colonial question they could in fact do nothing better than other history textbooks using in France. Hence, decolonization was one of most important historical processes in the world history after 1945. Particularly, this process was really a significant part of history of some European former motherlands, like France, Britain, the Netherlands and Portugal. However, the authors of the Franco-German common history textbook do not pay much attention to this process. Among 17 chapters of the textbook they reserve only one chapter (chapter 5 of the Second Part) under the title "*Das Ende der Kolonialreiche*" (The End of Colonial Empires) for the topic. The chapter is also relative short: only 13 pages (pp. 82 – 95), makes about 0.36% of the total coverage of the book (335 pages) [6,p.82-95]. The decolonization is also dealt with in the chapter 14 "*Die politische Entwicklung Frankreichs von 1945 bis heute*" (The Political Development of France from 1945 to Today), but only as one point of a part of the chapter under the subtitle "*Der Algerienkrieg as Bedrohung fuer die Vierte Republik*" (The Algerian War as a Threat to the Fourth Republic) [6,p.240].

It is clearly that the authors of the Franco-German common history textbook do not consider the history of the decolonization after the SWW and the relations between the former European "motherlands" and their former colonies in the post-colonial period as an important topic. That also means that in their presentation of the history of the "Europe and the World", they do not take the reconciliation between these partners as an important issue in the world order. This is surely not a right way to present and interpret the World history since 1945.

It seems in the first sight, that the authors of this new history textbook look at the history of Western colonization from the perspective of reconciliation, because of the most important reason for the birth of such common history textbook like this is reconciliation, and try to present the history of colonization and decolonization objectively. It is also to emphasize here, that this text was published in July 2006, directly after the crisis caused by the French "*LOI n° 2005-158 du 23 fEvrier 2005*". Dealing with the Western colonization in general and the French colonization in particular, the authors of this textbook avoid giving any open evaluation. They neither talk about the "*mission civilisatrice*", nor about the colonial "exploitation" and "suppression". That is also not the central topic of this volume. Dealing with the history of decolonization, they on the one hand acknowledge the independent will of the colonized peoples in Indochina, India and Africa and described the successes and impacts of the independent movements as positive transformations in the modern world. On the other hand, they are seemly critical towards the attitudes of French governments towards the colonial question after the SWW. The authors of the textbooks acknowledge the rational policy of the British in guaranteed India and other peoples with national independence and brought them together into the British Commonwealth. In the mean time they criticized the French policy of re-conquering the former colonies and suppressing the independent movements after the SWW. They also point out the negative consequence of the colonial wars in Indochina and Africa to the political development of France. The pupils are also informed about the massacres caused by the

French colonial troops in Vietnam and in Algeria in 1945 and 1946 and the defeats of the French army in the colonial wars in Indochina and Africa. In this respect, the new German-French common history textbook has really overcome the shortcomings of some other history textbooks used in France previously.

However, the new textbook has still contained of some points that can be considered as intentional distortions of the history of decolonization of Vietnam<sup>(3)</sup>. Like in other French history textbooks the authors of this textbook simply ignore the collaboration between the French colonial government in Indochina under General Governor Jean Decoux with the Japanese army from September 1940 to March 1945 [6,p.86].

The textbook writes: "The national movements and independent struggles had appeared already in the time between the World Wars; they were violently suppressed by the colonial powers, for example in India and North Africa" [6,p.86]. That is true for India and North Africa, but why do they not mention the suppressions of the French colonial government against the national movements in Vietnam before 1945? Are these suppressions not typical enough or they just want to ignore them?

In the "Dossier" "*Vietnam im Brennpunkt der internationalen Beziehungen*" (Vietnam in Burning Point of the International Relations) of the chapter 5 the intentional historical distortions of the textbook become even more clearly. Here, the authors describe the situation of Vietnam around the end of the

SWW and continue to ignore the Franco-Japanese collaboration. Then they come on to write: "... and in the last weeks of the Second World War the national movement that was lead by the Communist politician Ho Chi Minh, took the control over the northern part of the land"[6,p.94]. That is simply not true, because the Viet Minh took the control over the whole Vietnam, except only some provinces in the North, and the foundation of the independent DRV was declared on 2<sup>nd</sup> September 1945.

In the next part of the "Dossier" they write: "The Geneva Agreement that was signed in July 1954 fixed (*festlegen*) the partition of the land into two parts." [6,p.94]. Again, that statement is totally false. The Geneva Agreement did not fixe the partition of Vietnam, but only set up a temporal military demarcation line at the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel. The Agreement also regulated for a general election to reunify the country in July 1956. That was the truth that everyone knows. But the authors of the textbook ignore that and write: "However, the communist North that was supported by the USSR and China wanted to enforce a reunification on their own favor." [6,p.94].

Distortions and falsifications like these can be found also in the pages describing on the development of the countries in Asia and Africa during the post-colonial period. The authors emphasize the mismanagements, economic crisis, social and political crisis and wars in these lands, but they fail to acknowledge that these were also partly the consequences of the colonial policies that France, Britain and other colonial power had carried out in the colonies previously.

Taking the reconciliation in history teaching among European countries,

<sup>(3)</sup> In so far I am not able to check the history of the decolonization of Africa.

particularly, the reconciliation between Germany and France in the post-war period as an example "case study" can help us to draw out many valuable experiences for our studies here. Firstly, that is the lesson concerning the active role of the educators and historians of concerning countries. If they cannot find out the ways to talk and to work together effectively, then the conflicts cannot be reconciled. Certainly, the governments of concerning countries play very important role, because the conflicts in history teaching are often highly politicized and the education in many countries are often under the tight control of the states. Thus, the outcome of reconciling efforts depends largely on the attitudes of the concerning governments. The civil initiatives are also very important to the reconciliation. As pointed out here, the first reconciling effort in Europe was initiated by the Peace Movement, and the newest one was also initiated by the Franco-German "Youth Parliaments".

The first German - French common history textbook can be considered as a "classic" example of successful reconciliation for history teaching conflicts. Besides many positive characteristics, this textbook still contained a number of distortions or

falsifications. Above all, it reflects clearly a Eurocentric approach of the German and French authors. Therefore, the new German-French common history textbook can help to settle the old conflicts, but at the same time, it brings in new conflicts.

## References

- [1] Chladenius Johann Martin, *Allgemeine Geschichtswissenschaft*, Boehlau, Leipzig (1752), 1982.
- [2] Alexandre, Philippe, *Zur Vorgeschichte einer deutsch-franzoesischen Geschichtsschulbuchrevision*, [www.france-blog.info/pdf/Alexandre\\_250906.pdf](http://www.france-blog.info/pdf/Alexandre_250906.pdf).
- [3] Allain, *Der deutsch – franzoesische Dialog ueber die Geschichteschulbuecher*, [www.festokyo.com/text\\_allain.rtf](http://www.festokyo.com/text_allain.rtf).
- [4] Anne Haeming, <http://www.tagesspiegel.de/magazin/modernes-leben/werbinich/werbinich;art413,2212192>.
- [5] "Failure of Education": *franco-German reconciliation with Anti-Americanism*, <http://atlanticreview.org/archives/314-Failure-of-Education-Franco-German-Reconciliation-with-Anti-Americanism.html>.
- [6] Quintrec, Guillaume Le, Peter Geiss, *Histoire/Geschichte. Europa und die Welt seit 1945*, Ernst Klett Schulbuchverlag, Stuttgart – Leipzig, 2006.