

# RESULTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE GERMAN-ISRAELI TEXTBOOK COMMISSION

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On 23 June, the German-Israeli Textbook Commission publicly presented the results of its work at the German Federal Foreign Office in Berlin.<sup>1</sup> In the four years previously, German and Israeli scholars and educationists had evaluated more than 400 textbooks from both countries in the subjects of history, geography and social studies. The Georg Eckert Institute coordinated the project together with the MOFET Institute for Research,

## GERMAN AND ISRAELI EXPERTS EVALUATED 400 HISTORY, GEOGRAPHY AND SOCIAL STUDIES TEXTBOOKS

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The work of the Commission was financed by the German Foreign Office and the Israeli Ministry of Education.

The members of the Commission, most of whom were working in an honorary capacity, found themselves faced with several challenges. Firstly a sample that was both workable and representative had to be selected from the 1,200 textbooks that were authorised in Germany at the beginning of the project in the three subject areas mentioned above. The Commission decided to analyse the portrayal of Israel and the Holocaust in authorised textbooks from Bavaria, Berlin (or Brandenburg), Lower Saxony, North-Rhine Westphalia and Saxony. From the textbooks currently in use in Israel, those were chosen that addressed in one way or another German history, geography or society. Great care was taken to secure the quality of the methodological procedure. As the textbooks could not be subjected to a direct cross analysis on account of the language barrier, each side began by analysing its own books. All relevant paragraphs and chapters were assessed using methods of quantitative and qualitative content analysis, with a focus on both codes specific to the subject area and topic, and also on linguistic and didactic criteria. The results were clustered and summarised in interim reports, which were translated into Hebrew or German and made available to the other party. The reports were discussed at a series

of bilateral meetings that took place in Braunschweig, Berlin, Leipzig and Tel Aviv between 2011 and 2014, and ultimately both parties agreed on a shared set of results and mutual textbook recommendations.

Twenty-five years after the last German-Israeli textbook recommendations, the Textbook Commission had set to work expecting to find in the textbooks an echo of the changes that both countries and societies had undergone in the meantime: German reunification and the European unification process on the one hand, and the Middle East peace process with all its obstacles, yet also the development of Israel into a modern high-tech economy on the other. The first German-Israeli textbook consultations had concluded in 1985 with the recommendation that the textbooks – amongst other aspects – provide a more emphatic depiction of the political, social, economic and cultural diversity of the respective other country, and that they broaden their focus on historical events.

The sobering conclusion of the new textbook analyses is that only little has changed since those last critiques of the books' all too narrow perspective. Israel still appears in German textbooks of all three subjects almost exclusively in the context of the Middle East conflict. As the Commission ascertained, it would be virtually impossible to convey the historical and political complexities of the conflict in chapters averaging only four to six pages.<sup>2</sup> Despite the fact that – with only very few exceptions – the authors of all textbooks go to visible efforts to provide a balanced portrayal and to avoid explicitly taking sides, there are repeated instances of bias and distortion. Israel is primarily portrayed as a belligerent and – albeit often out of necessity – violent state. At the same time, other aspects of Israel are ignored, such as the fact that it is the only effective democracy in the Middle East, a state with a pluralist political system and a liberal social order after the western model. Additionally,

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## Deutsch-Israelische Schulbuchempfehlungen



### ECKERT. EXPERTISE

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hardly any of the textbooks speak of the special relationship between German and Israel. While key didactic categories such as multiple perspectives, controversy and readership orientation are taken into account by both the background texts and by the source material, in more than a few cases the portrayal is distorted by an unbalanced source selection, oversimplified headings or carelessly phrased assignments. History textbooks predominantly refer to current affairs, which in many cases suppresses or flattens the historical frame of reference necessary in order to truly understand the events in question. A strong influence of mass media is evident in the textbooks, not only in the language but primarily in the use of image sources, often using strongly

### UNBALANCED SOURCE SELECTION, OVERSIMPLIFIED HEADINGS OR CARELESSLY PHRASED ASSIGNMENTS IN PORTRAYAL OF ISRAEL

symbolic or emotionalised images that depict Israel as an aggressor. Only few textbooks succeed

in critically scrutinising the intentions and messages of certain images, for instance by means of an image analysis.

The portrayal of the Federal Republic of Germany in Israeli textbooks equally leaves much to be desired. There is no coherent depiction of post-1945 Germany in textbooks of any of the three subject areas in our study; something that had already been criticised by the first German-Israeli Textbook Commission. In Israeli geography and social studies textbooks, Germany is sporadically mentioned in a variety of contexts, all of which, however, have positive connotations: The geography textbooks, for instance, speak of Germany in an economic or ecological context, and the social studies books with reference to the protection of minorities or the development of democratic forms of government.

As the current Israeli curriculum for the subject of history (in effect since 2010) does not include post-1945 European history, the newer history

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textbooks only contain sporadic references to the Federal Republic of Germany in the context of events that were particularly important to Israel, such as the Luxemburg Agreement or the Eichmann Trial. Otherwise, Israeli history textbooks provide a more detailed picture of German history in the context of the Middle Ages, the European Enlightenment, and with regard to the emergence of national movements in Europe after the turn of the 19th century, and of course the portrayal National Socialist Germany, to which naturally a generous amount of space is allocated in the context of the Holocaust.

The German-Israeli Textbook Commission has developed detailed recommendations that seek to overcome the shortcomings, errors and distortions mentioned above. They also suggest with reference to the curricula alternative ways of portraying Israel or Germany in the textbooks. The success of these recommendations will depend on, amongst other aspects, rendering them accessible and feasible to their key target audience in both countries – the textbook publishers and authors – via relevant events or collaboratively designed teaching modules.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Deutsch-Israelische Schulbuchkommission (Ed.): *Deutsch-israelische Schulbuchempfehlungen*, Göttingen 2015 (Eckert.Expertise, vol. 5). Complete text available at: <http://www.edumeres.net/publikationen/expertise/eckert-expertise-band/article/deutsch-israelische-schulbuchkommission-deutsch-israelische-schulbuchempfehlungen.html>
- 2 These numbers are especially valid for the textbooks analysed for the first level of secondary school (*Sek. I*). In some history, social studies and politics textbooks of the second level of secondary school (*Sek. II*), there are considerably longer chapters which succeed in providing a more accurate and sophisticated portrayal of the conflict.