

Media Reflexion of Contemporary Polish History in Czech History Textbooks

Kamil Štěpánek / e-mail: stepanek@ped.muni.cz

Department of History, Faculty of Education, Masaryk Univerzity, Brno, Czech Republic

Štěpánek, K. (2013). Media Reflexion of Contemporary Polish History in Czech History Textbooks. *Czech-Polish Historical and Pedagogical Journal*, 5/1, 70–75. doi: 10.2478/cphpj-2013-0008

The present text deals with content analysis of Czech teaching texts with regard to presence of iconic text. The subject of the analysis is the image of Poland after World War II in Czech textbooks of history for the second stage of elementary education in the latter half of the past and the beginning of this century. Following summarisation, analysis and interpretation of the found visual material the author of this contribution concludes that the textbook authors still apply the stereotype of selective choice scheme and little activating teaching potential of the selected images.

Key words: Contemporary polish history; Czech textbooks; Iconic text; Teaching history

Authors of the present teaching materials definitely deserve admiration for their courage to write works to difficult and often unappreciative. At the same time, however, it needs to be said that in the present media time textbooks are unfortunately neither the only nor the most important source of historic information absorbed by children and young people today. Cognitive mediation becomes more and more dominated by internet, and yet there are themes pupils will continue to exclusively get acquainted with through school teaching and textbooks. I believe that this will also be the case of contemporary Polish history mentioned in the title of this contribution in the Czech Republic. Therefore I will try to analyze the teaching contents from the viewpoint of their representations by iconic text. To specify the objectives of this text in more detail: I will attempt at summarisation, analysis and interpretation of the found picture material in its entirety, or fragmentariness – introduction of the image of Poland in Czech textbooks of the latter half of 20th and early 21st centuries. The subject of the present research therefore included basic teaching aids for general population, i.e. for school children.

For the abovementioned intention to be fulfilled I analysed textbooks from three different periods of time: 1960s to 1980s, after 1989 and textbooks meeting the requirements of the present school reform. Selection of analysed materials from three detached time periods allowed

for better analysis of potential development and changes of the issue in question.

Knowledge of modern Polish history in the Czech environment is relatively little.¹ This applies even more to Czech children, whose nearly zero knowledge may and should be substantially deepened by their teachers and the teaching text and pictures in the educational media.

In the earliest analysed period mentioned above Marxist approach represented the only possible interpretation of history and all pupils were expected to be consistently taught this unified approach at schools.² The biased approach mainly affected interpretation of contemporary history. For example the role of personalities was reduced in favour of the role of "the people"... After November 1989 the Czech Republic entered a path towards creation of better quality textbooks and other teaching aids. I will try to characterise and summarise them as follows: Until recently the Czech history textbook market could be perceived as saturated. It was because it offered circa 60 textbooks or student books in nine series by six publishing houses for history lessons at Czech elementary schools after 1989.³ After introduction of more strict approval rules and preparation of educational changers implemented since the school year 2007/8 all these textbooks became obsolete and running out and three new series emerged written already according to the requirements of the ongoing reform. All textbook series were written for up to the ninth form of elementary schools and for the first to the fourth year of eight-year grammar schools inclusive.⁴

A couple of brief comments on the form and contents of this group of the analysed textbooks: All the series are characterised with a unified inner structure of teaching units. In addition to explanation of the basic curriculum content individual chapters include additional texts which were intended to inspire more interest in the taught theme in the pupils. In

¹ To-date literature usable by authors of textbooks for elementary schools, the summary History of Poland from mid 1970s is too tendentious for the period after 1918. Welcomed support was only offered by the Polish historian Andrzej Paczkowski and his book Fifty Years of Polish History 1939–1989 published by Academia, Prague 2000, 381 pages. The book by one of the most respected experts in contemporary history of Poland presents excellent educational and readable survey of Polish history of the five decades mentioned in the title.

² Dohnal, M. (1973): *Dějepis 9*. Praha: SPN; *Dějepis 8*. Praha: SPN, 1983.

³ The textbooks not involved in application of the school reform after 1989 include textbooks by Scientia Publishers 2002–2004 or SPL Práce Publishers 1993, still used by some schools.

⁴ Textbooks approved by the Ministry of Education of CR were published by FRAUS, Nová škola and SPN publishers.

sharp contrast to pre-November 1989 textbooks the text is combined with lots of illustrations and graphic symbols, simple maps, diagrams and other auxiliary materials helping the pupils with spatial and temporal orientation.

What is then the particular difference between the nature of visual information about modern Polish history in textbooks issued in the course of the past twenty years in comparison to the teaching texts of the communist era, if pictures were included in the pre-November textbooks at all?

The logical starting point of the research was production of the State Pedagogic Publishers from early 1970s, namely the unified textbooks issued by the State Pedagogic publishers in Prague for the final years of basic schools of the pre-November era.⁵ Neither textbook included any representation of the studied visual information. Although the textbook authors of the “normalisation era” could readily apply propagandistic visual presentation of building of real socialism in the country of our neighbour, they did not make use of this natural option. Absence of presentation of Polish historic events and civic commotion in 1956 can easily be interpreted by ideological atmosphere of the time and censor interference.

The edition of twelve textbooks issued by Práce Publishers was written at the turn of the final decade of the last century and maps history from the primeval era to late 1980s.⁶ The analysed iconic text is found in the final textbook by Jiří Jožák subtitled Czechoslovakia and the World 1945–1989 in Chapter 12 about 1970s and 1980s and characterised as a “period of transformations”. The colour picture is absolutely formal and does not inspire any further methodological and didactic approaches – you can only see many people in front of a gate with a sign over the entrance reading Gdansk Shipyards. The detailed explanatory comment inform not about the content of the picture but about genesis of independent Polish trade union. The context belongs to the paragraph describing the dramatic development in Poland leading towards the mass opposition movement called Solidarity.

The collective of authors working for Dialog Publishers⁷ extended their text for pupils of 9th form of elementary school with an unprecedented quantity of picture materials presented in the mosaic structure. Polish history in images is however only represented by a single picture – a photo of the editors’ office of the Solidarity movement.

⁵ Dohnal, M. (1973): *Dějepis 9*. Praha: SPN; *Dějepis 8*. Praha: SPN, 1983.

⁶ Jožák, J. (1995): *Nová doba, 4. díl. Československo a svět 1945–1989*. Praha: Práce, p. 94.

⁷ *Dějiny 20. století* (2005). Liberec: Dialog, p. 162.

The two-page text on contemporary history of our northern neighbour by Vladimír Nálevka in the textbook by Fortuna Publishers is extended with a photo of striking labour of the Gdańsk shipyards during a prayer and the head of the Polish opposition movement Lech Wałęsa.

The State Pedagogical Publishers⁸ illustrates the described events in the textbook for the same form of elementary school with a single photo of demonstrating crowds and the date of origin of the independent trade union movement.

The textbook published by Scientia Publishers⁹ the relevant picture material shows three separate images of Pope John Paul II, Lech Wałęsa and members of Solidarity striking in Warsaw. Didactic objective of development of pupil activities is best met by the latter one. About half-page text subtitled "Signal from Poland" is combined with functional photographs.

A little less successful is the textbook published by FRAUS Publishers and already completely conceived in harmony with the ongoing educational reform. The thematic unit "The world and the Czech Republic after the war" is introduced with a map showing territorial changes in Central Europe clearly governed by "transfer" of the Polish territory towards the west.¹⁰ The following events in Poland are traditionally documented with photographs of Lech Wałęsa¹¹ and a summary text about the post-war world of members of Solidarity in the streets.¹²

The competitor textbook published by Nová škola Publishers in its thematic unit "Western integration, eastern disintegration" illustrates the role of Catholic church in the fall of communism by a photo of Pope John Paul II on a visit to Poland in 1979.¹³ The picture is accompanied with a factual question. The text aid closing the series of teaching texts represents the only of the thirteen analysed textbooks which extended description of the events of 1956 in the communist block with a picture of labour uprising in the streets of Poznań.¹⁴

The established selective scheme is also applied by the product of SPN publishers. The pupils find the only photo on page 142 showing the

⁸ Kocian, J – Jožák, J. (1999): *Dějepis nejnovější dějiny*. Praha: Státní pedagogické nakladatelství, p. 136.

⁹ Čapka, F. (2004): *Dějepis 9 od roku 1918 do současnosti*. Praha: Scientia, p. 148.

¹⁰ *Dějepis 9* (2011). Praha: FRAUS, p. 97.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 115.

¹² *Ibid*, p. 135.

¹³ Čapka, F. (2011): *Dějepis Novověk, moderní dějiny*. Brno: Nová škola, p. 107.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 93.

meeting of Pope John Paul II with Prague Archbishop Cardinal František Tomášek in Prague in 1990.¹⁵

What to say as a conclusion to the image of contemporary Polish history in textbooks of history used in the course of the past fifty years in Czechoslovak/Czech elementary schools? Czech textbooks of history from the earliest period analyse, i.e. textbooks published before 1989, appear relatively meagre as a whole. But it needs to be noted that each textbook presentation naturally requires reduction of visual materials. Intentional deformation of information by authors of textbooks is no longer the case of textbooks of the past twenty years. The blunt descriptiveness of facts typical of the earliest analysed textbooks is replaced with other means of expression, often obviously at the cost of systematic information structure. Despite that the latter method of presentation better meets not only the requirements for modern teaching aids but also the needs of their recipients.

However, as shown, authors of textbooks apply the characteristic selective approach to choice of picture material, not only for older history of Poland. In our case I speak about the map of territorial changes in Central Europe accentuating Poland after World War II, pictures of crowded squares with banners of the trade union organisation Solidarity, photos of the trade union head Lech Wałęsa and Pope John Paul II. But this limited material at least introduces to Czech pupils Polish personalities of international relevance. If looking for a wider potential framework of historic events, which in the opinion of the post-November authors would deserve illustrations of their texts, legitimate attention might be justly claimed by the political upheavals in the communist block in 1956. However, in most of the texts pictures of demonstrations in Polish cities gave way to intervention of Soviet tanks in the streets of Budapest. The authors certainly hoped in increased curiosity of the pupils evoked by the more dramatic pictures. From the viewpoint of objectives and expected outputs of history teaching in the final form of elementary schools and preference of national to global history this selection might be acceptable, although providing completely insufficient and only fragmentary image of development of our northern neighbour.

From the didactic point of view, however, the basic illustrative level of the selected photographs with minimum informative value might be questioned. The principle of connection with other primary and secondary information is still observed. But the analysed set of photographs is clearly marked by absence of the potential of breaking

¹⁵ Válková, V. (2009): *Dějepis 9*. Praha: SPN, p. 142.

the possible undesirable stereotypes, whether ethnic, ideological or other. What is also missing is any presentation of the discrepancies and ambiguities inviting for examination, formulation of hypotheses by pupils and discussions, as well as appropriateness to the age of the pupils. These drawbacks on the part of the textbook authors are naturally reflected in the methodological application and provide little opportunity to the teachers for activating and developing ways of teaching.