

Contemporary Didactics of History in the Czech Republic

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Fundamental changes in Czechoslovakia after 1989 naturally had an impact on the educational system, and this impact was particularly pronounced in the subject history. This study presents a basic chronological overview of the changes made in terms of the content, didactics and methodology of history teaching at Czech schools, with a particular view to the adoption and implementation in school practice of the Framework Education System and School Education System. The implementation of these changes was far from simple and encountered frequent misunderstanding and much comment from teachers. Attention is also devoted to changes in the concept of school history textbooks. In conclusion, a number of basic notes are added on the didactics of the subject as an academic field and to new trends in particular.

Key words: *didactics; methodology; school history; the Education Act; key competences; historical thinking; regional history; everyday life; textbook; empirical research*

The fundamental politico-economic and social changes in Czechoslovakia after 1989 were also reflected in the education system and, of course, particularly markedly in school history. The law passed in 1990 stipulated compulsory school attendance of nine years. From the middle of the nineteen nineties, the first level of primary school was extended to five years, there began to be grammar schools offering six-year and eight-year studies in addition to four-year grammar schools, while there were also lyceums and other types of secondary education – church schools and private schools.

The liberalisation of Czech society (following the division of Czechoslovakia in 1993) was reflected in all areas of education. The basic changes for school history were: 1. The principals of primary schools could reduce history teaching to 6 hours according to new teaching plans and curricula (this proved unfortunate), history teaching was often similarly minimised at secondary technical colleges; 2. The history textbooks used were removed and gradually replaced with new

textbooks, with entire series of textbooks published by emerging (largely) private educational publishing houses.

This was accompanied in the nineteen nineties by criticism among both the professional community and civic society of the large degree of factualism, labelled “date-cramming”, in school history. The emphasis was placed on teaching methods and means that often lead to an unambiguous domination of form over content. Factualism dissipated from history lessons, though no discussion is possible without it as facts are to history what symbols and equations are to exact sciences. This led to a temporary decline in the standard of history education, followed by the rehabilitation of commensurate factualism.

There was also a similar retreat from the thematic conception of history back to a chronological conception. Introducing poorly prepared and hasty reform steps under the pressure of political transformations proved to be the path to short-term success that does not last, that results merely in increased administration of the school system and that is a dangerous game to play with the cultural standard of the nation. Rapid and easy solutions of this kind may do more harm than good.

The new Education Act No. 56 was passed in 2004 (and came into effect on 1 January 2005). It respected democratic and pluralistic trends in general education around the world. The new act was responsible for the introduction on 1 July 2007 of: a) The Framework Education Programme¹ and b) The School Education Programme, accompanied by hastily introduced “standards” that were intended to fill the conceptual gap between the two programmes. The Framework Education System for primary schools was created according to specifications that were at that time, and still remain, a mere mixing and reformulating of three still valid education programmes, of which two are mere modifications of old pre-Revolutionary curricula (i.e. before 1989). There is currently talk of a fundamental reform to the Framework Education Programme that will necessitate the drawing up of new School Education Programmes.

The school subject history is included in the Framework Education Programme along with a social science foundation in the educational area Man and Society. A wide-ranging discussion broke out among teachers reacting to the efforts on the part of the Ministry of Education to connect history with civics. The two subjects have even been integrated provisionally at many primary schools at their own initiative. The specialised history community has taken an unambiguously negative position on this issue and called for the preservation of the existing

¹ *Rámcový vzdělávací program pro základní vzdělávání* (2005). Praha.

subject model, particularly in view of differences as regards content, even though there is a certain kinship between the two subjects. The fact that no one considers connecting mathematics and physics, for example, even though a certain closeness may be found here, may serve as a comparison. The discussion on this matter led to the famous initiative on the part of Czech history didacticians known as A Word on History of 2003.² The most comprehensive definition of the functions that school history should fulfil was provided by the Catalogue of Requirements for the School-leaving Examination which has undergone frequent modification.

The process of putting key competences into practice in Czech schools was conducted in a number of phases. Various educational events associated with the training of school coordinators, who at many schools encountered resistance from teachers (“it’s pointless, we do that anyway”), were first held. This “warm-up round” (to use the sporting colloquialism) was followed by the elaboration of key competences in respect of their individual components and the description of output. Teachers were to think out and draw up strategies and methods for this that they would use in implementation; this task was rather demanding for teachers and took them a relatively long time, particularly the determination of competences for teaching. The long-term absence of systematic further education for teachers in the area of didactics and psychology manifested itself here. A positive aspect to the process as a whole was the initiation of systematic discussion at schools during the formation of School Education Programmes that enabled a comparison between individual schools. Assistance was provided by a number of institutions, of which we might mention, of many, the operation of the portal of the National Institute for Education (formerly the Pedagogical Research Institute), whose range of programme includes such items as “The Memory of the Nation”, “Totalitarianism” and “One World at Schools”.

There were also wide-ranging discussions at the time about issues related to the conception of school history. The leading Czech didactician Vratislav Čapek viewed history as the transformation of the system of historical science into the didactic structure of school history. History, in his view, was a “small science” in which pupils are acquainted with the basic approaches of the historian’s work (i.e. heuristics, criticism, the interpretation of sources, synthesis), with the classification of historical sources, with the fundamentals of auxiliary historical sciences. However,

² Slovo k dějepisu (2003). *Dějiny a současnost*. 25/4, pp. 53–54.

Zdeněk Beneš, another leading Czech didactician, considered this conception outdated and believed it did not correspond to the new reality. In his view, school history shapes, first and foremost, a highly structured historical awareness (thinking) and the historical culture of the young generation, though a large number of influences outside school – the media, the family, reading, films, travel experiences, etc. – also contribute towards their shaping. In this regard, Beneš compared sources of historical awareness to a supermarket in which history should also lead pupils to a recognition of the quality of historical phenomena such as truthfulness, accuracy and legitimacy.

Emphasis was gradually placed in the didactics of history on the development of key skills or target skills, i.e. the ability of the pupil to contribute to the creation of historical subject matter and to assess, analyse, apply, understand and remember it, while the basic task of school history should be the historical thinking of the pupil. The following basic competences were demarcated:

- for learning (being able to read verbal and iconic texts, orientation on the time axis and maps);
- for problem solving (the causes of historical situations, comparison with the views of classmates);
- for communication (the ability to express one's views and standpoints and to justify them);
- social and personal (co-operation in class groups);
- civic (perceiving a work of art, the pros and cons of people living together in various situations);
- work.

The appearance of history textbooks changed along with this. The recommended teaching matter was offered in more general form, with the selection of teaching matter depending to a large extent on the teacher, based on the famous thesis that the textbook is not dogma and is not intended to be learnt from cover to cover. A number of attempts to define suitable teaching matter were made from the beginning of the nineteen nineties onwards. A preference was seen for the most recent history of the twentieth century, and particularly history after 1945, although practice differed in schools, unfortunately, and was not always satisfactory. There was a gradual reduction to the history of prehistoric times and antiquity. This corresponded fully with the results of the questionnaire survey of 2005–2011 at secondary schools in which respondents stated the greatest handicap to be the minimal attention devoted to history after 1945. Grammar school students felt the lack of an interconnection between national and global history. The study areas

mentioned as absent included the interpretation of the history of everyday life. Discussion of the inclusion of topics such as the history of childhood, physical education and sport, and the history of the Roman people or gypsies came to the forefront.

New textbooks place the emphasis on the inspirational components of teaching, their visual form and stimulating activities. Repeat tasks provide ideas for creative tasks, for work with maps, group work among pupils, items of special interest, ideas for work with the Internet, examples of great literature, interconnection between subjects, and all-day projects. Year-long projects, key competences, expected output, an index of terms used and an index of names are also given at the back of a number of textbooks. Certain textbooks are also produced in an interactive version in addition to their classical form. The emphasis is, meanwhile, placed on cultural, social and economic history and (a new feature) the history of everyday life. A balanced proportionality has also been preserved at the level of regional history, ethnic minorities in the Czech Republic (including the Polish nationality in the Těšín region), different ethnic groups, gender history and the issue of the environment.

A number of notes in conclusion on the didactics of history as an academic field.

- A. The didactics of history was not part of university studies as an academic field in the nineteen nineties, and even now often remains merely a peripheral part of student training. The branch didactics of history does not have a clear position either in respect of its parent branch or of pedagogical-psychological disciplines. It is pleasing to note the opening in September 2015 of full-time four-year doctoral studies in the field of the didactics of history, with the awarding of the title Ph.D., at the Department of History at the Faculty of Arts at Ostrava University.
- B. Another problem is the continuing didactics-methodology relationship. Didactics remain rather undervalued by the Czech historical community, although the situation has been gradually changing for the better, evidence of which is provided, for example, by the fact that didacticians had an opportunity to present their field at the X Assembly of Czech Historians in Ostrava in September 2011.³

Why must the didactician still have to fight for his position among historians? First and foremost, because he is frequently identified with the

³ Beneš, Z. (2014). Zpráva o stavu historické edukace v České republice. In Zářický, A., Vorel, P., Kadlec, P., Závodná, M. (edd.): *X. sjezd českých historiků* vol. I. Ostrava, pp. 69–76.

methodology, with the science of “the art of teaching” history. There is a certain aversion among history students to the theoretical questions of didactics, associated with the implementation of the Bologna Process within the framework of structured teaching study in the Czech Republic. A larger number of bachelors of teaching (pedagogical assistants) are trained in the first cycle, though the current Czech legislation does not count on them since the full guarantee of a teacher’s education, i.e. acting in the role of the teacher, are master’s studies for which there has, however, been a restricted number of places in recent years. The incorporation of bachelor graduates in the system of primary education is, therefore, problematic in view of their employment and influenced by the financial possibilities open to schools.

Concurrently with this, there began to be talk of the need to increase the professional qualifications of history teachers by opening pre-graduate and post-graduate studies as specific forms of teachers’ history study. This is the future task facing all twenty-five faculties of teaching in the Czech Republic, though it will (again, or as usual) be confronted with a lack of money. Nevertheless, it can be said that the development of branch didactics (including the didactics of history) has been more dynamic in recent years and the outlook is more optimistic.

C. As essential part of the didactics of history is empirical research, the principal task of which is expert diagnosis of the state of history education. Extensive empirical investigations have been implemented since the middle of the nineteen nineties by the team of Blažena Gracová and Denisa Labischová at Ostrava University.⁴ The concept of their research is based on the tradition of German and Polish branch didactics. Other research projects have also been implemented in the Czech environment, such as the sociological investigation entitled *The Historical Awareness of the Population of the Czech Republic* by the team headed by Jiří Šubrt and the broad-ranging research *The Young and History*, to which our Department of History at the Faculty of Education at Masaryk University contributed on behalf of the Czech Republic.⁵ The field of research into the didactics of history has been significantly expanded. Oral history, which is now widely used and on which great emphasis is now placed, has found a place in the new interpretational situation. Dramatisation and the use of music have also found a place.

⁴ Gracová, B., Labischová, D. (2013). *Aktuální podoba výuky dějepisu. Z empirického výzkumu*. Ostrava.

⁵ Klíma, B. (ed.) (2001). *Mládež a dějiny*. Brno: Masarykova univerzita.

D. These new trends are also being followed by Czech didactics of history, though this move occurred at a relatively late date. It began taking note of some of them at some time in the nineteen eighties, though this was followed by a period of crisis when it was called into question as a special discipline and practically expelled from the “family of academic disciplines”. Its institutional foundation almost disappeared, and contact between didacticians (in small numbers) developed more or less at the level of personal links. Only the alarming fall in the standard of knowledge among Czech pupils led in 2010 to institutional changes in the standing of branch didactics. A special working group for branch didactics was set up within the framework of the Accreditation Committee of the Czech Republic which in February 2012 initiated a meeting of history didacticians in Prague. The following were stipulated as the most pressing strategic goals: the holding of discussion panels, reconstruction of the branch didactics of history as an academic discipline, the advancement of historical education, the determination of conditions for the transformation of branch didactics into a higher doctorate field, affiliation with other fields and in particular the creation of interdisciplinary didactics with the participation of related fields (such as civics and geography), monitoring the development of history didactics abroad and communication with branch didacticians abroad, and the creation of specialised publication activities (periodicals, editorial series, a system of colloquia and conferences). We might give a proud mention to our own mutual Polish-Czech (Czech-Polish) History Days, which are now in their sixteenth year, in respect of the last of these.