

The State and the Church: Historical Educational Themes on Czechoslovak and Polish Postage Stamps and Their Didactic Potential

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The text of this paper analyses the history of education as reflected by the postage stamps of the neighbouring countries the Czech Republic and Poland from 1945 to the present day. As a historical source, stamp production reflects modern history in the form of jubilee issues and also contributes towards shaping our collective memory by means of the selection of the topics depicted on postage stamps. This paper recommends their didactic use in history teaching on the basis of an analysis of these themes. The approach described here leads to an effective alternative educative medium that reinforces, first and foremost, interdisciplinary co-operation between school history and media education.

Key words: history teaching; didactics of history; postage stamps; propaganda; media education; the state and the church; history education

We derive information on the history of the modern world to a large extent from the mass media which include, surprisingly to many, postage stamps. The fact that it has proved possible to expand interest in this media object (though not in any particularly revolutionary way) among historians, didacticians and educationalists active in history teaching indicates a simple explanation: postage stamps are a pictorial source and, similarly to text sources, contain valuable information about the time at which they were produced. For historical cognition, however, they demand the application of corresponding methods of source criticism and, for our purposes, appropriate didactic implementation in history teaching. From the viewpoint of classification for the purposes of education, they logically have a place both among authentic teaching resources and among media of sensory perception which include photographs, caricatures, posters, reproductions of works of art, and so

on. They are also a legible source explicitly communicating the traditions and legacy espoused by the state structure. The changeable frequency of the subject on the timeline and its form can, on the other hand, testify to the transformations undergone by this tradition.

Postage stamps featuring the topic the history of education are today readily available on the Internet. We can examine their appearance and description in philatelic catalogues classifying stamps according to uniform rules. National catalogues and the services of the webpages of the Czech Post Office can, for example, also be used.¹ The postal gazettes of the Ministry of Transport and Communications and their historical predecessors and special-interest collector magazines (*The Czech Philatelist*, *Philately* and *The Bulletin of the Society of Collectors of Czechoslovak Stamps*) are key sources on Czechoslovak (and later Czech) stamps.

The essential specialist texts include the multi-volume edition of the *Monograph on Czechoslovak Stamps*, though no edition has been published to date on the post-war period.² Since the subject of interest to us here is the didactic potential of postage stamps, and not their investigation from the philatelic perspective, application of the given literature on stamps concerning the production process, printing techniques, production defects, rarity and perforation can be only sporadic. An important role is played by secondary information sources, the work of specialist historians on historical figures and detailed historical contexts, which help illuminate and interpret the symbolism of the events depicted where necessary and incorporate them into teaching as an alternative medium of the pupil's recognition of historical fact. When conceiving functions that an annotated mass medium might fulfil in modern history teaching, introductory guidance may be provided by one of the key works of modern German media didactics from the pen of H. J.

¹ <https://www.filaso.cz/katalogy.php>; <https://www.ceskaposta.cz/sluzby/filatelie-a-postfila/znamky/prehled-znamek> [on-line] [cit. 2017-07-03] etc.

² *Monografie československých známek. Díl 1, Popřevratová doba. Hradčany 1918–1920. Praha 1968; Monografie československých známek. Díl 2., Legionářské 1919 – hospodářství a věda 1923. Praha 1971; Monografie československých známek. Díl 3., Výplatní známky 1923–1939. Praha 1979; Monografie československých známek. Díl 7, Pošta čs. vojsk v Rusku 1914–1920. Praha 2016 (for volumes relating to the First Republic, i.e. 1–3 and 7, based also on older publications). Monograph Volume 6 – Czechoslovak Stamps in the Period 1945–1992 not produced to date in spite of various proposals (similarly Monograph – Czech Republic); at <http://www.infofila.cz/navrh-nacleneni-monografii-ceskoslovenskych-a-ces-r-2-c-794> [online] [cit. 2017-07-02].*

Pandel³ and the text by the British historian and didactician Robert Stradling, translated into Czech, promoting the principle of multi-perspective perception of information sources and the understanding of their relationship to the present day.⁴

Analysis of stamp issues and their teaching potential



Image 1.

An analysis of stamp issues in individual years in Poland and the Czech Republic (or Czechoslovakia) since the year 1945 revealed two corresponding motifs: propagation of the founding traditions of university education and the school reforms of the Enlightenment. The oldest, chronologically, is the jubilee commemoration of the university in Prague. The designers of the series of postage stamps commemorating the 600th anniversary of the foundation of Charles University, the painter and graphic designer Karel Svolinský and the

engraver Jiří Švengsbír, based their design primarily on the motif of the original university seal. The basis of their motif represents the standing Saint Wenceslas, Duke of Bohemia, with a sword and a banner decorated with the Přemyslid eagle. Charles IV, as crowned king, kneels at his feet holding the deed of foundation of the university with its seal. The monarch is thereby symbolically entrusting the future of Czech education to the protection of the Czech saint. The coat of arms of the Holy Roman Emperor is depicted to the right of the figures, with that of the Czech King to the left, while the letter W (Wenceslas) can be seen beneath a standard with the sign of the Saint Wenceslas eagle (Image 1).⁵ Saint Wenceslas was custodian of the legal order at Charles University, and the Czech monarch, as its founder, placed it under the protection of Saint

³ Pandel, H. J. (2005). *Handbuch Medien im Geschichtsunterricht*. Schwalbach.

⁴ Stradling, R. (2003). *Multiperspektivita ve vyučování dějepisu: příručka pro učitele*. Praha: MŠMT.

⁵ The motif of the stamp no longer uses the copy of the silver seal with the Gothic majuscule: "SIGILLUM UNIVERSITATIS SCOLARIUM STUDII PRAGENSIS". A similarity can be found between university seals and church seals. The seal of Charles University with the founder scene in which Charles IV, as founder of the university, presents the sealed deed of foundation to the patron of the land Saint Wenceslas, is non-standard.

Wenceslas, patron of the land. The image depicts the saint, the founder, and his two symbols of power – the imperial eagle and the Czech lion.⁶ The next stamp in the series presents a stylised portrait of the monarch. Both stamps also have a counterfoil with the text *Alma mater Carolina pragensis 1348–1948 a Universitas Carolina Pragensis 1348–1948*.



Image 2.

Uniwersytet Jagielloński in Cracow, the oldest university institution in our neighbouring lands, celebrated the 600th anniversary of its foundation in the nineteen sixties. The Polish Post Office promoted this jubilee with a series of five postage stamps (Image 2). The Jagiellonian University was established in 1364 as the second oldest university in central Europe under the official title *Studium Generale*. This series of commemorative stamps is based on the renaming of the university in the 19th century after the founding dynasty of Polish kings. We will now focus on the selection of the persons depicted in the stamp issue. The university was founded by Casimir III the Great on 12 May 1364, and his likeness is depicted on the stamp with a nominal value of 40 grosz. The university was soon suppressed, however, and was not revived until the reign of Jadwiga of Anjou (Jadwiga of Poland) and Vladislaus II Jagiellon in the last decade of the 14th century (the stamp of the nominal value of 2 zloty 50 grosz). Thanks to the personal efforts of Jadwiga at the Papal Court, Pope Boniface IX issued a Papal Bull in 1397 granting the university the right to establish a faculty of theology. Queen Jadwiga, what's more, also left her entire fortune to the university. Steadfast efforts made it possible to revive the university in the complete form with four faculties typical of medieval universities. One of these faculties was a Faculty of Theology enabling a high-level academic career.⁷ Jan Długosz, another figure depicted on

⁶ Štemberková, M. (2011). *Univerzita Karlova: Historický přehled*. Praha: Karolinum.

⁷ c.f. *Dějiny Polska*. Praha: NLN, pp. 197–198 or Rezník, M. (2010). *Dějiny Polska v datech*. Praha: Libri 2010, pp. 162–163.

the series of stamps, was the author of the oldest Polish chronicle taking in events in south-east and western Europe from 965 until 1480. This active participant in many royal diplomatic missions studied at the Jagiellonian University in the years 1428 to 1431.⁸

Studium Generale was the first university in Europe to have its own department of mathematics and astronomy, established in 1406. It is only logical then, that this series of stamps also features the likeness of Nicolaus Copernicus, another of the university's famous students, who originated the heliocentric theory of planetary motion and who studied here in the years 1491–1495.⁹ Chancellor of Cracow University Hugo Kottłataj, who figures in the pantheon of distinguished persons associated with the activity of the Commission of National Education, is another figure that cannot be left off the list. We will come back to him in more detail with the following stamp issue devoted to the history of education.



Image 3.

In the case of the figures portrayed on these stamps, suitable tasks for pupils are directed first towards independent determination of the historical facts (foundation dates, compilation of simple timelines for Europe as a whole and for central Europe, the political and scientific figures at individual institutions, political events and scientific discoveries linked to specific institutions, historical geography). Analysis of the subjects depicted on postage stamps represents a more demanding level: the development of portrait art and its comparison with this philatelic material. Pupils should reach specific conclusions under the guidance of the teacher, i.e. when did realistic portraits become part of European art? To what degree are we confronted with the true

⁸ Petrášek, J. (2017). *České dějiny ve světle strategie vyprávění annales Jana Długosze*. Mediaevalia historica Bohemica vol. 20, no. 1, 2017.

⁹ c.f. *Dějiny Polska*. Praha: NLN, p. 199 or Řezník, M. (2010). *Dějiny Polska v datech*. Praha: Libri 2010, p. 164.

appearance of historical figures? The stylisation of the subject is based predominantly on the principles of medieval art. Postage stamps can, then, also represent a suitable motivational entry point to be followed by an interpretation by the teacher or the independent determination of these principles by pupils from other information sources. The search for the physical appearance of people of former times (such as Holy Roman Emperor and Czech King Charles IV) is an incentive for an excursion into the art world of the Middle Ages and an opportunity for a more general interpretation of the characteristic features of Gothic art. We can remind pupils of the principles of painting of the time, which did not demand the absolute fidelity of a portrait, and the fact that artists often painted without direct knowledge of their subject. European portrait art was still in its infancy and tended to work in profile. We must not, of course, neglect to explain the fact that the Gothic painter worked with hierarchical proportion. The traditional approach allowed the artist to give his portrayal firm rules. Learning these rules gives the pupil the chance of figuring out who is standing in the scene, who is kneeling, and why, and what attributes of power, function or office are present. A comparison of the mentioned likenesses or extracts from specialist art history commentaries may allow the pupil to formulate his or her own assessment of the level of realism, particularly in medieval painting.¹⁰

The ministries of transport and communications of Poland and the then Czechoslovakia also promoted the school reforms of the Enlightenment on their postage stamps. Analysis of philatelic material shows this to be the second case of promotion of the educational traditions of the two countries (Image 3). A series of two occasional stamps was issued in Poland to mark the 200th anniversary of the foundation of the Commission of National Education (Komisja Edukacji Narodowej). The history of this institution began in 1773 when Pope Clement XIV abolished the Jesuits under pressure from public opinion and Enlightenment circles. In the same year, Polish monarch Stanisław August Poniatowski pushed the takeover of Jesuit property and Jesuit schools by the Commission of National Education through the Sejm with the aim of weakening the Catholic monopoly of education.¹¹ In the engraving, we see first a likeness of Jan Śniadecki to the left, the principal initiator and architect of the commission Hugo Kottłataj in the middle, and Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz on the right. The second occasional stamp

¹⁰ Stejskal, K. (2003). *Umění na dvoře Karla IV*. Praha: Knižní klub, pp. 104–115.

¹¹ c.f. *Dějiny Polska*. Praha: NLN, pp. 335–348. Reznik, M. (2010). *Dějiny Polska v datech*. Praha: Libri 2010, pp. 310–311.

depicts Grzegorz Piramowicz, the Polish Jesuit educator who became secretary of this commission following the dissolution of the order, in an engraving by an unknown artist. The motto accompanying him on the stamp expresses the Enlightenment ideal of service to state and country.

The Commission of National Education was the first in Poland and the whole of Europe to display the features of a modern ministry of education. The teaching of Latin and theology was limited at schools subject to the Commission of National Education, while emphasis was placed on the mother tongue and science.¹² The commission decided to bring science closer to the needs of life and initiated the creation of textbooks in Polish. It also rejected the use of corporal punishment in teaching. A number of political activists and distinguished military and literary figures came from its ranks. A relatively small group of people was, however, educated through the commission. The majority of the aristocracy continued to favour religious schools over state schools for their sons. Although the members of the commission were predominantly distinguished politicians, the greatest authority was wielded by distinguished writers and scientists of the age, including Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz and Jan Śniadecki who are depicted here.¹³ The commission did not last for long (1773–1794), though its importance in making education accessible to broader ranks of Polish society is considered significant.

Teaching may be conducted with pupils in the form of a moderated discussion with a view to the period in which the occasional series of stamps was issued (1973) and the governing regime of the time. Topic: interpret the stamp issue as a means of propaganda targeted at weakening the authority of the Polish Catholic Church. The specific features of the Polish Enlightenment undoubtedly included an evident sympathy for the movement from the Catholic clergy and its active work in it. This phenomenon, sometimes known as the Catholic Enlightenment, was not, however, unique in Europe.¹⁴

¹² The commission performed the reorganisation of education. The educational system was headed by two universities in Cracow and Vilnius, to which secondary schools were subordinate, while parish schools represented the lowest level of education.

¹³ Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz was a poet, dramatist and statesman. Jan Śniadecki was professor of mathematics in Cracow and, from 1803, in Vilnius. He was Chancellor of Vilnius University from 1807 to 1815. Hugo Kołłątaj was a satirist, poet, geographer, historian and philosopher.

¹⁴ For more on the similar engagement of the Spanish Catholic clergy, for example, in the Enlightenment movement c.f. Chalupa, J. (2016). *Dějiny Španělska*. Praha: NLN, pp. 270–273.



Image 4.

Although the Czechoslovak Communist regime of the Normalisation period had the opportunity of celebrating the 200th anniversary of the introduction of compulsory school attendance in our lands, it did not do so and the Post Office in this country did not return to this jubilee until twenty long years later (Image 4). A stamp came out a few days before World Teachers' Day which was declared by UNESCO in 1994 and which has been celebrated on 5 October every year since that time in more than a hundred member countries. Methodical use

of the stamp is possible in a number of ways. It may serve as an appropriate motivational source for the independent acquisition of the following information by the pupil: Empress Maria Theresa introduced compulsory school attendance (or the universal educational obligation, to be more precise) for children aged between six and twelve as part of efforts to improve the general level of education among the population. The General School Ordinance, officially issued on 6 December 1774, also covered the network of schools. Parish or "trivial" schools, at which the main subjects were reading, writing and arithmetic, were established in towns and villages with a parish. "Main" schools, at which subjects providing practical skills for occupations were also taught, were established in regional towns. "Normal" schools which had an even broader curriculum and also provided initial teacher training were established in capital cities. A network of primary schools was established in Cisleithania – the Austrian Lands and Bohemia and Moravia – which still has a fundamental influence on the level of education of broad masses of the population to this day. The education of the German and Czech rural population, frequently illiterate until that time, gave power to the industrial revolution and, later, to the nationalist struggle between the German and Czech-speaking population.¹⁵

The introduction of compulsory school attendance occurred here a considerable period of time in advance of the majority of European countries. The pupil will also reach this conclusion if he or she compares the basic information on both stamp issues and seeks further information

¹⁵ c.f., for example: <https://www.kzp.pl/>; https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jan_%C5%9Aniadecki; https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hugo_Ko%C5%82%C5%82%C4%85taj; http://filatelistyka.poczta-polska.pl/sklep_pl/850,28,18,0.

in an Internet encyclopaedia, for example. In contrast to the Polish stamps, the final form of the motif is entirely the result of the stylistic invention of the artist. In place of the expected traditional approach (a portrait of the monarch), the artist has applied a fashionable rococo silhouette on a background in pastel colours. The result represents in black silhouette a drawing of a teacher in period clothing with a violin under his arm and his small pupil. The stamp features the text 1774 Compulsory School Attendance.

Alternatively, during analytical work with the postage stamp, pupils first recall significant socio-political events associated with the date 1774 they have been told about by the teacher. They also learn something through art, as they are gently acquainted with a popular artistic technique of the second half of the 18th century. Suitable methodical approaches to be applied subsequently include the description of the depiction, identification of symbolic elements, clarification of their role and summary presentation of all the information found. They get to express their views on the importance of education to the development of society in a discussion guided by the teacher.

Conclusion

The visual medium, which has yet to be fully appreciated in modern history teaching in the Czech Republic, supports both intradisciplinary and interdisciplinary connections. Important days and anniversaries publicised by means of stamp issues have a fundamental importance in shaping the cultural memory and in the politics of social memory. Expanding pupils' activities to take in the analysis and interpretation of motifs depicted on stamps in a way commensurate to their age can be seen as an example of amplification of the comprehensibility of historical events. Their more profound comprehension in national history and transformations of commemoration by means of visual media (including postage stamps) will undoubtedly contribute towards cultivation of the historical awareness of the pupil of the issue of national identity, for example. The time level of the motif used is enriched by the motives of the state institution leading to the use of the philatelic subject. The pupil learns how to decode information on modern social priorities and the treatment of the legacy of long-gone times, in this case primarily the personalities shaping the historical conception of education in our lands. In spite of sober evaluation of the result of the introductory research, even this concise selection of philatelic material can be expected to have at

least drawn attention to its testimonial, motivational and educational potential. Analysis and interpretation (of postage stamps) is still something of an unknown quantity, at least in the environment of Czech school history teaching. Any form and degree of practical application beyond mere illustration would bring it closer to the desirable research trends of historical education that have long been developing to the west of our state borders.¹⁶

¹⁶ Source of images:
<http://www.filatelistyka.poczta-polska.pl/>
<https://www.filaso.cz/katalogy.php>