

Popular history magazines as a source of intercultural, transnational and media-critical history education: based on the example of the First World War

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Based on the example of the First World War

This contribution deals with the presentation of the First World War in popular history magazines, which constitute a mass-media sector of the public historical culture. The contribution refers to the EU-LL project entitled “European History Crossroads as Pathways to Intercultural and Media Education” (EHISTO) whose analysis of popular history magazines aims at building and promoting transnational and media-critical skills in history education.

The start of the First World War 100 years ago has been attracting considerable attention in the mass media. European and international history magazines are no exception to this. Since 2013, magazine titles referring to the “First World War” have been increasingly found on the magazine shelves of supermarkets, kiosks and station bookshops. With cover pages showing battle scenes, trenches, prominent political actors such as the German Emperor Wilhelm II, or also the Sarajevo assassination, the magazines seek to make potential buyers want to take them home.

This contribution deals with the topic of the First World War in the mass media from the point of view of the genre of popular history magazines. It thus refers to the EU-LL project entitled “European History Crossroads as Pathways to Intercultural and Media Education” (EHISTO)¹ whose analysis of popular history magazines aims at building and promoting transnational and media-critical skills in history education.

We will first introduce below the considerations on which the project is based, before going on to briefly outline the concept. In the third part, some selected observations on the presentation of the First World War in European magazines are outlined, which were drawn from the comparison of the magazines examined.

The popular culture of remembrance in a transnational perspective

The theoretical basis of the EHISTO project is the concept of the “European History Crossroads” (EHC) developed by the Council of Europe. The project hence follows the concept of “Shared Histories in Europe”². This in turn refers to the fact that even though the European states and regions were indeed involved in many transregional historical processes, and therefore “share” many historical experiences, they have nevertheless often had very different historical experiences which remain manifested to the present day in diverging and sometimes also controversial interpretations and constructions. One example is the Sarajevo assassination (28 June 1914), which forms part of all national narratives (“shared histories in Europe”). The nar-

1/ Cf. URL: <http://www.european-crossroads.de/> (1 March 2015)

2/ Cf. the e-book resulting from the Council of Europe’s project “Shared histories for a Europe without dividing lines” (2010-2014), URL: <http://bit.ly/1ywwRAd> (1 March 2015). EHISTO follows on from the broad spectrum of successful EU projects, which have so far fostered the intercultural dialogue in Europe by developing shared European themes for history teaching and by presenting multi-perspective approaches in terms of intercultural dialogue (e.g. European Council projects such as “Shared Histories for a Europe Without Dividing Lines” and “The Image of the Other in History Teaching”).



Popular history magazines with the topic of World War One

narratives are however fundamentally different. Amongst other things, this can be seen when looking at the remembrance and commemoration culture on the occasion of the centennial: In June 2014, the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra gave a memorial concert in the Vijećnica, the former town hall in Sarajevo, 100 years after Gavrilo Princip fired shots at the Austro-Hungarian Crown Prince and Princess, whereas in the Serbian part of Sarajevo, a statue was revealed the day before the concert to commemorate the heroism of the Gavrilo Princip. In this way, Princip's struggle for freedom against the occupying power Habsburg was honoured.

In the project, only the historical topics that met the following three prerequisites were considered as European History Crossroads:

- a) the topics are present in the national historical narratives of the partner countries³,

³/ Besides the Chair of History Didactics at Augsburg University (coordinator), the Universities of East Anglia (UK), Dalarna (Sweden), Łódź (Poland) and Salamanca (Spain) as well as the Institute for Film and Images (FWU) in Grünwald, Munich, are also involved.

- b) the topics are represented in the popular history magazines of all partner countries, and
- c) the topics are featured in the school curricula of the partner countries.

The transnational comparative analysis of the nationally presented historical topics of the “shared history” is of great importance for history education because the path to a European awareness of history hardly leads to a linear pan-European “master narrative”, but rather has to aim at the reciprocal perception and the fundamental acceptance of pluralistic historical experiences and interpretations in Europe. This idea corresponds with Jörn Rüsen’s postulate of “overcoming ethnocentrism through the experience of difference” (Rüsen 2002: 57-64) as the centrepiece of a European construction of historical identity. This implies the idea of a European identity centred on the perception and acceptance of the plurality of historico-cultural experiences and identities in (and outside of) Europe, as well as dealing with differences in a democratic, peaceful manner, and a corresponding tolerance of ambiguity.

The EHISTO project (2012-2014)

The EHISTO project started with the finding that history magazines (a) are issued throughout Europe, (b) usually illustrate the national representation of history and (c) thus have certain pan-European topics in common.

The main focus of our interest was the question concerning a transnational popular culture of remembrance in Europe, which becomes visible in popular history magazines and can be analysed in a media-critical way. A first approach to this field was made with the international comparison of national magazines on the same historical topics. Furthermore, the decision to analyse this was also determined by the fact that the market for history magazines – a comparatively traditional medium in the age of audiovisual and interactive communication – is expanding worldwide (Popp 2015; Springkart 2015). Moreover, the reception of magazines is usually combined with a deliberate purchase decision. This in turn permits conclusions to be drawn on a certain segment of the popular interest in history and leads to the question of how “history” is constructed and presented so as to guarantee the commercial success of the product.

Popular history magazines have nevertheless attracted comparatively little attention so far from history and media studies as well as history didactics, even though these historical and journalistic products form an in no way insignificant sector of historical culture. Lastly, history magazines were also chosen as the object of investigation and as an educational

The screenshot shows the EHISTO website header with the logo and the text "European history crossroads as pathways to intercultural and media education". The navigation menu includes PROJECT, NETWORK, OUTCOME, NEWS, EVENTS, GET INVOLVED, PRESSROOM, and CONTACT. The 'OUTCOME' menu is open, listing: Baseline study, Teaching and learning modules, Initial teacher training, In-service teacher training, Final conference, and Final publication. Below the menu is a large historical photograph of the arrest of Ferdinand Behr in Sarajevo, 1914, with a caption below it. Below the photograph is a text box containing the project's description and a note about the use of popular history magazines.

EHISTO (European history crossroads as pathways to intercultural and media education) is concerned with the mediation of history in popular (science) media and the question of social and political responsibility of journalists and other mediators of history, especially teachers, in the field of commercial presentation of history. The project responds to the increasing significance of a commercialised mediation of history within the public historical culture and reflects the fact that these representations, which do not always meet the EU standards for history education, can have a lasting impact on the young generation's understanding of history.

Using the example of popular history magazines, the project shall, besides the necessary basic research, develop didactically reflected materials for both

Presentation of the different outcomes on the EHISTO website: www.european-crossroads.eu

medium because they feature a format that can be easily combined with learning and teaching structures as well as seminar structures, and which functions as a motivating factor for young people and adults alike.

The project consortium consisted of five university experts for history didactics and media didactics as well as the FWU (Institute for Film and Picture in Science and Education) as the institute for the production of educational media. All university partners worked in close co-operation with local "EHISTO partner schools". Eleven history teachers and more than 300 pupils contributed to the production of the interactive online modules ("Learning Objects"; teaching and learning materials); they also tested and evaluated the material with regard to its practical suitability. The consortium was supported by an international research network reaching from Augsburg to Shanghai as well as by academic advisors and international

networks such as the International Society for History Didactics (ISHD)⁴, EUROCLIO (European Association of History Educators)⁵ and DVV International⁶, the Institute for International Cooperation of the German Adult Education Association.

Even though planned and implemented as a project for schools, the EHISTO Project also attracted considerable interest from the field of adult education from the outset.

Basic research was conducted within the project during the so-called “baseline study”⁷: The empirical studies gathered data from the partner countries regarding the attitude of history teachers towards popular history magazines as additional class material, ascertained best-practice examples and examined the national curricula as well as history magazines for possible European History Crossroads. The partners then analysed the national schoolbooks with regard to national tendencies in the representation of the chosen topics (“Columbus and the ‘discovery’ of the ‘New World’” and “The ‘outbreak’ of the First World War”)⁸. Lastly, an instrument for analysing popular history magazines was also developed which is available online and, in addition to addressing general questions, especially focuses on the magazine cover pages, editorials and the list of contents, picture series and articles. The instrument can be used e.g. in seminars and workshops to analyse any magazine topic and to mediate critical media competences.

Online materials were also developed for history classes in secondary schools⁹, for teacher training at higher education institutions and universities¹⁰, and for further in-service teacher training¹¹. Furthermore, extracts (e.g. articles) from history magazines were chosen, which are available for download free of charge in all five project languages. The EHISTO teaching, learning or study materials combine media-critical analyses and trans-

4/ Cf. URL: <http://www.ishd.co> (1 March 2015).

5/ Cf. URL: <http://www.euroclio.eu/new/index.php> (1 March 2015).

6/ Cf. URL: http://www.dvv-international.de/index.php?article_id=1405&clang=0 (1 March 2015).

7/ Cf. URL: <http://www.european-crossroads.de/outcomes/baselinestudy/> (1 March 2015).

8/ The analysis of both EHCs moreover provides suggestions for the preparation of further intercultural, transnational and media-critical tasks so that teachers are able – especially with the help of the results of the baseline study – to independently analyse further EHCs.

9/ Cf. URL: <https://media.sodis.de/ehisto/en/index.html> (1 March 2015).

10/ Cf. URL: <http://www.european-crossroads.de/outcomes/initialteachertraining/> (1 March 2015).

11/ Cf. URL: <http://www.european-crossroads.de/outcomes/inserviceteacher/> (1 March 2015).

national comparative perspectives. These materials can be used not only in schools, but also in Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) and Civic Education, as well as in adult education.¹²

So as to convey an impression of the different ways in which international magazines illustrate the EHC topic “First World War”, selected results from the EHISTO baseline study will be presented below.

Selected results from the comparison of the history magazines on the topic of the “First World War” analysed in the project

Sarajevo as a European “lieu de mémoire”

When analysing the history magazines from the countries participating in the project as well as further magazines e.g. from France, Belgium and the Netherlands, it became clear that the Sarajevo assassination is an integral part of the transnational popular remembrance of the First World War in Europe as no other World War-related topic.¹³ Since the amount of picture material (photographs, drawings) documenting this event is very limited, the same illustrations can be found everywhere; the picture caption wrongfully describing the depicted scene as the “arrest of Gavrilo Princip” is still prevalent.¹⁴

As expected, the Sarajevo assassination is presented as the key event in the historical background of the beginning of the War. In general, two different approaches can be observed: One narrative stages the “dramatic fall” of this event: one single, rather marginal incidence shaped by manifold “almost unbelievable” coincidences causes the downfall of the entire European pre-war order. This creates the prevalent visual idea that “Sarajevo” was the “spark” that lit the “fuse”, causing the European “tinder box” to explode (Metzger & Wilhelmi 2007: 22–27). In this way, the events which took place between the assassination and the beginning of the War are im-

^{12/} Cf. URL: <http://www.european-crossroads.de/outcomes/baselinestudy/analytical-framework/> (1.3.2015).

^{13/} Cf. *Geo Epoche* 15 (2004); *Damals* 5 (2004); *La Aventura de la Historia* 69 (2004); *G/ Geschichte* 11 (2007); *Muy Interesante Historia* 17 (2008); *Populär Historia* 10 (2008); *Allt Om Historia* 9 (2011); *History Review* 69 (2011); *Bbc History Magazine* 11 (2012); *Spiegel Geschichte* 5 (2013); *Die Zeit Geschichte* 1 (2014); *Geo Epoche* 65 (2014); *Geo Histoire* 13 (2014).

^{14/} The photograph by Philipp Rubel, which was further disseminated with the title “The arrest of the murderer”, shows the arrest of Ferdinand Behr who was accused of helping Gavrilo Princip when he was arrested. Ferdinand Behr verifiably had nothing to do with the assassination on 28 June 1914 (Hirschfeld 2009: 148-155).

aged to constitute a sort of “domino effect” which inevitably led straight to war. The other narrative however presents an open development in which important stages of the “July Crisis” are highlighted, action alternatives are discussed and reasons for as well as consequences of the chosen options are illustrated (Cf. Förster 2004: 14-19; Englund 2008: 24-30).

It is interesting to note in this context that the magazines analysed do not show any specific national differences in the perception of the assassination. Both narratives exist in every country; the significant “difference in quality” depending on the magazine types can be found everywhere. The magazine type presenting the “fuse” narrative generally features clear and strong tendencies towards personalisation¹⁵, emotionalisation, simplification and sensationalism as well as towards the use of insufficiently-verified and documented, sometimes also anachronistic picture material. The latter can also be found in the magazines that historicise the “July Crisis” and present it as an open process; nevertheless, these magazines are also prepared to “subject” their audience to controversial presentations, diverging opinions and open questions.

The question of “responsibility for the War”

All the magazines connect the analysis of the Sarajevo assassination and the “July Crisis” to the question of “responsibility for the War”. Contrary to expectations, the international comparison showed no significant differences in interpretation and evaluation. Only the Polish magazines are an exception to this: Some articles speak of unambiguous “guilt” and – without discussion – clearly place the blame with the elites of the German Reich (Szlanta 2009: 32-36). In general, however, the magazines analysed endeavour to provide a differentiated, balanced presentation of this topic, making many references to controversies in research, including recent works – such as Christopher Clark’s “Sleepwalkers” (2012) – and presenting interviews with historians.

The use of images

The European magazines’ “canon of images” used for the presentation of the First World War has not yet been completely examined (for an analysis of the “canon of images” in schoolbooks cf.: Müller & Wagner 2010:

¹⁵/ Personalisation here means that the power to shape the historical process is above all assigned to “great personalities” (Heuer 2006: 139).

27-42). It is however clear that the picture documents are used for illustrative purposes only and their potential as informative sources remains unexplored. Moreover, no argumentative connection is established between the pictures and the texts. The low degree of diligence in the use of picture documents can be observed not only with regard to the captions; staged photographs, for instance, taken and distributed by the national propaganda system, or indeed pictures that were put together in the darkroom, are printed without further explanations – sometimes even on the cover pages of the magazines. However, this use of images, which violates the ethics of history mediation (Council of Europe, Committee of Ministers 2001), cannot only be found in history magazines, but also in some of the history schoolbooks.

“Blind spots” in the magazines’ presentations

The content-related analysis of the magazines selected revealed that, on the one hand, the priority of the presentation of the battlefields of war clearly lies on the Western front (trenches, trench warfare). The Eastern front, the war in the Balkans, in the Alps and in the colonies merely play a subordinate role, if any at all. On the other hand, the European magazines broadly address – sometimes also from a comparative perspective – the phenomenon of war fever, whereas critical voices, the protest against the war, are virtually disregarded.

Especially in German magazines, the pacifist movements and the Hague Peace Conferences, especially the Hague Agreements and international humanitarian law, remain largely unaddressed. This also applies to the peace efforts of the Social Democrats prior to the “political truce”, to the consequences resulting from consenting to the approval of the war loans for the international workers’ movement, and to the further political history of the German Social Democratic Party SPD. Where these topics are addressed, this only takes place in a very marginal way and without the context of the events preceding the war, but rather with regard to the end of the war (example: Bischoff 2004: 144-161).

Moreover, it has to be said that the German magazines often interpret the First World War as the “great seminal catastrophe” (Kennan 1979: 3) of the 20th Century, so that – whether explicitly or implicitly – a connection is made to the Second World War. Accordingly, the special issue of a large German magazine on the First World War depicted Wilhelm II together with Hitler on the cover page in 2004 (SPIEGEL SPECIAL 1/2004). The special issue in 2013 (SPIEGEL GESCHICHTE 5/2013) however suggests a change: The bold reference to the Second World War and the suggestion

of continuity have disappeared; at the same time, the personalised mode of presentation (“great men make history”) is also largely scaled back in favour of historical approaches, thus adopting a social, micro-level, mentality or experience perspective.

It should be noted in conclusion that the history of remembrance regarding the victims of the First World War, the different cultures of remembrance in Europe (and the world), or indeed the founding of institutions such as the German War Graves Commission (1919)¹⁶ in connection with the idea of “reconciliation across graves” are addressed in neither the German nor the international magazines. The magazines themselves form part of the culture of remembrance, but neglect to consider the range of and the changes in the cultures of remembrance in Europe with regard to the topic of the First World War.

Conclusion

The question of whether Gavrilo Princip can be regarded as the “elicitor” of the “great seminal catastrophe” of the 20th Century, or rather as “Mandela with the wrong means” (Dušan Bataković, in: Hofmann 2014) depends on one’s point of view. EHISTO sought – and continues to seek – to make a contribution towards acquiring the skills required to recognise one’s own perspective as such, and towards becoming aware of other points of view, improving ethical judgement – or rather enquiring about further perspectives and being able to tolerate such an indissoluble experience of difference.

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¹⁶/ Cf. URL: <http://www.volksbund.de/home.html> (1.3.2015).

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