

History Teaching and Text-books in the Czech Republic

Vratislav Čapek

1. In the Czech Republic, after the November - so called velvet - revolution 1989, history got rid of one-sided interpretation of historical events and phenomena. Various opinions arise with political teaching, based above all on conservative, liberal, socialist and clerical points of view. Liberalization of state and of common life also brought about the individualization of curricula in schools according to the teachers' intention. Central institutions lost much of their former influence on the system of teaching especially in the newly founded private and church schools. A great variety of programmes of history teaching occurred which evoked instability and frequent attempts to change curricula. Moreover many different text-books were published which are offered to history teachers for selection, mostly made without any consideration of existing curricula. Enthusiasm for the newly acquired freedom was accompanied by some other difficulties. Many teachers were not prepared enough for these profound changes. A lack of critical thinking appeared among many teachers, who couldn't find their own professional way quickly. Supply got ahead of demand. Many teachers were at a loss, how to decide among so many text-books and different conceptions of history. However, historians and theory makers in the humanities were prepared for changes, which was proved by the many new texts and school-books which appeared immediately after the revolution. There are presumptions that these texts were prepared a long time in advance, hidden in shelves or in the minds of many authors. But most of the teachers, especially those living in the country, exhausted by the current life activity, having left the university a long time ago, faced a very complicated professional situation.
2. The first historical texts, dedicated especially to teachers, served to correct the false interpretations of historical events issued in communist times or to mention events, personalities or processes in history which have been kept in the dark. These texts were not, however, of didactic design and were written not only by prominent historians but especially by the younger generation. The first newly completed text-books appeared two years after the revolution. They were edited mostly by new private publishing houses and were comparable with the best tendencies in the Western European states. There was one interesting exception: a series of historical text-books, published in the late eighties, is still used, after small corrections, because it corresponds with the democratic viewpoints and with the modern didactic principles. It is an example of the fact that not the whole production of historical text-books from the pre-revolutionary times might be damned.

The conception of historical content changed. Changes in interpretations of national Czech history are now extraordinarily important for the consciousness of students. The former stress on the rise of the Czech state in the Middle Ages defending its independence against the German-Roman Empire, on the Husite Movement starting the reformation in Europe, on the foundation of Czech modern national culture and politics, on the opposition against the Habsburg Monarchy, on the development of the workers' movement, on Czech resistance in both great wars, on the socialist bloc in the cold war - was fully replaced. Instead of the fight against Germany the co-operation, peace contacts and many-sided influences came into the foreground, instead of revolution against the Catholic Church the reconciliation with the main European strands of the Church was stressed, instead of the rebellion of the Czech population

inside the Austrian Empire the economic and political advantages of the Monarchy for the Czech development were proposed, instead of only the Czech national development in Bohemia much more space was devoted to the German culture in Bohemia and to the minority of Jews in Czech lands. Much greater interest was given to the rise of democratic institutions and political culture in the 19th and 20th century, to the foundation of our independent state after the first great war and its development between the first and the second world war, to the development of the civil society, market economy and capitalist system, to the resistance against the Soviet rule in different forms. These changes represent the great overhaul of the historical identity of the people and students. They are not finished, the process is a longlasting one and faces at present many difficulties arising from the discontinuity of many present interpretations and from the loss of unavowed continuity of historical processes. The old identity has not yet fully been replaced by the new democratic identity, by the diversity of viewpoints, varieties of source materials, different perspectives on the same events and a real opportunity to evaluate critically the evidence put forward to support each perspective.

Generally, the positive mutual influences prevail over controversial and sensitive issues in history, with one exception: controversial issues are highly used in relation to the past 40 years of communism. Historical events and evidence are explained very often without critical approach in consequence of the transformation of the present society. One example: during the second great war the Stalingrad battle was regarded as the turningpoint of the whole war, now the same importance is ascribed to the battle of Normandy etc.

Another aspect influenced our teaching programmes and school conceptions very much: the separation of Slovakia from Czechoslovakia. This event in 1993 also changed Czech historical intentions. Instead of Czechoslovakian history with orientation to the East European states, especially from the point of view of Slovakia, Czech history in schools concentrates its interests on the national development, on the history of Germany and on the development of the whole Western European region.

The proportion between Czech and European history is 40 to 60 percent to the benefit of European history in nearly all Czech history text-books for compulsory education. If we compare the aspects of European history widely taught in secondary schools in Western Europe with those in Czech text-books, we come to the conclusion that the similarity is evident and more space belongs to world or European history than in Western countries. World history is taught in greater extent indeed, but not so much to the depth and not enough from the side of non-European countries. Eurocentrism is also apparent in various themes of world history, this fact is in harmony with the situation in Western Europe. The weakness is also revealed in the care taken with the history of the Central European Region; especially the relations to the border states, including Slovakian history, have many gaps. The difference between Czech and Slovakian history teaching increases. Czech national history is free of nationalism, is envelopped carefully in European history. There exists, however, a lack of examination of the national history from a variety of perspectives, especially from the side of other countries.

The Czech curriculum of history is so rich in content that it leaves little time for students to reflect critically on what they are being taught and to develop the skills which are fundamental to the discipline of history. Curriculum content is not limited to political and military history, where there tends to be more scope for nationalistic rhetoric than in, for example, the history

of ordinary people, or the history of economy or of culture.

3. The selection of subject-matter for history teaching depends also on the didactic conception of curricula and text-books.

I analysed eleven newly edited series of history text-books for the purpose of this paper which are now usually used in primary and secondary schools.

The first conception, still used, is an outline survey conception. The chronological framework prevails, it covers an extended period of time without many significant gaps in the time line. History is divided into the main time periods and inside these periods there are narrative descriptions of development of selected regions or states. The main topics represent causes and effects of events or sequences of events, historical continuity and changes. This conception prefers political history and is overloaded by facts and informations, it does not allow sufficient time for the cultivation of historical critical thinking in students and of a variety of interpretations. In this outline survey conception, not very often used in Czech text books, there is a description of events in some European regions, for instance Central Europe, East Central Europe, West and South Europe etc. Not very much space is devoted to the history of Baltic states or of Balkan states. The reason perhaps consists in the fact that these regions' history does not directly relate to the Czech national history and to Central European history at all. The history of the mentioned regions is explained from the point of view of the inner development of the countries, from inside every appointed region. The outline chronological framework today provides global or detailed informations in the Czech Republic, more as the handbook for teachers or for talented students, for their homeworks or for their individual study (1, 2).

A conception which is mostly used in the present Czech historical text-books is the "thematic" framework. This conception reflects problems, themes, but also events, phenomena rather than the history of the whole periods. Such themes can be analysed through a limited number of "case studies" which permit the development of more detailed historical inquiry; case studies enable a comparative approach; global characteristics of longer time periods without limitation in time or space, can entice students to understand the present, to look for the roots of current events, to introduce the pupil to historical methods, to investigate a variety of sources, documents, to examine alternative historical interpretations, to imitate historiographical research methods etc. (3-8, 10). Thematic framework concentrates its interest on the most important phenomena in Europe, which are common for the whole continent or region in the mentioned development. The consequence is that the history of small countries or countries which stand apart from the main trend of the development are not very often mentioned, with one exception. This exception illustrates the case when the history of smaller states heads the development, or when it is of importance for national history, especially for relations to the border states. The typical case study approach, as far as European history is concerned, in the Czech history text-books for secondary schools, are as follows. Examples are selected from the history of the new age: Attempt to change things in England by means of revolution, difference in the development of political systems in Europe - parliamentarism and absolutism, international relations and the leading role of France, changes in Central and Eastern Europe, economy and life of the society in the 17th and 18th century, world in the time of the rise of English colonialism, cultural and spiritual life between baroque and enlightenment, American and French revolutions and their echo in Europe, Napoleon and Europe, the time of restoration and of balance of powers, the revolution in

1848/49, Great Britain as the leading power in the world, the unification of Italy and of Germany and the rise of their importance for Europe, France between empire and republic, slow way of reforms in Russia, origin of the new power of the USA in the 19th century, technics, science and culture at the turn of the centuries, colonialism of great powers, international relations on the eve of the first great war (6).

The world in the 20th century is divided chronologically again into several periods: first great war, twenties, thirties, second world war - totalitarianism and democratic world (6).

The thematic conception arose of the problem how to combine the national and European history in text-books, which was important in the outline survey concept. The latter conception has several problems: how to differentiate the content of history in the primary and secondary schools, how to arrange the relation between Czech and European history: national history as an integral part of European history, national history in frame of Central European region, parallel explanation of national and European history. Czech school-books used all these possibilities in the outline conception.

The "Patch" Approach used in some of the Western states is not applied in the Czech Republic. This is an attempt to break up the syllabus into a few distinct areas selected for their historical significance or because they provide a good opportunity for applying historical methods and concepts. Now and then we can find this approach in a modifying conception, closely connected with the explanation of an important event, as for instance, the French revolution, or the Thirty Years War, or the Husite Movement etc. There is a range of different historical perspectives involved on each patch: economic, social, cultural, and political.

A dimensional framework - PESC formula - is accepted only in secondary school seminars where broad themes are used, or where cross processes are expected. For instance: economic development in the Middle Age, or culture in the early new age etc.

Inter-disciplinary frameworks are not applied in Czech text-books or in curricula. At the time this was popular in Western Europe we were separated from this development. But the definite influence caused a great interest in inter-disciplinary relations, but the school subjects remained independent.

Czech text-books of history have two further principal teaching conceptions. The first is the civilization conception for secondary school students and Czech history of everyday life conception for primary school students.

History of everyday life is called People in History and is concentrated especially on the Czech national development. The conception consists of four content levels. The first level parallels Czech history to the European development (historical processes) the second introduces Czech historical events in more detail (pictures from history), the third represents everyday life of the people in the given time period from Czech history (the key level), and the fourth level brings an individual story of a current human being or outstanding historical personality. In this level there is also the place for documentation. Every level is written in different letters. All levels together enable to make a many-sided portrait of the given time enlightened from various viewpoints. Combination of every level across history builds broad historical continuity in the definite dimension (11).

The last conception I want to mention in this paper is the civilization conception, derived especially from the French and Anglosaxon examples. Under the concept of civilization we realize the complex of common features in the named communities, which have a historical background, which are developed by the creative activity of the people, which affect profoundly the nature and which differ in time and space (diversity). According to these categories we investigate the system of thinking of the people in the given civilization as well as their economic, spiritual, social and material wants, technical and scientific inventions, political ideas etc. We recognize, in the historical development, European civilization in its different regions, the muslim civilization, civilizations of the Far East, South and North American civilizations, Euroasian civilization, civilization of the Middle East and African civilization (9). The mentioned conception leaves the traditional descriptive, chronological, narrative history aside. Thematic approach is used for the more extensive historical processes which overcome the country boundaries and which partly also remove the limitation of time in a strict sense.

The civilization approach established relations to the conceptions of People in History. It stressed processes and general development in Europe. There are, however, difficulties how the different countries, especially smaller countries, integrate into the civilization context. The contribution of every country to the development functions according to three models. A country is either in the focus of the general development, or its development is in harmony with general European trends, or, on the contrary, it presents a diversity towards the common features. Example: The national Czech history in the time of the French revolution was underdeveloped, uncomparable with the development in France. This was the reason why the mentioned revolution did not evoke a similar movement in Central Europe. The Husite Movement in the Middle Ages outrun the European reformation, it influenced the German reformation hundred years after. But the outrun was so great that the Czech Movement was crushed with the profound consequences. In the time of the revolution in 1848/49 Czech lands developed in harmony with the leading process in Europe. These three models were used in general.

4. To conclude I should like to mention two tendencies of present Czech history teaching. The first idea represents the effort to follow the European movement to its integration and the second adapts the history teaching to the "idea of Europe". The present situation has accomplished much of these wants. Aims and content of history teaching are already very close to the European standards, activity of students rises, education of teachers shows progress. Democratic and folk tradition of the Czech development from the 18th century till the first part of the 20th century build a good base for the present innovations.

Following text-books were analysed on behalf of this paper

(English translation)

1. History of European Civilization I, II. Paseka 1995
2. History of the Czech Kingdom I, II. Paseka 1994
3. History of the New Age. Scientia 1995
4. Series of Text-books for primary schools Ie VIII. Práce 1995
5. Serie of Text-books for primary schools I-V. Práce 1994-1995
6. Series of Text-books for secondary schools I-III. Práce 1994-1995
7. History of the New Age I-III. Fortuna 1995
8. History of the Modern Times I-III. Fortuna 1996-1997
9. World History I-II. Fortuna 1993-1994
10. Czech History I-II. Fortuna 1996-1997
11. People in History I-VIII 1995-1997