

# TRANS-EUROPEAN CONVERGENCES IN NATIONAL TEXTBOOKS FOR HISTORY EDUCATION? AN APPROACH TO THE COMPARISON OF IMAGE SOURCES IN SCHOOLBOOKS

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## ***Abstract***

According to findings of textbook analyses since 2004 all across Europe, students encounter a group of about 15 historical paintings and historical photographs in their history textbooks which are shown more often than average. This article will introduce this corpus and analyse those popular pictures according to historical-didactical standards. The questions of implicit historical theories as well as the proportion of national history and European education thereby seem to be especially important.

**Keywords:** Iconic sources; Visual literacy in history teaching; History textbook research; International comparison of textbook developments; Historical consciousness; Transnational historical culture.

## **Introduction**

This article, which deals with historical image sources in the sense of “images from the past”, focuses on the image inventory, which on average is most commonly reproduced in current history textbooks of the majority of member states of the Council of Europe. The interest in supranational trends in the illustration of national history books therefore applies to the particular type

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of historical portrayals that mostly are nationally authorised, pedagogically motivated, didactically conceived and always aimed at civic education. All over Europe, they still offer the adolescents primarily a national and not a transnational-European interpretation of history.

At the outset of the analyses (Compare Popp 2004), the results of which are delineated and commented here, surveys on the image preferences within the newly designed textbooks of the Central-, East- and South-East-European countries were available. After the Cold War, these countries had to make basic changes to the conception of history education, and, to the greatest extent without support by a corresponding science of history, create new narratives that – with a grain of salt – could meet the historically related requirements of the respective country (Compare, Woolf 2004:62 f). Since before 1989 the illustration of these schoolbooks mostly was extremely sparse, one had to perform a rapid “iconic turn”.

However, in order to correctly estimate the emerging trends in the choice of image sources, the survey was extended to all Council of Europe member states whose current textbooks were accessible in the Georg-Eckert-Institute library. A trans-European, relatively clear-cut corpus of around 15 historical paintings and photographs became evident, which appeared significantly more often than all other image sources. This transnational convergence in the iconic field, a didactically highly relevant sector of the textbook cultures, continues until today. This trend deserves attention, especially because it has not been induced “top down” but has grown, uncontrolled, “bottom up”, i.e. on the level of the individual national textbooks, which is why it has initially going unnoticed.

The following elucidations to the “images from the past”, which we encounter most frequently in today’s European textbooks, are to be seen against the background of how the relationship between national and European history in the current European schoolbooks has developed since 1989. This development shall therefore first be outlined with a few observations.

### **“Europe of Nations” in European history instruction**

It is self-evident that nowhere in Europe the history curricula and textbooks are limited to cover only the immediate national history but in addition they always present Europe-related and global-historical contents. Consequently, they touch upon topics that go beyond the national history in the narrower

sense. For instance, the national narrative of “how we became who we are” is routinely being embedded in a quasi-genetic connection of ancestry, which goes back to the Greek and Roman ancient world, and hence develops a historical depth of field that imparts a considerable plus in historical legitimation and prestige to the sometimes very young national histories. Across Europe, the curricula and textbooks follow more or less the following pattern. Starting from the Greek democracy and the Roman Empire there is a long line via the Migration Period, Charlemagne, the rise of the European cities and states during the Middle Ages and the early modern period, as well as via Reformation, the discovery of America, European expansion and Absolutism to the “modern era”, i.e. to the French Revolution and the declaration of human rights, to Industrialisation and “nation building” alongside demands for democratic and social participation, to colonialism and imperialism, as well as to the dictatorships in the modern mass societies, the world wars and the crimes against humanity of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. 1945 is when, in a way, the past ends: According to the textbooks, the European present is based on a radical new beginning, which after 1945, against the background of the terrible lessons of the recent past, has successfully directed the signs of history towards democracy, liberalism, tolerance, peace, prosperity and, last but not least, European integration, so that the “free West” could, at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, triumph over the ideological enemy, the communist system.

Even though across Europe this basically convergent “master narrative” presents many supranational topics “from Plato to NATO”, altogether there is still no homogeneous whole but rather a heterogeneous patchwork. On the one hand, this is the result of the common contents always being portrayed according to the particular national perspective. In a European comparison this can not only lead to divergent but also to controversial readings.<sup>2</sup> The differentness of the national perspectives is not only limited to the mentioned common themes but also includes the fundamental “re-writing of European history” which set in everywhere after 1989.

For one thing, the differentness of the national cultures of history and teaching contributes to the aforementioned heterogeneity. An illustrative example is the Franco-German history book regarding the gender-historic

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<sup>2</sup> A European comparative study on the current depiction of the First World War in the European textbooks could recently show that that even “difference lines” (Differenzlinien) become visible here which reach back directly to the bogeyman stereotypes during the First World War. Compare EU project “Regards croisés“ <[http://www.europe14-18.eu/preview\\_site/langues.html](http://www.europe14-18.eu/preview_site/langues.html)> (12.02.2010); for the comparative study on textbook iconography Compare (Müller&Wagner, 2010).

access,<sup>3</sup> which the German history didactics consider very important, whereas the universalistic understanding of history according to the French “*modèle républicain*” – which in this case has prevailed unilaterally – ignores that approach to the greatest extent.

As the example shows there is still a predominant “Europe of nations” in history textbooks: The history curricula are centred around the respective national histories and present non-national topics either from a national perspective or as narratively isolated digressions. In this respect the historical-political identification that is offered by the history books of this age of dynamised globalisation and world-wide migrations do not differ considerably from the interpretations that were typical of the history education introduced in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the course of “nation building”.

At the same time it is not unlikely that in the foreseeable future the national frame of reference in history education will continue to be relevant for the construction of collective identities. For one thing, “European integration” means by far less a replacement or dissolution of nation states than their transformation and mediatisation in the context of fundamentally changed macroregional contexts. Furthermore, the historic sciences, the central specialist reference disciplines for history didactics and history education, will, due to the language of the historical sources and the relevance of the nationally organised archives and libraries, still place their main focus on national history. After all, nation and nation state will stay alive in the citizens’ daily experience as primordial categories for as long as the national state plays a role in securing the livelihood of its citizens and no pan-European *lingua franca* has yet been established, which would allow a genuinely experienced communication community to develop.

A further contribution to the persistence of the notion of “Europe of nations” in history instruction is that so far there is no concept for the Europeanisation of history education and historical identities that could reach the necessary momentum on the national level. The cultural-political strategy of the EU aims primarily at the implementation of a unifying “European master narrative”, as if the processes of European integration at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century were mostly comparable with the “nation building” of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Compare critical statement concerning this e.g. Baringhorst 2004; Popp 2007). It still remains unclear though what “European history” could or should be.

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3 Compare both of the two already published volumes of the “Deutsch-französisches Geschichtsbuch” (Franco-German history book) (Geiss et al., 2006, 2008).

A different concept is supported especially by parts of the German history didactics. It does not assume a new European “metanarrative” but diversity and complexity of the existing historical identities in Europe. It is postulated that history lessons should highlight the national “master narratives” that circulate around school and in public as a social construct<sup>4</sup> and that they should enable the youths to critically analyse and judge the governmental and societal use of history (See Rüsen 2002, Schönemann 2002, Pingel 1993; Borries 1993). Instead of a “Europeanisation” of history education in terms of a “top down” dictated assimilation and levelling of the contents, a dialog between national cultures of history (-teaching) is favoured. This dialog creates mutual acknowledgement, and at the same time encourages the insight that, no matter if it is experienced primarily as a regional, national or macroregional one, historically grown identity always consists of a tightly woven network of sub- and supranational or -regional historical “affiliations”. According to this concept the “Europeanisation” of history education would primarily develop from a multilaterally comparative inter- and transnational change of perspective. It would primarily strive – against the backdrop of Europe’s peaceless past – to qualify adolescents for a tolerant and peaceful coexistence.<sup>5</sup>

While the first of the two concepts tends to historically “naturalise” the history of European integration in a way that is necessary if a new “master narrative” is to be established, the second one predominantly aims to “liquify” essentialistic concepts of national or European history by means of dialog and comparison. And this provides the motivation for not only presenting and historically-didactically commenting on the corpus of the most frequently reproduced images, but also for querying said corpus, in view of the Europeanisation of history education, to find out if and to what extent it represents a manifestation and repository of a new “master narrative” in the manner of the old “nation building”. There is at least a possibility that the corpus of the preferred “images from the past” might develop into a crystallisation point for a new collective image memory in European youths, starting from the national historical cultures and rising above them. Therefore, the following explanations not only address the selection of the most widespread images but especially the question of the aspects of nation, Europe and a democratic historical culture.

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<sup>4</sup> This also was the main intention of the EU project “Regards croisés” (Anm. 3).

<sup>5</sup> Compare on the importance of the idea of peace, which on the whole does not get a lot of attention in the current history, e.g. (Schulz-Hageleit, 2004:202-214).

## **Empirical approximation to the most popular image sources in current European history textbooks**

Already during the first analysis of the image sources (Compare Popp 2004)<sup>6</sup> in the current history textbooks of 27 EU member states and further member states of the Council of Europe, a surprisingly distinct trend began to show, which continues to this day. It reveals that about 15 image documents from the past are reproduced in an above-average frequency in national history textbooks across Europe. Hereby – and this was checked – the question of image copyrights possibly already being available to the publisher does not play a significant role. Neither is the didactic purpose in the main focus: The images of preference by no means represent especially suitable examples of image sources for the purpose of didactics. Rather everything suggests that the class book designers all around Europe unisonously ascribe an outstanding historical symbolic power to these images and consider them particularly suitable for collective identity formation.

The works concerned are the following, in chronological order of the depicted events:<sup>7</sup>

- “Declaration of Independence” by John Trumbull (1756-1843) [Capitol version: 1826, O/C, Washington];
- “Tennis Court Oath” [20. Juni 1789] by Jacques-Louis David (1748-1825) [1791, wash pen-and-ink drawing, Château de Versailles];<sup>8</sup>
- “The Third of May 1808” by Francisco Goya (1746-1828) [1810, O/C, Madrid];
- “The Congress of Vienna“ [1815] by Jean-Baptiste Isabey (1767-1855; model) and Jean Godefroy (1771-1839; engraver) [1819, copperplate engraving];
- “The Massacre at Chios” [1822] by Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863) [1823/24, O/C, 417 x 354 cm, Paris] or “Greece on the Ruins of Missolonghi” [1826] by the same artist [approx. 1826, O/C, Bordeaux];
- “Liberty Leading the People” [28. July 1830] by Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863) [1830, O/C, Paris];

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6 The surveys were not limited on the EU member states but strove to cover the initial 42 as well as the five new member states of the Council of Europe. A few of them, however, like for example Andorra, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, could not be factored in yet.

7 Compare certain respective articles in the following works: Gerhard Paul (ed.), *Das Jahrhundert der Bilder. 1900 bis 1949*, Göttingen 2009 and Gerhard Paul (ed.), *Das Jahrhundert der Bilder. 1949 bis heute*, Göttingen 2008. – on the individual works on “canonical” images also Compare (Popp&Wobring, 2010 (i.E.)).

8 Sometimes, though decreasingly often, the coloured oil painting, which was created by Jean Pierre Marie Jazet (1788–1871) [1823, Öl/Lw, 265 x 345 cm, Paris], is shown in schoolbooks and mistakenly ascribed to David.

- “The Proclamation of the German Empire at Versailles” [18 January 1871] by Anton Alexander von Werner (1843-1915) [the so-called “Friedrichsruh version” is preferred: 1885, O/C, Friedrichsruh];
- “Congress of Berlin” by Anton Alexander von Werner (1843-1915) [1881, O/C, Berlin];
- “The Signing of Peace in the Hall of Mirrors, Versailles” [28 June 1919] by William Orpen (1878-1931) [1920, O/C, London];<sup>9</sup>
- “Lenin speaking to Red Army recruits” [20 May 1920] (photograph)<sup>10</sup> or “Lenin in the Bolshevist headquarters in October 1917” by Wladimir A. Serow (1910-1968) [end of the 1940s, O/C, Moskau];
- “Guernica” [Bombing of the town of Guernica on 26 April 1937] by Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) [1937 (commissioned work for the Spanish pavilion at the world exhibition in Paris), O/C, Madrid];
- “Yalta Conference, 4–11 February 1945”, photograph [seated, from left to right: Churchill, Roosevelt, Stalin; different versions];
- “Raising a flag over the Reichstag” [2 May 1945] by Jewgeni Chaldej (Fotografie), [different versions; partly retouched];
- “Fall of the Berlin Wall, opening on the night of 9 November 1989”, photograph, [different versions].

It should be noted that in the method of counting the rates of occurrence, paintings and etchings were counted as singular works,<sup>11</sup> photographic documents, however, since in most cases they are taken from photo series with many similar shots, are counted according to the depicted scenes. This results, among other things, in the iconography of very prominent schoolbook topics such as the Napoleonic rule or the “Third Reich” not being represented in the identified top group due to the large variety of image contents available for these important events. The reason why other schoolbook-“icons” that are very well known in Germany are absent from the corpus is, however, that they are, on average, by far less present in the other European textbooks than in German history books. This applies, for instance, to the Alexander-mosaic,

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9 The photographs of the act of signing, which in the past were seen exclusively, are rarely to be seen today.

10 Most schoolbooks show the retouched version, in which Trotzki (in the right-hand part of the picture, next to the lectern) is missing.

11 The following works clearly are borderline cases: (a) David’s „Tennis Court Oath“: In this case, the wash pen-and-ink drawing and the oil painting created in 1828 by Jazet were added together. (b) Delacroix’ „Chios“ and „Missolonghi“: They were added together because both pictures, as variants, always perform exactly the same function (illustration of the Greek War of Independence). (c) Congress of Versailles: The painting and the photograph added together because the schoolbooks almost without exception showed either the photo or the painting. (d) The “Lenin speaking“-topic: Here, painting and photograph show the same subject alternatively.



the Augustus-statue, medieval portrayals of emperors, or even the picture of the small boy in the ghetto of Warsaw from the “Stroop-Report”. Regional-specific distributions can be observed when looking at the two Delacroix-paintings thematising the Greek struggle for freedom or Anton von Werner’s “Congress of Berlin”: These works are still underrepresented in German schoolbooks, while they are featured a lot in Central- East- and Southeast-European schoolbooks.

The indisputable top position in the herein presented group is taken by another work of Delacroix: “La Liberté guidant le peuple” (1830) is most frequently used in the current textbooks. The popularity of this painting lies partly in its aesthetics that matches today’s viewing habits quite well. More importantly, however, after 1989, people have started to present this work in the course of a secondary semiotisation as an icon of the “victory of the Western-liberal freedom” over the Soviet dictatorship, to be “read” “mythically” – as defined by Roland Barthes, i.e. detached from knowledge about the concretely portrayed event – and have started to communicate it as a symbol for the concept of a “fight for liberal freedom”. This created ideal conditions for the confounding of a European horizon of interpretation with traditional national-historical contents. After all, mythical or real struggles for freedom or liberation in the past are classic ingredients for national histories, and across Europe citizens consider liberal freedom for the most typical of all European values.

As a final remark it shall be noted that only one textbook in Europe shows all the above-mentioned images. The book is called “Illustrated History of Europe”] (Compare Delouche 1998),<sup>12</sup> which, to be sure, has not been introduced in any country as regular teaching material. However – as we know from corresponding interviews – after 1989 it served a great many schoolbook authors from post-communist countries as a catalogue for when they had to choose entirely new inventories of image sources. For this they used this work as a reference since they could assume that it would reliably represent the iconic status quo of the western European understanding of history.

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<sup>12</sup> The German title of the book is “Das europäische Geschichtsbuch”. 14 Authors from 13 European countries were involved in creating this collaborative work, which has been translated into all European languages.



### **Thematic emphases in the corpus of the most popular image sources**

In the following, the images which – at least according to possibility – more European youths will get to see than ever before, are viewed as a corpus, which is examined to find out which corner marks of European history are emphasised and which connections between the national and the European level become visible.

First of all it is to be stated that solely topics from the field of political history are represented. These do not date back further than the two great political revolutions at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century – the American (1776) and the French Revolution (1789) – which have laid the foundation for today's political system of values. Moreover it is to be ascertained that two political thematic threads dominate the corpus, which tie national and European history tightly together. For one thing, there is the theme of “political revolutions”: These are, in addition to the already mentioned ones, the French Revolution of 1830, the Socialist Revolution of 1917 and finally the so-called “Peaceful Revolution” of 1989. Another strongly represented thematic thread is – as expected – the one of “European conceptions of order”: This shows in the pictures of the conferences of 1815 (Congress of Vienna), 1876 (Congress of Berlin), 1919 (Versailles Conference), 1945 (Yalta Conference) as well as – though only indirectly related – in the pictures of the fall of the Berlin Wall. Nevertheless they also stand for a political reorganisation of Europe.

Fortunately, the corpus does not paint an idealistic, rosy picture of the modern European history but by all means illustrates the fateful combination of the “promise of participation and the readiness to use violence” (Dieter Langewiesche) in the process of “nation building”. The perverseness of political ideals and the destructiveness of ideologically-motivated state-inflicted violence, military violence and revolutionary violence are already hinted at in the Goya work and the “Liberté”; it is even more clearly palpable in Picasso's “Guernica” and also in the view on a Berlin destroyed by Allied bombs in the Chaldej-photographs.

The depiction of the sabre-swinging, acclaiming Prussian-German sword aristocracy in Anton von Werner's painting of the foundation of the German Reich, ranks among the most popular pictures in European schoolbooks only second to the “Liberté”. What is conducive to its popularity is the fact that in most cases it acts as a symbolic leitmotif that predicts the two world wars in that it associatively projects the “aggressive” German “nation building” as the centre of peacelessness of the European powers. In turn, its popularity

allows for Orpen's portrayal of the signing of piece in Versailles to be part of the top group because the former is quoted in the latter in a very obvious way. The Irish war and conference painter in British service effectively created a "counter-image" in order to give his own message a trenchant expression (Compare Popp 2010). By showing only the self-referential refractions of empty mirrors instead of enthusiastically acclaiming Prussian-German military officers, he could incisively stage the massive extent of the moral bankruptcy of the European value and world system. Also, in conjunction with the image of the foundation of the German Reich, the images of the fall of the Berlin Wall, with their reference to a second German "nation building" as a "peaceful revolution" with a civil attitude and democratic spirit, appear as the successful overcoming of the "old" European history's path of grave mistakes and painful aberrations.

Two more aspects seem to be worth mentioning. Firstly, the corpus excellently illustrates the visual practice of "gendering the nation-state" during the 19<sup>th</sup> century: The coexistence of, on the one hand, the impressive feminine allegories for glorifying national pride and demand for freedom, their patriotic fighting spirit and valourous defeats, and on the other hand the exclusively masculine ensemble of figures on conference and convention images reveals a deep divide between the social rank of the real women and the symbolic function of the "imagined womanhood" (Silvia Bovenschen).

Secondly it is worth taking a look at the Ottoman Empire: That the representatives of the Ottoman Porte do not appear in the depiction of the "Congress of Vienna" session is of importance against the backdrop that in 1814/15 the Islamic power was – under the sign of the "Holy Alliance" – deliberately excluded from the consultations about the rearrangement of Europe, even though the Ottoman Empire ruled over large parts of Southeastern Europe. The official painting of the "Congress of Berlin" 60 years later, however, shows different constellations: Ottoman ambassadors are now present on the conference and in the picture, one of the pictured representatives even being from Prussian descent. This account invokes in today's understanding of history not only the importance of the "oriental question" for the history of the European system of states until 1914, but also the role of the Ottoman Empire as an ally of the German Empire during the First World War. It thus calls up two aspects that are hardly mentioned anymore in the current schoolbook narratives. A far more dramatic staging of the Ottoman Empire, however, can be witnessed in connection with the Greek

War of Independence (1821–1830) – in the associative space of the topoi “oriental despotism” and “Asian cruelty”. And it seems remarkable that our “gallery hall” of images shows the violent suppression of national libertarian efforts in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by exclusively using the examples of revolutionary France (Compare Goya) and the Ottoman Empire (Compare Delacroix), while the other countless “perpetrators” remain unmentioned. A main reason for this is, among other things, the randomness with which other cases of comparable use of violence do not experience a comparably attractive and high-ranking pictorial representation and therefore have not found their way into the European image memory. This contingency of the aesthetic presence of artistically designed subjects shapes the corpus enormously, and conversely one can only speculate how the remembrance of the bombing of Guernica would turn out to be, had it not been for the world-famous Picasso-painting.

To summarise then: The corpus of the most commonly reproduced image sources in Europe can be characterised by saying that there is a pronounced political-historical access which is centred around a liberally characterised, Western version of European history, and which makes European integration primarily appear as an overcoming of both nationalism and socialism.

The images of 1989, that show civil, democratic and peaceful citizens, stand at the vanishing point of several thematic lines and allow a quasi-teleological conception of history to develop, which make the European integration appear as a way to a given destination and as a successful ending to a lengthy learning process. Thus we have a narrative in front of us which – maybe partly comparable to the well-known concept of the “House of European History” (Compare Sachverständigenausschuss 2008) – constructs the European history primarily as a linear narrative in order to show the European improvements and success stories concerning integration – and which is quite far removed from the outlined historical-didactical ideas.

The dominance of political-historical access corresponds with the absence of artworks that would give the fundamental social, economic and technical transformation and modernisation processes in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century the appropriate credit and status. This deficit reflects the conventions of contemporary academic painting that are valid for the art form of history paintings. These conventions are closely related to the “great individual” of historicism but not to the idea of interpreting the “great” political-historical “events” in the context of industrialisation, technisation and demographical dynamics, of colonialism and imperialism, of capitalism, “social issues”,

globalisation and world economy. It is obvious that here, migrations, cultural transfer and minorities, if at all, are discussed only marginally and “genre-like”. With this, however, the majority of the images that are particularly popular in the current history textbooks, deviates significantly from the democratic understanding of history which the Council of Europe and the EU demand for history education: Instead of presenting “history” to the adolescents as a look “from below” to the “great individuals up there”, a democratic understanding of history is required, which puts “society” as well as societal and mental structures into the main focus. The democratic understanding of history does not proceed narratively in a unilateral way but also permits a hard-headed, illuminating analysis.

In this context it is by no means inconsequential that in the top-corpus “illusionistic” image types like history paintings and photographs are predominant, which rather hide questions of basic presentability of “history” than raise them. What is missing are prominent testimonies of a modern and postmodern aesthetic argument over historical topics. Testimonies for which it is natural to critically question traditional conceptions of a “definite”, and also “tellable” history. Different from history paintings and traditional photographs, these unfortunately absent image sources would not only reflect modern historical-theoretical thinking but also the complexity of the historical experiences in Europe.

## **Conclusion**

Since we have to assume that the group of those most popular images in European textbooks – for the herein presented reasons – will exist for quite some time more or less in its current arrangement and will continue to have its didactic effect, it should be emphasised that it is very important for teachers to know if a picture in the textbook is part of this “canonical” group or not. Because only then can they use the respective image in the national history education to construct the European link in a dialogic approach and to discuss for example the diversity of historical experiences and interpretations, which, all across Europe, are being linked to the same facts that are represented in the textbook by a common image. If the corpus of the most prominent image sources is utilised that way, it can very well give a strong impetus to exploring the differentness of historic experiences in different historical cultures and therefore advance the European dimension in the sense of an effort to promote mutual understanding and acknowledgement. It would surely be

a productive cooperation project to analyse the South African and European image inventories used in schoolbooks for selected topics before and after the political change at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

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