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Historical consciousness and its role in teaching regional history

Abstract

This text deals with the basic concepts of historical consciousness and regional history and analyses their relationship. Moreover, it deals with the possibilities, challenges, and opportunities offered by regional history concerning the educational process. In conclusion, some research projects focused on this theme are briefly presented. The partial results of the research into the historical consciousness of regional history can also become a platform for a broader discussion focused on the issue of educational standards and the form of the history curriculum in primary and secondary schools.

Keywords: Regional History, Historical Consciousness, Teachers, Students, Schools, Field Didactics, Contemporary History

Introduction

Historical consciousness is one of the key categories for the didactics of history. The first clear and precisely defined definition of historical consciousness as a didactic and pedagogical phenomenon appeared in the German scholarship at the end of the 1960s in a work entitled *The Problem of Historical Consciousness* (Das Problem des historischen Bewusstseins) by the philosopher Hans Georg Gadamer.¹

Historical consciousness, as such, can be viewed from many angles and perceived in a variety of contexts. Apart from history, this phenomenon is most significantly reflected in the field of sociology, in which the interplay between individuals is a fundamental aspect. From a historical point of view, there

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¹ D. Labischová, 2013, p. 15–17.

is a clear connection between historical consciousness and collective memory. Emphasis is placed on the value system of the generation and community or a specific temporal and spatial context in general.

As mentioned, historical consciousness plays a crucial role in history teaching. It is probably the most frequently used term in current historical science and the didactics of history, especially in connection with the presentation and teaching of contemporary (recent) history, which represents a distinctive historical category that places specific requirements on both teaching and qualification and on the didactic-pedagogical skills of a particular history teacher.

Categories of historical consciousness

Historical consciousness is formed according to the presentation of the past. Based on daily life experience, it helps individuals orientate themselves in the world around them in general and thus form concrete (more comprehensive) views of what is happening in a broader context. At the same time, two basic lines determine the perception of historical reality – namely, the mental line and the emotional line – which result in consciousness or awareness of the processes, their causes, and consequences for the individual but also for the wider group.²

Over the course of almost half a century of research into historical consciousness, its basic categories have been defined:

- time awareness (synchronous and diachronic),
- awareness of geographical space (localization of historical reality, understanding or comprehension of the influences that historical events determine in terms of space/geography),
- awareness of a specific reality (distinguishing between real historical events and historical fiction),
- awareness of historicity (understanding or comprehension of the current events in society and the form of society through historical development; a reflection of the current social situation in the evaluation and assessment of specific historical processes and events),
- identity awareness (understanding the differences between communities, ethnicities, and cultural entities based on knowledge of the historical background),
- political awareness (understanding of processes and events taking place at the level of politics; comprehension of the important personalities, roles, or positions of various social groups in the field of politics and other aspects),
- economic and social awareness (comprehension of the role played by the economy in historical development, its influence on the formation of the structure of society and related social problems, etc.),
- the consciousness of morality – moral consciousness (perception of what is – concerning generally accepted principles of ethics – moral and amoral,

² D. Labischová, B. Gracová, 2010, p. 150–151.

including changes in the perception of morality through the prism of specific civilizations or social entities).³

It follows from the above that historical consciousness represents a comprehensive complex of partial “memories,” which shapes or co-creates not only the view of the past and a certain method of its perception but also, to a large extent, influences the view of future development. The first step in understanding the history – the development and historical conditions – of the so-called “big world” (i.e., general history) is often (or may be) an attempt to capture and understand the historical context of the so-called “small world” that surrounds us, and in which our life story takes place – our local community, school, work, or region. This approach has a relatively long tradition. It has been and is still often applied in the teaching of history in the Czech lands, that is, in the Czech Republic. In this respect, the thematic areas concerning the cultural heritage (monuments, traditions, important personalities, social structure of the community, local specifics, and others) of the given region, considering the national and general context, have proved their worth in the history curriculum at all types of schools.

Regional history and historical consciousness

In connection with the research of historical consciousness and regional history, it is necessary to define at least the general term “regional history,” from the point of view both of historical science and of subject didactics of history. The term “region” usually refers to a territory smaller than a country (state), i.e., sub-areas (administrative units, regions), into which the state is divided. However, the term “region” can also be understood in a broader global context as a state, group of states, or continent. On the other hand, a region can undoubtedly be considered a specific place, such as a city, municipality, or groupings of municipalities. In this context, the term “micro-region” is often used, which clearly defines the locality and its boundaries.

However, for the social sciences, which also means for history, the term “region” is not only a specific and clearly defined area but is also linked to the local social structure – i.e., the people living in the area who are also working there, learning, and creating a distinctive socio-moral environment. In other words, communities with specific characteristics, interrelationships, and a certain sense of belonging (linguistic, cultural, professional, and others) usually evolve, change, and eventually disappear over time.⁴

Regional history is part of a comprehensive and specific perception of human society, which significantly helps us understand historical development. An important mission of regional history in this context is to contribute to the knowledge of a given social structure or society and thus enrich the knowledge and understanding of the development of society as a whole. At the same time, it can

³ Z. Beneš, D. Hudecová, 2005, p. 11–12.

⁴ J. Bartoš, J. Schulz, M. Trapl, 2004, p. 6.

be said that regional history represents a relatively independent part of national, resp. general history.

The relationship between regional and general history can be grasped from two perspectives. The first point of view is that regional history is a kind of set of specific historical events based on which national (general) history is demonstrated (or reconstructed). This approach is also widely used in history teaching. The second is based on the thesis that the specificity of historical events taking place in individual regions creates a compact picture of national (general) history. It can be therefore deduced that to understand the national history, it is necessary to know and understand the developments in the sub-regions of the country.⁵

However, despite these ideas, it is certainly not possible – or would be very problematic – to consider regional history as a separate scientific discipline. Methods, subjects of study, and methodological principles are, in the case of regional history, identical to general research methods of history as such. That said, each region in the context of its historical development is marked by certain characteristics, which require the application of somewhat different research methods appropriate to the conditions of a particular geographical area. Research in the field of regional history has a clear interdisciplinary overlap, and knowledge from different fields is applied – especially monument care, folklore, ethnography, museology, historical geography, and demography.⁶ The connection between regional history and the field of environmental studies and education is also relevant in this respect, as awareness of historical developments at the local level and their reflection currently encourages interest in active environmental protection, especially in terms of preserving the natural and cultural heritage characteristics of the given region.

Finally, regional history plays an important role for all the inhabitants of a given area by concentrating their educational potential, including – simply put – the dimension of social cohesion. Residents have the opportunity to obtain information about the development of their region, i.e., the place where they live and with which their destinies are connected and to which, last but not least, many of them have a certain connection. As a result of the bond thus created, which arises based on historical awareness of the region, the emotional level of individual consciousness is gradually formed, resulting in a sense of patriotism.⁷ At this point, it should be noted that in the past (and unfortunately also in the present), however, this process at the national level has often (purposefully) resulted in manifestations of nationalism and chauvinism.

Regional history and historical consciousness in the history curriculum

In the field of education – specifically, in the history curriculum – the teaching of regional history is characterized by an effort to get to know the close, the known, and thus, the specific, and is based on such acquired historical

⁵ Ibidem, p. 6.

⁶ V. Čapek et al., 2005, p. 68.

⁷ D. Labischová, B. Gracová, 2008, p. 171.

consciousness to further develop an awareness of distant (meaning geographically) national and general historical events and processes. Concerning the curriculum, regional history represents something “close, familiar and easier to grasp,” which facilitates the process of history teaching and often, at the same time, streamlines the presentation of general or national history – i.e., specific examples from the field of regional history allow a better understanding of general historical phenomena.

The topic of regional history can be applied in all phases of the educational process. Positive responses from students are especially evident in cases where a topic related to regional history is applied in the motivational phase of teaching history. Regional history is also very useful in the phase of acquiring knowledge and skills, especially at the lower levels of primary schools.⁸ Teachers play a particularly important role here since, through the presentation of topics related to regional history, they can fundamentally influence and shape the historical consciousness of pupils.

As is clear from the facts already mentioned, the irreplaceable role of regional history thus lies in strengthening the historical awareness of pupils and students and in shaping a positive attitude towards the environment in which they live. Finally, it develops their historical knowledge and active interest in the past and present of the region.⁹ Activities in the field of regional history develop creativity, critical thinking, concrete expression (description) of given facts, independent thinking, and other skills.

If we look at regional history and its teaching from the research perspective of pedagogy and subject didactics, it is an area that is optimally applicable to support the critical thinking of pupils (see above). The result is independent research and publishing activities of students. However, this activity requires a certain level of intellectual ability and skill. It is, therefore, usable especially in secondary schools and grammar schools (and partly in the upper levels of primary schools), where students can distinguish the relevance of information sources (i.e., primary and secondary historical sources). Such independent research activities, which focus on working with historical sources, can facilitate cooperation with museums, galleries, archives, and witnesses and further strengthen the relationship of pupils and students to regional history and thus “general” history. For all these reasons, regional history is or should be a beneficial, useful, and attractive part of the history curriculum.

Teaching history places specific demands and requirements on teachers. They must be able to deal with the essential consequences of teaching concerning developments and events in the general (broader national, transnational, global) context, including their impact on the local (regional) level. In addition, they should be able to present historical events not only in their purely political context but also include aspects of social, economic, or cultural history. The characteristic of teaching history is also the possibility to provide students

⁸ S. Julínek, 2004, p. 156

⁹ T. Hubálek et al., 2017, p. 13.

with direct contact with history through adequately selected historical sources. Working with period materials or archival documents is important in terms of didactic clarity and supports the ability of students to process and interpret.¹⁰

A certain complication in the history curriculum is the above-mentioned primary orientation towards the so-called “great political history,” which may, in some cases, be difficult to understand and seem distant to pupils and students. As a counterweight, the topics of “small” regional history can be used, which are usually more understandable and closer for pupils and students (e.g., family memory) and far more effectively support the development of individual components of historical consciousness. In this context, there arises a question of the use of adequate didactic methods that can streamline the process of shaping value orientation and attitudes in pupils and students. The application of oral history and project teaching methods has proved its worth in current teaching practice.

For the teaching of regional history in the context of the formation of historical consciousness, the specific form (historical, cultural, linguistic) of regions depends on the consciousness of their inhabitants – and on how people in other regions view the region. It can therefore be stated that the regions – in a historical and cultural sense – exist only if they are in some way fixed in the minds of the local population. If this “regional consciousness” is gradually overwritten in the minds of the population and disappears, the region as such disappears too, even though the objective preconditions for its existence persist (e.g., the case of Lusatian Serbs in Germany, the awareness of Silesia in the Czech Republic, and others).¹¹

The concept of the so-called “small history,” historical consciousness, and the personality of a history teacher

In subject didactics, the historical consciousness of regional history represents a distinctive and specific category with significant cognitive and emotional potential. As mentioned, in the given context, the concept of so-called “small history” is becoming prevalent, occupies more and more space, and represents a kind of counterpart of “big history,” which is traditionally focused on political and socio-economic processes and remains the basis of the school interpretation of history. This concept is disrupted in the teaching of regional history, and the historical dimension associated with the immediate environment, which is far more oriented to individual memory and experiences, expressing geographical, emotional, and social closeness, and thus greater intelligibility, comes to the fore.

The concept of “small history” applied in the history curriculum (not at all levels of schools) significantly contributes to the development of the motivational component and further deepens it. In the case of pupils and students interested in history, the use of regional history topics deepens both their insight into this

¹⁰ P. et al., 2016, p. 72.

¹¹ T. Siwek, K. Bogdová, 2007, p. 1040.

area and the activity they develop in the field of history – such as involvement in the process of reconstruction of historical events in the immediate vicinity, where they can meet countless contact areas and stimuli about current events. At the same time, this process contributes significantly to the ability of the imagination and the ability to put individual historical events and processes into a broader context.

An important component in the development of historical consciousness against the background of regional history is the personality of the teacher. For further development and improvement of regional history teaching methods, and thus also for the use of its wider potential, it is necessary that the history teacher has both a positive attitude towards this discipline and the ability to present a specific topic in terms of didactics and pedagogy, involving students into the learning process and motivating them. At the same time, history teachers should be able and willing to accept new ideas, trends, and knowledge that are necessary for further professional development of their personalities, especially in the field of history didactics and, partly (due to the concept of current FEP), sciences. At the same time, it is necessary to state – or admit – that based on current practice and experience, this is, in many cases, a complicated process that does not always lead to the set goal and have the desired effect.

In the conditions of the Czech Republic, there was research carried out at the Department of Social Sciences of the Faculty of Education, University of Ostrava, in 2011 and 2012, which had a mixed design – qualitative and quantitative – with focus groups and in-depth interviews. This research focused on the relationship of historical consciousness to the phenomenon known as family history – i.e., an area of history that can be easily incorporated into the broader framework of regional history. The study was targeted at the reflection of various dimensions of historical consciousness and their application or use in the history curriculum at primary and secondary schools. Concerning regional history, the research made extensive use of the aspect of so-called family memory associated with the perception of cultural and historical identity. It was found that pupils, students, and teachers in this context retain a relatively broad historical consciousness linked to the period of the 19th and early 20th centuries. On the other hand, historical consciousness is largely suppressed in connection with contemporary history, especially after 1945. This fact seems to stem from the lack of attention paid to the given epoch of history in the history curriculum, the diversity and number of information sources, and the associated frequent absence of selection for relevant and irrelevant information for a given topic. It is here that the history teachers focus on their ability to grasp a specific topic not only from a professional-historical point of view but also from a didactic point of view.

Research with similar parameters and methods (mixed design, focus group method, and in-depth interview) concentrated directly on the relationship between regional history and historical consciousness is currently underway (implemented between 2018–2019) at the Department of Social Sciences, Faculty of Education, Palacký University in Olomouc. The results of research surveys available so far show similar parameters to the results of research carried out

in 2011–2012. It is also evident from the research done so far that oral administration (tradition) – i.e., personal (subjective) experience and thus a determined view of historical events – proves to be an important and de facto indispensable aspect in the process of forming historical consciousness.

As an illustration, we can present the outcomes from the part of the research focused on the intercultural perception of the history of the 20th century – i.e., the issue of national and ethnic minorities in the context of the Czech lands and Czechoslovakia after 1918. Respondents (students in secondary schools, including grammar schools, in the Moravian-Silesian region and parts of Olomouc region, i.e., the northeast of the Czech Republic) should have mentioned at least one personality of Czech, Slovak, German, and Polish origin, whom they consider to be significant in the conditions of Czechoslovakia, with a focus on the given region. Among personalities of Czech origin, President T.G. Masaryk dominated (95%), and Jan Prokeš (38%), a politician and mayor of Moravian Ostrava after 1918, was mentioned in relation to Ostrava. Milan Rastislav Štefánik (75%) was the most well-known among Slovak personalities, followed by Andrej Hlinka (40%), and, with positive connotations, Alexander Dubček (28%) was also mentioned. In the case of German nationality, the respondents most often mentioned the name of Konrad Henlein (80%), the leader of the strongly negative SdP, and a smaller part of the respondents (18%) mentioned the writer Franz Kafka. Awareness of personalities of Polish origin was minimal and concentrated mainly in the eastern part of the Moravian-Silesian region (Ostrava, Karvina, and Těšín), where some of the respondents (approx. 15%) mentioned the name of Josef Koždoně, a politician, chairman of the Slezská lidová strana, and, after 1918, the long-term mayor Český Těšín.

Conclusion

The cultivation of historical consciousness, which should be linked to the development of historical thinking, can be considered one of the key objectives in the teaching of history at all types of schools – especially at the second stage of primary and secondary schools. Regional history plays an irreplaceable role in this regard, which has a key influence due to its relative “proximity,” immediacy, comprehensibility, and often also the possibility of easier understanding and comprehension of historical processes, which is directly reflected in the process of forming historical consciousness. However, the skills and abilities that really shape or can shape the foundations of historical thinking have been – or are – often implemented based on theoretical postulates without using specific empirical knowledge and data. Therefore, the research of historical consciousness, especially in the context of teaching regional history, and the application of its results in practice through the subject didactics of history plays an important role in the training of qualified history teachers.

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