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Historical Education in the Process of Democratic Transition: The Czech Case

Abstract: *In his article the author focuses on the process of dealing with the past using the example of Czech democratic transition after 1989. First he defines the very concept “dealing with the past” in order to define the role of historiography and school education in a symbolic level of such a process. He deals with three basic problems – cultivation of historical consciousness within school environment, implementation of modern didactical concepts and finally using the Czech experience with post-communist historical education he outlines problematic issues surrounding the process of dealing with the past. Besides other things he concentrates on didactic aspects of the concept of cultural and communicative memory.*

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Key words: *history didactics, dealing with the past, cultural memory, communicative memory, cultural trauma, democratic transition, Central Europe, school education, historical consciousness.*

In this article, I will share one of many Central European experiences in dealing with the past from the perspective of historical didactics.¹ “Dealing with the past” is a natural process that a society undergoes at the moment of substantial transformation with respect to that society’s life. Sociologists talk about the process of “social change” as a period in which it is necessary to critically evaluate the past and deal with all the negative influences that could threaten future direction. In this vein, Central and Eastern European states must come to terms with their experienced during significant social change after the fall of the Soviet Communist Empire.

Personally, within society I distinguish two basic reactions to the past. The first is at the legal level, which aims to lay the foundations for a new establishment and

¹ The article is an extended version of the paper prepared for the international conference “Dealing with the Past in Serbia: What Next” held in Belgrade, 19-20 January 2012.

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to ensure its stability, which seeks to punish all guilt and to soften the grievances caused in the past. The new Czech parliament adopted a democratic constitution and the “Lustration Law” (Act no. 451/1991), which should have ensured that people from the old government power structures – such as the Secret police agents or senior officials of the Communist Party – wouldn’t penetrate into the administrative of the new republic. Unjustly convicted political prisoners were rehabilitated (Act no. 119/1990) and restitution laws (Act no. 87/1991 and 229/1991) enabled nationalized property to be returned to its owners. There were also attempts to bring criminal cases against the former regime. The law in 1993 (Act no. 198/1993) even declared that the communist regime itself was illegal and criminal.²

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I’m not a lawyer and my goal is not to evaluate this phase. I would like to talk about the second level in dealing with the past – the symbolic level. In its framework, a new public space and new historical traditions are being created. Almost immediately, we have the tendency to rename streets and squares, to publicly estimate the victims of the former regime, or to build monuments to freedom fighters. But it takes decades to change the values and the historical consciousness of society – and in this process historians and education play a key role.

In my article, I would like to talk about two basic issues. Using an example of the Czech environment, I would like to outline the role of historical education in dealing with the past. Then I would like to mention a few problems related to this process.

But first of all, it must be stressed that there is no consensus on the procedures of dealing with the past in Czech didactics and historiography. Given that the very concept of “dealing with the past” is vague and ambiguous, being used rather by politicians and the media, many historians use it with considerable scepticism. The reason why this term is marginalized in the discussion can be found in the experience of older historians who feared that history could once again become a politicized science. The second reason can be seen in the inability of certain circles of self-contained historical community to articulate and publicly present their views on current issues. For this reason, I feel that although 22 years have passed since the fall of the communist regime, the symbolic dealing with the past in my country is still in progress.

2 The format of my contribution does not allow me to discuss this legal level to the depth. Let me just mention that this process was not without problems and have not been finished yet. Restitution of church property is still under emotive discussion. In order to deal with painful past, some acts (especially the so called “lustration law”) caused many controversies. In hindsight, these acts were closely bound to the process of constructing of post-communist memory and establishing of the new elites. Some laws and discussion which were tied to their implementation had more symbolic than legal impact. For further information see Kiss (2009). The symbolic dimension of legislative acts describes Mayer (2004).

The process of democratic transformation and the subsequent disintegration of Czechoslovakia into two independent states in 1993 was a challenge for historiography in creating a new narrative of the state and nation. In this metanarrative the foundation of a democratic Czech Republic would represent the finalization of the earlier efforts of generations to build an independent state.³ Due to this change in context, it was necessary to deal with the heritage of 40 years of communist dictatorship and its Marxist-Leninist historical ideology. The identity of the new state was based on continuity with the first pre-war Czechoslovak Republic, and was subsequently questioned by the representatives of the former 3-million German-speaking minority, who were expelled from Czechoslovakia after World War II.

The lack of expert knowledge about Czech modern history and the constant updating and politicization of historical subjects resulted in a growing passivity amongst many teachers. They taught older history with only minor modifications and they ceased to teach modern 20th century history, usually ending with World War II – this is done in order to avoid teaching and having to interpret the problematic communist past.

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Choosing this style, however, they have undermined the fundamental goal of historical education, which is to cultivate the historical consciousness of students. Cultivation of historical consciousness is a complex process, which is tied to the transformation of the historical metanarrative after 1989.⁴ In contradiction to the theoretical hypothesis of internationalism, Marxist-Leninist historiography actually slightly modified older nationalist-oriented stories, which ultimately appear to be highly immune to scientific (historical) revision (Hudek 2010). Not only politicians and journalists, but also the new Czech textbooks of the 90's recycled various numbers of old stereotypes and myths – usually in the form of retelling an ethnocentric “big story” of the Czechs, while the historical narrative left out the perspectives of German, Jewish, Roma minorities, and Slovaks as well.

In recent years, however, a western didactic approach has influenced Czech historical education. This didactics' goal is to revise the antiquated “nationalist-oriented” education, by seeking to introduce cultural pluralism. Cultural pluralism is a key methodological innovation in the teaching of history, which offers a

3 This process can be illustrated by the presentations at the first session of Czech historians in 1993. Especially a former Prime Minister Václav Klaus stated in his opening speech that the foundation of a new republic was not an emergency solution forced by Slovak desire for the state independence, but a logical and positive continuation of the efforts of previous generations. See *VII. sjezd českých historiků 1994*.

4 For further information about the metanarrative in Czech and Slovak historiography see Kolář (2011) or Hudek (2010).

multiple perspective approach, which has been proven to be an effective tool in mitigating nationalist myths and deep-seated stereotypes.⁵

Evaluation of our own history from the position of different cultures is a precondition for the development of tolerance, empathy and skills of critical evaluation of history. An additional way of overcoming the political and nationalist interpretations of history is to promote new themes and interpretative models such as cultural history, gender, history of migration or history of consumerism. Last but not least, the implementation of pedagogical constructivism allows us to teach students to understand how the historical narrative has been created.

No matter if you are Euro-sceptic or not, our aim is not to defend the destruction of national identity and to indoctrinate Europeanism. We are only trying, in the context of Europe, to formulate an acceptable concept of national history, which will differ from the nationalist history, which for a long time has been abused for propaganda purposes.

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I cite from the report of Parliamentary Assembly of Council of Europe:

Nationalist history tries to justify patriotic values by amplifying the epic and mythical aspects of the “national characteristics”. This accents the differences in relation between neighbouring countries, highlights the uniformity, overshadows the history of areas or minorities and always leads to defining itself in relation to the external enemy.

(Doc. 7446 of Parliamentary Assembly of Council of Europe 1996: 20-21)

Since the 19th century the Czech metanarrative has been based on the conflict between Germans and Czechs in the Bohemian lands. The post-war displacement (“Vertreibung” – “Odsun”) was a great source of legitimacy for the communist regime, which “delivered” the Czech nation from a danger of “Germanization” once and for all.⁶ Persistence of this reflection of Germans who wanted to Germanize “Us” is obvious also in my secondary school classes. I teach in a former German town and with my Czech students we always analyse two pictures – the first shows the Jews being transported to the concentration camp and the second shows the Germans being driven out of the Czechoslovak state border. The pictures do not represent the similar event and destiny, but they look pretty similar.

5 Within Europe relatively well-known is a concept of German-French history textbook *Geschichte/Histoire* from 2003. One of the inspirational projects which aimed to implement modern methods of pluralism and constructivism into school education is a set of multiple perspective textbooks of Southeast European history. The textbooks are result of a long-time cooperation of experts from Thessaloniki’s Centre for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe. Workbooks can be downloaded online.

6 For further information about the consequences of the expulsion see Ther & Siljak (2001).

Students generally protest that these two events can not be compared side by side. As a teacher, I become a devil's advocate and defend the Sudeten German perspective. Many of my students catch themselves in the trap and subconsciously start to defend the Czech ethnocentric interpretation which persists in public and especially family narratives. The aim is to encourage students to think through whether the Germans have the right to be part of Czech history and whether they can be granted the status of victims after being expelled from their homes in 1945 under the slogans of national cleansing and revenge for Nazi occupation. The aim is also to rid the students of a history based on collective guilt.

You know, looking over the fence is always a useful exercise, because it allows you not only to find out more about your neighbour, but also, in her or his image, about yourself.

With little satisfaction over the transformation of didactical approach I quote from the new normative documents of the Ministry of Education, in which among the key goals of historical education we find the cultivation of "*the individual's historical awareness*" (Framework Education Programme for Elementary Education 2007: 43) or "*using tolerant approaches towards minority groups in society, uncovering racist, xenophobic and extremist opinions and attitudes*" (Framework Education Programme for Secondary General Education – Grammar Schools 2007: 39)

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Nevertheless we must stress that nowhere in the curricular documents has there been formulated the idea that historical education is to create preconditions for dealing with the past. Historians and didactics experts who formulated these normative documents passed over this point in silence.⁷

The second major aim of history teaching in the Czech environment is forming positive civic attitudes, developing a consciousness of belonging to a European civilization and culture and supporting "*the adoption of the values on which contemporary democratic Europe builds*" (Framework Educational Program for Elementary Education 2007: 43). This goal has a lot in common with the communist past. It can be achieved through presenting the stories and fates of formerly-silenced groups. Political prisoners or victims of collectivization are exemplary examples of people whose human rights and freedoms have been violated – the active opponents of undemocratic regime can provide value-patterns corresponding to the present.

Last but not least, teachers should, during their lessons, uncover the methods and procedures of abuse of history and pass on to pupils the skills of critical re-

⁷ Compare with the two recommendations of the Committee of Ministers of Council of Europe on history teaching in 21st-century Europe (Rec2001/15) and on intercultural dialogue and the image of the other in history teaching (CM/Rec2011/6).

flection of media messages and other means of communication. Pupils must be taught from an early age that the world they live in is the social reality created by the media and other forms of communication and social interaction. By emphasizing critical reflection we as a nation can raise young people who are not easily manipulated. Teachers influenced by pedagogical constructivism try to help pupils to create their own understanding of history, not primarily to transmit one true story. As a prevention of future conflicts, students need to know not only the facts but also how these facts were presented and misused in the past.

For the rest of my article, I want to discuss some of the problematic situations that are related to the symbolic dealing with the past in the environment of Czech schools.

50 In every-day situations, schools experience a significant lack of specific educational goals and teaching methods. What shall we learn about communism, why and how? These are simple questions with complicated answers. It took more than a decade until the new curriculum in the form of Framework Education Programme was adopted. In its formulation, as well as in everyday practice, we have no choice but to find an inspiration abroad. I am not saying that everything good in Europe spreads only in the direction from west to east, but German and French textbooks and methodological basis of the Council of Europe, for example Robert Stradling's *Teaching 20th century European history* already being translated into Czech – are highly inspiring for us (Stradling 2001). Their adaptation to the Czech environment are for our didactics and methodology one of the biggest challenges we face today, and I am glad to cooperate with the Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes in Prague, where we try, with financial support of the EU program *Education for Competitiveness*, to develop multimedia educational applications for the 21st century.⁸ Anyway, as we see from attendance of our seminars, the number of teachers who are active in lifelong learning and wants to learn how to use modern methods is still significantly small.

Another major problem is closely connected with the process of historical narration. Democratic change allowed historians to write freely without government censorship and without Marxist and Leninist ideological directives. Unfortunately, many historians have not left the past's black-and-white vision of the world. As Pullmann (2008) pointed out, the first 15 years were dominated by professional and public discourse called the "totalitarian-historical narration" which divided the society into the oppressed "We" (victims of the dictatorship), and oppressive "They" (perpetrators, the communist "regime" itself). Danger of this totalitarian-historical narrative lies mainly in its schematisation and blotting out the individual

8 The full name of the project is *Dějepis v 21. století: multimediální aplikace pro dějepisnou výuku* ("History in the 21st century: multimedia applications for history teaching"). Code CZ.1.07/1.1.00/26.0074.

responsibility for both an active and passive support of the regime. Although the historical research in recent years seeks to replace this concept with other interpretations that emphasize everyday social practice of socialist dictatorship, the totalitarian-historical narrative has considerably expanded in society and especially in the media. It is typical for the civil initiatives, which enter the school with projects in which they stress the repression and injustice of the communist regime.⁹ Pupils, who typically perceive the world as a clash between good and evil, naturally assume this superficial interpretation. The paradox is that teachers who should question this totalitarian-historical narrative have tended to assume it as well.

In my opinion the most interesting problem of dealing with the past is related to the historical memory of Czech society. If we follow the concept of memory formulated by the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1950) and the German anthropologist Jan Assmann (1992), we can distinguish the “cultural” and “communicative” (or rather “family”) memory, which interact with each other, but these memories can vary considerably.

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Cultural memory is shared within the defined community and in its formation and transmission are significantly involved institutionalized forms of communication – the official texts, rituals, celebrations. The institution of the school can be seen as one of the major carriers and mediators of cultural memory. In contrast, communicative or rather family memory is tied to the existence of living communicators and experience bearers and contains distinctive family understanding and interpretations of the past.

Teachers, encouraged by curricular documents, commemorate stories of active opponents or victims of undemocratic communist regime. What they do is in this case real symbolic “dealing with the past”. The main purpose of this memory is a living presentation of desirable attitudes and behaviours, not primarily “objective” recognition the past.

Now what is the problem? Parallel to this cultural memory, the family narratives affect the historical consciousness of pupils in many cases stronger than the school or the media. The majority of my students are not children of political prisoners – they are descendants of the orderly citizens of real-socialist Czechoslovakia. The natural ability of human memory to forget the negative and traumatic past along with different family experience has interesting results.

Smaller proportion of families remembers a period of good old times of social stability under socialism. I wouldn't say they uncritically glorify the communist

⁹ Most of all should be mentioned projects “Fighters against totalitarianism in Children's Eyes” (*Bojovníci proti totalitě očima dětí*), “Stories of Unjustice” (*Příběhy bezpráví*), “Traces of totalitarianism” (*Stopy totality*), “Stories of the Iron Curtain” (*Příběhy železné opony*), “Stories of the 20th Century: We did not give up” (*Příběhy 20. století: My jsme to nevzdali*) etc.

dictatorship; they are simply disgusted with the presence. Children of these families do not feel any need to deal with the past.¹⁰ In the second dominant group of families, students accept the prevailing anti-communist views of cultural memory, but the family narratives do not question the parent's (or grandparents) own responsibility as active or passive supporters of the regime. This can be interpreted as follows: pupils' attitudes may be a demonstration of anticommunist attitudes prevailing in the Czech cultural memory (or educational process). In their reflections students denounce the restriction of personal freedoms, persecution of opponents of the communist regime or a dictatorship as a form of government. Concurrently, family stories of Communism create such an image of family history so that students can take the view that Communists were "bastards", but afterwards they could add that there were no "bastards" in their families. If you read a German bestseller *Grandpa wasn't Nazi* (Welzer & Moller & Tschuggnall 2002), you can imagine that in less than twenty years a study entitled "My grandfather was not a Commie" would be very topical in the Czech environment.¹¹

- 52 Two months ago we discussed these findings at a conference *History and Memory: Soviet Case* in Vilnius with colleagues from other former communist states and we came to the conclusion that it is a current problem not only in the Czech Republic. If I should summarize our discussion in Vilnius, I would say that dealing with the past is difficult, if 1) the cultural and family memory have not reached consensus about the past, and 2) if you educate an ethnic minority of another nation from the state which does not want to deal with the past.

Teachers in the Baltic republics face the problem of how to tell the pupils from Russian minority about the history of the Soviet occupation? The Anti-soviet narrative of Baltic historical education is failing in the face of Russian students. We can imagine the poor situation of the Serbian teacher who should justify a Hague's trial with general Mladić in a class of students who come from families of Serbs expelled from their homes in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Slavonia or Kosovo. Even in the Czech Republic the development of methods of critical reflection of family and cultural memory is a great task for the didactics of history.

Problematic remembering is closely associated with the last issue about which I would like to write. The revolution of 1989 caused a non-violent collapse of the communist dictatorship, which the Czechs named sweetly "the Velvet Revolution".

10 However this group is growing significantly in comparison to the previous years. If I read student's projects in which oral history method was used, I see that the number of parents and grandparents who express disgust over corruption, politics and social instability is significantly higher than three years ago. Compare the results of one of the projects we coordinate (*Velké a malé příběhy moderních dějin*, internet),

11 For more information see my contribution to the conference *History and Memory: the Soviet Case* – Vilnius, 29th-31st November 2011 (Najbert 2012).

On the one hand, the absence of a violent push can be seen as an advantage, because families have not been traumatized by violence or even war and thus we do not need to develop methods of peace education. On the other hand, due to the continuity of society, many individuals don't feel the need to deal with the past. Even after twenty years, 11 % of voters chose the Communist Party in the parliamentary elections of 2010. Memory of ostalgie is significantly in progress – without critical distance, people watch on TV old series and movies in which the reality was distorted in order to portray the life in socialism smooth and joyful. Many values and stereotypes created in the years of communist dictatorship persist to today. Although the need to deal with the past was once heavily declared in public, in ordinary life, there was not time to stop and critically evaluate the past. Democratic transformation, the introduction of a market economy, and the disintegration of the Czechoslovak Federation followed in quick succession. The number of public statements soon began to enforce access of a “broad line” where we would split away the history of our recent past.¹²

American sociologist Gil Eyal (2004) described the situation using a concept of “collective trauma”. Briefly summarized, this collective trauma of Czech society lies in the very fact of the 40-year existence of communist regime. Both active and passive support of the regime by regular citizens resulted in the regime's legitimacy for the acts of injustice and violation of human's rights and dignity. After 1989, Czech intellectuals split into two groups each of which articulated different forms of dealing with this “trauma”. The first group represented by the former president Václav Havel and other dissidents pointed at the moral complicity of the whole society. In their eyes, the process of overcoming trauma was associated with the long-lasting process of philosophical “confession” and moral renewal of individual personality. In contrary, the other group represented by technocrats surrounding a Prime Minister Václav Klaus rejected deeper thematization of collective guilt and enforced drawing a sharp line between the past and present. For them, dealing with the past should have been legally clearly defined process consisting of rehabilitation, restitution of stolen property, lustration and symbolical condemnation of the former regime, “*thereby guaranteeing the establishment of the rule of law in the present, and allowing the majority of citizens to put the past behind them*” (Eyal 2004: 24).

Indeed, one of the leading politicians in the early 90's compared our future direction to a trip by car, in which we should look forward and occasionally look in the rear-view mirror. This politician – Václav Klaus – is now our president and I personally believe that majority of the Czech people have interpreted his metaphor

12 This “broad line” attitude prevailed especially in the relationship with Germany – see *Czech-German Declaration on Mutual Relations and their Future Development* from 21st of January 1997. Sudeten German representatives are not satisfied with this attitude and repeat again and again that the Czechs have not deal with their past yet.

not as a way in which our society can find the right balance between the future and past, but as an opportunity to stop looking in the rear-view mirror altogether.

I don't think teachers should substitute the psychoanalysts and "settle accounts" in order to heal trauma bottled up in the process of collective forgetting. On the other hand, school remains a specific place where we may freely analyse and discuss also matters that the public do not (or rather do not want to) see in the rear-view mirror. More precisely, with respect to all I mentioned in my article we have to reflect the current historical culture and do as much as possible for cultivation of historical consciousness of our young generation.

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Nastava iz istorije u procesu demokratske tranzicije: Češki primer

Apstrakt

U članku se autor usredsređuje na proces suočavanja s prošlošću koristeći primer češke demokratske tranzicije nakon 1989. Na početku određuje sam koncept „suočavanja s prošlošću“ da bi definisao ulogu historiografije i školskog obrazovanja na simboličkom nivou takvog jednog procesa. Autor se bavi trima osnovnim problemima – kultivacijom istorijske svesti unutar školskog okruženja, primenom modernih didaktičkih koncepta i, na kraju, koristeći češko iskustvo s postkomunističkim obrazovanjem iz istorije, u glavnim crtama izlaže problematične teme koje okružuju proces suočavanja s prošlošću. Imeđu ostalog, koncentriše se na didaktičke aspekte koncepta kulturnog i komunikativnog pamćenja.

Ključne reči didaktika iz istorije, suočavanje s prošlošću, kulturno pamćenje, komunikativno pamćenje, kulturna trauma, demokratska tranzicija, centralna Evropa, školsko obrazovanje, istorijska svest.