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## Professional debates within the international History Didactics

### Introduction

In the time span of mid-2020 to late 2023, the author of the present study was personally present at four major conferences devoted entirely or partially to history didactics. Namely it was: the Graz Conference in November 2020; the Budapest Conference in April 2021; the Luzern Conference in September 2021; and the Luzern Conference in September 2023. (See the author's reports in Vajda, 2023a and Vajda, 2023b.) Thus the author is in a unique position to summarize approximately 180 professional scientific lectures, presentations, and workshops, which all had very wide international character through active participants from five continents.

### Material and Methods

Present study analyses the content of the most recent major scientific conferences in history didactics. It analyses conference presentations and key speeches given by prominent scholars who represent renowned academic centres in the international field of history didactics, like K. Benziger, A. Chapman, Á. F. Dárdai, S. Doussot, A. Eckert, N. Fink, M. Furrer, P. Gautschi, A. Gyertyánfy, S. Lévesque, J. Kaposi, L. Kojanitz, A. Körber, K. van Nieuwhuyse, S. Popp, J. Rösen, J. Wojdon, and others. The study evaluates the content of these presentations, especially as far as their strategic aim was set; as well as it analyses the oral and written debate during and after the presentations, including live chats, comments, and formal Question and Answer sessions.

- As to the methods, the summary and evaluation of the content of these recent major scientific conferences is supported by recent scholarly literature on history didactics. And thirdly, the analysis of the above mentioned sources takes place in this study in accordance with the following three leading aspects:
- What kind of scientific and educational trends have influenced history didactics in the recent years (2020 – 2023)?
- Which are the most important issues and problems concerning international history didactics?
- What kind of trends can be predicted in the accounts of the participants regarding teaching and researching history didactics?

### Result

We will sum up the results of the evaluation of the content of recent major scientific conferences in history didactics in three paragraphs.

#### ***Debates over general problems***

A significant number of lectures during the examined time period dealt with general problems. These are such professional issues that history teachers have been constantly and persistently facing with in the last decades. These general problems include:

- the structural place and time frame devoted to history as a school subject within national curriculums (see more on this at Furrer et al., 2020 and Fink et. al., 2023);
- so called “most recent challenges”, including the impact of the social media on historical culture and education as well as “environmental issues”;
- the possible ways of state indoctrination through history teaching, including the fear from the over-reaching state domination over history teaching (see Á.F. Dárdai & Kaposi, 2021).

We can see a certain trend here, i.e. there is an unusual number of very serious issues ahead of us that make school history teaching very challenging nowadays. Conference participants at Graz, Budapest, and Luzern seemed to have some kind of consensus, even if not full agreement, on several issues. For instance, nobody questioned the need that history teaching should have or is expected to have some relevance that is related to life outside the school. Many lecturers shared the view that dealing with “burning issues” in classrooms during history lessons, such as autocratic ways of government or forms of dictatorship, is very important. History didacticians also agree that “debates over political systems never take place in an ideological vacuum”, i. e. European societies have become rather complex in the last decades. The social context of history teaching has changed dramatically in comparison with the situation 30-40 years ago. This kind of “social impact on society” was expressed from various aspects in a series of lectures, among others by Sabrina Moisan (Université de Sherbrooke) and Paul Zanazanian in their presentation on *Teaching history at university: oscillations between social, critical, professional or civic functions*, or by Paul Zanazanian (McGill University, Canada) who spoke about *Historical Consciousness and Self-Reflexivity: Some Thoughts Regarding “Why History Education?”* Some lectures concluded that history didactics as a science knows very little on the social impact of school history teaching. One of the specific forms how history is having an impact on society can be seen on the social media platforms where history, or individual opinions and feelings that are related to history, are reflected, mirrored, or exaggerated almost without any control. Carefully prepared historical edutainment videos circulate along with massively shared false historical beliefs on the social media platforms. Joanna Wojdon (University of Wrocław, Poland) focused her attention on *Teachers’ beliefs on history education seen through the lenses of social media*; Susanne Popp (University of Augsburg) and Dennis Röder (Stade, Germany) explored popular *Youtube videos on school history topics*; and Helyom Viana Telles (Instituto Federal Baiano, Brazil) had a lecture on *Ludification of culture, playable pasts and historical education - notes on the cultural relevance of video games for learning history*. No question therefore that history didactics as a science should care about the social impact of school history teaching, and should initiate much more research on this field.

An other general problem that several lectures focused on was the threats that history teaching has been facing for the last decades. From these threats, experts consider specifically one very dangerous, and that is the massive decrease in time-frames devoted to history in European national curriculums. The issue of the “integration” of history into larger groups of school subjects was specified as a dangerous process.

*This decrease of time devoted to history in European national curriculums is regarded by some as a life-threatening process that may potentially lead to liquidation of history as a school subject. Yet, the process has already started and led to significant reduction in numbers of history lessons per week throughout Europe.*

This seemingly unstoppable process was the main theme of Elisabeth Erdmann’s lecture (Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg, Germany) *History as an independent subject or in a subject network?*; also of Urte Kocka’s lecture (Freie Universität Berlin, Germany) *Historical Consciousness and Change*, and also of Andrea Brait’s lecture (University of Innsbruck, Austria) on *Teaching History in Subject Combinations – The Example of Austria*. We have been witnessing the process in countries like France, where history is taught along with geography, or in Slovakia where history has long been integrated into a group of school subjects called “People and society” along with geography and civic education. On the contrary, Hungary is an exemption in Europe and it seems to be a sole country where there is a rather extensive time frame dedicated to school history (appr. 2 or 3 lessons per week on lower secondary level) and with a compulsory school leaving examination (in Hungarian: érettségi) at the end of the upper secondary level (Kojanitz, 2021).

To make the situation even more complex, history teaching in Europe may lose ground due to some covert goals. In some cases projects aiming at “integrating” history with other school subjects, such as civic education, are explained by “noble social goals”. The argument goes that history should be merged into “civic education” because it is a “socially sensitive” discipline (whatever this mean)

(Kaposi, 2020). Rosa Cabecinha (University of Minho, Portugal) gave participants in Graz a very recent example, how this integration of history with civic education was done in Portugal. It might not seem obvious for the first glimpse, but the reduction of history lessons in schools, or their merging into larger school subject units, is linked not only with the appearance of “new challenges”, but it is triggered by with “rival canons” and some brand new school subjects that are often introduced to the school system at the cost of history. The description of this process was at the bottom of the lectures by several scholars, such as: Karel Van Nieuwenhuysse (University of Leuven, Belgium) *History education in Flanders: a battlefield of contradictory expectations, competing identities, and rival canons*; Anu Raudsepp (University of Tartu, Estonia) *Training students to instruct pupil’s historical researches in school - perspective for intercultural understanding as example of Estonia*; Karel Haav (Tallinn University of Technology, Estonia) *A social theoretical framework for integration of history and social studies*; Aimilia Salvanou (Hellenic Open University, Greece) *Memory cultures and historical education: A challenging relationship*; Joris Van Doorselaere (Ghent University, Belgium) *Teaching history using heritage in Flanders. Tensions between an imposed top-down model and a bottom-up participative process*; Heidi Eskelund Knudsen (University College Lillebaelt, Denmark) *Grounds for literacy in Danish history education? Interpretations of disciplinary concepts in curricular documents*; Johanna Norppa (University of Helsinki, Finland) *Teacher students’ choices in the dissonance of curricula and teaching traditions and others*.

### **Debates over narrativity**

Beyond general problems, the most often cited and debated topic at all recent international conferences on history didactics was the issue of “historical narration”. Having been following the related scholarly literature in the last decades (Gautschi et. al, 2012; Gyertyánfy, 2021; Körber, 2011; Rösen, 2006), no one could be surprised at the conferences to having heard at least three interrelated and yet quite divergent interpretations of “historical narration”.

The first interpretation on narration was given by Thomas Sandkühler. The speaker himself was well aware that even though the concept of narrativity is widespread among historians and history didacticians, it still has certain relations hiding in the shades.

*What exactly is a good history narrative?, T. Sandkühler asked in Graz. “History is explained by or through narratives”, he concluded. In other words, “past” is equal to “narratives about the past”, which equals to “history”, at least in the eyes of the public.*

To which Jörg van Norden (University of Bielefeld, Germany) added his more elaborated definition:

*“Historical narration is the sensible connection of present, future and past, struggling with current problems.”*

When describing that “history is explained by and through narratives”, T. Sandkühler rightly mentioned the importance of a “narrative competence” and “tangible references to linguistic actions”, referring to students’ linguistic abilities that are inevitable for any successful narration. As Jörg van Norden put it on the Chat Wall: “Aren’t reading, analysing, and interpreting sources means for developing narrative competencies?” T. Sandkühler finished his lecture with his opinion that “today the demand for historical narrative is extremely high”. We can agree with this, nevertheless, it seems appropriate to add that naturally there are other roads to historical (and any kind of) understanding than verbal explanation – for instance by doing things. In school environment “doing things” can be at least as important as “verbal narration” which leads us back to other well known forms of skills based learning in history.

To the second group of interpretations of “historical narration” belong those who emphasize the discursive character of narration. Debate and discussion = narration. In this sense, “History is primarily about argumentation”, as Wulf Kansteiner summed it up. Conference participants in Graz sank into an extensive (and almost endless) exchange of views over the existence, legitimacy, and impact of “narratives” and “counter-narratives”. The participants of the debate raised indeed relevant and genuine questions. For instance, how many narratives are there or can there be on a

specific historical event? How many should be present at school history teaching? If limited narratives are supposed to be present in the classrooms, who is to decide on their legitimacy? Which narratives are more valid than others and on what basis? Many conference participants shared Jörg van Norden's view who said that

*"I want to teach students to construct narrations which they need to orientate themselves; narratives that have consensual cogency (plausibility)."*

While discussing narrative canons and counter-canons, some participants picked up the issue that in modern school environment there are too many parties involved in education, commencing from authorities, through parents, ending with non-governmental organizations. There are far too many involved actors, "stakeholders", with far too many interests, which prevent schools from reaching consensus on certain historical issues. If there should be a selection among rival historical narratives (many times proposed by different interest-groups which may be hostile to each other) then can be the "winner one narrative" turned into a "forcefully prevailing one"? In other words, where are the boundaries of third party involvements, thus where are the boundaries of potential indoctrination attempts at schools? (See so called Patriotic Educational Laws at several countries.)

The last type of interpretation on historical narration was articulated explicitly as "narrative competency". In the understanding of most history didacticians, narrative competency includes specific skills such as finding and reading primary historical sources, analyzing them, speaking and writing about them, etc. (see e.g. Körber, 2011; and Gyertyánfy, 2020.) Many scholars agree that these are fundamental skills or "tools" for researching, dealing, and working with history. Historiography is *ab ovo* narrative, so anyone dealing with it is expected to ask and speak about it via professional competency at best. A certain level of professional competency is the point where any discussion about historical consciousness, historical thinking, or meta-narratives, etc. should be launched from (see Erdmann, 2008; Rüsen, 2006; Lee, 2005; and Kojanitz, 2021). There were a few lectures, both in Luzern and Budapest, confirming this rule. From these lectures, for instance it was the one by Eva Müller (University of Würzburg, Germany) and her *lecture Iconic knowledge as a tool for history education* which demonstrated how important a specific competency or skill in a school can be, through describing the ways and means of working with iconic (pictorial) sources. Narration articulated as "narrative competency" is the very point where history didactics is the closest both to the historical research and historiography. Also this is one of the key aspects what founding fathers of history didactics used to emphasize back in the 1960s.

### ***The post-colonial debate***

The scientific conferences in Graz, Budapest and Luzern offered world-wide international participation, and included speakers from Chile to Russia, from Japan to South Africa, and from Canada to Australia; so these conferences provided participants with an opportunity to be engaged in a truly global scientific discourse. If there is a historical topic which needs a global discourse, then it is surely the post-colonial debate, more precisely the debate over colonialism as a historical process, and the debate over the impact of colonialism on all parties involved.

The post-colonial debate has been with us for some time now. The International Society for History Didactics organized a special conference on the colonialism already in 2013 (see Jahrbuch/Yearbook/Annales 2014 of International Society for History Didactics, 2014; and Vajda, 2013). More recently, there were several lectures contributing to the post-colonial debate at the conferences within the international community of history didacticians. For instance, Philipp Bernhard's (University of Augsburg, Germany) "*Postcolonial theory as one step towards decolonizing (German) history curricula*", or Karl Benziger's (Rhode Island College) contribution in Budapest "*History Teaching, National Myths, and Civil Society*". Clearly, the post-colonial debate is most lively in Western European countries that were heavily involved in the process. Alice Dutra Balbé's (University of Minho, Portugal) lecture on "*Social representations of colonialism in Mozambique and Portugal*" in Graz argued that the topic of colonialism in schoolbooks is very different when looking on it from Portugal or Mozambique. A. D. Balbé researched the Portugal perception of the

Portuguese colonialism in Africa, articulated in 30 history schoolbooks, and it is almost needless to say that she could not report on almost any kind of “inclusivity” regarding the harm it had done to those colonised. When asked to elaborate a little deeper on her schoolbook analysis, especially on “deconstruction of canonized narratives” on the Portuguese colonisation, A. D. Balbé stressed the difference in number of pictures between Portuguese and Mozambique textbooks, stating that the didactical function of the pictures in the textbooks of the two compared countries is simply too divergent to compare them. (See more on pictures at Engel & Vajda, 2021) We heard very similar conclusions from Anna Clark (Sidney, Australia) in her lecture on *“Historiography and historical consciousness in settlercolonial societies like Australia: The 1938 Day of Mourning as ‘History Making’*”; in her description, both the Aboriginal community as well as other ethnic minorities or suppressed social groups in Australia today reject these celebrations as demonstrations of “persuasive national exceptionalism”.

There were further lectures on colonialism from Knysna Motumi and Elize van Eeden and Pieter Warnich (North-West University, South Africa) *“Voices from a South African community on why history education matters”*; Johan Wassermann (University of Pretoria, South Africa) on *“Forward to the past – moves towards making School History compulsory”*; Eugène Eloundou and Michael Ndobegang (Cameroon) on *“History Education, History Teaching and Political Power: the Manipulation and Usurpation of History Teaching and Learning in Cameroon Secondary Schools”*; and Shraddha Bhatawadekar (Brandenburg University of Technology, Germany) *“Integrating Heritage Education into Academic Curriculum. Building an Experiential Model for Teaching History in India”*. Having heard these lectures and viewpoints, it is quite clear that history teaching in countries such as South Africa, Cameroon or India is socially much more important than teaching it anywhere else in Europe. At certain places of the Globe where history teaching had not been a tradition, history teaching has now become a great social value, and it is starting to have an impact on society.

Post-colonial themes are time to time on agenda in East Central Europe too. Recently, it was Gábor Szabó-Zsoldos’s lecture Decolonization trends and aspirations in British history teacher training at a scientific conference titled “Changes in pedagogy - change in pedagogy III” organized by the János Vitéz Teacher Training Center of the Pázmány Péter Catholic University in Esztergom, Hungary in November 2021. Also, there was an online event with contributions on global history and post-colonial history in history education, organized by Susanne Popp and Mare Oja in January 2022. Yet, the postcolonial discourse has not gone further than some research on the presence or lack of colonial topics in history schoolbooks, or on the existence or lack of post-colonial aspects. Both deeper research and deeper debate on this issue, including e.g. violent removal of statues of previously adored historical personalities (see e.g. Lévesque, 2018; Liakos, 2009; Benziger, 2021), has been rare so far in East Central Europe (see e.g. Fodor, 2019) where this theme had not echoed significantly up until the 2000s.

## Discussion

If we look at the lectures heard at recent conferences in history didactics, one topic that lacks from the programmes of scientific events is *schoolbook research*. Schoolbook research, which used to be a lucrative and dominant feature of history didactical research some twenty years ago (see e.g. Á. F. Dárdai, 2006), today is only rarely a subject of lectures, workshops, etc. Judged from the recent conferences, empirical research on history schoolbooks is usually limited to one or two schoolbooks (which is not a valid quantity for substantial research), or to some very limited research aspects. There have been some exceptions, like Alice Dutra Balbé’s lecture in Graz who did a survey about the post-colonial content in the Portugal history schoolbooks, or Václav Sixta’s lecture (The Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes, Czech Republic) on *“Creating historical textbook: the current challenges”* in Luzern. We can observe a trend that history schoolbooks, and of course schoolbooks in general, have been losing in importance as a consequence of massive digitalization of school education materials (see more on this at Fekete, 2021). Yet, in the majority of European states,

printed schoolbooks seem still to dominate. And if this is true then it would be quite important to know more on the changing methodology of contemporary history schoolbook practice (see e.g. Gautschi et al., 2012; or Kratochvíl, 2019), and some forthcoming projects should focus on discovering more on this theme on European scale.

An other important question is what are the lessons learnt from the scientific discourse over historical narrativity. First, there is no doubt that vivid, sometimes sharp debate took place over the issue of narrativity at all recent conferences. On the one end of the spectre were those who insisted on the most basic form of narrativity in schools, i.e. that history is simply explained through narratives. On the other end of the spectre were those who insist on the original goals of history didactics as a discipline. The advocates of this latter group argue that any work, be it a historian's field research or a school activity, should be conceptually arranged around "narrative competencies". The point of clash between these two groups is the use of primary sources: while the first group questions the legitimacy of source-based history teaching, members of the second group insist on keeping school history teaching as close as possible to its cradle: *ad fontes*.

Finally, it is obvious that under the influence of so called "most recent challenges", school history teaching in the 21 century is forced to handle a very diverse list of cognitive tasks and challenges. Probably the most common of them is the mutually intertwined structure of "narratives – multiplicity of narratives – counter narratives", which raise many further issues, in fact serious problems that particular schools and history teachers in the schools must look into eye to eye. Of course, one can simplify things as one speaker did when he/she simply asked: "Why do you have to distinguish so many narratives? Isn't there only the *narrative*?" Even if the speaker may have a point, yet, it is a fact that we have been witnessing, at least in Europe, several competitions of historical narratives. Plus, it needs to be added to the complexity of the thought that "normative curriculums", especially curriculums involving very strongly directed narratives, can hinder the development of free historical thinking.

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