

SOME REMARKS ON QUESTIONS OF TEACHING OF HISTORY IN THE PRESENT TIMES

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The author states that there is a radical transformation going on in the national historiography. He also states that some historians inadequately call this transformation period as critical. According to him, the reputation of the historians' profession is in crisis. Teaching of history is not about telling fortunes, it is about encouraging man to think, about education of the spirit, and about the formation of a citizen's opinion of things. If this is true, then history will help us to have a better life, to be more tolerant, and to understand other people.

National historiography is experiencing an exceptionally important period, we could say, a period of breakthrough in its development, which is sometimes called a crisis period. The crisis is seen in a decline in the prestige of the profession of historian itself, in a decrease in the number of historians, an increase in the number of unemployed historians, a decrease in the assignments to conduct historical researches, etc. However, the primary evidence of the crisis probably consists in the fact that historical science has been shown to be incapable of implementing its functions in a proper way: namely preservation of social traditions and human experiences and handing them down to coming generations, the function of historical foresight and some other functions. It should be noted, however, that the interest of ordinary people, or the general public in their past has not decreased. The question is, whether contemporary professional historians are able to satisfy this interest.

The fact of becoming aware of the crisis in historical science conditioned the efforts to overcome it. Sometimes it is implemented in contradictions, even painfully – by giving up obsolete opinions and schemes, looking for new methods of investigations into historical phenomena and facts. The steady assessments, stereotypes and conceptions are being overcome. The need is felt for the renewal of the methodology of historical science, revision of traditional approaches to the assessment of historical events, by the introduction of interdisciplinary research methods accumulating the results from sociology, psychology, demography, anthropology,

geography, etc., which significantly enriched world science. Historians belonging to the well-known *Annales* school wrote about the necessity of cooperation between the historical science and other scientific branches as early as during the inter-war period. According to Marc Bloch, a significant representative and one of the founders of this stream in historiography (he founded the journal *Annales d'Histoire Économique et Sociale* together with L. Febvre), historical science enriched with such contacts is predetermined to become leading and synthesizing science. Another well-known twentieth-century historian Arnold Toynbee (1889–1975) wrote: “It is necessary to connect history and the social sciences in uniform understanding of human affairs.” It should be noted that “the purposefulness of systematic, deep, and all-round studies and acquisition of experiences and results of current foreign historiography is felt more and more strongly. There are favourable conditions today. The possibilities for mutual useful contacts are being extended and beneficial help by colleagues from abroad can be expected. For instance, a seminar was held in the Kiev-Mohylan Academy in March 1994 initiated by the representatives of the international organization Project for Civic Education under the title Transformation of Historical Education in Ukraine, also attended by the author of this paper. The historians from post-communist countries must make an effort to acquire the achievements of world historiography and to realize that at present they have to undergo continuing all-round education to avoid spiritual provincialism, in order to be able to accept new knowledge, because in many sections of our historiography our backwardness with respect to the world level is marked. It particularly concerns the research into the issues of mentality, culture, the role of ethno-psychological factors, evolution of socio-demographic structures, etc.

The situation in historical science described above can also be observed in the teaching of history at secondary schools and at universities. It should be said straightforwardly that in the last years there has been chaos in education, particularly in lecturing on history. In the situation of the deep changes taking place in the republics of the former Soviet Union, an urgent question comes to the fore concerning the teaching of history at secondary schools and at universities. The contribution brings some considerations on the issue, which should, in our opinion, be a subject of discussion.

The argumentation that the teaching of history requires improvement, innovation, and up-dating, could hardly be denied or doubted. It not only concerns the removal of the so-called “white places”, evident falsifications, etc. but also a much deeper structural, and conceptual reconstruction of teaching. The so-called “sterile history”, i.e. history purified of “unwanted” facts, comparisons, judgements, in principle non-problematic history, which was of moralizing character aimed at mechanical acquisition of certain empirical material and dogmatic evaluations has long been taught in post-communist countries for well-known reasons. In other words, it was “history without history”, from which analytical and critical elements were actually excluded; ideological approaches, applied till today, though the ideology has changed, prevailed in explaining historical events, processes, and facts.

This is why the preparation of history and its corresponding interpretation, which adapts the past to the present needs, continues “successfully”. Unfortunately, we are only at the start of the path leading from the declaration of real tasks in the teaching of history, in the shaping of the thoughts and souls of young people, in the acquisition of such historical knowledge, which would be conducive to the maintenance of the historical memory of a nation and its self-awareness, to actual implementation. Therefore, in the current over-politicized atmosphere it is very important to avoid pointless extremes, categorical conclusions, hypertrophic and resolute assessments.

The history taught in our secondary schools and universities has long been of a descriptive character, or, to be more precise, it was the history of events with political and economic problems in the forefront (in teaching and in textbooks). Such questions, as for example the history of culture, religion, and churches, questions of the mentality of ordinary people, position of different social layers and groups, their contribution to the development of society and many other aspects belonging to the domain of the history of society have been almost ignored, and, if they are mentioned at all, only as an appendage which did not play any special role in the historical process. Such an evident shift of emphasis toward economics and politics, which was detrimental to the chapters on other aspects of the history of society, was especially characteristic of modern and the most recent history. A. J. Gurevič pointed to some sad consequences of this state and wrote: “With the loss of man in history, historians lost their reader.”¹

In the meantime, the French historians of the Annales school proved that the exploration of humans not only within the coordinates of their political behaviour and economic activities but also in everyday life, personal worldview, manifestations of social psychology, allows us to create a fuller, more impartial picture of the life of people in the past in every aspect, to understand deep processes and driving forces in history. It is typical that the title of the first volume of the fundamental work of the well-known representative of this current, Fernand Braudel, is *Les Structures du quotidien* (The Structures of Everyday Life).² Historical events in which people take part are not determined so much by objective conditions but mainly by “the events”, which took place in their heads, consciousness and their souls under the influence of those circumstances, the influence of which does not always have an immediate character. M. Tartakovskij put it correctly as follows: “In descriptive history, the epoch is elucidated through events, while in people it is mirrored more adequately.”³

¹ GUREVIČ, A. J.: *Istoričeskaja nauka i istoričeskaja antropologija*. In: *Voprosy filosofii*, 1988, Vol. 1, p. 66.

² BRAUDEL, F.: *Material'naja civilizacija, ekonomika i kapitalizm 15–18 vv.* In three volumes. Vol. 1. *Struktury povsednevnosti: vozmožnoje a nevozmožnoje* (translated by L. E. Kubbel). Moskva, Progress 1986.

³ TARTAKOVSKIJ, M.: *Istoriosofija. Mirovaja istorija kak eksperiment i zagadka*. Moskva, Prometej 1993, p. 273.

This is why, in our opinion, in the teaching of history, adequate attention should be devoted to the analysis of the day-to-day private life of people, their ordinary consciousness and mentality so as to take into account not only the systemized idea of intellectuals (writers, philosophers, state and civil representatives) but also the social awareness of the “man in the street”, which is of equal importance. This is why this socio-psychological perspective of teaching should help us to understand how simple people perceived well-known historical events, realize the mechanism of human actions, the motives of their social activities. This is also topical because their behaviour and attitudes towards certain phenomena and events often seem to us incomprehensible, even irrational from the perspective of the present; but we forget that their perception of the world, their socio-psychological reactions are usually inadequate to our looks and reactions. The actual mission of a historian is to be able to understand his/her ancestors and not to judge them (as often happens today, regrettably), “to mark” their deeds, ideas, and desires. In this connection, the words of W. Churchill are worth noticing: “If the present tries to denounce the past, it loses the future.”

Such an approach can be met in many historical papers, textbooks, and handbooks in the West. One of the numerous works published on the occasion of the bicentenary of the French Revolution is entitled *Voices of the French Revolution*. In the introduction to this amply illustrated book, its editors – renowned scientists, Richard Cobb, expert in the history of the French Revolution, and Colin Jones, director of the Centre for West-European Research of Exeter University (Great Britain) – emphasize the importance of the evidences of participants or contemporaries of revolutionary events: “We used their voices – from letters, diaries, newspaper articles, speeches, reminiscences, verses.”⁴ Each chapter of one of the best known university textbooks on the history of Western society (its fifth edition appeared recently) contains a special section entitled *Experiences from everyday life*. For instance, the chapters devoted to the nineteenth century describe such topics as urban life, work in factories, women in production, teaching in schools, etc. The chapters on the twentieth century speak about films, members of the international brigades during the Spanish Civil War, refugees, party festivals.⁵

The necessity is emerging of completing the teaching of political and economic history with social history in the broad sense of the word, containing a summary of

⁴ *Voices of the French Revolution* (Richard Cobb, general editor, Colin Jones, editor). Topsfield 1988, p. 9.

⁵ CHAMBERS, M. – GREW, R. – HERLIHY, D. – RABB, Th. K. – WOLOCH, I.: *The Western Experience*. 5th ed. Vol. 3. *The Modern Era*. New York 1991.

⁶ See STEARNS, P. N.: *European Society in Upheaval. Social History since 1800*. London – Toronto 1970. For details on the content of social history, see BREISACH, E.: *Historiography. Ancient, Medieval and Modern*. Chicago and London 1983, pp. 362–378. *The Varieties of History. From Voltaire to the Present*. (Edited, Selected and Introduced by Fritz Stern). New York 1973, pp. 430–455.

social relations. The studies of foreign experiences in this domain can also be useful.⁶ A number of works on social history as well as textbooks based on social history were published in Western countries. For instance, professors from Illinois university – authors of the known textbook *A History of Western Society* – emphasize in the introduction that social history is a primary constituent of their work.⁷ Their focus was on various topics, such as the evolution of denominations, culture, science, medicine, development of education, lifestyle, law, collective psychology, the position of children and women, food, sex, matrimonial relationships, etc. The use of similar textbooks and the corresponding learning programme has been increasing at European and American universities. It actually means that the tuition is usually the teaching of the history of society or the history of civilization in contrast to – traditional for us – the teaching of mostly political and economic history, which artificially limits and clearly impoverishes the content of the historical process. The advantage of such an approach accentuating the analysis of society as a whole is evident because it enables an all-round examination of the historical development of humankind through the eyes of human values. Within the parameters of such an approach there is a place for the analysis of the cultural, scientific, and technical achievements of humankind, new phenomena in social life and in everyday life, for the exploration of the development of the political system and mass consciousness, changes in the socio-demographic structure of society, etc. It seems to us very important, since it contributes to the formation of a “stereoscopic” look at historical events, phenomena and processes. “Society and not the state is the social ‘atom’ towards which a historian has to direct his/her attention”, A. Toynbee wrote once, and appealed for the perception of historical science as a research into human relationships since the actual subject of research is the life of society in its internal and external manifestations.⁸

At the same time, we should avoid blind copying and uncritical borrowings of conceptions and concepts from foreign historiography. Thus for instance even in the countries where historians use the term “civilization”, discussions are held on its content, or the essential signs of civilizations. The vision of a “civilized” society is known to have changed with time. We know that some nations considered those who spoke different language or had strange habits to be uncivilized. For example, the Chinese have long regarded all foreigners as “Barbarians” and for ancient Greeks Barbarians were those who did not speak Greek. Also today, a person who speaks several languages is considered to be “civilized”.⁹ The history of Western countries (including the USA and Canada) is linked through the concept of “West-

⁷ MCKAY, J. – HILL, B. D. – BUCKLER, J.: *A History of Western Society*. In two volumes. 2nd ed. Boston. Vol. 1, p. 13.

⁸ TOYNBEE, A.: *Postiženie istorii*. Sbornik. Moskva, Progress 1991, pp. 40–41.

⁹ WINKS, R. W. – BRINTON, C. – CHRISTOPHER, J. B. – WOLFF, R. L.: *History of Civilization*. In two volumes. 7th ed. Englewood Cliffs 1988, p. 13.

ern civilization”, which means that we look at it as at one whole, as at the history of one “unitary” civilization. On the other hand, the majority of scientists do not speak about “Eastern civilization” but about the “civilizations of the East”, i.e. they do not recognize a socio-cultural unity of nations and countries of the East as it is with respect to the West. There are probably reasons for this and therefore it is justified to speak of Indian and Chinese civilization but is it also necessary to establish appropriate criteria? Some concepts we use are rather conventional and often offend by their significant “Eurocentrism”. For instance, the Near and Far East are “near” or “far” only from the point of view of Europe, i.e. merely in the geographical understanding because such determinations have no sense, for example for China or Japan. For Japan, the Near East is geographically rather the “Far West”. But nowadays, Japan is ranked among the countries of the West also in school textbooks, although, naturally, not on the basis of geographical criteria.¹⁰

At last, a question arises whether civilization is always a synonym of progress, a means of self-realization or just the opposite, “a blind alley” in the development of humankind which leads to homogenization, to the averaging of the distinctiveness of nations and national cultures, the inner world of a person. History knows pseudo-civilizing acts of quasi-civilized countries, which joined “undeveloped” nations by “iron and blood” to the “achievements of civilization”. The well-known French ethnographer and sociologist Claude Lévi-Strauss confirms that the movement of humankind from primitive society to civilization can in no case be considered a progress.

In spite of these contradictions, a look at the history of humankind (or the teaching of history) as the history of civilizations has been increasingly recognized because the idea of civilization itself evoked ideas about the unity of human history a long time ago, forced people to think about what progress actually is, whether it exists and in what it consists, about the individual stages of historical development, not only in the past and the present but also in the future. History is, in a sense, composed of the shaping, formation, development, flourishing, and decline of some types of civilization. It is also evident that civilization is directly connected with socio-economic formations, including the form of production relations and the type (degree of development) of production forces. We think that the difference between the Marxist and non-Marxist interpretations of history is not as great as it has seemed to us before. In principle the same content is often included in different definitions.

A conceptual overview of the teaching of history anticipates a search for an answer to complex questions: what is a historical process? Is it the development of production forces or of culture? Technological “breakthroughs” of humankind or improvement of the foundations of civic society? The answers to these and similar

¹⁰ KREDER, A. A.: *Novejšaja istorija 1945–1993. Učebnik eksperimentalnyj dla srednej školy 11 klass. Part 2.* Moskva, INI LTD 1994.

questions will affect not only the particular content of the teaching of history but also its educational, humanistic character. Then we shall probably have to verify the assessments of certain phenomena, individual historical figures, etc. We shall explain what we have in mind and what we want to say. The first history textbook "reading for children and family" published in the USA in 1823 begins as follows: "No greater victories meant an asset either to happiness or to betterment of humans, rather the other way round."¹¹ Unfortunately, it is a paradox of history that humans remember more often the names of various tyrants, despots, merciless conquerors and other "heroes", while the names of the inventor of the wheel, the architect who designed the Colosseum or the author of the old twelfth-century Russian epic *Slovo o polku Igoreve* have been lost for ever. Maybe G. Fabre was right, when he wrote: "History... celebrates battles, in which we die, but refuses to speak about tilled lands which feed us; it remembers the names of kings and their progeny but knows nothing about the origin of wheat. Look, a nonsense of humankind."¹² Maybe the time has come to implement substantial changes in the existing system of moral-value criteria and assessments, within the coordinates of which the teaching of history proceeds.

Returning to the question of the establishment of the content of historical progress we would like to say that, on the basis of the above-mentioned thesis, humans have always been in the centre of attention of history, more and more historians, philosophers, political scientists, incline to the opinion that it is primarily the position of humans within society, their freedoms and rights that determine the progress of humankind. Even the most perfect society in the technical sense, where man lives as a serf, a wheel, a unit in the statistical "mass", cannot be considered progressive and civilized.¹³ The progressiveness of this or another type of society should primarily be judged according to whether there are conditions conducive to self-improvement.

There is another strongly required and necessary component of the teaching of history about which we should speak because its significance has constantly been underestimated in post-communist countries. The author is convinced that the true historian must be able to imagine historical events or people about which he/she lectures or writes. This is why instruction in history should be accompanied by an element of vividness in all forms (various audiovisual materials, photos, pictures, etc.). It should be borne in mind that the actively guided visual memory of pupils and students will certainly promote better and deeper understanding of the histori-

¹¹ FERRO, M.: *Kak rasskazyvajut istoriju det'jam v raznykh stranach mira*. Moskva, Vysšaja škola 1992, p. 267.

¹² BULLER, P.: *Pšenica v Kanade*. Petrograd, Novaja derevňa 1923, p. 9.

¹³ BOLCHOVITINOV, N. N.: *V poiskach novoj sistemy koordinat v mirovoj istorii*. In: Novaja i novejšaja istorija, 1994, Vol. 3, pp. 89–90.

cal material. It is not a coincidence that almost every school, university or college textbook in Western countries is amply illustrated. Regrettably, our university textbooks and handbooks of modern and recent history but also of the Middle Ages lack such an element.

The scope of this study does not enable me to deal with all sides and perspectives of such a complex problem as the re-construction and innovation of the teaching of history and with the obstacles which should be coped with on this path. We shall pay more attention not only to the backwardness and ossification of didactic principles inherited from the old system of tuition, which has not broadened the horizons of young historians, the courage of creative exploration, critical understanding of historical facts but also to the danger of so-called ethnocentrism in the teaching of history, which leads to deformation of the historical consciousness of the young generation, revives old and creates new national, or more precisely, nationalistic myths, which can be negatively reflected in both interethnic and international relations. If in Western Europe the harmfulness of such myths has been increasingly realized by scientists and teachers,¹⁴ in Eastern and Central Europe, these myths, due to the well-known events of 1989–1992, got their “second wind”. We meet such a phenomenon also in the former Soviet Union in its young states which were established after its disintegration. Over-politicization evoked by political and economic transformation in Central and Eastern Europe led to the strengthening of state paternalism and to the abuse of patriotic feelings and national consciousness for political ends. New, so-called democratic regimes, often a far cry from real democracy, try to enforce “new” democracy, under the pretext of purifying education of the old ideology. They appropriate the right to determine who is a “real” patriot and who is an “unreliable” element or even “the enemy of the state”.¹⁵

Unfortunately, a similar phenomenon is also met in historical science. The world-famous historian E. Hobsbawm made an analysis of the phenomenon in his lecture delivered in 1993 at the Central European University in Budapest. He said that in the countries of this region of Eastern Europe, history becomes a raw material for the creation of nationalistic, ethnic or fundamentalist ideologies and myths which actually insult history. He appealed therefore to historians to become honest and principled in this question. “We cannot wait till the generation change. We have to withstand formation of nationalistic, ethnic, and other myths.”¹⁶ This challenge is

¹⁴ The evidence is A Handbook of the history of Europe, published in 15 European countries, where common European civilization is placed in contrast to the handbooks of national histories used in many European countries which partly stimulate inter-ethnic intolerance. See MEIER, H. F.: *Istorija Evropy ili kak dostič obščnosti?* In: Guten Tag, 1993, Vol. 2, pp. 27–29.

¹⁵ See PUSIC, V.: *Intellectual Trends, Institutional Changes and Scholarly Needs in Eastern Europe. A New Agenda for the Social Sciences. East European Politics and Societies.* Vol. 7, No I. Winter 1993, pp. 4, 10–12.

¹⁶ HOBSBAWN, E.: *Debunking Ethnic Myths.* Open Society News. Winter 1994, p. 11.

topical for our historians as well; some of them forget professional (but not only professional) dignity and deal with the “construction” of such history which is advantageous for the new power, suitable for the present political conjuncture but which has little in common with really objective interpretation of the historical past.

Let us sum up some results. The teaching of history must correspond to the current level of the development of the human sciences. As far as the content is concerned, the topical assignment is considered to be a rational combination of fact and interpretation, problem and national history, formation and civilization approaches. The integration of social, political, economic, and cultural history is also an important task. In the process of teaching, particular attention should without fail be devoted to spiritual-psychological considerations of the development of society and the “human dimension” should be included in the cycle of the lectures on history, which would provide an image of “history from the inside” and enable to look at the known historical events through the eyes of an ordinary man. This presumes a deeper study of national culture, distinctions of mentality, family structure and other aspects of the life of the “silent majority”, the history of which had long been ignored by traditional historical science. All this will, in our opinion, mean that the teaching of history will have a more and more synthesized character. On the route towards historical synthesis great possibilities open up to historians to enrich their subject and add a real humanistic flavour.

If we stress the synthesized character of the content of the teaching of history, it does not mean that we call for a definite renunciation of some traditional forms of teaching. The descriptive history also has its advantages, which systematize different events into a connected image, summarize different data into a coherent narrative in chronological order. It is an optimum interpretation of everything valuable, approbated through the experiences of historians from various countries who used different methods and types of teaching of history. Understandably, the command of historical knowledge would be much more effective if, for example, the descriptive interpretation would be combined with components of the philosophy of history which elucidate general, crucial mechanisms of social development.

Finally, an important principle, which should be remembered by every honest historian, meaning that it is his/her duty to apply the principle of historicism and scientific impartiality in the teaching of history, is still topical. One cannot acquiesce in a status which has nothing in common with the objective truth, when it changes into non-knowing, it conforms to the demands of the particular moment. The essence of the teaching of history cannot consist in political hobbies, changeable moods and current politicized assessments but in the unbiased, scientifically dependable attitude of a historian, who is morally responsible for the education of the young generation.

Ultimately, the teaching of history is not a prophecy declared at the teacher’s desk but the awakening of ideas in humans, genuine training of their spirit, shaping of civic attitudes. It is thereby important to reach an understanding of history by the

young people, which has been formed through their own efforts, not forced by teachers, a book, TV, a film, etc. Then history will become a real “teacher of life”, able to help people to reach their objectives by the most rational and humane means, to contribute to the harmonization of their mutual relations and tolerance. We have to teach history in such a way as to help people to find their place within society and their mission in life, determine their relation to the surrounding world, offer them an incomparable feeling of living together with people of different epochs, stimulate them to conscientious and active participation in the events around us which will eventually become history.