The Development of Students’ Critical Thinking through Teaching the Evolution of School History Textbooks

A case study

ANDREI SOKOLOV

In modern Russian historiography the traditional methodology of objectivism dominates. Most historians take the view that ‘historical truth’ exists and so that history has accurate and direct lessons to provide to contemporary society. This view is translated into the school history education and generally supported by teachers. In Russia schoolteachers regard the textbook as the most important and reliable resource they have at their disposal for teaching history. And most consider making pupils remember what is written in the textbook to be their pre-eminent task. The American author James Loewen calls a similar tendency in the USA the ‘tyranny of textbooks’ (Loewen, 2000: 214). In Russia politically influential agencies, including the Duma, demand that in all Russian schools only one state-approved textbook should be used as a guarantee that the ‘correct’ ideological agenda will be implemented. And for political conservatives the only acceptable textbook is that which contains a patriotic narrative. This position is clearly in opposition to a conception of history didactics that regards the textbook not as a compendium of truth but as a place of memory. As the British experts in school textbooks Foster and Crawford put it, ‘when an individual tells a story about their past they tend not to tell it in the way it happened, but in the way they choose to remember it – nations do exactly the same’. They suggest that the intellectual and
emotional relationships between a nation’s present, future and past ensure that the powerful historical narratives in many textbooks are based upon a mixture of myth, remembrance and official knowledge (Foster and Crawford, 2006: 6). It is a conception grounded in constructivist approaches to textbook analysis. In my view the ‘tyranny of the textbook’ also arises partly from the lack of attention often paid to ‘the textbook’ in the training of teachers. Ideally, every teacher should take into consideration the constructed nature of textbooks: that any textbook is a cultural artifact which tells as much (if not more) about the present as the past. In the process of decoding its narrative(s), students can come to appreciate that it contains a ‘truth’ based on the ideas, and often stereotypes and bias, of a particular time and society, or at least social and power groups within it (Apple, 1982; Horsey et al., 2006; Lerner et al., 1995; Schlisser and Soysal, 2005; Berghahn and Schlisser, 1987; Foster and Crawford, 2006). This strong tradition of research on British and American school textbooks, their evolution and place in the educational process has been particularly helpful in illuminating these issues and in designing my own teaching course (see also Chancellor, 1970; Elson, 1964; Loewen, 1996; Marsden, 2001; Moreau, 2004; Nietz, 1961).

Regarded as one of important professional skills of the teacher, a pedagogically socio-cultural analysis of textbooks is directed to the development of students’ critical thinking. Critical thinking is a slippery concept. On the one hand practitioners understand in a general way more or less what it means, on the other it is not very clear how exactly it should be defined. Since the 1960s critical thinking has become a leading concept in the field of education, especially in history teaching. But the term is prone to different interpretations. One can agree with Cutler (2006: 71) who poses the following questions: ‘It is not uncommon for historians to say that they want to teach their students to be ‘critical thinkers’. I have heard more than a few make this claim, but what does it mean? Exactly what do critical thinkers do? Is critical thinking in history different from critical thinking in other disciplines? The fundamental basis of critical thinking, it seems to me, lies in the ability of the individual
for reasoning, formulating and evaluating arguments of both their own and those coming from another person. Thus Missimer (1990: 31) stresses alternatives in thinking: ‘critical thinking is consideration of alternative arguments in light of their evidence’. Though authors on critical thinking have never ignored the linguistic aspect of the problem, in the most recent research it has become more central. As Dauer (1989: 5) puts it, ‘language is a primary instrument for thought and communication, and we are liable to mislead or miss something if we do not pay careful attention to the use of language’. This reminds us that critical analysis of textbooks involves close analysis of the language used by authors to construct narratives. In his influential book *Metahistory*, Hayden White proposed to study the works of historians in the same way as fiction. Such theorists as White or Roland Barthes contended that narrative is not a ‘neutral’ form into which content is stuffed, but is ideologically freighted. Narrative, they claimed, serves to impose coherence, continuity and closure on the messiness of life and of historian’s sources; the historian then smoothes over the gaps and absences to create an ‘effect of the real’ (Clark, 2004: 86). The same approach may be applied to textbooks. Such analysis is essentially discursive; it is an attempt to find out what is ‘on the top of a tongue’, as the Polish historian and methodologist Topolski (1998: 12) suggests.

**The course**

What follows examines my experience in teaching an optional course ‘The Evolution of the History School textbook in England and the USA’ which covers the period from the second half of nineteenth century to the present day. In it I emphasize that the textbook is a socio-cultural phenomenon written in a certain context and often containing stereotypes and prejudices of its time. The cross-cultural approach, I suggest, helps in finding and overcoming stereotypes, educates for tolerance of different opinions, and allows students to participate in a dialogue of cultures. In 2009 I, with others, conducted experimental work with 5th year students of the faculty of history of Ushinsky Pedagogical University in Yaroslavl in order to find our
how this course helps to develop their critical thinking and their competence in critical textbook analysis. The course included an introductory seminar, lectures and discussions on selected English and American textbooks, and student presentations. In seminars students became acquainted with the terminology and methods of textbook analysis and were invited to work intensively with one paragraph called ‘The Caucasus War: Imam Shamil’ in the chapter ‘The Russian Empire in the Reign of Nicholas I’ from the textbook *History of Russia* by Sakharov and Bokhanov (2003). The importance of taking into consideration linguistic tools was particularly emphasized.

The following list of questions was proposed to the students:

1. How are the causes of the war of Russia in Caucasus explained in the text?

2. How are the peoples of Caucasus accounted? In what words are the features of their nature, their way of life, their mentality described?

3. What do the authors say about the Caucasus war? What do they say about the ways and methods that both sides used to fight? How are the difficulties with which the Russian army met in the war, explained in the text?

4. Who are called “the enemies of Russia”? Why are they mentioned as enemies?

5. Do you find any similarities or analogies with the present?

6. Why is so much space given in the text to Shamil? What lessons should his biography (in the way in which it is presented) teach? What is, in your opinion, the symbolic meaning of his figure? In what words is it expressed?

7. How are the Russians, the royal family, Russia as a country described in the text?

8. What may be said about the using of the historical sources in this paragraph?
9. What are the visual materials given in the text? Are they presented as historical sources or simply to illustrate the authors’ narrative? What impression do they create?

10. What are the political and moral lessons that are intended to be learned by Russian schoolchildren from this text?

A brief practical introduction was provided to constructivist theories, discursive analysis, ideas on decomposing the text, notions such as ‘patriotic narrative’, ‘national narrative’, and ‘imperial narrative’. Though the task was unfamiliar and difficult for the students, most were enthusiastic in engaging with it. Most of the classes in the course were conducted as lectures with elements of discussion. The students were also familiarized with the educational contexts and English and American textbooks. Special attention was given to the so called cultural wars on textbooks, the debates on the content of school history education, and the new type of textbook that appeared in some European countries after the 1970s. In the last seminar the students presented their own final work based on skills they were intended to develop during classes.

How were we to evaluate the critical thinking developed in the class? Being skeptical about quantitative methods I looked for alternative modes of evaluation. Three main strategies were selected. In order to derive feedback on the teaching the students were given a simple task after each lecture. They were asked to write a very short paper (‘surprise paper’) stating in three to five points what had surprised them when listening to the lectures. I regard surprise as important stimulus to developing critical thinking about textbooks, and historical interpretations in general. It also facilitates more flexible teaching. The most important means of gauging the effectiveness of the course for critical thinking were the students’ final (position) papers. In these the students made their own analysis of a self-selected paragraph in the modern Russian history school textbook. These were to show to what extent the students had managed to see the limits of the textbooks’ narrative and how critical they were in their analysis of the text. Two students (who presented
The student experience

The analysis of the ‘surprise papers’ demonstrated that students were unsettled when they had to deal with something unknown or unusual to them. Their surprise provided a useful starting point for comparing the native and foreign textbooks. The students found that the system they knew and the textbooks to which they were accustomed were not the only ones possible and perhaps not the best. For some it was a surprise to understand that in teaching history schoolteachers are not simply getting their pupils to learn about past events but also through textbooks implanting certain moral, political and other ideas into the consciousness of the pupils. As one of the students put it, maybe in naive way, ‘It is shocking to see the influence of textbooks on pupils’ minds and how much it is possible to manipulate them, and they themselves will not understand it’. Some were surprised about the much smaller place that national history plays in other countries than in their own and students did not expect to find that before the second half of the nineteenth century the state did not interfere in education as much as it does today. One commented: ‘To my mind the state in England should have taken the initiative in the field of school education much earlier’. Many students were surprised by the fact that in England teachers chose the textbooks according to their own understanding of events. Much surprise was expressed about the fact that English textbooks, especially earlier ones, could be very critical of the English monarchs. This arises from the fact that modern Russian textbooks in general avoid any negative characteristics of rulers. Most of the students could not imagine that in England there were no national standards before 1988. They were surprised to know that in the 1990s in the USA the debates over the standards of history education reached the level of cultural wars. The students were also surprised to learn about the features that distinguish modern Western textbooks from Russian: the tendency to avoid the author’s narrative (in
England); a variety of visual sources; accent on skills; work with the documents, etc. One student, having in mind the English textbook being studied, wrote: 'I would really like to participate in a role play on the Peace of Versailles'.

In some cases students' amazement arose from modern discourses and bias. For instance it is possible to find the influence of 'religious', 'anti-American' and 'anti-Caucasian' discourses. When it was briefly mentioned by the teacher that in the American textbooks in the nineteenth century the white race had been called Caucasian, four students expressed their surprise. It may be explained by a negative stereotyping view of the Caucasian people shared by many Russians (in rude slang these peoples are called 'blacks'). The discussion on American textbooks revealed 'anti-American' stereotypes, at least in some works, for example those by Harold Rugg a left-wing American educationalist and author of school textbooks in the 1920–30s. Most of the students understood why these textbooks had been finally called 'anti-American' and one student commented: 'he was a very brave person, because he told the truth in spite of being strongly criticized. I think that our textbooks should be written in the same way'. In the situation in Russian society where religion is regarded even in official discourse as a main factor of morality and spiritual revival, it is easy to understand comments like these: 'it is surprising to learn about the skeptical attitude towards the use of religion in teaching history'; and 'it is surprising to hear about religion as a means of forming the moral consciousness of the lower classes of society'. Though the analysis of the student papers did not provide evidence of the development of a really critical mindset, it did demonstrate clearer understanding of the central ideas of the course. If this looks like a truism or at most a small victory, there is an importance in the simple statement made by one of the students: 'When working with the text it is necessary to pay attention to small details'.

Most students chose paragraphs to review from the textbook by Sakharov and Bokhanov, mentioned above. Two of the sixteen papers demonstrated no critical analysis at all, merely repeating what was written in the book in a very simplistic way. Fourteen students
realized that they should find links between the ideas of the textbook and the context in which it was produced. In three papers a very low level of such understanding and critical thinking was demonstrated, their authors for example not able to characterize the texts in the context of their time of construction but instead looking for direct correspondence between the time described in the paragraph and our own time. These students sometimes took into consideration not the broader forces at work but only concrete events that had happened in one year or another (including in one case the ‘Olympic games in Torino in 2006 when the Russian team won the fourth place’). The analogies these students made showed a low level of historical consciousness. For instance one saw a direct connection between the policy of Catherine II and Putin: ‘President V.V. Putin, like Catherine II, conducts reforms which Russia needs a lot; these reforms are necessary for the development of the civil society in our country, effective economy and the successful development of the society’. The student even provided a table to illustrate these links. Another made the parallel between Pugachev’s rebellion and ‘establishing order’ in Chechnya.

The low level of critical thinking in some papers is demonstrated by the uncritical acceptance of a propagandistic rhetorical paradigm of the ‘evil 90s’ followed by Putin’s salutary rule when Russia, as one student put it, ‘got up from its knees’. Or, as another suggested: at the beginning of the twenty-first century ‘Russia should have solved the problems of strengthening economic and political stability, and the national and social problems that accumulated in 1990s’. The period of 1990s is seen as a ‘time of crisis’ and one of the students goes so far as to compare the 1990s with the ‘oprichnina’ of Ivan the Terrible in the sixteenth century. At that time peasants left their villages looking for the defense from powerful boyars (nobles) and rich monasteries. ‘Practically the same process had happened in Russia in 1990s’, the student wrote. ‘The textbook is written and published in 2003; it was the time of restoring the country, economically and geopolitically, of the strengthening of the vertical of power and a period of reforms’. Another student wrote: ‘The beginning of the twenty-first century for Russia is a period of the
strengthening of the apparatus of the state, Presidency, international position of the country, enforcement of the struggle against the terrorist threats, the growth of the economic well-being of the population’. Only in one paper was the increasing pressure on the press and the limitation on the freedom of speech in today’s Russia mentioned. Many students readily reproduced the language and stereotypes of official propaganda. The examples given above show that many students in the group are inclined to take the ‘official’ position about what happens in Russia for granted. In some papers evidence of ageism and nationalistic bias was also found. Thus, one student wrote about the illustrations of the non-Russian (Siberian) peoples in the seventeenth century: chukcha and buryatka on the picture are ‘already in old-age, or close to it. It would be better to give the pictures of the younger people or children smiling, or adults doing something useful’. It reflects, in my view, a demagoguery characteristic of contemporary official discourse on youth.

However, the majority of students’ final papers, at least nine, show the development of a more critical attitude towards textbooks. Two others contain remarks showing movement towards critical thinking. At least eight students concluded that patriotic (in some cases, in their words, even nationalistic) narrative can be identified in their textbook. According to one of the students, the political system of Russia at the end of the nineteenth century is described in the textbook as ‘a strong powerful empire overcoming all difficulties in a worthy manner’. Such an approach was especially mentioned by the students in connection with the foreign policy of Aleksander III: ‘Russia took back the status of great power equal to the other powers; such epithets are used about Russia: great, strong, the biggest’. Analyzing the position of Russia before and during the Crimean War the textbook, in the words of one of the students, shows Russia as a peaceful country and great power that could successfully resist the attacks of its enemies. It is emphasized in this paper that ‘the causes of the defeat of Russia in that war remain unclear. Moreover, it is not written in the paragraph that Russia was defeated, but it is stated that she finished the war in unfavorable condition’. In their analysis of the policy of Catherine II one student’s attention was attracted by the
title of the paragraph 'Powerful Steps of Empire in Foreign Policy'. It was interpreted by the student as the authors' attempt to justify the Russian activities in Poland by saying that, contrary to her allies, the Russian Empire took only ancient Russian lands: 'The pupils would be led to the conclusion that at that time the Russian policy was not aggressive, Russia only took back the native land, and did it by peaceable methods'.

Some students observed that the authors stressed the difference between Russian and Russia, on the one hand, and non-Russians and other countries on the other hand, and this was always in favor of the former. One of the papers mentions that in the description of the invasion of the Volga region and Siberia Russia is depicted like a 'progressive state' realizing its civilizing mission and giving knowledge to the peoples 'who were acquainted only with the tribal system'. In the eighteenth century with the help of Russians the peoples of Siberia 'learned how to do agricultural works, how to build good wooden houses with stoves. Thus, the civilizing mission of Russians in relation to other ethnics is stressed'. The students noticed that in recounting the Russian history of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the textbook depicted European states as 'enemies' of Russia, or at least unfriendly countries. Among them England is mentioned most, followed by Turkey and France. One student paid close attention to phrases like this: at the time of the Polish rebellion of 1863 'European countries were drunken in their anti-Russian rhetoric'; 'they suffered a maniacal fear of the mythical threat from Russia'. The Polish people are described as a proud but unthankful and cruel nation. In the account of the rebellion of 1830–31 the textbook authors contrast the Russian and Polish people: the former are described only positively, the latter negatively, and the students recognized this. One of the student papers concludes that the whole history of the nineteenth century 'is shown as a fight of a “remarkable” Russian absolutism (samoderzhavie) against the internal and external enemies. Those who supported tsarism, are presented positively; those who were not happy with samoderzhavie, nearly without exception, are depicted like the enemies of their motherland (Decembrists, zapadniki, narodniki)'. In connection with the dom-
nant patriotic textbook discourse it is worth mentioning that some papers demonstrate the attention of the students to the language of the narrative and to the selection of illustrations. For instance there are remarks concerning the terms in which the process of ‘taking’ new lands and the civilizing mission of Russia is described. The textbook authors prefer not to use the verb ‘conquer’ but see the process as ‘moving’, ‘widening’, ‘generating innovations’. On the contrary, ‘chuckchi attacked the invaders’. This student clearly realizes that the aggressive role was attributed by the textbook authors to the local peoples.

Many student papers were critical of the ways in which Russian tsars and other historical figures are depicted in the Sacharov/Bokhanov textbook. The students clearly identified the overt idealization of most of the tsars of Romanov dynasty: not only Peter I, who became an icon even earlier than Soviet times, but also his predecessors like Michail and Alexei, and successors like Nicholas I, and especially Aleksander III. For instance, one student notes, ‘the first Romanov is depicted as a clever and quiet ruler, careful but consistent in his decisions, an ideal father of the family with high moral principles who took care of his people’. Much attention is given to Nicholas I whose words and actions are considered in the textbook in the most positive way. One student writes that he could not find any different views of historians on Nicholas, and notes that the authors wrote about his ‘wisdom’, and even compared, at least indirectly, him to his brother Aleksander I in order ‘to prove that democratic reforms were not for Russia, because they always led, even in France, to revolution and “chaos”’. This paper remarks that the authors simply ignore many ‘negative features of the character of Nicholas: indifference to the people, arrogance, intolerance to free thought, the wish to have a full subordination from the others’. Attention is also paid to the fact that the textbook authors value Nicholas’s circle highly, and particularly Benkendorf and Uvarov. With irony she puts the words ‘able political figures’ in inverted commas.

Aleksander III, like Nicholas I, is an object for admiration in the textbook, and the students recognized this. He is portrayed as a
person and political leader of many capabilities. He is a soldier (a ‘brave, but careful commander’), an excellent head of the family, a ruler merciful to his subjects who did a great deal for culture (the Historical Museum) and transport (the Siberian railroad). All his actions are great and grand. One student gave an illustrative quote from the textbook: ‘the system of samoderzhavie worked with all power under him, and it demanded from him a lot of time, spiritual and physical efforts’. Aleksander III did his best to strengthen the state and to fight against terrorism, because it was ‘really a shame for the country of Russia’. The struggle against the internal enemies is a mission of all the people of the country. The student makes the following comment:

The authors of the textbook try to convince the pupils that he took only right decisions. He is just the kind of leader Russia needs today. And even more: we have such a leader already and it is necessary to support all his beginnings to strengthen the position of Russia as quickly as it is possible… The image of an effective leader is formed on the pages of the book, and only a strong leader who doesn’t tolerate revolutions, rebellions and criticism of his official political course is able to develop modern Russia.

The students paid attention to the position of Pobedonostzev under Aleksander III, and especially in the context of Russian Orthodox Church. One student writes: ‘The words of the textbook have links with what happens in the sphere of religion today: From the 1880s the church began to play an active role as a second Ministry of People’s Education’. This student finds the characterization of Pobedonoszev one-sided, and makes even more interesting observations on the Russian economy and the condition of the working class. In the student’s view, the aim of the textbook is to convince pupils that the life of the workers was not as hard as we used to think. This student asks: ‘If the government created positive results and the labor code was one of the fairest in the world and cities had a good self-government and all the estates were in prosperity, why then did the revolution of 1905 happen?’ The student’s conclusion is as follows: the authors of the textbook ‘followed the modern tendency
to smooth problems over. This student clearly feels that today there is a tendency to keep silent about problems faced by workers and issues of their rights. It is clear that many students were becoming more able to see the partiality of approach in the textbook and its interpretation of history.

In addition, some students noticed a lack of gender balance in the textbook. One example relates to Catherine II: 'whose name', one points out, 'is mentioned more seldom than the names of the military commanders – the real heroes in this paragraph'. Another example is of Aleksander III and his ministers and favorites, in relation to whom one student writes: 'Men are shown as makers of history; they are shown as wise, fair, far-looking, sincere patriots'. But in general such observations about the gender aspect of the textbook narrative receive less attention in the students’ essays than might be expected. The explanation lies in the male-centered view still dominant today: men are the actors in history.

In the selective interviews the students recalled the skills they gained from the course: to express their own opinion; to prove own positions; to analyze information; to filter information; to think critically; to be critical about what is said on TV, press, news etc; to think why the news is presented in the way it is; to judge argumentation. Asked about the professional skills they developed as future historians and history teachers, the students gave the following answers: not to rely on only one textbook in teaching but to provide pupils with different texts (this especially important in senior classes); to analyze textbooks critically; to ask questions; to work with sources; to pay attention to details in texts; to find the main points and key words; to compare texts; to use practical tasks for their pupils. They were not so sure about ‘third generation’ skills because of lack of practical experience, but they agreed that a teacher trained in critical thinking about textbooks would influence their pupils to work in this way. As one remarked: 'It goes from you to us, and from us to schoolchildren'. And another added that the teacher who understands the importance of critical thinking, 'would support and shape the individual attitude of the pupils to their studies'. The following recommendations for teachers were formulated by the students: the
need to spend more time working with contemporary school history textbooks; to devote more time to practical analysis of foreign textbooks and not only to discuss but to engage in practical tasks derived from English and American textbooks that can help develop critical thinking and at the same time improve English language skills.

Conclusions

The analysis of the students' final papers and the project in general leads to the following conclusions: Firstly, though the student work was not as effective in demonstrating critical thinking as I expected at the outset of the project, it proved a positive challenge for many students. It provided a good beginning for them to start thinking about the limitations of their textbooks as patriotic narratives and their socio-cultural influences. Meeting with the unknown in a field they supposed to be very familiar to them created the following paradigm of learning: from surprise to doubt; from doubt to critical thinking. Secondly, there is a correlation between the critical thinking demonstrated and the students' learning achievements in general. Both the level of critical thinking in their papers and their marks were higher as a result. Thirdly, I enriched my own teaching experience. In 2010 and 2014 when I taught the same course I introduced some changes. I gave more time to the 'theoretical' aspects and to discussion about the methods of textbook analysis, and paid more attention to practical work with the textbooks themselves. And last but not least: my experience in teaching the course on textbooks confirms the observations made during the school practices of the students and in the work with the teachers of history. Improvement in teachers' abilities to reflect critically about teaching materials such as textbooks is highly necessary. Only in this way will we develop both in teachers and pupils a 'feeling' for history, aspiration for creative teaching and learning, and the will to find personal meaning in their history studies. This may help students of the subject at all levels to consider history not as a boring subject but to study it with enthusiasm and personal meaning.
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