the war in Ukraine and history education of refugee pupils in Poland

Joanna Wojdon

The article presents the process of developing history teaching material for Ukranian refugee pupils in Poland in the months immediately following the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. Initiated as a small-scale contribution to the aid for Ukrainian refugees in Poland, thanks to the support of EuroClio – European Association of History Educators, it developed into a project that combined humanitarian aspects with inter- and transnational history education, able to build upon the concepts of multiperspectivity and historical thinking and help teachers and students address the challenges of multilingual and multicultural classrooms. Written from the author's personal perspective of the project coordinator, it discusses the achievements and difficulties of the work of a group of educators, translators, sponsors and web-publisher with an aim to encourage reflection and discussion on history education of war refugee children in the school system of a receiving country.

Keywords: education for refugee children, History education, history textbooks, Russian-Ukrainian war, Ukrainian refugees in Poland

In this article, I present some of my personal experiences from the process of development of history teaching material for Ukranian refugee primary school pupils in Poland in spring 2022, i.e. in the months immediately following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Initiated as a small-scale contribution to the aid for Ukrainian refugees in Poland, thanks to the support of EuroClio – European Association of History Educators, it developed into a project that combined humanitarian aspects with inter- and transnational history education, able to build upon the concepts of multiperspectivity and historical thinking and help teachers and students address the challenges of multilingual and multicultural classrooms. I draw upon my own work with a group of educators, translators, sponsors and web-publisher and employ my personal experiences, observations, and reflections in order not so much to popularize this particular project (which is of bilateral rather than of wider international scope) but rather to shed light on the process of develpoing history teaching material in the context of war and conflict and to encourage reflection and discussion on the problems and opportunities, options and priorities associated with history education of war refugee children in the school system of a receiving country.

I start with sketching the situation at Polish schools receiving Ukrainian refugee pupils in March, 2022 and history teachers' concerns that were perceived as rather marginal from the macro-perspective of the on-going military conflict and humanitarian crisis, yet impacted everyday life in many Polish schools. Then I discuss the potential of open access e-textbooks versus other available teaching-learning tools and move to the core phases and aspects of adapting them to the use in mixed Polish-Ukrainian classrooms. The concluding part focuses on the achievements and failures

of the project as well as its wider potential and my own role(s) and perspective(s).

The war in Ukraine brought hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian refugees to Poland, starting from the very first day of February 24, 2022. Mothers with children constituted the majority of them. At first, there were no specific legal regulations as for dealing with the refugee pupils in Poland, and individual school headmasters were making individual decisions in order to admit them to schools. Then, administrative decisions on ministerial level were made that provided pupils with three options: (1) to continue online education within the Ukrainian system, (2) to join so-called "preparatory departments" with intensive Polish-language training, (3) to directly join regular Polish classes. By the end of the school year 2021/2022 there were 160,000 Ukrainian refugee pupils in the Polish school system (140,000 in primary schools and 20,000 in secondary school – see Pietrusińska & Nowosielski, 2022 for detailed statistics and presentation of the regulations). At least the same number of Ukrainians of school age remained outside the Polish school system (mostly secondary school pupils continuing education in their Ukrainian schools online). Some of them combined on-site Polish education with online lessons in Ukraine.

As the Ukrainian pupils were joining regular classes in spring 2022, teachers started voicing their helplessness in the media, for the situation was new to them, and not only in general terms, in the face of the political situation or psychological problems of students, but also in terms of didactical challenges. Observing the Facebook group "History teachers" (*Nauczyciele historii*), a private group with ca. 5,000 members, as part of a larger ongoing research project, first partial results of which will be published in 2023, I could easily find out that history teachers had not been prepared to work in multicultural classes with diversified language skills. Furthermore, "methodological centers" (whose role is to assist teachers in facing the challenges related to methodology of teaching) were not able to help much as the situation was new to them too. Thus, individual teachers were to develop their own solutions.

I am not aware of any systematic research on practices they were introducing in history education. History teachers-authors of the educational podcast "Podcasterix"[1], Jacek Staniszewski, Aleksander Pawlicki and Jakub Lorenc from one of the private schools in Warsaw shared their observations and recommendations. In episode 7 of their podcast titled "What should a history teacher take care of when talking about the war in Ukraine?" they pointed out that the first step was to provide refugee students with psychological support and help to work through the trauma, and only then to deal with historical education. They also saw the potential resulting from the inclusion in the teaching-learning process of a new view of the past, which was carried by Ukrainian students.

Gradually, a number of teaching aids were designed or just popularized to assist teachers and pupils. On the one hand, links to Ukrainian studies (also in Polish) were disseminated among teachers, which were to give Polish teachers an idea of what their new students had been learning at home. On the other hand, studies on the history of Poland in the Ukrainian language, published by the Institute of National Remembrance several years before, were popularized (Kamiński & Korkuć, 2016; Mędrzecki & Bracisiewicz, 2015).

However, including these materials in history lessons required a lot of effort from teachers, and challenged the dominant school practice, i.e. following a selected history textbook. Developing Ukrainian versions of Polish textbooks would have taken months while the teachers needed them within days, or weeks at most. Teaching Polish and Ukrainian pupils simultaneously, in one classroom, also posed a challenge.

Electronic textbooks, developed successively since 2014 and made available on the Integrated Educational Platform ZPE2, came to the rescue (see Wiszewski, 2016 for details on the e-textbooks project). Particular lessons on this platform create separate entities and can function independently. They are available under an open license, which allows to adjust and modify them, and also to translate them into foreign languages. Thanks to the contacts acquired previously while working on these materials, I was able to get access to ZPE publishing tools. That is how the idea originated of developing teaching materials in the Ukrainian language that would be identical to the ones in Polish and suited for immediate use at school.

In the first, exploratory phase, thanks to the support of Jacek Staniszewski, a history teacher, school headmaster and ambassador of EuroClio (European Association of History Educators), a short survey in the Facebook group "History teachers" (*Nauczyciele historii*) was developed that helped us determine what content students were to deal with at different levels of education in mid-April 2022. Fortunately, it turned out that the differences between individual schools were minimal. This can, quite paradoxically, probably be attributed to the centralized core curriculum and highly unified textbooks in Poland (the reality that I had been previously complaining about on several occasions, for didactical reasons – see e.g. Wojdon, 2017).

The units selected in this way were the first to be translated and then published on the ZPE platform, so that the chapters in Polish and Ukrainian would function side by side. Students in a mixed classroom could acquire the content in their own languages. Then they could either perform interactive tasks provided by e-textbooks or interact in the classroom with their peers in Polish, in Ukrainian or in English. The initiative would still remain in the teachers' hands, but at least they would be equipped with materials, the Polish version of which was most often already known to them.

Before that happened, however, it was necessary to create a team of translators and editors. Originally, automated translation was considered as the cheapest option, but the quality of the texts obtained in this way was highly unsatisfactory, considering that they were supposed to be educational materials in the field of humanities. From the beginning I assumed that while a lot of work could be done on a voluntary basis, translation – if it was to be reliable and fast – would have to be paid for. As the refugees were arriving, demand for translators was huge, but the number of people looking for a job in this profession also increased significantly. Eventually, all translations within the project have been performed by native speakers of Ukrainian, half of whom are war refugees, which gave the project an additional, humanitarian, dimension. The core of the team was made up of Olha Smolnytska, Viktoriia Amelina and Irina Rozhdestvenska, with a number of other translators engaged in individual chapters.

In terms of finances, Euroclio and its executive director Steven Stegers offered their support and in just a few days interested the American foundation History CO:LAB3 in the project. After a short conversation with its founder, Fernande Raine, via one of the instant messengers and a preliminary estimate of the amount of money required to translate materials for primary school to be used by the end of the school year – but without any extensive application forms and other paperwork – the funds were wired to Euroclio and subsequently paid to the translators (with the accounting burden taken by them).

Other important tasks were performed by Iryna Kostyuk, EuroClio ambassador from Lviv in Ukraine, whom I have already collaborated with in several European educational projects. She has

responded with considerable enthusiasm to my invitation to work as editor and proofreader. We both regarded education as a kind of "home front", worth developing in addition to the military one as it was also a form of opposition against the Russian aggression. I also treated Iryna's participation in the project as a form of insurance against charges of seeking indoctrination or denationalization of the young generation of refugees. She has been proofreading the translated texts not only in terms of language, but also in terms of content. We agreed that in the event that any elements of the textbook narrative turned out to be unacceptable to Ukrainian readers, at least the Ukrainian version (but perhaps also the Polish one) would be supplemented with explanations. Taking into account the reports from the meetings of the Polish-Ukrainian Textbook Commission, I considered the necessity to face such challenges (Sanojca, 2022). So far, however, only very few issues required additional comments for the Ukrainian students, and they referred to potential misunderstanding of certain historical terms (such as the *Polanie* tribe or scythemen), and not to controversial issues from the Polish-Ukrainian past. I believe that the harmonious cooperation benefitted both from the balanced content of the ZPE materials, and from the flexibility and open-mindedness of the Ukrainian educators, who expressed the conviction that Ukrainian refugee children should participate in education and, more broadly, in the culture of the countries they go to, and not remain solely in Ukrainian culture. This is a consequence of the decision to emigrate, they argue, and such an approach will make it easier for them to function in the host societies. The concept of multiperspectivity, as developed and popularized by Robert Stradling (2003), that forms the basis for many if not all Euroclio's endeavors, was shared by the Polish e-textbook authors and Ukrainian educators involved in the project. Apparently, it has worked well in these extreme circumstances of education in the time of war, at the place close to the on-going war, involving the societies with the experiences of the past wars and conflicts deeply rooted in historical consciousness, collective commemorations and traumas.

While choosing materials for translation, I tried to reconcile the requirements of the current core curriculum*4* with the content available on-line which had been prepared prior to the last reform of the education system in Poland*5*. We decided to start with the materials for primary school pupils as they more frequently chose to enroll to Polish schools rather than stay on-line, and at the same the language barrier was tougher while older pupils were quite efficient with the help of English and support for them seemed to be less urgent. I also hoped that the materials originally designed for primary school could be adapted for high school lessons, too.

Lessons for grade 4, which in the core curriculum is designed as the introduction to Polish history seen through the lenses of biographies of prominent historical figures, constituted a separate subproject. There were no materials of this kind available on ZPE platform (as they were incompatible with the previous curriculum). Therefore, I decided, with my private funds, to commission a translation of an informal textbook which I developed in 2019 and self-published on the Academia.edu platform, and then deposited in the Digital Library of the University of Wrocław*6*. Titled "History for Miłosz"*7*, the book follows a set of figures enumerated in the curriculum but uses selected aspects of their biographies to teach historical thinking and acquire skills of post-modernist historical education. As proposed by Peter Seixas (2000, cf. https://historicalthinking.ca), Sam Wineburg et al. (2012), this material pays more attention to "how history is done" and "how we learn and tell about the past" than to "what actually happened in the past" or "why X shall be commemorated".

Links to ready-made lessons in Ukrainian were published on my Facebook profile*8*, as well as in the groups "History teachers" and "KNH+" – the group of Members of the Historical Sciences

Committee of the Polish Academy of Sciences. This made it possible to observe, at least to some extent, teachers' reactions. I have not noticed any critical comments but instead teachers recommended to each other the links to the lessons. Academia.edu provided statistics of download rates of the 4th grade chapters. They boosted in spring, with up to over two hundred visits per day, but by the end of the school year they came to a kind of a stalemate.

During the summer break, the interest in teaching aids somehow faded away – which seemed to be natural at this period, but then at the beginning of the new school year, teachers' response to newly published materials was close to none. It seems that pupils managed to overcome language barrier or found their own ways to work with Polish language textbooks. On the other hand, teachers apparently became more confident in working with multiethnic classes.

The question remains open if extending the project beyond informal or semi-formal framework was within our reach and if it would prove to be more effective in terms of time, scope, outreach or sustainability. Were there other (better?) ways of addressing the needs of various stakeholders of history education in these particular circumstances and more generally? How to assess effectiveness of particular solutions?

It is still too early to draw any definite conclusions, especially that the military and humanitarian situation remain dynamic. Even if it was just a tiny contribution to the efforts to overcome the evil brought by the war it was worth the efforts and I am deeply grateful to all the contributors and users of this project. By no means was the project intended to serve as a model solution. It was rather an attempt to address the overwhelming situation from the grassroots level – though I tried my best to combine various professional roles that I play or used to play in the past: from an academic researcher of textbooks, historian, author of teaching materials, through teacher and teacher trainer specializing in the theory and practice of history didactics, involved in international cooperation, to project coordinator, trying to make use of the tools and resources developed in the time of peace and (relative) stability.

The translated chapters have played their (positive) role when they were most needed. I do hope, moreover, that their influence will extend beyond that particular moment – for the lessons learnt in bilateral communication and cooperation, as a form of bridge-building between our two countries and of peaceful opposition against the military aggression. Thus, the values of cooperation, trust, openness and understanding proved to be essential in the time of crisis. The materials exist and the time will show if they also have any "afterlife", either in terms of school practice or of more theoretical reflections on the potential of post-modernist approaches to history education which are open to a variety of opinions and foster dialogue on multiple interpretations of past events.

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