
photo: Jaroslav Reich

Peter Vanek, Michal Veselei

Pop-History as a Training Ground for Media Literacy (Comics in History Teaching)

ABSTRACT

The study focuses on the development of media literacy in teaching history, and such literacy is understood to be an integral part of historical literacy. By the end of their education, students should be capable of addressing different historical issues and problems by means of critical analysis of sources, taking their own position on the past and engaging in historical and commemorative culture. Such engagement with historical culture means that students should know how to approach diverse forms of remembering the past and its various depictions in the present. Media literacy thus represents the students' ability to systematically and critically analyse (deconstruct) the depiction of the past in the mass media and in so-called unconventional histories or pop-history (comics, films, fiction, PC games, selected social network accounts, etc.) as well as their ability to work with such depictions. Media reports and the products of pop-history are a means of processing and distributing historical information, the primary goal of which is not historical education. A component of the analysis of pop-history is determining the addressee of the work, the intention of the creators, the processes of creation, the nature of the work and its individual elements (historical, creative, authentic, interpretative, significant, supplemental). The connecting link with historical literacy is the way in which a specific depiction can help students create an image of history (construction) and how it can help them talk about history (reconstruction). On this basis, the study analyses the comic book Slovenské dejiny v obrázkoch [Slovak History in Pictures] as an illustrative example of developing media literacy in a school environment. This is the first work of its kind on the Slovak book market, and research and didactic attention has not yet been devoted to it. The study analysis focuses on key events in the 20th century history, which are given special attention in school education. The carried out media-historical analysis within the framework of deconstruction has identified stereotypical, polemical, misinterpretative, and conspiratorial parts of the comic book, which students can rewrite according to their current state of knowledge after prior instruction. The comic book also contains fragmentary or blank spaces that can be filled in during teaching with students' own creations. As part of this activity, students construct an image of the past and reconstruct it into a media output, thereby forming their media and historical literacy and exploring their intersections and differences.

KEY WORDS

Comics. History. Media Literacy. Pop History. Slovak History. Twentieth Century.

https://doi.org/10.34135/mlar-25-02-13

1 Introduction

In contemporary history teaching, the question of civic and leisure-time use of history is increasingly being raised and – as a result – students, future citizens, are becoming active subjects of historical culture in all its complexity. Information about the past will flow to them from different directions and in various forms. Developing media literacy, which is here understood as an integral part of historical literacy, thus becomes an important component of history teaching. On the one hand, there is critical and responsible work with information from various sources, including the assessment and evaluation of information content. This is a question of the evidence-based teaching of any subject. In our case, then, this means the shaping of historical knowledge by verifying historical information (creation of historical facts) originating mainly from historical sources. On the other hand, however, it is also necessary to focus especially and explicitly on an analysis of the processing, dissemination and critical reception of information through traditional media, such as television, radio and print, as well as new media based on digital coding (Voráč & Kopecký, 2023), because history is often a common part of journalism.

History is debated in diverse outputs or it forms thematically independent outputs. What's more, with many formats, such as podcasts, historical columns in daily newspapers or specialised social media accounts, the difference between informing, collective commemoration of events and entertainment is blurred. Last but not least, history is manipulated. This may involve intentional activities and distortions caused by an insufficient understanding of history or by argumentative transgressions. Therefore, the ability to detect or uncover manipulative techniques and sources spreading fake news, conspiracies or propaganda is part of media and historical literacy. At the same time, history is further used in commercial products (comics, films, fiction, PC games, theatrical performances, sightseeing tours, etc.), and as with mass media, education is not the primary goal of commercial products. These are intended to fill leisure time and bring profit, but within the framework of general media literacy, students must know how to approach individual products, critically analyse them and evaluate their various aspects and contents. They must also be able to take part in discussions and communication in various forms and contexts (De Abreu, 2020).

Media education can be a separate teaching subject for developing media literacy, or its central points can be reflected in civic education. This will depend on the curricula of individual countries. The fact remains, however, that aside from providing students with the tools and procedures for media analysis, media literacy also requires a practical and specific overlap into various teaching subjects. Thus, in history, we move from the construction of the past based on the examination of sources to the analysis of the portrayal of the past in different media. Therefore, in this study we understand media literacy in a broader context (the medium as a bearer of historical information outside formal or informal education) or as a certain sequence: the ability to learn historically (sources), the ability to analyse the portrayal of history in commercial products with a given topic (media) and the ability to analyse the use of history and information about it in traditional and new media (mass media). This knowledge and analysis are based namely on the same principles.

In the study, we focus more closely on one commercial product – i.e., a comic – a popular type of literature among students. This is why comics represent a good training ground for media literacy. First, we summarise theoretically the development of defining historical literacy (from its narrow understanding to media expansion) and point to the use of comics in history teaching. Then, using a selected comic book, *Slovenské dejiny v obrázkoch od najstarších čias po súčasnosť* (Zavarská et al., 2008), we analyse sequences mainly about the 20th century. Finally, we assess the didactic possibilities and limits of using the analysed work from the viewpoint of developing media literacy.

Slovenské dejiny v obrázkoch was published by the Otto Publishing House in Prague in 2008. It is the first and only work in Slovak devoted to history from the oldest times up to modern times. It offers a series of short sequences (double pages), each focusing on a selected historical figure or event. The text was written by Sabína M. Zavarská and Pavol Kršák, and the illustrations were drawn by Igor Danay. Their comic-like treatment and the effort to create a simple and understandable historical overview still draw attention today, though no more systematic attention has been devoted to its use. Therefore, we focused on key events in 20th-century's history which are given special emphasis in school education. We assumed that the older publication date would create certain interpretative collisions that can be meaningfully used in teaching history to demonstrate the pluralism of historical interpretations and the development of knowledge. Based on this assumption, we expected the creation of an inspirational space for a new elaboration of the selected historical event in the form of a student comic as a direct experience with media issues in the context of pedagogical constructivism. The process we chose can be generalised and used to analyse any pop-history product that teachers want to incorporate into their teaching as an educational resource.

2 Historical Literacy: From Knowledge to Media Reflection

By the end of the 20th century, the term *historical literacy* was used more loosely and without a clear definition (Madaras, 1991), and it was understood to be an expression for historical knowledge that every student should have (Partington, 1994; Zinsser,1995). Although another view stressed the procedural side, it ultimately focused on the production of knowledge, too. Historical literacy was considered to be the ability to critically assess evidence, and only on the basis of such assessment adequate historical knowledge can be formulated (Perfetti et al., 1995).

The procedural direction of thinking about literacy ultimately put the analysis of historical sources at the centre of student work (Wineburg, 2005), and it is such critical analysis that should specifically lead not only to knowledge, but also to a deeper understanding of the past (Lee, 2011; Downey & Long, 2015). Students in history classes are thus taught to think like historians. Historical literacy was therefore defined as a set of strategies and skills that scholars use to construct a picture of the past from historical sources (Nokes, 2012). Being literate, therefore, means being able to read historical sources with sufficient understanding to create an image of the past from them and to be able to talk about or write about such an image.

The semantic range of the mentioned concept was expanded by one more aspect in the curriculum theory. This was the connection of historical knowledge with everyday life of a student, which made it possible to view literacy as the ability to engage in civic life (Taylor & Young, 2003) or the historical and commemorative culture of the society in which the student lives (Körber, 2015). If, however, we start to consider the need for preparation for civic and private life, we must admit that historical scholarly discourse makes up only a small fraction of the information about the past that students will come across during their lifetimes. This discourse is usually represented by educational and popular literature, documentary films or memory institutions and places of collective memory. What's more, to what extent students pay attention to it in adulthood is questionable.

The past that students will encounter will rather have various unconventional depictions. Typical representatives of unconventional histories are pop-history products, such as films, fiction, comics or PC games with historical settings (Bartlová, 2003). Unconventional histories are characterised by subjectivity and emotionality. In their depictions, conventional causality and objectivity weaken, while the metaphorical nature and historical fiction increase. They are presented by means of various media and are produced by authors of various professions who do not necessarily have a historical education. Unconventional histories do not primarily address the cognitive component of a personality, nor do they focus on education and formation. This

does not mean, however, that they end up on the margin of history. On the contrary, by using history, they touch on the core of historical rationality, which they depict creatively. They can afford to say what is between the lines of sources; they can deduce what was not recorded and give voice to those who were ignored in the past (Domańska, 2006). Along with their relaxation function, they contribute to the preservation and transmission of collective memory and likewise to civic engagement with sensitive and controversial chapters of history. For people to be able to effectively and adequately benefit from pop history in a given direction, they must learn how to approach it.

These are therefore non-scientific products derived from scientific historiography. Their purpose is not to popularize the results of historical knowledge based exclusively on the authenticity of historical sources (e.g., encyclopedias or documents). They use such knowledge to work with historical narratives for entertainment (e.g., the Asterix and Obelix comics), leisure activities (e.g., fiction or educational tours with historical themes), or participation in public discussion and reflection on collective memory (e.g., the theather play *Hitlerov prezident* about the Slovak head of state during World War II). To this end, they may overgeneralize or speculate about knowledge, which the viewer or reader may mistake for objective facts. On the other hand, they may provide a great deal of accurate facts and interpretations of the past, but in a non-scientific way. This is therefore a matter of artistic or media communication.

In this regard, we distinguish in our study between unconventional histories and their products (often highly commercial) and works that use historical information in a limited, random and unsystematic way (e.g., films or fiction with multiple timelines, PC games, theatrical performances with historicising elements but with no connection to a specific historical period, or a recreational stay with an optional trip to a certain monument).

The commercial and mass nature of pop-history products can also have a cultivating effect. According to cultivation theory, long-term exposure to media content that repeats certain narratives contributes to the creation of a worldview based on those narratives. If the media have sufficient reach and present a consistent image of the world, the perceiver perceives it as objectively given, regardless of the fact that it may be an artistic interpretation or fragmentary (Gerbner et al., 2002). In this way, historical stereotypes can be maintained in society or excessive simplifications of the past can be created.

On the other hand, unconventional histories can overcome history that was written in the past from the perspective of the victors and historical actors, who were mainly men. This understanding of history was often reflected in commercial depictions of the past, creating a vicious circle. Again, from the perspective of cultivation theory, stereotypes are successfully spread in the media, even though the surrounding world may or may not correspond to them (Signorielli, 2001). The risk of pop history may therefore be its constant dissemination due to the selection of well-known historical events, but the benefit may be the portrayal of the past from the perspective of previously marginalized groups (women, children, slaves, or migrants). The undesirable or unreflective effect of cultivation also points to the importance of developing media literacy in students.

In deciphering and interpreting a certain pop-history product adequately, students must be able to systematically and critically analyse it. They must be able to deconstruct it using accompanying questions, and on this basis, they can then start to form their own ideas about the past. Such construction of their image of the past should ultimately lead to its external reconstruction, i.e., to the ability to tell other people about their own construct (Körber, 2015). Students at the same time should be aware that a film, PC game or comic is an interpretation of its creators that depicts the past only fragmentarily in order to connect it with other creative requirements and limitations. The individual historical information contained in a given work needs to be critically assessed, compared with others and included in a broader context. Thus, this information can be argumentative evidence in the construction of the past, but it does not have to be (Downey & Long, 2015). Last but not least, the aesthetic, entertainment and

utility functions of these products also need to be perceived, as they are often their primary goal. Our attention, however, is focused on students' interest or leisure-time involvement in historical culture.

The set of questions that students consider when analysing pop-history products used as educational resources in teaching history can be divided into two groups:

- Questions focused on the description of the work: Who created the work and when and under what circumstances? What was the intention of the creators, and for whom is the work intended? How did the creators proceed when producing the work? What does the work depict and what elements does it use? How is the work argued?
- Questions focused on the historical aspect of the work: Which elements of the work are key for constructing a picture of the past? To what extent can they share in this picture? Which arguments do they support? What other sources need to be added to these elements to create a more complex or more scholarly picture of the past? Can the work be considered reliable?

These generally formulated questions help students penetrate the selected product, which often uses symbolism, metaphors, irony or generalisations and represents the author's interpretation of the past. The author's aim may also be to capture the atmosphere of the period and the moods of historical actors who are not mentioned in the sources, but who the author reasonably assumes could have existed. The same questions are asked in the case of mass media analysis, but they are adjusted to a specific output; e.g., who informs about what from history and whom and why, and what arguments are made in the report and how, or what linguistic means are used? Therefore, the exact wording of the questions is adjusted based on the specific product, e.g., the comic strip we are observing herein.

In general, a comic strip is considered a work combining the visual and literary treatment of a certain story, which is presented through interconnected panels (pictures) into sequences (chapters). Thus, we understand the term *sequence* to mean a continuous part of the story that has a beginning, middle and end or that divides the comic strip into larger thematic units. The literary component is processed in the form of dialogue bubbles of the actors, frames intended for the narrator or accompanying text under the panels (McCloud, 1994). The graphic layout of the story itself then determines its pace and rhythm (Eisner, 1985).

The story being presented is of various genres, from action, adventure, sci-fi and fantasy comics to autobiographical or historical comics. Their purpose may be primarily entertaining or educational, but also artistic. Depending on their length, we distinguish short comics consisting of only a few panels (so-called strips), notebook comics dedicated to a more developed story, and graphic novels, which are devoted to an extensive storyline with several layers. Research tells us that the human brain processes such sequences similarly to a grammatically structured language (Cohn et al., 2014). Students can therefore genuinely read a comic strip sequence of panels as a narrated historical story.

The use of comics in history classes can demonstrably improve the understanding of historical subjects (Daulay et al., 2019) and develop students' critical thinking (Wright, 2024). Therefore, comics focused on the past can indeed be a carrier of historical knowledge and can thus be effectively used for motivation in this sense, to revive events that happened long ago, and to support the teaching subject itself (Zagkotas, 2018). An important factor remains, however, that students perceive a comic as a product of unconventional history and are able to critically analyse it. Therefore, inclusion of comics in teaching requires a media-historical analysis by teachers to determine the range of analytical questions for students and their clear wording, as well as to identify additional educational resources and student activities in order to obtain a true and comprehensive picture of the past.

Another possibility for including comics in history teaching is for students to create them themselves. And in this case, they must first answer minimally these questions: what do they want to depict? Why and for whom do they want to depict it, and how they will proceed? How will they combine their historical knowledge with historical fiction and a creative component? We will focus on a combination of both options. Based on an analysis of the selected comic, we will evaluate the measure to which it can be used by students for their own analysis (deconstruction), its possibilities for creating a picture of the 20th century's history (construction) and the opportunities for students to create their own comics (reconstruction) about missing or problematically depicted passages in the analysed work.

3 Results of the Analysis of the Depiction of 20th Century History

The analysed part of the comic book *Slovenské dejiny v obrázkoch od najstarších čias po súčasnosť* [*Slovak History in Pictures from Ancient Times to the Present Day*] (Zavarská et al., 2008) represents the period from 1880 to 2004. In the period concerned, a selection of key milestones and personalities are depicted in combination with selected interesting moments of Slovak modern history relating above all to the 20th century. The analysed sequences are found on pages 108-127. The authors of the comic themselves declared in its introduction on page 7 that their purpose was to arouse the interest of students in history as a school subject.

Our aim, therefore, was to perform a media-historical analysis of the given sequences from the perspective of the potential use of the comic book in teaching history focused on developing media literacy. We proceeded through analytical questions that unify the teacher's preparation for teaching (didactic analysis of the curriculum and educational resources), the design of learning tasks (selection and formulation of specific questions intended for the analysis of a selected sequence or comic book panels) and the active participation of students in the teaching itself (work on learning tasks and their solution). The following is a list of the questions used.

Formal questions focused on describing the comic:

- What was the authors' intention and for whom is the comic intended? (Is this a general overview for obtaining basic information, highlighting only certain information, or is it more of a fictional story set in a historical setting? Is the story told for children or young people, or does it also contain references for adults?)
- How did the authors proceed when creating the comic? (Do the panels bring something new compared to the text or is it just an illustration to the text? How are events and individual actors drawn – do they correspond to historical knowledge or are they altered for the sake of the story? Is this historical fiction, or are they real historical events? If direct speech is used, is it a real quote? Is this a stereotypical depiction or factually professional; does it contain a plurality of views on events?)
- What does the comic depict and what elements does it use? (Do time planes intersect? Do the characters in the comic behave in a period way or a modern way? Are period realities depicted faithfully or are they modified?)

Content questions focused on the historical aspect of the comic:

- Which elements of the comic are key for constructing a picture of the past? (Which information and drawings are historically important, authentic or significant in terms of understanding the interpretation of events? Which are essential, and what is more supplementary, incorrect or misleading?)
- To what extent can the given elements participate in the picture of the past? (Do they create comprehensive information, or do they need to be supplemented?)

- Which arguments do they support? (What historical discourse does the elements of the comic use?)
- What other sources need to be added to these elements to create a more complex, or more scholarly picture of the past?
- Can the work be considered reliable?

3.1 The Formal Side

The work analysed uses the form of a comic book to depict the past. Therefore, the authors chose a presentation of history that combines illustrations and text, which rests on historical figures and events. The depiction style is educational. The comic book can be used as a teaching aid, which is mainly intended for primary school students (with the onset of the teenage years). Despite the above, the work may also be of interest to adolescents and adults. In the comic, the authors have incorporated several allusions, symbols or references that require a deeper knowledge of the events depicted and a broader historical context. The above-mentioned can be demonstrated on an example of the illustrations on page 126, where, aside from the so-called "dash war", complicated negotiations between the Civic Democratic Party and the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia are visualised in the form of a chess game. The division of the republic itself is represented by two figures (obviously, Václav Klaus and Vladimír Mečiar), who "steer" their "rafts" (the Czech lands and Slovakia) over a water surface. The depiction of Vladimír Mečiar, who pushes Slovakia away from the western parts of the former republic with a long stick and at the same time "bids farewell" to his counterpart with a white handkerchief, is quite humorous. Ultimately, the two countries are symbolically reunited by joining the European Union, which is depicted as a large and stable vessel. *Slovenské dejiny v obrázkoch* offers more of a general overview and conveys basic information from Slovak history to the target group (students) in an attractive comic-book fashion.

The analysed part of the work captures the period from the birth of Milan Rastislav Štefánik (his life, deeds and merits) in 1880, with an emphasis on the formation of the Czechoslovak Republic, up to Slovakia's entry into the European Union. The mentioned lower boundary of 1880 can be considered standard and in line with the traditional chronological definition of Slovak modern history. The upper boundary of 2004 is equally in order, when considering the fact that the work was published in 2008. The authors adapted the illustrations and text to the student group of readers. The mixed atmosphere of the period is captured in the processed historical events. Heroism alternates with gloomy depictions – in principle, appropriate to the situation. The comic is also enlivened by several humorous caricatures (e.g., on page 122, the "bullfighter" Alexander Dubček battles the "bull" Leonid Brezhnev).

At first glance, it is evident that the authors selected an often simplified and even schematic way of visually depicting historical events, characters and contexts. A stereotypical vision that is still present in part of Slovak society is used in the analysed sequences (chapters). Milan Rastislav Štefánik, Andrej Hlinka and Slovaks in general are depicted in a positive light. On the example of Andrej Hlinka, this black-and-white vision could be refuted, or at least questioned (Holec, 2019). On the other hand, Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, Edvard Beneš and Czechs as a whole are depicted in a rather neutral way. In the case of Masaryk, the first president of Czechoslovakia, the authors limit themselves to dry statements. Such a significant figure in Slovak, Czech or Czechoslovak history would have deserved of more attention. The authors even mention on page 109 an unsubstantiated theory that Masaryk and Beneš could have been behind Štefánik's death (we will discuss this in more detail when analysing the content page of the comic). Stereotypical depictions are found on other pages – a Slovak is depicted as a peasant in a traditional costume on pages 110, 116, 126-127; Andrej Hlinka and Jozef Tiso wear only priestly robes on pages 110, 114-117, and Germans are always dressed in military uniforms on pages 111, 116, 119.

Obviously, such simplifications can be accepted to a certain extent in the case of comics, but they must not reinforce prejudices and negative stereotypes.

The authors of the comic selected a more modern language for the text elements. Direct speech is often used, and it usually does not represent a real quote from a given historical actor. Direct speech is placed as standard in thought bubbles and in text boxes under the illustrations. It is specifically through the text boxes that the "narrator" enters the story and factually as well as interpretively complements the entire historical story.

The characters behave in a more contemporary way than from their own period and are thus comprehensible for the reader. In terms of the realia (clothing, uniforms, means of transport, buildings, etc.), a simplified depiction combining period elements with today's ones is visible. Less emphasis is placed on detail. An example is the depiction of Štefánik's plane on page 109, which resembles a modern machine rather than the then Italian model Caproni Ca.33. The sequence focused on the Prague Spring shows a similar simplification; specifically, on page 123, the television building displays the heading "STV", i.e., Slovak Television. In 1968, however, the name STV was used only colloquially, and the official name was Czechoslovak Television (ČST).

When assessing the importance of the presented topics, it can be said that the comic includes the most important, but also less important, however, still interesting moments of modern Slovak history. The authors covered nearly all the major milestones of the period under review. However, for building historical thinking and awareness, as well as healthy patriotism, the comic book should have given space, for example, to the foreign anti-fascist resistance and Operation Anthropoid, in which Jozef Gabčík, Ján Kubiš and their comrades participated. The attractiveness of this topic has also been shown by its several film adaptations. Among the most significant films devoted to the topic of Operation Anthropoid are: *Atentát* (*The Assassination*, 1964), *Operácia Anthropoid* (*Anthropoid*, 2016) or *Heydrich: Muž so železným srdcom* (*The Man with the Iron Heart*, 2017).

The individual panels of the sequences are historically significant mainly in terms of understanding the interpretation of events. An additional topic is presented, for example, in the sequence about Bratislava. The authors here, on pages 112-113, introduce the reader to the issue of the future capital of Slovakia joining the republic in 1918 – 1919 in a relatively engaging way. It seems rather disproportionate, however, that the same amount of space (two pages) is given to the incorporation of Bratislava as to the sequences on autonomy and the wartime Slovak State, the Prague Spring or the Velvet Revolution.

Real historical events are presented in the comic, and they are sometimes embellished with historical fiction in the form of caricatures, thought bubbles, etc. This brings the depicted plot to life, which was probably the authors' intention. The illustrations themselves (inserted into panels) and their arrangement not only complement the text, but also largely make a significant contribution to the knowledge of the presented events.

3.2 The Content Side

The contents side of the comic is represented mainly by the text, which in some places has factual errors, overly generalises or presents stereotypes and controversial or even completely refuted myths. Such statements contribute to the misinterpretation of historical events and the spread of disinformation. We will show this with specific examples.

Right at the start of the first sequence of the analysed part of the comic, on page 108, it is written that Milan Rastislav Štefánik grew up in poverty. This is not strictly true; the conditions he grew up in can be described as modest, but it was definitely not poverty in the true sense of the word. His father, a Lutheran pastor and teacher, paid particular heed to the education of his children, which was definitely not cheap and not even common at that time. As a result, young

Štefánik was able to study at quality schools. At the end of the first sequence of the comic, on page 109, the authors repeat an unsubstantiated conspiracy theory about Štefánik's death:

> Shortly before landing, he [Štefánik] was shot down by Czech artillerymen. This was said to be a mistake, but later rumours spread that Masaryk and Beneš had given the order to shoot because they did not want Slovaks to have influence in the state. No one knows how it really happened.[1] (Zavarská et al., 2008, p. 109).

The alleged motive, in the view of the authors, was the unwillingness of the Czechs to recognise the existence of the Slovak nation and to eliminate the influence of Slovaks in the state. Such tendentious, misleading and nationalistic statements, rejected by most renowned historians (Kšiňan, 2021), do not belong in a comic primarily intended for schoolchildren. The authors of the comic thus took an anti-Czech stance (also present on other pages), which was and still is present in part of Slovak society. This is a typical misleading and even deceptive stereotype scheme – Slovaks are "peaceful and hospitable"; Czechs do not consider us (Slovaks) as "equal", and in the past they wanted to "oppress" us. Out of fairness, it should be added that in the next sequence of the comic, titled The Czechoslovak Republic, on pages 110-111, the positive results of the Czech presence for the development of Slovak education and culture are stressed (both through illustration and text).

We also find an exaggerated nationalistic historical discourse in the sequence about the interwar republic. Immediately in the introductory text box on page 111, the following is written: "After the founding of Czechoslovakia in October 1918, the life of Slovaks changed. After more than 800 years, Slovakia once again existed"[2] (Zavarská et al., 2008, p. 111). The mentioned statement represents an anachronism – a projection of today's national consciousness onto the Middle Ages. Slovak identity was formed much later, and there was no "Slovakia" in the past that would "again" appear after more than 800 years. Soon after, the idea of a Czechoslovak nation is labelled as erroneous. It is perhaps possible to agree that the idea of Czechoslovakism was artificially created, and its long-term viability can be debated. The authors, however, no longer mention in the comic the historical context of its formation, the justification for creating the republic or other benefits, which has since been discussed in detail in the scholarly discourse (Hudek et al., 2021).

When looking at the sequence about Andrej Hlinka on pages 114-115, as we have already mentioned above, an uncritical and excessively nationalistic narrative prevails. Andrej Hlinka undoubtedly ranks among significant personalities of Slovak history. During his life, he defended the rights of Slovaks in Hungary, supported the establishment of a common state in 1918, fully cultivated education and culture and also devoted himself to social and spiritual assistance to ordinary people. On the other hand, he promoted an authoritarian and theocratic thinking. He was himself characterised by nationalism or intolerance towards secular and other theories of opinion and his contacts and cooperation with enemies of the newly formed Czechoslovakia (Hungary, Poland), an anti-Czech stance, and separatist tendencies are also known. The authors focused in their comic only on his "good" qualities and deeds. The second page of the sequence on Andrej Hlinka omits important facts and contains a number of inaccuracies, half-truths or misinterpretations. For example, in the introductory text box it states: "They [Czech politicians] have usurped all the power in the common state"[3] (Zavarská et al., 2008, p. 115). This statement

[1] Authors' note: The text of the quotation in the original language: "Krátko pred pristátím ho [Štefánika] však zostrelili českí delostrelci. Bol to vraj omyl, no neskôr sa šírili klebety, že príkaz na streľbu dali Masaryk a Beneš, lebo nechceli, aby Slováci mali v štáte vplyv. Ako to bolo naozaj, nikto nevie" (Zavarská et al., 2008, p. 109).

[2] Authors' note: The text of the quotation in the original language: "Po vzniku Československa v októbri 1918 sa život Slovákov zmenil. Po vyše 800 rokoch znovu existovalo Slovensko" (Zavarská et al., 2008, p. 111).

[3] Authors' note: The text of the quotation in the original language: "Privlastnili si [českí politici] všetku moc v spoločnom štáte" (Zavarská et al., 2008, p. 115).

is false and easily refuted. Slovaks were also among the people who formed the state and occupied its highest positions. We can mention, for example, Milan Hodža, who took on the post of the Prime Minister in November 1935. In the first years of the republic, ministerial posts were held by Milan Rastislav Štefánik, Milan Hodža, Vavro Šrobár, Ivan Dérer, Ľudovít Medvecký and Martin Mičura.

Further, Hlinka's notorious trip to the Paris Peace Conference and his subsequent imprisonment are mentioned, as well as the "struggle" of the People's Party (the so-called "Ľudáks") for autonomy. The authors again took an uncritical approach, even one of adoration. They do not note the negative consequences of these actions (realised or planned). This is the sequence we consider to be the most problematic within the analysed comic.

The period from 1938 to 1945 is presented with a similar lack of critical thinking. The declaration of autonomy itself, directly stated as the "desired autonomy" (6 October 1938), is literally represented by a drawing of rejoicing Slovaks on pages 116-117. The authors somehow forgot to mention the historical context, as well as the fact that in this way the Ľudáks helped the Nazis destabilise the republic.

In the case of the period of the Slovak State (if we use the original name for the entire period from its declaration to the end of the Second World War, which was informally used even after the country was officially renamed the "Slovak Republic" in July 1939), the responsibility of the part of government and president for the deportations and fate of the Jewish population is not mentioned. On page 117, only the highest representative of Germany is effectively named as the culprit: "At Hitler's bidding, the Ľudáks deported 57 thousand Slovak Jews to German concentration camps"[4] (Zavarská et al., 2008, p. 117). The remaining deportations and Jewish victims from 1944 to 1945 are hushed up in the comic. Regarding this background, it is still a delicate issue that the public is still coming to terms with in terms of historical memory. The destruction of the Jewish community in Slovakia during the Holocaust, as well as the degree of responsibility of the government and the president at the time, is described in the books of historian Ivan Kamenec. We recommend, for example, the publication entitled *Po stopách tragédie* (Kamenec, 2020) on this issue.

In the case of deportations of the Jewish population, the Prime Minister and the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Vojtech Tuka, was literally involved in these events proactively, having the main say in the negotiations with the Germans. The process of "removal" itself was politically approved by President Jozef Tiso. What's more, the state had to pay 500 Reichsmarks for each person deported (Kamenec, 2020; Kamenec, 2013).

The behaviour of the Nazis after taking power in Germany, numerous testimonies, as well as the murders in the occupied territories or on the Eastern Front had to have clearly shown what the Jews were really in danger of after their deportation. However, the comic contains no mention of other persecuted groups of the population: Roma, homosexuals, political opponents, Czechs or religious minorities. Likewise, there is no mention of the totalitarian character of the Slovak state. The authors take up stereotypical and simplistic interpretations of the past and on page 117 literally write: "People [at first] lived well"[5] (Zavarská et al., 2008, p. 117). In contrast, the sequence on the Slovak National Uprising, exile and the Nazi occupation (1944 – 1945) on the following two pages is processed in principle in order, without any serious errors or misinterpretations.

More than four decades of post-war development are captured in the comic in three double-page sequences with the titles: Victory of the Communists, Prague Spring and the Velvet Revolution. This simplified division itself is logical and in order. The authors evidently did not have sufficient space to depict such a wide time interval in more detail. The text is

[4] Authors' note: The text of the quotation in the original language: "Na Hitlerovo želanie ľudáci vyviezli do nemeckých koncentračných táborov 57-tisíc slovenských židov" (Zavarská et al., 2008, p. 117).

[5] Authors' note: The text of the quotation in the original language: "Ľudia si [spočiatku] žili dobre" (Zavarská et al., 2008, p. 117).

for the most part limited to terse and mechanical statements, and, again, some misleading, one-sided or even controversial formulations are used. For example, the text under the illustrations about judicial murders and imprisonment on page 121 reads: "Husák was also sentenced to life imprisonment. He suffered there for years"[6] (Zavarská et al., 2008, p. 121). This suggests the notion that Gustáv Husák was in the position of a victim only. It would have been appropriate to recall his active participation in the establishment and consolidation of the totalitarian regime. The comic does at least mention later his "normalization" activities, but this is only a brief statement. The sequences about the communist regime also contain other untruths and inaccuracies. For the sake of illustration, we will mention the formulation on page 122, which says about the Prague Spring: "The communists also abolished the Iron Curtain"[7] (Zavarská et al., 2008, p. 122). In fact, the Iron Curtain as a physical and political border was not removed during this time. Similarly untrue is the statement in the sequence about the Velvet Revolution found on page 124, according to which, Gorbachev had "all those who were against the communists"[8] (Zavarská et al., 2008, p. 124) released from prison.

With their overall treatment of the topics of autonomy, the Slovak State (1939 – 1945) and the period of totalitarianism (1948 – 1989), the authors mostly limit themselves to short statements. At the same time, a more fundamental demonstration of the responsibility of many Slovak leaders for tragic events (participation in the breakup of the republic, deportations, persecutions, establishment of totalitarian regimes, etc.) is lacking. All of these are often blamed only on "external influences" – the Nazis and the Soviets, Hitler, Stalin or Brezhnev. A critical approach to history could contribute to society coming to terms with the past.

The last part of the comic, which on pages 126-127 presents the development after 1989 and up to 2004, also contains problematic formulations. The authors have characterised the period in question in a very limited space of two pages with relative accuracy. However, there is again an oversimplification and omission of important events in some places. For example, although Slovakia's entry into the European Union is mentioned, there is no mention of its entry into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) or Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

4 Discussion

The analysis of the selected part of the comic showed that for designing history teaching, *Slovenské dejiny v obrázkoch* can be applied as an educational resource in the following ways:

1. The use of stereotypical, polemical, misinterpreted or conspiracy-oriented sequences to form critical thinking and an approach to the media. The student work stresses the deconstruction of the comic: who created it, with what intention, for whom, how it was done, etc.
2. The use of linguistic and visual elements of the comic for forming the ability to assess and critically use media content. Students focus more on constructing an image of the past: which elements are key; what they create; what they need to be supplemented with, etc.
3. Correcting shortcomings and filling in blank spaces in the comic by creating their own product with a media message based on their own experience. Student work focuses on reconstructing an image of the past: what, how, for whom and why I want to create it myself.

[6] Authors' note: The text of the quotation in the original language: "Aj Husáka odsúdili na doživotné väzenie. Trpel tam roky" (Zavarská et al., 2008, p. 121).

[7] Authors' note: The text of the quotation in the original language: "Komunisti zrušili aj železnú oponu" (Zavarská et al., 2008, p. 122).

[8] Authors' note: The text of the quotation in the original language: "všetkých, ktorí boli proti komunistom" (Zavarská et al., 2008, p. 124).

Within the first option, students learn that the interpretation of the past is always pluralistic. This does not have to mean only different views of historians on events and personalities. The sources themselves contain different options for processing, and history is likewise rewritten by each generation, as each new generation must come to terms with the past from its own perspective and mentality (Rákosník, 2024). Stagnation in interpreting the past and the adoption of stereotypes thus signals that we are not thinking about the past, that we are not trying to understand it, but only uncritically accept images of the past created by previous generations. These, however, had their own reasons for portrayals of history, some of which were incorrect and resulted in misleading or downright false statements. Sensitive and controversial periods of national history – which people always find more difficult to deal with – also play a role here, and it is specifically in this area that unconventional histories that depict events creatively with sufficient lessons can play an important role.

The analysed comic is suitable for use in teaching from the perspective of the historical events timeline – the first information about it in a comic (past generations) – current orientation in history (my generation). Some panels, however, "feel" as if they present an exaggerated nationalism or anti-Czech attitude. We understand that the comic was published almost two decades ago, but most of the content criticism presented by us was already known even then or was at least discussed in the professional community. Unfortunately, the examined sequences do not help students come to terms with their own past. What's more, in some cases they even misinterpret historical events, confirm myths and deepen prejudices. Responsibility for many tragic events is shifted towards foreign actors and countries.

All of this means that a student's deconstruction of the problematic sequences, or rather their panels, must be preceded by instruction about historical reality and the reasons for its distortion. Thus, students must also work with other educational sources that will enlighten them. They should then be capable of detecting similar distorting tendencies in other pop-history products or in the mass media and understand where they come from. They learn that disinformation not only comes from dubious sources intentionally, but also survives in society in various forms. Knowledge of historical facts is not enough these days; one of the big questions when teaching history is how the historical meaning of events recorded in history is created and changed (Seixas & Morton, 2013). This means that it is okay if students "rewrite" their understanding of events and attitudes towards history within their own evidence-based learning.

The second option for applying the analysed comic in teaching is to understand that information about the past does not always form a closed, objective and meaningful whole. The task of the reader or viewer is then to adequately process it and frame it in their own deeper knowledge structures. The linguistic and visual simplifications used in the comic contribute to better comprehensibility of the content. Unless it is a graphic novel, it is natural that items are selected or reduced and that a certain plurality is lost. This also creates an opportunity for involving multiple sources (primarily historical sources) in teaching to create a more complex image of the past. Such activities may include searching for and processing the demands of the Slovak and Czech sides during mutual discussions on the breakup of the federation or simply specifying the exact type of Štefánik's aircraft.

Last but not least, the shortcomings of the analysed part of the comic and the omissions in it discussed above create possibilities for its continuation in the for of students' own creations. This may involve correcting misleading or stereotypical depictions, a new view on the mentioned events and personalities or "supplementing" the comic with new sequences. The benefit is also two-fold. On the one hand, it becomes necessary that the thought operations of the students lead to action, because facts only become real knowledge when used. This is one of the key methodological principles of history teaching (Pandel, 2013). On the other hand, it is about internalising the reasons and principles of media analysis, because only a product created by students themselves will leave an emotional and thoughtful mark on them. They will have to choose compromises and methods in expressing and representing their own ideas. Simply stated,

when students put themselves in the role of creators, they will better understand the fragmentary and conditional nature of their own creations, as well as their inadequacies and even polemical nature and the need for their reader's completion. Students should then be prepared to defend their creative processes and creations precisely from the point of view of media intention, not merely from the point of view of historical matter (historical knowledge).

Such method of depicting action can be comic panels, but also a caricature, or a meme in the form of a funny picture, video or a GIF file. Ideally, the development of historical knowledge, thinking and media literacy is intertwined with artistic and digital skills. The nationalistic or anti-Czech sequences in the comic can thus be sensitively corrected. The students' creations can also expand the curriculum to include the fates of not only Jewish victims of the Holocaust and the collaboration on the part of Slovak political representatives, but also on the part of the population, which gave its consent to this, as recent research has shown (Kubátová, 2025). Another opportunity may be a completely new treatment of Slovakia's entry into NATO, the OECD or a sketch dedicated to a selected historical figure.

5 Conclusion

The media world today offers a lot of news and products on historical topics, which are very often used automatically in school practice for the purpose of presenting history curriculum in a more attractive way. We are not denying that orienting oneself in history is the key purpose of history, but it is becoming increasingly necessary to teach students to think about the past, to communicate about it with other people, and to discuss current historical topics with them.

We used one specific example in our study to point out the importance of students being able to take a critical stance and also being able to conduct their own analysis of diverse media content. Comic books, which are a popular type of literature among students, are a good training ground for forming historical thinking and media literacy.

The analysed work, both in terms of form and content, has considerable potential to revive history teaching and bring the historical events it deals with into the present. It needs to be realised, however, that as a product of pop-history it cannot meet the criteria set for an educational publication, regardless of the educational ambitions of the authors themselves. However, it certainly contributes to building a picture of the past, while also, as if "subconsciously", to teaching that the position of an observer and informant of historical reality is part of this reality. We create history through our own research and communication.

Bibliography

Bartlová, M. (2003). Populární kultura a historie jako věda i fikce. In M. Bartlová (Ed.), *Pop history* (pp. 5-8). Nakladatelství Lidové noviny.

Cohn, N., Jackendoff, R., Holcomb, P. J., & Kuperberg, G. R. (2014). The grammar of visual narrative: Neural evidence for constituent structure in sequential image comprehension. *Neuropsychologia*, *64*, 63-70. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neuropsychologia.2014.09.018

Daulay, M. I., Ananda, A., Anwar, S., & Fatimah, S. (2019). Developing comics-based social sciences history teaching materials. In M. H. Jufrizal, Y. Rozimela, M. Atmazaki, A. Fauzan, R. Syahrul, M. A. Hamzah, M. Refnaldi, M.Yerizon, A. Fitrisia, A. Razak, A. Fauzi, L. Perpisa, Y. Tiarina, N. Suzane, C. R. Solusia, N. E. Putri, E. Rahmi, & D. Sukmaa (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 1st international conference on innovation in education 2018* (pp. 77-83). Atlantis Press. https://doi.org/10.2991/icoie-18.2019.19

De Abreu, B. S. (2020). Global perspectives on media literacy. In W. G. Christ, & B. S. De Abreu (Eds.), *Media literacy in a disruptive media environment* (pp. 9-22). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780367814762

Domańska, E. (2006). *Historie niekonwencjonalne.* Wydawnictwo Poznańskie. http://otworzksiazke.pl/images/ksiazki/historie_niekonwencjonalne/historie_niekonwencjonalne.pdf

Downey, M. T., & Long, K. A. (2015). *Teaching for historical literacy: Building knowledge in the history classroom*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315717111

Eisner, W. (1985). *Comics and sequential art: Expanded edition*. Poorhouse Press. https://alphalight.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/07/will-eisner-theory-of-comics-sequential-art.pdf

Gerbner, G., Gross, L., Morgan, M., Signorielli, N., & Shanahan, J. (2002). Growing up with television: Cultivation processes. In J. Bryant, & D. Zillmann (Eds.), *Media effects: Advances in theory and research* (pp. 43-68). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers.

Holec, R. (2019). *Hlinka – Otec národa?* Marenčin PT.

Hudek, A., Kopeček, M., & Mervart, J. (2021). *Czechoslovakism.* Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003205234

Kamenec, I. (2013). *Tragédia politika, kňaza a človeka. Dr. Jozef Tiso, 1887 – 1947.* Premedia.

Kamenec, I. (2020). *Po stopách tragédie.* Premedia.

Körber, A. (2015). *Historical consciousness, historical competencies – and beyond? Some conceptual development within German history didactics*. peDOCS. https://doi.org/10.25656/01:10811

Kšiňan, M. (2021). *Milan Rastislav Štefánik: Muž, ktorý sa rozprával s hviezdami*. Slovart.

Kubátová, H. (2025). *Kde líšky dávajú dobrú noc: Kresťanský nacionalizmus a holokaust na Slovensku*. N Press.

Lee, P. (2011). History education and historical literacy. In I. Davies (Ed.), *Debates in history teaching* (pp. 63-72). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315642864

Madaras, L. (1991). Gagnon, Ed. Historical literacy – The case of history in american education [Review of the monograph *Historical literacy – The case of history in american education*, edited by Paul Gagnon, 1989]. *Teaching History: A Journal of Methods*, *16*(1), 39-40. https://doi.org/10.33043/TH.16.1.39-40

McCloud, S. (1994). *Understanding comics: The invisible art.* HarperPerennial. https://dn720006.ca.archive.org/0/items/understanding-comics/Understanding%20Comics_text.pdf

Nokes, J. D. (2012). *Building students' historical literacies: Learning to read and reason with historical texts and evidence*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203137321

Pandel, H.-J. (2013). *Geschichtsdidaktik: Eine Theorie für die Praxis.* Wochenschau Verlag.

Partington, G. (1994). Historical literacy. *International Journal of Social Education*, *9*(1), 41-54. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ496935

Perfetti, C. A., Britt, M. A., & Georgi, M. C. (1995). *Text-based learning and reasoning: Studies in history*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203053065

Rákosník, J. (2024). *Co je nového v historii*. Nová beseda.

Seixas, P., & Morton, T. (2013). *The big six historical thinking concepts*. Nelson Education.

Signorielli, N. (2001). Television's gender role images and contribution to stereotyping: Past, present, and future. In D. G. Singer, & J. L. Singer (Eds.), *Handbook of children and the media* (pp. 341-358). Sage Publications.

Taylor, T., & Young, C. (2003). *Making history: A guide for the teaching and learning of history in Australian schools.* Curriculum Corporation.

Voráč, D., & Kopecký, K. (2023). *Nová média ve výuce mediální výchovy*. Palacký University Olomouc. https://doivup.upol.cz/pdfs/doi/9900/06/1900.pdf

Wineburg, S. (2005). What does NCATE have to say to future history teachers? Not much. *Phi Delta Kappan*, *86*(9), 658-665. https://doi.org/10.1177/003172170508600909

Wright, A. (2024). Teaching history through comic books: Opportunities for public & visual history. *International Public History*, *7*(2), 89-100. http://dx.doi.org/10.1515/iph-2024-2015

Zagkotas, V. (2018). Are comic books appropriate for teaching History? Three suggestions for Greek primary education. *Education 3-13*, *47*(3), 358-365. https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2018.1452955

Zavarská, S. M., Kršák, P., & Danay, I. (2008). *Slovenské dejiny v obrázkoch od najstarších čias po súčasnosť.* Ottovo nakladatelství.

Zinsser, J. P. (1995). Real history, real education, real merit – Or why is "Forrest Gump" so popular? *Journal of Social History*, *29*, 91-97. https://doi.org/10.1353/jsh/29.Supplement.91

Authors

Mgr. Peter Vanek, PhD.
University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava
Faculty of Arts
Nám. J. Herdu 2,
Trnava, 917 01, Slovak Republic
peter.vanek@ucm.sk
ORCID-ID: 0000-0002-3046-8048

Peter Vanek is the head of the Department of Historical Sciences and Central European Studies at the Faculty of Arts of the University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava. In his academic and pedagogical activities, he focuses on the economic, military and political history of the 20th century. He places particular emphasis on Slovakia and Central Europe in the years 1918–1945. He has also long been devoted to the chemical industry and economy in the interwar period, as well as the operation of the Slovak army on the Eastern Front during the Second World War.

PaedDr. et Mgr. Michal Veselei, PhD.
University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava
Faculty of Arts
Nám. J. Herdu 2,
Trnava, 917 01, Slovak Republic
michal.veselei@ucm.sk
ORCID-ID: 0000-0003-0087-7403

Michal Veselei at present works as an assistant professor at the University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava, where he gives lectures and seminars focused on history teaching. In his publishing and research activities, he focuses on the didactics of history, experiential pedagogy, unconventional histories and the popularising of historical sciences. He specialises in inclusive and research-oriented teaching of history and experiential events with historical themes.