



Polish teachers' epistemic beliefs on history as seen through the lens of social media

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ABSTRACT

This article is based on the content analysis of the Polish Facebook group *Nauczyciele historii* ("History Teachers") which is administered by, and addressed to, practicing and prospective history teachers. The group's over six thousand members engage and interact by writing, reading, reacting to, and commenting via as many as twenty plus posts daily. We examined the group's on-line discussions for manifestations of the member-teachers' epistemic considerations: their reasoning about the epistemic nature of history; their assumptions regarding the goals and meaning of history as a school subject; and their attitudes toward the narratives of difference, diversity, and multi-perspectivism. Our findings reveal that Polish history teachers' epistemology is poorly conceptualized, rather naïve, and largely unaffected by the developments in historical and didactical theories of the last 50 years. Those teachers do not reflect on the epistemic nature of history. They approach history as a "science", which they presume to be objective and unambiguous. They tend to see themselves as transmitters of knowledge about the past which their pupils should internalize, and as propagators of those "patriotic" values that—according to certain received, long-established discourses—strengthen national identity and social cohesion.

KEYWORDS

History teachers' epistemic beliefs, Social media analysis, Teachers' discussions on Facebook

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Introduction

Taking into consideration the important role that history education plays in developing democratic citizenship, with its appreciation of multiple perspectives and critical thinking, it is important to better understand how history teachers perceive history, history education and the sources of historical knowledge. Meanwhile, research on teachers' beliefs has been complicated by concerns about the reliability and validity of any gathered data, potentially compromised by the very presence of researchers, which can impact teachers' declarations: by inducing teachers' reflections that would not otherwise occur or by soliciting opinions formulated with the aim of catering to researcher expectations.

Looking to test newly-emerging research methods and to access data available from the communicational channels of the Internet age, we decided to adapt the approach implemented by Krzysztof Jaskułowski and his colleagues. Those scholars chose not to query teachers directly about their main research questions, but instead to talk about other, collateral issues and later to tease out answers from teachers' narratives focused on those other issues. Taking this method further, we elected not to approach teachers directly at all, but instead to analyze teachers' opinions expressed spontaneously on unrelated (to our study) occasions, in their posts on an online forum of a Facebook group. This allowed us to examine the member-teachers' epistemic considerations: their reasoning about the epistemic nature of history; their assumptions regarding the goals and meaning of history as a school subject; and their attitudes toward the narratives of difference, diversity, and multi-perspectivism. Even though those considerations were not formulated by the authors as "epistemic beliefs", and we cannot be sure that every single post has been authored by a professional history teacher, yet they did reflect their authors' epistemic beliefs. The authors would not formulate their opinions in the way they did if their assumptions and attitudes towards the epistemic nature of history were different. And since the group members who are identified as history teachers did not object those assumptions, we may assume that they express and reflect not only opinions of individual authors.

Apart from gaining insights into Polish teachers' epistemic beliefs on history, we wanted to test the scholarly research capacities of the various new channels of formal, informal and semi-formal exchange of information, advice and opinion among history teachers resulting from the development of social media. We assert that those channels can serve as valid investigative tools also on other issues: they allow researchers to "eavesdrop" unobtrusively on teachers in their natural environment, enabling first-hand observation of a range of attitudes and practices within teacher communities. And in the case of the instant study, they enable the observation and exploration of teachers' epistemic cognition not as if it were declared upon theoretical reflection but as it is actually embodied and manifested in their interactions with peers on Facebook.

Research background

The epistemic beliefs of the Polish teachers active on Facebook's teacher forums were searched for and categorized on the basis of Maggioni's et al. (2009) classification that includes: *copiers* who see history as objective truth; *borrowers* who approach history as interpretation based on selected facts; and *criticalists* who view history as a nuanced product of inquiry (Maggioni, Alexander, & VanSledright, 2009; VanSledright & Maggioni, 2016). Quite unsurprisingly, neither of those terms ever appeared in the analyzed material, confirming that theoretical analysis is scarce in scholarly discourse on history didactics in Poland; in teacher training, typically completed in the so-called concurrent model (Ecker, 2018: 1578-1579), as part of a 3 year (Bachelor's level) plus 2 year (Master's level) university program in history; and in the actual practice of teaching. This does not mean that theoretical reflection on historical research is absent in Poland: for example, Poland's Ewa Domańska has become an internationally recognized expert in the field. But such analysis has not informed university courses in history didactics (c.f. Choraży et al., 2009; Konieczka-Śliwińska, 2023) or impacted future history teachers. Consumed by the daily practice of teaching, Polish teachers largely do not voice any need to reflect or consult upon the epistemic nature of history.

They have not developed the habit of so reflecting. They overlook the role such reflection plays in the history of school-based education. Yet they do have beliefs, even if the latter are not expressed explicitly. They are manifested in the spontaneous reactions that can be captured in teachers' discussions on social media and the theoretical framework of Maggioni et al. (2009) allows us to do so.

Krzysztof Jaskułowski and his colleagues had already confronted the theoretical neglect of Polish history teachers in their study designed to establish how those teachers understood the goals of history education. Some of that study's respondents appeared never before to have faced the question of what deep purposes their teaching was supposed to serve (Jaskułowski, Majewski & Surmiak, 2018: 81-82). The responding teachers sometimes addressed *why* they were teaching (e.g. because they needed to implement a curriculum or because they wanted their students to know about the past) but were unwilling to address the questions: what for or to what ultimate end? Upon deeper consideration, several of the responding teachers put their educational goals in nationalist terms, for example: I teach history in order to form good, conscious Poles (Jaskułowski & Surmiak, 2017; Jaskułowski, Majewski & Surmiak, 2018). Based upon such findings, when Jaskułowski et al. continued their research to discover more about the attitudes of Polish teachers regarding national issues, they relied on indirect methodologies (Jaskułowski, Majewski & Surmiak, 2021). Instead of directly querying about a definition of, or attitudes to, nationalism, they solicited responses about the substance of school textbooks. Aware that the vast majority of Polish teachers were using officially-approved textbooks—while also complaining about such books, vocally and often—those researchers indirectly invited textbook critiques to build rapport with their respondents. Only subsequently, after completing interviews, did they analyze the received responses to develop conclusions regarding their core research objective: Polish history teachers' concepts of "the nation" and their approaches to nationalism. This strategy elicited the sought-after data: although not expressly solicited, nationalist positions repeatedly surfaced in the majority of the participating teachers' responses.

Such experience of Jaskułowski and his team prompted us not to inquire directly about Polish teachers' epistemic beliefs. Instead, we elected to solicit relevant answers in an off-hand, indirect manner. We posited that those teachers probably had thoughts about the epistemic nature of history, but likely were not ready to verbalize those thoughts on a researcher's request. Moreover, attempted verbalization on our prompts could render responses that were forced, overly intellectualized, tailored for the querying researcher, while we sought to discover genuine, authentic, deeply held intuitions and beliefs of teachers, passed on to students in a more—or less—deliberate manner.

We also used the experience from two studies of Internet user opinions conducted for two masters theses in the public history program at the University of Wrocław. One researcher, Dorota Choińska (2021), studied controversies over historical memory at the Polish-Belarusian borderlands, reflected in user comments to on-line versions of local newsprint articles. Another researcher, Agata Moskwa (2021), analyzed references to history in comments regarding tourist attractions posted by the users of TripAdvisor. Other papers on the use of social media in research on historical consciousness and understanding have also proved effective (Adriaansen, 2021; Ramirez & Smyth, 2021; Walden 2015). They have shown that Web 2.0 allows for tracking and analyzing opinions which individuals spontaneously offer and express in their self-selected Internet environment, unsolicited for purposes of research, but expressed while catering to real-life needs and experiences.

Methodology

The source

We selected a discussion group on Facebook with the accurately descriptive name *Nauczyciele historii* (hereafter "History Teachers"), which is administered by, and addressed to, practicing and

future history teachers. The group members engage and interact by writing, reading, reacting to, and commenting via, as many as twenty plus posts daily. For the purpose of this study, we analyzed all the posts published in March and April 2022.

As in the previous study based on this group (Wojdon, 2023), six major categories of posts could be distinguished:

1. History-related information, offering data, clarifications, explanations and links to academic and mass-market print and publications on events, processes, biographies.
2. Advertisements of offerings and products developed by teaching professionals, such as YouTube videos, podcasts or classroom teaching materials (e.g. maps, tests).
3. Invitations to in-service teacher training events and announcements of educational events for pupils and students, competitions or other projects involving schools.
4. Requests for teaching aids and materials, templates, sample tests and lesson plans, teaching tips and suggestions, alternative assessment rubrics, etc.
5. Questions posed by teachers.
6. Offers from teachers, including self-promotion.

Categories 4-6 were most social media-specific, because they prioritized and showcased the voices of users and members (in this case: Polish teachers). They were the most useful for our analyses; but posts and especially comments falling under categories 1-3 also provided useful data, indicating especially that epistemic beliefs were scarcely referenced or shared on the "History Teachers" group.

Validity of the source

According to data provided by Facebook, at the time of our research the "History Teachers" group had over 5,000 members self-identifying as teachers or candidates for the teaching profession. For the purpose of our research we accept the self-identification, because the group—which is private, i.e. not accessible to unregistered persons—has no reliable tools for verifying data submitted in membership applications. On occasion, group members have postulated the introduction of such verification strategies and encouraged cautious, circumspect commentaries and postings, in view of the fact that students, parents and/or school principals might be among group members, as readers or commentators. However, no administrative measures have been introduced to ensure that group members indeed are practicing or prospective teachers.

However, unlike in the studies done by Choińska (2021) and Moskwa (2021), most of the members of the "History Teachers" group are not anonymous and use their real names. Many are known in the teaching community as teachers, as authors of publications or as participants in educational projects. Some can be found on the websites of schools, which cite their information "about themselves". Yet occasionally un-identified and anonymous individuals join in the exchanges. Perhaps the "private" status of the group and the lack of anonymity prevent behaviors common in open Internet discourse, such as "the online disinhibition effect", i.e. the anonymity-encouraged flaunting of social norms, bad manners, or posting plainly offensive content (we have not examined to what degree group administrators ensure relative civility). Our respondents, like those in Choińska's (2021) study, showed a wide range of divergent opinions, expressed themselves spontaneously, freely commented on each other's statements (our analysis addresses both the posts and the comments), and also referred to extrinsic (to the Facebook forum) opinions and positions. Following the verification strategies of Caulfield & Wineburg (2023), we were unable to identify any organized pressure groups or lobbying campaigns, and promotional activities (e.g. of educational materials) were clearly marked as such, easily identifiable and conducted by the group members themselves. Therefore, in general, we consider the posts as genuine opinions of bona fide Polish teachers.

The Facebook platform has various mechanisms that prevent or limit data fluctuation. Posts, statements and entire threads are archived, so our primary research data can be retrieved and verified. However, because such verification is technically difficult, for the purposes of our research we took screenshots of the examined posts with their respective comments, also in order to preserve them, in case they might later be edited or removed. Such fluctuation of data is a common problem in research studies of Internet content, especially on social media. However, in view of the prevalence and richness of life in the virtual world, the fluctuation should not prevent scholars from studying and analyzing social media content.

Constraints

The data set collected for analysis posed two more problems, one of methodological and another of ethical nature.

First was the question of verifiability, in view of the fact that the group was “private”, so not every individual could access its content at all times. However, because it is fairly easy for a Polish-speaking user to gain access to the “History Teachers” group, the posts published there meet the standards of verifiable research data. There also exists a public group of Polish history teachers on Facebook, called *Lekcja lepszej historii* (“A Lesson in Better History”), but that group is much smaller (counting 2300 members in December 2022) and less active. That group mainly publishes announcements about projects, publications, and competitions for students and teachers. There are very few substantive discussions. For these reasons we decided not to use the *Lekcja...* group, but focused on “History Teachers”, where in April 2022 alone 145 posts appeared which almost always received feedback in the form of likes and emojis. The majority (123) of those posts received less than 10 reactions, but there were also several posts with over 50 reactions. The same pattern was observed in relation to comments. 123 posts received less than 10 comments, 16 got between 11 and 20, five between 21 and 30, and one as many as 94 comments.

The most “liked” and commented-upon posts in April 2022 were:

- A photo allegedly depicting German and Polish troops on July 15, 1410: a joke on the occasion of April Fools’ Day, posted on April 1, 2022 (142 likes and laughs, 18 comments);
- A TikTok post on teacher career development, from April 2, 2022 (73 likes, laughs, hearts);
- Ready-to-use classroom materials: “A Calendar of historical events that happened through ages during the Easter period”, from April 3, 2022 (49 likes and 10 comments);
- A question about viable methods of validly assessing Ukrainian students in Polish classrooms (in 7th grade), from April 24, 2022 (2 likes, 94 comments);
- A post advertising a lapbook on the topic of Poland’s May 3rd Constitution, from April 19, 2022 (41 likes and hearts, 6 comments);
- A post about a textbook on Polish history in the Ukrainian language, from April 4, 2022 (20 likes, 18 comments).

Second, this ethical question arose: to what extent do we, as researchers, have the right to “eavesdrop” on teachers without informing them about it? D. Choińska (2021: 169) writes: “It is the researchers’ choice whether they inform the targeted community that their online utterances are the base of a scientific analysis. Some practitioners claim that if the users post the information on a website whose access does not require any permissions nor identification, then such data can always be considered public and available for study. Others stress that even if the data is not confidential but discloses personal or intimate details, its contributors should be aware of their use for scientific purposes”. We considered any statement made in a group of 5,000 people *de facto* public, even if the group was technically a “closed” group. Moreover, we anonymized the statements and comments cited in this article; we did not use personal information that would reveal the identity of group members; we denoted the posts published or commented on in such a way that they are difficult to track down through the search option; and we have not included

links to them. They function as field-collected examples and samples of statements made by Polish teachers, and not as expressions of the views of any specific individuals. We did not notify the users about our research for the reasons already mentioned: to optimally minimize our potential impact, as researchers, on the opinions expressed by teachers. This procedure received ethical clearance from the research ethics commission at the Institute of History, University of Wrocław. In connection with the study, we limited our own activities in the group "History Teachers" to an absolute minimum. The original design was to be completely silent observers, without ever revealing our presence. Unfortunately, the war in Ukraine did not allow this design to be fully implemented: to benefit our research, we did not want to sacrifice the opportunity of directly reaching this large group of history teachers with information about the newly developed Ukrainian-language educational materials for history lessons in classrooms with Ukrainian refugee students (Wojdon, 2022). However, our posts on those topics were purely informational and did not concern the epistemology of history.

Data coding and verification

Each of the authors of this paper screened the posts independently, but our independent conclusions about teachers' epistemic beliefs turned out to be very similar. We then crosschecked those preliminary findings with the posts from May. Since our conclusions were thereby corroborated again, we established that our sample was sufficient to examine, and to support valid commentary and conclusions on epistemic beliefs of Polish history teachers.

The analysis of the posts was conducted in MAXQDA 2022. Every post was labeled with a code that characterized its content. Those without relevant information concerning the mentioned epistemic stances were classified as "unrelated" and not taken further into consideration. Of the remaining posts, we created the following sets of codes:

1. sources of historical information;
2. importance of facts and opinions/interpretations;
3. aims of teaching history;
4. meaning of learning history;
5. emotions evoked by history;
6. differentiation between history and memory;
7. non-standard approaches to history teaching;
8. reactions to politics of history;
9. critical thinking (or lack thereof).

This examination of FB posts involved a particular level of analysis that is not akin to conducting traditional deep qualitative and quantitative analysis. However, sets 1-4 allowed us to identify the instances of group members' reasoning about the epistemic nature of history and their assumptions about history as a school subject (its aims and meaning). The first set and sets 5-9 allowed us to observe the members' positions toward different narratives and multiperspectivity, as potential indicators of *borrowers'* and *criterialists'* approaches. While specific quotes did not say much, yet upon aggregating all the citations and interpreting them as a whole, we were able to see a copier stance emerging.

Results

“History Teachers” on the academic discipline of history and on history as a school subject

Focus on factual knowledge

How the active group members saw history and how they saw their role as history teachers was revealed through the vocabulary they used in their posts (here cited with our emphasis added), e.g.: “[a learning platform] that organizes **knowledge** very well,” (History Teachers, 2022, April 18a and 28a)¹; “I **showed** [a presentation] to the students” (History Teachers, 2022, April 13); about the Ukrainian children joining Polish schools: “They have **knowledge**, but let’s be honest, how much **are we able to tell** about events in history in a foreign language” (History Teachers, 2022, April 24); “what for would they need to **know** about the partitions of Poland [1138-1320] etc.” (History Teachers, 2022, April 4b). A representative example of a comment reads as follows:

I start with the Biblical deluge. Then a short video about the Swedes. Question. Why was this invasion [in 1655] called “the deluge”. **I emphasise** the enormity of the destruction, the unequal struggle against the invaders, the loss of cultural heritage. **I draw attention** to Czarniecki referring to the national anthem (History Teachers, 2022, March 31a).

While preparing classes on the occasion of an anniversary of Poland’s baptism in 966 A.D., History Teachers expected that their students would memorize the most important information about the event, including an exact date (History Teachers, 2022, March 29)—even though scholars for decades had been debating the circumstances of the baptism, with no consensus reached due to the scarcity of primary sources and the contradictory data the scarce extant sources provide.

Some posts in the “History Teachers” group promoted “learning through playing” strategies. As many as 25 user comments in April promoted such “attractive activities” as escape rooms, role-playing and games (mostly Kahoot!, Wordwalls and Genially activities). However, their main (if not sole) purpose turned out to be assessment and testing of pupils’ knowledge in more attractive forms. Whether the students would impersonate Julius Caesar’s “legionnaires” or participants on the “Wheel of Fortune”, their goal was to correctly answer factual questions or “show caniness and knowledge” (History Teachers, 2022, April 3b, April 20c).

The members of “History Teachers” often requested ready-to-use presentations on specific topics or materials that might help them prepare their own classroom presentations (History Teachers, 2022, April 2 and 12); and when they shared activities, those members rarely considered, or commented upon, *how* to use the files they were sharing or *for what particular purpose* (except for simply, literally: conducting a history lesson). A calendar of events that, over centuries, had taken place on Polish territories during Easter times was well-received by dozens of users (49 likes and hearts), who appreciated the “tremendous amount of work” and “tedious labor” of its author. Those commenting declared intentions to use the calendar in their classrooms, but offered no details as to *how* they would use it (History Teachers, 2022, April 3a), nor *what for/to what end*. One can reasonably appreciate the difficulty of designing intellectually stimulating classroom activities based on a set of unrelated events from a period of 10 centuries, from the 10th to 20th.

¹ Bold script emphasis added by the authors.

Lack of reflection on the constructed nature of narratives about the past

For many group members, history constituted no more than a treasure trove of interesting facts and curiosities. Responding to a contest posted by one teacher and educational influencer, in which two statistical history books could be won as prizes—*Okupowana Polska w liczbach* (*Occupied Poland in numbers*) and *Przedwojenna Polska w liczbach* (*Pre-war Poland in numbers*)—someone commented:

For me, the shocking discovery was the life expectancy of both men and women in the Second [interwar] Polish Republic and the rapid increase in life expectancy in the second half of the 20th century :-). For the record, in the early 1930s, men lived an average of 48 years while women lived more than 51. It is also interesting to note that the age difference between the two genders was not as big as it is today (History Teachers, 2022, April 26).

Both the author of the post and the commentator approached history as a collection of curiosia. The competition question—“What data (figures) in the context of history have made the strongest impression on you?”—required little analytical processing, especially that there was no need to justify the choice or answer. Neither the author nor commentators saw a need or opportunities for such a justification, for exploring or developing respondents' second-order concepts, e.g. of historical significance or continuity and change (Lévesque, 2005).

The group members claimed to attach great importance to factual accuracy. They saw factual accuracy as allowing a view of the past as it “really had been”, indicating that certain educational materials had high educational value. These standards can be observed in the posted recommendations of movies for classroom use. “I recommend the excellent video *The French Revolution*. [...] One may **learn interesting things** from it”, as someone responded to a member seeking materials for history lessons in English (History Teachers, 2022, April 22a). The idea of deconstructing the narrative of the film has not appeared in this or in other movie-related posts.

Another user penned the following comment concerning a movie about the Polish People's Republic: “pleasant and easy to watch, nevertheless overloaded with dates. Some of the claims are highly debatable and others are completely wrong (e.g. the mention of [president] Bierut from a working-class family is part of a biography fabricated for the [Communist] Party's purposes)” (History Teachers, 2022, April 20a). This commentator's intention was to discourage teachers from using the film in their teaching process, not to encourage critical screening.

As in the case of the above-cited French Revolution film, videos are regarded as potential replacement of teachers in transmitting information—yet another reason to conclude that factual accuracy is accorded great importance. It seems that pupils were to watch “valid” movies passively, without any queries or commentary before or after the screening: “TedEd on YT, great channel (some of the videos have Polish subtitles and English lector). It **does a great job ;-)**” (History Teachers, 2022, April 22a); “I **devoted three lessons** in the 8th grade to [watching] *Black Thursday*.² I think it is worth the time” (History Teachers, 2022, March 2).

“History Teachers” attitudes towards multiperspectivity

As Polish teachers typically follow the national curriculum, it is not surprising that their lesson plans are focused on Polish history. Many teachers organize commemorations of important events in Polish national history to strengthen the sense of national identity amongst their students. The analyzed posts confirm that this task is usually assigned to history teachers by school principals,

² The movie about a massacre of Polish workers by the communist authorities in December 1970 is 1 hour and 45 minutes long.

just as it used to be in the past (History Teachers, 2022, March 27, April 18b and 19). In this vein, the users active on this Facebook group appreciated the materials prepared by the Institute of National Remembrance and other public institutions whose aim was to promote Polish “patriotic values” (History Teachers, 2022, April 15a, 21a, 22b, 28b and April 15b and 20b). We did not observe any critical comments on such materials.

The view of history as a culture/identity builder explains why multiperspectivity is a rare concept in Polish schools. In the “History Teachers” group, exceedingly rare were posts and comments accounting for, or recognizing, the existence of diverging interpretations of the past or of diverse perspectives on historical figures. Such attitudes were displayed almost exclusively in reference to school-based extracurricular activities. In the extracurricular context, one user recommended the use of “[p]art of the Holy Bible. Selected for the Use of the Negro Slaves” from 1808, since “[it] has a good chance of generating curiosity and discussion in the classroom”—by illustrating how editors once had selected scriptural material to Christianize the enslaved in the United States, without exposing the enslaved to the concepts on freedom and equality also reflected in the scriptures. The post received 18 likes, but also “surprised” and “angry” emoticons (History Teachers, 2022, April 15c). Another person encouraged teachers to reach for books concerning Polish queens in order to see early modern Polish history from a gendered perspective (but received no reactions) (History Teachers, April 16, 2022).

The majority of those commenting made statements indicating their belief that there only existed one truth and that historians were obliged to find it. When teachers asked for suggestions and references useful for preparing lesson plans, those commenting often proposed they look for “reliable” content (History Teachers, 2022, April 2), preferably texts authored by professional scholars. The member teachers usually reached for officially-approved textbooks (cf. Roszak, 2018 on the process of textbook approval in Poland) and websites of Poland’s public institutions: museums and the Institute of National Remembrance; scholarly, college, and school texts (but less frequently monographs with a specific thematic focus); dictionaries published by established publishing houses and the Internet version of the renowned PWN (Polish Scientific Publishers) encyclopedia. References to Wikipedia were rare. This may mean that many teachers tended not to trust Wikipedia or knew it was generally perceived as unreliable, and therefore preferred not to admit that they were using it³.

The Russian aggression against Ukraine in February 2022, and the subsequent massive influx of Ukrainian refugees to Poland, posed unexpected challenges to the prevailing model of school history education—as transmission of, or search for, the one “truth” about the past. On the one hand, Polish teachers perceive “Polish” vs. “Ukrainian” pasts as two divergent narratives, despite the fact that the two societies for centuries had shared the same territory. On the other hand, however, they were reluctant to treat the Ukrainian narratives as equally valid. Such attitudes were reflected e.g. in the following comment: “[they, i.e. the Ukrainian pupils] have the right [sic!] to learn about Polish culture and to preserve their traditions, customs and religion” (History Teachers, 2022, April 24, cf. also April 4b and 24). Another commentator was more extreme and demanded that “[i]f they [Ukrainian pupils] are going to stay [in Poland] then they must embrace Our culture and science”.

The group users verbalized appreciation of student engagement and of activities aimed at developing critical thinking skills and creativity—at least when they expected to be observed by

³ The post from Autumn 2020, announcing a webinar on Wikipedia use in schools, was met with little enthusiasm among the group members (4 likes and one comment). The webinar organizer thanked for the one positive comment that followed the post, noting that she was glad to see a favorable response when many Polish teachers treated Wikipedia entries on equal footing with other Internet resources, i.e. as “evil” (History Teachers, 2020, November 25). This observation was confirmed by pupils of one of the Wrocław’s high school in which one of us taught in the school year 2021/2022.

school principals (History Teachers, 2022, April 4a and 7). But in concrete situations, those teachers regarded any narratives contradicting their beliefs as biased and manipulated, and judged harmful any exposure of their (Polish) pupils to such contradictory narratives. This was observed in relation to the movie *Gierek* (2022), a bio-pic profiling the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party in 1970-1980. While sharing film recommendations, one member cautioned others against this movie, opining that watching it with pupils was a "screw-up": "The kids got confused and had to be corrected, some wondered—Gierek the hero?" (History Teachers, 2022, March 25). According to some of those commenting, exposing young people to such "inappropriate" material could cause them to "misunderstand" the actual realities of the time. What is worse, students so exposed might begin to display "undesirable" attitudes, including an appreciation of communists. Such derogatory comments persuaded some teachers to abandon the idea of watching the movie with their pupils (History Teachers, 2022, April 20a).

In a similar vein, during a heated debate regarding textbooks for a newly-introduced school subject *Historia i Teraźniejszość* ("History and the Present") combining contemporary history and civic education, some commentators vocally opposed the government's attempt to use the new subject to indoctrinate pupils (History Teachers, 2022, April 1). Some were less skeptical about the government's political objectives. Yet not one person recognized that the mis-aligned or contradictory narratives about Poland's communist era offered any educational opportunities.

"History teachers'" non-approach to critical thinking

As mentioned above, during the period under analysis, no teacher shared any tips on how to encourage pupils' critical approaches to the movies. A similar lack of critical attitude was expressed towards museum exhibitions, which were to be taken at face value, with emotions involved but not reflected upon. For example, after a visit to Warsaw's Museum of everyday life in the Polish People's Republic, one member wrote only: "Amazing place! It brings tears to one's eyes" (History Teachers, 2022, March 2).

A similarly emotional approach was observed when someone recommended a lesson plan about everyday life in the Polish People's Republic aiming, inter alia, to show students that "even though there was nothing, everyone had [what was] the most important" (History Teachers, 2022, March 28). Thus, the posting teachers did not seem to differentiate between history (as an academic discipline) and memory (as a source of emotions and basis for identity formation). 19 likes followed a post in which a user shared a song by Jacek Kaczmarski (dubbed the "bard of Solidarity"), recommending its use to begin a teaching unit on the institution of martial law in Poland in December 1981. The post said: "[It] reminds me of my student days when we used to sing Kaczmarski during parties in the dorm ;-)" (History Teachers, 2022, April 27). Another user claimed that a song addressing the martial law "recreates the impression of how people felt under the martial law" (History Teachers, 2022, April 5).

The more remote in time the event discussed in the classroom, the fewer emotions and nostalgia were displayed. On the other hand, some group members expressed the belief that events that had happened in the past may happen again, and for this very reason people should learn history. For instance, under a post discussing the challenges of grading Ukrainian refugee pupils, one member asserted that due to various traumatic events from the past (which he enumerated and detailed, including massacres of Polish civilians by the Ukrainian Insurgent Army from 1943 to 1945) the two nations would be unable to live together (History Teachers, 2022, April 24). In this instance, history was perceived as a "teacher of life", with selected facts from the past cited to support one's beliefs and assumptions. Neither any critical approach nor any distinction between history and memory were explicitly mentioned.

Conclusion and discussion

On teachers' epistemic beliefs

According to people active on Polish "History Teachers" Facebook group, the first and most important purpose of history in schools is the transfer of knowledge about historical facts in accordance with the national curriculum and with the received concept of national identity. There is a lot of continuity in this approach. For decades, history education in Polish schools has served as a tool of national identity building. Even during the so-called communist decades, between ca. 1945 and 1989, nationalism played a crucial role in forming the system of values transmitted by public schools and the state propaganda system. Generations of Poles, including history teachers, were brought up in this paradigm and adopted it (Wojdon, 2012).

Many members of the Polish Facebook group "History Teachers" treat history as a set of "facts" that everyone in Polish society should know – yet another example of continuity in Polish teachers' attitudes. They do not explicitly consider or discuss the epistemic nature of history, though their posts and comments suggest that they recognize history as an academic discipline. Those teachers appear to believe that human knowledge about the past is drawn from historical sources, analyzed by "objective" professional historians who are equipped with the scholarly skills to do so reliably. These teachers see themselves as transmitters of the knowledge accumulated by scholars. In these respects, their attitudes parallel Maggioni's concept of *copiers*.

We cannot describe the members of "History Teachers" as *borrowers*, who—according to Maggioni et al. (2009)—regard history as a subjective construct, and accept divergent opinions. The group users cited above hardly tolerated any discrepancies or differences in judgments about the past events.

Unlike teachers recently examined by VanSledright and Maggioni (2016), the Polish teachers active on Facebook do not wobble epistemically—they have clearly formed epistemic positions, but lack what Mathis and Parkes (2020) call epistemic reflexivity and historical (self) consciousness. Our findings do not correspond with the results of eight other projects where researchers had conducted in-person interviews and questionnaires with teachers and prospective teachers to find out that on declarative level the majority of them valued criterialist approach (Stoel et al., 2022). Polish teachers seem to believe that their role is to pass on the "truth" about the past to younger generations, in order to raise them in a nationalist (patriotic) spirit. Such objectivist position correlates with the perception of history as a tool in nation building, which was also found in studies from other countries (Zanazanian & Moisan, 2012; Sakki & Pirttilä-Backman, 2019), and confirm these observations of Jaskułowski & Surmiak (2017: 43-44): "Remarkably, [Polish] teachers do not see any contradiction between teaching history as an instrument for promoting 'patriotism' and teaching history as an entirely fact-based practice [...] and they paradoxically define their role as politically and ideologically neutral".

During the period under analysis, no teacher shared any tips on how to encourage pupils' critical approaches to historical sources. The movies, one of the frequent topics of discussion, were seen as a useful tool for facilitating transmission of knowledge. We registered no reflection suggesting that the movies were interpretations, rather than representations, of the past—although such critical approach has been recommended in history didactics for years (cf. Seixas, 1994; Marcus et al., 2018).

What we have found overall confirms the findings from other studies: that Polish history teachers' epistemology is poorly conceptualized, rather naïve, and uninformed by the developments in historical and didactical theories of the last half-a-century. Our results reveal the urgent necessity for reform of history education in Poland, so it adheres to the contemporary world. Also the way history teachers are trained needs to be changed.

On social media as a research tool

Already in an earlier study of this Facebook group, one of us had concluded that its content confirmed the anecdotal reports about Polish teachers and corroborated the results of studies conducted by other scholars, using other methods; and, therefore, this Facebook group could be considered reliably representative of Polish teachers' opinions. Moreover, "[it] provide[s] access to larger and more divergent pools of practices and opinions [which] makes it a potentially useful basis for dealing with areas where traditional methods have failed or proved difficult to implement" (Wojdon 2023: 418-419). Current findings, related to teachers' epistemic beliefs, remain in line with that conclusion.

Therefore, thanks to the online-based approach, behaviors that formerly did not exist or could not be investigated with the help of the more traditional investigative tools, can now be observed, analyzed, and described (Jemielniak, 2013: 98-99; Markham, 2004: 95), even though the authenticity and accuracy of online data can vary greatly, with the potential for misinformation, manipulated content, or biased representation.

One could point to certain limitations resulting from unique character of interactions on social media. The majority of the group members just read posts (or perhaps just skim them), and only a minority exchange ideas, opinions, demands, etc., as well as react to the published or shared content through likes and emojis. Even fewer people engage in conversations under posts, perhaps out of fear of being judged or out of preference for passive membership. On the other hand, the active members of "History Teachers" not only communicate about the reality of history education in Poland among themselves, but also reach the passive members. Consequently, the exchanges in the group directly or indirectly influence opinions and teaching practices of the whole community, albeit one cannot evaluate precisely to what extent (cf. Choińska, 2021).

Our analysis also reveals that some teachers are open to novel, interesting ideas and/or ready-to-use materials. Therefore, Facebook groups (like "History Teachers") may be effective platforms for information-sharing and peer consulting, thereby promoting diverse approaches to history, disseminating historical-thinking teaching aids, and inspiring thoughts about how history is constructed, studied, and taught. We have been contemplating a form of action/intervention experiment: using the same "History Teachers" Facebook group to disseminate selected epistemic ideas and approaches—explicitly or implicitly—and then studying the members' reactions. Social media could thereby serve not only as a field research site but also as a transformative tool.

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