

## Why national narratives are perpetuated: A literature review on new insights from history textbook research

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### Abstract

National narratives have often served to mobilize the masses for war by providing myths and distorted interpretations of the past, while conversely wars were major sources for producing national narratives. Because national history is very likely to remain a central topic in history education, albeit in ways that differ from how the topic was used fifty years ago, it is important to gain a greater understanding of the underlying structures and mechanisms of these narratives in history textbooks. After outlining the historical interconnectedness of the emerging nation states and history teaching, this review article explains the complexity of the history textbook as an educational resource. Next, we identify some current problems and challenges in history textbook research. We continue by discussing promising research trends related mainly to national narratives, such as the analysis of images, the use of digital tools, and studies of the autonomy of textbook narratives and of history textbooks in relation to other media. Another recent reorientation is textbook research that uses a *holistic approach*. By this we mean studies that examine the history textbook as a whole: composition, periodization, visual intertextuality and chapters that do not at first glance appear to focus on national history. These studies offer new insights and explanations for the perpetuation of national narratives in history textbooks.

**Keywords:** history textbooks; textbook research; national narratives; holistic approach; history education

### Introduction

In the nineteenth century, the emerging nation states buttressed the professionalization of history into a scientific discipline. Although closely linked to the state, national historiographies presented themselves as an impartial discipline, founded on the critique of large quantities of sources. At the same time, historians indefatigably built a specific infrastructure to institutionalize the transmission of patriotic values and historical knowledge about the nation. They also influenced the rise of history teaching and the production of history textbooks. According to Berger and Lorenz (2008: 12), 'the state elites and the majority of professional historians presupposed that education in (national) history was essential for 'nation-building' and for 'responsible citizenship'.

In the period of nation-building, which often implied the exclusion of cultural and ethnic minorities (Stuurman, 2007), both historical scholarship and school history were major producers of national narratives (Wertsch, 2004). In the new millennium, we notice in many countries a strong revival of national narratives in education. A persistent complaint in public debates is that youngsters are not familiar with the history of their country of residence. National newspapers,

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television programmes and internet campaigns have accused school history of a fragmentary approach, teaching relativistic narratives and marginalizing national history (Moreau, 2003; Grever and Stuurman, 2007; Haydn, 2011). Policymakers expect a chronologically arranged history curriculum with a coherent and uniform national narrative; national governments demand the transmission of historical canons to bolster national identity (Phillips, 2000). Yet requirements closely linked to identity politics are often incompatible with criteria of the historical profession, such as distance and critical judgement (Rüsen, 1994; VanSledright, 2008; Grever *et al.*, 2012; Chapman and Wilschut, 2015). In sum, historical scholarship and history teaching are both deeply rooted in the making of national identity.

Most history textbook researchers are aware of these traditions. Repoussi and Tutiaux-Guillon (2010), Foster (2011), Fuchs (2011), Hasberg (2012) and other experts have published important overview articles about recent developments in history textbook research. Besides didactic issues, research methods, the production and distribution of textbooks and their reception by teachers and students, they also point to research about sensitive topics and textbook revisions after a regime transition. In a recent publication Fuchs and Sammler (2016: 12) argue that ‘systematic and critical reflection on the history of textbook revision is an important area of textbook research’, extending beyond the borders of Europe and the USA, encompassing East Asia, Latin America and Africa.

This review article aims to contribute to these overviews of history textbook research in a special way. We will reflect on history textbook studies which deal mainly with national narratives. By national narratives we mean (often canonized) stories about a nation’s origin and achievements, and the perceived characteristics of a national community, produced to make sense of past events and to create cohesion in the present with a view to the future (see e.g. Yadgar, 2002; Amin, 2014: 418; Létourneau, 2017). The plots of these narratives are governed by nations; they are the principal actors: nations wage wars, suffer defeats and triumphs (Grever, 2007: 35). National narratives appeal to young people and have been extremely explosive in their consequences since the nineteenth century. They have often contributed to the mobilization of the masses for war and for committing genocides by presenting tendentious myths or distorted understandings of the past (Berger, 2007: 65), while conversely wars were in their turn major sources for producing national narratives. National history, although it differs in many ways from that produced fifty years ago, is very likely to remain a central topic in history education, despite attempts to implement other cultural and geographical perspectives (Popp, 2009; Carretero *et al.*, 2012). Therefore, it is important to question the perpetuation of national narratives in textbooks and to gain a greater understanding of their underlying structures and mechanisms (Van der Vlies, 2016, 2017). Moreover, examining textbooks ‘through the lens of the “nation” is an effective way to unmask’ conflicts about content, purposes and so forth (Moreau, 2003: 18).

In the following paragraphs we will clarify the identity of the history textbook as an educational resource. Next, we will identify some problems and challenges in history textbook research. We will then discuss promising trends in the field related to national narratives, such as the analysis of images, the use of digital tools, and studies of the autonomy of textbook narratives and of history textbooks in relation to other media. We will pay special attention to a new form of textbook research that uses a *holistic approach*. These studies examine the history textbook as a whole: its composition, periodization, visual intertextuality and the role of chapters that at first glance do not seem to focus on national history. This holistic approach shows that the organization of historical knowledge sustains the perpetuation of national narratives in history textbooks.

### **History textbooks: A complex educational resource**

What exactly do we mean by a ‘textbook’ and a ‘history textbook’? Issitt (2004: 685) argues that textbooks ‘are a very fuzzy category as they reflect a multiplicity of meanings and uses’, and ‘it is precisely this definitional problematic that delivers them as rich sources’. Indeed, it is hard to define textbooks. Many definitions stress only one aspect, for example their purpose, use or status; other definitions are too comprehensive (Lebrun *et al.*, 2002). It is nonetheless important to keep in mind that textbooks are embedded not only in the wider context of education, politics, media, (popular) culture and commerce but also in the context of a specific professional discipline with its own cultural status, tradition and jargon.

*History textbooks* are educational resources related to the historical discipline, produced with the aim of supporting or – depending on the country – of determining the contents of formal history teaching and learning, mostly in schools. Because textbooks are intentionally written for teaching and learning purposes, they contain implicit or explicit pedagogic and didactic visions. Consequently, history textbooks are a rather hybrid object of research. Since the 1980s they have often consisted of three products: 1) the main textbook with stories, source fragments, images, graphs, maps and references to films and websites; 2) a workbook with various assignments for students, also often including images, graphs and maps; and 3) a teachers’ guide with explanations of historical topics, references to museums and various other media, didactic advice and pedagogical help (see Lebrun *et al.*, 2002; Hasberg, 2012). Recently, history textbooks have become even more hybrid as they are expanded to include associated educational websites and digital media (Haydn, 2011; Haydn and Ribbens, 2017).

For research purposes, history textbooks are difficult primary sources. To begin with, the textbook needs to narrate events from the past in such a way that students can follow and understand the content, which results inevitably in a selection of topics and a kind of simplification, depending also on the school level. Further, history textbooks have traditionally had a special status: they contain historical knowledge which it is generally believed that everyone should master, and learners or readers are understood to have a subordinate epistemological status (Issitt, 2004: 689). This is confirmed by the trustworthy authority that history textbooks often have (Wineburg, 2001), strengthened by their canonical function as a repository of ‘true’ and ‘valid’ knowledge (Olson, 1980: 194). This historical knowledge is selected and transmitted from one generation to another: ‘History textbooks preserve and communicate cultural truths intergenerationally’ (Porat, 2001: 51). An element that supports this special status is that words and sentences seem to be objective and impersonal; stories are told by an omniscient narrator. In the view of the public at large, including students, history textbooks appear as a ‘transcendental source’ of knowledge (Olson, 1980: 192), while they often conceal specific choices and ideological bias. Lowenthal (1998: 116) quotes a museum director who complained that youngsters have been taught history at school as a finite subject with definite right or wrong answers: ‘Most history texts are written as if their authors did not exist, as if they were simply instruments of a divine intelligence transcribing official truths’.

Furthermore, textbooks transmit preferred values, norms, behaviour and ideologies (Issitt, 2004; Pingel, 2008; Lässig, 2009). Elie Podeh, who researched Israeli textbooks, describes them as ‘another arm of the state, agents of memory’, and a kind of ‘supreme historical court’ because they ‘decide’ what is appropriate to include (Podeh, 2000: 66; Apple and Christian-Smith, 1991). From this perspective, history textbooks are collective memory agents of the nation (Kammen, 1993; Lowenthal, 1998). They function as instruments for socialization and identity politics (Lässig and Pohl, 2009; Brand, 2014).

These elements that make up the special status of history textbooks probably also stimulated the so-called ‘textbook wars’ in the 1990s and 2000s (Anderson, 1996; Macintyre and Clark,

2003; Grever and Stuurman, 2007). Political elites, opinion leaders, historians, education experts and teachers negotiate or even fight about which historical topics are relevant and worthy to be presented in textbooks, and in what ways. This also becomes manifest during major social and political transformations, which often leave their mark on the contents and perspectives of history textbooks. A telling case in this respect is the regime change in post-1989 Russia and ‘the enormous task of revising and rewriting textbooks to adjust to a new reality’ (Korostelina, 2014: 297), which provoked fierce debates over the contents of history textbooks in the mass media and professional forums. Recently, Russian president Putin has asked historians to develop a ‘history curriculum that would produce a single history free “from internal contradictions and ambiguities”’ (Kovalyova, 2013: n.p.). These plans to produce new history books have raised particular concern and critics say that the proposed version of history is ‘highly politicised and grossly distorts the facts’ (Kovalyova, 2013: n.p.). Another case is the Texas Board of Education in the USA, which sparked a heated debate through its plans to change the contents of history schoolbooks in 2010. Historians protested since a number of the Board’s changes were historically incorrect and appeared politically driven (‘Ron’, 2013). Other examples can be found from Japan (Saaler, 2005; Bukh, 2007), Australia (Macintyre and Clark, 2003), France (Tutiaux-Guillon, 2012), Greece (Repoussi, 2006) and Israel (Porat, 2001).

However, as Barton (2011) and Foster (2011) have rightly claimed, we must be careful not to assimilate different pedagogical contexts and curricular arrangements, ending up with misunderstandings about the various national contexts of history education practices. In the Netherlands, for instance, the central government does not screen history textbooks. Since the 1980s and 1990s, several Dutch history textbook series have introduced historical thinking skills in response to debates between experts in history education and revisions of the history curricula. Consequently, these textbooks are not ‘collective memory projects’ conveying a specific national ideology. This situation differs from that in other countries, such as France, Germany, the USA and Japan, where (national) governments control the history curricula and the textbooks (Symcox and Wilschut, 2009; Selden and Nozaki, 2009; Van Boxtel and Grever, 2011; Van Berkel, 2017). Separately, British high-school teachers seem to use their own resources to supplement or substitute the history textbook quite often (De Bruijn, 2014: 25). William Marsden (2001: 55) even pointed to an anti-textbook ethos in British education, due to financial constraints precluding teachers from using textbooks, while new technologies provided them with other teaching methods. Terry Haydn (2011: 86) emphasizes that the situation in the UK is probably atypical in terms of textbook use. Finally, there may also be differences between primary and secondary school-level teaching. Very likely, teachers in primary schools rely on textbooks particularly often. Recent research in Finland, for instance, shows that the majority of the history and civics teachers in basic (primary) education use a textbook in the class ‘always’ or ‘very often’ (Sakki, 2014: 45).

Because history textbooks are carriers of different social and political agendas, and function differently in different national and international contexts with different social and political demands, textbook research faces many more challenges than is generally assumed (Foster, 2011: 5).

### **The field of history textbook research: Problems and challenges**

Textbook research has a strong international research tradition. In the early 1920s, the League of Nations encouraged comparative textbook research on stereotypes and portrayals of the ‘Other’ in order to bring about international understanding. After the Second World War, UNESCO and the Council of Europe continued this type of research (Pingel, 1999; Nicholls, 2003;

Fuchs, 2011: 18). Since its foundation in 1951, the Georg Eckert Institute (GEI), now named the Georg Eckert Institute for International Textbook Research and based in Braunschweig, Germany, has contributed tremendously to textbook research. Gradually, the research has developed a more detached approach by providing critical analyses of contexts of production, content perspectives and discourses. These studies have raised questions, for instance, about the relations between power, ideology and historical knowledge (e.g. Foster, 2011). International organizations have supported textbook research on various school subjects and this research has been conducted in a variety of disciplines (history, geography, peace studies, education, media studies, sociology and psychology), but researching *history* textbooks in particular has almost always been considered crucial in the general field of textbook research (Korostelina, 2013).

History textbook research can be considered as educational historiography (De Keyser, 1998: 331) or school historiography (Repoussi and Tutiaux-Guillon, 2010: 154). This field of research discloses changing views on school history, the didactic revolution, the involvement of national governments in the construction of history curricula, and the influence of the publishing market. Although this research can offer fascinating views on the substantive development of the historical discipline and its (inter)national infrastructure, it is almost absent in handbooks of historiography and philosophy of history. One of the reasons might be that, traditionally, studies on history textbooks have focused on describing change and continuity in the historical representations of topics. The main questions in this research tend to be: Which persons, events or processes are marginalized or neglected? How are they presented? Related to this issue has been a lack of generic methods. In 1999, former GEI director Falk Pingel sought to address this, publishing a methodological guidebook for textbook research. Four years later, Nicholls argued that methods were still 'rarely discussed clearly and in depth', an issue that remained 'a gaping hole in the field' of textbook research (Nicholls, 2003: 25). Another likely reason for this historiographical neglect is that printed textbooks seem an outdated resource. Examining textbooks in the age of digital humanities is regularly considered antiquarian, both as a research object and in its methods. Yet Repoussi and Tutiaux-Guillon (2010: 156) argue that textbooks are still widely used in the classroom, often in combination with websites, apps and other online media.

This historiographical neglect is also curious because current debates among historians and opinion leaders about history education may benefit from the longitudinal approach of history textbook research. Statements in these debates are often incorrect, normative, nostalgic or coloured with simplistic dichotomies, such as 'traditional' (good) versus 'new' (bad) history education. A historical perspective 'has the potential to uncover – and dismiss – these dichotomies' (Verschaffel and Wils, 2012: 4). Moreover, the content of history textbooks is often measured against the yardstick of academic historiography (Van der Vlies, 2014). Historians criticize the absence of historical topics they value and loath chapters dedicated to 'trendy' items, or they denounce an excessive emphasis on historical thinking skills and glorify history books written before the 1970s (e.g. Symcox and Wilschut, 2009; Van Boxtel and Grever, 2011). What history should be taught is a question that has vexed historians and textbook authors for a long time. A telling example came in the politicized discussions in the United Kingdom in 2011 about history as a school subject in a new national curriculum, incited by comments from well-known historians such as Simon Schama (Vasagar, 2011). What many academic critics quickly forget – or hardly understand – are the consequences of the pedagogical context. History textbooks present, depending on the age of students, simplified versions of very complex and layered histories because the narratives must be comprehensible to young people. This is not to say that historians and others cannot be right in their criticism. In all these cases, however, this judgemental approach is not really helpful for illuminating how and why particular historical

topics in textbooks are portrayed and why textbook authors seem to cling to 'old canons' (Van der Vlies, 2017).

Whereas academic historians tend not to acknowledge the historiographical value of textbook research, in the public arena it attracts a lot of attention, as we have already discussed. Textbook research may even raise controversial reactions, as evidenced by the publication of James Loewen's *Lies my Teacher Told Me: Everything your American history textbook got wrong* (1995). Sociologist David Horowitz in particular complained that this book is not 'a scholarly work' but 'a sectarian polemic against the traditional teaching of American history and against what the author views as the black record of the American past' (*History News Network*, 2007). Loewen's book – a prize-winning bestseller – was based on research on 12 history textbooks popular in the USA, observations made in classrooms and interviews with high-school students and teachers. He not only revealed mythological, inaccurate and Eurocentric histories in the textbooks, but also highlighted ignored historical themes, such as the American exploitation of enslaved black people. In this way he emphasized that American history textbooks favour a feel-good (white) perspective. Beyond who is right, the polemic between Loewen and Horowitz clearly illustrates some challenges within the field of textbook research.

First, research on historical representations in history textbooks tends to reveal what is *not* in the history textbooks and what has been distorted or censored. Examples are the aforementioned book by Loewen and some chapters in the volume *Censoring History* (Hein and Selden, 2000). This kind of research demonstrates that history textbooks often perpetuate 'old narratives' and contribute to structural amnesia and other ways of 'forgetting' in societies, for example due to state interventions: national governments ask for textbook revisions or impose their idea of the 'right' knowledge. Sensitive topics about the past are suppressed, ignored or erased (Connerton, 2008). However, these studies do not clarify much about other reasons for the perpetuation of certain narratives in the genre of history textbooks, for example in societies where the government does not prescribe specific textbook contents. Therefore, next to the focus on the defects of history textbooks, an in-depth analysis of structures *within* textbooks is needed. Instead of stressing what is absent, textbook researchers are more and more concerned with the question of what is *in* the history textbook and why.

A second challenge is that we need much more research about the impact of (national) narratives in history textbooks on how teachers and students view the past. Besides Loewen's study, there are some other examples: Fournier and Wineburg (1997) have asked children aged 10–12 years to draw pictures of three types of historical figures after reading short texts. The researchers' impression was that the children's drawings were influenced by what they had learned and seen in traditional textbook accounts at school. Researchers have also investigated the relationship between students' age group and their historical understanding: identification with national narratives in textbooks appeared to be fairly constant (Carretero and Van Alphen, 2014). Others have analysed students' selection of national narratives after finishing high school and considered multiperspectivity in teachers' narrative constructions (Kropman *et al.*, 2015).

A third challenge is the issue of authorship. We need to know much more about who actually writes the history textbooks. Are the authors independently working trained historians? If not, what does this say about the quality of history textbooks? In several countries, such as the USA, the production of history textbooks is highly influenced by the commercial interests of the textbook industry (Moreau, 2003). Companies that publish history textbooks hire ghost writers and make agreements with professional historians to lend their names. The situation is quite different in Germany and the Netherlands. In his PhD study, Van Berkel (2017) shows that in these countries most textbook authors are trained historians, although this is less the case in the Netherlands than in Germany. The various forms of authorship across the field not only



influence the historical content and the quality of assignments in the textbooks, but might also offer an explanation for the practice of duplicating 'old' or familiar narratives.

In the next section, we will discuss some promising new research trends that can shed more light on the question how and why narratives, and particularly *national* narratives, are perpetuated in history textbooks.

### **Promising trends in textbook research and national narratives**

In the last decades, history textbook research has changed profoundly with respect to methods and theories. It has evolved from a rather descriptive analysis of textbooks to embrace the use of quantitative and qualitative methods derived from the social sciences, narratology and media studies. Guidelines for a systematic analysis of textbooks have been refined. There are some good introductions and pioneering studies (e.g. Foster and Crawford, 2006; Pingel, 2008; Haydn, 2011; Repoussi and Tutiaux-Guillon, 2010; Fuchs 2011; Fuchs and Sammler, 2016).

Several researchers have developed new tools for textbook analysis (e.g. Morgan and Henning, 2013). Moreover, based on new developments in the field of digital humanities, the Georg Eckert Institute has created a dedicated department, Digital Information and Research Infrastructures, for the further development of new digital tools and methods, derived from discipline-specific issues (GEI, 2017). These tools for textbook-related research provide new opportunities for data mining and tracing word patterns. Scholars use software such as Atlas.ti and Alcaste to code the content of textbooks and to examine vocabulary characteristic of a certain discourse. With digital tools, researchers can discover narrative *patterns*, for instance in the use of rhetoric and analogies. As a result, large-scale comparative research on national narratives in history textbooks offers insights about the general characteristics of these narratives and the role of the specific national context in the construction and continuation of these narratives.

An interesting example is a study by Inari Sakki (2014). She investigated how history and civics textbooks from five European countries portrayed European integration. By presenting a double content analysis (both quantitative and qualitative) about what was written on European integration and how, she discovered that in these countries the history of European integration is told from a national perspective. In another article, Sakki (2016) shows that French textbooks make European integration meaningful in reference to a shared post-war collective memory, referring also to an ancient idea of Europe, while English textbooks relate it to domestic policy. Furthermore, Sakki's type of research also shows a shift from national narratives to the study of post-national narratives. This theoretical construct does not mean the end of national narratives; rather, it places the individual nation within different, shifting borders and argues that the relations between people and the conditions of belonging cannot be understood without reference to wider geopolitical changes (e.g. Pease, 1997). This trend is also visible in the research framework developed by COST Action IS 1205 for analysing historical representations, presented in July 2016 (COST Action IS 1205, 2016). A working group, led by Tibor Polya and Eva Fülöp, includes research on how the European Union is visualized in history textbooks.

Another trend is the influence of the visual and spatial turns on textbook research (Fuchs and Sammler, 2016: 11–12). According to Pieter de Bruijn (2014), visual renditions of history have increasingly made their way into history textbooks, as famous heritage objects and historical sources are printed for illustrative or teaching purposes. Researchers have developed new ways of analysing images in textbooks, because visuals have become a considerable part of the main textbook and the students' workbook. With regard to national narratives, researchers have

discovered how selected 'iconic' photos sustained national narratives and how textbook authors themselves play an important role in the perpetuation of these iconic images (Kleppe, 2013).

Furthermore, comparative research into maps and images can reveal how the plot of the same historical 'event' is portrayed differently across national narratives, precisely because nations and their loss or triumph are the principal theme. For instance, Mario Carretero (2014) compared Spanish and Mexican textbooks about the American colonization and the representation of Columbus. Whereas all Spanish history textbooks contain biographic information about Columbus with lots of images, the Mexican textbooks include only brief mentions of his death and instead devote considerable text and visuals to the mistreatment of Indians and Mexicans. In the history textbooks of both countries, textual and iconographic information are closely connected to stimulate historical imagination about the American colonization.

Inspired by narratology, history textbook researchers also investigate less visible processes that play an important role in explaining changes and continuities in national narratives within the genre of history textbooks (Van der Vlies, 2014, 2016). After examining some founding myths of the United States, Ray Raphael claims that textbook narratives can 'survive' even after academic findings have added nuances or proved them wrong, because of 'three reasons, thoroughly intertwined: they give us collective identity, they make good stories, and we think they are patriotic' (Raphael 2004: 5). As we have seen, for quite some time textbook researchers have discussed the issue of identity politics and patriotic values; however, the focus on the *autonomy* of narratives is a promising approach for future research on the perpetuation of national narratives. Some national narratives are simply too good not to be told: 'Good does battle against evil, David beats Goliath, and wise men prevail over fools. (...) Even if they don't tell true history, these imaginings work as stories' (Raphael 2004: 5; see also Van der Vlies, 2016).

Emerging from older traditions, particular versions of the past can persist because they fit the canon and are considered 'relevant for later cultural formations' (Olick and Robbins, 1998: 129; Grever, 2007: 41). Therefore, such a version will probably change only when it 'no longer fits with present understanding or otherwise loses relevance for the present' (Olick and Robbins, 1998: 130). Hence, history textbooks can repeat familiar stories due to cultural factors. To enhance our understanding of this process and to get a grasp of the internal structures within history textbooks, the analysis of textbooks as an integrated whole is another promising trend.

### **A holistic approach: The structure of national narratives**

National narratives can be highly patterned and constituted according to a common structure (Feldman, 2001). These patterns can be very dominant and remain the same, even if the details of the specific stories change. Consequently, some researchers speak of a complex national narrative, which is 'constructed from a set of secondary narratives, myths, symbols, metaphors and images' (Yadgar, 2002: 58). To be able to unravel this complexity in the genre of textbooks, we need a holistic approach: a focus on the history textbook as an integrated whole. In 2003, Thomas Höhne proposed new research questions, aimed at yielding more insight into the structures of textbook narratives and the kind of knowledge they contain. He argued that these questions could overcome traditional, normative criteria in textbook research, such as 'true' and 'false', and shed light on the total textbook discourse (Höhne, 2002: 13). Specific narratives have meaning in the context of the whole textbook, and this certainly applies to *national* narratives. This means that the narrative structure or composition of the history textbook and its specific narratives about past events are connected. Changes in the narrative structure of the textbook, for instance due to societal transformations associated with different views on the past, have an impact on the function and meaning of the whole range of existing (national)



narratives. Some specific narratives disappear, while other former 'side stories' are emphasized and extended. For instance, in Dutch history textbooks the history of the transatlantic slave trade and slavery recently changed from a 'side story' related to commercial enterprises in early modern history into a more visible part of the national narrative, although experts remain critical about this (Klein, 2017: 76). This happened because migrants from the Dutch former colonies Surinam and the Antilles – often descendants of enslaved people – had persistently called for the acknowledgement of their past and the role of the Dutch (Van Stipriaan, 2007).

In her current research on national narratives in English and Dutch history textbooks, Van der Vlies analyses history textbooks in this way. Inspired by Michael Rothberg's concept of *multidirectional memory*, she uses the notion of *multidirectional textbook narratives*: narrations in history textbooks that combine different histories, places and times in a productive way to generate meaning from historical combinations. Rothberg argues that collective memory is too often seen as a zero-sum struggle in which things are present or absent; hence, he focuses on *multidirectional memory* and examines the 'dynamic transfers that take place between diverse places and times during the act of remembrance' (Rothberg, 2009: 11). Van der Vlies (2016) reveals these dynamic transfers on the level of textbook narratives: cross-references and exchanges between nationally framed stories from the past in textbooks. A striking example in English textbooks is the often-made cross-reference between the threat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 and the threat of the German Blitzkrieg in 1940. Differences, such as the fact that the danger came from the sea in 1588 whereas in 1940 it came through the air, do not weaken the comparison, however, because the events are connected in expressing the same idea: danger of invasion. Textbook narratives can show a pattern of interpretation into which several data and events can be entered. In this way it is possible to detect patterns of meaning in the narration of (national) history. Hence, history textbooks can contain a set of resonating stories; together they constitute, affirm and inculcate a national narrative (Van der Vlies, 2017).

The dynamic transfer of textbook narratives is currently even further strengthened by the use of new media. Textbook narratives are increasingly embedded in a (re)mediated world, especially now in the era of e-textbooks, which can easily direct students to YouTube or other websites by hyperlinks. From this perspective, Eleftherios Klerides points to the dynamic and hybrid forms of history textbooks, which he describes as 'multilayered', a 'combination of discourses' and an 'interdiscursive domain' (Klerides, 2010: 34). In line with this research, Heinze (2010: 125) suggests that history textbooks should not be regarded just as 'mirrors' in which a certain discourse is reflected but as 'mediators of discourses, for they provide the methodological and didactic impetus with which these discourses reproduce themselves' (Heinze, 2010: 125).

A holistic approach to history textbooks also elucidates how the organization of historical knowledge sustains the perpetuation of national narratives. Events from different time periods can be interrelated on the basis of a common plot or main storyline (Wertsch, 2004). The approach also gives insight into the arrangement of chronological time (diachronic and synchronic), the selection and naming of events and periods, and the use of colligatory concepts (e.g. 'Renaissance', 'Industrial Revolution', 'Cold War') which grasp different elements and stories together within a small plot (Jansen, 2010: 243; Grever *et al.*, 2012). But even more important is that a holistic approach goes beyond a representational analysis limited to one person, event or period, separated from the context of the whole textbook. Bert Vanhulle (2009), who used a holistic approach in his analysis of the 'narrative conception' of Belgian history textbooks in the period 1945–2004, argues: 'The emphasis lies on the structure and its consequences for the text as a historical representation, not on the portrayal of past events/groups/identities and the teaching consequences or consequences for the minds of pupils and

society at large' (Vanhulle, 2009: 264). Consequently, he is interested in locating the start of the narration. He wonders if history has a *fons*, 'a well from which the current of history springs', and if so in what direction. Because the researcher investigates the whole history textbook as 'one' historical representation, it is also possible to trace underlying conceptions of history: specific interpretations of the relationship between past, present and future, such as decline, progress or eschatology (Adriaansen, 2015; Van der Vlies, 2016; Grever and Adriaansen, 2017).

Alexander Albicher followed Vanhulle's approach in considering the history textbook as a complete narrative (Albicher, 2012: 43). Discussing how Dutch history textbooks have treated past and present in the period 1945–1985, he posed a series of questions: Are textbooks mainly exposing unique events and contingency or processes and structures? Is there a 'motor' that propels history? Apart from the periodization and categorization of history, he also studied fault lines and turning points. Turning points, for example, are important in the composition of a national narrative since they mark an end as well as a new beginning. As Zerubavel (2003: 85) has argued: 'Temporal discontinuity is a form of mental discontinuity, and the way we cut up the past is thus a manifestation of the way we cut up mental space in general.' Turning points underscore discontinuous time experiences in people's lives and are important anchors in mnemonic communities (Grever, 2001: 11, 18). Hence, to be able to understand the perpetuation of national narratives in history textbooks, we should regard this genre also in relation to wider cultural mnemonic schemata.

## Conclusion

In this article, we have discussed new insights from history textbook research in relation to the perpetuation of national narratives. The reason for this choice is that national history is likely to remain very important for history education. What can we conclude so far? First, because history textbooks are hybrid educational resources, functioning in different national contexts and often accompanied by fierce political controversies, history textbook research faces more problems and challenges than generally is assumed. Handbooks of historiography and philosophy of history in particular pay hardly any attention to history textbook research. We have identified three challenges: 1) the controversies about history education often focus on what is *not* in the textbooks, or present in distorted ways, which overshadows the question of what *is* in the textbooks; 2) research about the impact of history textbooks on how teachers and students view the past is scarce; and 3) we need to know much more about the authorship of history textbooks since that information might also shed light on the issue of duplicating 'old' stories.

Furthermore, we argued that current debates among historians and opinion leaders about history education may benefit both from the longitudinal approach of history textbook research and from an in-depth analysis of narrative structures *within* textbooks. This avoids simplistic and nostalgic dichotomies between 'good' and 'bad' history education. Next, we discussed some promising research developments related to national narratives. Regarding methods, we noticed that new tools for textbook analysis have been developed and applied, such as software to code the content of textbooks and to examine vocabulary characteristic of a certain discourse. Acknowledging that visuals have become a considerable part of the history textbook and the students' workbook, researchers also explore new ways of analysing images in history textbooks: how, for instance, 'iconic' photos sustain the national narrative. These methods are important contributions for understanding the perpetuation and transformation of national narratives in history textbooks, such as discovering *patterns* in textbooks, which helps in formulating the general characteristics of national narratives.

Finally, a promising new trend in history textbook research is the *holistic approach*: the analysis of the textbook as an integrated whole. In these studies, researchers analyse the dynamics of its internal structure and its interrelation with other media. This approach reveals how historical knowledge is organized, such as in the arrangement of chronological time, the selection and naming of events and periods, and the use of colligatory concepts. Moreover, a holistic approach enables textbook researchers to trace underlying conceptions of history: views on the relationship between past, present and future. This research trend highlights the construction of national narratives in history textbooks, and the (less visible) ways in which they are perpetuated. Through this approach, we might also get a better understanding of the changing function and meaning of existing national narratives in history textbooks, and their potential mobilizing power.

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