

Eckert.Dossiers No. 1

Daniela Kneissl

**Illustrative Historical material  
in the Franco-German history textbook**

Kneissl, Daniela. „Illustrative Historical material in the Franco-German history textbook.“ In Europe and the World, hg. v. Corine/ Marcowitz Reiner/ Pfeil Ulrich Defrance. Eckert.Dossiers 1 (2009). <http://www.edumeres.net/urn/urn:nbn:de:0220-2009-0001-226>.

**edumeres.net**



*This document was published under the creative-commons license:  
Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivate Works3.0 Unported;  
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/deed.en>*

Daniela Kneissl

## **Illustrative Historical material in the Franco-German history textbook**

The second volume of the Franco-German History Textbook features perhaps an even more impressive wealth of illustrations than the first. New aspects include first and foremost the dossiers, which directly address correlations between artistic and visual forms of expression and society, such as the Stalinist 'cult of personality' (pp. 282f.), the propaganda and cultural policy of the Third Reich (pp. 272f.), the worker seen through the eyes of the painter (pp. 114f.) or the portrayal of totalitarianism in film (pp. 292f.). At the same time, the close connection between history and views of the world conveyed by visual media and which can only be reconstructed via and in the latter, becomes apparent (cf. in particular Chapter 8: 'The Age of Mass Culture').

An entire chapter is dedicated to 'new forms of artistic expression and commitment (1815–1933)' (Chapter 7, pp. 130–143); here, key works from various eras of art history are primarily located in their historical background. Additionally, three of nine methodological sections directly address the interpretation of visual sources: history painting, caricatures or posters and photographs. Here, the dominant illustrative concept to be found in the Franco-German History Textbook becomes particularly striking.

The methodological section, 'Analysing Historical Paintings' (pp. 42f.), attempts to identify the central features of history painting and its significance as a source using the example of Anton von Werner's painting, 'The Proclamation of the German Empire' (1885). On the whole, the methodological section features shortcomings in its problem awareness. The suggested steps towards interpretation tend to confound completely different stages of image analysis, which should in fact begin with a description of the picture's structure in order to move on from these details to the intentions behind the portrayal. The link between the method of portrayal and the actual reason for the painting (in this case, Bismarck's 70th birthday) are not the focus of the analysis. The alternative question, 'To what extent does the picture correspond to historical reality?' [1] is unhelpful, as a more detailed study of the event would only be possible via other sources, each of which would only depict one aspect of the matter. This source, however, an extract from the painter's eye-witness account (p. 42), primarily repeats what he had heard and – incidentally – does not drastically contradict the painting. The actually interesting element is that here, historical reality has been painted within an idealised frame that dominates – indeed, it has even replaced – our idea of this fundamental event up until the present day. Pupils are unlikely, however, to reach this conclusion using the information provided here. The methodological section on 'Analysing a Photograph' (pp. 288f.) takes the example of a sufficiently well-known photograph of Lenin on a speaker's platform in the year 1920. His companions of the time, Trotzki and Kamenew, both of whom also appear on the photograph, were erased from the picture after 1927 in order to ostracise their legacies following their political outlawry. So far so good. Focused on this single picture, the methodological part essentially offers nothing other than a general verdict on photography as the ultimate medium of manipulation.

The pupils themselves are then even explicitly commanded to explore, using a

computer, how easy it is to manipulate images. The latest technical developments are thus directly related to the far less sophisticated possibilities of analogue photography in the first half of the 20th century. This is lethal within the context of the textbook. The inevitable conclusion is that each of the photographs given must be viewed from the prospect of their suitability for manipulation, including photographs of the abuse of the Jewish population by the Wehrmacht and the SS (eg. pp. 325, 331, 332). Serious analyses of photography are the exception in the second volume of the textbook, just as they were, incidentally, in the first. The symbolic scope of photography and the consequences of its global diffusion are merely brushed upon (p. 299 takes the example of Iwo Jima's photograph). A central function of these photographs – visualising rituals that only take shape via the intention to create a picture from them – is certainly neglected. The chapter on 'France in the Second World War', for instance, is introduced by two photographs intended to frame the era in question (p. 341): A troupe of German soldiers marching through the Arc de Triomphe in June 1940, and, underneath, a colour photograph of the same spot in August 1944, featuring a group of cheering people with American flags. It is indeed the act of taking the photograph that directly links the symbolic act of taking possession – or repossessing – the city with a strong national symbol. Such strategies of forming a collective awareness via photography are not mentioned at all in the didactic construct; the photographs continue to serve, as in the dossier on 'Societies in Mourning' (pp. 228f.), purely illustrative purposes. At the same time, however, the photographs on page 228 feature completely different memory cultures: the memories of those directly involved (front-line soldiers, p. 228, bottom) and those of their families (parents, p. 228 top). This last picture in particular is puzzling: The presentation of the old couple at the soldiers' graveyard does not so much demonstrate mourning as pride. The distance between the parents renders them the vanishing points marking the end of the two long rows of white gravestones that fade away into the background. From which context does this photograph originate? Is it a private picture or was it intended for publication? How long after the War was it taken? These details, as is so often the case, are not provided. The textbook thus fails to reach its own standards: The methodological sections repeatedly call upon the pupils to place pictures in their appropriate contexts. This would hardly appear to be a result of unclear origin; the photographer's name is omitted even for such well-known photographs as that of the American soldiers landing on 'Omaha Beach' in Normandy in June 1944 (p. 311), taken by Frank Capa. Essentially, the textbook hinders every attempt to move beyond the purely documentary function of photography. Analytical potential – this was more than obvious in the first volume too – is barely attributed to photographs. This is also the case for the police photograph that features a victim of cleansing politics soon after the seizure of power by the National Socialists (p. 267): The carefully labelled picture for the purposes of the inquiry is presented as evidence of a politically motivated murder, not as proof of the instrumentalising and undermining of the structures of the constitutional state, which did indeed document this public event, yet was hardly able to use this information to investigate the case.

The few successful examples of picture analysis include the methodological section on 'Analysing a Caricature or a Poster' (p. 256). Unfortunately, no other section of the textbook deals with the issue of following the development of a

certain motif. And yet it almost seems that propagandistic messages are the only area in which the source character is taken seriously. Nevertheless, here too, opportunities for highly relevant approaches are unnecessarily wasted. The National Socialist 'Race Table' (p. 260) thus serves merely illustrative purposes; the text is only partially recognisable in such a small-scale image. This would, however, be a good example to demonstrate particularly clearly the absurdity of the Nazi racial fanaticism: This chart, which at the time was widely distributed, bears witness to the direct dependency of the ethnic 'people's community' on the extension of the ideal 'Nordic' type, which hardly anyone could fulfil. It was not until the invention of the 'Phalician' and 'Mediterranean' races that the desperately needed bridge between the 'German' and the 'Nordic' races was found.

Certainly one might object that the teacher is at liberty to subject each image document to a more thorough analysis and thus to move beyond the prescribed set of questions. This is often hindered, however, by the fact that the pictures are too small. The opportunity to link individual topics and chapters by means of the images is also missed. The medial use of the famous photograph of 1919 that features Friedrich Ebert and Gustav Noske in swimming trunks is – justifiably – presented as evidence of the cartooning of democracy (p. 148). In the context of the topic 'Mass Media and Freedom in the 20th Century', however, it does bring us to the question of social acceptance of bare skin, not only in view of the portrait of the half-naked Josephine Baker on the same double page (p. 149) or that of the British female swimmers (p. 150), but also in the context of the idealisation of physical perfection in the 20th century (cf. Arno Breker's sculpture, 'Readiness' ('Bereitschaft', p. 273).

In conclusion, it remains to be said that, although there is a clear attempt to use images in the textbook as sources with equal weight, this ambition is not pursued consistently. Images are generally included in the 'Questions and Ideas' sections, yet as a whole, they remain in the role of illustrations because all too often the necessary information is missing that would be required to appropriately interpret the pictures.[2] This is a great pity: In many cases, the images can therefore hardly provide insights reaching beyond the boundaries of the text. True competencies in dealing with images can barely be taught in this way. It would have been considerably more worthwhile to have used a smaller selection of images with a clearer aim, reproduced in an appropriate size and if appropriate, linked via references between the chapters. Ultimately, it is the large number of images that is detrimental to the concept. And so Volume Two of the Franco-German History Textbook has also, along with the first volume, lost – rather than found – its way through the image jungle.

-----  
 [1] The concept of Realism is also used misleadingly with regard to Manet's painting 'Déjeuner sur l'herbe'. Here in particular it is a matter of an extremely multilateral example. The 'realism' effect arises via the transferral of a bucolic scene into the present. The picnic with the naked lady is hardly 'realistic' in the classical sense. Essentially, the nude is removed from its traditional mythological context and thus loses its moral legitimacy. As a result, contemporaries have reported a vulgar impression concerning this painting, especially since the naked lady is not portrayed abstractly. The painting has little to do with the definition of realism provided (p. 132), for the scenery in itself certainly reflects an idealised world view.

[2] To name only one example, this is the case for the wall painting 'The New Deal' by Conrad Albrizio (p. 97). The caption denotes 'Dedicated to President Roosevelt, 1934'. For interpretative purposes, however, it would be important to know that Albrizio decorated numerous public

buildings such as schools, factories or post offices in the south of the USA with his frescos. It was therefore a case of monumental 'Motivation Images', seen by a particularly large number of people and which were supposed to leave their tracks in people's consciousness due to its repetition effect.