



Teaching Entangled Migration Histories: The Image of Polish-Ukrainian Migrations of the 1940s in Polish History Textbooks (2000–25)

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ABSTRACT: Since 2022, approx. 1 million Ukrainian refugees have settled in Poland. As a result, history classrooms increasingly more often witness the encounter of different narratives on a contested past. This article is a step towards explaining how such narratives are shaped through history textbooks. I analyse how the portrayal of one element of this contested past—forced migrations of the 1940s—has been evolving in twenty-first-century Poland. I conclude that Polish textbooks pay increasingly more attention to the fate of non-Polish migrants, such as the Ukrainians resettled to Soviet Ukraine during “population exchanges” or to western Poland during Operation Vistula. At the same time, the fate of individual nations (Poles, Ukrainians etc.) takes precedence over the exploration of the parallels between the suffering of those nations. The opposite, however, can be said about supplementary teaching materials, which tend to explore stories that connect people across borders, even if these stories are contested or controversial ones.

KEYWORDS: textbooks, Poland, Ukraine, migration, repatriation, Operation Vistula.

STRESZCZENIE: Od 2022 roku w Polsce osiedliło się ok. 1 miliona uchodźców z Ukrainy. W rezultacie w szkolnych klasach dochodzi do zetknięcia odmiennych narracji dotyczących spornej przeszłości. W niniejszym artykule staram się zbliżyć do wyjaśnienia, w jaki sposób te narracje są kształtowane przez podręczniki do historii. Analizuję, jak w Polsce XXI wieku ewoluował obraz jednego z elementów tej spornej przeszłości, a mianowicie przymusowych migracji z lat czterdziestych XX wieku. Z moich badań wynika, że polskie podręczniki poświęcają coraz więcej uwagi losowi migrantów niepolskiego pochodzenia, takich jak Ukraińcy przesiedleni do Ukrainińskiej SRR w ramach „wymiany ludności” lub na Ziemię Zachodnie podczas Akcji „Wisła.” Jednocześnie los poszczególnych narodów (Polaków, Ukraińców itd.) zyskuje pierwszeństwo przed analizą podobieństwa doświadczenia cierpienia tych narodów. Odmiennie wygląda to jednak w przypadku uzupełniających materiałów dydaktycznych, które częściej podejmują historie łączące ludzi ponad granicami, nawet jeśli są to opowieści sporne lub kontrowersyjne.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: podręczniki, Polska, Ukraina, migracja, repatriacje, Akcja „Wisła”.



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Context and research questions¹

Forced migration affects all Central and Eastern Europeans, who experience it either personally or as close observers. Historians and sociologists analysed migrations in and between Poland and Ukraine, as well the significance of these migrations for the collective memory and national identity of various communities in both countries.² Education scholars, in turn, looked at the image of the Other in history textbooks. Their research explored, for example, how Polish textbooks depict Ukrainians and entangled Polish-Ukrainian histories.³ However, researchers in these fields have not yet fully analysed how history textbooks in both countries represent migrations of the immediate post-WWII period. As a result, scholarship does not fully explain how collective memories are replicated in Polish and Ukrainian classrooms.

Since February 2022, both official and personal interactions between Poles and Ukrainians have intensified. Different experiences and historical narratives have been brought into close contact on a number of arenas, including school classrooms. As of September 2022, 185,000 Ukrainian children were attending Polish schools, and at least another 500,000 resided in Poland, interacting with their Polish peers on a regular basis.⁴ By April

¹ I am grateful to Maria Kovalchuk from LMU Munich for inspiring discussions that informed my research on migrations in textbooks, and to Elżbieta Kwocińska from the Polish Academy of Sciences for sharing a wealth of Polish-Ukrainian teaching materials.

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² Wylegała, Anna: *Przesiedlenia a pamięć: Studium (nie) pamięci społecznej na przykładzie ukraińskiej Galicji i polskich „Ziem Odzyskanych”*. Toruń 2014; Topij-Stempińska, Beata: “Pamięć pokoleń. Historie rodzinne w przekazie międzypokoleniowym.” In: *Horyzonty Wychowania*, 2016, No. 36, pp. 29-45; Halicka, Beata: *The Polish Wild West: Forced Migration and Cultural Appropriation in the Polish-German Borderlands, 1945–1948*. London and New York 2020; and others.

³ Fic, Maciej: “Obraz Ukrainy i Ukraińców we współczesnych polskich podręcznikach historii dla szkół podstawowych.” In: *Przegląd Historyczny*, 2022, No. 3, pp. 519-44; Bonusiak, Władysław (ed.): *Polska i Ukraina w podręcznikach szkolnych i akademickich*. Rzeszów 2001; Maresz, Teresa: “Wspólne dzieje dwóch narodów a ich prezentacja we współczesnych polskich i ukraińskich podręcznikach do historii.” In: Roszak, Stanisław—Strzelecka, Małgorzata—Wieczorek, Agnieszka (eds.): *Polska–Europa–Świat w szkolnych podręcznikach historii: Zbiór studiów*. Toruń 2008, pp. 272-80, and others.

⁴ Potocka, Joanna: “Ukraińskie dzieci w polskich szkołach: minister podał liczbę.” In: RMF 24, 2 September 2022 [https://www.rmfm24.pl/fakty/polska/news-ukrainskie-dzieci-w-polskich-szkolach-minister-podal-liczbe,nId,6260249#crp_state=1, accessed 3 November 2022].

2025, the number of Ukrainian students increased to 295,000—roughly two-thirds of them refugees and the remaining third pre-2022 migrants.⁵ Without an understanding of the role that migration plays in history teaching, it is difficult to explain the dynamics of these contacts, to identify potential inflammatory points, and to seek avenues towards reconciliation. This paper is intended as a contribution towards the growing body of literature that aims to bridge this gap. I analyse how Polish textbooks of the past two decades portray three forced migrations of the years 1944–47 (a transition phase between the Second World War and the post-war period): the deportation of Crimean Tatars by the Soviet authorities (1944), the “population exchanges” between communist Poland and Soviet Ukraine (1944–47), and the resettlement of Ukrainians, Lemkos and Boykos from south-eastern Poland to the north and west of the country, known as Operation Vistula (1947). All of these forced migrations are significant—albeit to various degrees—for the history and collective memory of Poles and/or Ukrainians.

Research on Polish textbooks was carried out primarily in the Pedagogical Library in Gdańsk—a major urban centre in northern Poland. While some textbooks were unavailable in that collection, the sample of 24 publications from the time period 2001–19 generally overlaps with the publishing houses most commonly chosen by teachers.⁶ This is not a coincidence: the collections of pedagogical libraries, aimed specifically at teachers, certainly inform the choice of a textbook in at least some schools. I analysed textbooks used at all levels of primary and secondary education. In the Polish context, children start school at the age of six or seven. For most of the period analysed here, the educational system comprised primary schools (*szkoła podstawowa*) for years 1-6, middle schools (*gimnazjum*) for years 7-9, and high schools (*liceum*) for years 10-12. From 2017 onwards, middle schools were eliminated: primary schools covered the years 1-8, and high schools—9-12.

While history teaching in Poland continues to be based on textbooks that follow the curriculum and are approved by the education ministry, supplementary teaching materials on specific topics play an increasingly more important role. Prepared by academics, cultural institutions, or NGOs, these materials offer a deeper dive into or a novel perspective on topics that—according to their publishers—are not sufficiently covered in mainstream

⁵ Świdrowska, Elżbieta—Stano, Klaudia: “Uczniowie-cudzoziemcy w polskich szkołach w roku szkolnym 2024/2025. Raport z analizy danych.” In: Centrum Edukacji Obywatelskiej, April 2025 [<https://ceo.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/Raport-Uczniowie-cudzoziemcy-w-polskich-szkolach-w-roku-szkolnym-2024-2025-CEO-IRC-1.pdf>, accessed 19 February 2026].

⁶ Jaskułowski, Krzysztof et al.: *Wizje narodu w polskich podręcznikach do nauki historii—porównawcze badania antropologiczne. Badania ilościowe*. Warszawa 2017, pp. 40-4.

textbooks. In this paper, I analyse some of those supplementary materials devoted to Polish-Ukrainian topics.

Since the education reform of 1999, two main events influenced history teaching in Poland. Accession into the European Union in 2004 brought Poles into more frequent contact with other nations, mostly those from Western Europe. This sparked an increased interest in the culture and history of other EU member states, at school level promoted through the Socrates Comenius exchange programme, as well as through partnerships between individual schools (mostly those located in wealthy urban areas). The effect on Polish-Ukrainian contacts, however, was opposite, with Ukrainians now requiring a visa to enter Poland. Education reforms of 2012–15 meant that middle- and high-school students would study history in greater detail. In particular, a whole year was devoted to the twentieth century, and a greater emphasis was placed on social history.⁷ More recent events, including the overhaul of the history teaching system by the conservative Law and Justice government (2021), its partial reversal only two years later, and the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine (since February 2022) undoubtedly affected the teaching of history in Poland. The 2021 overhaul added a distinctly national flavour to the curriculum, while migration triggered by the invasion exposed Polish and Ukrainian students to a plurality of historical narratives.

This paper starts with a quantitative analysis of the content that textbooks devote to migration. I then conduct a qualitative analysis of how “facts” about migration are conveyed and how narratives are forged, before moving to an analysis of supplementary teaching materials on entangled Polish-Ukrainian histories. I conclude with prospects for further research that would include a comparative study of Polish and Ukrainian textbooks.

Quantity of information

In line with a greater focus of educators on social history, the quantity of content devoted to forced migrations—particularly those of non-Poles—has somewhat increased. However, the number of textbooks available on the market and the small amount of space devoted to (forced) migration in the first place does not allow for statistically significant conclusions. Instead, a quantitative analysis shows that post-war migration remains a niche topic in Polish history textbooks.

⁷ Hall, Katarzyna et al.: *Podstawa programowa z komentarzami*, Tom 4: “Edukacja historyczna i obywatelska w szkole podstawowej, gimnazjum i liceum.” Warszawa 2009, pp. 43-6; Olszak, Krzysztof: “Reforma MEN, czyli nowa podstawa programowa z historii.” In: *Historia.org.pl*, 22 February 2010 [<https://historia.org.pl/2010/02/22/reforma-men-czyli-nowa-podstawa-programowa-z-historii/>, accessed 2 November 2022].

Out of four primary school textbooks published at the start of the twenty-first century and analysed in this article, only two mention that the Second World War affected the ethnic composition of Poland. A textbook from the publishing house WSiP directly engages with “population resettlements” affecting Poles and Germans.⁸ Another textbook, from the publishing house MAC, acknowledges post-war Poland’s new ethnic composition and attributes it to “significant border changes.”⁹ No textbook, however, devotes more than four sentences to post-war forced migrations, which can be explained by the limited scope of the primary school curriculum. Interestingly, Ukrainians (as well as the other Slavic minorities affected—the Lemkos and the Boykos) are absent from the narrative, perhaps a testimony to a greater orientation towards the West on the eve of Poland’s EU accession (2004).

High school textbooks from the same period pay even less attention to forced migrations of non-Poles. Two books published by Operon in 2004 (for standard- and higher-level history courses) note in merely one sentence that a resettlement of Ukrainians, Belarusians and Lithuanians took place; three additional sentences explain the plight of Germans resettled in the post-war era.¹⁰ Similarly, a high school textbook published by WSiP in 2004 mentions post-war population transfers in two sentences, listing the nationalities of those affected and estimating their numbers.¹¹ Interestingly, this is also the only Polish textbook out of all those analysed for this project that notes the deportation of Crimean Tatars, whom the Soviet authorities accused of “collaboration with Germans” during the war.¹² The parenthesis in which collaboration is placed implies that the accusation was unfounded, but the topic is not explored any further—a testimony to the Crimean Tatars’ significantly less important place in Poland’s national imagery compared to that in Ukraine, as I discuss below. Operation Vistula is not mentioned by name in any of these early high school textbooks.

Against this background, middle school textbooks are the most informative ones. In the period between 2002 and 2004, two publications (out of three analysed) mention Operation Vistula by name. The 2004 textbooks by Operon and WSiP devote several sentences to the events of 1947

⁸ Polish original: “przesiedlanie ludności.” Gensler, Maria—Kąkolewski, Igor—Marciniak, Ewa: *Historia i społeczeństwo: Szkoła podstawowa 6, cz. 1*. Warszawa 2001, p. 246.

⁹ Polish original: “znaczące zmiany granic.” Machnicki, Jarosław—Wołowicz, Jacek—Liebrecht, Grzegorz: *Moje otoczenie: Historia i Społeczeństwo 5, cz. 2*. Kielce 2001, pp. 92-3.

¹⁰ Burda, Bogumiła et al.: *Historia 3: Historia najnowsza. Zakres podstawowy*. Gdynia 2004; Burda, Bogumiła et al.: *Historia 3: Historia najnowsza. Zakres rozszerzony*. Gdynia 2004, p. 182.

¹¹ Kochanowski, Jerzy—Matusik, Przemysław: *Człowiek i historia: Kształcenie w zakresie rozszerzonym. Cz. 4, Czasy nowe i najnowsze (XIX i XX wiek)*. Warszawa 2004, p. 116.

¹² Polish original: “za współpracę z Niemcami.” Ibidem.

(in the case of Operon, in a somewhat simplified manner).¹³ A slightly newer middle-school textbook, published by Nowa Era in 2007, includes a whole sub-chapter on Operation Vistula. This is the first such extensive coverage of the operation in the textbooks studied here, albeit simultaneously one which could benefit from further contextualisation, as discussed in detail below.¹⁴ The presence of Operation Vistula in textbooks from that time period probably stems from the fact that middle schools were a new and experimental initiative, introduced only in 1999, and the textbooks were written from scratch, likely with a reformist mindset, inspiring their authors to cover topics that had hitherto been contested, treated one-sidedly, or omitted altogether.

After the 2000s, all of the textbooks that I analysed mention forced migrations of both Poles and other national and ethnic groups, and most do so in rather nuanced ways. Primary school textbooks by GWO and Nowa Era do not mention Operation Vistula by name, but engage with the resettlement of Ukrainians and Lemkos, alongside that of Germans and Poles.¹⁵ Interestingly, the 2017 textbook by Nowa Era is a new rendition of a 2010 textbook by the same author (albeit published under a different title).¹⁶ While the two textbooks bear many similarities, a frame on “population resettlements” is a new addition to the 2017 version. This is symptomatic of the changes that occurred in history textbooks over those seven years—migration (and, more broadly, social history and the plight of civilians during wartime) gained a more prominent place in historical education. High school textbooks from the same period, published by Nowa Era and WSiP, each have separate sections on Operation Vistula, which discuss the events of 1947 in considerable detail.¹⁷ For this later time period, middle school textbooks have not been analysed: after 2012, the middle-school curriculum did not include material

¹³ Bąkowski, Dariusz: *Historia 3, Cz. 1: Podręcznik dla uczniów gimnazjum*. Gdynia 2004, p. 254; Kucharczyk, Grzegorz—Milcarek, Paweł—Robak, Marek: *Przez tysiąclecia i wieki: cywilizacje XIX i XX wieku, cz. 1*. Warszawa 2004, p. 260.

¹⁴ Wendt, Jan: *Przez wieki 3: Podręcznik do historii, gimnazjum*. Warszawa 2007, pp. 227-8.

¹⁵ Małkowski, Tomasz: *Historia i społeczeństwo 6: Podręcznik dla klasy 6 szkoły podstawowej*. Gdańsk 2014, pp. 122, 176; Wojciechowski, Grzegorz: *Wczoraj i dziś 6: Podręcznik do historii i społeczeństwa dla klasy szóstej szkoły podstawowej*. Warszawa 2017, pp. 149-50.

¹⁶ Wojciechowski, Grzegorz: *Dzień dobry historii! Podręcznik do historii i społeczeństwa dla klasy 6*. Warszawa 2010.

¹⁷ Roszak, Stanisław—Kłaczek, Jarosław: *Poznać przeszłość: Wiek XX. Podręcznik do historii dla szkół ponadgimnazjalnych: zakres podstawowy*. Warszawa 2014, p. 231; Dolecki, Rafał—Gutowski, Krzysztof—Smoleński, Jędrzej: *Po prostu historia: Szkoły ponadgimnazjalne. Zakres podstawowy*. Warszawa 2019, p. 326.

on the twentieth century, and after 2017, middle schools were eliminated from Poland's education system altogether.

Facts and Narratives

Alongside an increase in volume, the narratives about post-war forced migrations have been becoming more nuanced. Additionally, the strategies of imbuing migrations with an emotional charge have evolved. Early textbooks treat forced migrations, especially those of non-Poles, with detachment. Two 2001 primary school textbooks employ phrases akin to the passive voice: in the main text students can read that population transfers and border changes “happened.”¹⁸ The textbook from the publishing house WSiP quotes pure facts about the movements of Germans and Poles, without pointing to the reasons or the perpetrators: “The Polish population was moving from territories annexed by the USSR to [Poland’s] western territories. Germans who lived in Silesia, Pomerania, Warmia and Masuria were leaving for Germany.”¹⁹ The textbook by MAC criticises non-defined communists, then in power, for “not paying proper attention to the issues of national minorities.”²⁰ No national group is defined as a perpetrator of those migrations. This more factual and emotionally-detached approach is best placed in the broader socio-political context of the heated debates about the resettlement of Germans from Polish territories following the Second World War. Tensions between Germany and Poland (as well as between Germany and the Czech Republic) were fuelled by the German politician and activist Erika Steinbach’s proposal to construct a Centre against Expulsions in Berlin. The less emotional narrative of the textbooks from the very same period can be seen as an attempt at diffusing those tensions and imbuing discussions about the past with a more academic tone. The Polish-German tensions might also account for the fact that forced migrations of Poles and Germans are discussed, but those of Ukrainians—

¹⁸ Polish original: “nastąpiło przesiedlanie ludności”, “nastąpiły znaczne zmiany granic”; Gensler, Maria—Kąkolewski, Igor—Marciniak, Ewa: *Historia i społeczeństwo: Szkoła podstawowa 6, cz. 1*. Warszawa 2001, p. 246; Machnicki, Jarosław—Wołowicz, Jacek—Liebrecht, Grzegorz: *Moje otoczenie: Historia i Społeczeństwo 5, cz. 2*. Kielce 2001, pp. 92-3.

¹⁹ Polish original: “Na ziemię zachodnie przenosiła się ludność polska z terenów włączonych do ZSRR. Do Niemiec wyjeżdżali Niemcy zamieszkujący Śląsk, Pomorze, Warmię i Mazury;” Gensler, Maria—Kąkolewski, Igor—Marciniak, Ewa: *Historia i społeczeństwo: Szkoła podstawowa 6, cz. 1*. Warszawa 2001, p. 246.

²⁰ Polish original: “nie zwracali należytej uwagi na problemy mniejszości narodowych;” Machnicki, Jarosław—Wołowicz, Jacek—Liebrecht, Grzegorz: *Moje otoczenie: Historia i Społeczeństwo 5, cz. 2*. Kielce 2001, pp. 92-3.

not as present in the contemporary public debate—are similarly absent from the primary school textbooks analysed here.

Upper-level textbooks (and particularly middle-school ones) include more information on forced migrations, but they also tend to refrain from naming the perpetrators. It is only a quote from the historian and sociologist Marcin Kula, cited in one middle-school textbook from 2002, that points towards “Soviet and Polish communists” as those responsible for the resettlements.²¹ Some textbooks, however, pass a critical ethical judgement on forced population transfers. Kula exposes the hypocrisy of Poland’s new rulers, who allegedly supported internationalism, but in practice used force to turn Poland into an ethnically homogenous nation-state.²² In the same textbook, a short text on Operation Vistula—while not specifying the perpetrators as Poles or Soviets—describes the operation’s violence both on a physical and a symbolic level: “the [Ukrainian and Lemko] re-settlers were beaten and tortured, their houses and churches were burned”.²³ An accompanying photo shows the shadow of a cross standing in the middle of a field, labelled “the only trace of a Lemko village.”²⁴ The image conveys a sense of loss caused by the expulsions, and perhaps even of religious martyrdom experienced by the Lemkos. A similar focus on suffering—and, in this case, on its universal character—characterises the 2004 high-school textbook by WSiP. The paragraph on forced migration places German, Ukrainian and Polish victims of resettlement alongside one another: “The so-called expulsion of Germans was usually not different from the resettlement of Ukrainians from Poland (approx. 500 000) and of Poles from the eastern *Kresy* incorporated into the USSR (2 mln; unjustly called a repatriation—a return to the homeland).”²⁵

The first textbook from my sample to include a whole sub-chapter on Operation Vistula is the 2007 *Przez wieki* published by Nowa Era. While more focus on the plight of Ukrainians, Lemkos and Boykos adds another

²¹ Polish original: “radzieccy i polscy komuniści”; Starczewska, Krystyna et al.: *Świat współczesny: Od wybuchu II wojny światowej. Podręcznik dla gimnazjum: klasa III*. Warszawa 2002, p. 94.

²² Ibidem, pp. 94-5.

²³ Polish original: “przesiedleńców bito i torturowano, palono ich domy i cerkwie;” Ibidem, p. 94.

²⁴ Polish original: “jedyny ślad po łemkowskiej wsi;” Ibidem, p. 94.

²⁵ Polish original: “Od tzw. wypędzenia Niemców nie różniły się zazwyczaj przesiedlenia Ukraińców z Polski (ok. 500 tys.) oraz Polaków z wcielonych do ZSRR Kresów Wschodnich (2 mln; nazwane bezzasadnie repatriacją—powrotem do ojczyzny);” Kochanowski, Jerzy—Matuś, Przemysław: *Człowiek i historia: Kształcenie w zakresie rozszerzonym. Cz. 4, Czasy nowe i najnowsze (XIX i XX wiek)*. Warszawa 2004, p. 116.

layer of nuance to this textbook, the inclusion of this section has two (likely unintended) consequences. Firstly, by singling out Operation Vistula, the textbook moves away from the universal nature of suffering experienced by forced migrants of different nationalities—a strategy that has been followed by multiple authors since then. More information is thus introduced, but perhaps at the expense of a broader moral message. Secondly, this textbook for middle schools makes a few arguments that could have benefited from more contextualisation even at this early educational stage. The post-war armed conflict in south-eastern Poland is described as a “Polish-Ukrainian war,” even though there were multiple belligerents and ever-changing alliances between them. The claim that “the UPA [Ukrainian Insurgent Army] enjoyed the support of the local population” also detracts from the complexity of the situation on the ground. Finally, the textbook names the real victims of Operation Vistula: “the Lemkos and Boykos, who did not collaborate with the UPA.” This statement could have been further elaborated on, so that students with little contextual knowledge do not draw the conclusion that the violence suffered by the resettled Ukrainians—as opposed to that suffered by the Lemkos and Boykos—was somehow justified.²⁶

Subsequent high-school textbooks that discuss Operation Vistula often replicate the strategy of singling it out from other forced migrations, but are usually more nuanced in their assessment. Both the 2014 textbook published by Nowa Era and the 2019 one from WSiP describe the brutality of the operation; the former specifies the name of the Polish commander in charge. Both texts examine the propaganda that Polish communist authorities used to justify the operation. The two books have somewhat different assessments of the operation: the WSiP textbook seems to present the operation as brutal, yet successful in suppressing UPA’s actions,²⁷ while Nowa Era’s authors describe the fight against the insurgents as a mere “excuse” for the operation.²⁸ Such images are a testimony to the more nuanced research conducted on Operation Vistula over the past three decades, but also to the historiographical disagreements that have surfaced in the process.

²⁶ Polish original: “wojna polsko-ukraińska”, “Łemkowie i Boykowie, którzy nie współpracowali z UPA;” Wendt, Jan: *Przez wieki 3: Podręcznik do historii, gimnazjum*. Warszawa 2007, pp. 227-8.

²⁷ Dolecki, Rafał—Gutowski, Krzysztof—Smoleński, Jędrzej: *Po prostu historia: Szkoły ponadgimnazjalne. Zakres podstawowy*. Warszawa 2019, p. 326.

²⁸ Polish original: “pretekstem do przeprowadzenia tych działań”. Roszak, Stanisław—Kłaczek, Jarosław: *Poznać przeszłość: Wiek XX. Podręcznik do historii dla szkół ponadgimnazjalnych: zakres podstawowy*. Warszawa 2014, p. 231.

Supplementary teaching materials

In addition to regular textbooks, approved by the education ministry and used by most teachers as a basis for their lessons, a number of supplementary materials—produced by academics, NGOs, or museums—engage with Polish-Ukrainian relations in general and with forced migration in particular. Some of them are designed to be used in history and social studies lessons,²⁹ while others—in extracurricular activities, such as debate clubs. Here, I analyse the most prominent of those materials:

- 1 *Edukatorium Historyczno-Społeczne* (Historical-Social Educational Project, henceforth *Edukatorium*) is a two-volume set of ready-to-use lesson scenarios for primary and secondary schools. The first volume, on Polish-Ukrainian topics, was prepared in direct response to the full-scale Russian invasion of 2022. Its editors—Marcela Gruszczyk, Lech Krzyżanowski, and Miłosz Skrzypek—stress that the wave of Ukrainian refugees in Poland brought Polish and Ukrainian children closer together; “it was therefore a natural choice to highlight the frequently difficult and complicated Polish-Ukrainian relations across the centuries.”³⁰ With that in mind, the materials focus on moments of contact, conflict, and dialogue between the two nations: topics include Polish-Ukrainian relations in the 1920s and 30s, the role of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) in the Second World War, the events in Volhynia in 1943, and—crucially for this analysis—the resettlement of Polish Ukrainians in the second half of the 1940s. When used together, therefore, these lessons not only familiarise students with Polish-Ukrainian “repatriations” and with Operation Vistula, but they also present them in the broader context of Polish-Ukrainian ethnic tensions. The inclusion of difficult histories does not detract from the reconciliatory message of the whole project, evident throughout the book: for instance, students are supposed to “acknowledge the significance of tolerance towards national diversity,” and one homework exercise asks them

²⁹ This includes the Polish school subjects of “knowledge about society” (*wiedza o społeczeństwie*) and “history and the present” (*historia i teraźniejszość*). The latter subject—highly politicised and debated—was added to the high school curriculum in 2022 by the conservative Law and Justice government, and has been phased out since 2024, following the change of government.

³⁰ Polish original: “Naturalnym wyborem stało się zatem przybliżenie, często trudnych i skomplikowanych, relacji polsko-ukraińskich na przestrzeni wieków,” Gruszczyk, Marcela—Krzyżanowski, Lech—Skrzypek, Miłosz: *Edukatorium historyczno-społeczne: Scenariusze lekcji historii*, WOSu, HiTu. Bielsko-Biała 2023, p. 3.

to finish the sentence “Poles and Ukrainians should support each other, because... .”³¹ Importantly, lesson scenarios focus not just on events, but also on historical narratives and their relevance for the present day. Key terms—such as forced migration, voluntary migration, genocide, and ethnic cleansing—are explored alongside the controversies surrounding them.³² One full lesson (for primary schools) is devoted to the significance of “gestures and symbols” in Polish-Ukrainian relations.³³ The design of the lessons is meant to encourage “a critical approach towards other opinions and views”³⁴ and to show that “different memories of the past cannot be classified as either true or false.”³⁵ However, educators are given significant room for manoeuvre, with the exact way of raising awareness to these issues often left to the teacher’s own initiative and best judgement.

2 *Co-citizens or a discriminated minority? Ukrainians in Independent Poland* is a booklet authored by Izabela Kwiecińska, an academic historian, and published by the Józef Piłsudski Museum in Sulejówek near Warsaw. The booklet—one in a series of texts addressing topics hitherto underexplored in the museum—consists of three parts: a narrative text on Ukrainians in pre-war Poland (written in a factually and emotionally balanced way), a section with debate topics and sample arguments, and a selection of primary sources. (Debate topics include “This chamber would pass a law on Galicia’s autonomy” and “This chamber claims that the Second Republic [inter-war Poland] took sufficient efforts for its Ukrainian residents to feel like full-fledged co-citizens”).³⁶ Uniquely for such materials, this booklet is designed to be used not in history lessons, but in

³¹ Polish original: “[uczeń] uznaje wagę postawy tolerancyjnej wobec różnorodności narodowej”, “Polacy i Ukraińcy powinni wzajemnie sobie pomagać na różnych płaszczyznach, ponieważ;” Gruszczyk, Marcela—Krzyżanowski, Lech—Skrzypek, Miłosz: *Edukatorium historyczno-społeczne: Scenariusze lekcji historii, WOSu, HiTu*. Bielsko-Biała 2023, pp. 83, 41.

³² Ibidem, pp. 95, 226-8.

³³ Ibidem, p. 40.

³⁴ Polish original: “wykazać się krytyczną postawą wobec innej opinii oraz poglądów”; Ibidem, p. 83.

³⁵ Polish original: “różną pamięć o przeszłości nie można identyfikować w kategoriach: prawda/fałsz;” ibidem, p. 133.

³⁶ Polish original: “(1) Jest rok 1922. Ta izba, jako polski Sejm, wprowadziłaby w życie ustawę o autonomii Galicji. (2) Ta izba uważa, że II Rzeczpospolita uczyniła wystarczająco wiele, żeby zamieszkujący ją Ukraińcy mogli czuć się jej pełnoprawnymi współobywatelami”; Kwiecińska, Elżbieta: *Współobywatele czy dyskryminowana mniejszość? Ukraińcy w Niepodległej*. Sulejówek 2021, p. 18.

after-school debate clubs. The historical component, therefore, acts as a background for the debate—but the materials have the potential to “smuggle” historical knowledge and, more importantly, awareness of different viewpoints to youth otherwise uninterested in history.

3 *Europe: Our History*—a comprehensive, four-volume history textbook—occupies a special place amongst these materials. This textbook was published under the auspices of the Polish-German Textbook Commission and has been approved for use by the education ministries of Poland and of most German federal states (for use by late primary or middle school students). However, it has been used primarily as a supplementary, rather than main, textbook—hence its inclusion in this part of my analysis. Like many textbooks at this early educational stage, it devotes limited space to Polish-Ukrainian population transfers. Two sentences, written in an emotionally-neutral tone, introduce Operation Vistula,³⁷ and a map shows Polish-Ukrainian population “exchanges” of the post-1944 period.³⁸ Importantly, however, these population transfers are discussed in the broader European context of “expulsions, resettlements, and returns” of Central Europeans after the Second World War.³⁹ A question at the end of this chapter asks students to investigate whether anyone in their own families has forced migration experience (not necessarily in the context of the Second World War).⁴⁰ Forced migration is a relatively common experience in Polish families; by talking to older family members and subsequently sharing these stories with classmates, students are likely not just to find a personal connection to the topic, but also to discover a diversity of migration narratives—perspectives are likely to differ between individuals, between families, and between nationalities (especially if Ukrainian students are included in this exercise).

4 The Polish-German textbook, alongside a similar German-French project, serves as a direct inspiration for the creation of Polish-Ukrainian teaching materials and, ultimately, a joint textbook. This project, titled *The teaching of multinational history: Germany*—

³⁷ Brückmann, Asmut et al.: *Europa: Nasza Historia, Klasa 8: Od wybuchu II wojny światowej do czasów współczesnych*. Warszawa 2021, p. 102.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 55.

³⁹ Polish original: “Wysiedlenia, przesiedlenia i powroty”; *Ibidem*, p. 55.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 55.

Poland—Ukraine, is spearheaded by historians and educators from the three countries, primarily those centred around the Polish Academy of Sciences and the Leibniz Institute for Educational Media in Braunschweig.⁴¹ I had the opportunity to consult preliminary outlines of these materials: similarly to the aforementioned *Edukatorium*, they focus not just on historical events, but also on the multiplicity of historical narratives and interpretations. The latter is achieved through elements already tested in the Polish-German textbook, such as the “past in the present” and “point of view” frames.⁴²

While these supplementary teaching materials differ in content, form, and purpose, three overarching similarities can be noticed. First, these materials are guided by multiperspectivity, founded on the belief that different people and communities (such as nations) have different interpretations of the past that are all worth studying. While traditionally history teaching has served a nation-building function—still visible in more conservative approaches to the curriculum in Poland and elsewhere—these materials have the potential to sensitise students to the multiplicity of perspectives. This is achieved by juxtaposing oral history accounts, artworks, or popular myths presenting different interpretations of the same historical event or process.⁴³ Importantly, multiperspectivity is not limited to personal accounts or popular opinions—academic accounts also differ between and within nations, as highlighted by some of these materials.⁴⁴ One way in which students engage with such differing perspectives is through debates or mock court trials.⁴⁵ While such exercises are clearly aimed at increasing student participation and fostering their historical empathy, their success is largely contingent on the teacher’s effectiveness as a moderator of such debates. If

⁴¹ “O projekcie.” In: *Nauczanie wielonarodowej historii: Niemcy—Polska—Ukraina* [<https://sharedhistoryedu.com/o-projekcie>, accessed 27 February 2026].

⁴² Polish original: “przeszłość w teraźniejszości,” “punkt widzenia;” Wiatr, Marcin: Personal communication, October 24, 2025.

⁴³ Kwiecińska, Elżbieta: *Współobywatele czy dyskryminowana mniejszość? Ukraińcy w Niepodległej*. Sulejówek 2021, pp. 31-42; Gruszczyk, Marcela—Krzyżanowski, Lech—Skrzypek, Miłosz: *Edukatorium historyczno-społeczne: Scenariusze lekcji historii, WOSu, HiTu*. Bielsko-Biała 2023, p. 135.

⁴⁴ Gruszczyk, Marcela—Krzyżanowski, Lech—Skrzypek, Miłosz: *Edukatorium historyczno-społeczne: Scenariusze lekcji historii, WOSu, HiTu*. Bielsko-Biała 2023, pp. 110-12.

⁴⁵ Kwiecińska, Elżbieta: *Współobywatele czy dyskryminowana mniejszość? Ukraińcy w Niepodległej*. Sulejówek 2021, pp. 25-30; Gruszczyk, Marcela—Krzyżanowski, Lech—Skrzypek, Miłosz: *Edukatorium historyczno-społeczne: Scenariusze lekcji historii, WOSu, HiTu*. Bielsko-Biała 2023, pp. 134-5.

students are allowed to fixate on the debate itself—a competitive activity by nature—they risk becoming more entrenched in their views. One way of avoiding such polarisation is the use of Structured Academic Controversy: a debate model where groups of students are assigned sides for the first half of the discussion, then they swap sides for the second half, and finally they all come together to write a third, “consensus” argument.⁴⁶

Second, these supplementary materials promote a critical approach to history and to its uses and abuses. For example, the “past in the present” sections, central to *Europe: Our History* and to the planned Polish-Ukrainian teaching materials, explore the shadows that the past casts on the everyday lives of Central Europeans, while *Edukatorium* includes an entire lesson on the importance of symbols and symbolic gestures in Polish-Ukrainian relations.

Third, these materials—even though largely focused on history—have present-day agendas. *Edukatorium* aims to facilitate a better understanding between Polish and Ukrainian children in post-2022 classrooms and between Poles and Ukrainians more broadly; Polish-Ukrainian materials “foster open-mindedness and strengthen competencies necessary for a conscious participation in social life;”⁴⁷ Kwiecińska’s booklet (and other publications in the series) fill gaps in an existing museum exhibition; and the Polish-German textbook emerged from the work of the Polish-German Textbook Commission that has been working towards Polish-German reconciliation since the 1970s. Their creators, therefore, act as “memory activists” in Gutman and Wüstenberg’s understanding of the term: they strive to “effect mnemonic change, and by extension, alter societies writ-large.”⁴⁸ It is important to note that this orientation on the present does not detract from these materials’ academic integrity. On the contrary: they engage with controversial topics in much more transparent ways than some of the “conventional” history textbooks discussed in the first part of this paper.

⁴⁶ Bruen, Jennifer et al.: “Teaching Controversial Topics in the Humanities and Social Sciences in Ireland: Using Structured Academic Controversy to Develop Multi-Perspectivity in the Learner.” In: *Journal of Social Science Education*, 2016, No. 15 (3), pp. 18-25, at pp. 19-20.

⁴⁷ Polish original: “kształtują postawy otwartości oraz wzmacniają kompetencje niezbędne do świadomego uczestnictwa w życiu społecznym”; O projekcie. In: “Nauczanie wielonarodowej historii: Niemcy—Polska—Ukraina” [<https://sharedhistoryedu.com/o-projekcie>, accessed 27 February 2026].

⁴⁸ Gutman, Yifat—Wüstenberg, Jenny: “Introduction: The Activist Turn in Memory Studies.” In: Gutman, Yifat—Wüstenberg, Jenny (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Memory Activism*. London and New York 2023, pp. 5-15, at p. 5.

Conclusions

This paper analysed how three forced migrations—the deportation of Crimean Tatars (1944), the Polish-Soviet “population exchanges” (1944-47), and Operation Vistula (1947)—have been depicted in Polish textbooks and supplementary materials published in the twenty-first century. To begin with, the deportation of Crimean Tatars is absent from most textbooks. The other two forced migrations have consistently been present, but their depiction has been evolving. Polish textbooks devote increasingly more attention to the fate of non-Polish migrants, including—and perhaps primarily—of Ukrainians. At the same time, however, it is rarely the universality of suffering that is highlighted; instead, the fate of individual nations is singled out. This is largely in agreement with the narratives prevalent both among Poles, who reference *Kresy* as an important part of Polish national identity, and among Polish Ukrainians, who see Operation Vistula as one of their foundation stories. Supplementary teaching materials, in contrast, focus on shared histories, which—even though frequently contested—have the potential to connect people and nations across borders. In line with their “activist” goal (in Gutman and Wüstenberg’s understanding) of building bridges between nations divided by history, these materials focus on multiperspectivity, historical empathy, and the links between the past and the present.

This article is a step towards an exploration, rather than an exhaustive account, of the Polish-Ukrainian entanglements in the world of forced migration and history textbooks. As such, it might open up more questions than it answers. How are forced migrations represented in Ukrainian textbooks? How do these depictions match or contradict the Polish ones? How will the discrepancies between Polish and Ukrainian narratives be solved in joint Polish-Ukrainian teaching materials currently in preparation? With these questions in mind, I included the deportation of Crimean Tatars as a case study. Just like Operation Vistula is present in the collective memory of Polish Ukrainians, but largely absent from that of Ukrainians elsewhere, the 1944 events in Crimea are an increasingly more manifested part of the collective memory in Ukraine—but, as I have shown, not so much in Poland. By exploring the depiction of forced migrations in Polish, Ukrainian, and joint Polish-Ukrainian textbooks alongside one another, we would not only answer urgent practical questions for educators, but also gain a more nuanced understanding of the entangled collective memories, national identities, and the sense of belonging in Poland, in Ukraine, and beyond.

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