Ongoing History Writing in History Textbooks

The Most Recent Past as a Historiographical Problem

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Abstract • This article addresses the ways in which Swedish history textbooks for upper secondary schools published between 1994 and 2011 deal with the most recent past. The textbooks are chronologically organized and follow history into the textbook authors' time, and each new edition of the textbooks includes the latest developments. The article inquires as to whether this gradual addition of events is to be regarded as historiography at all, or what the possible difference is between contemporary commentary and historiography. It examines which events and developments are selected, how they are presented, and how they can be interpreted with regard to periodization and the use of history.

Keywords • contemporary history, history textbooks, ongoing history writing, periodization, upper secondary school, use of history

Textbooks written for Swedish upper secondary school basic history courses are arranged chronologically, starting with prehistoric times, continuing with antiquity and premodern times, and ending with the last two hundred years. All align with the steering documents, which make it clear that the subject of history in upper secondary school should focus mainly on "European historiography from a chronological perspective" and on "industrialization and democratization in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries."[1]

This article has a contemporary history focus. The chronological structure of textbooks means that there is a limit to the history presented, namely the present. Interestingly, most textbooks on the Swedish market are structured so that each new edition follows history into the most recent past. For example, an edition from the 1990s comments on the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Yugoslav Wars, an edition from the 2000s on the terrorist attacks in the United States and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and an edition from the 2010s on the Arab Spring and Brexit.

The fact that history textbooks contain passages discussing recent events raises questions about the most recent past as a historiographical problem. It seems that these passages participate in a kind of history writing in the making by gradually adding recent events. The research

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problem concerns whether this gradual addition of events is to be regarded as historiography at all or what the possible difference is between contemporary commentary and historiography. To put it bluntly, is historiography anything more than a tracing of contemporary commentary? One argument in favor of historical research is that distance from the events and knowledge of subsequent developments allow for a deeper undertanding by relating the past to both what preceded and what followed it.[2] In commentary on the present, one does not find the same distance, but in discussions about the advantages of contemporary history, it is emphasized that the historian's approach is applicable to the study of the contemporary, that proximity to events can be turned into an asset, and that all history writing is always already contemporary in one sense or another.[3]

In this article, I study the relationship between contemporary commentaries and historiography by following events and developments in history textbooks from the time they were added as contemporary commentaries until they were established as part of historiography.[4] I examine which concrete examples are included from the most recent past (that is, the selection), how they are presented, and how the presentations change over time. Furthermore, I analyze how the presentation of the recent past is conceptualized in terms of periodization, following theoretical discussions by historians Ludmilla Jordanova and Henry Rousso, and uses of history based on a typology of different uses developed by historian Klas-Göran Karlsson.[5] This article contributes, via concrete empirical findings, knowledge about the selection of events and the use of contemporary commentary in history textbooks, as well as insights into the research problem, namely, the relationship between contemporary commentary and historiography.

The study focuses on history textbooks for Swedish upper secondary schools during the period from 1994 to 2011, which corresponds to the period of the 1994 curriculum for upper secondary education up to the publication of the curriculum of 2011. The contemporary is a vague notion and has been, as Jordanova points out, used to describe everything from the present to the postwar period to the entire twentieth century.[6] In this article, the demarcation goes in the narrower direction, and the present and the most recent past refer to the present for the textbook authors at the time of writing to the past five to ten years for them. As the historian Marc Bloch emphasized, the present becomes the past the moment it passes; it is therefore problematic to make a sharp distinction between the present and the past.[7] However, I believe that the division is relevant here, because I am studying which recent events and developments were added to history textbooks gradually. This process of gradual addition that can be understood as, to use the words of the historian of ideas Sven-Eric Liedman, a kind of "ongoing history writing."[8]

The empirical research questions that guide the study are as follows:

1. Which events and developments from the most recent past are selected in history textbooks?
2. How are these events and developments presented, and how does this presentation change over time?
3. How are these events and developments in turn conceptualized in terms of periodization and the use of history?

Background

Generally speaking, historians take the present into consideration either as a site in which history is used for more or less direct purposes in the present or as a point of departure in their investigations of historical backgrounds and longer processes of change leading up to the present.[9] The impact of the present on the study and teaching of history has long been a delicate issue. How do power relations in the present shape what we choose to research or teach about?[10] In studies that span longer periods, the answer is usually that it depends on time-specific currents, in which different contextual factors and the zeitgeist steer the writing of history in a certain direction. For example, the historian Peter Novick showed that ideas about objectivity change over time, and similar results have been presented in history-didactic research, such as the shift from nationalist to pro-democracy historiography.[11]

Textbooks can be analyzed from various points of view, such as their function in society and in the education system; their specific content and the meaning they convey; and as a didactic tool in teaching.[12] The focus closest to the present study is on content and meaning, within which researchers have studied representations of various sorts (such as the nation's past, minority groups, and gender relations).[13] These studies of history textbooks are part of a broader approach to history didactics that examines what is often referred to as "historical culture"—that is, the overall transmission of history at a particular time and people's ideas about themselves and society in time and space. In this tradition, it is common to use various typologies to conceptualize the use of history, historical narratives, or the functions of history education.[14]

The idea that the writing of history is influenced by contextual factors and that it is used in the present for different purposes is commonplace but has also been problematized. Scholars like Peter E. Gordon, Rita Felski, and Peter Burke have questioned context as something that exists independently and outside of the historical phenomenon under study.[15] Instead, context is emphasized as something that is constructed by historical actors in the past and historians in the present. The historian of

ideas Viktoria Fareld has suggested that time and temporality should be understood as different layers of time operating in parallel in the material being studied and the historian's present, which she calls the "polychronic present."[16]

The polychronic present is also addressed in history-didactic research in which the conceptual triad of past, present, and future is a recurring point of discussion. Based on the concept of historical consciousness, it is argued that one value of history teaching is to produce an understanding of the human situatedness in time and space. The history didactician Niklas Ammert uses the term "multi-chronic" instead of "polychronic," but his theoretical arguments are similar to Fareld's, namely, that multiple time dimensions are simultaneously present when we think about and interpret the past.[17]

In line with the above approaches, I see narratives in history textbooks as expressions of representations and of various kinds of uses of history. They can also be viewed as expressions of the complex interconnection between time layers.

Theoretical Perspectives: Ongoing History Writing, Periodization, and Uses of History

The present and the most recent past are constantly being documented and analyzed every day, all over the world, in various contexts by various actors in various formats. Liedman uses, as mentioned, the expression "ongoing history writing" (*löpande historieskrivning*) to describe this constant activity.[18] In a similar vein, Jordanova argues that one type of periodization that people engage in is "descriptions of a time period."[19] What she is saying is that events and developments that are perceived as important as soon as they happen tend to become prominent points of reference for people in the present. When events become part of a narrative about the present, the narrative is likely to be transformed from describing facts to conceptualizing what is distinctive about "our time." She mentions symbolic dates such as 1789, *fin de siècle*, and 1968, which refer to actual events but also have assumed almost mythical positions in history as periodizations.

Rousso's discussion of periodization similarly focuses on major events as turning points. He calls one of his books *The Latest Catastrophe*, in which he argues that major events have become a prominent type of periodization.[20] When we talk about "our time," we often do so in terms of the most recent cataclysmic event. In the postwar period, as the name suggests, it is precisely 1945 that constitutes a recurring reference point. Although it is possible to argue that we are still living in the postwar era, Rousso raises the question of whether more recent transformative events

have increasingly replaced 1945 as the starting point for the contemporary and whether it is more natural today to orient ourselves by dates such as 1989 or 2001.[21]

To analyze the content in textbooks as consisting of expressions of uses of history, I have employed, as mentioned above, a typology that Karlsson has developed.[22] Karlsson defines "the use of history" as an occasion when parts of the historical culture are activated by different actors for different purposes. However, it is far from always the case that actors engage in an instrumental or even conscious use of history. The term "use" is therefore partly misleading, and it may be helpful to think of the uses as functions and needs rather than as aims and goals. In addition, it should be noted that the different uses overlap and rarely appear in their pure forms. This study does not focus on actors and their use(s) of history but takes the categories of the typology, as defined by Karlsson, as a starting point for the following textual analysis.

Karlsson predominantly writes about the scholarly, existential, moral, and ideological uses of history as well as a form of nonuse of history. Scholarly use is intended to find out historical facts, describe them as accurately as possible, and relate them to established traditions of historiographical interpretation; existential use concerns people's need to understand themselves in time and space, to be able to orient themselves, to put themselves in a context; moral use is about right and wrong and about using history to put things right or to teach about injustices in the past in order to achieve reconciliation or historical justice; ideological use is about using history for political purposes in order to legitimize a certain regime or to justify why a certain group is in power; and finally, nonuse can be difficult to see because most things are left out of the writing of history, but sometimes the very concealment of something can be palpable.

These theoretical perspectives harmonize, as I see it, with my research questions. Ongoing history writing prompts an inventory of the contemporary events that authors highlight in history textbooks. We need to start by finding out which events and developments are mentioned in order to move on to more analytical tasks (that is, how the presentations can be interpreted based on previous research and theoretical perspectives).

Method and Materials

The Swedish education system is divided into compulsory primary school (from preschool to year nine) and optional upper secondary school (years ten to twelve). I focus on upper secondary school textbooks because they lend themselves well to the study of contemporary commentary,

as the sections dealing with the most recent past are detailed and well developed. In history education research, textbooks are often emphasized as an important arena for conveying history.[23] In Sweden, there was a centralized examination of history textbooks carried out by the Swedish State Approval Scheme for Textbooks and Teaching Aids (Statens läroboksnämnd/Läromedelsnämnden) until the 1990s, which reinforces the image of these books as a state-approved mediator of history (although historian Henrik Åström Elmersjö concludes that it is not possible to determine whether the examinations had conservative or progressive effects).[24] From a methodological perspective, one benefit of studying textbooks is the possibility of following new editions over a certain period of time.

This study hones in on the period from 1994 to 2011, which corresponds to two revisions of the steering documents from 1994 and 2011, respectively. During this period, three syllabi were in effect (1994, 2000, 2011).[25] They are relatively similar in terms of their emphasis on chronology and traditional periodization. In the aims and goals for the basic courses in history at the upper secondary level, it is consistently stated that pupils should be familiar with the notion of historical development and the established concepts of epochs. In 2011, there were two basic courses in history at the upper secondary level, one for academic programs and one for vocational programs. The textbooks selected for analysis from 2011 are all geared toward the academic programs.

The curriculum expresses what is considered important to learn at a given time. Of course, there is no consensus on this, but the curriculum can be seen as a compromise between many positions and interests.[26] Although textbooks are expected to follow the curriculum, this is far from the only relevant context to note, as they are also influenced by more general currents of ideas and values in the contemporary world. Because most of the text is reused between editions, there is also much content that remains the same whether it is part of the curriculum or not.[27] In terms of the curricula followed here, the 1994 and 2000 syllabi regulate less of the specific content to be taught, and the 2011 syllabus contains a more detailed description of what is called "core content." Although my focus is not on the relationship between the syllabus and the teaching materials in history courses, it is important to recognize that the curriculum exists as a kind of framework for the teaching of history.

The source material examined here comprises three series of history textbooks for upper secondary school. These are *Epic* (*Epos*), *History of All Time* (*Alla tiders historia*), and *Perspectives on History* (*Perspektiv på historien*).[28] These are the only series for history in upper secondary school that were published with new editions throughout the period under investigation. Two minor irregularities should be noted. First, the first edition of *Perspectives on History* was published in 2001, and it is the series that

continued to publish new editions after 2011. Second, *Epic* and *History of All Time* went out of print after the 2011 editions. There are three editions per series, which means that I examined a total of nine textbooks. In addition to the fact that two of the series ceased publication in 2011, the study ends here in order to ensure a balanced critical distance from the material. Had I, for example, followed textbooks into my present, there would have been a problematic imbalance in my ability to distance myself critically from the source material at the beginning and end of the period under investigation.

The data-processing method can be described as a combination of content analysis and intertextual analysis. In the first stage, I located passages in the textbooks that deal with the present and the most recent past (five to ten years back). First, I coded these passages based on the first research question (the selection of events and developments). Second, I analyzed similarities and differences between the series and changes over time within and between textbook series. This required a more textual approach, juxtaposing textbook passages to discover nuances and changes. This part of the data-processing method can be understood as a kind of concrete intertextuality, in which I show how the texts build on each other and reuse or rephrase certain passages from other editions.[29] The observation of this form of intertextuality lends itself well to discussing the third research question, which concerns the construction of periodization and the use of history. I excluded a multimodal research design even though such a design would undoubtedly have helped deepen and nuance this study's results. As mentioned above, my research interest has been in tracing changes in the written representations from their addition as contemporary commentary to their occurrence as historiography. All translations from Swedish to English are mine.

Results

Events and Developments

First, I present the results in relation to the first research question (that is, which contemporary events and developments are selected).

There are numerous examples of events and developments from the recent past in editions from the 1990s. These include major transformative events, such as the fall of the Berlin Wall and the breakdown of the other communist regimes in Eastern Europe as well as the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the advent of the new Russian Federation. In addition, there are sections devoted to the ongoing war in the former Yugoslavia. Besides these events and developments, there are updates on recent developments in Sweden, such as the murder of Prime Minister

Olof Palme in 1986 and the economic recession of the early 1990s. Chapters dealing with the world outside Europe also include references to recent developments, such as the end of apartheid in South Africa, the genocide in Rwanda, the Gulf War, the famine in Somalia, peace negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, and democratic processes and poverty reduction in South American countries.

In the editions of the 2000s and 2010s, all these events and developments remain active and are deepened by recent developments. Besides this, the most visible additions to the presentation of the most recent past are the September 11 (9/11) terrorist attacks in the United States and the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. In the 2011 editions, the Arab Spring was added to the presentation. *Perspectives on History* (2001, 2008, 2011) includes a concluding chapter that discusses the future and makes some trend forecasts. It deals with broad processes of change related to digitalization, globalization, environmental and climate threats, the future role of the European Union, and developments in China and other emerging industrial powers.

In the following analysis, I focus on the events and developments that receive the most attention in the textbooks. These are the fall of the Berlin Wall, the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the emerging Russian republic, the Yugoslav Wars, and 9/11 and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The treatment of these events far exceeds the addition of recent developments in Sweden and the world outside Europe.

Presentation and Change over Time

How are these events and developments presented, and how do they change over time? This section addresses the second research question.

The Fall of the Berlin Wall

In the textbooks of the 1990s, the fall of the Wall and the breakdown of other communist regimes in Eastern Europe are unambiguously presented as a positive event. This is most evident in *Epic* (1996) in the frequent use of value-laden words, as in the following passage:

> The communists had disappeared from Polish politics. It was a *fantastic* [*fantastisk*] event that *naturally* [*självklart*] inspired opposition in neighboring countries . . . In East Germany, many reacted by trying to leave their country, which was still ruled by the *stubbornly* [*envist*] communist Erich Honecker.[30]

In subsequent editions of *Epic*, these writings remain unchanged. It has been added that several Eastern European countries have joined the

European Union, which is positive from the point of view of democracy, but that corruption is widespread in these countries and that the discrimination against women and the Roma is alarming.

In the 1996 editions, the post-1989 era is referred to as "A New World Order" and "The World after 1989," signaling that the events associated with 1989 were a turning point. Thus, the text observes that "the 1989 revolution was the most powerful political movement to sweep across the European continent since 1848" and that "the upheaval in world politics in 1989 was so profound that the year will go down in history as a defining year in European history—comparable to 1789."[31] The first edition of *Perspectives on History* (2001) was published a few years after the 1990s editions of *History of All Time* and *Epic*. It uses the same title for the final chapter but with an added question mark ("Towards a New World Order?"). Why is there a question mark after "New World Order"? The authors argue that the world that is taking shape after the end of the Cold War is a world full of contradictions; that democracy is on the rise while genocide is taking place in Rwanda and Srebrenica; and that a belief in "the international community" is weakening in the face of the actions of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the United States as world police in the former Yugoslavia.[32]

Epic describes the events of 1989 as a revolution and the result of popular protests, but the explanations in the other two textbooks are partly different. In *History of All Time*, the preliminary explanation for the events is that they came in response to the political signals from Gorbachev. In response to the question, "How could the Eastern European communist regimes free themselves so quickly from the communist straitjacket?" the authors observe that "clearly, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's political signals of openness and change played a major role."[33] The authors of *Perspectives on History* find the explanation in the economic sphere, asserting that "what ultimately determined the fate of the regimes was probably their economic failures."[34]

Later editions present greater agreement about what caused the end of the Cold War. In *History of All Time* (2011) and *Perspectives on History* (2011), the economy and the political system's failings are highlighted as the main cause.

> Did Communism collapse of its own accord? Yes, say some historians . . . One explanation is that the communists did not really need to be overthrown. Almost everywhere they gave up their power more or less voluntarily. They were neither willing nor able to rule any longer.[35]

These explanations coexist with the emphasis on popular mobilization in the form of "the courageous protests and demands for freedom and democracy by Poles, Hungarians, Baltics, and East Germans."[36]

In the editions from the 2000s and 2010s, the overall picture is that 1989 loses some of its status as a marker of periodization. The year is highlighted as an important turning point, but there is far less certainty that the post-1989 era is a completely new one. As mentioned above, *Perspectives on History* puts a question mark after the titular phrase "new world order" and in the 2004 edition of *History of All Time*, the authors have revised the division of chapters from previous editions and included the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the chapter "The World after 1945," thereby placing the end of the Cold War in the context of a longer postwar narrative.

The year 1989 passed fairly immediately from a descriptive to a conceptual level in Jordanova's sense; that is, the year was turned into a turning point, a marker of periodization. However, this periodization soon turns out to be under negotiation as it is gradually relativized and placed as part of a longer line of development. Also noticeable is the existence of several time layers, as evidenced by the fact that 1989 is made to correspond with 1945 in various ways (either as a breaking point or as a continuation) and that it is compared to other major historical events, such as those of 1789 and 1848.

Which uses of history are most visible in the presentation of the fall of the Wall? As Karlsson has pointed out, the line between scholarly and ideological uses of history is not as sharp as one might think, since both attempt to explain past events in one way or another.[37] The attempts to directly periodize the events and attribute meanings to them can be seen as an example of this. In terms of change over time, it is possible to suggest that the older editions are more committed to an ideological use of history via the critical tone toward communism and the desire to see the post-Wall era as something completely new. In later editions, the explanations are more elaborate and there are occasional references to what historians say, which can be interpreted as a scholarly use of history.

The Dissolution of the Soviet Union and the Emergence of the Russian Federation

The presentation of the dissolution of the Soviet Union is fairly similar in the editions from the 1990s. The emphasis is on Gorbachev's pro-reform policies and downplayed hostility toward the West. The two textbooks emphasize that the last Soviet leader was caught between two forces—namely, those who wanted a similar development to that in the rest of Eastern Europe and those who wanted to preserve the old Soviet system. After a failed coup attempt by reactionary forces, the Soviet Union dissolved and the president of the Russian Republic, Boris Yeltsin, took over as the president of the newly formed Russian Federation. In *Epic* (1996), it is apparent that this is very much a history in progress at the time of writing: "Will political disintegration and economic chaos be followed by a new dictatorship?"[38] And in *History of All Time*, a related issue emerges:

"A major concern for the world is how to control the nuclear weapons of the former superpower."[39]

In the 2000s editions, Vladimir Putin has taken office as president and the tone is cautiously positive. The authors observe that "during President Putin's time in power, the influence of the oligarchs has been curtailed and various reforms have been implemented in order to simplify the conditions for business. Economic growth has improved the lives of ordinary Russians."[40] Some problems are highlighted, such as the mass media's "favoring" of the current regime and the undue influence of politicians over the courts. Similarly, *History of All Time* notes that Putin has succeeded in improving the economy but that Russia has "a long way to go to achieve the parliamentary democracy that is the norm in Europe."[41] *Perspectives on History* notes that although the country has stabilized, democratic development has slowed down and the country is "increasingly authoritarian."[42]

In the 2011 editions, the tone is even harsher. *Epic* added a sentence stating that the country's democratic shortcomings "have hampered all opposition and led to those in power never being subjected to scrutiny."[43] *History of All Time* expanded the formulation, stating that not only is Russia far from having the same kind of democracy as in Europe, but that,

> on the contrary, progress has gone backwards as power has become more and more concentrated around the president . . . The independent human rights organization Freedom House has recently downgraded Russia from a "partially free" country to a "not free" country.[44]

In *Perspectives on History* (2011), the writing on the problems of democracy in Russia remained unchanged.

In the treatment of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, there is a strong focus on democracy as something desirable and aspirational. This focus can be interpreted as an ideological use of history in Karlsson's sense, in which the presentations in the textbooks legitimize and advocate democracy as a form of government. As research has shown, this is a prominent feature of textbooks throughout the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.[45] However, it is relevant to point out that democracy-promoting education is not unique to the subject of history; it is a general feature of schooling in Sweden highlighted in the steering documents.[46]

Additionally, it is interesting to ponder the meaning of questions about whether the Soviet Union would be followed by a new dictatorship and what would happen to its nuclear arsenal. One suggestion is that these questions can be interpreted as an existential use of history—that is, as occasions when the past, present, and future explicitly converge and as expressions of the human need to orientate oneself in time and space.

The Yugoslav Wars

In the mid-1990s editions, the wars are far from over and the conflicts are ongoing. During the conflicts, the concept of ethnic cleansing is established, and *Epic* (1996) and *History of All Time* (1996) use this concept early on in their narrative.

> In many areas, people of the "wrong" origin have been ruthlessly driven away. Not least the Bosnian Serbs have practiced this "ethnic cleansing" . . . They [Serbs / Bosnian Serbs] also engaged in what has been called "ethnic cleansing," when non-Serbs were expelled from areas bordering Serbia.[47]

In 1996, when the textbooks discuss the Yugoslav Wars, it is noted that the United Nations (UN) and NATO and the United States are engaged in the conflicts and that, at the time of writing, there was a ceasefire. The presentation of attempts by the outside world to mediate and intervene militarily in these conflicts is neutral.

By the time we get to the 2000s, the sections on the Yugoslav Wars have expanded considerably and now cover several pages in the textbooks. The section dealing with the concept of ethnic cleansing and the genocide in Srebrenica has been extended. In addition, the war in Kosovo in 1999 and its aftermath in the 2000s, with Kosovo's quest for recognition as an independent state and the establishment of the International Criminal Court in the Hague, are covered. The formulations in *Epic* are neutral, whereas in *History of All Time* criticism of NATO and the United States emerges:

> It was the first time that NATO had attacked an independent state, and without a mandate from the UN Security Council . . . Discussions about NATO's self-imposed role as "world police" began immediately when night after night television images showed burning buildings in Belgrade.[48]

When we get to the 2011 editions, there are few changes in the texts and no direct retrospective analysis of the war. The books limit themselves to describing minor recent developments, such as the trials of Ratko Mladić and Radovan Karadžić, the outcome of Martti Ahtisaari's work as a peace negotiator, and the proposal that Kosovo be recognized as an independent state.

The conflicts in the Balkans do not have the same epoch-making status as the fall of the Berlin Wall and the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Nor is there a clear democratic narrative in the presentation, even though the textbooks clearly take a stand in favor of peace and peaceful coexistence. This approach is moral rather than ideological (that is, it

takes a stand on right and wrong rather than on a particular ideological position). The critical tone toward NATO and US intervention in conflicts can be seen as a departure from an otherwise factual style of writing.

The Middle East and the War on Terror

Following the terrorist attacks in the United States on 11 September 2001 and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the textbooks of the twenty-first century expanded the sections on the conflicts in the Middle East. The authors of *Epic* added a whole new section, which they called "The Middle East: The Perennial Trouble Spot." The section was new, but the Middle East had also previously been visible as part of postwar history (the Suez Crisis, the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, the Iranian Revolution, and the Iran–Iraq War).

Apart from the slightly pejorative subtitle "The Perennial Trouble Spot," the presentations of the terrorist attacks and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq are neutral in *Epic*, focusing on what has happened and not so much on value judgments. In the other two textbooks, however, the commentary is rather critical. The invasion of Iraq is the main cause of criticism. *Perspectives on History* (2008) states that

> the US invasion of Iraq meant that the hopes for a new world order that had been kindled after 1989 were dashed. At that time, many believed that it would be possible for the "international community" to jointly maintain peace and security and intervene against repression on the basis of the UN Charter and international law. But after 11 September 2001, President George W. Bush declared that in the war on terrorism, the United States considers itself entitled to override the UN's exclusive right to decide on military strikes against another state "as a preventive measure" if it considers that developments there threaten the security of the United States. The US attack on Iraq was an application of such a policy.[49]

History of All Time makes similar criticisms:

> The bombing of Afghanistan raised the question of how many civilian casualties can be "accepted" in the fight against terrorism. How long would the United States be allowed to use its right to self-defense? And would the United States, or any other state, be allowed to strike first, to prevent attack? On the first anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, President Bush asserted that the United States had that right: Saddam Hussein's regime would be overthrown, whether or not the UN Security Council agreed, because it believed that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction.[50]

These quotes raise a moral question about what is right and wrong after a country has been attacked. Was the United States right to defend itself,

and at what cost? In addition, the criticism of NATO's and the United States' actions is repeated based on what the textbook authors saw as its consequences, namely that the dream of a more peaceful world in which the UN and the international community were the central actors was lost. As in the case of the Yugoslav Wars, this can be interpreted as a moral use of history. But the increasingly critical tone also makes it relevant to interpret it as an ideological use of history where the power and influence of NATO and the United States is problematized.

When we come to the editions from the early 2010s, the narratives on 9/11 and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq are identical to the ones quoted above; no further reflections are added. The additions concern the Arab Spring and democratic developments in the Middle East. The reactions to the events in 2010 are cautiously positive, as can be seen from the following passages.

> By October 2011, the regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya had fallen. What would come in their place was then unclear . . . Hopefully, the revolts will lead to democracy becoming the rule, and not the exception as it has been so far, in the Muslim world . . . Whether the protest movement marks the beginning of a real democratization in the region, however, is still too early to say.[51]

It can be noted that, as with the Yugoslav Wars, the September 11 terrorist attacks and the subsequent wars are not written up as epoch-making events in the textbooks.

Analysis

The first research question concerned the selection of events and developments. What appeared was a mix of major international events and developments, such as the fall of the Berlin Wall, the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the emergence of the new Russia, the Yugoslav Wars, and the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq on the one hand and recent developments in Sweden and in the world outside Europe on the other. There was a big difference in the amount of space devoted to various events and developments. The major international events were treated on several pages, whereas developments in Sweden and the rest of the world were treated in sporadic sentences or shorter paragraphs. In addressing the second question on presentation and change over time, I focused on the phenomena that were given the most space, which were the fall of the Berlin Wall, the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the emergence of the new Russia, the Yugoslav Wars, and the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

As for the events and developments, it started with their addition to history textbooks. At this stage, because the events were either ongoing or had just finished, the textbook authors were uncertain about their consequences and effects. Would Russia become democratic, or would the Soviet Union be followed by a new dictatorship? What would happen to the nuclear arsenal after the disintegration of the Soviet Union? In the editions from the 2000s and 2010s, the authors added subsequent developments and presented some reflections on these developments. The same applied to the wars in the former Yugoslavia, about which the editions from the mid-1990s reported a ceasefire while the editions from the 2000s and 2010s stated that a further period of war had passed. One could also observe a gradual shift from neutral to critical comments on NATO's and the United States' actions during these wars. Regarding the terrorist attacks of September 11 and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, two of three of the textbooks were immediately critical of US actions, a criticism that carried over to the editions of the early 2010s.

The third research question was twofold, dealing with periodization on the one hand and the use of history on the other. In relation to periodization, Liedman's term "ongoing history writing" seems to be appropriate to describe the passages in history textbooks that comment on the recent past.[52] However, it would be wrong to say that these events form a prominent grand narrative of the contemporary; on the contrary, the events and developments added to the ongoing history writing are usually of a factual sort, neutral formulations of what has happened in a chronological order. While the authors do make some interpretations and assessments, for the most part they focus on what has happened. This result largely confirms previous research that characterizes history textbooks as consisting of event history and suggests that analytical perspectives and historical-cultural issues are marginalized in the presentation.[53]

Faced with value-neutral and fact-based presentations, Jordanova's periodization type "descriptions of a time period" is helpful.[54] One way to apply her periodization type is to consider the selection of events that are given space. The fall of the Berlin Wall, the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Yugoslav Wars, and the war on terrorism are all examples of events and developments that were perceived as important in the authors' time. Here, then, one can imagine that the mere fact that certain events and developments are given priority over others is a form of periodization. Jordanova argues that descriptions of events become a form of periodization when they are assigned additional meanings. This is particularly the case with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, when phrases such as "the world after 1989" and "a new world order" appear in textbooks almost immediately. Such judgments go beyond the actual events and link subsequent developments

and wider meanings to them. As mentioned above, this periodization is not unambiguous in the textbooks; on the contrary, several passages in the textbooks signal that the authors do not see 1989 as an overriding impetus for further developments. *Perspectives on History* (2001) puts a question mark after the phrase "a new world order," and in the editions of the 2000s and 2010s, 1989 as a turning point is downplayed and new lines of conflict and other processes of change are highlighted as equally or more important.

Similar reflections can be made in relation to Rousso's expression "the latest catastrophe."[55] Certainly, major events and developments are used in order to conceptualize the contemporary; this is particularly evident in the way 1989 is initially launched in textbooks. Although 1989 as a turning point is downplayed in later editions, it is not replaced by any new periodization or grand narrative of the contemporary. Instead, I would describe the 2000s and 2010s textbooks as less definitive in their conclusions about their times and more likely to emphasize multiple lines of development. I would have expected 2001 to play a more central role as a turning point in the textbooks than what the sources show; for the purposes of interpreting the textbooks, Rousso's breaking point metaphor is not ideal.

The second part of the third research question concerned the use of history and was linked to Klas-Göran Karlsson's typology.[56] When analyzing the textbooks in relation to the different forms of use of history listed by Karlsson (scholarly, existential, moral, ideological, nonuse), certain patterns emerge. First, it should be repeated that the types are not mutually exclusive, nor are they intended as a kind of label to be applied to passages in the source material. On the contrary, it is difficult to speak unequivocally about the writings in the textbooks under study as a particular type of use of history.

Recurring in the presentations are references to democracy as something good and desirable; several passages relate to this in one way or another. It is reasonable to interpret this as an ideological use of history because it criticizes nondemocratic political systems and promotes the existing systems of government in Sweden and the Western world.[57] This is particularly evident in the presentation of the events of 1989 as "fantastic" or developments in Russia as problematic from a democratic point of view.

A related case in the textbooks is that of the wars in the former Yugoslavia and the war against terrorism, in which peace and peaceful coexistence are defended and the actions of NATO and the United States are criticized. In addition to exemplifying an ideological use of history, these passages reflect a moral dimension of what is considered right and wrong. Was the United States right to retaliate in the way it did in Afghanistan and Iraq? Would the world not be better off if the UN

and the international community were the guardians of the world? The existential aspect is not very visible in the sections analyzed here, but one could read such a dimension into the questions that are regularly asked ("Will Russia turn into a new dictatorship?" "What will happen to the nuclear arsenal?" "Would the Arab Spring lead to democratization in the Middle East?"). The existential aspect lies not so much in the concrete questions asked, but in the need to ask questions about the future as a way of orientating oneself in time and space. This is a clear example of multi-chronology in Ammert's sense (situations where readers are forced to think in multiple time dimensions and connect questions about the past, present, and future).[58]

A large part of the presentations in the textbooks would typically fall under a scholarly use of history, according to Karlsson's typology. However, the term "scholarly" is somewhat misleading in this context because the textbooks contain limited analysis of the events, even though they occasionally refer to what "some historians say." Considering the selection of events, periodization, and uses of history shown in this study, it is reasonable to conclude that the neutral and descriptive style of writing is always already permeated by time-specific currents and ideas. This is also something Karlsson emphasizes—namely, that the line between scholarly and ideological uses of history is rarely as sharp as some actors try to make it seem.[59]

Conclusion

There is no definitive answer regarding the relationship between contemporary commentary and historiography on a more qualitative level, but this study shows that there are overlaps and distinctive features. The most obvious overlap is at the factual level, where many of the facts mentioned are accurate and therefore repeated in subsequent editions. What happens over time is that subsequent developments are added as a kind of cumulative knowledge enterprise. It is common for history textbooks to build on the text of previous editions, which means that some formulations persist between editions, such as the value judgments about the fall of the Berlin Wall and the earliest conclusions that this event of 1989 will go down in history as being as important as the events of 1789 and 1848. The differences between contemporary commentary and historical writing that are visible in this study are that some initial uncertainties are edited out between editions. There are also ambitions to synthesize knowledge of the past as the distance from the events grows. Again, the fall of the Berlin Wall serves as perhaps the clearest example, in which there is a renegotiation in subsequent editions of how 1989 should be periodized.

The contemporary commentaries examined can be said to use the most recent past in slightly different ways. There is a strong democracy-promoting element, in which antidemocratic tendencies are criticized. This element can be interpreted as both an ideological and moral use of history (that is, a use to legitimize a certain government and culture and to discuss what is right and wrong). In addition, the contemporary commentary contains an existential use of history in which various dimensions of time are linked via open questions about the past, present, and future. Finally, a fact-oriented style of writing (a kind of scholarly use of history) is prominent in the form of generally factual and value-neutral representations. The scholarly approach is effective in the sense that most representations stand the test of time and the conditions described are correct. As noted above, there is a risk that this use camouflages more implicit values and periodizations that are made. At the same time, it is difficult to criticize a contemporary commentary for attempting to present contemporary events and developments as accurately as possible.

What can be concluded is that the initial selection of events greatly affects what lives on in subsequent editions; the selection of events forms a kind of mind map of the contemporary. Perhaps this is unproblematic, but it should be noted that it is the contemporary actors (that is, the historians of the present) who are responsible for the selection, not the actors of later times (that is, the historians of the future). This observation carries with it the suggestion that historiography depends more on contemporary commentary than is commonly imagined. The point, as I see it, of describing contemporary commentary as ongoing history writing is that it suggests that the presentation does something more than comment on the contemporary; it is a presentation that makes a certain claim to the writing of contemporary history and thereby affects future history writing.

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Notes

1. Skolverket [National Agency for Education], *Läroplan, examensmål och gymnasiegemensamma ämnen för gymnasieskola 2011* [*Upper secondary school 2011*] (Stockholm: Skolverket, 2011), 73. This article focuses on the period from 1994 to 2011. See the "Method and Materials" section for an account of the changes in curricula during the period and how the study relates to the relationship between the textbooks and the steering documents.
2. Kristina Spohr Readman, "Contemporary History in Europe: From Mastering National Pasts to the Future of Writing the World," *Journal of Contemporary*

History 46, no. 3 (2011): 506–530, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022009411404583; Henry Rousso, *The Latest Catastrophe: History, the Present, the Contemporary* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016); James Miles and Lindsay Gibson, "Rethinking Presentism in History Education," *Theory and Research in Social Education* 50, no. 4 (2022): 509–529, https://doi.org/10.1080/00933104.2022.2115959.

3. Ibid.
4. I have previously examined this relationship in another study on a different empirical case. It concludes that historiography is heavily influenced by contemporary commentary, especially as contemporary actors continue to guard the historiography of the events they themselves experienced. Cf. Daniel Nyström, "Den samtidskommenterande historikern" [The contemporary commentator], in *Det lyckliga 50-talet: Sexualitet, politik och motstånd* [Happy 50s: sexuality, politics and resistance], ed. Anders Burman and Bosse Holmqvist (Stockholm: Symposion, 2019), 220–234.
5. See the section "Theoretical Perspectives: Ongoing History Writing, Periodization, and Uses of History."
6. Ludmilla Jordanova, *History in Practice* (London: Hodder Arnold, 2006), 115.
7. Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft*, trans. Peter Putnam (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1954).
8. Sven-Eric Liedman, *Samtidskänslan* [Contemporary intuition] (Stockholm: Bonnier, 1965).
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11. Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Ulf Zander, *Fornstora dagar, moderna tider: Bruk och debatter om svensk historia från sekelskifte till sekelskifte* [Glorious days, modern times: uses of and debates on Swedish history from the one turn of the century to the next] (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2001); Niklas Ammert, *Det osamtidigas samtidighet: Historiemedvetande i svenska historieläroböcker under hundra år* [The simultaneity of the unsimultaneous: historical consciousness in Swedish history textbooks for a hundred years] (Uppsala: Sisyfos förlag, 2008); Ingmarie Danielsson Malmros, *Det var en gång ett land: Berättelser om svenskhet i historieläroböcker och elevers föreställningsvärldar* [Once upon a time there was a country: narratives about "Swedishness" in history textbooks and students' worldviews] (Höör: Agering, 2012), https://lucris.lub.lu.se/ws/files/5558442/3050954.pdf; Daniel Andersson, *Berättelser om 1700-talet: Frihetstiden och Gustav III:s regeringstid i svensk historiekultur från 1870-tal till 1990-tal* [Narratives about the eighteenth centry: the Age of Liberty and the reign of Gusav III in Swedish historical culture from the 1870s to the 1990s] (Umeå: Umeå University, 2023).
12. Sture Långström, *Författarröst och lärobokstradition: En historiedidaktisk studie* [The textbook tradition and the voice of the author: a study in history and didactics] (Umeå: Umeå University, 1997); Niklas Ammert (ed.), *Att spegla*

världen: Läromedelsstudier i teori och praktik [Reflecting the world: textbook studies in theory and practice] (Lund: Studentlitteratur, 2011).

13. See, for example, AnneMarie Brosnan, "Representations of Race and Racism in the Textbooks Used in Southern Black Schools during the American Civil War and Reconstruction Era, 1861–1876," *Paedagogica Historica* 52, no. 6 (2016): 718–733, https://doi.org/10.1080/00309230.2016.1223703; Enis Sulstarova, "(Re)presentations of Islam in Albanian History Textbooks from 1990–2013," *Journal of Educational Media, Memory and Society* 9, no. 1 (2017): 17–35, https://doi.org/10.3167/jemms.2017.090102; Lina Spjut, "From Temporary Migrants to National Inclusion: The Journey from Finnish Labor Migrants to a National Minority, Visualized by Swedish Textbooks from 1954 to 2016," *Journal of Educational Media, Memory and Society* 13, no. 2 (2021): 1–31, https://doi.org/10.3167/jemms.2021.130201; Mersija Fetibegović, "Channeling Nationalisms: Yugoslavianism in Croatian and Serbian Schoolbooks in the 60s and 70s," *Nordic Journal of Educational History* 9, no. 1 (2022): 133–155, https://doi.org/10.36368/njedh.v9i1.213.
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16. Viktoria Fareld, "Framing the Polychronic Present," in *Historical Understanding: Past, Present, Future*, ed. Zoltán Boldizsár Simon and Lars Deile (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), 25–33.
17. Ammert, *Det osamtidigas samtidighet*, 124.
18. Liedman, *Samtidskänslan*.
19. Jordanova, *History in Practice*.
20. Rousso, *The Latest Catastrophe*.
21. Ibid. See also Jan Polmowski and Kristina Spohr Readman, "Speaking Truth to Power: Contemporary History in the Twenty-first Century," *Journal of Contemporary History* 46, no. 3 (2011): 485–505, here 491, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022009411403337.
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23. Ammert, *Det osamtidigas samtidighet*, 32–33; Ammert, *Att spegla världen*.

24. Henrik Åström Elmersjö, *En av staten godkänd historia: Förhandsgranskningen av svenska läromedel och omförhandlingen av historieämnet 1938–1991* [An authorized history: the Swedish textbook approval scheme and the renegotiation of history, 1938–1991] (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2017), 274–275; Henrik Åström Elmersjö, "Negotiating the Nation in History: The Swedish State Approval Scheme for Textbooks and Teaching Aids from 1945 to 1983," Journal of Educational Media, Memory and Society 8, no. 2 (2016): 16–35, https://doi.org/10.3167/jemms.2016.080202.
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26. Cf. Lina Spjut, *Att (ut)bilda ett folk: Nationell och etnisk gemenskap i Sveriges och Finlands svenskspråkiga läroböcker för folk- och grundskola åren 1866–2016* [To educ(re)ate a people: national and ethnic communities in elementary school textbooks from Sweden and Finland 1866–2016] (Örebro: Örebro University, 2018), 42.
27. Cf. Helén Persson, *Historia i futurum: Progression i Historia i styrdokument och läroböcker 1919–2012* [History in the future tense: progression in history in curriculum and textbooks 1919–2012] (Lund: Lund University, 2018), 163.
28. See textbook bibliography.
29. Norman Fairclough, *Analyzing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research* (Oxford: Routledge, 2003).
30. *Epic* [*Epos*] (1996), 579 (emphasis added).
31. Ibid., 580; *History of All Time* [*Alla tiders historia*] (1996), 339.
32. *Perspectives on History* [*Perspektiv på historien*] (2001), 454–455.
33. *History of All Time* (1996), 342.
34. *Perspectives on History* (2001), 430.
35. *History of All Time* (2011), 370; *Perspectives on History* (2011), 365–366.
36. *History of All Time* (2011), 370.
37. Karlsson, "Historiedidaktik," 63–64.
38. *Epic* (1996), 582.
39. *History of All Time* (1996), 345.
40. *Epic* (2004), 368.
41. *History of All Time* (2004), 337.
42. *Perspectives on History* (2008), 342.
43. *Epic* (2011), 371.
44. *History of All Time* (2011), 408.
45. Danielsson Malmros, *Det var en gång ett land*; Andersson, *Berättelser om 1700-talet*.
46. Utbildningsdepartementet [Ministry of Education], *1994 Års Läroplan för de Frivilliga Skolformerna, Lpf 94* [Curriculum for the non-compulsory school system: Lpf 94] (Stockholm: Utbildningsdepartementet, 1994); Skolverket, *Läroplan*.
47. *Epic* (1996), 582; *History of All Time* (1996), 337.

48. *History of All Time* (2004), 340.
49. *Perspectives on History* (2008), 345.
50. *History of All Time* (2004), 343.
51. *Epic* (2011), 390; *History of All Time* (2011), 410; *Perspectives on History* (2011), 399.
52. Liedman, *Samtidskänslan*.
53. Persson, *Historia i futurum*, 219. In her longitudinal study of the period from 1919 to 2012, Persson finds that the focus on event history and chronology becomes more prominent in textbooks at the end of the period.
54. Jordanova, *History in Practice*.
55. Rousso, *The Latest Catastrophe*.
56. Karlsson, "The Holocaust as a Problem of Historical Culture"; Karlsson, "Historiedidaktik."
57. Danielsson Malmros, *Det var en gång ett land*; Andersson, *Berättelser om 1700-talet*.
58. Ammert, *Det osamtidigas samtidighet*, 124.
59. Karlsson, "Historiedidaktik," 63–64.

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