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Popular history magazines and history education

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ABSTRACT: This paper argues that popular history magazines may be a welcome complement to other forms of historical media in history teaching. By outlining a theoretical framework that captures uses of history, the paper analyses popular history magazine articles from five European countries all dealing with the outbreak of World War I. The study finds that while the studied articles provide a rather heterogeneous view of the causes of the Great War, they can be used to discuss and analyse the importance of perspective in history, thus offering an opportunity to further a more disciplinary historical understanding.

KEYWORDS: Uses of history, historical thinking, popular history magazines, narrative.

Introduction

Popular history as a source for historical knowledge has been the subject of some debate in academic circles (de Groot, 2008, pp. 4–6): some have argued that it offers a view of history that is too simple to be fit for a serious study of history, while others have argued that popular history indeed should be studied seriously since it is the history that most people will be familiar with. Popular history is also used in history education and this makes it particularly important to reflect upon whether it may be material fit to be used as a source of historical information. I will argue that popular history may indeed provide material that could be used in history teaching under certain circumstances and in this paper I want to discuss what advantages popular history may have and demonstrate how popular history could be approached in history education. Furthermore, I will present an analytical framework to aid educators interested in using popular history in their teaching in a constructive manner.

In the context of this study, popular history is defined as non-fictional history aimed at a non-expert audience that can be disseminated through a variety of media (e.g. films, novels, computer games, et cetera). The present study focuses on popular history magazines. From a history didactical perspective, magazines are interesting for at least two reasons: it can be assumed that they are consumed by teachers and pupils (and their families) alike (Popp 2015, p. 42) and that they could be claimed to obtain a kind of middle ground between popular and academic history: although the magazines are tailored to sell copies and advertisements and thus could be regarded as commercial rather than academic (cf. Axelsson 2012, pp. 278–279), they also publish texts by academic historians; all texts used for analysis in this study were authored by academic historians.

If we connect the aforementioned aspects of popular history and popular history magazines to the teaching of history, there are a variety of interesting approaches that can be afforded:

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the present analysis will focus on (i) what version of history is presented in the popular history magazines, (ii) what appears to be the aim of the historical account, and (iii) how is the account presented from a historiographical perspective, i.e. to what extent are disciplinary aspects visible in the studied accounts? The first of these approaches aims at specifying what historical content or subject matter popular history magazines have: do they give a historically acceptable version of history? With regards to what aims popular history magazines may have, it is interesting to study if the articles have a professed or implicit agenda and what that agenda may be? And, finally, what historiographic or disciplinary aspects are visible in the studied material? This disciplinary aspect of history is purported by some to be the real dividing line between popular and academic history: what distinguishes academic history is its reliance on critical analysis and evidence based presentation (cf. Lévesque, 2008, pp. 18–20).

This study makes use of a unique material: five articles that deal with the same topic from five different European countries (Sweden, the UK, Germany, Poland, and Spain). These articles have been made available by the EHISTO research project (www.european-crossroads.de). The project was an international collaboration between researchers in Germany, Poland, Spain, the UK, and Sweden that strove to further trans-national and media critical competencies in European history education through the use of popular history magazines (Popp, Schumann, & Hannig, 2015). Articles from national popular history magazines covering the same topic were chosen and translated into the languages of the participating countries (i.e. English, Polish, Spanish, German, and Swedish) and made available at the project's website.

Research on popular history magazines

It has been claimed that popular history magazines and their pertinence for history education has not attracted much interest in research in history and history didactics (Popp et al., 2015, pp. 15–16). Some history didactically minded research has however recently been carried out on popular history magazines and it has focused on what content the magazines have and how that content is presented, what entices buyers to buy and read popular history magazines (Hannig, 2015), and what attitudes teachers may have towards them. Regarding the topics that popular history magazines deal with, it seems that popular history magazines devote a lot of attention to the 20th century and the two world wars (e.g. Gorbahn, 2015, pp. 319–320; Vinterek, 2015, p. 316). Furthermore, a 'masculine' focus on history seems to be the norm: great men are both pictured a lot more than women and are devoted more space within the magazines (cf. Axelsson, 2012; Vinterek, 2015). Research also shows that while popular history magazines strive to present a picture of history as 'objectively true' (Popp, 2015, p. 57), they employ narrative techniques that strive to engage its readers on an emotional level (cf. Glaser, 2015, p. 166; Jaeger, 2015, pp. 130–131). It also seems as if popular history magazines devote some effort to coming across as more 'academic' or 'scientific' in character (Sjöland, 2015, pp. 236–237; Vinterek, 2015, p. 306). While it has been argued that popular history magazines provide too simple and mono-perspectival a view of history to be able to develop the historical understanding of its readers (Popp, 2015, p. 64), research has shown signs that some history teachers find popular history magazines quite useful both as a tool for learning and inspiration (Haydn, 2015, p. 367). This discussion is also something this paper seeks to further.

Theoretical approach

Uses of history

Even though there are perceptions of history as being academic or popular (or something else) in kind, it has been argued that there is no given consensus of what counts as an academic or popular rendering of history: these categories are dynamic and contextually contingent (cf. de Groot, 2008, p. 2; Salber Phillips, 2004, pp. 125–133). If one proceeds along this view of history, it could be argued that it becomes essential to analyse history didactically, i.e. to analyse how is history presented and disseminated in a certain context. A notion that may be helpful when doing this is ‘uses of history.’ It can be applied when analysing how history is used by various members of, and institutions in, society. Whenever history is the subject or topic of some kind of presentation (written, spoken, et cetera) it could be said that history is being used, i.e. there is a use of history. There are various approaches to how uses of history could be perceived, but the study presented here will focus on two dimensions of uses of history: what I have termed teleological and narratological uses of history.

Swedish historian Klas-Göran Karlsson has argued that the use of history is one of the most basic driving forces in the human psyche: we use history to achieve truth, develop identities, argue morally, and to claim legitimacy and power (cf. Karlsson, 2010, p. 89). He has also developed a typology of uses of history that has been widely used in Swedish history didactical research. According to Karlsson, history can be used in the following ways:

- *Scientifically* – to obtain and reconstruct new knowledge through an analytical and methodological approach;
- *Politico-pedagogically* – to illustrate, make public, and create debate;
- *Morally* – to rediscover and show historical wrong-doings and shortcomings;
- *Ideologically* – to invent, construct, and/or argue something;
- *Existentially* – to create meaning in life and build identities;
- *A non-use* – to cover up, conceal, or try to make some historical events, persons, or periods fall into public neglect (Karlsson, 2014, p. 72).

I have chosen to term these uses of history *teleological uses of history* since their primary object is to illustrate for what aim or purpose people or institutions use history. Although these categories or types of teleological uses of history are not fixed or mutually exclusive, they can offer us a way of analysing what agenda that may lie behind a certain historical account. When analysing popular history magazines this seems a particularly fruitful approach since they are supposed to do a lot of things at once: to generate profit for the publishers and entertainment and information for their readers. Furthermore, they also need to be able to attract authors with an academic background in order to develop and maintain credibility. Thus, teleological uses of history may allow us to say something about how the history presented relates to a larger historical culture or context.

German historical theorist Jörn Rüsen developed a typology of historical narratives that may be useful in portraying how history can be used from another perspective (Rüsen, 2012). According to Rüsen there are four types of historical narratives: the traditional, exemplary, critical, and genetic (Rüsen, 2012, pp. 57–58). To exemplify, a person can use history in the following ways: she can do so to assert a tradition (a traditional use of history): ‘To eat lye-soaked stock fish at Christmas is an old Swedish tradition,’ to argue an example (an exemplary use of history): ‘If we look at history, we can see that we have eaten lye-soaked

stock fish at Christmas for a very long time and should continue to do so to uphold a national identity,' to criticise a certain practice using the historical example either by giving a counter-example or an alternative account of history (a critical use of history): 'To eat lye-soaked stock fish at Christmas is a Catholic tradition that should be abolished, not least because Sweden has been Protestant for almost 500 years and we do have refrigerators today,' or to acknowledge that there are various perspectives that can be applied to how we should and could understand history (a genetic use of history): 'Depending what perspective you approach the Swedish Christmas tradition of eating lye-soaked stock fish, you may argue that it is nice traditional dish on the Christmas table, a reminder of the hardships of past generations, an offensive remnant of Swedish Catholicism, or an outdated way of conserving and preparing fish, for instance.'

I have chosen to term this dimension of uses of history *narratological uses of history* since it focuses on how history is presented, i.e. the historiographical or representational aspects of uses of history. Thus, all uses of history can be analysed both according to their teleological *and* their narratological qualities. The point is that these narratological uses of history portray cognitively different ways of treating history and historical accounts: a traditional and exemplary use of history sees history as something that is independent from interpretation and representation, thus becoming static and impervious to change. A critical use of history, uses the historical narrative to do the opposite: to show that change and disruption is what could be learnt from the historical example. While doing so, however, the historical example is treated in the same way cognitively as with the traditional and exemplary uses of history: it is treated as something that is 'true' in the sense that is not dependent on context and perspective (lye-soaked stock fish should not be eaten because it is a historical remnant and thus alien to us). A genetic use of history, on the other hand, acknowledges the contextual contingency of history and historical accounts and that how you regard history is affected by interpretation and perspective. Thus, narratological uses of history could be applied to further an analysis of teleological uses of history by focusing on the disciplinary aspects of the historical account we are presented with.

From a history didactical and educational perspective, an analysis of how the historical accounts from the popular history magazines use history both from a teleological and narratological perspective could yield interesting results: what could be said about the aims of the historical narratives we are presented with, and what status is given to the presented historical narratives: do they present history as something depending on perspective or not?

Material and methodology

As stated above the material I have used for this study has been derived from the EHISTO-project web page: www.european-crossroads.de. By registering online on the website, you can access a rather wide range of material from popular history magazines along with teaching guides for both school teachers of history, and history teacher educators. The articles covering two topics were chosen by the participants in the EHISTO-project: the First World War and Columbus and his 'discovery' of America. The material from the popular history magazines include front pages, editorials, and feature articles by scholars. These feature articles were chosen for analysis.

The chosen articles all deal with the outbreak of the First World War and they are all between 5 and 8 pages in length. Although the articles are amply illustrated, and this could be argued to be highly relevant as to how the article is interpreted (cf. Wobring, 2015), I have chosen to disregard the images and focus on the written text in the main article (i.e. I have also disregarded boxes with inserted text), mostly due to reasons of space and scope. Even

though this makes the present analysis lacking in a history didactically relevant aspect, my wish is that the analysis presented here may illustrate how further analyses applying uses of history could be performed (for instance on the uses of illustrations in popular history magazines). As previously mentioned, all the articles analysed have been translated into all the languages of the participating countries. I have used the English versions of all articles. Some of the English translations display both grammatical and syntactical errors, but they are not of the kind that may affect the understanding of the historical content of the texts. All articles clearly state who the author of the article is and the academic credentials and affiliations of the authors. The articles are ‘Weeks of decision’ by Stig Förster, a professor of contemporary history, from the German magazine *Damals* (Förster, 2004), ‘Assassination in Sarajevo. The Pretext’ by Julio Gil Pecharromán, a professor of contemporary history, from the Spanish magazine *La Aventura de la Historia* (Pecharromán, 2004), ‘An inevitable disaster’ by Peter Englund, a professor of narratology and an academic historian, from the Swedish magazine *Populär Historia* (Englund, 2008), ‘The shot that sparked the First World War’ by Christopher Clark, a professor of modern history, from the British magazine *BBC History Magazine* (Clark, 2012), and ‘Celebrating War. European societies at the advent of war’ by Piotr Szlanta, a professional historian specialised in modern German history, from the Polish magazine *Mówią wieki* (Szlanta, 2009).

Regarding the teleological uses of history in the articles, I have chosen to code references to academic history as ‘scientific,’ references to wrong-doings in the past as ‘moral,’ references to whether knowledge about the war is pertinent to understand later developments in history as ‘politico-pedagogical,’ references to how history could be relevant to our present identities or perception of selves as ‘existential,’ references to how history may be used to construct, convince or argue something as ‘ideological,’ and, finally, failure to mention pertinent details or events as ‘a non-use.’

When coding narratological uses of history, I paid close attention to how the historical narrative is presented; if the reader is presented with a narrative that seeks to enforce a view of the historical narrative as ‘true,’ I have coded it as ‘traditional,’ if the narrative argues for lessons to be learnt from the historical example, I have coded it as ‘exemplary,’ if the narrative uses the historical example to criticise or give an alternative view of certain aspects of contemporary or past historical culture, I have coded it as ‘critical,’ and, finally, if the historical narrative has engaged in attempts to display the contingent and interpretational aspects of history, I have coded it as ‘genetic.’

Results

Content

The studied articles display a variety of approaches to explaining why World War I broke out. Christopher Clark argues in the English article ‘The shot that sparked the First World War’ that the assassination of the Austro-Hungarian heir apparent Franz Ferdinand and his spouse in Sarajevo on the 28th of June 1914 was the reason the war broke out: ‘the assassinations remind us of the power that a single, symbolic event – however deeply it may be enmeshed in larger processes – can wield over history’ (Clark, 2012, p. 23).

The German article by Stig Förster begins by outlining the assassinations in Sarajevo, but claims that there were more complex reasons as to why the war broke out: he mentions the political, colonial, economical, and military power struggles between the European super powers, but argues that ‘these factors are not sufficient to explain why exactly the war broke out that summer of 1914’ (Förster, 2004, p. 14). Instead Förster claims that attention should

be given to ‘the activities and motives of about 50 men, whose decisions influenced the destinies of millions of people’ (Förster, 2004, p. 15). It was the mind sets and moods of the leading politicians, monarchs, and militaries that ultimately decided the outcome of the European crisis in July 1914, according to Förster’s view.

Polish historian Piotr Szlanta chooses yet another approach to explaining why the war broke out: ‘After mobilization was announced, cheerful crowds bade farewell to smiling soldiers departing for the front. [...] In the weeks to follow similar scenes were observed in numerous European cities’ (Szlanta, 2009, p. 32). Although Europe was ripe for war due to political, economic, and military reasons, it was the popular support across the European nations that made the war possible. It was not until bad news started coming from the front that ‘the initial enthusiasm began to fade and was replaced with disappointment, dissatisfaction and apathy’ (Szlanta, 2009, p. 36).

Spanish historian Julio Gil Pecharromán argues that the war broke out for more abstract, ideological reasons:

The 1914 summer meant, above all other considerations, the triumph of the nationalisms [sic!] as cultural and political phenomena. European governments, forced to choose between war and peace, were prisoners of a past of conflicts, whose major aims were the consolidation of a national awareness and the defence or acquisition of a territorial basis defined by *ethnic borders*. In order to base these achievements, the national elites, had not stopped using, all over [sic!] the 19th century, all the ideological propaganda and historical justification resources, and they had not stopped encouraging the most fanatic collective passions and the most simplistic and manipulated views of the *other*, the national enemy, faceless and with no virtues, who had to be smashed in the name of the [...] nation’s destiny (Pecharromán, 2004, p. 29).

According to Pecharromán the war was more or less ideologically determined: all factors (e.g. political, social, economic, and military) were all pointing in the same direction, it would be useless to point out ‘public opinion pressure or this or that interest group on each side of the belligerent powers and attributing them a decisive role’ (Pecharromán, 2004, p. 29).

The Swedish article by historian Peter Englund takes a similar stance on the outbreak of the war, though less deterministic than the Spanish approach: surely there were factors contributing to the outbreak of war, but mere coincidence played its role as well: ‘Today, in hindsight, it is possible to identify a number of critical points in the development [of the conflict], points where the outcome was by no means given, and in which an alternative history hides itself’ (Englund, 2008, p. 27). For instance, Englund argues that it was chance that allowed Princip to kill Franz Ferdinand: Princip was a ‘lousy shooter’ and the shots were ‘badly targeted’ but still managed to inflict lethal wounds on the Archduke and his wife. Furthermore, the driver of the Archduke’s car took a ‘wrong turn’ and happened to end up in the same street as Princip, who had already given up on trying to assassinate Franz Ferdinand (Englund, 2008, p. 27). Had not these coincidences met, there would not have been a conflict as we know it. Furthermore, it was only when the war was ‘believed to be inevitable by the right number of people in positions of power, [that] it became inevitable’ (Englund, 2008, p. 31).

Teleological uses of history

Although the studied articles present a rather multifarious picture of why World War I broke out, they make less varied teleological uses of history. The most predominant teleological use of history seems to be a politico-pedagogical one: the aim behind the articles seems to be that readers should learn what the true reason to why the Great War erupted is, be it because of murder, politics, or chance. Closely related to this use of history is an ideological use of history: as Pecharromán, Förster, Szlanta, and Englund try to convince us that it was the mind

set of the public and/or people in power that propelled Europe into the catastrophe. The war made sense to them, and we should understand that this was the decisive reason why the war broke out. There are also traces of moral uses of history: Stig Förster argues that the accusation in article 231 of the Versailles peace treaty, stating that Germany had the sole responsibility for the war, was 'unfair' and that the 'responsibility was in fact shared more evenly' (Förster, 2004, p. 19). Förster is also the only author that makes what could be coded as a scientific use of history: the July crisis has become a 'central topic in historical science [sic!]' (Förster, 2004, pp. 14–15) due to the fact that structural explanations to why the war broke out are deemed insufficient, and then he goes on to narrate what historical research has found out about the leading decision makers and their reasoning about the war.

It should, however, be stressed that these uses of history are overlapping and it may be difficult, if not impossible, to code one use of history according to only one category. For instance, when an author states that we should know more about the outbreak of World War I because we can learn important things from it, we could be witnessing a politico-pedagogical, ideological, moral, or commercial use of history. Or more precisely put, since interpretation and context are important aspects of how a text's meaning is rendered we could either read the statement as an invitation to learn about why such an important catastrophe could occur (politico-pedagogical), as an invitation to muse on the moral misdoings of the people in power (moral), or to show and convince us of something related to the mechanisms of war and conflicts (ideological). It depends on the questions you ask and the reason you ask them.

Narratological uses of history

The dominant narratological use of history found in the articles is the traditional one. What we are presented with are narratives that leave no traces of historiographical or disciplinary aspects of the historian's trade. Leaving the Swedish article aside, all authors present what could be called a closed and mono-perspectival approach to history: their account is the correct one for the reasons they give. Some examples to illustrate:

A spiral of international crises had poisoned the atmosphere in Europe. However, that war broke out in 1914 was not an inevitable fate. Therefore, recent research has a strong focus on the partly absurd decision-making processes which led straight to the disaster (Förster, 2004, p. 14).

A cheerful [crowd] bade farewell to smiling soldiers departing for the front. Young women gave them beverages, cigarettes and sometimes much more ..., since how could you refuse anything to the young heroes who were about to fight for their country (Szlanta, 2009, p. 32)?

The Europe [of] 1914 was the daughter of the Industrial revolution and the national-liberal revolutions which [had] shaken the continent since the end [of] the 18th century. The Nation-State concept, the parliamentary regimes and the liberal sytem of capitalist economy had arisen from those processes. But all of it had developed hindered by failed attempts, beginner['s] errors and the logical resistance from the structures that had to be replaced (Pecharromán, 2004, p. 24).

What these quotations have in common is that they present the historical account as if it were transparent, i.e. what we are given here are accounts of what 'really' happened and the 'real' causes of the Great War. The accounts are seemingly not products of the authors' choices and perspectives; they are written in the passive voice. In this sense the narratives can be perceived as closed and mono-perspectival: what we are presented with is to be perceived as the final word on what caused World War I.

There are also examples of exemplary uses of history: for instance, Julio Gil Pecharromán and Christopher Clark argue that the conflict between Austria-Hungary and Serbia could be regarded as 'something similar to what happened nowadays [sic!] with the US invasion of Iraq' (Pecharromán, 2004, p. 28) or the international development after the attack on the

World Trade Center in 2001 (Clark, 2012, p. 23), suggesting that there is something to be learnt from the historical example. Christopher Clark also makes what could be coded as a critical use of history when he states that:

Serbia remains one of the blind spots in the historiography of the July Crisis. The assassination at Sarajevo is treated in many accounts as a mere pretext, an event with little bearing on the real forces whose interaction brought war. The truth is that it confronted the Austro-Hungarian authorities with a challenge they were unable to ignore' (Clark, 2012, p. 23).

According to my interpretation, Clark uses the historical example to try to correct the historiographical error of not paying enough attention to the Sarajevo assassination. This is done by giving an alternative counter-narrative to what he perceives to be the dominant narrative concerning the causes of World War I. Clark does so, however, by asserting that his own position and narrative should be perceived as more accurate than other narratives, not acknowledging that his own perspective is contingent on his interpretation and approach.

The article that differs from the others regarding its narratological use of history is that of Swedish historian Peter Englund. The point of Englund's text is not to argue what the true or correct version of history is, but rather to argue the contingency of history:

The point here has not been to explore what is known as contra-factual [sic!] history or alternate history, but to show how the road leading up to the devastating World War I by no means was straight, and the outcome was by no means inevitable.

Yet the inevitable, paradoxically, [plays] a role in this event, but not as facts but as words. The world exists, independently of us, while at the same time it is also something that we [conjure]. When the war was believed to be inevitable by the right number of people in positions of power, it became inevitable. At the same time, this means that the opposite [could] also be possible, in a similar crisis, sometime in the future. All statements about reality affect it. History is made by humans (Englund, 2008, p. 31).

Depending on from what perspective we approach history (and events around us), we ascribe it (or them) different meanings. This could be regarded as a genetic use of history since Englund uses the historical example to argue the contextual contingency and specificity of matters historical.

Discussion

Regarding the content of the articles studied it can be difficult to draw any conclusions about what really happened in July 1914 since they present such disparate (and sometimes opposing) accounts of the events leading up to the outbreak of World War I. Furthermore, all articles make claims about the causes of the Great War that seem to have some weight to them, furthering the difficulty in choosing which story to believe. I want to argue, however, that this disparity could be regarded as a didactical benefit rather than a problem. If we want to teach history as a discipline where an understanding of the contingency of history is the rule rather than the exception (cf. Lévesque, 2008, p. 101), the material used in this study offers a good opportunity to display this. A material that offers a chance of promoting understanding of history's complexity and multi-perspectivity among its readers could be a welcome complement to history textbooks that tend to offer rather closed and one-dimensional accounts of matters past (cf. Eikeland, 2002, p. 158; Thorp, 2014, p. 512).

These same history textbooks also tend to present accounts of history that have been 'tidied up' from the interpretive and representative mess that a disciplinary approach to history yields. Furthermore, authors of history textbooks do not have a similarly conspicuous role to play as the authors of the articles studied: where the narratives presented in the magazine

articles have a clear ‘sender’ and voice, history textbooks tend to appear to be more anonymous and, therefore, give an appearance of presenting an ‘objective’ narrative free from perspective. For this reason I want to argue that the articles studied here may provide an excellent example for a discussion of voice and perspective in historiography and could consequently be used to complement the accounts offered in history textbooks.

The articles studied could also be a rewarding way of analysing the dissemination of history, both from the perspective of historical culture (through the teleological uses of history) and historiography or historical representation (through the narratological uses of history). This holds true when studying the texts both individually and in concert. Since the popular history magazine article format offers a rather limited space, authors tend to offer condensed narratives of history that are quite suitable for analysis from the perspective of uses of history. It should, however, be noted that while this could be argued to be a rich material for teaching the disciplinary aspects of history, it is also quite demanding. Educators that want to further their pupils’ or students’ meta-historical understanding through the uses of popular history magazines, need to be able to detect and scrutinise the disciplinary aspects of popular historical texts, and to devise learning modules to implement this kind of teaching (cf. Donnelly, 2014, p. 11). The analytical framework presented here (i.e. the focus on content, and teleological and narratological uses of history) could be a useful tool in furthering analyses of cultural context and representation in all types of historical narratives, not only those in popular history magazines.

Conclusion

In this paper I have done two things: I have illustrated how and argued why popular history magazines may be material fit for meta-historical analyses and history teaching, and I have presented a theoretical framework for analysing historical media from a history didactical perspective applying the notion of uses of history. The popular historical material offered through the EHISTO-project’s webpage may be a unique opportunity for history educators at all levels to analyse popular history magazines from a number of perspectives.

As the presented analysis has shown popular history magazines do convey complex and historically accurate views of history. If used together, the articles studied here can be used to analyse and discuss the contextual contingencies and representational practices that characterise history, both of an academic and popular nature through the multiple perspectives on a historical event presented. Furthermore, the theoretical framework presented may be applied on all kinds of historical media to further analyses of history didactical aspects in history education, for teachers and pupils alike. To present history in a coherent and convincing way is a challenge to writers of historical accounts of all types and an awareness of the interpretive and representative nature of history can be argued to be an essential asset in history education. Students of history may come to appreciate the complexity of history and accounts thereof through a systematic study of articles from popular history magazines, if given the necessary tools and guidance.

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