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On the Qualitative Aspects of the Hungarian School-Leaving Exam in History

Abstract: The Hungarian Core Curriculum and school-leaving exam requirements in history emphasize the importance of students' familiarity with the sources, procedures, and methods of historical research, as well as the need to deepen students' understanding of second-order concepts, such as historical sources, facts and evidence, interpretations, and historical perspectives. This study investigates (1) to what extent the 2023 advanced level school-leaving exam includes tasks suitable for assessing source analysis skills and (2) what level of source analysis skills the exam demands from students. In our research, we found that the school-leaving exam test we analyzed occupies a position somewhere in the middle of a long journey: it is much more than a simple, knowledge-based test assessing students' memory, yet it is still far from being an ideal school-leaving exam that effectively incorporates higher-order historical thinking operations.

Keywords: school-leaving exam; cognitive level; use of sources; procedural knowledge; critical thinking; task-solving activities; writing skills

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1. The Contextualization of the Exams

1.1 The Hungarian Education System in General

In Hungary, education is compulsory between the ages of 3 and 16. Generally, the system of educational institutions consists of kindergartens, elementary schools, upper secondary grammar schools, upper secondary vocational grammar schools, vocational special schools, and skills development schools. The durations of the programs of the International Standard Classification of Education are as follows: ISCED 0 is three years; ISCED 1 is four years; ISCED 2 is four years; and ISCED 3 is two to five years.

Hungarian public education institutions can be established and maintained by the state, minority self-governments, churches as legal persons, religious associations, natural persons, or other organizations. In the case of public education, central educa-

tional governance and the supervision fall under the auspices of the Ministry of Interior. Central regulation is based on the National Core Curriculum issued by the government, which also regulates the two lower layers of education: the Framework Curriculum (FC) and the local curriculum.

The Hungarian National Core Curriculum (NCC) is a strategic document that is mandatory to follow for all educational institutions and stakeholders. It provides the ideological, theoretical, and philosophical foundations for the main areas of knowledge to be conveyed. The NCC is the core document regulating Hungarian school education. It provides the normative basis for the preparation of the FCs and local curricula, the content of subjects, examination requirements, textbooks, and other teaching aids. The NCC conveys common national values and contributes to the preservation of national traditions while supporting the development of a sense of national identity. In addition, it determines the content and the developmental requirements that must be fulfilled during the various educational phases. Historical topics are arranged chronologically, but certain longitudinal themes recur each year. These include education; life in villages and towns; diseases and epidemics; rulers and statesmen; peace, wars, and warfare; the effects of environmental transformation; and the influence and coexistence of peoples and religions.

The FCs are based on the NCC. They take into consideration certain similarities and differences between different types of schools. Thus, specific overall curricula are developed to determine the contextual regulatory frameworks of the four-grade (grades 9–12) and six-grade (grades 7–12) upper secondary grammar schools.

The local curricula have to be developed by individual communities of school teachers. This means that school-level content regulation documents are adopted by the teaching staff in the field and are subsequently approved by the school maintainers after consultation with experts.

1.2 Goals and Purposes of History Education

The Hungarian NCC and the FCs serve as the foundation for the school-leaving exam (in Hungarian *érettségi vizsga*, sometimes in English also called the High School Graduation Exam (or Matura exam)). The aim of history teaching is to arouse young people's interest in the past and provide a variety of evidence demonstrating that knowledge of the past also serves as a means of gaining a true understanding of the present and preparing for the future. Moreover, history teaching must develop and strengthen attitudes and skills necessary for conscious participation in public life. It should also provide students with personal experiences that foster a sense of belonging to their family, place of residence, nation, Europe, and human civilization. Additionally, it must

foster an understanding of the forces that have shaped events and processes in the past, the fate of previous generations, their achievements, the evolution of their living conditions, and the ideas and beliefs that defined each age, as well as their origins and the reasons for their formation.

In the study of history, the NCC and FCs emphasize the importance of familiarity with the sources, procedures, and methods of historical research, as well as the need to deepen students' understanding of second-order concepts that foster historical knowledge and interpretation (e.g., historical time, change and continuity, causes and consequences, historical sources, facts and evidence, interpretation, significance, and historical perspective)—a key aspect from the perspective of our research.

The Hungarian NCC designates the overall structure of the development requirements, and it consists of the following parts: Acquiring Knowledge and Learning; Critical Thinking; Communication; and Orientation in Time and Space.

1.3 The School Leaving Exam in History

Hungary is a country where history is a compulsory subject from the 5th grade (11-year-old pupils) to the 12th grade (18-year-old pupils) in all elementary schools, upper secondary grammar schools, and upper secondary vocational grammar schools. The average number of lessons at the elementary and upper secondary level is between two and three per week. Teachers in the upper secondary level are required to hold a master's degree in history education. Students who take school leaving exams in history come basically from two types of schools. For students in upper secondary grammar schools that provide general education lasting four, six, or eight years, the school-leaving exam is taken as an admission test to higher education institutions. Students in upper secondary vocational grammar schools are prepared for the school-leaving examination and vocational (practical) examination, enabling them to either continue their studies at a higher education institution or start a working career.

Since 2005, Hungary has run a dual-level examination system. The intermediate-level exam (*Középszintű érettségi*) is the standard-level exam that is mandatory for most students. It assesses basic knowledge and skills required for graduation and further education. The advanced-level exam (*Emelt szintű érettségi*), a higher-level exam, is primarily taken by students applying to universities or specific programs requiring deeper subject knowledge, and it is often required for competitive degree programs (e.g., law, medicine, engineering). Both levels include a written and oral exam. Students must complete five mandatory subjects: Hungarian language and literature, mathematics, history, foreign language (usually English or German), and one elective subject (e.g., biology, physics, geography, art). Optional subjects can be added to improve university admission scores. Each exam is scored out of 100 points. To pass, students need at least 25% in each subject. Advanced-level exams weigh in more in university admission

(e.g., 1.5 times the points of intermediate exams). Points for university admission are calculated based on grades from the school-leaving exam and grades earned during high school. Advanced-level exams can add extra points to the final score, especially for competitive programs. This dual-level system allows students to tailor their exams to their future goals by either fulfilling basic graduation requirements or preparing for higher education. In organizational terms, intermediate-level exams can be taken by students at their own schools. By contrast, advanced-level exams are held in centrally designated secondary schools and are supervised and assessed by teachers from other institutions. In 2023, 68,131 students took the school-leaving history exam at the intermediate level, and 7,025 students took it at advanced level.

At both exam levels in history, the written test consists of two parts. The first part contains 12 short-answer questions, while the second part includes essay questions: one short task on world history, one long task on Hungarian history, and one complex task. Students must choose three out of six essay questions offered to them. At the intermediate level, students have 240 minutes (100 minutes for the first part and 140 minutes for the second part) to complete the tasks. At the advanced level, students have 300 minutes in total (125 minutes are allocated for the short-answer questions, and 175 minutes are reserved for writing the three essays in the second part). Students can choose whether they take the exam in Hungarian or one of the following 10 other languages: English, French, Croatian, German, Italian, Russian, Romanian, Spanish, Serbian, or Slovak. After the written exams, there is also an oral part at both the intermediate and advanced levels. Students have 15 minutes to present a topic using a set of questions and sources provided by the examiners. This task aims to assess students' knowledge, skills, and abilities related to historical thinking, interpretation, and communication. It evaluates their ability to use evidence to support arguments and conclusions. The set of questions must be prepared according to the topics prescribed for the oral exam. The question can be a presentation of a historical problem of a smaller period, an overview of a more complex problem, or one that spans several historical periods. The wording of the questions encourages problem-solving and the use of historical (textual, visual, graphic, material, etc.) sources and maps. The oral questions contain three to six sources and identify three to four processing and interpretation aspects. Moreover, an appropriate interpretation of different types of sources is also expected in the explanation of the question.

The written school-leaving exam tests in history are based on detailed requirements of the central Hungarian school authority, the Office of Education, which is a specialized department of the Ministry of Interior. The school-leaving exam requirements are in line with the NCC and FCs. The central history requirements elaborate on both

the specific content of the test as well as the specific competencies that should be addressed in them.¹

As to the content requirements, history teaching at the secondary level of education in Hungary is based on a chronological approach, combining Hungarian and European/World history. This means that themes range from ancient Greek and Roman times through medieval times to the most recent history, such as Hungary joining the European Union. In line with this, the school-leaving exam written test in history (at both the intermediate and advanced levels) contains questions and tasks from all these periods of Hungarian and European/world history.

In terms of competencies, the written history exams, in line with NCC and FC guidelines, are highly complex. The general requirements for the school-leaving exams state that one of the primary aims of the history exam is to assess students' ability to examine and analyze historical sources—both primary and secondary—and to envision realistically the lives of people in the past. More specific requirements include the following:

- Acquisition of knowledge and use of sources: this involves recalling knowledge, collecting relevant information from historical sources, formulating conclusions, and interpreting the sources.
- Communication on historical topics and application of professional language: students must demonstrate the ability to express historical ideas clearly and accurately, using appropriate terminology.
- Orientation in space and time: students need to demonstrate an understanding of chronology and geographical context.
- Exploration of factors shaping events and critical, problem-oriented thinking: this includes the ability to interpret differing perspectives on the same events or historical figures, as well as the ability to formulate opinions supported by arguments about controversial events and personalities.

1.4 How are the Exams Scored and Marked?

The Office of Education is responsible for preparing, organizing, and conducting the school leaving exams. The task sets for each subject are prepared by committees of five to eight members. The members of the Subject Committees are mostly practicing secondary school teachers. The chairman's mandate lasts for three years, while the

1 Detailed test requirements regarding "Competencies" are in section A while requirements on the "Content" is in section B. [https://www.oktatas.hu/pub_bin/dload/kozoktatas/eretsegi/vizsgakovetelmenyek2024/tortenelem_2024_e.pdf]. Accessed 1 June, 2024.

committee members can change annually. The chairman compiles the final task sets on both exam levels from the tasks prepared by the committee members. The task sets are first reviewed by a subject expert and language experts (for all 11 linguistic versions) and then tested by two practicing teachers who are not members of the committee. The reviewed and corrected versions are subsequently sent to the representative of the Office of Education, who can request modifications if necessary. The task sets are finalized based on a joint decision of the committee chairman and the responsible head of the Office of Education.

On the Hungarian written school-leaving tests in history at both exam levels students can achieve a maximum of 100 points: 50% from short-answer questions and 50% from short and long essays. Teachers receive a detailed evaluation guide every year, which includes model answer keys for each short-answer and essay-type questions to ensure consistent scoring and promote fairness and uniformity across assessments.

The first and principal rule for correcting and evaluating short-answer tasks is that correctors strictly adhere to the answers provided in the model answer key. Where the key specifies that an alternate wording of the answer is acceptable, all solutions that convey the same content as the key answer must be accepted. If the key allows for the acceptance of other correct answers, then all historically accurate responses must be acknowledged. A correct answer or an answer component (“item”) is generally worth either 0.5 or 1 point, as specified in the model answer key.

A scoring guide for teachers is also prepared for essay assignments. This guide specifies, for each assignment, the requirements that must be met for the answer to receive the maximum score, based on the competencies assessed in the essays. The point values assigned to the competencies vary, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Assessment and Scoring of Longer, Essay-Type Questions

Evaluation Criteria	Scoring = points	
	Short	Long
Understanding the Task	0–2	0–2
Location in Space and Time	0–2	0–4
Communication and Use of Special Vocabulary	0–4	0–6
Acquisition of Knowledge and Use of Resources	0–3	0–9
Analysis of Factors Shaping Events, Critical Thinking and Problem-Solving	0–6	0–12
Total (50 points)	17	33

1.5 Contextual Factors

When considering and evaluating the overall impact of the Hungarian written exam system, it is very important to point out that all the task sets as well as the answer keys of

the previous years can be downloaded freely from the website of the Office of Education.² It is widely recognized that previous tests are used willingly and frequently by teachers and students alike to prepare for the school-leaving exams. Thus previous sets of exam questions have had a continuing impact on the practice of history teaching in Hungary. Teachers naturally devote more time to developing knowledge and skills that are regularly included in written examination tasks. From this point of view, the formulation of the questions and the types of the tasks over the last 20 years have had a significant impact on Hungarian history teaching (Kojanitz 2023a: 558).

Preparation for the history exam can be considered continuous, as teachers incorporate tasks similar to those on the school-leaving exam when introducing new topics. In the final months leading up to the exam, classes are specifically focused on exam preparation to ensure students' success. Students who choose the school-leaving exam at the advanced level can prepare for it in separate groups in extra history classes during the 11th and 12th grades. State and private book publishers offer special study aids for exam preparation, mainly in the form of sample tasks for school training and individual practice. Many teachers and private businesses offer in-person and online exam training for students in history (and in other subjects too) for a fee. Since history is a compulsory school-leaving subject in Hungary, approximately 70,000 students take the exam each year. This represents nearly 100% of students, excluding only those absent for health reasons.

2. Methodology

2.1 Brief Description of the Analyzed Exam

Our case study analyzes the Hungarian written school-leaving exam test in history from 2023. The written test consists of two parts. The first part contains 12 short-answer tasks comprising a total of 50 subtasks. Most of the tasks are linked to textual and visual sources. Details about this are provided in the detailed analysis. The second part includes essay questions. There are six essay questions altogether in the paper, and students had to choose three: one short task on world history, one long task on Hungarian history, and one complex task.

2 School leaving exam tasks of previous years, plus all solution keys, dating back to 2005, can be accessed at: <https://www.oktatas.hu/kozneveles/erettsegi/feladatsorok>. Accessed June 1, 2024.

Table 2. The essay questions of the advance-level history exam from 2023

	Historical period	Topic
World history	Up to 1849	13. The Great Schism (short) Use the sources and your own knowledge to present the schism between Eastern and Western Christianity. Present the principal structural differences between the churches that evolved as part of the process.
	After 1849	14. World War II (short) Use the sources and your own knowledge to present the causes and circumstances of Germany's campaign against the Soviet Union and why it was a turning point in the course of the war.
Hungarian history	Up to 1849	15. Hungary in the 18th century (long) Use the sources and your own knowledge to present the demographic and ethnic changes in Hungary in the 18th century. In your answer mention the changes connected to religions in the country.
	After 1849	16. The crisis of the Kádár period (long) Use the sources and your own knowledge to analyze the economic processes that led to the crisis of the Kádár period and their social impact.
Complex	–	17. Medieval royal revenues (covering several periods) Using the sources and your own knowledge present the changes in royal revenues in Hungary between 1000 and 1490. In your answer mention the following points: • royal revenues in the 11th century, • the changes in royal revenues in the 13th century, • new royal revenues under Charles I, • the changes in royal revenues under Mátyás Hunyadi.
	–	18. Hungarian state organization in the reform period and the Dual Monarchy (comparative) Use the sources and your own knowledge to compare state organization and functioning in the reform period and the period of the Dual Monarchy. Do not present a chronology of events. In your answer mention the following points: • the system of government, • the limits of royal power, • governmental responsibility, • government structure, • the form of representation, • the functioning of the counties.

2.2 Research Questions

All NCCs and graduation requirements introduced in Hungary over the past 20 years have aimed to renew the approach and practice of history teaching. The primary focus has been on developing historical thinking, as well as the attitudes and skills necessary for the critical use of sources. The development of these skills will receive attention in

history lessons only if they are essential for the successful completion of the high-stakes school-leaving exam.

To evaluate the efficiency of the exam test in practice, we formulated two research questions:

1. To what extent does the 2023 advanced level school-leaving exam include tasks suitable for assessing source analysis skills?
2. What level of source analysis skills does the school-leaving test require from students?

2.3 Method

In our study, we understand our concepts as follows. By “subtask” we mean every single item that needs an answer (from the student’s point of view) and that is marked (from the point of view of the corrector). In the test we analyzed, there are 81 subtasks adding up to a total of 100 points (some subtasks are worth 0.5 points).

The Hungarian school-leaving history exams are rich in sources and resources; almost every written task contains two or three textual or visual sources and resources (Kojanitz 2023a). By “source” we understand primary historical sources (e.g., textual, visual, and statistical ones), including contemporary maps (Herber 2023: 105–112).

By “resource,” we mean materials in the tests that are not primary sources but serve as tools from which students can extract information. Resources are sometimes secondary sources (e.g., a historian’s account), but more often, they include textual, visual, cartographical, or numerical materials created by textbook editors.

What is common to resources is that they always serve as stimuli for students’ thinking about historical events or processes. Good examples of resources are four contour maps included in Part One of the test (Tasks 1, 4, 5, 6). By “infographic,” we understand a special type of visual resource that is based on a visual impulse (such as a mind map or a chart) with the purpose of providing visual support for students (visualization; Mitchell 1994; Kjeldsen 2018; Fodor 2019). By “essay,” we mean a genre in which students are expected to present a structured piece of written text, where their arguments are based on both historical sources and their own knowledge.

We used the advanced-level school-leaving tasks to analyze both quantitative and qualitative methods: we examined how many sources were associated with the short answer and essay tasks, the proportion of these being primary sources versus resources, and how often both types of materials appeared in the same task. A funda-

mental requirement for assessing source usage is that most of the tasks contain primary sources. We also evaluated the short-answer tasks related to primary sources from the perspective of the level of source analysis required of the students. For this, we used a five-stage analysis grid that was developed by Kojanitz (2023a). It distinguished five levels of tasks based on the type of knowledge and source analysis skills required to solve them—starting from knowledge-testing tasks, progressing through understanding the content of the sources, to tasks requiring the evaluation of source value (Table 3). The sub-tasks are often very different in nature. In many tasks, the same source is associated with a knowledge-testing sub-task, a sub-task requiring text comprehension, and another requiring the application of knowledge. Therefore, we classified the sub-tasks separately. The analysis covered only those sub-tasks that were related to a textual or other primary sources (e.g., pictures, cartoons, photographs, buildings, or objects).

For evaluating essay tasks, we used a method based on Benjamin Bloom’s taxonomy (Bloom 1956), also considering its further developed form that has been developed by Viliam Kratochvíl (2019), in order to systematically qualify cognitive levels of written tests. Bloom’s taxonomy is a pedagogical theory that evaluates the cognitive complexity of the learning content. His classification is based on the language analysis of specific instructions, such as the teacher’s questions or the instructions of the textbook tasks, such as “name,” “compare,” “find,” “distinguish,” “summarize,” etc. According to Bloom’s analysis, these question words (“what..., why..., in what way,” etc.) and instructions indicate what specific cognitive actions are expected from the students, and thus they are reliable signs of the cognitive difficulty of the individual tasks (Kratochvíl 2019: 81). We considered Bloom’s taxonomy as a proper analytical tool for classifying test tasks and questions, for distinguishing the cognitive demands of the test, and for assessing the broader learning objectives of the tests under our survey.

Table 3. The levels of tasks based on the type of knowledge and source analysis skills required to solve them

	Levels	Examples	Number of occurrences in the 2023 test
Without own conclusion	1. Does not require any source analysis. Purpose: To test the students' subject knowledge stimulated by sources. It asks about dates, places, and names related to the topic of the source.	Who? When? Where?	10
	2. Requires basic reading or observation skills. Purpose: Students must read the source excerpt or observe details of visual and material sources.	Which sources are the following statements true for? Which historical period do the following images make reference to?	10
	3. Requires linking the source to prior knowledge. Purpose: Students must connect the content of the source with their historical knowledge of the topic.	Name the person whom the sources are about! Match each source to the appropriate location in the map!	25
Own conclusion and source criticism	4. Requires independent conclusions. Purpose: Students must draw conclusions based on the source content.	Identify causes and consequences. Analyze the author's purpose, point of view, party affiliation, or views! Assess the author's attitude toward events, people, or opinions in the source! Evaluate the historical context of the source!	5
	5. Requires comparison or evaluation of sources. Purpose: Students must compare sources or assess their relevance, authenticity, and reliability.	Compare the purpose, content, and presentation of sources! Evaluate the relevance, authenticity, or reliability of the sources! Find relevant information in the sources to answer a question! Find evidence to support or refute a claim.	0

3. Analysis of the Advance-level Written Test in History

3.1 Primary Sources and Resources in the Tasks

Our present research confirms the extensive inclusion of sources and resources in the 2023 advanced-level history written test, to the extent that practically every task involves either sources or resources. Our findings regarding sources and resources are summarized in Tables 3 and 4.

Table 4. Categorization and quantity of sources in the 2023 Hungarian school-leaving written test in history at the advanced level

Types of Sources	Number of Sources in Part One (Short Questions)	Number of Sources in Part Two (Essays)	Total
Primary Sources			
- Textual (e.g., Tasks 14, 15, 18)	30	7	37
- Visual, including maps and contemporary paintings (e.g., Tasks 8, 9, 15)	7	0	7
- Statistical (e.g., Tasks 11, 15)	3	1	4
Sources Total			48

Table 5. Categorization and quantity of resources in the 2023 Hungarian school-leaving written test in history at the advanced level

Types of Resources	Number of Resources in Part One (Short Questions)	Number of Resources in Part Two (Essays)	Total
Resources			
- Textual (e.g., written statistical analysis in Task 11)	2	0	2
- Visual: Infographics (e.g., Tasks 2, 4, 18)	2	4	6
- Visual: Contour maps (e.g., Tasks 1, 5, 6)	3	0	3
Resources Total			11

As shown in Table 2, the 2023 test, which comprises 15 tasks and questions (12 short-answer questions and 3 essays), includes a total of 48 primary sources. This means that, on average, each task contains more than three primary sources, which can be considered a high ratio. In the short question part, the most typical sources are primary textual sources; of the 48 sources, 30 are textual (62.5%). These tasks can be seen as a form of straightforward knowledge testing, focused primarily on gathering information from various types of resources.

The essay part is also based typically on primary textual sources; there are eight primary sources in Part Two, of which seven are textual and one is a statistical chart. As can be seen in Table 2, there are altogether 11 resources included in the 2023 test as different kinds of textual and visual or numeric impulses for students' thinking about historical events or processes, including three contour maps.

Exploring our first research question also made us look at how students were encouraged to combine sources and resources—their corroboration, comparison of two or

more sources, and identification of similarities between them, etc. If we look carefully at the categorization of the combined use of sources and resources in the 2023 school-leaving written test at the advanced level, we find that eight out of 15 test tasks require a combined use of sources and resources. It can be said that both the “simple short-answer tasks” (in Part One) and the “longer essay-type tasks” (in Part Two) require and encourage students to use a combination of a larger quantity of sources and resources: for example the combined use of three textual sources (in Task 7); the combined use of four textual sources plus five visual sources (in Task 9); the combined use of two statistical sources (in Task 11f); and the combined use of two written sources (in Task 14), etc. In sum, in terms of the quantity and variety of primary sources and resources, the school-leaving written tasks at the advanced level create excellent opportunities and conditions for completing tasks that require the use of sources and resources.

3.2 The Levels of the Source Analysis Tasks

Eight of the 12 short-answer tasks include primary sources. These eight tasks comprise a total of 50 subtasks. The vast majority of the items could be categorized as Levels 2 and 3 on a five-level rating scale. These subtasks do not require students to draw independent conclusions (Table 3). Ten subtasks require factual knowledge, while 10 require an understanding of the content within the source. The most common type of task involves making connections between the details in the source and students’ prior knowledge, with 25 subtasks falling into this category. Only five subtasks require students to draw their own conclusions or provide explanations based on the source. However, none of the subtasks demand a comparison or evaluation of the sources from any perspective.

The short-answer tasks typically aim at knowledge-testing, text comprehension, the application of content knowledge linked to primary sources, and gathering information from different types of resources. Most questions and tasks show a rather straightforward knowledge-testing, including tasks such as “name the leader,” “name the form of government,” “name a political objective,” “name the event,” “name the event/alliance” etc. A smaller set of short-answer questions and tasks requires students to engage in more complex cognitive processes, such as reasoning or matching—connecting and linking historical facts with textual descriptions, maps, or images—or arranging events in chronological order. For example, see the following tasks.

Task 3. c) Read the following statement: “Both Hungarian kings linked to the sources also bore the title of Czech king, but the right of the ruler in source A) to the Czech throne was less questionable.” Then based on the sources, give reasons that support the statement. Give one reason connected to aspect 1 below and one reason connected to aspect 2 below.

Task 9. f) Match the appropriate images to the sources. Write the numbers of the images in the correct box in the table. Use each image only once and there is one extra image you will not need.

As to the essay questions of the advanced-level history written test, these are designed as cognitively complex tasks requiring in-depth analysis of sources and resources, and they also require a more thorough written explanation of a historical topic.

To check the three essay tasks, we found questions and tasks that require the usage and analysis of provided sources/resources from some selected points of view or in relation to a particular issue.

Task 14 is a “short essay” on the history of World War II: “Use the sources and your knowledge to present the causes and circumstances of Germany’s campaign against the Soviet Union and why it was a turning point in the course of the war.” There are two primary sources attached to the task: an excerpt from Adolf Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* and a written excerpt from Joseph Stalin’s radio speech on July 3, 1941 (two weeks after Germany’s attack on the Soviet Union). Based on these two written sources, the task asks students why Germany’s campaign against the Soviet Union was a turning point in the course of World War II. Here, the cognitive purpose of the task is clear: using two historical sources, which can be judged as relevant and appropriate to analyze, the task aims at surveying the historical significance of a key historical event. While doing this, a short essay in Task 14 requires written reasoning based on the sources and students’ previous knowledge. In practical terms, students need to include quotations from the sources and provide some corroboration as well.

Task 15 is a “long essay” on the history of Hungary in the 18th century: “Use the sources and your knowledge to present the demographic and ethnic changes in Hungary in the 18th century. In your answer mention the changes connected to religions in the country.” There are four relevant sources included in Task 15: three written sources (from the 17th and 18th centuries) plus one statistical source (a pie chart on “The ethnic composition of Hungary at the end of the 18th century”). The cognitive intention of the task is clear: testing students’ knowledge and skill to “present,” interpret, and differentiate change and continuity of a fundamental historical phenomenon on a specific example of demographic and ethnic changes in Hungary.

Task 18, in cognitive terms, is the peak of the Hungarian 2023 written school-leaving history exam test at the advanced level. It is a “complex and comparative” test task that challenges student’s most complex writing abilities.

This task is about the history of Hungary in the 19th century. Use the sources and your knowledge to compare state organization and functioning in the reform period and the

period of the Dual Monarchy. Do not present a chronology of events. In your answer mention the following aspects: the system of government; the limits of royal power; governmental responsibility; government structure; the form of representation; and the functioning of the counties.

At the core of the task is a four-part infographic (a four-section mind map stretching across an entire A4-sized sheet of paper) visualizing four different state and government structures (of the Kingdom of Hungary and the Dual Monarchy in 1848 and 1967); plus there are two written sources attached (a political proposal and an act). The cognitive goal of the task here is to evaluate historical change in a specific example of the Hungarian and Austrian Dual Monarchy. Any comparative analysis of two political entities (state organizations) and their functioning in two different periods (1848 and 1867) is a challenging task in itself. Task 18 is exceptional for two reasons. Firstly, the task description explicitly requires students to make a comparison. Secondly, this is the only task that explicitly states students must address specific aspects of analysis. The task description provides students with six specific aspects to serve as the main points of assessment, such as “the limits of royal power,” “the functioning of the counties,” etc. These two features make Task 18 different from the other 15 test tasks, and they lift it to the fourth and fifth cognitive levels of Blooms’s taxonomy (Bloom, 1956), which are analysis (i.e., breaking down a complete event into parts) and synthesis (i.e., putting parts together to form a new and integrated whole), respectively. This level of complexity puts Task 18 on the highest cognitive level among the tasks found in the 2023 test.

We observe a peculiar duality or contradiction within the essay tasks. On the one hand, we can see that all three essay tasks require students to use a complex combination of sources/resources and their knowledge. This can be judged as an analysis of primary sources and/or resources. In addition to that, a thoughtful and intentional progression can also be observed across the three essay tasks. Tasks 14 and 15 both require students “to present” (i.e., describe, interpret, write about) relevant historical events, whereas Task 14 requires students to present “causes and circumstances” (Task 14) and Task 15 to present “changes.” Moreover, Task 18 is a “complex and comparative” task. The published correction key for the school-leaving written exams reveals the main aspects of the marking criteria. The assessments for all three essay questions are based on the following five criteria: (1) “Understanding the task”; (2) “Location: space and time”; (3) “Communication and use of special vocabulary”; (4) “Acquisition of information and use of sources”; and (5) “Describing the reasons behind an event; critical approach and problem-centered approach.” Judging essay Tasks 14, 15, and 18 from these aspects, plus considering their content and immanent cognitive levels, we argue that these three essay tasks (one short essay, one long essay, and one complex and comparative essay) can be evaluated as tasks of the highest levels.

Yet, this cognitive quality is relative. Judging by the aspects of the Bloomian taxonomical system, test questions and tasks included in Tasks 14, 15, and 18 do not go beyond knowledge of remembering information (level 1) or the level of explaining the meaning of information (level 2). In our assessment, the most that these types of essay tasks require at certain points is an analysis (i.e., breaking down complex historical events into their parts [Bloom level 4, for instance in Tasks 15 and 18]). Nevertheless, the majority of questions and tasks in the 2023 test do not aim at real synthesis (putting parts together to form a new and integrated whole [level 5]), and they fall short of meeting the requirements for a nuanced and well-supported evaluation (level 6), which would be preferable to simplistic historical opinions.

The essay questions only require the simple reproduction of what students have learned, rather than an analysis or assessment of sources. In most cases, sources serve only as a reminder for usual knowledge-testing questions. For instance, tasks that begin with the word “Present...” (in Hungarian: *Mutassa be*; see Tasks 14 and 15) are typically not intended to cross-examine historical events or their later interpretations. Instead, they are designed to produce a chronological presentation of events, such as Germany’s campaign against the Soviet Union (Task 14) or the administrative system of Hungary in the 18th century (Task 18). Since our present analysis regards only one test, we are careful to say that essay tasks under our survey dominantly demand the recall of students’ previous factual knowledge.

4. Conclusion and Discussion

Our analysis of the 2023 advanced-level history examination paper highlights a significant gap in tasks designed to assess critical historical thinking, particularly in the area of source criticism. The exam includes no tasks requiring the evaluation of implicit or explicit content, identification of contradictions between sources, or assessment of their relevance and reliability—key elements of historical inquiry. This absence is concerning, given that these competencies are central to the disciplinary practices of history.

The exam structure further reflects this deficiency. None of the 12 “simple short-answer tasks” in Part One or the three “longer essay-type tasks” in Part Two evaluate students’ ability to critically engage with sources or apply procedural historical knowledge. While many tasks involve using sources (see Tables 3 and 4), they primarily test factual recall or surface-level comprehension, failing to measure higher-order thinking skills essential for historical analysis. This misalignment between the stated objectives of the school-leaving exam and its actual design raises questions about its effectiveness in fostering critical historical skills. Despite emphasizing source criticism (Wineburg, 2001; Wineburg & Fournier, 1994) as a goal, the test design prioritizes objectivity and standardization over the nuanced assessment of disciplinary competencies.

A key explanation for this gap lies in the normative character of the Hungarian school-leaving written exams. These exams are not only mandatory but also serve as a critical factor in university admissions. The results influence students' academic futures and affect the schools' rankings. Consequently, state authorities aim to "objectify" the tests by favoring indisputable, closed-ended tasks that can be assessed uniformly and transparently. This emphasis on objectivity limits the inclusion of tasks requiring subjective interpretation or individual reflection, as these are challenging to evaluate consistently. For instance, essay tasks that demand subjective analysis are avoided because their assessment could lead to disputes, potentially undermining the test's credibility. The high rate of student appeals in 2023 (1,363 cases out of 7,120 exams, the highest across subjects) underscores the sensitivity of this issue.

Test designers understandably strive to avoid ambiguity and controversy, yet this approach inadvertently excludes tasks that promote critical thinking in the subject of history. While the essay component shows some balance in complexity, it still prioritizes clarity and uniformity over open-ended, interpretative challenges (Kaposi 2023).

To address these shortcomings, both procedural and substantive changes are needed. Procedural reforms should include clear criteria for selecting and training task designers, as well as the systematic monitoring and evaluation of test tasks to ensure alignment with higher-order cognitive objectives (Kojanitz 2023b). Substantive reforms must focus on incorporating tasks requiring higher-order thinking, such as drawing historical analogies, creating models, formulating hypotheses, and distinguishing essential factors from secondary ones. Essay tasks should encourage multi-perspective evaluations of controversial historical events. Balancing these reforms with the test's normative character is undoubtedly challenging. However, international examples and domestic research can inform the development of tasks that are both fair and pedagogically valuable.

The current exam design's limited focus on higher-level historical thinking negatively impacts history teaching, particularly at the advanced level. Redefining the concept of the "essay" to prioritize argumentative, comparative, and justifying texts could enhance students' ability to critically engage with historical events. This would also prepare them for more nuanced public discourse on historical and political issues (Kaposi 2023; Van Nieuwenhuysse 2016). Furthermore, the development of students' writing skills—particularly in crafting analytical and synthetic texts—requires greater emphasis. History education must integrate systematic instruction in text creation and editing, as these skills are rarely practiced consciously in Hungarian schools. Enhancing students' reading and writing abilities calls for an interdisciplinary approach, linking history with language and communication studies (Holdinga, van Drie, Janssen & Rijlaarsdam 2023).

Maintaining the current level of the Hungarian school-leaving written test in history necessitates a dual focus on task design and skill development. By fostering higher-order thinking and communication skills, the exam can better align with its objectives, ensuring that future generations are equipped to engage critically with historical and contemporary issues.

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