

HISTORICAL NARRATIVES AND NATIONAL IDENTITIES

■ *A Qualitative Study of Young Adults in Flanders*

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Since the early 19th century, Western governments have had high hopes for history education, since history is expected to play a vital role in the formation of a national identity and the pursuit of national cohesion¹. In the last two and a half decades, a great deal of research has been done on the production of historical narratives about the national past in history education. Attempts to build specific identities through such narratives have been examined as well. To date, there are few studies that have investigated the way in which young people themselves consume and construct narratives about the national past. Little is known about the kind of historical narratives they build and how these are connected to their identities. This article reports on a small-scale, qualitative study that examines which narratives young adults construct about their national past, to what extent those narratives are underpinned by existing narrative templates, and whether the narratives are connected to their sense of belonging. The study addresses the Flemish region of Belgium, a case characterised by a specific context of a nation-state in decline, an institutional process of regionalisation, and a tradition of weak government interference in memory politics and history education.

This paper starts with a short introduction to the position of the national past within Belgian and Flemish history education. The second part provides a presentation of existing international research on young people's historical narratives and on how these connect to their identifications. This part is followed by a brief sketch of our research methodology, including a presentation of the narrative templates about the Belgian past which form the basis for this study. In the four next paragraphs, we present the results of our empirical study. We show how existing templates do not necessarily structure young people's thinking on the topic and explore whether other types of narratives inform their historical discourse.

I. History education in a European nation-state in decline

In the 19th century, Belgium, like in many West European countries, witnessed a broad cultural process of canonisation of the national past. History education was considered as a natural component of the formation of patriotism, and of national identity. The nationalisation of history education has never been radical in Belgium however. The impact of the state in the field of education was relatively small as freedom of education was one of the cornerstones of the ultra-liberal

Constitution. This resulted in strong autonomy for the different school networks, of which the Catholics were the largest in terms of number of students. Although national history enjoyed a privileged position in both Catholic and public education, and was taught separately from 'general' (mainly European) history, the teaching of the national past never occupied more than a third of the overall Belgian secondary school history curriculum. After the First World War, as the danger of exaggerated chauvinism was pointed out internationally, a plea was made for the integration of Belgian history within the general, European-oriented history course instead of being treated separately². This project for an 'integrated history' would be implemented after the Second World War in an era of changing national memory politics. From the 1950s onwards, the Belgian government decreased its engagement in those politics due, among others things, to the fact that the memory of World War II was becoming ideologically-charged and communitarian³. With the growing political visibility of both Flemish and Walloon nationalist movements, the Belgian government chose not to invest in national identity building. In the field of history education, this tendency to de-emphasize the importance of the national past coincided with a renewed call to internationalise history education as a response to the catastrophe of the war.

1. MARIA GREVER & KEES RIBBENS, *Nationale identiteit en meervoudig verleden*, Amsterdam, 2009. See also for example MARIO CARRETERO, MIKEL ASENSIO & MARIA RODRÍGUEZ-MONEO (eds.), *History Education and the Construction of National Identities*, Charlotte, NC, 2012. 2. TINE HENS, m.m.v. SAARTJE VANDEN BORRE & KAAT WILS, *Oorlog in tijden van vrede. De Eerste Wereldoorlog in de klas, 1919-1940*. Kalmthout, 2015. 3. VALÉRIE ROSLOUX & LAURENCE VAN YPERSELE, "The Belgian national past : Between commemoration and silence", in *Memory Studies*, no. 1, 2012 (5), p. 45-57.

Notwithstanding these changes, the position of history education came under fierce attack within the educational field from the late 1960s onwards; an attack which echoed broader demands for radical social and cultural reform in schools and in society at large. Critics wanted to replace history education by ‘social education’ (*maatschappelijke vorming*); a school subject focused on present society and expected to provide a better understanding of contemporary society and its problems in an era of Cold War, decolonisation, and a growing interest in the ‘Third World’. In their opinion, history lessons were antiquated, of little social or civic use, and insufficiently oriented towards global history. As a result, curriculum-developers further dismantled the national dimension of history education and embedded it in a European and world-historical framework. Patriotic discourse was replaced by a discourse of attachment to democracy, human rights, tolerance, and solidarity. Within this new paradigm, special attention was paid to the ‘dark pages’ of the past connected to colonialism, war, prejudice, and social inequality⁴.

The call for a history education more oriented towards global history coincided chronologically with the regionalisation of

education policy in Belgium. From the 1960s onwards, control over educational policy was increasingly transferred to the three regional ‘Communities’ of Belgium, who made different choices concerning educational policy. The process was completed in 1989 with the formal handover of all educational matters to the Dutch, the French and (the very small) German Communities. In other words, ‘Belgian’ history education no longer existed⁵. As the language communities in Belgium were granted political power too, regional authorities started to interfere actively in memory politics – if only to support their own subnational identities⁶. While Walloon and Brussels authorities made only modest efforts to develop a subnational identity, Flemish authorities, by contrast, developed more active memory politics. These politics did not, however, affect history education in any fundamental way as the Belgian tradition of freedom of education and autonomy for school networks was left intact.

In 1990, a new secondary education curriculum was set up in Flanders, in which the compulsory nature of history was guaranteed. The curriculum was set by the regional government which established final objectives, or standards, delineating

4. ESSA LOBBES, *Verleden zonder stof. De gedaanten van het heden in het Belgische geschiedenisonderwijs (1945-1989)*, Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, KU Leuven, 2012. KAAAT WILS, “The evaporated canon and the overvalued source : history education in Belgium. An historical perspective”, in L. SYMCOX & A. WILSCHUT (eds.), *National History Standards. The Problem of the Canon and the Future of Teaching History*, (International review of history education 5), Charlotte, NC, 2009, p. 15-31. 5. TESSA LOBBES & KAAAT WILS, “National History Education in Search of an Object. The Absence of History Wars in Belgian Schools”, in L. CAJANI, S. LÄSSIG & M. REPOUSSI (eds.), *History Education under Fire. An International Handbook*, Göttingen, 2015, forthcoming. 6. MARNIX BEYEN, “Tragically Modern. Centrifugal Sub-nationalisms in Belgium, 1830-2009”, in M. HUYSSSEUNE (ed.), *Contemporary Centrifugal Regionalism : Comparing Flanders and Northern Italy*, Brussels, 2011, p. 17-28. VALÉRIE ROSOUX & LAURENCE VAN YPERSELE, “The Belgian national past...”.

the minimum targets that history education should meet. In defining the standards, the Flemish Community made a deliberate choice not simply to enumerate factual knowledge that must be taught. As most history textbooks are based on very similar content selection, there is nevertheless a certain homogeneity in the topics addressed in history education. The attainment targets primarily aim at critical-thinking skills and attitudes and offer criteria to select subject matter. Apart from the aim to introduce students in the academic discipline of history, the subject of history is ascribed four functions with regard to ‘pupils as members of society’: to develop ‘historical consciousness’ (i.e. “the establishment of relationships between past and present and (...) the opening up of lines of thinking in the direction of the future”), to offer cultural training (with a special focus on “the way in which people from European and non-European societies perceived their reality and on the basis of their perception of that reality shaped it further”), to offer training in ‘social resilience’ (the critical handling of information), and to stimulate ‘identity building’⁷. The standards state that history education should support young people in their search for both personal and social identities, emphasising the plural character of identity. They do not refer to, nor try to support, a (sub)national identity.

Out of the 29 attainment targets in the two upper years of secondary education, not one refers to Flemish history and no more than one refers to the history of Belgium, requiring – in

line with the way Belgian history is addressed within academia – that “students analyse the lines of fracture within the evolving Belgian society from 1830 onwards”⁸. In lower classes, where the historical eras before 1800 are treated, no reference to Belgian or Low Countries history is made. This means that Belgian history is only addressed as a particular history which can be distinguished from European history after 1830. Its specificity is to be found in these ‘lines of fracture’, the ideological, socio-economic, and communitarian/linguistic tensions which have characterised Belgian politics and social relations since the mid-nineteenth century. Teachers are of course allowed to teach pre-1830 Low Countries history or other aspects of post-1830 Belgian history but no autonomy or specificity is attributed to it within the curriculum. The main frame of reference is Western (and especially Western European) but students are explicitly encouraged to try to frame historical phenomena in a broader, worldwide context. The standards require that, in each of the three stages of secondary school history education, at least one non-Western society is addressed. This choice reflects the ambition to take into account the growing impact of supranational political structures, the internationalisation of economics and culture, and the growing flows of inter-continental migration. At the same time, however, it reaffirms the Western orientation of the history curriculum, suggesting that the most important part of history is to be found in the historical trajectory of Europe and the Western World. In that sense, the curriculum

7. FLEMISH MINISTRY OF EDUCATION AND TRAINING, “Secundair onderwijs, derde graad ASO : vakgebonden eindtermen geschiedenis”, Brussels, 2000. 8. *Ibidem*.

constitutes a new articulation of the old division between the West and 'The Rest'. Combined with its focus on democracy and human rights, the implicit message of history as a school subject might be read as a tribute to Europe's and the Western World's slow but steady rise towards democracy and freedom.

Given the Western focus of the curriculum, and given the weak autonomy of the Belgian past within it, the question is whether young adults, after six years of secondary history education, have specific, autonomous representations of the national past. International research on this question stresses both the role of history education and the role of students' ethnic or national identification in their construction of narratives of the national past.

II. Research on young people's historical narratives

A lot of research has indeed been conducted internationally on the production, often by authorities, of narratives about the national past and their influence on secondary school history curricula⁹. The wider context of this research is often to be found in the fierce public discussions – 'history wars' – about the content of history education and the role of the nation within it¹⁰. The North American

debate from the early 1990s, which preceded the launch of 'national standards' for history teaching, provides a well-documented example¹¹.

The construction and outlook of historical narratives itself has also been the object of substantial research, in the wake of Hayden White's seminal *Metahistory* (1973) among others. A useful theoretical framework has been developed by James V. Wertsch, who distinguishes between specific narratives and schematic narrative templates¹². While the former are stories that include specific information about places, dates, and actors and involve chronology, temporal order, and emplotment, the latter provide a narrative framework that is compatible with many instantiations in specific narratives. A template is a pattern, an abstract structure that can underlie several different specific narratives, each of which has a particular setting. In his own empirical research, Wertsch elaborated several examples. In Russia, he asked Russians to narrate the story of the course of the Second World War. Participants belonged to different generations; some had experienced the fall of communism in 1991 while others had not. Wertsch concluded that both generations told a narrative that was based on one template of 'victory over foreign powers', even though there were substantial differences in factual

9. MARIO CARRETERO, *Constructing Patriotism. Teaching History and Memories in Global Worlds*, Charlotte, N.C., 2011. 'Textbooks, identity politics and lines of conflict in South Asia', special issue of the *Journal of Educational Media, Memory, and Society*, no. 6, 2014 (2). 10. TONY TAYLOR & ROBERT GUYVER (eds.), *History Wars in the Classroom: a Global Perspective*, Charlotte, 2012. 11. GARY NASH, CHARLOTTE CRABTREE & ROSS DUNN, *History on Trial. Culture Wars and the Teaching of the Past*, New York, 2000. BRUCE VAN SLEDRIGHT, "Narratives of Nation-State, Historical Knowledge, and School History", in *Review of Research in Education*, 32, 2008, p. 109-146. 12. JAMES WERTSCH, "Specific Narratives and Schematic Narrative Templates", in P. SEIXAS (ed.), *Theorizing Historical Consciousness*, Toronto-Buffalo-London, 2004, p. 49-62. JAMES WERTSCH, "Texts of Memory and Texts of History", in *L2 Journal*, no. 4, 2012 (1), p. 9-20.

knowledge¹³. Together with William R. Penuel, Wertsch set up a study on American college students. Asked to write a plea in which they had to defend a political measure with historical arguments, most students relied in their answer on a 'quest for freedom' template – even when this template was particularly ill-suited to answer the question¹⁴. The use of similar templates occurs most often in an unwitting and unreflective manner, as has also been found by other researchers¹⁵.

Furthermore, qualitative research suggests that young people do not adopt existing narratives about the national past literally, but construct their own in line with their ethnic or religious identifications. Research from the United States, Northern Ireland, and New Zealand concludes that young people's layered identifications play a part in their interpretation of the meaning and significance of the history they encounter in- and-outside school and in their formation of historical narratives¹⁶. The concept of 'layered identifications' is used, because young people often combine local, subnational, national, supranational, ethnic, and/or religious identifications¹⁷. Grever, Pelzer, and Haydn concluded in a large-scale comparative

French-Dutch-English study within multicultural high schools that connections exist between young people's identifications and their type of interest in the past and that many of the participating young people do not construe their identity in purely national terms¹⁸. In his research with 58 Franco-Ontarian high school students and their vision of the Canadian past, Lévesque found a strong correlation between students' historical accounts and their identifications¹⁹. The stronger their identification with, and sense of belonging to, a particular (sub)national community, the more their specific narratives presented militant orientations. Epstein found correlations between American young people's identifications and their historical narratives as well²⁰. She concluded that young Americans of different ethnic groups position themselves differently in relation to the national master narrative. While white students identify personally or collectively with the nation's history and situate family experiences within a national framework, black students take a much more critical stance towards US history. Their specific historical narratives do not fit well within the widespread historical master narratives of freedom, progress, and triumph. On the

13. JAMES WERTSCH, "Specific Narratives...". **14.** WILLIAM PENUEL & JAMES WERTSCH, "Historical Representation as Mediated Action : Official History as a Tool", in J.F. VOSS & M. CARRETERO (eds.), *Learning and Reasoning in History*, (International Review of History Education 2), London, 2000, p. 23-37. **15.** CESAR LOPEZ, MARIO CARRETERO, & MARIA RODRIGUEZ-MONEO, "Telling a national narrative that is not your own. Does it enable critical historical consumption ?", in *Culture & Psychology*, no. 20, 2014 (4), p. 548. **16.** KEITH BARTON, "School History as a Resource for Constructing Identities. Implications of Research from the United States, Northern Ireland, and New Zealand", in M. CARRETERO, M. ASENSIO & M. RODRIGUEZ-MONEO (eds.), *History Education and the Construction of National Identities*, (International Review of History Education), 2012, p. 93-107. **17.** MARIA GREVER & KEES RIBBENS, *Nationale identiteit...*. **18.** MARIA GREVER & KEES RIBBENS, *Nationale identiteit...*. **19.** STEPHANE LÉVESQUE, "French-Canadians, national identity and historical consciousness : Learning from the views of Franco-Ontarians", Presentation at the School and Memory Conference, Prague, 2014. **20.** TERRIE EPSTEIN, *Interpreting National History. Race, Identity, and Pedagogy in Classrooms and Communities*, New York/London, 2009.

contrary, they often reject them as based on white supremacy and black oppression, and as underrepresenting the contributions and experiences of blacks and other people of colour. This conclusion was partly confirmed by Hawkey and Prior who investigated the historical beliefs of adolescents of minority ethnic backgrounds living in inner-city areas in England. Their study indicates that some students prefer narratives from home or from their ethnic group over master narratives learned at school²¹. In her study of 26 twelfth-grade students, Peck concluded that ethnic identifications play a central role in determining both the narrative template(s) and the criteria which students use to select events on which to build a specific historical narrative of the Canadian past²².

Little research on the circulation and construction of historical narratives and identity questions within Belgium specifically has been executed to date. For this reason,

we started our research with a preliminary study in which, inspired by Wertsch' work, we distinguished 13 schematic narrative templates that underlie historical narratives about the Belgian past in contemporary Flemish historical culture (see appendix 1)²³. How did we define those 13 templates? In a first step, we identified historical narratives about the Belgian past on the basis of academic work on the historiography and historical culture of Belgium, such as *Les Grands Mythes de l'histoire de Belgique, de Flandre et de Wallonie* (1995), in which myths about the national past are deconstructed by prominent Belgian historians²⁴. To check whether these templates are still in use today, we analysed, secondly, editorial comments, opinions and columns in contemporary newspapers, recent general overviews of Belgian history, and posts on social media such as Facebook and Twitter. This second analysis inspired us to reject some older templates and to add a few recent ones. We ended up

21. KATE HAWKEY & JANE PRIOR, "History, memory cultures and meaning in the classroom", in *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, no. 43, 2011 (2), p. 231-247. 22. CARLA PECK, "It's Not Like [I'm] Chinese and Canadian. I am in between': Ethnicity and Students' conceptions of Historical Significance", in *Theory and Research in Social Education*, no. 38, 2010 (4), p. 574-617. 23. TIMO VAN HAVERE, KAREL VAN NIEUWENHUYSE, KAAT WILS, FIEN DEPAEPE & LIEVEN VERSCHAFFEL, "Het nationale verleden verhaald. Dertien narratieve sjablonen uit de Belgische geschiedenis", in *Hermes : Tijdschrift van de Vlaamse Vereniging voor Leraren Geschiedenis*, no. 19, 2015 (57), p. 14-28. 24. ANNE MORELLI (ed.), *Les Grands Mythes de l'histoire de Belgique, de Flandre et de Wallonie*, Brussels, 1995. See also for example MARNIX BEYEN & BENOÏT MAJERUS, "Weak and Strong Nations in the Low Countries. National Historiography and its 'Others' in Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Century", in S. BERGER & C. LORENZ (eds.), *The Contested Nation. Ethnicity, Class, Religion and Gender in National Histories*, Basingstoke, 2008, p. 283-310. GITA DENECKERE, TOM DE PAEPE, BRUNO DE WEVER & GUY VANTHEMSCHIE, *Een geschiedenis van België*, Ghent, 2014. JO TOLLEBEEK, "Enthousiasme en evidentie. De negentiende-eeuwse Belgisch-nationale geschiedschrijving", in J. TOLLEBEEK (ed.), *De ijkmeesters. Opstellen over de geschiedschrijving in Nederland en België*, Amsterdam, 1994, p. 57-74. JEAN STENGERS, "La Belgique de 1830, une 'nationalité de convention'?", in H. HASQUIN (ed.), *Histoire et historiens depuis 1830 en Belgique*, Brussels, 1981, p. 7-19. JEAN STENGERS, "Le mythe des dominations étrangères dans l'historiographie belge", in *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Filologie en Geschiedenis*, no. 59, 1981 (2), p. 382-401. TOM VERSCHAFFEL, "Spiegelpaleis. Belgische zelfbeelden en Belgische beelden van Nederland", in P. RIETBERGEN & T. VERSCHAFFEL (eds.), *De erfenis van 1830*, Leuven/Voorburg, 2006, p. 155-175.

with a list of 13 templates that are currently used in Flanders²⁵. The exact number, and the delineation of these 13 templates, is of course open to debate. It is certainly possible to merge some of them into a more general template. As the Belgian government has not invested in fostering a unified national historical narrative in recent decades and, as both the Walloon and the Flemish nationalist movement have produced their own interpretations of the history of Belgium, different and often conflicting narratives and narrative templates on the history of Belgium do circulate in contemporary society. Some have their roots in early nineteenth-century romantic representations of the nation's past, while others are of quite recent date; some are based on a well-researched, historiographical tradition, while others have more popular and/or political roots. Some embrace Belgium and its history, while others distance themselves from it, either in a scientific or in an emotional way.

An example of a template that embraces Belgium and its history is the 'Small but Tough' template in which the national past is approached as a continuous and forceful resistance of Belgians to foreign occupiers. This template can be fleshed out with concrete events such as the opposition of Ambiorix and his Gallic tribe against the legions of Julius Caesar, the brave resistance of 'poor little

Belgium' to the German occupation during the First World War or the armies of Adolf Hitler in the Second. While this template is favourably disposed towards Belgium and its history, the 'country of scandals' template expresses utter resentment towards present-day Belgium and its past. Here, the baseline seems to be that one can only be ashamed about Belgium and even feel aversion to it. Specific narratives based on this template can include episodes from the national past such as the colonisation of the Congo, collaboration with the German occupier during the World Wars and the subsequent repression, the dysfunction of the judicial and police systems as symbolised by the 1990s' paedophile scandal involving the serial killer Marc Dutroux, or the recent difficult and lengthy government formations. Another example of a template which distances itself from Belgium is the 'Flemish' template, in which the centuries-old Flemish nation plays the leading part and Belgium is considered the latest occupier of an unfree Flanders²⁶. Distancing oneself from Belgium and its history does however not necessarily involve emotional resentment; it can also be inspired by a more critical, scientific perspective such as in the 'lines of fracture' template. This version, which is referred to in the attainment targets of secondary school history education, approaches the national past through the ideological, socio-economic, and communitarian/linguistic

25. Templates that used to be common, but whose echo went down nowadays in Flanders, such as the Greater Dutch perspective elaborated by Pieter Geyl in his *Geschiedenis van de Nederlandsche stam* (1930-1962), were not included in the list of 13. 26. This moving between the status of self-employed and employee or unemployed was attested by BMax Rooses' *Vlaanderen door de eeuwen heen* (1912-1913) can serve as an example of a story told along this template.

tensions in Belgian society since 1830²⁷. After the Second World War new lines of fracture emerged over existing ones, regarding ethical questions (such as abortion and euthanasia), environmental problems, public security and migration.

Research on how those templates circulate and are actively ‘consumed’ or appropriated has not yet been undertaken in relation to young people’s identification. Regarding young people’s national identification, research conducted by Kris Deschouwer et al. among more than 5,000 first-year undergraduate students at Belgian universities and colleges pointed out that both Francophone and Flemish students identify with Belgium rather than with Flanders, Wallonia or the French Community²⁸. According to the Eurobarometer, respondents in Belgium have relatively weak attachments to their country in comparison with the rest of Europe, especially in Flanders²⁹. Other research, from the end of the 1990s, indicated that Francophones generally express a stronger attachment to Belgium than to their region³⁰.

III. Methodology

In order to gain insight into young adults’ understanding of the national past and the connections with their own sense of belonging, we used a methodology that has been developed by the Canadian educationalist Peck which consists of a set of performance tasks and both individual and group interviews among a small sample of subjects³¹. Our sample consists of 12 students. For this type of qualitative research, such a small number of research subjects is not exceptional³². Given the exploratory and innovative character of our research – innovative both within Belgian historiography and in relation to international research, given the peculiar character of national identity and history education within Belgium – we chose a small sample of students and a methodology that creates rich source material, allowing for an in-depth qualitative analysis. Observations of group performance tasks and interviews with participants generate insights in how students come to build historical narratives and how they explain and situate their own

27. During the 1930s and 1940s, ideological, socio-economic, and communitarian difficulties began to receive attention in Belgian history textbooks which presented them as resolved or manageable. During the 1960s, foreign social scientists discovered Belgium as an interesting case of a society riddled with (insoluble) contrasts; they analysed it by further developing a ‘lines-of-fracture’ model. Sociologist Luc Huyse played an important part in popularising this theory in Belgium with publications like *De gewapende vrede. De Belgische politiek na 1945*, Leuven, 1980. **28.** KRIS DESCHOUWER, DIMOKRITOS KAVADIAS & MIN REUCHAMPS, “België getekend – La Belgique dessinée. Résultats préliminaires”, unpublished research paper, 2011. **29.** Eurobarometer, *Eurobarometer 73*, Brussels, 2010. **30.** BART MADDENS, ROEL BEERTEN & JAAK BILLIET, “The national consciousness of the Flemings and the Walloons. An empirical investigation”, in K. DEPREZ (ed.), *Nationalism in Belgium*, London, 1998, p. 199-208. Recently, this study has been the subject of reflection in OLIVIER LUMINET, LAURENT LICATA, OLIVIER KLEIN, VALÉRIE ROSOUX, SUSANN HEENEN-WOLFF, LAURENCE VAN YPERSELE & CHARLES STONE, “The interplay between collective memory and the erosion of nation states – the paradigmatic case of Belgium : Introduction to the special issue”, in *Memory Studies*, no. 5, 2011 (1), p. 1-13. **31.** CARLA PECK, “It’s Not Like [I’m] Chinese and Canadian...”. **32.** Peck’s own PhD research was based on a sample of 26 students. For comparable research based on 12 subjects, see : K. YILMAZ, *Conceptions of history. Social studies teachers’ conceptions of history and pedagogical orientations towards teaching history*, Saarbrücken, 2011.

choices and relationship to the past. This is not possible when working with large-scale essay assignments or surveys³³. Nevertheless, as a consequence, we cannot claim that our results are representative of the overall student population in Flanders (and *a fortiori* not of ‘young adults’ in general).

In February-March 2014, we selected 12 first-year undergraduate students from the University of Leuven on a voluntary basis. Volunteers had to be first-year students who received general secondary school education in Flanders, which means that they all had met the same history attainment targets³⁴. We divided the 12 students in three groups of four (see appendix 2). The first group consisted of four male economics students (Andreas, Ilias, Lomme, and Luka); the second of four language and literature students, three female and one male (Anna, Elsa, Fran, and Thorben); and the third group of four education students (Aline, Charlotte, Febe, and Niki)³⁵. Eleven students are of Belgian descent, one female student from the second group (Elsa) is of Polish origin. We asked each student to complete a profile questionnaire and essay assignment. The profile questionnaire, consisting of 18 mainly closed-ended questions, was meant to map students’ ethnic-cultural background, their sense of belonging, and their opinions on history education and the national past. In the essay assignment, the participants had to characterise their identification in terms of ethnicity and (sub and supra)nationality. To

this end, they were asked to write a paragraph about their identification of approximately half a page. In groups of four, they subsequently executed a performance task in which they selected ten historical events from a list of 30 through group discussion (see appendix 3 for a list of the 30 events). We stressed that we did not expect the students to know about all 30 events, and that the short explanation of each event was intended to enable the students to consider all 30 when making their choice. We also stressed that there was no ‘good’ or ‘bad’ selection and that every choice was legitimate.

The guiding principle behind the selection of the 30 events was that they should enable the construction of narratives based on any of the 13 templates we distinguished earlier. A balance was sought between political, economic, cultural, and religious events. A chronological balance was assured as well; all historical periods were addressed and an equal number of events from before and after 1830 (the year in which Belgium became an independent state) were selected. Furthermore, important historical benchmarks and events that have given rise to conflicting interpretations were selected. Though the logic of selection was first and foremost national, many selected events – in particular those stemming from the pre-1830 period – refer to a broader geographic dimension. Of the 15 post-1830 events, nine were embedded in a broader international framework. Once selected, all 30 events were

33. For instance, see : NORMAN K. DENZIN & YVONNA S. LINCOLN (eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*, Los Angeles/London/New Delhi/Singapore/Washington DC, 2011. 34. The fact that they went to different schools with different history teachers is not a problem as the aim of our research is not to test young people’s historical knowledge or to evaluate specific teaching methods. 35. The names of the participating students have been changed in order to guarantee anonymity.

put on picture cards. Each card contained a title and a date such as 'Fascist parties win the 1936 elections in both parts of the country'. The cards also gave a short caption (of around seven lines) which describes the event in a factual way. The cards finally contained two to three iconic (or at least useful) images which collectively offered different perspectives on the event (see appendix 8).

During the performance task, we asked each group of four students to select the 10 events they considered most important to the national past and to explain their choice. This took about an hour. The same groups subsequently participated in a semi-structured interview which addressed their choices and their selection method. We also asked each group whether they thought that, had the group been differently composed in terms of gender, ethnicity, (sub)nationality, age or field of study, whether they would have made a different selection of events. These interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes. Taking into account that, when interviewing students in groups, some individuals may feel overwhelmed or silenced, we organised semi-structured individual interviews with each student one or two weeks later. During these interviews, the previous selection was discussed again; now without peer pressure. We were aware, however, that this situation could lead to a new situation where students might feel uncomfortable in the presence of a researcher with a history background. To counter this, we stressed that our research was not about testing students' historical knowledge but concerned only with their views and opinions which cannot be 'right'

or 'wrong'. In the individual interviews, we addressed the essay assignment on identity, and discussed the question of whether one's identities might have impacted on the selection during the performance task. These individual interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes. We digitally recorded both the performance task and the interviews, transcribed them literally, and analysed them with NVivo qualitative analysis software.

In our search for traces of the schematic narrative templates, all the data was examined, starting from the 13 templates we distinguished in our previous research. How did we determine whether one of these templates was present in the subjects' discussions on the Belgian past? We defined two criteria which had to be met. First, the core idea of the template in question had to be articulated through the discussion of a specific event. In the case of the 'foreign occupations' template, for instance, students should have mentioned that the Belgians were occupied by successive foreign powers for centuries. Second, students should explicitly have mentioned that this core idea was applicable to other events that are represented in the picture cards. With regard to the 'foreign occupations' template, students should have referred to the idea of occupation by foreign powers when discussing, for example, Ambiorix's revolt against Caesar or the First World War. To gain an understanding of how young people's narratives are connected to their identification and sense of belonging, we started from a grounded theory approach, meaning that we did not apply an existing theoretical framework but constructed theory through the analysis of

data³⁶. In order to analyse students' selection processes, particular attention was paid to the data gathered during the performance task and the group interviews. In analysing the connection between students' narratives and their identification, the essay assignment and the individual interviews played the most important role. The group interviews were of less importance, considering that participants might have felt themselves inhibited to talk about their identities in group. Therefore we chose to address identity-related issues especially in individual tasks/interviews.

IV. The use of narrative templates

In both group and individual interviews, we asked the students what method or logic they had used to select the ten picture cards representing historical events. All 12 participants indicate that they had discussed every card individually, without considering any connections between them and without the intention of telling a specific story which they had in mind. Although the performance task might have encouraged them to start with this form of selection strategy, the reported absence of any preconceived idea of the course or specificity of Belgian history is nevertheless striking. This seems to indicate that no ingrained specific master narrative is present in the minds of the participating students.

This conclusion is confirmed by the analysis of the group tasks. In one of the three groups of four students – the group with the

Education students – none of the 13 'Belgian' templates resonates. This can probably be explained in part by the low level of general knowledge about the national past within this group. One of its members says that she feels "really ashamed" about her (self-perceived) lack of historical knowledge. This sentiment is echoed by the others. The lack of factual knowledge about Belgian history is not a monopoly of this group; except for the four male economy students, all other students are unaware of several of the 30 listed events. This is particularly the case for events from the more distant past, such as sovereigns granting rights and liberties to Flemish cities in the Middle Ages. But more recent historical 'events', such as the Belgian painter René Magritte gaining an international reputation as a Surrealist painter, are also unknown.

In both the Economics and Literature groups, most of the typical 'Belgian' templates do not play any role in the selection and discussion of the 30 events either. Somewhat surprisingly, this is also the case with the 'lines of fracture' template, the only one that is part of the school history curriculum. When discussing the Flemish claim to unilingualism in Flanders in the 1960s for example, Aline and Niki speak about the importance of the recognition of Dutch as the only official language in Flanders and referred to the tensions which ensued from this at the time. They do not, however, thematise the communitarian tensions as a constant or as one of the lines of fracture within Belgian society since the second half of the 19th century. Furthermore, they do not interpret other historical events

36. CARLA PECK, "It's Not Like [I'm] Chinese and Canadian...".

from the list through this 'lines of fracture' template either. These included the 'First School War' between Catholics and Liberals (1879-84) which was a clear manifestation of ideological line of fracture or, for example, the establishment of blast-furnaces along the river Meuse which meant the breakthrough of the Industrial Revolution in Belgium and created a socio-economic line of fracture. The more recent lines of fracture regarding ethics, environmental problems, public security, and migration which were each addressed in at least one of the 30 cards, are not interpreted through this template either. While the 'lines of fracture' template should, in theory, have underpinned all of the participants' classes on Belgian history, it does not resonate in students' thinking aloud during the selection process. How should we explain this? Due to the systematic integration of Belgian history in a European narrative, it might well be that teachers in secondary schools do not emphasize the unity and cross-temporal character of the 'lines of fracture' template and instead treat some of its manifestations in the framework of wider transnational questions. Moreover, the 'lines of fracture' template is certainly lesser-known within popular historical culture than some other templates.

By contrast, two more popular templates, the Flemish template and the 'Small but Tough' template, seem to be well-known among two of the student groups. Although students do not rely on them to construct a narrative, they explicitly refer to them while discussing possible selections. Two of the three groups mention the possibility of looking at many events through a Flemish lens. They are aware that the Flemish template could be used as

a pattern. Their reflection is first triggered by a discussion of the Battle of the Golden Spurs. The students characterise this event as having been romanticised in order to fit into a Flemish-nationalist master narrative of a heroic past in which Flanders defended itself against foreign oppressors. Andreas, for instance, states during the individual interview that "this event is used to mobilise people in Flanders". During the group interview, Thorben says: "This story is often used in Flemish-nationalist propaganda, by putting Flemings against Walloons, but this is a completely wrong interpretation". The students of both groups identify this representation as myth and reject it. In the discussion of other events as well, they reject the 'Flemish' template by, for example, not agreeing with its representation of the alleged francophone oppression of Flanders during the 19th century. Six students from the two groups explicitly indicate that they did not identify with this Flemish template and distance themselves from any Flemish identification.

The second template upon which students explicitly reflect is the 'Small but Tough' template which narrates the story of a small country that always resisted foreign oppressors. This template resonates in the discourse of the same two groups which explicitly recognised it as a pattern and exposed it as a collection of national myths. The students refer to Ambiorix's defeat of the Romans and/or the defeat of Germany during the two world wars. Regarding Alva's order for the decapitation of the counts of Egmont and Horne in 1568, during the group interview, Andreas says that this was "an important story in stirring up a feeling of national unity". The students also

indicate that Belgium as such did not exist in the time of Roman or Spanish rule. Contrary to the Flemish template, however, students do not explicitly reject this; they recognise the template but do not feel the urge to denounce its representation of the past.

Wertsch and other researchers to whom we referred in the introduction have emphasised that narrative templates are most often used in an unwitting or unreflective manner. How should we then account for this remarkable awareness of the social function of templates among the students? Here again, the specificities of history education within the Flemish Community might offer part of the answer. As earlier research into history examinations has shown, history teachers in Flanders do pay some attention in their classes to the constructed nature of history, even though the history standards do not request this. 70 percent of teachers participating in a recent large-scale study of written examinations in history, asked at least one question that referred to the fact that history is not given but the result of interpretation and representation. Questions on the construc-

ted nature of collective representations of Belgian and Flemish history were part of this³⁷. Research on history education in other countries shows that this attitude is not as widely shared and that history, in a school context, is often presented as a static and finished product³⁸.

V. The attribution of significance

As the existing templates about the Belgian past do not seem to structure students' selection of the most important events, the natural question is on what grounds they did make their selections. Here, the concept of historical significance may be helpful. People rely on notions of significance when making distinctions between the historically important and the historically trivial. Seixas and Peck have rightly argued that historical significance "is about a relationship not only among events and people of the past, but also about the relationship of those events and people to us, in the present, who are doing the historical thinking"³⁹. Cercadillo and Peck distinguished five ways in which one

37. KAREL VAN NIEUWENHUYSE, KAAAT WILS, GERALDINE CLAREBOUT, GREET DRAYE & LIEVEN VERSCHAFFEL, "Making the constructed nature of history visible. Flemish secondary history education through the lens of written exams", in A. CHAPMAN & A. WILSCHUT (eds.), *Joined-up history. New directions in history education research*, Charlotte, 2015, p. 311-333. 38. MARIA DO CARMO BARBOSA DE MELO, "The Epistemological Reach of the History Teacher", in R. ASHBY, P. GORDON & P. LEE (eds.), *Understanding History. Recent Research in History Education*. Vol. 4. *International Review of History Education*, London/New York, 2005, p. 135-147. SABRINA MOISAN, *Fondements épistémologiques et représentations sociales d'enseignants d'histoire du secondaire à l'égard de l'enseignement de l'histoire et de la formation citoyenne*, thèse de doctorat inédite, Université de Montréal, 2010. JOAN PAGÈS & ANTONI SANTISTEBAN, "Enseigner et apprendre l'histoire en Catalogne", in M.-A. ETHIER, D. LEFRANÇOIS, & J.-F. CARDIN (eds.), *Enseigner et apprendre l'histoire. Manuels, enseignants et élèves*, Québec, 2011, p. 359-376. Kaya Yilmaz, *Conceptions of history. Social studies teachers' conceptions of history and pedagogical orientations towards teaching history*, Saarbrücken, 2011. 39. PETER SEIXAS & CARLA PECK, "Teaching Historical Thinking", in *Challenges and Prospects for Canadian Social Studies*, 2004, p. 111.



Edmond Van Offel (1871-1959) was a renowned illustrator, notably for his didactic history posters. This poster on national history illustrates the arrival of the first train to Belgium (1835) and wants to depict a modern country. It was edited in the late 1920s by Algemeene leermiddelenhandel Aug. Bosschaerts, 88 x 62 cm, on cardboard and linen between sticks.

can attribute significance to past events⁴⁰. ‘Contemporary significance’ considers events in their own historical context and evaluates them on the basis of their importance to people in the past; ‘causal significance’ assesses an event in relation to its causal power, with a view to its impact on later events; ‘pattern significance’ alludes to events as a beginning or turning-point in a process or development; ‘symbolic significance’ may operate from the perspective of people in either past or present and includes notions of moral exemplars or ‘lessons from history’. Finally, ‘present-future significance’ is closely related to causal and pattern significance, but operates in the long term where the bond between the historical event, the present, and the future is emphasised. In their respective research, both Cercadillo and Peck came to the conclusion that the significance which young people attribute to events from the national past is often ‘present-future’ and ‘symbolic’: attributed with a view to the present, in terms of understanding the present from the past, of providing lessons from the past for the present, and of historically-inspired identity formation. Those findings are in line with other research on the beliefs of young people on history and history education, which concluded that young people approach the subject in a present-oriented and judgmental way⁴¹.

In our research, the analysis of the group task conversations and the subsequent group

interviews allowed us to understand why students consider certain events more important than others. Although our own selection of the 30 events was not meant to provoke specific kinds of significance attribution, the selection did allow students to attribute different kinds of significance. In line with Peck’s and Cercadillo’s research, we found that students mostly apply a form of ‘present-future’ significance. When looking at the selections across the three groups, we can observe that each group selected no more than three events from before 1830, meaning that they chose seven events from 1830 onwards. Of those seven events, an average of four came from the 20th and 21st centuries, demonstrating that the selection is rather present-oriented. Students especially select those events which, in their opinions, still exert an influence on present-day society and that are helpful in explaining contemporary reality from its historical roots. Eight students for instance chose the establishment of male plural suffrage in 1893 as the starting point of the present-day democracy. All the students chose the picture card depicting Belgium’s independence in 1830, referring to its present existence.

Besides an understanding of the present from the past, the present-oriented attribution of significance is also connected with students’ beliefs that moral lessons can be drawn from the past and hence with ‘symbolic significance’.

40. LIS CERCADILLO, *Significance in history: Students’ ideas in England and Spain*, PhD thesis, University of London, 2000. ID., “Significance in history: Students’ ideas in England and Spain”, in A. DICKINSON, P. GORDON, & P. LEE (eds.), *Raising standards in history education*, (International review of history education 3), London, 2001, p. 116-145. CARLA PECK, “It’s Not Like [I’m] Chinese and Canadian...”. 41. TERRY HAYDN, *Pupil perception of history at key stage 3, Final report for QCA*, London, 2005. JAMES LIU et al., “Social representations of events and people in world history across 12 cultures”, in *Journal of cross-cultural psychology*, no. 36, 2005 (2), p. 171-191. MARIA GREVER, BEN PELZER & TERRY HAYDN, “High school students’ views...”.

Students mention positive *exempla* such as freedom of religion and same-sex marriage but also the ‘shameful’ events in the Congo Free State as an unpleasant episode in Belgian history. The rise of Fascism and the Holocaust, even though they are also considered terrible events, are not mentioned when students list dark pages from the national past. A majority of the students write these events off as a German matter and hence also a German responsibility; as Andreas puts it during the performance task : “I don’t consider that to be something that Belgians are responsible for.” Most students do not recognise a specific connection with Belgian history, even though the picture card in question was entitled ‘25,000 Jews, and 350 Roma and Sinti are transported to Auschwitz-Birkenau via Dossin Barracks, 1942-1944’ and all three images on the card referred to Belgian involvement in the Holocaust (two photographs from Dossin transit camp, located in the Belgian town Mechelen, and a photograph of a raid on Jews in Antwerp). How should we account for this marked ‘externalisation’ of the Holocaust ? It is very well possible that we are confronted here with the effects of the marginal position of specifically-Belgian history in the Flemish history curriculum. The question should also be whether this tendency is a perverse effect of recent investment in Holocaust education; a form of teaching which tends to focus on the German judeocide, but is not necessarily investing in the more delicate history of collaboration in occupied countries. Research in England for instance concluded that the Holocaust is often framed by teachers in terms

of ‘universal lessons’ and is divorced from any specific historical (or national) context⁴². This confirms earlier findings from Lucy Russell, who discerned a tendency to teach the Holocaust in schools from a social and moral perspective rather than as history⁴³.

Students’ overall tendency to morally judge historical events and to attribute symbolic significance seems to lead to a representation of Belgium as a country whose history has ‘good and bad sides’, and to the conviction that attention for both is needed. All 12 participating students explicitly mention the colonial past as a ‘dark page’ of national history. Two-thirds of the students balance this negative stance by also referring to positive elements such as the country’s prosperity, its freedom of religion, and its equal suffrage. At first glimpse, most students seem to narrate national history as a past with good and bad sides. A closer examination, however, reveals that there is more to it.

VI. A ‘European Enlightenment’ template

When examining students’ present-oriented attribution of significance, it is striking how nine of them choose as starting or turning points those events that mark progress towards freedom, equality and democracy : the introduction of the male plural vote as the beginning of democratisation, the 1781 Edict of Tolerance as the beginning of religious freedom, and the *Code Civil* as the beginning

42. ALICE PETTIGREW, STUART FOSTER, JONATHAN HOWSON, PAUL SALMONS, RUTH-ANNE LENG & KAY ANDREWS, *Teaching About the Holocaust in English Secondary Schools : An empirical study of national trends, perspectives and practice*, London, 2009. 43. LUCY RUSSELL, *Teaching the Holocaust in School History. Teachers or Preachers ?*, London, 2008.

of the constitutional state. The same events are referred to as incarnating values from which lessons can be drawn. Andreas and Ilias, for instance, mention that a lot can be learnt from historical examples of religious intolerance for present-day religious freedom in the West. Individual rights, individual and collective freedom, equality, and democratisation – a set of values which we could for the sake of convenience call ‘Enlightenment values’ – seem to function as a connecting thread through the selection process of historical events of those nine students, both during the group task and in the subsequent interviews. The pursuit of, or struggle for, rights and freedoms by individuals or groups is presented as the driving force in history. In doing so, students implicitly relate to a longstanding tradition of narratives of progress within Flemish history textbooks. As Bert Vanhulle has shown, even though schoolbook narratives have become more complex and diffuse over recent decades, traces of an older, liberal narrative of progress remain present⁴⁴. All the nine students, choosing those events that mark progress towards freedom, equality, and democracy as starting or turning points, basically develop a progressive, human rights narrative which is, inevitably, a European rather than a Belgian narrative. In other words, the historical pattern students see at work in Belgian history can be applied to the history of almost every (Western) European country; what they do is to specify a European ‘Enlightenment’ template in a national context. Specific events are interpreted and attributed

significance from this perspective. While we as researchers selected the 2003 legalization of same-sex marriage in Belgium, for instance, as a possible constituent of a ‘model country’ narrative, Lomme, Andreas, and Ilias each individually interpret the event in a European context, considering Europe, not Belgium, as a leader in ethical issues.

While nine students adhere to this ‘European Enlightenment’ template in narrating the Belgian national past, the three other students do not really adhere to a coherent template when they talk about the Belgian past. Thorben seems to want to build a narrative expressing affection for Belgium, composed of two components: a country of differences always succeeding in finding compromises, and a country, initially an artificial construct of the Great Powers in 1830, that succeeded in growing into a ‘real’ nation. When selecting specific events from Belgian history in the performance task, however, Thorben does not lean on those components. Furthermore, he generally fails to flesh out his narrative with concrete events. He does not, for instance, mention any concrete compromise that has been reached in Belgian history, although the 30 cards provide instantiations of it; Thorben’s poor general knowledge about the national past probably plays a part in this. The same applies to Anna and Elsa, who do not come to any specific narrative about the national past at all. In their case, however, this seems also to be related to their personal identifications and their sense of belonging.

44. BERT VANHULLE, “Waar gaat de geschiedenis naartoe? Mogelijkheden tot een narratieve analyse van naoorlogse Vlaamse geschiedleerboeken”, in *Bijdragen tot de Eigentijdse Geschiedenis*, no. 15, 2005, p. 133-175. BERT VANHULLE, “The path of history: narrative analysis of history textbooks - a case study of Belgian history textbooks (1945-2004)”, in *History of Education*, no. 38, 2009 (2), p. 263-282.

VII. National identification and historical narratives

Overall, the students who participated in this study seem to have never given much thought to issues of identity. Elsa expresses this very explicitly, when she is asked, during the individual interview, to expand on what she wrote in the essay assignment: “I think your questions are very difficult. I don’t know. I actually never thought about it, so your questions are very hard and complicated. I just don’t know. I cannot answer that”. Elsa’s use of the words ‘difficult’ and ‘complicated’ does not so much refer to the specific questions we asked, as to the difficulty she experiences in talking about issues of identity; issues that she has so far not reflected upon. The connection between identities and the past is hardly given any thought either. Students allude only in vague and general terms to this connection and only in situations when a certain identity is rejected, as in the identification of the Battle of the Golden Spurs as an element in the construction of present-day Flemish identity. When asked about it, students indicate that their identity and sense of belonging is mostly connected to the present rather than the past. Only one student – Elsa, who has Polish roots – acknowledges a connection between her identity and the past and subsequently acknowledges that her identity influenced her selection of historical events. The 11 other students reject a possible connection between their identity and their vision of the past or their selection of historical events. Febe, for instance, clearly states in a comment accompanying an answer in the questionnaire

that “history does not influence my feeling of identity”. Aline writes that “the past is the past. I don’t experience my identity in a different way because of events from the past”.

Closer examination of the research data does however reveal connections, parallel with Peck’s conclusions, between students’ identities and the ways in which they select historical events⁴⁵. In order to map students’ identities, we asked them to score a number of possible identities in a list (among which national, subnational, supranational, ethnic – in case they were not from Belgian descent, this could be at stake – or cultural) from one (‘extremely important’) to five (‘not important’) and to write a paragraph describing their own identity in racial, ethnic, cultural, and/or national terms. In this respect, we provided the following guidance: “Your description of your identity may include, but also go beyond, issues of citizenship or sense of loyalty. It is possible that you describe yourself as having more than one type of (cultural, ethnic, or national) identity. For instance, a person might describe their identity as ‘Greek’ even if they were born in Canada. Another person might describe their identity as ‘Canadian’, even if they were born in Greece. Others might describe themselves as ‘Greek-Canadian’. There are no ‘wrong’ answers and these examples are just starting points – describe yourself in a way which makes the most sense to you. Please be as specific and detailed as possible”. The essays students wrote on their identity consist of between a half-page and a full page and are mostly geared towards their present identity. On their own, the students make hardly any connection between their

45. CARLA PECK, “It’s Not Like [I’m] Chinese and Canadian...”.

identities and the past. In the individual interviews, we further discussed their answers with them. One student, Thorben, explicitly identifies with Belgium, claiming to feel more Belgian than Flemish. His professed identity fits with the narrative he tried to build expressing affection for Belgium and its history, depicting Belgium as a country of compromises and a 'real' nation. Three students do not identify with Belgium and its history. Anna rejects 'Belgium', albeit in an implicit way. She seems to have no feelings whatsoever for the nation; instead she puts forward another identity, although again very implicitly – a Flemish and Greater Dutch one, stemming from linguistic considerations⁴⁶. Anna's Greater Dutch opinion, however, is not really reflected in her selection of events from the national past. She does not, for instance, select a very characteristic event in the Greater Dutch narrative – the Pragmatic Sanction (1549) – that postulated the indivisibility of the Netherlands. Even when Anna's attention is explicitly drawn to this card, she does not withhold it. Again though, Anna's poor historical knowledge might have played a role here. Elsa also has no feelings for Belgium but without rejecting it. In Elsa's opinion, her foreign roots – both her paternal and maternal grandparents were of Polish origin and had emigrated to Belgium after the Second World War – play an important part. She explicitly puts a family identity above an identification with the country in which she lives. In the selection of historical events, this also plays a part. She refers, for instance, to the mining disaster of Marcinelle in 1956 in which 262 labourers, of 12 different nationalities

(mainly Italians), were killed, and connects that with the labour migrant background of her grandparents. She selects the picture card about the Dossin transit camp, not because she intends to make a reference to the Belgian involvement in the Holocaust, but as a symbol for the Holocaust on Polish soil and connects that with the fact that many of her Polish family members have been victims of the Nazi German occupation of Poland. Fran resolutely rejects a Belgian identification. She displays an aversion to Belgium, as she writes in her essay: "I can't approve of the current system within my country and because of that I don't want to identify with it. Because rape, vagrancy, poverty and the existence of underprivileged, unfair inequality...that is not me". She rejects Belgium, not on historical but on contemporary grounds, referring to social problems that are not specifically Belgian.

While three students have quite outspoken opinions about what Belgium means for them personally, the eight other participants identify, to a limited extent, with Belgium. This position varies from viewing Belgium merely as a country-of-residence, without any further sentiments, to a vague feeling of affection. Ilias, for example, states during the individual interviews that, for him, being Belgian is only connected to living in Belgium: "If I lived in Spain, I would feel Spanish". Andreas and Luka refer to a vague affection, linking being Belgian with Belgian ancestry and to the prevailing mentality, culture and values within Belgium. When asked to explain this further, they speak about freedom, individual rights, and equality as important elements of Belgian

46. The Greater Dutch movement emerged during the 19th century with the intention of uniting Flanders and the Netherlands to form a new pan-Dutch state.

culture. When challenged by the assertion that those values are applicable to many other European countries and asked for other, specifically-Belgian characteristics, Andreas and Luka (as well as the other six students) are unable to provide an answer.

Each of these eight students, in addition to Fran, speak of a supra-national form of identity too. Four students – Fran, Ilias, Lomme, and Luka – characterise themselves, in both questionnaire and the essay assignment, as citizens of the world first and foremost, while the other five – Aline, Andreas, Charlotte, Febe, and Niki – describe themselves as Europeans. Those identifications are closely linked to their values-oriented and progressive human rights narrative. Their supranational identification is, in most cases, strong. In the group interview, for instance, Andreas justifies his selection of historical events in these terms : “I especially took into account what directly influenced our lives and our opinions about Europe and Belgium... The way we look at society and our opinions about the past are the same as in other European countries”. Luka agrees. Their identification with a broader European viewpoint is also demonstrated through the use of the pronoun ‘we’. Andreas for instance mentions that ‘we’, as Europeans, are used to religious freedom, while Aline used ‘our’ in discussing European values. The use of ‘we’, ‘us’, and ‘our’ is clearly identity-related in these cases. Accordingly, the students’ transnational type of identification explains their limited affection for Belgium. National identities, according to them, are too closed, narrow-minded, and exclusivist. During the individual interviews, for example, Lomme states that “it is important that international

viewpoints prevail over national ones. A global point of view provides a much richer opinion than a national one, which carries the risk of manipulation within it”. On a general level, this link between historical narratives and students’ identifications is in line with the findings of Epstein, Lévesque, Peck and others. At the same time, however, the Flemish case seems to be different in a very crucial way : while these researchers observed (sub)national and ethnic forms of identity which sustained historical narratives first and foremost, we instead encounter students’ supranational identities, and the parallels between those identities and the narratives they build.

Students oppose the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion which accompany a strictly (sub) national identification. Charlotte for instance denounces “the exclusion of the Walloon people” by Flemings during the individual interviews. In opposing those mechanisms, and in constructing a European human rights narrative, students build in new forms of inclusion and exclusion. The value narrative that they construct and with which they identify holds a marked Western (European and Northern-American) perspective, even though they seem convinced that these values are universal. From that perspective, and armed with such a narrative, they observe and judge the world. They claim to embrace an open society in which all migrants are welcome on condition that ‘they’ accept ‘our’ values. In this way, the ‘open’ society to which they refer does not appear to be that open at all. Some students even judge other cultures and societies according to their progressive human rights narrative. Andreas, for example, compares the long path to

freedom, equality, and democracy in Belgium and Europe with the present-day Arab world. He concludes that “they still consider religion there to be very important; we here have gained much more freedom”. In so doing, he unintentionally draws new boundaries between the ‘progressive’ and ‘free’ West and the ‘regressive’ Arabic world.

VIII. Conclusion

This article examined the ways in which 12 young adults in Flanders select historical events to build a historical narrative about the Belgian past. It also inquired whether those narratives are connected with identity and sense of belonging. In drawing conclusions, we must bear in mind the very small and specific sample on which this study was based. Nevertheless, the research has produced some meaningful results. In parallel with what has been shown in studies in several other countries, the selection of ‘important’ events by Flemish students is based on a present-oriented and symbolic attribution of significance. Contrary to what has been found elsewhere, however, the participants in our research, in selecting historical events and discussing what connects them, did not rely extensively on narrative templates about the Belgian past which are part of Flemish popular culture. Even the ‘lines of fracture’ template, which forms part of the secondary school history curriculum, is not used. No ingrained nationally-oriented master narrative seems to dominate the students’ thinking. Some students are however familiar with

two popular templates : the ‘Flemish’ and the ‘small but though’ examples. Rather than relying on these when talking about the national past, they turn them into objects of critical reflection. Their weak or critical identification with Belgian-ness (or, indeed, the total absence of it) parallels the absence of a substantial and coherent Belgian historical narrative. Even though this is exceptional when considered in a comparative international perspective, it ought not to surprise those who are familiar with contemporary history education and historical culture in Flanders where no coherent Belgian historical narrative is taught or shared. The absence of an autonomous Belgian history curriculum in Flemish schools, combined with a strong focus on critical thinking skills, explains why some students are able to discern and criticise existing national or subnational ‘myths’ about the national past. But it may equally explain why the same students are neither inclined nor willing to consider the persecution of the Jews during the Second World War, for instance, as a fundamental part of Belgian history.

Our research suggests that students who combine a firm knowledge basis with a supranational identification seem especially able to approach longstanding and popular templates of Belgian history critically. More generally, the supranational identification of the majority of students who participated in this research stands out. It reflects, among other things, an increased awareness of living in a transnational or globalised society, even though this awareness in fact remains very Western-oriented⁴⁷. Students’ supranational

47. MARIA GREVER, BEN PELZER & TERRY HAYDN, “High school students’ views...”.

identities seem to parallel their embrace of historical narratives based on an Enlightenment discourse of progress. This leads them into drawing new identity boundaries between the 'progressive and free' West, and the 'regressive' Arab world. This tendency reflects current discourses in society at large, but it is probably also – unintentionally – supported by the history curriculum in Flanders. While the age-old framing of school history in national terms has been replaced by a European outlook, the history curriculum remains essentially Eurocentric; it includes few outside perspectives. Furthermore, the curriculum builds on a civilization narrative in which the realisation of democracy and human rights implicitly functions as both the end-point of historical development and a benchmark against which to study other societies.

'Others', among which Islamic societies, are hence seen as 'lagging behind'. This tendency to represent the past through similarly binary oppositions (the West and 'The Rest') has been laid bare before in international research on representations of Islam and Muslim cultures in history textbooks⁴⁸. Although the textbook accounts have evolved over time, stereotyping and 'us-and-them' accounts continue to recur. Curricula and textbooks seem, in other words, to create new mechanisms of exclusion. Although we do not suggest that school forms the only source of knowledge and identity-formation for young people, we cannot but observe that the 12 young people's narratives about the national past and their sense of belonging are very close to what the Flemish history curriculum has defined as its main aims.

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48. See the special issue of the *Journal of Educational Media, Memory, and Society*, no. 3 2011 (1), entitled 'Teaching about Islam and the Muslim World : Textbooks and Real Curriculum' (guest Editors : Marie McAndrew, Amina Triki-Yamani and Falk Pingel).

Appendix 1 :

13 schematic narrative templates about the national history of Belgium

Expressing affection for Belgium

1. 'Sleeping Beauty': Already established long before 1830, a Belgian spirit (*âme belge*) existed and strove unceasingly for national independence.
2. 'Foreign Occupations': Before its independence, Belgium was occupied by a succession of foreign powers, starting as far back as antiquity when Julius Caesar conquered Gaul.
3. 'Battleground of Europe': Throughout history, Belgium has suffered passively under the important European battles fought out on its soil, such as the Battle of Waterloo in 1815 or the First World War.
4. 'Modern Country': After 1830, Belgium's vigor and prosperity were displayed through its industry, commerce, and culture by, for instance, the construction of the first railway on the continent in 1835.
5. 'Small but Tough': From the legions of Caesar to the armies of Adolf Hitler, little Belgium always managed to resist foreign threats and to maintain some sort of national integrity.
6. 'Model Country': Belgium has always been an ambitious and progressive nation, with its liberal Constitution of 1831 or the legalisation of gay marriage in 2003.
7. 'Microcosm of Europe': As a meeting place of North and South – of the Germanic and Romance civilizations – Belgium can be considered a symbol and model for European diversity.
8. 'Absurdistan': Living in Belgium, one has to note the peculiar and even frustrating, but nonetheless pleasant, character of the country, with its seemingly-endless problems and inconsistencies.

Expressing rejection of Belgium

9. 'Artificial Country': There are no historical foundations to the Belgian nation. The country was created solely by other states in 1830 to safeguard the European Balance of Power.

10. 'Flemish': The centuries-old Flemish nation has long been oppressed and Belgium is the latest hindrance to the complete emancipation of Flanders.
11. 'Country of Scandals': With numerous episodes, such as the colonisation of Congo or its recent political problems, one can only be ashamed of Belgium and feel aversion towards it.

Expressing scientific distance

12. 'Ironical': The history of Belgium consists of the accidental presences of ever-changing populations, which are only connected to each other because they live within the nation's present-day borders.
13. 'Lines of Fracture': Belgian society is marked by various lines of fracture; next to the older ideological, socio-economic, and community divergences, newer topics such as immigration, environmental problems, and ethical discussions brought forth new lines of fracture.

Appendix 2 : Overview of the participants

Group 1 - Economics students

Andreas
Ilias
Lomme
Luka

Group 2 - Language and Literature students

Anna
Elsa
Fran
Thorben

Group 3 - Education students

Aline
Charlotte
Febe
Niki

Appendix 3 : Overview of the 30 events selection for the performance task

Expressing affection for Belgium

1. Ambiorix rises in revolt against Caesar, 54 BC
2. Clovis is converted to Christianity, c. 500 AD
3. Godfrey of Bouillon rules over Jerusalem after the First Crusade, 1099
4. Flemish foot militia defeat a powerful army of French knights during the Battle of the Golden Spurs, 11th July 1302
5. The Joyous Entry of Joanna and Wenceslaus of Brabant, 3rd January 1356
6. 600 *Franchimontois* fight Charles the Bold and Louis XI, 29th October 1468
7. Charles V postulates the indivisibility of the Netherlands in the Pragmatic Sanction, 4th November 1549
8. Alva orders the decapitation of the counts of Egmont and Horne on the Grand Place in Brussels, 5th June 1568
9. Inspired by the Baroque and the Counter-Reformation, Rubens paints *The Resurrection of Christ*, 1611-12
10. Emperor Joseph II allows freedom of religion in the Edict of Tolerance, 12th November 1781
11. Flemish and Brabant Peasants rise in revolt against the French oppressor, 12th October 1798
12. Allied forces clash with Napoleons at Waterloo, 18th June 1815
13. William I reforms education, 1817
14. Belgium achieves independence, 25th August – 4th October 1830
15. John Cockerill establishes the first blast-furnaces on the river Meuse, 1838
16. Hendrik Conscience writes *The Lion of Flanders*, 1838

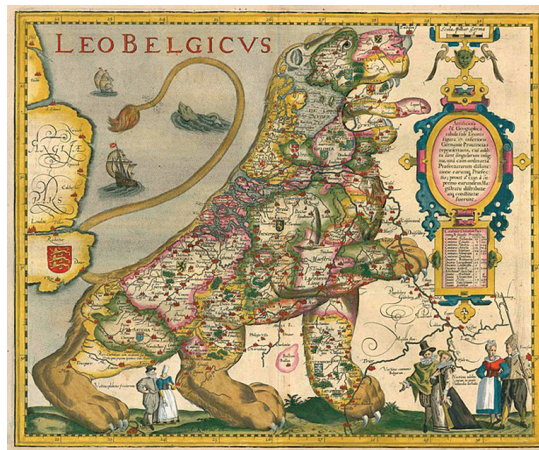
17. Marx resides in a dazzling, liberal and cosmopolitan Brussels, 1845-48
18. The First School War focuses differences between Liberals and Catholics, 1879-84
19. All male Belgians acquire voting rights, 1893
20. The rubber cultivation in the Congo Free State causes global turmoil, 1890-1908
21. Belgium and the world suffer under the First World War, 1914-18
22. Magritte plays with perception and reality in his Surrealist paintings of the 1920
23. Fascist parties win in elections in both parts of the country, 1936
24. 25,000 Jews and 350 Roma and Sinti are transported to Auschwitz-Birkenau via Dossin Barracks, 1942-44
25. Women acquire suffrage for parliament, 26th July 1948
26. The mining disaster in Marcinelle claims the lives of 262 people and shocks Belgium, 8th August 1956
27. Flemings demand unilingualism in Flanders, 1961-1968
28. The European institutions are established in Brussels, 8th April 1965
29. 300,000 people express their indignation over the poor working of police and justice in a White March, 20th October 1996
30. Belgium is the second country in the world to allow same-sex marriage, 2003

Appendix 4 : Example of a Picture Card about Charles V and the Pragmatic Sanction



Emperor Charles V, portrait by Titian, 1548

Leo Belgicus by Petrus Kaerius, 1617



“Wij, Karel, bij de gratie Gods Rooms Keizer, laten weten aan allen die nu zijn en hierna wezen zullen, dat wij geoordeeld hebben dat het van groot belang is voor onze voornoemde landen dat zij in de toekomst altijd onder eenzélde vorst zouden blijven die ze in één geheel zou houden, wetend dat hun deling ten gevolge van successies en erfenissen hun ondergang en ruïne zou betekenen. Afscheurd en van elkaar gescheiden zouden zij ten prooi kunnen vallen aan buurstaten. Dit zal echter kunnen vermeden worden indien onze landen altijd in het bezit blijven van één vorst die ze als één geheel bestuurt. Gegeven in onze stad Brussel in de maand november van het jaar Onzes Heeren 1549”. - Dutch translation of the Pragmatic Sanction, from appendix HAVO 2012 the Sourcebook.

Date : 4th November 1549

7. Charles V postulates the indivisibility of the Netherlands in the Pragmatic Sanction

The Habsburg Emperor Charles V ruled, among others, over territories in modern-day southern Italy, Spain, and Austria. In the course of his reign, he added parts of the Low Countries to his family's Burgundian possessions. He had dominion over 17 adjacent provinces (excluding Liège) which stretched from the northern Lordship of Groningen to the Franco-Dutch County of Artois in the west, and the Duchy of Luxembourg in the east. In 1549, he declared the 17 provinces to be a unified and indivisible entity, thus hoping to strengthen the territories internally and to protect them from external attacks.

Appendix 5 : Example of a Picture Card about Belgian independence



Painting by Gustaaf Wappers "Episode of the September Days of 1830 at the Grand Place of Brussels", 1835.



Caricature of the London Conference by Honoré Daumier, 1832. (Russia is depicted as a bear, Prussia as a horse, Austria as a monkey, France as a rabbit, Belgium as a turkey, the Netherlands as a dog, and Poland as a woman).



Painting of King Leopold I by Nicaise de Keyser, 1856

Date : 25th August 1830 - 4th October 1830

14. Belgium achieves independence

In the southern territories of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands, several groups were dissatisfied with William I of Orange. French-speaking Wallonia felt excluded by the King's language policy. The liberal Flemish nobility and bourgeoisie accused William of authoritarianism and other wrongs. Catholics demanded freedom of religion and of education. Belgium succeeded in gaining independence during the revolutionary wave of 1830, after the approval by the European Great Powers at the London Conference. Belgium chose a liberal constitution and a Unionist government, in which all the aforementioned groups were represented. Leopold of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha accepted the crown and became the first monarch of the new Belgian Kingdom on 21st July 1831.

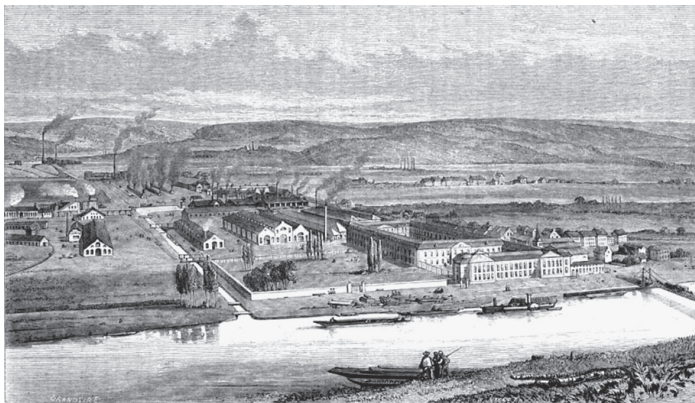
Appendix 6 : Example of a Picture Card about the industrialization of Belgium



John Cockerill's statue and tomb in front of the city hall in Seraing, 1871



Female workers leaving a textile factory in Aalst, end of the 19th century. Representation of 19th century working class-life in the film Daens by Stijn Coninx (1992)



Drawing of the view of John Cockerill's factory (Vue des établissements de John Cockerill à Seraing, dessin de Gransire, Magasin pittoresque, vol. 33, 1865).

Date : 1838

15. John Cockerill establishes the first blast-furnaces along the Meuse

In 1807, John Cockerill established a machine-building factory in Verviers. In 1817 he moved the factory to Seraing, located south-east of Liège. In 1838, he built a vertically-integrated iron foundry, which combined several aspects of production such as its own forge, rolling mill, blast furnaces, and machine construction. Coal could be shipped up from nearby mines via the Meuse. John Cockerill's company was among the first in Europe to produce puddled iron. Thanks to the high demand for iron in the railway sector, the company gained vast profits. The Industrial Revolution in continental Europe began in Belgium, through companies such as John Cockerill's which became a full-fledged industrial empire.

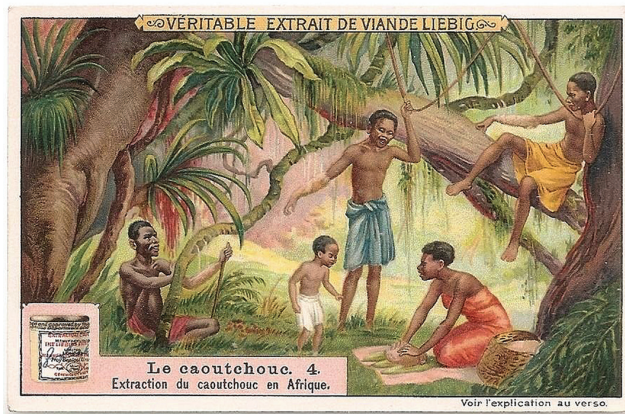
Appendix 7 : Example of a Picture Card about the colonization of the Congo



"In the Rubber Coils", caricature by Linley-Sambourne in the British satirical magazine *Punch*, 28th November 1906.



Bronze bust of Leopold II in Léopoldville (today's Kinshasa) by Thomas de Vincotte, early 1920s.



Liebig collector's card featuring a woman, a child, and several men harvesting rubber. From the Liebig's Extract of Meat Company series "Le caoutchouc", Liebig series S0987, 1910.

Date : 1890-1908

20. The rubber cultivation in the Congo Free State causes global turmoil

In 1885, Belgian King Leopold II received permission, via the Berlin Conference, to organize a gigantic territory in Central Africa as the Congo Free State. The Force Publique was created, with black soldiers and white officers. This army was expected to both fight Arab slave traders in the east and keep the local populations under control and the rubber production on the mark. The invention of the rubber tire and the expansion of the automobile industry caused a boom in the global demand for rubber. Given the absence of a census there is no consensus about the precise death rate due to the rubber harvest (and the ivory trade) in the Congo Free State. The region certainly underwent an extraordinary population decrease. As a result of international pressure, the territory was annexed by Belgium in 1908.

Appendix 8 : Example of a Picture Card about the First World War



Photo showing Indian soldiers, carrying a wounded officer, in Flanders Fields, 1918 (The Doctor in War, Houghton Mifflin co., Boston and New York)

Cartoon of little Belgium denying Germany free passage, by Frederick Henry Townsend, Punch, 12th August 1914



The painting Massacre at Dinant by George W. Bellows (1918). On 23rd August 1914, German soldiers executed 674 inhabitants of the Belgian city of Dinant, among whom 26 men aged between 65 and 75 years old, 76 women, and 37 children.

Date : 1914 – 1918

21. Belgium and the world suffer under the First World War

A few days after the outbreak of the First World War, German troops marched into neutral Belgium. Belgian civilian casualties and material damage like in Leuven (the university library) and Dinant caused an international outcry. On the Western Front, a race towards the sea occurred in which both of the warring parties fought for control of the narrow territory in front of the English Channel. The result was that the front became static and trench warfare emerged; trenches extended from the Swiss-French border to the Belgian coast. Millions of people were killed worldwide.

