

The Present in Flemish Secondary History Education Through the Lens of Written History Exams

Le rôle du présent dans l'enseignement de l'histoire au sein des écoles secondaires flamandes, analysé à partir d'examens écrits en histoire

Karel Van Nieuwenhuysse, Kaat Wils, Geraldine Clarebout and Lieven Verschaffel

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Article abstract

The present plays an important part in history education, in particular in efforts to make the study of the past relevant for today. This contribution examines how the relationship between past and present is dealt with in current Flemish secondary history education by analyzing 190 written history exams for the 11th and 12th grade. Ten percent of the questions address the present in an autonomous way and 8% relate past and present to each other. A more fine-grained analysis of the present-related questions reveals a variety of ways to integrate the present in history education, including the study of recent interpretations of the past.

THE PRESENT IN FLEMISH SECONDARY HISTORY EDUCATION THROUGH THE LENS OF WRITTEN HISTORY EXAMS

KAREL VAN NIEUWENHUYSE, KAAT WILS, GERALDINE CLAREBOUT & LIEVEN VERSCHAFFEL *University of Leuven*

ABSTRACT. The present plays an important part in history education, in particular in efforts to make the study of the past relevant for today. This contribution examines how the relationship between past and present is dealt with in current Flemish secondary history education by analyzing 190 written history exams for the 11th and 12th grade. Ten percent of the questions address the present in an autonomous way and 8% relate past and present to each other. A more fine-grained analysis of the present-related questions reveals a variety of ways to integrate the present in history education, including the study of recent interpretations of the past.

LE RÔLE DU PRÉSENT DANS L'ENSEIGNEMENT DE L'HISTOIRE AU SEIN DES ÉCOLES SECONDAIRES FLAMANDES ANALYSÉ À PARTIR D'EXAMENS ÉCRITS EN HISTOIRE

RÉSUMÉ. Le présent joue un rôle important dans l'enseignement de l'histoire, dont celui de rendre pertinente l'étude du passé dans le contexte contemporain. Cette contribution explore de quelle manière l'enseignement de l'histoire, tel que prodigué au sein des écoles secondaires flamandes, traite les relations entre le passé et le présent. Pour ce faire, les auteurs ont analysé 190 examens écrits en histoire, complétés par des élèves de 11^e et 12^e année. 10 % des questions abordent le présent de façon autonome, alors que 8 % font un lien entre le passé et le présent. Une analyse plus poussée des questions traitant du présent dévoile une variété de pistes pour intégrer le présent dans l'enseignement de l'histoire, incluant l'étude des interprétations récentes du passé.

Nowadays, hardly anyone will contest the idea that history education should relate in some way or another to contemporary society.¹ This conviction has been a guiding principle since the foundation of history as an autonomous school subject in the late 18th century. It even goes back to the humanist educational

system, in which antiquity was studied to teach morality. As the usefulness of history and its contribution to a better society was crucial to Enlightenment thinkers, they pleaded for the study of the more recent past in what soon would become a separate school subject. In the course of the 19th century, this “modern history” increasingly became associated with “national history,” aiming at the formation of valuable (national) citizens, who would be able to fully participate and contribute to public life. This fostered historical narratives that were teleological and progress-oriented in which the present functioned as a culmination point of historical developments, privileging continuity over change. In the same period, however, the professionalization of the discipline of history fostered a historicist emphasis on the need to approach the past in its own terms and the need to introduce students to the field of historical source criticism. Overly presentist, teleological, and nationalist approaches of the past became counterbalanced in this way by the conviction that history education was also about gaining a critical distance vis-à-vis both past and present.

In the course of the 20th century, triumphalist historical narratives became problematized in another way as well. The upcoming social history revealed a past world full of oppression, poverty, and inequality. From the last third of the 20th century onward the emphasis in the classroom was no longer (or no longer solely) on showing how certain ideals had developed in the course of history, but rather (or also) on the question of to what extent the past could live up to contemporary ideals that had yet to be achieved. From the 1980s onwards, the present presented itself in yet another way to the field of history education. As part of a broader movement of postmodernism, the awareness grew that all knowledge about the past is “contemporary,” originating in a present-day context, and therefore coloured by present-day prejudices and concerns. Inspired by the rise of this constructivist paradigm both in educational psychology and in historical research, history didacticians from the 1990s onwards began to emphasize the need to pay attention to the various and evolving ways in which significance is given in the present to the past.²

These all too hastily sketched evolutions bring up the question as to how the present is understood in history education today. Is the present in today’s history classrooms implicitly presented as the logical and laudable endpoint of historical evolutions? Or are students rather encouraged to focus on differences between past and present? Are they asked to historicize recent or current interpretations of the past and hence asked to deal with the role of the present in a more postmodern fashion? This contribution examines how in current secondary history education in the Flemish Community – the public body responsible for education in Flanders and the Dutch-speaking schools in the federal Belgian capital Brussels – the relationship between past and present is dealt with. It does so by analyzing written history exams for the 11th and 12th grade.

This paper starts with a presentation of the theoretical and empirical background of the study, describing the position of the present as prescribed in the official standards for secondary history education and discussing existing international research on the position of the present in history education. In a second and third part respectively, the method and the results of the empirical study are presented and discussed afterwards.

THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL BACKGROUND

Since the 1960s onwards, Belgium has evolved from a unitary to a federal state, whereby education became regionalized and was formally devolved in 1989 to three communities (the Flemish, the French, and the German speaking communities). In the new structure for Dutch-speaking education set out by the Flemish government in 1989, standards for each school subject needed to be drawn up, setting the minimum targets to be achieved by every student. The history standards were designed and implemented between 1991 and 2000 and are still in use. They consist of 29 specific attainment targets preceded by an explanatory text (Flemish Ministry of Education and Training, 2000a, 2000b).³

The abovementioned historically shaped approaches to the present in history education all seem to have left their traces in the actual history standards. On the one hand, the explanatory text approaches the school subject of history as an introduction to history-as-an-academic-discipline. For instance, students need to be able to critically analyze sources, and need to be aware of the fact that our knowledge of the past is based on a diversity of sources. On the other hand, much attention is paid to the functions and goals of history with regard to “students as members of society” (Flemish Ministry of Education and Training, 2000a, Guiding Principles section). These goals are defined as (1) the development of “historical consciousness” (whereby students have to relate past, present, and future to each other), (2) cultural education (with a view to understanding past societies), (3) individual and social identity-building, and (4) training in social “resilience” (in order to have students take up responsibility in today’s society). Three out of these four goals hold a direct link with contemporary society (Wils et al., 2011). Concerning the development of historical consciousness, the standards ascribe the present a prominent role:

History education becomes functional when students succeed in bringing the past in relationship with the present and the future. In doing so, students learn to understand which solutions were formulated, which means were used, where they led to, what realizations have been achieved, and what still needs to be done. History thus works on relating past and present, and on revealing lines of thinking in the direction of the future.⁴ (Flemish Ministry of Education and Training, 2000a, Guiding Principles section)

The standards seem to implicitly equate historical consciousness with the awareness that the past is useful for the present.

Looking at the 29 attainment targets, however, the overall picture of the position of the present and its relationship to the past is more nuanced. About one third of the specific attainment targets contains an implicit or explicit reference to the present such as “students ask questions about the past to clarify current tensions,” or “based on the historical consciousness that individuals and groups interact in social processes, students are willing to actively and constructively participate in the evolving society” (Flemish Ministry of Education and Training, 2000b, Specific Attainment Targets section). Two thirds of the attainment targets are geared exclusively towards (an understanding of) the past such as “students describe for each development stage of western civilization the most important elements of the cultural domain, in connection to the other societal domains,” or “students widen a number of historical concepts and problems and fit them in into a broader historical context” (Flemish Ministry of Education and Training, 2000b, Specific Attainment Targets section).

The tendency to define history education more from the viewpoint of the present, and thus to hold a more instrumental approach towards the past in secondary history education, has widened the gap between school history and the academic discipline of history, as the latter considers awareness of an unavoidable fundamental presentism and of present-day concerns and detaching oneself as much as possible from the present as necessary conditions for good historical scholarship (Munslow, 1997). This places history teachers in the 11th and 12th grade somehow in a dilemma. On the one hand, as academically trained historians, they have been taught to see and approach the past in a historicist way, and history in a perspectivist way – the past as fundamentally different from the present, and history as an interpretative construction. On the other hand, as history teachers, they have to implement the present-oriented demands of the history standards.

For their part, history didacticians have, especially since the 1990s, increasingly stressed that the present may form an obstacle to genuine historical thinking. Much in line with the historical discipline, they argue that one must detach oneself from the present, from one’s own contemporary values and assumptions, in order to think historically. Nevertheless, history didacticians do consider paying attention to the present an important aspect of history teaching, if only as an entry to make the constructed and thus evolving character of historical knowledge clear to students (Lévesque, 2009; van Drie & van Boxtel, 2008; Wineburg, 2001).

The changing position of the present has been an object of recent research in the history of history education (Lobbès, 2012, 2013; Wils & Verschaffel, 2012). In the field of history didactics, the role and position of the present has often been addressed through (mostly expert-novice) research on the historical thinking skills of students (Voss & Carretero, 1998; Lee, 2006; Levstik & Barton, 2008; Wineburg, 2001). Teachers’ beliefs about the relationship

between past and present have been less investigated. Von Borries (1994) explored the incidence of moral judgments in history courses on the crusades, and concluded that teachers seem to be as judgmental and condemning of the past, from a present-day point of view, as their students. Seixas (1998) came to a similar conclusion, as he found that student teachers often do not abandon their own contemporary moral perspectives. Virta (2001) explored student teachers' conceptions of history and their ideas on the significance of history as a school subject in society. One of her main research results was that most prospective teachers hold the opinion that the function of history is to explain the contemporary world. Wils et al. (2011) did research on the role of past and present in prospective teachers' beliefs, and concluded that most prospective history teachers

strongly value the involvement of the present in history education and in their history lessons, rejecting a purely "historicist" approach of the past. They do so usually from a rather "presentist" perspective, even though there is equally a certain openness towards a postmodern understanding of the inter-relatedness of past and present. (p. 217)

Actual classroom practices, however, have been far less studied. The ways in which history teachers deal with the tension between past and present in their teaching, for example, remains at least partly unknown, although the abovementioned research and the doctoral research of Tutiaux-Guillon (2003) suggested that presentism is part of actual teaching practices. Furthermore, seminal research on textbooks used in Flemish history education suggested a presentist approach as well, parallel to the tendencies within the official Flemish standards for history education (Albicher, 2005; Vanhulle, 2009).

RESEARCH METHOD

In order to get an accurate and large-scale view on the ways in which the present is involved in the teaching practice of history education, the choice was made to collect and analyze written history exams from the 11th and 12th grade. We limited our analysis to the exams, not the teachers' answer keys, since many teachers do not make and keep those in a written form. By asking for the answer keys, we would have risked a selection bias. As the research was not about students' performances nor about assessment practices as such, students' answers or the teachers' grading keys were not collected either.

We chose to analyse exams because it is largely accepted that what is addressed in student evaluations is a reliable indicator of the learning aims and the content as actually treated during instruction (Birenbaum & Dochy, 1996). Every teacher designs his or her own exams, sometimes in consultation with the history colleagues of the same grade and/or track, and in accordance with the prevailing standards. The way in which the present is dealt with in these exams can thus, at least to a certain extent, be considered as an indication of the position of the present in the history lessons.

History exams are situated at the end of the educational learning process. They are the end point of a series of history lessons. Those lessons play an important part in the expectations and perceptions of teachers and students in an educational setting without central examinations, such as in Flanders. If, for example, the 19th century has been examined throughout the semester, it will be self-evident to both teachers and students that the exam questions apply to the 19th century. There seems, in other words, no urgent need to make the temporal dimension explicit.

To collect the exams, an email was sent to the different networks and associations of Flemish history teachers. Teachers could hand in their exams anonymously, although only 5 of the 70 participating teachers made use of this possibility. In the communications with teachers, the precise aims and scope of the research were never mentioned in order to avoid teachers handing in exams in which the present was explicitly addressed, and thus in order to minimize bias of the research data.

A set of 190 written history exams was collected, stemming from the 11th and 12th grade in both public schools and state subsidized catholic schools, which share the same standards. All three types of secondary education where history is taught (general, technical, and arts education) are represented in the sample.⁵ When history teachers teach in different types of education, their exams vary because the number of weekly hours devoted to history vary (between one and two), even though the standards hardly differ. To limit the influence of individual teachers in the exam collection, a maximum of four exams per teacher was allowed.

The 190 exams are approximately equally spread out over both grades. All exams date from the school year 2010-11 and stem from 70 teachers working in 67 different schools. The teachers, both women and men, have a very different profile with regard to age and teaching experience. A common feature is, however, that (in principle at least) all teachers teaching in the 11th and 12th grades are academically trained historians. Schools have to provide two exam periods for each grade, one in December and one in June. They decide autonomously whether these exams take place in written or oral form. Besides these summative test marks, students can also earn marks during the semester through combining formative and summative evaluations such as tests, quizzes, papers, group tasks, or class presentations.

In terms of content, the 11th and 12th grade history classes are devoted to the period from ca. 1750 to the present. In the 12th grade, the period after 1945 is particularly addressed. Typical subjects of study include the industrial revolution and the transition from rural to (post-) industrial society, modern imperialism, colonization and decolonization, the Enlightenment and Romanticism, 19th century liberal democracy, World War I, fascism and communism, the Cold War, the different economic policy systems through the 19th and 20th century,

globalization, the golden sixties, cleavages in 19th, 20th, and 21st century Belgian society, the genesis and further development of the European Union, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The data collected consists of 5,784 exam questions. In order to be able to account for the weight teachers attribute to a specific question, the mark of each exam question was related to the total amount of marks of the whole dataset of the exams. Therefore, quantification in percentages is based on the number of marks rather than on the number of questions. Hence, in what follows, an expression such as “10% percent of the questions” means “10% of the totality of attributed marks.” All exam questions represent 13,785 marks in total.

Before analyzing the position of the present in the exams, a working definition of “the present” was necessary. As became clear from the introduction to this paper, “the present” in history education has meant and can still mean many different things. In defining this concept in our research, we have relied on King (2000), who distinguished different types of “present”: an “instantaneous” present, an “extended” present, and an “unfolding” present. The first two types are conceived as a “chronological time.” The instantaneous present is considered as the immediate “now” (what happens now, or has happened just seconds ago), while the extended present is described as a larger time period of the present (dependent on the context: a day, a month, a year, or even some years from now). The unfolding present is part of a “substantive time.” It concerns recent events or evolutions (e.g. crises, wars, revolutions) that are still unfolding, or persons still being in function (e.g. Obama as president of the USA). The present in our research is confined to this unfolding present. The war in Iraq, which started in 2003, is an example of an unfolding present; the third intifada in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict since 2004 as well. Other events within the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, such as the Six-Day War of 1967, cannot be considered as part of an unfolding present.

As a starting point for our analysis of exam questions, four categories, representing four possible manifestations of the present, have been designed. In order to measure the validity of our categories, ten percent of the exams were coded by two independent scorers, resulting in an inter-rater reliability for the four categories of .799. A first category consists of questions that deal exclusively with the present, mainly on topical affairs, and make no references to the past. It includes questions such as “Today the European Union is prosperous. What is the social consequence of this?” or “Give an example of a present-day totalitarian state. Explain on what grounds you characterize its regime as totalitarian.” Questions relating past and present to each other constitute a second category. Examples are this question: “Why is the French Revolution the foundation of our modern western society?” Or this one, accompanying a British cartoon in which King Leopold’s colonial rule in the Congo Free State at the end of the 19th century is criticized: “Can you provide a partial

explanation for the fact that the Democratic Republic of the Congo nowadays is one of the poorest countries on earth? Explain.” A third category is formed by questions exclusively addressing the past, such as “How can one explain the fact that the Great War dragged on for four long years? Why couldn’t the impasse be broken?” or “By whom and when were the Kingdom of the Netherlands and Piedmont founded as new, independent states? Why? Explain the name of these types of states.” In the fourth category, “indeterminate” questions were subsumed. For those questions, it is unclear whether they deal with the past and/or the present because of a lack of context. In the question, “Explain the concept of ‘representative democracy’ in a sufficient manner,” it is not clear whether the system of representative democracy in the 21st or the 19th century is hinted at. The same problem occurs in the question, “Explain: colonialism.” Does it refer to colonialism in the meaning of the 19th century overseas expansion, or of the 20th century US and USSR interventionism? A very small number of questions (1.6%) had to be disqualified, since they did not address historical issues, but concerned the way students learned their history course and prepared their exam. Other questions were disqualified, because the source accompanying the question was not included in the exam copy that was sent to the researchers.

RESULTS

TABLE 1. *Distribution of the 5,784 exam questions over the different categories: Overall and by grade, in percentages and marks*

Type of question	Overall Percentage (%)	Overall marks	Percentage 11th grade (%)	Marks 11th grade	Percentage 12th grade (%)	Marks 12th grade
1. Questions dealing exclusively with the present	9.2	1,274	3.1	224	15.9	1,050
2. Questions relating past and present to each other	7.8	1,076	7.6	547	8.0	529
3. Questions exclusively about the past	73.6	10,141	79.2	5,674	67.5	4,467
4. “Indeterminate” questions	7.8	1,071	8.3	597	7.2	474
5. Disqualified	1.6	223	1.8	128	1.4	95
SUM	100	13,785	100	7,170	100	6,615

The analysis of all exam questions resulted in the above partition over the four basic categories. As the numbers in the table show, almost 10% of all questions discuss the present in a separate, autonomous way, to test students' familiarity with topical affairs (see category 1 in Table 1). In reality, this percentage might even be higher, as within the category of indeterminate questions, several questions perhaps deal with the present as well. Themes brought up in questions dealing exclusively with the present are most often part of an unfolding present, and have received public attention for some years: recent developments in the Belgian nationality conflicts and the accompanying governmental formation crises, new developments in the Israeli-Palestine conflict, the strengths and weaknesses and the political, economic, financial, social, and judicial policies of the European Union, the international status of the United States, the wars in Afghanistan (since 2001) and Iraq (since 2003), the political and economic position of China in the world, the actions of the United Nations, the policy of Vladimir Putin in Russia, demographical evolutions worldwide, and the hidden civil war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Present, topical events that occurred during the semester out of which the exams stem (2010-2011) are far less questioned. Examples are the nuclear disaster of Fukushima in Japan, the eviction of Roma out of France, or the death of Osama bin Laden. The only exception is the Arab Spring, which began in December 2010 and is often questioned.

How can those questions that deal exclusively with the present and focus on topical affairs in the present be characterized? They are, in the first place, mostly internationally oriented, in line with the standards of history education, which are international in scope. A second characteristic is that they focus on public figures. Students are often asked to identify persons who are active in the field of national and international politics (e.g. the UNO or NATO secretary-general, European and American leaders) and to name their position. It thus turns out, thirdly, that most of the questions on topical affairs are factual knowledge-oriented. They test factual knowledge on events and persons, rather than requesting to describe explanations. Questions addressing understanding of topical affairs occur rarely. The following question is an example:

At the beginning of the 21st century, the international balance of power is characterized by "multipolarity".... Name and clarify two ways in which Europe and the European integration have an influence on global power relations. In your answer, show the connection with European integration on a "supranational" and "intergovernmental" level.

The percentage of questions which deal exclusively with the present (category 1 in Table 1) is much higher in the 12th grade (15.9%) than in the 11th grade (3.1%). This finding can certainly be attributed to the requirement of the standards to deal with the period from 1945 to the present in the 12th grade. If the overall number of almost 10% of questions dealing exclusively with the present might seem small, given the present-oriented character of the history

standards, it is nevertheless worth noting that 60 out of the 70 participating teachers include this type of question in their exams.

TABLE 2. *Distribution of the 1,076 marks of the category “Questions relating past and present to each other” over the three subcategories, in percentages and marks*

Questions relating past and present to each other	Overall percentage (%)	Overall marks
Through comparison	15	163
Through the course of history, including the intervening period	48	514
Through revealing the constructed nature of history education	37	399
SUM	100	1,076

The present is, of course, also brought up in questions that relate past and present (category 2 in Table 1). These questions represent almost 8% of the data. Three subcategories were distinguished, representing three ways in which the connection between past and present is made (see Table 2). The first subcategory contains questions that explicitly ask for a comparison between past and present such as “What were the causes of the 1929 economic crisis? Can you draw parallels between the 1929 crisis and the current financial crisis? And if so, what parallels?” or “What is the important difference between the linguistic regulation of 1878 and the current language legislation in Flanders?” Such questions ask for similarities and/or differences between past and present situations without asking students to include the intervening developments and processes in their answer. No reference to *the course of history* is asked for. In a second subcategory, the latter actually is the case. The questions here do relate past and present to each other by explicitly referring to the intervening period by referring to the course of history (through long-term evolutions and developments, through continuity and change, and/or through notions of causality). The following question forms a clear example: “What is the impact of the Holocaust on the contemporary obsession of Israel with security matters?” The third subcategory is composed by all questions referring to contemporary ways of dealing with the past. These questions ask to interpret interpretations of the past by historians or other experts, or to reflect on contemporary historical culture, heritage, and memory policies. Examples are “Explain... what Hobsbawm means by the short twentieth century,” or, on the controversial Japanese Yasakuni war memorial:

Each year, the Japanese prime minister pays a visit to the Yasakuni shrine. Explain in a sufficient manner why this is so touchy in the “neighboring countries” [of] China and Korea (North and South). Explain in your answer what the Yasakuni shrine is precisely.

Questions in the third subcategory reveal, in one way or another, the constructed nature of history as we have argued elsewhere (Van Nieuwenhuysse, Wils, Draye, Clarebout, & Verschaffel, 2015).

Sixty-five of the 70 participating teachers include questions relating past and present to each other in their exams. Combined with the teachers addressing the present in an autonomous way (category 1 in Table 1), we can conclude that only 3 out of the 70 teachers ask questions that do not deal with the present at all.

Questions dealing exclusively with the past (category 3 in Table 1) cover almost three quarters of the total number of questions. These questions ask for both factual knowledge and historical explanations. Almost 40% of all questions only about the past are accompanied by sources. Comparisons between past phenomena or events hardly occur. Only 5% of the questions dealing exclusively with the past enquire about similarities and/or differences.

In a number of questions (7.8%), it is not clear whether the question concerns the past and/or the present. Those questions have been categorized as indeterminate questions (category 4 in Table 1). Either they do not refer to any time-bound context, which makes it impossible to determine what time period they refer to, or the given time indications and context are unclear. This will be elaborated further on.

When looking at the overall results, and bearing in mind the present-orientedness of the standards for history on the one hand and (prospective) teachers' beliefs that the past needs to be examined in order to explain the current world on the other hand, it might come as a surprise that no more than 8% of all exam questions touch upon the past-present relationship, and 17% (categories 1 and 2 in Table 1) deal explicitly with the present. One might have expected a higher percentage of present-related questions. Possible explanations for this finding will be discussed further on, after having singled out some results concerning those questions that do not deal exclusively with the past.

Questions relating past and present to each other: Continuity versus change

In the relationship between past and present, continuity and change constitute two key concepts. They are of crucial importance in history education, as they constitute basic historical thinking concepts (Lévesque, 2009). While continuity is seen as an uninterrupted succession or flow, change is to be considered as "an alteration; possibly evolutionary erosion or sudden collapse, gradual building, or revolutionary upheaval" (Seixas & Morton, 2013, p. 77). Those two key concepts in historical thinking are inextricably bound up with each other. For change only becomes visible, often with hindsight, in contrast with what remains the same. Moreover, they mostly occur together because where in one sphere of life and of society changes might turn up, in another continuity rules (Drake & Nelson, 2005). Continuity and change occur together throughout history, although, in the last two centuries, it seems that change occurred more frequently and at an accelerating tempo (Rosa, 2005).

It is important, so history didacticians stress, that students do not consider the concept of historical change as they experience change in everyday life, where it is simply seen as an event, limited in time and space, which has taken place mostly intentionally, coming about for logical reasons. That, however, is how students often conceive change (Lee, 2005; Seixas & Morton, 2013; Shemilt, 1980). Historians, on the contrary, do not consider change as an equivalent to the occurrence of events, but rather approach it in terms of long scale, evolutionary, and not always intended processes. If students consider change as an abrupt, episodic, revolutionary, intentional event, Shemilt (1980) and Lee (2005) argued, they will not notice gradual, unintended changes in the context of actions and events. Therefore, change should be approached as a process, through which students leave behind the idea of history as a mere series of events, and become able to not only describe the “what” of the change but also to get an understanding of how and why change occurred.

This further questions how continuity and change are brought up in the written history exams when the relationship between past and present is questioned (category 2 in Table 1). Within the subcategory of “questions dealing with continuity and change through the course of history, including the intervening period” (subcategory 2 in Table 2), in which the present is involved, 489 out of the 514 marks (95%) refer to continuity, while only 25 out of the 514 marks (5%) refer to change. This means that gradual evolutions and/or ruptures between past and present are hardly ever integrated in the questions. The following question is one of the rare questions dealing with change: “In recent European history, two countries were split up under the pressure of growing nationalism. Which countries? Which new countries were born from the old ones? Which maps in your historical atlas do you use to solve this?” Most questions refer rather to continuity between past and present, as in the following example: “Explain the connection between the colonial period and the official language used in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.” Quite often, however, the opportunity comes along to integrate the concept of change into the questions as well. In the question, “Belgium today still makes use of innovations implemented by Napoleon. Give two examples,” the modernity of Napoleon and the continuity between past and present are brought to the fore. Napoleonic reforms or ideas that were later on objects of change are not asked for. The legal position of women in society or Napoleon’s ideas concerning the design of Europe and the organization of international relations might equally have been integrated in a broader question on Napoleon’s partly superseded or contested legacy. Whereas asking for continuity rather than for change is of course no problem in individual questions, it is nevertheless important to holistically address both continuity and change in a balanced way.

The above observation does not, however, imply that change in general is never at stake in history exams. In the subcategory of questions which ask to compare a past and a present situation (subcategory 1 in Table 2), change is at least

implicitly present, as students are asked to name similarities and differences between past and present situations, as in the following example questions: “Who were the great powers at that time [of the Vienna Congress]? Who are the great powers today?” or “Compare the current Chinese situation with the social situation in the time of Mao.” In those questions, the intervening period and developments that can explain the change are not thematized. In this way, students are not encouraged to consider change as a gradual process rather than as an abrupt event. Nor are they stimulated to think about the context in which those changes occurred. An unintended consequence of asking students to compare past and present might, in other words, be that they are not stimulated to reflect on the nature of historical change, which is such an essential part of learning to think historically. In a few questions which deal exclusively with the past (and which have not been analyzed systematically within the framework of this contribution), students are, however, stimulated to think about continuity and change.

A vague and implicit present

As mentioned above, one of the categories consists of so-called indeterminate questions (category 4 in Table 1). In those questions, it is unclear whether the past and/or the present are/is being referred to. From a question such as “Name three essential differences between communism and socialism and explain them briefly,” one cannot deduce what time period is meant. This particular question probably refers exclusively to the past, and more specifically to the 19th century, or at the latest, the Cold War period. That is, however, not made explicit, nor is there any suggestion of or reference to an evolution in the meaning of these concepts. The question might have been clear for the students, since the presupposition exists that students know what time period and theme are addressed in the exam questions. However, this involves the risk of a fading attention for the fact that the meaning of concepts and phenomena evolve over time. Concepts such as socialism and communism meant something else in the 19th century than they did in the 20th and the 21st century. It is therefore important to make those shifts in meaning sufficiently explicit, especially regarding the pursuit of more complex forms of historical thinking. The next question most probably concerns a question dealing exclusively with the present: “Unemployment benefits should be limited in time. What does a rather (economically) ‘right-minded person’ think of this statement? Pro or contra? Argue your answer.” Yet again, this is not made explicit. Moreover, the use of the present tense does not provide a clue here, since the exam from which this question stems, is fully made up in the present tense.

The indeterminate questions are most often short questions, each representing very few marks, mostly asking to explain concepts such as, for example, “Define neutrality” or “Define the concept [of] propaganda” or “Explain genocide.” Those questions aim for literal definitions, and do not provide any temporal context.

Out of the 1,071 marks of the “indeterminate” questions, 747 (70%) do not refer to any time-bound context. That way, the impression is created, probably unintentionally, that certain concepts, ideas, phenomena, and movements are ageless. In the other 324 out of 1,071 marks (30%) of the indeterminate questions, time indications and context are not absent, but they are unclear and/or inconsistent or ambiguous. How should one interpret, for example, the following question, stemming from an exam which deals almost exclusively with the 19th century: “The United States of America is a federal state. Define federal state. What powers does the federal government in Washington possess? Can you name two other federal states? Which ones?” It remains unclear whether all subquestions refer to the 19th century. It is, however, quite important to know which time period is hinted at as Belgium, for instance, has been a federal state since 1993, but was a unitary state in the 19th century. It is very well possible that this question was perfectly clear to all students, as they were present in the actual classes, and probably remember in which context federalism was discussed. The fact that the specific content which has been treated in class functions most often as an *implicit* referent in exams – a reference shared by all participants – clearly does not stimulate teachers to systematically pay attention to the temporal dimension of the past in their exams.

Time references are not only lacking in the category of indeterminate questions. In the category of “questions dealing exclusively with the present,” this is the case as well. Within this category, a distinction can be drawn between questions that *explicitly* touch upon the present, and questions that do not. In the following example, the presence of the word “currently” and the use of the present tense make it abundantly clear that the present is involved: “Is this phrase true or false? Currently, Laurent Kabila is in power in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.” In 289 out of the 1,274 marks (23%) of all questions which deal exclusively with the present, the temporal dimension is made explicit through words such as “today,” “nowadays,” or “currently.” In the other 985 out of 1,274 marks (77%), one can only deduce in an indirect way that the present is involved. When the question accompanying a picture of Anders Foch Rasmussen is “Who is this? What is his position?,” one can assume this is a question dealing with an unfolding present, since Rasmussen was at that time (and still is) secretary-general of NATO. Another indication of the temporal dimension can be given by the verbal tenses used in the exam, if, at least, they are consistently applied. When in an exam the past tense is consistently used for questions dealing exclusively with the past, one can reasonably assume that a question such as “Give three reasons why Belgium is an ideal target for terrorists?” is about the present. In 8,725 out of the 13,785 marks (63%) representing all questions, the tenses are consistently used. In 665 marks (5% of the questions), the present tense is used throughout the whole exam. In 4,395 marks (32%), verbal tenses are used inconsistently. In these exams, opportunities to familiarize students with the role of language in history and the need to make the temporal dimension of history explicit risk being missed.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The vast majority of the 190 history exams that have been examined are considerably past-oriented. Almost three quarters of all questions deal exclusively with the past. Given the beliefs of the history teachers in Flanders and the Flemish standards for history, both oriented towards the present, one might have expected different results (Flemish Ministry of Education and Training, 2000a; Wils et al., 2011). How can we explain this gap between teacher beliefs and curricular standards on the one hand, and exam practices on the other hand? A first explanation may be that Flemish teachers' beliefs about the need to orient history education towards the present might be more informed by a wish to legitimize the existence of history as a school subject and by the wish to conform to the prevailing norms of the standards than by deeply rooted personal beliefs. Those beliefs might be partly indebted to historicist traditions within historical scholarship and school history which have come to the fore in the course of the 19th century and which have never been completely superseded by new, more present-oriented ways of approaching the past. Since all Flemish history teachers in the 11th and 12th grade are academically schooled historians, a historicist approach inspired by a genuine, straightforward interest in and even passion for the past as such perhaps prevails over both the standards' demands to refer to the present and constructivist demands to connect historical knowledge to students' relation with an understanding of the current world. Secondly, linking past and present sometimes makes history lessons more complicated, especially when students' knowledge of topical affairs is limited. Teachers might therefore tend to concentrate on the past. A third and last explanation might be found in the intention of many Flemish history teachers to pursue a "complete" overview of history. Although the standards do not prescribe this, Flemish history teachers tend to give priority to providing a "complete" historical overview as it is presented in most textbooks, thus lacking time to make many sidesteps to the present and to make connections between past and present. In this respect, it is revealing that in the 12th grade, many more questions dealing exclusively with the present occur than in the 11th grade. For in the 12th grade, the standards require dealing with the period from 1945 to the present. Further research through classroom observations and especially in-depth interviews with teachers should shed more light on the extent to which each of the possible explanations listed above are applicable. At the same time, such research would provide a more fine-grained view on what kind of representations of the past are constructed in secondary school history classes.

A second finding is the fact that Flemish history teachers seem inclined to stress continuity rather than change in history. Indeed, 95% of the questions that relate past and present with reference to the intervening period refer to continuity. Nevertheless, the period since 1750 is full of fundamental changes. A potential result of this tendency might be an over-emphasis of continuities

between past and present, making the past seem more like the present by selecting those elements which are seen as the roots of present situations. What are possible explanations of this tendency? The Flemish history standards do not promote a particular focus on continuity; they even explicitly require focusing on both continuity and change. As explanations for teachers' emphasis on continuity rather than change cannot be found in the history standards, they might lie in both the history curriculum and in teachers' beliefs on the goals of history education. In Flanders, as mentioned, the curriculum is divided into limited time periods to be studied in each grade. This way of framing the curriculum might deter teachers from questioning long-term evolutions, in which change prevails over continuity. Teachers' beliefs of the goals of history education, from their side, tend to emphasize the past's usefulness to understand contemporary society. Since they want to make the past relevant for the present, teachers might be inclined to stress continuity over change (Schampaert, Wils, Clarebout, & Verschaffel, 2011). As mentioned in the introduction, history education has, since the late 18th century, been oriented towards citizenship education. This has traditionally resulted in approaches that privilege the study of the origins and development of present-day institutions and values and, more generally, which focus on those aspects of the past that are recognizable from a present perspective. Again, further research should clarify this finding. This research might start by analyzing the 73.6% questions that deal exclusively with the past, and by analyzing how in those questions past events are related to each other. Such research would add new arguments to debates about the benefits of a spiral over a linear (meaning a chronological) history curriculum.

Further research should equally go beyond the study of written history exams, as this source has its limitations. Written exams represent only one element of teaching practices. Furthermore, assessment in history education is not limited to exams. Throughout the school year, other tasks are given, and formative ways of assessment take place. Those tasks differ substantially from written exams, which, given their tight time frame, tend to privilege short open-answer questions. There are indications that writing assessments, for instance, stimulate students to evaluate current history policies or historical debates. In this way, students are incited to reflect on questions such as continuity and change, and, ultimately, on the position of the present in their own history class. All this indicates, however, that the study of (the whole of) assessment offers very interesting perspectives on didactical research.

NOTES

1. This research was based on a research project entitled, "End of Term Tests in History as an Access to the Study of Teaching Practices: A Methodological Survey and Two Case Studies." This project was financed by the Academic Formation Institute of the University of Leuven. It was conducted in the History Teacher Training Program and the Cultural History since 1750 research unit, in cooperation with the Instructional Psychology and Technology research unit, all of University of Leuven.
2. See the special issue entitled (and dedicated to), "Longing for the Present in the History of History Education" (Wils & Verschaffel, 2012), with contributions from Annie Bruter, Matthias Meirlaen, Evelyne Hery, Alexander Albicher, Peter Seixas, and Maria Grever, Pieter de Bruijn, & Carla van Boxtel.
3. Based on the official attainment targets, the different educational networks in Flanders further design their own curriculum. Because this would lead too far, no further attention is paid to the different curricula in this article, even though this distinction was included in the research.
4. Authors' translation; this applies to other citations of the standards, and of the written exams as well.
5. In vocational education, history does not exist as an autonomous school subject.

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KAREL VAN NIEUWENHUYSE is Assistant Professor in the History Teacher Training Program, University of Leuven (Blijde-Inkomststraat 21, Box 3307, B-3000 Leuven, Belgium). karel.vannieuwenhuyse@arts.kuleuven.be

KAAT WILS is Professor in the History Teacher Training Program & the Cultural History since 1750 research unit, University of Leuven (Blijde-Inkomststraat 21, Box 3307, B-3000 Leuven, Belgium). kaat.wils@arts.kuleuven.be

GERALDINE CLAREBOUT is Head of the Center for Medical Education, University of Leuven (O&N II, Herestraat 49 - Box 400, B-3000 Leuven, Belgium). geraldine.clarebout@med.kuleuven.be

LIEVEN VERSCHAFFEL is Full Professor in the Instructional Psychology and Technology research unit, University of Leuven (Dekenstraat 2, Box 3773, B-3000 Leuven, Belgium). lieven.verschaffel@ppw.kuleuven.be

KAREL VAN NIEUWENHUYSE est professeur adjoint au sein du programme de formation des enseignants en histoire, à l'Université catholique de Louvain (Blijde-Inkomststraat 21, boîte postale 3307, B-3000 Louvain, Belgique). karel.vannieuwenhuyse@arts.kuleuven.be

KAAT WILS est professeur au sein du programme de formation des enseignants en histoire et de l'unité de recherche sur la culture historique depuis 1750 à l'Université catholique de Louvain (Blijde-Inkomststraat 21, boîte postale 3307, B-3000 Louvain, Belgique). kaat.wils@arts.kuleuven.be

GERALDINE CLAREBOUT est à la tête du Centre d'enseignement médical de l'Université catholique de Louvain (O&N II, Herestraat 49, boîte postale 400, B-3000 Louvain, Belgique). geraldine.clarebout@med.kuleuven.be

LIEVEN VERSCHAFFEL est professeur titulaire à l'unité de recherche en didactique de la psychologie et technologie de l'Université catholique de Louvain (Dekenstraat 2, boîte postale 3773, B-3000 Louvain, Belgique). lieven.verschaffel@ppw.kuleuven.be