

# Applied History in the Netherlands and Flanders

## Synergising Practices in Education, Research, and Society

27

VIOLET SOEN AND BRAM DE RIDDER

This contribution shifts the debate on ‘applied history’ from the archetypal questions about terminology and definitions (‘what’s in a name?’) to its current context and potential (‘why it is here again and why it is most probably here to stay?’). Those advocating applied history in the Netherlands and Flanders by and large agree on a shared endeavour to apply historical skills and insights to contemporary societal debates. They thereby tend to promote long-term, comparative, and out-of-the-box thinking to confront today’s (wicked) problems. In these endeavours they offer an alternative to writing commissioned histories and commercial joint ventures, as well as to the ‘public history’ initiatives co-created by heritage institutions, museums or media outlets. Changing constellations of ideas and incentives in education, science, and society have certainly helped to create an incubation period for the development of applied history. History curricula now allow students to experience their added value in the workplace, research programmes ask to reflect upon the impact and valorisation of historical research, and most of all, younger historians are eager to merge postmodern approaches with clear societal achievements and are trying to do so on safe ethical and methodological grounds. This contribution argues that applied and fundamental research in the field of history could be mutually beneficial, rather than antithetical or antipathetic, and that both approaches can reinforce each other in the future.

Deze bijdrage verschuift het debat over ‘toegepaste geschiedenis’ van de archetypische vragen over terminologie en definities (‘what’s in a name?’) naar zijn huidige context en potentieel (‘waarom is het opnieuw hier en waarom zal het hoogstwaarschijnlijk blijven?’). In Nederland en Vlaanderen zijn voorstanders van toegepaste geschiedenis het grotendeels eens over een gezamenlijk streven om

zowel historische vaardigheden als inzichten toe te passen op maatschappelijke debatten. Daarbij hebben ze de neiging om langetermijn-, vergelijkend en ‘out-of-the-box’ denken te bevorderen bij de aanpak van hedendaagse complexe problemen. Zo bieden ze niet alleen een alternatief voor commerciële samenwerkingsverbanden of het schrijven van geschiedenisboeken in opdracht, maar ook voor publiekshistorische initiatieven die mede zijn opgezet door erfgoedinstellingen, musea of mediakanalen. Veranderende opvattingen in onderwijs, wetenschap en samenleving hebben bijgedragen aan deze ontwikkeling van toegepaste geschiedenis. Geschiedeniscurricula laten studenten tegenwoordig hun toegevoegde waarde direct op de werkplek ervaren via stages, terwijl onderzoeksprogramma’s vragen om na te denken over de impact en valorisatie van historisch onderzoek. Vooral jongere historici combineren al een postmoderne benadering met concrete maatschappelijke verwezenlijkingen en proberen dat te doen op een ethische en methodologisch verantwoorde manier. Deze bijdrage stelt dat toegepast en fundamenteel historisch onderzoek voor beide deelgebieden voordelig zou kunnen zijn, in plaats van antithetisch of antipathiek, en dat beide benaderingen elkaar in de toekomst kunnen versterken.

In early May 2020 in the opinion section of *NRC Handelsblad*, four Dutch scholars criticised the absence of historical insight and expertise from the management of the COVID-19 crisis in the Netherlands. In this co-authored op-ed, Beatrice de Graaf, Lotte Jensen, Rina Knoeff, and Catrien Santing stressed that the COVID crisis should not be understood solely as a medical challenge, but also as a ‘wicked problem’ that requires the involvement of scholars in the fields of history and the humanities.<sup>1</sup> In a larger piece subsequently published online by the Koninklijk Nederlands Historisch Genootschap (Royal Netherlands Historical Society, RNHS) the oldest professional organisation for historians in the Netherlands, the four authors turned their polemical outcry into a broader manifesto for ‘applied history’, calling on their fellow historians to ‘act upon and participate’ in societal debates, whether linked to the ongoing pandemic or not.<sup>2</sup> Both texts referred to the 2014 work *The History Manifesto* by Jo Guldi and David Armitage, which argues for the use

1 Beatrice de Graaf et al., ‘Historici moeten ook meedenken, juist nu’, *NRC Handelsblad*, 1 May 2020. Zie ook hun blog ‘Beste overheid, gebruik historische kennis in de strijd tegen de pandemie’, *de lage landen*, 1 April 2021, <https://www.de-lage-landen.com/article/beste-overheid-gebruik-historische-kennis-in-de-strijd-tegen-de-pandemie>. Accessed 4 October 2021.

2 The website [www.historici.nl](http://www.historici.nl), hosted by the Royal Netherlands Historical Society (RNHS), subsequently launched a ‘dossier’ on applied

history, which at the time of writing (10 September 2020) contained eleven entries by Dutch and Flemish historians. See: <https://www.historici.nl/category/dossier-toegepaste-geschiedenis/>. Another immediate result of the manifesto was a digital lunch seminar on applied history hosted by the RNHS, held on 16 June 2020 with more than fifty participants.

3 Jo Guldi and David Armitage, *The History Manifesto* (Cambridge 2014). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781139923880>.

of long-term perspectives in contemporary debates.<sup>3</sup> The Dutch manifesto further reflected, but did not explicitly mention, the *Applied History Manifesto*. This text was published in a 2016 online blog by Graham Allison and Niall Ferguson and underpins a larger research project at the Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Center. The American manifesto similarly promoted the need for more historical awareness and expertise in government. As it was published on the eve of Donald Trump's election, it received serious coverage in the United States and abroad, not in the least because it argued for a 'White House Council of Historians'.<sup>4</sup>

Both the Dutch and the American manifesto seized upon topical debates to promote the perspective of applied history. However, while conveying the broader message that the present can inspire historians to 'activate the past', the format and the timing of the manifestos' appeals created doubt about their purpose, especially amongst those unacquainted with or even antipathetic to such an approach.<sup>5</sup> Rather than uniting scholars with opposing views, the initial reactions of their peers made clear that the manifestos risked dividing the historians' academic guild: due to some carefully elaborated-upon methodological and epistemological considerations, some of its members, first and foremost, came to defend the guild's dedication to researching the past and the past alone.<sup>6</sup> For other critics, the genre of a 'manifesto calling for future action' seemed to invalidate previous initiatives pioneered by (Dutch-speaking) scholars that have engendered this movement towards applied history, revitalising,

4 Graham Allison and Niall Ferguson, 'Applied History Manifesto', *Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs*, October 2016, <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/applied-history-manifesto>. Accessed 13 October 2020. Niall Ferguson has meanwhile relocated to Stanford, where he co-organised an applied history conference in March 2018 which added to the controversy as it only listed male and white presenters. Priya Satia, 'The Whitesplaining of History is over', *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 28 March 2018. This conference furthermore sparked the worldwide movement 'Women also know history', which inspired many female historians to list themselves with their academic titles on social media: <https://womensoknowhistory.com/about/>. See also Maya Salam, 'Stanford History Event Was "Too White and Too Male," Organizer Admits', *New York Times*, 17 March 2018.

5 Jeremy Adelman, 'Who Needs Historians', *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 9 August 2016; Harvey Day, 'Does the President need help from historians? Top academics propose new "historical council" to help the White House avoid mistakes like the Iraq war', *The Daily Mail*, 24 August 2016; Gillian Tett, 'History lessons for the White House', *Financial Times*, 2 September 2016; Moshik Temkin, 'Historians Shouldn't be Pundits', *The New York Times*, 26 June 2017; Bastiaan Bommeljé, 'Historici kunnen niets bijdragen aan coronabeleid', *NRC Handelsblad*, 11 May 2020; Daniela Hooghiemstra, 'Geld is geen garantie voor culturele waarde. Wél voor de komst van handige jongens en meisjes die de taal van Den Haag spreken', *de Volkskrant*, 25 May 2020.

6 Beverley Southgate, *What is History For?* (London/New York 2005) 10-30. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203696668>.



In May 2020, the applied history manifesto by Beatrice de Graaf, Lotte Jensen, Rina Knoeff and Catrien Santing called for more attention to history in COVID-19 related decision-making. By that time comparisons with the Spanish Flu of 1918-1920 circulated widely. Image of the Seattle police force using face masks, December 1918. © National Archives at College Park, MD, record number 165-ww-269B-25.

but also reconfiguring, long-standing practices of public history.<sup>7</sup> At the moment that the Dutch manifesto urged for things to be done differently, Brill had already launched a *Journal of Applied History*, Leuven University Press had been planning to start a book series on the same topic, and this very journal, *BMGN – Low Countries Historical Review*, had invited its authors to add an *actualiteitsparagraaf* (current events paragraph) to their article, in which they explain the connection between their historical research and current affairs.<sup>8</sup>

The Dutch manifesto thus does not represent the start of something new, but is an integral part of a present boom in applied history that is closely associated with current developments in the field of public history. Indeed, as the manifesto itself states, problem-oriented historical thinking is, of course, a centuries-old – if not millennia-old – practice that never fully disappeared.<sup>9</sup> This contribution will sketch out the broader context of the current revival in applied history on both sides of the Atlantic and shall outline the implications of this revival for historians in the Low Countries.<sup>10</sup> Instead of elaborating on one definition of applied history or disentangling the epistemological and methodological questions behind it, this article will highlight those academic practices, groups, centres, and projects in the Netherlands and Flanders that are contributing to the global movement towards a more applied approach to history. Moreover, it will look into the methods by which these projects are making this contribution. The article will further analyse some of the shared perspectives between these new initiatives. Most importantly, this contribution will argue that the applied activities housed within the Netherlands and Flanders represent tangible translations of broader shifts in the way academic historians ‘do’ history today. After all, most

7 See the overview of this particular critique in Bram De Ridder, “‘And what do you do, exactly?’ Comparing contemporary definitions and practices of applied history”, *International Public History*, accepted for publication in 2022.

8 Harm Kaal and Jelle van Lottum, ‘Waarom “applied history”? Overwegingen achter de oprichting van het Journal of Applied History’, *Historici.nl*, 26 May 2020, <https://www.historici.nl/dossier-toegepaste-geschiedenis-waarom-applied-history-overwegingen-achter-de-oprichting-van-het-journal-of-applied-history/?type=bijdrage>; ‘Nieuw: de actualiteitsparagraaf van BMGN-LCHR’, *RNHS*, 31 March 2020, <https://knhg.nl/2020/03/31/nieuw-de-actualiteitsparagraaf-van-bmgn-lchr/>.

9 See Jacqueline Nießer and Juliane Tomann, ‘Public and Applied History in Germany: Just Another Brick in the Wall of the Academic Ivory Tower?’, *The Public Historian* 40:4 (2018) 11–27, as well as the rest of the roundtable on applied history in this volume. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/tph.2018.40.4.11>.

10 This also makes this article an internationally accessible response to Lieke Smits’ recent plea for a better connected Dutch-Flemish dialogue on public history: Lieke Smits, ‘Waardeer de historicus die het publiek opzoekt’, *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 134:1 (2021) 6. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5117/tvg2021.1.001.smit>.

scholars already engage in some form of applied history, be it in their role as teachers, scholars, or citizens. History internships, the valorisation of historical research, or simply the urge to provide connecting histories that ‘care’<sup>11</sup>, are just some of the activities that already permeate the discipline. Unravelling the synergies between these broader constellations of ideas and practices in education, science, and society helps account for the current development of applied history, while simultaneously highlighting the need for more joint initiatives and shared methodologies.

### Applied history: apart or together?

Undoubtedly anticipated by its authors, the Dutch manifesto for applied history immediately provoked sharp rebukes from those defending the discipline of history as a branch of fundamental research for the sake of the past and the past only. *NRC Handelsblad*, the very same newspaper that launched the Dutch manifesto, one day later featured a response by Bastiaan Bommeljé, who stated that ‘a serious historian [...] should only be directed towards the study of the past’.<sup>12</sup> Likewise, in a commentary for *de Volkskrant* historian Daniela Hooghiemstra opined that the discipline might be better off ‘without this sort of nonsense’.<sup>13</sup> Even a more sympathetic commentator like Ido de Haan still argued that the traits of the historian probably ‘render them rather unsuitable as policy advisors’.<sup>14</sup> These reactions demonstrated how the *NRC* op-ed had been picked up by some members of the discipline who framed applied history as pure policymaking, as opposed to a broader appeal to ‘apply and participate’ in the face of contemporary challenges. These comments illustrate the extent to which historians in the Netherlands and Flanders remain critical towards utilitarianism and showed how quickly a historian’s dedication to the present, even if only partial, is portrayed as an infraction against the past.

When considered more broadly, the critiques reframed some of the more stereotypical frictions between fundamental and applied research that run through almost all fields of science and scholarship, but which in history seem to have developed within a different context. Whereas the international renewal and reform movements of the 1960s and 1970s anchored applied economics and applied political and social sciences within their respective academic disciplines, similar tendencies to jumpstart applied history in history departments were channelled into a much more

11 Donald R. Davis, ‘Three Principles for an Asian Humanities: Care First... Learn From... Connect Histories’, *The Journal of Asian Studies* 74:1 (2015) 43–67. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911814001673>.

12 Bommeljé, ‘Historici kunnen niets bijdragen’.

13 Hooghiemstra, ‘Geld is geen garantie’.

14 Ido de Haan, ‘De lockdown als onderduik’, *De Groene Amsterdammer*, 29 July 2020.

broadly conceived public history movement. Historians at UC Santa Barbara in particular proposed that the applied version of their discipline be called public history. According to them, the most logical step for furthering this new (sub)field was the establishment of platforms co-created by academic historians and interested non-academics that worked to bring academic history and societal interests together. Since then the journal *The Public Historian*, the US National Council on Public History (NCPH), and the International Federation for Public History (IFPH-FIHP) have carved out a flourishing research field that analyses the diverse ways in which academically-trained historians can interact with society.<sup>15</sup>

Evidently public history had arrived at history departments, but it was not really viewed as an applied form of the discipline, mainly because it covered ‘current issues to solve’ as well as a wider field of activities in education, media, heritage, popular culture, museum studies, memory studies, and the like. Consequently, the term applied history gradually became side-lined. It had been coined early in the twentieth century by the subfield’s ‘founding father’, Benjamin Shambaugh (1871-1940), who edited the Iowa Applied History Series while counselling the Iowa legislature. Shambaugh’s legacy was later reevaluated when he was acknowledged as a key contributor to the intellectual foundations of public history.<sup>16</sup> In the 1980s, the term applied history again regularly popped up, but was often conflated with other terms like ‘history and policy’.<sup>17</sup> The terminological confusion between applied and public history became poignantly clear when American observers rebranded the 1982 ‘Social Science Research Council Anglo-Dutch Seminar on *Applied History*’ held at the Erasmus University of Rotterdam as the ‘the first European conference on *Public History*’ [emphasis by the authors]. According to Paul Knevel, the focus on the public rather than the applied use of history was reinforced by the cultural turn, as the socio-economic focus of the Rotterdam meeting was slowly replaced by epistemological and practical questions about ‘what is put before the public and by whom’, instead of ‘by which methods and with what aims should this connection be made’.<sup>18</sup>

15 <https://online.ucpress.edu/tph>; <https://ncph.org/>;  
<https://ifph.hypotheses.org/>.

16 Benjamin F. Shambaugh (ed.), *Applied History* (Iowa City 1914); Rebecca Conard, *Benjamin Shambaugh and the Intellectual Foundations of Public History* (Iowa City 2002).

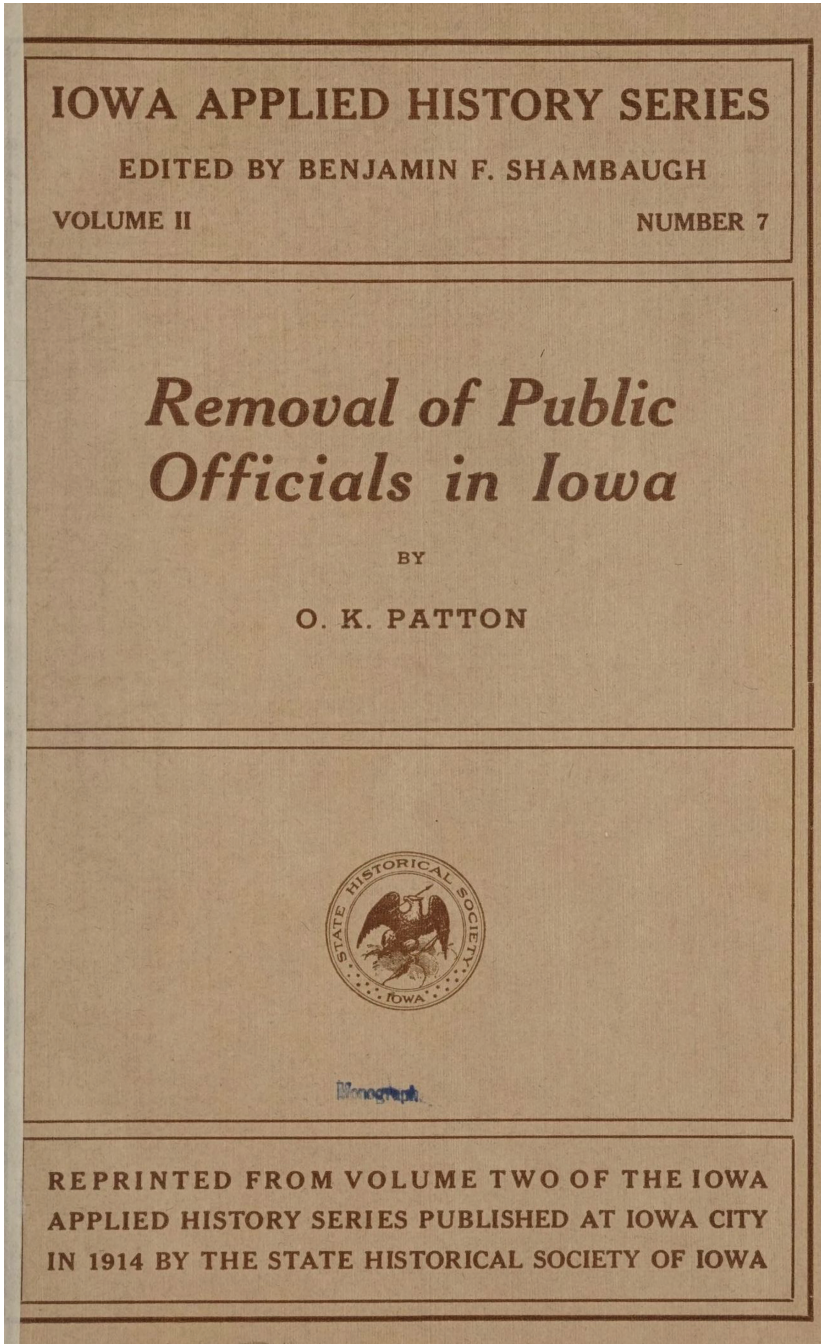
17 Two scholars who did actively use the term in the 1980s were Joel Tarr and Peter Stearns: Peter Stearns and Joel Tarr, ‘Applied History: A New-Old Departure’, *The History Teacher* 14:4 (1981)

517-531. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/493687>;

Peter Stearns and Joel Tarr, ‘Curriculum in Applied History: Toward the Future’, *The Public Historian* 9:3 (1987) 111-125. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/3377191>.

18 Paul Knevel, ‘Public History: The European Reception of an American Idea?’, *Levend Erfgoed. Vakblad voor public folkore & public history* 6:2 (2009) 4-8.





Cover of a reprint of volume 2, no. 7 of the Iowa Applied History Series, edited by Benjamin Shambaugh. O.K. Patton, Iowa City, Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, 1914.



Today, the relationship between public historians and the term applied history appears to be less complicated.<sup>19</sup> The American NCPH website now states:

[Public history] is history that is applied to real-world issues. In fact, applied history was a term used synonymously and interchangeably with public history for a number of years. Although public history has gained ascendance in recent years as the preferred nomenclature especially in the academic world, applied history probably remains the more intuitive and self-defining term.<sup>20</sup>

This interpretation suggests a gradual (re-)alignment of public and applied history, although uncertainties about the precise relation between both terms remain. For instance, neither the Dutch nor the American applied history manifesto mention public history, thereby suggesting that it is different from applied history, while the Applied European Contemporary History Network states on its website that applied history constitutes a ‘subordinate field’ to the broader public history approach.<sup>21</sup> By contrast, the IFPH-FIHP president Thomas Cauvin advocates a more flexible and inclusive definition of applied and public history, as outlined in his *Public History: a Textbook of Practice*.<sup>22</sup> Although many other variations can be found, the current trend is to consider applied history as a problem-oriented subfield of public history. As a subfield, applied history shares with public history its outward-looking, collaborative, and present-related objectives, but it starts with different questions, primarily because those questions are formulated as problems and challenges. From this perspective, every ‘applied historian’ can be considered a ‘public historian’. However, within the broader field of public history, applied historians can be ‘identified’ by

19 For example, the Flemish-Dutch Association for Early Modern History ([www.vnvngeu](http://www.vnvngeu)) dedicated two annual meetings to these interrelated questions, which in hindsight unconsciously mapped the move from ‘public’ to ‘applied’ history: Paul Knevel and Guido Marnef (eds.), *Vroegmoderne Geschiedenis in de publieke ruimte* (Maastricht 2016) and Jasper van der Steen and Hans Cools (eds.), *Vroegmoderne geschiedenis in actuele debatten* (Leuven 2020).

20 ‘About the Field’, *National Council On Public History*, <https://ncph.org/what-is-public-history/about-the-field/>. Accessed 1 July 2020.

21 This network is coordinated by the University of Jena and involves the University of Ghent

and CegeSoma, the Belgian expertise centre on historical conflicts. ‘The Network’, *Applied European Contemporary History*, <https://aec-history.uni-jena.de/network/>. Accessed 15 September 2020.

22 Thomas Cauvin, *Public History: A Textbook of Practice* (Abingdon 2016) 12–14. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315718255>. Cauvin recently relocated from universities in Louisiana and Colorado, where he was active for the NCPH, to participate in the Luxembourg Centre for Contemporary and Digital History (C<sup>2</sup>DH), a new hub for his approach.

the nature of their projects focused on contemporary issues, discrepancies, and injustices which have been identified by their audiences and partners beyond academia.<sup>23</sup>

At the international level, public and applied historians have already renewed their dialogue with one another. Conversely, in the Netherlands and Belgium, most history departments seem more cautious when it comes to applied history, especially when it is defined in terms of influencing contemporary debates or helping policymakers ‘use’ the past for decision-making processes.<sup>24</sup> The aforementioned responses to the Dutch applied history manifesto are a case in point, but many Flemish historians share this critique.<sup>25</sup> When in 2010 the Royal Academy for the Sciences and the Arts in Flanders held a forum on the role of historians in policy and society, the prevailing sentiment was one of caution. Many participants argued that historians ought to fear the instrumentalisation of their work and should thus maintain a critical distance from the present.<sup>26</sup> Here, the collective professional trauma of World War II, the obligation to avoid the failures of national colonialist projects, and the methodological advances accompanying postmodernism underpin core values that orient the craft towards ‘history for the sake of history’ and towards a defensive stance against those who seek to (ab)use the past for present gain.<sup>27</sup> Historians who were strongly committed to postmodernism sought to draft historical narratives that were ‘free from today’ and that sought to open up a more nuanced and ‘trustworthy’ view of the past. These narratives would help reveal the ‘paths not taken’ and present insights that contradict our assumptions of ‘development’ and ‘progress’. A committed generation of postmodern historians was eager to highlight that the past was indeed a foreign country in which (mostly dead) people did things differently and which was particularly hard to traverse in the absence of complete source records. As a result, historians became mediators or even

23 De Ridder, “‘And what do you do, exactly?’”; Bram De Ridder, ‘Toegepaste Geschiedenis: van problematisch tot probleemgericht’, *Over de Muur*, 20 May 2021, <https://overdemuur.org/toegepaste-geschiedenis-van-problematisch-tot-probleemgericht/>. Accessed 4 October 2021.

24 Carolyn Holbrook and David Lowe, ‘Can historians influence public policy? Challenges and possibilities’, *History Australia* 18:1 (2021) 3–22. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14490854.2021.1878464>.

25 This Fall 2010 meeting of the *Koninklijke Vlaamse Academie der Wetenschappen en Kunsten* in Brussels (for the conference proceedings, see the following footnote), coincided with a workshop

in Leiden in June 2010, where there was more enthusiasm for the possible roles of historians. In 2016, the RNHS hosted a meeting on this theme as well.

26 Els Witte, *De maatschappelijke rol van de geschiedenis. Historici aan het woord* (Brussels 2010).

27 Jo Tollebeek, ‘The Use of History in Belgium and the Netherlands, 1945–65: Presentism and Historicism in the Work of Jan Romein, Pieter Geyl, and Leopold Flam’, *Dutch Crossing* 39:1 (2015) 68–71. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1179/0309656414Z.0000000067>; Witte, *De maatschappelijke rol*.

co-creators of the past, sometimes at the cost of their connection with the present.<sup>28</sup>

The only safe ground for applied history seemed to be that of ‘concerned historians’ like Antoon De Baets, who were keen to prevent ‘abuses’ of history by politicians and opinion-makers.<sup>29</sup> As recently as August 2020, 58 Belgian historians openly criticised the newly-created Congo Commission in the Belgian parliament, arguing that history should be ‘entirely decoupled from the political debate about current affairs’, as the past ‘can never be instrumentalised for political confrontations or by interest groups’.<sup>30</sup> Such concerns almost inevitably emerge whenever history and/or historians are explicitly asked to take on a public function, whether this involves, for example, their engagement with national education curricula or their involvement in processes of transitional justice. Furthermore, given the ample ideological, political, and commercial misrepresentations of the past, the risks of applying history to contemporary challenges need to be taken seriously.<sup>31</sup> Yet, the fact that historians usually judge each other’s interactions with the present on a case-by-case basis underscores that there currently are no agreed-upon standards for either public or applied history and that it might be impossible (or even undesirable) to reach a strict consensus.<sup>32</sup>

- 28 Frank Ankersmit, *Meaning, Truth, and Reference in Historical Representation* (Leuven 2012). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7591/cornell/9780801450716.001.0001>.
- 29 Margaret MacMillan reminded us how to dismantle the games politicians sometimes play with history in *The Uses and Abuses of History* (London 2009). Her endeavour is mirrored by Antoon De Baets in the Network of Concerned Historians: <http://www.concernedhistorians.org/>. Accessed 13 October 2020.
- 30 ‘58 historici nemen “Congo-commissie” onder vuur’, *De Standaard*, 17 August 2020. Other historians came to defend the Commission and argued for more understanding between academic historians, politicians and the broader public: Eva Willems et al., ‘De verlamdende angst van de historicus’, *De Standaard*, 24 Augustus 2020. It is worth noting that earlier in 2020 similar tensions led to a crisis in the Kazerne Dossin, the Malines institute dealing with the Holocaust and human rights: Wouter Woussen, ‘Negen leden wetenschappelijke raad Kazerne Dossin nemen ontslag’, *De Standaard*, 10 March 2020. Similarly, the political proposal to create a ‘Flemish Historical Canon’ was fiercely criticised by academic historians: Fabian Lefevre, ‘Historicus ku Leuven: “Vlaamse canon neigt naar superioriteitsdenken”’, *VRT NWS*, 13 August 2019; Simon Demeulemeester, ‘Bruno De Wever: “Mijn broer zou beter moeten weten”’, *Knack*, 14 August 2019; Jan Dumolyn, ‘Een canon kan nuttig zijn, opgesteld door historici, artiesten en wetenschappers, niet door tweetende politici’, *Knack*, 16 August 2019; Bram De Ridder, ‘Wanneer geschiedenis een slagveld wordt: ook in het buitenland zijn historische lijstjes een politiek strijdpunt’, *Knack*, 21 August 2019.
- 31 Berber Bevernage, ‘Geschiedenis in overheidsopdracht: wetenschap, ethiek en politiek in de Belgische Lumumba-commissie’, *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 125:1 (2012) 80-95. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5117/TVGESCH2012.1.BEVE>.
- 32 Ludmilla Jordanova for example argued for a deeper reflection on public history practices without this leading to exclusionary hierarchies between ‘better’ and ‘worse’ forms of public history: Ludmilla Jordanova, ‘Public History



Applied history and wicked problems being presented to a student audience during the international 'Falling Walls' competition in 2018. Bram De Ridder, 'Breaking the Wall of Wicked Problems', Falling Walls Lab Leuven, 2018.

© Bram De Ridder.

Cauvin's studies have amply demonstrated that the international development of public history has been anything but a linear process, giving rise to manifold purposes, methodologies, and ethical standards in equally varied contexts.<sup>33</sup>

Still, these critical attitudes in themselves are testament to the increased attention to applied history in both the Netherlands and Flanders, suggesting that some important shifts have occurred.<sup>34</sup> Exactly ten years after most Flemish historians hesitated to establish the close working relationship with policymakers that the NRC op-ed sought to promote, a growing number of Dutch and Belgian historians again subscribe to the idea of applied history. Brill's *Journal of Applied History* for instance, led by Jelle van Lottum and Harm Kaal, 'promotes interventions in contemporary policy-making as well as in contemporary discussions about key social issues that are based on thorough historical research', thus inviting academic historians and policymakers to engage with each other.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, the aforementioned planned Leuven University Press book series proposes to revise the application of history. The series aims to clarify the benefits and risks of thinking historically when dealing with contemporary issues, to critically evaluate when and how historians can play an advisory role, and to reveal when and how the past matters for decision-making in current affairs, be it by governmental or societal stakeholders. Additionally, in the forum on applied history on the online platform *Historici.nl*, a number of academic historians have explained how they apply history in their current research or teaching, illustrating how quickly applied history is (or already was) becoming a part of the historical discipline in the Low Countries.<sup>36</sup>

Building on the observation that the academic interest in applied history has been growing steadily, in the following sections we argue that this reconfiguration of a part of public history into applied history is no coincidence. We will discuss how, in the past few years, most Dutch and Flemish historians have gradually, and perhaps unknowingly, moved

Workshop, "A Provocation", *Royal Historical Society*, 29 October 2015, <https://royalhistsoc.org/public-history-workshop/>. Accessed 4 October 2021; Thomas Cauvin, "New Field, Old Practices: Promises and Challenges of Public History", *Magazén* 2:1 (2021) 16.

33 Thomas Cauvin, 'The Rise of Public History: An International Perspective', *Historia Critica* 68 (2018) 3-26. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7440/histcrit68.2018.01>. Journals that have shaped this variety in approaches include the American *The Public Historian*, the Australia-based *Public History Review*, the German-published *International*

*History Review*, and the British *History Workshop Journal*.

34 Robbert-Jan Adriaansens and Tina van der Vlies, 'Discussedossier: uitdagingen voor de hedendaagse historische cultuur: een inleiding', *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 134:1 (2021) 103. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5117/TVG2021.1.007.ADR1>.

35 'Journal of Applied History', Brill, <https://brill.com/view/journals/joah/joah-overview.xml>. Accessed 13 October 2020.

36 *Historici.nl*, <https://www.historici.nl/category/dossier-toegepaste-geschiedenis/>. Accessed 13 October 2020.

towards applied activities. Furthermore, we will examine how incentives stemming from education, research, and society have slowly inculcated the idea that ‘doing history’ can be about much more than studying the past for its own sake or bringing historical information to a non-academic audience. Other disciplines have already identified the benefit of cooperation between fundamental and applied research, despite occasional conflicts. The field of history is now doing the same. The worldwide applied history movement creates opportunities to (re)join dynamics that drifted apart after the Second World War and to build a common ground for interdisciplinary approaches as well as a renewed cooperation between stakeholders in society and academia.

### History (students) on the job

The Dutch manifesto helped to portray applied history as a form of public action whereby historians use their knowledge of the past to assist politicians and policymakers in tackling major contemporary problems. As such, De Graaf, Jensen, Knoeff, and Santing adopted, to a great extent, the policy-based approach professed by Shambaugh, and implicitly connected themselves to the British *History & Policy* initiative (2002), the Dutch *Geschiedenis en Beleid* website (2016), and the Harvard Belfer Center’s Applied History Manifesto (2016).<sup>37</sup> All of those groups have indeed argued that handling contemporary problems should be the central task of applied historians. This in turn suggested that the main target for historical involvement should be policymakers and high-level expert groups, as this would allow historians to directly reach the men and women in power. For this reason, and although the alleged focus on government actors has been explicitly rejected by De Graaf, Jensen, Knoeff, and Santing<sup>38</sup>, the authors of both manifestos, as well as the people working in applied history in general, have sometimes been accused of searching influence for themselves instead of ‘speaking truth to power’.<sup>39</sup>

But what happens if one starts to reflect on applied history from another vantage point, namely that of the university student and teacher? One could argue that history students, and maybe to an even greater extent their parents, constitute the most eager audience in terms of caring about and wishing for applied history. At a minimum, first-year students expect an answer to the question ‘why study history?’ from the teachers

37 <http://www.historyandpolicy.org/>. Accessed 13 October 2020; ‘Geschiedenis en beleid’, *Historici.nl*, <https://www.historici.nl/geschiedenis-en-beleid/>. Accessed 13 October 2020.

38 Beatrice de Graaf, Lotte Jensen, Rina Knoeff and Catrien Santing, ‘Dancing with death. A historical

perspective on coping with Covid-19’, *Risk, Hazards & Crisis in Public Policy* 12 (2021) 348-349. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1002/rhc3.12225>.

39 Jeremy Adelman, ‘Who Needs Historians’, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 9 August 2016; Hooghiemstra, ‘Geld is geen garantie’.



at their university.<sup>40</sup> At most, they want to see concrete outcomes of interventions by academic historians in current societal debates. Given the *Freiraum* that university curricula in the Netherlands and Belgium allow, history professors can offer their students a mix of answers, playing the ‘postmodern card’ as well as the ‘transferable skills’ card.<sup>41</sup> History programmes raise students’ sensibilities to the ‘historical sensation’ and ‘joys’ of working with the past<sup>42</sup>, and educate them about the duty of acting upon a ‘historical vocation’.<sup>43</sup> They also offer postmodern insights into the inevitable gap between the past and present and the critical philosophy and methodology of history that accompanies it.<sup>44</sup> Even if the ‘transferable skills’ argument often conflicts with a postmodern epistemology, history programmes do design a set of courses for their students to be among the best data specialists in an era characterised by information overload. Students are made aware that historians are masters in finding relevant questions, in retrieving a source corpus, and in critically evaluating those sources. Historians are able to come up with a carefully formulated argument while recognising the contingency, complexity, and multi-causality behind societal processes in the past and the present.<sup>45</sup>

Since the start of the new millennium, the impetus for didactic standardisation, often inspired by national, European, and international frameworks of evaluation, has forced programme directors in Flanders and the Netherlands to consider more applied answers to the question

40 Numerous history departments now have a ‘why study history’ webpage for prospective students. The American Historical Association has a similar page that includes several resources: ‘Why Study History?’, *American Historical Association*, <https://www.historians.org/teaching-and-learning/why-study-history>. Accessed 13 October 2020. For a very recent set of answers as to why you should study history, see Marcus Collins and Peter Stearns, *Why Study History?* (London 2020).

41 Martha Nussbaum, *Not For Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton 2010); Helen Small, *The Value of the Humanities* (Oxford 2013).

42 Jo Tollebeek and Tom Verschaffel, *De vreugden van Houssaye. Apologie van de historische interesse* (Amsterdam 1992).

43 Eloquently phrased by Jan Roegiers: ‘I have tried to imprint upon my students the idea that the first function of history is to show that things used to be different in the past, fundamentally different. [...] The hopeful aspect of good

history, [...] is that one sees times changing, that nothing has to remain as it is. History removes the self-evident from contemporary existence, the illusion that it has always been and will always remain this way. On the contrary, everything will continue to change – even though we cannot know how – and in that change we can also play a role. Good history opens our eyes to the future’; Dutch quote cited in Violet Soen, ‘Afscheid van een groot kerkhistoricus. In memoriam Jan Roegiers (1944-2013)’, in: Violet Soen and Paul Knevel (eds.), *Religie, hervorming en controverse in de zestiende-eeuwse Nederlanden* (Herzogenrath 2013) 104.

44 Herman Paul, *Als het verleden trekt: kernthema’s in de geschiedfilosofie*. Wetenschapsfilosofie in context (The Hague 2016); Herman Paul, *Key Issues in Historical Theory* (New York 2015).

45 Jeannette Kamp et al., *Geschiedenis schrijven! Wegwijzer voor historici* (Amsterdam 2016).

‘why study history?’, and, even more crucially, to begin incorporating these approaches in the curricula.<sup>46</sup> As the Netherlands and Flanders share the same accreditation organisation, most history curricula in both regions now better outline these *professionele eindtermen* (professional education goals). As early as September 2012, the visitation commission of the history curricula in Flanders urged for more attention to the ‘balance between professional and academic perspectives’, a subsidiary result of the so-called Dublin Descriptors’ agreement in 2004 which was part of the larger Bologna Process. To a lesser or greater extent, history programmes now examine where their students end up in the labour market and try to provide practical connections between the expertise and knowledge of young historians and the professional functions they come to perform after their training.<sup>47</sup> For the Netherlands, this reflection has certainly been more far-reaching because of the split between regular master’s programmes and research master’s programmes. Before the split history curricula in the Netherlands could at least maintain the fiction of training students in historical research only with the aim of moulding them into future researchers. Today, Dutch programme committees have to define what a master’s in history has to offer to those students who will not become researchers and have to ‘apply’ their skills in non-research-oriented jobs.<sup>48</sup>

By offering education that goes beyond public history and heritage, the discipline recently achieved additional contemporary relevance. In some cases, this involves far-reaching interdisciplinary ‘mergers’, like the combination of history and political science offered by Leiden’s master’s

46 Werner Thomas, ‘Onverenigbaar met de arbeidsmarkt?’, *Leven na Letteren, Tijdschrift van de Alumni Letteren Leuven* 3 (2013) 97-104. More recently, Marianne Eekhout, ‘Historicus, en dan? De praktijk als onderdeel van de academische geschiedenisopleiding’, *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 17:2 (2017) 269. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5117/TVGESCH2017.2.EEKH>; Jeanette Kamp et al., ‘Van geschiedenis naar praktijk – maar hoe? Een reactie’, *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 17:2 (2017) 273-276. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5117/TVGESCH2017.2.KAMP>.

47 Jan Hein Furnée (ed.), *Geschiedenis en de arbeidsmarkt* (Nijmegen 2013). For a reflection: VLUHR, *De onderwijsvisitatie geschiedenis: een evaluatie van de kwaliteit van de opleidingen in het domein Geschiedenis van de Vlaamse universiteiten* (Brussels 2012). This study examined the balance

between a professional and an academic outlook and incited programmes to explore the role of ‘professional contexts’ other than research or education.

48 In Flanders, change has been more incremental, but the *Instituut voor Publieksgeschiedenis* of the University of Ghent nevertheless advertises a range of specific MA’s in Public History, including the Antwerp University Master in Cultural Management (Antwerp now also has a Master in Heritage Studies), the Flemish inter-university Master in Archival Studies, the older Master in Public History at the University of Amsterdam and the Master in Art, Culture and Heritage of Maastricht University. ‘Gespecialiseerde masteropleidingen’, *Universiteit Gent*, <https://www.ipg.ugent.be/nl/onderwijs/masters>. Accessed 13 October 2020.

degree in International Relations.<sup>49</sup> In others, it involves universities offering divergent tracks within their regular history master's programme, like the Master 'History Today' in Groningen, in which students choose one of three tracks called Policy, Media, and Education. Another example is the Nijmegen MA degree, in which two of the three options are 'History and Current Affairs' and 'Politics and Parliament'. As the students following this course do not have to train to become academic researchers, they choose to focus on the additional value of history today. This approach has even reached the level of doctoral studies, as exemplified by the 2020 opening meeting of the Dutch-Flemish Research School in Political History, which focused on the question 'what is the use of Applied History?'.<sup>50</sup>

The most striking effect of this pedagogical change is that internships, and sometimes even alternative final tests<sup>51</sup>, have become an accomplished fact within the academic history curricula in the Netherlands and Flanders. These internships in history master programmes probably constitute one of the most tangible proofs that applied history is already out there.<sup>52</sup>

49 'International Relations (MA)', *Universiteit Leiden*, <https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/en/education/study-programmes/master/international-relations>. Accessed 13 October 2020.

50 <https://onderzoekschoolpolitiegegeschiedenis.nl/>. Accessed 13 October 2020. This is not a surprising development, especially in view of the growing number of historians with a PhD leaving academia: Bram De Ridder, 'Carrières in context: Dertig jaar Vlaamse doctoraten in de geschiedenis becijferd', *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 134:1 (2021) 99-101. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5117/TVG2021.1.006>. RIDD.

51 A little over a decade ago, most history colleagues saw this kind of 'professional immersions' as an extravagancy and a craft's defeat to external agencies, that did not seem to understand the historian's profession. The question of the assessment of these alternative tests remains a hot topic, as is exemplified by the following interview: 'Anne van Lieshout: A cookery book as master's thesis', *University of Groningen*, 3 August 2017, <https://www.rug.nl/let/onze-faculteit/actueel/nieuwsberichten-2017/anne-van-lieshout-een-kookboek-als-masterscriptie>. Accessed 13 October 2020. Questioned about 'scientific justification', the Groningen alumna

answers: 'Although the cookery book *Een Friesche eetgeschiedenis* is the final product, I was assessed and finally graduated on the scientific justification for the book. This revolved around the current historiography and the choices I had made regarding the cookery book. As this was the first time that anyone had attempted to write a historical cookery book with supporting justification, my thesis supervisor (Dr Joop Koopmans) and I had to work out the blueprint for ourselves. It was a process of testing, writing, discussing and re-writing. We eventually found our way and the result speaks for itself! I enjoy archive research, but I also want my thesis to show just how practical history can be. A thesis in the form of a cookery book will reach a much wider audience'.

52 To cite but one example, since 2016, the master students at the University of Ghent can follow a 'praktijktraject publieksgeschiedenis', which includes two internships and a research seminar on public history. The 'practical' internship is oriented towards cultural heritage organisations in particular: 'UGent Praktijktraject', *Universiteit Gent*, <https://www.ipg.ugent.be/nl/onderwijs/ugent>. Accessed 26 August 2021.

Precisely these kinds of internships provoked BMGN to design strategies for broader dissemination in history education and society<sup>53</sup>, giving leeway to the *actualiteitsparagraaf*. And although internship opportunities for history students in the Netherlands and Belgium traditionally still take the standard form of working in cultural or heritage institutions, two particular schemes stand out. The first is the ‘learning histories’ method, which has been developed since 2004 by the ‘Groningse School’. By integrating the MIT approach to ‘learning organisations’ and upgrading it with the additional components of storytelling and hermeneutics, more than seventy master’s students engaged with both profit and non-profit organisations to provide the latter with ‘actionable knowledge’, that is, insights from the practice of history that could help these organisations to move and change, as ‘there is nothing more practical than good history’.<sup>54</sup> Another type of internship has been adopted in the last few years by historians at KU Leuven in order to develop ‘service learning’, a practice commonly found in US (liberal arts) programmes. Here, students engage in public service by joining a society-oriented organisation or group and reflecting on their experiences.<sup>55</sup>

What learning histories and service-learning have in common is a ‘show, don’t tell’ attitude, which immediately explains their popularity among students. Publications that deal with the ‘why history’ question usually rely on theoretical or methodological arguments rather than on concrete examples of success. Such theoretical arguments thrive in academia, but not necessarily during job interviews, when applicants standardly need to convince non-academic and non-historian interlocutors of the value of historical studies within the context of an organisation. Strikingly, a 2018 self-help book by the then recent history graduate Kayleigh Goudsmit

53 Stefan van Nieuwenhuizen and Peter Vis, ‘Werkervaring – Samenvatting onderzoek stagiairs Stefan van Nieuwenhuizen & Peter Vis’, RNHS, 29 May 2020, <https://knhg.nl/2020/05/29/werkervaring-samenvatting-onderzoek-stagiairs-stefan-van-nieuwenhuizen-peter-vis/>. Accessed 13 October 2020.

54 Rik Peters, ‘Applied history in actie: learning histories’, *Historici.nl*, 2 June 2020, <https://www.historici.nl/dossier-toegepaste-geschiedenis-applied-history-in-actie-learning-histories/>. Accessed 4 October 2021; Rik Peters and Karin Thier, ‘Learning Histories: Re-authoring the Future in the Mirror of the Past’, in: Jacques Chlopczyk and Christine Erlach (eds.), *Transforming Organizations: Narrative and Story-Based Approaches* (Cham 2019) 121-136. DOI: [https://](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-17851-2_9)

[doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-17851-2\\_9](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-17851-2_9); Rik Peters, ‘Verslag Learning Histories for Sustainable Societies’, *Historici.nl*, 30 January 2017, <https://www.historici.nl/verslag-learning-histories-for-sustainable-societies/>. Accessed 4 October 2021.

55 For an example of the results obtained in this module coordinated by Magaly Rodriguez Garcia, see Annela Robeyns and Esther Lamberigts, “‘Bedankt om naar mij te luisteren’”. De menselijke kant van mannelijk sekswerk’, *Veto*, 15 March 2018, <https://www.veto.be/artikel/bedankt-om-naar-mij-te-luisteren>. Accessed 4 October 2021. In 2019, Antwerp University also hosted the 2nd European Conference on Service Learning in Higher Education, with the involvement of the Leuven-based sinologist-historian Nicolas Standaert.

addressed to history alumni on the job market, indicates that as recently as 2018 many graduates in history were still not sure how to use their degree in a professional context, but were simultaneously eager to show the world the added value of their training.<sup>56</sup>

It is therefore not surprising that the question ‘why study history?’ is an important one, nor is it surprising that the answers to this question remain in constant flux. The changes in history curricula and the emergence of related internships demonstrate that applied history is gradually becoming an established part of the discipline. Perhaps it is no coincidence that many of the protagonists advocating for applied history have been engaged in some way in these wide-ranging educational reforms. Of course, as exemplified by longstanding debates in the context of primary and secondary education<sup>57</sup>, teaching history with an orientation towards the present is sometimes highly contested, if only because of the possible political or ideological repercussions. Yet, the persistence of these debates in fact demonstrates that the demand for applied history has never really diminished and that both the practice of, and reflection on, problem-driven historical thinking will remain important aspects of the historical profession.<sup>58</sup> In these circumstances, it is perhaps better to manage the educational (and other) risks associated with applied history than to ignore or avoid them altogether.<sup>59</sup>

### Interdisciplinarity and valorisation

The Dutch manifesto deplores the ‘micro-allotment’ of specialisms within the historical field as one of the reasons for applied history’s under-the-radar existence, especially because this disciplinary fragmentation has not fostered an inclusive academic environment in which ‘fundamental’, public, and applied history could function alongside each other. However, the text added that historians working in other university departments, like historians of medicine, international law, political institutions, economic crises, European integration, and area studies, have already found workable and more applied approaches to doing history, even though they have not been able to integrate

56 Kayleigh Goudsmit, *Gezocht: historicus* (Amsterdam 2018). Workshops offered by this author found great resonance in 2016: ‘Jonge Historici presenteert: Maak Werk van Geschiedenis’, *Jonge Historici*, 15 September 2016, <https://www.jhsg.nl/maakwerkvangeschiedenis/>. Accessed 4 October 2021.

57 See Tessa Lobbes, *Verleden zonder stof. De strijd om het geschiedenisonderwijs in België (1945-1989)* (Ghent 2017); Marnix Beyen, *Oorlog en verleden.*

*Nationale geschiedenis in België en Nederland, 1938-1947* (Amsterdam 2002); Els Witte, *Voor vrede, democratie, wereldburgerschap en Europa. Belgische historici en de naoorlogse politiek-ideologische projecten (1944-1956)* (Kapellen 2009).

58 These older precedents were also explicitly recognised and mentioned in both applied history manifestos.

59 De Ridder, ‘Carrières’, 99-101.



Applied history in the Low Countries has remained highly engaged with non-university based teaching, with projects such as RETOPEA and Ter Info working on the axis toleration-understanding in dealing with radicalisation and terrorism. The image shows Beatrice de Graaf discussing terrorism in a classroom in Utrecht. © Ruud Bisseling.



these approaches into the mainstream historical profession.<sup>60</sup> It is indeed no coincidence that the manifesto was written by historians who are used to collaborating with other fields of research, both inside and outside the humanities and social sciences. The strong drive towards interdisciplinary research has not only stimulated collaboration across disciplinary boundaries, but also between history and society, simply because many of the disciplines with which historians interact already have an applied component. In order to join forces with academics in other departments, interdisciplinary historians have been required (or allowed) to ponder over why history, for example, matters to law, science, and economics, and, even more challengingly, to the people who work in these fields outside of academia. In such debates, ideas about history serving as a ‘handmaiden’ to other disciplines are never far away, but the discussion at least shows that ‘history for its own sake’ is an approach that has been largely contained to monodisciplinary historical contexts.<sup>61</sup>

Particularly illustrative in this respect is the field of International Relations (IR), as some of its research traditions, the so-called English School for instance, not only build upon a strong basis in history, but simultaneously provide a series of insights on the added value of historical expertise.<sup>62</sup> It is therefore no surprise that the recent Atlantic redevelopment of applied history thrives among scholars working in the field of IR, as exemplified by Allison and Ferguson. Another prominent example is the Centre for Geopolitics at the University of Cambridge, which in 2018 launched *The Engelsberg Programme for Applied History, Grand Strategy and Geopolitics* together with the War Studies Department at King’s College London.<sup>63</sup> However, an important side-effect of this Atlantic vision on applied history

60 Beatrice de Graaf, one of the participants of the network meeting of the RNHS on applied history, rightly reminded us that applied history was already happening in her field of European Studies and Political Science and that historians better not miss the boat.

61 Dirk Heirbaut, ‘A tale of two legal histories’, in: Dag Michelsen (ed.), *Reading Past Legal Texts* (Oslo 2006) 92–93.

62 John Hobson and George Lawson, ‘What is History in International Relations?’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 37:2 (2008) 415–435. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0305829808097648>; George Lawson, ‘The eternal divide? History and International Relations’, *European Journal of International Relations* 18:2 (2010) 203–226. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066110373561>; Joseph MacKay and Christopher David LaRoche, ‘The

conduct of history in International Relations: rethinking philosophy of history in IR theory’, *International Theory* 9:2 (2017) 203–236. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S175297191700001X>; Lorenzo Cello, ‘Taking history seriously in IR: Towards a historicist approach’, *Review of International Studies* 44:2 (2018) 236–251. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210517000432>; Bram De Ridder, ‘Early Modern Peace and International Society: Using Disciplinary Hybridity to Question the Pax Hispanica (1598–1618)’, *The International History Review* 39:2 (2017) 216–236. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2016.1189953>.

63 This was founded in 2015 as the Forum on Geopolitics, the slogan of the Centre is ‘Providing historically-grounded solutions to enduring geopolitical problems’. Its flagship project is ‘A Westphalia for the Middle East’: <https://www.cfg>.

is that the bond with IR has contributed to narrowing down the scope of the term even further. By consequence, applied history has evolved from often meaning ‘history and policy’ into something more akin to ‘history and international policy’. Although this is more nuanced in the Low Countries, the Atlantic shift towards IR has at least created the impression that one cannot be doing applied history without being involved in topics such as ‘grand strategy’ and the ‘international system’. Hence, it again becomes necessary to stress that applied historians have been working in a wide range of interdisciplinary contexts and that the list of topics suited for an applied approach is much longer than what is often inferred from US- or UK-based initiatives. This is demonstrated daily by history interns or alumni.

Meanwhile, academic research in history has been significantly influenced, albeit perhaps undesirably for some, by applied elements coming from beyond ‘the ivory tower’. Concrete stimuli for more applied versions of historical research have certainly emerged out of the changing requirements of research-funding by the national funding agencies in the Netherlands (NWO) and Flanders (FWO). Alongside schemes promoting applied science and scholarship, research grants for more fundamental research now challenge scholars to reflect on how to valorise their findings for society. This means that virtually every historian has to think about where to apply their skills, knowledge, and expertise.<sup>64</sup> Requirements on this valorisation have thus far tended to privilege outreach and science communication (*wetenschapscommunicatie*). Yet, in the Netherlands especially, there are trends in the humanities to include the implementation of anticipated results in the initial research designs or at least to explain the anticipated impact on society (*kennisbenutting*) beyond the mere translation of academic results to non-academic audiences.<sup>65</sup> Other incentives for public engagement that aim to escape the ivory tower of scholarship have been labelled ‘scholarly opinions’. A significant example of this valorisation drive is the national research agenda, drafted consecutively by the Netherlands in 2015 and Flanders in 2018, which uses the participation of the broader public. Remarkably, and perhaps reassuringly, this audience-driven agenda has helped to illustrate the added value of historians, as the majority of humanities-related questions contain at least some historical components.<sup>66</sup>

polis.cam.ac.uk/. Accessed 13 October 2020. For the Engelsberg programme, see: ‘Applying history to 21st century problems’, *Engelsberg Applied History Programme*, <https://eahp.info/>. Accessed 13 October 2020.

64 As Harm Kaal and Jelle van Lottum suggested in their contribution to the forum on applied history on *Historici.nl*, Kaal and Van Lottum, ‘Waarom “applied history”’, *Nieuw: de actualiteitsparagraaf*.

65 In the Netherlands, this is called ‘kennisbenutting’ (<https://www.nwo.nl/beleid/kennisbenutting>), a term which has not made it into the Flemish research jargon.

66 <https://vragen.wetenschapsagenda.nl/>; See *De Vlaamse wetenschapsagenda 2018. Inspiratiedocument dat burgers en wetenschap verbindt* (Brussels 2018) for an evaluation of the ‘questions related to history’: Violet Soen,

Along with the national funding agencies and research agendas, the European Horizon 2020 framework created an additional impetus for historians to help solve current societal problems.<sup>67</sup> Playing the card of transferable skills, most historian-led consortia have been designed to offer advanced methodological training on a European scale or to exchange and empower research infrastructures more transnationally.<sup>68</sup> Still others have mixed this approach with a call to apply history in contemporary debates and policies. One such example is the ‘Religious Toleration and Peace Project’ (RETOPEA), coordinated by the KU Leuven History Department together with partner organisations in eight other countries. This project responded to the Horizon 2020 call on ‘Reflective societies – cultural heritage and European identity’ and hopes to be ‘a new experiment that goes beyond traditional understandings of Applied History’. RETOPEA, for instance, aims to teach teenagers how to develop ‘docutubes’, short movie clips that are inspired by historical source material and that focus on how these youngsters experience religious toleration and coexistence in their own lives.<sup>69</sup> RETOPEA has a solid base in research in history and history education, and its team members have committed themselves to advising regional, national, and EU policymakers on how contemporary education helps combat religious polarisation and propaganda, creating a very clear link between historical research and current policymaking. This combination of goals has taken hold in the Netherlands as well, as the city of Utrecht and Utrecht University joined forces in an applied history project that seeks to aid teachers in discussing terrorism in the classroom.<sup>70</sup>

As a result of these developments, history alumni are increasingly policy and society-oriented, and more and more academic historians are including current or applied elements into their research. Some prefer to keep this engagement as limited as possible, while others take up the challenge of helping to solve wicked problems and other challenges. Regardless of whether this inclusion of contemporary concerns is cause for praise or condemnation,

*Geschiedenis is een werkwoord. Een inleiding tot historisch onderzoek* (Leuven 2016) 48.

- 67 Morgane Le Boulay, ‘EU research policy as a transnational memory policy instrument? The framework programmes and the production of competing visions of Europe’, *Memory Studies*, online publication (2021) 2. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698020988751>.
- 68 See the examples of ReIREs – Research Infrastructure on Religious Studies: <https://reires.eu/>; Resilience – Religious Studies Infrastructure: tools, Innovation, Experts,

conNections and centres in Europe: <https://www.resilience-ri.eu/>; EHRI – European Holocaust Research Infrastructure: [www.ehri-project.eu/](http://www.ehri-project.eu/); EURhisFIRM – Long Term Data for Europe: [www.eurhisfirm.eu](http://www.eurhisfirm.eu/); Time Machine – Adding a New Dimension to the Past: [www.timemachine.eu](http://www.timemachine.eu). All accessed 13 October 2020.

- 69 <http://retopea.eu/s/start/page/home>; <https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/770309/reporting/fr>. Both accessed 13 October 2020.
- 70 ‘Over ons’, *Ter Info*, <https://ter-info.nl/over-ons>. Accessed 4 October 2021.



Bart Willems of the Belgian State Archives opening the first Corvus applied history workshop, held in Antwerp on 22 October 2021. The meeting included presentations by both historians and archivists, debating what role archival expertise can play in the further development of applied history. © Alexandra Van den Berghe.

the academic research trajectory towards applied science and scholarship is an ongoing evolution, also in history departments. This implies that, much like the Dutch manifesto requested, thinking about proper methodologies for applied history has become a concern not just for those willing to engage in applied research, but for the discipline as a whole.

### Public responsibility and methodology

Last but not least, applied history is intricately connected to what historians view as their responsibilities in society. In the past few years many historians responded to crises with clear personal engagement and concern. In the post-postmodern moment scholars dare to care, sometimes inspired by important advances in the Asian humanities or other area studies. In the French tradition, some even urge to care.<sup>71</sup> As mentioned, both the American and the Dutch applied history manifestos were written at a pivotal historical moment and illustrate that at least some historians are eager to address concrete societal problems and injustices, whether inspired by their area of expertise or by wider considerations. However, this engagement with the present raises questions about how applied history and public responsibility can be connected, especially in cases where historians seek to directly inform policy and/or policymakers. This is of course no new question and it rhymes closely with the concerns formulated at the KVAB meeting in 2010: how can researchers maintain their independence while working for a government of one or another ideological persuasion? Does such work not merely help those in power keep their power, while legitimising their ideology? And how can one connect with the present while respecting the past itself? Given these concerns, a crucial element of the Dutch manifesto is its statement that the primary challenge facing applied history is ‘the systematic further development of the methods and functionalities’ of the field. Without such tried, tested, and accepted methodologies, applied history indeed runs the risk of quickly losing the trust of scholars, students and public stakeholders alike.<sup>72</sup>

Although the Dutch applied history manifesto is right in pointing to the importance of recognisable methodologies, the constraints of the genre have not allowed its authors to point either to the methods that have already been developed or to those that are currently being developed. There exists a limited but recognisable set of publications that deal with possible methods for applied history, especially if they are defined within the scope of the ‘history and policy’ line. Here, John Tosh is a case in point as he not only provided important manuals for doing historical research, but also wrote a

71 Davis, ‘Three principles’, *passim*; Vincent Duclert, *L’avenir de l’histoire* (Paris 2010).

72 De Graaf et al., ‘Historici moeten ook meedenken’.

manifesto called *In defence of applied history* (2006), in which he discussed four possible methodologies, including ‘arguing by process’ and ‘prescriptive analogy’.<sup>73</sup> In 2007, David Staley took a different approach, emphasising the value of counterfactual historical thinking as a way of dealing with the future. In doing so, he opened up topics and tools that go well beyond the reliance on past-present analogies and that challenge one to be creative in historical thinking.<sup>74</sup> In 2016, the applied historians of Harvard’s Belfer Center went back in time by paying particular attention to the so-called ‘May Method’ of 1986, which they consider to be a ‘simple procedure’ based on historical analogies:

[...] put the analogy as the headline on a sheet of paper; draw a straight line down the middle of the page; write ‘similar’ at the top of one column and ‘different’ at the top of the other; and then set to work. If you are unable to list at least three points of similarity and three of difference, then you should consult a historian.<sup>75</sup>

Even more recently, John C. Hulsman’s 2018 ten lessons from historical events and persons are worth considering as a distinct methodological approach, as he brought a new touch to the very classic *magister vitae* take on history and policy. Hulsman’s use of history ranged from the Pythia of Delphi to George Harrison, offering an eclectic mix of examples tailored to illustrate geopolitical ‘rules’ like ‘know your country’s place in the world’ or the ‘losing gambler syndrome’.<sup>76</sup> Whether or not all of these methods are equally valuable is a question that needs to be examined, but it should at least be clear that several methodologies are already available for further analysis.<sup>77</sup>

Equally important to these ‘old’ approaches are the ‘new’ methods and tools for applied history that are actively being developed. One prominent us example is the ‘history communication’ approach of Jason Steinhauer, former

73 John Tosh, ‘In defence of applied history: the History and Policy website’, *History & Policy*, 10 February 2006, <https://www.historyandpolicy.org/policy-papers/papers/in-defence-of-applied-history-the-history-and-policy-website>. Accessed 4 October 2021.

74 David Staley, *History and Future: Using Historical Thinking to Imagine the Future* (Plymouth 2007).

75 Allison and Ferguson, *Applied History Manifesto*; Ernest May and Richard Neustadt, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision Makers* (New York 1986).

76 John C. Hulsman, *To Dare More Boldly: The Audacious Story of Political Risk* (Princeton 2018). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.23943/9781400889440>.

77 As a radical outlier, one could point to Alexander Rosenberg’s *How History Gets Things Wrong: The Neuroscience of Our Addiction to Stories*, published in 2019. This publication is so absolute in its denial of the value of historical thinking that rebutting it almost automatically delivers a well thought-out method for doing applied history.



director of the Lepage Center for History in the Public Interest. He created a separate curriculum and syllabus for ‘history communicators’ who want to deal with ‘the disconnect between the vast amounts of historical scholarship produced within the academy and cultural institutions, and non-experts’.<sup>78</sup> In the Low Countries, the *Journal of Applied History* has delivered on its promise to be a safe haven for methodological experiments, offering a publishing platform to several academic projects that are currently investigating the methods and tools associated with applied history. In one of these projects, the KU Leuven History Department and the Belgian State Archives jointly launched the Corvus Historical Consultancy project in 2019, financed by an applied research grant from the FWO.<sup>79</sup> They made it their mission to develop trustworthy methods and tools for applied history, whereby it is important to stress that Corvus not only builds on the knowledge and expertise of historians, but also on that of archivists and societal stakeholders. Corvus members actually include archivists that are working as applied historians *par excellence*, as they have been collaborating with politicians, civil servants, private actors, and the broader public for decades.<sup>80</sup> Meanwhile, its academics work together with nearly a dozen societal partners, ranging from the Flemish parliament and the federal police to the media company DPG, all of whom are equal partners in the search for functional methodologies. This cooperative and co-created approach departs from one-directional ‘dissemination of

78 Jason Steinhauer, ‘Building an interdisciplinary discipline’, *NCPH*, 27 April 2016, <https://ncph.org/history-at-work/building-an-interdisciplinary-discipline/>. Accessed 4 October 2021.

79 One example of this is the stimulation of funding categories that have explicit societal purposes, such as the Strategic Base Research (SBO) grants of the FWO, that combine fundamental research with applied results. The ‘innovation mandates’ of the Flemish Agency for Innovation and Entrepreneurship are another case in point. These mandates endow postdoctoral research at a private company.

80 Because archivists are responsible for turning the files of today into the historical sources – and thus the historical memories – of tomorrow, they have set up intricate discussions with politicians and administrations about the value of history and historical sources. Moreover, they have helped governments and executive branches to decide what information should be kept and disclosed,

creating a close working relationship with policymakers and the public at large. Archivists also help policymakers retrieve historical information that is deemed important for current plans and projects. Finally, the International Council on Archives (ICA) has made it its goal to ensure that historical information can support ‘good governance, the rule of law, administrative transparency, the preservation of mankind’s collective memory, and access to information by citizens’. This can be seen as a clear statement of public responsibility in service of the present. ICA members have defended this idea around the globe, sometimes working in precarious circumstances, placing them and their ‘defence of history’ closer to the actual frontlines of (geo) politics than most other historians: <https://www.ica.org/en>. Accessed 13 October 2020; Gustaaf Janssens, ‘Blijf niet staren op wat vroeger was ...’: *Toekomstgericht omgaan met archief en met geschiedenis* (Leuven 2015).

expertise’ as well as from pure historical consultancy and ‘commissioned’ history.<sup>81</sup>

This cooperative premise, which is reminiscent of the strategies used by other public historians, should be valued in the development of methods and tools for applied history.<sup>82</sup> Methodological projects such as Corvus do not prioritise immediate societal gain (although that is a bonus), but rather the long-term development of applied history as a (sub)field that is trusted by both academic historians and non-historically trained actors. In order to do so, the project starts from a problem-oriented vantage point that is developed in collaboration with the societal partners. Although Corvus operates within the broader themes of borders, trust, and media, it focuses on specific problems that stem from the immediate experience of its non-academic companions. This means that the questions to which history is applied are not necessarily the ‘grand’ or ‘wicked’ problems suggested by the two manifestos, but really depend on the initial perspectives of the societal partners themselves. The partners are of course interested in obtaining concrete results regarding the challenges they currently face, but they are aware that the research goal is not to find a specific solution to their problems, but rather to identify the best way to tackle comparable problems in the future. Recent topics that have been addressed in this cooperative manner include the mismatch between the ongoing drought and the collective memory of Flanders as a wet land, and the response of local governments to Black Lives Matter protests under lockdown conditions.<sup>83</sup>

Facing the question ‘who owns the past?’, historians should thus be able to admit that they do not have sole ownership of the past and that applied

81 Corvus does not consider its societal partners ‘clients’ but rather active partners in an on-going research process. In this sense, the Advies en Actualiteit consultancy group of Radboud University Nijmegen seems to have adopted the working methods of private historical research bureau’s, bringing ‘commissioned history’ (‘geschiedenis op bestelling’) back into the realm of the university. This is noteworthy as in previous years, commission history had more and more become the terrain of non-academic historians: ‘Advies & Actualiteit — onderzoek in opdracht’, *Radboud University Nijmegen*, <https://www.ru.nl/rich/rich-society/advies-en-actualiteit-onderzoek-opdracht/>. For a Flemish example of such a private research bureau, see Geheugen Collectief: <http://www.geheugencollectief.be>. All accessed 13 October 2020.

82 See for example Hilda Kean and Paul Ashton, ‘Introduction: People and their Pasts and Public History Today’, in: Paul Ashton and Hilda Kean (eds.), *People and their Pasts: Public History Today* (London 2009) 1-20. DOI: [https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230234468\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230234468_1).

83 Julie Wynant, *Droogtebeleid in stroomversnelling. Het belang van een collectief geheugen voor het creëren van urgentie* (Leuven 2020); Ben Eersels and Bram De Ridder, ‘Achteraf Bekeken. Wat de geschiedenis ons leert over illegale protesten en hoe we daarmee omgaan’, *Terzake Magazine* 3 (2020) 23-27. Such a cooperative method is not without difficulties – Corvus for example encountered communication gaps – but these difficulties should be seen as learning opportunities rather than discouragements, by historians as well as non-historians involved in applied history.

history offers a new inroad into the ongoing dialogue between history and society. Given the proper methods and tools, applied history will offer ways for historians to disseminate their expertise when needed or asked. It will also allow citizens to take the past as an additional resource (following the lines set out by Jürgen Ren and the Dutch manifesto); or to ‘use the past’ as a way to think and to inspire (in the vein of the proposals of Annelien De Dijn and the much older 1918 essay ‘On creating a Usable Past’ by Van Wyck Brooks)<sup>84</sup>; or to ‘activate the past’ by ‘analysing, alternating and anticipating’ (along the lines of the Corvus project).<sup>85</sup> As such, applied history contributes to the wider movement of citizen science, in which citizens can become co-owners of research, outgrowing the more top-down crowdsourcing initiatives (for which the field of history provided an important incubator)<sup>86</sup> and creating co-owned agendas for research and society. On a more conceptual level for instance, the aforementioned Thomas Cauvin launched the PHACS project in order to examine the possibilities of *Public History* as the new *Citizen Science of the Past*. This project seeks to develop historical practices in public and digital spaces that include, empower, and engage public groups in critical debates about the contemporary history of Luxembourg and Europe while maintaining ethical and methodological standards.<sup>87</sup> Given all of these initiatives and the corresponding growing interest of academic historians to contribute to societal debates, the interactions between the academic profession of history,

84 Annelien De Dijn, ‘Een bruikbaar verleden’, *Historici.nl*, 29 May 2020, <https://www.historici.nl/dossier-toegepaste-geschiedenis-een-bruikbaar-verleden/>. Accessed 13 October 2020; Van Wyck Brooks, ‘On creating a usable past’, *The Dial* 64:11 (1918) 337-341.

85 <https://www.corvushc.be/services>. Accessed 13 October 2020.

86 Violet Soen and Tine Huyse (eds.), *Citizen Science in Flanders: Can we count on you?* Young Academy position papers 2 (Brussels 2016). Both in the Netherlands and Flanders, crowdsourcing has now created a whole new set of interactions between historians, citizens and society. The Utrecht University-led consortium ‘Ja, ik wil’ on marriage acts pioneered how crowdsourcing transcriptions and digitisation could create a whole new level of qualitative and quantitative analysis, and the website [velehanden.nl](https://velehanden.nl) now engages dozens of volunteers: <https://velehanden.nl/>. The Itinera Nova-database, a

project in which the staff of the city archives of Leuven works together with academic historians, similarly relies on a large base of interested citizens for transcribing and for programming computers to read the registers of the bench of aldermen: <https://www.itineranova.be/in/home>. Both in the Netherlands and Belgium, citizen science has also been shaped by historians. In less than five years, the field has undergone a remarkable professionalisation. This includes new research infrastructures, some of which even move beyond the national boundaries, and more expansive and diverse collaborative platforms for interaction, mutual learning, and societal debates within research-driven projects: <https://www.iedereenwetenschapper.be>. All accessed 13 October 2020.

87 ‘Public History as the New Citizen Science of the Past (PHACS)’, C<sup>2</sup>DH, <https://www.c2dh.uni.lu/projects/public-history-new-citizen-science-past-phacs>. Accessed 13 October 2020.

the public, and society will most probably continue to change rapidly in the near future.

### Activating the past

This article has shifted the debate around applied history from the archetypical questions about terminology and definition ('what's in a name?') to its current context and potential in the Netherlands and Flanders ('why it is here again, and why it is most probably here to stay?'). It has become clear that most of the recent applied history protagonists in and around the Netherlands and Flanders more or less agree on a shared endeavour to apply both historical skills and insights to contemporary societal debates. They tend to promote long-term, comparative, and out-of-the-box thinking to confront today's (wicked) problems. In this aspiration, they offer an alternative to writing commissioned histories, commercial joint ventures, or public history initiatives co-created by heritage institutions, museums, or media outlets. Changing constellations of participants in education, science, and society have certainly helped to create an incubation space and time for these developments. History programmes now allow students to experience their added value on the work floor, research programmes ask them to reflect upon historical impact and valorisation, and most of all, younger generations of historians are eager to merge postmodern insights with concrete achievements, seeking to find ways to do so on safe ethical and methodological ground. Rather than becoming activists, these historians want to 'activate the past', acting upon a disciplinary and corporate responsibility towards students and society alike. The past, the remains of the past, and the knowledge and memory of the past will always affect 'the lives of real people'. History has never been a purely clinical study of the dead: it opens up avenues for writing connecting histories and for caring and connecting in the present.<sup>88</sup> History can provide analyses of the 'uncertainties of the past' and write unconventional stories that help to anticipate the future or help find alternatives to the present.

Along the way, this essay has argued that applied and fundamental research in the field of history could be mutually beneficial, rather than antithetical or antipathetic, and that both approaches can reinforce each other, or perhaps even need each other. If applied history is to stay in the Low Countries, the best-case scenario is that we care for and learn from both approaches or, in another version, just agree to disagree. Some readers of this essay might have discovered that they have been 'activating the past' all along, be it in their courses, research projects, outreach or consultancy. Others might, and even should, remain convinced that defending history as

*l'art pour l'art* or even as historical sensation is the best way to proceed. Only in these hermeneutical discussions can the field of history again become more inclusive and will it be able to engage with those who will always apply history in their academic analyses of international relations, economics, health, or to the policymaking, media, or societal debates around the same issues. If one thinks of history as a house with many rooms, then applied history probably refurbishes the front porch on which historians can brainstorm in close collaboration and co-ownership with whoever is popping in or passing by about what's happening on the street. At the same time, in this metaphor, fundamental research continues to thrive in the 'living room' with its many windows, remaining the beating heart of the discipline.

**Violet Soen** is Associate Professor of Early Modern History at KU Leuven. She is the author of *Geschiedenis is een werkwoord. Een inleiding tot historisch onderzoek* (Leuven 2021), an active campaigner for 'citizen science', co-author of the policy paper *Citizen Science in Flanders: Can we count on you?* (Brussels 2016) and facilitator of the EOS-portal [www.iedereenwetenschapper.be](http://www.iedereenwetenschapper.be). Through an FWO-grant scheme for 'strategical research', she and her Corvus team members examine the methodologies for an applied version of historical research and for historical consultancy especially. E-mail: [violet.soen@kuleuven.be](mailto:violet.soen@kuleuven.be).

**Bram De Ridder** is a postdoctoral researcher at KU Leuven. He holds an MA in international relations from the University of Cambridge (2012) and a PhD in early modern history from KU Leuven (2016), having worked on the subject of peace-making and border management during and after the Eighty Years War. After being a visiting scholar at Harvard University, he specialised in applied history, first as a researcher and assistant coordinator of the Horizon 2020-consortium [www.retopea.eu](http://www.retopea.eu), and subsequently as coordinator and researcher of the methodological project Corvus ([www.corvushc.be](http://www.corvushc.be)). E-mail: [bram.deridder@kuleuven.be](mailto:bram.deridder@kuleuven.be).