

Make history a final exam subject for all students

Why the Dutch know so little about their history Subject history marginally in education

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Open letter to ministers Dennis Wiersma and Robbert Dijkgraaf, Ministry of Education, Culture and Science

Many Dutch people know alarmingly little about the Second World War, the Holocaust and Srebrenica, according to research. The Bussemaker report was recently published to strengthen knowledge of the former Dutch East Indies, because knowledge about that history is no less weak. The report contains useful recommendations, but the most important advice is missing: strengthen the infrastructure of history education in the Netherlands.

Dutch Journalist Rudy Kousbroek already said in 1995: "As far as I know, the Netherlands is the only country in the world where it has ever been seriously proposed to abolish all history education. After all, we already have social studies. (...) the bottom has fallen out after the Mammoth Education Law".

Indeed, since 1968, history has become an optional subject in upper secondary education, and later only included in two of the four profiles for students at the two upper levels of secondary education (Havo and VWO). At the third level (the so-called VMBO), students only receive two years of history, usually fragmentary in a combination subject. Primary schools and teacher training colleges also spend few hours on history. Generations of young people therefore have had no history education at all after the age of fourteen or fifteen.

Is it strange then that comparisons with National Socialists and traitors during the Second World War are easily drawn during corona and farmer protests? Why are we surprised that people know so little about the migration history and colonial past of the Netherlands? Who remembers that the Netherlands used to be a republic and what the separation of powers means? Where do conspiracy theories come from?

Historical knowledge is not a cure for extremism, but it is a necessary condition for a nuanced view of current developments in the Netherlands and in the world. Think of the situation in the Middle East, the war in Ukraine or the tense relationship between the US and China. Without historical knowledge, people say and write what they like. It doesn't matter if it's right. Isn't there freedom of speech? That strikes us as a dangerous development.

At school you learn to understand the historical backgrounds of different points of view in the present and to check whether they are based on facts. In addition to factual knowledge, it is important that students can distinguish between facts, opinions and fabrications, between cause and reason, and between intended and unintended consequences. This is called "historical thinking" in history didactics. This ability to think critically and reason with arguments also gives students at colleges and universities a better starting position than is currently the case. Historical knowledge can also support the personal development of young people. Knowledge of their own backgrounds helps them determine their position in the world.

The complaints about the lack of historical knowledge among young people and adults, which have been going on for decades, will continue unabated if the government does not improve the weak position of history education in the Netherlands. The introduction of the historical canon and the epoch framework has not solved anything in that respect. Can we take the Bussemaker report seriously as long as history is not a school subject for all students in all secondary education?

We call on both ministers of Education, Culture and Science to take measures to really strengthen the infrastructure of history education instead of donating a subsidy here and there for a working group such or such. The teachers are ready, the textbooks are constantly being updated, the museums are happy to work with the schools. We urge you: Do something!

Maria Grever (Member of Royal Academy of Sciences in the Netherlands/Erasmus University Rotterdam)

Marjan de Groot-Reuvekamp (president of the Association of History Teachers in the Netherlands)

Steven Stegers (executive director EuroClio)

Henk te Velde (president of Royal Netherlands Historical Society (KNHG)/University of Leiden)

A list of close to fifty scholars, teachers, museum directors and other historians support this call.