Introduction: the dominance of the national container, also in the Netherlands

In the preface to his History of the Russian Empire, the renowned British historian Hugh Seton-Watson reflected on what it meant to write the history of another country. ‘It is difficult’, he argued, to write such a history, because ‘the foreigner has not grown up in its physical and mental climate, and he cannot understand them, still less feel them, in the same way as its own people do. He can spend long periods in a foreign land, learn its language and live among its citizens, to some extent think as they do, and be accepted as a friend’. Still, he concluded ‘this is not the same as being one of the people of the country’.  

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Seton-Watson wrote these reflections in 1967. Generations of Erasmus-exchange students, expanding international staff mobility, dual degree programmes, and EU-funding for cross-border research projects have of course Europeanised the field of history greatly since then. Like his book that is still widely cited, Seton-Watson's considerations on the obstacles for shifting one's national perspective, or adopting the national perspective of others still carry value today. Indeed, as Sonja Levsen and Jörg Requate rightly point out in their introduction, despite all the innovations in the field ‘the national container has remained the dominant frame of investigation’. European history still often appears as a collection of national histories, a series of national Sonderwegs.

Although much has changed for the better, this also applies to historiography in the Netherlands. One could argue that traditionally the history of the Netherlands has been written as if the country were only partially in Europe – or at least that is the way Dutch historians liked to see the country. Writing on the ‘essence’ of his country's national identity, Johan Huizinga, arguably the most famous Dutch historian, argued in 1935 that ‘the strongest asset’ of the Netherlands was ‘its Atlantic side’ as its ‘centre of gravity is in and over the sea’. This way of situating the Netherlands as if it were an island off the European coast rather than on the continent was partially a response to Hitler’s seizure of power in Germany two years earlier. But partially it reflected a longer-standing tradition in Dutch historiography in which the country's history was portrayed as that of a small freedom-loving, sea-faring nation fundamentally different from its European neighbours. The entire history of the Netherlands was nothing but a Sonderweg, because, in Huizinga's words, ‘its foundation was miraculous, its character peculiar and its development astonishing’.

The Second World War ended this illusion of being able to isolate from Europe. Indeed, after 1945 the Netherlands embarked on what one historian labelled ‘a journey to the continent’, or, in other words, the acceptance that its centre of gravity was much more continental than Huizinga had been willing to admit. In terms of historical research, however, this primarily led to research projects that reconsidered the early modern history of the Netherlands. New studies have re-examined the conditions that enabled its ‘golden age’ (a term contested today, because Dutch overseas expansion went with slavery and colonial violence); the Dutch part in the ‘Atlantic revolutions’; and its entanglement in the efforts to build a European security culture after the fall of Napoleon.

Also in this respect, the Netherlands reflects the trends outlined by Levsen and Requate. Indeed, for the more recent period, the Netherlands is still struggling to define its relation to Europe, not just politically, as recent clashes in Brussels have show, but also historically.
Recent monographs on contemporary Dutch history indicate that even the national Sonderweg-narrative has not been completely abandoned. The dominance of the national perspective persists for historical themes that are hotly contested in public debates, such as Dutch violence during decolonisation, the legacy of slavery, and public history of the remembrance of the Dutch colonial past. For all these themes, but also other global events such as the cultural ‘revolution’ of the 1960s, or, more recently, the rise of populism, there are obvious European parallels that deserve to be explored. For example, Dutch decolonisation in Indonesia and the French decolonisation in Indochina; the legacy of slavery in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom; populism in the Netherlands and its relation to its surge in other Western European democracies, and so forth), but the national container often remains dominant.

Barriers to Europeanisation and lessons to learn from other disciplines

While much more ‘Europeanised’ than during Huizinga’s days, especially for the contemporary period, Dutch historians battle with the same issues that Levsen and Requate outline. Why does this national perspective remain so dominant for historians across Europe? Language barriers are, of course, one explanation. Investing in the translation of source material that has been digitalised with remarkable speed over the past decade or so could be one solution to enable more comparisons across borders. Such investments are costly and time-consuming, however, and certainly do not tackle all issues at stake, because these do not result primarily from linguistic pluralism, but are intrinsic to our discipline as such. We often have an idiographic approach to our topic and look with suspicion on nomothetic approaches, believing that the world, past or present, is far too complex to be caught in generalities. This is also an obstacle to seeing European history as more than a collection of innumerable Sonderwegs.

We could learn from other disciplines in this regard, especially from political science. Aided by the fact that they often use sources that can be studied without linguistic obstacles, political science studies have become ‘Europeanised’ over the past decades, in terms of networks, journals and other forms of research infrastructure. What has also greatly aided the integration of the field is that scholars of European politics converge on a common set of overarching questions. These centre mainly, in one way or another, about the rise, expansion and destabilisation of democracy in Europe (the ‘waves’ of democratisation and
its backsliding). Its relevance for us is underlined by the fact that political science theories and methods been applied successfully to historical case studies.⁸

This rallying around a common set of questions with contemporary relevance could be an inspiration for post-1945 history. Important historical cross-border research into previous periods on critical themes include war and resistance, revolutions, and the legacy of imperialism. As a result, these phenomena are more often written as entangled histories than those of the most recent period of European history.⁹ The formulation of such themes for our own period could, therefore, be a response to the challenges to European history today. While we do not know yet how today’s challenges will ‘end’, starting by asking questions is crucial for finding the ‘meaningful objects of comparison and regions for investigation’ that Levsen and Requate highlight as a main objective of European history.

Although European history should not be reduced to the history of European integration, European integration history shows how such a cross-national dialogue can be fostered. The study of the political and economic integration of Europe has often successfully managed to supersede the national perspective or, at least, has shown how several national perspectives form pieces of the puzzle of the integration of Europe. This field has led to infrastructural changes around common themes – chairs in EU-history and new journals in the field. More important, it shows that an overarching question with contemporary relevance is key to starting a dialogue among scholars across the continent. Historical studies of the EU, not unlike the political science studies, all deal with a common question of great contemporary importance: how can we explain that, after the nationalism, antagonism, and violence of the first half of the twentieth century, Europe embarked on the road to integration, peace, and transnational cooperation?

Some common questions to foster transnational dialogues

Such dialogues on commonly shared questions can weave together national historiographies that are now isolated. One theme that seems particularly urgent to me is the history of migration, with particular emphasis not only on refugees and immigration from the former colonies, but also on the history, and the public perception of, labour immigration and emigration, the so-called ‘guest workers’ that migrated from southern to northern Europe in the postwar era.¹⁰ This is par excellence an instance of entangled
history with profound effects on both immigrant and emigrant communities. Yet the experience of countries with larger immigrant communities or countries with smaller immigrant communities and the experience of sending and receiving countries might also be of importance to explain different policies and attitudes on immigration that divide Europe today. Comparisons between countries like Germany and France with countries like Spain and Greece, but also with Eastern European countries seem particularly important in this regard.\textsuperscript{11}

A second topic of major contemporary relevance seems to me to be the welfare state, and particularly the neoliberal reforms of the welfare state since the late 1970s. The notion that neoliberalism was limited to the United Kingdom and the United States or even merely to conservative parties has long been discredited. Neoliberalism was of enormous importance even in left-wing parties and in continental Europe.\textsuperscript{12} But comparisons of neoliberalism have focused mostly on political parties and their ideology rather than the translation of neoliberal concepts into policies at the national level.\textsuperscript{13} Given the diffusion of international networks of neoliberal ideologues as well as the synchronisation of economic policy among European states, comparative research is crucial to understand how and why the scope and shape of the welfare state, and attempts to change it, differs so much across Europe. At first glance, comparisons between different types of welfare state regimes such as the Scandinavian and Mediterranean countries make sense. But also in certain welfare state models, such as the Rhineland model, major differences exist. For example, why has Germany undertaken so many neoliberal labour reforms and France has not?

A final theme, which is by no means an exhaustive list, of immense topical importance is the challenges that democratic institutions across European countries face today. As has been frequently emphasised, these institutions came to display a remarkable uniformity across Western Europe after 1945.\textsuperscript{14} The study of democracy’s postwar ‘model’ has been something of a booming topic, but the challenges posed to it since the 1970s with ever greater insistence are still unknown terrain. Not only the rise of populism, but particularly the decline of the centre parties that were intimately connected to the reconstruction of Western European democracies in the postwar, seems important to me.\textsuperscript{15} Whether French Gaullists, German social democrats or Italian Christian democrats, all these parties lost many of their members and then many of their voters since the late 1970s. They all faced challenges to their ideological assumptions, composition of their core constituency, and their organisational models. Yet historical studies remain largely fragmented along party and national lines. Only studies of how party politicians across Europe responded to these challenges could show how differences in chronology between, say, the collapse of the Italian Christian Democratic party in the early 1990s and the slow but steady decline of
Reading history forward in Europe’s laboratory

Starting from shared questions about pressing contemporary themes enables valuable comparisons and reveals entangled histories such as exist for the pre-1945 period. Of course, the risk of ‘Whig history’ is real when starting empirical historical research from contemporary challenges. It is therefore essential, as Daniel Ziblatt and Giovanni Cappoccia stated a few years ago, to read history forward. Instead of looking at outcomes, we should do what we as historians are actually good at, namely to go back to foundational moments and explain how the ideas, institutional reforms, and political struggles of the past help us to understand the world today. This also sets contemporary political history apart from political science, which all too often reads history backwards to find perceived analogies or illustrations to contemporary events.

Reading history forward is also of particular relevance for another challenge in European history, carving out more specifically the place of European history between global and national history. Although we cannot literally conduct experiments by travelling in time, history can be seen as a laboratory in which we can test hypotheses put forward in the social sciences. Not merely the methodological diversity of European historiography, but the actual diversity of its historical experiences is vital here. This is the reason that a growing number of social scientists use European historical case studies to develop and test their arguments. These offer a wealth of empirical material to illuminate a number of pressing questions.

While this has been mostly limited to processes of state formation and democratisation before 1945, the laboratory of democracy in Europe also offers a wealth of material for comparative historical questions for the postwar period. What were the ingredients of the model that eventually stabilised democracy in Europe after 1945? Why do political regimes across the continent now display such a high level of homogeneity after the heterogeneity before 1945? To what extent did many Southern and Eastern European countries in the third wave of democratisation import the ‘West European’ model? Why do the legacies of dictatorship affect the entrenchment of liberal democratic institutions and attitudes so differently among European states? To be sure, Europe does not provide a normative benchmark in a global perspective. The history of democracy in Europe illustrates perfectly
that Europe’s political modernisation was a process with many setbacks – and that is never irreversible. Nonetheless, the comparative study of Europe’s political laboratory feeds into both national and global history and provides new perspectives on both, as well as on the challenges Europeans face today.

This leads to my final point. The ‘self-reflective’ state of European history today impedes dissemination and public discussion of the results of empirical research, precisely at a time when an historical perspective on contemporary challenges is much needed. Our research might be less directly applicable to public policy solutions than that of economists or sociologists, but at the same time the usage of ‘history’ plays a crucial role in shaping politics both at the national and European level. Historians should play a more prominent role in the ‘European public sphere’ that is slowly taking shape. The goal of historians should not be fostering a pan-European public sphere that might very well remain marginal and elite-focused. Historians should be Europeanising national public spheres by contributing expertise and experiences from across borders in national policy discussions and public debates. Initiatives are already being taken to disseminate research among broader audiences of policy makers, journalists, and think tanks. But our professional organisations are still often organised along national lines, or along sub-disciplinary boundaries. Fostering networks that connect historians studying pressing contemporary challenges to encourage the exchange of empirical research and to make intervention in public and policy debates is essential. These networks could support a sustained cross-national dialogue and have a meaningful impact on national policy debates.

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2. Johan Huizinga, Nederlands geestesmerk, Leiden 1935: 40. [↩]
3. Huizinga 1935: 7. [↩]


7. Think for instance of the parliamentary minutes of parliaments and constituent assemblies/councils, for instance the French, Italian and German ones; of congresses and party programs of the SPD and CDU, for the latter including meetings of the party board; of the digitisation of newspapers, including party newspapers such as the Italian socialist daily Avanti; and the digitisation of campaign material and propaganda material of various social movements by the International Institute for Social History. Examples of successful translation of source material include for instance the ‘German History in Documents and Images’ which has digitised German sources since 1500 and translated these into English (https://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/about.cfm); and the database on national political party legislation from all countries in European Union (http://www.partylaw.leidenuniv.nl).


10. On the topic there are mostly edited volumes, which can be very good, but which are a collection of national case studies: David Cesanari and Mary Fulbrook (eds.), Citizenship, Nationality and Migration in Europe, London 1996.


19. See the recently established Journal of Applied History which ‘promotes interventions in contemporary policy making as well as in contemporary discussions about key social issues that are based on thorough historical research’.

20. For instance, in the field of Social History, with its European Social Science and History Conference; or the Association for Political History.