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***THE STORY OF FLANDERS: THE FLEMISH AUTHORITIES
AND THE CANONIZATION OF HISTORY****

Abstract: The Flemish authorities have recently sponsored a Flemish historical canon (a list of events and persons considered crucial elements of the region's history and identity) and a ten-episode series on the history of Flanders, entitled *Het verhaal van Vlaanderen* ("The Story of Flanders"), both realized in 2023. Both initiatives reflect the intention of the Flemish to reinforce Flemish identity. I situate the TV series and the Canon within the context of national history writing in Europe and Belgium and their recent evolution. In my analysis of both the TV series and the Canon, I argue that they did not deploy the historical narratives traditionally adopted by Flemish nationalism. While rejecting the nationalist interpretation of the history of Flanders, they nevertheless are examples of banal nationalism.

Keywords: *national history writing, Flemish identity, banal nationalism, Flanders.*

LA STORIA DELLE FIANDRE: LE AUTORITÀ FIAMMINGHE E LA CANONIZZAZIONE DELLA STORIA

Abstract: Di recente le autorità fiamminghe hanno patrocinato un Canone storico fiammingo (una lista di eventi e persone considerati cruciali per la storia e l'identità della regione) e una serie televisiva in dieci episodi sulla storia delle Fiandre, intitolata *Het verhaal van Vlaanderen* ("La storia delle Fiandre") realizzati entrambi nel 2023. Entrambe le iniziative riflettono l'intenzione dei fiamminghi di rafforzare la propria identità. In questo articolo considero sia questa serie televisiva che il Canone nel contesto della storiografia nazionale in Europa e in Belgio e della loro evoluzione più recente. Nella mia analisi del Canone e della serie televisiva sostengo che queste ultime non mobilitino le narrazioni storiche tradizionalmente adottate dal nazionalismo fiammingo. Pur rifiutando l'interpretazione nazionalista della storia delle Fiandre, esse costituiscono nondimeno degli esempi di nazionalismo banale.

Parole chiave: *storiografia nazionale, identità fiamminga, nazionalismo banale, Fiandre.*

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Introduction

Following the Dutch and Danish examples, in 2019 the Flemish government, a centre-right coalition of Christian Democrats, Liberals, and the (dominant) Flemish nationalist party *Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie*, N-VA, decided to establish a Flemish Canon. It intended to provide, by looking at persons, events and cultural heritage, a narrative of the historical and cultural development of Flanders as a European nation (quoted in Boone 2021: 39). It also decided to subsidize the production of the TV series *The Story of Flanders*. The ten-episode TV series was broadcast by the Flemish Public Broadcasting Company (VRT) between January 1st and March 5th of 2023 (VRT 2023a). Presented by a popular TV-figure, Tom Waes, it was a huge success, the second-most viewed programme in Flanders in 2023 (CIM 2024).¹ In May 2023, the Flemish authorities publicized the Canon itself, available both as a website and as a published volume. Established by a commission of Flemish intellectuals and scholars, it provides by means of 60 windows an overview of the most important events in the history of Flanders.

The TV series and the Canon engendered interest in the region's history as well as controversy. In this article, I look at the TV series and the Canon from the perspective of a scholar of nationalism, analysing how and in which measure they provide an identitarian narrative. For this purpose, I first outline the present European context of national identity narratives, and the role history-writing plays in them. I then contextualize the series and the Canon within the traditions of Belgian and Flemish national history writing and their recent evolution. In the following sections I discuss the TV series and the Canon, analysing how their features correspond to existent formats of national historical narratives. In a concluding section, I look at the polemics they engendered and contextualize this Flemish identity debate in a broader European context.

National history in the present context

In establishing a canon and proposing a TV series, Flanders followed the examples of Denmark and the Netherlands. Both countries had established a historical canon in 2006 (Govaert 2025: 8-10), followed by TV series broadcast in Denmark in 2017 and in the Netherlands in 2022. The renewal of interest in national history these decisions evoke has affected many European countries since the 1980s. These revivals were often a reaction against the 1960s and 1970s contestation and the rise of social and gender history that disrupted traditional national narratives. They occurred in countries with significant national minorities –

¹ CIM (Centre for Information on the Media) gives the number of 1,729,700 viewers (Flanders counted on January 1st, 2023, 6,774,807 inhabitants). Numbers of viewers vary highly according to the source, but all sources give more than 1 million viewers.

France, United Kingdom, Italy –, but also in Germany where no substantial minorities threaten national unity (Berger *et al.* 1999; Passmore *et al.* 1999; Berger – Lorenz 2010; Huysseune 2019). Interest in either national or subnational history nevertheless reflects multiple political, historiographic, and cultural motives and ideological backgrounds.

Revivals of national history in Europe are at the same time confronted with the negative connotation nationalism tends to have in Europe. The formation of the European Union was itself justified by referring to the negative inheritance of Nazism and extreme forms of nationalism. Particularly in the 1990s, there was much talk about the crisis of the nation-state (Hont 1994) and the emergence of post-nationalist polities (e.g. Kearney 2003). In his critique of such assertions, Michael Billig argued that nationalism continued to thrive in the softer form of banal nationalism, that unquestioned acceptance of the existence of the nation-state, its institutions, its official language(s) and its boundaries (Billig 1995). He also pointed out that this banal nationalism permeates the social sciences themselves, in the form of a methodological nationalism where the concept of «society» in fact refers to specific nation-states. Billig's concept has been the object of extensive academic debates (see the contributions in Skey – Antonsich 2017). Billig himself has formulated some corrections to his thesis, acknowledging for example that the concept of banal nationalism is also relevant for nations within nations (Billig 2017: 314).

The persistence of forms of banal nationalism undoubtedly helps to explain the revival of interest in national history. Such revivals, however, have to cope with the way scholarship on nationalism has deconstructed essentialist interpretations of national identities and has highlighted their modernity and constructed nature (cf. Anderson 1983; Gellner 1983; Hobsbawm – Ranger 1983). Historians have also become aware of how methodological nationalism has often characterized their profession and have developed more transnational modes of history-writing (Middell – Roura 2013: 8-10). The process of European integration has moreover strongly influenced the formats of national history-writing. Presently, identity discourses in the European Union have predominantly adopted the format of narratives of European integration as a process transcending the previously predominant forms of competitive and antagonistic nationalism (Stråth 2000; Stråth - Triandafyllidou 2003). They are now articulated as progressive narratives leading the nation's history to its inclusion in the EU, read as a space of democracy, economic modernity, and non-antagonistic national identities. Such narratives have a family resemblance with Fukuyama's «end of history» paradigm, here identified with the unquestioned values of liberal democracy and European integration. Recent national and sub-national history writing has as a rule adopted a European framework, inserting their history in a broader context and eventually in the process of European integration, thereby avoiding an essentializing of the significant Other that proved important in earlier national history writing (Stråth - Triandafyllidou 2003).

While non-antagonistic, such identities are nevertheless constructed in a comparative and even competitive perspective since, as Antonis Liakos has argued, «national histories were to

give an account of the reputation and the place of a nation» (Liakos 2013: 317-318). These comparisons are based on a model «of a single, linear developmental course of civilization in time, space, and values, with Western Europe (or simply “Europe” or “the West”) on top» (Liakos 2013: 318). Such narratives are in line with identity discourses that articulate European civilizational superiority against significant Others (Stråth 2000). They are also deployed to compare and classify nations (both states and sub-national entities) within Europe itself. The 2008 financial crisis, for example, enhanced the articulation of the opposition between the allegedly virtuous Northern European countries from the so-called laggards, the PIIGS. Reflecting earlier oppositions between “modern” and “backward” societies, such articulations may include historical narratives explaining this superiority. In recent years, there has also been a revival of culturally (Europe’s so-called Christian identity) or racially marked European identity articulations easily translatable in exclusive and ethnocentric national and subnational identities (cf. Stråth 2017).

Articulations of national history are very much case-dependent. Within Europe, dominant national historical narratives generally compete with alternative interpretive frameworks but are also connected with the history of other countries, and hence intertextuality is central for their interpretation (Berger - Lorenz 2010: 1). Berger and Lorenz (2008) sum up the elements relevant for the study of the strategies deployed in narratives of national histories such as their beginnings and endings, the relation between national, and religious, ethnic, class and gender master narratives, the relation between multi-national empires and the nation, and the impact of traumatic experiences. Equally from a comparative perspective, Krijn Thijs (2008: 71) proposes additional questions concerning these narratives. These may concern their central actors as well as the central antagonists (their presence and their eventual absence). They also look at the temporality of these narratives: are they cyclical, contingent, or progressive? Which narrative on the origins of the nation is provided, and what are considered the determinant events? What is the time economy of the narrative: does it propose a period of glory promising its revival; are there dark ages in the past, periods of suffering and trauma that are perhaps left unmentioned?

States have obviously been important actors involved in creating national identities sustained by national historical narratives. Non-state actors and grassroots movements, however, have equally contributed to this process. In Western Europe, sub-state nationalist movements and more recently sub-state authorities have equally embedded their own identity discourse in a historical narrative. The historical narratives these movements have constructed resemble state-related narratives both in their structure and in the tropes they deploy (Bruckmüller *et al.* 2012). These narratives often originated during romanticism, developing the trope of the nation as a cultural community, generally with a common language (Leerssen 2010). Influenced by the process of Europeanization that practically all these movements have undergone, their identity discourses have also been Europeanized (De Winter *et al.* 2005;

Masseti 2009; Cirulli *et al.* 2018). This Europeanization has corresponded with the demise of essentialist identity discourses and the adoption of a historical narrative compatible with European values. At the same time, they have in several cases also been confronted with a revival of state-nationalist historical narratives. An example is the recent revival of Spanish nationalism and its articulation in an essentialist reading of Spanish identity and history. In this context, activists in Catalonia defend the articulation of a Catalan historical narrative by highlighting how official national histories deny the specificities of communities as well as past oppressions and humiliations (Torrisco Casals 2017: 207-213). Where possible, these movements have also referred to past experiences of self-government. Catalonia is a typical example of how past forms of self-government are a central focus of sub-state identity discourses. Other examples are Corsica, where the island's XVIII century rebellion against Genoa and the figure of Pasquale Paoli, the most charismatic leader of this rebellion, are crucial elements of the local historical narrative, while in Brittany Breton nationalists take the medieval Duchy of Brittany as their territory of reference (Toutous 2021). In Flanders, historical narratives have also referred to the medieval principalities on its territory, particularly the County of Flanders, the most powerful one, but contrary to the cases of Catalonia and Corsica and to the claims of Breton nationalists, the territories of those principalities only very partly correspond with the present region.

The Belgian context of historical narratives

Because of its communitarian conflicts, its late process of state-formation and its internal political polarization (initially between liberals and Catholics, later involving also socialists and still later Flemish nationalists), Belgian national historical narratives have been both troubled and controversial. From early after independence on, narratives were elaborated to root the nation in a history with independence as a natural outcome, in order to neutralize the country's origins in a popular revolution. These narratives had to cope with the past fragmentation of the territory. To give this history a meaningful unity, they could refer to Catholicism, or to Belgium as a victim of wars fought out in the country and of oppression by foreign occupiers, and the resistance against this oppression (Tollebeek 1998). Because of the perceived risk of absorption by France, national narratives from the 1850s on presented (notwithstanding the practical dominance of French) Belgium as a bi-cultural entity, a synthesis of Latin and German elements (Tollebeek 1998: 335-336; Witte 2024: 70-71). Especially in the 1860s, the presumed annexationist intentions of Napoleon III enhanced the interest in episodes of resistance against France, most notably the 1302 Battle of the Golden Spurs, when a mainly plebeian army from the County of Flanders utterly defeated a French army bent on annexing the county. Equally important was the division between Catholic and liberal narratives. These particularly concerned the Eighty Years' War (1568-1648) and the re-conquest of the Southern

Netherlands by Spain. Catholics read this as an affirmation of the country's Catholic identity, while for liberals, who identified themselves with the Protestants, the *Geuzen* (the "Beggars"), it was a missed opportunity and the imposition of a cruel and bigoted regime (Beyen - Majerus: 290).

National history-writing found its most elaborate expression in the multi-volume history of Belgium published between 1908 and 1932, authored by the renowned historian Henri Pirenne (1862-1935) (cf. Prevenier 2011). Pirenne provides a narrative that highlights how Belgium has always been an in-between territory, marked by the often-conflicting political interests and cultural influences of France and Germany. He claimed that because of this mixed heritage, Belgians were not nationalistic. Its heritage of mixed influences and the productive virtues of its citizens were able to create economic growth whenever political circumstances allowed it, give the country its unity (even though he points out that its borders are themselves the result of the contingencies of history and therefore arbitrary). Overall, his narrative follows the liberal line of history (although Pirenne was as critical of the XVI-century Calvinists as of Catholics). Influenced by the German historian Karl Lamprecht and the economist Gustav Schmoller, Pirenne also displayed a considerable interest in economic and social history (Tollebeek 1996: 407-408; Woolf 2012: 389-390).

Although Pirenne described Belgians as non-nationalistic, his books undoubtedly deploy a Belgian nationalistic narrative (Witte 2024: 116-117). Pirenne claimed that the Belgian nation pre-dated the Belgian state, locating its origins in the Burgundian period (Tollebeek 1994: 72-73). His interpretation insisted on the bi-cultural nature of the Belgian nation. Especially after the First World War he firmly rejected the ethnic essentialism of German nationalists (Schöttler 2010: 411). Because he envisioned Belgium as a bi-cultural country, he was respectful of the goals of the Flemish Movement even if he did not agree with some of their policy goals, namely the Dutchification of the university of Ghent (Peeters - Verhulst 2023).

Pirenne's books, especially his later volumes were, however, published at a moment when the Belgian national narrative itself was going into crisis. The post-World War I rise of radical and anti-Belgian Flemish nationalism played a central role in this process. Flemish nationalists elaborated an alternative historical narrative based on the ethnic (and in its most extreme forms racial) distinctiveness of the Flemish people, although they recycled a large part of national history (starting with the 1302 Battle of the Golden Spurs) which they interpreted in a Flemish national and anti-Belgian key, often in a Great-Netherlandic perspective. Historians with Flemish nationalist sympathies, concerned about their professional respectability, handled this issue with more caution, although they did contribute to the development of a separate history of Flanders (Tollebeek 2023; Witte 2024: 126-131). The early XX century also saw the rise of a socialist narrative of Belgian history, focusing on social conflicts and the emancipation of the working classes, but this narrative was overall compatible with Belgian national narratives and Pirenne's reading of Belgian history. Belgium's early industrialization and the

turbulent history of its labour movement indeed have engendered a tradition of keen interest in social history, which distinguishes the country from its neighbours, the Netherlands and Luxemburg (Beyen - Majerus 2008).

After World War II, there was both continuity and change. Francophone historians still proposed Belgian national narratives, although avoiding patriotic single-mindedness (Beyen - Majerus 2008: 300; Witte 2024: 141-145). Scholars in the meantime became increasingly critical of Pirenne's Belgian national historical narrative (Prevenier 2011; Witte 2024: 146-147). Flemish academic historians preferred to avoid a too strong Flemish profile and engaged themselves after 1945 in a project perceived as more neutral, the writing a common history of the Low Countries, published in 12 Dutch-language volumes between 1949 and 1958 (Beyen - Majerus 2008: 283-284). This unease in Flanders about identity is visible also in teaching: in Flanders (but not in Francophone Belgium), at university level courses on the history of the Low Countries are preferred to those on Belgium or Flanders (Beyen - Majerus 2008: 299-303). On the other hand, many contributions were published on the history of the Flemish Movement outside academia, culminating in 1973-1975 in the publication of the two volumes of the *Encyclopedie van de Vlaamse Beweging* (Stijnen - Tollebeek 2023; Tollebeek 2023). After 1970, more scientific approaches became predominant in writing on the Flemish Movement. More recently, from the 1990s on and reflecting international trends in scholarship on nationalism, deconstructionist Flemish historians (Jo Tollebeek, Marnix Beyen and many others) rejected all essentialist interpretations of Flemish national identity, interpreting it instead as an imagined community (Beyen 2023; Witte 2024: 183-187). Contrasting with previous hagiographic tendencies, they developed a non-militant history of the Flemish movement. Many of them were involved in the publication, in 2018, of the volume *Wereldgeschiedenis van Vlaanderen* ("World History of Flanders"). Following the French example (the 2017 volume *Histoire Mondiale de la France*), it proposed an open, global, non-national and non-teleological history of the region (Van Ginderachter 2020).

In recent decades, Belgian identity discourses have rarely taken a historical turn. The transformation of Belgium from a unitary to a federal state (starting in 1970 and consolidated with the reforms of 1993 that officially made Belgium a federal state) included the devolution of competences on educational and cultural matters to the Flemish, Francophone and German-speaking communities. Federal authorities in Belgium therefore have no say in educational and cultural matters, they even mostly lack the instruments to promote identity discourses or research into national history. Belgian identity articulations therefore focus on the present, mainly as forms of banal nationalism around sports events. Research on the origins of Belgian identity is marked by the constructivist turn in the history of nationalism and does not trace back the history of this identity beyond the XVIII century (Huyseune 2017). Flemish identity discourse, as promoted by Flemish authorities from the 1980s on, is mainly focused on the present (Tollebeek 1994: 148-149; Oosterlynck 2011; Huyseune 2012). It represents Flanders as an economic success-story, and as early as the 1990s it associated

Flemish identity with the values of European liberal democracy, an open, tolerant, and pluralist society. Essentially presentist, this narrative nevertheless interprets Flemish self-government as the successful outcome of a historical trajectory marked by the mobilizations of the Flemish Movement. The Flemish national holiday, July 11th, officially is a commemoration of the 1302 Battle of the Golden Spurs, the canonical historical moment of Flemish identity discourse. As historian Louis Vos argued, official identity discourses have become a banal nationalism, «an almost unnoticed reiteration in everyday life, not recognized as nationalism but at the same time constantly flagged in the media through routine symbols and habits of language» (Vos 2002: 201). Flemish authorities have nevertheless not been devoid of interest in the history of the region. They have for example subsidized the ADVN, the archive of nationalist movements (originally focused mainly on Flemish nationalism), and the new editions of the *Encyclopaedia of the Flemish Movement*.

The 2019 decision of the Flemish government reflects traces of a more nationalist view on Flanders and Flemish history. It had been preceded by the publication of a booklet by then party leader of the N-VA, Bart De Wever, defending the necessity of reinforcing Flemish identity (De Wever 2019). The Flemish authorities nevertheless handled the establishment of a canon with caution. The letter explaining the mission stated that in following the Dutch model of a canon, the goal was explicitly non-identitarian (Vlaamse Regering 2020). The commission they organized for this purpose predominantly included respected intellectuals and scholars not associated with Flemish nationalism. Its director was the historian Emmanuel Gerard, previously already chair of the parliamentary commission investigating the murder of Patrice Lumumba. Besides the historian Jan Dumolyn, it also included archaeologists, art historians, philologists and philosophers

The decision of the Flemish authorities engendered vivid polemics. Several prominent Flemish historians from all Flemish universities, including Bruno De Wever, the brother of the president of the N-VA, involved themselves in these polemics, signing an open letter critiquing the canon from their discipline's perspective. They argued that such a canon would impose a teleological historical narrative leading to Flemish self-government, oblivious of the serendipity of history². In 2022, the Royal Flemish Belgian Academy of Science and the Arts published an opinion, authored by the historians Jo Tollebeek, Marc Boone and Karel Van Nieuwenhuysse, all three signatories of the open letter (Tollebeek *et al.* 2022). The opinion reiterated the arguments of previous interventions, also pointing out more in detail the negative effects of canon-construction in the Netherlands and Denmark (Tollebeek *et al.* 2022: 24-29, 44). The medieval historian Jan Dumolyn, member of the canon commission, defended the idea of a

² Various Authors, «De eenzijdige blik van de Canon van Vlaanderen», *De Standaard*, 27-X-2020.

canon as an instrument which can provide meaning to history³. From his viewpoint, a critical discussion on the history of Flanders effectively makes sense. He proposes to deconstruct exclusively nationalist narratives of Flemish history, introducing on the contrary a «history from below» popular perspective (Dumolyn 2019; ACOD Cultuur 2021).

This polemic reveals different approaches towards the role of public history. Critics of the canon emphasize their hostility towards any teleological historical narrative, whereas Dumolyn prefers to stress the meaning-giving role of history writing and to give this role a local embedding. The debate amongst historians on the canon, however, transcended political alignments and even the left-right divide, since Dumolyn is a confessed Marxist. In fact, beyond their different appreciation of the canon, they agree on the need to deconstruct Flemish national historical narratives, hence showing a professional consensus against nationalist instrumentalizations of history.

Analysing the TV series

The Story of Flanders was realized by the production house De Mensen, following the format of the Danish model. It was produced with generous subsidies of the Flemish authorities, for a total of 2.000.000 Euros (Verschaffel 2023). The 10 episodes more or less systematically combine reenactments of historical episodes with interviews with experts, historians and archaeologists. These experts were consulted to contextualize the reenactments and to guarantee their historical accuracy (VRT 2023b; De Smaele 2024). The series also frequently gives accounts of how historical and archaeological knowledge is obtained, and the interviews with experts several times include reflections on the uncertainty of historical knowledge (Van den Heede 2024). The general story line nevertheless remained under control of the editor-in-chief of the production house, Jesse Fabré (a graduate in German languages). While insisting on historical accuracy, he nevertheless made clear that the intention of the series was to tell a story that would inspire the audience, not to provide a course of history. He also stated that the makers consciously avoided an identitarian approach, since they were aware that it would be too divisive (Desmet 2023). Historians and other experts thus had control over the accuracy of the information provided but were much less involved in determining the overall outline of the series. In what follows, I will analyse how the narrative of *The Story of Flanders* relates to existent historical narratives and historiographic traditions (Belgian and/or Flemish), incorporates elements of the identity discourse of the Flemish Movement and Flemish authorities, and is influenced by new tendencies in history-writing, e.g. gender history.

³ Dumolyn J., «Een canon kan nuttig zijn, opgesteld door historici, artiesten en wetenschappers, niet door tweetende politici», *Knack*, 16-VIII-2019, <<https://www.knack.be/nieuws/een-canon-kan-nuttig-zijn-opgesteld-door-historici-artiesten-en-wetenschappers-niet-door-tweetende-politici/>> (last access 30-IV-2026).

A first characteristic of the series is that it essentializes Flemish territory. Each episode starts with a short reel showing a map of the region and highlights how it will narrate its story. It never provides a historical contextualization of the territory's borders, ignoring that the borders between Flanders and the other Belgian regions are recent, dating from the language laws of 1962-1963. The episode on post-World War II history does not refer to the creation of the language border and the federalization of Belgium and only briefly mentions the existence of a Flemish government. The series simply takes Flanders for granted. The reel itself is moreover self-contradictory since it gives a population count of the region excluding the (bilingual) Brussels region, while the map delineating Flanders includes Brussels. The series at no moment, however, provides an essentialized or ethnic interpretation of the region's population. The issue of ancestry is only very marginally present. In the first episode it is mentioned that we are all, for a small percentage, descendants of the Neanderthal people (but the "we" refers to «each of us not of African origins» – 1: 23.00-26.30). The issue of what characterizes Flemish identity is simply not addressed, and even language as a marker of identity is not a strong presence throughout the series. The last episode discusses at length the arrival of immigrants (including non-European ones) after the Second World War and their position in society, mentioning the rise of racism and countering racist stereotypes (10: 27.20-41.50). It sketches (with a clearly approving and optimistic tone) an image of a multicultural present of the region – in light of controversies on the veil, it is to be noted that this section includes veiled women (10: 41.50-43.50). It repeats the message of a scene of the first episode, showing the (mute) encounter of Neanderthal and Homo Sapiens, where it is stated that the idea of defending one's territory is not a good one, and that encounters with "Others" are not problematic and can (and should) lead to cooperation (1: 20.14-22.08).

The format of the series – ten episodes on often unrelated events – certainly did not facilitate the elaboration of a coherent teleological narrative of Flemish history, and it is indeed neither present nor intended. It repeatedly mentions economic successes and the economic importance of Flanders, as well as the rapid improvement of the standard of living after WWII, but it hardly describes the present – the period of Flemish self-government since 1980 – as the outcome of a progressive historical narrative, since the last episode also highlights the economic and social problems of the 1980s and the (negatively valued) rise of racism. What is striking is that the series hardly deploys any of the classical tropes of Flemish nationalism and actively deconstructs some of them in the last two episodes. Episode 9 and 10 pay attention to the rise of Flemish nationalism. While noting the discrimination of Flemish-speaking soldiers during the First World War, the series criticizes the Flemish nationalists' extreme right turn in the 1930s and their collaboration with the German occupier during the Second World War (9: 32.05-37.30; 10: 10.45-11.28). Highlighting the valour of resistance during the war, it ignores one of the main topics of Flemish nationalist discourse, the perceived victimhood of Flemish nationalists during the so-called «repression» of collaborators following the liberation of

Belgium in September 1944. Equally interesting is the handling of the main historical event cultivated by the Flemish identity discourse, the Battle of the Golden Spurs in 1302 (episode 4). In that episode, the Marxist medieval historian Jan Dumolyn argues that the issue was not a struggle on language, nor a nationalistic struggle, but essentially a social one, and the entire episode pays ample attention to social conditions in medieval cities. One of the Flemish leaders, Pieter De Coninck, is anachronistically presented as a prefiguration of XIX-century labour organisers.

If anything, many of the episodes of the series fit in the traditional Belgian historical narrative as it was developed in the decades after independence, a narrative around foreign occupations and final national liberation (Tollebeek 1998: 342-343). This is particularly true for the episodes on the origins of Belgian independence (episode 7) and the First World War (episode 9), but also in the emphasis on the role of the Burgundian dukes in unifying the territory, a traditional trope of Belgian national history (episode 5). For the medieval period, it focuses very much on the County of Flanders, as has been typical of both Flemish and Belgian national history writing, since that county was during that period both economically most successful and politically most powerful. Typically, it has problems confronting the religious wars of the XVI century that divided the Low Countries and, equally typical, it does not strive to provide a coherent narrative on that period (episode 6). It is, again standard, very discreet on the XVII and most of the XVIII century (particularly the former is normally interpreted as a period of decline).

The “Others” are also not the Others of the Flemish nationalist narrative, the Belgian state and/or the Walloons. They are rather the traditional Others of the Belgian national narrative, the past occupiers. Although for some their positive contribution are also mentioned, they do all appear as oppressors of Belgium: the Romans, the Spanish, the French, the Dutch, and the Germans. Of these Others, the French are most prominently present. They already appear in an episode that played a foundational role in nationalist narratives (and could fit in both the Belgian and the Flemish ones), the elopement of the French Princess Judith, daughter of the French King Charles the Bald (823-877), with an official named Baudouin, who would later become the first Count of Flanders. This scene allows the use for one of the first times of the term Flanders, referring of course to a territory quite different from the present region (3: 19.45-27.10). Interestingly, no word is spoken during this scene, presumably because neither of them would have spoken in Dutch. A shot from this episode (the two kissing each other) is repeated in the presentation reel of each episode, clearly suggesting the importance that is attributed to this foundational myth (in fact the only scene that implicitly traces an origin of Flanders) but also revealing the somewhat contorted relation with France that is characteristic for Belgian and Flemish national identities.

The French as a significant Other appear also in two other episodes, one on the 1302 Battle of the Golden Spurs (although more emphasis is put on the oppressive role of the local patricians), one on the French occupation of 1794-1815 (episode 7). While the French

occupation also led to some positive measures, the episode highlights the arrogance of the occupants and the imposition of conscription and pays much attention to the 1798 «*Boerenkrijg*», a peasant insurrection (7: 30:50-39.10). Significantly, this insurrection – which essentially took place in the Flemish countryside – is associated in the programme with the southern Netherlands (hence rather present Belgium). In this episode, the Belgian historical narrative is most explicitly present. The *Boerenkrijg* and the Brabant Revolution, the 1789-1790 insurrection against Habsburg Emperor Joseph II, the Brabant Revolution (7: 6.15-20.50), are presented as prefigurations of the 1830 Belgian Revolution. The cockades of the Brabant Revolution announce the Belgian flag created in the Belgian Revolution. The Dutch appear as the Other in the 1830 revolution (episode 7), but at the same time the separation of the Low Countries because of the Eighty Years' War is deplored (episode 6). The Germans appear only in recent history, as the occupiers of Belgium during the two world wars.

The series is, like in the episode on the Battle of the Golden Spurs, at moments very attentive to social issues. The social dimension of the 1830 revolution is underplayed, but the impact of the industrial revolution is discussed at length, with a (justified) focus on the town of Ghent, indeed known in the XIX century as the «Manchester of Europe» (episode 8). It pays ample attention to the formation of the socialist labour movement. It focuses on the female activist Emilie Claeys (1855-1943), for some time a prominent member of the Belgian Labour Party and a feminist, later discarded because of an extramarital affair – she was also an unmarried mother (8: 16.45-24.50). It also narrates the campaign for universal suffrage, the 1893 general strike organised for that purpose, and the death of five strikers in Borgerhout, a suburb of Antwerp, events in which the socialist labour movement played a central role (8: 24.50-31.53). The ninth episode devotes attention to the 1936 murder of two socialist activists in Antwerp, Albert Pot and Theo Grijp, killed by a fascist – in recent years commemorations of these murders have been reactivated, with a clear antifascist agenda, giving additional significance to the selection of this episode (9: 37.30-46.40). The outrage over this murder was one of the factors that launched the general strike of 1936, initiated by the Antwerp dock workers (the influence of the French 1936 general strike is, however, not mentioned), and which led to important reforms; among the latter, the introduction of paid holidays is especially highlighted.

Colonial history is only mentioned in episode 8, where the presence of an indigenous village at the 1897 World Fair is used to denounce racial stereotypes and the ruthlessness of colonization (8: 38.14-49.10). The series is predominantly masculine, without much interest in the agency of women. The first episodes rarely look at history from a gendered perspective. They ignore the role of women in society, culture, and religious movements in the medieval period⁴. Some token influential women do play a role: Judith, the daughter of the King of

⁴ Haemers J., «Een ander verhaal van Vlaanderen», *De Standaard*, 06-II-2023, <https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20230205_97857579> (last access 15-IV-2026).

France, whose role is mainly to be abducted, and Mary, the Duchess of Burgundy (1477-1482) more positively represented as the «people's princess» (episode 5: 40.14-47.23). This obvious reference to Princess Diana provides a romanticized image of this ruler, whose death at a young age in a hunting accident – again a parallel to Princess Diana's accidental death? – is extensively shown. The more recent episodes are more attentive to women and their place in society. Episode 9 highlights how after WWI there was a conscious attempt to convince women to focus on their role of housewife and give up paid labour, while the last episode narrates post-War female emancipation, highlighting the long-standing legal subordination of women and the feminist protests of the 1960s and 1970s (9: 25.40-28.12; 10: 5.10-8.17 and 19.35-24.17). Even in the episodes on recent history, sections focusing on the agency of women, as is the case for Emilie Claeys, remain rare.

The opposition between liberal and Catholic interpretations of national history had limited relevance for the makers of the series. Mentions of religion are rather limited throughout the series. Apart from a section on the Christianization of Flanders in the third episode (3: 6.30-19.32), religion appears most emphatically in the episode on the religious wars of the XVI century. The evaluation of the iconoclastic movement of 1566, the so-called «*Beeldenstorm*», is ambivalent, since it is described as both understandable and unnecessary violent (3: 5.08-15.07). It overall follows the liberal narrative in which the persecutions of the Inquisition and the authoritarian rule of the Duke of Alba (1507-1582, known in Belgium as “Alva”, perceived in liberal historical narratives as one of the villains) are denounced, but little of the rest of the following conflict is discussed. It is represented as a terrible civil war where too much happened to be discussed (episode 6). Its result, the successful imposition of Counter-Reformation on the Southern Netherlands, is instead mentioned. A preference for a more liberal or progressive narrative is also clear in the description of the 1789-1790 Brabant Revolution (episode 7), that presents a positive image of the liberal leader Vonck, a negative one of the conservative leader Van der Noot, while in the last episode the liberation of women is related to the decline of the influence of the Catholic Church.

The series *The Story of Flanders* ostensibly proposes a narrative that does not correspond with the Flemish nationalist tradition, even making a point of (implicitly or explicitly) deconstructing several of its favourite myths. It only very partly follows the predominant format of teleological identity narratives ending in well-being, democracy, and European integration. It is certainly hostile towards ethnic or racial definitions of identity, as proposed by radical right movements. It often relies, instead, on typical tropes of Belgian national history. However, in its narrative, Belgium is essentially reduced to Flanders. Wallonia is only very occasionally mentioned (although in those cases never with a negative connotation). Walloons are essentially the silent partners of the Flemish. In the episode on the XIX century, the industrial revolution, the central place of industrialization in Wallonia – with its important mining and metal industry, amongst others – remains unmentioned. Also the early history of the socialist party (BWP/POB, Belgian Labour Party) is distorted by this exclusive Flemish

perspective, downplaying the centrality of Wallonia in the 1893 strike and as its main electoral constituency. The town of Brussels appears much more regularly than Wallonia, but its status – inside or outside of Flanders – is never specified. The significant Other of the Dutch speakers in Belgium, the Francophones are somewhat more present than the region of Wallonia, as members of the upper class in Flanders, without a specific value judgement.

Language, a crucial component of Flemish identity, is surprisingly enough not a conspicuous presence in the series itself. Its existence is for sure acknowledged, for example in the third episode, when speakers of an early version of the Dutch language are identified as such (3: 9.45-10.30). Nor does the series pay much attention to its written expression, Flemish literature – the Flemish artistic past and present are overall rather neglected. Language is simply considered self-evident. Its use itself in the TV series is, however, telling. Tom Waes speaks in the colloquial Flemish that has been normalized through television and is known as «*Tussentaal*», the “In-between-language”. Through the use of *Tussentaal*, Tom Waes presents himself as a common man discovering through the making of the series the region’s history.

The absence of nationalist tropes is in sharp contrast with the essentializing of Flanders and its territory that takes place throughout the series. Flanders is simply taken for granted and never discussed. Its neighbours only have token appearances in the story, what happens in Flanders appears (except foreign invasions and occupations) as an essentially isolated story. Only at the very end of the last episode a short section very quickly describes international events from the last half century, including images of Martin Luther King’s «I Have a Dream» speech, the Moon landing, 9/11, Obama, Greta Thunberg, and the January 6th, 2021, assault of the American Capitol, suggesting at least that these events might be relevant for Flanders too (10: 45.14-45.58). At the same time, what has happened in Flanders is frequently described as exceptional – throughout the series the trope of exceptionality and of economic success are frequently deployed. The presenter frequently marvels about his discoveries and uses superlatives in describing them. Flanders appears also as a cultural and economic centre and Bruges as Europe’s most important trading town in episode 5 (on the XIV-XV century), or Belgium as the second industrialized country in the world (episode 8). It is in this self-centredness and self-admiration that a viewer best discerns the banal nationalism (sometimes Flemish, sometimes Belgian) present in the series, notwithstanding its deconstruction of nationalist tropes.

The Flemish Canon

Shortly after the end of the series, in May 2023, the Flemish authorities published the long-promised Canon of Flanders, both as a book and as a website (Commissie Canon van Vlaanderen 2024; Vlaanderen 2023). The Canon has since then also been made available in a French and an English version (Govaert 2025: 47-48). Through sixty thematic windows, the

Canon intends to provide a comprehensive overview of the main events in the history of Flanders. Although the Canon caters for a more select audience and is not constrained by the necessity of the TV series to offer an enticing spectacle, overlaps with *The Story of Flanders* are frequent. These overlaps in topics and approaches concern obvious themes, such as the 1302 battle (Commissie Canon van Vlaanderen 2024, window 13: 74-79), the 1566 *Beeldenstorm* and the following period of war (Commissie Canon van Vlaanderen 2024, window 21: 122-127), the two World Wars (Commissie Canon van Vlaanderen 2024, window 41, pp. 222-227 and 46-47: 246-255) and the 1830 revolution (Commissie Canon van Vlaanderen 2024, window 29: 160-165), but also less obvious ones like the arrival of the first Neanderthals in Flanders (Commissie Canon van Vlaanderen 2024, window 2: 16-19), the second window in the Canon and the beginning of the TV series, or the role of the socialist activist Emilie Claeys (Commissie Canon van Vlaanderen 2024, window 34: 186-189).

More explicitly than the TV series, the Flemish Canon follows the European matrix for identity construction, highlighting the region's adherence to European values. It celebrates European integration, democratic values, women's rights – also in the sections on earlier history, women are more present than in the TV series –, and LGBT+ rights. Like the TV series, it presents contemporary Flanders as an open, inclusive and multicultural society (Commissie Canon van Vlaanderen 2024, window 60: 310-313). Less evidently, it includes a critical evaluation of colonialism and points out the persistence of global inequalities (Commissie Canon van Vlaanderen 2024, window 40: 216-221; window 60: 312).

More than the TV series, the Canon provides a narrative with a finality, namely the creation of an economically successful self-governing region. It is certainly more attentive to items related to the history of the Flemish movement, the defence of the Dutch language and Flemish nationalism. It devotes a window to the creation of the language border and the transformation of Belgium into a federal state, and hence Flemish self-government (Commissie Canon van Vlaanderen 2024, window 54: 282-287). It discretely mentions the more controversial episodes of the history of the Flemish movement, although it clearly denounces the extreme-right turn of Flemish nationalism in the 1930s and its collaboration during the Second World War (Commissie Canon van Vlaanderen 2024, windows 45-46: 242-251). It is also more attentive to Flemish language and literature production, as well as to the arts in general, neglected in the TV series. It is at the same time more explicit in rejecting any essentialist understanding of the Flemish community, stating that Flanders is an «imagined community», with its origins in the XIX century (Commissie Canon van Vlaanderen 2024, window 31: 176). The Canon is also less than the TV series a story focused exclusively on the present territory of Flanders. It regularly points out, reflecting a more transnational vision of history, that the Belgian borders are accidents of history, and how political, social and cultural phenomena are not limited to the Flemish territory. An example is the window devoted to the Franco-Flemish renaissance school of polyphonic music (Commissie Canon van Vlaanderen 2024, window 17: 98-103).

While the TV series often followed a Belgian historical narrative depicting foreign occupiers as the Other, this theme is less present in the Canon. Only the German occupations in the two world wars are drastically denounced. Critique of the French Occupation is present, but milder, and emphasis is put on its positive contribution, the *Code Napoléon* (Commissie Canon van Vlaanderen 2024, window 28: 156-159). Concerning the Dutch period, the volume mentions the grievances that led to the Belgian Revolution of 1830, but also highlights how part of Flemish public opinion, particularly in Ghent, was pro-Dutch, because of Dutch language politics (Commissie Canon van Vlaanderen 2024, window 29: 160-165). Although more explicit of the past discrimination of Dutch speakers than the TV series, it is very prudent in its critiques of Francophones in Belgium and Flanders. One of the windows is devoted to the contribution of Francophone artists in Flanders. It focuses on the singer-songwriter Jacques Brel and highlights the importance of Francophone Flemish authors in the late XIX and early XX centuries (Commissie Canon van Vlaanderen 2024, window 53: 278-281). Brussels, often a sore spot in Flemish narratives, is mentioned several times, thereby linking the town to Flanders. Mentions of Brussels often have a positive connotation: either as a town whose authorities refused to cooperate with German authorities in their persecution of Jews (contrary to those in Antwerp), or as an example of a superdiverse society (respectively Commissie Canon van Vlaanderen 2024, window 47: 254 and window 54: 287).

In line with Belgian history-writing, the Canon also shows a keen interest in social history. It is also more attentive to Flanders' Catholic past than the TV series, and it overall presents an ideologically more neutral profile⁵. The Flemish Canon also addresses several critiques that were voiced against the Dutch Canon, such as the too limited inclusion of women, the lack of interaction with world history, or the absence of voices of outsiders (cf. Grever *et al.* 2006). The Canon reflects recent developments in history-writing, such as its attention to gender and to colonialism. It also incorporates elements of a more transnational approach. More than the TV series, the Flemish Canon is in line with the identity discourses of Flemish authorities articulated in the 1980s and 1990s. However, it also deconstructs essentialist readings of national (in this case Flemish) identities and is also concerned to situate the history of Flanders in a broader global context.

Conclusion: contextualizing Flemish identity debates in a European context

The Story of Flanders engendered a lively public debate, reflecting the controversial nature of Flemish identity itself, as well as the suspicion of many Flemish historians of the identitarian dimension of the series. Historians critical of the project were nevertheless nuanced in their evaluation of the series since – while critiquing particular points – they appreciated the

⁵ Van den Einden L., «De Canon van Vlaanderen is katholieker dan op het eerste oog, maar mist 'usual suspects'», *Katholiek Nieuwsblad*, 10-V-2023, <<https://www.kn.nl/verdieping/achtergrond/de-canon-van-vlaanderen-katholieker-dan-op-het-eerste-oog-maar-mist-usual-suspects/>> (last access 15-IV-2026).

extensive use of professional advisers and its efforts in some episodes to deconstruct the Flemish nationalist narrative⁶. Most critiques focused on the identitarian dimension that was nevertheless present in the series, stating that before the late XVIII century and even the XIX century it is impossible to argue the existence of a Flemish identity. The exclusive focus on Flanders, or even the strong focus in the medieval episodes on the county of Flanders, were equally criticized: the history of Flanders is for those critics embedded in the history of a broader area with which it shares most essential features. The historian of life sciences Koen Tanghe critiqued the series from an opposite perspective for not being sufficiently Flemish, with its too Belgian narrative on the First World War and in the absence of a more systematic reflection on Flemish identity, its history and prehistory⁷.

The publication of the Canon gave a new lease of life to these debates (Govaert 2025: 41-45)⁸. Historians opposed to the Canon (and who as a rule were also critical of the series) reiterated their critiques of an inadequate instrument for teaching historical awareness and for its role in promoting banal nationalism, although they acknowledged that the Canon was overall balanced and realized in a professional way (Govaert 2025: 41-44)⁹. The TV series and the Canon have certainly engendered public curiosity for history and a debate on how to write, understand and interpret Flemish history. Particularly the TV series is also an example of banal nationalism. Although it avoids most nationalist tropes and pays little attention to language, it essentializes Flanders. It never questions its existence and its borders and frequently considers its history as exceptional and marvellous. More in general it presents nationalities (the French, the Dutch, the German) as natural categories. The Flemish Canon is more attentive to the traditional tropes of Flemish identity, but it also more aware of the limits of self-centred (sub)-national history-writing. The controversies also reveal that it is difficult to altogether eliminate a specific history of Flanders. It is in fact a critic of the series and of identity discourses, the

⁶ De Schaepeprijver S. - De Wever B., «Ik snap heel goed waarom die serie loopt: dit is dé reden waarom mijn broer aan politiek doet?», *Humo*, 28-II-2023; Dhondt F., «Carta Academica: La Flandre soudainement saisie par l'histoire», *Le Soir*, 25-II-2023, <<https://www.lesoir.be/496960/article/2023-02-25/carta-academica-la-flandre-soudainement-saisie-par-lhistoire?fbclid>> (last access 15-IV-2026); De Wever B., «De essentie van geschiedenisonderwijs is kritisch, historisch denken en niet de Vlaamse identiteit versterken!», *Het Laatste Nieuws*, 29-I-2023.

⁷ Tanghe K. (2023), «De geschiedenis van Vlaanderen werd nog niet geschreven. Een Vlaamse invalshoek ontbrak in 'Het verhaal van - Vlaanderen'», *Doorbraak*, 07-III-2023, <<https://doorbraak.be/de-geschiedenis-van-vlaanderen-werd-nog-niet-geschreven/>> (last access 15-IV-2026).

⁸ Calluy K., «Niet iedereen even tevreden met nieuwe Canon van Vlaanderen: 'Hopelijk kan Pater Damiaan nog worden toegevoegd'», *VRT Nieuws*, 09-V-2023, <<https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2023/05/09/canon-reacties/>> (last access 15-IV-2026).

⁹ Anonymous (2023), «Niet de juiste manier om aan geschiedenis te doen': dit zijn de eerste reacties op de canon van Vlaanderen», *Het Nieuwsblad*, 09-V-2023, <https://www.nieuwsblad.be/cnt/dmf20230509_94653176>; Calluy K., «Niet iedereen even tevreden met nieuwe Canon van Vlaanderen: 'Hopelijk kan Pater Damiaan nog worden toegevoegd'», *VRT Nieuws*, 09-V-2023, <<https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2023/05/09/canon-reacties/>> (last access 15-IV-2026).

historian Rolf Falter who, after deconstructing Flemish identity, nevertheless ended redefining Flanders as a region marked by a historically embedded unique conservative and provincial culture¹⁰.

The Flemish case displays some dynamics of contemporary (official and semi-official) attempts of identity building in Europe but also differs from them in some respects. It certainly confirms that such attempts are carried out at the sub-state level. The identitarian intentions of the dominant Flemish nationalist party N-VA only materialized in the very diluted form of banal nationalism, especially in the TV series. The Canon has retained more elements of a nation-building narrative, including its finality – Flanders as a modern region respecting European values. While it includes some traditional themes of the Flemish national narrative, it avoids attributing them a nationalist interpretation. Both propose an identity that is in line with what are considered European values. These cautions certainly reflect the specific dynamics of Flanders' political and cultural life, where nationalist parties are electorally strong, but their identitarian aspirations remain controversial, especially in the scholarly and intellectual community. The absence of strong Belgian national identity claims certainly limited the urgency for strong affirmations of identity and explains the absence of negative Othering (of the Belgian state, Wallonia, the Francophones). Nor has Flanders ever been excluded or marginalized in Belgian historical narratives. These factors explain the contrast with other minorities that are effectively excluded or marginalized from national history discourses (Sardinia and Corsica being prominent cases), or that are confronted with a strong central national identity (minorities in France) or a resurgence of identitarian state nationalism (as in Spain, or the revival of English nationalism in the United Kingdom). These conditions all may reinforce the need to articulate an identity and a historical narrative that sustains it, contrasting or opposing the dominant narrative (while at the same time in general inserting, like in Flanders, their identity discourse in a European mould). Notwithstanding the common European background, the case of Flanders shows how case-specific factors (specific political, cultural and intellectual traditions, the dynamics of othering and the relation with these others) continue to play an important role in identity discourses and their embedding in a historical narrative.

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