

To historicise is to exercise:

going back to the past to interpret the present

Mila Bammens and Bjorn Wansink were concerned about young people's reactions to recent nuclear threats. In the second part of this article they set out a series of approaches and resources, used with young people in the Netherlands, to teach about nuclear weapons. The first part of the article sets out the careful and rigorous pedagogical approach which informs these resources. In times which can appear troubled, it is useful for us to think about historicising current issues which can alleviate the fears students may hold.

On February 29, 2024, Russian president Vladimir Putin warned that potential NATO troop deployment to Ukraine could escalate into nuclear conflict, threatening civilisation. He has repeatedly raised nuclear threats since 2022. Across the European continent, children started asking their parents and teachers questions such as 'What would happen if Putin were to use nuclear weapons?', 'Will there be a Third World War?', and, in our case closer to home, 'Are we safe in the Netherlands?' Concerns grew further after Mark Rutte, NATO Secretary General, urged NATO member states to increase their military budgets and called on citizens to mentally prepare for war. As uncertainty spread across Dutch classrooms, many teachers felt ill-equipped to respond to students' fears and sought guidance from TerInfo.

The authors of this article are affiliated with TerInfo, an interdisciplinary programme at Utrecht University in the Netherlands.¹ TerInfo develops Dutch-language teaching materials across primary education, secondary education, vocational training, and higher education, aimed at supporting teachers in addressing disruptive events and sensitive topics in the classroom. In the past, TerInfo has created resources on subjects such as terrorism, conspiracy theories, and transgressive memes. All materials are grounded in an historicising approach, which uses historical context to make controversial issues more accessible and discussable for students. This article focuses on that approach, with particular attention to its application in recently developed teaching materials on nuclear weapons.

Drawing on a growing body of academic literature, as well as more than a decade of experience in developing educational resources, we have established a pedagogical approach that helps teachers address complex topics such as war, terrorism, and political violence.² In the following sections, we elaborate on this approach and reflect on the insights we have gained over the years.

TerInfo's pedagogical approach

Contextualisation and the historicising method

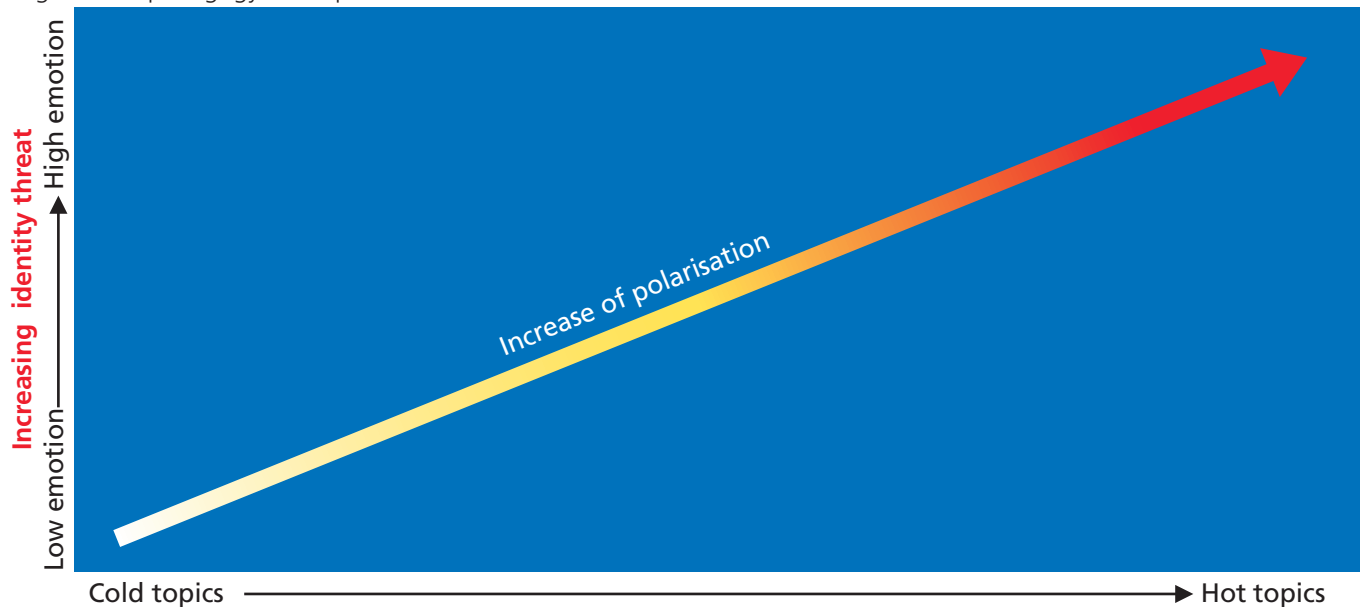
When extremely violent events occur in the world, adults and adolescents can enter a state of urgency and powerlessness. Disruptive events can feel sudden and catch us off guard as a society. Events never stand alone; they are always embedded in the past and connected to the present and possible futures. This is why we help students to contextualise events: to identify broader patterns, historical backgrounds, and social developments that explain why something is happening at this particular moment. At TerInfo, we do this by historicising: addressing the larger questions behind the headlines and placing events in a wider perspective.

We use history to place the threat of an event within a broader historical framework, since the past can help students navigate the present.³ Moreover, the past can offer perspectives for future action. Past examples can highlight that non-violent responses are possible and invite reflection on how we might contribute to a peaceful and just society.

Mila Bammens and Bjorn Wansink

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Figure 1: A pedagogy of de-polarisation for education



Research shows that placing oneself within an historical context over time can serve as a coping mechanism in times of crisis.⁴ A recent study by Yin and colleagues shows that people may respond in different ways to disruptive events in the world, such as pandemics and long-term conflict.⁵ Some feel overwhelmed and stressed, fixating on the panic of the moment. Others reflect on life's purpose and experience disruptive events as chapters of a greater story. They regard themselves as witnesses experiencing history, which can help safeguard and reinforce their personal sense of meaning in life.

People are narrative beings; especially in times of crisis, they construct stories to make sense of what is happening around them. We aim to support this process by offering well-informed explanations and a broader chronological framework based on reliable sources and academic experts. Rather than simplifying explanations, we often introduce greater complexity to deepen understanding.

We use the past to draw historical parallels.⁶ We ask questions such as: 'Have similar events occurred before?' and 'How did people respond to such events in the past?' We are aware of the risks of presentism and the uniqueness of historical contexts. Nevertheless, using the past to reflect on the present can help defuse emotionally charged debates. It creates a sense of distance, which we will now explain further.

Cold and hot topics

In our teacher training we often use a model that is developed by Wansink (see Figure 1).⁷ Research shows that class discussions become much more difficult if students in your class feel that their identity is at stake.⁸ If students perceive an issue as a threat to their identity, they are less able to listen and be open to other perspectives, and they feel even more compelled to defend themselves. So, the way you discuss these topics really matters.

The model proposed by Wansink classifies topics from 'cold' to 'hot' on a continuum. In this model, emotion is represented on the vertical axis: when students feel that their identity is threatened, their emotional response increases, often making classroom discussions more heated and challenging. The

'temperature' of a topic is represented on the horizontal axis: the more emotion a topic evokes, the 'hotter' it is, which can lead to greater polarisation. In contrast, cold topics do not trigger identity threats and evoke less emotions, and thus carry a lower risk of polarisation.

The model proposes to start discussions with students using 'cold(er)' topics, as these provoke less emotional reaction, and to gradually build up to discussing the sensitive topic over time. A way to do this is by looking for historical examples or parallels. For instance, to build up to a discussion of the present nuclear threat, we suggest starting with the Cold War. Examining how people prepared for the nuclear threat over half a century ago (see below) is more distant and emotionally neutral than immediately addressing current threats and fears.

We have conducted research into the impact of our method in teaching materials relating to terrorism.⁹ This study found that placing terrorism in an historical context and providing facts about (the current threat of) terrorism made students less afraid. Although we have not yet extended this research to other disruptive events, we suggest that this also applies to other moments of crisis and conflict. We therefore designed the teaching materials on nuclear weapons in a similar fashion to the ones on terrorism. Later in this article, we describe teaching methods relating to nuclear weapons and how they were received by students and teachers.

Multi-perspectivity

Multi-perspectivity also plays a key role in our educational approach. First, from an epistemological perspective, we emphasise that history is (inter)subjective and comprises multiple coexisting narratives about historical events rather than a single, objectively represented 'closed' narrative. Second, we point out that historical actors could have had different perspectives on a specific event. This means that we highlight different stories from the past itself. Third, students in the classroom may have different (cultural/religious etc.) backgrounds, leading to different perspectives.¹⁰ In a democracy students will have to accept that other perspectives exist alongside their own. Teaching history from multiple perspectives can teach them to empathise with others and to

Figure 2: Two perspectives on rearmament

In Dutch society, there is an ongoing discussion on militarisation and increased armament in relation to security concerns. These two perspectives can be discussed in the classroom, with students exploring several viewpoints, and articulating their own view.

Pro-armament advocates argue that the defence of European democracies must be strengthened, and that European rearmament also means less dependence on the USA. It is a classic concept, expressed in Latin as 'Si vis pacem, para bellum' (If you want peace, prepare for war). Opponents, by contrast, argue that increased militarisation and armament may heighten the risk of war. Since the Second World War, various groups like the Dutch Nieuwe Vredesbeweging (New Peace Movement) have protested against militarisation and nuclear weapons. They state that diplomacy should be increased and that money should be spent on education or climate mitigation rather than weapons.

see the value of a different perspective. It also allows students to experience what it is like to learn together, as each person adds their 'piece of the puzzle' from their own perspective. This creates a shared learning experience.

The limits of multi-perspectivity

Although multi-perspectivity in history teaching is important, it also has its limitations. On the one hand there are epistemological limitations, which means that not all knowledge is trustworthy. Students must develop the skills to assess the reliability of knowledge. On the other hand, not all perspectives are morally desirable. Our programme is normative in the sense that human rights, international rights and democracy form our moral foundation. For example, in our teaching materials we show that freedom of expression is not unlimited.

The pedagogy of hope

Although our historicising pedagogy focuses on the past, its goal is future-oriented. We propose that the future is open and we have individual and collective agency to influence the future.¹¹ We take examples from the past that show positive change is possible, in order to empower students. In the context of nuclear weapons these include, for example, major treaties aimed at limiting and abolishing nuclear weapons, massive protests against nuclear weapons, and examples of inspiring individuals, such as Helen Caldicott, Stanislav Petrov and Thomas Schelling who, each in their own way, helped reduce the impact of nuclear weapons around the world. We recognise, however, that the past also contains less hopeful or more troubling narratives. We believe that teachers should strive to strike a balance between hopeful and less hopeful stories.¹² Students may feel that they have little ability to bring about change on a global scale, so it makes sense to focus on actions that students can take in their own context, giving them a sense of control. It is important to demonstrate that we can all contribute to peace by our everyday actions.

Applying the historicising method: discussing the threat of nuclear weapons with students

Taking the above pedagogical principles into practice, we have developed teaching materials on nuclear weapons, thereby addressing concerns students have expressed regarding the increased threats in the world.

Students learn what nuclear weapons are, how often they have been used, and why countries possess them in the first place. The most important lesson is that, although the threat posed by nuclear weapons is significant, the likelihood of a nuclear war is small. They learn this by looking at the theory of mutual assured destruction and at past and present efforts to reduce the number of nuclear weapons and bring about peace. This helps to foster a realistic view and a hopeful outlook regarding nuclear weapons in the world. Below, we highlight some class activities.

The youngest students: interviewing family members and folding cranes

The lesson on nuclear weapons for the youngest students (aged 10 and above) includes two in-depth tasks.¹³ The first is similar to a task from the project on the Cold War as Wansink and others previously described in *Teaching History 166*.¹⁴ Students interview family members, acquaintances or neighbours about the Cold War, asking the following questions:

- What was it like to live during the Cold War?
- What do you remember about that time?
- Were you afraid of a nuclear war? Why or why not?

In the next lesson, they share what they have learnt from the interview and compare this with the stories of their classmates.

The second teaching activity shows students that they too can contribute to peace by hearing Sadako's story, a girl who survived the atomic bomb in Hiroshima but died a few years later of leukaemia caused by radioactive radiation. When she found out she was ill, she followed the Japanese legend which said that folding 1,000 paper cranes would bring good luck. The students then learn to fold their own paper cranes and write their wishes for the world on them.

Action perspective: preparing citizens for emergencies

A further teaching approach helped students realise that they can take action on their own, focusing on building their resilience.¹⁵ The threat of a (nuclear) war or another type of crisis (such as a power cut or extreme weather) can be overwhelming and make you feel powerless. However, there are always actions you can take to be better prepared. In 2025, the Dutch government called on citizens to put together an emergency kit. In this class activity, students learn that this is not the first time that the government has called on citizens to prepare for an emergency situation. Back in 1961, during the Cold War, Dutch citizens received

a number of brochures with information on how to prepare for a possible war or attack with nuclear weapons. We show copies of these leaflets (see Figure 3) to students so they can get an idea of and form an opinion about the advice that was given at the time by answering the following questions:

- What advice is given?
- What do you think the Dutch thought of these brochures?
- Do you find the brochures more reassuring or worrying? Why is that?

The class activity then moves on to the present day by looking at what advice is currently being given by the Dutch government (see Figure 4). They answer these questions:

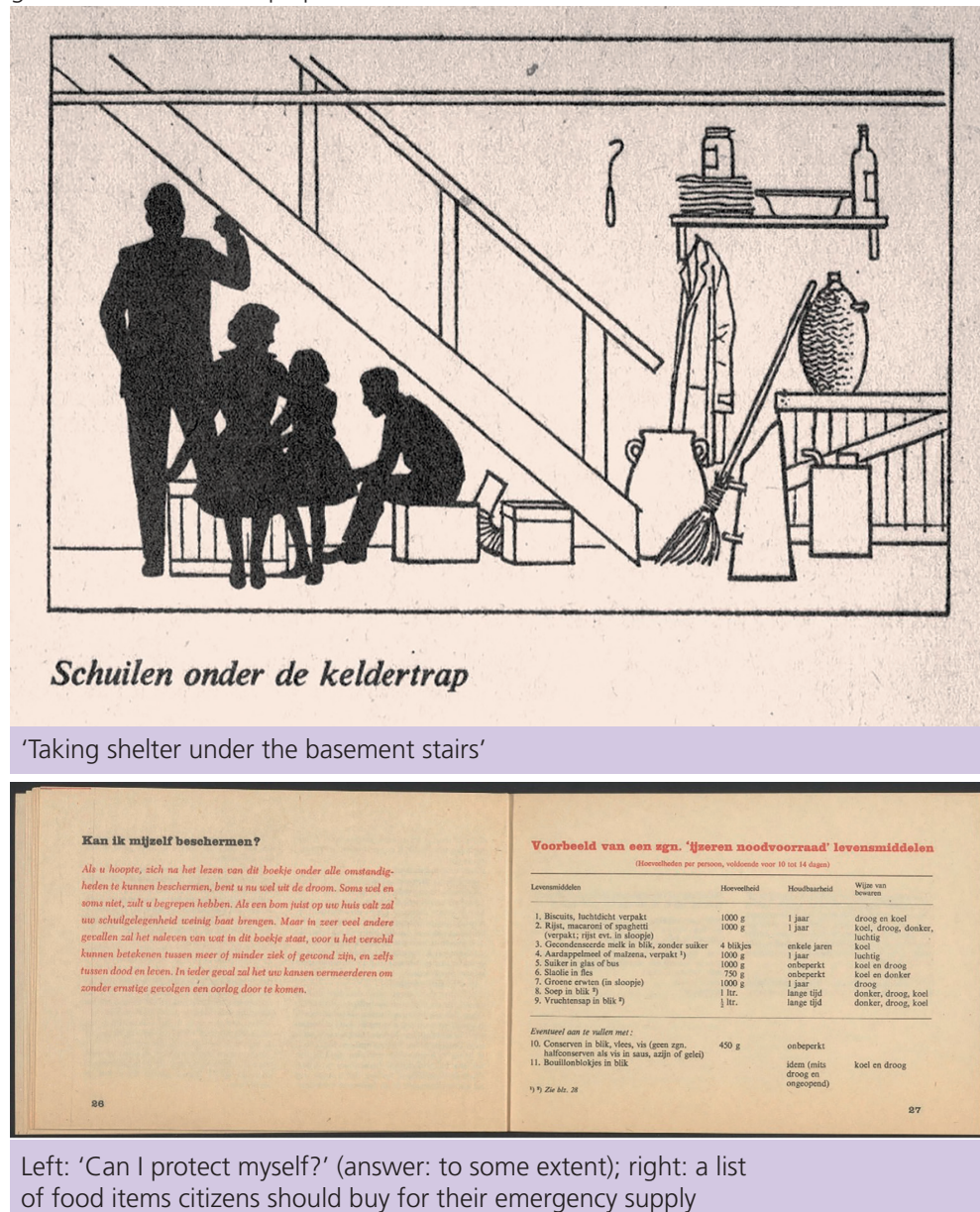
- What advice is given?
- List at least three similarities and three differences between the advice and information in the brochures and on the government website.
- What do you think are the reasons for these differences?
- What are the differences in terms of threats?
- If the government had to produce a one-page brochure to distribute, what do you think it should definitely include?

If you adapt this teaching method to the British context, you could add the following questions: What are the similarities and differences between how Dutch and British citizens are and were asked to prepare for emergencies? How can you explain the differences? By looking at the differences and similarities between the situation and advice then and now, students can learn lessons from the past and talk about how to prepare for the contemporary threat.

Simulating mutual assured destruction: MAD-game

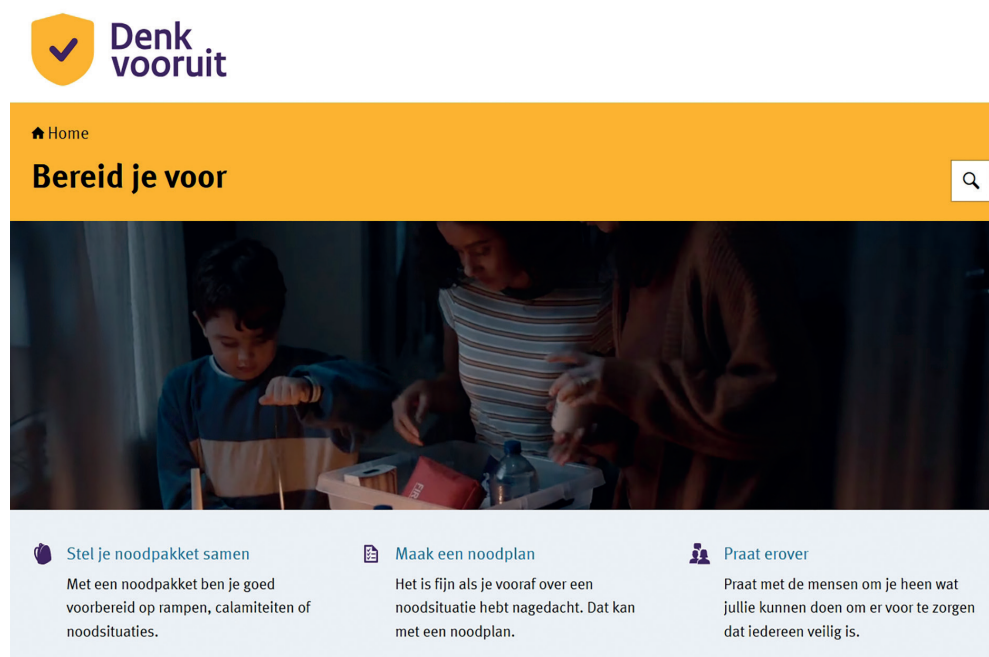
We developed a simulation game in which students can see that the threat posed by nuclear weapons is reduced by the deterrent effect of MAD: the theory of mutual assured destruction.¹⁶ This theory teaches us that a balance is created, to some extent, when two countries possess nuclear weapons. In the case of a nuclear weapon being detonated, both countries would be destroyed and therefore have just

Figure 3: Pages from the brochures distributed by the Dutch government in 1961 to prepare citizens for nuclear attacks¹⁷



Left: 'Can I protect myself?' (answer: to some extent); right: a list of food items citizens should buy for their emergency supply

Figure 4: The government-run website *Denk vooruit* (Think ahead) provides information to citizens on how to prepare for risks and emergencies¹⁸



Preparing for emergencies: UK versus the Netherlands

Just as in the Netherlands, citizens in the UK have been asked by the government to prepare for crisis situations, both now and in the past.

The UK during the Cold War

During the Cold War, the British government created the brochure *Protect and Survive* (1970s-1980s). It contained instructions on how to create a shelter in the home, advice on food and water supplies, an explanation of radioactive fallout, and advice on what to do after an explosion. It was intended to only be mass distributed in the event of a severe national emergency. Like the Dutch brochures, the tone was fairly matter-of-fact and practical and subsequently became the subject of satire.

Current approach

The Netherlands distributed physical emergency brochures door-to-door in late 2025 and early 2026 on top of online advice, aimed at preparing citizens for extreme weather conditions, power cuts, terrorism, pandemics and war. While the UK government has not created physical brochures, they do provide advice on emergency preparedness via the *Prepare Campaign website*. Just like the Dutch government, they recommend keeping water and non-perishable food, having a flashlight, radio, batteries and a power bank, and agreeing on an emergency plan with family members.

as much to lose. In the simulation, students discover that this is a delicate balance.

The students are separated into two groups that represent two fictional countries that both have nuclear weapons. The teacher introduces the case: the long-standing conflict between the two countries reaches a climax due to an incident, threatening nuclear escalation. The biggest question is whether it will lead to a nuclear war between the countries or whether there is still a way back. The students are all assigned a role, so each country has a president, diplomats, soldiers and civilians. Several rounds follow, in which the students try to convey their concerns and present advice to the president from their respective roles. The diplomats from both countries also consult with each other and try to find ways to bring about peace. In the final round, the presidents decide what to do: press the button and launch nuclear weapons or refrain from doing so. After the game, the teacher emphasises that although this game was fictional, we were very close to nuclear escalation during the Cuban

Missile Crisis (1962). The students watch a video about this, followed by a discussion with the following questions:

- In the video, you saw how great the threat can be when two nuclear powers face each other. To what extent did the threat of total destruction influence your decisions in the game?
- What ways could you think of to resolve this conflict without actually launching nuclear weapons?
- How was the Cuban Missile Crisis resolved?
- Do you think the MAD-theory is correct? (Discuss: The Cuban Missile Crisis is the prime example that proves it is correct, but did the simulation turn out that way too?)
- What did you learn from the role you played?
- What did you think of playing the MAD-game?

By experiencing for themselves how mutual deterrence works and learning how it has played out in the past, students can

better understand the contemporary threat and why nuclear war is unlikely in the near future. The Cuban Missile Crisis is a hopeful example because a period of intense tension was ultimately resolved through dialogue, and afterwards significant progress was made in reducing nuclear weapons. Moreover, we emphasise that although nuclear weapons pose an immense threat, the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 and their aftermath created a deterrent so strong they have not been used since. In another activity students read about individuals who have played a significant role in reducing the nuclear threat, promoting peace and security.¹⁹ Together these examples provide comfort, a realistic outlook and hope.

Responses to teaching materials on nuclear weapons

All our materials have been tested in schools by us and by teachers across the Netherlands. Students find the subject of nuclear weapons interesting, but also rather remote. They do not appear particularly anxious, but this could, of course, be a snapshot of time. It is possible that this will have changed following the USA-Israeli attacks on Iran on 28 February 2026 and their subsequent escalations. The students really enjoyed the opportunity to actively engage and appreciated the interaction and variety posed by the teaching methods. They appreciated that the lesson posed a different learning experience than their usual history lessons. Teachers noticed that certain students who are typically less vocal spoke up, and some fully embraced their roles within the simulation. It remains difficult to get students to grasp the gravity and the real threat posed by nuclear weapons. This was evident in the MAD-game. In every class where the game was tested, both countries 'pressed the button', effectively destroying each other. While not the intended outcome, this was not problematic, as the game is fictional and allowed for a playful tone. Students called the game 'comical and exciting', but also felt that not much was at stake, leading them to experience it as absurd or humorous. After the game, however, we showed them the video about the Cuban Missile Crisis and explained that the game was not just a fictional case study but rooted in an historical example. We then observed that the message resonated with the students and that they came to grasp the seriousness of the topic.

Conclusions

In times of uncertainty, history education offers more than knowledge: it provides orientation. The historicising approach outlined in this article shows how teachers can help students move from fear to understanding by situating current threats within longer historical trajectories. The examples we have shared are intended as adaptable practices that must be altered to fit the questions students have, to better respond to news events and/or specific contexts. It is not possible to simply transport a pedagogical method from one national context to another in a successful way.²⁰ Teachers in the UK may recognise familiar elements, from Cold War civil defence to contemporary resilience strategies, and can modify these activities to suit their own contexts. At the same time, working with examples from the Netherlands can create a useful distance: it could provide a less emotionally charged 'colder' context that students may find easier to discuss and reflect on before connecting it back to their own context. In

this way, historical perspective becomes both a pedagogical and emotional resource. To historicise is to exercise: to practise thinking across time so that the present becomes more understandable and manageable, and the future more imaginable.

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