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# The Contemporary Turn

## Debate, Curricula and Swedish Students' History

Thomas Nygren

**Abstract:** In the Swedish media during 2010 a proposal for a new syllabus for history was criticized for emphasizing contemporary history at the expense of ancient history. The present study shows how UNESCO and the Council of Europe's guidelines, like the national curriculum and guidelines and students' work since the 1950s, have increasingly focused on contemporary history. In the 1930s graduating students chose to focus mainly on the early modern era, but from 1950 contemporary history became more and more dominant in students' work. Even though history and civics were given separate status as school subjects in 1961, students' work in history continued to focus contemporary subjects. This study shows that the dominance of contemporary history in students' history is by no means a new phenomenon.<sup>1</sup>

**Keywords:** UNESCO, Council of Europe, curriculum, history teaching, teachers, students, contemporary history.

### Introduction

In January 2010 a proposal was presented for a new syllabus in history for Swedish secondary schools. The proposal was sharply criticized in the media by both professors and editorial writers. What chiefly upset people was the proposal to focus on contemporary history and to begin with the year 800, the Swedish Viking period. The historian Dick Harrison claimed that excluding ancient and medieval history was a "direct attack on the Swedish community of scholarship."<sup>2</sup> Older history was, according to ten professors of humanistic subjects, a cornerstone of cultural understanding: "It is precisely knowledge of our extraordinarily long human history and of the variation in human lives that makes us understand what it means to be human, despite cultural differences."<sup>3</sup> In their criticism of the proposal these professors contended that knowledge of the origins of world religions is needed to avoid or resist "religious fanaticism,"<sup>4</sup> and further, that older history could make history teaching less Euro-centric and create better understanding of our cultural heritage. "A great deal of European art, architecture, literature, theatre, film, philosophy and debates about political ideas is incomprehensible without any knowledge of ancient classical history. Consider such different phenomena as the con-

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<sup>1</sup> This article presents results from the research project "History Beyond Borders: The International History Textbook Revision, 1919–2009," funded by the Swedish Research Council.

<sup>2</sup> Dick Harrison, "Historia i skolan blir rena snurren," [History in School Goes Haywire] *Expressen*, 15 February 2010, [www.expressen.se](http://www.expressen.se) (accessed 13 October 2010).

<sup>3</sup> Anders Andrén et al, "Skolverkets förslag är trångsynt," [The National Agency of Education's Proposal is Narrow-Minded] *Svenska Dagbladet*, 19 February 2010, [www.svd.se](http://www.svd.se) (accessed 13 October 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Håkan Holmberg, "Ingen historia före 1709?" [No History Before 1709?] *Uppsala Nya Tidning*, 17 February 2010, [www.unt.se](http://www.unt.se), (accessed 13 October 2010); Anders Andrén et al, "Skolverkets förslag".

cept of democracy and films like ‘Gladiator’ and ‘Troy’.<sup>5</sup> It was also asserted in the media that the proposal to cut older history coincided with an increased interest in feature films about antiquity.<sup>6</sup> Editorial writer, Håkan Holmberg contended that older history was needed to defend contemporary democratic rights against dictators, slavery, serfdom, class differences and the oppression of women.<sup>7</sup> Critical thinking, identity and empathy were also enhanced by studies of older history, according to the upper secondary school teacher, Inger Hillerborg.<sup>8</sup>

In their defense of the reform, the historians in the syllabus group pointed to teachers’ demand for having “time for in depth studies and for taking account of context, not simply being left with a check list of world history.”<sup>9</sup> Per Eliasson and Kenneth Nordgren stressed the importance of ensuring time for concentration, training competence and analysis, given the time limits on teaching. They emphasized that too much material risks superficial teaching, which leads to insufficient historical understanding and a lack of understanding the present. Eliasson and Nordgren stated that: “In the real classroom it takes time to give explanations and establish contexts without which knowledge – however important or vital – is soon forgotten. It requires concentration.”<sup>10</sup> The upper secondary teacher, David Rosenlund was thinking along the same lines when he said that clearer directives, with clear boundaries and a focus on contemporary history would better enable the student to see the connections “between the content of the teaching and the student’s own life world.”<sup>11</sup>

The debate shows that the significance of contemporary history and the understanding of the present in relation to other means and goals for history teaching have been debated in Sweden. What history students needed to learn for life and higher education, was from the interwar-period and onwards a matter with various perspectives. The debate can also be seen as an expression of how the content of history teaching has interested and interacted with the surrounding society. In this study I investigate the position of contemporary history<sup>12</sup> in history education since the inter-war period in international guidelines (the ideological curricula), Swedish national curricula and syllabuses (the formal curricula), teachers’ perceptions (the perceived curricula) and students’ work in history (the experiential curricula).<sup>13</sup>

Inspired by John I. Goodlad’s perception that different curricular realities exist on different curricular levels, I examine international guidelines and Swedish history teaching between 1927 and 2002, concentrating on the period from World War II to the

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<sup>5</sup> Anders Andrén et al, ”Skolverkets förslag”.

<sup>6</sup> Lars Lindström, ”Antiken frodas på bio – men inte i skolan” [Antiquity Flourishes in the Movies – But Not in School] *Expressen*, 20 May 2010, [www.expressen.se](http://www.expressen.se) (accessed 13 October 2010).

<sup>7</sup> Håkan Holmberg, ”Ingen historia”.

<sup>8</sup> Inger Hillerborg, ”Historien ger överblick” [History Provides a General View] *Sydsvenskan*, 1 Mars 2010, [www.sydsvenskan.se](http://www.sydsvenskan.se), (accessed 13 October 2010).

<sup>9</sup> Per Eliasson and Kenneth Nordgren, ”Allt hinns inte med på historiektionerna” [There’s Not Time for Everything in History Lessons] *Svenska Dagbladet*, 1 Mars 2010, [www.svd.se](http://www.svd.se) (accessed 13 October 2010).

<sup>10</sup> Per Eliasson and Kenneth Nordgren, ”Allt hinns inte”.

<sup>11</sup> David Roslund, ”Ämnesreform en nödvändighet” [Subject Reform, a Necessity] *Sydsvenskan*, 1 Mars 2010, [www.sydsvenskan.se](http://www.sydsvenskan.se), (accessed 13 October 2010).

<sup>12</sup> Contemporary history is here defined as history in close connection with, and relevant in shaping, the present. The last 80 years.

<sup>13</sup> The concepts, ideological, formal, perceived, and experiential curricula were presented in John I. Goodlad, ed., *Curriculum Inquiry* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1979), 23, 348-49.

present. Implementation is treated as more than a top-down process, it concerns both transference and interpretation and a more independent creation of values in a complex interaction with the surrounding world.<sup>14</sup> In this study guidelines issued by the League of Nations, UNESCO and the Council of Europe are analyzed as a specific expressions of ideological tendencies in time, the ideological curricula; the formal curricula are followed through national curricular guidelines and also inspector reports; the perceived curricula are examined in debates in the teaching journals *the Swedish Upper Secondary Teachers' Journal* (TfSL), *The Association of History Teachers' Annual Report* (HLFÅ) and *New Information for History Teachers* (AFHL)<sup>15</sup> as well as through interviews with six teachers with more than 30 years' experience. The experiential curricula are studied through statistical analysis of students' choice of topics in their final exams in 1938-1963<sup>16</sup>, titles of students' individual projects in history between 1931 and 2002<sup>17</sup> and also through scrutinizing 145 individual projects in history written between 1969 and 2002.<sup>18</sup> My study is confined to upper secondary schools where final exams and individual projects in history were produced. The focus is on the period after the Second World War, when the urge for reform was strong, up to 2002, the last year this type of students' individual projects was written. The inter-war period is used as a background. I examine the treatment of contemporary history on the different curricular levels, and do not analyze the general pedagogic and social debate in depth.

Eckhardt Fuchs has previously described how the League of Nations became an international network that addressed itself to questions of education.<sup>19</sup> In the 1920s, history teaching as a mean for improving the present was debated, according to Jan Kolasa, within a subdivision of the League of Nations, The International Committee on Intellectual Co-operation (ICIC).<sup>20</sup> Regarding education, the post-war era has been depicted by

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<sup>14</sup> Goodlad, *Curriculum Inquiry*, 23, 348-49; David Tyack and William Tobin, "The 'Grammar' of Schooling: Why has it been so hard to change?," *American Educational Research Journal*, 31, no. 3 (1994): 469f, 477f.

<sup>15</sup> Issues of TfSL were studied from 1926 to 1942, and 1945 to 1956; HLFÅ, from 1942, 1945 to 2002; and AFHL, from 1968 to 1977.

<sup>16</sup> "De svenska uppsatserna vid allmänna läroverk samt enskilda och kommunala läroanstalter med studentexamen, fördelade efter ämnen och betyg," [Topics and statistics] National Archives of Sweden, Upper Secondary School Department, B II.

<sup>17</sup> I have studied 1680 titles produced between 1931 and 2002. 1,680 titles produced between 1931 and 2002 have been examined. In 1931 258 titles were registered from all upper secondary schools in Sweden; in 1939, 193 titles and 1950, 149 titles. In 1931, 297 students out of a total of 2,175 (14%) wrote on history; in 1939, 290 out of 6,263 (5%) and in 1950, 416 out of 6,705 (6%). I have also examined titles of individual projects in history in Boden, Umeå, Gotland, Gävle, Karlstad, Visby, Vänersborg, Ystad, Stockholm and Gothenburg, written by students studying in the social science, natural science and humanist programmes in 1969 and 1982, and in the social science and natural science programmes in 1992 and 2002. In 1969, 278 out of 1,303 (22%) individual projects were written on history at the schools investigated and in the programmes listed; in 1982, 184 out of 1,038 (18%), in 1992, 333 out of 1,086 (31%) and in 2002, 285 out of 1,395 (20%). National Archives, Stockholm, F Iida; City and Municipal Archives; School Archives.

<sup>18</sup> The individual reports were collected through a national search in school libraries and contacts with school archives and teachers. The individual projects were conducted in four different schools, in different parts of the country and supervised by at least eleven supervisors. Most papers come from Vasaskolan in Gävle and do not comprise any representative selection.

<sup>19</sup> Eckhardt Fuchs, "The Creation of New International Networks in Education: The League of Nations and Educational Organizations in the 1920s", *Paedagogica Historica*, 43, no 2 (2007).

<sup>20</sup> Jan Kolasa, *International Intellectual Cooperation: The League Experience and the Beginnings of UNESCO*, (Wroclaw, 1962), 68-77.

several scholars as a period when UNESCO and the Council of Europe tried to counteract future conflicts and build bridges between countries and cultures through teaching – not least, history teaching.<sup>21</sup> Previous research also indicate that Swedish student have been interested in contemporary history, rather than ancient history.<sup>22</sup>

## Contemporary History in International Guidelines

The League of Nations in 1927,<sup>23</sup> and later UNESCO and the Council of Europe, emphasized in their guidelines the value of history education for shaping the present and the future. According to them this would to promote peace and understanding over borders and between peoples.<sup>24</sup> The UNESCO guidelines for teaching international understanding in 1949 stated that:

There should be adequate treatment of world history and geography, the cultures of other nations, and of contemporary international events and problems. Wars and international conflicts of all kinds should be viewed in the total perspective of international relations. Not only politics but also art, music, literature, religion, education, recreation, science, health, industry, labour, agriculture and other aspects of living should be considered in the study of history and contemporary civilizations.<sup>25</sup>

UNESCO's formulation accentuated world-mindedness as an ideal and narratives about the development of civilization through cooperation; the present era's peaceful historical growth. In the 1950s, the Council of Europe discussed how contemporary questions should be dealt with in history teaching. The difficulties of being objective (as in neutral and true) were underlined. However, despite these problems, the recommendations highlighted the importance of teaching contemporary history. Pedagogical arguments was put forward that contemporary history would make history teaching more interesting.<sup>26</sup> In 1953, the Council of Europe stressed the importance of history for the understanding of one's own time and even for counter-balancing the media:

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<sup>21</sup> See for instance: Ann Low-Beer, *The Council of Europe and School History* (Strasbourg, Council of Europe, 1997); Falk Pingel, *UNESCO Guidebook on Textbook Research and Textbook Revision*, (Hannover: Hahn, 1999); Katérina Stenou, *UNESCO and the Question of Cultural Diversity* (Paris: UNESCO, 2007).

<sup>22</sup> Sture Långström, *Ungdomar tycker om historia och politik: En studie i pedagogiskt arbete*, (Umeå: Umeå Universitet), 67; Johan Hansson, "Historieintresse och historieundervisning: Elevers och lärares uppfattningar om historieämnet" (PhD diss., Umeå University, 2010), 179.

<sup>23</sup> *League of Nations, International Committee on Intellectual Co-operation, Sub-committee of Experts for the Instruction of Children and Youth in the Existence and Aims of the League of Nations, 4-6 July, 1927 C.I.C.I./E.J./24. (1)* (Geneva: UN Archives, 1927), 8-10.

<sup>24</sup> *A Handbook for the Improvement of Textbooks and Teaching Materials as Aids to International Understanding* (Paris: UNESCO, 1949), 78-79; "Recommendations to Teachers and Authors of Textbooks", in Burley & Dance 1960, 72.

<sup>25</sup> *A Handbook*, 78-79.

<sup>26</sup> Edouard Bruley & E.H.Dance, *A History of Europe* (Leyden, 1960), 48-50; *Recommendations to Teachers and Authors of Textbooks*, reprinted in Burley & Dance, 72; "Council of Europe, Course on History Teaching in Secondary Schools: Elsinor, Denmark, 21st August-1st September 1965, Final Report of the Committee for General and Technical Education" *Internationales Jahrbuch für Geschichts- und Geographieunterricht, Band X*, (Braunschweig: Albert Limbach Verlag, 1965/66, 125; Otto-Ernst Schuddekopt, *History Teaching and History Textbook Revision* (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 1967), 112.

We cannot understand the present situation in Europe without the background of recent history, in which the problems we Europeans are facing today often have their roots. If the younger generation is not taught recent history by historians, they will be left exclusively to the influence of press, film, radio, etc.<sup>27</sup>

Guidelines from the Council of Europe and UNESCO were directed to history and other closely related subjects such as civics and geography since a broad contemporary orientation, an interdisciplinary approach and skills such as critical thinking were to be strived after.<sup>28</sup> Aiming to influence teaching in school as a whole – very much including the subject of history – UNESCO adopted in 1974 recommendations in favour of international understanding for peace, human rights, fundamental freedoms and against racism and neo-colonialism. It was stated that “education should include critical analysis of the historical and contemporary factors of an economic and political nature underlying the contradictions and tensions between countries.”<sup>29</sup> UNESCO’s recommendations were revised in 1995, with a stronger emphasis on democracy and diversity, but still claiming a will to shape the present and the future.<sup>30</sup> In 1971 experts of the Council of Europe “recommended that, in the preparation of history syllabuses for the upper secondary schools, the planners starting point should be contemporary problems.”<sup>31</sup> Later the Council of Europe described history as a vital contemporary competence in a democratic, multi-cultural society.<sup>32</sup> The Council also underlined that “oral history, through which spoken testimony on recent historical events can make history come alive for young people, and which can offer the viewpoints and perspectives of those who have been omitted from the ‘historical record’.”<sup>33</sup> The subject of history became more comprehensive in the international guidelines and oriented to the present, with in many cases unclear boundaries towards other school subjects.

Ancient history had, on the other hand, a subordinate or even obscure position in UNESCO’s international guidelines, which instead asserted the value of contemporary world history.<sup>34</sup> During the 1950s and 1960s, the Council of Europe brought out the

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<sup>27</sup> *Recommendations to Teachers*, 72.

<sup>28</sup> *A Handbook*, 78-79; *Final Report: Intergovernmental Conference on Education for International Understanding, Cooperation and Peace and Education relating to Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, with a view to Developing a Climate of Opinion favourable to the Strengthening of Security and Disarmament*, ED/MD/74 (Paris: UNESCO, 1983); *Recommendation No. R (83) of the Committee of Ministers to Member States Concerning the Promotion of an Awareness of Europe in Secondary Schools* (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 1983).

<sup>29</sup> *Recommendation concerning Education for International Understanding, Co-operation and Peace and Education relating to Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms* (Paris: UNESCO, 1975). 3.

<sup>30</sup> *Declaration and Integrated Framework of Action on Education for Peace, Human Rights and Democracy: Declaration of the 44th session of the International Conference on Education endorsed by the General Conference of UNESCO at its twenty-eighth session, Paris, November 1995*, (Paris: UNESCO, 1995), 2.

<sup>31</sup> *Meeting of Experts on History, Strasbourg, 7–10 December, 1971*, DECS/EGT (71) 150 (Strasbourg: Council of Europe).

<sup>32</sup> *Nineteenth Session of the Standing Conference of European Ministers of Education, Education 2000: Trends, Issues and Priorities for pan-European Co-operation*, (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 1997); *Recommendation Rec (2001) 15 on History Teaching in Twenty-first Century Europe*, (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2001).

<sup>33</sup> *Recommendation Rec (2001) 15*.

<sup>34</sup> UNESCO’s promotion of world history in competition with the Council of Europe’s emphasis on European history is presented in Thomas Nygren, “International Reformation of Swedish History Education

value of antiquity in terms of a commonly-shared European cultural heritage, in its efforts to establish the Idea of Europe.<sup>35</sup> In later guidelines, which increasingly asserted the value of contemporary history, antiquity was not specifically mentioned, but European awareness and identity based on historical roots were underlined in more general terms.<sup>36</sup> Ancient history was clearly subordinate to contemporary history in the ideological curricula.

## Swedish Guidelines and Teachers' Perceptions of Contemporary History

After World War II the international guidelines were considered in both the formal curricula and in the teacher debate.<sup>37</sup> Swedish authorities emphasized the education of democratic citizens through more contemporary history and also proposed a separate, self-contained civic subject in the upper secondary schools.<sup>38</sup> Proposals and attempts at concentrating on contemporary history and separating the subjects of history and civics were met with skepticism on the part of many teachers.<sup>39</sup> Too much modern history would, according to the teachers, cause students to lose the explanations and connections that more extensive history could provide. Civics became an independent subject as of the new syllabus of 1961, despite the widespread criticism from history teachers, who contended that present-day society and the education of its citizenry would be best dealt with within the framework of the subject of history.<sup>40</sup> In the syllabus, the teachers were directed to "devote particular attention to 20th century history".<sup>41</sup> The inspectors' reports during the 1970s underlined the importance of contemporary history, claiming that "students' most evident area of interest lies in more recent periods of history."<sup>42</sup> Contemporary history was also emphasized later in the two following syllabuses up until 2002. How 20th century history was dealt with by teachers was examined in inspections as well as in investigations commissioned by the National Agency for Education.<sup>43</sup>

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1927-1961: The Complexity of Implementing International Understanding", *Journal of World History*, (2011): forthcoming.

<sup>35</sup> *Recommendations to Teachers*, 72; "Council of Europe, Course on History teaching," 126.

<sup>36</sup> *Recommendation No. R (83) 4 of the Committee of Ministers to Member States Concerning the Promotion of an Awareness of Europe in Secondary Schools* (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 1983); *Resolution (85) 6 on European Cultural Identity*, (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 1985); *Recommendation 1283 (1996) on History and the Learning of History in Europe*, (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 1996); *Recommendation Rec (2001) 15*.

<sup>37</sup> Nygren, *International Reformation*.

<sup>38</sup> Tomas Englund, *Curriculum as a Political Problem: Changing Educational Conceptions with Special Reference to Citizenship Education*, (Lund: Studentlitteratur, 1986).

<sup>39</sup> TfSL, 1948, 235; 1950, 12-13; TfSL, 1950, 432, 451; TfSL, 1951, 63-64, 476; HFLÅ 1951, 5; TfSL 1952, 251; TfSL 1953, 635-636, 640, 778-779; TfSL 1954, 116, 514; TfSL 1955, 286, 741-742, 786, 827.828; TfSL 1956, 180.

<sup>40</sup> Aktuellt från skolöverstyrelsen [National Syllabus] 1961:29.

<sup>41</sup> Aktuellt från skolöverstyrelsen [National Syllabus] 1961:29, 547.

<sup>42</sup> Rapport över verksamheten som gymnasieinspektör 1974-1975 [Inspector Report], National Archives of Sweden, Upper Secondary School Department, F IIIa, 7.

<sup>43</sup> Skolverket, *Undervisningen i 1900-talets historia: Redovisning av ett regeringsuppdrag* [Teaching 20th century History: Report of a government commission], 2000 08.23.



The experienced teachers in my study related how, ever since the 1960s, they had devoted increasing attention to modern history. Especially the teachers having a social scientific teaching strategy in history stressed the value of analyzing and illuminating the present from an historical perspective.<sup>44</sup> One of the teachers claimed that history can make one “better understand what will happen – it doesn’t need to be exact what one thinks will happen, but it often is. One sees patterns in the present in some way.” Several of these experienced teachers maintained that being able to see parallels in the past and the present between different parts of the world was extremely important in their teaching.

Ancient history was included in the syllabuses for history during the period investigated<sup>45</sup> except for between 1971 and 1981 when, on the upper secondary level, teachers were to focus on the period from 1000 and onwards. Ancient history returned to the syllabus in 1981 and in 1994 became a central period in the syllabus. The interviewed teachers described how antiquity had been part of their teaching, but their focus was increasingly on contemporary history. The records from their schools show that most of their students wrote individual projects in history on contemporary subjects.

## **Students’ History Becoming More Contemporary**

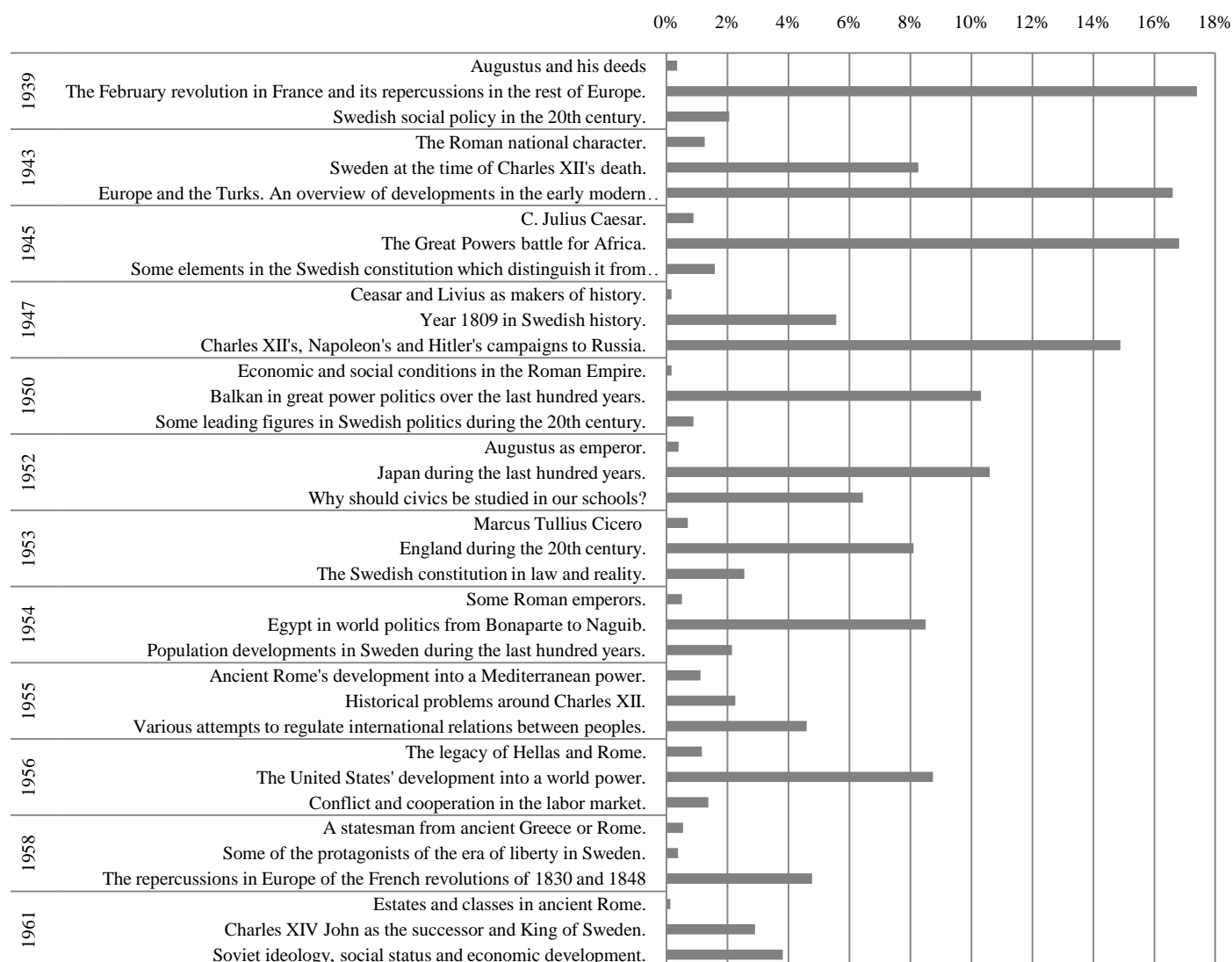
In the experiential curriculum, ancient history was not prominent when students in their final exams were to choose essay subjects. History was a relatively popular subject for these essays, but only a few wrote on ancient history (see Figure 1).

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<sup>44</sup> Thomas Nygren, ” Veteran Teachers’ Strategies in History Teaching: History didactic narratives from practice in Sweden” in *The Processes of History Education: Report from the Conference on History Teaching in Compulsory Schools in Malmö, March 5-7 2009*. Per Eliasson, Kenneth Nordgren & Carina Rönnqvist, eds. (2011) *forthcoming*

<sup>45</sup> Antiquity was also included in courses in classical languages and Swedish literature.

Figure 1: Number of students, in percent out of the total, writing their essays on various historical topics, based upon existing statistics, 1938-1961.<sup>46</sup>



Sources: "De svenska uppsatserna vid allmänna läroverk samt enskilda och kommunala läroanstalter med studentexamen, fördelade efter ämnen och betyg," National Archives of Sweden, Upper Secondary School Department, B II, 1938 to 1963.

The topics may be interpreted as an extension of the formal curricula, where the state could formulate what subject matter was to be considered central. The National School Board (SÖ), which formulated the topics, included antiquity as an alternative during certain years (the years mentioned in Figure 1).<sup>47</sup> The nationally formulated questions

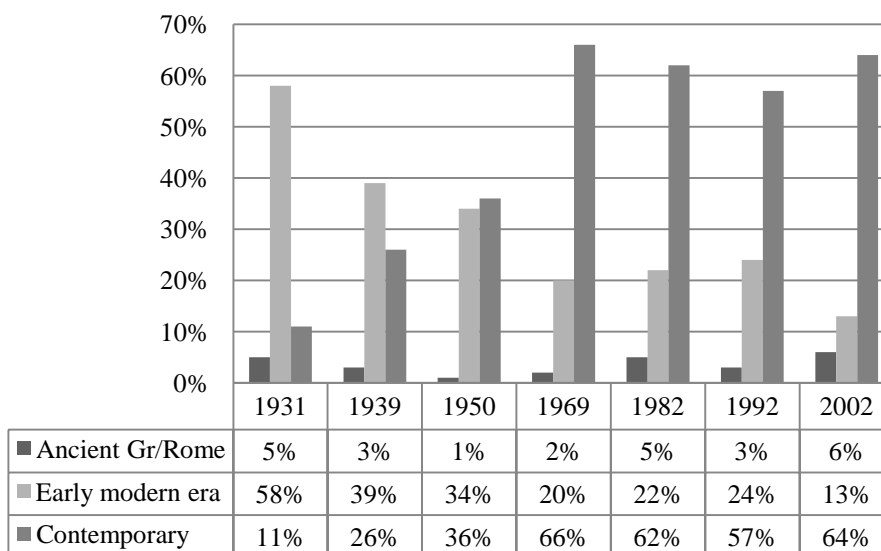
<sup>46</sup> Number students in total was: 1939 3,701; 1943 4,155; 1945 4,169; 1947 4,164; 1950 4,315; 1952 4,763; 1953 5,022; 1954 5,367; 1955 5,845; 1956 6,566; 1958 8,041 and 1961 11,082. Some of the statistics has previously been presented to show how world history was popular among students: Nygren, *International Reformation*.

<sup>47</sup> Since antiquity was not always a topic some students might have prepared themselves more for other topics. In certain years there were essay topics for students who wished to use Latin, so the legacy from

suggest a desire to stress both national and international history, often linked to contemporary history. Even if ancient history was included in the topics, few chose to write about it: between 0.1% and 1.3% of the students wrote about antiquity, when it was included in the subjects. As apparent in Figure 1, the most popular subjects for final exam essays had to do with international history from the 1800s onwards. Contemporary history, which concerned national history, was less appealing to the students, who rather chose contemporary world history.

A closer scrutiny of titles of students' individual projects in history, from 1927 until 2002, shows how students, supervised by teachers, turned towards contemporary history. In 1931, the majority of the students' individual projects dealt with the early modern era<sup>48</sup> and national history. Up to 1950, more individual projects concerned the early modern era than the history of the last 80 years (see Figure 2). From 1969 onwards contemporary history became totally dominating: a majority of the individual projects concerned the last 80 years when only 12–24% studied the early modern era and less than 7% studied the antiquity.

Figure 2: *Distribution of individual student projects, focusing on different time periods, in percent of total.*<sup>49</sup>



Sources: *National Archives of Sweden, City and Municipal Archives, School Archives.*

The Swedish Great Power period and its kings, subjects of many students' essays even in 1950, became increasingly problematised and replaced by subjects covering more contemporary world history, often focused on problems and conflicts. Students' individual projects and their final exams during the 1950s attested to the rising prominence of international history in the experiential curricula. Contemporary world history then retained this dominance into the 21st century. In comparison with the boys more girls

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antiquity was represented during those years. The Middle Ages however was not included as an alternative.

<sup>48</sup> The early modern era is here defined as from 1500 to 1789.

<sup>49</sup> The analysis is based upon the titles of 1680 individual projects in history between 1931 and 2002. Number of titles (N) analyzed 1931 258; 1939 193; 1950 145; 1969 278; See also footnote 17.

studied the early modern era, but both boys and girls focused primarily on contemporary history in their individual projects.<sup>50</sup>

Closer examination of titles and student projects in contemporary history shows evidence of how contemporary conflicts affected students' experiences of history: in 1969 students wrote about the history of Vietnam and racial conflicts in the US; in 1992, they chose to write on the Balkans, and in 2002, on Afghanistan. Far away conflicts but also the immediate surroundings were studied and oral history was, at least from the 1980s, used to find out more about local historical everyday life.<sup>51</sup> In their written work, students also revealed how they were inspired by feature films about historical subjects such as "Ådalen 31"<sup>52</sup> and "Gladiator".<sup>53</sup> In an essay from 1970, one student argued the superiority of a film (Ådalen 31) over a book for giving "better insights into the conflicts between social classes, how they lived, how great the differences in their ways of life were."<sup>54</sup> The fact that in 2002 students wrote about Bruce Lee, Elvis Presley, Andy Warhol, Marilyn Monroe and Walt Disney indicates how contemporary popular culture can influence students' interest in contemporary history. More contemporary history also involved a less distinct boundary between history and other subjects. The Israel-Palestine conflict, the aborigines, voodoo and the Beatles are four examples of subjects that were categorized as history in certain schools but in others were seen as respectively civics, religion and music subjects. In over half of the students' work analyzed in the present study (79 out of 145), the students made clear reflections around the relationship between the present and the past, locally, nationally and internationally. Using secondary sources but also oral history and primary material students studied a wide variety of contemporary historical subjects.

## Concluding Discussion

A more international and peaceful history education with a focus on contemporary history, as a way of building a better future, was emphasized in the international guidelines. The formal national curricula largely followed the same development with the present and the fostering of citizens being increasingly emphasized. The 1950s seems to have been a contemporary turn in Swedish history education. After the turn contemporary history acquired more and more importance when teachers and students chose their

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<sup>50</sup> In 1969 23% of the girls and 10% of the boys wrote about the early modern era; in 1982 20% of the girls and 19% of the boys; in 1992 23% of the girls and 17% of the boys and in 2002 15% of the girls and 10% of the boys. In 1969 63% of the girls and 77% of the boys wrote about contemporary history; in 1982 57% of the girls and 68% of the boys; in 1992 49% of the girls and 57% of the boys and in 2002 63% of the girls and 71% of the boys.

<sup>51</sup> Göran Blomqvist, *Hur var livet i Bomhus gamla folkskolor?* [What was Life Like in the Old Primary Schools in Bomhus?] (Gävle: Vasaskolan, 1987); Kristina Jagell, *Mackmyra bruk – bruksbor berättar: En dokumentation av åtta människors tid vid Mackmyra Bruk* [Mackmyra Village – Stories from Villagers: A Documentation of Eight Persons' Years in the Village]. (Gävle: Vasaskolan, 1993).

<sup>52</sup> Ulla Larsson, *Ådalen 31* (Gävle: Vasaskolan, 1970). The movie, "Ådalen 31" from 1969 by Bo Widerberg about the confrontation between strikers and the Swedish military won in Cannes in 1969 and was nominated for an Oscar.

<sup>53</sup> Josefine Holmqvist, *Gladiatorerna: Romarrikets stjärnor* [The Gladiators: The Stars of the Roman Empire], (Hässleholm: Linnéskolan, 2002). The movie "Gladiator" from 2000 was a box office success and won five Academy Awards.

<sup>54</sup> Ulla Larsson, *Ådalen 31*, 4.

areas of concentration in history. The division between history and civics in 1961, which was criticized by history teachers, did not entail history education to deal with older periods and civics to handle more recent history. Instead, according to the teachers in my study and to students' work, history teaching acquired an even more contemporary orientation after the division. The arguments of the teachers during the 1950s against the division, emphasizing the value of history per se as contemporary, timely, social science, may very well have contributed to the orientation towards more contemporary history that occurred during the 1950s and onwards.

Even if statistics cannot relate everything about the teaching that was carried out,<sup>55</sup> it is evident that students in their final exams often wrote on contemporary history, but that contemporary national history was marginalized. Students' orientation in the experiential curricula seems to have been affected by their own time. The present was used as an inspiration for their journeys into the past. More students wrote about the global world, which was becoming increasingly accessible during the period studied, not least through the development of technology and communications. World conflicts were made more tangible to the students and also popular culture was given a more prominent place in contemporary history in the experiential curricula. Whether the subject of history fostered critical thinking regarding the information conveyed by the media – as desired by the Council of Europe – remains to be investigated further. In accord with the guidelines that UNESCO formulated in 1949, both world politics and peaceful expressions of culture were subjects of students' work in contemporary history.<sup>56</sup> In the experiential curricula history as a more contemporary subject seems to have taken on a broader, possibly more interdisciplinary character – as was recommended in the international guidelines.

The position of antiquity may have been strong among the critics engaged in the debate and in the movies, but it has been marginal in students' work for a long time. Despite efforts from the Council of Europe to create a European awareness through references to a common ancient cultural heritage, students' focused primarily on contemporary world history. The occasionally heated Swedish debate in 2010, with accusations of a lack of knowledge from both sides,<sup>57</sup> concluded almost before it began when the Minister of Education, Jan Björklund, reacted by promising to include ancient and medieval history in the new syllabus.<sup>58</sup> The result was a compromise where ancient and me-

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<sup>55</sup> Students' essays were written at the end of their last year at school and therefore with a chronologically organized course, students can have been more aware of recent and contemporary history when writing their individual projects. However, this is not necessarily the case during the period studied, as the syllabus emphasized chronology less and less at the same time as students' work became more and more oriented towards recent history (see Figure 2)

<sup>56</sup> For a more thorough analysis of students' orientation towards global history and minorities see: Thomas Nygren, "UNESCO and Council of Europe Guidelines, and History Education in Sweden, c 1960-2002" *Education Inquiry* 2, no. 1 (2011): 37–60.

<sup>57</sup> Dick Harrison suspected that "these people themselves lack knowledge of older history", while Kenneth Nordgren claimed that "the critics argued on the basis of a dearth of knowledge of both old and new subject matter" in the syllabuses: Dick Harrison "Historia i skolan"; Lina Wennersten "Historieslag om antiken" [Battles in History Over Antiquity] *Svenska Dagbladet*, 1 April 2010, [www.svd.se](http://www.svd.se) (accessed 13 October 2010).

<sup>58</sup> "Regeringen stoppar Skolverkets förslag om slopad historia – replik från utbildningsminister Jan Björklund" [The Government Stops the Proposal by the National Agency for Education to Discontinue History – Reply from Educational Minister, Jan Björklund] *Svenska Dagbladet*, 17 February 2010, [www.svd.se](http://www.svd.se) (accessed 13 October 2010)

dieval history was included at the same time as contemporary history continued to be emphasized. In light of the present study, it is, however, uncertain whether the position of ancient and medieval history in the syllabus will affect students' experiences of history. What students retain after finishing their studies of history is affected by more factors than the contents of the formal curricula. Most likely, future students will also be inclined towards contemporary history when they leave school and encounter life in society and higher education – today as much as 60 years ago.