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# “Remembering” World War II and Willingness to Fight

## Sociocultural Factors in the Social Representation of Historical Warfare Across 22 Societies

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Students from 22 nations answered a survey on the most important events in world history. At the national level, free recalling and a positive evaluation of World War II (WWII) were associated with World Values Survey willingness to fight for the country in a war and being a victorious nation. Willingness to fight, a more benign evaluation of WWII, and recall of WWII were associated with nation-level scores on power distance and low postmaterialism, suggesting that values stressing obedience and competition between nations are associated with support for collective violence, whereas values of expressive individualism are negatively related. Internal political violence was unrelated to willingness to fight, excluding direct learning as an explanation of legitimization of violence. Recall of wars in general (operationalized by WWI recall) was also unrelated to willingness to fight. Results replicate and extend Archer and Gartner's classic study showing the legitimization of violence by war to the domain of collective remembering.

**Keywords:** *social representations; collective memory; war attitudes*

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What things do societies choose to remember? How do these things relate to their present characteristics, including willingness to wage new wars? Liu et al. (2005) found that across 12 Eastern and Western societies, young people overwhelmingly remember war and, to a lesser extent, politics as the most important events in world history, with World War II (WWII) being the most important event in all 12 samples. The centrality of war in the popular remembrance of history has been replicated by Pennebaker et al. (2006), giving rise to the main questions in this research. At the national level, is collective remembering of war associated with willingness to fight in current conflicts? Is it the remembrance of war in general or the specific remembering of WWII that relates to willingness to fight? Finally, is the general remembrance of war associated with culture or dimensions of cross-cultural variation (Hofstede, 2001)?

Relevant evidence was reported in a classic study by Archer and Gartner (1984). Using archival cross-national data, they found that combatant nations were more likely to experience increases in homicide rates compared with control nations in the years immediately following WWII. Increases in homicides were more likely in victorious nations with high casualties, and these increases were unrelated to economic deprivation or social disorganization and not attributable to returning male combatants. Archer and Gartner concluded that wars, especially victorious ones, tend to legitimate the use of violence in society and that this effect is not confined to combatants. For the U.S. Army in WWII, Stouffer (1949, cited in Collins, 2004) found that agreement with the standard positive meanings or rhetoric of war (e.g., the glory of war, heroism of battle, war enabling soldiers to realize their masculinity and comradeship) was highest among civilians at home, moderate among rear-area troops, and lowest among combat troops. Hence, we might expect a similar form of collective symbolic learning about the positive value and legitimacy of war to appear vicariously and across generations at the culture level for young people's collective memory of WWII; stories of war transmitted by secondhand accounts are less horrifying than the experience of frontline combat itself, across either time or space.

A group's representation of its history can explain how its world has come to be the way it is and justify its responses to current challenges (Liu & Hilton, 2005). In the case of victorious nations, like the United States and Russia, WWII is represented as a Just War, or a "Great Patriotic War" (Wertsch, 2002). Analysis of official documents in 19th- and 20th-century Europe (Rosoux, 2001), mainly focused on Germany and France, found common features of representations of past wars: "Our" shameful past war episodes are concealed; our heroes, martyrs, and epic battles are acknowledged and remembered; our internal conflicts and crimes are forgotten. Recalling past persecutions and martyrs imposes the duty of fidelity and justifies revenge against evil-doers. References to others as victims, civilians killed, and suffering are concealed. Aggression against enemies is portrayed as repaying injuries suffered by the nation or nation's ancestors. War becomes a legitimate form of honoring the memory of ancestors and victims (Rosoux, 2001). Hence, victory in war and glorifying war should instill positive attitudes toward war, backed by cultural norms favoring a willingness to fight in future wars at the collective level.

Collective memories are more likely to be formed and successfully maintained by rituals and institutions in the case of events that represent long-term, emotion-laden, social change (Pennebaker, Paez, & Rimé, 1997). Different authors suggest that three generations is the maximum that people vividly retain historical events. When asked about important political

events lived by relatives (Pennebaker et al., 1997) or about genealogical knowledge and relatives' episodic information, most people have information for about two or three generations (Candau, 2005). Assman (1992, cited in Laszlo, 2003) proposes that collective memories last for less than a century, about three generations, and then memories change to ritualized abstract and semantic knowledge or "cultural memories." These factors suggest experiential and word-of-mouth constraints on the glorification of war. Hence, recall and positive evaluation of war within the past three generations (e.g., WWII) should predict willingness to fight in future conflicts, but not remembering war in general (e.g., recall of WWI).

Social representations of war may also be related to general norms and meaning structures prevalent in a societal context. With respect to cultural values, high power distance values (PDI) are related positively to civil war and internal political violence, because asymmetrical and authoritarian systems increase the chance of intense internal conflicts (Hofstede, 2001). Moreover, confirming that hierarchical cultural values are positively related to collective violence, PDI correlated negatively with the main dimension of a sociostructural index of a "culture of peace" and was related to disposition to fight for the nation (Basabe & Valencia, 2007). PDI is associated at the cultural level with Schwartz's hierarchy and conservatism and negatively to autonomy. Such a "PDI cultural syndrome" promotes differences in power and hierarchical roles emphasizing obedience and respect for authorities and the legitimacy of using power to attain goals, including in-group or national goals (Hofstede, 2001). Hence, PDI should be associated with greater collective remembering of and more positive attitudes toward recent salient wars.

Postmaterialist values, however, emphasize expressive individualism and self-actualization. The shift from an industrial and materialistic to a postmaterialist society (Inglehart, Basañez, Diez-Medrano, Halman, & Lütjckx, 2004) appears to be associated with a shift from representations of war focused on heroes, martyrs, and a positive connotation of collective violence toward representations focused on suffering, victims, the murder of civilians, and the meaninglessness of war (Rosoux, 2001). These values probably erode "heroic war narratives," weaken remembering of wars, and do not provoke a positive attitude toward collective violence.

To summarize, we expected that victorious nations, and those with hierarchical cultural syndrome and low postmaterialism, should report higher recall of WWII, a positive evaluation, and a higher disposition to fight in a new war. These associations should not emerge with wars in general, as indexed by remembrance of WWI.

## Method

### Participants and Procedure

Responses to a questionnaire about world history were collected from 1996 to 2005. All participants were volunteers from undergraduate (mainly psychology) courses in universities in the Americas (Argentina, Brazil, United States), Europe (France, Germany, Hungary, Poland, Portugal, Russia, Spain, United Kingdom), Asia (China, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Taiwan), and Oceania (Australia, New Zealand). The sample was made up of 3,322 participants (60% female), with a mean age of 21.78 years ( $SD = 4.25$ ; range = 18–42).

**Table 1**  
**Sample Features, Historical Experience, Percentage Recalling World War I (WWI)**  
**and World War II (WWII), Evaluation, and Cultural Dimensions**

Country	Year	No of Participants	% of Women	WWII Exp.	Death Toll	WWII Rec.	WWI Rec.	Eval.	PDI	Postmat.
Argentina	2005	100	50	N	0.0	48	45	1.79	49	25
Australia	1996	98	75	W	5.7	68	60	1.73	36	35
Brazil	2005	367	80.4	W	0.0	40	32	2.03	69	12
China	2006	115	54	W	40.7	81	40	2.37	80	03
France	1997	102	51	W	13.4	64	30	2.12	68	18
Germany	1997	81	51	D	108.2	68	60	1.54	35	17
Hungary	1996	123	50	D	63	88	75	1.95	46	02
Hong Kong	2003	57	53	W	18.9	81	52	2.0	68	
India	2006	100	55	W	3.8	80	37	2.97	77	02
Indonesia	2006	104	52	W	56.7	79	32	2.80	78	03
Japan	1996	91	42	D	36.1	52	29	1.66	54	09
Malaysia	1998	180	81	W	4.5	60	60	3.95	104	
New Zealand	1996	112	68	W	7.6	73	64	2.15	22	20
Poland	1998	302	70	W	160.9	93	44	1.30	64	08
Philippines	2006	102	70	W	7.3	68	54	3.33	94	06
Portugal	2003	118	60	N	0.00	72	51	1.61	63	10
Russia	2005	60	80	W	137	92	79	2.95	105	02
Singapore	1998	201	70	W	18.9	94	84	3.96	74	07
Spain	2004/2005	142	68	N	0.0	50	45	1.4	57	17
Taiwan	2000	646	53	W	18.9	69	60	3.1	58	05
United Kingdom	1997	39	87	W	7.7	77	64	2.82	35	20
United States	2002	82	41	W	3.2	86	50	2.87	40	25

Note: Exp. = experience; N = neutral; D = defeated; W = winner; Rec. = percentage recalling wars; Eval. = evaluation: 1 = *negative* to 7 = *positive*; PDI = Hofstede's power distance scores; Postmat. = Inglehart's postmaterialism scores. All participants answered the questionnaire in their national language.

*Percentage remembering WWI and WWII as important historical events.* Participants were asked open-ended questions: "Imagine that you were given a seminar in world history. What seven events would you teach as the most important in world history? How positively or negatively do you regard each event?" (on a 7-point scale ranging from *very negative* to *very positive*). Open answers were, for the most part, coded verbatim for the main events used in this study, WWI and WWII. In some countries, WWII was mentioned by synonyms such as the Patriotic War in Russia, as described fully in Liu et al. (2005) and Pennebaker et al. (2006).

*Historical experiences.* Being victorious in WWII: Nazi–Fascist Axis nations were Germany, Hungary, and Japan. Spain sent troops to fight on the Russian front but was formally neutral, as was Portugal. Brazil sent troops to fight with the Allies, and Argentina was neutral until the very end. Victorious nations were considered all allied nations directly

involved in war. Defeated nations received a score of 1, neutral or passive allies 2, and active allies 3 (see Table 1). Casualties and involvement in WWII: WWII death toll was estimated death per 1,000 habitants using Wikipedia. For instance, Poland and Russia lost 15% to 20% of their populations ([www.wikipedia.com](http://www.wikipedia.com)). Internal political violence in the 20th century: Instances of civil war or number of political riots and armed attacks against or by the government in 136 countries between 1948 and 1977 were used to index internal political violence (Van der Vliert, 1998).

*Willingness to fight for country.* The World Values Study Group collected data in 54 nations with large random samples (from 1,000 in Argentina to 2,500 in Russia). Fieldwork was carried out between 1999 and 2002. One item asked, "Of course, we all hope that there will not be another war, but if it were to come to that, would you be willing to fight for your country?" (*yes* = 1, *no* = 2). Yes percentage was used (see Inglehart et al., 2004, p. E012, for national scores).

*Cultural factors.* Hofstede (2001) reports power distance scores for 53 nations and regions. These ratings were based on questionnaires answered by IBM employees throughout the world in the 1970s. In spite of the fact that the survey was performed more than 30 years ago, Hofstede's scores show high convergent validity with current surveys of values and with current cross-cultural studies (Hofstede, 2001). Inglehart's postmaterialism scores (World Values Survey [WVS]; Inglehart et al., 2004) result from a factor analysis with one pole representing postmaterialist values (high subjective well-being, not giving importance to hard work, encouraging tolerance, and trusting people) and an opposite pole representing materialist values, with items such as "rejection of different groups," "respect for one's parents," and "liking for work." Table 1 shows mean scores for each country for the variables of interest.

## Results

Nonparametric Spearman Rho correlations at country level were performed to compare relationships between sociocultural factors, WWI, and WWII recall and evaluation scores. Bonferroni's correction suggests that  $p < .01$  is significant and  $p < .05$  is a trend, but this is a strict correction due to the low number of nations. High death toll,  $r(22) = .61, p < .01$ , being a victorious nation,  $r(22) = .35, p < .05$ , and low postmaterialism,  $r(20) = -.49, p < .05$ , correlated with greater WWII recall. Death toll was unrelated to being a victorious nation and other variables. Being a victorious nation,  $r(22) = .64, p < .01$ , and Hofstede's PDI,  $r(22) = .47, p < .05$ , were related to positive WWII evaluation. Being a victorious nation,  $r(21) = .64, p < .01$ , and a positive evaluation,  $r(18) = .50, p < .05$ , of WWII correlated with willingness to fight. Internal political violence was unrelated to willingness to fight and other variables. Willingness to fight,  $r(22) = .55, p < .05$ , and low postmaterialism,  $r(20) = -.58, p < .01$ , correlated with power distance. Recall of WWI was not related significantly to willingness to fight,  $r(22) = .30$ , evaluation of WWII,  $r(18) = .39$ , cultural values (PDI),  $r(22) = -.20$ , or postmaterialism,  $r(20) = -.03$ .

## Discussion

Extending Archer and Gartner (1984), we found that vicarious collective remembering contributing to a legitimization of war occurred across a span of three generations at the culture level: Young people in victorious nations reported higher recall of WWII memories and a less negative evaluation of this event and expressed more willingness to fight in a new war for the motherland. This was unlikely to be related to wars in general, as recall of WWI was unrelated to these variables. This suggests that it is event-specific and focused symbolic learning, passed by word of mouth and mass media and replayed through institutional forms of commemoration and state building, that contributes to a culture of war, not a general abstract dimension of hawkish remembrance.

Level of involvement (i.e., higher death toll or casualties) also was associated with higher recall but was not related to evaluation or to willingness to fight in a new war. Being a victorious nation was associated with a less negative evaluation of WWII. The evaluative mean for winner nations was 2.64 compared with defeated Axis powers (1.71) and uninvolved nations (1.70). Because recalling and positive evaluation of WWII were related to willingness to fight for country, an idealized and positive image of WWII as a just or necessary war was relatively prevalent in victorious nations (Wertsch, 2002).

Even if defeated nations conceal more negative aspects of their WWII actions (e.g., denial of crimes of war by Japan and Germany), their representations of the war are not (or are not able to be) associated with a positive view of war. Because defeated nations remember war defensively, emphasizing in-group suffering, they may teach new generations about the negative effects of collective violence. The younger generations learn that wars are “social catastrophes” (Rosoux, 2001). Civil war or internal political violence after the war was unrelated to WWII recall, evaluation, or willingness to fight in a new war. This rules out direct experience of collective violence as a factor affording positive dispositions toward war. Although civil wars may be just as violent as wars between states, they are rarely glorified. Remembrance of wars in general, as indexed by the second most important war in lay histories, WWI, was unrelated to willingness to fight, suggesting, along the lines of Assman (1992, cited in Laszlo, 2003), that there is something qualitatively different about living memories like WWII collections, transmitted from parents and grandparents to children and grandchildren by word of mouth, that influences current political attitudes. Recall of WWI and general remembrance of wars was also uncorrelated with any of the dimensions of cultural variation that we investigated (e.g., PDI or postmaterialism), suggesting that collective remembering of war is event focused rather than a general cultural predisposition to glorify conflict.

On the other hand, positive evaluations of WWII and willingness to fight were associated with high power distance. This hierarchical cultural syndrome is associated with a positive attitude toward collective violence. Given WWII’s position as a core representation of world history, it is perhaps not surprising that remembering WWII and willingness to fight in a war were negatively related to postmaterialist values. Results confirm that postmaterialist values are related to an erosion of heroic war narratives.

Our study was limited by the nations and student samples (some of small size) available for collective remembering. However, usually, correlations between national and student samples in beliefs and opinions are high (Diener, Diener, & Diener, 1995; Liu et al., 2005).

Comparisons between countries using matched samples of young adults with higher education probably underestimate cross-cultural differences (Inglehart et al., 2004), as they compare participants with similar social backgrounds and exposure to a similar “globalized culture.” Obtaining results with such samples increases confidence in the subjective culture associated with the differences, because other more salient cultural differences are controlled for.

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