

Past imperfect

Our collective memories of events are often inaccurate. Finding out why could help international relations, say **Henry Roediger** and **James Wertsch**

DURING the Blitz, the UK was pummelled for eight months in a sustained bombing attack by the German Luftwaffe. In London alone, some 20,000 people were killed and a million homes were levelled. The time is remembered as one when plucky Londoners calmly went about their business with resolution and courage, defying Hitler and rallying behind Winston Churchill.

But did it really happen this way? Not according to historian Angus Calder. Drawing on letters, diaries and newspaper accounts from the time, he concluded that Londoners were panicked, exhausted, unable to sleep and in a constant state of mourning for their loved ones. About a quarter of London's population was evacuated to the countryside, Churchill was often booed when he toured bomb sites, and morale was low.

In retrospect, this was the city's "finest hour", but between September 1940 and May 1941, the scene in London was one of turmoil and despair. Today's portrayal therefore represents a collective false memory. Why do those who lived through it remember it as they do and what significance does this hold?

Conflicting accounts

Similar anomalies crop up with other events in the second world war. This year marks the 70th anniversary of the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The collective account in the US is that President Truman and his generals dropped the bombs to end the war, forcing the Japanese to surrender. This is part of the larger American narrative of "how the US won the war". By contrast, the prevailing narrative among Russians is that the bombs were dropped to frighten the Soviet Union into acquiescing to US demands after the war. According to this view, the Japanese were on the verge of

surrender, and the bombs were strategically unnecessary in the battle. And, of course, people of other countries have their own memories of the events.

Instances such as these have led us to the study of collective memory in an attempt to understand why stark differences exist between entire countries on "what really happened" and how these views can remain in place for generations.

Collective memory refers to the way in which groups of people remember the past. Such memories can form for a family, a business, a city, or even for a nation. Of course, individuals hold the memories, but studies show that personal memories can converge as individuals discuss events (for instance, eye witnesses talking about a crime) or across generations as events are recounted.

The empirical study of collective memory is a fairly recent endeavour, and researchers turn to many sources – newspaper accounts, interviews and by examining how frequently certain words or phrases occur in large volumes of text. Recently, social scientists have begun to survey large groups of people about their recollections of events, to assess memories more directly. This kind of quantitative research examines recollections of many people, and so provides a more consensual view of collective memory.

We are currently involved in a large online survey of how people in 11 combatant nations recall the second world war. Early results reveal stark differences in which events people in different countries remember, what they know, and how positive their perception is of the events. For example, when asked to list the critical events of the war, battles cited by nearly all Russians are not even mentioned by Russia's allies.

One example is the battle of Kursk, which resulted in more than 1 million casualties, and



PROFILE

Henry Roediger is a psychologist and James Wertsch is an anthropologist, both at Washington University in St Louis, Missouri. Wertsch is the author of *Voices of Collective Remembering*. Roediger is co-author of *Make it Stick: The science of successful learning*

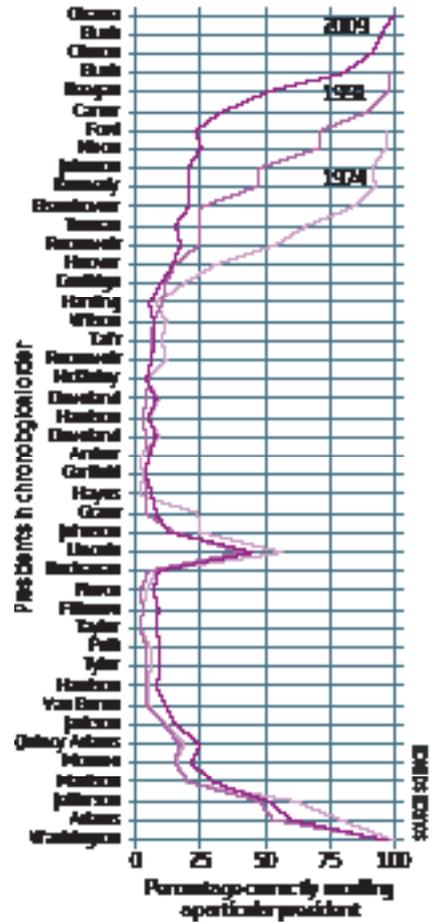
is widely viewed by historians as a critical turning point in the war.

Even within the same group, collective memories are not always static, and can change with new generations. One study has found that almost all people it surveyed in the US viewed the atomic bombs as a major event of the war, but different groups had different perspectives. Those who had lived through the war saw the bombings in a positive light (rating them about an 8 on a 10-point scale), whereas college students viewed the events rather negatively (about a 3). It seems that younger people, in line with



Collective forgetting

Most Americans remember only recent and notable presidents in the correct order



modern textbooks, are more likely to take into account the horrific deaths and radiation poisoning caused by the bombs, rather than thinking the bombs ended the war and resulted in the troops returning.

Quantitative research into collective memory can help us understand not just what is collectively remembered, but also what is being forgotten – and how fast. One US study asked people to recall as many presidents as they could, in 5 minutes, putting them in chronological order wherever possible. The experiment was conducted in 1974, 1991 and 2009. Not surprisingly, almost everyone knows the current president, but recall of the most

People have a picture of the Blitz as a time of courage and defiance. In reality, morale was low

recent presidents drops off steadily (see chart, above right). People are consistently able to recall Washington and the earliest presidents, Abraham Lincoln and those around him and then those closest to present day. The results of all except the most recent presidents were similar across 35 years.

We also scored people's ability to remember the names of presidents irrespective of order. This allowed us to measure how quickly leaders had been forgotten since the second world war. We found that presidents Kennedy and Nixon were being forgotten slowly, but Truman, Eisenhower, Johnson and Ford were being forgotten more rapidly. In another 40 years, they may be as poorly recalled as 19th century figures Zachary Taylor or Franklin Pierce.

Collective memory shapes not only varying recollections of the past, but also sets a course for future action. When US politicians were debating the invasion of Iraq in 2002 and 2003, proponents looked back to the second world war to justify invasion. They argued that stopping Saddam Hussein would be akin to intercepting a new Hitler before he could invade his neighbours. Those on the other side of the debate likened Iraq to Vietnam. They argued that the US was getting involved in a local dispute that posed no direct threat to the country's interests, and which was likely to involve a protracted and costly war.

If we can understand what the collective memory is, and why it is held, we will understand the reasoning and motivations behind it (even if we do not agree with them). And that understanding can help us resolve conflicts and better predict what actions a group or country might take in the future. n

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