

Who won World War II? Conflicting narratives among the allies

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Abstract

World War II was a cataclysmic event that consumed people from many countries for at least 6 years. We discuss a large-scale study of how people from 11 nations remember the war, including 8 Allied and 3 Axis countries. The study showed dramatic differences in how people of the former Soviet Union and those of the other 10 countries remembered the war. Events listed by the Soviet Union were almost completely different from those in the other 10 countries. In addition, Russians (as representatives of the former Soviet Union) claimed greater responsibility in winning the war (75% of the war effort) than did people from any other nation (although the US and UK also claimed over 50% responsibility). However, when people of each country rated other countries' contributions to the war, they rated the US as having a greater impact than the former Soviet Union. Another interesting finding is that when asked why the US dropped the atomic bombs on Japan, most people of ten countries said it was to win the war, with the exception being people from Russia. Further, the older the person in 7 of those countries, the more they agreed with the statement that the US dropped the bombs to end the war. Our study points up the importance of national collective memory in understanding and remembering World War II and how their can be stark differences in collective memory even among allies in the war.

Keywords

Collective memory, National narratives, World War II, National narcissism, Overclaiming of responsibility, Schematic narrative templates

"All wars are fought twice, the first time on the battlefield and the second time in memory."
Viet Than Nguyen (2013)

The answer to the question that forms the title of this chapter is that *yes*, of course, the Allies won the war. But our chapter asks which allies were the most responsible for the victory and how people of different allied nations remember the war. If one

defines (somewhat arbitrarily) allied combatants in World War II as those countries that had a thousand or more soldiers killed, then there were about 20 Allied countries in the war.

Prior research has uncovered the fact that two radically different versions of how World War II was won. One might be called a US/UK narrative, and the second is a Soviet/Russian account. Even though the US, the UK and the Soviet Union were all allies, their two narratives about the war are quite different, almost nonoverlapping. The events on the battlefield are long past, but the second war that is still being fought is the war for memory, for how the tale of the victory should be told. This chapter is about the two tales of the war, and some minor variants in some countries.

This second war is not being fought in autobiographical memory or living memory, but rather in collective memory. The soldiers who fought in the war are either very old or dead in 2022, but interest in the war and its memory is still alive. Collective memory refers to how groups of people remember the group's past (e.g., [Wertsch and Roediger III, 2008](#)). Collective memory is not history, which is intended as a relatively objective account of the past, but rather collective memory represents the way some version of the past may be remembered and used by people in the present. For example, as we write this chapter, the war between Russia and Ukraine is about four months old. Vladimir Putin justifies the war as a continuation of World War II, with Russia again threatened by outside forces from NATO that have been supplying troops to Ukraine. The war is thus partly conceived as a pre-emptive strike to fend off Russia's foes, operating through Ukraine. Putin even refers to the Ukrainians as neo-Nazis, even though their elected president is Jewish.

Most everyone in the West sees the war quite differently, with Russia invading a neighbor who had not provoked Russia in any way. If any analogy would be made to World War II by those in the West, it is that Putin is a new Hitler, attacking his neighbors for territorial conquest in Georgia, Crimea, and now again in Ukraine. Thus, collective memories in much of Russia versus the West about recent events are also quite different, but in a way the Russian-Ukrainian war is also about collective memory: Putin and many Russians consider (or remember, in the sense of collective remembering) Ukraine as part of Russia whereas Ukrainians insist that they are a separate country, although long dominated by Russia.

1 Background

James Wertsch grew up on a farm in Illinois, attended the University of Illinois, and then received his Ph.D. at the University of Chicago. Thus, he grew up learning American history as it is taught in US schools. However, from an early age he took a strong interest in Russia. After graduate school, he spent several years in Moscow studying with Alexander Luria but also being deeply influenced by Luria's former colleague, Lev Vygotsky. [Wertsch \(2002\)](#) tells the story of his conversations with a high school student, Sasha, about World War II and how the story Sasha told of the war was so different from the one Wertsch knew. This incident caused Wertsch to conduct a more formal study of 177 Russian high school students. He hypothesized

that “whereas Americans could be expected to respond to a question of major events in World War II by listing items such as Pearl Harbor, D-Day, the Battle of the Bulge, the liberation of the concentration camps by American troops, Guadalcanal, and Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the proto- typical Soviet account included the German attack of Russia, the Battle of Moscow, the Battle of Stalingrad, the Battle of Kursk, the Siege of Leningrad, and the Battle of Berlin” (2002, p. 152). The Russian students did indeed list all the events that Wertsch proposed and others such as the German invasion of the Soviet Union.

Later, [Zaromb et al. \(2014\)](#) conducted a similar study with both younger and older American adults, asking them to provide important events from World War II. The younger adults were college students, whereas the older adults were old enough to recall news reports and discussion of the war, even though most were too young to have fought in it. (The data were collected in 2009). Although many events were recalled, the three recalled by 50% or more people (younger and older) were the attack on Pearl Harbor, D-Day, and dropping of the Atomic bombs on two Japanese cities. These events represent the beginning, middle and the end of the war for Americans and make a convenient narrative. None of the events listed by the Russians were among the 10 most frequent events listed by Americans, despite the fact that the two countries were allied in the war against Germany, Japan and Italy. Similarly, in [Wertsch’s \(2002\)](#) study, Russians listed none of the US events in the important events of the war.

2 The current study

The purpose of this chapter is to report on a large-scale study conducted in 2015–2017 in which at least 100 people of varying ages from 11 different countries filled out a survey about World War II. Altogether, 1338 people were surveyed, and no one was paid; participants were volunteers and provided informed consent. A snowball sampling technique was used such that some people in each country were invited to fill out the survey and encouraged to send the link for the survey to others, who in turn filled it out (or not) and sent it on to yet other potential participants. The questionnaire consisted of several parts, including basic demographic information, a multiple-choice general knowledge test, a recognition test of events from World War II, a listing of (up to) the ten most important events of the war, and then other sections to be described below. The countries included were 8 Allies (Australia, Canada, China, France, New Zealand, Russia, the UK and the US) and 3 Axis countries (Italy, Japan, and Germany). Questionnaires differed slightly for the Allied and Axis countries, but most sections were the same. Two papers have been published on data from this large-scale study ([Abel et al., 2019](#); [Roediger et al., 2019](#)). We report key results from those studies and then another analysis of data not previously reported that are also of interest.

The purposes of the study were several. First, we included samples from Russia (representing the Soviet Union) and the US to replicate prior studies of [Wertsch \(2002\)](#) and [Zaromb et al. \(2014\)](#) with new samples. Our participants were all older

than high school students (see table 1 in [Abel et al., 2019](#)). Of course, we expected people in the US and Russia to have radically different views of the war. More importantly, we wanted to see the list of events that would be produced by people of the other 9 countries and how they would apportion responsibility for the victory in the war. To this end, we also included a section asking for people to judge the importance of their own country's and other countries' contributions to the war effort, as discussed below. We provide other analyses, too, for the first time. All subjects were tested in English, which of course is a limitation for people of countries whose native language is not English; they had to know English to participate. However, we believe this was not great, because similar results were obtained for students tested in their native language in Italy, Japan, and Germany ([Abel et al., 2019, 2022](#)).

3 Important events of World War II

[Abel et al. \(2019\)](#) asked participants in 11 different countries to list the 10 most important events of World War II. They were asked to list the events in any order and to simply provide the name or a short label, and they could provide the name of the event in their native or primary language if they did not know the English name for the event. The overall sample of 1332 participants listed a total of 11,024 identifiable events for World War II, so each person nominated just over 8 events on average (a total of 695 non-events had also been listed, such as a single name or overly vague response that could not be identified, and these non-events were excluded from the analysis). The mean number of events nominated differed across countries with Russian participants providing the most events on average (9.3) and Japanese participants providing the fewest events (6.9).

Across people from all countries, there were 4 “core events”—events shared by 50% or more of the sample—including the attack on Pearl Harbor (listed by 68% of participants, $n = 901$), the atomic bombings of Japan (67% of participants, $n = 899$), D-Day (64%, $n = 852$), and the Holocaust (54%, $n = 720$). The remaining top 10 events were listed by fewer than half of the sample, including the German invasion of Poland (40%, $n = 539$), Battle of Stalingrad (30%, $n = 397$), German invasion of USSR (23%, $n = 305$), Battle of Britain (22%, $n = 289$), Victory in Europe Day (V-E Day; 21%, $n = 282$), and the fall of France (18%, $n = 245$). See table 3 in [Abel et al. \(2019\)](#) for the top 15 events. These country-specific core events included the German invasion of Poland (a core event for 4 countries, including Australia, New Zealand, the UK, and Germany), De Gaulle's Appeal (a core event for France), the Battle of Britain (a core event for the UK), the Warsaw Uprising (a core event for Poland), and 6 unique core events for Russian participants (the Battles of Stalingrad, Kursk, Moscow, and Berlin; Siege of Leningrad; the German invasion of the USSR).

What is notable about those 4 core events endorsed by the majority of participants across all countries is just how much consensus existed between countries for the important events, including the Axis countries that fought on opposite sides of the war from the Allies. This consensus for core events by country can be visualized quite clearly in [Table 1](#), which presents a simplified adaptation of figure 1 from

Table 1 Core event comparison by country.

Country	Core events (% nominated overall)				% of 4 core events shared by country (%)
	Pearl harbor (68%)	Atomic bombs (67%)	D-Day (64%)	Holocaust (54%)	
Australia	×	×	×	×	100
Canada	×	×	×	×	100
France	×	×	×	×	100
NZ	×	×	×	×	100
UK	×	×	×	×	100
USA	×	×	×	×	100
China	×	×	×		75
Poland	×	×	×		75
Russia			×		25
Germany	×	×	×	×	100
Italy	×	×	×	×	100
Japan	×	×			50
Countries that share core event	11	11	11	8	

Note: An X indicates 50% or more of respondents within a country nominated a particular World War II event as important. This table is a simplified, adapted version of figure 1 in [Abel et al. \(2019\)](#) and adds data from Poland from ([Barzykowski et al., in preparation, as described in Abel et al., 2022](#)). Specific percentage values are referenced in the aforementioned sources.

[Abel et al. \(2019\)](#). Specifically, [Table 1](#) presents how many of the 4 overall core events (the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the atomic bombings of Japan, D-Day, and the Holocaust) were endorsed as core events for each country. An “X” indicates that a particular overall core event was also a country core event, meaning 50% or more respondents within a country nominated the same events as those nominated by the entire combined sample. Though not included in the [Abel et al.](#) study, we opted to include data from Poland to our description here to further highlight the consistency of these findings (data from Poland includes 204 participants collected by [Barzykowski et al., in preparation, as described in Abel et al., 2022](#)). Other top events nominated by each country that were nominated by less than 50% of a country’s sample can be found in [Fig. 2](#) from [Abel et al. \(2019\)](#).

Of the 12 total countries, 8 countries (including 6 Allied countries and 2 Axis countries) were in 100% agreement about core events (right side of [Table 1](#)), whereas the top 3 overall core events (Pearl Harbor, atomic bombings, D-Day) were endorsed by 11 of 12 countries (91.7%) as being a core event (bottom of [Table 1](#)). In other words, there exists clear and strong consensus about which events were the most important in World War II, even amongst countries that were enemies at the time. These results also highlight that Russia is a glaring exception to the event consensus by other countries, as they only agreed that D-Day represented a core event of World

War II. (D-Day, or the Opening of the Second Front as Russians call it, did not appear in [Wertsch's \(2002\)](#) study, which was conducted in Russian.) Despite Russia's disagreement with the other countries sampled, participants within Russia showed the strongest internal consensus about which events were the most important. Specifically, Russia had 7 core events (the most of any country) and, with the exception of D-Day, 6 of those 7 core events were unique to Russia and not endorsed by any other country as a core event. These core events include: Battle of Stalingrad = 93% of Russian respondents; Battle of Kursk = 73%; Siege of Leningrad = 65%; Battle of Moscow = 64%; German Invasion of USSR = 60%; and the Battle of Berlin = 57%. Clearly, Russia has a very different narrative of World War II that primarily focuses on the USSR and the Eastern front, which is in stark contrast to the largely Western or Allied view of the other sampled countries. The USSR-centric core events offered by the Russian respondents will be echoed in the next section when discussing their perceived contribution to the war effort relative to other countries.

Ultimately, the high consensus and overlap of important events nominated by most of the countries, even for those on opposite sides of the war, suggests a highly consistent schematic narrative template and knowledge structure in how World War II is collectively remembered ([Abel et al., 2022](#); [Wertsch, 2008](#)). In particular, most countries appear to endorse a more Western-centric view of the war and largely neglect important events from the Eastern front, whereas Russia displayed the reverse pattern. As noted by [Abel et al. \(2019\)](#), part of the reason for the consensus in event importance could be due to the influence of Western ideas, both immediately following the war as well as today through popular culture and media influence. In particular, the Allied- or Western-centric view of the war has likely proliferated due to greater worldwide exposure of the US perspective of the war, particularly in the last few decades. The US view or narrative of the war, and the role of Americans in fighting (and helping to win) the war, is the focus of many recent depictions of World War II. These narratives are evident in high-grossing films such as *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) and *Pearl Harbor* (2001), in television series such as *Band of Brothers* (2001) and *The Pacific* (2010), and the US narrative is particularly evident in prominent video game series, including *Brothers in Arms* (2005–2014), *Medal of Honor* (1999–2020), and *Call of Duty* (2003–present), which feature Americans as the protagonist more than 80% of the time ([Breuer et al., 2012](#); [Ramsay, 2015](#)). These examples, as well as the consistency of different countries to report Western/ Allied-focused events as being the most important events of the war, embody the modified Winston Churchill quote from [Abel et al. \(2019\)](#): “collective memory is written by some of the victors more than others” (p. 187). We consider other reasons for this consistent outcome in a later section of the chapter.

4 Rated contributions to the war effort

The data in the previous section show that people in Allied countries tend to view the victory in World War II through one of two lenses: The American/English version of the victory seems to be accepted by people in 11 of the 12 countries

(counting Poland), whereas the Soviet account seems to be accepted only by Russians in our survey. Even Chinese and Germans, who might be well aware of the Soviet contributions in the European theater of the war, favored the UK/US view. As we have seen, Polish subjects were given the questionnaire, and they too provided an account that resembled the UK/US narrative more than that of the former Soviets (Abel et al., 2022).

We also asked about the perceived contribution to the victory for each of the eight Allied countries surveyed. To do this, we used a technique common in social/personality psychology that has documented the phenomenon of overclaiming of responsibility. When people involved in a common effort are asked what percentage of the effort they are responsible for, the sums of the individuals add to >100% (Ross and Sicoly, 1979). For example, when high school basketball players on teams that won were asked to judge what percentage of responsibility they had for the victory, the totals summed to above 100%. Individuals believe (on average) that they are more responsible for a common achievement than they in fact are. Further, this phenomenon of overclaiming of responsibility increases with group size (Schroeder et al., 2016).

Given these facts about overclaiming in small groups, one might expect great overclaiming of responsibility when huge groups—imagined communities in Anderson's (1983) terms—are surveyed. Indeed, exactly this pattern has been found. When Zaromb et al. (2018) asked people of 35 countries what percentage of world history their home country was responsible for, the total summed to 1156%! There are 193 countries in the United Nations, and some national entities are not in that body (North Korea, Palestine, and others). Because of the emphasis in the US on American exceptionalism, Zaromb et al. had expected the US to stand out in its percentage. US respondents did claim 30% of world history, which is doubtless greatly exaggerated. However, among the 35 nations, the US was tied at about 20th (with Bulgaria and Peru). The countries at the top of the list were Russia (61% of world history), the UK (55%), and India (54%).

In a similar vein, when Putnam et al. (2018) asked people in all 50 states what proportion of US history people in their state were responsible for, the total came out as 907%. In a replication and extension of this work, Churchill et al. (2019) obtained 990%. From these studies, it is clear that asking large groups to estimate their contributions to history leads to great overclaiming.

Returning to the present study, we asked participants from our 11 countries to rate their own country's contribution to the victory in terms of percentage effort. Specifically, for the eight Allied countries, we asked "In terms of percentage, what do you think was [your country's] contribution to the victory of World War II? In other words, how responsible was your country for the victory of the war?" They were provided with a slider set to zero (with 100 at the other end) and moved it to give a percentage. The results are shown in Fig. 1, in the leftmost column for each country. Russians claimed that the Soviet Union was responsible for 75% of the victory, whereas claims of people from other countries were more modest. Nonetheless, both the UK and the US claimed slightly >50% of responsibility for the victory, with 51%

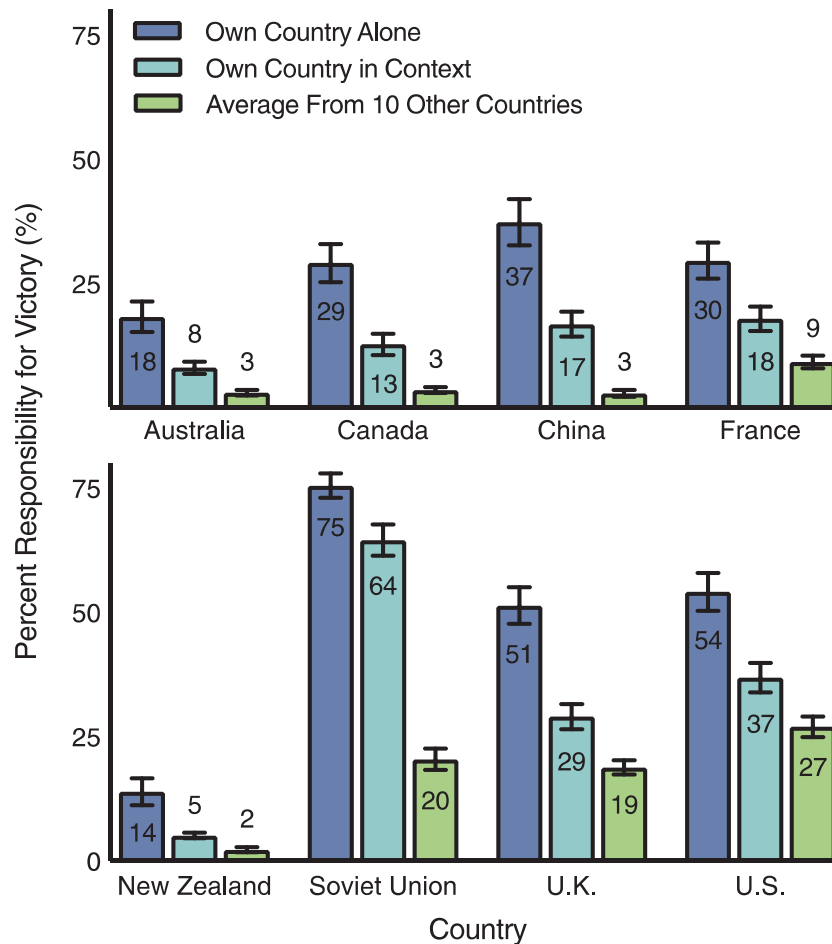


FIG. 1

Allied contribution to the war effort. Perceived percentage of contribution to the war effort is depicted for 8 former Allied countries. Ratings of each country's contribution to victory were provided (1) by participants concerning their own country's contribution, (2) by participants concerning their own country's contribution when asked in the context of 7 other Allied contributions, and (3) when participants in 10 other former Allied and Axis countries rated each country's contribution. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

From Roediger, H.L., III, Abel, M., Umanath, S., Shaffer, R.A., Fairfield, B., Takahashi, M., Wertsch, J.V., 2019. Competing national memories of World War II. Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. U. S. A. 116 (34), 16678–16686, figure 2 (p. 16680). Copyright by the National Academy of Sciences.

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and 54%, respectively. Altogether, these eight Allied countries claimed 309% of responsibility for the victory! Overclaiming of responsibility is alive and well in this study, too.

We next asked the question in a different way that we believed should moderate the tendency to overclaiming. We presented the eight countries with a box beside each for participants to write in a percentage, with the requirement that the total must add to 100%. A ninth box was labelled “Other” for the other allied countries. We asked: “In terms of percentage, how much do you think each of the following countries contributed to the Allied victory of World War II? In other words, how responsible was each country for the Allied victory of World War II?” The data are presented in the middle bar of Fig. 1, and it is readily apparent that the people of most countries greatly moderated their own percentage of responsibility for the victory. In fact, people in four countries (Australia, Canada, China, and New Zealand) dropped their estimate of responsibility by about half. People from France, the UK and the US dropped their percentages for their own countries quite a bit but not close to half. Only Russians (for the former Soviet Union) still did not moderate their responses by such a large factor, to 61% from 75%. Russians still believed that the Soviet Union was primarily responsible for winning the war.

The design of our study permits us to examine one more of attributing responsibility for the victory in the war, viz., the opinion of people in other countries on the contribution of each of the 11 countries in winning. That is, for each country (say, the US) we averaged the percentage responses from the other ten countries for that country (the US). We had 10 countries, because we also had the Germans, Italians and Japanese rate the Allied countries on their victory. The “other-rating data” are shown in the third bar in Fig. 1 where it can be seen that these ratings are much lower than the self-ratings. Surprisingly, especially to Russians, the US was credited with providing a greater level of responsibility for the victory, 27% relative to 20%, respectively (a statistically significant difference). The sum of the “other country” ratings total 96%, with the other 4% for the other Allied countries not mentioned.

We argue that overclaiming of responsibility can be taken as an index of national narcissism. If so, then Russians (for the Soviet Union) would seem to show the greatest narcissism. Of course, perhaps the Russians are right, especially for the war in Europe. We consider this possibility later, as well as general reasons for such overclaiming of responsibility.

5 Shifting of collective narratives for World War II

The prior sections discussed how the events of WWII that are collectively remembered and recognized are quite similar across groups, whether those groups are 11 different countries (but not Russia; [Abel et al., 2019](#)) or different age cohorts, such as younger and older adults in the same country ([Zaromb et al., 2014](#)). Yet differences can occur, too, even within the group of Allies that show relatively consistent overall judgments. That is, people from different countries may differentially

overclaim responsibility for their contributions to the war effort (Roediger et al., 2019), younger relative to older adults often view some of their countries' actions as more negatively valenced (Schwartz et al., 2005; Zaromb et al., 2014), and agreements about the importance or cause of certain agreed-upon-events can be quite different. We take up this issue next using previously unpublished data from the survey that underpinned the Abel et al. (2019) and Roediger et al. (2019) studies.

6 Disagreements in collective memory: Why did the US drop atomic bombs on Japan?

Whereas both Roediger et al. (2019) and Abel et al. (2019) depict the similarities and differences between the collective memories and narratives of nations, Zaromb et al. (2014) investigated how different generations within the same nation (the United States) remember their collective past. They found that younger and older adults—similar to the aforementioned findings with different countries—recalled similar events for WWII. Both age groups shared the same top 3 events, including the attack on Pearl Harbor, the D-Day invasion, and the dropping of the atomic bombs. However, the emotional valence and overall narratives ascribed to these events by younger and older adults differed in some distinctive ways, particularly for the US's use of atomic bombs on Japan. On a scale from 0 (extremely negative) to 10 (extremely positive), younger adults ($M = 3.4$) perceived the dropping of the atomic bombs as a negative event whereas older adults perceived it as a positive event ($M = 8.0$). Older adults probably interpreted dropping the bombs as ending the war, whereas as the younger adults were reflecting on the deaths and destruction caused by the bombings. Umanath and Abel (2022) asked 125 US students to nominate events of which Americans should be proud or ashamed about their country. They found almost a third (30.9%) felt ashamed about the atomic bombings of Japan. In addition, a nationally representative YouGov poll of 6,313 US adults taken in 2020 found that 52% of young adults indicated that the US should apologize to Japan, relative to only 21% of older adults (YouGov, 2020). Such findings demonstrate that different groups (age cohorts in this case) can collectively remember the same events yet have different emotional appraisals and potential narratives for those events.

Do such changes in narrative for the events of WWII occur for age cohorts within countries other than the US? Previously unpublished data from the World War II study show how participants from 11 countries rated statements about the extent to which they agreed with the statements on a scale from 0 (strongly disagree) to 10 (strongly agree). One statement read, "The reason the United States dropped the Atomic bomb on two Japanese cities was to end the war." The mean agreement ratings by country for this statement are depicted in Fig. 2 where it can be seen that all countries except two are at or above a mean of 5 (indicating agreement with the statement or at worst neutrality). One particularly clear example of how different narratives are embedded within these ratings is the strong disagreement ($M = 2.8$) from Russian participants, who diverged significantly more than every other country

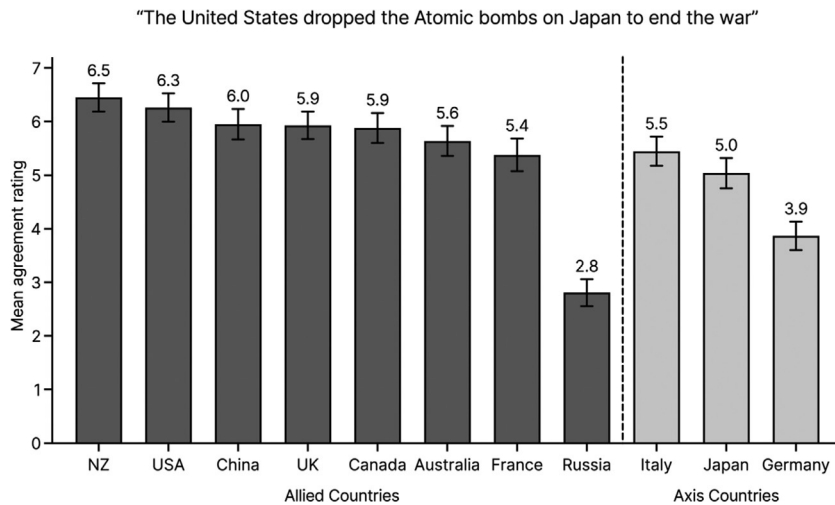


FIG. 2

Mean agreement ratings and ordered from highest to lowest mean agreement within the Allied (left side in dark gray) and Axis (right side in light gray) countries. Russia and Germany disagreed with this statement significantly more than every other country sampled (posthoc tests, Holm $P < 0.001$) except for each other (posthoc test, Holm $P = 0.15$).

except for Germany ($M = 3.9$). As has been noted elsewhere (e.g., [Roediger and Wertsch, 2015](#); [Wertsch, 2011](#)), the Russian collective narrative for why the US dropped the atomic bombs on Japan was not to end the war (which they believe would have ended soon regardless) but was instead to intimidate the USSR. Such justifications may also underlie why Russia was the only country not to endorse the dropping of the atomic bombs as a core event in WW2.

[Fig. 3](#) unpacks the mean data in [Fig. 2](#) by showing the breakdown of the overall mean ratings into the percentage of people in each country who provided ratings from 0 to 10 on the 11-point scale of strong disagreement to strong agreement. The wide range of opinion in each country shows the great variability of opinion on why the bombs were dropped within each country. Fully 40% of Russians gave a rating of zero, strongly disagreeing with the proposition that dropping the bombs ended the war.

Another way to examine these data is to look at the relation between age and agreement with the statement about dropping the bombs. [Zaromb et al. \(2014\)](#) found that in the US older adults thought that dropping the bombs was a positive event whereas younger adults perceived it a negative event. Might we also find age differences in beliefs about peoples' belief in why the bombs were dropped on Japan? Might these relationships differ across countries?

Aggregated across all countries, the age of participants positively correlated with their agreement rating (Spearman's $\rho = 0.27$, $P < 0.001$), suggesting older

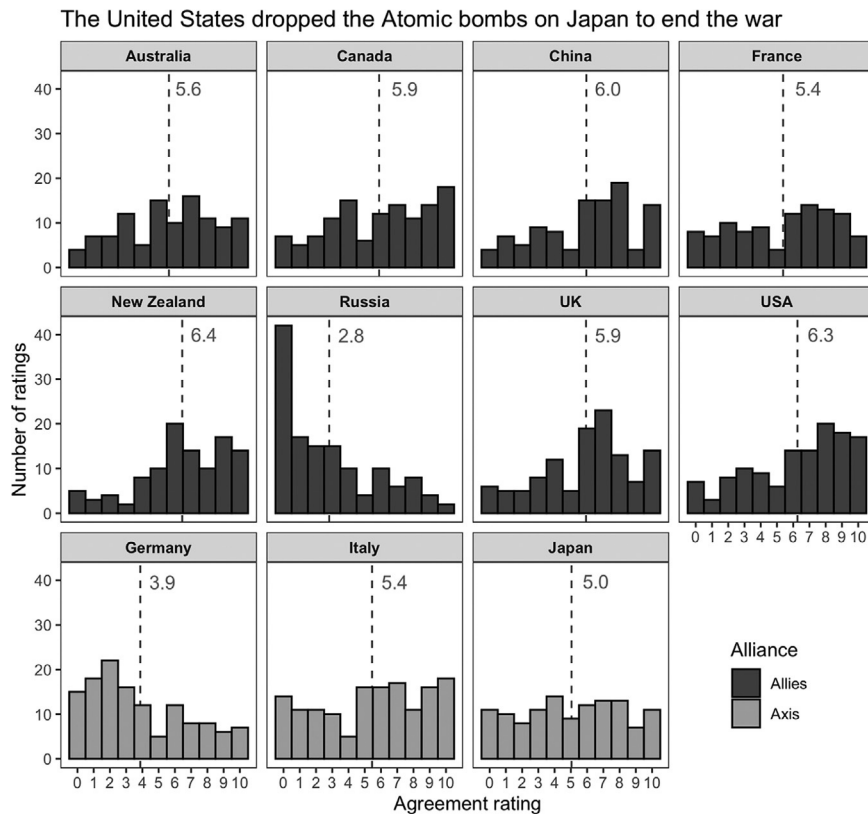


FIG. 3

Overall ratings of agreement from 0 (strongly disagree) to 10 (strongly agree) by participants from 11 different countries for the following statement: “The reason the United States dropped the atomic bombs on Japan was to end the war.” The vertical dashed line represents the mean rating of agreement of people in each country. Countries who belonged to the Allied powers (the top 2 rows) are shown in dark gray whereas countries who belonged to the Axis powers (the bottom row) are shown in light gray. Russia and Germany disagreed with this statement significantly more than every other country sampled (posthoc tests, Holm $P < 0.001$) except for each other (posthoc test, Holm $P = 0.15$). Russia also had by far the most 0 ratings (strongly disagree) of any country.

participants tended to agree more strongly with the claim that the US dropped the atomic bombs to end the war. This positive relation between age and strength of agreement remains unchanged when partially out performance on the WWII general knowledge questions (partial Spearman’s $\rho = 0.27$, $P < 0.001$), suggesting the relationship is not due to any differences in knowledge about the war across age groups. More broadly, this finding may represent a shift in narrative between

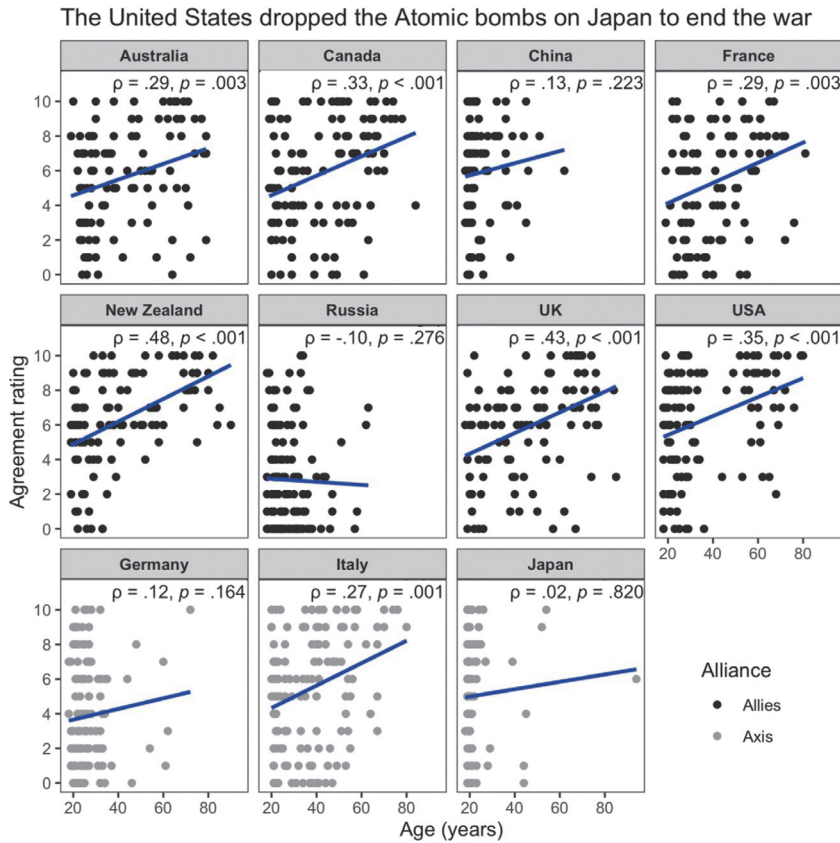


FIG. 4

The relationship between age and agreement rating within each of the 11 countries sampled. 7 countries had significant positive correlations between age and strength of agreement (Australia, Canada, France, Italy, New Zealand, UK, and USA) whereas 4 did not have significant relationships (China, Germany, Japan, and Russia). The blue line represents the best-fitting regression line (because it is a parametric measure it may not produce the same relationship as the non-parametric Spearman's rho measure).

younger and older adults across multiple countries similar to that observed by Zaromb et al. (2014) within the US (see also Roediger and Abel, 2015; Zolberg, 1998 for other examples).

Fig. 4 portrays the relationship between age and agreement broken down by country. In three countries (China, Japan, and Germany), little variability exists in the age distribution and so low correlations are observed. Across almost every other country a general pattern emerges where increasing age corresponds with stronger agreement that the US dropped the atomic bombs in 1945 to end the war. The positive relationship between age and agreement was significant for 7 of the 11 countries

(Australia, Canada, France, Italy, New Zealand, UK, and USA) whereas the relation was not significant for the other 4 (China, Germany, Japan, and Russia). For Russia the relation is slightly (but not significantly, negative. Of those four countries where no significant trend existed between age and agreement ratings, three of them (China, Japan, and Russia) were the only three countries in the original [Abel et al. \(2019\)](#) study that did share the same 4 core events (Pearl Harbor, Atomic Bombs, D-Day, Holocaust) as the other eight countries. It is worth noting, too, that there may not have been a significant relation for those countries because those four countries had the youngest sample on average (22.4 years for Japan; 25.5 years for China; 26.8 years for Germany; 28.2 years for Russia; the other countries all had mean sample ages of 35 years and older).

To summarize this section of the chapter, people of many countries report the belief that the US dropped the atomic bombs to end World War II, but great variability exists within each country on this matter. In addition, an overall positive correlation exists between the age of the respondent and the belief that the US dropped the atomic bombs to end the war. The great exception to these generalizations lies in people of Russia, many of whom strongly disagree on why the US dropped the bombs and whose older adults do not reflect the positive correlation between age and belief that the US dropped the bombs to end the war. Although we did not ask Russians in our survey, in all likelihood Russians believe that the US dropped the bombs in an effort to frighten the Soviet Union. However, due to successful espionage, the Soviet Union was able to develop the atomic bomb shortly after the US did ([MacIntyre, 2020](#)).

7 Understanding similarities and differences in remembrances of the war

The results we have reported may seem strange. The US, the UK and others were allies of the Soviet Union during World War II, yet people of Russia remember core events of the war quite differently from their allies. On the other hand, people of the Axis countries who the US, UK and others fought, remember the core events of the war much like the western allies. Further, the people of China, which became Communist like the Soviet Union, also remember core events of the war more like the Allies.

We can ask “Who is right?” among these disputes, but of course that would lead to more disputes. However, examining the death tolls of the various combatants may help to provide some clarity, at least for the war in Europe and North Africa. The number of soldiers killed in each of the 11 countries in our survey is shown in table 2 from [Roediger et al. \(2019\)](#). The US and the UK together lost just over 800,000 soldiers, a frightful number. However, in just two battles, the Battle of Stalingrad and the Battle of Kursk, the Soviet Union lost well over 1,100,000 soldiers, far more than the British and the US together lost in the entire war. And the Soviet soldiers were almost all killed on the Eastern front, whereas many Americans and Brits

lost their lives in the Pacific. In Europe, the Soviet Union had been carrying on the war alone since 1941 until the Allies invaded France in June 1944 (D-day, or what the Soviets and many historians call “opening of the Second Front”—the first and primary front being in the East).

We believe that part of the reason that people in the US, at least, believe that their forces were largely responsible for winning the war occurs from national egocentrism or national narcissism. Some evidence for this conclusion comes from a poll taken of US people during World War II. A June 1943 nationwide poll of 2,888 US adults asked the following question: “Which of these countries do you think has done the most toward winning the war so far?” with the options (ordered differently across two versions) being Russia, China, Britain, or the United States ([Gallup Organization, 1943](#)). The US was the most common answer selected by 45% of respondents, followed by Russia with 33%, then Britain with 10%, and finally China with 4.0%. (Some 8% expressed no opinion.) At this point, the US had only been officially at war for about 18 months and was not fighting in Europe, whereas the other countries listed had been at war for at least 36+ months. Even though the US had been at war for much less time, Americans already believed they were responsible for victories so far in the war. June 1943 was also before many of the events/battles that are probably associated with the US’s contribution to the war in modern day ratings (e.g., D-Day, the Battle of the Bulge [also called the Battle of the Ardennes Forest], Iwo Jima, and the atomic bombings of Japan).

An even earlier poll, conducted in July 1941, reveals similar optimism about American power even before the US entered the war ([Fortune Magazine, 1941](#)). This poll of 5,224 US adults asked what England’s chances of winning the war were if the US did not get further involved, followed by England’s chances of winning if the US joined the war. Ratings for a “sure” likelihood of England winning (the highest option offered) went from 18% to 53% if the US joined the war, suggesting Americans thought the US would make England’s victory nearly 3 times more likely. Of course, this judgment might have been correct.

If indeed the Soviets were largely responsible for the victory in Europe, why do the listings of events by western allies not reflect this? Was it always this way? In France, a poll was taken in May 1945 and then again in 1994 and 2004 asking the question, “In your opinion, what country contributed most to the defeat of Germany in 1945?” They were given choices of the UK, the US and the Soviet Union and had to pick one of these countries. In 1945, 57% of the French people surveyed reported that the Soviet Union was responsible for the victory. However, in the two later polls, that percentage dropped to 25% in 1994 and then 20% in 2004. Across those same years the percentage of French people saying the US was most responsible for winning the war rose from 20% in 1945 (despite the fact that France was liberated mostly by Americans) to 49% in 1994 and then 58% in 2004 ([Matthews, 2014](#)). So, at the end of the war, most French people recognized that the Soviet forces played a large role in winning the war against Germany, but that opinion changed over time. In the rest of this section we speculate on the reasons for this change.

First, the Cold War began shortly after World War II. The US and other Allies had felt solidarity with the Soviet Union during the war, but this feeling changed shortly afterwards as the Soviet Union gobbled up countries of eastern and northern Europe and imposed Communist rule and also tested their own nuclear bombs. The US and other nations became more nationalistic in the Cold War and perhaps minimized Soviet achievements in the war and emphasized their own achievements in the war. The US also helped to rehabilitate the war-torn countries of western Europe via the Marshall Plan. Of course, the Cold War and the Marshall Plan had nothing to do with victory in the war, but these events likely made people of western Europe and Japan more favorably disposed towards the US.

Second, textbooks written about the history of the war were also nationalistic. [Crawford and Foster \(2007\)](#) surveyed the treatment of World War II in history textbooks from China, England, France, Japan, Germany, and the US in the early 2000s. They found nationalism in all the textbooks. In their conclusion, they wrote:

A central theme in the pages of this book has been that within history textbooks remembering World War II is not only about inclusion, it is also about exclusion. In telling and selling the story of World War II, the creation of a collective national memory involves marginalizing some events, issues and groups at the expense of others, thereby leaving significant and critical contributions and histories unwritten. This is not simply the result of publishers not being able to include everything in national narratives, for, as we have seen, conscious decisions are made regarding what stories are told, how they are told, and what stories are not told. Through this process a dominant cultural, ideological, and political need appears to exist that aims to valorize the nation through the depiction of struggles against evil, conquests and triumphs won, gallant but always righteous defeats endured with dignity, and the achievements of individuals elevated to the position of national heroes and icons. These stories create a common tradition and are indispensable in serving to symbolically unify members of a nation both spiritually and emotionally. ([Crawford and Foster, 2007](#), pp. 203–204.)

Textbooks are written with a point of view, a nationalistic one. Thus it is understandable that they emphasize events in which the nation participated and understate contributions by those in other countries, even if (or maybe especially if) these other events were more important. [Crawford and Foster \(2007\)](#) observed that “the brutal and significant military confrontation between the USSR and Germany receives, on average, less than one page of total textbook coverage” (p. 136). How could American students begin to appreciate the importance of the battles that were among the first decisive defeats for the Germans? It is more surprising that Germans did not rate the contributions of the Soviet Union quite high, given that its soldiers were repeatedly defeated and eventually overrun by the Soviets.

Of course, textbooks are only one source of knowledge, and perhaps not even the most importance source, for many people. As noted above, the US has produced many novels, histories, movies and TV shows about World War II. Movies, in

particular, may have a wide impact when shown all over the world. In addition to those mentioned previously, there are *The Longest Day* (1962), *The Great Escape* (1963), *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957), *Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo* (1944), *Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949) and many others. The Soviet Union and later Russia have produced some films that had world-wide circulation and impact (e.g., Stalingrad), but these are vastly outweighed by ones from the West. In all likelihood, the huge media presence of the US and its version of the war has affected people in many countries and may account for why even countries like China and Germany take an American-centric view of the war.

The factors we have discussed—polarization from the Cold War, nationalistic textbooks, American media dominance—represent some possible factors for why 10 of the 11 countries we surveyed took the US view of the war. Future research will be needed to uncover, if possible, which of these factors was most important. In terms of accounting for why overclaiming of responsibility is such a potent force in all kinds of judgments, see [Roediger et al. \(2022\)](#), [Yamashiro and Roediger III \(2021\)](#).

8 Conclusion

World War II was perhaps the central event of the 20th century, in retrospect. How it is remembered is critical to our understanding of international relations today, such as its continued invocation by Vladimir Putin in regards to the War in Ukraine. Our survey has revealed national egocentrism in the way the war is remembered, but at the same time has shown that people of most countries, Allied and Axis alike, remember the critical core events as reflecting an American and British view of the victory. The Soviet/Russian view, despite its great plausibility in accounting for the victory in Europe, seems to be held only by Russians among the countries in our survey. Understanding the reasons for this state of affairs calls for further research, although we speculated on reasons why these perceptions may exist.

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