



Review

Victorious justifications and criticism of defeated: Involvement of nations in world wars, social development, cultural values, social representations of war, and willingness to fight[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Social representations of the historical past, anchored in historical experience and cultural values, play a motivational role for justifying collective behaviour. The First and Second World Wars (WWI and WWII) are the most remembered historical events around the world. The aim of the current study is to investigate, based on country-level data, the relationship between the country's role during the war, social development, cultural values and willingness to fight in a future war, and how social representations of WWII mediate these processes. The data from the World History Survey were collected from a total of 6628 university students from 36 countries. The results showed that ascribing WWII a progressive (UN creation, democracy) or technological-scientific explanation, but also perceiving WWII as a social catastrophe, prevailed more than beliefs justifying WWII (just and necessary war). Directly or indirectly victorious nations endorse legitimizing and positive representations of world wars more than defeated ones. The effects of hierarchical and collectivistic values and low social development on willingness to fight in a war are mediated by legitimizing social representations of WWII. Importantly, when controlled for socio-structural differences (human development index), the indirect effect of being a victorious nation in a war on willingness to fight through legitimizing representations of WWII was also significant. These findings suggest that social representations of WWII serve as anchors for determining the role of a nation in collective violence. Social representations legitimizing past collective violence seem to facilitate more positive attitudes towards potential future collective violence in victorious nations.

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The experience of world wars has left a permanent mark on the collective memory of most nations across the globe. Generally, warfare and collective violence were found to account for 48%, and politics for 27% of events nominated as important in international surveys on social representations of history (Liu et al., 2009). Even though wars produced only 2% of the 20th century's death toll (Layard, 2005), people stress the role of political violence in world history because such extreme and negative events have a great impact on individuals' perception and cognition (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001; Pennebaker & Banasik, 1997).

Even if research has confirmed that most war-related events are considered crucial for social representations (SR) of universal history (Liu et al., 2009; Techio et al., 2010), world wars, and particularly WWII, stand out compared to other warfare-related events as they are universally considered as the most relevant historical events in world's history. That is, world wars belong to the central nucleus of spontaneously evoked representations of history (Liu et al., 2005, 2009). Especially WWII is considered a "critical juncture" point in world history because it led to the fall or rupture (Liu, Fisher Onar, & Woodward, 2014) of historical colonial empires and to the reconstruction of political systems in Europe and Asia (Hobsbawm, 2009). Also, whereas 5% of WWI casualties were civilian, 60% of WWII victims included non-combatants, and such atrocities as the Holocaust committed during WWII transformed the existing historical narratives, meta-narratives and philosophical thinking about the human condition. This might explain why relatively few studies have investigated social representations of WWI. In this paper, we thus study simultaneously analyze the role of WWII and WWI in predicting intentions of collective behaviour.

The SR that people elaborate about the past may play a motivational role for collective behaviour (e.g. Kus, 2013; Smeekes, Verkuyten, & Poppe, 2011; Mols & Jetten, 2014; Klar, 2014), and such impactful historical events as world wars may have an exceptional and widespread relevance for prompting groups to act collectively. Anchored in the historical experience and in the cultural values of nations (Páez et al., 2008), SR of history may help justify actions of the ingroup towards outgroups (Liu & Hilton, 2005), especially the use of collective violence. More precisely, the present study intends to address the question whether SR of both world wars may predict intentions of collective behaviour in terms of disposition to fight in a future war for one's own country.

1. How one's country's involvement in world wars can influence people's support for future collective violence

Previous research has indicated that historical threats strengthen norms within nations (Gelfand et al., 2011) and incite more pro-war attitudes (Carnagey & Anderson, 2007). Other studies have shown that being a victorious nation in a war (World War II) was associated with a better recall and a less negative evaluation of the war, and subsequently with a stronger willingness to fight for the nation in a hypothetical future war (Basabe & Valencia, 2007; Páez et al., 2008). We now address the form of beliefs about war in general and the World Wars in particular that may influence the capacity for collective violence in the future.

For instance, one can ask how the catastrophe of WWII which inspired a critical and pessimistic view of history that prevailed in the second half of the 20th century (Dower, 1999; Judt, 2005), may be legitimized. War was and continues to be central for building nations and states. The experience of victory as a nation in a war may be expected to fuel a national narrative of glorification of the defenders of the homeland and vivid commemorations of battle scenes. The foundational

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