

COLLECTIVE MEMORIES IN BRITAIN AND THE UNITED STATES

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Abstract In this article we investigate the events and changes that the British and American public regard as important. We argue that national differences in perceptions of past events and changes might lead to different evaluations of recent history. Our data are from a 1990 probability sample of British households in which respondents were asked to report “the national or world events or changes over the past 60 years” that seemed to them especially important and, then, to explain the reasons for their choices. These questions replicated items from an earlier American survey on the Intersection of Personal and National History. The data are used both qualitatively and quantitatively to compare British and American views of recent history. Overall, the two nations have remarkably similar views on which events are important, and there are also striking similarities in the way British and American choices are structured by cohort. However, interesting national differences emerge in the meaning associated with World War II, the most frequently mentioned event. We discuss the implications of such distinctive memories for public opinion.

The English and Americans have been described as two peoples divided by a common language. This somewhat facetious characterization understates the immense differences in culture, systems of government, and national character of the two nations, to say nothing of their divergent histories and different roles in global politics. Given these

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differences, one might expect Britain and America each to have a peculiarly distinctive view of recent history. In this article we investigate systematically the events and changes that the British public regard as important in recent history and examine how the British view of history differs from that of Americans.¹

The American data come from a 1985 survey on the Intersection of Personal and National History, conducted by the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan. The core questions asked people what national or world events or changes were especially important in the last 50 years, and the reasons why they chose a particular event. These questions were replicated in Britain in October 1990. Thus, with the important exception of the 5-year time lapse between the two surveys, we can directly compare the historical perceptions and memories of the two countries. Of course, this 5-year period was one of immense historical change, with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the more general collapse of communist regimes, within both Europe and the Soviet Union itself. Thus it is not a period that is likely to go unmentioned in terms of important world events and changes.

Despite this major difference in the historical timing of the two surveys, we expect Americans and the British to share a broadly similar view of recent history. For example, we expect that both countries will have a common view of World War II as an event of outstanding importance. This is, in part, because the two countries have been allies throughout the period in question. Also, the American and British mass media, through which both historical and current events are portrayed, have much in common. Yet, we also expect there to be some clear national differences. For example, we predict that Americans will be more likely to mention domestic events and changes than the British because America is a superpower and because its own internal events and changes play a part in shaping world history in a way that is not true of Britain.

In the American study, strong cohort effects were found in people's choices of historical events, with people's memories referring back disproportionately to events that occurred in their youth. This finding provided empirical support for the fundamental premise behind Mannheim's idea of a political generation: that historical events that happen in people's formative years leave a permanent imprint on people's memories (Mannheim [1928] 1952). If the same pattern is true of the British data, then mentions of recent events in Europe should be con-

1. This article owes much to the ideas that informed the American project—the Intersection of Personal and National History—for which Howard Schuman and Philip Converse were the principal investigators. These original investigators, however, bear no responsibility for the British replication of the study or the opinions and interpretations expressed herein.

fined to younger cohorts, with older people tending to overlook such events in favor of earlier events from their teens or youth. The British data, however, because they were collected in 1990, less than a year after events such as the fall of the Berlin Wall, might give rise to what could be called a "period effect," with virtually everyone mentioning the recent events in Europe. Of course, if this happens, then the period effect would effectively wipe out any cohort effect. Our prediction is that, despite the historical importance of 1989, older cohorts will select events from their youth. This is not only because of the fact that for older people earlier memories are most readily recalled (e.g., McCormack 1979; Rubin, Wetzler, and Nebes 1986) but also because these earlier events have the advantage of primacy and later events rarely have the same impact (Halbwachs [1950] 1980; Mannheim [1928] 1952, p. 296; Schuman and Scott 1989). Thus we expect World War II to dominate the memories of older people in Britain, just as it dominated older people's memories in the United States.²

An interesting question is whether World War II will be significantly more memorable for the British and whether the wartime memories of the two nations differ significantly, not just in terms of individual memories but also in terms of the way in which the war has been represented in the collective memory of each nation. Past events may both influence how recent events and changes are evaluated and influence political action (Connerton 1989; Middleton and Edwards 1990). The "Munich model," for instance, had great potency as an example of how not to conduct foreign policy, on both sides of the Atlantic. However, if the two nations differ in their representation of past events, then this could have important ramifications for public opinion. For example, in America George Bush successfully used the analogy to Hitler to condemn Saddam Hussein and justify a military offensive in Iraq (Schuman and Rieger 1992). Yet, this analogy may not have been as effective in Britain, because, as we shall see, the British do not wholeheartedly share the American view of World War II as "The Good War" (Terkel 1984).

Data and Methods

In order to explore British and American memories of recent history, we asked a probability sample consisting of 600 individuals, 16 years

2. A further reason for expecting the generational effect to have priority over the period effect comes from the study by Schuman, Rieger, and Gaidys (in press) of Generations and Collective Memories in Lithuania. Moreover, it is not only the choice but also the assessment of historical events that is likely to differ by generation (see, e.g., Schwartz 1982, 1990).

and older, to think of “national or world events and changes” that have occurred over the past 60 years and to “name one or two . . . that seem to you to have been especially important.” These questions formed part of a pilot survey of the British Household Panel Study that was conducted by National Opinion Polls (NOP) using face-to-face interviews with all adult members of 353 households, in October 1990.³ Because this is a sample of households, individual observations cannot be regarded as independent. We therefore use the full sample only for descriptive purposes and confine our statistical analysis to one randomly selected member of each household. The questions in the 1990 British survey were a direct replication of those asked of a 1985 probability sample of 1,410 Americans (Schuman and Scott 1987, 1989).⁴ The full question wording is given in table 1. We then asked the respondent to explain why he or she chose each event or change. In evaluating our hypotheses, we draw on graphic presentations of memories by age and on logistic regression analyses using age and controlling for gender and education. We also undertake a more qualitative content analysis of explanations of memories, to help us explore the different understandings that people have of frequently mentioned events and changes.

Important Events and Changes

World War II and the recent events in Europe are clearly the most frequently mentioned events or changes from the last 6 decades, as shown in table 1, with 45 percent mentioning World War II and 30 percent the recent changes in Europe.⁵ In the case of the war, nearly all respondents actually say “World War II,” with a few citing the start, end, or winning of the war. However, mentions of Europe include not only the recent events and changes in Europe itself, such as the fall of the Berlin Wall, the reunification of Germany, and the open-

3. Addresses were randomly selected using a two-stage regionally stratified probability sample of Post Code Sectors of Britain, south of the Caledonian canal. The response rate was low (53 percent), but a careful comparison of key demographic features (e.g., age, sex, education, tenure, etc.) with the Office of Population and Census’s General Household Survey, shows that the BHPS sample was surprisingly unbiased. Nevertheless, it would be unwise and inappropriate to interpret the descriptive results presented in this article as being estimates of the British population.

4. The question wording was changed slightly to ensure that the two studies include a common historical reference period: the British question refers back 60 years whereas the American question refers back 50 years.

5. Here and in our subsequent analysis, we treat each category as a dichotomy: mentioned at all or not mentioned, as shown in cols. 3 and 5 of table 1.

Table 1. The 10 Most Frequently Mentioned Events and Changes in Britain

Event	First and Second Mention (Excluding None/Don't Know) ^a					
	First Mention, Full Sample		Random Individ- uals per Household		Full Sample	
	%	N	%	N	%	N
1. World War II	36.0	216	47.0	151	45.4	251
2. Europe	15.4	92	30.2	97	29.8	160
3. Space exploration	3.5	21	7.2	23	8.7	48
4. Gulf crisis	2.5	15	6.2	20	6.5	36
5. National Health Service	3.2	19	5.0	16	6.1	34
6. Falklands War	2.0	12	6.2	20	4.7	26
7. Transport and communication	1.7	10	3.7	12	4.5	25
8. Common Market/Monetary Union	1.5	9	4.0	13	4.2	23
9. Environment	1.7	10	4.0	13	4.2	23
10. Thatcher	.8	5	3.1	10	3.6	20
Other mentions	25.9	144				
None/don't know	7.9	47				
Total	100.0	600		321		553

NOTE.—Event/change question: “Finally, we have some questions about how people think about the past. There have been a lot of national and world events and changes over the past 60 years—say from about 1930 right up until today. Would you mention one or two such events or changes that seem to you to have been especially important. There aren't any right or wrong answers to the question—just whatever *national or world events or changes* over the past 60 years that come to your mind as important. [IF ONLY ONE MENTION:] Is there any other event or change that seems especially important to you?”

^a Each row represents a dichotomy of those mentioning the event at all, divided by the total ($N = 321$ randomly selected individuals or $N = 553$ full sample) mentioning any event. The percentages in cols. 3 and 5 are not mutually exclusive, as those who gave two responses appear in two categories. Thus the columns do not add to 100 percent.

ing up of communist countries in Eastern Europe, but also the decline of communism more generally, including in the former Soviet Union.

Mentions of World War II and Europe completely dominate people's choices of important events, and together they account for over half of our respondents' answers. Along with World War II and Europe, mentions of the exploration of space, the emerging Gulf crisis, and the creation or deterioration of the National Health Service come in the first five mentions. In addition, the Falklands War, advances in transportation and communication, Britain's entry into the Common Market (sometimes mentioned along with the upcoming Monetary Union), environmental concerns, and Thatcherism, all appear in the 10 most frequently mentioned events and changes, although each of these events was chosen by less than 5 percent of our respondents.

Gathered together under "other mentions" at the bottom of table 1 are a miscellaneous collection of events and changes. These range from those that just missed inclusion in the top 10—such as the Royal family, medical improvements, economic decline, Vietnam, Kennedy's assassination, moral decline, and women's rights—to events mentioned by only a couple of people, like the Suez crisis and England's winning the world cup in 1966. Some of these events, such as the infamous poll tax, are presumably of relatively short-lived importance (mentioned by eight people), whereas others like Northern Ireland (mentioned by six) may be a case where the ongoing nature of the problems render them unremarkable. It should also be noted that 8 percent of the respondents were unable or unwilling to mention even one event or change over the past 60 years that seemed important to them.

Comparison with the United States

In the United States, World War II (29 percent), the Vietnam War (22 percent), and explorations in space (13 percent) were the three most highly mentioned events, as shown in table 2. Thus in both Britain and the United States, not surprisingly, World War II dominates the historical memory, although the percentage choosing the war is considerably higher in Britain (45 percent vs. 29 percent). The choice of explorations in space as the third most frequently mentioned event in both Britain and the United States is surprising, for Americans clearly portray space achievements in terms of national glory. On both sides of the Atlantic, advances in communication and transportation are cited by a similar percentage of respondents (6 percent, Americans, vs. 5 percent, British).

It would be surprising if there were not some differences in the

Table 2. The 10 Most Frequently Mentioned Events in Britain and the United States

Event	Britain		United States	
	%	Rank	%	Rank
World War II	45.4	1	29.3	1
Europe, Berlin Wall, etc.	29.8	2	. . .	
Vietnam War	2.2		22.0	2
Space exploration	8.7	3	12.7	3
J. F. Kennedy's assassination	1.6		8.8	4
Civil rights	0		8.5	5
Nuclear war, threat of	2.0		7.8	6
Gulf crisis, emerging conflict	6.5	4	. . .	
National Health Service	6.1	5	0	
Falklands War	4.7	6	0	
Transport and communication	4.5	7	6.1	7
Depression	.3		5.6	8
Common Market/Monetary Union	4.2	8	0	
Computers	1.3		3.9	9
Terrorism	0		3.4	10
Environment (excluding nuclear power)	4.2	9	0	
Thatcher	3.6	10	0	
Base <i>N</i>		553		1,253

choices of events and changes in America and Britain. Certainly there is evidence in both countries of a nationalistic view of history, with the British mentioning Thatcher and the National Health Service, while Americans remember Kennedy's assassination and civil rights; but there is no evidence that Americans are more likely than the British to choose domestic events or changes. There are, however, some interesting omissions from each country's choices of important events. In Britain only two respondents mention the 1930s Depression, despite the fact that the question explicitly asks for events or changes from about 1930 right up until today, whereas the Depression figures relatively strongly in the American memory. In America there are so few mentions of the environmental movement (excluding nuclear power) that it did not merit inclusion as a separate category. Both omissions may reflect the different timings of the surveys, as many of the Depression generation would have died by 1990 and environmental issues have undoubtedly become more prominent in the last 5 years.

The Importance of Cohort in Britain

In table 3, we show the results of a logit analysis on mentions of important events and changes that includes gender, education, age, and age squared. Since for some events we predict a curvilinear age relationship, we did each analysis separately, with and without a quadratic term for age. If the quadratic term was not significant, then we report the coefficients associated with the model using linear age. It can be seen that age is by far the strongest predictor and, even with this relatively small sample, is significant for World War II, Europe, space exploration, the Falklands War, and the environment.⁶

We suggested that because the British data were collected in a period of great upheaval in Europe mentions of these recent events might so dominate people's choices that no cohort effect would be discernible. This, however, is clearly not the case, and in Britain, as in America, there are strong cohort effects in people's choices of important events and changes.

Figure 1 shows how nominations of World War II and Europe relate to age. It can be seen that mentions of the war rise steadily with age, with at least half of all respondents aged 55 and over mentioning the war. Thus people who were in their childhood or youth in 1939–45 are most likely to recall the war as an important event. However, it should also be noted that even among the youngest age group almost 40 percent have learned enough about the war to recall it as one of the most important events of the last half century. This is far higher proportion than in the United States, where only about 20 percent of young people mentioned the war. Perhaps in Britain World War II is given more prominence in schools, or there is more intergenerational transmission of family memories, or perhaps the difference is due to American youth being more likely to mention Vietnam. Interestingly, the young in Britain give almost equal prominence to World War II and recent events in Europe. It is striking, however, how few older respondents mention the recent dramatic events in Europe surrounding the collapse of communism. This is all the more surprising given that people were prompted to give two events or changes, and so the fact that a person mentions World War II did not stop them from mentioning Europe as well. Yet of all respondents aged 55 and over who mentioned any event, only 3 percent mentioned both Europe and the war, 7 percent Europe but not the war, and an overwhelming 49 percent mentioned

6. In both Britain and the United States, men and those with a college education are more likely to mention World War II than are women or the less educated. The same pattern holds for the British mentions in Europe. The relatively inconsequential Falklands War, however, tends to be chosen by less educated respondents.

Table 3. Relations of Gender, Education, and Age to Important Events or Changes in Britain: Significant *t*-Ratios

	Gender	Education	Age	Age ²
1. World War II	-1.89*	2.10**	2.73**	...
2. Europe	-1.88*	1.73*	-4.01***	-2.05**
3. Space exploration	-2.78***
4. Gulf crisis
5. National Health Service
6. Falklands War	...	-1.98**	-2.79***	...
7. Transport and communication
8. Common Market/ Monetary Union
9. Environment	-1.84*	...
10. Thatcher

NOTE.—Based on logistic analysis of each event or change using three predictors: gender, education, and age. The cell figures are statistically significant *t*-ratios (coefficient/standard error). Each analysis was done with and without an additional term for age squared to test for curvilinearity; if age-squared term was not significant, results are shown only for the model omitting it. The sample size ($N = 321$) consists of one randomly selected individual per household.

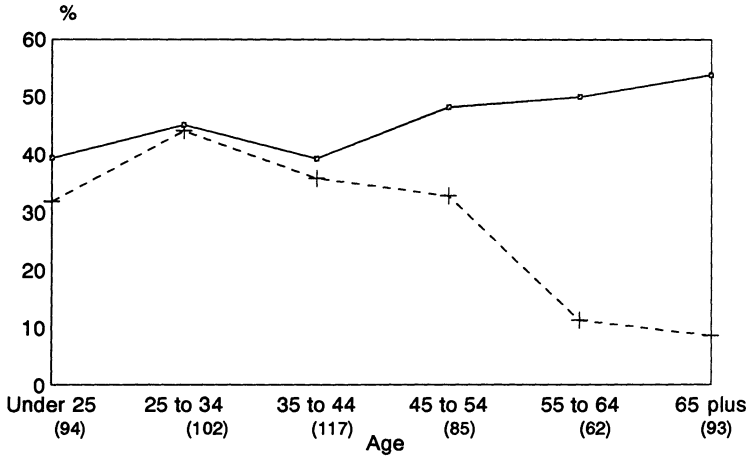
* $p < .10$.

** $p < .05$.

*** $p < .01$.

World War II but not Europe (data not shown). Thus, recent events in Europe apparently did not have the same impact on older cohorts that it did on younger people, presumably because older people's memories are dominated by the wartime events of their youth.

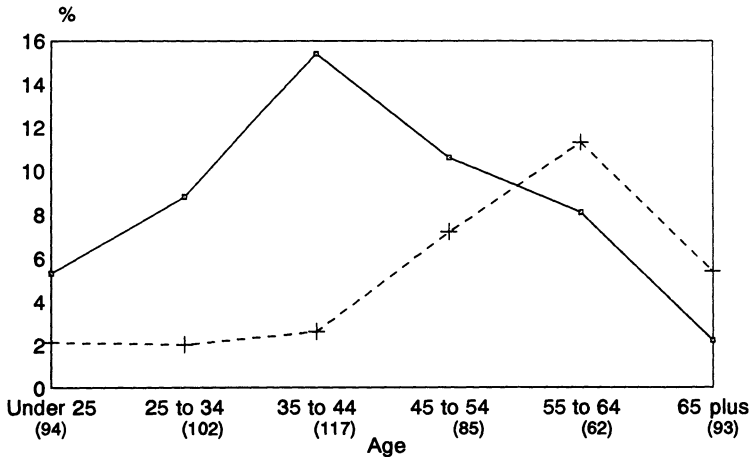
Two changes less easily connected with specific dates are shown in figure 2: the exploration of space and advances in communications and transportation. Interestingly, in the American data, mentions of space showed a puzzling lack of a relationship with age. In the British data, however, the relationship with age is quite clear, with the cohort most likely to choose space being those who are now aged 35–44, who were just 14–23 in 1969, when Armstrong thrilled millions of television viewers by taking the first tentative steps on the moon. In America, advances in transportation and communications are mentioned mainly by older respondents, who witnessed developments they never dreamed possible; the British data are similar (although age is not statistically significant) with younger respondents rarely mentioning television, jet planes, and the like, presumably because they are taken for granted and are not viewed as being remarkable.



—□— World War II + Europe

Figures in parentheses are base N's

Figure 1. Europe and World War II mentions, by age (Britain)



—□— Space + Transport & Communic.

Figures in parentheses are base N's

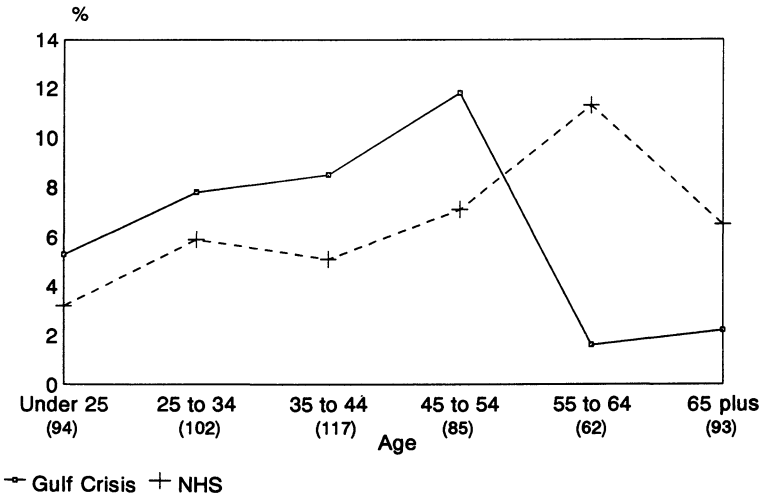
Figure 2. Space exploration and transport and communication, by age.

Most of the events and changes do support the predicted cohort effect, but there are some exceptions. We expected that the emerging Gulf crisis and threat of war would be mentioned predominantly by the youngest cohort but, as can be seen in figure 3, this is not the case. Mentions of the National Health Service (NHS) are also not significantly related to age, although mentions do peak for those approaching retirement, who have reason to be concerned about declining standards of health care in their impending old age and who were in their youth when the NHS was created.

As expected, young people disproportionately mention both the Falklands War and the environmental movement, as shown in figure 4. These youngest respondents would have been at an impressionable age (8–17 years old) during the Falklands War. It is also not surprising that the young are much more likely than the old to mention environmental concerns because it is only recently that green issues have figured prominently on the political agenda. Also, it makes sense that young people have a greater personal stake in the future condition of the planet.

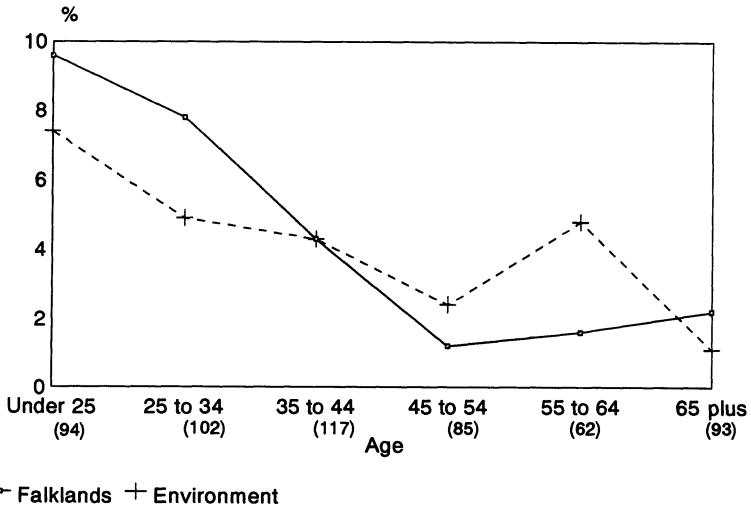
Reasons for Mentioning World War II

The evidence presented so far shows a surprisingly high degree of overlap between British and American views of history. However, it



Figures in parentheses are base N's

Figure 3. Gulf crisis and National Health Service, by age



— Falklands + Environment

Figures in parentheses are base N's

Figure 4. Falklands War and environment, by age

is possible that even when the same event is mentioned in the two countries, the meaning of the event could be quite different. In order to examine this possibility, we compare the reasons people give for regarding World War II as important in Britain and the United States. Moreover, because the American data indicated that perceptions of the war differed by birth cohort, our comparative analysis examines cohort differences both within and between nations.

In this analysis, our base *N* is reduced to 251 people mentioning the war in Britain and 362 in the United States. The degree of judgment involved in the coding of reasons is far greater than that involved in categorizing events and changes.⁷ We coded the British data using, wherever possible, the same coding categories as in America, but some responses were, as we shall see, nation specific. The percentage of British and Americans giving each reason category is presented in table 4 for six age groups. Each age group for Britain corresponds to the age group in the United States minus five, because of the 5-year

7. All coding in this study was done "blind" with no demographic information available. Both authors coded all responses independently. For the events and changes, there was a near perfect correlation, and no discrepancies involved the 10 most frequent events. The original reasons-coding was done using a far finer categorization than is used in this analysis, and the agreement percentage was only about 70 percent. However, once codes were collapsed into the broader categories reported here, the agreement rate exceeded 90 percent.

Table 4. Reasons Given for Mentioning World War II in Britain and the United States by Education, Gender, and Age

	N	Age Categories (%)						Logit <i>t</i> -Ratios		
		Under 25	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+	Age	Education	Gender
Britain (1990):										
Winning the good war	66	43	48	30	12	22	4	-4.49***	-2.87***	-1.71*
War experience	52	...	9	2	22	36	54	4.89***	-1.50	.52
Changed world structure	52	27	17	22	32	16	12	-1.50	2.42**	.86
Tragedy of war/lives lost	49	14	26	17	20	19	20	.07	.32	.76
Importance of war	28	19	11	15	7	7	8	-1.73*	.12	.56
N	37	46	46	41	31	50				
United States (1985):										
Winning the good war	62	13	30	21	12	12	12	-2.36**	-2.18**	-2.21**
War experience	99	4	9	14	45	47	47	6.63***	-1.69*	.81
Changed world structure	54	20	29	14	10	7	7	-2.88***	4.04***	-3.11***
Tragedy of war/lives lost	28	6	7	5	6	11	11	.44	-2.01**	.15
Importance of war	52	18	23	21	10	4	4	-3.23***	.85	-1.16
Economic prosperity	66	18	26	23	20	8	8	-2.11**	.81	-.20
Patriotism	27	11	10	7	4	4	4	-1.74*	.73	-.88
N	55	70	58	69	110					

NOTE.—The British age group corresponds to the U.S. age group that is 5 years younger because of the 5-year gap between surveys.
 * $p < .10$.
 ** $p < .05$.
 *** $p < .01$.

gap between surveys. (People under the age of 20 are not separated out in the American data because there are not enough 18–20-year-old respondents in the sample.) The table shows that, of British respondents aged 16–25 who mentioned World War II, 43 percent talked about some aspect of winning the war; this implies that 57 percent did not. The total number of people who gave a specific reason is given in parentheses—for example, 66 out of the 251 mentioning the war talked of winning. In the last three columns of table 4 are the *t*-ratios associated with a logit analysis, in which each reason is treated as a dichotomous dependent variable (mentioned or not mentioned), with age, education, and gender as predictors. It should be noted that each response was coded for up to two reasons, and thus categories shown in table 4 are not mutually exclusive.

The categories shown capture nearly all the reasons that were given in Britain for choosing World War II except 13 people who mentioned Hiroshima. Responses concerning Hiroshima and the dropping of the atom bomb make it clear that, as well as being linked to the end of the war, it is also viewed as the start of the nuclear age. It therefore seemed appropriate to exclude such mentions from this analysis of World War II reasons. There were some other miscellaneous mentions that did not fit with any of the main categories but had too few mentions to be treated as a separate category. However, the reasons listed here account for over 90 percent of all the explanations given.

Significant age differences occur for three out of the five reasons given for choosing the war in Britain. It is predominantly younger people who talk about winning the war and the general importance of the war, and it is older respondents who, not surprisingly, reminisce about their personal war experiences. Essentially the same pattern of cohort differences is found in the United States. However, there are three additional categories that are mentioned predominantly by the young in America: economic prosperity, patriotism, and the changes associated with the aftermath of the war, including the restructuring of nations.

The changing world structure is mentioned by more people of all ages in Britain than in America, perhaps because the recent upheavals in Europe made this a particularly salient reason. Responses often dwelt on the geographical and political divisions that followed the war, for example: “It did change the course of history for England and the rest of Europe. Germany was divided as a result and that was terrible for them” (woman, age 53). It is not surprising that economic prosperity is not mentioned at all in the British context, but the absence of British mentions of wartime patriotism was totally unexpected (only two people mentioned patriotism). With hindsight, we think that there

is a possible explanation for this national difference. In the United States patriotism was mentioned especially by those who would have been in their youth at the height of the anti-Vietnam War protests. In Britain there has never been a Vietnam equivalent, and perhaps unity in the face of an enemy is not seen as being remarkable.

In both America and Britain the good war image of World War II is widespread. Winning the good war includes mentions of overthrowing Hitler and liberating Europe from the evils associated with Nazi domination. These reasons range from the more general—for example, “It stopped us becoming a part of an enslaved Europe”—to those that included an egoistical slant, saying “We wouldn’t be here now if Hitler had won.” The depiction of World War II as the good war seems to have been passed down through the generations, becoming a widely understood epitaph of the war, and in this sense could be described as part of a collective memory that is shared by both Americans and the British. Yet in Britain, World War II evokes far more negative memories than in the United States. The British speak of the tragedy and futility of the war, expressing sentiments that, in America, would have been used to describe Vietnam. For example, “Horror of it. It was totally unnecessary” (man, age 40). “The destruction—it was pointless” (man, age 38). “A needless waste of life” (man, age 43). Perhaps this far more negative evaluation of the war may reflect the fact that the tragedy of war was closer to home for the British, with evacuations, the nightly bombardment of London, and the very real threat of invasion.

In Britain, fear was an integral part of daily life and older respondents (aged 55 and over) explain their choice of World War II in terms of vivid autobiographical experiences. For example: “We were evacuated and father being in the army. The bombs dropping close to home, the air-raid shelter and the damage” (woman, age 56). “My dad was away all the time—making bombs. We had no mum. I remember being terrified and no dad there” (woman, age 57). “I was ten when it started. It left a big impression as to what war is really like and what can happen. It’s an unfavorable impression” (man, age 62). We also found that stories of the fear and horror of war had been passed down the generations and younger respondents, who were not even born when the war ended, recounted the hardships their parents faced in the war years: “It dominated the generation of my parents. They had to go without food and had the constant fear of death over them” (man, age 37). These negative views of World War II appear to have influenced how younger people view the recent changes in Europe, with the fall of the Berlin Wall being greeted as a wonderful opportunity finally to put the hostilities of the war behind us.

Conclusions

There are striking similarities between the recent historical memories of the British and Americans and the most frequently chosen event in both Britain and America is World War II. Most of the differences in the choices can be explained by the momentous 5 years between 1985 and 1990 when the British and American surveys were conducted. Presumably, if the American study was replicated today, mentions of Europe would figure in their most frequently chosen events and changes, although perhaps less strongly than in Britain. Some differences, however, are likely to remain, as many historical memories are nation specific, with Britain mentioning Thatcher, the Falklands War, and the National Health Service and America choosing Vietnam, Kennedy's assassination, and civil rights.

The similarities of the two nations, however, might conceal important national differences. For example, although both Britain and America regard World War II as the most important event of the last half century, the meaning attached to the war is different in the two countries. In the United States the war was associated, especially by younger respondents, with the prosperity that followed the war, an association that does not figure in British responses at all. More interestingly, mentions of patriotism and the common spirit of the wartime years is also absent from British recollections. It seems possible that patriotism is more salient to Americans because of the aftermath of Vietnam, whereas in Britain unity in the face of a national enemy has never been seriously called into question.

Both the British data and the American data clearly show that, broadly speaking, different cohorts remember different events or changes that were imprinted on their memories in the early formative years of adolescence and emerging adulthood. In Britain, the cohort effect is demonstrated most clearly in the choices of World War II and Europe and among respondents over the age of 55: mentions of the war outnumbered mentions of Europe by five to one. The most plausible explanation is that people choose events that occurred in their youth rather than events that happened later in their life, thus creating a "reminiscence peak," because earlier events have the greater impact.

Although World War II was mentioned most often by older people who lived through the war years, almost 40 percent of young people in Britain, who were not even born when the war ended, also mentioned the war as important. This is a far greater proportion than in the United States, where only about 20 percent of young people mentioned the war. In both America and Britain, the images that World War II calls to mind differ for different age groups. Younger people mention the good war and the general historical importance of the war,

whereas older people explain their choice of World War II in terms of vivid autobiographical memories.

We argued that national differences in perceptions of past events and changes might lead to different evaluations of recent history, but we are unable to test this supposition with the present data. Moreover, it is difficult to predict the inferences people will draw from the past and use in assessing the present. However, what is clear from these data is that different cohorts have very different memories of the past. Thus, to the extent that these memories influence people's present day choices and views, cohort effects will play a critical role in shaping public opinion.

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