

## **Beliefs about history, the meaning of historical events and culture of war**

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This study examines beliefs concerning the content of history, the meaning of Second World War (WWII) and the evaluation of historical events in relation to pro-war attitudes. Participants were 1183 university students from Spain, Portugal, Argentina, Brazil, Peru and Cape Verde. Four supra-level dimensions in the representations of the past were found: History as progress and leaders-oriented, history as focused on justifying calamities, history as violence and catastrophe, and history as meaningless. The prevalent positive beliefs about history were linked with enthusiasm to fight in a future war for one's country.

Keywords: Social representations, history, central nucleus, collective violence.

### **Creencias históricas, significados de hechos históricos y cultura de guerra**

Se estudiaron las creencias sobre el contenido de la historia, el significado de la Segunda Guerra Mundial y la evaluación de eventos históricos en relación con una actitud favorable a la guerra. Los participantes fueron 1183 estudiantes universitarios de España, Portugal, Argentina, Brasil, Perú y Cabo Verde. Se encontraron cuatro grandes dimensiones en las representaciones sobre el pasado: la historia como proceso de progreso y dirigida por líderes; la historia compuesta por calamidades que se deben aceptar; la historia como violencia y catástrofes; y, la historia como carente de sentido. La prevalente visión positiva de la historia se asoció a una actitud favorable a luchar en una nueva guerra.

Palabras clave: representaciones sociales, historia, núcleo central, violencia colectiva.

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Some evidence suggests that people in many nations share universal elements of collective memory or hegemonic beliefs about the world history. Indeed, previous research concerning social representations of history and wars has shown a large degree of cross-national consensus with European history and Western cultural events being central, war-related events and leaders perceived as more prominent, and with some degree of nationalism and ethnoentrism being especially evident in nominations of leaders (Glowsky, Ellermann, Kromeier & Andorfer, 2008; Liu et al., 2005, 2009; Pennebaker, Páez & Deschamps, 2006).

Yet, little is known about the content and interpretation of social representations of past collective violence in general, or with respect to specific events of worldwide importance like WWII. WWII appears as a feature of the central nucleus of the social representations of history (Abric, 1994): It was mentioned as one of the most important historical events in more than 30 nations (Glowsky et al., 2008; Pennebaker et al., 2006). Interpretations about the representation and meaning of world history in general and WWII in particular might be crucial for establishing a world-wide “culture of peace” and the diminution of collective aggressive behavior. For instance, do people believe that WWII was a just war, a necessary war, or was it for them a social catastrophe? Is world history a story of progress, the unfolding of a divine plan, or a bad joke? Each interpretation carries different implications for the future. For this reason, in this study we focused

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on the character of beliefs about the content of universal history and the meaning of WWII, as well as on the evaluation of negative violent versus positive progress-oriented historical events, in relationship with a pro-war attitude or willingness to fight for one's own country.

### **History as a product of war versus sociostructural view of the past and willingness to fight**

There is evidence for the predominance of a vision of “violence as the main factor of history narrative” among lay people. Revolutions and wars are the most mentioned and rated as the most important events in the last millennium, whereas the advance of science and technology, including the industrial revolution, are less mentioned in free recall of history tasks. In Liu et al.’s (2005) study, participants recalled events related to warfare as being the most important above all other categories. A more recent study by Liu et al. (2009) confirmed that war-related events are considered crucial for social representations of universal history. Warfare and collective violence accounted for 48% and politics for 27% of events nominated as important. In addition, 45% of leaders named were known for their roles in wars and other collective violence events. In fact, two thirds of nominated historical events were negative because of the predominance of warfare, with states often born out of violence. This pattern suggests a naive theory of history among lay people, where great things (states) come out of great suffering and the actions of political leaders are central to progress in history. In spite of the development of social sciences emphasizing the role of structural factors and long-term perspective collective processes in history, people’s lay beliefs reproduce the philosophy of history as a product of violence and “great men” (Moscovici, 1983).

Why are wars, particularly WWII, so relevant or belong to the central nucleus of spontaneously evoked representations of history? A classic idea of collective memory (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983) is that social representations of past historical events possess a motivational

function as they prompt groups to act collectively, justify actions of the in-group towards the out-group (Liu & Hilton, 2005), and are anchored in historical experience and cultural values (Páez et al., 2008).

With regard to wars, there might be at least five factors accounting for such an effect:

1. A bias towards negative and extreme events: Even though wars produced only 2% of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's death toll (Layard, 2005), people stress the role of political violence in world history because extreme and negative events like wars have a greater impact on individual's perception and cognition (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer & Vohs, 2001). The far more deadly factor of disease is virtually collectively forgotten.
2. Wars are “good stories”: Wars are also remembered because they constitute instances of good narrative historical events. A good narrative has a causal beginning, an exciting plot, characters that one can identify with, and an ending of moral relevance or significance. Fights and wars are especially “narratable”; they have a protagonist/antagonist, a beginning/action/ending (Liu & László, 2007), and this makes them more salient in memory.
3. War is central for building nations and states: The foundational events in a nation's history, like an independence war or wars with other countries, have profound implications for justifying categories. As the well known historian sociologist Charles Tilly (1975) asserts, war makes states, and the states make war. These actual processes are reflected in lay beliefs about history which reproduce state-based narratives of history, transmitted by official education and institutional activities like commemorations, and cultivate a “culture of war” (conflict, hate and violence) (Páez & Liu, in press).
4. More specifically, WWII is a recent, three generation old collective event in communicative memory: People tend to remember “fresh events” which are anchored in direct experience and communicative memory or more accessible, face-to-face interaction. Britons were

more likely to remember WWII than were Americans by a margin of 16%, probably because the British nation experienced the war much more directly and personally (Schuman & Scott, 1989; Scott & Zac, 1993). Also, various authors suggest that three generations is the maximum time to retain historical events as vivid (Candau, 2005; Páez et al., 2008; Pennebaker, Páez & Rimé, 1997).

5. WWII really was a central historical turning point: A lot of countries were involved in the war, and the death toll, in particular civil one, was important. Whereas in WWI 5% of casualties were civilian, in WWII 60% of the victims included non combatants. WWII had important consequences, was associated with the fall of historical colonial empires and with the reconstruction of political systems in Europe and Asia (Hobsbawm, 2009). WWII serves as a part of the core representation of world history, anchoring new historical or political events (Liu et al., 2005).

The prevalence of a social representation of history as a process of collective violence is also confirmed by new research using a closed-ended questionnaire showing that historical calamities centered on violence are the most coherent concept across 30 societies' evaluations of historical events (Liu et al., 2010). However, another recent study with Spanish and Portuguese speaking samples using the same format (Techio et al., 2010) revealed that wars, and among them WWII, were rated as important and negative historical events, but wars were not perceived as more relevant than the Industrial Revolution, insinuating that people are aware of the importance of long-term socioeconomic factors in world history when prompted about them. In other terms, the warfare's centrality hypothesis was not confirmed. At odds with previous studies, war and politics-related events were not perceived as more important than socioeconomic trends in closed-ended ratings. It was concluded that even if wars are more vivid in free recall, and collective violence appears as the main factor mentioned spontaneously when remembering the past, semantic knowledge reinforces a socio-economic and technological view of the history, so that social and

structural factors are recognized as important and prevail in more reflexive and less spontaneous thinking about history. What is more, Spanish and Portuguese speaking nations included in Techio et al.'s (2010) research were not directly involved in WWII, which might have altered social representations of the past within this context.

Nonetheless, the key question is not only what kind of social representations of the past prevail, but also whether they strengthen the "culture of war" or "culture of peace". A classic example of the implicit theory of history as a product of violence is Marx and Engels' statement that "force is the midwife of history" (Marx & Engels, 1974) and previous historical research points out that agreement with such an interpretation of history could be associated with favourable attitudes towards participation in war. In this view, war is necessary for cultural evolution. In the same vein, a belief in "great men" or leaders as main actors at the history's arena could be related to the emphasis on obedience to the authorities of high status, which could also reinforce favourable attitudes towards the use of force, especially if these leaders endorse and justify the use of force (Moscovici, 1983). On the other hand, the agreement with the importance of socio-economics factors in history might be negatively related to a pro-war attitude. For instance, the belief in the centrality of economic development for social evolution was an important ideological factor that fueled the reformism and the abandonment of revolutionary violence by the Social-Democratic Party in the 19th and 20th centuries (Luxemburg, 2009; Marx & Engels, 1974).

Thus, in this study we aimed to analyze the structure and explanatory value of lay beliefs concerning the interpretation of world history in the Spanish and Portuguese speaking context. We believe there exists a lay view or lay version of "history as created by violence" and directed by leaders, although —due to the fact that nations in the analysis were not directly involved in WWII— a view of history as shaped by technology and socioeconomic changes might be also prevailing. The first view of history would be expected to relate positively to willingness to fight, while the latter one negatively.

## **Warfare: Justification versus social catastrophe and willingness to fight**

Should warfare play one of the central roles in social representations of the past, then individuals are faced with the cognitive challenge of dealing with its meaning. One strategy is to justify the past collective violence, especially actions of the in-group towards the out-group (Liu & Hilton, 2005), while the other is to adopt a generic attitude of criticism of use of force and stress its negative outcomes.

With respect to the historical experience of WWII, a better recall and a positive evaluation of it were associated with having been a victorious nation, and involve a stronger willingness to fight for the nation in a hypothetic future war (Páez et al., 2008). Such findings suggest a form of vicarious trans-generational learning in the justification of violence, whereby representations of past “just wars” and the experience of victory reinforce a culture of warfare. Particularly, Eurocentric representations focused on the recent past would provide a privileged position for the victorious Western powers of WWII to take action in the international arena in a way that is perceived as legitimate, when compared to other nations. The claim to be “defenders of the free world” comes more easily to the United States and United Kingdom than to other nations given the process and outcome of WWII. These representations of the past, dominant in Anglo-Saxon nations, may constitute an explanatory factor for their propensity to be involved in new wars, but it is less clear how they will impact lay beliefs in Hispanic and Lusophone countries.

Thus, WWII receives a positive connotation as a just or necessary war in the context of allied nations. In Anglo-Saxon and Russian collective memories, WWII was the “last good war” or Great Patriotic War (Emelyanova, 2002; Neal, 2005; Wertsch, 2002). As Wertsch (2002) argues, such a label is a condensation of the important positive narrative template “triumph-over-alien-forces” especially prevalent in Russia. In Asian social memories, WWII may have additional meanings of being an anti-colonialist and independence war (Liu et al., 2005). In a study about social representations of the past, Chinese mentioned WWII with two different labels: World War and Sino-Japanese War.

Seventeen percent of the respondents mentioned Sino-Japanese War (1931-1945) as a distinctive event versus 81% recalling WWII. The evaluation of the former independence war, which ended up in the defeat of the Japanese, was more positive than the evaluation of WWII (Pennebaker et al., 2006). This pattern confirms that attributing to WWII a sense of justness and of a nation's fight for independence facilitates a more positive evaluation of this war.

On the opposite side, defeated nations do not reinforce a positive view of "national warriors" - even if they conceal more negative aspects of their participation in WWII as in the case of German social representations stressing the "normality" and decency of German Army. Usually, defeated countries remember their in-group's suffering as a major part of war's legacy and highlight and teach the new generations about the negative effects of wars as social catastrophes (Páez & Liu, in press). These representations of WWII, such as the Japanese emphasis on the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, could explain why defeated nations report low willingness to fight in a new war for the nation (Páez et al., 2008; Liu et al., 2010).

Nevertheless, there is still little research dedicated to the central meanings attributed to WWII and how they relate to willingness to fight in a new war. We hypothesize that explaining WWII as a just and necessary war in history, with positive political (e. g. the creation of the United Nations) (UN) and technological consequences, reinforces a pro-war attitude, whereas perceiving WWII as a social catastrophe is associated not only to a more negative evaluation of this episode of collective violence, but also to less readiness to fight in a new war.

### **Evaluation of historical events: Calamities versus progress and willingness to fight**

To achieve a more holistic view of lay philosophy of history we took into account the evaluation of historical calamities and progress-related historical events, namely the rating of concrete events in history.

In previous research studies wars were mostly rated as neutral and their general appraisal was negative. Even in the case of positive labels for WWII (Great Patriotic War, Sino-Japanese Independence War) the evaluation was neutral and not positive (Liu et al., 2009). In fact, a new World History Survey did not find a predisposition to glorify war, but rather a cultural variation in the degree to which wars and other calamities were negatively perceived. Using a 30-nation sample, Liu et al. (2010) found two cross-cultural factors in the evaluation of historical events able to predict willingness to fight for one's country. The first and strongest factor was *historical calamities*, whereas the second one concerned *historical progress*.

The first factor was composed by wars and other social catastrophes, like WWI and WWII, the Holocaust, atomic bombing, Vietnam War, Iraq War, but also Cold War, Great Depression, and Asian Tsunami. This historical calamities factor possessed robust reliabilities across country clusters, which suggests it is valid across the 30 societies surveyed.

The second factor was less robust, and this historical progress dimension included technological and political events indicative of civilization advance in recent times, such as the digital age, the man on the moon, the foundation of the European Union and the UN, but also the creation/evolution of humankind. Non-Western societies evaluated historical calamities less negatively than Western societies did. The non-Western samples not only scored higher on their evaluations of historical calamities, but also tended to be more willing to fight. Moreover, a multilevel analysis found that a less negative evaluation of historical calamities and a more positive evaluation of historical progress both predicted an increased willingness to fight for one's country (Liu et al., 2010).

### **Hierarchical and collectivistic cultures and willingness to fight in a new war: Glorification of war or a stoic culture?**

Beyond evaluation of specific historical experience and the meanings attributed to history as a general construct and to WWII as a central

element in recent world history, there might be other circumstances which impact people's willingness to fight for or defend one's homeland; among them, values or ideology prevailing in the country.

Because a less negative evaluation of WWII and willingness to fight in a war were found to be associated with hierarchical and collectivist values (Basabe & Valencia, 2007; Diener & Tov, 2007; Fischer & Hanke, 2009; Páez et al., 2008), it is possible to think that these values imply a more positive view of the past. Such evidence puts emphasis on a positive narrative of collective violence and war, perhaps based on the necessity of sacrifice for the good of the nation (see Liu et al., 2010). On the other hand, a national culture of peace based on human rights and democracy, as well as promoting post-materialistic values, can be linked with less readiness to fight (Diener & Tov, 2007).

One possible explanation of the association between low social development, collectivist and hierarchical values and a favourable attitude towards war is the shift from an industrial and materialistic to a post-materialist society (Inglehart & Baker, 2000). This is associated with a shift from social representations of war focused on heroes, martyrs, and a positive connotation of collective violence, towards social representations of war focused on suffering, victims, the murder of civilians, and the meaninglessness of fighting (Lomsky-Feder, 2004; Rosoux, 2001). Post-materialist values probably erode "heroic war narratives" and positive attitudes towards collective violence. On the other hand, under conditions of scarcity, societies centred on survival and hierarchical values tend to ascribe more relevance to endurance and competition, sharing a particularly competitive view of inter-group relations. This "collectivistic hierarchical" cultural syndrome could strengthen a positive attitude towards collective violence (Cohrs, Moschner, Maes & Kielman, 2005; Sidanius & Pratto, 2001).

Such less negative evaluations of past collective violence fit well with the content of Inglehart and Baker's (2000) cross-cultural dimension of survival versus self-expression. Non-Western societies perceive the social representations of past socio-political violence (i. e. historical calamities) more as a part of the process of survival

and progress, whereas Western societies see them as something unimaginably horrible that cannot co-exist with their pleasant lives. Western societies consider past wars and socio-political violence to be negative and at odds with post-materialistic values-related narratives, which emphasize hedonism, self-expression and self-actualization. On the other hand, self-control, minimization and lower intensity of negative emotions characterize hierarchical collectivistic cultures. This suggests that a culture that accepts negative events and applies secondary or self-modification control to cope with negative emotions could be conceived as a type of stoic culture, which deals collective violence by means of endurance (Fernández, Carrera, Páez & Sánchez, 2008). Finally, a higher evaluation of progressive events fits well the traditional theory of modernization; nations with low social development, leaving traditional culture for a modern secular one, appraise war in this modernization framework; collective violence is a price to be paid to achieve historical progress (Hofstede, 2001; Inglehart, Basañez, Diez-Medrano, Halman & Luijk, 2004).

This study examines the content and association of beliefs about world history and WWII, the evaluation of historical events, and the willingness to fight in a war, in samples sharing a cultural background (Spanish and Portuguese speaking countries), but belonging to nations of high, middle, and low levels of social development. To analyze the relationship between cultural factors, social representations of history and willingness to fight, we focused on accessible data concerning political ideology, importance of religion and national pride, as indexes of progressive-traditional individual-level values (with left-wing ideology being low in traditional values and right-wing high) and nationalism, usually related to collectivistic and hierarchical values. In addition, it is important to note that none of the nations included in this study was directly involved in WWII, and so any results found here can be attributed solely to vicarious learning.

Summing up, first we compare the importance of lay beliefs about history and examine their structure as indicators of a general lay historiosophy, as well as their association with willingness to fight

in a new war. Agreement with socio-structural factors of history could be negatively related to a pro-war attitude, while agreement with the importance of leaders and justification of violence could be positively associated to a favourable attitude towards war.

Second, we analyze the meanings attributed to WWII and their association with the willingness to fight in a new war. We hypothesize that the perception of WWII as a just and necessary war, and related to progress, will be positively associated with the readiness to fight, whereas WWII viewed as a social catastrophe will be negatively related to pro-war intentions.

Third, we analyze the evaluation of wars and social catastrophes on one hand, and of progress-oriented events on the other, and how both factors are associated with willingness to fight. We examine which type of view of the past determines a pro-war attitude: A “stoic” or endurance of adverse events view of war, or a positive view of progress.

Fourth, we seek for higher order dimensions in the representations of the past concerning both a general view of world history and the “anchoring” effect of WWII. Then we examine through multivariate analysis the impact of beliefs about history, the meaning of WWII, and the evaluation of past negative and positive events on pro-war attitudes.

Finally, we explore the relation of social representations of the past with ideology, religiosity and national pride as indicators of hierarchical and collectivistic values. We expect that strong religiosity, conservative (right-wing) ideology, and national pride will be positively associated with enthusiasm towards participation in war.

## **Method**

### *Participants*

A total of 1183 university students from three continents (Europe, Latin America, and Africa) participated in the study. The samples were comprised of students from: University of Buenos Aires, Argentina

( $N = 356$ ; 47.8% female; age:  $M = 22.52$ ,  $SD = 4.705$ ), University of Joinville and Tiradentes University, Brazil ( $N = 222$ ; 73% female; age:  $M = 24.26$ ,  $SD = 7.79$ ), Pontifical Catholic University of Peru ( $N = 83$ ; 74.7% female, age:  $M = 20.27$ ,  $SD = 3.108$ ), University of Minho, Portugal ( $N = 208$ ; 68.8% female; age:  $M = 19.87$ ,  $SD = 2.63$ ), University of the Basque Country, Spain ( $N = 183$ ; 72% female; age:  $M = 25.06$ ,  $SD = 8.73$ ), and Jean Piaget University, Cape Verde ( $N = 131$ ; 63.4% female; age:  $M = 24.47$ ,  $SD = 5.71$ ).

### **Procedure and materials**

*Meaning of world history:* Participants were asked to evaluate (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*) how well do twelve statements concerning history describe what they feel is the main message or meaning of world history. Items were drawn from diverse sources linked with the philosophy of history, and ranged from progress to cyclical explanations, and from violence as the main driver of history to divine intervention. For instance, the belief about force as a main factor in history was operationalized through the Maoist statement “Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun”. All the items are presented in Table 1.

*Beliefs related to WWII:* The measure consisted of seven items concerning WWII and placed on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they agree or disagree with the explanations for the main effects and meaning of WWII. The items content ranged from WWII being a necessary or just war, the harbinger of technological progress or the creator of new social institutions, to WWII as a social catastrophe and leading to the Cold War. All the items are presented in Table 2.

*World History Survey:* We used an inventory of 40 events and leaders from the World History Survey (see Liu et al., 2010). This inventory included all events and leaders nominated in the top ten by two or more cultures, as reported by Liu et al. (2005), augmented by a few events chosen for specific theoretical purposes. Sample items

included WWI, WWII, the Industrial Revolution, 9-11, women's suffrage, etc. This event inventory is both comprehensive and content rich, and can be conceived as a valid cross-cultural instrument. For the purpose of this study we applied only some events' evaluation. Participants were asked to rate world events and leaders in terms of their positivity-negativity and importance. Following Liu et al.'s (2010) procedure, the instructions were: "The following questions are about your ideas on history. They are part of a world-wide effort to construct an international inventory of opinion about what is important and unimportant in history, and how people see these events and people. Below is a list of historical events. Please rate how positively or negatively you assess each event (on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 = *extremely negative*, 4 = *neutral*, and 7 = *extremely positive*). Please rate how important or unimportant you assess each event (on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 = *not very important*, 4 = *somewhat important*, and 7 = *of great importance*)".

Following Liu et al.'s (2010) findings, a score of evaluation of historical calamities was constructed by adding together answers to WWI, WWII, Holocaust, atomic bombing, Vietnam War, Iraq War, Cold War, Great Depression and Asian Tsunami. Another global evaluation of historical progress was created by the sum of scores of digital age, man on the moon, the foundation of the European Union and the UN, and the creation/evolution of humankind.

Apart from the list with historical events and world leaders, the questionnaire also included a measure of beliefs related to WWII and the meaning of world history.

Other variables taken into consideration in this study are: a) religiosity, measured by one item asking: "How important is religion in your life?" and placed on a 4-point scale (1 = *not important at all*, 4 = *very important*); b) left-right wing political ideology, operationalized through the question: "Often, when people talk about political matters they use terms like conservative/ right-wing or liberal/ left-wing to describe their views. How would you describe yourself in these terms?" (1 = *liberal / left-wing*, 7 = *conservative / right-wing*); c) national pride, measured by a single item asking: "How proud are you to be a citizen

of the country where you are living right now?" (1 = *not proud at all*, 4 = *very proud*); d) willingness to fight for own country in case there was another war, with the question: "Of course, we all hope that there will not be another war, but if it were to come to that, would you be willing to fight for your country?" (1 = *definitely no*, 7 = *definitely yes*).

## Results

### ***The structure of beliefs about history and its relation to willingness to fight***

Participants exhibited a moderate support for the belief that history is related to progress, is related to scientific and technological development, and results from the acts of "great people" (all means are presented in Table 1). Belief in history as an eternal cycle and as the rise and fall of civilizations was also partially supported. On the other hand, the ideas of history as being related to violence, full of pain and suffering for humankind, teaching nothing, being a joke or a farce, expressing a superior plan, and subjected to objective laws were rejected. These results suggest that young educated people from Latin cultures share a representation of history as moderately associated with social progress and scientific development, and reject the idea of violence and meaninglessness as the main message of history. Paired t-tests revealed that all the means, except for the belief in history as pain and suffering, were significantly different from the total mean index calculated for the beliefs about history, confirming that agreement and disagreement with specific beliefs were highly relevant.

To examine the dimensions of lay beliefs of world history, an exploratory factor analysis with Varimax rotation was performed. The factor analysis revealed the existence of four factors: The first one explained 19.6% of variance, the second 13.9%, the third 10.6%, and the fourth contributed 8.9% to the variation in beliefs concerning world history (Table 1).

**Table 1***Beliefs about universal history: Means, standard deviations and factorial loadings*

	<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	<i>Factor I</i>	<i>Factor II</i>	<i>Factor III</i>	<i>Factor IV</i>
		Progress and leaders	Joke, rise and fall, cycle, and pain	Laws and superior plan	Violence and no rules
Is the march of human society towards economic progress, greater freedom, democracy, equality and justice.	4.52 (1.80)		.70		
Describes technological and scientific progress.	4.66 (1.43)		.70		
Is the story of great men and women who change the world.	4.77 (1.68)		.69		
Is a sort of joke. All efforts lead one to laugh at the comedy of it.	2.10 (1.45)			.68	
Is the rise and fall of civilizations.	4.43 (1.62)			.60	
Is a cycle. Everything repeats again and again.	4.47 (1.87)			.59	
Is the story of the pain and suffering of humankind.	3.53 (1.75)			.55	
Is the result of a superior plan of a power greater than man.	2.47 (1.66)				.73
Is the result of objective laws which apply no matter what human beings attempt.	2.82 (1.50)				.67
Will teach us nothing.	1.47 (1.15)				.28
There are no general laws or rules of history.	3.87 (1.87)				.74
Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun (violence rules).	3.20 (1.83)				.69

*Note.*  $N = 1147/1166$ . Only factor loadings equal or above .55 are showed.

Factor I, denominated Progress and Leaders, included items related to beliefs about history as progress, scientific and technological development, and concerning changes promoted by “great men”. The items describing history as a joke, the rise and fall of civilizations, a cycle, and the suffering of humankind loaded in Factor II (Joke, Rise and Fall, Cycle and Pain). Factor III (Laws and Superior Plan) clustered statements suggesting that history is based on laws and has a superior plan. Factor IV included beliefs about history as violence and having no general sense.

Both, Factor I scores of belief in history as progress and actions of leaders ( $r(1083) = .15, p < .001$ ) and Factor III concerning history as a lawful phenomena and expression of a superior plan ( $r(1083) = .10, p < .001$ ), correlated positively with willingness to fight, whereas Factor IV, joining beliefs about history as violence and meaninglessness, correlated negatively ( $r(1083) = -.14, p < .001$ ).

There was also a small correlation between willingness to fight, history as an eternal cycle ( $r(1147) = .06, p < .039$ ) and history as a scientific and technological progress ( $r(1146) = .06, p < .046$ ). Finally, participants who stated that history is based on wars and violent politics ( $r(1144) = -.10, p < .001$ ) and those who admitted no sense of general laws of history ( $r(1134) = -.09, p < .003$ ) had lower scores in willingness to fight.

### ***The structure of meanings of WWII and its relation to willingness to fight***

The central meaning of WWII was mostly connected to the creation of the UN ( $M = 5.73$ ), to technological advances ( $M = 5.35$ ) and to the reconstruction of democracy ( $M = 5.14$ ), although WWII was also conceived as a social catastrophe ( $M = 5.18$ ). To a lesser extent, WWII was perceived as being the cause for the Cold War ( $M = 4.13$ ). Finally, participants disagreed with the idea of WWII as justified ( $M = 3.99$ ) and did not consider that it was a necessary war ( $M = 3.74$ ).

An exploratory factor analysis with a Varimax rotation found three dimensions (Table 2), with the first factor contributing 35,2%, the second adding 17,6%, and the third 16.8% to variance. Factor I was composed by the reconstruction of democracy, technological advances and the creation of the UN. Factor II included beliefs about WWII as necessary for independence and as a just war. Factor III loaded items claiming that WWII was a social catastrophe and a cause of the Cold War.

**Table 2**  
*The meaning of WWII: Factorial loadings*

	<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	<i>Factor I</i>	<i>Factor II</i>	<i>Factor III</i>
		Progress	Just and necessary war	Social catastrophe, Cold War
Formation of UN and Declaration of Human Rights.	5.73 (1.40)	.85		
Democracy and economic reconstruction.	5.14 (1.56)	.80		
Technological and scientific advance.	5.35 (1.56)	.75		
Necessary war (end of colonization and beginning of independence for many nations).	3.74 (1.86)		.83	
Just war (to stop Nazi, Fascist and Japanese aggression).	3.99 (2.01)		.82	
Cold War (establishment of Communist and Capitalist blocks).	4.13 (1.74)			.88
Social catastrophe (casualties, destruction, human suffering).	5.18 (2.31)			.69

*Note.*  $N = 1129/1158$ . Only factor loadings equal or above .55 are showed.

Regarding the relationship between the meaning of WWII and the willingness to fight, Factor I, WWII related to the reconstruction

of democracy and to advances ( $r(1058) = .11, p < .001$ ), and Factor II - WWII as a just and necessary war - ( $r(1058) = .20, p < .001$ ) correlate with a pro-war attitude, while Factor III, WWII as a social catastrophe, correlated negatively ( $r(1058) = -.05, p < .068$ ).

### ***Evaluation of negative versus positive historical events and willingness to fight***

The events perceived as historical calamities were negatively rated ( $M = 1.95, SD = .83$ ) in contrast to the events seen as stimulating progress and, hence, positive ( $M = 5.50, SD = .92$ ). The more positively assessed were the historical calamities, the more willingness to fight was reported by the participants of the study ( $r(978) = .09, p < .007$ ), although this relationship was stronger for the dimension of events seen as historical progress ( $r(1048) = .18, p < .001$ ).

### ***Higher level associations of belief about history, WWII meanings, and evaluation of historical events as calamities and progress***

A second order factor analysis revealed the existence of four higher order dimensions in the perception of universal history (Table 3). Positive evaluation of progress-related events, perception of WWII as an antecedent of social and technological advance, and world history seen as a progress and changes made by leaders, loaded on the first factor which explained 19.8% of variance. The second factor, contributing 15% to the total variance, clustered a less negative evaluation of historical calamities and the conception of WWII as a just and necessary war. A third factor accounted for 12.6% of variance and was composed of WWII as a social catastrophe and world history as a product of violence and teaching nothing. The last factor (11.1% of variance explained) included the view of history as lawful and expressing a superior plan and the disagreement with the “ironic” view of history.

**Table 3**

*The second order factor analysis with first order dimensions of beliefs about history and the meaning of WWII*

	<i>Factor I</i>	<i>Factor II</i>	<i>Factor III</i>	<i>Factor IV</i>
Progress		War and calamities justification	Violence, catastrophe, Meaninglessness Cold War	
Historical events as progress	.80			
WWII: Progress	.75			
History: Progress and leaders	.71			
WWII: Just and necessary war		.75		
Historical events as calamities		.72		
History: Violence and no rules			.76	
WWII: Social catastrophe, Cold War			.73	
History: Laws and superior plan				-.69
History: Meaninglessness (joke, cycle, etc.)				.64

*Note.* Only factor loadings equal or above .55 are showed.

***Multiple regression analysis of willingness to fight on beliefs of history, meaning of WWII, and the evaluation of historical calamities and progressive events***

An exhaustive model examining the impact of social representations of history on pro-war attitudes was tested by regressing the willingness to fight on the four second-order dimensions concerning the perception of history: Progress, war and calamities justification, violence and catastrophe, and meaninglessness, as well as on national pride, religiosity, and political ideology (to control for nationalism and rightwing ideology).

**Table 4**

*Multiple regression of willingness to fight on second-order dimensions of representations of the past and socio-demographic variables*

	Standarized B	t	p
Importance of religion	.18	4.95	<.001
Political ideology	-.06	-1.76	.078
National pride	.27	7.73	<.001
Second order factor I: War and history as progress	.10	2.88	.004
Second order factor II: Justifying WWII and historical calamities	.13	3.89	<.001
Second order factor III: Violence, catastrophe, Cold War	-.02	-.58	.562
Second order factor IV: Meaninglessness	.01	.30	.767

The model (Table 4) tested explained 16% of total variance in the participants' willingness to fight. The second order factors of interpreting war and history as progress, and justifying WWII and historical calamities, significantly predicted the intention to participate in a future hypothetical war. However, history as violence, catastrophe, Cold War and meaninglessness factors did not predict pro-war attitudes. Finally, high national pride and strong religiosity were also significant predictors of the readiness to fight for one's country.

#### ***National pride, importance of religion, and political ideology, and willingness to fight***

All the dimensions detected in this study through the first-order factor analysis and those factors developed by Liu et al. (2005) were additionally correlated with socio-demographic variables which could be significant for the construction of social representations of the past. Regarding the perceptions of WWII, we observed that various meanings of the war were unrelated to political ideology, while beliefs in WWII as a just war and related to progress, as well as disagreement with the belief that WWII was a social catastrophe, were positively

associated with national pride and religiosity (Table 5). In relation to general views of history, beliefs in world history as progress, social development and the influence of transformational leaders, as well as the perception of history as following laws and a superior plan, were associated with national pride, religion and right-wing ideology. History as a product of violence and meaningless were related to low religiosity and national pride, and the latter was also correlated to left-wing ideology. Finally, the evaluation of historical calamities was unrelated to traditionalism and nationalism, while positive evaluation of progress-oriented historical events correlated positively with these indicators. Willingness to fight was strongly associated with national pride and religious importance.

**Table 5**

*Correlations of beliefs about history and the meaning of WWII with national pride, importance of religion and political ideology*

	National pride	Importance of religion	Political ideology (conservatism)
WWII: Progress	.10***	.14***	.05
WWII: Just and necessary war	.15***	.07*	.02
WWII: Social catastrophe, Cold War	-.09**	-.11***	-.02
History: Progress and leaders	.15***	.19***	.11***
History: Meaninglessness (joke, cycle, etc.)	-.07*	-.12***	-.10***
History: Laws and superior plan	.12***	.18***	.09**
History: Violence and no rules	-.15***	-.17***	.03
Historical events as calamities	.01	.00	.06*
Historical events as progress	.23***	.19***	.17***
Willingness to fight	.39***	.30***	.07*

\*\*\*  $p \leq .001$ , \*\*  $p \leq .01$ , \*  $p \leq .05$ , +  $p \leq .10$

## **Discussion**

This study examined interpretive beliefs about world history and the meaning of WWII, and their association with the willingness to fight in a war, among Spanish and Portuguese speaking nations.

### ***Lay general historiosophy in Latino and African cultures***

*History as social progress and the result of “great men’s willpower” as a dominant belief and its relation to willingness to fight.* The findings of this study concerning beliefs about the meaning of general history suggest that Hispanic and Portuguese speaking countries share a view of history as being founded on social progress and scientific development, while downplaying the ideology of violence as a burden of humanity’s past. There is also a common assent with the idea of history as a product of great men or transformational leaders. However, our results disconfirmed that the agreement with socio-structural factors of history associate negatively with enthusiasm for war, and that approving the importance of violence in history is positively related to a pro-war attitude. Quite the opposite, whereas the first correlates positively with disposition to fight, the latter correlates negatively.

In addition, the belief in prominent leaders was found to go along with the socio-structural perspective. The stronger the acknowledgement of the importance of great leaders in history, the more eager are people to fight. It is quite striking that the same people who share a Marxist or technological and progressive view of history, simultaneously highlight the importance of great men. Nevertheless, taking into consideration the so-called Stalinist and Maoist cult of personality, it is understandable that a social view of history could be conflated with an individualistic willpower view of history (Hobsbawm, 2009). In any case, the belief in history as a product of great men correlates positively with the positive evaluation of leaders like Napoleon, Charlemagne, Sun Yat Sen, Churchill, Roosevelt, Washington, Lincoln, Kennedy, but also Jesus Christ, Pope Jean Paul II, Mother Theresa, and Princess

Diana, as well as—surprisingly—George Bush Jr<sup>5</sup>. On the other hand, such a viewpoint did not correlate with a positive evaluation of Hitler, Stalin, Mao, Che Guevara or Ghandi, and correlated negatively with the evaluation of Bin Laden and Sadam Hussein, suggesting that in our samples a belief in great leaders implies a belief in Western positive cultural heroes, and not in strong leadership associated with collective violence.

*Rejection of an ironic view of history, partial agreement with a cyclical view and criticism of violence, and an “odd” mixture of objective and divine laws.* It is also interesting that beliefs focused on history as an eternal cycle of repetition, a past full of suffering, and an “ironic” attitude towards history were only partially or not at all supported in Hispanic and Portuguese lay beliefs. Although they collapsed together in the same factor, there was more agreement with the view of history as a cyclic pattern or as a rise and fall of societies, than with the idea of history as a farce full of suffering, nothing but a *danse macabre*. Not surprisingly, that dimension, which joined somewhat connected yet still distinct views of historical meaning, was unrelated to willingness to fight. Probably, views of history as a cycle are more common in such cultures as India and China, in contrast to Portuguese-Spanish speaking cultures (Hofstede, 2001). However, in terms of specific items, the strongest correlation occurred between beliefs in history as a repetitive cycle and more willingness to fight. The moderate levels of agreement with the view of history as a cycle or as rise and fall is, after all, not contrasting with such a tendency if one considers Giambattista Vico’s (1744/1973) doctrine of the “spiral of history”, which proposes that the advance in history is not necessarily a lineal temporal progression but can be visualised vertically as a spiral of repetitive, though always at least somewhat progressive, cycles of rise and fall. It would also accord

<sup>5</sup> Pearson’s correlation effects were as follows ( $N = 1007 / 1101$ ): Napoleon:  $r = .11$ , Charlemagne  $r = .08$ , Yat Sen  $r = .09$ , Churchill  $r = .11$ , F. D. Roosevelt, Washington  $r = .16$ , Lincoln  $r = .13$ , Kennedy  $r = .16$ , but also Jesus Christ  $r = .18$ , Pope Jean Paul II  $r = .23$ , Mother Theresa  $r = .15$ , and Princess Diana  $r = .19$ , George Bush Jr.  $r = .12$ , Osama Bin Laden  $r = -.15$ , Sadam Hussein  $r = -.06$ .

with a rough view of Latin countries' recent historical experiences, containing both ups and downs.

The doctrine of objective laws was associated with the judgment of history as an expression of a superior plan – or the existence of God's laws. Because a belief in objective laws of history belongs to the Marxist tradition, the unification of this idea with the belief of a supernatural plan or a religious view of history shows the extent of the ideological defeat of the left-wing tradition amongst lay people. Such a lay belief, that the objective laws and God's laws go together, is an oxymoronic statement and stands against Marxist theory and theology, yet still might be considered evidence for a human need for a higher order, independently of the kind of force which would provide such order (nature versus God).

On the other hand, the nihilist belief in history as escaping rules or laws and the idea of "violence as the midwife of history" collapsed together in one factor, suggesting that the philosophy of historical violence is not only partially shared but also has a negative meaning. Moreover, this view of history as a product of violence and chaos was negatively associated to willingness to fight. Whereas the prevailing sociostructural view associated with pro-war attitude would imply justifications of collective violence, stressing the importance of violence and chaos in history as a predictor of reluctance to fight in a war is related to remembering the suffering and negative consequences of collective violence.

*Positivistic views of history and collectivistic expressive culture emphasizing sociability and positive interactions.* In sum, it seems that Hispanic and Portuguese speaking nations tend to seek for positive meanings in history and reject a nihilist view of existence. One plausible interpretation is the emphasis on positive emotions and interactions that characterize Latin-American Portuguese and Spanish speaking nations. For instance, altruistic behaviour is more frequent in middle level collectivistic Latin American nations and Spain than in other cultures (Levine, Norenzayan & Philbrick, 2001). The so called *simpatico* culture socializes people to suppress negative emotions, reinforces the

expression of positive emotions and transmits a positivistic view of life, which is also a dominant pattern in Africa. Africans self-describe as “the smile of humankind”, because sociability and positive interactions are emphasized – even amidst collective violence (Okeke, Draguns, Sheku & Allen, 1999). This optimistic view of life in part explains why Latin American nations with limited social development report higher levels of happiness than similar Asian nations. In fact, national means of subjective well-being in Latin America are similar to those in more developed nations (Diener & Larsen, 1993).

***The meaning of WWII and willingness to fight: Positive effects of WWII, disagreement with WWII as social catastrophe and pro-war attitude***

As far as the meaning of WWII is concerned, positive beliefs about WWII, linked to events like the creation of the UN, the reconstruction of democracy and technological advances, were generally supported and converged into a single dimension of positive effects of WWII. Conception of WWII as necessary and just collapsed together in another factor, yet participants did not agree with these meanings of the war – at least in our sample of Latin Americans, Europeans, and Africans belonging to nations not directly involved in WWII. Among these nations, the acknowledgment that WWII was a social catastrophe was stronger than the belief that it was a just and necessary war. The perception of WWII as a social catastrophe loaded on the same dimension as the idea of WWII as a cause for the Cold War. Finally, our results confirmed that positive and justifying social representations of WWII were, as expected, positively associated with the willingness to fight in a war for one's country, while regarding WWII as a social catastrophe was negatively related to pro-war attitudes.

In conclusion, the purposes and the burden of WWII were perceived as predominantly positive: It was seen as a reconstruction of democracy and as resulting in technological advances and the creation of the UN. Probably the main reason for this result is that none of the

cultures surveyed deeply suffered negative consequences from WWII. Only Brazil sent a token representation of forces to fight with the Allies, and all the other nations surveyed were neutral or bystanders of WWII (Páez et al., 2008). The Latin countries surveyed have benevolent interpretations of the meaning of history and WWII, in part because of the absence of direct experience with the negative effects of the war. The discourse of WWII as a just and necessary war appears to be a belief not supported by our Hispanic and Portuguese speaking sample of nations, in contrast to Asian and European nations. Because none of the Luso-Hispanic nations experienced WWII, the greatest calamity of the 20th century, for them progress may be more salient than calamity or the negative aspects of war.

***Beliefs about history, the meaning of WWII and evaluations of historical calamities and progress: WWII and the central nucleus of social representations of history, anchoring processes and links with experience***

A second order factor analysis showed that beliefs about history, ascriptions of meaning to WWII, and the evaluation of historical events could be grouped into supra-level categories. Less negative evaluations of historical calamities were associated with the perception of WWII as just and necessary. Progress-oriented beliefs about history and WWII were linked together with events as historical progress. History seen as violence was linked with pointing out negative consequentiality of WWII. And, finally, lack of rules and a superior plan was associated with seeing history as a meaningless farce or a never-ending cycle. The orientation towards progress in perceiving history and the indulgence in the evaluation of negative historical events were predictors of the disposition to fight in a war. One interpretation of these patterns of beliefs is based in the dominant role of WWII as a central event that helps to construct a general social representation of history —even for nations not directly involved in this event. WWII is a main feature of the social representations of history because it is frequently associated with

world history and is usually the top listed event in a free-recall task—two characteristics of events forming the central nucleus of a social representation (Abric, 1994). WWII is also linked to the anchoring processes of social representations of history. Anchoring implies a cognitive process wherein new social objects are integrated into the pre-existing patterns of representation (for instance, September 11 is like Pearl Harbour and Saddam Hussein is like Hitler) and it involves a social aspect in which a group gives meaning to a representation (for instance, the war against terrorism is just and necessary, like WWII) (see Jodelet, 2006). WWII not only forms part of the main nucleus of the social representations of history, but also serves as an anchor or central point when generating new meanings for more current events entering into public life.

In the case of the first factor, the attribution of a positive meaning to WWII (WWII causes the creation of the UN, promotes the development of technology and democracy) serves as an anchor for a positive evaluation of historical progressive events and for the general view of history as a process of socioeconomic progress and also the results of change produced by great leaders like Churchill, Roosevelt, but not Stalin, Mao, Che Guevara or Hitler. The factor which involved perceiving WWII as a just and necessary war —a view that was not supported by the majority of participants— could anchor a stoic view of history, which implies a higher acceptance of social and natural calamities (WWI and II, Depression, Tsunami, etc.). The prevailing positive beliefs about history as progress and, to a lesser extent, the stoic view of history as going through necessary calamities, are potential ideological basis of a culture of war.

Finally, the other two factors, a general view of history as a meaningless joke or as a repetitive cycle on one hand, and with violence as the driver on the other, may be anchored by the negative meanings of WWII as a social catastrophe and as a cause of the Cold War. These lessons of history surprisingly are found to erode a culture of war rather than give rise to nihilism or resignation.

At the opposite end of this implicit inductive anchoring process (that the perception of WWII anchors or induces a general view of history), it is possible that general views of history frame and help people to attribute coherent meaning to a specific event like WWII. A stoic view of history helps to build a less negative view of WWII as a just and necessary war, while a progressive view of history reinforces the attribution of a positive meaning of socio-political development to WWII.

***Beliefs about history, meaning of WWII, and evaluation of historical calamities and progressive events: Culture as a framework and the importance of traditionalist values and nationalism***

As regards the importance of the cultural factor in the beliefs about history and the pro-war attitude, previous studies found that materialist, collectivistic and hierarchical values were related to willingness to fight in large samples (Fischer & Hanke, 2009), and that pro-war attitudes are anchored in a successful historical experience of war (Basabe & Valencia, 2007). However, our results support the alternative idea that materialistic, collectivistic and hierarchical cultures emphasize a stoic view of history, but not a glorification of war. A less negative conception of war and a more positive view of historical progress and progressive events were associated with a culture of war or higher willingness to fight. In our results a positive evaluation of progress-related events was associated with history seen as social and scientific progress, and as an effect of transformational leaders' actions, as well as with the conception of WWII as a factor of social and technological advance. These positivistic and progression-oriented beliefs also predict the pro-war attitude. This means that current positive attitudes towards war are not based on a glorification of violence, but on a "progressive" and leader-centered view of history.

What is more, the association of the willingness to fight and a less negative evaluation of historical calamities and a more positive evaluation of historical progress with religiosity and nationalism,

suggest that these beliefs could be indeed related to traditional values like materialism, hierarchy and collectivism. The relative acceptance of war related to progress and a less negative evaluation of historical calamities can be interpreted as a mixture of traditional and materialistic values, that accept the negative side of social life as a normal price of the struggle for survival – and by this token war is viewed as another negative adverse event to endure. The importance of progressive events for the willingness to fight can also reflect a more traditional nationalism, associated to strong national pride, that justifies war by the advance and improvement of the nation as a last resort. Embedded in a modernization process, war is a price to be paid to achieve historical progress (Hofstede, 2001; Inglehart et al., 2004). The optimistic view of history can be also related to the *simpatico* culture or a culture that emphasizes positive aspects of social life, as we discussed above. In fact, a mixture of individualism and collectivism emphasizing the expression of positive emotions characterizes Latin nations and this can be reflected in the benevolent view of history that our results suggest.

Furthermore, the progressive view of history and war could be related to the fact that our sample of nations recently lived positive events, like overcoming colonial rule in Africa or military dictatorships, in the case of Spain, Portugal, Peru, Argentina and Brazil. Some of these countries (Spain, Portugal, Brazil and, to a lower extent, Peru) have also experienced a recent period of socioeconomic progress. However, all these nations still suffer from social problems and, in some cases, experience collective violence, like colonial wars or political violence. For instance, Brazil's military dictatorship in the 1960-70s, the thousands of deaths from the Peruvian guerrillas of Sendero Luminoso, the Argentinean war with United Kingdom and a brutal military dictatorship with thousands of missing people, Spain's nationalist terrorism or the *terrorism d'Etat* in the years 1969-1986, and the Spanish Civil War 70 years ago. But in accord with Páez et al.'s (2009) conclusions, it appears to be the lack of horror in these countries' experience of WWII that anchors their relatively positive historical frames of interpretation rather than recent civil wars or civil unrest.

## Conclusions

Our study has shown the existence of four distinct ways or attitudes to understand history. Our study has shown the existence of four distinct ways to understand history. First orientation relates to a favourable attitude towards war and involves minimization and rationalization of negative consequences of wars and other historical calamities. The second attitude towards history is associated with commitment to progressivism and industrialization or —nowadays— informatization as tools for advance of humanity. On the other hand, such a view of history involves recognition of the importance of prominent historical figures. The third orientation criticizes collective violence which might be an indirect manifestation of pacifistic beliefs and approval for post-materialistic values. Finally, the last option can be considered a strategy of avoidance, scepticism, sarcasm and distancing oneself from history.

These four factors that summarize our beliefs about history and collective violence form two orthogonal dimensions: Militarism versus pacifism, and meaningfulness based on progressivism versus meaninglessness based on nihilistic philosophy.

Further research is needed to analyze more profoundly intercultural variance, controlling for cultural values and the socio-economic development index for each country, preferably including a wider range of nations with different value profiles. In addition, it is recommended to broaden the sample by including the countries which were directly involved in WWII. It is also important to perform collective level analysis to examine structural and societal factors of cultures, beyond individual level analysis, as well as apply more confirmatory factor analysis to replicate the results obtained with the exploratory factor analysis. Last but not least, it is crucial to continue studying social representations of the past and collective violence, considering that, based on our samples, the prevailing stoic progressivist view of history fuels pro-war attitudes. Thus, the antecedents of this stoic view of history have to be found and used as a basis for strengthening these beliefs which could help achieve a strong and stable culture of peace, especially in the most threatened contexts.

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Recibido: 13 de enero de 2010

Aceptado: 15 de marzo de 2010

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