

# DNL - The Historian and World War II Memories (United States, Commonwealth)

[CA v1.5]

Programme : L'historien et les mémoires de la Seconde Guerre mondiale aux États-Unis et dans le monde britannique (Commonwealth compris)

Note : le Royaume-Uni est bien **inclu** dans la *Commonwealth* (cf. liste officielle : <http://thecommonwealth.org/member-countries>). Pour la période plus ancienne, il en est, *a priori*, de même puisqu'il est un des six pays fondateurs de l'*Imperial [since 1960: Commonwealth] War Graves Commission* (liste officielle : <http://www.cwgc.org/about-us/member-governments.aspx>) née en 1917 et qui s'occupe effectivement des morts anglais, écossais... en plus des canadiens, australiens, etc.

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## Introduction

"History is written by the victors" (attributed to [Winston Churchill](#) but also to [George Orwell](#), [Hermann Göring](#), etc.)

Never occupied and victorious, the United States and the United Kingdom, have an easier time with WWII memories than most European countries (including France).

## 1. History and Memory

### 1.1. What is History?

- History (from Greek *historia*, meaning "inquiry, knowledge acquired by investigation") is the study of the past, specifically how it relates to humans. It refers to the academic discipline which uses a narrative to

examine and analyse objectively a sequence of past events. History is often told as a linear narrative, with a beginning, middle, and end. [Historian](#) in the sense of a "researcher of history" is attested from 1531.

- [Carol Gluck](#) (professor of history at Columbia University, author of: ***Past Obsessions: World War Two in History and Memory***, New York, Columbia University Press, forthcoming) defines "**history as textbooks and work by historians**".
- Critical history is also referred to scholarly or scientific history. There are [five aspects](#) that establish a historical piece as meeting the standard of a scholarly work:

- Method- The application of a correct technique to find and criticize data and the arrangement and presentation of the data according to an effective plan. As Lord Acton said, "Method makes the historian."

- Candour- Critical history acknowledges all appropriations made by the author and doesn't conceal or gloss over matters which can't be so treated without a sacrifice of the truth. Dishonesty or failure to give due credit is plagiarism.

- Accuracy or Truth- A meticulous correctness of statement in all matters of fact is the ideal.

- Thoroughness- Use of all important sources bearing on a subject and treatment of all significant phases of the subject.

- Verifiability- A work of history must be fortified with indications of sources, which will enable the reader to check for accuracy and reliability.

- Historians write in the context of their own time, and with due regard to the current dominant ideas of how to interpret the past, and sometimes write to provide lessons for their own society.
- Bias in school teaching: in many countries history textbooks are sponsored by the national government and are written to put the national heritage in the most favourable light, to foster nationalism and patriotism.

## 1.2. What is Memory?

- Human memory is elusive — vivid for some experiences, faint for others — and not necessarily linear. All people seek their origins in what came before them; they derive their identities from both individual and collective memories. The past can be recalled and retold in many ways, whether it is through the written word, history, myth, legend, oral tradition, art, or performance.
- According to Carol Gluck (Columbia University): "memory refers to all popular views about an event, irrespective of medium [...] memories are propagated through official media such as government monuments and museums, but even more so through mass media like TV, movies and video games".
- Pr. Gluck said that most memories fail to capture the moral ambiguity of historical events, simplifying the past into a binary of good and evil.

- Different individuals and groups often have competing social memories because of their different experiences and perspectives. These competing social memories (also called counter-memories) can challenge and even change dominant versions of the past.

## 2. From World War II Heroic Memories to a Shifting Historiography

### 2.1. "The Good War"

#### 2.1.1. The United States: "The Good War"

- A retired Red Cross worker reminisced about World War II: "The war was fun for America," he remembered. "I'm not talking about the poor souls who lost sons and daughters. But for the rest of us, the war was a hell of a good time." That sentiment has led to the phrase, "the good war," in reference to World War II. "World War Two was just an innocent time in America," recalled Nancy Arnot Harjan who was thirteen years old at the time of the surprise Japanese [air strike on Pearl Harbor](#) (December 7, 1941). "I was innocent. My parents were innocent. The country was innocent."
- Beginning in the 1940s, the U.S. Entertainment industry complex (Hollywood, TV series, comics, video games...) has been powerfully building up and heralding this "good war" mainstream memory.
- WWII propaganda: Disney's iconic Mickey & Donald Duck gone in the army, Captain America (been revived in recent movies), Superman fighting... Racist depiction of Japanese.
- The Great Men: some generals became household names (like on the British side, Winston Churchill or Monty): Eisenhower (two terms republican U.S. president), George C. Marshall (the 1947 European Recovery Program), MacArthur, Patton...
- Heroic War Movies: hundreds of U.S. war movies have been shot, starting during WWII.

- D-Day (June 6, 1944): with A-list actors, ***The Longest Day, 1962*** with John Wayne; [Saving Private Ryan](#), 1998 by director Steven Spielberg. Emphasizing the U.S. Melting Pot: Eastern European Jews, Italians, Irish men...

- The "Day of Infamy" Dec. 7, 1941 (Roosevelt):

big budget American-Japanese movie [Tora! Tora! Tora!, 1970](#) - [trailer](#) - that dramatizes the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. In 1994, a survey at the USS Arizona Memorial in Honolulu determined that for Americans the film was the most common source of popular knowledge about the Pearl Harbor attack.

This memory endures in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with [Pearl Harbor](#), 2001.

- generous help of U.S. armed forces. Ex.: the aircraft carrier, [USS Yorktown](#), which was [commissioned](#) in 1943, was leased by the film producers of [Tora!](#)

## [Tora! Tora!, 1970.](#)

Beginning in the 1980s, there was a kind of push to celebrate the passing away of the WWII heroes (called the "**greatest generation**"): ***Band of Brothers, 2001*** is a ten-part, 11-hour television WWII miniseries, based on historian Stephen E. Ambrose's 1992 book of the same title. The executive producers were Steven Spielberg and Tom Hanks.

- Especially after the end of the Cold War (1991) and the rarefaction of the Russian bad guys, German S.S. have been popular fodder for U.S. horror and exploitation movies, violent video games ([Wolfenstein 3D, 1992](#))...: it seems that you can maim/dismember/kill them without any guilt and - very important from the point of view of Hollywood lawyers - no ethnic/religious/etc. U.S. minority is going to complain (an ongoing concern with islamist or northern Korean terrorists) about these gory terminations. It goes to the point that in a recent U.S. B-movie, a U.S. soldier is raped by a Svastika adorned giant robotic spider! The link between Himmler's S.S. and occultism has been used in three *Indiana Jones* movies and *Hellboy* (comics and movies)...
- That perception of World War II arose from several apparently well-founded bases. Amongst historians there was also a similar consensus (despite some marginal right wing attacks against supposedly wicked Roosevelt's provocation of Japan) until, at least, the 1970s. One historian even called it "the perfect war." WWII was described as a just war, a war launched not with imperial designs, but in self-defence against militaristic Japan and Nazism and for the cause of liberty and democracy. There were clear-cut villains and equally self-evident heroes. The war brought prosperity to the nation, lifting most from the doldrums of the Great Depression of the 1930s to full employment and weekly earnings that rose by as much as 70% during WWII. Manufacturing output doubled, and membership in trade unions increased by nearly 50 percent. WWII war enabled women - to enjoy unprecedented economic opportunities and, in turn, greater freedoms from the bonds of marriage and domesticity. Similarly, the war allowed black Americans greater employment mobility, and their contributions to the war effort gave them a powerful argument in the [civil rights movement](#) of the 1960s.

## **2.1.2. The United Kingdom and the British Commonwealth**

### **2.1.2.1. A United Nation in the Blitz**

- Bibliography:

Field, Geoffrey. '[Nights Underground in Darkest London: The Blitz, 1940-1941](#)', *International Labour and Working-Class History*, No. 62, "Class and Catastrophe: September 11 and Other Working-Class Disasters", Autumn, 2002, pp. 11-49.

- The [Blitz](#) (from German, "lightning"), the bombing of British cities by German aircrafts (September 1940 - May 1941), is the most remembered event of British WWII as the life of millions of civilians was disturbed (ex.: over a quarter of London's population had left the city by November 1940). Starting in September 1939, Lights would not be allowed after

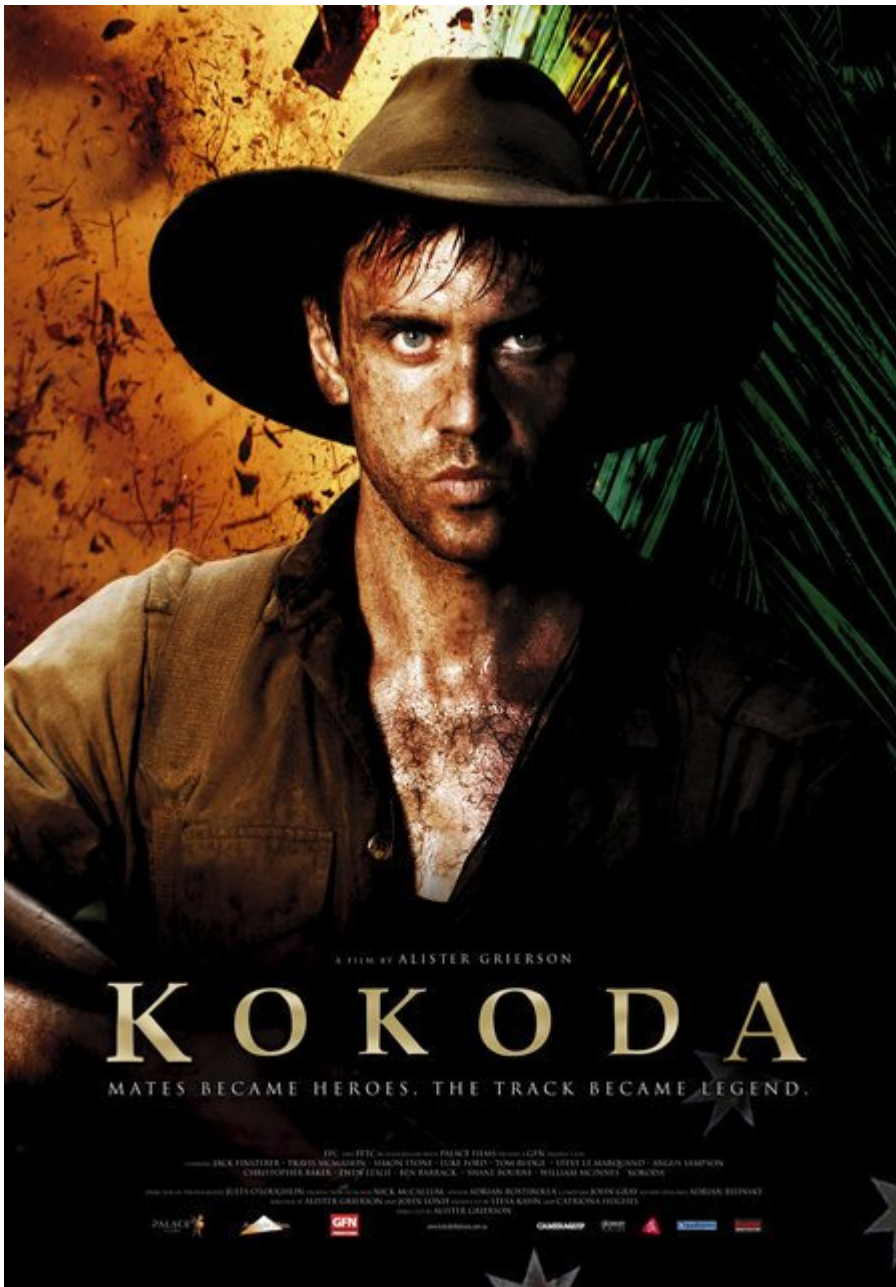
dark (the blackout) for almost six years. More than one million London houses were destroyed or damaged by the Blitz, and more than 40,000 civilians were killed. The bombing did not achieve its intended goals of demoralising the British into surrender (with dry British humour, people referred to raids as if they were weather, stating that a day was "very blitzy") or significantly damaging their war economy. A converse popular image arose of British people in the Second World War: a collection of people locked in national solidarity. It was evoked by both the right and left political factions in Britain during the [Falklands War](#) (1982) when it was embedded in a nostalgic narrative in which the Second World War represented aggressive British patriotism successfully defending democracy.

- The [Battle of Britain](#) (July-October 1940), the [Blitz](#), and the Atlantic War have been mainstays of the British film industry, describing an united nation, defeating for the first time the German air force ([Luftwaffe](#)) and winning the gruesome maritime attrition war. Ex.: [Valiant](#) (2005) (Animated, British war pigeons face German falcons), [The Dam Busters](#) (1955), [Battle of Britain](#) (1969): it's a British film directed by [Guy Hamilton](#), and based on the book *The Narrow Margin* by Derek Wood and Derek Dempster. The film endeavoured to be an accurate account of the Battle of Britain, when in the summer and autumn of 1940 the British RAF inflicted a strategic defeat on the Luftwaffe and so ensured the cancellation of Adolf Hitler's plan to invade Britain. The film is notable for its spectacular flying sequences, on a far grander scale than had been seen on film before; these made the film's production very expensive.

#### **2.1.2.2. *The British Commonwealth***

- The Commonwealth of Nations, commonly known as the [Commonwealth](#) (formerly the British Commonwealth) is today an intergovernmental organisation of 53 member states that are mostly territories of the former British Empire. The symbol of this free association is Queen Elizabeth II who is the Head of the Commonwealth. Member states are united by language, history, culture, and their shared values of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law.
- The [Imperial \[since 1960: Commonwealth\] War Graves Commission](#), born in 1917, maintains the Debt of Honour Register, with 1.7 million names of Commonwealth soldiers killed during WWI and WWII. The Register includes some civilian casualties from WWII. Most of the names are from major Commonwealth countries -- UK, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and India. But the actual burial sites of the dead can be found pretty much worldwide: 15,000 names in Israel and Palestine, 52,000 in Egypt, 7,000 in Libya, 38,000 in Burma (Myanmar), 29,000 in Singapore, 6,000 in People's Republic of China, 62,000 in India...
- Ex.: [Kokoda](#) (also known as *Kokoda - 39th Battalion*) is a 2006 Australian film directed by Alister Grierson and is based on the experiences of Australian troops fighting Japanese forces during the 1942 [Kokoda Track campaign](#).





[src]

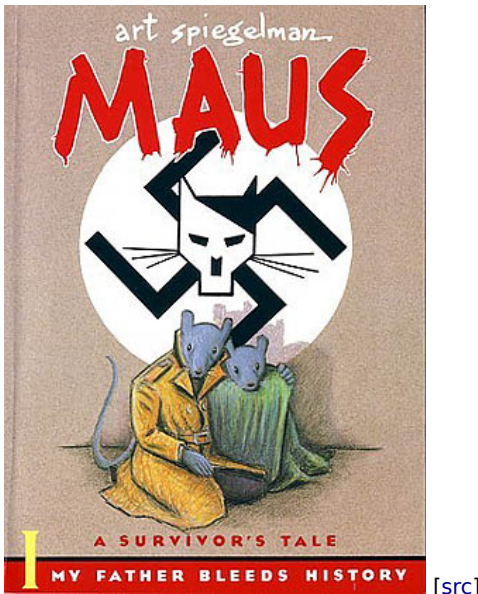
## 2.2. Muted Memories and the Historiographical Shift

### 2.2.1. Muted and Suppressed Memories

- **The Holocaust:**

- muted memories until the 1970s (most survivors wanted to forget)
- *Maus* is a [graphic novel](#) completed in 1991 by American cartoonist Art Spiegelman. It depicts Spiegelman interviewing his father about his experiences as a Polish Jew and Holocaust survivor. In 1992 it became the first graphic novel to win a [Pulitzer Prize](#). By 2011, *Maus* had been translated into about thirty languages. The volume of academic work published on *Maus* far surpasses that of any other work of comics. [Some Holocaust survivors objected](#)

to Spiegelman making a comic book out of their tragedy. Literary critics objected that the animal metaphor was "doubly dehumanizing".



[src]

- [The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum](#) (Washington, D.C.): since its dedication in 1993, this federal Museum has welcomed more than 36 million visitors, including 96 heads of state and more than ten million school-age children. The website is available in 15 languages and was visited in 2012 by more than 11 million people representing 226 countries and territories. A Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies fosters the continued growth of the Academic field of Holocaust studies.

- **Minorities and WWII:** with the [civil rights movement](#) of the 1960s in the U.S., the growing southern Asian immigration in the United Kingdom, the work of academic historians, these muted/suppressed memories are going mainstream => some recent Hollywood movies: about WWII [Navajos "code talkers"](#) (*Windtalkers*, 2002)<sup>1</sup> and black Americans pilots (*Red Tails*, 2012).

<sup>1</sup> The film was criticized for featuring the Navajo characters only in supporting roles and centering the story on a white character played by Nicolas Cage.



- Some other debates:

- The [internment of Japanese Americans \(1942-45\)](#) was the WWII internment in "War Relocation Camps" of over 110,000 people of Japanese heritage who lived on the Pacific coast of the United States. This has been heavily studied by Academic Historians. In 1980, under mounting pressure from the Japanese American Citizens League and redress organizations, U.S. President Jimmy Carter opened an investigation to determine whether the need to put Japanese Americans into internment camps had been justified by the government. The Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians (CWRIC) report, titled "Personal Justice Denied," found little evidence of Japanese disloyalty at the time and recommended the government pay reparations to the survivors. In 1988, President Ronald Reagan signed into law the *Civil Liberties Act*, which apologized for the internment on behalf of the U.S. government and authorized a payment of \$20,000 to each individual camp survivor. The legislation admitted that government actions were based on "race prejudice, war hysteria, and a failure of political leadership". The U.S. government eventually disbursed more than \$1.6 billion in reparations to 82,219 Japanese Americans who had been interned and their heirs.
- the participation of big U.S. corporations like G.M., Ford or I.B.M. to the III<sup>rd</sup> Reich war effort. Academic works uncovered the evidences.
- popular and historians discussions about the Allied Air Force not bombing Auschwitz in 1944.
- popular controversy - Historians have no real problem with Truman's decision
- about the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945.



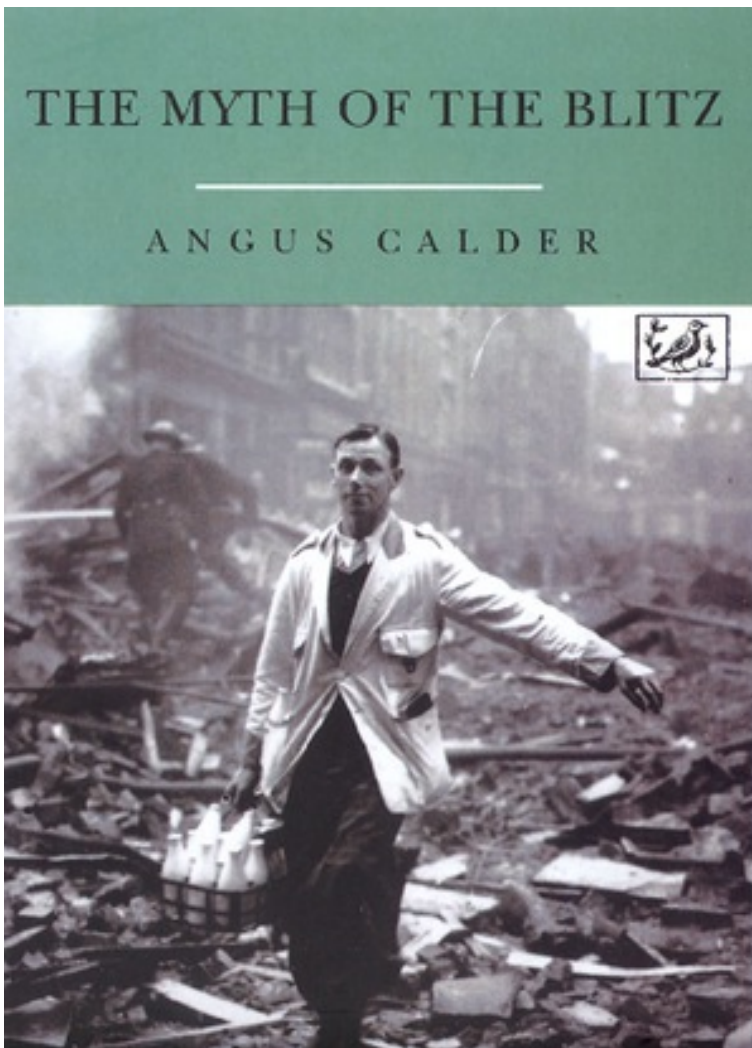
- [endless controversy](#) about the famous [V-J Day picture](#). It's a photograph by Alfred Eisenstaedt that portrays an American sailor kissing a woman in a white dress on Victory over Japan Day (V-J Day) in Times Square in New York City, on August 14, 1945. The iconic picture is used/referenced in *Watchmen* (2009), *Men in Black III* (2012), etc.

- controversy about some dubious WWII [Mohandas Gandhi's statements](#) (Ex.: "The Germans of future generations will honor Herr Hitler as a genius, as a brave man"). An Indian movie titled [Gandhi to Hitler](#) was released on July, 2011 in India:



British newspaper, [The Guardian](#), declared the film to be profoundly misguided and to show a shocking ignorance of history.

## 2.2.2. An Historiographical Shift? The Myth of the Blitz



Blouse, Overall: [fr. *blouse*]

Bottle carrier: [fr. *panier à bouteilles*]

Firefighter: is a rescuer extensively trained in firefighting, primarily to extinguish hazardous fires.

Heap of ruins: [fr. *champ de ruines*]

Milkman: a person who delivers milk in milk bottles or cartons.

- **The Myth of the Blitz?:** Historians' critical response to this construction focused on what were seen as over-emphasised claims of righteous nationalism and national unity. [Angus Calder](#)'s book ***The Myth of the Blitz (1991)*** exposed some of the counter-evidence of anti-social and divisive behaviours. In particular, class division was most evident. Rumours that Jews were inflating prices, were responsible for the Black Market, were the first to panic under attack (even the cause of the panic), and secured the best shelters via underhanded methods, were widespread. Moreover, there was also racial antagonism between the small Black, Indian and Jewish communities. The total number of evacuees numbered 1.4 million, including a high proportion from the poorest inner-city families. Reception committees were completely unprepared for the condition of some of the children. Far from displaying the nation's unity in time of war, the scheme backfired, often aggravating class antagonism and bolstering prejudice about the urban poor. Within four months, 88% of evacuated mothers, 86% of small children, and 43% of school children had been returned home.