

# World War II & the Lessons of History

By Tom W. Smith

This month marks the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II. On August 6th and 9th, 1945, atomic bombs were used against Hiroshima and Nagasaki and on August 15th Emperor Hirohito announced the surrender of Japan to the Allies. After eight years of war in the Far East, six years of fighting in Europe and the loss of tens of millions of soldiers and civilians, the largest war in human history was over. The end of World War II also concluded one of the two overarching political developments of the 20th century, the rise and fall of fascism. (The other—the rise and partial fall of communism.) Moreover, World War II framed world history for the next five decades. This period was known as the post-war era and was dominated by the Cold War. Many of the major events occurring in this time span were direct consequences of World War II. For example, the Korean War and the Berlin Wall emerged from the partition of Korea and Germany at the end of the War.

## War and Remembrance?

Yet despite World War II's monumental importance and its looming shadow over the ensuing decades, public knowledge of the War is superficial and limited. While 82-97% of the public says they have heard/read or know about such events as the Holocaust, Pearl Harbor, and the atomic bombing of Japan, these easy and self-graded questions exaggerate the public's true level of historical knowledge. Among 40 knowledge questions (excluding the six easier heard/read or know about variety) asked in national surveys from 1989 to 1995,<sup>1</sup> correct responses ranged from 89% knowing that Hitler was the leader of Nazi Germany to only 21-30% knowing that Eisenhower was the Allied Supreme Commander in Europe, that D-Day was the Normandy Invasion, or how the Warsaw Ghetto was connected to the Holocaust (see Table 1).<sup>2</sup> Knowledge is greater for general questions dealing with major events and what countries fought on what side. Knowledge is weaker for questions dealing with geography, numbers, specific titles and terms,

and individuals.<sup>3</sup> Overall, in people's memory of World War II many details are missing and even the big picture is fuzzy.

The average percent correct across all 40 questions was under 62%. Similarly, in an April 1994 Roper Starch survey people averaged only 3.2 right out of five questions (a score of 64%). Even worse, on a January 1994 CBS poll people averaged only 1.9 correct out of 6 items (32%).<sup>4</sup>

Limited knowledge about the War is not merely a result of adults forgetting what they learned in school. Overall,

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students are even less informed than adults. The US History Report Cards of the National Assessment of Educational Progress found that on 13 items about World War II, high school juniors got an average of only 60% correct in 1986 and 58% right in 1988 (see Table 2).<sup>5</sup> In November 1992 a Roper Starch survey found adults consistently outperformed high school students.<sup>6</sup> While 62% of adults correctly defined what the Holocaust was, only 48% of students did so. On five multiple-choice items 65% of adults got three or more correct, but only 59% of students did as well. The student data also reveal that knowledge of the chronology of events is even lower overall than knowing about people, places, and events. For example, only 45-49% correctly identified in what period the atomic bomb was used against Japan and only 49-57% knew in what half-century World War II occurred. This is particularly troublesome since the timing and order of events is crucial in determining cause and effect and understanding historical development.<sup>7</sup>

Historical knowledge varies considerably across socio-demographic groups. First, knowledge is considerably greater among the better educated. For example, in an April 1994 Roper Starch survey among those with less than a high school education, 55% knew what the Holocaust was. This rose to 74% among high school graduates, to 87% among college graduates, and to 92% for those with advanced degrees.

Second, historical knowledge also is much higher among members of cohorts who lived during or closer to World War II. As Karl Mannheim has noted, historical events that occur during a person's transition from childhood to adulthood leave a strong and lasting impression on a person's memory and life.<sup>8</sup> For example, in a January 1994 CBS poll, only 13% of those under 30 knew what D-Day was compared to 33% of those over 64. Sixty-four percent of those under 30 correctly answered that the first atomic bomb was used against Japan while 84% of those over 64 got this correct.

The informational disadvantage of younger cohorts is, however, completely offset by education. Among the college educated there is no drop-off in knowledge among more recent cohorts. Only among those with a high school education or less does knowledge decline among younger adults. Thus, education equalizes knowledge across generations.

## Extramural Lessons

If history were only an academic topic dealing with minutiae crammed into dusty old tomes, then it could be left in the hands of archivists and antiquarians and safely ignored by the public. But history is the collective biography of peoples and nations. A citizenry without an understanding of history is as lost as an amnesiac. Knowledge of the past is a prerequisite for understanding the present.

Two examples of how historical knowledge can illuminate issues and



Table 1: Knowledge of World War II, 1988—1994

Percent answering the question correctly					
What the Holocaust was	97%	Switzerland was not involved	69%	Adolf Eichmann's connection to the Holocaust	41%
Hitler leader of Nazis	87-89	Soviet Union was ally	67	Truman ordered first atom bomb dropped	40
Identify Pearl Harbor	84	First city atom bombed	65	Most American troops killed in World War II	38
Germany was enemy	84	Define term "The Holocaust"	62-68	Six million Jews killed in the Holocaust	35-44
Winner of World War II	84	Auschwitz, Dachau, and Treblinka		Germany crossed Poland to invade Soviet Union	35
Great Britain was ally	83	where concentration camps	62-67	Eisenhower was Supreme Commander of Allied Forces in Europe	30
Japan was enemy	82	Soviet Union was ally	56	D-Day was Normandy invasion	27
Nazis rose to power in Germany	78-81	Sweden was not involved	56	Warsaw ghetto's connection to the Holocaust	21
Japan attacked US first	78	Soviets had more casualties than US	55		
Identify December 7, 1941	75	Anne Frank's connection to the Holocaust	54		
Atomic bomb used against enemy	75	Soviet Union fought on America's side	49		
Atomic bomb first used against Japan	75	Dachau's connection to the Holocaust	46		
Meaning of term "the Holocaust"	73	Jews forced to wear yellow star	42-42		
Atomic bomb first used against Japan	71				

Note: Surveys of adult samples.

TABLE 1 QUESTION WORDINGS AND SOURCES:

Correct:

SRC - Summer/92: We are interested in how people think about the past. The particular event we are focusing on here is the Holocaust. Would you tell me what you think the Holocaust was?  
 Roper Starch - 11/92 & 4/94: Who [Joseph Stalin/Adolph Hitler/Hirohito/Winston Churchill/Other] was the leader of Nazi Germany? [1992 listed first; 1994 second.]  
 Gallup - 11/91: As you may know, this December 7th marks the 50th anniversary of Pearl Harbor. Would you know specifically what happened 50 years ago, relating to Pearl Harbor?  
*Minneapolis Star Tribune* - 4-5/88: The next question is about World War II. I'm going to read you a list of countries. Based on what you know or have learned about World War II, please tell me if each country was an ally of the United States, an enemy, or if it was not really involved in the War. How about ... Great Britain, Switzerland, Germany, Sweden, the Soviet Union, Japan?  
 CBS/NYT - 1/94: Who won World War II? 84% figure excludes 15% who volunteered that no one won the war. If these answers are kept in the base and counted as wrong, then the correct percent is 71%.  
 Roper Starch - 11/92 & 4/94: In which country [Belgium, France, Germany, Russia/Other] did the Nazis first come to power?  
 CBS/NYT - 11/91: In World War II, did the United States attack Japan first or did Japan attack the United States first?  
 Gallup - 11/91: This coming December the 7th marks the 50th anniversary of a significant event in American history which occurred on December 7, 1941. Would you happen to remember

what that event was?  
 Gallup - 7/90: To your knowledge, has an atomic or nuclear weapon ever been used on an enemy in wartime, or not?  
 CBS/NYT - 1/94: Where was the first use of the atomic bomb against the enemy in World War II?  
 CBS/NYT - 1/94: As far as you know, what does the term "the Holocaust" refer to?  
 Gallup - 7/90: Where was it (the atomic or nuclear weapons used on an enemy in wartime) used?  
 Gallup - 11/94: As far as you know, on what city was the first atomic bomb dropped?  
 Roper Starch - 11/92 & 4/94: As far as you know, what does the term "the Holocaust" refer to?  
 Roper Starch - 11/92 & 4/94: From what you know or have heard, what were Auschwitz, Dachau, and Treblinka [Capitals of countries allied with Nazi Germany/Concentration camps/Battle sites of the Second World War/Nazi slogans/Other]?  
*ABC/Washington Post*: To the best of your knowledge, during World War II, was the Soviet Union an ally of the United States or not?  
*Minneapolis Star Tribune* - 4-5/88: Please tell me whether you believe each one is true or not? During World War II, the Soviet Union had far more casualties than the United States?  
 SRC - Summer/1992: Now I'm going to read some names and places associated with the Holocaust. For each one you've heard of in connection with the Holocaust, could you tell me what the connection was? The first one is Adolf Eichmann. The next one is Dachau. The next one is the Warsaw ghetto. And the last one is Anne Frank.

CBS/NYT - 1/94: How about Russia? Was the United States fighting on the same side as Russia in World War II, was the US fighting against Russia, or wasn't Russia involved in World War II?  
 Roper Starch - 11/92 & 4/92: Many Jews in Europe were forced to wear a symbol on their clothes during the Second World War. What was it [A swastika/Hammer and sickle/A yellow star/A red cross/Other]?  
 Gallup - 11/94: As far as you know, which President ordered the first atomic bomb to be dropped?  
 Gallup - 3/90: In which of these wars [World War I, World War II, Korean War, Vietnam War] do you think the greatest number of American troops lost their lives?  
 Roper Starch - 11/92 & 4/94: Approximately how many Jews were killed in the Holocaust? [25,000/100,000/1 million/2 million/6 million/20 million].  
 Gallup - 4/88: On this card are listed many, though by no means all, of the countries in the world. Countries in some part of the world are listed together to help you find the name of the one you are looking for. Take a moment to familiarize yourself with the card—you will need to refer to it to answer the following questions. Which country did German troops have to cross through before invading the Soviet Union during World War II? [Lists 26 countries in Europe and 8 in Eastern Europe.]  
 CBS/NYT - 1/94: Who was the Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces in Europe — the countries that fought with the US in World War II?  
 CBS/NYT - 1/94: As far as you know, what does the term "D-Day" refer to?

influence matters will illustrate this point. First, those who are more knowledgeable about the Holocaust are much more likely to see it as relevant and important and to believe that it teaches vital lessons both to the present and future. For example, in the 1994 Roper Starch survey 48% of those giving a complete definition of what the Holocaust was considered it "essential" that all Americans know about the Holocaust, while only 23% of those with an incomplete or incorrect understanding thought it "essential," as did just 11% of those who did not know what the Holocaust was. Similarly, the proportion saying that one of the lessons of the Holocaust was that "firm steps need to be taken to protect the rights of minorities" rose from 29% among those scoring zero on a five-item World War II knowledge scale to 77% for those with two correct answers, to 83% for those with three or more an-

swers correct.<sup>9</sup> Second, support for the Persian Gulf War was notably higher among those who agreed with the historical analogy that "Saddam Hussein of Iraq is like Adolf Hitler of Germany in the 1930s and it is important to stop him now or he will just seize one country after another" than those who favored the alternative comparison that "Getting involved with Iraq in the Middle East is a lot like getting involved in Vietnam in the 1960s and a small commitment at first can lead to years of conflict without clear results."<sup>10</sup> Preference for these two analogies was rooted in part in knowledge (both first-hand and academic) about these two wars and, presumably, about history in general. Civilization is the accumulation and transmission of knowledge. Progress

comes from each succeeding generation learning about the world and then passing its lessons on to the next generation. Both scientific knowledge in general and understanding of humankind in particular are accumulated by a combination of theoretical study, empirical investigation and the very experience of surviving. The discipline of history collects, organizes, and synthesizes our past experiences so we can learn from our past in general and our mistakes in particular. As Thomas Jefferson observed, "The people are the ultimate guardians of their own liberty.... History by apprising them of the past will enable them to judge the future; it will avail them to the experience of other times and other nations; it will qualify them as judges of the actions and designs of men...." Or as Sir Francis Bacon more concisely and generally noted, "histories make men wise...."



**Table 2: Knowledge of World War II, American High School Juniors**

	Percent answering the question correctly			Percent answering the question correctly	
	1986	1988		1986	1988
Adolf Hitler was leader of Germany during World War II	87%	89%	Japan bombed Pearl Harbor between 1939-1943	60%	57%
Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor led US into World War II	80	--	World War II was between 1900-1950	57	49
US dropped first atomic bomb on Japan in World War II	80	80	Japanese-Americans were forced into camps during World War II	55	54
Churchill was prime minister of Great Britain in World War II	78	--	Stalin was leader of the Soviet Union during World War II	54	54
Women worked in factories during World War II	77	--	Franklin Roosevelt was President between 1929-1946	52	52
Nazi decimation of Jewish people in Europe called the Holocaust	76	75	US dropped first atomic bomb between 1943-1947	49	45
Germany and Japan were main US enemies in World War II	71	73	D-Day occurred between 1943-1947	40	37
World War II ended between 1943-1947	71	70	The United Nations founded between 1943-1947	26	26
US policy after World War II was to provide aid to Europe	67	--			
<b>Average</b>	<b>64</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>Average</b>	<b>64</b>	<b>58</b>

Source: 1986 National Assessment of History (see Diane Ravitch and Chester E. Finn, Jr., *What Do Our 17-Year-Olds Know? A Report of the First National Assessment of History and Literature* [New York: Harper & Row, 1987]); and 1988 National Assessment of History (see David C. Hammack, et al, *The US History Report Card* [Princeton: National Assessment of Educational Process, 1990]).

**Endnotes:**

<sup>1</sup> There were six heard/read or know items and 34 items asking for specific facts: Six of the 34 were asked twice, for a total of 46 items. Of these, 32 dealt with Europe, including 16 about the Holocaust; 11 with Japan, including six on the atomic bomb; and three with general or miscellaneous issues.

<sup>2</sup> While the highest ranking item listed in Table 1 is "What the Holocaust was" (97%), similar items had correct responses ranging from 62-73%. Therefore, correctly identifying who Hitler was is cited as the highest ranking historical knowledge item. Worth noting, the Hitler question was asked in an extremely easy format. It was a multiple-choice question with the three incorrect answers being Joseph Stalin, Hirohito, and Winston Churchill. Almost all incorrect responses came from people who simply said they didn't know.

<sup>3</sup> Question format also makes a difference. It is easier to correctly answer a) multiple-choice questions than opened-ended items; b) multiple-choice or true/false items with few alternatives than with many; and c) multiple-choice items with unlikely incorrect alternatives than with plausible, close-to-correct alternatives. Many different formats are used across these 46 items.

<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, historical knowledge is not the only subject in which Americans score poorly. Knowledge of vocabulary, geography, and politics is no better. Moreover, controlling for level of education, knowledge of vocabulary, geography, and politics has declined over the last 40 years. See, for example, Tom W. Smith, "The Relationship

of Age to Education Across Time," *Social Science Research*, Vol. 22, 1993, pp. 300-311.

<sup>5</sup> Seventeen items were asked in 1986. The average percent correct for all 17 was 64%. See David C. Hammack, et al, *The US History Report Card* (Princeton: National Assessment of Educational Progress, 1990); and Diane Ravitch and Chester E. Finn, Jr., *What Do Our 17-Year-Olds Know? A Report of the First National Assessment of History and Literature* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987).

<sup>6</sup> Tom W. Smith, *Holocaust Denial: What the Survey Data Reveal* (New York: American Jewish Committee, 1995).

<sup>7</sup> Historical knowledge of World War II is not an isolated or exceptional topic. The 1988 US History Report Card (see Hammack, et al, 1990) shows that scores about other periods are comparable. For example, the average score for the Civil War (54%) and Contemporary America since 1968 (57%) were marginally lower than for World War II (58%). Overall, historical knowledge did not change between 1986 and 1988. Dale Whittington believes that historical understanding has been about the same among students for several decades. See Dale Whittington, "What Have 17-Year-Olds Known in the Past?" *American Educational Research Journal*, Vol. 28, Winter 1991, pp. 759-780.

<sup>8</sup> Howard Schuman and Jacqueline Scott, "Generations and Collective Memories," *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 54, June 1989, pp. 359-381; Robert F. Belli, Howard Schuman, Steven Blixit, and Benita Jackson,

"The Misremembering of Important Past Events," paper presented to the American Association for Public Opinion Research, Ft. Lauderdale, FL, May 1995; and Tom W. Smith, "Collective Memory, Historical Generations, and Period Effects," Unpublished paper, forthcoming.

<sup>9</sup> Tom W. Smith, *Holocaust Denial: What the Survey Data Reveal*; Katherine Bischooping, "Integrating Qualitative and Quantitative Methods in a Study of Knowledge about the Holocaust," paper presented to the American Association for Public Opinion Research, St. Charles, IL, May 1993; and Katherine Bischooping, "Knowledge about the Holocaust: Hidden Assumptions about Measurement and Meaning," paper presented to the American Association for Public Opinion Research, Danvers, MA, May 1994.

<sup>10</sup> Howard Schuman and Cheryl Rieger, "Historical Analogies, Generational Effects, and Attitudes Toward War," *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 57, June 1992, pp. 315-326.



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