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Historical knowledge, importance, social identity, and memory accessibility for World War I Armistice: Comparing French- and German-speaking Belgians

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Abstract
Conflictual relations between language groups make Belgium a fruitful ground to study the interplay between historical knowledge, importance, collective memory and social identity related to historical events. This study compared German-speaking and French-speaking Belgians on the these dimensions for a historical event for which contrasted responses were expected, the centenary of Armistice on 11 November 2018. We also focused on generational differences by comparing senior, intermediate, and junior age cohorts. Results showed no generational differences but revealed that German-speakers construct their social identity differently than French-speakers. Namely, German-speaking Belgians integrated political with non-political events in their collective memory and relied more on school as source of knowledge and nationally relevant memories. In contrast, French-speaking Belgians relied on family and friends as source of knowledge, intertwined more personally and nationally relevant memories, and showed a strong association of national identity with the importance attributed to World War I.

Keywords
Armistice, collective memory, German-speaking Belgium, World War I, public event memory

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World War I is consistently ranked as one of the most important historical events of the twentieth century (Pennebaker et al., 2006). This granted historical importance is not only based on factual knowledge, but also depends on social-psychological aspects such as group identity or age cohort of individuals. What one group or age cohort considers an important historical event may be judged differently by other groups or cohorts (e.g. Abel et al., 2019; Pennebaker et al., 2006; Wertsch, 2008). While many countries nevertheless succeeded to build a somewhat consensual collective memory on World War I (Borghi, 2021; Sumartojo, 2021; Winter, 2006), Belgium's population to this day is divided in their view on World War I (Rosoux and Van Ypersele, 2012). The lack of consensus in collective memory disunites the Belgians along their language groups, which, however, has mainly been studied for the French and the Dutch but not for the German-speaking population (Hirst and Fineberg, 2012; Klein et al., 2012; Rosoux and Van Ypersele, 2012; Van Ypersele, 2014). This study therefore investigated potential differences in collective memory of World War I in French- and German-speaking Belgians. More specifically, we conducted a comparative analysis between French-speaking and German-speaking Belgians, examining their accessibility to the 100th anniversary of Armistice, their historical knowledge, and the sources of this knowledge. In addition, we investigated whether the recall of both groups was influenced by factors such as age cohort, sense of national or community identification, or the importance attributed to both world wars.

Collective memory and social identity

Collective memory refers to the form of memory that is shared by a group and interacts with social identity (Assmann, 2011; Halbwachs, 1925; Hirst and Manier, 2008). As such, collective memory encompasses the body of historical knowledge and the attributional self-image of the past that a community shares, as well as the process of collective remembering through which the community forms its agreed-upon historical knowledge and self-image (Wertsch and Roediger, 2008). Processes of collective remembering and collective forgetting of public events yield the necessary mnemonic convergence in a group to create the shared reality in which collective memory is grounded (Hirst and Coman, 2018).

One driving force guiding the collective remembering and forgetting is people's sense of social identity, that is, their extent of identification with a social group. The greater an individual identifies with their group, the more selective might be their retrieval of information about public events (Sahdra and Ross, 2007). In the case of Belgium, the Dutch- and the French-speaking Belgians tend to emphasize historical memories that not only portray their own language group in a favorable light but also discredit the members of the other language group (Klein et al., 2012). This selective, self-enhancing remembering goes together with selective, self-enhancing forgetting of at least some aspects of public events. After attending the King's 2012 summer speech, French-speaking Belgians recalled fewer pressing political topics than the Dutch-speaking Belgians, who perceive the French-speaking Belgian King as an outgroup member of their Dutch language group (Stone et al., 2022).

Similar processes of forming mnemonic convergence through collective remembering and forgetting were repeatedly found in groups of different nationalities (Abel et al., 2019; Coman et al., 2014; Liu et al., 2012; Roediger and Zerr, 2022; Schuman et al., 1998; Wertsch, 2008), voters of different parties (Mutlutürk et al., 2023), students of different universities (Coman and Hirst, 2015), and members of different ethnicities (Griffin, 2004) or age cohorts (Leksana and Subekti, 2023; Schuman and Scott, 1989; Welzer et al., 2002). However, the impact of major public events on collective memory usually lasts about three to four generations because the transmission of historical knowledge and personal memories lessens over time (Assmann, 2011). Intergenerational

conversations on facts and knowledge of the World War II showed that only 30% of the memories and facts recalled by French-speaking Belgians who were children during World War II were available to their children and only 10% to their grandchildren (Cordonnier et al., 2021; Stone et al., 2014). This loss of transferred knowledge affected personally and nationally relevant memories. Personally relevant memories are events from one's own or close others' lives, whereas nationally relevant memories concern a community or nation as a whole (Stone et al., 2014). Although the senior generation in intergenerational conversations could draw from personally relevant memories, they referred heavily to nationally relevant memories to establish the historical past. It might be for this reason that following generations rely more on nationally relevant memories and cultural sources like artifacts, books, school, monuments, or art work than on family memories when recalling important historical events (Cordonnier et al., 2021; Schuman and Scott, 1989; Stone et al., 2014).

In Belgium, social-psychological memory processes of collective, transgenerational remembering, and forgetting contribute to the long-standing and ongoing conflicts between the two main language groups, Dutch- and French-speakers (Klein et al., 2012). The third language group of German-speakers became involved after World War I when Belgium annexed former German territories and urged the German-speaking population to "become Belgian" (O'Connell, 2018). Yet, to the best of our knowledge, there is no study investigating the collective memory on Armistice and World War I of the German-speaking population. Therefore, an interesting, but much ignored angle of comparison involves the German-speakers versus the other two linguistic communities in Belgium, especially regarding the end of World War I.

Historical background of German-speaking Belgium

From 1815 to 1919, today's German-speaking Belgian cantons were parts of Prussia, which is why the inhabitants of these districts fought during World War I on the German side and were profoundly loyal to the German Emperor (Kaiser) and patriotic toward Germany (Kokaisl and Kokaislová, 2015; Koll, 2005). As a result, it very much troubled their national identity when Belgium annexed these regions in accordance with the treaty of Versailles.

To transform these new citizens into "real Belgians," the Belgian government had a strong policy of suppressing all references to Germany and imposed the French language in public and in schools. Furthermore, several cultural initiatives were launched and memorial sites changed in these regions to form a collective memory, which would draw the people nearer to a national Belgian identity (O'Connell, 2018). Despite these endeavors, a substantial part of the population in these cantons held on to a German identity and the gap between those in favor of joining Belgium and those in favor of returning to Germany widened all the more with the rise of Nazism in Germany (Beck and Verhoeyen, 2009; Koll, 2005). During World War II, the question of national identity became even more challenging. The German occupants regarded the German-speaking Belgian cantons as their territory that Belgium had unlawfully occupied following the treaty of Versailles. Consequently, all young men were forced to serve in the German army throughout World War II. After the war, it was challenging to address this topic, especially with the other linguistic groups in Belgium who had trouble accepting German-speakers as legitimate members of the Belgian community (Kokaisl and Kokaislová, 2015).

This history would suggest that contemporary German-speaking Belgians have negative associations with World War I. While the Armistice was cheered in the rest of Belgium (Luminet and Spijkerman, 2017), the outcome of the annexation of former Prussian areas prompted a social identity crisis in the inhabitants of the annexed cantons of Eastern Belgium at the time that lasted some 30 years. It was only after World War II that the inhabitants of those German-speaking areas

wanted to belong to Belgium and aimed to clean themselves from all associations with the Nazi regime and Germany. The world wars were tabooed in East Belgian families and school-aged children were urged to adapt to Belgian identity by quickly mastering the French language (Luminet et al., 2020). The Belgian government facilitated this acculturation by circumventing the promotion of detailed knowledge of both world wars. The teaching of the difficult war- and inter-war periods in primary and secondary education in East Belgium became compulsory only in 2008 (Ostbelgien, 2018). Following the federalization of Belgium at the end of the twentieth century, the Eastern cantons nowadays maintain a lively local culture and political autonomy that supports a strong Belgian and community identity in German-speaking Belgians (Kokaisl and Kokaislová, 2015).

The present study

As 11 November 2018, marked the *Grand Centenary*, numerous events facilitated by broad media-coverage commemorated World War I in Belgium, with the most prominent events taking place in the Dutch- and French-speaking parts of the country (Kesteloot and Van Ypersele, 2021; Vanneste and Ramshaw, 2021). Given that the events commemorating Armistice were less prominent in the German-speaking part of Belgium, this study aimed to investigate the collective memory in German-speaking Belgians compared to another linguistic group of Belgians. This study benefited from this one-time historical event by testing French- and German-speaking Belgians of three generations on their collective memory regarding Armistice and World War I. We operationalized and measured collective memory through memory accessibility of Armistice and historical knowledge about Armistice and World War I. These two indicators of collective memory and the importance attributed to both world wars were compared between language and age groups, while factoring in their senses of national and community identification.

Given that the German-speaking part of Belgium lost not only World War I, but, in the aftermath, also its national identity, endeavors in the past may have aimed at suppressing this historical event in the collective memory of German-speaking Belgians. The French-speaking Belgians, in contrast, may have well preserved the memory of World War I and Armistice as these historical events symbolize victory, patriotism, shared suffering, and a rare moment of national unity (Benvindo and Majerus, 2021; Rosoux and Van Ypersele, 2012; Van Ypersele, 2014). Moreover, reminiscing a victory is pleasant and enhances social identity (Berntsen, 2018; Bohn and Berntsen, 2007; Breslin and Safer, 2011; Talarico and Moore, 2012), which is usually strong and intercorrelated in French-speaking Belgians at a national and community level (Bouchat et al., 2020; De Guissmé et al., 2017). Therefore, we first hypothesized that French-speaking Belgians know more about Armistice and the World War I than German-speaking Belgians (Hypothesis 1) and that this knowledge differs as a function of social identity. Specifically, we expected that individuals of both language groups with a stronger sense of national identification recall Armistice and related historical details more easily (Hypothesis 1a). However, as historical knowledge and personal relevance of historical events are barely retained beyond a 100-year period (Assmann, 1995; Schuman and Scott, 1989; Stone et al., 2014), we furthermore expected the accessibility of Armistice and historical knowledge to diminish across age cohort and language group. We hypothesized the French-speaking older participants to know more about Armistice than the younger French-speaking and all German-speaking participants (Hypothesis 1b).

Because both world wars were highly impactful to entire current Belgium, we next hypothesized the French- and German-speaking Belgians to rate both world wars as equally important (Hypothesis 2). The French-speaking Belgians may yet show a stronger association of the importance of World War I with their national identification than the German-speaking Belgians

(Hypothesis 2a) because World War I strengthened the Belgian national identification in the French-speaking population but enforced it in the German-speaking population. We did not expect such group differences in magnitude in the correlation of the importance of World War II with Belgian national identification (Hypothesis 2b) because by the end of World War II, most inhabitants of the German-speaking cantons wanted to belong to Belgium to distance themselves from Nazi Germany (Kokaisl and Kokaislová, 2015; Koll, 2005; Rosoux and Van Ypersele, 2012).

Finally, we compared the senses of national and community identification in both language groups. While the German-speaking Belgians tend to live in the one region of the East-Belgian cantons, the French-speaking Belgians are located in the two different regions of Wallonia and Brussels, the capital area situated within the Flanders region borders. The French-speaking Belgians living in Brussels have developed in the recent years a high level of identification with Brussels as a region but not necessarily with the whole French-speaking community of Belgium. We therefore hypothesized that German-speaking Belgians would identify more strongly with their community than the French-speaking Belgians (Hypothesis 3a), but that both subsamples would show positive correlations between national and community identification as these two identifications might complement each other (Hypothesis 3b, cf. Bouchat et al., 2020; De Guissmé et al., 2017).

Methods

Participants

This study aimed to assess the collective memory of the German-speaking Belgians in contrast to one of the predominant linguistic groups in the Belgian population. In line with the researchers' own linguistic background and competence, the French-speaking Belgians were selected to serve as comparison group. Because interviews needed to take place in close timing to 11 November 2018, we failed to recruit 60 participants as originally intended. Between November 2018 and February 2019, a total of 55 participants could be recruited. The French-speaking subsample ($N = 30$) consisted of 13 men (43.33%) and 17 women (56.67%); the German-speaking subsample ($N = 25$) consisted of 11 men (44.00%) and 14 women (56.00%, Table 1). Subsamples did not differ in gender distribution ($\chi^2(1) = 0.02$, $p > .05$).

Based on previous findings in the Belgian context of World War II that younger generations know less about historical events than older ones (Cordonnier et al., 2021; Stone et al., 2014), we aimed to recruit three distinct cohorts in each subsample. Table 1 displays the age and gender distribution for each cohort of each subsample, which was similar between subsamples (all $p_s > .05$). Participants were recruited by colleagues, friends, social media announcements, and for older participants in retirement homes, reflecting a diverse population in both subsamples. To impede family and priming effects, participants were in no case related to each other and blind to the topic of the study before entering the interviews. To be eligible for the study, participants had to hold the Belgian citizenship,[1] grew up and lived most of their lives in the French- or German-speaking community of Belgium, and speak one of both languages natively. None of the older participants suffered from dementia or other forms of cognitive impairments as evidenced by relatives or caretakers.

Procedure

Semi-standardized interviews were conducted in the individuals' homes or in other quiet places such as university offices by two different interviewers in the participants' mother tongue. Interviews lasted between 8 minutes and 52 minutes ($M = 18.71$ min, $SD = 9.18$), depending on length and content of answers.

Table 1. Mean and standard deviations of age and gender distribution separated by subsamples and cohorts.

	Entire sample											
	Age			N								
Cohort	*M*	*SD*	Range	Male	Female	Total						
Young	21.05	2.68	18–26	10	9	19						
Intermediate	55.06	4.99	45–68	7	12	19						
Senior	84.47	6.92	72–94	7	10	17						
Entire sample	52.35	26.64	18–94	24	31	55						
	French-speaking subsample						German-speaking subsample					
	Age			*N*			Age			*N*		
Cohort	*M*	*SD*	Range	Male	Female	Total	*M*	*SD*	Range	Male	Female	Total
Young	21.40	2.27	20–26	5	5	10	20.67	3.16	18–26	5	4	9
Intermediate	53.44	6.48	45–68	3	7	10	56.67	2.24	54–60	4	5	9
Senior	84.80	5.71	75–94	5	5	10	84.00	8.85	72–93	2	5	7
Entire Subsample	53.21	27.24	20–94	13	17	30	51.36	26.44	18–93	11	14	25

Following consent, participants were asked what they spontaneously associate with the date of November 11. Participants would provide up to three spontaneous associations. Once they stopped naming events, the interviewer asked if they had any other association in mind. If no further events were mentioned, participants were asked to explain each associated event in detail. If Armistice was not among the associated events, more specific questions such as "Do you associate any historic event with this date?" were asked to cue participants for Armistice.

When participants had attributed Armistice to November 11, they were asked about their knowledge of Armistice and World War I. Participants were first given a chance to report their general knowledge on both historical events. If not mentioned by themselves, participants were next asked for specific historical details of Armistice such as place, time, and countries signing the peace treaty. If participants could not freely recall the historical details, interviewers gave first general and last specific prompts to facilitate recall. Eventually, participants were inquired about their sources of knowledge and their perceived importance of both world wars. We opted for this procedure because we expected a low-spontaneous accessibility of Armistice.

At the end of the interview, participants were asked if they know of other regional events taking place on November 11. Finally, participants completed a questionnaire assessing their social identity and some demographic information.

Material

Interviews were coded regarding accessibility of Armistice and regional events, historical knowledge of Armistice, and the sources and memories substantiating this knowledge. Both interviewers and one undergraduate research assistant carried out the content analysis for each language. Prior to the coding process, they engaged in discussions and reached a consensus on coding categories that encompassed all responses and criteria. Employing a common codebook, all transcribed interview responses were methodically assigned to the appropriate categories. Coding disagreements

occurred only for five out of 55 interviews, which were resolved in discussion with the principal investigator, the third author of this study.

Accessibility of Armistice and regional events. To analyze the accessibility of Armistice and other regional events, participants' spontaneous associations with the date of November 11 were coded along different categories reflecting the order of associations. The score of 0 was assigned when no spontaneous association with Armistice was provided. The score 1 was assigned when Armistice was the third spontaneous association; the score two was ascribed when Armistice was the second association; and the score 3 was given when Armistice was the first spontaneous association. Hence, the scale of accessibility of Armistice ranges from 0 (not accessible) to 3 (very accessible).

Historical knowledge about Armistice. Going beyond mere accessibility, interviews were additionally coded for depth and correctness of historical facts of Armistice and World War I. Combining form of recall (spontaneous vs prompted by interviewer) with the accuracy and amount of remembered historical details, we constructed a continuous scale reflecting the quality of historical knowledge. The highest score of 25 was reached when participants reported at least two correct historical details of Armistice and World War I and named correctly place, time, and at least three countries signing the peace treaty without needing interviewer prompts. The lowest score of 0 was assigned when no or wrong historical details were provided despite interviewer prompts.

Sources of knowledge and memories. Participants were requested to name the main sources from which they knew about Armistice. If not mentioned, participants were reminded of potential sources such as family and friends, media, school and university, movies and cinema, books or other publications, exhibitions, public holidays and commemoration events. Out of this selection, participants were asked to name their three main sources of knowledge on Armistice.

To contextualize school education as well as family and friends as potential sources of historical knowledge within the interviews, transcripts were additionally coded for the absence or presence of personally and nationally relevant memories. For example, a 94-year-old French-speaking participant born in 1924 reported a lively personally relevant memory related to Armistice:

> Every year, there was a parade in front of, because in each town and village, they had erected a monument for the dead. And one time, when I was in primary school, from 1931 onwards, the schools participated in the procession. This was very impressive because there were several orchestras . . . But what was the most striking for me, there were plenty of organizations in the parade, but at the head of it, there were not the veterans, there were the veterans' widows. They were covered in medals. But I thought that they had no right for this; it was not them who were beaten. It was meant to honor through them their husbands who had died.

In contrast, a 92-year-old German-speaking participant referred to a nationally relevant memory of Armistice: "It was Germany, France because this big battle in . . . well somewhere. They bring it up again. Also Merkel went there and met Macron, and they renewed the peace. Let's hope it stays that way." If an episode or fact was thought to be both personally and nationally relevant, it was coded as such, both personally and nationally relevant.

Importance of both World Wars. Two questions, adapted from Stone et al. (2014), assessed the subjective importance of the two world wars. Participants were asked to rate the importance of World

War I and World War II from their personal perspective on a 7 point-*Likert-type* scale (1 = not important at all; 7 = very important).

Social identification. Following Stone et al. (2014), participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement ranging from 0 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) with six statements concerning their national and community identification. Belgian national identification was assessed with items such as "I feel attached to Belgium" or "I feel proud of being able to say that I am Belgian." Cronbach's alpha for the resulting national identification scale was $\alpha = .74$ in the total sample ($\alpha = .81$ in the German-speaking subsample, $\alpha = .64$ in the French-speaking subsample).

German-speaking community identification was assessed through two items indicating the attachment to the German-speaking community and the pride of being East Belgian. Cronbach's alpha for the community identity scale of German-speaking participants was high with $\alpha = .90$. Similarly, French-speaking community identification was measured through two items indicating the attachment to the linguistic community in Wallonia/Brussels and the pride of being Walloon/Bruxellois (i.e. to come from Brussels). However, Cronbach's alpha was merely satisfactory ($\alpha = .67$) probably because French-speaking participants were living in two regions of Belgium, Wallonia and Brussels. This may have generated a more heterogeneous group than the German-speaking participants living in only one region in Belgium, and hence, a lower internal reliability for the French-speaking community identity.

Results

Following the above order of hypotheses, results will be presented in three sections. First, we show whether French- and German-speaking Belgians differed in their accessibility and historical knowledge of Armistice and whether these differences were a function of social identity or age cohort (Hypothesis 1). Second, we present the subjective importance attributed to both world wars and the senses of national and community identification in both language groups including potential intercorrelations of both constructs (Hypothesis 2). Finally, we compare the senses of national and community identification and their potential overlap for both language groups (Hypothesis 3).

Accessibility of Armistice

Overall, participants generated 91 associations with November 11, equaling in average 1.65 associations per participants. The French-speaking Belgians thought of significant less associations ($M = 1.40$, $SD = 0.67$) than the German-speaking Belgians ($M = 1.96$, $SD = 0.84$, $t(53) = -2.74$, $p = .008$, *Cohen's d* $= -.74$, *power* $= .80$). Indeed, 10.00% of the French-speaking participants could not think of a single association with November 11 and none of them thought of three associations (Table 2). In contrast, all German-speaking participants thought of at least one association with November 11 and almost a third (32.00 %) thought of three associations (Table 2). The associated event categories that emerged throughout the data analysis were Armistice, World War I and related events, St. Martin's Day, Start of Carnival, the September 11 attacks, other public or historical events, and personal events (Table 2). In total, 76.67% of the French-speaking Belgians and 84.00% of the German-speaking Belgians associated November 11 with Armistice. Hence, contradicting our first hypothesis, Armistice was equally accessible to both language groups ($\chi^2(1) = 0.46$, $p = .49$).

Because participants could provide up to three associations, the 30 French-speaking participants could potentially generate 90 associations and the 25 German-speaking participants could potentially provide 75 associations, which served as baseline for the frequencies provided in the lower

Table 2. Frequencies of associations with 11 November separated by subsample.

Number of associations	French-speaking subsample ($N = 30$)	German-speaking subsample ($N = 25$)
Zero	10.00% ($N = 3$)	–
First	90.00% ($N = 27$)	100.00% ($N = 25$)
Second	50.00% ($N = 15$)	64.00% ($N = 14$)
Third	–	32.00% ($N = 18$)
Associated events (three answers possible)	$n = 90$	$n = 75$
None	48.00%	34.67%
Armistice	23.00%	30.67%
11. September	5.56%	4.00%
Other historical or public event	5.56%	5.33%
1. World War/War-related event	4.44%	2.67%
Other event	3.33%	1.33%
Personal event	2.22%	2.67%
St. Martin's Day	–	10.67%
Carnival	–	8.00%
Sources of historical knowledge (three answers possible)	$n = 90$	$n = 75$
None	26.67%	21.33%
Family and friends	20.00%	12.00%
Media	17.78%	18.67%
School	17.78%	28.00%
Movies/cinema	7.78%	2.67%
Books/publications	6.67%	9.33%
Exhibitions	1.11%	1.33%
Public holiday	1.11%	–
Other sources	1.11%	4.00%
Commemorations	–	2.67%

The upper part of the table containing the number of associations shows how many participants of each subsample had zero, a first, second, and third association with November 11. Accordingly, percentages cannot be accumulated across rows but could have reached 100% in each line in each subsample. Frequencies of associated events and sources of historical knowledge are sorted by decreasing frequencies in the French-speaking subsample.

part of Table 2. Of the possible 90 associations of the French-speaking subsample, 23.00% concerned Armistice, whereas 30.67% of the possible 75 associations did so in the German-speaking subsample (Table 2). Most participants in each subsample thought of Armistice as either first (60.00% in each subsample) or second (16.67% of French-speaking, 16.00% of German-speaking subsample) association (Figure 1). Opposing hypothesis 1, subsamples did not differ in frequencies of mentioning Armistice as first, second, or third association ($\chi^2(3) = 2.77$, $p = .43$) nor in overall accessibility of Armistice (Table 3). Neither did accessibility of Armistice differ as a function of subsamples or age groups as evidenced by a 2×3 ANOVA (all $p_s > .05$, Figure 2).

Moreover, we found no significant correlations of accessibility of Armistice with national or community identification in either subsample (Table 4). Nevertheless, we tested whether accessibility of Armistice potentially differs in subsamples or age groups while controlling for national

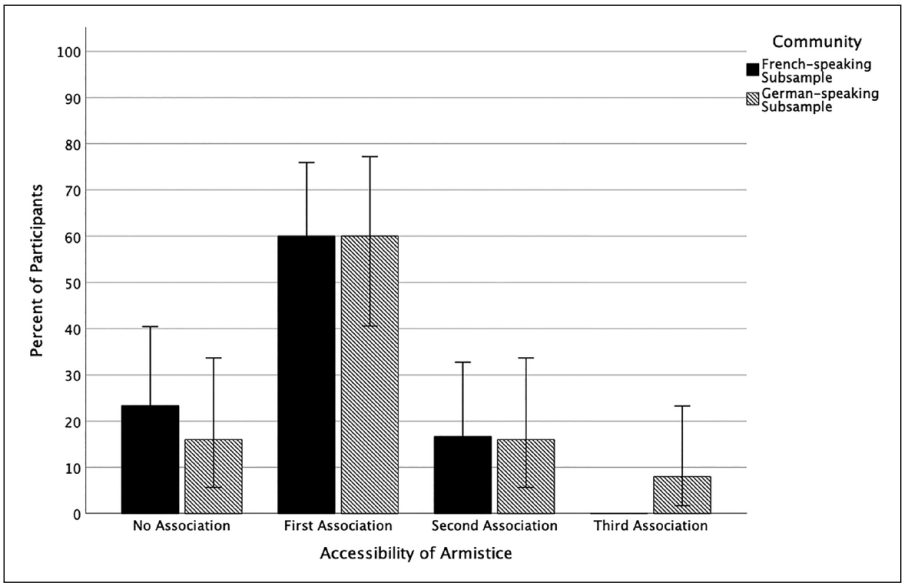


Figure 1. Percentage and confidence intervals of Armistice accessibility separated by subsample.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics and *t*-statistics comparing study variables between subsamples.

Study variable	Total sample			French-speaking subsample		German-speaking subsample		*t*	*Cohen's d*
	M	*SD*	Range	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*		
Accessibility Armistice	2.16	1.20	0–3	2.13	1.25	2.20	1.16	-.20	-.06
Historical knowledge	4.82	4.29	0–25	5.40	4.67	4.12	3.76	1.11	.30
Importance World War I	4.64	1.83	1–7	4.80	1.68	4.46	2.02	.66	.18
Importance World War II	5.67	1.57	1–7	5.74	1.48	5.58	1.69	.35	.10
National identification	6.02	1.29	1–7	5.78	1.15	6.30	1.41	-1.50	-.41
Community identification	4.87	1.90	1–7	3.97	1.60	5.96	1.66	-4.52*	-1.23
Ratio of national to community identification	1.54	1.20	0.60–7	1.78	1.17	1.26	1.20	1.61	.44

Statistical power for the t-tests was computed with the "pwr" 1.3-0 R package (Champely et al., 2017). Observed power ranges from 0.08 to 0.99 with most tests showing moderate to excellent statistical power.
*$p < .05$.

and community identification as covariates. However, the resulting 2×3 ANCOVA yielded no significant results (all $p_s > .05$). French-speaking and German-speaking participants of all ages associated November 11 with Armistice to similar extents, regardless of their sense of national or community identification.

Knowledge about Armistice and World War I

Participants of both subsamples evidenced rather poor historical knowledge (Table 3). Almost a third of participants (29.09%) ranged in the lowest quartile of the scale indicating no to little

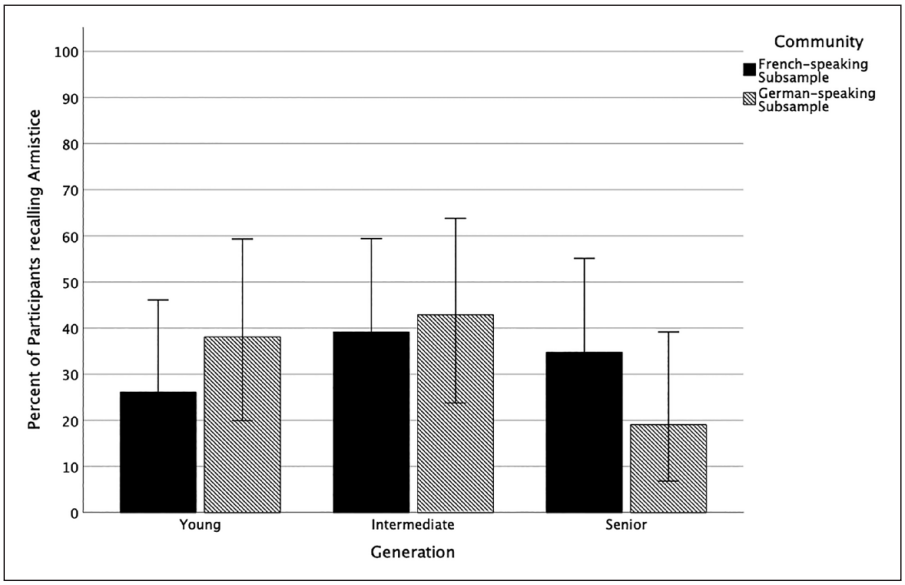


Figure 2. Percentage and confidence intervals of participants recalling Armistice separated by subsample and age cohort.

historical knowledge on Armistice and World War I. Half of the participants (50.91%) ranged in the second quartile evidencing moderate knowledge and the remaining 20.00% showed great knowledge on Armistice and World War I. Those with greater accessibility of Armistice were more knowledgeable about the historical background ($r = 0.36$, Table 4). This positive correlation was of similar magnitude in both subsamples as evidenced by *Fisher's-r-to-z-transformation* ($z = 0.27$, $p = .78$).

Accordingly, historical knowledge of Armistice and World War I did not differ in subsamples or age groups as evidenced by a 2×3 ANOVA (all $p_s > .05$). Controlling for national and community identification, however, revealed a main effect of community identification ($F(1, 47) = 8.07$, $p = .007$, $\eta_p^2 = .15$, *power* = .80). Unexpectedly, historical knowledge correlated significantly negatively with community identification in the entire sample ($r = -.37$, Table 4), and to larger extents in the German-speaking subsample than in the French-speaking subsample ($z = 2.52$, $p = .01$).

Sources of knowledge and memories

Similar to the associations of November 11, participants could provide up to three main sources of historical knowledge. Correspondingly, 90 sources and 75 sources served as baseline number for the French-speaking and German-speaking subsample, respectively (Table 2). The primary source of knowledge of Armistice in the French-speaking subsample were family and friends (20.00 %), which was similarly frequent in the German-speaking subsample (12%, $\chi^2(2) = 4.23$, $p = .12$) albeit not their main source. Instead, the primary source of knowledge in the German-speaking subsample was school (28.00%), which outnumbered the frequency of the French-speaking subsample significantly (17.78%, $\chi^2(1) = 5.83$, $p = .016$). Additional analyses showed that this difference occurred due to generational differences in the French-speaking ($\chi^2(2) = 11.52$, $p = .003$) but not in the German-speaking subsample ($\chi^2(2) = 5.63$, $p = .060$) because the senior French-speaking

Table 4. Intercorrelations between accessibility of Armistice, importance of both World Wars, and national and community identity in entire sample and subsamples.

Sample	Study variable	Historical knowledge	Importance World War I	Importance World War II	National identification	Community identification
Entire Sample	Accessibility Armistice	.363*	.159	-.004	.112	-.088
	Historical Knowledge		.116	.070	-.088	-.373*
	Importance World War I			.685*	.162	-.047
	Importance World War II				-.119	-.180
	National Identification					.568*
French-speaking subsample	Accessibility Armistice	.398*	-.022	-.237	.129	-.136
	Historical Knowledge		.126	.110	0.36	-.267
	Importance World War I			.750*	.451*	.129
	Importance World War II				-.087	-.302
	National Identification					.489*
German-speaking subsample	Accessibility Armistice	.330	.393	.283	.089	-.104
	Historical Knowledge		.085	.006	-.180	-.476*
	Importance World War I			.630*	-.022	-.116
	Importance World War II				-.130	-.066
	National Identification					.621*

Statistical power for the significant correlations was computed with the "pwr" 1.3-0 R package (Champely et al., 2017). Statistical power for the significant correlations ranges from 0.79 to 0.99.
*$p < .05$.

participants barely referred to school as source of knowledge (Figure 3). Maybe for this reason, less French-speaking (40.74%) than German-speaking participants (59.26%) included nationally relevant memories in their interviews, even though the difference was not significant between subsamples ($\chi^2(2) = 3.65$, $p = .056$). Instead, two thirds (66.67 %) of the French-speaking participants reported both nationally and personally relevant memories while only one third (33.00%) of the German-speaking participants did so. The number of nationally and personally relevant memories did not differ significantly with age group in either sample (all $p_s > .05$) and nobody included only personally relevant memories in their interviews.

The third most frequently mentioned source of knowledge was the media which was similar in both subsamples ($p > .05$). Likewise, other sources like movies, books, or exhibitions did not differ in frequency of occurrence (all $p_s > .05$, Table 2).

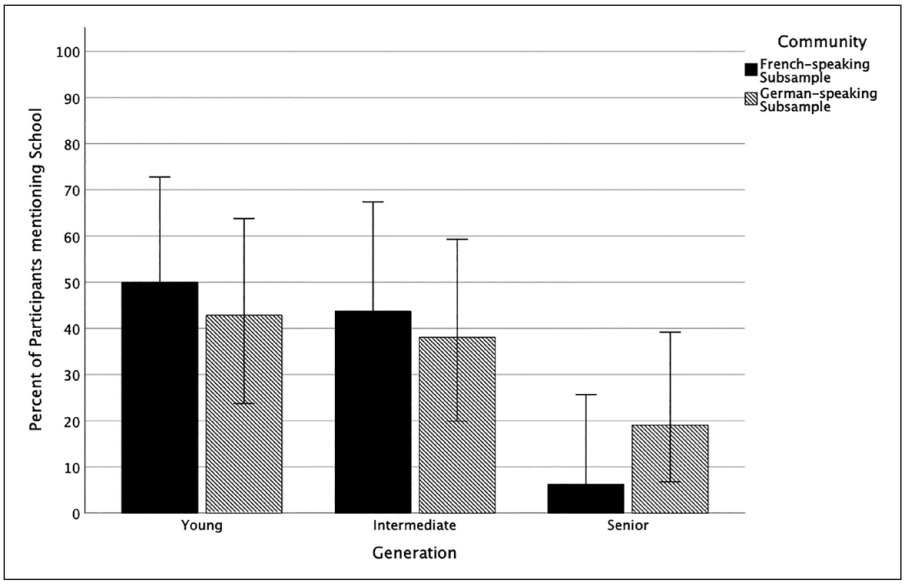


Figure 3. Percentage and confidence intervals of participants mentioning school as source of historical knowledge separated by subsample and age cohort.

Importance of both World Wars

Supporting hypothesis 2, French-speaking and German-speaking participants were similar in considering World War I and World War II to be important historical events (Table 3), and deemed World War II significantly more important than World War I as tested by a paired-samples *t*-test (Table 3, $t(50) = -5.62$, $p < .001$, *Cohen's d* = 0.76, *power* = 0.99). Neither rating of the importance of both world wars differed as a function of subsamples or age groups as evidenced by 2×3 MANOVA (all $p_s > .05$).

In line with hypotheses 2a and 2b, only the importance of World War I correlated significantly with the sense of national identification in the French-speaking subsample ($r = .45$) but not in the German-speaking subsample ($r = -.02$, Table 4). We therefore included national and community identification into the previously conducted 2×3 MANOVA testing the importance of both world wars as a function of subsample and age group, while controlling for a possible covariation with national or community identification. Yet, the subsequent MANCOVA revealed no significant differences (Pillai's $F(4, 86) = 1.219$, $p = .309$). French- and German-speaking participants of all ages deemed World War I and World War II similarly important, regardless of their sense of national or community identification.

Social identity

Belgian national identification did not differ between subsamples (Table 3), nor as a function of subsample and age group as evidenced by 2×3 MANOVA (all $p_s > .05$). Community identification, however, differed between subsamples. Confirming hypothesis 3a, the German-speaking Belgians identified more strongly with their community than the French-speaking Belgians (Table 3), regardless of age groups ($F(2, 49) = 1.00$, $p = .375$).

Accordingly, the French-speaking subsample identified significantly more strongly with their country than with their community ($t(29) = 6.90$, $p < .001$, *Cohen's d* = 1.26, *power* = 0.99), in contrast to the German-speaking subsample ($t(24) = 1.25$, $p = .223$, *Cohen's d* = 0.25). Yet, the ratio of the French-speaking and German-speaking Belgians were of similar magnitude (Table 3). As predicted in hypothesis 3b, the correlations of the sense of national identification with the sense of community identification were in both subsamples of highly positive (Table 4) and similar magnitudes ($z = -0.67$, $p = .50$).

However, in the German-speaking subsample, the senses of national and community identity appeared to influence the accessibility of regional events such as the start of Carnival and St. Martin's Day. Both these events were associated with November 11 only by German-speaking participants (Table 2), which is not surprising as these events are regional events important only in the German-speaking cantons. Specifically, 24.00% of the German-speaking subsample associated November 11 with the start of Carnival, and 32.00% associated November 11 with St. Martin's Day. The accessibility to these regional events did not differ by age cohort ($\chi^2(2) = 0.06$, $p = .97$).

Discussion

The centenary of World War I and Armistice might have been the most commemorated events in the history of Belgium (Benvindo et al., 2014; Jaumain et al., 2017). This study took advantage of these commemorative efforts, namely the Armistice centenary on 11 November 2018, to investigate cognitive accessibility and historical knowledge on World War I and Armistice in French- and German-speaking Belgians of three generations. Considering the accessibility of Armistice and related historical knowledge as two indicators for collective memory, we further explored whether differences in collective memory related to participants' age cohort, social identity, and the importance granted to both world wars.

Contradicting our first hypothesis, accessibility of Armistice was similar in French- and German-speaking Belgians and in all age cohorts. The German-speaking participants who associated November 11 with Armistice even outnumbered the French-speaking participants by almost 10%, although this difference did not yield statistical significance. Apparently, Armistice is as much part of the German-speaking Belgian's collective memory as it is of the French-speaking Belgian's collective memory. A facilitator for this finding was certainly the high media-coverage that broadcasted many events throughout a 4-year commemoration period from 2014 to 2018 that Belgium devoted to World War I (Kesteloot and Van Ypersele, 2021). The festivities celebrating the *Grand Centenary* may have rendered Armistice more salient in all Belgian's minds.

This may also explain why we found surprisingly no generational differences in accessibility of Armistice (Figure 2) or related historical knowledge as found in previous research (Assmann, 1995; Cordonnier et al., 2021; Stone et al., 2014). Instead, we observed the average historical knowledge to be rather low (Table 3) and the majority of our participants ignorant of public commemorative opportunities such as movies, books, exhibitions, or ceremonies (Table 2). While the public commemoration in Belgium may have helped to keep World War I and Armistice in collective memory across generations, it did not help maintaining a detailed historical knowledge.

However, collective memory encompasses more than historical facts; it evokes personal feelings associated with the events lived through, especially when nuanced fact knowledge is lacking (Bouchat et al., 2019). This was more obvious in the French-speaking Belgians who intertwined nationally and personally relevant memories in their interviews more often than the German-speaking Belgians and whose main source of knowledge were family and friends (Table 3). The German-speaking participants, in contrast, relied more on school or university as source of knowledge and accordingly referred more to nationally relevant memories. This might be a result of the

tabooing in East Belgian families causing German-speaking Belgians to know less family stories of the times of both world wars, or it may have been a means, especially in the older generation, to distance from unpleasant personal memories (Camia et al., 2020).

To our surprise, we found a negative correlation of historical knowledge with community identification. Given that correlations do not reveal causes we can speculate in two directions: either the more knowledgeable participants came to develop a broader, potentially more international perspective on World War I and as a result identified less with their community, or the ones who identify less with their community were more willing to seek more knowledge on World War I. Additional information like social class, education level, or political preferences could have helped understanding this finding better, but due to the focus on age/generation and the necessary close timing to 11 November 2018 of our study, we could not obtain this information from the participants. Nevertheless, our observations support recent findings showing that knowledge and emotional representation of World War I are linked to personal factors such as the sense of social identity (Bouchat et al., 2017, 2019).

Correspondingly, only German-speaking Belgians associated November 11 with St. Martin's Day and the start of Carnival. For them, the accessibility of the nationally celebrated Armistice did not interfere with the accessibility of these community events. The German-speaking Belgians seemed to combine their national identification with their German-related identity by integrating both historical and regional events into their collective memory. This finding is consistent with a previous study suggesting that socio-political identity not only guides how people remember political and non-political events, but moreover organizes public events in mnemonic networks that corresponds to the group's social identity (Mutlutürk et al., 2023). Our results indicate that German-speaking Belgians have no trouble integrating national with community identification, which also surfaced in the high means and intercorrelation of national and community identity (Tables 3 and 4).

The French-speaking Belgians, in contrast, showed a weaker community identification than the German-speaking subsample (Table 3). Instead of identifying as Walloon or Bruxellois, the French-speakers rather identified as Belgians, as evidenced by the result that French-speakers' community identification was outweighed by their national identification (Table 3). Moreover, and in line with our second hypothesis, the greater national identification in French-speakers correlated significantly with the subjective importance granted to World War I, while we did not find the same association in German-speaking Belgians (Table 4).

Several historical and mnemonic reasons could account for this finding. From a historical perspective, French-speaking Belgians may think of to World War I as a moment of resilience and victory that united the Belgian nation across language barriers in a mix of patriotic joy and mourning (Luminet and Spijkerman, 2017; Van Ypersele and Tixhon, 2000). Although this Belgian unity later declined when the memories of World War I were increasingly polarized in the inter-war period (Rosoux and Van Ypersele, 2012), World War I has not lost its national importance and French-speaking Belgians may still think of World War I as the historical event that brought about a sense of identity. To this day, French- and Dutch-speaking Belgians employ the collective memory of World War I to maintain stereotypes about the counter-language outgroup as well as to justify political claims and demands of their language in-group (Klein et al., 2012; Van Ypersele, 2014). Thus, the importance that French-speaking Belgians attribute to World War I and their sense of national identity may necessitate each other. At the same time, Armistice and its commemoration might have reanimated or created memories related to contemporary issues of Belgium that sparked the sense of national identity even more and which goes beyond the event of the Armistice itself (cf. Klein et al., 2012).

From a mnemonic perspective, the French-speaking Belgians may have been more motivated to associate their identity with the victory of World War I than the German-speaking Belgians. Previous research suggests that positively appraised public events such as victories form more elaborate memories, which in the long term are preserved in the collective memory and become central for the social identity of the victorious group (Berntsen and Thomsen, 2005; Bohn and Berntsen, 2007; Breslin and Safer, 2011; Sahdra and Ross, 2007; Stone et al., 2013; Talarico and Moore, 2012). In contrast, the German-speaking subsample descends from the defeated formerly German side and therefore may have been less motivated to associate neither their community nor their national identification to the importance of World War I. Research on individual identity has shown that individuals are reluctant to commit to identity informed by negative events (Camia et al., 2022). Our results suggest that the same might be true for groups.

Although there are less causes to expect differences in accessibility and historical knowledge of Armistice and World War I between French- and Dutch-speaking Belgians (Van Ypersele, 2014), one main limitation of this study is that we did not collect data from a Dutch-speaking subsample. Instead, this study included the understudied German-speaking Belgians and revealed that French- and German-speaking Belgian's knowledge of Armistice and World War I relate to their social identity. These results bolster the importance of including a social-psychological approach in the study of collective memories. Now that Armistice has passed its centenary, it remains to future research to investigate closer to what purpose and for how much longer World War I remains sufficiently relevant to inform collective memory and social identity in the three language groups of Belgium and beyond.

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Note

1. One participant did not hold Belgian citizenship. Taking into consideration that this person has always lived in the German-speaking Community and reported identifying as Belgian we still included this individual in the sample.

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