Narratives of Civil War and Economic Outcomes: Experimental Evidence from Finland

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Motivation

- Wars are going nowhere. Many conflicts recurrent and persistent hatred. Trillion dollar Q: How to break the cycle of violence and reconcile?

- Recent contributions in Economics show that war narratives can:
  - Can change beliefs and trigger actions (Fouka & Voth, 2023; Esposito et al., 2023; Oescher & Roesel, 2024).
  - Re-activate wounds and cleavages of the war (Fouka & Voth, 2023; Oescher & Roesel, 2024).
  - Ease the reconciliation process, by reconstructing shared memories of the conflict (Esposito et al., 2023)

- However, most current work is observational & deals with collective memory. Little work on the role of social memory (families and generations) (except Buehren et al. (2024)) and the intergenerational transmission of experienced events.

Some war narrative basics
Post cold war "memory boom" in History & Psychology

- Selective recollections of facts and framing of war memories: causes, use of violence, peace settlement.
- Can be top-down managed & institutionalized to serve political agendas (political memory) but experience of events passed down to next generations (individual and social memory) important (Assman, 2006).
- Solve collective action problems and justify policies: mobilization; POW camps; nation/institution building.
- Example: Putin's Narrative in the Ukrainian Conflict.

War Narratives of the Finnish Civil War 1918
White vs. Red Guards

An unusually violent conflict, led to victory for White Guard and internment in POW camps, political crime courts for all 75,000 Red Guards (20,000 Red Guards died in POW camps, of hunger or retributions).

War of Liberation narrative by the White Guards (Roselius, 2014).

- Classical nation-building/reconciliation narrative. War against a **common enemy**, i.e. the socialists who alledgedly collaborated with the Bolsheviks of Soviet-Russia.
- Dominating during interwar period.
- Revival after the Cold War.

Social injustice narrative by the Red Guards (Tepora, 2014).

- **Grievance** narrative.
- Was suppressed to worker's halls and underground socialist movement until World War 2.
- Leftward trend in 1960s' politics, popular culture, (e.g., Northstar trilogy).
- Official rehabilitation and nominal compensation in early 1970s.

This paper

Measurement: We measure an array of beliefs (perceptions & preferences) towards fairness, trust, upward mobility, redistribution.

- In 2018: Survey experiment among Civil War 1918 descendants to victors (conservatives), defeated (socialists), and population controls (Preregged at OSF).

Treatment: We estimate whether evoking the conservative (common enemy) and the socialist (social injustice) war narratives (by priming the subjects with statements) impacts beliefs among descendants in direct lineage.

- Both narratives are salient through their use of terminology (War of Liberation vs. Civil War), memorials, popular culture, etc.

Causality: Within each of the three sub-groups, we randomize the order of the treatment stimuli to come **before** or **after** the policy questions.

Sampling frame

White Guard	Red Guard	Population control
Children	Children	Representative sample

White Guard	Red Guard	Population control
Grandchildren	Grandchildren	Representative sample

White Guard	Red Guard	Population control
Great grandchildren	Great grandchildren	Representative sample

Survey experiment
Questionnaire structure

Treatment condition	**Control condition**

| Sociodemographics | Sociodemographics |
| Education, employment, political affiliation | Education, employment, political affiliation |

| Treatment stimuli | Policy questions |
| Reactivation of war narratives | Beliefs, preferences, perceptions |

| Policy questions | Treatment stimuli |
| Beliefs, preferences, perceptions | Reactivation of war narratives |

| Memory | Memory |
| Collective and transmitted | Collective and transmitted |

Treatement stimuli evoking war narratives (Likert scale, 5-step)

Grounded in empirical evidence on Finns' history conciousness (Torsti, 2012)

White 1. The Finns fought as a united front against Russia/Soviet-Russia and the communists.

Red 2. The 1918 war had its roots mainly in the prevailing economic inequality in Finnish society.

White 3. A victorious Red Guard (socialist) would eventually have implied unification with the Soviet Union.

White 4. The Red Guards are culpable of the war of 1918.

Red 5. The White Guards are culpable of the war of 1918.

Red 6. The post-war prisoner of war camps operated by the White Guards are a disgrace to the country's history.

White 7. The violent war events justified the punitive measures taken after the war.

Balancing

	Treated		Controls		Difference	S.E.
	Mean	Observations	Mean	Observations		
Female	0.48	623	0.52	1,204	0.04*	0.02
Age	53.79	623	54.36	1,204	0.57	0.90
Employed	0.47	623	0.47	1,204	-0.00	0.02
Retired	0.34	623	0.35	1,204	0.02	0.02
College	0.54	623	0.53	1,204	-0.02	0.02
Dad's education	10.02	623	9.66	1,204	-0.35	0.27
Mum's education	10.08	623	9.75	1,204	-0.33	0.25
Left-Wing	0.45	550	0.44	1,078	-0.01	0.03
Right-Wing	0.18	550	0.21	1,078	0.03	0.02

Belief in a Just World

	Sum of scores	Distributive	Procedural	GSS GETAHEAD	GSS OPKNOW
Treated	-0.615*	-0.189	-0.302**	0.201	-0.077
	(0.347)	(0.137)	(0.129)	(0.151)	(0.135)
Treated × Red	0.449	0.135	0.201	-0.090	-0.023
	(0.449)	(0.180)	(0.173)	(0.191)	(0.176)
R-square	0.125	0.106	0.075	0.107	0.058
Observations	1,223	1,223	1,223	1,223	1,223
lincom T + T × R	-0.166	-0.053	-0.101	0.111	-0.100
s.e.	0.283	0.116	0.114	0.117	0.111

Statement 2: "Regardless of the specific outcomes they experience, the procedures to which people are subject are fair."

Mobility Perceptions (ladder by Alesina et al., AER, 2018)

	Q1 to Q1	Q1 to Q3	Q1 to Q5
Treated	-4.349**	2.285**	1.686*
	(1.909)	(1.034)	(0.996)
Treated $\times$ Red	3.678	-1.239	-2.804**
	(2.468)	(1.349)	(1.277)
R-square	0.056	0.046	0.055
Observations	903	903	903
lincom T + T $\times$ R	-0.671	1.046	-1.118
s.e.	(1.568)	(0.854)	(0.819)

Trust and Policy Preferences

	Trust in others	Trust in institutions	Redistribution	Inheritance tax
Treated	-0.535**	-0.132	0.020	-1.704
	(0.226)	(0.137)	(0.152)	(1.120)
Treated × Red	0.280	0.263	-0.011	2.531*
	(0.287)	(0.178)	(0.193)	(1.457)
R-square	0.049	0.092	0.103	0.093
Observations	1,209	1,261	1,224	1,055
lincom T + T × R	-0.255	0.131	0.009	0.827
s.e.	0.176	0.113	0.119	0.938

	Q1 to Q1 (1)	Q1 to Q3 (2)	Q1 to Q5 (3)
Treated	0.470	-1.033	0.094
	(2.047)	(1.148)	(0.983)
R-square	0.131	0.140	0.092
Observations	320	320	320

	Trust in others (1)	Trust in institutions (2)	Redistribution (3)	Inheritance tax (4)
Treated	-0.223	0.046	-0.076	-1.218
	(0.215)	(0.149)	(0.162)	(1.367)
R-square	0.082	0.096	0.096	0.101
Observations	468	488	471	407

Mobility Perceptions in population control sub-sample

	Q1 to Q1	Q1 to Q3	Q1 to Q5
Treated	-0.944	-0.405	-0.940
	(3.111)	(1.751)	(1.574)
Treated $\times$ Left-Wing	4.118	-1.236	2.352
	(4.639)	(2.492)	(2.072)
Treated $\times$ Right-Wing	-0.332	-1.003	1.037
	(5.112)	(2.895)	(2.447)
p-value diff.	0.417	0.938	0.598
Observations	320	320	320

Children

	BJW	Q1 to Q1	Q1 to Q5	Trust in others	Inheritance tax
Treated	-1.252**	-4.075	0.383	-0.997**	-0.042
	(0.538)	(3.952)	(2.382)	(0.395)	(2.059)
Treated $\times$ Red	1.493**	-4.708	-0.367	0.704	0.100
	(0.724)	(5.374)	(2.852)	(0.496)	(3.334)
R-square	0.200	0.144	0.103	0.084	0.102
Observations	388	201	201	390	313
lincom T + T $\times$ R	0.241	-8.783**	0.016	-0.293	0.058
s.e.	0.471	3.526	1.906	0.302	2.328

Grandchildren

	BJW	Q1 to Q1	Q1 to Q5	Trust in others	Inheritance tax
Treated	-0.459	-4.174	2.282*	-0.277	-2.644**
	(0.504)	(2.626)	(1.222)	(0.300)	(1.299)
Treated × Red	0.046	5.236	-3.635**	-0.308	2.733
	(0.663)	(3.367)	(1.654)	(0.401)	(1.721)
R-square	0.113	0.069	0.118	0.071	0.124
Observations	609	504	504	588	540
lincom T + T × R	-0.413	1.062	-1.353	-0.585**	0.089
s.e.	0.430	2.153	1.106	0.263	1.156

Great grandchildren

	BJW	Q1 to Q1	Q1 to Q5	Trust in others	Inheritance tax
Treated	0.972	-7.149	3.029	-0.048	-2.684
	(0.998)	(4.730)	(2.015)	(0.567)	(3.212)
Treated × Red	-0.892	7.210	-3.688	0.481	5.599
	(1.234)	(5.748)	(2.880)	(0.717)	(3.495)
R-square	0.220	0.069	0.080	0.144	0.252
Observations	226	198	198	231	202
lincom T + T × R	0.079	0.061	-0.659	0.433	2.916
s.e.	0.669	3.388	1.998	0.412	1.873

Conclusions

- First experimental evidence showing that war narratives can be performative; if reactivated, trigger changes in beliefs.

- Find evidence of victors reconciliation narrative being more responsive to treatment stimuli than grievance among losers.

- Show the importance of intergenerational transmission of family narratives and social (generational) memory.

- Show a decay in memory. Hard to reactivate the fourth generation (great grandchildren). In line with historians understanding of the lifespan of orally transmitted family narratives (three generations). But also with the evolution of political memory into cultural memory (from the "past" to "history").