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The post-war generation remembers: A mixed-method study exploring children's attitudes towards World War II commemoration

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Abstract

This study investigated how children, a post-war generation without direct connection to war, relate to the commemoration of World War II (WWII). Seven group interviews were held among pupils in the Netherlands, aged 9 to 18 ($n = 55$) and, subsequently, questionnaires were administered to other pupils ($n = 374$). Results revealed that children are affected by the collective narrative of WWII, and connect to commemoration on a social and emotional level. Comprehension, tangibility, inclusiveness and a right atmosphere are key elements to appreciate a commemoration. Insights from this study may help societies practice more appealing remembrances with post-war generations.

KEYWORDS

children, commemoration, comprehension, learning lessons, World War II

INTRODUCTION

Up to the present day, 76 years after its ending, World War II (WWII) is still vividly remembered in many European countries. New monuments are still being built and the number of people attending commemoration ceremonies to remember WWII is even growing in the Netherlands (Claus, 2021; Holsappel et al., 2018). At the same time, national and local parties involved in the organization of WWII remembrance are concerned about the continuation by next generations.

They aim to involve more children, for example through school projects and by creating alternative forms of remembrance (Holsappel et al., 2018). But what does it mean to this third and even fourth generation since WWII to remember a war, that, sometimes not even their grandparents experienced? Why and how would they prefer to remember and commemorate this period in history? In this study, it is explored how children in the age of 9 to 18, a post-war generation without a direct connection to war, relate to WWII commemoration. Insights gained can help to understand what meaningful commemorations constitute for young, post-war generations.

Reasons to commemorate

Commemoration refers to an action that arises from an 'intention to keep the memory of a person or a thing alive' (Bomba, 2016, p. 7). It involves rituals; symbolic activities that are performed to achieve a desired outcome (Norton & Gino, 2014). Winter and Sivan (1999) argue that the subject of remembrance is so vast that no discipline can claim absolute authority in this field and Kansteiner (2002) advocates to enlarge understanding of the reception of memories. Therefore, we take an individual psychological approach, focusing on the thoughts, motivations and attitudes of children towards commemoration.

Most of the current young people in western European societies, do not have a direct connection to WWII. Even among families with specific family stories of WWII, memories are mostly decreasing between the second and third generation (Cordonnier et al., 2020). According to the theory of Assmann (2010), we live in an era in which communicative memory, based on daily conversations about memories that are still 'alive', turns into cultural memory, in which history is transferred by monuments and rituals. This transition raises concerns in society about the continuation of remembrance of WWII by next generations, who are often perceived as those who 'bear the responsibility of carrying memory forward' (Pennell, 2018, p. 84). In many western European societies, WWII functions as a moral compass; in educational settings, museums, but also in commemorations, the current narrative about WWII is aimed at developing empathy, identification and moralization through personal stories and emotional experiences (Hondius, 2010; Ribbens & Captain, 2011; Savenije, 2014; Somers, 2014). Furthermore, remembrance of both World Wars among children is often connected to citizenship education; remembering to learn the lessons from the past (Pennell, 2016), and citizenship values such as tolerance (Cowan & Maitles, 2007), democracy and equality (Starratt et al., 2017). Several scholars have raised concerns about the way the World Wars are portrayed in education and remembrance culture, engaging children emotionally with the past, but limiting critical questioning about diversities and complexities connected to war (e.g. Danilova & Dolan, 2020; Pennell, 2018; Sheehan & Davison, 2017). Pennell and Sheehan (2020) argue that children are socialized with a particular way of remembering and are often passive recipients of memory, with limited agency in how to participate in rituals of remembrance. Several studies reveal that the majority of young people highly supports remembrance activities, but they cannot clearly articulate why this is so (Imber & Fraser, 2011; Pennell, 2018).

Reshaping commemoration?

These critical notes stress the importance to further study the reasons for children to engage in commemoration, but also how they would prefer to do this when given the opportunity to

think 'out of the box'. Children not only passively adopt adults' views but are able to participate in the construction of memory (Habashi, 2013), and engage in a critical and nuanced way in national remembrance when given the opportunity (Sheehan & Davison, 2017). However, as noted, children have a distance to WWII in terms of time, experiences and family stories. Moreover, they have different perceptions, understanding and interests compared to adults. Therefore, it could be expected that children have a different opinion on how they want to remember WWII.

WWII commemoration in the Netherlands

Dutch remembrance culture differs from most other western European countries due to the fact that the Netherlands were not involved in the First World War (WWI). Therefore, a collective remembrance culture to remember war victims started only after WWII. Compared to WWI, more civilians lost their lives in WWII. This is reflected in Dutch commemorations, which have a less militaristic and more civil character. Besides, the quick military defeat in 1940 and the liberation by foreign armies in 1944–1945 did not leave Dutch citizens with much pride for their army during WWII. Instead of military parades, the heroic deeds of resistance fighters and later the personal suffering of civilians are central in commemorations (Raaijmakers, 2014). There are numerous days in which WWII is commemorated in the Netherlands. One of the oldest days in which most people participate is Remembrance Day, held every year on the 4th of May since 1946. Throughout the country, events of commemoration are locally organized. Traditional rituals are connected to these events, including two minutes of silence at 8pm, laying wreaths, singing the national anthem, and a military trumpet call. Several ceremonies are broadcasted live on television. Remembrance Day is followed by the celebration of freedom on the 5th of May (Liberation Day). The National Committee for 4 and 5 May, a state-led organisation, has the task to give direction to commemoration and keep the memory of WWII alive. According to their official memorandum, all civilians and military personnel are commemorated who, in the Kingdom of the Netherlands or elsewhere, died or were killed since the beginning of WWII, in situations of war or in peacekeeping missions. Even though Remembrance Day is broader than only commemoration of WWII victims, in practice the focus of this day is remembrance of WWII. In this article, we study perceptions towards various WWII commemorations, including Remembrance Day.

In Dutch society, the support for Remembrance Day is widespread and has been stable over the past twenty years. More than 80% of Dutch citizens appreciate this day as (very) important and adhere to the two-minute silence. Many children support Remembrance Day as well, although slightly less than adults do, referring to the commemoration more often as 'important' rather than 'very important' (De Regt, 2019). One of the main objectives of the National Committee is to introduce children to the traditions of commemoration and celebration. In the Dutch society, various attempts have been made to involve children in the activities of commemoration. Organizers of local commemorations add new rituals to the ceremony, such as dance or drama performances, in order to attract children and teenagers (Heemelaar, 2020). Also, children are reached through school projects, such as the program 'Adopt a monument', in which pupils learn about and/or organise a commemoration at a local WWII monument (De Groot - Reuvekamp & Wilschut, 2019).

Aim of the study

The current study was motivated by questions of Dutch national and local parties involved in the organization of WWII remembrances on how to attract and involve children in commemorations. Therefore, we examined considerations and motivations of children to engage in WWII commemoration. We employed an open and explorative approach, putting children's voices in the centre. Four research questions were formulated:

1. What experiences do children have with WWII commemoration and how important is it for them to commemorate? In line with prior research (Coopmans et al., 2016, 2017; De Regt, 2019), we expected that children had experience with WWII commemoration, associated with family involvement and prior lessons about commemoration at school, and rate the commemoration as important.
2. What reasons do children give to engage in, or disengage from commemoration? Literature gives insights in possible reasons to commemorate but, to the authors' knowledge, no research has investigated the reasons from a child's point of view in the Dutch context.
3. Which forms of commemoration, for example which specific rituals or elements, are valued by children? And (4) do the elements that children appreciate contribute to a positive evaluation of a commemoration? It was expected that the elements from the third question would predict the overall appreciation of the commemoration children were involved in.

We followed a mixed method design with both qualitative and quantitative measures to answer the various types of questions, to guide development of a questionnaire and enhance the credibility of our findings (Bryman, 2006). An exploratory sequential and convergent design was applied that unfolded in two studies (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The first study consisted of group interviews to explore question one, two and three. In the second study, we constructed a questionnaire partially based on the outcomes of the first study. The questionnaire was administered to a larger group of children who participated in a commemoration, to answer question one and four.

METHODS

Study 1

Procedures and participants

Seven group interviews were conducted at schools for primary, secondary, and vocational education, located in three different provinces in the Netherlands, between December 2017 and February 2018. Schools were selected based on their location and because they either participated in the program 'Adopt a monument' (three schools) or did not participate in any form of commemoration (four schools) to enlarge the diversity of responses. A total of 55 children in the age of 10 to 18 years participated in these interviews. Participants were invited by their teachers to voluntarily join the group interview. All children, and parents of children under 13, received an information letter and offered informed consent. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Ethical Review Board of the Faculty of Social Sciences of Utrecht University (FETC17-115).

Measures

Interviews were semi-structured, with a topic list guiding the conversations. The two main topics included (I) general attitude towards commemoration (i.e., associations with, meaning of, and involvement in commemoration), and (II) the evaluation of specific rituals and preferred ways of commemorating. To introduce the topic of commemoration, all group interviews were preceded by a short video of a television broadcast for children about Remembrance Day in the Netherlands. To discuss the second topic, images, or short videos of the performance of different commemoration rituals (see Appendix 1) were presented, including both traditional rituals (e.g. laying wreaths) and modern rituals (e.g. dance performance). Children expressed their evaluation of the rituals, what attracted them and if it was a way in which they would like to remember WWII. Each interview was recorded and lasted for approximately 1 h.

Analyses

All group interviews were transcribed and analysed using the program MAXQDA (VERBISoftware, 2010). We followed the analyses method as described by Boeije (2014). The first step contained open coding. In a triangulation session, three researchers (TM HM and an additional coder) coded two different interviews individually and discussed the coding until consensus was reached. The remaining interviews were open coded by the first author (HM). In the second step, axial coding was applied to all coded segments and integration into overarching categories took place. The overarching themes were discussed by two researchers (HM and TM). The last step included selective coding, in which a connection was made between the codes and the aims of the study.

Study 2

Procedure

We randomly selected nine schools for primary and secondary education, located in three different provinces in the Netherlands. All schools participated in the programme 'Adopt a monument' (De Groot - Reuvekamp & Wilschut, 2019). Five schools organised their own commemoration and four schools joined the locally organised ceremony on Remembrance Day. Questionnaires were administered from March 2018 to May 2018. Questions about prior experience and attitudes towards commemoration were asked before the commemoration they attended. After the commemoration, questions about the evaluation of the commemoration were administered. All children signed an informed consent form. Passive consent was obtained from parents or guardians by distributing an information letter with the opportunity to retract permission. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Ethical Review Board of the Faculty of Social Sciences of Utrecht University (FETC18-033).

Participants

A total of 374 children completed the questionnaire before the commemoration. Participants who did not provide informed consent ($n = 11$) were excluded from the analyses. Two hundred

fifty children (66.8%) participated in a commemoration and completed the questionnaire after the commemoration. The modest response rate may be because Remembrance Day fell on a school holiday, making attendance at the commemoration voluntary at several schools. The age of the children varied between 9 and 18 years. Additional demographic characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Measures

Socio-demographics (administered before commemoration)
Several individual characteristics of the participants were included, namely age and level of education (0 = primary, 1 = secondary).

Prior experiences (administered before commemoration)
Four questions were included to measure the children's prior experience with WWII commemoration, including physical attendance, participation via television or radio, through school, and participation of parents (e.g. 'How often did you attend a commemoration of WWII?', with answer options 0 = never, 1 = one time before, 2 = two or three times before, 3 = more than three times and 99 = I do not know).

Attitude towards commemoration (administered before commemoration)
With three questions, we evaluated the significance children attach to commemoration of WWII, Dutch victims in wars after WWII and continuation of commemoration for next generations (e.g. 'How important is it for you to commemorate WWII?'). Questions were scored on a scale ranging from 0 = not at all important to 10 = very important. A total score was calculated with the sum of the three items; Cronbach's alpha was.83.

Evaluation of commemoration (administered after commemoration)
Five questions were included to evaluate the perception of the commemoration, children participated in (see Appendix 2 for the complete questionnaire). Comprehension of the meaning of the rituals performed during the event was evaluated for every ritual, ranging from 1 = totally not [understood] to 3 = very well (e.g. 'Which rituals were performed at the commemoration you attended? [List of 12 different rituals] If yes, did you understand the meaning of this ritual?'). A total score for 'comprehensibility' was calculated by the mean score

TABLE 1 Characteristics of Participants in Study 2 (Before: $N = 374$; After: $N = 250$)

		Before	After
Characteristic		**M (SD)**	**M (SD)**
Age		12.44 (1.70)	12.16 (1.42)
		N (%)	*N (%)*
Gender	Male	167 (44.7)	113 (45.2)
	Female	207 (55.4)	137 (54.8)
Education	Primary Education	239 (63.9)	169 (67.6)
	Secondary Education	135 (36.1)	81 (32.4)

of all performed rituals. Other questions measured the presence of an eyewitness account of war (coded 0 = no, 1 = yes), involvement in (preparations for) the commemoration (coded 0 = no role, 1 = role) and the experienced feelings of sadness (from 1 = not at all to 10 = very much). Overall appreciation of the commemoration was measured with the item 'How do you evaluate the commemoration?', scored on a scale ranging from 0 = totally not appreciated to 10 = very much appreciated.

Statistical analyses

The data were analysed using SPSS version 23.0 (IBMcorp., 2016). The children's experiences with, and their attitudes towards commemoration, were explored using descriptive statistics. The associations between children's participation in commemoration, participation of parents, lessons at school, and attitudes towards commemoration were examined using Pearson correlations and independent-samples *t*-tests. Descriptive statistics were calculated to explore four aspects of commemoration, namely comprehension of the rituals, presence of an eyewitness account, involvement, and feelings of sadness during the commemoration. Lastly, Pearson correlations and a linear multiple regression analysis were conducted to examine whether these elements explained variance in the evaluation of the commemoration.

FINDINGS

Question 1: What experiences do children have with WWII commemoration and how important is it for them?

Almost all children participating in the group interviews had been involved in Remembrance Day in the Netherlands. They observed the two-minute silence, followed the national ceremony via television or radio, or joined a local commemoration. Other WWII commemorations were barely mentioned. Most children in the second study had followed a WWII commemoration at least once via television or radio (71.2%), and 39.1% had visited a local commemoration at least once.

Following the commemoration via television or radio was correlated to the participation of the parents in commemoration ($r = .60$, $p < .01$), but not to lessons in school ($r = .07$, $p = .23$). Correlations between visiting a local commemoration and both the participation of parents ($r = .27$, $p < .01$) and lessons at school ($r = .196$, $p < .01$) were statistically significant but small.

Children scored the importance to commemorate WWII on average with 7.59 ($SD = 2.14$) and the importance to commemorate Dutch victims of other wars after WWII slightly lower ($M = 6.96$, $SD = 2.11$). Children's scores on the item about the significance of continuing the commemoration for next generations were on average 8.27 ($SD = 2.21$), reflecting a high average level of agreement. The total score of attitudes towards commemoration ($M = 22.83$, $SD = 5.56$) was moderately related to the participation of parents in commemoration ($r = .36$, $p < .01$) and slightly related to lessons in school about commemoration ($r = .14$, $p < .01$).

Question 2: What reasons do children give to engage in or disengage from commemoration?

Children gave different reasons for their involvement in WWII commemoration. Segments representing reasons to commemorate could be divided into three categories, namely (i) tradition, (ii) social effects and (iii) learning lessons.

Tradition

Children often mentioned that commemoration was a custom for them, a part of Dutch culture. One child with an Italian background described her participation in commemoration as 'adjusting to how things are going here'. Moreover, commemoration deals with a shared history of which all citizens 'should know', according to participants. It is a way to pass this history and culture to next generations. As a reason not to commemorate, children noted that WWII is too long ago and a family connection with this history is absent.

Boy, 14 years: The war is too far from me. Me and nobody in my family has experienced something during that time.

Social effects

The second category of reasons to commemorate regards social effects during the commemoration. This was first and foremost related to the intention to support, respect and honour first-generation survivors and their relatives through commemoration. Furthermore, commemoration contributed to a general sense of support and connectedness in the community. One participant worded this as follows:

Girl, 16 years: The commemoration became more important for me in the last two years, with all the terrorist attacks and so on. (...) I think you have to come together in difficult times, because together you are stronger. Then you can help each other, support each other, and prevent this from happening ever again.

In contrast, a minority of children gave reasons for not participating in a commemoration, based on their experience of the event as 'uninteresting', 'tedious' or 'without significance for me'.

Learning lessons

Most reasons to commemorate or not, could be categorized into this third category. Children who attributed much importance to commemoration considered WWII as a period that should never be forgotten; the destruction and dehumanization in WWII cannot be compared to other wars, it provides deeper insight in the freedom we have nowadays, and it is a lesson for the future, to not repeat the past.

Girl, 18 years: We should never forget what happened in the past. When you forget the past, you are doomed to repeat it.

On the other hand, children argued that commemorations should not be necessary to think about the casualties of WWII: 'If it really interests you, you'll keep on thinking about them'. Furthermore, present-day sufferings, conflicts and wars, and the way in which society deals with this were reasons not to participate in commemorations for some children.

Boy, 18 years: There were thousands of deaths, millions, during the WWII. There are thousands of people who are dying now as well. Just at the time we talk now, people are dying through hunger and war. But what do we do? Media can communicate about it, but what do we really do?
Boy, 17 years: Talking, talking, talking, but no actions.
Boy, 18 years: The funny thing is, that people who died long ago are so important, but people who are dying now are not important. But they are all human beings.

Question 3: Which forms of commemoration are valued by children?

By analysing the group discussions around a broad range of rituals, we derived four key elements representing meaningful commemoration. A commemoration needs to be (i) comprehensible, (ii) tangible, (iii) inclusive and (iv) creating the right atmosphere.

Comprehensible

The importance of understanding the rationale of a commemoration involved two different aspects. Firstly, it is crucial to be able to attribute meaning to the rituals performed. Children often expressed their agreement or discontent with a ritual based on their comprehension of the meaning. In general, more traditional rituals were clearer to the children. For example, nearly all participants said that they understood why two-minute silence is part of the commemoration, although the meanings attributed to this ritual differed among the children. Some saw this silence merely as time for reflection, others as a mean to show respect for victims. Despite these different interpretations, this ritual was valued as a core aspect of commemoration. When a ritual was not well-known in the context of WWII commemoration, such as a dance act or lighting candles, children often responded with terms such as 'nonsense' or 'useless'. Moreover, in the interaction within the group interviews, the importance of understanding rituals became very clear. When the meaning of an unknown ritual was explained by another child or the interviewer, the responses of the other children became more neutral or even positive. An example, talking about the relevance of a Jewish ritual of placing stones at a memorial site:

Girl, 15 years: [Laughing] Never heard about this.
Girl, 17 years: Never heard about it either.
Girl, 16 years: When I was in Paris, we saw a coffin behind bars in a corridor. Behind the black coffin was a light, which represented the sun. There was just one coffin, but in the coffin were two million stones, for every deceased one.

Girl, 15 years: Then it may be beautiful. Not that I would like to see the tomb of Hannie Schaft [*a resistance fighter who has been buried in the city of the participant*] full of stones. But especially for the Jews, when this has more value to them than a flower that perishes, then there is some beauty to it.

Secondly, it is crucial that children understand the context of who and/or what is commemorated. This became particularly clear when discussing the value of testimonies as part of commemoration. Children emphasized that a testimony contributes to gaining more knowledge and deeper comprehension of the actual events someone lived through during WWII. Moreover, a testimony can provide a context in which other rituals are better understood. In the words of one of the participants:

Boy, 14 years: When I first hear a story about the war, and then, I have to be two minutes silent, I think more about the war.

However, it seemed important by whom the testimony was given: a poem or story of a peer was received with ambiguity.

Boy, 14 years: A child who reads a story doesn't know how it was then either. So why would I listen to that story? They don't know how it was either. Just as little as I do.
Girl, 18 years: [*about a child who reads a poem*] It is cute, but the real content is lacking.

Tangible

The group interviews revealed that war is a very abstract concept for most of the children. They expressed a strong need to imagine or visualize what it is like to experience wartime, to be able to put oneself in such a situation. This became clear through the positive responses to eyewitness accounts of WWII survivors, which helped participants to understand the context of war as well as to visualize certain situations and empathize with those affected. The same applied for most children to testimonies given by (young) refugees from war affected countries. Furthermore, rituals and activities in which various senses, such as seeing, hearing or touching are involved were positively evaluated. In particular, the presence of veterans during the commemoration spoke to the minds of young boys:

Boy, 11 years: I think it is good that soldiers are present. Some are very old, and some are even injured. If you see that, you can imagine even more what they did for us.
Boy, 10 years: They also have medals. You start thinking: Why are these people there?
Boy, 12 years: Imagine that you were a soldier and that you had to try to liberate everyone. And that you just had such a thing [a weapon]. That really intrigues me.

The aspect of making war tangible seemed chiefly important to the younger aged children. Telling examples were given by two participants, in response to the question what they would like to add in a commemoration:

Boy, 11 years: I would like fireworks during the commemoration. That gives a bang and then you can feel how it was to live in war.

Girl, 11 years: Maybe they can give virtual reality headsets to the children during a commemoration, with which you can see how it was in war, for example in a camp. Then you can maybe empathize even more, instead of only hearing stories.

Inclusive

The third element contributing to a meaningful commemoration is summarized as inclusiveness. Two specific aspects of inclusiveness came up during the group interviews, namely inclusion and participation of various age groups in the ceremony and inclusiveness in remembering victims of conflict after WWII. First, most children appreciated a commemoration which is appealing to both children and adults. The event might contain specific rituals that focus on children, but most children did not prefer a commemoration especially designed for children. Furthermore, opinions differed with respect to the value of including children in performing rituals. In general, as illustrated by the following example, younger children (aged 10–12) were more positive about active participation:

Girl, 10 years: For me it is important [*to lay a flower at a monument*], because then you can also put something yourself. Like a wreath. It feels like you can do something back.
Boy, 14 years: I am already actively participating when I am two minutes silent during the commemoration.

The second aspect of inclusiveness, remembering more recent victims of war, came mainly up in the group interviews with children in the age range of 14 to18 and among pupils with a migration background. The discussions revealed that Remembrance Day is primarily perceived by the pupils as a commemoration of WWII. Some children referred to the exceptional number of deaths in WWII through genocide, and the importance of WWII in the history of the Netherlands, to stress the importance of remembering this war. According to others, current conflicts in different parts of the world are more urgent and should receive more attention on Remembrance Day. In multiple group interviews, interactions between participants arose in which possibilities were suggested to acknowledge both WWII and current wars and conflicts:

Girl, 18 years: It is also important what happens at this moment, when we are commemorating. Of course, the past has been very tragic. Many people died in a way that should never have happened. But we should also not be quiet about what is happening at this moment. So, I think it is important that we give stage to people living in war these days. Yes, the Remembrance Day is about the WWII, but you can also think about something else, it is not only intended for the past. We make the Remembrance Day a bit broader instead of hiding something.
Boy, 17 years: For example, we can make a specific section at Dam Square [*place of the main ceremony on Remembrance Day*] for people, let's say who came here from Syria, so we do something for them as well. That is what I would like.

Right atmosphere

Fourth, children generally portrayed a clear idea of the atmosphere commemorations ought to have. Popular or childish elements, such as a dance performance in a cinema, were not considered suitable by most of the children. Furthermore, a commemoration should not be cheerful; sadness was reviewed as part of the right atmosphere. Other associations were 'seriousness' and 'filled with respect', but at the same time not too long or boring. Traditional rituals were unanimously rated as positive, contributing to an appropriate ambiance.

Girl, 13 years: Sadness is one of the words that commemoration is associated with most. The atmosphere needs to be suitable, which means not too cheerful.

Girl, 14 years: Just do it as it ought to be. So not inventing so many things, but just as it has always been.

However, not everyone agreed with what exactly is the most adequate way to commemorate. Participants revealed different opinions about what is appropriate during commemoration.

Girl, 16 years: The commemoration became a bit boring and tedious at some point. It could be nice if you make the commemoration more appealing to youth with dance, theatre, or poetry. (...) But a commemoration should not be in a cinema, as if you go for a nice outing. That wouldn't give me the feeling of a true commemoration.

Question 4: Do the elements appreciated by children contribute to a positive evaluation of a commemoration?

The qualitative study revealed four key elements contributing to a meaningful commemoration, namely (i) comprehensibility, (ii) tangibility, (iii) inclusiveness and (iv) a right atmosphere. To operationalize these elements in the quantitative study, four aspects were chosen: (i) the degree to which children comprehend the performed rituals, (ii) the presence of an eyewitness account of war during the commemoration, (iii) involvement of children in the ceremony and lastly, (iv) feelings of sadness during the commemoration (see Appendix 2 for a detailed description of these measures). On average, children understood the meaning of the performed rituals well ($M = 2.59$ [min. = 1, max. = 3], $SD = 0.39$). In 45.1% of the commemorations attended by the children, an eyewitness account of war was given during the ceremony. In most other commemorations (50.8%), a story about war was told by someone who did not experience war himself/herself. Only in 4.1% of the commemorations, no story of war was told. More than half of the children (55.6%) had an active role before or during the commemoration. Children scored their feelings of sadness during the commemoration on average with 4.54 ($SD = 2.63$; min. = 1, max. = 10). The overall evaluation of the commemoration was positive among children: on average, they rated the commemoration they attended with 7.96 ($SD = 1.65$; min. = 0, max. = 10).

Three of the four studied aspects, namely the comprehension of rituals, presence of an eyewitness account and feelings of sadness, were positively correlated with the evaluation of the commemoration (see Table 2). To examine the value of the studied aspects in relation to the evaluation of the commemoration, we performed a linear multiple regression analysis. Comprehension ($\beta = .40$, $p < .01$), involvement ($\beta = .21$, $p < .01$) and feelings of sadness ($\beta = .20$,

TABLE 2 Pearson correlations between elements of the commemoration and the evaluation of the event ($n = 209$*)

	1	2	3	4	5
1. General evaluation	1.00				
2. Comprehension	0.411**	1.00			
3. Involvement	0.105	−0.056	1.00		
4. Feelings of sadness	0.221**	0.051	−0.229**	1.00	
5. Eyewitness account	0.200**	0.127	−0.252**	0.363**	1.00

*The sample was smaller than the $N = 250$ included in the full sample, because of occasional missing values; **$p < .01$ (two-tailed).

$p < .01$), but not eyewitness account ($\beta = .13$, $p = .05$) significantly predicted the evaluation of the commemoration. The four studied aspects also explained a significant proportion of variance in evaluation of the commemoration, $R^2 = .26$, $F(4, 204) = 17.46$, $p < .01$. See Table 3 for further details of the analysis.

DISCUSSION

Most children in Dutch society have no experience with war and no personal connection to WWII. They are recipients of memory, affected by the collective narratives of WWII. But they are also able to construct and participate in national discourse (Habashi, 2013), and play a crucial part in the process of transmitting the memory of the war (Pennell, 2016). Motivated by questions from society about how to involve children in commemoration, we took an explorative approach, investigating children's attitudes towards WWII commemoration.

Most children participating in this study, aged between nine and 18, engaged in WWII commemoration and rated it as (very) important to commemorate. This matches findings of Imber and Fraser (2011) and Pennell (2018), about the importance children attribute to commemoration. In congruence with prior research, we found that participation of children and the importance they attribute to it was positively related to participation of parents (Coopmans et al., 2016, 2017). Besides family involvement, lessons in school about commemoration were associated with more participation and a more positive attitude among children as well.

TABLE 3 Summary of the linear multiple regression analysis for elements of the commemoration predicting evaluation ($n = 207$)

	B	*SE B*	*β*
Comprehension	1.65	0.25	0.40*
Involvement	0.67	0.21	0.21*
Feelings of sadness	0.12	0.04	0.20*
Eyewitness account	0.42	0.22	0.13

*$p < .001$.

More than lessons from the past

The most frequent incentive to continue with commemoration, mentioned by children, was to learn lessons from the past. This connects with the current narrative about WWII, aimed at developing moral understanding and citizenship values (Cowan & Maitles, 2009; Pennell, 2016; Savenije, 2014). This narrative is actively and apparently successfully transmitted to younger generations. Yet further studies are needed to gain more insights in the actual lessons children learn from participation in commemoration. Besides the aspect of learning lessons, our study revealed two other reasons for children to commemorate. Remembrance Day is seen as a part of Dutch culture by children, and many of them participated in WWII commemoration out of habit or tradition. This can be explained by the priorly described theory of Assmann (2010). The importance of family involvement mentioned before, indicates that communicative memory still plays a role. Yet, the motive to commemorate based on cultural tradition suggests that cultural memory is becoming increasingly dominant over time. Lastly, children engage in commemoration for social reasons, to show their support and respect to those directly affected and to connect with others. Based on a scoping review, Mitima-Verloop et al. (2020) distinguished different aspects that are significant in understanding the impact of commemoration. Among others, the experience of social support and recognition (for one's own experiences and other people's suffering) are mentioned to facilitate a more positive experience of the commemoration. Both aspects are presented by children in the present study as well. It points out that the current WWII commemoration affects children without personal connection to the subject of remembrance not only on a cognitive level, but also socially and emotionally.

Although the positive responses and reasons to commemorate outnumber the arguments to distance from commemoration, it is informative to investigate the counter arguments as well. Most of these reasons are not against WWII commemoration per se but are more related to the way remembrance events are carried out. Some children describe the commemoration as important for others, but for themselves as 'uninteresting', 'tedious', 'far-off', and 'not connected to present day suffering'. The key elements described in the following section, fit seamlessly with these arguments.

Meaningful commemoration

The preferred form of commemoration appeared to be based on underlying elements that contribute to a meaningful commemoration, rather than specific rituals that children like to perform. We identified four key elements. First, children want to comprehend the commemoration, that is to say they want to be able to attribute meaning to the performed rituals, and receive information about the context of who and what is commemorated. This does not mean that all children attribute the same meaning to a certain ritual, as the study of Imber and Fraser (2011) also reveals by studying the thoughts of children during a two-minute silence ritual. Children in our study who rated the rituals as understandable (i.e. were able to attribute meaning to the rituals) evaluated the commemoration they attended more positive. Besides comprehension, children have a need to make the concept of war tangible, to be able to imagine or visualize what it is like to experience wartime, for example through listening to eyewitness accounts. Our quantitative study indicated that the presence of eyewitness testimonies was indeed related to a more positive evaluation of commemorations. As we argued before, personification of the war is a current trend in (educational) settings (Savenije, 2014), but there is a risk of too much emphasis

on individual stories which limits our understanding of war in its full scope (De Bruijn, 2015; Pennell, 2016). Inclusiveness was a third major element contributing to meaningful commemorations, both in terms of who participates and who is commemorated. Inclusiveness for different generations is highly valued, although opinions about the importance of active involvement of children are mixed. Furthermore, inclusiveness is related to the criticism of WWII commemoration, as focus on the past and not recognizing present day wars and sufferings. A discrepancy appeared between the commemoration as it is 'officially' intended and how it is perceived by the children. Most children connect Remembrance Day solely to commemoration of WWII, while it is officially broader. However, research reveals as well that most Dutch people commemorate all victims of all wars in the two minutes of silence on Remembrance Day (Schalker & Koenen, 2019). The conflicting views on inclusiveness were also observed in the study of Imber and Fraser (2011). Their conclusion was in line with our findings, namely that attempts to broaden or generalize remembrance to include contemporary warfare, are only partially accepted. However, our findings also underline that dialogue about inclusiveness in commemoration is needed, in which children can inspire in how to achieve that. Lastly, most children had strong opinions about how a commemoration 'ought to be'. This outcome can be further understood by the importance of socialization processes, such as parental exemplar behaviour, in the transmission of commemorative behaviours (Coopmans et al., 2017; Pennell & Sheehan, 2020). The 'right atmosphere' was linked to feelings of sadness, dignity, and respect. Children who felt more sad during the commemoration they attended, perceived the event indeed more positive. Danilova and Dolan (2020) define this sadness as a 'sanctioned affective engagement' (p. 505) and argue that keeping silence while looking sad is a passive form of learning in which asking critical questions is considered disruptive and disrespectful. Notably, many new rituals of commemoration, with an initial attempt to attract children, were not understood or appreciated. Traditional rituals on the other hand, were highly appreciated.

As anticipated, the four studied aspects (i.e., comprehension of rituals, the presence of an eyewitness account, active involvement of children, and feelings of sadness) together, contributed to a positive evaluation of the commemoration. The level in which children comprehend the meaning of the rituals and the context of war was most crucial. The presence of an eyewitness account no longer affected the evaluation of commemorations when analysing this aspect together with the other elements. This might indicate that listening to an eyewitness account is more connected to the element of comprehension, by providing a clearer understanding of the context of commemoration, than that it leads to tangibility or imagination of war. Visual contributions, such as the presence of veterans, videos or virtual reality, might be more relevant in this matter. Still, we must be modest in our conclusion; the studied aspects only partly explain the evaluation. A more extensive quantitative study is needed to fully comprehend what makes certain commemorations more appreciated than others.

Limitations and strengths

The following limitations should be considered when interpreting our findings. The selection of children by teachers and their voluntarily participation in the group interviews, could have introduced a selection bias. Furthermore, the operationalizations of the key elements for a meaningful commemoration in the second study are limited compared to the broadness of responses that each element represents. For the present investigation, we used a relatively brief questionnaire to limit response burden; we do recognize that a broader set of

questions, and different operationalizations per element, could have given us more insight in the evaluation of the attended commemoration. The element 'inclusiveness', for example, not only concerns the involvement of children in the commemoration, but also who are present and who are commemorated. Lastly, we have to consider that responses of children can be prompted by uncritical thinking and social acceptance, because of how youth are socialized into established protocols and expectations of respect and empathy (Pennell & Sheehan, 2020). However, in line with the conclusion of Pennell and Sheehan (2020), applying group interviews allowed for a greater degree of reflection. The study has strengths as well. It takes a unique point of view, by questioning children directly about their thoughts, motivations and behaviours related to present day commemoration. Furthermore, we applied a methodologically strong design with mixed-methods. Results of the quantitative study confirmed and validated the findings of the qualitative study and demonstrated that they can be generalized to a big group of pupils.

The qualitative analyses provided several indications that there are differences in opinions based on age, which should be explored further by future studies. The present study was conducted in the context of WWII commemoration in the Netherlands. However, insights from this study are relevant for a broader international audience, where children grow up without personal connection to WWII as well. International comparisons of the findings would be pivotal and would deepen our understanding of contextual elements of commemoration that are connected to meaningful commemoration.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, our study offers in-depth insights in the attitudes of children towards commemoration. Results reveal that children are affected by the collective narrative of WWII. Yet they also connect to commemoration on a social and emotional level, and often have a desire to continue with this tradition. This does not imply that commemorations should not change. War is an abstract concept for many children, and eyewitnesses of WWII are less and less available to share their experiences. Openness towards critical perspectives should be stimulated, so children can decide, well-informed, how they continue and carry the memory of WWII forward. Results from the present and further studies may elevate discussions and bring societies a step closer in worthwhile remembering with post-war generations.

ETHICS APPROVAL STATEMENT

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Ethical Review Board of the Faculty of Social Sciences of Utrecht University (FETC17-115 and FETC18-033).

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CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interests.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available upon request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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APPENDIX 1

Introduction clip: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v = tunBEYzPAFQ

Rituals that were discussed during the group interviews in varying order, accompanied by a picture or video of the ritual. Depending on the time available, a random selection of the rituals was discussed.

1. Two-minute silence
2. Reading a poem / story by a child
3. Laying flowers
4. Flags at half mast
5. Personal story / eye witness account of WWII survivor or refugee
6. Laying stones at a monument
7. Laying wreaths
8. Presence of military personnel
9. Smart Phone Orchestra / ritual with mobile phones: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v = J4qB71hULRI
10. Wearing white clothes
11. Trumpet signal / Last Post
12. Writing cards with wishes
13. Lightning candles
14. Release balloons: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v = S-QlAz8qT2g
15. Reading names of those who died / were murdered
16. Play / drama / dance performance: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v = gvYqQ5Y4ahg
17. Laying cuddly toys at a monument
18. Making a nameplate of someone who died / was murdered: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v = XKBvLf5a1r8
19. Ringing bells
20. Carrying a pin with a torch on clothes

APPENDIX 2

Theme	Question	Optional answers
Socio-demographics	What is your age?	__ Years
	Which type of education do you follow?	☐ Primary education ☐ Secondary education

Theme	Question	Optional answers
Prior Experiences	How often did you go to a commemoration of WWII?	☐ Never ☐ One time before ☐ Two or three times before ☐ More than three times before ☐ I do not know
	How often did you follow a commemoration of WWII via television or radio?	☐ Never ☐ One time before ☐ Two or three times before ☐ More than three times before ☐ I do not know
	Did you do something with commemoration of WWII in a former year in school?	☐ Yes ☐ No
	Are your parents going to a commemoration of WWII, or do they follow via television or radio?	☐ Yes, (almost) every year ☐ Some years ☐ No, (almost) never
Attitude towards commemoration	How important is it for you to commemorate WWII?	0 = not important at all to 10 = very important
	How important is it for you to commemorate Dutch victims of other wars, after WWII?	0 = not important at all to 10 = very important
	Do you think we have to continue commemoration of WWII, when all who survived have passed away?	0 = not important at all to 10 = very important
Evaluation of the commemoration	Which rituals were performed at the commemoration you attended? - Two minutes silence - Laying flowers/wreaths - Reading poems - Half-raised flag - Singing national anthem - Official speech - Trumpet sound - Dance performance - Lightning candles - Prayers - Singer performance - Other, namely ...	☐ Yes ☐ No
	If yes, did you understand the meaning of the ritual?	1 = No, totally not 2 = A bit 3 = Yes, very well
	Did you do something yourself during the commemoration?	☐ Yes, I had a specific role ☐ I only watched and listened
	During the commemoration, I felt sad	1 = not at all 10 = very much

Theme	Question	Optional answers
	During the commemoration, was a story told about war?	☐ Yes, about WWII ☐ Yes, about another war ☐ No
	If yes: By whom was the story told?	☐ By someone who experienced WWII ☐ By someone who experienced another war ☐ By someone who did not experience war ☐ I do not know
	How do you evaluate the commemoration?	0 = totally not appreciated to 10 = very much appreciated