

---

# FORUM

---

## **How Global are Our Memories? An Empirical Approach using an Online Survey**

**Henning Ellermann, David Glowsky,  
Kay-Uwe Kromeier, Veronika Andorfer**

### **RESÜMEE**

Der Artikel geht der Frage nach, wie weit eine „globale Erinnerung“ in unserer zunehmend vernetzten Welt vorliegt. Ausgehend von einer weltweit durchgeführten mehrsprachigen Online-Umfrage (N=5500), versuchen wir herauszufinden, ob Menschen aus verschiedenen Teilen der Welt ähnliche historische Ereignisse als wichtig einschätzen. Befragte wurden gebeten, die drei wichtigsten politischen Ereignisse der letzten 100 Jahre und seit 2000, sowie das früheste politische Ereignis, an das sie sich erinnern können, zu nennen. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass einige wenige historische Ereignisse von vielen Teilnehmenden aus aller Welt als wichtig erachtet werden. Dieser Übereinstimmung sind allerdings Grenzen gesetzt: die Erinnerung an verschiedene Weltregionen folgt einem Muster von Zentrum / Peripherie. Zudem gibt es deutliche Unterschiede hinsichtlich der Disposition ausländischer Ereignisse zu benennen.

### **1. Introduction**

Developments in communication and transport in the last decades have significantly reduced the obstacles that physical distance presents to the maintenance of private and commercial ties with far-away places. Increasing interconnectedness of world regions and cultural transfers have not lead to a homogenized world culture, but attempts at homogenizing cultures at the national level have become more difficult. News of even the most distant events is available via television, internet or radio in many corners of the

globe, and due to transnational migration networks or participation in global markets, more people than ever may feel that distant events have an impact on their lives and thereby gain personal relevance. We want to explore what views of recent history people all over the world hold in what is often called an ‘age of globalization’.<sup>1</sup>

Views of history are of interest to a discussion of globalization because they influence the way people perceive the present.<sup>2</sup> Historical narratives are used by various actors to add legitimacy to political arrangements and regimes of territoriality such as nation states, regional integration projects or processes of globalization.<sup>3</sup> The traditional notion of historical (collective) memory as national memory is being increasingly called into question by processes of globalization. Some have even diagnosed the emergence of a new ‘cosmopolitan memory’ that transcends national borders and might provide moral narratives that underpin a global ethos.<sup>4</sup> Studies of historical memory commonly either examine cultural representations of history and elite discourses or focus on shared and divided memories of individuals in a society.<sup>5</sup> Taking the second approach to a global level, we ask: Which historical events that took place where on the planet are the main points of reference for people from different parts of the world? Is the home country the only place where important events happened, or is a certain world region dominantly represented? How fragmented or similar are the memories within societies and around the world?

To examine these questions, we conducted an online survey in the spring of 2005 that yielded nearly 5500 valid responses from 116 countries. Its core questions asked people what is the earliest political event they can remember taking place in their lifetime, what in their opinion was the most important political event since the year 2000, and what in their opinion were the three most important political events in the last 100 years?<sup>6</sup> The results support our central thesis: there is what could be called a ‘global memory’. A few key events are considered important by a large number of people from all regions

1 This article summarizes some results of the research project “Globus05 – The globalization of memory?” conducted in 2005 at the Institut für Kulturwissenschaften at the University of Leipzig. The authors would like to thank the research team members Stefanie Dorsch, Liu Jiaqi, Petra Klug, Susanne Lantermann, René Meyer and Eva Recknagel as well as all the translators for their work. We are very grateful for the support, ideas and comments of Frank Hadler and Matthias Middell.

2 How individuals will translate their subjective understanding of the past and present into action is hard to predict, though. Attempts to trace the influence of perceptions of history on current orientations have been made by way of testing people’s use of historical analogies. Cf. H. Schuman/Ch. Rieger, Historical Analogies, Generational Effects, and Attitudes Toward War, in: *American Sociological Review* 57 (1992), pp. 315-326; H. Schuman/A. D. Corning, Comparing Iraq to Vietnam. Recognition, Recall, and the Nature of Cohort Effects, in: *Public Opinion Quarterly* 70 (2006), pp. 78-87.

3 For a discussion of the attempts to carve out adequate territories for autonomous decision-making in times of increasing global enmeshment, see Ch. Maier, Consigning the Twentieth Century to History: Alternative Narratives for the Modern Era, in: *American Historical Review* 105 (2000), pp. 807-831.

4 U. Beck, The Cosmopolitan Society and its Enemies, in: *Theory, Culture & Society* 19 (2002), pp. 17-44; D. Levy/N. Sznajder, Memory Unbound. The Holocaust and the Formation of Cosmopolitan Memory, in: *European Journal of Social Theory* 5 (2002), pp. 87-106.

5 H. Schuman/A. D. Corning, Collective Knowledge of Public Events: The Soviet Era from the Great Purge to Glasnost, in: *American Journal of Sociology* 105 (2000), pp. 913-956.

6 For the exact wording of all questions, please see section 3 below and refer to the original questionnaire at <http://www.globus05.net/en/>.

of the world. The global congruence of memory is limited, though. We find considerable hierarchies in the extent to which different world regions are represented in people's memories, and also clear differences in the inclination of people from different countries to mention foreign events.

We will first give an overview of existing research about the memory of historical events and introduce the hypotheses (section 2), followed by a description of the methods of the survey (section 3). The results are presented in three subsections, dealing with different aspects of a globalized memory (section 4). We conclude with a discussion of the results and an outlook on further necessary work in this field (section 5).

## 2. Approaches and hypotheses

The field of empirical comparative research about the memory of historical events was pioneered by the sociologists Howard Schuman and Jacqueline Scott with an article presenting the results of a U.S. telephone survey from 1985. In this survey, a probability sample of over 1,400 Americans was asked to think of "national or world events or changes that have occurred over the last 50 years" and to mention "one or two that seem to you to have been especially important".<sup>7</sup> In the following 20 years, this survey was replicated in the United States<sup>8</sup>, in Great Britain<sup>9</sup>, in Germany<sup>10</sup>, in Japan<sup>11</sup>, and in China<sup>12</sup>.

The responses in the 1985 survey and its later replications show that respondents are more likely to name events that took place during their years of adolescence and early adulthood, supporting Mannheim's assumption that events occurring during this "critical age" leave a more lasting imprint on the memory of individuals than later experiences.<sup>13</sup> Yet some events, like the Second World War, are recalled to a high degree by all age groups, even those that are too young to have witnessed the event. This intergenerational consensus on certain events as reference points can be seen as an indicator of the degree to which societal narratives in media and education influence and channel the perception of history. The fact that only a handful of events are mentioned by significantly more

7 H. Schuman/J. Scott, Generations and Collective Memories, in: *American Sociological Review* 54 (1989), pp. 359-381.

8 H. Schuman/W. L. Rodgers, Cohorts, Chronology, and Collective Memories, in: *Public Opinion Quarterly* 68 (2004), pp. 217-254.

9 J. Scott/L. Zac, Collective memories in Britain and the United States, in: *Public Opinion Quarterly* 57 (1993), pp. 315-331.

10 H.-A. Heinrich, Zeithistorische Ereignisse als Kristallisationspunkte von Generationen. Replikation eines Messinstruments, in: *ZUMA-Nachrichten* 39 (1996), pp. 69-94.

11 H. Schuman/H. Akiyama/B. Knäuper, Collective Memories of Germans and Japanese about the Past Half-Century, in: *Memory* 6 (1998), pp. 427-454.

12 M. K. Jennings/Ning Zhang, Generations, Political Status, and Collective Memories in the Chinese Countryside, in: *The Journal of Politics* 67 (2005), pp. 1164-1189.

13 K. Mannheim, The Problem of Generations, in: *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge*, by K. Mannheim, London 1952 [1928], pp. 270-322.

than five per cent of the respondents in each country supports this assumption, but also highlights the considerable fragmentation of memories within societies beyond the few key events.<sup>14</sup>

In all countries, World War II is the most frequently mentioned event; most other events above a three per cent threshold are national events that took place inside the respective country.<sup>15</sup> In the memories of the British, German and American respondents, Latin America, Asia and the Middle East only feature as the sites of the Falklands, Vietnam and Gulf Wars, if at all. Responses in the Chinese survey were almost completely focused on national events, while Japanese answers also included the Oil Crisis of 1973, the Gulf War 1990/91 and the German reunification. In these various national surveys, events in Africa or Oceania were not mentioned often enough to be reported.

A more explicitly comparative approach to the “collective memory of political events”<sup>16</sup> taken by social psychologists who asked classroom samples of college students from a wide range of different countries about important events in history yielded similar results. The most frequently mentioned events center on political conflict and war, especially the two World Wars (which rank 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> in almost all societies examined).<sup>17</sup> Events named in Western states show strong Eurocentric representations of history, and the Asian samples express more Eurocentric than ethnocentric positions as well.<sup>18</sup>

A case for a global world view in the sense of a high interest in foreign and transnational events among the world’s population today can be made. The chances to participate passively in events that take place far away as part of a potentially global television (or internet) audience have never been greater, and transnational media and press agencies coordinate global “Media Events”.<sup>19</sup> The increased mobility of individuals and goods has created networks that can give events in distant parts of the world personal relevance, resulting in what Ulrich Beck has termed the “internal globalization” of individuals and societies.<sup>20</sup> Accordingly, we assume that there is what can be called a globalized memory in the minds of people around the world today:

14 Overall, the three most frequently mentioned events in the U.S. survey in 1985 were World War II (29.3 %), the Vietnam War (22.0 %) and the exploration of space (12.7 %) (Schuman/Scott, *Generations and Collective Memories* [fn. 7], p. 363). In the later replications of the survey in Germany, World War II and the German reunification were mentioned by over 60 per cent of respondents. Regarding the latter, a period effect in the 1991 German survey cannot be excluded.

15 Only in the Chinese survey, World War II was excluded as an answer by the chosen timeframe. The Chinese answers almost exclusively concern national events. Jennings/Zhang, *Generations* (fn. 12)

16 J. W. Pennebaker/B. L. Banasik, On the creation and maintenance of collective memories. History as social psychology, in: *Collective Memory of Political Events. Social Psychological Perspectives*, ed. by J. W. Pennebaker, D. Paez and B. Rimé, Mahwah 1997, pp. 3-19, p. 4.

17 Except for France, where the French Revolution ranks 3rd before WWI. J. H. Liu/R. Goldstein-Hawes/D. Hilton et al., Social Representations of Events and People in World History across 12 Cultures, in: *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 36 (2005), pp. 171-191, p. 178.

18 Ibid.; J. W. Pennebaker/D. Páez/J. C. Deschamps, The social psychology of history. Defining the most important events of the last 10, 100, and 1000 years, in: *Psicología Política* 32 (2006), pp. 15-32.

19 D. Dayan/E. Katz, *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History*. Cambridge, MA 1992.

20 Beck, *The Cosmopolitan Society and its Enemies* (fn. 4).

(H1) When asked about their earliest remembered political event or important recent events, people will give a substantial portion of events that have not primarily taken place in their own country.

Since we have also argued that worldwide interconnectedness has increased during the past decades, we assume that:

(H2) Young people who have grown up in this latest wave of globalization will show a more globalized perception of worldwide events in the sense of (H1) than older people.

This is not to deny the continued importance of the nation state as a frame of historical reference or the persistence of territorial patterns of memory. Enormous amounts of information are available in the world, but only few events leave a lasting impression. Attention is given only to those events which seem to be of importance to the recipients in the local context. Research about news values has shown that media select information according to the perceived importance of countries and actors, giving preference to economically powerful news “centers” over “peripheries”.<sup>21</sup> They also “domesticate” foreign events to create relevance for their audience<sup>22</sup>. The ‘periphery’ usually only receives coverage when spectacular pictures are available.<sup>23</sup> The studies described above have shown that in addition to distinctive national memories, there are a small number of key events that are named as important in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by a large proportion of respondents from countries around the world. Mostly these are events that touched the lives of many people worldwide, like the two World Wars. Therefore we examine the following last two hypotheses:

(H3) People’s memories of events which have taken place in other countries are presumably subject to patterns of subjective importance. Those historical events with a global scope presumably have the highest chances to be remembered by people in other countries. We expect people around the world to agree to a high extent on the most important political events of the last 100 years.

(H4) We assume that events that are remembered worldwide are mostly associated with politically and economically powerful regions. We will follow the hypothesis that Europe and North America have attracted most attention during the 20th century worldwide.

21 J. Galtung/M. Holmboe Ruge, The Structure of Foreign News. The Presentation of the Congo, Cuba and Cyprus Crises in Four Foreign Newspapers, in: *Journal of Peace Research* 2 (1965), pp. 64-91.

22 M. Gurevitch/M. R. Levy/I. Roeh, The global newsroom: convergences and diversities in the globalization of television news, in: *Communication and Citizenship. Journalism and the Public Sphere*, ed. by P. Dahlgren and C. Sparks. London 1997, pp. 195-216.

23 P. Rössler, Political Communication Messages. Pictures of Our World on Television News, in: *Comparing Political Communication. Theories, Cases and Challenges*, ed. by F. Esser and B. Pfetsch, Cambridge 2004, pp. 271-292.

### 3. Methods and data

In the survey, respondents were asked a total of 19 questions.<sup>24</sup> The online questionnaire contained a core series of three open-ended questions concerning historical events, followed by a second part with closed socio-demographic questions. The first open-ended item read: “Many political events have occurred during your lifetime. Please name the earliest political event that you can remember taking place.” This question aimed at what people today retrospectively construct as their first memory of political events, and the answers were expected to be strongly influenced by social narratives and media selection as well as by recent events.<sup>25</sup>

The next two questions asked people to attribute importance to historical events. First, respondents had to pick a current or very recent event: “Please name the political event that you consider most important since the year 2000.” With an expected high influence of mass media reporting, this is the least ‘historical’ of the open questions, giving us an indication of how respondents see current events in the new millennium. The last open question read: “Please name the three political events you consider most important in the last 100 years.” Now a longer period that went – in most cases considerably – beyond the life span of the respondents had to be evaluated, containing events only learned about from older relatives or media and in school.

We asked about political events for several reasons. This method excludes events of a personal (e. g. family) nature, it can be translated into foreign languages, and political events dominate media reports and history teaching in most parts of the world. For these advantages it had to be accepted that connotations and definitions of politics may vary and that people might be disinterested in politics.<sup>26</sup> The socio-demographic part of the survey covered questions like gender, year and country of birth, level of education and current country of residence.

The questionnaire was originally designed in German and then translated into 14 foreign languages to give as many people as possible the chance to answer in their native language.<sup>27</sup> The questionnaire was accessible online from April 1 to June 30, 2005. During this time, together with student researchers at the University of Leipzig, we created a network of multipliers which chiefly consisted of student organizations, universities and private contacts. People around the world were invited via email to take part in the survey. Additionally, respondents had the opportunity to recommend the survey via e-mail

24 Not all questions are reported or analyzed here. There was no time limit, but most respondents needed 10-15 minutes to complete the survey.

25 Cf. H. Schuman/W. L. Rodgers, *Cohorts* (fn. 8), esp. pp. 238-250, for ‘resurrected’ events and ‘memory vs. judgment’.

26 In this survey, the qualitative question of why people name a certain event could not be explored, especially for reasons of limited resources.

27 The 15 languages available were Arabic, Chinese (Mandarin), Czech, English, French, German, Hungarian, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, and Vietnamese.

to up to three friends with a standardized form after answering all the questions, creating a ‘snowball’ system of contacts.

Using an online survey has several disadvantages when compared to a face-to-face or telephone interview. There is little chance of controlling the answering conditions for the respondents, or ensuring that the socio-demographic data they give are more or less accurate. Unequal access to the internet in different world regions and social classes make a representative sample unlikely. On the other hand, internet users have access to vast amounts of information from around the world and thus become a logical target for the study of the possible effects of globalization on memories. The advantages of using the internet as the medium of contact outweigh the disadvantages for a project of this scope. The data is received in electronic format and the internet allows for quick networking and finding respondents in (theoretically) all countries of the world at very low communication costs.

In total, 5,431 people living in 116 countries completed the questionnaire. The distribution of respondents on the globe is far from even, with Latin America, Africa and large parts of Asia represented to a far lesser degree than Europe, North America and Australia/New Zealand. This is certainly due to our system of contacting respondents, limits in language skills for the recruiting of potential respondents, and also the ‘digital divide’. Not surprisingly, a disproportional number of respondents (2208 in total) grew up in Germany.<sup>28</sup> Most of our respondents have completed high school and often even attended university. As could be expected, the overall sample is not representative of the world population or the countries included. The age pattern of the sample reflects the networking strategy focusing on younger cohorts. The aggregated birth cohorts and sample sizes are: 1905–1949 (226 cases), 1950–1959 (349 cases), 1960–1969 (569 cases), 1970–1979 (2014 cases), 1980–1989 (2265 cases).

Drawing on standard reference sources, all answers were coded according to *type of event*, *location (country) of event*, *year of event*, and *person* (if mentioned). Approximately 160 *type of event* categories were created, some of them broader and some including only one frequently mentioned or specific event, like “9/11”, or the “Chinese Cultural Revolution”.

## 4. Results

### a. Regional perceptions of the most important historical events

Since we collected data on a global scale, we will start the analysis with a global view and then compare the patterns of historical memory between world regions. This analysis only includes respondents born between 1970 and 1989, as the large number of re-

28 Please refer to [http://www.globus05.net/total\\_responses.pdf](http://www.globus05.net/total_responses.pdf) for a detailed table of the location, age and gender of our respondents as well as the rate of migrants by country. Migration did not prove to have a significant effect on the memory of political events.

spondents belonging to this age group allows for the best international comparability.<sup>29</sup> Table 1 shows the five most frequent answers for each continent and gives the percentage of respondents who mentioned the event. It indicates strong worldwide similarities in the events from the 20th century remembered as important, confirming our hypothesis (H3).

As predicted, the focus is clearly on the World Wars, political violence and revolutions, with the different regions agreeing on four out of five most important events. World War II ranks highest and is mentioned by at least half of the respondents on each of the six continents. The explanation for this phenomenon is probably that this event is a truly global event, since it could be felt and often had far-reaching consequences for people around the globe. Additionally, the Second World War is still today commemorated regularly by national holidays, museums and military parades in many countries. The other three most important events, World War I, the 1989/90 end of communism and the 9/11 attacks vary in their importance, but are almost always included. Each region has one idiosyncratic event among its top 5 events.

As a second step, we want to investigate to what extent people on certain continents give importance to events on other continents. Our hypothesis (H4) assumes that Europe and North America – two economically and politically powerful regions – are given more importance than other continents. Table 2 only includes those events that were coded as non-worldwide. Worldwide events like the two World Wars, or the Cold War do not appear here, whereas e.g. the 1989/90 transformations are included as a European event and the 9/11 attacks are included as an event in North America. Continents always include the respondents' home countries, so many of the events on the 'home' continent actually concern national events.

Table 2 indeed shows a division between two groups of continents with regard to their worldwide perception as stages of important events. Europe is clearly the region mentioned most often; North America is mentioned to a high degree as well. Contrary to our assumption, Asia belongs to the group of highly salient continents as well. Most of the (non-worldwide) important political events named by the respondents have taken place on one of these three continents. Africa, even more so Latin America, and most extremely Oceania clearly play only a marginal role in the global memory.<sup>30</sup> Events that took place on a given continent are remembered to the highest extent by the population of that same continent, although this concerns mainly national events. We will now take a detailed look at the events from each continent that are remembered as important by people on other continents.

29 Age did not prove to be a good predictor of answers. World War II was a strongly represented event in all cohorts. Only the Russian Revolution and the Vietnam War were a clear preference of older resp. middle cohorts.

30 This again confirms the findings of Liu et al., *Social Representations* (fn. 17) and Pennebaker et al., *Social psychology of history* (fn.18), who document social representations of history that are markedly more Eurocentric than ethnocentric.



Table 1: Political events considered most important within the last 100 years (in %)

Includes respondents born 1970 to 1989.

	<i>Europe</i> (N = 2984)		<i>North America</i> (N = 299)		<i>Latin America</i> (N = 137)		<i>Africa</i> (N = 81)		<i>Asia</i> (N = 380)		<i>Oceania</i> (N = 187)	
1	WW2	65.8	WW2	56.2	WW2	50.4	WW2	49.4	WW2	54.5	WW2	52.9
2	1989/90	43.6	1989/90	35.5	1989/90	46.0	End of Apartheid	38.3	Foundation of a country	42.1	WW1	32.1
3	WW1	31.1	Cold war	19.1	Revolution	24.8	1989/90	24.7	1989/90	27.9	9/11 attacks	23.5
4	European Union	17.3	9/11 attacks	16.7	WW1	20.4	WW1	21.0	WW1	17.6	1989/90	23.5
5	Cold war	15.6	WW1	15.4	9/11 attacks	13.1	9/11 attacks	16.0	9/11 attacks	15.3	Women's rights movement	13.9

*Europe*, in the eyes of the rest of the world, has the role of the stage for the rise and fall of socialism. In our survey, Europe receives most of the global attention thanks to the Russian Revolution and the end of the Cold War, which is symbolized in many of the answers by the image of the “Fall of the Berlin Wall”. The only other historical episode mentioned frequently is Germany’s period of National Socialist rule under Adolf Hitler. Although we did not ask a specific question about important individuals in history, Hitler is the single most frequently mentioned person in answers from Europe, North America, Asia and Oceania, and he is the person most often mentioned overall.

*Table 2:*

*Intercontinental perception of regional political events of the last 100 years (in %)*

	Remember events that took place in					
	<i>Europe</i>	<i>North America</i>	<i>Latin America</i>	<i>Africa</i>	<i>Asia</i>	<i>Oceania</i>
Europe	79.3	11.2	1.7	3.0	11.9	0.0
North America	55.2	44.8	2.3	6.4	25.8	0.0
Latin America	67.9	25.5	30.7	2.9	21.2	0.0
Africa	38.3	18.5	0.0	60.5	29.6	0.0
Asia	44.2	20.3	1.1	2.1	69.2	0.0
Oceania	41.7	30.5	2.1	8.6	28.3	16.0

Gives percentage of respondents who named at least one “political event considered most important in the last 100 years” on the respective continent. Includes respondents born 1970 to 1989.

When speaking of *North America*, it has to be specified that practically all answers refer not to Canada but to the United States. And it has to be kept in mind that events were coded by the region where they took place; events which were initiated by the USA but took place elsewhere are therefore not included. As can be assumed after looking at Table 1, the dominating event that happened in the United States and is named by people on other continents in our survey are the 9/11 attacks. The second most frequently named event is the assassination of John F. Kennedy

*Latin America*, by contrast, did not play a noticeable role in the past 100 years for the majority of our respondents. Less than three per cent of the people that do not live in Latin America named a Latin American event as important. The only outstanding Latin American events are the Cuban missile crisis and the Bay of Pigs invasion. Both events are connected with the Cold War and the attention Cuba receives as an adversary of the United States.

We see a similar tendency for events that took place in *Africa*, which is chiefly remembered for the end of South African apartheid. It accounts for 51.4 per cent of all African events named by non-Africans. The diffuse event “Decolonisation” is the second most often-mentioned African event, named in 21.8 per cent of the non-African responses, and the genocide in Rwanda in 1994 ranks third at only 8.9 per cent.

In this survey, *Asia* is the most inward-looking continent apart from Europe, with almost 70 per cent of the Asian sample mentioning events on their own continent. But Asia also receives attention from about a quarter of the samples from each of the other continents, not fully confirming the predicted Eurocentric bias. The Asian events considered most important by people from other continents are the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of the Second World War, Ghandi’s fight for Indian national independence, the Chinese Revolution, the Vietnam War and conflicts in the Middle East.

*Oceania* is the most marginal continent in our survey concerning transcontinental perception. People from other world regions mention not one single political event from Oceania as most important during the past 100 years. Even the Oceanic population did not recall many important events in its past. Less than every fifth New Zealander or Australian names events that took place on this continent as one of the most important events during the last 100 years.

In sum, these results confirm the hypothesis that world regions are unevenly represented in the global memory. The spatial distribution of mentioned events seems to follow a logic of center and periphery, in which worldwide attention is mostly drawn by one half of the continents and the other half is neglected. The salience of Asian events in global memory is one of the surprises of this survey, but Asia is often remembered as the theater of events that were initiated by Western powers from the outside.

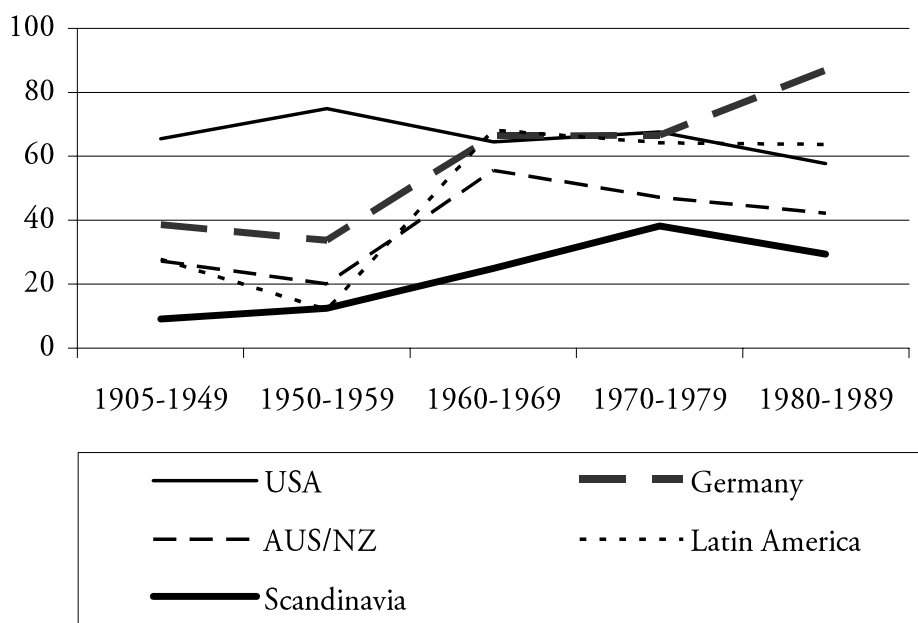
## b. Early media memories compared

So far we have looked at answers to the question about the three most important events of the last 100 years. Taking a different approach, we also wanted to know what people today retrospectively construct as their first memory of political events. We were mainly interested in whether the respondents would refer to clearly local and national events, or to events that took place abroad, with the hypothesis that younger people are more likely to recall foreign events. We expected the choice of events for each cohort to be as limited as in the 100-year question due to social and media pre-selection. Average recall peaked for events that occurred when the respondents were between 7 and 10 years old. Early political events were spread over a period ranging from age 2 to 19 though, suggesting a strong social influence on individual memory.

Figure 1 shows that younger people are not more likely to recall foreign events than older people. We had assumed that older cohorts might be more attached to a national narrative, while younger people would have had more contacts with and awareness of the rest of the world. If the hypothesis of an increasing globalization effect on younger cohorts were correct, the percentage of national events mentioned should decline with

every cohort. In some cases (like Germany) even the opposite seems to be true.<sup>31</sup> Despite small samples for the older cohorts, we can see that the location of the remembered event cannot be explained by year of birth. Rather, openness seems to depend on the country in which one has grown up and probably also learned about the event. In Scandinavian countries, a majority of respondents recalled events that did not take place their home country and that also stood in no direct relationship with the political situation in that country. Australians and New Zealanders, who are also hardly represented in the global memory of the last 100 years, are almost as likely as Scandinavians to mention events which did not take place in their home countries.<sup>32</sup> People from the United States on the other hand consistently recall mainly national events in all age groups, even though this number is declining for younger cohorts. Furthermore, a look at the foreign events mentioned by Americans reveals that from the Cuban missile crisis to the Iran hostage crisis, an average of around 70 per cent of all foreign events included direct U.S. foreign policy involvement. This portion of ‘American-made’ foreign events somewhat drops for the younger cohorts, depending on whether one wants to count the collapse of European socialism in 1989/90 as a decidedly American-influenced phenomenon or not.

*Figure 1: Respondents (by birth cohort) who named an event in their home country as earliest political event remembered (in %)<sup>33</sup>*



31 Events coded as global are not included in this graph. In the oldest cohort, the inclusion of the important event World War II in which the countries took part would add 10 to 20 per cent to the total percentage of national events in all countries.

32 Young people in China and India (not included in the graph) remember almost only national events that – with the notable exception of the Tiananmen Square massacre in Beijing – the rest of the world does not recall.

33 The category ‘Scandinavia’ includes results from Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden.

The types of earliest events remembered are chiefly dramatic, emotional moments of political change: wars, crises, elections, deaths and assassinations of politicians, scandals and meetings/negotiations of political leaders account for most of the answers. Perhaps, therefore, it is in smaller countries with little international weight that people tend to remember foreign events more often, because national events rarely seemed as dramatic or important to them as the developments in other countries. Yet the observation that some countries clearly appear to be more open and aware of foreign events than others only explains the general distribution of countries on the graph. It does not explain the drops and rises in recall of foreign events in the different cohorts that do not seem to follow a particular logic. Three points on the curves do suggest a plausible explanation, however. First, the birth cohort 1950–1959 shows the lowest values for the percentage of national events in all countries except for the United States, where it marks the highest value. This is due to what could be called the ‘Kennedy effect’. The assassination of President John F. Kennedy in 1963 is highly salient in the memories of that cohort not only in America, but in the whole world. Kennedy is the name most often mentioned in all the answers to the question of earliest political memory, and his assassination accounts for 26.3 per cent of the U.S. American answers from the cohort 1950–1959. In Germany, this value is still 26.1 per cent, and in Australia even 54.8 per cent. Despite the small worldwide sample we have for this cohort, people from over 20 countries, including India, South Africa and Brazil mentioned the violent death of John F. Kennedy as the first political event they can remember, so this is an event of truly global significance that had a world audience already in the early 1960s.

The second curious point in the graph is the peak of Scandinavian national memories for the cohort 1970–1979. Here, the deaths of politicians Olof Palme (Sweden, 1986) and Urho Kaleva Kekkonen (Finland, 1986) account for most of the rise in national events remembered. Although these events were briefly reported by the worldwide media, the rest of the world hardly recalls them.<sup>34</sup>

Third, the drop in national events in the youngest cohort is largely explained by the large amounts of people for whom the collapse of state socialism and the fall of the Berlin Wall were the first political memory. The fact that in Germany, birth cohorts stretching from 1970 to 1989 (with a peak from 1978 to 1985) remember the fall of the Berlin Wall as their first event again illustrates the importance of social forces that cause people’s memories to ‘cluster’ around one event. In Germany, 70.4 per cent of the cohort born 1978–85 mentioned the fall of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent German reunification. In the Czech Republic, 71.1 per cent mentioned the end of communism. For the same cohort in other countries, this event remains salient, but not nearly as dominant, accounting for only 38.5 per cent of the answers in France, 18.6 per cent in the United Kingdom, 16.7 per cent in Japan, 12.0 per cent in New Zealand and 3.8 per cent in India. This stark disparity in salience shows how global perceptions of the relevance even of a major

34 In this sense, Scandinavia is similar to India, where the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984 focused national attention, but the rest of the world hardly recalls it.

geopolitical event can differ. The events that marked the end of the Cold War are less evenly remembered around the world than the assassination of President Kennedy by the respectively relevant cohort.

So apart from the general propensity of people in a certain country to recall foreign events, the best explanation for the peaks and lows of the curves in the graph are given by the events themselves. Societies tend to turn their attention inwards when something spectacular happens on their territory. It seems that the importance attributed to the country in which the event happened determines whether people abroad will also recall the event. The extent of media reporting, background knowledge and a feeling of personal relevance are likely to influence the salience of memories of political events. Yet globalization and improved access to worldwide information have not made young people more aware of foreign events in general.

### c. The World since 2000

The global perception of the 9/11 terrorist attacks is of particular interest because this event directly affected a superpower, and because the narratives interpreting it have tended to stress global antagonisms. Most people's lives were not changed dramatically by this event, but still it ranks among the five most important events of the last 100 years in four of our six world regions (see *Table 1*). A variable comprising all terrorist activities<sup>35</sup> mentioned in our survey serves to test how terrorism ranks among the top events since the year 2000.

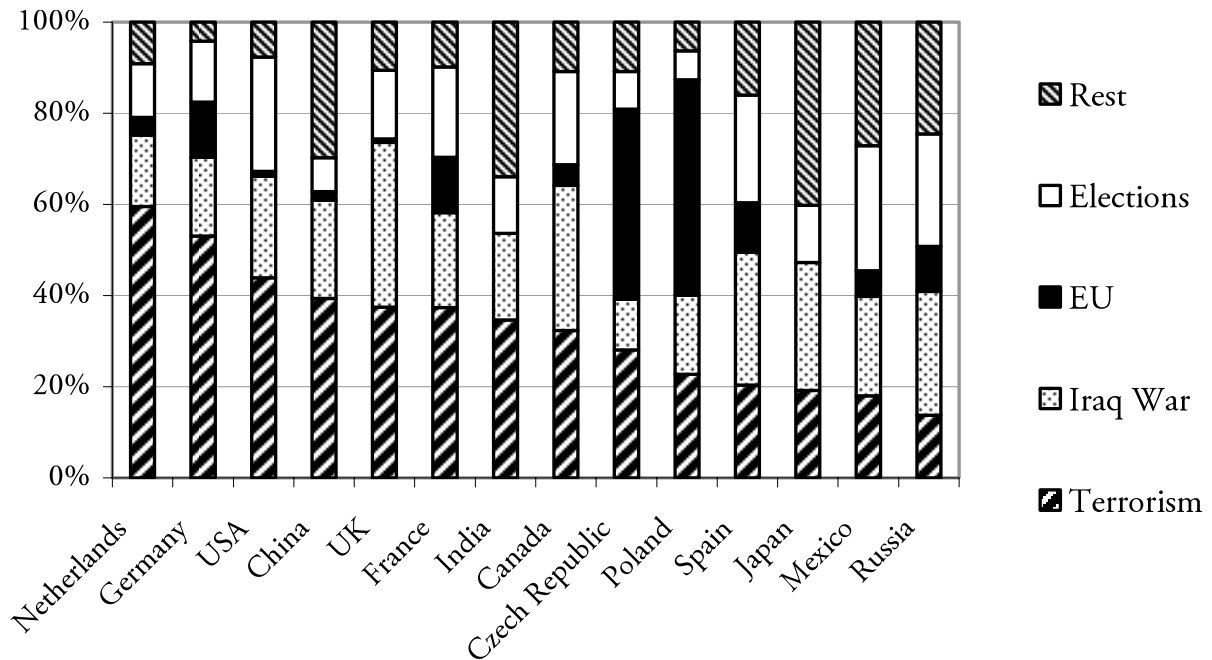
Figure 2 shows the most important events since the year 2000 from a European perspective, in the sense that European answers were taken as a guide to ordering the display in the graph. It shows that people who have grown up in the United States are not the only ones to feel that 9/11 was the most important event in recent years.

Three points have to be emphasized. First, there is no clear divide in the importance of terrorism that could be explained by a country's (geographical or cultural) proximity to the U.S. or its being a recent site of terrorist acts. Russia and Spain were both affected by shocking terrorist acts in 2004, but respondents from there do not mention these or other terrorist acts in more than 20 per cent of all cases. Respondents from these countries, like Japan or Mexico, are more concerned about the war in Iraq, which at least Japan and Spain also took part in. The second point to be emphasized is that two categories of events, terrorism and the war in Iraq, account for at least 40 per cent of the answers from all countries, and in some countries over 60 per cent. This demonstrates a very high salience in memories not necessarily of terrorism specifically, but definitely of global media events and concerns about U.S. foreign policy and America's place in the world.<sup>36</sup>

35 This refers almost exclusively to 9/11. Other terrorist acts were hardly mentioned in any country.

36 Ch. Bright/M. Geyer, *Where in the World is America? The History of the United States in the Global Age*, in: *Rethinking American History in a Global Age*, edited by Thomas Bender. Berkeley 2002, pp. 63-99.

Figure 2: Political events considered important since 2000 (in %)



Gives percentage of mentions in response to “Please name the political event you consider most important since the year 2000.” Cohort 1970–1989.

Adding the EU enlargement of 2004 and various national elections<sup>37</sup>, four categories cover 90 per cent of the answers from Europe, and still 60 per cent or more from outside Europe. The concentration on a few key events is very high. The third point, then, is the striking difference in the perception of the European enlargement in 2004. It is hugely important only in the new member countries, and is completely neglected in Asia and the United States. Even for most other European Union countries, the war in Iraq is much more important. This may be due to the rather abstract nature of the enlargement process for those not directly affected by it, but it also indicates how far Europe is from becoming a territory of shared memories and perceptions. The global role of the United States comes to mind much more quickly than the challenges the European Union faces.

## 5. Conclusion and outlook

There is a strong convergence of historical perceptions in different parts of the world, and a number of events can indeed be called part of a global memory. This global ‘canon’

37 This category also included more American events which were mentioned in many countries, especially the election of U.S. President George W. Bush in 2000/2004.

of events is comprised mainly of acts of political violence, like wars and revolutions. Yet world regions are very unevenly represented in world memory, and the only region mentioned by more than one third of the respondents on every continent is Europe. Additionally, many of the mentioned events that took place in other parts of the world also included Western powers on foreign soil, or are connected with the foreign policy of the United States during and after the Cold War. Africa, and even more so Latin America and Oceania hardly feature on the memory maps of our sample of the world population. We had assumed that events would be mentioned by people because they considered them relevant for their lives. Considering *distant* events relevant requires a 'globalized mind' that connects these events with one's personal situation. Narratives that give an event meaning and make it stick in a person's memory need to be available. This is relatively easy in the case of events that involve a global superpower.

The results of *Globus05* call for another or possibly several rounds of the survey in order to see how memories and attitudes change and events are re-evaluated. The surveys of Schuman and Rodgers<sup>38</sup> have shown that memories are re-evaluated over time – new events may take their place or old events can be 'resurrected' because recent occurrences have called an event back into memory. It should be very instructive to see how a recent event like 9/11, which has just received a worldwide re-assessment on its fifth anniversary<sup>39</sup>, will be remembered a few years from now. The collapse of state socialism in Central and Eastern Europe has already shown great volatility of salience in the memories of young people from regions not directly affected by this event. A further argument for repeating the *Globus* survey is the fact that globalization is a process, and change shows over time. Repeating the survey will also provide an opportunity for the further development of the methods for gathering responses through the Internet. Because of the low cost and global reach of the medium, the World Wide Web is an ideal tool for comparative empirical research on a global scale. The task for new round of the *Globus* survey would be to attract a larger, more representative sample of respondents from non-European countries.

So far, we have not been able to go beyond the simple identification of the events that people consider important. Since it is important to understand the subjective meaning an event has for the individual respondent, the next logical step would be to add a qualitative component to the world-wide comparative research. This can be done by altering the online questionnaire to accommodate open-ended questions that ask the respondent to give the reasons for mentioning certain events. Qualitative face-to-face-interviews in selected countries could also provide valuable insights into which narratives are behind the mentioned events. Schuman and Scott have shown that people from different age groups in the United States have different associations when they mention World War II as an important event.<sup>40</sup> Similar differences should also be observable between people

38 Schuman/Rodgers, Cohorts (fn. 8)

39 W. J. Dobson, The Day Nothing Much Changed, 2006, in: Foreign Policy September/October 2006, [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/story/cms.php?story\\_id=3546](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/story/cms.php?story_id=3546).

40 Schuman/Scott, Generations (fn.7), pp. 371-377.



living in different parts of the world. So qualitative research could add depth to the findings of the Globus05 survey and shed more light on the factors that potentially make our memories 'globalized'.