

How to Study a War

To understand how a culture understands its wars, you have to learn

1. the standard reference points for any war, and
2. a small number of key events, players, etc., that become code words in themselves -- moments that have been turned into reference points for the culture's thinking about its own history.

There is, therefore, not the war shared across a culture, but rather various histories or memories of war, some of which are "officially sanctioned" and others which come from more individual, possibly critical or traumatic, sites within society.

FOR ANY WAR, You need to know:

- * geographical location(s): country/ies, continent(s), city/ies (especially capitals), involved nations, and important map points. For example: rivers, mountain ranges of note, harbors or other landmarks of note (like 'Omaha Beach' for D-Day)
- * combatant nations, and their official politics: who supports whom in treaties, official politics, and interests. Why does the government of each support the war; do their arguments remain the same throughout the war?
- * "start date" and "end date" for each participant nation's war. That is, which event is arguably the trigger for what is now identified as the war (which may not be the start date for another country's version of the war); what is the closing act/treaty?
- * issues: why start it, what do you use as legal justification, why did this particular set of participants get drawn in, who is empowered to speak as negotiator, etc.

FOR EACH COUNTRY IN THE WAR, you need to have a sense:

- * what groups in the society support or do not support "the war effort"? Think of issues like age, ethnicity, race, income, gender, religion, region, and other demographic variables to define which groups might take on their own identities vis-à-vis the war. Different armed services and different industries might even have different opinions about the war.
- * its particular set of noteworthy events within the war (e.g. "The Blitz" in London in WW II). Remember that "noteworthy" is defined differently for each group involved. Thus, for example, WW II is remembered by Native Americans with reference to the Navajo "code talkers" who served in the Pacific Theater; by African-Americans, with reference to the Tuskegee Airmen.
- * the official politics that anchors these facts into a national ideology