

# TRANSMEMO

## The Sorrows of Belgium: WWII memories and family transmission

Contract - BR/175/A3/FINAL REPORT

### SUMMARY

Scholarly literature from different academic disciplines has repeatedly confirmed that the Second World War was the main divisive historical event that caused political, cultural and social conflict in 20th century Belgium, but also led to the creation of the French-speaking and Dutch-speaking communities as different communities of memory, reinforcing the (political, cultural) cleavages between both. By using the angle of family memory transmission, this interdisciplinary research investigates the creation and consolidation of both family and collective memories, the parallels between historical narratives of existing interviews and family memories among several generations, and the conditions for stimulating reconciliation processes between different groups with different memories.

Interviews with 194 participants from 77 different families of Dutch-(D) and French-speaking (F) linked either with the resistance (R) or the collaboration (C), in-depth individual and triadic interviews with three participating families and a quantitative survey among 922 French-speaking and Dutch-speaking Belgians of all generations confirm that the issue of collaboration during the Second World War still divides the Belgian society. Participants were particularly open and shared intimate parts of their life. Many participants indicated that they rarely (if not never) had the chance to discuss this family past at length with someone interested in their story. Follow-up interviews show that the TRANSMEMO project had a positive impact on its participants, whether by decreasing negative emotions or facilitating family transmission.

The results of the interviews underline the added value of a multilevel approach including history, psychology and political sciences in the understanding of the processes, consequences and content of complex collective memories related to the Second World War in Belgium.

### Psychological findings

In the general population, Dutch-speakers perceive collaboration as more moral and support amnesty of the former collaborators at a higher level than their Francophone counterparts. These attitudes were predicted by the social identification of participants.

With regards to our study within families linked to the resistance or to the collaboration, CD-participants held the belief that there was a strong repression against Dutch-speaking collaborators after the war and thus, that collaborators suffered a lot. Yet, such experiences of suffering were not part of their family narratives. RF-participants in general did not show patterns of cumulative heroization nor victimization. CF- family relationships played an important role in the way family stories are told and there is a connection between the way participants perceive their ancestor, how they acquire historical knowledge and their use of justifications to explain the events that transpired during the war. RF/RD memories are transmitted across more generations than expected, which suggests that the content of the memory and the role the memory might play in shaping family identity may matter. But the third generation did not have access to the retold memories of the oldest

generation, which suggests that communicative memory may have a shorter lifespan than the supposed 3 generations. The quality of the relationship between family members did not enhance or hinder the transmission of elaborate anecdotes. Regarding the function of these memories, war-related family stories support the creation of personal and family identity. RF/RD memories also serve a directive function at the collective level: knowing the family past helps to understand the way the world is today and guides how people should behave in the future. CF/CD memories serve more social functions as they help participants to better understand their families and the relationships between the different members.

### **Historical findings**

The historical analysis of this project yields two interrelated findings. First, it appears that this substantial source production and collection deserves to be further explored, both from a more documentary research perspective on families' experiences in war years and the period that followed, as well as from the analytical study of intergenerational memory transmission. The historical approach employs primarily a qualitative method, so the analysis is inevitably still premature due to time constraints.

Nevertheless, for the Flemish sample, a discourse analysis, in combination with the prosopographic data, already clearly shows that the political beliefs of the respondents are to a large extent co-responsible for the formation of their memories and evaluation of the war years. While this trend has been analyzed in depth for the Flemish collaborators, with a significantly identifiable correlation between the social frameworks of the family memory and the political instrumentalization and collective memory formation in the broader society, the research for the Flemish resistance fighters still needs to be further developed.

In French-speaking Belgium, the focus of the analysis lays upon a selection of resistance families. The broad conclusions contrast somewhat with the analysis of the Flemish sample since the general pattern in the transmission of family stories points to an increasing depoliticization according to the generation, as well as a decontextualization of the historical facts.