Visualising War and Peace: Teaching Children about the Second World War.

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An Introduction to Peace Education

The field of peace education addresses how we may build a future of global peace when our global history is filled with violence, war, and conflict. One proposal is to focus on the upbringing of the next generation. Educational psychologists note that socialisation by adults during childhood has lasting impacts on pro-social behaviour, and mechanisms for morally disengaged reasoning start to develop during childhood.[1] These findings indicate the importance of childhood as "the time when the seeds of peace and conflict are sown". Children will grow up to become leaders and policy makers, and purposefully educating future generations during their formative years may well encourage them to prioritise peace and moral courage, and advocate for alternatives to violence.[2]

Hymel and Darwich (2018) explore various techniques for fostering positive social-emotional development, and advocate for their incorporation in schools, such as by using cooperative learning structures in classroom activities and practising resolving conflicts peacefully.[3] Alternatively, McCorkle (2017) focuses on the specifics of the history curriculum rather than on 'soft skills'. The importance of how historical war is presented is accentuated, for example that the perceived justifications for war can impact visualisations of modern warfare.[4] McCorkle (2021) also details several potential pitfalls when teaching WWII, including portraying it as a war between good and evil, a lack of consideration for methods for conflict reduction, and war seeming unavoidable once diplomacy has not succeeded.[5]

Teaching war to children is therefore both important and complex, not to mention naturally sensitive due to the subject matter. What guidance, then, is given on how to approach teaching about war? What educational resources are provided to children, and what visualisations of war do they promote?

Teaching Historical vs Current War

There is an abundance of information advising how to talk to children about current wars, in particular the ongoing war in Ukraine. Copious online resources from news outlets, charities, and school websites offer advice about the emotional impact of learning about the Russo-Ukraine war. Resources emphasise active listening, creating a safe space where children can express their feelings and have them validated, and for checking-in on children following this initial conversation.[6] On the other hand, guidance for

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[1] Hymel and Darwich, *Building Peace Through Education,* pp. 345-357.
[2] Lombardo and Polonko, Peace Education and Childhood, pp. 182-203.
[3] Hymel and Darwich, *Building Peace Through Education,* pp. 345-357.
[4] McCorkle, *Problematizing war*, pp. 261-281.
[5] McCorkle, *Expanding Beyond World War II*, pp. 240-250.
[6] For a list of websites consulted in my review, see Bibliography, section 'Teaching Current War'.

how to teach about WWII focuses on subject content, omitting consideration of the potential emotional impacts of learning about war. Online educational websites such as BBC Bitesize, BBC Teach, and Keystage History dive straight into factual information, the only indication of consideration for the emotional impact being the division of information into target age groups.[7] Indeed, a closer examination is needed to verify whether this is due to potential emotional impact, or an increased level of detail. This varying treatment of approaching war in a historical versus current setting may suggest that there is an emotional distancing created by history, meaning that children experience less emotional distress when learning about WWII compared to the Russo-Ukraine war.

This also ties in with the sense of perceived threat that children feel when learning about the Russo-Ukraine war. Psychologists advocate for discussing the Russo-Ukraine war with children at home and school since, without guidance, children may exaggerate the dangers to themselves while filling in the blanks from what they have absorbed from the playground, news, or social media. Several resources accordingly suggest that adults reassure children by telling them that the war will not affect them, that their lives will go on as normal; a common suggestion is to show them a map of the world to illustrate how far away it really is.[8] Perhaps, then, geographical distance is analogous to historical distance. 'Historical distancing' may be interpreted as necessary to protect children; the intent is not to traumatise them. Nevertheless, there is a distinction between emotional distancing and a sense of perceived threat; even when children are reassured that the Russo-Ukraine war is of no threat to them, their emotional wellbeing solely from learning that others are experiencing war first-hand is considered. Considering that empathy is deemed an important component of peace education, the functioning of empathy while learning about historical war should be examined.

Furthermore, the prominent field of research into Holocaust education challenges this notion of historical distancing. There are several books and articles which consider the complexities of cultural memory and the most effective methods of approaching teaching, and an empirical study titled 'Teaching About the Holocaust in English Secondary Schools' (Kay et al., 2009) examined the practices employed in teaching the Holocaust in England.[9] Guidance for approaching the Holocaust is also available for UK teachers through the Holocaust Educational Trust, which offers free training workshops, and supplies booklets with comprehensive advice.[10] Although the Holocaust is undeniably immensely upsetting, and unprecedented as a deliberately orchestrated genocide by a nation state, the relative abundance of resources on approaching the Holocaust versus WWII might reveal that the lack of consideration for the emotional impact of historical war is not as simple as a distinction between past and present. Why, then, are there few resources for the emotional impact of learning about soldiers

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[7] See Bibliography, section 'Online Educational Resources for WWII'.
[8] See Bibliography, section 'Teaching Current War'.
[9] See Bibliography, section 'Holocaust Education'.
[10] Holocaust Educational Trust, 'Education'.

suffering and dying, or civilians being bombed? What does this suggest for what visualisations of war may be picked up by children? Are children specifically desensitised to the horrors of historical war, justifying them as being 'just a part of war'? Do children view soldiers' suffering as a necessary sacrifice to protect their country, rather than considering the individual costs involved?

Another contrast in the approach between teaching the Russo-Ukraine war and WWII is the significance given to challenging stereotypes and potential opportunities for nationality discrimination. Numerous resources offering advice on teaching the Russo-Ukraine war emphasise the importance of distinguishing between Russian leadership and the general population, and encourage teachers to challenge anti-Russian sentiments by including information about how the Russian populace are being harmed by sanctions, and the thousands of Russians who have protested.[11] On the other hand, there are no 'Teacher's Guides' on educational websites for WWII which highlight the importance of discouraging anti-German ideology.[12] Some nuance is implicitly encouraged, such as describing Hitler's manipulation of the German population through propaganda, and the resistance of some German citizens by continuing to buy from Jewish-owned businesses.[13] Nevertheless, this does not appear to be a priority for teachers to highlight to children; as nuance is encouraged for the Russo-Ukraine war, the reason for this cannot be that children aren't deemed to be capable of understanding nuance. Is it assumed that children will distinguish between past and present, and not develop any contemporary anti-German sentiments? Or is it assumed that the 'blame' is assigned only to Hitler, and that this won't extend to the population?

Overall, there are some distinctions between the approaches in teaching historical and current war indicated by resources available for teaching the Russo-Ukraine war and WWII, which may promote different visualisations of war. The reasonings and assumptions behind these distinctions should be further discussed and disputed, to conclude on the best practice models to integrate peace education into teaching about historical war.

War and Peace Museums

Museum visits are commonly utilised during school trips to complement classroom learning. The use of artefacts, eyewitness testimonies, and activities produce a unique and memorable learning opportunity. The Imperial War Museum additionally has online learning resources including photos and descriptions of some of their collections, enabling remote access to the 'essence' of the museum learning experience.[14] This element may be particularly useful when accounting for schools that do not have access to museums in-person, whether for geographic, financial, or indeed pandemic reasons.

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[11] See Bibliography, section 'Teaching Ukraine'.
[12] See Bibliography, section 'Teaching WWII'.
[13] BBC Bitesize, 'Persecution of Jews in Germany, 1933-1939' and 'The rise of Hitler and the Nazis'.
[14] Imperial War Museum, 'Learning Resources: Second World War'.

However, here the focus will be on visits to museums that are targeted at schools: how is teaching about war approached in a museum setting?

Available at Imperial War Museum London are self-guided visits to the Second World War Galleries and Churchill War Rooms.[15] Centring on museum resources targeted specifically at schools, the London and North branches both have 'learning sessions' regarding the Holocaust. A further pattern between the branches is the 'We Were There' sessions, which are offered at IWM London, Duxford, and North.[16] Children meet with veterans and eyewitnesses from the Second World War to the present day, enabling them to understand the impact of war on individuals, on a micro rather than macro scale.[17] The level of the individual is also highlighted at IWM North with 'Second World War Loan Boxes', which contain items inspired by WWII.[18] Engagement with these boxes is left to the discretion of the teachers, whereas with the 'We Were There' sessions, teachers are advised to brainstorm questions for the eyewitnesses with their pupils, as well as to consider the advantages and disadvantages of talking to eyewitnesses compared to using other sources.

Perhaps the most distinctive 'learning session' offered by IWM is the 'Documentary Challenge', wherein children explore a gallery and record a documentary about conflict. Children are instructed to consider three main elements: authenticity, human stories, and relevance to today. They are encouraged to go beyond stating facts and figures, to consider who and how people were affected. Significantly, the 'Documentary Challenge' encourages children to consider narratives about war, why certain elements have been preserved and remembered by history, and what story *they* want to tell. The instruction sheet encourages independent and creative thought, and to think about the potential consequences of the dissemination of their documentary, including the reactions and attitudes that their audience may have.[19]

The descriptions IWM's 'learning sessions' all have sections outlining clear links to the National Curriculum, demonstrating the value for teachers to use museums to supplement classroom learning. Likewise, Bradford Peace Museum provides lists of National Curriculum links alongside each workshop description. The school subjects linked to by each museum are similar, such as History and Citizenship, although Bradford Peace Museum also links to promoting fundamental values through SMSC (spiritual, moral, social, and cultural development). This indicates an underlying difference in approach between war and peace museums; the latter prioritise the nurturing of peaceful thinking. For example, the workshop 'Everyone Comes From Somewhere' explores the history of Bradford as a place welcoming of refugees, in particular through the story of a nine-year-old Jewish boy who was part of

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[15] Imperial War Museum, 'Churchill War Rooms' and 'Second World War Galleries'.
[16] Imperial War Museum, 'We Were There: Ask Questions about Conflict'.
[17] The sessions have two eyewitnesses to conflict; where possible, one of the eyewitnesses will have experienced WWII as a child.
[18] Imperial War Museum, 'Second World War Loan Boxes'.
[19] Imperial War Museum, 'Documentary Challenge'.

the Kindertransport.[20] Apsel identifies that "peace history is to a great extent unknown and hidden", and commends Bradford Peace Museum for "identifying and documenting the lives and activities of peacemakers…that would otherwise be lost."[21]

Although visualisations of peace can be produced while learning about war, curricular materials gravitate towards warfare rather than peacemakers.[22] Furthermore, schools in England are heavily influenced by the National Curriculum, as this determines performance in league tables; since peace education is not part of the National Curriculum, it is not prioritised by teachers.[23] Indeed, Bradford Peace Museum is the only accredited peace museum in the UK. Does this reflect a lack of demand, as schools are under too many timetabling restraints to visit? Though, schools are not the sole target audience of museums; does this reflect the lacking influence of peace education in the UK? In any case, peace museums are particularly useful in peace education, and the creation of further peace museums would likely promote peaceful thinking to children. Furthermore, a research project conducted by Bradford Peace Museum and Royal Armouries found that "sites such as the Imperial War Museum North do not teach sensitive histories to children younger than Year 5 as they do not want to have to dilute the information given".[24] Peace museums could be a viable alternative for younger children to learn about peace, when learning about the terrible aspects of war is too emotionally disturbing.

Both war and peace museums provide a uniquely engaging learning experience which supplements classroom learning. However, the significance of peace museums is, as yet, understated, and could play a key role in future peace education.

Horrible Histories

Moving outside of an explicitly educational setting, the goal of CBBC's TV Series *Horrible Histories* was to show children "the sides of history they don't teach you in school".[25] Based on the homonymous book series by Terry Deary, *Horrible Histories* celebrated enormous success, being nominated for and winning numerous awards.[26] What visualisations of war and peace can be extrapolated from *Horrible Histories*?

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of *Horrible Histories* is its wholehearted devotion to humour. The episodes are filled with comedy sketches and parodies of songs and TV shows, each of which focus on a particular historical era or event. Although undoubtedly entertaining, what visualisations of war does

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[20] Bradford Peace Museum, 'School Programme'.
[21] Apsel, Joyce, *Introducing Peace Museums*, p.57.
[22] Finley, *How Can I Teach Peace When the Book Only Covers War?*, pp. 150-165.
[23] Behr, Hartmut, Nick Megoran, and Jane Carnaffan, *Peace education, militarism and neo-liberalism.*
[24] Johnson, Shannen, and Emily Elsworth, *War and Peace: Researching how sensitive issues are approached in museum learning*.
[25] IMDb, 'Horrible Histories'.
[26] IMDb, 'Horrible Histories: Awards'.

this use of black comedy promote? The premise of the show necessitates that dark historical events are made light of, but should this form of comedy be off-limits? As considered in the first section of this essay, the emotional impact of war is considered predominantly only when the war is current. Does the same apply to comedy? It seems reasonable to assume that many would take offence at jokes directed towards the Ukraine conflict; following this assumption, does the lack of controversy surrounding *Horrible Histories'* dark comedy imply a widespread emotional distancing from historical events?[27]

Furthermore, does the joking about war encourage children to distance themselves from the events of war, decreasing their empathy for those involved in WWII? One sketch showed German soldiers attempting to keep warm at Stalingrad, including wearing boots from dead Russians that needed the legs thawing out.[28] This provides children with an insight into the grim and despondent conditions of war; however, the comedic portrayal downplays the suffering that the men faced. This decreases the effectiveness of this information being a discouragement of war, as comedy may form an emotional barrier between the children consuming the TV series and the men who suffered at Stalingrad. Alternatively, comedy may be constructive in communicating disturbing information to children. Comedy may act as a buffer, enabling the terrible parts of war to be communicated to children without causing great upset; humour may be a more child-friendly way to make 'anti-war' sentiments accessible to children.

Another problem with the overwhelming use of comedy is that the show does not give a comprehensive account of the historical periods which it covers, since "the point, from the outset, was…this was a comedy show based on history, not a history show with a bit of humour grafted on.".[29] The method of the show's writing involved finding parts of history that could be made into jokes, rather than the focus being on educational value; it is logical to conclude that attention was not paid to the distribution of which elements of WWII were included.[30] Which elements, then, *are* included, and what visualisations of war do they promote?

Notably, the show has a British bias. There are numerous sketches about British civilian life, covering topics such as rationing, children evacuees, British blackouts, and the role of women – whereas there are only three sketches (out of forty-four) which cover the German civilian perspective.[31] Additionally, both of the songs about WWII – arguably the most memorable part of the show – are from a British perspective, covering the British RAF and 'WWII Girls'.[32] Furthermore, only eight sketches mention the involvement of countries that are not Britain and Germany, which may encourage the reductive

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[27] Noteworthy is that *Horrible Histories* has no sketches about the Holocaust; either this topic was deemed off-limits, or due to the comedic nature of the show, humour could not be found in something so atrocious.
[28] BBC iPlayer. 'Horrible Histories Series 2: Episode 8'.
[29] The Guardian, 'How Horrible Histories became a huge hit'.
[30] British Comedy Guide, 'Horrible Histories'.
[31] List of sketches available at Horrible Histories Wiki, 'Woeful Second World War (Sketches).
[32] BBC iPlayer, 'Horrible Histories Series 4: Episode 1' and 'Horrible Histories Series 2: Episode 4'.

sentiment of good vs evil. However, the show does distinguish between political leaders and citizens. The HHTV News segment recounting the timeline of WWII clearly assigns blame for the war on Hitler as an individual, while the three sketches on German civilian life (covering the Hitler Youth, Berlin Housewife cooking, and the Great Depression) respectively create sympathy for German civilians.[33] Furthermore, the sketches do not exclusively present the British as heroes. For example, sketches about the British Home Guard show them as unprepared and clumsy.[34]

Humour also enables the presentation of battle tactics without glorification. In particular, three sketches feature in the show's 'Dodgy War Inventions/Machines' recurring segment, which depict failed battle tactics, detracting from any notion that war tactics are 'cool'.[35] Nevertheless, *Horrible Histories* sometimes falls into the problem of "presenting war as a chess game, which focuses on the macro strategies rather than individual lives lost".[36] Churchill refuses to sleep, questioning, "How can we sleep when we need to plan the D Day landings, the greatest single day waterborne invasion of all time?".[37] This detracts from the aims of peace education, as the focus is on Churchill's genius and impressive scheme rather than on the resulting casualties.

This presentation of Churchill is especially problematic during a sketch in which Chamberlain and Churchill argue over whether Hitler should be appeased. Once Churchill's insistence that Hitler is planning an invasion comes true, his assertion that "war is the right choice" is implied to similarly be true.[38] Children may infer that war is the only option when dealing with people who refuse to co-operate; if anything, the sketch implies that Britain's mistake was not just immediately declaring war, as Chamberlain looks like a fool for trusting Hitler would keep his word to not invade any further. Additionally, although it may be considered outside the scope of a comedy show, there is no exploration of how conflict could have been reduced or avoided. In fact, the possibility for peace can be inferred as impracticable. At the end of the HHTV segment recounting the timeline of WWII, the presenter rapidly shifts from encouraging the audience to "give peace a chance" to accidentally pricking himself on a bunch of white roses, and declares war once the roses 'refuse' to apologise to him.[39] On the one hand, this shows how the reasonings for war are often nonsensical and unjustifiable. On the other, this suggests that war is inevitable due to human nature, suggesting humans have a propensity for anger and vengefulness.

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[33] BBC iPlayer, 'Horrible Histories Series 5: Episode 7', 'Horrible Histories Series 1: Episode 12', 'Horrible Histories Series 4: Episode 7', and 'Horrible Histories Series 5: Episode 8'.
[34] BBC iPlayer, 'Horrible Histories Series 2: Episode 1'.
[35] BBC iPlayer, 'Horrible Histories Series 2: Episode 8', 'Horrible Histories Series 4: Episode 4', and 'Horrible Histories Series 5: Episode 2'.
[36] McCorkle, *Problematizing war*, p. 269.
[37] BBC iPlayer, 'Horrible Histories Series 2: Episode 4'.
[38] BBC iPlayer, 'Horrible Histories Series 5: Episode 11'.
[39] BBC iPlayer, 'Horrible Histories Series 5: Episode 7'.

The use of comedy in *Horrible Histories* has advantages and disadvantages which should be taken into account when producing entertainment media for children. Analysing *Horrible Histories* is particularly interesting, as a hybrid, in-between media created primarily for educational purposes, and media that is purely entertainment.

Conclusions

Using principles and findings from the field of peace education, this project has examined how teaching war to children is approached in various settings, and what visualisations of war and peace these methods may promote.

Firstly, the distinction in approach between teaching historical and current war, along with the fact that making jokes about WWII in *Horrible Histories* is deemed appropriate, suggest that there is an emotional distancing regarding historical war. The reasoning behind this distinction, as well as the resulting effects on key mechanisms of anti-war ideology such as empathy, could be considered.

Secondly, an investigation into museum resources targeted at schools has revealed the ways in which children can be treated as independent thinkers while learning about war. A further analysis of war and peace museums could compare the approaches, and resulting impacts, in more detail. Additionally, the role of peace museums in peace education is thus far understated. An international consideration of peace museums could reveal the specific motivations for the founding of peace museums, and whether it is just the UK that lacks peace museums, or if it is a global deficit.

Thirdly, an analysis of *Horrible Histories* has demonstrated the potential visualisations of war and peace that may arise from media created with no consideration for peace education, with the aim of education secondary to entertainment. Expanding beyond the 'Woeful Second World War' segments would provide a more complete understanding of the advantages and disadvantages of using humour while teaching about conflict and violence.

Finally, while this research project has suggested avenues for future inspection, it is limited by speculative reasoning. Surveying or interviewing children who have engaged in learning about historical and current war, visited war and peace museums, and watched *Horrible Histories*, would be beneficial in verifying the accuracy and extent of these inferences. This, in turn, would help in informing best practice models for approaching teaching war.

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