The story of the nation in wartime: U.S. and Canadian history teachers teach World War II

Faden, L. Y.
In press
in (Re)Building Memory: School Textbooks, Identity, and the Pedagogies and Politics of Imagining Community, ed. by J. Williams. Amsterdam: Sense.

Abstract

This chapter examines the enacted curriculum of World War II history in required Canadian and U.S. high school history classes. Canada and the United States offer an interesting basis for comparison, as they have similarities in geography and economic structures, and both bear the historical legacy of British colonialism. However, the two countries have very different civic and political cultures, making the representation of the nation in each country a rich avenue for comparison. This study of the presentation of World War II in high school history classes investigates how the historical narratives of wartime reflect the different stances that Canada and the U.S. have towards military power and their respective positions in the community of nations.

Findings indicated that history teachers’ views of the nation contradict popular and scholarly accounts of national culture (e.g., Hardwick, et al, 2010; Kaufman, 2009; Lipset, 1990, 1996). Canadian teachers took a patriotic stance towards teaching national history that celebrated heroic military action. U.S. teachers expressed ambivalence towards the nation and focused on diplomatic and political developments. In both the Canadian and the American classrooms, little attention was paid to larger ethical questions about the conduct of war.

This research has received support from SSHRC and OGS.