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The phrase. But this reinvented cultural memory doesn’t reflect the people wetting themselves with fear when the air-raid siren sounded. It’s very hard to talk about bad memories, and it’s much easier, indeed quite seductive, to adopt the publicly acceptable cultural memory rather than the repressed fears of the individual.”

Related research on the First World War led to Dr Noakes’ involvement as co-investigator in one of five AHRC-funded public engagement centres in conjunction with the Heritage Lottery Fund. The aim of the UK Gateways to the First World War co-ordinating centre is to provide support for community projects that bring together academics and members of the public through research and commemoration of the war at its centenary. “The centre directly supports community groups funded by a range of HLF programmes, particularly through its new £6m First World War: Then and Now community grants scheme,” said Dr Noakes.

Activities organised through the Gateways project include talks, open days and study days to help understand the legacies of conflict and the process of commemoration, and to support this practice within local communities. The Gateways project, which will also provide research training, and link with schools and education projects, advises on sources and archival work, as well as creating opportunities for reflection on what it means to commemorate the centenary of the First World War.

Graham Dawson, Professor of Historical Cultural Studies in the College of Arts and Humanities has explored the ways in which individuals and communities deal with the past within conflict resolution processes, and his widely respected work has resonance with Dr Noakes’ current research. Professor Dawson’s work is about composing a narrative notion of the experiences of the past, helping to make us feel composed about the present. Individual narratives might be factually flawed, our memories unreliable, but our narratives are composed to help us deal with the sometimes difficult and traumatic, or perhaps just inconvenient, memories that are hidden away.

One interview with a veteran of the Dunkirk evacuation included a mass of detail from geographically dispersed places and from a series of events that no one individual experienced. It became clear that he had constructed his narrative from films and documentaries, despite the fact that he had experienced the evacuation himself at first hand. “I think we use these public images as a way of giving voice to our experiences in a publicly acceptable way,” said Dr Noakes. “We want to claim our part in the big public events of our time, but we try and do so in a way that conforms to the accepted narrative.”

With a wide range of applied and interdisciplinary research across the humanities aiming to understand war and political violence, University of Brighton academics are helping to create the tools that can one day be used to intervene and prevent future violence.

From the Troubles in Northern Ireland to Apartheid-era South Africa, and from the Balkans in the 1990s to England in the 1940s, academics at the University of Brighton are helping to understand violent conflict and its effects on those who survive it.

“Those who cannot remember the past, are condemned to repeat it.” Spanish philosopher George Santayana’s insight has particular resonance for a group of researchers from across the arts, humanities and social sciences, who are focusing on the ethical and political justifications of violence, and the way in which cultures deal with their experiences and fear of conflict.

Cultural and social historian Dr Lucy Noakes from the College of Arts and Humanities engages with the relationship between the social and cultural history of war and the cultural memory of warfare in post-war societies. She has recently explored the impact of wartime death on the psychic, geographic and cultural landscapes of post-World War Two Britain, finding shifting ground as cultural memories evolve.

“Waritime propaganda of the ‘chirpy cockney’ endured for decades and influences cultural memory today,” said Dr Noakes. “The notion of ‘we’re all in it together’ is a valuable political trope still in use – nowadays to describe austerity rather than the Home Front – but in the 1940s there was a stronger reality attached to the phrase. But this reinvented cultural memory doesn’t reflect the people wetting themselves with fear when the air-raid siren sounded. It’s very hard to talk about bad memories, and it’s much easier, indeed quite seductive, to adopt the publicly acceptable cultural memory rather than the repressed fears of the individual.”

Photographs: The British Airborne Division at Arnhem and Oosterbeek in Holland. O’Brien (Lieut). © IWM