



Article

Social Representations of the War in Italy during the Russia/Ukraine Conflict

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Abstract: Social representations of the war, anchored in historical experience and cultural values, play a motivational role in justifying collective behavior. Following Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the research delves into the meanings associated with war through a social representation approach. Employing Doise's sociodynamic approach, researchers identify the semantic field linked with war and analyze its organizing principles, revealing the variability of representations. In total, 313 Italian participants (female = 241, 75.4%; age range = 18–74) completed a questionnaire featuring a free association task with the word “war”, providing demographic and political and religious orientation data. Lexical correspondence analysis, utilizing Spad-t software, highlights three polarized themes: the emotional dimension aroused by war, media-conveyed imagery, and the underlying causes of conflict. The social anchoring analysis projects variables such as gender and political orientation onto a factorial plane. Finally, cluster analysis dissects psychological anchoring, identifying four distinct groups characterized by their descriptions of war: effects, reasons, emotions, and images. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

Keywords: social representation; war; psychological anchoring; social anchoring; Russia; Ukraine; conflict



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1. Introduction

While the study of people's lay understanding of war and peace has a longstanding tradition in social sciences (e.g., Wagner et al. 1996; Sarrica and Contarello 2004), the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has pushed Europeans to confront with the largest attack on a European country since World War II and with the unforeseen consequences of such conflict. Out of a population of 41 million, it has been estimated that approximately 8 million Ukrainians have been internally displaced, and another 8 million were forced to flee the country before April 2023. Between February 2022 and May 2023, approximately 5 million (mostly women and children) Ukrainians were relocated to other European countries, and of them, 175,000 were relocated to Italy (OpenPolis 2023).

Besides the emotional storm it has unleashed, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has sparked a major debate on its geopolitical, historical, and economic causes and on the position to adopt in the face of the conflict at the individual, national, European, and global levels.

This debate has permeated all spheres of our daily lives, both in interpersonal relations and at a collective level; for example, discussions between family members, friends, acquaintances, and work colleagues, but also the debates that have developed in all types of media (e.g., television, press, radio, social media). According to the analysis of the discourse of one of the biggest Italian media outlets, *Corriere della Sera*, the acute stage of the conflict is described by a white-and-black dichotomy between the collective West and Russia. Moreover, when analyzing the anti-Russian economic sanctions, a negative

linguistic representation of Russia emerged, and the justification of the severe economic sanctions led to the creation of a strong enemy image (Asmyatullin 2022).

Over the last few years, Italian populist parties have had links to the Putin regime. Suffice it to point out the long personal friendship between Silvio Berlusconi and Vladimir Putin. However, the Russian invasion and the extensive popular and institutional support for Ukraine have changed everything, leading populist parties to review their positions and their discourse (Guerra 2023). As regards the right-wing coalition, Meloni (the leader least compromised by Russian ties) used the war to gain credibility at the international level and to moderate her image to get to the government. Other Italian populist parties voted in favor of sanctions and the sending of weapons as part of both the Draghi and Meloni administrations. Moreover, all the right-wing populist parties, which typically take a hard line against immigration, welcomed Ukrainian refugees (Biancalana 2023).

Concerning public opinion, Italians generally blame Russia for the invasion and express support for Ukraine, as 80% of citizens say they favor welcoming Ukrainian refugees (Freyrie 2022).

For all those reasons, we find it more interesting than ever to analyze the topic of war within the framework of social representation theory (Moscovici 1961) at a historical moment in which war arrogantly reappears at the gates of Europe, and a number of refugees were relocated in Europe.

The social representation theory (SRT; Moscovici 1984, 1988) provides a holistic stance from which to understand processes of meaning-making that take place within social groups. SRs are systems of knowledge or forms of common sense that people use to make sense of the world around them and act accordingly. They are built during everyday interaction, when people interact through gossip, discuss different issues, read newspapers, watch TV, and scroll social media. In this sense, SRs are intrinsic to everyday conversation and allow for the construction of shared pictures of the world (Moscovici 1961). SRs are formed when groups of individuals are faced with a new object of knowledge (which is relevant and which generates a great dispersion of information, often insufficient, ambiguous, and contradictory to each other) towards which they must take a position (Moscovici 1961). Even if the theory has been widely criticized during the last 30 years for a number of reasons, such as its theoretical ambiguity (e.g., Rätty and Snellman 1992; Voelklein and Howarth 2005), the SR approach has become a widespread method for studying common-sense knowledge in different social groups (Sammut et al. 2015). For instance, the theory has allowed for the study of the “folk science”, which is the popularization of scientific ideas such as conception (Wagner et al. 1995) and also the social perception of outgroups such as Roma women (e.g., Bonomo et al. 2013, Pivetti et al. 2017; Melotti et al. 2023) and the social representations of robots (Brondi et al. 2021).

Over the years, various authors have developed numerous approaches to the study of SRT: the Content-oriented approach, the Structuralist approach, and the Sociodynamic approach.

1.1. The Content-Oriented Approach

The paradigmatic example of this approach is Moscovici's (1961) study on the RS of psychoanalysis in the French press. The main focus of this approach is on the content of RS. In this perspective, the researchers' focus is mainly on the objectification of RS, paying little attention to the anchoring process.

More recently, researchers of this orientation have shown a growing interest in researching Themata (Moscovici and Vignaux 1994), defined as basic semantic units in common sense thinking, often express an opposition (e.g., war-peace, good-bad, man-woman) and are often rooted in culture and transmitted through language, communication, and common sense from generation to generation (Markovà 2015, 2017).

1.2. The Structuralist Approach: The Central Core Theory

The structuralist approach, with the central core theory, sets out to analyze the structure of RS in an attempt to understand the structure of objectified and shared knowledge and

how it can change over time (Abric 1987, 1994; Flament 1989, 1994; Moliner 1994, Guimelli 1994; Rouquette and Rateau 1998; Vèrges 1992). According to this approach, RSs are socio-cognitive structures consisting of two elements: the core and the peripheral elements. The central core is the fundamental and necessary element for the production of RS, the non-negotiable part of RS, without which it would not exist at all, while the peripheral elements are the variable elements of RS that may depend on the characteristics of individuals and social groups and the context in which they are located.

1.3. The Sociodynamic Approach

The sociodynamic approach considers SRs as modern forms of common sense, real theories of common sense. In this perspective, Doise (1986) defined SR as generative position principles linked to specific social insertions. The individual is an actor socially inserted in a context that is characterized culturally, socially, historically, as well as physically. He/She participates in interpersonal relations and communicative exchanges and belongs to groups. Social insertion indicates a positioning of the individual that takes into account the interdependence between social roles, situations, and context. Emiliani and Molinari (1995) state that social insertions are the point of origin for the construction of SR. The authors define SR as organizing principles of stances governed by the social insertions of belonging and relations with socially meaningful objects. SR would thus be the articulation and structuring of ideas, concepts, and theories on the basis of specific social insertions of the subjects producing them in a specific context.

The sociodynamic approach is particularly interested in the genesis and transformation of SR and how social actors elaborate and organize their knowledge of reality. Thus, the analysis of the anchoring process of the anchoring of the RS in the social sphere, i.e., how the group of individuals producing the SR brings it back into a network of known categories, becomes central (Doise 1992).

On the methodological level, Doise et al. (1992) offered some indications that are very useful in order to analyze SR from a sociodynamic perspective:

1. The first step is to reconstruct the common “mental map”, which is the shared content of the object of social representation;
2. Secondly, it is necessary to identify the organizing principles of the subjects’ individual stances with respect to the shared content of the RS (psychological anchoring);
3. Lastly, it is necessary to highlight the intergroup differences (social anchoring) and the psycho-social anchoring linked to the subjects’ different social insertions. This means trying to identify those organizing principles that underlie the process of transforming individual differences into intergroup differences.

1.4. Studies on the Social Representation of War

The SRT has been proficiently used as a bridge to investigate the lay understanding of peace and war for over 20 years (e.g., Gibson 2012; Sarrica 2007).

In the framework of central core theory, we can cite the work of Wagner et al. (1996), Sarrica (2007), and Sarrica and Wachelke 2010.

Wagner et al. (1996) investigated the structure of word associations for war and peace in Spain and Nicaragua. Results showed the existence of substructures or stable cores for the word “war” in both countries. Stable cores were composed of “hot” words, i.e., words close to the individual experience such as “death”, “hunger”, “poverty”, and “destruction”. In contrast, peripheral words reflect more distanced or intellectual thoughts about war, being the results of more refined intellectual thinking such as “politics”, “economy”, “power”, and “armaments”.

Sarrica (2007) compared the SR of peace and war (and conflict) in 2004 and 2005 in a sample of Italian university students. Results showed that the SR of war was stable in time. It was focused mainly on images of “death” and “blood” and was structured around three main features: concrete objects and tangible images, negative consequences, and negative feelings. In contrast, peace was represented in terms of ideals, interpersonal relations, and

metaphors. Those results paralleled those collected in 2009 among a sample of Italian teenagers, with the representation of war being found as stable and associated with the idea of destruction, both at the material and moral level (Sarrica and Wachelke 2010).

In sum, previous studies (e.g., Sarrica and Wachelke 2010) adopting the structuralist or “central core” approach to the study of SR (Abric 1994) have shown that the SR of war was stably structured around the concept of death, blood, and emotions such as hate.

Other research has been conducted following the sociodynamic approach (Sarrica and Contarello 2004; Bouchat et al. 2019).

Sarrica and Contarello (2004) compared the representations of war and peace in a sample of peace activists and a sample of common (non-activists) people via a free association task. Data analysis using the software SPAD-T showed that the SR of war was different in the two groups, with non-activists seeing it as frightening and peace activists as a way of addressing the conflict. Non-activists assimilated the conflict to war, whereas activists represented it as more manageable. Those results support the idea of understanding peace activism as a form of group copying, enabling individuals to manage a threatening social object such as war.

Bouchat et al. (2019) explored the SRs of armed conflicts among 1347 undergraduate students from 10 European countries, including the main European actors of World War I (WWI), such as France, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom. They investigated the SRs of World War I via a free association task. Results revealed the existence of seven lexical classes, three of which focused on places and actors of the war, whereas three others highlighted negative emotions, and one was specific to the Serbian sample. The six classes were shared across the whole sample, indicating the presence of a shared representation of the war. Moreover, the study related pacifist attitudes with SRs of peace, with high levels of pacifist attitudes being linked with negative evaluations of the war and a focus on its concrete negative consequences.

Hewer (2012), in a reflection on the concepts of peace and conflict from a sociodynamic perspective, highlights the connection between ideology, representations, and power in that SRs generated by one culture could serve to enforce the same culture as they are both the source and recipient. In this sense, when disagreements arise over politics, economics, values, territory, or religion, that disagreement is not simply a matter of opinion that can be changed by rational confrontation. Rather, such differences are based upon different versions of reality learned and constructed within a certain group through existing social and cultural structures. Therefore, what is familiar and “clear” to one culture is not necessarily understood by another. For this reason, it is important to study SRs of peace and war in general and to look beyond sources such as history textbooks and political discourse. One could also revolve to less formal contexts, such as sports, comedy, humor, and everyday conversation.

Van Der Linden and Licata (2012) summarized the dialectic relationship existing between wars and social representations. If wars can generate representations that can contribute to their continuation on the battlefield and in groups’ collective memories, the way wars (and peace) are represented could affect people’s attitudes towards wars, as well as their potential for resolution. For this reason, it is critical to study the content and the structure of SRs of war in times of emerging (and continuing) wars at the borders of the European Union, such as the case of the Ukrainian conflict.

This study aims to analyze the SRs of war according to the sociodynamic approach conceived by Doise (1992, 2002, 2019), which considers SRs to be principles that generate stances linked to specific social insertions, suggesting that the study of SRs must include the analysis of shared content and the analysis of psychological, social, and psychosocial anchoring (e.g., Bonomo et al. 2013; Melotti et al. 2018; Melotti et al. 2022). Following this approach, our study initially aimed to explore the common content within the social representation of war by reconstructing its shared “mental map”. In other words, this refers to how people discuss war in a social context shaped by news concerning the Russia–Ukraine conflict. According to Van Dijk (2008), the context involves the subjective

aspect, namely the fact that each of us constructs mental models of context that inevitably influence discursive production and communicative exchanges. These mental models, in fact, represent relevant parameters for how people use and understand discourse in social situations. Next, we analyze the psychological anchoring, trying to identify the organizing principles of participants' individual positions in relation to the shared content of SR, identifying subgroups of subjects distinguished by different nuances in representation. Finally, we analyze the social anchoring of RS in order to illustrate the relationship between representation and social belonging as a function of gender and other socio-demographic variables, such as interest in religion and political orientation. The choice to focus on gender is linked to the results of previous studies (Sarrica and Contarello 2004; Sarrica 2007), which have shown that the SR of war in women is characterized more by the emotional dimension than that of men, which, on the other hand, is marked by more object-based or practical reference. As in the works cited above, we expect women's SR to be more emotionally charged. We then chose to explore the social anchoring of the SR of the war according to political orientation and religion because, especially at the beginning of the war, there were numerous stances for or against the war by Italian political parties and by the Catholic Church, represented by the Vatican.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Participants

The sample consists of 313 subjects, 67 males, 241 females, 4 non-binary, and 1 who answered "other". The average age is 33.8 years, ranging from 18 to 74 years.

With respect to nationality, 305 were Italian and 8 foreigners. To the question "Are you religious?", 132 subjects answered "yes" and 181 "no".

Political orientation is predominantly center-left wing: $M = 5.10$, $sd = 1.24$ (calculated on a 7-point scale, from 1 = extreme right wing to 7 = extreme left wing).

The level of education is quite high: 54.6% of the respondents have at least a university degree.

In terms of employment, 57.8% were students, 34.8% workers, 2.2% unemployed, and 5.1% other types (retired, housewife, on a leave from work, etc.).

Participants were recruited through non-probabilistic sampling using a snowball method. The questionnaire link, accompanied by a brief presentation of the objectives of the study, was sent via e-mail and social platforms (Facebook, Instagram, Whatsapp, etc.) by the researchers of this study to friends, family, colleagues, and students. All participants were also asked to disseminate the questionnaire to other useful contacts.

2.2. Instruments

An online questionnaire was prepared using the Microsoft Forms platform. Participants were asked to answer a free association task to the stimulus word "war". Questions on political and religious orientation and a socio-demographic sheet completed the questionnaire.

2.3. Procedure

Data were collected between April and December 2022 and were analyzed using Spad-t (Lebart et al. 1995; Lebart et al. 1994; Lebart and Salem 1994) and IBM Spss Statistics (28.0.1.1 version) software.

In compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), all participating subjects provided informed consent to participate in the study. This consent was obtained after each participant read and understood the information form regarding participation in the research.

The current research adheres to the ethical standards outlined by the Associazione Italiana di Psicologia (AIP) and received approval from the Bioethics Committee at the University of Bologna.

2.4. Data Analysis

Following the theoretical and methodological framework proposed by Doise et al. (1992), we proceeded to analyze the semantic field of the object of social representation as follows: (1) examination of shared content, presenting the representational plan obtained from the analysis of lexical correspondence (ACL); (2) investigation of social anchoring, wherein variations in representations were explored in relation to socio-demographic factors such as gender, political affiliation, and religious orientation; (3) exploration of the psychological anchoring, where different individual positions towards the object of representation were highlighted through the identification of homogeneous clusters for the type of association obtained with the ACL.

3. Results

3.1. The Shared Content of Social Representations of War

The initial step involved normalizing the text generated in response to the stimulus “war” by standardizing singular/plural and masculine/feminine forms. Following this, the text was semantically categorized to produce a limited number of distinct categories: for instance, terms like “missile”, “atomic bomb”, and “ordnance” were classified under the category “bomb”. This process was conducted by two independent judges, and any contentious or unclear cases were referred to a third judge for resolution.

Prior to lemmatization and categorization, in total, 1619 associations were generated, averaging 5.2 associations per participant. There were 507 distinct categories, accounting for 31.3% of the overall responses.

After lemmatization and categorization, we obtained 1613 words, referring to 357 distinct words (22.1% of the total). Table 1 displays the frequencies of the 47 categories with a frequency of 7 or more.

Table 1. List of 47 categories with frequency ≥ 7 .

Categories	n	Categories	n	Categories	n	Categories	n
death	146	loss	21	horror	14	ignorance	9
destruction	109	bombs	21	fighting	14	soldiers	9
fear	62	hunger	19	politics	15	choice of the few	8
pain	58	blood	18	victims	12	wounded	8
violence	56	money	17	anxiety	12	no human rights	7
suffering	41	interests	17	anger	12	helplessness	7
poverty	33	useless	17	despair	12	children	7
weapons	33	innocents	14	nonsense	11	humanity	7
injustice	28	people	14	terror	11	peace	7
power	27	civilians	14	inhumanity	11	economic crisis	7
hatred	25	cadavers	14	devastation	11	cruelty	7
conflict	21	sadness	14	refugees	10		

To highlight individual differences regarding the object of representation, we performed a Lexical Correspondence Analysis (LCA) (Lebart and Salem 1988) using SPAD-T’s ASPAR procedure. This analysis enables us to identify the underlying principles organizing the participants’ individual positions (the opposite poles of the axes). The analysis was based on the 47 categories with a frequency of 7 or more. Two factorial axes were extracted, explaining 8.12% of the total inertia. Figure 1 displays the factorial plane formed by the intersection of the first and second axes, projecting the categories that contributed to the factors. To determine the acceptance level of significant terms, we used the rule of absolute contribution (a.c.) $\geq 100/n$ of categories (100/47), resulting in a threshold value of a.c. ≥ 2.1 .

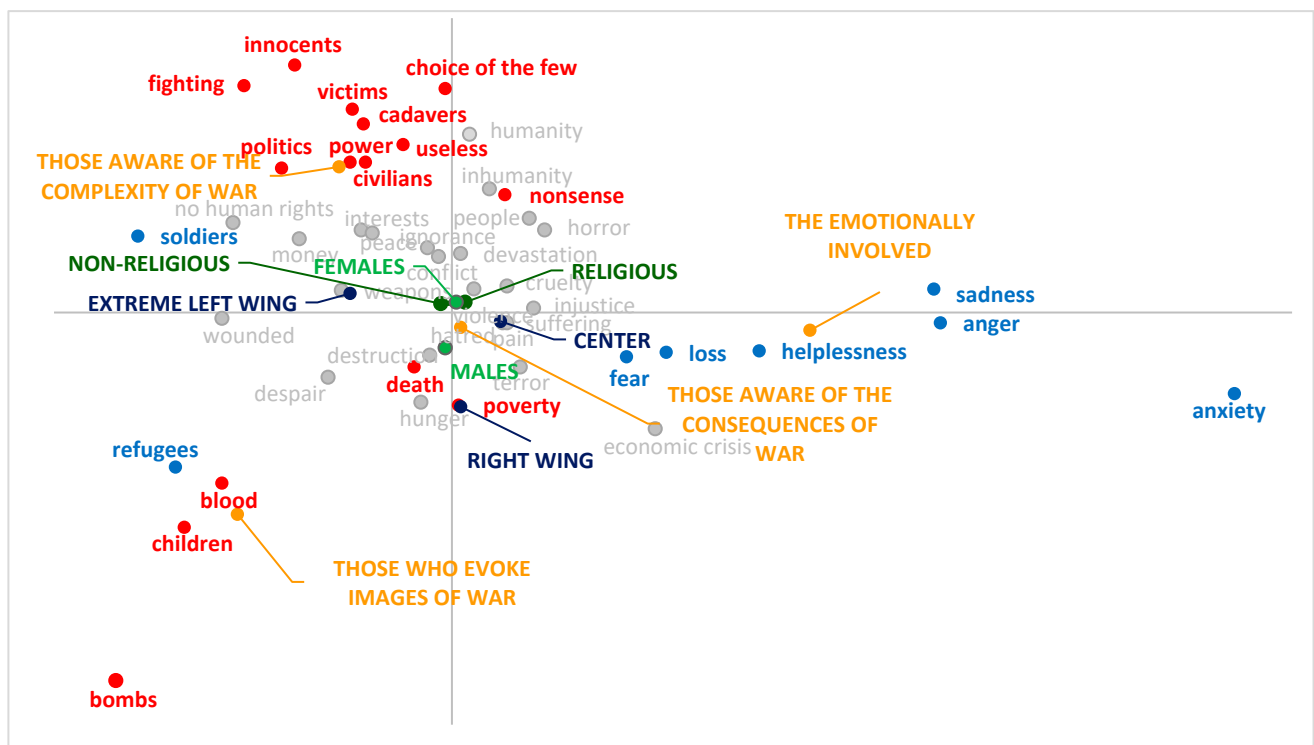


Figure 1. Correspondence factor analysis. Colored words are those that weigh in analysis because they show $a.c. \geq 2.1$; grey words do not weigh in analysis because they show $a.c. \leq 2.1$.

On the left of the first factor, the horizontal one, we find some of the actors of the war, the “soldiers” (a.c.: 3.2) and the “refugees” (a.c.: 2.8), while on the right-hand side are categories that refer to the emotional dimension aroused by the conflict: “anxiety” (a.c.: 26.6), “sadness” (a.c.: 11.8), “anger” (a.c.: 10.3), “fear” (a.c.: 6.8), “loss” (a.c.: 3.5), and a sense of “helplessness” (a.c.: 2.4).

On the second factor, the vertical one at the bottom, we find categories referring to the images and effects of war: “bombs” (a.c.: 25.0), “blood” (a.c.: 4.6), “children” (a.c.: 2.8), “death” (a.c.: 3.8), and “poverty” (a.c.: 2.5). At the top, however, a representation emerges that seems to reflect a critical reflection: “victims” (a.c.: 4.4) and “cadavers” (a.c.: 4.4) of innocent (“innocents”, a.c.: 7.5) “civilians” as a result of “useless” (a.c.: 4.4) and meaningless (“nonsense”, a.c.: 2.1) “fighting” (a.c.: 5.9) due to political choices (“politics”, a.c.: 2.2) made by those (“choice of the few”, a.c.: 3.5) with “power” (a.c.: 5.3).

3.2. The Social Anchoring

We considered the variables gender, political orientation, and religion for the social anchoring. We first observed how these are placed on the factorial plane¹ and then assessed which categories are significantly more enunciated by the subgroups belonging to these variables (e.g., male–female–non-binary–other and religious–non-religious).

In Figure 1, we can observe that males and females are placed in contrast on the second factor, with the former being significantly placed at the bottom of the factorial plane ($V\text{-Test}_2 = -3.9$), and females at the top ($V\text{-Test}_2 = 4.7$).

With respect to religion, we find that the two subgroups contrast on both factors: looking at the factorial plane, the religious are placed in the upper right-hand part ($V\text{-Test}_1 = 1.9^2$, $V\text{-Test}_2 = -2.1$), while the non-religious are in the upper left-hand part ($V\text{-Test}_1 = -1.9^3$, $V\text{-Test}_2 = 2.1$).

With reference to political orientation, we find the right-wingers significantly at the bottom of the factorial plane ($V\text{-Test}_2 = -4.0$) and the center-wingers and extreme left-

wingers contrasting in the first factor by being significantly on the right ($V\text{-Test}_1 = 2.8$) and left ($V\text{-Test}_1 = -3.6$), respectively.

Thereafter, by means of the MOCARM procedure implemented in Spad-t based on the V-test, it was possible to evaluate the categories significantly more associated with “war” by the different modalities of the additional variables (gender, religion, and political orientation). With regard to gender, we find that males most frequently mention “hunger” ($V\text{-Test} = 2.6$), “economic crisis” ($V\text{-Test} = 1.9$),⁴ “cruelty” ($V\text{-Test} = 1.9$),⁵ “bombs” ($V\text{-Test} = 1.8$),⁶ and “death” ($V\text{-Test} = 1.8$).⁷

With respect to religious orientation, the non-religious most often mention “innocents” ($V\text{-Test} = 2.0$), while the religious mention “ignorance” ($V\text{-Test} = 1.8$).⁸

With respect to political orientation, right-wingers most often associate “bombs” ($V\text{-Test} = 2.6$), center-wingers with “refugees” ($V\text{-Test} = 1.8$),⁹ and extreme left-wingers with “inhumanity” ($V\text{-Test} = 2.1$).

3.3. The Psychological Anchoring

By utilizing classification analysis in Spad-t, we identified four distinct groups of subjects. Each group is internally consistent regarding their responses to the free association task on “war”, reflecting the individual positions towards the object of representation.

In the first group (208 subjects, 162 females, 42 males, three non-binary, and one “other”), we have called “those aware of the consequences of war” because they most frequently mention the categories that describe the consequences of armed conflict: “destruction” ($V\text{-Test} = 5.5$), “pain” ($V\text{-Test} = 3.8$), “poverty” ($V\text{-Test} = 3.2$), “suffering” ($V\text{-Test} = 3.1$), “death” ($V\text{-Test} = 3.0$), and “hatred” ($V\text{-Test} = 2.8$).

The second group (25 subjects, 15 females, nine males, and one non-binary) we labeled “those who evoke images of war” those that are broadcast by the media through the news and social media: “bombs” ($V\text{-Test} = 10.3$), “blood” ($V\text{-Test} = 3.6$), “wounded” ($V\text{-Test} = 2.9$), and “refugees” ($V\text{-Test} = 2.6$).

The third group (30 subjects, 22 females, and eight males), we called “the emotionally involved” because they mainly enunciate the emotions one feels when faced with a war: “anxiety” ($V\text{-Test} = 7.4$), “anger” ($V\text{-Test} = 6.0$), “sadness” ($V\text{-Test} = 5.0$), “helplessness” ($V\text{-Test} = 3.0$), “economic crisis” ($V\text{-Test} = 3.0$), “fear” ($V\text{-Test} = 2.6$), and “loss” ($V\text{-Test} = 1.9$).¹⁰

The fourth group (50 subjects, 42 females and eight males), we called “those aware of the complexity of war” because they enumerate categories that refer to different aspects related to war (human, political, and economic): “fighting” ($V\text{-Test} = 7.0$), “innocents” ($V\text{-Test} = 5.9$), “cadavers” ($V\text{-Test} = 4.2$), “power” ($V\text{-Test} = 3.9$), “soldiers” ($V\text{-Test} = 3.6$), “civilians” ($V\text{-Test} = 3.6$), disrespect for human rights (“no human rights”, $V\text{-Test} = 3.6$), “victims” ($V\text{-Test} = 3.5$), “politics” ($V\text{-Test} = 2.9$), “choice of the few” ($V\text{-Test} = 2.5$), “money” ($V\text{-Test} = 2.0$), and “uselessness” ($V\text{-Test} = 1.9$).¹¹

4. Discussion

This article sets out to investigate the social representations of war in a historical context in which the topic of war has become salient due to the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Unlike many studies on this war, which report the analysis of media language (Ononiwu 2023), social media (Raviolo and Pasta 2022), and the public political speeches of Putin and Zelensky (Chiaruzzi and Ventura 2023; Paret 2023), our study seeks to capture social representations as shared by lay people through a task of free associations. The aim is thus to determine the words and semantic categories associated with the term “war”. The context of the war between Russia and Ukraine serves as the backdrop, reinforced and often exacerbated by media reportage of events and their actors. As Van Dijk (1998) asserts, the representations we have of events, manifested through the language we use—which is never neutral—and the words we choose to use, are fundamental to understanding the ideologies circulating in society, which often appeal to the logic of common sense, thereby subtly shaping the opinions and attitudes of people. According to some authors

(Croteau and Hoynes 2018, p. 291), “common sense is the way we describe things that everybody knows, or at least should know, because such knowledge represents deeply held cultural beliefs”. It is for this reason that Fowler (1991) asserts that language embodies the worldviews or ideologies of news reporters rather than objectively reflecting reality.

Following the psychodynamic approach, this study has explored the organizing principles of the representation of war and individual positioning. The results show well-defined and polarized semantic categories related to the word “war”: we have the effects of the war (destruction, poverty, pain, death), the images (bombs, blood, refugees, children), the negative emotions (fear, loss, sense of helplessness, anger, sadness), and the reasons for the war, that is, the complexity that characterizes every war and conflict (power, combat, soldiers, “choice of a few”, cadavers, victims, innocents, politicians). We believe that our research on SR of war during the Russia–Ukraine conflict via a free association task has allowed us to study the emergence of the emotional part of the shared representation. Our results are in line with previous studies on SRs of war (e.g., Sarrica and Wachelke 2010), focusing on the concept of death, blood, and emotions. We particularly note how such carefully selected words have the potential to rouse people’s emotions, almost an attempt to “humanize” the war to make it less painful: this is the case of the group we called “the emotionally involved”, focused particularly on the emotions aroused by the war. This emotional reaction has also been elicited by the relocation of many Ukrainian refugees to Italy shortly after the beginning of the conflict (Biancalana 2023).

According to some authors, the affective/emotional dimension is fundamental (de-Graft Aikins 2012; Campos and Rouquette 2003; Pivetti et al. 2017) because social representations seem more consensual if the object of the representation conveys a stronger affective/emotional burden. And in the case of war, we know how the emotional part plays an essential role not only in keeping high media attention but also because they influence opinions, attitudes, and behaviors regarding the conflict; according to Bar-Tal, in the case of extreme (intractable) conflicts, emotions can lead people to interpret the event according to the central dimensions of evaluation that triggered the emotion (Bar-Tal 2007, 2013). For example, fear, one of the central emotions emerging from our study, according to Bar-Tal (2011), is associated with a low-control evaluation of the situation and increases the risk of making pessimistic forecasts about the situation. According to Rimé (2008, 2009), emotions are a field where meanings are produced, and they drive communication, enabling the absorption of an unfamiliar object of knowledge and turning them into social representations, making the unfamiliar familiar (Moscovici 1961; Moscovici 2005). Social psychologist Jodelet (2008) also suggests paying attention to the role emotions, memory, and tradition play in the formation of social representations to advance the SRT.

We also analyzed social anchoring and how gender, religion, and political orientation served as anchoring points for the representations. Regarding the gender variable, it seems that women have a more critical stance on the war and are generally less favorable to the war than men, associating more negative emotions (e.g., fear, hatred) with it compared to men, who tend to focus more on the effects (hunger, economic crisis, death) and images of the war (bombs). We also believe that political dimensions guide communication processes and activities by determining the elements to include or exclude from the social representation of the war. For participants who expressed a right-wing political stance, the war is associated with the image (“bombs”), while for those who expressed a left-wing political stance, the emotional element (“inhumanity”) emerges, with all the direct effects that this word can have on the general scenario of the war. One possible explanation points to the positions of right-wing parties that were once close to Putin and then, after the invasion, voted in favor of sending weapons to Ukrainian soldiers and in favor of sanctions on Russia (Guerra 2023). Right-wingers were confused by this change in political actions and, in their own way, took distance from the conflict by distancing themselves from the conflict.

Those results are in line with the idea that Italian left-wingers consider individualizing moral foundations as more relevant and inviolable than binding foundations (Di Battista

et al. 2020). According to the Moral Foundations Theory (MFT; [Haidt and Graham 2007](#)), individualizing foundations are related to care for and concern for the discomfort of others (harm/care) and concern for justice and rights (fairness/reciprocity), while binding foundations describe the interest in group membership (ingroup/loyalty), social order, and respect for traditions and institutions (authority/respect), and interest in control of impulses and desires (purity/sanctity). In this sense, the SRs of war shared by Italian left-wingers parallel their pivotal concern for care for other people.

In summary, the analysis of words conducted in this study shows how the SRs of the war tend to overlap many different themes, channeling into polarized axes, by the impact of emotions that stands out, as if feelings determine the truth of the facts ([Bar-Tal 2013](#)).

As for the many limitations of this study, it is relevant to mention its cross-sectional nature and the scope of the sample. We collected data from a convenient sample of mostly female young Italians, which is limited in size. Those limitations do not allow for the generalizability of the results. However, generalizability is not the aim of qualitative studies. This study aimed to contribute to the literature on lay understanding of war by exploring the common content within the SRs of war during a specific period of time characterized by the Russian–Ukrainian war. The news and images of war at the borders of Europe, as well as the strong migration of refugees from Ukraine to Italy, have provided a hint for the construction of shared representations of war in times of conflict.

Even if the methods of free associations have been widely used in the study of social representations (e.g., [Dany et al. 2015](#); [Morgiève et al. 2021](#); [Stark et al. 2016](#)), it should be complemented with interviews with relevant actors so that the results of the free associations are validated via triangulations of data ([Flick 2004](#)).

Also, the theory of social representations has been criticized based on the lack of a clear definition of the construct, leading to considering any social understanding as a social representation ([Räty and Snellman 1992](#) for a review). Another relevant criticism maintains that the SR theory considers representation as a cognitive phenomenon that can mainly be explained by intra-individual psychological processes, poorly affected by social influence ([Jahoda 1988](#)). But, in our understanding, following a sociodynamic approach, the SR theory describes cognition as inherently and inevitable social and cultural at the same time, as it is constructed during everyday conversations, small talks, and (social) media scrolling ([Voelklein and Howarth 2005](#)). In this sense, the theory puts emphasis on the lay understanding of relevant social objects and provides hints for the comprehension of public opinion on themes such as the war and the anchoring points of citizens' positions.

5. Conclusions

This study can be considered as a preliminary exploration of SRs of war during the current Russia–Ukraine conflict at the borders of the European Union. This study has explored laypeople's SRs of the war among a convenient sample of young Italians via a free association task. Our study showed well-defined and polarized semantic categories related to the word "war". The underlying principles organizing the participants' positions referred to (a) the actors of the war vs. the emotional reaction to the war on the first factor and (b) the images vs. a critical reflection on the consequences of war on the second factor. In line with the previous literature, the emotional dimension has emerged as the first factor.

As for social anchoring, female participants were closer to the critical reflection stance, whereas male participants located themselves closer to the images of war. Religious people positioned themselves closer to the emotional side of the representation, feeling compassion for the weeks, whereas non-religious and left-wing people were referring to the actors of the war. Right-wing people were placed closer to the category of images, such as bombs and the effects of war.

We conclude with the consideration that psychological barriers play a crucial role in crystallizing any possibility of agreement between conflicting parties ([Bar-Tal et al. 2010](#)). These barriers, deeply rooted in cognitive, emotional, and motivational processes, are reinforced by pre-existing rigid beliefs, worldviews, and emotions, leading to distorted and

selective information processing. Social psychologists refer to these obstacles as “freezing factors” (Kruglanski 2004), which cause a rigid, inflexible approach to conflict. Needs deprivation (“others have, we do not”), stress, feelings of superiority, and a heightened sense of justice further entrench this rigidity, closing off any cognitive space for viewing reality outside a conflictual framework. Emotions such as fear also intensify this dynamic, sustaining a sense of constant threat and driving the escalation of hostilities.

In addition to these psychological barriers, other mechanisms serve to perpetuate the conflict’s ethos. Government control over mass media can lead to selective dissemination of information, censorship of news that challenges the status quo, and delegitimization of alternative perspectives. These tools help to (re)produce and reinforce a conflict-driven narrative, making it difficult to alter the course of the dispute. The “mirror effect”, in which each party reflects and intensifies the other’s antagonistic attitudes (Fisher and Kelman 2011), further fuels this vicious cycle, exacerbating the violence.

Thus, beyond the tangible and immediate causes of conflicts, such as the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine or other global wars, the primary barriers to resolution are these deeply ingrained “psychological” walls. These barriers are often reinforced by biased communication that constructs distorted social representations of each side, complicating dialogue and any possibility of a peaceful resolution. It is, therefore, essential that concrete and alternative solutions be found to overcome these psychological and communicative barriers, paving the way for peaceful coexistence in the face of ongoing conflicts.

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Data Availability Statement: The datasets generated and analyzed during the current study are not publicly available due to Italy data protection regulations and the assurances in the informed consent agreement and ethics approval that the data will not be disclosed, but they are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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Notes

- 1 In the ACL, these variables are considered “supplementary” in that they do not contribute to factor determination but can be projected in the factorial plane following the V-test $\geq |2.0|$ criterion (Lebart and Salem 1988; Bolasco 1999).
- 2 This result is approaching significance.
- 3 This result is approaching significance.
- 4 See note 3 above.
- 5 See note 3 above.
- 6 See note 3 above.
- 7 See note 3 above.
- 8 See note 3 above.
- 9 See note 3 above.
- 10 See note 3 above.

¹¹ See note 3 above.

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