

Age of Empire gave Britain something to smile about

Rhys Blakely Science Correspondent

On June 22, 1887, *The Times* reported that 26,000 children had “disported themselves from noon to dewy eve” in Hyde Park to mark Queen Victoria’s golden jubilee.

They were fed in tents, 250 at a time, on meat pies, cakes, buns and oranges. There were Punch and Judy shows, performing dogs, monkeys and ponies. The Queen joined them, in a carriage led by the Life Guards.

According to analysis of the national mood over the past 200 years, it was the most content that Britain has been.

Researchers at [Warwick](#) and Glasgow universities and at the Alan Turing Institute in London tracked the happiness of four countries — Britain, the United States, Italy and Germany — by analysing the emotional tone of the language used in books and newspaper articles.

The study suggests that the 1880s, during which the British Empire was approaching its peak, was this country’s most optimistic decade.

The researchers admit that the era was also notable for high rates of disease, child labour, inequality, and poor housing. However, the national mood — among the reading classes, at least — was exceptionally optimistic.

The research analysed the language used in more than eight million books and 65 million news-

paper articles to try to discern the four countries’ collective state of mind.

The results suggest that national moods lift during bursts of economic euphoria and raised expectations, and plummet during times of conflict. In America, sentiment plunges during the butchery of the Civil War, while the roaring Twenties show up as an exuberant peak. In the post-war US, the lowest point coincides with the Vietnam War and the evacuation of Saigon. The happiness of Italians and Germans took a blow from the revolutions that took place across Europe in 1848.

In Britain, spirits sank during the First and Second World Wars. The mood was buoyed by the end of wartime rationing. But by 1957 — when Harold Macmillan insisted that “most of our people have never had it so good” — the nation was in a slump that would not end until 1982.

Britain appears to have been consistently less cheerful than Germany or Italy — even during the postwar years.

An increase in average longevity of one year had the same effect on happiness as a 4.3 per cent increase in GDP.

Professor Daniel Sgroi, of the [University of Warwick](#) said: “Aspirations seem to matter a lot: after the end of rationing in the 1950s national happiness was very high as were expectations for the future. Things did not pan out as people hoped and national happiness fell.”

Governments around the world are increasingly using happiness data when

considering the impact of policies on national wellbeing.

The researchers drew on a database of nearly 14,000 English words, which had been ranked on a scale of one to nine, according to how “happy” they were.

The books and articles from each year were then given a score, to estimate the national mood.

The authors made allowances for the shifts in meaning of certain words. They also tried to take account of how the market for books shifted, from the elite to the general public, and acknowledged that their analysis was likely to be affected by how the market for literature has changed. “Over the long run, as the target for a typical published book moved from the wealthy elite to the general public, the content of these books changes,” they write. They have tried to adjust the data to take account for the shifts in who makes up Britain’s readers.

Professor Thomas Hills, of the [University of Warwick](#), said: “What’s remarkable is that national subjective wellbeing is incredibly resilient to wars. Even economic booms and busts have little long-term effect.”

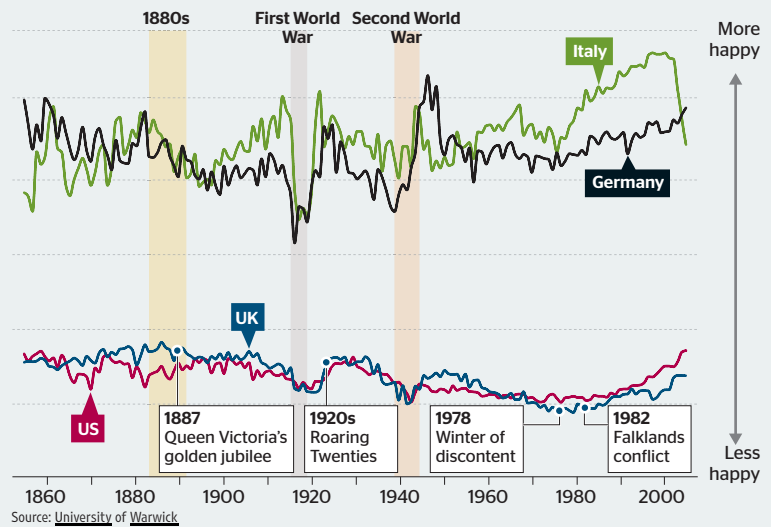
He added: “Our national happiness is like an adjustable spanner that we open and close to calibrate our experiences against our recent past, with little lasting memory for the triumphs and tragedies of our age.”





British happiness compared

Analysis of books and newspapers shows the 1880s were Britain's happiest years while the 1980s were the least happy. The UK has always scored lower than Germany and Italy



Postwar Britain was less happy than Germany, despite the publication of *Casino Royale* in 1953. Things were gloomier in 1972, when *Watership Down* came out