

**HOLOCAUST DISTORTIONS  
AND POPULIST POLITICS  
IN CENTRAL EUROPE**



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A 2025 cross-national study (9,157 respondents across six Central European countries) reveals widespread distortion of Holocaust history and strong links to populist attitudes. Nearly 4 in 10 respondents (38.7%) equate Israel's policies with Nazi genocide, while significant shares – especially in Poland (46.1%) and Hungary (37.9%) – believe their nations suffered more than Jews during World War II. Average respondents in the region also substantially overestimate how many of their compatriots rescued Jews during the Holocaust, with figures often exceeding 50% (with the highest numbers in Poland: 58.9% and Slovakia: 53.5%).

Across all six countries, populist attitudes were the most consistent factor associated with endorsement of Holocaust distortions. People with stronger populist views were more likely to endorse both Holocaust inversion and competitive victimhood claims, and this pattern held in every

country studied – unlike demographic factors such as age, education, gender, or left-right self-placement, which varied considerably between national contexts. Historical distortions are embedded in a broader pattern of populist instrumentalization of history: **44.5%** of respondents believe history should primarily serve current national interests, and **18.1%** support censoring historical facts to protect the nation's image.

Interviews with teachers in Poland, Hungary, and Slovakia revealed that state-level populist politics directly or indirectly affect how the Holocaust is taught in schools. Teachers reported pressure from school communities and parents, institutional discouragement of sensitive or overtly politicized topics, and widespread self-censorship – even in the absence of formal restrictions. As a result, the educational environments intended to counter historical distortions are themselves shaped and constrained by the political climate that promotes them.

## SOCIAL CONTEXT

The distortion of Holocaust history has become a politically relevant phenomenon in many European countries. It manifests itself both in explicit statements that deny or minimize Nazi crimes and in more subtle narratives that relativize the suffering of Jews or portray nations that collaborated with the Nazis as the exclusive victims of World War II.<sup>1</sup> Such narratives are no longer confined to extremist fringes, but are increasingly appearing in mainstream political discourse, public debates on education, and state-sponsored remembrance initiatives.

<sup>1</sup> International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA). (2021). *Recognizing and countering Holocaust distortion: Recommendations for policy and decision makers*. <https://holocaustremembrance.com/resources/countering-holocaust-distortion-policy-recommendations>



## GOALS OF THIS REPORT

Our aim was to diagnose the extent of belief in these distortions in European societies and to examine their possible causes. This report presents findings from a nationally representative survey conducted in six countries as part of the research project funded by the IHRA Yehuda Bauer Grant carried out at the Center for Research on Prejudice at the Faculty of Psychology, University of Warsaw in cooperation with the Institute for Research in Social Communication of the Slovak Academy of Sciences and the Social Groups and Media Research Lab of Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest (ELTE). It documents:

- how widespread different forms of Holocaust distortion are;
- how these distortions vary across national contexts;
- and how strongly they are associated with populist attitudes.

These survey results were supplemented with interview studies conducted with teachers in Slovakia, Hungary and Poland. The purpose of these interviews was to assess the perceived impact of populist regimes on Holocaust education as one of the potential sources of belief in historical distortions.

Together, the report aims to inform policymakers, educators, and media professionals about the societal demand for historical distortion. Understanding this demand is essential for designing effective history education and interventions to counter antisemitism and safeguard evidence-based public discourse.

## HOLOCAUST DISTORTIONS

### HOLOCAUST INVERSION

Holocaust inversion involves reversing the roles of Holocaust perpetrators and victims by portraying Jews or Israel as the “new Nazis” and their opponents as the “new Jews,” implying that contemporary Jews behave like the perpetrators of the Holocaust and treating the Holocaust as a “lesson for Jews”.<sup>2</sup> Robert Wistrich referred to it as “the most potent form of contemporary antisemitism”.<sup>3</sup> Rather than offering constructive, policy-focused criticism, Holocaust inversion relies on a disproportionate framing that portrays

<sup>2</sup> Klaff, L. (2019). Holocaust inversion. *Israel Studies*, 24(2), 73–90. <https://doi.org/10.2979/israelstudies.24.2.07>

<sup>3</sup> Wistrich, R. (2004). ANTI-ZIONISM AND ANTI-SEMITISM. *Jewish Political Studies Review*, 16(3/4), 29. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25834602>

Israel as an evil equivalent to Nazi Germany. This association can easily legitimize antisemitic hate and violence. To measure endorsement of Holocaust inversion, we asked our respondents two parallel questions: whether the actions of Palestinians towards Jews are similar to the actions of the Nazis, and whether the actions of Israelis towards Palestinians are similar to the actions of the Nazis.

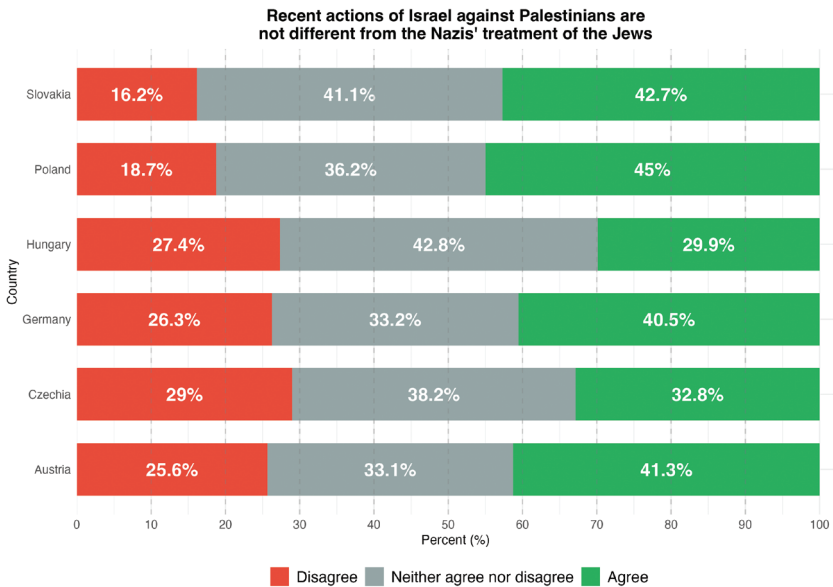
45% of respondents in Poland, 42.7% in Slovakia, 41.3% in Austria, 40.5% in Germany, 32.8% in the Czech Republic and 29.9% in Hungary agree with the statement that Israel's actions towards the Palestinians are no different from those of Nazi Germany towards the Jews (Figure 1). However, this belief was not equally widespread across the studied societies (see Table 1). In most countries, women were somewhat more likely than men to equate Israel's actions with those of Nazi Germany. The difference was particularly pronounced in the Czech Republic and Germany. Meanwhile, in Poland, men and women endorsed this view at similar rates. In most countries, age differences were minimal, with older and younger respondents exhibiting comparable levels of agreement with this statement. The exception was Austria, where younger people were more inclined to agree that Israel's actions were similar to those of Nazi Germany. Regarding education, people reported similar levels of agreement regardless of the number of years of education. In the Czech Republic, Holocaust

inversion is particularly evident among the less educated. In Austria, Poland, and Hungary, those with right-wing views were more likely to equate Israel's actions with Nazi Germany, though the association was strongest in Austria and weaker in Poland and Hungary. In Germany, political orientation played no meaningful role. In the Czech Republic and Slovakia, people with left-wing views were more likely to endorse this comparison.

When it comes to equating recent actions of the Palestinians with the Nazi treatment of Jews (Figure 2), 45.7% of respondents in the Czech Republic supported such a Holocaust distortion, 41.1% in Germany, 40.3% in Slovakia, 38.1% in Austria, 32.8% in Hungary, and 30.1% in Poland. Women were more likely to agree that the actions of Palestinians towards Jews are similar to those of Nazi Germany in most countries, particularly in Slovakia and Germany (see Table 2). However, in Austria and the Czech Republic, the difference between men and women was negligible. In most countries, age played a limited role. In Hungary, Austria, and Germany, younger and older respondents endorsed this belief at similar rates. However, in the Czech Republic, Poland, and Slovakia, older respondents were notably more likely to agree that actions of Palestinians towards Jews are similar to those of Nazi Germany. In Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic, those with more years of education were somewhat less inclined to agree,

though education made no meaningful difference in the remaining countries. Regarding political views, individuals closer to the ideological right were more likely to endorse this comparison, with the clearest differences observed in Austria. In Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Germany, political orientation played a weaker role.

Figure 1



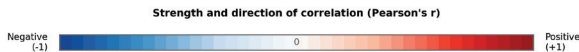
*Note.* Since the values are rounded to one decimal place, the total percentage may not add up to exactly 100%.

**Table 1**

*Relationships between agreement with the statement that Israel's actions towards Palestinians are similar to Nazi Germany's actions toward Jews, and demographic as well as ideological variables*

Correlation coefficients by country

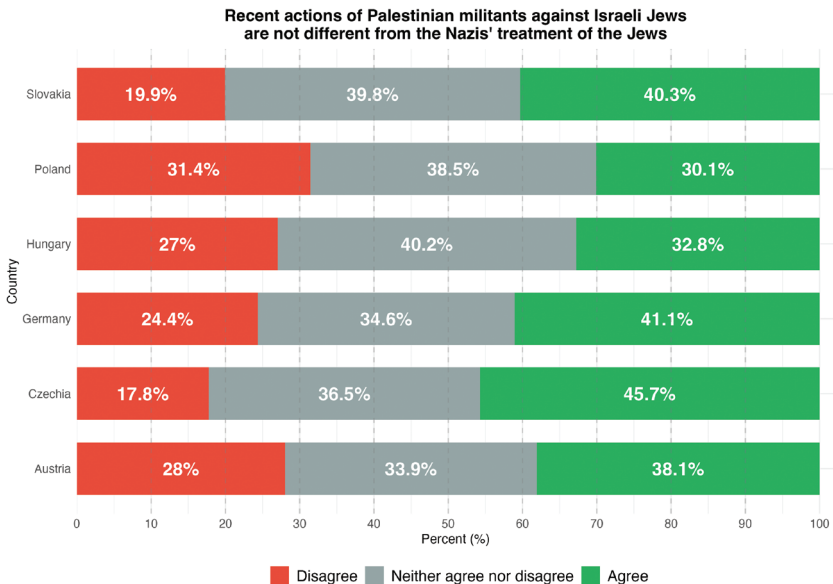
Country	Age	Gender	Years of education	Political views	Populist attitudes
Hungary	-0.02	0.07**	-0.04	0.06*	0.13***
Poland	0.04	-0.03	-0.02	0.07**	0.12***
Austria	-0.13***	0.07**	-0.01	0.10***	0.19***
Germany	-0.04	0.12***	0.01	0.01	0.18***
Slovakia	0.05	0.09***	-0.02	-0.07**	0.14***
Czech Republic	-0.04	0.16***	-0.11***	-0.16***	0.18***



*Note.* Each number represents the strength of the correlation between two factors. Positive values indicate that higher scores on a given factor are associated with greater endorsement of the distortion. Negative values mean the opposite. For gender, positive values mean that women were more likely to endorse the view than men. For age, positive values mean that older respondents were more likely to endorse

the view. Education was measured as the total number of years spent in the educational system. Positive values mean that more years of education are associated with a higher level of endorsement. Political orientation was measured on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*left-wing*) to 7 (*right-wing*). Positive values mean that those who placed themselves further to the right were more likely to endorse the distortion. \* indicates  $p < .05$ . \*\* indicates  $p < .01$ . \*\*\* indicates  $p < .001$

Figure 2



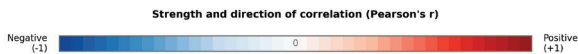
*Note.* Since the values are rounded to one decimal place, the total percentage may not add up to exactly 100%.

**Table 2**

*Relationships between agreement with the statement that Palestinian militants' actions against Israeli Jews are similar to the Nazis' treatment of the Jews, and demographic as well as ideological variables*

Correlation coefficients by country

Country	Age	Gender	Years of education	Political views	Populist attitudes
Hungary	0.03	0.07**	-0.08**	0.06*	0.06*
Poland	0.06*	0.07**	-0.06*	0.05*	0.17***
Austria	-0.05	0.03	-0.05	0.14***	0.11***
Germany	-0.00	0.11***	-0.03	0.06*	0.10***
Slovakia	0.06*	0.14***	-0.01	0.07**	0.05*
Czech Republic	0.10***	-0.01	-0.08**	0.08**	0.07*



*Note.* Each number represents the strength of correlation between two factors. Positive values indicate that higher scores on a given factor are associated with greater endorsement of the distortion. Negative values mean the opposite.

For gender, positive values mean that women were more likely to endorse the view than men. For age, positive values mean that older respondents were more likely to endorse the view. Education was measured as the total number of years spent in the educational system. Positive values mean that more years of education are associated with a higher level of endorsement. Political orientation was measured on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*left-wing*) to 7 (*right-wing*). Positive values mean that those who placed themselves further to the right were more likely to endorse the distortion. \* indicates  $p < .05$ . \*\* indicates  $p < .01$ . \*\*\* indicates  $p < .001$

Importantly, across all six countries, people with stronger populist attitudes – that is, those who see society as divided between “the people” and “corrupt elites” and distrust experts – were more likely to endorse both forms of Holocaust inversion (see Tables 1 and 2). In other words, the more someone embraced a populist worldview, the more likely they were to agree with comparisons between the Holocaust and contemporary events in the Middle East. This pattern appeared in every country, though weaker in the case of stating that actions of Palestinians towards Jews are similar to those of Nazi Germany, making populist attitudes one of the most consistent distinguishing factors between those who endorsed these distortions and those who did not.

## VICTIMHOOD COMPETITION

Another form of Holocaust distortion involves the belief that the suffering of one's own nation during World War II was greater than that of the Jews. Such competitive victimhood has been identified as one of the roots of contemporary antisemitism.<sup>4</sup> This distortion is often understood as a need to preserve a positive moral image of the nation, with victim status serving as a source of moral legitimacy.<sup>5,6</sup> To achieve it, historical narratives are reshaped and distorted in order to renegotiate the magnitude and significance of victimhood, elevating the suffering of one's nation while relativizing or marginalizing Jewish suffering. National victimhood at the cost of diminishing Jewish victimhood has been observed to be strongly related to

- 4 Antoniou, G., Dinas, E., & Kosmidis, S. (2020). Collective victimhood and social prejudice: a post-Holocaust theory of anti-Semitism. *Political Psychology*, 41(5), 861–886. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12654>
- 5 Vollhardt, J. R. (Ed.). (2020). *The social psychology of collective victimhood*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190875190.001.0001>
- 6 Noor, M., Vollhardt, J. R., Mari, S., & Nadler, A. (2017). The social psychology of collective victimhood. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 47(2), 121–134. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2300>

other antisemitic discourses.<sup>7</sup> The primacy of national victimhood in populist discourse has been observed in many political speeches, for example, Polish education minister Przemysław Czarnek mentioned that “Poland was the greatest victim of World War II, both materially and, above all, personally”.<sup>8</sup>

In order to assess the scale of such distortion in Central European populations, we asked our respondents whether their nation suffered more or less than Jews during World War II. Polish people were the most inclined to claim that they had suffered more than the Jews, with **46.1%** of Poles believing this to be true. Moreover, **37.9%** of respondents from Hungary, **30.2%** from Austria, **28.7%** from Slovakia, and **28.6%** from Germany shared the same opinion. Those surveyed in the Czech Republic were the least likely to say

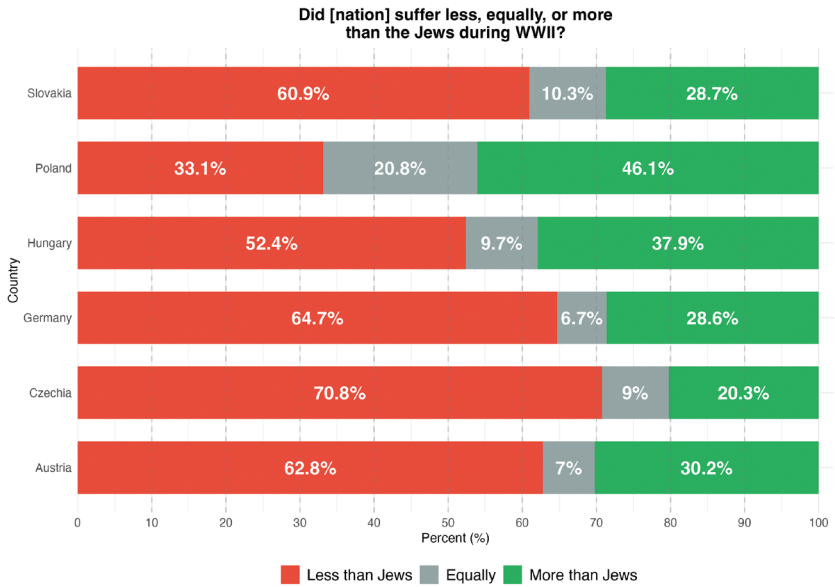
7 De Guissmé, L., & Licata, L. (2017). Competition over collective victimhood recognition: When perceived lack of recognition for past victimization is associated with negative attitudes towards another victimized group. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 47(2), 148-166. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2244>

8 Leszczyński, A. (2023, June 10). Czarnek: „Polacy są największą ofiarą wojny”. Sprawdzamy: tylko wtedy, kiedy wliczyć polskich Żydów [Czarnek: “Poles are the greatest victims of the war.” We checked: only if Polish Jews are included]. *OKO.press*. <https://oko.press/czarnek-polska-najwieksza-ofiara-wojny>

that they had suffered more, with **20.3%** of respondents claiming that their nation suffered more than the Jews.

The extent to which respondents endorsed competitive victimhood varied by demographic characteristics and beliefs (see Table 3). In Germany and Austria, younger people were considerably more likely to claim that their nation suffered more than the Jewish people. In the remaining four countries, however, age differences were minimal. In the Czech Republic, years of education mattered most, with those who had spent more time in the educational system being much less likely to agree with the statement. A similar, though weaker, pattern appeared in Hungary, Slovakia, and Poland. Meanwhile, in Germany and Austria, the number of years of education did not differentiate respondents on this issue. Women were more likely than men to agree in most countries, particularly in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia, and Germany. In Poland and Austria, however, there was no clear difference between men and women. In Austria, Germany, Poland, and Hungary, people with right-wing political views engaged in competitive victimhood more than the left-wingers. In Slovakia and the Czech Republic, competitive victimhood was present equally among left and right-wing supporters. People with stronger populist attitudes were more likely to claim greater national suffering in every country, with this link being particularly strong in Poland, Germany, and Austria.

Figure 3



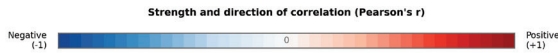
*Note.* Since the values are rounded to one decimal place, the total percentage may not add up to exactly 100%.

**Table 3**

*Relationships between the claim of how much the nation members suffered compared to the Jewish people, and demographic as well as ideological variables.*

Correlation coefficients by country

Country	Age	Gender	Years of education	Political views	Populist attitudes
Hungary	-0.01	0.12***	-0.10***	0.16***	0.10***
Poland	-0.05	0.04	-0.05*	0.20***	0.31***
Austria	-0.12***	0.00	0.02	0.31***	0.27***
Germany	-0.12***	0.09***	0.01	0.30***	0.29***
Slovakia	-0.02	0.10***	-0.06*	-0.01	0.19***
Czech Republic	-0.03	0.16***	-0.19***	-0.04	0.23***



*Note.* Each number represents the strength of the correlation between two factors. Positive values mean that higher scores on a given factor are related to the claim that the compatriots suffered more than the Jewish people during World War II. Negative values mean the opposite. For gender, positive values mean that women were more likely to endorse the view than men. For age, positive values mean that older respondents were more likely to endorse the view.

Education was measured as the total number of years spent in the educational system. Positive values mean that more years of education are associated with a higher level of endorsement. Political orientation was measured on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*left-wing*) to 7 (*right-wing*). Positive values mean that those who placed themselves further to the right were more likely to endorse the claim. \* indicates  $p < .05$ . \*\* indicates  $p < .01$ . \*\*\* indicates  $p < .001$

## MORAL WHITEWASHING

Denial of past involvement in Holocaust-era crimes and exaggeration of moral wartime behaviors are among the key features of “usable past”, as historian Yehuda Bauer named instances of Holocaust distortion in Central Europe.<sup>9</sup> It is obvious that all nations aim to maintain a positive image of themselves, also with regard to history. However, the need to maintain a positive image of one’s own nation often comes at the expense of truth, leading to the concealment of crimes or harmful actions. Recent research

<sup>9</sup> Bauer, Y. (2020). Creating a “Usable” Past: On Holocaust Denial and Distortion. *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs*, 14, 209-227.

on lay representations of the Holocaust found that contemporary Poles significantly exaggerate the scale of help offered by their compatriots during the Nazi occupation of their country, while underestimating the scale of indifference and refusal to help, and antisemitic beliefs fuel such distortions.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, research conducted in Hungary found that the exaggeration of wartime resistance and denial of complicity was directly linked to antisemitic views and strong national identity in this country,<sup>11</sup> a pattern found also in cross-national comparative studies.<sup>12</sup> Such views were also visible in the speeches and statements of populist politicians in Europe, for example, Polish Education

<sup>10</sup> Babińska, M., Rees, J., & Bilewicz, M. (2026). Revisiting secondary antisemitism: Antisemitism as a cause, not a consequence, of in-group-serving Holocaust distortions. *American Psychologist*. [Manuscript accepted for publication.]

<sup>11</sup> Hirschberger, G., Kende, A., & Weinstein, S. (2016). Defensive representations of an uncomfortable history: The case of Hungary and the Holocaust. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 55, 32–43. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2016.08.006>

<sup>12</sup> Kazarovytska, F., Imhoff, R., & Hirschberger, G. (2025). Beyond victimhood and perpetration: Reconstruction of the ingroup's historical role in eight Eastern and Western European countries under Nazi occupation. *Political Psychology*, 46(4), 785–805. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.13037>

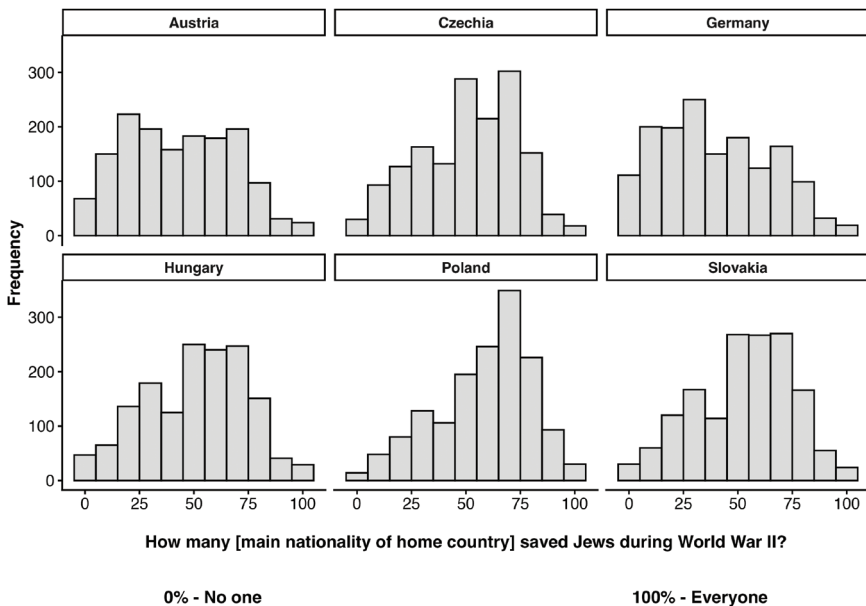
Minister Przemysław Czarnek, who claimed that “the vast majority of Poles offered help to their Jewish brothers.”<sup>13</sup>

In the survey, we aimed at analyzing how prevalent this kind of distortion is. For this purpose, we asked our respondents to assess what percentage of their nation was responsible for saving Jews during World War II and what percentage of their nation had actively collaborated with the Nazis.

As Figure 4 shows, respondents in every country tended to overestimate how many of their compatriots had saved Jews during World War II. The average Polish respondent estimates that **58.9%** of their compatriots actively rescued Jews during the Holocaust, whereas according to the average Slovak, it was **53.5%**, the average Czech respondent estimates **51.5%**, and the average Hungarian **51.2%**. In Austria, the average estimate was **43.7%**, while the average German estimate was that **39.9%** of Germans during the National Socialist era were saving Jews.

<sup>13</sup> Radio Maryja. (2023, June 4). Min. P. Czarnek: Jako szef polskiego MEiN nie będę finansował żadnych badań, które będą miały na celu szkalowanie dobrego imienia Polaków [Minister P. Czarnek: As the head of the Polish Ministry of Education and Science, I will not fund any research aimed at defaming the good name of Poles]. *Radio Maryja*. <https://www.radiomaryja.pl/informacje/min-p-czarnek-jako-szef-polskiego-mein-nie-bede-finansowal-zadnych-badan-ktore-beda-mialy-na-celu-szkalowanie-dobrego-imienia-polakow/>

Figure 4



We also assessed how widespread specific estimations are in these societies. In Poland, **20.4%** of respondents estimated that between 60 and 70% of Poles saved Jews during World War II, and **20.1%** estimated between 70 and 80%. A similar pattern emerged in Hungary, where the most common estimate was also between 60 and 70% (**18.2%** of respondents), followed by between 50 and 60% (**14.8%** of respondents) and between 70 and 80% (**13.7%** of

respondents). In the Czech Republic, **17.9%** of respondents placed their estimate at 60-70% of compatriots who had saved Jews during World War II, followed by 50-60% (**15.7%**) and 70-80% (**14.7%**). Slovakia showed a comparable pattern, with **16.7%** of respondents estimating between 60 and 70%, **16.6%** estimating between 50 and 60%, and **15.7%** estimating between 70 and 80%. Germans obviously gave lower estimations, yet still these estimations were surprisingly high compared to the actual scale of rescue: the most common response among current Germans was between 20 and 30% of compatriots who had saved Jews during World War II (**15.1%** of respondents), **14.4%** of Germans estimated that between 30 and 40% of their compatriots were helping, while only **26.9%** chose the options from 0 to 20%. Austria showed the most varied estimates, with approximately the same number of people choosing all ranges, which suggests that there is no dominant discourse on Austrian behavior toward Jews during the Holocaust (neither true nor distortive). When considering these figures, it is important to take into account that the rescue of Jews in Central and Eastern Europe was an extremely rare behavior, involving only a small minority of the population.

The tendency to overestimate the number of compatriots who rescued Jews varied among respondents depending

on their age, gender, education, political views, and populist attitudes (see Table 4). In Germany, older people were less likely to overestimate the number of the national in-group members who saved Jews during World War II, and a weaker but similar pattern emerged in Austria. By contrast, in Slovakia, older respondents tended to give higher estimates. In Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic, age made no meaningful difference. In most countries, women tended to give higher estimates than men, particularly in Hungary and Slovakia. In Poland, however, the difference between men and women was minimal. In the Czech Republic, the number of years spent in the educational system mattered, as those with more education gave considerably lower estimates. A similar, but weaker, pattern was seen in Hungary, Slovakia, and Poland. In Germany and Austria, years of education made no difference. Regarding the political spectrum, the pattern was particularly clear in Austria, Germany, and Poland, where those who leaned more towards the right gave substantially higher estimates of national rescue. A similar – but weaker – tendency appeared in Hungary. However, in Slovakia and the Czech Republic, people across the political spectrum gave comparable estimates. Populist attitudes showed a consistent link to overestimation of the nation members who saved Jews during World War II in five out

of the six countries, meaning people with stronger populist views gave higher estimates, with Hungary being the sole exception where this relationship was not found.

**Table 4**

*Relationships between the estimation of how many compatriots saved Jews during World War II, and demographic as well as ideological variables.*

Correlation coefficients by country

Country	Age	Gender	Years of education	Political views	Populist attitudes
Hungary	0.05	0.12***	-0.08**	0.11***	0.04
Poland	-0.03	0.02	-0.06*	0.17***	0.19***
Austria	-0.06*	0.06*	-0.04	0.20***	0.23***
Germany	-0.09***	0.08**	0.03	0.22***	0.21***
Slovakia	0.08**	0.08***	-0.05*	-0.04	0.15***
Czech Republic	0.05	0.07**	-0.13***	0.01	0.16***

**Strength and direction of correlation (Pearson's r)**

*Note.* Each number represents the strength of the correlation between two factors. Positive values mean that higher scores on a given factor are related to a higher estimation of compatriots who saved Jews during World War II.

Negative values mean the opposite. For gender, positive values mean that women were more likely to endorse the view than men. For age, positive values indicate that older respondents gave higher estimates. Education was measured as the total number of years spent in the educational system. Positive values mean that more years of education are associated with higher estimations. Political orientation was measured on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*left-wing*) to 7 (*right-wing*). Positive values mean that those who placed themselves further to the right were more likely to estimate a higher percentage of compatriots who saved Jews. \* indicates  $p < .05$ . \*\* indicates  $p < .01$ . \*\*\* indicates  $p < .001$

The results were quite different for the question about how many compatriots had collaborated with the Nazis during World War II (Figure 5). On average, German respondents estimated the highest level of collaboration among their compatriots (**61.4%**), followed closely by Austrian respondents (**59.5%**). Hungarian (**49%**) and Slovak (**48.2%**) respondents placed their estimates near the midpoint, whereas Czech respondents estimated somewhat lower (**42.6%**). Polish respondents gave by far the lowest average estimate of collaboration among their compatriots (**33.7%**).

Furthermore, in Germany, the vast majority of respondents placed their estimates at the high end: **20.6%** of

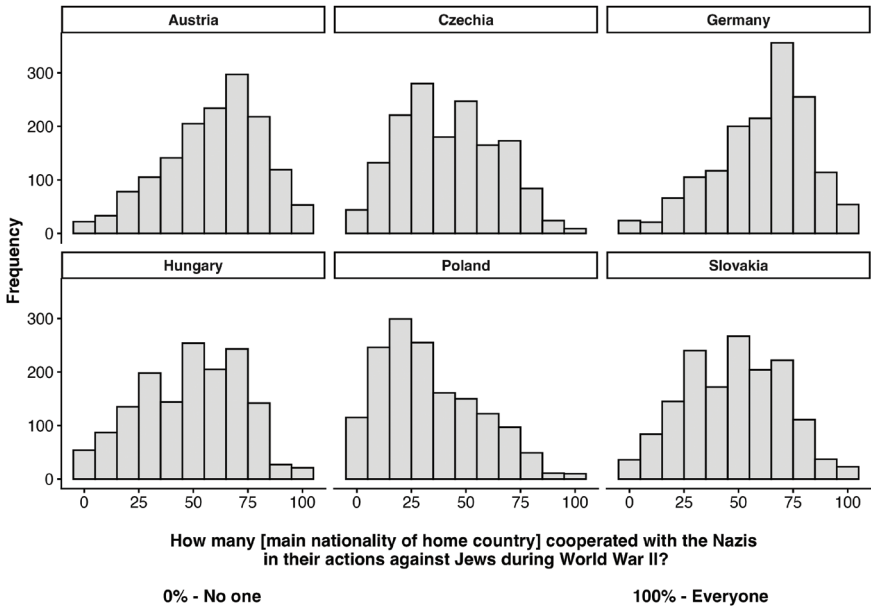
respondents estimated between 60 and 70%, **20.5%** estimated between 70 and 80%, with a further **11.7%** estimating between 80 and 90% and **6.2%** estimating between 90 and 100%, reflecting awareness of widespread societal involvement in Nazi crimes. Austria showed a similar pattern, with the most common estimate being between 60 and 70% of compatriots who had collaborated with the Nazis during World War II (**20.4%** of respondents), followed by between 70 and 80% (**17.2%**) and between 50 and 60% (**13%**). In Hungary, the most common answer was between 60 and 70% of compatriots who had collaborated with the Nazis during World War II (**16.5%**), followed by between 70 and 80% (**13.6%**), between 40 and 50% (**13.2%**) and between 30 and 40% (**13.1%**). Slovakia showed a relatively flat distribution, with the most common estimates at between 60 and 70% (**14.9%**), between 40 and 50% (**14.8%**), between 30 and 40% (**14.1%**) and between 50 and 60% (**13.8%**). In the Czech Republic, the distribution shifted lower, peaking at between 20 and 30% (**16.8%**), followed by between 30 and 40% (**15.5%**), between 40 and 50% (**13.3%**) and between 50 and 60% (**13.1%**). Poland stood out with particularly low estimates: the most frequent responses were between 10 and 20% of compatriots who had collaborated with the Nazis during World War II (**18%** of respondents),

between 20 and 30% (17.7%), between 0 and 10% (16.4%) and between 30 and 40% (15.6%), and only 14.8% of Polish respondents believed that more than half of Poles had collaborated with the Nazis during World War II.

Estimates of the number of compatriots who collaborated with the Nazis also varied depending on demographic characteristics and beliefs. However, the patterns differed from those observed for rescue estimates (see Table 5). Age showed a consistent pattern across all six countries, with younger people providing higher estimates of national ingroup members who had collaborated with the Nazis during World War II than older respondents. This tendency was strongest in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, and Austria, and weaker in Germany and Hungary. In Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary, women gave higher estimates of collaboration than men, while in the other countries, the difference between the genders was minimal. Years of education played almost no role across the six countries. Political views showed a clear pattern only in some countries. In Hungary, those who had more right-wing views gave lower estimates of compatriots who had collaborated with the Nazis during World War II. A similar – but weaker – tendency appeared in Germany, Poland, and the Czech Republic. In Austria and Slovakia, there was

no relationship between political orientation and collaboration estimates. Populist attitudes were generally unrelated to the estimation of how many national ingroup members had collaborated with the Nazis during World War II. However, in Poland and the Czech Republic, people with stronger populist views gave somewhat higher estimates of collaboration.

Figure 5



**Table 5**

*Relationships between the estimation of how many compatriots had collaborated with the Nazis during World War II, and demographic as well as ideological variables.*

Correlation coefficients by country

Country	Age	Gender	Years of education	Political views	Populist attitudes
Hungary	-0.06*	0.05*	0.01	-0.09***	0.02
Poland	-0.13***	0.16***	-0.02	-0.05*	0.07**
Austria	-0.10***	-0.04	-0.02	0.03	-0.02
Germany	-0.06*	0.02	0.03	-0.07**	0.03
Slovakia	-0.16***	0.01	-0.03	-0.02	0.04
Czech Republic	-0.20***	0.13***	-0.01	-0.07**	0.07**

Strength and direction of correlation (Pearson's r)

*Note.* Each number represents the strength of the relationship between two factors. Positive values mean that higher scores on a given factor are related to a higher estimation of compatriots who had collaborated with the Nazis during World War II. Negative values mean the opposite. For gender, positive values mean that women were more likely to endorse the view than men. For age, positive values mean

that older respondents gave higher estimates. Education was measured as the total number of years spent in the educational system. Positive values mean that more years of education are associated with higher estimations. Political orientation was measured on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*left-wing*) to 7 (*right-wing*). Positive values mean that those who placed themselves further to the right were more likely to estimate that a higher percentage of compatriots had collaborated with the Nazis. \* indicates  $p < .05$ . \*\* indicates  $p < .01$ . \*\*\* indicates  $p < .001$ .

## HISTORICAL POPULISM: INSTRUMENTALIZING THE PAST

History as a field of study strives to uncover historical truth, but issues of collective memory and historical politics often distort it. One way of perceiving history is through instrumentalism – an approach that tends to ignore truth in favor of national interests. This populist understanding of history has been discovered in a seminal work on lay theories on history by Adrian Wójcik and Maria Lewicka.<sup>14</sup> To measure the prevalence of historical instrumentalism, we asked participants to respond to three statements: (1) “Knowledge of the past should serve the current interests of our nation”; (2) “More important than historical truth is that it serves the current interests of the nation” and (3) “Sometimes it

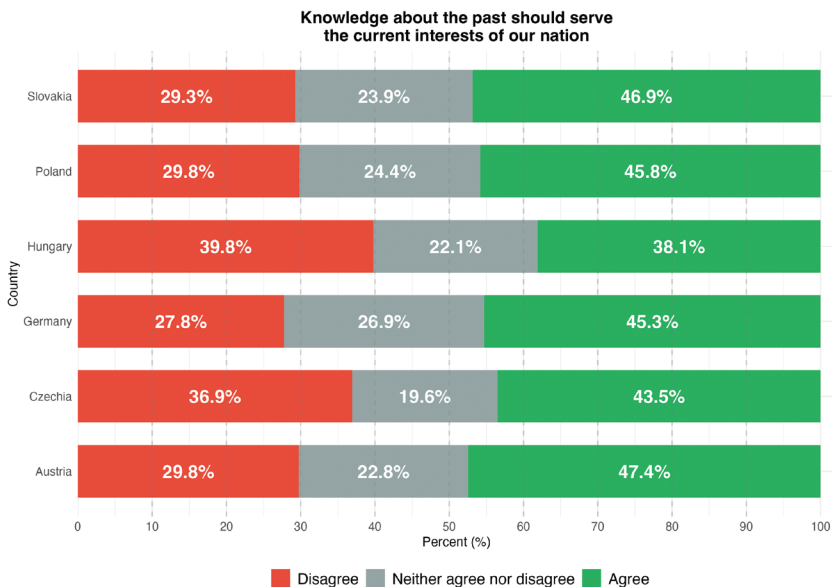
<sup>14</sup> Wójcik, A. D., & Lewicka, M. (2022). Between discovery and exploitation of history: Lay theories of history and their connections to national identity and interest in history. *Memory Studies*, 15(6), 1497-1516. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17506980221134507>

is better to remain silent about certain historical events to protect the image of our nation”.

In the six countries surveyed, agreement with the statement that knowledge of the past should serve the current interests of their nation ranged from **38.1%** to **47.4%** (Figure 6). Agreement was highest in Austria (**47.4%**), Slovakia (**46.9%**), Poland (**45.8%**), and Germany (**45.3%**), and lower in the Czech Republic (**43.5%**) and Hungary (**38.1%**). At the same time, disagreement was highest in Hungary (**39.8%**) and the Czech Republic (**36.9%**), compared to **29.8%** in both Poland and Austria, **29.3%** in Slovakia, and **27.8%** in Germany. Overall, such responses suggest moderate attitudes towards historical instrumentalism.

**Figure 6**

*Percentage shares of “Agree” and “Disagree” responses to the statement: Knowledge about the past should serve the current interests of our nation.*



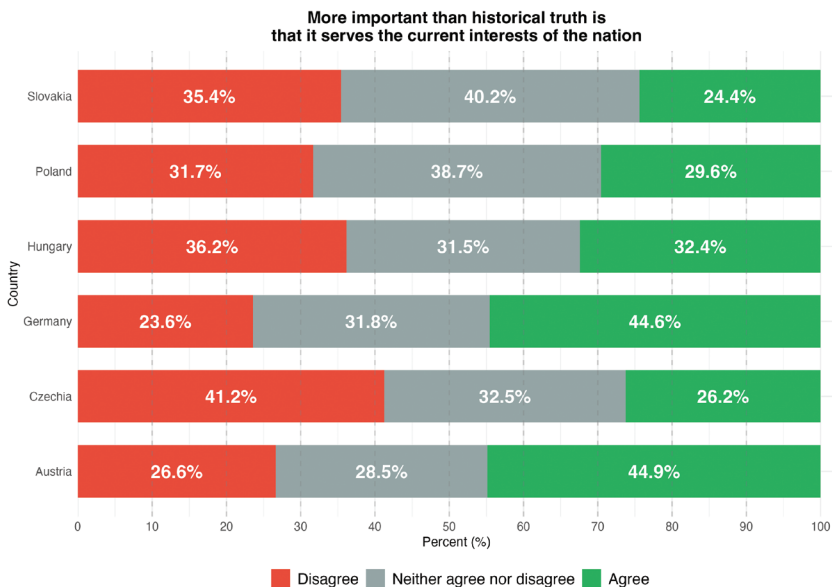
*Note.* Since the values are rounded to one decimal place, the total percentage may not add up to exactly 100%.

Responses to whether the nation's current interests are more important than historical truth were also moderate, but respondents were more likely to choose a neutral answer (Figure 7). Austria (44.9%) and Germany (44.6%) showed the highest agreement with the statement, whereas Slovakia (24.4%) and the Czech Republic (26.2%) showed the lowest, with Poland (29.6%) and Hungary (32.4%) falling in between. Neutral answers were especially common in Slovakia (40.2%) and Poland (38.7%), followed by the Czech Republic (32.5%), Germany (31.8%), Hungary (31.5%), and Austria (28.5%).

In contrast to previous questions, reactions to the statement that it is better to avoid historical events to protect the national image were clearly negative (Figure 8). Disagreement was strongest in the Czech Republic (69.3%) and Slovakia (63.5%), followed by Austria (57.1%), Germany (56%), Hungary (55.2%), and Poland (54.4%). Agreement with this statement was low across all countries, ranging from 12.3% in the Czech Republic and 14.3% in Slovakia to 20.1% in Hungary, 20.5% in Poland, 20.8% in Germany, and 20.9% in Austria. Perhaps that particular form of historical instrumentalism is perceived as the most extreme and provokes the strongest resistance.

**Figure 7**

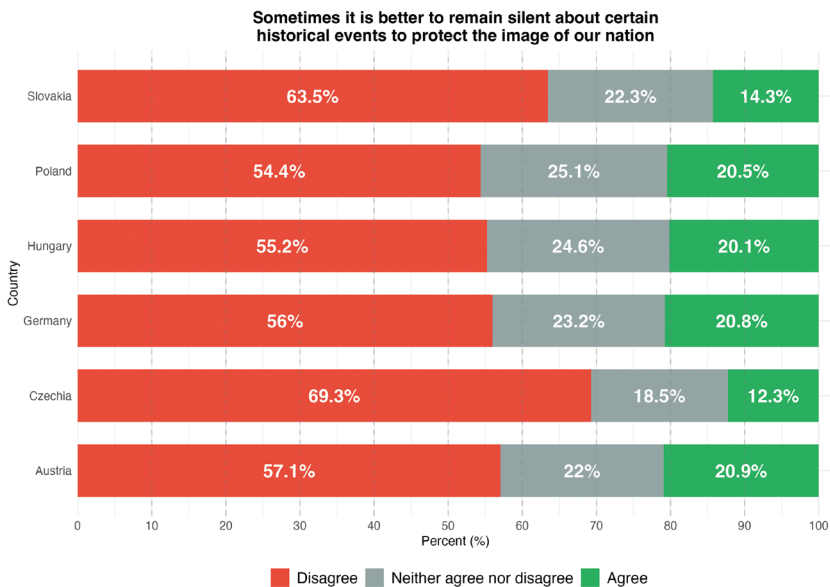
*Percentage shares of “Agree” and “Disagree” responses to the statement: More important than historical truth is that it serves the current interests of the nation*



*Note.* Since the values are rounded to one decimal place, the total percentage may not add up to exactly 100%.

**Figure 8**

*Percentage shares of “Agree” and “Disagree” responses to the statement: Sometimes it is better to remain silent about certain historical events to protect the image of our nation.*



*Note.* Since the values are rounded to one decimal place, the total percentage may not add up to exactly 100%.

The three measures of historical instrumentalism described earlier form a consistent scale. Therefore, for the rest of the analysis, they were combined into a single score. Looking at each measure on its own helped show how these attitudes break down across the population, but when it comes to assessing how they relate to other factors, a single composite score is more reliable.

Historical instrumentalism was positively associated with all major forms of Holocaust distortion across most countries (see Table 6). The link with competitive victimhood was found in all countries, strongest in Austria, Germany, and Hungary, and weaker but still positive in Poland, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic. Historical instrumentalism was also associated with greater estimates of the number of compatriots who saved Jews during World War II in all six countries, most notably in Austria and Germany. Greater historical instrumentalism was associated with a higher willingness to support the idea that Israeli actions toward Palestinians are similar to those of Nazi Germany, in five of the six countries. In Poland, however, the association was nearly nonexistent. Across all six countries, agreement with the statement that Palestinian actions toward Jews are similar to those of the Nazis showed positive associations with historical instrumentalism. Estimates of national collaboration were, in turn, the most inconsistent.

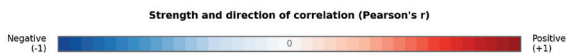
In Hungary, greater historical instrumentalism was associated with lower estimates of collaboration. In Poland and the Czech Republic, however, the relationship was reversed. In Austria, Germany, and Slovakia, no meaningful relationship emerged.

**Table 6**

*Relationships between historical instrumentalism and Holocaust distortions*

Correlation coefficients by country

Country	Victimhood competition	Comparison of Israel's actions to Nazi actions	Comparison of Palestinian actions to Nazi actions	Saving Jews estimation	Collaboration estimation
Hungary	0.31***	0.11***	0.10***	0.21***	-0.08**
Poland	0.19***	0.04	0.16***	0.13***	0.07**
Austria	0.41***	0.20***	0.15***	0.33***	-0.01
Germany	0.36***	0.15***	0.12***	0.30***	0.03
Slovakia	0.21***	0.09***	0.11***	0.12***	-0.01
Czech Republic	0.24***	0.17***	0.09***	0.16***	0.09***



*Note.* Each number represents the strength of correlation between two factors. Positive values indicate that higher levels

of historical instrumentalism are associated with higher scores on the given distortion measure. \* indicates  $p < .05$ . \*\* indicates  $p < .01$ . \*\*\* indicates  $p < .001$ .

The demographic and political correlates of historical instrumentalism were only partially consistent across the six countries (see Table 7). Age played no consistent role except in Poland, where older respondents scored slightly higher in historical instrumentalism, and in Hungary, where the opposite tendency was observed. Gender differences were also inconsistent. Women scored higher in Hungary, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic, men scored higher in Poland and Austria, and the difference was negligible in Germany. More years of education were most clearly linked to lower levels of historical instrumentalism in Hungary and the Czech Republic, with a weaker pattern in Slovakia and no relationship in the remaining three countries. Right-wing political orientation was associated with stronger historical instrumentalism in Hungary, Poland, Austria, and Germany, most markedly in the latter two. No meaningful relationship emerged in Slovakia, and a small opposite tendency appeared in the Czech Republic. Populist attitudes were the strongest and most consistent predictor across all six countries, especially in Austria, Germany, and Poland.

**Table 7**

*Relationships between historical instrumentalism and demographic as well as ideological variables.*

Correlation coefficients by country

Country	Age	Gender	Years of education	Political views	Populist attitudes
Hungary	-0.06*	0.11***	-0.20***	0.20***	0.14***
Poland	0.11***	-0.09***	-0.04	0.12***	0.30***
Austria	-0.02	-0.06*	-0.02	0.27***	0.37***
Germany	-0.01	0.03	0.04	0.27***	0.36***
Slovakia	0.03	0.10***	-0.07*	0.01	0.26***
Czech Republic	-0.05	0.08**	-0.17***	-0.05*	0.20***

**Strength and direction of correlation (Pearson's r)**

Negative (-1)  Positive (+1)

*Note.* Each number represents the strength of correlation between two factors. Positive values indicate that higher scores on a given factor are associated with greater historical instrumentalism. Negative values mean the opposite. For gender, positive values mean that women were more likely to endorse the view than men. For age, positive values mean that older respondents were more likely to endorse the view. Education was measured as the total number of years spent in the educational system. Positive values mean

that more years of education are associated with a higher level of endorsement. Political orientation was measured on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*left-wing*) to 7 (*right-wing*). Positive values mean that those who placed themselves further to the right were more likely to endorse the distortion. \* indicates  $p < .05$ . \*\* indicates  $p < .01$ . \*\*\* indicates  $p < .001$



## **HISTORICAL POPULISM IN THE STATE AND THE CLASSROOM**

The survey data presented above show that populist attitudes are consistently associated with Holocaust distortions across all six countries. To understand how populist politics impacts Holocaust education in practice, we conducted interviews with teachers in Poland, Hungary, and Slovakia. The interviews describe how Holocaust education works inside schools – what institutions expect, what colleagues and administrators encourage or discourage, how communities react, and what practical constraints teachers face. The analysis focused on three layers of the teachers' narratives: national, local and individual.

The national level primarily refers to government policy and top-down discourse on historical policy. The local level concerns schools' surrounding community and local history. The final layer, the individual level, relates to personal identity and teachers' moral attributes and choices.

## INSTITUTIONAL NARRATIVE: RIGHT-WING POPULISM AND THE POLITICS OF HISTORY

In recent years, politicians have begun to use distorted narratives regarding the Holocaust as a populist tool that restructures national identity. The most prominent example of such distortion is moral whitewashing – a practice that minimizes unethical behavior in favor of constructing a moral group image. However, the degree and form of this distortion varies from country to country. In Poland, teachers described a strong tendency for Polish narratives and the theme of national identity to focus on moral superiority. Importantly, such narratives often emphasize the heroic acts, while ignoring the complicity of some Poles in the Holocaust. The right-wing government in Poland contributed to this by proposing a law that targeted Holocaust researchers investigating the participation of Poles in the Holocaust. One teacher described the effect of the proposed law as follows:

It cannot be that, the day before the ceremonies at the Auschwitz Museum, MPs propose an amendment [to the Institute of National Remembrance bill, known as the “holocaust law”] investigating those

who accuse the Polish nation of Nazi crimes. This had a chilling effect. Teachers stopped teaching about it.

(PL2, history teacher, male, 64 y.o., Poland)

Importantly, populist politics in Poland did not end with the search for an internal enemy. One teacher reported that during a conference organized by the Institute of National Remembrance, he heard narratives that denied the involvement of Poles, saying that the only atrocities were committed by Germans.

Similar mechanisms in the context of renouncing responsibility for one's own nation could also be observed in Hungary. In this context, one Hungarian teacher explained existing simplified political narratives, where certain groups avoid addressing the topic of Hungarian wrongdoing, because they perceive it as excessive:

Now we understand what the Germans did. And it is somewhat noticeable that the resistance (...) does not say or does not want to deal with it because it feels that it is over, so that we are placing too much emphasis on it, perhaps wanting to portray the Hungarians in a bad light.

(HU10, history teacher, 57 y.o., Hungary)

Whitewashing tendencies were sometimes highlighted by Slovak teachers. In Slovakia, public debate is reshaped through right-wing politics and the communist era:

I would say that the greater downplaying comes with the recent period of communism; perhaps such downplaying was greater in the 1990s of this period, or even... perhaps around 2010, when... it had a stronger presence in politics. The extreme right-wing in parliament, too.

(SVK2, history teacher, 43 y.o., Slovakia)

In general, teachers emphasized the presence of political influence on education and national collective memory, but its impact varied between countries. According to accounts of teachers in Poland, increasingly polarized rhetoric encourages distortions of the Holocaust narrative that serve to strengthen national identity through moral whitewashing. Teachers often described a strong emphasis on national heroism and moral superiority, while pointing to narratives that minimize the actions of wartime states. Hungarian teachers mentioned more indirect means, such as the obligation to use new, centrally distributed textbooks or the restriction of extracurricular activities in general. A common aspect of history teaching was that the Holocaust was

mainly a part of Jewish history, and responsibility primarily lay with Nazi Germany. While collaboration as a topic was mentioned, both the positive ingroup moral exemplars and the suffering of the national majority received similar attention, creating the impression that the local population was a mere bystander or even a victim, rather than a perpetrator of the Holocaust.

#### **LOCAL NARRATIVES: IMPORTANCE OF THE LOCAL COMMUNITY**

In terms of local narratives, teachers described them as an intersection of state-level narratives and specific local communities. A recurring theme was pressure to avoid sensitive topics – even when no formal restrictions existed. One teacher reported that the principal generally discouraged teaching “controversial” aspects of Holocaust history. In practice, even a slight suggestion to avoid the topic functioned as a limit. Those limits were often set not by school authorities but by parents in the school community. According to one teacher:

And some parents are currently being given a tool, through informed consent, to influence or suppress

certain topics (...) they disagree with, such as discussing disinformation or hoaxes in class.

(SVK2, history teacher, 43 y.o., Slovakia)

Another factor shaping local Holocaust education concerned regional differences within the countries. Teachers pointed out that in some areas, local identity is closely tied to a nationalist version of history, which can influence school approaches to the Holocaust:

There are certain regions of Poland, where this terribly nationalistic version, defending the Polish nation (...) is a characteristic feature.

(PL2, history teacher, 64 y.o., Poland)

In Hungary, teachers also described how these norms may coexist with stigma towards marginalized groups from nearby regions, especially when discussing the Roma Holocaust:

So when the Roma Holocaust comes up, they can express themselves even more strongly, but when it comes to Jews, they also see many films and hear different stories that are related to world domination, money, and many other things. And because of

this, they can express themselves quite sharply and less sensitively.

(HU01, history and Hungarian teacher, Hungary)

Another Hungarian teacher noticed that students do not feel empathy with Roma people, “because they consider this social group to be useless from a societal point of view, and they say that it’s not such a big deal” (HU11, history teacher, 49 y.o., Hungary).

Overall, reflection on Holocaust narratives at the local level shows how narratives imposed by the state shape local reality. In the case of Poland and Hungary, state policy has a huge impact on Holocaust education in specific localities. In Slovakia, however, teachers noted the influence of parents on teaching, and the impact of state narratives was indirect – though it often did not pertain strictly to the Holocaust, but rather to other topics that polarize Slovak society.

#### **INDIVIDUAL NARRATIVES: PERSONAL ASPECTS OF TEACHING THE HOLOCAUST**

On the individual level, Holocaust narratives in the local and national context shape teachers’ individual experience with Holocaust education. One of the most common

themes was self-censorship. Although many teachers denied being influenced by their community or state narratives, their statements revealed a great deal of anger and fear regarding freedom of teaching. As one teacher put it: “They wanted to make me afraid to discuss this topic with my students” (PL2, history teacher, 64 y.o., Poland). At the same time, many teachers presented strong dedication towards Holocaust education. As one teacher said:

(...) I participated in a training course on the use of video interviews in 21st-century education, and I became so passionate about it that I developed a lot of digital teaching materials myself, so I live and breathe this (...)

(HUII, history teacher, 49 y.o., Hungary)

Such mission framing in teachers often appeared alongside efforts to compensate for limited curriculum time, low-quality materials, or weak institutional support.

In contrast, several teachers expressed moral distancing, presenting Holocaust education as one topic among many that must be covered, rather than as something requiring special attention. This stance was linked to practical constraints and exam-oriented pressures, and it often carried a tone of resignation. One teacher reflected:

(...) if teachers answer honestly, these interviews will turn out poorly, but for it to turn out well, there would have to be a subject on the Holocaust. (...) students are really fed up and have too much of this subject, so the Holocaust is part of history... perhaps an extraordinary part, but still a part. You just have to do your job. No one will pay special attention to the Holocaust on their final exams, but rather to various questions from different eras. Unfortunately.

(PL1, history teacher, 57 y.o., Poland)

At the individual level, teachers deal with institutional and local narratives in different ways. Some expressed resignation and powerlessness in the face of curriculum requirements and the school community's expectations. In contrast, others were passionate and treated teaching about the Holocaust as a moral obligation. Regardless of how they coped with the pressure, almost every teacher admitted that their scope of action is limited – either to themselves and their feelings of guilt in the case of intense powerlessness, or to the local community, with state narratives beyond their control.



## **HISTORICAL DISTORTION AND POPULISM: THE SUMMARY**

Across all six countries surveyed, populist attitudes are the strongest and most consistent factor associated with beliefs that distort the history of the Holocaust – stronger than age, education, gender, or political self-identification on the left-right spectrum. Whether it is comparing Israel or Palestine to Nazi Germany, or claiming that one’s own nation suffered more than the Jews, people who hold a populist worldview are consistently more likely to endorse such distortions. This pattern is not limited to one country or political tradition – it appears in all six national contexts studied, from Poland and Hungary to Germany and Austria. At the same time, interviews with teachers in Poland, Hungary, and Slovakia show that populist historical politics at the state level does not remain at the level of political rhetoric – it permeates classrooms through social pressure, institutional expectations, and teacher self-censorship.

As a result, educational environments that are intended to counteract historical distortions are themselves shaped and constrained by the political climate that promotes them. The survey data also show that **59.3%** of respondents on average across the six countries rejected the idea that uncomfortable historical facts should be silenced in order to protect the country's image. The distortion of history, therefore, does not operate through open calls for silence, but through more subtle means – moral whitewashing, selective emphasis on national heroism, and competing narratives about victims – which are more difficult for both teachers and media professionals to identify and address.

## METHOD

### SURVEY

The survey was conducted between 13 June and 23 July 2025 using the CAWI (Computer-Assisted Web Interviewing) method. In total,  $N = 9,157$  respondents participated in the study across six countries: Austria ( $N = 1,505$ ), the Czech Republic ( $N = 1,559$ ), Germany ( $N = 1,527$ ), Poland ( $N = 1,515$ ), Slovakia ( $N = 1,541$ ), and Hungary ( $N = 1,510$ ). The average interview length was approximately 30 minutes. Invitations to participate in the study were distributed in a way that allowed for cross-quota control of key demographic characteristics, including gender, age, and size of place of residence, in order to ensure that the achieved samples were representative of the adult populations in each country. Quotas were established on the basis of data from the European Social Survey.

Data collection was carried out through online research panels. In Poland, interviews were conducted using the research panel operated by ARC Rynek i Opinia. In Austria, the Czech Republic, Germany, Slovakia, and Hungary, interviews were conducted via the Syno International research panel, a member of the global ESOMAR organization. The questionnaire was programmed using CADAS software. To ensure high quality, the completed dataset was subject to verification procedures, including reviewing the completeness of responses and verifying answers to control questions. Interviews that did not meet quality standards were removed from the final dataset.

## INTERVIEWS WITH TEACHERS

We also conducted qualitative research in the form of interviews with history teachers and Holocaust educators in Poland, Hungary, and Slovakia. The interviews were semi-structured – each interviewee received the same set of questions with little or no deviation from the plan. The script included questions about changes in Holocaust education over time, national issues such as historical policy and right-wing radicalization, and the individual and local conditions of teachers in school environments. At the beginning, we conducted

one face-to-face interview in each of these countries to test the interview script. In the first round of interviews, we recruited teachers who we knew had a particular interest and expertise in the Holocaust. The teams then continued their work, conducting another two interviews in Slovakia, four interviews in Poland, and twelve interviews in Hungary, for a total of 21 interviews to be analyzed, including the pilot. Participants were interviewed in their native languages.

In Poland, we interviewed three Holocaust specialists who are history teachers, one Holocaust educator who originally taught English, and one history teacher interested in 20th-century history, particularly World War II. First, the three interviews mentioned were conducted face-to-face, while the last two were conducted remotely due to the need for further travel. Among the teachers, two taught in Warsaw, Poland's largest city, while the others taught in medium-sized cities – Toruń, Bydgoszcz, and Kraków. The entire Polish sample consisted of men.

In Hungary, we conducted 13 interviews with secondary school teachers of history, Hungarian grammar, and literature. Two of the teachers were not only practicing teachers but also experts in history, specifically Holocaust teaching. Some interviews were conducted in person, others online. Five teachers were from secondary schools in Budapest, and the others from medium-sized countryside towns.

In Slovakia, we interviewed three Holocaust specialists, all of whom were history teachers. The second subject they taught was either civics or the Slovak language and literature. The first was teaching in a high school in the capital of Bratislava, the second in a high school in the second-largest Slovak city, Košice, and the third in a vocational school in a small town in the Bratislava region. The second and the third teachers had also participated in IHRA-supported teacher trainings in the past. We interviewed one woman and two men. While the first interview was conducted in person, the second and third were conducted online.

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*Holocaust distortions and populist politics in Central Europe*

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