


## Unknowing, indifferent, or committed: Relations between age and assessments of the German population's involvement and inaction during the time of National Socialism

Michael Papendick,<sup>1,2,3</sup>  Jonas H. Rees,<sup>1,2,3</sup> and Andreas Zick<sup>1,2,4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Institute for Interdisciplinary Research on Conflict and Violence, Bielefeld University, Bielefeld, Germany, <sup>2</sup>Research Institute Social Cohesion, Bielefeld University, Bielefeld, Germany, <sup>3</sup>Department of Social Psychology, Bielefeld University, Bielefeld, Germany, and <sup>4</sup>Faculty of Education Science, Bielefeld University, Bielefeld, Germany

We examine German participants' assessment of the time of National Socialism. Especially for younger generations, shifts in the culture of remembrance may change their assessments of historical events. We argue that factors such as increased formal education about the topic and decreased personal contact with contemporary witnesses can weaken attributional biases (e.g., ingroup favouritism) in the assessment of the role of the German population during the time of National Socialism. We use data from a German representative sample ( $N = 1,000$ ) and focus on the links between participants' age and the estimated involvement of the German population under National Socialism as perpetrators, victims, helpers, and "bystanders," as well as the agreement with explanations why the general population did not act against National Socialist crimes. Younger participants estimated the proportions of perpetrators and bystanders within the German population as higher and were less likely to agree that Germans did not know about the systematic killings. Older participants were more likely to agree with situational explanations for the population's inaction (i.e., that Germans did not know or did not have an opportunity to act against the crimes). We find a positive relation between a more critical perspective on the involvement of the population in the past and participants' feelings of responsibility in the present.

**Keywords:** bystanders, culture of remembrance, historical consciousness, historical learning, National Socialism.

The German National Socialist past, the time of the Nazi dictatorship from 1933 to 1945, and the systematic exclusion, persecution, and extermination of millions of humans during the reign of the National Socialist regime have become fundamental features of the German national identity and collective memory (e.g., Liu & Hilton, 2005). Besides more recent historical events, such as the German division and reunification, the time of National Socialism tends to emerge as the most salient period within the German culture of remembrance (Rees, Zick, et al., 2019). This is reflected not only in common and well-established forms of historical remembrance, such as national memorial days for the victims of National Socialism and memorial sites of former concentration camps, but in a large variety of forms and practices of remembrance, such as literature, documentaries and movies, and even video games (e.g.,

Paintbucket Games, 2020). While Germans' confrontation with their National Socialist past includes tendencies to deny, suppress, and relativize (Connerton, 2008; Welzer et al., 2014), and the status quo of the German culture of remembrance has been attacked by extreme right-wing parties, the general importance of the topic appears indisputable in large parts of German society (Rees, Papendick, & Zick, 2019; Rees, Zick, et al., 2019).

The time of National Socialist tyranny, the regime's crimes and its victims, are not only the content of collective commemoration but have become essential aspects of historical and political education, especially human rights education, both in Germany and elsewhere (Bromley & Russell, 2010; Salmons, 2003; Short & Reed, 2017). One of the more salient examples of such education may be learning about the links between the National Socialists' atrocities and the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights, with the Holocaust providing countless examples of extreme violations of these rights. The potential to utilize historical events or periods such as the time of National Socialism for human rights education, the communication of values and the sensitization for racist and extreme right-wing attitudes

*Correspondence:* Michael Papendick, Institute for Interdisciplinary Research on Conflict and Violence, Bielefeld University, 33615 Bielefeld, Germany. E-mail: michael.papendick@uni-bielefeld.de

Received 6 February 2020; accepted 21 December 2020.

appears obvious and expectations regarding the impact of such communication are high. The educational approaches of historical and political education, and the effects of confrontation with the topic, however, have been called into question (Bilewicz, Witkowska, Stubig, et al., 2017; Marks, 2007; Pampel, 2007). The idea of a *historical consciousness* (Ammert et al., 2015; Rüsen, 2004) that originates from a confrontation with historical events and reveals opportunities for individuals' actions in the present may sound intuitive but lacks empirical evidence. In a study in the specific context of education about the Holocaust, Stubig (2015) found that learning about National Socialism among students led to decreases in their self-reported national pride and other positive feelings toward their nationality, but not to increases of tolerance or decreases of xenophobia or anti-Semitism. Eckmann (2010) discusses the challenges of utilizing Holocaust Education as a tool for human rights education and the risks of the oversimplification that learning about historical stereotypes will "magically" transfer to an increased awareness of stereotypes and prejudices today. Other authors such as Bilewicz, Witkowska, Stefaniak, and Imhoff (2017), Marks (2007), and Pampel (2007) have discussed the specific challenges of Holocaust Education and a number of psychological and educational obstacles to *learning from history*. One of the aspects Marks (2007) identifies to be underrepresented in education about National Socialism and the Holocaust is the role of the German population during this time. Education about the German population's attitudes, and the lack of action on the part of "bystanders," as a central societal condition for the National Socialists' crimes appears less prevalent compared to education about the groups of the victims and the perpetrators. This bystander perspective may, however, be particularly helpful for understanding the societal processes that preceded and helped enable the extermination of millions. From a psychological perspective, historical sources representing the German majority society during National Socialism and the Holocaust, such as diaries and photographs (Kellner, 2011; Longerich, 2009), deliver valuable insights into observations and reactions of those not actively involved. These insights may function as starting points for individuals to reflect on concepts such as social responsibility, group-focused enmity, and the role of civil societies in laying the grounds for unthinkable crimes (Morina & Thijs, 2018; Zick et al., 2008). Sources representing bystander perspectives, such as the diaries written by Friedrich Kellner from 1939 to 1945, give insight into German citizens' past reality of life in the course of the events of German National Socialism beyond victimhood and perpetration, and reflect the circumstances and developments beyond direct involvement. These sources may have an

increased potential to facilitate recipients' identification with the actors and to mirror individuals' possibilities and inabilities for taking action during social aberrations. Therefore, they may function as critical correctives for bystander behaviour with regard to current societal issues and for tendencies to overestimate individual courage or to underestimate the influence of developments in societies as a whole. Due to the variety and the lack of a more systematic preparation of the historical sources, the topic of attitudes and behaviours of those Germans who were not directly involved, but are often referred to as bystanders, has long been underrepresented in the historical examination of National Socialism. Authors such as Barnett (1999), Gellately (2002), Hilberg (1992), and Longerich (2009) illustrated and discussed the diverse group of Germans that "stood by" the Nazis' crimes and revised the myth of a German population that was "unknowing" or "uninvolved." The authors conclude that in many cases the German population actively participated in or benefitted from the processes of exclusion, persecution, and murdering of Jews and other groups. Knowledge and awareness of the regime's crimes among large parts of the German population during the time of National Socialism appear unquestionable according to historical research (e.g., Barnett, 1999; Gellately, 2002; Longerich, 2009). Becoming aware of the German population's involvement in the historical reflection may be interpreted as an indicator for the acknowledgement and understanding of the complexity of the processes that enabled the systematic National Socialist crimes. It may further be regarded as an essential presupposition for an appropriate attribution of responsibilities and, eventually, the deduction of "lessons from the past."

While the role of bystanders among the German population has been investigated from historical and sociological perspectives, there is little social psychological research on how Germans today perceive the population that lived during the era of National Socialism and to what extent they attribute knowledge or responsibility to the population of Nazi Germany. Imhoff et al. (2017) compared differences in attribution for the Holocaust between Germans, Poles, and Israeli Jews. In their study, they asked participants for a number of potential explanations for "regular people" becoming "ruthless killers" (Imhoff et al., 2017, p. 908) and distinguished between dispositional and situational explanations. While dispositional arguments refer to assumptions such as anti-Semitic and racist attitudes or an authoritarian personality (Adorno et al., 2019) widely shared by the German population, situational perspectives propose extraordinary circumstances causing extraordinary behaviour of ordinary people (e.g., Mandel, 2002). Results reveal that German participants attributed the Holocaust and the

crimes of their ancestors to situational far more than to dispositional factors. This attributional pattern was also reported in a comparable study by Doosje and Branscombe (2003), in which they investigated patterns of intergroup attributional biases regarding the explanation for historically negative behaviours of groups. A sample of German participants attributed Germans' mistreatment of Jews during the Second World War to situational instead of dispositional reasons and this pattern was more pronounced for the explanation of ingroups' compared to outgroups' transgressions. Both studies, however, focused on the attributional explanations for the behaviour of the specific group of German perpetrators (Imhoff et al., 2017) or Germans in general (Doosje & Branscombe, 2003), but did not explicitly examine the role of the German population and did not focus on potential differences among national subsamples.

With the present paper, we aim to shed further light on contemporary Germans' perspectives on the complex conditions of National Socialism and the Holocaust and especially on whether Germans of different ages differ with regard to their assessment of the past. We focus on the assessment of the German population's involvement in National Socialism as perpetrators, victims, helpers of potential victims, and bystanders, and investigate the attributional patterns of German participants when explaining why Germans "back then" did not intervene in the systematic persecution and murdering of others. We assume participants differ by age due to an increased temporal distance from the time of National Socialism and due to changes in Germans' confrontation with the topic. In the theoretical framework of the culture of remembrance, the increasing temporal distance from National Socialism and the continuing demise of contemporary witnesses constitute a break in the collective memory of Germans (Assmann, 1992; Halbwachs, 1992). This break can mark a loss of knowledge and a potential detachment from history (Cornelißen, 2015; Knigge, 2010; Körber Foundation, 2017). At the same time, from a social psychological perspective this detachment could foster a differing assessment of the German population's role during National Socialism. According to social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), individuals' judgments about a group's behaviour depend on their relation to the group. Individuals who more strongly identify with a social group will be more likely to strive for positive distinctiveness for their ingroup and thereby maintain or regain their own positive social identity. One strategy for achieving this is ingroup favouritism, a tendency to respond more positively to members of one's ingroup, and a group-serving biased attribution of positive and negative behaviour (e.g., Bilewicz, Witkowska, Stefaniak, & Imhoff, 2017;

Khan & Liu, 2008). This biased judgment is reflected in the attribution of ingroup members' positive behaviour to dispositional, and ingroup members' negative behaviour to situational characteristics, to maintain a positive ingroup identity. The extent of an ingroup bias depends, among other factors, on the strength of individuals' identification with the ingroup. High identifiers are more likely to show strongly biased judgments (Spears et al., 1997).

In the context of the present study, we expect younger Germans to show a more critical assessment of the German population's involvement during National Socialism and to be less likely to agree with situational explanations for the group's negative behaviour. Conversely, we expect older Germans to show a less critical assessment and an increased likelihood to agree with situational explanations to exonerate the German population. Two factors we discuss here to explain these differing assessments of the past are the amount of personal contact with Germans who lived through the time of National Socialism and the amount of formal education about the topic. In their studies, Welzer et al. (2014) examined 40 family conversations and 142 individual interviews within German families, covering three generations. Results show that approximately two thirds of the family conversations about National Socialism covered narrations about the victimhood or heroism of ancestors. The authors regard this as the result of two mechanisms: The generation of German witnesses of the time tends to selectively emphasize personal sufferings and sacrifices while narrations and critical reflections of transgressions are rare; simultaneously, children and grandchildren tend to victimize and heroize their parents or grandparents and to selectively reinterpret or avoid specific narrations to preserve the moral integrity of their ancestors. The authors argue that these narrative structures distort descendants' assessments of the historical events and of the role of the German population during National Socialism. Our studies (Rees, Papendick, & Zick, 2019; Rees, Zick, et al., 2019) reinforce the impression that narratives about helpers and victims among ancestors under National Socialism are more likely to be passed on in German families than narratives about perpetrators. A decrease in confrontation with these distorted narratives due to decreasing contact with Germans who lived during the time of National Socialism could lead to a decrease of biased assumptions about the time (e.g., about the involvement of the German population). At the same time, a greater degree of formal education about National Socialism, focusing on historical facts, could strengthen more objective assessments of the past. An inspection of current curricula in German schools shows that the topic of National Socialism is

firmly anchored in history classes in all German federal states (German Ministry of Culture, 2005). The curricula also involve visits to memorial sites and the training of German teachers to improve their competencies in educating about National Socialism. An analysis of the representation of the Holocaust in German schoolbooks (Carrier et al., 2015) concludes that these books present the historical events in a particularly objective and documentary way. Our studies (Rees, Papendick, & Zick, 2019; Rees, Zick, et al., 2019) confirm that school education is one of the central points of contact with the topic of National Socialism for younger Germans (i.e., most of the initial visits to former concentration camps take place in the context of school education). While learning about National Socialism is firmly anchored in German school education nowadays, older generations' education about the topic was less substantial and also less self-evident (Dudek, 2013; Meseth, 2005). This was not only due to an insufficient accounting for the past in the post-war generation but also due to the National Socialist entanglement of functionaries in post-war society, including educational institutions. We assume that these shifts in the culture of remembrance and Germans' confrontation with the topic of National Socialism result in differing assessments of the past.

To sum up, we hypothesize that participants' age is related with their confrontation with and assessment of the time of National Socialism, specifically of the involvement and behaviour of the German population. First, we test for the prediction that participants' age is linked with their ways of confronting the topic of National Socialism. We predict that younger Germans report more formal education in school and less personal contact with contemporary witnesses, reflecting changes in the German culture of remembrance. We further predict age to be linked with assessments of the German population during the era of National Socialism. Specifically, we predict that younger Germans perceive the population as more involved in National Socialist crimes and are less likely to attribute the population's inaction to exonerating, situational factors. We predict younger participants on the one hand to estimate the proportion of helpers among the German population as lower, the proportions of perpetrators and bystanders as higher than older participants, representing a greater involvement of the population in the commission of National Socialist crimes. When asked for specific explanations for the German population's inaction (i.e., the reasons why they did not act against the regime's crimes), we predict younger participants to be more likely to agree with accusatory dispositional explanations for inaction (e.g., that the population shared the views of the Nazi regime or did not care about the fates of the

regime's victims). On the other hand, we predict older participants to assess the involvement of the German population in the commission of crimes as lower and to be more likely to agree with situational explanations for the population's inaction (e.g., that the German population did not know about the crimes or did not have an opportunity to act against the crimes). Finally, we explore the prediction that an increased acknowledgement and awareness of the German population's involvement during National Socialism, representing a more critical assessment of the past, is positively associated with a feeling of responsibility for present-day societal issues (i.e., a stronger awareness and feeling of responsibility for the discrimination and exclusion of groups of people in Germany today).

## Method

We present primary data collected within a larger research project, the Multidimensional Remembrance Monitor, which examines the culture of remembrance in Germany on various levels, such as the contents, emotions, practices, and consequences of remembrance, via annual representative surveys (for an overview see Rees, Papendick, & Zick, 2019). The project's aim is to empirically map the status quo of as well as changes within the German culture of remembrance on a public as well as an individual level and to test whether these translate into consequences for attitudes toward present-day sociopolitical issues. The project collects annual representative surveys with recurring modules, serving as a monitoring instrument, as well as flexible modules to focus on specific aspects in each of the surveys. So far three surveys have been conducted and descriptive results have been published as technical reports, containing the complete list of items used in each of the surveys. The current paper relies on data from the second survey that was conducted in November and December of 2018 and published in 2019 (for work based on the same research program, see also Rees et al., in press).

## Participants

The sample comprises  $N = 1,000$  randomly and representatively selected respondents with an age range from 17 to 93 years ( $M = 50.2$ ,  $SD = 18.8$ )<sup>1</sup> and an approximately even gender distribution (51.1% female) from all German federal states. Within the sample, 15.7% of all respondents reported living in former Eastern Germany, and 19.9% stated having a migration background.

<sup>1</sup>Lower quartile (25th percentile) = 37 years,  $Mdn = 50$  years, upper quartile (75th percentile) = 65 years.

## Design and Procedure

Data were collected via computer-assisted telephone interviews (CATI) that were conducted by a professional survey institute. Interviews were carried out by trained and supervised interviewers guided by a questionnaire displayed on screen and answers were recorded and transcribed immediately. This method brings a number of advantages, for example, it ensures an efficient and highly standardized data collection while meeting the criteria for a random and representative sampling and allowing participants to ask questions during the survey. While CATIs guarantee anonymity, effects of social desirability cannot be completely ruled out. Participation was voluntary, and participants could withdraw from participation or answering single items at any time, which explains missing values within the dataset. Participants were not incentivized for taking part in the interviews, which took 32 minutes on average. The study adhered to the guidelines of the ethics committee of Bielefeld University. We subsequently introduce the measures relevant for the present paper. Distributions and zero-order correlations of all measures are presented in Table 1.

## Confrontation with the Topic of National Socialism

To assess participants' general extent of dealing with the topic of National Socialism, they were asked to estimate how often they had used nine ways to confront themselves with the topic on a scale from 1 = *never* to 5 = *four times or more often*. The list of potential ways of confrontation comprised low-threshold (e.g., "Watched a documentary," "Read a novel") as well as more effortful activities (e.g., "Visited a memorial site," "Attended a lecture"). These items were averaged to yield an indicator for the extent to which participants had critically dealt with the time of National Socialism; the scale's internal consistency was good ( $\alpha = .793$ ).

## School Education and Personal Contact with Contemporary Witnesses

To test two specific ways of confrontation, participants were also asked about their school education ("How much would you say you learned about the time of National Socialism in school?"; scored from 1 = *nothing at all* to 5 = *very much*) and their personal contact with contemporary witnesses ("How many people do or did you know who lived through the time of National Socialism themselves?"; open numerical answer).

## Perception of the German Population During National Socialism

Participants answered a number of questions regarding their retrospective assessment of the German population and the German population's behavior during the time of National Socialism. This assessment comprised estimations of the population's involvement in and awareness of the crimes during National Socialism as well as the agreement with specific reasons explaining the population's inaction.

**The German population's involvement in National Socialism.** First, participants were asked to estimate the proportions of Germans who were involved in National Socialism as perpetrators, victims, or helpers ("During the time of National Socialism, what percentage of the German population do you think were among the perpetrators/were among the victims/helped potential victims?"; open numerical answers) as well as the proportion of the German population that knew about the systematic persecution and murdering of people during this time ("During the time of National Socialism, what percentage of the German population do you think knew that groups of people were being systematically murdered at the time?"; open numerical answer). We used these estimations as an indirect measure of participants' perception of the German population and their involvement during the Nazi era. For example, a high estimate of the proportion of perpetrators and a low estimate of the proportion of helpers among the Germans during National Socialism represents a more accusing assessment, whereas a low estimate of the proportion of Germans who were aware of the crimes represents a more exonerating assessment.

**Reasons explaining the German population's inaction.** Subsequently, participants were specifically asked whether they regarded seven different reasons as conclusive as to why Germans did not act against the National Socialist regime ("Why would you say people did nothing to stop the systematic murdering of groups of people back then?"). For each of the reasons, participants stated ("yes" or "no") whether they regarded the specific reason as appropriate for explaining the German population's inaction. The list comprised reasons ranging from an exonerating attribution to *situational factors* ("They did not know about the murders") to indifference ("They did not care about the fate of the people being persecuted and murdered") and to an accusing attribution to *dispositional factors* ("They shared the views of the National Socialist regime").

Table 1  
Distribution and Correlations of Measures

Variable	M (SD)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)	(13)	(14)	(15)	(16)	
(1) Age	50.19 (18.82)	-.05	-.37**	.25**	-.16**	-.05	.04	-.21**	-.13**	-.02	.17**	-.12**	.16**	.13**	-.07*	.04	
(2) Extent of confrontation with the topic	3.02 (0.95)		.22**	.15**	.02	-.05	-.15**	.11**	.07*	.19**	.07*	.17**	-.11**	-.15**	.17**	.31**	
(3) Extent of school education	3.19 (1.30)			-.01	.03	-.03	-.10**	.16**	.09**	.11**	.01	.17**	-.12**	-.11**	.03	.09**	
(4) Contacts with temporary witnesses	11.57 (14.09)			.03	.03	-.08*	-.03	.01	.07*	.09**	.12**	.06	.04	.04	-.04	.10**	
(5) Estimated percentage of perpetrators	33.98 (25.27)				.09**	.09**	.06	.32**	.04	.05	.00	.12**	-.09**	-.11**	.10**	.12**	
(6) Estimated percentage of victims	34.71 (23.73)					.43**	.01	.14**	.01	-.04	-.08*	-.14**	.01	.04	-.08*	.05	
(7) Estimated percentage of helpers	15.77 (12.26)						.02	-.14**	-.05	.03	.03	-.14**	.12**	.04	-.13**	-.03	
(8) Estimated percentage of Germans who knew about the crimes	39.26 (28.28)							.10**	.07*	-.23**	.06	-.16**	-.16**	-.46**	.19**	.19**	
(9) "They were afraid they would be punished or persecuted by the National Socialist regime."	95.4								.08*	.09**	.12**	-.07*	-.05	.09**	.09**	.09**	
(10) "They did not have a personal sense of responsibility for taking action."	73.0								.17**	.13**	.13**	-.16**	-.08*	.21**	.21**	.16**	
(11) "They did not realize the seriousness of the situation."	72.8									.05	.08**	.21**	-.03	-.03	.01	.01	
(12) "They shared the views of the National Socialist regime."	53.9											-.16**	-.07*	.37**	.37**	.11**	
(13) "They did not have any opportunity to do anything about it."	51.1												.19**	-.17**	-.08*	-.08*	
(14) "They did not know about the murders."	38.9															-.15**	-.20**

(continues)

Table 1 (continued)

Variable	M (SD)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)	(13)	(14)	(15)	(16)
(15) "They did not care about the fate of the people being persecuted and murdered."	28.8															.11**
(16) Civic courage	3.76 (0.79)															

Note. Variable (2) represents the mean on a 9-item-scale ranging from 1 = no confrontation to 5 = high confrontation. Variable (3) ranged from 1 = nothing at all to 5 = very much. Variables (5) to (8) were recorded as estimates from 0 to 100%. Variables (9) to (15) were coded 1 = yes and 0 = no, and the overall percentages of "yes" responses are displayed. Variable (15) represents the mean on a 5-item scale ranging from 1 = no civic courage to 5 = high civic courage. \* $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ .

### Attitudes Toward Present-Day Societal Issues

Finally, we assessed participants' self-reported civic courage regarding the discrimination and exclusion of groups of people in Germany today (e.g., "I feel it is also my responsibility to prevent discrimination and the exclusion of people or groups of people in Germany," "I am willing to get actively involved in fighting discrimination and the exclusion of people or groups of people in Germany"; scored from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). The four items were averaged to form an indicator of civic courage, with an internal consistency of  $\alpha = .664$ .

### Analysis Plan

Linear regression analyses were computed to test for the relation between age and the general extent of confrontation with the topic of National Socialism as well as the two specific ways of confrontation we assumed to systematically differ. In these analyses participants' age was specified as a predictor, the general extent of confrontation with National Socialism, the self-reported extent of education about the topic in school, and the reported amount of personal contact with contemporary witnesses were specified as outcome variables. To test for the assumed relation between age and differing assessments of the involvement of the German population, we computed separate linear regression analyses with participants' age as the predictor variable and participants' estimations of the German population's involvement in National Socialism as perpetrators, victims, helpers, and bystanders as outcome variables. To test for the assumed relation between age and differing explanations for the German population's inaction, we computed logistic regression analyses with participants' age as the predictor variable and their agreement with seven specific reasons explaining the population's inaction as outcome variables. Finally, we computed a linear regression analysis to test exploratively whether a more critical assessment of the past, operationalized by the estimations of the German population's knowledge, was linked to participants' attitudes toward present-day issues. For this analysis, participants' estimation of the percentage of Germans who knew about the regime's murders was used as the predictor variable, while self-reported civic courage with regard to the discrimination and exclusion of groups of people in Germany today was used as the outcome variable. All statistical analyses were performed using SPSS 25.0.

## Results

### Relations Between Age and Participants' Confrontation with the Topic of National Socialism

Linear regression analyses were computed to test for the relations between participants' age and their extent and ways of confrontation with the topic of National Socialism. Participants' age was not related to the general extent of their self-reported confrontation with the topic of National Socialism,  $R^2 = .002$ ,  $F(1, 978) = 2.08$ ,  $p = .149$ . Age was, however, significantly related to the two specific ways of confrontation we examined. It was related to the self-reported amount of school education,  $R^2 = .14$ ,  $F(1, 998) = 158.92$ ,  $p < .001$ , with younger participants reporting higher amounts of institutional education,  $\beta = -.37$ ,  $t(998) = -12.61$ ,  $p < .001$ . We found the expected opposing trend for participants' amount of personal contacts with contemporary witnesses,  $R^2 = .06$ ,  $F(1, 952) = 63.29$ ,  $p < .001$ , with older participants reporting significantly more personal contact with people who have or had lived through the time of National Socialism themselves,  $\beta = .25$ ,  $t(952) = -7.96$ ,  $p < .001$ . To sum up, age was not related to the general extent of confrontation with the topic of National Socialism. It was, however, significantly related to specific ways of confrontation, with younger participants reporting more formal education in school and older participants reporting more personal contact with contemporary witnesses.

### Relations Between Age and the Estimations of the German Population's Involvement During the Time of National Socialism

On average, participants in our sample estimated that  $M = 33.98\%$  ( $SD = 25.27\%$ ) of the German population were involved in National Socialism as perpetrators,  $M = 34.71\%$  ( $SD = 23.73\%$ ) as victims, and  $M = 15.77\%$  ( $SD = 15.26\%$ ) as helpers of potential victims. Participants further estimated that  $M = 39.26\%$  ( $SD = 28.28\%$ ) of all Germans knew about the regime's systematic murdering of people in this time. As expected, these estimations reflected differences in participants' assessments of the German society during National Socialism. The linear regression analyses showed that participants' age was significantly related to their perception of the German population's involvement in the National Socialist crimes. Specifically, age was significantly related to estimations of the proportion of perpetrators,  $R^2 = .03$ ,  $F(1, 936) = 26.34$ ,  $p < .001$ , and the proportion of Germans who knew about the systematic murdering of groups of people during National

Socialism,  $R^2 = .05$ ,  $F(1, 930) = 45.10$ ,  $p < .001$ . The lower the participants' age, the higher their estimations of the proportion of Germans who were perpetrators,  $\beta = -.17$ ,  $t(936) = -5.31$ ,  $p < .001$ , as well as the proportion of Germans who were aware of the extermination of humans,  $\beta = -.21$ ,  $t(930) = -6.72$ ,  $p < .001$ . Participants' estimations of the proportion of victims among the German population,  $R^2 = .003$ ,  $F(1, 914) = 2.33$ ,  $p = .13$ , as well as the proportion of Germans who helped potential victims,  $R^2 = .001$ ,  $F(1, 938) = 1.25$ ,  $p = .26$ , was not significantly related to participants' age.

### Relations Between Age and Explanations for the German Population's Inaction During the Time of National Socialism

When asked for specific reasons for the German population's inaction during the systematic extermination of groups of people in the time of National Socialism, the reason most frequently given was the population's fear of being punished or persecuted by the National Socialist regime (95.4%), followed by the lack of a personal sense of responsibility for taking action (73.0%) and a lack of realization of the seriousness of the situation (72.8%). As expected, participants' agreement with the presented explanations was related to their age, reflecting differing assessments of and explanations for the population's inaction. Results of the logistic regression analyses are summed up in Table 2. Younger participants were significantly more likely to state that the population during National Socialism was committed to and shared the views of the National Socialist regime, more likely to agree that the population was afraid of being punished or persecuted, and marginally more likely to agree that the population did not care about the fates of the persecuted groups. In contrast, older participants were more likely to agree that the population "did not know" about the murders, did not realize the seriousness of the situation, and did not have any opportunity to act against the Nazis' crimes.

### Relations Between a Critical Assessment of the Past and Attitudes Toward Present-Day Issues

The regression analysis showed that participants' estimates of the proportion of Germans who knew about the murders were significantly related to self-reported attitudes toward present-day sociopolitical issues,  $R^2 = .04$ ,  $F(1, 911) = 33.11$ ,  $p < .001$ . Participants who estimated the proportion of bystanders as higher, assuming that more Germans were aware of the National Socialists' crimes, reported a higher level of civic courage with



**Table 2**  
*Logistic Regression Analyses for the Prediction of Participants' Agreement with Specific Reasons Explaining the German Population's Inaction During National Socialism by Participants' Age*

Reason	<i>b</i>	95% CI for Odds Ratio			<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	$\chi^2$
		Lower	OR	Upper		
They were afraid they would be punished or persecuted by the National Socialist regime.	-.037**	0.946	0.964	0.982	.057	16.34**
They did not have a personal sense of responsibility for taking action.	-.003	0.989	0.997	1.005	.001	0.50
They did not realize the seriousness of the situation.	.021**	1.013	1.021	1.029	.042	28.94**
They shared the views of the National Socialist regime.	-.013**	0.981	0.987	0.994	.018	13.27**
They did not have any opportunity to do anything about it.	.018**	1.011	1.018	1.025	.035	25.92**
They did not know about the murders.	.014**	1.008	1.015	1.022	.023	16.93**
They did not care about the fate of the people being persecuted and murdered.	-.008*	0.985	0.992	1.000	.006	4.32*

Note. Nagelkerke's *R*<sup>2</sup> is reported.

\**p* < .05; \*\**p* < .01.

regard to the awareness of and willingness to engage in the prevention and reduction of discrimination and the exclusion of social groups in Germany today,  $\beta = .19$ ,  $t(911) = 5.75$ ,  $p < .001$ .

### Discussion

The main objective of the present study was to examine whether and to what extent contemporary Germans' views on the German population during National Socialism are related to their age. We found that younger Germans reported differing points of contact with the time of National Socialism, as they reported having learned more about the topic in school and having met fewer individuals who have lived through the time of National Socialism themselves. We assumed these kinds of changes in the culture of remembrance would result in differing assessments of the role of the German population during National Socialism. In fact, younger Germans reported a more critical perspective on the role of society in Nazi Germany. They assumed a stronger involvement of the German population as perpetrators, and as bystanders who were aware of the regime's crimes but did not intervene. When asked to explain the population's inaction, younger Germans were more likely to reject the situational explanations that Germans during National Socialism "did not know," did not realize the seriousness of the situation, or did not have any opportunity to act against the Nazis' crimes. Those participants showing a more critical assessment of the past also reported an increased feeling of responsibility in the present.

### Access to the Topic of National Socialism

Results show that the general extent of confrontation with the topic of National Socialism appears to be independent from Germans' age. Younger Germans did not confront themselves with the topic less intensively than older Germans. Regarding specific ways of confrontation with the past, however, older Germans reported deriving less knowledge from institutional education and more from personal contact with contemporary witnesses. Younger participants, on the other hand, reported more facts-based confrontation with the topic in school, and less personal points of contact. These results are further supported by additional data from the present project on the German culture of remembrance (Rees, Papendick, & Zick, 2019; Rees, Zick, et al., 2019). For example, younger Germans reported fewer conversations about the topic of National Socialism in their families as well as less knowledge about the role of their own ancestors during the time of National Socialism. These results substantiate the discussions about current shifts in the German culture of remembrance in which "established" ways of confrontation with the time of National Socialism slowly vanish while others evolve and become more influential for the assessment of the past. These changes, again, could be interpreted as a detachment from history and a loss of knowledge. Studies such as the one by Welzer et al. (2014), however, illustrate Germans' frequently biased perspectives of their ancestors' involvement in the Nazis' crimes, the selective communication of stories of heroism and victimhood, and the selective suppression of stories of guilt and responsibility within German families. A further

detachment from these biased family representations or individual narratives may increase the impact of more fact-oriented confrontations with the topic (see also Rees et al., in press).

### **The German Population's Involvement and Inaction During National Socialism**

To test our prediction that these changes in access to the topic of National Socialism are not only negative but potentially enable a more critical perspective of the role of the German population, we tested for links between participants' age and their assessments of the time of National Socialism. We hypothesized that younger participants would be more likely to choose accusing explanations for the population's inaction and emphasize the German population's awareness of and involvement in the perpetration of crimes, while older participants would more likely exonerate the general population and attribute their inaction to a lack of knowledge. Our results support these predictions, showing that younger participants more often denied the situational explanation that Germans "did not know"—not only when specifically asked whether the lack of knowledge was an appropriate explanation but also when asked to estimate the proportion of Germans who were aware of the regime's systematic murdering. Older participants, in turn, were more likely to attribute Germans' inaction to the situational and more exonerating explanations of a lack of knowledge or a lack of opportunities to act. These results are in line with those reported by Imhoff et al. (2017) and Doosje and Branscombe (2003), but extend them in demonstrating that ingroup favouring attributional biases regarding the explanation for the Holocaust may also hold for the specific group of the bystanders to the Nazi crimes, and that differences in attributional patterns are not only found between national groups but also between different generations within German society.

However, we also found deviations from our assumptions and the results reported in previous studies. First, and in contrast to the results reported by Imhoff et al. (2017) and Doosje and Branscombe (2003), we found that within our overall sample, the dispositional explanation that the German population during National Socialism did not intervene because they shared the views of the Nazi regime was affirmed more often than the situational explanation of a population that was inactive due to a lack of knowledge. While counterintuitive at first, we argue that this deviation can be explained by the situational attribution we presented ("They did not know about the murders"). Compared to the more complex situational explanation of "the bad economic conditions and the high unemployment rate" presented by

Imhoff et al. (2017, p. 914) the situational explanation of a lack of awareness of the crimes among the German population stands in clear contrast to historical knowledge. Therefore, it is comprehensible that participants in our study were less likely to affirm the situational explanation. This result supports our hypothesis that an explicit denial of the German population's knowledge of the Nazi regime's atrocities can be interpreted as an *active exoneration* of the German population. Additionally, the study by Imhoff and colleagues focused on attributions of the causes of the Holocaust while the present study examined explanations for the lack of resistance within the bystanding German population, and therefore addresses a different aspect of explaining National Socialism. The second result in contrast to our expectations is the lack of age differences in the estimation of helpers among the German population. As we expected younger Germans to report a generally more critical and accusing assessment of the past, we assumed that this critical assessment would be expressed in a lower estimation of helpers among the German population as well. A potential explanation for this result may be a differing definition of the particular group of helpers, depending on participants' age. If younger Germans have a different concept of "helping potential victims" in mind, they may come to a different conclusion about the proportion of helpers among the German population. More specifically, potential definitions for acts of helping during National Socialism may range from small acts of support in everyday life (e.g., giving food) to more serious interventions (e.g., explicitly saving someone's life or taking severe personal risks to support someone). Another explanation would be that younger Germans are generally more aware of the population's involvement in particular roles, as perpetrators or bystanders, but know less about acts of help and support for the victim groups of National Socialism. Future research should further elaborate on how younger Germans *themselves* define the groups of perpetrators, victims, helpers, and bystanders, and whether these definitions differ from those of older Germans.

In sum, our results corroborate the assumption of generational differences within German society not only with regard to access to the topic of National Socialism, reinforcing discussions about shifts in the German culture of remembrance (Cornelißen, 2015; Knigge, 2010; Körber Foundation, 2017), but also with regard to assessments of the societal circumstances of National Socialism and the Holocaust. These results, especially younger participants' higher estimations of knowledge among the German population during the Nazi era, may be regarded as the result of more facts-based confrontations with the topic of National Socialism. Our exploratory analyses show that those participants who reported

a more critical perspective on the German population during National Socialism also reported more courageous attitudes with regard to German society today. One obvious interpretation of these results would be to conclude that these participants share a more (self-) critical perspective on societal issues, attributing responsibility not only to external factors or actors, but hold the society, including themselves, accountable. Following this interpretation, this attribution of responsibilities may at least partially derive from the confrontation with the topic of National Socialism in general or with the bystanding behaviour of the population during National Socialism in particular. Yet, deducing some kind of *historical learning* or *historical consciousness* from the present data would be a clear exaggeration and overinterpretation.

### Limitations and Future Directions

Although the present study contributes to a better understanding of contemporary Germans' perspectives on the time of National Socialism and generational differences in these perspectives, a number of methodological restrictions confine potential inferences and should be considered in future research. One of our assumptions is a potentially positive consequence of changes within the German culture of remembrance, resulting in a less biased perspective on the German population in the time of National Socialism. While the theoretical deduction from social identity theory, explaining this effect with the concept of ingroup favouritism, is reasonable and the results support our hypothesis, the extent of participants' identification with the German population during National Socialism was not explicitly measured. The same applies to the assessment of participants' estimations of Germans' involvement in the National Socialists' crimes and the interpretation of specific estimations (e.g., higher estimations of the percentages of perpetrators and bystanders) representing a more accusing perspective on the role of the German population. The different explanations for the population's inaction we examined and the correlations between these explanations and participants' estimations of the population's involvement reinforce our interpretation that specific estimations of the German population's involvement represent more critical assessments of the past. The assessment and evaluation of the political, economic, and societal circumstances of National Socialism, however, is a complex question that can hardly be assessed with few quantitative items. Future research might wish to assess participants' understanding of the conditions of National Socialism and the Holocaust in a more differentiated manner and also include questions on whether participants perceive direct or indirect relations between the past and the present. While the present study included

estimations of the German population's involvement to assess participants' impression of civil society during the time of National Socialism, more explicit questions are needed to draw a full image of how Germans today perceive and explain the time of National Socialism. This assessment should further take into account the developments during and prior to the time span from 1933 to 1945. Participants' answers to questions regarding "the time of National Socialism" will most likely be influenced by the specific point in time that is invoked. Answers to questions referring to the early years of National Socialism will differ from those referring to the years of the Holocaust. Qualitative studies on the topic would enable assessments of individuals' explicit understanding of National Socialism and of how far they regard their personal confrontation with the time of National Socialism as relevant for their attitudes toward present-day issues. Finally, the potential causal relationships we discuss in the present paper (e.g., the assumption that a confrontation with historical sources representing the German population's bystanding behaviour promotes more critical perspectives on the role of the German population in general) need to be tested experimentally to understand how far and under which conditions contemporary Germans may draw inferences from a confrontation with National Socialism. These studies should also take into account additional factors that may influence contemporary Germans' assessment of the past, such as their national identification with Germany.

### Conclusion

A better understanding of the psychological processes of confrontation with the topic of National Socialism and different historical sources could help estimating the potentials and conditions of historical learning or historical consciousness in general and the specific confrontation with the role and behaviour of bystanders to societal felonies in particular. If this confrontation turns out to be a useful leverage point for historical learning, practitioners in the fields of remembrance culture and historical-political education could strengthen the focus of Holocaust education on the role of the bystanders and the societal and social psychological processes which enabled German National Socialism. However, while the present study's results may convey the impression that younger Germans tend to a less biased and more fact-oriented perspective on the role of the German society during National Socialism, bringing future generations in contact with the topic *despite* increasing temporal distance and decreasing points of personal contact appears as a challenge on its own.

## Conflict of Interest

No conflict of interest has been declared by the authors.

## Funding

The MEMO research project is supported by a research grant from the foundation “Remembrance, Responsibility and Future” (EVZ Foundation). Open Access funding enabled and organized by ProjektDEAL.

## Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

## References

- Adorno, T., Frenkel-Brenswik, E., Levinson, D. J., & Sanford, R. N. (2019). *The authoritarian personality*. Verso Books.
- Ammert, N., Edling, S., Löfström, J., & Sharp, H. (2015). Bridging historical and moral consciousness: Promises and challenges. *Historical Encounters: A Journal of Historical consciousness: Promises and challenges. Historical Encounters: A Journal of Historical Consciousness, Historical Cultures, and History Education*, 4, 1–13.
- Assmann, J. (1992). *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen* [Cultural memory: Writing, memory and political identity in early high cultures]. CH Beck. <https://doi.org/10.17104/9783406703409>
- Barnett, V. J. (1999). *Bystanders: Conscience and complicity during the Holocaust*. Greenwood Press.
- Bilewicz, M., Witkowska, M., Stefaniak, A., & Imhoff, R. (2017). The lay historian explains intergroup behavior: Examining the role of identification and cognitive structuring in ethnocentric historical attributions. *Memory Studies*, 10(3), 310–322. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698017701614>
- Bilewicz, M., Witkowska, M., Stubig, S., Beneda, M., & Imhoff, R. (2017b). How to teach about the Holocaust? Psychological obstacles in historical education in Poland and Germany. *History Education and Conflict Transformation*, 169. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-54681-0\\_7](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-54681-0_7)
- Bromley, P., & Russell, S. G. (2010). The Holocaust as history and human rights: A cross-national analysis of Holocaust education in social science textbooks, 1970–2008. *Prospects*, 40(1), 153–173. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-15419-0\\_17](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-15419-0_17)
- Carrier, P., Fuchs, E., & Messinger, T. (2015). *The international status of education about the Holocaust: A global mapping of textbooks and curricula*. UNESCO Publishing.
- Connerton, P. (2008). Seven types of forgetting. *Memory Studies*, 1(1), 59–71. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698007083889>
- Cornelißen, C. (2015). *Remembrance: From collective to cultural memory*. Retrieved from <https://www.goethe.de/en/kul/ges/20542299.html>
- Doosje, B., & Branscombe, N. R. (2003). Attributions for the negative historical actions of a group. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 33(2), 235–248. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.142>
- Dudek, P. (2013). *Der Rückblick auf die Vergangenheit wird sich nicht vermeiden lassen: Zur pädagogischen Verarbeitung des Nationalsozialismus in Deutschland (1945-1990)* [A look at the past can not be avoided: On pedagogical processing of National Socialism in Germany (1945-1990)]. Springer-Verlag.
- Eckmann, M. (2010). Exploring the relevance of Holocaust education for human rights education. *Prospects*, 40(1), 7–16. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11125-010-9140-z>
- Gellately, R. (2002). *Backing Hitler. Consent and coercion in Nazi Germany*. Oxford University Press.
- German Ministry of Culture (2005). *Unterricht über Nationalsozialismus und Holocaust [Teaching about National Socialism and the Holocaust]*. Retrieved from [https://www.kmk.org/fileadmin/Dateien/pdf/Bildung/AllgBildung/Zusammenfassung-Holocaust-November-05\\_01.pdf](https://www.kmk.org/fileadmin/Dateien/pdf/Bildung/AllgBildung/Zusammenfassung-Holocaust-November-05_01.pdf).
- Halbwachs, M. (1992). *On collective memory*. University of Chicago Press.
- Hilberg, R. (1992). *Perpetrators, victims, bystanders: The Jewish catastrophe, 1933–1945*. Aaron Asher Books.
- Imhoff, R., Bilewicz, M., Hanke, K., Kahn, D. T., Henkel-Guembe, N., Halabi, S., Tal-Shani, S., & Hirschberger, G. (2017). Explaining the inexplicable: Differences in attributions for the Holocaust in Germany, Israel, and Poland. *Political Psychology*, 38(6), 907–924. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12348>
- Khan, S. S., & Liu, J. H. (2008). Intergroup attributions and ethnocentrism in the Indian subcontinent: The ultimate attribution error revisited. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 39(1), 16–36. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022022107311843>
- Kellner, F. (2011). *"Vernebelt, verdunkelt sind alle Hirne": Tagebücher 1939–1945* ["All brains are clouded, darkened": Diaries 1939-1945]. Wallstein Verlag.
- Knigge, V. (2010). Zur Zukunft der Erinnerung [On the future of memory]. *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, 25(26), 10–16.
- Körber Foundation (2017). *Deutsche Wollen Aus Geschichte Lernen [Germans want to learn from history]*. Retrieved from <https://www.koerber-stiftung.de/deutsche-wollen-aus-geschichte-lernen-1143>
- Liu, J. H., & Hilton, D. J. (2005). How the past weighs on the present: Social representations of history and their role in identity politics. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 44, 537–556. <https://doi.org/10.1348/014466605x27162>
- Longerich, P. (2009). *Davon haben wir nichts gewusst!. Die Deutschen und die Judenverfolgung 1933-1945 [We did not know! Germans and the persecution of the Jews 1933-1945]*. Siedler Verlag.
- Mandel, D. R. (2002). *Instigators of genocide: Examining Hitler from a social-psychological perspective*. Oxford University Press.
- Marks, S. (2007). Teaching about National Socialism and the Holocaust: Narrative approaches to Holocaust education. *Interchange*, 38(3), 263–284. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10780-007-9029-9>
- Meseth, W. (2005). *Aus der Geschichte lernen: Über die Rolle der Erziehung in der bundesdeutschen Erinnerungskultur [Learning from history: On the role of education in the federal German culture of remembrance]*. Department of Educational Science, Johann-Wolfgang-Goethe University.

- Morina, C., & Thijs, K. (Eds.). (2018). *Probing the limits of categorization: The bystander in Holocaust history* (Vol. 27). Berghahn Books.
- Games, P. (2020). *Through the Darkest of Times [Computer video game]*. Paintbucket Games.
- Pampel, B. (2007). "Mit eigenen Augen sehen, wozu der Mensch fähig ist": Zur Wirkung von Gedenkstätten auf ihre Besucher ["Seeing with your own eyes what man is capable of": On the effect of memorial sites on their visitors]. Campus Verlag.
- Rees, J. H., Papendick, M., & Zick, A. (2019). Mapping memory culture in Germany: What, how, and why Germans remember. In S. Mukherjee, & P. S. Salter (Eds.), *History and collective memory from the margins: A global perspective* (pp. 323-340). Nova Science Publishers.
- Rees, J. H., Zick, A., Papendick, M., & Wäschle, F. (2019). *Multidimensional Remembrance Monitor Study II/2019*. Retrieved from <https://www.stiftung-evz.de/service/publikationen/studien.html>.
- Rees, J. H., Papendick, M., & Zick, A. (in press). This ain't no place for no hero. Prevalence and correlates of representations of victims, helpers, and perpetrators during the time of National Socialism in German families. *Journal of Pacific Rim Psychology*.
- Rüsen, J. (2004). *Historical consciousness: Narrative structure, moral function, and ontogenetic development. Theorizing Historical Consciousness* (pp. 63-85). University of Toronto Press.
- Salmons, P. (2003). Teaching or preaching? The Holocaust and intercultural education in the UK. *Intercultural Education*, 14(2), 139-149. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1467598032000082636>
- Short, G., & Reed, C. A. (2017). *Issues in Holocaust education*. Routledge.
- Spears, R., Doosje, B., & Ellemers, N. (1997). Self-stereotyping in the face of threats to group status and distinctiveness: The role of group identification. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 23(5), 538-553.
- Stubig, S. S. (2015). *Die Wirkung des Geschichtsunterrichts zu Nationalsozialismus und Holocaust auf die Identität von Jugendlichen [The effect of history lessons about National Socialism and the Holocaust on the identity of youths]*. Shaker Verlag.
- Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1986). The social identity theory of intergroup behavior. In S. Worchel, & W. G. Austin (Eds.), *Psychology of intergroup relations* (pp. 7-24). Nelson-Hall.
- Welzer, H., Moller, S., & Tschuggnall, K. (2014). "Opa war kein Nazi". *Nationalsozialismus und Holocaust im Familiengedächtnis ["Grandpa wasn't a Nazi": The Holocaust in German family remembrance]*. S. Fischer Verlag.
- Zick, A., Wolf, C., Küpper, B., Davidov, E., Schmidt, P., & Heitmeyer, W. (2008). The syndrome of group-focused enmity: The interrelation of prejudices tested with multiple cross-sectional and panel data. *Journal of Social Issues*, 64(2), 363-383.