

# Ambivalence and Contradictions in Education against Antisemitism: Exploring the Views and Experiences of Young Germans

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## Abstract

This paper presents results of the qualitative study “Antisemitism and Youth,” which examines young non-Jewish Germans’ knowledge of and experiences with antisemitism, as well as their perceptions of educational efforts against it. The study explores the contradictions between persistent antisemitism in Germany and intensive work to counter it. Through the analysis of interviews with young Germans, the study examines their understanding and representations of Jews and Jewish life. It reveals that young Germans’ views are shaped by narratives of strangeness, victimhood, guilt, and criticism of antisemitism. While most of the participants express firm opposition to antisemitism, they lack experience in identifying and deconstructing it. This article highlights some of the study’s key findings and presents conclusions for antisemitism-critical education.

**Keywords:** antisemitism, Holocaust education, narratives, young people

## AMBIVALENCE AND CONTRADICTIONS IN EDUCATION AGAINST ANTISEMITISM: EXPLORING THE VIEWS AND EXPERIENCES OF YOUNG GERMANS

Growing up and living in Germany’s migration society is characterised by cultural, religious, and ethnic diversity with young people as the most heterogeneous population group. Compared to other age groups, young people also show the greatest openness to social diversity.<sup>1</sup> Intercultural education programs have been established in Germany for several decades, similar to many other countries.<sup>2</sup> Among others, these programs include initiatives aimed at combating antisemitism, which particularly focus on the historical context of the Holocaust in Germany.<sup>3</sup> Educational work about the Holocaust is seen as a foundation of schooling in Germany. It takes place in Holocaust education in school, at memorial sites as well as non-formal educational

initiatives run by a variety of non-governmental organisations.

However, despite these efforts, violence and discrimination against Jews and Jewish institutions still characterises the Jewish experience in Germany. Especially in the context of school, antisemitic expressions are widely documented.<sup>4</sup> Jews and Jewish life have to be protected by state authorities, particularly in the public sphere. Although social diversity in Germany is increasing, encounters with Jewish life are not common for young people due to the small Jewish community in the country but also because the majority of the Jewish population is secular and therefore not recognisable by religious clothing, for example.<sup>5</sup>

This paper explores the contradiction between Germany’s intense educational efforts against antisemitism and the ongoing antisemitic violence and discrimination in the country. The analysis is based on interviews with young

non-Jewish Germans, aimed at examining whether Germany's attempts to counter antisemitism through Holocaust education and historic guilt may have unintended side effects. The paper presents empirical results on narratives containing antisemitism-informed knowledge and related critical narratives. The study shows that, despite having broad experiences with Holocaust education, young people in Germany tend to reproduce stereotypes of Jews and Judaism. Therefore, the paper argues that formalised educational programs may fail in educating students to identify and reflect on antisemitism in its ideological aspects. The paper begins with a brief history of prevention programs against antisemitism in Germany and describes the state of research on antisemitism and youth in the country. The research methodology is then outlined, followed by a presentation of selected empirical findings in three sections. Finally, the paper concludes with recommendations for education against antisemitism in Germany.

For clarity, we use the term "Shoah" to refer to the genocide of the Jewish population throughout the paper. We use the word "Holocaust" to refer to the extermination policies of all persecuted people by the National Socialists. In addition to Jews, people living with disabilities and Sinti and Roma were also affected by the extermination policies of the National Socialists.

### Starting Points and State of Research

Anti-Judaism as part of Christian doctrine manifested antisemitic stereotypes within the German population, which culminated in the development of modern antisemitism in the framework of National Socialist (NS) ideology and the so-called race theory.<sup>6</sup> Antisemitic ideology was integral to all parts of German society (virtually from the birth ward to funerals, culture, education, and family life) during the NS time. Racist and antisemitic policies and ideology have contributed significantly to the involvement of

the majority of German society in the genocide against the Jewish population. The propagated myth of de-Nazification after the so-called "hour zero" was impossible to achieve since the all-encompassing antisemitic ideology was passed on to the next generation and was on constant display in the public sphere. The surrender of National Socialist Germany and the allies' subsequent reeducation plan did not lead the German population to publicly come to terms with their crimes but rather created taboo and communication latency of still believed antisemitic prejudices.<sup>7</sup> The continuity of antisemitic incidents testifies to the fact that antisemitism continued to be widespread in post-National Socialist German society. After decades of collective amnesia, during the 1960s, younger generations, along with the student protest movement, intensely demanded to critically engage with the Holocaust as part of German history. In 1985, a speech by then federal president Richard von Weizsäcker promised redemption through remembrance, with the commemoration of Holocaust victims as the core of a new national self-understanding.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, German historians were discussing whether the National Socialists' and their collaborators' crimes against humanity should be considered a historical object.<sup>9</sup>

It has been these fundamental social debates about a paradigm shift in dealing with the Holocaust which made it possible for Holocaust education to become established in Western Germany. Parallel to the ongoing legal and incipient political reappraisal of the Holocaust, a pedagogical and cultural examination of the NS crimes emerged in Germany from the 1980s onward. According to the German educational scientist Matthias Proske, Auschwitz and the Holocaust have been used as symbols for a moral-pedagogical project that focused on learning about democracy, education for tolerance, and human rights education, for the present and the future.<sup>10</sup> Political-historical education in the classroom, visits to memorials, student exchange programs and nationwide

non-formal education programs thus took on the task of making the crimes during the Holocaust the subject of democracy education. Today's young Germans experience a variety of political and educational discourses that address and reject antisemitism.

Despite the widespread affirmation of "Never again!" in political and educational settings, antisemitism-informed knowledge persists in all parts of German society and antisemitic violence continues to occur regularly. Therefore, young people in Germany grow up in a society shaped by antisemitism and are socialised with stereotypes, ascriptions, constructions and aesthetics relevant to antisemitism, which we call antisemitism-informed knowledge.<sup>11</sup> Several studies indicate that these constructs should be distinguished from the ideological antisemitic worldviews of earlier generations in Germany. Current research on young people's practices and attitudes towards Jews and Judaism highlight the ambivalence of socialisation in post-National Socialist society. Quantitative studies on antisemitism in German society show lower antisemitic attitudes among young Germans than other age groups.<sup>12</sup>

Research on youth language in Germany and France<sup>13</sup> shows that antisemitic terminologies and content are systematically woven into the speech of young people and that the practice of speech about Jews is subject to ambivalent and pejorative constructions of difference.<sup>14</sup> In a qualitative study based on group discussions with young Germans in the context of youth work, sociologist Barbara Schäuble describes this process of othering as fragmented antisemitism. Fragmented antisemitism refers to antisemitism-informed knowledge and ascriptions based on heterogeneous contexts and is partly inconsistent. Contexts of meaning, which refer to the central topoi of the construction of Jews, are shaped by a relationship to the Shoah characterised by tensions. In specific contexts, Jews are constructed as the enemy.<sup>15</sup>

In contrast to studies on young people from the German dominant society, namely from the

Christian majority, the educational scientist Anke Schu examines antisemitism among Muslim male youth based on biographical interviews. Being attributed as antisemitic is experienced by these young men as threatening and anti-Muslim.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, Schu finds that young Muslim men believe in images of Jews based on primary antisemitism. Further, they also hold antisemitic prejudices against the state of Israel. The young people Schu interviewed developed these prejudices in the context of a permanently precarious personal life situation in Germany and experiences of racism in a capitalist-dominant society. Generally, most reconstructive studies show that young people express a programmatic distancing from antisemitism, which is, however, broken by the beforementioned constructions of difference.<sup>17</sup>

Based on principles of intercultural and interreligious dialogue, contact and encounter are discussed as forms of processing and intervention against antisemitism.<sup>18</sup> Even though rich empirical evidence is given in social psychological research on the positive effects of multiethnic contact among young people, this approach is also strongly criticised<sup>19</sup> because it ignores the ideological constitution of antisemitism as an interpretation of the world.<sup>20</sup> However, there are hardly any substantial findings on the significance of contact between non-Jewish people and Jews in Germany.<sup>21</sup> A study from Israel, for example, shows that encounters between Jewish and Arab Israelis (Christian and Muslim Palestinians, Druze, Bedouins) in the Center for Humanistic Education at the Ghetto Fighter House have a strong influence on the participants' perception of the other group and of Jewish-Arab relations.<sup>22</sup>

Overall, research suggests that non-Jewish youth in Germany have little contact with Jewish people. For young people in East Germany, the psychologist Ronald Freytag made the observation two decades ago that a "psychological desolidarisation" also goes hand in hand with a lack of real-life contacts with Jews.<sup>23</sup> Also Barbara Schäuble concludes that young people's

statements regarding Jews are rarely based on actual interactions with Jewish individuals.<sup>24</sup> Accordingly, young people tend to draw from dominant social discourses and discussions in class or in the media in their talk *about* Jews, rather than to concrete experiences *with* Jewish people. A study of young people from families with Palestinian and Lebanese backgrounds who have migrated to Berlin shows that everyday contact with Jewish people hardly exists and that relevant spaces of experience exist primarily in family or media thematisations.<sup>25</sup> With regard to the design of pedagogical interventions, the psychologist Marina Chernivsky speaks of the imbalance between a lack of personal contact and the overwhelming media presence in political and historical contexts.<sup>26</sup> All of these issues become apparent in the course of the interviews conducted in this study, the underlying design of which we will outline now.

### Research Design and Methodology

Results presented in this paper are based on a qualitative empirical study investigating non-Jewish young people's experiences with Jewish life and their perspectives on antisemitism.<sup>27</sup> In cooperation with the Memorial and Educational Center "House of the Wannsee Conference", the project aims to decode antisemitism-informed knowledge among young, non-Jewish Germans and to develop pedagogical approaches to intervene against anti-Jewish hate. The study is based on a two-stage analysis of data from narrative interviews with non-Jewish young adults in different regions of Germany. Overall, thirty-one people aged between seventeen and twenty-six from different educational backgrounds and regions of Germany have been interviewed. In addition to a narrative prompt in order to conduct biographies of young people, the interviews included a detailed eminent inquiry section on experiences with Jewish life and knowledge about Judaism, as well as the Holocaust and Israel. By including young people from diverse

communities, the sample represents the cultural and religious diversity of German society. Except for three participants, most interviewees attended educational paths leading to A-level qualifications.

The two-step data analysis refers to different aims of the project. Results presented in this paper are based on a discourse-oriented analysis referring to grounded theory methodology.<sup>28</sup> Thematically relevant parts of selected interviews have been coded and categorised to identify antisemitism-informed knowledge and its critique in young people's conversations about Judaism, Jews and Jewish life, but also about the Holocaust and the Israel-Palestine conflict. Based on theory and existing studies, narratives of antisemitism have been identified in the speech patterns of young people.<sup>29</sup> Thereby, narratives are understood as systems of regulation that structure and process public discourses and common knowledge.<sup>30</sup> They are understood as manifestations of common knowledge that move and combine specific meanings to shape explanations of the world.<sup>31</sup> Our analysis points to three narratives that contain antisemitism-informed knowledge, namely those of strangeness, victimhood, and guilt. Additionally, one critical narrative was identified. These four narratives are presented in the following empirical sections of this paper.

### Missing Spaces of Contact and the Narrative of Strangeness

The interviews of young non-Jewish Germans for the project "Antisemitism and Youth" confirm the finding from other studies that young people have hardly any personal experience with Jews or Judaism in Germany.<sup>32</sup> Instead, relevant spaces of experience in which young Germans generate knowledge about Jews and Judaism are educational settings, media representations and discourse on social media. Additionally, they gather information about Jews and Judaism through hearsay from closely linked specific social milieus. For example, the

seventeen-year-old high school student with the code name Eda<sup>33</sup> describes her contacts with Judaism as “not in real life, so not really,” and adds, when asked by the interviewer, “*Rather in school, through books*” (lines 498–506). For Eda, Jewish life is not part of her world and encounters are limited to Jews being made an object of school lessons. There, Jews are reduced to victims of the National Socialists’ extermination policies and genocide. In discussions in history class, German class or religious education in school, Jews and Judaism seem to remain solely a subject of objectifying contemplations. An example of this can be found in the words of Aylo, an eighteen-year-old comprehensive school student, who stated: “*I’ve never seen anyone in the city [. . .] where I thought, yes, she or he is Jewish, and I think that’s a shame, because I’m interested. To really see someone who is walking around freely*” (lines 495–498). The phrase “walking around freely” contrasts with the images of Jews as victims that Aylo likely encountered in school materials and lessons. Despite efforts to educate about the Holocaust, these representations remain dominant and contribute to a strong construction of difference towards Jews and Judaism, which many of the young Germans interviewed also exhibited.

Educational work against antisemitism thus remains historically and thematically limited to the Holocaust. Additionally, the thematically limited education supports constructions that underpin what we refer to in the analysis as the *narrative of strangeness*. Jewish people are thereby constructed as “the Other”—people who do not belong to the national and religious in-group, which is the Christian majority. This othering combines ideas of Judaism as a religious practice that is traditional and unfashionable, in addition to the orientalisering and derogatory descriptions of Israel as a “third world nation” and “weak state.” It also operates with categories, such as traditional, strict, cultural. This can be seen in a description of nineteen-year-old Anja, who explains a visit to Borough Park, New York:

*on a trip with my parents in New York [...] ehm we were in such a district [...] and there only lived very strict Orthodox Jews [...] and there is also everything written in Hebrew only and something I found totally, well, I’d say impressive because in such a city like New York [...] they are all with skirts, running around and it was a bit like back then [...] sometimes I say in the Middle Ages in quotation marks. (Lines 716–721)*

The student is confused by the spatial segregation and the visible religious practice she observes in New York. Even though Anja is familiar with Christian contexts, she gets irritated by observing the practice of Orthodox Jews. Also, she does not compare or make references to other types of religious communities. Instead, she remains in the mental framework of strangeness when she describes it as belonging to another time. Analogous to other forms of racism, the narrative of strangeness homogenises Jews and reflects neither differences in religious practice nor the ethnic self-constructions of Jewish people. The aforementioned constructions of Jews support antisemitism-informed knowledge.

However, when the young people interviewed describe direct contact with Jews, they also express feelings of alienation. This can be seen in a report of the sixteen-year-old high school student Anke: “*I know some Jews, well, saying I know them is exaggerated [. . .] I know that they exist [laughs] [. . .] She was in my class, but that was also someone who was very reserved and who was also rather in a different group than I was*” (lines 938–944). In this very distanced description, it remains unclear whether the student was read as Jewish or identified herself as such. Anke’s school does not encourage students to openly present their ethnic and religious identities. Therefore, diversity remains invisible in school classes, and as such they cannot become places of community building or contexts of solidarity. Jews remain “the Others.” The eighteen-year-old high school student Thore

reports about the concealment of someone's Jewish identity in everyday life, in connection with the discussion of Judaism at a Christian school: "*When I was fifteen or sixteen, I discovered this for the first time, when we talked about Judaism as a topic at school, my parents told me, ah yes, our neighbour [. . .] he is also Jewish, and then I knew, oh really um*" (lines 511–514). In his life, being Jewish remains invisible until it is made relevant as a topic of education.

This narrative of strangeness is also supported by feelings of shame, as could be seen in the experience of Thore quoted above, where the identity of the neighbor seems to have been hidden for a long time. Central contexts for conveying the interpretations associated with the narrative are historicising references to Judaism in religious and school education and media representations of Judaism. For the twenty-six-year-old student Veronika, representations of traditional-Orthodox Judaism in a TV series have sparked her interest in Judaism:

*Woah. I know some stuff actually because I dealt with it, [. . .] so it started a bit with a Netflix [. . .] uh I know that not everything is true what was said in the Netflix series, which is called "Unorthodox" and you might know it. And then they showed a little bit like in a certain religious group, some would almost say a sect, but of Judaism and how they live. One of them has fled and whatever and they also exaggerate a bit, they just show a lot. And that sparked my interest a bit.* (Lines 604–611)

Even though Veronika reflects on the cinematic construction as "*exaggerate[d]*", the reception leads the young woman to understand the depicted religious practice as "correct" or authentic: "*I don't know any real Jews and just thought so woah [. . .] I want to learn more about it [. . .] and then I watched a lot of reports and documentaries and so on*" (lines 611–612). Here, at the same time, an exoticism is revealed, which sparks the speaker's interest further. As can be learned from postcolonial studies, exoticism is strongly connected to the narrative of

strangeness, because it creates and emphasises differences.<sup>34</sup>

Media representations of Jews and Jewish life also left a strong impression on some of the other young people interviewed. They mostly encounter media representations of Jews and Judaism in the news, where instead of personal stories, Jews and Judaism are almost entirely thematised in connection with violence. Antisemitic incidents in Germany form an important reference point, as fourteen-year-old student Annette reports: "*A synagogue even burned down last year. Oh no, that was in the news this year, as far as I remember. I could be wrong*" (lines 467–468). Further, when asked about encounters with Jewish life, Israel becomes relevant as a site of conflict, as seventeen-year-old Marie, a junior high school student, describes:

*It's still actually the case that there's still fighting going on, which is actually insane. As far as I know there is officially no war, it is only again and again at places is evenly, is fought bloody. But actually, there is total insanity. So, it appears . . . yes, again and again in the news this Middle East conflict is, yes, actually always and permanently a topic.* (Lines 800–804)

When asked about encounters with Judaism and Jewish life, young Germans refer to media presentations of violence and conflicts. But neither the continuity of antisemitic violence in Germany nor the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians seem to be related to their life. Both remain objects of observation instead of being represented as active subjects.

Further, religious education in school and visits to local synagogues reproduce the representation of Jews as "the Others," even though young Germans get in touch with Judaism as a lived religion. For Anna, a twenty-year-old volunteer, the Jewish community center becomes a place of education for religious practices: "*As I said, we went to a synagogue with the school [. . .] and looked at everything and had their traditions elaborated and detailed [. . .] Just also, for example,*

*about the meat, what they eat and such and what is kosher and what is not and so on*" (lines 683–686). In a similar way, the nineteen-year-old trainee Angelina describes a visit to the synagogue, which was organised by the *chazan* (prayer leader) of the community: "*There was also the Torah there, he showed us so, so the man who just reads out there, he just showed us uh how the Torah looks like, we could [ . . . ] look at it, actually I found it exciting, he was also very friendly*" (lines 409–411). These and similar experiences of contact mediated through educational institutions prove to be dominant forms of encountering Judaism and Jewish people in the study. Angelina specifically points out that the *chazan* was "very friendly," as if that was not her initial expectation, indicating a construction of difference of Jews in her perception. Overall, the narrative of strangeness is characteristic for educational as well as media-led representations of Judaism for young non-Jewish Germans.

### Judaism as Educational Subject in Narratives of Victimhood and Guilt

For the majority of the young people interviewed, school forms the central context of their engagement with Judaism. Martha, a nineteen-year-old high school graduate reports that Judaism was mainly discussed in history classes: "*Well, in history classes it was [ . . . ] really about Judaism. [ . . . ] As far as I remember, exclusively [ . . . ] about Judaism in times of National Socialism in Germany and the Holocaust. [ . . . ] So I think before that, of course, it was also about the position of Judaism before National Socialism and during National Socialism and [ . . . ] how that has developed until today. Um, that was actually quite good, so you had more of a historical overview of Judaism*" (lines 1055–1060). The contextualisation of the crimes of the Shoah, which Martha experienced in school, appears as an exception in the young people's accounts. For most interviewees, the thematisation of Judaism remains isolated in the context of classroom discussion of National Socialism and the Holocaust.

Thus, institutionalised education leads to a mainly historical reference to Jewish life. The analysis of the interviews shows that history and social science lessons mainly create images of Jews as victims of antisemitic violence, crimes, and genocide during National Socialism. This leads to a second dominant representation of Jews, that we describe as the *narrative of victimhood*. This narrative plays a determining role in young people's perspectives on Judaism. For example, Maya, a seventeen-year-old high school student, describes Jews primarily as victims of the Shoah: "*the Jews as the persecuted or in the Middle Ages as the marginalized and those who were to blame for everything*" (lines 373–374). When asked what comes to their mind when they hear Judaism, many young people in our study react like Lena, an eighteen-year-old high school graduate, who says "*uhm, of course the Nazi times and that everything was very terrifying, uhm, we also had the book of Anne Frank in school*" (lines 458–459). While in the experiences of Martha and Maya, the historical continuity of antisemitism is taught in school, the genocide of Jews remains a singular historical event that generally defines Jewish life up to the present for most of the interviewees. Different Jewish origins and biographies are neither considered nor even known. This reference of victimhood to Jews and Judaism becomes relevant against the background of the young Germans' positioning in a post-National Socialist society, where there is hardly any contact with Jews and, if at all, if at all, their Jewishness is invisible. Critical approaches on Holocaust education criticise the passive construction of Jews as a historical object and victim.<sup>35</sup>

The *narrative of guilt* is closely connected to the narrative of victimhood in the interviews. This narrative reflects problems of the German culture of remembrance and reappraisal of the Holocaust as the society of perpetrators. The involvement of ancestors in NS crimes is de-thematised or denied. Instead, antisemitism is reproduced through ways of speaking that refer to fragments of NS ideology, and the

significance of the Holocaust is downplayed. In everyday German language in contemporary Germany, there are traces of NS ideology, and its widespread use has led to its normalisation and legitimisation. An unreflected use of NS terminology is as common as un-deconstructed ways of speaking about antisemitism. For example, problematic images and descriptions can be found in German educational materials on the topics of the Holocaust, Jewish life, and antisemitism. In the recent published final report on the depiction of Jewish history, culture, and religion in North Rhine-Westphalia's school textbooks, the experts strongly criticise the use of NS terminology and with it the partial incorporation of NS ideology in educational material.<sup>36</sup>

The extent of the problem is not only evident from educational materials but also from German penal law, which should be the framework for acceptable behavior in German society. However, it was never reworked after the Holocaust and voided of National Socialist terminology and thus ideology. Several sections of the penal code, which originated from the notorious NS judge and war criminal Roland Freisler, have remained unchanged until now, indicating the scope of the issue. During his time as the judge of the infamous so-called *Volksgerichtshof* (people's court), he was feared for his cruel and unjust trials, spreading terror. He is responsible for more than 5000 death sentences and executions.<sup>37</sup> Freisler contributed significantly to the Nazification of German law and on his initiative, the so-called racial defilement became punishable by death. Freisler was also present at the Wannsee Conference in 1942, where he supported and legitimised the plan to murder the Jewish population.<sup>38</sup> With the "Initiative Nazi-Free Law", German lawyers have been unsuccessfully campaigning for the reformulation of relevant paragraphs for many years. As the Holocaust survivor and linguist Victor Klemperer wrote about NS language in his work *Lingua Tertii Imperii* (The language of the Third Reich): "Words can be like tiny doses of arsenic:

they are swallowed unnoticed, they seem to have no effect, and after a while, the toxic effect is still there."<sup>39</sup> In his work, he shows that the "language of Nazism" was the breeding ground for the actions, attitudes, and habits of thought of the National Socialists.<sup>40</sup>

Considering that language constitutes reality, and the fact that trivialisation and revisionist depictions of the Holocaust are common in Germany, it is all the more surprising that there is hardly any current academic discussion in the field of education about the influence of NS language and ideology on contemporary German society. For example, the National Socialists coined the dehumanising abbreviation "a-sozial," meaning anti-social, which is still in widespread use in Germany today.<sup>41</sup> But during NS time, people marked with this imagined verdict were abducted to labour or death camps, and most of them were murdered. In the speech of Lena (eighteen years old, apprentice) there are trivialising descriptions of the genocide and traces of NS ideology by the use of the antisemitic term "Jewish star." It is important to take into account here that Lena does not mean the "Star of David" but the criminal marking practice with a yellow piece of cloth enforced by the National Socialists. Lena says in her interview:

*Um [...] for me it's very strange that the people have been disadvantaged that much because um um [...] so that they were so restricted, that they then only were allowed to be in such and such places, had to wear the Jewish star, that they were so excluded from society and um just didn't find themselves in it at all, that just also many neighbors then just watched, so to speak. And the people let that happen to them that's what I can't quite understand. (Lines 544–550)*

The capacity for violence in the German language is particularly evident in the use of the term *Judenstern* (Jewish star) because it suggests a connection to Judaism instead of the violent practices of the National Socialists. In the words of NS ideology, as a "hygienic prophylaxis," Jews



were forced to wear a yellow star, marking them as “enemies of the German national community” that represents the escalation towards mass murder.<sup>42</sup> A language practice of a *yellow star* would sever the connection to Judaism and instead give cause to address discriminatory practices of marking Jews in the history of Germany, which already existed in the Middle Ages. Further, Lena speaks about “restrictions” and “neighbors that just watched,” instead of pointing out that the German population was actively involved in the exclusion, expulsion, and murder of their Jewish neighbors and often profited from it. Her remark on the Jewish population that “let things just happen to them” further testifies to a lack of knowledge and also insufficient speaking practice when addressing the crimes of German society. Instead, she reproduces antisemitism by using terminology inherent to NS ideology and relativising statements about the crimes against the Jewish population. Ultimately, Lena’s description conceals the involvement of the majority of German society in NS crimes.

Based on the before-mentioned narrative of guilt and related educational discourses, some non-Jewish Germans feel shame when they meet Jews. For the eighteen-year-old high school graduate Lia an exchange program with Israel is reflected as “*a big highlight in my life*” (lines 28–29). Despite this, her remembering is characterised by shame: “*When I think about it, it really is a religion where I am always speechless or sometimes also a bit ashamed that I am German, because of the history and so. [ . . . ] I was in Israel and we spoke with survivors [ . . . ] of the Holocaust who spoke to us in German. [ . . . ] I sometimes really sat there and thought to myself, why do I have to be German [ . . . ] or at least Christian or something. I don’t know, [ . . . ] that touched me so much and affected me in a way, that I really thought, [ . . . ] that I don’t want to be that anymore or something. But, ehm, Judaism is an extremely interesting religion*” (lines 447–454). In this quote, the narratives of strangeness, victimhood, and guilt

overlap. Even though Lia participated in many history and civic education programs and even took part at an exchange program with Israel, her identity as a German is determined by specific educational discourses on Judaism. As showed above, these discourses construct Jews as the historical or religious “other” and as victims of antisemitism. What can be understood from Lia’s feelings is that her learning about antisemitism remains precarious. In her presentation she remains in the opposition of victims and persecutors and continues to subscribe to a historical determination of antisemitism.

To sum up, the analysis of interview data shows that non-Jewish young people in Germany have almost no contact with Jewish people and only limited knowledge about Jewish life in its present diversity. Instead, their interview expressions are characterised by fragments of antisemitic narratives that are dominant in German public discourses. The analysis indicates that media representations and educational programs impart this antisemitism-informed knowledge.

### Critique of Antisemitism—Between a Programmatic Self-Image and Habitus

Even though almost all young Germans interviewed reproduce antisemitism-informed knowledge in their descriptions, most of them also position themselves clearly and unequivocally against antisemitism:

*I think that you can only understand that if you get to know it [ . . . ] so if you [ . . . ] if you are taught this whole history if you learn it in school that this must be addressed in any case [ . . . ] that somehow [ . . . ] that is very important I think that this continues to be a topic. (Martha, line 96)*

*It is important that one learns from it and does not make the mistake that one now for example with AfD or if one watches what happens now then one knows [ . . . ] that one also sees such a history [ . . . ] it is important the history yes. (Khalel, lines 109–116)*

In their interviews, nineteen-year-old high school graduate Martha and twenty-year-old high school student Khalel, like most of the young people we interviewed, refer positively to education critical against antisemitism in school. They further describe Holocaust education as a tool to protect democracy and also as prevention against antisemitism. Both interviewees refer to the importance of Holocaust education in schools, linking it to the danger of the continuity of antisemitism and right-wing extremist networks. They understand right-wing populism and extremist groups as current dangers to social cohesion and a democratic order. Referring to images of victims of the Holocaust she has seen in school, Martha summarises that it is “[. . .] pretty bad to see that, but erm [...] yes, as I said, maybe also [...] important to see that, erm yes, maybe we can take something away from it, learn something and erm say to ourselves, this must never again happen” (lines 1271–1274). The repetition of the imperative “Never again!”<sup>43</sup> is common in most interviews and can be understood as a *narrative of the critique of antisemitism*. As such, it refers to the self-image of the post-Holocaust perpetrator society in Germany, where historical-educational work is considered an essential part of civic education. Young people in Germany seem to affirm the social norm that the horrors of the Holocaust must not be repeated. On a reflexive and programmatic level, they position themselves as critical of antisemitism. Educational work, especially in the context of schools, is documented in the interviews as a central space in which this positioning emerges. Nevertheless, the references to “Never again!” remain superficial and often do not mean more than the simple reproduction of a social norm in the form of a phrase.

Young people’s speech about antisemitism reveals a critical narrative that combines historical responsibility for the Holocaust with the demand for reflection and resistance against current forms of antisemitism. In this positioning young people call upon continuities of

antisemitic violence in Germany and point to relations based on discrimination and inequality. A high school student named Anke, who is sixteen years old, critiques the prevailing depictions of Jews in German discussions: “*Judaism is defined only by the Holocaust, so to speak, for many people in Germany I think [...] that the only thing one associates with Judaism is the Shoah, so to speak*” (lines 906ff.). Other interviewees also show solidarity with those affected by antisemitism. Lia, eighteen years old and in high school, talks a lot about Jewish people’s experiences in Germany: “*and anyway then I just found an interview with, for example, a restaurant owner who keeps getting emails from some anonymous senders who then insult him so rudely*” (lines 953–955). The interviews indicate that, because of the persistent antisemitic attacks in Germany, the young people we interviewed also advocate for safeguarding Jewish establishments. While nearly all young people we spoke with reject antisemitism, deeper biographical analysis shows that there are differences in the relevance of the critical narrative in their lives. For many young people this position remains affirmative and programmatic, but does not lead to concrete action or self-reflection. Critique of antisemitism holds as a qualification for the majority of young people in contemporary German society. For some, positioning themselves critical to antisemitism is connected to an ongoing practice of identity work instead. Sam, a twenty-five-year-old student, reflects on their own responsibilities and says: “*Yes, because I think it’s really bad and I want to work hard to ensure that it doesn’t happen again, at least in Germany.*” They reflect on the limits of their knowledge and evaluate the confrontation with antisemitism as an important personal task.

## CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

The analyses presented on the views and experiences of non-Jewish young people in Germany show that from the reality of the post-National

Socialist society in Germany ambivalences and contradictions arise. All the young people interviewed had experiences with Holocaust education and interreligious education in school and in non-formal contexts. These educational programs are part of the German state's post-Holocaust self-image and are supposed to contribute to a democratic political culture and counter antisemitism and racism. However, our analysis shows that this does not succeed seamlessly. It is true that young people position themselves against antisemitism. At the same time, however, they reproduce antisemitism-informed knowledge.

Educational work against antisemitism thus seems to have unintended side effects. The historicisation of the Holocaust as an object of school education becomes a routinised practice in the presentation of the young people interviewed. Above all, it does not necessarily open up a critique of the ideology and worldview of antisemitism for young people. In the interviews, young people repeat antisemitic stereotypes and attributions from social discourses. They construct Jews and Jewish life as foreign, and the Holocaust is described in a relativising way. Jews are constructed exclusively as victims of the Shoah. Despite partial references to Judaism in school, young people hardly differentiate between knowledge about Jews as individual personalities belonging to an ethnic group and Judaism as a religion and experiences with the German culture of remembrance about the NS era and the Shoah. This indicates that they do not learn to recognise and name antisemitism.

Young Germans have limited personal encounters with Jews and Jewish life. Instead, their knowledge results from diverse educational practices such as Holocaust education, interreligious education, and exchange programs, in addition to representations of Jews in the media. Based on this, four dominant narratives shape young Germans' attitudes towards Jews and Jewish life, namely the

narrative of strangeness, victimhood, guilt, and the critique of antisemitism. For non-Jewish young Germans, contact with Jews is primarily institutionally framed and thus normatively charged in the sense of political or interreligious education. Related encounters are not commonplace nor carefree, but mark Jews as "the Other." Through this reference, Judaism is either represented as a historical phenomenon or placed in an international context. Thus, it is not given any relevance to everyday life in German society. The lack of perception of commonplace encounters with Jews and Jewish life reinforces this construction of difference.

The self-image of Germans as a society that has overcome NS ideology results in the imperative for young Germans to align themselves with the critique of antisemitism. This imperative is at the same time relevant to education, as for the young people themselves. Our study shows that this does not lead to a practice of identification and deconstruction of antisemitism per se. A key finding of our analysis is that dealing with antisemitism at school does not simultaneously represent a central context for practicing antisemitism criticism for most young people surveyed. From our point of view and given our findings, however, this should be a very important goal of antisemitism-critical education. If the rejection of antisemitism is not to remain an empty program, young people must be enabled to recognise antisemitism. This would include openly addressing the historical continuity and the change and adaptation of antisemitism in Christianity and Germany. Othering as a practice of exclusion, homogenisation, debasement, and the associated processes should become the core of antisemitism-critical education. For Holocaust education, this would mean, for example, prioritising the critical examination of ideologies in opposition to memorising historical data of war and mass murder. The long-demanded departure from the perpetrator's perspective for a diversification of

remembrance cultures can also significantly contribute to a meaningful way of dealing with the Holocaust.

Ongoing professionalisation of teaching personnel about identifying and deconstructing antisemitism as an intervention against antisemitism in Germany's diverse social spaces is needed. Based on the results of our research project, we developed workshops for multipliers, students, and pupils that empower them to identify, classify, and deconstruct antisemitism. As a last step, intervention against antisemitism is practiced. The goal is to enable participants to recognise antisemitism in their life-worlds, such as schoolbooks and social media posts.

Sensitising workshop participants to antisemitism-informed knowledge and NS terminology in German patterns of speaking aims to positively influence the discourse on antisemitism, the Holocaust and Jewish life.

The presented results of our research project indicate further research gaps such as investigations of educational spaces where the deconstruction of antisemitism actually shows results and where young people are empowered to position themselves against antisemitism. Particularly, research activities in the field of German historical education to critically reflect the usage of NS ideologically charged speech seem necessary.

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