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Revisiting Secondary Antisemitism: Antisemitism as a Cause, Not a Consequence, of Ingroup-Serving Holocaust Distortions

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Holocaust distortions are central to contemporary antisemitic rhetoric, appearing across political ideologies and geographic contexts. Such distortions, often closely linked to collective memory processes, raise critical questions about the causal relationship between antisemitism and Holocaust narratives. Theoretical and conceptual work on secondary antisemitism suggests that modern antisemitism stems from ingroup-serving Holocaust distortions, motivated by collective guilt. However, social psychological research suggests that contemporary attitudes may shape historical representations, indicating that antisemitism could be a cause, rather than a consequence, of these distortions. In a longitudinal analysis of a quota-representative sample of the German and Polish populations, two countries with distinct Holocaust histories, we examined the bidirectional relationship between antisemitic prejudice and ingroup-serving Holocaust distortion. Using structural equation modeling, we assessed the reciprocal influence of antisemitism and Holocaust reinterpretation, with both national models showing good fit (comparative fit index > .98, root-mean-square error of approximation < .065, standardized root-mean-square residual < .04). By assessing participants' perceptions of their ingroup's emotions and behaviors during the Holocaust alongside contemporary antisemitic attitudes, our findings show that antisemitism actively influences biased Holocaust representations. These results challenge the premise of secondary antisemitism, highlighting that historical distortions often reflect current prejudices rather than driving them. Our findings underscore how collective memory can be adapted to justify present-day biases, emphasizing the dynamic interplay between historical narratives and contemporary intergroup attitudes.

Public Significance Statement
Antisemitic prejudice today can cause people to rewrite Holocaust history in ways that cast their own nation in a better light. Surveying quota-representative samples in Germany and Poland over time, we found that stronger antisemitic views predicted later tendencies to exaggerate their country's compassion and downplay its wrongdoing during the Holocaust and not the other way around. The finding means that countering present-day antisemitism is essential not only for protecting Jewish communities but also for safeguarding honest public memory of the Holocaust.

Keywords: secondary antisemitism, holocaust distortion, collective memory, defensive representations of history

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All data, analysis scripts (in R Markdown), a codebook, an HTML-rendered output file, and supplemental materials for this study are available on the Open Science Framework at https://osf.io/c2yv6/?view_only=86f461992a2c4109aee8e4ef461aa9bf.

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Maria Babińska played a lead role in formal analysis, investigation,

continued

Biased representations and distortions of the Holocaust are often central to antisemitic rhetoric and discourse, ranging from statements by the Palestinian president claiming that the genocide was not rooted in German prejudice against Jews (Knell, 2023) to remarks by the Russian Foreign Affairs Minister attributing responsibility for the Holocaust to Jews themselves (BBC News, 2022). Such misrepresentations appear in both contemporary radical left-wing anti-Israel rallies and the nationalist right-wing political activism across Europe and beyond. This raises a critical question: What role do biased and distorted portrayals of the Holocaust play in fueling antisemitic prejudice?

The concept of secondary antisemitism (Schönbach, 1961) posits that contemporary antisemitism originates from an inability to adequately confront and process Holocaust history. Developed by social scientists associated with the Frankfurt School, this framework suggests that modern antisemitism stems from distortions of Holocaust memory. Political scientist Lars Rensmann (2017) explained,

> post-Holocaust secondary antisemitism … is not conceived as a weaker form of Jew hatred but rather points to a particular, new origin or source of antisemitic resentment: the wish to repress and split off Holocaust remembrance and guilt from the collective memory of a tainted nation. (p. 6)

Thus, secondary antisemitism is traditionally conceptualized as a guilt-driven distortion of history that perpetuates antisemitic beliefs and prejudices.

This conceptualization appears to conflict with fundamental principles of social psychology regarding collective memory and historical representations (Hilton & Liu, 2017; Liu & Hilton, 2005). Historical narratives are shaped by contemporary interests, attitudes, and worldviews (Klar & Bilewicz, 2017), often serving to justify existing prejudices and stereotypes. Distortions and biased views of history frequently reflect preexisting intergroup biases. This raises an intriguing question: Is antisemitism a cause of distorted Holocaust narratives, or as secondary antisemitism theorists argue, is it a consequence of these distortions? To address this tension, the present study uses a longitudinal cross-lagged panel approach to investigate whether antisemitic prejudice prospectively predicts biased representations of the Holocaust.

Secondary Antisemitism

Secondary antisemitism refers to antisemitic attitudes arising from the memory and acknowledgment of the Holocaust, or rather the lack thereof, often manifesting through denial, minimization, or inversion of guilt. Coined by Adorno (1955) after World War II, the term describes attempts to deflect responsibility for the Holocaust by blaming its victims or criticizing the emphasis on Holocaust remembrance. Wodak (2018) identified secondary antisemitism as a distinct discursive strategy, which can appear in latent, explicit, or indirect forms. Central to such rhetoric is the justification of ingroup behavior by shifting blame onto Holocaust victims. Consequently, discourse analysts argue that antisemitic responses are rooted in the denial of collective guilt and distorted portrayals of the Holocaust.

The implications of secondary antisemitism extend beyond historical denial into contemporary antisemitic practices and rhetoric. By reframing Holocaust memory as a manipulative tool, secondary antisemitism perpetuates historical revisionism and sustains broader antisemitic ideologies under the guise of legitimate critique. This phenomenon is fueled by collective guilt among Holocaust perpetrators and bystanders, serving as a psychological defense mechanism to mitigate this guilt (Rensmann, 2017).

Although initially conceptualized by philosophers and social scientists to explain postwar German politics (Adorno, 1955; Schönbach, 1961; Wodak, 2018), secondary antisemitism has since become a valuable framework for psychologists examining antisemitic prejudice. From a psychological perspective, it aligns with just-world belief theory (Lerner, 1980), according to which victims can be perceived as responsible for their suffering in order to maintain the observer's belief that the world is just and everyone gets what they deserve. Secondary antisemitism, therefore, arises not from direct contact with Jewish individuals but from biased Holocaust narratives that alleviate collective guilt.

Empirical research has operationalized secondary antisemitism through validated scales. For instance, Imhoff (2010) developed a scale for German samples that measures views of Jews as perpetrators, emphasizes ingroup victimhood, and critiques Holocaust remembrance. Similarly, Bilewicz et al. (2013) created a scale in Poland focusing on blaming Jews, denying ingroup complicity, and attributing sole responsibility to Germans. While these tools establish the construct's validity, they fall short of capturing the dynamic interplay between guilt-driven Holocaust distortions and antisemitic bias. Experimental studies have sought to address this gap.

One early experimental study found that reminders of long-lasting effects of Holocaust crimes against Jews elevated antisemitic attitudes among German participants (Imhoff & Banse, 2009). This has been observed using both unobtrusive measures (affect misattribution procedure) and under forced truthfulness (bogus pipeline procedure). However, these findings were

methodology, visualization, supervision, writing–original draft, and writing–review and editing and a supporting role in conceptualization and project administration. Jonas Rees played a supporting role in conceptualization, investigation, methodology, and writing–original draft and editing. Michał Bilewicz played a lead role in conceptualization, project administration, supervision, writing–original draft, and writing–review and editing and a supporting role in investigation, methodology, and formal analysis.

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limited by small sample sizes and specific historical context, as the studies were performed amid heated debate on Jewish material claims against Germany. Subsequent direct replication attempts, as well as conceptual replications, have largely been unsuccessful (Imhoff & Messer, 2019). Additional indirect evidence of the secondary antisemitism causal model comes from archival research. An archival study of antisemitic incidents and support for antisemitic parties showed that the prevalence of such incidents and popularity of anti-Jewish political movements is statistically related to a higher percentage of Jews killed during the Holocaust (Feinberg & Stewart, 2019). This evidence is still indirect, however, as the scale of past antisemitic violence cannot be equated with denialist views about such violence—with several examples of perpetrator societies where Holocaust history has been openly addressed (e.g., Germany and Austria). While all the abovementioned studies highlight guilt-driven motivations for secondary antisemitism, they do not directly test the causal role of guilt-induced historical distortions in shaping antisemitic responses.

Holocaust Distortion: Cause or Consequence of Antisemitism?

The term "Holocaust distortion" has attracted substantial attention from researchers across various disciplines in recent years (cf. Bauer, 2020; Puchala et al., in press; Rozett, 2022). According to the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance working definition of Holocaust denial and distortion (International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, 2013), one of the principal aspects of Holocaust distortion involves intentional efforts to excuse or minimize the impact of the Holocaust or its key elements, including the role of collaborators and allies of Nazi Germany. Bauer (2020) suggested that what distinguishes Holocaust distortion from Holocaust denial is its ingroup-defensive motivation. Such distortions are rooted in a desire to preserve a positive national self-image that might be threatened by accurate depictions of national involvement in the Holocaust. Therefore, these distortions should not be seen merely as inaccuracies in reporting historical facts, but rather as motivated representations of history that serve the interests of the group.

An example of such distortion is the exaggeration of the scale of aid provided to Jews by Poles during the Holocaust. Currently, the average Pole estimates that over 50% of the Polish wartime population participated in such rescue efforts (Babińska & Bilewicz, 2023). This perception stands in stark contrast to historical research, which consistently estimates that active rescuers constituted less than 2.5% of the ethnic Polish population (Prekerowa, 1987). The relation of such distortions with antisemitic prejudice has been widely studied by psychologists (Babińska & Bilewicz, 2023; Hirschberger et al., 2016; Kazarovytska et al., 2025).

The psychological impact of Holocaust representations on attitudes seems well-documented. For instance, essentialist attributions of the Holocaust correlate with negative attitudes toward contemporary Germans in Israel and Poland (Imhoff et al., 2017) and influence immigration views in both countries (Hirschberger et al., 2022). However, these studies rely on correlational designs, leaving open the possibility that attitudes may shape Holocaust narratives rather than vice versa.

Some studies directly explore the relationship of Holocaust distortion with antisemitism. Hirschberger et al. (2016) found that ingroup-serving Holocaust narratives in Hungary correlated with traditional and modern antisemitic beliefs. Experimental manipulation of Holocaust narratives emphasizing heroism and forced collaboration versus active collaboration elevated Holocaust-related antisemitism but had limited effects on broader antisemitic attitudes. While these findings suggest a causal role for social representations in specific antisemitic beliefs, they did not address the issue of reverse causality.

Cross-national studies provide further insights. For example, Kazarovytska et al. (2025), based on a study in eight different nations, identified three primary representations of ingroup involvement in the Holocaust: as willing collaborators, forced collaborators, or victim-heroes. Surprisingly, all three correlated positively with antisemitic beliefs. By contrast, Babińska and Bilewicz (2023) found that heroic representations of Poles during the Holocaust correlated positively with antisemitism, while critical perspectives correlated negatively. However, these studies examine correlations rather than causation and do not focus explicitly on distortions.

Despite evidence linking Holocaust distortion to antisemitism, the reverse pathway—antisemitic beliefs shaping distorted Holocaust views—remains largely unexplored. This omission is significant given the psychological principle that current attitudes shape collective memory and historical representation.

Collective Memory as a Potential Outcome of Current Intergroup Relations

The idea that current attitudes and motivations shape collective memories and social representations of history is almost self-evident (Baumeister & Hastings, 1997; Liu & Hilton, 2005). Individuals with strong positive regard for their current fellow ingroup members often act as "lay censors" of national history—omitting certain contents of ingroup's past and repressing dissident voices (Klar & Bilewicz, 2017). A highly positive view of the ingroup leads to biases in interpretation and explanation of national history. People strongly identifying with their nation tend to explain the history in a group-serving manner (Bilewicz et al., 2017), show less willingness to acknowledge negative historical events (Doosje et al., 2006), feel less guilt for past wrongdoings (Klein et al., 2011; Wohl et al., 2006), and are less inclined to forgive instances of mistreatment in the past (Uluğ et al., 2023).

Collective memory can also serve to legitimize current intergroup inequalities and efforts toward national cohesion.

A study analyzing the collective memory of colonial oppression of the Māori people in New Zealand found that high levels of cohesion motivation led to the denial of historical injustices (Sibley et al., 2008). Cross-country comparisons of collective memory also suggest that social representations of history tend to legitimize global inequalities, with European events and figures clearly dominating even in Latin American and Pacific Rim societies (Liu, 1999; Techio et al., 2010). This indicates that present-day interests, attitudes, and inequalities are reflected in what people tend to remember and forget in their narratives about the past.

Bilewicz (2016) suggested that biased representations of history can be understood as an emotion regulation strategy aimed at downregulating current intergroup emotions. This aligns with a fundamental principle of social cognition, which holds that "thinking is for doing"; in other words, social understandings and perceptions are shaped to facilitate current social interactions (Fiske, 1992). It also resonates with contemporary views on cognitive dissonance, which emphasize the primacy of action over cognition (Harmon-Jones et al., 2015).

From this perspective, individuals' views of the Holocaust should be influenced by their current intergroup relations between them and Jewish people. For instance, when hostility toward Jews increases, views about the Holocaust should shift accordingly. To our knowledge, this alternative to the causal assumptions behind the concept of secondary antisemitism has not been tested yet.

The Current Research

In order to test whether ingroup-serving distortions of Holocaust memory may be causally linked to antisemitic prejudice (as suggested by the traditional conceptualization of secondary antisemitism) or whether antisemitic prejudice may be expressed through ingroup-serving distortions of the Holocaust (as could be inferred from psychological research on collective memory), we performed a longitudinal cross-lagged panel study that would allow us to test causal inferences by analyzing whether the relations between two variables changing over time are reciprocal or directional (Heise, 1970). Although such causal inferences are obviously imperfect and subject to biases from unmeasured confounding variables (Lüdtke & Robitzsch, 2022), they offer an advantage over experimental tests of causality when one of the variables is difficult to manipulate. In the study of attitude–cognition relations—for instance, the effects of antisemitic attitudes on perceptions of Holocaust history—it is possible to experimentally increase the salience of certain representations of the past (e.g., Hirschberger et al., 2016). However, testing the reverse path would be impossible because antisemitic attitudes cannot be easily primed in experimental settings. Hence, we decided to perform a longitudinal study as an initial test of the causal relationship between antisemitism and ingroup-serving distortions of Holocaust memory.

Although the concept of secondary antisemitism was originally coined in Germany to explain the emergence of antisemitic attitudes after the Holocaust among the perpetrators and their descendants (Adorno, 1955; Imhoff & Banse, 2009; Rensmann, 2017), it has also been applied to other societies where either collaboration or passive bystandership during the Holocaust poses a threat to national identity and historical pride (Barna et al., 2022; Bilewicz et al., 2013). This is why we decided to conduct our study in two different contexts—one that has a clear perpetrator status in relation to the Holocaust (Germany) and another that was under Nazi German occupation and is regarded primarily as a collective bystander, albeit with individual acts of complicity and anti-Jewish violence during the Holocaust (Poland).

In this study, we tested the relationship between ingroup-serving Holocaust distortions and the most common antisemitic attitudes—conspiratorial, traditional, and secondary (Bilewicz et al., 2013; Kazarovytska et al., 2025). To capture ingroup-serving Holocaust distortions, we focused on participants' assessments of how frequently members of their ingroup engaged in particular behaviors and held specific attitudes toward Jews during the Holocaust. We defined ingroup-serving Holocaust distortion as the tendency to overestimate moral or heroic behaviors and to underestimate immoral ones. Such representations of the Holocaust are among the most typical distortions of Holocaust memory in both Poland (Grabowski, 2024) and Germany (Welzer et al., 2002).

Method

Participants and Design

Two parallel longitudinal studies were conducted in Poland and Germany using quota-based samples recruited through IMAS International, a professional polling agency operating in both countries. Quotas for age, gender, and education ensured demographic representativeness. Participants were drawn from IMAS's verified online panels, which use a two-step registration process and ongoing quality controls (e.g., participation history, data verification, removal of low-quality responders). Two attention checks were included in our survey, and IMAS's internal procedures helped minimize inattentive or random responding.

In Poland, the first wave of data collection took place in September 2019 (t_1), and the second wave took place in September 2022 (t_2). The initial sample in the first wave comprised $N = 1{,}078$ adult Poles (51% women, 49% men, and one person who identified as a different gender; $M_{age} = 45$, $SD_{age} = 14.90$). The attrition rate between waves was 39%, leaving a final sample of $n = 662$ participants (48.2% women, 51.8% men; $M_{age} = 48.44$, $SD_{age} = 14.67$).

In Germany, the first wave of the study took place in September 2019 (t_1), and the second wave of the study took place in November 2022 (t_2). The initial sample in the first wave included $N = 1{,}090$ adult Germans (50% women, 50%

men, $M_{age} = 48.76$, $SD_{age} = 15.6$). The attrition rate between waves was 20%, leaving a final sample of $n = 672$ participants (48.7% women, 51.3% men, $M_{age} = 51.42$, $SD_{age} = 14.96$).

To assess the potential impact of attrition on the generalizability of our longitudinal findings, we compared participants who completed the second wave to the full Time 1 sample on key demographic characteristics. In both countries, participants who remained in the study were significantly older compared to the initial sample, Poland: $M = 48.44$ versus 45.96, $t(1411.7) = -3.41$, $p < .001$; Germany: $M = 51.42$ versus 48.76, $t(1465.9) = -3.57$, $p < .001$. No significant differences were observed in educational attainment nor in gender composition between completers and noncompleters in either country (results of all attrition analyses are provided in the additional online Section 1 at https://osf.io/c2yv6/?view_only=86f461992a2c4109aee8e4ef461aa9bf).

The measures we used in our analysis were part of a larger survey that also included other measures such as stereotype content and intergroup emotions. Overall, the questionnaire consisted of 219 questions and took approximately 30 min to complete. The project obtained approval from the authors' faculty ethics committee (Opinion No. 16/10/2019, Faculty of Psychology, University of Warsaw).

Measures

Ingroup-serving Holocaust distortion measure was constructed based on participants' lay perceptions of their ingroup members' emotions and behaviors during the Holocaust. Participants were asked to indicate how common six specific emotions and behaviors of the respective ingroup (Poles or Germans) toward Jews during the Holocaust were. Specifically, participants were asked to estimate the percentage of Poles/Germans who (a) felt sorry for Jews, (b) selflessly saved Jews, (c) were indifferent to the suffering of Jews, (d) felt schadenfreude, (e) refused to help Jews, and (f) cooperated with Germans/Nazis in their actions against Jews during World War II. Thus, the scale included three questions about emotions with varying degrees of morality (compassion, indifference, and schadenfreude) and three about behavior with different degrees of morality (selfless help, refusal of help, and cooperation with perpetrators). Responses were given on a scale from 0% (*nobody*) to 100% (*everyone*). The indicator of ingroup-serving Holocaust distortions was assessed by subtracting the estimates of moral ($\alpha_{PLt1} = .75$; $\alpha_{PLt2} = .78$; $\alpha_{DEt1} = .73$; $\alpha_{DEt2} = 79$) and immoral ingroup emotions and behaviors ($\alpha_{PLt1} = .79$; $\alpha_{PLt2} = .89$; $\alpha_{DEt1} = .70$; $\alpha_{DEt2} = .75$) with higher values suggesting greater ingroup-serving Holocaust distortion. More information about the empirical structure of this measure is provided in the Results section.

Antisemitic beliefs were measured using three subscales from the antisemitism scale developed by Bilewicz et al. (2013). The first subscale focused on traditional forms of antisemitism and included four items, such as "Jews are responsible for the death of Jesus Christ" ($\alpha_{PLLt1} = .86$; $\alpha_{PLt2} = .89$; $\alpha_{DEt1} = .86$; $\alpha_{DEt2} = .89$).The second subscale measured secondary antisemitism and included four country-specific items, such as "Jews spread the idea that Poles are anti-Semites" ($\alpha_{PLt1} = .82$; $\alpha_{PLt2} = .86$; $\alpha_{DEt1} = .85$; $\alpha_{DEt2} = .87$). The third subscale assessed belief in Jewish conspiracies and consisted of six items, such as "Jews often meet in hiding to discuss their plans" ($\alpha_{PLt1} = .94$; $\alpha_{PLt2} = .96$; $\alpha_{DEt1} = .94$; $\alpha_{DEt2} = .96$). All statements were rated on a scale from 1 (*definitely disagree*) to 5 (*definitely agree*).

Analytic Strategy

The first part of the analysis used data from the study's first wave, which consisted of a quota-representative sample of Poles and Germans. This analysis aimed to compare contemporary Polish and German respondents' perceptions of their historical ingroup members' emotions and behaviors toward Jews during the Holocaust. The ggplot2 package (Wickham, 2016) was used to visualize group-level distributions.

In the second part of the analysis, we investigated the longitudinal relationship between antisemitism and ingroup-serving Holocaust distortion, testing directional associations between antisemitic beliefs and biased representations of the Holocaust. Models were estimated using maximum likelihood (ML) with the lavaan package (Rosseel, 2012) in RStudio (Posit Team, 2024) running R Version 4.4.0 (R Core Team, 2024). Missing data were handled using listwise deletion in the main analyses. For each national subsample, a two-wave autoregressive cross-lagged panel model was specified, regressing latent variables of antisemitic beliefs and Holocaust distortion onto each other at both time points. Antisemitic beliefs were modeled using three parcels representing traditional, secondary, and conspiracy-based subcomponents; each parcel aggregated multiple items. Internal consistencies were satisfactory across waves (Cronbach's αs = .79–.86).

To ensure comparability of the latent constructs over time and support the interpretation of cross-lagged effects, we tested for longitudinal measurement invariance separately in the Polish and German samples. We followed a two-step procedure, first estimating a configural model with freely estimated factor loadings across time and then a metric model constraining loadings to equality. In both samples, the metric model showed comparable or slightly improved fit relative to the configural model (e.g., comparative fit index [ΔCFI] = .000, root-mean-square error of approximation [ΔRMSEA] ≤ .008), supporting metric invariance (Chen, 2007; Cheung & Rensvold, 2002). Based on this, factor loadings were constrained to equality across time in the final structural models. To account for differences in scale metrics across observed variables, all variables included in the final models were *z*-standardized within each country. Each model included autoregressive and cross-lagged paths between latent antisemitism and Holocaust distortion, with a total of 27 estimated parameters and two equality constraints.

The two quota-representative national samples (Poland and Germany) were analyzed separately. Each subsample exceeded the recommended minimum of 10–20 participants per estimated parameter (Weston & Gore, 2006), providing sufficient power for model estimation and hypothesis testing. We did not conduct multigroup structural equation model or formal comparisons between countries, as the meaning and psychological relevance of the Holocaust distortion measure differ substantially across national contexts. In Germany—a country with a clear historical perpetrator status—the measure captures defensive downplaying of acknowledged wrongdoing. In contrast, in Poland—where collective memory involves a more ambivalent combination of victimhood and complicity—the measure reflects a complex negotiation of moral positioning. Given these conceptual differences, we did not assume measurement invariance and instead estimated models independently for each group.

To account for differences in response scale metrics, all variables included in the final model were z-standardized separately within each country before estimation. We used a classic cross-lagged panel model framework to examine the prospective effects of between-person differences in antisemitic beliefs on changes in ingroup-serving Holocaust distortion. All structural paths were specified a priori based on theoretical considerations and retained regardless of statistical significance. In line with Loehlin (2004), no post hoc path trimming was performed.

Model fit was evaluated using multiple indices: χ^2, RMSEA, CFI, Tucker–Lewis index (TLI), and standardized root-mean-square residual (SRMR). While commonly cited thresholds (e.g., CFI $\geq$ .95, RMSEA $\leq$ .08, SRMR $\leq$ .08; Hu & Bentler, 1999) can be helpful guidelines, we interpret them heuristically in light of sample size, model complexity, and theoretical fit (Schermelleh-Engel et al., 2003).

To account for potential bias due to age-related attrition, we reestimated the structural equation models including age as a covariate. While the inclusion of age led to a modest decline in overall model fit, it did not meaningfully alter the magnitude or significance of the key structural paths. This suggests that our main findings are robust to demographic differences between retained and attrited participants. Full results of the age-adjusted models are provided in the additional online Section 7 at https://osf.io/c2yv6/?view_only=86f461992a2c4109aee8e4ef461aa9bf.

Transparency and Openness

All data, R scripts and their rendered HTML reports (as a single rendered Markdown document of the results and full models), the study codebook, and all materials are publicly available online at https://osf.io/c2yv6/.

Results

Descriptive Analyses of Germans' and Poles' Lay Perception of Ingroup Members' Emotions and Behaviors During the Holocaust at Time 1

In the first step of our analysis, we calculated means of estimates of different behaviors and emotions in the Polish and German population during the Holocaust (Table 1).

Among Polish participants, compassion toward Jews was perceived as the most prevalent emotion during the Holocaust. Indifference was seen as significantly less common than compassion, $t(1077) = 20.53$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.63$, and schadenfreude was perceived as less prevalent than indifference, $t(1077) = 27.36$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.83$. Helping Jews was considered more frequent than refusal of help, $t(1077) = 11.55$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.35$, and refusal of help was perceived as more common than collaboration with Nazis, $t(1077) = 24.31$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.74$.

In contrast, German participants perceived refusal of help as the most dominant behavior during the Holocaust. Indifference was rated as more common than schadenfreude, $t(1089) = 18.66$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.57$, which in turn was seen as more prevalent than compassion, $t(1089) = -14.81$, $p < .001$, $d = -0.45$. Refusal of help was considered significantly more common than collaboration with Nazis, $t(1089) = 33.70$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.02$, and collaboration was seen as more prevalent than helping behavior, $t(1089) = 14.87$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.45$ (Figure 1).

Results obtained in Germany differed from those obtained in Poland, and all differences tested using independent sample t tests proved to be significant, with effect sizes ranging from $d = -1.30$ for the difference between Polish and German estimates of collaboration to $d = -0.67$ for the difference between Polish

Table 1
Means and Standard Deviations of Estimates of Emotions and Behaviors of Poles and Germans During the Holocaust

Measure	Poland		Germany	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
1. Percentage of Poles/Germans feeling compassion	63.25	20.44	39.11	21.67
2. Percentage of Poles/Germans helping Jews	51.28	24.07	24.79	20.16
3. Percentage of Poles/Germans being indifferent	40.67	23.01	56.07	23.23
4. Percentage of Poles/Germans who refused to help	37.71	23.02	62.19	22.67
5. Percentage of Poles/Germans feeling schadenfreude	22.79	23.14	42.37	24.58
6. Percentage of Poles/Germans collaborating with Nazis	22.20	20.56	50.58	22.92

Table 2
Principal Component Analysis of the Estimates of Emotions and Behaviors Toward Jews During the Holocaust in Germany and Poland

Measure	Germany		Poland	
	1	2	1	2
1. Percentage of Poles/Germans feeling compassion		.75	.81	
2. Percentage of Poles/Germans helping Jews		.94	.94	
3. Percentage of Poles/Germans being indifferent	.59	−.34		.71
4. Percentage of Poles/Germans who refused to help	.48	−.50		.75
5. Percentage of Poles/Germans feeling schadenfreude	.85			.87
6. Percentage of Poles/Germans collaborating with Nazis	.84			.90

and German estimates of indifference (for detailed results of *t* tests, see the additional online Section 2 at https://osf.io/c2yv6/?view_only=86f461992a2c4109aee8e4ef461aa9bf).

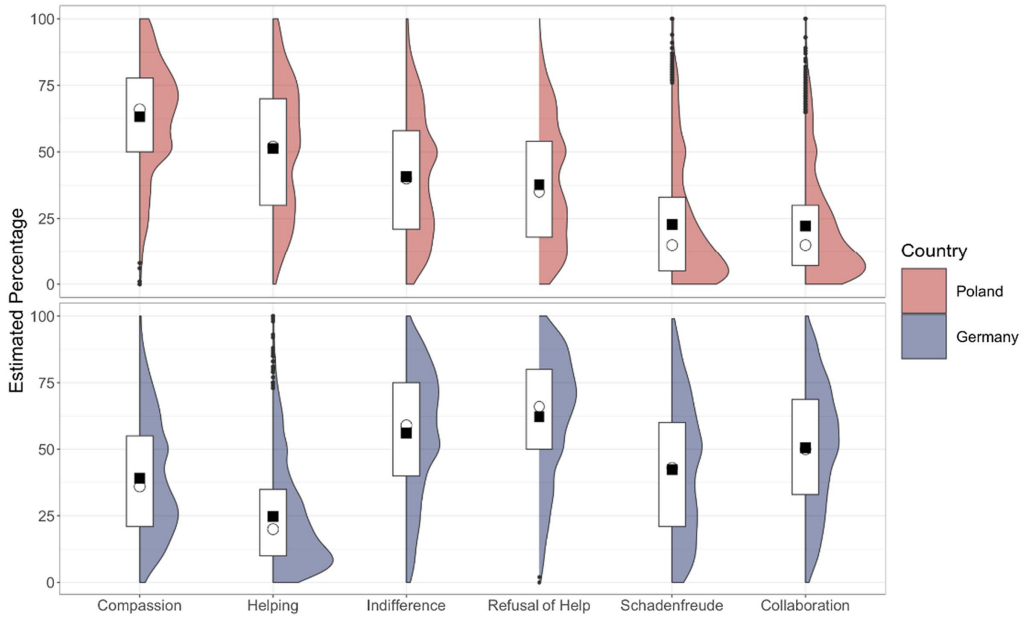
In order to determine the structure of the ingroup-serving Holocaust distortion, we conducted a principal component analysis with Oblimin rotation in both countries (Table 2).

In the Polish sample, the results revealed two distinct factors: one related to estimates of moral emotions and behavior, while the other to estimates of immoral emotions and behaviors. In contrast, the German sample revealed two factors with two cross-loading items—indifference and refusal of help—indicating a more complex structure in the examined estimates of emotions and behaviors.

To construct a clean and theoretically coherent index of ingroup-serving Holocaust distortion, we focused on the four items that most clearly reflect morally unambiguous reactions, moral compassion and helping (Items 1 and 2), and immoral, *schadenfreude* and collaboration (Items 5 and 6). These items showed strong primary loadings in both samples, supporting their use in the composite index. The index was computed by subtracting the mean estimate of immoral behaviors from the mean estimate of moral behaviors. This score captures the extent to which participants exaggerate positive over negative representations of their national ingroup's actions and emotions during the Holocaust. Excluding neutral reactions ensures greater clarity and focus in our measurement.

To evaluate the reliability of the distortion index, we used the analytic formula for difference scores with correlated components (Williams & Zimmerman, 1996). The resulting reliability coefficients ranged from .71 to .83 across countries and time points, indicating satisfactory measurement precision for use in structural modeling (see the additional online Section 4 at https://osf.io/c2yv6/?view_only=86f461992a2c4109aee8e4ef461aa9bf).

Figure 1
Distribution of Estimates of Emotions and Behaviors Toward Jews During the Holocaust in Poland and Germany



Note. Mean values are represented by black rectangles, and median values are represented by white circles. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

Next, we examined density plots of our measure and found that despite differences in means, both in Germany and in Poland, the distributions of the variable were similar and resembling a normal distribution suggesting within-country variability in the degree to which people hold defensive representations of the past (Figure 2).

Cross-Lagged Panel Model Testing a Longitudinal Relationship Between Ingroup-Serving Holocaust Distortion and Antisemitic Prejudice

In the first step of the cross-lagged panel analysis, we examined correlations of the observed variables of interest at Time 1 and Time 2 (Table 3). To examine the proposed causal relationship between antisemitic beliefs and ingroup-serving Holocaust distortion, we estimated two cross-lagged panel models using maximum likelihood estimation with robust standard errors.

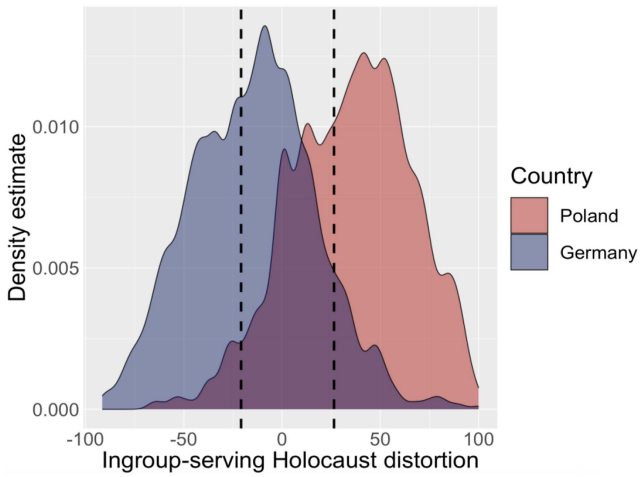
Measurement Invariance

Prior to the analysis, we tested and established longitudinal measurement invariance of the constructs (Table 4).

We conducted two-step longitudinal measurement invariance analyses separately for the Polish ($N = 662$) and German ($N = 672$) samples to assess whether antisemitism was measured equivalently over time. In both samples, the configural models (with freely estimated loadings) showed good fit. Constraining factor loadings across T1 and T2 in the metric models did not substantially reduce model fit. Changes in CFI and RMSEA were well within recommended thresholds (ΔCFI $\leq$ .010, ΔRMSEA $\leq$ .015; Chen, 2007; Cheung & Rensvold, 2002), supporting metric invariance. This level of invariance allows for valid interpretation of longitudinal associations (van de Schoot et al., 2012). Full model estimates and local fit statistics are provided in the additional online Section 4 at https://osf.io/c2yv6/?view_only=86f461992a2c4109aee8e4ef461aa9bf.

Figure 2

Distribution of Ingroup-Serving Holocaust Distortions in Poland and Germany



Note. Mean values are represented by vertical lines. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

Cross-Lagged Effects in Poland

To determine the relationship between antisemitic beliefs and ingroup-serving Holocaust distortion, we estimated a model linking measures of these constructs at Time 1 with their counterparts at Time 2. This allowed us to test whether antisemitism at Time 1 predicted changes in biased representations of history over time.

In the Polish sample, the structural equation model demonstrated a satisfactory overall fit to the data: $\chi^2(11) = 36.71$, $p < .001$; RMSEA = 0.059, 90% CI [0.039, 0.081]; CFI = 0.988; TLI = 0.970; SRMR = 0.039. These values are well within the thresholds commonly accepted for good model fit (e.g., Hu & Bentler, 1999). The model degrees of freedom were calculated as the number of distinct variances and covariances among the eight observed variables $\left(\frac{28(8+1)}{2} = 36\right)$ minus the number of estimated parameters (25), yielding 11 degrees of freedom.

To further assess model adequacy, we also examined local fit by inspecting standardized residual correlations (see the additional online Section 6 at https://osf.io/c2yv6/?view_only=86f461992a2c4109aee8e4ef461aa9bf: Local Fit Measures). Only one pair of observed variables exceeded the commonly used |0.10| threshold (i.e., ingroup-serving Holocaust distortion T2–traditional antisemitism $t_2 = -0.155$), indicating a slight overestimation of the association between these two indicators. However, this value falls within the range typically considered acceptable for localized residuals (e.g., Kline, 2016), particularly in theory-driven models that demonstrate good global fit and lack a systematic pattern of misfit. As this residual does not involve a central structural path and given the theoretically grounded nature of the model and the strength of global fit indices, we retained the specified model.

Results revealed that Polish respondents who reported higher ingroup-serving Holocaust distortion relative to the rest of the sample at Time 1 also reported significantly higher ingroup-serving Holocaust distortion at Time 2 ($\beta = 0.596$, $SE = 0.031$, $p < .001$), but Holocaust distortion at Time 1 only weakly predicted antisemitic beliefs at Time 2 ($\beta = 0.074$, $SE = 0.032$, $p = .030$). The autoregressive path of secondary antisemitism (Time 1 predicting Time 2) was significant and strong ($\beta = 0.678$, $SE = 0.072$, $p < .001$). Finally, antisemitism at Time 1 significantly predicted ingroup-serving Holocaust distortion at Time 2 ($\beta = 0.133$, $SE = 0.041$, $p < .001$), suggesting that antisemitic beliefs may play a causal role in shaping biased representations of the Holocaust over time, rather than the other way around (see Figure 3; full model estimates are provided in the additional online Section 5 at

Table 3
Means and Zero-Order Correlations Between Ingroup-Serving Holocaust Distortion and Antisemitic Beliefs at Time 1 and Time 2 in Poland (Below the Diagonal) and in Germany (Above the Diagonal)

Variable	Poland	Germany								
	M (*SD*)	*M* (*SD*)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Time 1										
1. Secondary antisemitism	3.32 (1.11)	2.87 (1.16)	—	.67*	.47*	.31*	.84*	.62*	.44*	.32*
2. Belief in Jewish conspiracy	3.35 (1.09)	2.38 (1.08)	.62*	—	.64*	.26*	.64*	.83*	.58*	.25*
3. Traditional antisemitism	2.37 (0.99)	1.79 (0.87)	.35*	.45*	—	.18*	.44*	.59*	.73*	.18*
4. Ingroup-serving Holocaust distortion	34.77 (30.83)	−14.53 (31.51)	.22*	.14*	−.03	—	.32*	.24*	.16*	.68*
Time 2										
5. Secondary antisemitism	3.35 (1.11)	2.89 (1.20)	.59*	.45*	.25*	.22*	—	.68*	.48*	.31*
6. Belief in Jewish conspiracy	3.38 (1.10)	2.35 (1.14)	.51*	.67*	.28*	.18*	.68*	—	.68*	.23*
7. Traditional antisemitism	2.38 (1.01)	1.79 (0.93)	.30*	.23*	.53*	.01	.40*	.44*	—	.20*
8. Ingroup-serving Holocaust distortion	29.70 (31.72)	−15.03 (31.85)	.26*	.20*	.04	.63*	.27*	.22*	−.03	—

* $p < .001$.

https://osf.io/c2yv6/?view_only=86f461992a2c4109aee8e4ef461aa9bf).

To further establish the robustness of these results, we reran our analyses using 1,000 bootstrap samples to derive more empirically grounded confidence intervals. The bootstrap results yielded consistent findings: The path from antisemitism to Holocaust distortion remained statistically significant (β = 0.152, 95% CI [0.067, 0.242]). In contrast, the path from Holocaust distortion to antisemitism exhibited a wider confidence interval and did not reach conventional significance levels (β = 0.070, 95% CI [−0.009, 0.151], $p = .085$). These bootstrap-based estimates reinforce the conclusion that antisemitic beliefs more reliably predict subsequent ingroup-serving Holocaust distortion than the reverse. Full model estimates are available in the additional online Section 5 at https://osf.io/c2yv6/?view_only=86f461992a2c4109aee8e4ef461aa9bf.

Cross-Lagged Effects in Germany

Similarly, we estimated the model in the German sample. Global fit indices indicated that the model fit the data acceptably: $\chi^2(11) = 48.91$, $p < .001$; RMSEA = .064, 90% CI [0.046, 0.084]; TLI = .979; CFI = .990; SRMR = .042. As in the Polish model, the degrees of freedom were computed by subtracting the number of freely estimated parameters (25) from the number of distinct observed variances and covariances among the eight observed variables $\left(\frac{28(8+1)}{2} = 36\right)$ resulting in 11 degrees of freedom.

We also examined localized fit by inspecting standardized residual correlations (see the additional online Section 5 at https://osf.io/c2yv6/?view_only=86f461992a2c4109aee8e4ef461aa9bf). Four residuals exceeded the conventional cutoff of |.10|: ingroup-serving Holocaust distortion T_1 with secondary antisemitism T_1 ($r = .11$), ingroup-serving Holocaust distortion T_1 with secondary antisemitism T_2 ($r = .11$), ingroup-serving Holocaust distortion T_2 with secondary antisemitism T_1 ($r = .11$), and ingroup-serving Holocaust distortion T_2 with secondary antisemitism T_2 ($r = .11$). These findings indicate that the model slightly underestimates the associations between secondary antisemitism and Holocaust distortion. This pattern is theoretically coherent given that the Secondary Antisemitism scale includes items explicitly referencing the Holocaust (e.g., defensive reactions to guilt or commemoration), suggesting conceptual overlap with distortion measures. Crucially, none of these residuals involve the model's core autoregressive or cross-lagged paths. In light of our theory-driven specification, strong overall fit, and the interpretability of these localized discrepancies, we retained the current model while interpreting these minor misfit areas with appropriate caution.

The results revealed that, in Germany, ingroup-serving Holocaust distortion at Time 1 significantly predicted ingroup-serving Holocaust distortion at Time 2 (β = 0.65, $SE = 0.03$, $p < .001$) but did not predict antisemitic beliefs at Time 2 (β = −0.01, $SE = 0.02$, $p = .218$). The autoregressive path of antisemitic beliefs (Time 1 to Time 2) was significant and

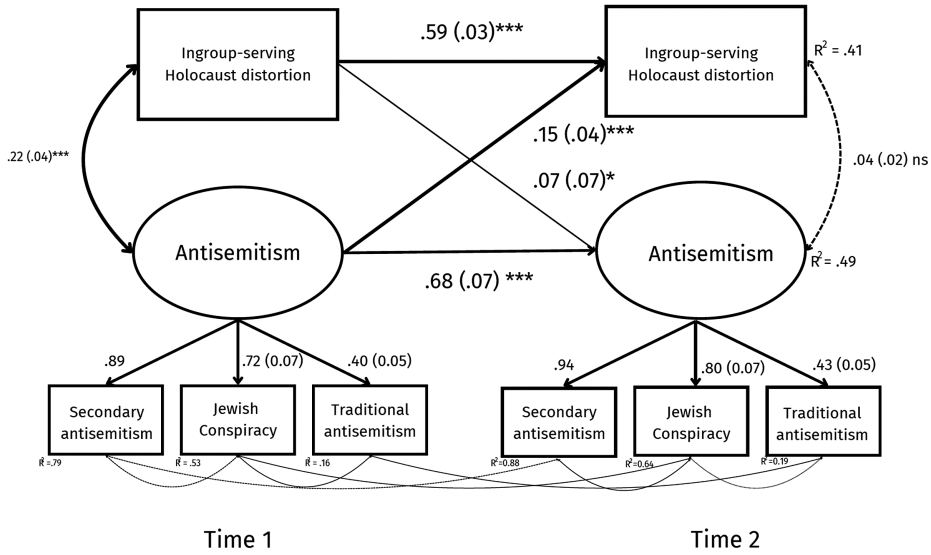
Table 4
Measurement Invariance of Antisemitism Across Time Points Comparison

Country	Model	χ^2	*df*	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	90% CI RMSEA	SRMR	ΔCFI	$\Delta\chi^2$ (Δdf)	p ($\Delta\chi^2$)
Poland	Configural	3.646	1	0.999	0.978	0.063	[.000, .138]	0.008			
	Metric	5.594	3	0.999	0.993	0.036	[.000, .082]	0.014	0.000	1.95 (2)	.377
Germany	Configural	0.740	1	1.000	1.001	0.000	[.000, .096]	0.003			
	Metric	1.285	3	1.000	1.003	0.000	[.000, .046]	0.005	0.000	0.545 (2)	.761

Note. RMSEA = root-mean-square error of approximation; CFI = comparative fit index; SRMR = standardized root-mean-square residual; TLI = Tucker–Lewis index; CI = confidence interval.

Figure 3

Cross-Lagged Structural Equation Model of Ingroup-Serving Holocaust Distortion, Antisemitism, and Its Dimensions Over Time in Poland



Note. Standardized estimates are shown; standard errors are in parentheses. Solid lines are significant ($p < .05$); dashed lines are not. R^2 indicates explained variance.
$^{*}p < .05$. $^{***}p < .001$.

strong ($\beta = 0.92$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < .001$), indicating substantial stability in antisemitic beliefs over time. Additionally, antisemitic beliefs at Time 1 significantly predicted ingroup-serving Holocaust distortion at Time 2 ($\beta = 0.15$, $SE = 0.04$, $p = .012$), suggesting that antisemitic beliefs contribute to biased representations of history, reinforcing the idea that antisemitic attitudes influence broader intergroup biases rather than the reverse. Figure 4 presents the model with standardized coefficients. Full model estimates are available in the additional online Section 5 at https://osf.io/c2yv6/?view_only=86f461992a2c4109aee8e4ef461aa9bf.

Discussion

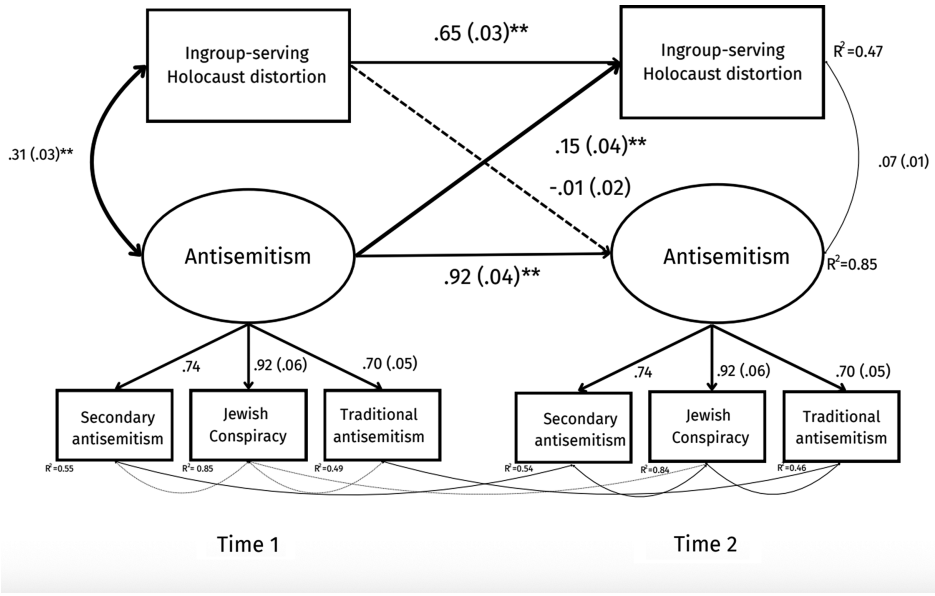
The Holocaust remains a crucial and central historical event that profoundly shapes collective memory and intergroup relations in Europe. How nations perceive their historical roles—whether as perpetrators, bystanders, or victims—affects not only their sense of collective identity but also their attitudes toward present-day moral and political issues. These representations are often shaped by complex sociopsychological dynamics, including group-serving biases and efforts to maintain a positive ingroup identity. In the present study, we investigated how Germans and Poles perceive their ancestors' behaviors and emotions during the Holocaust, focusing on reactions that range from compassion to collaboration. By examining these representations in both national contexts and their relationship with contemporary antisemitism, we sought to examine Holocaust distortions in both countries as well as their relationship with antisemitic attitudes.

We found, unsurprisingly, that representations of Polish and German behaviors and emotions during the Holocaust differ substantially. This finding aligns with studies highlighting the self-stereotype of Germans as perpetrators during World War II and Poles as its primary victims. However, Germans in our study believed that one in four of their historical counterparts helped Jews, while half supported the Nazis. This suggests that even when acknowledging collective perpetratorship, individuals still perceive their ingroup as somewhat moral, demonstrating an ingroup-serving Holocaust distortion. Notably, while Rees et al. (2021) found that Germans estimated the frequency of heroic helpers in their population at 14%, our study reported such estimation at substantially higher levels (25%). This discrepancy may arise from our methodological approach, where participants first estimated the prevalence of ingroup members feeling compassion, potentially anchoring subsequent estimates. Supporting this, the difference between estimates of compassion and helping Jews in Germany was comparable to Poland.

German participants perceived attitudes in the middle of the morality spectrum, such as indifference, as most prevalent—a view consistent with historical evidence that most people witnessing extreme violence remain passive. However, they also believed half of their population collaborated with the Nazi regime, supporting the collective perpetratorship self-stereotype (Imhoff et al., 2017). Despite this, Germans still estimated that one fourth of their population helped Jews, highlighting a persistent ingroup-serving Holocaust distortion.

Figure 4

Cross-Lagged Structural Equation Model of Ingroup-Serving Holocaust Distortion, Antisemitism, and Its Dimensions Over Time in Germany



Note. Standardized estimates are shown; standard errors are in parentheses. Solid lines are significant ($p < .05$); dashed lines are not. R^2 indicates explained variance. *ns* = not significant.
** $p < .001$.

More importantly, our longitudinal findings suggest that general antisemitic beliefs may drive the scale of Holocaust distortion both in Poland and in Germany. This contrasts with the key tenet of secondary antisemitism theory, which posits that antisemitism arises as a consequence of ingroup-serving Holocaust distortions (Adorno, 1955; Schönbach, 1961). In contrast, our study demonstrates that long-standing antisemitism can be expressed through biased representations of the Holocaust within collective memory, framing these narratives in ways that justify contemporary anti-Jewish sentiment. While prior studies have shown that narratives about an ingroup's past can influence intergroup relations (Hirschberger et al., 2016), we demonstrate that these narratives are, in fact, motivated by broader prejudiced attitudes toward Jews today.

While the traditional conceptualization of secondary antisemitism assumes that antisemitism emerges from biased historical representations, our longitudinal analysis suggests the reverse: Contemporary antisemitism actively shapes how the Holocaust is construed in collective memory. This dynamic points to the role of present-day attitudes in constructing historical narratives that justify contemporary prejudices. Such a reinterpretation highlights the bidirectional interplay between collective memory and prejudice, demonstrating that historical representations are not static reflections of the past but adaptive tools shaped by sociopsychological needs of the present (cf. Klar & Bilewicz, 2017). This perspective opens new avenues for understanding the evolution of collective memory, emphasizing the need to address contemporary biases to disrupt the cyclical reinforcement of prejudice through historical distortion and misrepresentation.

Limitations

Our research is, of course, not without limitations. We assessed ingroup-serving Holocaust distortion using a quantitative measure in which participants estimated the prevalence of immoral versus moral behaviors and emotions in their historical ingroup during the Holocaust (cf. Babińska & Bilewicz, 2023). Asking participants to estimate prevalence in such numerical terms may introduce interpretive variability, even with anchors at 0%, 50%, and 100%. Moreover, the fixed order of reactions may have anchored participants' estimates, necessitating an interpretation of the results comparatively rather than in isolation. In the present study, we measured three components of antisemitic prejudice, conspiracy-based, secondary, and traditional, following a well-established typology (Bilewicz et al., 2013; Kazarovytska et al., 2025). Yet, we did not measure the most timely form of antisemitic belief: the "new antisemitism," related to the denial of Jewish rights to self-determination (Babińska & Bilewicz, 2023; Klug, 2003).

Finally, and most importantly, causal inferences in cross-lagged panel models can be affected by unmeasured confounding variables (Lüdtke & Robitzsch, 2022). It is plausible

that both antisemitic prejudice and ingroup-serving Holocaust distortions are influenced by history-related collective emotions (Bilewicz, 2016) or by the objective scale of crimes committed against Jewish people (Feinberg & Stewart, 2019). Another limitation concerns the two-wave design. Although three or more waves are generally preferred for modeling reciprocal change processes and testing stationarity (Hamaker et al., 2015), theory-driven two-wave cross-lagged panel models remain an accepted first step for evaluating directional hypotheses (Kearney, 2017; Little, 2013; Selig & Little, 2012). Future longitudinal, cross-national work that incorporates additional waves, multilevel (hierarchical) modeling, and finer grained measures of collective emotions and anti-Israeli attitudes will be essential for overcoming these constraints and probing alternative dynamic structures.

Constraints on Generalizability

Several contextual and methodological factors constrain the generalizability of our findings. First, both the Polish and German samples were quota-based and broadly representative in terms of age and gender at Time 1. However, attrition between waves was nonrandom: Older participants were more likely to remain in the panel in both countries, and women were slightly overrepresented among completers in Poland. Although robustness checks controlling for age and applying full information maximum likelihood yielded consistent results, these demographic shifts suggest that our findings may better reflect the attitudes of older and potentially more civically engaged segments of the population.

Second, while we found support for temporal measurement invariance—enhancing confidence in the comparability of antisemitism constructs across time—causal inference in cross-lagged panel models still depends on strong assumptions (e.g., correct model specification, no omitted variables) that are difficult to fully satisfy in observational research. As such, the observed directional paths should be interpreted as consistent with, but not definitive evidence of, causal effects (Hamaker et al., 2015).

Conclusion

The traditional conceptualization of secondary antisemitism suggests that, to explain the long-lasting manifestations of antisemitism in contemporary societies, it is essential to analyze ingroup-defensive mechanisms linked to the ingroup's behaviors during the Holocaust. Our research extends this view by suggesting that the reverse may also be true: It is impossible to understand contemporary views of the Holocaust without referring to persistent antisemitic biases. Therefore, it is not accidental that, during numerous antisemitic and anti-Israel rallies, images portraying the Holocaust in a distorted manner are frequently employed. It is also unsurprising that Holocaust distortions feature so prominently in antisemitic movements worldwide—from the United States (Weitzman, 2023), through Eastern Europe (Grabowski, 2024), to the Middle East (Litvak, 2023). Wherever antisemitism is on the rise, distortions of Holocaust history also appear.

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