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Confronting the Past in a Polarized Present:
The Effect of Holocaust Representations on
Mobilization for Symbolic Justice and Against
Antisemitism

Discussion Paper

SP V 2024-504

October 2024

Research Area

Dynamics of Political Systems

Research Unit

Transformations of Democracy

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Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung (2024)

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Abstract

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Awareness of past atrocities is widely seen as critical for restoring justice and building resilient democracies. Yet, confronting people with past injustice committed by their group can also lead to defensiveness. Through a survey experiment (n=2,198), we measured the effect of three different prototypical forms of information about the Holocaust on intentions to commemorate the Holocaust, intentions to counter antisemitism, and attitudes towards minoritized groups. We find that all three forms demonstrate overall effectiveness in mobilizing individuals for commemoration and against antisemitism and improving their attitudes towards minoritized groups. We find heterogeneous treatment effects by party affiliation. For far-right supporters, reading about the story of an individual victim is particularly effective. For others, formats that center the sheer extent of atrocities or focus on symbolic justice efforts have greater mobilizing potential. We repeated the survey with the same respondents three months later (Nov 2023), following the start of the Israel-Gaza war, and found that means and treatment effects are overall stable despite the change in context. The results demonstrate the power of providing people with information about past atrocities and injustice for political mobilization and prejudice reduction.

Confronting the Past in a Polarized Present: The Effect of Holocaust Representations on Mobilization for Symbolic Justice and Against Antisemitism. *

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Abstract

Awareness of past atrocities is widely seen as critical for restoring justice and building resilient democracies. Yet, confronting people with past injustice committed by their group can also lead to defensiveness. Through a survey experiment (n=2,198), we measured the effect of three different prototypical forms of information about the Holocaust on intentions to commemorate the Holocaust, intentions to counter antisemitism, and attitudes towards minoritized groups. We find that all three forms demonstrate overall effectiveness in mobilizing individuals for commemoration and against antisemitism and improving their attitudes towards minoritized groups. We find heterogeneous treatment effects by party affiliation. For far-right supporters, reading about the story of an individual victim is particularly effective. For others, formats that center the sheer extent of atrocities or focus on symbolic justice efforts have greater mobilizing potential. We repeated the survey with the same respondents three months later (Nov 2023), following the start of the Israel-Gaza war, and found that means and treatment effects are overall stable despite the change in context. The results demonstrate the power of providing people with information about past atrocities and injustice for political mobilization and prejudice reduction.

*We thank participants of the Columbia Sociology Statistics Lab and Berlin Social Science Center (WZB) Transformations of Democracy workshop for their valuable feedback. We acknowledge funding for this research by the Volkswagen Foundation (Volkswagen Stiftung project number: 94937).

1 Introduction

Our present societies, their dynamics, and problems, are heavily shaped by their histories, including atrocities and gross injustices. As James Baldwin (1965) observed when writing about the continued influence of the history of slavery on race and racism in the United States, “history is literally present in all that we do. It could scarcely be otherwise, since it is to history that we owe our frames of reference, our identities, and our aspirations.” In a similar vein, W.E.B. Du Bois noted several decades earlier that while societal problems, including “race problems,” needed to be solved in the present, “their cause and their explanation lie in the past” (Du Bois, Green and Driver, 1980, p.36).

A century later, a growing corpus of social scientific studies underlines the continued influence of violent pasts, such as slavery, genocide, colonialism, and authoritarianism, on a variety of social and political outcomes (Cunningham, Lee and Ward, 2021; Simpser, Slater and Wittenberg, 2018). These include intergroup attitudes, such as racial resentment (Acharya, Blackwell and Sen, 2018) and implicit bias (Payne, Vuletich and Brown-Iannuzzi, 2019), as well as political behavior, such as support for antisemitic and right-wing political actors (Abbott and Bailey, 2021; Charnysh and Finkel, 2017).

Given this lasting impact of violent pasts on their societies, it is crucial that citizens are aware of past atrocities. Such awareness can foster support for democracy and should ideally contribute to the prevention of future atrocities (Balcells, Palanza and Voytas, 2022; UNESCO, 2017). The challenge is that people often react with defensiveness when exposed to information about the implication of their group in past atrocities. They may, for example, question or criticize the source of the information, or engage in competitive victimhood (Bilewicz et al., 2017; Leach, Zeineddine and Čehajić Clancy, 2013). In a polarized context, this can lead to backlash, meaning that in some cases symbolic justice initiatives are not only ineffective but have a negative effect, that is, opposite to the initiatives’ intentions (Rozenas and Vlasenko, 2022; Villamil and Balcells, 2021). Tellingly, Baldwin directed the above-quoted statement about the importance of awareness of history specifically at white

Americans (the paragraph begins with “White man, hear me!”). He noted that white Americans commonly react with defensiveness and distancing when reminded of their group’s implication in slavery and warned them of the harm this does, not only to Black Americans but also to themselves (Baldwin, 1965).

Germany and the Holocaust are often used as an example of how a nation dealt with its violent past when the majority group was complicit in committing horrific atrocities. Holocaust education is central in the school curriculum and a plethora of civil society initiatives have worked over the past forty years towards increasing awareness of the Holocaust and commemorating victims and survivors (Antweiler, 2023; Bilewicz et al., 2017; Smith, 2021). Initiatives that began in Germany, such as the small, local *Stolpersteine* (“stumbling stones”) memorials for victims of national socialist (NS) persecution have been adapted to other contexts, for example, as “witness stones” for enslaved people in Connecticut, USA.

However, despite Germany’s frequent use as an example and a point of reference, we know very little about the causal impact of such initiatives on ordinary citizens – even in Germany. The responses of ordinary citizens as consumers of and active participants in remembrance efforts matter for keeping the past alive (Hirst and Manier, 2008). Once engaged, citizens are more motivated to contribute to further commemoration efforts, which can create a positive feedback cycle (Ditlmann, Firestone and Turkoglu, 2024).

The goal of Holocaust remembrance is typically twofold: Providing symbolic justice to the victims, and preventing similar atrocities and injustices from recurring (Balcells and Voytas, 2023; UNESCO, 2017). Representations of the Holocaust vary in Germany, ranging from formats focused on individual victims’ personal stories to formats displaying the sheer extent of atrocities and emphasizing the guilt and responsibility of the perpetrators. In the current paper, we identify three different representations of the Holocaust that are commonly used in German civil society, and present them to participants in a survey context. We ask: Do these formats mobilize people for symbolic justice? Do they improve attitudes towards outgroups and mobilize people against antisemitism? Do any of them lead to backlash?

To answer these questions, we designed a survey experiment (n=2,198) with three different treatment conditions. Each condition constitutes a typical representation of the Holocaust: there is a text about the sheer extent of the atrocities and the impunity enjoyed by the perpetrators (*no justice*), a story about an individual victim (*personal story*), and a text about symbolic justice efforts (*symbolic justice*).

Our results suggest that, overall, all three conditions are effective. All conditions lower Holocaust fatigue and improve attitudes towards Jews and refugees compared to a neutral control condition. The *no justice* and *symbolic justice* conditions furthermore mobilize people to engage in commemoration and counter antisemitism.

Exploratory analyses of heterogeneous treatment effects reveal variation by party affiliation: Far-right supporters respond positively to the *personal story* condition but not to the other two conditions. It is promising that the *personal story* condition seems effective and that we observe null effects rather than backlash for the other two conditions – even among far-right supporters.

The treatment effects are also remarkably stable in the face of a changing political context. We repeated the survey experiment with the same participants three months later, after the beginning of the Israel-Gaza war. Despite an enormous shift in context, with the Israel-Gaza war and reports about growing antisemitism in the news every day, both the means and treatment effects remained stable overall, adding robustness to the findings from wave 1.

This study contributes to literature on memory and politics, right-wing populism, and prejudice reduction by demonstrating the powerful, yet nuanced impact of exposure to past atrocities. Studies on symbolic politics and initiatives related to the remembrance of past atrocities have found conflicting evidence about whether such initiatives lead to desired outcomes, such as improved intergroup relations and support for democracy (e.g., Balcells, Palanza and Voytas, 2022; Rahnama, Forthcoming; Turkoglu, Ditlmann and Firestone, 2023) or to backlash (e.g., Rozenas and Vlasenko, 2022; Villamil and Balcells, 2021). This vari-

ation raises interesting questions that are difficult to answer, in part because the studies – conducted in the field – test the impact of initiatives with different formats in different countries and regions, making it difficult to pinpoint the source of variation. By using real-world materials, our survey experiment allows us to directly compare the effectiveness of different formats. The (unexpected) absence of negative or null effects suggests that learning about historical atrocities mobilizes for symbolic justice independent of the format of an initiative, at least among Germans who are part of the political mainstream.

There is, however, variation by political ideology, possibly due to parties mobilizing memory for political purposes (Niklasson, 2023; Zubrzycki and Woźny, 2020). In recent years, right-wing populist actors in particular have increasingly used revisionist narratives of national histories, including atrocities and wars, to advance political agendas that paint the national majority group in a positive light and downplay the suffering of minoritized groups (Keim, 2021; Zubrzycki and Woźny, 2020), thereby pursuing a “politics of resentment and nostalgia” (Bonikowski et al., 2019, p.74). It is interesting to see this reflected in our findings in a generally much more negative response to the representations of the Holocaust by far-right voters. The fact that one format – a personal story about a victim – is exempt from this general trend speaks to the power of personal narratives and suggests avenues for overcoming polarization.

Lastly, the findings suggest that exposure to representations of past atrocities can mobilize people to engage in collective action and – at least temporarily – improve attitudes towards out-groups, which are notoriously difficult to change (Brauer, 2024; Paluck et al., 2021). The study therefore adds to a growing literature suggesting that representations of history reinforce or challenge prejudice and can increase support for social justice (Bonam et al., 2019; Kraus and Vinluan, 2023; Nelson, Adams and Salter, 2013).

The article is organized as follows: We first present our theoretical framework motivating the study. We then present the design and results of the experiment (study 1a), followed by an exploratory analysis of heterogeneous treatment effects by party affiliation (study 1b),

followed by the design and results of wave 2 of the experiment (study 2). We close with a discussion of the results and their implications.

2 Theory

Awareness of past atrocities is widely seen as critical for restoring justice and building resilient democracies. Acknowledging past atrocities can provide symbolic justice for the groups who were victimized (Balcells and Voytas, 2023), thereby enabling reconciliation (Shnabel and Nadler, 2008). Learning about past injustices can furthermore increase the acknowledgement of ongoing injustices by members of the majority group, as a study of white US-Americans showed who were more likely to acknowledge present-day systemic racism after learning about discriminatory housing policies in the past (Bonam et al., 2019). Information about past injustice and the redress efforts that followed can also increase solidarity among minoritized groups: For instance, when Asian Americans learn about the internment of Japanese Americans, they express more solidarity for Black Americans and greater support for reparations for slavery (Kraus and Vinluan, 2023). Symbolic justice efforts more broadly have the potential to improve intergroup relations. For example, a recent study of Confederate symbol removals showed that people living in proximity of such removals reported lower levels of racial resentment and greater support for affirmative action following the removals, compared to those in comparable areas that did not experience Confederate symbol removals (Rahnama, Forthcoming).

These potential benefits of learning about past atrocities and injustice and symbolic justice efforts related to them are especially relevant for diverse, multiethnic democracies, which require prosocial behavior across social groups to build social cohesion and prevent conflict (Baldassarri and Abascal, 2020). As democracies are increasingly under threat, exposure to past atrocities and injustice can promote support for democratic values and actors today. In Chile, visits to a museum where people learned about the history of the

military dictatorship and the fate of the victims resulted in increased support for democracy and opposition to military governments (Balcells, Palanza and Voytas, 2022). In Berlin, Germany, neighborhoods with newly installed local memorials commemorating victims of national socialist persecution saw a decrease in electoral support for a far-right party that advances revisionist accounts of German history and opposes a multiethnic society (Turkoglu, Ditlmann and Firestone, 2023). Active participation in keeping the memory of victims alive has furthermore been shown to mobilize people for commemoration and collective action in support of a pluralistic, democratic society (Ditlmann, Firestone and Turkoglu, 2024). A growing corpus of empirical studies thus lends tentative support to the goal of preventing future atrocities by teaching about past atrocities, as, for example, is set forth in the United Nation’s agenda for global citizenship education (UNESCO, 2017).

Despite these potential benefits for social cohesion, most societies downplay, reconstruct, avoid or outright deny historical atrocities (Cohen, 2001). At the level of individual citizens, social identity theory provides one explanation for this phenomenon: Because our self-esteem depends on the worth of groups we identify with (Tajfel and Turner, 1986), exposing people to information about past injustice that paint their group in a negative light, can lead to defensiveness, for example through locating the historical atrocities in the distant past (Bilewicz et al., 2017; Cohen, 2001; Peetz, Gunn and Wilson, 2010). Despite the problem posed by defensiveness to information about past atrocities, however, we have limited empirical evidence about what kinds of Holocaust representations might provoke such negative reactions as opposed to the desirable positive reactions described above (Balcells and Voytas, 2023).

One possible reason may be how previous experimental studies have presented the information about past atrocities. They typically emphasize the extent of the atrocities and the ways in which the in-group are implicated (Leach, Zeineddine and Čehajić Clancy, 2013). Commensurate real-world initiatives focus on perpetrators and changing their legacy, for example, through changing street names (Villamil and Balcells, 2021). In contrast, formats

that highlight the perspective of victims and individual stories may increase compassion and avoid the defensiveness observed when presenting information focused on the guilt of the perpetrators (Balcells and Voytas, 2023; Bilewicz et al., 2017; Imhoff, Bilewicz and Erb, 2012). Information focused on symbolic justice efforts by the majority group, furthermore, may also lower defensiveness and increase engagement. Learning that many others are involved in symbolic justice efforts – as is the case when there is an active commemoration culture – signals a positive social norm that people may want to comply with (Murrar, Campbell and Brauer, 2020; Paluck, 2009).

In the present study, we experimentally manipulate the type of information representation about the past atrocity respondents are exposed to. As explained in more detail below, one condition emphasizes the extent of the atrocities and impunity enjoyed by the perpetrators (*no justice condition*), one condition is the story of an individual victim (*personal story condition*), and one condition presents symbolic justice efforts to keep the memory of the victims alive (*symbolic justice condition*).

Representations centering the injustice: Formats of exposure to past atrocities often aim to convey factual information about the scope and extent of the atrocities, details about the crimes committed, and the consequences for victims or survivors, and perpetrators. The Topography of Terror museum in Berlin is a typical example of a museum that adopts this approach, as are many memorial sites in locations where atrocities were committed, such as concentration camps. This approach is based on the acknowledgement that the truth and knowledge about the truth of what happened are central requirements for transitional justice, and that true reconciliation cannot occur without a reckoning with that truth (Czollek, 2023; Lederach, 2010).

For members of victim groups it is crucial that the injustice done to them is acknowledged and that the truth is brought to light (Shnabel and Nadler, 2008; Quinney, Wenzel and Woodyatt, 2022). Providing information about the full extent of horrific crimes and suffering can also serve as a strategy against gaslighting. Gaslighting is enabled by struc-

tural inequalities (Sweet, 2019). In the case of atrocities and injustice, bringing the truth to light is therefore especially important when victim groups continue to be minoritized. In such contexts, shining a light on what happened makes it harder for perpetrator groups to downplay the crimes they committed. Thus, providing factual information about past injustice is very important to achieve justice for victims.

Given that perpetrators often live in the same societies, and are often members of the majority or dominant groups, their reaction to such materials also matters, and is less well understood. As explained above, social identity theory suggests that people will react negatively to information that sheds a negative light on their group (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). They may respond by denying the atrocities or distancing themselves from them (Knowles et al., 2014). The empirical evidence for this claim is mixed. In fact, many studies find little or no effect among perpetrators when they are confronted with historical atrocities that implicate their group (Leach, Zeineddine and Čehajić Clancy, 2013). Others find evidence for defensiveness. For example, an experimental study found that when reminding Germans of the horrors of the Holocaust and Germans' complicity in it, they judge it to be more distant in the past than when given no information or given additional information about reparations and symbolic justice efforts (Peetz, Gunn and Wilson, 2010). Thus, while the provision of factual information about past atrocities is arguably the most common representation format, it is not clear whether it can mobilize members of the perpetrator group for symbolic justice and improve attitudes towards minoritized groups, or whether it may instead provoke defensiveness.

Representations centering personal stories: Another frequently used format of exposure to past atrocities are personal stories about victims. Well-known examples of institutions that use this include the Anne Frank centers in multiple countries or the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, which uses “identification cards” that allow visitors to learn more about the life and experiences of persecution of a specific victim or survivor. Another example is the French civil society initiative Convoi 77 that invites school students to research

the biographies of Holocaust victims who came from their towns and were deported to Auschwitz from France. Yad Vashem has similarly emphasized the importance of centering the stories of individuals in its educational approach, in part as an active strategy against the dehumanization of NS victims and survivors.

Personal stories have a unique ability to capture our attention and imagination, and motivate us to combat injustice (Goetz, Keltner and Simon-Thomas, 2010; Lee and Feeley, 2016). More broadly, studies in other contexts have demonstrated that narratives can be more effective for mobilization than facts, for example, when it comes to mobilization against climate change (Constantino and Weber, 2021; Johnson, Bilovich and Tuckett, 2023). In the context of transitional justice, highlighting the perspective of victims and focusing on individual stories may increase compassion and help overcome defensiveness on the part of the perpetrator group (Balcells and Voytas, 2023)

But critics also highlight potential pitfalls of this approach. The focus on individual victims may move people’s focus away from issues of power and the institutions that exert such power (Davis, 2023). This is particularly concerning when considering the importance of system-level change for addressing major social and political problems (Chater and Loewenstein, 2023). In addition, approaches aimed at evoking empathy by the majority group have ironically led to backlash when tested in the context of actual intergroup interactions, as when White Canadians were encouraged to empathize with the experience of indigenous Canadians and subsequently became more defensive when interacting with indigenous Canadians (Vorauer and Sasaki, 2009). In the context of education about past atrocities, the personal stories approach may furthermore end up excluding minoritized groups as they may evoke very different emotions for them based on their own experiences as minoritized groups (Özyürek, 2018).

Representations centering symbolic justice efforts: A third common format of exposure to past atrocities focuses on efforts undertaken in the aftermath of atrocities to restore justice, whether symbolic or material. This often occurs in the context of commemoration

initiatives. When Germany is referred to as an example of how a nation can grapple with its past, reference is often made to its “commemoration culture”. As Smith (2022) notes when comparing Germany to the US, it is notable how omnipresent efforts are that acknowledge the crimes committed and seek to keep the memory of the victims alive.

Empirical studies have shown that providing information about efforts by the perpetrator group to restore justice can lower defensiveness (Peetz, Gunn and Wilson, 2010). Learning about moral exemplars, that is members of the in-group who acted in ethical ways, has a similar effect (Cehajic-Clancy and Bilewicz, 2021). Formats that present symbolic justice efforts may serve a similar function as role models by demonstrating what can be done and inspiring similar action in others (Morgenroth, Ryan and Peters, 2015) or increasing their sense of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977).

In addition, learning about symbolic justice efforts can change the perception of social norms, i.e make it more likely that people believe that others care about an issue and take action. Perceived social norms have been shown to be a highly effective lever for achieving behavior change (Murrar, Campbell and Brauer, 2020; Paluck, 2009; Tankard and Paluck, 2016). A change in perceived social norms may have a “crowding-in” effect (Rahnama, Forthcoming) by signaling the desirability of supporting or engaging in a certain type of action, such as symbolic justice efforts.

Overall, prior work suggests that learning about past atrocities has numerous potential benefits for strengthening democracies and improving intergroup relations. However, it bears the risk of provoking defensiveness among the implicated group. In this study, we therefore test the effect of three prototypical representations the Holocaust, one focused on the atrocities and the impunity enjoyed by the perpetrators, one focused on an individual victim’s story, and one focused on symbolic justice efforts to make sure the atrocities and victims will not be forgotten. Because of the dynamics described above, we expect confrontational information that highlights the implication of the perpetrator group to evoke backlash compared to a neutral control condition. In contrast, we expect information centering victim

stories or symbolic justice efforts to evoke a positive response.

3 Study 1a: The effect of prototypical Holocaust representations

3.1 Experimental Research Design

We tested the effect of the three prototypical forms of information about the Holocaust in a survey experiment (n=2,198). In this section, we describe the treatment and control conditions, sample, and outcomes.¹

3.2 Intervention

The survey experiment consisted of four conditions: Three treatment conditions and one control condition. The treatment conditions were prototypical representations of the Holocaust, each about one page long (320-330 words). All conditions were based on factually accurate information and adapted from real-world memorial and museum websites. Sometimes we simplified the language to increase accessibility.

The first treatment condition (*personal story condition*) was a short text about an individual victim of the Holocaust: Georges Halpern, an eight-year-old Jewish boy from Austria who first had to flee to France and who was then deported and killed in Auschwitz. The second condition (*no justice condition*) was a text about the extent of the atrocities at the Buchenwald concentration camp, detailing the large numbers of people held captive, abused and murdered there, and concluding with facts about the impunity enjoyed by former concentration camp guards and overseers. The third condition (*symbolic justice condition*) was a text about the Arolsen Archives, the largest archive in the world documenting NS persecution, based in Bad Arolsen, Germany. The text described a common type of document from

¹For more details, including on ethics, see Appendix Sections A-D. The appendix can be found on OSF: <https://osf.io/x4kds>

concentration camps (prisoner registration cards), and explained why the efforts to preserve these documents are essential for the descendants of victims and survivors as well as for the general public as they make the denial of the atrocities impossible. The control condition was a neutral text of the same length about digitization in telecommunication.² After reading the randomly assigned text, participants answered a battery of questions related to the hypothesized outcomes, as well as questions about demographics.

3.3 Sample

Study participants were recruited through Bilendi, a survey company, and invited to participate in an online survey on “social and political issues”. A total of 2,198 people participated in wave 1 of the study in August 2023. Of those, 337 people (i.e. approximately 15% of the sample) indicated that they would vote for the far-right AfD party if elections were happening today. This is somewhat lower than the average support for the AfD in the German population, which was around 20% during the time that the data was gathered. Lower survey response rates among people who support parties that are not in government may explain this difference (Borgschulte, Cho and Lubotsky, 2022). Participants were randomly assigned to one of the three treatment conditions or the control condition.³

4 Outcomes

We measured two main sets of outcomes: action intentions and attitudes. Consistent with the two-fold goal of Holocaust education and commemoration efforts – providing symbolic justice and preventing similar atrocities from occurring in the future – we measured mobilization related to commemoration (symbolic justice goal) and to collective action against antisemitism (prevention goal). For attitudes, we measured Holocaust fatigue (symbolic justice goal) and attitudes towards outgroups (prevention goal).

²For the full text of all conditions and a list of sources, please see Appendix Section A.

³For summary statistics on the sample and balance across the conditions, see Appendix Section C.

To improve reliability, we created respondent-level indices for all outcomes based on multiple items (see table 1 for number of items and Cronbach’s alpha). For action intentions, we measured mobilization for commemoration and against antisemitism (based on Bilali, Godfrey and Freel (2020)).

For attitudes, we measured Holocaust fatigue (based on (Papendick et al., 2022)), and feeling thermometer scores. With the feeling thermometers, we measured how cold or warm participants report feeling towards the following minoritized groups: Jews, Roma and Sinti, and refugees. Please see table 1 for examples of items on collective action intentions and attitudes and Appendix Section B for more details on all items.

Table 1: An overview of outcome items

Outcome	N items	Cron. α	Sample item
Holocaust memory	3	0.92	Commemorate the victims of Nazi persecution in physical space.
Countering antisemitism	4	0.93	Participate in events that raise awareness about antisemitism.
Holocaust fatigue	4	0.85	I don’t understand why, today, I am still supposed to deal with Germany’s history in the time of National Socialism.
Feeling thermometer	3	0.82	How cold vs. warm do you feel towards [Jews]?

The question for collective action items is: How motivated are you currently to ... (1 – not motivated at all and 7 – very motivated)?. The question for Holocaust fatigue items is: Please indicate your agreement with the following statements (1-strongly disagree and 7-strongly agree).

5 Estimation

The general model of this study is defined as:

$$DV_i = \beta_1 \text{SymbolicJustice}_i + \beta_2 \text{NoJustice}_i + \beta_3 \text{PersonalStory}_i + \gamma \mathbf{X}_i + \epsilon_i \quad (1)$$

where DV_i refers to dependent variables (e.g., mobilization for commemoration index) for participant i . For each dependent variable, we run a separate model. SymbolicJustice_i refers to whether participant i was exposed to a text about the Arolsen Archives and documents stored there, and β_1 is its coefficient. NoJustice_i refers to whether participant i was exposed to a text about atrocities committed by the Nazi regime, and β_2 is its coefficient. PersonalStory_i refers to whether participant i was exposed to the story about an individual

victim of Nazi persecution, and β_3 is its coefficient. For those who were assigned to the control condition, all three treatment variables are coded as 0. To increase efficiency, we control for individual characteristics— \mathbf{X}_i (age, education, gender, migration background, living in East Germany, and party preference). ϵ_i is the error term and robust standard errors are used.

6 Results

The effects of the three treatment conditions – personal story, no justice, symbolic justice – as compared to the control condition are displayed in figure 1. Overall, all three treatment conditions are effective at lowering Holocaust fatigue and improving feeling thermometer scores towards Jews and refugees. The *no justice* and *symbolic justice* conditions are also effective at mobilizing people for commemoration and action against antisemitism. There are no statistically significant differences between the effectiveness of the three conditions. That said, looking at effect sizes for the overall sample, the *personal story* condition is generally less effective when compared to the control condition than the other two. This is not the case when looking at subgroup differences, as we will show below.

Considering that the treatments are light-touch interventions – reading one short page – several of the effects are substantive in size and comparable to the average effect sizes in information treatment experiments (Coppock, 2022). For example, the *symbolic justice* condition increases action intentions for commemoration by 0.2 standard deviations [SE=0.06 and p=0.001] and against antisemitism by 0.1 standard deviations [SE=0.06 and p=0.03]. All three conditions improve feeling thermometer scores towards Jews and refugees by between 0.1 and 0.2 standard deviations.

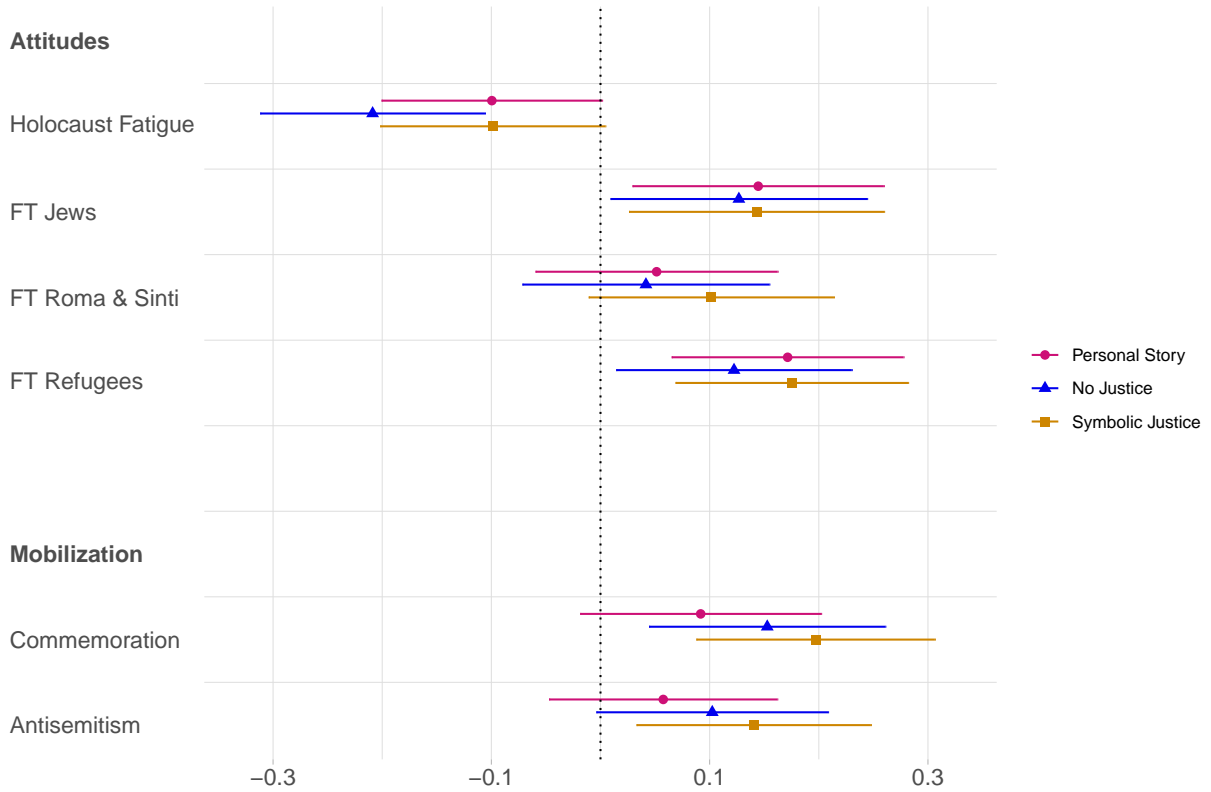


Figure 1: The effects of the three treatment conditions on attitudes and mobilization compared to the control condition. Dots denote standardized coefficients for treatment and bars to 95% confidence intervals. N= 2,198.

7 Study 1b: Heterogeneous treatment effects by party affiliation

Representations of history, such as the ones we selected for Study 1a, serve a purpose in the present. They are often referenced to construct and maintain a certain understanding of national identity today (Liu and Hilton, 2005; Zubrzycki and Woźny, 2020). As such, it comes as no surprise that in an increasingly polarized present, representations of the past are increasingly polarized and polarizing (Niklasson, 2023). Accordingly, it is important to understand if participants' political ideology influences how people respond to information about past atrocities. Especially far-right actors and supporters are advancing revisionist narratives that deny or downplay atrocities committed by the majority group and glorify na-

tional histories (Keim, 2021; Niklasson, 2023). Far-right parties regularly employ grievances about the past and its representations to garner votes (Martín, Paradés and Zagórski, 2023; Niklasson, 2023). More broadly, political ideology shapes how people perceive their countries' histories, with people on the right generally holding more positive assessments of their countries' pasts (Rigoli, 2024). Thus, people's political ideologies, in particular the presence or absence of support for the far right, may explain variation in the effectiveness of treatments. While we observed no backlash in the pooled sample as described above, we may identify backlash among supporters of the far right. We therefore explored heterogeneous treatment effects by party affiliation (far right versus others).

7.1 Estimation

To estimate heterogeneous treatment effects by party affiliation (support for the far right versus other parties), we use the above model (equation 1) for each subgroup (i.e., far right (AfD) supporters and supporters of other parties).⁴

7.2 Results

We find heterogeneous treatment effects by party affiliation (see Figure 2). Implying defensiveness, there is little evidence for an effect of the *no justice* and *symbolic justice* conditions on far-right supporters compared to the control conditions. This concerns action intentions as well as attitudes. At the same time, the supposed defensiveness did not result in backlash: none of the experimental effects are significant in a negative direction. Interestingly, the *personal story* condition has a positive effective on far-right supporters. Far-right supporters exposed to the story of an individual victim report increased intentions to commemorate the victims of national socialist persecution [b=0.3, SE=0.16, p=0.05] and to take action against antisemitism [b=0.4, SE=0.14, p=0.01], compared to the control condition. The *personal story* condition is also effective at improving feeling thermometer scores towards refugees

⁴Participants who did not want to answer this question were dropped from the analysis.

among far-right supporters [$b=0.3$, $SE=0.14$, $p=0.04$] – a significant finding considering the vilification of refugees by the far right. For supporters of other parties, the *personal story* condition has the least mobilizing potential, while the *symbolic justice* condition is most effective for increasing intentions to engage in commemoration and action against antisemitism. We thus observe clear differences in the treatment effects between respondents who support the far right and others.

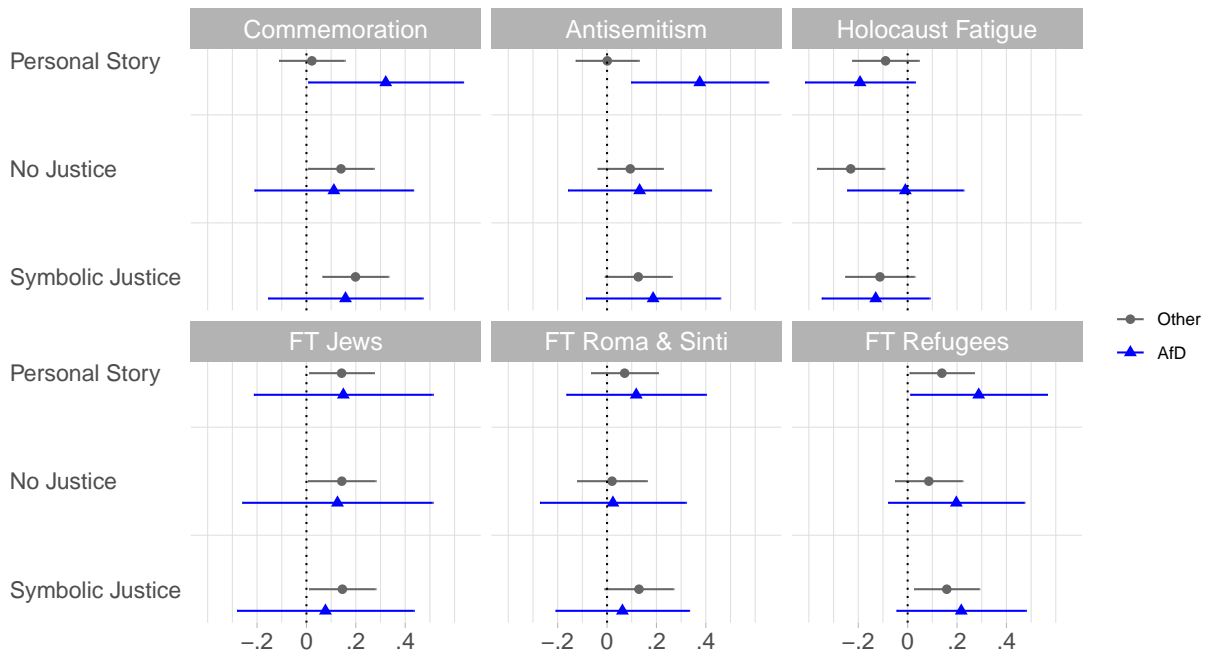


Figure 2: Heterogeneous treatment effects by party affiliation (far right vs. others) on mobilization and attitudes. Dots denote standardized coefficients for treatment and bars to 95% confidence intervals. $N=2,198$, of which AfD $N=337$.

When we interact the treatments with a continuous political ideology variable, we find that the personal story condition is overall more effective for people on the right compared to people on the left. However, consistent with the notion that the far right is distinct in their efforts to glorify the past and reject critical perspectives on national history (Keim, 2021; Zubrzycki and Woźny, 2020), this interaction is driven by AfD supporters. When excluding them from the analysis, we no longer observe a significant interaction. Furthermore, when comparing models that use a binary variable for AfD support versus the continuous political

ideology variable as a predictor, we see that the former have around twice the R-squared value compared to the latter, that is, they explain much more of the observed variation.

Thus, it appears to be specific characteristics of the far right that result in the heterogeneous treatment effects observed between far-right supporters and others.

8 Study 2: Repeating the intervention in a changed political context

Because representations of history serve a purpose in the present (Liu and Hilton, 2005), responses to such representation may dynamically be shaped by changes in the broader political context. Prior research on symbolic politics has found backlash when an issue was politically salient but no backlash when it was not salient (Rozenas and Vlasenko, 2022). Several weeks after our data collection for study 1, Hamas attacked Israel in early October 2023 and Israel retaliated, resulting in the Israel-Gaza war. Immediately, discussions about antisemitism and the Holocaust – via references to Germany’s historical responsibility to support Israel – took center place in German political debates and media (see e.g. Thureau, 2023). Building on Rozenas and Vlasenko’s (2022) findings, we leveraged this shift in the the political context to test if it may moderate our treatment effects. We therefore repeated our study and assessed whether treatment effects differed between August 2023 (before the Hamas attacks) and November 2023 (after the attacks and then beginning of the Israel-Gaza war).

Because of the significant shift in the political context, which suddenly increased the political salience of the topic of our study, we did not expect our positive treatment effects to replicate. We also expected more polarized responses and a more negative response by far-right supporters in particular.

8.1 Design

We repeated the survey experiment three months later, in November 2023, inviting participants from wave 1 to participate again, resulting in a panel dataset. A total of 1,438 persons participated in the second wave, i.e. about 65% of the original sample. There are no significant differences in attrition between conditions.

Repeating the experiment, we assigned participants to the same conditions in wave 2 as they had been assigned to in wave 1 and measured the same outcomes.⁵ This allowed us to assess whether there were differences in means between August and November 2023 as well as whether there were differences in the treatment effects – all while holding sample characteristics as stable as possible. In addition, this reinforcement design more closely mimics the reality of public communication and education where people typically encounter the same or similar information multiple times as opposed to only once (Paluck et al., 2021).

One might be concerned about fatigue or other negative reactions among participants upon reading the same text a second time; however, further analysis alleviates concerns. More specifically, in both waves, we asked participants about the text (e.g., the text is informative; I did not learn anything new from the text). The average scores are very similar to each other and there are no statistically significant differences between waves.⁶

8.2 Results

We find that treatment effects overall remain stable between the two waves (see Figure 5).⁷ We do observe slightly stronger effects on action intentions in wave 2 compared to wave 1, and slightly weaker effects on attitudes, but the direction of the effects remains the same. Thus, despite a significantly changed political context, the experimental results, against our

⁵The average survey response times were similar in both waves (14.5 vs. 15 minutes), which suggests that the respondents read the texts as carefully the second time as the first time despite seeing them for the second time.

⁶We report the averages by wave and condition in the Appendix Section F.

⁷Results are unchanged when restricting the sample to respondents who participated in both waves. We also tested for selective attrition by treatment condition and found none.

expectation, replicated. For the overall sample, not only treatment effects but also means remained stable between wave 1 (August 2023) and wave 2 (November 2023).⁸ At the same time, the effects are also not significantly stronger overall, suggesting that the second time exposure does not add much beyond the first.

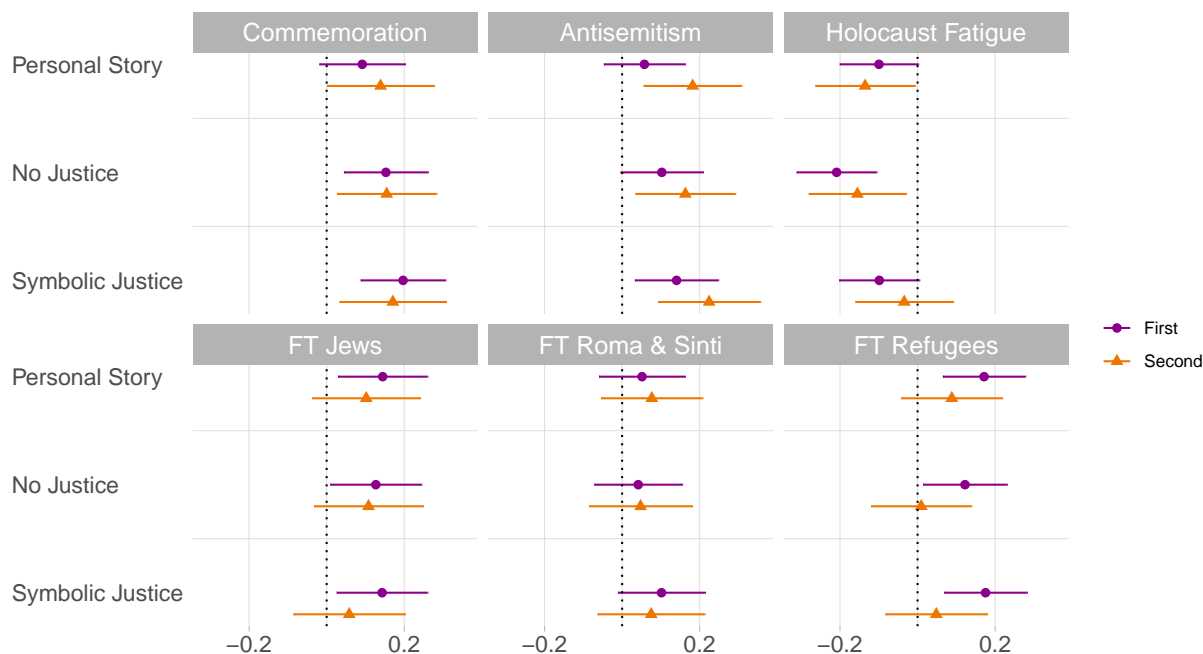


Figure 3: Treatment effects in wave 1 (August 2023; N= 2, 198) and wave 2 (November 2023; N= 1, 438)

8.2.1 Worsened attitudes towards minoritized groups among far right

In contrast to the stability observed in the overall sample, we see greater volatility among far-right supporters. Among this subgroup, we observe a substantive drop in the mean feeling thermometer scores towards Jews, Roma & Sinti, and refugees (see Figure 4). We also observe a drop in the average reported motivation to engage in commemoration (see Figure 5). In terms of treatment effects, the *personal story* condition is still effective for mobilizing far-right supporters for commemoration and against antisemitism but less so than in wave 1. In addition, the *personal story* condition no longer improves their attitudes towards refugees

⁸For more details, see Figures 4 and 5.

(see Figure 6).

The far right’s reaction to the Israel-Gaza war may explain this greater volatility among far-right supporters compared to others. By and large, German parties supported Israel following the October 7 attacks. However, the far-right party Alternative for Germany (AfD) and ideologically proximate far-right groups immediately used the war for their anti-Muslim, anti-immigrant rhetoric (Seibringer, 2023). In addition, while purporting to stand with Israel, the regional youth chapter of the AfD in South-West Germany for example made it clear that the AfD youth chapter puts Germany first, in contrast to the young center-right Christian Democrats who supposedly put Israel before Germany (Seibringer, 2023). Far-right actors also connected the war with the popular “Great Replacement” conspiracy theory, which is both antisemitic and anti-immigrant and claims that powerful Jewish forces are behind an effort to replace white populations with non-white populations, primarily via immigration (Bracke and Hernandez Aguilar, 2024; Seibringer, 2023). Thus, the reaction of the German far right to the Hamas attacks and the ensuing Israel-Gaza war stood out due to the thinly veiled instrumentalization of the war for its anti-immigration agenda.

Thus, while the overall effects and means remained stable among the overall sample despite a drastic change in the political context, we see greater volatility both in attitudes towards minoritized groups and to some extent also in response to the treatments, i.e. Holocaust representations, among far-right voters. The drop in means in attitudes towards minoritized groups, including Jews, among far-right supporters and their decreased motivation to engage in commemoration is notable and underlines the instrumentalization of the purported concern about antisemitism for the far-right’s anti-immigration agenda.

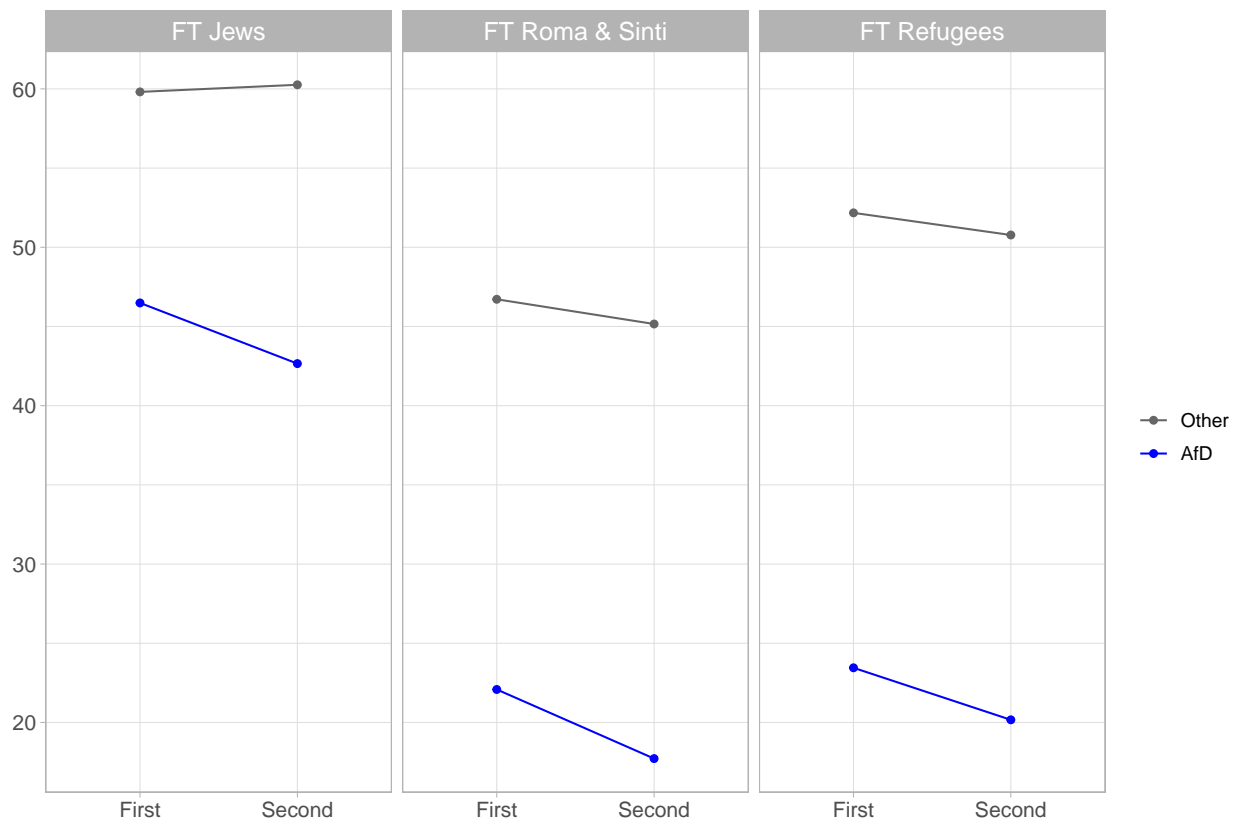


Figure 4: Mean feeling thermometer scores on a scale of 0-100 in wave 1 (August 2023) and wave 2 (November 2023) by party affiliation (far-right AfD versus others). N= 1,438.

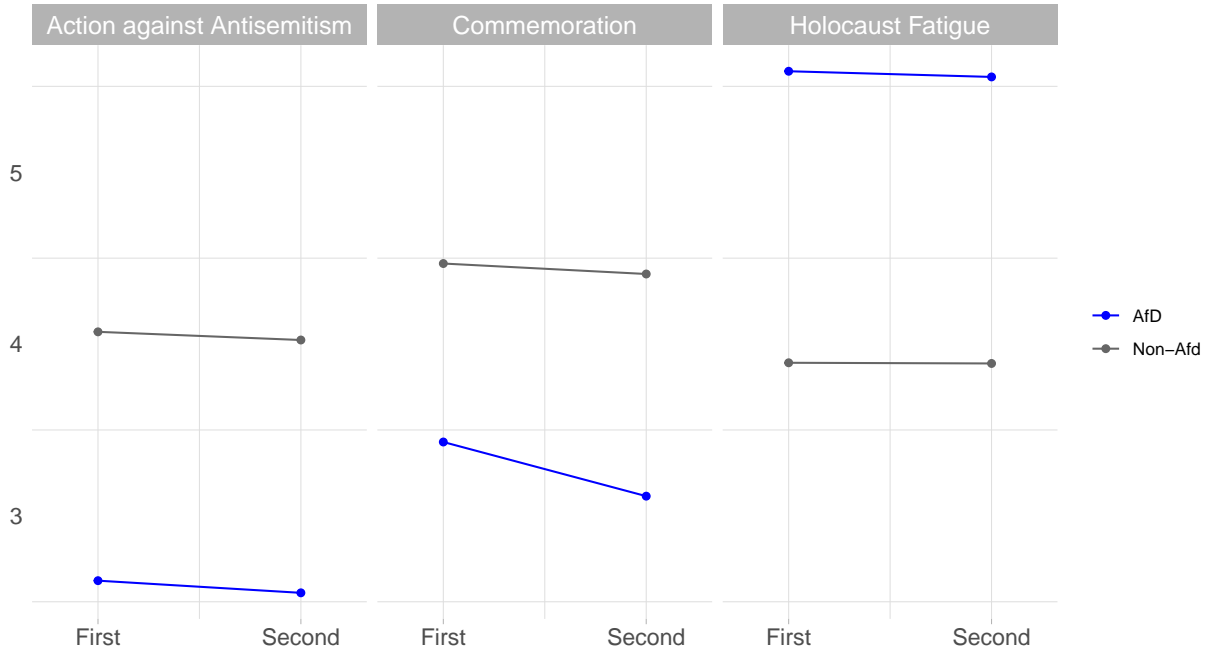


Figure 5: Mean values of core outcomes beyond feeling thermometers in wave 1 (August 2023) and wave 2 (November 2023) by party affiliation (far-right AfD versus others). N= 1,438.

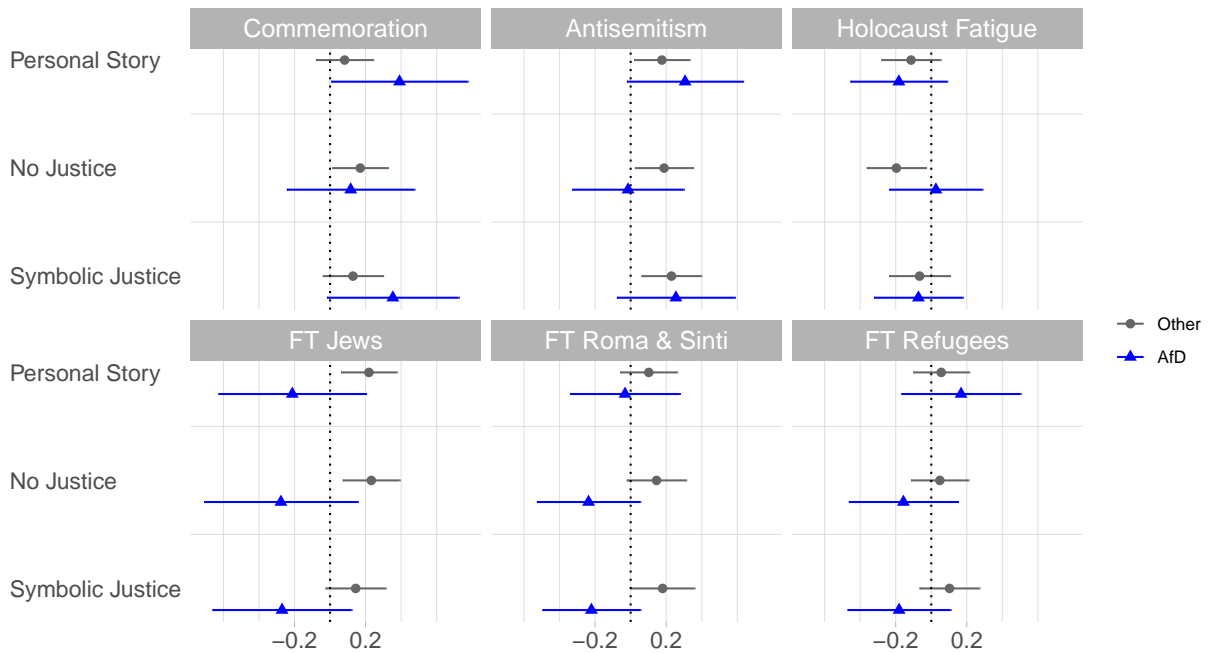


Figure 6: Heterogeneous treatment effects by party affiliation on mobilization and attitudes in wave 2 (Nov 2023). Dots denote standardized coefficients for treatment and bars to 95% confidence intervals. N= 1,438, of which AfD N= 250.

9 Discussion

Initiatives around the world aim to make past atrocities and injustices visible, realizing the importance of remembering the past in order to provide justice in the present and prevent similar injustice from recurring in the future. Germany and its “commemoration culture” related to the Holocaust are often used as examples in that context. For example, sociologist and staff writer at *The Atlantic* Clint Smith describes commemoration initiatives in Germany as examples to follow as he reflects on his research on the history of slavery and its state of commemoration in the United States (Smith, 2022). Even in popular culture, such as comedian Trevor Noah’s 2023 stand-up show, Germany’s commemoration initiatives are held up as examples for the US and other countries to follow. Yet, despite their frequent use as examples, empirical research on the impact of common ways in which information about the Holocaust is presented in Germany is scarce.

We find that that three typical formats of representing the Holocaust in German memory initiatives are largely effective. Information about the sheer extent of the atrocities and the impunity enjoyed by the perpetrators (*no justice*), a story about a victim (*personal story*), and a text about symbolic justice efforts (*symbolic justice*) all lower Holocaust fatigue, and improve attitudes towards Jews and refugees. Only the *no justice* and *symbolic justice* formats effectively mobilize people for commemoration and for action against antisemitism. We do not observe backlash to any of the three formats. The effect sizes (0.1-0.2 standard deviations) are commensurate with effect sizes from information intervention studies (Coppock, 2022). These results are encouraging for actors in civil society and education who adopt and employ these approaches, and suggest that the initiatives that sparked the interest of Clint Smith and others indeed fulfil their promise.

The effects are also remarkably stable. Despite a drastic change in political context due to the October 7th Hamas attacks and the resulting Israel-Gaza war, both means and treatment effects were hardly unchanged between August and November 2023. An exception to this are the mean feeling thermometer scores among far-right supporters and their average motivation

to engage in commemoration, which dropped in that period. This raises interesting questions about how participants interpret the treatment each time, and what this can tell us about their reactions to similar representations of past injustice in the real world. If the main driver is novelty, then the effect should wear off at the second time. Instead, the effects we observe might be driven by remembering or reflecting (similar to what, for example, commemoration days try to achieve), which would also explain why it wears off quickly but can be re-activated, and mobilized easily.

Importantly, when looking into the details of the results, it becomes clear that there is no one size fits all approach. For example, while the personal story format has the least mobilizing potential for the overall sample, it is the only effective format for mobilizing people on the far right of the political spectrum. The personal story format even improves attitudes towards refugees among far-right supporters – one of the most targeted groups by the far right’s anti-immigrant rhetoric. Thus, these results suggest that it might be advisable, when possible, to tailor interventions depending on political affiliation rather than adopting one format for everyone. Building on this exploratory analysis, future research should further investigate heterogeneous treatment effects by political affiliation, ideally also in contexts beyond Germany.

This study contributes to the literature on memory and politics. Past research has examined how engaging with past atrocities can affect attitudes and political behavior in specific cases. For instance, visiting a museum about the dictatorship in Chile has been shown to positively impact attitudes toward democracy (Balcells, Palanza and Voytas, 2022), the removal of confederate statutes in the US to lower racial resentment among people living nearby (Rahnama, Forthcoming), and the local commemoration of victims of Nazi persecution to decrease local levels of far-right support in Berlin (Turkoglu, Ditzmann and Firestone, 2023). This study examines the effects of various formats in a single case, showing that providing information about past atrocities, in a range of different formats, has positive effects.

This study is particularly relevant for research on memory and far-right mobilization (Balcells and vanderWilden, 2024) as our findings suggest that the effects of different formats vary along party lines, as discussed in more detail above. Since right-wing populist parties commonly advance nostalgic, revisionist narratives about national histories and downplay episodes that paint the majority group in a negative light (Bonikowski et al., 2019; Keim, 2021; Zubrzycki and Woźny, 2020), the positive effect we find of the personal story on far-right supporters and the absence of backlash to any of the formats even among that group is particularly noteworthy. It is also consistent with past research on the impact of stumbling stones — memorials that center the lives of victims of Nazi persecution — on far-right support (Turkoglu, Ditlmann and Firestone, 2023).

The study furthermore contributes to the literature on prejudice reduction by showcasing the potential of historical representations as prejudice reduction interventions. While our treatment was light-tough (i.e., brief, cheap, and easy to implement) it built on long, expensive and hard to implement formats that exist in German civil society. Changes in the salience of different historical representations might be an important source of low or high prejudice, even if reducing prejudice is not the primary intention of reminding people about history. In showing that reminding people about the Holocaust reduces prejudice, this study adds to a growing literature that highlights the importance of historical representations as sources of prejudice (Bonam et al., 2019; Kraus and Vinluan, 2023; Nelson, Adams and Salter, 2013).

The study has several important limitations. The first concerns generalizability to other contexts. As Germany is often used as an example when discussing and designing education about and commemoration of past atrocities, the findings add important empirical evidence to this learning across contexts that is already happening. At the same time, it is possible that the findings may look different in contexts where there are, for example, much lower levels of acknowledgment of the respective past atrocities, as countries are generally on a spectrum from complete denial to full acknowledgment (Zubrzycki and Woźny, 2020). Future

studies should investigate the effects of exposure to past atrocities in a comparative fashion.

A second limitation concerns the empirical design. While we chose treatment texts that mirror texts from real-world museum and memorial site websites to increase ecological validity, survey experiments come with inherent limitations. They are light-touch interventions whose effects typically have a short duration (Coppock, 2022) unlike field experiments (see, for example, Balcells, Palanza and Voytas, 2022). Survey experiments also allow researchers less oversight than lab experiments. We cannot know for sure whether respondents read the texts in full detail. At the same time, survey experiments allow for much greater sample sizes than lab experiments, thus enabling greater statistical power.

Overall, this study provides promising evidence about the potential of exposing people to information about past atrocities. Even supporters of a far-right party that downplays the Holocaust and criticizes its commemoration (Kahn, 2022) reported increased motivation to engage in commemoration and take action against antisemitism after reading the story of a Holocaust victim. Our present societies continue to be shaped by histories of violence and gross injustice and awareness of that past is instrumental for building resilient, multiethnic democracies. While engagement with the past is often polarizing (Niklasson, 2023), the findings of this study provide encouragement to provide people with factual information about past atrocities, be they about individual experiences, details about the extent of atrocities and their consequences, or subsequent symbolic justice efforts that make sure that the past is not forgotten.

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