

HOLOCAUST MEMORY AT RISK

The Distortion of Holocaust History across Europe.

Summary of Findings and Recommendations | September 2021



Preface

THE HOLOCAUST AND WORLD WAR II SHAPED THE POSTWAR WORLD ORDER.

The enduring significance of this history makes a transatlantic commitment to remembrance and education vital for the future. The 80th anniversary of the beginning of the genocide of Europe's Jews offers new opportunities to build a stronger partnership between the United States and Europe. To that end, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum shares research on Holocaust distortion in the lands where it happened and recommendations for how we might address this together.

COVER IMAGES (clockwise from left): Mailboxes in France bearing the image of Simone Weil, a Holocaust survivor and politician, are seen vandalized with swastikas in 2019. *Michel Euler/Associated Press*; In 2013, Hungarian politician and pastor Lorand Hegedus unveils a statue in Budapest of Miklos Horthy, Hungary's wartime leader, who was a vocal antisemite and complicit in the murder of the country's Jewish population during the Holocaust. *REUTERS/Alamy Stock Photo*; Far-right activists participate in a 2019 march honoring Hristo Lukov, the leader of the ultranationalist wartime Union of Bulgarian National Legions who was complicit in the deportation of more than 11,000 Jews turned over by Bulgaria to Nazi Germany. *REUTERS/Alamy Stock Photo*

HOLOCAUST MEMORY AT RISK

Summary of Findings

EUROPE SETS THE TONE FOR HOW THE HOLOCAUST IS REMEMBERED EVERYWHERE. After decades of progress, Holocaust memory is being challenged in a rapidly-changing Europe. Across the continent to varying degrees, the historical record is increasingly being distorted or disregarded by governments, leading politicians, and others with growing influence over national policy making and public opinion. This is taking place as the survivors and witnesses to the Holocaust pass into history. And distortion is intensifying notwithstanding the substantial efforts by survivors, historians, educators, institutions, and memorial sites to document and educate about the Holocaust. Recognizing the global importance of sustaining Holocaust memory in the lands where it happened, this document describes the situation for policy makers, opinion leaders, and government officials in both the United States and Europe. It includes recommendations to encourage further conversation and robust transatlantic cooperation to confront the current challenges.¹

A NEGATIVE TRAJECTORY IN THE ARC OF HOLOCAUST MEMORY

The recent trajectory in Holocaust memory across Europe is disturbingly negative. By the end of the first decade of the 2000s, the general trend was that Holocaust commemoration, research, and education was increasingly informed by a far-reaching confrontation with difficult history. Outright Holocaust denial had begun to fall into disrepute following a number of high-profile trials and efforts by European governments to criminalize it. In the past decade, however, we have witnessed an accelerating trend toward distortion of Holocaust history in mainstream political and public discourse. Although governments and nongovernmental institutions continue to launch important initiatives to preserve the memory of the Holocaust and promote public awareness and education about it, the current trend threatens decades of progress.

1. The Museum's findings are based on in-depth reviews of Holocaust distortion in 11 countries on whose territory the Holocaust took place, encompassing the places where the vast majority of Jews lived and were killed: Austria, Bulgaria, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Russia, and Ukraine.



ABOVE, from center: Matteo Salvini of Italy's Northern League Party, Jörg Meuthen of Germany's Alternative for Germany Party, and Marine Le Pen of France's National Rally Party in May 2019. *Luca Bruno/Associated Press*

RIGHT: Prime Minister of Hungary Viktor Orbán and President of Poland Andrzej Duda, two countries where governments have condoned challenges to Holocaust history. *Janek Skarzynski/Getty Images*



A REGION-WIDE PROBLEM WITH TRANSNATIONAL IMPACT

State-sponsored or otherwise politically influential Holocaust distortion is wide-ranging and widespread across Europe. It can appear as:

- Public statements denying or minimizing national and societal responsibility for crimes against Jews or collaboration with Nazi Germany
- Attempts to limit academic and public discourse on Holocaust history by means of legislation and penalties
- Political interference with the accurate representation of history in museums and exhibitions, and at historical sites
- The rejection of the importance of Holocaust remembrance and memorials by influential political and societal leaders
- Efforts to glorify, honor, exonerate, or otherwise “rehabilitate” Holocaust-era historical figures or entities despite their association with crimes against humanity, collaboration with Nazi Germany, or direct involvement in the persecution and murder of Jews

The proponents and enablers of Holocaust distortion include governments, political leaders, and non-state actors. They have increasing political power and societal influence, and are bringing ideas once considered to be unacceptably extreme into the mainstream of politics and public discourse.

Holocaust distortion is fueled by a climate of resurgent, aggressive nationalism in several parts of Europe, coupled in Eastern Europe with the legacy of Soviet-era distortion and post-Soviet distortion of the Holocaust and World War II.

Nevertheless, Holocaust distortion is not just a national phenomenon. The trends of distortion and those who spread it reach across national boundaries. Conflicts over Holocaust-era history also contribute to transnational tensions between several European countries. Disputes and tensions over memory of the past have international implications. This requires international solutions built on dialogue between and across governments and international organizations.

HOLOCAUST DISTORTION AND OTHER PROBLEMATIC TRENDS

Current trends in Holocaust distortion do not exist in a vacuum. Growths in distortion have occurred parallel to other troublesome trends, such as the erosion of democratic norms and institutions, the intensification of antisemitism, and the rise of aggressive nationalism and xenophobia. Although all nations try to shape their historical narratives, in democracies, free speech and academic inquiry foster open, robust public discourse. Absent these democratic norms, history can become a political tool to promote authoritarian ends and to justify the targeting of Jews and other minorities.

Antisemitic harassment, violence, and discrimination are at high levels and increasing in many parts of Europe. While there are differences from country to country, the rise in violence and other manifestations of antisemitism in Europe occur from points across the ideological spectrum from the far right to the far left, and from those espousing radical Islamist and other extremist religious and nationalist views. Holocaust distortion is often a vehicle to express antisemitic ideas, or incite antisemitic feelings. Holocaust distortion also can promote negative views about other groups perceived to be “outsiders.” Many political leaders who are proponents or enablers of Holocaust distortion are also at the forefront of campaigns against Roma and LGBTQ+ people—who were persecuted during the Holocaust—as well as refugees and migrants, Muslims, and people of color. These campaigns contribute to social divisions.

An accurate understanding of Holocaust history is essential to grappling with some of the challenges that threaten European democracies today. The memory of the Holocaust serves as a warning against the return of group-targeted hatred within the context of an erosion of democratic principles and institutions. Moreover, the collective memory of two world wars and the Holocaust played a key role in driving the creation of global, transatlantic, and European institutions designed to protect peace, security, and human dignity. Holocaust distortion and related misuses of history for political purposes inevitably undermine the justification and the defense of these institutions and the principles on which they are based.



2018 march in Vilnius, Lithuania, honoring individuals who had collaborated with the Nazis during the Holocaust. The banner says, “We know who our nation’s heroes are.” *Julius Norwilla/DefendingHistory.com*

Recommendations

For decades, government officials, survivors, historians, educators, and institutions have invested substantial effort and resources in documenting and understanding Holocaust history. These efforts, which have reached millions in schools and universities, at museums and memorials, and in public discourse, have aimed to encourage reflective engagement with that history. Yet, current trends in Holocaust distortion are spreading and intensifying, presenting new and rapidly-evolving challenges. Unfortunately, the substantial work that has taken place thus far has not been effective enough in preventing troubling distortions. The situation requires action at all levels. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum stands ready to deepen its transatlantic engagement in reciprocal partnership with European governments, regional multinational organizations, and nongovernmental organizations that share these concerns.

Based on its findings, the Museum believes that the following efforts are needed to help reverse current trends:

- New ideas and approaches, while expanding and amplifying what has been most effective up to now
- Regular assessment of the effectiveness of various strategies
- Greater emphasis on communicating the relevance of the Holocaust today, taking into account a variety of different audience perspectives, as well as the connections between memory policies and the stability of democratic institutions, the commitment to civic responsibility, and the preservation of freedom and human rights
- Region-wide strategies to confront region-wide trends, supported by enhanced transnational and transatlantic cooperation by governments and intergovernmental organizations

- Innovation in education that is rigorous, relevant, and designed to cultivate critical thinking in the targeted audience, whether they be students, leaders, officials, or the general public
- Special efforts to reach government and civil service professionals
- Enhanced use of digital education and public communication strategies to combat Holocaust distortion

Guided by these general principles, the Museum offers the following initial set of specific ideas in order to encourage further conversation, cooperation, and robust action.

RESEARCH AND EDUCATIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE FOR HOLOCAUST MEMORY

National governments and intergovernmental organizations should:

1. Monitor the impact of public memory and education efforts by conducting periodic, coordinated public opinion surveys to measure attitudes toward Holocaust commemoration and education and the pervasiveness of distorted narratives;
2. Support research on the regional, trans-national, and cross-border nature of the Holocaust as well as Holocaust memory, denial, and distortion (including how denial and distortion are introduced and spread across borders online and through social media); and
3. Expand and strengthen the institutional infrastructure of organizations and memorial sites that (a) provide accurate and authoritative information about the Holocaust based on rigorous academic standards, (b) conduct outcomes-based research on the efficacy of Holocaust memory policies, and (c) develop measures to counter common manifestations of Holocaust distortion.



Statue of Stepan Bandera in Lviv, Ukraine. Bandera's Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists and its military wing occasionally collaborated with Nazi Germany and were responsible for crimes against ethnic Poles and Jews. ©Bloodua/123RF.COM

GUIDELINES AND STANDARDS

The European Union, together with the Council of Europe and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), should develop guidelines for governments to counter manifestations of Holocaust denial and distortion. These should include a call for political leaders and public figures to speak out strongly and promptly when Holocaust denial or distortion occurs, as well as vetting standards and procedures to ensure that grant support is denied to nongovernmental organizations that engage in Holocaust denial or distortion.

National governments and the European Union should establish guidelines to prevent the rehabilitation of convicted war criminals and other individuals and groups who were directly involved in the advocacy and/or perpetration of Holocaust-era crimes.

TRAINING OF PUBLIC SERVANTS

In order to better prepare national and international public servants to counter Holocaust distortion in the course of their work to protect the security of individuals and defend fundamental human rights:

- I. Training programs should be organized by:
 - National governments and the European Union for civil servants, law enforcement professionals and judges, and military leadership (including through existing structures such as the European Judicial Training Network (EJTN) and the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Training (CEPOL)); and
 - National and multilateral bodies of parliamentarians for legislators and their staff.

These programs should communicate:

- The actions and roles of their profession during the Holocaust, and the relevance of understanding those failures to the fulfillment of their current professional responsibilities; and
- How distorted historical narratives facilitate hate speech, antisemitism, racism, intolerance, and xenophobia.

There are some programs of this type at the national level, but none that reach across national boundaries and address the roles and responsibilities of civil servants, law enforcement and other officials as a European-wide phenomenon during the Holocaust.

2. The European Union, Council of Europe, and OSCE should provide training in identifying and monitoring Holocaust denial and distortion for those officials who, at both the national and multilateral levels, monitor commitments to combat antisemitism, racism, and other forms of intolerance, as well as to protect democracy, human rights, and the rule of law.
3. A transatlantic training initiative should be established, drawing from the history of the Holocaust and other sources, to enhance the ability of military officers to recognize and confront the potential for mass crimes and human rights violations against civilian population groups labeled as “different” or outside the “national community.” NATO and the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies could be partners in this initiative.

A more detailed briefing on the Museum’s research can be found at ushmm.org/holocaust-memory.

A LIVING MEMORIAL TO THE HOLOCAUST, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum inspires citizens and leaders worldwide to confront hatred, prevent genocide, and promote human dignity.worldwide to confront hatred, prevent genocide, and promote human dignity.



ushmm.org/connect

UNITED STATES
HOLOCAUST
MEMORIAL
MUSEUM

100 Raoul Wallenberg Place, SW Washington, DC 20024-2126 ushmm.org