

Bad Arolsen,
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ABSTRACT

Gen Z and Nazi History: High Receptivity and Strange Fascination

Results of the rheingold study based on the principles of depth psychology exploring Gen Z's attitude towards National Socialism (01/2022)

Sample and methodology:

The aim of this study is to analyze the significance of Nazi history for Generation Z and to find contemporary, accessible approaches to learning about the topic of National Socialism. For the purposes of the survey, a total of 100 respondents – adolescents and young adults aged 16 to 25 and adults aged 40 to 60 (comparison group) – were interviewed in accordance with the principles of depth psychology (in-depth interviews and group discussions). The respondents were selected with care to ensure that sociodemographic structures (gender, regional distribution, age distribution, education, and occupation) were reflected as accurately as possible. The in-depth exploratory interviews were conducted and analyzed using the rheingold method. A total of 1058 adolescents and adults subsequently took part in a quantitative survey. The study is representative in terms of age, gender, and region for each age group.

Gen Z is surprisingly interested in the Nazi era

Generation Z's general level of **interest in** the National Socialist era is surprisingly **high**: Seventy-five percent of them say that they are interested in the topic. This makes them even more interested in it than their parents' generation (66%) – today's 40 to 60-year-olds – who were surveyed as a comparison group for the purposes of the study. During the in-depth interviews and group discussions, not only did the enormous fascination that this topic holds for Gen Z come across very clearly, but also their strong sense of its uncanniness. Members of the parents' generation were more able to distance themselves and less liable to allow themselves to be affected by negative emotions.

The high level of interest is connected with three factors:

- Gen Z has no sense of personal guilt
- Gen Z sees the Nazi era in stark contrast to their multi-optional culture of possibility
- Gen Z experiences exposure to this very extreme chapter of history as a kind of psychological test of courage

The feeling that they are not to blame makes it easier for Gen Z to approach the topic

In comparison with previous generations, Gen Z has the opportunity to look at the Nazi era more impartially, **free from** any sense of personal **guilt**. Hardly any members of Gen Z know anyone personally who actually experienced the Nazi era – not only the megalomania and the pain, but also the guilt:

“It’s not the fault of young people today.”

“I can’t take responsibility for the past, but I can take responsibility for today.”

For Gen Z, the Nazi era stands in stark contrast to the multi-optionality of contemporary culture

For Generation Z, the Nazi era is a period of history that represents the complete **antithesis** of the world they live in today. Because Gen Z – perhaps more than any previous generation – lives in a democratic world of far too many options. All kinds of avenues are open to this generation in the worlds of work, entertainment, and consumption. They are very free in the decisions they make, and they grow up with the feeling that they can develop in any direction they like and achieve almost anything they aspire to. At the same time, they have to find and make their own way in today’s complex world. This is both a blessing and a curse.

This multi-optional culture of possibility is diametrically opposed to the rigid culture of domination of the Nazi era, which was characterized by very clearly defined categories, ideas, and convictions. The “cult of the Führer,” the duty to pledge unconditional obedience and engage in nationalistic thinking that held sway over individuality and diversity makes the Nazi era just as fascinating as it is terrible in the stark contrast it embodies. The Nazi era was an utterly extreme period in every respect, characterized by the attempt to impose rigid ideas and act out fantasies of grandeur by all available means.

Taking a closer look at the Nazi era is like a test of courage

The terrifying otherness and the monstrosity of the Nazi era give the period an aura of “true crime” for Gen Z. It is perceived as attractive, extremely abhorrent, monstrous, and utterly extreme, and this produces a kind of **fascinated fear**:

“The Nazi era was so absurd and so barbaric that I sometimes find it hard to believe that these things really happened.”

As a result, young people often feel that engaging in a closer examination of this period of great extremes is rather like a **test of courage**. It has a certain appeal for many young people who harbor a desire for extreme experiences, a curiosity about entering the realm of the extreme, the realm of taboo, and gaining insights into this monstrous chapter of history.

However, almost a third of Generation Z admit that this thrilling encounter with the topic of National Socialism is also **frightening**. They are afraid of the huge impact the topic could have on them and that they might never be the same again after delving into its murky depths. To paraphrase Nietzsche: "If you gaze too long into an abyss, the abyss will gaze back into you."

The fear of being captivated by the lack of ambiguity of the Nazi era and by its displays of power or of being seduced by the ideas of salvation that were particular to the period certainly resonates with some.

"I'm afraid I would probably have sided with the Nazis in those days, just to make myself look better."

A large proportion of Gen Z clearly distance themselves from the ideologies of the Nazi era after studying the period in detail. However, there are indications that a small proportion of them sympathize with right-wing ideas and see the ideology of the Nazi era as providing some kind of solution or answer – without openly professing their allegiance to these views in the survey. They feel overwhelmed by the many available options and by the complex challenges that confront them, and they are looking for simple, clear-cut answers. They see the Nazi era as a time of clear, unambiguous definitions and of intoxicating dominance and displays of power.

The Nazi era helps Gen Z to gain a better understanding of the fundamental questions that confront them in their lives today

Young people find that studying the Nazi era is not only about coming to terms with the past, but also about gaining a better understanding of the **present** and of the circumstances of their own lives. Because it is between the ages of 16 and 25 in particular that young people face existential questions that concern their future development and individual identity: Where do I belong? How individualistic may I be? How much can I decide for myself – and how much can others decide for me? What abilities and what knowledge do I need in order to lead a good life? How big can I dream? What kind of system do I live in, and how is this system evolving?

The extreme nature of the Nazi era is what shows Gen Z the consequences that can be associated with these questions.

Studying the Nazi era raises Gen Z's awareness of social issues – and of racism in particular

These fundamental questions give Gen Z a highly relevant, personal way of relating to the topic of Nazism. At the same time, they make young people more aware of social issues that are important and urgent today – racism in particular, but also exclusion, division, and radicalization. Forty-eight percent of Generation Z see connections between current political and social developments and Nazi history. When asked which are the most important issues facing society today, racism is seen as being highly relevant – of all the possible answers, the greatest discrepancy between Gen Z and the comparison group is found here (39% Gen Z as opposed to 14% comparison group). The issue of racism is even more relevant for young people with a “migration background” (46%). Sixty percent of Gen Z agree with the statement that every one of us is slightly racist and that we should all pay more attention to this issue.

Susceptibility to right-wing ideologies, fake news, the rise of conspiracy theories, anti-semitism, and the increase in aggressive behavior are other current issues that are associated with the Nazi era:

“I would be lying if I said I didn't find the mechanisms of the Nazi era frightening. If history repeated itself, I would be directly affected.”

“Back in those days, people had it drilled into them that the Jews were the root of all evil. Total propaganda – they believed it and attacked the Jews!”

“I watch short videos every day on TikTok of African Americans talking about their experiences of racism, for example. It makes me want to find out more and understand how something so awful can happen to a single individual.”

Gen Z sees a strong connection between the problem of fake news today and the Nazi propaganda of the time – some view the media and the information they disseminate with a very critical eye. It is evident that Gen Z thinks deeply and sensitively about current issues.

“The early days of Nazism show how change can creep in very gradually and how dangerous manipulation can be.”

Respondents with a “**migration background**” can use the fundamental questions described above to approach the Nazi era too, but they bring a different perspective. They are often confronted directly with issues like everyday racism and are quick to draw parallels with the past. They tend to see themselves as being on the side of the potential victims. They view Germany as their home, but they ask themselves how individualistic they can allow themselves be and to what extent they need to conform.

Barriers and obstacles to finding about more about the Nazi era

In addition to the fascination of the Nazi past, the study also identified the major **barriers** and obstacles to finding about more about the Nazi era. As well as feeling frightened of being **overwhelmed** by emotions in the face of the enormity of the events of the Nazi era, many often fail to see any connection with the circumstances of their own lives. Especially when teaching in schools focuses too much on **factual knowledge**, young people are unable to relate this factual knowledge to their own daily lives. They find the subject abstract, over-complex, and boring as a result.

Often, **fixed opinions** and the imposition of a rigid moral code give them the impression that this is a closed discourse that can no longer be questioned. *“When we had lessons about the Nazi era at school, I always had the feeling I had to be careful. There would be no dialog or discussion. You weren’t allowed to have your own opinion. There was a consensus on what you were supposed to think about it and how you were supposed to learn about it!”*

Forty-seven percent have the impression that there are a lot of things you just cannot say without being put in a box. Forty-four percent wish they could discuss the Nazi era in an **environment** where they could **free** to speak without being afraid of saying the wrong thing. They want to learn their own lessons by studying the subject in depth and identify the moral of the story for themselves.

*Fifty-four percent think that Nazi history is often only looked at from the victim's perspective and would like to see the **perspective switch** between victims and perpetrators.* They want to put themselves in the victims’ shoes and empathize with the injustice done to them, but they want to get a feeling for the role played by the perpetrators as well: What made it happen, what makes people become evil? Could they be capable of such cruel acts themselves?

“I also want to hear about the motives of all the SS officers, concentration camp commanders, and people who betrayed their Jewish neighbors. If the reasons were transparent, I would probably realize that something similar could happen to me, too.”

Recommendations for teaching young people about the Nazi period

Generation Z would like to see a **constructive and contemporary** approach to the Nazi era. Pure theory and basic facts are not enough. They prefer real-life examples and **insights into the concrete realities of people's lives**. They are very much in favor of an open discussion and a **culture of debate** without moral overtones. An element of choice is needed so they can explore topics that they find interesting in greater depth. Points of reference in their own lives and connections at regional and global level to concrete examples make approaching the topic easier. Learning about the life stories of people who can function as role models, such as Anne Frank or Oskar Schindler, is also an important way of tackling the topic.

Ideally, Gen Z wants to do their own research and set off on a tour of discovery. This can be facilitated by merging digital and analog offerings and linking them intelligently. The **vehicles for knowledge** favored by Gen Z are easy-to-understand information in podcasts, videos, or on Twitch.tv, and exciting stories in films or series. They can imagine hearing the stories of contemporary witnesses via holograms or chats, for example, and would like opportunities to engage with original sources and documents.

The more successful this process of learning and experiencing is for Generation Z, the better protected they will be from succumbing to the temptation to accept "simple" answers and the better supported they will be as they find and make their own way in today's complex world.

"History makes us sensitive and teaches us to take a close look."

"I always tried to be better and more beautiful than my classmates. I used to put them down to make myself look better. Learning about history at school taught me that there is actually no justification for treating some people worse than others."

FAQs

1. Whose views are represented in the Gen Z study?

The study presents the views, knowledge, attitudes, and perceptions of the respondents, which were collected both qualitatively and quantitatively. In their capacity as the commissioning body, the Arolsen Archives would like to point out that the history of the Nazi era, the correct contextualization of the historical details and various reasons for persecution, and the ideological motivation of the perpetrators should be viewed in a more complex and differentiated light than the respondents were often able to do given their level of knowledge.

2. What is meant by “parallels” to the Nazi era?

A distinction must be made here between the perception of the respondents and historical accuracy. While it may appear to respondents that parallels exist on a personal or political level for one reason or another, a balance must be struck here. Do parallels really exist or would connections or references be a more accurate term? The correct terminology often differs from the way things are referred to colloquially. When the term “parallels” is used, it should be understood to mean “connections” or “references.”

3. How do we define respondents with a “migration background”?

The study uses the same definition as the Federal Statistical Office of Germany.

According to their definition, a migration background exists if 1. the person does not have German citizenship, or 2. the person's place of birth is outside the current borders of the Federal Republic of Germany and they immigrated to the current territory of the Federal Republic of Germany after 1949, or 3. the birthplace of at least one of the person's parents is outside the current borders of the Federal Republic of Germany and this parent immigrated to the current territory of the Federal Republic of Germany after 1949.

References made to the “migration background” of respondents in the study are based on information they provided themselves. The respondents defined themselves in terms of the definition given above. The “migration background” specified by the respondents and referred to in the study does not reflect the specific details of an individual's personal immigration history.

4. Why do respondents with a “migration background” tend to see themselves as being on the side of the (potential) victims in the context of the Nazi era?

As explained in question 3, the “migration background” was not specified in any detail, so no conclusions can be drawn as to the reasons that prompted most respondents with a “migration background” to see themselves as being on the side of the (potential) victims.

The fears and experiences of racism and other forms of discrimination that were often referred to in the study probably play a role here. Here too, as was also the case with question 1, a distinction must be made between the perception or knowledge of the respondents and any correct historical or scientific categorizations.

5. Why is antisemitism rarely recognized as a phenomenon in the study / hardly given any specific mention despite the fact that it is a central tenet of National Socialism?

Among the many positive findings, this is one of the most interesting questions to emerge from the study, and one that will probably require more research before it can be answered. One thing is evident: often no clear distinction is made between racism and antisemitism. Although Gen Z see the topic of racism as one of the most important topics and although there is a definite awareness of it, it is clear that “antisemitism” as a concept and phenomenon is addressed less explicitly by the respondents – despite the fact that most of them are aware that 6 millions Jews were murdered, making them the largest group of victims of National Socialism.

6. More than half of the respondents think that the history of National Socialism is only considered from the victim's perspective. Is that true, and what does it mean when they say they want “more perspectives”?

There were various groups of victims in the Nazi era, and some did not begin to talk about their perspective until quite late on, some even only recently, and they are still struggling to have their voices heard today. In contrast to the responses given by the comparison group, the responses of the test group clearly show that social debates have an impact on knowledge and focus.

This could also give us reason to make some necessary clarifications when communicating about the topic of remembrance. It may be that the respondents only have the impression that Nazi history is being told from the point of view of the victims because people's suffering is such an essential part of it. As with the other questions, it is important to bear in mind that respondents' perceptions or knowledge may not be consistent with all the facts that are generally accepted as being true.

However, being interested in multiple perspectives – including the motives of the perpetrators – is not necessarily a bad thing. In fact, it may well reflect a desire to take a closer look at the perpetrator's conspiracy narratives, hate ideologies, and worldview.