

# What German children know about the Second World War

Maya Götz

**This article summarises the results of a representative study of 840 German 6- to 13-year-olds on their knowledge of the Second World War and of the persecution by the National Socialists.**

“Isn’t it a bit too soon to confront primary school children with the topic ‘Second World War and Holocaust?’”: when a children’s television editor raised this concern, she was presumably vicariously expressing the discomfort felt by quite a few adults. The desire to shield children, who are today growing up in a far more peaceful environment, from the barbarous acts which took place over 70 years ago is all too understandable. At the same time, research in history pedagogy shows convincingly that children come into contact with clues and fragments of history from a very young age. Qualitative surveys have shown clearly that children possess islands of knowledge, e.g. about concentration camps, which they integrate into their worldview (e.g. Becher, 2009; Hanfland, 2008). In 2009, Koch’s dissertation quantitatively investigated, for the first time, German fourth-graders’ (aged about 9-10) knowledge of the Second World War in a study of 803 children. She showed that 8 in 10 children in this year group recognised Adolf Hitler and the swastika in images, and around 6 in 10 children knew that Germany was involved in the Second World War. Many of the 9- to 10-year-olds had inner visual

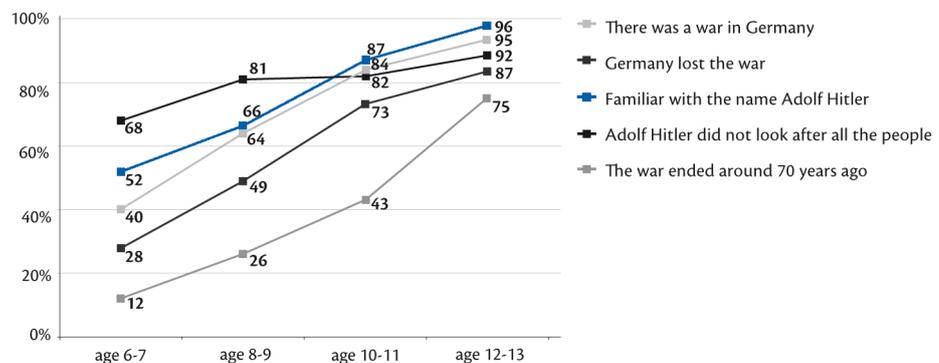
representations of the National Socialist period. Somewhat fewer than half the children in this year group knew the outcome of the war, and only a very small minority had any knowledge of the Night of Broken Glass, the ghettos, or the Auschwitz concentration camp (Koch, 2017). It can be concluded that children possess only individual islands of knowledge, and in this respect it is not realistic to expect to be able to keep children away from history. Neither is it appropriate to infer from their individual islands of knowledge that primary school children are generally well informed. Up until now, we have not known the level of knowledge or ignorance children in Germany possess, or understood how this develops with age. In order to close this gap in the research in the context of the research topic “Explaining the Second World War and the Holocaust appropriately to children” (see also Götz & Holler in this issue), the IZI carried out a representative study. It questioned n=840 German children between the ages of 6 and 13<sup>1</sup>

on their knowledge of the topic of the Second World War and persecution during the National Socialist Period.

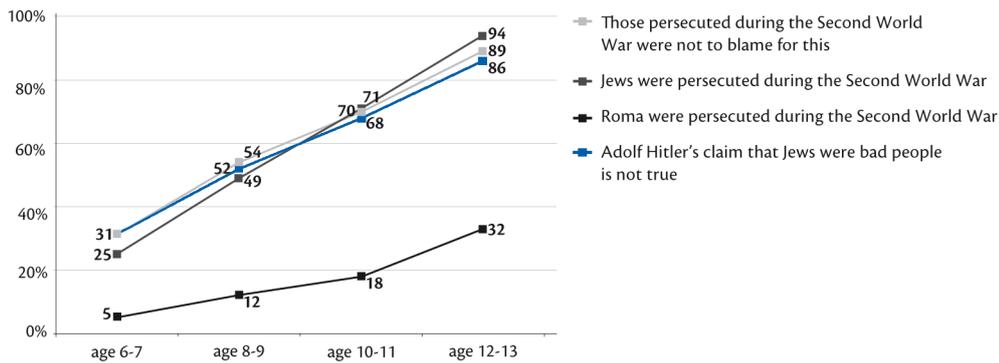
## KNOWLEDGE ABOUT THE SECOND WORLD WAR

40% of the German 6- to 7-year-olds and 64% of the 8- to 9-year-olds knew that Germany was involved in 2 major world wars (Ill. 1). This percentage rose in a linear manner to 95% among the 12- to 13-year-olds. We can conclude that approximately every second German primary school child has already heard of the world wars.

As in the study by Koch, just under half the 8- to 9-year-olds knew that Germany did not win the war, a percentage that rose among the 10- to 11-year-olds to 73% and reached 87% among the 12- to 13-year-olds. A quarter of the primary school children who knew that Germany was involved in 2 world wars did not know how the war ended. This suggests that they



Ill. 1: Knowledge of 6-13-year-olds on the topic of the Second World War (n=840)



Ill. 2: 6- to 13-year-olds' knowledge of the topic "Persecution in the Second World War" (n=840)

of the parents, or whether or not the child had a migration background. This supports the theory that children tend to appropriate particular forms of knowledge and worldview independent of their parents as symbolic material circulating within our culture (see also Zick in this issue)

do have inner images of the war and a "sense of knowledge", but that they lack the minimal contextualisation, e.g. that Germany was defeated in the war. Around a quarter of the 8- to 9-year-olds and fewer than half the 10- to 11-year-olds (43%) were correct in their assessment of when the last major war ended. It was only among the 12- to 13-year-olds that three quarters of those questioned knew that the war ended around 70 years ago (and not, for example, 150, 100 or 50 years ago). We can conclude, therefore, that the majority of pupils are able to locate the events chronologically only from age 12 to 13. Around half of all the 6- to 7-year-olds knew the name Adolf Hitler; 66% of the 8- to 9-year-olds and at least 8 in 10 pupils from the age of 10 upwards. As research has already highlighted, children become familiar with the name Adolf Hitler from an early age, some of them without knowing about the Second World War and its outcome. In response to the question "Did Adolf Hitler look after all the people in Germany?", already around 7 in 10 of the 6- to 7-year-olds replied in the negative, a

figure which rose to 81% among 8- to 9-year-olds. This suggests that children become aware, early on in their lives, of the connotations of the name of Adolf Hitler as someone whose rule brought great suffering to people. This means that in some cases children pick up on the name of Adolf Hitler and his potentially negative connotations sooner than they acquire any concrete knowledge of the Second World War and its outcome. Interestingly, in the replies to the questions there were no clear differences in terms of the educational background

### KNOWLEDGE ABOUT PERSECUTION

In order to gain a first impression of what knowledge children possess on the topic "Persecution in the National Socialist Period", the IZI asked the children, on the one hand, to identify potentially persecuted groups and, on the other, to assess the extent to which these groups were themselves to blame for this persecution. A quarter of the 6- to 7-year-olds knew that Jews were persecuted during



© Picture-alliance/AGF-images

Ill. 3: Many German children and adolescents have a (superficial) knowledge of the persecution of Jews during the Second World War; there are major gaps in knowledge with respect to the persecution of Roma

## RESEARCH

the Second World War. As their age increased, this percentage rose in a linear manner to 94% among the 12- to 13-year-olds (Ill. 2).

If we look at this in the context that only 10% of 6- to 7-year-olds and 25% of 8- to 9-year-olds were able to explain the term “Jew” (see also Götz in this issue), we see once again that this conceptual knowledge is superficial. Terms are recognised correctly in particular contexts, but this does not mean that this can be described as sound knowledge or even merely as islands of knowledge. This is also reflected in the fact that only a few 6- to 7-year-olds (6%) were absolutely sure that Jews were persecuted, agreeing with the statement “strongly”. Among the 8- to 9-year-olds this “strong” agreement rose to just under a fifth (17%), among the 10- to 11-year-olds to just under a third (32%), and it was only among the 12- to 13-year-olds that at least 58% were sure (agreeing “strongly”) that Jews were persecuted in the Second World War. This suggests that children’s knowledge of the context urgently needs to become more secure. It is an undisputable historical reality that Jews were persecuted during the National Socialist period (Ill. 3). Children – particular those growing up in Germany – ought to know about this historical fact and its consequences.

The gaps in knowledge become evident once again when it comes to the question of whether Roma were persecuted during the Second World War. Here, even among the 12- to 13-year-olds, only a third knew this historical fact – and in fact only 11% were absolutely sure of this. This reflects the clear warnings from Antiziganism Research that there is a need to make up ground in working through the history of the persecution of Roma (End, 2014). Barely any children replied “yes” to the control question of whether Aryans were persecuted, but only a quarter of the 8- to 9-year-olds and 64% of the 12- to 13-year-olds were able to reply with absolute certainty in the negative.

In this respect, this reflects a rather superficial conceptual knowledge which should not be confused with sound knowledge.

Just under a third of the 6- to 7-year-olds and over half the 8- to 9-year-olds rejected the statement “During the Second World War, the people who were persecuted were themselves to blame”. It was only among the 10- to 11-year-olds that this rejection rose to 70%, and among the 12- to 13-year-olds it was 9 in 10 children.

Only in exceptional cases did the children say “yes” to the question “Hitler said: Jews are bad people. Was he right?” However, only a third of the 6- to 7-year-olds and around half the 8- to 9-year-olds consciously rejected this statement, a figure which rose to 86% among the 12- to 13-year-olds. There is still a proportion of children – although it is a proportion which clearly decreases with age – who say they do not know whether Hitler’s highly anti-Semitic views were right. Primary school children in particular can be regarded as vulnerable to anti-Semitic statements, so it should be considered necessary – at the very least out of a sense of historical responsibility – for children to be given more assurance of the falsity of anti-Semitic statements.

### *Understandable historical facts and contexts*

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Some German primary school children have already heard of the war, but this does not mean that they know how the war ended or how to locate it chronologically. The majority know the name Adolf Hitler, and the name has potentially negative connotations, but only some of the children know about the persecution of particular ethnic groups during the Second World War. Primary

school children in particular can be regarded as vulnerable to anti-Semitic and antiziganistic statements because they are not certain about the basic concepts of racist/ethnic persecution. Even 12- to 13-year-olds often do not know about the persecution of Roma. It is important here to give children more certainty around locating the events chronologically, to give them the historical facts and contexts in a way they can understand, and to purposefully counter prejudices. ■

## NOTE

<sup>1</sup> n=439 boys and n=401 girls were sampled according to the age, sex and migration background of the respondents, the school-leaving qualifications of the head of the household, and the distribution according to German federal states and municipal size classes as well as the mother’s marital status. Duration of the study: 6 September to 1 October 2018, conducted by IconKids & Youth.

## REFERENCES

- Becher, Andrea (2009). Die Zeit des Holocaust in Vorstellungen von Grundschulkindern. Oldenburg: Didaktisches Zentrum.
- End, Markus (2014). Antiziganismus in der deutschen Öffentlichkeit. Strategien und Mechanismen medialer Kommunikation. Dokumentations- und Kulturzentrum Deutscher Sinti und Roma. Heidelberg: Selbstverlag.
- Hanfland, Vera (2008). Holocaust – ein Thema für die Grundschule? Eine empirische Untersuchung zum Geschichtsbewusstsein von Viertklässlern. Berlin: LIT Verlag.
- Koch, Christina (2017). Wissen von Kindern über den Nationalsozialismus. Eine quantitativ-empirische Studie im vierten Grundschuljahr. Wiesbaden: Springer VS.

## THE AUTHOR

Maya Götz, Dr. phil., is the Head of the IZI and of the PRIX JEUNESSE INTERNATIONAL, Munich, Germany.

