

Third Reich's legacy tied to present-day xenophobia and political intolerance

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Credit: Wikipedia

Who—or what—is to blame for the xenophobia, political intolerance and radical political parties spreading through Germany and the rest of Europe? A new study from Rice University and Washington University in St. Louis shows a major factor is people's proximity to former Nazi concentration camps.

"Legacies of the Third Reich: Concentration Camps and Outgroup Intolerance" will appear in an upcoming edition of the journal *American Political Science Review*. Lead author Jonathan Homola, an assistant professor at Rice, and fellow authors Miguel Pereira and Margit Tavits of Washington University were interested in understanding why some

Europeans are more xenophobic, less accepting of "outgroups" and more supportive of radical right-wing political parties.

The researchers focused closely on Germany but also examined other parts of Europe. They looked at survey responses from the European Values Study and the German General Social Survey as well as recent electoral results. They were especially interested in explaining intolerance toward Jews, Muslims and foreigners and support for radical right-wing parties. The researchers also used [census data](#), information on the location of Third Reich concentration camps and historical election results.

The researchers found consistent evidence that present-day Germans who live closer to concentration [camp](#) sites are more xenophobic; less tolerant of Jews, Muslims and immigrants; and more likely to support extreme right-wing political parties. They also found preliminary evidence of this behavior in other parts of Europe.

"We believe that individuals living near concentration camps during World War II were more likely to conform to the beliefs system of the regime," Homola said. "And we think this was because of [cognitive dissonance](#)."

Cognitive dissonance is the process of people justifying new information and beliefs that don't necessarily align their values in order to eliminate feelings of guilt or psychological discomfort. In the case of the Holocaust, these beliefs were passed down from generation to generation, Homola and his fellow authors said.

"While the causes of the Holocaust have attracted ample scholarly attention, its long-term sociopolitical consequences are less understood," Homola said. "Our evidence proves that when it comes to political attitudes, these consequences are real and measurable even today. The

prejudice that this racist and inhumane institution instilled in the local population is hard to erase even after the institution itself is long gone."

Homola said prior research in the U.S. has established a similar link between extreme political beliefs or racism and proximity to areas that once were home to a large number of slaves. These historical explanations for present-day prejudice are especially timely, he said, as political developments in the U.S. and Europe have brought intolerance toward marginalized groups back into the limelight.

"It is important to understand both contemporary factors and historical legacies that make exclusionary political appeals attractive," he said.

More information: Jonathan Homola et al, Legacies of the Third Reich: Concentration Camps and Out-group Intolerance, *American Political Science Review* (2020). [DOI: 10.1017/S0003055419000832](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055419000832)

Provided by Rice University

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