

# Beyond victimhood and perpetration: Reconstruction of the ingroup's historical role in eight Eastern and Western European countries under Nazi occupation

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## Abstract

The Nazi regime's aggressive expansion across Europe during WWII created a landscape of suffering, resistance, and collaboration. How do lay Europeans today reconstruct their ingroup's roles during Nazi occupation, and how do different role representations relate to defensive responses aimed at protecting the ingroup from threat? We tested two theoretical predictions: Following the identity threat prediction, we expected that denying culpability but endorsing morally favorable group representations (e.g., victim-heroism) would represent an ingroup-defensive strategy, correlating with other defensive responses, such as victim-directed negativity or victim-blaming. Following the identity management prediction, we expected that precisely accepting culpability and acknowledging threatening representations (e.g., willing collaboration with Germans) would form the basis for a defensive stance and thus correlate with defensive intergroup reactions. Analyzing data from nine European samples spanning eight countries ( $N = 5474$ ), we found support for the identity management prediction in six contexts: Lay representations as willing collaborators were associated with negative collective emotions and correlated with victim-directed negativity, whereas victim-hero representations showed no such connections. The remaining three countries revealed a mixture of the two identity accounts. We discuss implications for understanding historical representations and identity protection in groups that were both victims and perpetrators of massive intergroup atrocities.

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## KEYWORDS

collaboration, historical defensiveness, identity threat, intergroup attitudes, social representations of history, victim-heroism

## Highlights

- Morally threatening representations of the ingroup as willing collaborators under Nazi occupation are associated with historically defensive responses.
- Morally non-threatening representations of the ingroup as victim-heroes are mostly not associated with defensive responses.
- Representations of the ingroup as forced collaborators are related to victim-heroism but still show a defensive potential comparable to willing collaboration.
- Memory politics need to develop ways to acknowledge a dark past. The acknowledgment itself can be seen as a triumph of the current group over its past.

## INTRODUCTION

In his seminal work, chemist, writer and Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi (1988) coined the term *gray zone* to describe the morally ambiguous space between oppressors and oppressed. In this zone, victims can act as perpetrators and perpetrators as victims. Research on social representations of history (Liu & Hilton, 2005) reinforces the notion that victimhood and perpetration are not mutually exclusive. Rather, groups can experience both roles, even within the same conflict (Bilali & Vollhardt, 2019). The involvement in multiple roles may be particularly pronounced in groups occupied by a foreign power, such as countries occupied by Nazi Germany during WWII. Though not responsible for initiating the Holocaust, some governments and parts of the population committed considerable atrocities as collaborators of the occupiers. Others resisted the German regime and were victimized themselves (Stauber, 2011). This ambiguity regarding the ingroup's role provides ample room for reconstructing the convoluted history—and creating representations that are favorable to the group.

The present research examines how lay people today reconstruct their nation's historical roles in the face of such ambiguity. Recognizing that sociopolitical realities under Nazi occupation could take very different forms, we investigate ingroup representations in four Eastern European (Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Ukraine) and four Western European countries (Austria, Belgium<sub>Flanders</sub>, Belgium<sub>Wallonia</sub>, France, the Netherlands). With the aim of examining competing theoretical predictions regarding the defensive potential of these representations, we analyze their nomological networks (Cronbach & Meehl, 1955), encompassing collective emotions and defensive intergroup responses.

## EUROPEAN COUNTRIES UNDER NAZI OCCUPATION

Until this day, the Holocaust has far-reaching implications for national identities and political charters in many countries (Li et al., 2023). For some countries, their roles as victims or perpetrators are well established (e.g., Germany). Most European countries, however, do not clearly belong to one of these categories (Giner-Sorolla et al., 2021). Particularly countries that

fell under German occupation may have been entangled in various capacities, intertwining both roles.

Being under Nazi occupation was not a uniform phenomenon. Austria was annexed and incorporated into the German Reich (*the Anschluss*), Vichy France became a collaborationist regime, whereas Hungary joined the Axis Powers as an ally and was occupied only in 1944 (Bitunjac & Schoeps, 2021). Locally, the collaboration also markedly differed. While some people risked their lives to rescue persecuted groups, others supported the persecution (Stauber, 2011). In countries like France, Belgium, or the Netherlands, this support often concerned the bureaucratic implementation of mass murder by providing addresses of persecuted individuals or enacting anti-Jewish decrees. In several Eastern European countries, collaborators also actively contributed to destroying Jewish communities or participated in liquidation operations, as seen in the actions of the Lithuanian Security Police or Ukrainian collaborators in Babyn Yar (Bitunjac & Schoeps, 2021).

Despite these differences between (and within) countries, post-war discourses share some noteworthy similarities. Across both Eastern and Western European countries, prevailing narratives emphasized the groups' resistance, viewing collaboration as a marginal phenomenon (Bitunjac & Schoeps, 2021; Stauber, 2011). Only from the 1970s/80s, and even later in some Eastern European countries, these narratives have faced increasing challenges, leading to ongoing contestation of the national historical lore (e.g., Grabowski, 2016; Szabó, 2020). But how are the vast geopolitical differences, alongside the identified commonalities in public discourse, reflected in today's representations of the national ingroup's historical roles?

## SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS OF THE NATIONAL INGROUP'S ROLE UNDER NAZI OCCUPATION

Social representations of history are not merely portrayals of the past. Rather, they are reconstructive, creating meaning for the identity of a group today (Liu & Hilton, 2005). As such, the same historical events can be construed in very different ways, giving rise to differing narratives about *who* a nation is. Informed by literature on representations of collective violence (Bilali & Vollhardt, 2019; Bilewicz et al., 2017; Giner-Sorolla et al., 2021; Hirschberger et al., 2016, 2022; Imhoff et al., 2017; Licata & Klein, 2010), we examine three types of ingroup representations that appear particularly relevant to the context of occupation: Willing collaborators, forced collaborators, and victim-heroes.

### Willing collaborators

Individuals from occupied countries may adopt a representation of their national ingroup as collaborators assisting the occupiers in enforcing their goals (e.g., exterminating persecuted groups). A decisive characteristic of such collaboration is the degree of *intentionality*. Intentionality plays an essential role in both moral evaluation and legal classification of crimes (Cushman, 2008; Lewy, 2007). Unlike the primary perpetrators, occupied groups do not bear initial responsibility for atrocities but are subjected to another group's ideology. However, the internal alignment with this ideology and willingness to participate in destruction can vary. Therefore, within the constrained environment of occupation, precisely the intention to collaborate can become pivotal in determining the extent to which the occupied side with the offenders. Indeed, Ehrenreich and Cole (2005) posit that the very deliberate decision to participate in genocide turns bystanders into perpetrators. This perspective also aligns with the needs-based model of reconciliation (Shnabel

& Nadler, 2008), characterizing perpetration by lowered morality (i.e., endorsing an inhumane ideology) but heightened agency (i.e., intentional acting in accordance with this ideology).

## Forced collaborators

Yet, the involvement in harmdoing is not always based on a voluntary decision. Historical (Bitunjac & Schoeps, 2021), political science (Kalyvas, 2008), and psychological literature (Bilali & Vollhardt, 2019) distinguishes willing collaboration from collaboration resulting from threat or the need to survive. Coercion to collaborate places the occupied population in the complex position of having to balance the protection of their own group against the protection of others, thereby navigating the moral compromises associated with collaboration (Stauber, 2011). As such, forced collaboration does not completely abrogate the ingroup's perpetrator role, but reduces the group's responsibility and moral accountability for the violence committed. Thus, despite acts of perpetration, the diminished agency resulting from a lack of self-determined action, and the reduced moral threat resulting from inflicting harm without initial intention to do so, lean toward the characterization of victimhood (Shnabel & Nadler, 2008).

## Victim-heroes

Eventually, members of formerly occupied countries may represent their ancestors as victims of foreign military, economic, and political control. Being under occupation implies being in a highly asymmetric conflict, facing dominant opponents, and fearing the loss of political autonomy, territorial integrity, and cultural identity (Bleibleh & Awad, 2020). Further, the complex stance of groups under occupation between victims and perpetrators (Bilali & Vollhardt, 2019) can make their victimization experiences appear less visible to outside observers, leading to the feeling of being forgotten (Szabó, 2020).

A notable characteristic of victimhood experiences under occupation is their intertwining with acts of heroism. At first glance, this may seem contradictory: Heroism is characterized by strong agency, whereas victimhood connotes a lack of agency (Shnabel & Nadler, 2008). However, national narratives on ingroup suffering under oppression often do not align with portrayals of weak or passive victims (Khlevnyuk, 2023). Instead, victimhood often entails the narrative of courage of the oppressed. In these narrations, group members become victimized precisely *due to* their heroic resistance against oppression. Indeed, findings by Giner-Sorolla et al. (2021) empirically support the link between perceived ingroup victimhood and heroism in WWII across a range of nations. Furthermore, particularly representations of victim-heroism were predominant in public discourse in many Eastern and Western European countries in the first four to five decades after WWII (Stauber, 2011).

## THE DEFENSIVE POTENTIAL OF DIFFERENT INGROUP REPRESENTATIONS

In the context of Nazi occupation, all three of these representations can occur, varying in their degree of moral identity threat to the group. Particularly the representation of willing collaboration—mirroring intentional co-perpetration—is arguably more threatening than forced collaboration or victim-heroism. As such, the three representations may also differ in how much identity-protective *historical defensiveness* they entail. Yet, divergent theoretical perspectives

give rise to at least two distinct predictions regarding the defensive potential of the three representations: the identity threat and the identity management prediction.

## Identity threat prediction

The ingroup's involvement in historical wrongdoing can evoke substantial social identity threat (Branscombe et al., 2004; Doosje et al., 1998). To mitigate this threat, group members may engage in a range of cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses aimed at protecting the ingroup from threat, known as historical defensiveness (Bilewicz, 2016; Li et al., 2023). These responses can concern at least three broad areas: the acceptance of transgression-based emotions, intergroup attitudes, and ingroup representations.

Being part of a group involved in historical intergroup crimes can lead to negative emotions, such as collective shame, guilt, or moral fear (Branscombe et al., 2004; Gausel et al., 2012). However, as part of a defensive reaction, group members may resist accepting or admitting such “group-image-threatening emotions” (Doosje et al., 1998, p. 879). In doing so, they can avoid affirming the ingroup's responsibility for committing wrongs and confronting the threatening past. Group members may also engage in defensive intergroup negativity. In order to downplay, justify, or moralize the ingroup's transgressions, thus reducing social identity threat, they can claim that the victim group itself behaves immorally toward the perpetrator ingroup (i.e., reverse discrimination), played an active role in the crimes committed (i.e., victim-blaming), or generally hold negative attitudes toward the former victim group (e.g., antisemitism; Bilewicz, 2016; Li et al., 2023; Kazarovytska & Imhoff, 2024). Eventually, group members can distance the ingroup from crimes by displaying a response closely related to both resisting guilt (i.e., emotional responses) and modulating the conflict parties' behavior (i.e., intergroup responses): they portray the ingroup as forced to commit these crimes or not committing them at all, but acting as a victim-hero (Bilewicz et al., 2017; Hirschberger et al., 2016, 2022; Imhoff et al., 2017). In this way, the construal of the ingroup's role itself becomes part of a defensive response.

The causal order of these emotional, intergroup- and ingroup-directed responses is debated in the literature. Some authors argue that representations of the ingroup's historical role trigger defensive intergroup responses, which then help to downregulate aversive collective emotions (Bilewicz, 2016; Doosje et al., 1998; Kazarovytska & Imhoff, 2022). Other authors suggest that emotions such as collective guilt or certain facets of shame can reduce intergroup defensiveness and initiate reparation (Brown et al., 2008; Gausel et al., 2012). Notably, no matter whether defensive intergroup responses downregulate aversive emotions or emotions reduce intergroup defensiveness, both lines of research ultimately converge on positing a *negative relationship* between aversive emotions and intergroup defensiveness.

Summing up, a basic assumption in the reviewed literature is that representations of the ingroup's role are susceptible to identity-protective motives (Bilewicz et al., 2017; Hirschberger et al., 2016, 2022; Imhoff et al., 2017). Accordingly, the endorsement of morally favorable portrayals, such as those as forced collaborators (i.e., attributing responsibility externally) or victim-heroes (i.e., viewing the ingroup as agents of good), can itself indicate a defensive response within a broader framework of defensive reactions. Following this rationale, we can derive a predicted pattern we refer to as the *identity threat prediction*: Representations of forced collaboration and victim-heroism—manifestations of defensiveness in the face of identity threat—should be positively associated with other defensive responses, such as negativity toward the former victim group, but be incompatible with accepting shame, guilt, or fear of moral condemnation and victimization. Conversely, openly admitting responsibility as willing collaborators may constitute a non-defensive response negatively linked to intergroup defensiveness but positively related to accepting shame, guilt, and moral fear.

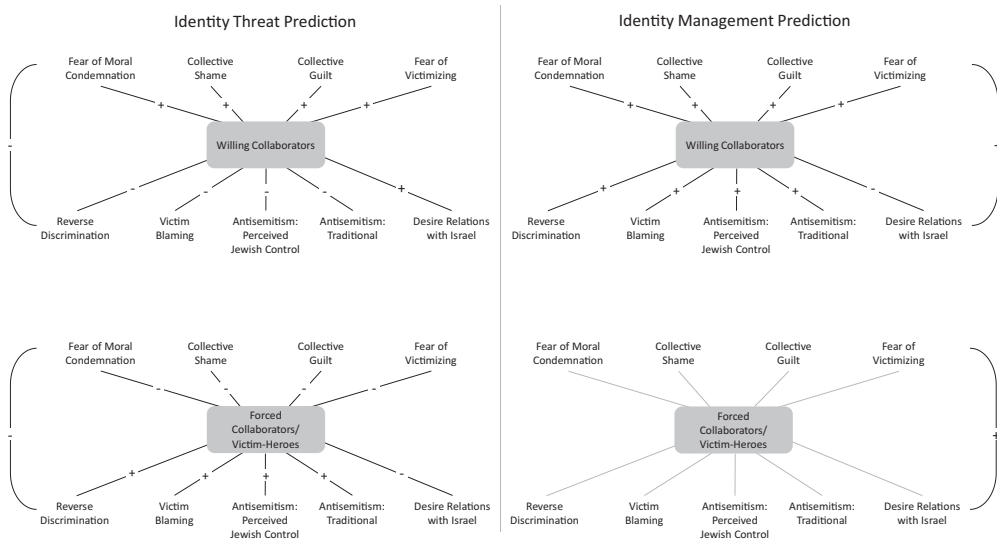
## Identity management prediction

However, other literature gives reason to question that group members will defensively modify their reconstructions of the ingroup's role. Psaltis et al. (2017) argue that post-conflict representations can be belief- or knowledge-based. Whereas belief-based representations are rooted in affect and appear resistant to opposing information, knowledge-based representations are more pragmatic and receptive to change through contradictory evidence. This perspective parallels work on motivated reasoning (Kunda, 1990): While individuals may be motivated to confirm those beliefs that lead to a desired conclusion (e.g., the innocence of the ingroup), they also seek accuracy (e.g., accept the ingroup's wrongdoings in the face of respective historical proof). Indeed, Doosje et al. (1998) suggest that when confronted with information about the ingroup's historical crimes, the "motivation to be accurate" may be even stronger than "the motivation to favor one's own group" (p. 883).

Particularly ongoing public discourse and education about the nation's harmful past, present in many countries occupied by Nazi Germany (Bitunjac & Schoeps, 2021; Stauber, 2011), may therefore complicate turning a blind eye on the ingroup's harmful behavior. However, it may be precisely the recognition of the ingroup's harmful behavior that motivates group members to justify, rationalize, or moralize it through various means helping to protect the ingroup from threat, such as negativity against the former victim group. Thus, while accuracy motivations do not enable full denial of the ingroup's harmful role but require some acknowledgment, this burdensome acknowledgment can be associated with motivation to devalue and blame the victim group. As Bilali and Vollhardt (2019, p. 93) argue: "In face of credible and unequivocal information, distorting the events and denying ingroup responsibility might be difficult. In such cases, group members need other coping strategies to deal with the moral threat of ingroup wrongdoing."

Following this theorizing, we can predict a different pattern of interrelations, we refer to as the *identity management prediction*: Considering that group members may not completely deny their group's historical responsibility, but at least to some extent, acknowledge willing collaboration, they may also admit associated shame, guilt, and moral fear. However, precisely, this acknowledgment of wrongdoing can be linked to defensive intergroup responses aimed at managing and alleviating threats to the group's image. Forced collaboration, in turn, placing responsibility for harm on another group's shoulders, may be less burdensome, and thus entail fewer negative emotions and less defensiveness. Finally, morally favorable victim-hero representations may not be related to negative emotions or intergroup defensiveness at all, lacking an ingroup-threatening basis.

Essentially, according to the identity management prediction, group members may not deny their ingroup's culpability but attempt to justify it by devaluing or blaming the victims. This differs from the identity threat prediction, where group members may deny culpability as part of their defensive reaction against social identity threat. Thus, in both identity predictions, we expect defensive intergroup responses (e.g., victim-blaming) in an attempt to preserve a favorable ingroup image, but only in identity management do we expect these responses to go together with responses that reflect an acknowledgment of culpability (e.g., collective shame and guilt). Figure 1 contrasts the two patterns of associations predicted by identity threat vs. identity management accounts. In view of the conflicting literature on the causality of emotions and defensive intergroup responses, we provide an overview of possible causal orders leading to these patterns in our supplemental online materials (SOM-A) available on our Open Science Framework (OSF) project page.



Note. (+) indicates a positive relationship, (-) indicates a negative relationship. Non-significant correlations are shaded.

**FIGURE 1** Predicted patterns compatible with the identity threat prediction (Left) and the identity management prediction (Right).

## Methodological approach: nomological network analyses

The current work presents two possible theoretical frameworks on the representations of the ingroup's historical roles. One conceptualizes morally favorable ingroup representations as manifestations of defensive reactions against history-based identity threats (i.e., identity threat prediction). The other one considers the acceptance of threatening roles as the basis for engaging in defensive identity management (i.e., identity management prediction). To empirically address these two theoretical predictions, we apply a nomological network approach (Cronbach & Meehl, 1955). Formally, conceptualizing a construct within a framework of other constructs corresponds to specifying its nomological network. Following Cronbach and Meehl (1955), “a construct is defined implicitly by a network of associations or propositions in which it occurs” (p. 200). Thus, by elaborating and testing what other variables a construct should (not) relate to, we can define more precisely what the construct entails (i.e., construct validity).

A nomological network approach cannot provide a decisive answer as to which processes *cause* the patterns obtained. However, nomological network analyses can provide insights into which patterns seem *compatible* with certain theoretical predictions. If we theoretically expect a causal relation (e.g., representations of a harmful ingroup role lead to defensiveness), but don't find a corresponding correlational association (i.e., harmful ingroup representations correlate positively with defensiveness), this does not exclude the existence of a causal process. However, it suggests that the process is more complex than initially expected (e.g., entails additional suppression effects). Thus, nomological network analyses can help narrow down what theoretical processes seem (*in-*)*compatible* with the present data.

## THE PRESENT RESEARCH

We examine social representations of the national ingroup's historical roles in eight Eastern and Western European countries that were occupied by Nazi Germany in WWII. Several of them have already received attention in the literature on historical representations (e.g., France,

Hungary, Poland; Bilewicz et al., 2017; Giner-Sorolla et al., 2021; Hirschberger et al., 2016), but we know less about these representations in others (e.g., Lithuania, Ukraine). We also cannot tell from the extant literature whether historical representations are uniform across affected countries or whether they differ based on geography or sociopolitical conditions (e.g., official collaboration vs. invasion). Drawing on different theoretical perspectives, we test competing predictions regarding the defensive potential of representations as willing collaborators, forced collaborators, and victim-heroes. Given the theoretical similarities between construals as forced collaborators and victim-heroes, we expect their nomological networks to share similarities, but will examine them separately to detect more nuanced differences.

## METHODS

### Sample

Samples representative in age and gender were recruited through the Qualtrics Survey Platform. All participants were born in the respective countries and indicated to be native speakers of the country's language. Jewish participants were excluded from analyses, resulting in the following samples from Hungary ( $n = 648$ ; 334 women, 313 men, one gender diverse respondent; aged 18–80 years,  $M = 44.73$ ,  $SD = 15.52$ ), Lithuania ( $n = 608$ ; 323 women, 283 men, two gender diverse respondents; aged 18–69 years,  $M = 42.99$ ,  $SD = 13.45$ ), Poland ( $n = 519$ ; 284 women, 235 men, age measured on a scale ranged from 1 = 18–30 years to 6 = older than 70 years,  $M = 3.43$ ,  $SD = 1.96$ ), Ukraine ( $n = 605$ ; 332 women, 273 men; aged 18–71 years,  $M = 44.54$ ,  $SD = 13.46$ ), Austria ( $n = 627$ ; 315 women, 309 men, three gender diverse respondents; aged 18–83 years,  $M = 44.22$ ,  $SD = 15.08$ ), Belgium<sub>Flanders</sub> ( $n = 604$ ; 299 women, 299 men, six gender diverse respondents; aged 18–83 years,  $M = 46.28$ ,  $SD = 15.73$ ), Belgium<sub>Wallonia</sub> ( $n = 605$ ; 329 women, 273 men, three gender diverse respondents; aged 18–81 years,  $M = 44.47$ ,  $SD = 15.35$ ), France ( $n = 657$ ; 338 women, 316 men, three gender diverse respondents; aged 18 to 80 years,  $M = 44.76$ ,  $SD = 15.29$ ), and the Netherlands ( $n = 601$ ; 305 women, 391 men, five gender diverse respondents; aged 18–82 years,  $M = 45.75$ ,  $SD = 15.80$ ). The final data set thus included  $N = 5474$  respondents.

### Measures

The following scales were part of a larger research project on historical representations, Holocaust attributions, and intergroup attitudes, including attitudes toward immigrants. We present only results relevant to the current research question. Unless indicated otherwise, the scales were anchored from 1 = *completely disagree* to 7 = *completely agree* and presented in randomized order.

### Representations of historical roles

We measured representations of the national ingroup's historical roles using nine items from the defensive representations questionnaire by Hirschberger et al. (2016). Table 1 provides an overview of the items.

### Emotions

We further measured emotions associated with historical harmdoing. Two items by Gausel et al. (2012) captured *fear of moral condemnation* (e.g., “I think we, the [ingroup], could be

**TABLE 1** Representations of the national ingroup's historical roles.**Willing Collaborators** ( $\alpha = .80$ )

1. Most [ingroup members] disliked Jews and wanted to help the Nazis.
2. The Nazi ideology appealed to most [ingroup members].
3. Most [ingroup members] people willingly collaborated with the Nazis.

**Forced Collaborators** ( $\alpha = .77$ )

1. Some [ingroup members] did terrible things, but only because they were forced to.
2. The [ingroup members] mistreated the Jews because they faced death if they refused.
3. The [ingroup members] participated in the killing of Jews because they had no choice.

**Victim-Heroes** ( $\alpha = .77$ )

1. The [ingroup members] were the victims of the Nazis during WWII.
2. Most of the [ingroup members] actively fought against the Nazis.
3. Most [ingroup members] tried to save the Jews from Nazi persecution.

Note: Items were presented in fixed-randomized order. We report Cronbach's  $\alpha$  calculated across contexts, but report it separately for all contexts in SOM-B on OSF.

isolated from the 'good company' of moral nations if our actions during the Holocaust are exposed"). Another item by Gausel et al. (2012) assessed *collective shame* ("As a [ingroup member], I feel disgraced when I think about what we have done to the Jews"). One further item from the collective guilt acceptance scale (Branscombe et al., 2004) captured group-based *guilt* ("I feel guilty about the negative things the [ingroup] did to the Jews in the past"). Finally, we assessed the *fear of victimizing (FOV)* other groups (e.g., "As we were harmed in the past, so we might harm others") using five items by Schori-Eyal et al. (2017).

## Intergroup defensiveness

A set of scales addressed participants' intergroup defensiveness. This included two items on *reverse discrimination* (e.g., "Jews are prejudiced against the [ingroup]"), two items on *victim-blaming* (e.g., "Jews don't like to admit their own role in the Holocaust of their people"), three items on antisemitism in the form of *perceived Jewish control* adapted from Bilewicz and Krzeminski (2010; e.g., "Do you think the Jews control the media in [country]?"; anchored from 1 = *not at all* to 5 = *definitely yes*), two items on *traditional antisemitism* adapted from Bilewicz et al. (2013; e.g., "Jews are responsible for the death of Jesus Christ"), and two items on the *desire for future intergroup relations with Israel* (e.g., "I oppose relations between [country] and Israel," reversed-coded).<sup>1</sup>

## Demographics

Demographic measures included age, gender, religion, religiosity (one item ranging from 1 = *not religious at all* to 7 = *very religious*), and political self-placement (one item ranging from 1 = *extremely liberal* to 7 = *extremely conservative*). The Polish survey was conducted prior to all

<sup>1</sup>Exploratory factor analyses with Kaiser-criterion (eigenvalues >1), and principal component analyses identified a common factor for all emotions except FOV. Reverse discrimination, victim blaming, and traditional antisemitism also formed one factor, while perceived Jewish control and the desire for relations with Israel formed two additional distinct factors. It is important to note that people's desire for future intergroup relations with Israel may not necessarily reflect historical defensiveness. Reluctance toward relations with Israel could be a stance toward current actions and policies of the Israeli government rather than an expression of identity-protective tendencies or antisemitism. The lower alpha value for this scale (Table 2) might reflect this differentiation between a desire to pursue positive relations with Israeli people and attitudes toward the policies of the Israeli government. Nevertheless, we observed largely similar patterns for this variable as for the other measures of intergroup defensiveness, as detailed below.

other surveys and misses some scales that were later included in the other surveys (i.e., FOV, perceived Jewish control).

## RESULTS

### Measurement invariance

To determine how well the theory-driven three-factor model of the defensive representations questionnaire fits the data, we conducted a multigroup confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) using the R package *lavaan* (Rosseel, 2012). A three-factor model with theory-compliant factor specifications achieved appropriate fit according to both incremental and absolute fit indices, Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = .953, Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) = .076.

Subsequently, we tested for metric measurement invariance, which represents a central requirement for meaningful cross-group comparisons of correlational patterns. Echoing recent recommendations for larger samples, we compared fit indices of increasingly restrictive models (equivalent factor structure; equivalent factor structure and loadings; equivalent structure, loadings, and intercepts) to test for configural, metric, and scalar invariance (Cheung & Rensvold, 2002). Supporting metric invariance, the difference in fit between the model with constrained factor structure and the model with constrained factor structure and loadings ( $\Delta\text{CFI} = .004$ ,  $\Delta\text{RMSEA} = -.005$ ) did not exceed the cutoffs proposed to prohibit the assumption of the next higher invariance level ( $\Delta\text{CFI} < .01$ ; Cheung & Rensvold, 2002;  $\Delta\text{CFI} < .005$  and  $\Delta\text{RMSEA} < .01$ ; Chen, 2007). However, strong invariance was only supported when comparing absolute ( $\Delta\text{RMSEA} = .005$ ), but not incremental fit indices ( $\Delta\text{CFI} = .025$ ). Accordingly, intercepts seemed to vary across contexts, suggesting that mean differences between contexts have to be interpreted with caution.

### Main analyses

While we refrained from comparing mean differences between contexts, we compared agreement with each of the three ingroup representations (willing collaborators, forced collaborators and victim-heroes) within contexts. To that end, we conducted a linear mixed model (LMM) using the R package *lme4* (Bates et al., 2015). The model specified the type of representation as the predictor (dummy-coded with forced collaborators as the reference category) and participants' agreement with these representations as the outcome variable. To account for variance between contexts, we allowed for random intercepts and slopes per context. Results revealed that representations as willing collaborators received significantly less agreement, than representations as forced collaborators, Estimate = 3.47,  $SE = .08$ ,  $p < .001$ , and victim-hero representations were substantially more supported than those as forced collaborators, Estimate = 2.14,  $SE = .08$ ,  $p < .001$ . The total explained variance by the model was  $R^2_{\text{conditional}} = .24$ . Most of the explained variance could be ascribed to fixed effects, resulting from the representations,  $R^2_{\text{marginal}} = .23$ , whereas context differences hardly contributed to the total explained variance. This suggests that the differences found between representations were robust across contexts.

To examine the nomological networks of the three ingroup representations, we first conducted LMMs with representations (grand-mean centered) as predictors, and nomological network variables as criteria, separately for each ingroup representation. We further included random intercepts and slopes per context, allowing the relationships between representations and criteria to vary across contexts (Table 2). Compatible with the identity management

TABLE 2 Fixed effects in LMMs of ingroup representations on variables from the nomological network.

Variables	$\alpha$	Model: Willing collaborators				Model: Forced collaborators				Model: Victim-heroes			
		Estimate	SE	$R^2$ marginal	$R^2$ conditional	Estimate	SE	$R^2$ marginal	$R^2$ conditional	Estimate	SE	$R^2$ marginal	$R^2$ conditional
Fear of moral condemnation	.79	.32***	.01	.19	.22	.11*	.02	.02	.07	-.08*	.02	.01	.05
Collective shame	–	.12***	.01	.08	.13	.05*	.01	.01	.06	-.03*	.01	.00	.05
Collective guilt	–	.12***	.01	.06	.09	.05*	.01	.01	.04	-.01	.01	.00	.03
FOV	.85	.72***	.04	.19	.25	.29***	.06	.03	.12	-.15	.04	.01	.07
Reverse discrimination	.82	.23***	.04	.09	.18	.19***	.02	.06	.12	.07	.03	.13	.20
Victim-blaming	.80	.18***	.04	.06	.17	.19***	.02	.06	.14	.12*	.04	.03	.09
Antisemitism: Jewish control	.94	.21***	.04	.06	.13	.15***	.03	.03	.09	.06	.04	.00	.06
Antisemitism: traditional	.69	.23***	.03	.09	.15	.15***	.02	.04	.08	.05	.03	.00	.04
Desire relations with Israel	.64	-.21***	.02	.09	.17	-.04*	.02	.00	.09	.13**	.03	.03	.10
Political orientation	–	.01	.00	.01	.03	.01	.01	.00	.02	.03	.01	.01	.03
Religiosity	–	.04*	.02	.02	.06	.04*	.01	.01	.04	.04**	.01	.01	.03
Age	–	-.64***	.12	.02	.49	-.47**	.12	.01	.49	.61***	.09	.02	.50

Note: We calculated Cronbach's  $\alpha$  across contexts, but reported it separately for all contexts in SOM-B on OSF.

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

prediction, results indicated that representations as willing collaborators were associated with both aversive emotions and defensive responses, just as representations of forced collaboration. However, more in line with the identity threat prediction, victim-heroism was negatively related to aversive emotions, yet significantly linked to several defensive responses. Thus, LMM analyses provided inconclusive results.

These inconclusive findings may stem from the summative analysis collapsing all contexts, potentially capitalizing on effects present only in certain contexts (see also marginal and conditional  $R^2$ s in Table 2, indicating that comparably large parts of variance could not be ascribed to the fixed effects but stem from random effects, i.e., contextual differences). Further exploration substantiated that context significantly moderated the relationship between ingroup representations and network variables (SOM-C on OSF). Thus, we proceeded to examine nomological networks separately for each context (Table 3). Additionally, we explored the interrelations between emotions and intergroup responses, expecting differences in line with the identity threat and identity management patterns (for reasons of parsimony, we describe them briefly in the results section, but report them in full in SOM-B on OSF).

In line with the identity management prediction, *willing collaboration* consistently correlated positively with transgression-based emotions and intergroup negativity across all contexts. Further compatible with identity management, emotions, and defensive intergroup responses overall correlated positively in all contexts,<sup>2</sup> except Hungary, Poland, and Austria. In these contexts, we observed both positive correlations of emotions with certain defensive responses (e.g., with FOV in Hungary,  $r = .19$  to  $.24$ ,  $p < .001$ , or with FOV and fear of moral condemnation in Austria,  $r = .14$  to  $.23$ ,  $p = .032$  to  $< .001$ ) and negative correlations (e.g., with shame or guilt in Hungary and Austria,  $r = -.24$  to  $-.15$ ,  $p = .032$  to  $< .001$ ,<sup>3</sup> or with all three measured emotions, moral fear, shame, and guilt, in Poland,  $r = -.17$  to  $-.38$ ,  $p = .002$  to  $< .001$ ), with emotions partly suppressing each other (see SOM-D on OSF). With respect to the two identity predictions, the nomological network pattern of willing collaboration thus supported the identity management prediction in six of the nine samples but revealed a mixture of both identity accounts in Hungary, Poland, and Austria.

Representations of *forced collaboration* correlated positively with aversive emotions in Ukraine, Belgium<sub>Flanders</sub>, Belgium<sub>Wallonia</sub>, France and the Netherlands. Deviating from our initial expectations, forced collaboration thus did not alleviate the burden of shame, guilt, and moral fear. Instead, it paralleled the pattern observed for willing collaboration, correlating with both aversive emotions and intergroup defensiveness. Notably, in Lithuania, forced collaboration did not correlate with any of the network variables, aligning with our initially expected identity management pattern for this representation. Coupled with the nonsignificant correlation found between forced and willing collaboration in Lithuania, these results suggest that forced collaboration in Lithuania might indeed have been perceived as a non-threatening role, entailing no defensiveness. Our findings thus appear consistent with an identity management pattern for threatening ingroup representations in five contexts and non-threatening representations in one context. In contrast, the patterns in Hungary, Poland, and Austria deviated from these findings, aligning instead with the identity threat prediction (i.e., no correlations with emotions, positive correlations with intergroup defensiveness).

Further corroborating the identity management prediction in Lithuania, Ukraine, Belgium<sub>Flanders</sub>, Belgium<sub>Wallonia</sub>, France, and the Netherlands, *victim-heroism* representations in these contexts were not or even negatively related to aversive emotions and were mostly unrelated to defensive victim-group negativity. Conversely, findings in Hungary, Poland, and Austria were again more consistent with the identity threat prediction, as indicated by negative correlations between victim-heroism representations and emotions but

<sup>2</sup>Some correlations were non-significant; however, none of them were significantly negative.

<sup>3</sup>For the reversed-coded variable *desire for relations with Israel*, correlation coefficients were inverted.

TABLE 3 Descriptive statistics, reliabilities (Cronbach's  $\alpha$ ) and nomological networks of the three representations, separately for all contexts.

Variables	Hungary	Lithuania	Poland	Ukraine	Austria	Belgium <sub>Flanders</sub>	Belgium <sub>Wallonia</sub>	France	Netherlands
Willing collaborators									
Forced collaborators	.02	.03	.25***	.18***	-.07	.25***	.41***	.32***	.35***
Victim-heroes	-.30***	-.27***	-.40***	-.40***	-.11	-.15*	-.15*	-.11	-.08
Fear of moral condemnation	.41***	.46***	.47***	.38***	.31***	.51***	.53***	.41***	.47***
Collective shame	.09	.22***	.26***	.26***	.28***	.41***	.43***	.29***	.34***
Collective guilt	.20***	.16**	.29***	.13	.21***	.30***	.42***	.30***	.26***
FOV	.38***	.45***	—	.49***	.30***	.49***	.47***	.46***	.46***
Reverse discrimination	.17**	.30***	-.01	.24***	.20***	.38***	.52***	.44***	.53***
Victim-blaming	.10	.19***	-.09	.21***	.16**	.32***	.42***	.43***	.44***
Antisemitism: Jewish control	.10	.26***	—	.09	.09	.35***	.45***	.35***	.41***
Antisemitism: Traditional	.17**	.31***	.15*	.29***	.17**	.39***	.44***	.47***	.40***
Desire relations with Israel	-.20***	-.38***	-.31***	-.31***	-.15*	-.32***	-.39***	-.38***	-.37***
Political orientation	-.06	.01	-.05	.08	.01	.05	.06	.03	.06
Religiosity	-.06	.10	.03	.01	-.02	.26***	.15*	.17**	.21***
Age	-.11	-.15*	-.11	-.19***	-.09	-.22***	-.27***	-.25***	-.29***
<i>M (SD)</i>	3.11 (1.38)	2.88 (1.35)	2.75 (1.34)	2.37 (1.34)	3.50 (1.33)	3.03 (1.36)	2.62 (1.40)	3.00 (1.43)	2.89 (1.41)
Forced collaborators									
Victim-heroes	.50***	.43***	.21***	.11	.66***	.34***	.29***	.43***	.38***
Fear of moral condemnation	.06	.06	.10	.08	.00	.19***	.34***	.25***	.25***
Collective shame	.10	-.03	.09	.14*	-.04	.16**	.25***	.14*	.16**
Collective guilt	.06	.04	.12	.15*	-.09	.18***	.19***	.12	.17**
FOV	.07	.09	—	.15*	.06	.26***	.32***	.21***	.29***
Reverse discrimination	.27***	.09	.16**	.18***	.28***	.27***	.28***	.33***	.34***
Victim-blaming	.29***	.11	.16**	.21***	.31***	.28***	.32***	.34***	.30***

(Continues)

TABLE 3 (Continued)

Variables	Hungary	Lithuania	Poland	Ukraine	Austria	Belgium <sub>Flanders</sub>	Belgium <sub>Vallonia</sub>	France	Netherlands
Antisemitism: Jewish control	.22***	.06	–	.04	.29***	.19***	.24***	.21***	.21***
Antisemitism: Traditional	.23***	.07	.13	.06	.20***	.23***	.26***	.30***	.26***
Desire relations with Israel	–.03	.10	–.08	–.03	–.05	–.06	–.09	–.11	–.14*
Political orientation	.04	–.04	–.01	–.16**	.20***	.13	.03	.15*	.07
Religiosity	.04	.10	.08	.00	.09	.17***	.12	.16**	.05
Age	–.15*	–.21***	–.16**	–.25***	.05	–.11	–.26***	–.07	–.17**
<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	4.11 (1.39)	4.41 (1.41)	4.37 (1.18)	3.84 (1.47)	4.24 (1.46)	4.05 (1.28)	3.81 (1.42)	3.93 (1.41)	3.90 (1.30)
<b>Victim-heroes</b>									
Fear of moral condemnation	–.08	–.16**	–.30***	–.23***	.05	–.04	–.05	.02	–.09
Collective shame	.03	–.07	–.25***	–.15*	.00	–.12	–.05	.00	–.04
Collective guilt	–.06	–.03	–.15***	.04	–.08	–.01	–.06	.05	.08
FOV	–.16**	–.10	–	–.36***	.15*	–.07	–.02	–.10	.01
Reverse discrimination	.19***	–.03	.24***	–.10	.34***	.05	–.05	.03	.09
Victim-blaming	.21***	.05	.31***	–.03	.46***	.14*	.00	.08	.15*
Antisemitism: Jewish control	.16**	–.04	–	.04	.33***	.01	.00	.02	–.01
Antisemitism: Traditional	.20***	–.05	.12	–.10	.24***	.06	–.02	–.02	.07
Desire relations with Israel	.04	.24***	.24***	.31***	–.11	.18***	.24***	.27***	.17**
Political orientation	.14*	.05	.11	–.15*	.22***	.11	.01	.17**	.05
Religiosity	.18***	.11	.11	.06	.15*	.02	.02	.01	.02
Age	.14*	.14*	.12	.23***	.08	.18***	.20***	.23***	.18***
<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	4.23 (1.34)	4.92 (1.17)	5.69 (1.08)	5.74 (1.20)	3.80 (1.32)	4.58 (1.22)	4.78 (1.34)	4.82 (1.35)	4.59 (1.28)

Note: We report Pearson's  $r$ , except for correlations with age in Poland (ordinal scale) for which we report Spearman's  $\rho$ .  $p$ -values were adjusted for multiple comparisons according to Holm's methods.

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

positive correlations with intergroup defensiveness. Summing up, we found consistent support for an identity management pattern in the majority of contexts. In contrast, findings in Hungary, Poland, and Austria were partially compatible with both identity threat and identity management accounts.

## Robustness analyses and further explorations

Given that participants could hold several ingroup representations simultaneously, we conducted additional linear (mixed) models including all three representations as predictors, thus examining their incremental effects. When controlling for the other two representations, forced collaboration was less consistently associated with defensive reactions in certain contexts (Poland, Austria). However, the overall pattern of results led to similar conclusions regarding the two identity predictions as the analyses reported above (SOM-E on OSF). Furthermore, we tested for interactions between representations but did not detect any effects (SOM-F on OSF).

In contrast to the other items, one item on forced collaboration specified that only “some” (instead of “most”) ingroup members were involved in the respective role (Table 1). Given the specificity of this item in the degree of normative language, we conducted robustness analyses excluding this item (SOM-G on OSF). Results remained virtually identical, except in Poland, where we observed a shift from a pattern typical of *non-threatening* representations *within the identity threat prediction* (i.e., reduced aversive emotions and enhanced intergroup defensiveness) toward a pattern more typical of *threatening* representations *within the identity threat prediction* (i.e., enhanced emotions and reduced defensiveness).

Finally, ingroup identification can moderate the relationship of historical roles and acceptance of negative emotions as well as defensiveness (e.g., Doosje et al., 1998). While our goal was to test for an associative pattern rather than for moderations, we still conducted respective analyses to provide more nuanced insights into the data. Results revealed that ingroup glorification intensified defensive responses while attachment reduced them (SOM-H on OSF).

## DISCUSSION

Across eight countries that were occupied by, annexed to, and/or collaborated with Nazi Germany in WWII, lay Europeans today endorsed historical representations of the ingroup as victim-heroes significantly more than those of forced or willing collaborators. Is this endorsement of morally favorable ingroup roles a defensive maneuver aimed to protect the group from threat (identity threat prediction), or is it precisely the threatening admission of willing collaboration that is related to defensive identity management (identity management prediction)? To gain a more nuanced understanding of the different ingroup representations, we put competing predictions regarding their defensive potential to the empirical test. Results revealed that in the majority of contexts, representations as willing and forced accomplices were linked to aversive emotions and negative reactions toward the Jewish victim group, whereas victim-heroism was not associated with any of those responses. Thus, in most contexts, we found support for an identity management approach. However, in Hungary, Poland, and Austria, we observed an identity management pattern only for representations as willing collaborators but an identity threat pattern for the other two representations.

## Contributions to research on social representations of history

The present findings contribute to the literature on social representations of history and their relevance for present-day national identities (Liu & Hilton, 2005). Considering that groups

strive to maintain a positive collective identity, recollections of their ingroup's historical roles tend to be construed in a manner that aligns with this purpose (Bilali & Vollhardt, 2019). Congruent with this rationale, our findings reveal that morally favorable victim-hero representations were endorsed significantly more than portrayals as willing or forced collaborators. Notably, despite large historical differences between countries (Bitunjac & Schoeps, 2021; Kalyvas, 2008; Stauber, 2011), we found virtually no context-specific variation in this pattern. This underscores the reconstructive character of historical representations (Liu & Hilton, 2005): Representations of the past are not necessarily depicting what has happened; instead, they can selectively make use of the past to create narratives that serve to build a positive national identity in the present. The finding that nine European contexts showed similar patterns further underlines that even in the ambiguous gray zone of occupation (Levi, 1988), there are typical tendencies to reconstruct the historical role of the ingroup in a favorable manner—despite the many differences between the studied contexts.

Looking at interrelations between ingroup roles, construals as *willing collaborators and victim-heroes* were mostly negatively correlated. This supports the notion of national-level moral typecasting (Giner-Sorolla et al., 2021). Here, the historical roles of (co-) perpetrators and heroes are contrasted against each other and appear incompatible.

The role as *forced collaborators*, however, appeared to be more complex than suggested by previous literature. Hirschberger et al. (2016) combined accounts of forced collaborators and victim-heroes into one factor distinct from willing collaboration which—as compared with the other two—acknowledges the ingroup's responsibility for harm. This differentiation mirrors the difference between internal (i.e., willingness) and external (i.e., force) attributions for ingroup transgressions (Bilewicz et al., 2017). Yet, our results challenge the assumption that this distinction is sufficient to create a clear contrast between collaborator roles. Specifically, while representations as forced collaborators and victim-heroes were indeed positively related, construals as forced and willing collaborators were *also* positively correlated in six out of nine samples. Accordingly, for many present-day Europeans, heroism and forced collaboration may not be contrasting representations. Instead, forced collaboration seems to share similarities with victim-heroism (e.g., the presence of oppression) *and* intentional complicity.

Such similarities with intentional collaboration may result from at least two reasons. First, harmful consequences for the persecuted groups may occur, irrespective of whether they were intended. Indeed, Cushman's (2008) two-process model proposes that judgments of immorality are based on evaluating not only intentions, but also the *consequences* of actions. These can be detrimental, even without the explicit ethical decision to cause destruction (Lewy, 2007). Second, entry into the immoral domain may result not only from the commission of evil, but also from omission to help (Carnes & Janoff-Bulman, 2012); not only by acting upon one's own harmful intentions, but also by failing to resist the harmful intentions of others. Thus, even though collaboration was forced, it may still have been perceived to share similarities with willing collaboration in terms of its moral meaning.

Notably, age correlated negatively with representations as willing or forced collaborators, but positively with victim-heroism in most contexts. This aligns with research by Licata and Klein (2010) on Belgian memory of colonial crimes in Congo, indicating that older generations adopt a more favorable ingroup's role. The authors suggest that these age effects may result from different socializations about the crimes, which also seems plausible in our data: Critical public discourse on ingroup collaboration emerged only decades after the end of the war (Stauber, 2011), making older generations growing up in an environment characterized by narratives about the ingroup's suffering or resistance. Alternatively, older generations are less distant from the historical crimes (Bilali & Vollhardt, 2019), which may reinforce the need for positive ingroup representations.

## Contributions to research on historical defensiveness

### Lithuania, Ukraine, Belgium, France and the Netherlands

Our research contributes to the literature on historical defensiveness (e.g., Bilali & Vollhardt, 2019; Bilewicz, 2016; Kazarovytska & Imhoff, 2024). In six out of nine contexts, our data resonated with an identity management pattern: Participants who acknowledged their group's intentional or forced complicity with the German mostly also admitted to experiencing negative emotions, such as collective shame, guilt, or moral fear, while engaging in defensive intergroup responses aimed at warding off identity threat (Bilali & Vollhardt, 2019; Bilewicz, 2016; Branscombe et al., 2004). In contrast, representations as victim-heroes mostly did not (or even negatively) correlate with aversive emotions or defensive intergroup responses. Thus, the acknowledgment of deliberate co-perpetration (but not victim-heroism) came along with engagement in ingroup-protective reactions. The notable finding that six contexts revealed a comparable pattern underscores the similarity of psychological responses to historical trauma that goes beyond the specific history, geographic location or politics of each country.

Our results contrast with Brown et al.'s (2008) findings, highlighting the prosocial (i.e., non-defensive) potential of ingroup perpetration. Moreover, while consistent with Hirschberger et al.'s (2022) finding that the ingroup's intentional engagement in genocide can enhance collective guilt, they are inconsistent with the finding that this sentiment is associated with the support of the victim group. However, the observed identity management pattern resonates with Bilali and Vollhardt's (2019) argument that acknowledging ingroup responsibility for harmdoing—often considered a constructive approach to deal with the past—may backfire, as group members then apply other defensive strategies to manage identity threat. In fact, confronting white Americans with their group's responsibility for the Native American genocide led to increased dehumanization of victims (Castano & Giner-Sorolla, 2006). Similarly, revealing to Chilean participants that their group caused harm to indigenous people increased both ingroup responsibility and derogation of victims (Čehajić et al., 2009). Thus, while recognizing ingroup harmdoing can have positive intergroup effects, it may also come along with defensive backlash, entailing negativity toward the former victim group (see also Gausel et al., 2012).

In this sense, our results resonate with the *moral exemplars* approach (Čehajić-Clancy & Bilewicz, 2020). Recognizing that information about the ingroup's past moral deeds can act as a buffer to a threatened social identity, the authors propose that learning about ingroup moral exemplars can reduce defensive reactions, thereby promoting intergroup reconciliation. Although perceived ingroup morality has also been found to *fuel* historically defensive reactions (Kazarovytska et al., 2022), the present findings do not reconcile with such a moral licensing pattern. Instead, they suggest that morally commendable victim-hero depictions of the ingroup are associated with constrained historical defensiveness and a greater inclination to establish positive intergroup relations in most examined contexts.

### Hungary, Poland, and Austria

However, the above reasoning does not hold in three of the nine studied samples. While the pattern for willing collaboration in these samples mirrored the identity management pattern found in the other contexts, several other results were inconsistent with this approach: Transgression-based emotions partly correlated negatively with defensiveness, forced collaboration was linked to defensive responses but not negative emotions, and victim-heroism was also related to intergroup negativity. All of these findings resonate with an identity threat approach.

Speculating on why these three contexts differed, one possible explanation revolves around the “official roles” of these groups during WWII. Despite the fact that groups often carry multiple

roles in intergroup conflicts, some countries faced Nazi occupation against their will, whereas others were led by governments collaborating with Germany. Within our sample, Hungary and Austria fall into the latter category (Bitunjac & Schoeps, 2021). This known complicity with Nazi Germany can pose obstacles to the adoption of victim-hero representations, requiring greater denial and defensive modulation in advocating these narratives than in countries less known for collaborating with the Nazi regime. In contrast, Poland experienced considerable victimization during WWII (Stauber, 2011). However, Polish victimhood narratives are challenged by the critical discourse on the country's co-perpetration (Grabowski, 2016), potentially giving rise to a sense of competition over recognition of the group's victimhood (Szabó, 2020). Such competitive victimhood, in turn, can lead to the devaluation of the Jewish victim group.

The divergence of these three contexts could also result from the present-day ideological climates in these countries that can shape historical representations (Licata & Klein, 2010). Pető (2022) argues that Hungary's right-wing government initiated a paradigm shift in memory politics, downplaying collaboration with Germany and emphasizing the ingroup's victimhood. Similarly, memory politics in Poland shifted in recent years back toward narratives of innocence and victimization (Grabowski, 2016), a trend also observed in Austrian WWII narratives (Caramani & Manucci, 2021). The identity management prediction, however, is rooted in a pragmatic integration of critical narratives into ingroup representations. Environments that do not encourage critical discourse may therefore prevent a pragmatic assessment of the ingroup's historical roles. Ironically, though seemingly protective, silencing critical discourse may then hinder a non-defensive evaluation of the ingroup's historical victimization.

## Limitations and directions for future research

Our work is limited in that we measured participants' agreement with predefined historical roles that most likely simplify participants' actual constructions of history. For example, when endorsing a narrative of forced collaboration, participants may differ in whether they construe *forced* collaboration as life-threatening coercion (as phrased in some of our items) or rather as a decision to obey in order to not lose privileges. To avoid such ambiguity and expand our existing knowledge of social representations of the past, future studies could openly ask participants to describe their nation's historical role and examine them against theoretical representations (for an example, see Hirschberger et al., 2022). Such a bottom-up approach seems particularly valuable when history is ambivalent and contested, as in the case of the Nazi occupation (Grabowski, 2016; Szabó, 2020).

Due to its cross-sectional design, our research cannot answer which causal processes underlie the observed patterns. Future research could put emphasis on testing the potential mechanisms experimentally by manipulating historical ingroup representations (for such manipulation in the context of Holocaust representations in Hungary, see, Hirschberger et al., 2016) and examining their influence on collective emotions and (defensive) intergroup attitudes.

Future research could also explore representations of ingroup roles under occupation, beyond the context of Nazi occupation. Our research covers a range of eight different nations that faced various forms of occupation, including annexation, military occupation, or puppet state occupation and constitutes one of the most comprehensive cross-contextual examinations of social representations of Nazi occupation to date. However, occupation can come in various forms, such as colonial occupation (i.e., often characterized by the exploitation of resources), international administration (i.e., the occupation of a territory with the aim of post-conflict stabilization, such as after the Kosovo War), or de facto occupation (i.e., such as in Nagorno-Karabakh; Garagozov, 2016). These forms of occupation differ markedly from German occupations in WWII not only in their geo- and sociopolitical

conditions but also in their absence of local support in industrialized genocide across borders. Thus, they may raise completely different identity questions than the one of moral culpability examined in the present research. For example, Garagozov's (2016) work on collective memories in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict examined the narrative of common cultural traits between Azerbaijanis (the occupied) and Armenians (the occupiers)—a representation that was not part of the present research. Considering that psychological processes are substantially shaped by the political realities in which they unfold (e.g., Licata & Klein, 2010), analyzing the interplay of different types of occupation and their reflection in individuals' representations of them, deserves future study.

## Conclusion

Research on social representations of history among groups that struggle to find clarity in Primo Levi's gray zone can inform our understanding of present intergroup attitudes. In the context of the complicated stance of being occupied by Nazi Germany in WWII, portrayals of the ingroup as collaborators of the Germans came along with attempts to downplay the harmdoing of the ingroup and devalue its victims, whereas morally favorable victim-hero portrayals did not show such defensive tendencies. However, our results need to be considered in their dynamic character. For example, the present data were collected before Russia expanded its war of aggression against Ukraine in 2022. Considering that Ukrainians now fight against invasion of their territory, heroic narratives—which can be a valuable resource for dealing with war—might increase (on the adaptiveness of collective representations in times of peace vs. war, see Bilewicz & Liu, 2020). Insights into social representations of the past are important for understanding what happens in the present. Yet, these insights must be continually reexamined to account for the history that happens today.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

This research was not preregistered and examines competing theoretical predictions in an exploratory manner. Data used for the present analyses, the analysis script, study materials, and supplemental online materials (SOM) are available on our Open Science Framework (OSF) project page, accessible at <https://osf.io/ebv2c/>.

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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