

# **The transition of teaching the Holocaust**

from elementary schools  
to the lower secondary

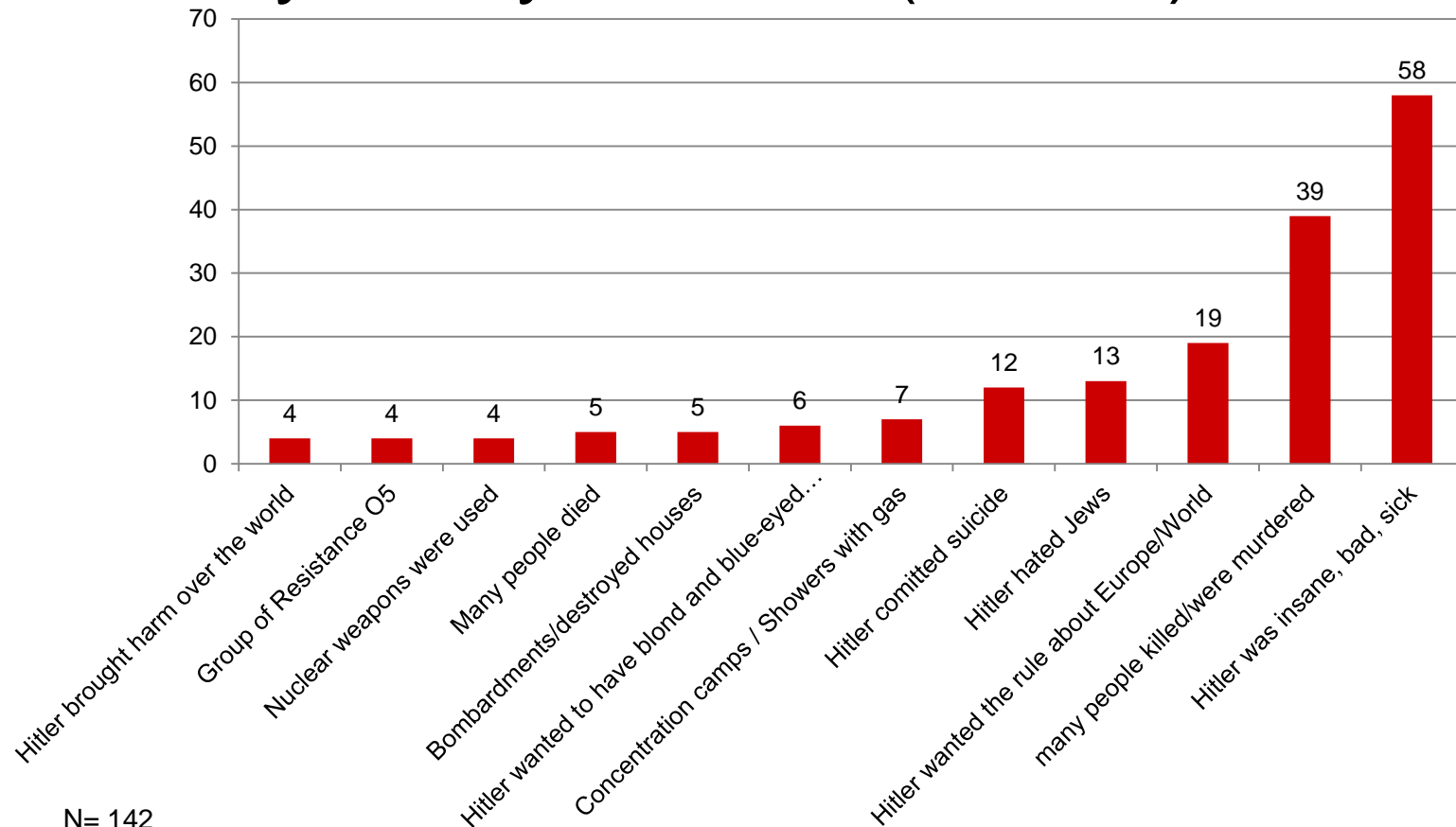
Philipp Mittnik

# Questions?

- What age is appropriate to start to talk with students about the Holocaust?
- Is it *necessary* to start already at the age of 8-10 years?
- Which priorities should be set in the different types of schools?
- Are there different perspectives on the Holocaust in the U.S. compared to Austria/Germany?
- Should American children learn as much about the Holocaust as Austrian children?

# Holocaust Education at Elementary Schools

- Survey of 10y. old kids (Vienna), Mittnik 2014



N= 142

# Concerns of Elementary School Teachers

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- Topic too challenging?
  - Trivialization?
  - Too early?
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- In which manner should we confront students at that sensitive age?





# Different Living Environments of Children – Vienna, 1st district



# National Socialism in Austrian Elementary Schools

- No mandatory part of the curriculum
- But ALL Austrian textbooks for 9-10-year-olds contain the topic ‘National Socialism’ and ‘World War II’.
- Treatment of the topic is entirely superficial
- “*We mention the topic, but we don’t talk about it seriously*” (FRIEDLÄNDER 1998)

# Should the Holocaust be taught in Elementary Schools?

Arguments in favor	Arguments against
Introducing the topic at the beginning of secondary school is too late due to external influences.	Students may be overtaxed or even traumatized.
Implementing this topic is coherent with the curriculum.	The topic may potentially destroy the children's positive worldview.
Frequently, the students' prior knowledge about the topic is flawed – teachers can fix that.	Since children may not have any prior knowledge about the topic, it is not necessary to talk about it in order to protect them.

(BECK/HEYL 2004)



# Terminological criticism

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- Perspective of the German-speaking didactics of History
  - ‘Holocaust/Shoa’: Single focus on the genocide of Jews, denial of other victim groups
  - Simplified representation of National Socialism
  - Personification of sorrow: students have to learn about tragical biographies
  - Mystification/glorification of ‘heroes’: Anne Frank, Oskar Schindler,...

- Concept:
  - Students have to learn about the cruelties of the Nazis to fight against contemporary racism and anti-semitism
  - Students should know about the significance of human rights in the context of the Holocaust
  - Learning about the Holocaust must have a value for the students' lives

- “Americanization of the Holocaust”
  - Correlation between the Nazi cruelties and a general moral education
  - Focused on the teaching of values and tolerance without mentioning the aspects of genocide
  - Prevention against anti-semitic and extreme right-wing tendencies in society (DECKERT-PEACEMAN 2002)

# Counter-thesis

- “The History of the Holocaust is not suitable for a sustainable treatment of contemporary racism and xenophobia.” (EHMANN 2000)
- “Teaching or Preaching” – criticism of the increasing moralization of the Holocaust in education (SALMONS 2003)

# Teaching about the Holocaust in Austrian lower secondary schools

- Mandatory curricular aspects: ages 13-14
- Nationwide compulsory curriculum for all school types
- All History teachers of the lower secondary (ages 10-14) **have to** teach about National Socialism



# Compulsory curricular aspects in Austria

- National Socialism as an example of a totalitarian regime
- Ideology, propaganda, mobilization of the youth, persecution, organized mass murder, resistance
- Remembrance of Jewish life before and after the Holocaust
- World War II
- Commemorative cultures

# Compulsory curricular aspects in the United States

- Curricula not harmonized
- Each state has different curricula, comparable to Germany
- Mandatory implication of Holocaust only in New Jersey and a few other states
- “Every board of education shall include instruction on the Holocaust and genocides in an appropriate place in the curriculum of **all elementary and secondary** students.”

# A secret curriculum?

- Significant change since the 1980s
- Importance of textbooks: they are constructions of history and **designers of public knowledge** (LÄSSIG 2010)
- Austria: “Federal Approbation Committees” review all textbooks in all subjects

# Austrians position 1980s

## Der Widerstand gegen den Nationalsozialismus wächst

Je länger der Krieg dauerte und je mehr die »Nazis« wüteten, desto stärker regte sich aber auch der *Widerstand* in unserer Heimat. Vor allem katholische und evangelische Priester, Christlichsoziale, Sozialdemokraten und Kommunisten, die trotz Todesgefahr für ein freies, demokratisches Österreich eintraten, füllten die Gefängnisse und Konzentrationslager.

Das größte Konzentrationslager auf österreichischem Boden befand sich bei *Mauthausen*. Hier wurden Menschen aus allen Teilen Europas zusammengetrieben und mußten in den Granitsteinbrüchen härteste Sklavenarbeit verrichten. Insgesamt fanden in diesem Lager 120.000 Menschen den Tod!

Als am 20. Juli 1944 das Attentat auf Hitler verübt wurde, waren auch österreichische Widerstandsgruppen in die Pläne eingeweiht, und gerade in Wien ließ sich die Aktion erfolgreich an. Das Scheitern des Unternehmens in Berlin bedeutete auch für unser Land, daß sein Leidensweg noch nicht zu Ende war.

Zeitbilder 1982, p. 32

“The failure of Stauffenberg’s attempted assassination also meant for our country that the (Austrian) suffering had not come to an end.”

# Austrians position 1980s

*Österreich wurde jetzt ein Teil des Deutschen Reiches, die Bundesländer waren nun »Reichsgaue«. Den Namen »Österreich« gab es nicht mehr. Unser Heimatland und seine Menschen standen im Dienste Hitlers: Die Bodenschätze wurden ausgebeutet, Rüstungsindustrien entstanden, die wehrfähigen Männer mußten an allen Fronten für Hitler kämpfen. Wer den Wehrdienst verweigerte oder sonst Widerstand leistete, hatte mit der Todesstrafe zu rechnen. Besonders argen Verfolgungen waren die österreichischen Juden ausgesetzt. Zu Tausenden wurden sie in Konzentrationslager verschleppt und dort erbarmungslos getötet.*



Zeitbilder 4,  
1983, 145

“The name Austria didn’t exist any more. [...] The mineral resources were exploited, arm industry was build, the young men have to fight an all fronts for Hitler. If someone declined the military draft or was engaged in the resistance movement, he had the risk to get killed with death penalty. Especially hard persecutions were subjected to the Austrian Jews.”

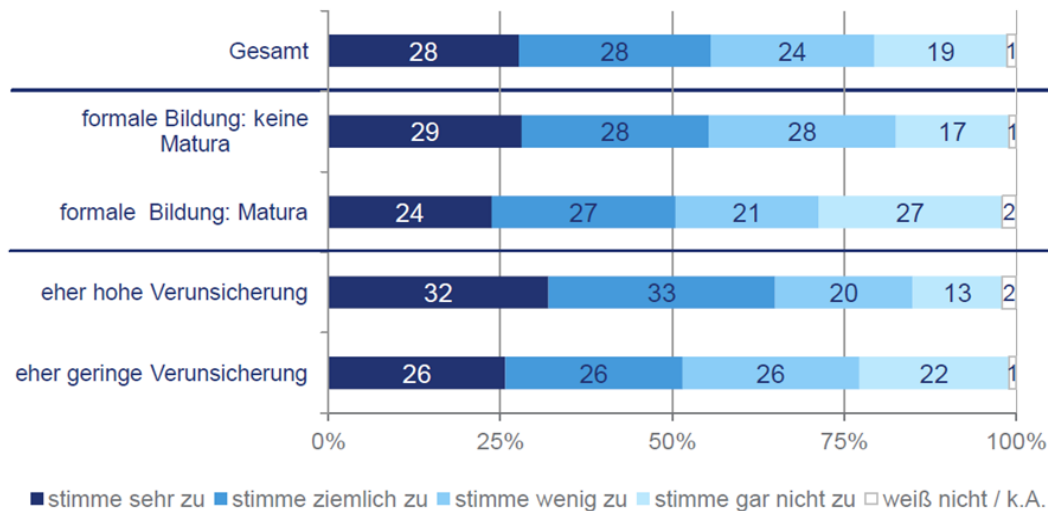


# Should we still talk about the cruelties of the Holocaust at all



# Discussion about the Holocaust?

## Diskussion über 2. Weltkrieg und den Holocaust sollte beendet werden



Frage im Wortlaut: Stimmen Sie folgenden Aussagen sehr, ziemlich, wenig oder gar nicht zu: Die Diskussion über den Zweiten Weltkrieg und den Holocaust sollte beendet werden.

SORA & Institut für Zeitgeschichte der Universität Wien

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**51% of the  
higher  
educated in  
Austria say:  
NO**

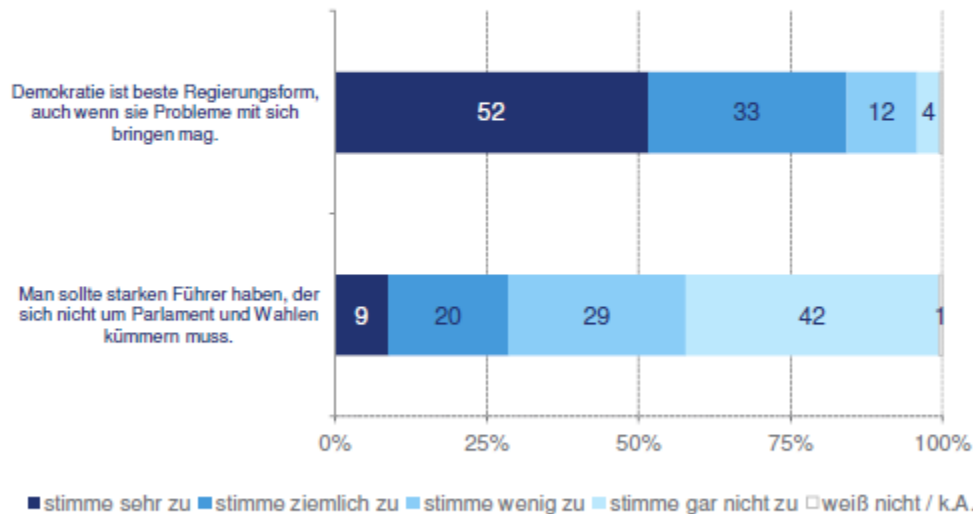
Zukunftsfonds/Institut für  
Zeitgeschichte 2014  
Wien, Rathkolb

# Would Austrians prefer once again a “strong Führer/leader”



# A new “Führer” for Austria?

## Demokratisches vs. autoritäres System



SORA 13069 Präsentation Autoritäre Einstellungen

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**29%**  
**say**  
**YES**

Zukunftsfonds/Institut  
für Zeitgeschichte 2014  
Wien, Rathkolb

# Conclusions

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- At the elementary level
  - Individual cases
  - Anti-semitism
  - Austrians as perpetrators
  - Contemporary significance
  - Importance of democracy
  - Human Rights



# Conclusions

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- Important for transition
  - Create empathy, but not fear!
  - Create interest
  - Highlight the importance for society

# Conclusions

- At the lower secondary level
  - Build on the students' prior knowledge
  - Each teacher should focus on 8-10 aspects of the NS regime in their lessons
  - Allocate sufficient time
  - Attempt to explain why the Austrians predominantly supported the Nazis
  - Don't shock the students with pictures of mass murder
  - Refrain from a moralization
  - Austria as a nation of perpetrators
  - Create connections to contemporary historical questions