

Pilot Project

Decoding Antisemitism: An AI-driven Study on Hate Speech and Imagery Online





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Citation recommendation

Ascone, Laura; Becker, Matthias, J.; Bolton, Matthew; Chapelan, Alexis; Krasni, Jan; Placzynta, Karolina; Scheiber, Marcus; Troshke, Hagen; Vincent, Chloé (2022).

Decoding Antisemitism: An AI-driven Study on Hate Speech and Imagery Online. Discourse Report 3.

Berlin: Technische Universität Berlin. Centre for Research on Antisemitism.

DOI: [10.14279/depositonce-15314](https://doi.org/10.14279/depositonce-15314)

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1. Introduction

Decoding Antisemitism is a transnational and interdisciplinary research project analysing the content, structure and frequency of antisemitism in online spaces. We provide insights into the progress and interim results of our corpus analyses through the bi-annual publication of a discourse report. These regular presentations of our findings are central to our intention to break new ground within both academic and non-academic domains.

This report focuses on the online fallout from two recent controversies in France and Germany. The first is the heated debate within France about the introduction of the so-called health pass, the Covid-19 “passport” proving vaccination or Covid-negative status. Protests against the pass, which stimulated huge amounts of online and offline discussion, led to a widespread climate of anti-elitism. While this was targeted mainly at the political elite, the protests against the pass – and in particular the arrest of a protester who blamed the pass on a Jewish elite – generated a significant number of antisemitic debates.

The second event analysed in this report is the reaction in Germany to three instances of criminal proceedings against former concentration camp personnel. The topic of historical responsibility and guilt for the Holocaust continues to be a critical issue within German society. Our analysis reveals that for all efforts to the contrary over recent decades, for many Germans the desire to downplay responsibility, reject guilt and relativise the Holocaust retains a worryingly high appeal.

While these two events – the health pass protests and the Nazi trials – are radically distinct in both content and context, our analysis shows that antisemitic responses to both are underpinned by trends of Holocaust distortion or trivialisation, and that antisemitic tropes are used to critique the actions of the respective governments.

With this report, we are pleased to introduce our [new website](#). The website contains information about our team and the advisory board, the research design of the project, project-related news on talks, workshops, publications and more, as well as this and previous reports we have published.

At the core of our project is the recognition that precise terminology is crucial for the accurate description of verbal and visual antisemitism, and for distinguishing legitimate criticism from hate speech. To this end, an accessible glossary of the key terms and definitions we use in our work is also available on the website. For those who would like more in-depth information about the processes we use to identify antisemitic content, we are happy to share an abridged coding guidebook. It contains the key elements of the resource used by our coders to analyse comment threads: stereotypes, linguistic and image-analytical categories, defined and substantiated with explicit and implicit examples. We also hope to publish the full version of the guidebook, which lists over 150 concepts, in due course.

Our hope is that by sharing these highly detailed, comprehensive resources with interested parties – not only academic but relevant political, media, security and industry stakeholders too – our pioneering qualitative content analysis approach will help to drive a better understanding of the ongoing evolution of antisemitic discourse online, and thus the ability to combat it more effectively. To obtain a copy of the abridged guidebook, or to provide any feedback on the report or the project, please email us at info@decoding-antisemitism.eu.

With regard to the machine learning part of the project (step 2 in the research design), our colleagues at KCL are still working with our annotated data sets, which – in the course of training processes – will form the basis of our AI models. A major challenge for the models is that, apart from a few obvious terms (such as “greed” or “Zionazis”), the linguistic differences between antisemitic and non-antisemitic contributions are often gradual. This is especially true of Israel-related discussions. Moreover, comments which seek to counter or combat antisemitism can often take up antisemitic turns of phrase themselves in order to either highlight them as antisemitic, or to question their content. The same holds true for ironic statements that may reject an antisemitic idea or reproduce the latter in a subtle way. Corresponding subtleties must also be “learned” by our artificial intelligence.

Possible approaches include support vector machines, logistic regression and neural networks. Different models for individual antisemitism markers or antisemitic concepts will be combined and followed by supervised fine-tuning.

We would like to thank Flip Jansen from HTW Berlin for supporting us with all aspects related to AI and machine learning.

2. Executive Summary

1. This report demonstrates the breadth, diversity and adaptability of antisemitism online. Two radically distinct discourse triggers in different countries – the Covid-19 health pass in France, and trials of ex-concentration camp personnel in Germany – stimulated an equally distinct repertoire of antisemitic expression. Yet there were also parallels: a shared tendency to distort, downplay or trivialise the Holocaust, and the integration of antisemitic concepts with critiques of state power and conduct.
2. A total of 4,246 *Facebook* and *Twitter* comments related to the health pass were analysed. The level of antisemitic discourse jumped from 3 to 15% when discussion turned to the prosecution of a protester who accused prominent French Jews of responsibility for its imposition.
3. The most frequent antisemitic concepts were DENIAL OF ANTISEMITISM¹ and TABOO OF CRITICISM. Those arguing the protester's accusation was antisemitic were dismissed as malicious scaremongers seeking to curtail free speech on behalf of the political elite. Others affirmed the accusation, arguing that Jews were "overrepresented" in the French elite.
4. Web users frequently compared the actions of the French government in combatting Covid-19 to those of the Nazis, and protesters to the Jews. Commenters thus positioned themselves as victims through a trivialisation of the Holocaust.

1 – Since stereotypes are phenomena that exist on the conceptual, i.e. mental, level and can be reproduced using language, stereotypes are given in small caps in accordance with the conventions of cognitive linguistics.

5. The two antisemitic scenarios here – one aligning protesters against Jews, the other with them; one identifying Jews with power, the other utilising their suffering – confirm the shapeshifting nature of antisemitic discourse.
6. A total of 3,780 comments responding to trials of former concentration camp personnel in Germany were analysed, with 25 % containing antisemitic concepts. Almost all of the antisemitic comments expressed forms of so-called “secondary antisemitism.”
7. The most frequent antisemitic concept was the REJECTION OF GUILT. Users sought to exonerate the accused – and thus the German people more widely – of responsibility for the Holocaust. Commenters suggested that even SS officers had no choice in their behaviour.
8. Users called for a CLEAN BREAK with the past, seeking to restore an unblemished image of the German nation and family. Several other comments attempted to downplay guilt by comparing contemporary political scenarios or (alleged) crimes with the Holocaust, thus distorting the latter.
9. The analysis indicates that efforts within German society to “work through” and come to terms with the past remain insufficient. There are significant gaps within what had been assumed to be a broad consensus in Germany about the Nazi crimes. Remedying this should be an urgent priority.

3. The emergence of antisemitism in anti-health pass demonstrations in France

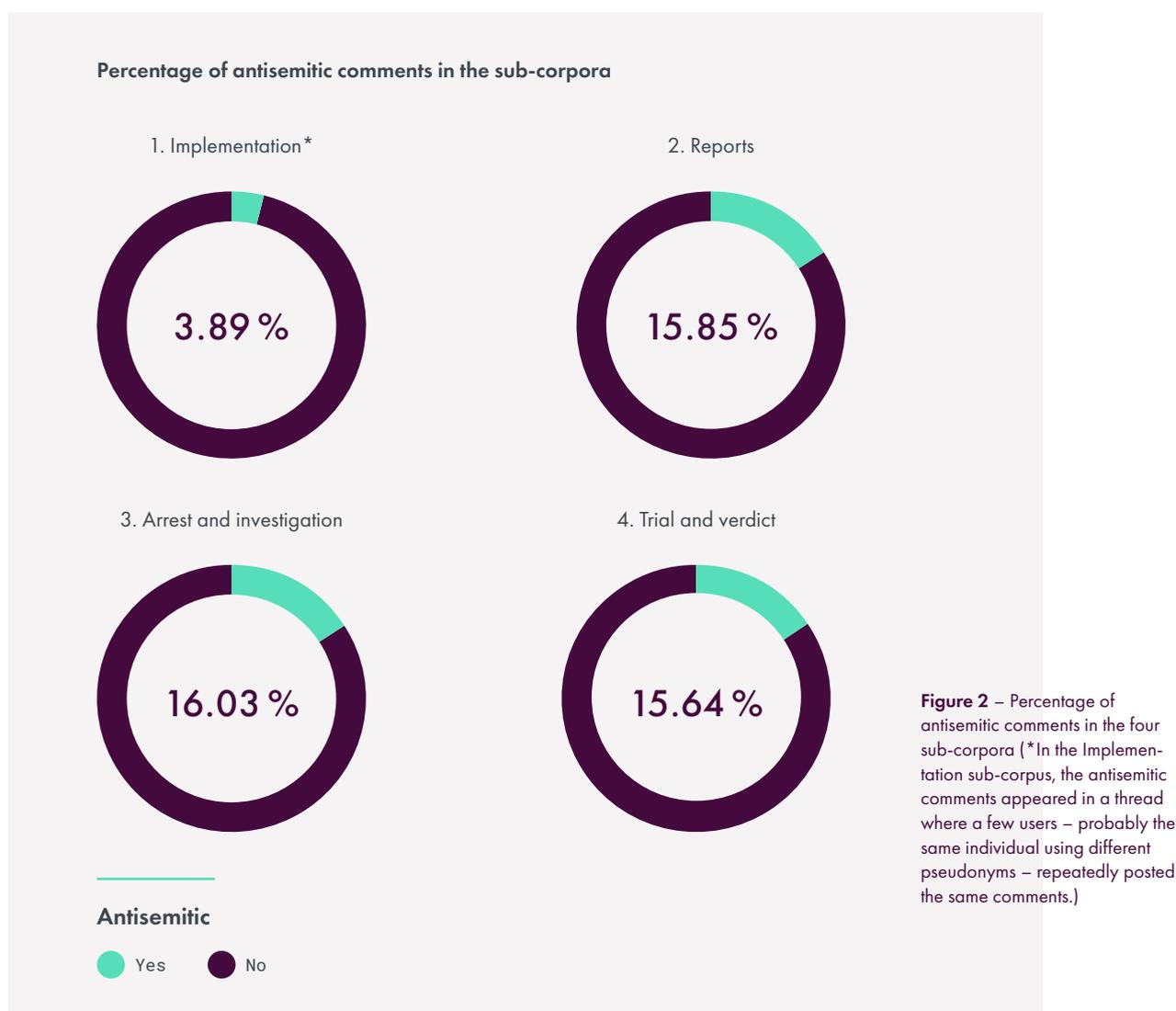
In August 2021, as Europe was battling an upsurge of Covid-19 cases, the French authorities were amongst the first to implement a “health pass” (*pass sanitaire*) requiring everyone aged 12 or older to present proof of vaccination or a negative test to access many public places (bars, cultural venues, shopping centres, etc.). Large protests broke out, denouncing an attack on freedom and discriminatory measures against the unvaccinated. However, the demonstrations were marked from the beginning by antisemitic tropes and slogans, such as the use of Holocaust imagery to protest mandatory vaccination, or allegations of Jewish conspiracies. A teacher with far-right allegiance, Cassandre Fristot, was arrested in Metz over a sign headlined “BUT WHO?” [“MAIS QUI?”] and followed by names of several Jewish personalities and their alleged supporters (see *Figure 1*). The rhetorical question “WHO?” [“QUI?”] spread online as an antisemitic dog-whistle hinting at shadowy Jewish grey eminences behind the Covid pandemic and the vaccination campaigns (Audureau 2021). Fristot received a suspended six-month sentence in October 2021.



Figure 1 – Antisemitic placard held by Cassandre Fristot on 7 August 2021, in Metz (“Metz prosecutor’s office opens an investigation and the Licra files a complaint after a protester showed an antisemitic placard during a demonstration against the #healthpass”)

Our corpus comprises 4,246 user comments collected from the comments sections of the Facebook and Twitter pages of the following mainstream media outlets: *Le Monde*, *Le Figaro*, *Libération*, *Le Parisien*, *L'Express*, *Le Point*, *Marianne*, *L'Obs*, *Le Journal du Dimanche*, *France Bleu*, *Marianne*, and *Valeurs Actuelles*. The corpus is organised chronologically around four major moments: the **implementation** of the health pass (5–7 August 2021), **reports** of anti-semitic placards in the protests (7–18 August),

the **arrest and investigation** launched against Fristot (8–10 August) and her subsequent **trial and verdict** (September–October). *Figure 2* shows the proportion of antisemitic and non-antisemitic comments in the four sub-corpora. Antisemitic comments are barely present in the threads reacting to the implementation of the health pass in France. However, as soon as attention is paid to the reports of antisemitic signs and Fristot's case, the number of antisemitic comments increases.



3. The emergence of antisemitism in anti-healthpass demonstrations in France

As presented in Figure 3, these three major moments seem to trigger the same antisemitic concepts, although in different percentages, which will be presented in the following sections.

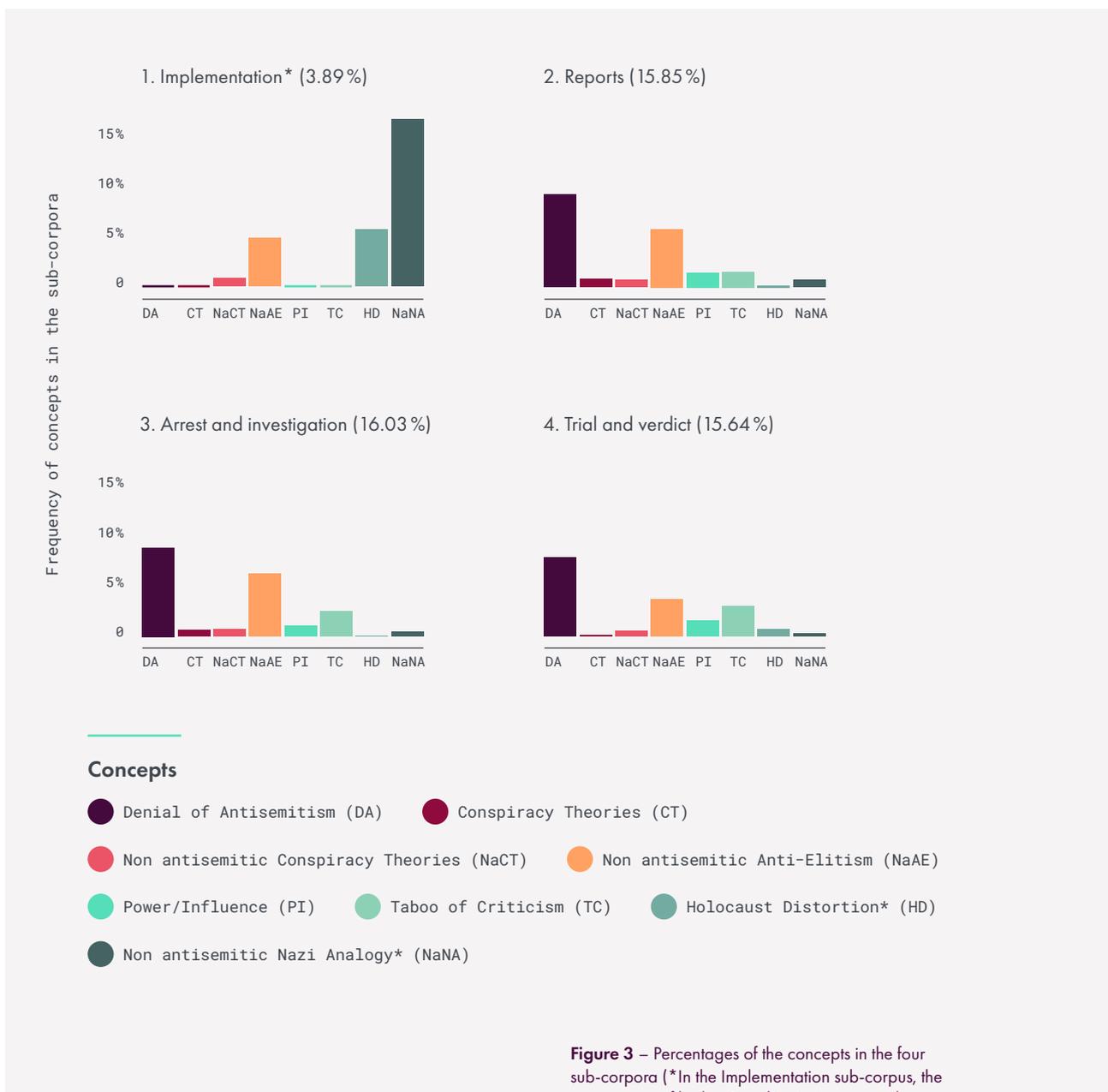


Figure 3 – Percentages of the concepts in the four sub-corpora (*In the Implementation sub-corpus, the occurrences of both HD and NaNA appeared in a thread where a few users – probably the same individual using different pseudonyms – repeatedly posted the same comments.)

3.1 Conspiracy theories

A common reaction to the media coverage of the events is either DENIAL OF ANTISEMITISM or its trivialisation. Some users expressed what appears to be genuine bafflement at the fact that a simple phrase like “But who?” could carry antisemitic subtext. Others, however, alleged a malicious intent behind the accusations of antisemitism, thus rejecting such accusations (which implies a denial of antisemitism), only to affirm and reinforce anti-Jewish stereotypes. Here we focus on the link between the sense of victimisation related to anti-elitism and conspiracy theories in general, which can lead to antisemitic worldviews.

Affirmation of the placard is expressed in various ways. Some users take an anti-elitist stance and declare that the attacks on Jewish figures happened solely on the grounds of being part of the elite – ignoring the fact that they have nothing in common for the most part, except their Jewish origins:

“Antisemitic? I only see the names of those who make up this elite that despises the people. Lies, corruption, conflicts of interest, manipulation: that’s what they have in common!”

[“Antisémitisme ? Je ne vois que les noms de ceux qui composent cette élite qui méprise le peuple. Mensonges, corruption, conflits d’intérêts, manipulation : voilà leurs points communs !”]

(TW-VALEU[20210808]).

Others go further, saying that the names on the sign only reflect the supposed reality according to which Jews are really controlling the world. One comment uses irony, as indicated notably by the lying face emoticon, to denounce what is thought to be an “overrepresentation” of Jewish figures among the powerful: “While they do not, in fact, have any overrepresentation in the media, business and political circles. 😏” [“Alors qu’ils n’ont, en effet, aucune sur-représentation dans les médias, les milieux économiques et les milieux politiques. 😏”] (TW-LEMON[20210810]).

Some comments made a direct connection between the anti-elitism stance and the antisemitic conspiracy theories. They use the stereotype of Jewish power, both as a way to deny the antisemitism of the sign, implying that the accusation of antisemitism is only an instrumentalisation to divert the attention from real problems, and as a way to defend the sign, saying that it is true that the people mentioned have a lot of power. For instance, in the following comment, we can wonder whether they are talking about the culprits in this context, that is the health crisis, or in general, implying that Jews are always the culprits: “And where did you see antisemitism, it is not my fault that the culprits are Hebrews” [“Et où as tu vu un antisémitisme ce n’est pas de ma faute si les coupables sont hébraïques”] (FB-LEPOI[20211008]). It is interesting to note that the word “Jews” is not mentioned, but instead the user chooses a synonym as a hedging strategy.

3. The emergence of antisemitism in anti-healthpass demonstrations in France

Others make the link with a potentially non-antisemitic conspiracy. Not every conspiracy theory is antisemitic at heart, but the context of the debate around an antisemitic sign, and here the dog-whistle vocabulary of a “cosmopolitan oligarchy” in reference to Jews, makes the antisemitic character of the following conspiratorial comment clear:

“One should not confuse antisemitism or racism with the hatred of cosmopolitan oligarchs who do not feel any discomfort in constantly reminding us that they are the owners of the planet, that they make or unmake presidents, that they speculate on food, rare earths, land and control the states thanks to perpetual debt”

[“Il ne faut pas confondre l’anti sémitisme ou le racisme avec la détestation des oligarques cosmopolites qui n’éprouvent aucune gêne à nous rappeler sans cesse qu’ils sont les propriétaires de la planète, qu’ils font ou défont des présidents, qu’ils spéculent sur la nourriture, les terres rares, le foncier et contrôlent les états grâce à la dette perpétuelle”]

([LEFIG\[20211008\]](#))

Finally, some users are very clear about their thoughts on an alleged Jewish conspiracy, and express their antisemitic worldview in general statements such as the following: “everybody knows that the Jews command everything” [“tout le monde sait que les juifs commande² tous”] (FB-MONDE[20211008]), or “You’d think that it’s her fault that all these high-ranking people are Jewish !!! lmao” [“A croire que cest de sa fautes a elle si tout ses gens haut placer sont juif !!! mais mdrrrr”] (FB-NOUVE[20211008]). By presenting their antisemitic statement as a general truth, the authors of these comments gain a sense of authority, which aims at deflecting counter arguments.

3.2 Taboo of criticism

The topos of TABOO OF CRITICISM, whether explicitly or implicitly embedded into broader conspiracy narratives, is an essential part of antisemitic discourse. Building on a vague parody of the liberal free speech ethos, it casts Jews as a powerful elite protected by a complicit or fearful establishment. In the French context, the argument is often articulated in relation to the idea of the country’s alleged shift towards dictatorship: “The state is taking over everything! [...] Soon no more freedom of speech, vaccine or no vaccine we’ll need a pass for that” [“L’état prends le pouvoir sur tout! [...] Bientôt plus de libre expression, vaccin efficace ou pas un Pass pour vivre ça!”] (FB-NOUVE[20211008]). When another user tries to point out the situation in real authoritarian regimes such as Russia or China, they are met with a pessimistic prognosis: “Don’t worry, in 5 years we’ll be at their level too!!!” [“l’inquiète encore 5 ans et on sera a leur niveau!!!”] (FB-LEPAR[20211006]). On occasion, the criticism takes aim at president Macron and the ruling party, LREM: “Freedom of speech exists in France – unless we criticise Macron and his friends... freedom according to LREM” [“La liberté d’expression existe en France – mais il est interdit de critiquer MACRON et ses amisla liberté vue par La REM”] (FB-NOUVE[20211008]). Indeed, in ANTISEMITIC CONSPIRACY THEORIES, Macron is frequently portrayed as being infedated to powerful Jewish interests, as a result of his former

² - In accordance with the conventions of cognitive and pragmalinguistics, we have not corrected the spelling, punctuation or grammatical errors.

employment at the Rothchild bank. Other countries are also brought into the debate: the US with its tradition of absolute free speech is positively referenced; conversely, Germany is constructed as a quasi-Orwellian dystopia where the smallest misstep when referencing Jews can land one in jail or even get one “lynched” (FB-VALEU[20211006]).

The idea of fear lies at the core of the TABOO OF CRITICISM topos: in the conspiracist worldview, society is split between fearful masses terrorised into submission and a handful of brave truth-tellers. The recurrence of verbs such as “to dare” highlights the courage it takes to even name the alleged Jewish elite. Talking about Cassandre Fristot upon her arrest, a web user laments: “For once, someone dares...” [“Pour une fois que quelqu’un ose...”] (FB-NOUVE[20211008]). Another one chimes in: “She dares [to say] what we don’t dare. Truth bothers [people] in this country” [“Elle ose ce que nous n’osons pas. la vérité gêne dans ce pays”] (FB-LEPAR[20211006]).

It is rare that web users directly mention Jewish communities and individuals: to highlight their alleged privileged status, they often use religious references to the “chosen people”: “Freedom of speech is dead when it comes to the chosen one. Lick my ass” [“la liberté d expression est morte face a l elu mon Q”] (FB-MONDE[20211006]). Some refer to the

“forbidden community” [“communauté interdite”] (TWITT-MONDE[20210810]). There are also, however, explicit and unabashed antisemitic statements: “Jews are untouchable and people are starting to understand it” [“Les juifs sont intouchables et les gens commencent à le voir”] (TWITT-MONDE[20210810]).

The kindred leitmotifs of Jewish POWER and of TABOO OF CRITICISM exist in a nexus. The most eloquent example of this is an apocryphal quote attributed to Voltaire or Orwell, “To learn who rules over you, simply find out who you are not allowed to criticise.” While it is now widely known it originates from Holocaust denier Kevin Strom (Weiss 2019: 73), the quote still surfaces repeatedly in multiple threads analysed. Users contend that the term “antisemitism” has been invented only to silence dissent: “this term has been invented to prevent people from naming the culprits and vilify those who dare speak out against the all-pervading evil” [“ce terme a été inventé justement pour qu’on évite de dire qui est responsable et condamné ceux ou celle qui oserait dénoncer le mal régnant partout”] (FB-MONDE[20211006]).

When alleging a supposed TABOO OF CRITICISM around Jews, as shown in *Figure 4*, users often resort to hyperboles and sarcasm:

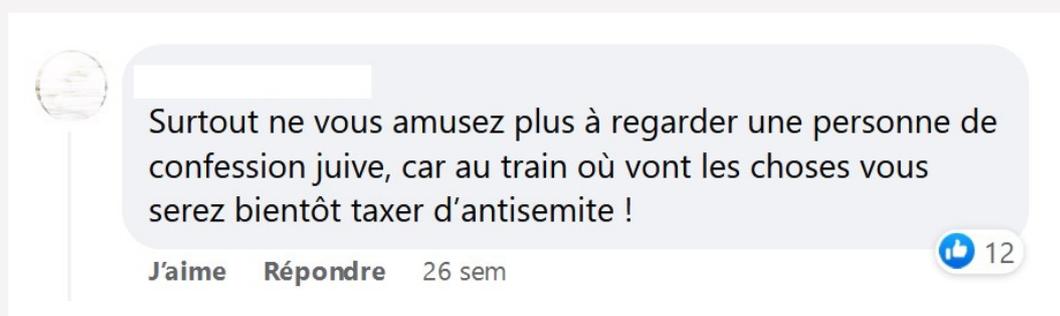


Figure 4 – Example of an anti-semitic comment – “Don’t even think about looking in the direction of a Jewish person, at this rate you’ll soon be labelled an antisemite!” (FB-VALEU[20211006])

3. The emergence of antisemitism in anti-healthpass demonstrations in France

However, a genuine sense of panic permeates another comment which urges popular mobilisation: “Counter-revolution becomes urgent for our survival” [“La contre-revolution devient urgente pour notre survie”] (FB-MONDE[20211110]).

As highlighted by comparing the incidence of the topos in our sub-corpora (see *Figure 3*), the alleged TABOO OF CRITICISM discourse is triggered by perceived victimisation – such as the Fristot affair. Seen through this prism, her arrest and prosecution activate the populist scenario of a brave whistleblower who pays the price for her courage.

3.3 Nazi analogy

So far, we have seen that in the context of anti-health pass demonstrations and Cassandre Fristot’s trial, antisemitic comments tend to refer either to antisemitic conspiracy theories, or to the topos of TABOO OF CRITICISM. Another concept characterising the *Facebook* threads triggered by this discourse event is the analogy between the French government and Nazi Germany, whose distribution across the sub-corpora is presented in *Figure 3*.

The Nazi analogy directed against the French government does not always constitute an antisemitic concept. For this analogy to be antisemitic, an explicit reference to Jews and/or the Holocaust is necessary. As a consequence, the following comment was not considered antisemitic: “the ‘constitutional’ council, guarantor of the constitution, shows us its submission to the globalist injunction of the paSS, and then to the dictatorship” [“le conseil ‘constitutionnel’ garant de la constitution, nous montre sa soumission a l’injonction mondialiste du paSS, et donc a la dictature”] (FB-MONDE[20210806]). Here, the user alludes to the comparison between the French government and the Nazis through the wordplay “paSS,” which combines the health pass and the Nazi SS. Yet, since this comment does not refer to the Jews or to the Holocaust, it cannot be considered a form of HOLOCAUST DISTORTION, as it is the case in the following comment.

“anyone who doesn’t comply with the Nazi science domination will be burnt and will be deported soon”

[“TOUTE PERSONNE QUI NE SE PLIE PAS À LA DOMINATION DE LA SCIENCE NAZI SERA BRULÉE ET SERA BIENTÔT MENÉE EN DÉPORTATION”]

([FB-MARIA\[20210805\]](#))

In this comment, the comparison between the current situation and the Nazi era is operated on two levels. On the one hand, the expression “the Nazi science domination” conveys the idea that, by implementing the health pass, the French government is acting like the Nazis in the 1930s and 1940s. On the other hand, stating that any individual against the health pass “will be deported soon” implies a comparison between any person against the health pass and the Jews deported under the Nazi regime. Therefore, the comment implicitly constitutes a HOLOCAUST DISTORTION and can be considered antisemitic. Furthermore, this analysis revealed that the antisemitic analogy between the French government and the Nazis always implies HOLOCAUST DISTORTION.

A more in-depth analysis was conducted on these comments in order to see how the reference to the Holocaust is verbalised. Even though users express it in different ways, what is common to all these comments is the feeling of victimisation conveyed by the user, as shown in the comment: “you categorise us as ‘no vax’ as if we were the new jews to be marginalised, because you are the new Nazis” [“vous nous étiquetez comme ‘no vax’ comme si nous étions les nouveaux juifs à marginaliser, car vous êtes les nouveaux nazis”] (FB-MARIA[20211020]). Here, the user presents themselves as part of a group who suffers categorisation and marginalisation. They are victims of the actions undertaken by the French government, which lead the user to consider politicians to be the “the new Nazis.” Furthermore, the user explicitly compares the categorisation “no vax” to the categorisation “Jews” operated by the Nazis (“as if we were the new jews to be marginalised”). In some comments, this feeling of victimisation is linked to a potential threat that those against the health pass would face: “anyone who doesn’t comply with the Nazi science domination will be burnt and will be deported soon” [“TOUTE PERSONNE QUI NE SE PLIE PAS À LA DOMINATION DE LA SCIENCE NAZI SERA BRULÉE ET SERA BIENTÔT MENÉE EN DÉPORTATION”] (FB-MARIA[20210805]). As stated before, the user alludes to the Holocaust through the verb “deported.” If allusions convey this analogy in a more or less implicit way, explicit comparisons were also found in our corpus:

“finding nothing alarming in a law that is a copy-paste of the Ahnenpass of 1933, is that normal to them?”

[“Par contre ne rien trouver d’alarmant à une loi qui est un copié / collé du Ahnenpass de 1933 ça c’est normal pour eux ?”]
([FB-MONDE\[20210810\]](#))

In this comment, the user explicitly compares the implementation of the health pass in France to the “Ahnenpass of 1933.” The expression “copy-paste” reinforces the analogy between the French government and the Nazis, as well as the analogy between those against the health pass and the Jews, as if the two scenarios were identical.

3.4 Conclusion

Antisemitism has been successfully attached to the anti-elitist frame of the protests against the health pass. It fuelled conspiratorial perspectives on the current crisis, which are reinforced by the topos of the TABOO OF CRITICISM. This proves that, at its core, antisemitism functions as a fetishised, obsessive critique of power. HOLOCAUST DISTORTION through the analogy between the Third Reich’s genocidal policies and anti-Covid measures also show how narratives of Jewish suffering have been hijacked by certain protesters in order to position themselves as the “ultimate victims.” These tropes illustrate perfectly the “paranoid style” (Hofstadter 1963) which characterises antisemitic discourses. They enact a form of performative victimisation which consolidates the ingroup through a sense of moral urgency and shared oppression by the outgroup (the government, health authorities, shadowy global elites, etc.).

4. Prosecution of former concentration camp personnel in Germany

Over the course of 2021, state prosecutors in Germany initiated criminal proceedings against three former concentration camp personnel. These proceedings had been covered by the media in advance and attracted much public attention. We analysed 3,780 web comments responding to stories related to these trials published by German mainstream media outlets (*FAZ, taz, Zeit, Spiegel, Süddeutsche Zeitung, Bild* and *n tv*). These included comments posted on the media outlets' websites, as well as their *Facebook* pages and *Twitter* profiles. As the topic of guilt and responsibility for the Holocaust is particularly historically charged in German society and continues to generate substantial public debate, the comments were analysed quantitatively and qualitatively, focusing both on their general position on the trials and users' specific handling of the notion of guilt. The articles included in this corpus were published between 8 February 2021 (indictment of a former concentration camp guard) and 7 October 2021 (start of this guard's trial).

4.1 Secondary antisemitism

News stories on the trials received many antisemitic reactions, most of which can be categorised as forms of *secondary antisemitism*. (see, among others, Rensmann 2004, Bergmann 2010, Beyer 2015). It is referred to as *secondary* because its focus is on the exoneration of guilt for the Holocaust, and it is only directed against Jews in this connection. Knowledge of the crimes of the Holocaust, and their continued discussion, require that one positions oneself in relation to them whenever the topic arises. In the Nazi successor societies of Germany and Austria (and where there was collaboration with the Nazis in

carrying out the Holocaust), the desire for relief from feelings of shame and guilt on the part of the perpetrator generation and their descendants remains an active factor in society. This motive can lead to a defensive attitude against ideas of remembrance, commemoration, and even the historical facts themselves, since these can be experienced as burdening one's own self-image – at an individual and familial level, as well as that of the nation.

The topoi of secondary antisemitism seek to make antisemitic acts invisible, urging an end to their remembrance so as to protect antisemitic perpetrators through the deflection of blame. They also look to protect antisemitic attitudes by obscuring the violence associated with them. In this way, the suffering of the victims and their descendants is trivialised or negated.

On the one hand, REJECTION OF GUILT can be achieved through the position taken regarding participation in the crime: through a denial of guilt, any involvement or responsibility is denied. Externalisation of guilt goes one step further than denial and seeks to attribute blame to other actors. In relativising guilt, culpable behaviour is acknowledged in principle, but an attempt is made to minimise the individual's personal responsibility. On the other hand, REJECTION OF GUILT can also refer to the object of guilt: by relativising and denying the Holocaust or antisemitism, an attempt is made to reinterpret the acts themselves or to declare them non-existent.

The rejection of remembrance is expressed above all in demands for a CLEAN BREAK, which stands for an end to any further debates about anything related to the Holocaust. However, it is also reflected in the

stereotype of ADMONISHER, according to which Jews continuously confront the (German) society with the Holocaust and thus stand in the way of the “carefree” social development that is desired – the positive self-image or national pride that would be possible if only responsibility for the Holocaust could be pushed aside.

4.2 Results of the analysis

The corpus contained a wide spectrum of reactions, ranging from approval of the trials to criticism – often based on the belated nature of the trials, the possibility and impact of punishment on the accused, and accusations of “symbolic politics.” Twenty-five per cent of the comments were antisemitic (see Figure 5). Controversial debates took place and antisemitic comments were also met with counter-speech. REJECTION OF GUILT strategies make up by far the largest share of antisemitic statements. Calls for a CLEAN BREAK as well as HOLOCAUST DISTORTION are also prominent, albeit to a lesser extent (see Figure 6).

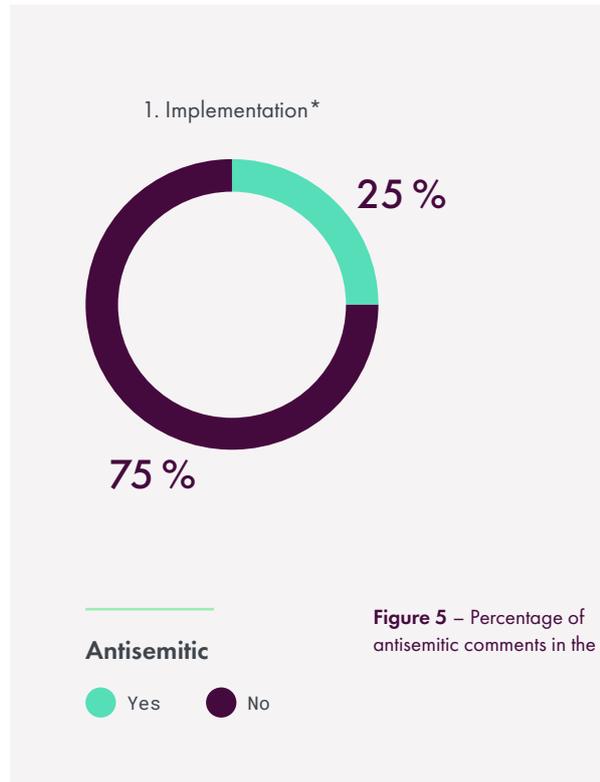


Figure 5 – Percentage of antisemitic comments in the corpus

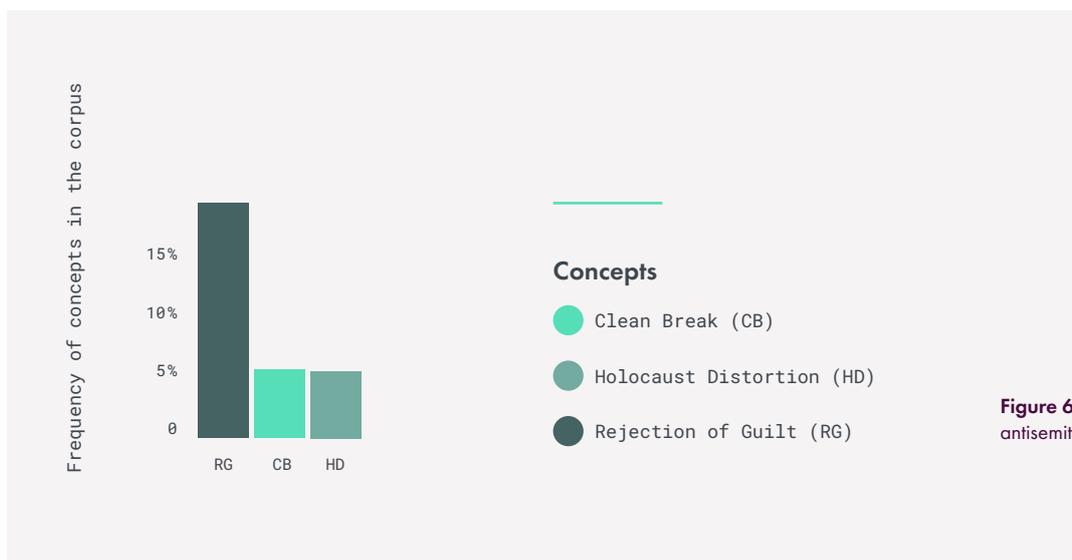


Figure 6 – Percentage of antisemitic concepts in the corpus

4. Prosecution of former concentration camp personnel in Germany

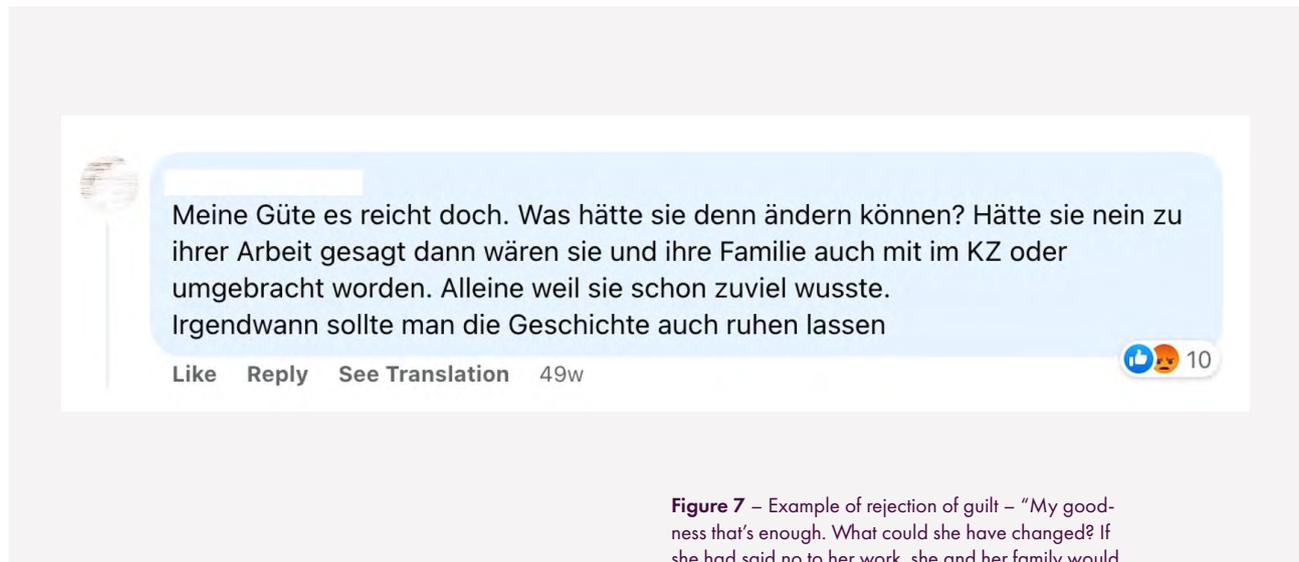


Figure 7 – Example of rejection of guilt – “My goodness that’s enough. What could she have changed? If she had said no to her work, she and her family would also have been in the concentration camp or killed. Just because she already knew too much. At some point, one should also let history rest in peace” (SP-FB [20210226])

When users sought to defend the accused by criticising the belated nature of the trial, arguments slipped into REJECTION OF GUILT (see Figure 7). This comment, like many other, claims that there was no alternative to the actions of the concentration camp workers. By being relativised, guilt is thus averted: either one followed the regime without exception, which included working in the concentration camp, or one experienced victimisation. As a result, the possibilities of individual action and consequently responsibility are limited and thus withdrawn from moral evaluation, so that any complicity in the murders in concentration camps appears excusable or is denied. Moreover, the REJECTION OF GUILT is articulated at the beginning and at the end with a demand for a CLEAN BREAK. The anchoring of this narrative in the discourse is demonstrated above all by the frequent accusations of ahistoricity aimed at those seeking to attribute blame, responsibility or guilt to the accused, and the reversion to “historical” arguments which – erroneously, as in the comment above – claim the scope of action of concentration camp personnel was strictly limited:

“because today one has a completely wrong picture of the time. For me, the scandal is that after 75 years someone dares to judge what happened at that time” [“weil man heute inzwischen ein völlig falsches Bild von der Zeit hat. Für mich ist der Skandal das sich nach 75 Jahren jemand erdreistet über damalige Geschehnisse urteilen zu wollen”] (SP-FB [20210226])

Via an implicit assertion that a moral and legal assessment of crimes can only be made at the time they are committed, such comments deny any legitimacy of the trials and also relativise guilt in favour of the accused. The relativisation can go so far that the purpose of a concentration camp is entirely elided, and participation in the crimes is reinterpreted as an everyday and unproblematic activity unrelated to the actual function of the camps: “the woman did her duty... no more and no less” [“die Frau hat ihren Dienst gemacht... nicht mehr und nicht weniger”] (B-FB[20210717]).

The content of these concepts finds expression at a linguistic-communicative level too. Thus, the activation of the antisemitic concept of REJECTION OF GUILT is achieved partly by means of rhetorical questions: “What deeds has a secretary committed?” [“Welche Taten hat eine Sekretärin vollbracht?”] (B-TW[20210930]). By structuring an antisemitic concept in the form of a rhetorical question, the user is able to implicitly communicate an antisemitic view while keeping a potential defence open – that the question was literal and thus entirely innocent – should that implicit meaning be challenged. In this case, any complicity of the accused is doubted and thus guilt is denied. Similar rhetorical devices are used to deny even the guilt of an SS member: “His victims? What was he guilty of as a guard? Do you know that yet?” [“eine Opfer? Was hat er sich als Wachmann zu Schulden kommen lassen? Wissen Sie das schon?”] (W[20210801]). Furthermore, ironic statements are used to express the supposedly disproportionate character of those trials via indirect argumentation structures: “Next, please accuse the guard towers and fences as well? ↯ ↯ ↯” [“Als nächstes bitte auch die Wachtürme und Zäune anklagen? ↯ ↯ ↯”] (B-FB[20210930]). The apparent contradictoriness of such a statement implies that the concentration camp secretary would have been as uninvolved in the crimes as inanimate objects and, on the basis of this execution ad absurdum, seeks indirectly to relativise guilt, ridicule the trial, and attack its legitimacy.

REJECTION OF GUILT can also occur despite the acknowledgement of Nazi crimes and the consent to prosecution of these acts. By means of externalisation – in this case by narrowing the blame from German society as a whole to a small circle of so-called “Haupttäter” (the “main perpetrators” or “culprits”) – those perpetrators without direct military or political authority are largely absolved of responsibility for their part. Thus, all those who were indispensable for the functioning of the persecution and extermination are all but exonerated:

“Now you start the thorough legal workup and find only the little cogs in their old age. That is the real scandal for me. A young woman who worked as a secretary, an assistant cook, etc., all of them certainly made a contribution to the crime, but it is negligible compared to that of the lawyers, concentration camp doctors, etc.”

[“Jetzt beginnt man mit der gründlichen juristischen Aufarbeitung und findet nur noch die kleinen Rädchen im Greisenalter vor. Das ist für mich der eigentliche Skandal. Eine junge Frau, die als Sekretärin tätig war, ein Hilfskoch usw, alle haben einen Tatbeitrag sicher geleistet, aber der ist verschwindend, in Vergleich zu dem der Juristen, KZ-Ärzten usw.”]

(W[20210801])

4. Prosecution of former concentration camp personnel in Germany

Antisemitic statements can be secured through a variety of strategies: here, again the ostensible acknowledgement of Nazi crimes is used to present the main concern – in this case demands for a general CLEAN BREAK – in an apparently legitimate manner: “Yes it was bad what happened in the 3rd Reich but this woman is 96 years old leave it alone!” [“Ja es war schlimm was im 3 Reich passiert war aber diese Frau ist 96 Jahre lasst es gut sein!”] (SP-FB[20211005]). The desire for a CLEAN BREAK can also be expressed by demands to turn to other, supposedly more pressing current problems, or references to the age of the accused, which should supposedly exempt them from prosecution: “Why can’t he just be left alone...? I believe we have other problems in this day and age other than kicking grandpas in the leg when they are 100 years old” [“Warum kann man ihn nicht einfach nur in Ruhe lassen... glaub wir haben in der heutigen Zeit andere Probleme wie Opas mit 100 Jahren auf das Bein zu treten”] (SP-FB[20211007]). Here, at the same time, the term “grandpa” and the metaphor of a physical attack are used in an attempt to create a certain sympathy for the defendant. Irony also comes into play when the prosecution is accused of excessiveness by means of an exaggerated scenario: “you should be ashamed of yourselves. A 96-year-old woman. Maybe someone else can be dug up and judged.” [“schämen solltet ihr euch. Eine 96 Jahre alte Frau. Vielleicht kann man ja noch jemanden ausgraben und ab urteilen.”] (SP-FB[20210930]). Users attempt to rationalise their outrage over the trial through references to actual or supposed grievances – here through an anti-establishment topos popular on the right: “Unbelievable, what’s the point? There are a lot of criminals in the Bundestag, the judiciary should take care of that!” [“Unglaublich, was soll das? Im Bundestag sitzen viele Kriminelle, darum sollte sich die Justiz mal kümmern!”] (B-FB[20211001]).

In addition, statements can be found which attempt to negate the historical guilt of the Germans by HOLOCAUST DISTORTION: “We should also not forget what the Spanish and Portuguese did in South America... Whole cultures were wiped out there just like that...” [“Wir sollten auch nicht vergessen, was die Spanier und Portugiesen in Südamerika gemacht haben...

Dort wurden ganze Kulturen einfach mal so ausgelöscht...”] (SP-FB[20211005]). By using other historical scenarios in a comparative manner, there is an attempt, on the one hand, to divert the focus of interest from the Holocaust and, on the other, to place it within a multitude of crimes, ignoring the differences of the respective historical events (crimes in the context of colonialism and the Holocaust). Thus, the character of the Holocaust is no longer grasped as unique in human history but rather, on the contrary, as arbitrary. As a result of this HOLOCAUST DISTORTION, all Germans are absolved of particular responsibility and thus once again a REJECTION OF GUILT is implicitly postulated. HOLOCAUST DISTORTION occurred especially with reference to the Covid pandemic:

“You only have to look at the current situation, how quickly society is being divided by the Corona story. [...] How quickly people condemn, believe everything some politicians say, push those who think differently into a right-wing corner, restrict freedom of expression out of fear for their jobs... Every time, every country, every epoch has committed terrible crimes.”

[“man braucht ja nur aktuell schauen, wie schnell die Gesellschaft mit der Corona Geschichte gespalten ist. [...] Wie schnell verurteilt wird, alles geglaubt wird was irgendwelche Politiker sagen, anders denkende in die Rechte Ecke geschoben werden, mit Angst um den Arbeitsplatz freie Meinungsfreiheit eingeschränkt wird... Jede Zeit, jedes Land, jede Epoche hat furchtbare Verbrechen begangen.”]

(SP-FB[20211007])

First, with reference to current social conflicts, the targeted persecution of Jews under National Socialism is reinterpreted here as a clash of interests between equal groups. In the concluding sentence, as in the previous example, the Holocaust is generalised by being reduced to just one in a series of crimes. The extension of guilt to all of (historical) humanity again serves the REJECTION OF GUILT.

Criticism of current politicians in the context of Covid is also used to activate the already well-known demand for a CLEAN BREAK. The alleged crime of today's politicians – their policies to fight the pandemic – is said to be of greater weight than that of a perpetrator in the Holocaust:

“Putting a 96-year-old lady in prison. I know of over 700 politicians who deserved it more. Because they were mature enough to recognise the injustice in their actions.”

[“Eine Dame 96 Jahre alt ins Gefängnis stecken. Ich weiss von über 700 Politikern die das eher verdient haben. Denn die waren reif genug um das unrechte in ihrem handeln zu erkennen.”]
([B-FB\[20211001\]](#))

4.3 Conclusion

These trials are among the last to be directed against former concentration camp personnel. Accordingly, they are the last such discourse events for which the ensuing debates can provide such direct insights into freely formulated positions on these topics across German society. In the light of the comments analysed here, efforts within German society to come to terms with the past (*Aufarbeitung*), to confront the execution and background of the National Socialist crimes and the nature and extent of the Holocaust – and in this case in particular the question of guilt – remain insufficient. Rather, it becomes apparent that there remain considerable gaps within what had been assumed to be a broad consensus across German society about these crimes – here, the denial of guilt leads to downplaying even the specific responsibility of direct perpetrators, with the guilt that goes along with it being denied in a variety of ways. Attempts by the successor generation to excuse the perpetrator generation amount to an offer of solidarity from the former to the latter, and, along with efforts to suppress the memory of the Holocaust, stand for a fundamental lack of empathy with the victims and the deep desire to forget or avoid historical truth. Moreover, it testifies to a widespread inability to derive moral and practical consequences from one's actions, or to present any challenge to new modes of institutionalised injustice or persecution of minorities.

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