

MISREADING THE PUBLIC: THE CASE OF THE HOLOCAUST POLL

By David W. Moore and Frank Newport

A Roper Starch Worldwide poll conducted in November 1992, for the American Jewish Committee (AJC), and released last April in conjunction with the dedication of the Holocaust Memorial Museum, caused considerable consternation across the country. More than one American in five (22%), the poll reported, believed it was “possible the Nazi extermination of the Jews never happened.” Another 12% said they were unsure—34% in all seeming to indicate doubt.

News organizations across the country lamented the ignorance of so many Americans about this important event in world history. One newspaper even called these Americans “willfully stupid.”¹ *The New York Times* and *Washington Post* pointed to the 34% of Americans as evidence “the world does need reminding” of the Holocaust.² Elie Wiesel, the Nobel laureate and Holocaust survivor, who has written extensively about the killings in both fiction and nonfiction, was “shocked” at the results.³ When Stephen Spielberg’s epic Holocaust film, “Schindler’s List,”

first opened, results of the poll were again frequently cited with dismay.

Possible Question-Wording Effect

The Roper Starch question which produced these “shocking” results asked respondents, “Does it seem possible or does it seem impossible to you that the Nazi extermination of the Jews never happened?” To affirm belief in the Holocaust, the respondent had to choose the double negative form of the response, that it seems *impossible* the Nazi extermination of the Jews *never* happened. Further, this question mentions the *extermination* of the Jews, rather than a Nazi *attempt* to exterminate the Jews.

To examine the possibility that the wording of this question may be partly responsible for the high percentages of people expressing doubt about the Holocaust, Gallup decided to conduct a split-sample experiment as part of its January 15-17, 1994 survey.

All respondents were first asked whether they had heard of the term, “Holocaust.” Regardless of their response, the next question was prefaced with: “[As you know], the Holocaust usually refers to the killing of millions of Jews in Nazi death camps during World War II.”⁴ Form A respondents (a random half of the sample) were then asked the Roper Starch question, while Form B respondents were asked, “Do you *doubt* the Holocaust actually happened, or *not*?”

Form A vs. Form B

As shown in Figure 1, the Gallup poll results of the Form A question show that 33% said it was “possible” the extermination of the Jews never happened, with another 2% who said “unsure,” for a total of 35%. The original Roper Starch results had 22% who said “possible” and another 12% “unsure,” for a total of 34%.⁵

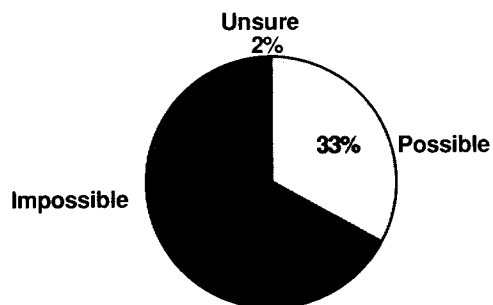
In Form B, however, just 9% of respondents said they “doubt” the Holocaust actually happened, with another 4%

Figure 1

Comparison of Form A and Form B Questions on the Holocaust

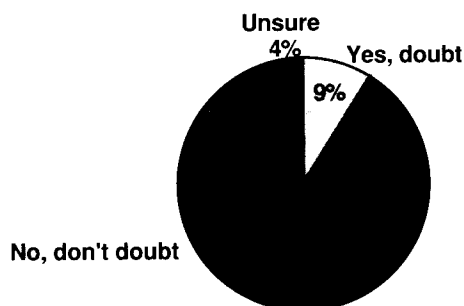
Form A (N=485)

Question: The term Holocaust usually refers to the killing of millions of Jews in Nazi death camps during World War II. Does it seem possible or does it seem impossible to you that the Nazi extermination of the Jews *never* happened?



Form B (N=525)

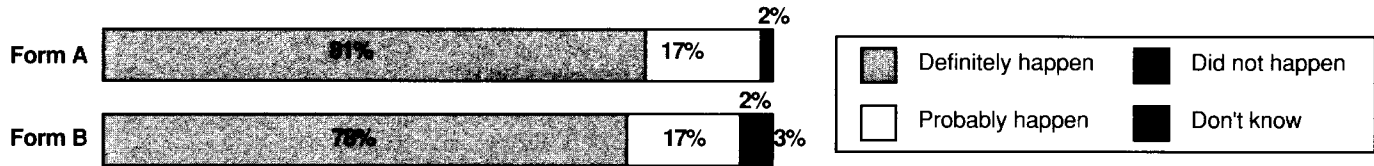
Question: The term Holocaust usually refers to the killing of millions of Jews in Nazi death camps during World War II. Do you doubt that the Holocaust actually happened, or not?



Source: Survey by the Gallup Organization, January 15-17, 1994.

Figure 2 Did the Holocaust Happen?

Question: Just to clarify, in your opinion, did the Holocaust definitely happen, probably happen, probably *not* happen, or *definitely not* happen?



Source: Survey by the Gallup Organization, January 15-17, 1994.

who said “unsure,” for a total of just 13%.

These data make it clear that question wording did influence the pattern of responses to the Holocaust issue. The Form A question produced about two and a half times more people who could be classified as doubters than did the Form B question.

Follow-up Question

Regardless of their answers to these questions, all respondents in the Gallup survey were then asked, “Just to clarify, in your opinion, did the Holocaust definitely happen, probably happen, probably *not* happen, or *definitely not* happen?” There were essentially no differences in responses to this question by form; the follow-up question was unaffected by whether it was asked after the Roper Starch question, or after the alternative. The result: 81% in Form A and 78% in Form B said the Holocaust “definitely happened,” and 17% in each form said it “probably happened.” Thus, 98% in Form A and 95% in Form B expressed their belief that the Holocaust occurred. Only 2% in each form said it did not happen. In Form B, another 3% said unsure.

Reasons for Skepticism

Although significantly fewer respondents expressed doubt about the Holocaust when asked the alternative question, the fact that any Americans at all

could say they “doubt” the Holocaust, or say the Holocaust only “probably” happened, could be cause for concern. To explore this issue further, all respondents who did not pick the option that the Holocaust “definitely” happened were asked to explain their views in their own words. An analysis of these open-ended responses indicates that the most frequently cited reason people gave for choosing the “probably happened” or the “probably” or “definitely” didn’t happen alternatives was lack of historical knowledge. Our results suggest that only about 4% of Americans have what might be called real doubts about the Holocaust: either that it did not occur, or that it has been greatly exaggerated.

Conclusion

Given the enormous tragedy of the Holocaust and the lessons it carries for human behavior, it must be a part of the public’s living memory. The results reported by the AJC suggested an alarming degree of public skepticism about whether the Holocaust actually happened. It’s not surprising that many were left deeply troubled. However, the Gallup experiment indicates that at worst only half that number have *any* doubt, and less than one in twenty have fundamental doubts about the occurrence of the Holocaust.

Endnotes:

¹ Debra J. Saunders, “Poll Shows America in Deep Dumbo,” *The San Francisco Chronicle*,

April 23, 1993, p. A30.

² “The Holocaust Remembered,” *New York Times*, April 23, 1993, p. A34; also see Laurie Goodstein, “Holocaust of Mirrors: A Tour of the Museum with Two Men who Deny What They Can See,” *Washington Post*, October 1, 1993, p. C1.

³ Leonard Larsen, “What’s on America’s Mind? Not Much, History Poll Finds,” *Sacramento Bee*, June 2, 1993, p. B7.

⁴ “As you know” was used only for those respondents who said they *had* heard of the term, the Holocaust.

⁵ The differences between the Roper Starch and Gallup results — mostly due to the larger number of “unsure” respondents in the Roper Starch than the Gallup poll — could also be due to the fact that Roper’s question followed a long series of questions about the Holocaust, while in the Gallup poll, the question followed only the items noted in the text. These small differences, however, do not invalidate the experiment, since both forms in the Gallup poll include the same number of questions about the Holocaust, and thus control for wording effects caused by the two forms.

*David W. Moore is
managing editor, and
Frank Newport is editor-in-
chief, The Gallup Poll*

The American Jewish Committee and Roper Starch Worldwide announced on January 28, 1994 that they will be repeating their Holocaust survey, to address the double negative issue which is the subject of this article. The results of the new Roper inquiry will be presented in the next issue of *The Public Perspective*.