

Keynote symposium. Teaching and learning about the Holocaust: Explorations in policy, pedagogy and praxis.

Paper presented by Alice Pettigrew:

### **The Holocaust in England's classrooms and curricula: past framings, present practice**

So, as Stuart has described, in my role as one of the research team within the Centre for Holocaust Education, and as a social scientist more broadly, my own work tends to focus on the here and now, on teacher and student accounts and classroom practice in the present day. However, this afternoon I'd like to reflect upon and discuss with you some of the very significant ways in which that present continues to be shaped and impacted upon by decisions made and actions taken in the past. Of course, among this audience of historians of education I know I am somewhat preaching to the converted, but essentially what I am trying to emphasize and illustrate is the critical importance of positioning contemporary research and analysis within an appropriate historical frame.

[SLIDE: TEACHERS RESEARCH]

In 2009, colleagues and I published a research report entitled *Teaching About the Holocaust in English Secondary Schools: An empirical study of national trends, perspective and practice*.

The research had been commissioned in order to directly inform the development and delivery of a programme of continuing professional development and essentially it sought to offer as detailed as was possible a snapshot of what was already going on in schools. It used a mixed methodological approach with an online survey and small group interviews to

examine teachers' aims and understandings when teaching the subject, the pedagogical decisions and content choices they made and the nature of any challenges they experienced in doing so.

As a follow-up to that research, we are currently undertaking an even more ambitious study in which our focus has shifted to the student perspective, this time examining, for example, the sources and content of young people's knowledge and understanding of the Holocaust and their attitudes towards learning about the Holocaust in school.

In this afternoon's paper I will be drawing largely from the first, teacher focused study but I would be very happy to discuss either project in further detail during questions or at a later point if time does not allow.

[SLIDE: NATIONAL CURRICULUM]

So, back to the matter at hand. In England, the Holocaust has been named and listed as a compulsory component of secondary school students' history education since the inception of the country's very first national curriculum in 1991. And while its position there has remained constant through something like 12 different secretaries of state for education, 5 different prime ministers and now 5 different content specifications, it is important to note and to recognise that its inclusion in that very first policy framing was far from guaranteed or assured.

Of course the construction of ANY singular curriculum with national, statutory status was always going to be a complex, contested and – in this instance at least – ultimately rather

volatile affair and the inclusion or otherwise of the Holocaust provides an interesting case in point. For, in early draft proposals circulated in August 1989, the Holocaust did not in fact appear in the initial lists of compulsory taught content for history. Nor, for that matter, did either the First or Second World Wars.

In the confines of just this short paper, I can only offer a very truncated account of the activity that followed but this is a period detailed with much greater nuance in a recent book by my colleague Andy Pearce, *Holocaust Consciousness in Contemporary Britain* and also in a 2006 study, *Teaching the Holocaust in School History* by Lucy Russell. Both of these are works I must acknowledge and am considerably indebted to here.

Suffice it to say that, while cautiously welcomed by both teachers and historians, the draft proposals caused considerable public outcry and political furore. The history working group conceded that the most commonly articulated criticism of the whole proposal was the omission of the two World Wars and, as they characterised it, 'related studies such as Facism'. This criticism was seized upon as an important opportunity by an increasingly well galvanised group of campaigners and lobbyists – a group who shared personal, professional and/or political concerns regarding an ostensible lack of knowledge or awareness of the Holocaust among the general British public at that time.

Key among these lobbyists was John P Fox, a historian who authored an especially critical response to the proposed curriculum submitted to the Secretary of State for Education on behalf a cross-party group of MPs. This response argued that the omission of the rise and fall of the Third Reich [was], and I quote, 'totally unacceptable; without logic; educationally

insupportable; and offensive to all those who fought in or suffered from the Nazis or the Second World War' not least among these offenses was the danger it would likely lead to the further neglect of, and I quote again, 'one of the greatest war crimes perpetrated in modern history – Nazi Germany's attempted destruction of the whole of European Jewry'. Interestingly at this stage the crimes in question were not explicitly referred to as 'the Holocaust'.

[SLIDE: SPECIAL STATUS]

Now, John Fox is, I consider, a particularly interesting actor here, for 1989 also saw the formal launch of a final report based on research Fox had conducted in English schools and universities two years previously.

Although there had been no formal requirement to teach about it prior to 1991, the Holocaust had, in fact been engaged with by students and teachers, at least in some schools since the late 1970s through the educational work of the Imperial War Museum and with increasing prominence throughout the 1980s. Fox's research had been commissioned by Yad Vashem – a global centre for Holocaust remembrance and research – to find out more about the precise forms in which such engagement was taking place.

I don't want the Fox report as it came to be known to detain us too long here, but rather, I want to draw attention to one of the author's published concerns, namely that, where it was being introduced in schools, the Holocaust was not generally being approached as a "special subject" or distinct area of study. In fact, Fox warned that there appeared to be considerable resistance among teachers to such a suggested approach.

Here I think it is important to clarify, that in this context, Fox is using the term 'special' to refer to whether or not the Holocaust was presented as a distinct object of enquiry or as a component part of a wider unit of study. However, I think it is perhaps an unfortunate choice of word as there is a second sense of the word 'special' – as unique or singularly important in some way – which also echoes through the report and through the discursive constructions Fox and others used in petitioning the Department for Education in late 1989. And it is this second sense of the word 'special' which, as I will go on to argue, continues to echo – with problematic consequence – in the present day.

Now, my point is neither to defend nor to decry a 'special' status for teaching about the Holocaust within the school curriculum although I am sure it will come as no surprise to you to hear that, working within a Centre for Holocaust Education, I am surrounded by colleagues who could argue a number of very compelling cases for its inclusion. However, and of critical importance, I know that each of those colleagues would be united in their agreement that, however compelling they believe their individual cases to be, they nonetheless still need making. Now, by that I mean they need to be critically considered, clearly outlined and supported by a sound intellectual and/or pedagogical rationale. Yet precisely such deliberation or explication was notable only in its absence in 1989.

As Lucy Russell has written, campaigners such as Fox were, understandably, focused upon wining an argument and securing a position within the curriculum for the Holocaust and Second World War. And they had to do so within a very narrow timeframe. Rather than make and explain a case, to policy makers, or indeed to teachers, the educational import of

the Holocaust was presented as though self-evident. And this in fact only served to obscure very real contentions and controversies, among the British Jewish community for example, over whether and in what manner it was appropriate to learn about the Holocaust in school. In the short term, it was ultimately a very successful strategy, but again, as I hope to be able to demonstrate, and as both Pearce and Russell have also argued – there was an important missed opportunity here and this absence of critical reflection continues to impact the shape and form given to teaching and learning about the Holocaust in the present day.

Okay, so if we now jump forward almost three decades, our 2009 research presented a picture which suggested that teachers themselves – at least those who took part in our survey – now broadly agreed with the sentiment that the Holocaust should indeed be taught about within England's secondary schools. And so, for example, among the Key Stage 3 History teachers who gave responses to the relevant questions, 86% agreed with the statement 'it is right that teaching about the Holocaust is compulsory in the history curriculum' while 93% agreed, 'it will always be important to teach about the Holocaust'.

[SLIDE: TEACHERS EMPHASISING IMPORTANCE]

Many of those who were interviewed in greater detail also made reference in various ways to the 'special' status of the Holocaust within their own teaching. They talked, for example, about how, for them it wasn't 'just another topic' or how their usual concerns and approaches as teachers 'went out the window' when they approached the Holocaust.

Others like the two teachers whose words are reproduced above explained that they in turn emphasised this importance or singularity to their students. The words of the second teacher are especially salient to my argument here.

For her - and ultimately for her students - it is by dint of its secured position in the curriculum that the educational importance of the Holocaust is both demonstrated and assured.

[SLIDE: TEACHER QUESTIONING IMPORTANCE]

However, when, as interviewees, we tried to explore this a little further, the same teachers regularly struggled to articulate exactly *why* they considered the Holocaust to be so important in educational terms.

Or, like the teacher above, they approached this 'why?' in interview as an interesting question that they had not really considered before.

And while this uncertainty caused some consternation in our analysis, if we think back on the genesis of the curriculum it really shouldn't have been at all surprising. For there too, the importance of teaching about the Holocaust was assumed and presented as something you didn't need to think about. At a policy level, no answer had been provided to the 'why' question, either in the first national curriculum, nor in any of its subsequent revisions in the intervening years.

[SLIDE: TEACHER'S QUESTIONS]

And this matters. For without a clear rationale of *why* they should be teaching about the Holocaust, teachers are left with very little guidance on *how* they should be teaching about it, what content they should be including, and what they should be hoping to achieve. And this absence was again felt keenly by some of the teachers in our study. Over 40 % of those with experience of teaching about the Holocaust indicated that they felt it was difficult to do so effectively.

I think some of these problems are nicely articulated by the teacher whose words are reproduced above. And again, in hearing this teacher's unanswered questions, it is instructive to remember the policy framings of the past.

[SLIDE: INTERVIEW WITH FOX]

And so, I return to John P Fox and an interview he gave to Lucy Russell in 2004 in which she asked directly what his personal intentions and aspirations for the inclusion of compulsory teaching about the Holocaust had been.

And as you can see, Fox himself had no clear steer on the approach he thought that teachers should be taking, nor to what end.

By 2009, there had already been three revisions to the initial curriculum reference to the Holocaust that Fox had been so instrumental in securing, but at no point had the question of rationale or further guidance been addressed.

In fact, when Tony Blair's New Labour government came to power in 1997 and established a panel for curriculum review, the Task Group responsible for history content were explicitly directed - and I am quoting Lucy Russell here 'there was [to be] no discussion regarding what was important about teaching the Holocaust in history, what the term 'Holocaust' encompassed, or how the Holocaust should be taught in school'.

[SLIDE: IMPACTING PRACTICE]

Again, the educational import of the Holocaust was left to be presented as though entirely uncontentious and self-evident whereas, in reality there are – and always have been – multiple, competing perspectives on how, why and indeed whether the Holocaust should be taught in schools. One of the key points made by both Pearce and Russell is that, in the absence of any clear discussion at an educational policy level the form and content of teaching and learning about the Holocaust in England can – and is – in practice shaped by all manner of opportunistic and not always entirely appropriate or helpful contemporary socio-cultural concerns.

And so, for example, in our 2009 research, many of the teachers we spoke to framed their own practice in a language that prioritised 'relevance' and 'relatability' to their students' twenty-first century, multicultural lives. And again, this makes sense against a background of a government for whom issues of 'social inclusion', 'community cohesion' and 'managing diversity' had, since it first came to office, been high priorities in the domestic policy agenda.

But do such concerns make for good history teaching?

I am conscious we could spend at least an entire panel session considering the tension or otherwise between ostensibly 'historical' and more broadly, 'civic', 'moral' or otherwise instrumentalist teaching aims. However, I do want to emphasise that the issue of aims can have profound consequence for the specific form and content of the classroom history that ends up being taught. And so, for example, here we have an extract from interview in which a group of teachers explain how the very definition of the Holocaust that they would use with and present to their students is consciously impacted upon by the perceived priority of 'relevance'.

[SLIDE: FUTURE PROSPECTS]

In drawing to a close, let me reiterate my central argument – that the inclusion of reference to the Holocaust in the first national curriculum was orchestrated such that its importance was, from the outset presented as self-evident and its pedagogical rationale never clearly explored. As a consequence, history teachers continue to work with considerable ambiguity over their ultimate teaching aims.

But I'd also like to spend just a few moments considering the potential import of any of this for the future. For 2014 presents an interesting juncture with, I would argue, both a renewed sense of urgency and also considerable opportunity.

First, what do I mean by urgency.

As many of you may know, our recently departed education secretary Michael Gove has had a very busy 4 years in office and two key pillars of his not inconsiderable legacy have very

significant implication here. As a starting point, Gove oversaw arguably the most dramatic – and certainly the most controversial – revision, or rather entire restructuring, of the national curriculum. And in its newest iteration – due to be taught in schools from this coming September – the rhetorical significance awarded to the Holocaust has never been more pronounced or profound. It now literally stands alone as the only specified compulsory content within a unit of study entitled, ‘Challenges for Britain, Europe and the wider world 1901 to the present day’. Other key twentieth century events – such as both the First and Second World Wars, for example, are listed only as content that ‘*could*’ be included.

But at the same time, Gove has also encouraged an ever increasing numbers of schools to move away from local authority control by becoming what are known in this country as academies. Essentially, this gives school leaders the power to set their own agendas and priorities and enables them to opt out of the national curriculum thus seriously undermining the notion that *any* named content is actually statutory any more.

While these two initiatives appear to be pulling in precisely the opposite direction, I actually think that both create conditions in which a clearly articulated, cogently argued rationale of the educational importance of the Holocaust is more urgently required.

[SLIDE: OPPORTUNITY]

And as I also suggested, now is perhaps an especially opportune moment to do so.

For this year has also seen the establishment of a special Prime Ministers Commission on the Holocaust which specifically emphasises a commitment to education. Now, while I think

there is something really rather problematic by the notion of ‘preserving the lessons of the Holocaust’ implied here and throughout the government’s related web-pages – not least because it speaks to an apparent elision between ‘education’ and commemoration – surely, given the short history I’ve just recounted, any meaningful commitment to the notion of ‘lessons’ or ‘learning’ about, or from the Holocaust must now encompass some kind of critical reflection, discussion and debate?

[SLIDE: OPPORTUNITY]

And here I really hope that the work of the Centre for Holocaust Education – and in particular our empirical research – with teachers and now also with students – can instructively contribute to precisely such deliberation and debate.

Now, I was torn between which of the following two slides to leave you with. I am aware that both breach just about every guideline for effective powerpoint presentations that there has ever been but together they illustrate just something of the scope and scale of our current research. The first summarises notes made from an early research meeting and encapsulates some of the many questions we ultimately hope our research might help to answer. The second offers just a really, tiny fraction of some of the data we have already collected and the kinds of things we ultimately hope to be able to use it to explore.

My point being, there is an important opportunity here: to really interrogate what students – and their teachers – know or don’t know, feel or believe about the Holocaust, and to use that information as a baseline for deliberation on the critically important questions that have remained unanswered throughout its formal history on the curriculum: What is Holocaust education actually for?