CENTRE FOR
HOLOCAUST EDUCATION

UCL

Victims of the Holocaust

Using national research to inform your classroom practice.

Research briefing 2

Highlights from our research report **'What do students know and understand about the Holocaust?' Evidence from English secondary schools** (Foster et al, 2016). Free to download at www.ucl.ac.uk/holocaust-education

At the UCL Centre for Holocaust Education, we use the term 'the Holocaust' specifically for the genocide of European Jews.

While many other groups were also persecuted by the Nazi regime, only the Jews were targeted for total annihilation, across national borders, wherever the Nazis could reach them.

Our first briefing in this series, 'Non-Jewish victims of Nazi persecution and murder', looked at the specific experiences of several Nazi victim groups and explored how much students in English secondary schools currently know about them. This second briefing examines the distinctive experience of the European Jews during the Holocaust, and how much students know about this vital history.

What do students know about the victims?

Key findings

1 Over 90% of survey respondents correctly identified Jews as victims of the Holocaust.

2 Most students indicated that there was something distinctive about the Jewish experience but could not explain what this was. Some did not see the Nazis' intent to murder all Jews, wherever they could reach them, as a defining feature of the Jewish experience.

3 While students were conscious that Jews were murdered in large numbers, a significant proportion were unable to say how many people were killed.

4 Students showed considerable uncertainty in their understanding of the policies enacted against Jews. In particular, many students struggled to articulate the specifics of the Jewish experience of persecution and murder.

5 Students were not able to provide robust explanations for why the Jews were targeted. With 68% unaware of what 'antisemitism' means, their explanations tended to rest on distorted understandings and misconceptions.

Why does this matter?

To understand the significance of any genocide, it is essential to know who the victims were and the lives and communities that were lost. Becoming familiar with the vibrancy of pre-war Jewish life, and the diversity of their communities, enables students to appreciate what existed before they were almost totally destroyed in the Holocaust.

Understanding pre-war Jewish life is also important so that Jews do not appear on the historical stage only as victims to be murdered, defined entirely by their persecution and death. Nor should they be seen as a passive mass. It is vital that young people recognise the pre-war Jews as individuals, who responded as best they could to the unfolding genocide.

> It is crucial that students also know what was specific about the Holocaust: that it was only the Jews who were targeted by the Nazis for total murder.

Knowledge of individual Jewish lives and diverse Jewish communities can also stand as a counter to the age-old antisemitic stereotypes young people are likely to encounter through their study of Nazi ideology and propaganda.

Teachers should take care not to unwittingly reinforce some of these harmful stereotypes. If students are to be able to explain why Jews were targeted, without looking for some 'fault' within the victims themselves, or attempting to rationalise the causes of their persecution, then they need to understand the Nazis' world view as a significant distortion of the reality of pre-war Jewish life.

Many public commemorations, historical representations and educational initiatives of the Holocaust (this research briefing included) give particular prominence to the fate of the Jews. Regrettably, this is at times, and mistakenly, taken as evidence that Jews somehow 'dominate the media', or 'use' the Holocaust to further their own interests at the expense of others. Without due care, commemoration and education can themselves reinforce age-old antisemitic myths of Jewish influence and power. If young people are not to be drawn into such misunderstandings, then it is crucial that they also know just what was specific about the Holocaust: that it was only the Jews who were targeted by the Nazis for total murder. Every last Jewish man, woman and child was to be killed in a continent-wide genocide.

What do students know about the Jewish experience?

When the survey asked, 'Who were the victims of the Holocaust?' more than 90% of responses correctly identified the Jews. Over half (52.9%) of students who replied to this question made reference to Jews only. An additional 39.7% mentioned Jews and other victim groups. Only 2.4% did not include reference to the Jews. This indicates that the vast majority of students understand the Holocaust to be related to Jewish people.

But what exactly do students know about the fate of the Jews and the reasons for their persecution? Various areas of the research help to build a picture of students' sense of the Jewish experience. For example, when asked to describe the Holocaust in the survey and to brainstorm information about it during interviews, students commonly made reference to Jews in association with mass death or large scale killing.

Additionally, among survey respondents, 86.6% of students indicated that the statement 'The Nazis planned to kill every last person of this group, wherever they could reach them' applied to the Jews. This strong result indicates awareness amongst most students that Jews were killed *en masse*, and in an organised, intentional way.

Credit: Emile Holba

Totality and scale

However, responses to this statement also demonstrated that some students appeared to believe that the totality of the Nazi's plans were not limited to Jews alone. Over a quarter of students believed that intended annihilation was also true for gay men (29.6%) and disabled people (26.7%). So students tended wrongly to believe that other victims of Nazi persecution shared a similar fate.

Curiously, these misconceptions appeared to develop with age suggesting that students become increasingly less likely to regard totality as limited to Jews alone. For example, while 16.6% of Year 7 students suggested homosexuals were also marked for complete murder by the regime, this figure rose to 30.9% in Year 9 and peaked at 40.6% in Year 12. This has particular resonance for thinking about what students take 'the Holocaust' to mean as they progress through their school careers.

> Students tended wrongly to believe that other victims of Nazi persecution shared a similar fate.

When the survey asked 'Approximately how many Jews in all of Europe were killed during the Holocaust?' just over half of all respondents (52.9%) selected the most historically accurate choice, 6 million. But on closer inspection a more complicated picture emerged. For example, almost 30% of those who answered correctly indicated that their response was either a guess or made with uncertainty. Adding to this, over a third of all students (36%) massively underestimated the total number of Jews killed selecting responses of 2 million or less. This included 10.3% of students who appeared to believe that no more than 100,000 lives were lost.

Indications of the scale of the genocide can be observed in the development of Nazi policy towards Jewish children. Following the invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, the *Einsatzgruppen*, together with other SS and police units, principally focused on killing adult males. By August 1941, however, mass shootings increasingly involved women and children. By May 1945, around 90% of Jewish children (around 1.5 million) had been killed.

When students were asked 'Approximately what percentage of Jewish children living in Nazi controlled Europe were murdered?', only 15.9% of all students chose the correct answer (i.e. 90% of Jewish children). While the results of this question must be treated with caution, as students may simply not have come across the correct percentage in the course of their studies, they do indicate unfamiliarity with the policy of mass murder pursued against Jewish children. This also speaks to student knowledge of the scale of the genocide more generally.

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Together, these findings show that a significant number of students believed that total annihilation was pursued against multiple victim groups, and many were not sure how many Jews were killed.

This raises the question of what exactly students see as being specific to the Jewish experience. In absence of these understandings about totality and scale, many students spoke in somewhat confused terms about the specific nature of actions against Jews. For example, a number of younger students described Jews as being 'singled out' or 'treated the worst' (Ellie, Year 9). Attempting to expand on these ideas, students often became muddled, with some indicating that treatment merely constituted the Nazis 'doing more' to Jews and the notion that 'there was more focus on them' (Lachlan, Year 10). As Hamish (Year 9) stated: 'I think they [the Nazis] particularly really hated Jewish people and they did more to them'.

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Why the Jews?

When attempting to explain why the Jews were targeted, young people employed different levels of historical knowledge and conceptual understanding.

One explanation was provided by responses to the survey statement 'They were blamed by Hitler for Germany's defeat in the First World War.' The majority of students (64%) correctly indicated that the statement applied to the Jews. This finding was age-related. While 50.2% of Year 7 students ascribed the statement to Jews, the percentage rose to 80.2% in Year 12. This data indicates that, over time, students become more acquainted with the 'stab-in-the-back' indictment made by Hitler and the Nazis to account for Germany's defeat in the First World War. Focus group interviews confirmed that many students saw scapegoating as an explanation for the Jewish fate.

However, some students, in attempting to explain 'why they Jews?' relied more on their knowledge of Nazi allegations against Jewry (e.g., the suggestion that Jews were rich and powerful), rather than on the anxieties, paranoia, and antisemitism of the perpetrators themselves. This uncritical approach meant that students were not able to challenge the misconceptions upon which this scapegoating was founded in the first place.

The three main dimensions raised by the students in their attempts to explain the hatred directed towards the Jews were the size of the Jewish population, their socio-economic status, and their beliefs.

1 Population size

Many students dramatically over-estimated the size of German Jewry. When asked by the survey what percentage of the German population in 1933 were Jewish, 73.9% suggested that Jews made up between 15% and 30% of the total population. Only 8.8% identified the correct figure of less than 1% – equivalent to just 505,000 people in the whole of Germany (which had a population of around 67 million). Such overestimations can arise from the same myths of Jewish power and influence that underpinned so much Nazi propaganda. They can also prevent students from understanding that the Jews were in fact a small, vulnerable minority in Germany and, indeed, throughout Europe.

2 Socio-economic position

The focus groups revealed that some young people entertained troubling myths about the socio-economic position of German Jews. Their comments often drew on familiar antisemitic stereotypes:

'They were doctors, lawyers; they owned shops so they were rich, I guess you could say' (Holly, Year 10)

'[They] were paid well ... high powered' (Will, Year 12)

'Had the best jobs' (Aaliyah, Year 10)

Here the students appeared to accept the faulty logic that Germans had reason to dislike or fear Jews, or to blame them for the depressed state of interwar Germany.

In making a clear distinction between 'the Jews' and 'the Germans' these students also tended to reinforce the worrying view that Jewish people were not themselves German and a part of the wider German society.

3 Jewish beliefs

In the survey, 41.6% of students responded that Jews could have avoided persecution 'if they gave up their beliefs'. This finding suggests that young people incorrectly believed that religious intolerance provided the rationale for persecution. Such a conception ignores the importance of racial theory in Nazi ideology: that the Nazis erroneously believed that the Jews were a distinct and dangerous 'race' who could not be accepted as part of wider society.

Furthermore, many students also invoked a generalised notion of 'difference' to explain why the Jews were targeted. This led to oversimplified views which severely limited understanding and did not recognise the multifaceted nature of Nazi anti-Jewish sentiment.

Antisemitism

Explaining how and why the Holocaust happened requires at least some reference to antisemitism. However, this term was familiar to only 31.8% of students surveyed.

This does not mean that the remainder were necessarily ignorant of anti-Jewish sentiment in Europe in the 1930s and 1940s, but a lack of awareness of what antisemitism means and refers to raises pressing questions. It could be evidence that students do not know or understand the long history of hatred and discrimination against Jews in Europe, and how these changed and shifted in a modern, secular world. It also suggests students are unfamiliar with the foundational principles of how the Nazis saw the Jews within their world-view, and that these were centred on notions of race and blood instead of religion. Finally, the finding indicates students may not appreciate the different forms and types that antisemitism took during this period.

In the absence of this knowledge, the majority of students relied on over-simplified or sometimes inaccurate concepts. For example, some of them attributed anti-Jewish policy to Hitler and Hitler alone, or repeated the common myth that his personal hatred was the sole cause of Jewish persecution. Such personification of the Holocaust's causes significantly limits understanding of the broader, European-wide complicity in the genocide.

Credit: Emile Holba

Key recommendations

It is vital to improve understanding of the distinctive fate of Jewish victims. Teachers should more thoroughly explore with their students the policies enacted against the Jews and investigate why they were targeted by the Nazi regime.

The research indicates teaching should:

- Explain that the Nazi policy of killing every last person, wherever they could be found, applied only to the Jews. This is the key difference in the Jewish experience when compared with other victim groups targeted by the Nazi regime.
- Ensure that students know that approximately 6 million Jews were murdered in the Holocaust.
- Discuss the radicalising nature of the Nazi persecution against Jews and its relationship with the events of the Second World War (see below).
- Challenge widespread misconceptions about Jews in Germany, including the size of Jewish communities, their socio-economic status and their beliefs, while also exploring details of pre-war Jewish life.
- Examine the long history of anti-Jewish discrimination and the specific features of Nazi antisemitism.

In order to fully understand the distinctive features of the Jewish persecution and murder, students also need knowledge of the radicalising nature of the Nazi persecution against Jews and its relationship with the events of the Second World War. This is discussed in the third briefing in this series, 'An unfolding genocide'.

Our support for teachers

The UCL Centre for Holocaust Education's support for teachers is uniquely responsive to the challenges identified in this research. We have designed powerful resources and pedagogic approaches to support teachers in successfully addressing the formidable issues raised by a study of the Holocaust.

We offer:

- A free full day CPD programme
- A series of standalone, after-school CPD workshops

All of these sessions are free and open to all secondary school teachers in England. They are regularly delivered at venues across the country.

Some of our resources addressing issues raised in this briefing

Who were the 6 million?


Credit: Yad Vashem

Workshop and related classroom materials, included as part of our full day CPD

This workshop reveals the vibrancy and diversity of pre-war Jewish life and helps students to appreciate the magnitude of what was lost in the Holocaust.

What was the Holocaust? An interactive timeline


Credit: Olivia Hemingway

Workshop and related classroom materials, included as part of our full day CPD

This provides both depth and overview of the history of the Holocaust. It tracks the development of the Holocaust over time and reveals how the persecution and murder of the Jews was related to and interwoven with Nazi crimes against other victim groups, so that the distinctiveness of each is appreciated and understood.

Resistance


Credit: Auschwitz State Museum

Twilight CPD workshop and related classroom materials

‘Resistance’ empowers teachers to engage their students in an astonishing range of responses and acts of resistance by Jewish people. These include examples of armed resistance - Jewish partisan activity, uprisings in the ghettos, revolts in the death camps - and also the struggle to maintain human dignity in the face of the most extreme persecution. ‘Resistance’ also explores efforts by the victims to record and preserve the evidence of the genocide even as the Nazis sought to hide all traces of their crimes.

Unlocking antisemitism

Twilight CPD workshop and related classroom materials

This workshop locates and contextualises Nazi racial thinking in terms of the long history of European anti-Judaism.

It also provides essential knowledge and understanding to counter common myths and stereotypes of the Jewish people.

Being human?


Credit: USHMM, courtesy of Richard Freimark.

Workshop and related classroom materials, included as part of our full day CPD

‘Being human?’ extends the responsibility and complicity for the genocide beyond Hitler and the Nazi hierarchy to ordinary people in Germany and across the continent.

More learning online

Our website has a range of teaching and learning materials that allow students to explore the rich diversity of pre-war Jewish life and the contributions that Jews have made to European society. This knowledge is vital if they are to recognise and challenge the antisemitic myths, misconceptions and stereotypes that fed Nazi propaganda and continue to circulate in various forms to this day.

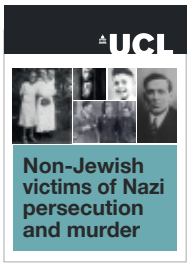
Visit **holocausteducation.org.uk/teacher-resources/subject-knowledge** for more information.

About these briefings

Victims of the Holocaust is the second in a series of research briefings which report key findings from a landmark study of young people's knowledge and understanding of the Holocaust published by the UCL Centre for Holocaust Education in 2016. The study drew on survey responses from 7,952 11 to 18 year olds from across England and focus group interviews with an additional 244.

Further details of the methods used in this research – including the complete, 91 question survey instrument – are freely available on the UCL Centre for Holocaust Education's website (www.ucl.ac.uk/holocaust-education) where you can also find a full list of other titles in this series.

The current list of research briefings explores what students know about these key areas of knowledge:



The UCL Centre for Holocaust Education is the only specialist Holocaust organisation combining research into classroom needs with CPD and practical support for teachers.

To find out more about us, book events and explore our full programme of workshops and CPD, please visit our website.

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Front cover image: Four generations in the Pitel family, Poland, 1938.
Credit: Yad Vashem.

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