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Spaces of killing

Using national research to inform your classroom practice.

Research briefing 4

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

If students are to understand the significance of the Holocaust and the full enormity of its scope and scale, they need to appreciate that it was a continent-wide genocide.

The perpetrators ultimately sought to kill every Jew, everywhere they could reach them and uprooted victims from communities across Europe. It is therefore crucial to know about the geography of the Holocaust relating to the development of the concentration camp system; the location, role and purpose of the ghettos; where and when Nazi killing squads committed mass shootings; and the evolution of the death camps.

This briefing, the fourth in our series, explores students' knowledge and understanding of these key issues, drawing on survey research and focus group interviews with more than 8,000 11 to 18 year olds.

What do students know about where the Holocaust took place?

Key findings

1 54.9% of students surveyed incorrectly thought that the largest number of killings of Jewish people took place in Germany.

2 Students commonly referred to camps and ghettos but many had limited understanding of where or why they were established.

3 Most students (71%) recognised Auschwitz as explicitly connected to the Holocaust but knowledge of other camps was very limited.

4 Students often confused concentration camps (where very large numbers of people from many victim groups were persecuted and huge numbers were killed) with death camps (specifically designed for the mass murder of Jews).

5 The majority of students did not know about the *Einsatzgruppen* (Nazi killing squads) and the mass shootings of up to two million people in the East.

Why does this matter?

Knowledge of the 'spaces of killing' is important to an understanding of the Holocaust. If students do not appreciate the scale of the killings outside of Germany and particularly the East, then it is impossible to grasp the devastation of Jewish communities in Europe or the destruction of diverse and vibrant cultures that had developed over centuries.

Entire communities lost

Thousands of small towns and villages in Poland, Ukraine, Crimea, the Baltic states and Russia, which had a majority Jewish population before the war, are now home to not a single Jewish person. One out of every three people who walked the streets of Warsaw was Jewish before the Second World War; now you can walk in that city and never meet a Jewish resident.

A failure to recognise the extent of this devastation obscures the void that now exists in Europe because of this genocide.

Spaces help understand the histories of different victim groups

A vague notion of 'the concentration camp' could be one reason why all victim groups can become misleadingly grouped under the single label 'Holocaust'. (This is covered in more detail in our first briefing in this series, 'Non-Jewish Victims of Nazi Persecution and Murder'.)

Disabled people were not sent to concentration camps, but many were forcibly sterilised, and – later – huge numbers were murdered by the medical profession in asylums installed with gassing apparatus during the so called 'Euthanasia' programme.

Relatively few of the six million Jewish victims of the Holocaust were ever registered in a concentration camp. They were shot into mass graves in the East; perished of starvation and disease in the ghettos; or were deported to specially built death camps where they were murdered within hours of their arrival.

The concentration camps, though murderous, were not designed for mass murder, and the atrocious histories of those camps belong more to other victims, including homosexuals, Sinti, Russian POWs and Poles, than to Jews.

Knowledge of the different spaces of killing can lead to far deeper understanding of the particular histories of different victim groups. And knowing how the different spaces developed over time, and how they were connected to broader Nazi policy and the unfolding course of the Second World War, can help explain the process of persecution, mass murder and genocide.

What do students know and understand about where the Holocaust took place?

Survey respondents were asked to describe what they thought the Holocaust was. Among the more than 6,000 relevant free text descriptions received, references to location were infrequent and typically non-specific.

Where reference was made to a named country, this was almost exclusively restricted to Germany or ‘Nazi Germany’ (734 individual references) and, to a much lesser extent, ‘Poland’ (51 references). While many other countries in Nazi occupied Europe were caught up in the events of the Holocaust, no other country was explicitly named by surveyed students. The vast majority of students who mentioned a particular location incorrectly thought that the geographical space where the mass killing of Jewish people took place was Germany.

This finding was further reinforced by students’ answers to the multiple choice question, ‘In which country did the largest number of killings of Jewish people actually take place?’ Just over a third of students (35.2%) selected the correct answer, Nazi-occupied Poland, while the majority of students (54.9%) incorrectly believed that the largest number of killings happened in Germany.

It was also noticeable that, given the explicit relationship between the Holocaust and the invasion of the USSR in June 1941, very few students (2.3%) selected the Soviet Union as an option.

Credit: Olivia Hemingway

Misconceptions about ‘camps’

The free text descriptions also revealed that ‘camps’ featured very prominently in students’ general conception of the Holocaust. Across all year groups, ‘camp’ or ‘camps’ consistently appeared among the ten most frequently used words or terms. Among the Year 7 to 11 students, it ranked within the top five.

The association between ‘camps’ – and more specifically, ’concentration camps’ – and the Holocaust was at times so strong that, in several cases, the two terms were presented as though synonymous as, for example, when one student claimed,‘Holocaust is a concentration camp for Jews’ (Year 9 student, survey response).

Further analysis of students’ descriptions suggested that, while the phrase of a concentration camp was familiar to most, this was not always underpinned by very comprehensive understanding. For example, many students only appeared familiar with limited or isolated aspects of the camp system: some appeared to conceive of camps entirely in relation to the exploitation of Jewish labour while others seemed to believe that their primary purpose was medical experimentation and testing.

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The limits of students’ knowledge of the camp system was further substantiated by another survey question which presented students with a list of named events, people and places and asked them which they considered to be connected with the Holocaust. 71% of students identified Auschwitz as related to the Holocaust. However, two other named camps, the concentration camp of Bergen-Belsen and death camp of Treblinka were recognised by only 15.2% and 14.9% respectively. During interviews, a few students hinted at the existence of ‘other camps’ but not one of students from Year 11 or below named a camp other than Auschwitz. This indicates an emphasis on Auschwitz in the public sphere and perhaps in classroom teaching which excludes or marginalises other camps.

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Furthermore, while ‘camps’ in abstract appeared to play a centrally important role in students’ conceptions of the Holocaust, the vast majority failed to acknowledge that the Nazis operated a variety of different camps with varying form and function. For example, one Year 9 student wrote:

‘[The Holocaust is] otherwise referred to as the concentration camps. These were built during the second world war by the Nazis in which they imprisoned Jews, Blacks, gays and disabled there to work and build more of the camp and then they would put the ones that could no longer work in a gas chamber where they were gassed until no one in there was alive.’

As this quote indicates, there was considerable confusion about the characteristics of different types of camps and about the people who were imprisoned there. Arguably, the prevalence of ‘Auschwitz’ in students’ conceptions of the Holocaust could contribute to this confusion. For not only does a focus on Auschwitz exclude other camps from students’ understanding, but its own complicated nature perhaps helps to obscure the distinctions between the different kinds of camps.

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Limited knowledge of the death camps

Within both the free-text survey responses and in interviews, it was concentration camp imagery that dominated students' imagination while there was very little evidence of widespread familiarity with the death camps. Where reference was made to death camps, knowledge and understanding was fragmentary and confused.

For example, Paige (Year 10) suggested:

'There could have been a few death camps before the war. But some of them were work camps and it wasn't until the war had got really started that they all turned into death camps and they weren't work camps anymore.'

Or, as Matt (Year 9) suggested while the rest of his focus group attempted to recall the names of death camps other than Auschwitz-Birkenau:

'I know there was another one; it was like another big one. I don't actually know the name of it but it was like either in Holland or Poland. It was in that kind of area.'

There was no death camp located in the Netherlands, although there were other types of camps that possibly influenced this student's understanding, and very large numbers of deportees from the Netherlands were sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau and Sobibor.

The examples here illustrate how low-level knowledge of the existence of 'lots of camps' in occupied Europe, together with at least some familiarity with aspects of the concentration camp model, leads to a limited and skewed understanding of the nature of death camps and the means by which they came into existence.

Concentration and death camps

The first Nazi concentration camps were constructed from 1933, not for Jews, but for the Nazis' political opponents. In the early years of the regime, most people who were sent to these camps walked out again within months.

Concentration camps and the subsequent expansion of a vast network of slave labour camps – however murderous they became – served a very different purpose from death camps, the first of which, Chelmno, began killing in late 1941. While tens of thousands died in the concentration and slave labour camps, and huge numbers of many victim groups suffered in these spaces, the death camps were established for the explicit purpose of murdering Jews as quickly as possible. Typically, the people who arrived there were dead within hours.

So the death camp was a wholly different place to the concentration camp, not because of its primary victims, the Jews, but because of its particular function – as a factory for murder. And while there were thousands of concentration camps and sub-camps, **there were only six death camps - Chelmno, Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka II, Auschwitz-Birkenau and (for a short time) Majdanek** (see map on page 10-11).

Westerbork, Holland, Jews boarding a train to Auschwitz.
Credit: Yad Vashem

Spaces of Nazi persecution and murder

LONDON
PARIS
BERLIN
PRAGUE
VIENNA
WARSAW
BUDAPEST
BUCHAREST
TALLINN
LENINGRAD
MINSK
MOSCOW
KIEV

Key to symbols

- Death camps
- Main concentration camps
- Concentration and death camps
- Sub camps
- Transit camps
- Ghettos
- Mass murder sites 06|1941-11|1942

Key to shading

- Nazi controlled land
- Allied countries
- Neutral countries

Special thanks to Professor Nikolaus Wachsmann for his valuable advice in developing this map.

Perceptions of ghettos

Besides camps, some students also referred to ghettos in their short descriptions of the Holocaust and it was common for ghettos and camps to be presented almost interchangeably.

Focus group interviews with Year 7 to 11 students contained a number of references to the ghettos and provided more opportunity to explore students' knowledge about these places. When 'ghettos' were mentioned students described some characteristics of these spaces such as 'unsanitised places' (Kayley, Year 9), and 'where conditions were bad and stuff' (Ian, Year 10).

However, when asked where ghettos were located, students appeared less assured. For example, Bianca (Year 10) positioned them 'away from everybody', and Danielle (Year 9) placed ghettos 'in the ruins of Germany, the dirty parts where no-one goes'. References such as these suggested students lacked knowledge of when and where ghettos were established. This could hinder their understanding of why ghettos were established and how anti-Jewish policies became radicalised over time.

Textile manufacturing in the Warsaw Ghetto
Public Domain

Unaware of the killing squads

The survey and interviews additionally indicated a lack of knowledge about Nazi killing squads and their actions.

For example, only 24.3% of survey respondents recognised that the *Einsatzgruppen* were connected to the Holocaust. Nor was it just the term '*Einsatzgruppen*' that students did not recognise. In individual descriptions of the Holocaust during the survey, only 65 out of 6,094 free-text responses made any reference to people being shot (in sharp contrast to 750 references to the Nazi's use of gas as a means to murder victims).

Only a handful of younger students referred to mass shooting during the interviews and even then with a noticeable absence of detail and considerable uncertainty.

Ukraine, Lubny, October 1941, Jews brought to the site of their execution by Einsatzkommando 11b.
Credit:Yad Vashem

Ghettos

Following the German invasion of Poland in September 1939, ghettos were established to separate Jewish communities from the non-Jewish population. Typically the Nazi leadership in Berlin regarded them as a provisional measure to control and segregate Jews who they considered an existential threat.

The first ghetto was established in Poland in Piotrków Trybunalski in October 1939. Often places of horrific deprivation and suffering, larger ghettos were also set up in Lodz (April 1940) and Warsaw (October 1940). In total, more than 1,000 ghettos were created in Nazi-occupied Poland and the USSR during 1940 and 1941. Ghettos were not intended as sites of systematic industrial killing, but they were places of mass suffering and mass death, thus making them important spaces in the geography (and history) of the Holocaust. They were also places of extraordinary resilience, resistance, and spiritual and physical courage in which Jews struggled to cope with the unfolding genocide.

Jews captured during the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising 1943.
Credit: Yad Vashem

Mobile killing units: The *Einsatzgruppen*

The *Einsatzgruppen* were key agents in a transition in policy from persecution and ghettoization in Nazi occupied-Poland, to a practice of widespread murder in countries incorporated into the Soviet Union. These mobile killing units were given open-ended instructions to follow the German army in the invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941 and operate behind the front line, removing those regarded as political and military opponents.

Jews were ideologically (and irrationally) considered a threat and were soon being killed ‘as partisans’. Quickly, the routine of rounding up Jewish men was extended to include all Jews found in cities, towns and villages. The *modus operandi* of these killers saw men, women and children executed in mass shootings close to their homes, while their killers and some of their neighbours looted and plundered their possessions.

These mobile killing squads, assisted by thousands of local auxiliaries from the occupied lands, are estimated to have murdered up to 2 million people, some 1.5 million Jews, and hundreds of thousands of Roma and Soviet political leaders, or ‘commissars’.

Members of Police Battalion 101, a mobile killing unit.
Credit: USHMM, courtesy of Michael O’Hara & Bernhardt Colberg

Key recommendations

To fully appreciate the scope and scale of the Holocaust, students' understanding should not be dominated by the concentration camps but strengthened by substantive knowledge of ghettos, the actions of the *Einsatzgruppen*, and the development of the death camps.

They should also know the earlier history of the concentration camp system and its chief role in the persecution of other victim groups, as well as how this camp system intersects with the persecution of German Jews, at first, followed by the genocide of European Jews later on.

The research indicates teaching should:

- Explain when, why and where the concentration camps were established, which groups were imprisoned there, and how the role of the camps changed over time.
- Help students understand when, where, and for what purpose the ghettos were established.
- Include the *Einsatzgruppen* as the key agents in the transition from the persecution of the Jews to mass murder. Teaching should also refer to when and where these killing squads operated and who supported and assisted them.
- Recognise the distinctive role and significance of the development of the death camps, following the decision to murder all Jews, everywhere that the Nazis and their collaborators could reach them.

Our support for teachers

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

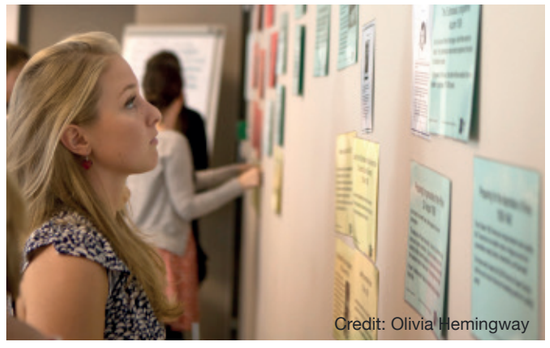
We offer:

- 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

What was the Holocaust? An interactive timeline


Credit: Olivia Hemingway

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

The historical overview and timeline in this CPD highlights the development of the concentration camp system; the 'euthanasia' killing sites; the establishment of the ghettos; the actions of the *Einsatzgruppen;* and the development of the death camps. It examines the histories of a range of victims and how they relate to these spaces.

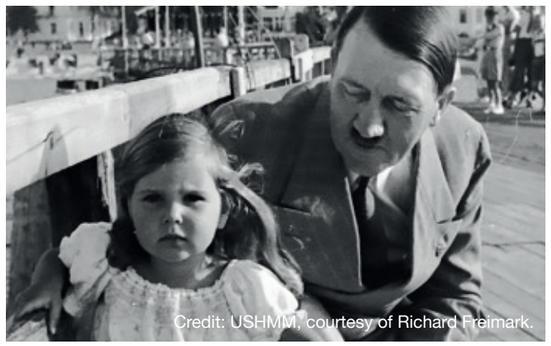
A space called Treblinka

Credit: Yad Vashem

Twilight CPD workshop and related classroom materials

In this lesson students undertake a historical enquiry into Treblinka. Focussing on what occurred in this space during the first five months of the camp's existence, students discover the reality of genocide. As they are confronted with the chaos of Treblinka in late summer 1942 and reconstruct the responses of the perpetrators, students acquire a deeper appreciation of the developmental nature of the Holocaust and are brought closer to its human impact.

Being human?


Credit: USHMM, courtesy of Richard Freimark.

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

In this session we examine the behaviour of individuals and groups in these 'spaces of killing', including links between broader society and the concentration camp at Mauthausen; aspects of the murder of disabled people at Hartheim 'Euthanasia' centre; the actions of Police Battalion 101 engaged in mass shootings in Poland; as well as guards and doctors at Auschwitz-Birkenau.

What was a concentration camp?

Credit: Yad Vashem

Lesson plan developed by the UCL Centre for Holocaust Education in collaboration with Nikolaus Wachsmann, Professor in Modern European History at Birbeck, University of London. The lesson plan - along with other educational resources - is freely available on our website.

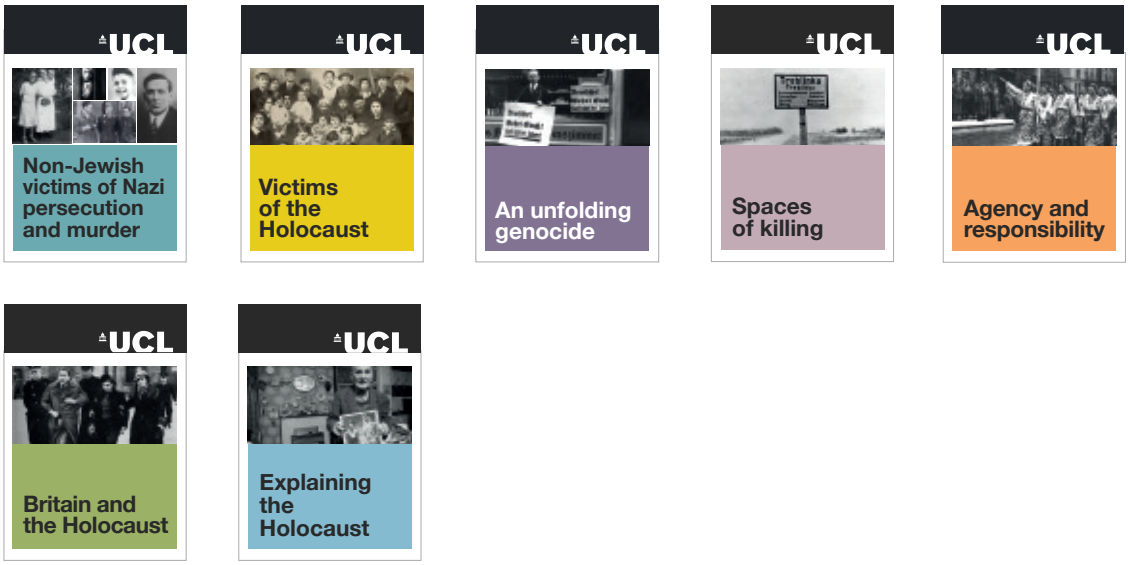
For more on Nazi concentration camps visit: **www.camps.bbk.ac.uk**

About these briefings

Spaces of killing is the fourth 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.

www.ucl.ac.uk/holocaust-education
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@ucl_holocaust

Front cover image: The entrance sign to Treblinka.
Credit: Yad Vashem

Supported by Department for Education Pears Foundation