



Agency and responsibility

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Research
briefing **5**

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

The Holocaust was not inevitable. It happened because of the choices people made and the actions they took as a result of those choices. Understanding the choices and actions of the people involved is crucial for young people if they are to grasp how the Holocaust was possible, as well as being able to critically consider the broader issues of agency and responsibility.

Our research shows that there are serious gaps in students' understanding of the extent of collaboration and complicity by both German and non-German citizens across Europe in the persecution and mass murder of Jews and other groups. These gaps raise urgent questions about the way the Holocaust is taught in our schools and about the importance of sound historical knowledge as a basis for understanding the operations of extremism over the intervening decades and in the present day.

This research briefing draws on survey research and focus group interviews with more than 8,000 11 to 18 year olds in order to answer the questions: Who do English secondary school students consider responsible for the Holocaust? How much do they understand about the action or inaction of various groups and individuals involved? What can be done in schools and beyond to ensure that students' knowledge and understanding of this history can be strengthened and improved?

What do students know about who was responsible?

Key findings

1 When asked who was responsible for the Holocaust, 81.9% of students surveyed ascribed responsibility only to Hitler and/or 'the Nazis'.

2 Students' knowledge and understanding of 'the Nazis' was limited. Most thought of them as an elite paramilitary group. They did not recognise that the Nazis were in fact a political party and national movement with widespread and broad-based popular support.

3 Students' knowledge of key Nazi agencies and individuals associated with the Holocaust was also limited.

4 Fewer than 10% of students suggested that the wider German public and society were complicit in, or responsible for, the persecution and mass murder of Jews and other victim groups.

5 Very few students identified the widespread perpetration, collaboration or complicity of non-German people across Europe in countries allied to or occupied by Nazi Germany.

6 Most students appeared to believe that those who supported Hitler and his actions did so because they were 'brainwashed', 'scared' or simply 'did not know' about the Holocaust.

Why does this matter?

If students only see Hitler and a few leading Nazis as responsible for the Holocaust, then the major challenge of understanding how and why people across Europe became complicit in the murder of their neighbours is overlooked.

This has significant consequence for understanding how and why the Holocaust happened. Explanations that rest on the actions of a powerful individual and the fanatics that surrounded him fail to recognise the extent to which the genocide had origins deep within broader European social, cultural and political traditions.

These misunderstandings mean that young people are missing important opportunities to critically consider:

- how a government's intentions are turned into action
- how politics and power work
- the scope for individual initiative and agency
- the relationship between governments and their people, including conformity, opposition and consent.

Explanations that rest on the actions of a powerful individual and the fanatics that surrounded him fail to recognise the extent to which the genocide had origins deep within broader European traditions.

Without this understanding, there is a danger that the Holocaust can function as a consoling narrative, which offers only rhetorical warnings against racism and extremism in general, while avoiding confrontation with more troubling questions, including issues of:

- identity, belonging and the creation of the 'other'
- nationalism and the nation state
- the long histories of European anti-Judaism, anti-Gypsyism, negative attitudes to disabled people and homophobia
- modern social and economic relations, greed and exploitation
- the ease with which an individual can become complicit in gross human rights violations without feeling personally responsible.

Who do students consider responsible for the Holocaust?

Students who took part in our survey were asked directly who they believed was responsible for the Holocaust. They were invited to provide a free-text reply. The overwhelming majority of those who answered made reference to Hitler and/or the Nazis (81.9%). Half of all students ascribed responsibility to Hitler alone (50.7%), while 20.6% said Hitler was responsible in association with the Nazis and an additional 10.6% stated that the Nazis were responsible without explicit reference to Hitler.

Focus-group interviews confirmed that students commonly placed Hitler at the centre of the action by describing him as the 'executive' or 'driving force' behind the Holocaust. While not an unreasonable idea, the study found that students did not understand why people followed Hitler's lead. Although they appeared well aware that Hitler could not have carried out the persecution and the killings by himself, students often believed that this worked as a simple top-down process, where others had no choice but to blindly follow his orders. They did not recognise how far the web of complicity extended throughout European society, or the degree to which vast numbers of people willingly facilitated the genocide, whether they did so through conviction, conformity, or for personal gain.



Credit: Emile Holba

Involvement of ordinary Germans

In response to the survey question ‘Who was responsible for the Holocaust?’, only a small percentage of respondents (9%) made any kind of reference to ‘the Germans’, ‘the German people’ or ‘Germany’.

What students knew about the participation and involvement of ordinary Germans was further explored during interviews. The majority of younger students who took part in interview (those in Years 7 to 11, aged between 11 and 16) characterised the involvement of the wider German public in one of three ways.

1 Facilitating Hitler’s rise to power

The first was the suggestion that the German people helped, supported or allowed Hitler to come to power. However, only a small number of students appeared able to talk in any detail about how this rise to power was achieved.

The absence of knowledge about how Hitler and the Nazis came to hold political office was striking but perhaps not surprising given that very few of these younger students appeared to appreciate that ‘Nazi’ referred to a political party – the National Socialist German Workers’ Party (or *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei*) – which enjoyed widespread popular support in the early 1930s. Many students characterised the Nazis as simply Hitler’s elite guards who unquestioningly carried out his will. However, this understanding became more sophisticated among older students who took part in the study.

Among students in Years 10 and 11, for example, more frequent reference to the Nazis as ‘a political party’ (Fahima, Year 10) emerged. Furthermore, these older students generally offered more contextual knowledge about the Nazis and Hitler’s rise to power and they often appreciated that the failings of the Weimar Republic and the devastating consequences of the economic depression after 1929 led to increasing popular support for Hitler and the Nazis.

2 Helping Jews

A second set of actions that students designated to the German people was that of actually helping Jews. More specifically, it was revealing that a number of students talked of Germans ‘hiding’ Jewish people, ‘in their houses, like in their attics’ (Rachael, Year 10) and one even offered Anne Frank as an example. While some Germans did help Jews to hide, this practice was by no means as widespread as many young students appeared to presume. According to Hilberg (1993: 197), of the few thousand ‘who found refuge or help’, the majority were ‘relatives of the rescuers by reason of a mixed marriage, or they were of partial German descent or converts to Christianity’. Students’ misperception here may perhaps be accounted for by familiarity with the story of the Frank family: a family which, of course, went into hiding not in Germany but in the Netherlands, and did so in an annex within their own property, not a German’s house.

3 Inaction and passivity

The third set of responses that students commonly ascribed to the German people was inaction. Many students saw the German people as passive bystanders with the events of the Holocaust simply developing around them without their own direct involvement or engagement. As one student commented,

‘They [the German people] did nothing; they just went along with it and didn’t try to fight it’ (Lauren, Year 10).

Why did the Germans respond the way they did?

During interview, students were also invited to consider why the German public might have responded in these ways and in turn, how far they could be considered responsible.

Again, three explanatory frameworks dominated students' accounts:

- Germans were 'brainwashed' into supporting the Nazis
- Fear prevented the German people from opposing Hitler and the Nazis
- Most Germans simply did not know about the unfolding events of the Holocaust.

Students tended to emphasise the role of propaganda and fear as forces that led the German people to support, or at least go along with, the actions of Hitler and the Nazis.

For example, Elliot (Year 9) argued:

'They were just brainwashed with propaganda. He showed them how bad the Jews were and then he fooled everybody into thinking they were the bad guys and they should be killed.'

Ariella (Year 9) stated,

'It was drilled into their brains'

and Juliette (Year 9) reasoned:

'I think many of them did it out of fear of going against him and not knowing what would happen to them.'

Many students also explained many Germans' inaction in terms of ignorance. As Sabir (Year 10) suggested:

'They just ... they didn't know it was happening'

while Chloe (Year 9) reasoned that

'If they had known what was going on in Auschwitz I'm sure they would have done something.'

The overarching conclusion for the majority of students appeared to be that Germans had no agency, no choice and, as a result, no responsibility.



Berlin, Germany, November 1938, Damaged Jewish shops after Kristallnacht.
Credit:Yad Vashem

These explanations highlight that serious misconceptions, which are still very prominent in wider public discourse, continue to have currency with students, even among those who have been taught about the Holocaust within school.

For example, students' widespread belief that many Germans were ignorant of the treatment of the Jews is significantly mistaken and could instructively be addressed. Current historical scholarship clearly suggests that knowledge of the fate of the Jews was commonplace in German society during the war years (see for example, Kershaw, 2008; Lacquer, 1998). Confronting students with evidence of this may open up meaningful discussions about the complicity, collaboration, and responsibility of many ordinary Germans.



People in Lörrach, Germany, waiting to enter a building in which the belongings of their Jewish neighbours are to be sold.
Photo taken on 27 November 1940 (private owner)



Laboratory workers at the Institute for Hygiene in Hamburg, Germany, in 1937.
Credit: Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz

Involvement of communities outside Germany

Students also appeared to have very limited knowledge or understanding of the ways in which collaboration extended beyond Germany's national borders. When students were asked to consider the question of responsibility during interviews, it was notable that they did not refer to the brutal actions of local people, fascist paramilitary organisations and other collaborationist regimes in the Axis (for example, in Hungary, Slovakia, Croatia, Bulgaria, and Vichy France).

This lack of knowledge relates closely to students' limited awareness of exactly when and where the Holocaust took place, issues which are examined in detail in briefings 3 and 4 of this series.

However, students should be able to recognise that not all perpetrators of the Holocaust were German. Indeed, throughout Europe, governments, state agencies, police forces and local communities were not only important in facilitating genocide, but also keen participants themselves. If students are not aware of how and why local populations participated in mass killings, or even led their own, then their understanding of how the genocide was possible will be significantly limited.

Knowledge of important Nazi agents

Finally, it is also important that while students placed considerable emphasis on Hitler and the Nazis as responsible for the genocide, knowledge of some of the key Nazi individuals and agencies such as Adolf Eichmann, the SS, or the *Einsatzgruppen* (mobile killing squads), was not widespread.

When presented with a list of names of people, places and events, and asked which were associated with the Holocaust, 91.4% of student respondents chose Adolf Hitler, while only 24.3% identified the *Einsatzgruppen* and just 23.2% chose Adolf Eichmann. Just 44.4% of students recognised a connection with the SS. And yet these agents were responsible for significant atrocities. The *Einsatzgruppen*, for example, were responsible for the murder of an estimated 1.5 million Jews.

Students' lack of awareness of these and other key individuals and agencies was also evident during interview. For example, Heinrich Himmler - the Head of the SS, Chief of the German Police and the man whom Peter Longerich (2012: 517) positions at the very centre of the transition to 'the European-wide extermination programme' - was mentioned very infrequently and primarily by the oldest students.

The widespread recognition of Hitler is perhaps unsurprising, but it is important to consider why students appear to know so little about other key actors. It also begs a fundamental question: without this broader context, how much can any student understand about how Nazi policy was formulated, or how Hitler's intentions were put into action?

References

Hilberg, R. (1993) *Perpetrators, Victims, Bystanders: The Jewish catastrophe*. New York: Harper Perennial.

Kershaw, I. (2008) *Hitler, the Germans and the Final Solution*. New Haven: CT: Yale University Press.

Lacquer, W. (1998) *The Terrible Secret: Suppression of the truth about Hitler's 'Final Solution'*. New York: Henry Holt.

Longerich, P. (2012) *Heinrich Himmler*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Key recommendations

The research highlights the need for teaching that helps students to recognise that responsibility for the Holocaust extended far beyond 'Hitler and the Nazis'. Understanding of responsibility can be improved if lessons include a broader range of the agencies and individuals involved, as well as exploration of what actions were taken by whom and why.

The research indicates teaching should:

- Explain that the Nazis were a broad-based political party with considerable popular support.
- Consider the complicity of ordinary Germans. This should refer to the evidence that many of them had knowledge of the unfolding events. It should also contextualise behaviour within an awareness of the conditions of daily life under Nazi rule, and the factors that enabled or constrained individuals' range of action.
- Acknowledge the roles of collaborating authorities and populations throughout Europe.
- Understand the roles played by some of the many other people and agencies, besides Hitler, who were important in making decisions or implementing the genocide. These might include, for example, Himmler, Heydrich, Eichmann, the German army, the police and bureaucracy, the SS and the *Einsatzgruppen*.
- Take account of the agency of ordinary soldiers and police officers who were tasked with the killings, recognising that there is no evidence of severe reprisals against those who refused to participate.
- Explore a range of motivations for complicity in the genocide, particularly antisemitism, but also factors such as greed, personal advantage and peer pressure, as well as dominant social norms.
- Consider Hitler within the broader web of perpetration and complicity. This is not in any way to diminish his role but to ensure that issues of wider culpability are not overlooked.
- Look at the full spectrum of responses to the Holocaust, from perpetration and collaboration to resistance and rescue, so that a fuller range of choices and individual actions becomes apparent.

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

Being human?



Credit: USHMM, courtesy of Richard Freemark.

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

This workshop is specifically designed to address common myths and misconceptions about perpetrators and collaborators, as well as bystanders and rescuers. It helps teachers to uncover students' preconceptions, revealing a range of stereotypes, such as 'mad' or 'evil' perpetrators, and myths, such as the misconceptions that ordinary people were brainwashed or simply unaware of what was happening.

These ideas are tested against a range of engaging and thought-provoking case studies, which examine the situations faced by real people, as we discuss the dilemmas and decisions, beliefs and motivations of people in the past. Together these case studies reveal the many different ways in which large numbers of ordinary people became complicit in mass murder. They also highlight a small minority who actively resisted the Nazi genocide.

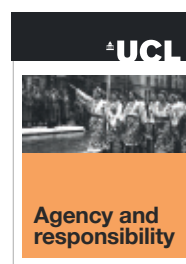
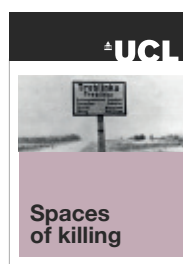
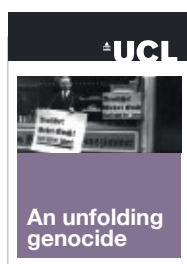
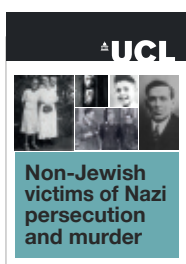
Students become able to contrast this new knowledge with their prior expectations, to discover that the past is far more complex, nuanced, and troubling than they had imagined. In so doing, they come to understand that responsibility for the Holocaust extended far wider than simply 'Hitler and the Nazis'. They are left with searching questions about what it is to be a citizen in the modern world.

About these briefings

Agency and responsibility is the fifth 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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Front cover image: Lvov, Poland, Ukrainian nationalist women parading before Hans Frank.
Credit: Yad Vashem