

---

**‘We knew nothing about what was going on.’**

**What does the evidence suggest about the relationship between the wider German public and the Nazi concentration camps?**

---

## Key Question: What does the evidence suggest about the relationship between the wider German public and the Nazi concentration camps?

### Teaching Aims & Learning Objectives

- To develop an understanding of what knowledge the wider German public had of the Nazi concentration camps and their role in the unfolding genocide.
- To consider the extent to which the wider German public were complicit in the camp system.
- To be able to critically analyse a range of primary sources from the 'Nazi concentration camps' website in order to consider what themes, tentative understandings, and questions the evidence might suggest.

### Rationale

Recent research reveals some of the myths and misconceptions students hold about the Holocaust.

As part of the UCL Centre for Holocaust Education survey, students were asked the open question, 'Who was responsible for the Holocaust?' (survey question 42, p.235). 6,897 students in Years 7 to 13, from a variety of secondary schools around England, answered this question. The results show a significant bias towards a Hitler-centric account of events, which downplays the role and knowledge that ordinary Germans had: the total proportion of pupils who referenced 'Hitler' as being responsible was 79.4%, whereas only 3.9% attributed responsibility to 'Germans', 'Germany', or 'the German people'. Interestingly, attributions to this category actually declined with age, as 6.1% of Year 7 students gave this response, whereas by Year 13 this had declined to 2.1%. Also of note is that the research found a common theme in students regarding Germans as being brainwashed, scared or ignorant of what was happening.

This lesson aims to use evidence about the Nazi concentration camps as a case study to help address issues of knowledge and complicity in the unfolding of events that led to Nazi terror and the Holocaust. In large part this aims to counter the popular idea that the wider German public had little, if any, knowledge of, or complicity in, the Nazi concentration camps.

### Key Information

- Students need to be able to access the 'Nazi Concentration Camps' website.
- This lesson is intended to be taught over three one-hour sessions, and can be delivered as a standalone enquiry, or preferably as part of a broader Scheme of Work, investigating issues surrounding the Holocaust.
- The lesson is intended for Year 9 History students and above, though it may be tailored to suit Year 8 students by reducing the quantity of sources used.
- PowerPoint slides, a Keywords help-sheet, a Writing Prompts help-sheet, and two differentiated Evidence Record Cards and Writing Frames are available to accompany this lesson.

## Lesson Plan: What does the evidence suggest about the relationship between the wider German public and the Nazi concentration camps?

### Take a survey - Who was responsible for the Holocaust? (15 minutes)

Show students the open response question 'Who was responsible the Holocaust?' (Slide 2), and give them about 30 seconds to individually compose a free response. They can record their response(s) in rough on paper or in the back of their exercise books. As a class, share and collate these responses. A suggestion for how this could be done is by using the following headings, but do *not* give them these headings beforehand as this may be potentially leading.

- Hitler
- Hitler and the Nazis
- Hitler and the SS and/or other named individual
- Hitler and the Germans/Germany
- Hitler, the Nazis and Germany
- Hitler, the Nazis and the SS
- Nazis with no reference to Hitler
- Germans/Germany/German people
- Nazis and Germans
- A relevant answer that did not fit the categories
- Inaccurate answer

Once class results have been collated, tell them that this specific survey question was asked of 6,897 students from Years 7–13 in a range of schools around England in 2015 by the UCL Centre for Holocaust Education. Show them the results of the survey (Slide 5). They can then compare their results with the UCL research. Some questions you may ask include:

- Did anything surprise you?
- Seeing the research responses, does this now make you rethink your own response?
- Where does your idea of who was involved in the Holocaust come from?

To link to the next part of the lesson, remind students of the conclusion they collectively reached about who was responsible for the Holocaust. Ask them what they might do to test their ideas for their validity. Hopefully, they will mention the need to look at some other sources of information that may help. If not, nudge them this way. At this point, introduce them to the idea of historical evidence as contained in the 'Nazi Concentration Camps' website. There are two aspects you could briefly draw out here; first, the nature of the variety of primary source perpetrator and victim testimony that, critically used, can help students make deductions and reach tentative conclusions that reflect on the strength of their original position; and second, how a website such as this can help in accessing and understanding evidence, under themed headings, to help in such an enquiry.

## What does the evidence suggest about what the wider German public knew about the Nazi concentration camps? (75 minutes)

Explain to students that they will now be conducting an enquiry into the extent to which the wider German public knew about the Nazi concentration camps, using a variety of evidence from the 'Nazi Concentration Camps' website.

For this part of the lesson, students preferably work in small groups (2–4 ideal) to identify how the evidence develops their understanding of what the wider German public knew about the Nazi concentration camps. They need a copied set of the Evidence Record Cards on which to record their ideas. The PowerPoint can also be shown to take them through the enquiry task.

The 'Nazi Concentration Camps' website is very intuitive and easy to navigate. Students will primarily be working in the 'Themes' and 'Documents' sections, but make them aware that there are other sections that will support them.

- Timeline – gives students some historical, chronological context to help them understand how the document they may be looking at links to previous events, especially those connected to the broader context of the Second World War, which research shows students generally lack understanding of.
- Maps – allows students to locate places mentioned in the documents spatially. A geographical awareness of where the camps are located, their linkages to the community around them and the strategical positioning is also an area students have shown to be lacking awareness of.
- Overview – helps students to understand not just the horrific conditions of the camps, but also to see how their functions change over time, as do the types of inmates. Students are also able to make comparisons between camps, the variety of which help break from an Auschwitz-centric notion of what camps were like.

The enquiry is framed by a quote from Source 97 given by a teacher local to Nordhausen about claims made by local people, in reference to the camps, that 'We knew nothing about what was going on.' In light of their own survey responses, students are going to investigate how well this is substantiated. It is highly recommended that the teacher leads the whole class to investigate this one source together as an exemplar (see Slide 15). This will help students navigate around the website and locate the sources. Also, the teacher can support the students in pulling out the key words together, identifying inferences or questions that this source may provoke, and then model with students what they might write on their Evidence Record Card to get them started.

There are 11 sources (94–101, 118–119, and a short clip from the testimony of Christa M.), that students will need to find on the website and analyse by completing the Evidence Record Cards.

These cards are designed to be flexible – to be used in both individual and more collaborative work. Students can use them to gather and share their findings at their own pace. As a small team they will need to collaborate to effectively answer the enquiry question in the time given.

One way this could be done is by breaking down the task, so they are each taking a smaller number of sources and then feeding back to the rest of the group. However, allowing them to find their own approaches and reflect on them, rather than giving them options, is to be encouraged.

In terms of practicalities, this lesson using the website will cross over the first two hour-long sessions. The first 45 minutes will come at the end of the first session, and will include a modelling of how to look at a source and complete an Evidence Record Card. The second session will allow them an additional 30 minutes to complete the task before pulling their findings together in the Reflection session at the end.

## Reflection (30 minutes)

Remind students of the initial enquiry question: 'What does the evidence suggest about the relationship between the wider German public and the Nazi concentration camps?'

- Encourage students to look back at the evidence they have gathered and consider how they would now respond to the enquiry question. Can they select 3 or 4 pieces of evidence that would either support or counter it, and explain how and why they do? Encourage each group to give feedback, and also reflect on how their opinions might stay the same or change on hearing the ideas of other groups.
- Ask what issues around using such evidence from the 'Nazi Concentration Camps' website they might have encountered in trying to answer the question. You may explore ideas here around whether the evidence is sufficient and compelling enough to reach conclusions, what gaps (if any) there may be, and how reliable and useful the different forms of evidence are. Ultimately, students need to be aware that the evidence presented, whilst compelling, is not necessarily 'conclusive' in enabling them to reach conclusions. They could be brought to consider, for instance, any geographical or temporal gaps in the evidence. Referring to both the Timeline and Maps sections of the website will help in this.
- At the beginning of the lesson, students were asked a broader question from the survey, 'Who was responsible for the Holocaust?' From this case study of the relationship between the camps and the wider German public, what would they now say, and why? Have their ideas been reinforced, or have they changed? How and why has this happened?

## Extension questions for further reflection

For students who might be receptive to extending their reflection along broader, more philosophical lines, the questions below might help provoke their thinking. They might consider what this enquiry tells them (if anything) about:

- The nature of historical evidence and its role in telling us about the past
- The nature of claims to truth and where they come from. How do we know when something can be said to be 'true'? Where does our knowledge come from? How can we test it?
- Why do only 3.9% of students in England attribute responsibility for the Holocaust to the wider German public? What shapes people's perceptions, and what are the implications of this?

## Assessment: What does the evidence suggest about the relationship between the wider German public and the Nazi concentration camps? (60 minutes)

Following the headings given in the writing frame, students are encouraged to construct a structured, developed written response to the enquiry question.

Some students may benefit from:

- Using the word bank of Key Words containing vocabulary from some of the sources.
- Being given the starter sentences and connectives on the Writing Prompts sheet to help with their writing.
- The teacher modelling part of the *process* of writing with students. Students can suggest sentences and then refine them if necessary as part of a class discussion on the creation of an effective piece of writing.

### Engaging all learners

In part the idea of modelling looking at a source, as well as modelling the start of the written task with students, is a way of engaging those that may require initial support and encouragement. The key to modelling is to make the implicit explicit – to make visible the thinking processes in identifying the key vocabulary in the source, identifying the message and the context around it, analysing the extent to which it answers the enquiry question, and considering any further questions or issues it might throw up.

There is a Key Words bank of vocabulary related to the sources connected with this lesson. Students can use this when reading the sources to help with language they may find more challenging. The word bank is divided into words that have specific historical references (such as ‘SS’ and ‘death march’) as well as those in more general English usage, which can also support the development of student literacy.

To further develop their writing, students may also benefit from using a variety of words and phrases on the Writing Prompts support sheet, which are designed to move students from writing that may seem largely descriptive, to that which works towards being more analytical and critical. There are a variety of ways in which these words and phrases signal an intention to operate in this sense, including: prioritising, inferring, comparing, connecting, evaluating, contextualising and synthesising. The use of the word ‘however’, for example, may act as a prompt to show that students are able to see both the positive and negative sides of something. It is stressed, however, that this list is not exhaustive, and is not intended as a ‘tick sheet’ of phrases to include. Rather, it is a prompt for thinking more analytically for those who would benefit.

The use of individual Evidence Record Cards is also designed to promote engagement. A large chart with 13 rows and multiple columns may be daunting for some students to complete. Breaking the task down into the completion of individual cards, which can then be combined as

part of a group construction of knowledge, may help mitigate the workload and make the enquiry seem more achievable for some.

The use of IT, via the 'Nazi Concentration Camps' website, is intended to develop a critical use of websites, an ability to navigate around them, and to use them for specific purposes. It is hoped that such a focus will help develop broader skills that are both useful to, and transcend, the use of this specific website.

This lesson also aims to help bridge the gap between academia and schools by bringing contemporary research into the classroom. The 'Nazi Concentration Camps' website is based on Nikolaus Wachsmann's 2015 landmark book *KL: A History of the Nazi Concentration Camps*, a winner of the Wolfson History Prize and the Jewish Quarterly-Wingate Prize. He is a professor in Modern European History at Birkbeck, University of London, who has based his study of the camps on a huge array of widely scattered sources.

Also, the ideas behind encouraging students to construct their own knowledge and understandings from the evidence and of participating in their own survey that reflects a wider recent national survey will hopefully provide a sense of ownership over the outcomes of the lesson.



## Additional Information

### Pedagogical guidance

This session follows a number key pedagogical strands:

- **An emphasis on student-centred, socially constructed knowledge and understanding, and a central role for the teacher within this.** Students are encouraged to formulate and refine their opinions in light of interacting with others in a group. This follows a type of constructivist approach that underpins this resource, based on the premise that ‘all knowledge is constructed ... it is not the result of passive reception’ (Noddings, 2012: p.126). However, as theorists such as Biesta argue, this shouldn’t negate the key role of the teacher in shaping, challenging and broadening student thinking.
- **A focus on the use of primary historical documents.** Students are encouraged to form hypotheses and make tentative judgments by referring to a base of primary documents revealed during the lesson. Two key aspects that Kaiser and Salmons emphasise in the use of primary documents are the context in which such evidence is sited and the pedagogical approaches used. Primary documents that are written by perpetrators, they stress, must be seen in a context ‘where the perpetrators did all they could to hide the evidence of their crimes, and the question of “how do we know what we know?”’ (Kaiser & Salmons, 2016: p.100) becomes central. Further, this lesson mirrors their belief that ‘ultimately, the aim of student interrogation of the sources is to reveal how different narratives are constructed; deepen student understanding of the Holocaust; add nuance and complexity to their understanding, and to allow students’ own meanings to emerge out of that encounter with the past, rather than using the past to teach predetermined lessons.’ (Ibid. p.101)
- **An approach that addresses and takes into account prior student knowledge, and aims to challenge potential myths and misconceptions that may be held.** Prior knowledge that students bring with them is presumed, the context and nature of which needs to be unpacked by the teacher. By taking part in a small element of the UCL Centre for Holocaust Education Survey (2015), students reveal prior knowledge and conceptions of the relationship between the wider German public and the Nazi concentration camp system.
- **Learning that is based on contemporary classroom research into current states of student knowledge in English schools of British responses to the unfolding Holocaust.** This comes principally from the 2015 UCL Student Survey, which revealed a number of key student misconceptions that this lesson attempts to redress. One of these is that 3.9% of all students surveyed attributed any responsibility for the Holocaust to the wider German public, compared with 79.4% attributed to Hitler.
- **Developing student knowledge and understanding through the revealing of information at key moments.** A key element of this lesson is that events unfold chronologically, with information through primary sources layered to enable students to confirm or reevaluate previous thinking. However, there are potential dangers here that teachers need to be aware of: students need to be diverted away from thinking that events

the sources describe were in some way predestined, and the teacher has a key role to play here in developing students' understanding of second-order concepts such as 'evidence' and 'change and continuity'.

- **Nurturing the ability of students to think critically.** Students should be supported in formulating arguments with “deductive soundness” (Shand, 2000: p.3). This is where their conclusions clearly follow from the premises, and there is a clear logical thread to arguments students make. It also seeks to expose assumptions students may have, to avoid the making of unsupported assertions, and to adopt an openness to refine and re-evaluate their positions in light of the evidence.
- **Developing an effective use of IT in historical enquiries.** As this lesson is focused on historical evidence located on a website, there needs to be an awareness of some of the specific opportunities and issues that this raises. In terms of opportunities, the website is particularly powerful in allowing students access to a wide variety of documents and testimony about the camps, grouped under thematic headings, as well as under specific camps to aid navigation. Allied to this, the complementary Timeline and Maps sections support students in contextualising the evidence in time and space. However, students also need to be reminded that websites as a whole need to be approached critically. Students need to move away from the notion of websites as being uncontested sources of truth, and towards a position where they critically engage with them by considering issues such as the authorship of the site, and the intentions of those creating it.

## Historical Context

The 'Nazi Concentration Camps' website is replete with historical information to help contextualise aspects of this enquiry.

The notion of knowledge and complicity in the Holocaust in terms of the wider German public was reflected in the Goldhagen-Browning debate from the 1990s. Although this debate was focused by Browning in particular, and Goldhagen to a slightly lesser extent, on the issue of why people killed, it also touches in part on wider notions of responsibility and complicity. In sum, whilst students should be left to reach their own conclusions from where the sources lead them, this lesson does not advocate Goldhagen's position that there was a specifically 'virulent brand of German racial anti-Semitism' (Goldhagen, 1996: p. 417). Students need to be able to avoid such mono-causal explanations of the Holocaust as being unique to the German people.

As a further note, there is a distinction that is made throughout the lesson between 'Holocaust' and 'camps'. The UCL Centre for Holocaust Education survey question that frames this enquiry is to do with knowledge of realms of responsibility for the Holocaust. As a subset of this, students in this lesson are examining as a case study the relationship that the wider German public had with the camps, which emerged well before the Holocaust.

Students also need to be aware that 'camps' took many forms and functions, and that these were often liable to change as the war progressed. Students also need to appreciate a notion of camps not as enclosed spaces, which barbed wire, walls and searchlights may give the impression of, but as having a dynamic relationship with the surrounding community in which they were situated. Further, students need to be able to distinguish between what was, and what was not, known about the camps. Much, in fact, was known. As Wachsmann himself asserts, 'the concentration camps were never cut off from the outside world, least of all from the communities surrounding them' (Wachsmann, 2015: p. 480). Black also writes about how a large number of German companies profited from the construction, maintenance and supply of the camps, be it crematorium specialists, bankers, suppliers or insurers. In this way, he asserts how this underlines 'the major extent, of German knowledge of, and profit in, the Holocaust' (Black, 2016: p. 95).

## Bibliography

Black, J. (2016). *The Holocaust: History and Memory*, Indiana University Press.

Browning, C. (1992). *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, London & New York: Penguin.

Foster, S. et al (2015). *What do students know and understand about the Holocaust? – Evidence from English Secondary Schools*, London: UCL Centre for Holocaust Education

Goldhagen, D. (1996). *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*, London: Abacus.

Kaiser, W. & Salmons, P. (2016). "Encountering the Holocaust Through Primary Documents" in Totten, S. & Feinberg, S. (eds), *Essentials of Holocaust Education: Fundamental Issues and Approaches*, New York & London: Routledge.

Noddings, N. (2012). *Philosophy of Education*, Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press.

Shand, J. (2000). *Arguing Well*, London & New York: Routledge.

Wachsmann, N. (2016). *KL: A History of the Nazi Concentration Camps*, London: Abacus.

## Acknowledgements

Lesson plan and materials created by Tom Haward from materials from the 'Nazi Concentration Camps' website created by Nikolaus Wachsmann.

Many thanks to Andy Pearce, from the UCL Centre for Holocaust Education, and Professor Wachsmann for providing additional thoughts and editing in the production of this resource.

© November 2016. All Rights Reserved.

Additional editing by Andy Pearce and Nikolaus Wachsmann.

**Centre for Holocaust Education, UCL Institute of Education**, University College London, 20 Bedford Way, London, WC1H 0AL **Tel:** +44(0)20 7612 6437 **fax:** +44(0)20 7612 6126

**email:** holocaust@ioe.ac.uk **web:** www.ucl.ac.uk/holocaust-education

UCL Centre for Holocaust Education is jointly funded by Pears Foundation and the Department for Education.