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## **What was a Nazi concentration camp?**

**What role did concentration camps play within the Third Reich?**

## Key Question: What was a Nazi concentration camp?

### Teaching Aims & Learning Objectives

- To be able to test initial conceptions about what a Nazi concentration camp was, and refine them in light of documentary evidence

### Rationale

This is the first in a series of lessons that seeks to reveal and reconceptualise student notions of the Nazi concentration camps, designed to explore the nature of the Nazi concentration camps.

This lesson aims to set a framework for the two subsequent lessons by exploring students' initial conceptions of the Nazi concentration camps. To achieve this, students will produce a class 'Conceptual Map' to make explicit the initial concepts they have, as well as a chance to initially test some of these concepts by looking at the 'Camps' section on the website. And opportunities at the end for students to refine their conceptual map.

### Key Information

- Students need to be able to access the Nazi Concentration Camps website.
- This lesson is intended to be taught as a one hour session - the first part of a short sequence of lessons exploring and challenging student conceptions of Nazi concentration camps.
- Power Point slides are available to accompany this lesson. Students will also need some plain A5 paper, a pencil, and some coloured pens or highlighters.

## Lesson Plan: What was a Nazi concentration camp?

### Making knowledge visible: Sketching a camp (20 minutes)

#### 1. Sketching a camp

Provide students with an A5 piece of blank paper (postcard size) and a pencil. Tell them that in 2 minutes they need to sketch an image of what they think a Nazi concentration camp looked like (Slide 2). Stress this exercise isn't assessing their artistic skills, but rather trying to visualise their prior knowledge and understanding of concentration camps.

#### 2. Constructing a Collective Concept Map from the sketches

When finished, ask students to put their sketches up on the wall with blue-tac to make a 'gallery' of images (Slide 3).

Through guided questioning, help students distil both common features their sketches include, as well as some of the outlier features, in the form of a Collective Concept Map (Slide 4).

You can do this by asking them;

- What features between the sketches repeat themselves?
- Are there any features which appear in just one, or a small number of sketches?

Tell them this will be revisited at the end of the lesson to see how it has changed or stayed the same.

As this Collective Concept Map is verbally constructed by the class, draw it for them on a white board or a flip chart so they can visually see how their ideas develop. Tell students they need to make their own version of this Concept Map as you draw it, to be able to refer back to and refine at the end of both this lesson, and future lessons in this series. Alternatively, a copy of this diagram could be made at the end and distributed to students for the lessons that follow this, to act as a benchmark to see how their thinking changes over this and subsequent lessons.

### 3. Introducing their Collective Concept Map

Ask students where their ideas about camps have come from, and how reliable and complete their sources may be. Then ask them what they might do or look at to establish the accuracy of their sketches. Hopefully, they will mention the need to look at some other sources of information that may help. If not, nudge them this way.

To help develop their initial thinking further, tell students they are now going to have a look at the 'Nazi Concentration Camp' website. The aim of this next section is both to start to become familiar with the website, and to test their initial thoughts against some of the evidence.

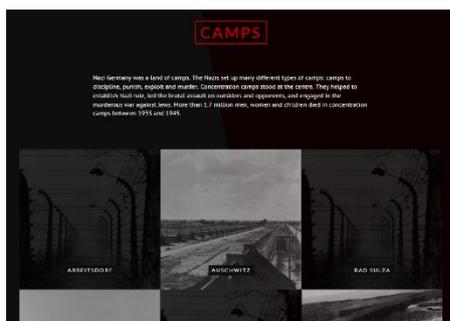
## What can be initially learnt about the Nazi concentration camps? (25 minutes)

Tell students that in pairs they will be having an initial look at one example of a camp, and some of the documents relating to it.

Give them the url of the Camps section of the site and ask them to access it on their screen.

The link to this is; <http://www.camps.bbk.ac.uk/camps.html>

The initial page will look like this;



Give each pair a different camp to look at from this section of the website. You can show them Slide 5 to help them visualise where these camps were located. Draw their attention to the date, and here mention some of the context to the map as mentioned in the Historical Context section of this lesson plan (p.7-8).

The camps to look at, each allocated to a pair of students, are;

1. <i>Auschwitz</i>	2. <i>Bergen-Belsen</i>	3. <i>Buchenwald</i>	4. <i>Dora</i>
5. <i>Esterwegen</i>	6. <i>Flossenbürg</i>	7. <i>Mauthausen</i>	8. <i>Majdanek</i>
9. <i>Neuengamme</i>	10. <i>Ravensbrück</i>	11. <i>Riga</i>	12. <i>Sachsenhausen</i>
13. <i>Stutthof</i>	14. <i>Vaivara</i>		

There may be more camps than pairs of students, in which case select some from the list for them. At this point which ones are selected doesn't matter, as the purpose of this is for students to start to appreciate the diversity of the Nazi concentration camps.

As students read some of the documents about their camp, ask them to add any information to their Collective Concept Map to help describe what a camp was like.

This can be in the form of words and phrases, but they will need to indicate which camp they are referring to. They can use the number code above for this (Slide 6).

Students add to their Collective Concept Map by marking on it using 3 different colours;

- Concepts that the evidence from their study of their concentration camp has confirmed.
- Concepts that the evidence from their study of their concentration camp has shown to be inaccurate
- New concepts that they might add, that weren't in the original Collective Concept Map

## Reflection (15 minutes)

Remind students of the initial investigation question; 'What was a Nazi concentration camp?'

Ask students to feedback some of their ideas from looking at the website to the rest of the class. As they do so, all students add further ideas to their Collective Concept Maps.

Aspects to draw out with the class will obviously vary depending on which camp they looked at, and what the resource records for that camp show. However, in summing up, draw out the following points;

- Not all camps were the same – in fact, there was no 'typical' concentration camp
- Different camps had different functions (e.g. as labour camps, exchange camps, punishment camps, transit camps), and these functions were liable to change over time

- On the map provided (Slide 5), most camps are in Germany, Austria, occupied Poland and the eastern Baltic states. Ask them why they think this is? (see Historical Context on p.7-8)
- Ask them what camps are missing, and why? (again, see Historical Context on p.7-8)

Encourage students to reflect on further questions they may want to ask to reach a better understanding of Nazi concentration camps. These may link into the next 2 lessons in this series.

## Engaging all learners

Sketching their own visual ideas of what a concentration camp looked like at the start of the lesson is an activity that avoids assumptions about students' pre-knowledge of Nazi concentration camps, and as such is meant to be accessible to all. Students anxious about sketching could be encouraged to work as a pair on this activity, where students are encouraged to share different ideas between each other first, before revealing them to the rest of the class.

Some students may need vocabulary support, depending on the class. Such words as 'inmates' and 'partisans,' for example, may need further explanation.

Further, encouraging students to construct their own knowledge and understandings from the documents will hopefully provide a sense of ownership over the outcomes of the lesson.

## Additional Information

### To note

This lesson aims to help bridge between academia and schools by bringing contemporary research into the classroom. The Nazi Concentration Camps website is based on Nik Wachsmann's 2015 landmark book '*KL: A History of the Nazi Concentration Camps*,' based on his study of the camps using a huge array of widely scattered sources.

As the first in a series of three, this lesson aims to develop students' conceptions of camps and initially start to test them. The idea here is that the concepts students bring to the classroom about what camps were like are made explicit, and then the second part of the lesson, and the two subsequent lessons, focus on sources from the website that encourage students to use new knowledge and understanding to challenge and refine their conceptual frameworks. A distinction is being made here between 'knowledge' as information, and how this can be used to shape 'concepts,' or ways of thinking about things, which is reflected in the sequence of activities and lessons.

As a point of information for the 'What can initially be learned about concentration camps?' section of the lesson, those camps without 'related resources' have been omitted from the list on page 4, as has Dachau, which in Lesson 3 appears as a separate case study in its own right.

## Pedagogical guidance

This lesson, and the following 2 lessons in this series, are designed around a number key pedagogical strands. Whilst not all strands occur in every lesson, they are all mentioned here (though this is not repeated in the other lesson plans);

- **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. The introduction aims to make student conceptions of Nazi concentration camps visible. In so doing, this acts as a benchmark to show how knowledge and understanding of the 'concentration camps' has developed by the end of the lesson.
- **Learning that is based on contemporary classroom research into current states of student knowledge in English school of British responses to the unfolding Holocaust.** This comes principally from the 2016 'What do students know and understand about the Holocaust? – Evidence from English Secondary Schools' report, which revealed a number of key student misconceptions that this lesson attempts to redress. One of these is that knowledge and understanding of the difference between concentration camps and death camps is often 'fragmentary and/or confused' (p.197). One Year 10 student, for instance, described how '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 started that they all turned into death

camps and they weren't work camps any more' (ibid.). An aim of this sequence of lessons is therefore to encourage clearer differentiation and understanding between different types of camps.

- **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 that 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 their intentions in creating it.

## Historical Context

### Definitions and Origins of Camps

A ‘concentration camp’ was an SS camp used to confine and persecute prisoners. This can be seen as an umbrella term for other particular functions of camps, such as ‘labour camps’ and ‘transit camps,’ but needs to be seen as being distinct from ‘death camps,’ whose sole purpose was the mass murder of inmates, and from whom only a very few survived. The vast majority of Jews actually never had the concentration camp experience.

It should also be noted here that, as Professor Wachsmann discusses, Himmler’s claim that concentration camps were a ‘time-honored institution,’ and Hitler’s claim that ‘concentration camps were not invented in Germany... It is the English who are their inventors, using this institution to gradually break the backs of other nations,’ especially in relation to the British camps in the South African War, are examples of crude Nazi propaganda, which nevertheless contain a grain of truth. Camps as places of detention did exist in Europe and beyond well before the Nazis, but a vital distinction needs to be made; as Wachsmann explains, ‘these were not prototypes of the later SS camps, differing greatly in terms of their function, design and operation’ (p.7).

### Points to emphasise in this lesson

It needs to be remembered that camps changed and developed over time, as in the case of Bergen-Belsen, which is a clear example of the shifting functions of camps. Likewise, some of

these camps are sited in Greater Germany, whilst others are elsewhere; this geography is important as a reflection of their initial purpose(s).

### **On the website**

The Nazi Concentration Camp website is replete with historical information and context. Aspects of this investigation can be contextualised by exploring other themes within the website, as well as Professor Wachsmann's book 2015 'KL: A History of the Nazi Concentration Camps.' In particular, the 'Overview' section of the website contains some context that may be useful to highlight with the students. Aspects to highlight include;

- The SS operated over 25 concentration camps from 1933-45.
- Additional to this, there were over 1,200 attached satellite camps.
- There was no 'typical' concentration camp.
- The first camps, set up in 1933, were designed for political prisoners, in a period often known as the Nazi 'consolidation of power.' By late 1934, some observers even thought that the camps might close completely as they had served the purpose of destroying the opposition.
- Hitler then approved a permanent concentration camp system (under Himmler), as he saw the benefit of a system of 'lawless terror.'
- Many new camps, such as Auschwitz, were established after war was declared in 1939. At this point, conditions for many inmates turned from poor to deadly.
- From 1942, the camps participated in the Holocaust.

### **From the UCL, Centre for Holocaust Education research**

The 2016 'What do students know and understand about the Holocaust? – Evidence from English Secondary Schools' report identifies some students' misconceptions concerning the concentration camps. For instance, the conflation a large number of students make between camps and prisons is mistaken. The camps, which Stone describes as 'initially used for the purpose of crafting the racial community and eliminating political opponents,' (Stone, 2015: p.10) were 'also outside the due process of law and people could be sent there without formal legal charge or trial' (UCL CfHE, 2016: p.196).

Further, in student focus group interviews, 'camps' and 'concentration camps' figured prominently in students' collective conceptions of the Holocaust. However, as the report indicates, their conceptions were often mistaken, and lacked variegated understanding. An example of this is when, 'their locating of the gas chambers exclusively within Auschwitz suggested that many other students did not know about other camps and this was borne out in both interviews and survey responses.' (CfHE, 2016: p.195)

### **About the maps**

The map on Slide 5 is taken from the Maps sections of the website. It shows the distribution of the concentration camps in 1944, but the website also allows students to see how this

distribution altered over time by comparing different years, from 1933-45. References to this map occur on p.4 and 5 of this lesson plan. Some contextual features to the 1944 map that could be brought out include;

- Most camps are found in Germany, Austria, occupied Poland and Baltic states in Eastern Europe. However, to appreciate the dynamic sense of these camps you could show the 4 images on the 'Expansion of the Concentration Camps' section in Maps. This shows a clear expansion of the camp system into Eastern Europe over time.
- The camps in the Maps section had significantly changing functions over time. Bergen-Belsen, for instance, was the largest training camp for the Wehrmacht in 1935, became a prisoner-of-war camp, and then, when it was taken over by the SS in 1943, became a 'holding camp' for a potential prisoner exchange program. In March 1944 it then became a 'recovery camp' where those deemed 'unfit for labour' were sent. Bergen-Belsen can therefore be highlighted as an example of a camp that had changing functions and a constantly fluctuating population. This general pattern was not atypical of other camps.
- You might also ask students which camps are missing from the 1944 map. The answer is the death camps of Chelmno, Belzec, Treblinka, Sobibor and Birkenau, as the website focuses on concentration camps rather than death camps (as outlined in the definition above). These five death camps had only a single purpose: the mass murder of as many Jews as quickly as possible.

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