

# Problematic Portrayals and Contentious Content Representations of the Holocaust in English History Textbooks

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**Abstract** • This article reports on a study about the ways in which the Holocaust is portrayed in four school history textbooks in England. It offers detailed analysis and critical insights into the content of these textbooks, which are commonly used to support the teaching of this compulsory aspect of the history National Curriculum to pupils aged eleven to fourteen. The study draws on a recent national report based on the responses of more than 2,000 teachers and explicitly uses the education guidelines of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) as a benchmark against which to evaluate the textbook content. It identifies a number of potentially alarming findings of which two themes predominate: a common tendency for textbooks to present an “Auschwitz-centric,” “perpetrator narrative” and a widespread failure to sensitively present Jewish life and agency before, during, and after the war. Ultimately, the article calls for the improvement of textbook content, but equally recognizes the need for teachers to be knowledgeable, judicious, and critical when using textbooks in their classrooms.

**Keywords** • England, history textbooks, Holocaust education, IHRA, National Curriculum

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## Introduction

The Holocaust has been a compulsory topic for inclusion within the National Curriculum for history in England since 1990.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, history teachers are directed to teach about the Holocaust within the first three years of pupils’ secondary education (between the ages of eleven and fourteen).<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, despite its mandatory inclusion in the National Curriculum, teachers are offered no specific guidance on how to



teach this complex, potentially contentious, and often emotive subject. Furthermore, the curriculum does not detail what specific content should be covered in the study of the Holocaust, nor does it stipulate how much curriculum time teachers should devote to the subject. Not surprisingly, therefore, previous small-scale research and anecdotal evidence suggests that classroom practice varies widely and many teachers feel daunted by the challenges inherent in teaching this troubling and complicated episode in human history.<sup>3</sup>

In direct response to these demands and challenges, researchers at the Institute of Education, University of London (IOE) were commissioned to conduct a comprehensive analysis of teaching and learning about the Holocaust in England.<sup>4</sup> In 2009 this led to the publication of the IOE's national research report, *Teaching About the Holocaust in English Secondary Schools: An Empirical Study of National Trends, Perspectives and Practice*.<sup>5</sup> The report was based on the responses of 2,108 secondary school teachers to a 54-question online survey and small-group follow-up interviews with 68 teachers at 24 different schools across England. This was the first and remains the only large-scale national research study into teaching and learning about the Holocaust conducted in England.

In the period since the national study, researchers at the IOE have engaged in a range of follow-up activities to more fully understand classroom practice in Holocaust education (e.g., conducting further interviews with teachers; producing case studies of selected schools; reviewing available educational programs for teachers). One area of subsequent investigation was the examination of school history textbooks.

## **The Holocaust and History Textbooks: A National Research Study**

A specific focus on history textbooks was deemed important because 67 percent of teachers who responded to the online survey stated that they were "likely" to use textbooks when teaching about the Holocaust. Teacher interviews also revealed that history textbooks were considered a valuable educational resource, widely used in the classroom.<sup>6</sup> The rationale for a specific focus on textbooks is particularly compelling in a curriculum area that many teachers consider difficult and challenging. This is especially so given the IOE's report revealed widespread confusion on teaching aims, uncertainty about definitions, and potentially important gaps in subject knowledge. Of particular significance, 82.5 percent of teachers surveyed admitted that they had had no formal professional development in the subject and were primarily "self-taught".<sup>7</sup> In this context, in addition to using textbooks as an educational resource, teachers often use them to develop their own subject knowledge. As one respondent explained,

I think it was actually just reading a school history textbook and seeing that for the first time. Because I never studied it to any depth at all at school or university during my history degree, it has purely come from teaching and learning through textbooks.

Given the complexities and sensitivities of the subject and the evidence that many teachers lack detailed subject knowledge, it is perhaps not surprising that large numbers retreat to the safety of the textbook on the assumption that it offers accurate and appropriate content carefully selected by professional writers and specialists. For this reason, the importance of a detailed study of textbooks is readily apparent. Indeed, although it would be imprudent to suggest that textbook content easily translates into what teachers teach and pupils learn, analysis of school textbooks offers rich insights into the ways in which many pupils encounter and understand the Holocaust.<sup>8</sup>

Specific research into how the Holocaust is portrayed in school textbooks is also worth conducting because so few studies currently exist. Although a growing body of international research has emerged on the use of school history textbooks in general, only limited attention has been paid to textbook portrayals of the Holocaust in different nations.<sup>9</sup> Strikingly, moreover, no detailed textbook study focused solely on portrayals of the Holocaust has ever been published in the UK.

### **The Textbook Sample and the Status of the Textbook in England**

In many respects England is very unusual in matters of textbook production, selection, and use. Unlike many other countries, state regulated or “approved” textbooks do not exist. Rather, individual schools, and often individual teachers, are free to choose which textbooks to purchase from the open market. Not surprisingly, due to the potentially lucrative nature of this situation, a number of major publishing houses have emerged to dominate the textbook market. These publishers make every effort to ensure their books are relevant to the National Curriculum and attractive to schools by virtue of meeting their needs. However, it is important to emphasize that schools have absolute freedom to choose which books they select and buy. A further particular characteristic of textbook provision in English schools is that no requirement exists to replace books on a regular basis. Thus, despite the existence of revised materials on the market, some schools continue to use history textbooks that are more than ten years old.

Following a wide-ranging review of secondary textbooks currently available on the market in England, a purposive sample was made of textbooks that met four criteria: they (a) were designed to provide an

overview of key events of the twentieth century for pupils aged eleven to fourteen (i.e., they were general world history textbooks); (b) devoted specific, but proportionate attention to the Holocaust; (c) were produced by a major textbook publishing house for adoption in schools across the country; and (d) were published since 1999. The table below details the four textbooks selected for analysis. Throughout the text, they are referred to as Book A, Book B, Book C, and Book D in keeping with the code outlined.

**Table 1.** The four textbooks selected for analysis.

Code	Author(s)	Principal Title	Publisher	Pages/ Total pages	Year of publication
A	Clayton, Collier, Day, Rees	<i>History in Progress: 1901 to the Present Day</i>	Heinemann (Pearson Education)	98–103  192 total (3.26%)	2009
B	Aaron Wilkes	<i>Technology, War and Identities: A World Study After 1900</i>	Folens (Oxford University Press)	98–103  144 total (4.38%)	2004
C	Shephard & Shephard	<i>Re-discovering The Twentieth Century World</i>	Hodder Education	87–95  127 total (7.31%)	2001 (Revised Edition) Reprinted 2010
D	Byrom, Counsell, Gorman, People, Riley	<i>Modern Minds: The Twentieth Century World</i>	Longmann (Pearson Education)	84-91  128 total (6.56%)	1999

## Methodology

Drawing upon the authors' previous research studies and methodological considerations raised by other scholars in the field of textbook research, the textbooks were analyzed using story line, content, and pictorial analysis.<sup>10</sup> Primary attention was given to qualitative content analysis; however, quantitative measures were used to explore relative emphasis on selected areas of content such as the number of sources authored by Nazi leaders or the priority given to the study of the Holocaust relative to other events of the twentieth century.

Analysis began with close readings and rereadings of the four textbook chapters, where a text-driven content analysis approach was ad-

opted.<sup>11</sup> After initially working individually and deploying a “constant comparative” method through a close line-by-line reading of the text,<sup>12</sup> the authors came together to discuss and compare the emergent themes and initial codes that had arisen. At this point it was decided that the emergent themes—such as the uncritical use of Nazi euphemisms, the adoption of a “perpetrator-oriented perspective” (discussed below), along with the lack of attention to prewar Jewish life and the lack of Jewish agency—related to the findings of the 2009 IOE report, which could be used as an *explicit* context.<sup>13</sup> In addition, it was agreed that an *external* and explicit benchmark should be used, against which textbook content could be legitimately evaluated. As Krippendorff insists, “[We as c]ontent analysis researchers [...] must do our best to explicate what we are doing and describe how we derive our judgments.”<sup>14</sup> This, he argues, operates as a guard against the unchecked tendency toward “applying our individual worldviews to texts and enacting our interest in what those texts mean to us.”<sup>15</sup>

Accordingly, the educational guidelines of the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research (commonly referred to as the IHRA guidelines) were employed for this purpose. The IHRA is an intergovernmental body, supported by more than thirty member states, whose purpose is to place political and social leaders’ support behind the need for Holocaust education, remembrance, and research both nationally and internationally. The IHRA guidelines for teachers cover five primary areas including recommendations on “why, what and how to teach about the Holocaust” and are internationally recognized as key guiding principles for intelligent and sensitive Holocaust education (see [www.holocausttaskforce.org/](http://www.holocausttaskforce.org/)). Nevertheless, the authors are aware that the guidelines are in themselves texts that allow for multiple readings and furthermore, inevitably, represent a certain set of positions within the field of Holocaust education. As such, they are utilized here as an explicit and public rather than “objective” benchmark. However, an examination of some of the major institutions operating in the field, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the United Nations (UN), the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM), and Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, provides significant support for the general acceptance of the IHRA guidelines. Moreover, a committee that included authors from a number of the leading organizations in the field, including the USHMM, Yad Vashem, Auschwitz-Birkenau State Memorial and Museum, and the Imperial War Museum in London wrote the guidelines.<sup>16</sup>

Overall, analysis of the selected textbooks exposed a complex range of interrelated issues, many of which are beyond the scope of this article; they included: the explicit and implicit aims of the textbook, the pedagogy of textbooks, textbook language and definitions of the Holocaust, and the

use of Holocaust imagery. Nevertheless, two themes, “perpetrator narrative” and “Jewish life and agency”, proved particularly salient. These two themes provide the organizational structure for the findings presented in the following sections.

## **Textbook Analysis and Findings**

### ***Theme One: Textbook Content and “Perpetrator Narrative”***

The detailed IHRA guidelines which focus on content, i.e. “what to teach about the Holocaust”, emphasize four important areas. First, they recommend that, rather than teaching about the subject as a separate area of study, the “Holocaust must be studied in the context of European and global history as a whole to give pupils a perspective on the precedents and circumstances that contributed to it.” Second, the guidelines advocate that in order for pupils to truly appreciate the complexities of the subject, they must be introduced to a range of perspectives, including those of the victims, perpetrators, collaborators, bystanders, and rescuers, and to a detailed understanding of key content areas relating to the periods before, during, and after the war.<sup>17</sup> Third, IHRA guidelines suggest that to understand the Holocaust on a human level, pupils must undertake a “meaningful exploration of the motivation, thoughts, feelings, and actions of people in the past” by directly studying primary source materials such as “letters, diaries, newspapers, speeches, works of art, orders, and official documents.” Finally, the guidelines stress the importance of ensuring that pupils do not assimilate the language or perspective of the perpetrator. For example, they point out that bureaucratic euphemisms like “the Final Solution” must only be used critically and not employed “to describe the historical event.” Similarly, the guidelines strongly recommend that teachers alert pupils “to the fact that the perpetrators produced much of the evidence of the Holocaust” and avoid the danger of viewing events only “through the eyes of the perpetrators.” Implicit in the guidelines is the recommendation that teachers avoid overemphasizing the actions of the Nazis and their followers. Instead they are encouraged to devote thoughtful attention to studying the Holocaust from a range of perspectives in order to give pupils a more detailed and intelligent understanding of the complexity of events.

In relation to typical practice in England, the 2009 IOE report revealed that one of the most commonly reported challenges to teaching about the Holocaust was deciding what content to cover within an average of just five or six lessons. Detailed analysis of the topics that teachers reported including in their teaching suggested that, rather than exploring victims’ responses to persecution and genocide, teachers are more likely

to focus on what may be termed *perpetrator-oriented* narratives: narratives that focus on the actions of the Nazis and their collaborators and position Jewish people and other persecuted groups as objects rather than subjects of study.<sup>18</sup> Two content areas dominate teachers' coverage of this period; first, the events of the 1930s, including Hitler's rise to power and the Nazi state; propaganda and stereotyping; persecution of the Jews; the Nuremberg Laws and "*Kristallnacht*"; second, an explicit focus on Auschwitz-Birkenau. Other key aspects of the Holocaust, including the prewar lives of Jewish people, important stages in the development of the Holocaust during the war years, and Jewish responses to the unfolding genocide received less attention.<sup>19</sup>

Of the four books analyzed, two books (A and B) proved particularly problematic in relation to the concerns raised by the 2009 IOE report and the recommendations of the IHRA. For example, in its six pages of text related to the Holocaust, Book B devoted almost exclusive attention to events in the death camps and at Auschwitz-Birkenau in particular. Opening with the dramatic heading "What was a death camp like?", set opposite a large photograph of the train tracks running into Birkenau, the textbook focuses on disturbing accounts of life in the camp and the systematic and brutal murder of millions of Jews.

A brief account of the persecution of the Jews in the 1930s, the ghettos, and the execution squads that foreshadowed the death camps prefaces the book's focus on the death camps. However, beyond the plans and actions of the Nazi perpetrators, the book is almost completely devoid of context. The reader is offered no sense of prewar Jewish life or of resistance to the Nazis, nor any sense or critical understanding of the Holocaust and its significance in the postwar world. Rather, young readers are introduced to disturbing images and accounts primarily authored by the perpetrators, with little, if any, contextual understanding. For example, of the ten sources included in Book B, nine are authored or presented from the perspective of the Nazis<sup>20</sup> (these include the views of leading Nazis such as Heinrich Himmler and Rudolf Höss<sup>21</sup>). The only possible exception is an unattributed eyewitness who luridly describes "infants wailing in the fire" and a guard smashing a baby against a wall "until only a bloody mess remained in his hands." It further recounts how the mother was forced to "take this 'mess' with her into the gas chamber."

Similarly, although Book A provides a little more context than Book B (for example, it devotes some attention to Jewish persecution in the 1930s and examines the issue of who was to "blame" for the Holocaust), in the central pages devoted to investigating "Who was responsible for the Final Solution?", six of the seven sources are authored by Nazis or Germans complicit in the genocide. Once again, the only source not written by a Nazi is a gruesome description by Zalmen Gradowski, a Polish Jew, of how victims of the gas chambers were reduced to ashes in the camp furnaces:

The furnace is opened and the stretcher pushed in. The hair catches light first. The skin swells and blisters, bursting open after a few seconds. Arms and legs twist, veins and nerves seize up and cause the limbs to jerk. By now the whole body is on fire, the skin splits open, fat spills out and you hear the fire sizzle. The stomach bursts. The intestines pour out and within a few minutes no trace remains (Book A: 101).

Accordingly, even when a Jewish person is introduced to the readers of these textbooks, they do not provide a broader understanding of other perspectives or of the wider Jewish experience during the 1930s and 1940s. These texts do nothing to “rehumanize” the victims, but rather sustain an exclusive focus on the brutal actions of the Nazi perpetrators.

Book D devotes nine pages to the study of the Holocaust. Under the compelling headline “The greatest crime in the history of the world” (a quote later attributed to Winston Churchill), Book D frames its focus around the central question, “Why is it so important to remember the Holocaust?” In its exploration of this important question the reader is provided with a two-page overview of the roots of antisemitism and Hitler’s disposition to blame the Jews for Germany’s problems during the 1930s. Strikingly absent, however, is any detailed focus on the relationship between the prosecution of the war and the Holocaust. Instead, the establishment of and experiences in the ghettos, the actions of the *Einsatzgruppen*, the expansion of the camp system, and the development of killing centers are skipped over in two or three cursory sentences. The final three pages of the chapter briefly focus on resistance to the Nazis, how much people knew about the Holocaust during the war years (both within Germany and among the Allies), and the significance of the Holocaust to contemporary society. In summary however, consistent with other books aimed at young readers, it fails to offer any deep contextual understanding of events, nor does it provide testimony from a range of primary sources.

Book C follows a similar pattern to Book D in its nine-page investigation of the chapter’s organizing question: “How did the Holocaust Happen?” The first three pages are devoted to a study of the history of antisemitism in general and a more specific focus on “the treatment of the Jews in Nazi Germany.” Two pages focus on the establishment of ghettos in occupied Poland and the slaughter of “over two million people” by the *SS Einsatzgruppen* following the invasion of the USSR in June 1941. The following two pages center on events at Auschwitz and the “Final Solution”, and the chapter concludes abruptly with a brief focus on resistance and “the German reaction” to the Holocaust at the end of the war. However, although the book does attend to particular areas of content in more detail than in other textbooks analyzed, it is similarly problematic to these in its use of primary source material. For example, of the ten sources employed to accompany the central narrative of wartime events (pages



90–93 inclusive), every written source is either written by a German or a Nazi officer and the five photographic sources typically show disturbing images of Jews as victims in the ghettos or the concentration camps (the captions to two selected photographs, for example, read: “Jewish women and children being led naked to the place where they will be killed”; “Prisoners putting a dead body into an oven in Auschwitz”).<sup>22</sup>

In overview, analysis of the four textbooks reveals that they typically fail to provide the necessary content to meet the guidelines advocated by the IHRA. No textbook, for example, provides readers with a range of perspectives from the viewpoints of victims, perpetrators, collaborators, bystanders, and rescuers; almost without exception, the textbooks do not provide a detailed understanding of key content areas relating to the periods before, during, and after the war. Potentially more problematic, however, is the fact that textbooks appear to reinforce and perpetuate a focus on perpetrator narratives. Source material typically derives from evidence drawn from members of the Nazi party and problematic terms like the “Final Solution” and “*Kristallnacht*” are used uncritically in all the books. Given that the IOE report revealed concerns about both the quality of teachers’ substantive knowledge and their choice of content when teaching about the Holocaust,<sup>23</sup> this textbook analysis raises further significant issues. Most important, it suggests that rather than providing teachers with access to robust content and a broad range of perspectives, history textbooks may instead exacerbate existing problems and support enduring misconceptions.

### ***Theme Two: Textbook Content and Portrayals of Jewish Life and Agency***

The second area of our textbook analysis is closely related to the previous one in that it critically examines how the experiences and perspectives of Jewish people before, during, and after the war are portrayed and explained in the four selected history textbooks. In relation to this issue the IHRA guidelines are very clear and, once again, broadly center around four key recommendations. Most important, the IHRA guidelines emphasize that Jewish people should not be defined “solely in terms of the Holocaust.” Rather, they advocate that a compelling need exists to portray Jewish life before and after the Holocaust “in order to make it clear that the Jewish people have a long history and rich cultural heritage.” Above all, the guidelines stipulate that “[y]oung people should be aware of the enormous loss to contemporary world culture that resulted from the destruction of rich and vibrant Jewish communities in Europe.”

The second major area of recommendation is that pupils and teachers “recognize that antisemitism is a worldwide and centuries-old phenomenon” which must be understood and contextualized. Similarly, the

guidelines highlight that pupils should also appreciate that during the 1930s and 1940s many non-German individuals, agencies, and governments willingly assisted in the persecution and murder of Jews. Thirdly, the guidelines emphasize the importance of individualizing the stories and personal experiences of those who lived through the Holocaust by introducing pupils to “case studies, survivor testimony, and letters and diaries from the period to show the human experience.” The guidelines stress the importance of avoiding portrayals of Jewish people as statistics or as a “faceless mass of victims” who are “dehumanized and degraded” by Nazi persecution and terror. Rather, the guidelines advocate that pupils must “understand that each ‘statistic’ was a real person, an individual with a life before the Holocaust, friends, and family.” Finally, the guidelines specify that pupils should appreciate that Jewish people reacted to persecution, terror, and murder in a variety of ways. For example, “there were many forms of resistance to Nazi persecution, from armed struggle to finding ways of maintaining human dignity even in the most extreme circumstances of the ghettos and the camps.” The IHRA guidelines emphasize that it is important for young people to know that “the victims of the Nazis did not always passively accept their persecution” and to study how the victims responded, “the limits on their freedom of action, and the many different forms of Jewish resistance to the Holocaust.”

Once again the IOE’s analysis of teachers’ topic choices, pedagogical practice, and substantive knowledge in England revealed a number of key issues and concerns in relation to teaching about the Jewish experience before, during, and after the Holocaust. For example, only a quarter of teachers claimed to teach about “Jewish cultural life before 1933” and/or the “contribution of the Jews to European social and cultural life before 1933.” Most teachers appeared to begin their teaching with a cursory look at the history of antisemitism before sharply focusing on Nazi persecution during the 1930s. Furthermore, relative to topics commonly selected by teachers, such as Auschwitz-Birkenau, propaganda and stereotyping, “*Kristallnacht*”, the Nuremberg Laws, Hitler’s rise to power, and the Nazi state, attention to the Jewish perspective appeared secondary. This is evidenced by the fact that many teachers consistently reported that topics such as life in the ghettos, the Warsaw ghetto uprising, Jewish resistance in the camps, and the actions of Jewish partisans received limited coverage in the classroom.<sup>24</sup>

Overall, a picture emerged from the IOE research that indicated that many teachers appeared to give relatively little attention to who the victims of the Holocaust actually were and how they responded to the unfolding genocide. The proportion of the German people who were Jewish was routinely overestimated;<sup>25</sup> relatively few teachers spent time covering the history and diversity of the Jewish people in Europe, prewar Jewish life, or the contribution that Jewish people made to the development of

European society; nor did many focus on Jewish resistance to the Nazis in the camps or Jewish partisan activity.

Most experts in the field argue with conviction that it is impossible for pupils to understand the devastating impact of the Holocaust unless they have an awareness of what was lost and destroyed, and that any understanding of the significance of the Holocaust must include an appreciation of how Europe was dramatically changed by the destruction of centuries-old Jewish communities throughout the continent. Despite this clearly comprehensible justification for placing an emphasis on Jewish life and culture before the war, *none* of the textbooks analyzed included any specific information on this vital issue. In most textbooks, the reader encounters Jewish people as victims of persecution and destruction without any sense of who the Jewish people were nor any attention to the richness and diversity of their lives in prewar Europe.

Although two books (A and B) worryingly leap to descriptions of Jewish persecution in Nazi Germany and the devastating horror of the Holocaust without supplying any context, the two others at least provide some background reference to the historical roots of antisemitism. Books C and D devote several paragraphs to the issue. Each one defines the meaning of antisemitism, traces its origins to events in the Middle Ages and its development in later centuries, and explains it as a phenomenon occurring in many countries.<sup>26</sup> Potentially troubling, however, is that although antisemitic ideas, rooted in the prejudices of the past, are presented in the textbooks, as discussed below, nowhere are they critically analyzed or challenged.

Three books attend to Nazi antisemitism and the persecution of the Jews during the 1930s (A, C, and D). Each one uses a range of pictorial and written sources to illustrate the incremental marginalization and persecution of the Jewish people and summary details of the Nuremberg Laws are commonly presented. Each book freely reproduces Nazi views toward the Jews. For example, one book uses a cartoon of Hitler in which he declares, in a series of speech bubbles, the reasons for his hatred for the Jews. In one extract he claims, "The whole of Germany is governed by the Jews. The Jew sits in the government and swindles and smuggles" (Book D: 87). Similarly, Book C uses extracts from *Mein Kampf*: "The black haired Jewish youth lies in wait for hours on end, glaring and spying on the unsuspecting German girl whom he plans to seduce, corrupting her blood" (Book C: 88). A third book (Book A) illustrates antisemitic perspectives by showing a propaganda poster for the film *The Eternal Jew*, which provides a gross caricature of those positioned by the Nazi ideology as the enemies of the German people. Book B includes a brief text box under the heading "!"FACT" that offers no *historical* account of antisemitism, but asserts, "Millions saw them [the Jews] as a selfish race who were only interested in making money rather than improving

the nation" (Book B: 90). What is remarkable in each of these sections typically devoted to Nazi antisemitism, ranging from a paragraph to two pages in length, is that the racist attitudes and portrayals they depict go *completely* unchallenged in the textbooks. In keeping with Pate's criticism of how the Holocaust is portrayed in US textbooks, no attempt is made to refute or deconstruct any of the Nazi prejudices.<sup>27</sup> Accordingly, given that Jewish people suddenly appear in the textbooks without any historical introduction, it is entirely possible that without a full understanding of the irrational motivation underlying the prejudices held against them, pupils might unwittingly and unintentionally be led to accept and internalize the prejudices explicitly conveyed in the sources featured in the textbooks.

As Short and Reed identified in an earlier textbook study, the problem is potentially further exacerbated by textbook references to the influence and power of Jewish people in prewar Germany.<sup>28</sup> For example, one textbook declares that Hitler "grew to hate the rich and successful Jews around him" (Book D: 87) and another book, in the context of the economic depression of the 1930s, explains how Germans "turned on the Jews, many of whom were rich and successful in business" (Book C: 87). Given that Nazi propaganda blamed the Jews for all the ills of the German nation and portrayed them as an existential threat to the survival of the German people, it is arguably very important that textbooks make teachers and their pupils aware of the very small numbers of Jews living in prewar Germany (less than one percent of the population) and the limited amount of political and economic power held by the Jewish community. Nevertheless, a key and unprecedented characteristic of the Holocaust was the irrational motivation underlying the Nazis' antisemitic ideology that elevated a small, vulnerable minority group to the level of deadly adversary that must be eradicated at all costs. Unfortunately, however, analysis of the content of selected textbooks suggests that these books may be unwittingly reinforcing myths and stereotypes about the power, wealth, and control possessed by the Jewish people.

The IHRA guidelines explicitly recommend that Jewish people are seen as active agents with individual human identities and experiences; in contradistinction to this, textbook narratives tend to regard the victims of the Holocaust more as objects rather than as subjects of study, turning them into a passive mass of people to whom things were done, rather than individuals actively responding to the unfolding genocide. Strikingly, and again in clear contrast to what the IHRA guidelines present as good practice, no textbook uses case studies, survivor testimony, letters, or diaries from the period to illustrate the diverse and very human experiences of the Jewish people.<sup>29</sup> Instead, as described in section one, the focus of the textbooks is almost exclusively on the actions of the perpetrators and their collaborators.

In brief contrast, however, three books (B, C, and D) do offer, albeit fleetingly, accounts of Jewish resistance to the Holocaust. As one book notes,

The reactions of the Jews to this persecution varied widely. During the round-ups in Poland and Russia there were many occasions when Jews resisted . . . . There was also resistance in the camps. In Treblinka, in 1943, one of the prisoners managed to get into the arsenal, from where he handed out grenades and guns . . . . But the Germans regained control of the camp and 550 prisoners were killed (Book C: 94).

Book D reports on Jewish resistance in the Warsaw ghetto and a revolt in “the Sosibor [*sic*] death camp in 1943.”<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, Book B offers a brief one-paragraph text box under the heading “!FACT Rebellion” that states that there were “occasional rebellions” in the death camps and again gives a cursory account of the rebellion at Treblinka. Thus, although three books do make reference to resistance in the camps, there is no sustained engagement with a perspective to counterpoint that of the perpetrators. Similarly, although three of the textbooks analyzed abruptly end the study of the Holocaust with the defeat of the Nazis, one textbook (D) does briefly attend to the legacy of the Holocaust, the lives of Holocaust survivors, and the international significance of the genocide.

Nevertheless, and despite these fleeting inclinations to engage with the lives and agency of the victims, the tables below illustrate that, when measured against the IHRA guidelines, the history textbooks analyzed offer highly problematic portrayals of the Jewish experience.

**Table 2.** Textbook portrayals of “Jewish life and agency” using IHRA recommendations.<sup>31</sup>

<b>Content</b>	<b>Book A</b>	<b>Book B</b>	<b>Book C</b>	<b>Book D</b>
Historical explanation of antisemitism	No	Limited	Yes	Yes
Jewish culture and life before WWII	No	No	No	No
Antisemitism in Nazi Germany	Yes	Limited	Yes	Yes
Explanation/Refutation of antisemitic ideas	No	No	No	No
Jewish perspectives & testimony on events	No	No	No	No
Jewish armed resistance	No	No	Yes	Limited
Other forms of resistance and reaction	No	No	Limited	No
Sense of what was “lost” by destruction of Jewish culture and life	No	No	No	No
Experiences of survivors in postwar era	No	No	No	Limited

**Table 3.** Textbook coverage of content considered typically undesirable by the IHRA.

Content	Book A	Book B	Book C	Book D
Lurid images showing the killing of Jewish people	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Testimony describing atrocities vs. Jews	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Central narrative which defines the Jews in terms of the Holocaust	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Portrayals of Jewish people as typically rich and influential	No	No	Yes	Yes

Overall, therefore, Jewish people are presented in the textbooks analyzed as silent and anonymous victims of the Holocaust. For the most part they appear *en masse*, only to be persecuted and murdered. Graphic portrayals of dead bodies and lurid accounts of heinous acts committed against the Jews are a consistent and dominant feature of all books. Furthermore, despite the recommendation that Jewish people not be defined by the Holocaust, this is exactly what emerges in textbook portrayals. Typically, Jewish people are featured without any explanation of their heritage or culture, or of the *void* left by the destruction of Jewish communities across Europe.<sup>32</sup> Finally, the textbooks offer no sense of what it meant to “survive” the Holocaust, nor any understanding of the Jewish experience in the postwar world.

## Enduring Concerns and Ongoing Challenges

According to Supple (1992), in the years immediately following the introduction of the National Curriculum in England many teachers felt “under-informed” and “under resourced to teach the subject.” Of particular concern was that no adequate textbook was available to secondary school teachers. Indeed, Supple’s review of existing textbooks reached the gloomy conclusion that

most textbooks dealt with the Holocaust in a dangerously superficial way. Gaps included few images and little information about Jewish people other than reproductions of anti-Semitic stereotypes; there was no description of the variety of Jewish life before the Holocaust; no explanation of the roots of anti-Semitism; no idea of the variety of response to Nazism ... no notion of named individuals other than Nazis or perhaps Anne Frank [and] ... no mention of ‘resistance’ or ‘rescuers’.<sup>33</sup>

As exemplified by the findings of the current study of four commonly used secondary school textbooks, almost two decades after Supple’s ini-

tial investigation grave concerns remain about how the Holocaust is portrayed in school textbooks in England. As this study has shown, current textbooks typically present an “Auschwitz-centric,” “perpetrator narrative” focused almost exclusively on the brutal actions of the Nazis and their collaborators. Young readers are denied any knowledge of the diversity and richness of prewar Jewish life, any sense of the irrational motivation underlying antisemitic ideas either historically or during the period of Nazi domination, any understanding of the complex and varied ways in which Jewish people experienced and responded to unfolding genocide, and any appreciation of the significance and legacy of the Holocaust in the postwar era.

Very few historical topics or content areas are mandatory in the history curriculum in England. However, the study of the Holocaust is regarded as an exceptional event central to any pupil’s understanding of the modern world. As such it is a compulsory aspect of the school curriculum in England for each one of the more than three million pupils who attend secondary school in any given year. Unfortunately, however, treated in conjunction with the 2009 IOE report, this study demonstrates that significant numbers of pupils in classrooms across the country may be receiving an inadequate education in this vital area of the curriculum. It suggests that textbook authors and textbook publishers need to take greater responsibility for the accuracy and appropriateness of the material they include and, moreover, that teachers need to be knowledgeable, judicious, and critical when using textbooks to teach about the Holocaust in their classrooms. Their failure to do so runs the risk of (re)producing stereotypes about and even more worryingly *from* this most significant and traumatic period of our collective history.

### List of Textbooks Quoted

Byrom, Jamie, Christine Counsell, Michael Gorman, Derek Peale, and Michael Riley. *Modern Minds: The Twentieth-Century World* (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited (Longman), 1999).

Clayton, Stuart, Martin Collier, Steven Day, and Rosemary Rees. *History in Progress: 1901 to Present Day* (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited (Heinemann), 2009).

Shepard, Colin, and Keith Shepard. *Re-Discovering The Twentieth Century World: A World Study After 1900* (London: Hodder Education, 2001).

Wilkes, Aaron. *Technology, War and Identities: A World Study After 1900* (Oxford: Oxford University Press (Folens), 2009).

### Notes

1. In the context of European and world history, the history National Curriculum specifically mandates that pupils should be taught about “the changing

nature of conflict and cooperation between countries and peoples and its lasting impact on national, ethnic, racial, cultural or religious issues, including the nature and impact of the two world wars and the Holocaust, and the role of European and international institutions in resolving conflicts." Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, 2007 (updated 2011), *History Programme of Study for Key Stage 3 and Attainment Targets*, p. 116 <http://media.education.gov.uk/assets/files/pdf/h/history%202007%20programme%20of%20study%20for%20key%20stage%203.pdf> (accessed 30 September 2013). At the time of writing the current National Curriculum for history is under review, however, the Department for Education draft consultation document still includes the Holocaust as a compulsory element of the proposed 2013 key stage 3 history curriculum.

2. Although not mandatory outside of the history curriculum, research reveals that the Holocaust is in fact taught across a range of subjects, including English, citizenship, and religious education, and to all seven year groups in secondary education (that is, pupils aged eleven to eighteen). Alice Pettigrew et al., *Teaching About the Holocaust in English Secondary Schools: An Empirical Study of National Trends, Perspectives and Practice* (London: Institute of Education, 2009), 30–39.
3. Margot Brown and Ian Davies, "The Holocaust and Education for Citizenship: The Teaching of History, Religion and Human Rights in England," *Educational Review* 50, no. 1 (1998): 75–83; Neil Burtonwood, "Holocaust Memorial Day in Schools—Context, Process and Content. A Review of Research into Holocaust Education," *Educational Research* 44, no. 1 (2002): 69–82; Bruce Carrington and Geoffrey Short, "Holocaust Education, Anti-racism and Citizenship," *Educational Review* 49, no. 3 (1997): 271–82; Jane Clements, "A Very Neutral Voice: Teaching About the Holocaust," *Educate* 5, no. 1 (2005) <http://www.educatejournal.org/index.php/educate/article/view/60/56> (accessed 24 September 2012); Lucy Russell, *Teaching the Holocaust in School History*, (London: Continuum, 2006); and Geoffrey Short, "Teaching About the Holocaust: A Consideration of Some Ethical and Pedagogic Issues," *Educational Studies* 20, no. 1 (1994).
4. Funded by the Department for Education and Pears Foundation (a UK charitable trust).
5. Pettigrew et al., *Teaching About the Holocaust*.
6. *Ibid.*, 47.
7. *Ibid.*, 31–62.
8. Michael W. Apple and Linda K. Christian-Smith, eds., *The Politics of the Textbook* (New York: Routledge, 1991); Stuart J. Foster and Keith A. Crawford, eds., *What Shall We Tell the Children? International Perspectives on School History Textbooks* (Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing, 2006); and William E. Marsden, *The School Textbook: History, Geography and Social Studies* (London: Routledge, 2001).
9. Those that do exist include: Patricia Bromley and Susan Russell, "The Holocaust as History and Human Rights: A Cross-national Analysis of Holocaust Education in Social Science Textbooks, 1970–2008," *Prospects* 40 (2010): 153–173; Keith A. Crawford and Stuart J. Foster, *War, Nation, Memory: International Perspectives on World War II in School History Textbooks* (Greenwich, CT: Informa-



- tion Age Publishing, 2007); Henry Friedlander, *On the Holocaust: A Critique of the Treatment of the Holocaust in History Textbooks Accompanied by an Annotated Bibliography*, Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, 1973; David Lindquist, "The Coverage of the Holocaust in High School History Textbooks," *Social Education* 73, no. 6 (2009): 298–304; Bodo von Borries, "The Third Reich in German History Textbooks since 1945," *Journal of Contemporary History* 38, no. 1 (2003): 45–62; Barbara Wenzeler, *The Presentation of the Holocaust in German and English School History Textbooks—A Comparative Study*, 2012, <http://centres.exeter.ac.uk/historyresource/journal6/Barbararev.pdf> (accessed 24 September 2012).
10. Crawford and Foster, *War, Nation, Memory*; Foster and Crawford, *What Shall We Tell the Children?*; Stuart J. Foster, "Dominant Traditions in International Textbook Research and Revision," *Education Inquiry* 2, no. 1 (2010): 1–16; Laura Hein, and Mark Selden, eds., *Censoring History: History, Citizenship and Memory in Japan, Germany and the United States* (London: M. E. Sharpe, 2000); Jason Nicholls, "Methods in School Textbook Research," *International Journal of Historical Learning, Teaching and Research* 3, no. 2 (2003); Jason Nicholls, *School History Textbooks across Cultures: International Debates and Perspectives* (Oxford: Symposium Books, 2006); Falk Pingel, *UNESCO Guidebook on Textbook Research and Textbook Revision* (2nd revised ed.) (Paris: UNESCO, 2010).
  11. Krippendorff distinguishes between "text-driven", "problem-driven", and "method-driven" approaches to content analysis. Klaus Krippendorff, *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology* (Thousand Oakes: Sage, 2004), 340–341.
  12. Barney G. Glaser, "The Constant Comparative Method of Qualitative Analysis," *Social Problems* vol. 12, no. 4 (1965); Juliet Corbin and Anselm Strauss, *Basics of Qualitative Research 3e* (Thousand Oakes: Sage, 2008).
  13. While every effort was made not to read the textbooks *for* the themes from the recent HEDP research, once these themes emerged as pertinent, the HEDP research provided a rich context within which to make sense of the textbook data and, conversely, the opportunity to understand the way the common concerns and issues revealed by the national study were mirrored in the textbook content. As Corbin and Strauss assert, "it is not that we use experience or literature as data, but that we use the properties and dimensions derived from the comparative incident to examine the data in front of us." Corbin and Strauss, *Qualitative Research*, 75.
  14. Krippendorff, *Content Analysis*, xxii.
  15. *Ibid.*, xxi.
  16. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) in collaboration with Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, provides "suggestions for educators" on preparing for Holocaust memorial days; such preparations, as they explicitly state, are "quite different in character" (p. 2) from classroom teaching. The organizations direct their readers specifically to the IHRA "[f]or additional guidelines on the rationale for teaching about the Holocaust as well as suggestions on how to approach this topic in the classroom" (p. 18). The United Nations, through the "The Holocaust and the United Nations Outreach Programme," states that they and the IHRA "work together to assist United Nations Member States in

- the adoption of national educational curriculum on the Holocaust.” The UN provides a range of educational materials, but accordingly no explicit rationale or guidelines separate from those of the IHRA. The one major international organization that provides its own “guidelines for teaching” in English is the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. These recommendations closely mirror the IHRA guidelines and in many cases use the exact same wording.
17. Although it is recognized that teachers will not be able to incorporate all elements into their teaching, the IHRA recommends, wherever possible, attention to the following content areas: 1933–1939: dictatorship in National Socialist Germany; Jewry in the Third Reich; early stages of persecution; the first concentration camps; world response; 1939–1945: World War II in Europe; Nazi racist ideologies and policies; the “euthanasia” program; persecution and murder of Jews; persecution and murder of non-Jewish victims; Jewish reactions to Nazi policies; ghettos; mobile killing squads; expansion of the camp system; killing centers; collaboration; resistance; rescue; world response; death marches; liberation; aftermath: postwar trials; displaced persons’ camps and emigration.
  18. Pettigrew et al., *Teaching About the Holocaust*, 41–45.
  19. In this regard it is potentially significant that the Wannsee Conference, the mass murders by the *Einsatzgruppen*, and Operation Reinhard (the plan to murder some two million Jews in the German-occupied part of Poland known as the General Government, which resulted in the killing of some 1.7 million Jewish people, the vast majority in the gas chambers of the death camps of Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka II) were among the topics least likely to be selected to be taught in English schools.
  20. One source, from an “eyewitness”, is unattributed.
  21. We note that textbook C presents inaccurate and confusing information in respect to Höss. Source D refers to the “*Memoirs of Rudolf Hoss*, the first commandant of Auschwitz,” when more accurately his name should be spelt Hoess or Höss. Then, four pages later, the reader learns about Rudolf Hess, “the man in charge of Auschwitz,” which confuses Rudolf Höss with Rudolf Hess, Hitler’s deputy in the Nazi Party for much of the 1930s and early 1940s.
  22. One source is unattributed but described as a “visitor to the Warsaw ghetto.”
  23. Pettigrew et al., *Teaching About the Holocaust*, 41–45; 51–63.
  24. *Ibid.*, 41–45.
  25. The online survey asked a series of knowledge-based questions. Specifically, one question asked teachers what, in percentage terms, was the Jewish population of Germany in 1933 (teachers were given multiple choices: less than 1 percent; approximately 5 percent; approximately 15 percent; more than 30 percent). Analysis revealed that only 32 percent of history teachers and fewer than one in five citizenship, English, and RE teachers provided the correct answer (that is, less than 1 percent), with many teachers seriously overestimating the size of the Jewish population in prewar Germany.
  26. Many scholars would put its origins as much earlier than the Middle Ages. Further, it is perhaps significant that the textbooks do not distinguish between anti-Semitism (a modern term dating from the nineteenth century) and anti-Judaism, which may be more appropriate for earlier forms of religion-based prejudice.

27. In his 1987 study Glenn Pate remarked: "Disturbingly, not all books which refer to the scapegoat concept mention that the Jews were not to blame for Germany's troubles. A reader of some of the texts could get the impression that the Jews were guilty." Pate, "The Holocaust in American Textbooks," in *The Treatment of the Holocaust in Textbooks: The Federal Republic of Germany, Israel, The United States of America*, ed. Randolph L. Braham (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987).
28. Geoffrey Short and Carole Anne Reed, *Issues in Holocaust Education* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004).
29. It is true that accounts written by Jewish people are included in order to describe the horrors inflicted by the Holocaust, but no account provides any sense of Jewish agency.
30. More accurately the reference should be to the Sobibor extermination camp in occupied Poland.
31. "Yes" indicates the content area is covered; "no" means it is absent; and "limited" refers to textbook coverage of a few sentences or less.
32. These findings are consistent with an earlier textbook study in which Short and Reed noted that "none of the books recognize, even in passing, the positive aspects of Jewish history. The focus is exclusively on persecution." Short and Reed, *Issues*, 64.
33. Carrie Supple, "The Teaching of the Nazi Holocaust in North Tyneside, Newcastle and Northumberland Secondary Schools" (PhD diss., University of Newcastle, 1992), 21.