

# Non-Jewish victims of Nazi persecution and murder

Using national research to  
inform your classroom practice.

Research  
briefing **1**

Highlights from our research report **'What do students know and understand about the Holocaust?' Evidence from English secondary schools** (Foster et al, 2016).  
Free to download at [www.ucl.ac.uk/holocaust-education](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/holocaust-education)

Our research shows that serious gaps exist in students’ knowledge about the experiences of non-Jewish victims of the Nazis and these gaps have significant implications for their understanding of this important history as a whole.

While UCL Centre for Holocaust Education uses the term ‘the Holocaust’ to refer specifically to the genocide of 6 million European Jews, we know that the Nazis and their collaborators also committed mass violence against many other groups. A full understanding of this complex history depends on recognising both the similarities and also, crucially, the differences between the experiences of these victim groups. There were distinct reasons why each group was targeted and they experienced persecution in tellingly different ways. And while understanding the differences is important, victim experiences should not be considered in isolation, either. This is because a deeper comprehension of the experience of each group can contribute to a greater overall understanding of the broader system of Nazi violence, mass murder and, ultimately, genocide.

Drawing on survey research and focus group interviews with more than 8,000 11 to 18 year olds, this research briefing considers the extent to which this complexity is understood among students in England’s secondary schools.

# What do students know about the victims of Nazi persecution and murder?

## Key findings

- 1

The overwhelming majority of students correctly identified Jews as victims of the Holocaust.
- 2

With age, students increasingly believed other groups to be victims of the Holocaust as well. By the age of 16, the majority of students identified at least one other group as victims of the Holocaust in addition to Jews. As will be explained in this briefing, this broader understanding of other victim groups under the umbrella of the Holocaust is problematic.
- 3

Alongside Jews, students were most likely to identify gay men as victims, followed by disabled people, and the Roma and Sinti (often referred to as ‘Gypsies’).
- 4

The vast majority of students were unfamiliar with the unique experiences of each group. They also knew little about the specific reasons for their persecution and the particular policies enacted against them.
- 5

Typically, students assumed that all of the Nazis’ victims were targeted and treated in similar ways, chiefly because they were seen as ‘different’.

# Why does this matter?

The research points to significant gaps in students’ understanding. Many young people seem to collapse a variety of different crimes and their victims into an all-encompassing ‘Holocaust’ in which Hitler and the Nazis simply targeted and murdered anyone perceived as ‘different’.

The problem is that generalisations like these may ultimately support the condemnation of intolerance, but they do little to acknowledge or value diversity. Nor do they enable students to develop accurate historical understandings.

Greater differentiation of Nazi victim groups is needed, not to create a hierarchy of suffering, but to genuinely understand why and how individual people came to be persecuted and killed.

## Complexity and respect

Greater differentiation of Nazi victim groups is needed, not to create a hierarchy of suffering, but to genuinely understand why and how individual people came to be persecuted and killed. Each victim, whether Jew, Roma, gay, disabled, Communist, trade-unionist, Pole or Soviet prisoner of war, is surely entitled to the uniqueness of their own suffering and death.

Indiscriminately grouping these people together as ‘Holocaust victims’ blurs important differences, and risks submerging each individual’s experience into a vague and faceless mass. It also does a disservice to today’s students, who are denied an understanding of the complexity and diversity of history.

## Greater understanding

Moreover, none of the Nazi regime’s crimes can be fully understood in isolation from the others. Not only were there similarities and differences between the persecution and murder of different victim groups, but often these policies overlapped and were intertwined; understanding what happened to each group, and why, is an important contribution to a fuller understanding of the broader system of violence and mass murder.



# Who do students identify as the victims of the Holocaust?

**When asked directly, ‘Who were the victims of the Holocaust?’ over 90% of students surveyed correctly identified Jews. Among these students, nearly half also named at least one other group of victims.**

Interestingly, the data showed that, while younger students tended to identify only Jews as victims of the Holocaust, with age, students were increasingly more likely to identify additional victim groups. By the age of 16, most students would include Jews and at least one other group.

This finding suggests a shift in students’ understanding of the Holocaust during the course of their formal schooling. It implies that, as students get older, they both become more aware of other Nazi crimes, and see the term ‘the Holocaust’ less as a descriptor of something specific to the genocide of European Jews and more as an ‘umbrella’ or catch-all phrase for a shared experience of all Nazi victims. This is at odds with accepted definitions of the Holocaust, including our own. As mentioned previously, the UCL Centre for Holocaust Education uses the term ‘the Holocaust’ to specifically denote the genocide of European Jews. This issue is discussed and explained in the next briefing of this series, ‘Victims of the Holocaust’.

The inclusion of other victim groups in students’ attempts to define the Holocaust has significant implications for their understanding, which are explored below.



Credit: Emile Holba

Who do students think were the victims of the Holocaust?

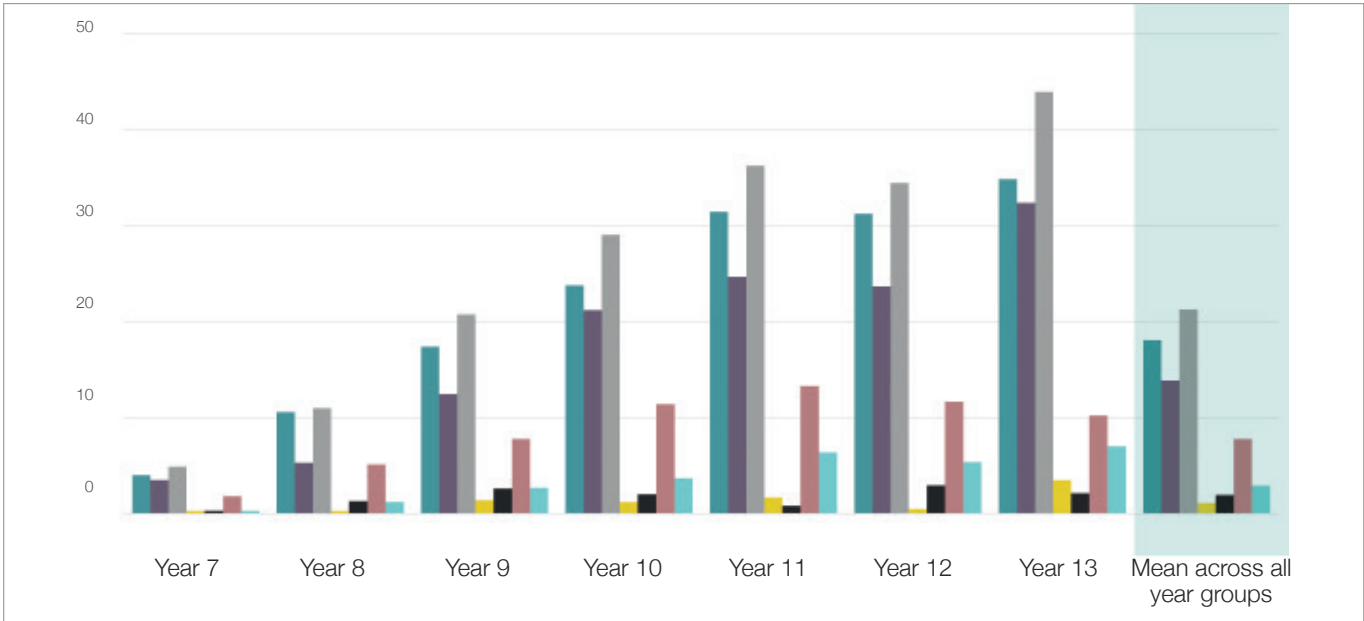


Figure 1. Non-Jewish groups identified as victims of the Holocaust in students’ responses to the question ‘Who were the victims of the Holocaust?’ (percentage by year group)

KEY

- Disabled people
- Roma/Sinti (Gypsies)
- Gay men
- Jehovah’s Witnesses
- Poles
- Black people
- People with mental health problems

During the survey, students were asked ‘Who were the victims of the Holocaust?’ and invited to provide their free-text responses. **As Figure 1 illustrates**, after Jews, gay men (or ‘homosexuals’ in some students’ words) were the second most commonly cited victims of the Holocaust, followed by disabled people, at third, and the Roma and Sinti (or ‘Gypsies’) as the fourth group referred to by a sizeable proportion of students.

Focus group interviews confirmed that these were the three principal non-Jewish victim groups in students’ consciousness. Sporadic references were also made to Black people, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Communists, Slavs and Poles. Strikingly, however, the murder in Nazi captivity of some 3.3 million Soviet prisoners of war received barely a mention.

While there are positive indications of progression in some aspects of students’ learning - older students tended to know more about the wider scope of Nazi violence and were more likely to recognise that a number of different victim groups were persecuted – the manner in which this is conceived is arguably problematic. Collapsing all victims of Nazism beneath one catch-all term, ‘the Holocaust’, risks blurring the distinctiveness and distinguishing features of each group’s experience.

Complete annihilation

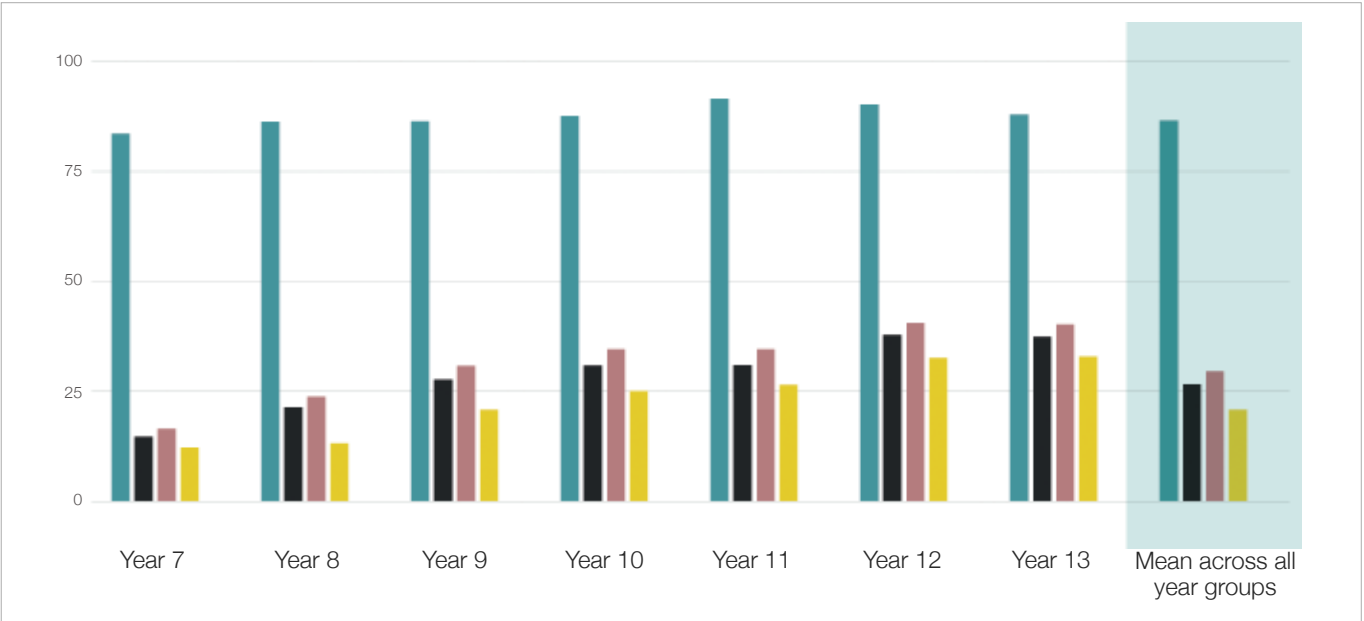


Figure 2. Student responses when asked to which group the statement, ‘The Nazis planned to kill every last person from this group, wherever they could reach them’ applied. (percentage by year group)

KEY

- Jews
- Disabled people
- Homosexuals
- Roma & Sinti

For example, one important distinction that should be made here is the recognition of the totality of mass murder. Within the survey, a series of questions began with the short explanation, ‘The Nazis persecuted (or unfairly treated) a number of different groups of people’. Students were then presented with a list of statements and asked to indicate to which group – or groups – each applied. The first of these statements read: ‘The Nazis planned to kill every last person from this group wherever they could reach them.’

**As is illustrated in Figure 2**, a very high percentage of students in every year group (from 83.6% in Year 7 to over 90% in Year 11) correctly recognised that the Nazis planned to kill all Jews wherever they could reach them.

However, more than a quarter of students indicated that they believed this was also true for both homosexuals and disabled people.

Interestingly, the frequency of both of these misconceptions appeared to increase with age. For example, while 16.6% of Year 7 students incorrectly suggested homosexuals were marked for complete annihilation, this figure rose to 30.9% in Year 9 and peaked at 40.6% in Year 12. While older students were more likely than their younger counterparts to recognise that a number of different groups were targeted by the Nazi regime, they were also more likely to conflate the experience of these other groups with that of the Jews.

# What do students know about the distinctive fate of different victim groups?

In interviews, students across all age groups regularly struggled to identify anything distinctive about the fate of different groups of people or the policies that were enacted against them. When asked what happened to gay men, for example, only a small number of students were able to offer any information and commonly did so with uncertainty. Among such responses, Year 10 student Lauren’s was typical:

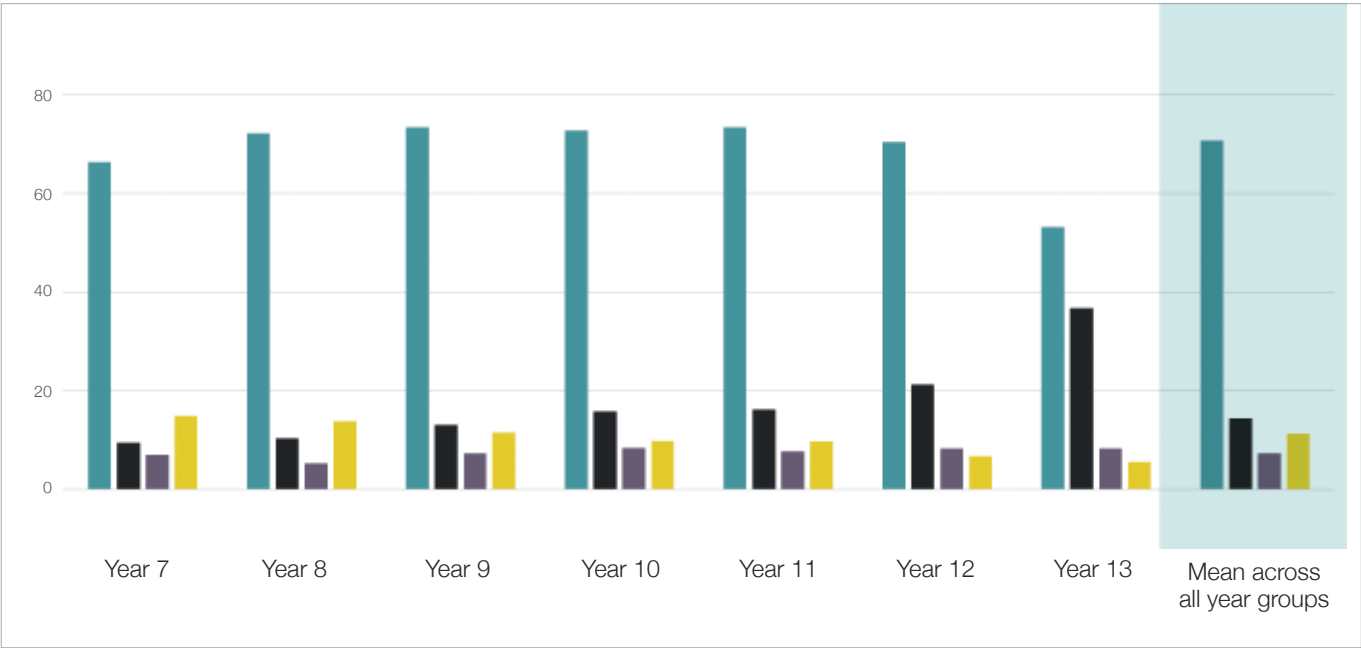
‘I think they got sent to concentration camps as well or they got killed, I can’t remember.’

Asked why gay men were targeted by the Nazi regime, students were again very uncertain but tended to explain the persecution in terms of a perceived difference and/or dislike based on ideas of biology or religion. For example, some students expressed the opinion that homosexuals were targeted because they were perceived as biologically ‘wrong’ or because their behaviour went against Christian doctrine.

A second statement included within the survey asked students to indicate who were the first victims of the Nazis’ mass murder programme. Here, **as Figure 3 illustrates**, only 14.4% of students replied correctly that this statement applied to disabled people while the majority incorrectly believed that it applied to Jews (70.7%).

Within interviews, although students very regularly identified disabled people within their lists of those targeted by the Nazis, most appeared to know very little about the origins or development of the specific policies enacted against them. The majority of students were not able to provide any detail about what happened to disabled people during this period. One student made reference to medical experimentation while others made vague or uncertain references to concentration camps and murder. Students’ limited understanding was also evident when asked why disabled people were victimised. Here, some struggled to provide any reason while others made vague references to Hitler and his vision for a ‘perfect’ blue-eyed, blonde-haired German people.

## First victims of mass murder



**Figure 3. Students’ responses when asked to identify which group the statement ‘They were the first victims of the Nazis’ mass murder programme’ applied.** (percentage by year group)

### KEY

- Jews
- Disabled people
- Homosexuals
- Roma & Sinti

Roma and Sinti were the third most commonly identified non-Jewish victim group in survey responses. During interviews, students appeared to know even less about the experiences of this group than they did about gay men or disabled people. While ‘gypsies’ were often named as victims in the focus groups, students were invariably silent when asked to provide further detail.

Holly, a Year 10 student was perhaps speaking for the majority when she said:

‘I don’t really know about them [the ‘Gypsies’] that much.’

As her classmate, Imogen (Year 10), went on to explain:

‘We do get taught that lots of people were involved, were like victims, but mostly focus on the Jews and homosexuals sometimes.’



On only two occasions during interviews with a wide range of participants did younger students offer any kind of explanation of the persecution of Roma and Sinti and these revolved around Hitler and his resentment for their nomadic living style:

‘He [Hitler] didn’t have much power over them, as much power as he did over people living in the city houses in Germany, because they were more free people that did whatever they wanted to do really.’ (Zoe, Year 8)

‘I think they lived in caravans, like he [Hitler] didn’t really like the way they lived I would say or their lifestyle and stuff.’ (Holly, Year 10)

Older students, in Years 12 and 13, fared little better in their attempts at explanation. Kylie (Year 13) suggested that

‘They just didn’t fit the social norm.’

Patrick (Year 12) framed ‘Gypsies or Roma’ as not fitting ‘Hitler’s perfect ideal’ - possibly because

‘They had less a sense of German identity, they didn’t conform to his sense of perfect Aryan, perfect brotherhood.’

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# Understanding the victims

The following pages provide a short overview of the typical experiences of the victim groups mentioned by students most often. It also highlights some of the ‘forgotten’ victims who were seldom mentioned.

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## Gay men



**While homophobia and legal discrimination of homosexuals was the norm throughout interwar Europe, persecution became particularly extreme in Nazi Germany.** In 1936 the Office for the Combating of Homosexuality and Abortion was established. The linkage of homosexuality with abortion revealed how both were regarded as population problems which undermined Nazi attempts to increase the so-called 'Aryan race'.

Homosexuality was additionally regarded by some as a threat to the moral and spiritual wellbeing of the nation and throughout the 1930s, gay men were harassed by the police, imprisoned, and increasingly incarcerated in concentration camps, where their treatment was particularly severe and mortality rates were exceptionally high.

The precise number of homosexuals who died at the hands of the Nazis is unclear but estimates put the number at 10,000 - 15,000.

Persecution was thus brutal and violent but the regime did not adopt a coherent, organised policy of murdering gay men. Instead, deterrence and violent 're-education' tended to be pursued and the policies did not extend beyond the borders of the Reich.

Image: A writer arrested for homosexuality. Düsseldorf, Germany, 1938.  
Credit: USHMM

## Disabled people



**Nazi persecution of disabled people began in the first months of the regime.** Believing that people with hereditary conditions would weaken the so-called 'Aryan race', and that the birth of more children with disabilities would be a financial and social burden, the German government passed a law in the summer of 1933 allowing for the compulsory sterilisation of people deemed to have mental or physical disabilities. By the start of the Second World War more than 300,000 people had been forcibly sterilised.

During the war, the children's 'euthanasia' programme, assisted by a highly effective bureaucracy, secretly murdered around 5,000 disabled children, mostly through lethal injection or starvation. Its adult equivalent, code-named T4 after the address of its administration (Berlin's Tiergartenstrasse 4), began killing in the winter of 1939, and expanded the existing bureaucratic

structure to deal with the much larger number of adults. A transportation company was established, asylums were identified for the installation of gassing apparatus, and a cadre of administrative and medical staff were recruited.

In August 1941, when more than 70,000 adults had been murdered, 'euthanasia' was formally halted by Hitler. The programme had become common knowledge, leading to public protests. However, Burleigh and Wippermann (1991: 153) argue that 'more likely the programme was halted because the original target figure had been reached'. T4 personnel were redeployed in the East, bringing their knowledge, experience and expertise to the construction and operation of the death camps built for the genocide of Jews first from Poland and then from across German-occupied Europe.

Image: Hartheim castle.  
Credit: USHMM

## Roma and Sinti



**The course of the development of Roma and Sinti persecution reveals a lot about the qualities of the Nazi regime.** While initially there was no formal policy towards the Roma, 'anti-Gypsy initiatives emerged from numerous agencies, above all the police and the SS but also the academic community' (Connelly 2010: 275). For example, 'Gypsies' were not specified in the racial legislation of 1933-34 but the authorities nevertheless applied the laws in such a way that Roma and Sinti 'were sterilised without any legal basis whatsoever' (Burleigh and Wippermann 1991: 116). If aspects of policy evolved organically, central government still made interventions that radicalised the persecution of the Roma and Sinti. In November 1935 a decision was taken to expand the Law for the Protection of German Blood and Honour, which criminalised sexual relations between Germans and Jews, to include the Roma and Sinti (Friedländer 1997: 153).

Together with sterilisation, this decision illustrates that the main domestic concern that caused the persecution of 'Gypsies' was the mixing of what were perceived as different races and the perceived negative impact on the purity of the German blood (Bloxham 2013).

While the Nazi regime never planned nor intended to kill every last person from this group wherever they could find them, 'Gypsies' were deported eastwards *en masse* in 1942, and thousands died either in gas chambers or in overcrowded ghettos while many more were shot by Nazis and their collaborators throughout Eastern Europe and the occupied territories of the Soviet Union. How many were killed remains a subject of debate: while 'most estimates put the figure in the 190,000-250,000 range, there is a possibility that it could be as high as half a million' (Levene 2013: 132).

Image: Trzebinia, Poland, portrait of a Roma woman.  
Credit: Yad Vashem

## Forgotten victims



**While Jews, Roma and Sinti, gay men and the disabled were all mentioned by large numbers of students as victims of the Nazis, some other groups were rarely mentioned.**

We can only speculate on why these groups appear to have all but 'disappeared from view', but it seems likely that they are considered somehow less 'relevant' to contemporary social issues. Many schools are rightly concerned with homophobia, for example, or the attitudes of society today towards disabled people; perhaps other groups persecuted and murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators have less 'purchase' on many teachers' and students' concerns with modern British society.

Whatever the reason, the outcome is that the murder of up to 15,000 gay men appears to receive

a lot of attention in the school classroom, whereas the murder of 3.3 million Soviet POWs seems to be forgotten, and the Nazi genocide of Poles (in which at least 1.8 million non-Jewish Poles were murdered) is barely mentioned. The persecution of political opponents also appears largely overlooked, even though the first concentration camps targeted these victims, and an understanding of this initial period of terror is important in understanding the later development of Nazi violence and genocide.

It may be that an over-emphasis on the 'lessons of the Holocaust', leads to a particular focus on groups that feel 'relevant' to today's issues, but that this leads – unwittingly – to both a distortion of the past and the forgetting of millions of victims.

Image: Soviet prisoners of war under German guard.  
Credit: USHMM





Credit: Olivia Hemingway

## References

Bloxham, D. (2013) *The Final Solution: A genocide*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Burleigh, M. and Wiperman, W. (1991) *The Racial State: Germany 1933–1945*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Connelly, J. (2010) 'Gypsies, homosexuals and Slavs'. In P. Hayes and J.K. Roth (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Holocaust Studies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Friedländer, S. (1997) *The Years of Persecution, 1933–1939*. London: Orion Books.

Levene, M. (2013) *The Crisis of Genocide – Annihilation: The European Rimlands, 1939–1953*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

# Key recommendations

All victims of Nazi persecution and murder deserve full recognition in their own right, rather than to be simply listed under the heading 'Holocaust'. Students need to learn what happened to each group; to understand the distinctive reasons why each was targeted; to appreciate the similarities and differences in their persecution; and how this unfolded in both the pre-war and wartime contexts.

## The research indicates teaching should:

- Explain the particular experiences of different groups of victims to enable students to consider how each of these crimes was significant in itself.
- Examine policies that underlined the persecution of different victims.
- Discuss the cumulative nature of some of these policies and its relationship with Nazi ideology and the events of the Second World War.
- Consider why specific groups were targeted.
- Understand the main difference between the persecution of Jews and the persecution of other victim groups: the intention of total annihilation.

The issue of what students know and understand about the specific fate of the Jews, the reasons for their persecution and the policies enacted against them is discussed in more detail in the next research briefing of this series, 'Victims of the Holocaust'.

## Our support for teachers

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

### We offer:

- A free full day CPD programme
- A series of standalone, after-school CPD workshops

**All of these sessions are free and open to all secondary school teachers in England. They are regularly delivered at venues across the country.**

## Some of our resources addressing issues raised in this briefing

### Being human?



Credit: USHMM, courtesy of Richard Fraimark.

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

The workshop and classroom materials 'Being human?' explore aspects of responsibility and complicity for both the genocide of Jews and the genocide of Roma.

## What was the Holocaust? An interactive timeline



Credit: Olivia Hemingway

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

Our flagship introduction provides both overview and depth in its approach to the history of the Holocaust. It reveals how the persecution and murder of the Jews was interwoven with Nazi crimes against other victim groups, including political opponents, disabled people, Roma, Sinti, gay men, Poles, Soviet POWs and Jehovah's Witnesses.

Crucially, it ensures that the distinctive experience of each victim group is understood and appreciated.

## More learning online



Our website offers a series of lectures designed to deepen teachers' subject knowledge. They address topics such as the Roma genocide and common myths and misconceptions about all victim groups.

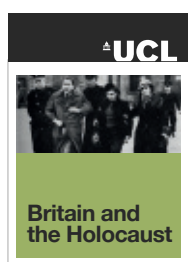
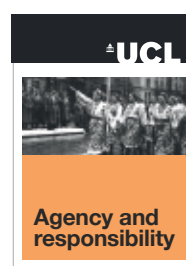
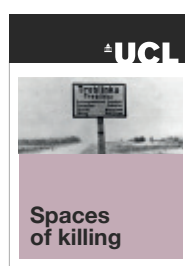
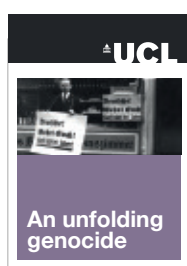
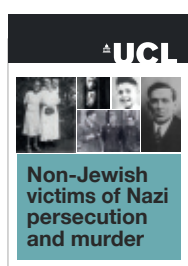
Visit [holocausteducation.org.uk/teacher-resources/subject-knowledge](https://holocausteducation.org.uk/teacher-resources/subject-knowledge) for more.

# About these briefings

**Non-Jewish victims of Nazi persecution and murder** is the first in a series of research briefings which report key findings from a landmark study of young people's knowledge and understanding of the Holocaust published by the UCL Centre for Holocaust Education in 2016. The study drew on survey responses from 7,952 11 to 18 year olds from across England and focus group interviews with an additional 244.

Further details of the methods used in this research – including the complete, 91 question survey instrument – are freely available on the UCL Centre for Holocaust Education's website ([www.ucl.ac.uk/holocaust-education](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/holocaust-education)) where you can also find a full list of other titles in this series.

The current list of research briefings explores what students know about these key areas of knowledge:



The UCL Centre for Holocaust Education is the only specialist Holocaust organisation combining research into classroom needs with CPD and practical support for teachers.

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Front cover images clockwise from left: Helene Gotthold (middle), United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM); Settela Steinbach, Yad Vashem; Joseph Muscha Müller, USHMM; Xaver Franz Stützinger, USHMM; Roger Bushell (left), Yad Vashem.