



An unfolding genocide

Using national research to inform your classroom practice.

Research briefing **3**

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

The Holocaust was not a single, monolithic event but a sequential process that developed and became radicalised over time.

For students, building a detailed knowledge of the Holocaust's chronology can enable them to see the underlying patterns and processes involved. It can allow them to identify key turning points and understand why significant decisions were made in the context of each particular moment. This powerful knowledge can help them to understand how extremist actions in a society can take root and develop.

This third briefing in our series reports on what English secondary school students know and understand about the chronology of the Holocaust, when it happened and how it developed. Closely linked, the next briefing examines students' knowledge and understanding of where the Holocaust took place.

What do students know about when the Holocaust happened?

Key findings

- 1 The majority of students correctly identified the 1940s as the decade in which the Holocaust took place. This improved with age (from 55.3% correct responses among Year 7s to 90.5% in Year 13).
- 2 Students in Years 7 to 11 did not typically have a secure or confident understanding of the chronology of the Holocaust. Only students who continued to study history in Years 12 and 13 were able to provide a more robust chronological framework.
- 3 40.2% of students incorrectly believed that the 'organised mass killing of Jews' began immediately when Hitler came to power in 1933. Only the oldest students were aware that the persecution and murder of Jews increased in intensity and scale throughout the late 1930s before the genocide started in the early 1940s.
- 4 Very few students in Years 7 to 10 were able to detail specific policies or events that dramatically impacted on the lives of Jews during the period of their pre-war persecution. (e.g. the April 1933 Boycott, the Nuremberg Laws of 1935, or Kristallnacht in 1938).
- 5 Very few students appeared to fully grasp the significance of the relationship between the Second World War and the Holocaust. For example, only 7.4% of students correctly understood that the event which primarily triggered the 'organised mass killing of Jews' was the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941.
- 6 Many students were unclear as to how and why the Holocaust ended. Fewer than half of those surveyed knew that it came to a close as a result of the Allied liberation of Nazi occupied territories.

Why does this matter?

If students are to understand that a genocide does not happen merely because someone wills it, it is important that they see how the development from persecution to genocide unfolded and evolved over time; that key decisions were taken by a range of individuals and agencies; and that the context of a European war was critical in shaping these decisions.

So that students understand a genocide does not happen merely because of one person's will, it is important that they see how the Holocaust unfolded over time; that decisions were made by a range of different individuals; and that the people involved were influenced by the context of the unfolding war.

Becoming more aware of how the persecution of the Jews developed through different phases in state policy also helps students to identify key turning points, enabling them to think through the types of interventions that might have been effective at different moments, both within Germany and by foreign powers, to prevent further radicalisation to mass murder.

A chronological study of the Holocaust can provide important insight into causes and key factors, enabling students to draw conclusions that can increase their awareness of the warning signs of genocide, which in turn may help to strengthen efforts at prevention in our time.

What do students know and understand about when the Holocaust happened and how it developed?

Our study explored what students know about the chronological development of the Holocaust through survey questions and interviews. First, the survey asked students 'When did the Holocaust happen?' Most (68.5%) correctly identified 'in the 1940s' as the right answer. Correct responses improved by age.

The number of correct responses was generally strong among most year groups, but there were still some areas of significant misunderstanding. For example, one in five students in Years 7 to 9 thought that the Holocaust occurred in the 1920s. And while most students responding to the survey were able to identify the decade in which the Holocaust took place, the focus group interviews revealed that students typically found it difficult to provide more accurate chronological detail.



The genocide as a process

The focus groups offered some encouraging findings, as many students seemed to recognise that the Holocaust was not a single, monolithic event, but a process that developed over time. For example, most students understood, at least at a basic level, that Nazi policy towards the Jews was not the same throughout the 1930s and 1940s:

‘They [the Jews] were, like, bullied first; like the Nazis would go into their homes and destroy things and torture them maybe and then take them away.’ (Michael, Year 8)

‘I can’t remember when Hitler came to power, but he started introducing laws that restricted people.’ (Rob, Year 9)

Imprecise historical knowledge

Despite their rudimentary understanding that the persecution of the Jews was a process rather than a single event, the interviews revealed both the incomplete and imprecise nature of the historical knowledge students used to make sense of this period.

The lack of reference to specific Nazi policies or acts against the Jews was particularly striking. For example, across all interviews with students in Years 7 to 11, just one student cited the April 1933 Boycott – an event which revealed much about the regime’s approach to anti-Jewish policy at the time - while only two students referred to Kristallnacht (the so-called ‘Night of Broken Glass’) – which is widely regarded by scholars as a major turning point in the history of pre-war anti-Jewish persecution.

A related survey question asked students to identify from a list of people, places and events, those that were associated with the Holocaust. Here only 36.1% identified Kristallnacht, while 49.1% believed the word was not connected to the Holocaust at all.

This lack of specific historical knowledge unquestionably hindered students’ ability to recognise critical periods in the development of the Holocaust. So, for example, it was evident that students had not considered how during the period between 1933 and 1939, the Nazi persecution of the Jews was confined to an expanding Greater Germany whereas, after that point, the outbreak of war saw persecution both expand spatially, and radicalise in nature.

When did mass killing begin?

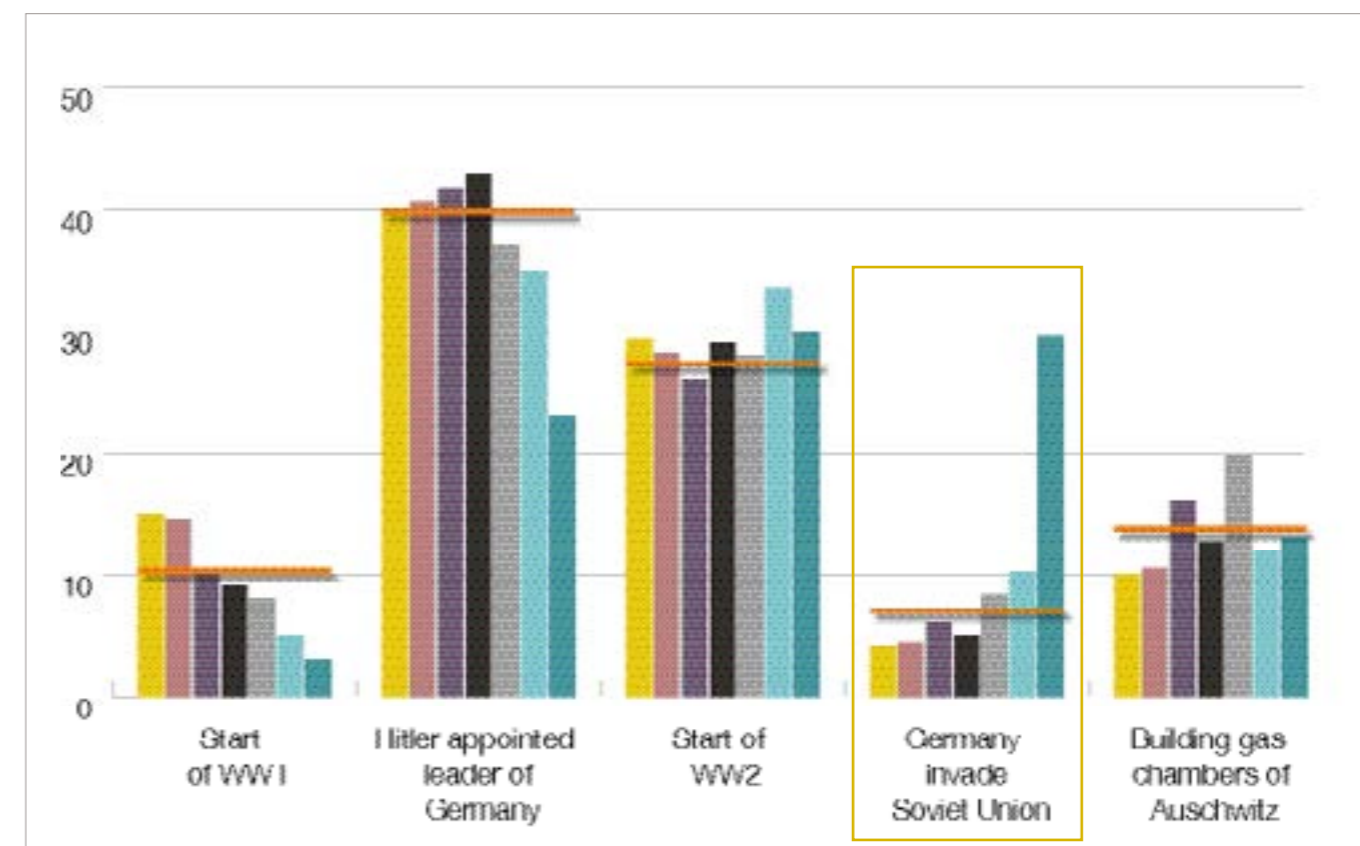
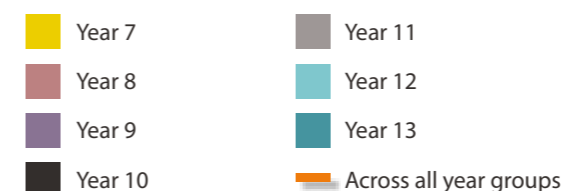


Figure 1. Students’ responses to the survey question: ‘The organised mass killing of Jews began immediately after a particular historical event. What was it?’ (percentage by year group).

The yellow box denotes the most accurate answer.

KEY



The context of war

Knowledge of the outbreak and course of the Second World War is crucial in accounting for the radicalisation of Nazi policy. However, it became clear during interviews that most younger students (Years 7 to 11) did not have a general chronicle of significant events of the Second World War, which would help them make sense of the Holocaust.

Very few students understood the significance of the Nazi invasion of Poland in September 1939 as a key factor in the development of more widespread and murderous policies against the Jews. Similarly, very few of them could place the establishment of the ghettos into a coherent chronological framework. Further evidence of students' lack of chronological understanding is that only one student in Year 7 to 11 explicitly mentioned Operation Barbarossa (the Nazi invasion of the USSR in June 1941), while not one student explained that the German advancement to the east, which brought millions more Jews under Nazi control, proved a catalyst for the subsequent mass murder.

Students' lack of understanding of the chronology of the genocide was further illuminated by their responses to a survey question that asked: 'The organised mass killing of Jews began immediately after a particular historical event. What was it?' As Figure 1 on page 7 illustrates, 40.2% of students believed that mass killing began when 'Hitler was appointed leader of Germany' while the correct answer that it started when 'Germany invaded the Soviet Union' was selected by only 7.4%.

Not one student explained that the German advancement to the east, which brought millions more Jews under Nazi control, proved a catalyst for the subsequent mass murder.

Furthermore, another significant event in the chronology of the Holocaust, which very few students referred to in interviews, was the Wannsee Conference. In the few cases when they did, details were very sketchy. Daniel (Year 10), for example, stated:

'I can't remember when it was but they decided; there was a meeting in a room where they had all big Nazi leaders and when they decided that they would use the 'Final Solution', which was killing in death camps.'

The Wannsee Conference was included alongside Kristallnacht within the survey in the list of events that students might associate with the Holocaust. Strikingly, only 15.2% of students recognised it had any connection with this history.

The Wannsee Conference

Held on 20 January 1942, the Wannsee Conference was a meeting of 15 high-ranking officials of the state, the Nazi Party, and the SS.

While it has been popularly presumed that this meeting was the point when genocide of the Jews was decided upon, the decision had, in fact, already been taken. In reality, the conference was a manoeuvre by Reinhard Heydrich to assert his authority, while coordinating the various agencies that would be involved in mass murder across the continent.

The surviving minutes of the meeting indicated the circulation of a statistical breakdown of Europe's '11 million' Jews, sorted by country, and the conception of a gigantic deportation programme to the East.



The villa where the Wannsee Conference took place.
Credit: Yad Vashem

Concluding, the survey of students' views revealed considerable uncertainty as to how and why the Holocaust ended. When asked 'Why did the Nazi-organised mass murder of the Jews end?' just 46.1% of students responded with the correct answer – that it ended because the Allied armies liberated the lands where the Holocaust was taking place. A broadly similar proportion (41.5%) thought it ended because Hitler committed suicide.

In conclusion, the survey and interviews provided evidence that students' chronological knowledge of the Holocaust and how it developed was limited and often imprecise. Students had difficulty stating when it started and how it ended. Key events in the pre-war persecution of Jews, such as the 1933 Boycott, the Nuremberg Laws, and Kristallnacht, were not generally known or understood. Key events during the war that contributed to the transformation of anti-Jewish persecution into a continent-wide genocide were not mentioned.

Such limited knowledge of the chronology of the Holocaust meant that students were severely restricted in their ability to reach a deeper understanding of how and why it unfolded.



Mendel Grossman in his photographic laboratory inside the Lodz ghetto.
Credit: Yad Vashem

Expanding territory and a change in policy

Before 1939 and the outbreak of the Second World War, Nazi persecution was confined to German (and then Austrian and Sudeten) Jews and did not yet amount to a programme of systematic mass murder. During these pre-war years, Nazi anti-Jewish policy initially focused on excluding the Jewish minority from society, politics and the economy, followed by their enforced migration out of the Reich.

In the years immediately after the outbreak of the Second World War, as the German army conquered more territory across Europe and millions of Jewish people fell under Nazi rule, anti-Jewish policy became more murderous and engulfed a range of European countries proving particularly catastrophic in Eastern Europe, the Baltic states and the Nazi-occupied territories of the Soviet Union.



Local residents watch the burning of the ceremonial hall at the Jewish cemetery in Graz during the November Pogrom, 1938.
Credit: USHMM

The start of systematised mass murder

Following the German invasion of Poland in September 1939, Jews became subjected to unprovoked and random acts of violence, including murder. In October 1939, the first ghetto was established, followed by hundreds of others across the Nazi-occupied territories of Poland and the Soviet Union. They were seen as a provisional measure whose purpose was to control and segregate Jews.

Systematic mass murder of Jews in Eastern Europe began in the summer of 1941 with Operation Barbarossa and the invasion of the Soviet Union. The Nazis realised that their planned mass deportation of European Jews to the East (or Madagascar) was not feasible. Building on their phobic belief that the Jews constituted an existential threat, the Nazis developed the fantasy that the destruction of the Jews was critical to their own security.

Mass murder was initially conducted by mobile killings squads, the Einsatzgruppen, and their local collaborators, who combed thousands of towns and villages across tens of thousands of square miles in search of their victims.

Later, towards the end of 1941 and the beginning of 1942, the killing was made more 'efficient' by the construction of stationary death camps. In this new development, millions of victims were mobilised in mass deportations to a few gas chambers, which could be staffed by just a handful of guards.

Key recommendations

The research indicates teaching should:

- Develop students' understanding of the Holocaust as a process by emphasising key phases, events and turning points in the development from persecution to mass murder and genocide, and thus their conceptual understanding of change and continuity, causation and significance.
- Make the distinction between antisemitic persecution in Greater Germany before 1939 and continent-wide mass murder of Jews during the Second World War.
- Help students understand the relationship between the course of the Second World War and the progressive radicalisation of anti-Jewish policies.
- Include some key dates and events that mark the cumulative radicalisation of the Nazi policy and action in their persecution of the Jews (for example, the 1933 Boycott; the 1935 Nuremberg Laws; the mass violence of Kristallnacht in November 1938; the German invasion of Poland in 1939 and the beginning of the ghettos; the invasion of the Soviet Union in the summer of 1941 and the beginning of systematic murder by the Einsatzgruppen; the decision to extend mass murder across the continent in the autumn of 1941 followed by the Wannsee Conference in January 1942; the development of the death camps towards the end of 1941 and into 1942).

Alongside chronological knowledge and conceptual understanding, an awareness and appreciation of the geographical dimensions of this period is critical. The fourth briefing in this series, 'Spaces of Killing', explores students' understandings of the geography 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 throughout their careers in successfully addressing the formidable issues raised by a study of the Holocaust.

We offer:

- a suite of 8 core CPD modules with accompanying classroom materials, 'What was the Holocaust, how do I teach it and why does it matter?'
- a range of additional CPD workshops
- self-guided online short courses
- teaching resources and material
- self-guided online lessons for students
- an online MA module, 'The Holocaust in the curriculum'
- a MOOC, 'Teaching the Holocaust: Innovative approaches to the challenges we face'
- an ITE course
- a research-informed textbook for Key Stage 3, 'Understanding the Holocaust: How and why did it happen?'

All of these are free and open to all secondary school teachers in England.

For more information and to access our courses and resources, visit www.ucl.ac.uk/holocaust-education

Some of our resources addressing issues raised in this briefing

A space called Treblinka



Credit:

Workshop and related classroom materials, included as part of our additional CPD offer

In this lesson students undertake a historical enquiry into Treblinka. Focussing on what occurred in this space during the first five months of the camp's existence, students discover the reality of genocide. As they are confronted with the chaos of Treblinka in late summer 1942 and reconstruct the responses of the perpetrators, students acquire a deeper appreciation of the developmental nature of the Holocaust and are brought closer to its human impact.

What happened to the Jews of Europe? The Holocaust and victims of Nazi persecution



Credit: Olivia Hemingway

Course and related classroom materials, included as part of our core CPD offer

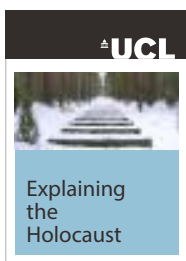
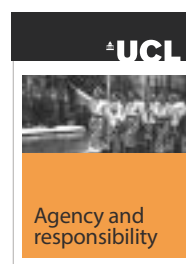
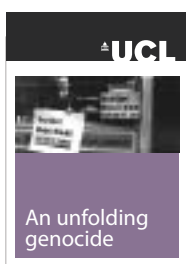
An interactive timeline engages students in the key events in the development of persecution and mass murder. It enables them to identify key phases and turning points, building powerful knowledge of this complex past.

About these briefings

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

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

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



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

To find out more about us, book events and explore our full programme of workshops and CPD, please visit our website.

www.ucl.ac.uk/holocaust-education

email: holocaust@ucl.ac.uk

[@ucl_holocaust](https://twitter.com/ucl_holocaust)

Front cover image: A man supporting the boycott of Jewish businesses next to a Jewish-owned store, Berlin, April 1933.
Credit: Yad Vashem