



# Britain and the Holocaust

Using national research to  
inform your classroom practice.

Research  
briefing **6**

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)

Learning about British responses to the Holocaust requires students to identify and grapple with challenging political and ethical questions, including important issues of personal, national and international responsibility.

How much did the British government and the British public know about the Holocaust as it unfolded? How did they act on that knowledge? If students are to fully understand and critically assess these questions, then their learning must be based on a secure contextual and historical foundation.

This briefing, the sixth in the series, draws on our research with more than 8,000 11 to 18 year olds. It examines what students currently know and understand about Britain's response to the Holocaust, as well as considering how their learning might be extended and improved.

# What do students know about the British response to the Holocaust?

## Key findings

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- 1 Survey responses suggested that students of all ages had a limited and often erroneous understanding of the British government's response to the Holocaust.
- 2 When asked 'what happened when the British government knew about the mass murder of Jews?', 34.4% of students who completed the survey wrongly suggested that Britain declared war on Germany, and 23.8% incorrectly believed that Britain did not know anything until the end of the war.
- 3 Only 6.7% chose the most appropriate answer: that Britain said they would punish the killers when the war was over. While the accuracy of student responses did improve a little with age, even among the oldest students less than 10% identified the most historically accurate answer.
- 4 Interviews confirmed that many students mistakenly believed the British government either didn't know or only found out about mass killings at the end of the war.
- 5 Overwhelmingly, students in Years 7 to 11 did not appear to have the necessary contextual information to explain Britain's reaction to the Holocaust.

## Why does this matter?

Today, the Holocaust features prominently in British social and political culture and has come to play a central role in how the country remembers the Second World War. Typically, the Holocaust is used as a symbol of the evils of Nazism and as such, it is readily adopted as part of a popular narrative of 'why we fought'. This narrative helps to reinforce a broadly positive sense of British self-identity, or 'British values'. It also frames British foreign policy as having had a largely positive role in the world.

But these framings of the Holocaust as part of our national story may be problematic. From an educational perspective, it is certainly important for young people to know that Britain was one of the Allied Powers that defeated Nazi Germany. This defeat did indeed bring about the end of the Nazi occupation of Europe and the genocides perpetrated by that regime. But it is a distortion of history to believe that Britain fought the Nazis in order to save the Jews.

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This idea is not only harmful to students' knowledge of the Holocaust, but also to their understanding of why the country went to war. A deeper historical understanding would enable students to understand more clearly how the Holocaust links to, and is part of, their own history. Students should be aware of how much Britain actually knew about the mass killings of Jews, as well as how both the government and the public responded when this information became available. This awareness allows them to grapple with significant ethical and political questions, including issues of national and international responsibility.

# How do students understand and explain Britain's response to the Holocaust?

What secondary students knew and understood about the British government's response to the Holocaust was explored in both the student survey and focus group interviews.

The survey asked 'What happened when the British government knew about the mass murder of Jews?' The range of responses revealed important misconceptions, as explained below and illustrated in Figure 1 (page 7).



Credit: Olivia Hemingway

First misconception

## On learning about the mass murder, Britain declared war

More than one third (34.4%) of students across all age groups appeared to believe that Britain declared war on Germany when they learned about the mass murder of Jews.

In fact, Britain declared war on Germany in September 1939, following the German occupation of Poland, while the systematic mass murder of Jews did not begin until two years later, following the German invasion of the Soviet Union in the summer of 1941.

Second misconception

## Britain didn't know until the end of the war

The second most popular answer was that Britain 'didn't know anything until the end of the war' (23.8%).

Historians agree that news of the systematic mass killing of Jews reached the Allies soon after it began, as early as the summer of 1941, when the British were able to decode secret German radio signals reporting the actions of SS murder squads after the invasion of the Soviet Union.

The Allies then had a fairly full and accurate picture of what was happening by the end of 1942, when reports of the Nazi plan to kill all of Europe's Jews reached the West from at least three separate sources: the Bund in the Warsaw ghetto, the Riegner telegram from Switzerland and from Jan Karski, a Polish courier who reached London and provided the first eyewitness account.

The fact that they knew is further underscored by Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden's statement to the House of Commons on 17 December 1942, which publicly condemned the extermination of Jews by Germans – undeniable proof that the British government knew about the unfolding genocide by the end of 1942.

### What happened when the British government knew about the mass murder of Jews?

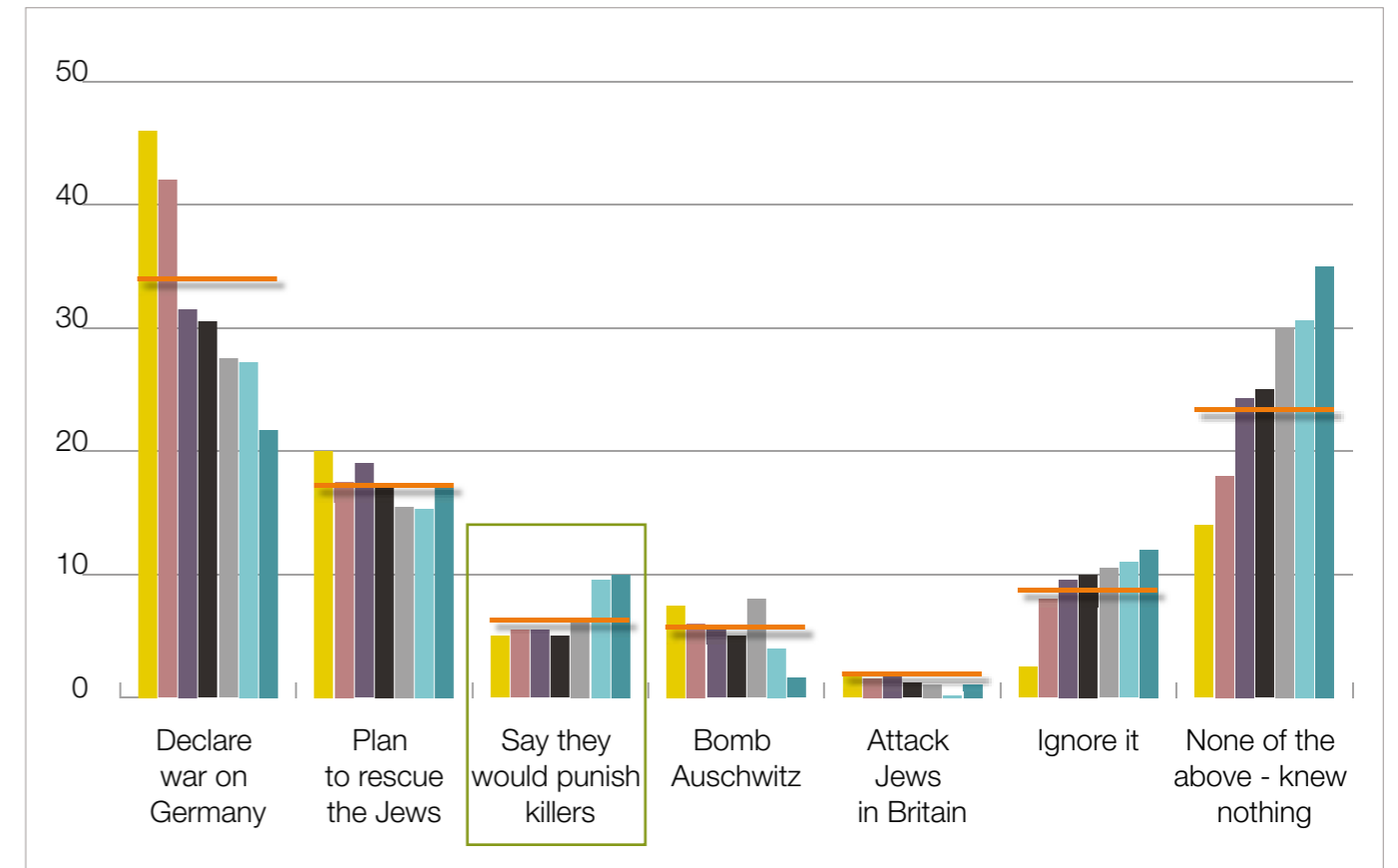


Figure 1: Students' responses to the survey question 'What happened when the British government knew about the mass murder of Jews?' (percentage by year group)

The green box denotes the most accurate answer

KEY

- Year 7
- Year 8
- Year 9
- Year 10
- Year 11
- Year 12
- Year 13
- Across all year groups

### Third misconception

## Rescue plans

The third most common answer, selected by 17.6% of respondents, was that the British government drew up 'rescue plans to try to do everything to save the Jewish people.'

The first and last articulation of Britain's official response to the knowledge of the ongoing genocide (the Allied Declaration of 17 December 1942) merely promised to bring those responsible to justice. About four months later in April 1943 the British and Americans convened at the Bermuda Conference, but failed to produce any plans to rescue Europe's Jews.

Despite knowledge of the wholesale mass murder, saving European Jews never became an explicit war aim of the British government and armed forces.

Instead, they argued that the best way to help all persecuted people in occupied lands would be to win the war as soon as possible, since rescue attempts for the Jews would divert precious resources from that central goal. Actions to save or rescue Jews during the war years were extremely limited. Although many people were sympathetic to the plight of the Jews, few took part in campaigns to save them.



A British soldier standing in front of the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp sign  
Credit: Imperial War Museum, BU9956

### The most accurate answer

## A promise to punish the killers when the war was over

The most appropriate answer was that the British government said they would punish the killers when the war was over. Significantly, this option was selected by only 6.7% of respondents across all year groups. Overall, survey responses suggested that students had a very limited and often erroneous understanding of Britain's response to the Holocaust.

Focus group interviews with students indicated that the majority of them believed the British government either did not know or only learned of the mass killings at the end of the war.

For example, Fahima (Year 10) reflected:

**'I don't think they knew a lot. I mean they knew Hitler was passing laws but I don't think they knew the extent of the genocide really. I mean they probably would have known that people had been killed but not the scale.'**

Many students explained the Allied lack of knowledge by suggesting that the killing was conducted in remote locations and it was kept secret under the cover of war.

It was also commonly believed that if Britain and the Allies had known about the mass killing they would have acted sooner. For example, Hannah (Year 9) reasoned:

**'I don't think they knew it was on that wide a scale though. I mean, if you knew that millions of Jews were being murdered you would do something about it.'**

## What could Britain have done?

While the majority of students interviewed thought that the British government didn't know about the Holocaust, a number of others suggested in interview that the British did know at an earlier point in the war.

This provided an opportunity to explore what students believed the British did, or could have done, in response. Most of the younger students appeared to lack the contextual knowledge needed to confidently answer this question and commonly resorted to guesswork, which was frequently simplistic and often mistaken. Some suggested that 'killing Hitler' would have been the best way to stop the Holocaust. Others argued that Britain did not try to stop the genocide because doing so would 'start a war'.

Deena (Year 9), for example, argued that:

'[Britain did not want to act] because there might be another war, like ... they were trying to avoid another war like World War I.'

Several students offered more plausible reasons for why it would have been difficult for the British government to prevent the Holocaust. For example, some suggested it would be difficult to liberate Jews from the camps because

'They were embedded deep behind German ranks.' (Nick, Year 9)

'They were probably quite well guarded.' (John, Year 9)

'There were other countries in the war that supported Hitler.' (Hamish, Year 9)

Although these students recognised that there were numerous limitations to what Britain could do once the war had started, some students argued that Hitler should have been stopped at an earlier point. Rosie (Year 8), for example, suggested:

'They could have stopped Germany taking over all the countries, like, before he started getting so powerful. Because they didn't do anything while he was taking over most of Europe.'

Sabir (Year 10) agreed:

'They should have intervened, especially when they found out that Hitler was increasing army numbers and submarines and stuff like that.'

Other students, however, countered these arguments by suggesting that Britain could not have known in the late 1930s about how Hitler's policies would have turned to mass murder during the 1940s.

In general, very few younger students could offer any significant historical or contextual knowledge to help them assess Britain's situation. In contrast, Year 12 and 13 students were more able to offer reasonable explanations about why it would have been difficult for Britain to stop the Holocaust.

Some students suggested that the British were limited in what they were able to do. For example, Alex (Year 12) explained:

'During the 1930s in the build-up to the war, when the Nazis were starting to discriminate against Jews, they [the UK] did condemn the actions but they didn't want to go to war over it, because both Britain and France were fairly sort of neutral, and then finally when Germany invaded Poland and the war started, that's when they got involved, but I think when the actual Holocaust started in 1941 the British didn't really have the ability to stop it at that point because how could they get to Poland?'

Many of the older students interviewed took a pragmatic view suggesting that Britain's primary objective was to defend Britain and defeat the Nazis:

'I think it wasn't a priority, I think winning the war was more of a priority, however awful it sounds.' (Aimee, Year 13).

'I think they were more focused on defending their country than helping the German Jews.' (Nikki, Year 13).

The general sense of the interviews with older students was that, despite undoubted sympathy for the Jews, it would be unfair to blame Britain and the Allies for not acting sooner and more decisively. Current historiography accepts that the scope for action was limited. But the criticism remains that so little time, energy, and resources were committed to the effort of devising rescue plans.

# Key recommendations

The research suggests that many secondary school students were unclear about Britain's knowledge of, and response to, the systematic mass killing of the Jews.

Significant numbers of students across all age groups mistakenly believed that Britain went to war to save the Jews. This suggested a lack of understanding of the chronological development of both the war and of the genocide within it. Importantly, it also suggested that most secondary students did not understand the actual reasons why this country declared war on Germany in 1939, and they tended to cast that decision in a moral rather than a geopolitical light.



## The research indicates teaching should:

- Include the chronological development of Nazi persecution and mass murder and its relationship with the Second World War. Students should be able to recognise that Britain was already engaged in full-scale war with Germany before the mass killings began.
- Provide evidence of what and when the British government and British public knew about the unfolding genocide. Students could learn, for example, about:
  - When the British were able to understand secret German radio messages and what knowledge that gave them about the actions of the SS killing squads.
  - The Riegner telegram
  - The extraordinary story of eyewitness Jan Karski
  - Reports in the British press
  - Public campaigns pressing for more to be done to save Europe's Jews
  - Anthony Eden's statement in the House of Commons
  - The outcome of the Bermuda Conference
  - The subsequent protest and suicide of Szmul Ziegelbojm.
  - What scope of action was available to Britain and the Allies once these details were known and understood.
- Discuss what course of action the British government actually decided to take and potential criticisms of this approach. The government and military planners decided it was more important to win the war rather than diverting resources to a rescue effort. Punishment of those responsible would happen when the war was won.
- Refer to Britain's policy towards Jewish refugees before 1939, during, and after the war. This could include a critical focus on the apparent lack of resources invested in rescuing Jews before the war and the British restrictions to Jewish immigration to Palestine after the war. It could also include instances when Britain helped Jews, including the Kindertransport, and Britain's role in the liberation of Bergen-Belsen.

## 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](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/holocaust-education)

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

### What were British responses to the Holocaust?

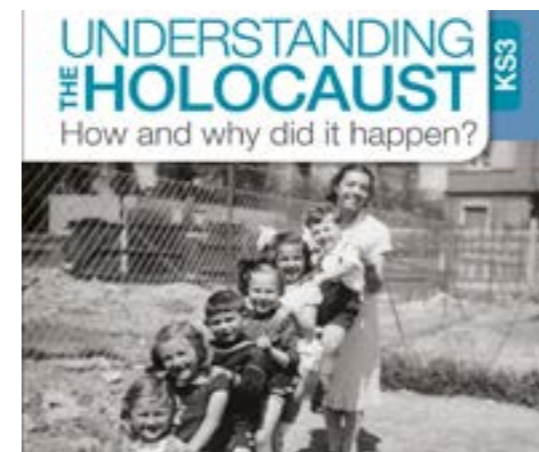


Credit: The Wiener Holocaust Library

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

This workshop draws upon rich evidential material held in the National Archives, Wiener Library, Churchill Archive, Mass Observation Archive and the Ben Uri Gallery to facilitate students' detailed enquiry into what the British government and public knew about the fate of Jews and when, how this knowledge was comprehended, and the attitudes and responses that followed.

### Understanding the Holocaust: How and why did it happen?



Credit: USHMM, image 14679

Key Stage 3 textbook with accompanying online CPD and guidance material

The Centre's textbook provides opportunities for students to learn about the choices and actions of people caught up in the events of the Holocaust. In a thematic unit on responsibility, students can learn about a range of responses to knowledge of the unfolding genocide including that of the British. Teachers can acquire a free class set of textbooks by completing the self-guided, online CPD course. To access the course, visit: <https://holocausteducation.org.uk/the-holocaust-education-ks3-textbook/>

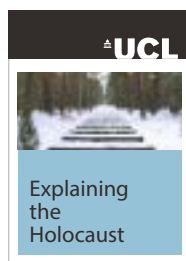
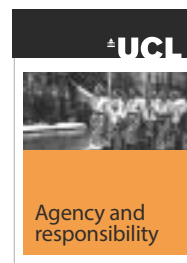
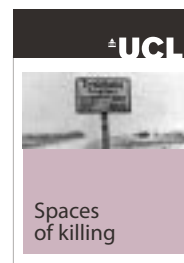
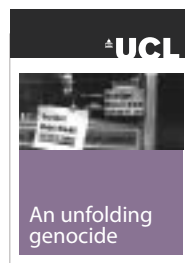


# About these briefings

Britain and the Holocaust is the sixth 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.

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](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/holocaust-education)

email: [holocaust@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:holocaust@ucl.ac.uk)

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

Front cover image: A Jewish man being escorted by the police at Croydon airport as he is about to be deported back to Czechoslovakia, 31st March 1939.  
Credit: The Wiener Library