



Explaining the Holocaust

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Research
briefing **7**

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

Explaining the Holocaust, the seventh in our series of research briefings, draws together research findings discussed in the previous six briefings, in order to explore how students' limited substantive knowledge, misconceptions and misunderstandings can impact their explanations of why the Holocaust happened.

For example, in Research Briefing 5, Agency and Responsibility, we highlighted that many young people appear to place primary – and in many cases, exclusive – responsibility for the Holocaust in the person of Hitler. The problem with such 'Hitler-centrism' is that students may overly rely on their understanding of Hitler's personal motives and actions to explain the Holocaust. This risks reducing a complex historical process to a monocausal explanation.

This briefing argues that to construct robust explanations, students require knowledge of what people did and did not do, and a secure grasp of how things happen in history. Students need to understand that it was not just Hitler and the Nazis who were responsible for the Holocaust, but that it occurred as a result of both the actions of individuals and groups in the short-term, and more long-standing trends and developments. This is crucial for the progression of students' historical thinking and the meanings they are able to derive from a study of this complex and emotionally challenging past.

Key findings

- 1 Students were concerned with why the Jews were specifically targeted, but had considerable difficulty in providing robust, developed answers to this question. Instead – worryingly – many students appeared to resort to stereotypical misconceptions regarding who 'the Jews' were to explain why they were targeted.
- 2 68% of survey respondents did not recognise the term 'antisemitism'.
- 3 Very few students appeared to understand the Nazi racial views or to recognise that Hitler and the Nazis' racial ideology had deeply rooted origins in the western social, cultural and political traditions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.
- 4 A generalised notion of racism or intolerance to difference appeared to shape many students' explanatory accounts.
- 5 Where students attempted to identify causes of the Holocaust, they overwhelmingly did so with central reference to Hitler and/or the Nazis' personal hatred of Jews.
- 6 Most students appeared to have very limited understanding of how or why so many other people across the European continent became complicit in the persecution, looting and murder of the Jews and commonly relied upon notions of 'brainwashing', fear and/or ignorance in their attempts to explain these actions.
- 7 Most students had a limited and unclear understanding of the relationship between the Holocaust and the Second World War.

Why does this matter?

It is one thing to know that something in the past has happened; it is another to be able to offer an explanation of how and why a past event has occurred. Explanations require more than just discrete items of knowledge or a descriptive narration, for they are built on the ability to understand that different factors and forces can interrelate and have degrees of influence. Yet, being able to explain the past does not necessarily mean any explanation goes; explanations can vary in strength and validity, depending on how they have been constructed and the weight of evidence that underpins them.

If students locate responsibility for the Holocaust only in the personal beliefs and prejudices of Hitler and the Nazis, then they overlook the complicity of many thousands of others across the European continent. If they don't understand the deep historical roots of antisemitism and anti-Judaism, then they will not be able to comprehend why the Jews were targeted. Recognition of this context means that the Holocaust can then not be simply 'explained away' as an aberration of the Nazi era, but can rightly be seen as a part of the wider western tradition, which has profound implications for the meanings students may draw from this history.

Furthermore, if students believe that racism and intolerance alone offer sufficient explanation for the Holocaust, then they are left with only a very superficial understanding of how genocides become possible in the modern world. Beyond generalised notions of racism and intolerance, explanations of the Holocaust need to take into account factors such as the ideas and ideologies of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; the rise of ultra-nationalist groups across Europe; the socio-political and economic crises in the aftermath of the First World War; the development of the Second World War; and the webs of agencies, business and bureaucracy of a modern nation state, which became instrumental in the project of genocide. Recognising the complexity of these factors, teachers have the challenging task of finding accessible ways to introduce them to their students.

Importantly, developing understanding of these causal factors will help students better understand why the Jews were targeted without looking for some fault within the victims themselves.

Developing understanding of ideas, agents, actions and context will help students better understand why the Jews were targeted without looking for some fault within the victims themselves.

Robust explanations of how and why the Holocaust happened are important not only for students' historical understandings but also, crucially, in helping students become informed and critical members of society able to identify wider patterns of genocide, warning signs, and interventions that may help to strengthen efforts at genocide prevention.

How do students' misconceptions affect their historical explanations?

While the research did not directly ask students to explain why the Holocaust happened, a number of key findings from both survey and interviews help us consider the consequences misconceptions and misunderstandings may have on students' historical explanations and, by extension, their historical understanding more broadly.

Understanding why the Jews were targeted

During one of the preliminary pilot studies undertaken in preparation for this research, 342 participants aged 11-18 were asked to share any questions they had regarding the Holocaust. By far the single most common response across all age groups was some variation of the question 'why the Jews?' Revealingly, this was true even among those who had recently been taught about the Holocaust in school. The question "why the Jews?" is, of course, one which arguably should trouble our students. After all, the prospect of explaining the resolve of human beings to murder others is something that ought to be challenging. Even so, it was apparent that young people's confusion and uncertainty about 'why the Jews?' stemmed in large part from absent knowledge and skewed conceptual understandings.



Credit: Emile Holba

Why the Jews?

The question of 'why the Jews?' was examined further during focus group interviews as part of the main student research. Here, participants were asked directly, 'Why did the Nazis and their collaborators specifically target the Jews?' At times, the question was met with complete bewilderment. More commonly, students responded tentatively or couched their replies with confessions of uncertainty. In general, students were able to offer some attempt at an answer but the quality of these responses and the extent to which they constituted a developed, historical explanation varied considerably. In most instances students began - and in a number of cases ended - with reference to who they thought 'the Jews' were. Broadly speaking, students' ideas related to one of three categories: population size, socioeconomic status and beliefs.

Population size

First, as explained in Research Briefing 2, students tended to overestimate the Jewish population of Germany. In a relevant survey question, 38.6 per cent of students indicated that 15% of the total German population in 1933 was Jewish and a further 35.3 per cent of students indicated this number to be over 30%. Only 8.8 per cent of student respondents chose the correct answer, that Jews made up less than 1% of the German population in 1933. The problem with such overestimations is that students fail to see the Jews as a vulnerable minority within Germany. This allows Nazi propaganda that presented Jews as a dominant group to be left unchecked. It also leads students to uncritically accept population size as a reason for blame to be levied against Jews.

'I think there was quite a lot of them in the population in Germany so maybe they [the Germans] thought that because there is a lot of them there is a lot of them to blame for why Germany was like broke and stuff.' (Deena, Year 9)

Socioeconomic status

Second, students attempted to explain the Jewish persecution by drawing on - and, perhaps unwittingly, reproducing - anti-Jewish stereotypes and Nazi propaganda about Jewish power and/or wealth. Those students who unwittingly deployed antisemitic stereotypes, often spoke of 'the Jews' as a disproportionately rich, powerful or successful group whom Hitler, and ultimately the wider German public, felt envious of or threatened by. A number of students, for example, explained that, following the First World War, the German economy was depressed and unemployment high and so concluded:

'The Germans, when they saw that the Jews were better off than them kind of, I don't know, it kind of pissed them off a bit.'

(Fahima, Year 10)

The problem with such accounts is not only that students uncritically accept Nazi propaganda and frame it as way of explanation for the hostility against Jews, but that they also seem to understand the Jews as separate from Germans - as if one could be either but not both.

Beliefs

Finally, instead of understanding that Nazi ideology saw Jews in racial and not religious terms, many students mistakenly argued that Jews were persecuted and murdered primarily on the basis of their religion. This argument is equally problematic for its assumption that all Jewish people necessarily saw themselves as "Jewish" purely in religious terms and shared the same faith. For 41.6% of students however, Jews could have avoided persecution if they had given up their beliefs. This misunderstanding was also evident in how some students responded to the survey question inviting a short description of the Holocaust:

'[The Holocaust was] Where Hitler put all the jews in concentration camps and the ghettos. He made all the jews work and he would kill the jews as well. All because they were a different religion to him. I think this was wrong.' (Year 10 student)

'The Holocaust was the death of millions of people in religious groups because other people didn't believe what they did and wanted them punished.' (Year 10 student)

In general, the survey and focus-group data indicated that religion played a very important role in shaping many students' understandings of 'why the Jews?' Significantly, while the awareness that anti-Jewish hostility is historically related to religious doctrine could allow students to recognise long-term causal factors relating to the history of anti-Jewish sentiment in Europe, findings indicated that students rarely thought along those lines. For, although students showed some awareness that Jews had been subjected to prejudice and discrimination at other times in history, students rarely framed this as a long-term 'cause' of the Holocaust.

Understanding antisemitism and the Nazi world view

In addition to the lack of reference to the history of European anti-Judaism, data from the survey and focus group interviews indicated a general lack of understanding of Nazi antisemitism.

Understanding antisemitism and the Nazi world view is central if students are to develop explanatory accounts for why the Jews were targeted and why the Holocaust happened. However, one of the most significant findings of our research with secondary school students was that the term 'antisemitism' appeared largely unfamiliar to most of the young people who took part. Among those who completed the survey, 68% did not recognise the term. Interviews confirmed the survey findings that the word 'antisemitism' was absent from the lexicon of most 11 to 16 year olds.

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By consequence, students were commonly unaware that the Nazis saw Jews as inherently different, and that the difference was seen as rooted in 'scientific' ideas about blood, race and biology. In some respects, this was paradoxical as students in nearly all focus group interviews made reference to the Nazis being obsessed with people having 'blonde hair and blue eyes'. Survey descriptions of the Holocaust also had frequent allusions to the 'Aryan ideal'. So, while being aware of a racial paradigm in Nazi ideology, students seemed generally unable to describe how the paradigm related to Nazi treatment of Jews. And although students of all ages referred or alluded to ideas of race, racism and Aryan ideals, they were generally limited in their ability to describe their role in the Holocaust.

Antisemitism

'Antisemitism' is a key concept in understanding why the Jews were targeted. As Yehuda Bauer explains, "after all, the Germans and their allies all over Europe did not murder the Jews because they loved them, or even because they were indifferent to them, or because of a generalised 'racism'. They did not kill all the green-eyed men and the red-haired women, but Jews" (in Foster et al. 2016: ix). Antisemitism refers to 'the belief that Jews have common repellent and/or ruinous qualities that set them apart from non-Jews' (Hayes, 2017: 3). The term first appeared in 1879 and was intended to describe something different from previous forms of anti-Jewish sentiment. As Hayes (2017) explains, antisemites claimed to be against a phenomenon they themselves invented, 'Semitism'. They claimed to combat Semites (speakers of the Semitic family of languages) but in fact not all Semites were targeted – speakers of Arabic and Aramaic were not included though they both speak Semitic languages.

Indeed, the target of the new term was Jews and 'by focusing on their ancestral language and using an abstract, pseudoscientific euphemism to group them, the antisemites purported to (a) differentiate Jews authoritatively from everyone else, (b) root their difference in their very nature and thought processes, and thus (c) assert that opposition to Jews was not a mere prejudice, but a response to a demonstrable reality that had to be dealt with politically' (Hayes, 2017: 4-5; emphasis added). Those who espoused antisemitic ideas claimed that Jews had been shaped over time by their language and their original desert environment to be a fundamentally and unchangeable different species than Europeans; a species that had to be contained and expelled (ibid). Nazis combined such antisemitic ideas with racial doctrines about superior and inferior races, as well as ideas about 'racial hygiene' and along with nationalism created the special fusion that was their ideology.

References

Foster, S. et al. (2016). What do students know and understand about the Holocaust? Evidence from English secondary schools. London: UCL Centre for Holocaust Education.

Hayes, P. (2017) Why? Explaining the Holocaust. New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company.

Generalised notions of racism and prejudice

Related to the lack of understanding of Nazi antisemitism as a concept and a historical development, some survey responses indicated the role of abstract or generic notions of 'racism', 'prejudice' and intolerance of 'difference' in attempts to describe and explain the Holocaust:

The holocaust was the mass killing of the Jews due to racism from German nazis. (Year 9 student)

The Holocaust was caused by a person who was prejudiced and didn't respect other religions. (Year 11 student)

The Holocaust was when Hitler took people that he didn't think were 'normal' (Jews, homosexuals etc) and put them in concentration camps. (Year 10 student)

Such generalised notions of racism or prejudice and intolerance against generic difference are unlikely to help students understand how and why the Holocaust happened. Racism, prejudice and intolerance do not always result in genocide and are thus insufficient in explaining the Holocaust. In addition, when students use such generic terms, they are likely to draw upon wider understandings of what those terms mean to them within the context of the present day. To improve students' understanding, a degree of knowledge of the special characteristics of Nazi ideology - and the socio-economic conditions that made them popular - will help them develop a better grasp of the context which made the Holocaust possible.

Hitler-centrism

Without an understanding of antisemitism and the Nazi world view, it is perhaps not altogether surprising that students relied very heavily on the desires and prejudices of Hitler - or of 'Hitler and the Nazis' - in order to explain why the Holocaust happened:

The Holocaust was caused by a German man named Adolf Hitler. He hated Jewish people because what they believed was different so he killed nearly every Jew. (Year 10 student)

Indeed, even among the minority of students who did explicitly reference 'antisemitism' within their short descriptions of the Holocaust, many appeared to attribute this to Hitler as, 'the man who began antisemitism' or who 'created antisemitic views' (extracts from Year 9 students' survey responses, emphasis added).

In focus group interviews, Hitler was repeatedly framed as the key causal factor in the persecution of the Jews or the 'driving force' (Alex, Year 12) behind the Holocaust more broadly. In general, it was quite evident that many students saw the persecution and murder of the Jews through Hitler's thoughts and deeds. As one Year 9 student described:

'It [the Holocaust] was about war against Jews. Hitler caused all of it. He wanted a world without Jews.'

Such a monocausal explanation not only constitutes an impoverished explanatory account, but it can also have a negative impact on students' understandings as it encourages them to decontextualize Hitler and his views from the rest of European history, making it possible for Tom (Year 10) to suggest:

'I don't think anyone knows where Hitler got his ideas of being against Jewish people from.'

Understanding the involvement of other agents

As explored in detail in Research Briefing 5, the widespread complicity, collusion and collaboration of a wide number of agencies and large numbers of individuals across Europe - that was essential for a continent-wide genocide to be enacted - was little appreciated or understood by most students.

Students had limited knowledge of important Nazi agents, such as Adolf Eichmann and Heinrich Himmler, and Nazi agencies such as the SS or the Einsatzgruppen. Furthermore, very few students suggested that ordinary Germans were involved in the genocide. Many saw them as passive bystanders and others explained their inactivity on fear, brainwashing or simple unawareness of what was happening:

'If the people didn't follow his orders they would be treated the same way as the Jews, forced into labour camps or shot dead.'

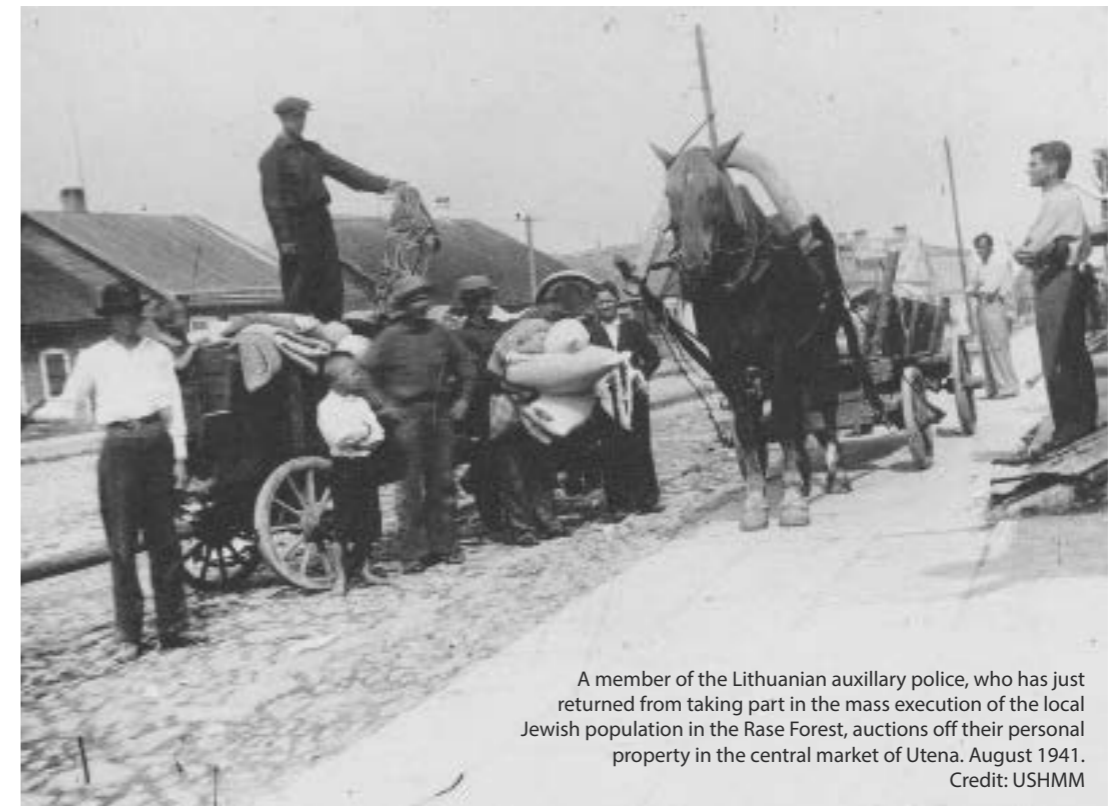
(Harrison, Year 12)

'I think he [Hitler] kind of brainwashed people because he put those sorts of posters up and things and people like saw them all the time and it just kind of got into their head that he was the boss and he was going to tell them what to do.' (Julia, Year 9)



SS officers socialize at their retreat at Solahuette outside of Auschwitz. From left to right are Richard Baer, Josef Mengele, Josef Kramer, Rudolf Hoess and Anton Thumann. July 1944. Credit: USHMM

'I've always assumed they didn't know [...] Because I feel like they couldn't have known, I feel like it couldn't have happened if people had known what was going on.' (Sally, Year 13)



A member of the Lithuanian auxiliary police, who has just returned from taking part in the mass execution of the local Jewish population in the Rase Forest, auctions off their personal property in the central market of Utena. August 1941. Credit: USHMM

Students also appeared to have very limited knowledge of how collaboration extended beyond Germany's borders. References to the brutal actions of fascist paramilitary organisations and other collaborationist regimes in the Axis (e.g. in Hungary, Slovakia, Croatia, Bulgaria and Vichy France) as well as those of local populations across Europe were conspicuous by their absence.

If students are unaware of all the people who not only facilitated the genocide but were keen participants themselves, then their understanding of how the genocide was possible becomes significantly limited.

Understanding the historical context

In accounting for why the Holocaust happened, it is fundamentally important for students to understand the relationship between the Holocaust and the Second World War. During the pre-war years, Nazi anti-Jewish policy focused first on excluding German Jews from society, politics and the economy and, later, on the enforced migration of Jews from the Reich. However, in the years immediately after September 1939, as the German army conquered more territory across Europe during the Second World War, Nazi anti-Jewish policy extended across the continent and became radically more murderous. Knowledge of the outbreak and course of the Second World War is therefore crucial in accounting for the radicalisation of Nazi policy and for explaining how and why the Holocaust happened.

While the majority of students in Years 7 to 11 knew that the Holocaust happened around the time of the Second World War, they found it difficult to explain the connection. This issue is discussed in more detail in Research Briefing 3 of this series, but it is worth mentioning here that, within interviews, most younger students did not appear to have a general chronicle of significant events of the Second World War against which to make sense of the Holocaust. For example, very few younger students made the important connection between the invasion of Poland in September 1939 and the subsequent establishment of ghettos. In general, students were unable to offer any specific chronological detail on how German expansion to the East during the war led to the systematic and organised mass killing of Jews. Only history students in Years 12 and 13 seemed to understand that, as the German army conquered more land, particularly in Eastern Europe, millions of Jews came under their control:

'The further they [the Germany army] invaded east and west the more Jews are then coming under their control, so as the war goes on the more and more countries they are occupying, they've got a greater number of Jews, so in the '30s some of the Jews that they exiled and sent, escaped to countries east of them, they've got now under their control, so they've just got like basically too many of them, they don't know what to do with them.' (Amelia, Year 13)

In general, the study found that students had a very limited knowledge of the context and wider socioeconomic and political conditions which enabled the Holocaust to unfold in the manner that it did. Only a limited number of students tried to explain the Holocaust by looking at its immediate historical context and these explanations were mainly framed with reference to Germany's economic downturn and the loss of the First World War.



Portrait of a Jewish family in the Lodz ghetto.
Credit: USHMM

Key recommendations

In order to develop students' understanding of why the Holocaust happened, and to help them move away from simplistic and often personified explanations, teachers could design lessons that help students better understand both the long-term factors and the specific, contingent context which together resulted in the Holocaust.

The research indicates teaching should:

- Discuss pre-war Jewish life in Europe to effectively deal with misconceptions about who the Jewish people were and make clear that they were not in any way responsible for their persecution.
- Explain reasons for the targeting of Jews by including a discussion of the long history of European antisemitism and anti-Jewish persecution.
- Clarify the special characteristics of Nazi antisemitism.
- Discuss nationalism as a movement in Europe that presented Jews as outsiders threatening the national project.
- Expose students to the various individuals and groups of people across Europe who drove the events forward and became complicit in the genocide; their motives, choices and actions.
- Explore the social, economic, and political conditions that gave rise to National Socialism.
- Provide clear chronological and geographical frameworks and explain the progression of the genocide in relation to the Second World War.

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

Nazi antisemitism: Where did it come from?



Credit: University Library Heidelberg

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

This course explores the roots of antisemitism, focussing on the deep history of the 'longest hatred' and identifying the myths and falsities that underpinned it. The session supports teachers in identifying the essential knowledge and understanding students should develop to challenge common misconceptions. It also aims to develop students' ability to critically engage with deep time and long-term causes.

Being human: Choices, behaviours and the Holocaust



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

This course extends the responsibility and complicity for the genocide beyond Hitler and the Nazi hierarchy to ordinary people in Germany and across the continent.

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

This course places key events and decisions in their historical context, making clear the connections between the radicalisation of Nazi policy and the outbreak and course of the Second World War, and also highlights the dynamic between actions 'from above' (the decisions of Hitler and the Nazi leadership) and that of initiatives 'from below' (how lower level functionaries and the general public both responded to and – at times – drove forward the unfolding persecution).

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

The questions of what was known in the outside world about the unfolding genocide, and why the Allies did not prevent the Holocaust, is the subject of the materials in this workshop.

About these briefings

Explaining the Holocaust is the seventh 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.

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Front cover image: Treblinka rail tracks. Credit: Little Savage (own work), Public Domain