
What happened to the Jews of Europe?

The Holocaust and victims of Nazi persecution

Key Question: What happened to the Jews of Europe?

Teaching Aims & Learning Objectives

- Develop knowledge and understanding of how different minority groups were treated during the period of the Nazi regime, so as to recognise similarities and differences in policies
- Understand that the policies enacted against Jewish people had distinctive characteristics
- Reinforce chronological understanding of key developments in the experiences of those groups targeted by the Nazis and their collaborators

Rationale

Research tells us that students commonly lack secure knowledge and understanding of what happened to the various victim groups targeted during the period of the Third Reich. In turn, students often resort to guesswork and assumption about the different experiences of victim groups, tending to presume that everyone was a victim of the same thing. As a result, students often cannot identify what was specific about the policies enacted against different groups – particularly in relation to the Jewish people of Europe. Furthermore, research also shows that students tend to have flawed and faulty chronological frameworks, and have limited understandings of the spaces of persecution and murder. This material provides teachers with tools to address these shortcomings and correct misunderstandings.

Key Information

- The following material is intended to be delivered as two one hour lessons, primarily in a history classroom. For the first lesson, students require:
 - Sets of Personal stories; Recording grids; Key terms
- For the second lesson, you need a long blank wall space. You will also need the follow card sets:
 - Date cards and Key events
 - Personal stories; Experience of Jewish people; Experience of non-Jewish victim groups; Key phases cards; Summary cards

Lesson Plans

Lesson one: Who were victims of Nazi persecution?

Starter (5 mins)

Arrange students into six groups. Show slide 2 of the PowerPoint and outline the topic of the lesson – explain that students will be learning about the experiences of a number of people who were persecuted during the period of Nazi Germany. Give groups a few minutes to discuss the two questions – What does persecute mean? and Which groups do you know were persecuted during this time?

Collect responses from the class to the two questions. Show slide 3 of the PowerPoint to reinforce a collective understanding of what persecution means. Explain to students that they will be learning more about different groups persecuted by the Nazis. Who was persecuted during the Nazi period? Was everyone treated in the same way?

Exploring personal stories (25 mins)

Provide each group of students with a set of **personal stories** (see Additional Guidance for suggested sets), and each student with a **recording grid**.

Explain that the class is exploring a collection of 24 stories. Emphasise that all of these stories involve persecution, many actually involve more than this. Indicate how each individual story provides insights into the wider experience of a group. Draw attention to cards with a black line along the bottom, and tell students this means that person ultimately died between 1933-1945. Equally explain that for those stories without a black line along the bottom the individual(s) concerned were still alive when Nazi Germany was defeated.

Instruct the groups to read the four stories they have been given, and record key information about the experiences on their recording grids.

Did the same thing happen to everyone? (10 mins)

Reinforce to students that they now know more about some of the people and by extension, some of the groups, who were victims of persecution. But did everyone have the same experience? Remaining in their groups, instruct students to review their grids and discuss this question. Support students by suggesting they annotate or use highlighters on their grids to mark out commonalities and differences. Emphasise that groups need to come up with

an answer to the question and be able to explain their reasoning. After 5-6 minutes collect responses from the class.

Plenary (20 mins)

Develop the class discussion by focusing on the following stories:

- Ossi Stojka
- Robert Ölbermann
- Helene Lebel
- Edith Stein

You can do this by using Slide 7 of the lesson PowerPoint. Be sure to first ask those groups who explored the stories to briefly comment on what that person experienced.

As you move through the stories above, encourage students to consider what they have in common and what differentiates them.

Conclude the lesson by reinforcing what has been discovered: that this selection of individuals and range of groups were all persecuted by the Nazis and their collaborators, but that the *nature* of the persecution differed. What happened to some groups did not necessarily happen to others.

Emphasise that the experiences of different groups can be explained by how the Nazis viewed each group. In the Nazi world view some groups were perceived as being more dangerous or threatening than others. Be sure to make it clear that the level of danger or threat was not a reflection of reality. However this didn't matter - the perception and attitude of the perpetrators was crucial, for it determined the policies which were then pursued.

Illustrate this by referring back to Edith Stein - someone who was seen by the Nazis in a completely different way to how she saw herself. Despite converting to Catholicism, changing her name and living her life in a Christian way, the Nazis only ever saw her as Jewish. This was because they understood Jews in so-called 'racial' terms, and according to that viewpoint Edith – or rather Teresa – and Jewish people more generally were a fundamental threat to Germany's existence.

Conclude by noting what we don't yet know what happened to these groups, how, and when. Indicate these will be lines of enquiry in the next lesson.

Lesson two: What happened to the Jews of Europe and non-Jewish victim groups?

Prior to the lesson affix the **date cards** chronologically onto the wall. Also stick the **key event cards** beneath the relevant year.

Personal stories and key events (10 mins)

Remind students of previous learning. Highlight that as yet they do not know too much about how people came to have the experiences they did. Explain how this lesson will focus on learning more about what exactly people experienced by putting their stories into the historical context. This means thinking more about the timeline of what happened when.

Put students in the same groups as the previous lesson. Provide each group with the **personal stories** they previously examined and some Blu Tack. Ask the groups to briefly look over the cards. For those with a black line along the bottom they need to identify when the person died. For those who survived students must discover which year saw the greatest extent of their persecution (e.g. imprisonment, sterilisation, and so forth). Having done so, instruct students to stick their stories under the most relevant year.

With the stories on the wall ask how the wall looks. Where are the most stories? Where are the least? Can the pattern of stories be explained? Suggest that it might be helpful to look at the **key events cards**. Draw particular attention here to the outbreak of WW2 and the invasion of the Soviet Union - is there a relationship between these events and the number of personal stories?

What happened to the Jews of Europe? (25 mins)

Distribute the **experience of Jewish people cards**. Explain that these cards describe key developments in the persecution of Jewish people in Europe during the period – things like laws, events, and actions. Ask students to stick the cards onto the wall at the appropriate points.

Instruct students to walk the length of the timeline they are creating. They don't need to read the detail of every yellow card, often the headline captures the essence. Then open a discussion on the following:

- How are these cards distributed across the timeline?
- Where are the key turning points? Why may they have occurred? How can we explain the huge escalation in murders from 1941-42?
- Does it look like there was a policy of mass murder of the Jews from the beginning?

Emphasise that the number of cards is not coincidental - it reflects how antisemitism was central to the Nazi worldview. Because of this, the policy pursued against Jewish people was distinctive. Walk students through the development of the Jewish experience by using **the key phases cards**. As you stick these on the wall underline how persecution evolved and developed into murder, taking twists and turns before culminating in a continental genocide we call the Holocaust. Transition to the next stage of the lesson by rhetorically asking if the experience of the Jews of Europe was the same for non-Jewish groups.

Experience of non-Jewish victim groups (20 mins)

Distribute **the experience of non-Jewish victim groups cards** among the class. Explain that these cards describe key developments in the persecution of various victim groups – such as laws, events, and actions.

Ask students to look over the cards they are given. Emphasise that they do not need to read all of the detail on every card. After no more than 5 minutes instruct students to put the cards onto the wall. Once complete, explain that the different colours on the card correspond with how the Nazis categorised the different groups of people that they persecuted (see Additional Information for more on this).

Task students with returning to one of the non-Jewish personal stories they are familiar with. Explain that they need to link their story with the relevant experience of non-Jewish victim groups cards. They can first do this by identifying the relevant colour (see Additional Information for more here) and then following what happens to this colour over time. Where does their chosen personal story fit in with the experience of the group? How does the personal story help us understand what was happening to different groups? Allow at least 10 minutes for this exercise. Then collect sample feedback from the class. Do so by focusing on what happens to 1-2 colour sets.

Plenary (5 mins)

Summarise the arc of the lesson: students have learnt more about what happened to different groups and individuals during the years 1933-1945. Underline how the experiences of these groups were related - their persecution happened at the same time and sometimes crossed over. Also emphasise that some of these groups had similar experiences. However, there were also key differences - the same thing did not happen to everyone. Ask: why is that important to know and understand? Suggest that it is necessary for various reasons. One reason is in order to properly remember

these events and the persons they effected. Another is to consider what those events mean, and to begin to identify what we need to do to prevent such crimes.

Assessment exercises

Option One: 'What happened to the Jews of Europe?'

Provide students with access to all those **personal stories** relating to Jewish people, to all **the experience of Jewish people** cards, and to the **key phases** cards. Using these materials, ask students to provide their own response to the question 'What happened to the Jews of Europe?' between the years 1933-1945. Encourage students to draw on the personal story cards to give their account colour and humanity.

Responses to this exercise could take a number of different forms, including:

- An extended piece of writing of around 1-2 sides of A4 in length
- A flow chart diagram (for structure, this could build on the five key phases cards)
- An expanded account of an individual or individuals featured in the personal stories cards, which positions the person or persons within the broader experience of European Jewry

Option Two: 'Different things happened to different people'

Working in pairs or small groups, provide students with **the summary cards**. Task the groups with reading through all of these summaries. Ask students to then devise a 5 minute presentation, of a type and medium of their choice, which responds to the statement 'Different things happened to different groups of people'. To help structure their response, encourage the groups to consider all or some of the following questions:

- Why is this an important truth to understand and acknowledge?
- What experiences of groups or individuals illustrate this reality?
- What are the consequences of assuming that the same thing happened to everybody?
- What was similar and what was different about how the Nazis and their collaborators treated minority groups?

Engaging all learners

Literacy

This material makes particular demands on students' literacy. Although each set of cards has been written to ensure the material is as accessible as possible, teachers will need to be alive to this issue. The accompanying list of **key terms** may help students access the material and better understand the experiences that individuals and groups had. Teachers might consider allowing students to annotate cards as they move through the lessons.

Demands on working memory

These lessons require students to work through a large amount of material, and to process a considerable amount of information. Moreover, students will also need to retain details of individuals and particular occurrences for quick recall in order to grasp how things develop.

It is possible that some students may feel overwhelmed by the amount of work that seems to be required or remembered. In Lesson one, the recording grid is intended to both consolidate learning and act as a reference point for students. The grids could be completed individually or as groups. Teachers may find it helpful to scaffold the grid exercise – either by completing one case study altogether as a class, or by providing students with recording grids that have one completed row already.

In Lesson two students should be reminded repeatedly that they do not need to read every word of every card. To further help students to digest the information they encounter in Lesson two, it is possible to construct the timeline in an even more staged manner. For example, teachers could first focus on just populating the timeline with cards related to 1933-1939 and then proceed to ask similar questions to those above. Having done so, teachers could then shift to populate the remainder of the timeline: 1939-1945. Breaking down the material in this way over one or two lessons may make a significant difference to the demands on the working memories of students.

Additional Information

The following information provides guidance on the pedagogy of the two lessons together with historical details to support teachers. Whilst it is recommended that teachers read through this material, it is not essential.

Context: students' knowledge and understanding

These two lessons respond directly to research conducted by the UCL Centre for Holocaust Education into student's knowledge and understanding of the Holocaust. Published in 2016, this landmark research found that most students had significant gaps in their knowledge and understanding, and that many students responded to these gaps by uncritically drawing upon myths and misconceptions prevalent in wider culture.

Particularly notable were findings related to students' knowledge and understanding of the experiences of the various minority groups persecuted by the Nazi regime and its collaborators. It was found, for example, that the majority of students held what could be described as an inclusive conception of victimhood – an understanding which framed the various groups as sharing a common experience and fate.

Fundamentally, this understanding is problematic – for the simple reason that it runs counter to the historical reality. A key commonality of the various groups targeted by the Nazis and their collaborators was that they were all perceived as being enemies of some description. However, not all groups were seen to pose the same degree of threat or type of danger. Accordingly, whilst many groups became victims of persecution and some were even murdered, the Nazis did not pursue one single policy against everyone. Instead, different policies were implemented against different groups, at different times, for different reasons.

A further related finding of concern was that many students did not, in fact, 'know' a great deal about what happened to groups they were identifying as victims. Instead of demonstrating secure historical knowledge of what happened to a particular group, students tended to resort to guesswork and supposition. This was particularly true of knowledge about the experience of Jewish people, German gay men, Roma, and the so-called 'disabled'. Degrees of knowledge did differ among students of different ages, but the general picture remained that the majority of students had insufficient historical understanding of what was common and what was distinct about the experience of a specific victim group.

The above findings are of real concern. This is because they have the potential to perpetuate misunderstandings, lead to further misconceptions, and skew the meanings that students draw from studying this history. It is for these reasons, amongst others, that the two lessons here are calibrated to help students to develop secure and robust historical knowledge and understanding.

More information about the findings outlined here can be found on the UCL Centre for Holocaust Education website, where you can download digestible research briefings – visit: <https://holocausteducation.org.uk/research-page/research-inform-teaching/>.

Pedagogical guidance

Enquiry approach

Underpinning ‘What happened to the Jews of Europe? The Holocaust and the victims of Nazi persecution’ is a pedagogical approach rooted in enquiry.

Effective historical enquiries tend to have particular characteristics, including:

- They reject the idea that history exists as a pre-given entity somewhere to be discovered, instead emphasising that history is a body of knowledge which is constructed through distinct processes and procedures.
- They underline the need for the focus of the enquiry to engage with a genuine question, or questions, which are of legitimate concern and warrant addressing.
- They recognise that historical knowledge is built up and built on over a period of time – be it a lesson or series of lessons – and that through this process students become able to provide a robust answer to the enquiry question.
- They understand that whilst students should have ownership of and be the drivers in an enquiry, that the teacher plays a critical role in guiding and supporting students through the process.
- They highlight the need to develop substantive knowledge in conjunction with conceptual understanding.

‘What happened to the Jews of Europe? The Holocaust and victims of Nazi persecution’ employs a number of enquiry questions in pursuit of the overarching question. This approach explains the structure and sequence of the lessons, and their direction of travel. There is, for example, only so much that can be achieved in thinking about *what* happened to the victim groups targeted by the Nazis and others without first establishing just *who* these groups were. In a similar vein, one cannot begin to contemplate where the

experiences of different groups overlapped or departed from one another without taking the time to delve deeper into the actions and policies which were enacted against different groups. And of course no enquiry can be effective if there is not space at the beginning to draw out students' prior knowledge and understandings as well as their preconceptions. Indeed, this step is essential to ensure that new learning is not layered on top of faulty foundations.

Context and content, the micro and the macro

When it comes to knowing, teaching, and learning history, context is crucial. This is especially so in the case of understanding what happened to the Jews of Europe and other non-Jewish victim groups during the period of the Third Reich. Contextual knowledge enables students to make sense of how policies emerged and developed, and to appreciate and be able to explain any change or continuity. Contextual knowledge can also help students to grasp what did or did not happen at a particular moment in time, since it encourages students to look at historical events and experiences in situ rather than retrospectively in a teleological fashion.

These principles explain a fundamental premise of the second lesson: that of trying to better understand the personal stories explored in Lesson one by placing them in (and learning more about) their historical context. The personal stories in the first lesson serve various purposes. These include introducing students to the different victim groups targeted by the Nazis and their collaborators, and also providing access points to the past by giving students an identifiable human 'face'. Yet these personal stories and the experiences they contain cannot be properly understood without knowing more about the contexts and circumstances in which they occurred.

Each stage of Lesson two works towards this objective – from the key events cards to the card sets exploring the experience of Jewish people and non-Jewish people. At the same time however, as students develop more 'content' knowledge of what happened to the various victim groups, the personal stories ensure that this understanding does not become detached and abstract. Being able to look back at the human experiences retold in the personal stories cards can help to remind students that the traumatic events they are learning about had real world impact.

In this way, just as the various card sets used in this resource deepen students' knowledge and understanding of what happened to whom, when, where and how, they equally allow the teacher to oscillate between the micro and the macro. This can be invaluable when trying to support students to

develop a knowledge base without losing sight of the human dimensions of this brutal history.

The use of colour

A pedagogical tool

The card sets for the experience of Jewish people and the experience of non-Jewish victim groups make extensive use of colour. This is to enable students to more easily see patterns in the 'big picture' of the Nazi crimes, and also to follow certain narrative threads relating to distinct victim groups.

Why these colours?

The colours broadly follow those used by the Nazis to distinguish between different groups within the concentration camp system. Within the camps groups were marked by different coloured triangles sewn onto individuals' uniforms – red for political prisoners, black for 'asocials' and Roma, yellow for Jews, etc. While there is a logic to this, we need of course to be careful not to take up the Nazi perspective on the victims themselves. Accordingly, we have not employed any colours on the personal story cards and instead retold these stories against a simple white background. By contrast colour has been used where cards show the actions of perpetrators. This approach ensures that it is not the people who are being labelled with these colours, but rather the policies of the Nazis themselves. After all, the colours tell us nothing about who the victims were as people, but do reveal the Nazi worldview which lay behind each act of discrimination, persecution or murder.

Turning a weakness into an opportunity for deep learning

One problem encountered in colour coding the Nazi policies was that a number of victim groups did not enter the concentration camp system, and so were not given a coloured triangle. The disabled, for example, were subject to a range of measures including sterilisation and ultimately systematic mass murder in the so-called 'Euthanasia' programme, but they were never a category of concentration camp inmate. Likewise black people were also subject to forced sterilisation but were not sent to concentration camps for being black and so there was no coloured triangle for this group either. Allied prisoners of war within the camp system were not marked by a particular colour triangle.

Rather than assigning arbitrary colours ourselves, we decided to give groups such as these a neutral grey shading. The weakness of this decision, of course, is that it may imply that the Nazi worldview behind the treatment of each of these groups was the same, which was not the case. However, this

perceived weakness in our rendering of the timeline can actually become a powerful learning opportunity if the students are engaged in critiquing this decision. Ask your students to compare the Nazi actions targeting black people, the disabled and Allied prisoners of war (the summaries on the extension cards will help here).

It should be clear that the reasons for persecution and the specific policies towards each of these groups varied greatly. Just as it would be a mistake to say everyone experienced the same thing, so too it would be wrong to collapse each of these groups into a single category. As each new group is explored, so even more differences in the Nazi worldview and the policies that they followed begin to emerge - distinctions which are obscured whenever the different groups are pushed together into a single category (be that a colour or a linguistic term). Students could equally be asked, for example, to consider the inherent problems of defining a group by colour or, indeed, a categorical descriptor. After all, groups of people are themselves often marked out by difference, and this can be illustrated by looking across people in the personal stories card set who, for the Nazis, were all members of the same 'group'. Jewish life and communities were marked by the richness of their diversity, similarly not all gay men the same – there were as many different political outlooks, social lives, interests and personalities as any other group.

It is thus important to recognise the use of colour for what it is – a tool to help us see some of the patterns, trends and features that are to be found within a complex and complicated past. However it is also seen that this 'big picture' is too complex to be easily divided up into simple categories and broad generalisations.

Supplementary notes for key phases of Nazi persecution of the Jews

It may be helpful to consider just what the Nazis meant by the phrase 'Final Solution to the Jewish Problem'. The problem as they saw it was how to live alongside what they regarded as a foreign and dangerous 'race'. On first achieving power, we observe a Nazi policy of trying to limit Jewish influence, at the time seen as too powerful in government, the economy, and society. A 'Final Solution' of sorts was reached with the Nuremberg Laws of 1935, which appeared to settle the 'problem' by not allowing Jewish people to be citizens of Germany.

By the late 1930s the policy shifted to pushing Jews out of Germany by making life unbearable for them. The November Pogrom of 1938 (often called *Kristallnacht*) and its aftermath was a key turning point here, representing the reappearance of state-endorsed mass violence against German Jewry. It prompted tens of thousands of Jews to desperately seek refuge in other countries – an endeavour complicated by the Nazi policy of expropriation, and the reticence of most countries to accept large numbers of penniless refugees. Still this did not deter the Nazis from continuing to push Jews out of territory under their influence and control.

Until 1941 there was no ban on Jewish emigration overseas, indicating the non-existence of a plan before this date to murder all Jews in Europe. That said, with expansion serving only to increase the millions of Jews under Nazi control, there was a growing recognition of the impossibility of having these people leave their lands voluntarily.

So, a new development emerged in 1940: forced deportation, with plans devised to ‘dump’ Jews into a massive reservation in Eastern Europe, or else on the African island of Madagascar. Such plans were, of course, genocidal. It would be impossible for millions to survive without sanitation, appropriate housing and medical services, or without the means to feed themselves. But at this juncture there was not yet a plan for continental mass murder.

All this changed with the invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941. Now there was the realisation millions more Jewish people would soon come under Nazi authority, and this was combined with an ideological worldview which saw Soviets and Jews as synonymous. Plans were duly made to send murder squads to follow the advancing German army charged with shooting Jews wherever they could be found. Systematic mass murder had begun in the newly conquered territories of the Soviet Union.

Finally, by the end of 1941, a decision had been made to extend the mass murders in the Soviet Union to a programme to try to murder every Jewish man, woman and child everywhere the Nazis could reach them. This plan for total murder is what, today, we call the Holocaust. There was no comparable or equivalent plan for any other victim group.

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