



Agency and responsibility: Perpetrators and collaborators

The Holocaust did not ‘just happen’. It was the result of choices made by people and of actions taken on the basis of those choices. Understanding these choices and actions – the factors that enabled or constrained them and the responsibility of the various individuals and groups who are generally referred to as ‘perpetrators’ and ‘collaborators’¹ – is crucial if students are to grasp how the Holocaust was possible. Engagement with issues of agency and responsibility is also critically important if students are to understand and participate in public life. This briefing draws on research with more than 8,000 11-18 year olds to examine how notions of agency and responsibility, perpetration and collaboration, are currently understood in relation to the Holocaust in England’s secondary schools.

KEY FINDINGS

- 50.7% of all students across all year groups appeared to believe the Holocaust was *solely* attributable to Adolf Hitler.
- Students’ knowledge of Nazi agencies and individuals was limited.
- Most students saw the Nazis as an elite group loyal to Hitler, not as a political party with broad support from the German population.
- Fewer than 10% of students suggested that many Germans were complicit in, or responsible for the persecution and mass murder of Jews and other victim groups.
- Very few students knew about the role played by collaborative regimes and local populations across Europe.

Who do students consider responsible for the Holocaust?

This briefing reports findings drawn from a national study in which 7,952 secondary school students completed a survey and 244 took part in interviews to find out what they knew and understood about the Holocaust. When those who were surveyed were asked to provide an open-text reply to the question, ‘Who was responsible for the Holocaust?’ the overwhelming majority of students (79.4%) made reference to Hitler. Half of all students (50.7%) ascribed responsibility to Hitler alone and 20.6% said Hitler was responsible in association with the Nazis.

Focus-group interviews confirmed that students commonly placed Hitler at the centre of the action by describing him as the ‘executive’ or the ‘driving force’ behind the Holocaust. Although students were well aware that Hitler could not have carried out the persecution and the killings by himself, they often

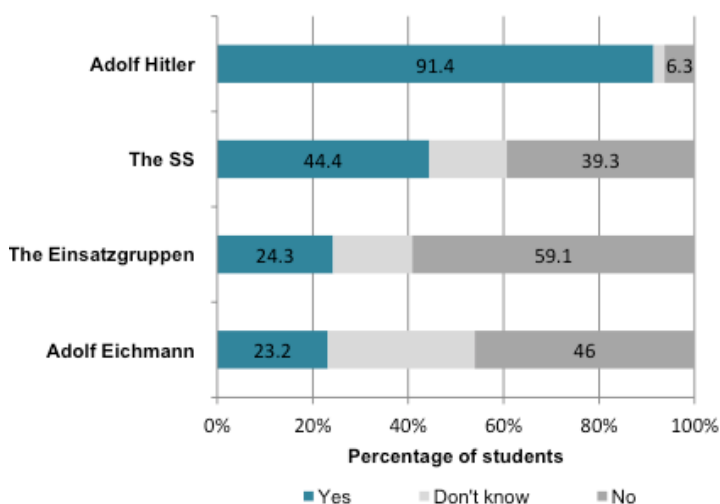
ABOUT THESE BRIEFINGS

The UCL Centre for Holocaust Education seeks to ensure that teaching and learning about the Holocaust is informed by rigorous scholarship and pioneering empirical research. Drawing on survey responses from 7,952 11-18 year olds from across England and focus group interviews with a further 244, in 2016 the Centre published a landmark study of secondary school aged students’ knowledge and understanding of this history. This series of research briefings aims to introduce classroom practitioners to key findings from that study and considers their implications for all those engaging with this complex subject in England’s schools and further afield.

believed that he ordered others to fulfil his goals in a simple top-down process whereby other individuals blindly followed his will.

While Hitler clearly dominated many students' understandings of the Holocaust, typically they did not appear to recognise the significance of key individuals and agencies such as Adolf Eichmann, the SS or the *Einsatzgruppen* as is illustrated in their survey responses shown in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. Students' recognition of individuals and organisations connected to the Holocaust



Importantly, most 11 to 14 year olds did not appear to understand that 'Nazi' referred to the National Socialist German Workers' Party which in July 1932 enjoyed the electoral support of more than 13 million Germans.

Within interview, students were asked directly about the participation and involvement of ordinary Germans. Among younger students (11-16) a small number made reference to individuals helping Jews but the majority were most likely to describe how many Germans were responsible for helping or allowing Hitler to come to power or did not take any action at all.

Students' explained the action or inaction of many Germans in three ways:

- Germans were 'brainwashed',
- Germans were afraid,
- Germans did not know.

Students tended to emphasise the role of propaganda and fear as forces that led the German people to support, or at least go along with, the actions of Hitler and the Nazis. For example, Elliot (Year 9) said:

They were brainwashed with propaganda. He showed them how bad the Jews were and then he fooled everybody into thinking they were the bad guys and they should be killed.

Ariella (Year 9) stated, 'it was drilled into their brains' and Juliette (Year 9) reasoned:

I think many of them did it out of fear of going against him and not knowing what would happen to them...

Many students also explained many Germans' inaction in terms of ignorance. As Sabir (Year 10) stated: 'they just... they didn't know it was happening' and Chloe (Year 9) reasoned that

...if they had known what was going on in Auschwitz I'm sure they would have done something.

These explanations highlight that serious misconceptions, which are still very prominent in the public discourse, continue to have currency with students even after they have encountered the Holocaust in school.

The overarching conclusion for many students was that Germans had no agency, no choice and, as a result, no responsibility. Some students even reasoned that the German people were themselves 'victims' of Nazi oppression.

Furthermore, students' knowledge and understanding was limited in relation to how genocide on such a scale became possible through the collaboration of other regimes and the involvement of local populations across Europe. Students appeared unfamiliar with collaborating regimes, such as the Vichy government, and Axis Allies. This lack of knowledge relates to students' limited awareness of when and where the Holocaust took place; an issue which will itself be examined in further detail within a forthcoming briefing in this series.

Implications for teaching about the Holocaust

These findings emphasise the need for lessons which help students move away from Hitler-centric conceptions to more sophisticated understandings of the political and social structures of Nazi Germany that allowed the hatred for Jews to be translated into government practice. In simpler terms, students need to understand that there were many other individuals who were involved in the process of genocide. There were also numerous groups and individuals who willingly participated in the killings.

Limited knowledge of individuals and agencies associated with the National Socialist Party machinery, such as Nazi leaders, SS commandants of death camps, and *Einsatzgruppen* commanders, can clearly hinder students' understanding of who did what and of where various forms of responsibility lie. Students would clearly benefit from lessons that emphasise the role and actions of Nazi individuals and agencies in driving events from persecution to mass murder.

Furthermore, it can be argued that students' core knowledge should also include the crucial role played by other government entities that came under the control of the Nazi regime, such as the German army, the police force and the German bureaucracy more generally. In addition, the inclusion of the role of soldiers and police officers who participated in the killings not only because of ideology, but also out of peer-pressure or self-interest is also important in developing students' thinking about agency and responsibility.

Moreover, teachers might help students see the 'Nazis' as a broad based political party and also allow them to understand the wider historical context in which it benefitted. Indeed such awareness might help students understanding of how far-right extremist views can develop and take root in any society. Students would also benefit from exploring more deeply life under Nazi rule; how the Nazi state was organised and controlled and what choices were open for ordinary Germans.

Students' widespread belief that many Germans were ignorant of the treatment of the Jews is a serious misconception that should be addressed. Current historical scholarship clearly reveals that knowledge of the fate of the Jews was commonplace in German society during the war years. Some scholars have argued that knowledge of the genocide was widespread even in early summer of 1942. Confronting students with related evidence can open up meaningful discussions about the complicity, collaboration, and responsibility of many ordinary Germans.

Finally, if students are asked to consider questions of perpetration and responsibility, then they also need to acknowledge that not all perpetrators were German. Indeed, throughout Europe some local governments and populations were not only important in facilitating genocide, but were themselves keen participants.

If students are not aware of how and why local authorities and populations participated or even led initiatives of mass killing, then their understanding of how genocide was possible can be severely limited.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Understanding of agency and responsibility can be improved if lessons include *more agents* as well as exploration of *what actions* were taken and *why*. The research points to the need for teaching to help students move away from Hitler-centric narratives and:

- include historical information about some of the many other people and agencies (for example Eichmann, the SS, the *Einsatzgruppen*) who were important in making decisions about, or implementing, genocide;
- explain that the Nazis were a broad based political party with considerable popular support and examine their rise to power;
- consider the role of the German army, the German police and the German bureaucracy;
- take account of the agency of ordinary soldiers and police officers who were tasked with the killings;
- discuss the complicity of ordinary Germans: provide evidence about the knowledge they had of the unfolding events as well as life under Nazi rule and the factors that enabled or constrained action;
- acknowledge the role of collaborating authorities and populations throughout Europe.



HOW WE CAN HELP

UCL Centre for Holocaust Education is uniquely responsive to actual classroom needs. Our teacher development workshops, pedagogical approaches and educational materials are designed directly to meet the classroom challenges revealed by our national research and discussed in this series of briefings.

For example, the CPD workshop and accompanying classroom lesson 'Being human?' is specifically designed to address common myths and misconceptions about not only perpetrators and collaborators, but also bystanders and rescuers. It helps teachers to develop independent, critical thinking, uncovering students' preconceptions about who these people were. This tends to reveal a range of stereotypes and misconceptions, from 'mad, evil monsters' to 'heroic models of virtue'. Students then test these ideas against a range of engaging and thought-provoking case studies, examining the situations faced by real people; discussing and debating the dilemmas and decisions, beliefs and motivations of people in the past. Together these reveal many different ways that ordinary people could become complicit in mass murder, while others resisted the Nazi genocide. Contrasting this position to their prior expectations, students discover that the past is far more complex, nuanced and troubling than they had imagined. In so doing, they come to understand that responsibility for the Holocaust extended far wider than 'Hitler and the Nazis' and are left with searching questions about what it is to be a citizen in the modern world.

'Being Human?' can currently be accessed as a standalone, after school CPD workshop, free and open to all secondary school teachers in England. It is regularly delivered at venues across the country.

For details of this and the UCL Centre for Holocaust Education's full CPD provision, please visit <http://www.holocausteducation.org.uk/courses-events>

If you cannot make one of the dates listed then please email holocaust@ioe.ac.uk to arrange a free workshop in a venue close to you.

THE UCL CENTRE FOR HOLOCAUST EDUCATION

The Centre for Holocaust Education is part of the UCL Institute of Education – currently the world's leading university for education – and is comprised of a team of researchers and educators from a variety of different disciplinary fields. The Centre works in partnership with the Pears Foundation who, together with the Department for Education, have co-funded its operation since it was first established in 2008. The UCL Centre for Holocaust Education is the only institution of its kind, both within the United Kingdom and internationally, where pioneering empirical research leads to innovative and ground-breaking teacher development and the production of accompanying educational resources specifically designed to address clearly identified classroom needs.

The Centre offers a wide-ranging educational programme appropriate to teachers at all stages of their careers including a national Initial Teacher Education in Holocaust education, a variety of in-depth and subject specific CPD and a fully accredited taught Masters-level module *The Holocaust in the Curriculum*. Through its Beacon School programme, Centre staff work intensively with up to 20 schools across England each year in order to recognise and further develop exemplary whole-school approaches and effective pedagogy.

¹ The popularly used terms 'perpetrators' and 'collaborators' are used here with caution as it is recognised that fitting people into delineated and distinct categories eschews historical complexity by disregarding the different motives, actions and roles of individuals and groups and can have severe repercussions for historical understanding. The discussion here aims to help teaching and learning about the Holocaust move beyond simplistic generalisations and look more carefully at agents, their motives, choices and actions.

TO FIND OUT MORE

Please contact us to find out more about the Centre's programmes and events and for a full report on this research:

www.holocausteducation.org.uk

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