UCL Centre for Holocaust Education

Understanding attitudes, behaviours and actions during the Holocaust

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Research Digest 1

Two decades of research informing classroom practice in Holocaust education

Contents

Published in Great Britain in 2025

UCL Centre for Holocaust Education

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20 Bedford Way
London WC1H 0AL
United Kingdom

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A CIP record is available in the British Library

ISBN 978-1-7392422-3-7

Front cover photograph by Alejandro Lopez, UCL Media Services, 2024.

About the UCL Centre for Holocaust Education

The UCL Centre for Holocaust Education is the world leader for research-informed teacher and student education. Its high impact programmes deepen knowledge and understanding of the genocide and powerfully explore its significance.

The Centre operates at the frontier of Holocaust education nationally and internationally, inspiring and empowering thousands of teachers every year. Teachers who engage with our landmark research, our innovative professional development courses, and our cutting-edge materials, acquire the confidence and expertise to tackle this complex history within the classroom. In turn, the Centre helps millions of students develop the knowledge and skills required to understand the Holocaust and confront the related and continued threats posed by extremism, prejudice and antisemitism today.

Acknowledgments

We are very grateful to the students and teachers who participated in this research. This includes those who took part in the Centre's most recent study in 2024/25, and all those who have contributed their time and insights to our research since 2008. It is only through working with schools that we can understand the constantly evolving considerations and challenges they encounter when teaching and learning about the Holocaust. This collaborative engagement enables us to develop professional development programmes and resources that are responsive to classroom needs. Senior leaders, teachers and students are fundamental to the work we do, and we continue to be extremely appreciative of them for supporting us in so many ways.

Special thanks is due to Pears Foundation for its long-term funding and support. We are particularly grateful to Sir Trevor Pears CMG and Amy Braier for their guidance and insights which enrich our work and enhance the impact of our programmes on teaching practice and students' knowledge. In addition, we are grateful to the Department for Education for also continuing to robustly support the work of the UCL Centre for Holocaust Education.

Top photograph by
Olivia Hemingway, 2011.

Bottom photograph by
Alejandro Lopex, UCL Media Services, 2024.

Introduction

This document is a digest of data gathered from four groundbreaking research studies conducted by the UCL Centre for Holocaust Education between 2008 and 2025. It draws on research with teachers and students in England, giving combined participant totals of over 3,000 teachers and 12,000 students. Cumulatively, these national studies represent the most sustained, in-depth empirical research conducted anywhere in the world into how the Holocaust is taught and learnt about in schools.

This digest, the first in a series, is thematically focused on attitudes, behaviours and actions of individuals, groups and organisations during the Holocaust.[1] As such, it is concerned with broader issues about how and why the Holocaust happened – issues which are of fundamental importance for understanding the Holocaust, and for being able to consider its significance. To these ends, the digest presents data from the Centre's national studies that give insight into what teachers and students know and understand about attitudes, behaviours and actions during the Holocaust. This is, of course, vast and complex terrain. That is salient because teachers and students cannot be expected to know everything or be familiar with all scholarship on the issue. Nevertheless, this digest demonstrates that there are several troubling long-term trends, and a number of prevailing misconceptions which appear to be stubbornly resistant to change.

More than 80 years on from the end of the Second World War, teaching and learning about the Holocaust is taking place at a time of dramatic societal change and upheaval, unprecedented technological revolution, global historical events, and acute anxiety. Understandings of what the past is, what happened there, and what it can (and should) be used for, are increasingly contested. Meanwhile, how the past is known about, has come under growing assault by the growth of misinformation, disinformation, and conspiracy theory. A key element in these developments has been the acceleration of students' encounters with Holocaust-related content online. This is very much a live issue, but some insights into this matter have been collated through the Centre's most recent research study and are duly presented in this digest.

1 Future research digests will cover research findings related to other aspects of the Holocaust including knowledge and understanding about the victims of the Holocaust.

Ongoing challenges in Holocaust education

Teaching and learning about the Holocaust is a challenging enterprise. Partly this is because the history of the Holocaust is complex; in terms of what happened, where, when, how, and involving whom. Partly it is because of the essential nature of what actually took place; in the sense of the brutality of what occurred, what was destroyed, its scale, its scope, and the implications of these realities. These specific aspects of the Holocaust make teaching and learning about it challenging. But the challenges of Holocaust education also come from the reality that any educational activity is complicated and not straightforward.

Across the Centre's research studies this intersection between specific and generic challenges has been in evidence. For instance, the Centre's 2009 study (Pettigrew et al., 2009) of teaching trends, perspectives and practices (see Figure 1) found generic issues, such as pressures on curriculum time, had direct impact upon teachers' approaches to curriculum content. Then, the Centre's 2016 study (Foster et al., 2016) into what students know and understand about the Holocaust (see Figure 1), documented how a sector-wide shift towards a condensed Key Stage 3 further compounded this particular challenge at the same time as raising new issues related to age appropriateness, emotional maturity, and levels of contextual knowledge about the historical period of the Holocaust. These issues were further highlighted by teachers in the Centre's 2023 study (Hale et al., 2023), with insufficient curriculum time one of the most frequently cited challenges they encountered. Almost half of teachers reported difficulties associated with teaching the Holocaust to students in Years 7 and 8 as part of a two-year Key Stage 3 programme.

The Centre's research studies have also illuminated particular issues and challenges that have emerged *out of* established practices and approaches. For example, the Centre's 2016 exploration of what 10,000 students knew and understood about the Holocaust revealed that the majority of young people possessed troubling knowledge gaps, held problematic understandings, and frequently adopted misconceptions which were prevalent within wider society. Whilst this situation was the product of a confluence of factors, an important consideration was the prevalence of the belief that the aim of teaching about the Holocaust was to combat intolerance, and to 'learn' its 'lessons'. In both the 2009 and 2023 studies, we found broad consensus among teachers over these aims, whilst the idea of there being moral and civic 'lessons' of the Holocaust has much currency in British culture. Importantly, however, the research suggested that the pursuit of these aims translates into less comprehensive study of the historical details of the Holocaust in the classroom.

In accounting for these trends, it is necessary to acknowledge the challenges that have arisen from the way that the Holocaust is framed within the National Curriculum. Since 1991 the Holocaust has been a named topic within the National Curriculum for history. This has meant it is regarded as statutory, compulsory content, that all school students should learn about. However, at no point over the past 34 years has there been clarity within the curriculum about what content should be covered, how it should be taught, or even what the purpose of teaching and learning about the Holocaust actually is. Whilst some might see this as a welcome absence of prescription, the reality is many teachers want more guidance and support on how they should teach a subject that is inherently challenging. This truth is further compounded by the Centre's research in 2023 showing that not all teachers tasked with delivering Holocaust education, had received specialist professional development; either in training or in service.

The long-standing presence of the Holocaust in the National Curriculum has undoubtedly made a positive contribution to increasing general knowledge and understanding of the Holocaust within British society. Equally, the nature of that knowledge and the condition of that understanding is at least in part a reflection of the type of Holocaust education the past generation of school students have received. With that in mind, an emerging challenge to ensuring teaching and learning about the Holocaust is of a consistently high quality in all schools, has been broader trends and pressures in the education sector. In terms of the former, the acceleration of academisation in England has created a situation where the majority of schools are not, in fact, currently required to teach about the Holocaust – by virtue of them being part of Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs), who do not have to follow the National Curriculum. As

to the latter, an intensification of recruitment and retention issues in schools, heightened workload, the availability of staff to cover lessons, and depleting school finances have all combined to create major obstacles for teacher professional development. Thus, the ability and opportunity for teachers to receive evidence-based training in Holocaust education has been curtailed.

In addition to these longstanding barriers to effective Holocaust education, the long-term impact of the pandemic continues, including students making slower progress than expected, experiencing mental health issues and struggling with socio-emotional skills (Major et al., 2024; SIMS, 2023). Moreover, recent research has found 13–14-year-olds spend an average of four hours online, with 40.0% of this time spent on Snapchat, 13.0% spent on YouTube and 9.0% spent on TikTok (Ofcom, 2025a). With so much time spent on these platforms, students are undoubtedly exposed to misinformation and disinformation. Students may encounter common misconceptions about the historical details of the Holocaust, including some of the misconceptions discussed in this digest. Even more worrying, is the potential for them to come across antisemitic content, Holocaust denial and distortion (see UNESCO, 2022).

In light of all these realities, the scale and nature of the challenges that teachers encounter when teaching about the Holocaust is stark. Collectively, these issues point towards the need to urgently reflect on Holocaust education today and what has and has not changed in the last two decades. This needs to happen from all quarters, including schools, academia, policymakers and Holocaust education organisations. These issues are not insurmountable; rather, they should galvanise all parties to reimagine Holocaust education in response to these issues. Importantly, action must begin from the starting point of being research-informed about what is taking place in classrooms across the country; exploring the evidence provided by the teachers who are doing the teaching, and the students who are learning about this subject.

Photograph by Alejandro Lopex, UCL Media Services, 2024.

National studies by the UCL Centre for Holocaust Education

The UCL Centre for Holocaust Education has conducted four national studies. Two studies – published in 2009 and 2023 – looked at teaching practice. Two studies –published in 2016 and 2025 – looked at students' knowledge and understanding of the Holocaust and their experiences of learning about this history.

Teaching about the Holocaust in English secondary schools: An empirical study of national trends, perspectives and practice

Pettigrew et al., (2009)

holocausteducation.org.uk

- This was a mixed-methods study to explore teaching aims, content, pedagogy, assessment, curriculum planning, teachers' knowledge and understanding, and their training experiences.
- An online survey was completed by 2,108 teachers across England.
- 1,038 of the teachers had taught about the Holocaust in the three years before completing the survey – it is the data from this subsample that are used in this digest.
- Within this subsample, 57% of teachers principally taught about the Holocaust in history, and 27% in religious education.
- Group interviews with 68 teachers in 24 schools were also conducted.

What do students know and understand about the Holocaust? Evidence from English secondary schools

Foster et al., (2016)

holocausteducation.org.uk

- This was a mixed-methods study to explore students' historical knowledge and understanding about the Holocaust, where and when they had learnt about the Holocaust in school, where they encountered the Holocaust outside school (e.g. in films) and students' attitudes about learning about the Holocaust.
- Over 900 secondary school students took part in pilot studies which informed the study design and survey questions.
- A survey was completed by 7,952 secondary school students from 74 schools across England.
- Additionally, 49 focus groups with a total of 244 students from 17 schools were conducted. Focus groups were organised by themes, including 24 groups focused solely on knowledge and understanding about the Holocaust.
- Across the study a mix of students who had and had not learnt about the Holocaust in school took part.

Continuity and Change: Ten years of teaching about the Holocaust in England's secondary schools

Hale et al., (2023)

holocausteducation.org.uk

- This was a mixed-methods study to explore teaching aims, content, pedagogy, assessment, curriculum planning, teachers' knowledge and understanding, and their training experiences.
- This study also compared teaching practice in 2019/20 with teaching practice a decade earlier, drawing on data from the Centre's first teacher study by Pettigrew and colleagues.
- An online survey was completed by 964 teachers who had taught about the Holocaust in the three years before completing the survey.
- 68% of the teachers principally taught about the Holocaust in history, almost 17% in religious education.
- Additionally, 49 interviews with 134 teachers in 45 schools (mix of individual and group interviews) were conducted.

Teaching and learning about the Holocaust 80 years on: A study of student knowledge and understanding in England (2025)

holocausteducation.org.uk/research/80-years/

- This was a mixed-methods study to explore students' historical knowledge and understanding about the Holocaust, where and when they had learnt about the Holocaust in school, where they encountered the Holocaust outside school (e.g. in films), what content about the Holocaust they had encountered online and how much trust they had in different sources of information.
- The study also compared students' knowledge and learning experiences in 2024/25 with students a decade earlier, drawing on data from the Centre's 2016 student study.
- A survey was completed by 2,778 secondary school students from 21 schools across England.
- A teacher in each school was invited to complete a survey about how the Holocaust was taught in their school - 17 schools out of 21 provided this information.
- Ten focus group discussions were conducted with students across six schools.
- Only students who had learnt about the Holocaust in school participated in this survey.
- The majority of students (83.9%) were in Years 8 or 9. For this reason, comparisons between the 2016 and 2024/25 findings are based on data from Years 8 and 9 only to ensure more valid comparisons.

Figure 1 Summary of national studies conducted by the UCL Centre for Holocaust Education

Caption: Members of the SS Helferinnen (female auxiliaries) and SS officer Karl Hoecker sit on a fence railing in Solahuette eating bowls of blueberries. In the background is a man playing the accordion (1944).

Credit: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Photo Archive #34767A. Copyright of United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Caption: Dutch Jews, some wearing Jewish Stars, work in the newspaper office.

Credit: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Photo Archive #74905. Courtesy of Eric Zielenziger. Copyright of United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Research findings

This section of the digest presents findings that give insight into what teachers and students know and understand about some of the attitudes, behaviours and actions of individuals, groups and organisations during the Holocaust. It focuses on:

- Students' notions of responsibility
- Beliefs about the responses of people in Germany
- Students' knowledge of what antisemitism refers to
- Knowledge about the response of the British government

Trends in knowledge and understanding over time are also explored. However, it is important to note that the Centre's national studies were not longitudinal studies where the same participants were tracked over time. Furthermore, the participants within each study were not connected to each other. For example, the students in the 2025 study were not taught by the teachers in the 2023 study. Despite this and the passage of time between the studies, the findings can be meaningfully linked; they collectively tell a compelling story about how teaching and learning about the Holocaust has developed over time and the aspects that have remained unchanged.

Students' notions of responsibility

Latest findings

The 2025 student research showed:

- A third of students ascribed sole responsibility for the Holocaust to Hitler. This was a lower proportion of students compared to 10 years ago.
- Hitler-centric perceptions and understandings of responsibility continued to dominate.
- Knowledge of 'who the Nazis were' had improved in the last 10 years but was still inadequate.

Trends over time

In the 2016 research with students, the survey included an open-ended question: Who was responsible for the Holocaust? As explained by the researchers, Foster et al., (2016), responses included single-word or short answers such as, 'Hitler'; 'Nazis'; 'Hitler and the Nazi Party'; 'Hitler, Himmler and the SS'. Other responses were more detailed explanations for perpetration, discussing factors such as Nazi ideology and antisemitism, as well as outlining the roles of multiple individuals, groups and organisations.
For example:

'The Nazi party was responsible for the Holocaust. However their ideas came from Adolf Hitler – their leader.'

'Adolf Hitler, Heinrich Himmler, the SS, the Gestapo and Nazi collaborators.'

'The leading members of the Nazi Party for example Josef Goebbels, Adolf Hitler and Heinrich Himmler.'

'The German people and those who would turn in their own people to survive.'

Taken from Foster et al., (2016, p.149)

In 2016, the responses were carefully analysed and coded, with the codes derived from the content offered by students – an approach known as inductive coding. When the 2025 data was analysed, the same coding framework was applied to enable valid comparisons between studies.

Table 1 presents the data from the 2016 and 2025 studies. In both instances, only data for students in Years 8 and 9 are presented to enable valid comparisons between studies (see Figure 1 for further information). The data shows:

- In 2016, 52.9% of Year 8/9 students ascribed responsibility to Hitler alone and 19.5% indicated Hitler in association with the Nazis was responsible.
- In 2025, 33.6% of Year 8/9 students ascribed responsibility to Hitler alone and 27.6% cited Hitler and the Nazis.
- Thus, the trend to cite Hitler alone or with the Nazis remained prevalent in 2025, albeit with a smaller proportion of students citing Hitler alone compared to 2016.

Table 1
Percentage of students, by study, giving each answer in response to the question 'Who was responsible for the Holocaust?'

	2016 (n=2,727) Y8/9 only	**2025 (n=2,105) Y8/9 only**
(Only) Hitler	52.9	33.6
Hitler and the Nazis	19.5	27.6
Hitler, the Nazis and Germany	1.1	1.8
Hitler and the Germans/Germany	3.0	1.8
Hitler, the SS and/or named individuals e.g. Himmler	2.9	0.6
Hitler, the Nazis and the SS	0.6	0.4
The Nazis (no direct reference to Hitler)	11.5	12.1
Germans/Germany/German people[2]	3.7	1.9
Nazis and Germans	0.8	1.7
Inaccurate answer	1.2	1.3
Accurate and/or relevant answer not outlined above	2.8	17.2

2 The codes were informed by students' responses, but it is important to note the following taken from Foster et al., (2016, pg. 139): The term 'the German people' is problematic–it overlooks the fact that some of the 'German people' were Jewish, as well as the differentiation in the beliefs, attitudes and actions of the non-Jewish German majority. Some directly carried out the crimes of the Nazis or actively supported them; a small number rescued their Jewish neighbours; many more were passive. So, when we discuss the 'complicity' of 'the German people' we speak in generalisations. It is important to state that we do not mean each and every individual living in Germany but rather the complicity of society; and while individuals who were passive should not be viewed uncritically, we of course do not regard them as bearing equal responsibility as those who actively participated.

The use of inductive coding in 2016 resulted in just 2.8% of responses not fitting into one of the codes. However, in applying this pre-existing framework to the 2025 data, it was apparent that some students were responding differently, indicated by 17.2% of responses not aligning with one of the existing codes. Within these responses, the majority of students (66.5%) cited Hitler and half of them mentioned the Nazis. Thus, whilst these students were not saying responsibility exclusively lay with Hitler and/or the Nazis (and thus, did not fit into the relevant pre-existing categories from 2016), Hitler and/or the Nazis were a part of their answers. Overall, these students' responses deviated from what was found in 2016 because they referenced other individuals and groups such as bystanders, collaborators, police and Einsatzgruppen. For example:

> *'Adolf Hitler and his minions he acquired (mostly him because he had the idea for it and became the leader)'*

> *'The person responsible for the Holocaust was Adolf Hitler but it was not just him who contributed as thousands of Nazi leaders, soldiers and even bystanders on the street played a part in this.'*

> *'Those responsible for the Holocaust included Adolf Hitler, the leader of Nazi Germany at the time, the Nazi Group and the Einsatzgruppen, a death squad made especially for the killing of Jewish people.'*

> *'There were many different people responsible for the holocaust but some were more responsible that others. There were persecutors, collaborators and bystanders which all had a part to play in how the holocaust started but the people who mainly started it were the Nazis.'*

Overall, students in 2025 were less likely to attribute responsibility solely to Hitler compared to students in 2016 and more likely to recognise the role of the Nazis, which is encouraging. However, it is notable that for some students in 2025, a Hitler-centric view of perpetration was dominant.

The 2016 student research included 24 focus groups with 120 students from Years 8 to 13 to explore students' knowledge and understanding of the Holocaust. Focus groups aimed solely at the in-depth investigation of students' historical knowledge were not included in the 2025 research. However, given similarities in survey responses across the two studies, the findings from 2016 give important insights which remain relevant to the 2025 data. In 2016, Foster and colleagues (pg. 150) reported that:

> For many younger students, Hitler's role in the Holocaust was all encompassing and emphatic. At the most simplistic level he is seen to be personally involved in the persecution and murder of Jews; however, the vast majority of students also understood that Hitler could not have carried out the Holocaust by himself. These students subsequently believed he ordered and commanded others to fulfil his goals. Typically, these acts were seen as a top-down process, with Hitler as executive director and other individuals blindly following his will.

It is also important to note that even though more students could identify the Nazis in 2025, it is not clear whether they could accurately explain who the Nazis were. This was not explored in the survey, but the focus groups conducted in the 2016 student study revealed that most younger students did not know that 'the Nazis' referred to the National Socialist German Workers' Party, how the Nazis acquired political power, and that they had broad-based support across all sectors of the German population in the 1930s. It is also apposite that in the 2025 study, a third of participating schools reported they did not include material about Hitler's rise to power and the Nazi State when teaching about the Holocaust. Thus, it is likely that many students in 2025, as in 2016, would struggle to explain who the Nazis were and how they came to power.

Another consideration is the extent to which students' knowledge and understanding of Holocaust perpetration extended beyond Hitler and/or the Nazis. Only a minority of students in both studies appeared to recognise that ordinary citizens across Europe were complicit in the persecution and murder of their Jewish neighbours through apathy and inaction. As explained below, when students believe that only Hitler (and possibly a core group of Nazis) were responsible for the Holocaust, and do not recognise that 'ordinary' people across Europe became complicit in the genocide, they will struggle to understand how and why the Holocaust happened.

Top photograph by Alejandro Lopex, UCL Media Services, 2024.

Bottom photograph by Emile Holba, 2014.

Beliefs about the responses of people in Germany

Latest findings

The 2025 student research showed:

- Compared to 10 years before, students in 2025 were less likely to (erroneously) think the German occupying forces were shot if they refused an order to kill Jews.
- However, this remained a prevalent misconception in 2025 with only 14.2% correctly identifying members of the occupying forces would instead be given another duty.
- Even though the majority of students answered the question incorrectly, two thirds of them were confident they had given the correct answer, indicating an embedded misconception.

Trends over time

The 2016 research with students explored in detail, via focus groups, how students explained the decisions and actions of those involved in the persecution and murder of Jews, including the actions of ordinary people. This included the view that ostensibly innocent German people were 'brainwashed' by Hitler and the Nazis. Key Stage 3 students tended to think that German people had no choice, thus implying they were absolved of responsibility. Students referred to a climate of fear and intimidation instilled by the Nazis that left civilians with no other choice but to become bystanders or collaborators in the persecution of Jews. Students referred to there being severe consequences for anyone who did not support Hitler's and/or the Nazi's regime, for example they or their family would be killed.

This leans into a persistent and significant misconception that members of the German occupying forces would be executed if they refused to carry out orders to kill Jewish people. However, the historical record has found no evidence of this. Instead, evidence shows the most likely consequence was the individual would be excused from the killing and given other duties (see Hayes, 2017).

The prevalence of this misconception was explored across all four of the Centre's national studies with teachers and students. As shown in Figure 2, there was a belief, especially amongst students, that the military or police would be shot for refusing to obey an order.

Figure 2
The percentage of teachers and students in the Centre's national studies who **incorrectly** reported that the German military of police would be shot for refusing to obey an order to kill Jews

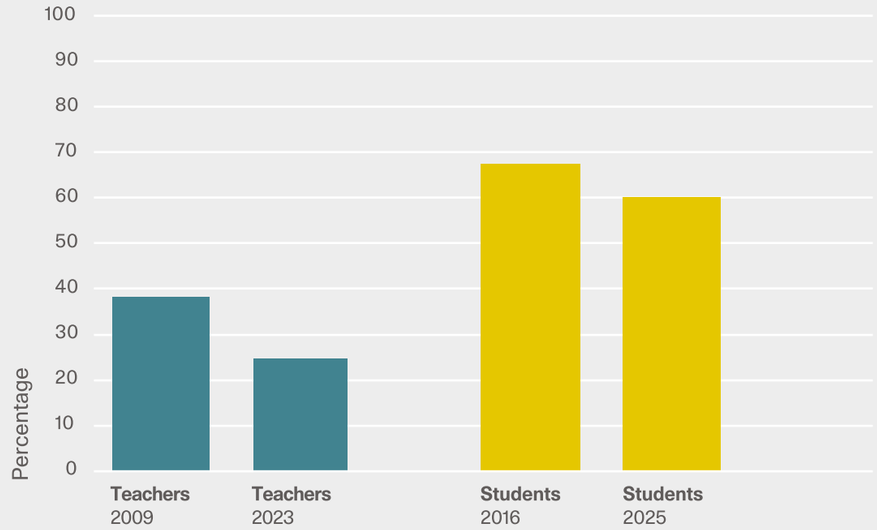


Figure 3 presents the percentage of survey respondents in each study who answered the question correctly. It is notable that knowledge appears to have improved over time. More teachers in 2023 could answer this question correctly compared to teachers in 2009. Similarly, more students in 2025 could answer the question correctly compared to in 2016, which could be due to increased awareness in teachers. However, knowledge in this area remains weak, and certainly students' knowledge has not mirrored the pace of change seen in teachers' knowledge. This raises questions about why changes in students' knowledge have not been more pronounced. Confidence questions in the survey provide some insight by indicating this is an embedded misconception rather than a knowledge gap.

In the 2016 and 2025 student surveys, each knowledge question was accompanied by a confidence question: How confident are you of this answer? With response options: I don't know the answer – this was just a guess; I am not very confident of this answer; I am fairly confident of this answer; and I am very confident of this answer. In the case of the question asking about the consequences of refusing to obey an order to kill, whilst most students in both studies answered this question *incorrectly*, around two thirds of students were confident they had given the *correct* answer. In other words, there was a discrepancy between what students thought they knew and what they actually knew, which suggests an embedded misconception rather than a knowledge gap.

This can have consequences for learning because if a student guesses an answer and/or is cognisant that the answer might be incorrect, they are arguably more likely to seek out the correct answer and assimilate their teachers' explanations. Whereas, if a student is confident in the accuracy of their (incorrect) answer, it might be more challenging for them to revise their knowledge and understanding accordingly. This is arguably even more likely if the correct information appears counterintuitive; for example, it is easy to imagine students struggling to grasp why someone would kill if they could opt out and do something else. Thus, any new information risks being disregarded or interpreted through students' existing schema. This is especially concerning in recent years with the rise of misinformation and disinformation online. For some students, finding information online that aligns with their misconceptions may serve to strengthen their belief in the accuracy of the misconception irrespective of what their teacher says.

Arguably, these are issues that apply to teachers too. The misconception that people were forced to kill Jews during the Holocaust otherwise they would have been shot themselves, is a ubiquitous misconception. Teachers are unlikely to seek out information to the contrary unless they become cognisant of it being a misconception. Given that not all teachers have access to specialist Holocaust education continuing professional development (CPD) it becomes evident how this misconception can go undetected.

This highlights the importance of training opportunities for teachers to develop their knowledge and understanding about the Holocaust. The Centre's 2023 research with teachers evidenced the positive role of CPD.

For example, the research found that only 19.2% of teachers without experience of specialist Holocaust education CPD knew that the German occupying forces were given another duty. This compared to 48.4% of teachers who had some form of training (which could be anything from a one-hour session to a full day). In teachers who had participated in the UCL Centre for Holocaust Education's high engagement programmes (namely the Beacon School Programme and/or the MA module), 91.1% of them could answer the question correctly (see Figure 4).

This shows that it is not simply participation in CPD that has a positive influence, the *type* of CPD is critical. The Centre's high engagement courses are sustained over time, research informed and delivered by experts who mentor teachers. Indeed, across the Centre's portfolio of courses designed for different career stages, teachers have the opportunity for long-term learning and support from experts and peers. These are all aspects of high-quality and effective CPD (Cordingley et al., 2015).

Figure 3
The percentage of teachers and students in the Centre's national studies who correctly reported that the German military of police would be given another duty if they refused to obey an order to kill Jews

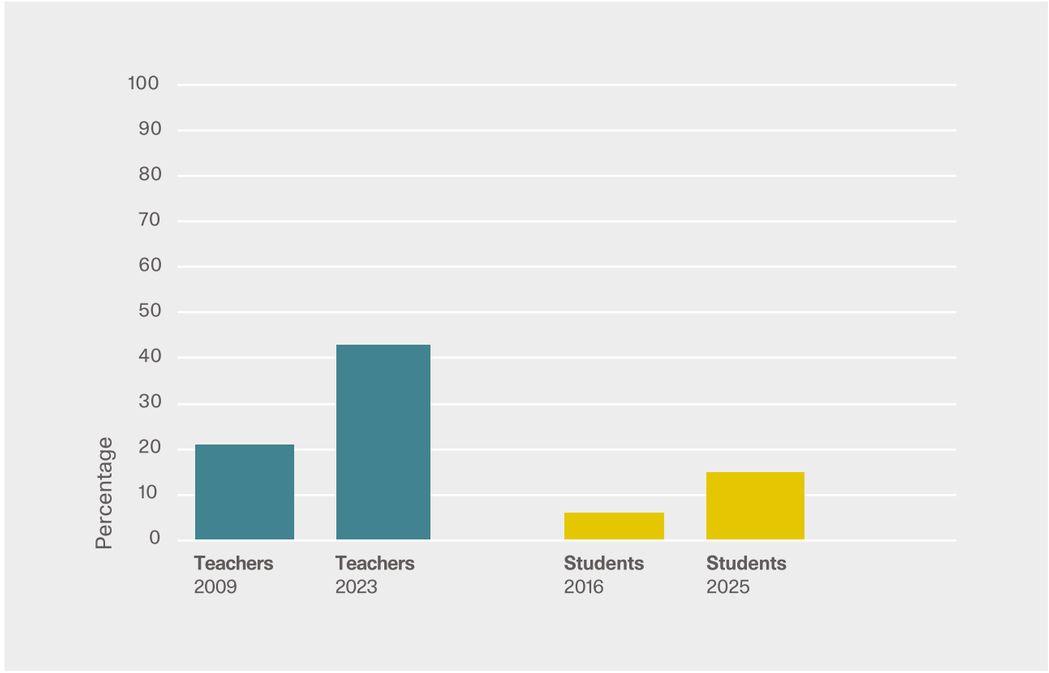
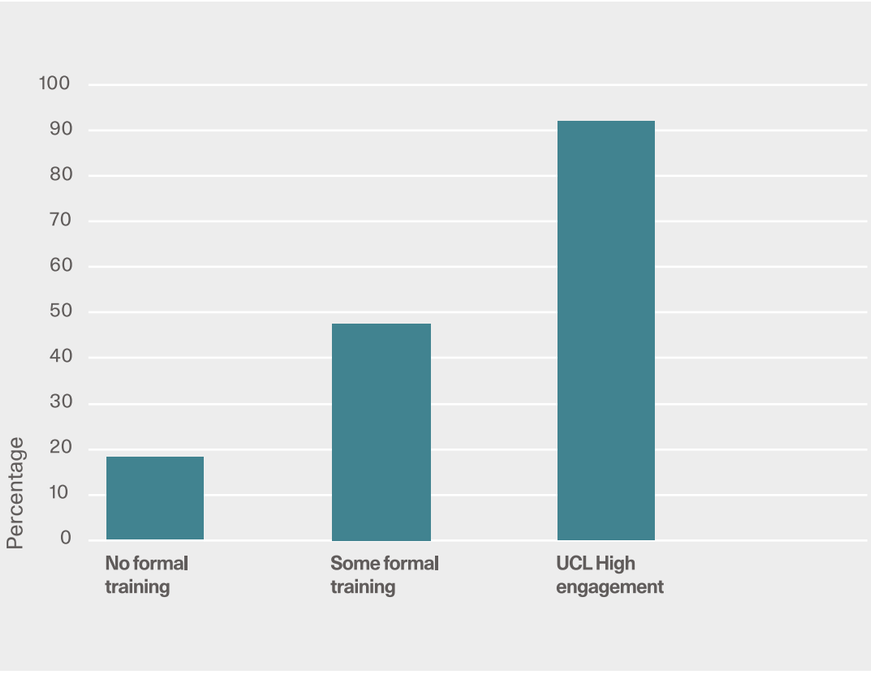


Figure 4
Percentage of teachers who correctly identified that German military/police would be given another duty if they refused an instruction to kill Jewish people, by Holocaust education training experience



Caption: German soldiers parade in formation during war games at the Nazi Party Congress in Nuremberg (1937).

Credit: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Photo Archives #47196. Courtesy of Julien Bryan Archive. Copyright of United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Caption: One photograph from an album of antisemitic signs in Germany. The sign (in translation) reads "This beautiful city Hersbruck, on this gorgeous spot on the earth was created only for Germans, and not for Jews. Jews are therefore not welcome here".

Credit: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Photo Archives #74592. Courtesy of John Howell. Copyright of United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Students' knowledge of what antisemitism refers to

Latest findings

The 2025 student research showed:

- 75.2% of students could identify what the term 'antisemitism' refers to.
- Recognition of the term antisemitism had greatly increased compared to 10 years before.
- However, it was unclear if greater recognition of the term also meant students were more aware of the long history of antisemitism or could explain the Nazi form of antisemitism.

While many students had some consciousness of the longevity of anti-Jewish sentiment in history, few had any sense of how this related, compared and contrasted with Nazi antisemitism. As a result, the distinctive characteristics of Nazi antisemitism are not grasped by most students. Student explanations for 'Why the Jews?' displayed (and are undermined by) not only insufficient levels of substantive knowledge but also underdeveloped conceptual understanding. Students tend to hold flawed ideas of causation, as is captured by the positioning of Hitler as the primary reason for the murder of the Jews.

Trends over time

When looking at people's attitudes, behaviours and actions during the Holocaust, it is important to recognise that they did not occur in a vacuum. One critical factor driving people's actions (and inaction) at the time, was their perceptions of Jewish people and antisemitic beliefs. Thus, antisemitism is a key concept for understanding why Jews were targeted for genocide and how the Holocaust was able to occur.

The focus groups conducted for the 2016 research found a discernible lack of student understanding of antisemitism – either as a substantive concept or as a particular form of Jewish hatred within Nazi ideology. This was also evidenced in the 2016 survey, where only 28.3% of Year 8/9 students knew what the term 'antisemitism' referred to.

In response to the same question in 2025, 75.2% of students could identify what antisemitism referred to, which was a sizeable increase compared to 2016, and is encouraging. However, knowing what the word refers to does not mean that the students understood the long history of antisemitism spanning two millennia, could explain the Nazi form of antisemitism, or could recognise examples of antisemitism today. The research in 2025 did not explore students' understanding in these areas, however, based on focus group discussions with students in 2016, Foster et al., (p. 137) reported that:

The majority of schools participating in the 2025 survey reported that the students had learnt about the long history of antisemitism. Similarly, the Centre's 2023 research with teachers found that 72.9% of teachers covered this topic in their teaching of the Holocaust, and 83.6% taught about Nazi ideology. Thus, the knowledge gaps and misconceptions described by Foster et al., (2016) might not be as prevalent today. However, it is an important area to be cognisant of, especially as other evidence suggests that antisemitism is often not covered when teaching about the Holocaust (Pistone et al., 2024).

Photograph by Emile Holba, 2014.

Knowledge about the response of the British government

Latest findings

The 2025 student research showed:

- Just over a quarter (28.6%) of students correctly identified that the British government knew about the mass murder of Jews in 1941-42.
- Just 13.1% of students knew that the response of the British Government was to say they would punish the killers when the war was over. This represented a small increase in knowledge compared to students in 2016.
- These knowledge gaps could have occurred because British responses to the Holocaust appeared not to be widely taught.

Trends over time

In examining some of the attitudes, actions and behaviours of individuals and groups during the Holocaust, it is relevant to explore notions of national and international responsibility. In other words, looking at what different countries, including Britain, knew of what was happening at the time, and the actions, if any, that these countries engaged in.

In exploring these issues, students (and teachers) may make suppositions about British responses that are influenced by contemporary framings of the Holocaust. This is because the Holocaust features prominently in British social and political culture and is significant in how the country remembers the Second World War, including the rescue of thousands of Jewish children via the Kindertransport programme and the liberation of concentration camps such as Bergen-Belsen.

While these events did occur, incomplete knowledge about British responses and misunderstanding of the chronology of events have contributed to myths and misconceptions about Britain's connection to the Holocaust. Learning about this not only provides an opportunity to identify and challenge misconceptions, but it also enables students to grapple with challenging political and ethical questions about national and international responses to the Holocaust.

The 2023 survey with teachers and the 2025 survey with students, asked the question: When did the British government first know about the mass murder of millions of Jews? Results from the teacher survey showed:

- Many of the teachers (59.8%) correctly identified that the government knew about it in 1941-42.
- However, 13.3% thought the government found out in 1944, after the British were involved in the Allied invasion of occupied Europe.
- And 12.6% of teachers were unsure about the answer to this question.

The results of the student survey showed this was an area where students' knowledge was especially low:

- Just over a quarter of students (28.6%) knew the answer to the question was 1941-42.
- Instead, 33.4% incorrectly selected 1944, after the British were involved in the Allied invasion of occupied Europe.
- 16.3% thought the British government knew it was happening when the war broke out in September 1939.
- 11.6% of students thought the government only knew about it after the war had ended in 1945.

In terms of teachers' and students' knowledge about the response of the British government, there was also evidence of confusion and knowledge gaps. Students' responses to the question 'What was the response of the British Government when they learned about the mass murder of Jews?' in 2016 and 2025 are shown in Figure 5. While knowledge did increase slightly in 2025 compared to 2016, in both studies, only a minority of students, selected the correct answer 'Said they would punish the killers when the war was over'. In the 2025 survey, the most frequently cited option was 'Thought up rescue plans and tried to do everything possible to save Jewish people' with more students selecting this response compared to 2016. In 2016, students were more likely to select 'Declared war on Germany' compared to 2025.

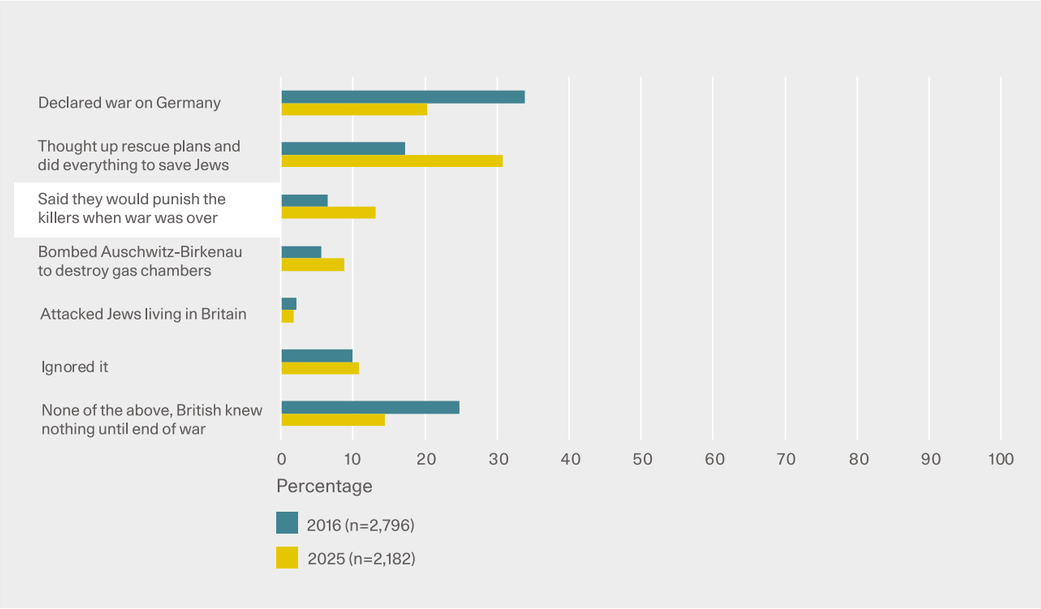


Figure 5
Percentage of students selecting each response for the question 'What was the response of the British Government when they learned about the mass murder of Jews?', by study

The knowledge gaps found in 2025 are arguably unsurprising given that out of the schools who participated in the survey, only six indicated covering content about British responses to the Holocaust. Data from teachers was not collected in the 2016 student study, but arguably this was a topic not widely covered given there was little professional development for teachers focused on this topic at the time.

The Centre's 2023 research with teachers has indicated many of them had knowledge gaps in this area. Less than half of teachers (40.3%) correctly identified that the British government said they would punish the killers when the war was over. Instead, one third (32.2%) thought the government ignored the situation and 18% were unsure about the response of the British government.

Photograph by Alejandro Lopex, UCL Media Services, 2024.

The influence of online content on students' misconceptions about the Holocaust

This digest has focused on research findings related to attitudes, behaviours and actions during the Holocaust. By exploring data from teachers and students across four national studies spanning almost two decades, it is possible to see a connection between classroom encounters of the Holocaust and students' knowledge and understanding, including where misconceptions emerge.

Previously, the Centre's research has explored additional channels through which students accessed material related to the Holocaust, including books and films. This work highlighted the prominence of the text and film *Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, which has drawn criticism for perpetuating myths and misconceptions about the Holocaust. The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) have cautioned about using this novel/film, especially with learners who lack sound knowledge about the Holocaust and thus, are more susceptible to believing misinformation about this history (IHRA, 2019). Although this text is problematic, at least teachers can access it and be cognisant of the potential implications for students' learning. However, the ways in which students obtain and engage with information has changed rapidly in recent years, with students using AI and video platforms for learning and/or schoolwork (Ofcom, 2025b). The plethora of online content, including user generated and/or unverified information, makes it extremely difficult, arguably impossible, for teachers to know what their students are looking at and how this is influencing their knowledge and notions about the Holocaust.

The Centre's 2025 study sought to explore students' engagement with online content when learning about the Holocaust and reflect on how this might be related to ongoing misconceptions. The survey presented a list of social media/video platforms and students had to indicate if they had **deliberately** used them to learn about the Holocaust.

The results, based on 2,508 responses from students in Years 8 to 13, showed that YouTube was the most frequently used platform, by 36.3% of students, followed by TikTok, used by 26.9% of students.

Students were also asked if they had seen information about the Holocaust on social media when they **had not** been purposely looking for it. Over half of students (59.4%) indicated this had happened. Within this subsample (n=1,489), the majority (66.4%) reported coming across Holocaust-related information on TikTok, followed by YouTube (36.9%) and Instagram (19.1%).

The survey did not ask for details about the nature of the Holocaust-related content they had encountered, however studies conducted by other researchers can provide some insights. For example, UNESCO (2022) found 17% of Holocaust-related content on TikTok, denied or distorted this history. They reported that to avoid content being removed, it was sometimes 'camouflaged' and/or users were signposted to unmoderated platforms or more radical forums.

Of course, not all problematic material pertaining to the Holocaust will involve distortion or denial – some material may include muddled information, reflect the content creator's knowledge gaps or draw on prevalent misconceptions that proliferate in society. Those posting and sharing such information may not be aware it is inaccurate.

The Centre's 2025 research highlighted the important role of teachers who are well informed about the Holocaust in supporting students' critical analysis of online content related to this history. In focus group discussions, students said when determining if online content is credible, they consider if it aligns with what their teachers have told them. As one student from a UCL Centre for Holocaust Education Beacon School explained when discussing clickbait and online videos about the Holocaust:

> *'You can think about what you've learnt at school and if the first thing they've said doesn't align with it then you just won't watch the rest of the video because if that's a lie then the rest of it probably is as well.'*
>
> Year 10 student, UCL Beacon School in the North East.

The volume of information available online, including a plethora of unverified user-generated content, raises questions about what students are being exposed to. Moreover, there is increasing awareness that the content presented to social media users is personalised based on the material they engage with online. For example, in the case of YouTube, Cinelli et al., (2022, pg. 3) reports that studies have found "the algorithm seems to be responsible for the creation of the filter bubble and eventually of rabbit holes, that is, loops of questionable and conspiracy contents suggested by the algorithm, creating a vicious circle of problematic recommendations". This is especially concerning given that students do not always recognise problematic online content when they encounter it and indeed may believe in the legitimacy of the information. Ofcom (2025b) found that while teenagers are often sceptical about information they see on social media, 36% of 12–15-year-olds believed that news on social media platforms was always, or mostly, reported truthfully.

The Centre's 2025 survey asked students about their trust in several different information sources, including trust in social media and trust in teachers. Table 2 presents data from the students who had accidentally come across content about the Holocaust on TikTok, YouTube and/or Instagram and answered these trust questions (n=1,105).

It is reassuring that most of these students appeared to have little or no trust in social media. Of course, not everything on social media is inaccurate, but taking a critical approach to content encountered online is prudent.

In contrast, around a fifth (21.1%) of students had 'quite a lot' or 'a lot' of trust in social media. Additionally, 38.0% of students who came across content about the Holocaust on these platforms reported having little or no trust in teachers. These findings raise troubling questions about what students are being exposed to online and how some young people make judgements about the authenticity of this content if they place more trust in material they see online than they place in their teachers.

Photograph by Alejandro Lopex, UCL Media Services, 2024.

Table 2
Trust levels in students who accidently came across Holocaust-related content on TikTok, YouTube and/or Instagram

	Not at all	Only a little bit	Quite a lot	A lot	Not sure
In general, how much do you trust teachers?	9.3	28.7	35.3	23.8	2.8
In general, how much do you trust social media?	15.9	59.5	16.0	5.1	3.4

Supporting teaching and learning

Why knowledge in these areas matters

Informed by years of research exploring the prevalence and impact of misconceptions, the Centre's approach to Holocaust education places emphasis on the importance of robust content knowledge and key conceptual frameworks. With this understanding, teachers and students become equipped to engage in critical reflection and challenge the myths and misconceptions about the Holocaust.

This history demands more than surface-level understanding. Students must grapple with the motivations, ideologies, social structures, and historical continuities that allowed ordinary individuals, institutions, and states to become agents of exclusion and violence. These enquiries raise unsettling questions about human nature, identity and belonging, authority and obedience, and the fragility of democratic values.

For example, when studying the Holocaust, students must understand that responsibility reaches far beyond Hitler and the Nazi regime. A vast web of complicity – stretching across Germany and much of Europe – played a crucial role in enabling persecution and genocide. Similarly, believing that the killers acted as they did to avoid being murdered themselves, is not only inaccurate, but it also leads to a deeply distorted understanding of what happened. Students fail to recognise the broader factors which contributed to their actions, such as antisemitic attitudes, personal gain, complicity and conformity.

It is encouraging that in recent years students have developed more knowledge about what antisemitism – as a concept – refers to. However, in terms of reflecting on how antisemitic attitudes have been enacted throughout history, how this was related to Nazi antisemitism and how antisemitism contributed to the Holocaust happening, students' knowledge and understanding tends to be weaker. However, this is content that should be included in any study of the Holocaust given that antisemitism is a key concept for understanding how the Holocaust occurred and responding to the question 'Why the Jews?'

Learning about Britain's response to the Holocaust opens discussion about national and international responses to the Holocaust. The Holocaust is used as a symbol of the evils of Nazism, and a popular narrative (and misconception) is that Britain's response to the mass murder of Jews was to declare war on Germany and/or do everything possible to save Jews – with initiatives such as the Kindertransport highlighted. These narratives help to reinforce a broadly positive sense of British self-identity, or 'British values', but are problematic.

Of course, Britain was one of the Allied Powers that defeated Nazi Germany, bringing the end of the Nazi occupation of Europe and the genocides perpetrated by that regime. But when students have secure knowledge about the chronology of the Holocaust and the response of the British government after finding out about the mass murder of Jews, they will be able to recognise that Britain did not fight the Nazis to save the Jews. They can understand that initiatives such as the Kindertransport were organised by refugee and aid committees, not the British Government and that the transport stopped towards the end of 1939, before the Nazi policy to kill all European Jews and the creation of death camps. When students understand the misconceptions surrounding Britain's response to the Holocaust, they can grapple with the complexity in Britain's connection to the Holocaust at the time and in how it features in British social and political culture today.

Teaching recommendations

The Centre's experience of working with over 34,000 teachers to date has shown teaching about the Holocaust is complex. Key to addressing the issues described in this briefing are well-planned lessons underpinned by carefully considered pedagogy which:

- Encourage students to explore **how the Holocaust unfolded**, focusing on gradual escalation, legal frameworks, and societal complicity.
- Integrate lessons on **obedience, propaganda, resistance, and complicity** to help students understand the psychological and social mechanisms of genocide.
- Facilitate discussions around **moral choices** and **individual agency**, using case studies of real people who displayed a range of attitudes and behaviours.
- Address the myth that refusal to participate in killings led to execution by teaching about **actual consequences for dissent** within Nazi institutions.
- Use historical evidence to **demonstrate that those who participated in and enabled persecution and murder had choice and agency**, in order to explore why they acted as they did.
- Present **a nuanced view of Britain's wartime policies**, including immigration restrictions, rescue efforts, and political constraints.
- Encourage students to analyse **post-war narratives** and how they may have shaped idealised views of Allied actions.
- Create spaces for students to **reflect on questions of perpetration, culpability and responsibility** during and in the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust.
- Incorporate the **voices of those who perpetrated, those who facilitated and enabled, and those who were victims of the genocide** to ensure students have a multidimensional understanding of human behaviours during the Holocaust.
- Include materials from **different national contexts**.

Photograph by Emile Holba, 2014.

Putting research into practice

The Centre works closely with schools to support them in drawing on the research to inform and develop their teaching practice. Some examples are presented below.

We have found teaching about the Holocaust presents enduring pedagogical challenges. Therefore, we have worked with the UCL's Centre for Holocaust Education for some years now to help support our work. This includes exploring what our students know through surveys. From this, we found that while our students' knowledge often exceeded national averages found in the Centre's 2016 study, several misconceptions persisted—mirroring patterns consistently found in the Centre's recent research.

In response, we launched a collaborative project with the Centre to address some particularly resilient misconceptions. For example, where pupils thought that perpetrators acted solely out of fear rather than choice, it significantly distorted their understanding of the Holocaust. Whereas knowing that individuals could refuse participation in killings without punishment, meant their grasp of human agency, prejudice, discrimination and moral responsibility became more nuanced.

The project builds on our existing Holocaust enquiries across the Federation, with the Centre's research enabling us to focus on targeted misconceptions and strengthen teacher knowledge. Through our partnership with the Centre, our project seeks to enhance classroom practice, deepen students' grasp of the Holocaust and encourage students to engage more critically with broader issues such as antisemitism, discrimination and individual moral responsibility.

Harry Pike, History Consultant at the Harris Federation.

Engagement with research by the UCL Centre for Holocaust Education has been instrumental in highlighting common misconceptions, such as the belief that only Hitler and leading Nazis were responsible for the Holocaust. This understanding has shaped our curriculum, allowing us to design lessons that challenge these ideas and develop students' critical, reflective thinking.

Using the Centre's Being human? Choices, behaviours and the Holocaust resources, students analyse real case studies to explore the roles of collaborators, bystanders, and perpetrators, deepening their grasp of social responsibility and moral choice. Addressing such misconceptions has strengthened students' academic knowledge, empathy, and capacity to recognise and challenge injustice.

The Centre's research continues to underpin our curriculum and teaching practice, ensuring Holocaust education is both intellectually rigorous and values driven. Our school and students are extremely proud to be part of the UCL Centre for Holocaust Education Beacon School Programme, which has inspired a culture of thoughtful engagement, compassion, and community awareness across the whole school.

Alice Arnold, Lead Practitioner: Humanities at Trafalgar School.

The research by the UCL Centre for Holocaust Education plays a crucial role in diagnosing historical learning needs by highlighting common misconceptions. Data from pre-surveys we conducted in partnership with the Centre provided the necessary evidence base to tailor instruction. It was vital to tackle these misconceptions because they simplify history in dangerous ways.

We wanted to ensure the students in our care walked away with accurate and true understanding of the facts. Even 5 years after we started with the Beacon School programme, students still remember key information today and that shows the impact of the research and the programme to our students.

The research was immediately woven into curriculum design, equipping our teachers with the most current and trustworthy information to guide students toward historical truths, however uncomfortable they may be. On further reflection of the UCL-informed surveys that we have conducted annually, we have been able to diagnose trends and misconceptions to aid our future planning and continue to squash misconceptions and untruths as a result.

Fiona Burr, Head of Faculty: Humanities & Social Sciences, at The Chalk Hills Academy, Advantage Schools.

How the Centre supports teachers

The knowledge gaps and misconceptions discussed in this digest highlight the complexity of teaching and learning about the Holocaust. For students, the Holocaust is a challenging subject to grapple with – both cognitively and emotionally. It raises profoundly difficult and uncomfortable questions about the human condition. For teachers supporting students through this complex learning experience, specialist Holocaust education professional development can help them to develop their own knowledge, confidence and pedagogical approaches, which in turn, positively impact on students' knowledge and understanding.

The UCL Centre for Holocaust Education's professional development programme for teachers is informed by almost two decades of research. It includes age-appropriate resources, pedagogical innovation and active, thought-provoking enquiry. The Centre is also creating a bank of short self-guided CPD courses, exploring key educational issues that are encountered when teaching about the Holocaust. To access the full portfolio of courses, teaching materials, reports and books, see the Centre's website: https://holocausteducation.org.uk/

Resources that are especially relevant to the issues discussed in this digest are highlighted here.

Being human? Choices, behaviours, and the Holocaust

These resources are specifically designed to address common myths and misconceptions about perpetrators and collaborators, as well as bystanders and rescuers. A range of engaging and thought-provoking case studies reveal the many different ways in which large numbers of ordinary people became complicit in mass murder. They also highlight a small minority who actively resisted the Nazi genocide. See: Being human? – Centre for Holocaust Education

Nazi Antisemitism: Where did it come from?

This self-paced, 90-minute course explores the long and complex history of antisemitism, tracing its development and showing how it culminated in the atrocities of the Holocaust. It gives a detailed, nuanced perspective, which supports a richer, more comprehensive context for students. See: Nazi Antisemitism: Where did it come from? – Centre for Holocaust Education

What were British responses to the Holocaust?

These resources draw upon rich evidential material held in the National Archives, Wiener Library, Churchill Archive, Mass Observation Archive and the Ben Uri Gallery. The resources facilitate students' detailed enquiry into what the British government and public knew about the fate of Jews and the attitudes and responses that followed. See: British responses to the Holocaust – Centre for Holocaust Education

School textbook: Understanding the Holocaust: How and why did it happen?

The Centre's textbook is the only research-informed school textbook on the Holocaust in the world. Published by Hodder Education, the textbook has been specifically designed for use at Key Stage 3. It was written in direct response to the findings of the Centre's 2016 research into students' knowledge and understanding of the Holocaust. Accompanying guidance material is also available online. **Teachers can acquire a free class set of textbooks** by completing a self-guided, online CPD course. See: Understanding the Holocaust at Key Stage 3: Teaching with a research-informed Textbook – Centre for Holocaust Education

Photograph by Olivia Hemingway, 2014.

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Photograph by Alejandro Lopex, UCL Media Services, 2024.

Centre for
Holocaust Education

The UCL Centre for Holocaust Education is part of the UCL Institute of Education and was developed in partnership with Pears Foundation. The Centre works in partnership with Pears Foundation who, together with the Department for Education, have provided principal funding to the Centre since 2008.

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ISBN 978-1-7392422-3-7

Pears Foundation

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