

‘The Holocaust is a place where . . .’: The position of Auschwitz and the camp system in English secondary school students’ understandings of the Holocaust.

Dr Alice Pettigrew and Dr Eleni Karayianni

UCL Centre for Holocaust Education, UK.

Abstract:

This paper presents data drawn from a recent empirical study involving more than 8,000 English secondary school students (aged 11 – 18) who took part in either a survey or focus group interview. It critically examines the significance of Auschwitz and the wider camp system within young people’s knowledge and understanding of the Holocaust. The paper reflects upon the tension between, on the one hand, academic historians’ requirements of clarity, differentiation and the recognition of both complexity and nuance in making sense of this past, and, on the other, the imprecision, abstraction and/or confusion often associated with, and characteristic of, dominant, Auschwitz-centric narratives of the Holocaust. In doing so, it identifies a number of important yet ostensibly widely shared misinterpretations, mistakes and misconceptions reflected in English school students’ engagement with this history.

Keywords: Auschwitz; English secondary schools; young people’s knowledge and understanding of the Holocaust.

Introduction

Across Europe, North America and beyond, the Holocaust is one of the most regularly referenced and often represented periods of recent human history and, as Dan Stone has noted, ‘in western Europe’ - if not also further afield – ‘our image of the Holocaust centres on Auschwitz-Birkenau.’¹

Indeed, for many, Auschwitz has become *the* symbol of the Holocaustⁱⁱ and, seventy years after liberation, its arresting graphic vocabulary – of barbed-wired fences and railroad tracks, of shaven heads, tattooed forearms and striped, pyjama-like, uniforms, for example – looms large in the popular imagination, regularly invoked within box-office hit feature films and best-selling novels, through poetry, philosophical and theological writing, through regular museum exhibitions, photography and other visual works of art. However, as recent research conducted by University College London’s Centre for Holocaust Education has made clear, popular prominence and widespread familiarity are not necessarily good indicators of phenomena being well understood.ⁱⁱⁱ On the contrary, precisely such familiarity can in fact lead to significant *mis*understanding through the unthinking repetition of misleading simplifications, common misinterpretations and other unwitting distortions of the historical truth. Moreover, as Bloxham and Kushner suggest, where a historical phenomenon acquires ‘symbolic,’ ‘iconic’ or, in Tim Cole’s language ‘mythic’ status – as many have argued is the case both for Auschwitz and for the wider Holocaust which it is so commonly taken to represent – the danger of such distortion is even more pronounced.^{iv} For icons and symbols derive their value not simply – nor even primarily – from what they may be able to tell today’s audience about the past. Rather they acquire or are invested with symbolic status through the resonance of the meanings they are seen to communicate in relation to *contemporary* socio-political values, agendas and concerns. And as the scholar Oren Stier helpfully distinguishes, while a historian might approach the past through disciplinary lenses which seek to differentiate or to clarify and which place enormous value on both specificity and nuance, symbolic currency depends upon simplification, upon the containment or erasure of complexity, and upon abstraction and generalisability.^v

This paper presents data and analysis drawn from an unprecedentedly large study of English secondary school students’ knowledge of the Holocaust. In doing so, it critically considers the status and significance of both Auschwitz and the wider camp system within young people’s

collective understanding of this history and offers empirically substantiated insight in response to two, commonly articulated historians' concerns. The first is outlined perhaps most clearly by Kushner et al. when they warn of 'the danger ... that Auschwitz has become so dominant as a metaphor for the "Final Solution" ... that other sites and experiences relating to the Holocaust will be neglected in the popular imagination' leading to a significantly truncated and in important respects misleading engagement with this history.^{vi} The second is advanced in detail by Cole who argues that the 'mythical' Auschwitz which exists in popular consciousness is an 'imaginary' 'amalgam' of different places and different time periods that 'draws on the historical camps in Oswiecim, but plays scant regard to [their] historical complexity.'^{vii} The paper seeks to answer two principal sets of questions then: 1) to what extent does Auschwitz and the wider camp system feature within English secondary school students' apprehension of the Holocaust and with what consequence? and 2) How much do these same students actually know – or think they know – about Auschwitz itself? How accurate and how detailed is their understanding of its history?

Auschwitz and the Holocaust imaginary

It might at first seem axiomatic that Auschwitz-Birkenau should occupy such a central position within contemporary understandings of and engagements with the Holocaust. Between 1940 and 1945, approximately 1.3 million people were deported to the complex of camps and sub-camps which uniquely comprised both concentration and extermination facilities. Of those, approximately 1.1 million were murdered there. For historian Peter Hayes, '[b]ecause of both the toll it exacted and its sheer physical size, Auschwitz became the very capital of the Holocaust – not its decision-making centre, to be sure, but the place most indelibly linked with all of its multiple dimensions.'^{viii} More recently, Nesfield has argued that, '[w]hat Auschwitz-Birkenau as an entire site represents is the Holocaust encapsulated – the final destination of so many victims, Jewish, non-Jewish, political, non-political, from all corners of Europe: those selected for forced

labour, and those selected for death.’ ‘In one respect, then,’ she summarises, ‘Auschwitz is a multi-faceted location ideal for interrogating the scale and breadth of the Holocaust.’^{xix}

However, other scholars have both questioned the adequacy of this particular camp system as a short-hand or exemplar of the Holocaust writ large^x and documented that its present-day prominence as the pre-eminent focal point for this history is itself contingent and was by no means assured. Tim Cole for example, follows Tony Kushner in describing that, immediately following the Second World War ‘Auschwitz simply had no popular resonance in liberal culture’^{xi} and up until the 1960s, ‘the name Auschwitz’ was in fact ‘little known in the West.’^{xii} Initially, Bergen-Belsen, the first German concentration camp liberated by British troops, was the most commonly shared symbol of Nazi brutality within the United Kingdom while Buchenwald performed a similar function within the US. Cole suggests that it was only during the 70s, 80s and 90s that Auschwitz began to displace these and other camps from popular consciousness internationally and acquired its figurative status as *the* symbol of the Holocaust that it is so widely recognised today.

Because both Bergen-Belsen and Buchenwald were concentration camps rather than death camps, it could be argued that Auschwitz is indeed a more appropriate signifier of the systematic, attempted total extermination of European Jews. However, as British historian and documentarian Lawrence Rees and others have importantly reminded us, for much of its existence, Auschwitz was not principally intended as a death camp whereas four other camps, Chelmno, Belzec, Sobibor and Treblinka were each constructed with the express and solitary intention of maximising the ‘efficiency’ of mass murder.^{xiii} Through the use of parked gas vans (at Chelmno) and later, purpose-built gas chambers in hidden crematoria, these, often surprisingly small, facilities were together responsible for the deaths of an estimated 1.6 million Jews.^{xiv} And yet, while at its peak Sobibor, for example, could facilitate the deaths of over 500 individuals in a single gas chamber

in a process that took just 2 – 3 hours from arrival to burial, it is Auschwitz alone that has come to be remembered as the epitome of the bureaucratised, industrial, mass-killing of the Holocaust. Outside of specialist academic communities, these other ‘death factories’ are comparatively little known. For unlike Auschwitz, they were so successful in their singular purpose – of extermination – that, with only a handful of very unusual exceptions, all who were sent there were almost immediately killed.^{xv} At Auschwitz, in contrast, there was an already well-established network of concentration and labour camps which continued to operate alongside the infamous Zyklon-B gas chambers once these became operational. Although staggering numbers of Jews were murdered there, among those chosen to labour rather than face immediate execution, comparatively large numbers were in fact able to survive. As Jonathan Webber reflects, ‘Auschwitz survivors were thus numerous enough to ensure that their story was told to the world’ (The Guardian, January 13, 2005; para 3) while as Michael Berenbaum and others document, at Belzec, for example, ‘less than a handful of those taken [there] survived.’^{xvi}

Moreover, much of Auschwitz itself survived the war intact. Today visitors from across the globe can visit the 191 hectare site which was officially opened as a museum in 1947 and which continues to house 155 original buildings – including barracks, camp blocks and outbuildings – 13 kilometres of rusting fencing, roads, drainage ditches, railway tracks and an unloading platform as well as the visible ruins of its four gas chambers and crematoria (<http://auschwitz.org/en/museum/preservation/>). There are no museums or comparable sites to visit at Belzec, Treblinka or Sobibor as the Nazis were largely successful in entirely destroying any trace of the murderous camps constructed there.^{xvii}

Arguing powerfully against its dominance as *the* – singular – focus of remembrance and popular understanding of the Holocaust, Snyder has recently suggested that Auschwitz was in fact, ‘a place where the third technique of mass killing was developed, third in chronological order *and also*

third in significance.^{xviii} Indeed, for Snyder, even the development of asphyxiation through carbon monoxide poisoning at Chelmno, Treblinka, Sobibor or Belzec only represents the second most important development in the mass killing of the Holocaust. For him, ‘the most important technique, because it came first, because it killed the most Jews, and because it demonstrated that a Final Solution by Mass Killing was possible, was shooting over pits.’^{xix}

Here Snyder is referring to what Desbois has characterised as ‘the Holocaust by Bullets’ – that is the shooting at close range of an estimated 1.5 million Jewish people by mobile killing squads, or *Einsatzgruppen*, often supported by local, non-military police officers across the occupied territories of the Soviet Union.^{xx} These mass killings were concentrated between 1941 and 1942 but continued throughout the Second World War. Their importance has led historians such as Snyder, Stone and others to significantly challenge the efficacy and adequacy of ‘Auschwitz’ as a synonym for the Holocaust as a whole. Stone, for example, urges us to think beyond what he characterises as an ‘Auschwitz syndrome’

which has kept us fascinated by the apparent paradox of modern technology being employed in the service of mass murder [and] has stopped us from seeing other aspects of the Holocaust.^{xxi}

‘Auschwitz,’ he argues clearly, ‘is *not* synonymous with the Holocaust *per se*, which was a Europe-wide phenomenon, much of which appears more akin to colonial massacres than to the iconic image of the death camp.’^{xxii} In failing to recognise these other forms of killing, our understanding of the Holocaust – and critically, our understanding of both its victims and its perpetrators – is significantly compromised.

The position of Auschwitz in contemporary teaching and learning about the Holocaust

Although they have garnered significant attention within academic discourse, such criticisms and warnings appear to have done little to disrupt the importance still placed upon Auschwitz within the field of Holocaust education both in the UK and further afield. Since 2007, according to Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum website, the site has been visited by more than a million people each year with that number rising to over two million in both 2016 and 2017 (<http://auschwitz.org/en/visiting/attendance/>). Of these, as Nesfield helpfully summarises, ‘70% were classified by the museum as “young people”’ and ‘a majority were organised educational groups, particularly high school, college and university students.’^{xxiii} While recognising some of the criticisms outlined above and acknowledging that a single site visit cannot ever address the complexity of this history, Nesfield explains that the site remains an attractive – and pragmatic – choice of destination for British teachers and educators seeking ‘an “authentic” educational and historical experience of the Holocaust’ for their students within a manageable amount of time. Since 1999 the Holocaust Educational Trust has taken some 34,000 teachers and secondary school students on 24-hour visits to Poland as part of its flagship *Lessons from Auschwitz* programme. Since 2008, such trips have been supported through funding from UK government (<https://www.het.org.uk/lessons-from-auschwitz-programme>).

In addition to those immediately impacted by actual site visits, Auschwitz has also significantly influenced secondary school-aged Britons’ educational encounters with the Holocaust in a variety of other ways over the last four decades. As Pearce documents, Auschwitz was the focus of two of the first touring exhibitions to bring the Holocaust to UK audiences in 1981 and 1983. The second of these, *Auschwitz: An Exhibition*, was intended primarily to reach young audiences and was accompanied by the preparation of a teaching pack, *Auschwitz: Yesterday’s Racism* produced by the Inner London Education Authority. This proved a very popular resource and was revised for much wider distribution in schools long after the close of the exhibition itself.^{xxiv} Auschwitz then came to occupy a physically and symbolically dominant position in the UK’s first permanent

exhibition of the Holocaust in London's Imperial War Museum^{xxv} – again, a large proportion of whose visitors comprise school parties – and, since 2001, in keeping with many other countries, the UK marks Holocaust Memorial Day – often through school-based and other educational activities – on the 27th of January, the day of the camp's liberation.

Prior research also attests to the continuing significance still placed upon Auschwitz within the teaching of the Holocaust in England's secondary schools. A 2009 research study, for example, asked teachers to identify the individual topics they were most likely to include within a unit of lessons on the Holocaust. 87% of over 1,000 respondents indicated that they were more likely than not to teach about Auschwitz-Birkenau. This was second only to 'the experiences of individual men, women and children persecuted by the Nazis' (more likely than not to be taught by 88%). Other topics relevant to the fate of the Jews such as Operation Reinhardt and the *Einsatzgruppen* were likely to be included by a much smaller number of teachers (12% and 20% of respondents respectively).^{xxvi} Moreover, a recent analysis of 21 history textbooks used within English secondary classrooms reports that Auschwitz continues to feature very commonly in their content and is frequently the main or only example of a camp used.^{xxvii}

Although educational encounters with Auschwitz have been the subject of a number of other studies both in Britain and internationally, the focus of most has previously been upon the experiential nature and specific opportunities and challenges of site visits or upon students' emotional and/or civic engagement with this history.^{xxviii} Given the serious concerns outlined by Kushner, Cole, Snyder, Stone and others above, it is perhaps surprising that, to the best of the current authors' knowledge, the impact of Auschwitz-centric teaching upon young people's knowledge and understanding of the Holocaust has not been the focus of significant empirical study before.

Method

The study from which the findings presented in this paper are drawn was conducted by a team of researchers within the UCL Centre for Holocaust Education who sought to examine what English secondary school students (aged 11 – 18) know and understand about the Holocaust.^{xxix} The research drew on contributions from more than 8,000 participants making it the largest ever study of its kind. A mixed methodology was employed combining an extensive, 91 question survey-instrument completed by 7,952 students and focus group interviews with a further 244 students.

The participants came from 74 different schools across England. Schools were targeted to ensure the sample was broadly representative of: 1) the number of schools in each of nine government regions; 2) academic performance (as reflected in national examination results); and 3) the composition of different ethnic groups within each region. While a sampling framework was used to identify schools invited to participate, the schools and students who actually took part were volunteers. Students from year groups 7 to 13 took part, with the largest proportion of students in Year 9, the year when the Holocaust is most likely to be taught as part of the History curriculum. Slightly more girls (53%) than boys participated in the research. 73% of the sample were White, 13% were Asian or Asian British, 6% were of Black/African/Caribbean or Black British background and 2% per cent belonged to other ethnic groups.

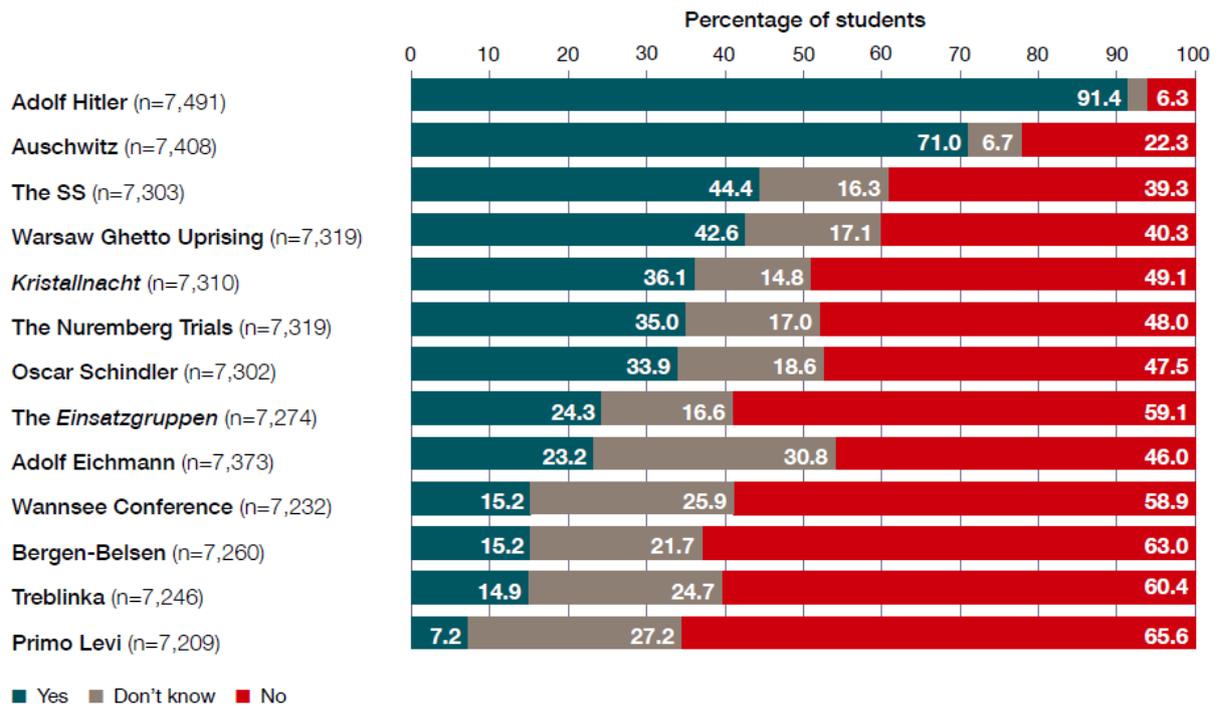
The data collected from the survey were analysed using SPSS. The survey included three questions requiring free-text responses which were both thematically coded and coded using a numerical framework for inclusion within statistical analyses. 49 focus group interviews were conducted with a total of 244 students (119 girls and 125 boys) from years 7 to 13. Qualitative data were interpretatively coded and emerging themes were compared and contrasted with the findings from the survey.

While the exploration of students' knowledge and understanding of Auschwitz was not an explicit or direct aim of this research, students' responses to a number of key questions asked during both the survey and interviews revealed interesting insights into what secondary school students know about Nazi camps in general and Auschwitz in particular. The discussion now turns to these findings.

What prominence is given to Auschwitz and the camp system within English secondary school students' conceptions of the Holocaust?

During analysis of its survey data, the study found evidence of strong recognition of Auschwitz among students. For example, one survey question asked students to indicate whether or not they believed a list of given events, people and places were connected to the Holocaust. As Figure 1 below illustrates, Auschwitz was the second most regularly associated term after 'Adolf Hitler': 71% of survey respondents positively identified Auschwitz with the Holocaust while only 15% of students made the same association with either Bergen-Belsen or Treblinka. Indeed, more students actively rejected the premise that either was in any way related to the Holocaust (63% and 60% of students respectively).

Figure 1: Students' recognition of people, events and places associated with the Holocaust.



Elsewhere within the survey, students were presented with photographs and asked to choose from a list of options what they thought each photograph represented. Here again photographs related to Auschwitz were widely recognised. For example, 72 % of respondents recognised the entrance to Auschwitz concentration camp and 87% recognised that the tattoo on a Jewish survivor's arm meant that he had been a prisoner at Auschwitz.

Students who completed the survey were also invited to provide a short description, just one or two sentences long, to indicate what they believed 'the Holocaust' was. 6,133 students provided answers here ranging from single word responses to short paragraphs of up to 250 words. These 'descriptions' were particularly revealing. For while the survey question did not instruct students to demonstrate *everything* they knew about the Holocaust, it did provide an opportunity for them to share their core understanding of this history. Across all 6,133 responses, this translated into an enormous amount of complex data including a wide variety of descriptive, evaluative and 'factual' (as well as counterfactual) content. Through close textual analysis of recurring words, phrases and related terms it was possible to clearly discern the most commonly shared content. Table 1

summarises the ten most frequently occurring words and phrases used by students across all year groups. The term ‘camps’ was among the top 5 most commonly included in student descriptions among all but the oldest year groups where it was superseded by references to the Second World War.

Table 1: Approximate frequency counts (freq) of the 10 most commonly appearing words or phrases by year group.

Rank	Year 7 (n=533)	Year 8 Freq (n=854)	Year 9 Freq (n=2,299)	Year 10 Freq (n=1,074)	Year 11 Freq (n=472)	Year 12/13 Freq (n=862)	Year 12/13 Freq (n=862)	Year 12/13 Freq (n=862)
1	Jews/ Jewish	472 Jews/ Jewish	862 Jews/ Jewish	2,346 Jews/ Jewish	1,088 Jews/ Jewish	498 Jews/ Jewish	934	
2	Killed	302 Killed	450 Killed	1,258 Killed	638 Killed	271 Killed	384	
3	Hitler	232 Hitler	402 Hitler	1,032 Hitler	522 Hitler	230 Hitler	365	
4	Camps	167 Camps	293 Camps	741 Camps	336 Nazis	158 Nazis	358	
5	Nazis ^a	130 Nazis	211 Nazis	697 Nazis	303 Camps	131 Second World War	214	
6	Second World War	125 Second World War	164 Second World War	424 Second World War	178 Million/6 million	92 Camps	205	
7	Sent or Taken	98 Sent or Taken	157 Sent or Taken	355 Million/6 million	161 Germany	88 Germany	198	
8	Germans ^b	91 Gassed	154 Germans	336 Sent or Taken	156 Second World War	78 Genocide	196	
9	Gassed ^c	68 Germans	143 Million/ 6 million	317 Race/racism/ ethnicity	146 Race/racism/ ethnicity	77 Million/ 6 million	161	
10	Religion ^d	43 Million/ 6 million	92 Gassed	300 Homosexuals	133 Homosexuals	60 Race/racism/ ethnicity	153	

a Count includes references to: ‘Nazis’, ‘Nazi party’, ‘Nazi Germans’ and ‘Nazi regime’

b Count includes ‘German people’

c Count includes all references to ‘gas’ and ‘gassing’ (including ‘gas chambers’ and ‘gas showers’)

d Count includes references to ‘religious’ and ‘beliefs’

Across all students’ descriptions, 56 individual references were made to Auschwitz or Auschwitz-Birkenau. This might ostensibly seem like a very small number but it is important to note that only 15% of students included any kind of geographical reference point at all within their short descriptions (this compares to 74% of students who included identification of at least one perpetrator, 92% at least one victim and 93% at least one action within their account^{xxx}).

With regard to *how* Auschwitz was framed within these 56 short descriptions, the place name was most commonly presented as 'the main camp' or as an exemplar ('like' or 'such as') that students were able to identify as, for example, among the students who wrote:

The Holocaust was when 6 million Jews were killed in so many horrible ways. Some were kept in concentration camps, the main one was in Auschwitz. Germans took Jews from their homes and put them in the ghetto. Soon afterwards started the massacre of the ghetto where most of Jews were wiped out. Survivors were put in concentration camps. (Year 9 student).

In WW2 Hitler wanted to kill all Jews and people he thought was 'incorrect' and 'wrong' so he sent them all on over-crowded trains to camps like Auschwitz to be gassed and killed. (Year 9 student)

An attempt made by the Nazi party in Germany to wipe out and commit genocide against the Jews. The Nazis also killed disabled people. To do this the Nazis used gas chambers and concentration camps, an example of this was Auschwitz run by Rudof Hoess. (Year 10 student)

The attempted mass extermination of a number of peoples by Nazi Germany, including Jews, gypsies, and homosexuals. It took place during the Second World War and for the victims it often involved imprisonment in concentration camps such as Auschwitz-Birkenau until the victims were gassed. (Year 12 student).

While the students quoted above displayed a notable degree of subject knowledge, for other students however, there appeared to be greater confusion and the confluences most feared by Stone, Snyder and others more fully realised:

Adolf Hitler dictator of Germany in the 30s and 40s tried to wipe out the Jewish race and religion in concentration camps called Auschwitz-Birkenau . . . (extract from Year 9 student description).

It was where all the Germans took all the Jews to a place called Auschwitz to then separate them to see who would die straight away or who would be worked to death. When they were killed, thousands of people were put into a tiny gas chamber and gassed to death for no reason. (Year 11 student).

The Holocaust was the mass murder of Jews, Gypsies, Romanians and other ethnic groups in a camp called Auschwitz, during the Second World War. (Year 9 student).

While these examples, which very explicitly reduce the totality of the Holocaust to one named camp, were very infrequent and more common among the younger students surveyed, a closely related tendency to equate or conflate the Holocaust with a more generalised notion of ‘the camps’ or ‘concentration camps’ was much more pronounced. Exploring the detail behind the frequency with which the term ‘camp(s)’ was deployed in student descriptions (as already indicated in Table 1), the dominance and impact of a somewhat imprecise and often rather muddled notion of the camp system in student thinking becomes more clear. More than any other single word or phrase used by students in their descriptions, the association between ‘camps’ – and in particular ‘concentration camps’ and/or ‘gas camps’ – and the Holocaust was so strong that, in a number of cases, they were presented as though synonymous:

Holocaust is a concentration camp for Jews (Year 9 student).

The Holocaust was the concentration camp within the world wars that Jews would be sent to work as slaves and eventually be gassed to death (Year 13 student).

[The Holocaust is] otherwise referred to as the concentration camps. These were built during the second world war by the Nazis in which they imprisoned Jews, Blacks, gays and disabled there to work and build more of the camp and then they would put the ones that could no longer work into a gas chamber where they were gassed until no one in there was alive (Year 9 student).

[The Holocaust was] a gas camp the Germans controlled to kill Jewish people (Year 10 student).

In other examples the conflation was not quite so explicit but nonetheless remained significant as, for example where the Holocaust was described as ‘a place’ with pronounced concentration camp-like features and purpose, or where the verb ‘concentrating’ was invented to become the principle action of the Holocaust:

[The Holocaust was] the Nazi way of killing all Jews by *concentrating* them into fortified camps to do hard labour or be killed (Year 9 student, emphasis added).

It is instructive to note that Kucia reports a similar conflation of ‘the Holocaust’ as a concentration or ‘annihilation camp’ among 4% of the Polish students he surveyed within a 2000 study.^{xxxi}

Figure 2 summarises all of the most frequently occurring words used where students made reference to actions undertaken during the Holocaust within their short descriptions. The nouns ‘concentration camp’ and ‘death camp’ are included here to reflect the regularity with which they were used alongside various verbs such as ‘sent to,’ ‘taken,’ ‘imprisoned’ and/or ‘created.’ Taken as a whole, this figure is unlikely to do much to assuage the fears of Snyder in his insistence that, ‘The image of the German concentration camps as the worst element of National Socialism is an illusion, a dark mirage over an unknown desert’ for ‘the vast majority of Jews killed in the Holocaust never saw a concentration camp.’^{xxxii} His concern that the large number of Jews killed by bullets have been ‘largely forgotten’^{xxxiii} certainly seems to be borne out in the comparative prevalence of terms such as ‘gas,’ ‘gassed’ and/or ‘gas chambers’ in student descriptions (in total, 751 individual references) compared to the use of the word ‘shot’ which was included only 41 times. Even the word ‘shower’ was included with greater frequency (69 references). It is also telling to return to Figure 1 and note that only 24% of all students surveyed appeared to recognise that the *Einsatzgruppen* were in any way connected with the Holocaust while a majority (59%) actively rejected that proposition.

Figure 2: Most commonly used words and phrases that refer to actions undertaken during the Holocaust across all student descriptions.

abused (10) achieve (11) affected (11) agree (16) aim (28) attacked (25) **attempt** (350) **auschwitz** (56)
 away (84) beaten (12) **blamed** (79) bodies (22) bombing (21) **brutally** (46) built (18) **burned** (59)
camps (359) **captured** (106) **carried out** (62) chambers (29) cleansing or ethnic-cleansing (17)
 command (18) **committed** (56) **concentration camps** (1204)
 conducted (16) considered (19) control (55) create (122) **death camps** (211)
 decided (74) deemed (16) deliberate (49) **destroy or destruction** (124)
 didn't like (163) didn't want (16) **died** (235) **discriminated** (339) **disliked** (40)
 eliminate (57) **eradicate** (59) experimented (18) extermination camps (13)
extermination (157) felt (18) fighting (14) **forced** (96) **gas chambers** (253)
gas (123) **gassed** (375) gathered up (16) gathered (29) **genocide** (452)
get rid of (106) ghettos (84) **hated** (99) held (26) hurt (12) **imprisoned** (40)
 in charge (51) invaded (28) isolated (12) **kept** (117) **killed** (3018) labour camps (29)
 labour (58) **led** (171) locked (29) mass extermination (40) **mass genocide** (110)
mass killing (284) **mass murder** (211) mass slaughter (11) **massacre** (43)
 methods (28) mistreated (10) **murdered** (229) **ordered** (104) organised (22) performed (14)
 persecution (86) **planned** (63) poison (14) **power** (104) prison camps (11) **punished** (41)
 putting (62) remove (31) **rid** (52) room (33) rounded (37) **ruled** (61) segregated (13) **sending** (56)
sent (376) separated (40) shooting (24) shot (41) shower (69) **slaughter** (57) slavery (12)
 starved (65) suffer (26) survived (16) **systematic** (46) **taken** (170) **targeted** (35) told (21)
took (310) **tortured** (225) train (21) trapped (17) **treated badly** (55) **tried** (247)
wanted (280) **wipe out** (182) work camps (28) **work** (303)

What do young people actually know and understand about Auschwitz and the wider camp system?

In general terms and as may readily be apparent within the small number of examples already provided, students' free-text descriptions of the Holocaust indicated that while the *idea* of a concentration camp was familiar to most students and awarded central significance by many, this was perhaps not always underpinned by very comprehensive understanding.

In 120 student responses, there was some recognition that different types of camps existed, but, in the majority of the descriptions provided, no such distinction was apparent. Instead, most students appeared to operate with a more monolithic conception of ‘the camps’ – or, in a number of cases, ‘the camp’ singular – as prison-like places where victims were ‘brutally’ ‘beaten,’ ‘burned,’ ‘starved,’ ‘tortured’ or ‘punished.’ It should be additionally mentioned that, while the majority of students who provided descriptions of the Holocaust appeared to understand camps as places of death, for some, the whole camp system was presented as though the enslavement and forced labour of victims was its primary – in some cases exclusive – function. For example:

When the Nazis (in WW2) captured slaves (Jews mainly) and made them produce weapons until they died of either lack of nutrition or exhaustion (Year 9 student).

I think Holocaust is a place that the Germans took their slaves in the world war. I believe it was just Jewish people they took there (Year 9 student).

The Holocaust was when Hitler kept the Jews in slavery (Year 9 student).

In many of these accounts, the actual killing of Jews or other victims was not even mentioned while in others, students only appeared to recognise the deaths of those who were ‘too old or too weak’ (Year 9 student) to work:

A Holocaust was a place where all the Jews had to go when they was either old, too young or had a disability. Hitler was the one that said the Jews had to go into the Holocaust. Only the healthy Jews was allowed to stay alive (Year 10 student).

Students' descriptions also commonly revealed confusion over the identities and various fates of the different victim groups targeted by the Nazis. While Jews were the primary victim group most readily identified within most students' understandings of both the camp system and the wider Holocaust, a large number appeared to collapse the experiences of Jews with those of various others such as 'Blacks, gays and disabled' as in one of the examples already presented above. While student confusion over the differential fates and specific targeting of different communities is discussed in much further detail in Foster *et al.*, it is worth noting here that this finding talks directly to Cole's warning that, 'the blurring of distinct camps' necessary for the creation of a 'mythic' 'single, imaginary "Auschwitz"' 'results in the homogenisation of the "Auschwitz prisoner" [and] tends to downplay the particularity of those imprisoned and murdered in the individual camps.'^{xxxiv}

The primacy of Auschwitz in students' thinking, as well of some of the reasons and consequences for this, was further reinforced within focus group interviews. Here again, Auschwitz was considered the 'main one' or, as John (a Year 9 student) explained, 'the main one you get taught.' Matt (another Year 9 student) offered an alternative rationale for camp's dominance in students' thinking: 'The main one that everyone knows of is Auschwitz because that was where the gas chambers were.'

That Matt locates the gas chambers exclusively within Auschwitz was indicative of the wider suggestion that many students knew very little, if anything, about the existence and function of other camps and crucially, the other extermination camps of Chelmno, Treblinka, Belzec, Sobibor or Majdanek. This was borne out in both interviews and survey responses. Although a couple of younger students hinted at the existence of 'other camps,' no students below Years 12 and 13 were able to name a camp other than Auschwitz in interview.

And although both the survey and interview data suggested that most students ‘know about’ Auschwitz, when we examined interview data more closely, the picture became more complicated. The quotes below provide examples of a number of problems in students’ understanding about Auschwitz.

Interviewer: When you think about the Holocaust where are you thinking of? Where did this happen?

Megan: Auschwitz.

Interviewer: And Auschwitz is what?

Megan: It's a concentration camp or a death camp. Mainly Germany.

(Extract from interview with year 9 students)

Auschwitz was actually hidden from everybody in the more outskirts, not the outskirts, but in Germany, but in a small area of Germany. (Chloe, Year 9)

The first potentially concerning misunderstanding illustrated here was the misapprehension among some students that Auschwitz was located within Germany instead of in pre-war Polish territory annexed to the Reich. This reflects a wider impoverished understanding of the geography, scope and scale of the Holocaust shared by many students and articulated in various ways throughout the 2016 study and the German-centrism characteristic of many of their accounts.^{xxxv} The second is the common confusion – or possible conflation – of Auschwitz as ‘a concentration camp *or* a death camp’ although it is not possible to tell whether this particular student believes both terms refer to the same thing or is recognising her own confusion in relation to the multifarious functions of Auschwitz throughout its history.

Finally, there is the problematic, erroneous and yet, among students very widespread, notion that Auschwitz – and by extension much of the action of the Holocaust – operated in secret and was well hidden. Again, this was a misconception very commonly articulated during interview among students who reasoned that ‘ordinary Germans’ – let alone ‘ordinary’ Poles, Belarussians or Ukrainians, for example, who were entirely absent from such accounts – were unaware of the extreme horrors of the Holocaust because the mass killings were carried out in remote locations and purposely hidden from view. Such misconceptions have considerable implication for students’ understanding of issues of agency and responsibility.

Further insights into understandings of Auschwitz came out of another exchange with Year 9 students about the very nature of a concentration camp:

Tim: Didn’t they make them all work there really hard and it was mainly like a prison for them; make them work and ...

Catherine: Hardly any food.

Tim: Just ... nothing.

Interviewer: So tough conditions ... but earlier we said they got gassed and killed.

Tim: Yeah. It is sort of ...

Interviewer: So is it both?

Catherine: Didn’t they use them and use the ladies for prostitution, and then when they got bad or old or weak, then they killed them. When they were useless.

Harry: The men were used for, like, builders and ...like really hardly ... like other people didn’t need ...

Catherine: I think the women and the children got killed first.

Interviewer: So some people got killed almost straight away?

Catherine: The weaker ones. But if they were strong and capable
...And the old ones, yes.

Tim: Yeah. If they were strong and capable then they would
be used to provide a purpose.

Interviewer: Is there a difference between a concentration camp and
a death camp?

Catherine: I think they're the same.

(Extract from interview with year 9 students).

This interview extract illustrates familiarity with some aspects of the Nazi treatment of Jews and the conditions in the camps, but students' difficulty to differentiate between camps established for different purposes, is again clearly shown throughout this quote and especially in the last statement.

Conclusion and implications

Auschwitz has ... become the standard shorthand of the Holocaust
because, when treated in a certain mythical and reductive way, it seems
to separate the mass murder of Jews from human choices and actions.^{xxxvi}

This paper opened with reference to concerns regularly articulated by academic historians and other scholars that the over-reliance or over-emphasis on Auschwitz as *the* singular symbol of the Holocaust could lead to significant distortions in our understanding of and engagement with this history. It is important to emphasise that such warnings were not borne simply out of historical pedantry. Rather they reflect concern regarding the meanings derived by, or in another vernacular the 'lessons' potentially learned from – or at least engaged with – contemporary audiences'

encounters with this history. If, for example a young person believes that the majority of the mass killings committed during the Holocaust were conducted in a hidden manner, largely unbeknownst to ‘ordinary’ civilians or with a distance created between the perpetrator as bureaucrat, just playing their part in a systematic and depersonalised ‘industrial’ genocide, this has rather different implication for questions related to complicity and responsibility than the recognition that vast numbers of victims were shot at close quarters with the full cognisance – and in many cases, practical collaboration – of various local communities. Likewise, if the horrors of the Holocaust are kept largely contained within one, singular, ‘mythic’ and in many respects abstracted location, they are much easier to distance from our sense of selves – our sense of humanity and of modern European society.^{xxxvii}

In this respect then, it should be of some concern, not only to academic historians but also to all those truly committed to robust educational encounters with the Holocaust that the data presented within this paper and drawn from extensive empirical research in England’s secondary classrooms clearly evidences many of the exact same distortions, misconceptions and omissions that the authors whose work opened the paper feared.

For in answer to the questions that opened this paper, the UCL Centre for Holocaust Education’s research with English secondary schools students suggests: 1) that both Auschwitz and the wider camp system continue to exert considerable influence over school students’ understandings of the Holocaust, emphasising the experiences of some victims and actions undertaken by some perpetrators while almost entirely displacing those of many more; and 2) that in spite of this widespread familiarity, very few students were able to display significant or detailed understanding of the complex history of Auschwitz itself nor its relationship to the wider camp system. Instead most relied upon and reproduced a somewhat abstract and in many cases rather confused conception of Auschwitz as a singular, generic and multi-functioning ‘concentration-

death-camp' with the particularity of the various subcamps and the specificity of various groups imprisoned and those murdered there significantly blurred.

There is a danger here of course that this paper be read simply as an indictment of individual students' knowledge and that is certainly not the authors' intent. Without knowing what and how these young people were taught about the Holocaust, it is both impossible and inappropriate to make too many value judgements about the detail – or absence of detail – of what they were able to recall through a series of survey questions or in interview. The data discussed here is, however, presented in order to offer empirical corroboration of the enduring dominance of the 'mythic,' 'reductive,' Auschwitz as 'shorthand of the Holocaust' that Snyder cautions against within young people's minds. And while it is not the intention of the paper to make critical judgements about the students who took part in the UCL study, we do believe these findings raise important questions for educators, curriculum designers, educational policy makers and all those who share a concern to bring the best available understandings from the academic disciplines into the classroom. For popular *misconceptions* of Auschwitz, and of the Holocaust, do not appear to be significantly challenged – indeed they may even be further strengthened – through formal encounters with this history at school. If this is true, then as Snyder, Stone, Cole, Kushner and others posit, the opportunities for learning *from* this history through confronting the real human actions taken and terrible choices made, are significantly compromised.

Notes:

ⁱ Stone, "Beyond the Auschwitz Syndrome," 456.

ⁱⁱ Cole, *Images of the Holocaust*; Snyder, *Bloodlands*.

ⁱⁱⁱ Foster *et al.*, *What do students know?*; Pettigrew *et al.*, *Teaching about the Holocaust*.

^{iv} Bloxham and Kushner, *The Holocaust: Critical Historical Approaches*; Cole, *Images of the Holocaust*. See also Young, *The Texture of Memory*; Wollaston, *Sharing Sacred Space?*; Stier, *Holocaust Icons*.

^v Stier, *Holocaust Icons*.

^{vi} Kushner *et al.*, "Approaching Belsen: An Introduction," 7.

^{vii} Cole, *Images*, 105.

^{viii} Hayes, "Auschwitz: Capital of the Holocaust," 331.

^{ix} Nesfield, "Keeping Holocaust Education Relevant," 47.

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- ^x See, for example, Webber, Jonathan. "Why Here?" *The Guardian*, January 13, 2005.
- ^{xi} Kushner, "The Memory of Belsen," 188.
- ^{xii} Cole, *Images*, 99.
- ^{xiii} Rees, *Auschwitz*. See also *The Independent*, 9 January 2005: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/media/the-camp-5344602.html>. Extermination facilities were also built and, for a short time, used at a fifth site, Majdanek although, like Auschwitz, this was initially constructed as a concentration camp facility.
- ^{xiv} Snyder, *Bloodlands*.
- ^{xv} Capland and Wachsmann, *Concentration Camps in Nazi Germany*.
- ^{xvi} Berenbaum, *The World Must Know*, 123.
- ^{xvii} Gilead et al, "Excavating Nazi Extermination Centres." See also Capland and Wachsmann, *Concentration Camps*.
- ^{xviii} Snyder, *Black Earth*, 209, (emphasis added).
- ^{xix} *Ibid.*
- ^{xx} Desbois, *Holocaust by Bullets*.
- ^{xxi} Stone, "Beyond the Auschwitz Syndrome," 457.
- ^{xxii} *Ibid.*, emphasis added.
- ^{xxiii} Nesfield, "Keeping Holocaust Education Relevant," 44.
- ^{xxiv} Pearce, *Holocaust Consciousness*.
- ^{xxv} Lawson, "Ideology in a Museum of Memory."
- ^{xxvi} Pettigrew et al., *Teaching About the Holocaust*.
- ^{xxvii} Foster and Karayianni, "Portrayals of the Holocaust."
- ^{xxviii} See, for example, the works by Forges (1999), Fuchs (2003), Shechter and Salomon (2005), Pampel (2007), Kverndokk (2011), Cowan and Maitles (2011) and Cohen (2013) all cited in Eckmann et al., *Dialogue Beyond Borders*.
- ^{xxix} Foster et al., *What do students know?*
- ^{xxx} For a much fuller account of these and other findings see Foster et al., *What do students know?*, 37-69.
- ^{xxxi} Kucia, *Holocaust Sites, Relics, Representations, and Memory*.
- ^{xxxii} Snyder, *Bloodlands*, 282.
- ^{xxxiii} Snyder, *Black Earth*, 207.
- ^{xxxiv} Cole, *Images*, 107.
- ^{xxxv} Foster et al. *What do students know?*
- ^{xxxvi} Snyder, *Black Earth*, 208.
- ^{xxxvii} See also Dwork and Van Pelt, *Auschwitz*.

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