



# The valuable contribution Citizenship education can make to learning about the Holocaust

**Rebecca Hale and Corey Soper of the Centre for Holocaust Education present findings from a national study exploring teaching and learning about the Holocaust and offer guidance to help Citizenship teachers deliver meaningful, effective lessons.**

While the Holocaust remains an important part of the History national curriculum, learning about the Holocaust within Citizenship education can enrich students' understanding and support them to make more meaningful connections with contemporary issues.

"I want young people to see that [the Holocaust] is highly relevant to society today and to us as individuals today and I want them to see that relevance and then for this to galvanise them into action... I want them to be so angry that this happens in our world that they're beating a path to our doors and saying, 'What can I do to stop it?' (Citizenship teacher, interview response, Hale et al., 2023)

The sentiment expressed in this quotation is one commonly shared by many teachers engaged in Holocaust education. It speaks not only of a hope that young people will derive meaning from the Holocaust and apply it to contemporary issues, but that this will lead students to become active citizens who challenge injustice. Undoubtedly, these are laudable aims, but they are not straightforward. In this article, we draw on findings from a national survey to consider the critical role Citizenship teachers can play in supporting students to reflect on the significance of the Holocaust and highlight some key considerations when teaching this subject.

## Continuity and change – a national study

In 2023, the UCL Centre for Holocaust Education published a national study with teachers, Continuity and change: Ten years of teaching about the Holocaust in England's secondary schools (Hale et al., 2023). The report was based on data collected in 2019–20 and explored the landscape of Holocaust education, comparing the findings with a similar study conducted a decade earlier by Pettigrew et al. (2009).

Hale et al. examined multiple areas of teachers' practice through a survey completed by 964 teachers across England and interviews with 134 teachers from 45 schools. While almost two-thirds of survey respondents (65.4%) reported they principally taught about the Holocaust within History, a small subsample of teachers (5.1%) reported teaching about the Holocaust in Citizenship, PSHE or through related provision, including SMSC and tutor/form time.

In the analysis, researchers grouped these teachers together as the 'Citizenship/PSHE group'. But it must be acknowledged and emphasised that these curriculum areas are not synonymous and ideally would have been analysed separately. However, examination

of survey responses revealed that in teachers' thinking there was considerable overlap in how Holocaust education was approached within Citizenship education, PSHE and SMSC. It was especially difficult to separate these different curriculum framings where they were delivered simultaneously through enrichment days, tutor/form time, and/or assemblies.

Evidence suggests that the situation that emerged in the survey is not uncommon in schools, despite educators and researchers identifying problems with merging PSHE, Citizenship, and SMSC (Jerome et al., 2022). It should also be noted that in the survey, within the Citizenship/PSHE group, only 13.5% of teachers had specialised in Citizenship during their initial teacher training. Instead, teachers had trained in a range of other subject areas, including 24.3% who trained in Religious Education. Thus, while this article includes findings from a subsample of teachers classified as 'Citizenship/PSHE', it is done with acknowledgement of the complexities and challenges associated with how these subjects are delivered in schools, including that many of the teachers were not Citizenship specialists.

## The importance of historical knowledge

One of the most important principles for teaching about the Holocaust within any discipline is to ensure it is always based on sound historical knowledge. Clearly it is unreasonable to expect Citizenship teachers to have encyclopaedic knowledge of the historical events, but secure subject knowledge is essential if they are to achieve their aims and objectives.

However, evidence from Hale et al. (2023) showed that many teachers had gaps in their own knowledge, which may lead to misconceptions and misunderstandings. The table on page 47 lists questions where knowledge levels were lowest in the UCL survey and the percentage of teachers who answered each question correctly.

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Question	Correct answer	Percentage who answered correctly	
		All teachers	Citizenship/ PSHE group
In percentage terms, the Jewish population in Germany in 1933 was?	Fewer than 1%	45.0%	20.0%
If a member of the German occupying forces refused an instruction to kill Jewish people, the most likely outcome for that individual would be?	Excused from the killing and given other duties	42.4%	23.5%
The systematic mass murder of Jewish people began in...?	1941 with the invasion of the Soviet Union	42.0%	37.1%
What was the response of the British Government when they learned about the mass murder of Jews?	Said they would punish the killers when the war was over	40.3%	31.4%

As demonstrated in Hale et al. (2023), knowledge gaps and misconceptions can have implications for broader meanings derived from the Holocaust. For example, lots of teachers did not realise the Jewish population in 1930s Germany was very small and either greatly overestimated the size of the Jewish population or were unsure of the answer. Knowing that there were just 505,000 Jewish individuals within a German population of 67 million enables teachers and students to recognise how the Jews were a vulnerable minority group. The Jews were not – as the scurrilous Nazi propaganda contrived – a powerful, dominant group in Germany intent on destroying the country from within.

Understanding both the minority status of the Jews and the defamatory lies being spread about them also potentially paves the way for more meaningful discussions in relation to modern-day persecution of Jewish people. This includes identifying and challenging conspiracy theories about the Jews that proliferate online, as well as understanding that the Jewish community continues to be subjected to abhorrent abuse and threats. In the UK today, research by the Community Security Trust indicates that the number of antisemitic incidents has dramatically increased since 2013, reaching a peak of 4,103 recorded incidents in 2023 (CST, 2024).

## Complex questions and challenging discussions

The Holocaust forces teachers and students to confront the very worst of humanity, raising complex questions about how it could have happened. Thus, teachers need to be prepared for these challenging discussions and ensure they are conducted in an informed and age-appropriate manner. It is also important to prepare students, forewarning them that this subject is potentially emotionally challenging, and setting clear expectations for how students will engage and discuss during these lessons. This is especially critical due to the highly politicised nature of discourse about this past, and the presence of Holocaust denial and distortion. For some students, this will be an important opportunity to see a model of how difficult and politicised conversations can occur, and how they can discuss and potentially disagree respectfully. It can also model how opinion and argument need to be grounded in deep and accurate knowledge in order to be valid.

One area that raises uncomfortable questions for students is perpetration and responsibility. The findings in the table above indicate that not all teachers were aware that members of the occupying forces who refused an order to kill Jewish people were excused from the killing and given another duty. Instead, as shown in Figure 1 (below), many teachers thought that the military and police would be shot for refusing to obey an order. Evidence has also demonstrated that this is a prevalent misconception among students (Foster et al., 2016).

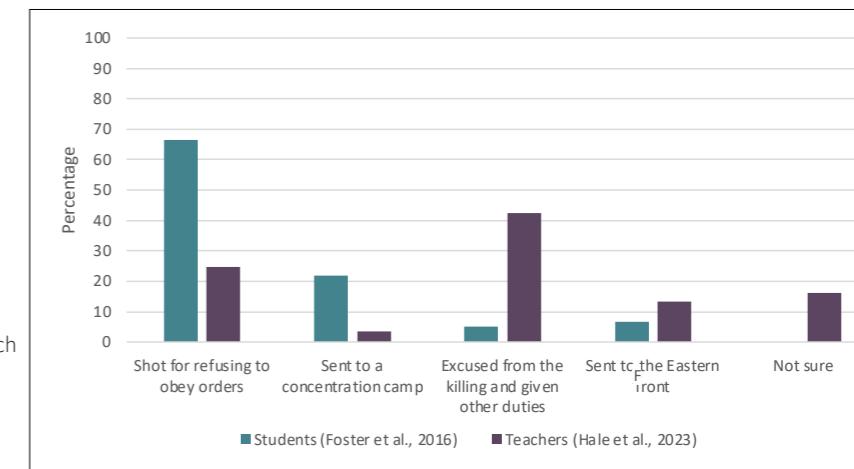


Figure 1: The percentage of students and teachers selecting each answer when asked what would happen to members of the occupying forces who refused an order to kill Jewish people (students did not have a 'not sure' option)

Other common misconceptions in relation to perpetration include the view that Hitler was solely to blame for the Holocaust, and the erroneous belief that ordinary German people were ignorant of the treatment of the Jews (Foster et al., 2016). These sorts of misconceptions about responsibility and agency have profound repercussions. They prevent students confronting difficult and uncomfortable questions about why the perpetrators and broader society acted as they did, including the collaboration and complicity of German and non-German citizens across Europe. Without this understanding, students will struggle to recognise how complicity and apathy can fester in society even when confronted with human rights violations (CfHE, 2019).

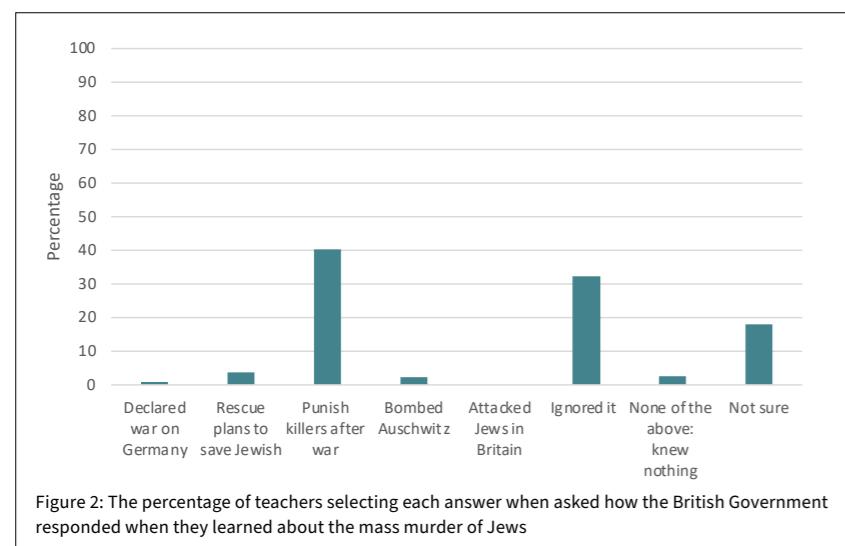
## Personal stories

While looking at questions of agency and responsibility is important, Pettigrew et al. (2009) cautioned against focusing on what was done to the victims (the perpetrator narrative), with relatively little attention given to how the Jews responded. One way to address this is through the inclusion of personal stories from the period.

Exploring the experiences and actions of real individuals humanises the victims and avoids them appearing as an abstract statistic. The use of personal stories also facilitates opportunities for young people to learn about Jewish life, which is essential to their understanding of the significance of the Holocaust, its consequences, and rehumanising the victims. The UCL study showed that teachers are increasingly likely to include this content. The CPD programme created by UCL and freely accessible to teachers across England (see details on page 49) draws on personal stories, including the story of Holocaust survivor Leon Greeman, and is a powerful way for young people to connect with this history.

## Evaluating established narratives

When teaching about the Holocaust, it is helpful to be cognisant of the cultural and political representations of the Holocaust that proliferate within contemporary society. One salient example is Britain's connection to this history. As shown, in the table above and further illustrated in Figure 2 (below), there was confusion about how the British Government responded when they learned about the mass murder of Jews. Figure 2 presents data across the whole sample and shows that just 40.3% of all teachers accurately identified that the British Government said they would punish the killers when the war was over (31.4% of teachers in the Citizenship/PSHE group). A third of all teachers (32.2%) thought that the Government ignored the situation.



The spread of answers is arguably unsurprising given the different narratives about Britain's relationship to the Holocaust that circulate today. UCL's research showed that most students and teachers did not realise that the Government's only official response to the mass murder of Jews was in December 1942, with a promise to bring those responsible to justice. Commitment to this approach was reinforced at the Bermuda Conference in April 1943, when delegates

from Britain and the United States decided that a military victory was the best way to help the Jews (Musch & Heyen, 2023). Thus, despite knowing about the systematic mass murder of European Jews, no plans were made to rescue them. Although the public was sympathetic to the plight of Jewish people, few took part in campaigns to save them.

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In some schools, Holocaust education has been used to promote fundamental British values. However, this approach needs to be adopted carefully and must be grounded in sound historical knowledge. This should include understanding what the Kindertransport was. While this initiative saved the lives of 10,000 Jewish children, it was organised by refugee and aid committees, not the British Government. It separated children from their parents and was typically dependent on children having a guarantor who would cover the re-emigration costs (£50 at the time, the equivalent of £2000 today). Moreover, the transports had ceased by the end of 1939, and thus had ended before the Nazi policy to kill all European Jews and the creation of death camps such as Chelmno and Treblinka (The National Archives, 2023).

Where schools are linking the Holocaust to British values, drawing on individual stories can support meaningful reflections from students. For example, the case of Dr Michael Siegel can be powerful for

enabling students to understand the importance of democratic citizenship. Siegel was a Jewish lawyer working in Munich who went to the police station on 10 March 1933 to file a complaint. His client, a Jewish businessman, had been arrested without legal process and sent to Dachau concentration camp, after the SA (an organisation associated with the Nazi party) had attacked his business. When Siegel arrived, rather than the typical police officers, he encountered Nazi Storm Troopers who had been deputised into the police force. Despite the clear illegality of the SA's actions, it was Siegel who suffered. The SA members violently beat Siegel and paraded him through the streets, bearing a sign reading "I am a Jew, and I will never again complain to the police".

This case can enable students to consider a concrete example of how the rule of law was subverted and undermined in Nazi Germany and

demonstrates how 'normal' elements of democratic citizenship were stripped from Jewish people across the Nazi period. This can open up rich conversations with students, supporting them to explore these principles and move forwards in their understanding of the Citizenship curriculum.

## Conclusion

Although most students will learn about the Holocaust within History, their understanding can be enriched when studying it through a different disciplinary lens, including the significant perspective that Citizenship education can offer. A study of the Holocaust within Citizenship education should be underpinned by sound historical knowledge for both teachers and students. Equipped with this knowledge, more meaningful learning can take place – especially pertinent when exploring contemporary issues such as power, democracy, government, the justice system, human rights, and the responsibilities of citizens. ☀

**"It can be daunting to teach about the Holocaust, but the UCL Centre for Holocaust Education provides lots of support"**

## UCL Centre for Holocaust Education resources

It can be daunting to teach about the Holocaust, but the UCL Centre for Holocaust Education provides lots of support, including:

- An initial teacher education programme tailored to different subjects, including Citizenship. Lecturers from the UCL Centre for Holocaust Education run these courses for free through ITE providers and tutors, for example: [www.ucl.ac.uk/prospective-students/graduate/teacher-training-programmes/citizenship-pgce#course-overview](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/prospective-students/graduate/teacher-training-programmes/citizenship-pgce#course-overview)
- A continuing professional development programme, which is free for secondary school teachers in England. Online and in-person courses are offered, with new sessions being added regularly: <https://holocausteducation.org.uk/teachers-resources/>
- Research briefings designed exclusively for teachers. Each briefing outlines key research findings and recommendations for teaching practice: <https://holocausteducation.org.uk/research-page/research-inform-teaching>
- A research-informed school textbook, *Understanding the Holocaust: How and why did it happen?*, supported by comprehensive teacher guidance materials. A free class set of textbooks is available to state-maintained schools in England on completion of a short CPD course: <https://holocausteducation.org.uk/ks3-textbook/>
- A free downloadable book, *Holocaust Education: Contemporary challenges and controversies*, provides insights into classroom teaching and learning, including the dilemmas of using atrocity images in the classroom: [www.uclpress.co.uk/products/131536](http://www.uclpress.co.uk/products/131536)

For more information about any of these, please contact the UCL Centre for Holocaust Education: [holocaust@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:holocaust@ucl.ac.uk).

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