To what extent does the acquisition of historical knowledge really matter when studying the Holocaust?

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Introduction

The UCL student study (Foster et al. 2016) provided intriguing insights into what young people know and understand about the Holocaust and the extent to which they are able to make meaning from it. In broad overview, although the vast majority of students thought learning about the Holocaust was important and interesting, the research also starkly demonstrated that students often lacked core historical knowledge and typically harboured an array of troubling misconceptions. This chapter further explores the implications for these findings. In particular, it examines conflicting views about the relative importance of historical knowledge in understanding the Holocaust.

On the one hand, for example, it can be argued that it is not the specific historical knowledge of the Holocaust that is of essential educational importance, but rather the broader ‘lessons’ it provides for contemporary society. From this perspective it is assumed that a cursory overview of the Holocaust is sufficient for students to appreciate that this was a deeply troubling episode in modern history and one which sharply illustrates where prejudice and discrimination might lead if left unchallenged. Developing this argument further it is, therefore, claimed that the key educational focus should be on considering the implications of the Holocaust for the present, not on a detailed exploration of the past.
On the other hand, an alternative position exists which argues that in order to derive true meaning from the Holocaust, it is essential that students have an informed understanding of its specific and contingent historical context. This perspective claims that unless the historical Holocaust is more fully understood, there is a danger that students might acquire simplistic moral and universal lessons which, though well intentioned, typically will be ill-informed and fuel the prevalence of troubling myths and misconceptions.

Although it is recognised that the complexity of any educational enterprise can never be distilled into a crude binary choice of two possible alternatives, to provide some clarity the primary focus of this chapter will be to argue strongly for the second position (i.e., on the importance of students’ acquiring and developing key historical knowledge of the Holocaust in order for them to develop deeper understandings). As will be explained later in this chapter, the principal reason for adopting this position is because the UCL study clearly demonstrated that limitations in students’ historical knowledge proved a barrier to deeper and more profound understandings of the Holocaust and its contemporary significance.

This chapter will, therefore, briefly position the arguments advanced above into the broader educational and political landscape. It will also explore the concept of ‘historical knowledge’ and discuss divergent views on these important educational issues. The chapter will then summarise the key findings of the UCL study, paying particular attention to common limitations in students’ historical knowledge. In advancing the core argument, specific examples from the 2016 study will be identified which illustrate how a lack of core knowledge appeared to hinder students’ deeper understanding of the Holocaust and its salience for the modern world. The chapter will then conclude by arguing for an approach to teaching which encourages the development of substantive and conceptual historical knowledge so that students may acquire a more sophisticated and intelligent understanding of the Holocaust.

It is important to establish that in this chapter primary attention is given to teaching and learning about the Holocaust in history classrooms. In so doing, however, it is fully recognised that the Holocaust is taught in other subject areas (e.g., citizenship, English, religious education) and on occasions in whole school and cross-curricular ways. It is also recognised that many history teachers often approach the Holocaust with an emphasis on trans-disciplinary and/or civic and moral goals (Kinloch 1998; Pearce 2017; Pettigrew et al. 2009; Pettigrew 2017; Russell 2006; Salmons 2003; Short 1994). Nevertheless, the focus on history is
warranted for three important reasons. First, the national teacher study published by the Institute of Education in 2009 demonstrated that history is by far the most likely curriculum subject in which the Holocaust is taught (Pettigrew et al. 2009). Second, it is the only subject area in which the study of the Holocaust is mandated in the current Key Stage 3 National Curriculum (DfE 2013). Third, there is a long-standing tradition in history education which recognises the important connection between the acquisition of substantive historical knowledge and distinctive disciplinary or conceptual understandings (Booth 1993; Counsell et al. 2016; Foster and Yeager 2001; Husbands et al. 2011; Lee 1999; Lee 2005; Seixas 2004; Shemilt 1987; VanSledright 2011; Wineburg 2001). This issue will be further developed later in this chapter.

Despite the focus on history education, the arguments advanced here are relevant to all curriculum areas in which the Holocaust is taught. For, if the Holocaust is to be taught in any meaningful way, it is essential that educators consider what historical and contextual knowledge and understanding is important for young people to acquire. Similarly, the issues raised in this chapter are not only relevant to educators in England but have salience for teachers in the extensive range of countries across the world in which the Holocaust is taught (Carrier et al. 2015).

**Knowledge, historical knowledge and the current political landscape**

In 1860 Herbert Spencer famously posed the essential education question: What knowledge is of most worth? (Spencer 1860). Underpinning Spencer’s important question is the notion that some kinds of knowledge are more important or significant than others. A major challenge for societies across the world, therefore, always has been (and always will be) to determine what young people should learn in their formal education system. With the emergence of free compulsory education in societies across the world in the past hundred years or so, this matter has taken on greater urgency and importance and has occupied the attention of curriculum theorists, politicians, government officials, business leaders, educators and parents. The question ‘what knowledge is of most worth?’ is, of course, fraught with complexity and typically open to debate and dispute. The answer to the question is also inexorably value-laden and shaped by the respondent’s ideological, philosophical and epistemological views. For this reason, what gets taught in schools often is contested and controversial.
Arguably, no subject has experienced more conflict and argument than school history (see, for example, Crawford 1995; Foster and Crawford 2006; Granatstein 1998; Nash et al. 1997; Symcox and Wilschut 2009; Taylor 2004). This is largely because in countries throughout the world, school history often is not really about understanding the past, but rather focused on serving particular agendas in the present (e.g., promoting a particular form of collective national identity). As a result, the official ‘stories’ that are selected to be taught to young people in history classrooms are often influenced by the ideological dispositions of those in power, and therefore they are often inherently controversial.

In England divisions over the purpose and content of school history have raged for many decades, and they were particularly vehement in the years surrounding the introduction of the National Curriculum for history in the early 1990s (Crawford 1995; Foster 1998; Phillips 1998; Slater 1989). During this period, in crude overview, two conflicting views of school history and its overarching purpose dominated. On the one hand stood those, usually from the political right, who considered the history classroom to be a place in which young people should absorb a selected version of the nation’s past. Simply, their aim was to use school history as a means to instil in students a sense of unity and patriotism and a veneration for the nation’s glorious accomplishments. On the other hand stood those of a more progressive political persuasion. From their perspective the historical past was open to exploration, enquiry and interpretation. It therefore demanded that students should not only encounter dominant narratives, but also critically evaluate historical evidence and appreciate how and why selected narratives or interpretations were constructed.

These contested views of school history are, of course, very much alive today. For example, in recent years, undoubtedly influenced by the work of E.D. Hirsch (1983; 1987; 2016), authoritative figures in the current government have championed the importance of ‘content rich’ learning and students’ acquisition of core factual knowledge (see, for example, Abrams 2012; Gibb 2017; Peal 2014). As a result, they have also been critical of enquiry-based learning and the inappropriate use of historical sources in history classrooms. Furthermore, it appears that these influential political figures strongly believe that knowledge acquisition is the essential purpose of history education. In so doing, they potentially risk obscuring the vital link between knowledge acquisition and deeper conceptual understanding.

This chapter takes a very different position regarding the importance of the acquisition of historical knowledge. Compelling reasons exist for why acquiring historical knowledge is fundamentally important, but
this process is significant only when it is directly linked to developing students’ deeper and more profound understandings. Knowledge alone, it will be argued, is not enough. Rather, it is the acquisition of knowledge that both enables and compels young people to derive deeper meaning and understanding that is the vital goal of history education.

To appreciate the importance of historical knowledge it is essential to understand the relationship between students’ substantive knowledge of the past and their conceptual, disciplinary or second-order understanding. Substantive knowledge refers to the concepts which organise and feature in any exploration of history (e.g., revolution, monarchy, dictatorship, democracy). Substantive knowledge might also include knowledge of key facts, dates, individuals and events. Second-order or disciplinary understanding of the past refers to key historical concepts such as causation, chronology, continuity and change, historical evidence and interpretation, significance and empathy. As a result of key research into students’ historical understanding (see, for example, Foster and Yeager 1999; Lee and Ashby 2000; Seixas 2004; Shemilt 1987; VanSledright 2004; Wineburg 2001) it is generally accepted that students who are able to employ both key substantive knowledge and disciplinary understandings are better equipped to fully appreciate and understand the past. Accordingly, understanding this vital relationship in Holocaust education is of central importance in this chapter.

Limitations in historical knowledge and understanding

The UCL study of English secondary school students’ knowledge and understanding of the Holocaust (Foster et al. 2016) explored a variety of issues and pursued numerous lines of enquiry. For example, it investigated students’ attitudes and dispositions towards studying the Holocaust and it explored the various ways that students encountered the Holocaust, both in school and beyond. However, the primary aim of the study was to provide a detailed portrait of students’ knowledge and understanding of the Holocaust. In particular, Part III of the report (pages 99–201) focused on an in-depth exploration of students’ responses to key overarching historical questions: Who were the victims? Who were the perpetrators and who was responsible? When and where did the Holocaust take place? These broad questions also encompassed other important subsidiary questions such as: What was the Holocaust? Why did it happen?
In designing and developing the study, UCL researchers were mindful that ‘any empirical examination or attempt to measure “knowledge” is an inherently complex and contested enterprise’ (8). Furthermore, the researchers recognised that students’ ‘historical knowledge is rarely fixed and inert’ but typically ‘socially constructed, context-dependent and complex’ (102). 

It was understood, therefore, that survey-based knowledge questions and focused interviews would ‘never be able to address all the complexities of uncovering every aspect of students’ knowledge and understanding of the Holocaust’. Nevertheless, a staggering array of student responses did provide an ‘unprecedented and rich’ body of evidence from which to draw important conclusions and identify key findings.

It is not possible to provide detailed commentary here on the full extent of UCL’s 2016 study as it relates to students’ historical knowledge and understanding. It is, however, potentially instructive to be reminded of some key headline findings:

• 68 per cent of students did not recognise the term ‘antisemitism’ and most appeared unaware of the racial dimensions of Nazi antisemitism.
• Although 90 per cent correctly identified Jews as victims, very few knew what differentiated them from other identified victim groups (e.g., gay men, disabled people, Roma and Sinti). Most students thought victims were targeted and treated in similar ways.
• 73.9 per cent overestimated the Jewish population in pre-war Germany by 15 to 30 times.
• A third massively underestimated the scale of the murder of Jewish people, with 10.3 per cent believing that no more than 100,000 Jews were killed.
• When asked ‘who was responsible for the Holocaust?’ 56.1 per cent of 11–14-year-olds replied simply ‘Hitler’ while 81.9 per cent made reference only to Hitler and/or the Nazis.
• Fewer than 10 per cent attributed any blame or responsibility to the German people and very few students appreciated broader complicity and collaboration across Europe.
• 50.7 per cent incorrectly believed that the largest number of Jews murdered during the Holocaust came from Germany and 54.9 per cent believed that mass murder occurred in Germany, not German-occupied Poland.
• Only 7.4 per cent appreciated that the German invasion of the Soviet Union was the event that primarily ‘triggered the organised
mass killing of Jews’, with 40.2 per cent erroneously believing that mass killing began immediately after Hitler’s appointment as Chancellor in 1933.

- Only 15 per cent associated Treblinka or Bergen-Belsen with the Holocaust and only 24.3 per cent recognised the term Einsatzgruppen.
- 34.4 per cent incorrectly reasoned that the Holocaust triggered Britain’s entry into war and 23.8 per cent incorrectly thought the British government did not know about the Holocaust until the end of the war in 1945.
- Fewer than half of all students (46.1 per cent) correctly knew the ‘end’ of the Holocaust (in terms of mass killing) came as a result of the Allied liberation of lands occupied by the German army.

Typically, student knowledge and understanding improved with age and it commonly proved more robust among students studying history aged 17–18. Nevertheless, as outlined above, substantial gaps in knowledge existed across all ages. For our purposes here the critical question is: to what extent does this lack of historical knowledge matter?

**Why does historical knowledge matter?**

In response to this question some might argue that although the possession of solid historical knowledge is useful, it is not an imperative. Indeed, if students have a broad understanding of the Holocaust (e.g., they know who the victims were, who was responsible and that it involved mass killing) it could be argued that this is a solid enough basis from which to draw important ‘lessons’.

Different perspectives on whether or not teachers should pay more attention to developing students’ historical knowledge, as opposed to a focus on broader moral or civic lessons, was a feature of the IOE’s teacher study (Pettigrew et al. 2009). In fact, this tension was particularly exposed in discussions over teachers’ aims. Representative of the views of many of the 2,108 teachers who participated in the study, one teacher remarked:

> I’ve got to be honest, I mean, the historical side of it is important, don’t get me wrong, but when I’m teaching it, the moral significance of it – the human significance of it – is far more prevalent for me personally. . . . And I’d be kind of worried if there were people
there who were just really interested in the chronology. And if I came out of my lesson thinking that pupils in the class just thought of it as just another topic, I would be a bit disappointed. In fact, I wouldn’t just be disappointed, I’d be really upset.

(Pettigrew et al. 2009, 79)

Teachers commonly argued, for example, that providing students with an elementary understanding of the history of the Holocaust allowed them to explore and understand more relevant contemporary issues such as what can happen when racism or prejudice is not challenged. In so doing, however, it appeared that classroom attention to the specific and contingent development of persecution and murder in Nazi Germany and beyond often remained disturbingly absent. In fact, what often appeared evident was classroom focus on what has been termed a ‘mythic’ Holocaust as opposed to an ‘historical’ one (Cole 1999; Bell 2003). Employing the term ‘mythic’ here does not mean that the Holocaust did not exist, but rather that its reality has been shaped and potentially distorted to suit contemporary agendas and broader universal aims.

The central argument advanced in this chapter is that it is vital that students acquire progressively rich and age-appropriate historical knowledge of the Holocaust in order for them to derive meaning and understanding from it. But achieving this objective has implications for pedagogy. Specifically, it challenges educators and Holocaust educational organisations to eschew mythic representations of the Holocaust and requires them to pay more attention to the historical Holocaust and its potential to develop deeper and more profound understandings. To argue for the value of historical knowledge is unequivocally not to suggest that knowledge needs to be acquired for knowledge’s sake. Rather, it originates from the belief that if students are equipped with carefully considered historical knowledge they are more likely to be able to understand and make meaning from the past.

This argument also relates to the value placed upon what Michael Young and Johan Muller have termed ‘powerful knowledge’ (2013; 2016) which recognises that educators have a responsibility to organise specialist learning experiences which typically cannot be attained outside of school. When teaching about the Holocaust, therefore, it is important for educators to consider what particular substantive content and conceptual knowledge it is important for students to acquire. Accordingly, in the two sections that follow specific attention is paid to the issue of complicity and responsibility which illustrates how the presence, or absence, of particular historical knowledge impacts meaningful understanding.
Students’ knowledge and understanding of responsibility and complicity

In articulating who they believed was responsible for the Holocaust, the vast majority of students adopted a Hitler-centric explanation. For example, 91.4 per cent of all students associated Hitler with the Holocaust, 79.4 per cent directly referenced Hitler when asked ‘who was responsible for the Holocaust?’ and, significantly, 56.1 per cent of 11–14-year-olds appeared to believe the Holocaust was solely attributable to Hitler. In a similar vein, when students were invited, in free-text responses, to ‘describe what the Holocaust was’ the overwhelming majority included Hitler in their descriptions:

It was when Adolf Hitler attempted to wipe out the Jews by committing Genocide. (Year 10 student)

When Hitler captured the Jews, put them in a concentration camp and gassed them. (Year 9 student)

The holocaust was a period in time where the German leader Adolf Hitler discriminated against everyone who was different and tried to kill them all. (Year 10 student)

As these examples and thousands of others suggest, many students across all age ranges tended to personalise and narrate their understanding of the Holocaust through a Hitler-centric lens. His influence was seen to be ubiquitous and omnipresent. As the UCL study explained, ‘For many younger students Hitler’s role in the Holocaust was all encompassing and emphatic’ (150). Indeed, many students appeared to believe that Hitler simply issued commands and others fulfilled his wishes. The report continues, ‘Typically these acts were seen as a top-down process, with Hitler as executive director and other individuals blindly following his will’ (150). Of particular note in the analysis both of student survey and interview responses, was the infrequent reference to other potentially ‘high profile’ perpetrators. For example, in contrast to the 91.4 per cent of students who associated Hitler with the Holocaust, only 44.4 per cent stated that the SS were somehow involved in it. Similarly, only 23.2 per cent and 24.3 per cent respectively associated Adolf Eichmann and the Einsatzgruppen with the genocide and during interview very, very few students referenced other prominent figures such as Himmler or Goebbels. In stark contrast, Hitler dominated students’ narratives and explanatory accounts.
Although students overwhelmingly identified Hitler as the agent most responsible for the Holocaust, some also ascribed responsibility to ‘the Nazis’. For example, 20.6 per cent held ‘Hitler and the Nazis’ jointly responsible and a smaller number, 10.6 per cent, identified the Nazis as culpable, with no reference to Hitler. In an effort to more fully appreciate how younger students (i.e., 11 to 14-year-olds) perceived and understood the role of the Nazis, the UCL study uncovered a striking finding. It became apparent that most younger students did not fully grasp that the Nazis were a broad-based political party that enjoyed considerable popular support and electoral success during the early 1930s. Rather, most students appeared to view the Nazis as ‘a relatively small and powerful group who ruthlessly carried out Hitler’s orders’ (152). Indeed, many students appeared to frame the Nazis as loyal acolytes or disciples of Hitler who did his bidding without question. Students, therefore, variously described the Nazis as ‘believers’, ‘people who he sent to do his work’, ‘a disciplined core group’, ‘Hitler’s personal hit squad’ (152). Notably, one student remarked, ‘I think they were like robots, because Hitler, like, controlled them. They had to do what Hitler said. They had to follow his commands really’.

Another important issue identified in the UCL study was the clear sense that very few students considered the German people responsible for the Holocaust. For example, only 3.9 per cent of 6,897 students who responded to the question ‘who was responsible?’ explicitly held ‘Germans/Germany/German people’ accountable. Furthermore, only 3.1 per cent viewed ‘Hitler and the Germans/Germany’ responsible and 0.9 per cent ascribed responsibility to the ‘Nazis and the Germans’. Follow-up interviews attempted to further understand how students saw the relationship between the Holocaust and the German people.

What was particularly evident was most students sharply differentiated between the actions of German citizenry and the Nazis. For, whereas overwhelming numbers held strong opinions about the terrible acts committed by the Nazis against the Jews and other victim groups, very few believed the German people played a significant role in the genocide. As the UCL report explains, ‘many students saw the German people as passive actors on the historical stage . . . it was [as] if the Holocaust happened around the German people, with events unfolding without their involvement or engagement’ (157). Pursuing students’ understanding further, the research suggested that three explanations dominated their view of the role adopted by many Germans during the Holocaust: they were brainwashed, they were scared, or they didn’t know.
The UCL study offers detailed commentary on these three explanatory factors (158–66). In overview the research revealed that students believed that as a result of, for example, Nazi propaganda, charismatic speeches, and an influential education system, Hitler was able to ‘control’, ‘manipulate’ or even ‘trick’ the German people into supporting his actions:

Hitler created these stereotypes about how Jews were bad and Gypsies were bad and people were bad and . . . it was drilled into their brains. (Year 9)

He persuaded people obviously, like in schools. He starts teaching people how Jews are inferior to them. Brainwashing them. (Year 9)

It was clear, therefore, that many students appeared to believe that ostensibly innocent German people were ‘brainwashed’ by Hitler and the Nazis in the 1930s and 1940s and in this sense, they had no agency, no choice and, revealingly, no responsibility.

The second explanation for the apparent inaction of many Germans stemmed from students’ common belief that they lived in a suffocating climate of fear and intimidation:

I think if they were forced into it, it showed like that they were really, really scared of Hitler and of what he could do to them if they didn’t do what he wanted. (Year 8)

It speaks for how powerful Hitler must have been as a person, they must have been in absolute fear of him, they mustn’t have wanted to put a foot wrong, and it shows that Hitler as a person had reached that level in Germany where if you went against him there was no going back for you. (Year 13)

If the people didn’t follow his orders they would be treated the same way as the Jews, forced into labour camps or shot dead. (Year 12)

Accordingly, students typically reasoned that many Germans supported or went along with the actions of the Nazi state because of the oppressive and intimidating context in which they lived. Once again, most students absolved the German people of blame or responsibility because they were perceived to have little agency or choice.

The third explanation for why students commonly believed many Germans were not culpable stems from their understanding...
that they ‘did not know’ about the brutal treatment and mass killing of Jews:

I’m not sure that they knew the extent of what was going on as well. I think they sort of knew that Hitler was treating Jewish people badly . . . but I don’t think that they knew that he was going to kill them. That wasn’t really known until like after the war. (Year 10)

. . . they didn’t really know what was going on. They just knew that the Jews may have been a problem, but they didn’t know about the concentration camps and the torture. (Year 10)

Auschwitz was actually hidden from everybody in the more outskirts . . . so nobody actually knew about it. So, I guess half the population didn’t know. (Year 9)

In sum, therefore, many students reasoned that due to a number of factors (including deceptive propaganda and the belief that mass killing was carried out in remote locations), the German people were unaware of Nazi crimes against the Jews. Accordingly, students commonly reasoned if the German people didn’t know about the Holocaust, how could they be held responsible?

Final note should also be made of how students perceived the role of other agents and collaborators across Europe. Put simply, it was very apparent that the vast majority of students had little to no understanding of the extent to which the genocide of Jews engulfed the entire continent. For the most part, Key Stage 3 students had no sense of the role played by other collaborating regimes (e.g., the Vichy government) and most were unfamiliar with the brutal development of the ‘Holocaust by bullets’ in Eastern Europe which is estimated to have taken around 2 million lives (Bloxham 2009; Cesarani 2016; Desbois 2008). Typically, students framed their understanding of the Holocaust in a very German-centric way.

This was evidenced in how 50.7 per cent of students incorrectly believed that the largest number of Jews murdered during the Holocaust came from Germany, while 54.9 per cent believed that mass murder occurred in Germany, not German-occupied Poland. Many students did, however, have a limited conception of Nazi camps and the mass killing of Jews and other victim groups during the Second World War. On occasion this also led to an understanding that the Holocaust was carried out beyond Germany. But often this knowledge was sketchy and lacked meaningful detail. Certainly, it appeared the vast majority of students were profoundly unaware of the geographical scope and scale of
the Holocaust and typically did not appreciate that its execution required the complicity and collaboration of tens of thousands of individuals in localities, regions and nations all across Europe.

**How limitations in knowledge prevented deeper understanding of complicity and responsibility**

The significant gaps in student knowledge undoubtedly hampered deeper understanding and fuelled serious misconceptions about complicity and responsibility. This deficiency poses salient educational issues and challenges, of which three will be mentioned here.

The first area of concern is students’ common belief that Hitler was either solely responsible for the Holocaust and/or he orchestrated its development and execution with top-down efficiency and authority. Of course, Hitler is a central figure in the genocide of the Jews, but students’ understanding of his role fails to appreciate the limitations of his power and the complex way that Nazi policy was enacted across Europe. It also exposes the repeated and ongoing issue of how students’ knowledge and understanding of the Holocaust is worryingly incompatible with historical scholarship (Cesarani 2016; Lawson 2017). For most contemporary scholars of the Holocaust have moved beyond crude ‘intentionalist’ and ‘functionalist’ debates† over the significance of Hitler’s leadership and responsibility and typically acknowledge that Hitler acted within a complex and dynamic political context which placed limitations on what one man could accomplish. As Ian Kershaw has written, most historians now eschew explicit focus of the omnipresent dictator in favour of ‘the notion of polycratic rule – a multi-dimensional power structure, in which Hitler’s authority was only one element (if a very important one)’ (Kershaw 2000, 74).

Furthermore, the UCL research (Foster et al. 2016) revealed that almost no students had even a very basic understanding of the complex and often chaotic way that Nazi policy was implemented during the Holocaust. For most students, its implementation was a simple matter of top-down orders being followed by individuals almost in blind obedience to Hitler. This understanding, of course, is at odds with key historical scholarship which indicates such a simplistic interpretation is very problematic (Bankier 1992; Bloxham 2001; Bloxham 2009; Browning 1992; Cesarani, 2005; Kershaw, 2008; Marrus 1987). As Lawson (2017, 352) asserts, students’ understanding is ‘depressingly out of step with modern historiography … Indeed, for many historians it was the lack of
command and control, and central direction – in other words the chaotic nature of the state – that drove policy onwards.’

Of course, this is not to suggest that school students should have detailed knowledge of existing and emerging scholarship, but an urgent need exists for students to move beyond simplistic understandings of Hitler’s role as an omniscient puppeteer whose every wish was carried out with clinical efficiency. Indeed, if young people are to acquire a more sophisticated understanding of how extremist ideas take root and radicalise across societies, it is imperative that students move beyond naively attributing responsibility to a single individual and consider alternative interpretations and causal factors. In this respect in the process of acquiring substantive knowledge, it is also important that students develop a more sophisticated understanding of second-order concepts such as causation and significance. For if they are to appreciate how things happened in the past, it is vital they understand causality and, crucially, have adequate substantial knowledge to inform this understanding.

The second issue of concern is directly related to the first and focuses on how many students (particularly those who had not studied the Holocaust beyond age 14) typically did not appreciate who the Nazis were and how they enjoyed popular support from people across all sectors of German society. Indeed, the UCL study strikingly revealed that many students did not appreciate that first and foremost ‘Nazism’ was a political movement which, for example, received the support of more than 13 million Germans in July 1932. This is of course a significant misconception. For, if students fail to appreciate the broad-based nature of the Nazi Party and the circumstances in which they rose to power, it potentially inhibits their understanding of how right-wing political extremism can develop and flourish in any society. Furthermore, in the context of the Holocaust, limitations in students’ knowledge about the Nazi Party dramatically impairs their ability to understand the pivotal role played by Nazi Party members in the subsequent enactment of genocide. Once again deficiencies in both students’ substantive knowledge and conceptual understanding (e.g., of causal factors) seriously undermines their ability to understand this complex history.

A third problematic issue is the common failure of many students to appreciate that the Holocaust deeply impacted societies all across Europe. This failing is troubling for many reasons. Most significantly, it suggests that few students grasp the Jewish specificity of the Holocaust in which the perpetrators determined to murder all Jews (every last man, woman and child), everywhere that they could be reached (Bauer 2002). In pursuit of this goal the Nazis and their collaborators murdered,
for example, millions of Jews from Poland and the USSR, more than half a million in Hungary, in excess of 100,000 Jews in Germany, Czechoslovakia, Romania and Holland and tens of thousands in Belgium, Austria, Yugoslavia, Greece and France. In fact, few European nations escaped the brutality and destruction of the Holocaust. Typically, however, school students appeared not to know about its geographic scope and scale. As a consequence of this impoverished understanding, most students were unable to appreciate the devastating impact of the Holocaust in villages, towns, cities and nations across Europe. Furthermore, limitations in students’ knowledge stood in the way of a broader appreciation of the troubling extent of widespread complicity and collaboration in nations all across Europe. Indeed, historians such as Dan Stone (2010, 32) have suggested that local participation in ‘indigenous Holocausts’ revealed that the genocide of the Jews was much more than a German-led project and exposed deep-seated, centuries-old prejudices commonly in existence across the European continent.

Overall, therefore, what these three examples illustrate is that students’ lack of historical knowledge and conceptual understanding profoundly impaired their ability to appreciate some of the most troubling aspects of the Holocaust and, arguably, its profound significance and relevance for contemporary society. For example, most students did not grasp key causal factors. Few understood, for instance, that the persecution of the Jews did not begin with Hitler but was a feature of European history for centuries. As detailed above, in the UCL study 68 per cent of students did not recognise the term ‘antisemitism’ and only a tiny minority had even a rudimentary sense of its long history. As a result, therefore, most students failed to appreciate that in the particular and contingent context of the 1920s and 1930s, Hitler drew on and exploited deep-seated antisemitic prejudices already prevalent in German and European culture. Indeed, the common failure of students to appreciate how ‘ordinary people’ across Europe were complicit in the persecution and mass murder of Jews is, arguably, the most troubling findings from the research. For, if young people only see Hitler and a small coterie of his followers as responsible for the Holocaust, they will fail even to perceive – let alone respond to – one of the most troubling questions raised by this history: How was it that not very long ago and not very far away ‘ordinary people’ became complicit in the murder of their neighbours?

Unfortunately, it appeared that few students understood that the web of complicity extended across the continent and that vast numbers of Europeans willingly participated in genocide – either out of greed, peer pressure, conviction, or self-preservation. As a result, most did not have
adequate knowledge and understanding of the Holocaust to consider vital questions about human agency and responsibility such as: Why did this happen? Why in the context of the times did people act as they did? In what circumstances could this happen today? Furthermore, meaningful engagement with the historical Holocaust might compel students to ask themselves what they would have done and confront the uncomfortable and ‘frightening’ dilemma raised by Bauman (1989, 152) not ‘that this could be done to us, but the idea that we could do it’.

It was, however, clear that most students were not equipped with the historical knowledge and conceptual or second-order understanding to address such important issues. Of course, given the wealth of scholarship on the Holocaust it is unrealistic to expect students to possess encyclopaedic knowledge. It is also recognised that knowledge must be developed in age-appropriate ways. Nevertheless, at some level it is reasonable to expect that students should have relevant knowledge of the rise of the Nazi party, its membership and the development of its power structures. It is also important for students to appreciate both the extent and limitations of the power and influence of Hitler and his inner leadership circle. Additionally, students also should know something about the role played by many Germans, collaborating regimes, Axis allies and local populations. If students acquire some of this substantive knowledge alongside the development of deeper conceptual understanding (e.g., of cause and consequence, change and continuity, historical significance and human agency, and responsibility), it is highly likely that they will have a more informed and meaningful understanding of the Holocaust. Indeed, as the UCL study demonstrated, on the rare occasions when students appeared to have more robust historical knowledge and conceptual understanding, it was very evident that their broader appreciation of the Holocaust and its contemporary significance was more profound and sophisticated. This appreciation was particularly evident, for example, among students who had studied history at A Level (i.e., typically those aged 17–18). Many of these students appeared able to apply their more extensive substantive knowledge to answer deeper and more profound questions. Accordingly, a number of these older students appreciated that responsibility for the Holocaust was more widespread and diffuse than their younger counterparts believed. These students appreciated that the power structures of the Third Reich were complex and multifaceted and they typically eschewed the notion that Nazi Germany was ruled in a simplistic top-down way. Furthermore, a number of older students appreciated the limitations of Hitler’s control and offered a more sophisticated appreciation that many ‘ordinary’ Germans were complicit
in the Holocaust. As this brief example illustrates, when students were able to draw on relevant substantive knowledge, they exhibited more profound and historically accurate understandings. Unfortunately, the number of students who evidenced this more sophisticated understanding were relatively few. However, the example illustrates that with age-appropriate and thoughtful teaching it is possible to meaningfully develop students’ understanding of important issues which derive from studying the Holocaust.

Thus far a detailed explanation of one important facet of the Holocaust (i.e., complicity and responsibility) has been used to illustrate how students’ lack of historical and conceptual knowledge often resulted in an impoverished understanding of the Holocaust. But, of course, this finding is salient for all aspects of students’ understanding of the Holocaust.

For example, another illustration of how limited substantive and conceptual knowledge typically inhibited deeper understanding relates to the victims of the Holocaust. Many students’ understandings of the victims of the Holocaust were often based on crude and ill-informed generalisations. For example, although 90 per cent of students correctly identified Jews as victims, very few could precisely say what differentiated Jews from other identified victim groups (e.g., gay men, disabled people, Roma and Sinti). Typically, students erroneously assumed that all Nazi victims were targeted and treated in similar ways, chiefly because they were ‘different’. This misunderstanding often led to the tendency for many students to lump all victim groups together as a faceless mass with no agency and stood in the way of a deeper understanding of the diverse experiences of ordinary people caught up in the maelstrom of history. Furthermore, it also appeared to prevent any intelligent second-order explanation of what caused the Holocaust and – without any appreciation of the vibrancy of life before the war – what was lost as a result of its devastation (i.e., its historical consequence and significance).

Another cause for concern revealed by the research was that whereas most students significantly overestimated the pre-war Jewish population, many also massively underestimated the numbers of victims murdered. Students typically appeared to accept stereotypical myths about the power, influence and size of the Jewish population in pre-war Germany and very few had any appreciation of the diversity of Jewish society and culture before the Second World War. In a similar vein, the research revealed that students’ chronological and geographical knowledge of the Holocaust appeared weak and, as a consequence, their ability to identify key conceptual developments, turning points and
important historical context was severely impeded. It also prevented students from understanding the process, development and radicalisation of the genocide and, by extension, their ability to assess its contemporary relevance.

Overall, therefore, an apparent lack of knowledge appeared to prevent deeper understanding of the Holocaust. Typically, students were unable to fully appreciate how, why, where and when the Holocaust happened, and the absence of this knowledge inhibited students’ ability either to explain human actions in the past, or to consider the Holocaust’s significance for us today. It also exposed students’ weak conceptual or second-order understandings of the Holocaust which appeared to prevent intelligent exploration of, for example, cause and consequence, change and continuity, empathetic understanding and historical significance.

**Conclusion**

The UCL study revealed that in addition to school-based learning, most students encountered representations and narratives of the Holocaust outside of school. In fact, 85 per cent of students in Year 10 and above stated they had learned about the Holocaust outside of school. These encounters with the Holocaust took many forms and included television, literature, the internet, personal stories and museum visits. It was, however, particularly noticeable that many students were affected by representations of the Holocaust in popular films. For example, 84.4 per cent of students who said they had seen a film about the Holocaust reported they had watched *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, and this experience appeared to influence their understanding of the genocide. Unfortunately, however, as numerous critics have observed, encounters with the Holocaust which occur outside of school often fuel and exacerbate common misconceptions and typically reinforce the salience of a mythic Holocaust (Cesarani 2008; Foster et al. 2016; Gray 2014a, 2014b; Pearce 2014; Pettigrew et al. 2009; Russell 2006). *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, for example, has been heavily criticised for its historical inaccuracies and inappropriate framing. Indeed, it is potentially problematic that the mythic Holocaust represented in films and other cultural artefacts often reduces the events of the Holocaust to a simplistic morality tale of good versus evil and avoids its more profound and deeply troubling aspects (e.g., how in a modern, ostensibly educated state, could this happen?). Furthermore, the ubiquitous presence of a mythic Holocaust often obfuscates a more intelligent
understanding of the substantive history of the Holocaust and its contemporary significance and leaves no room for the development of vital conceptual understandings.

Of course, the concerns raised here may not be so much of an issue if our educational system was critically challenging and addressing how the Holocaust is represented and portrayed in the broader culture. But as this chapter has shown, this seems to be far from the case. In fact, typically students’ lack of historical knowledge appears to act as a significant barrier to a deeper and more meaningful understanding of the Holocaust. It also, by extension, prevents any intelligent consideration of its contemporary representation and significance and how interpretive accounts of this history are constructed. From this perspective it is potentially possible that rather than challenge prevailing misconceptions, schools may reinforce and perpetuate them. This troubling reality presents educators with a real challenge and underscores the critical importance of ensuring students acquire a robust understanding of the historical Holocaust.

As I have written elsewhere (Foster 2013; Foster et al. 2016; Foster 2018) an imperative exists, therefore, to ensure teachers who teach about the Holocaust are better equipped to help their students develop their knowledge and conceptual understanding in accessible, age-appropriate ways. In this respect, it is absolutely critical that teachers have access to high-quality professional development support which not only helps them consider vital pedagogical issues, but also offers insight into current and emerging historical scholarship.

The ultimate goal of course is to improve the historical knowledge and conceptual understanding of young people so that they are able both to understand the complexity of the Holocaust and address fundamental questions such as: What was the Holocaust? Who was responsible and complicit in its development and execution? Why and how did they do it? How were the actions of perpetrators, victims and bystanders affected by the context of the times? Who were the victims and how and why were they targeted? How did the victims respond? When and where did the Holocaust happen? How did the Allies and people across Europe engage with the Holocaust? How and why did it end? Ultimately, therefore, the acquisition of important historical knowledge and the development of associated conceptual understanding is of paramount importance. Indeed, developing students’ substantive knowledge in conjunction with conceptual understanding is essential if students are to understand this complex history and to critically evaluate the way the Holocaust is presented in modern culture.
Notes

1. For a more detailed discussion of the study’s approach to interrogating historical knowledge, see Foster et al., 101–4.

2. It is important to recognise that many students who were studying history aged 17–18 had a more sophisticated understanding of Hitler’s role, but this was very much an exception to the rule.

3. Historiographical debates between ‘intentionalists’ and ‘functionalists’ were particularly apparent in the 1970s and 1980s. Essentially, ‘intentionalists’ believe that Hitler always had a master plan to carry out the Holocaust and its execution was directed in a ‘top down’ manner. Functionalists oppose this theory and argue by contrast that the Holocaust resulted from the actions of those from the lower ranks of German bureaucracy and government.

References

All online material last accessed 24 July 2019 unless indicated otherwise.


DOES THE ACQUISITION OF HISTORICAL KNOWLEDGE REALLY MATTER?


