Holocaust Education

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Introduction

Within Britain, the government-led narrative of the country’s relationship with the Holocaust treads a sometimes uneasy line between triumphalist eulogy, on the one hand, and acknowledgement Britain ‘could have done more’ (Prime Minister’s Holocaust Commission Report 2015, 24), on the other. Nowhere is this better exemplified than in *Britain’s Promise to Remember: The Prime Minister’s Holocaust Commission Report*, which contains in its executive summary the following statement:

Ensuring that the memory and the lessons of the Holocaust are never forgotten lies at the heart of Britain’s values as a nation. In commemorating the Holocaust, Britain remembers the way it proudly stood up to Hitler and provided a home to tens of thousands of survivors and refugees, including almost 10,000 children who came on the *Kindertransports*. In debating the more challenging elements of Britain’s history – such as the refusal to accept more refugees or the questions over whether more could have been done to disrupt the Final Solution – Britain reflects on its responsibilities in the world today. In educating young people about the Holocaust, Britain reaffirms its commitment to stand up against prejudice and hatred in all its forms.

(Prime Minister’s Holocaust Commission Report 2015, 9)
This passage holds a number of assumptions, frames thinking about Britain’s role in particular ways, and is notable for what it doesn’t say as much as for what it does. It seems a highly political and politicised statement – as is evidenced by the association of Holocaust memory and ‘Britain’s values as a nation’, the conflation between standing up to Hitler and the acceptance of ‘tens of thousands of survivors and refugees’, and the admission there are ‘challenging elements’ but lack of clarity about what as a nation should be done differently.

It is within this context, and in response to it, that the teaching resource *British Responses to the Holocaust* was conceived and developed. Designed to open dialogue and encourage rethinking of dominant political and cultural narratives, this resource starts from the premise that Britain’s role in and relationship with the Holocaust is understood as a complex and problematic history. This is not a specifically British phenomenon: all countries have problematic pasts, and how such pasts are represented, encountered, and considered in educational spaces is a key element of how students’ knowledge and understanding of their historical culture are formed.

This chapter discusses the evolution of *British Responses to the Holocaust* and analyses its potential to effect changes in what both teachers and students know and understand about this history. It will be argued that encouraging students to consider Britain’s relationship with the Holocaust is an inherently political act, one where the historical record can provide a counterpoint to the current dominant accounts. The resource exemplifies how primary archival sources can be used to offer counter-narratives, and foster more nuanced, complex, and altogether challenging understandings of connections between Britain and the Holocaust. The resource also has implications for teaching this history in the context of the teaching of ‘British values’, a requirement for English schools since 2014, allowing students the opportunity to reflect on the identification of Britain as a ‘tolerant’ country.

*British responses to the Holocaust: Then and now*

Key questions around what the Allies knew about the Holocaust, when they knew it, what options were available to them, and what actions they ultimately chose are critical to being able to understand the government’s capacity to respond to the unfolding genocide and the context in which this developed. Such questions need to be considered not just in the war years, but in the policy approaches forged before. From
1933 on, emigration was a central tenet of the Nazis’ policy towards the Jews, to the extent that by 1939, Jewish emigration from the Reich ‘had become a major European problem’ (Wasserstein 1988, 7). For Britain, this problem was compounded by tensions in its Mandate for Palestine, which from 1936 saw Arab uprisings for independence and against open-ended Jewish immigration. In consequence, the government White Paper of May 1939 restricted Jewish immigration to just 10,000 over the next five years. The year before, from 6–15 July, the Evian Conference called by President Roosevelt to discuss the refugee crisis resulted in only the Dominican Republic and later Costa Rica offering to accept Jewish refugees. Britain, as with the other 30 delegates, offered no new initiatives.

As the war unfolded, the British government accrued intelligence of the mass murder of Jews to the extent that by the end of 1942 these crimes had become widespread public knowledge. Two sources of information in particular came to Britain in 1942 that were particularly significant. The Riegner Telegram of August was intelligence from an anti-Nazi German industrialist who had close connections with high-ranking Nazi officials. It outlined for the first time the planned extermination of the Jews, who would ‘after deportation and concentration in the East, be at one blow exterminated’ (Foreign Office 1942). The ‘Karski Report’ of November was an eyewitness report given to the Foreign Office describing the liquidation of the Warsaw ghetto, deportations and gassings at Belzec. Both of these were key elements in an accumulation of evidence of unfolding genocide in Europe that had accumulated over time. By December 1942 the government felt it could no longer ignore the knowledge that had suffused into the public realm, a time when ‘from the beginning to the end, few facts of Nazi anti-Semitism were left unstated by the British press’ (Sharf 1964, 193).

On 17 December 1942, Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden’s Allied Declaration given in the House of Commons was a very public acknowledgement that the British and American governments possessed sufficient knowledge and understanding about the Nazi policy towards the Jews to recognise its criminality, its fundamental abhorrence, and the necessity for punitive measures to be taken against its perpetrators. Yet despite this, within government circles there appeared to be inertia in terms of drawing up and taking tangible steps which might provide relief, sustenance, or rescue to those targeted for murder. The Anglo-American refugee conference in Bermuda of April 1943, convened to discuss potential collaborative efforts between the British and Americans to rescue
Jews, is a case in point. London (2000, 216) has spoken of its ‘inadequacy’ in terms of outcomes, and Cesarani (2016, 621) has described it as ‘a place where every concrete proposal [to rescue Jews] was shot down’ by the respective delegations.

Accounting for these behaviours, Kushner (1994, 36) persuasively argues ‘it is . . . essential to understand that the available information would be channelled through domestic ideological considerations that were . . . to hinder understanding of the Jewish plight’. Foreign policy considerations were principally centred upon a strategic commitment to winning the war, and the accompanying belief this was the most effective means of ending the genocide and bringing its perpetrators to justice. Government reluctance to help save Jews was also compounded by a latent antisemitism within British society, and the complicating foreign policy issue of the volatile political situation in the British mandate of Palestine, which became effective from 1923. Ultimately, much of the historical scholarship evolving especially from the late 1970s (Wasserstein 1988; London 2000; Gilbert 2001) has tended to conclude, as Wasserstein (1988, 345) does at the end of his study of British policy, that ‘there is little to celebrate in this account of British policy towards the Jews of Europe between 1939 and 1945’.

Such interpretations of British policy contrast with those professed in political circles over the last decade or so. These have recently coalesced into a narrative that has connected to the government’s concern with promoting ‘British values’, and its identification of the education system as a transmitter for these. This is because in some quarters, such as for MP Ian Austin, Britain’s role in the Second World War, and in particular its role in the Holocaust, are seen as a defining moment in the demonstration of British values. In turn this raises questions about the sorts of stories politicians want educators to tell about British responses to the Holocaust, and how they reflect notions of the ‘British values’ outlined by Lord Nash (Department for Education 2014). First set out in the government’s Prevent Strategy of 2011, he identified five specifically British key values: democracy; the rule of law; individual liberty; mutual respect; and tolerance for those with different faiths and beliefs. In the context of schools, OFSTED Chief Inspector Amanda Spielman has promoted this in proclaiming that ‘pupils should learn how we became the country we are today and how our values make us a beacon of liberalism, tolerance and fairness’ (cited in Bulman 2017).

Ian Austin, in ‘Britain’s Promise to Remember’, is one MP who signals an attempt to position Britain’s relationship with the Holocaust not
only in exceptional and universalist terms, but also in a way that cuts to the core of what he understands 'British values' to be:

Whilst Britain could have done more, no one can deny that when other European countries were rounding up their Jews and putting them on trains to concentration camps, Britain provided a safe haven for tens of thousands of refugees. In 1941, with Europe overrun and America not yet in the war, just one country – Britain – soldiered on, against all odds, fighting not just for our freedom, but for the world’s liberty too. I believe this period defines Britain and what it means to be British. It is Britain’s unique response to the Holocaust and its unique role in the war that gives us the right to claim a particular attachment to the values of democracy, equality, freedom, fairness and tolerance.

(Prime Minister’s Holocaust Commission Report 2015, 24)

There are many aspects of this interpretation, though, that invite interrogation. ‘No one can deny’, for instance, makes a claim towards an assumed common understanding that is somehow beyond questioning. Also, the repetition of the idea that in some way Britain’s response to the Holocaust was ‘unique’, especially in the ways in which it aligns Britain in particular to values such as ‘equality’ and ‘tolerance’, as well as the conflation of Britain’s relationship to the war with Britain’s relationship to the Holocaust, presents a narrative of Britain’s role as being of special significance in standing up to German aggression, and by implication to the Holocaust. Yet this is problematic, as such a conflation disguises the differences between the two: whilst at one point in the war the British government, despite being supported by the Empire and its dominions, promoted a narrative of being isolated in fighting against Hitler, it did little to rescue Jews from the European genocide, preferring instead to pledge to punish the perpetrators at the end of the war. There is also an assertion of a monolithic, homogenised understanding of how Britain responded, belying a more nuanced reality that British people responded in ways that were both fluid and at times contradictory and conflicting.

The creation of the UK Holocaust Memorial Foundation (UKHMF) in 2015 provides a specific lens through which such discourses can be viewed. Founded to deliver the recommendations of the Prime Minister’s Holocaust Commission, the UKHMF has oversight for the construction of a new memorial and learning centre. Revealingly, the memorial is intended to ‘stand beside Parliament as a permanent statement of our
British values’ (Prime Minister’s Office, 2016). Yet some see such a juxtaposition as problematic. Tollerton (2017), for instance, sees the move as an attempt ‘to empower a similarly reinvigorated view of Britain and its governance’. In the context of British values, he goes on to note how underlying the interface between ‘British values’ and public Holocaust memory is a fundamental point that, because of the side Britain fought on in World War II, remembrance of Nazi atrocities can appear to offer a moral clarity that ultimately bolsters national pride. Unlike other, messier aspects of British history (especially those concerned with colonialism and empire) a sacred site of Holocaust remembrance is ripe with potential to empower veneration of the state.

(Tollerton 2017)

*British Responses to the Holocaust in context: Pedagogy and practice*

*British Responses to the Holocaust* is a teaching resource that attempts to navigate a sometimes uneasy pathway between calls for ‘veneration of the state’ and an historical record where veneration may be more difficult to justify. It takes as its point of departure knowledge and understandings that the 2016 UCL Centre research reveals students have about what Britain ‘knew’ and ‘did’ in response to the Holocaust (Foster et al. 2016).

The clearest overall indicator of these was provided by responses to the question ‘What happened when the British government knew about the mass murder of the Jews?’ contained within the national survey. This multiple choice question was accompanied by a selection of seven possible answers, and was responded to by 7,166 secondary students of all year groups. The answers selected by students provided a striking insight into their substantive knowledge of this topic. Across the age-range, the most popular response (34.4 per cent) was that Britain ‘declared war on Germany’. Second to this was that Britain ‘didn’t know anything until the end of the war’ (23.8 per cent). The most appropriate answer, from the seven options available, was that Britain pledged to ‘punish the killers after the war’. However, this was chosen by only 6.7 per cent of all students. Of those who chose this option only 3.8 per cent were ‘very confident’ of their answer, with 68.7 per cent stating they were either not very confident or didn’t know and just guessed.
Discussions in focus group interviews provided further insight. A number of students suggested Britain and the Allies did not know about the killings as they happened in remote locations and were kept secret, and that if they had known about it they would have acted sooner: ‘if we did know we would have done something’ (2016, 185) suggested one Year 12 student in a response that typified the views of many others. As the report highlighted, ‘students typically had a limited and often erroneous understanding of Britain’s role during the Holocaust’ and ‘did not have the necessary contextual information to accurately explain Britain’s response to the Holocaust’ (2016, 200).

These findings have various implications. Students do not seem to know or understand why Britain went to war, and they tend to either incorrectly attribute the role of saviour to Britain, or absolve it of responsibility. At root then, there is a disconnect between how students understand British responses to the Holocaust, and the actual historical record. Mediating this is the crucial role of teachers and their own levels of knowledge and understanding of this history. Misconceptions in the classroom are reflective of a complex range of contemporary popular cultural and political discourses – but this only further underlines the critical importance of educational interventions which can work towards challenging and complicating erroneous assumptions.

The findings from the 2016 national survey provide the primary context for the pedagogical approach of British Responses to the Holocaust which rests on a socially constructivist approach to teaching and learning and a focus on the use of original archival source material. Bauman (1989, vii–viii) encapsulates one of the key tenets of this resource when he describes how ‘my image of the Holocaust was like a picture on the wall: neatly framed’, which then over time changed to become ‘a window, rather than a picture on the wall’ in terms of exposing the complexity of the past and its construction. Bauman’s metaphor mirrors the pedagogical approach taken here, which seeks to replace ‘pictures’ for ‘windows’ in the way that Jenkins (2003, 7) sees history as ‘being about, but categorically different from, the past’, where describing the past is fundamentally about illuminating the present. As Kaiser and Salmons (2016, 101) note, this is where an interrogation of the sources is intended ‘to allow students’ own meanings to emerge out of that encounter with the past, rather than using the past to teach predetermined lessons’.

A key part of this construction involves working with primary source documents from a range of different archives located in England that articulate different voices and realms of knowledge that existed in
Britain through the course of the Second World War, be it the Foreign Office (The National Archives), Churchill himself (The Churchill Archives), Jewish immigrant communities (The Wiener Library and the Ben Uri Gallery), or the British public (Mass Observation). The intention is that students will move from a notion of a homogenised, unified conception of Britain’s reaction, towards gaining a more differentiated understanding of what British responses there were, how they changed and interacted, and what, if anything, they meant. To do this whilst the research focuses exclusively on the response of the British government, *British Responses* also tries to illustrate how this intersects with other segments of British society.

A central feature of *British Responses to the Holocaust* has been its focus on developing student knowledge and understanding by revealing important information at key moments. As events unfold chronologically, information through primary sources is layered, prompting students to confirm or re-evaluate previous thinking. However, there are potential dangers here that teachers need to be aware of, such as the need to divert students away from thinking that events the sources describe were in some way predestined. It is intended that the teacher needs to play a key role in developing students’ conceptual understanding both of evidence and of change and continuity.

In the spirit of research-informed practice, *British Responses to the Holocaust* starts with the same question in the student survey. This is to unpack student’s existing knowledge and understanding of British responses, and enable teachers to calibrate their support for students appropriately as the lesson progresses. In a blind vote students respond to the question by choosing one of seven options. At the end of voting the responses are collated into a combined ‘class vote’ to synthesise how they thought the government responded, which is then shown to them for comment.

With the survey question duly framed as an enquiry question, the notion of ‘British responses’ is problematised through a juxtaposition of two historical sources that seem paradoxical. One of these is the declaration from a British soldier involved in the liberation of Bergen-Belsen on 15 April 1945 that while Nazi atrocities had previously been ‘whispers . . . now I know what we had been fighting for’. Set against this is another source: Eden’s ‘Allied Declaration’ speech to the House of Commons in December 1942, with its statement that there were ‘reliable reports . . . of Hitler’s oft repeated intention to exterminate the Jewish people of Europe’. Students are invited to speculate on why realms of knowledge of the unfolding genocide might have seemed widespread
in late 1942, yet paradoxically not prevalent amongst British soldiers in 1945.

In the main section of the lesson students examine a range of archival sources showcasing various British responses. Drawing from a range of different institutions such as the National Archives, the Wiener Library and Mass Observation, this material complicates the notion of a monolithic singular ‘British’ response by presenting a medley of different voices in different contexts from different quarters across British society. In small groups students are provided with envelopes containing large A3 cards with a source related to the enquiry question on it, as well as a smaller A5 envelope with some contextual information about the source.

Following the main activity, students end by reflecting on where their new knowledge has taken them. First, they return to the original survey question, with teachers encouraging students to consider Churchill’s statement to the House of Commons of 8 December 1942, that ‘when the hour of liberation strikes in Europe, as strike it will, it will also be the hour of retribution’ (Churchill Archives 1942). Second, students reflect on the earlier juxtaposition of narratives from British soldiers after the liberation of Bergen-Belsen with Eden’s ‘Allied Declaration’ to the House of Commons, contemplating how new knowledge may cast a different light on such an apparent paradox. Finally, teachers open up space for students to reflect on broader issues which have been animated by this investigation: the ways sources may be problematised; wider issues that the sources generate that might connect past with present; and further questions students may wish to ask about how narratives of British responses to the Holocaust are constructed.

Piloting and development

In the process of developing this resource, different aspects of it were trialled with a variety of teachers and students in different parts of the country. These consisted of a Year 9 class in a mixed secondary school in the South of England in July 2016 (A); a teacher residential at the Wiener Library in October 2017 (B); a teacher Continuing Professional Development (CPD) session in a school in the North of England in December 2017 (C); a Year 9 class in a mixed secondary school in South-East England in January 2017 (D); a teacher CPD session in a school in North-East England in March 2017 (E); and a Year 9 class from a mixed comprehensive school in the Midlands in May 2017 (F). It is
acknowledged that this is a small-scale investigation: as a consequence, whilst more general conclusions may be elusive, there are initial, tentative directions in which the data points. In particular these coalesce around how students understand the present through the lens of the past, and how they understand constructions of self and national identity, informed as they are by contemporary notions of ‘British values’.

**Student responses**

In student pilot studies, all groups were presented with the student survey question. In school F, initial responses took two positions: one holding that the government didn’t know anything, and the other that the government did know about the unfolding genocide but faced pragmatic, logistical barriers to helping that rendered intervention futile. It is interesting that both these positions constructed a benign view of Britain’s role. Jack, for instance, declared ‘I said that I don’t think the government knew anything because I assumed if they knew they’d have done something’ (F: 50–1). The use of ‘assumed’ is revealing here, seeming to indicate a belief in inherent benevolence or government actions being underpinned by well-intentioned motives.

William agreed with Jack, and went further in providing some contextual factors to explain why the British government wouldn’t have helped:

> Same with me. Because it was quite hard to get to, because obviously we’re quite an isolated country; it was quite hard to get from France, because I was thinking of Dunkirk and D-Day and events like that. And it was hard to get to Germany if it wasn’t by plane. So we couldn’t really shut down the camps anywhere else, apart from liberating through France.

(F: 52–5)

However, William also seemed to be saying something different to Jack in trying to justify why pragmatically, to his understanding, Britain couldn’t have helped, rather than saying the British government had no knowledge of the genocide. The difference may be the result of wider contextual knowledge of the war, as references to Dunkirk and D-Day and ‘liberating through France’ suggest. It was apparent in the UCL Centre’s 2016 research that often when students were able to integrate wider contextual knowledge to their understandings, their explanatory accounts
tended to be more rigorous. It could be that the same sort of process was being repeated here. George reiterated this position, saying ‘The government did know but they couldn’t really control the actions that were going on’ (F: 57). The only divergence from these two positions came from Olivia, who was the only student to acknowledge that the best answer was ‘they wanted to focus all their efforts on, you know, fighting the war and so they wanted to deal with it afterwards’ (F: 70–1).

Mark, in focus group A, gave voice to what most students described as a sense of confusion in trying to reconcile the knowledge he assumed the government had, and their subsequent apparent lack of action:

I thought they must have known really because it was such a massive event. I thought they must have known but then if they’d known then they must have done something about it so it was a bit confusing as to why they didn’t do that.

(A: 96–8)

Especially revealing were responses students gave when asked to reflect on how their views had changed on how the British government responded having completed the lesson. In focus group F they unanimously declared, like Olivia, that ‘they [the British government] definitely knew’ (F: 82), showing that the original survey option that the British government ‘didn’t know anything until the end of the war’ was inaccurate. When pressed on what was then done with this information however, the nuances in student accounts, sometimes subtle and sometimes more flagrant, seemed to suggest something more complex. Jack, for instance, exemplified the position some students held that there was a fluidity in the government’s approach, where

They planned to attack or punish the Nazis after the war, but at first they ignored it – only the government knew, as they wanted to protect the British citizens, well, I think, to keep the morale high. Because if morale dropped Hitler could have had an advantage on us.

(F: 85–7)

Jack’s qualification of Britain’s expressed intention to punish the perpetrators after the war is noteworthy for its coexistence with an understanding of ‘wilful ignorance’; a benign interpretation of the British government’s intentions to strategically withhold information of the
unfolding genocide to bolster morale. To defend this further, William went on to support Jack’s position, offering the explanation:

We just ignored it. We couldn’t. . . . We didn’t ignore it because we’re selfish, we just ignored it because we couldn’t do anything. . . . It’s not that we wanted to agree with Hitler and him persecuting the Jews because we’re not like that. We were allied with the people who were fighting the Nazis, so we couldn’t have done anything about it.

(F: 89–94)

Particularly intriguing is the way William constructs his defence of Britain’s position. Three things seem salient: William’s repeated use of the word ‘we’; the refutation that Britain ignored the unfolding genocide ‘because we’re selfish’; and the further moral distancing from the perpetrators in the phrase ‘we’re not like that’. In terms of classroom practice this highlights the need for teachers to be aware of the language students use in making sense of this history: understanding how students construct their accounts of the past may also help address any myths and misconceptions they may hold.

Firstly, William’s use of the first person plural ‘we’ seems to signal an association of the self with nation, in terms of the kind of ‘imagined’ ways that Anderson (2006) talks of. It also seems to indicate William’s sense of moral positioning with the nation he identifies with that conflates the past with present. In doing so, educators need to be aware that students may also reference contemporary events when learning about the past, and that these may mediate their understandings of the past.

Taking the use of ‘we’ further, William then explains the British government’s lack of action as an inability to pragmatically do anything, rather than ‘because we’re selfish’. It could be argued here that he is trying to construct a rationale for British responses that seems morally acceptable and comforting. The contention that ‘we couldn’t do anything’ is problematic, though. Whilst acknowledging that there were contingent logistical complexities around rescuing Jews in wartime, both the Evian Conference of 1938 and the Bermuda Conference of 1943 offered clear opportunities to rescue at least some Jews. William’s claim then lacks contextual knowledge and understanding that leads him to construct a reductive misconception of British responses.

Finally, William’s idea that ‘we’re not like that’ can be seen as a form of in-group identification that seeks to draw distinct lines between
behaviours that are acceptable and those that are not. It could be argued, however, that it implicitly obscures more than it reveals: if the British response is not one of ‘persecuting the Jews’, then neither necessarily is it its implicit antithesis that all was done to explicitly rescue them. William’s use of the term ‘we’ in identifying with British responses to the Holocaust also refers to assumptions of what it is to ‘do’ History in terms of how ‘all History is a conversation between past and present’ (Lawson 2010, 9). I argue that it goes further here in being less of a present-past dialogue and more of a conflation of identities; both between self-and-other, and now-and-then.

There are also resonances in how William’s use of language reflects Billig’s (1995, 29) notion of ‘banal nationalism’, where ‘the creation of a national hegemony often involves a hegemony of language’. Here, Billig’s contention that ‘common-sense’ assumptions that nationalism, and identification with the nation, are seen in some way as being ‘natural’ and embedded in everyday language as a response to political motivations seems compelling. So when William says ‘we just ignored it’ or ‘we’re not like that’, teachers need to be aware that the use of such language is far from ‘natural’, and that the relationship between student and nation, in both the past and present, is complex. In particular, how students may tend to conflate or analogise issues around British responses and contemporary accounts of issues such as displacement, refugees and immigration need to be handled carefully to avoid slippage into all-encompassing, reductive understandings, whilst at the same time using opportunities in the classroom to explore contemporary settings of historical themes.

The moral positioning of students in relation to government action also emerges in more ambivalent constructions of British identity. This emerged in a focus group of Year 9 students in a school where, in response to the Riegner Telegram, Helen suggested:

There is no harm in saying what they did was bad I mean, cause we . . . I know we had hindsight but we worked out what the document meant with very few prompts within a lesson so I think that if there was some scrutiny over what the British government did it would have helped. So if you look at it from both sides, we are not saying oh the British government is great, oh it’s amazing.

(A: 113–17)

Helen’s adoption of a more critical stance toward British policy suggests the substantive knowledge that can be derived from archival sources may
become a tool to interrogate British responses, rather than just affirm them. Whilst she refers to a specific source, the opportunity to consider a range of sources which cumulatively provide alternative, and at times conflicting, narratives of British responses, creates opportunities to reflect and construct different narratives. It is in such spaces, and the way they relate past and present, that hold the capacity to disrupt more fixed, hegemonic narratives of British responses. However, realising these potential explorations requires teacher intervention. It cannot be presumed that a disruptive space will necessarily be understood and processed as such by students, who will then move forward towards refining and recalibrating their thinking. Indeed, without teacher interventions some students may even refute the new or alternative information as incorrect for how it challenges or does not conform to their understandings. This raises pedagogic issues for teachers: a need to gauge where student knowledge and understanding is at different points in the lesson, and identify and challenge the misconceptions they may hold. It also means that while students may have ownership of their own learning and the construction of knowledge, this yet needs to be mitigated by teachers to avoid a relativism where all constructions are seen as equally valid.

Another interesting aspect that emerged from student focus group responses was how the intersection between the British government and the British public was understood by them as they considered the historical sources. Leo, for instance, from school F, commented that:

I think that the government would have done something if the majority of the people had believed them. Because they didn’t, they didn’t have full support which would have ended up with, like Kyle said, low morale, lower morale, which could have allowed Germany to take advantage of that.

(F: 103–5)

George felt that ‘the British public I think knew what was happening, but they couldn’t do anything to control it because they had nothing to do with it’ (F: 148–9).

Three key aspects of Leo’s and George’s comments appear significant: a tentativeness in the language used by both students; a seeming lack of clarity over how much the British public knew of what was happening; and a contemporary semblance of Wasserstein’s (1988, 356) notion of both physical and psychological distance as having a ‘disinhibiting effect’.
Leo’s way of understanding government inertia was to explain it in terms of a sense of public disbelief in what they were being told. This reflected how some students attempted to resolve the paradox between Eden’s Allied Declaration and the sorts of narratives that emerged from British soldiers liberating Bergen-Belsen in 1945, whose literal confrontation with the ‘traumatic’ (Reilly et al. 1997) conditions of the camp provided a visceral sense of an aspect of the Holocaust that up to then hadn’t been encountered in such starkness. Some students felt that whilst Eden may have spelt out the Nazi intention to exterminate the Jews of Europe in 1942, it wasn’t until the British eyewitness evidence from the liberation of Bergen-Belsen that disbelief turned to a more unsettling confrontation with the reality of such camps. George’s comment that the British public were aware of what was happening yet were in a sense distanced from it seems to deny them an agency that other sources suggest: a public protest at the Royal Albert Hall on 29 October 1942, to express outrage at the atrocities, and Eleanor Rathbone’s ‘Rescue the Perishing’ pamphlet call-to-action from June 1943, being two such examples.

Student responses, then, reveal a complex interaction between notions of identity and identification with the nation, ways of explaining British responses in light of historical archival records, and affective reactions. It is argued here that when teachers are conscious of and acknowledge such student constructions and responses, deeper understandings of this history are made more possible through an appreciation of the constructed nature in the present of narratives of the past.

Teacher responses

At times the potential cognitive disruption created by the sources produced affective responses that revealed a sense of discomfort amongst teachers. After reading the Riegner Telegram Karl, a Head of History, declared ‘I’m a historian, I’m reading this, and I feel ashamed’ (E). His response showed the affect it had on him of realising that the British government clearly had knowledge on 10 August 1942, of the plan for all Jews in countries controlled or occupied by Germany to ‘be at one blow exterminated’, as well as the identification he felt with the response of the British government, the shame felt on behalf of the actions of others in the past.

Amongst teacher groups in particular there seemed to be a sense of heaviness and internalisation towards the end of the session around what the sources seemed to imply. Some of these were observed by my
colleague, Eleni Karayianni, in her field notes. Whilst observing a session with teachers in school B for instance, Karayianni described how

One teacher commented that the specific focus on the British response, instead of everybody else’s response, could suggest that the British were somehow to blame for the Holocaust. So, perhaps it would be useful to include a little bit about how other countries responded to the Holocaust.

(C: 76–9)

Further, she noted that

They also felt that the lesson ends quite negatively and it would be good to add something on ‘Jewish life in Britain after the war’ and to talk about stories of survivors who came in Britain after liberation (‘the Boys’ for example).

(C: 82–4)

This urge to shift the focus from Britain both spatially and temporally could be seen to be a call to contextualise British responses alongside those of other countries, possibly to enable a better understanding of, or even to allow for a more informed judgement on, Britain’s role. It could also be seen as an apparent desire to mitigate negative portrayals of the British government at the time in order to, in a sense, ‘redress the balance’. Yet this is something some historians are wary of, a number of whom see explanations for the actions of the British government as being many and interlinked, rather than the more monocausal explanations teachers tended to articulate around the government’s perceived lack of knowledge of the unfolding genocide. Gilbert (2001, 341), for instance, in speaking of the Allied response in a more general sense, describes how whilst the story of the negative Allied response to many of the Jewish appeals for help was one of a lack of comprehension in the face of the ‘unbelievable’, concludes the story is ultimately one of ‘many failures’. Speaking specifically of the British response, Wasserstein (1988, 345) also suggests multiple reasons for British inaction, including the British government’s ‘imaginative failure to grasp the full meaning of the consequences of decisions’, the ‘low priority’ accorded to Jews in the context of the war effort, and the spatial notion of how ‘distance had a disinhibiting effect’ (Wasserstein 1988: 356). In light of this, his ultimate assessment is damning: ‘there is’, he writes, ‘little to celebrate in this
account of British policy towards the Jews of Europe between 1939 and 1945’ (1988, 345).

Although the sample was fairly small, some teacher responses tended to show a sense of needing to frame British responses in a more benign light, primarily in the interest of perceived ‘balance’. It should also be remembered that students’ knowledge and understanding will be impacted by how far teachers are able to identify and address issues within their own knowledge and understanding of such issues, which if left unaddressed will inevitably have a negative impact on their teaching. It is argued here that this also develops beyond ideas of knowledge and understanding, as teachers’ comments at times also reflected broader paradigms of thought and belief, be they reflective of more benign or critical views of British responses.

Conclusions

Three implications of the development of British Responses to the Holocaust and data collected from fieldwork from it warrant particular remark: the dialectic between past and present that emerges from student accounts; the political, tied up as it is with notions of personal and national identity; and the current discourse of ‘British values’ and their pedagogical implications for teacher practice. None of these areas is discrete: all intersect and inform each other with the notion of affect, for instance, interplaying between all three.

Firstly, a number of student accounts reveal a sense of conflating past and present, especially in ways relating to moral positioning. The idea expressed, for example, that ‘we’re not like that’ when comparing the British with Nazis suggests an atemporal stance that sees moral positions in terms of national identity, and as being binary and unwavering. It can also be seen in Mbembe’s (2001, 14) notion of temporal ‘entanglement’ which acknowledges the difficulties in navigating ‘the complex interaction of pasts, presents and imagined futures’ (Mirzoeff 2009, 127).

Secondly, this also has political implications. In the more specific context of History education, this is encapsulated in Seixas’s view (2000, 21) of how such ‘entanglement’ is ultimately a contested political terrain, where what is fought over is ‘the power of the past to define who we are in the present, our relations with others, relations in civil society . . . and broad parameters for action in the future’. Taking a wider view, Connerton (1989, 2) sees this as an intrinsic aspect of a dialectic between past and present, where in attempting to construct a narrative
of national identity, ‘our experience of the present very much depends on our knowledge of the past’. Yet this knowledge has a political hue. When Rieff (2016, 23) asks, ‘must we deform the past to preserve it?’, student and teacher reactions to British Responses to the Holocaust suggest a tension between the uncovering of different narratives of British responses and notions of the way truth and the past can be manipulated for a range of ends. Brotherton’s observation that ‘we build a fortress of positive information around our beliefs, and we rarely step outside – or even peek out of the window’ hints at an instance of ‘positive test strategy’ (cited in D’Ancona 2017) where we look for what we expect to find. So when we find what we don’t expect, either a form of wilful amnesia descends, or feelings of discomfort and, as revealed in this study, of ‘shame’ emerge.

Thirdly, such feelings also become problematic when set in the context of ‘British values’; of how such values as ‘tolerance’, ‘individual liberty’, and ‘democracy’ (Department for Education 2014) sit in British schools, especially as the teaching of them has become mandatory. Issues of tolerance, for instance, could be said to sit uncomfortably with evidence of British reluctance to aid Jewish immigration at the Bermuda Conference, ironically at the same time as the start of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising on 9 April 1943. Questions therefore arise over the choices made, and who makes them, as to what is remembered of Britain’s role. It raises questions of why, for instance, stories of the Kindertransport programme gain such cultural appeal and traction in Britain, at the expense of the failures of the Bermuda Conference. It raises questions of which stories we are wanting to remember, and which to forget. Lawson (2017) goes so far as to argue that the sorts of misconceptions students hold about the Holocaust, as highlighted in the 2016 student survey, are as a consequence of the dominant culture of Holocaust remembrance in the UK. If we prefer to tell comforting stories that vindicate the British role, then questions need to be asked about what the implications of this are. When Amanda Spielman, as Chief Inspector of OFSTED, the English schools’ inspectorate system, declared that ‘pupils should learn how we became the country we are today and how our values make us a beacon of liberalism, tolerance and fairness’ (cited in Bulman 2017), how this can be reconciled in the classroom with feelings of ‘shame’ that were articulated in this research is moot.

The research data also points to four key findings for teacher pedagogy. Firstly, it is argued here that for students to understand ideas around British responses to the Holocaust as being constructed in the present, as being fluid and always under construction both in and beyond the classroom, constitutes a more sophisticated way of seeing the past than more
static, hegemonic accounts. The aim is to move towards a more robust understanding of British responses that is complex and nuanced: for students to see that different accounts of Britain’s role exist, whether at the time in the strategic justification of winning the war first and then punishing the perpetrators, especially in the triumphalism of 1945 and its immediate aftermath, or more contemporary historians who are left with a ‘profoundly saddening impression’ (Wasserstein 1988, 345) of Britain’s actions. This is especially so when students are able to start to see how the past is constructed by different people at different times for different purposes.

Secondly, British Responses to the Holocaust is designed to open a landscape and dialogue that aims to rethink dominant political and cultural narratives about the role Britain played. In this it attempts to develop an appreciation of complexity, where many of the questions around British responses are contingent on issues of who knew what, when, and the options available to them for action in a constantly shifting context of war. In this sense, the idea that, as Foster et al. note, ‘a study of the past can provide straightforward “lessons” for the present is problematic for a number of reasons’ (Foster et al. 2016, 220) is of significance. This resource is rather designed to open a space for critical thinking founded on historical sources to offer alternative considerations of British responses rather than teaching predetermined lessons.

In rethinking dominant cultural narratives, London (2000, 273) directly refers to what she terms ‘a number of myths: that refugee policy was more humane than it was; that Britain put no limits on aid to persecuted Jews; or even that Britain has never turned its back on genuine refugees’. A number of student and teacher comments seem ready to paint a more benign picture of British policy in these respects; be it looking at the stories of survivors who came to Britain or looking at how other Allied countries responded. Seixas (2000) opens up the idea that this past-present relationship has potentially interesting curricular implications when the question is asked ‘Should pupils themselves directly study ways in which their own, present subjective contexts shape interpretation of the past?’ (Counsell et al. 2016, 84). With so much written of the symbolic relationship between past and present, it seems hard not to avoid thinking about how their own positioning effects their interpretation of events.

Thirdly, language used in the classroom such as ‘we’re not like that’ can be slippery and problematic, excluding as it includes, but yet which can potentially be used as a reflective tool to help students consider the construction of identity and its implications. Considerations of
who the ‘we’ refers to open up issues of inclusion and exclusion. The case of Ludwig Neumann, which students read about in one of the historical sources, is instructive here. Ludwig was a German-Jewish industrialist who ultimately fled to Britain after his textile factory was requisitioned by the Nazis. Interned in a camp on the Isle of Man as an enemy alien, Ludwig later fought in the war for the British, operating anti-aircraft guns. His story raises issues of who are included and who excluded in constructions of national identity, and so who is meant by the ‘we’ that students identify with.

Fourthly, when the proclaimed record of Britain as a ‘beacon of liberalism, tolerance and fairness’ is greeted with feelings of shame, this has implications for the classroom and beyond in how responses such as this can be acknowledged. As this research shows, this sense of friction and unease with discomforting national narratives has affective implications for both teachers and students: they may be embraced, evoking feelings of shame or guilt, or rebuked through more benign interpretations of British responses. Confronted with conflicted and ‘difficult’ histories, both students and teachers show themselves often caught in a cognitive gap in the way historical sources indicate narratives other than those they feel comfortable and familiar with. Psychologically, this seems to have the potential to limit the ability of students and teachers to absorb the true implications of what they are confronted with. This at times plays out in their affective responses, expressed in terms of emotions such as shame, guilt and confusion. How such responses are accounted for in the classroom is prescient in the current time as Britain engages with contemporary issues of displacement, refugees and immigration.

References


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