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Muslim students and the Holocaust in England’s secondary schools: ‘Reluctant learners’ or constructed controversies?

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Introduction

The theme ‘challenges and controversies’ is particularly pertinent to the current chapter since Muslim student responses to learning about the Holocaust are regularly presented as ‘a challenge’ and often framed in terms of ‘controversy’. The central provocation of this chapter, however, is a critical examination of why this should be so.

The chapter traces the construction of a controversy. It examines existing empirical research in relation to wider popular and political discourses which have positioned both ‘Muslim students’ and ‘the Holocaust’ in powerful and often problematic ways. The chapter draws on the author’s own data and analysis from two important research studies: a national examination of teachers’ practice and perspectives when teaching about the Holocaust in England’s secondary schools (Pettigrew et al. 2009); and an extensive investigation of English secondary school students’ knowledge, understanding and experience of learning about this history (Foster et al. 2016). The second study included detailed survey responses from more than 1,000 young people who identified as Muslim and focus group interviews with 26 students from two, predominantly Muslim, secondary schools. This represents an unprecedented and important data-set within which to explore the chapter’s central themes. While the author’s
primary research was conducted within the specific context of secondary-level education in England, the chapter locates its arguments within both national and international discursive frames.

**Constructing a controversy? Reporting and misreporting the Historical Association’s TEACH research**

TEACHERS DROP THE HOLOCAUST TO AVOID OFFENDING MUSLIMS, *The Daily Mail*, 2 April 2007 (see Clark 2007)


These agencies must be understood as actively and continuously part of the whole process to which, also, they are ‘reacting’. They are active in defining situations, in selecting targets, in initiating ‘campaigns’, in structuring these campaigns, in selectively signifying their actions to the public at large, in legitimating their actions through the accounts of situations which they produce. They do not simply respond to ‘moral panics’. They form part of the circle out of which ‘moral panics’ develop. It is part of the paradox that they also, advertently and inadvertently, amplify the deviancy they seem so absolutely committed to controlling.

(Hall et al. 1978, 52; emphasis in original)

In April 2007, the United Kingdom’s Historical Association (HA) published a report entitled ‘Teaching Emotive and Controversial History 3–19’. Across more than 40 pages, the TEACH report shared examples of effective practice and provided several detailed case studies. These referred to varied areas of the history curriculum including, for example, British colonialism, the transatlantic slave trade, the Bolshevik Revolution and the War on Terror (Historical Association 2007).

The report received significant interest from the British press but just two paragraphs attracted most of this attention. Those paragraphs were drawn from a short chapter listing eight possible teaching constraints. One in particular – ‘teacher avoidance of emotive and controversial history’ – appears especially to have caught the imagination of journalists, and both are worth reproducing in full here:

Teachers and schools avoid emotive and controversial history for a variety of reasons, some of which are well-intentioned. Some
feel that certain issues are inappropriate for particular age groups or decide in advance that pupils lack the maturity to grasp them. Where teachers lack confidence in their subject knowledge or subject-specific pedagogy, this can also be a reason for avoiding certain content. Staff may wish to avoid causing offence or appearing insensitive to individuals or groups in their classes. In particular settings, teachers of history are unwilling to challenge highly contentious or charged versions of history in which pupils are steeped at home, in their community or in a place of worship. Some teachers also feel that the issues are best avoided in history, believing them to be taught elsewhere in the curriculum such as in citizenship or religious education.

For example, a history department in a northern city recently avoided selecting the Holocaust as a topic for GCSE coursework for fear of confronting anti-Semitic sentiment and Holocaust denial among some Muslim pupils. In another department, teachers were strongly challenged by some Christian parents for their treatment of the Arab-Israeli conflict and the history of the state of Israel that did not accord with the teachings of their denomination. In another history department, the Holocaust was taught despite anti-Semitic sentiment among some pupils, but the same department deliberately avoided teaching the Crusades at Key Stage 3 because their balanced treatment of the topic would have directly challenged what was taught in some local mosques.

(Historical Association 2007, 15)

Most of this detail was lost or entirely ignored, however, in newspaper stories which led with the misleadingly simplified contention schools were ‘dropping the Holocaust’ to avoid causing ‘Muslims’ offence. And this resulted in outrage. As Brian Whitaker notes in his account of ‘The Birth of a Myth’, coverage of the story in The Times newspaper alone quickly attracted some 450 alarmed or indignant readers’ comments. ‘From there, Chinese whispers took over . . . and suddenly the whole of Britain had apparently caved in to pressure from Muslims’ (Whitaker 2007). On the other side of the Atlantic, The New York Post’s reporting of the story under the headline ‘UK’s Sickening Silence’ attracted similarly strident criticism. ‘That a once-mighty nation should capitulate to a group of people whose fundamentalist beliefs are the antithesis of the culture that made that country great is an indictment of the present government of Great Britain’, insisted one comments page contributor: ‘What’s next?
The adoption of Arabic as the official language of Great Britain?’ Another contributor contended that ‘England’s decision to teach lies rather than facts for the sake of not offending anti-Western Muslim racists, may mark a turning point in history’. ‘This is another symptom of latent anti-Semitism by many Europeans’, concluded a third (Eckstein et al. 2007).

Within days, the ‘story’ began to circulate even more widely by way of an anonymously written email although the unknown author did not directly cite the TEACH report, nor any other empirical ‘evidence’, to support their hyperbolic claims:

Recently, this week, the UK removed the Holocaust from its school curriculum because it ‘offended’ the Moslem population which claims it never occurred.

This is a frightening portent of the fear that is gripping the world and how easily each country is giving into it!

(Reproduced in Whitaker 2007)

Recipients were urged to forward the email, acting as links in a ‘memorial chain’. Although its content was quickly and resoundingly debunked on numerous fact-checking websites (see, for example, Mikkelson 2007), it continued to circulate widely. So much so, in fact, that some ten months later, Britain’s Minister for Schools was compelled to write directly to embassies and media agencies around the world to formally refute its message and clarify official departmental policy (BBC 2008).

The whole affair was a source of embarrassment and concern to the UK government. Britain, as one of the original signatories of the Stockholm Declaration on Holocaust education, remembrance and research, had, in 2000, formally pledged its commitment to promoting teaching and learning about the Holocaust in all its schools. As the Minister was very keen to reassure an international audience, this commitment was and continues to be reflected in England’s statutory national curriculum. The Holocaust remains a compulsory component of history teaching at Key Stage 3 (for 11–14-year-olds). In the school at the epicentre of the TEACH report controversy, teachers had described their reticence to pursue an additional unit of Holocaust-related coursework for older students taking post-compulsory, GCSE level history. There was no indication that this or any other school were failing to meet their statutory duty and certainly no suggestion of a change in government policy here.

I did not choose to begin this chapter with an extended retelling of this episode to defend the potentially damaged international reputation
of the British government, however. Rather, I conceived it as an opportunity to reflect upon the readiness with which the flimsiest of pretexts was seized upon as evidence of a ‘turning point in history’, ‘capitulation’ to ‘anti-Western Muslim racists’, or the ‘latent antisemitism’ of ‘many Europeans’ (Eckstein et al. 2007). It is also intended as an invitation to critically consider some of the other forms of damage that such problematic framings may entail: damage to our conceptualisations and expectations of ‘Muslim’ pupils, for example, or to the potential effectiveness of our pedagogical practice when teaching about the Holocaust in schools.

**Contemporary ‘folk devils’ and ‘moral panic’: A social constructivist approach**

Newspaper stories and their headlines are not commissioned, crafted or published in a vacuum. It is a central tenet of cultural studies that the media does not simply ‘report’ reality but, rather, helps construct it. The arguments offered in seminal studies by Cohen (1972) and Hall et al. (1978) have salience to the current chapter. Together they show how the media can help construct a heightened, disproportionate sense of public concern – or ‘moral panic’ – over the behaviour of certain groups in society (after Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994, 33). Such groups are cast as ‘folk devils’. Upon them wider social, cultural and political fears are projected and blame for both real and perceived threats to ‘traditional way of life’ is placed.

In recent decades, a growing number of scholars have argued convincingly that since the mid-1980s at least, ‘Muslim’ communities – and in particular ‘Muslim youth’ – through numerous instances of exaggeration, distortion, bias and/or sensationalism in large swathes of the British media, have increasingly been positioned as the pre-eminent contemporary ‘folk-devil’ within the UK (Baker et al. 2013; Poole 2009; Ameli et al. 2007). The ‘moral panic’ they engender is constructed as twofold: as both a physical threat to national security, and as an existential threat to the notion of a unitary British national identity, ‘British values’ or ‘the British way of life’. The first is reflected in those popular and political discourses which repeatedly obscure important distinctions between Islam and Islamist terrorism and which focus on potential radicalisation and/or extremism. These have garnered significant momentum since the September 11th attacks of 2001. The second is reflected in discourses which emphasise obstacles to integration. Such discourses invoke notions
of ‘culture clash’ or ‘self-segregation’ and regularly position all Muslims as foreign outsiders, irreducibly apart from – and often oppositional to – the dominant national ‘we’.

It is in this context that the misreporting of the TEACH research – and, this chapter will argue, that any other serious exploration of the (potential) ‘problem’ of Muslim students’ educational engagement with the Holocaust – must be understood. As both Cohen and Hall et al. emphasise, the media are not the only agencies complicit in the creation of moral panics. In *Policing the Crisis*, Hall et al. also documented the role of both the police and the judiciary in co-constructing a heightened, disproportionate and ultimately damaging societal anxiety around black youth and criminality. Following Cohen, more recent proponents of the moral panic thesis have also drawn attention to the collusion of parties such as politicians or religious representatives, relevant professionals and pressure groups (see, for example, Critcher 2008, after Cohen 1972). It is a central contention of the current chapter that, without considerable and consistent care and critical reflexivity, educational researchers, commentators, policymakers and practitioners concerned with Muslim student responses to the Holocaust might also risk contributing to (or in Hall et al.’s formulation, ‘amplifying’) the problem (or ‘deviancy’) they ostensibly seek to address. While the chapter is motivated by a desire to promote robust and potentially transformative educational encounters with the Holocaust for all British school students, it does so with a keen awareness of those wider discursive framings that can so readily position ‘Muslims’ – and here ‘Muslim students’ – in reductionist, problem-oriented and oppositional terms.

But perhaps the notion of a ‘constructed controversy’ through which I have framed this chapter is itself a provocation. It could be interpreted by some as an act of cowardice, or as sophistry employed to avoid a knotty and perhaps uncomfortable problem in English schools and further afield. It is therefore important to clarify that it is not the intention of the chapter to reject outright the reality that in some classrooms and in some contexts, students identified as Muslim may express antipathy, resentment or hostility towards learning about the Holocaust. Nor is it to deny that this reality, where encountered, warrants attention. Taking a broadly social constructivist perspective, I emphasise instead the need for reflexivity in considering how this ‘problem’ is identified, interpreted and ultimately framed (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994; Berger and Luckman 1966) in order that we may better understand – and ultimately better address – any actual experiences of student resistance or opposition if they arise.
In practice, this means asking the kinds of questions that inform my discussion in what remains of the chapter: How, by whom and on what basis was the phenomena of Muslim school students’ responses to learning about the Holocaust first conceptualised and communicated as a ‘problem’? To what extent has or can this conceptualisation be challenged? How widely is it shared? How is the signifier ‘Muslim’ employed and/or understood in the framing and discussion of this issue? What work is that word doing (either wittingly or unwittingly)? Which Muslim school students are we talking about? How many? And how have they been identified? In what – if any – specific contexts have encounters interpreted as problematic been most or least likely to occur? Crucially, what may be the consequence of constructing, and of empirically examining, this ‘problem’ in these ways? Wherever possible, I have considered questions such as these with reference to existing available data and published empirical research. Some prove easier to consider than others. All are complex and ‘answered’ only very tentatively and incompletely here.

‘Reluctant learners?’

Following the TEACH report, the first empirical exploration of specifically Muslim students’ responses to learning about the Holocaust in the UK appears in an article written by Geoffrey Short in 2008, ‘Teaching the Holocaust in Predominantly Muslim Schools’. Explaining the rationale for this focus, Short notes the absence of existing studies able to examine ‘how aspects of the student body, such as its ethno-religious identity, might frustrate the efforts of teachers’ (Short 2008, 95). Short considers this absence ‘troubling’:

For if, as has been claimed, antisemitism is spreading among the UK’s Muslim population, there has to be concern over the way the Holocaust is taught in predominantly Muslim schools.

(Short 2008, 95)

The nature of this concern, Short continues, is ‘the possibility that such students will respond inappropriately’. Speculation as to a potential problem rather than an encountered reality motivates the research.

Short spends much of his opening four pages offering various illustrations to substantiate the first proposition, that ‘antisemitism is spreading among the UK’s Muslim population’. He also suggests potential sources for antisemitic sentiment including: individual and
community-based political perspectives vis-à-vis international conflicts; the availability of ‘imported’ Middle Eastern and Arabic propaganda via satellite television and the internet; and potential interpretations of passages from the Koran. On this basis, he then reiterates that ‘it might reasonably be assumed that a significant proportion of Muslim students will respond to lessons on the Holocaust in ways likely to cause their teachers some anxieties’ (Short 2008, 97; emphasis added). He concedes, however, that, at the point of writing, there was little evidence to support such an assumption. As Short himself explains, the little ‘evidence’ he was able to examine was largely anecdotal and almost entirely related to contexts other than British schools. It is perhaps of little surprise, then, that based on his own research as reported in the 2008 paper, Short’s overwhelming conclusion is that this was a largely unwarranted concern.

Short’s research comprised in-depth interviews with teachers from 15 schools where Muslim students constituted the single largest ethnic group. As he reports, these teachers ‘showed no reluctance to engage with the Holocaust’. Far from appearing tempted to avoid or reduce teaching time on the topic, on average they spent a comparatively large number of history lessons relative to teachers in previous studies (Short 2008, 101). ‘Just over half’ of the teachers that Short interviewed ‘claimed that working in a predominantly Muslim environment had influenced their approach to teaching the Holocaust’ but they also reported that, ‘for the most part’, their students seemed ‘to respond very positively’, were ‘really interested’ and ‘very receptive’ (Short 2008, 102):

There was no opposition of any kind from parents and roughly half the teachers reported no antisemitism at all when discussing the subject with students, even though, in a couple of schools, negative stereotyping of Jews was said to be rife . . . .

Three teachers stated that a minority of Muslim students made antisemitic remarks when starting work on the Holocaust, but that they stopped doing so as the work progressed. For a couple of teachers, however, their students’ attitude towards Jews posed a major problem and, in the words of one them, the Holocaust had, at one stage, proved a ‘hugely difficult topic to teach’.

(Short 2008, 104–5)

Again, the experience of the small number of teachers who encountered ‘major problems’ among students or for whom the Holocaust proved ‘a hugely difficult topic to teach’ warrants further attention. However, the clear majority of those who took part in Short’s small study did not appear to conceive of or experience the responses of Muslim students as a
‘problem’ or impediment to teaching about the Holocaust at all. As Short reflects in the conclusion to his 2008 paper, ‘the fact that students in most schools responded enthusiastically has to be seen as a positive development’ (Short 2008, 108). It is therefore perhaps surprising to note that when Short returned to this same data in a second paper five years later, this positive development was far from the forefront of his framing.

Under the revised title, ‘Reluctant learners? Muslim youth confront the Holocaust’, the later paper follows a similar format to the first but is updated with reference to additional international studies. Short concludes his 2013 paper on a rather more cautious note than the first, summarising that ‘while many [Muslim students] have a positive attitude and behave appropriately, others are antagonistic and disruptive’. It is this second group – whom Short characterises as ‘reluctant learners’ ‘confront[ing] the Holocaust’ (Short 2013, 121; emphasis added) – that frame and become the implicit focus of this second paper.

While Short’s own empirical data did not change between the 2008 and 2013 papers, one can perhaps presume that his perspective was altered in relation to the additional studies cited. One particular paper, by Suzanne Rutland, shared a series of troubling accounts given in interview by eight teachers from Sydney schools with a ‘very high proportion’ of students with ‘Arabic-speaking and Muslim backgrounds’. Rutland’s teachers ‘consistently testified to a pattern of anti-Semitic beliefs among their Muslim students’ (Rutland 2010, 81; cited in Short 2013, 127). As Short acknowledges, Rutland’s research was very small-scale. Importantly its conclusions were at odds, not only with Short’s own initial empirical data, but also with most of the other studies referenced in his 2013 paper (for example, Carr 2012; Gryglewski, 2010; Cohen 2005; Reed and Novogrodsky 2000). Arguably, ‘Enthusiastic learners: Muslim students engage with the Holocaust’ might have been a more representative title under which to summarise the paper’s empirical content. However, Short’s paper also includes a number of practical suggestions for engaging the minority of ‘reluctant’ learners in the classroom, and the somewhat more provocative paper title may have been chosen in order to signpost this instructive content.

**Teacher perspectives on the significance of cultural diversity in the classroom**

In 2009, I was also presented with an opportunity to gauge the extent to which classroom teachers in England perceived or experienced Muslim students’ engagement with lessons about the Holocaust as a ‘problem’.
I worked as one of the small team of researchers on the Institute of Education’s national study documenting practice in teaching about the Holocaust in England’s secondary schools (Pettigrew et al. 2009). This study combined survey responses from a nationally representative sample of more than 2,000 teachers with focus-group interviews with a further 64.

Neither the survey-instrument nor interview-guide directly asked participants about teaching Muslim students as this was not an explicit focus of the research. However, both did invite teachers to share their perspectives on the rather more open question of cultural diversity in the classroom. One survey question asked respondents to what extent they agreed with the statement, ‘I find having students from diverse cultural backgrounds influences the way that I teach about the Holocaust’. Of those who answered this question, 23.3 per cent agreed or strongly agreed. A free-text box accompanying the question invited those teachers to share further details.

In fact, a sizeable proportion of the 179 responses given here suggested that cultural diversity in the classroom did not – and moreover should not – influence teaching about the Holocaust. For example, one teacher’s response read:

I do not teach [about the Holocaust] to draw explicit moral lessons or sermons and so even in a school that is 70% Muslim with strong links to Palestine, I still take a historical disciplinary perspective and so [the salience of] the cultural background of the class is the same as for all other inquiries.

(Extract from survey response)

This teacher’s unprompted qualification, ‘even in a school that is 70% Muslim’, denotes an awareness of the proposition large numbers of Muslim students in a classroom could pose specific challenges to teaching about the Holocaust. In this case, however, this is a premise that they themselves appear to reject.

Other teachers responding to the same question described diverse backgrounds and experiences among students as a resource that could be drawn upon in lessons. A small minority expressed an appreciation – or perhaps apprehension – that some students may perhaps feel a closer, personal or community-based connection to historical events other than the Holocaust. Some of these teachers appeared to share a concern that such students might believe their ‘own’ stories were being overlooked or that their personal and/or familial histories of persecution or prejudice...
were being ignored. This was almost entirely presented, however, as teacher interpretation and/or informed speculation and not made with reference to specific experience. None of these teachers described cultural diversity as a ‘problem’ to be overcome.

During interview, participating teachers were invited to reflect at length on any challenges encountered while teaching about the Holocaust in school. Given this invitation, very few teachers raised issues related to cultural diversity of their own volition. A follow-up prompt asked more directly, ‘how might the particular group of students that you are teaching influence the approach you take?’ Here teachers were much more likely to talk about variation in student ability or maturity than to raise cultural diversity as an area of concern. Even when asked more directly still, ‘What about the cultural background of your students? Could that make a difference to how you teach? In what way?’ few teachers responded in terms of challenges or problems they had encountered. Among those who did, the most common suggestion was that the presence of German or Polish heritage students during specific classroom discussions might require consideration and sensitivity. By and large, however, the cultural homogeneity of predominantly white, ethnic majority classrooms was more often framed as a challenge than cultural diversity; some teachers argued that where students had limited exposure to people from different cultural backgrounds, it could lead to problematic misunderstandings, insensitive attitudes and/or prejudice through ignorance and naiveté.

Contra the most contentious ‘finding’ of the TEACH report, not a single teacher within the survey or interviews gave any suggestion that they had ever even considered avoiding teaching the Holocaust. Moreover, while a small number of teachers suggested that they felt antisemitism and/or Holocaust denial might be a potential issue among certain groups of students, very few reported having any first-hand experience of this. Once again teachers were more likely to report this as a problem that they anticipated encountering among ‘white’, ethnic majority students than among those identified as Muslim (Pettigrew et al. 2009, 98–100).

Reluctance to remember? The Holocaust, ‘new’ antisemitism and Europe’s Others

If research with teachers in the UK context gives only very limited support to the proposition that the responses of Muslim students can constitute a significant problem for Holocaust education, an alternative perspective
The history of the Shoah remains challenging for humanity and for European societies in particular. However, a new challenge has been discussed in recent years. Some migrant communities which are now part of European societies although they do not share the history of the Shoah, seem to be reluctant to remember the murder of European Jewry as one of the greatest crimes of humanity. Teachers have reported difficulties teaching about the Holocaust, particularly with Muslim students.

(Allouche-Benayoun and Jikeli 2013, 3)

While some of the illustrations of student disruption and/or outright hostility provided within the volume are compelling and certainly warrant further attention, it is perhaps instructive to note that one of the sources initially offered to substantiate the authors’ opening framing is the much misreported TEACH report (Allouche-Benayoun and Jikeli 2013, footnote 4).

In order fully to understand the salience of this edited collection and of related publications and symposia (see, for example, Jikeli et al. 2007), it is important that we recognise not only national, but also international discursive frames. While earlier sections of this chapter made significant reference to the construction of a Muslim ‘folk devil’ as both a physical and existential threat to an imagined-as-unitary British national community, a related set of powerful discourses operate at the level of a larger, European ‘we’. Within such discourses, the Holocaust performs a centrally important role. As Esra Özyürek describes:

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, remembering the Holocaust and fighting against anti-Semitism have emerged as the connected centrepieces of European identity.

(Özyürek 2016, 40; see also Romeyn 2014; Assmann 2007)

Özyürek describes how, through the 2000 Stockholm declaration and two later conferences convened by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in Vienna (2003) and Berlin (2004), ‘fighting antisemitism’ came to be ‘defined as a central value of the
recently enlarged Europe’ (Özyürek 2016, 43). But as she continues, the price of galvanising a shared European identity on the basis of ostensibly very positive, democratic values was the creation of a necessary ‘other’ against and in relation to whom the virtues of post-war ‘Europeanness’ could be defined. Özyürek is not alone in locating this process at least in part within what she and others have characterised as an ‘alarmist’ discourse which closely associates Muslims and other ‘immigrants’ to Europe with what has, increasingly commonly, been framed as a ‘new antisemitism’ (see also Rothberg and Yildiz 2011; Silverstein 2008; Bunzl 2005).

David Feldman outlines a similar argument while framing a recent research study of the relationship between antisemitism and immigration in five different European societies, including the UK:

The prospects for absorbing and integrating a predominantly Muslim population of refugees has become a flashpoint for conflict between the proponents and opponents of liberal policies on immigration and cultural pluralism.

The theme of ‘Muslim antisemitism’ plays a key role in these debates. In part this is because of the experience and impact of jihadist terror which on some occasions has been aimed specifically at Jewish targets. In part, too, it is a consequence of the role played by Holocaust memory, and the related commitment to overcoming antisemitism in the construction of European identity after the end of the Cold War. In this context, the commitment of Muslims to expunge antisemitism is regarded as not only good in itself but also as a marker of Muslims’ capacity to integrate within European society.

(Feldman 2018, 15, 16)

A related proposition, that any Muslim’s ability to claim a right to belong within contemporary European society is contingent upon the ‘appropriateness’ or otherwise of their engagement with the Holocaust, is articulated clearly in one of the contributions to Jikeli and Allouche-Benayoun’s edited collection:

The reality is that however much Muslims may not wish to participate in Holocaust commemoration it is a defining aspect of European history, and they will have to participate if they wish to live in, and be considered Europeans.

(Whine 2013, 38, emphasis added)
Although none of the other contributors state the case quite so baldly as Whine above, this appears to be a sentiment shared at least to some degree and articulated in various ways throughout many other chapters of the book.

**Whose problem? Which Muslim students?**

To avoid any possible confusion here, let me emphasise once more that it is by no means my intention to undermine very real concerns over – and very real recent experiences of – antisemitism as reported in Britain and across Europe. I do however believe that it is both possible and necessary to do so while at the same time advocating caution against the most alarmist and/or reductionist interpretations of existing available data. Again, this also means exercising critical reflexivity over how the specific issue of antisemitism – and, relatedly, potential opposition to learning about the Holocaust – among ‘Muslim communities’ is regularly framed.

This would also appear to be the position adopted by both Feldman and colleagues in the 2018 study already cited and in the 2017 report on antisemitism in Great Britain issued by the Institute for Jewish Policy Research (JPR) (Staetsky 2017). Both studies identify and acknowledge the apparent empirical reality of heightened levels of antisemitic attitudes as captured by survey instruments among respondents who identify as Muslim. At the same time however, both also emphasise three key points which bear relevance to the arguments explored in this chapter. Firstly, while levels of antisemitism as measured in the JPR’s UK study, for example, were higher among Muslim respondents than among the general population as a whole, this still reflected only a minority of the total number of Muslim people surveyed. As Staetsky helpfully summarises, ‘significant proportions of Muslims reject all such prejudice’, ‘thus the broad stigmatisation of all Muslims is neither accurate nor helpful’ (Staetsky 2017, 58).

Secondly, in the UK study, as in all five nations reviewed in Feldman et al.’s comparative research, the relative size of the Muslim population is small and thus ‘the degree to which Muslims are responsible for the total levels of antisemitism in these societies is low’:

The findings from the Muslim population, therefore, should not deflect from the fact that, for the most part, antisemitic attitudes stem from the majority population, not from minorities.

(Feldman 2018, 23)
As Feldman warns,

the focus on Muslim antisemitism can promote a process of ‘exter-
nalisation’: the projection of antisemitism in the majority society on
to Muslim and immigrant minorities.

(Feldman 2018, 16)

Indeed, Lentin and others would argue that this process of ‘exter-
nalisation’ extends further still, with the focus on ‘new’, Muslim anti-
semitism obscuring not only enduring European antisemitisms but also
all other continuing forms of European racism (Lentin 2017; see also
Benbassa 2007).

Thirdly, and as both Feldman and Staetsky are quick to remind us,

Muslims encompass a very diverse population which contains
distinctions of class, education, sex, ethnic background, gener-
atation, religious practice and belief. Surveys of attitudes [or indeed
any enquir y] that are unable to take into account these potential
sources of variation may prove blunt instruments.

(Feldman 2018, 23)

As Feldman has written elsewhere, it is both misleading and damaging to
think of ‘the Muslim community’ – or indeed any community – as a sin-
gular, homogenous or discrete entity, not least because ‘the similarities
across and differences within such communities are often at least as sig-
nificant’ (Feldman and Gidley 2014, 12; emphasis in original). Moreover,

failing to recognise the diversity and range of voices and positions
within such populations, also fail[s] to address the real structures
of disadvantage that shape their experiences.

(Feldman and Gidley 2014, 12)

In essence, the danger that we are being warned of here is of overde-
termining what, if anything, the signifier ‘Muslim’ means in this context
and how much explanatory power we might wittingly or unwittingly be
awarding the term. This is perhaps the most resonant criticism that could
be levelled against existing attempts to address or explore the ‘problem’
of Muslim student responses to the Holocaust.

Authors such as Short and Jikeli – who has conducted his own
extensive qualitative research with young Muslim men in the UK, France
and Germany and who reports significantly worrying articulations of antisemitism (Jikeli 2015) – invariably acknowledge that ‘Muslim youth are not a monolithic entity’ (Short 2013, 130) and/or that ‘Muslim communities . . . are diverse, and individual’s attitudes even more so’ (Jikeli 2015, 4). However, they seldom appear to question whether, and to what extent, Muslim students’ (rare) reluctance to learn about the Holocaust, or their expressions of antisemitism, are in fact attributable to their ‘Muslimness’. Nor do they very significantly engage with the important argument that ‘Muslimness’ itself is a contingent and context-dependent, constructed phenomena. Critically, they minimise the role potentially played by ‘majority’ societies (and majority governments) who, as we have seen, can stand to gain from the identification of ‘Muslims’ in oppositional, pejorative and/or variously ‘Othered’ terms. They may also significantly contribute to the structural marginalisation and material disadvantage of minority communities (Kundnani 2007).

Julia Eksner makes a closely related argument in her 2014 study which examines how ‘(some) German Muslim youths come to position themselves against the State of Israel today’ (Eksner 2014, 3). Eksner resists and is ultimately critical of the explanatory frame of ‘Muslim antisemitism’ in Jikeli’s and other German-language studies concluding, ‘the assumed transmission of antisemitic stereotypes and attitudes via ethnocultural “Muslim” group membership as primary process pathway is currently not clearly supported by the empirical evidence’ (Eksner 2014, 11). Instead, as she argues in a 2015 paper, that ‘Muslim youth’s positioning against Israel is by no means a “natural” or “cultural” given; rather, Muslim youth’s responses are structured by pre-existing discursive relations in Germany’; ‘in order to understand the anti-Israeli posture found among some German Muslim youths, one needs to understand less obvious discursive and structural conditions that fuel and encourage such attitudes’ (Eksner 2015, 208).

Crucially, Eksner also suggests such discourses can become self-fulfilling. She cites a German study by Stender and Follert (2010):

In the face of contradicting data about the attitudes of their Muslim students (which were not antisemitic), the mostly autochthonous German teachers of these students defined antisemitism as the problem of ‘Muslim students,’ influenced by the widespread mass media discourse on ‘Muslim antisemitism’ in the phrasing of their words . . . . Most importantly, students who are ascribed with stigmatized identities that position them as Muslim, anti-Western, anti-Israeli, and antisemitic respond to these positionings.

(Eksner 2014, 32, citing Stender and Follert 2010)
This is not to suggest that expectations of antisemitism – or of opposition to learning about the Holocaust – in any sense simply create antisemitism, or opposition, from nought. On the contrary, Eksner highlights that the experience of marginalisation and pejorative ‘Othering’ concomitant with precisely such expectations can contribute to the feelings of disenagement, resistance and/or antagonism which may in turn spark or fuel antisemitic or oppositional sentiment.

With this in mind, it is prudent to return to the conclusion reached in Short’s 2013 paper. Short draws his paper to a close with the reflection, ‘No matter how amenable some Muslim students might be to learning about the Holocaust, teachers ought to be prepared for a hostile reaction from others’ (Short 2013, 130). There is a sound pedagogical rationale for such a reflection likely made in all good faith. However, if we are to take seriously the warning offered by Eksner and others, that Muslim students’ identifications as Muslim are at least in part dependent on other people’s expectations and wider discursive constructions, there is perhaps a danger that a ‘prepared’ but otherwise unreflexive teacher might exacerbate precisely the situation they were intending to address. At the very least, we could argue that this same teacher’s preparation could more instructively be spent ensuring that their pedagogy encourages and enables students to respond to taught content from emergent and flexible rather than predetermined positions. More pragmatically, it is also important to offer alternative ‘evidence’ to counter any potential dominance of those narratives that position an essentialised notion of ‘Muslim students’ as an obstacle to teaching and learning about the Holocaust. Such ‘evidence’ is important not only for teachers but also for their students, especially those who might otherwise bear the weight of such skewed representational discourses.

The 2016 UCL student study

To this end it is instructive to share analysis of a sub-sample of student responses drawn from the UCL Centre for Holocaust Education’s 2016 study (Foster et al. 2016): survey responses from 1,016 11–18-year-olds who self-identified as Muslim and interview responses from a further 26. On the basis of this data-set, the largest of its kind internationally, ‘Muslimness’ appears to have very low explanatory power as to attitude towards learning about the Holocaust. The wider study from which this data was drawn has already been described in earlier chapters of this book, but it is worth noting that Muslim students comprised 12.8 per cent of the total cohort of 7,978 individuals who completed the detailed
online survey (see also Foster et al. 2016). At the 2011 census, approximately 8 per cent of all school-aged children in England were Muslim. Of those that took part in the UCL survey, 70.5 per cent indicated that religion was ‘very important’ to them personally, 26.2 per cent that it was ‘quite important’ and 3.4 per cent that it was ‘not important’; 49.6 per cent identified their ethnicity as Asian–Pakistani, 16.2 per cent as Asian–Bangladeshi, 7.5 per cent as Asian–other (including Indian). This is broadly consistent with data collected from the adult Muslim population in 2011 (Muslim Council of Britain 2015).

Within the survey, all participating students were invited to indicate to what extent they agreed with a series of statements designed to examine attitudes towards learning about the Holocaust in school. There were 11 statements in total including items such as: ‘The Holocaust does not really interest me’; ‘Too much time in school is spent learning about the Holocaust’; ‘Young people should learn about the Holocaust so they understand where prejudice and racism can lead’; and ‘The Holocaust is not related to my life because it happened in another country’. To enable statistical comparison across students, a single mean measure was calculated by combining individual students’ responses to all 11 statements. The highest scores reflected those students who appeared most positive towards learning about the Holocaust. Across all 7,958 students, the average score was 34.6 (of a possible 44). This was interpreted to demonstrate very high levels of positive engagement with this history across survey respondents as a whole; a ‘neutral’ rating in response to all 11 statements combined would have scored 22. Responses for individual groups and cohorts of students were also examined but only very limited variation was found. Most significantly for our discussions here, the average score across all those students who self-identified as Muslim was 33.8. The average score for those who identified as having ‘no religion’ by way of comparison was 34.2. However, when analyses were run to take account of the potential influence of other demographic variables captured in the survey, such as socio-economic class or academic ability, even this very small distinction was found to be statistically insignificant (Foster et al. 2016, 81). Among the students who took part in the UCL study, gender, academic ability and socioeconomic class all appeared to have a more pronounced impact than ‘Muslimness’ on how positively or otherwise a student felt towards learning about the Holocaust.

Positivity also characterised the accounts given by the 26 Muslim students invited to take part in interviews. It is important to emphasise the limitations of the qualitative dimension of this study. In total, only 5 focus groups were conducted in just 2 different schools and female
interviewees outnumbered males by 20 to 6 as one of the participating schools was a single-sex girl’s school. Nonetheless, the two schools – one in central London, the other in a large urban area in the West Midlands – offered significant contrast in the approaches they adopted to teaching and learning about the Holocaust. In one school a large amount of curriculum time across all year groups was devoted to the subject and students who took part in interview appeared especially knowledgeable about this history. In the second, the Holocaust received limited attention spread over just one or two lessons in Year 9. The students at both schools were aged between 12 and 17.

As such, the study certainly does not claim to offer an exhaustive or authoritative account of all Muslim students’ attitudes towards learning about the Holocaust in all of England’s schools. However, the responses given in interview do further corroborate and inform the impression given by the much larger and more representative survey data-set already described. Together, they strongly suggest that the more contentious negativity captured in studies by Jikeli and Rutland, for example, as cited above, is unlikely to reflect a majority perspective and is less widespread than readers of only those studies might be inclined to believe. Moreover, although they are less likely to find their way into arresting newspaper headlines, the positive affirmations shared by Muslim students in the UCL study are no less important to document than the outright hostility that both Jikeli and Rutland share.

In the school with a well-established and extensive programme related to the Holocaust, students demonstrated considerable interest and engagement. For example, some reported that they had chosen their post-compulsory examination subjects to ensure they could learn more about this history. Others emphasised what they saw as the Holocaust’s universal significance: ‘No matter where you are in the world you should learn about that’ (extract from interview with Chandni, Year 9). These students repeatedly explained their interest with reference to a notion of shared humanity transcending ethnic, religious or national identities:

It was done against humans. I think it’s just innate in us to feel emotions towards it, regardless of their race or religion or anything. (Extract from interview with Laboni, Year 12)

I think if we are empathetic people then we will be interested to learn about it. Because even though they are not Muslims or they are not Bengali, they are Jews, they are still human beings. (Extract from interview with Yasmina, Year 7)
Although students from the second school tended to be less emphatic in their responses, they still expressed interest in the Holocaust, considered it to be an important subject to learn about and, in general, expressed the desire to learn more than they already knew. Interestingly, while, during interview, some students shared strongly held personal views regarding the Israel-Palestine conflict and acknowledged that this could in some contexts lead to tensions between Muslims and Jews, they gave no indication that such perspectives in any way impacted their attitude towards learning about the Holocaust.

The closest that any student in either school got to articulating a position of potential opposition echoed one of the concerns tentatively advanced by a small number of teachers who took part in UCL’s 2009 study:

Laboni: Some students might want to learn about something a bit more closer to their identity and identify with it a bit more . . .

Samreen: It’s like Eurocentric. Being Muslim, it is more than likely that you’ll be from somewhere in Asia or Africa. I think learning about perhaps the Nationalist challenge in India would be a bit more interesting to us than what happened in Germany perhaps.

(Extract from interview with Year 12 students)

One group of Year 13 students were willing to challenge the prominence given to the Holocaust within the national curriculum a little further and ventured criticism of the celebratory British national narrative within which they felt this history was framed:

Marwa: It [the Holocaust] shows the British in a positive light.

Zarak: That’s why they publicise it . . . When you are studying certain subjects you sort of inoculate the conflicting arguments so you don’t really know much about them, so you can’t really acknowledge them. So obviously by putting the Holocaust in, you see Britain, as like they are doing a good thing, so you don’t really think about the bad things they might have done.

[...]

Rameesha: I think it’s like last year we learned about how Hitler got into power and more about the Holocaust. That should be like the British Empire, how they attained the British Empire, find out what the British Empire did for them.
Wassim: All they really talk about is how our tiny island ruled this many countries, which shows its power. It doesn’t tell you about all the people who died, and like India and how they lost their freedom. They don’t display the debts, they don’t show the debts.

(Extracts from interview with Year 13 students)

One possible framing of these students’ voices could interpret their words as resentment towards learning about the Holocaust, or worse still, a disavowal or undermining of its significance relative to other historical events, which, in some commentators’ analyses, is tantamount to emergent Holocaust denial (see, for example, Jikeli 2015). There is insufficient space here to grapple with the legitimacy or otherwise of claims that attention given to the Holocaust in English classrooms (or elsewhere) underscores the relative inattention given to, for example, the country’s own colonial and slave-trading past, (though for relevant contributions to such discussions see, amongst others, Lawson 2014; Stone 2000; and Rothberg 2009). However, given the concerns of the current chapter it is especially important to emphasise that almost exactly the same sentiments and potential provocations were also raised by a number of other, non-Muslim, ‘white’ or ‘majority ethnic’ students during interview. It would therefore and once again be both misleading and potentially harmful to read even these, very tentative, potential criticisms as foremost a function of students’ ‘Muslimness’ in any simplistic way.

Concluding thoughts and unanswered questions

This chapter volunteered the notions of ‘constructed controversy’, ‘folk devils’ and ‘moral panics’ as instructive lenses through which to consider recent popular, media, and even some academic discourses regarding the ‘problem’ of Muslim student responses to learning about the Holocaust. It did so, not to deny the existence of any such problematic or otherwise challenging encounters, but to insist on a sense of proportionality and to highlight the importance of reflexivity and care in how teachers, policy makers, researchers and other commentators approach such discourse. It emphasised that discussions of how some Muslim students engage with taught content on the Holocaust are themselves framed by – and can in turn contribute to – wider discursive frameworks currently operating at both a national and international level which powerfully position ‘Muslim’ communities as a ‘problem’, a ‘threat’ and/or a ‘challenge’,
outside of and antithetical to British and/or European ‘values’ and identity. Some of these same discourses simultaneously position ‘appropriate’ engagement with – and reverence for – the memory of the Holocaust as a litmus test for ‘insider’ status, an indicator of whether those marked as ‘other’ truly belong.

In this context, the chapter suggests that it is of considerable importance that both teachers and educational researchers avoid alarmist overgeneralisations and resist essentialist ‘explanations’ that overdetermine the significance of ‘Muslimness’. Drawing on prior empirical research and an unprecedentedly large dataset that allowed comparative examination of Muslim students’ attitudes towards learning about the Holocaust, the chapter found very little evidence to suggest that this should be considered a significant area of concern.

That said, as other chapters in this collection have powerfully argued, educational exposure to the Holocaust can be a profoundly enriching and potentially transformative opportunity. If any students are less likely than others fully to engage with this opportunity – whether by virtue of their own prior understandings and expectations, individual or familial political perspectives, religious beliefs, their own perception or experience of marginalisation, or, for that matter, the prior judgements made about them by teachers – this warrants further attention. Of all the indicative questions I listed earlier in this chapter, one proved impossible to answer on the basis of existing literature and empirical data: In what – if any – specific contexts have encounters interpreted as problematic been most or least likely to occur? But, in terms of responsive pedagogy, this is arguably the most important. If we are to move beyond ‘Muslimness’ as an insufficient explanation for a particular type of (potential) opposition to learning about the Holocaust, further, more nuanced, reflexive and responsible research and classroom reflection is required.

Notes

1. See, as a point of comparison, some of the charges of ‘burying ones head in the sand’ levelled at David Feldman and colleagues, for example, in their recent analysis of the relationship between antisemitism and immigration into Western Europe (Baker 2018) or at the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia accused of suppressing research which appeared to provide evidence that ‘Muslim youths’ were the main source of rising antisemitism within Europe (as detailed in Bunzl 2005).

2. The notion of Muslims as ‘immigrants’ – that is, as relative newcomers or ‘outsiders’ – is itself somewhat contentious and rather problematic but is precisely one of the characteristic hallmarks of those discourses that serve to repeatedly position Muslims – irrespective of their country of birth – as temporary sojourners in distinction to the dominant and largely unquestioned national, or here European, ‘we’. The notion of a distinctly ‘new’ antisemitism is similarly contentious and much debated (see, for example, Fine 2009 for an instructive overview of relevant debates).
References


