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## Holocaust Education in Worcester Schools: An Evaluation

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## **Cover Page Footnote**

I would like to thank both of my advisors, Dr. Mary Jane Rein and Professor Thomas Kühne for providing me with the inspiration to undertake this project and supporting me throughout its completion. I would also like to thank both the LEEP Center at Clark and the Steinbrecher Fellowship Program at Clark for providing the funding to undertake this project.

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## ABSTRACT

This project sought to assess the state of Holocaust education in Worcester public secondary schools. The project was based on interviews conducted with roughly 30 students from two Worcester high schools as well as two of their teachers. In these interviews students were asked a series of questions to determine both their knowledge and understanding about the Holocaust, as well as their reactions to learning about it. The interviews with the teachers sought to uncover how the Holocaust was taught to students and with what goals in mind. Students overwhelmingly demonstrated levels of knowledge about the Holocaust below what could be expected of them following learning about the subject for any length of time at the secondary level. However, both the students and their teachers demonstrated positive attitudes towards the subject of the Holocaust, which indicates that, given the proper support, a more effective curriculum could be implemented. Given that this is the first research ever conducted into Holocaust education in Worcester schools, there is significant room for further work in the subject.

Research into *teaching and learning about the Holocaust* (TLH) has rapidly emerged as an international field of study over the last decade. TLH research in the United States (US), while popular for longer than in many other countries, is often far less comprehensive by comparison. This is due to the decentralized nature of Holocaust education in the US context. Without a national curriculum or mandate to teach the Holocaust, the content and methods of Holocaust education programs can vary dramatically between districts, schools, and even classrooms. Thus, attempts to represent Holocaust education accurately confine research in the US to a small area of study. It is with this in mind that I set out to investigate the state of Holocaust education in Worcester Public Schools, specifically at the secondary level.

My research was conducted in two of Worcester's public high schools, both characterized by diverse student populations. School A<sup>1</sup> has a student population of over 1,200 (grades 9-12), while School B has a stu-

dent population of less than 400 (grades 9-12). The focus of this study, however, was not to compare Holocaust education between schools, but rather to assess what students understand about the Holocaust as a whole and to identify major themes that emerged in the demonstration of this understanding.

A total of 25 students were interviewed for this project, all of whom had directly engaged with the Holocaust in class during the 2016-2017 academic year. The interviewed students encountered the Holocaust in one of three different subjects: English, World History, or US History. The students were interviewed primarily in groups of two and three, though two one-on-one interviews did take place. The rationale behind grouping students for interviews was that students would be more comfortable talking in the presence of other students, rather than one-on-one with a researcher they had never met before. This proved largely true, as students often built on each other's points, filled in when one struggled to recall information on the spot, but also felt comfortable disagreeing with one another. By comparison, the two one-on-one interviews yielded much shallower results.

<sup>1</sup> At the request of the school system, I have kept the individual school names anonymous.

Through my interviews with these students, I hoped to gauge the effectiveness of their classroom instruction on the Holocaust, as well as how they received the topic. Thus, I selected my questions to address two main issues: what students knew about the Holocaust and how they reacted to learning about it.

It was my aim, through questions surrounding knowledge, not only to gain an understanding of students' grasp of the basic facts of the Holocaust, but also how they apply these facts to form deeper understandings about the Holocaust—why events happened, how they unfolded, and their significance. To give an example, a student may be able to recall that “the Nazi Party” was responsible for the Holocaust. However, the retention of this fact may prove to be of little consequence if they do not also understand who made up the Nazi Party and how it functioned as to enable the transformation of Germany into a genocidal society.

Following the model of the University College of London Centre for Holocaust Education's study titled *What do Students Know and Understand about the Holocaust?*, I identified three broad themes surrounding the Holocaust around which to structure my knowledge questions: *victims*, *perpetrators*, and the *space & time* of the Holocaust. The basic questions I asked to gauge students' knowledge and understanding of the Holocaust were as follows:<sup>2</sup>

1. How would you define the Holocaust to someone who had never heard of it before?
2. Provide a brief timeline of the major events in the Holocaust
3. Who were the victims of the Holocaust, and why were they targeted?
4. Who was responsible for the Holocaust?
5. Where did the Holocaust take place?
6. When did the Holocaust take place?
7. How many Jews were killed in the Holocaust?
8. At the start of the Holocaust, before the killings took place, what percentage of the German population would you say was Jewish?

On the theme of victims, I hypothesized that students would be able to identify multiple victim groups, as well as the significance of the Jews in Nazi policy; however, they would lack sufficient knowledge in differentiating between the policies towards and the experiences of the different groups. Furthermore, I predict-

ed that although they would be able to identify the Jews as somehow significant, they would be unable to fully articulate the reasoning behind their persecution (racial antisemitism).

On the theme of perpetrators, I hypothesized that students would offer a largely intentionalist view of Holocaust perpetration, focusing on Hitler and “the Nazis” as a small minority without recognizing the role of the German people, ordinary soldiers, and other collaborators. If students did discuss the German people in the context of the Holocaust, I hypothesized that they would be framed as either ignorant of what was unfolding or brainwashed/terrorized into inaction by the Nazis.

On the theme of time and space of the Holocaust, I hypothesized that students would demonstrate an incomplete chronology of the Holocaust (particularly the start of systematic mass murder), as well as a misconception of the Holocaust as an inevitable event rather than an evolving process. I also hypothesized that students would take a German-centered view of the Holocaust when it came to the location of killings and the origins of the victims.

The justification of Holocaust education is a frequently debated topic. Through my questions on students' reactions to Holocaust education, I hoped to gain a better understanding of the student perspective in learning about the Holocaust. The most often cited reason in support of learning about the Holocaust by teachers and educational researchers is that it provides moral lessons that can be used today. I hoped to learn if students share this view and, if not, what they see as valuable in learning about the Holocaust (or why they think it is not valuable).

The questions I asked to assess the students' reactions to learning about the Holocaust are as follows:

1. Have you ever encountered the Holocaust inside or outside of school before and, if so, what did you learn this year that was new to you?
2. Is there anything you didn't think you learned enough about or want to know more about?
3. Do you think you spend enough time learning about the Holocaust in school?
4. What did you like learning about the Holocaust?
5. Is there anything you didn't like about learning about the Holocaust?
6. Do you think it is important to learn about the Holocaust, and why?
7. Are there any lessons from the Holocaust we can take today?

<sup>2</sup> As these were asked in an interview setting, follow up questions may have been asked depending on students specific responses.

I hypothesized that students would express an overall positive attitude towards learning about the Holocaust and that they would primarily cite its supposed moral lessons to justify its inclusion in the classroom.

In addition to student interviews, I conducted interviews with two of the four teachers whose students participated in this project.<sup>3</sup> These two teachers taught the Holocaust in their courses on US History and English.

Through my interviews with teachers I hoped to gain a clear picture of what and how students are being taught about the Holocaust in their classrooms. With this data, I could then establish what students *should* know about the Holocaust based on what is taught in their respective classrooms. I could then compare that to what knowledge and understanding students *actually* demonstrated in their interview.

In addition to assessing how effective each teacher was at accomplishing their desired learning goal with students, I also sought to evaluate each teacher's program individually: examining the resources/materials that they use; their sources of background information; and what lessons that they hope to convey to their students through the Holocaust.

The questions posed to each teacher were as follows:

1. How do you define the Holocaust when you first introduce it to your students?
2. When in history do you start your teaching of the Holocaust, what major events do you cover, and where do you end?
3. What do you cover with your students about who the victims of the Holocaust were and why they were targeted?
4. What do you cover with your students about who was responsible for the Holocaust?
5. Is there anything you would like to cover about the Holocaust that you don't get a chance to?
6. What materials do you use to teach about the Holocaust in your unit?
7. How long do you spend on the Holocaust? Is it taught on and off or all at once every class period?
8. Given the wealth of popular media on the Holocaust, are there any common miscon-

ceptions your students often come into class with?

9. How do your students react to learning about the Holocaust?
10. What lessons do you want your students to take from learning about the Holocaust?
11. Do you make any explicit connections between the Holocaust and other historical or present day events?
12. What are your sources of knowledge on the Holocaust?

The first four questions intentionally mirror those posed to the students in an effort to create a clear way to compare what knowledge students should possess to what they actually demonstrate.

### Student Interview Summaries

Provided below is a brief synopsis of the responses students gave to each question of the interview, as well as a summary of some of the general trends seen in the responses.<sup>4</sup>

#### *Knowledge Questions*

1. How would you define the Holocaust to someone who had never heard of it before?

The definitions given in each interview tended to vary greatly in content and depth. Some of the simplest answers included "people getting their rights taken away and being dehumanized." The most sophisticated answers described the Holocaust along the lines of "the Nazi extermination plan for the Jews that took place during World War II." As a general trend, History students were more able to give concise, reasonably accurate definitions of the Holocaust (such as the latter), while English students defined it using more abstract, general concepts such as dehumanization. Although more History students were able to provide what would be considered an accurate definition of the Holocaust, as analysis of later questions will show, this does not necessarily mean they demonstrated a deeper *understanding* of the definition.

2. Provide a brief timeline of the major events in the Holocaust.

Every group of students, English and History, fo-

<sup>3</sup> I had originally intended to interview all four teachers whose students participated in the study. However, as of the time this is being written, I have been unable to do so.

<sup>4</sup> The questions are listed here in the same order in which they were posed to the students.

cused almost exclusively on the concentration camps as the sole “major event” in the Holocaust, with the exception of one. This group, ninth-grade World History students, mentioned the Treaty of Versailles, economic issues in Germany, the rise of the Nazi party and propaganda (albeit believing it brainwashed the people of Germany), and Hitler’s territorial expansion. Most other students demonstrated an understanding of the Holocaust as synonymous with the concentration camps; that Hitler came to power (more on their understanding of Hitler and his role later) and immediately began placing Jewish people in concentration camps and gassing them. Not a single reference was made to *Kristallnacht*, an event inextricable from the escalation of the Holocaust, or the Einsatzgruppen shootings, a less commonly taught but nevertheless crucial piece of the Holocaust.

### 3. Who were the victims of the Holocaust and why were they targeted?

Every group mentioned the Jews as victims of the Holocaust, while about half mentioned at least one other victim group (homosexuals, Jehovah’s Witnesses, disabled individuals) or acknowledged the existence of other victim groups; however, all students demonstrated one of two significant misunderstandings about why the victims of the Holocaust were targeted.

One theme of the students’ misunderstanding (whether they stated that the Jews were the only victims or acknowledged the existence of others) held that all individuals persecuted in the Holocaust were targeted for the same reason - they were “different” or “did not fit Hitler’s ideal.” When pressed, one student acknowledged that when it came to killings in the gas chambers, the individuals killed there were “mostly Jews” but could not articulate why. This misunderstanding of the Holocaust was most common among History students.

The second major theme of misunderstanding among students about victimization in the Holocaust held that Germany (or sometimes Hitler specifically) “needed someone to blame for its problems,” specifically the loss of World War I and the economic crisis and decided to “take it out on the Jews” (the term ‘scapegoating’ came up quite frequently). In no interview was the idea of antisemitism<sup>5</sup> and its historical tradition in Europe, or the Nazi worldview of a racial

<sup>5</sup> While the *Oxford English Dictionary* continue to insert a hyphen into anti-Semitism, numerous Holocaust scholars have argued against this practice, as the idea of “Semitism” itself was invented by those opposed to it, i.e. there is no such thing as “pro-Semitism”. For a more in depth explanation of

struggle for survival, brought up.

### 4. Who was responsible for the Holocaust?

Most students placed central, if not sole, responsibility for the Holocaust on Hitler. Although a small number of students acknowledged the fact that Hitler and the Nazi Party had support from German people, they described this group of supporters as small and wealthy. When asked about the role of the general German population, some acknowledged that Germans benefited from Nazi policies at the expense of the Jews; however, they would not go as far as to indicate that this made the German people culpable or responsible. Many also indicated a belief that the German people were either “brainwashed” by Hitler and Nazi propaganda or were unaware of the events of the Holocaust.

A Hitler-centric view of Holocaust responsibility is even more evident in the language most students used to describe the Holocaust throughout the interviews. Students often narrated the Holocaust with Hitler as the central agent, for example, “Hitler decided to kill all the Jews by putting them in concentration camps” and “one man caused millions of deaths.” When asked why it is important to learn about the Holocaust, multiple students stated that it is important for us to know how one man could manipulate a whole country. Students also paid significant attention to Hitler’s background, with multiple students stating they want to know what made Hitler “hate the Jews so much that he would decide to kill them all.”

### 5. Where did the Holocaust take place?

Roughly half the students interviewed stated that the Holocaust took place only in Germany. The other half only had vague knowledge that it occurred “around Europe” and often only brought up this knowledge when pressed. Only one student mentioned Poland as the central location where the majority of the camps were located.

### 6. When did the Holocaust take place?

Most students correctly (but roughly) identified the 1940s as the period during which the Holocaust took place. Only one group, however, stated the largely recognized time period of 1933-1945. It is unclear if some students know that the systematic mass killing

this word choice see Hayes, Peter. *Why? Explaining the Holocaust*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2017. P.5



of the Holocaust did not begin until the 1940s, or if most believe that the mass killing began immediately when the Nazi regime rose to power and that this did not occur until the 1940s; however, I believe the latter is more likely based on the descriptions of the Holocaust throughout most interviews.<sup>6</sup> Most of the History students were able to recognize that the Holocaust occurred in conjunction with World War II, while not all of the English students connected the two events.

7. How many Jews were killed during the Holocaust?

Most students answered this with reasonable accuracy. Some gave the answer of 6 million with confidence, some stated a number below that in the millions, others said “millions” generally. A few simply said “a lot” or “it can’t be counted.”

8. At the start of the Holocaust before the killings took place, what percentage of the German population would you say was Jewish?

This question was universally answered incorrectly. Just about every student gave a number between 40 and 60 percent with confidence (some even attempted to correct other students’ answers, saying “no, it had to be higher”). This indicates that students believe that most, if not all, of the “millions” of Jews killed in the Holocaust that they discussed in Question 7 were German.

*Reaction Questions*

1. Have you ever encountered the Holocaust inside or outside of school before, and if so, what did you learn this year that was new to you?

A substantial number of students mention learning about the Holocaust at home through documentaries or Internet browsing, which can be a significant source of misconceptions as much of the popular media on the Holocaust students would encounter on their own (short films, video clips, websites, etc.) tends to seek an effect of shock and awe rather than historical accuracy. These sources often stress the most horrific details of

the Holocaust rather than paint a historically accurate picture.

The most common answer students gave when asked what new information they learned in class this year fell along the lines of “we just went into more detail”; however, there were some specific answers. English students tended to mention specific, gory details as new information they learned (stealing of gold from teeth, shaving of heads, travel in cattle cars, etc.). This is most likely because such specific, horrific acts are often what stick out as the most memorable, particularly when asked to remember something on the spot in an interview setting. The most significant answer given multiple times by English students pertained to the US involvement and their reluctance to come to the aid of the Jews, both refugees and those under Nazi tyranny. This falls in line with the learning goals of their teacher, who in their interview expressed a desire to teach the actual role of the US in history, rather than just its successes. History students also mention small details (e.g., the patches used to identify different groups in camps); however, the most common answer among these students was Hitler’s rise to power.

2. Is there anything you didn’t think you learned enough about or want to know more about?

There was a wide variety of answers to this question. The most popular involved knowing more details about concentration camps and gas chambers, falling in line with the fixation on gory details that permeated most interviews. The second most popular answer involved wanting to learn about why the Jews were targeted in the Holocaust (it was also sometimes phrased as “why Hitler did it” or “why Hitler hated the Jews”). This again demonstrates that a portrayal of the Holocaust as a complex process is often missing from these classrooms (though some of this may come from a lack of student engagement), both in the fact that the students ask the question to begin with and the way in which they phrase it. Other answers include requests for more personal stories and other various single answers (resistance, the aftermath, etc.).

3. Do you think you spend enough time learning about the Holocaust in school?

More students than not believed they spent enough time learning about the Holocaust in class. Many also indicated that they believed that what they learned in class gave them a complete and accurate understanding of the Holocaust (many commented something along the lines of “it was great to go into full detail/get the

<sup>6</sup> This view will be elaborated on in a later section assessing the results of these knowledge questions, in which I highlight that students lack an understanding of the Holocaust as an escalating process, viewing it instead as a predetermined discrete event.



whole picture this year”). All failed to recognize that there is a level of depth and complexity that they are mostly missing, e.g. the Hitler centric view of the Holocaust students demonstrated in response to knowledge question four reflects a lack of understanding about the widespread nature of involvement in the Holocaust crucial to its unfolding.

#### 4. What did you like about learning about the Holocaust?

Students interpreted this question in a variety of different ways. Some talked about what they thought was most important to know (people being persecuted and killed), some brought up what they found most interesting to learn about (war crimes trials, how one group could be targeted in such a way). However, the most common response across classes was students stating that they like knowing what “actually” happened. Many asserted that the Holocaust had been “sugar coated” in previous classes and that they enjoyed learning “the real truth of it.” This connects to my analysis of the previous question in that most students actively indicated that they believe themselves to have an in-depth and accurate understanding of the Holocaust.

On a more general level, almost all students reacted positively to learning about the Holocaust, indicating in some way that it is an interesting and valuable subject which they enjoyed learning.

#### 5. Is there anything you didn’t like about learning about the Holocaust?

This question produced a similar variety of interpretations as the last. Many noted that, though interesting to learn about, the Holocaust is also sad and frightening. Some mentioned aspects of the learning process, such as the fact that other students in class would make light of the material by laughing. One student did respond to this comment by admitting that she was one of the students who laughed, but only because the material made her feel uncomfortable. Some students interpreted the question as asking what they did not like about the Holocaust itself, leading them to respond with things along the lines of people getting murdered or the US not intervening.

#### 6. Do you think it’s important to learn about the Holocaust, and why?

All students unanimously answered yes to this question. Whether some of these positive responses came from a desire to say what they thought I wanted

to hear, or because they felt embarrassed to say otherwise, will never be known; however, most students seemed engaged enough in explaining why it is important that I believe their answers to be genuine.

The most popular answer to the question of why the Holocaust is important to learn was because it is a significant event in history that we should know about. This stands in stark contrast to my hypothesis about how students would answer this question, which predicted that students would find the Holocaust important to learn about because of its moral implications and lessons for the present (which is the most popular rationale found by most researchers in the field). The idea that the Holocaust should be taught for its own sake and because of its historical importance is a significant school of thought among Holocaust education researchers and Holocaust historians.<sup>7</sup> However, it is unlikely these students hold this view for the same well thought-out reasons.

The second most popular answer (though given by only about half as many students as the first) is that we should learn about the Holocaust so that it does not happen again. This falls more in line with my hypothesis; however, only one student followed up the assertion that we should learn about the Holocaust for the sake of prevention by making a connection to the present day.

Only one student put forth another popular rationale for teaching the Holocaust seen worldwide: to memorialize the victims.

#### 7. Are there any lessons from the Holocaust we can take today?

There was a huge amount of variety in students’ answers to this question. A small number of students stated that there are no lessons to be learned from the Holocaust or that they could not think of any. One student stated that because similar events were not happening in the US (though they did state that they were taking place in other parts of the world) we did not have a real lesson to learn from it. Many students stated generic, simplified lessons such as “treat people equally” or “if something feels wrong to you, don’t do it.” Many also stated lessons that reflected their misunderstanding of the Holocaust described earlier (that Germany/Hitler blamed the Jews for their shortcomings,

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<sup>7</sup> For examples of this view see Lipstadt, Deborah. “Not Facing History.” *The New Republic*. March 6th 1995; Dwórk, Deborah. “A Critical Assessment of a Landmark Study.” *Holocaust Studies* 23:3 (2017). 385-395.

thus deciding to annihilate them), citing lessons such as “people should take responsibility for themselves” or “don’t blame other people for your mistakes.”

### Interview Summaries-Teachers<sup>8</sup>

#### 1. How do you define the Holocaust when you first introduce it to your students?

Ms. English and Ms. US History provided very different answers to this question. Ms. English discussed introducing the Holocaust through the book *Night* by Elie Wiesel. Ms. US History, on the other hand, introduced the Holocaust through the term genocide, first defining the term with her students and then discussing classroom norms over how to discuss this difficult and sometimes graphic topic. However, neither teacher provided a clear and concise definition of the Holocaust that they use with their students.

#### 2. When in History do you start teaching the Holocaust, what major events do you cover, and where do you end?

Ms. US History stated that her teaching of the Holocaust comes within the context of her unit on World War II, the guiding question for which is “What is acceptable in times of war?” She begins her unit by having students discuss various ethical dilemmas, some of which would have arisen in the Holocaust. The background context of the Holocaust itself is given through a homework assignment that takes the form of a reading on the rise of the Nazi Party. Although Ms. US History did not continue to elaborate on what major events in the Holocaust are covered and where her class ends, it is largely covered later in the interview.

Ms. English discussed beginning her unit with a two-day period about the rise of Adolf Hitler to power and the impact of the loss of World War I. She framed her teaching of the loss of WWI as leaving the German people desperate, saying “they needed someone to blame; they needed a scapegoat to feel better about themselves because they were so destitute.” As her unit on the Holocaust centers around *Night*, Ms. English describes spending a significant portion of the unit on life inside concentration camps.

#### 3. What do you cover with your students about who the victims of the Holocaust

were and why they were targeted?

In discussing her approach to victims, Ms. US History stated a desire to ensure her students knew that, in addition to the Jews, there were other groups persecuted in the Holocaust (specifically listing political prisoners, disabled individuals, and the Roma and Sinti). When addressing the issue of why these groups were targeted, Ms. US History stated that much of this learning was done by the students on their own through the examination of primary and secondary sources, adding on that the state history standards she is forced to adhere to mandate almost no knowledge on the Holocaust. She additionally expressed a desire for her students to develop some level of empathy for the victims and a hope that some individual, story, or moment would resonate with them.

Ms. English took a much more direct approach to answering this question. Outlining her approach to the victims, she stressed her emphasis on the dehumanization of the Jews and the importance of dehumanization in the Nazi efforts to dominate such large numbers of people. I find the summary of Ms. English’s description of why the Jews were targeted in the Holocaust best represented through a direct quote:

“at one point we discuss that despite the devastation of the war [WWI] and people not having resources, Jewish people were able to maintain because they survived as a community. The baker baked bread for everyone; the attorney made sure everyone knew their rights, the educators made sure that everyone was educated. So they shared their resources and I feel like that’s why they became a target... they were smaller in numbers, but they had a spirit about them, and they had this livelihood that people envied... and I think that’s how they became a victim, because of their physical difference, but also their cultural difference and their inability to... be sucked in and devastated politically like other people were in society.”

#### 4. What do you cover with your students about who was responsible for the Holocaust?

Similar to her description of her approach to victims, Ms. US History stressed the more self-guided nature of her classroom on this topic, stating that the question of responsibility is one she would pose to the students rather than impress a single answer on them. However, she stated that she hoped they would come to the conclusion of Nazi Germany, as evident in the

<sup>8</sup> To keep the identities of the teachers confidential, they will be referred to by their subject- Ms. English and Ms. US History.

readings she provided them.

Ms. English stressed teaching the societal causes of the Holocaust, particularly the loss of WWI. She also stated that although Hitler was the face of the Holocaust, it could not have happened in a vacuum and she does not assign total responsibility to one person.

5. Is there anything about the Holocaust you would like to cover that you don't get a chance to?

Ms. US History again stressed her wish that the state standards for US History include more on the Holocaust, as she would like to spend more time on it in general. Specifically, she expressed a desire to further examine the role of the US in the Holocaust and what American people on the homefront actually knew at the time.

Interestingly, Ms. English responded to this question primarily by stressing her inclusion of the role of the US in the Holocaust. She stated the importance of teaching the negative parts of American history, which are often overlooked. She discussed teaching the US failure to act sooner, reluctance to publicize what was occurring in the Holocaust, and refusal to allow Jewish refugees to enter the country. She expressed a desire to teach more of US History.

6. What materials do you use to teach the Holocaust in your unit?

Following her previously described model of leaning towards student inquiry-based learning, Ms. US History cited using a large number of primary sources, mostly drawn from the 1994 Facing History and Ourselves resource book *Holocaust and Human Behavior* to guide students through the unit. She listed sources such as speeches, survivor stories, and propaganda pieces. A significant part of the unit is also based on student group research projects, which are then presented to the rest of the class; however, as the larger focus of the unit is WWII, not all student projects focused on aspects of the Holocaust. Ms. US History described having three groups this past year focus their projects on the Holocaust: one looking at concentration camps; another focusing on medical experiments; and a third examining resistance. She framed these presentations as a way for students to further teach each other about certain aspects of the Holocaust. She also stressed her use of materials from the wealth of premade curricula on the Holocaust to help guide her unit.

In addition to the book *Night*, which serves as the focal point for much of her class, Ms. English discussed

the significant role film plays in her teaching of the Holocaust. She stated that she finds film to be valuable because it engages all students at the same time, even if they experience the film differently. The two films she mentioned showing at full length were *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* and *Life is Beautiful*. Additionally, she showed clips from *Schindler's List* and *The Pianist*. She also emphasized the use of resources on Holocaust remembrance such as museum websites and speeches related to the topic. Finally, she discussed providing students with poems written by victims of the Holocaust during its unfolding and by survivors in the aftermath.

7. How long do you spend on the Holocaust in your unit? Is it taught on and off, or all at once?

Ms. US History stated that she spent roughly one week on the Holocaust in full and although it may come up in passing after that, all the direct class time on the Holocaust occurred in that week. Ms. English, on the other hand, stated that she spends largely two months on the Holocaust in her class, though instruction was occasionally interrupted on certain days for state testing prep and the speed of the class depended on the strength of the students.

8. Given the wealth of popular media on the Holocaust, are there any common misconceptions with which your students often come into class?

Rather than focusing on misconceptions, Ms. US History stated that her students simply do not come into class with as much general knowledge on the Holocaust as she would hope. She described that the students do not typically comprehend the breadth and scope of the Holocaust or the historical context of the persecution of Jews (a concept she is unable to cover). She highlighted that the popular cultural understanding of "Nazi" is well known to her students, but they often lack detailed historical knowledge.

Ms. English listed several common misconceptions she sees from her students, primarily a belief that Adolf Hitler was the sole individual responsible for the Holocaust. Other misconceptions she highlighted were a belief that the Holocaust only encompassed German Jews and that the US was in no way connected to any part of it. Perhaps the most interesting misconception Ms. English believed her students to have was about the importance of free labor. Ms. English discussed at length the central role she depicts free labor as having in the Holocaust, communicating to her students the

idea that the opportunity to exploit the Jews for free labor and property theft was a primary cause of the Holocaust.

9. How do your students react to learning about the Holocaust?

Ms. US History focused on the fact that her students were consistently fascinated by the Holocaust, stating that the intensity and horror of the subject often appeals to students of their age. She also mentioned that this fascination often leads to a desire to know more.

Ms. English stated that her students were overwhelmingly shocked by the horrific nature of what occurred in the Holocaust. She also highlighted that, given the central role of Elie Wiesel's book *Night* in the unit, students began to connect emotionally to the story, often relating it to their own suffering. Ms. English also discussed the few Jewish students she had in her classes, many of whom became very emotional and some who wanted increased levels of sympathy and empathy from their classmates. Finally, she discussed the fact that several students with connections to other countries or historic injustices attempted to compare the horrors of the Holocaust to that of their own particular cultural history or personal experience. In response to this, Ms. English stressed her emphasis of a shared dehumanization and the need to examine commonalities as well as differences.

10. Do you make any explicit connections between the Holocaust and other historical or present day events?

The only explicit connection Ms. US History discussed making to the Holocaust is the persecution and internment of Japanese individuals taking place in the US at the same time. Beyond that, she did not connect the Holocaust to other genocides or historical events.

Ms. English discussed explicitly raising the connection between the Holocaust and the treatment of Native Americans, as it is not a connection the students often make on their own. She did mention that students frequently connect the Holocaust to slavery in the US on their own. Finally, she discussed exploring the issues of immigration in the Holocaust, explicitly connecting the treatment of Jewish refugees in the US with the treatment of immigrants today under the Trump administration. Although she did not mention it as a response to this question, Ms. English discussed throughout the interview an approach to the Holocaust centered on the general ideas of dehumanization and persecution that can be applied in various contexts to-

day.

11. What are your sources of knowledge on the Holocaust?

Ms. US History cited a long history of exposure to the Holocaust from her time as a child when she read numerous works of historical fiction on the subject. However, as she did not study the Holocaust in college at all, Ms. US History discussed using resources developed by more qualified teachers, seeking out such curricular material on the Internet.

Ms. English described building a background in the study of Jewish culture and history from her time in divinity school. When it comes to resources directly related to the Holocaust, she cites using materials offered by organizations such as the Jewish Federation and other nonprofit organizations.

Neither teacher mentioned having ever taken a professional development seminar on the Holocaust nor having engaged with any published scholarly work on the subject.

### Assessing the Results: What Do Students Know about the Holocaust?

We are now left with the central question of the study—what do students actually understand about the Holocaust? In framing my analysis of this issue, I will again use the three broad themes of Holocaust knowledge described previously: victims; perpetrators; and the space & time of the Holocaust.

#### *Victims*

As they are taught, students are able to recognize the central role of the Jewish people as victims of the Holocaust. Additionally, almost all students recall the number of Jews murdered in the Holocaust with reasonable accuracy. However, there appears to be a misconception about the national origins of these murdered Jews. When asked what percentage of the German population was Jewish, almost all students answered around fifty percent. This indicates that they believed most, if not all, of the millions of Jews murdered in the Holocaust to be from Germany. Although many students recognized that concentration camps were located in countries outside of Germany, the interviews indicated that they did not know that it was primarily non-German Jews that filled these camps. Knowing that Jews across Europe, not just Germany, were targeted for annihilation is crucial to understanding Nazi ideology, and by extension, the Holocaust. Nazi ideolo-



gy held that in order to ensure the survival of the Aryan race, all people of the Jewish race across Europe (and, as some scholars have argued, the world) needed to be annihilated.

On the topic of other victim groups in the Holocaust, the results are mixed. When a teacher makes a distinct effort to recognize and identify other victim groups in the Holocaust (such as in the case of Ms. US History), students often retain this knowledge and are able to recall many of the groups accurately (homosexuals, disabled individuals, Roma and Sinti, etc.). When no distinct effort is made, students either only vaguely recognize the existence of other persecuted groups, incorrectly identify groups (e.g., Catholics), or fail to recognize other groups' persecution at all.

For those students that do recognize the existence of other persecuted groups, their understanding of the hierarchy of persecution is largely lacking. No student was able to accurately articulate the reasoning behind the persecution of such groups, and only a small number recognized the fact that they were not targeted for death in the same manner as the Jews.

Turning to the issue of why the Jews were targeted in the Holocaust, we find one of the most significant shortfalls in students' knowledge: the belief that the Jews were victimized in the Holocaust either because they did not fit Hitler's "ideal" or because Germany blamed them for the loss of the war and the nation's economic woes. Students demonstrated no knowledge of historic European antisemitism or Nazi racial ideology. This ignorance represents a deficiency not only in knowledge of victims but also in students' understanding of the Holocaust as a whole.

Moving beyond simple factual knowledge, 'understanding' above refers to students' comprehension of concepts, such as causation, and how they apply these concepts to the Holocaust. For example, when students stated that the reason the Jews were targeted in the Holocaust was because they "did not fit Hitler's ideal," they cited some sort of difference (physical, religious, cultural, etc.) as a cause of the Holocaust. However, they were unable to articulate or conceptualize how basic intolerance of difference escalated to mass murder precisely because they lack knowledge on the historical particularities of the Holocaust. Where this becomes especially problematic (beyond historical inaccuracy) is when students attempt to draw lessons from the Holocaust, whether at the directive of their teacher or on their own.

Here I will briefly turn to Ms. English's problematic pedagogy of Jews in Germany. In her class, German Jews are portrayed as a homogenous, close-knit community that thrived during the economic turmoil of the

Weimar years, which is then cited as the reason for their scapegoating and eventual targeting by Nazi Germany. This is categorically false—many of the small number of Jews in Germany had very little, if any, connection to their Jewish identity or culture, seeing themselves only as Germans. These Jews were also scattered throughout the socioeconomic ladder and were just as impacted by the economic crisis as any other German.

The reasoning behind Ms. English's depiction of German Jews in this way is unclear; however, the most likely cause is simple misinformation. As highlighted in her interview, Ms. English has never had formal professional development on teaching the Holocaust and relies largely on premade resources found on the Internet (which are not necessarily the most reliable sources of information). It appears that Ms. English's source(s) on Jewish life in Germany fail to distinguish between the ways the Nazis depicted the Jews and reality.

Whatever the cause, this particular depiction of the Jews in Germany and the reasons for their persecution have a significant impact on the way students perceive Jewish life and understand the Holocaust.<sup>9</sup> While the idea of the Jews as a wealthy homogenous community is not necessarily a malicious antisemitic trope in itself, it is often the foundation of such beliefs, including those of many Holocaust deniers.<sup>10</sup> Widening our lens, invoking this misconception as a basis for belief is not uncommon. Many scholars who have done classroom research on Holocaust education report encountering students with varying degrees of misconceptions about Jewish life in the years surrounding the Holocaust. However, the development of such misconceptions from direct classroom instruction as exhibited in this study is certainly of note.

### *Perpetrators*

Students overwhelmingly view Adolf Hitler as the driver of and often the sole individual responsible for the Holocaust. This falls largely in line with my hypothesis on this issue and is an extremely common narrative among students around the world. However, it is surprising that this narrative held true among English students, despite the emphasis their teacher (Ms. English)

<sup>9</sup> Many of Ms. English's students reflected this depiction of Jewish life in their interviews.

<sup>10</sup> For a more detailed examination of how such views sit at the root of Holocaust denial, see Lipstadt, Deborah E. Denial. In Hayes, Peter and John K. Roth (Eds). *The Oxford Handbook of Holocaust Studies*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.

described placing on a narrative of Holocaust responsibility that moved beyond Hitler. How her teaching of the “societal responsibility” for the Holocaust described in her interview actually unfolded in the classroom is unclear; however, it evidently did not move students past understanding the Holocaust as synonymous with Hitler.

This does not mean that students failed to recognize the participation of parties in the Holocaust outside of Hitler. Multiple students observed that many German citizens must have benefitted from the Nazi policies against the Jews and that these citizens must have held similar animosity towards the Jews as Hitler did; however, in the students’ minds, this did not translate into responsibility for the Holocaust. Indeed, more students held the belief that most of the German citizens were ‘brainwashed’ into hating Jews or were unaware of the events of the Holocaust.

Here again, we see a lack of deeper understanding about how the Holocaust unfolded. Students believed that one man (Hitler) could be the sole agent in the systematic mass murder of millions and failed to recognize the existence of a complex process that involved complicity, if not culpability, from all rungs of society in Germany and beyond. This is not to say that students need to fully comprehend the convoluted web that enabled the escalation of the Holocaust (indeed, many scholars have devoted entire monographs to explaining this process), but they must be made aware of its existence in order to mitigate the development of oversimplified understandings.

#### *Time and Space of the Holocaust*

Most students were able to roughly identify the years in which the Holocaust unfolded and many understood it as taking place in the context of World War II. However, what most students did not seem to grasp was the idea of the Holocaust as an escalating, contingent process rather than an inevitable event. Most students understood the Holocaust as unfolding rapidly, with Hitler’s coming to power being followed immediately by the concentration and mass murder of Jews.

Some explanation for Ms. English’s students’ understanding of the Holocaust may be found in the fact that much of their Holocaust unit is centered on Elie Wiesel’s *Night*. As Wiesel was a Hungarian Jew, his experience during the Holocaust (as far as it is narrated in *Night*) does not begin until 1944, leaving a student lacking outside knowledge solely with the impression that the Jews were immediately rounded up and placed in concentration camps.

This incomplete timeline of the Holocaust ob-

served in many students (that the Nazi Party came to power and immediately began murdering Jews en masse) is a key component of the deficiency in general understanding discussed earlier. One of the crucial learning objectives of the Holocaust, stated by Ms. US History in her interview, is to understand how the persecution of Jews escalated to genocide (contrary to a commonly held belief, neither Hitler nor the Nazi Party had any discernible intention to annihilate the Jews at the time they rose to power). This view of the Holocaust as a discrete event rather than a complex process demonstrates that this learning goal remains unfulfilled and creates further complications when addressing the issue of lessons from the Holocaust.

### **Discussion & Limitations**

Due to the restrictive time constraints of this study, I made a conscious effort to limit the scope of the knowledge I covered to include what could be considered the basic core of knowledge on the Holocaust. I recognize that I have left out multiple key concepts that students could be expected to know and understand upon the completion of a course or unit on the Holocaust (including rescue, resistance, refugees, etc.). Future research could include not only a more expansive topic range, but also classroom observation during the teaching of the Holocaust to help better understand what exactly students are being taught in the classroom, rather than relying solely on their knowledge after the fact, which could fail to distinguish knowledge gained during classroom instruction from material encountered on one’s own (books, the internet, films, etc.).

Discussing the idea of the effectiveness of Holocaust education in these classrooms presents its own challenge, as there is no established set of metrics based on objectively “right” or “wrong” answers with which to measure a student’s knowledge of the Holocaust. Thus, like many other researchers in this field, I was forced to rely on my own advanced knowledge of the Holocaust as well as the vast body of literature on the subject to evaluate the knowledge of students. This inevitably leaves the study open to criticism from those who wish to debate the significance of various nuanced issues within the history of the Holocaust as they have been applied above. However, given the basic level at which the Holocaust is taught in these schools, there is very little room for meaningful historiographical debate.

Perhaps the most significant limitation of this study stems from the decentralized nature of Holocaust education as discussed in the introduction. Although the results of the study were similar in both schools, it is



difficult to extrapolate such findings to all of Worcester schools given the potential for Holocaust education to vary greatly from school to school or even classroom to classroom. The addition of at least one more school, particularly one with a stronger reputation for academic performance, to the study would have made the results far more conclusive vis-à-vis Worcester Public Schools.<sup>11</sup>

### **Conclusion: The Issue of Lessons**

Returning to the question of lessons to be gained from the Holocaust, it is here that we find the risks of a flawed or incomplete understanding of the Holocaust (beyond blatant historical inaccuracy). This is not to say that many of the lessons articulated by students in these interviews are not lessons students ought to be learning; however, these generic lessons such as “treat people equally” or “don’t blame other people for your mistakes” are certainly not best taught through the Holocaust.

Such lessons come from a teaching of the Holocaust that has been stripped of its complexity and historical context. The Jews were not annihilated because Germany “saw them as different” or “blamed them for their mistakes,” they were annihilated because of a complex escalation involving a long historical tradition of antisemitism, a radical Nazi ideology fixated on race, and an amalgamation of particular circumstances that elicited the complicity of an entire society in one of the greatest crimes in human history. It is only when taught with accurate historical context and with respect to its historical particularities that any truly meaningful lessons can be drawn from the Holocaust.

In concluding this study on what the students understand about the Holocaust and how they react to it, it would be foolish not to highlight the fact that the classroom is only one of the ever-expanding sources of exposure to the Holocaust students encounter (though certainly the most important one). Numerous students throughout the interviews reported encountering the Holocaust outside of school through Internet browsing, movies, books, speaking to parents, etc. Thus, the knowledge and understanding demonstrated in these interviews was shaped both by what students encountered in school and what they discovered on their own.

Unfortunately, much of what students encounter beyond the classroom is misleading and can do more

harm than good in fostering their knowledge of the Holocaust. This doubles the responsibilities of classroom education not only to cultivate an accurate and nuanced understanding of the Holocaust, but also to do so knowing that much of mainstream media is working against it. It is my hope that this study helps contribute to that effort by shedding light on the current state of Holocaust education in local Worcester schools and offering a point from which to look forward.

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<sup>11</sup> I put in a request to conduct my research in such a school during the planning of my project, but was denied for an unknown reason.

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