

# Moral dilemmas: history, teaching and the Holocaust

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The new Holocaust Exhibition at the Imperial War Museum in London has been very favourably received by the general public, and by teachers and their students. Initially controversial – was a war museum the ideal site for such an exhibition, for example? – it has since been widely praised for offering a comprehensive examination of the Holocaust, and one set within its historical context. In this article Paul Salmons, of the Museum's education service, argues that it is both possible and legitimate for an exhibition devoted to the history of the Holocaust to raise important moral questions.

Nicolas Kinloch has argued that teaching the Holocaust should be located within a historical rather than a moral framework. Many history teachers, he says, have been too concerned with the lessons of the Holocaust, and have neglected the big historical questions of why and how the Holocaust happened. For Kinloch, the only meaningful moral lesson that the Holocaust can teach us is, 'that, generally speaking, it is cruel and undesirable to kill large numbers of people for any reason whatsoever'. Hopes that we may also be effective in combating modern day prejudice are misplaced, he argues, because they rest on false comparisons between the genocidal policies of a totalitarian regime and the racism students encounter in Britain today. On this basis Kinloch argues that teachers' efforts to 'make the world a better place' by showing young people the extremes of where prejudice might lead are 'rightly doomed to failure'.

The Holocaust Exhibition at the Imperial War Museum was established to document the *history* of the Holocaust, not to tell people how to feel about these events, nor to further any campaigning agenda aimed at creating a more liberal society. Sober and understated in tone, the philosophy underpinning the exhibition is that this is a story requiring no embellishment and that visitors are capable of making their own moral judgements.

Located within the national museum of twentieth century conflict, this permanent exhibition relates the events of the Holocaust through original historical evidence: a pair of callipers used by Nazi scientists to determine race by the size and shape of people's skulls; yellow stars of David marked with *Jude*, *Juif* and *Jood*; a hand-cart used for carrying the dead in the Warsaw ghetto; a cattle wagon, concentration camp uniforms, clandestine photographs taken by prisoners inside Auschwitz-Birkenau; newly discovered film footage of Jewish children in hiding.

Here the evidence of the Holocaust is made available to the British public for the first time, the raw material of rigorous, analytical, historical enquiry. But does this emphasis on history mean that visitors draw no moral lessons, think not at all upon such issues as intolerance, prejudice and racism in the world today? In short, does a historical approach to presenting the events of the Holocaust prevent visitors from engaging in personal reflection and drawing moral conclusions that are meaningful for them?

The letters and diaries written in the ghettos; the toothbrushes, combs and cooking utensils brought by deportees to Auschwitz; the trinkets and family photographs displayed in the exhibition are all 'the stuff of history', but they were also the treasured possessions of real people. As one visitor commented:

*'One of the best aspects of the exhibit is the personal nature of the individual stories. The small photos and biographies of individuals are so touching. At the thought of millions in mass graves the human mind steps back, unable to take it all in. But to focus on one person, this woman or that child, hits you very very hard.'*

Once the Holocaust is understood as a human event, it is perhaps inevitable that we reflect upon what this tells us about humanity. At an early stage in the exhibition's development Rabbi Hugo Gryn – an adviser to the project – hoped that the exhibition might have a 'civilising influence' on society. Comment cards left by visitors at the end of the exhibition show that many people do draw parallels with other cases of genocide, do make connections with prejudice in British society, and do question our individual responsibility in the face of continuing inhumanity. The following visitor response is typical:

*'A moving reminder of unimaginable horrors. Unfortunately atrocities are still perpetrated worldwide and we still find excuses that allow them to continue.'*

## Historical enquiry as a function of moral concerns

It would appear, then, that learning the history of the Holocaust and drawing moral lessons are *not* mutually exclusive. Many of the 'big historical questions' we want our students to investigate are a function of the *moral* questions that continue to trouble academic historians, as they search for the meaning of human action and inaction during the Holocaust. How could 'ordinary men' become brutal murderers? Why didn't more Jews fight back? Why didn't more people in Nazi Europe try to help their Jewish neighbours? Why wasn't there more opposition to the Nazis from within Germany? How could some Jewish leaders in the ghettos hand over members of their own communities to the Nazis? Why didn't the outside world do more to prevent the Holocaust?

It seems to me that implicit in the *framing* of these historical questions there is a nagging assumption that people at the time failed to make 'the correct moral choice'. There is both a danger and an opportunity here. The *danger* is that we then answer these questions with the very assumptions that form them – that we explain the past in moral rather than historical terms, and in so doing we reduce our students' understanding of complex events to straightforward lessons of 'right and wrong'. For example, our dismay that more was not done to help the Jews may lead us to condemn the vast majority of people in occupied Europe as 'bystanders', and to judge them complicit in the murders of millions. Our attempt to galvanise our students to stand against injustice today then comes at the cost of denigrating people in the past, whose behaviour we have not explained. The *opportunity* is to use these seemingly stark moral choices to stimulate historical enquiry in depth: students will ask why the Allies didn't do more to save the Jews of Europe, and why the *Judenräte* drew up lists of Jews for deportation because, with hindsight, we *expect* 'more moral' behaviour.

Comfortable 'explanations' that people made the wrong moral choices may lead to resolutions that we will act more morally than our forebears. We can then experience the catharsis of saying 'Never again', and congratulate ourselves on our strong moral values. Except that life choices were and are rarely straightforward options of 'right and wrong'. Historical enquiry of the Holocaust, of the type we regularly demand from our students, will reveal to them the complexities of the world in which choices were made and decisions taken; only then can people's actions (and inaction) be judged within the context of their time, and only then can we begin to draw meaningful lessons for today.

It follows, then, that important moral and ethical questions raised by the Holocaust are within the scope of the history teacher, but that these need to be approached from an understanding of the historical situation.



A Zyklon B canister on display at the Exhibition  
Reproduced courtesy of James Johnson

## The need to 're-humanise' people in the past

Steve Illingworth has reminded us of the danger of seeing Jews only as victims, which can 'lead to well-meaning but rather patronising feelings of pity', and that students need to understand 'that there were real lives behind the emaciated figures in the concentration camps.' Shulamit Imber, of Yad Vashem, has spoken of the need to rescue the individual from the gas chamber. Schools visiting the Holocaust Exhibition are sent a specially commissioned film, *The Way We Lived*, which explores the vibrancy and diversity of Jewish communities before the Holocaust. The film also introduces the survivor witnesses who relate their personal testimonies on audio-visual displays throughout the exhibition. This provides a valuable link between school and museum, with the stories of individuals whom students have already 'come to know' in the classroom continuing to unfold in the exhibition.

Some history departments still use explicit photographs of Nazi atrocities in an attempt to communicate the full horror of the Holocaust. But should our objective be to shock and horrify? What do young people actually learn from such an approach? Too often Jews become defined by the Holocaust, dehumanised and objectified.

Moreover, history is distorted by the inappropriate use of such images – many people still perceive the Holocaust as Bergen-Belsen, emaciated corpses bulldozed into open graves. The Holocaust was not Belsen, however. The

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back a  
face and  
a name.**

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appalling conditions discovered there by advancing British troops in April 1945 should not be allowed to overshadow the murder of millions more, in entirely different circumstances, in Eastern Europe. For most of the war Belsen was a *holding* camp, never a *death* camp. The millions murdered in the death camps of occupied Poland were usually gassed on arrival; they did not necessarily resemble the skeletal, dehumanised 'living dead' whom we see in the harrowing film footage of Belsen and other camps liberated at the end of the war. Similarly, the 1.5 million murdered by the *Einsatzgruppen* had not suffered months of appalling, overcrowded conditions, typhus and starvation that we see in the faces of the inmates of Belsen.

It is possible to teach the Holocaust effectively and movingly without such images, and none appears in any of the classroom resources produced by the Imperial War Museum. Within the exhibition photographs of atrocities are displayed as part of the historical record but are not allowed to dominate. A recent study that investigated students' learning inside the exhibition singled out the power of the original artefacts to move young people: 'In pupils' accounts of their day at this exhibition, Emma (Year 9) commented that although she learned a lot in class, it was "easier to understand when I was there looking at things." It is interesting that, for most pupils, the artefacts such as the shoes [which belonged to victims of the death camps] and the prison uniforms, made a much deeper impression on them than any classroom textbook could have done.

School groups that visit the Holocaust Exhibition are given an orientation session to help prepare them for what, for some, will be a very moving experience, and a feedback session to allow space for reflection and discussion about what they have learned. A special focus is given here on

how to look at, interpret, and learn from artefacts – often small and seemingly everyday objects that most students have not been trained to use as historical evidence but which will play a central role in their learning at the museum. Students' learning inside the exhibition is further supported by the use of audio tours that guide them through the galleries, focusing on key artefacts, photographs and personal stories, raising questions and stimulating enquiry. Two tours are currently available, taking account of the needs of different age groups: one for Year 9 students and one for GCSE/AS level students. From the Autumn Term a new tour for students with Moderate Learning Difficulties will be available, and from the Spring Term a tour for students with visual impairment will help young people who are blind or partially sighted to interpret the exhibition.

While much has been said of the dangers of dehumanising the victims of the Holocaust, I am concerned that less consideration is given to the possible dehumanisation of the 'perpetrators', 'rescuers' and 'bystanders'. Imagine if you were to ask your Year 9 class: *Describe the kind of person who becomes a 'perpetrator'? What must that individual have been like to drag innocent people from their homes, lead them to an open grave, and shoot them in cold blood in the back of their heads, or to herd men, women and children into the gas chambers?* What response are you likely to get from your 14 year old students? Perhaps they would say that such people must be mad, evil, sadistic, or psychopathic. Then if you were to ask, *Describe the kind of person who becomes a 'rescuer'? What kind of person would risk their lives for their neighbour, or even for a complete stranger?* Perhaps your class would tell you that these people must have been heroic, brave, good – even saintly? And the 'bystanders': to our Year 9 students were they cowardly, uncaring, selfish, and immoral?

## Case study one: Leopold Socha

Leopold Socha was a petty criminal and sewer worker in the Polish city of Lvov. In the summer of 1943, Socha and three of his workmates discovered a group of Jewish men, women and children hiding in the rat-infested tunnels of the sewers. They had fled there as the Nazis rounded up and murdered the last Jews of the Lvov ghetto.

These people were helpless: they couldn't leave the sewers for fear of discovery and had no means of obtaining food, drinking water, clean clothes or water for washing. One of the women was pregnant. They were completely at the mercy of Socha and his colleagues.

Leopold Socha and his workmates knew that helping Jews to hide from the Nazis was punishable by death. They also knew that the Nazis rewarded those who betrayed Jews in hiding.

- What was the moral dilemma that faced Leopold Socha and his workmates?
- What choices did they have? Try to think of at least three courses of action open to them.
- Do you think that this would have been an easy decision for them to make?
- Look out for the story of Leopold Socha in the Holocaust Exhibition to discover the choice he made.

Such responses are understandable at the beginning of a scheme of work – they are even a useful starting point. But what are we doing to complicate and deepen this thinking, to make these people real, breathing human beings, to show that people in the past were not two dimensional caricatures of heroes and saints, monsters and demons? We need to begin to explain the history of the Holocaust as a human event, and both action and inaction as the (often difficult) choices of *ordinary* people in *extraordinary* circumstances.

## Case Studies:

### moral dilemmas stimulating historical enquiry

The case studies on pages 36, 37 and 38 have been adapted from lessons in *Reflections*, the teachers' resource pack designed to support the Holocaust Exhibition. The objective is to use moral dilemmas faced by people at the time. The actual decisions made are kept from the students, so that they have to find out what choices were made. The knowledge gained during the visit then informs discussion during a follow-up lesson, stimulating new lines of enquiry.

Students discover that Leopold Socha *did* help the Jews in hiding, but only in return for payment. How does this fit with preconceived ideas about the kind of people who rescued? Of course, not all rescuers demanded money in return for help, as another case study in the same lesson – that of Anna Wiechec – makes clear. But neither were such demands untypical, and many Jews in hiding faced extortion and blackmail. When the money ran out many 'rescuers' abandoned the Jews they had been helping, or even betrayed them to the Nazis. It was possible for the same person to be a bystander one day, a rescuer another, a collaborator or a perpetrator as circumstances changed.

When the Jews in the sewers of Lvov could no longer pay their helpers, for more than a year Leopold Socha continued to risk his own life to help them, and eventually led them out of the sewers to safety. But was he a saint? Leopold Socha is interesting, because he was an ordinary man, with strengths and weaknesses. As such he is someone we, and our students, can relate to more easily than the conventionally heroic figures of popular myth and Hollywood films, and the morality of *his* actions provides far more scope for discussion.

## Case study two: Szmul Zygielbojm

Szmul Zygielbojm was a Jewish leader living in London when, in December 1942, he met with Jan Karski, an eyewitness to the mass murder of the Jews of Poland.

Zygielbojm listened in shocked silence as Karski described the starvation of thousands of Jews trapped inside the Warsaw ghetto, massacres where people were shot into open graves, and factory methods of extermination at the death camp of Belzec, where trainloads of people were being murdered every day.

Karski also brought a cry for help from

inside the Warsaw ghetto, calling upon Jewish leaders in the free world to do all they could to help the Jews being murdered in Nazi-occupied Europe. The message said:

'We are only too well aware that in the free and civilised world outside, it is not possible to believe all that is happening to us. Let the Jewish people, then, do something that will force the world to believe us. We are all dying here; let them die too. Let them crowd the offices of Churchill, of all the important English and American leaders... Let them proclaim a fast [starve themselves] before the doors of the mightiest, not retreating... until they undertake some action to rescue those people who are still alive. Let them die a slow death while the world is looking on. This may shake the conscience of the world.'

- What did the Jews of the Warsaw ghetto call upon Zygielbojm and other Jewish leaders to do? Why did they make this demand?
- What choices did Zygielbojm have?
- Look for Szmul Zygielbojm's story in the Holocaust Exhibition to discover the decision he made.



'...perhaps by my death I will contribute to shaking out of their indifference those who can and should act now, at what seems the last moment, to save from certain annihilation the handful of Polish Jews which is still alive.'

Reproduced courtesy of the Ghetto Fighters' House

## Case Study three: Freddie Knoller

Crammed into a cattle wagon with more than 80 Jewish men, women and children, Freddie Knoller was imprisoned on a train heading for Eastern Europe. With not enough room to sit down and only one bucket of water between them and a second bucket for their toilet, they endured a journey that lasted for three days and three nights. Heading towards an unknown destination and an uncertain fate, some believed they were travelling to their deaths, others that they were being taken to a work camp. Everyone was frightened and there was an atmosphere of utter despair.

Freddie and some other young people saw a chance to escape. They began to tear at the wooden boards of the cattle truck so that they could jump from the train and escape.

But others on the train begged them to stop. The SS had warned that if one person escaped, half of those still inside the wagon would be shot.

Elderly people, the sick and the very young could not possibly jump from a moving train and the people in the wagon begged Freddie and the others not to break out, pleading, 'Don't do that, they are going to kill us!'

- What choices did Freddie Knoller face as the train travelled towards the East?
- What risk was he taking if he stayed on the train? What would happen to those left behind if he escaped?
- In a situation like this, can we say the decision is a matter of 'right and wrong'?
- Look for Freddie Knoller's story in the Holocaust Exhibition to find out what decision he made.

men from Hamburg *choose* to commit mass murder? What made these men continue to kill in other towns and villages? In the exhibition students learn about the reasons for Hitler's rise to power, the appeal of the Nazi party, the power and effects of antisemitic propaganda in dehumanising the Jews. A follow-up lesson requiring students to analyse the letters that the perpetrators wrote home to their wives and children, where remarkably they describe and *explain* their own actions, can develop understanding still further. Students *want* to bring their historical skills to bear on this evidence because the question of why people became murderers is a problem about morality and human behaviour that troubles them deeply.

Just as moral issues can motivate historical enquiry, so too can historical events inform attitudes and perceptions in the present. For example, the case study of Gad Beck – who risked his life to save his gay lover from a Nazi camp – can challenge young people's perceptions of homosexual love, and can provide a powerful lesson in classrooms where homophobia is more prevalent than antisemitism or racism.

### The problem of time

Elsewhere in this journal Nicholas Kinloch argues forcefully that the Holocaust was not a unique event, without parallel in human history. He further asserts that

'only if the Shoah is unique does it justify the amount of time it occupies in British secondary education'. But I am not convinced that the Holocaust *does* occupy a significant amount of curriculum time in many British schools. The Holocaust is not a mandatory subject in either Scotland or Wales, and in England – where it is part of a broader requirement for 'A world study after 1900' – many teachers spend only two or three lessons on the Holocaust in Year 9. Moreover, it is not the uniqueness of the Holocaust that demands curriculum time; it is the complexity of the subject, the difficulties in teaching it, and the dangers of doing so badly.

There is a potential for real harm when we teach the Holocaust. We need to be sensitive to the emotional impact that this subject can have on young people. We need strategies for moving students without traumatising them, for ensuring they understand the enormity of the events without titillating or horrifying them with graphic images. Students need time for thought and reflection. We need to be careful that we do not inadvertently reinforce stereotypes and prejudices, that we do not define Jews through the Holocaust and that we do not create anti-German feeling. The persecution of Roma, homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses, political opponents of the Nazis, Soviet Prisoners of War, and people with disabilities needs to be understood and to be visible throughout the scheme of work, not relegated to a single lesson on 'other victims'.

**It is no bad thing for young people to realise that for some questions there are no answers.**



The Holocaust Exhibition at the Imperial War Museum: 'Very valuable. The students were absorbed and a group have asked to do a presentation for the whole school!' R Aylward, Leighton Park School, Reading, Berks  
Reproduced courtesy of Andrew Putler

The problem, of course, is that all of this takes time. But if our students are even to begin to understand the scale and nature of the tragedy, and if there is to be any meaningful reflection on what relevance these events have in Britain today, then a significant amount of classroom time *must* be set aside. Nor will a visit to the Holocaust Exhibition alone be sufficient. While it is hoped that a visit to the exhibition will enrich your students' study of the Holocaust, the most important work in this sensitive subject must be done in school. The visit can be a major focus within a broader scheme of work, providing a powerful and moving overview of the Holocaust and deepening knowledge and understanding. But students need careful and thorough preparation for their visit and meaningful follow-up work back at school.

So once more we return to the problem of time. One possible solution is that a subject that so engages students' interest can provide an opportunity for a whole-school approach, a strategy which might have particular currency with head teachers when the Citizenship Orders come

into force from September 2002. A cross-curricular scheme of work has the potential to enrich a study of the Holocaust. Many English and Religious Studies departments are already teaching aspects of the Holocaust a few doors down the corridor from their History colleagues, but often little is known about what is happening in these classrooms. Imaginative links between departments can enhance the scheme of work by drawing on different specialisms, approaching the Holocaust from multiple perspectives, and building upon ideas and knowledge gained in other lessons. Universal questions are brought into sharp focus: the nature of good and evil, the place of a just God in a world after Auschwitz. These are valid questions, even if they are outside the usual orbit of the history lesson. And however historical the approach, learning about the Holocaust evokes powerful emotions which poetry, art and music can help students to express creatively and imaginatively.

The Holocaust touches upon so many aspects of the human condition that it is profoundly relevant to teachers across a range of subject disciplines, but many

**A successful visit should not be judged purely on the answers it provides but on the new questions students begin to ask.**



'It is this facility which enhances all the teaching that has gone on before, it actually encouraged my students to reflect, pause, take time to investigate. The choice offered to my students was invaluable' Molly Kady, St Swithin's School  
 Reproduced courtesy of The Abbey National Charitable Trust

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do not consider the 'history' to be of more than marginal importance here. The challenge for history teachers, then, is to demonstrate to their colleagues in other departments, to students and to their parents, the centrality of learning history (and not just the history of the Holocaust) if we are to understand human behaviour and human society in any meaningful way.

School groups visiting the Holocaust Exhibition must be Year 9 and above, must be pre-booked and are admitted free of charge. In its first year 25,500 secondary students have visited the Holocaust Exhibition. All schools are asked to complete feedback forms on the quality of the new Holocaust education service that supports learning in the Museum – some 97% have rated their visit as 'Excellent', the remaining 3% as 'Good', with the exception of one teacher who considered it 'Average'.

*If you would like to comment on this article, or require more information about visits to the Holocaust Exhibition or details of Imperial War Museum publications that support a cross-curricular approach to teaching the Holocaust, please email me at: psalmons@iwm.org.uk*

**REFERENCES**

Kinloch, N (1998) Learning about the Holocaust: moral or historical question? *Teaching History*, 93, pp44-46.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*

<sup>3</sup> There have been over 250,000 visitors to Europe's largest permanent exhibition on the Holocaust since HM Queen opened it in June 2000. A new permanent exhibition exploring issues relating to genocide in the twentieth century will open at the Imperial War Museum in 2002.

<sup>4</sup> Illingworth, S. (2000) 'Hearts, minds and souls: Exploring values through history' *Teaching History*, 100, Thinking and Feeling edition, pp20-24.

<sup>5</sup> One teacher commented, 'This was a superb film which gave our students a valuable insight into Jewish culture and heritage. It covered areas which are frequently overlooked in films about the Holocaust and was therefore particularly relevant. In addition, it was helpful for our students to 'meet' many Holocaust survivors whose testimonies also feature in the exhibition'. (Sophie Davison, Stanborough School, Herts)

<sup>6</sup> British Army Film and Photographic Unit, from the Film Archive of the Imperial War Museum

<sup>7</sup> Prince, K. (2001) 'An investigation into the problems of, and possible solutions to, teaching the Holocaust as part of the History National Curriculum Key Stage 3', unpublished dissertation by a PGCE student, University of Sussex.

<sup>8</sup> The audio guides are only available to school groups and are the only part of the school visit that incurs a charge (£2.00 per person). Their use is strongly recommended: the audio guides give pace and structure to students' learning, ensuring that the most important and moving parts of the exhibition are not missed.

<sup>9</sup> Salmons, P. (2000) *Reflections*, Imperial War Museum 2000. This resource pack contains 34 detailed lesson plans and worksheets for History, English, Religious Education, Citizenship and PSHE, comprising a cross-curricular scheme of work for Year 9 and GCSE students, together with archive photographs and artefacts from the exhibition on flashcards, overhead transparencies with full colour maps and documents, and a CD-ROM. A students' guide to the Holocaust, *Tom Apart*, complements this inter-disciplinary approach, stimulating reflection and discussion of key themes and issues.

<sup>10</sup> Kinloch, N. (2001) 'Parallel catastrophes? Uniqueness, redemption and the Shoah', *Teaching History*, 104 pp8-13.

<sup>11</sup> 'Many students commented that it is the most moving, powerful and informative museum they have visited' – Steve Milledge, Cockermouth School, Cumbria

<sup>12</sup> 'We had spent seven weeks studying the Holocaust prior to the visit – using the pre-visit film and the work scheme [*Reflections*] provided by the museum. Our students were certainly moved by what they saw and perhaps looked at the exhibits with greater interest because they had heard of some of the events and people in lessons' – Gill Lynch, Presdales School, Ware, Herts

<sup>13</sup> 'Extremely comprehensive overview from start to finish – the pupils were talking about the things they had read or seen the following day.' – Rebecca King and Rebecca Banerjee, Campion School, Leamington Spa, Warwickshire.