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Teaching the Holocaust through geography

By looking at the Holocaust from a geographical perspective at university, Cheryl Hatt could more easily comprehend the complexities and diversity of people's experiences, and was able to place Auschwitz within a clearer context as a major, but not the only component of the Nazi Holocaust machine. This article describes some practical teaching ideas for using a geographical approach while teaching the Holocaust.

Accompanying online materials

The motivation behind this study

The Holocaust is a statutory focus in the key stage 3 National Curriculum and it is often revisited at GCSE and A level. My own experience of Holocaust education at school was confined to several lessons in year 9, which, I feel, left me with a very simplistic and linear view of the Holocaust as an unpleasant but inevitable journey from Nazi-occupied Europe to the gas chambers of Auschwitz.

As a sixth former participating in the Holocaust Educational Trust's visit to Auschwitz, I was still left with a stereotypical view of the Holocaust. However, this changed significantly when I studied a module at university entitled 'Holocaust Landscapes'; here I revisited the Holocaust through a geographical lens. By looking at the Holocaust from a different perspective I could more easily comprehend the complexities and diversity of people's experiences, and was able to place Auschwitz within a clearer context as a major, but not the only component of the Nazi Holocaust machine. It was whilst on a PGCE visit to the Imperial War Museum's Holocaust exhibition that the value of this approach struck me again, and I began to think how such a focus could be adapted to work not just with history undergraduates, but with key stage 3 students too. My own personal experience of learning about the Holocaust has heavily influenced my attitude towards teaching it, so I decided to use a geographical approach as a focus with my year 9 students.

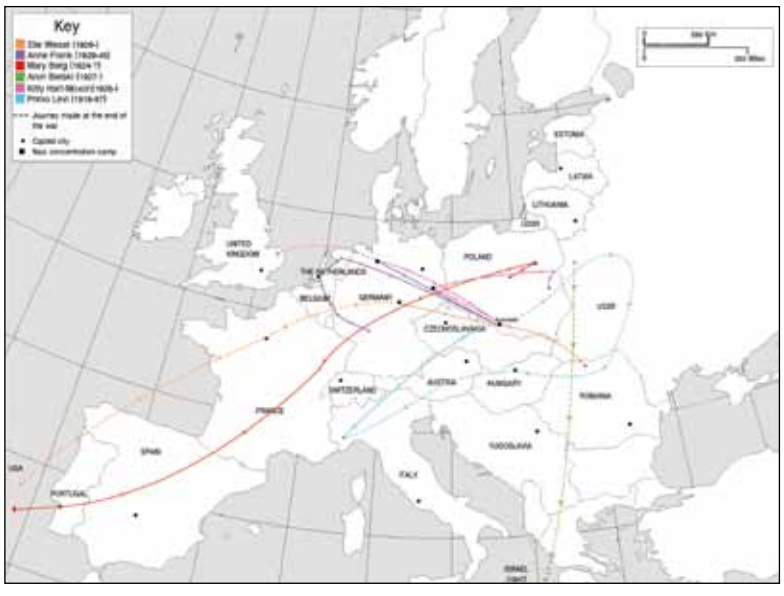

Figure 1: Holocaust journeys.

The Holocaust in schools today

There have been a variety of different approaches to the teaching of the Holocaust and these have extended to a number of departments beyond history, including English, RE and citizenship. The focus has been on a range of topics such as the history of anti-Semitism, the rise of the Nazi party and the development of Nazi persecution. Furthermore, there appears to be a common focus upon ghettos, 'The Final Solution' and the reactions towards the Holocaust on the part of local citizens and the Allied forces. There has also been a trend towards balancing the 'big picture' with the micro-histories of specific communities and individual testimony. This balance has presented the Holocaust to students in human terms and has involved them in complex and thought-provoking issues (Kitson, 2001). Many schemes have tended to be chronological in their approach and lend weight to Lambert's claim that thus far the Holocaust has been located in time but not necessarily in space (Lambert, 2004). Arguably a more definite focus on the latter could lead to a deeper understanding of this definitive event.

Spaces and places in Holocaust education

I firmly believe that there is great value in shifting the focus of lessons on the Holocaust around spaces and places. That is not to water down the history which is so fundamental to the teaching of the Holocaust, nor is it to depart entirely from a chronological focus; it is rather to advocate the idea of using spaces such as 'attics' and 'cattle cars' as windows into a broader interpretation of the Holocaust.

There are several valid reasons for adopting a geographical approach. The first reflects a current shift in thinking in history, where the academic literature is beginning to take account of the geography of the holocaust (Beorn *et al*, 2009). Secondly, there is much to suggest that the discipline of geography has more to offer our understanding of the Holocaust (Lambert, 2004), and more specific to the field of education is that a study of landscape, location and environment can serve to challenge the simplified and clichéd view of the Holocaust as 'Auschwitz'.

Furthermore, a geographical perspective can show that the Holocaust did not equate to an inevitable and unavoidable outcome of death at Auschwitz for all Nazi victims. This is not to distinguish the event from Nazi aims and policy, but to emphasise that location mattered in the context of Nazi-occupied Europe, and one's survival often depended on spatial criteria (Beorn, 2009). This has been clearly documented in the

Imperial War Museum's 'Country by Country' feature of their Holocaust exhibition, which shows the varying experiences of Nazi victims as exemplified by dramatically different fatal statistics (Paulsson, 2009). By framing lessons around location, landscape, and the physical and climatic environment within the Holocaust, we can show our students why Anne Frank was forced into an attic, why the Bielski brothers were able to offer active resistance and why 99 per cent of the Danish Jewish population survived the war, in addition to unpicking how Bergen-Belsen differed from Auschwitz, and how Warsaw's ghetto was unique rather than typical. The Holocaust occupied a physical space that our students can see today, most pertinently through the media of photography and satellite imagery. By studying these landscapes and how the Nazis, Jewish and other people utilised their environment, we can reveal a more complex and nuanced picture which places an extraordinary event in an ordinary, tangible and physical world.

A geographical approach in practice:

There are numerous ways in which key geographical concepts and processes can complement the teaching of the Holocaust in history lessons.

Using maps to investigate topography, landscape and environment

One landscape which I decided to focus on with my year 9 class was the forest. I wanted to examine how the forests of Europe were utilised by both the Nazi and Jewish people. Through this study I would be encouraging my students to think about the development of Nazi policies towards the Jews, the nature of resistance and the diversity of Jewish experiences across Europe.

I decided to begin this topic with a brief discussion of students' ideas of the forest, their personal experiences of it and the associations it held for them through the mediums of books and films. I then challenged them to think how it might have been used or experienced during the Holocaust, steering their discussion towards both Nazi and Jewish experiences, in order to measure their prior knowledge and their initial expectations.

It was here that I decided to focus initially on the Nazis' use of the forest and the *Einsatzgruppen* massacres in Eastern Europe. I provided students with two maps: the first a topographical map of Europe, and the second the direction of the four Nazi killing squads and some statistical information on the number of people killed. Students were asked in pairs to draw on the routes of the *Einsatzgruppen* onto their topographical maps and discuss with their partner what they could observe from the map. Supplementary photographs and satellite imagery of the extensive forests around Latvia, Lithuania and Belarus were then made available to the class. Questions were framed firstly about the direction of these troops, secondly about the geographical landscape, thirdly about the number of casualties, and finally about why similar killing squads were not in operation in Berlin, Amsterdam or the West generally. A class discussion then ensued as to why the Nazis chose to carry out these massacres in the forests of Eastern Europe.

The subject could be developed further by getting students to use topographical maps of Europe to investigate extraordinary examples of Jewish resistance, to demonstrate how some Jewish people were able to utilise their environment to survive and compromise Nazi policy.

An excellent comparison would be to analyse maps of rural Belorussia and urban Amsterdam, and the corresponding experiences of the Bielski brothers and the Frank family during the Holocaust. Maps of differing scales, showing their position in Europe, their geographical surroundings, the proximity of civilisation and even the make-up of their respective dwellings, could all be used to encourage students to consider the advantages and limitations one's physical environment could have on the chances and nature of resistance.

Tourism and the Holocaust

Another geographical concept that can be utilised in the teaching of the Holocaust is tourism. A growing trade has developed in tours and visits to sights of atrocity and suffering, and Nazi concentration and extermination camps feature very much at the centre of this. Dark tourism has sparked controversy and debate which remains extremely current, and it is possible to educate and engage our students in these debates about the appropriateness of visiting these places.

After studying the location and nature of several concentration and extermination camps, I asked my year 9 students whether Auschwitz should feature in *Poland (Lonely Planet Country Guide)* (Parkinson *et al.* 2005) as one of the 'top ten' attractions. The enquiry first involved reading the current description of the site in the Lonely Planet guide, followed by an analysis of several contrasting sources encompassing a range of views. This took the form of snippets from articles, charity adverts, an online forum, as well as controversial images and quotations from influential individuals; these can be downloaded from the TG pages of the GA website. My most basic objective was for students to be able to summarise two contrasting views and to be able to show evidence for both. There was, however, ample scope for the more-able to engage with and challenge the views they were presented with and to formulate an independent argument. After sharing their views in the form of a lively and valuable class discussion, we plotted these on a scale at the front. I then offered students a choice of activity: they could write to the management team at Auschwitz informing them of their views about the site being open to the public; they could write to the Lonely Planet publishers and comment on their feature; or they could re-write the feature themselves in a way that they felt was more appropriate.

The students were very energetically engaged in this task as they felt their opinions were valued and important. The 'Lonely Planet' was a feature that a large majority of students were familiar with, and the fact that one student's parents

Figure 2: Auschwitz features in the *Poland (Lonely Planet Country Guide)* as one of the 'top ten' attractions. **Photos:** Lucy Oxley.

had visited Auschwitz only the summer before effectively demonstrated to the group that the issue was relevant even today.

Retracing the footsteps of the Holocaust

Having spent a number of lessons with my year 9 students examining various aspects of the Holocaust, I decided to bring together their knowledge and understanding into a 'big picture' focus. I devoted three lessons to the research and presentation of an individual's experience of the Holocaust. Although the individuals in question were carefully selected, the nature and form of the students' presentations was left up to them.

The students researched individuals of a similar age to themselves, with the importance of geography coming through a focus on location and the physical experience.

The specific objectives were made clear to the class from the outset: they were to research the journey of their individual so as to present their findings to the class in the final lesson. Within these presentations I asked students the following:

- Firstly, they needed to show the physical journey of their individual. An atlas, a blank map of Europe on a sheet of acetate and some OHP pens were given to each group to aid them in this task. The ultimate purpose of this was to place all six journeys on top of one another, thus illustrating the length, breadth and at times overlapping nature of these people's journeys (see online resources).
- Secondly, I wanted the groups to be able to offer the class additional information about their individual's journey – to put flesh on the physical journey and shed further light on particular aspects of the Holocaust. An example was shown to the class using Kitty Hart-Moxon's testimony, explaining what the 'Kanada' block at Auschwitz was, and both the relief and the distress inmates felt whilst working there.
- Finally, I asked students if they could draw links with any of the topics, themes or issues of the Holocaust that we had previously discussed. I offered 'resistance' as an example because I thought it would be interesting to hear their views on whether or not they believed their individual to have resisted the Nazis in some way, and if so what methods were used. This then prompted a whole-class discussion about the nature, value and limitations of these examples of resistance, which afforded individuals the opportunity to form opinions, challenge the views of others and reach substantiated judgements.

Conclusion:

This task, as an end to the module, served not only to locate the Holocaust in space and show the importance of geography and landscapes in the Holocaust, but attempted to offer a 'big picture'. It provided the chance to measure students' understanding of various topics and themes covered previously, and to develop them further by adding the flesh of real people and their experiences of the Holocaust. It allowed students to demonstrate empathy by giving them individuals of their own age whom they could hopefully relate to on some level. Most importantly, for me, it deconstructed the view for them of the Holocaust as a singularly unanimous journey to the gas chambers of Europe. | **TG**

Online resources

Go to *www.geography.org.uk/tg* and click 'Autumn 2011'.

- Contrasting sources encompassing a range of views for dark tourism debate
- Holocaust journeys

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Useful webpages

Kitty Hart-Moxon's story can be found online at the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust, Untold Stories website *www.hmd.org.uk* (accessed July 2011)

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