

## Remembering and Forgetting: The Holocaust in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Britain

“The world has lost a great man. We must never forget Sir Nicholas Winton's humanity in saving so many children from the Holocaust.”<sup>1</sup>

“MPs' have voted against an attempt to compel the Government to offer sanctuary in the UK to 3,000 unaccompanied child refugees from Europe.”<sup>2</sup>

Although the preceding years had borne witness to a heightened engagement with the Holocaust in the political and public spheres, with the establishment of Holocaust Memorial Day (HMD) on 27 January 2001, Britain entered a new phase in the development of its Holocaust consciousness. In the fifteen years since the inaugural ceremony took place Britain has sought to position itself at the very forefront of Holocaust remembrance and education on a national, international, and supranational, level.<sup>3</sup> As such, the Holocaust has emerged as a dominant socio-political symbol in 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain despite the fact that, as Bob Moore has highlighted, “the Holocaust intersects with British history in very few ways.”<sup>4</sup> This article will discuss the increasingly central role of Holocaust commemoration and education in 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain, and will consider how it has not only come to impact conceptualisation of the historical event, but also its influence on broader interpretations of British identity.

Given the increasing presence of the Holocaust in British historical consciousness, there are multiple intersections which could be discussed in order to ascertain how the various threads of Holocaust remembrance affect 21<sup>st</sup> Century Britain. The intersection of education and commemoration is certainly one of the defining features of Holocaust institutionalisation within Britain to the extent that Holocaust pedagogy and the politics of commemoration should not and indeed, *cannot*, be analysed separately notwithstanding their supposed differences. Reflecting on their similarities the article will show how these institutionalised spheres have intersected with contemporary cultural discourse surrounding questions of civic morality, immigration and the memory of other genocides. The article argues that the way in which the Holocaust has intersected with these issues has both implicitly and explicitly connected Holocaust discourse to contemporary debates on what constitutes British identity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The main argument is that a domesticated and at times rather mythical narrative of events situated at an “experiential and geographical distance” are often used to promote a self-congratulatory notion of past and present British identity.<sup>5</sup>

The growing inter-dependence between education and commemoration means that they intersect in a myriad of ways both reflecting and reinforcing the meaning of, and supposed messages from, the Holocaust that each project. These meanings and messages domesticate and decontextualize the Holocaust in popular understandings and in so doing they help to develop and re-orientate a conceptualisation of an inherent British identity that has existed in various forms since before the Second World War had even begun. Charting the increasing prominence of the Holocaust in British commemorative culture, education and political discourse this article will show how interpretations of the historical event are becoming ever more central in the continuing quest for a positive British identity in the post-imperial age. In a global community in which Britain's' influence has been steadily diminished this reconfiguration of identity encourages the British people to retain a sense of moral authority based on allusions to supposed stoicism, unity and

---

<sup>1</sup> David Cameron cited in Adam Withnall and Paul Gallagher, “Sir Nicholas Winton: Britain's Oskar Schindler”, *The Independent*, 1 July 2015

<sup>2</sup> Alexandra Sims, “Immigration Bill: MPs Vote Against Child Refugee Amendment”, *The Independent*, (25 April 2016)

<sup>3</sup> FCO, “Envoy on Post-Holocaust Issues Submits Report on Holocaust education in the UK”, (15 December 2010); FCO, FCO, *ITF Country Report of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland*, (October 2012), 1; Holocaust Commission, *Britain's Promise to Remember: The Prime Minister's Holocaust Commission Report*, (January, 2015), 9

<sup>4</sup> Bob Moore, “Should More be Done to Remember the Holocaust in Britain?”, *History Extra*, (February 2014), Retrieved from 18 April 2016 [www.historyextra.com/feature/debate-should-more-be-done-remember-holocaust-britain](http://www.historyextra.com/feature/debate-should-more-be-done-remember-holocaust-britain)

<sup>5</sup> Andy Pearce, *Holocaust Consciousness in Contemporary Britain*, (New York: Routledge, 2014), 25

heroism within the narrative of the national past. This narrative not only draws heavily on the Second World War but, increasingly, on the Holocaust as an event which is the antithesis of what it means to be British. Whilst Sharon MacDonald is certainly valid in her assertion that "self-definition in contrast to national others - though it still goes on - has become less advisable in an era of increased global communication, trade and supra-national organisations", it is apparent that self-definition based on contrast as opposed to shared experience is still an integral ingredient in contemporary constructions of British identity.<sup>6</sup> The centrality of the Holocaust in British consciousness and this self-definition through contrast entwines Britain closer into European history; but, paradoxically however, it also distances her from the events of the Holocaust and the continent in which they took place. This ideological distance thus reinforces a post-imperial sense of British exceptionalism built on moral values that are deemed in some way to be exclusively 'British'.

### Holocaust Memorial Day: 'Too Much History'?

When discussing the commemoration of Yom HaShoah in 1997, one British journalist observed that, the "desire to commemorate the Holocaust is so acute that Jews have a special day set aside on which to do so."<sup>7</sup> This short article concluded with the reflections of William D. Rubinstein that the Holocaust "was such a traumatic, central event in modern Jewish history that if anything there is more of a desire to commemorate it, not less. It's more real to modern people than events of biblical times."<sup>8</sup> Although recognising the need for members of the Jewish community to commemorate the Holocaust this article offered no suggestion that a day devoted to Holocaust remembrance was necessary for wider British society. The fact that this was not mentioned is indicative of the place of the Holocaust in British culture in the 1990s. It was not that the British people were unaware of the Holocaust or its significance, nor was it the case that they were callously indifferent. It was more that the event itself remained on the margins of mainstream society and culture. This is not the space to explore the changing shape of British engagement with the Holocaust in the post-war years but, in essence, it can be said that "awareness of and interest in the Holocaust was generally confused and contradictory, fluctuant and turbid" in the decades following 1945.<sup>9</sup> That being said the early years of the 1990s had been marked by an increasing engagement with the Holocaust and the decade bore witness to an evolution in the development of British Holocaust consciousness. The culmination of a variety of factors including the success of *Schindler's List* and the multitude of public acts of remembrance which had taken place across the country in 1995 to mark the fiftieth anniversaries of the liberation of the camps of Auschwitz-Birkenau and Bergen-Belsen all encouraged greater awareness of the genocide. Nonetheless, as Mark Donnelly observes, "these anniversaries themselves were part of a wider programme of war-related commemorations that year."<sup>10</sup> The Holocaust was thus being commemorated as part of a more holistic response to the memory of the events of the Second World War in British culture, often projected through the lens of British moral superiority and accompanied by allusions to the myth of societal cohesion and accolades to British heroism in the face of the tyranny of German Fascism. Despite an increased interest in the Holocaust within historical culture, it was the Second World War, not the Holocaust, which was the central focus of the fiftieth anniversaries.

Reflecting, and fuelling, this somewhat inconsistent public engagement with the Holocaust, institutional acknowledgement during this time can also be described as being rather fragmentary. This was, however,

---

<sup>6</sup> Sharon Macdonald, "Commemorating the Holocaust: Reconfiguring National Identity in the Twenty-First Century", Jo Littler and Roshi Naidoo (eds), *The Politics of Heritage: The Legacies of Race*, (Abdingdon: Routledge, 2005), 49-68, 55

<sup>7</sup> C. Garner, 'Rabbi calls for end to Holocaust Memorial Day', *The Independent*, (20 October 1997)

<sup>8</sup> Rubinstein as cited in *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Andy Pearce and Kara Critchell, "Holocaust Consciousness in Britain", (Paper presented at the University of Winchester 12 February 2015)

<sup>10</sup> Mark Donnelly, "We Should do Something for the Fiftieth: Remembering Auschwitz, Belsen and the Holocaust in Britain in 1995", Caroline Sharples and Olaf Jensen (eds), *Britain and the Holocaust: Remembering and Representing War and Genocide*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 171-189, 172

soon to change when the inaugural Holocaust Memorial Day took place on 27 January 2001. The establishment of the day marked the biggest shift towards a sustained and deliberate institutional engagement with the Holocaust since the subject became a mandatory part of the National Curriculum for British Secondary Schools in 1991.

The creation of the day itself certainly “followed an international trend” towards more co-ordinated commemoration of the Holocaust at this time.<sup>11</sup> Despite the clear influence of European and international engagement with the Holocaust on the evolution of British Holocaust consciousness, however, Britain did not simply import transnational trends in Holocaust education and commemoration. Such “reductionist interpretations” are, as Pearce rightly states, “fundamentally flawed” and imply indifference or apathy in Britain towards developing its own institutionalised Holocaust consciousness.<sup>12</sup> Contrary to such interpretations the day emerged as a result of interweaving international and domestic influences including lobbying by interested parties, burgeoning political interest within the Labour Party which had recently assumed control of the Government following a landslide election win in 1997 and the domestic turn towards civic morality and multicultural ideals. To suggest that the nation state is the sole mediator and container of the past is, as Levy and Sznajder observe, “a breathtakingly unhistorical assertion” and it is certainly not the intention of this article to suggest otherwise.<sup>13</sup> Whilst transnationalism and the so-called ‘cosmopolitan memory’ have certainly helped in shaping Holocaust discourse in 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain this trend is still in what Emiliano Perra describes as the “embryonic” stage of development.<sup>14</sup> As Jean Marc Dreyfus suggests, “Holocaust memory is in fact only superficially globalised. Each country actually renationalises it” and, as such, is still in essence continually being shaped by national considerations and interpretations of identity. These interpretations are of course influenced by transnational events, concerns and meanings but they are also based on the sense of entitlement borne out of a belief in some kind of ‘rightful belonging’ to the national group.<sup>15</sup>

Across the country reactions to the announcement of a day of Holocaust remembrance varied. David Cesarani, who was later to become a founding trustee of the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust, emphasised the inherent value in having a day in the national calendar that could act as “contested terrain for interpretations of the Holocaust and genocide.”<sup>16</sup> Others, most notably Donald Bloxham, Dan Stone and Tony Kushner, were far more wary about the lack of confrontation with some of the more difficult questions associated with the day, including amongst others the failure to address the issue of Britain’s own colonial past.<sup>17</sup> Responding to such criticisms Cesarani accused those articulating these views as “offering a counsel

---

<sup>11</sup> Nira Yuval-Davis and Max Silverman, “Memorializing the Holocaust in Britain”, *Ethnicities*, 2/1, (March 2002), 107-123, 107

<sup>12</sup> Andy Pearce, “The Development of Holocaust Consciousness in Contemporary Britain”, *Holocaust Studies: A Journal of Culture and History*, 14:2 (2008), 71-94, 72. Due to the limitations of space I am unable to offer a full discussion of the interplay between these international developments and their influence on the domestic landscape of Holocaust remembrance. For further information on this and the role of the Stockholm International Forum please see Andy Pearce, “Britain’s Holocaust Memorial Day: Inculcating ‘British’ or ‘European’ Holocaust Consciousness?”, in Caroline Sharples and Olaf Jensen (eds), *Britain and the Holocaust: Remembering and Representing War and Genocide*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 190-211 and Larissa Allwork, *Holocaust Remembrance between the National and the Transnational: The Stockholm International Forum and the First Decade of the International Task Force*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2015)

<sup>13</sup> Daniel Levy and Natan Sznajder, “Memory Unbound: The Holocaust and the Formation of Cosmopolitan Memory”, *European Journal of Social Theory*, 5/1, (2002), 87-106, 89

<sup>14</sup> Emiliano Perra, “Between National and Cosmopolitan: Twenty-First Century Holocaust Television in Britain, France and Italy”, Axel Bangert, Robert S.C.Gordon and Libby Saxton (eds), *Holocaust Intersections: Genocide and Visual Culture in the New Millennium*, (London: Maney Publishing, 2013), 24-45, 25

<sup>15</sup> Jean-Marc Dreyfus. J.M, “Battle in Print: Dehistoricising the Holocaust: Remembrance and the Abandonment of History”, (19 October 2010) available at: [www.battleofideas.org.uk/index.php/2011/battles/5404](http://www.battleofideas.org.uk/index.php/2011/battles/5404), (accessed 7 January 2016)

<sup>16</sup> David Cesarani, “Seizing the Day: Why Britain Will Benefit from Holocaust Memorial Day”, *Patterns of Prejudice*, 34/4, (2000), 61-66, 66

<sup>17</sup> Donald Bloxham, “Britain’s Holocaust Memorial Days: Reshaping the Past in the Service of the Present”, *Immigrants & Minorities*, 21/1-2, (2002), 41-62; Tony Kushner, “Too Little, Too Late? Reflections on Britain’s Holocaust Memorial

of despair” suggesting that, when considering the establishment of such a day of remembrance, one should start from the position that “politics is the art of the possible, not the realm of perfection.”<sup>18</sup>

Tensions and conflicts surrounding the day were also to enter the public and political spheres before the inaugural ceremony in what Ya’ir Auron describes as “a particularly stormy controversy” over the exclusion of victims of the Armenian genocide from the commemorative programme.<sup>19</sup> The omission of any reference to Armenia in the conceptualisation of the day was quickly noted by journalist Robert Fisk who referred to the exclusion as an act of “sheer political cowardice” on the part of the British government.<sup>20</sup> Initial efforts by the Anglo-Armenian community to be represented during the first Holocaust Memorial Day came to no avail but interest in, and growing criticism of, the absence of Armenia was soon to gain momentum following a flurry of reports highlighting the omission in the national press. Reflecting growing public interest in this decision, representatives from the Home Office were asked during a House of Commons debate in November 2000 whether the Government would include any reference to the massacre of Armenians during the commemoration of the Holocaust Memorial Day. The Minister of State for Immigration, Mike O’Brien provided a response which did little to allay or address these concerns and, instead, simply reiterating the government’s line that:

“Holocaust Memorial Day is focused on learning the lessons of the Holocaust and other more recent atrocities that raise similar issues. We took a conscious decision to focus on events around the Holocaust and thereafter, although we did examine requests to consider the atrocities and other vents that preceded the Holocaust....It is always difficult to draw a line and wherever it is drawn it runs the risk of being misinterpreted.”<sup>21</sup>

Nonetheless, for many the marginalisation of the genocide undermined the entire ethos of a day commemorating the Holocaust. Mark Levene attributed this lack of inclusion and the British government’s persistent failure to recognise the Armenian genocide to “the government’s current political sensitivities, not only with regard to any direct relationship with Turkey but, much more profoundly, as a result of the complex set of interconnections enmeshing Britain within the Atlantic alliance.”<sup>22</sup> Levene’s interpretation that present-day political concerns took precedence over the legitimate acknowledgement and commemoration of the Armenian genocide was shown to be justified after a Foreign Office memorandum was revealed which showed that whilst accepting that the British government would be “open to criticism in terms of the ethical dimension [...] recognising the genocide would provide no practical benefit to the UK” particularly in light of the importance of the British relationship with Turkey.<sup>23</sup>

In an attempt to deflect growing anger from interested parties, a small number of representatives from the Armenian community were invited to attend the inaugural ceremony “after the event was seen to be in danger of descending into an unseemly row over recognition between different groups.”<sup>24</sup> It was also agreed that the “massacre of Armenians” could be referred to by the BBC and within the ceremony itself.<sup>25</sup>

---

Day”, *Journal of Israeli History*, 23/1, (2004), 116-129, Dan Stone, “Day of Remembrance or Day of Forgetting? Or, Why Britain Does Not Need a Holocaust Memorial Day”, *Patterns of Prejudice*, 34/4, (2000), 53-59

<sup>18</sup> Cesarani, “Seizing the Day”, 63; David Cesarani, “Does the Singularity of the Holocaust make it Incomparable and Inoperative for Commemorating, Studying and Preventing Genocide? Britain’s Holocaust Memorial Day as Case Study”, *The Journal of Holocaust Education*, 10/2, (Autumn 2001), 40-56, 51

<sup>19</sup> Yair Auron, *The Pain of Knowledge: Holocaust and Genocide Issues in Education*, (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2005), 100

<sup>20</sup> Robert Fisk, *The Great War for Civilization: The Conquest for the Middle East*, (London: Harper Collins, 2005), 423

<sup>21</sup> Mike O’Brien, “House of Commons Debates Written Answers: Holocaust Memorial Day”, *Hansard*, Col. 917, (30 November 2000)

<sup>22</sup> Mark Levene, “Britain’s Holocaust Memorial Day: A Case of Post-Cold War Wish-Fulfilment, or Brazen Hypocrisy?”, *Human Rights Review*, (April-June 2006), 26-59, 28

<sup>23</sup> FCO’s Eastern Department, “FCO Memorandum to Minister Joyce Quin”, (12 April 1999)

<sup>24</sup> Kamal Ahmed, “Holocaust Day Mired in Protest”, *The Guardian*, 21 January 2001

<sup>25</sup> *Holocaust Memorial Day: Remembering Genocide: Lessons for the Future Commemorative Programme*, (London: HMSO, 2001)

Armenia, however, has remained a consistent part of discourse surrounding the remembrance day over the years, particularly in 2015 with the centenary of the atrocities. In response to the heightened arguments surrounding Britain's lack of recognition of this genocide, which has instead been referred to rather euphemistically as the Armenian "tragedy", the British Government shifted its position preferring to account for this lack of engagement by suggesting that:

"...the British Government recognise as genocide only those events found to be so by international courts – for example the Holocaust and the massacres in Srebrenica and Rwanda. We do not exercise a political judgement in ascribing the term "genocide" to a set of events, whether in Armenia, the Holodomor in Ukraine or the massacres of the Kurds by Saddam Hussein in 1998."<sup>26</sup>

The decision by the British government to frame their interpretation of genocide as those decreed by international courts, as opposed to genocide as it is defined by the 1948 UN Convention on Genocide reflects the tension between officially remembering the Holocaust and remembering other genocides in contemporary society. The Armenian controversy not only exposed the sensitivities surrounding the creation of a nationwide day of Holocaust remembrance, but also highlighted the complexities of attempting to manage and negotiate the relationship between the Holocaust and other genocides in British memorial culture. The response to criticism of the omission provided by Neil Frater, a representative from the Home Office's Race Equality Unit responsible for overseeing the consultation process for Holocaust Memorial Day, however, provided a fascinating insight into the confusion endemic to the conceptualisation of the day itself. Although referring to the atrocities in Armenia as "an appalling tragedy" and offering the British government's "sympathies" to the descendants of those who had perished, after consulting with the Holocaust Memorial Day Steering Group the decision was taken not to include Armenia in the day "to avoid the risk of the message becoming too diluted if we try to include too much history."<sup>27</sup> This fear that the message of the day might become too 'diluted' raises significant questions about the way in which the Holocaust intersects with other genocides in British consciousness and, in turn, what exactly the 'message' of the day is intended to be.

Although the Holocaust was the principal hub around which this day had been created, incorporating other genocides also appeared to be one of the main objectives of the day. In the programme created to accompany the inaugural memorial service at Westminster Abbey, the Home Secretary Jack Straw noted that "Holocaust Memorial Day is about learning the lessons of the Holocaust and other more recent atrocities that raise similar issues" whilst going on to stress the significance of exploring "its contemporary relevance in light of continuing instances of genocide and other appalling atrocities around the world."<sup>28</sup> That HMD was designed to focus on more recent crimes against humanity was frequently reiterated by those within the House of Commons and the House of Lords who, when pressed about the place of Armenia within the day, repeated the adage that "Holocaust Memorial Day should focus on learning the lessons of the Holocaust and other more recent atrocities that raise similar issues."<sup>29</sup>

The supposed emphasis on 'more recent' genocides not only ensured that Armenia did not, and does not, feature prominently within the remembrance day but also led to the somewhat uneven treatment of past genocides in British commemoration. Other genocides that have occurred since the Holocaust, in particular those committed in Bosnia and Rwanda, have to varying degrees come to be absorbed into the day of remembrance. Yet the position of the Holocaust as the central genocide of the day, and the subsequent

---

<sup>26</sup> David Lidington, "House of Commons Business of the House: 1915 Armenian Genocide", *Hansard*, Cols. 1260-1269, Col. 1265, (23 Mar 2015) Despite this controversy some organisations in Britain did seek to develop initiatives to promote awareness of the genocide to coincide with the centenary. This included the Weiner Library which established the 'Fragments of a Lost Homeland Exhibition' which ran for 6 months.

<sup>27</sup> Neil Frater as cited in Fisk, "The Great War for Civilization", 424.

<sup>28</sup> Jack Straw, "Holocaust Memorial Day: Remembering Genocide Commemorative Programme"

<sup>29</sup> Lord Bassam, "House of Lords Debate: Crimes Against Humanity Commemoration", *Hansard*, Col. 354, (25 January 2001)

hierarchy of suffering this implies, has been evident since the opening ceremony the official programme for Holocaust Memorial Day 2001 asserted that “over 169,000,000 people died during the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a result of state sponsored mass murder” before going on to clarify the government’s position that, “among them all, the Holocaust stands out as an example at the extreme.”<sup>30</sup> Sentiments such as these articulated the extent to which the Holocaust was designed to be the main focus of the day. The strapline ‘Remembering Genocides: Lessons for the Future’ was, Cesarani noted, only included due to criticism of the apparent focus on the Jewish victims of Nazi persecution.<sup>31</sup>

What then of the ‘message’ that the Government was trying to convey? The message that, they feared, would be so easily diluted by ‘too much history’? When announcing the establishment of the day, Tony Blair articulated his hope that, “Holocaust Memorial Day will be a day when we reflect and remember and give our commitment and pledge that the terrible and evil deeds done in our world should never be repeated.”<sup>32</sup> The way in which both this, and later, memorial days were framed reveals the start of a very particular, and increasingly institutionalised, trend with regards to how the Holocaust was thought about, and thought with, in the opening years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This distinctive trend encouraged the abstraction and decontextualisation of the Holocaust within British consciousness in which its ‘lessons’ and the supposed meanings derived from them, became an increasingly central aspect of commemoration and of education. By framing the Holocaust as an event against which contemporary ‘lessons’ of tolerance and anti-racism can be learnt, Holocaust is not only used for political and social agendas, but also increasingly removed from its historical context. This abstraction can ultimately be seen in the “unmooring of the Holocaust from its historical specificity and its circulation instead as an abstract code for Evil and thus as the model for a potential antiracist and human rights politics.”<sup>33</sup>

In its formative years, responsibility for the day lay under the auspices of the Home Office and the Department for Education and Skills. In 2005, however, the independent charitable organisation the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust (HMDT) was established to promote, support and deliver Holocaust Memorial Day to the country on behalf of the British government. Although the day is now ostensibly run independently from the government, it continues to be funded by them and is therefore still reflective of official policy. Despite this continuity the creation of this charitable body was to have considerable implications for the way in which the Memorial Day was to be framed over the following years. Every year the Memorial Day is based on a specific theme, thereby providing “a focus for events and education in local and national commemorations.”<sup>34</sup> The inaugural ceremony ‘Remembering Genocides: Lessons for the Future’ was followed by ‘Britain and the Holocaust’ (2002) and ‘Children and the Holocaust’ (2003).

Although these themes aroused controversy they also contained the opportunity for historical rootedness and the possibility of contextual discussion and critical self-reflection. The potential for such confrontation and reinterpretation of official narratives of the past was particularly offered by the 2002 theme of ‘Britain and the Holocaust’. Nonetheless, whilst the theme paper referred to the fact that the “ambiguity of Britain’s response to Nazi tyranny and racism is lodged in our heritage”, this ambiguity was presented as “an inspiration, a warning and a guide” whilst the day, and the associated events connected to it, failed to stimulate a considered response to British actions either in the past or in the present.<sup>35</sup> After the establishment of HMDT, however, there was a shift towards more abstract themes promoting civil morality and democratic values. The emphasis on the “lessons” that contemporary society could draw from the event became increasingly more central to the day than engagement with the historical event itself. This

---

<sup>30</sup> “Holocaust Memorial Day: Remembering Genocide Commemorative Programme”

<sup>31</sup> Cesarani, “Does the Singularity of the Holocaust make it Incomparable and Inoperative”, 41

<sup>32</sup> Tony Blair cited in, “UK to Mark Holocaust Memorial Day Each Year”, *Birmingham Post*, (27 January 2000)

<sup>33</sup> Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonisation*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 229

<sup>34</sup> Holocaust Memorial Day Trust, “Previous Years Themes, Retrieved on 1 May 2016 from, <http://hmd.org.uk/resources/previous-years-themes>

<sup>35</sup> David Cesarani, *Holocaust Memorial Day Theme Paper: Britain and the Holocaust*, (2002)

emphasis on moral instruction as opposed to encouraging critical reflection has been termed by Donald Bloxham as being the “pathos approach” to Holocaust commemoration and education, favouring moral judgment and ceremonial processes of remembrance at the expense of tackling more complex historical questions regarding how people came to commit such crimes and why they were able to do so.<sup>36</sup> In 2006 the theme chosen, ‘One Person *Can* Make a Difference’, spoke acutely to the aims of the day; people were encouraged to learn “to use one’s voice to enhance positive human values.”<sup>37</sup> By the same token the 2008 theme ‘Imagine... Remember, Reflect, React’ “challenges us all to imagine the unimaginable” and stands as a “call to action to remember the past, reflect on the present and react to create a better future.”<sup>38</sup> The importance of remembrance was also raised by the theme of 2015 ‘Keep the Memory Alive’ which in its theme paper reiterated the imperative of remembrance to ensure that “we pay respect to [the victims’] unimaginable suffering while retaining the lessons of the past for future generations”<sup>39</sup>

As the years went by the themes became ever more focused about the way in which learning from the Holocaust could generate positive active participation in contemporary society. The vision paper for the ‘Legacy of Hope’ event in 2010 explicitly asked those participating in the day to “to look within and without, to be sure of our moral compass, to be certain of our choices and to use our voice, whenever we can, to speak out.”<sup>40</sup> Such an inducement to speak out was later encouraged by the theme vision of 2012, which specifically demanded that people ‘Speak up [and] Speak out’ against discrimination and exclusion in their communities. Community was also at the heart of the day the following year, ‘Communities Together: Build a Bridge’ and the traditional ceremony was accompanied by a special public event held on the Millennium Bridge in which “members of the public signed personal statements, pledging to build a bridge in their communities for HMD.” If ‘too much history’, especially uncomfortable history, was the concern of the government, one can see how the shift away from contextualised historical engagement and towards abstract identification in the service of moral civic instruction was discernible.

This forces us to reconsider the reasons why this institutionalised day of remembrance was being framed in such a manner. In discussing the reasons behind his scepticism towards Holocaust Memorial Day, the son of one survivor observed: ‘I suspect that it is because remembering the Holocaust has become an official ritual that allows every sanctimonious politician and public figure to put their superior moral virtues on public display.’<sup>41</sup> Increasingly, therefore, the Holocaust is not only used to advance messages of tolerance but also as an opportunity for politicians to be seen to demonstrate their own moral standing through promoting their own role in the commemorations themselves. Every year politicians are invited by the Holocaust Educational Trust to sign a Holocaust Memorial Day Book of Commitment designed to illustrate their commitment to the day of remembrance and their pledge to remember those who died. MPs ‘speak out’ against prejudice and intolerance by signing the books of remembrance.

The lucid and carefully sculpted entries of the Prime Minister of the time usually contain messages for contemporary society through platitudes such as “humanity survived our descent into evil and if we recommit today to remembrance and to resistance to evil, then that is the legacy of hope.”<sup>42</sup> At the same time, backbench MPs who sign the memorial books often express sentiments that never explain why “we must always remember what happened” or define exactly why “each new generation needs to know what happened.”<sup>43</sup> The photographs taken of those members of Parliament signing the book, in turn, are then placed on individual MPs constituency website as proof of their actions and of their dedication to remembering what happened. The assumption is that by illustrating their commitment to ensuring the

---

<sup>36</sup> Bloxham, “Britain’s Holocaust Memorial Days”, 47

<sup>37</sup> Holocaust Memorial Day Trust, “*Theme Paper: One Person Can Make a Difference 2006*”, (2005)

<sup>38</sup> Holocaust Memorial Day Trust, “*Theme Paper: Imagine... Remember, Reflect, React 2008*”, (2007)

<sup>39</sup> Holocaust Memorial Day Trust, “UK Event”, (2016), Retrieved on 14 April 2016 from <http://hmd.org.uk/page/uk-event>

<sup>40</sup> Holocaust Memorial Day Trust, *Theme Paper: Legacy of Hope 2010*, (2009)

<sup>41</sup> Frank Furedi, “The Holocaust should not be for sale”, *Daily Telegraph*, 26 January 2006

<sup>42</sup> Gordon Brown, *Holocaust Memorial Day Book of Remembrance 2010: The Legacy of Hope*, (Unpublished)

<sup>43</sup> Annette Brooke, *Holocaust Memorial Day Book of Remembrance*, 2010; Robert Goodwill, *Holocaust Memorial Day Book of Remembrance*, 2007

Holocaust is never forgotten they have demonstrated their willingness to be a part of the moral imperative to remember and demonstrate their own position as good citizens whilst using the memory of the Holocaust to encourage others to act likewise.<sup>44</sup> Regardless of sincere individual commitment the cumulative effect is often that “Holocaust Memorial Day is becoming a Victorian religious rally to which the audience is urged to subscribe and those who don’t are cast as uncivilised.”<sup>45</sup>

Such abstraction from critical historical understanding alongside the continual reference to Britain’s role in the Second World War ultimately reinforces understandings of a national identity built on supposed, and inherent, British values, thus validating the concern expressed as early as 2000 by Cesarani that the event might “serve to celebrate Britain’s role in defeating Nazism and its supposedly humane immigration record in the 1930s and since.”<sup>46</sup> Such decontextualisation and abstraction is also discernible in the educational initiatives promoted by organisations committed to ensuring the Holocaust continues to have a significant presence in British culture, as will be considered in greater depth in the following section.

### Education and Holocaust Memorialisation

The question as to whether pedagogy has a “special and unique task in the education of man in the world after Auschwitz” has been posed repeatedly.<sup>47</sup> The establishment of Holocaust Memorial Day saw the firm institutionalisation of the Holocaust within British society as an educational event.<sup>48</sup> Education certainly emerged as a significant mediator of Holocaust consciousness in the final decade of the twentieth century having become a mandatory part of the first National Curriculum for all secondary school students in England and Wales in 1991. The development of Holocaust education since this time has frequently been cited as a key turning point in terms of Britain’s engagement with the Nazi genocide, signalling a shift from the institutional silences or distortions that had characterised previous decades.<sup>49</sup>

Following the establishment of Holocaust Memorial Day, however, pedagogy was to play an even greater role in the transmission of the Holocaust in British society. As Cesarani suggested, the commemorative day “will be reinforced by an educational programme informed by government departments but devolved on to educational authorities and schools around Britain.”<sup>50</sup> Education was thus envisaged as being the means by which critical engagement with the day, and the Holocaust, could occur. Reflecting this educational commitment the HMDT oversaw the publication and distribution of education packs tailored around the specific theme of the year and the creation of individual resources with accompanying guidance notes for educators. Although the HMDT holds overall responsibility for the day, other educational organisations who are active throughout the year have come to assume a leading role in encouraging participation in HMD and in promoting Holocaust teaching and remembrance outside of this framework.

---

<sup>44</sup> For examples of Members of Parliament detailing their role in Holocaust remembrance please see: Paul Blomfield, “I’ve signed the Holocaust Memorial Day Book of Commitment to ‘speak out’ against prejudice”, 18 January 2012, available at: [www.paulblomfield.co.uk/news/news-story/article/ive-signed-the-holocaust-memorial-day-book-ofcommitment-to-speak-out-against-prejudice.html](http://www.paulblomfield.co.uk/news/news-story/article/ive-signed-the-holocaust-memorial-day-book-ofcommitment-to-speak-out-against-prejudice.html), (accessed 29 January 2013); Phillip Lee, “Local MP ‘Speaks Out’ Against Prejudice by Signing Holocaust Memorial Day Book of Commitment”, 20 January 2012, available at [www.philliplee.com/social-responsibility/local-mp-speaks-out-against-prejudice-by-signing-holocaust-memorial-day-book-ofcommitment/](http://www.philliplee.com/social-responsibility/local-mp-speaks-out-against-prejudice-by-signing-holocaust-memorial-day-book-ofcommitment/), (accessed 28 January 2013)

<sup>45</sup> Adrian Hamilton, “Keep the Politicians out of Holocaust Day”, *The Independent*, 26 January 2006

<sup>46</sup> Cesarani, “Seizing the Day”, 66

<sup>47</sup> Arye Carmon, “Problems in Coping with the Holocaust: Experiences with Students in a Multinational Program”, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 450, July 1980, 227 – 236, 227

<sup>48</sup> Cesarani, “Does the Singularity of the Holocaust make it Incomparable and Inoperative”, 40

<sup>49</sup> For a detailed account of the emergence of the National Curriculum for History, see Lucy Russell, *Teaching the Holocaust in School History: Teachers or Preachers?*, (London: Continuum, 2006). On Britain’s relationship with the Holocaust see: Andy Pearce, *Holocaust Consciousness in Contemporary Britain*, (London, 2014); Andy Pearce, “The Development of Holocaust Consciousness”; David Cesarani, “How Post-War Britain Reflected on the Nazi Persecution and Mass Murder of Europe’s Jews: A Reassessment of Early Responses”, *Jewish Culture and History*, 12/1-2 (2010) pp. 95-130; Tony Kushner, *The Holocaust and the Liberal Imagination: A Social and Cultural History*, (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1994); Sharples & Jensen, *Britain and the Holocaust*

<sup>50</sup> Cesarani, “Seizing the Day”, 64

Governmental guidance for teachers on how to tackle this complex and emotive subject had been fragmentary at best during the formative years of Holocaust teaching. This perhaps accounts for the influence which non-governmental institutions like the Holocaust Educational Trust, the Imperial War Museum and Holocaust Centre have had on the shape of Holocaust education. These organisations were to play an even more significant role in promoting education and remembrance after the establishment of Holocaust Memorial Day for education, much like the community-based aspects of the day was always "intended to be driven by grassroots activists."<sup>51</sup> The most significant of these is the Holocaust Educational Trust (HET), a lobbying turned charitable organisation formed in 1988 in the wake of the establishment of the All Party Parliamentary War Crimes Group as a means of "promoting research, supporting Holocaust education, producing resources and advancing the teaching of the Nazi genocide in educational institutions."<sup>52</sup> In the years since its creation the Trust has grown to be one of the most prominent educational charities in the country.

The material being promoted by the HET was specifically designed to inspire integration, citizenship and community engagement. This mode of Holocaust education, which developed in earnest after the establishment of HMD, prioritises the transmission and mediation of such contemporary 'lessons' applicable for all, reinforces a more malleable narrative of the Holocaust with recognisable pertinence for contemporary British society. As a result of this this emphasis, it is possible to see a gradual shift promoted by HMDT and organizations such as the HET and Anne Frank Trust away from the historical context of the Holocaust in favour of imparting contemporary 'lessons' more effectively.

The question as to whether there is a possibility of 'lessons' for contemporary society being derived from the Holocaust has prompted fierce and prolonged debate between educationists and historians alike.<sup>53</sup> These debates cannot be reproduced here but what is apparent is that the concept of 'lessons' has emerged as a dominant aspect of the way in which the Holocaust is both taught and conceptualised. Whilst this approach is reflected in other countries too, within Britain the approach to Holocaust teaching transmitted through 'lessons' for the future has achieved a particular pertinence and provides the moral justification for the continued inclusion of the Holocaust on the National Curriculum. As Andrew Burns observed, it is hoped that the "lessons from that disastrous period of history guide us in the future."<sup>54</sup> Such sentiments are continually evoked in both the classroom and in wider culture and used to reflect the righteousness of Britain's moral commitment to multiculturalism or as a means of emphasising the benefits of living in a tolerant democracy.

This move towards the Holocaust as holding 'lessons' for contemporary society can even be discerned in the shifting emphasis of the aims of the Holocaust Educational Trust. The founding aim of the Trust was originally to "show our citizens and especially our youngsters what happened when racism replaced diversity and when mass murder took over a nation."<sup>55</sup> Such an aim reflected the relative dearth of easily accessible information for students and teachers at the time and the seeming ambivalence of the wider British population towards engaging with the Holocaust. In this vein the organisations' primary purpose

---

<sup>51</sup> Stephen D. Smith, *Never Again! Yet Again! A Personal Struggle with the Holocaust and Genocide*, (Jerusalem: Gefen Publishing House, 2009), 116

<sup>52</sup> Pearce, "Development of Historical Consciousness", 72; Geoffrey Short and Carol Ann Reed, *Issues in Holocaust Education*, (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2004), 59

<sup>53</sup> For further information on these debates please see: Nicholas Kinloch, "Learning about the Holocaust: Moral or Historical Question?", *Teaching History*, 93, (1998), 44-46; Nicholas Kinloch, "Parallel Catastrophes? Uniqueness, Redemption and the Shoah", *Teaching History*, 104, (2001), 8-14; Steve Illingworth, "Hearts, Minds and Souls: Exploring Values through History", *Teaching History*, 100, (2000), 20-24; Geoffrey Short, "Lessons of the Holocaust: A Response to the Critics", *Educational Review*, 55/3, (2003), 277-287; Peter Novick, *The Holocaust and Collective Memory*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2000), 261-263; Alice Pettigrew, "Limited Lessons from the Holocaust? Critically Considering the Anti-Racist and Citizenship Potential", *Teaching History*, 141, (2010), 50-55; Paul Salmons, "Moral Dilemmas: History Teaching and the Holocaust", *Teaching History*, 104, (2001), 34-40

<sup>54</sup> Andrew Burns, 'Holocaust Memorial Day: Lessons for the Future', (24 January 2013), Retrieved on 24 August 2013 from [www.het.org.uk/index.php/blog/entry/holocaust-memorial-day-lessons-for-the-future](http://www.het.org.uk/index.php/blog/entry/holocaust-memorial-day-lessons-for-the-future)

<sup>55</sup> Greville Janner, *To Life! The Memoirs of Greville Janner*, (Stroud: Sutton Publishing Limited, 2006), 214

was to inform the British people about the subject itself. In contrast, the aim of the Trust at the present time is to “educate young people from every background about the Holocaust and the important lessons to be learned for today.”<sup>56</sup> Other educational organizations have also adopted this conviction about moral ‘lessons’ being transmitted to students in a transformative manner. The Holocaust Centre in Nottingham suggests that Holocaust education can help to foster “good citizenship”<sup>57</sup> values whilst the London Jewish Cultural Centre claims that through learning about the Holocaust we are able to “fight prejudice and bigotry.”<sup>58</sup> Such is the prominence of the notion of the Holocaust holding contemporary meaning applicable to daily life that the idea that the Holocaust contains ‘lessons’ for contemporary society is accepted almost without question in the public sphere.

Reflecting, and shaping, the significance attributed to the existence of such contemporary ‘lessons’ and the shift towards a more contemporary orientated Holocaust education is the Lessons from Auschwitz (LFA) project run by the Holocaust Educational Trust. Established in 1999 the LFA project is a four part programme for sixth-form students, aged between 16 and 18, and teachers which includes a one day visit to the sites of Auschwitz I and Auschwitz II. Originally created by Rabbi Barry Marcus of the Central Synagogue in London as a way to inform the Jewish community in Britain about the Holocaust, since the adoption of the project by the Trust, the visits have now escalated to such an extent that they are a high profile vehicle through which the Holocaust is mediated to British students.<sup>59</sup> The British government has funded the project since 2005 when the Treasury pledged an annual sum of £1.5million to facilitate and expand the project.

Since the adoption of the initiative by the Holocaust Educational Trust the project has been re-orientated towards a more multicultural audience through the projection of a universalised British narrative espousing lessons for contemporary society. Following the visit to Auschwitz, as part of the Follow Up session, educators provide students with a selection of ‘historical conclusions and contemporary lessons’ that the Trust feels that students should learn as a result of being taught about the Holocaust.<sup>60</sup> These contemporary ‘lessons’ which students are provided with range from the fact that “Societies are made up of individuals. If we want to make the world a more humane place, we must start with our own everyday actions”, to “The UK government plays a key role in global events and we, as citizens, can influence governmental policy” to “We must promote tolerance of others by recognising the role played by all regardless of gender, race or creed.”<sup>61</sup> Students then chose which of these contemporary concerns resonates most with them and that is then defined as being a ‘lesson’ of the Holocaust.

After participation in the project students become Ambassadors for the Trust. In this role, the Trust asserts, these young people become part of the “the driving force behind our efforts to ensure that people across Britain understand the importance of remembering the Holocaust”<sup>62</sup> and that the ‘lessons’ they have gleaned from Auschwitz can be mediated by them into wider society. This is often achieved by students presenting their trip to their school, writing material for the local newspaper, discussing their visit with local community groups or planting a memorial tree and inviting those in the community to witness the

---

<sup>56</sup> Holocaust Educational Trust, ‘About Us’, Retrieved on 20 April 2016 from, [www.het.org.uk/index.php/about-us-general](http://www.het.org.uk/index.php/about-us-general)

<sup>57</sup> The Holocaust Centre, ‘About Us’, Retrieved on 24 April 2016 from, [www.holocaustcentre.net](http://www.holocaustcentre.net)

<sup>58</sup> London Jewish Cultural Centre, ‘UK Schools Speaker Programme’, (2013) Retrieved on 12 December 2014 from <http://www.ljcc.org.uk/holocaust>

<sup>59</sup> Barry Marcus, “You are witnesses: Collection/Anthology of Personal Reflections from the One Day Visits to Auschwitz, (London: Holocaust Educational Trust, 1999). For a more detailed discussion of the Lessons from Auschwitz programme and the one day visits established by Rabbi Marcus please see Kara Critchell, *Holocaust Education in British Society and Culture*, (Unpublished PhD thesis, 2014)

<sup>60</sup> Holocaust Educational Trust, “Lessons from Auschwitz: Historical Conclusions and Contemporary Lessons Resource”, (Unpublished)

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Holocaust Educational Trust, “About the Ambassador Programme”, Retrieved on 28 April 2016 from, <https://www.het.org.uk/ambassadors/about-the-ambassador-programme>

dedication. As Chief Executive of the Trust Karen Pollock observed, 'The inspiring work students go on to do in their local areas demonstrates the importance of the visit.'<sup>63</sup>

It has been asserted that, "education is a simulacrum of the society it serves" but it is clear that through the way in which current pedagogy and commemoration intersect education does not simply represent the society it serves but it also concurs in shaping society's self-perception.<sup>64</sup> Much like Holocaust Memorial Day the question with education is what exactly it hopes to achieve. Are Holocaust educators seeking to teach the history of the event or are they intending to use the Holocaust to provide moral instruction aimed at forging feelings of citizenship and a sense of identity based on democratic values? Perhaps more significantly, perhaps, what is the intention of the British Government in funding this initiative over the last decade and HMDT over the last 15 years? The message that the Government wants to mediate through education appears to be subscribing to the same "pathos" approach to the subject that was observed in Holocaust Memorial Day. Certainly the decontextualisation of the Holocaust, discernable in the National Curriculum in which it is compulsory to teach about the Holocaust but not mandatory to teach about the Second World War seems to point in that direction.

The use of the Holocaust to encourage civic sentiments and democratic values is certainly not unique and is situated alongside a shift in British policy towards education in response to international, and perceived domestic, threats. The introduction of the Preventing Violent Extremism (more commonly referred to as the 'Prevent') Programme in the wake of the terror attacks of 2001 and the London bombings of 2005 to promote "mainstream British values: democracy, rule of law, equality of opportunity, freedom of speech and the rights of all men and women to live free from persecution of any kind"<sup>65</sup> is just one example of how the field of education has been recruited into helping to sculpt a sense of British identity. This was taken even further in the summer of 2015 when the Government made adherence to the programme a statutory duty to respond to the "ideological threat of terrorism" and to "prevent people from being drawn into terrorism."<sup>66</sup> Situated alongside such discourse, and alongside institutionalised attempts to both sculpt identity and counter extremism in the age of terror, the moves in Holocaust education towards promoting citizenship and democracy reflect a more significant shift in British educational policy over the last 15 years.

#### An Absence of Intersections? Britishness and the Kindertransport

If education is being overtly harnessed to project supposedly 'British' values to counter subversive elements in society in the so called 'pre-criminal space' then the use of the Holocaust as a way of asserting British identity is rather more subtly employed.<sup>67</sup> This is often achieved by drawing on powerful and emotive 'symbols', such as Holocaust survivors who have become integral to education in Britain, to the point that they are referred to as being the "Heart of Holocaust Education."<sup>68</sup> As the Holocaust Educational Trust tells students: "survivor testimonies are powerful because they challenge the process of dehumanisation...we cannot imagine the numbers of people that suffered during the Holocaust....However, we can gain some understanding by focusing on the individual stories and testimonies of those who suffered and died."<sup>69</sup> By using survivor testimonies to encourage a focus on the individual experience, educators are trying to ensure that the victims of the Holocaust are not simply reduced to abstract figures.

---

<sup>63</sup> "A Project so Vital to Help Pupils Learning", *Western Daily Press*, 1 May 2008

<sup>64</sup> Martin L. Davies, "Education after Auschwitz: Revisited", Martin Davies and Claus-Christian Szejnmann (eds), *How the Holocaust Looks Now: International Perspectives*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 247-260, 253

<sup>65</sup> HM Government, *Prevent Strategy*, (June 2011), 34

<sup>66</sup> HM Government, *Protecting Vulnerable People from being Drawn into Terrorism: Statutory guidance for Channel Panel Members and Partners of Local Panels*, (April 2015), 3

<sup>67</sup> Homa Khaleeli, "Is the Prevent Strategy Demonising Muslim Schoolchildren?", *The Guardian*, (23 September 2015)

<sup>68</sup> Holocaust Educational Trust, 'Survivor Stories', Retrieved on 20 April 2016 from [www.het.org.uk/index.php/survivor-stories](http://www.het.org.uk/index.php/survivor-stories),

<sup>69</sup> Holocaust Educational Trust, *Lessons from Auschwitz Orientation Seminar Notes for Educators*, (Unpublished, 2011), 8

It is believed that, if students are able to engage with individual testimony, their understanding of human experience within an incomprehensible event can be enhanced.<sup>70</sup>

Organisations like the Holocaust Educational Trust have campaigned consistently and passionately to ensure that the importance of survivors is recognised. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, in Britain survivors continue to participate in Outreach projects in schools on a daily basis giving their testimony and reliving their story in the hope that, through education and remembrance, the events of the Holocaust will not be forgotten and that its 'lessons' will encourage people towards tolerance and an appreciation of difference.

The form of education promoted by these organisations within their Outreach programmes has also helped to propel the survivor witness into the public eye, thereby ensuring that they are increasingly accessible to the public. As the emotive impact of survivor speakers in the classroom became increasingly recognised within the educational sphere, so was their value noted and harnessed within commemorative events including the national ceremony. Whilst survivors may be at the heart of Holocaust education, however, how they are encountered in this sphere both reflects wider engagement with the Holocaust in commemorative culture and helps to perpetuate narratives of supposedly 'British' liberal democratic values. The visible position of naturalised British survivors during memorial days provides indisputable proof of the value of past British actions on the international stage whilst at the same time championing deeply ingrained self-perceptions of Britain that might end up hindering open discussion about less uplifting aspects of British life in the present.

The use of the survivor as a screen in British consciousness can be seen most acutely in the theme of rescue encouraged by allusions to the Kindertransport which features heavily in both education and memorialisation. Referred to by the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust as a "unique humanitarian programme" the Kindertransport was overlooked in British collective consciousness until the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the transports.<sup>71</sup> Since that time, the Kindertransports have evolved so as to become "a source of great national pride within the British historical imagination."<sup>72</sup> The British scheme to allow approximately 10,000 children into Britain following Kristallnacht on 9 November 1938 has been seen as Britain "securing the future" of those Jewish children who came to Britain.<sup>73</sup>

That the Kindertransport has become enshrined within British cultural imagination as an example of the British people rescuing thousands of innocents in a time of adversity is unsurprising. The murder of 1.5 million children, understandably, carries significant emotive power. Just as the murder of children has assumed a prominent position within Holocaust consciousness so too the rescue of children has become an equally dominant theme in British historical understanding. This was enhanced by the decision to make the 'Children of the Holocaust' the theme of Holocaust Memorial Day 2003, thus highlighting the contrast between the position of Jewish children in Nazi occupied territories and the relative safety of those who had been permitted entry into Britain. This has been further reinforced by the creation of an interactive exhibition referred to as 'The Journey' at The National Holocaust Centre & Museum in Nottingham. The exhibition, built primarily for the mediation of the Holocaust to primary-aged children, follows the story of 10 year old Leo Stein, a German Jewish boy who came to England as part of the Kindertransport.

---

<sup>70</sup> Samuel Totten, "The Use of First-Person Accounts in Teaching about the Holocaust", *The British Journal of Holocaust Education*, 3/2, (Winter 1994), 160 – 183, 160

<sup>71</sup> Holocaust Memorial Day Trust, "The Kindertransport", Retrieved on 20 April 2016 from <http://hmd.org.uk/genocides/kindertransport-refugees>. To mark this anniversary Bertha Leverton, herself a Kindertransportee, planned a reunion for those who had come to Britain as children in 1938. Publication of the event led to over 1000 Kindertransportees attending and began the process of returning the memory of the transports to British consciousness.

<sup>72</sup> Caroline Sharples, "The Kindertransport in British Historical Memory", Andrea Hammel and Bea Lewkowicz (eds), *The Kindertransport to Britain 1938/39 New Perspectives: The Year Book of the Research Centre for German and Austrian Studies*, Vol. 13, (Amsterdam: Rodopi B.V, 2012), 15-27, 21

<sup>73</sup> Lembit Öpik, "House of Commons Debate, Holocaust Memorial Day", *Hansard*, Vol. 477-501, Col. 488, (29 January 2009)

Given that the Holocaust, with the oft-forgotten exception of the deportation of Jews from the Channel Islands, did not take place on British soil it is perhaps not surprising that one of the most significant roles of survivors in maintaining and reinforcing a notable British connection to the Holocaust is through those who came to Britain. Popular British understanding of the Kindertransport, mediated by politicians, the media and organisations such as the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust and the Imperial War Museum is, to varying degrees, one of prevailing pride in the British rescue of thousands of Jewish children from the clutches of Nazi aggression.<sup>74</sup> One widely publicised commemorative event reinforcing this memory of Britain as a place of refuge, and in which survivors appeared to play an integral part, was the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary re-enactment of the journey carried out by hundreds of children from Czechoslovakia to Britain in what has become known as the Winton Train, or the Czech Kindertransport. Independent of the Kindertransport operation, but often considered in conjunction with it, the rescue of 669 children by Nicholas Winton has become a significant part of British historical consciousness of the Holocaust.

On 1 September 2009, in order to commemorate this act, a train carrying 170 people, including 22 of the child evacuees who were originally involved in this transport and their descendants, left Prague and followed the route taken by the original Winton Trains. They were met in London on 4 September by Nicholas Winton himself with the words, widely reported at the time, 'It's wonderful to see you all after 70 years. Don't leave it quite so long until we meet here again.'<sup>75</sup> How can we interpret survivors' roles in the remembrance of this event? On the one hand their presence was vital. Without the survivors the journey could not have been relived and the memory would undoubtedly have resonated less widely with the public. Yet conversely whilst the survivors were necessary, their experiences were somewhat supplementary to the commemoration which overwhelmingly centred on Winton himself. The same is also true within popular consciousness of the Kindertransport and, indeed, within wider commemoration of the Holocaust. For whilst the prominence of survivors indicates an increased engagement with them, it can also be seen to promote narratives of British heroism and righteousness.

The press contributed considerably to the perpetuation of the narrative which emphasises the salvation provided to the children who were admitted into Britain, many of whom are still living in this country. The BBC discussed the enactment under the heading, 'Czech evacuees thank their saviour'<sup>76</sup>. In fact so dominant is the memory that the man who organised the transports from Czechoslovakia is often referred to in the British media as the 'British Schindler'.<sup>77</sup> These traditional interpretations of rescue are reinforced by the expressions of gratitude articulated by survivors themselves. One survivor, Bronia Snow, is reported as stating that in Britain she quickly became 'an Anglophile...I became appreciative of this wonderful country, its toleration, and its good manners.'<sup>78</sup> Sentiments such as this expressing appreciation towards Britain are frequent and extremely important when considering the role of survivors in British understanding of the Holocaust and of Britain's role within it. Survivor's political value does not only lie in the messages of humanity politicians want to promote but also in the relationship they appear to have with the country in which they found refuge.<sup>79</sup>

Due to the emotiveness of the subject, the expressions of gratitude expressed by survivors and the political pride articulated during commemorative activities, the Kindertransport and the Winton Train have been absorbed within British historical consciousness as acts of rescue which are seen to be representative of

---

<sup>74</sup> Ruth Barnett, "The Acculturation of the Kindertransport Children: Intergenerational Dialogue on the Kindertransport Experience", *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies*, 23/1, (Fall 2004), 100-108, 101

<sup>75</sup> "WWII Rescue Train Recreated", *BBC News*, (4 September 2009)

<sup>76</sup> Robert Hall, "Czech Evacuees Thank Their Saviour", *BBC News*, (4 September 2009)

<sup>77</sup> Daniel McLaughlin, "Survivors Gather to pay Tribute to British Schindler", *The Independent*, (2 September 2009)

<sup>78</sup> Bronia Snow in Stephen Adams, "Schindler Train: I didn't talk to a soul. I was traumatised", (4 September 2009), *Daily Telegraph*, Retrieved on 4 January 2016 from [www.telegraph.co.uk/history/world-war-two/6138764/Schindler-train-I-didnt-talk-to-a-soul.-I-was-traumatised.html](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/history/world-war-two/6138764/Schindler-train-I-didnt-talk-to-a-soul.-I-was-traumatised.html)

<sup>79</sup> Erich Reich, "Letters to the AJR", *Association of Jewish Refugees Journal*, (January 2009); Martin Stern, "Holocaust Memorial Day Trust Podcast", Retrieved on 21 April 2016 from [www.hmd.org.uk/resources/stories/martin-stern](http://www.hmd.org.uk/resources/stories/martin-stern)

tolerance and liberalism at a time when other nations were embracing Fascism. Through replicating the journey of the Winton Train the notion of British rescue, an already powerful story, became firmly entrenched in Britain's Holocaust consciousness. It was not so much the Jewish children but the British man who rescued them who took centre stage during the commemorative events. As a result the survivors are necessary to the story not because of what their experiences reveal about the Holocaust but because of what their presence in Britain reinforces about British identity and a British past. For their very presence contributes to the notion of British benevolence and the sustained gratitude of those who were a part of these schemes, in turn, contributes to the sense of pride the memory of them instils. This of course should not suggest a belittling of Winton's achievements, nor the achievement of the Kindertransports, but rather that to consider them critically would create a more grounded historical consciousness and place British attitudes both in the past and in the present within a more contextualised and historically nuanced understanding.

The number of refugees present within Britain and the continued presence of survivors in Britain after the war imply contentment in British life. The physical presence of survivors contributes to the understanding of the Kindertransport as a "humane initiative" for which the British government were responsible. Yet the way in which the Kindertransport and British attitudes towards immigration are remembered circumvent difficult questions and risk turning a complex and multifaceted event into a simple redemptive narrative. As Louise London suggests, "a gulf exists" between the memory and history of British engagement with its past when considering this period and, in particular, the notion of providing a safe haven for all those who required it.<sup>80</sup>

Despite the presence of survivors, the historical consciousness promoted is not one primarily about their experiences but, increasingly, about British pride. This positive narrative does not account for the fact that as Mark Mazower has noted, despite Britain 'priding itself on its tolerance and liberalism, it has in fact only accepted Jews on certain conditions and requires their conformism and assimilation.'<sup>81</sup> The position of the survivor in contemporary Holocaust discourse allows for a reduced engagement with the reality of British actions during the war, moreover, it also enhances a somewhat distorted consideration of the Jewish/non-Jewish relationship and fails to encourage an introspective analysis of British attitudes towards Jewish immigrants at the time thereby allowing the continuation of a somewhat mythical remembrance both of the Holocaust and of British treatment of the "Other."

When considering the role of survivors in British culture and society the perceived relationship between Holocaust memory and expressions of national identity become increasingly more acute. As a result, survivors are not simply valued due to what they can tell about the Holocaust but their presence is also important in terms of what they say about Britain. Whilst British politicians appear to agree that more could have been done in support of refugees at the time the overwhelming sentiment to have pervaded British imagination is that, as one politician acknowledged:

'It is true that our country did not do enough, of course, and that it could have done more, and sooner, but no one can deny that when other countries were rounding up their Jews Britain provided a safe haven. It was British troops, as we have heard, who liberated the concentration camps, rescuing tens of thousands of inmates from almost certain death and enabling many of those to go on and prosper under the democratic values of the UK.'<sup>82</sup>

The domestication of Holocaust survivors and their experiences in education situated alongside the relative decontextualisation of the Holocaust in the commemorative sphere so as to impart lessons for common humanity combine to reinforce a narrative that subscribes to traditional assumptions of identity which, as

---

<sup>80</sup> Louise London, *Whitehall and the Jews, 1933-1948: British Immigration Policy, Jewish Refugees and the Holocaust*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 13

<sup>81</sup> Mark Mazower, "England, Liberalism and the Jews", *The Jewish Quarterly*, 167, (1997), 33-38, 33

<sup>82</sup> Ian Austin, "House of Commons Debate: Holocaust Memorial Day 2012", *Hansard*, Vol. 538, Col. 342, (19 January 2012)

will be discussed in the following section, whilst both emphasising the centrality of the Holocaust, whilst also run the risk distancing Britain from Europe in British imagination.

### European Holocaust Consciousness or Domesticated Holocaust Identity?

The way in which the Holocaust has come to be absorbed into British consciousness since 2001 reflects the inherent tensions between the decontextualized narrative which has evolved in British Holocaust education and commemoration, and the subsequent impact this narrative has had, and continues to have, on contemporary conceptualisation of British national identity. These conceptualisations based on representations of the Holocaust also intersect with dominant narratives of the Second World War and influence understandings of Britain's place in Europe and constructions of European identity. British narratives of the war and the Holocaust present distinctive features. As Mark Donnelly noted, despite being "a global conflict which killed some 60 million and which left the legacy of Auschwitz, Hiroshima and countless acts of barbarism [the war] has evoked nostalgia, pride and even sentimentality in Britain."<sup>83</sup>

It is certainly difficult to separate the memory of the Holocaust, and the perils of Fascism, from the memory of the British defeat of Nazism and the prevailing of democratic ideals. As a member of the House of Lords declared during a debate to discuss the 50th anniversary of the end of hostilities, "after many years of fighting and after much travail the Allies succeeded in defeating a determined, efficient and dedicated enemy and it is right and fitting that we recall that feat of arms. Secondly, for us and for many of our allies the end of the war represented a triumph for democracy and for democratic ideals."<sup>84</sup> Since the establishment of Holocaust Memorial Day, however, the Holocaust has become increasingly central to popular understandings of the past and interpretations of British identity. The Holocaust now reinforces the memory of the war as opposed to the war simply facilitating engagement with the Holocaust as was previously the case. As Andrew Dismore MP noted, "the need to commemorate the Holocaust applies in Britain as much as anywhere. Our country made terrible sacrifices to defeat Hitler. The period of Nazism and the Second World War remain a defining episode in our national psyche."<sup>85</sup> Subsequently, the indelible association between Britain, the Second World War and the Holocaust in cultural imagination contribute to a sense of identity built on pride in British heroism during this time not only in resisting Fascism but also for liberating Holocaust survivors, and the rest of Europe, from the yolk of Nazism. That this pride has not abated and that this narrative has continued to be perpetuated, was illustrated by an Early Day Motion, tabled in 2006, concerning the recognition of the newly established Veterans Day (renamed Armed Forces Day in 2009) which asserted that the House of Commons recognises that:

"the courage and sacrifice of British servicemen made during the Second World War was paramount to saving victims of the Holocaust; notes that on 15th April 1945 British troops liberated the Bergen-Belsen Nazi concentration camp, rescuing tens of thousands of inmates from certain death; further notes the compassion, hope and freedom that liberators gave back to the Holocaust survivors, many of whom have prospered under the democratic values of the UK."<sup>86</sup>

The narrative presented by this EDM is, of course, extremely simplistic drawing as it does on the perpetuation of distorted interpretations of Britain's supposed role of heroic 'liberator' of the surviving Jewish population of Europe. Nor does it reflect the complexities of the immediate post-liberation period during which almost 14,000 people died within the camp.<sup>87</sup>

---

<sup>83</sup> Mark Donnelly, *Britain in the Second World War*, (London: Routledge, 1999), 1

<sup>84</sup> Lord Richards, "House of Lords Debate: Fiftieth Anniversary of the End of World War II", *Hansard*, Vol. 563, Col. 790, (25 April 1995)

<sup>85</sup> Andrew Dismore, "House of Commons Debate: Holocaust Remembrance Day", *Hansard*, Vol. 334, Col. 362, (30 June 1999),

<sup>86</sup> Early Day Motion 2414, "Holocaust and Veterans Day: 2005-06 Parliamentary Session", (Tabled 20 June 2006)

<sup>87</sup> Ben Shephard, *After Daybreak: The Liberation of Belsen, 1945*, (London: Pimlico, 2006), 4

Of course national 'myths', and the subsequent interpretations of identity they inspire, tend not to develop around negative actions of the state and are instead shaped around the affirmation of a positive self-identity through the assertion of supposed national values such as heroism, liberal democracy or tolerance. Yet this is also achieved by positioning the perceived characteristics of the nation against the actions and characteristics of the 'Other'. In the immediate aftermath of the war and the liberation of the camps "Britain and its allies had begun to carve out for themselves a new role as the moral teachers of a defeated Germany."<sup>88</sup> Certainly in the years following the cessation of hostilities, the "misconception which the freeing of the camps fostered was the not unnatural idea that the Germans were totally responsible for the destruction of the European Jews."<sup>89</sup> With the discovery of camps such as Belsen the physical proof of the depravity of Nazi Germany meant that the British public could see for their own eyes the depths to which the German collective had fallen.

The British government and the British public embraced the role of moral guide, fuelled by the sense of entitlement resulting from being the nation which had not succumbed to Nazism. Rather than considering key figures such as Irma Grese and Josef Kramer as being solely responsible for the crimes that they had committed, however much the 'Beast' and 'Beastess' of Belsen were absorbed into popular consciousness at the time, they were also "dismissed as typical Germans, the products of a warped and diseased nation."<sup>90</sup> The acts of those SS guards within the camps were now being viewed by the British public as representing an entire nation of depraved and bestial "barbarians" who needed to be re-educated before they could be reintegrated into international society.<sup>91</sup> Situated against prevailing sentiments regarding British heroism and valour such depravity exemplified the superiority of British national character.

The way in which the Holocaust was encountered in these early months has helped to shape a self-perception of Britain as a nation of tolerance situated against the negative characteristics of the 'Other'. This self-image, drawn from the domesticated narrative of the past and of Britain's perceived role within history, encourages a particular sense of entitlement to international leadership, particularly with regards to issues with moral or humanitarian implications. When asked about the importance of Holocaust Memorial Day the newly appointed United Kingdom Envoy for post-Holocaust issues stated that Holocaust commemoration was crucial for Britain, observing that, "we, of course historically, we were the country that stood up to Nazism, and in the early days of the war... And I think we have a lot of good things to, not to preach to other people, but there's good practice in the UK and so if we're active we can spread that good practice around Europe."<sup>92</sup> This evocation of British values during the Second World War and British actions in 'liberating' survivors of the Holocaust, thus allows politicians, and the British public, to maintain a position of moral superiority within the global arena whilst encouraging the view that other countries should be grateful for British heroism and disinterested benevolence. As one MP declared in 2012:

"when other countries were rounding up their Jews and herding them on to trains to the gas chamber, Britain provided a safe haven for tens of thousands of refugee children. Think of Britain in the thirties. The rest of Europe was succumbing to fascism...but, here in Britain, Mosley was rejected. Imagine 1941: France invaded, Europe overrun, America not yet in the war and just one

---

<sup>88</sup> Aimée Bunting, "My Question Applies to this Country": British Identities and the Holocaust, *Holocaust Studies*, 14/1, (2008), 61-92, 66

<sup>89</sup> Jon Bridgman, *The End of the Holocaust: The Liberation of the Camps*, (Singapore, Areopagitica Press, 1990), 10

<sup>90</sup> "The Shackled Monster of Belsen", *Daily Express*, (21 April 1945); "Belsen Beast Taken Back to Death Camp", *Daily Worker*, (22 September 1945); "Blonde Beastess has Confessed her Guilt", *Daily Mirror*, (6 October 1945); Tony Kushner, "The Memory of Belsen", Jo Reilly, David Cesarani, Tony Kushner and Colin Richmond (eds), *Belsen in History and Memory*, (London: Frank Cass, 1997), 181-205, 184

<sup>91</sup> H. Kinchett, "Letters: All These Horrors Must be Known", *Daily Mirror*, (23 April 1945)

<sup>92</sup> Andrew Burns, "Podcast for the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust", Retrieved on 13 February 2016, from [www.hmd.org.uk/resources/podcast/sir-andrew-burns](http://www.hmd.org.uk/resources/podcast/sir-andrew-burns)

country standing for liberty and democracy, a beacon to the rest of the world, fighting not just for our freedom, but for the world's liberty."<sup>93</sup>

Reflecting the Early Day Motion discussed previously, this rhetoric is also rooted in misconception. For the reality is of course that Britain did not go to war for the liberty of the Jewish people, in fact the government were at pains to prove the opposite at the time; moreover whilst Mosley was rejected antisemitism was still a potent if less violent force in British society, and although the Kindertransport memory is one in which Britain takes solace, it should be remembered that restrictions were fierce and resistance towards further Jewish immigration was rife. Nor does this pride in British values take into account issues surrounding immigration either past or present in British society or Britain's own role in acts of genocide and colonial violence.

The imperial decline of Britain in the wake of the cessation of hostilities in 1945 has ultimately meant that politicians and the wider population have clung to the lingering memories of supposed heroic narratives of the past so as to sustain pride in British actions and British national character which both prevents and obscures introspective analysis of both historical events and British actions (or lack thereof) in the present. The Holocaust is certainly not alone in being represented in this way, although it has become an increasingly central historical event in shaping contemporary British identity. Even the atrocities in Armenia which, as previously discussed, Britain chooses not to officially recognise as a genocide are sculpted around a highly selective narrative that seeks to characterise Britain's historical response as equally positive. When discussing the genocide in 2015 the Minister for Europe reflected on the fact that, "the British Government of that time robustly condemned the forced deportations, massacres and other crimes. We continue to endorse that view. British charities, as we look back, played a major part then in humanitarian relief operations."<sup>94</sup>

The period after the General Elections of 2010 can be defined by a newly invigorated political impetus towards a domestic commitment to ensuring the future of Holocaust remembrance, education and commemoration in British society and culture. This renewed sense of commitment to Holocaust education was not necessarily anticipated. Although the establishment of Holocaust Memorial Day had achieved cross-party support, the decisive shift towards the greater institutionalisation of Holocaust memorialisation and education in the first decade of the twenty-first century had overwhelmingly been instigated and championed by the Labour Party under the leadership of Prime Ministers Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. Following the General Election of May 2010, however, the Labour Party's 13 years in power came to a close after the creation of a coalition government led by the Conservative Party alongside the Liberal Democrats. Like the rest of the country, those invested in Holocaust education and remembrance faced a period of considerable uncertainty about what the future would hold for Britain as they waited to hear how the shift in governmental control of the country would impact the future direction of these spheres of Holocaust memory. Their concern was understandable and was reinforced by the fact that in 2008 *The Guardian* had reported that the leader of the Conservative party, now the newly elected Prime Minister, David Cameron, referred to day trips to Auschwitz run by the Holocaust Educational Trust as among some of the many 'gimmicks' funded by the sitting Labour government. The inference that this popular programme was simply a "short term gimmick" generated a swift popular, and political, backlash that was played out across the pages of the national press.<sup>95</sup>

Contrary to these concerns, however, the new government not only pledged their support for the Lessons from Auschwitz programme but also instigated a series of initiatives which implied a newly invigorated

---

<sup>93</sup> Ian Austin, "Holocaust Memorial Day 2012", Col. 342

<sup>94</sup> David Lidington, "HOC Armenian Genocide", Col. 1265

<sup>95</sup> Nicholas Watt, "Cameron under fire for Holocaust 'gimmick' remark", *The Guardian*, (23 February 2008); Helene Mullholland and Deborah Summers, "Cameron Branded 'Sick and Ignorant' in Auschwitz Row", *The Guardian*, (22 February 2008); Andrew Porter, "David Cameron under fire over Auschwitz gaffe", *The Telegraph*, (22 February 2008)

engagement with the Holocaust and a determination to augment the place of the Holocaust within British consciousness. Reflecting this shift towards greater engagement with the Holocaust and the apparent desire within the incumbent government to take a more active role in the promotion of Holocaust teaching and commemoration was the announcement of an Envoy for Post Holocaust Issues in June 2010. The fact that this appointment was announced just one month after a deeply contested election which resulted in a hung parliament reflects the significance attached to the Holocaust in British political imagination and the emphasis now being placed on this apparent 'revival' of domestic engagement with it. The statements which accompanied the announcement of this role, and the sentiments they expressed, were also revealing about the way in which Britain was choosing to situate itself in regards to the wider European context of Holocaust memorialisation. Following his appointment, the new Envoy, Sir Andrew Burns, delivered a statement in which he claimed that, "the UK already plays a leading and active role in promoting Holocaust education, remembrance and research, in tackling and resolving outstanding issues and claims and in raising public awareness of the continuing relevance of the lessons and legacy of that terrible moment in European history."<sup>96</sup> The explicit reference to the UK as being a leading figure in the sphere of Holocaust education and remembrance was reiterated by Burns' successor, Sir Eric Pickles, who used his opening statement as an opportunity to praise the fact that "The UK is a leader internationally in ensuring the Holocaust is properly commemorated and the lessons learnt" and to pledge his commitment "to ensuring we retain and build on this position over the years to come."<sup>97</sup>

Whilst acknowledging that "the UK has taken an increasingly active approach to preserving the memory of the Holocaust" over the years the new Foreign Secretary William Hague went on to suggest that although "this has worked well to date [...] I am concerned that the UK is not taking the leading role it should in these international discussions or best representing the interests of the many Holocaust victims and their families in the UK affected by these issues."<sup>98</sup> The expression of such sentiments not only implies the need for Britain to show greater initiative in international discussions about the Holocaust but also articulates idea that the UK can, and *should*, be taking a leading role within the international community. The sense of British exceptionalism encountered within historical conceptualisations of the Second World War appears to be situated alongside an on-going quest and "deep craving" for leadership which, Anne Deighton suggests is, "one facet of what has remained of Britain's post-imperial political culture."<sup>99</sup>

The danger of connecting the Holocaust with overt expressions of British identity is that it allows the perpetuation, and indeed evolution of, a post-imperial identity based on positive notions of liberal democracy and tolerance which ignores or omits critical evaluation of Britain's own past actions of atrocity and state crimes whilst also helping to defend limited responses to humanitarian crises in the current time. It is certainly the case, as Bloxham and Kushner have observed, that in "Britain racism is often seen as someone else's problem - particularly the Germans since the Second World War - yet it does not take a fascist regime for the proliferation and implementation of racism to take place."<sup>100</sup> Through the repetition of such sentiments a considered and critical self-reflection is discouraged whilst also distancing Britain from Europe by drawing on past 'achievements' such as not being invaded during World War Two (aside from the Channel Islands) and through acts such as the Kindertransport or the Winton Train. As Mark Levene observed in 2006, "the underlying spuriousness, indeed mendacity of Britain's recent foreign policy record destroys any moral basis upon which it can make claim, let alone offer leadership on the basis of any

---

<sup>96</sup> Andrew Burns cited in FCO Press Release, "UK appoints post-Holocaust Issues Envoy", (9 June 2010)

<sup>97</sup> Eric Pickles cited in FCO Press Release, "Sir Eric Pickles announced as UK Envoy on Post-Holocaust Issues", (10 September 2015)

<sup>98</sup> William Hague, "Statement to the House of Commons on appointment of post-Holocaust issues envoy", (9 June 2010)

<sup>99</sup> Anne Deighton, "The Past in the Present: British Imperial Memories and the European Question", Jan-Werner Müller (ed), *Memory and Power in Post-War Europe: Studies in the Presence of the Past*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 100-120, 100

<sup>100</sup> Donald Bloxham and Tony Kushner, "Exhibiting Racism: Cultural Imperialism, Genocide and Representation", *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice*, 2/3, (1998), 349-358, 352

Holocaust association.”<sup>101</sup> Considering the conflicts which Britain has participated in in the decade since this article was published, and the apathetic if not outright callous treatment of refugees fleeing conflict in Syria in 2015 and 2016, one is entitled to question the truthfulness of British claims to moral distinction and the extent to which Holocaust ‘lessons’ can really be said to be learnt.

The years after 2010 were, however, defined by the establishment of initiatives similar to that of the Envoy designed to expand, develop and reinforce the British government’s commitment to, and leadership in, Holocaust education and commemoration. Following a plea from the Auschwitz-Birkenau Foundation, the UK pledged 2.1 million pounds of financial assistance to enable restorative work to take place at the site to ensure the preservation of the camps as a place of commemoration, education and remembrance.<sup>102</sup> Such financial commitment was also to enter the domestic landscape with the Prime Minister committing an additional £300,000 worth of funding for the Lessons from Auschwitz project in 2013. The Holocaust Educational Trust were not only to feature as recipients of financial support but were also to feature significantly in this drive by returning more visibly to their earlier lobbyist roots by encouraging further public commemoration of the Holocaust, the survivors and the liberators. In 2009 MPs drafted Early Day Motion 1175 calling for ‘Recognition for British Heroes of the Holocaust’ in honour of those who had performed acts of rescue. Whilst a number of those had been named as Righteous among the Nations in Israel the campaign highlighted the fact that none of those who had initiated acts of rescue had been honoured within Britain itself. Despite this omission, as the *Jewish Chronicle* reported, “such individuals embody all that is best about Britain - and deserve formal recognition, not only to acknowledge their deeds but to serve as an example to future generations about the importance of making a stand against racism, discrimination and other forms of injustice.”<sup>103</sup> The creation of this award was the result of many months of forceful campaigning by the Trust for institutional recognition of their actions.

In a similar vein it was announced in 2015 that Holocaust survivors across the United Kingdom were to receive commemorative medals “to mark 70 years since the end of the Holocaust.”<sup>104</sup> The medals, another initiative of the Holocaust Educational Trust, featured the inscription ‘Liberation 1945’ emerging through barbed wire on one side and on the other an inscription to commemorate the British forces who liberated the camp of Bergen-Belén and “a stylised eternal flame” that, it was claimed, “has come to memorialise the Holocaust victims.”<sup>105</sup> The medals were awarded to Holocaust survivors at a special ceremony presided over by the Chancellor of the Exchequer who stated that, “here we stand in Downing Street in tribute to fight against Nazism. In tribute to the millions who died. In tribute to the brave survivors. In tribute to the liberators.”<sup>106</sup> Echoing the Heroes of the Holocaust awards the emphasis on Britain as liberators and as defenders of freedom and liberty dominated the official rhetoric of the day as Holocaust survivors were, once again, absorbed into a domesticated narrative of national distinctiveness and superiority.

The Home Secretary’s desire for Britain to take a more “active approach to preserving the memory of the Holocaust” during this period was also achieved within the educational system.<sup>107</sup> In February 2013 the Department for Education published its draft proposals for the reform of the National Curriculum. Included amongst the programmes for study highlighted within the suggested reforms for Key Stage 3 history (when pupils are between 11 and 14 years of age) it was proposed that pupils should be taught about the “Nazi atrocities in occupied Europe and the unique evil of the Holocaust.”<sup>108</sup> The deliberate framing of the

---

<sup>101</sup> Levene, “Britain’s Holocaust Memorial Day”, 27

<sup>102</sup> Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum Report 2008, (Auschwitz-Birkenau w Oświęcimiu, Państwowe Muzeum, 2009)

<sup>103</sup> Robyn Rosen, “Gordon Brown Honours British Holocaust Heroes”, *The Jewish Chronicle*, (8 March 2010), Retrieved on 28 March 2016 from [www.thejc.com/news/uk-news/29169/gordon-brown-honours-british-holocaust-heroes](http://www.thejc.com/news/uk-news/29169/gordon-brown-honours-british-holocaust-heroes),

<sup>104</sup> HM Treasury and Department for Communities and Local Government Press Release, “Commemorative medal marks 70 years since the end of the Holocaust”, (14 January 2015)

<sup>105</sup> Ibid

<sup>106</sup> George Osbourne, “Speech Delivered at Reception for Holocaust Educational Trust”, (14 January 2015)

<sup>107</sup> William Hague cited in FCO Press Release, “Foreign Secretary urges active approach to preserving the memory of the Holocaust”, (27 January 2011)

<sup>108</sup> The Department for Education, *The National Curriculum in England: Framework Document for Consultation*, (February 2013), 171

Holocaust as an event of “unique evil” caused astonishment amongst historians, educationists and teachers, many of whom raised concerns about how the Holocaust was being utilised politically and positioned historically.<sup>109</sup> Tony Kushner interpreted the proposals as a demonstration of the extent to which “crude ethical readings of the Holocaust have now permeated the sphere of pedagogy in Britain.”<sup>110</sup> Others raised concerns that to situate the ‘unique evil of the Holocaust’ alongside a new history curriculum aimed to inspire a positive affirmation of British history and identity would not only be to ignore other genocides but, more significantly, could encourage the view that, as one history teacher observed, the Holocaust took place “outside of history as something which was perpetrated by aliens from the planet evil who were defeated by the forces of good.”<sup>111</sup> Certainly the proposals prompted much debate over the type of history that should be taught in schools, particularly given the emphasis of the former Education Secretary, Michael Gove, on ensuring that a positive, patriotic narrative of Britain's national story was projected in the classroom.<sup>112</sup>

Although this line was removed after the initial consultation period for the curriculum came to an end, the original decision to define the Holocaust as being an event of ‘unique evil’ is revealing about the way in which the Holocaust has been absorbed into sections of British society.<sup>113</sup> Reference to genocide had been made in a previous revision of the curriculum in 2008 which explained to teachers that students should explore the “changing nature of conflict and cooperation between countries and peoples” including “the Holocaust and other genocides.”<sup>114</sup> Although the Holocaust was the only genocide to be explicitly named the introduction of ‘other genocides’ into the curriculum offered the opportunity for greater contextualisation of the Holocaust within this field. In contrast, the term ‘genocide’ was notable by its absence when the 2013 revisions were revealed.

In 2011 the newly appointed Envoy for Post Holocaust Issues had claimed that “Britain is a very cosmopolitan society...and so the events that have taken place in other countries that are of comparable dreadfulness, in Cambodia or in Rwanda or in Bosnia, Sudan are issues which the British public are interested in and care about.”<sup>115</sup> Whilst these sentiments are not wholly without foundation they do perhaps invest the British population with greater awareness and understanding about these genocides than might be the case in reality. Research conducted by the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust in 2014 found that “half the UK population cannot name a genocide that has taken place since the Holocaust despite millions being murdered as a result of persecution in Cambodia, Rwanda Bosnia and Darfur.”<sup>116</sup> The figures shocked many and the *Daily Telegraph* responded by expressing their barely concealed outrage at the sheer “scale of ignorance of major world events among young people” after reporting that for those aged 16-24

---

<sup>109</sup> Pearce, “*Historical Consciousness in Contemporary Britain*”, 223-225; “History Curriculum Newsprint & BBC Debates, (2013), Retrieved on 26 April 2016 from [http://historyworks.tv/news/2013/03/09/history\\_curriculum\\_debate\\_updates/](http://historyworks.tv/news/2013/03/09/history_curriculum_debate_updates/)

<sup>110</sup> Tony Kushner, “Loose Connections? Britain and the Final Solution”, Sharples and Jensen, *Britain and the Holocaust*, 51-70, 52

<sup>111</sup> Peter Morgan, “New History Curriculum Draft Proposal - Have your Say!”, *The Historical Association*, available at [http://www.history.org.uk/forum/topic\\_view.php?os=40&fid=27&tid=160](http://www.history.org.uk/forum/topic_view.php?os=40&fid=27&tid=160), (accessed 17 December 2015) On the backlash to Gove’s policy, see “Michael Gove Redrafts New History Curriculum after Outcry”, *The Guardian*, (21 June 2013); “Gove’s ‘Gentle Tweak’ to History Curriculum”, *Times Educational Supplement*, (10 July 2013); “A History Teacher’s Appraisal of Michael Gove’s Approach to the Teaching of History”, *Independent*, (8 January 2014)

<sup>112</sup> On the backlash to Gove’s policy, see ‘Michael Gove Redrafts New History Curriculum after Outcry’, *The Guardian*, 21 June 2013; ‘Gove’s ‘Gentle Tweak’ to History Curriculum’, *Times Educational Supplement*, 10 July, 2013; ‘A History Teacher’s Appraisal of Michael Gove’s Approach to the Teaching of History’, *Independent*, 8 January 2014; Richard J Evans, “Michael Gove’s history curriculum is a pub quiz not an education”, *New Statesman*, (21 March 2013)

<sup>113</sup> The Department for Education, *The National Curriculum in England: Framework Document*, (July 2013), 210

<sup>114</sup> Department for Children, Schools and Families and Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, *The National Curriculum Statutory Requirements for Key Stages 3 and 4*, (2007), 116

<sup>115</sup> Andrew Burns, “Podcast for the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust”

<sup>116</sup> Holocaust Memorial Day Trust, *HMDT survey: Half of UK population unable to name a post-Holocaust genocide*, (24 January 2014), Retrieved on 24 April 2016 from <http://hmdt.org.uk/news/hmdt-survey-half-uk-population-unable-name-post-holocaust-genocide>,

only eight out of ten were able to name an act of genocide to have taken place since World War Two.<sup>117</sup> The exclusive emphasis on the Holocaust and the concurrent removal of genocide from the National Curriculum, however, might not necessarily be the best way to counter this lack of awareness.

As part of the government's renewed drive towards a more rigorous domestic engagement with the Holocaust, a Parliamentary Inquiry into Holocaust education was launched in 2015. The Education Committee responsible for overseeing the Inquiry requested written submissions from interested parties to investigate a range of issues relating to the scope and quality of Holocaust education in Britain. The Committee asked for submissions which specifically addressed, 'the focus on the Holocaust in the national curriculum and the absence of teaching of other genocides' for, as they were later to report, "the teaching of other genocides and atrocities is an important aspect of young people's understanding of the modern world."<sup>118</sup> Ironically the launch of an inquiry into the absence of genocide in education was carried out by the very same government that have removed reference to genocide from the curriculum.

Yet it is not as straightforward as simply saying that the proliferation of the Holocaust across the various facets of British culture has come to dominate popular conceptions and understandings of genocide, thereby relegating the memory of other genocides to the periphery of public consciousness. Whatever the consequences, intentional or unintentional, of Britain's complex, relationship to the Holocaust it is clear that the way in which the Holocaust has been represented in Britain has exerted a significant influence on the public understanding and engagement with other genocides. For example the popularity of initiatives like the Lessons from Auschwitz programme, and the subsequent political and financial value attached to them, has certainly inspired the creation of other organisations, such as Remembering Srebrenica to campaign for the institutionalisation of a Srebrenica Memorial Day, which was achieved in 2013. If not fuelling public engagement with the genocides themselves the success of the way in which organisations committed to Holocaust memory have structured themselves, and framed the history that they want to remember, has certainly inspired those invested in the promotion of the importance of remembering other acts of atrocity and genocide.

The renewed frenzy towards Holocaust remembrance and education culminated in the establishment of a cross party Holocaust Commission in 2014. The Commission, the Prime Minister declared, had to carry out the "sacred task" of ensuring that the country "has a permanent and fitting memorial to the Holocaust and educational resources for future generations."<sup>119</sup> The memorial will be designed to "serve as a focal point for the national commemoration of the Holocaust and stand as a permanent affirmation of the values of British society" and will be accompanied by the creation of a Learning Centre overseen by the newly established UK Holocaust Memorial Foundation (UKHMF) dedicated to the advance of Holocaust learning.<sup>120</sup> As the language employed here shows, despite the reservations expressed following this announcement, the Holocaust is still being used as a means by which to reinforce interpretations of British identity through the evocation of 'British' values.<sup>121</sup> The location of the new memorial, directly alongside the Houses of Parliament also appears as an attempt to physically demonstrate the centrality of the Holocaust in the British imagination and the importance to remembering the event to the British people.

Sharon Macdonald has argued that the shift from a focus on 'the war' to an emphasis on 'the Holocaust' "allows for a less nation- and more European-based form of commemoration. The fact that Holocaust Memorial Day has been achieved as part of a European initiative, to coincide with commemoration in other European countries, is expressive of European cooperation."<sup>122</sup> This claim is partially true; at the same time,

---

<sup>117</sup> John Bingham, "Towie Generation have never heard of Rwandan Genocide", *Daily Telegraph*, (24 January 2014)

<sup>118</sup> "Government response to the House of Commons Education Committee on Holocaust Education", 2<sup>nd</sup> Report of Session, (21 April 2016), 4

<sup>119</sup> David Cameron, "Holocaust Commission Speech", (delivered 27 January 2014); David Cameron as cited in Prime Minister's Office Press Release, "Prime Minister Launches Holocaust Commission, (27 January 2014), Retrieved 24 April 2016, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/prime-minister-launches-holocaust-commission>

<sup>120</sup> United Kingdom Holocaust Memorial Foundation, *National Memorial and Learning Centre: Search for a Central London Site*, (September 2015), 5

<sup>121</sup> 'Debate: Should More be Done to Remember the Holocaust in Britain?', *History Extra*, (27 January 2016)

<sup>122</sup> Macdonald, "Commemorating the Holocaust", 66

however it should not be inferred that the way in which the Holocaust has been remembered and taught simply implies a growing proximity to Europe in British imagination. The Holocaust then, particularly when viewed through the lens of heroism, liberation and moral tenacity, subscribes to, and reinforces, wider notions of Britain being somehow distinct from Europe in terms of identity whilst paradoxically positioning itself as a European leader in Holocaust memory. Even those committed to the future of Britain in Europe and the consolidation of a broader European identity evoke the imagery of exceptionalism through allusion to an identity based on victory in the war. Former Prime Minister Tony Blair, who was certainly an advocate for greater European integration and identity, described Britain as “the victor in WWII, the main ally of the United States, a proud and independent-minded island race (though with much European blood flowing in our veins)...” during a speech delivered in Warsaw.<sup>123</sup> The lack of critical engagement inherent in the narrative encountered within Britain, however, fails to encourage deeper understandings of the politics of British, European and international identity and also resists confrontation with Britain’s imperial past.

### Conclusion

Discussion about the Holocaust and its place in British society has grown in the 15 years since the first Holocaust Memorial Day took place. Fuelled by the increasingly symbiotic relationship between Holocaust education and Holocaust commemoration, the decontextualized narrative projected by these institutionalised representations and the way in which they have come to intersect with existing interpretations of British identity, this discussion has helped to solidify an historical narrative which reinforces a sense of exceptionalism and disconnection from Europe whilst, paradoxically, centralising a European event into British domestic imagination.

The terms of reference for the recently established Holocaust Commission state that “The Holocaust is unique in man’s inhumanity to man and it stands alone as the darkest hour of human history.”<sup>124</sup> As Tom Lawson rightly observes, “this is an absurd statement, and it immediately ignores or consigns to lesser importance all other incidents of genocide, some of which might be more challenging and more difficult to deal with in Britain.”<sup>125</sup> Yet despite the absurdity of the statement the sentiment that “there is nothing equivalent to the Holocaust” has gained powerful political, cultural and societal value drawing as it does on the inherent connection between the Holocaust and the British public’s perception of their own national identity framed through the lens of World War Two as the heroic liberators of Europe.<sup>126</sup> Such interpretations of identity allow the British public and the government to assume a position of leadership built on supposed British values whilst avoiding engagement with more sensitive issues like colonial genocides. The commemoration of the highly domesticated, and politically comfortable, narrative is, perhaps, more politically rewarding than simply remembering genocide in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Of course this narrative has not gone unchallenged. Academic criticism of the direction of mainstream Holocaust consciousness has accompanied Holocaust Memorial Day consistently since its establishment. Public discussion about the omission of Armenia from the commemorative day and from being recognised has to a certain extent increased as a result of debates in the popular press. Survivors themselves have also become increasingly willing to voice some of the more negative experiences they encountered and endured within Britain which runs counter to the popular and institutionalised narrative of the country as welcoming and tolerant. It is clear that inherent tensions continue to haunt the relationship between remembering the Holocaust and navigating identity in 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain.

These tensions and conflicts can, in part, be attributed to the way in which the memory and meaning of the Holocaust has been used, framed and shaped by successive governments in order to promote particular domestic and international agendas and to respond to continually changing world affairs. Attending the

---

<sup>123</sup> Tony Blair, Prime Minister’s speech to the Polish Stock Exchange, (6/10/2000), Retrieved 16 April 2016 from <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20060715135117/number10.gov.uk/page3384>;

<sup>124</sup> HM Government, The Prime Ministers Holocaust Commission: Consultation Terms of Reference, (27 January 2014)

<sup>125</sup> Tom Lawson, “Should More be Done to Remember the Holocaust in Britain?”

<sup>126</sup> David Cameron, “Prime Minister’s Speech: 25th Anniversary of the Holocaust Educational Trust”, (16 September 2013)

25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Holocaust Educational Trust the Prime Minister drew on similar imagery within his speech stating that, “the Holocaust stands apart as a unique moment. It is the darkest hour of human history. And we must ensure that it is always remembered in that way.”<sup>127</sup> Herein lies the heart of the contradictions and tensions inherent in the way in which the Holocaust is encountered within British education and commemoration. For as long as the British government, British society and British culture continue to perpetuate such sentiments which indirectly infer a hierarchy of significance and relevance it unfortunately remains likely that remembering the Holocaust will, ultimately, not result in remembering genocide to any significant degree.

Equally, the lack of honest critical engagement this inspires compounds any further reflection on current political concerns thereby allowing a sense of complacency and entitlement to enter into public discourse about whether or not to accept refugees into the country. By defeating the Nazis in the Second World War Britain assumes the role of moral leader of Europe whilst seemingly being exempt from further interrogation about their present-day actions including the isolationist policy they are following regarding the treatment of refugees. In 2013 Richard Evans observed:

‘If we want to help young people to develop a sense of citizenship, they have to be able and willing to think for themselves. The study of history does this. It recognises that children are not empty vessels to be filled with patriotic myths. History isn't a myth-making discipline, it's a myth-busting discipline, and it needs to be taught as such in our schools.’<sup>128</sup>

Despite the aspirations of Evans it is apparent that Holocaust education, being as it is inextricably linked to commemoration and remembrance, is contributing to a patriotic British narrative whilst also perpetuating a somewhat mythical and redemptive interpretation of the Holocaust, infused with politically charged representations of the past, as opposed to one rooted within historical understanding.

The decline of Britain in the post-imperial world which has, to a not insignificant degree, fuelled this fractured British identity has ultimately meant that politicians and the wider population have clung to the lingering memories of the past so as to sustain pride in British actions and British national character which both prevents and obscures introspective analysis. Yet these memories are indelibly associated with positive affirmations of British character and history. The Kindertransport and the liberation of Bergen-Belsen in 1945 have lingered in British consciousness not for their reality but for what the representation of these acts articulates about Britain. Holocaust education is not independent from this milieu. In such context the emotive and commemorative emphasis in the approach to Holocaust teaching runs the risk of unwittingly stifling contemporary debate about sensitive political and historical issues.

The Prime Minister's reference to “a bunch of migrants” on 27 January 2016 mere moments after he proclaimed that a statue to commemorate the Holocaust would be established in Parliament square to stand “as a permanent statement of our values as a nation”, and the Government's rejection of providing refuge to 3000 children who had fled the brutal conflict in Syria a few months later, show that decontextualized and self-congratulatory Holocaust memory can co-exist with much less pleasant attitudes in the present, *pace* its supposed ‘lessons’.

---

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Richard Evans, “Myth-busting”, *The Guardian*, (13 July 2013)