

# 'It made my brain hurt, but in a good way':

## helping Year 9 learn to make and to evaluate explanations for the Holocaust

Why genocides occur is a perplexing and complex question. Leanne Judson reports a strategy designed to help students think about perpetration and evaluate and propose explanations for perpetrators' actions. Students in a mixed ability class were given explanations of differing levels of complexity to evaluate, drawing on a wide range of complex materials about perpetrators as 'real' people rather than simply 'monsters'. Students were also provided with explicit guidance to help them scaffold their arguments, in explanation or in evaluation of explanations. Results were positive, in terms of the quality of pupil work and in motivating pupils to take pride in their work.

### Leanne Judson

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### Introduction

My Year 9s love talking – as I am sure all 13–14-year-old pupils do. Their ability to verbalise their thoughts and discuss their learning, thought processes and understanding was and remains very strong. Their thinking process, their ability to question the past, was a definite strength, further boosted by their ability to question each other. However, they have struggled to match their ability to talk to their ability to communicate their opinions effectively on paper. Their written explanations have lacked depth and developed reasoning. Typically they were quick to express opinions but they were full of 'hot air', lacking reference to evidence to support their views. This is something that needed tackling, particularly in preparation for the demands of GCSE and given the level of extended writing and analysis needed to achieve the higher grades. They also lacked pride in their work and would rather not be publicly highlighted as achieving – particularly true for many of the boys in the class – for fear of being called a 'swot'. I wanted them to be proud of the work they produced because of the level of thinking that had to go into it and the level of skill required to communicate their findings and I decided to use the unit of work described below as an opportunity to help them develop their writing.

As a unit within the Scheme of Learning on the twentieth century, Year 9 had been learning about the Holocaust. The Holocaust scheme is based on lesson ideas and materials that I gained on the Institute of Education (IOE)'s free professional development course in Holocaust education.<sup>1</sup> It began with an activity called *Authentic Encounters* that examines a little wooden toy that belonged to Barney Greenman, a two-year-old child murdered in Auschwitz-Birkenau.<sup>2</sup> It is designed both to identify pupils' prior knowledge and to generate the questions about the Holocaust that pupils themselves want answering. This generated intense discussion among my Year 9, who demanded to know the answers to a whole range of key historical questions: 'Why didn't people say they weren't Jewish?' 'Who decided where people should go?' 'What happened to those who survived?' 'Why did it happen – did no one try to stop it?' 'Did Hitler and his minions have psychological disorders?' The rest of my scheme then aimed to address as many questions generated by the pupils as possible. Again, the IOE resources proved valuable here – Year 9 explored the diversity and vibrancy of pre-war Jewish life; they created a 'big and messy' timeline closely examining key dates and turning points in Nazi policy and how they affected real individuals from across the victim groups; they investigated the effectiveness of Jewish resistance using six case studies; and also investigated another of their key questions 'Why the Jews?'<sup>3</sup>

But one enquiry that had not yet been addressed through these lessons was the recurring question 'Who would do this?' I wanted all pupils to investigate the role of the perpetrators in the Holocaust and to focus on the frequently recurring question 'Why had the Holocaust happened?' My starting point was an IOE resource entitled

Figure 1: A 'Dear Teacher' letter written by a Holocaust survivor<sup>4</sup>

Dear Teacher,

I am a survivor of a concentration camp. My eyes saw what no man should witness:

Gas chambers built by learned engineers;  
Children poisoned by educated physicians;  
Infants killed by trained nurses;  
Women and babies shot and burned by High School and College graduates.

So I am suspicious of education. My request is: Help your students become human. Your efforts must never produce learned monsters, skilled psychopaths, educated Eichmanns.

Reading, writing, and arithmetic are important only if they serve to make our children more humane.

*Being Human?: Understanding the perpetrators, collaborators, bystanders and rescuers* which explores the actions and decisions of perpetrators, collaborators, bystanders and rescuers in the Holocaust. I found these resources to be excellent in many ways but I was concerned that the topic would need further differentiation to meet the needs of my pupils.

As Salmons argues in the pedagogical notes to *Being Human?* our pupils bring to the classroom strong opinions about the people involved in the Holocaust:

*It appears that even before they have studied this history many young people already have a fairly strong idea of why these people acted as they did. There is a tendency to fall back on stereotypical notions of 'evil, mad Nazis' (those 'monsters' again), on 'brave, heroic and saintly' rescuers, and 'cowardly' or 'indifferent' bystanders. While this provides a comfortable explanation (and even a useable one, if we only want the Holocaust to serve as a moral fable), it is of course a gross oversimplification and even a distortion of a complex past.<sup>5</sup>*

One of our challenges, according to Salmons, is to address these preconceptions and then have students test them against the evidence of actual case studies. I wanted my pupils to be able to test the validity of their views and then be able to communicate their findings effectively. I wanted to stretch and challenge my class in a number of ways. First, I wanted to develop pupils' literacy skills and the written quality of their explanations by asking them to read some challenging texts, to discuss their ideas orally and to develop them into explanations on paper. Second, I wanted to develop their historical thinking and their ability to reason and to argue. I will focus in what follows on teaching these lessons to one Year 9 class of 28 mixed-ability pupils. Their attitude to learning was generally good and they were keen to learn. Verbally they were confident and could respond to and challenge other pupils' responses to topics, just not so keen always to write down their ideas to fully communicate their understanding, which had, in some cases, limited their

academic progress in relation to the targets they had been set based on data on their earlier school performance. The pupils enjoyed history lessons; the majority of the class had already chosen to take GCSE history in the following academic year.

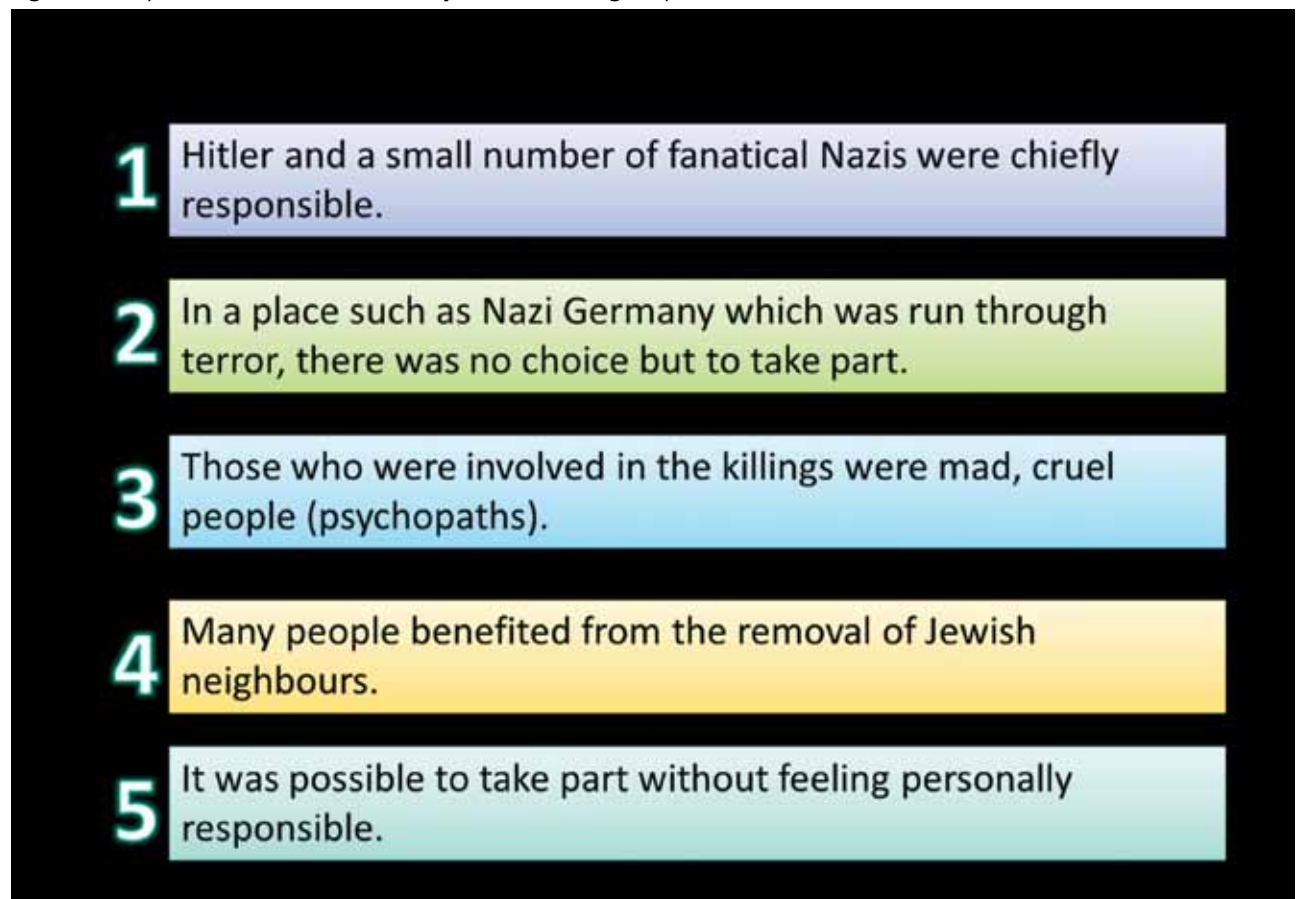
## 'Educated Eichmanns'

The lessons focusing on this enquiry were taught over two hours, with an additional hour provided for pupils to complete writing and re-drafting their answers.

The first lesson began with a 'Dear Teacher' open letter on the aims of education written by a Holocaust survivor, which was on the board as pupils arrived in the classroom (Figure 1). Pupils were asked to read it and note down any questions they had or words they did not understand. Clarification of specific terms was discussed and a brief question and answer session followed. Pupils were asked what the message of the letter was, why it was written and a further question why was it focusing on education. They suggested ideas such as: 'Nurses are not supposed to kill'; 'Did the engineers know what the gas chambers were for?'; 'Doctors are supposed to make you better'. Some pupils asked what was an 'educated Eichmann', and 'who was Eichmann?'

Pupils were then given a brief biography of Adolf Eichmann which explained who he was and his role in the Nazi state, highlighting that his was a desk job. Pupils were also told of his escape to South America, his subsequent kidnapping by Israeli intelligence agents, and his trial in Jerusalem. In trying to understand what kind of a man he was, pupils considered two quotations about Eichmann, one from the prosecution lawyer at his trial, Gideon Hausner, who said that Eichmann had a 'satanic personality' that he was a 'new kind of killer – the kind that exercises his bloody craft from behind a desk'<sup>6</sup> Another quotation was from Hannah Arendt, who said that Eichmann was an unexceptional character whose willingness to unthinkingly carry out the policies of his superiors demonstrated 'the banality of evil.' Eichmann, claimed Arendt, 'did his duty... he not only obeyed orders, he also obeyed the law.'<sup>7</sup>

Figure 2: Explanations to be tested by the student groups



How to reconcile such radically different depictions of the same man? Pupils were asked to consider these quotes as a pair – what could they infer about Eichmann? Did they want to accept either view? On what basis could they choose? They were then given a quote from British historian, Professor David Cesarani: ‘[Eichmann was] not insane...nor was he a robotic receiver of orders.’<sup>8</sup>

One question was then placed on the board – ‘If [as Cesarani maintains] Eichmann could have made other choices, what does that tell us about the other people involved in the Holocaust?’

Pupils were then given three minutes to generate their own theories explaining why they thought people participated in the Holocaust. All pairs then fed back and their theories were written up on a flipchart sheet. Pupils suggested theories such as ‘people were so scared of being punished that they had to take part’; ‘some people are just evil’; ‘the general public did not know what was going on’.

Five explanations had been pre-selected for the pupils to test – apart from a slight change of wording the explanations were the same as the ideas generated by the pupils. The class had been pre-selected into groups to match the difficulty of the explanation to be tested. Explanation 5, ‘It was possible to take part without feeling personally responsible’, in my opinion and based on my knowledge of the class, would be harder to test using the evidence than explanation 1, ‘Hitler and a small number of fanatical Nazis were chiefly responsible.’ Six groups had been pre-generated despite there being only five explanations: the final group were given the challenge of creating their own explanation based on the evidence they were to be given.

Once pupils had manoeuvred themselves into their groups, each was given an evidence pack and informed that this was part one of two lessons on this area. The evidence pack was drawn from the *Being Human?* lesson activity and case studies of perpetrators, bystanders, collaborators and rescuers mentioned earlier.<sup>9</sup> Each group was given half of the evidence (there are 37 case studies) except for Group 6 who had access to all of it. They were also given a large sheet of paper with the explanation that they were investigating written on it. They were all asked ‘how far is the explanation supported by the evidence you have?’ The class were then set to their task, reading the case studies and making notes on their findings as a group on their sheets.

I sat at the back of the classroom and watched and listened as they began on their task. The classroom was silent to begin with (a rarity!) and then gradually began to buzz with discussion and sharing of findings. The engagement level was high as pupils were absorbed in the details of the IOE case studies but also supported by the need to focus their findings – some were even suggesting and swapping case studies with different groups as they felt they would support a different explanation. I spoke to each group and made some suggestions of other case studies that they might look at to support or refute their findings, for example, the case of Police Battalion 101 when questioning whether people had a choice; Anton Slupetzky as a the case of a local businessman benefiting economically by supplying canisters of gas to Mauthausen concentration camp; Theresa Stangl, the loving wife of the commandant of a death camp, to explore the complicity of those who helped the perpetrators feel that despite their ‘work’ they remained ‘normal’ members of society.

The reading and collating of evidence lasted for 35 minutes. Drawing the first lesson to a close, each group was asked to

Figure 3: An outline structure for an extended answer



discuss ‘On a scale of 1-10, how far do you agree with the explanation you have been testing?’ Discussion time was allocated and then each group was asked in turn to explain their judgement and reasoning behind it before packing up for the day.

## Taking it further

The following lesson – a week later – focused on the write-up of each pupils’ findings. The structure of this was linked to the 12 (now 15) mark questions on AQA Modern World Paper 2.<sup>10</sup>

A brief discussion of what an outstanding piece of work would include followed, to draw out the need for a developed argument, considering alternative hypotheses (Figure 3) and supported by evidence. An outline writing frame was also provided to help pupils structure their answers and pupils were set to their work (Figure 4). A mark scheme was also shared based on the AQA exam focusing on the need to support opinions with specific factual evidence to prove their explanations or argue against them. As Group 6 had a slightly different task, they were asked how they could adapt the structure to suit their piece of work, instead of arguing for and against and then concluding. They decided on a criterion of a successful response between them before beginning to write. The group decided that instead of arguing for and against a statement, they would organise their response into factors to support their conclusion, with each factor providing evidential support to back up their theory.

Pupils wrote their responses for around 45 minutes. They were able to refer specifically to quotes from the case studies and they also had the ‘big ideas’ flipchart sheets that they

had created earlier to help to structure their responses. Any pupils who had completed their answer were asked to swap, read, reflect and discuss each other’s work and its quality in terms of the GCSE mark scheme. Again to close the lesson, pupils were asked to assess how much they agreed with the explanation they had been given, and whether they agreed with a different explanation more than the one they had been investigating. Given my pupils’ ability to talk, this generated debate and quite animated discussion as pupils argued their cases, providing specific examples to prove their cases without being prompted. At this point it was a struggle to get the majority of the pupils out of the classroom – they wanted to stay and discuss their views – I would have gladly continued the conversation had another class not been waiting patiently to come in!

## ‘It made my brain hurt, but in a good way’

This series of lessons produced the highest level of work of the year for the class. The vast majority of pupils, who previously had lacked depth in their written responses, now produced work worthy of a high-level GCSE grade. The quality of their explanation was much stronger than they had previously managed; pupils were referring to specific examples to support the case they were arguing, in some cases linking examples to corroborate their point. I had been impressed with the independence that the pupils had shown in the initial activity of researching the evidence and supporting others in their findings; rather than questioning me, they attacked questions or discrepancies between themselves and they shared ideas and discussed the case studies in groups to decide whether they supported or refuted their explanation. The quality of questions that the pupils generated in assessing

Figure 4: An extended answer writing frame

**“Hitler and a small number of fanatical Nazis were chiefly responsible for the Holocaust.”**

**Do you agree?**

Replace the quote with the explanation you were testing

<div style="background-color: white; border-radius: 50%; width: 40px; height: 40px; display: flex; align-items: center; justify-content: center; margin: 0 auto;"> <span style="font-size: 2em; font-weight: bold; color: #e91e63;">A</span> </div>	<p style="font-weight: bold; color: black; margin: 0;"><i>“There is an argument that Hitler and a small number of fanatical Nazis were chiefly responsible for the Holocaust...”</i></p> <p style="font-size: 0.9em; margin: 0;">Facts + specific examples to support this theory with explanation in detail and depth</p>	<div style="background-color: #c8e6c9; border-radius: 10px; padding: 5px; width: 60px; height: 60px; display: flex; align-items: center; justify-content: center; margin: 0 auto;"> </div> <p style="font-size: 0.8em; margin: 0;">for example therefore consequently</p>
<div style="background-color: white; border-radius: 50%; width: 40px; height: 40px; display: flex; align-items: center; justify-content: center; margin: 0 auto;"> <span style="font-size: 2em; font-weight: bold; color: #009688;">B</span> </div>	<p style="font-weight: bold; color: white; margin: 0;"><i>“However, in some ways this interpretation is not completely true...”</i></p> <p style="font-size: 0.9em; margin: 0;">Facts + explanations of 2/3 other examples to support your ideas. <b>Explained</b> in depth</p>	<div style="background-color: #c8e6c9; border-radius: 10px; padding: 5px; width: 60px; height: 60px; display: flex; align-items: center; justify-content: center; margin: 0 auto;"> </div> <p style="font-size: 0.8em; margin: 0;">because as a result furthermore</p>
<div style="background-color: white; border-radius: 50%; width: 40px; height: 40px; display: flex; align-items: center; justify-content: center; margin: 0 auto;"> <span style="font-size: 2em; font-weight: bold; color: #e91e63;">C</span> </div>	<p style="font-weight: bold; color: white; margin: 0;"><i>“In conclusion...”</i></p> <p style="font-size: 0.9em; margin: 0;">You should make a decision – <b>how much do you think this quote is true?</b> A little, partly, very, significantly? Then justify your choice in detail. Convince the reader of your point of view.</p>	<div style="background-color: #c8e6c9; border-radius: 10px; padding: 5px; width: 60px; height: 60px; display: flex; align-items: center; justify-content: center; margin: 0 auto;"> </div> <p style="font-size: 0.8em; margin: 0;">because this meant that... thus therefore</p>

the evidence enhanced their learning as they then focused on finding answers to the questions they had created. Most pupils were comparing and contrasting case studies and in some cases beginning to compare contexts of their own accord in trying to refine the evidence for or against the explanations that they were considering.

In particular, Group 6, who had to create their own explanation, excelled at the task. They were challenged from the outset and thrived in the trust that they could figure this out for themselves. This group came to the conclusion that the Holocaust happened because ‘the Nazis believed that they had the power and the authority to do as they wished without ever having to face the consequences of their actions.’

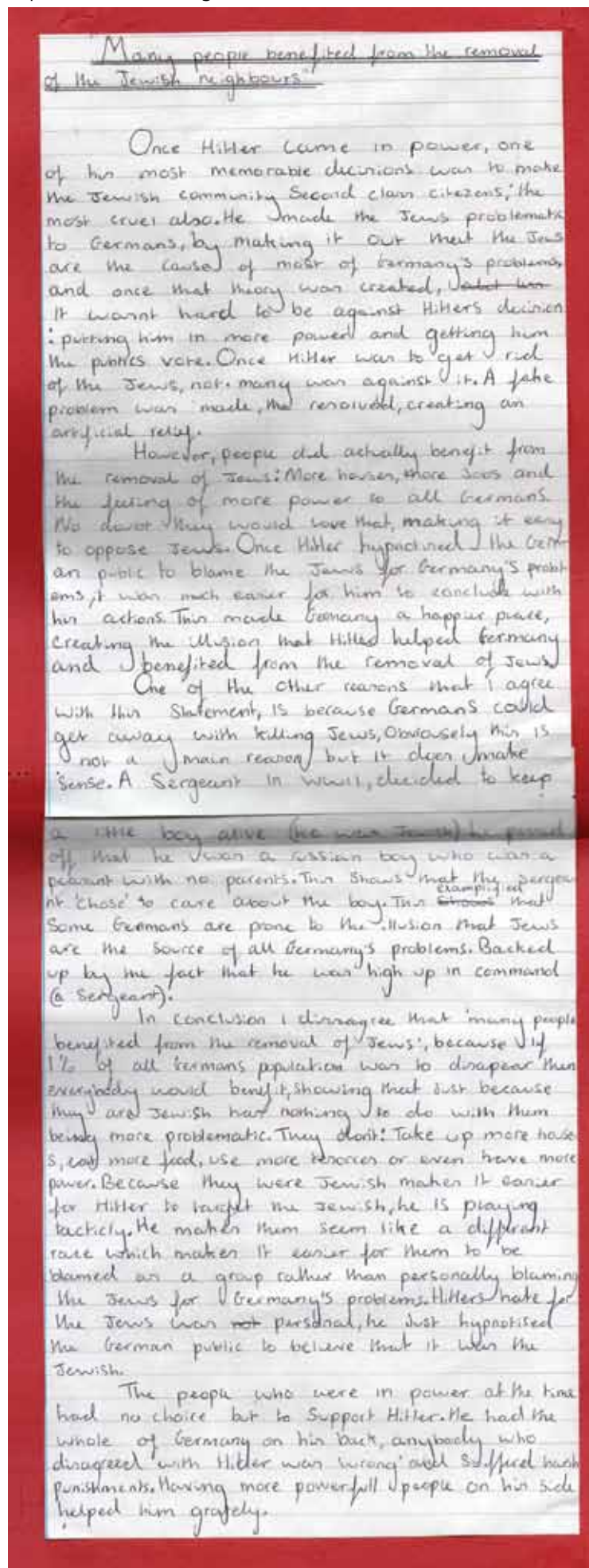
When surveyed at the end of the school year on which lessons in history they had felt the most challenged, 94 per cent of the class cited the lessons on perpetrator, bystander and rescuer behaviour. When I followed this up, pupils felt challenged by the independence they were given, with the stress on them to investigate the case studies and consider their own arguments without being guided at each stage of the process. Furthermore, 100 per cent of the pupils surveyed cited the explanations work as their highest level of achievement in history for the year and the work that they were most proud of. The pupils said they were interested in the topic but when I spoke to them personally, they commented that they could not say they enjoyed studying it because they felt that ‘enjoyed’ would be the wrong word to use for studying the Holocaust – more that they were focused on finding the answers to their own questions, and that is what they enjoyed. Pupils were motivated by the subject content, but also by the level of independence and trust placed in them to attack a high-level challenge. Interestingly, some pupils

then changed their GCSE option to history after this series of lessons! Some responses in the survey included ‘It made my brain hurt, but in a good way’; ‘I could see how much better my work was’; ‘At first I thought it was really hard to write down what I meant, but when Miss reminded me to use the people to prove my point, it was easier to explain how I wanted it to sound’; ‘It was difficult to get your head around, but the more you read, the more it made sense, even though the reading was hard.’

Rather than reducing the amount of written material, I found that challenging pupils, not only with a range of materials to sort through but also by the amount of written material contained in each case study, provided a literacy challenge, yet one that all pupils worked at – even the reluctant readers. They were engaged with the material as they had been engaged by the topic – they were, after all, answering questions that they had generated themselves right at the start of the topic. The nature of the topic – of the motives of perpetrators, resisters, bystanders – engaged the pupils. They were incensed in some cases, with real anger at humanity – one pupil in particular was infuriated by a letter from Elenore Gusenbaur living in Mauthausen, who wrote to the commandant of the camp to acknowledge the actions in the camp, but to ‘request that it be arranged that such inhuman deeds will cease or else be conducted out of sight’ and wanted to question the role of local communities further in response to this.<sup>11</sup> As each case study revealed nuance and complexity rather than the simple moral lessons so common in much Holocaust education, so the pupils continued to generate their own new lines of enquiry.

On reflection, not all pupils could access all of the written materials: in some cases the text was quite difficult,

Figure 5: An example of pupil work: an assessment of Explanation 5 (see Figure 2)



particularly for the lower ability spectrum of the class and they needed further literacy support to ensure equality of access. However, much of this support came from other pupils within the same group – defining and explaining words, using me as a reference point for the context of the words. In future I would pre-organise the evidence packs, ensuring that although there were challenging pieces in each set, the pack of evidence for Group 1 would be more accessible to their levels of literacy – redrafting some case studies myself to ensure clarity of understanding. Also, as the group without an explanation worked so well with the challenge, I would stretch this element further and open it up to more pupils to stretch the more able further.

In the next academic year, more curriculum time is being given to Year 9 – this will be an ideal opportunity to refine their reasoning skills further, opening up a debate on one explanation to focus their speaking and listening skills and draw on a range of counter-arguments, or using an on-line forum to allow pupils to further their questioning and continue to explore their explanations and counter-arguments outside of the classroom, as many wanted to continue to discuss their views after the lesson had ended. Furthermore, I intend to provide pupils with the opportunity formally to assess each other, acting as a critical friend to challenge unsupported comments, to reflect and provide specific feedback, to demonstrate understanding of the skills in more depth.

I was, however, proud of the work that the pupils had produced, so much so that I demonstrated the outcomes of the lessons to the next cohort of IOE Beacon Schools when they met for their residential seminar in London, in July 2013. Pupils' work is currently on display in the history corridor – further evidence of the pupils' response and satisfaction with their work: not one asked me to remove their name from their work – as they have before – so that they could show staff, heads of year and their parents on Open Evening just what they had achieved. That was the biggest achievement for me.

#### REFERENCES

- 1 The Institute of Education (IOE) is part of the University of London. Its free professional development programme and educational materials are based on large-scale national research into the challenges of teaching and learning about the Holocaust. Details of the free professional development courses (CPD) and educational materials can be found at [www.ioe.ac.uk/holocaust](http://www.ioe.ac.uk/holocaust).
- 2 Salmons, P. (2009a) *Authentic Encounters*, London: Institute of Education. A free resource to teachers participating in the IOE's free CPD in Holocaust education.
- 3 These resources, lesson plans and activities were created by Salmons except for Andrews, K. (2009) *Pre-war Jewish life*, London: Institute of Education. They are available to teachers participating in the IOE's free CPD in Holocaust education.
- 4 Ginott, H. G. (1993) *Teacher and Child: a book for parents and teachers*, New York: Collier, p.317.
- 5 Salmons, P. (2009b) *Being Human? Understanding the Perpetrators, Collaborators, Bystanders and Rescuers in the Holocaust*, London: Institute of Education.
- 6 Milchman, A. and Rosenberg, A. (1992) 'Hannah Arendt and the etiology of the desk killer: the Holocaust as portent' in *History of European Ideas*, 14, pp.213-26.
- 7 Arendt, H. (1977) *Eichmann in Jerusalem: a report on the banality of evil*, London: Penguin, p.135.
- 8 Cesarani, D. (2005) *Eichmann: his life and crimes*, London: Vintage, p.16.
- 9 Salmons (2009) *op. cit.*
- 10 AQA Modern World History, Option B, Paper 2, Section B. <http://filestore.aqa.org.uk/subjects/AQA-91452-W-SMS-JUN15.PDF>
- 11 Salmons (2009b) *op. cit.*

Figure 6: An example of pupil work: an assessment of Explanation 1 (see Figure 2)

Hitler and a small number of  
fanatical Nazis were  
chiefly responsible for  
the Holocaust. Do you agree?

The argument of this question is one that runs deep through the motives and causes of the Holocaust. I would agree because Hitler (a fanatical Nazi) had the power to withdraw the idea of such a thing but to imply and portray this as a good, honest movement is all the support the public needs to be sure that what the leader seeks is what they seek which, in turn, brings me round to propaganda spread throughout fanatical leaders to the Nazis smallest fanatical contributor (Otto Wolf), eluding people, coursing their path to the "correct" way (hating the Jewish and "ridding" the land of the "scourge")

However this is not entirely true as the people themselves contradict my previous statements; not everyone fell under the grasp of the Fuhrer, a sum of civilians were actually not aware of the Holocaust (still ignorant and keeping the Holocaust going but, not intending to) few were actually anti-Nazi but could not show their dedication to their cause otherwise they would be quickly dealt with. Although there are a minority of people who were either unaware or anti-Nazi, there were those who did what the Nazi did without being a Nazi (Max Taubner, an accordion player who killed Jews without being told) but, I raise this because although they had killed many Jews they did not actually contribute to the actual Holocaust.

In conclusion my overall opinion is that I do agree with the statement as Hitler had created a metaphoric bomb but the people themselves set it off, if it wasn't for the support of Nazis and civilians alike, the Holocaust wouldn't of had been able to continue, although the minority were either anti-Nazi or unaware, that's all they were, a minority, against a country an army against a person, who would win? The Nazis and their supporters were in charge because they had been left to dwell for too long, the country couldn't survive now without them otherwise it would collapse! They had now created their own destruction, the war crimes committed ensured now mercy.