

The Battle of Cable Street: Antisemitism & Fascism in the UK

History and Contemporary Parallels

Scheme of Work Overview

“The Battle of Cable Street: Antisemitism and Fascism in the UK – History and Contemporary Parallels” explores a dramatic moment in British history when communities in London’s East End came together in support of the local Jewish minority in October 1936 to confront the threat of fascism in what became known as the Battle of Cable Street. Estimated numbers of those involved vary significantly: 2,000 to 5,000 Fascists, 6,000 to 10,000 police, 100,000 to 500,000 counter-protestors. The chaos and violence of the day led directly to the passing of the Public Order Act 1936. And, whilst this event is often remembered as a powerful act of resistance, it took place within a much wider context of growing political extremism, economic hardship and widespread antisemitism - both in Britain and across Europe - which continued long after the events of Cable Street.

The six-lesson scheme of work is designed to help students understand the Battle of Cable Street within its historical context and develop their understanding of the changing nature of antisemitism and the rise of various forms of extremism. The first three lessons explore the causes and events of Cable Street, with the following two being about consequences – first the immediate aftermath, then ongoing antisemitism and fascism in the UK and how it has been challenged. The final lesson draws on the history of Cable Street and broader antisemitism and extremism in the UK to look at how students can respond to similar hatred today, however expressed. The programme is designed for the History curriculum but also covers important citizenship education themes. Given the challenging themes covered, lessons are designed for students aged 12 and over and have a strong emphasis on creating a safe learning environment.

At the heart of the scheme are two lessons focused on events leading to, and taking place on, 4th October 1936. Students will examine the complexity of the Battle of Cable Street, working with a range of primary sources, including eyewitness accounts from local residents, police officers and members of the BUF. Through this, they will develop their ability to analyse evidence, consider differing perspectives and understand how historical narratives are shaped.

Students will explore the consequences of the battle, both immediate and long-term, and consider developments such as the continued short-term growth of the BUF, the introduction of the Public Order Act, and the persistence of antisemitism in Britain in the lead up to and after the Second World War. They will also examine how Cable Street has been remembered and represented over time, including how it has been mythologised in political/cultural contexts.

In the final stages of the course, students will draw connections between the past and the present. They will reflect on how antisemitism and extremism continue to exist today—often in different forms to those seen 90 years ago—and consider why it is important to challenge prejudice wherever it appears. By the end of the scheme, students will be equipped to suggest informed responses to antisemitism and to understand the connections between the events of Cable Street and resistance to the rise of extremism in all its forms.

This scheme of work is designed for students aged 12 and upwards, fits within a broader History curriculum set in the 20th century and makes links to elements of the advised Secondary National Curriculum for England topics related to ‘challenges for Britain, Europe and the wider world 1901 to the present day’ including:

- the Second World War
- social, cultural and technological change in post-war British society
- Britain’s place in the world since 1945
- a local history study (for schools in East London, for example)

There are also links to elements of Key stage 3 Citizenship, specifically:

- the precious liberties enjoyed by citizens of the United Kingdom
- the nature of rules and laws and the justice system

Whilst not intended to be formally assessed, it is important that teachers (and Learn About Britain) are able to measure the development of student’s understanding of both their learning and the themes of the scheme of work. To that end, students will share their knowledge of Cable Street and reflections on themes linked to British history and culture, and elements of the last lesson will speak directly to the initial questioning of the first, allowing teachers to gauge understanding of the relevance of Cable Street to the UK today.

Below is a summary of the planned scheme of work and lesson content.

SOW lesson order:

1. Who were the BUF and why did they have support?

Intro and context

- Frontloading concepts and classroom etiquette for discussing tough subjects
- Students will investigate the conditions in Britain during the 1930s, including the impact of economic difficulties, earlier unrest such as race riots, and the rise of fascist movements at home and abroad.
- They will explore the extent of support for the British Union of Fascists (BUF), as well as the different reactions to the planned march through the East End, considering why opinions varied so widely at the time.

2. Who marched, and why Cable Street?

- The events leading up to the march and counter-protest and the shifting attitudes and responses of the Home Office, Jewish organisations such as the Board of Deputies, trade unions, nascent anti-fascist groups and the press.
- Important questions in this lesson will focus on why the BUF wanted to march in the East End and why the responses were so varied.

3. **What did people see at Cable Street? Eyewitness Accounts**

- An exploration of the events of the day using a range of primary sources, eyewitness accounts and video content filmed especially for this resource.
- This lesson highlights the complex range of participants, the changing responses from the Home Office on the day and the role of the police.
- Contemporary social attitudes are to the fore.
- Reaching conclusions via historical sources.

4. **The aftermath of the Battle: Fascism (un)defeated?**

Exploring the immediate consequences and the wider impact.

- Continued antisemitism leading up to and during the Second World War and its impact on Britain's response to the Holocaust.
- Students will explore their expectations of what the consequences of the Battle would be and compare this with what actually happened.
- Reaching conclusions via historical sources.

5. **How has antisemitism in the UK changed and continued after Cable Street?**

Consolidating learning in context

- Using historical knowledge to explore antisemitism in the UK from the 1947 riots to recent examples of antisemitic attacks in London and Manchester.
- Developing an understanding of trends in antisemitic and in racist attacks, and a recognition of when there are likely to be spikes in attacks.

6. **Why does Cable Street still matter? Responding to antisemitism and rediscovering the spirit of Cable Street**

Reflecting and responding to learning

- Students will explore the variety of commemorative responses there have been to Cable Street, including the mural, theatre and song.
- By reflecting on the history of Cable Street and broader antisemitism in the UK, students will consider how to respond to similar situations in the present day.
- As well as addressing responses through real-life case studies, there will an option for students to identify an example of injustice, hatred or discrimination they feel strongly about and consider their responses to it. From this, they will be encouraged to consider their own responses to antisemitism in the UK past and present, and to consider what they can do to counter hate in their communities.
- An end of unit activity, designed by students, will showcase learning (allowing for informal teacher assessment) and let students respond to what they have learned and understood about the need to prevent hate in their communities.