

Lesson 4 Challenge 1

Read through the evidence provided from the first-hand reports, newspaper articles and letters. Now complete the table using these three headings:

Reported reason for the disaster	Evidence to support idea	What was the source of this information? What date was it published?

Lesson 4, Challenge 1

Many residents of Bethnal Green suspected that the borough's Jewish population was to blame for the disaster. At the meeting of the Borough's Emergency Committee the morning after it had happened, it was suggested by some that a 'foreign element' might have caused it, and that foreigners were more excitable than the 'good ol' Cockney'. But Mr Bridger, the Chief Warden of the tube shelter, said that only one in a hundred who used the shelter were Jewish, and caused no trouble.

The inquest, which was held by Mr Dunne two weeks after the disaster, received many letters from members of the public suggesting that 'foreign elements' were to blame. There were so many rumours like this that Mr Liverman, who was Chairman of The Board of Deputies of British Jews, wrote to Mr Dunne pointing out that Bethnal Green was not a Jewish district, in fact Jews tended to avoid living there as it was a 'centre of Fascist activity'; in fact, those who did use the shelter were often victims of anti-Semitic behaviour.

But then, on 12th March, the Police received an anonymous letter stating that the disaster had been a 'planned piece of Fascist hooliganism' by the Blackshirts of Bethnal Green. It said that the Fascists had shouted 'Gas!' and started pushing people down the shelter steps, and later spread rumours that foreigners were to blame.

Other letters, sent to the inquest, said that Fascists had shouted 'bombs, bombs!' to cause panic, or that it might have been deliberately caused by a gang of pickpockets.

Lesson 4, Challenge 2

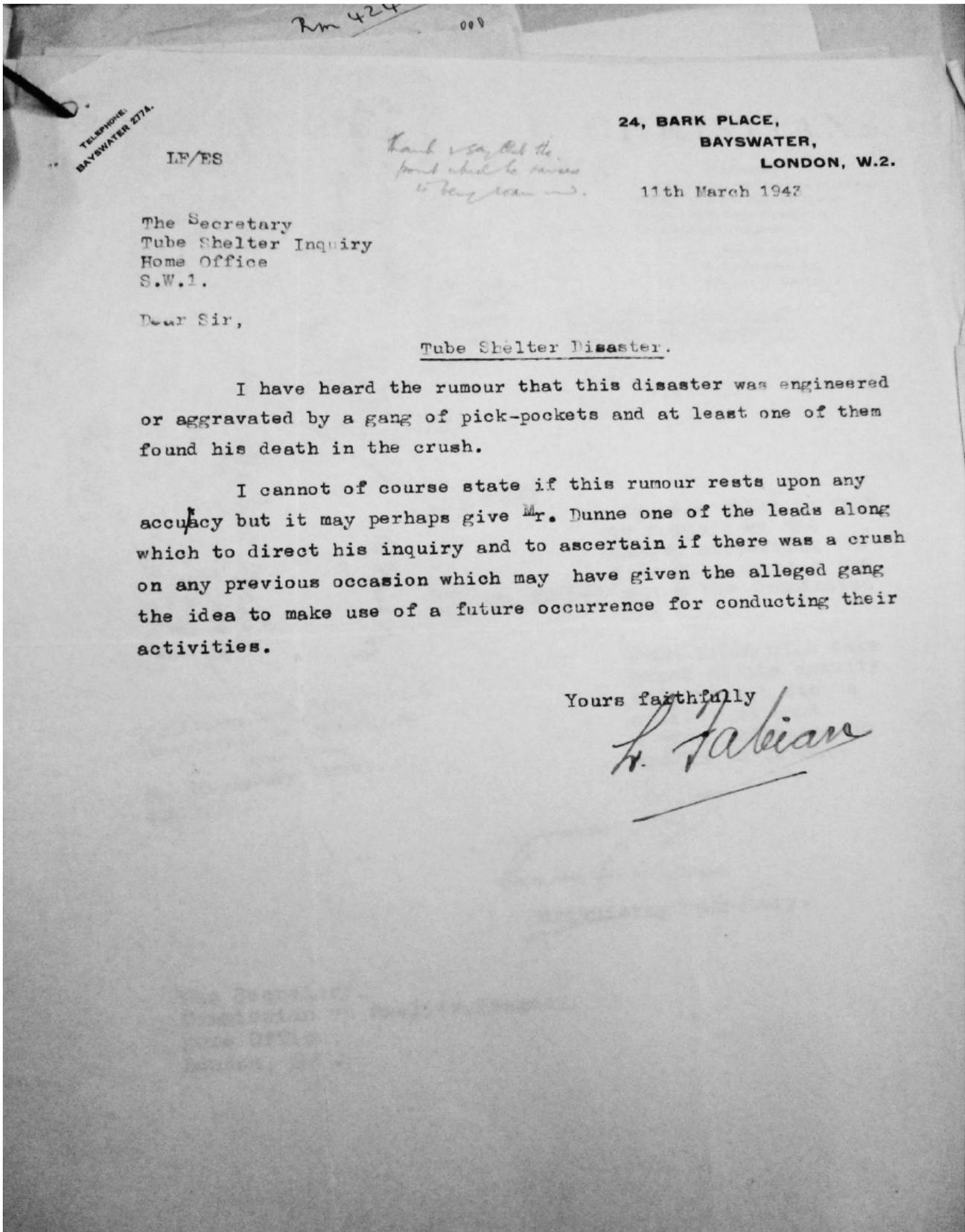
Extract from the Dunne Report, 1943

I should like at this point to deal with two specific allegations which have received some publicity, and which are without any foundation whatsoever. Each may be dismissed with a very few words:

a) That this was a panic induced by Fascists or criminal persons for nefarious purposes. There were some deaths among men with criminal records. They and their relatives are as much entitled to sympathy as any of the other victims. This story had some local, and I hope limited, circulation. It is an absurdity.

b) That this was a Jewish panic. This canard had a much wider circulation and was, I understand, endorsed by the broadcast utterances of a renegade traitor from Germany [Dunne is referring to Lord Haw-Haw who broadcast pro-Nazi radio propaganda]. Not only is it without foundation, it is demonstrably false. The Jewish attendance at this shelter was, and is, so small as to constitute a hardly calculable percentage.

Lesson 4, Challenge 1



Lesson 4, Challenge 1



The news report above covers the verdict of the coroner, an official who has to determine the cause of death. He went on to say, 'There is nothing to suggest that any particular section of the populace became victims of this disaster. Taking the names as a whole, they represent a cross-section of the populace of East London.' His report was made after the inquest.

Lesson 4 Challenge 2: Information sheet

Lord Haw-Haw: character profile

William Joyce, aka Lord Haw-Haw, was a notorious broadcaster to the UK of Nazi propaganda during World War II. His announcement 'Germany calling, Germany calling' was a familiar sound across the airwaves, introducing threats and misinformation that he broadcast from his Hamburg base.

In 1945 Joyce was captured and returned to Britain, where he was later hanged for treason.

Lord Haw-Haw's broadcast

After the Allied bombing raid on Berlin on 1st March 1943 Lord Haw-Haw broadcast on Rome Radio on 5th March about the 'devastating' reprisal raids on London by the German Luftwaffe on 3rd March, and then went on to say: 'As proof of the panic which spread over the population of London as a consequence of these heavy raids, came the announcement by the British Ministry of Public Security that during the alert 178 people were killed and 68 were severely injured in front of a shelter. The incident was caused by the fall of a woman. The people who lost their footing were smothered and trodden over by more panic-stricken people rushing to the shelter.'

Lord Haw-Haw gave a longer version on the Daily Digest World Broadcast the following day. The B.B.C. issued the following extract from it:

'LONDON TUBE SHELTER PANIC: MORRISON'S FAIRY TALE

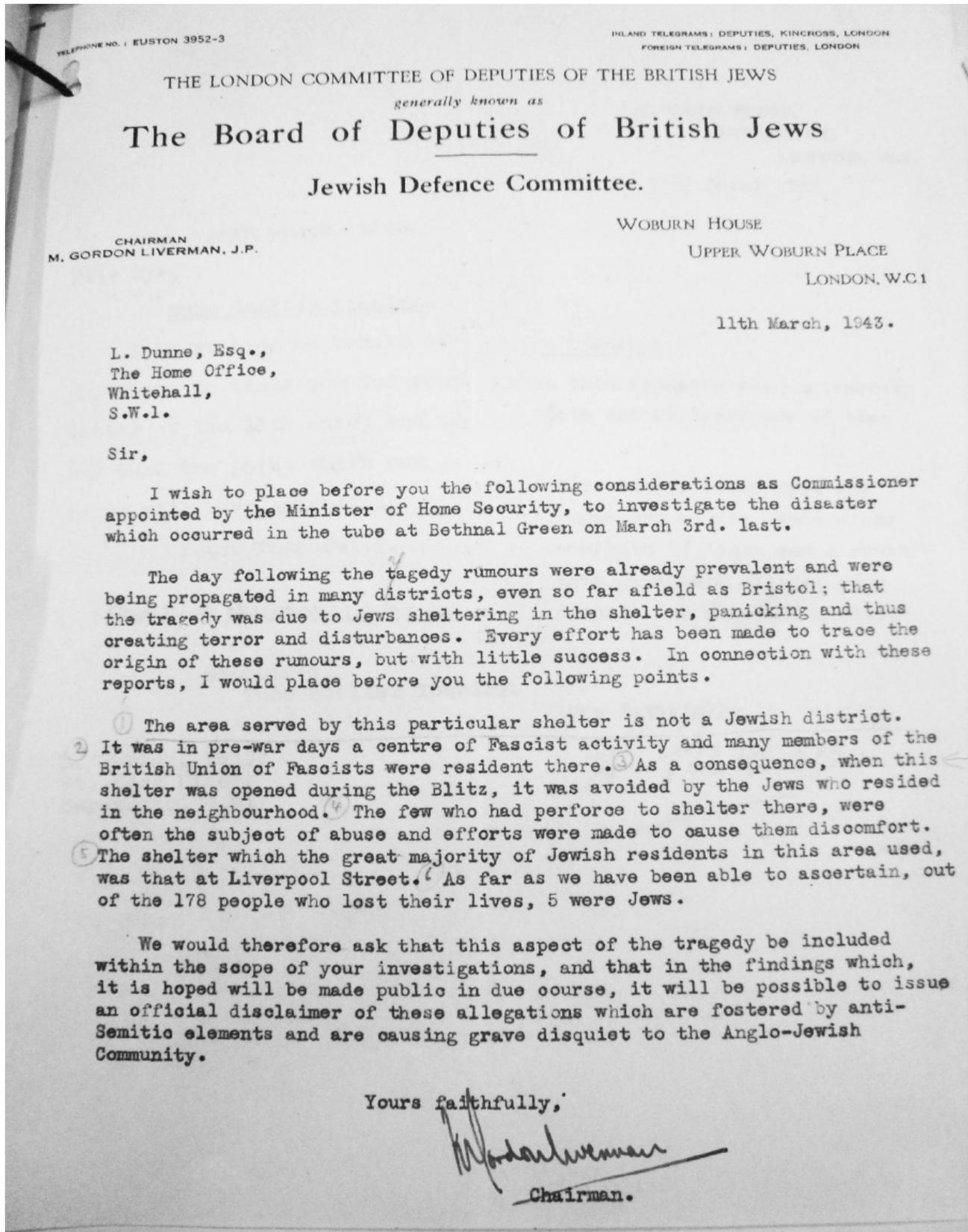
As a result of panic during an air raid, 178 persons were killed and 60 were injured in a London shelter. There were 600 people already in the shelter when a woman carrying a child stumbled on the stairs. In less than a minute hundreds of people were trampled upon. In his report about the incident the British Home Secretary added that there had been no bombs dropped in the vicinity of the shelter. That sort of fairy tale can only be told to a child or an Englishman. It is plain that as far as air raids are concerned, the nerves of Londoners seem to be on edge. If 178 persons are trampled to death in hardly a minute, thousands must have tried to force their way down to this shelter.'

A piece of propaganda by Dr Joseph Goebbels, German Minister of Propaganda

'According to an official report, a peculiar disaster has occurred in a London air-raid shelter. At the sound of the alarm, people trooped into the shelter and a woman, accompanied by a child, stumbled at the foot of the stairs leading down into the shelter. Instead of the unfortunate woman being helped to her feet, she was trampled on by the crowd behind her. In the jostling which resulted 178 people were suffocated and 60 others badly injured within a few minutes. The curious thing is that no single bomb fell in the area of the air-raid shelter.'

Nazi broadcasts about the disaster were sent to many countries. There was also one sent to Italy mentioning a similar disaster that happened in the Italian town of Genoa, which the Nazis think the British exploited: 'The last thing we want to do is gloat over the disaster in the shelter during the last German bombardment of London. But when a similar disaster occurred at Genoa not so very long ago, due to practically the same cause, British propaganda, with its usual bad taste, did its utmost to make capital out of it. In the B.B.C. broadcasts to Italy, they actually did exploit it with a view to spreading the belief in Italy that the Government had been inactive in making adequate preparations...'

Lesson 4, Challenge 2



Lesson 4, Challenge 2

