Bergen-Belsen

A Short History for Teachers

About Bergen-Belsen: A Short History for Teachers

You can use this resource to support your subject knowledge development about Bergen-Belsen. Its purpose is to help build teachers' substantive knowledge of the camp and its history and significance.[1] Here you will find information about the development of Bergen-Belsen as a concentration camp and useful contextual knowledge about the Second World War and Bergen-Belsen's place within the wider history of the Holocaust. There are also links to additional resources and materials that you may be of use to you.

The Short History is divided into the following main sections:

1. Introduction
2. The Context: Nazi Germany 1933-1945
3. The History of Bergen-Belsen
4. Bergen-Belsen and the History of the Holocaust
5. Bergen-Belsen, Britain and the Holocaust
6. Resources and Materials

The most important section is Section 3 – here you will find a narrative history of the development of the camp, which you can overview using Figure 4. You will find Section 2 particularly useful if you are not familiar with the history of Nazi Germany that provides the context for the development of the camp. You will find Section 4 particularly useful in helping to situate the story of Bergen-Belsen within the wider narrative of the Holocaust. Section 5 provides contextual material to help you think about Britain's relationship to the events of the Holocaust and thus provides another context in which to think about Bergen-Belsen. Section 6 provides pointers to useful additional sources of information and teaching resources and materials about the history of Bergen-Belsen.

Alongside the narrative, you will find many examples of individual stories, images and maps. These are intended to aid comprehension but also to ensure that the voices of victims and liberators are not lost in the bigger picture.

In addition, the narrative is interspersed with 'Reflection Questions'. These are intended as aides to reflection, on the history that emerges from the overview and the sources and micro-stories, to enable you to think through the nature of events at Bergen-Belsen and the experiences of victims, liberators and others.

[1] Please refer the 'Pedagogical Materials' in Chapter 3 of the School Resources for input on teaching and learning approaches.

Contents

1 Introduction

Bergen-Belsen is a site of terrible tragedy and suffering.

Between 1940 and 1945, 19,700 prisoners of war died in the Prisoner of War (POW) camp housed at the site. Meanwhile, between 1943 and 1945, around 52,000 civilians also perished in the site's concentration camp. Even after its liberation on 15 April 1945, thousands more would succumb to the effects of disease and malnutrition.

Today, many thousands of people – Jews, Russians, Poles, Roma and Sinti, Italians and many other groups – lie buried on the site, most in mass graves, victims of murder, starvation and neglect. Bergen-Belsen is therefore a place of traumatic history and of memory; a space that challenges any and all that contemplate it and step foot in it.

The history of the site called 'Bergen-Belsen', however, is complex and often poorly understood in popular culture. The images of the camp commonly associated with its liberation are not representative of the Holocaust more generally nor of Bergen-Belsen camp during its existence.

This short history provides an overview of Bergen-Belsen's development, its relation to the broader history of the Holocaust, and Britain's encounters with it.

2 The Context: Nazi Germany 1933-1945

Much has been written about the rise and nature of the Nazi party and about their rule in Germany and in German-occupied Europe during The Second World War.[1] We cannot hope to provide a full account of these matters here, however, some summary of the context is necessary before an account of Bergen-Belsen and its development can be given. What follows in this section aims to provide some context to the rise of the Nazis that then led to the development of the concentration camp (KL) system in general and to Bergen-Belsen in particular.

2.1 The Nazi Party's Path to Power

The National Socialist German Worker's Party (NSDAP or 'Nazi' Party) had its origins in 1919 when it was one of over 70 extreme right-wing political sects in Germany. It arose from a post-war populist and nationalist culture that resented the terms of the Treaty of Versailles and the subsequent political and economic chaos that followed. Central to Nazi ideology were pseudo-scientific racist ideas that placed the 'Aryan master race' at the heart of a German state, comprising the 'people's community'. These ideas also led them to exclude, disenfranchise and persecute excluding anyone that did not fit the Nazi ideal. This racism was a key element of Adolf Hitler's worldview. Hitler saw history as racial struggle. He was radically antisemitic and believed that the conquest of 'living space' was the only way to secure Germany's future. For Hitler, a life-or-death struggle with Marxism and with those the Nazis considered to be their 'racial' enemies were inevitable.

Whilst the Nazis received some support in the 1920s, they were only ever a marginal, fringe political party at this time. They attempted to seize power by force in Munich in 1923 and resolved, after this failure, to use democracy to destroy democracy and seek a 'legal' path to power. In 1928, they polled just 2.6% of the vote. But the impact of the Wall Street Crash in October 1929 had devastating global consequences on economies around the world, including Germany. The Nazis campaigned on a platform that included job creation and revoking the terms of the Treaty of Versailles. In the presidential elections of March/April 1932, the Nazis became the second largest party in Germany and in the July 1932 parliamentary elections the Nazis were the largest party, polling 37.3% of the vote. These were astonishing results. But they did not secure a majority (more than 50%) and subsequent elections in November 1932 were disappointing for them: their share of the vote fell to just over 33%.

Despite this decline in electoral fortunes, Hitler approached von Papen, the German Chancellor, for talks that resulted in the formation, with President Hindenburg's consent, of what became known as the 'Hitler Cabinet' on 30th January, 1933. With the pretext of defending the German nation following the Reichstag Fire, Hitler seized emergency powers for himself and detained his political enemies, in particular the communists.

It could be said at this point that the Nazis were the largest political party in Germany and had taken power in accordance with the constitution - albeit through the seizure of extraordinary powers during what was seen as a time of crisis and in a context where they were able to use police powers to harass political parties who opposed them. However, it could never be said that the Nazis were elected to power – in their most successful election they are 12.7% short of a majority. In addition, although they came to power in accordance with the constitution, they were manoeuvred into power as a result of bargains that they struck with the German elites, who thought they could use the Nazis for their own purposes.

2.2 Terror and the Concentration Camp system

'Wild' concentration camps were set up as soon as Hitler became chancellor.[2] A parallel system of law and order developed through which members of the paramilitary wing of the Nazi Party – the S.A. or 'Storm Troopers' set up improvised detention centres through which to terrorize democratic opposition to their hyper-nationalist and racist agenda. These early camps were superseded by a more organised and systematic regime of terror. Like the early camps, the planned concentration camps were creations of the Nazi Party apparatus not the German state. Heinrich Himmler– leader of the SS or 'Protection Squadrons' - rose gradually to become one of the most powerful figures in Nazi Germany by creating a police empire. This was a SS parallel state, existing alongside the institutions of the German federal and national states. Dachau, an SS concentration camp set up in 1933, became the prototype for the SS camp system more generally, which bypassed the normal court and legal system. From 1936, when Himmler was appointed Chief of German Police, the SS took over all policing functions in Germany as a whole. The SS, over time, diversified into various sub-organizations, including a military wing and the 'Death's Head' SS, whose job it was to run the camp system.

The era of the early 'wild' concentration camps ended as the Nazi party consolidated its political control of Germany in 1933/34. The subsequent expansion of the camp system, on the model of the SS camp at Dachau, came in the lead-up to The Second World War and, particularly, during the war itself. This expansion began after *Kristallnacht* in November 1938 when Jews were detained in camps in large numbers for the first time, mostly on a temporary basis. Once the war had begun concentration camps – alongside other types of camp, such as Prisoner of War (POW) camps – became key tools of policy, particularly with the founding of the SS Economic-Administration Main Office (WVHA) in March 1942. This organization was devoted to using slave labour – extracted from conquered populations (such as Poles), political enemies and Jews – to support the Nazi war economy. As we will see, this policy had dramatic impacts in Bergen-Belsen. As Wachsmann has noted of the system as a whole, "Prisoner numbers peaked in early 1945, at more than 700,000. When the war ended, just a few months later, many of these inmates were dead."[2]

Various types of camp evolved over time. As summarised by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum below.

[2] 'Wild' referred to the fact that these camps were violent and unregulated. They were improvised by members of the Nazi Storm Troopers (SA) and were not centrally planned.

Figure 1: The Types of Camp in Nazi Germany[3]

- **Concentration camps:** For the detention of civilians seen as real or perceived "enemies of the Reich."
- **Forced-labour camps:** In forced-labour camps, the Nazi regime brutally exploited the labour of prisoners for economic gain and to meet labour shortages. Prisoners lacked proper equipment, clothing, nourishment, or rest.
- **Transit camps:** Transit camps functioned as temporary holding facilities for Jews awaiting deportation. These camps were usually the last stop before deportations to a killing centre.
- **Prisoner-of-war camps:** For Allied prisoners of war, including Poles and Soviet soldiers.
- **Killing centres:** Established primarily or exclusively for the assembly-line style murder of large numbers of people immediately upon arrival to the site. There were 5 killing centres for the murder primarily of Jews. The term is also used to describe "euthanasia" sites for the murder of disabled patients.

As we will see, Bergen-Belsen did not fit neatly into any one camp type. It changed dramatically over time and it was unusual in being originally intended as an 'exchange' camp in 1943. In the final stages of the war, as WVHA exploitation of labour intensified in 1944, Bergen-Belsen began to approximate more and more to a forced-labour and transit camp.

3 Nazism, Expansionism and War

1. We demand the unification of all Germans in the Greater Germany on the basis of the right of self-determination of peoples.
2. We demand equality of rights for the German people in respect to the other nations; abrogation of the peace treaties of Versailles and St. Germain.
3. We demand land and territory (colonies) for the sustenance of our people, and colonization for our surplus population. [4]

Nationalist self-assertion – with consequences for Germany's borders and relations with other states – had been a fundamental aspect of Nazi ideology since the launch of the party and, as the quotations above show, it was the bedrock of the Nazi political programme.

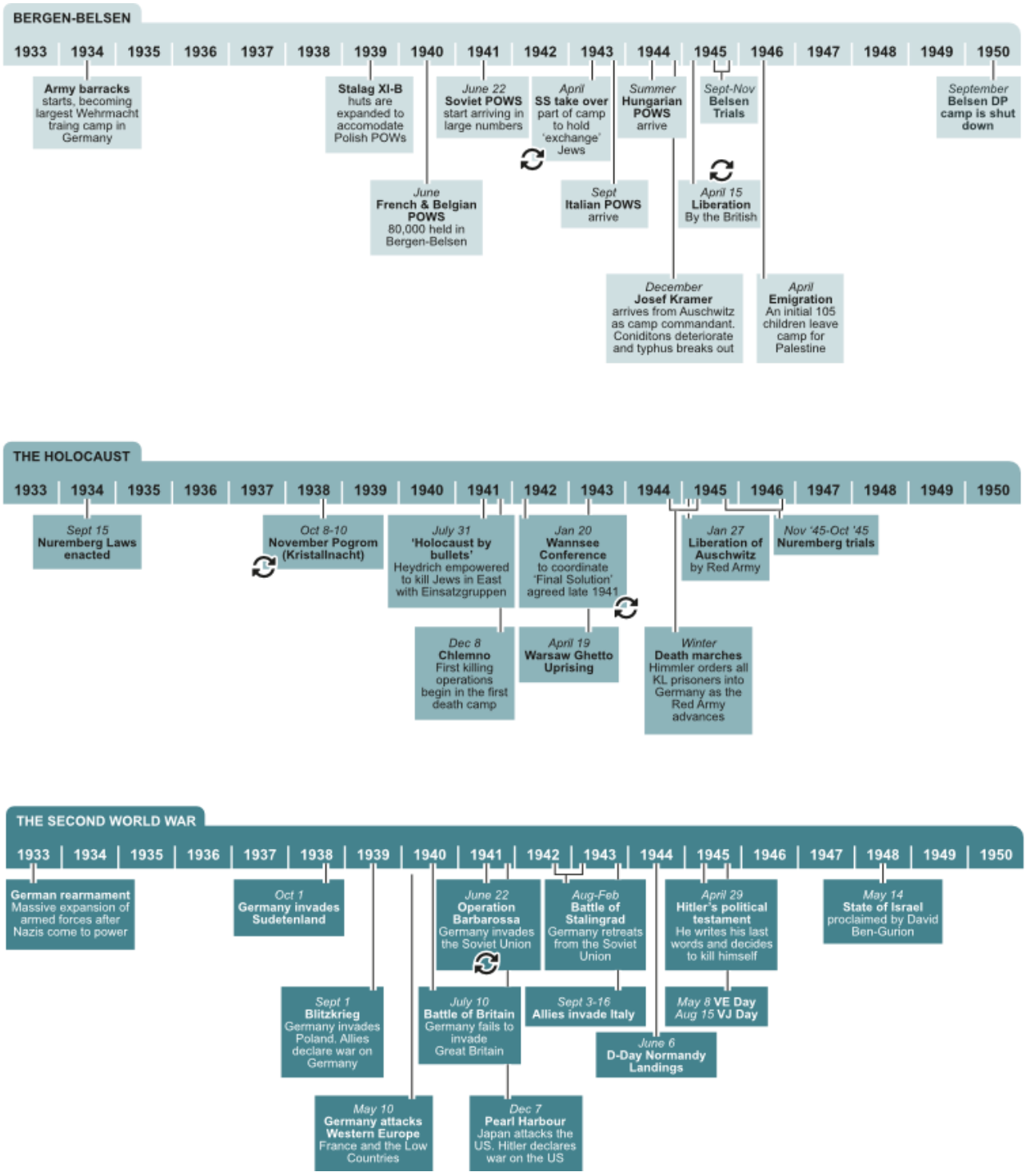
As we will see further below, the history of Bergen-Belsen is closely connected to the national expansionist policies pursued by the Nazi regime from the mid-1930s. German re-armament, in defiance of the Treaty of Versailles, from 1935 onwards, explains the existence of the buildings that formed the basis of the camp, constructed that year. Military expansion explains the creation and development of the POW camp at the site from 1940 to 1945. The idea of 'exchange' that led to the creation of Bergen-Belsen as a camp for Jews came, in part, from the Germany Foreign Office and was linked to diplomatic negotiations during the Second World War. It was the progress of the war that led to the evolution of the Bergen-Belsen 'horror' camp and to its surrender to the British in April 1945.[3]

[3] The term 'horror camp' originated with Brigadier Glyn Jones, the British commanding officer during the relief of Bergen -Belsen, to denote the horrific conditions that obtained in the camp.

3.1 Conclusion

The figure that follows summarises some key aspects of the timeline of Nazi Germany in one diagram and to point to key turning points – for example, *Kristallnacht* in November 1938 and the creation of an SS camp at Bergen-Belsen in April 1943. It also aims to show how many strands of Nazi policy converge in Bergen-Belsen. It was – as we will see below – a very unusual SS concentration camp. Nonetheless, the site weaves together key themes in the history of Nazism – terror (the SS), military expansion (the cause of there being a camp at what was to become Bergen-Belsen from 1935) and racialized exploitation (of Russian POWs and of 'exchange' Jews). Although it was an unusual camp, the history of Bergen-Belsen reveals a great deal about the history of Nazism and about the descent into depravity and inhumanity that its hyper-nationalist and racist politics caused.

Figure 2: Belsen: Overview timeline



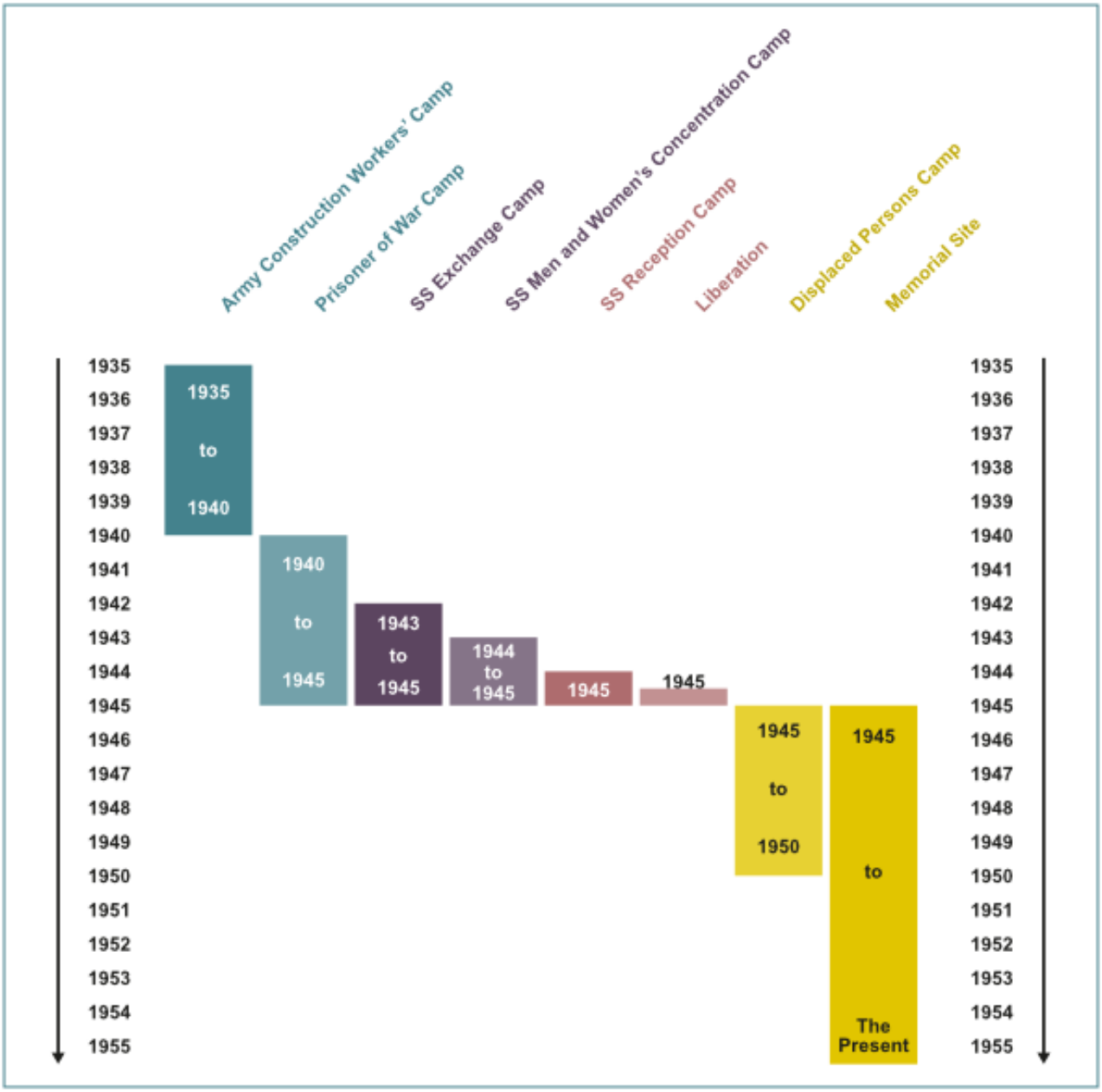
4 The History of Bergen-Belsen

The site of Bergen-Belsen is located in western Germany, in the area known as Lüneburg Heath near the town of Celle, between the major cities of Hanover and Hamburg.

Figure 3: The Location of Bergen-Belsen Memorial Site Today

Today, the Bergen-Belsen Memorial is located one mile south of where a military barracks and tank training school were constructed in the mid-1930s and 4 miles from Bergen railway station.

Figure 4. Bergen-Belsen: Historical overview



This figure summarises the different phases of Bergen-Belsen's development – from a construction workers camp to a memorial site.

As the figure shows, the camp had many overlapping functions at the same time, particularly in 1944 and 1945. The development of the 'Horror Camp' that the British encountered in April 1945 took place between the autumn of 1944 and the spring of 1945. This horror was to some extent foreshadowed in the POW phase of the camp, when thousands of Soviet POWs died at the site as a result of starvation, neglect and overwork.

4.1 From construction camp to prisoner of war camp, 1935-1945

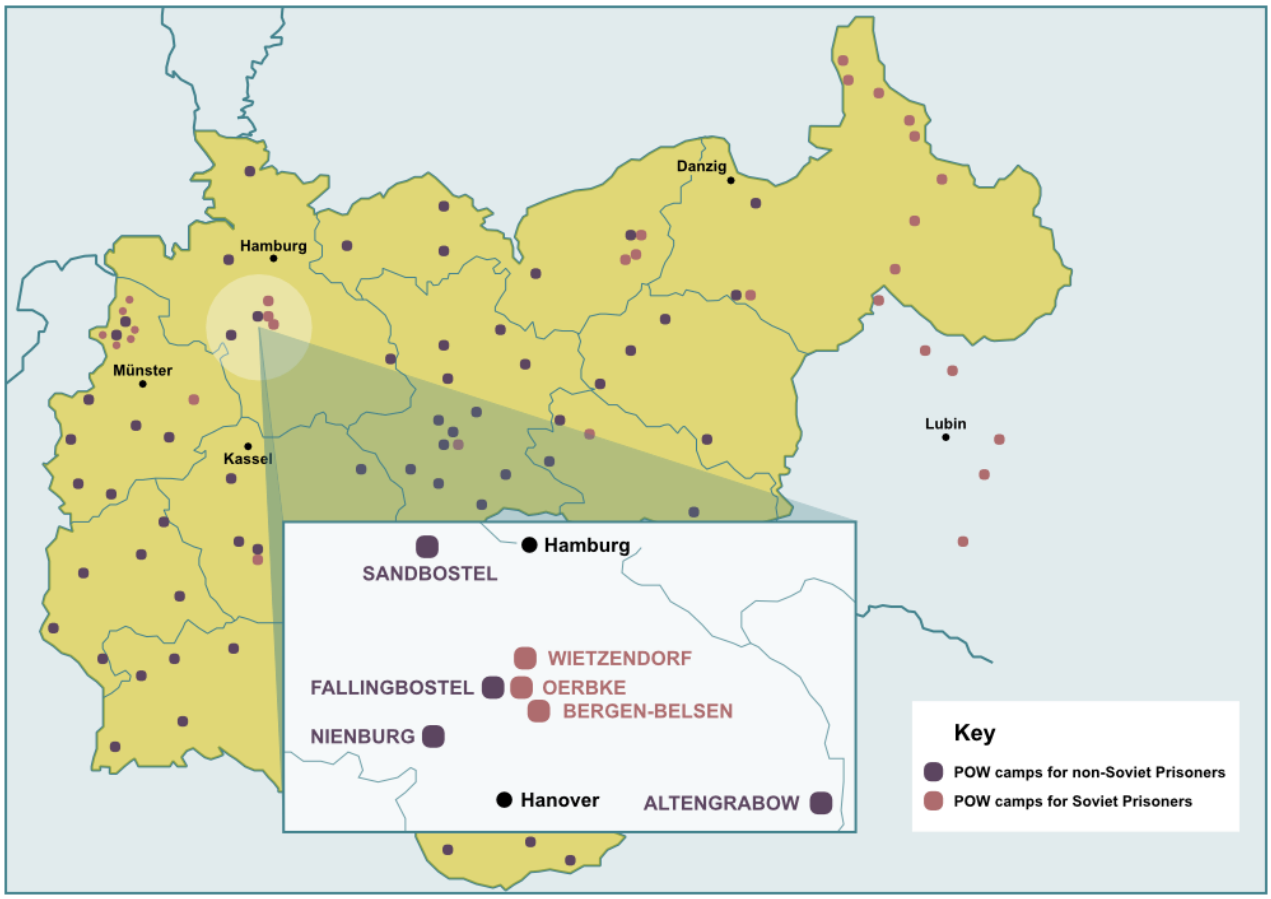
4.1.1 The Army Construction Worker's Camp

The first phase of the site's history is linked to the military expansion of the Third Reich and to German re-armament in the period 1935-1939. The site was a camp for construction workers involved in building military facilities in the large German army military training area on Lüneburg Heath, including a nearby tank training school and army barracks. This phase was largely over by the start of the Second World War in September 1939. As the facilities had been built, there was no longer any demand for the construction camp. During this period, there was no indication that in a few years' time it would become a site of mass death and suffering.

4.1.2 The Army Prisoner of War (POW) Camp

In the second phase of the site's development, it remained a military installation administered by the German army. Starting in 1940, in the wake of the rapid victories that the German army had in Western Europe that year, the site became part of a larger complex of Prisoner of War (POW) camps in Germany and one of a cluster of camps on Lüneburg Heath. It was called Camp XIC. The Germany Army had captured many thousands of prisoners of war and the underused ex-construction camp was repurposed to house these POWs.

Figure 5. German POW Camps 1941[4]



[4] Strictly speaking, we should not refer to Bergen-Belsen until the founding of the SS camp on the site in April 1943. The camp called Bergen-Belsen in this map was called Camp XIC between 1940-1943.

In 1940, 600 POWs from France and Belgium were detained in the camp. After the invasion of the Soviet Union, Camp XIC expanded dramatically and, by November 1941, 21,000 Soviet POWs had been imprisoned in the camp. Some prisoners were housed in a POW hospital created in the former construction workers' huts. Most of the POWs were forced to make their own shelters using earth and tree branches and whatever could be found on the site itself.

This general neglect of Soviet POWs reflected the Nazis' racial ideology. For Nazis, The Second World War was a race war and Russians and other 'Slavs' were treated as racially inferior and fit for extermination and enslavement. The poor treatment of Soviet prisoners followed from these beliefs. Whereas 57% of the 5.7 million Soviet POWs captured by the Germans died in imprisonment, only 3.6% of the 231,000 British and American POWs captured by the Germans died in German custody. [5]

Figure 6. POW Camp 'Stalag XI C' (311) at Bergen-Belsen © Historical Association

Some Soviet prisoners – identified as Jews or communists – were taken to Sachsenhausen Concentration Camp and shot in 1941-42. The rest were subjected to a regime of extermination through work, starvation, neglect and exposure. The sanitation facilities at the camp were primitive and prisoners were not provided with adequate food – and often with no food at all. Dysentery and other diseases were common, and a typhus epidemic broke out in November 1941.[5]

[5] Dysentery is an infection of the intestines that causes diarrhoea. It is highly contagious, particularly in insanitary conditions. Typhus is an infection spread by flea bites and by dust containing flea-dung. It is lethal if untreated and highly infectious in insanitary conditions.

By the spring of 1942, at least 14,000 Soviet POWs had died in the camp. In addition, more than 30,000 Soviet POWs died of starvation in the other camps on Lüneburg Heath.

Figure 7. Soviet POWs forced to dig a mass grave in which to bury dead prisoners, Camp XIC[6]*

Photograph of Soviet POWs taken by German army soldiers. Such photographs were taken privately, and often printed in multiple copies and shared with mocking captions written on the back.

Reflection Question

What is revealed, through this picture, about the treatment of Soviet POWs by the German Army?

A POW camp continued to exist at Bergen-Belsen through to January 1945, when the POW hospital was finally shut down. From April 1943, however, the Army handed over most of the site to the SS. This was a key moment. Though the Army retained use of and responsibility for the hospital, the rest of the site was now controlled by the SS. The function of the camp now underwent fundamental change.

An account by Mikhail Levin, who was imprisoned in Bergen-Belsen POW camp in 1941-43.[7]

We were taken to a place called Bergen, I think. But we knew nothing. We didn't know where they were taking us. Some said they'd take us somewhere to be shot. Others said we'd be taken somewhere to work. But nobody knew anything, nobody explained anything to us. There was nobody to ask and nobody talked to you. I did speak a bit of German, mind you.

The earliest cases of disease in the camp occurred in autumn when it got colder and the first frost came. The first cases of dysentery and typhoid fever[6] occurred a little earlier, and everyone was starving. People started to eat grass. It's interesting that the bark of the few trees that were there was gnawed off and eaten. People ate belts, too. The belts that held up our trousers, you see? But there weren't many belts around. They took them from the prisoners. You weren't allowed to wear belts, I don't know why.

The winter of 1941/1942 was very harsh. It was one of the coldest winters ever. That was when the mass deaths, the 'great dying' started. Typhoid fever and dysentery were raging through the camp and there was the hunger, the starvation. Your body couldn't cope with the slightest ailments, and people were dying. Every day, hundreds of them were taken away on the carts.

Mikhail Levin in 1946[8]

4.2 The Exchange Camp

In the spring of 1943, the SS took over the majority of the POW camp at Bergen-Belsen and converted it into an 'exchange camp' for Jews.[7] What had been a military camp now entered the SS empire of camps, many of which were used as tools to economically exploit those the Nazis considered to be their enemies or their 'racial' inferiors.

The plan was to use prominent Jews and Jews with international connections or foreign identity papers as currency for 'exchanges' with enemy or neutral powers, such as Britain. This plan emerged in 1942/43 from discussions between the German Foreign Office and the SS. The idea was that prominent or Jews with foreign identity papers would be kept alive and used in negotiations. Accordingly, a small proportion of Dutch Jews were to be transported to Bergen-Belsen, rather than to Auschwitz-Birkenau or Sobibor for extermination; a small handful of the Jews of Salonika and Hungary were to be sent to Bergen-Belsen rather than to the gas chambers of Auschwitz, and so on. The Army POW department agreed to hand over Camp XIC to the SS and, for the first time, the name 'Bergen-Belsen' appeared in an SS decree on 27th April 1943.

The camp was classified as an SS 'Detention Camp' not a civilian 'internment camp' to avoid scrutiny by Red Cross inspectors. As a detention camp, Bergen-Belsen did not fit easily into the SS camp

[6] Typhoid is a bacterial infection spread in food or water. It affects many internal organs and can be fatal if not treated quickly.
[7] The term 'exchange camp' refers to the fact that inmates were detained in the camp in order to be used in 'exchange' of goods and personnel negotiated with foreign powers.

system as it had evolved by 1943. Generally speaking, this system featured thousands of concentration camps where prisoners were subjected to hard labour and punishment until death, and a smaller number of death camps where people were exterminated immediately. The unusual nature of Bergen-Belsen was evident, for example, in how most of those imprisoned in the camp were allowed to retain their own clothes and contact with family members. Moreover, the higher echelons of the Nazi leadership authorized Bergen-Belsen's distinctiveness: Heinrich Himmler, the Head of the SS, had stipulated that 'exchange' Jews should work but 'be kept healthy and alive.'[9]

The particularities of Bergen-Belsen in 1943 had longer-term consequences. The notion of 'exchange' suggested that the camp lacked permanence – that it might be closed when exchanges were over. As a result, the camp infrastructure was neglected. From the SS perspective there was little point in investing in adequate buildings and sanitation facilities for a temporary camp where inmates' labour could not be exploited as intensively as it was in other concentration camps.[10]

Between April and May 1943 around 600 inmates from Natzweiler-Struthof and Buchenwald concentration camps were sent to Bergen-Belsen to prepare the camp for the reception of 'exchange Jews'. These inmates were housed in what was called the 'Prisoners' Camp'. Conditions in the 'Prisoners' Camp' were the same as those in the concentration camp system more widely – inmates were treated very harshly and forced to complete demanding physical labour on inadequate starvation rations.[11] This included making modifications to the camp.

Jews who the SS considered valuable to use in negotiations then began to be transferred to the detention camp. A figure of between 10,000 to 30,000 'exchange' Jews had been discussed. In the end, at least 14,600 Jewish inmates, including 2,750 children and adolescents, were transported to Bergen-Belsen for exchange purposes between July 1943 and December 1944.[12] This figure included:

- 2,500 Polish exchange Jews arrived on April 29th, 1943 and were housed in a fenced-off area of Bergen-Belsen called the '**Special Camp**';
- In July 1943 350 Sephardi Jews with Spanish, Turkish, Argentinian and Portuguese passports arrived from Salonika and were housed in another separate and fenced off area of the camp called the '**Neutral Camp**';
- In early 1944, 3,670 Jews from The Netherlands were transported to Bergen-Belsen and were housed in a segregated area of the camp known as the '**Star Camp**'; and
- In July 1944, 1,684 Hungarian Jews were transported to Bergen-Belsen and imprisoned in a segregated '**Hungarian Camp**.'[13]

In the end, very few of the 'Exchange Jews' were actually exchanged:

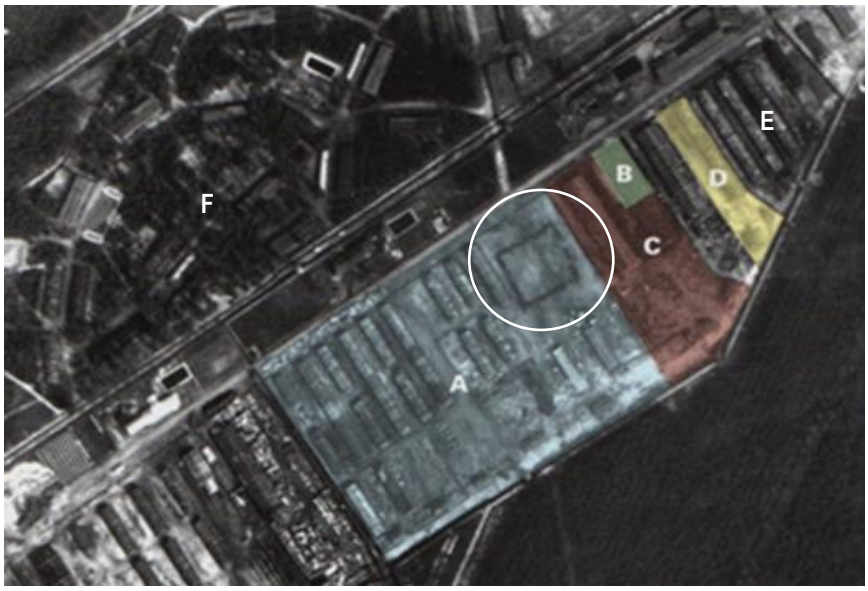
- 1,800 of the Polish Jews sent to the 'Special Camp' were deported to Auschwitz by early 1944 and killed - the Nazis decided that the documents they had showing South and Central American citizenship were not likely to be honoured; however,
- In February 1944, 365 Jews from the 'Neutral Camp' were deported to Spain; in July 1944, 222 Jews from the 'Star Camp' were exchanged for Germans with the British and allowed to travel to Palestine; in January 1945, 136 Jews from the 'Star Camp' were sent to Switzerland and safety;

and in July and December 1944, the Jews from the Hungarian camp were transported to Switzerland and to freedom. [14]

That so few Jews were ultimately "exchanged" could be explained in various ways. From inception, the plan was founded on the erroneous belief that there was such a thing as "international Jewry" who possessed the necessary power and resources to "rescue" Jews offered for exchange. This belief was, of course, completely detached from reality and spoke of the fantastical nature of Nazi antisemitism. Added to this, it has been suggested that the Nazis often made unrealistic demands when negotiating exchange and that this was a factor in limiting success. Finally, it has been said that more exchanges might have occurred if the British had been able to identify more German nationals to offer in exchange.[15]

Figure 8. An Aerial Photograph of Bergen-Belsen 'Exchange' Camp, in September 1944[16]

'A' denotes the 'Star Camp', 'B' the 'Special Camp', 'C' the 'Hungarian Camp', 'D' the 'Neutral Camp' and E the 'Prisoners Camp'. All these sections were part of the SS camp. 'F' denotes an area that was still under the control of the Germany Army until January 1945 – this the POW hospital. In the top right-hand corner of the 'Star Camp' a 'square' of prisoners can be seen taking part in an 'appell' such as the one described by Doriane Kurz in the interview below (see the white circle). This is an allied photograph and it is likely that the prisoners and Camp SS will have heard the plane. The fact that the photograph exists reflects the Allied advance towards Germany after D-Day in June 1944.



Bergen-Belsen was divided into different sections or 'subcamps' – identified in Figure 8 above. These sections were strictly segregated with barbed wire fencing. 'Exchange' inmates were denied contact with POWs and different types of 'Exchange' inmates were denied contact with each other. 'Exchange' inmates from German-occupied Poland, kept in the 'Special Camp' (B above) would have had information about the 'Final Solution' that the SS would not have wanted inmates who might potentially be sent 'east' to know in advance of their fate, as this knowledge might enable them to resist. The segregation also reflected differences in the regime in each subcamp, discussed below.

Doriane Kurz describes an Appell in the 'Star Camp'

Doriane Kurz was deported to Bergen-Belsen with her mother and brother at the end of 1943 from Westerbork. She contracted typhus in March 1944 and was liberated from a train of 'exchange' Jews evacuated from the camp just before the English arrived. You can listen to her interview at this link or by clicking on her picture.

Reflection Question:
What can we conclude from Doriane's story about conditions for 'privileged' prisoners in Bergen-Belsen before conditions in the camp declined after summer 1944? Consider both Doriane's story and the information about 'Appell' in Figure 8 as you consider this question.

Conditions in the different subcamps differed in significant ways. Inmates in the 'Star Camp', for example, were required to wear a yellow 'star', identifying them as Jews, on their clothing, and to perform manual labour and they received standard concentration camp diets, which were insufficient to support long-term health. This was not true for inmates in the Hungarian Camp or for inmates in the Neutral Camp.

Although conditions varied in the different 'exchange camps', conditions in all of them were better than those found in labour camps such as Auschwitz III. The intention was, as Himmler had said, that inmates in the Bergen-Belsen camps would survive, at least until it was clear if they were of 'value' and could be 'exchanged.' This is not to say, however, that inmates in the various sections of the 'exchange camp' did not experience extreme hardship.

For inmates in the 'Star Camp':

- Food rations were inadequate – amounting, in one report from June 1944, to 325 grams of bread and litre of thin soup per day and a weekly ration of 75 grams of margarine, a tablespoon of jam, occasionally some cottage cheese and coffee substitute, and twice a week water broth with groats.
- Work was unpleasant and demeaning – for example, inmates on the 'shoe detail' were required to dismantle and recycle useable leather from old shoes under SS supervision.
- Inmates were constantly subject to institutional and personal cruelty, ranging from being forced to stand to attention in roll calls in all weathers for hours, to being subjected to beatings and assaults.

In addition, the promise of freedom, through 'exchange', was held out to all, and yet, as we have seen, very few were ever exchanged.

Eddy Boas, a Dutch Jew, describes conditions in the Star Camp in the Winter of 1944/45.[17]

My mother, brother and I were sent to a section of Bergen-Belsen called Star Camp where we were allocated to Barrack 22 which was meant to hold 300-400 women and children. When we arrived the bunks were two-high, my brother slept in the top bunk and my mother and I shared the bottom one.

The 1944/45 winter was one of the most severe in many years. I had grown at least two or three sizes. The only way to clothe us was to steal or trade with mothers who had boys growing out of size or we had to find clothing discarded by parents of young children who had died. My mother told me this was not easy and often we just had blankets wrapped around us to keep warm. Shoes especially were difficult to find and if I did get them they were pretty well worn-out. During the winter my feet, especially my toes, would get very cold. To keep my feet warm my mother told me to pee on them. Though the warm did not last long, it felt good for a while.

Eddy Boas is on the left, sitting with his mother. Photo courtesy of Eddy Boas.

Reflection Question:
What does Eddy Boas' account tell you about the challenges that inmates in the 'Star Camp' faced in winter?

Conditions in the 'Exchange Camp' deteriorated in 1944 and plummeted downwards in early 1945. Even so, Himmler persisted in thinking that he could use Jewish lives as bargaining tools. As the Third Reich neared defeat in 1945, Himmler sought to position himself as someone the Allies might negotiate with. He hoped, against Hitler's orders, to negotiate some kind of peace. Himmler wished, therefore, to do things to improve his image with the Allies. He also continued to hope that 'exchanges' might be made. As late as the 11th April 1945, 'Exchange Jews' were still being transported away from liberation to keep them under SS control.

In all, at least 1,400 of the Jews detained for 'exchange' had died by the time that the camp was liberated on the 15th April 1945.

'Exchange' Jews liberated near Farsleben, 13th April 1945[18]

Between 6th-11th April 1945, the Nazis deported 2,500 'exchange Jews' from Bergen-Belsen towards Theresienstadt concentration camp. The aim was to retain them as negotiating tools. Only one train arrived. One was liberated by Soviet troops. The third – shown in the picture - was liberated by the US Army, having been abandoned by the SS near the village of Farsleben. The picture, taken by an American soldier, captures the moment of liberation. It was discovered in 2001 by Matt Rozell, an American high school teacher and author.

Reflection Question:
What does this picture and the story of these trains reveal about the story of Bergen-Belsen in 1945?

4.3 The 'Men and Women's Camp': Integration into the concentration camp system, March to December 1944

In 1944, Bergen-Belsen underwent further changes. The SS administration decided that the facilities at Bergen-Belsen were underused, and they began to integrate the site it into the wider concentration camp system. The increased demand on the Bergen-Belsen camp, particularly from August 1944, reflected the fortunes of war.

After the German defeat at Stalingrad in February 1943, the Soviets began to push Germany back from the East. After D-Day in June 1944 Britain, America and their allies were advancing towards Germany in the West. Germany was increasingly on the retreat and driven to exploit concentration camp 'slave labour' more fully than had been the case earlier in the war.

This had consequences for Bergen-Belsen. The integration of the camp into the wider concentration camp system was a grave threat to the welfare of the 'exchange' Jews. It led to a significant deterioration of conditions in the camp. Standard concentration camp 'norms' were imposed and the camp became increasingly over-crowded.

4.3.1 The Men's 'Recuperation' Camp, March 1944

In March 1944, the 'Prisoner's Camp' (See Figure 8 above) was expanded to receive a transport of 1000 inmates from Dora-Mittelbau concentration camp, a subcamp of Buchenwald in Germany. These inmates were worn out by hard labour, disease and neglect. This area of Bergen-Belsen was reclassified as a 'recuperation' camp. Many of these men were suffering from tuberculosis and all were no longer able to work. 'Recuperation' was a euphemism - no doctors accompanied the 1000 men and no medicines were provided for them. These inmates were simply left to die. Only 57 of the 1000 inmates survived the war. By January 1945, around 4600 inmates had been transported to Bergen-Belsen for 'recuperation'. The population of this section of the camp never exceeded 2000 because of the speed with which inmates died after arriving.[19]

Rudolf Küstermeier describes his arrival at the 'Recuperation Camp' and conditions for sick prisoners sent to Bergen-Belsen to 'recuperate.'[20]

We entered the camp through deep puddles, with wet feet and trousers. For the first time we saw the assembly yard where we were to stand for so many hours day after day. We had to be counted which, as we knew already, was a difficult job. We had been standing for 30 hours, 80 or 100 of us crowded together, in the goods wagons we had travelled in. Then we had marched 6 kilometres. And now we were standing again. Slowly the sky grew overcast, it snowed and rained - but we were standing as before. I looked around for special accommodations for the sick. But all I saw was filth, water, rubbish and dark, miserable partially dilapidated huts.

Finally, we were allowed to get into the huts. They were no different on the inside than on the outside. There were no beds, no chairs, no benches and no light. The windows were broken, and there were neither straw mattresses nor straw to lie on. All there was the slimy floor and rain coming in through the roof. We were told that we would not get anything to eat for the next two or three days because the kitchens could not cope with the new arrivals.

Rudolf Küstermeier was imprisoned for resistance activity in 1934. In February 1945, he was brought to Bergen-Belsen and placed in the 'Men's Camp' to 'recuperate.' He was one of the few prisoners in the sick camp who survived.

Reflection Question:
What does Rudolf Küstermeier's account of arrival at the 'Recuperation Camp' enable us to conclude about the meaning of 'recuperation'?

4.3.2 The 'Women's Camp,' August – December 1944

In August 1944, a new camp section was established, further integrating the camp into the wider concentration camp system. This was called the 'Women's Camp' and it was principally a 'transit' camp for women from other parts of the system who were transported west, from camps such as Auschwitz and Dachau as the Allies advanced. These prisoners were to be used as slave labourers in industries inside Germany, in an attempt to boost the failing German war economy. Women who were too ill to work remained at Bergen-Belsen. The women were imprisoned in a new section of the camp named the '**Women's Camp**' and, at first, lived in tents. These tents, however, were destroyed in a storm in November 1944 and the 'Women's Camp' was transferred to huts in the 'Star Camp' that were separated from the 'exchange' prisoners by barbed wire.

Around 12,100 women were transported to the Women's Camp by December 1944. Of these, approximately 6,500 were transferred on to forced labour elsewhere. By December 1944, 8,000 of the 15,257 inmates in Bergen-Belsen were crammed into the Women's Camp.

An Outline of Anne Frank's Story

Anne Frank (1929-1945) is, without question, the best-known victim of Bergen-Belsen. This is on account of her diaries, written in hiding in Amsterdam and subsequently published to world-wide acclaim by her father when he returned home from Auschwitz after The Second World War.

Anne's family were Germany Jews who fled Nazism by moving to Amsterdam. When Anne's sister was required to conduct labour service in Germany in 1942, the family went into hiding for just over two years in Amsterdam before being betrayed and transported to Auschwitz. Anne and her sister were transported to Bergen-Belsen in late October 1944 and housed in the 'Women's Camp'. They died of typhus in Bergen-Belsen within days of each other in March 1945.

Anne Frank in 1940.[21] Photo courtesy of Anne Frank House, Amsterdam.

Reflection Question:

The stories of Yvonne Koch and Anne Frank are very different, but they are united by common experience of Bergen-Belsen in late 1944 through to Spring 1945. With only these two stories to work with, what could you reconstruct about the nature of Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in this time period?

Yvonne Koch was born in 1933 in Czechoslovakia to Jewish parents. In autumn 1944, at age eleven, she was deported to Bergen-Belsen concentration camp without her parents[22]

I was terribly hungry and ran back to the hut where I'd got the potato peelings. A strong young woman was standing there, and she spoke to me in a Slavic language. She gave me a turnip.

And because I was always very cold and hungry – I was only wearing what I'd come in – I kept going back to this strong Russian woman. I think she was Russian, and she always gave me something. I often didn't find her when I went there, she wasn't there. But it was a ritual: I went there every day.

It was in the winter, in January, and there she was waiting for me and she gave me these gloves. She'd seen I was very cold. Even now I still have these bluish-red hands. She'd somehow knitted these gloves with different threads from blankets and she gave them to me. I always wore them, always had them on my hands. They always warmed me. And I always thought of this woman. I have such a strong memory of her because she was the first person to be good to me.

And then I went there a few times more, but I never saw her again. I don't know if she was shot because somebody had seen that she was looking after me. I cried a lot, and the time when I was given something to eat was over.

4.4 From 'Reception Camp' to 'Horror Camp': December 1944 to April 1945

Abel Herzberg's diary for the *16th March 1945* records the increasing overcrowding of the camp and its impact.[23]

Every day now transports of thousands of people are arriving from the concentration camps. Men and women, including Dutch people, acquaintances, friends. Twenty to twenty-five per cent are dead, sometimes more. On the way to our latrines… there is a field full of corpses. And every day the carts trundle past filled with corpses and more corpses. It is a gruesome sight…The crematorium can no longer cope with the volume…I am worn out and can hardly move. Almost the entire day I lie on the bed (if one can call it such). The filth is increasing. We are sick of it.

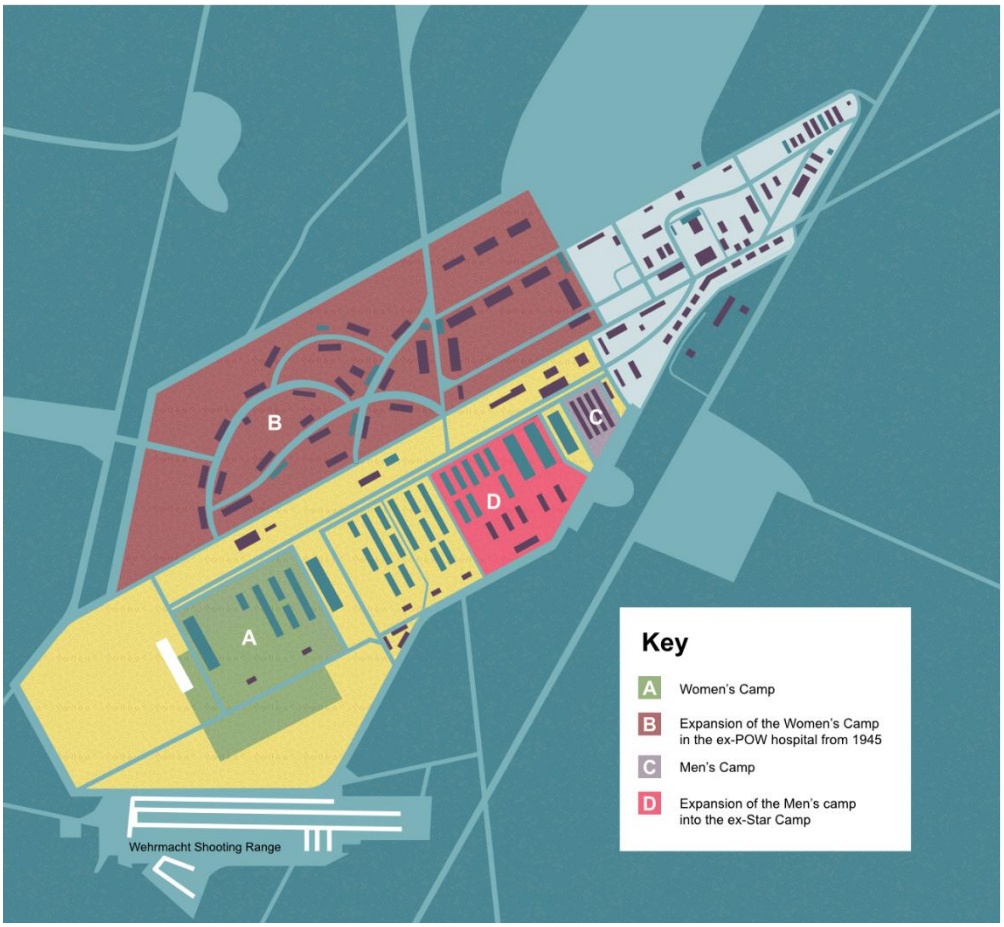
Reflection Question:
Herzberg had been in Belsen on the 'Palestine' exchange list since January 1944. He was told he would be departing to Palestine with 222 others in July 1944 but was struck off the list without explanation. He kept a diary in Bergen-Belsen and published it in 1950.

How different might the entry for 16th March 1944 have been from the extract above, do you think? What changes might he have experienced in the year between those two dates?

The transformation of Bergen-Belsen from an "exchange" to a concentration camp was complete by December 1944. Importantly, increases in the camp's population over preceding months were not accompanied by any improvement in facilities. Disease – including typhus - spread rapidly in the overcrowded and insanitary conditions, and inevitably led to a sustained increase in the camp's death rate. Bergen-Belsen was not a death camp containing specialist equipment designed for the purpose of murder. Nevertheless, it rapidly became a 'camp of death,' where mass death resulted from systematic neglect, disease, overcrowding and starvation. Perhaps not coincidentally, this development overlapped with another noteworthy event: the closure of the POW camp in January 1945 – an occurrence which saw Bergen-Belsen now fall completely under the jurisdiction of the SS.

A key milestone in this transformation occurred on the 2nd of December 1944 when SS-Hauptsturmführer (Captain) Josef Kramer, the former commandant of the Auschwitz-Birkenau extermination camp, became commandant of Bergen-Belsen. Kramer brought personnel with him from Auschwitz, including SS medical staff and male and female guards who had participated in selections for the gas chamber at Auschwitz. This change of regime brought cultural change: across all subsections of the Bergen-Belsen camp harsher treatment and brutality became the norm.[24]

Figure 9. Bergen-Belsen, January 1945



Changes in the administration of the camp coincided with dramatic deterioration in camp conditions. With the Women's Camp plagued throughout the second half of 1944 by outbreaks of typhus, the movement towards spring in 1945 saw the camp's population again undergo immense increase. The rate of arrival from other camps rose exponentially from early 1945. Auschwitz was liberated in January 1945 and the SS evacuated concentration camp inmates out of the path of liberation and into Germany through 'death marches.' These death marches were motivated, in part, by the desire to remove potential witnesses to mass murder and conditions in concentration camps. They were also motivated by the desire to keep hold of slave labourers who could be further exploited or used as hostages, and by the desire to continue the killing operations of the Holocaust by other means. Many thousands of already weakened inmates were made to travel away from liberation in the depth of winter by foot, by train and or by truck, with inadequate clothes, shoes and food supplies. Thousands died in transit and many were shot when they could march no more. Those who made it to Bergen-Belsen further swelled the over-populated camp.

Lilly Appelbaum Malnik describes death march from Auschwitz to Bergen-Belsen

Lilly Appelbaum Malnik arrived in Bergen-Belsen by death march from Auschwitz late in 1944. She was liberated in Belsen in April 1945 and emigrated to the United States in 1946. In this oral history interview she describes the experience of the death march.

Reflection Question:
What can we infer from Lilly Appelbaum Malnik's account about the nature and purpose of the 'Death Marches'?

Between December and April 1945, the inmate population of Bergen-Belsen expanded more than three-fold. A camp of just over 15,000 inmates in December 1944 had tripled in size by March, to just under 45,000, and continued to expand right down to liberation in April 1945, when the population was at least 53,000 and perhaps as high as 61,000.[25] The insufficient facilities of the camp were thrown into sharp relief:

In the spring of 1945 20,000 to 25,000 people had just as many toilets and washing rooms available to them as 2000 people one year earlier, or rather, even less because the camp administration had not let the water taps and other installations which had become unusable to be repaired. The state of affairs was especially horrifying in the second Prisoners' camp where… 8,000 to 10,000 inmates did not have a single W.C. or water tap.[26]

In the end, even the SS recognized that it was not physically possible to accommodate many further inmates in the camp – on the 8th April 1945, 15,133 inmates from Dora-Mittelbau concentration camp were housed in the Bergen-Belsen army barracks rather than in the concentration camp itself.[27]

Accommodation in Bergen-Belsen concentration camp was hopelessly inadequate – thousands of inmates were crowded into huts intended for hundreds. This situation created ideal breeding conditions for disease. Food supplies became increasingly disrupted as the Allies advanced and the camp's food supplies began to run out. There were, nevertheless, surplus stocks in the nearby Army camp and inmates in Bergen-Belsen could have been fed had anyone seen fit to make this food available to the inmates. Food distribution increasingly broke down in March, stopping entirely for many inmates, and cases of cannibalism occurred where starving prisoners were reported to be eating parts of corpses. Water supplies were disrupted due to air raids and bombing, driving desperate inmates to drink contaminated water from puddles, and supplies had begun to fail entirely by early April. Medical supplies and facilities were almost non-existent and inmates suffering from typhus and other infectious diseases were not treated.[28] The result was a death rate spiralling out of control and amplifying the spread of disease further.

In February 1945, 7,000 inmates died of disease, malnutrition and exposure. The fatalities soared to 18,000 in March. Some 9,000 lost their lives in the first part of April, and, tragically, 14,000 died after liberation.[29]

Harold Le Druillenec's first day in Bergen-Belsen

Harold Le Druillenec was a British citizen and school teacher from occupied Jersey. He was imprisoned for resistance activity from June 1944. He arrived in Bergen-Belsen on the 5th April – ten days before liberation.

He was one of two British survivors of Bergen-Belsen to be present when the camp was liberated.

He described aspects of his experiences in the camp in the first Bergen-Belsen trial in September 1945.[30]

Figure 10. Image courtesy of Jersey Heritage

Eventually I went to Belsen, arriving there about 5th April, around 10 o'clock in the evening. I received no food on arrival, but some fortunate individuals who had a few cigarettes or a bit of bread from the journey had soup - swede, turnip or mangel - offered to them in exchange. I was taken to Block 13. I should think, on that night, there must have been somewhere around 400 to 500 people in that block… To begin with, a French Colonel, an old friend of mine from the previous camp, and myself turned into one of the few beds, three-tiered bunks they were, in the hut. About five minutes later some severe blows on the head made us realise that we were not supposed to be there. We gathered from this language of blows that these beds were reserved for the officers and orderlies amongst the prisoners themselves. The Colonel and I made a point of finding some other French people - there was safety in being in groups - and sat with legs wide apart and other people sitting in between in a group on the floor… Actually, that proved to be my luckiest night in Belsen, because the next day or two the next Kommandos were sent in and had to sleep in this already overcrowded hut. The floor was wet and abominably foul and we had to lie in that, but we were allowed two very tattered blankets. The next morning, about half-past three, we were roused and sent out of the hut, again the language of blows being the only way of giving orders…

Did anybody die in that hut that night? - After we had been out on the Appell, or roll-call, for some time the next morning the hut was cleared of the superficial debris, litter, etc., and then some seven or eight dead were taken out and put in a latrine trench, which ran the whole length of most of these huts.

Were there any rafters in the hut? - Yes, boards were usually put across two rafters by some enterprising prisoners, and rather than sleep on the murderous floor below they slept across these narrow boards. Most of the people in the hut were suffering from dysentery, and, as many of those people on the boards were suffering from this, I think I can leave the rest to your imagination. It was possible for people below to move out of the way, but if they had they would probably never have found a place to get down again, so after a little experience they learned it was better not to…

What was the atmosphere inside that hut like? - Well, it is rather difficult to put into words. I do not think it is humanly possible to describe that - it was vile. I think I have told you sufficient to make you realise that the smell was abominable; in fact it was the worst feature of Belsen Camp. A night in those huts was something maybe a man like Dante might describe, but I simply cannot put into words.

Were you given any food before the Appell? - No, nor drink.

What food did you have during the day? - The first day I had precisely nothing.

Reflection Question:
Harold Le Druillenec had experience of other camps before Belsen. What can we infer from his account (a) about how Belsen differed from other camps and (b) about the ways in which inmates could help to ensure their survival??

4.5 The Liberation of Bergen-Belsen

4.5.1 The Truce: Bergen-Belsen, 12th-13th April 1945

In early April 1945, the Allied advance into Germany was nearing Bergen-Belsen. On 11th April 1945, the SS leadership agreed to hand the camp over to the advancing British troops – they had concluded that they could not risk trying to evacuate the camp since moving the inmates might spread typhus among the wider German population.[31] Himmler also hoped that handing the camp over, without guarantees about the treatment of the SS personnel in it, would further his aim of positioning himself favourably in peace negotiations with the Allies.[32]

On the 12th April, German army officers approached the British 11th Armoured Division to negotiate a truce, informing the local British commander - Brigadier Taylor-Balfour - that typhus and typhoid fever were rife in the camp. A truce, to last 6 days, was agreed early on the 13th setting up a neutral zone around the camp with the aim of containing the outbreaks of infectious disease in the camp.

Bergen-Belsen was to be the only camp in the entire concentration camp system to be officially 'handed-over' by the SS to the Allies and the only camp in which the SS commandant remained in post to surrender.

4.5.2 Understanding the Crisis in the 'Horror' Camp: Bergen-Belsen, 15th-20th April 1945

Renate Lasker records the experience of liberation from the perspective of an inmate of the camp. [33]

It must have been midday. For days we had heard the rumbling noises of heavy artillery, but we hadn't known who was firing. We had had no idea what was happening to us. The noise came closer… and then… a voice through a loud-hailer… first in English and then in German. At the beginning we were too confused and excited to take anything in. But the announcements kept being repeated, again and again. At last we understood: BRITISH TROOPS ARE STANDING BY THE CAMP GATES… PLEASE KEEP CALM… YOU ARE LIBERATED…We were also told – and this was not news to us – that there was typhus in the camp, and that we should wait for the troops to come. We should be patient… medical help was on its way. It took a while for the significance of the announcements to sink in.

When the first tank finally rolled into the camp, we looked at our liberators in silence. We were deeply suspicious. We simply could not believe that we had not been blown up before the Allies could get to us.

Reflection Question:
What does Renate Lasker's account reveal about inmates' experiences of 'liberation'?

On the morning of the 15th April, an advanced guard of the 29th Armoured Brigade stopped briefly at the camp and were followed, in the afternoon, by a unit of the 63rd Anti-Tank Regiment, Royal Artillery. Under the terms of the truce, many SS personnel and Hungarian and German Army soldiers remained in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp and the nearby Army barracks. German personnel in the camp included the camp commandant, Kramer, and 49 male and 26 female SS camp guards. Lieutenant Colonel Taylor and Lieutenant Derrick Sington inspected the camp accompanied by 14 Amplifying Unit and the Camp Commandant, stating that the camp had been liberated, that inmates were to remain in the camp in order to prevent typhus spreading, and that help was on the way.

Later that afternoon, Brigadier Hugh Glyn-Hughes arrived and made a tour of the camp and a preliminary assessment of the scale of the crisis in the camp. Hughes urgently requested that medical units and supplies be sent to the camp. Concrete actions to address the crisis in the camp began on the 16th as further British units arrived. Food and water began to be distributed to inmates of the camp, a process, tragically, that resulted in many deaths. The bodies of many of the starving inmates were unable to assimilate the rich rations that the British had available. Over the next few days, up to the 20th when the German troops left the camp, various actions were taken to prepare the concentration camp for evacuation and to address the needs of the former inmates, including re-establishing water supplies to the camp and burying thousands of dead bodies. The British forced the SS guards to bury the bodies and placed the Commandant and the Camp SS under arrest.

Brigadier Hugh Glyn-Hughes' Description of Conditions on the 15th April

*Figure 11: Image courtesy of IWM (**IWM BU8226**)*

Glyn-Hughes had served with distinction in the First World War, became a General Practitioner after the war and remained an army reservist. He was mobilized in 1939 and trained medical units for active service.

From 1944 he was Deputy Director of Medical Services for the VIII Corps and the 2nd Army. He was the first medical officer to enter Bergen-Belsen and assumed control of the relief of the camp.

This is an extract from his speech to the Inter-Allied Conference in June 1945.[34]

After a quick survey of the whole camp area an appreciation was made that 25,000 required immediate hospitalisation and of this number 10,000 would probably die, despite all efforts. There figures proved to be very near the mark, although the number of deaths after liberation was higher, approximately 13,000.

In the camp there was no sign of hygiene at all, huts which should have contained at the most 80 to 100 prisoners, in some cases has as many as 1,000. Some huts had a lavatory, but this had long ceased to function, and the authorities had made no provision outside, so that conditions on the ground and in the huts themselves were appalling, especially when it is realised that starvation, diarrhoea and dysentery were rife.

Apart from the frightful conditions in the compounds and huts there were many horrors – the enormous pile of dead lying everywhere, a crematorium, a gallows in the centre of the camp and signs of mass burial – one enormous grave open and half-filled on our arrival.

That is the broad picture of Belsen. The magnitude of the task was not really apparent until one got into the huts and one was faced with the appalling stench and the sight of countless numbers of miserable skeletons herded together on the floor or in bunks, often four to a bed and the living sharing with the dead. In one hut were counted 20 women in 35 square feet; the bare minimum of space allotted to one British soldier in the most crowded conditions. There were few blankets and many were without clothing at all; there was no straw and few rooms had bunks.

Reflection Question:
What impression of the camp does Glyn-Hughes's account give?

What were the most pressing, immediate challenges the British Army faced?

A very important presence in the camp from the 17th April were members of the British Army Film and Photographic Unit (AFPU). Thirty-three rolls of film and 200 photographs were taken by the AFPU in Bergen-Belsen. It is impossible to overstate the importance of these images in recording evidence of the crimes that had taken place at Bergen-Belsen and, equally, in defining public understanding and historical memory of the Holocaust in the 1940s and after, particularly in Britain. Perhaps equally important was the presence of the BBC. Richard Dimbleby's radio broadcast from Bergen-Belsen, recorded on the 17th April, was particularly impactful in raising and shaping public awareness of the suffering at Bergen-Belsen.

Richard Dimbleby's Bergen-Belsen Broadcast, 19th April[35]

Figure 12 Photo by Leonard McCombe/Picture Post/Hulton Archive/Getty Images)

Richard Dimbleby's radio broadcast describing conditions in Bergen-Belsen had a dramatic impact in making the British public and the wider world aware of conditions in camps.

The broadcast was aired on the 19th April 1945. It had been submitted four days earlier but was held back as the BBC doubted the veracity of his report. It was only broadcast after Dimbleby threatened to resign.

He intended to explicitly draw attention to the fact that the majority of prisoners in the camp were Jewish in the broadcast but this reference was cut by the BBC.

The broadcast can be listened to at this link.

Reflection Question:
Many, like Dimbleby, were shocked at what they encountered at Bergen-Belsen: yet knowledge of Nazi concentration camps had existed in Britain even before the war. How might you account for this?

4.5.3 The Relief of Bergen-Belsen, 20th April -1st June 1945

The British were entirely unprepared mentally or practically for the crisis they faced in Bergen-Belsen. The medical supplies and equipment they had with them were adequate for military purposes but not for the relief of the equivalent of a small town stricken by famine and epidemics.

They divided Bergen-Belsen into three camps (see Figure 13 below). The plan, devised by Brigadier Glyn-Hughes, consisted of two key aspects.[36] One focused on the former military barracks in Camps 2 and 3 and aimed to prepare hospital and medical facilities to tend to the thousands of starved and chronically sick former inmates in the former concentration camp (Camp 1 in Figure 8). The other aspect was to feed and tend to the sick and starving inmates in Camp 1, to try to contain and combat typhus and other infectious diseases in that camp and to bury the 10,000 bodies in the camp that were contributing to the spread of disease.

Figure 13. Dr William Collis' sketch of the Bergen-Belsen camp complex, April 1945[37]

The map shows three camps – Camp 1 = the concentration camp; Camp 2 = where 15, 000 arrivals from Dora-Mittelbau were accommodated in the German Army barracks from 8th April 1945 and where the British established their hospitals; and Camp 3 = the remainder of the barracks. The map was included in Dr William Collis' report on the relief of the camp published in the *British Medical Journal* in June 1945.

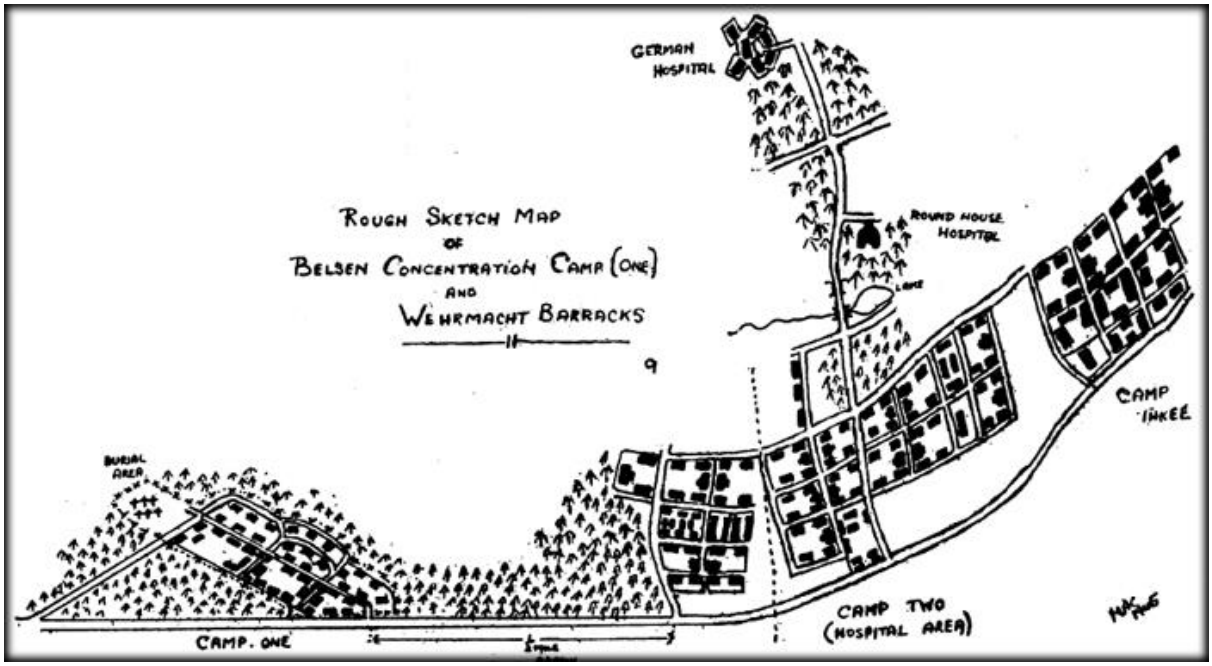


Figure 13 © British Medical Journal

The British and international forces involved in the relief operation expanded rapidly in the days and weeks following the liberation of the camp. Initially, the management of the camp was the work of the British Army. From the first, they were able to draw on the help of medically trained former inmates – such as Dr Hadassah Bimko and Dr Ruth Gutman who had managed to maintain hospital huts in Camp 1. In the days that followed, other groups began to arrive including British and Swedish Red Cross Units, Friends (Quaker) Relief, units of the Royal Army Medical and Dental corps and members of the US Army Medical Corps. The British were also able to call upon the services of 97 medical student volunteers from London hospitals and German doctors and nurses from the military hospital in the Bergen-Belsen barracks. Organisations that were crucial in supporting liberation and the transition from former concentration camps to displaced persons camps include the American Jewish Joint Relief Committee (JRC), the Jewish Relief Unit (JRU) and the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA).[38]

The relief of Bergen-Belsen was greatly complicated by the epidemic of infectious diseases raging in Camp 1. Typhus – a disease spread by fleas and also by dust containing flea-dung – was raging in the camp and needed to be contained, to avoid it spreading beyond the camp into the civilian population. At the time of liberation, the camp contained 10,000 corpses. Many of the inmates in the camp were weakened by disease and lack of food and water and around 500 died every day during the early phases of liberation. Former inmates needed decontamination with the insecticide DDT which killed the typhus-spreading fleas that were driving the epidemic.

Feeding former inmates who were starving was, as we have seen, a challenge for which the British army were not prepared when they arrived. It took time to identify food that could help the greatly

weakened former inmates to recover. It also took time to assemble enough staff and resources to enable the relief effort to be effective. Thousands of hospital beds were required, for example – as were new clothes for all former inmates whose contaminated clothing was destroyed as they were moved from Camp 1 to Camps 2 and 3.

Gunner James Illingworth Interviewed at Bergen-Belsen in April 1945

Today is 14th April 1945. My name is Gunner Illingworth and I live in Cheshire. I'm at present in Belsen camp doing guard duty on the SS men. The things at this camp are beyond describing. When you actually see them for yourselves, you know what you're fighting for here. Pictures in the paper can't describe it at all. The things they've committed, well, nobody would think they were human at all. We actually know now what has been going on in these camps and I know personally what I am fighting for.

Reflection Question:
What, if anything, does Gunner Illingworth's comment add to Glyn Hughes' account of Bergen-Belsen?

The relief operation was very challenging in other ways too. A great many of the former inmates were traumatised – as well as near-starved and suffering from typhus, tuberculosis and other ailments. Many were former inmates of Auschwitz and other concentration camps, whose families had been murdered and who had been subjected to systematic terror and brutality by members of the SS and by other inmates in positions of authority. It required great sensitivity to look after people who had suffered in these ways and many of the relief workers simply did not have the necessary knowledge, training or sensitivity. For example, the SS had used injections in Bergen-Belsen and elsewhere to kill

inmates – a fact that made it very difficult to administer drugs in the Camp 2 and 3 hospitals. British medical personnel did not know this backstory, or the experiences of inmates who had experienced Auschwitz and other camps, and they often found inmates' reactions difficult to understand.

Separation also had particular meanings for former inmates of camps where 'selections' for extermination had been common. This made it very difficult to separate prisoners from each other, as relief-workers often wished to do during the transfers from Camp1 to Camps 2 and 3. It was also difficult for relief workers to understand why many former inmates horded and 'stole' food obsessively. The relief workers had not experienced systematic starvation or a situation in which a slice of bread could mean the difference between life and death.

Finally, many of those involved in the relief operation had an outdated understanding of the camps that had been shaped during the 1930s. According to this perception, camps were part of an apparatus for general political oppression. The specific experience of Jews, who had been singled out for extermination on 'racial' grounds, was not well-understood by many of the relief-workers. Initial delays in removing former inmates from Camp 1 and deaths caused by inappropriate dietary regimes were particularly bitter for former inmates who knew that they were the 'last remnant' of a people and culture that the Nazis had aimed to wipe out through systematic genocide under the cover of war.

Red Cross Nurse Molly Silva Jones' diary entries for 19th April 1945, with later additions. [39]

Figure 14 © Image courtesy of IWM. (IWM BU 5484)

Possibly none of us had ever been so stirred – with pity – shame – remorse – yes, because even in 1934 we had heard of these camps and had not realised, not wanted to realise, that such things could happen. And lastly but not least we were stirred with a cold anger against those primarily responsible, the Germans, an anger which grew daily at Belsen. Stirred also an increased desire to help; nothing we could do was enough to restore… some measure of mental and physical health. We went back to the road without speaking. We knew the uselessness of words, not for the last time at Belsen.[40]

Reflection Question:
What does Molly Silva Jones' diary reveal about knowledge of camps before 1945 in England?

The relief of the camp was, then, a grave and extremely challenging task. In all, over 3000 British soldiers were involved in the relief of Bergen-Belsen and the barracks in Camps 2 and 3 came to contain the largest hospital complex in Europe. Despite the heroic efforts of British soldiers, volunteers and medical teams, however, around 14,000 former inmates had died by the summer of 1945.

The following represent key milestones in the development of the relief effort:

- On 17th April, the first group of 500 prisoners were evacuated from Camp 1 to a typhus hospital set-up in Camp 2.
- On 20th April, The Royal Army Service Corps took over supplying food to the former inmates and set up five kitchens each with a capacity to cater for 10,000 persons.
- On 21st April the so called 'Human Laundry' was established – to wash and decontaminate former inmates being moved from Camp 1 to Camps 2 and 3. The evacuation of Camp 1 began and 320 former inmates were moved into hospital in Camp 2 and 3. The first of the emptied huts in Camp 1 were burned down. Subsequently, as the transfer operation improved in efficiency, the number of former inmates that could be moved per day increased to between 500-650 a day.
- On 28th April the backlog of burials was finally completed in Camp 1.
- From 4th May, systematic efforts were made to provide medically administered diets to treat starvation. London medical students supervised the systematic feeding of former inmates in Camp 1. The aim was to ensure that weaker former inmates were not neglected, as they had been when relief staff numbers were limited.
- The death rate in the camp slowly declined in the weeks after liberation – from 11th of May, dropping to under a 100 a day. On the 19th May – the day on which the last former inmates were evacuated from Camp 1 - only 1 death was recorded.
- By 21st May, around 14,000 former inmates had been admitted to the various hospitals in Camp 2 and the last 421 former inmates were evacuated from Camp 1 and, just after 6pm, the last remaining barrack of Bergen-Belsen former concentration camp was burnt to the ground.

4.5.4 The Bergen-Belsen Trials, September 1945 - June 1946

The Accused in the 1st Bergen-Belsen Trial[41]

Figure 15 © Peter J Carroll/AP/Shutterstock

In a sense the final phase of liberation was the Bergen-Belsen trials, through which members of the Camp SS and others who had implemented the regime in the concentration camp were put on trial.

Unlike the Nuremberg Trials of 1945-1949, at which 24 key military and political leaders of the Third Reich and 100 others were indicted with crimes against peace, war crimes and crimes against humanity, the Bergen-Belsen trials took place under British military legislation and defendants were charged with violations of the 'laws and customs of war'.[42]

Because many of the Bergen-Belsen SS had been transferred from Auschwitz, as many prisoners had been, in late 1944, the indictments related both to crimes committed in Bergen-Belsen and at Auschwitz. The trials were the first time that the details of the Nazi extermination programmes were fully explored in a court of law. It is notable, however, that the crimes were not presented as targeted at Jews and that the specific and genocidal nature of the Nazi Holocaust was missing from the trials.

The main Bergen-Belsen trial took place at Lüneburg between September and November 1945 - Josef Kramer and 40 other defendants were indicted and tried. The trial resulted in 30 convictions and 12 death sentences. Further trials involving ex-officials of the camp took place in May 1946 at Wuppertal, resulting in five convictions and four death sentences, and at Lüneburg in June 1946. The second Lüneburg trial focused on Kapos exclusively – concentration camp prisoners who had been granted authority over others and who helped to implement the SS regime. Five ex-Kapos were sentenced to death and one to 15 years' imprisonment.[43]

Reflection Question:
Below are (a) a news reel clip of the opening of the trial and (b) an extract from the opening statement by the prosecution from the 1st Bergen-Belsen trial.

What can we conclude from these texts about the ways in which the British framed the nature of the crimes committed at Bergen-Belsen at this time? How did the British understand the motives behind the crimes that were committed in 1945? Would we frame things differently in 2020, knowing what we now know seventy-five years on?

British Pathé News report on the opening scenes of the 1st Bergen-Belsen Trial[44]

Colonel T. M. Backhouse's Opening Statement for the Prosecution, 1st Bergen-Belsen Trial, 18th September 1945[45]

I shall ask you to say that the conditions which were found in Belsen, and the conditions which you will hear of with regard to Auschwitz, were brought about not only by criminal neglect but that they were caused by deliberate starvation and ill-treatment, with the malicious knowledge that they must cause death; that such starvation and ill-treatment as occurred was bound to cause the death of many and to cause lasting physical injury to many more. In respect of Auschwitz I will go further and say that not only, will the Prosecution ask you to say that it was done with the deliberate knowledge that the conditions would cause death, but that there was deliberate killing of thousands and probably millions of people, quite deliberate cold-blooded extermination of millions of people in that camp, and that each of the accused who, was serving at Auschwitz and is charged in the second charge had his or, her share in this joint endeavour in this group of persons who were carrying out this policy of deliberate extermination. In respect of Belsen, there will not be an allegation that there was a gas chamber or that persons were herded by their thousands to their death, but there will be an allegation that by the treatment that was given to the people at Belsen, every member of the staff at Belsen who stands before you bore their share in that treatment which they knew was causing and would continue to cause death and injury.

I shall ask the Court to view the evidence as a whole and I shall ask them to say that each must bear his responsibility not only for the actions of his own hand but for the actions of this criminal gang who were working together. Nevertheless, lest there should be the slightest doubt, no person

has been brought before this Court against whom the Prosecution will not produce some evidence of personal acts of active and deliberate cruelty and, in many cases, murder. If you view these separate acts separately, you must, of course, decide each individual case against each individual accused, whether he is guilty or not guilty, but in to considering the separate evidence of these individual acts of cruelty I ask the Court to bear them in mind not only as individual acts but as acts of one of the members of this group, which is evidence not only against himself but against every single one of the persons who were working in that camp as part of that group taking part in this concerted ill-treatment.

4.5.5 Displaced Persons (DPs) and the Post-War Context

Once the war in Europe ended, with Germany's surrender on the 8th May 1945, the story of the former concentration camp at Bergen-Belsen became bound-up with processes shaping the post-war world, not least, conflict in the Mandate in Palestine and the emergence of the Cold War. Developments in the camp also related to how the Second World War and the fate of victims of Nazism came to be understood.

Former inmates of Bergen-Belsen – like thousands of other people who were far from their former homes at the end of the war – were classified as 'Displaced Persons' (DPs), a status that entitled them to support that ultimately aimed to return them to their original homes and countries. Many of those who had recuperated in Camp 2 and 3 wanted to return rapidly – for example, on the 25th April – ten days after the liberation of the camp - around 2000 French and Dutch former inmates left Bergen-Belsen to begin their journeys home.

There were two key categories of former inmate for whom 'return' was challenging:

- Polish soldiers and political prisoners, aligned with the anti-Communist Polish Government-in-Exile, based in London, who did not wish to return to post-war Poland. Poland was under the control of what they regarded as a puppet Communist regime that supported the Soviet Union, whose troops had occupied much of Eastern Europe after the defeat of Germany. Many of these DPs had lost their homes in former-Polish territory that the Soviet Union had annexed.
- Jewish former inmates who had no 'home' left to return to because their families and communities had been systematically wiped out by the Nazis and their collaborators during the Holocaust. In many cases Jews were not welcomed back in their former homes where antisemitism was often prevalent and where many former compatriots had benefitted financially from the Holocaust and did not want to return property to returning Jews.

Bergen-Belsen Displaced Persons (DP) camp, then, became home to large populations of Polish and Jewish former inmates – from Bergen-Belsen and from elsewhere in Europe who relocated there. Up to 10,000 Polish displaced people and up to 12,000 Jewish displaced persons resided in the camp in the years after liberation.

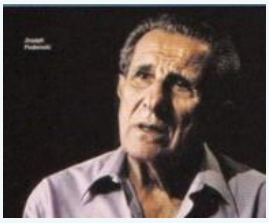
Originally, Polish and Jewish DPs were housed together, however, tensions arose and, from June 1945, separate Polish and Jewish DP camps were created.[8]

The question of the Jewish identity of many of the former inmates in the camp was a difficult one for the British. In the minds of the British, Jewishness was understood as a religious not a national identity. For the British, inmates that the Nazis had categorized as 'Jews' were better understood as nationals of the countries whose citizenship they had held before they were persecuted by the Nazis. The British felt that Jewish former inmates should be regarded, for repatriation purposes, as Hungarian, French, German, Polish, and so on. Indeed, for many British policy makers to classify such people as Jews in national terms was to continue Nazi discrimination.

These questions were further complicated by the fact that, until the ending of the British Mandate and the Declaration of the State of Israel on the 15th May 1948, the British were the rulers of Palestine. From 1939, the British had sought to limit Jewish emigration to Palestine to minimise tension between Jews and Arabs in the Mandate (See Section 5.1 below).

The British handed over control of the DP camp to the UNRRA (United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration) in March 1946 and the camp was run by the UNRRA, the Polish DP Camp Committee and the Central Committee of Liberated Jews in the British Zone.

Changing identities and the experience of Displaced People. Josef Podemski discussed post-war Jewish identities[46]



Josef Podemski interviewed in the 2000s about his experiences in the Bergen-Belsen DP camp. In the image below he can be seen holding the Israeli flag. The train was an emigration train heading for Israel. Podemski emigrated to Israel in 1949 and then to Canada.

There was this whole discussion going on at that time because we were being classified by the UNRRA, I think. And if you were born in Poland, you were a Polish citizen to them, but we said, 'No, we don't want anything to do with that. We've had enough. Our memories of Poland are gone!' And people who were born in Hungary or Czechoslovakia also said, 'We're not Hungarian, we're not Czech, we're not Austrian. We are Jews! This is what Hitler made of us!'

Figure 16 © Yad Vashem Photo Archive

[8] There had been tensions between former inmates of many nationalities – French, Russian and so on. Polish and Jewish former inmates remained in the camp longer than other nationalities, however, for the reasons mentioned above.

Reflection Question:
How does Josef Podemski's story help us understand why the Jewish DP camp continued to exist for so long after 1945?

4.5.6 Life in the Polish and the Jewish Displaced Persons' Camps, June 1945 to July 1950

The Polish DP camp lasted from June 1945 to September 1946 – by that time, two thirds of the Polish DPs had agreed to return or had returned to Poland or, in the case of DPs who had been in the Polish Home Army, secured the right to emigrate to Britain.

The Jewish DP camp lasted much longer and was not officially closed until July 1950. Bergen-Belsen DP camp became the largest Jewish DP camp in Germany and a centre of culture and of Zionist activity. Many of the Jewish DPs wanted to emigrate to Palestine, the Americas or elsewhere, rather than to 'return' to their European countries of origin. Many were able to do so – emigrating to Sweden, to the Netherlands or to Palestine, for example. In part this was because of the scale of destruction wrought through the Holocaust. Many Jews had nothing to go back for – their families had been murdered and their communities, homes and businesses had been destroyed. In part it was because of widespread antisemitism in countries formerly occupied by the Germans, such as Poland, that at times turned violent: the Kielce pogrom of July 1946 being a notable instance. According to the controversial interpretation forwarded by Jan Gross, what 'stands out' from that 'gruesome occasion is the widely shared sense in Polish society that getting rid of the Jews, by killing them if necessary, was permissible.[47] Clearly, this was not an incentive for Polish Jews to return home. However, emigration to Palestine was heavily restricted by the British. The majority of DPs remained in the camp, therefore, waiting for it to become easier to emigrate to the Americas or for restrictions on emigration to Palestine to be eased.

Conditions in both the Polish and the Jewish DP camps were tough – there were many shortages and DPs existed on limited diets, with a lack of clothing and restrictions on privacy related to living in a camp. However, in both camps, the DPs organised to represent their communities and agitate for improvements in their conditions. The DP camps were, in effect, small towns, and considerable energies were devoted to building community institutions and asserting cultural autonomy and control. Religious life, schools, sporting activities, newspapers and cultural events were organized with great energy in both the Polish and the Jewish DP camps. Efforts were made to train and provide vocational skills to equip younger DPs with trades that they could practice on leaving the camp. In the Jewish DP camp, a kibbutz was organised involving over 2,700 people in preparation for lives farming collectively in Palestine. The most dramatic sign of this new assertion of life and growth was the birth rates in the two camps. Four hundred weddings and 200 births had been recorded by July 1946 and, in total by the time that the camp was closed, 1000 Jewish weddings had taken place in the Jewish DP camp and more than 1000 Jewish children had been born there.

The British recognised Jewish DPs as a religious group. Many of the DPs aimed, however, to have their Jewishness recognised as a political and national identity. The members of the Central Committee of Liberated Jews in the British Zone acted as the governing body of the Jewish DP camp and organized political institutions such as a police force, judges and a congress of Liberated Jews in the British Zone.

Extracts from a report on the meeting of The Jewish Congress on 24-27th September 1947 by Major C.C.K. Rickford, Policy Section Prisoner of War and Displaced Persons Division[48]

The First Congress of the Remnants of Israel in Germany liberated from concentration camps through the victories of the United Nations, profoundly conscious of its historical responsibility for the fate of the forty thousand Jews it represents, wholeheartedly endorses the Conference of the World Jewish Congress, and asks the British Government and Allied Nationals:

- To designate Palestine as a Jewish State
- To vest the Jewish agency with the control of immigration into Palestine and with the necessary authority to develop the resources of the country.
- To effect the transfer of the first million Jews to Palestine and to raise an international loan for this purpose
- To ensure that the countries of Jewish emigration facilitate this transfer in every way.

Reflection Question:
What can we infer from the fact of this report? What does it tell us about attitudes amongst the DPs at Bergen-Belsen and what can we infer about the British from the report's existence?

Aspects of Jewish life in Bergen-Belsen DP Camp, 1945-1950

A scene from the play 'Partisans' performed by the 'Concentration Camp Theatre' in Bergen-Belsen DP camp.[50]

The report of the first Congress of Liberated Jews in the British zone, September 1945.[52]

Members of the 'Remnant of Israel' Yeshivah (religious study centre) at Bergen-Belsen DP camp.[49]

Members of the Kibbutz Nocham, Bergen-Belsen. The aim of the Kibbutz movement in the DP camps was to prepare Jews to be settlers farming collective farms in Palestine.[51]

Reflection Question:
What do these sources about life in the DP camp allow us to conclude about Jewish life in the camp after 1945?

4.6 Bergen-Belsen as a Site of Memory and Commemoration, July 1950 to the Present

Bergen-Belsen became a memorial site almost as soon as it was liberated, for example:

- a Jewish memorial was consecrated on the site in September 1945, and replaced with a permanent stone structure in April 1946;
- a large wooden cross was erected on the site to commemorate Polish victims of Bergen-Belsen in November 1945; and
- a memorial to Soviet victims of German Army mass murder and neglect was erected by the end of 1945.

The commemoration of victims at the site has not been without controversy. The burning down of the buildings on the site by the British, understood as necessary at the time to remove the danger of infection, was criticized by some former inmates because it removed concrete evidence of what had happened at the site. The original official memorialization of the site by the German Provincial Government in Hannover resulted in landscaping of the site that further removed the visual record of what had been present at the site when the camp existed.

The unveiling, on 14th April 1946, of the Jewish memorial stone at Bergen-Belsen, erected by the Central Jewish Committee for the British Zone of Occupation. The inscription reads "Earth conceal not the blood shed on thee".[53]

Figure 17 © IWM (BU 12580)

Reflection Question:
What does this image reveal about Bergen-Belsen, one year on?

Renewed awareness of the Nazi past in the 1960s – linked to revivals in antisemitism and to high profile trials of former Nazis – led to the establishment of a Document Building and permanent exhibition and to additional landscaping at the site in 1960-61 and 1964-68.

Two former women inmates weep over one of the mass graves, 14th April 1946[54]

Figure 18 © IWM (BU 12578)

Reflection Question:
What does this image reveal about Bergen-Belsen, one year on?

After impetus was provided by a visit of President Ronald Reagan to the site in 1985, funds were allocated to expand and develop the documentation centre – completed in 1990. From 1987, state funding was provided for research and education staff at the site.

From 2000 German Federal funding was provided for the memorial Centre at Bergen-Belsen and a new documentation centre, focusing on the POW camps on Lüneburg Heath as well as on the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp and the DP camp, opened. The exhibition at the site focused, in innovative ways, on presenting Bergen-Belsen through the voices of those who were imprisoned there. Extensive research, including through oral history interviews with survivors, continues to take place. This short history depends heavily on the results of this work.

Memorial ceremony at the Jewish monument, 18 April 2010.[55]

Reflection Question:
What does this image reveal about the continuing meaning of the site, 65 years on?

5 Bergen-Belsen and the History of the Holocaust

5.1 Bergen-Belsen as an 'Icon' of the Holocaust

> To this day, concentration camps... are often seen through the lens of the liberators, with the all-too-familiar pictures of trenches filled with bodies, mountains of corpses, and bone-thin survivors staring into cameras. Powerful as these pictures are, however, they do not reveal the full story.[56]

Often, history comes to be understood through 'iconic' images that are widely publicised and that become fixed in public memory. To illustrate with an example from a different period of history not related to the Holocaust, the image of Kim Phuc running from a Napalm attack or images of the massacre and My Lai – for example – have become iconic of the Vietnam war and have come to stand for the wider story of the war in many people's minds.

The iconic main gate of Auschwitz I[57]

Reflection Question:
Like the gates to Auschwitz-Birkenau, the gates to Auschwitz I – and the slogan above them ('Work Makes You Free') – are both iconic of the Holocaust. However, the experiences of prisoners in these two camps were very (a) different from each other and (b) very different from the experiences of people at 'killing centres' such as Belzec, Sobibor and Treblinka, and (c) very different from the experiences of those who were killed during the 'Holocaust by bullets'?

In what sense – if any - can they be said to 'stand for' the Holocaust as a whole, do you think?

What is true of the Vietnam War is also true of the Holocaust in terms of how both have come to be associated with a number of key iconic images – such as – in the case of the Holocaust - the gates of Auschwitz-Birkenau or, and particularly in Britain, images of Bergen-Belsen. The existence of such 'iconic' images can be very helpful – they help to condense and fix key aspects of the past in public

memory and prevent forgetting. However, such 'iconic' images can come to obscure the very things they seem to 'stand for'.

The 'iconic' images of Bergen-Belsen all come from the period of what Brigadier Glyn Jones referred to as the 'horror camp' and include images of emaciated survivors, bodies being buried in mass graves. Perhaps most iconic of all is the horrifying image of Private Frank Chapman bulldozing bodies into a mass grave. Striking and deeply shocking as these images are, they are not, representative of Bergen-Belsen or of concentration camps more generally. It is worth pausing to consider, then, what this iconic popular image of Bergen-Belsen, first, *reveals* – and thus helps us to understand – and, second, *obscures* about the wider history of the Holocaust and Bergen-Belsen's role within that history.

5.2 The Holocaust

Although there are disagreements about precisely how it should be defined, one commonly accepted definition is the following:

> *The Holocaust was the systematic murder of Europe's Jews by the Nazis and their collaborators during the Second World War.*[58]

There has been extensive debate about how the Holocaust came about and about how it unfolded. There is also debate about where we should place its start and – to a lesser extent – its end dates.[59] Some 'intentionalist' historians see the Holocaust as an outcome of a deliberate policy of extermination formed in the minds of Hitler and leading Nazis early in the history of the Nazi Party that unfolded with a horrible logic and inevitability as the regime developed.[60] Other 'functionalist' historians – and, this has been the consensus of most contemporary researchers since the early 1990s – see the Holocaust as developing during the Second World War in a way that was not pre-determined. In particular, these historians see it as unfolding after the invasion of the Soviet Union in the summer of 1941 as a result of the interaction of a combination of factors.[61]

Key developments in the history of the Nazi genocide include:

- The activities of the Special Action Squads – *Einsatzgruppen* - deployed behind Germany Army troops during and after the invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941. With the assistance of local populations, these squads conducted mass shootings of Jewish men, women and children in Eastern Europe. This 'Holocaust by bullets' was responsible for the deaths of more than 1.5 million of the estimated 2.9 million Holocaust victims who died within the Soviet Union's 1941 borders.[62]
- 'Operation Reinhard' through which 1.7 million Jews from the General Government in German-occupied Poland and elsewhere in Europe (e.g. the Netherlands) were transported to specially designed Killing Centres where they were systematically murdered in gassing facilities at Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka and Majdanek.[63]
- Killing operations in Auschwitz-Birkenau, between February 1942 and November 1944, through which at least 960,000 Jews were killed by gas or extermination through work on starvation rations.[64]

- Death Marches through which concentration camp prisoners were forced to march west from camps such as Auschwitz to camps – like Bergen-Belsen - further away from advancing Soviet troops. It is estimated that at least 50,000 Jews died in death marches in the final winter of the Second World War.[65]

A group of SS officers relaxing at an SS social facility near the Auschwitz Labour and Death Camps[66]

The picture shows, from left to right, Dr Josef Mengele (who conducted experiments on twins at Auschwitz and who selected prisoners for gassing), Rudolf Höss (Commandant of Auschwitz from 1940-1943 and again in 1944), Josef Kramer (the last Commandant of Auschwitz in 1944 and then the last Commandant of Bergen-Belsen in 1944-1945) and an unidentified officer relaxing at an SS social facility near the Auschwitz Labour and Death Camps.

Reflection Question:
What does this image – and the fact the someone took it – reveal about the Camp SS?

5.3 Bergen-Belsen and Understanding of the Holocaust

The idea of using Bergen-Belsen to house Jewish people for "exchange" was conceived at a time when millions of Jewish men, women, and children had already been shot into mass graves dug across Eastern Europe or gassed in specially constructed camps in German-occupied Poland. Against this backdrop, Bergen-Belsen was 'an anomaly', since at the time, it was the only concentration camp inside Germany's pre-war borders that held large numbers of Jewish prisoners, and the only camp for Jews not geared towards their eventual death.[67]

Jews being kept alive was unusual enough in itself, but – as noted – in 1943, 'exchange Jews' in Bergen-Belsen were allowed to wear their own clothes, remain in contact with their families in the camp and, although treated harshly, they were protected from death.

Given its exceptionality, one might presume Bergen-Belsen provides little insight into the history of the Holocaust. However, the reverse is true. The decision – taken at the highest levels of the Nazi hierarchy – to pursue (albeit temporarily) the prospect of exchange reveals a great deal. It points to

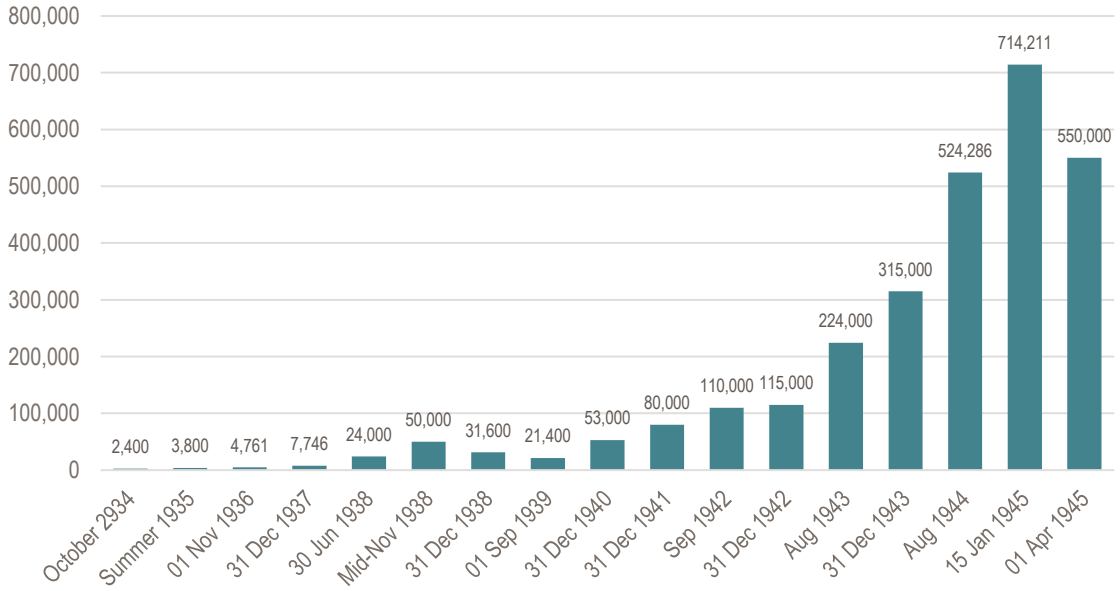
tension between ideological considerations (racialised genocide) and pragmatism ('exchange' for benefits of various kinds) in Nazi policy. The role of Himmler in this process, and that of the German Foreign Office and the SS, also highlights how numerous actors and agencies had a hand in Nazi Jewish policy, which cannot be thought of exclusively in Hitler-centric terms.

The history of Bergen-Belsen also allows us to understand differences within the Nazi systems of oppression and policies of genocide, and their development over time. The fate of Soviet POWs at Camp XIC reminds us of the pervasive nature and the extent of racism in the Nazi world-view. Russians, like Jews, were seen as 'subhuman' and as worthy only for extermination and exploitation. The harsh treatment and neglect of non-Jewish prisoners at Bergen-Belsen – in the 'Prisoners' Camp' and the 'Men's Camp', where sick concentration camp slave labourers were sent to die, gives us an insight into the wider 'concentration camp' system.

Similarly, the links between the Bergen-Belsen and Auschwitz draw attention to other categories of camp in the SS system – namely to death camps and labour camps. It will be recalled that 1,700 of the 'exchange Jews' from German-occupied Poland originally housed in the 'Special Camp' in 1943 were subsequently sent directly to Auschwitz for extermination when the SS decided that they were not, after all, valuable 'exchange' assets. The links between Bergen-Belsen and Auschwitz were furthered of course during its final months with the arrival of Kramer and his entourage – a development which was marked by a spike in brutality and neglect.

Finally, the history of Bergen-Belsen and its increasing overcrowding in its final six months give us insights into the frenzied way in which the Nazi regime came to depend on slave labour to prop up its failing economy in the last phase of the war when Soviet forces were advancing towards Germany from the East and when Allied forces were advancing on Germany from south and west. A fact illustrated by the exponential growth in the concentration camp population in the graph below.

Figure 19. Daily Inmate Numbers in the SS Concentration Camps, 1934-1945[68]



The figures for 1935, 1938, 1940, 1941, December 1942, December 1943 and April 1945 are estimates.

6 Bergen-Belsen, Britain and the Holocaust

Britain's encounters with the Holocaust are part of at least two larger stories and need to be understood in that context:

- The story of the British Mandate in Palestine; and
- The story of the British Empire's war against Nazi Germany and her allies.

6.1 Jewish Emigration and the British Mandate in Palestine

Between 1918 and 1948 – when the State of Israel was founded by a resolution of the United Nations – the British ruled Palestine, first, by occupation, and second, from 1920, under a 'mandate' from the League of Nations. The 'mandate' in Palestine was one of a number that dealt with the administration of territories which had been part of the Ottoman Empire before its break-up during and after the First World War.

In 1917, through the Balfour Declaration, the British had indicated support, in principle, for the creation of a Jewish 'national homeland' in Palestine. However, once Britain was in control of Palestine under the League of Nations mandate, practical considerations relating to managing relations between Arab and Jewish populations led the British to impose restrictions on immigration to Palestine. In the wake of the Arab Revolt of 1936-1939, the British authorities imposed limitations on Jewish immigration to Palestine as follows:

- A cap was set on Jewish migration to Palestine of 75,000 people over the next five years (1939-1944);
- Any Jewish immigration after that point would depend upon Arab "acquiescence"; and
- Limitations were placed on land transfer to Jews.

Once war began, the British came under sustained pressure to lift these restrictions. Moreover, fresh challenges presented themselves with a spike in the number of Jewish refugees trying to enter into Palestine illegally. A commitment to upholding the quota – itself bound up with a need to avoid stoking Arab hostility – increasingly ran into a growing body of evidence that Nazi policy towards the Jews had become one of annihilation. This background forms a context that helps to explain British responses to demands made by Displaced Persons in the former concentration camp at Bergen-Belsen and elsewhere to be allowed to emigrate to Palestine after April 1945. It was possible for emigration to take place and former inmates from Bergen-Belsen did emigrate to Palestine, however, because of this context, the British placed heavy restrictions on who could go and turned back those who tried to enter Palestine illegally.

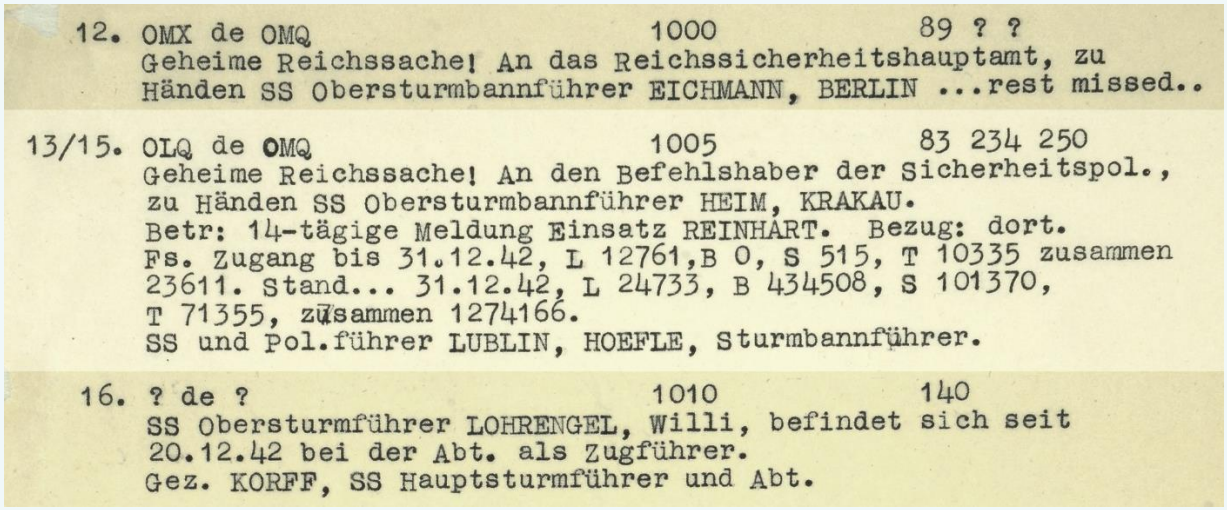
Figure 20. The British Mandate in Palestine, 1920-1948

The Mandate consisted of Palestine and Transjordan. The latter was granted limited autonomy in 1923.

6.2 Britain, The Holocaust and The Second World War

6.2.1 Britain's Knowledge of the Holocaust

The events and developments that we now call "The Holocaust' unfolded during the Second World War and under the cover of war with a logic that was very hard to discern at the time. Britain's encounters with and knowledge of the Holocaust emerged through the experience of the British Empire's struggles to defend British interests and to defeat Nazi Germany and her allies. The British perspective on these events was limited by a number of filters affecting how events were understood. A view of what the concentration camp system was, formed during the early 1930s when the primary function of camps was the repression of political opponents of Nazism, shaped expectations about what camps were. Domestic political concerns about refugees and immigration in the 1930s shaped how refugees were perceived. Government awareness of a degree of public antisemitism in Britain at the time also influenced governmental decisions.[69] From the perspective of British strategists in the Foreign Office and elsewhere, the Holocaust – which did not come to be widely known by that name until the 1960s – was one of many aspects of the war and certainly by no means the most important to the government at the time. Britain's key war aims were to maintain Britain's diplomatic obligations, such as the guarantee that had been given to protect Poland from invasion, and to defend and maintain the interests and security of Britain and her Empire against attack by Germany, Italy, Japan and their allies.



12. OMX de OMQ 1000 89 ? ?
Geheime Reichssache! An das Reichssicherheitshauptamt, zu Händen SS Obersturmbannführer EICHMANN, BERLIN ...rest missed..

13/15. OLQ de OMQ 1005 83 234 250
Geheime Reichssache! An den Befehlshaber der Sicherheitspol., zu Händen SS Obersturmbannführer HEIM, KRAKAU.
Betr: 14-tägige Meldung Einsatz REINHART. Bezug: dort.
Fs. Zugang bis 31.12.42, L 12761,B 0, S 515, T 10335 zusammen 23611. Stand... 31.12.42, L 24733, B 434508, S 101370, T 71355, zusammen 1274166.
SS und Pol.führer LUBLIN, HOEFLE, Sturmbannführer.

16. ? de ? 1010 140
SS Obersturmführer LOHRENGEL, Willi, befindet sich seit 20.12.42 bei der Abt. als Zugführer.
Gez. KORFF, SS Hauptsturmführer und Abt.

A Decoded Security Police / SS communication, December 1942[70]

3/15 OLQ de OMQ 1005 83 234 250

State secret! To the commander of the Security Police, for the attention of SS Senior Assault Unit Leader HEIM, CRACOW.

Re: 14-day report operation REINHARD. Reference: radio telegram from there.

Recorded arrivals until December 42, L 12761, B 0, S 515, T 10335, totalling 23611.

Situation 31 December 42, L 24733, B 434508, S 101370, T 71355, totalling 1274166. SS and police leader of Lublin, HOFLE, Assault Unit Leader.

Reflection Question: The British intelligence officers reading this decrypted message did not know what we now know about Operation Reinhard and the Holocaust. What difficulties might intelligence officers might have had making sense of decoded messages like this?

The knowledge of the measures that Nazi Germany was taking under the cover of war emerged gradually after the invasion of the Soviet Union, for example, in 'Special Action Group' communications intercepted and decoded by British intelligence and other intercepts made as the unfolding murder of European Jewry progressed. For example:

- a radio message, sent on the 18 July 1941, from Police Regiment attached to Army Group Centre on the Russian front reporting the execution of 1,153 Jews near Slonim in Belarus; and
- an intercepted communication of 11 September 1941 from Police Regiment South to Police and SS Headquarters revealing that it had liquidated 1,548 Jews.; and
- An intercepted communication – the so called 'Höfle Telegram' - of 11 January 1943 from the SS leader in Lublin to the SS commands in Cracow and Berlin listing the numbers of Jews killed to date in Operation Reinhard in Lublin, Belzec, Sobibor and Treblinka in 1942, totalling 1,274,166 deaths.[71]

Many of these messages were difficult to interpret, without contextual knowledge of events on the ground in German-occupied Poland and elsewhere that British intelligence often lacked. The significance of the 'Höfle telegram' (reproduced above) was not appreciated by British intelligence at the time. It was only in 1997 that it came to light, when a batch of war time documents including it were declassified.[72] We now appreciate that the telegram – sent on the 11th January 1943 from the SS leader in Lublin to the SS commands in Cracow and Berlin - listed the numbers of Jews killed to date in Operation Reinhard in Lublin, Belzec, Sobibor and Treblinka in 1942, totalling 1,274,166 deaths. Even where the full import of communications was understood, it was strategically important for British intelligence not to reveal that it was able to decode German radio communications. Doing so would lead the Germans to use new encryption tools, and so the knowledge gained through such intercepts was not made public.

Nevertheless, it was clear, long before the invasion of occupied Europe by British, American, British Imperial forces and others in June 1944, that the annihilation of the Jews was unfolding in Nazi-occupied Europe. This knowledge was made most dramatically clear to the British public in a declaration read in the British House of Commons by the British Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden, on the 17th December 1942.

6.2.2 Britain's Actions in Response to the Holocaust

Anthony Eden's statement to the House of Commons, 17th December 1942[73]

I regret to have to inform the House that reliable reports have recently reached His Majesty's Government regarding the barbarous and inhuman treatment to which Jews are being subjected in German-occupied Europe… I should like to take this opportunity to communicate to the House the text of the following declaration which is being made public today at this hour in London, Moscow and Washington:

"The attention of the Governments of Belgium, Czechoslovakia, Greece, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, the United States of America, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and Yugoslavia, and of the French National Committee has been drawn to numerous reports from Europe that the German authorities, not content with denying to persons of Jewish race in all the territories over which their barbarous rule has been extended the most elementary human rights, are now carrying into effect Hitler's oft repeated intention to exterminate the Jewish people in Europe. From all the occupied countries Jews are being transported, in conditions of appalling horror and brutality, to Eastern Europe. In Poland, which has been made the principal Nazi slaughterhouse, the ghettoes established by the German invaders are being systematically emptied of all Jews except a few highly skilled workers required for war industries. None of those taken away are ever heard of again. The able-bodied are slowly worked to death in labour camps. The infirm are left to die of exposure and starvation or are deliberately massacred in mass executions. The number of victims of these bloody cruelties is reckoned in many hundreds of thousands of entirely innocent men, women and children.

"The above mentioned Governments and the French National Committee condemn in the strongest possible terms this bestial policy of cold-blooded extermination. They declare that such events can only strengthen the resolve of all freedom loving peoples to overthrow the barbarous Hitlerite

tyranny. They re-affirm their solemn resolution to ensure that those responsible for these crimes shall not escape retribution, and to press on with the necessary practical measures to this end."

Reflection Questions: How closely does the account of the Holocaust, up to the end of 1942, given in Eden's speech above correspond to what we now know? What actions in response to the Holocaust did this declaration commit the British and other Allied governments to? How adequate was this as a response, do you think? Were other responses possible in the circumstances of the war? How far does Eden's framing of Nazi genocide in this declaration cohere or contrast with the ways in which the British understood Bergen-Belsen in news reports and in the Bergen-Belsen trials in 1945/46?

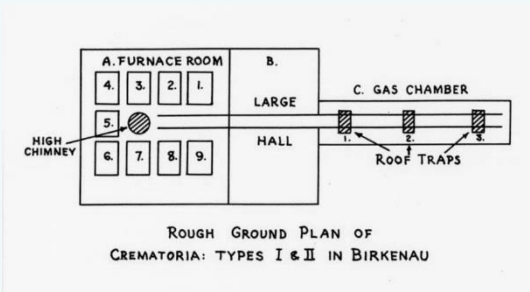
As the Eden declaration demonstrates, the British government's response to reports of the Holocaust, prior to the liberation of Bergen-Belsen in 1945, was to focus on winning the war and to make clear to perpetrators of crimes against the Jews of Europe that retribution would come when the war had been won.

Demands for responses that were more active and that intervened to stop the Holocaust from continuing before the war was won were made after 1942 – for example, in the demand to bomb Auschwitz that followed the Auschwitz Protocols in 1944. The adequacy of British and Allied responses remains a matter of controversy and debate.

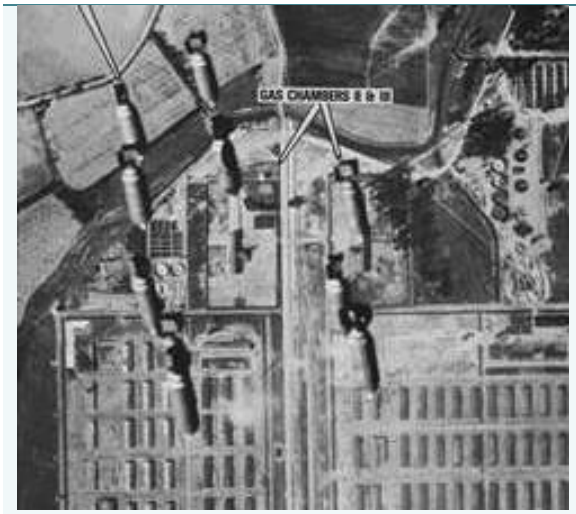
The Auschwitz Protocols 1944

Rudolf Vrba and Alfred Wetzler, two Slovakian Jews, made a daring and successful escape from Auschwitz-Birkenau in April 1944 with the aim of making public how mass murder worked at the camp. They wanted to warm potential victims amongst the Jews of Hungary and to influence the actions of the Allies.

Vrba and Wetzler's sketch of the killing facilities at Auschwitz-Birkenau[74]



The Protocols explained the gas chambers at Auschwitz and the ways in which deception was used to trick prisoners into going to their deaths quietly. Vrba and Wetzler's evidence was disseminated to the American and British governments. Debates arose about the extent to which actions could be taken to bomb the gas chambers and disrupt railway lines that fed the gas chambers and crematoria at Auschwitz.



Detail of an aerial photograph of Auschwitz-Birkenau in 1944 showing bombs dropping onto the plant.[75]

The extent to which a bombing mission to disrupt the killing facilities at Auschwitz-Birkenau was possible or desirable was hotly debated in 1944. Winston Churchill was in favour, however, British and American logistics experts raised doubts about the realism of the idea.

The practicality and the desirability of bombing, which would certainly have killed many inmates, are still hotly debated.

No mission to bomb was undertaken, although Auschwitz I was bombed in error by a mission that meant to target synthetic rubber factories in Auschwitz III. Reconnaissance planes had also flown over the Auschwitz complex and photographed it.

6.2.3 Debating British Responses

The extent to which the British government's responses to the unfolding murder of European Jewry were proportionate and reflected the most effective actions that could have been taken in the circumstances has been subject to debate since 1945. Some historians have argued that the British record was 'mixed' and that more active and decisive responses were possible, however, others have argued that Britain did all that could have been done in the circumstances and that it was right for the government to focus all efforts on defeating Nazi Germany.[76] For those who accept this line of argument, the idea that there were other more direct forms of 'rescue' that Britain could have offered European Jewry in 1944 is a 'myth'.[77]

We cannot hope to resolve this question here in an introductory overview. We can, however, present a recent response to the question published by the British government, for reflection and evaluation.[78]

Assessing British Responses to the Holocaust:
From *Britain's Promise to Remember* (2015)[79]

For most people, Britain's relationship with the Holocaust is seen through the eyes of survivors, refugees or children who arrived on the 'Kindertransport', those who have rebuilt their lives in the UK. It is largely a positive story of resilience and rebuilding.

It was the British armed forces that liberated Bergen-Belsen, discovering 50-60,000 inmates, many of whom were dying of starvation and disease, and the bodies of thousands more who had already succumbed. Images that exist of the liberation are horrifying beyond all imagination. For months, British medical staff and soldiers strove to return to health those inmates who survived the terrible first days of the liberation…

After the war, the British welcomed thousands more survivors, including 1,000 young survivors of the Nazi concentration camps…

However, Britain's story was not wholly positive. From 1933 to 1938, Britain, like most democratic governments in Europe, turned a blind eye to the growing persecution in Germany. Antisemitism was

also present on the streets of Britain. The British Union of Fascists was active from 1932, engaging in acts of violence against Jewish people and buildings, particularly in the East End of London.

As the number of Jewish refugees from Germany increased during the 1930s, there was constant pressure to restrict immigration, mainly due to high unemployment. In 1938 Britain relaxed its domestic immigration controls and allowed 50,000 refugees to enter the UK. But at the Evian Conference in France that year, Britain, along with all but one of the 32 countries attending, refused to accept more refugees in any significant numbers. In addition, Britain controlled Palestine where it was overseeing the development of a Jewish National Home. Over 60,000 Jews emigrated there. However, in 1937 violence in the region led Britain to curb Jewish immigration. After the outbreak of war, the British government banned all immigration from Nazi-occupied territories. Those who had managed to get into the country were put into internment camps in places such as the Isle of Man and Sandwich in Kent, often alongside Nazi sympathisers. It is now clear that, from the summer of 1941, the governments in London and Washington knew that mass murder was taking place. In December 1942 the Allied governments issued a solemn declaration condemning the extermination of the Jews. Yet, despite knowledge of the 'Final Solution' and pleas for help, there was no real effort by the Allies to rescue the Jews of Europe. The Allies argued that they did not have the capacity to conduct accurate air raids on Nazi camps. They felt that a speedy victory in the war was the best method to put a stop to the Nazi atrocities and to save the Jewish people.

It is easy to make judgments in hindsight, but Britain was one of the few countries which offered some sanctuary, and alongside France was the only country to declare war on Nazi Germany without having been attacked. It is clear that Britain has a unique relationship with this terrible period of history…

Reflection Question: In light of the information outlined in this short history, how far do you agree with the assessment offered in Britain's Promise to Remember?

7 Resources and Materials

7.1 Books on Bergen-Belsen

Bardgett, S. and Cesarani, D. (eds.) (2006) Belsen 1945: New historical perspectives. London: Vallentine Mitchell.

Baxter, I. (2014) Images of War: Belsen and Its Liberation. Pen & Sword: Barnsley, S. Yorks.

Buchholz, M. (Ed.). (2010). Bergen-Belsen - Wehrmacht POW Camp, 19401945, Concentration Camp, 1943-1945, Displaced Persons Camp, 1945-1950: Catalogue accompanying the permanent exhibition. Göttingen: Lower Saxony Memorials Foundation / Wallstein Verlag.

Flanagan, B. & Bloxham, D. (2005) Remembering Belsen: Eyewitnesses Record the Liberation. London & Portland, OR: Vallentine Mitchell.

Imperial War Museum. (1991) The Relief of Belsen April 1945: Eyewitness Accounts. London: Imperial War Museum.

Reilly, J., Cesarani, D., Kushner, T. & Richmond, C. (eds.) (1997) Belsen in History and Memory. London: Frank Cass.

Reilly. J. (1998) Belsen: The liberation of a concentration camp. London & New York: Routledge.

Shephard, B. (2005). After Daybreak: The liberation of Belsen, 1945. London: Jonathan Cape.

7.2 General books

Burleigh, M. (2001). *The Third Reich: A New History.* London: Pan Books.

Cesarani, D. (1998). *Britain and the Holocaust*. London: Holocaust Educational Trust.

Cesarani, D. (2016). *Final Solution: The Fate of the Jews 1933-1949*. London: Macmillan.

Davidowicz, L., S. (1990). *The War Against the Jews, 1933-45.* London: Penguin Books.

Kushner, T. (1994) *The Holocaust and the Liberal Imagination – A Social and Cultural History*. Oxford, UK & Cambridge, USA: Blackwell.

Lawson, T. (2010) *Debates on the Holocaust*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Smith, L. (2006). *Forgotten Voices of the Holocaust*. London: Ebury Press.

Stone, D. (2015). *The Liberation of the Camps: The End of the Holocaust and Its Aftermath*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press

Wachsmann, N. (2016). *KL: A History of the Nazi Concentration Camps*. London: Abacus.

7.3 Organisations

Bergen-Belsen Memorial: https://bergen-belsen.stiftung-ng.de/en/your-visit/

Birkbeck University of London: The Nazi Concentration Camps. http://www.camps.bbk.ac.uk/themes/camp-system.html

Holocaust Educational Trust: https://www.het.org.uk/

International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance. (2019): Teaching guidelines https://holocaustremembrance.com/educational-materials/ihra-recommendations-teaching-and-learning-about-holocaust

Jewish Virtual Library: https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/

National Archives: https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/

National Holocaust Centre: https://www.holocaust.org.uk/

The Anne Frank Trust UK: https://annefrank.org.uk/

UCL Centre for Holocaust Education: https://www.holocausteducation.org.uk/

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum: https://www.ushmm.org/

Wiener Library: https://www.wienerlibrary.co.uk/

Yad Vashem: https://www.yadvashem.org/

7.4 Research

Foster, S., Pettigrew, A., Pearce, A., Hale, R., Burgess, A., Salmons, P and Lenga, R-A. (2016). What do students know and understand about the Holocaust? Evidence from English secondary schools. London: Centre for Holocaust Education, UCL Institute of Education.

UCL Centre for Holocaust Education https://www.holocausteducation.org.uk/research/research-inform-teaching/

7.5 Classroom resources

BBC archives holds Dimbleby's broadcast 'Richard Dimbleby describes Belsen'.

https://www.bbc.co.uk/archive/richard-dimbleby-describes-belsen/zvw7cqt

A webcast of Mala Tribich giving her testimony to English school students on Holocaust Memorial Day 2017 is available through the Holocaust Education Trust:

https://vimeo.com/201856270

Rudi Oppenheimer gave his testimony as someone who survived Bergen-Belsen
https://www.holocaust.org.uk/rudi-oppenheimer-testimony

The Holocaust Educational Trust has lesson materials 'Liberation', 'British responses to Nazism and the Holocaust' and 'Dilemmas, choices and responses' which all make reference to Bergen-Belsen. These can be downloaded from https://www.het.org.uk

The Holocaust Educational Trust supplemented their project *70 Voices* in 2015 to mark the 70th anniversary of the end of the Holocaust with material related to the liberation of Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in April 1945. Scroll down to view these accounts. http://www.70voices.org.uk/

The Holocaust Educational Trust's former head of Education Alex Maws and Professor Tony Kushner reflected in 2015 on the camp's liberation and its impact on British understanding of the Holocaust.
http://www.70voices.org.uk/content/podcast13

The National Holocaust Centre has material related to Bergen-Belsen

https://www.holocaust.org.uk/news/rip-rudi-oppenheimer

https://www.holocaust.org.uk/pages/search.aspx?q=bergen%20belsen

The Weiner Holocaust Library hosts a 3D reconstruction of Bergen-Belsen
https://www.wienerlibrary.co.uk/memoryinadigitalage

UCL Centre for Holocaust Education has lesson materials 'British responses to the Holocaust', 'What was a concentration camp?' and 'The German public and the Nazi concentration camps' which all relate to Bergen-Belsen. These can be accessed at https://www.holocausteducation.org.uk/teacher-resources/materials/

University of Southern California Shoah Foundation for survivor and liberator filmed oral history accounts https://iwitness.usc.edu/SFI/

7.6 Online information about Bergen-Belsen

Bergen-Belsen Memorial: Historical grounds of the camp
https://bergen-belsen.stiftung-ng.de/en/your-visit/historicalgroundsofthecamp/

Bergen-Belsen Memorial: History of Bergen-Belsen.
https://bergen-belsen.stiftung-ng.de/en/history/

Imperial War Museum: Stories 'The Liberation of Bergen-Belsen'
https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/the-liberation-of-bergen-belsen

Jewish Virtual Library: Second Bergen-Belsen Trial (May-June 1946).
https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/second-bergen-belsen-trial-may-june-1946

Leech, C. R: Bergen-Belsen Timeline 1935 - Today.
http://www.bergenbelsen.co.uk/pages/Timeline.html

Leech, C. R: 1st Belsen Trial.
http://www.bergenbelsen.co.uk/pages/Trial/Trial/TrialProsecutionCase/Trial_010_Druillenec.html

Leech, C.R: 'Stalag XIC (311) and KZ Bergen-Belsen, A History From 1935'.
http://www.bergenbelsen.co.uk/index.html

National Archives:
https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/resources/belsen-concentration-camp/

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum:
https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/bergen-belsen

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum: Nazi Camps.
https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/nazi-camps

Wachsmann, N. Camp system | The Nazi Concentration Camps:
http://www.camps.bbk.ac.uk/themes/camp-system.html
http://www.camps.bbk.ac.uk/search.html?q=Bergen-Belsen

8 Bibliography

Aderet, O. (2016, October 9). The Holocaust Train That Led Jews to Freedom Instead of Death. *Haaretz*. Retrieved from https://www.haaretz.com/world-news/europe/.premium.MAGAZINE-the-holocaust-train-that-led-jews-to-freedom-instead-of-death-1.5446799

Boas, E. (2018, October 16). Against all odds: My family survived Bergen-Belsen. Retrieved September 22, 2019, from https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/against-all-odds-my-family-survived-bergen-belsen/

Buchholz, M. (Ed.). (2010). Bergen-Belsen - Wehrmacht POW Camp, 19401945, Concentration Camp, 1943-1945, Displaced Persons Camp, 1945-1950: Catalogue accompanying the permanent exhibition. Göttingen: Lower Saxony Memorials Foundation / Wallstein Verlag.

Bullock, A. (1952). *Hitler: A Study In Tyranny*. London: Pelican.

Burleigh, M. (2001). *The Third Reich: A New History*. London: Pan Books.

Carr, G. (2019). Harold Osmond Le Druillenec. Retrieved September 14, 2019, from https://www.frankfallaarchive.org/people/harold-le-druillenec/

Cesarani, D. (1998). *Britain and the Holocaust*. London: Holocaust Educational Trust.

Cesarani, D. (2006). A Brief History of Bergen-Belsen. In S. Bardgett & D. Cesarani (Eds.), *Belsen 1945: New Historical Perspectives* (pp. 13–21). London and Portland: Vallentine Mitchell.

Cesarani, D. (2016). Final Solution: The Fate of the Jews 1933-1949. London: Macmillan.

Collis, W. R. F. (1945). Belsen Camp: A preliminary report. *British Medical Journal*, *9th June 1945*, 814–816.

Davidowicz, L., S. (1990). *The War Against the Jews, 1933-45*. London: Penguin Books.

Dimbleby, R. (1945). BBC Home Service News - Richard Dimbleby Describes Belsen - BBC Sounds. Retrieved September 14, 2019, from https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/p03yjbsf

Eden, A. (1942). *United Nations Declaration* (Parliamentary report No. Hansard, 17 December 1942). London: Hansard. Retrieved from https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1942/dec/17/united-nations-declaration#S5CV0385P0_19421217_HOC_280

Evans, R. J. (2004). *The Coming of the Third Reich*. London & New York: Penguin Books.

Flanagan, B., & Bloxham, D. (Eds.). (2005). *Remembering Belsen: Eyewitnesses record the liberation*. London and Portland: Vallentine Mitchell.

Fordham University. (1996, 2019). The 25 Points 1920: An Early Nazi Program. Retrieved October 2, 2019, from https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/25points.asp

Foster, S., Pettigrew, A., Pearce, A., Hale, R., Burgess, A., Salmons, P., & Lenga, R.-A. (2016). *What do students know and understand about the Holocaust? Evidence from English secondary schools*. London: UCL Centre for Holocaust Education. Retrieved from https://www.holocausteducation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/What-do-students-know-and-understand-about-the-Holocaust2.pdf

Friedländer, S. (1997). Nazi Germany and the Jews: The Years of Persecution, 1933-1939 (Vol. 1). New York: HarperCollins.

Gedenkstätte Bergen-Belsen. (n.d.-a). History Bergen Belsen. Retrieved from https://bergen-belsen.stiftung-ng.de/en/history/

Gedenkstätte Bergen-Belsen. (n.d.-b). History Bergen Belsen. Retrieved from https://bergen-belsen.stiftung-ng.de/en/history/

Haggith, T. (2006). The Filming of the Liberation of Bergen-Belsen and its Impact on the Understanding of the Holocaust. In S. Bardgett & D. Cesarani (Eds.), *Belsen 1945: New Historical Perspectives* (pp. 90–122). London and Portland: Vallentine Mitchell.

Hanyok, R. J. (2005). *Eavesdropping on Hell: Historical Guide to Western Communications Intelligence and the Holocaust, 1939-1945*. Fort Meade: Centre for Cryptologic History, National Security Agency. Retrieved from https://www.nsa.gov/Portals/70/documents/about/cryptologic-heritage/historical-figures-publications/publications/wwii/eavesdropping.pdf

Hayes, P. (2017). *Why? Explaining the Holocaust*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company.

International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance. (n.d.). What to Teach about the Holocaust. Retrieved October 2, 2019, from https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/index.php/educational-materials/what-teach-about-holocaust

Jewish Virtual Library. (n.d.). Second Bergen-Belsen Trial (May-June 1946). Retrieved September 22, 2019, from https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/second-bergen-belsen-trial-may-june-1946

Kershaw, I. (1991). *Hitler*. London & New York: Longman.

Kershaw, I. (1999). *Hitler, 1989-1936: Hubris*. London: Penguin Books.

Kolb, E. (1986). Bergen Belsen: From “Detention Camp” to Concentration Camp, 1943 to 1945 (2nd ed.). Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.

Lattek, C. (1997). Bergen-Belsen: From “privileged” camp to death camp. In D. Cesarani, T. Kushner, J. Reilly, & C. Richmond (Eds.), *Belsen in History and Memory* (pp. 37–71). London & New York: Routledge.

Leech, C. R. (2015a). 1st Belsen Trial. Retrieved September 14, 2019, from http://www.bergenbelsen.co.uk/pages/Trial/Trial/TrialProsecutionCase/Trial_010_Druillenec.html

Leech, C. R. (2015b). Bergen-Belsen Timeline 1935 - Today. Retrieved from http://www.bergenbelsen.co.uk/pages/Timeline.html

Library of Congress. (n.d.). Nuremberg Trials. Retrieved September 22, 2019, from https://www.loc.gov/rr/frd/Military_Law/Nuremberg_trials.html

Michman, D. (2011). Debates on the Holocaust. Retrieved from https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/1160

Osowiecki. (2012). ‘…trying to count the stars’: using the story of Bergen-Belsen to teach the Holocaust. *Teaching History*, *149*, 38–46.

Rees, L. (1997). The Nazis: A Warning from History. London: BBC.

Reilly, J., & Bloxham, D. (2005). The Belsen Camp in Historical Context. In B. Flanagan & D. Bloxham (Eds.), *Remembering Belsen: Eyewitnesses record the liberation* (pp. 126–139). London and Portland: Vallentine Mitchell.

Rubinstein, W. (1999a). Britain and the Holocaust: A Critique | History Today. *History Today*, *34*(September 1999). Retrieved from https://www.historytoday.com/archive/britain-and-holocaust-critique

Rubinstein, W. (1999b). The Myth of Rescue: Why the Democracies Could Not Have Saved More Jews from the Nazis. London & New York: Routledge.

Scrapbookpages. (n.d.). Bergen-Belsen Erholungslager - Recuperation Camp. Retrieved September 22, 2019, from https://www.scrapbookpages.com/BergenBelsen/BergenBelsen03.html

Shephard, B. (2005). After Daybreak: The liberation of Belsen, 1945. London: Jonathan Cape.

Sherman, A. J. (1994). Island Refuge: Britain and Refugees from the Third Reich, 1933-39 (2nd ed.). London: Routledge.

Snyder, T. (2010, October 21). The Reich’s forgotten atrocity | Timothy Snyder. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/cifamerica/2010/oct/21/secondworldwar-russia

Stone, D. (2015). The Liberation of the Camps: The End of the Holocaust and Its Aftermath. New Haven & London: Yale University Press.

The Cabinet Office. (2015). *Britain’s Promise to Remember: The Prime Minister’s Holocaust Commission Report*. London: The Cabinet Office. Retrieved from https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/prime-ministers-holocaust-commission-report

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. (n.d.a). Auschwitz. Retrieved September 20, 2019, from https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/auschwitz

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. (n.d.b). Einsatzgruppen: An overview. Retrieved September 20, 2019, from https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/einsatzgruppen

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. (n.d.c). Heinrich Himmler. Retrieved September 25, 2019, from https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/heinrich-himmler

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. (n.d.d). Nazi Persecution of Soviet Prisoners of War. Retrieved September 25, 2019, from https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/nazi-persecution-of-soviet-prisoners-of-war

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. (n.d.e). Operation Reinhard (Einsatz Reinhard). Retrieved September 20, 2019, from https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/operation-reinhard-einsatz-reinhard

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. (n.d.-f). Nazi Camps. Retrieved September 20, 2019, from https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/nazi-camps

Wachsmann, N. (2016). KL: A History of the Nazi Concentration Camps. London: Abacus.

Wachsmann, N. (2019). Camp system | The Nazi Concentration Camps. Retrieved October 2, 2019, from http://www.camps.bbk.ac.uk/themes/camp-system.html

Whittock, M. (2011). A Brief History of the Third Reich: The rise and fall of the Nazis. London: Robinson.

Wolfisz, F. (2017). Holocaust survivor: 'My parents risked all for us.' *The Times of Israel*. Retrieved from https://jewishnews.timesofisrael.com/holocaust-survivor-my-parents-risked-all-for-us/

Writte, P., & Tyas, S. (2001). A New Document on the Deportation and Murder of Jews during "Einsatz Reinhardt" 1942. *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, *15*(3), 468–486. https://doi.org/10.1093/hgs/15.3.468

Yad Vashem. (n.d.). *Death Marches*. Retrieved from https://www.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%206260.pdf

9 Endnotes and Image Credits

[1] Bullock, 1952; Burleigh, 2001; Evans, 2004; Friedlander, 1997; Kershaw, 1991, 1999; Rees, 1997; Whittock, 2011.

[2] Wachsmann, 2019.

[3] United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, n.d.f.

[4] Fordham University, 1996.

[5] Snyder, 2010; United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, n.d.d.

[6] From https://bergen-belsen.stiftung-ng.de/en/history/thepowcamp1940-1945/

[7] Buchholz, 2010, p.62.

[8] Buchholz, 2010, p.49.

[9] Shephard, 2005, p. 12.

[10] Kolb, 1986, p. 22 and 32.

[11] Wachsmann, 2016 is an authoritative account of the wider concentration camp system.

[12] Buchholz, 2010, p.271 and Gedenkstätte Bergen-Belsen, n.d..

[13] Cesarani, 2006, pp. 17–18.

[14] Cesarani, 2006, pp. 17–18.

[15] The failure of 'exchange' is discussed in Kolb, 1986, p.27.

[16] Buchholz, 2010, p. 162.

[17] Text from Boas, 2018 and image from Wolfisz, 2017.

[18] Aderet, 2016. Image from https://www.haaretz.com/world-news/europe/.premium.MAGAZINE-the-holocaust-train-that-led-jews-to-freedom-instead-of-death-1.5446799

[19] Lattek, 1997, p.53.

[20] Text from Scrapbookpages, n.d.; image from https://geschichte-bewusst-sein.de/opposition-und-widerstand-im-ns-staat-deutsche-politische-haeftlinge-im-konzentrationslager-bergen-belsen/.

[21] Image source: Unknown photographer; Collectie Anne Frank Stichting Amsterdam - Website Anne Frank Stichting, Amsterdam. Unknown photographer. Public domain. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anne_Frank#/media/File:AnneFrank1940_crop.jpg

[22] Buchholz, 2010, p. 222.

[23] Text from *Between Two Streams: A Diary from Bergen-Belsen* (I. B. Tauris) as cited at http://www.70voices.org.uk/content/day73

[24] Leech, 2015, Gedenkstätte Bergen-Belsen, n.d., Buchholz, 2010, pp. 133, 139 and 145.

[25] Buchholz gives the figure as around 53,000 (2010, p. 217), Stone gives the figure as 60,000 (2015, p. 83) and Reilly and Bloxham give the figure at 61,000 (Reilly & Bloxham, 2005, p.132).

[26] Kolb, 1986, pp.42-43.

[27] Leech, 2015.

[28] Cesarani, 2006, pp. 19, Leech, 2015.

[29] Cesarani, 2006, pp. 19.

[30] Carr, 2019; Leech, 2015a.

[31] Flanagan & Bloxham, 2005, p. 6.

[32] Reilly & Bloxham, 2005, p. 138.

[33] Text from: http://www.70voices.org.uk/content/day75

[34] The commander of the British relief effort at Belsen, Brigadier H L Glyn-Hughes CBE DSO MC, Deputy Director of Medical Services, Second Army, in his caravan. Catalogue number: IWM BU 8226 (https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205125145). Flanagan & Bloxham, 2005, pp. 10-11.

[35] Image credit - Richard Dimbleby. Original Publication : Picture Post - 1717 - How The BBC Covers The Invasion - pub. 17th June 1944 (Photo by Leonard McCombe/Picture Post/Hulton Archive/Getty Images) https://www.gettyimages.co.uk/detail/news-photo/british-journalist-richard-dimbleby-a-war-correspondent-for-news-photo/94253338?adppopup=true

[36] Flanagan & Bloxham, 2005, p. 21.

[37] Collis, 1945, p. 815.

[38] Stone, 2015, pp.105-138; Buchholz, 2010, p. 305.

[39] https://media.iwm.org.uk/ciim5/37/162/large_000000.jpg?_ga=2.159422905.567662626.1568976997-1254751079.1564256742

[40] Text from http://www.70voices.org.uk/content/day79

[41] https://bergen-belsen.stiftung-ng.de/en/history/theprosecutionoftheperpetrators/

[42] Library of Congress, n.d.; Flanagan & Bloxham, 2005, p. 99.

[43] Jewish Virtual Library, n.d..

[44] https://youtu.be/huW6lSIcCt8

[45] http://www.bergenbelsen.co.uk/pages/Trial/Trial/Trial_005_OpenSpeechPros.html
[46] Images Buchholz, 2010, p.362 and 365. Text p.362.
[47] Gross, 2006, p.108.
[48] Flanagan & Bloxham, 2005, p. 86.
[49] Buchholz, 2010, p.333.
[50] Stone, 2015, Plate 8.
[51] ©USHMMPhoto 97797 - https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/pa1118987.
[52] Buchholz, 2010, p.337.
[53] https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205194155
[54] https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205194156
[55] https://bergen-belsen.stiftung-ng.de/en/history/placeofremembrance/
[56] Wachsmann, 2016, pp. 3–4.
[57] © Tomasz Pielesz
[58] International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, n.d..
[59] Hayes, 2017.
[60] Davidowicz, 1990.
[61] Michman, 2011; Cesarani, 2016, ppxxv-xl.
[62] Foster et al., 2016, p.144; United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, n.d.b.
[63] United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, n.d.c.
[64] United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, n.d.a.
[65] Yad Vashem, n.d.a.
[66] https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/photo/a-group-of-ss-officers-socializing-at-an-ss-retreat-outside-auschwitz
[67] Wachsmann, 2016, p. 337.
[68] Wachsmann, 2016, p. 627.
[69] For debate on these issues, see Cesarani, 1998 and Rubinstein, 1999a.
[70] This is the so called Höfle telegram. Nothing was made of it at the time it was intercepted in January 1943 and it was only discovered in after Bletchley Park files were transferred to The National Archives from GCHQ in 1997 (Writte & Tyas, 2001). The document is an extract from a larger telegram (National Archives catalogue reference HW 16/23; available at https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/resources/holocaust/hoefle-telegram/).
[71] Hanyok, 2005, pp. 77–79.
[72] Writte & Tyas, 2001.
[73] Eden, 1942.
[74] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vrba%E2%80%93Wetzler_report#/media/File:Vrba-Wetzler_report_sketch_(crematoria).jpg
[75] https://www.britannica.com/topic/Why-wasnt-Auschwitz-bombed-717594
[76] Cesarani, 1998 and Rubinstein, 1999.
[77] Rubinstein, 1999.
[78] There are striking similarities between this argument and that made in Sherman (1994).
[79] The Cabinet Office, 2015, p. 23-24.

UCL CENTRE FOR HOLOCAUST EDUCATION
HOLOCAUST EDUCATIONAL TRUST
THE NATIONAL HOLOCAUST CENTRE AND MUSEUM
Department for Education

This programme is delivered by UCL Centre for Holocaust Education, the Holocaust Educational Trust, with support from the National Holocaust Centre and Museum, and made possible thanks to funding from the Department for Education