Encountering Bergen-Belsen

What were the experiences of those who worked at Bergen-Belsen 15 April-21 May 1945?

BELSEN 80

Key Question: What were the experiences of those who worked at Bergen-Belsen 15 April-21 May 1945?

Teaching Aims and Learning Objectives

- To explore a range of sources to discover what happened at Bergen-Belsen during the period 15April - 21 May, 1945.
- To explore accounts from a number of perspectives including: the British Army, medical staff, photographers, artists, journalists and clerics.
- To reflect on the experiences of those who worked on the relief effort.

Rationale

This lesson is one of four designed to support a national schools' programme to commemorate the 80th anniversary of the liberation of the concentration camp Bergen-Belsen.

On 15 April 1945 British and Canadian troops entered the concentration camp at Bergen-Belsen. Faced with a typhus epidemic, these soldiers tried desperately to maintain order, prevent the spread of disease, and provide sustenance to the living. Over the coming days medical professionals and others arrived at the camp to support this work. 36 days later, the last building in the camp was burnt to the ground.

The conditions these people confronted during this period have since become legendary. Perhaps less well-known are the personal experiences of these individuals during the initial "liberation" phase. For many, the encounters left indelible imprints that lasted a lifetime.

This lesson presents students with insights into how people encountered Bergen-Belsen. In the process, it helps them to grapple with some of the horrific and traumatic consequences of the Nazi genocide of the Jews and consider its legacies.

Key Information

This one-hour lesson is written for Key Stage 4 students and above. Teachers should exercise their professional judgement as to whether they believe the materials contained in the lesson are age appropriate for their particular students. The following material is required:

- A (printed) copy of the Source Cards - Sets A, B, C, D, and E, a Question Grid – one per group of 5 or 6 students; 6 sets of Leader Cards; sugar paper; flip chart pens and Blu-tac.
- Prior knowledge of the history of Bergen-Belsen is required. Ideally, students will have engaged with the material in the lesson 'How did Bergen-Belsen become the "world of a nightmare"?' to develop a sound knowledge of the camp before undertaking the activities in this lesson.

Lesson Plan

Starter (5 mins)

Build-up a portrait of students' existing knowledge and understanding of Bergen-Belsen's liberation. Collecting feedback on a whiteboard, direct your questioning along the following lines:

- What "facts" do you know about Bergen-Belsen?
- What can you say about how and when it was liberated?
- Who was involved in the liberation of the camp?
- What conditions do you think the liberators faced?
- How do you think the experience of liberation affected the liberators?

Outline to students that in this lesson they are going to explore the experiences of the British Army, medical staff, photographers, artists, journalists and clerics who worked at the Bergen-Belsen camp when it was first liberated.

Activity One: Exploring the Source Cards (15 minutes)

Explain to students that they will be undertaking their investigation by examining a variety of sources. With students organised into 5 groups of 5 or 6, distribute the five sets (A, B, C, D, E) of Source Cards (all of the sets need to be used in the lesson).

Whilst each set of 10 Source Cards is different, they all touch on the following topics:

- Discovering Bergen-Belsen
- Finding the dead
- Encountering survivors
- Facing typhus
- Providing relief
- Making images
- Telling the story

Provide each group with a Question Grid and ask them to nominate a scribe.

Instruct the groups to complete their Question Grid using the information contained on their Source Cards. Highlight they will need to work collaboratively; share out the set of cards among the group with each student taking responsibility for one or two cards and explaining them to the rest of the group in order to complete the Question Grid.

This activity will help students start to formulate ideas about what it was like to enter the camp and the various experiences of those who did so.

The grid covers the following questions,

Upon arrival:

- What did the camp look like?
- What did people find upon entering the camp?
- What work did they do?
- What challenges did they face?
- How were the events and conditions recorded and by whom?

A copy of each group's completed Question Grid could be photocopied and secured into students' books or folders, if desired.

Spend some time leading a whole class feedback, focussing on the above questions. Ensure students' knowledge is clear on this foundational information before moving on to distilling the information and considering how people were impacted by their encounter with Bergen-Belsen.

Activity Two: Reflecting on the Source Cards (30 minutes)

Part 1 (10 minutes)

- Explain to the groups that they will now think about how to organise and categorise their Source Cards in order to highlight common issues people faced and identify the impact encountering Bergen-Belsen had on people.
- Provide each group with a sheet of sugar paper, a set of Leader Cards (including blank cards if you decide to give your students the option of adding statements), blue tac and flip chart pens.
- Ask groups to affix their Leader Cards to their sugar paper, leaving enough space around each card to be able to add some Source Cards. The Leader Cards offer a range of statements; they contain either factual information or highlight people's responses.
- Students are then to select Source Cards that best illustrate or relate to the Leader Cards and position their selected cards around the Leader Cards. Using flip chart pens, encourage students to annotate and draw links between the Source Cards and the statements on the Leader cards. Perhaps the Source Cards link to more than one statement, perhaps students want to highlight particular points, draw inferences and connections or develop new statements (which they can write on blank Leader Cards).

Part 2 (10 minutes)

- Arrange a set of Leader Cards on a clear wall, ensuring enough space for students to add their selection of Source Cards.
- Ask groups to collect up their selected Source Cards from their tables and secure these cards on the wall, arranged around the Leader Cards.
- Encourage students to explore the whole wall and read any cards that they will not have seen in their groups.

Part 3 (10 minutes)

Once groups have looked at the Source Cards on the wall, draw out what the cards suggest about people's experiences. Discuss the similarities and differences between experiences. Discuss the connections, annotations and ideas students may have developed in Part 1 of the activity. Choose some cards to discuss in more detail and ask students to share something about the cards that have struck them.

Plenary (10 minutes)

End the lesson by asking the following questions:

- What do you now know about what happened at Bergen-Belsen between 15th April and 21st May 1945?
- What do you know about the experiences of people who worked at Bergen-Belsen during these dates?
- What do you know about how the experience of being at Bergen-Belsen affected the "liberators"?

Ask students to identify one card on the wall which resonates with them and they feel most clearly communicates the experiences of those tasked with the relief of Bergen-Belsen. Invite students to share their choice with the class.

Additional Information

Pedagogical guidance

The following guidance provides insight into the pedagogy of the lesson, highlights and offers commentary of some of the issues it surfaces or touches upon, and forwards practical suggestions for the classroom.

Engaging all learners

The following suggestions may be useful when planning the lesson:

- This lesson uses a range of materials; photographs, paintings and text, and is centred on group work. In order for all students to feel supported and to encourage group interaction, careful construction of the groups will be essential. Pairing confident readers with others less confident can help students when reading the text on the Source Cards 'Telling the story'.
- It is worth noting that in a group of five, each student will only have two Source Cards for which they are responsible when feeding back during the activity 'Exploring the Source Cards'. These could be two cards with text or a combination of a card with text and a card with an image. In some cases, students might work with two image cards. Therefore, whilst all students should be encouraged to contribute in their group's discussions, the amount of reading required can be increased or reduced as needed dependant on literacy levels.
- The choice of scribes for the activity 'Exploring the Source Cards' could be drawn from volunteers keen to undertake this role or students who are confident in representing their group's discussions in writing.
- Some of the Source Cards comprise transcripts of sound files from the Imperial War Museum or BBC sound archives (indicated on the relevant cards). Some students may find listening to these transcripts helpful whilst reading the cards. You can access these sound files by visiting: https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/the-liberation-of-bergen-belsen The recording of Richard Dimbleby's report can be found at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/archive/richard-dimbleby-describes-belsen/zvw7cqt

  Please be aware that only a brief transcribed extract from Dimbleby's broadcast appears on a Source Card and that the recording itself contains distressing material including description of cannibalism.

Bergen-Belsen at a moment in time

This lesson focuses on Bergen-Belsen from 15 April-21 May 1945. This charts the period from the day the British forces entered the camp until the camp was destroyed, after the survivors had been evacuated. It is this short few weeks that this lesson seeks to explore. This lesson does not cover the events that led up to the discovery of the camp nor how the conditions within came to be. It is important students appreciate that the conditions in Bergen-Belsen as of 15th April were the consequence of developments in the preceding 36 months. Meanwhile, the experiences of those "liberated" after 21st May were also shaped by the aftermath of the Second World War. The periods

before and after the events covered in this lesson are therefore of key importance and it is vital that this lesson is taught within the context of the wider history of the camp, and the Holocaust. To teach the broader history of the camp, before embarking on this material, please see the lesson, 'How did Bergen-Belsen become the "world of a nightmare"?' (The first lesson in this Chapter of the School Resources). For a historical overview of the camp please see 'Bergen-Belsen: A Short History for Teachers' (Chapter 2 in the School Resources).

Liberators and relief workers in focus

The study of Bergen-Belsen in the classroom serves educators a particular challenge. Upon entering the camp, British forces, relief workers, medics, clerics, journalists, photographers and artists faced unspeakable sights. This lesson introduces students to some of these men and women. Confronting an unexpected situation, ill-equipped, ill-experienced and understaffed, they sought to relieve the unimaginable suffering and stem raging typhus, at risk of infection themselves, all the while under enemy fire. Others recorded these events for history and sought to tell the world of what they had witnessed. The Source Cards present the photographs, art, reports and narratives of the work they undertook. Some accounts (age appropriate extracts) are derived from material created at the time, others are reminiscences spanning from a year through to many years later. Given the narratives are drawn from different periods of time it is necessary to consider this factor when examining the Source Cards. One might, for example, note the interplay of personal memory with national and collective memory; the collective memory of the liberation of Bergen-Belsen might be said to colour the memories of those who were there. Equally, encountering Bergen-Belsen and the ensuing trauma might have rendered the experience an unforgettable clarity. Material created at the time offers a snapshot of the events, whilst interviews conducted years later may offer additional reflections.

Different voices

Whilst it is the voices of survivors we are often most eager to hear, this lesson focuses on the experiences of those who entered the camp in April and early May 1945. The photographs on the Source Cards are clearly attributed to the photographers and on some, brief biographical information is provided with an image of the photographer, to offer students the chance to see the man behind the camera lens.

There are also several Source Cards comprising 'Dope' or caption sheets. These caption sheets summarise the contents of sets of photographs and provide detailed descriptions of what the photographers and filmmakers witnessed. These sheets give us the men's words, as well as the images they created, and offer some insight into their thinking and attitudes as they worked to document what they saw. In reading these caption sheets, students should be encouraged to think about the individuals making the images we see today.

Students might notice on one of the caption sheets, the mention of a 'Field Censor'. From this, students might infer a level of control regarding what was released. Indeed, it is important for students to consider the audience for whom the images were created. On the same caption sheet it is noted, 'it is to be requested by Field Marshall Montgomery and General Dempsey that these pictures receive the maximum publicity'. This indicates a clear desire that these images reach the British public. For further work on the issues surrounding how information about the camp was reported, and received, the assembly and tutor time material on 'Dimbleby's Dispatch 17 April 1945' is recommended (see the material in Chapters 5 and 6 of these School Resources).

It is important for students to know that those who filmed and photographed the liberation and subsequent relief effort at Bergen-Belsen faced significant 'emotional and psychological' challenges (Haggith, 2006: 98). Although the men in the Army Film and Photographic Unit (AFPU) were 'tough and battle-hardened' soldiers, 'this had not prepared them for the mounds of naked corpses, and the vast scale of suffering and death' (Haggith, 2006: 95) and the men were 'deeply troubled' by their first encounter with the camp (Haggith, 2006: 94).

As time went on, believing their work to be of value (Haggith, 2006: 98) and occupying themselves with the work in hand (Haggith, 2006: 99-100), individuals found ways of coping – including for some – a 'hardening' to get the job done and remain sane (Haggith, 2006: 100).

In turn, it is also important for students to consider the experiences of the artists as they worked to communicate the very essence of horror at Bergen-Belsen. Indeed, Doris Zinkeisen never recovered from her experiences. Describing the letters she wrote home, her son says,

> they reflect the agony she endured while doing her work as a war artist. She always told us that the sight was awful, but the smell she could never forget. She had nightmares for the rest of her life until she died (in Capet, 2006: 180).

The Source Cards also offer accounts from others such as Army personnel, medical staff, clerics and journalists. In doing so, this lesson presents significant challenges. Having engaged with the horrific conditions of the camp, students face the added difficulty of seeking to explore the trauma of the liberators and relief workers themselves. It is therefore imperative that enough time is given to discussion of these issues with students. Whilst inferences can be drawn from the Source Cards it is to be noted that students are not asked to speculate on the feelings of the people they are studying but to use the historical evidence to develop substantiated hypotheses regarding the impact of encountering Bergen-Belsen. In addition, students are not encouraged to imagine what they might have felt or how they might have responded in the same situation. For further guidance on teaching this difficult material please see the teacher guidelines, 'Pedagogical approaches to teaching about Bergen-Belsen' (Chapter 3 in these School Resources).

Whilst the focus of this lesson is on those who worked upon liberation of the camp, this in no way equates their traumatic experiences with the victims and survivors of the Holocaust. Neither does it imply that the survivors did not play the leading role in their recovery and in working towards building their lives anew after the Holocaust. It is recommended that students engage with the material to be found in the 'Bergen-Belsen survivors and the Forever project' (see the Renee's Story tab in the Resources Hub) to ensure that survivors' voices are still prominent in students' understanding of this history.

Images of Bergen-Belsen

The lesson employs a range of photographs and paintings. They have been chosen with the aim of balancing the twin responsibilities of duty of care to students in the classroom and fidelity to the past. We do not seek to sanitise the history but equally, material from Bergen-Belsen presents us with some of the most depraved recorded treatment of others at the hands of their captors. Haggith (2006: 89) notes, 'among the images of concentration camps most familiar to the general public, those taken at Belsen are some of the most grotesque and disturbing'. It is therefore vital that we tread cautiously into this territory. It is advised that teachers read the information provided on supporting students as

they engage with the history of Bergen-Belsen. Please see the teacher guidelines, 'Pedagogical approaches to teaching about Bergen-Belsen' (Chapter 3 in these School Resources).

Respect for victims and survivors has meant we have tried to ensure that the lesson material presents no humiliating images of individuals, and art work is employed to present perhaps the most challenging scenes. Photographs of bodies in mass graves have been avoided. The only photograph depicting such a pit is taken at a distance with the focus on a British Army chaplain, the bodies more difficult to discern than in other photographs that might have been used. The painting, 'One of the Death Pits, Belsen: SS Guards collecting Bodies', is instead used to relay such a scene. One might argue that this less stark approach might be easier to engage with in the classroom than a photograph of the same scene, although its horror is no less acute.

Haggith (2006: 96) explains that whilst their training was to prepare the men in the AFPU for 'battle photography', 'there were no official guidelines on filming military dead' and nothing to enable them for filming in the camps. They had therefore devised their own standards, 'enemy dead were filmed; badly wounded or dead Allied servicemen were not' and images of 'corpses of civilians or those in distress' were also not to be captured (Haggith, 2006: 96). However, filming and photography at Bergen-Belsen involved the crossing of significant professional boundaries. Haggith (2006: 93) notes that the showing of film from Bergen-Belsen has been criticised as it 'demeans and dehumanises Holocaust survivors'. He writes,

> There is also the danger that the viewer becomes brutalised by the endless views of naked, emaciated corpses, the anonymity of the bodies distancing us from what the Holocaust meant in human terms. Inevitably, the cameramen have been blamed for contributing to these distortions, by concentrating on images from the dead and losing sight of the individual in the urge to prove the grotesque scale of suffering. There is also an implied criticism that they acted callously when filming the helpless inmates, transgressing taboos about the portrayal of the dead and the human body and showing little respect for their subjects (Haggith, 2006: 93).

Research by Haggith and others however has 'led to a more sympathetic assessment of the AFPU's cameramen' (Haggith, 2006: 93). Haggith acknowledges the men's appreciation of the individuals they were filming and photographing (Haggith, 2006: 107) and of their awareness of the survivors', more often than not, Jewish identity (Haggith, 2006: 109), which was often 'downplay[ed]' in the newsreels (Haggith, 2006: 93).

Before moving to consider the art produced at Bergen-Belsen, it is important to acknowledge the manufactured nature of the film and photographs. Images were composed (Haggith, 2006: 103-107) but it is crucial for students to understand that scenes with survivors were not staged – as with some liberation scenes in other camps (Haggith, 2006:100). Haggith (2006: 100) refutes any suggestion that this might be the case, arguing, 'under the extreme conditions at Belsen the idea that any of the scenes could have been faked or restaged for the camera is preposterous'.

Meanwhile, Capet (2006: 170-171) acknowledges the manufactured nature of photographs and film but recognises that the notion the "'camera does not lie'" has led to the belief that 'a photograph will always be a more reliable source of information than a drawing or painting'. He argues that the memory of Bergen-Belsen has been shaped by – among others – photographers and filmmakers, but

that artists have been excluded from this process. He posits the reason for this absence is the 'works of art are deemed to be too demanding for general educational use' (Capet, 2006: 182).

Capet (2006) discusses three paintings in particular, noting 'it is obvious that the three paintings examined here are too shocking and graphic to be casually included in school textbooks' (Capet, 2006: 182). The three he describes in detail are,

- 'One of the Death Pits, Belsen: SS Guards collecting Bodies' by Leslie Cole
- 'Belsen Camp: The Compound for Women' by Leslie Cole
- 'Belsen: April 1945' by Doris Zinkeisen

These are all included – although certainly not 'casually' – in the teaching material for this lesson. Teachers can work with students to unpack the images. Discussion could focus on the composition of scenes and choice of colours, for example in the painting 'One of the Death Pits', Cole composes the scene 'with the centre and foreground describing exactly what his title suggests, while the upper part constitutes the literal, physical background' (Capet, 2006: 176). Meanwhile the colours are muted and drab, 'the skies extremely menacing' (Capet, 2006: 177). This 'same choice of colours … only there is even less light' is used in his work 'Belsen Camp' (Capet, 2006: 179). 'Dark' colours, 'with very small relieving touches of light grey, once more suggesting smoke', are also to be found in 'Belsen: April 1945' by Zinkeisen (Capet, 2006: 181).

Analysis of these paintings to uncover key aspects of the liberation of Bergen-Belsen can be an important pursuit, but the horror of these artworks is unmistakable. The bodies in 'Belsen: April 1945' present us with 'distortions … the result of deliberate starvation by the Nazis' (Capet, 2006: 181) whilst the women in 'Belsen Camp' are contorted by illness, starvation and despair. Students are faced with a painful choice, that of viewing these desperate images in their totality, perhaps blurring the individual, or focussing on one face, one body, one life, and potentially denying the vastness of the suffering. Viewing 'One of the Death Pits', Capet (2006: 178) puts it,

> The viewer seems to be in a no-win situation: either he only considers the global scene, laying himself open to the accusation of callousness or he starts to consider the individual bodies, trying to imagine their life stories – including, of course, the circumstances of their death – and may feel that he is intruding into their privacy.

The decision to include these significant but graphic artworks in this lesson cannot be taken lightly, as Capet (2006: 182) reminds us,

> the paintings of Leslie Cole and Doris Zinkeisen … are on possibly the most "disturbing" subject of twentieth-century history and cannot leave even the dispassionate historian emotionally unaffected. The impact they have had on the few privileged people who have seen them paradoxically prevents them from having a wider impact among the general public.

So, are they 'too demanding', requiring sound historical knowledge to make sense of them and 'too shocking' to use in the classroom (Capet, 2006: 182)? Or are they crucial in understanding the liberation of Bergen-Belsen and it is 'remarkable that visual testimonies of such importance should continue to be neglected as aids in Holocaust education' (Capet, 2006: 182)?

Researchers for the 2016 report (Foster *et al*.) 'What do students know and understand about the Holocaust?' asked a small sample of students what they thought about the use of atrocity images in their classroom. Whilst the discussion focussed on photographs rather than paintings, the issues raised are similar.

> In summary, most students appeared to welcome the opportunity to examine archival images in class and took exception to the possibility that teachers may avoid using them in order to shield them from the disturbing reality of the Holocaust. They were, in the main, insistent on the importance of using the archive imagery in class in spite of the emotional unease that such images can arouse, emphasising their critical role in helping grasp a sense of the reality of the Holocaust.
>
> Students demonstrated sensitivity and concern in relation to the question of responsibility to the individuals captured in the photos in terms of dignifying their memory and whether, with this concern in mind, classroom use of atrocity images was appropriate. Students wrestled with this dilemma but a significant number felt that the educational weight of the images assuaged any possible ethical wrongdoing to the memory of the victims depicted. Indeed, it was felt that such engagement with the images is, in itself, an empowering memorial. The conversations were evidence of the maturity in young people's critical thinking (Foster *et al*., 2016: 95-96).

Whilst some students feel ready to engage with atrocity images, teachers, unlike their students, have a duty of care to everyone in their classroom.

Although the report does not conclude 'by arguing for or against the use of atrocity images' when teaching about the Holocaust, 'the interviews conducted with young people do raise some important pedagogic questions' (Foster *et al*., 2016: 96), outlined as follows,

- Do atrocity images of the Holocaust have a legitimate place in young people's learning?
- Do young people have the right to see such important archival representation as evidence of the Holocaust?
- Do such images provide a vital tool in developing consciousness of the reality of the Holocaust?
- Should the classroom use of such images be negotiated with students rather than simply presented or not presented to them?
- Might young people be more resilient to the potential negative effects of atrocity imagery than is generally attributed to them?
- Are there strategies that teachers can employ to support young people in engaging sensitively with images of brutality and death?
- If they avoid the use of Holocaust imagery, are teachers missing the opportunity to help young people through their encounters with images which they are likely, in all probability, to meet outside the classroom without the aid of structured framing or support?

Alcohol and mental health

Further challenges posed by this lesson might be less obvious but are equally apposite.

Whilst some of the cards depict atrocity images or provide graphic descriptions of suffering, other more seemingly benign cards may trouble students and teachers in a different way. For example, one of the cards contains the following:

> It was not a party but damned hard work which those meetings produced. I am very certain that it was the very considerable quantities of liquor that we got through at those meetings that kept those of us who were responsible for the administration of the place from going as mad as most of the internees in the Horror Camp.
>
> Mervyn Willet Gonin 1945-1946.
> IWM Document archive 85/38/1

For fear of tarnishing the reputation of those described in the text, deciding to include this extract – describing heavy drinking – in the lesson has been difficult. However, given that the aim of this lesson is to acknowledge the overwhelming demands made on those seeking to relieve the suffering at Bergen-Belsen, alongside their humanity, the text remains.

A key question is how students might relate to it. Firstly, we have the issue of adults using alcohol to survive a difficult situation and manage their feelings. Whilst the context is extreme, teachers might find this card generates discussion about the fragile control most, if not all, adults have over aspects of their everyday lived experiences. Secondly, it may be that students themselves struggle with the use of alcohol or they have family members who have a difficult relationship with alcohol or controlled substances. With this in mind, it may be helpful to discuss this material with the school's Designated Safeguarding Lead before teaching this lesson.

Meanwhile, other cards mention feelings of anger and make reference to mental health. It will be important to allow students time and space to process their reading about how these adults coped with their feelings. Given that this lesson asks for empathy, students should be encouraged to approach this material with sensitivity and likewise will benefit from a sensitive classroom climate.

For further pedagogical guidance on approaching the use of difficult material in the classroom and duty of care, please see the teacher guidelines, 'Pedagogical approaches to teaching about Bergen-Belsen' (Chapter 3 in these School Resources).

Historical context

For a more comprehensive historical overview of the camp please see 'Bergen-Belsen: A Short History for Teachers' (Chapter 2 in these School Resources).

To teach the broader history of the camp, before embarking on this material, please see the lesson, 'How did Bergen-Belsen become the "world of a nightmare"?' (the first lesson in Chapter 4 in these School Resources).

For a general overview of the liberation of the camp please visit: https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/the-liberation-of-bergen-belsen

For a detailed, day-by-day timeline from 15 April – 21 May 1945 please visit http://bergenbelsen.co.uk/pages/Timeline/Timeline1945After.html

The following outlines key information pertinent to this lesson

The Army Film and Photographic Unit (AFPU)

The AFPU was instituted in October 1941 (Gladstone, 2002: 316). Haggith (2006: 97) explains that 'although members of the AFPU were encouraged to produce footage suitable for the commercial newsreels, their primary role was to compile a historical record of Britain's armed forces'. Meanwhile, Gladstone has argued (2002: 329) that even though film and photography had been used as 'weapons' in the First World War, 'the creation of the Army Film and Photographic Unit was mainly a belated reaction to German film propaganda during the first two years of the Second World War'. The men were to be 'recruited directly from within the Army and would be appointed as sergeant cameramen or sergeant photographers' (Gladstone, 2002: 323).

The AFPU consisted of four sections, No 5 in North West Europe covering the liberation of Bergen-Belsen. The sections worked 'broadly based on the principles first implemented in the Middle East' set out in a Middle East General Order (Gladstone, 2002: 324-5),

> The primary object of this Unit is to obtain records of the battle; material thus produced will be used for both publicity purposes and for War Office use. It is hoped by this means to obtain valuable publicity for the work and daily life of the Army and to counteract the propaganda of the enemy …
>
> The photographers are in no sense civilians but should be regarded as military personnel armed with cameras. They will be trained in the principles of warfare and in the tactics and formation of units in action and in how to use their cameras to the best advantage.

War artists

The works of Leslie Cole, Doris Zinkeisen and Eric Taylor feature in this lesson.

- Eric Taylor (1909-1999) enlisted in the British army in 1939. Whilst not salaried as an Official War Artist, he sketched when time allowed. His work was bought by the War Artists Advisory Committee.
- Artist and teacher, Leslie Cole (1910-1976) worked as an Official War Artist. With a 'background in the decorative arts, as a mural decorator and fabric painter', Cole worked for the War Artists Advisory Committee from 1941 (Capet, 2006: 174).
- Doris Zinkeisen (1898-1991) painted as an Official War Artist to record the work of the British Red Cross Society and the Order of St John, in addition to working as a nurse. Born in Scotland, before the war she attended the Royal Academy and was a theatre costume designer (Capet, 2006: 179).

Typhus

Typhus symptoms include, 'headache, fever, nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea, dry cough, tummy pain, joint pain and backache' (NHS, n/d). Stopping the spread of typhus and treating those infected was a key concern of Lieutenant-Colonel M.W. Gonin, commanding officer, 11 Light Field Ambulance, Royal

Army Medical Corps (Flanagan and Bloxham, 2005: 23). In the following extract he describes how the disease was spread,

> Typhus is produced by an infected louse. The louse lives on human blood and it is only the faeces of the infected louse which gets into the bloodstream of the patient through the puncture wound of the hungry louse that causes the disease. It can, however, also be contracted by breathing into the lungs dust consisting of the louse faeces. It was by this method that the men of my unit caught the disease after working in the horror camp.
>
> Documents/Private Papers. Doc.3713 written 1945-1946
> IWM Document archive 85/38/1

Historical context – The medical relief effort

On 12th April, a truce was agreed between *Wehrmacht* officers and the 11th Armoured Division of the British Army. Informing the British of a typhus epidemic, they advised that a neutral zone be set up to stem any spread. On 15th April Brigadier H.L. Glyn Hughes (the Deputy Director of Medical Services) inspected the camp (Shepherd, 2006: 36).

Hughes discovered approximately 60,000-65,000 people across two sites. The original camp (Camp 1) – comprising camps within the camp, held 40,000-45,000 prisoners. Typhus, starvation and dysentery abounded and thousands of unburied bodies lay around. Another 15,000 prisoners were found at the second site (Camp 2). Typhus, however, had not spread to this number (Shepherd, 2006: 36).

On the 16th April, Army rations were distributed, a spate of problems stalling the initial plan to provide soup. These rations, too rich for the tender stomachs of those starved for so long, caused further problems and 'some 2,000 people perished because of being given inappropriate food' (Shepherd, 2006: 37). It would take several weeks to establish a suitable dietary protocol.

It was decided to move those considered likely to recover to a makeshift hospital (Camp 2) and leave others deemed beyond saving to their fate (Shepherd, 2006: 36). With the war continuing around them, available Army resources were few. Understaffed and under-resourced, the medical relief effort started on 18th April (Shepherd, 2006: 36).

Shepherd (2006: 37) has divided the 'acute' period of the medical relief effort into four phases:

Week 1 18-23 April

Inadequate resources, 'a divided chain of command', 'turnover of personnel', 'lack of experience in dealing with such situations' and 'a war-weariness among British soldiers and officers, a feeling of disbelief that this crowning horror should be added to all the others they had seen in the war' (Shepherd, 2006: 38), marked the first week. On 21 April evacuation of Camp 1 via the 'human laundry' to the makeshift hospital in Camp 2 began, whilst the bodies of the dead were taken to mass grave pits (Shepherd, 2006: 37).

Week 2 23 April-2 May

The second week saw improvements. Burying of the dead was completed, and the first evacuations of former prisoners took place (Shepherd, 2006: 39). Medical personnel also arrived, such as British aid workers for the Red Cross and experts in typhus and nutrition. In dealing with typhus, the outstanding

Captain Davis led the work (Shepherd, 2006: 40). By 'promoting [British soldiers] to supervisory positions while getting Hungarians and Poles to do the [DDT] spraying', Davis effectively managed the apprehension of British soldiers working in Camp 1 (Shepherd, 2006: 40). This resulted in the epidemic being under control by 21 May (Shepherd, 2006: 40). However, Shepherd highlights that parallel strategies to deal with starvation, diarrhoea and tuberculosis were marred by incompetence (2006: 40-41).

Week 3 3-10 May

In the third week, 96 medical students arrived from London hospitals. With Hungarian soldiers as support, these men worked in Camp 1. They ensured the fairer distribution of food and provided limited medical attention (Shepherd, 2006: 42). There was mixed success; the death toll began to decline but the food mixture and other measures proved problematic and some students fell ill themselves (Shepherd, 2006: 42-43). Shepherd (2006: 43) notes however, that whilst the work of the medical students 'is one of the epics of British medicine', the DDT spraying programme under Captain Davis undoubtedly led to the improving situation.

A perhaps startling development was the arrival of German doctors (PoWs) and nurses 'often to a violently hostile reception from the patients' (Shepherd, 2006: 43). Within a short time however, patients adapted, and the staff apparently 'worked harder than anyone' (Shepherd, 2006: 43).

With the war in Europe ending May 8, 1945, further support and supplies began to reach Bergen-Belsen.

Week 4 11-21 May

By 20th May all survivors had been evacuated from Camp 1 and Camp 2 had been 'turned into the largest hospital in Europe' (Shepherd, 2006: 44). On 21st May, the last hut in Camp 1 was burnt down. Shepherd (2006: 45) remarks, 'the medical operation at Belsen did not end on 21 May; indeed, for some inmates, it never ended … but by 21 May the bulk of the recorded deaths had taken place'.

Hindsight would suggest that mistakes were made, certainly Cesarani (2006: 3) acknowledges, 'it is well known that 14,000 people died in the camp after the liberation and that at least 2,000 died because they were given the wrong type of food by well-meaning British soldiers who intended merely to alleviate their starvation'. But Shepherd argues, 'in judging this kind of operation, the historian has, I believe, to give much more credit for what was done than discredit for what was not done' (Shepherd, 2006: 45).

The above overview of the medical relief effort is a summary of the 2006 chapter by Ben Shepherd, 'The Medical Relief at Belsen'. In S. Bardgett and D. Cesarani (Eds), Belsen 1945: New historical perspectives (pp. 31-50). London: Vallentine Mitchell. With kind permission from Vallentine Mitchell publishers.

Acknowledgements and references

Activity 2 is based on an approach developed for a lesson on the topic of the 'Holocaust by Bullets' in partnership with Imperial War Museum, London.

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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