
How did the British deal with the perpetrators at Bergen-Belsen?

BELSEN

80

Key Question: How did the British deal with the perpetrators at Bergen-Belsen?

Teaching Aims & Learning Objectives

- To be able to describe how the British treated the perpetrators of Bergen-Belsen after liberation.
- To be able to start to understand how the way the perpetrators were treated was influenced by the context of the still on-going conflict, an emerging policy of 'denazification' and a search for a meaningful 'justice'.

Rationale

When the British arrived at Bergen-Belsen on the 15th April 1945 they witnessed a site of horror: dead and emaciated bodies filled the barracks in a space that had reached crisis point. Some 37,000 had perished there, and around 13,000 would die in the weeks to come, mostly from starvation and typhus. As well as tending for the dead and survivors in the immediate aftermath, one of the key issues that confronted the British was what to do with the perpetrators.

Students are notably curious to know what became of the perpetrators at Belsen. This lesson therefore allows students to get a sense of who some of the key perpetrators were, what they were charged with, what some of the evidence from the trial – both for the defence and prosecution – revealed. At the end of the lesson students are invited to reflect on the extent to which the judicial process and sentences they received were a 'just' response. It also gives an insight into how some of the minor functionaries in the camp, as well as Germans in the surrounding area, were treated in the context of an emerging policy of denazification.

Key Information

- The lesson is intended for Year 8 students and above. It is specifically devised for History and Citizenship classes.
- This is the fourth in a chronological sequence of four lessons exploring issues around the liberation of Belsen. It is assumed students will be familiar in particular with conditions within the camp at the point of liberation, as well as the broader chronology of the progression of the war. By building on this context students will be able to progress in their understanding of the how the British dealt with the perpetrators.
- You will need the following accompanying resources;
 - PowerPoint
 - The ability to play two clips of film from British Pathé on 'Concentration Camp Atrocities: Interviews at Bergen-Belsen (1945)' and 'The Belsen Trial'
 - Source cards for 3 of the accused: Josef Kramer, Irma Grese and Dr. Fritz Klein. 1 set per each group of 3 students
 - 'Table of the Accused' from the UN War Crimes Commission. 1 per group.
 - Material to support teacher knowledge is included at the end of these lesson plans.

Overview

This overview is based on a single one-hour lesson.

- 1) 'What is happening?' (Dr Fritz Klein at Bergen-Belsen) (10 mins)
- 2) Pre-trial British responses (10 mins)
- 3) Introducing and Contextualising the Belsen Trial (10 mins)
 - 'What would it take for justice to happen?'
 - 'The Charge'
 - British Pathe newsreel film
- 4) 'The Accused' case studies: Group work and plenary (20 mins)
- 5) Reflection: 'Was justice done?' (10 mins)

Lesson Plan

1) What is happening? (10 mins) (slides 1 & 2)

Show students slide 1. It tells students that they are going to watch a brief, minute-long film clip. As they watch they have 3 things to think about and feedback afterwards;

- **The person:** What language are they speaking in? How are they dressed? Who might this person be?
- **The place:** Where are they? Why might they be in this place?
- **The film:** Who is filming? Why might this film be being made?

Now show the film clip. Start at 00:00 and end at 00:58.

As students feedback their ideas you can reveal to them that;

- The person speaking is Dr Fritz Klein. He arrived at Belsen from Auschwitz-Birkenau on the 15th December 1944 as an SS Doctor. He is speaking in German. Although he was identified as an ethnic German, he was actually born in Romania and went to University in Hungary. Students may comment on whether his clothes look like those of a doctor, and why this might be.
- This is in Bergen-Belsen shortly after liberation. Dr Klein is standing by one of the large pits that had been dug for mass burial.
- This is an extract from a British Pathé newsreel film. The purpose of films such as this was to visualise Nazi crimes for the public, both in Britain and in Germany. In doing so, it can be considered a form of testimony and witnessing, at a time where there was a need to evidence crimes before the Belsen Trial.

Now show slide 3, which links the film clip to the main issue which students will be investigating this lesson; 'How did the British deal with the perpetrators at Bergen-Belsen?'

Tell students that Dr Fritz Klein was just one of 45 officials who worked in Belsen who were defendants at the Belsen Trial which ran from 17th September 1945 to the 17th November 1945.

2) Pre-trial British responses (10 minutes) (slides 5, 6 & 7)

Show students the following 3 slides. For each one ask them;

- What can you see?
- What do they think is happening?
- What caption could you provide for each photograph?

Each slide also has a clue text box that can appear on the slide to help students identify what is happening and make inferences;

The **captions** for each photograph read;

- **Slide 5** shows 'Former prisoners watch German SS guards load a lorry with bodies of the dead as British Army officers lead German civilians around the camp, forcing them to bear witness to the crimes of the regime, April 1945.' (IWM)
- **Slide 6** shows 'Former female camp guards and German mayors from surrounding towns are forced to view mass graves in Bergen-Belsen concentration camp.' (USHMM)
- **Slide 7** shows Joseph Kramer, the Commandant of Belsen. He is wearing irons at Belsen before being removed to the PoW cage at Celle.

If helpful for students, you can also project the following 'clues' which will provide a small amount of context and help direct their questioning of each photograph.

The **clues** for each photograph read;

- **Slide 5** What are the SS guards in the truck being made to do, and why? Why are local German civilians being made to watch?
- **Slide 6** There are 3 groups of people in the photo; female guards, local mayors and British soldiers. What might the soldiers make them look at, and why?
- **Slide 7** This is Josef Kramer, Commandant of Bergen-Belsen, and formerly Auschwitz. In what way is he being treated differently to the SS guards? Why might this be?

The purpose of each of these photographs is to show the ways in which the British, in the aftermath of liberation, ensured both those who worked in the camp, and those who lived in the local area, bore witness to the crimes that had been committed in the camp. The SS guards, except Kramer, were sent out to work collecting the corpses and taking them to pits dug by a bulldozer provided by the Royal Engineers. Kramer was treated differently by being kept in prison until the Belsen Trial.

Ask students;

- Why did the British do this?

- Is this a way of ensuring 'justice' is done? If so, how, and if not, why not?

Depending on the group, you may wish to explore this further with them. You could, for instance, introduce here the idea of different degrees of responsibility. Ask students;

- As Commandant of the camp, should Kramer be held more accountable than other who worked there?
- Should civilians who lived around the camp bear any degree of responsibility?
- Ultimately, what are the limits of responsibility? Who can be included or excluded?

3) Introducing and contextualising the Belsen Trial (10 minutes)

a) The Charge (slide 8)

This is briefly given to students so they are familiar with what the perpetrators at the trial were accused of. This will help them make a judgement on how the evidence presented addresses the charges. The key things to emphasise with students are;

- The perpetrators were being accused of 'war crimes.'
- As so many had come from Auschwitz-Birkenau, they were being tried on two counts; crimes committed at Bergen-Belsen and crimes committed at Auschwitz-Birkenau.
- 'War crimes' in both camps consisted in essence of the ill-treatment and ultimate death of a number of named and unnamed inmates.

b) British Pathé newsreel: 'The Belsen Trial' (slide 9)

Show students this film clip. It lasts 01:37 minutes.

It can be accessed at <https://www.britishpathe.com/video/the-belsen-trial-aka-belson-trial>

There is a transcript of the film in the Additional Information section.

The film serves as an introduction to the Belsen Trial. Make sure, though, that students are aware that this is a constructed narrative for a specifically British audience back home. In terms of the trial being impartial, invite students to reflect on the language used in the voiceover and the extent the film is objective. Words and phrases such as describing Kramer as 'the Beast of Belsen,' and asking rhetorically whether in the future Germans may "mistake fairness for weakness", are used in the film and can invite comment. Students may also comment on the way the soundtrack to the film helps shape the British interpretation of the Belsen Trial.

4) The Accused case studies: group work and plenary (20 minutes) (slides 10-18)

Ask students to sit in groups of 3.

Each student is given a case study card of a perpetrator who was brought to trial at Belsen in later 1945. There are 3 different case studies, and 2 cards that go with each individual.

Each group is also given a copy of the 'Table of the Accused' from the trial records. The 3 case studies of perpetrators are all highlighted with a red dot on the trial records.

As a group tell them to read about each of their 3 case studies, see what their charges, verdicts and sentences were, and consider in light of the evidence whether they had committed a war crime. Remind students that only a small amount of the large wealth of evidence available can be selected for each card, but that at least each will indicate a sense some of the nature of, and some of the issues around, the evidence presented to the court.

Give students 10 minutes to look and discuss, and be prepared to feedback to the rest of the class.

Most of the sources have additional text boxes next to them to help support some students in understanding some fundamental points in each source. They can also gain a richer understanding by engaging with original sources themselves.

Context and background information about each of the 3 perpetrators is included in the Additional Information section of this lesson plan.

Amongst some of the points that can emerge in the plenary, you may wish to emphasise;

- Whilst Kramer was ultimately responsible for what happened in the camp, the defence argued in mitigation that Kramer didn't flee when the British came (as all Commandants of camps had previously done), that he was 'just carrying out orders' in a context where there is a 'fundamental German principle that orders are given to obey,' and that unlike British officers, Kramer hadn't been brought up to take as much responsibility for his actions, and where the "mind of the German" is one where "humanity is lost sight of."
- A Polish Jewish eyewitness from both Auschwitz-Birkenau and Belsen, describing Irma Grese at the trial, said 'I have seen this woman commit many acts of brutality,' Grese was one of only 3 female guards who received a death sentence, from a total of 16 who were charged on counts that were just as serious as Grese's. According to The Times, as the verdicts were read, she was the only defendant to remain defiant.
- Dr Fritz Klein was an educated man, who has studied medicine in a non-German university (University of Budapest, Hungary). In his responses to cross-examination he admitted realising that the gassing of inmates at Auschwitz was an instance of mass murder. He also said that when patients arrived in hospital who had been beaten by the kapos or SS, he complained about it to his superiors, but when the SS or kapos asked him not to report them and to keep quiet, he did so.

5) Reflection: How did the British deal with the perpetrators? Was 'justice' done? (10 minutes)

What does justice look like? (slides 19 & 20)

Show students slide 19. Ask them the following, using a think-pair-share process;

- What do you think you are looking at?

- What symbols do you notice in the statue? (highlight the blindfold, scales and sword)
- What statement is being made about the sort of justice that might be desirable?

Introduce the idea that statue introduces the idea of how we might think about justice when considering whether justice was done at Bergen-Belsen. This is a visual way of thinking about what justice might 'look like'

The statue is a representation of 'Lady Justice'. For additional information about it, and the symbolism behind it, see the Additional Information section towards the end of this lesson plan.

Final reflection questions (slide 21)

Show students slide 21, which contains 2 reflection questions;

- So how did the British deal with the perpetrators at Bergen-Belsen after April 15th, 1945?
- Was 'justice' done at the Belsen Trial?

Using think-pair-share, invite students to share their reflections. The first question is the key inquiry question for this lesson. The second extends it further to encourage students to start opening up thinking about notions of justice, and the extent to which the Belsen Trial was a 'just' trial. In doing so, You might encourage students to reflect on the following;

- The statue of Lady Justice suggests what justice might look. (neutrality, impartiality, objectivity, reasoning etc). To what extent do you think the Belsen Trial succeeded in this? How can you tell?
- Before the trial, prisoners such as Dr Fritz Klein were forced to bury bodies, and local mayors were brought to the camp by the British to witness the scenes. Was this justice? Or revenge? To what extent does this reflect a policy of 'denazification'?
- These events occurred at a particular time: Britain and her Allies had spent the last six years fighting a protracted and exhausting war, the outcome of which was often uncertain, and suffered high casualties. The crimes committed by the Nazis and others were beyond anything that had ever been witnessed in continental Europe before. How might this have influenced proceedings at the Belsen Trial?

Additional Information

Engaging all learners

This resource is intended to be accessible for a wide range of different learners. To this end, it;

- Uses a variety of different types of source material: photographs, film, and text-based documents.
- Is selective about the amount of text students are presented with: enough text is given for students to gain significant knowledge and understanding of events, without feeling swamped or overwhelmed with text.
- Key words in the text of the sources are explained (e.g. 'Apel' slide 14; and 'kapo' in slide 15) to support literacy.
- Most sources on the 'Accused cards' (slides 12-17) have summary text boxes next to them to help direct students towards some of the most salient points in the sources, whilst the original sources are still shown should students wish to read further.
- Each of the pre-trial photographs (slides 5-7) has a 'clue' text box to give a small amount of context and to help prompt students in their looking
- Uses visual cues from the photograph of 'Lady Justice' to encourage students to reflect on the symbolism used and how it relates to notions of justice. This is accessible for all students.
- Within the hour lesson there are a variety of modes of instruction, from teacher-led, to individual reflection and group social constructivist learning, to help meet the needs of different learners

Historical Overview

Please see *Bergen-Belsen: A Short History for Teachers* (Chapter 2 of these School Resources) for the history of the camp and for an overview of the Belsen trials.

'The Belsen Trial' British Pathé Newsreel transcript (slide 9)

'Justice on the British model is given to those who had other ideas of how prisoners should be treated. The Belsen war criminals arrive at Lüneberg trial. Their faces give little clue to what they're thinking. Last out of the lorry is Josef Kramer, the 'Beast of Belsen.' The calm orderliness of the scene contrasts violently with the ghastly pictures which shocked the country when they were shown in British newsreels. Our cameraman Kenneth Gordon covers the opening scenes of the trial. Kramer's chief woman assistance, Irme Grese, wears the curls. Major General Bernie Ticklin presides over the court, and the prisoners have been provided with Allied officers as defence council. Each prisoner wears a number for identification purposes, though the cards were taken off at a later stage of the trial. Next to Kramer sits Doctor Fritz Klein, German medical officer at Belsen: a man with a loaded conscience. Chief sadist among the women, Irma Grese, number 9, sobbed her way impassively through the long tale of horror. After 12 years of Nazi thuggery, one wonders what the Germans think of British justice. They may well mistake fairness for weakness.'

Tony Kushner comments on the way some of the key perpetrators were portrayed in the British media. He explains how 'Kramer, the "Beast of Belsen" was depicted as a shambling gorilla – with Irma perceived as the evil results of the Nazi regime and dismissed as typical.' He goes on to explain how "some comfort could be found in the idea that those involved were somehow abnormal, social and psychological misfits."

Historical context to the 4 case studies of 'The Accused' (slides 11-16)

Josef Kramer

Josef Kramer was formerly Commandant of Auschwitz-Birkenau from 8th May to the 25th November 1944, and then of Bergen-Belsen from December 1944 to its liberation on 15th April 1945.

He was the only SS Commandant not to flee their camp before the Allies arrived. The majority of the SS had already fled on 13th April, but Kramer stayed together with 80 warders. He delivered a report on the numbers of internees in the camp, and then stayed with the British as they conducted an initial tour of the site, at which point they started to realise the full extent of the horrors that greeted them.

The extract on the case study comes from part of a deposition given by Major Winwood, Kramer's defence attorney, at the trial, on the 10th October, 1945. As his defence attorney, Winwood constructs a case for mitigating Kramer's sentence. The source extract reveals that this is predicated on the following lines of argument;

- That Kramer was just carrying out the orders he was given: there is a 'fundamental German principle that orders are given to obey,' which meant there was no room for his own 'personal feelings' in the matter.
- Inherently, British officers hold a greater degree of responsibility and have 'been brought up to consider the principles of tolerance, kindness, and the rule of fair justice.' In contrast, this is not something that German officers such as Kramer have experienced.
- Making a similar distinction, Major Winwood asserts that 'the mind of the German... is drilled into one particular channel and the broad view of humanity is lost sight of.'
- In his defence, Major Winwood also notes that despite the fact that 'his superiors had washed their hands of him. Yet he stayed there until the last moment to face the music when he, like many of the SS men, could forsaken Belsen have fled.'

Students could be invited to consider the credibility of these lines of defence, and the extent to which, in a broader sense, they reflect 'justice' being done.

The 'Table of the Accused' reveals that Kramer was found guilty of both charges (war crimes committed in both Auschwitz-Birkenau and Bergen) and was sentenced to death by hanging.

Irma Grese

Iram Grese was warden of the women's section of Bergen-Belsen. Previously she had been an SS guard at the Nazi concentration camps of Ravensbrück and Auschwitz-Birkenau, where she participated in selections for the gas chambers. The inmates had given her the nickname of 'the Hyena of Auschwitz.' She arrived at Belsen in March 1945 with a large number of inmates from Ravensbrück.

The evidence presented to the court comes from Gitla Dunkelmann, a Polish Jew who witnessed Grese's actions at Auschwitz and then recognised her again at Belsen. In her statement she said;

- 'I have seen this woman commit many acts of brutality'
- 'I have seen her strike women about the face and body with a rubber truncheon and kick them'
- 'If a person collapsed out of weakness she would kick or beat them'
- 'She was the worst of the women SS'

The 'Table of the Accused' reveals that Grese was found guilty of both charges (war crimes committed in both Auschwitz-Birkenau and Bergen) and was sentenced to death by hanging. She was one of only 3 female guards sentenced to death, although many of the others faced charges just as serious as hers. As the verdicts were read, The Times reported that she was the only defendant to remain defiant.

Dr. Fritz Klein

Born in what is now Romania, Klein was considered an 'ethnic German' and was drafted into the German army. He served as a doctor in the women's camp, and then the 'gypsy camp' at Auschwitz-Birkenau from the 15th December, 1943. He participated in a number of selections. In January 1945 he was eventually transferred to Belsen. After the British arrived he was imprisoned and forced to bury the dead in mass graves.

The extract provided is from a cross-examination by Colonel Backhouse. From this interview, Colonel Backhouse establishes that;

- Klein was an educated man, and educated in a non-German university (he studied medicine at the University of Budapest)
- He realised that those being killed in gas chambers at Auschwitz was a case of mass murder
- He had not personally witnessed any beatings, but in hospital he received a number of patients who had been beaten by the SS
- He complained about the beating to his superiors, but when asked by some of the kapos or SS not to report what they had done, he agreed not to and kept quiet.

The 'Table of the Accused' reveals that Klein was found guilty of both charges (war crimes committed in both Auschwitz-Birkenau and Bergen) and was sentenced to death by hanging.

'Lady Justice' (slide 19)

There are 3 symbols on the statue you should direct your students towards, and then identify as a whole what the statue represents;

The blindfold.

The blindfold represents the idea that justice is 'blind.' Sometimes the statue is literally shown without eyes rather than blindfolded. This is symbolic of the fact that justice isn't based on appearances, but is objective, unbiased and impartial. She uses reason rather than senses to come to a decision. The idea of the blindfold was adopted in the fifteenth century; in Roman times forms of justice had open eyes.

The Scales.

The Scales of Justice represent the idea that justice accounts for both sides of a story, as well as symbolising objectivity – that justice results from the relative ‘weight’ of the evidence presented at trial. The scales are said to date back to the Egyptian goddess Ma’at, the goddess of justice.

The Sword

The sword represents power in two senses of the word;

- The power of Reason against any physical power. This power comes from the people, who have consented as a society that the nature of the law is what is desired to be carried out
- The sword is double-edged. This means that Reason is impartial as it can be used for or against anyone.

The statue also shows that the sword is subservient to justice, rather than the other way round, and that the power must be used judiciously rather than indiscriminately

Ultimately, the statue as an entirety represents the idea of neutrality – that justice should always be an impartial exercise of the power of Reason. In the context of the Belsen trial in particular, you can use this concept as a starting point for encouraging students to reflect on the extent to which the trial may be said to be objective and impartial, both in its aspiration and its reality.

References

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

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

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

Wachsmann, N. (2015) *KL: A History of the Nazi Concentration Camps*. London: Abacus.

Credits:

Slide 2

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ep3QkJTKqrE&t=75s>

Concentration Camp Atrocities: Interviews at Bergen-Belsen (1945) | British Pathé

Slide 5

Imperial War Museum: ‘Former prisoners watch German SS guards load a lorry with bodies of the dead as British Army officers lead German civilians around the camp, forcing them to bear witness to the crimes of the regime, April 1945. © IWM (BU 4255)

Slide 6

USHMNN: ‘Former female camp guards and German mayors from surrounding towns are forced to view mass graves in Bergen-Belsen concentration camp.’ USHMM Photograph Number: 78248

Slide 7

Imperial War Museum: ‘Josef Kramer, Camp Commandant, photographed in irons at Belsen before being removed to the POW cage at Celle. He was tried and executed for war crimes in December 1945.’ IWM: Catalogue number BU 3749

Slide 8, 12, 13, 16, 17 & 18

Open Access. Law Reports of Trials of War Criminals selected and prepared by the United Nations War Crimes Commission, English edition, Volume II The Belsen Trial, London. published for the United Nations War Crimes Commission by His Majesty's Stationery Office https://www.loc.gov/frd/Military_Law/pdf/Law-Reports_Vol-2

Slide 9

British Pathé: 'The Belsen Trial' British Pathé

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=huW6ISlcCt8>

<https://www.britishpathe.com/video/the-belsen-trial-aka-belson-trial>

Slide 10

'The Accused' photographs

Josef Kramer USHMM: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Hadassah Bimko Rosensaft - Photograph Number: 35224 Caption reads: 'Josef Kramer, formerly the SS commandant of Auschwitz-Birkenau killing center and Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, under arrest.' Date: 1945 April 15 - 1945 April 17 Location: Bergen-Belsen, [Prussian Hanover; Lower Saxony] Germany

Irma Grese USHMM - United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Hadassah Bimko Rosensaft. Close-up of Irma Grese, known as "The Bitch of Belsen", an SS wardress in Auschwitz-Birkenau, Ravensbrueck, and Bergen-Belsen concentration camps. Date: After 1945 April 15. Locale: Bergen-Belsen, [Prussian Hanover; Lower Saxony] Germany

Dr Fritz Klein

http://www.bergenbelsen.co.uk/pages/Trial/Trial/TrialDefenceCase/Trial_027_Klein.html

Slide 11

The Accused: Josef Kramer

Left photograph:

Josef Kramer [USHMM: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Hadassah Bimko Rosensaft - Photograph Number: 35224] Caption reads: 'Josef Kramer, formerly the SS commandant of Auschwitz-Birkenau killing center and Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, under arrest.' Date: 1945 April 15 - 1945 April 17 Location: Bergen-Belsen, [Prussian Hanover; Lower Saxony] Germany

Right document: Bergen Belsen and Auschwitz-Birkenau Trials, 1945-1949. ISBN: 73365-G02. Weds 10th October. Examined by Major Winwood.

Slide 13

The Accused: Irma Grese

Left photograph:

War Criminals from Bergen-Belsen, 1945-1947. Content © The National Archives; images © Microform Academic Publishers, 2018. All rights reserved. 73365-F03 <https://microform.digital/boa/documents/11839/war-criminals-from-bergen-belsen-1945-1947> Irma Grese, Hilde Lobauer

Slide 14

The Accused: Irma Grese

Bergen Belsen and Auschwitz-Birkenau Trials, 1945-1949. Content © The National Archives; images © Microform Academic Publishers, 2018. All rights reserved. ISBN: 73365-G02

<https://microform.digital/boa/documents/11873/bergen-belsen-and-auschwitz-birkenau-trials-1945-1949>

Slide 15

The Accused: Dr. Fritz Klein

Left photograph:

War Criminals from Bergen-Belsen, 1945-1947. Content © The National Archives; images © Microform Academic Publishers, 2018. All rights reserved. ISBN: 73365-F03

<https://microform.digital/boa/documents/11839/war-criminals-from-bergen-belsen-1945-1947>

Negative No.9. Franz Hoessler – Theodor Neuskel – William Spahr - Robert Kurt – Fritz Klein – Eugen Hahnert

Right document:

Bergen Belsen and Auschwitz-Birkenau Trials, 1945-1949. Content © The National Archives; images © Microform Academic Publishers, 2018. All rights reserved. ISBN: 73365-G02

Slides 19-20

Photograph of 'Lady Justice' © Tom Haward



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