

The Liberation of Bergen-Belsen

In the spring of 1945, Allied armies began their final advance into Germany. As they progressed across Europe, from the east and west, they came across the horrific Nazi camps, rife with death, disease and starvation. The first major camp to be liberated was Majdanek in Poland by the Soviets in July 1944. The Nazis sought to cover up their crimes, attempting to destroy evidence of the camp and dismantling others. Faced with the advancing Soviet Army, they began to evacuate prisoners, mostly on foot, to camps in Germany. These 'Death Marches', as they came to be known, resulted in tens of thousands of additional deaths. In the early months of 1945, the Allies uncovered many more camps. This included the Soviet liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau in Poland in January, and the US liberation of Buchenwald in Germany in April. On 15th April 1945, the British Army arrived at a concentration camp in Northern Germany called Bergen-Belsen. Here, the soldiers were confronted with the horrors of the Holocaust and an enormous relief effort was launched.

In early April 1945, VIII Corps was advancing across Germany when word arrived that the Germans were looking to call a local truce. On 12th April, a German messenger was brought into the corps headquarters to negotiate the terms. Among the troops closest to this area was the 11th Armoured Division. On their line of advance lay a camp at a place called Belsen. The German messenger explained that diseases such as typhus, a deadly bacterial infection spread by lice, were endemic there. His plan was to declare it an open area, avoiding any fighting that might allow the prisoners to escape and spread disease. Reconnaissance, including SAS patrols, had already verified the camp's presence and the truce was accepted. A neutral exclusion zone was then placed around the camp, with no shots to be fired in its vicinity. The Germans, and the Hungarians they employed, would remain as guards until the British arrived and then return to their lines. On 15th April, with strong German resistance continuing around the neutral zone, the first British troops arrived at Belsen. They made their way down roads that led away from nearby villages and deep into the woods. Members of the 63rd Anti-Tank Regiment, Royal Artillery, along with a loudspeaker truck from the Intelligence Corps were the first to enter the camp. They were utterly unprepared for what they found.

'As we walked down the main roadway of the camp, we were cheered by the internees, and for the first time we saw their condition. A great number of them were little more than living skeletons.'

There were men and women lying in heaps on both sides of the track. Others were walking slowly and aimlessly about, vacant expressions on their starved faces.'

- Lieutenant-Colonel R. I. G. Taylor, DSO, MC, 53rd Anti-Tank Regiment, Allied Military Commander for the takeover of Belsen

There were more than 60,000 emaciated prisoners in desperate need of sustenance and medical attention. Worse still, 13,000 corpses lay around the camp, unburied and rotting. Despite being experienced soldiers familiar with the horrors of war, they had never encountered anything of this kind.

'Penetrated one hut, a flimsy wooden shack with windows broken. Seemed packed with men and women – most lying down, couldn't tell which were dead and which were living. One died just as Jamie was talking to him and another had died just before...Stench unbearable and Jamie had to go out and be sick. He is a pretty tough hardened old Reporter, but said he had never dreamed of anything like this.'

- Captain E Bryan Burstall, No 5 PR Service, 2nd Army

Veteran BBC journalist Richard Dimbleby, accompanying the troops, produced a radio report based on what he saw. Initially, his superiors refused to believe it and would not broadcast it, until he threatened to resign.

The Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, originally solely a prisoner-of-war camp, was established by the Schutzstaffel, or SS, in 1943. Interred within the camp were mostly Jews, as well as others the Nazis deemed inferior and enemies of their state, including Roma people, gay men, Jehovah's Witnesses, Slavic people, political prisoners and criminals, including Roma people, gay men, Jehovah's Witnesses, Slavic people, political prisoners and criminals. There were 20 nationalities altogether, in the most horrific conditions. Many had been marched from camps further east and then simply dumped at Belsen by their captors. Additionally, there was a Soviet prisoner-of-war camp attached, the inmates of which were also in an appalling state. Belsen was not an extermination camp like Auschwitz-Birkenau. Rather than an organised system of murder, it mainly caused death by neglect. Prisoners died mostly of disease and starvation. Over its entire existence, 70,000 people are estimated to have died at Belsen.

While still at war, the British took on the humanitarian crisis. Emergency medical aid was organised under the direction of Brigadier Glyn-Hughes.

'Disease of all kinds was rife and in a vast number of cases it was difficult to tell which conditions predominated, whether it was typhus, starvation, tuberculosis, or a combination of all three, which was responsible for the shattered wrecks of human beings who formed the majority of the inmates. In addition, every variety of disease, infection and surgical condition was to be found to a greater or less extent.'

- Brigadier Glyn-Hughes, D.D.M.S., 2nd Army

By the end of 16th April, 27 water carts had been provided, along with enough food for an evening meal, all delivered by VIII Corps. But it was not simply a case of handing out the food. In fact, the Army rations had a negative effect on the weakened prisoners ...- their malnourished bodies could not cope as the food was so much richer than what they were used to. The prisoners' health needed to be monitored, and their diets steadily improved; a special gastric diet for those on the verge of starvation was implemented. Limited amounts of milk, sugar and water were given, either by medical volunteers from Britain who had arrived on 29th April, or by those internees strong enough to feed themselves and others. Despite these efforts, a further 14,000 people died after the camp's liberation. The surviving prisoners were stabilised, deloused and moved to the nearby tank training barracks at Bergen-Hohne, which would become a Displaced Persons, or DP, camp. The Round House there was used as a hospital. In Bergen-Hohne, the internees were registered, medically treated, clothed and prepared for repatriation. Within four weeks, 28,900 people had been moved. Throughout, the Army also had to organise the burial of those prisoners who had died of disease or starvation. The Hungarians and SS guards still on the site, along with other German prisoners of war, were made to help. Civilians, including the local council of the city of Celle, were forced to visit the camp and see it for themselves. They were also made to watch footage of appalling scenes filmed within the camp. On 21st May 1945, once the last prisoners had been moved and the last casualty buried, the camp huts were burned to the ground. Outside the camp, the British put up signs in English and German to mark all that had been done. This handwritten Army record gives statistics for deaths, burials and evacuations from the camp between 19th April and 26th May 1945. It provides some insight into the huge scale of the relief effort undertaken at Belsen. For instance, between Camps 1 and 2, it is recorded that 26,666 people were buried in this period. After the liberation of Belsen, the British began investigating what had happened there.

After the liberation of Belsen, the British began investigating what had happened there. This Army report was written to record evidence after the British arrived at Belsen. It includes information about the purpose of concentration camps, the nature of Belsen and prisoner demographics. It also includes a nominal roll of SS men and women, a list of witnesses and some witness statements. These statements shed light on the everyday brutality prisoners were subjected to.

'I personally received 25 strokes in the presence of the inmates of the block...In Belsen I have seen a man beaten up for giving a piece of bread to a hungry worker. When prisoners were marched out for work, perhaps one would fall out or lag behind owing to lacking strength. On one or two occasions I saw (Camp Commandant Josef) Kramer hitting such men with his fist or his boot.'

- Jan Belunek, 25 years old, of Czechoslovakia

Between 17th September and 17th November 1945 in Lüneburg, 44 men and women who had worked at Belsen were tried. Eleven of the defendants were sentenced to death, including commandant Josef Kramer, head female guard Elisabeth Volkenrath, and camp doctor Fritz Klein. They were executed in Hamelin in December 1945. More than a hundred international journalists had reported on the trial and broadcast the evidence to the wider world.

After the war, the survivors of Belsen and the other liberated Nazi camps were faced with the challenge of rebuilding their lives. Finding themselves in DP camps in the Allied zones of occupation in Germany, the survivors now had to contend with homelessness. The task was not a case of simply returning to their original homes. Many Jews found that others had taken over their houses and the return to their countries was often met with hostility, and even antisemitic violence. Seeking refuge in other countries was also difficult at first. No country was willing to take large numbers of Jewish refugees. Within a few years, they had settled around the world. Most emigrated to the State of Israel after its establishment in 1948. As for the British Army in Germany, it later played a leading role in administering and rebuilding the British zone of occupation. As part of this, it maintained a military presence at Bergen-Hohne, on the doorstep of the Belsen camp, for the next 70 years. After the liberation of Belsen, groups of Jews, Poles and Soviets built commemorative monuments on the site. In 1952, the Bergen-Belsen Memorial was inaugurated. It remains to this day as a site of commemoration, education and research.