



# Belsen Concentration Camp

## What did the British find when they entered Belsen concentration camp?

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## Introduction

Adolf Hitler set up his first concentration camp in Germany in 1933, soon after coming to power. He used it to keep his opponents locked away without trial. Soon many more camps were built, usually in remote areas, or forests. These camps were run by the SS (Shützstaffel). Concentration camps were soon being used to imprison Jews and other victims of the Nazi race policies. When the "final solution" - Hitler's plan to kill all the Jews in Europe - was put into effect in 1941, gas chambers were built at several death-camps, of which Auschwitz was the most famous.

Belsen (full name Bergen-Belsen) was set up in 1943. It was never used as a death-camp, but was still a place of unbelievable horrors and brutality. Towards the end of the war, thousands of Jews had been evacuated from camps in eastern Europe and marched west to avoid the advancing Soviet army. There were 40,000 prisoners at Belsen in April, 1945, many dying each day, as well as thousands who had recently died and had not been buried.

The outside world knew of the camps even before the war, but took little notice of reports of what they were like. Thus when Allied soldiers began to advance into Germany at the end of the war and discovered the camps, they were deeply shocked by the conditions. These documents record what the British soldiers found, and how they responded.

## Tasks

Look at Source 1

1. What are the different causes of death described in this document?

Look at Source 2

2. This is a report about SS Guards shooting prisoners after the liberation of the camp:
  - a) Give your own account of what had happened at the cookhouse. How did the incident end?
  - b) What does this account tell you about the attitudes of Kramer and the SS Guards towards the Jews?
  - c) What does it tell you about the attitude of the British towards Kramer and the SS? What does the writer say which tells you this?

Look at Source 3

3. This section of the document describes how the problems of feeding the prisoners at Belsen was initially handled:
  - a) How did the British army set about meeting the basic needs of the prisoners?
  - b) What effect did this have?
  - c) The writer describes this as "amazing". Why do you think he used this word?

Look at Source 4

4. This is a witness statement from one of the prisoners at Belsen:
- What had Hilde Lisiewitz done?
  - What had Karl Egersdorf done?
  - Look at the photographs in Source 5. Do the people you are looking at seem capable of the actions you have read about?
  - Kramer and some of the SS Guards were put on trial for war crimes by the British. Kramer's defence was that he was only following orders. Some guards said the same. Do you think this is an acceptable defence?
  - Kramer and several guards were executed. Hilde Lisiewitz was sentenced to one years imprisonment and Karl Egersdorf was acquitted and released. Do you agree with these punishments?
  - Many guards escaped and lived quietly for many years. Do you think it is right to arrest and try former concentration camp guards 40 or 50 years after the events described here?

Look at Source 5

5. These are photographs of some of the SS guards who worked at Belsen. Those who are mentioned in the reports in Source 4 are shown here.
- What can we learn from these photographs?

## Background

Hitler was driven by the racist ideas at the core of his beliefs. He did not invent anti-Semitism - these views had had been around in Europe for centuries - but he used it to win support. Many Germans, after their country's defeat in the First World War and the terms of the Treaty of Versailles, were bitter and resentful. Hitler offered them a scapegoat to avoid facing up to the country's problems and the faults of its leaders: he blamed everything on the Jews.

From 1933, when Hitler became Chancellor of Germany, he was able to bring all the resources of a modern state to put anti-Semitism into practice. A stream of laws gradually deprived Jews of almost all their rights as citizens, from basic and important ones such as the right to an education and freedom of employment, to apparently trivial ones such as not being allowed to own pets, or a radio. Alongside these laws there were boycotts of Jewish shops and businesses and a casual violence towards Jews by Nazis and their supporters.

One effect of all this was that ordinary Germans began to think of Jews as not proper citizens. This was encouraged by the Nazis' total control of news, which was used for relentless propaganda against Jews. At the same time, Nazi control of education meant that all children were getting a similar message. While many resisted it, this decade of brain-washing may help to explain the behaviour of Germans found in these documents.

Only 1% of the population of Germany was of Jewish origin, but after the German invasion of the USSR in 1941, the Nazis took over an area of traditional Jewish

settlement with up to 4 million Jews. Nazi leaders drew up what they called the "final solution" to what they called the "Jewish question". From then on, Nazi Germany was devoted increasingly to this "final solution". More concentration camps were built, some with gas-chambers designed for mass murder. Jews all over Europe, from Norway to Greece, were hunted down, arrested, listed, ferried on trains for hundreds of miles and then murdered or worked to death. Even when Germany was losing the war and every effort might have been needed to avoid defeat, trains, soldiers and resources were diverted this task.

Belsen was never a death-camp, but was well-placed to hold Jews from western European countries. It was large anyway, but in April 1945 its numbers were swollen by huge consignments of prisoners force-marched or brought by train with no food or sanitation from camps further east. One of Belsens best known prisoners was the diarist, Anne Frank who died in the camp in March 1945, only a few weeks before the camp was liberated.

## Teachers Notes

The focus of many studies of the Holocaust is on the death-camps like Auschwitz, probably rightly. However, this study of Belsen reveals at least two other aspects of the subject.

First, it shows that British soldiers were aghast at what they found when they liberated the camps. Even though news of the "Final Solution" the camps, the railway journeys, the mass-murders had been reported outside Germany, it clearly was not widely known. Allied leaders had always said that their business was winning the war and refused to divert their attention to blocking the traffic in human lives. They do not seem to have circulated knowledge of what they knew to the wider public. The apparently cold report reveals both the callousness of the camp commandant and his guards and the anger of the author at their behaviour.

Second, instead of the usual Holocaust pictures of emaciated or dead bodies, it shows the perpetrators. These photos may well be just as chilling as the more obvious horror pictures, especially when individual acts of cruelty can be linked to individuals whose faces pupils can see.

Apart from the set tasks, these two themes could provide plenty of scope for discussion.

It is worth noting that the SS had several divisions, one of which was responsible for the running of the concentration and death camps.

Nazi Germany had three types of camps in operation, Labour camps (*Arbeitslager*), such as Kaiserwald in Latvia and Malchow in Germany, which used political prisoners as forced labour for the German Government, Concentration camps, such as Bergen-Belsen and Dachu, both in Germany, which used Jewish prisoners as free labour for the German state and various related companies, such as IG Faber, and Death Camps, such as Sobibór and Treblinka in Poland which were set up for the sole purpose of exterminating Jews.

Some death camps were purpose built for the executions, while some were converted concentration and labour camps. Probably the best known of these is the Auschwitz camp, where sections were used as a labour camp, and the infamous Birkenau part of the camp was used as a death camp.

Sources

Illustration : FO 371/36653

Source 1, 2 & 3: WO 235/19 76008

Source 4: WO 235/19 76008 Deposition of Dora Almaleh

Source 5: WP 235/19 Photos S.G.C. 9 and S.G.C. 3

## **Schemes of Work**

**How and why did the Holocaust happen?**

Key Stage 3 Unit 19.



## Source 1 : Description of conditions at the camp on 16th April, 1945 (WO 235/19/76008)

### Men's Compounds.

- No. 1. Typhus was on the wane and reached its peak in March. It is understood that it commenced early in February.
- No. 2. This was the largest men's compound and contained approx 8,000. Typhus had commenced here at a later date than in Compound 1 and had now reached its peak. There were 266 cases and now cases were still occurring, but the medical members considered the worst was over. It was in this Compound that the story of cannibalism was reported to me by one of the doctors. There had been none for the last 2 days but before that there had been many cases.
- No. 3. There were many fewer inmates in this compound and no hut set aside as a hospital. Conditions in many of the huts were indescribable, several dead bodies could be seen, in some cases moved up to the ends, in others left just as they lay. Only by entering the huts could the cases of extreme emaciation be seen, so many obviously past any help however skilled. The gutters outside the huts contained living and dead. There was no attempt at sanitation whatsoever, the men just squatting anywhere.

### Women's Compound.

- No. 1. This was a very large compound containing approx 23,000. Conditions here were much the same as in the men's compounds except that in a greater proportion there had been attempts to preserve order and some semblance of cleanliness. There did seem, however, to be more cases of extreme emaciation, amongst the women than the men and in hut 208 conditions were appalling. Practically every inmate was so weak that they could hardly raise themselves and the passage was equally crowded with both living and dead. Not so many dead bodies were left for any length of time in the huts or surroundings but in the middle of the compound and

practically adjoining the children's area was a very large area of naked dead women piled high. It must have contained many hundreds.

The hospital block in this compound was a paradise compared to any others and I can't speak too highly of the efforts of certain of the women doctors. One woman Gynaecologist was conducting all the obstetric cases, averaging 5 to 7 per day, and for some days without any water supply available.

The care that had been taken of the children was also most noticeable.

In this compound, however, the number of bunks available for Hospital cases was grossly inadequate. 474 for a total of approx 2,000 acutely ill. In many cases there were 3 in each bunk and the condition in the Typhus ward where there were no bunks at all was indescribable. The same applied to the Men's compound. The typhus in this compound was well segregated and was definitely on the wane. There were approx 250 cases here. Out of the 23,000 inmates of the compound medical personnel estimated that there were not more than 5,000 well.

No. 2. In this compound there were 4,500 women.

Only one hut was set aside as a Hospital and this had no bunks in it. There was no segregation of typhus, of which there were 300 cases.



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Men's Compounds.

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No. 3

There were many fewer inmates in this compound and no hut set aside as a hospital. Conditions in many of the huts were indescribable, several dead bodies could be seen, in some cases moved up to the ends, in others left just as they lay. Only by entering the huts could the cases of extreme emaciation be seen, so many obviously past any help however skilled. The gutters outside the huts contained living and dead. There was no attempt at sanitation whatsoever, the men just squatting anywhere.

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In this compound there were 4,500 women. Only one hut was set aside as a Hospital and this had no bunks in it. There was no segregation of typhus, of which there were 300 cases.

## Source 2 : SS guards have to be stopped from shooting prisoners (WO 235/19)

### 4. INVESTIGATIONS CARRIED OUT.

15 Apr 45.

Joseph Kramer (Commandant) was interviewed by Lt.Col Taylor, DSO, (Allied Military Commander and myself, and whilst this was being carried out there was the sound of intermittent small arms fire but no indication that this was within the camp area. However, a runner arrived to say that there was rioting at the Central Cookhouse. On arrival there everything seemed quiet, but one SS man stated that there had been stealing of soup. There was no evidence of this. Rifle fire continued to be heard, this time near at hand, and on proceeding through the camp, SS Guards were found to be shooting prisoners who in their hungry condition were endeavouring to remove potatoes from a pile near the cookhouse.

Commandant Kramer made no attempt to stop his men and it was only on a threat to shoot the SS personnel immediately, on a basis of one for one, should any further killing take place that the situation became quiet. Neither Commandant Kramer nor any of his personnel made any attempt to succour the wounded and dying, nor to remove the dead. An order was given to this effect

and the Commandant himself made to assist.

There was naturally considerable excitement amongst the prisoners who were thronging the Central road outside their Compounds. Their welcome was exuberant, but at that time absolutely orderly, and although it was extremely difficult to induce them to return within their Compounds, this was eventually done.

A detachment was left within the Camp to maintain order and tanks positioned near the main food store.

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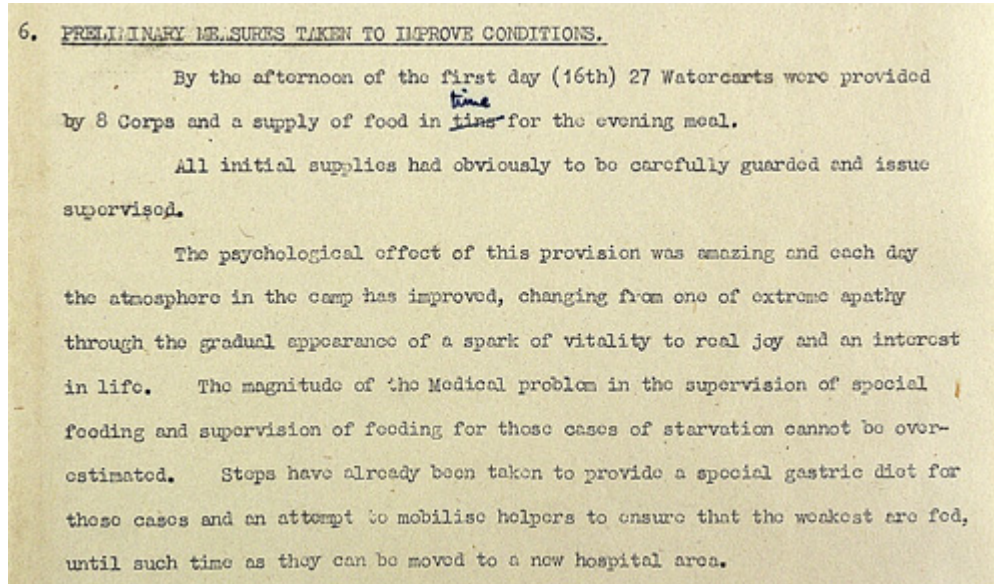
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## Source 3 : First attempts to improve the situation (WO 235/19)



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### 6. PRELIMINARY MEASURES TAKEN TO IMPROVE CONDITIONS.

By the afternoon of the first day (16th) 27 Watercarts were provided by 8 Corps and a supply of food in time for the evening meal.

All initial supplies had obviously to be carefully guarded and issue supervised.

The psychological effect of this provision was amazing and each day the atmosphere in the camp has improved, changing from one of extreme apathy through the gradual appearance of a spark of vitality to real joy and an interest in life. The magnitude of the Medical problem in the supervision of special feeding and supervision of feeding for those cases of starvation cannot be over-estimated. Steps had already been taken to provide a special gastric diet for these cases and an attempt to mobilise helpers to ensure that the weakest are fed until such time as they can be moved to a new hospital area.



## Source 4 : Signed statement by Dora Almaleh, prepared for British War Crimes Tribunal, 13th June, 1945 (WO 239/19)

EXHIBIT "118"  
163  
No. 16.  
2

THE MATTER OF WAR CRIMES  
AND  
APPROPRIETIES AT BELSEN.

DEPOSITION OF DORA ALMALEH (Female) late of 19B Othos Peve Gamma, Salonika, Greece, sworn before Major SAVILE GEORGEY CHAMPION, Royal Artillery, Legal Staff, No. 1 War Crimes Investigation Team.

1. I am 21 years of age and because I am a Jewess I was arrested on 1st April 1942 and taken to Auschwitz Concentration Camp where I remained until I was transferred to Belsen in November 1944.

2. I recognize No. 2 on photograph 22 as an S.S. woman at Belsen. I knew her by the name of HILDE and I have now been told that her full name is HILDE LESIEWITZ. One day in April 1945 whilst at Belsen I was one of a working party detailed to carry vegetables from the store to the kitchen by means of a hand cart. In charge of this working party was LESIEWITZ. Whilst I was on this job I allowed two male prisoners, whose names I do not know, to take two turnips off the cart. LESIEWITZ saw me do this and she pushed the men, who were very weak to the ground and then beat them on their heads with a thick stick which she always carried. She then stamped on their chests in the region of the heart with her jack-boots. The men lay still clutching the turnips. LESIEWITZ then got hold of me and shook me until I started to cry. She then said 'Don't cry or I'll kill you too'. *and after 15 minutes* She then went away ~~and~~ I went up to the men and touched them to see if they were still alive. *I found the 3 feet their heads and could feel nothing. They were cold like dead men* I formed the opinion that they were dead. I then went away leaving the bodies lying there and I do not know what happened to them.

3. I recognize No. 1 on photograph No. 5 as an S.S. man at Belsen who was in charge of the bread store. I have now been told that his name is KARL EGERSDORF. One day in April 1945 whilst at Belsen I was working in the vegetable store when I saw a Hungarian girl, whose name I do not know, come out of the bread store nearby carrying a loaf of bread. At this moment EGERSDORF appeared in the street and at a distance of about 6 metres from the girl shouted 'What are you doing here?'. The girl replied 'I am hungry' and then started to run away. EGERSDORF immediately pulled out his pistol and shot the girl. She fell down and lay still bleeding from the back of the head where the bullet had penetrated. EGERSDORF then went away and a few minutes later I went and looked at the girl. I am sure she was dead and men who were passing by looked at her and were of the same opinion. *The bullet had entered in the centre of the back of the head.*

I do not know what happened to her body.

SWORN BY THE SAID DEPONENT  
DORA ALMAHAR AT BELSEN  
THIS 13<sup>th</sup> DAY OF JUNE 1945,  
BEFORE ME,

*Azragiz Dopa*.....

*P. P. Crauf*  
Major R.A.

I HEREBY CERTIFY that, the said Deponent not understanding English, this Affidavit was translated in my presence to the said Deponent before swearing and I am satisfied that its contents were fully understood by the said Deponent.

Dated this 13<sup>th</sup> day of JUNE 1945.

*P. P. Crauf*  
Major R.A.

I HEREBY CERTIFY that I have accurately translated this Affidavit to the said Deponent.

Dated this 13<sup>th</sup> day of JUNE 1945.

*Trade Neumann is his interpreter*

It appears to be a matter for medical evidence as to whether it is possible for a human body to have lost its warmth by death within 15 minutes, even where the man was in a weak state and had been savagely assaulted.

*P. P. Crauf*  
Major R.A.

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## Source 4 : Transcript of Signed statement by Dora Almaleh, prepared for British War Crimes Tribunal, 13th June, 1945 (WO 239/19)

IN THE MATTER OF WAR CRIMES

AND

ATROCITIES AT BELSEN

DEPOSITION OF DORA ALMALEH (Female) late of 19B Othos Peve Ganna, Salonika, Greece, sworn before Major SAVILE GEOFFREY CHAMPION, Royal Artillery, Legal Staff, No. 1 War Crimes Investigation Team.

1. I am 21 years of age and because I am a Jewess I was arrested on 1st April 1942 and taken to Auschwitz Concentration Camp where I remained until I was transferred to Belsen in November 1944.
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I do not know what happened to her body.

SWORN BY THE SAID DEPONENT DORA ALMALEH AT BELSEN THIS 13TH DAY  
OF JUNE 1945, BEFORE ME

S.G. Champion [Signed]

Major R.A.

I HEREBY CERTIFY that, the said Deponent not understanding English, this Affidavit was translated in my presence to the said Deponent before swearing and I am satisfied that its contents were fully understood by the said Deponent.

Dated this 13th day of JUNE 1945.

S.G.Champion[signed]

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**Source 5a : Camp guards at Belsen, photographed by British 2nd Army photographer. Hilde Lisiewitz is second from the left (WP 239/19)**



**Source 5b : Camp Guards at Belsen, photographed by British 2nd Army photographer. Karl Egersdorf is 1st on the left. (WP 239/19)**

