

The Liberation of Bergen-Belsen (April 1945)

Abstract

Bergen-Belsen, situated in north central Germany, was originally established as a POW camp in 1940 but was expanded as a concentration camp in 1943. As a POW camp, Belsen held tens of thousands of Soviet POWs among others; at least 20,000 of them are thought to have died at the camp. In the last two years of the war, large numbers of Jews from across Europe were brought to the camp and used as slave labor in satellite camps. About 50,000 civilian deaths have been counted, though records are spotty because SS staff attempted to destroy all evidence at the camp in the spring of 1945. Among the civilian deaths, the Dutch fifteen-year-old, Anne Frank, died of typhus here on March 12, 1945.

One month later, the camp was liberated by British and Canadian soldiers (April 15, 1945). About 60,000 prisoners were still at the camp, most of whom were severely malnourished and ill. About 13,000 dead bodies had been left on the grounds unburied. As seen in the film, Allied soldiers worked quickly to force the captured guards to bury the dead in mass graves. Although food and medical attention was given to survivors, fourteen thousand died in the weeks after liberation from disease and starvation. The level of brutality, suffering and inhumane treatment of the sick and dead, which was chronicled in several reports and films shot by the British liberators, such as this one, meant that Bergen-Belsen came to symbolize for many the horrors of Nazi crimes. This film was among the evidence used in the Nuremberg Trials.

Source

Kramer, Camp Commandant, is taken into custody.
Such was the speed of the Allied advance that the guards were taken before they had time to flee.
Inside Belsen, the same story: starvation and sickness.
Liberated prisoners could not control their emotions.
Despite German attempts to cover up, we found these in the open field: clear cut evidence of beatings and outright murder was on every hand.
Nameless victims were numbered for records which the Germans destroyed.
SS guards were impressed to clean up the camp area.
German woman guards were ordered to bury the dead.
Sanitary conditions were so appalling that heavy equipment had to be brought in to speed the work of cleaning up.
This was Bergen-Belsen.

Source: National Archives and Records Administration, gov.archives.arc.43452

Recommended Citation: The Liberation of Bergen-Belsen (April 1945), published in: German History in Documents and Images,
<<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/nazi-germany-1933-1945/ghdi:video-5027>> [May 13, 2024].