

# ‘Extermination’ Camp Propaganda Myths

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## 1. The Camps<sup>1</sup>

Everyone has heard that during the Second World War German authorities systematically killed many hundreds of thousands of prisoners, especially Jews, in concentration camps.<sup>2</sup> For example, in his closing address to the Nuremberg Tribunal (July 26, 1946), chief British prosecutor Sir Hartley Shawcross said that “*more than six million*” Jews were killed by the Germans, and that

“[...] murder [was] conducted like some mass production industry in the gas chambers and the ovens of Auschwitz, Dachau, Treblinka, Buchenwald, Mauthausen, Majdanek and Oranienburg.”<sup>3</sup>

Some months earlier – in late April and early May 1945 – an American congressional delegation of six US senators and six US congressmen visited three German concentration camps: Dachau, Buchenwald and Nordhausen. In these camps, the American lawmakers concluded in their report, German authorities carried out “*a calculated and diabolical program of planned torture and extermination*”. The delegation’s report was published as an official US Senate document. American newspapers gave prominent coverage to the report, which was also a US prosecution exhibit at the main Nuremberg trial.<sup>4</sup>

How valid are such accusations? How have they held up with the passage of time? Before focusing on two of the most important of the German wartime camps – Buchenwald and Bergen-Belsen – we take a quick look at the camp system in general, with an eye to answering these and similar questions. What was the purpose of these camps? How were they administered?

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<sup>1</sup> Chapter 2. and 3. of this article were reprinted from: *The Journal of Historical Review*, 7(4) (1986), pp. 405-418, and 15(3) (1995), pp. 23-30, respectively (online: [ihr.org/jhr/v07/v07p405\\_Weber.html](http://ihr.org/jhr/v07/v07p405_Weber.html) and [.../v15/v15n3p23\\_Weber.html](http://ihr.org/jhr/v15/v15n3p23_Weber.html)).

<sup>2</sup> Thus, American journalist and historian William Shirer wrote in his influential best-selling account, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*: “*All the thirty odd principle Nazi concentration camps were death camps and millions of tortured, starved inmates perished in them.*” (In the 1962 Crest paperback edition, p. 1259. In some other editions, this is p. 967.)

<sup>3</sup> *International Military Tribunal, Trial of the Major War Criminals Before the International Military Tribunal* (henceforth *IMT “blue series”*), 42 vols., Nuremberg 1947-1949; here: vol. 19, p. 434.

<sup>4</sup> Nuremberg document 159-L, *ibid.* vol. 37, pp. 605-629; *Congressional Record - Senate*, May 15, 1945, pp. 4576-4582; “*Congressional Atrocity Report Stresses Calculated Killings*” (*AP* dispatch), Washington (DC) *Evening Star*, May 15, 1945, front page.

## 1.1. Abandoned Extermination Claims

Since the end of the Second World War in 1945, many claims about mass killings in German war-time camps – claims that were once widely accepted and backed with apparently impressive evidence – have been quietly dropped. No reputable historian still accepts, for example, the claim made by the Soviet prosecution at Nuremberg that at one camp the Germans used “*special electrical appliances for the mass murder of the doomed*”. Prisoners allegedly were killed there in a special “*building where the floor was electrified in a special way*”.<sup>5</sup> Similarly discredited is the Nuremberg claim by the American prosecution that Jews were systematically killed at the Treblinka camp by steaming them to death.<sup>6</sup>

At Nuremberg and for some years afterward it was seriously claimed that many inmates were systematically gassed at Dachau, Buchenwald and other concentration camps in Germany proper. Allied prosecutors at Nuremberg presented seemingly solid proof of such gassings. Over the past several decades, however, nearly all claims of gassings and mass extermination at these and other camps in Germany proper have been quietly abandoned. No reputable historian of this subject now supports the once supposedly proven story of “*extermination camps*” in the territory of the old German Reich.

A US War Department official, Stephen F. Pinter, looked into the claims of mass extermination in German camps. In a letter published in 1959 he summarized his findings:<sup>7</sup>

*“I was in Dachau for 17 months after the war, as a US War Department Attorney, and can state that there was no gas chamber at Dachau. What was shown to visitors and sightseers there and erroneously described as a gas chamber, was a crematory. Nor was there a gas chamber in any of the other concentration camps in Germany. We were told that there was a gas chamber at Auschwitz, but since that was in the Russian zone of occupation, we were not permitted to investigate, since the Russians would not permit it.*”

[... Often cited is] *the old propaganda myth that millions of Jews were killed by the National Socialists. From what I was able to determine during six years in Germany and Austria, there were a number of Jews killed, but the figure of a million was certainly never reached. I interviewed thousands of Jews, former inmates of concentration camps in Germany and Austria, and consider myself as well qualified as any man on this subject.*”

An authoritative debunking of many execution gassing stories was provided in 1960 by Martin Broszat, an official (and later director) of the semi-official Institute for Contemporary History (Institut für Zeitgeschichte) in Munich. “*Neither in Dachau, nor in Bergen-Belsen, nor in Buchenwald were Jews or other prisoners gassed*”, he wrote in a letter published in the Hamburg weekly *Die Zeit*. Broszat acknowledged that there were no mass gassings in any of the camps in Germany proper, and noted that the “*inmates who died in Dachau or other concentration camps in the Old Reich [Germany in its borders of 1937] were above all victims of the catastrophic hygienic and supply conditions*”.<sup>8</sup> Broszat (who died in 1989) did not present any evidence for his statement, nor did he explain why the apparently convincing “*testimonies*” and official “*proofs*” for gassings at

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<sup>5</sup> *IMT “blue series”, op. cit.* (note 3), vol. 7, pp. 576-77. Although he named Belsen as the camp where these electrocutions were supposedly being carried out, he may have meant to refer to Belzec.

<sup>6</sup> Nuremberg document PS-3311. *ibid.*, vol. 32, pp. 153-58.

<sup>7</sup> Letter by Pinter in the Catholic weekly *Our Sunday Visitor*, June 14, 1959, p. 15. See also Theodore J. O’Keefe, “*The Liberation of the Camps: Facts vs. Lies*”, *The Journal of Historical Review (JHR)*, 15(4) (1995), pp. 18-23 (online: [ihr.org/jhr/v15/v15n4p18\\_Okeefe.html](http://ihr.org/jhr/v15/v15n4p18_Okeefe.html)).

<sup>8</sup> M. Broszat, “*Keine Vergasung in Dachau*”, *Die Zeit* (Hamburg), August 19, 1960, p. 16. (US edition: August 26, 1960, p. 14). Facsimile reprint, with translation, in “*No Gassing in Dachau*”, *JHR*, 13(3) (1993), p. 12. The Institut für Zeitgeschichte is funded by the German federal government and the Bavarian state government.

did he explain why the apparently convincing “*testimonies*” and official “*proofs*” for gassings at camps in Germany proper were no longer to be considered valid.

French-Jewish historian Olga Wormser-Migot likewise concluded in her detailed 1968 study of the German concentration camp system that the stories of execution gas chambers in Germany proper and Austria are mythical.<sup>9</sup> Part of the reason for the persistence of baseless ‘gas chamber’ stories, she wrote, is confusion about the distinction between a gas chamber and a crematory. Another factor, perhaps more basic, is an ‘unconscious desire’ to keep alive the memory of the evil wartime treatment of the Jews. Psychologically, the ‘gas chamber’ has become one of the “*leitmotifs of the heroic epic of the deportation*”.<sup>10</sup>

Even noted ‘Nazi hunter’ Simon Wiesenthal has acknowledged (in 1975 and again in 1993) that “*there were no extermination camps on German soil*”.<sup>11</sup>

The Holocaust story these days is that there were only six ‘extermination’ camps, all of them in what is now Poland. Prominent Holocaust historians now claim that masses of Jews were gassed at just six sites: Auschwitz (including Birkenau), Majdanek (Lublin), Treblinka, Sobibor, Chelmno and Belzec.<sup>12</sup>

## 1.2. No Documentary Evidence

The German authorities kept astonishingly detailed records of every aspect of camp affairs.<sup>13</sup> Remarkably, though, there is no contemporary documentary evidence of homicidal gassings or of a policy of mass extermination in the camps. Not a single contemporary German document mentions or even refers to killings of Jews in gas chambers. Nor are there any contemporary plans or diagrams of extermination gas chambers. There is similarly no documentary proof that any of the various rooms or buildings said to have been execution gassing facilities were, in fact, ever used as such.

What ‘evidence’ there is for mass extermination in the German wartime camps consists entirely of dubious ‘testimony’, either from a handful of German officials (such as the now discredited “*confession*” of former Auschwitz commandant Rudolf Höß), or from a small number of former inmates.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>9</sup> O. Wormser-Migot, *Le Système concentrationnaire nazi*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris 1968, p. 11; see also pp. 12, 541-544.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*; quoted in Germaine Tillion, *Ravensbrück*, Anchor, Garden City, N.Y., 1975, pp. 218-219.

<sup>11</sup> Letters by Wiesenthal in *Books & Bookmen* (London), April 1975, p. 5, and in *Stars and Stripes* (European edition), Jan. 24, 1993, p. 14. Facsimile of Wiesenthal’s *Stars and Stripes* letter is in *JHR*, 13(3) (1993), p. 10. See also M. Weber, “*Simon Wiesenthal: Fraudulent ‘Nazi Hunter’*”, *JHR*, 15(4) (1995), pp. 8-16 (online: [ihr.org/jhr/v15/v15n4p-8\\_Weber.html](http://ihr.org/jhr/v15/v15n4p-8_Weber.html)).

<sup>12</sup> Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, 3 vols., Holmes & Meier, New York 1985, p. 1219. Note also Uwe Adam, “*The Gas Chambers*”, in François Furet (ed.), *Unanswered Questions*, Schocken, New York 1989, pp. 142-154; “*Gas Chambers*”, Israel Gutman (ed.), *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*, Macmillan, New York 1990, p. 541.

<sup>13</sup> Jean-Claude Pressac, *Auschwitz: Technique and Operation of the Gas Chambers*, B. Klarsfeld Foundation, New York 1989. See also S. Crowell, “*Wartime Germany’s Anti-Gas Air Raid Shelters: A Refutation of Pressac’s ‘Criminal Traces’*”, *JHR*, 18(4) (1999), pp. 7-30; M. Weber, “*High Frequency Delousing Facilities at Auschwitz*”, *JHR*, 18(3) (1999), pp. 4-12.

There are extensive documents confirming, for example, purchase and installation of crematory ovens and (non-homicidal) delousing gas chambers, often down to the last Pfennig. See, for example, *IMT “blue series”*, *op. cit.* (note 3), vol. 7, pp. 584-585.

<sup>14</sup> On the Höß evidence, see Robert Faurisson, “*How the British Obtained the Confessions of Rudolf Höß*”, *JHR* 7(4) (1986), pp. 389-403.

‘Eyewitnesses’ of gassings are rare. Only a small number of persons has ever claimed to have seen such execution gas chambers in operation, and their scant descriptions of homicidal gassings are typically cursory, vague and/or contradictory. As a number of historians have acknowledged, such testimony is not very credible. Holocaust historian Gitta Sereny has warned that quite a few of the familiar ‘eyewitness’ testimonies are nothing more than baseless hearsay. Some of the best-known ‘memoirs’ of extermination gassings, she complains, are “*partial or complete fakes, such as Jean-François Steiner’s Treblinka or Martin Gray’s For Those I Loved*”.<sup>15</sup>

Similarly, the archives director of Israel’s Yad Vashem Holocaust center has confirmed that more than 10,000 of the 20,000 ‘testimonies’ of Jewish ‘survivors’ on file there are “*unreliable*”. Many survivors, wanting “*to be part of history*”, apparently let their imaginations run away with them, director Shmuel Krakowski said in 1986.<sup>16</sup>

### 1.3. Wartime Development of the Camp System

At the outbreak of war in 1939, there were six relatively small concentration camps (Konzentrationslager) in Germany (including Austria). Including their subordinate ‘satellite camps’, these held a total of 21,400 inmates.<sup>17</sup>

As Germany’s demand for labor in war-related industries grew, and it became obvious that the conflict would not end quickly, attention turned to the camp inmates as an important source of manpower. Accordingly, the camp system was placed under the control of a new “*SS Economic-Administrative Main Office*” (SS Wirtschafts-Verwaltungshauptamt) or WVHA, headed by Oswald Pohl, a former naval officer. Headquartered in Oranienburg, just north of Berlin, the agency was created in early 1942 “*to utilize prisoner labor on a large scale*”.<sup>18</sup>

Until 1942, Jews were not held in the concentration camps in large numbers. (A notable exception was the temporary “*protective custody*” roundup of many Jews in the wake of the infamous November 1938 ‘Crystal Night’ outbreak of violence. After a few days or weeks, these detainees were released.) In January 1942, SS chief Heinrich Himmler explained that the concentration camps would now have to “*deal with major economic tasks*”, and ordered that the camps should therefore prepare for the reception of 100,000 Jewish men and up to 50,000 Jewish women during the next several weeks.<sup>19</sup>

Camp system administrator Pohl confirmed the new policy in an April 1942 report to Himmler:<sup>20</sup>

*“The war has brought about a marked change in the structure of the concentration camps, and has changed their function with regard to the employment of the prisoners. The custody of prisoners for reasons of security, education or prevention is no longer the main consideration.*

*The mobilization of all prisoner labor resources for war-related tasks (increase in armament production) and, later, for peacetime reconstruction work, is becoming more and more important. Accord-*

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<sup>15</sup> “*The men who whitewash Hitler*”, *New Statesman* (London), Nov. 2, 1979, pp. 672-673.

<sup>16</sup> *The Jerusalem Post* (Israel), August 17, 1986, p. 1.

<sup>17</sup> Pohl report to Himmler, April 30, 1942. Document R-129. *IMT “blue series”*, *op. cit.* (note 3), vol. 38, p. 363; R. Hilberg, *op. cit.* (note 12), p. 870.

<sup>18</sup> Nuremberg document NO-542. Quoted in Léon Poliakov, *Harvest of Hate*, Holocaust Library, New York 1979, p. 72; R. Hilberg, *op. cit.* (note 12), p. 867.

<sup>19</sup> Himmler to Glücks, Jan. 25, 1942. Nuremberg document NO-500. *Trials of War Criminals Before the Nuernberg Military Tribunals*, Washington, DC, 1949-1953 (henceforth *NMT “green series”*), volume 5, p. 365; R. Hilberg, *op. cit.* (note 12), p. 917. Only a fraction of this number of Jews was actually sent “*during the next few weeks*”. Gerald Reitlinger, *The Final Solution*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Sphere Books, London 1971, p. 107.

<sup>20</sup> Pohl report, April 30, 1942. Document R-129. *IMT “blue series”*, *op. cit.* (note 3), vol. 38, pp. 362-367.

*ingly, measures have now become necessary to gradually transform the concentration camps from their earlier one-sided political role into an organization suited for economic tasks."*

In his attached order to camp commandants (and others), Pohl wrote:

*"The camp commandant alone is responsible for the employment of the labor personnel. This employment must be exhaustive, in the full sense of the term, and meant for the highest level of efficiency [Leistung]."*

As a result, both the number of camps and the number of inmates increased dramatically during the remaining war years. The camps became enormous forced labor centers where inmates were employed in production essential to the war effort, not only in SS industrial work but in many private German firms. In accord with the new policy, large numbers of Jews were diverted to the camps. As Pohl euphemistically put it in a September 1942 communication to Himmler:

*"Employable Jews who are migrating [that is, are being deported] to the East will have to interrupt their journey and work in war-related industry."<sup>21</sup>*

The number of internees (Jewish and non-Jewish) in Pohl's WVHA camp system grew steadily: 110,000 in September 1942, more than 154,000 in March 1943, about 200,000 by May-June 1943, and nearly 225,000 by August 1943.<sup>22</sup> By April 1944, the WVHA system had grown to 20 full-fledged concentration camps (KL) and 165 satellite labor camps.<sup>23</sup>

In a June 1944 speech to military commanders, Himmler reported with some satisfaction on the productivity of his enormous camp work force.<sup>24</sup>

*"In this year of the war, 40 million working hours of labor are now devoted to war production every month in the concentration camps. Most, or up to nine-tenths, of the concentration camp inmates are non-Germans and criminals [sic]. They produce one-third of the German fighter planes. One-third of the German rifle barrels are now produced there with just one German foreman for every 90 prisoners. Countless other things are manufactured, from the finest optical instruments to munitions and enormous quantities of mortars and 3.7 flak guns. In addition, these camp workers are building great underground factories."*

In mid-August 1944, the WVHA camp system held 524,000 people.<sup>25</sup> By January 1945, this figure had grown to about 714,000. The actual number of inmates may have been substantially higher, as many tens of thousands of people – many of them Jews – were hastily brought into the camps during the war's final chaotic months.<sup>26</sup>

As extensive as it was, the concentration camp network did not include ghettos or camps under the control of the Higher SS and Police Leaders, where most Jews were held. In addition to Jews in concentration camps such as Auschwitz-Birkenau, Lublin (Majdanek) and Bergen-Belsen, many

<sup>21</sup> Pohl to Himmler, Sept. 16, 1942. R. Hilberg, *op. cit.* (note 12), p. 917.

<sup>22</sup> Pohl report to Himmler, Sept. 30, 1943. Document 1469-PS. *NMT "green series", op. cit.* (note 19), vol. 5, pp. 381f.

<sup>23</sup> Pohl to Himmler, April 5, 1944. Nuremberg document NO-20a. *NMT "green series", op. cit.* (note 19), vol. 5, p. 383; R. Hilberg, *op. cit.* (note 12), pp. 870-871; Danuta Czech (ed.), *Auschwitz Chronicle: 1939-1945*, I.B. Tauris, London/New York 1990, p. 605.

<sup>24</sup> B. Smith, A. Peterson (eds.), *Heinrich Himmler: Geheimreden*, Propyläen, Frankfurt 1974, p. 199. (June 21, 1944).

<sup>25</sup> WVHA report (W. Burger), Aug. 15, 1944. NO-1990. *NMT "green series", op. cit.* (note 19), vol. 5, pp. 388-89. An additional 612,000 were reportedly in the process of being added to the camp system.

<sup>26</sup> Yehuda Bauer, in Brewster S. Chamberlin, Marcia Feldman (eds.), *The Liberation of the Nazi Concentration Camps 1945*, US Holocaust Memorial Council, Washington, DC, 1987, p. 91; however, Oswald Pohl estimated that at the end of 1944 there were no more than 700,000 people in the WVHA camps. See Pohl's written statement of June 1, 1948. *Deutsche Hochschullehrer Zeitung* (Tübingen), Nr. 1/2, 1963, pp. 24-25, p. 24.

hundreds of thousands of Jews were held in numerous special labor camps and company camps, especially in Poland and the occupied Soviet territories.<sup>27</sup>

#### 1.4. Measures to Reduce Deaths

As already suggested, it has been widely claimed that Germany's wartime camps were organized to systematically kill as many prisoners as possible. The masses of dead and dying inmates in the camps liberated by Allied forces during the final weeks of the war in Europe certainly seemed to confirm this view. While incontestably large numbers of prisoners perished in the camps, succumbing especially to typhus and other diseases, such deaths were not due to any policy or program. To the contrary, German authorities undertook extensive measures to save the lives of concentration camp inmates.

SS chief Himmler responded to reports of large-scale deaths in the camps with an urgent letter on December 16, 1942, to camp system administrator Pohl:

*"Efforts absolutely must be taken to reduce the death rate in the concentration camps by improving the nutrition and, whenever possible and necessary, the working conditions. The camp commandants are to be held personally responsible for this."*<sup>28</sup>

Acting on this, SS officer Richard Glücks, head of the WVHA agency that supervised the camps, sent a secret directive on December 28, 1942, to every concentration camp, including Buchenwald, Auschwitz and Majdanek (Lublin). It noted with alarm that more than half of recent arrivals in the camps – 70,000 out of 136,000 – had died. *"With such a high death rate"*, Glücks added, *"the number of prisoners can never be brought to the level ordered by the Reichsführer SS [Himmler]"*.<sup>29</sup>

Glücks went on to order that

*"[...] camp physicians must use all means at their disposal to significantly reduce the death rate in the various camps. [...] More than they have in the past, the camp doctors must supervise the nutrition of the prisoners and, in cooperation with the administration, submit improvement recommendations to the camp commandants. [...] The camp doctors are to see to it that the working conditions at the various labor sites are improved as much as possible."*

The secret directive concluded:

*"The Reichsführer SS has ordered that the death rate absolutely must be reduced."*

Glücks followed up by pointedly informing the concentration camp commandants in January 1943:

*"As I have already pointed out, every means must be used to lower the death rate in the camp."*<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> R. Hilberg, *op. cit.* (note 12), pp. 524-25, 531-32. By 1943, there were some 700,000 Jews in camps in German-occupied Poland alone. Source: *Die Welt* (Bonn/Berlin), Jan. 9, 1986 (or 1985?). Translation in *The German Tribune* (Hamburg), Jan. 19, 1986, p. 5; Also, according to a December 1943 report by the Generalgouvernement (Poland) main labor office, there were about 1.4 million "Jewish workers" in the German-ruled GG of Poland. Source: Albert Speer, *Der Sklavenstaat*, DVA, Stuttgart 1981, p. 398.

<sup>28</sup> Facsimile reprint in *Obozy hitlerowskie na ziemiach polskich 1939-1945*. Panstwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, Warsaw 1979, pp. 135-136.

<sup>29</sup> A. de Cocatrix, *Die Zahl der Opfer der nationalsozialistischen Verfolgung*, International Tracing Service/ICRC, Arolsen 1977, pp. 4-5; Document PS-2171, Annex 2. *Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression*, Washington, DC, 1946-1948 (henceforth *NC&A "red series"*), vol. 4, pp. 833-834; D. Czech (ed.), *op. cit.* (note 23), p. 291.

This directive was quoted, as document E-168, at the main Nuremberg trial by SS defense attorney Dr. Horst Pelckmann on August 7, 1946: *IMT "blue series"*, *op. cit.* (note 3), vol. 20, pp. 434-435. It was also cited by Pelckmann on August 26, 1946: *ibid.*, vol. 21, p. 605.

<sup>30</sup> Document NO-1523. *NMT "green series"*, *op. cit.* (note 19), vol. 5, pp. 372-373.

In a secret order of October 26, 1943, to the commandants of the major camps, including Buchenwald, Auschwitz and Lublin (Majdanek), Pohl laid down specific measures to ensure the health and productivity of the internees.<sup>31</sup> Each commandant, he wrote, was to personally see to it that this directive was brought to the attention of his camp administrator and head camp physician, who had to confirm receipt with their signatures. A copy of the order was sent to Himmler.

Pohl's directive began by stressing the importance of the camps in the war effort:

*"Because of our work during the past two years, the concentration camps now represent a factor of decisive military importance in armaments production. From nothing we have built an armaments works without parallel.*

*In earlier years, because of the educational-rehabilitation purpose that prevailed at the time, it was not important whether the prisoners performed productive work. Now, however, the labor productivity of the prisoners is important, and all measures by commandants, administrators and physicians must be directed above all at maintaining the health and the productivity of the prisoners.*

[...] *In this regard, the following are necessary:*

- 1. Nutrition that is proper and appropriate for the work.*
- 2. Proper and appropriate clothing.*
- 3. Use of every natural means of maintaining good health.*
- 4. Avoidance of all unnecessary exertions unless directly required to maintain productivity."*

Pohl went on to cite specific measures for improving the health and well-being of the prisoners:

*"The mid-day lunch should consist of 1.25 to 1.5 liters – not thin soup, but thick, substantial meals.*

*Receipt of additional [food] parcels is to be encouraged.*

*Meal time and proper digestion requires rest. For this reason, there should be sufficient rest periods at mealtime. No unnecessary marches. The food should be brought to the people, not the people to the food.*

*In addition to warm food, clothing is needed to keep the body warm and protect it from cold. This is especially important in the case of prisoners who work outside.*

*Care must be taken to ensure an undisturbed night-time sleep period of at least seven to eight hours.*

*Roll calls should be kept as brief as possible."*

Pohl also specified that ill prisoners in the sick bays were to receive a special diet to help restore their health, and that good work and helpful suggestions by inmates were to be rewarded with bonuses.

While such measures were not always implemented as ordered, these high-level directives did not fail to have an impact.

Pohl reported to Himmler in September 1943 that the monthly death rate in the camps had fallen from about ten percent in the summer and fall of 1942 to about two percent in August 1943. *"The reduction in the mortality rate"*, he went on, *"is due primarily to the fact that the hygienic measures that have long been demanded have now been carried out, at least to a larger extent"*. Himmler

<sup>31</sup> Pohl order to camp commandants, Oct. 26, 1943. Bundesarchiv (Koblenz), Bestand SS-Wirtschafts-Verwaltungshauptamt. Signatur NS 3/386. Sammlung von Verwaltungsanordnungen, insbes. KL; Quoted at length in *Deutsche National-Zeitung* (Munich), August 12, 1977, pp. 1, 7. Cited in D. Czech (ed.), *op. cit.* (note 23), pp. 514-515.

thanked Pohl for his work, and expressed the belief that the situation would improve still further once better sewerage and sanitary facilities were installed.<sup>32</sup>

## 2. Buchenwald: Legend and Reality

Buchenwald is widely regarded as one of wartime Germany's most notorious "death camps". In fact, though, this carefully cultivated image bears little resemblance to reality. Today, more than half a century after the end of the Second World War, the camp deserves another, more objective look.

### 2.1. History and Function

The Buchenwald concentration camp was located on a wooded hill outside of Weimar. It was opened in July 1937. Until the war years, almost all the inmates were either professional criminals or political prisoners (most of them ardent Communists). Some 2,300 Buchenwald inmates were pardoned in 1939 in honor of Hitler's 50th birthday.

At the outbreak of war in September 1939 the camp population was 5,300. This grew slowly to 12,000 in early 1943, and then increased rapidly as many foreign workers, especially Poles, Ukrainians and Russians, were brought for employment in war production.<sup>33</sup>

During the war years Buchenwald was expanded into a vast complex of more than a hundred satellite factories, mines and work shops spread across a large portion of Germany. The most important of these was probably the Dora underground plant, which produced V-2 missiles. In October 1944 it became the independent Nordhausen (Mittelbau) camp.<sup>34</sup>

Many thousands of Jews arrived at Buchenwald from Hungary and various eastern camps in 1944 and 1945. Most had been evacuated by railroad from Auschwitz and other camps threatened by the advancing Red Army.<sup>35</sup>

The number of inmates increased enormously during the final months of the war: 34,000 in November 1943, 44,000 in April 1944, and 80,000 in August 1944. A monthly peak was reached at the end of February 1945, when 86,000 inmates were crammed into the severely overcrowded camp. Almost 30,000 inmates were evacuated from Buchenwald during the week before the U.S. Army takeover on 11 April 1945. Altogether a total of 239,000 persons were interned in the camp between 1937 and April 1945.<sup>36</sup>

### 2.2. The Commandant and His Wife

The first Commandant, Karl Koch, ran Buchenwald from 1937 until early 1942, when he was transferred to Majdanek. He proved a notoriously brutal and corrupt administrator who enriched himself with valuables stolen from numerous inmates, whom he then had killed to cover up his thefts. The camp physician, Dr. Waldemar Hoven, murdered many inmates in cooperation with

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<sup>32</sup> Pohl to Himmler, Sept. 30, 1943 (and Himmler response). Document 1469-PS. *NMT "green series", op. cit.* (note 19), vol. 5, pp. 379-382.

<sup>33</sup> The information in this section is from two sources: "Buchenwald", Cecil Roth et al. (eds.), *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Macmillan and Keter, New York and Jerusalem 1971, vol. 4, pp. 1442, 1445; and U.S. government report B-2833 of 18 June 1945. Document 2171-PS, published in the *NC&A "red series", op. cit.* (note 29), vol. 4, pp. 800-833.

<sup>34</sup> U.S. Army report of 25 May 1945. Document 2222-PS. Published in *NC&A "red series", op. cit.* (note 29), vol. 4, pp. 860-864; "German-Born NASA Expert...", *New York Times*, 18 October 1984, pp. A1, A12; "Ex-Nazi Denies Role...", *New York Times*, 21 October 1984, p. 8.

<sup>35</sup> Document 2171-PS. *NC&A "red series", op. cit.* (note 29), vol. 4, pp. 800-833.

<sup>36</sup> 2171-PS. *NC&A "red series", op. cit.* (note 29), vol. 4, pp. 832-833.

Koch and the Communist underground camp organization. Koch was eventually charged by an SS court with murder and corruption, found guilty and executed.<sup>37</sup>

His wife, Ilse Koch, was involved in many of her husband's crimes, but the fantastic charge that she had lamp shades and other items manufactured from the skins of murdered inmates is not true. This allegation was made by the United States prosecution team at the main Nuremberg trial.<sup>38</sup>

General Lucius D. Clay, Commander in Chief of U.S. Forces in Europe and Military Governor of the U.S. Occupation Zone of Germany, 1947-49, carefully reviewed the Ilse Koch case in 1948 and found that, whatever her other misdeeds, the lampshade charge was baseless. He commuted her sentence from life imprisonment to four years and informed the Army Department in Washington:

*"There is no convincing evidence that she [Ilse Koch] selected inmates for extermination in order to secure tattooed skins or that she possessed any articles made of human skin."*<sup>39</sup>

During a 1976 interview Clay recalled the case:<sup>40</sup>

*"We tried Ilse Koch. [...] She was sentenced to life imprisonment, and I commuted it to three [four] years. And our press really didn't like that. She had been destroyed by the fact that an enterprising reporter who first went into her house had given her the beautiful name, the "Bitch of Buchenwald," and he had found some white lampshades in there which he wrote up as being made out of human flesh.*

*Well, it turned out actually that it was goat flesh. But at the trial it was still human flesh. It was almost impossible for her to have gotten a fair trial.*

*[...] The Germans picked her up and gave her 12 years for her treatment of her own people. But it wasn't really a war crime in the strict sense of the word.*

*And those are the kinds of things that we had to deal with all the time."*

### 2.3. The Inmates: Life and Death

There is no question that many atrocities were committed against Buchenwald inmates. However, at least a very large portion of them were committed, not by the German SS guards, but by the underground Communist camp organization that gained almost total internal control after 1943. This remarkable situation was confirmed in a detailed U.S. Army intelligence document of 24 April 1945 entitled *Buchenwald: A Preliminary Report*.<sup>41</sup> This confidential analysis remained classified until 1972.

In a short preface, Army intelligence chief Alfred Toombs called this secret report "*one of the most significant accounts yet written on an aspect of life in Nazi Germany*" because it "*tells how the*

<sup>37</sup> Nuremberg testimony of Günther Reinecke, 7 August 1946. Published in the *IMT "blue series"*, *op. cit.* (note 3), vol. 20, pp. 438, 441-442; SS indictment brief against Karl Koch, 11 April 1944. Document NO-2360.

<sup>38</sup> *IMT "blue series"*, *op. cit.* (note 3), vol. 3, pp. 514-515; vol. 5, pp. 220-201; vol. 32, pp. 267ff.

<sup>39</sup> "Clay Explains Cut in Ilse Koch Term", *New York Times*, 24 Sept. 1948, p. 3.

<sup>40</sup> Interview with Lucius D. Clay. *Official Proceedings of the George C. Marshall Research Foundation*. Transcript of a videotape interview shown at the conference "U.S. Occupation in Europe After World War II", 2324 April 1976 at Lexington, Va., sponsored by the George C. Marshall Research Foundation, pp. 37-38. (I am grateful to Robert Wolfe of the National Archives for bringing this interview to my attention.)

<sup>41</sup> Egon W. Fleck and Edward A. Tenenbaum, *Buchenwald: A Preliminary Report*, U.S. Army, 12th Army Group, 24 April 1945. National Archives, Record Group 331, SHAEF, G-5, 17.11, Jacket 10, Box 151 (8929/163-8929/180). I am grateful to Mr. Timothy Mulligan of the Military Branch of the National Archives for bringing this report to my attention. See also Donald B. Robinson, "Communist Atrocities at Buchenwald", *American Mercury*, October 1946, pp. 397-404; and Christopher Burney, *The Dungeon Democracy*, Duell, Sloan and Pearce, New York 1946, pp. 21ff., 28f., 32-34, 44, 46, 49.

[Buchenwald] *prisoners themselves organized a deadly terror within the Nazi terror.*” The general accuracy of the report had been independently confirmed, Toombs added.

As large numbers of foreigners began arriving at the camp during the war years, the confidential report noted, the understaffed SS found it necessary to turn over an ever larger share of camp administration to the inmates themselves. In practice this meant that by 1943 the well-organized and disciplined Communist inmate organization had taken virtually total control of the camp’s internal operation. As the report explained:

*“The trusties had wide powers over their fellow inmates. At first they were drawn almost exclusively from the German criminals. This period lasted until 1942. But gradually the Communists began to gain control of this organization. They were the oldest residents, with records of 10-12 years in the concentration camps [...] They clung together with remarkable tenacity, whereas the criminal elements were simply out for their own individual welfare and had little group cohesiveness. The Communists maintained excellent discipline and received a certain amount of direction from outside the camp. They had brains and technical qualifications for running the various industries established at the camp.*

*Their advances were not made without resistance from the criminals, but gradually the criminals were eliminated from power, partly by intimidation, partly with the aid of the SS. Numbers of the criminals were killed by beatings, hangings, or injections of phenol into the heart or of air or milk into the veins. The injections were a specialty of the camp doctor [Hoven], who became a partisan of the Communist faction.*

*Besides the top positions in the trusty organization, there were a number of key Communist strongholds in the administration of the camp. One was the food supply organization, through which favored groups received reasonable rations while others were brought to the starvation level. A second was the hospital, staffed almost exclusively by Communists. Its facilities were largely devoted to caring for members of their party [...] Another Communist stronghold was the Property Room [...] Each German trusty obtained good clothing and numerous other valuables. The Communists of Buchenwald, after ten or twelve years in concentration camps, are dressed like prosperous business men. Some affect leather jackets and little round caps reminiscent of the German navy, apparently the uniform of revolution.”*

As a result of all this:

*“[...] Instead of a heap of corpses or a disorderly mob of starving, leaderless men, the Americans [who captured the camp] found a disciplined and efficient organization in Buchenwald. Credit is undoubtedly due to the self-appointed Camp Committee, an almost purely Communist group under the domination of the German political leaders.*

*[...] The trusties, who in time became almost exclusively Communist Germans, had the power of life and death over all other inmates. They could sentence a man or a group to almost certain death [...] The Communist trusties were directly responsible for a large part of the brutalities committed at Buchenwald.”*

Communist block chiefs, the report stated, would personally beat their charges and “*sometimes forced whole blocks to stand barefoot in the snow for hours, apparently on their own initiative.*” The Communists killed “*large numbers*” of Polish inmates who refused to submit to their rule. They forced French inmates to give up thousands of Red Cross parcels. The report mentioned several particularly brutal Communist camp leaders by name.

It confirmed that the camp physician, Dr. Hoven, had been an important Communist ally who killed numerous criminal and anti-Communist political prisoners with lethal injections. An SS investigation team uncovered his activities during the war and sentenced him to death for murder. However, because of the critical wartime shortage of doctors, he was reprieved after 18 months in jail. After the war the Communists tried to protect their ally, but Hoven was sentenced to death for a second time by a U.S. military tribunal and executed in 1948.

Camp Communists maintained close relations with the well-organized underground Communist party on the outside.

*“From Buchenwald an inmate went out regularly to establish contact with a Communist courier bringing news and instructions. Bound by his loyalty to the Party, the contact man never made use of his opportunity to escape personally.”*

The Communist camp military organization had three machine guns, fifty rifles and a number of hand grenades. The German Communists lived better than any other group. The report noted:

*“Even now they may be distinguished from the rest of the inmates by their rosy cheeks and robust health, though they have been in concentration camps for much longer than the others.”*

Finally, the report's authors warned against the simplistic and naive notion that former inmates should be trusted and helped just because they had been interned in German camps.

*“Some are in fact ‘bandits,’ criminals from all Europe or foreign workers in Germany who were caught stealing [...] They are brutalized, unpleasant to look on. It is easy to adopt the Nazi theory that they are subhuman.”*

A book published in 1961 by the Communist-run “*International Buchenwald Committee*” of East Berlin proudly describes the wartime activities of the camp's Communist underground. It ran an underground camp newspaper, an illegal radio transmitter, an inmate orchestra (which played Communist songs), a large library and even a military organization. It held Communist ceremonies and political meetings, and carried out extensive sabotage of German war production.<sup>42</sup>

Former Buchenwald inmate Ernst Federn, a Jew, explained after the war how the Communist camp organization cooperated with the SS to increase its own power and eliminate opponents and undesirables. He recalled that the leader of the Jewish section of the Communist camp organization, Emil Carlebach, “*declared quite frankly that for him only his [Communist] friends counted, that everybody else might as well perish.*” Federn reported that he personally witnessed two acts of brutality by Carlebach, who was a Block Senior from 1942 until 1945. In one case he ordered the death of a fellow Jewish inmate for allegedly mistreating inmates at another camp. On another occasion Carlebach personally beat an elderly Jewish inmate from Turkey to death because he had unavoidably relieved himself in the barracks.<sup>43</sup>

Similarly, an Englishman who spent 15 months in Buchenwald reported after the war that the Communist camp organization did not consider the Jewish inmates particularly worth trying to keep alive.<sup>44</sup>

In recent years some homosexual organizations have claimed that thousands of homosexuals were “*systematically exterminated*” in the German concentration camps.<sup>45</sup> While it is true that many were interned as criminals, no homosexual was ever killed by the Germans for that reason alone. It is also worth recalling that during the 1930s and 1940s, homosexual behavior was considered an odious crime in most of the world, including the United States.

A former Buchenwald inmate recalled in 1981:

<sup>42</sup> Internationales Buchenwald-Komitee, *Buchenwald*, Kongress, East Berlin 1961.

<sup>43</sup> Ernst Federn, “*That German...*”, *Harper's*, August 1948, pp. 106f..

<sup>44</sup> Christopher Burney, op. cit. (note 41), pp. 109, 124, 128ff.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Jack Wikoff, “*Der Mythos von der Vernichtung Homosexueller im Dritten Reich*”, *Vierteljahreshefte für freie Geschichtsforschung* 2(2) (1998), pp. 135-139 (online: [vho.org/VffG/1998/2/Wikoff2.html](http://vho.org/VffG/1998/2/Wikoff2.html)). English: *Remarks*, PO Box 234, Aurora (NY), no. 22, 20.4.1997 (editor's note).

“[...] *Homosexuals were oppressed by the Nazis because of their social mores [...] In Buchenwald, a great number of them were not killed by the Nazis, but by political prisoners [Communists], because of the homosexuals’ aggressive and offensive behavior.*”<sup>46</sup>

Day-to-day conditions were much better than most portrayals would suggest. Inmates could both receive and send two letters or postcards monthly. They could receive money from the outside. Inmates were also paid for their labor with special camp currency which they could use to purchase a wide variety of items in the camp canteen. They played soccer, handball and volleyball in their spare time. Soccer matches were held on Saturdays and Sundays on the camp playing field. A large camp library offered a wide range of books. A motion picture theater was very popular. There were also variety shows, and musical groups put on regular concerts in the central square. A camp brothel, which employed 15 prostitutes when the Americans arrived, was available to many inmates.<sup>47</sup>

## 2.4. Extermination Factory?

The Americans who arrived at Buchenwald in April 1945 found hundreds of sick inmates and many unburied corpses in the camp. Horrific photos of these gruesome scenes were immediately circulated throughout the world and have been widely reproduced ever since, giving the impression that Buchenwald was a diabolical mass killing center.

The American government encouraged this impression. A U.S. Army report about Buchenwald prepared for the Supreme Allied Headquarters in Europe and made public at the end of April 1945 declared that the “*mission of the camp*” was “*an extermination factory*”.<sup>48</sup> And two weeks later a U.S. Congressional report on German camps, later used as a Nuremberg trial document, was issued which likewise described Buchenwald as an “*extermination factory*”.<sup>49</sup>

This superficially plausible description is, however, completely wrong. The great majority of those who died at Buchenwald perished during the chaotic final months of the war. They succumbed to disease, often aggravated by malnutrition, in spite of woefully inadequate efforts to keep them alive. They were victims, not of an ‘extermination’ program, but rather of the terrible overcrowding and severe lack of food and medical supplies due to a general collapse of order in Germany during the tumultuous final phase of the war.

Along with these indirect victims of the war were many healthy inmates. B. M. McKelway inspected Buchenwald shortly after the U.S. takeover as one of a group of American newspaper editors and publishers. He reported that “*many of the hundreds of inmates we saw appeared to be healthy while others suffering from dysentery, typhus, tuberculosis and other diseases were living skeletons.*”<sup>50</sup>

<sup>46</sup> *The Jewish Times* (Baltimore). Quoted in “*On the Holocaust*”, *The Gay Paper* (Baltimore), December 1981, p. 2.

<sup>47</sup> John Mendelsohn, “*Sources*”, *Prologue*, National Archives, Washington, DC, Fall 1983, p. 180; Konnilyn G. Feig, *Hitler’s Death Camps*, Holmes and Meier, New York 1981, p. 96; K. Morgen testimony, 7 August 1946, *IMT “blue series”*, *op. cit.* (note 3), vol. 20, p. 490; testimony by former Buchenwald inmate Amost Tauber at Nuremberg ‘I.G. Farben’ trial, 12 Nov. 1947. Printed in Udo Walendy (ed.), *Auschwitz im IG-Farben Prozeß*, Verlag für Volkstum und Zeitgeschichtsforschung, Vlotho 1981, p. 119; Roger Manvell and H. Fraenkel, *The Incomparable Crime*, Putman, New York 1967, p. 155; *Buchenwald Camp: The Report of a Parliamentary Delegation*, HMSO, London 1945, pp. 4f.

<sup>48</sup> “*Official Army Report Lists Buchenwald as Extermination Factory*”, *The Washington Star*, 29 April 1945, p. A7

<sup>49</sup> U.S. Congressional Report on Camps, Doc. 159-L., *IMT “blue series”*, *op. cit.* (note 3), vol. 37, pp. 605-626; and *Congressional Record* (Senate), 15 May 1945, pp. 4576-4582.

<sup>50</sup> B.M. McKelway, “*Buchenwald...*”, *The Washington Star*, 29 April 1945, pp. A1, A7

One striking indication that Buchenwald was not an ‘extermination’ camp is the fact that some of the internees were children too young to work. An estimated one thousand boys, aged two to 16, were housed in two special children’s barracks. Train transports of Jewish children arrived from 1942 to 1945. Some arrived from Auschwitz in 1943. Other Jewish children came from Hungary and Poland.<sup>51</sup> The confidential U.S. Army report of April 24, 1945, noted the “*most remarkable sight of the children*” who “*rush about, shrieking and playing*”.<sup>52</sup>

## 2.5. The Gas Chamber Lie

Perhaps the most vicious lie circulated after the war about Buchenwald is the charge that the Germans exterminated inmates there in gas chambers. An official French government report submitted to the Nuremberg tribunal as a prosecution exhibit imaginatively stated:

*“Everything had been provided for down to the smallest detail. In 1944, at Buchenwald, they had even lengthened a railway line so that the deportees might be led directly to the gas chamber. Certain [of the gas chambers] had a floor that tipped and immediately directed the bodies into the room with the crematory oven.”*<sup>53</sup>

The chief British prosecutor at the main Nuremberg trial, Sir Hartley Shawcross, declared in his closing address that “*murder [was] conducted like some mass production industry in the gas chambers and the ovens*” of Buchenwald and other camps.<sup>54</sup>

In a book published in 1947, French priest Georges Henocque, former chaplain of the Saint-Cyr Military Academy, claimed to have visited the inside of a Buchenwald gas chamber, which he described in detail. This particular story has been cited as a good example of the kind of Holocaust lies which even prominent personalities are capable of inventing.<sup>55</sup>

Another French priest and former inmate, Jean-Paul Renard, made a similar claim about the camp in his own book published shortly after the war:

*“I saw thousands and thousands of persons going into the showers. Instead of liquid, asphyxiating gases poured out over them.”*

When fellow Frenchman and former Buchenwald inmate Paul Rassinier pointed out to the priest that there was no gas chamber in the camp, Renard replied:

*“Right, but that’s only a figure of speech [...] and since those things existed somewhere, it’s not important.”*<sup>56</sup>

In a book published in 1948, Hungarian Jewish writer Eugene Levai charged that the Germans killed tens of thousands of Hungarian Jews at Buchenwald in gas chambers.<sup>57</sup>

A widely distributed booklet issued by the Jewish Anti-Defamation League of B’nai B’rith also spread the tale that people were gassed at Buchenwald.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. A7; affidavit of H. Wilhelm Hamman of 6 March 1947. NO-2328. Hamman was an inmate from 1938 until April 1945.

<sup>52</sup> E.W. Fleck and E.A. Tenenbaum, *op. cit.* (note 41), p. 14; see also the photo of Jewish children inmates at Buchenwald in Robert Abzug, *Inside the Vicious Heart*, Oxford, New York 1985, pp. 148f.

<sup>53</sup> Nuremberg document 274-F (RF-301). *IMT “blue series”*, *op. cit.* (note 3), vol. 37, p. 148.

<sup>54</sup> *IMT “blue series”*, *op. cit.* (note 3), vol. 19, p. 434; *NC&A “red series”*, *op. cit.* (note 29), suppl. vol. A, p. 61.

<sup>55</sup> Georges Henocque, *Les Autres de la Bête*, G. Duraissie, Paris 1947, p. 115. Facsimile reprint and commentary in Robert Faurisson, *Mémoire en Défense*, La Vieille Taupe, Paris 1980, pp. 185-191.

<sup>56</sup> Paul Rassinier, *Debunking the Genocide Myth*, The Noontide Press, Torrance, CA, 1978, pp. 129f.: cf. more recently: Paul Rassinier, *The Holocaust Story and the Lies of Ulysses*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Institute for Historical Review, New Port Beach 1990.

<sup>57</sup> Eugene Levai, *Black Book on the Martyrdom of Hungarian Jewry*, Zurich 1948, p. 439.

In 1960 the Buchenwald gassing story was officially declared a fable. As mentioned before, in that year, Martin Broszat of the anti-Hitler Institute for Contemporary History in Munich specifically stated that no one was ever gassed at Buchenwald.<sup>8</sup> Professor A.S. Balachowsky, a member of the Institut de France, likewise declared in November 1971:

*“I would like to confirm to you that no gas chamber as such existed at Buchenwald [...].”*<sup>59</sup>

Holocaust writer Konnilyn Feig conceded in her book, *Hitler’s Death Camps*, that Buchenwald did not have a gas chamber.<sup>60</sup> Today no serious historian still claims gassings there.

## 2.6. How Many Perished?

The numbers of persons estimated to have perished at Buchenwald while it was under German control vary tremendously. According to former inmate Elie Wiesel, the prolific Jewish writer and 1986 Nobel Peace Prize recipient, *“In Buchenwald they sent 10,000 to their deaths every day.”*<sup>61</sup> This wildly irresponsible statement is, unfortunately, all too typical of the glib rhetoric of the man who was also chosen to head the U.S. government’s official Holocaust Memorial Council.

The 1980 edition of the *World Book Encyclopedia* claimed that *“more than 100,000”* died in the camp.<sup>62</sup> The *Encyclopaedia Judaica* put the number at 56,549.<sup>63</sup> Raul Hilberg, writing in the 1982 edition of the *Encyclopedia Americana*, stated that *“more than 50,000 died in the Buchenwald Complex”*.<sup>64</sup>

The U.S. Army intelligence report of April 24, 1945, (cited above) noted that the total number of certified deaths was 32,705.<sup>65</sup> A detailed June 1945 U.S. government report about Buchenwald put the total at 33,462, of whom more than 20,000 died in the chaotic final months of the war.<sup>66</sup>

The authoritative International Tracing Service of Arolsen, an affiliate of the International Red Cross, stated in 1984 that the number of documented deaths (of both Jews and non-Jews) at Buchenwald was 20,671, with another 7,463 for Dom (Mittelbau).<sup>67</sup>

While even these lower figures are regrettably high, it is important to realize that the great majority of those who died at Buchenwald were unfortunate victims of a catastrophic war, not German policy. Most of the rest were murdered by order of the Communist underground camp organization. Several hundred were also killed in Allied bombing attacks.

In one air raid against a large munitions factory near the main camp, British bombers killed 750 persons, including 400 inmates.<sup>68</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Earl Raab, *The Anatomy of Nazism*, ADL, New York 1979, photo caption opposite page 21. The Buchenwald gassing myth was also propagated in Francis Tomczuk, *“Days of Remembrance”*, *American Legion Magazine*, April 1985, p. 23.

<sup>59</sup> Germaine Tillion, *op. cit.* (note 10), p. 231.

<sup>60</sup> K. Feig, *op. cit.* (note 47), p. 100.

<sup>61</sup> Stefan Kanfer, *“Author, Teacher, Witness”*, *Time magazine*, 18 March 1985, p. 79.

<sup>62</sup> *“Buchenwald”*, in Clarence L. Barnhart, Robert K. Barnhart (eds.), *World Book Encyclopedia*, Doubleday, Chicago/London, vol. 2, p. 550.

<sup>63</sup> *“Buchenwald”*, *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, *op. cit.* (note 33), vol. 4, p. 1445.

<sup>64</sup> R. Hilberg, *“Buchenwald”*, in Bernard S. Cayne (ed.), *Encyclopedia Americana*, Americana Corporation, New York 1982, vol. 4, p. 677.

<sup>65</sup> E. Fleck and E. Tenenbaum, *op. cit.* (note 41), p. 18.

<sup>66</sup> 2171-PS. *NC&A “red series”*, *op. cit.* (note 29), vol. 4, p. 801.

<sup>67</sup> Statement by Arolsen registry official Butterweck, 16 Jan. 1984. Facsimile in *Deutsche National-Zeitung* (Munich), Nr. 18, 27 April 1984, p. 10.

<sup>68</sup> *Buchenwald Camp: ...*, *op. cit.* (note 47), p. 5; 2171-PS. *NC&A “red series”*, *op. cit.* (note 29), vol. 4, p. 821.

## 2.7. American and Soviet Atrocities

Following the American takeover of Buchenwald in April 1945, about 80 remaining German guards and camp functionaries were summarily murdered. Inmates brutally beat the Germans to death, sometimes with the aid and encouragement of American soldiers.<sup>69</sup> Between 20 and 30 GIs took turns gleefully beating six young Germans to death.<sup>70</sup> Inmates also commandeered American jeeps and drove to nearby Weimar, where they looted and randomly killed German civilians.<sup>71</sup>

After the war the Soviet secret police operated Buchenwald as a concentration camp for “*potential class enemies*” and other “*possibly dangerous*” German civilians. In September 1949, more than four years after the end of the war, there were still 14,300 inmates in the “*special camp*”. (While Buchenwald was under German control, the number of inmates did not reach 14,000 until May 1943.) Conditions were horrible. Even the Soviet official in charge of the concentration camps in Germany, General Merkulov, acknowledged the severe lack of order and cleanliness, particularly at Buchenwald. At least 13,000 and as many as 21,000 persons died in Soviet-run Buchenwald, but no one has ever been punished for the deaths and mistreatment in this notorious postwar camp.<sup>72</sup>

One former inmate described his “*five years of horrible seclusion, humiliations, interrogations and annihilation*” in the Soviet-run camp in these words:<sup>73</sup>

*“People were mere numbers. Their dignity was consciously trampled upon. They were starved without mercy and consumed by tuberculosis until they were skeletons. The annihilation process, which had been well tested over decades, was systematic. The cries and groans of those in pain still echo in my ears whenever the past comes back to me in sleepless nights. We had to watch helplessly as people perished according to plan – like creatures sacrificed to annihilation.”*

*Many nameless people were caught up in the annihilation machinery of the NKVD [Soviet secret police] after the collapse of 1945. They were herded together like cattle after the so-called liberation and vegetated in the many concentration camps. Many were systematically tortured to death. A memorial was built for the dead of the Buchenwald concentration camp. A figure of death victims was chosen based on fantasy. Intentionally, only the dead of the 1937-1945 period were honored. Why is there no memorial honoring the dead of 1945 to 1950? Countless mass graves were dug around the camp in the postwar period.”*

In an act of stunning hypocrisy, the Communist rulers of the post-war ‘German Democratic Republic’ have turned the Buchenwald camp area into a kind of secular shrine. Every year, hundreds of thousands visit the site, complete with museums, bell tower, monumental sculpture and memorials dedicated, ironically enough, to the “*victims of fascism*”.<sup>74</sup> There is nothing to remind visitors of the thousands of forgotten Germans who perished miserably during the years after the war when the camp was run by the Soviets.

<sup>69</sup> Robert Abzug, *op. cit.* (note 52), pp. 49, 52.

<sup>70</sup> Marguerite Higgins, *News Is a Singular Thing*, Doubleday, Garden City, N.Y., 1955, pp. 78f.

<sup>71</sup> Elie Wiesel, *Legends of Our Time*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York 1968, p. 140; Raul Hilberg, *op. cit.* (note 12), p. 987.

<sup>72</sup> “*Bis 1950: Buchenwald und Sachsenhausen*”, *Amerika Woche* (Chicago), 11 May 1985, p. 3; “*Im Todeslager der Sowjets*”, *Deutsche National-Zeitung* (Munich), Nr. 47, 15 Nov. 1985, p. 4; “*Soviet Camps Busy, Berlin Paper Says*”, *New York Times*, 10 Sept. 1949, p. 6.

<sup>73</sup> Letter by E. Krombholz of Aschaffenburg, “*Erlebnisbericht aus einem Sowjet-KZ*”, *Deutsche National-Zeitung* (Munich), Nr. 11, 9 March 1984, p. 10; see also sketches of conditions in Soviet-run Buchenwald by former inmate Dr. Heinz Möller in *Deutsche National-Zeitung* (Munich), Nr. 6, 3 Feb. 1984, p. 5.

<sup>74</sup> “*Nazi Death Camp...*” (AP) *Gazette-Telegraph* (Colorado Springs, Col.), 1 July 1984, p. H12; “*At Buchenwald...*”, *New York Times*, 14 April 1985, pp. 1, 29.

The story of Buchenwald, like the story of virtually every German wartime concentration camp, is a microcosm of the entire Holocaust tale. The widely-accepted portrayal of Buchenwald, like those of the other German camps, contrasts sharply with the little-known reality.

### 3. Bergen-Belsen Camp: The Suppressed Story

Fifty-five years ago, on April 15, 1945, British troops liberated the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. The anniversary was widely remembered in official ceremonies and in newspaper articles that, as the following essay shows, distort the camp's true history. Largely because of the circumstances of its liberation, the relatively unimportant German concentration camp of Bergen-Belsen has become along with Dachau and Buchenwald – an international symbol of German barbarism.

The British troops who liberated the Belsen camp three weeks before the end of the war were shocked and disgusted by the many unburied corpses and dying inmates they found there. Horrific photos and films of the camp's emaciated corpses and mortally sick inmates were quickly circulated around the globe. Within weeks the British military occupation newspaper proclaimed:

*“The story of that greatest of all exhibitions of ‘man’s inhumanity to man’ which was Belsen Concentration Camp is known throughout the world.”*<sup>75</sup>

Ghastly images, recorded by Allied photographers at Belsen in mid-April 1945 and widely reproduced ever since, have greatly contributed to the camp's reputation as a notorious extermination center. In fact, the dead of Bergen-Belsen were, above all, unfortunate victims of war and its turmoil, not deliberate policy. It can even be argued that they were as much victims of Allied as of German measures.

The Bergen-Belsen camp was located near Hannover in northwestern Germany on the site of a former army camp for wounded prisoners of war. In 1943 it was established as an internment camp (*Aufenthaltslager*) for European Jews who were to be exchanged for German citizens held by the Allies.

More than 9,000 Jews with citizenship papers or passports from Latin American countries, entry visas for Palestine, or other documents making them eligible for emigration, arrived in late 1943 and 1944 from Poland, France, Holland and other parts of Europe. During the final months of the war, several groups of these “*exchange Jews*” were transported from Axis-occupied Europe. German authorities transferred several hundred to neutral Switzerland, and at least one group of 222 Jewish detainees was transferred from Belsen (by way of neutral Turkey) to British-controlled Palestine.<sup>76</sup>

Until late 1944 conditions were generally better than in other concentration camps. Marika Frank Abrams, a Jewish woman from Hungary, was transferred from Auschwitz in 1944. Years later she recalled her arrival at Belsen:

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<sup>75</sup> Walter Laqueur, *The Terrible Secret: Suppression of the Truth about Hitler's “Final Solution”*, Little Brown, Boston 1980, p. 1.

<sup>76</sup> Testimony of Commandant Kramer in Raymond Phillips (ed.), *Trial of Josef Kramer and Forty-Four Others (The Belsen Trial)*, William Hodge, London 1949, p. 160; “*Bergen-Belsen*”, *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, *op. cit.* (note 33), vol. 4, p. 610. According to this source, one group of 136 of these “*exchange Jews*” was deported from Belsen during the war to neutral Switzerland, and another group of 222 was transferred to Palestine; according to an Israeli newspaper report, a group of 222 “*exchange*” Jews reportedly left Bergen-Belsen on June 29, 1944, and, by way of Istanbul, arrived in Palestine on July 10. (*Israel Nachrichten*, quoted in *Deutsche National-Zeitung*, Munich, Sept. 23, 1994, p. 5)

"[...] We were each given two blankets and a dish. There was running water and latrines. We were given food that was edible and didn't have to stand for hours to be counted. The conditions were so superior to Auschwitz we felt we were practically in a sanitarium."<sup>77</sup>

Inmates normally received three meals a day. Coffee and bread were served in the morning and evening, with cheese and sausage as available. The main mid-day meal consisted of one liter of vegetable stew. Families lived together. Otherwise, men and women were housed in separate barracks.<sup>78</sup> Children were also held there. There were some 500 Jewish children in Belsen's "*No. 1 Women's Camp*" section when British forces arrived.<sup>79</sup>

During the final months of the war, tens of thousands of Jews were evacuated to Belsen from Auschwitz and other eastern camps threatened by the advancing Soviets. Belsen became severely overcrowded as the number of inmates increased from 15,000 in December 1944 to 42,000 at the beginning of March 1945, and more than 50,000 a month later.<sup>80</sup>

Many of these Jewish prisoners had chosen to be evacuated westwards with their German captors rather than remain in eastern camps to await liberation by Soviet forces.<sup>81</sup>

So catastrophic had conditions become during the final months of the war that about a third of the prisoners evacuated to Belsen in February and March 1945 perished during the journey and were dead on arrival.<sup>82</sup>

As order broke down across Europe during those chaotic final months, regular deliveries of food and medicine to the camp stopped. Foraging trucks were sent to scrounge up whatever supplies of bread, potatoes and turnips were available in nearby towns.<sup>83</sup>

<sup>77</sup> Sylvia Rothchild (ed.), *Voices from the Holocaust*, New American Library, New York 1981, p. 190.

<sup>78</sup> Josef Kramer statement (1945) in R. Phillips (ed.), *op. cit.* (note 76), pp. 731-737. This is also in Arthur Butz, *The Hoax of the Twentieth Century*, Institute for Historical Review, Newport Beach 1993, pp. 272ff.

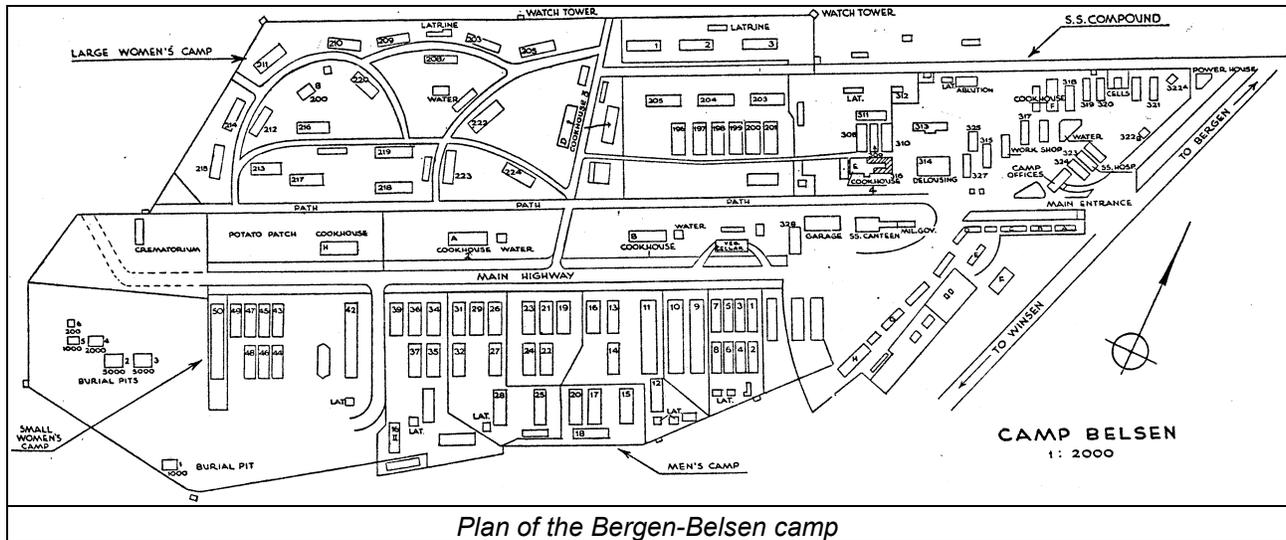
<sup>79</sup> R. Phillips (ed.), *op. cit.* (note 76), pp. 19, 32f.; Roman Hrabar, with Zofia Tokarz and J. E. Wilezur, *The Fate of Polish Children During the Last War*, Interpress, Warsaw 1981, p. 76.

<sup>80</sup> *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, *op. cit.* (note 33), vol. 4, p. 610; *Gedenkbuch: Opfer der Verfolgung der Juden unter der nationalsozialistischen Gewaltherrschaft*, 2 vols., Bundesarchiv, Koblenz 1986, pp. 1761f.

<sup>81</sup> Testimony of Dr. Russell Barton, Feb. 7, 1985, in the first "*Holocaust*" trial of Ernst Zündel. Official trial transcript, pp. 2916-2917; See also Barton's testimony during the second, 1988 Zündel trial in Barbara Kulaszka (ed.), *Did Six Million Really Die?*, Samisdat, Toronto 1992, p. 175, and, Robert Lenski, *The Holocaust on Trial: The Case of Ernst Zündel*, Reporter Press, Decatur, Ala., 1990, p. 159.

<sup>82</sup> Testimony of Commandant Kramer in R. Phillips (ed.), *op. cit.* (note 76), p. 162.

<sup>83</sup> Josef Kramer statement (1945) in R. Phillips (ed.), *op. cit.* (note 76), pp. 731-737. Also in A. Butz, *op. cit.* (note 78), p. 274.



### 3.1. Epidemic

Disease was kept under control by routinely disinfecting all new arrivals. But in early February 1945 a large transport of Hungarian Jews was admitted while the disinfection facility was out of order. As a result, typhus broke out and quickly spread beyond control.<sup>84</sup> This disease was the worst killer, but typhoid fever and dysentery also claimed many lives. Aggravating the situation was a policy during the final months of transferring already sick inmates from other camps to Belsen, which was then officially designated a sick or convalescence camp (*Krankenlager*). The sick women of Auschwitz, for example, were transferred to Belsen in three groups in November-December 1944.<sup>85</sup>

Commandant Josef Kramer quarantined the camp in an effort to save lives, but SS camp administration headquarters in Berlin insisted that Belsen be kept open to receive still more Jewish evacuees arriving from the East. The death rate soon rose to 400 a day.<sup>86</sup>

When SS chief Heinrich Himmler learned of the typhus outbreak at Bergen-Belsen, he immediately issued an order to all appropriate officials requiring that

“[...] all medical means necessary to combat the epidemic should be employed [...] There can be no question of skimping either with doctors or medical supplies.”

However, the general breakdown of order that prevailed on Germany by this time made it impossible to implement the command.<sup>87</sup>

<sup>84</sup> Derrick Sington, *Belsen Uncovered*, Duckworth, London 1946, pp. 117f. Quoted in A. Butz, *op. cit.* (note 78), pp. 34f.; Gerald Reitlinger, *op. cit.* (note 19), p. 504 (note).

<sup>85</sup> G. Reitlinger, *op. cit.* (note 19), p. 497 (and 638, n. 23).

<sup>86</sup> R. Phillips (ed.), *op. cit.* (note 76), pp. 152f., 166f., 734, 736; Tom Bower, *Blind Eye to Murder*, Granada, London 1983, p. 224; Dr. Ernst von Briesen, “Was passierte in Bergen-Belsen wirklich?“, *Deutsche National-Zeitung* (Munich), Jan. 13, 1984, pp. 4f., 8.

<sup>87</sup> Andre Biss, *A Million Jews to Save*, A.S. Barnes, New York 1975, pp. 242, 249f.; Felix Kersten, *The Kersten Memoirs, 1940-1945*, Macmillan, New York 1957, p. 276.

### 3.2. 'Belsen Worst'

Violette Fintz, a Jewish woman who had been deported from the island of Rhodes to Auschwitz in mid-1944, and then to Dachau and, finally, in early 1945, to Belsen, later compared conditions in the different camps:<sup>88</sup>

*"Belsen was in the beginning bearable and we had bunks to sleep on, and a small ration of soup and bread. But as the camp got fuller, our group and many others were given a barracks to hold about seven hundred lying on the floor without blankets and without food or anything. It was a pitiful scene as the camp was attacked by lice and most of the people had typhus and cholera [...] Many people talk about Auschwitz – it was a horrible camp. But Belsen, no words can describe it [...] From my experience and suffering, Belsen was the worst."*

Belsen's most famous inmate was doubtless Anne Frank, who had been evacuated from Auschwitz in late October 1944. She succumbed to typhus in March 1945, three or four weeks before liberation.

### 3.3. Kramer Reports a 'Catastrophe'

In a March 1, 1945, letter to *Gruppenführer* (General) Richard Glücks, head of the SS camp administration agency, Commandant Kramer reported in detail on the catastrophic situation in the Bergen-Belsen, and pleaded for help.<sup>89</sup>

*"If I had sufficient sleeping accommodation at my disposal, then the accommodation of the detainees who have already arrived and of those still to come would appear more possible. In addition to this question a spotted fever and typhus epidemic has now begun, which increases in extent every day. The daily mortality rate, which was still in the region of 60-70 at the beginning of February, has in the meantime attained a daily average of 250-300 and will increase still further in view of the conditions which at present prevail."*

*Supply. When I took over the camp, winter supplies for 1500 internees had been indented for [...]; some had been received, but the greater part had not been delivered. This failure was due not only to difficulties of transport, but also to the fact that practically nothing is available in this area and all must be brought from outside the area [...]*

*For the last four days there has been no delivery [of food] from Hannover owing to interrupted communications, and I shall be compelled, if this state of affairs prevails till the end of the week, to fetch bread also by means of truck from Hannover. The trucks allotted to the local unit are in no way adequate for this work, and I am compelled to ask for at least three to four trucks and five to six trailers. When I once have here a means of towing then I can send out the trailers into the surrounding area [...]. The supply question must, without fail, be cleared up in the next few days. I ask you, Gruppenführer, for an allocation of transport [...]*

*State of Health. The incidence of disease is very high here in proportion to the number of detainees. When you interviewed me on Dec. 1, 1944, at Oranienburg, you told me that Bergen-Belsen was to serve as a sick camp for all concentration camps in north Germany. The number of sick has greatly increased, particularly on account of the transports of detainees that have arrived from the East in recent times – these transports have sometimes spent eight or fourteen days in open trucks [...]*

*The fight against spotted fever is made extremely difficult by the lack of means of disinfection. Due to constant use, the hot-air delousing machine is now in bad working order and sometimes fails for several days [...]*

<sup>88</sup> Martin Gilbert, *The Holocaust*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York 1986, pp. 722, 785f.

<sup>89</sup> R. Phillips (ed.), *op. cit.* (note 76), pp. 163-166.

*A catastrophe is taking place for which no one wishes to assume responsibility [...] Gruppenführer, I can assure you that from this end everything will be done to overcome the present crisis [...]*

*I am now asking you for your assistance as it lies in your power. In addition to the above-mentioned points I need here, before everything, accommodation facilities, beds, blankets, eating utensils – all for about 20,000 internees [...] I implore your help in overcoming this situation.”*

Under such terrible conditions, Kramer did everything in his power to reduce suffering and prevent death among the inmates, even appealing to the hard-pressed German army – “*I don’t know what else to do*” – he told high-ranking army officers.

*“I have reached the limit. Masses of people are dying. The drinking water supply has broken down. A trainload of food was destroyed by low-flying [Allied] war planes. Something must be done immediately.”<sup>90</sup>*

Working together with both Commandant Kramer and chief inmate representative Kuestermeier, Colonel Hanns Schmidt responded by arranging for the local volunteer fire department to provide water. He also saw to it that food supplies were brought to the camp from abandoned rail cars. Schmidt later recalled that Kramer

*“[...] did not at all impress one as a criminal type. He acted like an upright and rather honorable man. Neither did he strike me as someone with a guilty conscience. He worked with great dedication to improve conditions in the camp. For example, he rounded up horse drawn vehicles to bring food to the camp from rail cars that had been shot up.”<sup>90</sup>*

“*I was swamped*”, Kramer later explained to incredulous British military interrogators:<sup>91</sup>

*“The camp was not really inefficient before you [British and American forces] crossed the Rhine. There was running water, regular meals of a kind – I had to accept what food I was given for the camp and distribute it the best way I could. But then they suddenly began to send me trainloads of new prisoners from all over Germany. It was impossible to cope with them. I appealed for more staff, more food. I was told that this was impossible. I had to carry on with what I had.*

*Then as a last straw the Allies bombed the electric plant that pumped our water. Loads of food were unable to reach the camp because of the Allied fighters. Then things really got out of hand. During the last six weeks I have been helpless. I did not even have sufficient staff to bury the dead, let alone segre-*



*Mass grave at Belsen camp, shortly after its liberation by British troops. Photographs such as this are widely reproduced as proof of a German policy of extermination. Contrary to Allied propaganda claims of the time, and Holocaust allegations in recent decades, though, these unfortunate prisoners were victims of typhus and starvation that were indirect consequences of the war – not of any deliberate policy. At least 14,000 Jews died in the camp following the British takeover.*

<sup>90</sup> Signed report by retired Colonel (Oberst a.D.) Hanns Schmidt to Kurt Mehner and Lt. Colonel Bechtold, Braunschweig, March 3, 1981. Photocopy in author’s possession.

<sup>91</sup> Essay by Alan Moorehead, “*Belsen*”, in Cyril Connolly (ed.), *The Golden Horizon*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London 1953, pp. 109f.

*gate the sick [...] I tried to get medicines and food for the prisoners and I failed. I was swamped. I may have been hated, but I was doing my duty."*

Kramer's clear conscience is also suggested by the fact that he made no effort to save his life by fleeing, but instead calmly awaited the approaching British forces, naively confident of decent treatment. Later he stated:

*"When Belsen Camp was eventually taken over by the Allies, I was quite satisfied that I had done all I possibly could under the circumstances to remedy the conditions in the camp."*<sup>92</sup>

### 3.4. Negotiated Transfer

As British forces approached Bergen-Belsen, German authorities sought to turn over the camp to the British so that it would not become a combat zone. After some negotiation, it was peacefully transferred, with an agreement that *"both British and German troops will make every effort to avoid battle in the area."*<sup>93</sup>

A revealing account of the circumstances under which the British took control appeared in a 1945 issue of *The Journal of the American Medical Association*:<sup>94</sup>

*"By negotiations between British and German officers, British troops took over from the SS and the Wehrmacht the task of guarding the vast concentration camp at Belsen, a few miles northwest of Celle, which contains 60,000 prisoners, many of them political. This has been done because typhus is rampant in the camp and it is vital that no prisoners be released until the infection is checked. The advancing British agreed to refrain from bombing or shelling the area of the camp, and the Germans agreed to leave behind an armed guard which would be allowed to return to their own lines a week after the British arrival.*

*The story of the negotiations is curious. Two German officers presented themselves before the British outposts and explained that there were 9,000 sick in the camp and that all sanitation had failed. They proposed that the British should occupy the camp at once, as the responsibility was international in the interests of health. In return for the delay caused by the truce the Germans offered to surrender intact the bridges over the river Aller. After brief consideration the British senior officer rejected the German proposals, saying it was necessary that the British should occupy an area of ten kilometers round the camp in order to be sure of keeping their troops and lines of communication away from the disease. The British eventually took over the camp."*

### 3.5. Brutal Mistreatment

On April 15, 1945, Belsen's commanders turned over the camp to British troops, who lost no time mistreating the SS camp personnel. The Germans were beaten with rifle butts, kicked, and stabbed with bayonets. Most were shot or worked to death.<sup>95</sup> British journalist Alan Moorehead described the treatment of some of the camp personnel shortly after the takeover:<sup>96</sup>

*"As we approached the cells of the SS guards, the [British] sergeant's language become ferocious. 'We had had an interrogation this morning', the captain said. 'I'm afraid they are not a pretty sight.' [...]"*

<sup>92</sup> Josef Kramer statement (1945) in R. Phillips (ed.), *op. cit.* (note 76), p. 737. Also quoted in A. Butz, *op. cit.* (note 78), p. 275; Essay by Alan Moorehead, *op. cit.* (note 91); Dr. Russell Barton, "Belsen", in Basil Liddell Hart, Barrie Pitt (eds.), *History of the Second World War*, Purnell, Paulton (Som.) 1966, Part 109, 1975, p. 3025.

<sup>93</sup> R. Phillips (ed.), *op. cit.* (note 76), pp. 396-397.

<sup>94</sup> "Typhus Causes a Truce", *The Journal of the American Medical Association* (Chicago), May 19, 1945, p. 220.

<sup>95</sup> Leonard O. Mosley, *Report from Germany* (1945). Quoted in Montgomery Belgion, *Victors Justice*, Regnery, Hinsdale, Ill., 1949, p. 80 (and p. 81); *Time* magazine, April 29, 1985, p. 21; See also essay by A. Moorehead, *op. cit.* (note 91), London 1953, pp. 105f.

<sup>96</sup> A. Moorehead, *ibid.*

*The sergeant unbolted the first door and [...] strode into the cell, jabbing a metal spike in front of him. 'Get up', he shouted. 'Get up. Get up, you dirty bastards.' There were half a dozen men lying or half lying on the floor. One or two were able to pull themselves erect at once. The man nearest me, his shirt and face spattered with blood, made two attempts before he got on to his knees and then gradually on to his feet. He stood with his arms stretched out in front of him, trembling violently.*

*'Come on. Get up', the sergeant shouted [in the next cell]. The man was lying in his blood on the floor, a massive figure with a heavy head and bedraggled beard [...] 'Why don't you kill me?' he whispered. 'Why don't you kill me? I can't stand it any more.' The same phrases dribbled out of his lips over and over again. 'He's been saying that all morning, the dirty bastard', the sergeant said."*

Commandant Kramer, who was vilified in the British and American press as "*The Beast of Belsen*" and "*The Monster of Belsen*", was put on trial and then executed, along with chief physician Dr. Fritz Klein and other camp officials. At his trial, Kramer's defense attorney, Major T.C.M. Winwood, predicted:

*"When the curtain finally rings down on this stage Josef Kramer will, in my submission, stand forth not as 'The Beast of Belsen' but as 'The Scapegoat of Belsen'."*<sup>97</sup>

In an 'act of revenge', the British liberators expelled the residents of the nearby town of Bergen, and then permitted camp inmates to loot the houses and buildings. Much of the town was also set on fire.<sup>98</sup>

### 3.6. Postwar Deaths

There were some 55,000 to 60,000 prisoners in Bergen-Belsen when the British took control of the camp. The new administrators proved no more capable of mastering the chaos than the Germans had been, and some 14,000 Jewish inmates died at Belsen in the months following the British takeover.<sup>99</sup>

Although still occasionally referred to as an 'extermination camp' or 'mass murder' center, the truth about Bergen-Belsen has been quietly acknowledged by scholars.<sup>100</sup> In his 1978 survey of German history, University of Erlangen professor Hellmut Diwald<sup>101</sup> wrote of

*"[...] The notorious Bergen-Belsen concentration camp where 50,000 inmates were supposedly murdered. Actually, about 7,000 inmates died during the period when the camp existed, from 1943 to 1945. Most of them died in the final months of the war as a result of disease and malnutrition – consequences of the bombings that had completely disrupted normal deliveries of medical supplies and food. The British commander who took control of the camp after the capitulation testified that crimes on a large scale had not taken place at Bergen-Belsen."*



Josef Kramer in British captivity. After a military trial, the former Bergen-Belsen Commandant was put to death.

<sup>97</sup> R. Phillips (ed.), *op. cit.* (note 76), p. 156.

<sup>98</sup> "Bergen-Belsen", *Der Spiegel* (Hamburg), Nr. 30, 1985, pp. 71f.

<sup>99</sup> "Holocaust", *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, *op. cit.* (note 33), vol. 8, p. 859; M. Gilbert, *op. cit.* (note 88), pp. 793ff.; See also R. Phillips (ed.), *op. cit.* (note 76), pp. 20, 46f.; According to a 1992 *Associated Press* report, more than 60,000 prisoners were held in Belsen camp when it was liberated. Then, "in the first five days of liberation, 14,000 prisoners died and another 14,000 perished in the following weeks." Graham Heathcote, *AP* from Tostock, England, "2 hours changed me for the rest of my life", *Orlando Sentinel* (Florida), Dec. 20, 1992, p. A 29, and, "Journey into hell", *The Spokesman-Review* (Spokane, Washington), Dec. 20, 1992.

<sup>100</sup> *Time* magazine, April 29, 1985, p. 21, referred to Belsen as a camp created for the "extermination" of "the Jewish people".

<sup>101</sup> Hellmut Diwald, *Geschichte der Deutschen*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed., Propyläen, Frankfurt 1978, pp. 164f.

Martin Broszat, Director of the Institute for Contemporary History in Munich, wrote in 1976:<sup>102</sup>

“[...] In Bergen-Belsen, for example, thousands of corpses of Jewish prisoners were found by British soldiers on the day of liberation, which gave the impression that this was one of the notorious extermination camps. Actually, many Jews in Bergen-Belsen as well as in the satellite camps of Dachau died in the last weeks before the end of the war as a result of the quickly improvised retransfers and evacuations of Jewish workers from the still existing ghettos, work camps and concentration camps in the East (Auschwitz) [...]”

Dr. Russell Barton, an English physician who spent a month in Bergen-Belsen after the war with the British Army, has also explained the reasons for the catastrophic conditions found there.<sup>103</sup>

“Most people attributed the conditions of the inmates to deliberate intention on the part of the Germans in general and the camp administrators in particular. Inmates were eager to cite examples of brutality and neglect, and visiting journalists from different countries interpreted the situation according to the needs of propaganda at home.

For example, one newspaper emphasized the wickedness of the “German masters” by remarking that some of the 10,000 unburied dead were naked. In fact, when the dead were taken from a hut and left in the open for burial, other prisoners would take their clothing from them [...]

German medical officers told me that it had been increasingly difficult to transport food to the camp for some months. Anything that moved on the autobahns was likely to be bombed [...]

I was surprised to find records, going back for two or three years, of large quantities of food cooked daily for distribution. I became convinced, contrary to popular opinion, that there had never been a policy of deliberate starvation. This was confirmed by the large numbers of well-fed inmates. Why then were so many people suffering from malnutrition? [...] The major reasons for the state of Belsen were disease, gross overcrowding by central authority, lack of law and order within the huts, and inadequate supplies of food, water and drugs.

In trying to assess the causes of the conditions found in Belsen one must be alerted to the tremendous visual display, ripe for purposes of propaganda, that masses of starved corpses presented.”

### 3.7. Gas Chamber Myths

Some former inmates and a few historians have claimed that Jews were put to death in gas chambers at Bergen-Belsen. For example, a significant work published shortly after the end of the war, *A History of World War II*, informed readers:

“In Belsen, [Commandant] Kramer kept an orchestra to play him Viennese music while he watched children torn from their mothers to be burned alive. Gas chambers disposed of thousands of persons daily.”<sup>104</sup>

<sup>102</sup> M. Broszat, “Zur Kritik der Publizistik des antisemitischen Rechtsextremismus”, Supplement B 19/76 of May 8, 1976, to the weekly newspaper *Das Parlament* (Bonn), p. 6. Revised from issue No. 2, 1976, of the *Vier-te Jahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* (Munich). Hellmut Diwald, *op. cit.* (note 101).

<sup>103</sup> Dr. R. Barton, *op. cit.* (note 92), Part 109, 1975, pp. 3025-3029; Barton confirmed this evaluation in testimony given in the 1985 and 1988 Toronto trials of German-Canadian publisher Ernst Zündel. On Barton’s testimony in the first, 1985 trial, see “View of Belsen was propaganda, trial told”, *The Globe and Mail* (Toronto), Feb. 8, 1985, pp. M1, M5, and “Disease killed Nazis’ prisoners, MD says”, *Toronto Star*, Feb. 8, 1985, p. A2; On Barton’s testimony in the second, 1988 Zündel trial, see Barbara Kulaszka (ed.), *op. cit.* (note 81), pp. 175-180, and R. Lenski, *op. cit.* (note 81), pp. 157-160; Among his other positions after the war, Barton was superintendent and consultant psychiatrist at Severalls Hospital (Essex, England), and director of the Rochester Psychiatric Center (New York).

<sup>104</sup> Francis Trevelyan Miller, Litt.D., LLD, *A History of World War II*, John C. Winston Co., Philadelphia 1945, p. 868.

In *Jews, God and History*, Jewish historian Max Dimont wrote of gassings at Bergen-Belsen.<sup>105</sup> A semi-official work published in Poland in 1981 claimed that women and babies were “put to death in gas chambers” at Belsen.<sup>106</sup>

In 1945 the Associated Press news agency reported:<sup>107</sup>

*“In Lueneburg, Germany, a Jewish physician, testifying at the trial of 45 men and women for war crimes at the Belsen and Oswiecim [Auschwitz] concentration camps, said that 80,000 Jews, representing the entire ghetto of Lodz, Poland, had been gassed or burned to death in one night at the Belsen camp.”*

Five decades after the camp’s liberation, British army Captain Robert Daniell recalled seeing “the gas chambers” there.<sup>108</sup>

Years after the war, Robert Spitz, a Hungarian Jew, remembered taking a shower at Belsen in February 1945:

*“[...] It was delightful. What I didn’t know then was that there were other showers in the same building where gas came out instead of water.”*<sup>109</sup>

Another former inmate, Moshe Peer, recalled a miraculous escape from death as an eleven-year-old in the camp. In a 1993 interview with a Canadian newspaper, the French-born Peer claimed that he “was sent to the [Belsen] camp gas chamber at least six times.” The newspaper account went on to relate:

*“Each time he survived, watching with horror as many of the women and children gassed with him collapsed and died. To this day, Peer doesn’t know how he was able to survive.”*

In an effort to explain the miracle, Peer mused:

*“Maybe children resist better, I don’t know.”*

Although Peer claimed that “Bergen-Belsen was worse than Auschwitz”, he acknowledged that he and his younger brother and sister, who were deported to the camp in 1944, all somehow survived internment there.<sup>110</sup>

Such gas chamber tales are entirely fanciful. These days no reputable scholar supports it.<sup>8</sup>



*A protest meeting in the Bergen-Belsen camp, September 1947. For five years following the end of the war, British authorities maintained the camp as a “Displaced Persons” center. During this period it flourished as a major black market center. At this pro-Zionist gathering of 4,000 Jews, camp leader Joseph Rosensaft speaks against British policy in Palestine.*

<sup>105</sup> Max I. Dimont, *Jews, God and History*, Simon and Schuster, New York 1962, p. 383.

<sup>106</sup> R. Hrabar et al., *op. cit.* (note 79), p. 76.

<sup>107</sup> *The Associated Press News Annual: 1945*, p. 404.

<sup>108</sup> M. Holland, “The horrors of Belsen”, *Sunday Herald Sun* (Melbourne, Australia), Jan. 22, 1995, p. 93; M. Holland, “Man who uncovered the horror of Belsen”, *Sunday Times* (Perth, W Australia), Feb. 5, 1995, p. 2.

<sup>109</sup> S. Rothchild (ed.), *op. cit.* (note 77), p. 197.

<sup>110</sup> K. Seidman, “Surviving the horror”, *The Gazette* (Montreal, Canada), August 5, 1993. Facsimile reprint in *JHR*, 13(6) (1993), p. 24.

### 3.8. Exaggerated Death Estimates

Estimates of the number of people who died in Bergen-Belsen have ranged widely over the years. Many have been irresponsible exaggerations. Typical is a 1985 York *Daily News* report, which told readers that “*probably 100,000 died at Bergen-Belsen*”.<sup>111</sup> An official German government publication issued in 1990 declared that “*more than 50,000 people had been murdered*” in the Belsen camp under German control, and “*an additional 13,000 died in the first weeks after liberation*”.<sup>112</sup> Closer to the truth is the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, which maintains that 37,000 perished in the camp before the British takeover, and another 14,000 afterwards.<sup>113</sup>

Whatever the actual number of dead, Belsen’s victims were not “*murdered*”, and the camp was not an ‘extermination’ center.

### 3.10. Black Market Center

From 1945 until 1950, when it was finally shut down, the British maintained Belsen as a camp for displaced European Jews. During this period it achieved new notoriety as a major European black market center. The ‘uncrowned king’ of Belsen’s 10,000 Jews was Yossl (Josef) Rosensaft, who amassed tremendous profits from the illegal trading. Rosensaft had been interned in various camps, including Auschwitz, before arriving in Belsen in early April 1945.<sup>114</sup>

British Lieutenant General Sir Frederick Morgan, chief of “*displaced persons*” operations in postwar Germany for the United Nations relief organization UNRRA recalled in his memoir that<sup>115</sup>

“[...] *under Zionist auspices there had been organized at Belsen a vast illegitimate trading organization with worldwide ramifications and dealing in a wide range of goods, principally precious metals and stones. A money market dealt with a wide range of currencies. Goods were being imported in cryptically marked containers consigned in UNRRA shipments to Jewish voluntary agencies [...]*”

### 3.11. Legacy

A kind of memorial center now draws many tourists annually to the camp site. Not surprisingly, Bergen’s 13,000 residents are not very pleased with their town’s infamous reputation. Citizens report being called “*murderers*” during visits to foreign countries.<sup>116</sup>

In striking contrast to the widely-accepted image of Belsen, which is essentially a product of hateful wartime propaganda, is the suppressed, albeit grim, historical reality. In truth, the Bergen-Belsen story may be regarded as the Holocaust story in miniature.

<sup>111</sup> “*Bergen-Belsen*”, *Daily News* (New York), April 20, 1985, p. 3.

<sup>112</sup> “*Ceremony Recalls Victims of Bergen-Belsen*”, *The Week in Germany* (German Information Center, New York), April 27, 1990, p. 6; A figure of 50,000 is also given in *Time magazine*, April 29, 1985, p. 21; According to a stone memorial at the Belsen camp site, 30,000 Jews were “*exterminated*” there; A semi-official Polish account published in 1980 reported 48,000 Belsen “*victims*”. Czeslaw Pilichowski, *No Time Limit for These Crimes*, Interpress, Warsaw 1980, pp. 154f.

<sup>113</sup> “*Bergen-Belsen*”, *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, *op. cit.* (note 33), vol. 4, pp. 610ff.; Colonel Schmidt, the German officer who worked to alleviate conditions in Belsen during the final weeks and also arranged for the camp’s surrender to the British, estimated that “*altogether about 8,000 people*” died in the camp. (This figure may, however, only include victims of the final chaotic weeks under German control.) Source: Signed report by Oberst a.D. Hanns Schmidt, *op. cit.* (Note 90).

<sup>114</sup> L. Dawidowicz, “*Belsen Remembered*”, *Commentary* (American Jewish Comm., New York), March 1966, pp. 84f.; *Deutsche National-Zeitung* (Munich), March 21, 1986, p. 4; M. Gilbert, *op. cit.* (note 88), pp. 690, 793.

<sup>115</sup> F. Morgan, *Peace and War*, Hodder and Stoughton, London 1961, p. 259.

<sup>116</sup> “*Bergen-Belsen*”, *Der Spiegel*, Nr. 30, 1985, pp. 71f.