

The dead of Bergen-Belsen

Number and burial places of the victims of the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp

The Bergen-Belsen Memorial is repeatedly confronted with the question of where the people who died in the concentration camp were buried. One reason for this inquiry from visitors is that the total number of victims is estimated to be around 52,000, but the inscriptions on the mass graves mention “only” 23,200. This difference raises questions: When and where were the victims of the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp buried between 1943 and 1945 (even after the liberation), and where do their remains lie today?

With the goal of clarifying this question using historiographical methods, in 2015 the Lower Saxony Memorials Foundation commissioned a systematic evaluation of all available sources regarding the number and burial sites of the victims of the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. The following is an interim report.

1. Burials in the grounds of the camp

Locating the graves and determining the number of victims buried in each mass grave is a complicated undertaking due to the insufficient historical source material (the SS destroyed the entire camp register shortly before the camp’s liberation) and the fact that the graves were established over a long period of time, responsibilities changed, and various landscaping measures were carried out in the grounds over the course of years and decades. In the following, we provide a rough chronological account of the burials and the establishment and identification of the mass graves.

April/May 1945

When the British Army liberated the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp on 15 April 1945, the liberators found around 10,000 unburied bodies in the camp. We also know from various sources that, when the troops arrived, there must have already been at least one open mass grave containing numerous bodies. Different statements were made about this mass grave by the British liberators – for example:

1. *“About 2,000 bodies were in a large pit at the South end of Camp I.”*¹

¹ Col. C. H. Montague, “Belsen. Report by HQ Garrison on 18-30 April 1945”, The National Archives, London (TNA), WO 171/4604 (copy: Bergen-Belsen Memorial, in the following GBBA, BA 673).

2. *"Near the crematorium were signs of filled-in mass graves and outside to the left of the bottom compound was an open grave, a pit rather, half-full of corpses, it has just begun to be filled."*²
3. *"For one reason or another the SS had changed their method of disposing of the ever-increasing masses of dead some time before the arrival of the British, and had dug and filled at least one mass grave."*⁶
4. *"At the end of the road [main camp street], we saw a large open mass grave containing hundreds of corpses."*⁴

Liberated prisoners also later gave accounts of mass graves that had been established by or on the order of the SS before the camp's liberation. Here are some examples:

1. *"[...] and only before the liquidation by the British troops the S.S. started digging graves for those people [prisoners who had died – KS]."*⁵
2. *"The particular job of the remaining SS men [after the agreement on a neutral zone – KS] was to tidy up the camp and, more especially, to get the dead brought to the burial pits. How were they to do this without transport and with the pits half-a-mile away? The SS, energetic and ferocious as never before, found a way. And so we saw and enacted the last of those memorable tableaux which will stay in our minds forever."*⁶
3. *"[...] we were made to understand that we had to drag these dead bodies a certain route to what we were to find to be large burial pits. [...] We did bury many thousands in the last four or five days."*⁷
4. *"The pyres have had to stop. [...] So they began digging huge mass graves at the end of the camp, where a few months ago the tents of the women from Auschwitz stood [...]."*⁸
5. *"I lead the British patrol to the edge of the pit. It isn't yet filled to the brim, far from it. But there are already thousands of bodies."*⁹

² Statement by Brigadier Hugh Llewellyn Glyn Hughes in the Bergen-Belsen Trial 1945, TNA, WO 235/13 (copy: GBBA, BA 710).

³ Derrick Sington, *Belsen Uncovered*, London 1946, p. 49.

⁴ Statement by Leonard Berney, see: John Wood (ed.), *Liberating Belsen Concentration Camp: A Personal Account by (Former) Lt-Colonel Leonard Berney R.A. T.D.*, Charleston, SC 2015, pp. 4f.

⁵ Statement by Dr Fritz Leo in the Bergen-Belsen Trial 1945, TNA, WO 235/13 (copy: GBBA, BA 710).

⁶ Rudolf Küstermeier, "How we lived in Belsen", in: Derrick Sington, *Belsen Uncovered*, London 1946, p. 138.

⁷ Statement by Harold Osmond Le Druillenc in the Bergen-Belsen Trial 1945, TNA, WO 235/13 (copy: GBBA, BA 710).

⁸ Michel Fliccx, *Vom Vergehen der Hoffnung. Zwei Jahre in Buchenwald, Peenemünde, Dora, Belsen*, Göttingen 2013, pp. 260f.

None of the statements make it possible to determine precisely where these mass graves were located.

About one month after the liberation, on 21 May 1945, the British Army burned down the last hut in the former prisoners' compound of the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. At the same time, more than 20,000 deceased prisoners were buried in eleven mass graves in the grounds of the former camp under British supervision. These victims included the 10,000 unburied bodies that had been found when the camp was liberated as well as prisoners who had died after the liberation from the effects of their imprisonment.

We do not know how many former prisoners died in the first days after the liberation. Solid information is only available from 19 April 1945 onward: Within the space of one month, until 19 May 1945, more than 10,400 liberated prisoners died in the former main camp, despite the rescue operations that had been initiated immediately.¹⁰ The victims were laid to rest in one of the mass graves or, in a few cases, in individual graves in the grounds of the former camp.

The burials ordered by the British started on 17 April 1945 at the latest.¹¹ German SS personnel and Hungarian soldiers had to carry out this work under the supervision of the British Army. The activity continued until 19 Mai 1945, when the last survivors were taken to the nearby former Wehrmacht barracks that had been converted into an emergency hospital.

Due to the danger of epidemics, the burials took place within a short period of time; it was not possible to record the names and other details of the dead, as a British report revealed:

“Burial of Dead. [...] No camp records were found and in view of the urgency of the situation and lack of manpower no record could be kept of the tattoo numbers on forearms. Many were indecipherable in any case. If an attempt had been made to note the tattoo numbers

⁹ Jean-Pierre Renouard, *My Stripes Were Earned in Hell*, Lanham, MD 2012, p. 86.

¹⁰ Cf. Statistical Record of Belsen Camp, IWM, British Private Papers, Dr A[rnold] R[aphael] Horwell (copy: GBBA). Dr Horwell worked in the 102 Control Section of the Second Army. His overview includes a detailed list of the people who died in Bergen-Belsen after the liberation. The data covers the people who died in the former main camp, the former sub-camp, and the hospitals set up in the nearby former Wehrmacht barracks.

¹¹ Cf. Lt. Col. J.A.D. Johnston, “Medical Appreciation – Belsen Concentration Camp. Report by 32 (BRIT) CCS/RAMC on 1 April 1945 to 30 April 1945”, TNA, WO 177/669 (copy: GBBA, BA 688).

*this would have taken 7 1/2 hours extra each day. This time could not be spared. This lack of identification made a terrible situation even more appalling.*¹²

In October 1945, a report was published in the supplement to the monthly magazine *British Zone Review* detailing how the victims had been buried in the mass graves in the grounds of the former camp and how the graves were marked:

*“When pits were ready for closing a thin layer of earth was put in. This was treated with oil, and the pits filled and built up into mounds about 2 feet 6 inches high. A combined service was held by the various Chaplains when each pit was finished and a notice board was erected stating the approximate or actual numbers buried, and the date the pit was closed.”*¹³

On 7 May 1945, the British cameraman Sgt Hewitt filmed the mass graves that had already been closed.¹⁴ This footage shows the notice boards for the ten graves that had completed to that point, meaning that grave 11 (a+b) had not yet been closed.

It seems that no other mass graves were created in 1945 and 1946: *“Altogether, 24,000 people were buried in Camp 1 after the liberation in 12 common graves of various sizes.”*¹⁵ “Camp 1” refers to the main camp in Bergen-Belsen (as opposed to the branch camp at the Bergen-Hohne barracks, which was referred to as the “barracks camp” or *Lager 2* and was subsequently named Camp 2 by the British). The figure of 24,000 quoted here roughly corresponds to the total of 23,200 dead mentioned in the inscriptions on the mass graves today.

Early/mid-1950s

The location of another mass grave (grave no. 12) was marked in the grounds in the early 1950s at the latest. The precise circumstances and reasons surrounding the late marking of

¹² Col. C. H. Montague, “Belsen. Report by HQ Garrison on 18-30 April 1945”, TNA, WO 171/4604 (copy: GBBA, BA 673).

¹³ “Belsen. An account, based on Official Reports, of the uncovering by the British Army of the Belsen Concentration Camp and of the action taken during the vital days to minimise the suffering of the 60,000 inmates”, supplement to the *British Zone Review*, 13.10.1945. Also see: Capt. Andrew Pares, “The Story of Belsen, 113 L A A Regiment R A (D L I) T A”, Hannover 1945 (copy: GBBA, BA 2388).

¹⁴ See

https://www.ushmm.org/online/film/display/detail.php?file_num=204&tape_id=9EEC4FDA-8AB5-4819-BBB1-F4CF5B5B8BEC&clip_id=&media_type=flv; accessed on 27.1.2017.

¹⁵ Cf. “Report on the Search in Belsen” by Lt. H. Francois Poncet [sic!], French Search Officer, Belsen, 10.6.1946, 1.1.3.0/82350821/ITS Digital Archive, Bad Arolsen. In 1945, Henri François-Poncet was trained in Paris as a liaison officer for the imminent occupation of Germany. He began his work in Bergen-Belsen shortly after the camp’s liberation. In addition to writing reports, he drew up lists of the names of the survivors from France, which are invaluable today.

this grave have not yet been clarified and require further research. It is also not clear how many people were buried in this grave.

Mid-1960s

A letter from the French survivor Georges Bonnet from 19 February 1964 to the French Minister of Veterans and War Victims resulted in the identification and enclosure of another mass grave in the grounds of Bergen-Belsen. In his letter, Bonnet said that during survivor pilgrimages to the Neuengamme and Bergen-Belsen memorials in the preceding three years, he had repeatedly found ashes and bones at a site outside of the landscaped Memorial grounds. This is where the SS had deposited the ashes from the crematorium. He included a drawing in his letter which made it possible to precisely locate the site near the former crematorium.¹⁶

Following this letter, the site was inspected at the end of July 1964 by representatives of the Lower Saxony Ministry of the Interior, the regional administrative authority in Lüneburg, and the state building authority in Celle.¹⁷ A few days later, an undertaker from Lüneburg wrote in an expert report commissioned by the district president in Lüneburg that the only way to acquire valid findings regarding the extent of the ash residue was to “completely excavate the area”.¹⁸ One consequence of the report was that the roughly 2,000 m² site was immediately fenced in. Planning also began on the development of a symbolic grave modelled on the existing mass graves that had been redesigned in 1960, and thus on the expansion of the original grounds of the Memorial.¹⁹

Parallel to the expert report from the Lüneburg undertaker, a police medical officer wrote a comprehensive investigative report about the site at the request of the Lower Saxony Ministry of the Interior.²⁰ In addition to precisely describing the situation of the site, he listed the finds in detail, which included the remains of human bones. Immediately after receiving

¹⁶ Cf. copy of a German translation of the letter from the French concentration camp survivor Georges Bonnet to the French Minister of Veterans and War Victims, Paris, 19.2.1964, GBBA, BA 2795.

¹⁷ Cf. record of the site inspection concerning the Bergen-Belsen Memorial and the “Am Zelttheater” and “Am Kasino” cemeteries for foreigners on 31.7.1964, Archiv Lüneburg, 11320/3.2 (copy: GBBA).

¹⁸ Cf. expert report on the burial site found outside of the Bergen-Belsen Memorial, 6.8.1964, Archiv Lüneburg, 11320/3.2 (copy: GBBA).

¹⁹ Cf. letter from the district president in Lüneburg to the Lower Saxony Minister of the Interior, 6.8.1964, Archiv Lüneburg, 11320/3.2 (copy: GBBA); letter from the Lower Saxony Minister of the Interior to the district president in Lüneburg, Archiv Lüneburg, 11.8.1964, 11320/3.2 (copy: GBBA).

²⁰ Cf. investigative report of the police medical officer, Hannover, 10.8.1964, Archiv Lüneburg, 11320/3.2 (copy: GBBA).

this investigative report, the Lower Saxony Ministry of the Interior notified the public of the “new gravesite in Bergen-Belsen.”²¹

When the new U-shaped symbolic mass grave (grave no. 13) was established, the Memorial’s grounds were enlarged and the wayfinding was changed, since the remains had been found outside of the existing memorial complex.²² No further changes were made after mass grave no. 13 was established. There are, therefore, 13 sites identified as mass graves in the grounds of the former Bergen-Belsen concentration camp:

Grave no.	Date	Number of dead based on inscription
1	April 1945	1,000 dead
2	April 1945	5,000 dead
3	April 1945	5,000 dead
4	April 1945	2,000 dead
5	April 1945	1,000 dead
6	April 1945	800 dead
7	April 1945	1,000 dead
8	April 1945	2,500 dead
9	April 1945	800 dead
10	April 1945	800 dead
11a	April 1945	2,500 dead
11b	April 1945	800 dead
12	1945 ²³	unknown number of dead
13	1945 ²⁴	unknown number of dead
Total		23,200

Table 1: Overview of the number of prisoners buried in the mass graves based on current grave inscriptions

2. The number of deaths and burials

Around 38,000 prisoners are thought to have died in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp by 15 April 1945. Another 14,000 people died in Bergen-Belsen after the liberation from the

²¹ Cf. press office of the Lower Saxony Minister of the Interior, press release no. 47/64, 12.8.1964, Archiv Lüneburg, 11320/3.2 (copy: GBBA).

²² Cf. supplemental cost estimate for the expansion and development at the western edge of the memorial in Belsen b./Bergen, Staatshochbauamt Celle, 20.8.1965, GBBA, BA 2795.

²³ The year establishes a connection with the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. Grave no. 12 was designed in the 1950s, grave no. 13 in 1964/65.

²⁴ Ibid.

effects of their imprisonment. Because of the very fragmentary source material (the SS destroyed the camp register before the liberation), we only know the names of 10,227 of the prisoners who died in Bergen-Belsen, either in the concentration camp itself or immediately after its liberation.²⁵

There is a significant difference between the figure of around 52,000 deceased prisoners which has been determined by researchers and the 23,000 buried prisoners who are indicated on the grave inscriptions. However, this difference is minimised when several factors are taken into account. The following explanation shows that the difference is not as great as it appears.

Deaths in 1943 and the crematorium

48 prisoners are known to have died in 1943. At least six of the deceased (from May and June) were cremated in Celle. The deaths were recorded in the Bergen register office. According to an order from 4 June 1943, a registration district was supposed to be established specifically for the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp.²⁶ From 1 July 1943, therefore, deaths were recorded in the register of the Bergen-Belsen register office. It is still not clear what happened to the bodies because we do not know when the crematorium was built in the concentration camp (it probably began operating in late 1943).²⁷

Deaths in 1944

2,047 entries were made in the register of deaths in 1944. According to the register, 8 prisoners died in January, 12 in February, and 37 in March. The number of deaths rose significantly in April 1944. This is because the men's camp was set up after an "invalids' transport" from the Dora satellite camp of Buchenwald arrived on 27 March 1944 with sick and dying prisoners who were no longer able to work. The transport carried 1,000 prisoners, 310 of whom died in April alone. It can be assumed that all of the prisoners who died in Bergen-Belsen in 1944 were cremated. No mass graves were dug, and the whereabouts of the ashes are unknown (most were probably dumped near the crematorium).

The 2,047 deaths that were registered in 1944 probably do not represent the actual number of prisoners who died that year. Evidence for this can be found in the fact that higher

²⁵ Cf. list of names of former prisoners of the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp (status: 1.11.2016). This figure does not include victims who died in other locations.

²⁶ Cf. letter from the administrator of the Fallingbostal district, 11.6.1943, 1.1.3.1/3399252/ITS Digital Archive, Bad Arolsen.

²⁷ See also: Juliane Hummel, "'Das ist das Krematorium'. Bemerkungen zum Krematorium im KZ Bergen-Belsen", in: Habbo Knoch/Thomas Rahe (eds.), *Bergen-Belsen. Neue Forschungen*, Göttingen 2014, pp. 257–276.

cremation numbers were recorded in the few existing documents than in the register of deaths (for example, the cremation of the prisoner Karl Basel on 16 June 1944 was assigned the consecutive number 1,087 for the year 1944, but according to the register of deaths only 694 prisoners had died up until this date).²⁸ One possible explanation for this could be that the deaths of prisoners from the Soviet Union were covered up. There are various indications that this was the case, but due to their complexity they cannot be explained in detail here. However, if this supposition proves to be correct, the number of deaths for the years 1943 to 1945 would have to be adjusted upwards.

Deaths in 1945

According to the existing registration numbers, around 2,700 entries were recorded in the register of deaths between January and March 1945. The last entry with a registration number is dated 23 March 1945. On 5 April 1945, ten days before the liberation, the last entries were recorded for prisoners who had died the previous day.

The figure of around 2,700 death register entries deviates considerably from the known number of deaths. More than 18,000 prisoners are known to have died in March alone.²⁹ In January and February 1945, the number of deaths was around 7,500. And for the period from 1 to 15 April 1945, we can only estimate that more than 9,000 prisoners died.³⁰

The crematorium appears to have generally continued functioning until late February 1945. The families of two prisoners who died at the end of February 1945 received certificates from *Kriminalsekretär* Frerichs, head of the Political Department in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, dated 1 and 8 March 1945.³¹ The pre-printed form stated:

“The urn will be handed over without objection upon presentation of a certificate from the local cemetery administration confirming its proper interment. The certificate should be sent as soon as possible to the crematorium of the Bergen-Belsen reception camp, Dept. II.”

However, the crematorium reached its capacity limits no later than March 1945. For this reason, the SS began burning the dead on outdoor pyres instead.³² There are varying reports about the number of bodies burned in this way. Former prisoner Michel Fliccx, for example,

²⁸ Cf. cremation certificate from the Bergen-Belsen crematorium for Karl Basel, GBBA, BT 1488.

²⁹ Cf. Jakob de Heer list, Nederlands Instituut voor Oorlogsdocumentatie (NIOD), Amsterdam, 250k-147.

³⁰ According to the De Heer list (note 27), 3,913 prisoners died in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp from 1 to 6 April 1945.

³¹ These were the political prisoners Karl Schlombach and Heinrich Wagner, who died on 25 and 26 February 1945, respectively.

³² Cf. among others: Michel Fliccx, *Vom Vergehen der Hoffnung* (note 8), pp. 249f.

wrote that 500 to 800 bodies were burned each day.³³ These figures cannot be verified, which is one of the main reasons for the difference between the number of dead and the number of people buried. By the start of April 1945 at the latest, the SS ordered that the dead be buried in mass graves. Precisely where these graves were located is not clear (see the statements at the start of this report). The following table provides an overview of the number of dead in the concentration camp, both before and after the liberation.

Time period	Est. number of deaths	Disposal of bodies
1943/44	3,100	Crematorium
January 1945	1,100	Crematorium
February 1945	6,400	Crematorium
March 1945	18,100	Crematorium, pyre
1.-6.4.1945	3,900	Mass graves
7.-15.4.1945	5,400	Mass graves
Total (duration of the camp's existence)	38,000	Ash graves and mass graves
19.4.-20.6.1945	14,000	Mass graves (former concentration camp and nearby barracks as well as very few individual graves)
Total	52,000	

Table 2: Total of number of prisoners who died between 1943 and June 1945 based on research for the permanent exhibition that opened in 2007

The total figure of 52,000 dead includes the prisoners who died in the hospitals in the nearby former Wehrmacht barracks. By 26 May 1945, 2,906 burials had taken place there in the so-called tent theatre cemetery. This number rose to at least 3,524 by 20 June 1945. This figure must be subtracted from the total of 52,000 dead, leaving a difference of around 48,500.

It is not yet clear how many prisoners died during the brief existence of the sub-camp in the Wehrmacht barracks or how many of these prisoners fell victim to lynching shortly after the liberation. We do know, however, that these prisoners were laid to rest in a cemetery behind *Mannschaftsblock* (MB) 90 (Small Cemetery). Furthermore, the discovery of a mass grave directly adjacent to MB 90 in 1982 raises the question of whether there are even more

³³ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 250.

undiscovered graves within the barracks which may hold the remains of former prisoners. An unknown number of dead must therefore be subtracted from the total sum of 48,500.

We can assume that the prisoners who died in 1943/1944 and in January and February of 1945 were cremated. More than 10,000 dead can therefore be subtracted from the total figure. This still leaves a difference of around 15,000 between the 23,200 recorded burials and the around 38,000 deceased prisoners. An unknown but probably large number of these prisoners from the main camp were burned on a pyre. It is also not known how many bodies were buried in mass graves right before the liberation. By taking into account the circumstances outlined here, the apparently large difference between the number of dead mentioned on the grave inscriptions and the number of prisoners who actually died in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp is reduced significantly, though it cannot yet be quantified. If deceased prisoners were still being exclusively burned or cremated in March 1945 (which is not at all certain, however), there could not have been many more than 24,000 prisoners buried in mass graves. This number roughly corresponds with the inscriptions on the marked mass graves.

Summary

We still do not know the location of other potential mass graves that might have been closed and left unmarked before British troops arrived. We also cannot rule out the possible existence of as yet undiscovered individual graves. In the latter case, the transfer of remains to the former grounds of the camp in the course of redesigning the Memorial must also be examined in more detail. In general, it is advisable to carry out a precise study of the various redesign measures in the Memorial over the past decades.

Due the uncertainty surrounding the locations of graves in the grounds of the former camp, it is only proper for the entire grounds to be viewed as a cemetery. Since a large number of the victims were Jewish, the site has been declared a Jewish cemetery. As a result, excavations and other invasive methods of determining the location of graves are not possible.

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