



The Holocaust and Wales

Liberation

Created by the Centre for the Movement of People (CMOP) at Aberystwyth University



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This resource examines the perpetration of the Holocaust by the Nazis and their collaborators and the liberation of the Nazi camps and ghettos by the Allies.

It contains:

- Background information on the Nazi camp and ghetto systems and where to find out more
- Map: Spaces of Nazi persecution and murder
- Short biographies of William Richard Williams, Leslie Hardman and Manfred Gans
- Links to audio clips of oral history recordings of William Richard Williams and Leslie Hardman
- Extract from Manfred Gans' war diary, 1945
- Transcripts of the audio clips

The resource assumes a basic understanding of the Holocaust. You may wish to cover the Holocaust Educational Trust's (HET) worksheet ['Defining the Holocaust'](#) before exploring these resources. See also the HET's ['General Principles for Teaching the Holocaust'](#).



Background information on the Nazi camp system and Bergen-Belsen

From 1933, German authorities established a variety of detention facilities to confine those whom they defined as political, ideological, or racial opponents of the regime. In the earliest years, concentration camps were established to detain political opponents of the regime, including German Communists, Socialists, trade unionists, and others from left and liberal political circles. The camps were outside the German legal system, meaning detainees could be held indefinitely.

In time, as well as concentration camps, the system expanded to include forced labour camps; prisoner-of-war (POW) camps; transit camps; and camps which served as killing centres, often called extermination camps or death camps.

Until 1943, Bergen-Belsen in northern Germany was exclusively a POW camp. In April 1943, a portion of Bergen-Belsen was converted first into a civilian residence camp and, later, into a concentration camp. Over the course of its existence, Bergen-Belsen Concentration Camp held Jews; prisoners of war; political prisoners; Roma; Sinti; people who did not conform to the Nazi social norms, e.g., beggars, alcoholics, drug addicts, prostitutes and pacifists (people who believe war is unjustified); people with disabilities; criminals; Jehovah's Witnesses; and homosexuals.

As Allied forces advanced into Germany in late 1944 and early 1945, Bergen-Belsen became a collection camp for thousands of Jewish prisoners evacuated from camps closer to the front. The arrival of these prisoners, many of them survivors of forced evacuations on foot, overwhelmed the camp's meagre resources.



At the end of July 1944, there were around 7,300 prisoners interned in the Bergen-Belsen camp complex. At the beginning of December 1944, this number had increased to around 15,000, and in February 1945, the number of prisoners was 22,000. As prisoners evacuated from the east continued to arrive, the camp population soared to over 60,000 by 15 April 1945.

By early 1945, prisoners would sometimes go without food for days; fresh water was also in short supply. Sanitation was incredibly inadequate, with few latrines and taps for the tens of thousands of prisoners. Overcrowding, poor sanitary conditions, and the lack of adequate food, water, and shelter led to an outbreak of diseases such as typhus, tuberculosis, typhoid fever, and dysentery, causing an ever-increasing number of deaths. In the first few months of 1945, tens of thousands of prisoners died. One of them was the diarist Anne Frank.

In total, some 6 million Jews were killed during the Holocaust, as well as millions of Soviet prisoners of war, Romani, Poles, disabled people, homosexuals and political opponents of Nazism.

For more information on the Nazi camp system and Bergen-Belsen, see:

- <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/concentration-camp-system-in-depth>
- <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/bergen-belsen>
- [https://www.het.org.uk/images/downloads/Guidance notes/Final Solution ks4.pdf](https://www.het.org.uk/images/downloads/Guidance%20notes/Final%20Solution%20ks4.pdf)



Background information on Nazi ghettos and Theresienstadt

During the Second World War, German authorities forced Jewish populations into ghettos. Ghettos were often enclosed districts that isolated Jews from the rest of the population. The Germans established at least 1,143 ghettos in the occupied eastern territories.

Some ghettos existed for only a few days. Others lasted for months or years. The Germans saw them as a means to control and segregate Jews while the Nazi leadership deliberated upon options for the permanent removal of the Jewish population. Nazi-appointed Jewish councils (Judenräte) administered daily life in the ghettos.

Theresienstadt Ghetto in northwest Czechoslovakia served as a transit camp for Jews whom the Germans deported to killing centres, concentration camps, and forced labour camps. It was expected that the poor conditions there would hasten the deaths of many deportees until they could be deported.

Theresienstadt Ghetto was exceptional in that the Nazis used it to hide the nature of the deportations. In Nazi propaganda, Theresienstadt was cynically described as a 'spa town' where elderly Jews could 'retire' in safety. Despite the terrible living conditions and the constant threat of deportation, Theresienstadt had a highly developed cultural life. Writers, professors, musicians, and actors gave lectures, concerts, and theatre performances.

Fifteen thousand children passed through Theresienstadt. Although forbidden to do so, they attended school. They painted



pictures, wrote poetry, and otherwise tried to maintain a vestige of normality. Approximately 90 % of these children perished in killing centres.

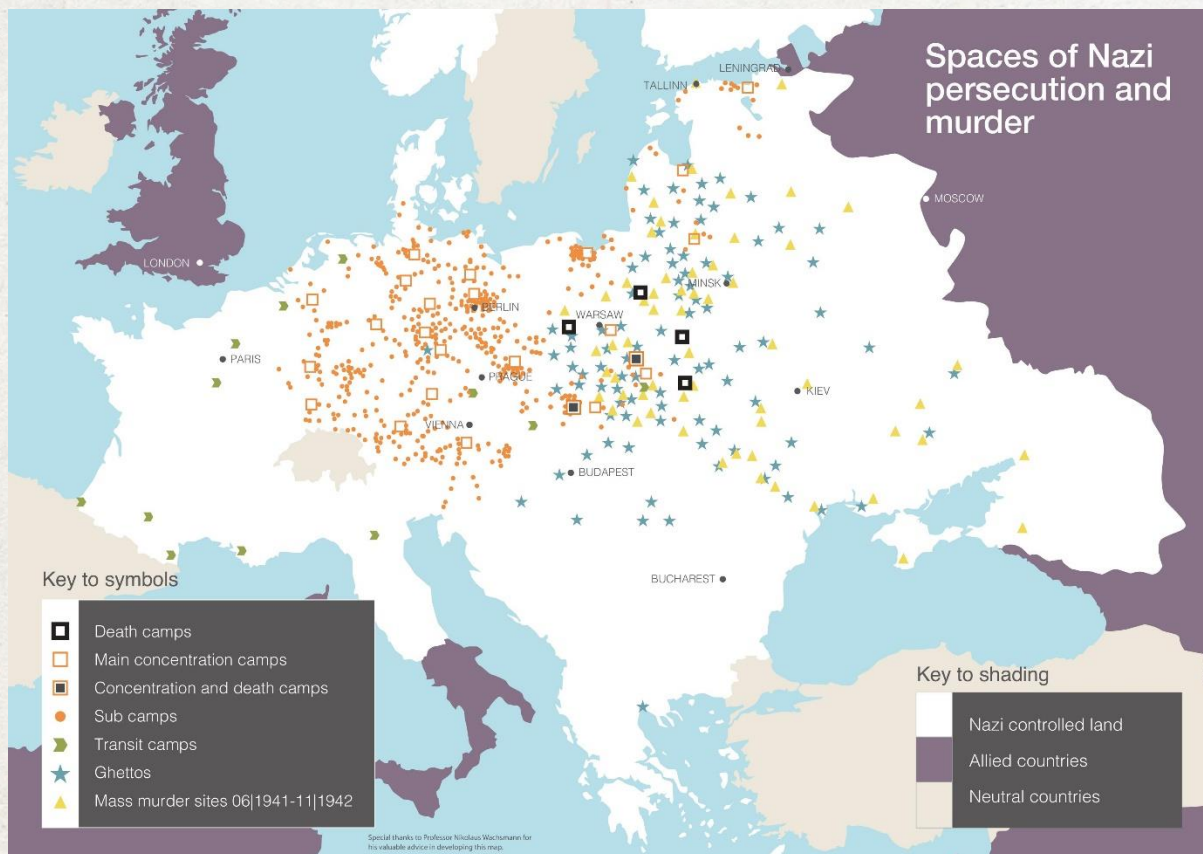
The Germans permitted the International Red Cross to visit in June 1944. It was all an elaborate hoax: the Germans intensified deportations from the ghetto shortly before the visit to reduce overcrowding, and the ghetto itself was 'beautified'. Gardens were planted, houses painted, and barracks renovated. The Nazis staged social and cultural events for the visiting dignitaries. Once the visit was over, the Germans resumed deportations.

Of the approximately 140,000 Jews transferred to Theresienstadt, nearly 90,000 were deported to almost certain death. Roughly 33,000 died in Theresienstadt itself.

For more information on Nazi ghettos and Theresienstadt, see:

- <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/ghettos>
- <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/theresienstadt>

Historical source 1: Map: Spaces of Nazi persecution and murder



Taken from 'Spaces of Killing' University College London (UCL) research briefing paper (pp 10-11)

Map reproduced with the permission of UCL Centre for Holocaust Education and not for further reproduction

Link: https://holocausteducation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/4.-SpacesOfKilling_updated-final.pdf



Historical source 2: Short biography of William Richard Williams

William Richard Williams was born in 1920 and attended Llandaff Cathedral School in Cardiff. After obtaining an apprenticeship with the Austin Motor Company, he joined the Royal Army Service Corps in 1939 and was commissioned as an officer in 1941. He participated in the Normandy landings in June 1944 and was one of the first British soldiers to arrive at the liberation of Bergen-Belsen Concentration Camp in northern Germany in April 1945. He first entered the camp with a Schutzstaffel (SS) escort (the SS was the paramilitary organisation responsible for administering the Nazi concentration and extermination camps) before it was transferred to Allied control a few days later.

For more information on the SS, see:

- <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/ss>

Historical source 3: [Audio Clip: William Richard Williams entering Bergen-Belsen Concentration Camp](#)

Historical source 4: Short biography of Leslie Hardman

Reverend Leslie Hardman was born in Glynneath, near Neath, in 1913, to a Jewish family. He moved to Manchester as a child, trained to become a rabbi, and got a job as a minister in Leeds in 1936. During the Second World War, he became an army

chaplain and was posted to Belgium and the Netherlands. After his unit crossed into Germany, he was the first Jewish British Army chaplain to enter Bergen-Belsen Concentration Camp. He supervised the burial of approximately 20,000 victims at the camp. He later served as the rabbi at the Hendon United Synagogue in London.

Historical source 5: [Audio Clip: Leslie Hardman entering Bergen-Belsen Concentration Camp](#)

Historical source 6: Short biography of Manfred Gans

Manfred Gans was a Jewish refugee from Borken in Germany who fled to Britain as a sixteen-year-old in 1938. During the war, he joined the British Army and transferred to the No. 3 Group of No. 10 (Inter-Allied) Commando (also known as X Troop), and trained at Aberdyfi, Gwynedd. He returned to Borken with his unit in April 1945, where he found out that his parents had been arrested and sent to Theresienstadt in German-occupied Czechoslovakia. He requested leave to try and find them, crossing through the American, Soviet and German lines. By the time he arrived in early May, the camp had been liberated by the Soviets.



Historical source 7: Extract from Manfred Gans' war diary, 1945

At last THERESIENSTADT. Civilians show the way to the Ghetto. I always thought I would die with excitement at this moment but I am pretty cool now, only that queer feeling in the pit of the stomach which I get before a parachute jump.

[...]

Slowly we drive through the barrier. I stand on the front seat of the jeep leaning over the screen. I realise what a moment this is. It might have been a scene in Lordship Gdn, London, on Saturday afternoon. There are people – Jews – in the thousands everywhere. They look undernourished, overworked, but fairly well dressed. Western Europe's Jews, every face seems to be familiar. They are all ages, but every eye reflects senility and tiredness. What a grim sight!! I can't even force myself to smile at them. Everybody crowds around. Drive on carefully. Some are too weak to get out of the way quickly. This is the way we drove into the liberated towns of France, Belgium and Holland. The crowds were the same, but what a different atmosphere!

[...]

All eyes are on us, but they are too stunned to utter a sound. I can only look at them grimly. Stop in front of the Registration Office. There is one girl still working. I demand my parents [sic] address. She answers in English probably learned throughout the empty days of the concentration camps. The Jewish spirit is indomitable. She gets terribly excited. "They are really still here, are you lucky? I must go with you myself," though I nearly die with excitement. Outside my driver is being besieged. We can



hardly get through the crowds now. Where do all these people live? What a terrible overcrowding! Light inside some of the windows reveals beds and tables made out of raw woods [sic]. Everywhere they are double and treble bunks. Stop! this is the house. The girl enquires. My parents are having supper on the balcony. I send her forward, and went into the corridor. Human beings everywhere! No privacy here! I am getting slightly excited. Damn it I have jumped out of aeroplanes, I am not going to let this get me down! That does the trick. Still looking grim with my arms crossed over my chest.

The next minutes are indescribable. I suddenly find myself in their arms. They are both crying wildly, it nearly sounds like the crying of despair. I look at father and in spite of having prepared myself for a lot I have to bite my teeth together not to show my shock. He is hardly recognisable! Completely starved and wrecked. My first regular thoughts after a few minutes are "What a grim show". The next our old Commando watch word "Don't panic!" I lead them to the balcony and force them to sit down. They still can't utter a word for crying. Some of their friends, fine people, come to calm them down. Now at last I manage a smile. People rapidly collect in the yard beneath the balcony. They all shout "Congratulations". and "Mazel-tow" to my parents. Now they are cheering. That rectifies my parents. Father is completely calmed down now – one look into his eyes convinces me that his spirit is completely unbroken. He still is the realistic idealist he always has been.

Source: [Manfred Gans War Diary](#), United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Gans family papers 1900-2004 [bulk 1938-1950], Accession Number: 2012.478.3 (2004)

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Transcripts

[Audio Clip: William Richard Williams entering Bergen-Belsen Concentration Camp](#)

We got there, and there were no signs of anything at all, it was just a...an area, a small lane leading off into a wood. But fifty yards down that little cutting, there was a German sentry box, the black and red and white stripe, with a lift pole, and a Hungarian soldier. Well, we were told later he was Hungarian, a funny looking soldier, in so...sand uniform, putties and a rifle slung across his back. He just lifted the pole and waved us through.

[...]

We went, I and my two SS went through the gate into the camp proper and it was something which, a sight that I will never forget. I think first of all was...it was just a series of barbed wire, high barbed wire fences, huts on the left-hand side. There were bundles all over the main concourse – which was just dry earth, there was no grass anywhere – and there were just bundles, it looked like rags but turned out to be dead inmates. We were told to refer to the inmates as DPs – Displaced Persons. We had no knowledge who they were, where they came from, nationality, sex, or religion. And as we went in further, then the stench of the whole place came at me, coupled with the fact that there was an acrid haze hanging over the camp, formed from the inmates setting fire to their straw palliasses and wooden so...and wooden floorboards, anything they could make to burn, and it seemed to hang as a haze over the whole camp. There were inmates, or DPs, hanging on the wires, fallen beside it, grotesque positions, and just, you just had to pick your way through them. Two were walking and came towards us, and the SS, my escort, just shot them.

[Audio Clip: Leslie Hardman entering Bergen-Belsen Concentration Camp](#)

I got to the gates, first the soldiers wouldn't let me in, I think they were all terrified, full of nerves. Anyhow, I eventually got in...to the gates, there was a young girl there...young girl, maybe a young woman. She saw the Magen David on my uniform, so she saw I was Jewish, well she wanted to rush forward and hug me. She looked so repulsive that I, I, I moved backwards, and as she moved forwards, she was...she was liable to fall, but I managed to control myself and kept her, kept her on her feet. And then, as we walked a few yards later, there was about eight or ten people lying on the ground. And I said, 'Why aren't they in their huts?' – there was some huts nearby – she said, 'They're dead! And so, we'll all be dead if more help...doesn't come quickly.' Right, so then...I moved, or then I met three or four women who could talk to me, and then I started to learn about the gruesome, horrific things the Nazis did.

