

Polgehroneon

Re-interpreting Liberation: the end of the Holocaust?

Dan Stone

In August 1945, Zalman Grinberg, a doctor from Kovno and spokesman for the Liberated Jews in the American Zone of Germany, addressed 1,700 Jewish survivors. 'What is the logic of destiny to let these individuals remain alive?!' he asked them:

We are free now, but we do not know what to begin [sic] with free but unhappy life. It seems to us, that for the time being mankind does not comprehend ... what we have experienced during this period of time. And it seems to us, neither shall we be understood in the future. We unlearned to laugh, we cannot cry any more, we do not comprehend our freedom yet, because we are still among our dead comrades.¹

Grinberg provides us with a sense of the state of Holocaust survivors in its immediate aftermath. For most, this was not a moment of celebration, despite the fact that they had dreamed of surviving and seeing Nazism defeated.

Histories of the Holocaust tend to end in 1945, as if the defeat of Nazism and the liberation of the camps closed this terrible chapter of European history.² Yet for many survivors liberation did not mean the end of their suffering. There are very few studies of the liberation process, yet there are many sources available, including military and government reports, soldiers' and survivors' testimonies, the records of relief organisations, films and photographs to help us understand it and there are good reasons why it deserves attention.³ These include: i) showing that liberation is part of the history of the Holocaust; ii) explaining how certain misunderstandings about the Holocaust arose, such as the notion that Belsen or Dachau were death camps, or that the liberation of Auschwitz was a key moment; iii) correcting the 'rosy' view of liberation which prevails despite the fact that the end of Nazi persecution did not mean an end to survivors' troubles or trauma; iv) reminding us that the 'happier' half of the twentieth century (the postwar years) did not mark a clean break from what had gone before, thus giving us a more balanced view of modern European history.

Survivors were often too ill to realise that they had been liberated, or were 'liberated' not in camps but in hiding or on death marches, as their guards simply melted away in the face of Allied advance. They were often bewildered, ill and hungry. Their joy at survival was immediately tempered by the realisation of profound loss: of homes, loved ones and, in many cases, homelands. Many suffered an intense

existential loneliness. Often it required years of 'illegal' travel and work, learning new languages and meeting new people before survivors began to lead anything like a normal life again. As Eva Roubíčková, who spent six weeks in the ghetto hospital in Theresienstadt recovering from typhoid before being discharged, writes:

Leaving Theresienstadt meant freedom for the first time in four years. I should have been elated. I was not. I was deeply unhappy, emotionally numb. Life seemed to have lost its meaning. I could not understand why I had survived. At first I hoped to find someone else from my family, but after meeting people coming from Poland and learning for the first time of the gas chambers and extermination camps, I realized I was alone and would never see my family again.⁴

Some survivors who tried to return to their homes in Eastern Europe were murdered and almost all found they were unwelcome. They ended up in Displaced Persons (DP) camps in the lands of the perpetrators. These camps, such as Belsen-Hohne or Landsberg, became new Jewish communities. With the establishment of the state of Israel most DPs left the camps, but not all Jewish survivors wanted to go to Israel, and while Balts and Ukrainians, including many Nazi collaborators, found their way easily into the UK, the US and Canada, the last Jews were left languishing until the mid-1950s.

The Red Army liberated Majdanek in August 1944, Auschwitz in January 1945 and Stutthof, Ravensbrück, Gross-Rosen and Theresienstadt in April-May 1945. Most of these camps had small numbers of inmates in them, as the Nazis had evacuated them on death marches. This is why conditions were so shocking in Belsen, Dachau and Buchenwald in early 1945: not because they were death camps but because survivors of the eastern camps had been dumped there in huge numbers. The British and Americans liberated Natzweiler-Struthof in November 1944, and then Dora, Buchenwald, Dachau, Bergen-Belsen, Mauthausen and its terrible sub-camps in April-May 1945, as well as many smaller camps. Of about half a million Jews still alive before the start of the death marches, only some 200,000 survived to the liberation. About 90,000 were liberated in camps on German soil and of these about 20,000 died in the following weeks.

For the liberating soldiers, the experience was shattering. Images of corpses from Belsen have been seared into British

consciousness, as have similar images from Dachau in the US. Many of the soldiers were still teenagers; even after fighting their way across Europe they were unprepared for the Nazi camps. In Belsen, the first British soldiers to enter became the builders of a national collective memory. Lieutenant-Colonel M. W. Gonin wrote a devastating short report:

*Piles of corpses, naked and obscene, with a woman too weak to stand, propping herself against them as she cooked the food we had given her over an open fire; men and women crouching down just anywhere in the open, relieving themselves of the dysentery which was scouring their bowels; a woman standing stark naked washing herself with some issue soap in water from a tank in which the remains of a child floated.*⁵

The process of nursing the survivors back to health was a trying one and, despite the high death rates in the first weeks after liberation, must be reckoned as a remarkable logistical achievement.

Liberation then needs to be examined if we are to escape from the ‘wish-fulfilment’ narrative that it brought about an ‘end’ to the Holocaust. Historical research reveals that physical and psychological illness scarred survivors for life; liberators too remained emotionally troubled by what they had seen. Examining liberation explains why certain stereotypes about the Holocaust emerged and provides us with more accurate historical information. Above all, we see that liberation did not mean unalloyed joy but was inextricably mixed with sorrow and shock. This is perhaps best summed up by Marcus Smith, a US army doctor involved in the liberation and medical relief at Dachau:

*An incredible sight, a stench that is beyond experience. Horror-stricken, outraged, we react with disbelief. ‘Oh God!’ says Rosenbloom. Ferris silent, and so is Howcroft, his vocabulary inadequate to describe this circle of evil. I hear Hollis... say that even primitive, savage people give a decent burial to their own dead and the dead of their enemies. I shut my eyes. This cannot be the twentieth century, I think. I try to remember the redeeming attributes of man. None comes to mind.*⁶

Designing enquiries to help pupils think about interpretations of liberation

When did the Holocaust end? *Key Stage 3* (11-14-year-old) students could explore this issue by examining school textbooks and websites, such as Yad Vashem’s, whose narrative ends in 1947, or the Imperial War Museum’s, which refers to the period ‘from 1933 to 1945’.⁷ Students could be asked to debate the question of end points and to consider what the ‘end’ really means. When should we say that something has ‘ended’, with the processes that drove it, with its direct or with its indirect consequences? *A-level*

(16-19-year-old) students could pursue the same questions by looking at more sophisticated materials – such as the work of historians cited in this feature. In addition, they could be asked to explain *why* the Holocaust ends when it does and to explore *the role* that ‘liberation’ plays in different narratives: does it function as the ‘end’, as a ‘coda’ or as the beginning of another story?

The Editors

Further reading

Hirsh, M. (2010) *The Liberators: America’s Witnesses to the Holocaust*, New York: Bantam Books.
 Kolinsky, E. (2004) *After the Holocaust: Jewish Survivors in Germany after 1945*, London: Pimlico.
 Mahoney, K. (ed.) (1995) *1945: the year of liberation*, Washington, DC: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.
 Shephard, B. (2005) *After Daybreak: the liberation of Belsen, 1945*, London: Jonathan Cape.
 Stone, D. (2014) *Goodbye to All That? The Story of Europe since 1945*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
 Stone, D. (forthcoming 2015) *The Sorrows of Liberation*, New Haven: Yale University Press.

REFERENCES

- Grinberg, Z. (1945), ‘We are Living Corpses...’, *Aufbau*, 11, no. 3, p.7.
- See for example two of the major histories of the Holocaust: Longerich, P. (2010) *Holocaust: the Nazi persecution and murder of the Jews*, Oxford: Oxford University Press; Friedländer, S. (2007) *The Years of Extermination: Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1939-1945*, London: HarperCollins.
- See Bridgman, J. (1990) *The End of the Holocaust: the liberation of the concentration camps*, Portland, OR: Areopagitica Press; Abzug, R.H. (1985) *Inside the Vicious Heart: Americans and the liberation of Nazi concentration camps*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Roubířková, E. (1998) *We’re Alive and Life Goes On: a Theresienstadt diary*, trans. Zaida Alexander, New York: Henry Holt, pp.173-74.
- Gonin in Ben Flanagan and Donald Bloxham (eds) (2005) *Remembering Belsen: eyewitnesses record the liberation*, London: Vallentine Mitchell, p.15.
- Smith, M.J. (1995) *Dachau: the harrowing of hell*, Albany: State University of New York Press, p.80.
- www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/holocaust/about/10/aftermath.asp; www.iwm.org.uk/exhibitions/iwm-london/the-holocaust-exhibition

This edition’s Polychronicon was compiled by Dan Stone, Professor of Modern History at Royal Holloway, University of London.

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