The Liberation of the Camps: the End of the Holocaust and its Aftermath

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The 70th anniversary of the Allied victory over the Nazi regime and of the liberation of the camps led to a renewed interest in the Nazi rule over much of Europe and, even more so, in the Holocaust. Unsurprisingly, a number of new studies were and still are being published, many of which discuss the meaning that the Holocaust holds for us today.

One of these studies is Dan Stone's *The Liberation of the Camps*, an important and insightful history of the long and protracted process of rehabilitation that the survivors of the camps faced after they were liberated from the hold of the SS.

Dan Stone, Professor of Modern History at Royal Holloway, University of London, is a well-known expert in the field of Holocaust and comparative genocide studies. His latest book is largely based on survivor testimony, both written and oral, collected in the immediate post-war period (for example, by the American psychologist David P. Boder) when no 'Holocaust narrative' yet existed, and throughout the 70-year period since the liberation of the camps, when the understanding of the Holocaust, including that of the survivors, became increasingly differentiated and sophisticated. The survivor testimonies are complemented and contextualised by accounts from liberators and relief workers as well as official reports and documents by government agencies and relief organisations.

The main structure of the book is straightforward. The first two chapters deal with the discovery of the camps by the advancing Allied troops. Stone starts off with the camps in the east which were liberated by Soviet troops: the 'eastern camps', as he calls them 'for convenience' (p. 68), focusing in particular on Majdanek, Auschwitz, Stutthof, Ravensbrück, Groß-Rosen and Theresienstadt. In the second chapter Stone turns to the camps liberated by the troops of the Western allies: the 'western camps', focusing on Natzweiler-Struthof, Ohrdruf, Buchenwald, Dachau, Mauthausen and Bergen-Belsen.

It is not quite clear why Stone deals with the camps in this sequence. Whilst broadly following the progress of the Allied troops into Germany, it is not fully reflecting the chronological order of discovery: for example, Stutthof was only reached by Soviet troops on 9 May, and Theresienstadt (Terezín) on 8 May

1945. However, with the main emphasis on the testimonies of survivors and liberators, the changes from camp to camp are of minor importance.

The two chapters do not run fully in parallel: the chapter on the 'western camps' is divided into sections on 'The Liberators' and 'The Liberated', with some of the camps dealt with in both parts; the chapter on the 'eastern camps' does not have this kind of subdivision. On the other hand, the Soviet filming of the liberated camps is discussed relatively prominently, whereas the equally important films of the Western Allies are only mentioned in passing.

The third chapter discusses the rescue and rehabilitation efforts immediately following the discovery of the camps: the emergency feeding of the survivors, the delivery of medical care, the slow process of recovery – all of which had to start immediately while the war against Nazi Germany was still continuing. The dying did not stop with the arrival of the Allied troops, and many camps remained the death camps into which the SS had turned them in the previous months. For many prisoners, liberation from SS rule came too late to save them from the effects of the deprivation, diseases and enforced starvation which they had endured. At Bergen-Belsen alone, more than 10,000 prisoners died after their liberation from the hold of the SS, despite all efforts of the British to provide as much help as quickly as was possible under the circumstances. As it became clear that many survivors could not go back to where they had lived prior to their persecution and incarceration, housing them became an ever more pressing problem, together with finding a permanent place for them to live.

The fourth chapter looks closer at a range of aspects of life in the Displaced Person (DP) camps: the attempts of rebuilding lives, the psychological problems which the inhabitants of these camps faced, the need and yearning for education and vocational training, theatre and religious celebrations as opportunities to confront the recent past, the reconstitution of family life (the DP camps had the highest birth rates in post-war Germany) and the burgeoning of Zionism amongst a large number of survivors, especially the young. Every birth was a reason for joy amongst the grief over those who perished, every girl starting her period was celebrated.[\(1\)](#)

The fifth and final chapter puts the Jewish Holocaust survivors, now long-term DPs in the western zones of occupied Germany with nowhere to go, into the wider context of the changing world: the emerging Cold War which turned the DPs into pawns and bargaining chips, and the issue of Palestine which for a time put a serious strain on the alliance between the United States and Great Britain.

In this final chapter, it is much less the testimony that drives the narrative, and this gives this chapter a different feel. It is like moving away from the survivors and looking at them, rather than being guided through the unfolding events by them through their testimony.

Stone's book manages to establish a very powerful and moving kaleidoscope of voices covering in great detail the period from the discovery of the camps by Allied troops up to the early/mid-1950s. Despite all individual differences and different contexts of liberation, the overwhelming picture that emerges from all the testimony is one of great loss, sadness, loneliness, despair and uncertainty in addition to the physical and mental scars from the years of persecution and incarceration. There is joy, too, but the joy is very much mitigated by the uncertainties over their future, the difficulty of making sense of the persecution and the losses endured, and the feelings of guilt for having survived.

In the introductory chapter, Stone gives a very brief – and much needed – overview of the Nazi camp system and how it developed from its beginnings in 1933 to the chaotic final days of the war, including the death marches from east to west (pp. 9–18).

As he is trying to be as brief as possible and inevitably has to employ a broad brush, it is probably unavoidable that some inaccuracies slip in: for example, Neuengamme opened as a subcamp of Sachsenhausen concentration camp in December 1938, whereas Auschwitz I was only set up in May/June

1940, and the purposes of the two camps were very different (p. 11); Stutthof was the first concentration camp set up outside Germany's borders of 1937 and opened on 2 September 1939, immediately after the start of the German invasion of Poland (p. 11). A couple of points that I would regard as important were omitted; for example, in the late 1930s, and before the outbreak of war, the SS began setting up concentration camps in order to make use of the prisoners as forced labour for SS construction projects; for instance, the already mentioned Neuengamme camp was established on the grounds of an abandoned brickyard, and Mauthausen and Flossenbürg were located near large stone quarries.

I am also wondering whether some sort of glossary, chart or similar of the camps mentioned in the book would have made it easier for the general reader, because all these camps are, of course, again referred to in the main chapters, with some of the information repeated and additional information provided. I regret in particular the fact that the book does not contain a single map.

It would have probably also been useful to introduce the term 'extermination camp' in the introduction as a clear and distinct category of Nazi camps. There is a danger that calling the camps which were set up in the east for the sole purpose of the systematic extermination of (mainly) Jews 'death camps' (p. 12) blurs the issue, as by the end of the war and before the Allied troops uncovered them, almost all Nazi camps had become 'death camps' – at this stage, however, the method of murder was not industrialised killing in gas chambers, but death by systematic criminal neglect, and all prisoners were caught up in this, no matter what religion, ethnicity, political persuasion or sexual orientation. What had started out as relatively clear differentiations at some point of the Nazi rule had become muddled in the final days of the Nazi regimes as prisoners were shifted around in death marches.

This was the situation facing the Allied troops when they arrived at the gates of the concentration camps, and Dan Stone rightly emphasises the confusion gripping everyone. The troops on the ground were in no way prepared for what they were uncovering, and they were overwhelmed by the incomprehensible scale of human misery they encountered. There was no time to enquire about the different types of camps, or the different groups of victims. It took time for the Allies to establish a firmer knowledge of the nature of the Nazi camp system, and identify which groups were targeted in what way.

However, I do not agree that it was in particular (or exclusively) the Soviets who 'manipulated' the early reports and films of what they uncovered because 'the fact that the victims ... were predominantly Jews was of little ideological use [to them].' (p. 32) In fact, initially in all narratives the liberated camps became unspecific Nazi horror camps, universalised and de-individualised. This is to some extent understandable, as the degree of human suffering and misery witnessed after the uncovering of the camps made any differentiation between nationalities, religions, and races seemingly meaningless or insignificant; all groups persecuted by the Nazis were affected in almost equal measure by the atrocious treatment they suffered during the final stages of the Nazi regime: 'In the face of so much human suffering [...] one did not think in terms of Jews and non-Jews'.⁽²⁾ Moreover, grouping people in terms of their nationality rather than their race or religion was the officially agreed Allied policy.

Jews as a group specifically targeted by the Nazis are also all but missing in the early films of the Western Allies. The most important example is the recently restored, completed and digitised *German Concentration Camps Factual Survey*, not least because its producer Sidney Bernstein, who was Jewish himself, was well aware of the fate of the Jews, even though the details were still a bit sketchy.⁽³⁾ However, at this time, spring/summer 1945, these films were not just produced as records of the crimes uncovered, but were also (or even primarily) intended as a propaganda tool: to bolster the resolve of the home front while the war was still going on, and to make it absolutely clear to the German population that these crimes had actually been committed. Assuming as the Allies did that the German population was through and through anti-Semitic, it seemed to make little sense to emphasise the specific fate of the Jews; instead, a more universalised message and one that also made explicit reference to the fact that 'Germans', too, were amongst the victims, appeared a much better strategy.

It took some time before a more differentiated narrative evolved. Contrary to what Stone suggests (p. 217), the Belsen Trial, held in Lüneburg before a British Military Tribunal from 17 September to 17 November 1945, developed into a first public exploration of the Nazis' racial and extermination policies, the process of the industrialised killing at Auschwitz-Birkenau and the killing through systematic criminal neglect at Bergen-Belsen, and the death marches from Auschwitz to Bergen-Belsen.⁽⁴⁾ The differentiation of the Nazi camp system became an important element of the Belsen Trial and shone through many of the testimonies. Jewish witnesses, when asked why they were arrested and incarcerated, answered clearly and unequivocally: because I was a Jew (or: Jewess). Even the Gypsy Family Camp at Auschwitz was mentioned. It is, therefore, from winter 1945–6, and not earlier, that we need to question more rigorously why certain victim groups were included in reports and films, and others were not.

With the narrative of the book so greatly driven by survivor testimony, the raw emotions expressed in them stretch – at times overstretch – the 'hearts' of the readers. This is not a bad thing at all but in fact one of the merits of this book, embedded in historical context and based on evidence as the narrative is. However, I did not find the book equally compelling when it came to pushing the boundaries of our current understanding.

Stone aims to demystify the term liberation and show that it was 'a process, something that happened over time – sometimes a very long time', arguing that '[i]n the popular imagination, the liberation of the Nazi concentration camps was a joyous affair bringing an end to the inmates' torments' (p. 2). I am not convinced that this is still the popular imagination. Our understanding of the 'liberation' of the Nazi camps has changed immensely over the last decade or so, and I would like to think that there is now wide agreement beyond historians and curators of Holocaust museums that 'liberation' is not limited to the day or the hour of the arrival of the Allied troops. For example, the re-developed permanent exhibition at the *Gedenkstätte* Bergen-Belsen, which opened in October 2007, includes a whole section which presents the liberation of the camp as a process linking the history of the concentration camp with the post-war history of the DP camp. Stone also focuses on the liberation of the camps 'because it is fundamental to the unfolding of the postwar years in Europe' (p. 3). Again, this linkage has been made in individual camp histories and exhibitions, not least at the *Gedenkstätte* Bergen-Belsen as the DP camp at Bergen-Belsen became one of the most important centres for the campaign for the right of Jewish Holocaust survivors to emigrate to Palestine. The richness and breadth of geographical coverage of Stone's sources transform the local into a national and transnational narrative.

Whilst the whole book is about 'liberation', and asks us through the voices of the survivors to question our understanding of 'liberation', Stone does not propose a new conceptual framework, and he does not discuss the terminology. Does the term 'liberation' capture the multi-faceted, painful, contradictory, protracted process of rehabilitation facing those who were 'liberated', or would it be better to stop using the term 'liberation' altogether? Annette Wieviorka called her latest book on this subject simply 'the discovery' ⁽⁵⁾, and there have also been suggestions that more descriptive phrases, such as 'the arrival of Allied troops at the concentration camps', or 'the opening of the gates', should be used.

Another question is when this process ended; or are there several endings depending on the type of rehabilitation issue? Stone calls the liberation 'the bridge between the war years and the postwar' (p. 3), but does not indicate where and when he thinks this bridge touches down on to the wider ground again. We all know that many Holocaust survivors expressed in their testimonies that only death would liberate them of Auschwitz, and we also know from studies covering second- and third-generation Holocaust survivors that scars of the horrors of Nazi persecution were handed down to the following generations, both individually and collectively. In various shapes and forms these scars of the persecution continue to cast a long shadow which reaches to the present day.

This would mean that 'liberation' is a process that never ended – but how meaningful is such a concept? Or should we return to using 'liberation' for the actual taking-over of the camps by Allied forces, i.e. the liberation of the prisoners from the hold of the SS, and find another term for the long 'bridge between the

war years and the postwar'?

My final point takes me back to the beginning. Stone focuses his study squarely on the Jewish survivors because of what he sees as 'the particular experiences that they had undergone during the war and their particular fate after it, a fate which separated them from the other DPs' (p. 22). It has become something like a mantra that their specific experience separates the Jews from all other victim groups of Nazi persecution – but how far is this really true for the post-liberation period, too? How far can one even speak of 'the Jewish experience' after liberation?

Most Jews from Western Europe returned to their pre-persecution homes in the first few weeks and months after their liberation from the Nazi camps; those who remained in the DP camps were mainly Jews from Eastern and South-eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. However, many non-Jewish survivors from Eastern and South-eastern Europe and the Soviet Union did not want to, or could not, go home either, for various reasons. How does, for example, the fate of the Ukrainians compare to that of the Jews? Or the fate of the Balts? Or the fate of the Poles? Can one really argue that their sense of loss, devastation, disorientation is substantially and qualitatively different from that of the Jewish survivors, and if so, in what ways? And how do the (ultra-)orthodox Jews fit into the picture, a group that has consistently been overlooked despite evidence of its significance.[\(6\)](#)

I appreciate that conceptual questions such these were outside the remit of the current study and addressing them would have gone beyond its scope. Dan Stone has written an engrossing book that is incredibly rich in survivor testimony, weaving a tapestry that covers a lot of ground and grips the reader because of the moving and raw character of the stories. Further studies need to build on this and address the wide range of issues and questions which this book opens up.

Notes

1. R. Schulze, 'Andrew Matthews and the two Sachslová Sisters', in *Belsen 1945: New Historical Perspectives*, ed. S. Bardgett and D. Cesarani (London, 2006), pp. 79–83.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. S. J. Goldsmith, 'After Belsen and Dachau', *Midstream*, 31 (April 1985), 4.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. *German Concentration Camps Factual Survey*, United Kingdom 1945 (unfinished). Produced by Sidney Bernstein. Restored and completed by Imperial War Museums UK 2014. For more see T. Haggith, 'The 1945 Documentary *German Concentration Camps Factual Survey* and the 70th of the Liberation of the Camps', *The Holocaust in History and Memory*, 7 (2014), 181–97.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. I am currently working on a study which takes a fresh look at the Belsen Trial: 'The Belsen Trial: a re-appraisal'.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. A. Wiewiorka, *1945: La Découverte* (Paris, 2015).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. See, for example, H. Lustiger Thaler, 'History and Memory: The Orthodox Experience in the Bergen-Belsen Displaced Persons Camp', *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 27 (2013), 30–56; H. Lustiger Thaler, 'The Rebirth of Orthodox Judaism in British Occupied Germany: Religious "Yiddishkeit" in the Bergen-Belsen Displaced Persons Camp', in *Bergen-Belsen – Neue Forschungen*, ed. H. Knoch and T. Rahe (Göttingen, 2014), pp. 226–41.[Back to \(6\)](#)

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

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