THE "BEAST" IN BERGEN-BELSEN: JOSEF KRAMER AND THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE "FINAL SOLUTION"
TO THE "JEWISH QUESTION," 1943-1945

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR GRADUATION HONORS

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To begin, I would first wish to thank all those individuals who have made this project possible. The events and stories that construct the Holocaust have always been a subject of interest for me. Understanding this, it seems fitting that I first committed myself to this project while traveling to Europe in the spring of 2005. While there, I observed the structures and locations that represent the Holocaust and was compelled to study the period further; specifically Concentration Camps Auschwitz-Birkenau and Bergen-Belsen. Because the journey would not have been possible without participation from both students and faculty members, I would like to thank Caroline Webster, Gabi Cote, Monica Reynolds, Bonnie Newton, and Anne Warhank who accompanied me to Europe, along with Shannon Ackeret and Dr. David Messenger who organized the trip.

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INTRODUCTION

Hence today I believe that I am acting in accordance with the will of the Almighty Creator: by defending myself against the Jew, I am fighting for the work of the Lord.1

-Adolf Hitler

In the summer of 1944, Adolf Hitler’s “Thousand-Year Reich” was on the verge of total military collapse. In June, American, British, and Canadian armies landed on the Normandy coast of France and began pressing toward German-controlled Paris. In the east, extensively scattered and poorly supplied German troops were spread across a 1400-mile front and faced the Red Army whose fierce fighting ability had made it legendary. Confronted with an impossible military situation, German forces became engaged in defensive operations for the duration of the Second World War.

Hitler’s offensive against the Jews of Europe, however, was entering its fourth year and showed no signs of slowing down. Ironically, the more desperate the German military situation became, the more fanatical the Nazis approached the “Final Solution” to the “Jewish Question.” In May 1944, the first transports carrying Jews from Hungary arrived at Auschwitz-Birkenau. By September, over 400,000 Hungarian Jews would be gassed and cremated, becoming the largest nationality claimed by the Nazis at Auschwitz.2

By the end of 1944, elements of the Red Army were in position to invade Germany-proper for the first time since World War I. With Auschwitz-Birkenau in striking distance of the Soviet Army, Hitler ordered the evacuation of all prisoners held in the east to the interior of Germany. Enforced with ruthless tenacity and efficiency, the migration of Jewish captives West enabled Hitler to continue his pursuit of Jewish
eradication in Europe. Carried out mostly on foot with no winter clothes or supplies, the “death marches” began on 17 January 1945 and forced thousands to walk hundreds of miles toward transit camps and railway stations.3

Also retreating from the Soviet advance were S.S. officers who, despite facing the inevitability of a lost war, still embodied the stringent beliefs that constructed the Nazi ideology. In December 1944, one such S.S. officer left Auschwitz and boarded a train en route to the Northwest corner of Germany. With him came subordinates who had aided him throughout his 12-year career in the Nazi-concentration camp system. Representing the group that would ultimately continue Hitler’s brutal campaign of mass genocide, these men later felt vindicated of personal responsibility because they were simply following orders. Arriving at Concentration Camp Bergen-Belsen on 2 December 1945, Josef Kramer began implementing procedures that would later earn him the title, “The Beast of Belsen.” Using the skills that enabled him to kill thousands of individuals at Natzweiler and Auschwitz-Birkenau, Josef Kramer transformed Bergen-Belsen into the new epicenter of death, one that would claim over 40,000 lives in a four-month period of murder.
CHAPTER 1

AUSCHWITZ-BIRKENAU AND BERGEN-BELSEN: THE EVOLUTION OF GENOCIDE

Each [Nazi combatant] assumed the right to decide the fate of men, and death was the intended result of his power and contempt.  
-Benjamin Ferencz, U.S. Chief Prosecutor for the Nuremberg Einsatzgruppen Trial, 1947

So the aim is the same, only the tactics differ. There [Auschwitz] a quick, cynical procedure, mass murder by gas – and here [Bergen-Belsen] a slow, mean and calculated extermination by starvation, violence, terror and deliberately maintained epidemics. . .  
-Hanna Levy-Hass

The systematic murder of the European Jewish community, labeled the Holocaust, consumed the lives of approximately six million Jewish civilians and has forever scarred the European countryside with remnants of malicious destruction. Between the years 1939-1945, bands of Nazi crusaders appealing to the demonic aspirations of their Führer, Adolf Hitler, savagely killed masses of innocent civilians existing under the despotic heel of the Nazi jackboot. Commissioned as the “Final Solution” to the “Jewish Question,” the systematic genocide of men, women, and children of Jewish parentage reached barbaric levels in the killing fields of Soviet Russia and tyrannical extermination camps of Eastern Europe.

Compelled by the Wehrmacht’s defeat at Stalingrad and the unremitting advance of the Allied powers in 1941-1942, Reichsführer-SS (Supreme Commander) Heinrich Himmler, Chief of the Schutzstaffel (S.S.), began transferring centers of extermination toward the protected and isolated heart of German-occupied territory. These execution camps, with the largest located in the village of Oswiecim (Auschwitz), used violence,
terror, torture, and poison gas as means designed to annihilate the Jews of Europe. Camp commandants, appointed from inside the S.S. organization, personified the ideological values embraced by Nazism* and radically enforced the objectives of their Führer. Inspired by their respective commandants’ brutal leadership, S.S. soldiers actively and obediently participated in the slaughter of their Jewish captives.

Utilizing this regimented adherence toward authority, the Nazis vindictively gathered Jews from across occupied-Europe into concentration camps designed to purify the continent for those of “noble blood.” As previously stated, KL (Konzentrationslager) Auschwitz-Birkenau emerged as the largest concentration camp throughout Nazi-dominated Europe. Possessing the capabilities to murder approximately 279,000 individuals per month, Auschwitz-Birkenau served as the spiritual and physical center for the “Final Solution” to the “Jewish Question.”

Similar to the symbolic edifices that came to embody the Holocaust at Auschwitz-Birkenau, the structures enveloping Concentration Camp Bergen-Belsen gained an equally infamous reputation by the winter of 1944-1945. Employing starvation, typhus, exposure, and sadistic violence as mercenaries of murder, the Nazis transformed Bergen-Belsen into a major epicenter of death. Never encompassing the total size of Auschwitz-Birkenau, Bergen-Belsen still managed to emerge as a major force that aided the Nazis in their pursuit of genocide. Examining the respective histories and expansions of these death camps provides us with a deeper understanding of how and why the Holocaust came to fruition.

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* These values included acceptance of racial disparity, strict obedience toward authority, and rigid hatred of the Jewish ethnicity and its followers.
Located between the Vistula and Sola Rivers in Upper Silesia (currently western Poland), Auschwitz provided the Nazis with an abundance of favorable characteristics that enabled the camp to expand.\(^7\) With opportune railway connections nearby in the town of Oswiecim, along with the general remoteness of the area, Concentration Camp Auschwitz inherently exhibited the distinctive qualities that propelled it to “become a universally recognized symbol of genocide.”\(^8\)

The official opening of Auschwitz came on 27 April 1940, following an executive decree issued by the Reichsführer-SS, Heinrich Himmler.\(^9\) Originally serving as a Polish army base before the outbreak of war, the surviving structures immediately began to provide the Nazis with suitable barracks altered to house German and Polish political prisoners. On 20 May 1940, thirty convicted criminals from Germany entered Auschwitz, becoming the first inmates in the infamous history of the camp.\(^10\) Following the initial arrival of prisoners from Germany, Auschwitz methodically began to assume more and more detainees throughout 1940. Along with advent of new prisoners, Auschwitz also began to expand its leadership apparatus. It was in May 1940 that Josef Kramer, future commandant of Birkenau, assumed his first position inside Auschwitz’s central office.

By 1 March 1941, Auschwitz controlled within its fences approximately 10,900 prisoners, mainly of Polish origin.\(^11\) Following an official visit by Heinrich Himmler on the same day, Obersturmführer Rudolf Höss,\(^1\) the camp commandant, was ordered to “expand the camp at Auschwitz so that it could hold up to 30,000 prisoners; [and] build a camp for 100,000 prisoners of war on the territory of the village of Brzezinka

\(^1\)Rudolph Höss, also spelled Hoess, remained commandant of Auschwitz for the duration of World War II. Following his capture by the Allies, he was hanged at Auschwitz in 1947.
Having participated in the early planning stages for the proposed German invasion of the Soviet Union, Himmler recognized the need for additional prisoner-of-war (POW) camps and Brzezinka was a natural choice for the German Reichsführer.

Located three kilometers from Auschwitz, Camp Birkenau had access to all previously existing rail lines and roads in Oswiecim. With official construction of Birkenau beginning in October 1941, captured Soviet soldiers from the Eastern Front served as manual laborers for their Nazis captors. Upon arrival to the construction site, Soviet prisoners were often greeted with the phrase: "You have arrived here not at a sanatorium, but at a German concentration camp, from which the only exit is through the chimney of its crematorium." Of the 36,285 prisoners held at Auschwitz-Birkenau, from 1 March 1941 to 31 January 1942 approximately 18,000 inmates died "from hunger, maltreatment, and exhaustion from hard labor." The brutal proclamation issued by Schutzhaftlagerführer (Camp Administrator, Division III) Karl Fritzsch had become a reality for the beleaguered Polish and Soviet prisoners.

In July 1942, with the decision regarding the "Final Solution" to the "Jewish Question" already decided upon, Heinrich Himmler visited Auschwitz-Birkenau to inspect the ever-growing concentration camps. With Germany now involved in wars against both the Soviet Union and the United States, Himmler, who understood the value of slave labor, ordered Commandant Höss "to speed up the expansion of the camp at Birkenau, to liquidate all Jewish prisoners unable to work, and to expand the camp’s armament works." Arming Germany for total war became the main priority for Himmler. Following his capture in 1945, Höss testified:
In accordance with the will of the Reichsführer SS the concentration camps were to become armaments plants. Everything else was to be subordinated to this. All other considerations must be set aside. His words made it quite clear that the unwarrantable general conditions in the camps were of secondary importance. Armaments came first, and every obstacle to this must be overcome. . . . I had to become harder, colder and even more merciless in my attitude towards the needs of the prisoners. . . . Everything had to be sacrificed to one end, the winning of the war. . . . By the will of the Reichsführer, Auschwitz became the greatest human extermination centre of all time.\textsuperscript{16}

The expansion of Auschwitz-Birkenau and its armament facilities provided the Nazis with a “beneficial” method of aiding the German war effort, while simultaneously exterminating the untermenschen (sub-humans) of the east. Despite this “advantageous” system, however, Himmler, who had already chosen Auschwitz-Birkenau as a site for mass executions in 1941, ordered the construction of extermination facilities (gas chambers) inside Birkenau to begin in August 1942.\textsuperscript{17} The development of Auschwitz-Birkenau as the future “extermination capital” of Nazi-occupied Europe began following this proclamation.

Using gas as a method for mass extermination, however, was not a revolutionary idea conceived by the Nazis in 1942. As early as September 1941, Zyklon B, an insecticide produced at Monowice (later Auschwitz III), was used to kill 900 Soviet soldiers in Block 11 of Auschwitz.\textsuperscript{18} Later described by Höss during his capture, the killing of the Soviet prisoners was done in a “humane” manner and he was “impressed by the whole procedure.”\textsuperscript{19}

The Russians were ordered to undress in an anteroom: they then quietly entered the mortuary, for they had been told they were to be deloused. The whole transport [900 men] exactly filled the mortuary to capacity. The doors were then sealed and the gas shaken down through the holes in the roof. I do not know how long this killing took. For a little while a humming sound could be heard. When the powder was thrown in there were cries of ‘Gas!’, then a great bellowing, and the trapped prisoners hurled themselves against both the doors. But the doors
held. They were opened several hours later, so that the place might be aired. It was then that I saw, for the first time, gassed bodies in the mass.  

It was the result of these early experiments that inspired Heinrich Himmler and others among the Nazi command to use gas as a means of eliminating the Jewish race in Europe.

Following the decree issued by Himmler in the summer of 1942, work immediately began to further expand the death camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau. Between the periods from August 1942 through June 1943, approximately 8,000 prisoners labored each day to enlarge the camp, create gas chambers, and construct crematoriums. In June 1943, with the completion of four crematoria and adjoining gas chambers, the liquidation of camp inmates began to consume the daily lives of the S.S. soldiers. Possessing the capabilities to murder approximately 10,000 inmates per day, Auschwitz-Birkenau began to receive an influx in transports carrying victims to their unsuspecting deaths.

A description of this carnage, provided by an anonymous prisoner who escaped from Auschwitz and moved to the United States, further expands on what was occurring in Oswiecim in 1943: “The crematoria had been finished and the number of arrivals was steadily increasing. Gassing and burning were carried out at record speed but the supply of corpses became so large that occasionally they had to resort to the old method of open air cremation. It is estimated that approximately 1 ½ million Jews were exterminated in this manner. With the exception of the Polish Jews, the other Jews had no idea what was in store for them at AUSCHWITZ.” Confirming the above report, in August 1943 alone over 50,105 Jews entered Auschwitz from locations across Europe, becoming new
victims forced to ominously contemplate the meaning of the phrase, "Arbeit Macht Frei."\(^\text{23}\)

By 20 January 1944, the total population of the Auschwitz-Birkenau complex exceeded 80,000 prisoners.\(^\text{24}\) In order to properly control the daily procedures occurring inside the component camps of Auschwitz, Nazi officials decentralized the power structure, ultimately dividing the compound into three separate sites. Under this new structure, the commandant of Auschwitz I would remain operational director for all three camps, but individual leaders would also be appointed to Birkenau (Auschwitz II) and Monowice (Auschwitz III). In May 1944, a former electrician from Munich was appointed commandant of Birkenau. Described as a "killer worthy of the task ahead," Josef Kramer led a campaign of immense brutality and slaughter while serving at Birkenau in 1944.\(^\text{25}\)

As stated above, the year 1944 would bring about the largest number of deaths in Concentration Camp Auschwitz-Birkenau. As described by Rudolf Höss during the Nuremberg Trial:

At least 2,500,000 people were gassed there [at KL Auschwitz—FP] and subsequently burned; another 500,000 perished from emaciation and disease, for a total of 3,000,000 victims. This number represents 70-80% of all the prisoners at Auschwitz; the remainder were sent to industries exploiting concentration-camp prisoners as a source of forced labor. . . . The remainder consisted of 100,000 German Jews and a large number of people—mainly Jews—from Holland, France, Belgium, Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Greece, and other countries. We liquidated around 400,000 Hungarian Jews in the course of one summer, in 1944.\(^\text{26}\)

Overseeing the mass-murders inside Birkenau was Commandant Josef Kramer, who transferred to the camp before the start of the Hungarian genocide. This immense rate of

\(^\text{1}^\) "Arbeit Macht Frei" translated as "Work Brings Freedom." This phrase, one inspired following an inspection of Concentration Camp Dachau by Rudolf Höss, appeared on the main gate of Auschwitz and was seen by all forced to walk under it.
extermination was prompted by the massive defeats sustained by the German Wehrmacht throughout 1943-1944. Due to the advancing Red Army in late 1943, Treblinka, Sobibór, Belzec, and Chelmno ("Operation Reinhard" Death Camps) were all closed and forced to send their Jewish captives to Auschwitz. With space limited, most captives were gassed and cremated the moment their train arrived to Auschwitz-Birkenau.

As the winter of 1944-1945 descended upon Concentration Camp Auschwitz-Birkenau, all hopes of a German military victory in World War II had been shattered. By January 1945, with the Soviet Army closing in on the Auschwitz-Birkenau complex, large death marches began to be organized by the Nazis as the primary way of moving prisoners inside German-occupied territory. Acting as the largest staging ground for these marches, Auschwitz bore witness to the ever-growing desperation of the retreating Germans. By "January 17, 1945, 18,672 women reported for the last roll call in Birkenau, Auschwitz, and the satellite camps. The next day, the vast majority of these women embarked on the evacuation journey, which has become known as the death march. . . . The women were loaded onto open freight cars and deported, most to Bergen-Belsen and Ravensbrück, where ultimately about 10,000 women ended up."28

In an attempt to hide the monstrous crimes committed at Auschwitz-Birkenau, the Nazis organized a formal demolition of the crematoria and gas chambers in the Birkenau complex. With the Soviet Army within striking distance of the camp, on 20 January 1945, Crematoriums II and III were blown up and traces of their existence were hidden as completely as possible.29 Six days later, Crematoria V met a similar fate at the hands of the retreating Nazis. With the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau occurring the day following the formal destruction of Crematoria V, most of the approximately 2,000 Nazi
and S.S. guards had escaped west toward Germany-proper.\textsuperscript{30} Having been depleted of its prisoners due to the Nazi-inspired death marches, Auschwitz-Birkenau contained approximately 7,000 inmates when soldiers of the 60\textsuperscript{th} Army of the First Ukrainian Front approached the camp on 27 January 1945.\textsuperscript{31}

With the fall of the “epicenter of death” to the Soviet Army in January 1945, the Nazis, who were still actively committing acts of genocide inside German-controlled territory, began transporting Jews to a remote location in northern Germany. Exhibiting many of the characteristics previously offered by Auschwitz in 1940, Bergen-Belsen became an “advantageous” choice for the conduct of mass murder to continue.

Located in northwestern Germany, Bergen-Belsen, originally named Stalag 311, was established as a prisoner-of-war (POW) camp for captured Allied soldiers following the Nazi victories of 1940 in Western Europe.\textsuperscript{32} Rarely retaining more than several thousand prisoners, Stalag 311 was portrayed as an insignificant location when compared to the massive camps looming in the east. By 1942, Stalag 311 served as both a forced labor camp and a transit arena for Jews being sent to the death camps in occupied Poland. Because of its insignificance, Stalag 311 was poorly maintained and lacked proper sanitary installations. By early 1943, the barracks were in a dilapidated condition and the camp lacked satisfactory kitchen facilities.\textsuperscript{33} Irrespective of these problems, the spring of 1943 brought momentous modifications to Stalag 311. It was the transformation of Stalag 311 into Concentration Camp Bergen-Belsen that would ultimately lead to the genocide of 1945.
Figure 1. The above image is an aerial photograph taken of Bergen-Belsen in 1945. It shows the respectively small size of the concentration camp and the railway lines that lead directly to the camp’s gates. (www.scrapbookpages.com/BergenBelsen/BergenBelsen09.html, accessed 22 March, 2006.)
Prompted by the Wehrmacht’s collapse in the Soviet Union at Kursk in June 1943, significant revisions regarding Bergen-Belsen began to be dictated. The first official reference of camp “Bergen-Belsen” came on 10 May 1943 when it was formally established as a “civilian internment camp.” On 29 June 1943, however, the Main Economic-Administrative Office of the S.S. (WVHA), in an attempt to avoid discrepancies with the Geneva Convention, circulated a decree that re-constituted Bergen-Belsen as a “detention camp.” In August of that same year, the Reich Security Main Office (RSHA) issued the “Richtlinien Decree,” empowering Bergen-Belsen to serve as a special “exchange camp” in Western Europe. Due to the implementation of these memorandums, Bergen-Belsen “increasingly developed away from its original character as a ‘detention camp’ and more and more approached the normal type of concentration camp.” With the establishment of Bergen-Belsen as a new confinement arena for large masses of Jews, plans designed to expand the camp began to be implemented in autumn 1943.

In early February 1944, the WVHA established another new task that transformed the structural make-up and mission of Bergen-Belsen. Due to the rigorous abuse of slave labor in the Nazi-controlled concentration camps of Europe, large masses of exhausted and sick workers began to accumulate. With space limited, camps across Europe began to serve strictly as sick or “recuperation camps.” With transports arriving in increasing

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5 Operation “Kursk” was the final German offensive in the Soviet Union in World War II. Following its failure, German officials conceded that the war in the East was lost and fought a defensive struggle for the duration of the war.

** The Geneva Convention called for open inspection of all “civilian internment” camps. By instituting Bergen-Belsen as a “detention camp,” the Nazis advantageously avoided Geneva inspections.

†† While serving as an “exchange camp,” Bergen-Belsen received Jews from across Europe to be traded with German POW’s captured by the Allies. This plan, however, failed to produce substantial returns for the Germans, ultimately leading to the expansion of Bergen-Belsen into a concentration camp.
numbers to Bergen-Belsen, additional space was needed to adequately secure the rising masses of prisoners. On 7 August 1944, bands of workers began constructing large tents behind the original prisoner barracks. This new district was intended to lodge incoming women from across Europe. As stated by a surviving inmate: "A few day later [after 7 August 1944] 10 to 12 tents were ready, into which the first women’s transport moved on 11 August, followed by further transports of thousands of women within the next days."³⁹

By mid-August, the same anonymous inmate estimated that there were as many as 4,000 new arrivals in Bergen-Belsen. As described by Eberhard Kolb in his text on Bergen-Belsen: "While the conversion of the Prisoners’ camp into a ‘recuperation camp’ in the spring of 1944 represented the first stage in the change from ‘detention camp’ to concentration camp, the second state in this transformation began in the summer of 1944 with the establishment of the Women’s camp."⁴⁰

By late October 1944, space in the Women’s camp was extremely limited and prisoners began to feel the constraints of overcrowding. In November, approximately 3,000 “ill but potentially curable women” arrived from Auschwitz-Birkenau and were forced to live on thin layers of straw located inside or near the congested tents. According to a survivor of this group: “When one wanted to go to the open latrine in front of the tent, there was no way one could squeeze through the mass of people to the exit.”⁴¹

By December 1944, Bergen-Belsen contained within its fences 15,257 prisoners. With the Allied powers advancing on all fronts, inmate totals in Bergen-Belsen began to skyrocket upwards. The final transformation of Concentration Camp Bergen-Belsen occurred when Josef Kramer was appointed commandant on 2 December 1944.⁴²
Following his promotion, "... the Bergen-Belsen camp, which lacked all facilitates for receiving such numbers of prisoners, became the destination of ... evacuation transports. The inferno of Bergen-Belsen had begun."  

By 1 January 1945, the former POW camp built to hold 10,000 inmates contained 18,465 individuals and grappled with the burden of overcapacity. Describing the situation in his personal diary, Kramer stated, "I had to accept what food I was given for the camp and distribute it the best way I could. But then they [German authorities] suddenly began to send me trainloads of new prisoners from all over Germany. It was impossible to cope with them. ..."  

By 15 January 1945, 5,811 men and 16,475 women, totaling 22,286 prisoners, inhabited the camp. To make matters worse for inmates, an extreme episode of typhus engulfed the camp and led to massive amounts of fatalities. Transmitted by body lice, typhus would ultimately become the largest killer inside Concentration Camp Bergen-Belsen. Together with the spread of typhus and immense overcrowding, 1,000 people died in the month of January alone. As noted by Anita Lasker-Walisch, a former prisoner of Bergen-Belsen, personal hygiene was important in the prevention of disease. Lasker stated:

Washing in Belsen was a big problem. Because the washing possibilities were outside. You can imagine what it was like in the winter. You were already hungry. You were half-dead. Bu we knew that, the moment you didn’t wash every day, it was the beginning of the end. So we used to wash each other and bully each other: ‘Come on’. We saw so many dead people that we didn’t even notice them, especially in Belsen. Heaps and heaps of corpses staked up. There was no way of burying them, getting rid of them. People died so fast and in such enormous quantities, we didn’t even notice it. ... You must be terrible tough or insensitive to actually survive."
Along with the spread of disease, the congested conditions of the camp created foul and inhumane surroundings for the beleaguered inmates. Testifying in the Belsen Trial in September 1945, Harold Osmond Le Druillenec, a survivor of Bergen-Belsen, described the appalling conditions that existed in the sleeping quarters inhabited by prisoners:

The Colonel [a personal friend of Druillenec] and I made a point of finding some other French people—there was safety in being in groups—and sat with legs wide apart and other people sitting in between in a group on the floor. Sleep was impossible; the whole hut I should describe as a babel gone mad. . . . The floor was wet and abominably foul and we had to lie in that, but we were allowed two very tattered blankets. The next morning, about half-past three, we were roused and sent out of the hut, again the language of blows being the only way of giving orders. 49

By the end of February 1945, nearly 22,000 prisoners were crowded into the isolated concentration camp. 50 Together with the rapid spread of typhus, horrendous sleeping conditions, starvation, and barbaric treatment from S.S. guards, 7,000 enslaved inhabitants of Bergen-Belsen lost their lives in the month of February. 51 With the continued flow of Jews into the camp, prisoners braced themselves for March 1945.

Along with sustaining the rampant spread of typhus, the tremendous overcrowding began to affect the limited food supply in the camp. In February 1945, Kramer allocated each individual prisoner a ration of two slices of bread and ½ liter of turnip gruel or potato parings per day. By March 1945, rations began to dramatically tailspin downward, often forcing prisoners to go without food for days.

The search for food, later described as a desperate affair that “governed the life of each individual in Bergen-Belsen,” often drove inmates into acts of madness. 52 Vividly described by Kramer during his defense trial, cannibalism became a severe reality inside the camp. Kramer testified, “I remember one case of cannibalism quite well. It was
Figure 2. The poor and cramped conditions inmates were forced to live in are visible through this image. It becomes easy to understand why disease was able to flourish inside Bergen-Belsen. (http://joerg-hutter.de/Karl_Gorath/konzentrationslager.htm, accessed 14 March, 2006).
reported to me that a prisoner had entered the mortuary and that parts of one body there were missing. I put a guard on the dead bodies at night and that guard arrested a man that same night who had approached a dead body. This man was arrested, but before he could be interrogated next morning he hanged himself.53

By the onset of 15 March 1945, the inhabitants of Bergen-Belsen numbered 45,117, the largest total-to-date in the history of the camp.54 During March, due to another serious outbreak of typhus and lack of food, 18,168 people died inside Bergen-Belsen.55 Later described as a technical problem, the lone camp crematory could only incinerate three bodies at one time. Absent proper tools and burial facilities, German soldiers were forced to place emaciated bodies in lifeless piles that stretched to all corners of the camp.

With inmates dying at such an immense rate, heaps of bodies began to be set afire in the open spaces of the Belsen camp. This operation was discontinued in mid-March, however, because the German Forestry Administration forbade the use of wood to cremate prisoners.56 Due to this proclamation, by April thousands of bodies were lying among those who were still alive, further adding to the horrors of Bergen-Belsen. Described as being “green and swollen . . . in all stages of decomposition . . . ,” dead prisoners acted as “a monstrous sight” for the liberating British army upon their arrival in the spring of 1945.57 Traveling with the liberating British Second Army, Brigadier-General H.L. Glyn Hughes, Deputy Director of Medical Services, described the scene in his personal journal:

No description nor photograph could really bring home the horror that was outside the huts, and the frightful scenes inside were much worse. There were various sizes of piles of corpses lying all over the camp, some outside the wire and some in between the huts. The compounds themselves had bodies lying about
in them. The gutters were full and within the huts there were uncountable number of bodies, some even in the same bunks as the living. Near the crematorium were signs of filled-in mass graves, and outside to the left of the bottom compound was an open pit half-full of corpses. It had just begun to be filled. Some of the huts had bunks but not many, and they were filled absolutely to overflowing with prisoners in every state of emaciation and disease. There was not room for them to lie down at full length in each hut. In the most crowded there were anything from 600 to 1000 people in accommodation which should only have taken 100.58

To conclude, Concentration Camps Auschwitz-Birkenau and Bergen-Belsen came to embody the Nazi-German campaign of Jewish annihilation in Europe. Using opposing means to constitute “results,” the two death camps bore witness to over 1.5 million fatalities during their years of operation. While significant links comparing Auschwitz-Birkenau and Bergen-Belsen remain, the most noteworthy can be seen in regard to the leadership positions of the two camps. Governed by individuals who accepted and embodied the physical values of Nazism, the genocide of the Jewish race became a tragic reality, forever symbolizing the barbarity of the World War II years in Europe.
 CHAPTER 2  
THE RISE AND INFLUENCE OF JOSEF KRAMER IN THE CONCENTRATION-CAMP SYSTEM

Thus conscience does make cowards of us all; / And thus the native hue of resolution / Is sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought, / And enterprises of great pitch and moment / With this regard their currents turn awry / And lose the name of action.¹

-William Shakespeare

He hath disgraced me, and hindered me half a million, laughed at my losses, mocked at my gains, scorned my nation, thwarted my bargains, cooled my friends, heated mine enemies; and what’s his reason? I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? Fed with the same food, hurt healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer . . . ? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die . . . ? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that.²

-William Shakespeare

Chronicled among the worst crimes in human history, the Nazi German campaign of Jewish eradication in Europe claimed the lives of millions of innocent civilians during the tenacious years that encompassed the Second World War. Described as "atypical men who were confronted with exceptional situations," perpetrators of the Holocaust blindly and deferentially committed acts of murder in the name of their nation and Führer, Adolf Hitler.³ Among these "atypical men," Josef Kramer, a former electrician from Munich, systematically ascended in stature and power to become a distinguished figure in the Third Reich.

Joining the National Socialist Party in 1931, Kramer rose in standing and actively served within the Nazi Party structure, culminating with his acceptance into the S.S. in 1932.⁴ Following Hitler’s seizure of power in January 1933, prominent undesirables living inside Germany were immediately relocated into criminal detention camps
organized throughout the German Reich. It was during these early years that Kramer, whose career accelerated inside the walls of Dachau and Auschwitz, became mesmerized by Nazism’s teachings and beliefs, ultimately formalizing his acceptance of mass genocide.

Using the skills developed throughout his career in the camp system, Josef Kramer became the ideal candidate to assume command of the Bergen-Belsen Concentration Camp in the winter of 1944. Consistent with the terrifying images that came to represent the Holocaust, Kramer used authority, panic, and hatred as instruments of malice intended to intimidate and terrorize civilians during their confinement in the camp system. Inspired by his brutal and inhumane leadership, Concentration Camp Bergen-Belsen, located between the villages of Bergen and Belsen in northern Germany, emerged as a comparable Auschwitz of the West. It was in Bergen-Belsen, where the massacre of over 50,000 people transpired due to starvation, murder, and disease, that Josef Kramer merited his title as the “Beast of Belsen.” Despite his upbringing as a devout Catholic, intimidation became the underlying value that defined Kramer’s life as the commandant of Bergen-Belsen.

Raised in a middle-class family in Augsburg (located in southern Germany), Kramer received a traditional Catholic education throughout his upbringing. Although he avoided service due to his youth, Kramer became dramatically influenced by the horrendous conflict of World War I. Following Germany’s defeat in World War I, Kramer began a three-year training program to become an electrician. Due to inflation and severe economic depression that enveloped Germany in the 1920s, however, Kramer

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†† Dachau served as the first operational concentration camp in Germany, formally opening in March 1933, one month after the Nazis ascended to power.
receded into the growing masses representing the German unemployed. Later described as his “years of failure,” the frustrations of the early 1920s compelled Kramer to doubt his usefulness to his parents (who remained his closest supporters until his death) and the greater German society. Flushed with disappointment, Josef Kramer, alongside countless other jobless and dejected Germans, became drawn to the spectacle that was Adolf Hitler.

Certified by Kramer’s widow years later, Nazism became a “movement [that] gave him great hope . . . and allowed him to believe in himself once again.” By 1934, Kramer was recruited into the regular services of the S.S., granting him full-time employment and promotional opportunities. Within the next two years, Kramer was officially promoted to the rank of Oberscharführer (Lieutenant) and stationed as a clerk at Dachau Concentration Camp. Kramer’s preliminary services at Dachau ended in 1935, when, following a decree issued from Berlin, he was sent to Esterwegen Concentration Camp located in southern Germany. Upon his arrival at Esterwegen, Kramer ascended to an administrative position and served in the camp’s central office. In 1936, following another brief appointment, Kramer was sent back to Dachau and continued his work in its central office. As stated by Kramer during his defense trial in 1945: “[in 1936] There were only political prisoners, criminals and anti-socials in this camp [Dachau]. Anti-socials are people like beggars and gypsies and people who do not want to work . . . . The only cases in which people were killed was when they were trying to escape, in which case the guard had orders to shoot.”

Kramer’s participation in the pre-war concentration-camp system earned him promotions and continual re-assignments to areas located across the Third Reich.
Figure 3. An image of Josef Kramer while serving in the concentration-camp system. (http://joerg-hutter.de/Karl_Gorath/konzentrationslager.htm, accessed 12 March, 2006).
Following his second term at Dachau, transfers led him to Sachsenhausen Concentration Camp in 1937 and Mauthausen Concentration Camp in 1938. While stationed at Mauthausen, Kramer was promoted to the rank of Oberstürmführer (colonel) and praised by his superiors for his devout loyalty and efficiency. Kramer later explained that, in 1938: “There were between 1500 and 2000 prisoners and they were all men. This includes Jewish prisoners. There was sufficient room in the camp for all prisoners when I was there. None of the prisoners knew at the time they arrived when they were going to leave. . . . The deaths that occurred were mostly from natural causes.”

Hitler’s invasion of Poland in September 1939, officially beginning World War II in Europe, brought new implications for the S.S. and Josef Kramer. With the German annexation of Poland that same year, newly acquired Lebensraum (living-space) was incorporated into the Nazi sphere of influence. Along with the attainment of western Poland, Hitler also gained control of the largest Jewish population in Europe. With the incorporation of over three million Jews from Poland, Nazi Germany began the construction of new concentration camps in the vicinity of Warsaw, Krakow, and Lodz (cities located in occupied Poland). By early 1940, a former Polish army base in Oswiecim had been successfully converted into a political prisoners camp and was under the command of Oberstürmführer Rudolph Höss. This camp, translated in German as Auschwitz, was to become the next transfer post of Josef Kramer.

Arriving in May 1940, Kramer served as Commandant Höss’s deputy and ruthlessly performed his assignments inside the camp. Due to his extraordinary obedience and extended services at Auschwitz and other camps throughout the Reich,
Kramer was again transferred to Dachau in November 1940 to be trained as a Lagerführer (camp leader). Serving approximately six months in the training school at Dachau, Kramer received his first authoritative appointment to Natzweiler Concentration Camp in April 1941. Significantly smaller than Dachau and Auschwitz, Natzweiler, where Kramer officially became camp commandant in July 1942, bore witness to the ever-growing brutality of the oppressive Nazi regime.

Located in the Vosges Mountain Range in Alsace, France, Concentration Camp Natzweiler was originally built to imprison German convicts and Communist soldiers. By 1943, however, the enforcement of the "Final Solution," which was actively being pursued in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, reached Natzweiler. In August 1943, complying with direct orders from Berlin, Kramer dutifully murdered eighty Jewish prisoners in a hastily constructed gas chamber. Following their deaths, the bodies were sent to Strasbourg for research conducted to portray racial differences between Jews and Aryans.

After Kramer's capture two years later, he personally confessed to the killings and stated that he "didn't feel anything. I received an order to kill the prisoners, and that is what I did." An investigation of Natzweiler on 9 December 1944 by members of the US 6th Army found evidence of the above described gassing. As stated by Col. Paul Kirk and Lt. Col. Edward Gully: "They [US 6th Army] found, among other things, 'what appeared to be a disinfestation unit' and 'a large pile of hair appearing and reputed to be human female.' They were shown a building with a space 'allegedly used as a lethal gas chamber.' In this building was 'a cellar room with a special type elevator,' and 'an incinerator room with equipment obviously intended for the burning of human bodies . . .
a cell room and an autopsy room.” The blood from those killed at Natzweiler was not the first on the hands of Kramer and tragically would not be the last.

The brutal conduct of Josef Kramer did not go unnoticed in Berlin. In the spring of 1944, following a series of devastating defeats at the hands of the Soviet Union, the Nazis began concentrating all available resources on the destruction of the European Jews. Adopting Auschwitz-Birkenau as its extermination capital, Nazi Germany controlled the capabilities to murder and cremate approximately 279,000 individuals per month. In May 1944, Berlin delegated command of the Birkenau extermination camp over to Josef Kramer, described as being a “killer worthy of the task ahead.”

Asserting his leadership abilities after his new appointment, Josef Kramer maintained a personal association with the killing process while serving as commandant of Birkenau. Kramer’s duties included directing brutal treatment toward inmates, preserving discipline among S.S. soldiers, and overseeing selections for those intended to be sent to the gas chamber. Helen Hamermasch, a former prisoner of Auschwitz-Birkenau and Bergen-Belsen, described her first selection process upon her arrival to Birkenau in 1944. “At this first selection Kramer chose people and helped to load them into the vehicles. He beat them if they cried. There was no method in the selection which was done according to the whim and fancy of the people concerned.” This allegation presented by Helen Hamermasch at Kramer’s Trial in 1945 was further supported by Dora Szafran. When asked about an incident involving prisoner brutality, Szafran, also a former inmate of Auschwitz, exclaimed that “Kramer did take part in a beating, but he had more important tasks such as sending people to be gassed.”

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88 Because of its tremendous size, Auschwitz was split into two and eventually three camps. Auschwitz II, formally known as Birkenau, became the center for extermination in the Auschwitz complex.
asked about these allegations, Kramer dismissed them, exclaiming that they were “untrue from beginning to end.”27 By expressing no remorse for his victims, Kramer demonstrated that he truly was a “killer worthy of the task ahead.”

While serving at Auschwitz-Birkenau, Kramer personally helped to administer the largest extermination campaign in the history of the camp. According to testimony given by Commandant Rudolph Höss during the Nuremberg Trial, “at least 2,500,000 people were gassed there [KL Auschwitz-Birkenau] and subsequently burned; another 500,000 perished from emaciation and disease, for a total of 3,000,000 victims.”28 The substantial achievements of Josef Kramer at Auschwitz-Birkenau, similar to his actions at Natzweiler, were again recognized by officials in Berlin. In the winter of 1944, inside the shattered and bombed capital city of the Third Reich, Josef Kramer received his final transfer order: Concentration Camp Bergen-Belsen.

When Josef Kramer assumed command of Bergen-Belsen in December 1944, there were a total of 15,257 prisoners under his direct control.29 Rachla Koppel, a Polish Jew incarcerated at both Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen during 1944-1945, testified after the war that “conditions at Belsen deteriorated when Kramer came; the prisoners had to parade bare-footed and were starved. There were no beatings until Kramer came.”30 The testimony of Ada Bimko, similar to Rachla Koppel’s, further portrays the brutality that overtook Bergen-Belsen upon the arrival of Josef Kramer. Bimko testified that, following the arrival of Kramer:

We [prisoners] had suddenly the feeling that Belsen was going to become a second Auschwitz. For instance, they started with roll-calls, Appelle, and those S.S. men who previously did not hit the prisoners started now to do so. I remember when Russian prisoners were working in the women’s camp erecting a hut. Four of them were so weak that when they carried a wall, the side of this hut, they had to bend down very low to be able to do so. Kramer came and started
shouting at them, ‘Quicker, quicker,’ but these people were unable to work quicker. Then he went to the Russians and kicked them.\textsuperscript{31}

The emergence of Bergen-Belsen as a new Auschwitz transpired due to the rapid advancement of the Red Army in the East. With the collapse of the German Eastern Front in 1944, concentration camps throughout German-occupied territory began to transfer prisoners deeper and deeper inside German territory. Since Bergen-Belsen sat in a remote location in northern Germany, it was rarely the target of Allied air strikes and rested outside the primary path of the American and British armies advancing from France.

By 1 March 1945, supplies of food and drinking water became scarce commodities as more and more people were thrust into Bergen-Belsen (14,797 men and 26,723 women).\textsuperscript{32} Because Kramer failed to construct water taps inside the prison camp, inmates were forced to collect water from dirty cisterns located throughout Bergen-Belsen. To further complicate the desperate situation, an Allied bombing raid destroyed the electrical capabilities of Belsen and rendered the water pumps useless four days before the liberation of the camp. Despite having the means and aptitude to remedy the frantic situation, Kramer failed to act and allowed the camp to decay further. As described by Eberhard Kolb in his account on Bergen-Belsen: “At some hundred metres distance from the camp there was a brook which could have been used for water supplies. Within a very short time after the liberation the British laid a water conduit from this brook into the camp with materials they found in the camp, and four days after the take over all of the kitchens were connected to this water pipe.”\textsuperscript{33}

The tremendous lack of food and water affected other operational aspects of the camp as well. In the early spring of 1945, the sanitary conditions of the site were
described as being appalling at best. Due to Kramer’s systematic disregard for the inhabitants of the camp, there were only enough toilets to accommodate 2,000 inmates.\textsuperscript{34} Because of this affair, the entire camp had been transformed into a muddy and refuse-laden latrine. “That is exactly what the Nazis wanted,” stated Hanna Levy-Hass, “to kill even our innermost memory that we were once human beings.”\textsuperscript{35}

By 4 April 1945, with the addition of approximately 30,000 prisoners arriving from across Germany, Bergen-Belsen contained within its fences over 60,000 captives.\textsuperscript{36} With death rampant in the camp, Kramer issued a final command before the onset of the British liberation. In an attempt to hide the thousands of bodies scattered throughout all regions of the camp, Kramer ordered that all prisoners would be “put to work ‘carrying corpses.”\textsuperscript{37} Further analysis by Eberhard Kolb in his text on Bergen-Belsen describes the final days before liberation: “... emaciated figures dragging the emaciated bodies of their dead fellow-prisoners towards the mass graves, watched over by the SS men, driven on by blows from the canes of the Kapos,[***] while two prisoners’ bands on Kramer’s orders played dancing music all day long ‘for distraction’ – a dismal and gruesome \textit{danse macabre}, a Dance of Death more nightmarish that even the visionary fantasy of a poet could conjure up. This was the last act of the rule of Kramer and his SS men.”\textsuperscript{38}

The sinister nature of Josef Kramer allowed the tragic situation brewing inside Bergen-Belsen to become far worse than it needed to be. His compliance with the Nazi campaign to eradicate Judaism in Europe culminated at Bergen-Belsen, resulting in the death of over 40,000 individuals during his leadership.\textsuperscript{39} Such barbarity illustrates his acceptance of the savage Nazi ideology that led to the starvation of thousands of innocent

\textsuperscript{***} Kapos, or organized prison policemen, was the name given to inmates who assisted members of the S.S. in maintaining order in the camp. Kapos were often described as being crueler toward inmates than their S.S. masters.
people. Never feeling remorse for his actions, Kramer, upon his capture by the British, stated that he pursued every possible avenue of help and was only following orders as they were given to him. This response, one that would be echoed throughout the shattered Third Reich, was Kramer’s justification for his conduct at Bergen-Belsen. The tragic and remorseful end of Bergen-Belsen had arrived, along with the infamous career of Josef Kramer, a man forever known as the monstrous “Beast of Belsen.”

To conclude, Josef Kramer embodied all the attributes that personified Adolf Hitler’s ideal Nazi soldier. Obedient toward authority, rigorous in duty, and brutal in nature describe how Commandant Josef Kramer served Germany during the Second World War. Utilizing his murderous tendencies throughout his 12-year career in the camp system, Kramer succeeded in pursuing Hitler’s “Final Solution” to the “Jewish Question.” Employing starvation, filth, disease, and brutality as means to an end, Kramer developed Bergen-Belsen into a major epicenter of genocide in 1945. As the gas chambers of Auschwitz-Birkenau ceased to operate, the inferno of Bergen-Belsen was just being ignited.
CHAPTER 3
THE EVOLUTION OF BERGEN-BELSEN INTO THE NEXT EPICENTER OF DEATH

I shall ask you to say that the conditions which were found in Belsen, and the conditions which you will hear of with regard to Auschwitz, were brought about not only by criminal neglect but that they were caused by deliberate starvation and ill-treatment, with the malicious knowledge that they must cause death. . . . In respect to Auschwitz I will go further and say that not only will the Prosecution ask you to say that it was done with deliberate knowledge that the conditions would cause death, but that there was deliberate killing of thousands and probably millions of people in that camp. . . . In respect to Belsen . . . there will be an allegation that by the treatment that was given to the people at Belsen, every member of the staff at Belsen who stands before you bore their share in that treatment which they knew was causing and would continue to cause death and injury.1

-Colonel Backhouse, Chief Prosecutor for the Belsen Trial, 1945

During the opening soliloquy of the Nuremberg Trial in 1945, the Prosecution stated: “It is with sorrow and with hope that we here disclose the deliberate slaughter of more than a million innocent and defenseless men, women, and children.”2 Gathered from across the defeated Third Reich, organizers, planners, and commanders of the Nazi Party and German military listened as accusations of aggressive warfare and human genocide stacked against them. Expressed by Chief Justice Robert Jackson before the onset of the trial: “Our case against the major defendants is concerned with the Nazi master plan. . . . The groundwork of our case must be factually authentic and constitute a well-documented history of what we are convinced was a grand, concerted pattern to incite and commit the aggressions and barbarities which have shocked the world.”3 With both documental and primary evidence exhibited at Nuremberg, sixteen of the twenty-
four indicted individuals were found guilty of crimes against peace, humanity, and conspiracy.

Similar to the conclusions established at Nuremberg, the Belsen Trial exemplified how the destructive ideology of Nazism allowed Hitler’s “Final Solution” to the “Jewish Question” to come to fruition. Beginning on 17 September 1945, the trial was governed under British law because the concentration camp rested in the British zone of occupation. Lasting exactly two months, the Belsen Trial generated substantial media attention, spreading stories of crimes committed by the Nazi regime throughout the world. Encompassing forty-eight accused perpetrators, the Belsen Trial concluded that the actions taken by soldiers inside Concentration Camp Bergen-Belsen directly led to the death of thousands of inmates in the spring of 1945.

Looming at the center of the trial sat Josef Kramer, a former camp commandant whose barbaric conduct at Bergen-Belsen earned him the title, “The Beast of Belsen.” Throughout the trial, Kramer testified that he had exhausted all means of attaining supplies and aid for the prisoners and was simply “doing [his] duty.” Compiled evidence and sworn testimony of former Belsen inmates, however, told a different story.

Following the disastrous German military campaigns in the summer of 1944, perpetrators of the Holocaust began relocating extermination camps toward the interior of the German Reich. Located in a rural community in northwest Germany, Bergen-Belsen, by the spring of 1945, emerged as a major relocation center for the Jewish captives of the German regime. Comprising similar characteristics offered by Auschwitz-Birkenau (adjacent railway lines, isolation from a large urban population, and available space for expansion), Bergen-Belsen materialized and transformed into the new epicenter of death
at the close of 1944. Without gas chambers and other structural buildings designed to exterminate large masses of people, Josef Kramer used cruder tactics that enabled him to murder over 35,000 people during the spring of 1945.

As previously stated, the progression of Bergen-Belsen into the new Auschwitz occurred due to the rapid advancement of the Red Army on the Eastern Front. Illustrated by Eberhard Kolb in his text on Bergen-Belsen: “When the selections at Auschwitz were discontinued in November 1944, when the crematoria and gas chambers were dismantled and blown up, the suffering of the Jews in the concentration camps under the National Socialist régime was not yet over. . . . These ‘victims of the last hour’ died either during the transports themselves — be it from exhaustion, be it from the bullets of the accompanying SS escorts —, or they perished miserably in the absorption camps from hunger and disease.”

Analyzing the conduct taken by the Germans in their pursuit of the evacuations, Kolb concluded that “this was the last great National Socialist mass murder, after the end of the mass killings in the gas chambers of the extermination camps. . . . They were herded together in open goods carriages and transported for days through the country, unprotected from the weather, without food or water. . . . Those who reached the reception camps . . . alive, fell victim en masse to the epidemics and the incredibly unhygienic conditions in the camps.”

Josef Kramer was put in command of Bergen-Belsen because of the obedient behavior he exhibited toward his superiors and for his ruthless behavior. Having been inundated in the camp system since 1934, Kramer emerged as an ideal candidate to command the new center of Jewish extermination in the winter of 1944. This fact, Chief
Figure 4. The assembly of Nazi-war criminals at the beginning of the Belsen Trial. Josef Kramer is sitting in the corner of the first row wearing a sign with a “1” on it. (www.mikekemble.com/ww2/belsen.html, accessed 18 March, 2006).
Prosecutor Colonel T. M. Backhouse indicated during the trial, revealed how members of the S.S. were able to use all means necessary to kill their defenseless prisoners.

If you teach people to gas 4,000,000 victims you cannot expect them thereafter to be very gentle with lives in other ways. If you have been used to sending a transport of a thousand human beings an hour to a gas chamber, shooting an odd person cannot be a very serious matter—nor can a beating. If you have been used to guarding a Kommando [prisoner-work detail] all day and coming back at night with one or two dead bodies being carried behind, people who have died through exhaustion or beating, you cannot expect to be very gentle when you get back. . . . That was the picture in a concentration camp, and that was the picture of Belsen.7

Testimony presented by Dr. Fritz Leo asserted that Concentration Camp Bergen-Belsen was to be the next Auschwitz. Dr. Leo explained that he had received information from a Belsen Kapo that plans had been made to construct a gas chamber in an isolated corner of the camp. He stated that "a very trustworthy and good Kapo, a Czech called Bellenech, told me that in the middle of March he had orders from his S.S. building contractor to build a hut underground which was to have been covered entirely with earth and kept air-tight. When Bellenech said to this S.S. contractor, 'I know perfectly well for what purpose this underground hut is being built,' the S.S. man looked at him and said, 'Well, I think you are right.' It was quite clear to all of us that plans for a gas chamber had been prepared."8

While no physical evidence of a gas chamber was ever found inside Bergen-Belsen, Colonel Backhouse noted the significance of Dr. Leo's testimony.

I would not ask the Court to say that there is evidence on which they can properly find that any actual gas chamber was in the course of construction. But do you doubt that there would have been? The gas chambers at Auschwitz were being demolished and were being taken down, stone by stone. Where were they going? Was not the obvious place to take them where all the sick people were being collected together? Nobody would suggest that the Nazi mind is not logical. It is quite inconsistent that in the one place that should collect sick people and kill them, and in the other, where there were precisely the same people, that same Jews and Poles, etc., they should care for them in a convalescent camp.9
Newly-arrived prisoners from destinations across occupied Europe quickly overwhelmed all aspects of the camp. Built to adequately sustain fewer than 10,000 inmates, Bergen-Belsen, by its liberation on 15 April 1945, contained approximately 60,000 captives inside its barbed fences. Exacerbated by the severe overcrowding, massive food and water shortages led inmates to commit acts of cannibalism to satisfy their hunger.

The more evacuation transports arrived in Bergen-Belsen the more catastrophic the situation became there. The over-crowded huts, often without any heating lacked all equipment or furnishings and people had to lie on the bare floors. The camp authorities deliberately refrained from easing the situation and made no attempt to draw on the reserves of food, clothing and medical supplies which were stored at the nearby military training grounds. The lack of water was so severe that prisoners in Bergen-Belsen died of thirst. Others went mad with hunger and thirst and turned to cannibalism in their despair.

During the Belsen Trial, Colonel Backhouse asserted that the food and water shortages were deliberately planned and orchestrated as a means to exterminate the prisoners inside Bergen-Belsen. On 12 November 1945, Col. Backhouse argued:

There was never the slightest attempt to improve conditions there [Belsen], to bring medical supplies, beds or anything else that one would naturally require to build a convalescent camp. There was not the slightest attempt to provide diet, nor to make provision for the sick when they arrived, by the staff who were there. You have the picture of Belsen with more and more people coming in and no serious attempt being made to organize it. . . . Can you imagine that situation with any normal and sane people in charge, quite apart from any complaints they may or may not have sent to Berlin? Surely they would be working day and night to get the place straight and help these people by organizing it.

During the Prosecution’s closing argument, Colonel Backhouse cited further evidence that prisoners were purposely starved by Commandant Kramer and the leadership staff at Bergen-Belsen. He stated: “You have to consider also what attempt was made with regard to feeding. It looked as if Kramer was really saying that owing to the breakdown
in supplies he did not get enough food for these people, but then Müller [former accomplice of Kramer at Belsen] said that the prisoners got all they were entitled to apart from bread. . . . Is it not quite obvious that these people were being starved, and if they were not being deliberately starved, at least there was not the slightest care as to whether they were starved or not.”

Evidence cited by Colonel Backhouse and the Prosecution supported the assertion that starvation was employed as an instrument of death by the Nazis at Bergen-Belsen. As a survivor of both Auschwitz and Belsen observed, “In Birkenau entire groups would simply disappear . . . In Bergen-Belsen . . . you died slowly, from illness, exhaustion, cold, most from hunger. . . . In Bergen-Belsen you stared death in the face at every moment.” Malnourishment and dehydration, however, were not the only mechanisms used to obtain “results” for Josef Kramer and his S.S. force at Belsen. Disease also acted as a principal killer for the Nazis during the final months of World War II. Typhus would ultimately replace the gas chambers of Auschwitz as the primary method of execution for Josef Kramer at Bergen-Belsen.

Matured through the unsanitary conditions created by the influx of new prisoners, typhus easily spread throughout the camp, becoming the single largest killer inside Bergen-Belsen. Contracted from lice, the disease rapidly flourished, helping to claim over 1,000 lives in January, 7,000 in February, 18,000 in March, and 18,168 by 15 April 1945. When asked to testify about the rampant spread of the disease, Dr. Fritz Leo, a survivor of Bergen-Belsen, stated that a lack of medical supplies enabled typhus to expand unabatedly. “It [typhus] was spreading very strongly through lice, and against lice we had absolutely nothing, neither water, clean clothes, bathing facilities or
delousing powder, so from the end of February typhus was spreading like fire through the whole camp and consequently nearly everybody in our camp got it.”

Once questions regarding the typhus epidemic were answered, Dr. Leo offered a description of the hospital facilities inside Bergen-Belsen. “After a fortnight we got always a small amount of medicine or bandages. We had to do all our operating on top of a small wooden bench and were confined to small operation through lack of facilities. We had a small stove for the distillation of water and so on. If someone had, for example, appendicitis, he had to die through lack of facilities to operate, although we had enough surgeons who could have done the job very well.”

Forcing prisoners to live in an environment of waste enabled the Nazis to effectively degrade the lives of inmates and create an environment that allowed typhus to spread rapidly. Illustrated in The Holocaust Chronicle: A History in Words and Pictures, refuse played a vital role in the German mission at Bergen-Belsen.

The Germans attempted to destroy Jewish hearts, souls, minds, and bodies in many ways, often involving excrement. This was an aspect of German policy: Degrade the Jews by forcing them to live and die in an environment that was dominated by filth. Troops locked deportees in freight cars with no provisions for excretion. Camp barracks were running rivers of filth, filled with dirt, vomit, disease, and excrement. At the Bergen-Belsen, Germany, camp, one latrine served 30,000 women prisoners. Prisoners at almost all camps caught typhus and/or dysentery, both of which caused diarrhea. Many prisoners tied string around the bottom of their trousers to catch their excrement, thus saving themselves from being beaten or killed for taking time to try to get to a latrine.

It was inside this agitated environment that tens of thousands of victims met their agonizing and dehumanizing deaths.

Along with physically killing prisoners, typhus also succeeded in infecting the minds and spirits of its victims. In her personal diary, Hanna Lévy-Hass explained how
the sickness decayed every bodily attribute that made her human, including her will to survive.

Typhus-like fever has stricken us all, and we stay in bed. . . . I was feverish for 15 days. At first my temperature was 41 and 40 [degrees], later 39 and 38 [degrees]. There was no medicine. Whoever can, sticks it out. . . . The feeling of hunger completely disappeared. I fantasized. I felt only that I was close to death, very close, that it was not only generally around but this time in my immediate vicinity. I felt its breath inside myself. . . . My organism felt absolutely nothing and seemed slowly to suspend its functions. Only the thought of death was still alive in me, stubbornly. . . . In view of death and the dead, complete indifference. It has become a trivial affair. . . . For the moment only death is our closest and most loyal ally.¹⁹

During the Belsen Trial, Kramer was repeatedly attacked by the Prosecution for allowing the disease to spread throughout the camp. The Prosecution’s argument accused Kramer of deliberately sustaining the disease in order to murder large masses of people:

It is plain that towards the end at Belsen there were obvious transport difficulties, and there must have been obvious difficulties in organization and feeding; but what the Prosecution say is that no attempt whatever was made to cope with those difficulties, and that the situation at Belsen was the result of a deliberate and the grossest conceivable neglect. At Auschwitz anybody unfit to work was sent to the gas chamber. Do you really believe that there was ever any intention of setting up a convalescent depot in December, 1944, for the sick people from the North-West when these sick people were being gassed at Auschwitz . . . ? It was not a camp for sick people. It was a death camp; a torture camp.²⁰

A notable piece of evidence provided by the Prosecution was the testimony of Corporal Herta Ehler, a former soldier who served under Kramer at Belsen and was a Defendant at the Belsen Trial. She testified that Kramer stated: “Let them die, why should you care,” after she expressed concern over the spread of typhus during the spring of 1945.²¹ Colonel Backhouse charged: “Was not that a continuation of the general situation in Auschwitz? What was the attitude of the Aufseherinnen [female S.S. officers], the Blockältesten [“Block Elder”] and the Kapos [prisoner-policeman]? If they were honest people, do you not think that their attitude would be one of concern for these
sick and dying people? Do you not think they would be trying to help them sympathetically instead of boxing their ears or slapping their faces?"²²

The daily arrival of new prisoners to Bergen-Belsen compelled Kramer to begin implementing brutal practices throughout the camp to maintain order. These routines, Anita Lasker recalled following her liberation in April 1945, led to unnecessary protocols that further eroded life in Bergen-Belsen. Lasker explained how: "There were no roll-calls in Belsen until Kramer came in December, 1944. Kramer started long roll-calls and introduced Auschwitz conditions, which were very strict."²³ These tragic conditions consumed the daily lives of inmates at Bergen-Belsen.

In spite of the ill-treatments deployed by S.S. soldiers, relatively few deaths occurred due to sadistic acts of violence during Kramer’s term as Bergen-Belsen’s commandant. Such events did occur, however, as stated by Dora Szafran during the Belsen Trial. Szafran testified that “I have seen Kramer beat a person so often that I cannot really say how many times.”²⁴ Further testimony offered by Dora Szafran describes one of these murderous acts committed by Kramer. Szafran stated, “I saw Kramer . . . shoot with Schmeisser guns at a group of prisoners. They fired through the kitchen window for no reason and I can say that they killed about 22 people.”²⁵ Helen Hammermasch testified: “When I first came to Belsen I noticed that a kind of children’s building was being erected. At this work some Jews, Polish Aryans, and Russians were employed, and I saw that Kramer beat these people, and on one occasion he kicked a Russian with his boots so severely that he fell down on the ground and could
Figure 5. A mass grave filled with emaciated bodies located inside Bergen-Belsen. Approximately 40,000 individuals met a similar fate in the spring of 1945. (www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/biographic/kramer/html, accessed March 27, 2006).
not stand up any more and was left lying in the snow. I remained at the place for another fifty minutes and the Russian did not stand up. From that I deduced that he was dead." Kramer truly was master of life and death inside Concentration Camp Bergen-Belsen.

Following the accusations delivered by the Prosecution, Colonel Backhouse concluded his segment in the Belsen Trial by focusing on Commandant Josef Kramer one final time:

He [Kramer] knew exactly what was happening; he accepted the responsibility of the beatings; he accepted the responsibility of killing people there. He was concerned in the killings of people both at Auschwitz and Belsen. He has been in one concentration camp after another and, in my submission, he was deliberately chosen for Birkenau. He was again quite deliberately chosen for Belsen, when Belsen was going to accept the same people as were being sent to Auschwitz. . . . Is it not obvious that he was sent as a forerunner of the new Auschwitz removed from the threat of the Russian advance . . . ? The camp, I would suggest, was to take the place of Auschwitz.  

To conclude, the verdicts delivered at the Belsen Trial went beyond issuing formal punishment toward individuals who were responsible for committing mass genocide. Citing specific evidence and testimony from perpetrators and survivors, the Prosecution established that Bergen-Belsen, in the winter of 1944, emerged as the new center where the "Final Solution" to the "Jewish Question" would come to fruition. Viewing the transfer of Josef Kramer on 2 December 1944 to Bergen-Belsen as an indication of this new German policy, the Prosecution demonstrated how the brutal nature of the Nazi ideology was approached and managed by its followers. Kramer, who personally managed and oversaw the killing of Jews at Natzweiler in 1943 and Birkenau in 1944, was "sent there [Belsen] for precisely the same purpose, being a person who could be relied upon to do the dirty work that he was required to do with the utmost secrecy. . . ." The closure of Auschwitz-Birkenau in the winter of 1945 did not mark an
end of the Holocaust in Europe; it simply indicated that the genocide of Jews would be approached using new methods in a new location. Bergen-Belsen became that place, one that would ultimately claim the lives of more than 40,000 individuals during the final months of World War II.
The tragedy of Bergen-Belsen stands as a permanent and frightening example of the crimes committed under the leadership of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party. Beginning after his rise to power in 1933, Hitler embarked on a campaign to physically and emotionally separate members of the Jewish ethnicity from “true” Germanic citizens living under the tyrannical rule of the Nazi system. Following the collapse of Poland to the German army in the fall of 1939, Jews from across the ever-expanding Third Reich began to be funneled into detention and concentration camps located throughout occupied Europe. After the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, the commissioned “Final Solution” to the “Jewish Question” evolved into the murderous campaign that ultimately claimed the lives of six million Jews during the years engulfed by the Second World War. It was the evolution of this systematic policy of extermination that led the Nazis to expand Concentration Camp Bergen-Belsen and inflate its intended mission during the winter of 1944-1945.

Also influenced by the evolution of the Holocaust was Josef Kramer, a devout and unwavering member of the S.S. since his induction into the organization in 1934. While serving inside multiple concentration camps throughout his tenure in the S.S., Kramer became indoctrinated with the teachings and values that were central to the Nazi ideology. This action ultimately formalized Kramer’s acceptance of genocide, allowing him to develop into the man that infamously became known as the “Beast of Belsen” in April 1945.

Studying the background of both Josef Kramer and Concentration Camp Bergen-Belsen helps to explain why both entities were chosen to continue the extermination of
Jews following the fall of Auschwitz-Birkenau to the Soviet Army in early 1945. Bergen-Belsen encompassed several characteristics that allowed the Nazis to murder Jews on a massive scale and in relative secrecy from the outside world. Employing disease, starvation, exhaustion, and brutality as means designed to exterminate large factions of people, Kramer transformed Bergen-Belsen into the new center of death for the Nazi Party. Testimony given during the Belsen Trial demonstrated that every soldier and combatant who served at Bergen-Belsen fully understood what was happening inside the camp during the spring of 1945. Never attempting to impede the spread of disease or circulate more food to camp prisoners, Josef Kramer allowed the terrible and unsanitary conditions of Bergen-Belsen to aid him in his pursuit of mass genocide.

Examining the evidence and facts amassed at the Belsen Trial, it becomes clear that Bergen-Belsen was designed to take the place of Auschwitz-Birkenau in the winter of 1944. This was signified by the transfer of Josef Kramer in December 1944. The focal point of Hitler’s “Final Solution” was transferred from Poland to the northwest corner of Germany. The infamous events that unfolded at Bergen-Belsen will forever serve as reminders of the horrors of the Nazi regime in Europe during the cataclysm that was the Second World War.
NOTES

INTRODUCTION

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CHAPTER 1: AUSCHWITZ-BIRKENAU AND BERGEN-BELSEN: THE EVOLUTION OF GENOCIDE


6 Franciszek Piper and Teresa Swiebocka, Auschwitz: Nazi Death Camp (Oswiecim, Poland: Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, 2004), 186.

7 Ibid., 21.

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CHAPTER 2: THE RISE AND INFLUENCE OF JOSEF KRAMER IN THE CONCENTRATION-CAMP SYSTEM


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20 Ibid.


33 Ibid., 43.

34 Ibid., 42.


37 Ibid., 46.

38 Ibid., 47.

CHAPTER 3: THE EVOLUTION OF BERGEN-BELSEN INTO THE NEXT EPICENTER OF DEATH


6 Ibid., 38-39.


8 Dr. Fritz Leo, “Testimony of 26 September 1945,” Trial of Josef Kramer and Forty-Four Others: The Belsen Trial, 124.


10 Kolb, Bergen-Belsen: From “Detention Camp” to Concentration Camp, 1943-1945, 41.


13 Ibid., 604.

15 Anonymous, “Hell,”

16 Dr. Fritz Leo, “Testimony of 26 September 1945,” Trial of Josef Kramer and Forty-Four Others: The Belsen Trial, 121.

17 Ibid.


25 Ibid., 88-89.


28 Ibid., 606.
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