

Mark Celinscak. *Distance from the Belsen Heap: Allied Forces and the Liberation of a Nazi Concentration Camp* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), 306 pp., ISBN: 9781442615700.

The liberations of hundreds of concentration camps and their satellites by American, British, Canadian, and French troops in Austria and Germany during April and May 1945 have had a strangely marginal standing in the history of Nazi genocide, one that has sorely underestimated their importance to public memory of Nazi genocide. To be sure, these camps—Buchenwald, Dachau, Mauthausen, Belsen, among myriad others—were not extermination camps but rather the ruins of brutal labour and transit camps that had become, by the end of the war, destinations for prisoners of forced marches from Poland and sites of mass death from typhus, starvation, and other forms of cruel neglect. These western camps, many of which were once deemed “mild” by prisoners within the system, supplied the shocking images of wanton murder that moulded and still helps to mould public and private memory of the Holocaust even today. The liberations lent an unimaginably horrific face to mass murder that the Nazis had more or less successfully hidden for most of the war.

Mark Celinscak’s *Distance from the Belsen Heap* is a signal contribution to the relatively small literature on the liberations, one that introduces new actors and strives to be more multidimensional in its understandings than most past treatments. It is the single best book on the liberation of Belsen or any other one of the camps that became symbols of Nazi depravity. For Americans, the key names were Dachau and Buchenwald. For those within the colonial or cultural reach of the British Empire, the camp was Belsen. It has taken till now for a historian to do full justice to Canadian participation in Belsen’s liberation and the attempted relief of its often-doomed survivors, as well as the Anglo-Canadian the literary-artistic contemplation of what Belsen meant. Indeed, one achievement of this volume is Celinscak’s identification and integration of Canadian and Canadian Jewish soldiers and their army units into a solid, comprehensive account of the liberation as a military operation. At the same time, he carefully researches Canadian sources for eyewitness reactions to Belsen among those who accepted the surrender of the camp or arrived soon after. He thus gives added transnational texture to an operation mostly considered British in prior popular and academic accounts.

Not surprisingly, in most ways the first reactions of Canadians on the scene and at home differed little from those of others as they confronted the camps: sometimes traumatic shock, disgust, and a battle between the recognition of an unavoidable assault on the mind and the senses and an urgent need to forget. The very title of the book encapsulates these ironies and contrasts. “Distance from the Belsen Heap,” a quotation from the Leonard Cohen poem, “Lines from My Grandfather’s Journal”

(1961), speaks of the necessity to distance oneself from the horror, to “get up each morning to make a kind of peace” and yet a few stanzas later the poet admits that he “will never be free from this tyranny.” Aside from its use of Belsen as a reference point, however, the sentiment echoes those of others, whether British, American, or Canadian, who felt trapped in the first-hand or immediate second-hand memory of the scenes at Belsen, Dachau, or Buchenwald.

While Celinscak’s depiction of the initial days at Belsen adds crucial detail in its addition of Canadians to the mix and its careful reconstruction of the military operations surrounding the Nazi handover of the camp, his most original contributions to the historical literature come in more longitudinal interpretive discussions. He depicts the weeks and months after liberation through the work of doctors, nurses, and chaplains, and surveys the attempts of British and Canadian artists and photographers to elicit order and meaning from their experience. In the chapter, “A Camp on Exhibit,” he uses the later theoretical observations of such philosopher/psychologists as Julia Kristeva and Karl Jaspers and a variety of later historians to guide first-hand evidence that illustrates or modifies discussions of responsibility, complicity, and the very meaning of witness. Furthermore, among British and Canadian Jews who were at Belsen it is exceedingly interesting to see how the experience sometimes shaped significantly the rest of their lives. Nor was that only the case with Jews. At the same time, some confessed (with some underlying embarrassment) that being at Belsen had no extraordinary, long-lasting effect. More than most scholars, Celinscak has created a dialogue between these eyewitnesses and more theoretical looks at what meaning that experience might hold.

The chapter, “The Impossible Real: Bergen-Belsen in Art and Photography,” accomplishes a similar task in setting forth some of the theoretical work on representation of the Holocaust with the actual work and words of photographers and artists who attempted to depict what they saw at Belsen. Celinscak contributes to the difficult discussion of representation not only the in work of familiar artists and photographers but also some whose work is hardly known today. Particularly interesting is his elaboration of the British and Canadian War Artists who were given the official task of documenting Belsen. A final chapter that assesses the experiences of chaplains, doctors, and nurses at Belsen as they helped both survivors and military personnel is both moving and insightful. Burying the dead, healing the sick, in short creating an increasingly resilient community from the depths of hell—Celinscak peoples these tasks and humanizes them beyond statistical measures.

In all, the research and the comprehensive vision that *Distance from the Belsen Heap* brings to the liberation of Belsen greatly advances our view of that impossible to comprehend not only the shock of recognition that the liberations brought but also to the transition from slavery to freedom for those lucky enough to survive. The questions Celinscak poses may not be new but the thoroughness and sensitivity

with which he has presented his answers make *Distance for the Belsen Heap* a model study of events that have for too long been considered footnotes to history.

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