

# The secret history of torture

*Michael Still reflects on 'turning a blind eye' to torture*

Coverage of the Holocaust, relating to Holocaust Memorial Day, has prompted some odd memories.

In the mid-1950s I was a national serviceman and was posted to northern Germany. On one occasion I and some other soldiers happened, to our surprise, on the site of the Belsen concentration camp.

Bergen-Belsen, or Belsen, was a Nazi concentration camp in what is today Lower Saxony in northern Germany, south-west of the town of Bergen. It was originally established as a prisoner of war camp. In 1943 parts of it became a concentration camp. Initially, Belsen was an 'exchange camp' where Jewish hostages were held with the intention of exchanging them for German prisoners of war held overseas. The camp was later expanded to accommodate Jews from other concentration camps. When it was liberated on 15 April 1945 the Allied soldiers discovered approximately 60,000 prisoners inside, most half starved and seriously ill, and another 13,000 corpses lying around the camp not buried.

After 1945, the name Belsen was applied to the displaced persons camp established nearby, but it is most commonly associated with the concentration camp.

When we saw the site some ten years later, it was like a piece of parkland screened by trees. Neatly kept grass-covered mounds each had a label noting, in thousands, the number of bodies buried below.

As a boy I had seen the newsreels that were filmed just after Belsen had been liberated. A sergeant in our unit had been with a photographic corps sent to film Belsen in 1945. He said the distributed films left out the worst scenes.

Now I wonder about the screen of trees. My memory of the site is that, when I saw it in the mid-1950s, there were trees that were more than ten years old, but some

conifers can grow quickly. Had the trees and SS troops been enough to prevent locals knowing about the nature of Belsen?

British forces, when they came, made local people see the camp just after it had been liberated. The locals were horrified at what had been hidden from them.

I have been re-reading the first part of *Cruel Britannia: A Secret History of Torture* by Ian Cobain. Part of the book deals with the Combined Services Detailed Interrogation Centres (CSDICs). These centres were set up by British forces, in the area of Germany that they occupied, at the end of the second world war.

In *Cruel Britannia* Ian Cobain tells of the difficult problems set for British military intelligence services. They had to find and catch dangerous Nazis still at large, discover Joseph Stalin's intentions for Europe, and find how Stalin's intelligence services recruited and trained German agents in West Germany. The CSDICs were secret and not gentle places.

Less than two years after the liberation of Belsen, hospitals in that region were confidentially reporting that they had treated patients who had been imprisoned in the CSDICs. These patients were so emaciated that their appearance reminded medical staff of the prisoners at Belsen.

Some of the patients were so unwell that, despite treatment, they soon died. Some had scars on their legs from 'shin screws'. These were implements found by the 'occupiers' at an ex-Gestapo prison in Hamburg and had been re-used at some CSDICs.

We need to remember the Holocaust, and to find out more about the secret history of torture so that we can avoid repeating such behaviour.

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