

# The mass graves of Hohne and the French attempt (and failure) at exhumation (1958–1969)

Jean-Marc Dreyfus<sup>1,2</sup>

1 *The University of Manchester, Manchester, UK*

2 *Sciences Po, Paris, France*

Corresponding author: Jean-Marc Dreyfus ([jean-marc.dreyfus@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:jean-marc.dreyfus@manchester.ac.uk))

Published 10 May 2023

## Abstract

The Bergen Belsen Nazi concentration camp has been widely described and studied, especially as the images taken by British troops at the moment of the camp's liberation shaped the very representation of Nazi crimes and the Holocaust. Much less-known are the debates about the exhumations of more than 20 000 corpses of inmates, the ones who died in the weeks before or after the liberation. The French mission in search of corpses of deportees, the so-called 'Garban mission', tried to negotiate the access to the camp grounds. After an international uproar and a decade of negotiations, the permission was finally not granted.

## Key Words

Exhumations, Holocaust, Nazi camps, Postwar, WWII

The Bergen-Belsen Memorial is today one of the most widely visited former concentration camps and sites of terror in Germany. It is a 'city of memorials', with a complex structure of commemoration and many layers of memory<sup>1</sup>. There are many individual memorials, a symbolic tombstone for Anne Frank, a place of worship, and a huge museum. Bergen-Belsen is known and remembered for the gruesome images that were taken by British troops immediately following the liberation of the camp on April 15, 1945. These images have often been taken from the (heavily edited) newsreels shown in cinemas in Britain and all over Europe<sup>2</sup>. They were also widely used in subsequent documentary movies shown both at Nuremberg and in other high-profile trials, and with the aim of 'reeducating' the Germans. The many visitors to the Memorial do not know (and are not told) that the site is also a huge cemetery, with the corpses seen in the photographs displayed within the museum, located both on

the main camp sites (where mass graves are now marked and with the approximate number of deaths being given) and not far away from them – not in Bergen-Belsen itself but in the nearby military camp at Hohne (where the Wehrmacht barracks were located, in which many survivors were sheltered). In the military camp, only a few individual graves are marked, when the trenches in which the corpses were aligned are not. Today, the military camp belongs to the Bundeswehr; after the fall of communism and the reunification of Germany, it was transferred from the British troops that had occupied it for decades. In contrast to other camp sites in Germany, no exhumations have been performed in Bergen-Belsen and no attempts have been undertaken to rebury the corpses in individual, identified, decent graves<sup>3</sup>. In Dachau, for example, the mass graves of the Leitenberg (about 10 000 corpses of inmates who died in the last weeks of the camp's existence and following its liberation), were opened from

1 See the website of the Memorial <https://bergen-belsen.stiftung-ng.de/en/>.

2 On those images, see for instance the seminal Bardgett S, Cesarani D (2006) (Eds), *Belsen 1945: New Historical Perspectives*, London/Portland, 250 pp.

3 The treatment of corpses that had not been cremated and which were found when the camps were liberated or abandoned by the guards remains a spot of the research on the camp and Holocaust memory.

1952 onwards. Some corpses were identified and repatriated (mostly to France), while others were put in mass graves as part of a landscaped memorial cemetery that today forms part of the official Dachau memorial.

None of this happened at Bergen-Belsen. Not because no plans were drawn up to exhume over 12 000 dead bodies of victims who, after the liberation of the camp, died from exhaustion, disease (typhus) or as a consequence of mistreatment by SS guards. The driving force behind the plan to exhume was the *Mission Garban*, an offspring of the ministry of Veterans, War Victims and Deportees<sup>4</sup>. The French mission was named after Pierre Garban, its director between 1946 and 1965. Launched in 1946, it took over from the French occupation forces, which had started exhuming any corpses considered ‘French’, whether those of fallen soldiers or any category of deportee (Resistance fighters, Jews or hostages). The French mission was far from the only one to search for the bodies of its nationals; Italy, Belgium and Norway, for example, instigated similar operations. Representatives of the *Mission Garban* toured the sites of concentration camps, went along the roads of death marches, and exhumed a total of 50 000 corpses, including 7000 that were identified as French by means of traditional forensic techniques of identification. Information given by survivors on the circumstances of death was taken into consideration, as well as the measurements of corpses provided by the families and close examinations of victims’ teeth.

At first, the *Mission Garban* only opened graves containing small numbers of corpses. The forensic techniques employed after the First World War somehow seemed to have been forgotten – then huge mass graves were opened and soldiers’ corpses repatriated to families. It was only from 1956 on that the French mission dared to open increasingly larger graves. The last endeavour was to be performed at Bergen-Belsen. In April 1958, everything was prepared, with tents installed at the site to shelter the equipment that was to be used to disinter and examine the corpses. However, this coincided with April 15, which is the day of the anniversary of the liberation of the camp; at this time, a small group of camp survivors were holding a ceremony at the site and they spotted the equipment and the facilities. Upon learning that French officials were about to exhume the dead, the survivors immediately notified Joseph Rosensaft, the leader of the International Committee of Bergen-Belsen. Rosensaft, at that time a resident of New York, was himself a survivor and, after the liberation, the leader of the Jewish com-

mittee of the Displaced Persons’ Camp established at the site. Rosensaft was well connected and apprised Nahum Goldmann, the president of the World Jewish Congress, who raised the issue with Konrad Adenauer<sup>5</sup>.

From the very beginning, this controversy over the exhumations at Bergen-Belsen was handled at the highest political level. Several interest groups engaged with the idea of exhumations, favouring or opposing it for various reasons. The survivors of Bergen-Belsen were supported by the organised West-German Jewish community, the *Zentralrat der Juden in Deutschland*. Although their demand for the graves to remain untouched was never formally based on Jewish religious law, they consulted various rabbis to ascertain their opinion. When asked, German rabbis opposed the exhumations on religious grounds. The Israeli chief rabbi, in turn, permitted disinterment. He, too, quoted religious reasons (to give at least some Jews a Jewish funeral and to bury them in a Jewish cemetery). Jacob Kaplan, the Chief Rabbi of France, also approved exhumations. Associations of French deportees, mostly Resistance fighters in support of the mission’s endeavours, lobbied the French government and the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs. They claimed that the French had the right to exhume and repatriate the corpses of their comrades in arms to French soil. The Jewish representatives from the other side accused them of nationalism<sup>6</sup>. Yet, in reality, the West German authorities could hardly prevent the exhumations, as a French-German agreement on the ‘consequences of deportation’, which granted the French Government the right to repatriate the corpses of all deportees from the territory of the Federal Republic of Germany [FRG], had been signed in October 1954.

Several attempts at negotiations were made, with meetings taking place in Paris under the auspices of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Nahum Goldmann met with French Jewish leaders and German diplomats to strike a deal. Several solutions were suggested: it was proposed that limited exhumations could be permitted but only if the French could prove that they had precise information about the localisation of the corpses they were looking for. This was, of course, impossible, especially in view of the hasty and disordered condition in which thousands of corpses had been buried in huge mass graves in April and May of 1945. The proposed solutions were never implemented and for years the situation remained at a standstill. The French associations of Resistance fighters were determined to see the exhumations start as soon as possi-

4 I am currently writing a monograph about *Mission Garban*. My research is informed by the fact that postwar exhumations of deportees have not only been forgotten in the social and cultural realms but have indeed been neglected by the current, though extensive, research on the aftermath of deportations. On the mission, see Dreyfus J-M (2015), *Renationalizing Bodies? The French Search Mission for the Corpses of Deportees in Germany, 1946–58*. In: Anstett E, Dreyfus J-M (Eds), *Human Remains and Violence: Methodological Approaches*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 67–78. The volume is accessible in open access at file:///C:/Users/JeanMarc/Downloads/628394%20(9).pdf

5 There are many archival materials pertaining to this controversy. I mostly used the diplomatic archives of the French Ministère des Affaires étrangères (La Courneuve, EU, RFA, n° 1706, 3037) and the German Diplomatic Archives in Berlin (PAAA, B86).

6 For a more detailed description of the negotiations, see Dreyfus J-M, (2015), *L'impossible réparation. Déportés, biens spoliés, or nazi, comptes bloqués, criminels de guerre*, Flammarion, Paris, 180–191.

ble. At that time, the most influential association was the *Réseau du Souvenir*. Its members were not communists and were politically well-connected in Gaullist circles. On its behalf, the duchess d'Ayen, the widow of Jean de Noailles d'Ayen, wrote to Maurice Couve de Murville, who was at that time Minister of Foreign Affairs. Her husband had been deported to Neuengamme and from there transferred on a death march to Bergen-Belsen, where he died on April 13, 1945, two days before the liberation of the camp. In her letter, the duchess pointed out a contradiction in the position of the Jewish families and organisations. She rightly noted that some French Jewish families had seen the remains of a relative repatriated by the *Mission Garban*. In April 1959, a small delegation of French survivors visited Hohne only to find that some of the small number of tombstones erected at the site had been desecrated by anti-Semites.

An Arbitration Commission first was called to life in 1965 by the Europe desk of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs; this was permitted by the 1955 Bonn agreement on German sovereignty. A diplomatic agreement was signed in June 1966 to create the Commission. The Commission organised consultations, with memorandums from both sides (in this case, the French state and the Federal Republic of Germany). The German delegation worked closely with the *Zentralrat*, which was represented by its general-secretary Henrik van Dam. Long and detailed hearings were held in the Koblenz castle, where the Commission had its seat. In its detailed memorandum, the French delegation explained the techniques it employed to exhume and identify deportees' corpses. In the case of the prospective works at Bergen-Belsen, the investigations were to be based on a few identified graves; the French claimed to have at their disposal a precise count of Jewish and non-Jewish victims (1700 and 980 respectively) buried in the Hohne mass graves. These debates are fascinating precisely because they are indicative of the state of memory in the mid-1960s – the emphasis was on the memory of Resistance but Jewish memory was on the rise. The lawyer Arrighi, the spokesperson for the French delegation, advocated a universalised memory of deportation in order to sustain demands for exhumations. Some of his statements were dubious, leaning as

they did towards anti-Semitic tropes. He also contrasted the weight of the French rabbinate, which represented 600 000 Jews, to that of its German counterpart, where 35 000 Jews lived at the time. The court even travelled to Bergen-Belsen and the visit was reported by three mainstream media outlets: the German weekly *Stern*, *The New York Times* and *Associated Press*. There was no further press coverage of this year-long debate. Only on 30 October 1969, more than 11 years after the controversy started, did the Arbitrary Commission reach its decision. Exhumations were refused. Eight judges opposed them with only one vote in dissension (the French judge). Strangely enough, the main argument advanced by the Commission centred on the meaning of the 'landscape of memory': the landscape of the camp site was seen as part of survivors' memory and should be respected. In this sense, the exhumations would disturb this set landscape. To this day, no exhumations have taken place in Bergen-Belsen.

This specific case is interesting in many ways: it shows the last attempt to exhume large graves in Germany and it is a reminder of the importance of postwar exhumations not only in the FRG, but also across Europe. It documents the process of differentiation between the memory of the Holocaust and the memory of resistance and deportations. It also illuminates how, very early on, politicians at the highest level had to deal with issues of memory and religious sensitivities. The minimal press coverage contrasts, nevertheless, with the high-profile controversies that would emerge in the 1980s and 1990s, such as the one around the Carmelite Convent at Auschwitz-Birkenau.

## References

- Bardgett S, Cesarani D [Eds] (2006) *Belsen 1945: New Historical Perspectives*. London/Portland, 250 pp.
- Dreyfus J-M (2015a) Renationalizing Bodies? The French Search Mission for the Corpses of Deportees in Germany, 1946–58. In: Anstett E, Dreyfus J-M (Eds) *Human Remains and Violence: Methodological Approaches*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 67–78.
- Dreyfus J-M (2015b) *L'impossible réparation. Déportés, biens spoliés, or nazi, comptes bloqués, criminels de guerre*, Flammarion, Paris 2015, 180–191.