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Hist 133B

### **The Conscription and Life of SS Females in Bergen-Belsen**

I started this project by searching for the origins behind a photograph in the GHDI archive. The photo's description provided minimal background, including a title and brief description of the liberation of Bergen-Belsen. The photo can be found in the Bildarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz or the Visual Archive of the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation as photo #30023163. It actually originates from the Imperial War Museum where the photo was taken in April 1945 and is credited to Sgt H Oakes of the No. 5 Army Film and Photo Section, Army Film and Photographic Unit in the British Army. After finding the source of the original photo, I



I found myself interested in several new interests such as Hilde Lohbauer, the Luneburg trial, Irma Grese, and the liberation of Bergen-Belsen. For the final version of this project, I focused my research on the conscription of SS women such as Hilde Lobauer and her life in the concentration camp. Further research yielded documents that expose Hilde as a willing recruit because of her cruelty. Additionally, the research explained what happened to her in the Bergen-Belsen Trial after the liberation in 1945 when the British arrested her for her crimes.

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In the original search I came across a photo in the GHDI archive titled *Female SS Guards after their Arrest in Bergen-Belsen*<sup>1</sup>. The photo had a brief description of the women shown in the photo, but there were no other details given besides the supposed date for the photo. The

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<sup>1</sup> *Female SS Guards after their Arrest in Bergen-Belsen*. GHDI. Richard Breitman, May 15, 1945. [https://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/sub\\_image.cfm?image\\_id=1922](https://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/sub_image.cfm?image_id=1922).

given date of May 15, 1945 turned out to be incorrect.<sup>2</sup> The description stated that the women of the SS started as the wives of their male SS counterparts and they started as mostly household aides. However, they rose in importance as more and more women were recruited or volunteered for positions in the SS. What intrigued me the most was that I had never heard of women being conscripted into the SS. This sparked my curiosity and I wondered whether women were forced to commit these horrible acts in the camps. So from there I tried to find the origins of the photograph starting with the small watermark in the bottom left corner. The mark was from the Bildarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz (BPK).

Looking into the online BPK system I was able to find the photo under the number 30023163<sup>3</sup>. Though there was little other information, a date was provided on the photo; April 15, 1945 which was the correct date upon further exploration. Though the BPK was a bit of a dead end in terms of clues, I began to search through the Imperial War Museum archive since Bergen-Belsen had been liberated by the British. Searching through the online gallery of WWII photos I was able to narrow down the search by using the terms Bergen-Belsen and 1945. I had to resort to these keywords since the title of the GHDI photo had yielded no results. In my search for the photo I found many other photos of the camp, its liberation, and of guards such as Hilde Lohbauer. Hilde's last name can be found spelled Lohbauer or Lobauer. Lohbauer is the most used spelling as it is the German spelling that was most often used during the trial. After pages of photos I found the photograph titled *The Liberation of Bergen-Belsen Concentration Camp, April 1945*.<sup>4</sup> The broader title explained part of why the photo had been harder to find. And listed underneath the photo was the date it was taken and the person who had taken it. The photo was taken April 19, 1945 and is credited to Sgt H Oakes of the No. 5 Army Film and Photo Section, Army Film and Photographic Unit in the British Army and is part of the War Office Second World War Official Collection. In the description of the photo, Hildegard Kanbach, Irene Haschke, Elisabeth Volkenrath, and Herta Bothe, are identified.

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<sup>2</sup> "Bergen-Belsen Concentration Camp." Wikipedia, December 27, 2023.  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bergen-Belsen\\_concentration\\_camp#:~:text=The%20camp%20was%20liberated%20on,currentl%20stands%20at%20the%20site](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bergen-Belsen_concentration_camp#:~:text=The%20camp%20was%20liberated%20on,currentl%20stands%20at%20the%20site).

<sup>3</sup> *After the liberation of the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp*. 1945. Photograph. Bildarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz.  
<https://www.bpk-bildagentur.de/shop>.

<sup>4</sup> Oakes, H. *The Liberation of Bergen-Belsen Concentration Camp, April 1945*. 1945. Photograph. IWM.  
<https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205127625>.

While I had found the origins of the photo, I was still curious about the conscription of female SS guards. Continuing my research, I looked up Hilde Lohbauer and found a German Wikipedia article on her, which, after my exploration, I realized left out some details.<sup>5</sup> She was one of the women I found separate photographs of in the IWM during my initial search, as well as several headshots<sup>6</sup> of her, one titled *The Liberation of Bergen-Belsen Camp, April 1945*,<sup>7</sup> in which her headshot is shown alongside a typed up text that states why she was arrested after the war. She was arrested for her crimes against the prisoners but also for working alongside Nazi scientist Dr. Kline. Additionally in the statement it is typed that though she started as a political prisoner, she was conscripted against her will because she showed streaks of extreme cruelty during her time as a political prisoner. This cleared up my curiosity on whether women were forced, but I continued my research on her and the photo with further searches on the Luneburg Bergen-Belsen trial.



These further searches yielded most importantly a transcript of the trial where each of the day's proceedings was typed up. It includes the death certificates for those who were executed and the sentences for all of the prisoners.<sup>8</sup> The trial transcript includes an examination of Hilde Lohbauer by British Major Cranfield. She was asked about the charges against her both in Auschwitz-Birkenau and in Bergen-Belsen. She denied any excessive punishments, using a truncheon to beat prisoners, and her role in selecting prisoners for the gas chambers. She sustained that any beatings were the result of her camp superiors forcing her to be harsher on the prisoners. She said that she did beat prisoners but never hard enough to break the skin and always under orders. Hilde was given a 10 year sentence for her crimes during the war but she was released early after 7 years and subsequently disappeared from the record. So while I had started my research trying to track down a photo from Bergen-Belsen's liberation, I ended up

<sup>5</sup> "Hilde Lohbauer." Wikipedia, September 15, 2023. [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hilde\\_Lohbauer](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hilde_Lohbauer).

<sup>6</sup> Hewitt, H. *Belsen Concentration camp*. 1945. Photograph. IWM. <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205430491>.

<sup>7</sup> Hewitt, H. *The Liberation of Bergen-Belsen Concentration Camp May 1945*. 1945. Photograph. IWM. <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205126429>.

<sup>8</sup> Leech, Colin Russell. "Transcript of the Official Shorthand Notes of 'The Trial of Josef Kramer and Forty Four Others.'" Trial Transcript - Contents. Accessed February 7, 2024. [http://www.bergenbelsen.co.uk/pages/TrialTranscript/Trial\\_Content.html](http://www.bergenbelsen.co.uk/pages/TrialTranscript/Trial_Content.html).

researching the role of conscripted SS woman like Hilde Lohbauer and what happened to them after 1945.

### **Annotated Bibliography in Chronological Order**

*Female SS Guards after their Arrest in Bergen-Belsen. GHDI.* Richard Breitman, May 15, 1945.  
[https://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/sub\\_image.cfm?image\\_id=1922](https://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/sub_image.cfm?image_id=1922).

This is the original photo that I found on GHDI that started the search. The GHDI is a reliable source that was provided in class. The site categorizes its documents by time period, then by type of media, and finally by subcategories that depend on the time period. This site was a great starting point but in my later searches found that it was not the most thorough as it did not have the correct or extensive background on the photograph that I would have hoped. The people in the photo are listed and a date is given but the date is the wrong month and there is no link to who actually took the photo in 1945. I chose this photo because I had never seen it before and I wanted to add to the short and lacking description.

“Bergen-Belsen Concentration Camp.” Wikipedia, December 27, 2023.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bergen-Belsen\\_concentration\\_camp](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bergen-Belsen_concentration_camp).

This Wikipedia page is all about Bergen-Belsen from its creation to its liberation in the spring of 1945. The source is a Wikipedia page so it may not be the most reliable source of information but it was part of my initial search in trying to find the origins of my photograph and find out more about the people listed in it. In the end it was not a vital source but it was still part of my exploration and ended up having an important source linked at the bottom of the page.

“After the liberation of the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp.” 1945. Photograph. *Bildarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz*. <https://www.bpk-bildagentur.de/shop>.

This photo is the result of my search in the BPK. The Bildarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz or the Prussian Cultural Foundation is an archive of many works not just limited to WWII history. Some of the works have been loaned out and they work in collaboration with museums all over Europe and the UK but mainly with museums in Germany. It is a reliable site as it is a certified

archive and I did end up finding the photograph in the archive. It was listed under a number and you could buy a copy but besides providing the correct date for when the photo was taken it did not provide any more helpful information.

Hewitt, H. *Belsen Concentration camp*. 1945. Photograph. *IWM*.

<https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205430491>.

This photograph is also from the IWM and while most information on the site I wrote above this photo came up in the search as a photograph of Hilde Lohbauer who, while not listed in the original photo, is part of this group of female SS. I researched her because I was intrigued by part of the original photo description that stated that some female SS were conscripted and she was one of these women. This photo like the one below had the same description of why she was arrested after the liberation so it was good to have extra verifiable details for my work. So to find side profiles of her in the archives this was a great find and helped me decide what to do for the final part of my project.

Hewitt, H. *The Liberation of Bergen-Belsen Concentration Camp May 1945*. 1945. Photograph.

*IWM*. <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205126429>.

This photograph is also from the IWM and while most information on the site I wrote above about this photo came up in the search as a photograph of Hilde Lohbauer the ‘SS woman without uniform’. The photo is a head-on shot of her after the liberation of the camp and typed alongside is her war crimes and why she will be tried. It is a great source that was vital for the second half of my exploration and I already knew that the information was reliable.

“Hilde Lohbauer.” Wikipedia, September 15, 2023.

[https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hilde\\_Lohbauer](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hilde_Lohbauer).

This was the main result of my search for who Hilde Lo[h]bauer was. I found her name in the archives and in the list of the conscripted SS women at Bergen-Belsen, and decided to Google her name. The result was this short Wikipedia page that I had to translate from German. The Wikipedia page is short and only has two external links to other Wikipedia pages. It is not the

most reliable or helpful especially since I was able to compile more information on my own. But it was part of the cursory search and helped me to realize I could create a more comprehensive English version of this Wikipedia page and fill in some of the gaps.

Leech, Colin Russell. "Transcript of the Official Shorthand Notes of 'The Trial of Josef Kramer and Forty Four Others.'" Trial Transcript - Contents. Accessed February 7, 2024.  
[http://www.bergenbelsen.co.uk/pages/TrialTranscript/Trial\\_Content.html](http://www.bergenbelsen.co.uk/pages/TrialTranscript/Trial_Content.html).

This source was taken from the bottom of the Bergen-Belsen Wikipedia page. It was the most cited source used to fill out the page. The UK site is attributed to a list of names, none of which I am sure are reliable sources since nothing else is listed but their names. However, despite this, this online source is a comprehensive transcript of the entire Bergen-Belsen Trial in Luneburg. The transcript is organized by day and the site includes death certificates for those who were hanged, sentences, and any evidence or testimony that was presented at the trial. It is a great source that gave me insight into what Lohbauer thought of her role in the camps. Additionally it gives the audience a glimpse into her state of mind and it is very clear on what her sentence was and the charges she was tried on.