

BRITAIN'S CAMP:
THE BRITISH NATIONALIST NARRATIVE OF BERGEN-BELSEN
BY DORIS ZINKEISEN



A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department
of Art History
University of Houston



In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Art History



By
Rebecka A. Black
December, 2012

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ABSTRACT

British painter Doris Zinkeisen (1889 – 1991) is largely unknown to art history. Therefore, her paintings done as a commissioned war artist (1941 – 1945) have yet to be adequately examined. The majority of these 14 works are easily understood as nationalist propaganda as they depict the relief work of British forces in Europe. However, Doris Zinkeisen also produced three paintings of the Nazi concentration camp at Bergen-Belsen: *Belsen: April, 1945*, *Human Laundry* and *The Burning of Belsen*, which have been interpreted as harrowing works of Holocaust art. This thesis examines these three works by Zinkeisen and argues they are best understood as nationalist propaganda for Britain. This thesis seeks to expand the art historical scholarship on an unremembered, yet prolific artist. Second, it contributes research to the study of British commissioned war-time art. Finally, it reclaims nationalist propaganda too long misunderstood as Holocaust art.

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Introduction

British painter Doris Zinkeisen (1889 – 1991) is largely unknown to art history. Her work as a highly successful scenographer during the 1920s through 1940s forms the bulk of the research available on her. However, her painted works, specifically, her paintings done as a commissioned war artist during World War II have yet to receive adequate scholarly criticism. Zinkeisen produced approximately fourteen paintings 1941 - 1945 and all were commissions from the British Joint War Organization. The majority of these works are easily understood as nationalist propaganda as they clearly depict British relief work in Europe. However, Zinkeisen also produced three paintings of the Nazi concentration camp at Bergen-Belsen (Belsen) in 1945, which have been interpreted as “harrowing” works of Holocaust art (*figures 1-3*).¹ This study examines these three paintings of Belsen by Doris Zinkeisen and argues that, when viewed together, they are also better understood as nationalist propaganda for Britain. The purpose of this study is three-fold: first, it expands the art historical scholarship on an unremembered, yet prolific artist. Second, it contributes research to the larger study of British commissioned depictions of Belsen - an area of study in its infancy.² Third, and more importantly, it reclaims nationalist propaganda too long misunderstood as Holocaust art.

¹Philip Kelleway, *Highly Desirable: The Zinkeisen Sisters and Their Legacy*, (Leiston, Suffolk: Leiston Press, 2008.), p72. Zinkeisen produced one other work related to Belsen. However, it is a portrait of General George. Lindsay. As a portrait, it does not directly address the same subject as the three works to be discussed in this study. See the Imperial War Museum archives for a complete list of exhibitions in which the Belsen works have been included since 1945.

²Ulrike Smalley. "Objective Realists?: British War Artists as Witnesses." *Bearing Witness: Testimony and the Historical Memory of the Holocaust*. 2. (2009): 53 - 67. p53. Smalley claims the entire collection of British commissioned art of Belsen “has yet to be discussed in its entirety.”

In 1945 Zinkeisen was sent by the British Joint War Organization, composed of the British Red Cross and the Order of St. John, to Northwest Europe to paint British Red Cross relief efforts and the repatriation of civilian internees and prisoners of war. She was also sent to Belsen just weeks after the British liberation on April 15 to record British relief efforts there.³ Only two paintings clearly address her commission, *Human Laundry* and *The Burning of Belsen Concentration Camp* – two subjects not depicted by other British artists at Belsen (*figures 2 and 3*).⁴ The remaining work, *Belsen: April, 1945*, like many paintings of Belsen, emphasizes atrocity through the theme of mass death and thus it does not adhere to her commission (*figure 1*). What is most valuable to scholars however is not the defiance against convention or commission from an un-remembered painter; it is the culturally and historically specific reason for Zinkeisen's defiance: the extreme nationalist pride which skewed British understanding of Belsen.

Memory of Belsen through British Nationalism:

The formation of British collective memory of Belsen began in April 1945 when the British arrived at Belsen on the twelfth. Three days later, on April 15, British forces liberated nearly 60,000 prisoners who had been systematically starved and abused under Nazi control December 1944 to May 1945.⁵ Although Bergen-Belsen was originally a site

³Ibid., Zinkeisen was given a studio in Brussels where she would bring back her sketches from across Europe to create her paintings. Her Belsen works are 4 of 14 she painted as a JWO artist.

⁴Ibid., p53. I specify British artists at Belsen here because there were artists of other nationalities present just after the liberation of Belsen. They were also commissioned to produce painted works of Belsen. Among them are Canadians Aba Bayefsky and Alex Coleville. Feliks Topolski was commissioned by the British and Polish forces to paint images from Belsen. Among other British artists at Belsen were Mervyn Peake, Leslie Cole, Edgar Ainsworth, Sgt. Eric Taylor, Alex DeGrineau, and Mary Kessell, though she arrived in September, 1945.

⁵David Cesarani, "A Brief History of Bergen-Belsen," *Belsen 1945: New Historical Perspectives*, Vallentine Mitchell, Portland, Oregon, (2006). p13.

which housed German military barracks and training grounds (1935 – 1938), in 1939 it was converted by Soviet prisoners into a prisoner of war camp. Between 1941 and 1942 an estimated 14,000 Soviet P.O.W.s died from disease and starvation at Belsen and the camp had the highest death rate of all German P.O.W. camps, foreshadowing Belsen's tragic future as a Nazi concentration camp.⁶

Belsen was not a Nazi camp, as the term is understood today, until April 1943 when Himmler used the Soviet camp to house political prisoners in the Nazis' newest civilian internment camp. Scholars refer to Belsen as an 'exchange camp' rather than concentration camp during its initial phase as a Nazi camp. During this early phase, Belsen was used to hold Jewish prisoners thought to be of use as objects of political exchange. As such, conditions for inmates were "relatively lenient" for prisoners considered of higher political value to Nazi leaders.⁷ However, by July 1944 only 358 of the over 4,000 'exchange Jews' of Dutch, Polish, French, North African, Eastern European, and Salonikan origins were actually exchanged.⁸

Conditions at Belsen rapidly decreased from December 1944 until British liberation.⁹ In August 1944 the 'women's camp' was established to hold the thousands of sick women shipped to Belsen from the camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau. As the Allies continued advance in 1944, many more prisoners (mostly women) were sent to Belsen

⁶Ibid., p14.

⁷Joanne Reilly, *Belsen: The Liberation of a Concentration Camp*, (London: Routledge, 1998.), p11. According to Reilly, the Hungarian Jewish prisoners of the "Star Camp" at Belsen were among this higher class of prisoner. They were often allowed to practice the religious customs, schooling sessions for children, and were also allowed to hold social events such as dances.

⁸Christine Lattek, "Bergen-Belsen: From 'Privileged Camp to Death Camp,'" *Belsen in History and Memory*. (London: Frank Cass & Co., 1997). p46.

⁹Reilly, p11.

from Auschwitz, Buchenwald, and Sachsenhausen but adequate accommodations were not made to hold or help the mass sick of prisoners. December of 1944, Josef Kramer, former commandant at Auschwitz, took over as commandant of Belsen. Under his control the systematic starvation and neglect of the estimated 60,000 predominantly Jewish prisoners at Belsen began, leading to the death of over 37,000 people (nearly 14,000 of which occurred after British liberation).¹⁰ However, these figures are not able to take into account the number of deaths before liberation and subsequently before Zinkeisen's arrival.¹¹ Additionally, these figures are unable to capture an accurate idea of Belsen demographics regarding ethnicity/nationality of prisoners before British liberation. What is interpreted from these figures, and from Belsen's history as an 'exchange camp' for Jewish prisoners, is that nearly half of Belsen prisoners alive at the time of liberation were Jewish.¹² Accordingly, Zinkeisen depicts Belsen as a camp composed of Jewish victims.

The idea that Belsen was liberated by the British in 1945 has come under question in recent scholarship. Upon British arrival, the S.S. in command of Belsen "handed over" the camp on April 12, 1945 – three days before the recorded liberation.¹³ Therefore, British World War II scholar Angus Calder re-phrases the liberation as when "the British found Belsen."¹⁴ Despite Belsen's history as a Nazi camp of catastrophic suffering freely

¹⁰Lattek, pp46,56-57. See also Ben Shephard, *After Daybreak: The Liberation of Bergen-Belsen 1945*, (New York: Schocken Books, 2005.) p4.

¹¹Ibid., p57.

¹² Ben Shephard, *After Daybreak: The Liberation of Bergen-Belsen 1945*, (New York: Schocken Books, 2005.) p4.

¹³Ibid., p3.

¹⁴Angus Calder, *Disasters and Heroes: On War, Memory and Representation*, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2004), p83.

given over to Allied control, Belsen is iconic in the British collective memory and is thought of as Britain's camp; Belsen is remembered as a British rather than Jewish event.¹⁵ In a frequently cited study of Belsen Joanne Reilly writes, (from the British perspective) "Belsen is 'our' camp and has become a symbol of the righteousness of the British war effort."¹⁶ This nationalist understanding of Belsen as Britain's Camp reconfigures Belsen and its over 60,000 multi-national and predominantly Jewish prisoners into one idealized event - a *thing* - easily understood and celebrated as a moment of British victory.¹⁷

Further skewing British understanding of Belsen was the intense British nationalism during World War II. Biographer Philip Kelleway points out the "profound sense of patriotism" throughout Zinkeisen's *oeuvre*.¹⁸ Her painting career outside the context of World War II is also nationalist in tone and is considered anachronistic nostalgia for pre-World War I England.¹⁹ For all of Britain, World War II (and not just Belsen) is remembered as a moment of nationalist pride and celebration. World War II is thought of as "The People's War" – the war in which all Britons, like Zinkeisen, were at

¹⁵Cesarani, p1. Also see Christine Lattek, "Bergen-Belsen: From 'Privileged Camp to Death Camp,'" Belsen in History and Memory. (London: Frank Cass & Co., 1997).

¹⁶Reilly, p1.

¹⁷Ibid., Introduction.

¹⁸Kelleway, p66. Additionally, Zinkeisen was an avid volunteer during war time for services benefitting nationalist causes. Even in her theatre pursuits she expressed her nationalist pride: her letter to the editor of the London Times in October 1945 expressed her desire to keep the Cunnington collection of Englishwoman's dress in England for the benefit of "the nation" as it "would be little short of a tragedy" if it were "allowed to leave the country." See, Doris Zinkeisen, "Englishwomen's Dress, *The London Times*, 12 October, 1945. p5.

¹⁹Peter Nahum, email message to Rebecka Black. 07 February 2012. Peter Nahum is a collector and dealer of British painting at Leicester Galleries, London. According to Nahum, "The Zinkeisen style is nearly always retrospective and decorative and often with strong references to the 18th century."

their “finest hour,” happy to “do their bit” at home or abroad for Country and King.²⁰

WWII Britain was also an era of intense nationalist fear of the ‘other.’ The “British” were an imagined community that disregarded the multi-national composition of Britain:

England, Scotland, and Wales, and its colonies populated with Eastern ‘others.’²¹ At

home the Nazi air attacks (the Blitz) on England (1940 – 1941) further perpetuated fear of German ‘others’ and strengthened the sense of a homogenous “Britishness.”

Additionally, the increased number of Jewish refugees to England during World War II stoked British latent anti-Semitic fears and spawned retaliation in the form of Jewish internment.²² This extreme nationalist pride coupled with a recharged anxiety for anyone deemed “un-British” is the cultural context Doris Zinkeisen portrays in her paintings of Belsen.

British Commissioned War Art:

Zinkeisen was not a lone nationalist artist producing British propaganda during World War II. Britain, through the Ministry of Information, had encouraged its artists to produce painted documents of British war efforts to promote British artistic skill since World War I. In 1917 the Imperial War Museum (IWM) was established in London to not only collect artistic testaments of World War I, but it also commissioned works from British artists. During World War II, Sir Kenneth Clark established the War Artists Advisory Committee (WAAC) to again keep British artists working and away from active service. Clark also founded the WAAC to keep British art at the forefront of

²⁰Sonya O. Rose, *Which People's War: National Identity and Citizenship in Britain 1939 – 1945*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003). p1. See also Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*.

²¹*Ibid.*, p288.

²²Bernard Wasserstein, *Britain and the Jews of Europe 1939-1945*, 2nd edition, (New York: Leicester University Press, 1999, p79.

international artistic production. Clark felt British artists should produce patriotic works to ensure Britain's cultural legacy as superior; therefore, he saw little difference between the role of a soldier and the role of an artist in terms of protecting and promoting "British" ideals of the imagined nation.²³

Clark's WAAC was the model for artistic production during World War II and government as well as private organizations followed suit by commissioning works from artists which promoted the patriotic service they provided to Britain during war. Among organizations following the lead of the WAAC were the British Red Cross and the Order of St. John (a volunteer ambulance service). During the Blitz, Zinkeisen was an active volunteer for both organizations. Although the WAAC never directly commissioned works by Zinkeisen, the WAAC did purchase her works depicting the efforts of the British Women's Royal Navy Service (WRNS). Several of her other commissioned works for the Red Cross were purchased by the IWM, who also absorbed much of the WAAC collection when the organization dissolved.²⁴

Zinkeisen and the Belsen Narrative:

Doris Zinkeisen's commissioned works, specifically, those of Belsen, are only three of hundreds of nationalist propaganda produced by British artists under the WAAC's influence; they are only a small portion of Belsen works produced by other artists; and they are only three of many of works Zinkeisen produced during her seven-

²³Barbara McCloskey, *Artists of World War II: Artists of an Era*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2005). p72.

²⁴Emily Oldfield, email message to Rebecka Black. 18 September 2012. Emily Oldfield is the curator of art at the British Red Cross Museum. According to Oldfield, "The reason for the IWM requesting the pictures was for a temporary exhibition about women artists, but they wanted to keep them permanently. They were offered as a loan, but this was declined."

decade career. This small fraction of Zinkeisen's *oeuvre* offers important insight into British nationalism in relation to the Holocaust, perhaps more than any other painting of Belsen. This is because Zinkeisen's approach to presenting Belsen, if viewed in the format I propose, parallels both the British collective memory and the *Holocaust Exhibition* display approach at the IWM in London – a historically nationalist institution where two of Zinkeisen's Belsen works are still housed. Both British memory and the IWM exhibition create a linear progressive narrative of events beginning with the shocking discovery of Nazi atrocity and ending with the defeat of the Nazis. This structure effectively leads the viewer from dramatic crisis to its solution and, thereby, offers the viewer catharsis in the narrative presented.²⁵ Through the IWM *Holocaust Exhibit* format the viewer is encouraged to engage in the expected silent reverence for the subject rather than question what is presented because the presentation matches his or her expectations formed by the British collective memory of the Holocaust.

Likewise, I argue Zinkeisen's Belsen works are best understood as a three-part narrative rather than as individual snapshots of Belsen.²⁶ The three part narrative structure I propose parallels British memory of Belsen through visualization of shock and relief followed by celebration. The result of Zinkeisen's narrative, and the British three-part Belsen story it reflects, is a narrative of redemption which, like the *IWM Holocaust*

²⁵Katherine Biber, "Bad Holocaust Art," *Law Text Culture*. 13, no. 1 (2009): 227-259. p29.

²⁶Smalley, p54. Smalley contends that works of Belsen by British artists are documentary snapshots by each artist. Two of Zinkeisen's works discussed here have been separated from the other discussed here since 1945 when the War Artists Advisory Committee purchased *Human Laundry* and *Belsen: April, 1945*. *The Burning of Belsen* was kept by the British Red Cross.

Exhibit, leaves the viewer's (presumably British) nationalism unchallenged and his or her understanding of Belsen uncomplicated and also unchallenged.²⁷

Setting the Stage:

I discuss Zinkeisen's paintings of Belsen as acts rather than chapters to parallel the three-part structure of Zinkeisen's narrative and to emphasize the dominant mode in which Zinkeisen worked c.1920 - c.1990: as a prolific scenographer. Zinkeisen did not stop designing for the theater during World War II; nor did she stop after the war. In fact, Zinkeisen became more involved with scenography immediately after World War II. Biographer Philip Kelleway proposes that theater became Zinkeisen's place of refuge and escape after war and Belsen.²⁸ There is also a sense of escape from reality, perhaps better understood as denial though, within Zinkeisen's Belsen narrative. The idea that a socially privileged artist could document the entirety of any element or event of Belsen after liberation is certainly not realistic. Zinkeisen's three-part narrative approach denies any reality of Belsen by claiming that Belsen can be understood in one neatly structured package with a clichéd happy ending (for the British). Therefore my approach to discussing the chapters as acts keeps the reader grounded in the bias of Zinkeisen's approach by emphasizing that Zinkeisen depicted elements of Belsen that progress her narrative of British heroism.

I do not propose in this examination that Doris Zinkeisen had anti-Semitic feelings or underestimated the gravity of the Holocaust. However, I do propose that

²⁷K. Hannah Holtschneider, *The Holocaust and Representations of Jews: History and Identity in the Museum*, Routledge, New York (2011). p17-44. p29. This quote is describing Holtschneider's assessment of the IWM *Holocaust Exhibition* which is a relevant comparison to Zinkeisen's Belsen narrative.

²⁸Kelleway, p115-118.

Zinkeisen, as a British commissioned artist with documented nationalist pride, reflects her cultural context of British anti-Semitism and extreme war-time nationalism in her Belsen narrative. According to accounts from family and friends, Zinkeisen did experience an emotional change after visiting Belsen.²⁹ Undoubtedly, what Zinkeisen witnessed at Belsen was unsettling. However, her personal feelings about Belsen, as evidenced in her paintings, were complex and therefore enrich the unexpected nationalist focus of her narrative.

Act I of Zinkeisen's narrative is the painting *Belsen: April, 1945*. The work is analyzed in context with Edward Said's thoughts on the 'Other' and is compared to British depictions of Belsen atrocity in news papers and by other Belsen artists. Said's discussion of the 'other' plays a large role in Act I because Zinkeisen presents the victims of Belsen, in a still-life, as the 'other.' The predominantly Jewish victims of Belsen literally take center stage in Zinkeisen's first work and in doing so become a spectacle for the viewer to see but not understand, much as they were presented in news reports and images published in Britain. As such, I consider these objects of biopolitical value (the prisoners) in context with Giorgio Agamben's ideas of biopolitical life and they are explored in connection to Bill Brown's "Thing Theory." The discussion of Act I contends that *Belsen: April, 1945* exploits victims of Belsen to emphasize Nazi atrocity against the Jews, thus logically setting up a need for heroism rather than empathy. The heroism follows in Acts II and III.³⁰

²⁹Ibid., 75.

³⁰Ibid., p29. Holtschneider explains that by presenting an obvious problem to the viewer the next logical part in the three part drama is a solution.

Act II of Zinkeisen's narrative is *Human Laundry*, the scene of relief in the facility the British liberators nicknamed "human laundry." Zinkeisen structured *Human Laundry* as a genre scene, which allows the viewer to engage with Belsen in a style more accessible than that of the abstract style of Belsen April 1945. Zinkeisen is the only Belsen artist to have painted a scene of starved survivors receiving care. However, *Human Laundry* is not relief. Rather, Zinkeisen uses Human Laundry to introduce a subplot into her narrative. In this work Zinkeisen critiques food rations in Britain by depicting German civilians (with exaggerated forms) giving relief to emaciated Belsen survivors. Zinkeisen intentionally juxtaposes large Germans with starved survivors to re-emphasize German evil (not just Nazi) to reinforce Germany as the enemy and to highlight British heroism through sacrifice at home. My discussion of Human Laundry as a nationalist critique is based on Zinkeisen's letter in which she expresses her anger at the unnecessary British sacrifice caused by, in her mind, all Germans. I contextualize my argument with discussion of food shortages in Britain British news reports concerning the German vs. Nazi issue, and with photos of the converted stable known as "human laundry," to support my proposal that *Human Laundry*, when understood as a nationalist critique, functions only to progress Zinkeisen's narrative of British heroism and is not a record of British relief.³¹

Finally, as Act III, *The Burning of Belsen*, which depicts events of the ceremonial burning of evacuated prisoner huts, is discussed as a monument to the British and their

³¹The letters used in this thesis are found in Philip Kelleway's biography of Zinkeisen, which also used in this thesis. Zinkeisen's family retains the letters but granted limited access and reproduction permission to Kelleway for his 2008 biographical (and non-critical) examination of the artistic legacy of Doris Zinkeisen and her sister Anna.

efforts at Belsen. The atrocity presented in Act I and the struggle for relief and a clear hero in Act II inevitably leads to a definitive and cathartic conclusion in Act III. *The Burning of Belsen* is explored through its private display history at the British Red Cross headquarters, photos and witness testimonies of the ceremonial burning on May 21 and is also explored through James E. Young's theories on Holocaust memorial and memory. I propose *The Burning of Belsen* is, as a monument to British victory, a reflection of the British nationalism which led to the misunderstanding of Belsen. The ritualistic razing in *The Burning of Belsen* is also the cathartic finale to Zinkeisen's narrative. This catharsis allows the viewer to leave the subject of Belsen with a definitive and positive end which does not challenge the established national memory.

Zinkeisen's Belsen narrative is a visual re-telling of the known memory of British heroism at Belsen. If viewed disconnected from one or the other, as has been done since 1945, Zinkeisen's paintings are mistakenly understood as separate moments of Belsen. As such, the individual works do not adhere to Zinkeisen's commission to record British efforts; however, if viewed together as a narrative, the works do (collectively) address her commission. Zinkeisen intended the works to remain together thus confirming the need to discuss her works in context with each other, as is done here.³² In doing so her trilogy is a visual mimesis of the British nationalist collective memory of Belsen. In reclaiming Zinkeisen's works as nationalist propaganda the overarching goal is to question the silence associated with criticism of Holocaust art because in many cases, such as this,

³²Emily Oldfield, email message to Rebecka Black. 18 September 2012. In regards to the Zinkeisen paintings' history she says "In 1981 Jessie Wilks, Art Consultant to the Imperial War Museum, who was interviewing Doris Zinkeisen. She mentioned that the 'Burning of Belsen' was one of the four Belsen pictures, the other three held at the IWM, suggesting that they should all be together."

silence and misguided reverence are a mistake. Zinkeisen's works were commissioned as nationalist propaganda and she created them to be so because of her cultural context. Producing nationalist propaganda based on Belsen does not make Doris Zinkeisen a "bad" artist; it just excludes her paintings from being understood only as Holocaust art.

There is a tendency to view art related to the Holocaust with automatic sympathy and silent reverence rather than with objective criticism. Philosopher Berel Lang points out, the Holocaust is a modern historic moment "as close to sacred as any secular event will ever be."³³ The often unquestioned reverence for Holocaust subject matter poses a challenge to art history. As a category, Holocaust art depicts events or victims of the Holocaust and evaluation of the art is visually is guided by a sense of responsibility to the victims rather than by objective critique of content or formal qualities, thus making criticism of Holocaust art an ethical issue. However, according to Lang, the ethical limits of representation are not known until they are transgressed.

I argue Zinkeisen's depictions of Belsen transgress these limits but have been overlooked by scholars because of the expected reverence and her "documentary" approach to the Belsen. It is important to note that Belsen, though just as horrific as an 'exchange camp,' was not part of the Holocaust, as that term is understood today: the extermination of European Jews for ethnic cleansing by Nazi command. Belsen was a concentration camp where Jewish prisoners were systematically starved, neglected, and allowed to suffer and die in unimaginable conditions once their political value was deemed lost. Accordingly, my thesis examines Zinkeisen's representations of Belsen as

³³Lang, p19.

only representations of *Belsen* - not of the Holocaust – painted by a socially privileged British artist working within the context of a nationalistic commission. My approach is such because understanding these paintings as wholly reverent representations of the Holocaust denies key elements of their creation and function; and it threatens to redefine Holocaust art through nationalist propaganda. This study therefore seeks to not only examine art; it also, through examination of Zinkeisen's British narrative of Belsen, seeks to challenge the all too frequent silence inherent in the larger context of Holocaust discourse.

Act I

Belsen: April, 1945: The Problem

Act I of Doris Zinkeisen's narrative is *Belsen: April, 1945* (figure 1). In this painting, Zinkeisen attempts to portray the "50,000 people of which 10,000 lay dead either stacked in heaps or still lying in the huts with the living" she witnessed at Belsen.³⁴ Zinkeisen depicts what she called this "quite awful" sight with the visual trope of a central triangular mass composed of starved corpses.³⁵ The highlighted triangular form of emaciated bodies captures viewer attention but the omission of contextual information has led to the interpretation that *Belsen: April 1945* evokes empathy for Belsen victims. However, this chapter argues that *Belsen: April, 1945* emphasizes the accepted British view of Jews as the 'other' and therefore cannot function as an empathetic depiction of Belsen victims. I propose rather that *Belsen: April 1945*, through emphasis on the spectacle of atrocity presents the Jewish victims as the problem to be solved in Britain's Camp, functioning only to engage the British viewer in the visual narrative of British heroism at Belsen.

The Problem:

The opening act to a three-part narrative is expository. Act I typically introduces the audience, or in this case, the viewer, to the main character(s) and establishes the setting of the narrative. Zinkeisen does not introduce the protagonist of Britain's Camp in *Belsen: April, 1945*. The second, more important function of the first act though is to introduce a problem to be resolved in Act III. Zinkeisen follows this formula and does

³⁴Kelleway, p76.

³⁵Ibid.

present a problem to be resolved. Zinkeisen presents Jewish victims as the problem of her narrative by relying on the British understanding of Jews as the ‘other.’

According to Edward Said, to the West the ‘other’ are not understood as equal citizens; often they are not even viewed as people. Rather they are problematic objects in need of reform or confinement.³⁶ Western societies, like WWII Britain, according to Said, define the ‘other’ as “backward, degenerate, and uncivilized...and prone to habits of inaccuracy.”³⁷ Ultimately these ‘others’ were alien to Western society in biological, political, and moral terms, bolstering the notion that Jews were inherently unequal to the British.³⁸ As the representative ethnic ‘other,’ the Nazi persecution of Jews in Europe was misunderstood by many Britons. Instead, many British claimed the Jews were magnifying events in Europe based on false propagandistic information reported during World War I regarding Jewish pogroms in Poland.³⁹

Historian Sonya O. Rose argues that terms of anti-Semitic discourse inevitably changed due to the changed nature of World War II compared with World War I.⁴⁰ This means the War was no longer only in Europe; it was also in Britain so the threats to Britain were emphasized. The German air raid attacks (The Blitz) 1940-1941 only emphasized xenophobic sentiment and heightened the sense of the homogenous “British” imagined community at home. The mass imprisonment and extermination of Jews (and other degenerates) overseas was a new concern which certainly changed the visual

³⁶Edward Said, “Latent and Manifest Orientalism,” *Orientalism* (1978) (New York: Random House, Inc., 1994.), p207.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Ibid., p205, 207.

³⁹Wasserstein, p149.

⁴⁰Rose, p92.

discourse of anti-Semitism in WWII Britain. Since Zinkeisen's paintings from Belsen are works that reflect the dominant British understanding of Belsen, the World War II era articulation of British anti-Semitism is also evident in *Belsen: April, 1945*.

Male artists and BAFPU photographers at Belsen have also been criticized for exaggerating the 'otherness' of the, specifically, female victims, by emphasizing her in a victimized and often nude state. Scholars have noted the "special interest" the BAFPU cameramen took in the young women as evidence.⁴¹ For example, *Women and children bathing in the bath-house before being given clean clothes* and *Women inmates use a mobile bath unit which is equipped with hot water* (figures 4 & 5) are, like many BAFPU images, argued to be the work of heterosexual male intrusive voyeurism rather than an objective record of Belsen.⁴² As such, the images create a spectacle of the 'other' in terms of ethnicity (Jew) and gender.

Belsen: April, 1945 also presents gender as a spectacle of the 'other.' *Belsen: April, 1945* does not 'other' the female form; rather it presents the male 'other' as victim, which was not an uncommon view of the Jewish male. To British culture in WWII the 'others' were the Jews who were inherently 'unBritish.'⁴³ It is clear that the two central figures of Zinkeisen's heap are anatomically male through exposed circumcised penis.⁴⁴ In the history of art, at least until the middle of the twentieth century, the representation of the male form as nude is reserved for heroes and gods. Male nudity is a symbol of virility and masculinity; the nude male form is therefore idealized. The semi-nude male

⁴¹Haggith p,106.

⁴²Ibid., p43.

⁴³Rose, p97.

⁴⁴Kelleway, p79.

form is not idealized in *Belsen: April, 1945*. Instead, it is left exposed and limp, contradicting heroic ideals of virility and masculinity. Though it would not have been accurate for Zinkeisen to depict male Jewish victims as healthy or idealized, in consideration of Zinkeisen's commission, it is evident that Zinkeisen was not required to highlight the genitalia of male victims within a camp predominantly populated with women. Zinkeisen's focus to do so reiterates the idea of male 'other' weakness through the spectacle of the defeated, emasculated, and semi-nude male form.

Though there are two semi-nude male forms clearly portrayed in *Belsen: April, 1945*, only the central male figure is implied as an ethnic 'other.' A comparison of the two reveals that the male with his face turned upward is clean shaven and pale, (non-'other' traits), and he is not the focus of the scene. He functions in *Belsen: April, 1945* as a visual device meant to lead viewer attention elsewhere. Starting from his outstretched arm, the line created from the man's hand to his nose, point in the direction of the bearded man in the center, who eerily stares back at the viewer functioning as *punctum* of this image - that contrasting detail which engages the viewer in the image.⁴⁵ It is his face - the face of the 'other' - which Zinkeisen has positioned to engage the viewer in the scene. This clear depiction of facial detail in a largely non-detailed composition stresses the male Jewish 'other' as ultimate victim.

It may be argued that Zinkeisen's pre-war success as a society portraitist makes this distinct portrait within *Belsen: April, 1945* insignificant. However, no other individual face in Zinkeisen's Belsen narrative is depicted with as much intentional detail

⁴⁵Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982.) p27,43.

as this male figure, except perhaps the other male to his left who is also shown as being of non-British ethnicity. Even within this image, the figure to the right of the central male has a face with very little definition, but with hair paler in tone than that of the central male. To front a mass of corpses – victim ‘others’ – with an exposed male form depicted as an ethnic ‘other’ also negates the patriarchal power of not only the individual shown, but more so the mass of people among which he sits – his people. The implication of Zinkeisen’s pile of bodies then becomes about the spectacle of an entire nation as weak and as victims because their patriarchs were proven so by the Nazi regime.

Not only is the central male form powerless, his semi-nudity references the shameful state often associated with sexual depravity, immorality, and indecency. According to Said’s description of the ‘other,’ these characteristics related to sexuality, indecency, and nudity are commonly characterized as negative female traits, but as Sonya O. Rose points out, the dominant anti-Semitic thought was that “girls might possibly be taught how to be sexually responsible citizens [but] Jews would always be Jews.”⁴⁶ The “unmanly” and demonized Jew was a common depiction in wartime Britain.⁴⁷ Jews were often portrayed in editorials and caricatures as “cowardly and over-emotional” providing the feminized unmanly ‘other’ to the idea of the stable and masculine British.⁴⁸ Zinkeisen’s image of the stripped male Jew references the cultural stripping of his

⁴⁶Rose, p106.

⁴⁷Ibid., p97.

⁴⁸Ibid.

individual power, his cultural power, his masculinity and his life easily turning him, and the people among the “heap” he represents, into a poignant spectacle of Nazi atrocity.⁴⁹

Zinkeisen further reflects this negative understanding of Jews as the ‘other’ in *Belsen: April, 1945* by displaying them, center stage, as an intentionally confined object within the implied and abstracted context of Nazi atrocity, based on emaciated forms and connection to the painting’s title. The large triangular mass of bodies receives all implied light in this painting thus Zinkeisen places the victims on display by spotlighting them among a dark obscure background establishing the Jews of Belsen in April 1945 as a central figure of her narrative. As an object of study on display rather than a documentary image, the ‘otherness’ of victims is accentuated because the viewer understands through this image that “atrocities happened there, not here (Britain)” or “it happened to ‘them’ (Jews) because ‘they’ are weak.”⁵⁰ Therefore the viewer has voyeuristic power over the victims because he/she is not the ‘other’ thing portrayed.

The viewer’s power over the ‘specimen’ is also reflected in the raked perspective used to literally display the Belsen victims for the viewer’s consideration. Like the actual lifting of the back of a stage (raking) to ensure the audience has full view, Zinkeisen depicts the victims’ bodies in a perspective contrary to pictorial reality (based on one-point perspective), unless the viewer was below them. Instead, they are, as one unit, lifted towards the viewer from upstage in the composition – a tool of painting and theater practitioners employed for the visual benefit of the viewer. In painting though, the one point perspective tool is not as exaggerated, meaning the focal point is not as raked if a

⁴⁹Kelleway, p76.

⁵⁰Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, (New York: Picador, 2003.) p88.

depiction of reality is the goal. Zinkeisen could have employed the raking technique to counteract high placement of her painting in museum display; however, comparison to Eric Taylor's *Human Wreckage at Belsen Concentration Camp, 1945* (figure 6) and British Army Film and Photographic Unit (BAFPU) photographs by Sgt. Bill Morris show similar raking of the scene so the viewer has full visual access to death at Belsen (figures 7 & 8). This raking presents the victims as a spectacle of death by manipulating perspective solely to enhance the viewing experience. By emphasis on viewer perspective, in *Belsen: April, 1945* Zinkeisen presents the (British/Western) viewer with a spectacle of atrocity - a *thing* - rather than a complex people to be understood or empathized with.

Theodore Adorno argues that “in the concentration camps it was no longer an individual who died, but a specimen” – a thing.⁵¹ As things, the prisoners at Belsen were dehumanized and stripped of any identity they possessed before Belsen. Although Belsen functioned as an ‘exchange camp’ initially rather than concentration camp, its function as a place where Jews were viewed and used as commodity dehumanized those prisoners. Joanne Reilly asserts that Belsen prisoners were treated with relative lenience in the early phase of the camp but does not clearly connect that it may have been because they were viewed only as objects of biopolitical value.⁵²

The life of prisoners, as commodity in the initial phase of Belsen, holding value only as objects related to political gain echoes ideas discussed by Giorgio Agamben *Homo Sacer*, (following Heidegger's ideas in *Being and Time*) and ideas of “Thing

⁵¹Theodore Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, (United Kingdom: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973.) p362.

⁵²Reilly, p11. Reilly claims that initially Belsen exchange prisoners were treated “relatively lenient.”

Theory” by Bill Brown. If Agamben’s ideas are applied to the Belsen prisoners, systematic starvation and subsequent deaths of Belsen prisoners are logical products of the Nazi biopolitical view of the prisoners. Initially, the life of prisoners held political value for the nation-state. However, as the end of the war approached, the prisoners lost their value as political commodity; but their status as objects was not lost. Instead, the thing-ness of prisoners increased precisely because they had lost their biopolitical value.⁵³ To paraphrase Bill Brown, the thing-ness of something (in this case a Jewish prisoner) becomes apparent when it stops working for its prescribed purpose.⁵⁴ No longer able to contribute their life for Nazi political gain, the life of Belsen prisoners, as beings in a space external to accepted law and logic, lost all value. Therefore, their subsequent suffering only increased and their death was logical rather than murderous (in Nazi thinking) because their life no longer served its intended political function.⁵⁵

Zinkeisen’s portrayal of one of the “heaps” of Belsen victims among a fictitious reality further emphasizes their thing-ness in this external space outside of accepted logic.⁵⁶ The heap also oversimplifies the suffering of prisoners by transforming thousands of people into one lump sum. In doing so, Zinkeisen creates an object - a thing - to give a visual comprehensible figure to what Bill Brown labels the “unfigurable.”⁵⁷ Therefore,

⁵³Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, (Stanford University Press: Stanford, California, 1998) p72.

⁵⁴Bill Brown, "Thing Theory," *Critical Inquiry*, 20, no. 1 (2001): p4.

⁵⁵Agamben, p80-101. According to Agamben, the concentration camps operate outside the accepted logic and law of the nation-state therefore becoming an external space with its own internal logic and law. Additionally, Agamben, in these pages, recounts multiple examples of Nazi experiments on VP prisoners. As individuals with no life value, like Belsen prisoners, their suffering and death was not murder; rather it was accepted because it advanced science for the stability of the nation-state.

⁵⁶Kelleway, p79. Zinkeisen describes Belsen bodies as piled into “heaps.”

⁵⁷Brown, p5.

the heap - this still-life - suggests the amount of death and suffering at Belsen can be visually understood through summary of just a few defined figures amassed into one thing. This is primarily the result of Zinkeisen depicting Belsen after liberation – a misrepresentation of Belsen. Hannah Arendt argues that Allied images of concentration camps are misleading because they present camps after liberation rather than during Nazi control.⁵⁸ The result is a misunderstanding of the camps. In the case of Belsen this is particularly important because Belsen was not always the camp seen in photos and paintings; it was not always littered with heaps of dead *things*.

Society of Spectacle:

By accentuating spectacle and ‘otherness’ rather than accurate information, *Belsen: April, 1945* reflects the nature of Zinkeisen’s British society – a “society of spectacle;” meaning what engaged the British public was the idea of spectacle and therefore that is how the war and the Holocaust were presented.⁵⁹ The British understanding of the Holocaust and of World War II in general were inaccurate which only accentuated interest in the spectacular nature of the ‘other’ and Holocaust atrocity. The British view of atrocity at Belsen is that all, especially the Germans, should view it. This created a contradictory environment of judgment against Nazi atrocity accompanied by a desire to see it displayed. According to an article in *The London Times*, “Nobody but a monster would want to see the current news-reels, which contain photographs of the camps of Belsen and Buchenwald; nobody should shirk seeing them and the news-reel

⁵⁸Hannah Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, (New York: Harcourt, 1973.) p219.

⁵⁹Sontag, p109.

companies, in distributing the evidence are fulfilling a public duty.”⁶⁰ As a member of this “society of spectacle,” Zinkeisen complied with the British *schadenfreude*-esque desire to witness the misfortune of ‘others’ by artistically dramatizing her experience with an effective visual trope.⁶¹

The display of spectacle and atrocity through emphasis of the ‘other’ seen in *Belsen: April, 1945* and other Belsen paintings by British artists was seen first in newspaper photos and articles following the liberation of Buchenwald and Belsen. On April 19, 1945, *The Manchester Guardian (TMG)* printed a photograph (*figure 9*) with the caption “Citizens of Weimar looking at the cremation ovens in Buchenwald concentration camp.”⁶² The image shows a tour of well dressed people facing a wall of open crematorium ovens guarded by an American soldier. The emphasis in this image is the ovens but the implications are that the citizens of Weimar (Germany) need to face what they have done under the coercion and supervision of the Allies. This theme is repeated in the caption of images from Belsen published on April 21, 1945 in the *TMG* (*figure 10*). The caption for the photo reads: “S.S. men, under British guards, forced to remove dead bodies at the Belsen concentration camp to lorries for burial.”⁶³ Both captions and images promote Allied heroism and emphasize Nazi evil but neither directly addresses the victims. Both pieces also create a spectacle of the camps and emphasize objects of death rather than those who died.

⁶⁰“The News-reels: Belsen and Buchenwald,” *The London Times*, p8. May 1, 1945.

⁶¹Sontag, p109.

⁶²“The Buchenwald Concentration Camp.” *The Manchester Guardian*, p.6, April 19, 1945.

⁶³“The Belsen Concentration Camp.” *The Manchester Guardian*, p.3, April 21, 1945.

The photo below the image of the S.S. guards is only of Belsen victims and it is presumably titled “A section of Belsen;” this image parallels *Belsen: April, 1945* in visual focus and in its detached clinical title.⁶⁴ Interestingly “A section of Belsen” is presented below the image of British and S.S. men and is printed smaller and without description. Without a caption, the viewer is not told how to interpret “A section of Belsen” so is therefore left to rely on the larger dominant image for explanation of the scene. *Belsen: April, 1945* as well is best understood in context with other images by Zinkeisen from Belsen but until this study has been understood as only a snapshot of Belsen.

Like “A section of Belsen,” *Belsen: April, 1945* presents a mass of bodies with little context for the viewer to understand. The photo, “A section of Belsen” is meant to be (considering layout of the images) understood as followed by a scene of British guards forcing S.S. men to “remove dead bodies” because the scene of British enforcement of justice provides resolution for the scene in “A section of Belsen.”⁶⁵ Published just days after the liberation of Belsen, “A section of Belsen” was one of the first images to of Belsen seen by the British public, including Zinkeisen since she is not reported to have arrived at Belsen until May 1945.⁶⁶ Zinkeisen then was painting her narrative within the established understanding of Belsen imagery – atrocity followed by British heroism. She was also depicting Jews within the tradition of viewing them as the ‘other’ to British society. So even though “A section of Belsen” and *Belsen: April, 1945* compositionally emphasize victims, the victims are the ‘others’ creating the problem for Britain to solve

⁶⁴Ibid., “A Section of Belsen” is situated next to an article about the unequal pay of women. This is an interesting layout choice as it parallels the victimization of an ethnic other with a form of victimization against the ‘other’ gender in British society.

⁶⁵Ibid.

⁶⁶Kelleway, p75-77. Zinkeisen’s letters to her husband date her Belsen arrival after 22 April, 1945.

and are meant only to be understood in relation to their British heroes and S.S. enemies. Without this clear contextual understanding provided by Zinkeisen's other Belsen images, *Belsen: April, 1945* is easily mistaken as another scene of atrocity rather than the opening act of heroism it is.

Jewish Studies Scholar Tony Kushner argues that upon liberation Britain understood Belsen, and ultimately the Holocaust, "through the prism of atrocity" seen in the photos and film reels taken by the BAFPU.⁶⁷ Subsequently, what is remembered of Belsen in the British collective memory is atrocity. The atrocity seen in photos and paintings was similar to what Zinkeisen portrays; however, her depiction is dramatized through abstraction and omission of context. BAFPU photographers at Belsen equally dramatized their images. Many employed the barbed wire fence as a framing device and film shots intentionally focused on the drag marks left behind after corpses had been pulled through sand for burial (*figures 11 and 12*).⁶⁸ Though meant to be documents, BAFPU photographers framed their images so that the horror of what they encountered was dramatized.

Other British artists at Belsen also dramatized imagery by emphasizing the mass scale of atrocity in what I term as Belsen pit scenes. These images, like *Belsen: April, 1945*, also rely on the exaggerated triangular composition to express the scale of death contained in a Belsen mass grave. With a triangular form, the mass of the object is nearest to the viewer but the receding plane to point of the triangle is used to emphasize a

⁶⁷Tony Kushner, "From 'This Belsen Business' to 'This Shoah Business': History, Memory, and Heritage, 1945 – 2005. *Belsen 1945: New Historical Perspectives*. Eds. Suzanne Bardgett and David Cesarani, (London: Valentine Mitchell, 2006). p190.

⁶⁸Toby Haggith and Joanna Newman, Eds. *Holocaust and the Moving Image: Representations in Film and Television since 1933*, (New York: Wallflower Press, 2005.) p105-106.

mass of object receding into space thus implying an infinite number of objects, in this case, Belsen victims. This is seen in *Human Wreckage at Belsen Concentration Camp, 1945* (figure 6) by Eric Taylor and *One of the Death Pits, Belsen: S.S. Guards Collecting Bodies* (figure 13) by Leslie Cole.⁶⁹ The works by Taylor and Cole both emphasize the atrocity of mass death at Belsen; however, Cole's work provides the context needed - even without the title - to understand his scene as that of a death pit and therefore a concentration camp.

Although the exaggerated triangular form employed by the British appears to best represent the incomprehensible nature of atrocity at Belsen, this form emphasizes the 'otherness' of victims by presenting them in an unnatural display format. In contrast, Canadian artist Aba Bayefsky, also commissioned to Belsen after liberation, painted a pit scene at Belsen, *Belsen Concentration Camp Pit* (figure 14), but he minimizes the spectacle with a curvilinear presentation of bodies. The only strong triangular form within Bayefsky's depiction is the central triangle created by the bent leg of the victim in the foreground. This central triangle acts as the sharp *punctum* of this image, like Zinkeisen's portrait of a victim in her depiction. The triangle is a strong geometric form (repeated throughout and gradually smaller as they recede) to contrast the circular nature of composition and create visual tension. Bayefsky's painting also brings the victims closer to the viewer by eliminating the foreground space seen in British photos and paintings, including Zinkeisen's. The elimination of space acts as an elimination of distance between victim and viewer. Bayefsky, himself a Jewish artist, placed the viewer

⁶⁹There are other works that can be understood as "pit scenes" by artists not mentioned here. For Example, works by Aba Bayefsky from Belsen are definitively "pit scenes."

at a more comprehensible angle and did not exaggerate perspective for the voyeuristic empowerment. Instead, Bayefsky metaphorically placed the viewer in the pit with the dead ‘others’ rather than above them.⁷⁰

The title of Bayefsky’s work directly acknowledges that his painting depicts a death pit. *Belsen: April, 1945* by Zinkeisen and *Human Wreckage at Belsen Concentration Camp, 1945* by Taylor only imply the death pit. Taylor and Zinkeisen’s pit scenes may be implied graves because compared to BAFPU photographs at Belsen the vertical forms of both paintings also reflect the tree line or buildings present in the background of some photographs, specifically those taken by Sgt. Morris (*figures 7 & 8*). In *Belsen: April, 1945* Zinkeisen employed strong verticals to each side of the heap and portrayed the mass of bodies as continuing indefinitely into the background – implying an untold number of victims and the multiple mass-grave pits at Belsen. Similarly, Eric Taylor’s pit scene relies on clear vertical strokes above his depicted mass of bodies to form the walls of a death pit.

Zinkeisen confines the ‘other’ into a pit to offset the terrifying notion of death on an indefinite scale and thereby further distances herself and viewer from the subject she portrays. Similarities to her contemporaries at Belsen show that Zinkeisen was depicting Belsen with a socially constructed emphasis on atrocity and distance from and confinement of the ‘other’ through which her British public understood Belsen.⁷¹ To aid in the study of the specimen of the ‘other’ at Belsen, Zinkeisen’s heap confined by

⁷⁰Laura Brandon, *Art or Memorial: The Forgotten History of Canada's War Art*, (Alberta, Canada: University of Calgary Press, 2006.) p56. Aba Bayefsky also created two “pit scenes” prior to the work discussed here. They both have similar curved compositions with multiple triangular forms.

⁷¹Kushner, p190.

vertical forms, limits Belsen victims into one form, which parallels the British desire to isolate and confine the alien other (Jews) as was done in 1940 when Winston Churchill ordered the internment of Jews in Britain.⁷²

Belsen scholar Antoine Capet claims that Zinkeisen's "deliberate mixture" of styles that emphasize atrocity and implies confinement connotes the idea of the universal or "general testament" to the Holocaust, making *Belsen: April, 1945* "less effective as a document on the Holocaust proper."⁷³ However, Capet argues Holocaust educators should employ Belsen paintings, including this work by Zinkeisen, as educational resources.⁷⁴ Essentially, by championing Zinkeisen's work, Capet supports the educational use of "ineffective...document[s]" that give only a "general treatment" of the Holocaust.⁷⁵ Zinkeisen makes a claim in *Belsen: April, 1945*, but it is not about the Holocaust. Rather, her claim is that Belsen was an endless pile of dead Jewish prisoners.

However, there were thousands of survivors at Belsen so Zinkeisen's depiction is an inaccurate representation of Belsen. But to show survivors in the opening act of Zinkeisen's narrative would detract from the initial drama of the Belsen story remembered in the British collective memory. The presence of survivors would also diminish the need for British heroism because it would lessen the notion of mass atrocity

⁷²Wasserstein, p79, 311. In addition to the internment of Jews in Britain and the British Colonies, there was also the mass deportation of Jews out of Britain, specifically to Canada and Australia, to help alleviate the hysteria and Jewish immigrant situation in Britain. Churchill was thought of by many as a Zionist sympathizer. See p87.

⁷³Antoine Capet, "The Liberation of Bergen-Belsen Camp as seen by Some British Official War Artists in 1945," *Belsen 1945: New Historical Perspectives*. Eds. Suzanne Bardgett and David Cesarani, (London: Valentine Mitchell, 2006.) p181.

⁷⁴Ibid. Capet questions the lack of Belsen paintings as educational tools in general. He discusses works by Zinkeisen and Leslie Cole specifically.

⁷⁵Ibid.

and death at Belsen. Despite being an inaccurate representation, *Belsen: April, 1945*, to quote Capet, “in all its horror,” is rather effective as the dramatic start to Zinkeisen’s Belsen narrative of British heroism.⁷⁶

The mass death at Belsen, according to *Belsen: April, 1945*, affected a population Britain did not consider a part of its own. However, the painting provides Britain with a spectacle and further proof that Nazi Germany was capable of unimaginable atrocity. As a painted image of a subject already familiar to the British, *Belsen: April, 1945* depicts the beginning of British heroism at Belsen by establishing a victim group that Britain already understood as the ‘other.’ Zinkeisen in *Belsen: April, 1945* exploits their ‘otherness’ to emphasize the actual problem to be solved in her narrative, which is how Britain held Germany responsible for their crimes implied in *Belsen: April, 1945*. But, by depicting Jews as the ‘other,’ Zinkeisen inescapably presents the Jews as a problem, mimicking through representation the Nazi view of Jews as a problem to be solved (though very differently). Also, by negating the importance of the Jewish and individual identity of Belsen victims in *Belsen: April, 1945* Zinkeisen does not challenge the British memory of British heroism at Belsen; nor does she challenge the idea of the Jew as the ‘other.’ The accepted sequence of events from Belsen leads the viewer to anticipate resolution rather than contemplate the situation presented. The resolution is provided by the viewer’s understanding of Belsen as being liberated by the British therefore the anticipation is created in *Belsen: April, 1945* specifically for British heroism to be seen in Act II and III of Zinkeisen’s narrative.

⁷⁶Ibid.

Act II

Human Laundry: The Twist

The second act of a three-part narrative is the most complex as it must continue the narrative by engaging the viewer further. In Act I: *Belsen: April, 1945* Zinkeisen portrayed the problem to be solved in Britain's Camp. Working within the accepted British memory of Belsen, Zinkeisen follows the Jewish problem of Nazi atrocity with a scene of relief in *Human Laundry* (figure 2). Structured as a genre scene, *Human Laundry*, the nickname given by British liberators to the improvised medical facilities portrayed, depicts medical relief efforts at Belsen. Essential in the second act is the addition of a subplot which enhances the larger narrative but more importantly keeps the viewer's interest. Accordingly, in *Human Laundry* Zinkeisen depicts German nurses providing care to Belsen survivors. The unexpected twist of German heroes at Belsen complicates the British memory and has led scholars to interpret the work as a positive challenge to the importance of national identity during war.⁷⁷ I propose however that instead of challenging ideas of identity *Human Laundry* conflates Nazi evil with all Germans to emphasize British heroism at home. Based on Zinkeisen's own words, *Human Laundry* is a critique against Germany which functions as nationalist propaganda. As such, Belsen victims are again exploited for nationalist purposes.

German vs. Nazi:

Just as the term "British" had to be defined to understand the function and subject of *Belsen: April, 1945*, the term 'German' must be defined to understand *Human*

⁷⁷Ulrike Smalley, (Curator of Art), interview by Rebecka Black, Imperial War Museum, London, "Doris Zinkeisen," May 18, 2012.

Laundry. The ‘other’ in World War II Britain was not just the Jew. The unsteady British/German relations created during World War I were further compounded by the Blitz, the German air raid attacks on England 1940-1941. For over two decades the British understood Germans as the enemy and events of World War II did little to change that except only to increase ill feelings. Therefore, to many Britons *German* connoted enemy. The revelation of atrocity seen in images like *Belsen: April, 1945* inspired the addition of ‘evil’ to the British definition of ‘German.’ A Nazi German, in British understanding, was undoubtedly to blame for the Holocaust, but it was Germany that produced the Nazis.⁷⁸ Christopher Buckley of *The Daily Telegraph* was one of several correspondents who in 1945 wrote newspaper editorials blaming all Germans for atrocities at Belsen. He wrote:

You may decide that German people, collectively, are guilty of nothing more than ignorance and negligence...but you are still faced by the fact that the German people, collectively, produced the men and women in requisite numbers to maintain this system...Belsen is the nearest thing I know to a spectacle of absolute evil...”⁷⁹

Because of the history of contempt for the general German population, many British felt it was necessary for all Germans, whether “good Germans” or “less conspicuous Nazis” to view film and photos from Buchenwald and Belsen, especially the German youth, to force German acknowledgement of Nazi crimes.⁸⁰ A 1945 editorial in *The Daily Express* argued:

“...it was necessary for the British public to view the photographs (of Buchenwald) in order to grasp the wickedness of the Germans – the wickedness against which the war had been waged.”⁸¹

⁷⁸Antero Holmila, *Reporting the Holocaust in the British, Swedish, and Finnish Press, 1945-50*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011.) p28.

⁷⁹Ibid., p28.

⁸⁰“Germany and the Camps: Making the Truth Known, Films for The Reich.” *The London Times*, p.2, April 23, 1945.

⁸¹Holmila, p25.

Anti-German sentiment was often confused with anti-Nazi feelings but for the British, who had been at war with Germany officially since 1939 (not considering World War I) it was easy to blame all Germans for a second war. Major Williams, a liberator at Belsen, commented in a personal letter home that “You would never think human beings, including Germans, could stoop so low or have such low morals.”⁸² Zinkeisen, whose home was destroyed by the German attacks on England in 1940, noted her anti-German feelings in a June 2, 1945 letter to her husband. She describes seeing “Hanover and the complete flattened out state it’s in which gave me a great deal of pleasure.”⁸³ The Germans, in Zinkeisen’s and much nationalist British thought, were to blame for World War II and crimes at Belsen (as well as Buchenwald) provided further evidence for that thought.⁸⁴

Nationalist Critique:

Of course not all Germans during World War II were S.S. or Nazi supporters and not all British felt as such.⁸⁵ However, in the British collective memory of Belsen, the Germans (specifically the Nazi Germans) were the clear antagonist against British good; they were the enemy against which the imagined homogenous British “people” of the “People’s War” fought on the battlefield and at home. The idea of the “People’s War” at home is the actual subject of *Human Laundry*. As in the first painting, Zinkeisen exploits the victims of Belsen in *Human Laundry*. However, in this second painting Zinkeisen

⁸²Major William R. Williams, private papers, April 18, 1945, Imperial War Museum Archive Collection, Documents.3120. Imperial War Museum, London.

⁸³Kelleway, pp66, 77. According to Kelleway, “An incendiary bomb also hit Doris’ home in Chester Terrace during the Blitz air raids of 1940. The top two floors were destroyed and rendered the home uninhabitable.”

⁸⁴Holmila p26.

⁸⁵Wasserstein p85.

exploits victim-survivors to address a specific nationalist concern about food rations in England, thereby critiquing Germany for attacking her British home front again.

Zinkeisen states very directly in a May 24th letter to her husband that what she saw at the “human laundry” stable “is going to be one of my pictures.”⁸⁶ She does not clearly explain why, but further reading of her letter implies that it is because of the robust physical condition of the German nurses compared with that of the starved Belsen survivors. In her letter, Zinkeisen describes how “human laundry” patients were “washed down by fat German nurses” and how “the contrast between the German fat and these bones is quite ridiculous.”⁸⁷ Zinkeisen biographer Philip Kelleway as well as IWM curators Ulrike Smalley and Kathleen Palmer has noted that *Human Laundry* was intended to be a critique of food rations in Britain during World War II.⁸⁸ However, what scholars have overlooked is how Zinkeisen exploits victims and survivors of Belsen to make this nationalist critique.

It is troubling that Zinkeisen chose to visually and metaphorically exploit the starved survivors of Belsen to address a nationalist concern about British food rations when food supplies for Belsen survivors were even less adequate than in Britain. Staff Captain, Major W.R. Williams was among the first of British liberators to arrive at Belsen and was responsible for distribution of food and supplies. In a personal letter from April 18, 1945 he recalls: “I spent the first day trying to organize the cookhouses and

⁸⁶Kelleway p75-76.

⁸⁷Ibid., p76.

⁸⁸The scholars to whom I refer are art historian and Zinkeisen biographer Dr. Philip Kelleway, former IWM curator of art, Ulrike Smalley and IWM curator of art Kathleen Palmer.

trying to cope with the hungry mobs.”⁸⁹ Though Williams was able to organize working cookhouses to feed survivors he admits they were “inadequate and cannot cope [without] skilled cooks, no lighting or water.”⁹⁰ Not only were the facilities inadequate for feeding survivors, the inadequate care offered in “human laundry” facilities meant that many hungry survivors did not live to benefit from what little Major Williams’ cookhouses provided. He notes that “We have both [lighting and cooks] and food for all who can get it. Some are so weak they try and set up and fall back dead.”⁹¹ Zinkeisen’s *Human Laundry* is a record reflecting the issue of inadequate food supplies, but for Britain vs. Germany rather than for starved Belsen survivors. The Germans and starved survivors were only a visual means to support her argument against what she and many felt was an unnecessary British sacrifice.

In the IWM exhibition catalogue for *Women War Artists* (2011-2012) curator Kathleen Palmer claims that *Human Laundry* is Zinkeisen’s “angry response;” an “angry response” to what though is not clear and Palmer’s discussion of *Human Laundry* is protective of Zinkeisen and the painting. Palmer implies that Zinkeisen is responding to the contradiction of body conditions seen between German nurses and Belsen survivors. Palmer further states Zinkeisen’s “angry response” has been misinterpreted by scholars and critics. Palmer acknowledges, however, that Zinkeisen may have also been confused as to who these German nurses actually were since in a 1981 document produced by

⁸⁹Williams, pp1-4.

⁹⁰Ibid.

⁹¹Ibid.

Zinkeisen for the IWM, Zinkeisen refers to the German nurses as “prisoners.”⁹² Palmer explains the inaccurate description as Zinkeisen possibly understanding the nurses as former Belsen staff forced to help with relief efforts. She clarifies in her description of *Human Laundry* that Zinkeisen was incorrect; the German nurses shown were medical personnel from a nearby German town who were, according to Palmer, only “pressed into service.”⁹³ Whether the German nurses were “pressed into service” or were forced to help rehabilitate survivors is a matter only of phrasing. Regardless of Palmer’s careful phrasing (defensive of British command), the German nurses Zinkeisen portrayed were prisoners forced to help in relief efforts. Furthermore, Palmer does not clarify how *Human Laundry* has been misinterpreted, nor does she offer a clear interpretation of her own based on Zinkeisen’s writings. Palmer does, however, describe Zinkeisen, as evidenced by *Human Laundry*, as having an “urge as an eye-witness to create a dispassionate record.”⁹⁴ However, if *Human Laundry* depicts Zinkeisen’s “angry response,” then it cannot also be a “dispassionate record.”

Human Laundry is Zinkeisen’s “angry response,” but based on a June 2nd 1945 letter, it is not survivor conditions at Belsen that angered Zinkeisen. In this letter Zinkeisen expresses strong disapproval for what she felt was an unnecessary British sacrifice at home by saying: “There is certainly no shortage of food in Germany...so why

⁹²Kathleen Palmer, *Women War Artists*, exhibition catalogue, (London: Tate Publishing and Imperial War Museum, 2011) p57. Palmer points to Zinkeisen later referring to the nurses as “prisoners” as the reason for misinterpretation of the painting, which they were not.

⁹³Ibid.

⁹⁴Ibid., p57. Palmer also attributes the urge for dispassionate records of war to Lee Miller, Margaret Bourke-White and other artists at Belsen.

should we go short of our rations at home feeding starving Europe?”⁹⁵ Britain was in great need of food in 1945 and rations were strict creating long queues for supplies (*figure 15*).⁹⁶ Therefore, Zinkeisen, working within the context of 1945 Britain was not the only artist to artistically respond to food shortages during WWII. In Evelyn Dunbar’s *Queue at the Fish Shop* (*figure 16*), Dunbar, like Zinkeisen, uses her commission as a vehicle for literally expressing herself. The panoramic view shown, meant to emphasize the queue length, is from Dunbar’s house in Kent and the woman walking towards the viewer is Dunbar.⁹⁷ By including herself in this scene, Dunbar reiterates that all of Britain was affected by shortages. However, Dunbar, again like Zinkeisen, critiques food rations, but she does so by addressing the social and gender divisions they invoked. Dunbar clearly defines who was expected to wait in these long queues – women and the elderly.⁹⁸ Dunbar and Zinkeisen used their individual commissions to explore issues beyond their surface subject matter by, in a sense, exploiting oppressed groups to address a national concern.⁹⁹ Considering Zinkeisen’s cultural context during the “People’s War,” artistic focus on nationalist issues in commissioned works, like *Human Laundry* and *Queue at the Fish Shop* was expected.

⁹⁵Kelleway p77.

⁹⁶“Rations Dependant on Harvest: Mr. Hudson’s Call for Volunteers.” *The London Times*, p.2, April 2, 1945. Minister of Agriculture, R.S. Hudson called for volunteers, especially young children to help harvest British crops to ensure larger food rations for Britain. The previous years’ crops, according to Mr. Hudson, were not all harvested thus resulting in lower harsh rations of which Zinkeisen may have considered in her comments.

⁹⁷Roger Tolson, *Art from the Second World War*, (London: The Imperial War Museum, 2008.) p6-7. Additionally, the woman crossing the street is Dunbar’s sister and the soldier on the bike is Dunbar’s husband. This painting was a commission from the War Artist’s Advisory Committee.

⁹⁸Ibid.

⁹⁹Palmer, p57.

Using the ‘Others:’

Zinkeisen presents her critique of food rations in Britain primarily through her palette and through manipulated perspective. As she did in *Belsen: April, 1945*, Zinkeisen rakes *Human Laundry* to show full contrast between “fat Germans” and Belsen survivors.¹⁰⁰ The nurses shown are German women (internees) forced to work under British medical staff directives.¹⁰¹ The emaciated dark skinned survivors are emphasized next to the very sterile white nurses creating a stark visual contrast through which she critiques food rations. In a comparable photograph taken by the BAFPU, the skin tone of survivors and nurses is not noticeably different, nor are the German nurses as corpulent as Zinkeisen portrays (*figures 17 & 18*). Zinkeisen, however, was not alone in exaggerating the attributes of the German nurses. Personal friend of Zinkeisen and British Red Cross Commissioner, Evelyn Bark, O.B.E. also commissioned to Belsen recalls:

“I am convinced that the German nurses, who had been ‘shanghaied’ by the R.A.M.C. for this work, had been picked for their brawn. Every one of them was a typical Brunhilde; with their massive bosoms and broad hips they formed an appalling contrast to the near skeletons they were handling.”¹⁰²

Aside from the use of the term “shanghaied” here, which is imbued with British imperialism, Bark softens the idea that the German nurses were forced into service of the British, most likely under gunpoint rather than shanghai trickery. As for Zinkeisen’s exaggeration of the nurses’ forms, former curator of art at the Imperial War Museum, Ulrike Smalley however claims Zinkeisen did not exaggerate, rather she “emphasizes” the shape of the nurses:

¹⁰⁰Kelleway, p76.

¹⁰¹Smalley p56.

¹⁰²Evelyn Bark, O.B.E., *No Time to Kill*, (London: Robert Hale, Ltd, 1960.) p52.

“Although a comparison of *Human Laundry* to photographs of the same scenes confirms that Zinkeisen did not exaggerate the body shape of the nurses, her painting style emphasizes the well-padded forms of the German personnel, drawing the viewer’s awareness to the contrast between them and the concentration camp inmates in a way the photos do not.”¹⁰³

Like Kathleen Palmer’s defensive discussion of *Human Laundry*, Smalley as well protects Zinkeisen in her word choice of “emphasize” rather than “exaggerate;” both of which mean that Zinkeisen did not visually portray the truth about the German nurses.

As seen in the analyses of *Human Laundry* by Kathleen Palmer and of *Belsen April, 1945* by Antoine Capet, three British scholars, there is a recurring deliberate attempt to interpret British actions at Belsen and also Zinkeisen’s painting as a sympathetic account of Belsen. However, through a post-colonial lens, the faithfulness of Zinkeisen’s record of Belsen in *Human Laundry* is not so much a sympathetic account as it is an apathetic account of Belsen survivors.

Zinkeisen does not completely ignore Belsen survivors in *Human Laundry*, but she reminds the viewer that survivors in *Human Laundry* were still the ‘other.’ She does this by including them only as objects needed to progress her narrative and again, as in *Belsen: April, 1945* by portraying them as ethnic ‘others’ by emphasizing stereotypical physical features. For decades a bearded face, frail form, and dark skin were the general, often least offensive, characteristics in Nazi propaganda to connote a Jewish man.¹⁰⁴ Additionally, in *Human Laundry* and the comparable BAFPU photograph Zinkeisen and the photographer intentionally include a large portion of the grid floor in the scene. As in *Belsen: April, 1945*, this floor space adds culturally desired distance between viewer and

¹⁰³Smalley, p56.

¹⁰⁴British artists George Cruikshank and Gustave Dore also exploited these characteristics in the 19th century to emphasize a particularly negative view of Jewish males See George Cruikshank’s depictions of the character Fagin in the illustrated version of Charles Dickens’ *Oliver Twist* in 1837. Also see Gustave Dore’s influential *The Wandering Jew*.

‘other.’ More importantly, since Zinkeisen uses *Human Laundry* to critique food rations through juxtaposition of physical attributes of two ‘others,’ in this work the grid floor is also reminiscent of an anthropometrical photograph; many of which include ethnic or criminal subjects in front of a grid or ruler to measure their physical attributes and scientifically document their ‘otherness’ for the purpose of eugenic study.

Anthropometrical measurement was also employed by Nazi scientists to document physical abnormalities (compared to their own and ideal attributes) of Jews as a way to scientifically justify their eugenic experiments and mutilation of those deemed degenerate, like Jews, during the Holocaust.¹⁰⁵

In *Belsen: April, 1945*, the Belsen victims are presented as the problem and the personification, as an isolated group, of atrocity. To be in accordance with the British collective memory, in Act II: *Human Laundry*, Zinkeisen must, and does, portray a survivor to reference British liberation and progress the narrative away from atrocity. The survivor in *Human Laundry* appears to be in the recovery process, as evidenced by his or her quasi-upright position on the table. Zinkeisen depicts this survivor as up-right not only to agree with nationalist memory, but to compositionally supply the contrast to the German nurse caring for the survivor. Visually, the upright survivor and the nurse caring for him/her create one figural unit, with accentuated differences in color and form. The curvature of the survivor’s back is also paralleled by the curvature of the nurse’s posture to the right of the scene, thus leading the viewer’s attention to the ultimate result of this

¹⁰⁵Benno Müller-Hill “Human Genetics and the Mass Murder of Jews, Gypsies, and Others,” *The Holocaust and History: the Known, the Unknown, the Disputed, and the Re-Examined*, Eds. Michael Berenbaum and Abraham J. Peck, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press in association with the United States Holocaust Museum, 1998), pp104-106.

other dichotomous pair – the well-fed German versus the (presumably) dead starved victim.

Zinkeisen does not evoke sympathy for the victim with this scene, because after all, she shows a survivor. The survivor alleviates viewer fear or concern for the state of the state for Belsen victims because according to Zinkeisen's commissioned record, there were survivors at Belsen, not just the heap presented in *Belsen: April, 1945*. With any possible concern for Belsen victims alleviated what *Human Laundry* evokes from the British viewer is contempt for the Germans elicited by the plump form of the German nurses next to the cavernous forms of the victims. The contempt evoked by this figural pairing is two-fold: there is the initial contempt for the Nazi German atrocities at Belsen, but Zinkeisen's artistic reaction to atrocity at Belsen points at the more prominent British nationalist contempt for all Germans during World War II.

Zinkeisen's lack of sympathy for the Belsen victims and survivors is further evident in her May 24th letter. In it Zinkeisen refers to the survivors as "bones" rather than as survivors.¹⁰⁶ Zinkeisen does describe survivors with other terms such as "people" and "bodies" within the same letter but in this particular sentence the use of the term "bones" to describe survivors is particularly dehumanizing. In her June 2nd letter that harshly critiques food rations, Zinkeisen also refers to the Belsen survivors in a collective and impersonal manner. She writes: "why should we go short of our rations at home feeding starving Europe?"¹⁰⁷ It is unclear whether she used the term "Europe" to actually describe European areas also suffering from limited food supplies or if she meant the

¹⁰⁶Kelleway, p76.

¹⁰⁷Ibid., p77.

European Jews, which at that moment made up the largest portion of Belsen survivors. Either way is quizzical but still reflective of Zinkeisen's unsympathetic heap in *Belsen: April, 1945* and also reflective of how many Britons viewed the Jews collectively as a problematic thing. In either instance, Zinkeisen ignored the survivors at Belsen to express her nationalist concerns.

Zinkeisen's denial of survivor conditions could be attributed to her shock at survivor behavior or to her fear of typhus possibly threatening her own health, leading her to textually dehumanize survivors to maintain a safe physical and emotion distance from them. There were many in Britain who also wanted to maintain a safe distance from victims of the Holocaust. The *TMG* article, "The Jews," discussed in connection with *Belsen: April, 1945* states "For the moment we can put aside the guilt and responsibility [about the millions of dead]; our task is with the living."¹⁰⁸ This statement is just as vague and interesting as Zinkeisen's statement about "feeding starving Europe."¹⁰⁹ This statement, unlike *Human Laundry*, gives emphasis to the survivors, but it also denies the millions who did not survive, which negates much of the sentiment in wanting to help the living. To deny millions acknowledgement of their deaths is also quite harsh because even the mention of the dead is not focused on their victimization; it is focused on relieving British guilt.

Compositionally and stylistically, *Human Laundry* is also reflective of British reticence towards acknowledging the suffering of Jews and a general misunderstanding of Belsen. The subject matter of *Human Laundry*, which is focused on issues affecting

¹⁰⁸"The Jews." *The Manchester Guardian*, p.4, April 26, 1945.

¹⁰⁹Kelleway p77.

the British rather than victims and survivors of Belsen and is presented in a style not divergent from Zinkeisen's work before Belsen, implies she may not have been capable or willing to empathetically process their experiences of Belsen. Though Ulrike Smalley claims that all works of British art from Belsen are psychological responses she does not specify that all responses were the same and of course, they were not. If considered a psychological response to Belsen, *Human Laundry* was, like many British responses, a nationalist reaction against Germany piqued by what she encountered at Belsen. Her reliance on personal/professional stylistic conventions parallels British latent anti-Semitism and anti-German sentiment by reflecting an emotional attachment to the familiar rather than full engagement with the reality of Belsen survivors. Although Zinkeisen's depiction of the "human laundry" facility is unique within painted images of Belsen, once fully investigated the image, in terms of context rather than subject, is all too familiar as a work of British nationalist propaganda.

"Human Laundry:"

Since Zinkeisen was the only British artist to depict the "human laundry" facility it is important to discuss how what is shown functions in the British collective memory and subsequently within Zinkeisen's narrative. After describing her initial impressions of Belsen in her May 24, 1945 letter, Zinkeisen describes the medical facilities where survivors were sent to be cleaned and disinfected after months of neglect: "The living were taken in ambulances by the medical boys to a big stables attached to the barracks, where rows and rows of tables had been arranged in the stalls without partitions."¹¹⁰ The

¹¹⁰Ibid., p76.

“stables” Zinkeisen describes were two medical facilities, which had been converted from stables. After conversion, the stables took on the nickname “human laundry” because it was only a make-shift, emergency quasi-medical facility where evacuated Camp I survivors were washed, treated with DDT, and fed as part of British medical recovery efforts.¹¹¹ The overgrown plant matter in the window panes and the stable partitions seen in Zinkeisen’s *Human Laundry* record the make-shift nature of the stable-turned-hospital near Belsen. The title of Zinkeisen’s *Human Laundry* implies a documentary approach to her subject since she titled the piece after the facility portrayed.

However, Zinkeisen’s *Human Laundry* does not present an accurate record of the “human laundry” facilities or of what happened there. The care within “human laundry” was only palliative for most. Unfortunately, “human laundry” despite “all its ritualistic properties” could not adequately help all of the survivors. Even after washing and delousing, 80 percent still suffered from severe diarrhea with typhus and/or TB.¹¹² Young girls, as young as twelve and barely alive were in advance stages of pregnancy, starvation, and disease.¹¹³ Every day after liberation hundreds more, up to 500 at a time, ill and starved survivors arrived at “human laundry” for care, but the ill equipped and hurried environment led to chaos and conditions nearly as unhealthy as were in Camp 1 upon liberation. British medical personnel recall the survivors, too weak to move,

¹¹¹Shephard, p149. There were two “human laundry” facilities. One which treated primarily women was at the Panzer Training School (the stable) and the other which also treated men was at the Hohne Military Barracks, according to the Imperial War Museum.

¹¹²Ibid., p89.

¹¹³Bark, p50.

defecating and urinating wherever they lay. Human waste along with the filth of the converted facilities often covered the floor of “human laundry.”¹¹⁴

Zinkeisen’s depiction does not reference these abject conditions though. The only implication in Zinkeisen’s work that conditions in “human laundry” were less than clean is the inclusion of the overgrown window plants and the tattered door curtain. Evelyn Bark, O.B.E of the British Red Cross describes “human laundry” in a contrasting manner which parallels Zinkeisen’s depiction. Bark arrived at Belsen with the Red Cross after liberation and recounts that “within a week the machinery for getting this disease [typhus] under control was in full swing,” implying that the “human laundry” facility described by liberators and first responding medical staff was a different operation by the time Bark and the Red Cross had time to assist. Bark notes that Zinkeisen had arrived at Belsen after her and specifically recalls watching Zinkeisen “start a painting of the saddle-room.”¹¹⁵ The “human laundry” Zinkeisen presents then is the facility in clean working order, which explains her unsoiled version of *Human Laundry*. By the time Zinkeisen had arrived at Belsen the converted stable was a cleaner, more ordered “atmosphere charged with disinfectant” rather than the chaotic unsanitary stable described in earlier accounts.¹¹⁶ Since Zinkeisen only witnessed the sanitized version of “human laundry” her image is also a sanitized version of “human laundry,” which corresponds to the need of this second painting in her narrative to emphasize relief at Belsen.

¹¹⁴Shephard, p87-88.

¹¹⁵Bark, p52.

¹¹⁶Ibid, p51.

Hannah Arendt argues in *Elements of Totalitarianism* that images (specifically photographs) of the concentration camps are misleading because they can only portray the camps after Allied troops arrived.¹¹⁷ What is shown in these images are piles of dead, bulldozers pushing piled corpses, mass graves filled with thousands of corpses creating the idea that all Nazi camps were extermination camps. Belsen was not an extermination camp and the emphasis on death in the photos, film, and many paintings misrepresents the complex reality of Belsen and its multiple facilities. Zinkeisen's *Human Laundry*, though anomalous in subject matter, is also misleading for the same reason, but it did not have to be. Zinkeisen was present at Belsen during British medical relief work, which is what she was commissioned to paint. However, she chose to emphasize in *Human Laundry* the unnecessary continuation of food rations in Britain by further criminalizing Germans for her British viewer. Therefore, Zinkeisen, in *Human Laundry*, misleads because she denies the suffering present at "human laundry." Many victims received medical care and began to recoup their dignity at the "human laundry" stables after liberation.¹¹⁸ However, many died there, too weak and ill from months of suffering. Subsequently, Zinkeisen's *Human Laundry*, as a critique of food rations in Britain should not be understood as an accurate account of the facility despite the work being a unique artistic portrayal by an eye-witness of the scene.

Because Zinkeisen portrays "human laundry" as the clean functioning facility of relief also seen in BAFPU photos, she did not threaten the viewer's nationalist memory

¹¹⁷ Arendt, p219.

¹¹⁸ Dr. Phylomena Bandsey, "Human Laundry," Interview with Rebecka Black, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, June 28, 2012.

of Belsen as a victory, nor did it challenge the viewer's understanding of Germans as the enemy and Jews as the 'other.' Therefore, Zinkeisen was able to visually manipulate issues she witnessed within "human laundry" into a sub-plot about the food shortage and rations in Britain. This kept her British viewer engaged in the narrative through a subject literally close to home. The addition of an emphasized nationalist focus in *Human Laundry* is also where Zinkeisen begins to erase the suffering and victims of Belsen which culminates in the complete visual omission of Belsen victims in Act III, which allows her to refocus her narrative on the expected British victory at Belsen.

Act III

The Burning of Belsen Concentration Camp: Victory and Resolution

Zinkeisen presents British victory in the finale of Britain's Camp with the painting *Burning of Belsen Concentration Camp* (figure 3), which portrays Zinkeisen's memory of when British forces razed the last standing barracks at Belsen.¹¹⁹ Of the three works discussed, *Burning of Belsen Concentration Camp* (*Burning of Belsen*) has received the least amount of scholarly attention. I suggest this is because unlike the other two Belsen paintings by Zinkeisen, *Burning of Belsen* is not on display for the general public nor is it held by an exhibiting institution. Rather, throughout most of its history *Burning of Belsen* was displayed in board rooms of the British Red Cross. Currently, it is held in the archives of the British Red Cross Museum, available to view by appointment only. This display history in conjunction with the subject, style, and its function as Zinkeisen's eye-witness testimony of the event is evidence that *Burning of Belsen* is a nationalist monument meant to remember British glory rather than a memorial for horrors of suffering at of Belsen.

Painting as Monument:

Judaic Studies scholar James E. Young, in his discussion of Holocaust memorials, argues some memorials aim to educate or "inculcate a shared experience;" others are

¹¹⁹Bark, p55. Bark recounts Zinkeisen was at the ceremony and remembers watching Zinkeisen begin her painting of the burning of Belsen. The *Burning of Belsen Concentration Camp* has varied titles depending on the source consulted. The British Red Cross Museum, where the work is held, titles the piece, *The Burning of Belsen Concentration Camp, 1945*. The BBC refers to the work in their online gallery as *The Burning Down of Huts in Camp I, Belsen Concentration Camp*. See: www.bbc.co.uk/arts. Zinkeisen's friend and fellow Red Cross worker at Belsen, Evelyn Bark labels the piece as *Belsen Burning*. I, and biographer Philip Kelleway, use the title given by the organization that holds the image and rights, the British Red Cross.

works of “self-aggrandizement” and therefore function as monuments to those who create them rather than memorials to the subject presented.¹²⁰ Young distinguishes between memorials and monuments by describing monuments as objects of memorial, which can also mark victory.¹²¹ Paintings, as objects, can also function as objects of memorial, and therefore can function as monuments, especially those in the category of history painting. History paintings, like *Burning of Belsen*, celebrate the individuals or nations they reference by what art historical canon describes as “historic or legendary incidents in a deliberately grand and noble way.”¹²² *Burning of Belsen* does evoke a sense of remembrance, but the subject shown to be remembered is that of British victory.

Working in a nationalist mode discussed by George L. Mosse in *Fallen Soldiers*, Zinkeisen perpetuates the myth of World War II from the nationalist British perspective in *Burning of Belsen* by emphasizing Belsen as a victory. In doing so, the necessity of Britain’s involvement at Belsen (with the ‘others’) is justified without having to directly acknowledge the horror of Belsen or its survivors.¹²³ Mosse further discusses the mythologizing of war, and in this case Belsen, as a predominantly European phenomenon (heightened after World War I) that glorified war experiences for the nation to justify involvement; but also it justified the horrible loss of life that resulted from war.¹²⁴ Therefore, like a mythologized nationalist monument, *Burning of Belsen* marks the

¹²⁰James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993.) p2-4.

¹²¹*Ibid.*

¹²²“history painting,” *Dictionary of Art Terms*, Thames and Hudson (London: 1995) p100.

¹²³George L. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars*, (Oxford University Press: New York, 1990). p.6.

¹²⁴*Ibid.*

triumph of British victory over Nazis at Belsen in a grand and noble way. By virtue of being a preserved object, *Burning of Belsen* further functions as a monument by making the burning of Belsen “perpetually present,” because as long as the painting exists, the visual (and accepted) memory of British victory remains present and tangible.¹²⁵

The Battle:

Unlike most history paintings there are no human figures (heroes and/or villains) present in Zinkeisen’s *Burning of Belsen*. Though Zinkeisen was commissioned by and working for specifically the Joint War Organization of the British Red Cross and the Order of St. John, she also does not directly reference either organization in the painting, making it an interesting choice for the organization to have kept. However, Zinkeisen did not need to directly reference these organizations because without them Zinkeisen makes a larger claim – the British conquered Nazi evil through destruction of Belsen.¹²⁶ This larger claim rather than focus on accuracy imbues the painting with a nationalist purpose, which parallels the British collective memory of Belsen.

To make this larger claim about British victory without human figures or direct references, Zinkeisen presents the military flame-thrower, in the center of the composition, as the active hero of the scene. It destroys not only with its flame projectile but it also crushes, with its solid massive form, what a British war correspondent referred

¹²⁵Young, p3.

¹²⁶Ibid.

to as “this most terrible of all Hitler’s camps.”¹²⁷ Zinkeisen’s masculine metaphor for the British in this work also establishes a contrast of central figures seen in her narrative. The masculine and active tank counters the feminized, weak, and passive Jewish male seen in *Belsen: April, 1945*. Additionally, in *Human Laundry* the Germans are presented as greedy robust female forms (and one male with his back turned). They are contrasted in *Burning of Belsen* with the masculine, sturdy, and heroic form of the British flame thrower. When viewed together, as intended, Zinkeisen’s Belsen trilogy reiterates British masculinity and heroism by juxtaposing weak Jews with masculine British and evil German with heroic British without ever including a British figure.¹²⁸

Zinkeisen also omits the Jewish and (Nazi) German figure in *Burning of Belsen*. However, there are forms in *Burning of Belsen* which are also better understood as metaphors for both. The gallows to the right of the road in *Burning of Belsen* and the barbed wire fence serve as Zinkeisen’s German/Nazi antagonist against which the British hero (flame-thrower) prevails.¹²⁹ The flame-thrower’s victory is first evidenced by the damaged barbed wire fence implied to have been penetrated by the British hero

¹²⁷David Woodward, Manchester Guardian, War Correspondent. "Belsen Surprises Burgomasters." *The Manchester Guardian (1901-1959)*, Apr 25, 1945.

¹²⁸Emily Oldfield, email message to Rebecka Black. 18 September 2012. In regards to the Zinkeisen paintings’ history Oldfield says “In 1981 Jessie Wilks, Art Consultant to the Imperial War Museum, who was interviewing Doris Zinkeisen in order to make an audio tape for the museum visited British Red Cross National Headquarters to view the paintings. One was in the Blue Room and the other three (I believe they are not referring to the portrait) are in the Service Hospital Welfare Department (S.H.W.D.) Zinkeisen mentioned that the *Burning of Belsen* is one of the four Belsen pictures, the other three held at the IWM, suggesting that they should all be together.” The fourth image mentioned is the portrait of General George Lindsay who led relief efforts at Belsen. Though this work does not include discussion of Gen. Lindsay’s portrait, the same ideas of memorial can be applied to the portrait. Ideas of emphasizing British masculinity through a portrait of Lindsay also apply. Since portraiture is commissioned for various reasons, primarily for memorial, this discussion does not include analysis of Gen. Lindsay’s portrait.

¹²⁹Based on the British conflation of Nazism with all German people and Zinkeisen’s own conflation of the two, I refer to Nazis as German/Nazis since the British and Zinkeisen struggled to distinguish between the two.

portrayed. The images sent back by BAFPU photographers of victims framed by barbed wire make Zinkeisen's image of destroyed barbed wire a poignant reference to British liberation of Belsen victims (*figure 6*) but not to the victims themselves. Instead, the damaged barbed wire emphasizes and celebrates British victory over Nazi barbarism because the British public had the BAFPU photos as a reference point for understanding the significance of the fence.¹³⁰ The gallows and fence, like the flame thrower, help complete Zinkeisen's monument of triumph for the British rather than address the suffering at Belsen because according to the painting, the suffering has ended.¹³¹

The use of metaphors in *Burning of Belsen* is interesting. It is interesting first, because she was commissioned to record the relief work of doctors and nurses, which she does not do at all in this painting. It is also interesting because Zinkeisen was at the ceremony and according to Evelyn Bark, Zinkeisen began the painting at the ceremony.¹³² Zinkeisen recounts moments of the ceremony to her husband in a letter dated May 24,

1945:

“The burning of the camp, though impressive, made me sick. The smell of burning wood with the smell of death. They brought tanks along with flame throwers and sprayed the whole thing – There was an awful gallows 40ft high, it was still standing when I left, where the Germans used to string them up by their wrists. The horrible crackling of those burning wooden huts seemed to eat at ones brain...”¹³³

Zinkeisen's description of the burning of Belsen versus her depiction of the event is contradictory. Zinkeisen only passively claims that the burning was impressive.

However, she actively focuses on the burning in *Burning of Belsen*. Her description

¹³⁰Young, p6.

¹³¹Ibid., p3.

¹³²Bark, p55.

¹³³Ibid., p76. The bands seen on the wrists of figures in *Belsen: April, 1945* may be devices for hanging prisoners which Zinkeisen references when discussing the gallows at Belsen.

emphasizes the atrocity at Belsen but only in relation to the Germans (note, Zinkeisen is conflating Germans with Nazis here, as she did in *Human Laundry*.) The only mention of victims or survivors is when she refers to how the "...Germans used to string *them* up..."¹³⁴ She allows the gallows to metaphorically function as the victims and does not even reference survivors being present at the ceremony, which is evident in *Burning of Belsen*. As in discussions of *Belsen: April, 1945* and in *Human Laundry*, in her letter Zinkeisen presents the victims as objects rather than humans by not directly addressing them on their own terms as victims or as survivors. This negates their identity as individuals but it also negates their suffering by allowing atrocity to overshadow the suffering it caused.

By the time Zinkeisen completed her painting, which at the earliest if completed in her studio was May 24, 1945, it was common knowledge that the British had liberated and burned Belsen so an inclusion of explicit British symbols was unnecessary, thus negating this work as a record.¹³⁵ The previously published BAFPU photos and film footage acted as documentary record. Therefore, Zinkeisen had no need, nor did she record the details, which potential viewers had seen in journalistic documentary fashion. Instead, by emphasizing larger actions over defined individuals, Zinkeisen's painting memorializes an abstract ideal of good defeating evil. By memorializing abstract ideals – righteousness and justice - she also did not have to directly address the victims of Belsen

¹³⁴Ibid.

¹³⁵See "Belsen Camp Burned." *The Manchester Guardian (1901-1959)*, May 22, 1945. Also, images and footage taken by the BAFPU had already been sent back to Britain in the days following the destruction of Belsen on May 21, 1945.

in her composition, an omission notable throughout her Belsen narrative and within revelations of Belsen to the British public in April 1945.¹³⁶

The Victory:

To mark British triumph at Belsen, Zinkeisen depicts an overwhelming plume of black smoke billowing from the center of the composition. As the focal point of the painting, the plume simultaneously denotes total destruction and connotes the dark evil of Nazi policy in a visually heavy form. Zinkeisen further dramatizes the historic moment when the last structure of Belsen was burned by depicting the plume at a sharp diagonal angle, creating a visual tension within the composition.¹³⁷ The intensity of the black plume contrasts with the white of the sky to its right and with the intense, unnatural orange of the flames to its left. This color contrast, not seen in BAFPU black and white photos, dramatizes the monument by intensifying the effect of the diagonal created by the plume and sharp diagonal angle of the road receding toward the plume. As in *Belsen: April, 1945* Zinkeisen in *Burning of Belsen* placed a large triangular form (the road) in the center of her composition. In this painting the surrounding environment of Belsen is used to emphasize the orthogonals of the road receding into the background. The orthogonals also create a column-like form reminiscent of victory columns crowned with a heroic figure. For instance, Napoleon's Column in Paris and Nelson's Column in London serve as grand "pedestals" for images of these national heroes.¹³⁸ The hero atop

¹³⁶Reilly, p50-51.

¹³⁷*The Burning of Belsen Camp* portrays when the last structure of Camp I at Belsen was burned.

¹³⁸Alan Borg, *War Memorials: from Antiquity to Present*, (London: Leo Cooper, 1991.) p6.

Zinkeisen's victory column, formed by the manipulation of perspective, is also a national hero – the British at Belsen (the flame-thrower).

To further connote British victory, Zinkeisen presents Belsen, the camp, in *Burning of Belsen* in a state of complete destruction - just as she portrayed victims in *Belsen: April, 1945*. Zinkeisen is able to visually claim the burning of Belsen as a nationalist moment of victory because the Jewish problem of mass death at Belsen in *Belsen: April, 1945* has been solved (evidenced by survivors in *Human Laundry*); and the German enemy introduced in *Human Laundry* has been vanquished (evidenced by the destroyed fences and fire in *Burning of Belsen*). Additionally, Zinkeisen omits details from the ceremonial burning that if included would have detracted from the nationalist focus of the painting.

Based on Evelyn Bark's account, Zinkeisen's work depicts the ceremonial burning on May 21, 1945.¹³⁹ By that date, other Belsen barracks and parts of Camp I had already been burned in practical, less glorified efforts to stop the spread of typhus. If Zinkeisen had been interested in creating an accurate record, she could have recorded images of remaining structures before the ritualistic razing by the British. Additionally, Zinkeisen could have depicted the survivors present at the ceremony. However, if Zinkeisen had included the predominantly Jewish survivors in *Burning of Belsen* the emphasis on a larger claim of good (British) versus evil (German) would have been jeopardized. As discussed in Act I and II, in dominant British thought the Jews were the 'other' and as victims of Nazi evil at Belsen, they could not be themselves definitively

¹³⁹Bark, p55.

evil. However, to include Jewish survivors in a scene emphasizing British victory over Nazi German evil, Zinkeisen would have had to identify Jewish survivors as definitively not evil since the survivors were victims of definitive evil. Instead of complicating her composition with a multitude of ambiguous figures possibly detracting from the larger ideals portrayed, in *Burning of Belsen* Zinkeisen depicts only the portion of Belsen's history over which the British could definitively make a claim of ultimate victory – its final destruction.

Zinkeisen was not alone in her grand ennobling of Belsen's destruction by British flame. The *Manchester Guardian* reported on May 22, 1945 that "The last traces of the notorious Belsen camp were burned yesterday in a ceremony attended by former prisoners...In its place a monument is to be raised."¹⁴⁰ Red Cross Commissioner and witness to the ceremony (*figures 19 & 20*), Evelyn Bark describes the ceremonial burning:

"I went back to Belsen at the end of May to attend a short ceremony to end what we called "Belsen First Phase." By that time No. 1 Camp had been cleared: all the dead had been buried and the survivors, now properly cared for, were no longer creeping round in wretched rags. The last hut stood out among the charred remains. At the end of it a large banner carrying a picture of Hitler's head had been hoisted; at the other flew a swastika flag. Bren gun-carriers equipped with flame thrower guarded the small platform on which four British officers stood. One of them gave a brief account of all that had happened at Belsen, paying tribute to the work of the British Red Cross; a salute was fired to the dead; the officers mounted the gun-carriers; and the flame-throwers were discharged."¹⁴¹

¹⁴⁰"Belsen Camp Burned." *The Manchester Guardian (1901-1959)*, May 22, 1945. The discrepancy in date can be attributed to miscommunication or to the fact that the camp at Belsen was burned in phases beginning with Camp I on May 19, 1945. As camps were fully evacuated, barracks were burned to prevent the spread of disease to other areas of the camp not evacuated at that point. Evelyn Bark points out in her autobiography that the ceremony called, "Belsen First Phase" took place after Camp I had already been "cleared." She does not indicate it had been completely burned but says that "the last hut stood out among charred remains." Flame throwers then burned the last hut in the ceremony the *Manchester Guardian* article recounts. See Bark p55.

¹⁴¹Bark, p55.

Based on Bark's account, the ceremony also functioned as a memorial to British victory over Nazi evil and also discounts survivors, just as Zinkeisen's composition. According to Bark, the survivors were all properly cared for since they "were no longer creeping around in wretched rags."¹⁴² This is very limited criteria for proper survivor care which completely negates and insults what survivors have experienced at Belsen. A further insult to survivors was surely the hoisting of the image of Hitler and the swastika flag. Their inclusion in this ceremony clearly defines the burning of Belsen as British triumph over the Nazi regime and with such strong visual imagery there is no consideration given to the survivors as, in Zinkeisen's image.

Bark also claims that at the ceremony a British officer "gave a brief account of all that happened at Belsen."¹⁴³ Bark does not specify a timeline for the events recounted but, it is not likely that the British officer recounted "all that had happened" at Belsen before British arrival because the British were not present for all that had happened at Belsen, only what had happened since their (heroic) arrival. Therefore, the events he accounted for undoubtedly were events only related to British liberation and relief efforts, again omitting survivor suffering or recounting it from a limited nationalist perspective, just as in *Burning of Belsen*.

British Heroism:

Unlike her other two Belsen works discussed in this study, Zinkeisen uses an overtly expressive painterly style in *Burning of Belsen*, which adds a sense of heroism to Zinkeisen's nationalist monument. It does so by depicting a theme rather than specific

¹⁴²Ibid.

¹⁴³Ibid., The IWM records the officer who conducted the ceremony as "the British commandant of Belsen."

details. Additionally, it adds a heroic element to Zinkeisen's role as artist as well by implying, through style, she painted the work at the site of the burning, implying the threat of danger (from fire and contact with victims) to Zinkeisen. However, as a proper nationalist doing her bit during the People's War, Zinkeisen (in nationalist thought) bravely risked these dangers to record the liberators' harrowing victory at Belsen. Because of these potential risks and heightened nationalist emotions at the ceremonial razing, Zinkeisen's painting style is hurried and painterly.

According to art historian Heinrich Wölfflin the painterly style, such as that seen in *Burning of Belsen*, presents subjects (through figures and forms) as only "ungraded masses," and thus it only creates the *appearance* of reality.¹⁴⁴ Furthermore, in the case of *Burning of Belsen* the paint is thickly applied in visibly quick strokes, which renders the idea of a *trompe l'oeil* image impossible. Without the restrictive nature of definitive line, Zinkeisen's painterly style is unhindered by limits of representing reality; therefore, she does not detailed elements; instead she depicts heroic ideals and celebrated memory of victory through a painted monument. Unlike Zinkeisen's usual "confident" and controlled illustrative and linear style, seen in *Human Laundry*, because of the expressive and quick painterly strokes seen in *Burning of Belsen*, it appears Zinkeisen may have painted it as a *plein air* work, meaning outside and at the scene of the burning.¹⁴⁵ The idea she painted the ceremonial razing as it unfolded conveys a sense of adherence to her

¹⁴⁴Heinrich Wölfflin, "Linear vs. Painterly," *Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art*, (1915.) p21.

¹⁴⁵Tom Foakes (Curator of Art) "Doris Zinkeisen." Interview by Rebecka Black. The Museum of the Order of St. John. London, England. May 18 2012. Mr. Foakes, describes Zinkeisen's style before Belsen as very "confident" meaning there was a clear sense of preparation and thoughtfulness given to her works based on her quality of line and overall compositional structure - a confidence not seen as much in *Burning of Belsen Concentration Camp*.

artistic and national duties even through such an emotional and dramatic experience, thus elevating Zinkeisen's status as an artist-heroine, in a sense.

The notion that Doris Zinkeisen captured this moment of Belsen's end as it was happening adds a layer of meaning to *Burning of Belsen* that many history paintings do not have. Whether or not Zinkeisen actually painted *Burning of Belsen* on site during the event is uncertain though. Zinkeisen's letter from May 24, 1945 informs her husband that "human laundry" is "to be one of my pictures." The plural, "pictures" implies she had not painted any images of Belsen by May 24, 1945.¹⁴⁶ However, her letter indicates Zinkeisen was at Belsen some point between May 19 and May 21, 1945, which is when Belsen was burned. The ceremony to burn the last structure of Camp I was on 21 May. In her May 24 letter, she describes witnessing the "impressive" burning of Belsen but not the grand ceremony.

Another contradiction arises in Evelyn Bark's account of Zinkeisen painting *Burning of Belsen*. Bark describes watching "Zinkeisen as she rapidly brushed in the first strokes on her canvas to record that scene."¹⁴⁷ Bark also remembers that Zinkeisen finished the work in her Brussels studio where she had to wear gloves to paint because of the cold. Zinkeisen biographer Philip Kelleway points this information out as strange because Brussels in April would not have been "icy cold" as Bark describes it. Although the most credible account of Zinkeisen painting this work at the scene is uncertain, again Zinkeisen's anomalous expressive style and intentionally tense and dramatic support that Zinkeisen at least began *Burning of Belsen* while watching the momentous event. The

¹⁴⁶Kelleway, p76.

¹⁴⁷Bark, p55.

idea that Zinkeisen painted any of the painting on site imbues it, and the artist to some extent, with a heroic status almost equivalent to those who burned Belsen and ended its atrocities – thus converting a generic composite record into a history painting and nationalist victory monument.

The eye-witness factor for Zinkeisen gives her and her history painting credibility as an accurate record because it could be argued that as eye-witness, Zinkeisen recorded the event rather than portrayed or expressed her reaction to it. However, as seen in comparison to photographs (*figures 19 & 20*), Zinkeisen did not record the ceremony that accompanied the burning of Belsen. She did, however, depict a composite of elements related to the ceremonial burning. Neither *Burning of Belsen* nor Zinkeisen's letter records irrefutable specifics about the ceremony or the razing, although Bark recalls Zinkeisen's presence. Zinkeisen's version of the burning of Belsen, like *Human Laundry*, may also be an altered composite of photographs taken by the BAFPU. If a photograph taken by Sgt. Oakes of the main camp at Belsen (*figure 21 & 22*) is reversed, the composition is the same as Zinkeisen's *Burning of Belsen*, (*figure 3*) with the addition of fire. Also the large black plume that dominates Zinkeisen's work is strikingly similar to the large plume seen in BAFPU photographs (*figure 20*). Just as with *Belsen: April, 1945* and *Human Laundry*, Zinkeisen was a witness to the scene she portrays, but she allows photographs (*figures 19-21*) to act as the records letting her work function as monument by depicting only what is most pertinent to her aim – British heroism.

Context and Display:

Burning of Belsen shows Zinkeisen continued the long tradition of British artists creating monuments and memorials to military victories and heroes. This tradition saw its peak production during her career, specifically in the years following World War I.¹⁴⁸ Zinkeisen was also not anomalous as a female artist working in this tradition; nor was Zinkeisen the only female artist to depict events related to the Holocaust, without addressing victims or survivors.¹⁴⁹ Zinkeisen's contemporary, Dame Laura Knight was also commissioned to Europe during World War II to record British efforts abroad. On a short term contract with the WAAC, Knight was present at the Nuremberg Trials in 1946. There, she was granted special access to a box situated above prisoners on trial and the perspective shown in her piece *The Nuremberg Trial* (figure 2) reflects her view.¹⁵⁰ James Young points out that in many German Holocaust memorials, the Jews are recalled in memorials through their absence, therefore giving visual parallel to their loss.¹⁵¹ In Knight's piece, the awkward diagonal placement of Nazi prisoners, forced into the composition below a scene of destruction, works in the same manner to imply the loss of Holocaust victims through destruction and presence of the accused. Also, by emphasizing the prisoners in their box under watch of guards, the heroism of Allied (and hence British) forces is also implied and overtakes the theme of this work by emphasizing victory through the idea of justice being served.

¹⁴⁸Jim Corke, *War Memorials in Britain*, Shire Publications, Oxford: 2005. p4.

¹⁴⁹Calder, p223. According to Calder, "Benjamin West's *Death of Wolfe* (1771), despite or because of its wild historical inaccuracy, established that prints of battle pictures could be firm favourites with the UK paying public. Hence the very odd career of Elizabeth Thompson (1846-1933)."

¹⁵⁰Palmer, p17.

¹⁵¹*Ibid.*, p.2.

The element of *Burning of Belsen* that most clearly defines the painting as a nationalist monument to British victory is its institutional and display history. As previously mentioned, of the three works discussed, *Burning of Belsen* is the only painting not part of the IWM collection.¹⁵² Instead, *Burning of Belsen* has remained in the collection of the British Red Cross since 1945. The Red Cross commissioned Zinkeisen to paint relief efforts, so they had first choice when it came to the purchase of her related works. They likely kept *Burning of Belsen* because of its memorial and monument qualities which celebrate not only Red Cross relief work, but also British triumph at Belsen.¹⁵³ All of Zinkeisen's works kept by the British Red Cross were displayed in various buildings of the organization until July 1958 when *Burning of Belsen* was moved to the Back Board Room of the National Headquarters.¹⁵⁴ There the work served as a

¹⁵²Zinkeisen's portrait of Gen. Lindsay is in the collection of the British Red Cross Museum along with *Burning of Belsen Concentration Camp*.

¹⁵³Ulrike Smalley, email message to Rebecka Black, 24 May 2012. Smalley transcribes a letter from Secretary of the WAAC to Zinkeisen in September 1945 regarding her 13 Red Cross paintings: "When my Committee saw the pictures yesterday which you had done recently on the Continent we were given to understand that the Red Cross Society were to have the first choice. My Committee would be very glad to have four of them if they are available after this choice is made, namely, the two paintings of Belsen, the portrait of the nurse and the portrait of the medical officer and they would be glad to give you 125 Guineas for these four pictures if the purchase can be arranged."

¹⁵⁴Emily Oldfield, email message to Rebecka Black, 24 September 2012. According to Oldfield: "I have consulted documentation, which includes correspondence between the Assistant Secretary of the organisation Mary Naylor Smith and Evelyn Bark, with regard to the paintings and it appears that in July 1958 it was agreed that all the paintings, except for the portrait of General Lindsay should be hung in the back board room at National Headquarters, Barnet Hill, where we were located at the time. Captions were to be printed for them. It was proposed that the portrait of General Lindsay be offered to his widow and in the meantime it was sent to be kept in Evelyn Bark's office. It also appears (from a letter from the Vice-Chairman to Doris Zinkeisen 30 June 1958) that before they were all moved to the Back Board room, the paintings were located in different buildings. Two were at National Headquarters and the three others in different buildings." See also Bark, p48-49. Bark's autobiography includes a black and white photograph of Zinkeisen's work with a caption that reads "'Belsen Burning,' the painting by Doris Zinkeisen now hanging in the Board Room of the British Red Cross Society." Bark's text was published in 1960. According to Oldfield, no further information on when the paintings were taken out of the board room is known.

visual reminder of the Red Cross efforts and British victory by depicting the historic event which marked British victory.

According to James E. Young monuments and memorials are “invested with national soul and memory.”¹⁵⁵ By emphasizing British victory in *Burning of Belsen*, Zinkeisen imbues her work with national memory of victory at Belsen. In doing so, her work becomes an object of reverence, especially for the British Red Cross, but more broadly for the British. Because the British Red Cross, a national agency, was able to display the work however it pleased, it was also able to shape the memory of the event and did so in the best interest of the organization. By presenting the burning as a celebratory moment for the British, Zinkeisen’s work helped shape the memory of Belsen to best serve British nationalist memory at the British Red Cross.¹⁵⁶ Zinkeisen did this by presenting the ceremonial burning of Belsen as a heroic moment and she produced the painting in an expressive style conducive to portraying ideals rather than historic facts. Therefore, *Burning of Belsen* has historically served as an object of nationalistic remembrance.

Resolution:

The final act in a three-part narrative must resolve all issues and conflict, even the subplots, presented thus far. This presumes a simplicity that does not exist in recounting the historic narrative of Belsen. However, Zinkeisen is able to resolve her British narrative of Belsen in *Burning of Belsen* by allowing the British perspective of the

¹⁵⁵Young, p2.

¹⁵⁶Ibid., p3. Young points out memorials are often reshaped by subsequent generations. Zinkeisen’s though still represents her desire to best serve national interests.

burning of Belsen to act as subject. This then resolves the problem presented in Act I by showing that the place where the victims of *Belsen: April, 1945* died has been destroyed, negating the need for British concern or guilt. The burning of Belsen also resolves the subplot presented in *Human Laundry* by actually depicting British dominance over German/Nazi weakness through metaphor, allowing the British viewer to celebrate and feel good about their “Britishness.” Zinkeisen’s use of painterly metaphor allows *Burning of Belsen* to not be restricted by facts so it is able to conclude all problems within the narrative, thereby succinctly ending her story in a manner that abides by British memory. By not challenging British memory, the visual raconteur, Zinkeisen is able to lead the viewer safely through a purportedly complete narrative of Belsen and have the viewer come away from the subject of Belsen relieved, proud, and with their memory confirmed.

Conclusion:

The purpose of this study has been to offer critical insight into Doris Zinkeisen's under-examined Belsen images because, although she remains a relatively unknown British artist, her works provide three interrelated interpretations of Belsen, post-liberation, that parallel the larger British (mis)understanding of Belsen. In *Belsen: April, 1945*, Zinkeisen revealed the initial understanding of British shock at Nazi atrocity against the 'other.' Her composition simultaneously acknowledges the victims while it negates their suffering by exploiting them as a dramatic opener in her narrative. Zinkeisen also presents Belsen prisoners as only destroyed 'others,' denying the possibility of understanding the victims as anything else other than weak and defeated. However, in *Human Laundry* Zinkeisen does acknowledge Belsen survivors, but only as a tool to explore a nationalist concern. Finally, in *Burning of Belsen*, Zinkeisen completely erases Jewish suffering and identity by not including acknowledgment or reference to their presence at the ceremony portrayed. There is a decreasing presence of victims within Zinkeisen's narrative. I propose this loss of Jewish representation transgresses the limits of representation pertaining to the Holocaust because it is eerily and disturbingly mimetic to the decreasing loss of Jewish life during the Holocaust.

An additional goal of this study was to incorporate and add to the current Belsen scholarship, which has seen a resurgence prompted by the recent 60th anniversary of Belsen's liberation. However, the resurgence of interest in Belsen, according to Belsen scholar Ben Shephard, has unfortunately continued the British tradition of overlooking

the “unpleasantness” of Belsen.¹⁵⁷ The interest in Belsen from British scholars is no coincidence since Belsen remains “Britain’s Camp” in the British collective memory. Historian and Belsen scholar Suzanne Bardgett and David Cesarani along with other Belsen scholars and curators of the Imperial War Museum in London have, as was discussed in this thesis, attempted to address absences in the Belsen record because “much of the visual record [of Belsen] has been overlooked.”¹⁵⁸

Although images of Belsen, photos and paintings, clearly require further scrutiny, this analysis of Zinkeisen’s three works indicates that perhaps the paintings from Belsen can be educational resources for the ideas they actually represent – British nationalism during World War II. A more in-depth understanding of British relief work at Belsen and the British art scheme during World War II leads to a fuller understanding of the larger history of British Belsen imagery. The history of Belsen does not have to be understood, nor should it only be understood in terms of victims, villains, and heroes. To limit Belsen to such a strict understanding is to completely misunderstand it. Therefore, the argument for a re-evaluation of the educational value of Belsen paintings is valid. The re-evaluation though should not stop at a surface level analysis. Just because the subject matter is sensitive does not mean scholars should not question every aspect of the work’s creation and function. Instead, because the subject matter, in this case Belsen, is still forming British memory of World War II, any works considered as evidence or witness to Belsen should receive critical analysis. What the paintings of Belsen by Zinkeisen teach, if adequately analyzed, is not just the atrocity of Belsen. Rather, critical analysis of

¹⁵⁷ Shephard, p6.

¹⁵⁸ Cesarani, p7.

Zinkeisen's paintings discussed here, reveal that Belsen was a complex series of events important enough to understand as more than just a British victory.

According to James Young, memorials and monuments are based on specific experiences of the events remembered.¹⁵⁹ Berel Lang's discussion of the transgression of representational limits further elucidates this point by claiming (based on Wölfflin's logic) that not all representations of the same moment are possible at the same time.¹⁶⁰ For example, the German experience of Belsen was that of digging graves at Belsen for those the Nazi guards starved to death. In contrast, the victim and survivor experience of Belsen is that of fear, starvation, and suffering. In contrast to both, the British experience of Belsen was that of saving survivors through liberating and razing the camp. However, none of these brief summations encompass the complexity of any experience of Belsen. Zinkeisen attempted to portray Belsen in a restrictive three-part narrative structure; therefore, her depictions of Belsen emphasize one narrow perspective - British victory.

However, Zinkeisen as a civilian artist did not experience victory at Belsen; she only witnessed British actions that she (and the British public) interpreted as victorious and heroic. Accordingly, her narrative of Belsen is better understood as a narrative of British triumph at Belsen. Working in a nationalist mode, Zinkeisen remembers glory instead of horror.¹⁶¹ As such, it is not longer appropriate to consider her works from Belsen as Holocaust art because, as has been shown, Zinkeisen was not commissioned to document suffering at Belsen, nor was she commissioned to record events related to the

¹⁵⁹Young, p56.

¹⁶⁰Lang, p54.

¹⁶¹Mosse, p.6.

mass extermination of Jews within Nazi concentration camps; she was commissioned to record British relief efforts at Belsen.

Second, it is inappropriate to consider them as Holocaust art because this confuses the definition of British commissioned war art within British art history. As discussed in the introduction, the war art schemes of World War I and World War II in Britain were viewed as critical (nationalist) programs to keep artists working and to keep British art at the forefront of artistic production. By understanding Zinkeisen's Belsen works as Holocaust art, art historians are missing an opportunity to contribute to the emerging discourse on war art and its role in the construction of national identity and memory, as evidenced by Zinkeisen's nationalist narrative of Belsen.¹⁶² More importantly, art historians are also threatening to redefine Holocaust art through nationalist propaganda. This re-definition miscalculates and misrepresents the complexities of under-evaluated camps, like Belsen. Furthermore, this redefinition proposes, in a larger context, that moments related to the Holocaust can be remembered as victory rather than the tragic historic loss they were.

¹⁶²Brandon, pxix-xx.

Appendix



Figure 1: Doris Zinkeisen, *Belsen: April, 1945* (1945) oil on canvas, ART LD5467. Imperial War Museum, London



Figure 2: Doris Zinkeisen, *Human Laundry*, oil on canvas (1945) ART LD5468. Imperial War Museum, London



Figure 3: Doris Zinkeisen, *Burning of Belsen Concentration Camp* (1945). oil on canvas, British Red Cross Museum, London



Figure 4: Sgt. Hewitt, (No.5 BAFPU) Women and children bathing. April 1945. BU5459. IWM, London



Figure 5: Sgt. Oakes, (No.5 BAFPU) Women inmates use a mobile bath unit which is equipped with hot water. April 1945. BU4237. IWM, London



Figure 6: Eric Taylor, Human Wreckage at Belsen Concentration Camp, 1945 (1945) watercolor and ink, ART LD5588, Imperial War Museum, London



Figures 7 & 8: Sgt. Morris (No. 5 BAFPU) Bodies at Belsen. April 1945. BU3770 & BU3774. Imperial War Museum, London



Figure 9: "The Buchenwald Concentration Camp." *The Manchester Guardian*, p.6, April 19, 1945. ProQuest Historical Newspapers. July 8, 2012.

THE MANCHESTER GUARDIAN, SATURDAY, APRIL 21, 1945

THE BELSEN CONCENTRATION CAMP



S.S. men, under British guards, forced to remove dead bodies at the Belsen concentration camp to lorries for burial. At this camp, near Bremen, 30,000 people are reported to have died in the last few months, and the liberating forces found hundreds of bodies lying on the ground.



A section of the Belsen camp.

TREASURY AGAINST EQUAL PAY
Women's Standards

Sir Alan Barlow, Joint Second Secretary to the Treasury, told the Royal Commission on Equal Pay at Burlington Gardens, London, yesterday that the policy of the Treasury was against equal pay.

The broad mass of women in the Civil Service, he said, were receiving remuneration fully in accordance with the "fair wage principle."

Claiming that the standard of living of the average woman civil servant was higher than that of the average man, Sir Alan said: "Women can afford to take more expensive holidays than the man can. The man has to dig in his garden or snitch a week at Southend."

Dame Anne Loughlin, a member of the commission, asked whether there was any reason why wife and child allowances should not be paid in the Civil Service as in the Army.

Miss A. E. Sharp, one of the principal assistant secretaries to the Treasury, said it could be done. "But we do not

Figure 10: "The Belsen Concentration Camp." *The Manchester Guardian*, p.3, April 21, 1945. ProQuest Historical Newspapers. July 8, 2012.

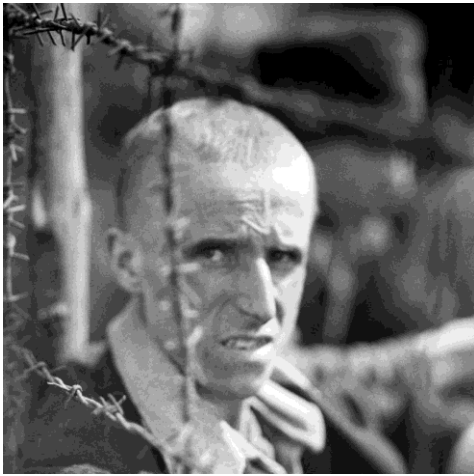


Figure 11: Sgt. H. Oakes (No. 5 BAFPU) portrait of a camp inmate, April, 1945. BU4069, Imperial War Museum, London



Figure 12: Sgt. Mike Lewis, Corpse of an inmate being dragged to a mass grave. Film Still, 24 April 1945. FLM 3720. IWM, Imperial War Museum, London.



Figure 13: Leslie Cole, *One of the Death Pits, Belsen: S.S. Guards Collecting Bodies* (1945) oil on canvas, ART LD5105, Imperial War Museum, London



Figure 14: Aba Bayefsky, *Belsen Concentration Camp Pit* (1945) oil on canvas, CWM 19710261-1394, Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, Canadian War Museum, Ontario



Figure 15: Ministry of Information, Photo Division, Britain Queues for Food: Wartime Shortages in London (c.1945) D25037, Imperial War Museum, London



Figure 16: Evelyn Dunbar, *Queue at the Fish Shop*, oil on canvas (1944) ART LD3987, Imperial War Museum, London



Figures 17 and 18: Sgt. Hewitt (No. 5 BAFPU) "Human Laundry," BU5474 & BU5471. Imperial War Museum, London



Figures 19 & 20: Bert Hardy (No. 5 BAFPU) *Burning of Belsen ceremony*, 21 April, 1945. BU6670 & BU6674, Imperial War Museum, London



Figure 21 & 22: Sgt. H. Oakes (No. 5 BAFPU) *Belsen, main camp from guard tower, and reverse*, April, 1945. BU4711, Imperial War Museum, London



Figure23: Dame Laura Knight, *The Nuremberg Trail*, (1946). oil on canvas, ART LD5798, Imperial War Museum, London

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