
LE MONDE EN 1945

THE WORLD IN THE AFTERMATH OF WORLD WAR II



Chronology

August 14, 1941: the Atlantic Charter

November 1943: Tehran Conference

January 1945: liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau camp

February 1945: Yalta Conference

May 8, 1945: German surrender

June 1945: foundation of the United Nations

August 6 and 9, 1945: Hiroshima and Nagasaki nuclear bombings

September 2, 1945: Japanese surrender

July-August 1945: Potsdam Conference

November 1945-October 1946: Nuremberg trial

May 1946-November 1948: Tokyo trials



Repères

Au sortir de la Seconde Guerre mondiale, le monde est politiquement et économiquement bouleversé. Les pertes humaines sont énormes dans les deux camps, et il faut y ajouter le traumatisme causé par la découverte des camps de concentration et d'extermination mis en place par le régime nazi (cf. dossier n° 1). La majorité de l'opinion publique découvre l'ampleur exacte du système concentrationnaire nazi au fur et à mesure de l'avancée des troupes alliées dans le Reich moribond. La nécessité de juger les dirigeants allemands s'impose alors (cf. dossier n° 4). Les destructions massives infligées notamment par les bombardements aériens ou les combats ont laissé l'économie exsangue, en Allemagne notamment qui traverse une véritable « année zéro » (cf. dossier n° 2 sur le bilan de la guerre). Enfin, l'usage de la bombe atomique marque un tournant dans l'histoire des luttes entre États qui rentre dans une nouvelle ère et illus-

tre de façon brutale la domination technologique et militaire des États-Unis. L'équilibre politique est également bouleversé, et les États-Unis, l'URSS, puissances extra-européennes, apparaissent comme les grands vainqueurs et les seules « superpuissances » face à d'anciennes puissances européennes ruinées. Si l'heure n'est pas encore à l'affrontement entre elles, chacune des deux puissances s'efforce d'étendre son influence au mieux de ses intérêts. C'est dans ce contexte que se fait la mise en place du plan Marshall destiné à accélérer la construction européenne en 1947.

La violence de la guerre et celle du totalitarisme nazi ont profondément marqué les esprits, aussi les États vainqueurs tentent-ils de mettre en place une nouvelle organisation de la scène politique internationale, visant à favoriser la coopération des hommes et à défendre leurs droits fondamentaux (cf. dossier n° 3 sur l'ONU). Cependant, ces idées généreuses se heurtent bientôt aux politiques nationales (colonialisme de la Grande-Bretagne et de la France), et à la naissance progressive d'une opposition entre les ex-Alliés qui proposent deux modèles politiques et économiques différents.

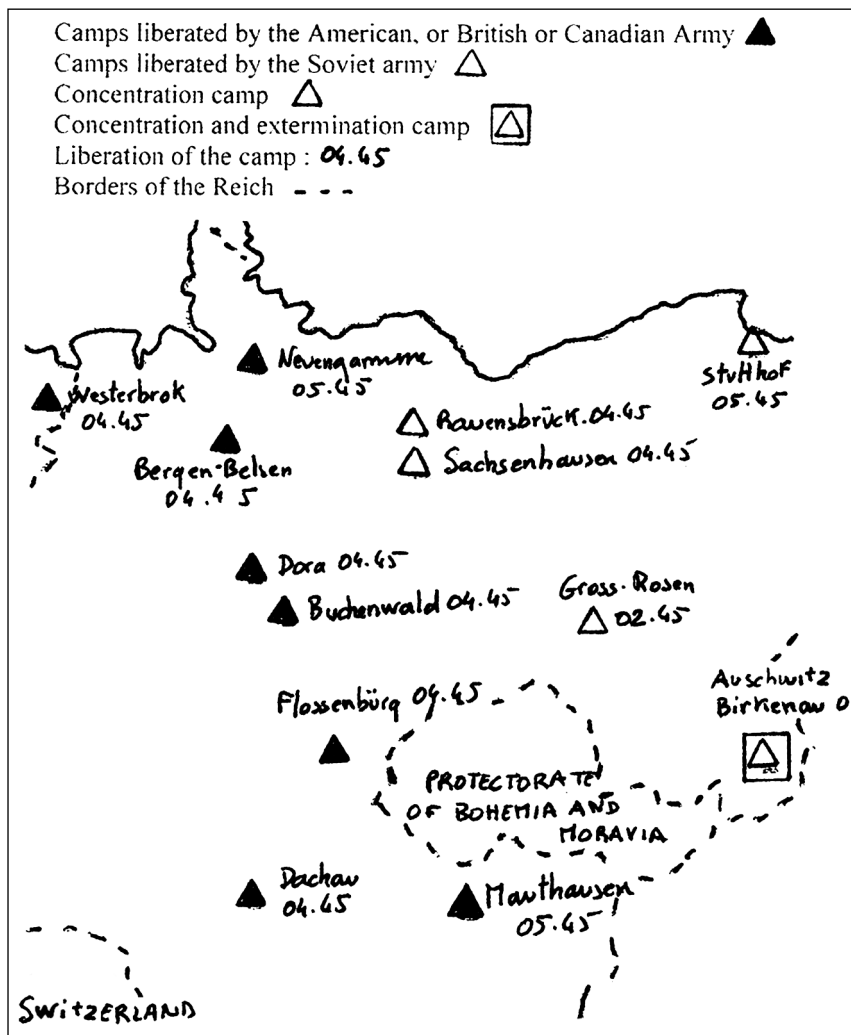
Cinq dossiers sont proposés à l'étude dans ce premier thème :

- Dossier n° 1 : la découverte des camps de concentration et d'extermination. Cette découverte par les soldats alliés lors de la conquête du territoire allemand constitue une étape importante de la prise de conscience de ce qu'était la dictature nazie.
- Dossier n° 2 : le bilan matériel, économique et humain de la Seconde Guerre mondiale et les problèmes de la reconstruction, avec notamment les objectifs du plan Marshall.
- Dossier n° 3 : un nouvel ordre international se met en place avec la création de l'ONU.
- Dossier n° 4 : étude du procès de Nuremberg, au cours duquel furent jugés certains des principaux responsables nazis.
- Dossier n° 5 : le Japon est dans une situation très difficile en 1945 : brisé économiquement et traumatisé par les bombardements nucléaires d'Hiroshima et Nagasaki, il s'est cependant reconstruit en profitant de l'aide octroyée par les États-Unis dans le contexte du début de la Guerre Froide.

DOSSIER N° 1. DISCOVERING THE HORROR OF CONCENTRATION AND EXTERMINATION CAMPS

How was the Nazi system discovered?

DOCUMENT 1: LIBERATION OF MAJOR NAZI CAMPS IN 1945



**DOCUMENT 2: VISIT TO THE CONCENTRATION CAMP AT BERGEN-BELSEN
BY AN ENGLISH OFFICER, APRIL 19, 1945.**

‘We drew up outside a building which was part of the barracks of the camp and there saw several hundreds of the prisoners wandering about in a listless sort of way. (...). The first thing I remember were groups of ragged, dejected looking people behind barbed wire which had been broken down in most places. (...). As we went further, I saw a group of about 20 bodies with their clothes off—men, women and children—just dumped in a pile. Live prisoners were squatting or walking near them quite unconcerned. Every one was pale and haggard beyond belief. Most of the corpses appeared to have died from hunger. Their limbs were like my wrist and their skin looked like rubber stretched over skeleton. They were discoloured in varying stages of decay and still the live ones carried on their existence as though they were not there at all. After a short time, we came on a pile of dead female bodies, 80 yards by 30 yards, and about 3 feet high. There must have been at least 500 lying there thrown on top of one another, so thin and so emaciated it was difficult to believe they had ever been people at all. Many of them were covered in horrible sores. The sight was something that I am quite unable to describe and the smell was its equal (...).’

Major Hugh Saint Clare Stewart (commanding No. 5 Army Film & Photo Section),
published in *The Hollywood Reporter*, May 1945.



Questions

- 1°) Introduce the documents.
- 2°) Explain the situation of concentration camps and prisoners when they were liberated by the Allies.
- 3°) What do we learn about the horror of concentration camps from the second document?



Answers

- 1°) The first document is a map which illustrates the advance of the Allied forces in Germany and the liberation of concentration camps by the Soviets on the eastern front, and by the British and the Americans on the western front. It is a secondary source, contrary to the text, which is the testimony of a British officer who discovered the horrible truth about concentration camps a few days after Bergen-Belsen was liberated. The officer was a member of the army film section, and he went to the spot so as to see for himself the horrors of camps, as some Allied generals – Eisenhower for instance – did.

- 2°) The liberation of concentration camps lasted from January to April 1945. At first, as they were retreating from the Allied forces, the Nazis compelled prisoners to leave the camps (this is known as 'death marches') and executed those who were too weak to move on. The Soviets liberated the first major camp – Auschwitz – on January 27. Then, as they felt defeat was impending, the Nazis fled, leaving behind them the remaining camps and their prisoners, who survived in dreadful conditions. Indeed, the British officer described the prisoners as barely alive, ghost-like figures trying to survive among corpses. Diseases and starvation caused countless deaths even after the departure of German wardens.
- 3°) Although they had heard of imprisonments, the Allied troops were unaware of the extent of the cruelty inflicted on deportees. They discovered the harsh reality when liberating the camps. The Nazis not only wanted to kill the prisoners but also to dehumanise them while they were still alive. Thus, Major Stewart was shocked at the number of dead ('There must have been at least 500 lying there thrown on top of one another') and at the dreadful physical and mental state of the survivors, who looked like ghosts and seemed untouched by the bodies surrounding them. This can be explained by the fact that they were in shock ('as though they were not there at all') after living for weeks, or months, in the camp.



Commentary

Introduction

1945 is the year when the German troops were defeated, and when concentration and extermination camps were discovered by the Allied forces. The two documents show that some camps were liberated in January 1945, but that the Allied soldiers only became aware of the reality of what had happened in April 1945. The first document is a secondary source explaining how the Allied forces liberated the camps while the other one is a primary source showing how shocked a British officer was when visiting a concentration camp. Both documents show that the Allies gradually became aware of the atrocities committed in camps while progressing through the Reich (I), but that it was still a shock for the soldiers who were faced with a reality they were unaware of (II).

I. The liberation took place as the Allied troops were moving across Europe

A. Geographic situation

- Two types of camps:
 - extermination camps, where Jews and Gypsies were deported and killed massively, through the use of gas chambers for example;
 - concentration camps (e.g. Dachau), where the German government sent those who were regarded as opponents of the Nazi regime. Prisoners often died from hardship.
- Most camps were situated in Eastern Europe, in the vicinity of the biggest Jewish communities and in territories that were directly administered by the Reich, so as to keep the system relatively secret.

B. Several stages in the liberation

- Soviet soldiers were the first to liberate camps in the east, while British and American troops discovered those on the western front. Bergen-Belsen for instance was liberated by Anglo-Canadian soldiers.
- The Nazis originally wanted to evacuate the camps, so the first that were discovered by the Allied forces were empty. On the other hand, thousands of deportees were found in other camps, living in dreadful circumstances. The discovery was so dreadful and unexpected that it caused deep trauma among the soldiers who arrived in the camps and among public opinion.

II. A shock to Allied soldiers

A. An unexpected discovery

- As the Nazi regime kept the camps secret, the soldiers did not expect to find such horrors.
- No army was prepared to rescue so many prisoners, and many deportees died even after the camps were liberated.

B. Dehumanisation

- The deportees were extremely weak, they suffered from starvation, disease and ill-treatment.
- They were in shock, and resembled skeletons.

C. An upsetting revelation

- The discovery of concentration camps came as a shock to public opinion.

- This explains why so many journalists – who were often members of the Allied armies – went to the spot to take pictures and write testimonies.

Conclusion

The idea of concentration and extermination camps was central to the Nazi theories. The Allied soldiers who liberated Europe were often the first to discover the terrible reality, as they were moving forward. The urge to judge those responsible for these horrors and to state their crimes clearly ('crime against humanity') led to the Nuremberg War Crimes Trial in autumn 1945.



Vocabulary

A testimony: un témoignage

Starvation: la famine

DOSSIER N° 2. THE WORLD ECONOMIC SITUATION AFTER WORLD WAR II (1945-47)

What was the world economic situation in the aftermath of World War II?

DOCUMENT 1: WORLD WAR II CASUALTIES IN SOME COUNTRIES AND GENERAL TOLL

	Military deaths	Civilian deaths	Jewish Holocaust deaths	Total deaths
<i>The Allies:</i>				
Canada	45,300			45,300
China	4,000,000	6,000,000		10,000,000
France	212,000	267,000	83,000	562,000
Poland	400,000	2,200,000	3,000,000	5,600,000
Soviet Union	10,600,000	11,500,000	1,000,000	23,100,000
United Kingdom	382,600	67,800		450,400
United States	407,300	11,200		418,500
<i>The Axis:</i>				
Germany	5,500,000	1,840,000	160,000	7,500,000
Italy	306,400	145,100	8,000	459,500
Japan	2,000,000	600,000		2,600,000
Total	25,340,000	31,300,000	5,754,000	62,394,000

DOCUMENT 2: THE MARSHALL PLAN

‘I need not tell you gentlemen that the world situation is very serious. (...) In considering the requirements for the rehabilitation of Europe the physical loss of life, the visible destruction of cities, factories, mines, and railroads was correctly estimated, but it has become obvious during recent months that this visible destruction was probably less serious than the dislocation of the entire fabric of European economy. (...) Long-standing commercial ties, private institutions, banks, insurance companies and shipping companies disappeared, through the loss of capital, absorption through nationalization or by simple destruction. (...) It is logical that the United States should do whatever it is able