



Language Use by Victims, Perpetrators, and Observers at the 1945 Belsen Trial: Confronting and Encoding the Holocaust

Roxanne Taylor

To cite this article: Roxanne Taylor (2025) Language Use by Victims, Perpetrators, and Observers at the 1945 Belsen Trial: Confronting and Encoding the Holocaust, *The Journal of Holocaust Research*, 39:3, 202-220, DOI: [10.1080/25785648.2025.2573819](https://doi.org/10.1080/25785648.2025.2573819)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/25785648.2025.2573819>



© 2025 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 23 Oct 2025.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 1306



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Language Use by Victims, Perpetrators, and Observers at the 1945 Belsen Trial: Confronting and Encoding the Holocaust

Roxanne Taylor 

School of Arts and Humanities, University of Huddersfield, Huddersfield, UK

ABSTRACT

This article examines the use of language during one of the earliest moments of postwar scrutiny of and reflection on the Holocaust, namely the Belsen trial. The linguistic expression of the Holocaust by those who experienced it firsthand – primarily as victims but also as perpetrators – is compared with the linguistic expression of a set of secondhand observers of the Holocaust, namely British military legal personnel. As a case study, this article takes the way SS personnel and prisoners with supervisory or leadership responsibilities are referred to in affidavits prepared before the trial and during the trial itself. There are notable differences between the language used by such observers to describe the Holocaust and the language used by those who experienced the Holocaust firsthand. British military personnel with no direct experience of the Holocaust make substantial use of code-switching into German, not only using but also adapting terminology that can be classed as Nazi German. This adaptation is viewed here as a parallel to the failure by the British at the trial to adequately understand camp society. Victims and perpetrators used a more varied set of linguistic expressions, making use of their own phraseology and colloquialisms in English, French, German, and Polish, which evidence individual priorities and perspectives. It is argued that differences in language use represent a linguistic parallel to and indeed expression of other differences between postwar observers and Holocaust victims and perpetrators themselves, and that the language used before and during the Belsen trial is a valuable lesson in the importance and indeed the challenge of paying careful attention to testimony.

KEYWORDS

Belsen trial; code-switching; Nazi German; British military law; war-crimes trials

Introduction

This article compares the linguistic strategies used to describe specific experiences of the Holocaust by those who experienced the Holocaust firsthand – victims and perpetrators – with the linguistic strategies used to describe the same experiences by outside observers, viewed in the context of one of the first postwar war-crimes trials, which brought the Holocaust to the attention of the wider world. By examining such linguistic strategies,

CONTACT Roxanne Taylor  r.taylor3@hud.ac.uk  School of Arts and Humanities, University of Huddersfield, Queensgate, Huddersfield HD1 3DH, UK

© 2025 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

we can approach wider questions of the (in)comprehension and (mis)understanding of the Holocaust by those who did not experience it, a critical issue as the 'era of the witness' comes to a close, giving way to what has been termed the 'post-witness era'¹ or as Ionescu and Mitroiu prefer, the 'post-testimonial era'.²

The Belsen trial constitutes one of the earliest moments of sustained examination of the Holocaust, and one of the earliest examples of one group of outsiders – British military legal personnel – seeking, and arguably failing, to approach some comprehension of the Holocaust. Language use at the trial highlights how, soon after the liberation of the camps, a gulf in language and understanding arose on the part of the British establishment, and hence the wider outside world, serving as a salutary lesson for the current era of increased Holocaust distortion and showing how easily an outside observer – even one with access to a range of witnesses and committed to bringing perpetrators to justice – could, and still can, fail to pay full attention to what those who experienced the Holocaust firsthand had to say.³

English was a language used and encountered very infrequently by victims and perpetrators alike during the mass murder of European Jews. Only a tiny minority of victims of the Holocaust had English as an L1 (a language acquired as a child).⁴ Although many victims and perpetrators had various levels of competency in English as an L2 (a language learned as a teen or adult), English was a minor component of the linguistic landscape of the Holocaust. However, at the time of writing this article, as we approach 80 years since those held at KL Bergen-Belsen were liberated, English is the majority language of international scholarship and material about the Holocaust.

Nearly two decades ago, Alan Rosen noted that from the 1990s onward, 'English, an outsider to the Holocaust and the responses to it, has been conscripted as a central language',⁵ a trend that has only continued. Writing more recently, Peter Davies suggests 'one could also argue that the Holocaust is a concept that developed in a particular way in English language discourse'.⁶ Factors behind growth of English as the predominant and preferred language in which to discuss the Holocaust include the perceived neutrality of English precisely as a language neither of victims nor perpetrators,⁷ and the perceived moral status of English as the language of the liberators.⁸ Postwar war-crimes trials mark one transition between the linguistic landscape of Europe during the mass murder of European Jews, and that of post-Holocaust examination and reflection in

¹Diana I. Popescu and Tanja Schuldt, (eds.), *Revisiting Holocaust Representation in the Post-Witness Era* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015). See also Annette Wieviorka, *The Era of the Witness*, trans. Jared Stark (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

²Arleen Ionescu and Simona Mitroiu, "Holocaust Narratives in the Post-Testimonial Era: Introduction," *Parallax*, vol. 29, no. 1 (2023): p. 3. For a recent alternative perspective, see Sanna Stegmaier, "Reconceptualizations of Testimony at the End of the 'Era of the Witness': USC Shoah Foundation's Dimensions in Testimony Project," in Thomas Pegelow Kaplan, Wolf Gruner, Boaz Cohen, and Miriam Offer, (eds.), *Holocaust Testimonies: Reassessing Survivors' Voices and Their Future in Challenging Times* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2025), pp. 183–202.

³For instance, see Mark Weitzman, "Holocaust Denial and Distortion," in Mark Weitzman, Robert J. Williams, and James Wald, (eds.), *The Routledge History of Antisemitism* (London: Routledge, 2023), pp. 373–82, and sources therein.

⁴Piotr Kuchwicz, "The Grammar of Survival. How Do We Read Holocaust Testimonies?" in Myriam Salama-Carr, (ed.), *Translating and Interpreting Conflict* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), pp. 61–2.

⁵Alan Charles Rosen, *Sounds of Defiance: The Holocaust, Multilingualism, and the Problem of English* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), p. 16.

⁶Peter J. Davies, *Witness between Languages: The Translation of Holocaust Testimonies in Context* (Rochester: Camden House, 2018), p. 4.

⁷Alan Rosen "Strong Enough to Carry Experience: The Holocaust, Multilingualism and the Problem of English," *Jewish Culture and History*, vol. 7, no. 3 (2004): pp. 32–4.

⁸Rosen, *Sounds of Defiance*, p. 105; Aimee Catherine Bunting, "Britain and the Holocaust, Then and Now," PhD diss., University of Southampton, 2006, p. 65.

Europe, North America, and beyond.⁹ Language is therefore a fitting means of exploring postwar trials, all the more so for trials conducted in English, such as the Belsen trial.

Language, The Holocaust, and postwar trials

Language and the Holocaust

Previous research on language use and the Holocaust has not focused on postwar trials, except in studies of the professionalization of court interpreting.¹⁰ Particularly prominent is research on linguistic competence as a factor in an individual's lived experience of the Nazi camp system and in survival.¹¹ The multilingual nature of the Holocaust has been widely recognized, as has the development of a pan-European pidgin, based primarily on German and Polish, within various camps.¹² Nazi German, the form of German specific to the policies and practices of the National-Socialist regime, has been identified by many commentators from Victor Klemperer onward,¹³ and is catalogued in Robert Michael and Karin Doerr's lexicon.¹⁴ Melani Schröter's research on the afterlives of certain Nazi-German items borrowed into French and English is perhaps closest to the present study, documenting shifts in the meaning, frequency, and context of such borrowed terms, showing, in part, that British-English speakers describing KL Bergen-Belsen borrowed terms from Nazi German, often with altered and widened meaning.¹⁵

⁹Donald Bloxham, *Genocide on Trial: War Crimes Trials and the Formation of Holocaust History and Memory* (Oxford: OUP, 2001), p. 227; Donald Bloxham, "Holocaust Studies and Genocide Studies," in Joyce Apsel and Ernesto Verdeja, (eds.), *Genocide Matters: Ongoing Issues and Emerging Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 66.

¹⁰Eugene Davidson, *The Trial of the Germans: An Account of the Twenty-Two Defendants before the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1997), p. 34; Kevin Jon Heller, *The Nuremberg Military Tribunals and the Origins of International Criminal Law* (Oxford: OUP, 2011), p. 31; Francine Hirsch, *Soviet Judgement at Nuremberg: A New History of the International Military Tribunal after World War II* (New York: OUP, 2020), pp. 98, 114–8; see also Jesús Baigorri-Jalón, "The Nuremberg Trial as a Turning Point in the History of Interpreting: Notes on Historical Transitions," *The Interpreters' Newsletter*, vol. 27 (2022): pp. 1–24; Simona Tobia, "Crime and Judgement: Interpreters/Translators in British War Crimes Trials, 1945–1949," in Moira Inghilleri and Sue-Ann Harding, (eds.), *Translation and Violent Conflict* (London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 275–94.

¹¹Heidi Aschenberg, "Linguistic Terror in Nazi Concentration Camps: Lucien and Gilbert - Portraits of Two 'Interpreters,'" in Michaela Wolf, (ed.), *Interpreting in Nazi Concentration Camps* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), pp. 63–78; David Gramling, "Translanguagers and the Concentrationary Universe," in Wolf, *Interpreting in Nazi Concentration Camps*, pp. 43–60; Malgorzata Tryuk, "Interpreting in Nazi Concentration Camps During World War II," *Interpreting*, vol. 12, no. 2 (2016): pp. 125–45; Andromachi-Evita Poulou, "Deutschkenntnisse als Machtfaktor und Überlebensstrategie" [Knowledge of German as a Power Factor and a Survival Strategy] (German), *Schnittstelle Germanistik*, vol. 2, no. 1 (2022): pp. 141–61.

¹²Wolf Oschlies, "Lagersprache—Soziolinguistische Bemerkungen zu KZ-Sprachkonventionen" [Camp-languages: Sociolinguistic Observations on the Language Conventions of the Concentration Camps] (German), *Muttersprache*, vol. 96 (1985): pp. 98–109; Nicole Warmbold, *Lagersprache: Zur Sprache der Opfer in den Konzentrationslagern Sachsenhausen, Dachau, Buchenwald* [Camp-language: On the Speech of Victims in the Concentration Camps of Sachsenhausen, Dachau, Buchenwald] (German) (Bremen: Hempen, 2008); Imke Hansen and Katarzyna Nowak, "Über Leben und Sprechen in Auschwitz: Probleme der Forschung über die Lagersprache der polnischen politischen Häftlinge von Auschwitz" [On Life and Speech in Auschwitz: Problems of Study into the Camp Language of the Polish Political Prisoners of Auschwitz], in Christiane Heß, Julia Hörath, Dominique Schröder, and Kim Wünschmann, (eds.), *Kontinuitäten und Brüche: Neue Perspektiven auf die Geschichte der NS-Konzentrationslager* [Continuities and Discontinuities: New Perspectives on the study of National-Socialist Concentration Camps] (German) (Berlin: Metropol Verlag, 2011), pp. 115–41.

¹³Victor Klemperer, *The Language of the Third Reich: LTI—Lingua Tertii Imperii*, trans. Martin Brady (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2006); Andreas Musolff, "Language under Totalitarian Regimes: The Example of Political Discourse in Nazi Germany," in Ruth Wodak and Bernhard Forchtner, (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 660–72.

¹⁴Robert Michael and Karin Doerr, *Nazi-Deutsch/Nazi-German: An English Lexicon of the Language of the Third Reich* (Westport: Greenwood, 2002).

¹⁵Melani Schröter, "How Words Behave in Other Languages: The Use of German Nazi Vocabulary in English," *Pragmatics and Society*, vol. 9, no. 1 (2018): pp. 91–116.

The trials

The Belsen trial has been identified as a relatively neglected topic across all areas of historical and legal research in comparison to the International Military Tribunal (IMT),¹⁶ although there are multiple studies that provide an overview of the trial, dating back to the publication of the trial transcript in 1949,¹⁷ as well as instances of focused research on specific facets of the trial, such as particular defendants, the legal personnel themselves, and media and literary representation.¹⁸ Overall, the historical judgment is one of failure and missed opportunity: The failure to fully recognize that Jews were persecuted and murdered solely because they were Jews, the high evidential threshold, and the conflation between Belsen and Auschwitz at the trial have all been criticized.¹⁹ A failure to address motivation and the differences between perpetrators has also been criticized: For John Cramer, the trial failed to explore motivations and instead reduced the complex reasons ‘why’ to individual monstrosity and mechanical systems.²⁰ Beyond academic study, survivors of Belsen, notably Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, also criticized the trial for the suspicion cast on witnesses and the lawyers’ insistence on identifying the dates and times of specific incidents, which suggested both that the British had no concept of the camp’s conditions and no oversight of the scale of the crime represented by the very existence of the camp.²¹

¹⁶Donald Bloxham, “British War Crimes Trial Policy in Germany, 1945–1957: Implementation and Collapse,” *British Studies*, vol. 42 (2003): pp. 91–118; Lorie Charlesworth, “Forgotten Justice: Forgetting Law’s History and Victims’ Justice in British ‘Minor’ War Crime Trials in Germany 1945–48,” *Amicus Curiae*, vol. 74, no. 2 (2008): pp. 2–10.

¹⁷Raymond Phillips, (ed.), *Trial of Josef Kramer and Forty-Four Others (The Belsen Trial)* (London: William Hodge and Co., 1949); A.P.V. Rogers, “War Crimes Trials under the Royal Warrant: British Practice 1945–1949,” *International & Comparative Law Quarterly*, vol. 39, no. 4 (1990): pp. 780–800; John Cramer, *Belsen Trial 1945: Der Lüneburger Prozess gegen Wachpersonal der Konzentrationslager Auschwitz und Bergen-Belsen* [Belsen Trial 1945: The Lüneburg Trial of the Guards of the Concentration Camps of Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen] (German) (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2011); John Cramer, “Der erste Bergen-Belsen-Prozess gegen Josef Kramer, den letzten Kommandanten von Auschwitz” [The First Bergen-Belsen Trial of Josef Kramer, the Last Commandant of Auschwitz], in Joachim Perels, (ed.), *Auschwitz in der deutschen Geschichte* [Auschwitz in German History] (German) (Hannover: Offizin, 2010), pp. 111–26; Beth A. Healey, “Nazi Crimes, British Justice: The Royal Warrant War Crimes Trials in British-Occupied Germany, 1945–1949,” PhD diss., Northwestern University, Evanston, 2017; Claire Louise Sharman, “War Crimes Trials between Occupation and Integration: The Prosecution of Nazi War Criminals in the British Zone of Germany,” PhD diss., University of Southampton, 2007; Caroline Sharples, “‘Where, Exactly, Is Auschwitz?’ British Confrontation with the Holocaust Through the Medium of the 1945 ‘Belsen’ Trial,” in Tom Lawson and Andy Pearce, (eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Britain and the Holocaust* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), pp. 181–200.

¹⁸For instance, see John Cramer “Tapfer, unbescholten, mit reinem Gewissen’: KZ-Aufseherinnen im ersten Belsen-Prozess eines britischen Militärgerichts 1945” [Brave, Blameless, with a Clear Conscience’: Female Concentration Camp Guards at the First Belsen Trial before a British Military Court in 1945], in Simone Erpel, (ed.), *Im Gefolge der SS: Aufseherinnen des Frauen-KZ Ravensbrück* [In the Wake of the SS: Female Guards of Ravensbrück Women’s Concentration Camp] (German) (Berlin: Metropol-Verlag 2007), pp. 103–13; John Cramer, “Der erste Bergen-Belsen-Prozess 1945 und seine Rezeption durch die deutsche Öffentlichkeit” [The First Bergen-Belsen Trial and its Reception by the German Public], in Clemens Vollnhals and Jörg Osterloh, (eds.), *NS-Prozesse und deutsche Öffentlichkeit. Besatzungszeit, frühe Bundesrepublik und DDR* [National-Socialist Trials and the German Public: Occupation Period, early Federal Republic and GDR] (German) (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 2011), pp. 75–93; Inge Marszolek, “Coverage of the Bergen-Belsen trial and the Auschwitz trial in the German Nordwestdeutscher Rundfunk: The Reports of Axel Eggebrecht,” in David Bankier and Dan Michman, (eds.), *Holocaust and Justice: Representation and Historiography of the Holocaust Post-War Trials* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2010), pp. 131–57; Devin O. Pendas, Laura Jockusch, and Gabriel N. Finder, “Auschwitz Trials—the Jewish Dimensions,” *Yad Vashem Studies*, vol. 41, no. 2 (2013): pp. 139–71; Victoria Stewart, *Literature and Justice in Mid-Twentieth-Century Britain: Crimes and War Crimes* (Oxford: OUP, 2023); Margaretha Franziska Vormdarm, *Justice for the Enemy?: die Verteidigung deutscher Kriegsverbrecher durch britische Offiziere in Militärgerichtsprozessen nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg (1945–1949)* [Justice for the Enemy?: The Defense of German War Criminals by British Officers in Military Court Trials after the Second World War (1945–1949)] (German) (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2019).

¹⁹Bloxham, *Genocide on Trial*; Cramer, *Belsen Trial 1945*, p. 397.

²⁰Cramer, *Belsen Trial 1945*, pp. 402–3.

²¹Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, *Inherit the Truth, 1939–1945: The Documented Experiences of a Survivor of Auschwitz and Belsen* (London: Giles de la Mare, 1996), p. 123.

Other assessments of the trial have been somewhat more positive: Kim Christian Priemel stresses the importance of ‘eye-witness testimony – from both victims and perpetrators’ and the role of the trial as a blueprint for those that followed,²² while Beth Healey argues that by focusing on Nazi actions that predominantly affected Jews, such as the operation of the gas chambers, British trials acknowledged the Nazi persecution of the Jews on the basis of their Jewishness.²³

Overview of language at the Belsen trial

The Belsen trial was the first war-crimes trial by the English-speaking Allies to address crimes committed as part of the mass murder of European Jews.²⁴ The trial itself took place between September 17 and November 17, 1945, in the converted MTV gymnasium of the town of Lüneburg.²⁵ Preparation for the trial, namely interviewing witnesses and drawing up legal affidavits at Belsen itself, was already underway by early May 1945, as indicated by the dates of various affidavits.²⁶ The trial was conducted under British military law by a British Military Tribunal.²⁷ The defendants included Joseph Kramer, former commandant of Belsen; Fritz Klein, a SS doctor; and 43 other staff members and functionaries, including SS guards and former prisoners.²⁸

There was only one official language of the Belsen trial: English. The official transcript of the trial proceedings is entirely in English, although the proceedings themselves were multilingual.²⁹ Discussions between members of the court, the president, the judge advocate, and the prosecuting and defending officers took place in English, and some, but not all, of these discussions were translated into German and Polish for the benefit of the defendants – German and Polish speakers who, for the most part, spoke no English at all.³⁰ The majority of witnesses gave evidence in either German or Polish, with others giving evidence in French, Hungarian, and, indeed, English.³¹ Any evidence given in a different language was translated into English for the court, and it is this English translation of the spoken German, Polish, French, or Hungarian that entered the transcript and hence survives in the archival record of the trial.³² This evidence was also translated into German and Polish for the benefit of the defendants, where needed. The exact sequencing of translation, or the methods used by the translators, is not clear from the internal evidence of the transcript, nor from other archival material, such as a list of

²²Kim Christian Priemel, “Consigning Justice to History: Transitional Trials after the Second World War,” *The Historical Journal*, vol. 56, no. 2 (2013): pp. 573, 575.

²³Healey, “Nazi Crimes,” p. 73; Pendas, Jockusch, and Finder, “Auschwitz Trials.”

²⁴Russel Kent, *The Curiohaus Trials: Bringing the Nazis to Justice 1945–1949* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2025).

²⁵The National Archives, London (TNA), WO235/12/D; Sharples, *British Confrontation*, p. 188.

²⁶See, for instance, TNA, WO235/20/66/2r.33; TNA, WO235/86/2r.12; TNA, WO235/88/2r.3. On the work of the WCIT, see Healey, “Nazi Crimes,” pp. 40–50; Robert Sherwood, “The United Kingdom War Crimes Investigation Teams after World War II,” in Larissa Allwork and Rachel Pistol, (eds.), *The Jews, the Holocaust, and the Public: The Legacies of David Cesarani* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), pp. 207–22; Simona Tobia, “Questioning the Nazis: Languages and Effectiveness in British War Crime Investigations and Trials in Germany, 1945–1948,” *Journal of War & Culture Studies*, vol. 3, no. 1 (2010): pp. 123–36.

²⁷TNA, WO235/12/B, D; Rogers, “War Crimes Trials.”

²⁸TNA, WO235/12/D.

²⁹TNA, WO235/13–18.

³⁰TNA, WO235/13/94, 135.

³¹The language in which a witness gives evidence is mentioned in the transcript. See, for example, TNA, WO235/13/230, 265, 277, 304. For English-speaking witnesses, see, for example, TNA, WO235/13/56, 95, 112.

³²TNA, WO235/13–18.

interpreters at the trial.³³ Some comments made during the trial by both legal personnel and witnesses allude to the translators' fatigue levels and competency, or the accuracy of specific translations, but otherwise translation is obscured by the Englishness of the transcript.³⁴

British legal personnel at the trial were L1 speakers of British English, with the notable exception of the Polish- and English-speaking Lieutenant Jedrzejowicz, who acted as defending officer for six Polish defendants, and also acted as an interpreter between Polish and English at certain points during the trial, when other Polish interpreters were either absent or fatigued.³⁵ Tadeusz Cyprian, having observed the trial on behalf of the Polish government, wrote a report to the United Nations War Crimes Commission noting the lack of both linguistic and legal competence of the interpreters employed at the trial, and questioning the English framing of the trial: '[W]ould it not be easier if the tribunal itself consisted of officers – lawyers – well acquainted with international law and having a knowledge of the German language?'³⁶

Materials

Documents: Affidavits and transcript

The primary data on which this study of language use is based are documents held in the National Archives in London and fall into two groups.³⁷ First, a subset of the affidavits prepared ahead of the trial, and second, a subset of the utterances recorded in the trial transcript – the 'Transcript of the Official shorthand notes', produced in 1945.³⁸

Between May and August 1945, testimony in the legal form of affidavits was taken from witnesses, who included individuals formerly incarcerated at Belsen, as well as SS personnel and former prisoners held in custody. From a linguistic perspective, these affidavits fall into several groups: English affidavits produced by legal personnel on the basis of testimony given by speakers of languages other than English, in cases where only the English affidavit is retained; affidavits produced on the basis of testimony given in English by L2 speakers of English; and affidavits in English produced on the basis of testimony given in English by L1 speakers of English. In addition, there are also affidavits in languages other than English, which are retained in the archival record alongside their English translation – the latter being the evidence actually submitted to the trial.

The first group of affidavits – those produced in English on the basis of testimony in languages other than English – cannot be used as documentary evidence for the linguistic strategies used by the individuals whose testimony formed the basis of the affidavit. The collection of material for the preparation of affidavits was undertaken by the War Crimes Investigation Team (WCIT) working at Belsen and Celle after the liberation of the

³³TNA, WO235/12/C.

³⁴For interpreters and their translations, see, for example, TNA, WO235/13/55–6, 63, 89, 199, 212; TNA, WO235/16/251, 259.

³⁵TNA, WO235/13/55, 63.

³⁶United Nations Archive, UNWCC/C/151, "The Belsen Trial in Luneburg," a digitization is available at <https://www.legal-tools.org/doc/0177d7/pdf> (accessed September 2, 2025). See further Agata Fijalkowski "Tadeusz Cyprian: Polish War Crimes Prosecutor and Photographer," *Law and Humanities*, vol. 15, no. 1 (2021): pp. 47–83.

³⁷Documents held at the National Archives were consulted in July 2024.

³⁸The transcript constitutes the contents of TNA, WO235/13-18, organized day by day.

former.³⁹ This process was described in some detail by members of the WCIT called as witnesses at the trial.⁴⁰ Former prisoners and SS personnel gave oral testimony about their experiences in the presence of WCIT personnel, but as the WCIT staff only spoke English, these descriptions of events and individuals were translated by various military and civilian interpreters with unverifiable accuracy.⁴¹ Most of the time, one of two former female prisoners acted as interpreters for the WCIT; their competency in a range of European languages was praised and apparently trusted implicitly, yet never actually verified.⁴² The translations of what had been said were then used as notes, on the basis of which an English affidavit was composed by WCIT personnel.⁴³ As Lieutenant Colonel Champion explained during the trial, ‘the actual English wording of these affidavits would have been done by an Englishman’.⁴⁴

An examination of the language use of victims and perpetrators themselves therefore requires an exclusive focus on a relatively small number of documents: affidavits in Polish, French, and German, which have (exceptionally) been retained in the archival record; affidavits based on statements provided in English by L2 speakers of that language; and affidavits based on statements provided in English by L1 speakers. These documents cannot be described as verbatim records of how a person used language to describe their experience. However, while legal personnel may have shaped the structure of the affidavits and omitted some material, it is likely that the phrasing used by a witness speaking in English was replicated in the affidavit, all the more so when that witness switched to another language. In the case of affidavits preserved in languages other than English, the input of the English-speaking legal personnel was limited, and it is likely that the individuals’ choice of language was replicated.

The second set of documentary data examined is the trial transcript, typed up from shorthand made in court. The shorthand, however, does not form part of the archival record. Evidence used in this study consists of testimony given by a prisoner from the Channel Islands who was an L1 speaker of English; evidence given in L2 English by witnesses whose level of competency in English was sufficient for a legal context;⁴⁵ and questions, summaries of the case, and other legal discussions in English by the legal personnel.

A case study: Words for individuals with supervisory roles in the camps

As a case study, this exploration of language use in affidavits and at the trial itself focuses on terms used to refer to individuals in supervisory and authoritative roles at Auschwitz-Birkenau and Belsen. These individuals include SS personnel – both men and women – as well as male and female prisoners in positions of authority and responsibility. There is frequent reference to such individuals throughout the affidavits and the trial, and hence there is a wealth of material to analyze. The distinct roles and responsibilities of individuals within the SS and prisoner population were precisely one of the key issues

³⁹Cramer, “Der erste Bergen-Belsen-Prozess,” p. 114.

⁴⁰TNA, WO235/13/223–9, 281–93.

⁴¹A range of interpreters sign the affidavits: see for example WO235/20/68, 85, 88, 91, 94, 100. The most frequent signatures are those of Charlotte Duschenes and Traute Neumann.

⁴²Cramer, *Belsen Trial 1945*, p. 50.

⁴³TNA, WO235/13/163, 219, 223–9, 262, 288, 289.

⁴⁴TNA, WO235/13/287r.15–16.

⁴⁵Lasker-Wallfisch, *Inherit the Truth*, p. 123.

that the trial failed to address: Cramer has argued that one of the weaknesses of the trial – both in terms of delivering justice and understanding and communicating the horror of the two camps – was a simplification of the structural complexities of the camps' staffing.⁴⁶

The trial, like other war-crimes trials in other jurisdictions,⁴⁷ did not distinguish SS personnel from prisoner functionaries in terms of moral or legal culpability. While places, objects, and the words referring to them might have been accessible to those who had not experienced the camps – and might have even survived liberation – the roles people held in the camp were necessarily inaccessible to those who had not experienced the camp. At the moment of liberation, the roles of prisoner, prisoner functionary, and SS personnel changed to those of patient, displaced person, witness, or prisoner. Words for roles, therefore, are a particular point of difference in experience and identity both within and outside the camp.

Analysis

Throughout the following analysis, linguistic forms are transcribed as they appear in the archival record, reflecting spelling, capitalization, word-spacing, hyphenation, and punctuation.⁴⁸

The pre-trial affidavits

The first group of data considered are affidavits that were originally produced in a language other than English, where the non-English version has been retained. This set consists of affidavits in French (Antoni Aurdriez and Max Markowicz); German (Michal Bialkiewicz, Melamed Chaim, Gertrude Neumann, and Pinkus Filc); and Polish (Maria Synowska, Czesława Szymkowiak, and Rozalja Szparaga).⁴⁹ Some of these affidavits are handwritten, but most are typed.⁵⁰

As an initial example, Max Markowicz's affidavit describes various prisoner roles within the supervisory hierarchy, both by switching from the matrix language of his affidavit – French – to German, by using French lexemes and descriptive phrases. Markowicz identifies an internee as 'lager ALTESTER du camp II',⁵¹ switching to the German noun.⁵² Elsewhere he describes giving something 'au Raport Fuhrer', using the German

⁴⁶Cramer, *Belsen Trial 1945*, pp. 397–402.

⁴⁷"The Jewish Kapo Trials in Israel: Is There a Place for the Law in the Gray Zone?" in Michael J. Bazyler and Frank M. Tuerkheimer, *Forgotten Trials of the Holocaust* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), pp. 195–226; Orna Ben-Naftali and Yogev Tuval, "Punishing International Crimes Committed by the Persecuted: The Kapo Trials in Israel (1950s–1960s)," *Journal of International Criminal Justice*, vol. 4, no. 1 (2006): pp. 128–78; René Wolf, "Judgement in the Grey Zone: The Third Auschwitz (Kapo) Trial in Frankfurt 1968," *Journal of Genocide Research*, vol. 9, no. 4 (2007): pp. 617–35.

⁴⁸References for linguistic forms in footnotes include the file, folio, recto/verso, and line number.

⁴⁹TNA, WO235/20/117, 63, 98, 98; TNA, WO235/21/138; TNA, WO235/20/97, 104/5, 104/7, 104/8–9, respectively.

⁵⁰Handwritten affidavits are those of Aurdriez, Markowicz, Bialkiewicz, Chaim, Synowska, Szymkowiak, and Szparaga. In the case of Markowicz, Bialkiewicz, Chaim, Szymkowiak, Szparaga, and part of Aurdriez's affidavit, someone other than the signatory handwrote the affidavit—perhaps the investigator or an assistant. Synowska's affidavit (TNA, WO235/20/5r-v) may be in the same hand as the signature, and the second, additional part of Aurdriez's affidavit (TNA, WO235/20/117/3v) seems to be the same hand as the signature.

⁵¹TNA, WO235/20/63/2r.3.

⁵²Michael and Doerr, *Nazi-Deutsch*, p. 255.

lexeme *Führer* within a French noun phrase – indicated by the form *au*, which includes the French determiner *le* – alongside either the French *rapport* or the German *Rapport*. Since the word is the same in both languages, and the capitalization is not a firm indicator, it remains unclear whether Markowicz considered ‘Raport’ French or German.⁵³ Later in the affidavit, Markowicz refers to ‘le chef de Block du 17’ (the boss of block 17).⁵⁴ Once again, the grammatical context of the noun phrase is French, as is evident from the determiner and the preposition *de*, and again, there is a blending of French and German: The French noun *chef*, meaning leader or boss, indicates the individual’s status in the hierarchy, but the German lexical item *Block* designates the scope of their responsibility.

Antoni Aurdriezj’s affidavit refers to his own role as a prisoner: ‘Je reconnais avais été “Stubendienst,”’ (I acknowledge having been *Stubendienst*) switching to the German term *Stubendienst*, which refers to an individual with cleaning and housekeeping responsibilities.⁵⁵ The same affidavit also makes use of French descriptions of leadership roles. One individual, Adam Bartchinski, is referred to in a French noun phrase with a gender and number-marked determiner as ‘le kapo Adam’.⁵⁶ Bartchinski is also described as ‘1^{er} serviteur de service’, (the head attendant) and later as belonging to the ‘1^{ère} chambre de service’ (the chief assembly of the functionary service).⁵⁷ In both instances, Bartchinski’s relative status in the hierarchy is expressed by means of the standard French adjective *premier* (1^{er}).

An unknown Polish prisoner is referred to by Aurdriezj as working ‘avec le[s] SS-kapo’.⁵⁸ The handwritten affidavit may read *le* or *les*, referring to either one or several people; the typed English translation made in 1945 reads ‘with the SS Kapo’, suggesting that the English translator read the affidavit as *le*, indicating a single person.⁵⁹ In principle, ‘SS kapo’ might refer to a prisoner/prisoners working closely with the SS, or to a member/members of the SS.

From the context, the latter meaning is more likely: Aurdriezj is describing a prisoner who worked with the ‘SS-kapo’ to collect food coupons from outside the camp. It therefore seems plausible that ‘SS-kapo’ refers to a member/members of the SS. If this reading is correct, *kapo* is used here to refer to anyone in a supervisory or leadership role – whether a prisoner or a member of the SS – rather than to a prisoner somehow associated with the SS. Even if ‘le[s] SS-kapo’ is referring to a prisoner, it is notable that the noun phrase includes the German abbreviation SS as a modifier, suggesting that for Aurdriezj, association with the SS was something that needed to be additionally stated rather than inherent in the term *kapo*.

In the postwar period, *kapo* became an exceptionally emotionally and morally loaded term,⁶⁰ undergoing such semantic change that the noun can now be misused as a slur in

⁵³TNA, WO235/20/63/2r.15.

⁵⁴TNA, WO235/20/63/2r.13.

⁵⁵TNA, WO235/20/117/3r.12.

⁵⁶TNA, WO235/20/117/3r.29-30.

⁵⁷TNA, WO235/20/117/3r. 23, 3v.10–11.

⁵⁸TNA, WO235/20/117/3v.27.

⁵⁹TNA, WO235/20/117/1r.44.

⁶⁰Philip Friedman, *Oshvientshim* [Oświęcim, Auschwitz] (Yiddish) (Buenos Aires: Tsentral-farband fun Poylishe Yidn in Argentine, 1950), p. 60, <https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/collections/yiddish-books/spb-nybc200377/friedman-philip-oshvientshim> (accessed August 8, 2025); Karin Doerr, ‘Words of Fear, Fear of Words: Language Memories of

the twenty-first century.⁶¹ In July 1945, the noun *kapo* may well have already carried some of the associations of moral repugnancy and condemnation that later coalesced to it, or it may have had the same sort of associations as other terms relating to prisoner functionaries. The use of *kapo* might therefore represent a particular condemnation of Bartchinski and others in Audriziej's affidavit, but this cannot be said for certain, especially given that Audriziej describes Bartchinski using other words too. In addition, Audriziej himself admits in his affidavit to beating a Polish prisoner: 'je reconnais avoir battu un Polonais'.⁶² While he is accused in other affidavits of being 'Stubendienst',⁶³ he does not use the term *kapo* to describe himself, which could be a way of presenting a hierarchy of responsibility in which he appears less culpable than others.

Affidavits produced in German naturally include German terms to refer to different supervisory and leadership roles. Some of the terms used in German-language affidavits are those used by the Nazi regime. Filc's affidavit recalls having his teeth knocked out 'vom Lagerältesten' and identifies another prisoner as 'Blockältester im Block 12'.⁶⁴ However, in the same affidavit supervisors are described as 'der Lagerleitung und Bewachung' (those in charge of the camp and on guard).⁶⁵ *Lagerleitung* is a nominal compound comprising the noun *Lager*, and a term for leadership, *Leitung*. This specific compound is seemingly a Nazi-German designation for this group of prisoners, according to existing research into Nazi German, although both compound elements – *lager* and *Leitung* – feature in other Nazi-German terms.⁶⁶ Filc's affidavit also refers to 'seinen Stellvertreter und Männer vom Stubendienst' (his deputy and men from the *Stubendienst*), focusing on the relationship between different prisoners.⁶⁷ Individuals are 'vom Stubendienst' – from the *Stubendienst* class or community – rather than the noun *Stubendienst* being applied to an individual, a formulation that might be read as a way of diminishing personal responsibility and focusing on the system and structures of responsibility instead.

In all three Polish-language affidavits, there is an apparent functional split in the use of Polish and German, depending on an individual's rank in the functionary hierarchy. A Polish woman, Stanisława Starotska, who held the role of supervising a barrack block is referred to by means of the Polish noun *blokowy* (block leader, block person).⁶⁸ When Starotska's later role of compound supervisor – a compound consisting of multiple barracks – is mentioned, a switch to the German *Lagerälteste* takes place.⁶⁹

These three Polish-language affidavits – all from women, and referring to female prisoner functionaries – are the first instance in this analysis where a potentially gendered dimension to language use, including the code-switching (changing from one language

Holocaust Survivors," *Explorations in Anthropology*, vol. 9, no. 1 (2009): pp. 47–57; Ben-Naftali and Tuval, "The Kapo Trials in Israel," p. 169.

⁶¹David Schraub, "The Distinctive Political Status of Dissident Minorities," *American Political Science Review*, vol. 114, no. 4 (2020): pp. 964–66.

⁶²TNA, WO235/117/12/3r.18.

⁶³TNA, WO235/20/98/2r.15.

⁶⁴TNA, WO235/20/97/3r. 28, 3r.10.

⁶⁵TNA, WO235/20/97/3v.12.

⁶⁶Michael and Doerr, *Nazi-Deutsch*, pp. 254–6, 263.

⁶⁷TNA, WO235/20/97/3r.36–7.

⁶⁸TNA, WO235/20/104/5r.11, 7r.12, 8r.11.

⁶⁹Written as "Lager Eltester" in the affidavits of Synowksa and Szymkowiak, and as "lager-bl{...}test{...}ter" in that of Szparaga. TNA, WO235/20/104/5r.20, 7v.2, 8v.20.

to another), is apparent: In Szparaga's affidavit, one woman is referred to as a 'raport-führerin', a word marked with German feminine morphology,⁷⁰ but Starotska's roles are both referred to with terms – both Polish and German – that can be used about men (and by men) as well. As we shall see shortly, English-language affidavits likewise contain gendered terms like policewoman and the German *Aufseherin*. Note too that the WCIT personnel and military interpreters were all men, but the civilian interpreters who signed the affidavits were all women; at the trial, all legal personnel and interpreters were men, but many witnesses were women. The trial itself was an overtly masculine context, but the pre-trial process of taking testimony was not necessarily the case. Further research is needed to differentiate language use about men and women, and by men and women – particularly the seemingly limited extent of gendered language to describe female perpetrators by female former prisoners in comparison to the extensive use of female-specific terms for female perpetrators by male lawyers at the trial.⁷¹

A minority of affidavits were given in English by L1 speakers of languages other than English. The witnesses were L2 speakers of English, and their spoken or written English was evidently judged by themselves, by the officers of WCIT, and perhaps by any civilian or military interpreters present to be sufficient for a legal affidavit. These individuals were Kathreen Neiger (an L1 speaker of German); Eva Krystyka Stojowska (an L1 speaker of Polish); and Zdenek Weisner (an L1 speaker of Czech).⁷²

Stojowska's affidavits include English calques for some German nominal compounds. A calque is a morpheme-by-morpheme translation – of a word into another language. As a hypothetical example, the Nazi political term *Auslappung* might be translated as 'spreading', but a calque of this noun would be 'out-overlapping' or 'out-lapping', as in these terms, the two components of *Auslappung* – the prefix *aus-* and the deverbal noun *-lappung* are translated separately. As this hypothetical example shows, calques can result in the creation of new lexical items that would not otherwise be used, and this is true of the calque in Stojowska's affidavits. The term 'block leader' is a calque for the Nazi-German compound *Blockälteste*,⁷³ and appears in her affidavits multiple times to refer to this class of prisoners, to which Stojowska herself belonged: 'I asked some of the other Block-leaders'; 'they, these other Block-leaders'; 'I was one blockleader'.⁷⁴ English descriptions or circumlocutions in her affidavit include an identification of one woman as 'secretary of block 18' and another as 'a camp policewoman'.⁷⁵ Both these roles could have been described with a German noun, but the affidavit describes each using everyday English designation for the professions of secretary and policewoman.

Three separate affidavits were signed by Neiger on dates in May and June 1945. The first includes the comment, 'I am well acquainted with English'.⁷⁶ In Neiger's three

⁷⁰TNA, WO235/20/104/8v.3.

⁷¹For recent perspectives on language and gender in the context of the Holocaust, see, for instance, "Words for Female and Effeminate Bodies," in Hannah Pollin-Galay, *Occupied Words: What the Holocaust Did to Yiddish* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2024), pp. 143–64; Laura Miñano Mañero, "Gendering the Language of Genocide: Linguistic Violence Against Women in Nazi Concentration Camps," *Journal of Language Aggression and Conflict* (2024); Sharon B. Oster, "The Female *Muselmann* in Nazi Concentration Camp Discourse," *The Journal of Holocaust Research*, vol. 34, no. 3 (2020): pp. 198–219.

⁷²TNA, WO235/20/66, 84, 93, respectively.

⁷³Michael and Doerr, *Nazi-Deutsch*, p. 101.

⁷⁴TNA, WO235/20/84/1r.30, 1r.31–2, 4r.17, respectively.

⁷⁵TNA, WO235/20/84/1r.16, 1r.21.

⁷⁶TNA, WO235/20/66/2r.31.

affidavits, English circumlocutions are used to describe what particular individuals did. The defendant Volkenrath is described as 'SS. woman ELIZABETH VOLKENRATH';⁷⁷ the same phrasing that focuses on the SS affiliation is used to describe 'another SS woman HERTA EHLERT';⁷⁸ Irma Grese is described as 'one of the chief S.S women in the camp'.⁷⁹ Neiger's affidavit also describes Gertrud Fiest's role as 'when she was on "Appelle" duty', focusing on the activity rather than the rank of the woman.⁸⁰ There are no instances of code-switching from English to German when designating roles in any of Neiger's affidavits; instead, hierarchy between individual women and their affiliation with the SS is key.⁸¹

Finally, one witness whose pre-trial affidavit was produced in English was an L1 speaker of English. Harold Osmond Le Druillenc was born on Jersey and completed his teacher training in Exeter.⁸² Le Druillenc's affidavit uses a range of common English terms to refer to individuals working within a camp or prison setting, rather than German-language ranks or designations specific to the Nazi system. The affidavit includes the noun phrase 'the camp staff' to refer to a mix of SS personnel and prisoners with supervisory responsibilities, and elsewhere to 'guards and officials'.⁸³ 'Guard' is the favored term throughout Le Druillenc's affidavit to refer to those likely to be charged: '[N]or can I identify any of the guards who beat or killed internees'.⁸⁴ The SS are specifically designated as 'the German SS personnel-guards and others'.⁸⁵

Overall, affidavits produced before the trial evidence a diverse range of linguistic strategies used to refer to roles in the supervisory hierarchy: switching to Nazi German; embedding some German within a phrase in the matrix (main) language; calquing a Nazi-German term into the matrix language; describing the role using familiar nouns in the matrix language, like *chef* or 'guard' or 'secretary'; giving a longer paraphrase or description of what the role entailed, how one individual related to another, or what activity they did. Several affidavits use the modifier 'SS' to make a particular point about an individual's responsibility; others focus on the system more than the individual's role within it.

The trial: The witnesses

The focus of this section is on an L1 English witness and a witness for whom English was an L2. Le Druillenc's spoken testimony uses a variety of terms for prisoners with some responsibility or leadership role. For example, describing food at the camp, he related: 'They used to have some soup apparently sent to the block at midday and used to distribute it to the other officers, namely Kapos, vorarbeiters and ordsnungsmanner, and also to anyone who had a few cigarettes to exchange'.⁸⁶ Here, Le Druillenc first groups all prisoners with leadership status together using the English noun 'officer', and then lists other

⁷⁷TNA, WO235/20/66/2r.2.

⁷⁸TNA, WO/235/20/66/2r. 14.

⁷⁹TNA, WO235/20/66/4r.9–10.

⁸⁰TNA, WO235/20/66/2r.21.

⁸¹TNA, WO235/20/66.

⁸²TNA, WO235/24/20(a).

⁸³TNA, WO235/24/20(a)r.29, 20(a)r.47.

⁸⁴TNA, WO235/24/20(a)r.46.

⁸⁵TNA, WO235/24/20(a)r.26.

⁸⁶TNA, WO235/13/122r.25–37.

designations, including various code-switched German-language terms, such as *Vorarbeiter*, as well as the multilingual term *kapo*. In response to a question by the prosecutor – ‘The blockaltesters, what was their attitude?’⁸⁷ – Le Druillenc does not use the German term *Blockälteste* in his answer, nor even an English calque of the German nominal compound like ‘block leader’. Under cross-examination, Le Druillenc again uses the English noun ‘guards’ to describe the class of prisoner functionaries collectively, explaining: ‘Most of the guards, or so-called guards anyway, who were in charge of the huts were not S.S. at all, but under the orders of the S.S. were blockaltesters, Kapos, vorarbeiters and the like’.⁸⁸ ‘Guards’ is once again used as the umbrella term.

The German designation ‘*vorarbeiters*’ is only heard during the trial in Le Druillenc’s spoken evidence in the two instances detailed above. *Vorarbeiter* is the standard German word for a foreman or overseer, and is not specific to the Nazi era. Le Druillenc seems to have spoken no German himself, making repeated reference throughout his testimony in court as to how important being near French-speaking prisoners was to him, and he presumably encountered all the terms he used in court during his time in Nazi custody – official and unofficial alike. This fact becomes more remarkable when compared with the predominant use of official Nazi-German terminology by legal personnel as outlined below.⁸⁹

Anita Lasker took the witness stand on day thirteen, giving her evidence in English.⁹⁰ In a contemporary letter, Lasker reflected how her English-language competency and her appearance influenced how her evidence was received at the trial.⁹¹ At the trial, Lasker uses a number of English phrases to describe the role of various functionaries – even when German terminology could have been used instead. For example, Lasker describes Herta Ehlert, one of the defendants, as follows: ‘She was second commander. She used to work together with Volkenrath in Belsen camp’.⁹² ‘Second commander’ is a description of Ehlert’s position, qualified further by ‘worked together with’. Ehlert is further described by Lasker: ‘She was the right hand of Volkenrath’, using the English idiom ‘to be someone’s right hand’ to describe the hierarchical but close relationship between the two women.⁹³

The trial: The legal personnel

At the beginning of the trial, the prosecuting officer, Colonel Backhouse, provided a quasi-glossary to help the court refer to employees of the Nazi state and prisoners with positions of responsibility and leadership. Backhouse clarified for the court:

You will find that there are the S. S. men in charge of the kitchens, in charge of the blocks, in charge of the working parties, in charge of the roll-calls, and so on, generally known as the

⁸⁷WO235/13/122r.34. In the transcript, German terms are generally typed without capitalization or umlauts, and with English -s rather than German -en for the plural, and with the final -e of the singular of *Blockälteste* and *Lagerälteste* rendered as -er in line with English spelling conventions (for example, tester or wrestler). This suggests that the shorthand writers in court and/or the stenographers who typed up the shorthand did not have much or any knowledge of German. There is internal consistency in these deviations from German spelling, however, so it may have been that at least some legal personnel occasionally pronounced these terms closer to standard German than the transcript records.

⁸⁸TNA, WO235/13/128r.19–21.

⁸⁹TNA, WO235/13/120, 123.

⁹⁰TNA, WO235/14/47–51.

⁹¹Lasker-Wallfisch, *Inherit the Truth*, p. 128.

⁹²TNA, WO235/14/49r.24–6.

⁹³TNA, WO235/14/49r.30.

lager-fuhrer, or the block-fuhrer, or the kommando-fuhrer. Wherever you find the word “fuhrer” you may take it is the S. S. men in charge. In addition to that there were appointed virtually prefects amongst the internees ... they, you will find, were generally made the prefects or lager-fuhrers, one to each block, one to each room, and, as a rule, one to each kommando.⁹⁴

Notable in Backhouse’s statement is the rigid linguistic distinction between SS personnel and prisoner functionaries, although, as evidence of terms like ‘S.S. kapo’ has shown, such a rigid linguistic distinction did not necessarily hold true for the former prisoners themselves.

German nominal compounds, including *Blockälteste*, *Blockführer*, *Kommandoführer*, *Lagerälteste*, and *Lagerführer*, are used repeatedly throughout the trial by British personnel. On day seven, Backhouse himself asks Sophia Litwinka: ‘Do you recognise the lager-fuhrer here?’ to refer to one of the accused who held such a position at Belsen.⁹⁵ Captain Fielden asked: ‘Could an SS man on the administrative staff also act as a blockfuhrer?’ while Captain Neave asked Ignatz Schlomowicz on day 35, ‘Had you ever been a block-altester before?’⁹⁶

Only in a minority of cases are such nominal compounds accompanied by English explanations of their meaning or by English calques translating each element of the compound into English – something that may indicate how Backhouse’s attempt to define the terms for the court on the first day was assumed to be sufficient preamble by the defending and prosecuting officers. Captain Munro, for instance, asked Ada Bimko: ‘Would the S.S. be in charge of those parades, or blockaltesters or supervisor be in charge?’ glossing the element *-älteste* or perhaps the whole noun *Blockälteste* as ‘supervisor’.⁹⁷ Likewise, Major Cranfield asked Abraham Glinowieski: ‘Is it correct that all of them, S.S. personnel, kapos, blockaltesters, block leaders, all assisted in getting the prisoners formed up on parade?’ He used both the German noun *Blockälteste* and an immediate English calque of that term, ‘block leaders’, to refer to some prisoner functionaries, alongside a mix of code-switched and English designations.⁹⁸ Cranfield also uses the noun *kapo*; given the already discussed afterlife of this noun, this is likely an example in which the associations the word carried for the British lawyer (if any) differed dramatically from those it conveyed to the witness.

German nouns are also modified by the English possessive -’s, for example when Backhouse asks Helen Hammermasch: ‘Do you remember any incident in the block altester’s room?’ or when Munro asks Esther Wolgruch, ‘Is it not the case that the dog escaped from the aufseherin’s control?’⁹⁹ In both examples, an English noun phrase is modified by a German noun, like *Aufseherin*, which is, in turn, marked by the possessive -’s, as is required of any noun in this syntactic position in an English noun phrase. What is most notable here is that the nouns *Aufseherin* and *Blockälteste* are treated morphosyntactically as an English noun would be. Hence, it might be argued that, for some British

⁹⁴TNA, WO235/13/37r.3–21.

⁹⁵TNA, WO235/13/168r.20.

⁹⁶TNA, WO235/14/298r.27; WO235/16/191r. 39.

⁹⁷TNA, WO235/13/159r.44–5.

⁹⁸TNA, WO235/13/260r.15–16.

⁹⁹TNA, WO235/13/211r.22; TNA, WO235/14/62r.1.

personnel at least, these German terms had already been borrowed into the English lexicon.¹⁰⁰

The use of German nominal compounds in the spoken English of the British legal military personnel undergoes adaptation and extension from that seen in Nazi German, as well as that evidenced in affidavits and witness testimony in court. Mixing English and German in a single nominal compound is one such adaptation. Lieutenant Jedrzejowicz asked: 'Did you ever see for yourself or hear how the Germans chose a prisoner and appointed him as a blockaltester or camp altester?' combining the English noun 'camp' with the German compound element *-älteste*¹⁰¹ to form an entirely novel English-German compound not used in any of the English-language witness testimonies at the trial, nor in any of the English affidavits.

One such adaptation is the use of the compound element *-älteste* as a standalone noun – *Älteste* – as a designation for any prisoners with responsibility and leadership. Cranfield asked: 'Were the prisoners got on the parade by the altesters and the kapos?'¹⁰² using the German noun to refer generically to a group of prisoners, which Cranfield imagined as being distinct from a further group referred to as *kapos*. Later in the trial, Cranfield also asked: 'In each block compared with the number of internees were there very few persons such as aufseherins and altesters to control the internees?'¹⁰³

As a free-standing German noun, *Älteste* may be translated as 'leader' or 'elder', but the use by Cranfield is rather more specific, as it refers to a prisoner with leadership and supervisory responsibilities, and can be used to designate the collective class of such prisoners. This use of *Älteste* is not attested in the affidavits and therefore represents an extrapolation of the second element of noun – noun compounds, such as *Lagerälteste*. In Cranfield's coordination 'aufseherins and altesters', the contrast is presumably between female SS personnel, referred to using *Aufseherin*,¹⁰⁴ and prisoners in a supervisory capacity.

A different manipulation of a German noun – noun compound is evident when Backhouse asked Glinowieski: 'Can you be more precise as to what lager altester he was?'¹⁰⁵ The question word 'what' does not target the whole nominal compound *Lagerälteste*, but rather the compound element *Lager*. In other words, the question posed is not 'What type of camp leader was he?' but rather 'Of which camp compound was he the leader?' Indeed, this was how Glinowieski responded – with a camp number. Such a targeting of the compound element *Lager*- without the element *-älteste* is not just further evidence of the use of *Älteste* as a standalone noun to mean any prisoner with leadership or supervisory responsibilities – something not evidenced in witness statements and in the affidavits examined. It may also serve as evidence that, in Backhouse's English usage, *Lager* and

¹⁰⁰Despite it being impossible to reconstruct exactly how the legal personnel rendered German terms (for example, whether plurals were produced with English or German morphology), it seems highly likely that both Backhouse and Munro added the possessive *-s*, rather than using the German genitive case, not least because English and German have a different word order when it comes to marking possession; in English the possessor comes first, but in German the possessor comes second. Compare "the woman's house" to *Das Haus der Frau*.

¹⁰¹TNA, WO235/13/160r.10.

¹⁰²TNA, WO235/13/260r.13.

¹⁰³TNA, WO235/14/44r.14–15.

¹⁰⁴Michael and Doerr, *Nazi-Deutsch*, p. 78.

¹⁰⁵TNA, WO235/13/264r.37.

Älteste had already been borrowed as ‘English’ nouns, allowing the syntactic process of wh-extraction to target a single element of a noun – noun compound.

Code-switching from English to German to allow the stand-alone use of the compound element *-älteste* – either a superordinate term for all classes of prisoners with supervisory responsibilities or as a generic term for any prisoner with such responsibilities – is a linguistic practice not observed in the affidavits and witness statements of victims. At the same time, it represents an innovation in English, creating new linguistic designations for prisoners that were not part of the Nazi-German lexicon.

Elsewhere, British military personnel used German nominal compounds to refer to very broad classes of individuals. Corbally asked Glinowieski: ‘Will you tell the court what exactly happened when you made a complaint against the guards and lager ältesters in the camp, that is after the British liberated the camp?’ This question seemingly groups perpetrators into the SS (referred to with the English noun ‘guard’), and prisoners in supervisory roles (referred to with the code-switched German noun *Lagerälteste*).¹⁰⁶ This second class of perpetrators would seem to include all and any prisoners in supervisory roles: The complaint that Corbally is considering appears to be a general accusation against any perpetrator among the prisoner population, rather than against specific individuals who had supervisory responsibilities over multiple barrack blocks or another very large group of prisoners. Such individuals might well have been referred to in German as *Lagerälteste*. Hence the whole class of prisoners with supervisory roles are designated with a German compound, in contrast to the standalone use of *-älteste* just discussed. It should be noted that here, Corbally seems to have made a linguistic distinction between SS personnel and prisoners, insofar as a standard English noun – ‘guard’ – is used for the SS, but code-switching to German is used for the prisoners. This distinction between SS and prisoner functionaries might reflect a different level of familiarity and understanding of these two groups – the SS being the more familiar group, while prisoners with supervisory roles were less familiar and hence referred to with a non-English term.

Less frequently than in the affidavits and spoken testimony of victims, British personnel occasionally used English descriptive phrases or circumlocutory expressions to convey an individual’s role. For example, when examining Helene Klein, Backhouse asked: ‘Who was the night guard of that block?’¹⁰⁷ Here, there may be the same distinction between SS personnel – understood as part of relatively familiar military units and referred to using standard English terms – and prisoner functionaries, who are referred to with German terms, as noted above. ‘Night guard’, however, seems to be a straightforward designation for a person responsible for prisoners overnight.

Discussion

By focusing on the way in which individuals with positions of power in the camps – whether SS personnel or prisoners with responsibilities over groups of other prisoners – were referred to by former prisoners and by British personnel, this study has shown that British military personnel innovated their own terms and designations during the

¹⁰⁶TNA, WO235/13/263r.17–19.

¹⁰⁷TNA, WO235/14/22r.7.

trial, and made frequent use of code-switching from English to German, including using terms belonging to the Nazi-German lexicon.

The differences in how military personnel and those who experienced Belsen and Auschwitz refer to aspects of the Holocaust can be read both as a successful innovation of language to describe unprecedented circumstances and as a substantive failure of empathy and justice. On the one hand, British military personnel use English in an adaptive way as they confront the Holocaust in English, open to code-switching and potentially borrowing lexical items from German. Distinctions between prisoners on the basis of their exact roles were not pressing at the trial; the complexities of camp organization and hierarchies were simplified and never properly investigated.¹⁰⁸

In this respect, the adaptive uses of code-switched German compound elements to refer to whole classes of prisoners and SS personnel successfully reflect the specifically British conceptualization of individuals and their roles with linguistic innovation. For some British-English speakers at the trial, there was some evidence to support a linguistic distinction between SS personnel and prisoners, as English nouns like ‘guards’ are used for the former, and code-switched German terms for the latter. This differentiation is evidence of distinct British attitudes to both groups, discussed further below, and also represents an innovative linguistic strategy for conveying the British understanding of how prisoners were supervised.

On the other hand, the language strategies of victims – including those who used English to recount their experiences – are not reflected in the way English was used by British military personnel. British personnel also made less use of longer English descriptions to relate an individual’s role or position in the camp, compared to former prisoners on the witness stand. Code-switching into French or Polish to include terms like *blokowy* or *chef* is not one of the linguistic strategies used by the British personnel at the trial, which is perhaps understandable in the case of Polish-language terms in particular. There are no examples of a British lawyer using an unofficial term shared with those who experienced Bergen and Auschwitz, even German terms like *Vorarbeiter*, other than the ubiquitous noun *kapo*.

As indicated above, there is some evidence for a possible distinction made between SS personnel, who are referred to using familiar English nouns like ‘guard’, and prisoners with supervisory roles, who are referred to by German terms, either fully German noun – noun compounds or adaptations thereof. Such a distinction may indicate the othering of prisoners with supervisory roles, reflecting the perceived – and real – challenge of classifying prisoner functionaries as perpetrators or victims, as well as the outsiders’ inability to understand ‘choiceless choices’ made by such individuals.¹⁰⁹ At the same time as this possible othering, prisoner functionaries are also referred to by the British with a predefined set of Nazi-German terms. At face value, using such terms might be seen as judging prisoner functionaries from the same standpoint as the Nazis, but, in fact, this British usage does not replicate Nazi terminology. Nazi German was adapted at the trial – both through the coining of the generic term *Älteste* and the use of various German nominal compounds to refer to broader sets of

¹⁰⁸Cramer, *Belsen Trial 1945*, p. 402.

¹⁰⁹Lawrence L. Langer, “The Dilemma of Choice in the Death Camps,” *Centerpoint: A Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, vol. 4, no. 1 (1980): pp. 53–9.

individuals than in the camp. This use of a 'sort-of' Nazi German is both indicative and reflective of the lack of understanding of the supervisory hierarchy in the camp, and means that prisoner functionaries are linguistically in a different sort of 'gray zone', designated and viewed from neither the perspective of the Nazis nor that of other prisoners. Individual circumstances, agency, and decision-making among prisoner functionaries are reduced to a set of evidently poorly understood and widely adapted Nazi-German terms, and the dual status of prisoner functionaries as victims and perpetrators is still left unaddressed.

Reflections and conclusions

Language strategies, therefore, offer a new perspective on responses to prisoner functionaries. Language hierarchies between Nazi German and English, and the way terms for prisoner functionaries are particularly adapted by the British, may speak to the way prisoner functionaries were understood and classified as perpetrators in 1945. Hence, language offers a new way of exploring how other judicial systems considered prisoner functionaries as perpetrators.¹¹⁰

Language usage before and during the Belsen trial also highlights the diversity of ways individuals experienced various aspects of the camps, underscoring the value of an individual's voice. Even within the relatively formulaic medium of affidavits and courtroom answers, individuals use distinct phrases and patterns of code-switching, reflecting not only the variety of their own language histories and exposure to different languages, but also the variety of their prewar lives and their experiences of persecution and incarceration that led to Belsen in April 1945.

There is, for example, considerable diversity in how former prisoners refer to perpetrators. In the case of prisoner functionaries, this diversity may allow for alternative classifications of individuals and groups as victims and perpetrators.¹¹¹ Individuals assess different perpetrators in different ways. For some, like Synowksa and Markowicz, control and responsibility are significant, as an individual's ranking in the functionary hierarchy is a point of linguistic differentiation. For others, like Lasker, interpersonal relationships between known and feared perpetrators are at the forefront of a description, while for Aurdzisiej, a more general association with the SS is important. Shared trauma is also an individual experience, and individuals respond in distinct ways, as evident in language use as in other aspects of life.

The trauma experienced by those held prisoner at Belsen was not shared by the British personnel who first came to liberate them and alleviate their suffering, and later to bring justice. These differences are reflected in language use, and, in turn, language offers a fresh perspective on the gulf of understanding and comprehension between victims

¹¹⁰Laura Jockusch and Gabriel N. Finder, (eds.), *Jewish Honor Courts: Revenge, Retribution, and Reconciliation in Europe and Israel after the Holocaust* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2015); Wolf, "Judgement in the Grey Zone"; Bazyler and Tuerkheimer, "The Jewish Kapo Trials"; Ben-Naftali and Tuval, "The Kapo Trials in Israel"; Dan Porat, *Bitter Reckoning: Israel Tries Holocaust Survivors as Nazi Collaborators* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019); Adam Brown, *Judging "Privileged" Jews: Holocaust Ethics, Representation, and the "Grey Zone"* (New York: Berghahn, 2013); Jonathan Druker, "Ethical Grey Zones: On Coercion and Complicity in the Concentration Camp and Beyond," in Simone Gigliotti and Hilary Earl, (eds.), *A Companion to the Holocaust* (Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell, 2020): pp. 487–501.

¹¹¹See for instance Brown, *Judging*; Sari J. Siegel, "The Coercion-Resistance Spectrum: Analyzing Prisoner-Functionary Behaviour in Nazi Camps," *Journal of Genocide Research*, vol. 23, no. 1 (2020): pp. 17–36.

and observers, survivors and later generations. The evidence presented here indicates that, while witnesses – by contributing affidavits and giving evidence in court – considered their experiences representable and understandable, this judgment or expectation was not fully borne out. The British understanding of events assumed forms and words of their own, distinct from that of the victims. The incomplete or inadequate comprehension of the British, reflected by divergent language use, once again underscores the special position of victims and survivors relative to outsiders and later generations.

Finally, and of greatest concern, an examination of language use at the trial demonstrates how vulnerable accounts of the Holocaust – in this case, those of witnesses to Belsen – are to distortion, with respect to the classification of perpetrators, in the adoption of Nazi-German concepts and terms, and in the redefinition of some of these terms. Distortion in 1945 may have arisen for understandable reasons, such as the prioritization of justice, or because historical oversight was still lacking. Distortion nonetheless arose months after the liberation, in a context where large numbers of living witnesses were willing to testify. Far from being a cause for resignation in the face of distortion and ignorance, the example of the Belsen trial offers a lesson in the superficially obvious, but evidently neglected, need to pay careful attention: to ‘slow down’, to language, and to testimony.¹¹²

Acknowledgements

The author would like to express gratitude to staff at the National Archives, Kew, for making research visits there so straightforward. The author acknowledges the hard work of their students Jaxon Blakeman, Luis Ordonez, and Annabel Walker for their hard work collecting examples of code-switching in late-twentieth century Holocaust testimonies as part of their research placements, which encouraged the continuation of the research that led to this article. The author also thanks Isabel Wollaston for (perhaps unwittingly) inspiring the author’s original interest in language in post-Holocaust contexts.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Note on contributor

Roxanne Taylor is a lecturer in English at the University of Huddersfield where she teaches across Humanities programs. She sometimes works in collaboration with Holocaust Centre North, based in Huddersfield. Roxanne’s background is in Linguistics, and her research covers language use at war-crimes trials and in early testimonies, with a particular focus on contact between languages.

ORCID

Roxanne Taylor  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3740-9278>

¹¹²Henry Hank Greenspan, foreword to Kaplan et al, *Reassessing Survivors’ Voices*, p. xi.