

Summary Judgement at Dachau: Exploiting the Massacre of SS Guards by Allied
Liberating Troops at Dachau

by

Stephen C. Krzeminski

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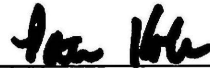
Liberating Troops at Dachau

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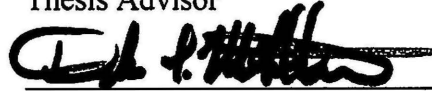
Stephen C. Krzeminski

This thesis was prepared under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor, Dr. Patricia Kollander, Department of History, and has been approved by all members of the supervisory committee. It was submitted to the faculty of the Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters and was accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

SUPERVISORY COMMITTEE:



Patricia Kollander, Ph.D.
Thesis Advisor



Douglas McGetchin, Ph.D.



Evan Bennett, Ph.D.



Ben Lowe, Ph.D.
Chair, Department of History



Michael J. Horswell, Ph.D.
Dean, Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts
and Letters



Khaled Sobhan, Ph.D.
Interim Dean, Graduate College

April 9, 2019

Date

Abstract

Author: Stephen C. Krzeminski

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This research analyzes how American soldiers reacted to the Dachau concentration camp, and offers statistics that counter the arguments made by Holocaust deniers and revisionists. It compares how the Soviets, British, and Americans conducted themselves as they freed other prisoners, and discusses why every camp liberation was dissimilar. Evidence gathered from the liberators who executed the SS disproves the argument that they were premediated killers and emphasizes how unique Dachau's conditions were on the day of liberation, when compared to other concentration camps. It also directly refutes many arguments made by Holocaust deniers, and addresses their erroneous narratives, statistics, and conclusions regarding the Dachau liberation, and the Holocaust in general.

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I wish to express sincere gratitude to my thesis adviser, Dr. Patricia Kollander, whose guidance through years of research and several revisions made this thesis possible, and to my other committee members, Drs. Douglas McGetchin and Evan Bennett, who devoted so much of their free time to read and direct my work. I am also grateful to my father, whose patience, encouragement, and love helped me more than any archive's source collection.

Dedication

This manuscript is dedicated to the Holocaust's liberators, who sacrificed their youth to fight fascism and end so much suffering; may their stories forever be told. And to my mother, whose love and guidance has continued since God called her to heaven.

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Chapter 1: Introduction, Current Literature, and Historical Debate—
“the liberation of one factory of death resembled the liberation of another . . .”

On the morning of April 29, 1945, with the end of Europe’s Second World War less than ten days away, Allied forces discovered a concentration camp in the German town of Dachau. Elements of the US Seventh Army’s 42nd Infantry Division, 45th Infantry Division, and 20th Armored Division converged on the town from three separate directions. Their men were unaware of what they were about to uncover, even though American units had liberated several camps during the previous two weeks. Dachau was a work camp, not an extermination camp, but thousands of men ultimately perished because of the harsh conditions set in place by the Nazis. It was also infamous for the terrible medical experiments Nazi scientists conducted on the prisoners. At the time of liberation, 31,342 people were living within the compound’s walls, in an area originally constructed for less than 5,000 inhabitants.¹ As the American armies pushed the German defensive lines further inward, the orchestrators of the concentration camps attempted to erase any existence of their prisoners; fleeing guards killed thousands and those unscathed by weapons were often deathly ill with typhus, left to their fate by the defeated Germans. While some died after liberation, their health too far gone, those who remained strong and persevered until liberation welcomed the conquering Americans.

¹ Jack Hallowell, *Eager for Duty: History of the 157th Infantry Regiment (Rifle)* (Baton Rouge, LA: Army & Navy Publishing Company, 1946), 167.

Some liberators briefly lost their composure at Dachau and American soldiers executed seventeen SS prisoners of war. The sight of SS troopers, whom the Americans assumed were ultimately responsible for every terrible thing they had seen, overwhelmed several of the young Americans. Just days before, the GIs discovered dozens of German civilians who had been tortured and murdered by the SS for trying to surrender to an American unit. During the morning of the liberation, the GIs had been forced to follow rail-lines that contained tens-of-thousands of recently murdered civilians. Some soldiers were so terribly shaken that they had to be relieved of their weapons, but some did not have their weapons taken in time. An American lieutenant from Massachusetts, Bill Walsh, who earlier that day had been temporarily relieved of command after succumbing to his hysteria and anger, ordered riflemen and a machine-gun squad to shoot the disorderly SS prisoners. For a period of less than ten seconds, Lieutenant Colonel Felix Sparks of the 45th Infantry Division, the highest-ranking officer inside Dachau that morning, lost control of the liberation. He immediately rushed to the coal yard where the Germans were being executed, physically kicked the GIs away from their weapons, ordered a cease fire, and had the wounded SS treated for their fresh injuries. These killings cast a dark cloud over what was supposed to be a triumphant liberation and the freeing of tens-of-thousands of tortured men.

Though Dachau was the only camp where Americans executed many surrendered Germans, historians have not examined why this was, and the few major works that have discussed the liberation have omitted the executions or glossed over them. American units liberated dozens of camps, each in a different, yet certainly horrific, state. Why then, did other liberators not react similarly to those who entered

Dachau? This thesis will refute the idea that American soldiers purposely set out to cause pain and suffering to surrendered and defenseless prisoners, and while executions happened at Dachau, they have been vastly exaggerated. It will show that Dachau was unique in its structure, conditions, and number of remaining German personnel, which was why no other American liberation resulted in summary executions.

Dachau was not the only liberation to be underexplored. Curiously, historians almost totally ignored the reactions of Soviet liberators, whose people suffered more at the hands of the Germans than any of their wartime allies. The dearth of works on these men may have had something to do with the fact that their government forbid Soviet soldiers from carrying diaries, and the Communists' postwar Government restricted historical research. People were hence forced to rely on accounts written by the few soldiers who defied orders and the war correspondents tasked with turning the atrocities into political statements. Russian reporters were eager to spin the tragedy in their country's favor, rather than circulate factual or sympathetic news. After the war, as the East and West drew dividing lines, Russian soldiers and historians could not express their true feelings or publish accurate narratives of the Holocaust. Sympathetic histories that pitied the dead, rather than celebrate the Red Army, may have been viewed as weak-minded or Russo-phobic, and were not made. "People were afraid to express their true feelings and thoughts," wrote one Russian historian.² The Soviet Union censored the Holocaust, or made it about Communist anti-Fascist victims rather than Jews, because an overwhelming number of victims had been persecuted for their politics or

² Anita Kondoyanidi, "The Liberating Experience: War Correspondents, Red Army Soldiers, and the Nazi Extermination Camps," *The Russian Review* 69 (2010): 440.

faith, a practice often committed in Russian Gulags. "Once they had won their freedom, the Russian people forgot the persecution of Jews as a bad dream [and] the growth of Soviet anti-Semitism became a bitter revelation."³ When authorities approved occasional Holocaust information for distribution, the Soviet government forced publishers to print it in Yiddish, to limit the potential audience to Jewish readers.⁴ In the late 1950s, one Russian war correspondent-turned historian, Il'ia Erenburg, tried publishing "a collection of documents, witness testimonies, and letters about crimes committed by the Nazis against the Soviet Jews," but the Soviet government disallowed it.⁵ After the Soviet Union collapsed, however, he was able to publish a three-volume memoir that detailed his liberating stories.

As historian Arkadi Zeltser has observed, "Soviets assumed they [Holocaust victims] were likely legitimate prisoners who may have hated the Red Army. Soviets felt little initial sympathy, and thought that if Germans killed Germans, all the better."⁶ Zeltser argued that Soviets might have also lacked consideration because the information released by the government was intended to be an example of what happened to those who preferred non-communist regimes. "The ill will that some civilians initially exhibited toward the Red Army in their hopes that the Germans would be a preferable alternative to the Bolsheviks resulted in a certain *schadenfreude*

³ Il'ia Erenburg, *Liudi, Gody, Zhizn': Vospominaniia v trekh Knigakh 2* (Moscow: Raduga Publishers, 1990), 352.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Arkadi Zeltser, "Differing Views among Red Army Personnel about the Nazi Mass Murder of Jews," *Kritika: Explorations In Russian & Eurasian History* 15 (2014): 566.

[malicious joy]” for Russian soldiers.⁷ Zeltser has also emphasized, “the majority of [Soviet] servicemen were former peasants or city-dwellers who had not received an extensive education and rarely kept diaries.”⁸ This left only the propagandistic stories, which remained the only Soviet coverage of the camps for several decades.

The Soviet government may have also denied sympathetic publications because they were worried about the Nazi victims who remained in the Soviet Union, who may have felt entitled to welfare compensation. Historian Mark Edele has contended that after the war, Russian citizens and politicians publicly discriminated against the Third Reich’s prisoners, civilian and military alike. Stalin’s regime denied benefits to Red Army soldiers who had been imprisoned, and likewise did not allow historians to create a sympathetic narrative for the civilian victims.⁹ “A culture which worshipped the lean, muscular body of the athlete and the feats of Socialist supermen,” Edele insisted, “did not make the trauma of physical mutilation easy to bear.”¹⁰ It was better for society, the Soviets concluded, to keep the Third Reich’s emaciated victims out of site and out of mind. Government censorship of the tragedy, therefore, intended to deny victims or Jews any platform for public sympathy, and avoid any hypocrisy in the postwar recognition of former-prisoners.

Edele has also pointed out that the Soviet government promised all Russian veterans benefits after the war, but subsequently denied aid once the soldiers were

⁷ Ibid, 568.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Mark Edele, *Soviet Veterans of the Second World War: A Popular Movement in an Authoritarian Society, 1941-1991* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 175.

¹⁰ Ibid, 73.

disarmed. With over twenty-five million servicemen returning home, tens-of-millions of Soviet civilians displaced, and the demand for labor in short supply, people turned to the government for assistance it could not provide. Acknowledging Holocaust victims as such would have added millions of people to the ranks of those who petitioned Stalin's government. Any special status offered to Jews, East-Germans, or other reluctant Soviets may have given them a place in the workforce or syphoned aid away from the disgruntled veterans. Edele has concluded that the Soviet "administrative apparatus was too dysfunctional, understaffed, and overburdened to deliver welfare to millions."¹¹ Stalin could not assist his own veterans (and prisoners of war, who were suspected of treason), let alone Holocaust victims.

After communism and the Soviet Union collapsed in the early 1990s, Russian historians revisited the Soviet experience during World War II. But although this decade witnessed the publication of the impressive four-volume *History of World War II*, this work devoted only two short paragraphs to the liberation of the concentration camps.¹² In the twenty-five volume, *Russian Archives: The Great Patriotic War*, an extensive collection of World War II documents published in 1993, the editors neglected all newspaper articles, army reports, and personal communications about the liberations. Instead, they published only officers' instructions and orders to liberate a single concentration camp.¹³ While more works appeared thereafter, few authors'

¹¹ Ibid, 40.

¹² Anita Kondoyanidi, "The Liberating Experience: War Correspondents, Red Army Soldiers, and the Nazi Extermination Camps," *The Russian Review* 69 (2010): 437.

¹³ V. A. Zolotarev, ed., *Русский архив: Великая Отечественная война* (Moscow: St. Petersburg Press, 1993), Passim.

works were translated into English. In their recently published studies, Valerii Avgustinovich and Sergei Pereslegin, both leading experts in World War II, have also failed to recount in detail the Soviet liberation of the camps.¹⁴

American historians had more sources to draw from because GIs frequently kept diaries and corresponded with their families. American historians also benefitted from the fact that their government did not restrict them, and their narratives of the Holocaust did not face censorship for political reasons.¹⁵ In addition, American soldiers were almost all literate and were not discouraged from writing letters or creating memoirs, though only a fraction were published. But like their Russian counterparts, these works also concentrated on creating narratives that emphasized how terrible the Holocaust was and neglected to argue about the liberation process.¹⁶ For decades, the already humble and quiet “Greatest Generation” did not discuss their wartime experiences at length, and the Holocaust’s scale was not something they felt comfortable sharing with the public. In 1990, Jon Bridgman published *The End of the Holocaust: The Liberation of the Camps*, which focused exclusively on concentration camps liberated by American troops, but it too neglected how the soldiers revealed their emotions through their actions. Even Stephen Ambrose, a passionate and well-

¹⁴ Zeltser, "Differing Views among Red Army Personnel about the Nazi Mass Murder of Jews," 568.

¹⁵ This still left the possibility of self-censoring or decayed memory. Howard Buechner’s *Dachau: The Hour of the Avenger* cited wildly inaccurate death tolls, which subsequently prompted Buechner to recant his story. Similarly, Felix Sparks’ memoir, *The Liberator*, includes a fabricated tale about how Colonel Sparks, after the Dachau incident, was personally exonerated by General George Patton.

¹⁶ Dan Stone, *The Liberation of the Camps: The End of the Holocaust and its Aftermath* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2015), 31.

recognized World War II historian, had a difficult time placing the liberators in their rightful place. Known for his widely popular 1992 book-turned miniseries, *Band of Brothers*, Ambrose's book only dedicated two paragraphs to the liberation of Landsberg, a sub camp near Dachau. Ambrose also failed to discuss the emotional impact the camp made on the soldiers and limits his time to mention only Major Richard Winters' comment, "Now I know why I am here!"¹⁷ His 1997 work, *Citizen Soldiers: From the Beaches of Normandy to the Surrender of Germany*, only devoted one page, out of its approximately five hundred pages, to the camps' liberations.¹⁸ His 1998 work, *The Victors: The Men of World War II*, which focused on individual accounts in an emotional and personable narrative, similarly devoted only two pages to the soldiers' experiences with the camps.¹⁹

More recently, several historians have completed works dedicated to the liberators. Dan Stone, professor of modern history at the University of London, has published several Holocaust-related books since 2001, including a historiography of the Holocaust. Until 2015, however, his scope was limited to the victims and the perpetrators. His attention has since shifted to the liberators in *The Liberation of the Camps: The End of the Holocaust and its Aftermath* (2015), which has contributed thorough studies of numerous liberations, including those at Belsen, Buchenwald,

¹⁷ Stephen E. Ambrose, *Band of Brothers* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 262-263, Passim.

¹⁸ Stephen E. Ambrose, *Citizen Soldiers: From the Beaches of Normandy to the Surrender of Germany* (London: Simon and Schuster UK Ltd., 1997), 463-464, Passim.

¹⁹ Stephen E. Ambrose, *The Victors: The Men of World War II* (London: Simon and Schuster UK Ltd., 1998), 342-343, Passim.

Dachau, and some Russian liberations as well. While it has researched and detailed the events, there was little argument about how each camp's conditions may have had affected the soldiers who liberated them.²⁰ John McManus published a similar work in that same year, *Hell Before their Very Eyes*, but this work also neglected to discuss how each camp's liberation was different.²¹

While historians were slow to research the liberators, non-professionals waged a war of interpretation over the same information the Allies uncovered in 1945. The facts have not changed, but as the number of survivors from those terrible days dwindle, a growing number of revisionists fight to distort historical truths of the Holocaust.²² Deniers who say these events were a farce often challenge a factual event and argue that the Allies exaggerated such evils. Though the executions at Dachau were largely overshadowed by the end of the war and the discovery of the Holocaust's true extent, it was retold primarily by apologists and deniers who call themselves historians. These people have also ignored other liberations where soldiers did not execute surrendered Germans, such as Ohrdruf, Buchenwald, and other camps. They cast the liberation of Dachau in only negative light by exaggerating body counts and insisting the atrocities equaled those committed by the Third Reich.

²⁰ Dan Stone, *The Liberation of the Camps: The End of the Holocaust and its Aftermath* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2015), Passim.

²¹ John McManus, *Hell Before their Very Eyes* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2015), Passim.

²² While people have generally accepted the Holocaust as fact, small factions have committed their lives to manipulate evidence of the tragedy, attempting to downplay the scale of the Holocaust, or deny it happened entirely. See Deborah Lipstadt, *History on Trial: My Day in Court with a Holocaust Denier* (New York: Ecco, 2006).

Not until 1987 did the US government declassify the Dachau liberation report, and by that time, several works falsely accused the liberators of killing up to five-hundred POWs in cold blood.²³ These works shamed company commanders and executive officers, and used select or fabricated information to make it seem like the Americans were eager executioners. Howard Buechner's 1986 book, *Dachau: The Hour of the Avenger*, charged that Jack Bushyhead, an American Lieutenant who was present at Dachau, oversaw the execution of 346 surrendered Germans.²⁴ Lieutenant Bushyhead was a full-blooded Cherokee Indian, and Buechner attempted to stereotype the young Lieutenant as a wild aborigine who scalped, mutilated, and murdered five hundred Germans."²⁵ Buechner claimed that Bushyhead's family had been "brutalized during the infamous Trail of Tears, a race based death march," which prompted him to murder hundreds of Germans because he "had a kinship with the Jewish people," who, "like the Cherokee, had been harassed and driven from country to country for thousands of years."²⁶ Conveniently enough for Buechner, Bushyhead had died the previous year and was unable to personally defend himself, but he left no written records that ever suggested such a connection. Buechner did not defend the Nazis' actions or deny their guilt, but he concluded, "the deaths of these few hundred sadists could hardly atone for the millions of people who suffered and died at the hands of so many other participants

²³ Kirk Sparks, son of Felix Sparks, Interviewed by Alex Kershaw in Alex Kershaw, *The Liberator* (New York, NY: Broadway Books, 2012), 270.

²⁴ Jurgen Zarusky, "Dachau and Nazi Terror, 1933-1945, Studies and Reports" (Brussels: Comite International de Dachau, 2002): 135.

²⁵ Ibid, 86.

²⁶ Howard A. Buechner, *Dachau: The Hour of the Avenger* (Metairie, LA: Thunderbird Press, Inc. 1986), 97.

in *The Final Solution*.”²⁷ Buechner had not intended to write a revisionist book that condemned the liberators, but his work was the first narrative of the executions, and it set a low standard for subsequent works.

The author never recanted the exaggerated statistics, even after concrete evidence that disproved his work was made public. Historian David Israel directly contradicted Buechner’s book in 2005: “Buechner’s inaccuracies and arbitrary use of figures in citing the untrue story about the total liquidation of all SS troops found in Dachau was eagerly accepted by revisionist organizations and exploited to meet their own distorted stories of Dachau.”²⁸ Though historians dismissed Buechner’s work, far-right Germans or deniers who were still trying to absolve themselves from the horrors of the Holocaust championed it. A Holocaust denier commented that although Buechner’s book “has a predilection to cling to outdated propaganda stories about a gas chamber at Dachau,” his work was more believable than the stories of “an academic liar such as Elie Wiesel.”²⁹ Another, S.C. Ashworth, has claimed that Buechner’s work proved “the Allies fought a dirty war,” an argument that he argued is not revisionist, but “historical fact.”³⁰ While all wars are dirty, and the Allies did bomb civilians and

²⁷ Ibid, 107.

²⁸ Hallowell, *Eager for Duty*. 198., David Israel, *The Day the Thunderbird Cried: Untold Stories of World War II* (Medford, OR: Emek Press, 2005), 176.

²⁹ Patrick McNally, “Holocaust Fable as Jewish Hate Speech.” Accessed June 11, 2018, Web. <http://web.archive.org/web/20060709142144/http://www.adelaideinstitute.org:80/Think/mcnally17.htm>

³⁰ S.C. Ashworth, “Happy UN Holocaust Day on January 27!” Accessed June 9, 2018, Web. <http://dehoaxotox.blogharbor.com/blog>

sink merchant shipping, the Nazis took it to a particularly low level, much lower than the Allies.

Holocaust apologists and deniers were even less concerned with the liberators' emotions. Although the United States declassified the official report on Dachau, possibly to expose the untruths presented by Buechner, apologists have insisted that the American soldiers' treatment of POWs eclipsed any alleged German atrocities. Though relatively few deniers or apologists have held enough credit to publish in trade or academic presses, they make their own pseudo-academic presses and journals, or release their unsubstantiated facts to the world via the internet. This process has made their work free and accessible to anybody with a computer. One such organization, Ernst Zündel's website, *Zündelsite*, has continued to use alleged American atrocities at Dachau as grounds for Holocaust denial. The site repeatedly referred to the liberation as a, "Mafia-style, St. Valentine's Day Massacre machine-gunning," of "ethnic Germans and Hungarian army soldiers."³¹ Zündel's 2011 article also supported Buechner's erroneous assertion that Americans executed five-hundred SS prisoners of war. It also falsely claimed that General Patton destroyed the only existing evidence of the event.³² In fact, the two-hundred-page report was not destroyed and was made accessible to the general public in 1987, twenty-four years before the *Zündelsite* report. Photographs of the coal yard and the American firing line, used by Zündel as proof of "proud" soldiers who took the photos as "souvenirs," were actually used as evidence

³¹ Ernst Zündel, "The Dachau Massacre," *Zündelsite*, 2011.
http://www.zundelsite.org/archive/warcrimes_ww2/dachau_massacre/the_dachau_massacre.html.

³² Ibid.

by the Seventh Army during their investigation. Whitaker's team labelled and placed the photos in the investigative report that is still accessible today.

Another online article on a Holocaust denial website called *Scrapbookpages* provided over two-thousand words on the event, but cited almost no peer-reviewed sources.³³ The organization repeatedly quoted men who belonged to units that had not been present during Dachau's liberation, and cited the official investigation that occurred in 1945.³⁴ The site has only included statements in fragments and neglects the fact that the investigative committee recommended the offenders only be rebuked, not formally charged.³⁵ The site conveniently disregarded testimonies made by dozens of soldiers who published memoirs, wrote letters, kept diaries, or gave speeches, in which they publicly condemned their own actions.

To make matters worse, false information about the liberation of Dachau is far more accessible than reliable accounts. A simple Google search for the Dachau liberation, which is often how most research begins, immediately provides the user with inaccurate information; the previously mentioned *Zündelsite* and *Scrapbook Pages* both appear on the first page of results.³⁶ Recent Wikipedia articles and journalists' one-page newspaper stories also stop short of telling the true story of the liberation.

³³ "Execution of SS soldiers at Dachau." *ScrapbookPages*, 30 November, 2007.
<https://www.scrapbookpages.com/DachauScrapbook/DachauLiberation/SoldiersKilled.html>

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Joseph Whitaker, Lieutenant Colonel, Inspector General Division, Seventh Army, *Observation of Dachau, Diagram of Coal Yard Shooting, Report and Conclusions*, May 3, 1945, Record Group 338, Entry 41933, Seventh Army Report of Investigations, National Archives.

³⁶ Google, "Dachau Liberation."
https://www.google.com/search?source=hp&ei=PX4yW4nBD5KazwLVaPYDw&q=dachau+liberation&oq=dachau+liberation&gs_

The United Kingdom-based *Daily Mail* claimed in May 2015, “Dachau’s SS guards [were] tortured and shot dead by GIs in ‘cold blood’ because they ‘so had it coming.’”³⁷ The piece cited wildly inaccurate death tolls and indicated that Dachau’s liberation was the norm across Europe. Another article published a few weeks later juxtaposed pictures of American officers with images of Adolf Hitler, a not so subtle attempt at comparison.³⁸ The article also claimed that the government purposely hid the event until 1991, when the report was accidentally “discovered” by journalists.³⁹ This inaccurate claim is disproved by the fact that the Army launched several investigations and made the information publicly accessible.

American periodicals have also used selected evidence from the Dachau liberation to cloud the popular narrative. An article in *The New Republic* by Steven Friess entitled, “A Liberator, but Never Free,” relied heavily on a letter written by David Wisley, an anesthesiologist with the 116th Evacuation Hospital, which arrived at Dachau on May 2, 1945.⁴⁰ The letter, written three days after the liberation, was a product of rumor and typical soldierly “scuttlebutt.” Wisley incorrectly cited the number of dead SS and the timing of the executions. The article emphasized Wisley’s view that the SS deserved their fate, and directs the reader to believe that he was content

³⁷ Daniel Bates, “Revealed: American doctor's first-hand account of how he saw Dachau's SS guards being tortured and shot dead by GIs in 'cold blood' because they 'so had it coming,’” *Daily Mail UK* (London), 15 May, 2015.

³⁸ Daniel Bates, “Let's get those Nazi dogs:' How 70 years ago, enraged by the horrors they found at Dachau, liberating US troops took revenge by executing dozens of German guards,” *Daily Mail UK* (London), 15 May, 2015.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Steve Friess, “A Liberator, But Never Free.” *New Republic* 246 (2015): 12.

with the executions, if not proud.⁴¹ What the Friess article neglected, however, is the substantial portion of the letter that discussed brutal treatment of camp inmates. Wisley's letter, when read in its entirety, concentrated on the torture, experimentation, forced labor, and executions that occurred at Dachau, as well as the "heroic" efforts made by GIs who tried to save a German child who was accidentally injured, and the aid wounded Germans and prisoners received.⁴²

Popular culture that referenced the Dachau liberation also cluttered the narrative. Martin Scorsese's 2010 hit, *Shutter Island*, was a psychological thriller about a World War II veteran-turned detective in 1960s America. The protagonist, played by Leonardo DiCaprio, was a GI who helped liberate Dachau. The movie devoted approximately three minutes to the liberation, where DiCaprio's character was directly responsible for the execution of many German guards. The first images of the camp follows Leonardo DiCaprio's character as he passes through an iron gate, which has the words *Arbeit macht frei* (work will set you free) stenciled into the posts. DiCaprio explains that the GIs took the surrendered guards' weapons and lined them up against a fence. The movie shows hundreds of Wehrmacht, not SS, soldiers, cowering in fear while aggressive GIs shove and strike them. During the actual liberation, however, there were less than fifty German soldiers at Dachau; several were too sick to walk, and approximately twenty-five SS were gathered and held at gunpoint. A German attempts to run from the Americans and a rifle shot from off screen kills the man.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² David Wisley, letter to Emily Wisely, May 8, 1945, *MAS Ultra - School Edition*, EBSCOhost, Accessed March 7, 2018.

DiCaprio's character, an admitted hater of all Germans, takes advantage of the confusion and begins shooting into the hundreds of surrendered Germans. Without saying a word, dozens of other Americans subsequently fire into the mass gathering, dropping every prisoner during the movie's eighteen-second span of gunfire.⁴³

There were several inaccuracies in *Shutter Island's* Dachau. There was only a brief glimpse at the Dachau's prisoners, and a viewer with no background information would not understand how dreadful the concentration camp was. The fences gripped by prisoners as DiCaprio's character first entered the compound were not as tranquil as the movie suggests. The enclosures at Dachau were electrified and several prisoners died during the liberation because, in their excitement, they tried to climb the fences and greet the Americans. While it could be argued that these were stylistic "*mise-en-scene*" elements included by Scorsese to enhance the mood, the final scene in Dachau of the mass slaughter of unarmed Germans was egregious in terms of inaccuracy. Millions of people who viewed the film likely believed that Scorsese's depiction of Dachau's liberation was true.⁴⁴

This thesis will use primary research to contribute to the historical literature and create an accurate narrative about Dachau's liberation, the execution of surrendered SS, and the subsequent investigation and acquittal of the responsible GIs. The sources used in this thesis will include several official reports and documents that were often overlooked or used in piecemeal by both historians and revisionists. Most important

⁴³ "Shutter Island (2010) Movie Script," SpringfieldSpringfield.co.uk https://www.springfieldspringfield.co.uk/movie_script.php?movie=shutter-island; For the full movie, see Martin Scorsese, dir. *Shutter Island*. Hollywood, CA: Paramount Pictures, 2010.

⁴⁴ "Shutter Island," IMDB.com <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1130884/> (Accessed February 25th, 2018).

are the two reports generated by Lieutenant Colonel Joseph Whitaker of the Seventh Army's Inspector General Division. His 1945 reports, titled "Observation of Dachau, Diagram of Coal Yard Shooting, Report and Conclusions," and "Investigation of Alleged Mistreatment of German Guards at Dachau," are both located in the National Archives in Washington, D.C. Whitaker's reports have been briefly considered by historians like Alex Kershaw, who occasionally used testimonies in his biography of Felix Sparks, *The Liberator*, but limited his attention to his protagonist, who was never personally interviewed by Whitaker.⁴⁵ Similarly, John McManus only references the two reports six times in *Hell Before their Very Eyes*, which devoted seventy-four pages to Dachau's liberation and impact.⁴⁶ Dan Stone's *The Liberation of the Camps*, and Michael Perry's edited *The Official Report by the US Seventh Army* have both failed to reference either of Whitaker's reports.⁴⁷ Similarly, revisionists, who have scoured the combined four-hundred pages and plucked out-of-context testaments from interviewed soldiers and witnesses, and ignored the Seventh Army's conclusions, only occasionally cite the detailed reports when they find it convenient.⁴⁸ It will also use official after-action reports from all levels, most of which are also housed in the National Archives. Different officers witnessed different events and interpreted them in unique ways. This thesis will look at information from individual lieutenants, captains, colonels, and generals, and compare their material with the reports generated at the battalion and

⁴⁵ Kershaw cites the report five times in, *The Liberator*, on pages 282, 286, 287, 288, 316.

⁴⁶ McManus, *Hell Before their Very Eyes*, 168, 170, 171.

⁴⁷ Michael W. Perry, ed, *Dachau Liberated: The Official Report by the US Seventh Army* (Seattle, WA: Inkling Books, 2000), Passim.

⁴⁸ Zündel "The Dachau Massacre," *Zündelsite*.

division levels. Correlating evidence will be used for the narrative, while conflicting materials will be discussed and analyzed.

This thesis will also use other sources, such as letters, cables, and memoirs from officers, soldiers, and civilians. It will consult correspondence from senior American commanders, such as Generals Dwight D. Eisenhower, George C. Marshall, Omar Bradley, and George S. Patton, most of which is located at the Dwight D. Eisenhower Library archives in Abilene, Kansas. Their official and unofficial communications with one-another are indicative of how difficult it was for Americans of all ranks to process the Holocaust and remain composed. It will also use memoirs from enlisted soldiers who fought their way into the concentration camps, and kept diaries or wrote letters home when they could find time. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum has collected a staggering number of personal testimonies from men of all ranks, and information from men whose names historians frequently omitted will be used to support the narrative and argument. Sam Dann has also compiled hundreds of letters, cables, and testimonies from the 42nd Infantry Division soldiers who liberated concentration camps in *The Rainbow Liberation Memoirs*, and this thesis will borrow some of their stories as well. Army newsletters and American newspapers that reported on the concentration camps and Dachau's executions are also consulted.

In 2010, Anita Kondoyanidi, a history professor at American University, wrote, "By its nature, the liberation of one factory of death resembled the liberation of another," indicating that each site fit into a sort of ubiquitous concentration camp-mold.⁴⁹ When considering the dearth of research dedicated individual liberations and

⁴⁹ Kondoyanidi, "The Liberating Experience," 439.

the soldiers who conducted them, Kondoyanidi's conclusion seems to indicate general consensus. It will be seen, however, that this was not the case; each camp had unique features and affected the soldiers in a different way. This thesis will first discuss the conditions present in three major camps liberated just prior Dachau: Majdanek, Ohrdruf, and Buchenwald. It is important to discuss these camps and examine their situations because there were no large-scale reprisals at either site.

Chapter Three will focus on Dachau's liberation and exactly how the American soldiers conducted themselves. It will follow the GIs as they made first contact with surrendering Germans and their victims. The conditions upon liberation will be examined and compared with the other camps. Dachau's history and purpose will also be discussed in this section; to understand what exactly the GIs encountered, it is important to consider why the camp was established, the horrific medical experiments that occurred before the Americans arrived, and how people existed inside its walls. It will, in most cases, use the soldiers' own words to discuss how they listened to victims' stories, provided aid, openly wept, were infuriated by the scene, and ultimately disobeyed their commanding officer's orders and executed seventeen SS prisoners. Soldiers who filed after-action reports generally omitted the executions or fabricated excuses to explain the deaths of seventeen SS troopers. Why several versions of such reports were filed and how they affected the ensuing investigation will also be discussed.

The subsequent section will focus on the investigation ordered by the Seventh Army and conducted by Colonel Joseph Whitaker into the executions of German soldiers at Dachau. It will examine Whitaker's interviews with witnesses and the two-

hundred-page reports, which his section presented to General Patton at the investigation's end. The work will then discuss the postwar period and how the American soldiers involved in the Dachau incident dealt with the liberation in their private lives. It will include information on how men either tried to make amends through volunteer work, public lectures, museum displays, and other outreach efforts—or how several men, though only a minority, expressed no guilt for their actions and have remained convinced that the SS received what they deserved for their atrocities. The concluding lines will suggest how major organizations, such as the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, the US Army, and other political organizations can refute the denial websites and books. It will recommend dedicated attention to the liberation and the executions, and official explanations to reject the condemnation of the liberators and the false narratives that surround them. Official organizations can supersede the deniers' claimed territory, and more information on the soldiers' wartime and postwar stories alone will dispel the notion that the GIs were cruel executioners. Each man's story, when placed in context with official reports, will offer a detailed look at the liberation and argue how dissimilar it was from the others.

Chapter 2: Prelude to Dachau – Prior Awareness and the first Liberations—
*“In the matters of horrors, the Westerners were evidently novices.”*⁵⁰

The American and Soviet soldiers who liberated Nazi Germany’s concentration camps faced the daunting task of unexpectedly receiving tens-of-thousands of withered men, women, and children who had been held for years as prisoners or slave laborers by the Third Reich. Each soldier’s journey to the site was different and dissimilar circumstances met them at each camp’s liberation. Russian soldiers, who frequently assumed the internees were enemies of the Soviet Union as well as the Nazis, only paused at camps, offering some food and aid before continuing their westward drive. As per General Dwight D. Eisenhower’s orders, American soldiers who liberated camps during the war’s final few days lingered amongst the liberated, offered extended care, and, in some cases, forced townspeople who lived near the camps to witness and clean up the dead. Dachau’s liberation on April 29, 1945 occurred after two other major American liberations, and months after the Soviets discovered enormous extermination camps at Majdanek and Auschwitz. While every GI who entered a camp expressed anger, it was surprising, even to General Eisenhower, that more of his men did not release their fury more violently.⁵¹ Every soldier’s diary, letters home, or passionate

⁵⁰ Jean Cathala, *Without Flowers or Rifle* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1981), 371-372.

⁵¹ General Eisenhower was appalled when he first entered a concentration camp on April 11th, 1945. An initial reaction, which he cabled to General George Marshall, emphasized how furious his men were and would be at the Germans. He emphasized that the GIs would have “no trouble hating them,” after learning about the condition of the camps. General Dwight D. Eisenhower, “Eyes Only” cable to General George Marshall, April 19, 1945, Eisenhower Pre-Presidential Papers, Box 134, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

testimonies admitted ignorance about concentration camps. The few who believed such rumors could not comprehend the camps' scale without seeing them.

By the time American forces liberated their first concentration camp, the Soviet Union's Red Army had already experienced the Nazi regime's full brutality for four years and endured atrocities committed towards millions of noncombatants. Germany invaded the Soviet Union on June 21-22, 1941, under the codename Operation *Barbarossa*. The attack was a complete surprise to Stalin, whose government signed a nonaggression treaty with Hitler, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, in August 1939. Though Russia never trusted the agreement, Germany was battling Britain and her Empire, and the Soviet Union did not believe Hitler would open a two front war in 1941.⁵² The Red Army had over five-million regular soldiers when the Wehrmacht attacked, but the Soviet Union's large territories could not be easily defended. By October 1941, German forces occupied the Baltic States, encircled the major city of Leningrad, cut off much of the resource-rich southern regions, and threatened Moscow. By December, the Soviet Union had suffered 2.6 million casualties, but they brought troops from Siberia and launched a counteroffensive.⁵³ They succeeded in pushing the Germans away from Moscow, and throughout the first half of 1942, Russian soldiers slowed the Wehrmacht's progress. By early 1943, bitter fighting paired with a harsh Russian winter, Soviet General Georgy Zhukov's encirclement plan, and Hitler's refusal to consider retreating, all helped the Red Army eventually defeat the Wehrmacht at

⁵² Michael Reiman, *About Russia, Its Revolutions, Its Developments and Its Present* (New York: Peter Lang, 2016), 121.

⁵³ John Erickson, *The Soviet High Command: A Military-Political History, 1918-1941* (London: Routledge, 2001), 628.

Stalingrad.⁵⁴ In July 1943, the Germans hoped to launch a decisive blow against the Red Army by encircling hundreds-of-thousands of Russian soldiers at Kursk. When the Wehrmacht attacked, however, overwhelming Soviet armor met them and devastated thirty-six German divisions.⁵⁵ Within two months, similar successes at the battles of Orel and Kharkov “marked the ruin of the German army on the Eastern Front,” and prompted the Red Army to advance westward until the end of the war.⁵⁶

Russian reports detailed incomprehensible atrocities, millions of executions, and razed cities, which prompted American and British skepticism, even before the Holocaust’s scale was revealed in late 1944. They seemed to follow previous patterns, which used false statistics and select information to advance Stalin’s rhetoric and condemn the West. During the 1930s, Stalin’s government repeatedly and publicly cited the United States, Britain, and other western nations as enemies, spinning politicians’ words to report that the US praised Nazi Germany.⁵⁷ Throughout the decade, Charles Lindbergh, Henry Ford, and other prominent “America First” movement supporters, including Time Magazine, honored Hitler. When Russia and Germany invaded Poland in 1939, the propagandistic newspaper *Pravda* chided the capitalist world for profiting from war, claiming that the New York stock market had risen, and businessmen were richer at the expense of European fighting.⁵⁸ Such claims

⁵⁴ Reiman, *About Russia*, 129.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 135.

⁵⁶ Winston Churchill, *The Second World War 2* (New York: Time Incorporated, 1959), 316.

⁵⁷ Erickson, *The Soviet High Command*, 442.

⁵⁸ Ewa Thompson, “Nationalist Propaganda in the Soviet Russian Press, 1939-1941,” *Slavic Review* 50 (1991): 389. It is important to note that this was not unique to the Nazi invasion. Stocks usually rise when war declarations are passed; the same happened at the beginning of World War I.

from the East were frequent enough for Americans to ignore most of what the Russian media reported. Even as mutual belligerents in 1942-45, the Soviet government assumed the West was happy to “fight the Germans until the last Russian,” and had no faith in United States or Britain’s wartime assurance.⁵⁹ The United States had, after all, supported anti-Communist factions for decades, and even sent American soldiers to support the Tsarists in Siberia in 1918, and the British sent soldiers to the Russian port in Archangel. Trust was so fragile between the East and West that when Stalin sent his foreign minister, Vyacheslav Molotov, to visit the White House in early 1942, the politician was not convinced that he would be treated humanely. Despite the fact that he was going to discuss strategy, logistics, and relief efforts with President Franklin Roosevelt, Molotov brought his own bread and sausage, and a pistol for self-defense.⁶⁰

For their part, the West did not trust Russian intentions either. President Roosevelt, whatever his personal feelings towards Stalin’s regime were, understood that the Red Army was the largest military on the continent and agreed with Prime Minister Winston Churchill that Germany could not be defeated if Russia collapsed. Their priority was to keep Russian soldiers in the war, even though they recognized the threat Stalin’s government posed. So real was the tension between Moscow and London, historian Craig Symonds has suggested that Churchill may have agreed with a strategy to “fight the Nazis to the last Communist.”⁶¹ At a meeting in the White House

⁵⁹ Craig L. Symonds, *Neptune: The Allied invasion of Europe and the D-Day landings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 52.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 60.

⁶¹ Ibid, 52.

on December 29, 1941, Roosevelt and Churchill originated the title “United Nations” to replace “Allies,” because the West was not allied with the Soviet Union, they were simply “on the same side.”⁶² Lend Lease shipments of munitions, food, and other wartime supplies, as well as pledges to open a second front to relieve pressure on the Eastern Front, were not done altruistically, but out of necessity to keep Russian manpower in the war.⁶³ After the war, the West recognized that the Soviet Union lost more than twenty million people to the Nazis’ brutality and, as both a humanitarian and political gesture, allowed Stalin to influence post-war Europe. “The role of victim,” historian Geoffrey P. Megargee has concluded, “placed a veneer of respectability onto a regime that was nearly as bad as the Nazis.”⁶⁴

In-person wartime conferences between Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin (the Big Three) did not substantially improve relations. After the Tehran conference in 1943, which sought to assure Stalin that the US and Britain would open a second front against Germany, Moscow repeatedly questioned their sincerity. Even after the 1944 D Day invasion, Stalin, who pledged to launch a simultaneous offensive eastward, waited two weeks to be sure that the Normandy operation was not a feint. At the Yalta conference in February 1945, the Big Three agreed to allow formerly Nazi-occupied regions to hold democratic elections. It immediately became “as plain as a pike staff,” however, that Moscow’s conferences with the West were misleading and lined with

⁶² Ibid, 44.

⁶³ Ibid, 60-62.

⁶⁴ Geoffrey P. Megargee, “The Germans Turn East: Operation Barbarossa and the Beginnings of the Final Solution,” in *The West Point History of World War II* 1 (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015), 177.

empty promises.⁶⁵ Stalin immediately reneged on his promises and had sixteen Polish non-communist political leaders arrested.⁶⁶ The war had not yet ended but the few strands that connected the East and West were already breaking, and American trust, which had always remained skeptical of Russian promises, was severed.

In addition to the inherit distrust between governments, the tendency for wartime armies and newspapers to publish unsubstantiated facts for morale's sake, meant that many American soldiers later learned the same lessons about the Holocaust that Soviet troops experienced early in the war.⁶⁷ Two days after Hitler launched Operation *Barbarossa*, the Russian government established dedicated anti-fascist committees to oversee what information and propaganda would be released. Throughout the entire war, they used aggressive headlines to inspire soldiers, publishing news of Russian victories on the Eastern front and eventually printing 135,000 articles between June 1941 and May 1945.⁶⁸ After driving the enemy out of Soviet territory in 1943-44, however, soldiers were exhausted, undernourished, undersupplied, and eager to return home. *Pravda* and other wartime newspapers amplified their angry slogans to inspire the Red Army's venture westward. Even before they discovered any concentration camps, Soviet headlines read, "It is impossible to

⁶⁵ Simon Berthon, *Warlords: An Extraordinary Re-creation of World War II Through the Eyes and Minds of Hitler, Churchill, Roosevelt, and Stalin* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2007), 296-297.

⁶⁶ Cyril E. Black, *Rebirth: A Political History of Europe since World War II* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000), 63.

⁶⁷ Ian Toll, *Pacific Crucible: War at Sea in the Pacific* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2011), 57.

⁶⁸ Shimon Redlich, *War, Holocaust and Stalinism* (London: Routledge, 1995), 4.

defeat an enemy without learning how to hate him with all the soul's powers," and, "Take vengeance for Kiev's torments."⁶⁹

Since the German invasion began, the Red Army's Main Political Administration, which oversaw the military press during the war, published gruesome scenes to inspire Soviet soldiers: in 1942-44, newspapers' front pages frequently displayed corpses in the streets, public hangings, lootings, and burnings.⁷⁰ Soviet reporters regularly described German atrocities, and as the Red Army advanced eastward into Poland in 1944, units uncovered work camps where hundreds of people were labored to death or exterminated. When compared to the extermination camps that would be discovered in 1944-45, such as Treblinka, Majdanek, and Auschwitz, these early encounters were small and not of much concern to the Red Army. Initially, photographs had "everything to do with the Nazis' violent occupation politics in the Soviet Union, but little to do with the death camps."⁷¹ Pictures of murdered civilians, towns ruined by the retreating Germans, destroyed crops and factories, and other wartime destruction continued to crowd the newspapers, as they had for months. But rarely did the Russian press express sympathy for the victims or publicly indicate that Jews and other non-communist minorities were specifically targeted. The Russian press hardly suggested there was anything "abnormal" about such wartime travesties, probably because Stalin's government had sponsored their own work camps in Siberia

⁶⁹ Yan Mann, "Writing the Great Patriotic War's Official History during Khrushchev's Thaw" (PhD diss, Arizona State University, 2016), 62, 64.

⁷⁰ N.A., "Ukrainy," *Pravda* (Jan. 11, 1944), Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, Photoduplication Service, Microfilm reel, AN50.K47.

⁷¹ Shneer, "Picturing Grief," 32.

since the late 1920s. Even after camps where hundreds of people had been worked to death were discovered, the headlines remained consistent with the previous three years' violent rhetoric.

Staggering death statistics were common in the East, and people worldwide had become accustomed to such reports. During the 1930s, three million people died from a manmade famine in Ukraine, Stalin killed millions during his "Great Terror," and communists shot tens of thousands outright. But the Nazis' "intent was genocidal to an extent that the Soviets' was not."⁷² Beginning in June 1941, German commanders circulated the *Kommissarbefehl* or "Commissar Order," which authorized mass killings and reprisals against guerillas or uncooperative Soviets. Their actions were "impossible to keep secret," and it was widely circulated that the Wehrmacht and SS murdered "the very old and the very young," claiming they were fighting "a battle against partisans."⁷³ Since the first German soldier advanced into the Soviet Union, the harsh German policies against the Soviets were not individual acts of violence. "Commanders sent out a series of orders that attempted to explain and justify shootings and other criminal policies, which were common knowledge in the [Wehrmacht] ranks."⁷⁴ Retreating Russian armies also practiced a "scorched earth" policy where they destroyed everything they could not carry, which often exacerbated civilian suffering.

⁷² Megargee, *The West Point History of World War II*, 167-168.

⁷³ Ibid, 198-170.

⁷⁴ Walter von Reichenau, Field Marshall, "Behavior of the troops in the Ostraum," October 10, 1941, in John Mendelson, *The Holocaust, Selected Documents in Eighteen Volumes* 10 (New York: The Lawbook Exchange Ltd. 1982), 755.

Well-known Soviet correspondents such as Ilya Ehrenburg, Konstantin Simonov, Boris Gorbатов, Vasilii Grossman, and *The Soviet News* in London disseminated this information amongst the Allies.⁷⁵ Though Soviet correspondents reported the event as the Red Army continued westward, Russian soldiers voiced mixed reactions to the stories. Russian infantryman Daniil Fibikh wrote in his diary on January 9, 1942, “When one hears such tales and then reads about German brutalities against the peasant population, one experiences a certain satisfaction. You didn’t leave with us; you waited for the Germans and were perhaps even glad at their arrival. So take what you get, dear peasants, and enjoy it.”⁷⁶ His reaction was not atypical, and aside from being a propagandistic piece, the Red Army did not concentrate on the victims because they did not affect strategic goals or war aims. Soldiers felt pity for the dead, but unlike future liberators, they were not horrified. They initially believed it was the victims’ fault for not leaving when the Russian army had departed, and desolate sites discovered by the Red Army in 1943-44 were not unique because they reflected a situation that prevailed across the entire occupied region.

Soviet attitudes towards Nazi atrocities, shifted, however, after the liberation of the extermination camp at Majdanek, Poland in July 1944. The easternmost camp constructed, the Nazis built Majdanek in 1941 and it eventually grew to include 144 barracks, each designed to hold around 300 people. It served as both a work camp and a death camp, but Majdanek’s sole purpose was to murder the prisoners it held. It housed a crematorium, multiple gas chambers, numerous gallows, a ditch for corpses,

⁷⁵ Anita Anidikondoy, “The Liberating Experience: War Correspondents, Red Army Soldiers, and the Nazi Extermination Camps” *Russian Review* 69 (2010): 438.

⁷⁶ Zeltser, “Differing Views among Red Army Personnel,” 563-590.

and a high, electrified, barbed-wire fence that surrounded the camp. The Nazi administration paved all roads in the camp, cut the grass neatly, and lived in special quarters surrounded by flowerbeds and Birchwood benches on which to rest.⁷⁷ Initially, the Nazis executed prisoners of war and political prisoners in Majdanek, but with the implementation of the “Final Solution” in 1942, Polish Jews became the main target.⁷⁸ Poles, Jews, and other nationalities were put to death during the camp's three-year existence and as many as 360,000 prisoners perished. When the first Red Army scouts approached the perimeter, only 640 living prisoners remained. No SS or Wehrmacht soldiers were in the camp when it was liberated, and almost no written material from the Red Army soldiers who entered the camp survived.⁷⁹ The Russians recovered German administrative records, however, including prisoner rosters, orders from senior commanders, disciplinary records, and lists of executed prisoners.⁸⁰ The few prisoners left behind by the retreating Germans emphasized Majdanek’s purpose and scale.

⁷⁷ Zeltser, "Differing Views among Red Army Personnel," 447.

⁷⁸ Zhukov, "Frontovaia Pechat," 61.

⁷⁹ Jozef Marszalek, *Majdanek: The Concentration Camp in Lublin* (Warsaw: Interpress, 1986): 83, 142-143; For more information on the camp at Majdanek, see Stone, *The Liberation of the Camps*, 29-65.

⁸⁰ “Administracja KL Lublin (Administration of Concentration Camp Lublin), 1941-1944,” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington: DC, Record Group 15.184M.



Figure 1. Soviet Soldiers at Majdanek examine a mound of human bone fragments, located near a crematorium, 1944. Photographer N.A., July 1944. Ghetto Fighters' House Archives.

The Red Army documented the camp, but its discovery seemed to follow the pattern of Soviet reporting from the previous three years and skepticism of the camps was “compounded by the Soviets’ manipulation of the reports of what they found.”⁸¹ Russian war correspondents were not free to write what they witnessed, and their reports did not emphasize that Jews were a primary target. After the camps were discovered, there was a “determination to reject a special Jewish claim for suffering in the course of the Great Patriotic war.”⁸² Prisoner accounts indicated that Jews had made up a quarter of the murdered, including 40,000 killed during a two day slaughter in late 1943, but correspondents were not instructed to publish accounts that were sympathetic to Jews.⁸³ Since the Soviet Union formed, propaganda stressed that there was no such

⁸¹ Dan Stone, *The Liberation of the Camps* (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 32.

⁸² Dan Stone, *The Historiography of the Holocaust* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillian, 2004), 287.

⁸³ Stone, *The Liberation of the Camps*, 36.

entity as a Jewish nation, and that “there never could be a common destiny linking Soviet Jews who were engaged in building a socialist world with the Jews of capitalist countries.”⁸⁴ “The Soviets,” Dan Stone has written, “wanted to portray the defeat of fascism as a victory for international working class anti-fascism . . . to represent the victims as people who had died in the name of the anti-fascist cause.”⁸⁵ Reporters instead constructed narratives that indicated the entire Soviet Union’s population was represented in the death camps. This extermination narrative had some truth to it, but it had been circulated since June 22, 1941, and did not change much after the camps were discovered. Ilya Erenburg, a well-known international correspondent in Britain, published the first detailed account of the camp in *Pravda* on August 7, 1944. He emphasized that people of different ethnicities died there, saying, “one day they killed Jews, another day they killed Poles, on other days, the victims were Russians.”⁸⁶ Ehrenburg suffered from insomnia and nightmares after witnessing these horrors. In his memoirs, he recounted how seeing the half-cremated bodies made him completely numb.⁸⁷

Photographs were also directed to incite anger towards Hitler, rather than evoke sympathy for the victims. One photo published from a formerly Nazi-occupied town announced, “Hitler ordered his bandits to annihilate the peaceful Soviet population.”⁸⁸

⁸⁴ Mordechai Altshuler, *Soviet Jews in World War II: Fighting, Witnessing, Remembering* (Boston, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2014), 21.

⁸⁵ Stone, *The Liberation of the Camps*, 32.

⁸⁶ Il’ia Erenburg, “Nakanune,” *Pravda*, August 7, 1944.

⁸⁷ Antony Beevor, *The Fall of Berlin 1945* (New York: Penguin Books, 2002): 28.

⁸⁸ Shneer, “Picturing Grief,” 34-35.

Pictures and articles depicted Soviet suffering to unite the population, rather than emphasize that the Nazis were systematically destroying millions of non-Russians as well. *Pravda* also published a report from another correspondent, Konstantin Simonov, whose “mind refused to accept the reality of what his eyes and ears took in.”⁸⁹ His belief that the camps could not be understood without direct observation was correct; Western news agencies and military officers dismissed the stories, claiming that the camps’ scale and statistics must be exaggerated Russian propaganda.

The discovery of the camp hardened Russian hatred towards the Germans. Ilya Egorkin, who entered the camp with the Soviet 4th Tank Army, wrote: “These German beasts burnt to the ground our village in Mogilev province and killed its people. Majdanek was the camp for our people. This crime is calling us to take revenge on the fascists. We will take vengeance on the Nazis for their crimes.”⁹⁰ His language also indicated, much like *Pravda*’s headlines, the belief or claim that Russians were the only ones being murdered. Sergey Petrachenko, a companion of Egorkin, comforted his anguish by telling his fellow comrades, “I will beat and kill the German beasts ruthlessly.”⁹¹

No records detailing Soviet treatment of any SS captured at Majdanek survived the war. Liberated prisoners who wrote or spoke about the event made no mention of reprisals committed by soldiers.⁹² Prior to the Soviets’ arrival, the SS gathered all

⁸⁹ Konstantin Simonov, *Kazhdyi den' Dlinnyi* (Moscow: Sovetskaia Rossiia, 1965), 105.

⁹⁰ Marszalek, *Majdanek*, 450.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² *The Liberation of the Camps*, 7-12, 15-17, 19, 20.

moveable prisoners and marched them away, leaving behind those they believed were mortally ill. By September, all former SS guards and camp personnel were long gone. It must be understood, however, that by mid-1944, the Red Army hesitated to treat *any* captured Germans humanely. Winston Churchill commented, “surrender,” to the Red Army, “meant little relief from the hardships,” and even that was not guaranteed because “the Russians took few prisoners.”⁹³ SS, Wehrmacht, and civilians all experienced the wrath of an army that was not rebuked for sacking enemy territories.⁹⁴ An example of Soviet regard for their enemy was after the battle of Stalingrad, when approximately 91,000 Germans were taken prisoner, but only 6,000 survived the decade of captivity before repatriation.⁹⁵ Historian Christopher Duffy has emphasized that Soviet soldiers manifested “cruelty on a scale which far exceeds that which might have been expected from men who had been brutalized by a pitiless war,” and unlike American GIs, whose homeland was not invaded during the war, “Russian military men of every rank went to war with personal scores to settle.”⁹⁶

After Majdanek, Soviet propagandists concerned themselves with spreading anti-German sentiment, rather than reporting on the actual camp and its victims.⁹⁷ The

⁹³ Churchill, *The Second World War*, 319, 322.

⁹⁴ Niall Ferguson, “Prisoner Taking and Prisoner Killing in the Age of Total War: Towards a Political Economy of Military Defeat,” in *War in History* (London: Penguin Group, 2007), 186.

⁹⁵ “The Great Patriotic War,” *BBC* (May 12, 2000).

⁹⁶ Christopher Duffy, *Red Storm on the Reich* (Cambridge, MA: De Facto Press, 1991), 273, 275.

⁹⁷ While it is odd that Soviet propaganda did not perpetuate a symbiotic relationship between empathy for the victims and inspiring hatred against the Germans, it may have been to avoid issues regarding collaboration. The Germans enlisted local civilians to help them, including Ukrainian “*Hiwis*,” or auxiliaries, which may have eroded morale or rejected the notion that the Soviet Union was truly united.

government even ordered the slogan "Workers of the world, unite!" removed from *Pravda*'s headlines, and replaced it with "Death to the German occupiers!"⁹⁸ Captions that did not sideline communist rhetoric remained fervently anti-Hitler, rather than sympathetic. "Let us kill Nazis. Death to the Nazis," one Soviet paper proclaimed. "We need to preserve them for retribution against the Nazis. We need to keep our nerves and hearts for hatred," trumpeted another.⁹⁹ They also exaggerated death tolls to incite hatred towards the Germans. On September 17, 1944, *Pravda* wrote that the blood of 1,500,000 dead in Majdanek demanded vengeance.¹⁰⁰ In truth, the Nazis killed 360,000 people in the camp. This astounding amount may have been more believable to western audiences, but Russian propaganda insisted on inflating the already horrific number. A film crew documented the liberation and published their images in Moscow in late 1944, but the silent film made no indication of Majdanek's enormous death toll, save the gruesome images, and failed to capture the camp's magnitude.¹⁰¹ The reel was not circulated to the West and it is unclear whether American or British military leaders viewed it.

Mistrust towards the USSR in general and its state-run press in particular helps explain why American soldiers disregarded such Soviet reports of German atrocities. Western news agencies even questioned reports produced even by their own

⁹⁸ Jeffrey Brooks, *Culture and Entertainment in Wartime Russia* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995), 11.

⁹⁹ Edel, *Soviet Veterans of the Second World War*, 65.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ "Maidanek," Record Group 238.5, Reel 1, Filmdokumente on the German Concentration Camps, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

journalists.¹⁰² When an American correspondent traveling with the Red Army asked the *New York Herald* to publish an article about a camp in 1944, it denied him the space; editors asked for “further corroboration of the horror story,” and added, “even on top of all we have been taught of the maniacal Nazi ruthlessness, this example sounds inconceivable.”¹⁰³ Jean Cathala, a French war correspondent, emphasized how Western governments were ignorant about the Holocaust. “In December [1944], when Charles De Gaulle arrived in Moscow no one in his entourage seemed to be aware of the discovery of the first death camps.”¹⁰⁴

By 1945, as the Red Army advanced further westward into Poland, soldiers uncovered larger extermination camps, the most infamous of these was Auschwitz, located approximately two-hundred and fifty miles from Majdanek. Soviet authorities assigned only one leading war correspondent, Boris Polevoi, to write about Auschwitz’s liberation and then postponed its publication until the official Nazi surrender in early May. When the report was disseminated, it made no mention whatsoever of Jewish victims. Reports on liberated concentration camps were not recognized as relevant to Soviet morale and were subsequently sidelined.¹⁰⁵ The sudden shift away from the inconceivable reports after only several weeks may have confirmed Western suspicions about the camps’ reality. In the interim, the Americans liberated many concentration camps, including Dachau, without much further warning from the

¹⁰² Marszalek, *Majdanek*, 453.

¹⁰³ Werth, *Russia at War*, 898-99.

¹⁰⁴ Cathala, *Without Flowers or Rifle*, 18.

¹⁰⁵ Werth, *Russia at War*, 898-99.

Soviets. Their failure to report accurately on the camps and the reluctance of the American newspapers and commanders to believe the stories meant that American soldiers remained ignorant of the Nazis' plan, even after the first camps were discovered.

By the spring of 1945, ninety-one American, British, and French divisions, containing approximately 4.5 million soldiers, 17,000 tanks, 63,000 artillery pieces, and 28,000 aircraft, advanced deeply into German territory.¹⁰⁶ U.S. troops shared the sense that victory was imminent. By first light on April 4, elements of the American 4th Armored Division, which had been fighting since July 1944, approached the concentration camp Ohrdruf.¹⁰⁷ Its supporting infantry, the 89th "Middle West" Division, had entered Europe in late January, 1945 and Germany on March 10, and had been progressing non-stop for weeks.¹⁰⁸ Since they arrived on the continent, neither unit had respite from fighting and were forced to sleep in foxholes.

One trooper, reflecting on his company's time in the German countryside, remembered being surrounded by, "rolling, bouncy hills, green slopes . . . venerable stone bridges dating back to Roman times, charming little farmhouses."¹⁰⁹ Though picturesque, the scenery only made men from the Middle West Division more eager to

¹⁰⁶ Charles MacDonald, *The Last Offensive: The European Theater of Operations* (University Press of the Pacific, 2005), 322, 478.

¹⁰⁷ "Order of Battle of the US Army - WWII - ETO 4th Armored Division" (Washington, DC: US Army Center of Military History): 448.

¹⁰⁸ "Order of Battle of the US Army - WWII - ETO 89th Infantry Division" (Washington, DC: US Army Center of Military History): 448.

¹⁰⁹ John McManus, *Hell Before their Very Eyes* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2015), 1.

return home. But even as they conducted war against the SS and fugitives who remained in the magnificent landscape, there was an even greater and more despicable juxtaposition to come. As the infantrymen, accompanied by their armored support, moved through the forested region, they entered the town of Ohrdruf, thirty kilometers southwest of Erfurt, the central-German state of Thuringia's capital.

Ohrdruf was a satellite camp of Buchenwald, a major concentration camp located approximately thirty miles to the east. Ohrdruf was originally built in 1938 as a command center for German High Command but was never used. Instead, planners refurbished the area into a penitentiary and given to Adolf Hitler by Heinrich Himmler as a present for his birthday. Deep concrete tunnels and thick communication wire remained. The advancing Americans did not immediately understand what they had discovered. One GI, Leavitt Anderson, was perplexed by the intricate buildings, some as deep as nine stories underground, lined with "the most sophisticated electronic switching equipment."¹¹⁰ Thousands of slave laborers, housed nearby in a small camp positioned outside the actual perimeter, built the complex. Unlike many of Ohrdruf's prisoners, who had been marched away to escape the American lines, the sub-camp's occupants were executed and dumped into a freshly dug mass grave.¹¹¹ Bathing facilities were nonexistent in Ohrdruf, and the prisoners were infested with lice. They were crowded into one-hundred by thirty-foot barracks constructed from local surplus

¹¹⁰ Leavitt Anderson, Unpublished memoir (Released in 2006 by Colonel Don Patton, US Army, Retired), 97.

¹¹¹ Fourth Armored Division, Combat Command A, Combat History and After Action Report, April 1945, US Army Unit Records, Book 1, Box 78, Records of Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF); National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

materials, which lacked both windows and electricity. Many structures leaked or collapsed in inclement weather. Ohrdruf's brutal conditions contrasted sharply with the fairytale landscape the soldiers traversed before entering the camp. This contrast astounded the soldiers, who could not comprehend the atrocities committed by the Nazis.

The GIs who entered Ohrdruf on April 4, 1945 were the first American combat troops to discover and liberate a concentration camp. What they found was unlike anything they had ever seen, in either civilian life or military service. Historian John McManus notes that they "had no historical base point against which to compare such horrid conditions and misdeeds; they had never heard of the Holocaust."¹¹² When the first GIs cut the locks on the gates, there were few surviving prisoners; less than 250 of the approximately 10,000 who had been registered in early 1945.¹¹³ Sergeant Ralph Craig remembered "so many corpses they were beyond counting."¹¹⁴ Most survivors were eastern-European slave laborers. To date, US forces had only discovered small work camps; Ohrdruf was, however, the first installation discovered by the Americans that was specifically intended to work prisoners to death.¹¹⁵ Though some soldiers were privy to reports from the Red Army about Nazi atrocities, they disregarded them as inflated propaganda. The first men into Ohrdruf had been moving rapidly for weeks

¹¹² McManus, *Hell Before their Very Eyes*, 15.

¹¹³ Twelfth Army Group, Publicity and Psychological Warfare Group, Report on Ohrdruf, April 12, 1945, Record Group 331.54.151. Records of Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF); National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

¹¹⁴ Ralph Craib, US Army, Retired, "The Forgotten Death Camp," *San Francisco Chronicle* (April 9, 1995).

¹¹⁵ Stone, *The Liberation of the Camps*, 65-66.

and hardly had a chance to listen to briefings, let alone read newspapers or bulletins. Both the 4th Armored Division and the 89th Infantry Division claimed to have entered first, but the units advanced in conjunction with one another, with the infantry escorting the tanks, and it was likely that the mixed force entered simultaneously.

A few pitiful survivors met the first riflemen who entered the camp. The soldiers stood at the gates and perimeter, stunned at what they discovered. There was a “brooding silence” amongst the soldiers who “seemed reluctant, out of rage or respect for the victims, to say a word.”¹¹⁶ The enlisted GIs showered the few survivors with “food and chocolate and other treats that I had not known for almost five years,” remembered Andrew Rosener, a recently freed prisoner.¹¹⁷ Corpses were strewn about, and some barracks were still smoldering from the previous day when the fleeing SS had burned hundreds of prisoners alive, leaving a repugnant smell that nauseated the liberators as they lingered.¹¹⁸ David Cohen, a Jew from New York and a photographer with the 4th Armored Division, was frozen with horror and could not close his camera’s shutter as he contemplated what he saw. “I couldn’t take it; I was sick; I felt like throwing up . . . I wanted to take pictures, but I couldn’t,” he remembered.¹¹⁹ Cohen noticed that all his colleagues were shocked, saddened, and angry. The Catholic chaplain tried to recite prayers in Hebrew, but he too was overcome with sobs.¹²⁰ Cohen

¹¹⁶ McManus, *Hell Before their Very Eyes*, 15.

¹¹⁷ Andrew Rosener, statement, April 23, 1995. Accessed February 8th, 2018. www.89infdivww2.org.

¹¹⁸ David Cohen, statement in *Liberating the Concentration Camps: GIs Remember* (Washington, DC: National Museum of American Jewish Military History, 1993), 11.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

did not remember feeling angry because he was too numb to feel anything but horror and sadness.¹²¹

Lieutenant Colonel (future general) Alvin Irzyk was a professional, high ranking officer who had been wounded twice, received the United States' second highest award for valor (the Distinguished Service Cross), and two silver stars as well. Irzyk had commanded the 4th Armored Division since Normandy and had seen his share of brutal combat. But when he entered Ohrdruf, he temporarily fell out of touch with his senses and his command. "I had seen the most horrible wounds, soldiers on both sides killed, dismembered," he recalled. "By this time, I believed I was somewhat hardened and understood deaths on the battlefield, but the examples of the deliberate and bestial suffering and death . . . was far beyond my comprehension."¹²² Even the most senior officers were lost in a daze with little control over themselves. Irzyk's brief loss of personal control did not disrupt the liberation or have lasting implications, only because the men under his command were equally isolated and paralyzed. The colonel and his men could do nothing except share their provisions with the victims.

Every officer and soldier's dismay was amplified by their unpreparedness. Captain Albert Schwartz from Texas recalled, "Although there had been rumors about concentration camps, which we had dismissed as exaggerations, we were stunned by what we found - an absolute abomination."¹²³ Soldiers who had family in Europe were

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Alvin Irzyk, *A Warrior's Quilt of Personal Military History* (Raleigh, NC: Ivy House Publishing Group, 2010), 193.

¹²³ Albert Schwartz, written statement in 1996, *Liberating the Concentration Camps*, 21.

equally ignorant about the Holocaust. Norman Brody, whose Jewish family had resided in Eastern Europe, “had vaguely heard that something was happening to the Jews, but I didn’t know what until we arrived.”¹²⁴ Private Willy Herbst had been incarcerated in the Paderborn concentration camp until 1939, when he was able to obtain American immigration papers and flee the continent. He enlisted in the US Army in 1943 and returned to liberate Germany in 1945. He was dismayed by how terrible the camps had become. “Even though I had been in a concentration camp before, I had never realized what might have been in store for me.”¹²⁵ He was later informed that the remainder of his Jewish family, who had not been fortunate enough to escape to America, had been executed at Dachau.

After he shared what provisions he had, the 4th Armored Division’s civil affairs officer, Lieutenant Colonel James Van Wagenen, immediately did what he could to obtain justice. Since the Wehrmacht and SS units fled, the Americans declared *all* Germans responsible for the camp, and Van Wagenen summoned the nearby town’s mayor, Albert Schneider, to the site.¹²⁶ Schneider was a known Nazi, but he had no open ties to the SS. Van Wagenen remembered that Schneider was shaken by what he saw. The mayor hinted that he had known about Ohrdruf when he mumbled, “There were rumors in town, but we did not believe these.”¹²⁷ He was then ordered to fetch

¹²⁴ Norman Brody, Statement in *Liberating the Concentration Camps*, 29.

¹²⁵ Willy Herbst, Statement in *Liberating the Concentration Camps*, 43.

¹²⁶ Christopher E. Maurello, *Forced Confrontation: The Politics of Dead Bodies in Germany at the End of World War II* (New York: Lexington Books, 2017), 28-32; Irzyk, *A Warrior’s Quilt of Personal Military History*, 203.

¹²⁷ McManus, *Hell Before their Very Eyes*, 17.

more civilians to witness the camp and aid in burials. The mayor, however, was overcome by guilt, or understood he was likely to be punished for the camp. Schneider, along with his wife, cut their wrists and committed suicide.

Other officers who witnessed the death and emaciation at Ohrdruf held not only the Wehrmacht or SS responsible for Nazi atrocities, but also ordinary Germans who had voted them into power in the first place. Walter Siefert, a member of the Medical Attachment to the 354th Regiment, wrote about the despicable German civilians, saying, “The population of Ohrdruff (*Sic*) knew very well [what] was going on . . . the people of Ohrdruf were rather wealthy because of their supply of cheap labor.”¹²⁸ When the German people were exposed to the camp, he bitterly noted, “Even now the people had no feeling of guilt whatsoever.”¹²⁹ Colonel Hayden Sears, Commanding Officer of Combat Command A, 4th Armored Division, spoke for many when he declared, “We hold the whole German nation responsible because of its support and toleration of the Nazi government.”¹³⁰ Their disgust was only exacerbated as prisoners revealed how they had been tortured and worked to death by not only the SS, but also civilians. “They did not have any human feelings toward us,” recalled one surviving prisoner, Gregory Kravchenko.¹³¹ “At work, civilian Germans beat us to death,” he told an American war correspondent.¹³² The Americans rejected the notion that the Germans knew nothing

¹²⁸ Walter Siefert, Unpublished Memoir, 1945, 27.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid, 19.

¹³¹ Saul Levitt, “Ohrdruf Camp,” *Yank: The Army Weekly*, May 18, 1945.

¹³² Ibid.

about what was going on, but their anger at the civilian population was limited to forced labor and did not result in violent retribution.

Two weeks before Dachau's liberation, Ohrdruf seemed to prove that Russian propaganda was true after all; it was evident that Nazi Germany had been systematically working hundreds of thousands of prisoners to death. General Dwight D. Eisenhower, commander of all Western Allied forces in Europe, was notified of the camp's existence by Major General Walton Walker, Commander of the American XX Corps, and Major General Troy Middleton, Commander of the American VIII Corps. Walker and Middleton ordered the site be left undisturbed, and Eisenhower and his staff arrived at the camp on April 12. Though briefed on the camp, Eisenhower was informed that he could never comprehend or understand the camp unless he saw it in person.¹³³ Eisenhower had been in the Army since before the First World War, planned and led the greatest invasion in history, and subsequently coordinated the entire Allied effort. He was certainly a battle-hardened flag officer, toughened by months of decision making which had resulted in hundreds of thousands of American, British, Canadian, French, and German deaths. But even he was dumbstruck by the carnage, unprepared by the documents and letters he had received. Immediately after he witnessed the camp, Eisenhower wrote to the General of the Army, George C. Marshall, that Ohrdruf was "Beyond the American mind to comprehend . . . [the] cruelty and bestiality were so overpowering as to leave me a bit sick."¹³⁴

¹³³ General Dwight D. Eisenhower, Letter to General George C. Marshall, April 15, 1945, George C. Marshall Collection, Record Group 41.03.30, Lexington, VA.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

Two of America's other most experienced and respected commanders, General Omar Bradley and Lieutenant General George S. Patton, accompanied Eisenhower to the site and were equally appalled. As they toured the camp, onlookers noted "how battle-hardened, yet disgusted the men were."¹³⁵ "I was too revolted to speak," and both "stunned and numbed," Bradley remembered.¹³⁶ He too was a career soldier, experienced in combat and leadership, who began his career, like Eisenhower, before World War I. They were especially disturbed when a former prisoner, "showed us how the blood had congealed in coarse black scabs where the starving prisoners had torn out the entrails of the dead for food."¹³⁷ The experience was too much for General Patton, who escaped behind a shed and vomited.



Figure 2. Generals Dwight D. Eisenhower (Left) and George S. Patton (Far right) talk with survivors at Ohrdruf in the Supreme Allied Commander's first visit to a concentration camp. Photo by Felix Grad, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

¹³⁵ McManus, *Hell Before their Very Eyes*, 21.

¹³⁶ Omar Bradley, *A Soldier's Story* (New York: Henry and Holt Company, 1951), 539.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

After the discovery of Ohrdruf, Eisenhower wrote that his soldiers would no longer be “having trouble hating them [Germans].”¹³⁸ Surely, the general believed, his soldiers would share his idea that the Germans had to be held collectively accountable for the mass murder. “I think I was never so angry in my life,” Eisenhower later said. “I believe he [German war criminals] must be punished and I will hold out for that forever.”¹³⁹ The Supreme Commander was so disturbed and infuriated by the Nazis’ practices that he instructed American and British governments to send newspaper editors and legislators to see Ohrdruf’s appalling conditions for themselves. “I felt that the evidence should be immediately placed before the American and British publics in a fashion that would leave no room for cynical doubt.”¹⁴⁰

Eisenhower and his subordinate commanders knew their men would be overwhelmed if they discovered another camp, and understood that the next liberation might not be uncontested like Ohrdruf. While he debated the best course of action, the remainder of the Third Army continued moving at twenty miles-per-hour, penetrating deeper into the Fatherland. The Seventh Army’s 6th Armored Division and 80th Infantry Division were some of the most experienced combat units in Europe, and both had participated in every major engagement since Normandy (the 80th Infantry “Blue Ridge” Division had suffered over 25,000 casualties by April 1945).¹⁴¹ Much like the

¹³⁸ General Dwight D. Eisenhower, “Eyes Only” cable to General George C. Marshall, April 19, 1945, Eisenhower Pre-Presidential Papers, Box 134, Eisenhower Library, Abilene, KS.

¹³⁹ General Dwight D. Eisenhower, Interview with Sherman Witt, March 1, 1965, Box 34, Eisenhower Library, Abilene, KS.

¹⁴⁰ Dwight Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe* (New York: Doubleday, 1948), 408-409.

¹⁴¹ “Order of Battle of the US Army - WWII - ETO 80th Infantry Division” (Washington, DC: US Army Center of Military History): 268.

4th Armored Division and Middle West Division, these seasoned veterans were rapidly advancing when they discovered an aberration from the beautiful Thuringian countryside.

Captain Robert Bennett and his southernmost column of the 6th Armored Division captured fifteen SS troopers after they emerged from a nearby forest. His soldiers were searching their German prisoners when Bennett was surprised to see approximately fifty emaciated figures emerge from the same wooded region, armed with German rifles and submachine guns, yet speaking Russian. To Bennett's dismay, the group approached the Americans and subsequently tried to kill the German prisoners with their bare hands, possibly because they thought the SS deserved a slow or more personal death, rather than a quick demise.¹⁴² The language barrier prevented the GIs from immediately understanding what was happening. Through much gesticulating and rudimentary translation, the armed and emaciated figures indicated that they had come from a nearby prison called Buchenwald, which the Americans' SS prisoners had recently abandoned. After the final SS sentries abandoned their posts on April 11, prisoners forced their way into the compound's armory. They collected whatever weapons remained, and chased the fleeing Germans all the way to the American lines.¹⁴³

¹⁴² Robert Bennett, S3, interview with Lieutenant Hollis Alpert, April 21, 1945, Combat Interview-283, Records of Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF); National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

¹⁴³ Christopher Burney, *The Dungeon Democracy* (New York, NY: Duell, Sloan, and Pearce, 1946), 123-136.

The camp at Buchenwald was established in 1937 in the Ettersburg Mountain region, a place where famous literature had been conceived and composed, the landscape including the “celebrated oak tree where [Johann Wolfgang von] Goethe was said to have composed his works.” The tree was visible from the concentration camp where more than two-hundred and fifty thousand people were eventually held.¹⁴⁴ The camp held both criminals and political opponents of the Nazis, as well as children and religious exiles, and social deviants, such as Jews or Roma. Infamous for its horrible medical experiments, many “scientists” tested the efficacy of vaccines and treatments against contagious diseases such as typhus, typhoid, cholera, and diphtheria, as well as experiments to “cure” homosexuality, which resulted in hundreds of deaths.¹⁴⁵ The internal workings of the camp were also unique; communists, criminals, and other groups of prisoners routinely killed each other in an attempt to better their own chance for survival.¹⁴⁶

With the sound of American columns growing from a distant rumble to a constant roar, the SS guards fled the camp at 12:10PM on April 11. Their disorganized scramble was made more chaotic when communist prisoners attempted to seize the guard towers and abandoned weapons, and successfully captured several fleeing SS. Other communist prisoners formed groups and pursued the escaping SS into the

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Buchenwald,” Holocaust Encyclopedia, Washington, DC.

¹⁴⁶ McManus, *Hell Before their Very Eyes*, 29.

surrounding woods, killing most of the men they tracked down.¹⁴⁷ In total, Buchenwald's prisoners tracked down seventy-six former SS guards, most of which were beaten to death or executed.¹⁴⁸ The fifty malnourished Russian men who met Captain Bennett could not effectively convey what kind of place from which they had emerged. The language barrier made it impossible for the Americans to understand the magnitude of the camp, which still held twenty-one thousand people, now under former-Communist prisoners' control, on April 11. Bennett recalled that he did not think he could "spare many troops to investigate," because he did not recognize what would soon be uncovered and his orders were to continue his penetration into the collapsed German lines.¹⁴⁹ Bennett delegated two of his officers and an M-8 "Greyhound" armored car to investigate the area. Captain Frederic Keffer sped towards the site and soon discovered a barbed-wire surrounded compound, filled with thousands of prisoners who erupted with joy when they spotted his American uniform.

Upon entering the camp, Captain Keffer was "thrown into the air, caught, thrown" up again by the deprived men. "How the men found such a surge of strength in their emaciated condition was one of those bodily wonders in which the spirit overcomes all weaknesses of the flesh," he remembered.¹⁵⁰ The two Americans entered

¹⁴⁷ Sixth Armored Division, "After Action Report," April 1945, George Hoffman Papers, Box 8, Record Group MS.01.26, Washington, DC, George Washington University.

¹⁴⁸ Theresa Ast, "Confronting the Holocaust: American Soldiers Who Liberated the Concentration Camps," PhD Dissertation (Emory University, 2000), 30-31.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Captain Frederic Keffer, Interview with Lieutenant Hollis Alpert, April 21, 1945, Combat Interview-284, Records of Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEP); National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

a camp that had visible signs of disease, neglect, torture. They did not encounter any German soldiers and, unlike Ohrdruf, there was no immediate and omnipresent sight of death. Buchenwald's prisoners had been tasked with removing the dead for burial or cremation. The Communist prisoners assumed control of the camp after the SS fled, twenty-four hours before the Americans arrived, and instructed their fellow prisoners to properly dispose of the dead; they removed most remaining corpses by day's end.¹⁵¹

Such a "clean" compound may have presented the Americans with less initial shock than other camps where GIs who entered immediately encountered decaying bodies; at Buchenwald, the two Americans witnessed approximately one-hundred exposed bodies that were in the process of being buried. By the next day, the dead were no longer visible.¹⁵² The instructions issued by the Communists might have also lessened the psychological blow because the prisoners, after the SS departed, were organized into burial details and food distribution groups, and some even provided rudimentary medical treatment. While they worked in primitive conditions with inadequate supplies, the stronger prisoners were able to care briefly for their comrades before the Americans arrived. Equally important was the fact that they were the only two Americans in a sea of jubilant, foreign-speaking prisoners, whose joyous cheers might have also checked any angry reactions. Keffer left the camp at nightfall to brief his commanding officer, who then diverted a major element of the 6th Armored Division to the area.

¹⁵¹ Sixth Armored Division, "After Action Report."

¹⁵² Keffer, Interview with Alpert, April 21, 1945.

Before the main force arrived, another small American party, whose eighteen-page report would provide the most famous look at a concentration camp's liberation, visited Buchenwald. Egon Fleck and Lieutenant Edward Tenenbaum, analysts for the Twelfth Army, arrived at the camp when they heard it was no longer under SS control. Armed prisoners, who stood at attention and "cheered at the sight of an American uniform," greeted them.¹⁵³ The only living SS either American encountered were "securely staked to the ground."¹⁵⁴ Fleck and Tenenbaum, now the only Americans in the camp, remained overnight. The next day, the two men met cautious scouts who approached the camp after Captain Keffer had briefed their officers.



Figure 3. Buchenwald's shattered and decimated interior totally differed from the camp's non-descriptive exterior, but relatively few corpses were strewn about. Here, two survivors, each weighing approximately eighty pounds, greet their American liberators. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Betty Cunliffe.

¹⁵³ Egon Fleck and First Lieutenant Edward Tenenbaum, *Buchenwald, a Preliminary Report*, April 24, 1945, Twelfth Army Group Publicity and Psychological Warfare Group, Record Group 331.54.151, National Archives, Washington, DC.

¹⁵⁴ Keffer, Interview with Alpert, April 21, 1945.

The combat troops who arrived after Keffer, Fleck, and Tenenbaum were infantrymen, supporting the 6th Armored Division's lead elements. Unlike at Ohrdruf, these soldiers knew they were approaching a camp that held the decimated ranks of civilian prisoners, even if they had not imagined the true scale of the complex. They had been briefed on what to expect and had been offered a few hours to think about what they would soon discover.¹⁵⁵ When they arrived, there were even fewer bodies than Keffer, Fleck, and Tenenbaum had witnessed. The seriously sick were being cared for with the little supplies the camp had, and armed former-prisoners paraded around the compound, resembling some order and pride in their triumph over death.¹⁵⁶ Though there were hardly any visible dead, the living were a pitiful sight and the Americans were disturbed by their condition. Major General Hobart "Hap" Gay accompanied the armor to Buchenwald, and furiously scribbled his hatred for the Germans, which had been aggravated by the camp's conditions. "The sight and stench of these living dead . . . was entirely too much. No race and no people other than those which are strictly sadists could commit crimes like these."¹⁵⁷ The relative calm of Buchenwald allowed soldiers time to digest and process the situation. Men like Gay, who were not frantically shuffling life-saving materials to and fro, explored the camp tried to interact with the prisoners, all the while boiling with anger towards the Germans.

¹⁵⁵ A Company, 317th Infantry Regiment, Morning Report, April 13, 1945, National Personnel Records Center, St. Louis, MO; Sixth Armored Division, "After Action Report," April 1945.

¹⁵⁶ Fleck and Tenenbaum, *Buchenwald, a Preliminary Report*.

¹⁵⁷ Major General Hobart "Hap" Gay, diary (April 14, 1945), United States Military History Institute, Carlisle, PA.

The GIs had no opportunity to interact with the SS guards who fled the previous day. Warrant Officer Dwight Pearce took one severely beaten guard into captivity, one of the few surviving SS who had been made into “a bloody mess” and left for dead by the prisoners.¹⁵⁸ “I felt the captors were less than human beings,” Pearce remembered. “I felt the country was run by a madman, who had a lot of willing accomplices. We all felt deep hostility toward the Germans before we saw this concentration camp . . . and this just added fuel to our flames.” Indicating his physical anger, he added, “I had a feeling of revenge.”¹⁵⁹ Staff Sergeant Martin Renie, a squad leader in the 317th Infantry division, could not keep himself from breaking down and sobbing. “It was all so



Figure 4. American soldiers march into Buchenwald’s main gate. This photo, when compared with Figure 3 above, gives an indication of the juxtaposition the liberators experienced. From the outside, the compound seems auspicious, almost like a large farmhouse. April 11th, 1945. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Virginia Longest.

¹⁵⁸ Dwight Pearce, interview with Beth Machinot, August 7, 1978, Fred Crawford Witness to the Holocaust Project, Box 3, Record Identifier: 06080100CFLI00041001000, Emory University.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

fantastically unbelievable that we were in complete shock . . . I was ashamed of the whole human race.”¹⁶⁰

Led by the Communist faction in the camp, prisoners succeeded in apprehending several SS during their confused departure. The dead SS and the beaten man whom Pearce had discovered were victims of the prisoners’ rage, which had accumulated through years of bitter mistreatment and neglect.¹⁶¹ The prisoners felt they were owed their justice and, likely to their surprise, the Americans did not intervene or stop their vigilante justice. Private Victor Geller felt no guilt in his role as a bystander. He argued that he and his fellow GIs “had not suffered what the survivor[s] had suffered,” and suggested that because the Americans were so angry, maybe some “agreed that the Nazi[s] deserved to be tortured.”¹⁶² Though they did not directly execute any Germans, their passive acquiescence indicated their contempt for the German guards. It was clear to all parties that the SS had been so cruel to their victims that spot-justice was warranted.

The GIs who witnessed the camp understood the brutality for what it was: the systematic and bureaucratic annihilation of Nazi opponents. Much like how General Gay condemned the German people to all be sadists for allowing such horrors to proceed, the men under his command were equally angry, “certainly with the Nazis

¹⁶⁰ Martin “Dick” Renie, “Buchenwald Errata – I Was Not the First,” *The United Service Magazine* 323 (September 1968).

¹⁶¹ McManus, *Hell Before their Very Eyes*, 29.

¹⁶² Victor Geller, unpublished memoir (Washington, DC: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum), 9-11.

but, in a larger sense, with all Germans.”¹⁶³ “The true nature of fascism was too incredibly vicious for acceptance by decent people,” John Glustrom remembered. He believed the liberation brought “the degeneracy of the German people” into focus.¹⁶⁴ The angered and shocked Americans finally appreciated the sentiment that Red Army correspondent Konstantin Simonov and General Eisenhower shared. Though they had been informed before they entered the camp, the GIs, and especially the officers who likely received extended briefings, were, much like the men who stumbled onto Ohrdruf, overcome with anger and grief when they discovered the equally horrific sight at Buchenwald. There, a slight understanding of what to expect, the less-chaotic and more organized environment, and lack of Wehrmacht or SS guards resulted in much anger amongst the GIs, but no direct reprisals. No similar luxuries, however, were offered to the soldiers who liberated Dachau a few days later.

¹⁶³ McManus, *Hell Before their Very Eyes*, 46.

¹⁶⁴ John Glustrom, interview with Ed Sheehee, November 6, 1978, Fred Crawford Witness to the Holocaust Project, Atlanta, GA: Emory University, Box 3, Record Identifier 06080100CFLI00041001000.

Chapter 3: The Liberation of Dachau—

“We had lost all hope of ever seeing you, but you had finally come.”¹⁶⁵

The prison camp at Dachau began its tenure as a penitentiary for Adolf Hitler’s political enemies in 1933. Contrary to popular belief, Dachau was not the first penitentiary established by the Third Reich. That gruesome distinction is held by Nohra, in Thuringia, established a few weeks before Dachau, and Oranienburg, established near Berlin only a day or two prior to Dachau.¹⁶⁶ Though the Nazis constructed all camps at roughly the same time, Dachau became the epitome of what the SS hoped to accomplish thanks to Commandant Theodore Eiche, who made it the model system for all other Nazi concentration camps. The main facility was located barely nine miles from the major industrial city of Munich and many civilians lived in and around the surrounding area. Dachau was initially constructed to hold just under 5,000 prisoners, many of whom were German communists, social democrats, and other political opponents of the Nazis.¹⁶⁷ Homosexuals, Roma, and repeat criminal offenders soon joined their ranks. These prisoners were often forced to wear humiliating triangular patches like the infamous yellow triangular patches worn by Jewish enemies

¹⁶⁵ Nerin Gun, *The Day of the Americans* (New York: Fleet Publishing Corp., 1966), 18.

¹⁶⁶ “‘Ein Konzentrationslager für politische Gegner’: In der Nähe von Dachau,” *Münchener Neueste Nachrichten* (March 21, 1933.); John McManus, *Hell Before Their Very Eyes*, (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2015), 66. While these previously constructed installations were not built to Dachau’s scale or for the same brutal intentions, they were all built by the Nazis to hold the state’s political enemies.

¹⁶⁷ “‘Ein Konzentrationslager für politische Gegner’”; “Dachau, Establishment of the Camp,” *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Holocaust Encyclopedia*.

of the state; “P” for *Polinisch* (Polish), “F” for *Französisch* (French), and so on. In 1937, SS officials began expanding the barracks and original camp grounds.¹⁶⁸ Nazis forced prisoners to conduct their labor in appalling conditions and they constructed a large number of buildings in a little under a year of work. The increased demand for goods during the buildup to a wartime economy prompted the camp’s commanders to admit more prisoners. Several years before any official declaration of war, SS officials apprehended an increasing number of capable laborers for the camps.

On November 9 and 10, 1938, a wave of violence took place across Germany and Austria, remembered as the *Kristallnacht*, or “Crystal Night.” The pogrom occurred after Herschel Grynszpan, a Jew living in Paris, murdered a German diplomat named Ernst vom Rath. He was angry because all Polish Jews, his family included, had been expelled from Germany with only a night’s notice. Nazi officials used the incident as an excuse to attack Jewish institutions; Joseph Goebbels publicly emphasized Nazi disapproval of the Jews, which prompted German and Austrian attacks against their businesses and people.¹⁶⁹ Nazi activists destroyed over 250 synagogues while the police arrested and sent nearly ten thousand Jews to Dachau. The Nazis released many of these detainees within a few months but threatened those who had been “rehabilitated” with violence and further interment if they spoke openly of the violent treatment they suffered at Dachau. Hundreds continued to be held as prisoners so the SS guards and commanders could learn how to run a brutal establishment more effectively. Dachau set precedents: Eiche worked out systems of collective punishment

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ “Rohm Purge,” *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*, Holocaust Encyclopedia.

and public torture to instill “discipline” in prisoners and guards alike, and subsequent camps’ structures were also developed. Thereafter, “each camp reflected Dachau’s example of unrestrained confinement, torture, forced labor, and murder.”¹⁷⁰ Dachau’s personnel oversaw the thirty-two barracks that would hold over thirty-thousand men at its peak, and interned men were purposely worked to death because the SS saw their labor as expendable and replaceable.¹⁷¹

Dachau’s purpose and its main function throughout the war was emphasized by the term *Vernichtung durch Arbeit* (annihilation through labor). The labor camp’s objective was to extract the greatest amount of physical production from the prisoners before they died to stimulate the German wartime economy. Guards woke the men at either 4:00am or 5:00am, depending on the season, and did not return to their barracks until 9:00pm.¹⁷² Work details were tasked with construction assignments and forced to move massive stone blocks, which were used by the Germans to reinforce buildings or fortifications, with nothing but their bare backs for support.¹⁷³ Eicke wanted his SS men to represent the strength of Germany and refused any signs of weakness. “His intention was to lay a foundation of hostility in his SS men toward the prisoners,” wrote Rudolf

¹⁷⁰ Kenneth Mellanby, “Medical Experiments On Human Beings in Concentration Camps in Nazi Germany,” *The British Medical Journal* 4490 (1947): 141.

¹⁷¹ Gun, *The Day of the Americans*, 162.

¹⁷²“Liberation of Dachau,” 45th Infantry Division Monthly History, April, 1945, Box 1020, Documentary Sources Relating to the Holocaust, Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, Abilene, KS.

¹⁷³ Ibid, 36-41.

Hoss, Eicke's colleague and the commandant of the camp at Auschwitz.¹⁷⁴ By 1945 tens of thousands of forced laborers had been worked or starved to death.

In addition to the political opponents and religious victims, wartime Dachau frequently held downed Allied pilots who were the "all too-frequent" victims of a commandant's personal fury.¹⁷⁵ American and British pilots were designated "Terrorflieger" or "terror fliers," and the Germans argued the Geneva Convention (which protected captured combatants from mistreatment and was frequently ignored by the Axis powers) did not apply to criminals. When the 45th Infantry Division arrived at Dachau on April 29, they were sickened to learn that only a few days prior, the SS in the camp executed one such pilot before they and their comrades fled the camp. SS officer Menrath and his clerk drove Lieutenant George F. Brown Jr., a fighter pilot shot down over Germany in 1945, to a bomb crater, threw him in, and shot him four or five times. Wounded and on his knees, Brown begged for mercy, but the Nazis shot him in the head with a pistol.¹⁷⁶ GIs who heard the story from former prisoners on April 29 were duly enraged.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁴ Hans-Gunter Richardi, Elenor Philipp, Monika Lucking, Greg Bond, eds., *Dachau: A Guide to Its Contemporary History* (Dachau, Germany: City of Dachau Office of Cultural Affairs, 2001), 74-75.

¹⁷⁵ *United States v. Christian Menrath et al.* 12-765 (War Crimes Branch, United States Army, Europe, 24-27 February 1947), Record Group 549.1.9, National Archives at College Park, MD.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Felix Sparks and several other 45th Infantry Division soldiers referenced the anger they felt when they were told about, "a recently executed American officer." Though they never provided much detail on the man, it can be deduced that they were referring to Lieutenant Brown; Kershaw, *The Liberator*, 270.

Airmen were not the only unique guests at the camp. Unlike Majdanek and Ohrdruf, Dachau housed dozens of “scientists” and “doctors” who used the prisoners as live test subjects for experiments. These procedures were so horrific that the American public struggled to believe their stories. “Some people in this country,” Dr. Kenneth Mellanby wrote during postwar Dachau trials of Nazi war criminals, “have suggested that the accounts which they have read of these experiments, and of condition in concentration camps generally, have been willfully distorted as propaganda in order to intensify hatred against the Germans.”¹⁷⁸ Like Eisenhower had predicted, civilians far removed from the Holocaust still failed to recognize its scale. Such a fact indicates that if the GIs who liberated Dachau *had* been made aware of the camp’s conditions, they still could not have been mentally prepared.

What disturbed the GIs was that the camp’s hospitals and laboratories, at first glance, appeared to be legitimate areas for research. But they were actually used for what prosecutors eventually termed “thanatology” (the science of producing death).¹⁷⁹ Experimenters did not advance medical science, but were assigned to Dachau to produce methods of speedy extermination. Particularly cruel methods were used at Dachau, and Mellanby, a doctor sent to Nuremburg to examine the evidence, was sickened and saddened by the Nazis’ practices.

The inmates were subjected to cruel experiments; victims were immersed in cold water until their body temperature was reduced [and] they died immediately. Other experiments included high-altitude experiments in pressure chambers, experiments to determine how long human beings could survive in freezing water, experiments with poison bullets, experiments

¹⁷⁸ Mellanby, “Medical Experiments on Human Beings,” 148.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid, 149.

with contagious diseases, and experiments dealing with sterilization of men and women by x rays and other methods . . . Thousands of individuals were the involuntary victims of medical experiments and a high proportion died. Many more died as a result of medical neglect or improper treatment. Finally, thousands of prisoners were put to death by methods devised and executed by physicians engaged in 'research' into the problem of killing as rapidly and expeditiously as possible.¹⁸⁰

Prisoners died in such large numbers that it was impossible for the camps to effectively dispose of the bodies and the stench of death could be smelled for miles in all directions.¹⁸¹

Prisoners were directed out in working parties, and also hired out to townspeople, businesses, and other public services that required labor. It was not uncommon, one survivor remembered, for a prisoner to collapse or die in a communal space, but he never saw any German civilians help those who succumbed.¹⁸² Men who collapsed from their workload were simply left in the streets to die.¹⁸³ The men worked day and night in the main compound, at one of the dozens of sub-camps, or under direct civilian supervision. Moreover, many of the work camps swelled in population following the German decision to keep their prisoners out of the hands of the Russian army, which was advancing from the East towards the Reich's heartland. The Germans uprooted Eastern prisoners and marched them westward to work camps such as

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Felix Sparks, Letter to Colonel Robert Sholly, (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, Rainbow Division Veterans Association, March 12, 1992).

¹⁸² United States Seventh Army, *Dachau*, pamphlet, May 1945, 42.

¹⁸³ Barbara Distel, *Dachau Concentration Camp* (Dachau: Comité International de Dachau, 2005), 4-7.

Dachau.¹⁸⁴ Prisoner testimonies made it clear that, despite claims to the contrary, the citizens of Dachau were well aware of what was happening to camp inmates.¹⁸⁵ The German war machine's rail lines clattered night and day, bringing with them their dying human cargo. Their continued arrival only brought diseases and more deplorable conditions, and the circumstances preceding and during Dachau's liberation were worse than those at Ohrdruf, Buchenwald, or other American-liberated camps.

Lieutenant Colonel Felix Sparks, who liberated Dachau, was only 27 years old and hence one of the youngest battalion commanders in the army. The young Texan was no stranger to adversity. In 1933, when he was only sixteen years old, the copper mine his father worked at ceased operations thanks to the onset of the Great Depression. The Sparks family "counted themselves lucky to have running water," but that was all they had; their main source of food were the few animals the family managed to trap.¹⁸⁶ After he graduated high school as the "most gifted student in his senior year," Sparks sought jobs as a riveter and mechanic to no avail.¹⁸⁷ He enlisted in the army in 1935 and, over the next four years, saved enough money to attend college in Tucson, Arizona. After his first school year, Sparks entered a summer training camp for prospective officers, where his prior-enlistment and writing skills earned him an "outstanding cadet" commendation.¹⁸⁸ In 1940, as Hitler's armies enveloped Europe,

¹⁸⁴ Stone, *The Liberation of the Camps*, 11.

¹⁸⁵ Marcus J. Smith, *The Harrowing of Hell. Dachau* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1972), 64.

¹⁸⁶ Felix Sparks, Regis University lecture, "Stories from Wartime," (1998).

¹⁸⁷ Jim Sheeler, "One Last Honor," *Rocky Mountain News*, March 10, 2007.

¹⁸⁸ Sparks, Regis University Lecture.

Sparks was recalled for duty as a second lieutenant. He arrived at Fort Sill, Oklahoma in January, 1941 where his service commitment was supposed to end in a year. When Hitler declared war on the United States on December 11, 1941, however, Uncle Sam extended Sparks' service time for the duration of the war.

The Army promoted Sparks to captain in 1943 and his Second Battalion, 157th Infantry Regiment first experienced combat in Sicily, where they landed alongside the rest of the 45th Infantry Division "Thunderbirds" as a part of Operation *Husky*. Ironically, his division's insignia had been a swastika until 1938, when the Army, in response to Hitler's aggression in Europe changed it to the mythical thunderbird.¹⁸⁹ While leading Easy Company in an assault on Salerno, Italy, Sparks was wounded in the abdomen by "a splinter from a 40mm American anti-aircraft shell [that] had in fact penetrated all the way to his liver."¹⁹⁰ While recovering in a hospital in Africa, Sparks was informed that his wound made him "unfit for duty," and he would not be returned to his command. Sparks refused to be separated from his men, however, and he decided to sneak back to Italy. He visited a nearby airfield, located a B-17 "Flying Fortress" crew that was bound for Italy, and persuaded them to carry him as a stowaway across the Mediterranean.¹⁹¹ He was listed as absent without leave (AWOL), but after he successfully hitchhiked to the 45th Infantry Division's headquarters, he was permitted

¹⁸⁹ Hallowell, *Eager for Duty*, 142.

¹⁹⁰ Awards Files, 1943-1945, Records of U.S. Army Operational, Tactical, and Support Organizations (World War II and Thereafter), Record Group 497, Box 338; E Company, 157th Infantry Regiment, 45th Infantry Division, After Action Report, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

¹⁹¹ United States Department of Defense, The Adjutant General's Office, Felix Sparks' Distinguished Service Cross Recommendation File, Record Group 427, Box 2A, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

to rejoin his company without consequence. His commanding officer “knew how much [Sparks] was respected by his men in Easy Company and fellow officers,” and promised that he “would take care of it.”¹⁹²

If his Purple Heart and circuitous trek back to Italy did not reflect Sparks’ selflessness and dedication to his men and country, his conduct at Anzio spoke volumes. Beginning on January 22, 1944, Easy Company held a small portion of the American line for five days, constantly blunting German armor and infantry attacks. Both flanks of Sparks’ Easy Company crumbled, however, and German tanks were able to bypass the now-isolated GIs. Sparks was ordered to hold his position and was promised a tank platoon (five tanks and twenty-five infantrymen) as reinforcement. When the armor came, however, only two Sherman tanks arrived with no supporting infantry. Sparks made the most of what he had; he skillfully deployed the two tanks and called in artillery support to hold his position. While defending this area, his perimeter dissolved. On several occasions, Sparks cursed at distant howitzer gunners through the radio, compelling them to fire 155-millimeter shells on his position.¹⁹³ During a brief lull in the fighting, Sparks, now down to less than twenty healthy men, was approached by a German halftrack bearing a white flag. Sparks met with a German

¹⁹² Karl Mann, Oral History, National World War II Museum Digital Collections (New Orleans, LA, 2015).

¹⁹³ General Orders 415, Headquarters, 45th Infantry Division (1945), Record Group 338, Box 4016, National Archives, Medals and Awards Citations Files, 1941 - 1974, College Park, MD.

captain and the two officers agreed to a brief cease-fire to collect and evacuate their wounded.¹⁹⁴

Sparks' conduct was indicative of his personality and leadership: he loved his men and fought to keep them alive. He allowed the Wehrmacht captain to retrieve his wounded because he had no deep hatred for the Germans and saw no sense in letting the wounded suffer, especially if the cease-fire provided Sparks' men a brief respite. His company annihilated almost to a man, was subsequently ordered to retreat while the remainder of the battalion advanced; out of the approximately eighty soldiers who began the battle, Captain Sparks and fourteen enlisted men were the only non-casualties.¹⁹⁵ When he received a letter and a package from a missing man's mother, Sparks' eyes "filled with tears" when she asked him to "give the cookies she had baked" to comfort her son's friends, none of whom had survived.¹⁹⁶ During the battle for Anzio, the entire battalion, of which Sparks soon became the executive officer, lost hundreds of its experienced and hardened veterans. Fresh troopers replaced them in the days leading up to Operation *Dragoon*, the southern invasion of France.

He persevered during a similarly daunting scenario in Reipertswiller, France, in January 1945 when Sparks assumed command over his battalion after his Commanding Officer (CO), John McGinnis, to whom Sparks was the Executive Officer (XO), was wounded by German artillery. Sparks and his battalion were ordered to hold

¹⁹⁴ Felix Sparks, Emajen Buechner, ed., *Sparks: The Combat Diary of a Battalion Commander* (Metairie, LA: Thunderbird Press, 1991), 85.

¹⁹⁵ Felix Sparks, *157th Infantry Division Newsletter* (1989).

¹⁹⁶ Felix Sparks, Blair Lee, ed., *Déjà Vu* (Bloomington, IN: Author House, 2008), 165.

their eight-hundred yard line, despite heavy shelling and advancing German armor. Again, both of Sparks' flanks crumbled under *Panzer* attacks, and again the battalion found itself isolated and exposed.¹⁹⁷ Two rifle companies were attacked from the rear and cut off from Sparks' already isolated position. They remained inaccessible for four days, when Sparks personally led two Sherman tanks to relieve them. He stood atop one advancing tank, firing the .50 caliber machine gun until it ran out of ammunition. He then disembarked and charged, by himself, towards the pitiful American perimeter.¹⁹⁸ He remembered spotting wounded GIs and "successively dragged each soldier to the tank, loading them ... on the tank deck. The Germans did not fire at me ... although I was an easy target. We then backed the tanks back down the trail into our rear positions."¹⁹⁹ His actions earned him a Silver Star and the nomination for the Congressional Medal of Honor, but his battalion was almost annihilated after the five day ordeal. Johann Voss, a Wehrmacht soldier whose unit had fought against the 157th Infantry, discussed Sparks' actions in his own memoir, *Black Edelweiss*. He recalled watching an American officer, certainly Sparks, expose himself to rescue his wounded men, and that the Germans held their fire out of respect for his courage.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁷ 157th Infantry Division, After Action Report, January 1945, US Army Unit Records, Record Group 407, Box 1454, Records of Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF); National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

¹⁹⁸ N.A., *History of the 157th Infantry Regiment* (San Angelo, TX: Newsfoto Publishing Co., 1946).

¹⁹⁹ Felix Sparks, interview with Christopher Miskimon, "A Fighting Soldier of the 45th," *WWII History* (2016); Robert Frederick, General, letter to Walter O' Brien, Colonel, January 29, 1945, HQ Records 45th Infantry Division, Record Group 338.7.2, National Archives, Washington, DC.

²⁰⁰ Johann Voss, *Black Edelweiss: A Memoir of Combat and Conscience by a Soldier of the Waffen-SS* (Bedford, PA: The Aberjona Press, 2002), 188.

Sparks recognized that, for the second time in less than a year, he and his men had suffered terribly from absurd orders. When he returned to the division's headquarters, he angrily confronted his commander, General Robert Frederick, and spat "If I had to do it over, I'd go against your orders and pull the battalion out while I could."²⁰¹ While his attitude endeared him to those serving under Sparks, it earned him a negative reputation amongst his fellow commanders. Sparks lost almost all of his experienced veterans, and his ranks were reinforced by replacement troops in February. Approximately 70% of Sparks' recently arrived men had only just arrived in Europe, and most of their exposure to combat came from stories wounded veterans told at replacement depots.²⁰² His men spent most of February and March in reserve. By April, as the American advance into Germany developed into a footrace to reach Berlin, the 157th Infantry regiment again found itself advancing as a forward unit. They did not meet much German resistance, however, and spent most days walking or driving. Virtually none of his GIs had fought against the Wehrmacht or SS; they knew little about death or combat, except for what the few veterans had told them.

Felix Sparks was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel, and by late April, he had led his men to the outskirts of suburban Munich, alongside the 42nd Infantry Division, the 692nd Tank Destroyer Battalion, and the 191st Tank Battalion. Proper briefings on concentration camps had not yet begun. Whether because American units were advancing too quickly eastward, officers did not want to halt their progress and risk

²⁰¹ Paul A. Cundiff, *45th Infantry CP—A Personal Record from World War II* (Tampa, FL: Privately Published, 1987), 239.

²⁰² Ibid, 244.

German counter attacks, or Eisenhower's staff did not know how to expose his soldiers to the Holocaust, the 45th Infantry Division was not briefed on concentration camps.

The 42nd Infantry Division's commander, Brigadier General Henning Linden, and Colonel Sparks' Thunderbirds were tasked with moving their respective forces into the Dachau camp. One prisoner, Nerin Gun, kept a diary in Dachau and remembered looking across the horizon every day with hopes that he would one day see American soldiers. He knew he would be severely punished if the Nazis discovered his writings, but he ignored the threats and desperately hoped for salvation. On April 29, 1945, his perseverance was rewarded. "We had prayed, we had waited, we had lost all hope of ever seeing you, but you had finally come. Messiah from across the seas, angel and demon. You had come at the risk of your own life, into an unknown country, for the sake of unknown people, bringing us the most precious thing in the world, the gift of freedom."²⁰³

On the morning of April 29, 1945, an order came to Sparks' radioman that his 127th Infantry Battalion was to investigate a concentration camp near the town of Dachau. Upon arrival, they were to "post air-tight guard and allow no one to enter or leave."²⁰⁴ The order was not specific on what they would find at Dachau and the soldiers received no indication that they were approaching a horrific place. Sparks was angry and confused. His battalion had previously been ordered to move forward until it reached Munich, and he was eager to press forward and attack the retreating Germans.

²⁰³ Gun, *The Day of the Americans*, 22.

²⁰⁴ 42nd Infantry Division, "S-3 to All Battalions," April 29, 1945, Record Group 120, Box 21, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

“I had absolutely no idea what a concentration camp was,” he later confessed to his diary.²⁰⁵ Lieutenant Bill Walsh, the commander of Sparks’ Item Company, was equally ignorant of the term. The twenty-five-year-old had “once seen a prisoner of war camp in upstate New York that housed fit, well-fed, and happy” German prisoners, and he wondered if Dachau was similar in nature.²⁰⁶ Before his comrades received the order to approach the camp, Jack Lerner “hadn’t the slightest idea Dachau was there.”²⁰⁷ Members of the 42nd Infantry Division, like those who had liberated camps in the weeks before, initially shared these thoughts. One remembered thinking, “Who could ever dream that such a place might exist!”²⁰⁸ In hindsight their naivety would have been amusing, had the disillusion not been so tragic. The fog of war and Nazi policies had kept the true scale of the Nazi final solution obscured from public view, even after major camps were liberated in both the East and the West. Another probable explanation for the lack of immediate exposure was the West’s desire to focus on the war’s end. With the Third Reich’s final bastions quickly crumbling, American commanders likely believed overall victory remained their most important objective, and that the Holocaust’s victims’ suffering would end with Allied success.

The combined advance towards the site began with confusion, as nervous men in tanks, tank destroyers, jeeps, and infantrymen all crept towards their objective. The green GIs encountered some resistance as fanatical SS troopers fought to delay the

²⁰⁵ Sparks, *The Combat Diary of a Battalion Commander*, 200.

²⁰⁶ N.A. “Dachau Report,” *45th Division News* 3 (May 13, 1945): 1.

²⁰⁷ Jack Lerner, testimony in *GIs Remember*, 45.

²⁰⁸ Sam Dann, *Dachau 29 April 1945: The Rainbow Liberation Memoirs* (Lubbock, TX: Texas Tech University Press. 1998), 5.

American advance, but suffered no casualties. Snipers delivered most incoming fire, and SS engineers blew bridges or blocked roads to hamper American armor. German resistance was hindered by the reluctance of their own men, who knew the war was ending and were keen on not being the last men to die in Germany. Jumpy US soldiers often paused to fire on suspicious tree lines, only to find them barren. At one point, a tank destroyer attached to the 42nd Infantry Division engaged a Sherman tank attached to the 45th Infantry Division. The “friendly fire” incident destroyed the tank, but the crew managed to escape.²⁰⁹ This confusion continued throughout the day and resulted in dozens of confusingly dissimilar after-action reports.

The GIs’ route took them near a town called Landsburg, located approximately twenty miles from Dachau. On April 27, two days before the Third Army approached the area, a Wehrmacht unit and an SS detachment inhabited the still civilian-populated town. As the Wehrmacht elements retreated from the town, Landsburg’s residents draped white linens, cloths, or other items over their windowsills to indicate the townspeople’s willingness to surrender. The SS commander was infuriated by the civilians’ defeatism, and subsequently brutalized the town’s inhabitants. Lieutenant Julius Bernstein remembered, “They went from house to house and dragged outside whomever they found and hanged them from the nearest tree or lamp post.”²¹⁰ When the GIs learned that the SS were torturing and executing people who wanted to end the

²⁰⁹ John Linden, “The Surrender of Dachau KZ Prisoner Compound, 29 April, 1945: A Compilation of Documents and Photographs,” 42nd Infantry Division Papers, U.S. Army Military History Institute, Washington, DC.

²¹⁰ John H. Roush, ed., *World War II Reminiscences* (San Rafael, CA: Reserve Officers Association of California, 1995), 166-167.

war, anger at the fanatical Germans boiled. Americans who eventually entered Dachau and encountered the SS's work remembered the dangling civilians who were murdered by their own countrymen in "Drumhead Courts."

As Sparks' men moved into Dachau's surrounding area they experienced unexpectedly light resistance from German forces, most of which had retreated away from the site. The respite gave the soldiers a moment to appreciate their surroundings; some remembered the immediate area to be "as pretty as any other town they had seen in Bavaria," which boasted cobbled streets and brightly painted homes.²¹¹ To Lieutenant Colonel Walter Fellenz it seemed "that you were approaching a wealthy girls' finishing school in the suburbs of one of our great cities. All was so neat, so orderly, so beautiful."²¹² The well-manicured outskirts of a Nazi safe haven were soon to be contrasted with Dachau's hellish interior, located less than a mile away; Americans, who had been living in foxholes for weeks, could not comprehend such stark differences of living conditions. The pampered SS troopers, who lived in comfort while prisoners starved, symbolized Hitler's dream of an Aryan race that lived in comfort at the expense of conquered lesser beings.

Their first encounter with the camp itself came as men followed railroad tracks lined with freight cars within sight of the camp's perimeter. There were thirty-nine boxcars within the immediate vicinity, each one containing approximately two

²¹¹ Felix Sparks, "The Last Battle," *157th Infantry Regiment Association Newsletter* (June 15, 1989): 18.

²¹² Walter Fellenz, Lieutenant Colonel, Report to The Commanding General, 42nd Infantry Division, May 6, 1945, 45th Infantry Division Museum, Oklahoma City, OK.

thousand corpses.²¹³ The corpses had been riddled with holes from Allied strafing attacks because the boxcars lacked any proper POW markings. This failure to tag prisoner transports was a violation of the Geneva Convention, as were most other Nazi actions. Smaller bullet holes also indicated that the retreating SS executed any men who survived the trip.²¹⁴ Dan Dougherty, a scout with the 157th Infantry Regiment recalled the eyes of the corpses staring at them men with heartbroken looks, asking them, “What took you so long?”²¹⁵ The cadavers were frail and covered in their own excrement, mangled and frozen in agony. A civilian relief worker, Francesca Wilson, who was not exposed to the camp’s inhabitants until mid-May, remembered her first sight of the prisoners:

These people were victims of more than famine, they were victims of cruelty . . . some were walking skeletons, most had hollow cheeks and large black, expressionless eyes . . . They had the furtive look and gestures of hunted animals . . . by the constant fear of death, all that was human had been taken away from them.²¹⁶

The railway that led to Dachau and held the tens-of-thousands of bodies was what welcomed the already exhausted 42nd and 45th Infantry Divisions. Unlike at Ohrdruf or Buchenwald, where GIs gradually became aware of the camps’ horrors and had time to adjust to the scene, Dachau’s liberators were immediately thrust into the camp’s

²¹³ Felix Sparks, Interviewed by Albert Panebianco, June 15, 1989 in Kershaw, *Liberator*, 275.

²¹⁴ Walter Fellenz, Letter to Editor, *New York Times* (December 22, 1977).

²¹⁵ Dan Dougherty, Interview with Jeffrey Hilton, 157th Infantry Regiment Reunion, Colorado Springs, 2007.

²¹⁶ Sian Liwen Roberts, “Pace, Life History, and the Politics of Relief: Episodes in the Life of Francesca Wilson, Humanitarian Educator Activist,” PhD Dissertation, (University of Birmingham, 2010), Permalink: <https://www.scribd.com/document/109504693/Episodes-in-the-Life-of-Francesca-Wilson>; S3 Journal, 157th Infantry Regiment, April 29th, 1945, Record Group 338, Box 9, Folder 7, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

terrible depths. “Men who were not sure why they were fighting the Germans got their answer when they saw the load of death in boxcars,” Solomon Lasky remembered.²¹⁷



Figure 5. Members of the 42nd Infantry discover the gruesome cargo that was held in one of the boxcars. Photo taken by Lee Miller, 29 April, 1945. *The Official Report by The US Seventh Army 1945* (Edited and condensed in Seattle, WA. Inkling Books. 2000).

The first mass casualties most Thunderbirds witnessed were the horribly mutilated and tortured civilians and prisoners. From the beginning, Lieutenant Walsh and Colonel Sparks were “paralyzed by the first boxcar,” and Walsh added that, “The sights and smells robbed the mind of reason.”²¹⁸ Sparks saw the bodies of two men who had escaped the horrific boxcar and attempted to escape by crawling across the ground, only to have their heads crushed by a German rifle butt. After absorbing the impact of his surroundings, Sparks remembered vomiting uncontrollably.²¹⁹ They continued

²¹⁷ Solomon Lasky, testimony in *GIs Remember*, 44.

²¹⁸ Buechner, *Sparks*, 304.

²¹⁹ Sparks, Interviewed by Panebianco.

parallel to the railroad, with each boxcar and building containing more and more horrors. “You try to tell yourself that you can control yourself,” said Private John Lee, who remembered being teary and emotionally overwhelmed.²²⁰ He also wondered “if there’s some sort of way of getting revenge.”²²¹ Sparks’ men, overcome with anger and shock at the sight of such brutality began to shout, “Let’s get these Nazi dogs!” or “Let’s kill every one of these bastards!”²²² The confusing amalgam of mixed units, already suffering from a breakdown of chains of command, was in jeopardy of becoming a chaotic human wave.

Sparks understood the necessity of maintaining control and order. “It took several minutes,” but when he believed his men calmed enough to act professionally, he told them “We’re going into the camp.”²²³ Sparks and his men could hardly fathom what had happened at Dachau while they passed buildings that housed the SS guards, which were freshly painted and had roses blooming outside. Well-trimmed hedges and the few trees that remained standing gave no indication of the horrors that were being held captive inside the ten-foot high walls that surrounded Dachau. As he and elements

²²⁰ John Lee, “Action at the Coal Yard Wall,” *Second Platoon Newsletter* 20 (April 2001), 18.

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² Sparks, Interviewed by Panebianco. Most GIs who subsequently wrote about the collective sense of rage mention the vocal anger, but none of them mentions any counteracting voices from officers or NCOs. Whether this was because the men in charge advocated such talk, or intrinsically assumed their men would not fire their weapons unless ordered to do so or were confronted by an enemy, is often neglected in memoirs. It cannot be said, however, that *all* of the officers were too shocked too command, because, once inside the camp, Lt. Col. Sparks explicitly forbade his men from executing any prisoners.

²²³ Kershaw, *The Liberator*, 275.

of the 45th Infantry began to advance into the main compound, while GIs of the 42nd Infantry began to enter Dachau from another point.

Nicknamed “Rainbow,” due to the identification one-quarter Rainbow insignia worn on the shoulder of the soldiers’ uniforms, the 42nd Infantry division under General Linden had been racing with Colonel Sparks to capture the bountiful prize of Munich.



Figure 6. Acting camp Commandant Heinrich Wicker, standing with his head held high and his arms crossed behind his back, looks down his nose at the liberating Americans and his surrendering men.

Note his posture, as he proudly stands at parade rest in front of dozens of dead bodies. Brig. Gen. Linden can also be seen at the extreme left of the image. Photo from John McManus, *Hell Before Their Very Eyes* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press. 2015).

He received the same order to capture the concentration camp at Dachau and was equally perplexed by the sudden shift. Both divisions followed the railway tracks lined with freight cars burdened with death, until the two split and moved on the compound from separate directions. Sparks’ men moved into the camp from the southwest and entered the compound, and General Linden’s infantry swung below the camp and moved towards the main gate from the southeast.²²⁴

²²⁴ Henning Linden, Brigadier General, “Memo to Commanding General Regarding Dachau,” May 2, 1945, Record Group 120, Box 22, Folder 5, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

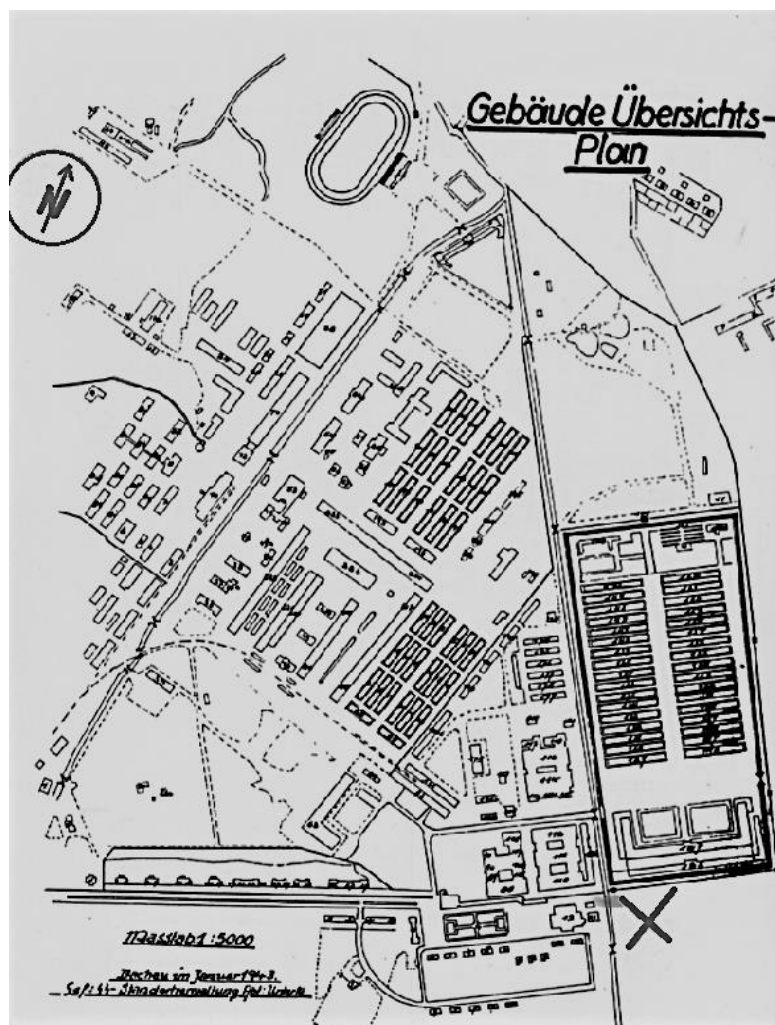


Figure 7. A Diagram of Dachau Dated January 1943. The ‘X’ indicates where the 42nd Infantry Division, under General Linden, entered at the main entrance along the “Avenue of the SS.” Image taken from Dachau Collection, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford, California in Sam Dann, *Dachau April 1945: The Rainbow Liberation Memoirs*. Lubbock, TX: Texas Tech University Press, 1998.

The 45th Infantry had entered the camp’s perimeter by the time Linden’s men were approaching the main gatehouse of Dachau. A road titled, “Avenue of the SS,” which led through a gate complete with a giant concrete eagle and a Nazi insignia at its base penetrated the main checkpoint.²²⁵ A Rainbow soldier remembered that at this gate a man wearing a white armband, who was a Red Cross worker for the Wehrmacht,

²²⁵ Kershaw, *Liberator*, 270.

officially surrendered himself.²²⁶ Lieutenant Walsh, leading Sparks' Item Company, later remembered seeing the same representative and immediately thinking, "You sonofabitch, where the hell were you five minutes ago, before we got here, taking care of these people, with your red cross armbands and all that shit?"²²⁷ His testimony was taken decades after the liberation, but he was still fervently mad about it. His dark mood rarely gave any hint of remorse for his later actions, a stubbornness that Holocaust deniers have often referenced.²²⁸ The worker informed the Americans that the camp was undefended, apparently hinting that there was no reason for the infantrymen to enter the camp. The Americans set up a perimeter around the main entrance and most remained outside of the complex until they were ordered to enter.²²⁹

General Linden and his aide arrived moments after his men. At the complex's main gate, the Americans discovered an SS officer standing at "parade rest."²³⁰ This was Lieutenant Heinrich Wicker, acting camp commander. What enraged the surrounding Americans was the proud manner of which the man held himself as he stood only a few yards away from thousands of tortured, dead, and dying souls. "The young lieutenant's stiff demeanor, neat uniform, and impassive, almost arrogant expression," disgusted the liberators, who had become violently ill as they had

²²⁶ Frank Burns, Letter to John Degro, 1999 in Sam Dann, *Dachau 29 April 1945: The Rainbow Liberation Memoirs*. (Lubbock, TX: Texas Tech University Press. 1998), 48.

²²⁷ McManus, *Hell Before Their Very Eyes*, 89.

²²⁸ Theodore O' Keefe, "The 'Liberation of the Camps' Facts vs Lies" *Zündelsite*.

²²⁹ Frank Burns, Letter to John Degro, 1999.

²³⁰ Linden, "Memo to Commanding General Regarding Dachau."

approached his position.²³¹ Linden's aide, First Lieutenant William Cowling later wrote in a letter to his parents, "I was just hoping he would make a funny move so I could hit the trigger of my tommy gun."²³² Wicker was not cut down by Cowling, but the recently freed prisoners may have executed him; his family reported him as missing after the war, and his remains were never discovered.²³³ Although the camp was surrendered to the 42nd Infantry Division, almost no soldiers ventured into the camp until after the 45th Infantry Division began their sweep of the camp's western portion. Most of the camp's several hundred SS occupiers had fled in the previous days, killing as many prisoners as they could before leaving the survivors to their fate. The few Wehrmacht soldiers who remained were ordered out of their enclosures and placed under guard by Lieutenant Cowling and Private John Veitch, who became the first Rainbow soldiers to enter Dachau.²³⁴

Colonel Sparks and his men were not greeted by any surrendering soldiers and had no knowledge of the camp's defenses. Unlike the men who entered Buchenwald, who had been tersely briefed on the camp, or the Rainbow soldiers, who were informed about the camp's surrender, the Thunderbirds were caught completely off guard. Because they faced sporadic resistance, occasional friendly fire incidents, and were the first men to set foot into the opposite side of Dachau, they had little intelligence on

²³¹ Ibid.

²³² William Cowling, Lieutenant, Letter to his Parents, 28 April 1945. Collection of Barbara Cowling Cuite, reprinted for 42nd Infantry Division Archives, Record Group 338, Box 8, Folder 4; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

²³³ McManus, *Hell Before Their Very Eyes*, 105.

²³⁴ U.S. Army Investigation and Trial Records of War Criminals: Dachau, Record Group 238, Microfilm 1174 (six rolls), National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

what they were to encounter and were prepared for further German resistance. Sparks' green, and now-emotional, troopers entered the camp's perimeter and expected to meet the same fanatical Germans whose work they had witnessed at Landsburg. Their most recent memories were of the town's executed civilians and the boxcars' terrible cargo.

Item Company's Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Bill Walsh, made the infantry's first contact with the enemy. Born in 1920 in Newton, Massachusetts, the twenty-five year old officer, with a "chowder-thick" accent, had been fighting with the 45th Infantry Division since 1943.²³⁵ "A proud Thunderbird," Walsh was, according to his family, "a gentle and kind man," but during the brutal fighting in Italy, France, and Germany, he had become callused to death from its omnipresence.²³⁶ Walsh never had any brushes with authority and, according to his fellow soldiers and officers, before Dachau's liberation, was an average infantry officer.²³⁷

Walsh discovered four surrendered SS men who were being held in an unoccupied boxcar. Walsh called for a .30 caliber machine gun squad to guard the men, but as he did, he was overcome with anger. Rather than order the machine gun team to do it, he un-holstered his sidearm and shot each of the four men at close range. Three of the men were not fatally wounded but Walsh left them to lie in their misery. A private entered the boxcar and, out of compassion for the mortally wounded men, ended their misery, later saying, "I never like to see anybody suffer."²³⁸ The young lieutenant had

²³⁵ Sparks, *The Liberator*, 269; McManus, *Hell Before Their Very Eyes*, 86.

²³⁶ Sparks, *The Liberator*, 320-321.

²³⁷ Strong, *The Liberation of KZ Dachau*.

²³⁸ Thomas Farraguer, "Vengeance at Dachau in Dark Footnote to Death Camp's Liberation, US Soldiers Shocked by Holocaust Executer Nazi SS Troops." *Boston Globe* (July 2, 2001).

gone mad with grief. Minutes after his impromptu executions, Walsh was spotted by Sparks, chasing a German soldier from house to house, yelling, “Bastards! Bastards! Bastards!”²³⁹ Sparks’ numerous orders to stop were lost to Walsh, who had completely broken down mentally. Sparks clubbed the Walsh over the head with his sidearm, which knocked him to the ground where he cried hysterically. “I’ll be honest with you. I broke down,” Walsh confessed later in life. “I started crying. The whole thing was getting to me. This was the culmination of something that I had never been trained for.”²⁴⁰ Although his response was violent, there was no premeditation to his actions, only impulse that was stirred by the thousands of innocent dead. But because he could not control himself, he set a bad example for his men. Discipline and order decays quickly as troops take the cue about how to behave, and much like the precedent set by Germans and their 1941 Commissar Order, his men would also let their emotions get the better of them. He never felt guilty for what he did, but he also never hinted that he killed the SS out of personal bigotry.²⁴¹ Sparks ordered Walsh into a room to recover, and temporarily suspended the Lieutenant’s command.²⁴² But he was not alone in his

²³⁹ Felix L. Sparks, Lecture, (Regis University, 1998).

²⁴⁰ William Walsh, interview with James Kent Strong, in *The Liberation of KZ Dachau*, 1990.

²⁴¹ Ibid.

²⁴² This order was never supported or confirmed by anybody other than Sparks, who often neglected to include this in his multiple tellings of the story. Whether or not he did relieve Lieutenant Walsh of his command became a focal point of Joseph Whitaker and the Seventh Army’s investigation of the ensuing incident. John McManus has commented, “If the relief incident actually did happen . . . then the colonel’s subsequent inaction represents a major oversight on his part.” McManus, *Hell Before Their Very Eyes*, 96, 108-110.

anguish; several other men were overwhelmed and had to be calmed by their comrades as well.

An American doctor, Captain Alvin “Doc” Weinstein, entered the camp shortly after the 45th Infantry assumed control. He was credited as the first American doctor to enter the camp and was probably the only participating American who knew about Dachau before its liberation.²⁴³ He had met a former Dachau prisoner in the late 1930s and worked with him while interning at Queens General Hospital in New York.²⁴⁴ The man referred to the camp as a horrific place, but no words could have prepared Captain Weinstein for what he was about to uncover. The camp had evolved from its horrific states during the 1930s into something much worse. As he studied the compound’s pitiful medical facilities, a young German civilian approached Weinstein. Weinstein did not bother to ask for his name, but the man claimed he had worked in the camp as a physician. The battalion surgeon was horrified to hear stories about the “research” the man conducted on patients. Experiments submerged men in ice-cold water, then removed them and had them engage in sexual acts with other prisoners to warm them back up. Some experiments tested high-altitude sickness on already devastatingly weakened prisoners, others had unbelievably high death tolls and produced little scientific material. Weinstein could not believe a man of medicine would conduct such medical experiments on live people. He asked the German, “How could you do this to human beings?” and received a sheepish reply of, “Oh, they were all going to die,

²⁴³ Dann, *Dachau 29 April 1945: The Rainbow Liberation*, 89.

²⁴⁴ Alvin Weinstein, 2nd Battalion Medical Detachment, Written Testimonial, 1995, The Holocaust Resource Center of Keane University.

anyhow.”²⁴⁵ The lack of humanity displayed by those who worked inside the camp could not be more apparent. Even the medical personnel had lost every trace of compassion for their fellow man. Their calm nature as they spoke about their actions did not amuse the American soldiers, whose impatience and disdain festered at their enemy’s compliance.

Many of the approximately fifty SS and Wehrmacht soldiers who remained in the camp were not fit to walk, let alone resist the Americans. Their comrades had abandoned them in hospital beds with the understanding that Americans rarely killed unarmed wounded. Some men, recalled Private Lee, were not wounded, but simply faked their injuries with hopes that the American soldiers would pass over the hospital and the wounded Germans.²⁴⁶ Most had not been posted at the camp but had been taken there simply because it was the closest medical facility in the area. Dachau’s hospital was the first building discovered by Sparks’ men.²⁴⁷ His GIs were appalled at the sight; neatly made beds and well cared for men lined the corridors while just outside, thousands died because of their conditions and exposure to the elements. The dearth of medical attention available for the prisoners was obvious, but the wounded Germans were quartered, well-fed, and fit.²⁴⁸ John Degro, Item Company’s lead scout, ordered the Germans out of their beds and ordered the SS men outside to the nearby coal yard.²⁴⁹

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

²⁴⁶ Lee, “Action at the Coal Yard Wall,” 18; Israel, *The Day the Thunderbird Cried*, 259.

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

²⁴⁸ Seventh Army, G5 Historical Report, April 1945, Record Group 338, Box 9, Folder 7, Records of Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEP); National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

²⁴⁹ John Degro, Letter to Howard Buechner, March 17, 1986.

Unbeknownst to the Americans, the hospitalized SS had not served in the SS-*Totenkopfverbände*, which oversaw the concentration camps' management. But the fact that they were in the camp, even after the SS were all ordered to fight a guerilla-style resistance, supports the idea that they were in some way affiliated with Dachau's violent purpose.²⁵⁰ Degro did not know these men's units and did not care. Their SS insignia indicated that they were some of Hitler's most fanatical warriors and, as far as the Thunderbirds and Rainbow soldiers were concerned, were responsible for the dead that surrounded them.²⁵¹

Several Thunderbirds watched over these men in a coal yard while others searched the camp. Sparks arrived a few minutes after the SS were assembled and, in an attempt to maintain control, ordered the guards not to fire unless the Germans became hostile or tried to escape.²⁵² This order was passed along to every soldier, who were all wondering what the fate of their prisoners would be and if they themselves would have any say in the process. The sights had already taken a toll on the Thunderbirds and provoked their emotions into a state of chaos. As the few prisoners who were able to walk ventured out of their barracks, a few English-speaking POWs informed Colonel Sparks about the sickening things that happened at Dachau. A kennel located near the coal yard held over two dozen guard dogs, which were owned by the

²⁵⁰ Holocaust deniers frequently claim the executed Germans were innocent bystanders or Wehrmacht soldiers who happened to be in the camp. Their claims are unsubstantiated, and the Germans who remained in Dachau on April 29 were members of the SS, whether they served in Dachau or another nearby camp.

²⁵¹ Kershaw, *Liberator*, 281.

²⁵² Sparks, Lecture, 1998.

camp's former Commandant, Egon Zill.²⁵³ The prisoners told Sparks' men that the dogs were not used for security, but for sport. Zill and his men enjoyed the idea of stripping a prisoner naked and tying him to a metal pole in full view of the camp. The SS trained the dogs viciously, and Zill would walk to the bound prisoner and tap the man's testicles with a stick. The vicious dogs would then charge and rip the man's genitals off while the SS "roared with laughter."²⁵⁴ Enraged by what they heard, Sparks' men immediately killed the dogs and ventured back to the coal yard where Private Degro and his squad held the surrendered SS troops.

Lieutenant Walsh, calmed and reassured by his fellow soldiers, felt he had regained control of his senses and journeyed to the coal yard as well. He arrived after Sparks had left and echoed his order to fire only if the Germans attempted to flee.²⁵⁵ The SS men, which were well known to be more fanatical than regular army troops, remained isolated and held at gunpoint, while the regular Wehrmacht men were herded into groups and marched away. The yard was located next to the hospital that had just been cleared by Item Company, and an eight-foot wall divided the open area yard from the medical facility. Some of the SS "arrogantly refused to stay back against the wall and to keep their hands up," one Thunderbird remembered.²⁵⁶ The Americans were

²⁵³ Lorin Fickle, "A Survivor Named Tell," Personal communication with Howard Buechner, Published June 6, 1986.

²⁵⁴ Jurgen Zarusky, *That is not the American Way of Fighting*. "Dachau and Nazi Terror, 1933-1945, Studies and Reports" (Comite International de Dachau, Brussels, 2002), 34.

²⁵⁵ Joseph Whitaker, Lieutenant Colonel, Inspector General Division, Seventh Army, *Observation of Dachau, Diagram of Coal Yard Shooting, Report and Conclusions*, May 3, 1945, Record Group 338, Entry 41933, Seventh Army Report of Investigations, National Archives, Washington, DC.

²⁵⁶ Lee, "Action at the Coal Yard Wall," 18.

enraged. These Germans, who had caused so much pain, death, and suffering for innocent people, were clearly defeated by the Americans. It aggravated the soldiers to see the SS testing their captors' patience by acting like disobedient children, even though they stood at the end of more than twenty rifles.

The Germans continued to inch their way towards Walsh's men, ignoring his orders to halt. Private William Curtin, lying prone behind a machine gun, remembered feeling uneasy as he covered the group, which was several times their size. He pulled the charging handle on the Browning and chambered the lead round, which the POWs interpreted as a sign that they were about to be executed.²⁵⁷ They abruptly moved forward towards the Americans.²⁵⁸ Incensed by thoughts of the murdered civilians at Landsberg, the thousands of bodies in train cars, tortuous stories from the victims, and now the insubordinate POWs, Walsh felt that they had sufficient reason to fire. He barked a command to commence and his men obliged. Several riflemen, a .30 caliber Browning Automatic Rifle, a .30 caliber M1919 Browning machine gun, and Walsh with his .45 caliber pistol commenced firing. Curtin, the machine gunner, later claimed to have fired "three bursts. About fifty rounds in all," before his weapon jammed.²⁵⁹ The firing only lasted for a few seconds, but most of the Germans fell, regardless of whether they were hit or not.

²⁵⁷ 157th Infantry Regiment, After Action Report, April 1945.

²⁵⁸ John Lee, William Walsh, Testimony in Joseph Whitaker, *Investigation of Alleged Mistreatment of German Guards at Dachau* May-June 1945, Record Group 338, Entry 50170, Seventh Army Report of Investigations, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

²⁵⁹ William Curtin, *Ibid.*

Peter Galary, a medic with the 45th Infantry, witnessed the shooting. He was convinced that the SS were responsible for the murder of thousands of civilians. Galary,



Figure 8. The machine gun team ordered to guard the surrendered SS in the coal yard. Note the surrendered German in the middle of the frame, standing defiant, refusing to raise his hands over his head. The bodies behind the POWs are those of murdered prisoners. Behind the machine gun is nineteen-year-old Private William C. Curtin. Photo by Robert Goebel, 29 April, 1945, Record Group 111, National Archives.

like all other medics during the Second World War, carried no weapons. Galary had witnessed the freight cars containing the thousands of dead civilians and heard the stories from the prisoners about what had happened at Dachau, and he too was emotionally compromised. He noticed an SS officer who had fallen, unscathed by the barrage, and the distraught Galary grabbed for another Thunderbird's weapon. He wanted to kill the officer, but his comrade refused to be relieved of his firearm.²⁶⁰ The sights had been so terrible and horrific that a man sworn to save lives wanted nothing

²⁶⁰ Farraguer, *Boston Globe* (July 2, 2001).

more than to kill those who were responsible. The term for such rage eventually became known as “berserker rage.”

This anger, which John Protevi, a scholar in Ethics and Social Philosophy described as the opposite of “freezing or surrender(ing) in perceived hopeless situations,” can prompt an individual to lose physical control and react violently to desperately terrifying situations.²⁶¹ Much like how a person can be paralyzed with fear, Protevi has concluded that a person can “black out” and impulsively lash out against someone they perceive as evil. This is not common, even in war, he contends, but the alignment of several factors can prompt such a reaction. “Distance, weaponry, teamwork, and hierarchy,” he has discovered, “as they intersect fear and anger,” and “are shaped by hatred and dehumanization,” can prompt even the most thoroughly trained men to lose control.²⁶² These reasons were all accounted for at Dachau: there was no distance from the horrific scene because the GIs were suddenly thrust into and immersed in the scene; the GIs possessed their weapons and had only just witness the terrible weapons, including crematoriums, gas chambers, and firing squads, the Nazis used to slaughter tens-of-thousands of civilians; the Americans were part of a team whose structure had broken down at Dachau, and by collectively firing on the SS prisoners, they may have felt comfortable working in unison against an evil entity;

²⁶¹ John Protevi, “The Berserker Rage,” in Myisha Cherry and Owen Flanagan, eds. *The Moral Psychology of Anger* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017), 1; S. M. Braund and G. W. Most, eds., *Ancient Anger* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 11-49.

²⁶² *Ibid*, 1-2.

much like their longing for comradeship in the face of such evils, the GIs lacked specific orders from their officers until Lieutenant Walsh ordered them to fire.

While this “perfect storm” of factors occurred during every other camp’s liberation, the catalyst for berserker rage was the presence of the responsible SS, who appeared unremorseful, even in defeat. Such a response to the surrendered Germans, Protevi would conclude, does not mean the Americans were intrinsically evil. Human emotions “are plastic, gifted with various deep reaction patterns and the ability to learn to manipulate the triggers of, and our responses to, those patterns in ways that enable us to adapt to the constructed biosocial-techno environments in which we are placed.”²⁶³ When such theories are considered, Holocaust deniers’ accusations that the Americans were premeditated killers or somehow equivalent to the Third Reich’s “Final Solution,” falter. And while it does not eliminate culpability, it offers an explanation to why the GIs abandoned their training and briefly lost control of their senses.

Colonel Sparks arrived seconds after the shootings and fired his Colt .45 sidearm into the air, which captured his men’s attention. They ceased firing and he forbade any further executions.²⁶⁴ He kicked Private Curtin off his machine gun and the teenager began weeping uncontrollably. Curtin, Walsh, and the other men who fired argued that the Germans attempted to flee, but that was not the case.²⁶⁵ Silence

²⁶³ Ibid, 11.

²⁶⁴ Felix Sparks, Interview with Flint Whitlock, 1996; Whitaker, *Observation of Dachau, Diagram of Coal Yard Shooting, Report and Conclusions*; Kershaw, *Liberator*, 287.

²⁶⁵ Sparks, Interviewed by Panebianco.

penetrated the coal yard as the reality of what happened began to set in on the distressed soldiers. Sparks immediately rounded up all German medics who remained in the compound ordered them to treat their fallen comrades. The more seriously wounded SS were transported to a nearby aid station before any former prisoners received similar attention.²⁶⁶

All who were present recognized that such brutality was what they had spent years fighting to stop. Twenty-two-year-old Corporal Henry Mills watched but did not participate in the shootings and was sickened.²⁶⁷ As he absorbed the sights and sounds of the most hellish place he had ever been, his mind thought of home. He remembered thinking, “I’ve got to go home now. I want to see my mom.”²⁶⁸ Like most replacement soldiers, he was hardly old enough to be in college and only recently entered the Army. Their minds were not finished physically developing as they fought against and ended such horrible tragedies. The young men did not think these SS deserved a defense or trial because they showed no remorse as they stood amongst thousands of massacred civilians.²⁶⁹ Before Dachau, the 157th Infantry had peacefully accepted hundreds of

²⁶⁶ Ibid.

²⁶⁷ Stanley Milgram and Christopher Browning each have written extensively on how ordinary men become willing killers, reluctant killers, or conscientious objectors. While their work focuses on how every day Germans participated in the murder of millions, their conclusions are valuable when studying the Dachau incident. While they argue that Nazis killed out of basic obedience to their officers, the same can be said for those under Walsh’s command: they did not fire on their prisoners until Walsh ordered it, even though they were angry. In this case, the breakdown of discipline did not break down the chain of command. They obeyed Col. Sparks’ order to hold their fire, but subsequently obeyed Walsh’s more recent orders. Similarly, Browning concludes that not all men act with such obedience, and men like Corporal Henry Mills, who watched but did not participate, consciously refused to comply with such violent orders. See Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1992).

²⁶⁸ *The Liberation of KZ Dachau*, documentary by James Kent Strong, 1990.

²⁶⁹ Walsh, Interview with James Kent Strong, 1990.

surrendered Wehrmacht soldiers and no GI under Sparks or Walsh's command executed a POW.²⁷⁰ The men who fired on the surrendered POWs had followed the Geneva Convention before and proved that they were not bloodthirsty killers. But when confronted with such a despicable scene, the GIs did not know what to do besides hurt those who had been hurting others; they wanted to be sure that these SS never harmed anybody ever again.

As the Americans focused on the reality of their situation, many on-looking prisoners realized they were free. Those with enough strength cheered and blessed the Americans, who told the English-speaking prisoners that they would do whatever they could to help. Lieutenant Walsh had already taken part in two executions that day and was certainly still shaken and functioning on full adrenaline. Minutes after firing on the SS prisoners, he realized the consequence of his actions and noticed some prisoners were emulating his work. An emotionless Walsh later remembered seeing "two or three men, perhaps guards, who were surrounded by inmates and being battered to death by shovels."²⁷¹ He did not stop the killings. American passiveness towards violent prisoners, as previously discussed, was not uncommon and most onlookers believed the Nazis' victims were owed justice. The prisoners, for the first time in years, released their anger and fury on their captors who had taken so much from them. Private John Lee found two prisoners attacking a white-coated German doctor behind the hospital. He ordered them to stop as they too used a shovel to devastate the German.²⁷² A rough

²⁷⁰ Felix Sparks, Interview with Alex Kershaw, 2000.

²⁷¹ Walsh, Testimony in Whitaker, *Investigation of Alleged Mistreatment of German Guards at Dachau*.

²⁷² Lee, "Action at the Coal Yard," 20.

translation revealed that the man had castrated the attacking prisoners, and they removed their pants to prove it to the Americans. “I have to admit the three of us turned around and walked away,” he said. “Whatever happened to that man, I don’t know.”²⁷³ Former prisoners not only attacked the few uniformed Germans that remained in the camp, but, to the Americans’ initial horror, they began attacking their fellow inmates. Several prisoners were identified as German collaborators. Hundreds of men tore into these singled-out individuals, clawing and ripping them apart with their bare hands.²⁷⁴ The Americans watched the pitiful sight of grown men who had become feral, reduced to nothing more than tattered rags draped over walking skeletons. They were crying, singing their national anthems, dancing, and cursing Hitler all at the same time.²⁷⁵

Although the Americans were successful in their liberation of the camp, the consequences of their actions began to percolate amongst other present parties. Regardless of what the men had witnessed or what crimes the SS had committed, the Geneva Convention, a protocol that many Axis countries blatantly ignored, prohibited the execution of unarmed prisoners. An unnamed member of the 42nd Infantry Division informed his commanding staff of the unwarranted executions. His actions might have been an angry response to Colonel Sparks’ earlier refusal to allow any civilian reporters into Dachau, which contrasted General Linden’s orders and angered the reporting

²⁷³ Ibid.

²⁷⁴ Felix Sparks, “Dachau and Its Liberation,” *157th Infantry Association Newsletter*, (March 20, 1984): 18-25.

²⁷⁵ *The Liberation of KZ Dachau*.

staff.²⁷⁶ Some men felt that they should not have to acknowledge Sparks because Linden was in overall command. Sparks and Linden argued furiously about who could give orders to soldiers in the camp's proximity, to the point when both men pulled their side arms, ready to shoot each other over the notion.²⁷⁷ Such public altercations between commanders had not happened at Ohrdruf, Buchenwald, or any other site's liberation, an indication of how unique Dachau's condition was.

There was no disdain between the two officers; Linden did not even know Sparks' name when he later compiled his report on the camp, but the chaos they uncovered shortly drove both officers to their breaking point as they struggled to lead their distraught men. Put simply, the Americans were frustrated because they did not know what to do. The confusion was severe enough to prompt gunfire, which erupted over both soldiers' and prisoners' heads as men witnessed their officers bicker and struggle to maintain order over the precarious situation.²⁷⁸ The gunfire was not directed at anybody but was done to force the exuberant prisoners away from the electrified fence that surrounded the compound. Linden and Sparks watched a man die when the crowd of prisoners pushed him into the fence and ordered the firing to prevent any further casualties.²⁷⁹ The Americans, startled by the electric fence, rushed inside and disabled the electricity, but not before it claimed its final victim.

²⁷⁶ Sparks, "Dachau and Its Liberation," 22.

²⁷⁷ Kershaw, *Liberator*. 295.

²⁷⁸ John Linden, "The Surrender of Dachau KZ Prisoner Compound, 29 April, 1945: A Compilation of Documents and Photographs," 42nd Infantry Division Papers (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army Military History Institute).

²⁷⁹ Sparks, Interviewed by Panebianco.

Sparks and Linden had maintained order and avoided chaos in the face of any previous threat, but like their men, they too lost their composure after trying to comprehend the concentration camp. Overwhelmed by their emotions, they fought and swore at one another, almost forgetting the fact that they ended eleven years of suffering. Colonel Sparks and his Thunderbirds were barely in the camp for ten hours, but they were exhausted from the overwhelming amount of psychological destruction. Sparks was attempting to orchestrate a relief effort for the camp's inhabitants when, at approximately 4:30PM local time, his "presence was requested by a Lieutenant Colonel from the inspector general's office of the Seventh Army."²⁸⁰ He was there to question Sparks about his altercation with Linden, and formally investigate the conduct of his "out of control" soldiers.²⁸¹

²⁸⁰ S3 Journal, 157th Infantry Regiment, April 29, 1945, Record Group 338, Box 9, Folder 7, National Archives, Washington, DC.

²⁸¹ Ibid.

Chapter 4: The Investigation and the Liberators—
“America’s moral position will be undermined . . .

The day after Dachau’s liberation, General Robert T. Frederick, commander of the 157th Infantry Regiment, informed Sparks that General Linden was upset over their altercation but did not hint that it had anything to do with the executions. In reality, Linden had no further quarrel with Sparks or the 45th Infantry Division, and his report actually commended the Thunderbirds for their part in the liberation. The commotion at headquarters was actually because two cameramen had recorded the shootings at the coal yard in Dachau, and Sparks’ command was set to be investigated by the army. The photos, and several unclear and confused recollections about the executions, were all the Seventh Army had to consider before launching an investigation. The lack of clear information certainly prompted staff officers, already shocked by reports of Dachau’s conditions, to question the liberators’ experience. Initially, officers did not have a unified approach about what had happened, or what to do in the wake of the killings. Most after-action reports filed by April 30 neglected to mention the executions. Several written after the investigation was launched mentioned dead SS, whom other Americans may have assumed tried to defend the camp and were killed in combat.²⁸²

²⁸² Walter Fellenz, Lieutenant Colonel, 1st Battalion 222d Infantry Regiment. “Report to the Commanding General, 42nd Infantry Division, 6 May 1945,” 43-54; William Cowling, Lieutenant, “Report of the Surrender of the Concentration Camp. 2 May 1945,”; Henning Linden, Brigadier General, Assistant Commander, 42nd Infantry Division, “Memorandum to the Commanding General, Harry J. Collins, May 2, 1945,”; Henning Linden, Brigadier General 42nd Infantry Division, “Report on Surrender of Dachau Concentration Camp. 2 May 1945,” in *The Official Report by The US Seventh Army 1945*, Edited and condensed (Seattle, WA.: Inkling Books. 2000).

Due to the chaos, officers who did not witness the killings could not accurately report that SS POWs had been executed.

Major General Arthur White, the Seventh Army's Chief of Staff, saw the photographs and immediately considered investigating the incident.²⁸³ The US Army, unsure of how many other camps would be discovered or how long the war would continue, wanted to prevent other units from acting in a similar manner.²⁸⁴ Between April 29 and May 4, 1945, investigators questioned twenty-three officers and enlisted men under oath, and scrutinized official after action reports and debriefings.²⁸⁵ The formal accounts presented by General Linden and his aide, Lieutenant William Cowling, made no reference to any execution of SS prisoners. Colonel Sparks was only mentioned in Linden's report when the General briefly noted that the 45th Infantry Division had orders to clear the camp by "shooting it out with the SS guards and keepers."²⁸⁶ The dearth of immediate information does not suggest that the Americans tried to cover the incident up; it only indicated how confused the situation had been. It was more likely that the killings did not bother the GIs, who did not think they were worth mentioning, or they heard the gunfire and assumed the Germans resisted. A general would not intentionally lie in his official report to the Adjutant General's

²⁸³ 3rd Battalion, 157th Infantry Regiment Journal, May 1, 1945, Record Group 407, Box 11075, Records of Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEP); National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

²⁸⁴ Albert Panebianco, interview with Michael Hirsh, September 5, 2008, Concentration Camp Liberators Oral History Project, Tampa, FL, University of South Florida Special Collections, Paper 109.

²⁸⁵ David Israel, *The Day the Thunderbird Cried* (Medford, OR: Emek Press, 2005), 175.

²⁸⁶ Henning Linden, Brigadier General 42nd Infantry Division, Report on Surrender of Dachau Concentration Camp, May 2, 1945, 42nd Infantry Division Papers, National Archives.

Office, especially to defend a man with whom he had an altercation. Had Linden done so, he would have risked his reputation, been fiercely rebuked by the Army, and possibly been demoted. Linden even misspelled Sparks' name, referring to him as Lieutenant Colonel "Squires."²⁸⁷ His report did not, as Holocaust deniers have claimed, intentionally "cover up this war crime and lie to officers about what really happened," but rather indicated that even the liberators' flag officers were stunned by Dachau's ghastly scene.²⁸⁸

Linden's aide, William Cowling, had a good reputation amongst his fellow officers. According to Sam Dann, who collected, analyzed, and published thousands of GIs' reports and letters, Cowling "reported the facts exactly as he saw them. He never allowed his personality to intrude."²⁸⁹ His combat report made a direct point to mention the Thunderbirds' encounter with SS troopers; however, he did not mention any executions. He reported that, "some of the [SS] guards fired at some of the prisoners who were trying to break through the fence. The doughboys of the two divisions shot the SS guards who had commenced the firing."²⁹⁰ This was exactly how Cowling interpreted the situation and, like Linden, he did not attempt to sweep the incident under the rug. This was proven by the fact that in several letters written after Dachau's liberation, in which he told his mother about his anger and desire for revenge, he did

²⁸⁷ Ibid.

²⁸⁸ Ersnt Zündel, "A Picture Tells a Thousand Words! Brutal Murder of Hundreds of Innocent Germans: Dachau," *Zündelsite*.
http://www.zundelsite.org/archive/warcrimes_ww2/dauchau_massacre/the_dachau_massacre.html

²⁸⁹ Dann, *Dachau 29 April 1945*, 18.

²⁹⁰ William Cowling III, Lieutenant, Report of the Surrender of the Concentration Camp, May 2, 1945, 42nd Infantry Division Papers, National Archives.

not mention the executions.²⁹¹ While the section explaining the dead Germans was inaccurate, Cowling, who was not in the coal yard during the executions, assumed how the SS died. All throughout the liberation, “rifle shots,” from both inside and outside the camp, “punctuated the strained silence with an almost reassuring familiarity.”²⁹² He likely deduced that the sporadic gunfire accounted for the dead Germans. The remainder of his report, which detailed how his group found the train cars, witnessed the horrific entrance, encountered the acting camp commandant, interacted with the 45th Infantry Division, and distributed aid, was “factual, impersonal, dispassionate . . . He believed that an official report must be confined strictly to the facts.”²⁹³

Another report, compiled by Colonel Walter Fellenz, who was inside the camp during the shootings, presented the exact number of dead SS. He was not at the coal yard when the SS were executed, however, and, like Cowling, presumed the Germans were killed in combat. His report assumed that “the SS tried to train their machine guns on us; but we quickly killed them each time a new man attempted to fire the guns. We killed all seventeen SS.”²⁹⁴ His use of the pronouns “us” and “we” did not indicate that he was present; American officers often used collective terms, rather than personal pronouns, when writing after action reports. Several testimonies, including those of Felix Sparks and noncommissioned officers, mentioned SS armed with machine guns

²⁹¹ William Cowling to his parents William J. Cowling Jr. and Grace Cowling, “Dachau, April 28-30, 1945,” collection of Barbara Cowling.

²⁹² Kershaw, *Liberator*, 281.

²⁹³ Dann, *Dachau 29 April 1945*, 20-21.

²⁹⁴ Fellenz, Report to the Commanding General.

in towers along Dachau's perimeter.²⁹⁵ Since they were the only living Germans Fellenz witnessed, he reasoned that they prompted the American rifle fire and were its victims. His was an obvious reference to the seventeen dead SS, but it again neglected any mention of foul play. The reports did not incriminate any American soldiers, but Joseph Whitaker, who interviewed GIs, liberated prisoners, and German POWs who had been inside the camp, offered a more accurate conclusion.

Lieutenant Colonel Joseph Whitaker, the man officially tasked with investigating Sparks and his men, had seen the pictures and argued that even though the SS had violated every article of the Geneva Convention, the Americans could not do the same. War crimes were not acceptable in the American army. Soldiers were sent to Europe to end the suffering of all men, regardless of their rank or profile. Sparks' reputation as a rogue commander, which followed him since his confrontation with General Robert Frederick, may have also contributed to the surprisingly thorough investigation.²⁹⁶ As he questioned witnesses and participants, he repeatedly asked his whether Colonel Sparks had intentionally separated the Wehrmacht prisoners from the SS prisoners. Every testimony given to the inspector argued against Sparks' involvement in the groupings, but Whitaker needed undisputable evidence that the GIs had no premeditation in their motives.

Lieutenant Bill Walsh was the focal point for Whitaker. The commanding officer of the 157th Infantry regiment's Item Company, Walsh had executed the

²⁹⁵ *Stars and Stripes* (May 3, 1945).

²⁹⁶ Robert Frederick, General, letter to Walter O' Brien, Colonel, January 29, 1945, HQ Records 45th Infantry Division, Record Group 338.7.2, National Archives, Washington, DC.

surrendered SS troopers in the boxcar and then given the order to fire on the SS in the coal yard. He was directly under Spark's command and one of the most thoroughly interrogated men. He did not want to admit any information that could result in his imprisonment.²⁹⁷ Walsh swore to the Seventh Army investigator that he "was told the SS were in command of the camp and they would need special watching," but he did not say who gave him the order. He told the investigator that his men fired only a brief volley against the uncooperative German prisoners.²⁹⁸ He was shown photographs of the coal yard, the lined-up SS, and the armed American machine gun squad. Walsh insisted that his men only fired after the SS advanced towards them, despite all repeated orders for them to halt. When Whitaker interrogated Walsh a second time, he admitted that he personally ordered his men to fire, but again emphasized that it was only after the SS provoked the GIs.²⁹⁹ When asked if he had intended to execute the SS when he arrived at the coal yard, he emphatically replied, "No, sir."³⁰⁰

Whitaker visited the site and examined the dead SS. He noticed the wall behind where the SS had stood and counted only twelve bullet holes in the concrete.³⁰¹ This indicated that the GIs only fired a brief and controlled volley that ceased when the prisoners had fallen. Walsh and several other Thunderbirds denied Sparks that had any

²⁹⁷ William Walsh, Interview with James Kent Strong, in James Kent Strong, *The Liberation of KZ Dachau*, Documentary (Cary, NC: Strong Communications, 1990).

²⁹⁸ Whitaker, *Observation of Dachau*, May 3, 1945, NARA, Record Group 338, Entry 41933.

²⁹⁹ Ibid.

³⁰⁰ Ibid.

³⁰¹ Joseph, Whitaker, Lieutenant Colonel, Inspector General Division, Seventh Army, *Investigation of Alleged Mistreatment of German Guards at Dachau*, May-June 1945, Record Group 338, Seventh Army Report of Investigations, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

direct involvement with the executions and agreed that he was not present at the coal yard during shooting. But every testimony offered a unique and different piece to the puzzle that Whitaker slowly assembled.³⁰² He pressed on and even interviewed able-bodied prisoners who had witnessed the firing, and German soldiers who had been fired upon.³⁰³

One interrogated former prisoner, Anton Zlotorzynski, told the inspectors that the Americans only fired on the Germans after one SS trooper abruptly “jerked his hand toward the place under his left armpit as if he were reaching for a gun. As he did that,” Zlotorzynski continued, “the American soldier who had brought him from the tower stepped back and the other soldier who had been guarding the soldiers with his gun went ‘B-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-t!!!’, and it was finished.”³⁰⁴ Zlotorzynski’s mention of the sudden jerking motion verified several American GIs’ testimonies, which swore the SS abruptly moved and advanced towards their line.

Whitaker also made it a point to include the perspective of men who had been fired upon. SS *Oberscharfuhrer* (Senior Squad Leader) Hans Linberger’s testimony to Whitaker was exactly the type of tale prosecutors needed to bring charges against the Americans. He told Whitaker how he immediately fell forward and laid prone through the entire ordeal, saying, “To me it didn’t matter if they would hit me standing or lying down.”³⁰⁵ Men fell all around him, but he remained unwounded. It was possible that

³⁰² Ibid.

³⁰³ Ibid.

³⁰⁴ Ibid.

³⁰⁵ Ibid.

Linberger was the fallen officer Peter Galary had intended to execute. The captured SS trooper's testimony seemed to verify the dark cloud that loomed over the liberation. Although Whitaker understood that evidence supplied by a former SS trooper would be met with skepticism, he had sufficient reason to pursue a court martial for the offenders.

Most soldiers Whitaker interrogated either did not know what happened or claimed they did not know where Colonel Sparks was during the event. Sparks' jeep driver, Private Carlton Johnson, claimed that he and Sparks were "100-200 yards away" from the yard where the shootings took place.³⁰⁶ He also claimed that Sparks immediately ran to cease the firing once it had erupted, and ordered the captured German medics to tend to the wounded SS.³⁰⁷ Several interrogated men confirmed Johnson's story, insisting that medics had been taken from their work with Dachau's prisoners and sent by Sparks to tend to the recently wounded SS.

A minority of the American men Joseph Whitaker questioned swore under oath and claimed they had seen Sparks personally fire on unarmed SS troops.³⁰⁸ Private Fred Randolph from Item Company claimed that Sparks "fired . . . with his pistol, about two or three shots."³⁰⁹ A few individuals also testified against Lieutenant Walsh, including Randolph, who confirmed that Walsh personally fired on the SS in the boxcar and at the coal yard. But the only thing Whitaker knew for certain was that nothing he had

³⁰⁶ Whitaker, *Investigation of Alleged Mistreatment of German Guards at Dachau*.

³⁰⁷ Ibid.

³⁰⁸ Ibid; Kershaw, *Liberator*, 315-316.

³⁰⁹ Whitaker, *Investigation of Alleged Mistreatment of German Guards at Dachau*.

heard was consistent; the official reports told the Seventh Army one thing, while every single testimony given under sworn oath provided a different story.³¹⁰ The hastily assembled investigation was conducted only a few days after the incident, when many of the soldiers still exhibited emotional trauma from the liberation. But Whitaker's commanders pressed him for conclusive evidence and suggestions on what actions, if any, needed to be taken against Sparks and his men.

Whitaker determined that the SS were intentionally separated from the Wehrmacht prisoners, but the investigation concluded that there was no malicious intent. Sparks and Walsh never explained why the SS were isolated, and it is possible that the SS distanced *themselves* and congregated away from the other prisoners. This was not uncommon. Historian Craig Symonds has explained that during the Normandy invasion, when large numbers of SS and Wehrmacht were held in temporary Allied internment camps, SS prisoners would cordon off their own section of the compound and not associate with other German soldiers. They even went as far as placing sentries and guards, whose purpose was to prevent non-SS from wandering too close.³¹¹ This was likely because the SS saw themselves as a unique and elite sect of the German military, more fanatical and dedicated than the Wehrmacht soldiers whose sweeping 1939-42 victories were, by 1945, a fading memory. Whitaker's conclusion that the SS prisoners were not purposely singled out and separated for execution lends credit to the

³¹⁰ Eyewitness accounts are notoriously unreliable as people remember vastly different events and invent a lot. For more information on psychology and criminal justice literature, see Elizabeth F. Loftus, *Eyewitness Testimony*. With a New Preface (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1996).

³¹¹ Symonds, *Neptune*, 331-332.

possibility that the SS did group themselves away from their fellow countrymen, and that the Americans had no premeditation for their actions.

But Whitaker summarized that, “the SS troopers had not advanced towards Walsh or his men and had in fact been summarily executed on Walsh’s orders.”³¹² He concluded that Walsh and others, “participated in the execution of seventeen” unarmed prisoners of war.³¹³ Whitaker recommended charges be brought up against Walsh and several enlisted men who fired on the SS. The charges did not mention anything about premeditation, torture, or theft, and did not indicate that the soldiers were proud of their actions. Whitaker did not have a personal stake in the investigation; none of his recommendations indicated that he wanted to protect the GIs or, the inverse, imprison them in Leavenworth. After it was decided that the Allies would prosecute Nazi war criminals, the American Army could point to Whitaker’s objective conclusions, which indicated that they did all they could to avoid hypocrisy. Following the investigation, Whitaker’s report was read and studied by Seventh Army rear-echelon staff, commanded by General Wade Haislip. Because Walsh was one of Sparks’ company commanders, his actions fell under the Lieutenant Colonel’s jurisdiction, and were deemed his responsibility. While he was not recommended for legal punishment, his military career was still at risk if men under his command were convicted for executing POWs.

³¹² Whitaker, *Observation of Dachau, Diagram of Coal Yard Shooting, Report and Conclusions*.

³¹³ Ibid.

Sparks believed General Patton would determine the outcome; he assumed the Army would pillory his men to set an example. Sparks served under Patton in Sicily and knew the general personally. He was fully aware that the hard fighting general was notoriously tough on his men. Sparks told his biographer that he was personally summoned to meet with Patton at his headquarters, where he claimed he found the four-star legend sitting behind his desk, looking over the files and court-martials drawn up for Sparks and his Thunderbirds.³¹⁴ During his meeting with Patton, Sparks claimed he was told, “There is no point in an explanation. I have already had these charges investigated, and they are a bunch of crap. I’m going to tear up these goddamn papers on you and your men.”³¹⁵

While multiple officers and soldiers confirmed Sparks’ account of his unit’s actions at Dachau, the same cannot be said about his supposed meeting with Patton. Following Sparks’ initial meeting with investigators and the subsequent analysis, it was recommended by Whitaker that charges be drawn against some of the Thunderbirds. However, the Seventh Army never took any further actions. General Patton did regard Sparks as an excellent combat soldier, and it was obvious that he had briefly lost control of a nearly uncontrollable situation. The General may have personally chosen to overlook the incident, but he never met with Felix Sparks. Patton’s logbooks showed no record of any meeting with any commanders of the 157th Infantry Regiment.³¹⁶

³¹⁴ Sparks, “Dachau and its Liberation,” 18; Kershaw, *The Liberator*, Ibid.

³¹⁵ Ibid, 19.

³¹⁶ Seventh Army Headquarters, Assembly Area Command, April 30-July 14, 1945, Box 32, Folder 1, National Personnel Records Center, St. Louis, MO.

While Patton may have had a persuasive voice in the decision not to prosecute the accused GIs, the initial decision was left to General Wade Haislip, who assumed control over the Seventh Army during the investigation.³¹⁷ Haislip decided to take no action against the GIs, with whom he empathized and believed were not cold-blooded killers, but distraught men.

Another discrepancy in Sparks' story was the detail of Patton destroying what was a two-hundred-page report. This would have been illegal and highly irregular, even for the legendary George S. Patton. While Sparks and his men did owe their proven innocence to the Seventh Army Commander and his headquarters, it was General Haislip, not Patton, who first decided the GIs should be forgiven. Other staff officers attempted to draw up murder charges against individuals who had worked under Walsh's order to fire, but the Seventh Army directly overstepped them.³¹⁸ But this was all done from a distance. Sparks' postwar testimonies and stories of meetings with Patton occurred in 1986, before the release of any official records the next year. His story was likely fabricated to prove his men's innocence many years after the war.

The Army formally dropped the charges drawn up against the Thunderbirds on November 20, 1945, when the Army's Assistant Theater Judge Advocate determined there was no "systematic criminality among United States forces."³¹⁹ All those who

³¹⁷ Ibid.

³¹⁸ Flint Whitlock, *Rock of Anzio* (New York: Basic Books, 1998), 390; Ibid.

³¹⁹ "Alleged Violation of the Geneva convention by United States Troops," 12th Army Group letter to army commanders April 1945; "War Crimes and Punishment of War Criminals," The General Board, United States Forces, European Theater, November 20, 1945, Study No. 86, Record Group 47, File .0005/1, Page 6, Leavenworth, Kansas: US Army Combined Arms Center.

supported the accused likely believed that no third-party witness could judge the men for their actions without experiencing the same mental burden that had been placed on Sparks' men. While Sparks stretched the truth about his meeting with Patton, when the General resumed command over the Seventh Army on June 9, 1945, he supported Sparks and upheld Haislip's decision. Kenneth Wickham, who acted as the 45th Infantry Division's chief of staff, remembered that Patton said, "to hell with it [the Inspector General's investigation], and that was it."³²⁰ Neither General Haislip nor Patton ever officially said why they did not take Whitaker's recommendations. Patton died less than six months after Dachau's liberation, and Haislip, who retired in 1951, never wrote a memoir or spoke publicly about the event. They probably would have agreed that anybody placed in a similar situation would have reacted similarly, and did not want to appear sympathetic to the SS. Their recommendations were most likely generated by a combination of respect for battle-worn soldiers who liberated the camps and the understanding that Dachau was unique in its horrors.

The case was studied for several months, even after Haislip and Patton refused to prosecute the GIs. For the Allies to represent the truly moral side of the conflict, they first had to assert their own morality. General Eisenhower wrote of their duty: "America's moral position will be undermined . . . if criminal conduct of a like character by her own armed forces is condoned and unpunished."³²¹ He said this before Dachau's liberation, but his message was clear enough to inspire Whitaker to take every

³²⁰ Whitlock, *Rock of Anzio*, 390.

³²¹ Dwight D. Eisenhower, General, Letter to George C. Marshall, Major General, in Rick Atkinson, *The Guns at Last Light* (London: Picador, 2013), 613.

precaution against any seemingly biased conclusion and he successfully built a case against the officers and their men. Whitaker took the testimonies and gathered evidence from all perspectives to build a case that was undeniably objective, and he was thorough in assuring the world that America did not tolerate war crimes in any fashion. The fact that the American military meticulously investigated and was prepared to file charges against their own GIs is another point often overlooked by Holocaust deniers. Whitaker's commitment alone denies the argument that the Americans tried to hide the incident or were proud of their soldiers' actions.

Men who had to remove their emotions from their work presented the official reports, but the writers still possessed the same anger and grief as the soldiers who committed the atrocities. Lieutenant Cowling, who sent his report without any mention of the executions, also wrote a more personal description of the camp to his parents in Kansas. He began his letter on April 28, 1945 with whimsical language and excitement about the war's approaching end, but it was interrupted by the uncovering of the camp. By the time he resumed his letter on April 30, he was clearly shaken by the previous day's event. His short report to the Seventh Army was factual, but his letter home was emotional and angry. He told his family, "I sincerely regret that I took the eight prisoners that I did. . . I will never take another German prisoner armed or unarmed."³²² Cowling did not participate in the executions, but his letter illustrated that the anger felt by those who killed the SS troopers was not premeditated and not unique. He continued on to say what many of the soldiers who had been responsible for the executions said:

³²² Cowling, Letter to his Parents.

“How can they expect to do what they have done and simply say I quit and go scot free? They are not fit to live.”³²³ Worries about the SS walking away and returning to civilian life prompted the few GIs to carry out their own sentencing. In a conventional war, surrender, honored as a sacred symbol, could not be betrayed. Cowling and the other American soldiers believed the Germans had not fought a conventional war and did not deserve to be treated as if they had. His letter put the atrocities into words and indicated the deep frustration most liberators felt.

After the war, in all theaters that involved American forces, the Army investigated reports about suspected Allied crimes. The United States did not try to forget or cover up crimes committed by its Army: twenty cases alleging American crimes were recommended to the General Board, which was established by General Eisenhower on June 17, 1945. The Board oversaw the United States Chief of Counsel and Judge Advocate General, which investigated both Allied and Axis war crimes in Europe.³²⁴ This, like Whitaker’s vigorous investigation into the Dachau murders, was an attempt to prove America’s virtue while Axis war criminals were tried. American courts considered cases ranging from murder to theft: During Operation Husky, American soldiers near the town of Caltagirone, Sicily, executed approximately seventy Italian and German prisoners of war. General Patton, the usually staunch defender of his men, growled at General Omar Bradley to “Try the bastards.”³²⁵ The Army convicted Sergeant Horace T. West to life in prison for “willfully, deliberately,

³²³ Ibid.

³²⁴ “War Crimes and Punishment of War Criminals,” The General Board, 1, 6.

³²⁵ Rick Atkinson, *The Day of Battle* (New York: Henry Holt, 2008), 119.

feloniously, [and] unlawfully" murdering surrendered prisoners.³²⁶ West's commanding officer, Captain John T. Compton, argued he was following General Patton's orders, but the Judge Advocate determined the men had grossly misinterpreted Patton's comments. Compton was immediately transferred to the 179th Infantry Regiment, where he was subsequently killed in action.³²⁷ In another case, Private Edward Joseph Leonski, who terrorized civilians and strangled three women, was arrested, convicted, and hanged for his crimes.³²⁸ Allied soldiers entering Germany were warned even against looting and the sentence levied on malefactors was two years in a military prison with possible hard labor.³²⁹ Soldiers were tried for rape, theft, and murder, but in every case, individuals' sadistic acts were to blame. Since the first Americans were prosecuted for crimes committed in England in 1942, the United States proved they did not tolerate offensive behavior from any of their servicemen.³³⁰

Dachau's liberation was one of the cases studied by the General Board, which had the power to re-open the investigation and charge the accused if they felt such actions were warranted. Colonel Charles Decker, the deputy judge advocate, closed the case in late 1945 forever. He officially recognized that the GIs' mindsets, because of

³²⁶ "Report of Investigation of Shooting of Prisoners of War by Sgt. Horace T. West," (August 5, 1943); "Report of Investigation: Shooting of Prisoners of War under direction of Captain John T. Compton," Office of the Inspector Gen., Headquarters, 45th Infantry Division (August 5, 1943).

³²⁷ Ibid.

³²⁸ Barry Ralph, *They Passed This Way: The United States of America, the States of Australia, and World War II* (East Roseville, Australia: Kangaroo Press, 2000), 158.

³²⁹ "War Crimes and Punishment of War Criminals," The General Board, 7-8.

³³⁰ David Wilson, "The Secret War," *Guardian* (2007).



Figure 9. A sign posted in Germany for passing American soldiers to see. The placement of the sign and its message indicates that American commanders expected moral behavior from their soldiers and were prepared to punish malefactors. The US Army never permitted its soldiers to behave as brutish conquerors and clearly did not condone mistreatment of German civilians or their property. Photo taken by Cpl. Donald R. Ornitz, 1945, Record Group 111, National Archives.

the horrors they stumbled across, were highly agitated in a highly unusual situation, and the men did not deserve to be punished. “In the light of the conditions which greeted the eyes of the first combat troops,” he concluded, “it is not believed that justice of equity demand that the difficult and perhaps impossible task of fixing individual responsibility now be undertaken.”³³¹ His official statement did not hint any sympathy for the GIs, but his verdict’s impact indicated that the Army did not want to punish the men who liberated Dachau and helped end the Holocaust.

The American servicemen who went into Ohrdruf, Buchenwald, and Dachau in 1945 were all angry and wanted justice, but murder is not justice. By killing the SS, they deprived the prisoners of the chance to give testimony and convict the guards. The

³³¹ *Boston Globe* (July 2, 2001).

men who entered Dachau, unlike those who entered other camps, had fresh memories of murdered civilians and miles of corpse-laden boxcars imprinted in their minds as they listened to stories from people who had been live experiments. Even though the Americans executed seventeen unarmed men, they did it because of their skewed sense of morality; they believed they were stopping the spread of evil by directly removing the evildoers and, in doing so, they themselves committed evil. Colonel Alvin Irzyk, who briefly lost his sense of leadership when liberating Ohrdruf, illustrated that during each liberation, young, educated officers, who were expected to lead their men by example, were not immune to pain. The difference was that at Ohrdruf there were no living SS or Wehrmacht soldiers. At Dachau, Lieutenant Walsh could not control himself from lashing out at the first Germans he saw. But this meltdown was not a luxury he could afford; as an officer, he was expected to control his emotions, no matter how overwhelming they were. He was expected to compose himself and control his men by example. But the young New Englander broke, and his leadership eventually broke down beneath him. It was not a matter of the weak-minded men falling apart, but strong men who remained composed for months succumbing to the Holocaust's reality and scale.

Much like how Majdanek, Ohrdruf, Buchenwald, and Dachau were different experiences for the soldiers, liberations were also dissimilar for the prisoners. In the East, prisoners liberated themselves after their German guards fled. Those who were not transported with the fleeing Germans usually fended for themselves by hiding in abandoned villages and scavenging for food.³³² Men imprisoned by the Nazis for their

³³² Stone, *The Liberation of the Camps*, 31.

political views, unless they were communist, expected similar treatment as the Nazis from the Russians and summoned whatever strength they had to escape their liberators' influence.³³³ Though the plight of the prisoners was pitiful, stopping the westward offensive to provide humanitarian aid would delay the end of the war, and was therefore not done by the Soviets.³³⁴ Russians fed the prisoners and then told them to walk to railroad junctions, where "they could try to get a ride home."³³⁵

Unlike the Russian liberations, which had often occurred while Hitler's regime was still offering ferocious resistance, American liberations occurred in April 1945 when it was evident that Nazi Germany was defeated. American forces, when they recognized the extent of the camps they uncovered, could offer extended relief and aid for the prisoners without diverting crucial military assets that would prolong the war. Many American GIs were also Jewish. When they entered camps, Jewish soldiers took extended periods to offer relief and spoke Yiddish to the prisoners. They were often the ones overwhelmed by men who hugged and kissed them.³³⁶ The former prisoners did not worry about continued persecution because of their affiliation or faith, as they sometimes did in the East, and allowed themselves to be overcome with joy at the sight of Jewish GIs.

"I knew these people were Jews," said Abe Cheslow, a former college student serving with the 20th Armored Division. "You do feel a kinship. I said, 'Ich bin ein

³³³ Ibid. 96.

³³⁴ Ibid.

³³⁵ Ibid. 31.

³³⁶ Stone, *Liberating the Concentration Camps*, Passim.

Jude.”³³⁷ Sergeant Morris Einstein gave money to some of the Jews in the camp he entered. Though he knew it was not what they needed at the time, he had nothing else to give. He was determined to help and hoped it would allow them to do something after the war.³³⁸ The Americans, whatever their emotions, were determined to provide some sort of aid or assistance to the emaciated victims, and they often spent prolonged periods in one region to do so. Eli Heimbarg, a chaplain’s assistant, focused on taking names and memories, so they would never be forgotten. He was humbled by their love and felt, “It was I who should have been hugging and kissing them.”³³⁹ One prisoner liberated by the Americans, Rosalyn Orenstein, could not say “enough about their kindness and generosity.” Selflessly, in her time of greatest need, she pitied their families: “They were just young kids like we were. I felt sorry for their mothers having to send their kids off to war at age eighteen.”³⁴⁰

Some prisoners liberated themselves, even if they were able to do so only once American soldiers had secured their former prison. As previously mentioned in the section on Buchenwald’s liberation, Dachau was not the only camp where former guards were executed. Even soldiers who wrote only about their sadness and shock at the camps referenced the former prisoners and their treatment of guards and collaborators. Once it was apparent that the prisoners were no longer under armed German supervision, they immediately vented their rage. Drahomir Barta remembered

³³⁷ Abe Cheslow, *Liberating the Concentration Camps*, 31.

³³⁸ Morris Einstein, *Liberating the Concentration Camps*, 36.

³³⁹ Eli Heimbarg, *Liberating the Concentration Camps*, 41.

³⁴⁰ Rosalyn Orenstein, *Liberating the Concentration Camps*, 55.

that, “Since the SS and guards had left the camp, prisoner rage was released against camp functionaries and others who happened to be present.”³⁴¹ This occurred at every camp where any surviving guards remained. At Belsen, a camp liberated by British and American forces, “The weak slashed pictures of Hitler, tore down Nazi paraphernalia, or simply refused to acknowledge anything the few remaining German soldiers said.”³⁴² A British photographer remembered the stronger prisoners killing “collaborators, pro-Nazis, guards, etc. British and American troops wanted nothing to do with it and let them.”³⁴³ Prisoners who suffered for years, most liberators agreed, deserved justice on the spot. According to American, British, and Russian testimonies and letters, most did not interfere with the reprisals. Former prisoner Benjamin Piskorz told American interviewers that he “did the same thing as they [captured Nazis] did with us,” and felt the Germans all deserved to be imprisoned in Russian Gulags.³⁴⁴ Harry Herder watched as a group of inmates at Buchenwald found a former guard, interrogated him, placed a rope in his hands, and forced him to hang himself. “I understood why the Buchenwald Prisoners did what they did,” one soldier remembered. “I had witnessed their agonies . . . so I did not stop them.”³⁴⁵ It can be understood that liberators at each camp felt the Nazis deserved the punishments they received from the

³⁴¹ Florin Freund, *Concentration Camp Ebensee: Subcamp of Mauthausen* (Vienna: Austrian Resistance Archives, 1998), 55.

³⁴² Shlomo Venezia, *Inside the Gas Chambers: Eight Months in the Sonderkommando of Auschwitz* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 144-145.

³⁴³ N.A. Midgley, Description of Belsen, 18 April 1945, IWM Documents, 2.

³⁴⁴ Benjamin Piskorz, interview with David Boder, 1 September 1946.
http://voices.iit.edu/interview?doc+piskorzB&display+piskorzB_en (original interview in Yiddish)

³⁴⁵ McManus, *Hell Before their Very Eyes*, 99.

former prisoners, but those wishes only came to an immediate fruition at Dachau. To censure the Thunderbird soldiers who fired would also mean condemning the Allied soldiers who did not interfere with the prisoners' attacks and would condemn the Holocaust's victims who demanded immediate vengeance.

Colonel Sparks and his 45th Infantry Division were sent home as liberators and conquerors. Regardless of his having dodged a charge or a conviction, Sparks was, "greatly pained by the notion that he had not acted honorably and humanely that day," his son remembered.³⁴⁶ He stopped the continuation of the slaughter but was plagued by the idea that others might remember him and his men as ruthless murderers. The official report that detailed the events and testified the Lieutenant Colonel's innocence ended any rumors that wounded his pride as a man who had liberated so many victimized people. But it was not released until 1987, which gave plenty of time for phony stories to circulate. In addition to the report, an image of Sparks, captured by Robert Goebel, was widely published nearly fifty years after it had been taken. Goebel's previously undeveloped image had captured the scene of Sparks ordering his men to stop the killings. The image showed Sparks with one hand outstretched towards his men and his other pointed straight up in the air, firing his sidearm. The image, along with the declassified documents, ended any question of Sparks' involvement, and finally put down the terrible rumors that haunted Sparks and his men. Most Holocaust deniers have omitted the fact that there were orders given by Sparks, and even Walsh, which intended to prevent a massacre. While their websites frequently share the image of Private Curtin lying prone behind his machine gun, none use Sparks' picture.

³⁴⁶ Kirk Sparks, Interview with Alex Kershaw, 2007.



Figure 10. The image that affirmed Colonel Sparks' innocence from murder. Sparks, stood behind Private Curtin's .30 Caliber Browning machine gun with his sidearm aimed skyward, desperately trying to convey his cease fire order. Two SS prisoners remain standing, either in defiance or terror, while the remainder have fallen in response to the gunfire. Photo taken by Robert Goebel, 29 April, 1945, Record Group 111, National Archives.

Sparks felt remorse about what his men had done, and argued he did everything possible to control the situation. "I never like to see people killed unnecessarily . . . We did kill some people there I consider unnecessarily," he later confessed, but, "it was just one of those things that no one could control. I never countenanced any unnecessary killing at any time during the war."³⁴⁷ Holocaust deniers have compared Sparks to gangsters and murderers, and most discussions or accusations revolve around his character, leadership skills, and participation in the event. Sparks lived his life delivering lectures on the Holocaust and defended the integrity of his men. He dedicated the last fifteen years of his life to combat Holocaust denial, which his daughter told his biographer was "the most terrible lesson you could get in

³⁴⁷ Felix Sparks, personal account, Felix Sparks Collection 41933, Library of Congress.

discrimination,” and he vowed to “fight those kinds of people until my last breath.”³⁴⁸ He did so until the day he died. He defended his men with equal tenacity, believing they had done what any human being would have done in the same situation. In 2001, the Colorado Centennial National Guard Armory was named in Sparks’ honor. And when Van T. Barfoot, the 157th Infantry Regiment’s sole living Medal of Honor recipient was asked about Sparks’ conduct at Dachau, he answered by praising the aging soldier: “There were very few officers who had the concern for his men that Colonel Sparks did . . . He has advanced America.”³⁴⁹

The medical officer who confronted Dachau’s doctors, Captain Alvin Weinstein, like many other liberators, did not pen his memories in ink for fifty years. When he did, he made no mention of the reprisal killings. He did not say whether he intentionally omitted the details because he felt no remorse, or simply did not feel the need to discuss them. He did emphasize, however, that he did everything he could to suppress the memory and hide what he saw from his family. This was stark contrast to German guards, officers, and medical personnel, some of whom even brought their families to Dachau to witness their work.³⁵⁰ Other men who liberated the camp certainly experienced an amalgam of emotions as well. While Colonel Sparks spoke of the guilt he felt and was eventually vindicated by physical proof of his innocence,

³⁴⁸ Blair Lee Sparks, interview with Alex Kershaw, *Liberator*, 355.

³⁴⁹ *Rocky Mountain News* (September 14, 1995).

³⁵⁰ Weinstein, Written Testimonial, 1995.

soldiers like Weinstein carried the same burden for the rest of their lives in relative secrecy.

Lieutenant Walsh never felt any regrets for his actions. His postwar life indicated that he was an educated and well-respected man. He attended Northeastern University and studied engineering, and after his death in 1998, Walsh was eulogized as “a gentle and kind man who loved to play golf and be with his children.”³⁵¹ While the *Boston Globe* may not have wanted to attack the recently deceased veteran, their description directly refuted the Holocaust deniers who charged Walsh as an evil, hate-filled murderer. He never wrote a memoir and was rarely interviewed by historians, but he too became an avid member of many Holocaust memorials, lecturing on his experiences and what he saw during the final days of the war. He was a special honoree at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum’s dedication ceremony, and a guest of honor at the fiftieth anniversary of D-Day celebration. In 1990, when asked how he felt about his actions almost forty-five years later, Walsh hinted that his actions were wrong. He associated himself with the SS, saying, “When I go to hell with the rest of the SS, I’m going to ask them how the hell they could do it.” But he subsequently exploded and said, “They all knew goddamned-well why some of them were killed.”³⁵² Many other Thunderbirds and 42nd Infantry Division soldiers shared similar thoughts about their conduct on that day.

Private John Lee, in contrast with Walsh, felt great remorse for what had happened. “I realize you can’t resolve it by doing that. It was wrong what happened

³⁵¹ *Boston Globe* (July 2, 2001).

³⁵² Walsh, Interview with James Kent Strong.

there,” he later said. But in the same instance, he defended their actions, saying, “But you had to have been there to see what we saw.”³⁵³ Mixed emotions surrounded the liberators for the rest of their lives, but all of them understood why they had acted with such swift punishment. Combat engineer Donald Boots believed there was a stark difference between the Axis’ culturally created evil and the situational reaction of the American soldiers. “Sometimes in fighting an enemy,” he told an interviewer in 2001, “we allow ourselves to become like the ones we’re trying to destroy. It’s a thin line. You can destroy for love. You can destroy because it’s something that you have to do and still not have any hatred there. You can destroy something and cry. If you don’t feel this,” Boots concluded, “then we’re no better than the ones we’re destroying.”³⁵⁴ There certainly was a difference in hatred between the Nazis, who killed millions of innocent civilians in concentration camps, and the Americans, whose overwhelming anger stemmed from the Nazi atrocities.

³⁵³ Sparks, “Dachau and its Liberation, 11.

³⁵⁴ Donald Boots, Interviewed by Ronald E. Marcello, May 17, 2001, University of North Texas Oral History Collection, Denton, TX.

Chapter 5: Conclusion—
“They’re just pictures to you.”

Unbeknownst to the liberating armies approaching Dachau, Himmler ordered Dachau’s commandant to remove all occupants from the camp by whatever means necessary, saying, “No prisoner must fall into the hands of the enemy alive.”³⁵⁵ This was not to be the case. The acting commandant, SS Lieutenant Heinrich Wickert, spared the lives of the prisoners, not because he and his men were merciful; rather, the war was lost and senior Nazis hoped the Allies would treat them better if they refused to comply with Himmler’s orders. For this reason, the camp surrendered over thirty thousand emaciated men to the 42nd and 45th Infantry Divisions. They did, however, “burn or otherwise remove” the records, index systems, and most other incriminating materials regarding the prisoners and their captors.³⁵⁶

Nonetheless, right wing nationalists and Holocaust deniers used the defiance of the order to claim that the camp officials did not want to “liquidate” tens of thousands of lives. Holocaust deniers contend that the Americans were no better than the Nazi regime, arguing that “German victims of the American 'liberators' and 'defenders of democracy' were put on show-trials in Allied kangaroo courts, where they were accused

³⁵⁵ Sam Dann, *Dachau: 29 April 1945 The Rainbow Liberation* (Lubbock, TX: Texas Tech University Press, 1998), 6.

³⁵⁶ John McManus, *Hell Before Their Very Eyes* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2015), 73-75; Dann, *Dachau*, 223.

of phony atrocities, only yards away from [Dachau's] blood-soaked walls where criminals in American uniform had been committing real atrocities."³⁵⁷ Such language, implying that Dachau's Nazis were harmless victims of American violence, is a common theme. One denier, Thomas O' Keefe, has written that "American soldiers [at Dachau] under the command of . . . communist inmates whom the G.I.'s armed, in clear violation of their own rules of warfare, murdered 560 innocent men in cold blood, deliberately, [*sic*] cruelly, with malice and forethought."³⁵⁸ They juxtapose pictures, usually taken hundreds of miles away from Dachau, of the SS "Christians holding rosar(ies)," with American soldiers, usually pictured drinking, smoking, or smiling with their weapons.³⁵⁹ The photos of Americans were almost all taken during basic training or while the men were on leave; there are no pictures of the GIs looking happy while in Dachau. Their selected images of dead Germans are often too blurry to provide a true glimpse, and their failure to attribute photographers means the photographs could have been taken anywhere at any time. Misleading or inflammatory statements typically follow pictures of the American soldiers, such as, "Obviously, the murder of 560 Germans didn't bother him," or "then they robbed them!"³⁶⁰ But no photos support such claims. Sam Dann, a member of the 42nd Infantry Division, attempted to discourage the comparison between the Nazis' systematic annihilation of millions of

³⁵⁷ "The Dachau Massacre," *Zündelsite*. Web, Retrieved November 29, 2018.
http://www.zundelsite.org/archive/warcrimes_ww2/dauchau_massacre/the_dachau_massacre.html

³⁵⁸ "Dachau Massacre," *Zündelsite*. Web, Retrieved November 28, 2018.
<http://www.zundelsite.org/dachau-massacre.html>

³⁵⁹ "The Dachau Massacre," *Zündelsite*. Web, Retrieved November 29, 2018.
http://www.zundelsite.org/archive/warcrimes_ww2/dauchau_massacre/the_dachau_massacre.html

³⁶⁰ *Ibid*.

people, and the ad-hoc actions taken by the liberating Americans. In his memoirs he wrote:

Rainbow soldiers sometimes would not discuss Dachau even with their wives for a long time afterward. In telling contrast, however, some members of the SS not only informed their wives of the atrocities they were committing but invited them along to share in the experience. . . One of its officers, Captain Julius Wohlauf, brought his wife to a day-long massacre. . . She happened to be pregnant at the time. . . She was not the only lady present.³⁶¹

Evidence presented in this thesis shows that the deniers' claims are baseless and untrue. However, it is important to point out that Americans soldiers' generally benign attitudes about the Germans did shift after the liberation of Ohrdruf, especially after Colonel Van Wagenen deemed all Germans responsible for the crime. The soldiers' breaking point came after they saw how cruel humans could be towards one another; there was no premeditation and their ad-hoc reaction was an empathetic response to the carnage. Private William Curtin, who fired on the surrendered SS guards at Dachau, emphasized this. He admitted the German prisoners only became a direct threat after he pulled the charging handle on his machine gun. When he chambered the lead round, he did not expect to pull the trigger, but when Bill Walsh ordered the emotionally distraught Curtin to fire, he did not question the lieutenant. These men were trained for combat, but as Walsh admitted, they were not trained how to respond to mass-casualty incidents like concentration camps. Leadership faltered during other liberations, but Dachau was unique: unlike other camps liberated to date, the conditions were especially horrible, and the camp had a significant number of surviving SS guards.

³⁶¹ Dann, *Dachau*, X; Johannes Neuhausler, *What Was it Like in the Concentration Camp at Dachau* (Dachau: Comite International de Dachau, privately printed, 1972), 10.

It cannot be said that American commanders did absolutely nothing to prepare soldiers to receive both civilian and military prisoners. After 1944, American soldiers in all theaters of the war received pamphlets, which intended to humanize the enemy and prevent atrocities. Though written and distributed before the Allies knew about the devastating conditions and inhumanity found in concentration camps, a 1944 pamphlet warned that when taking prisoners, close attention must be paid to the rules of war:

We must . . . be absolutely sure in our own minds that a person is fighting us or harming our installations before we shoot him. International law clearly demands that those who do not fight back at us . . . must, whenever possible, be taken alive, and must not be injured or have their possessions taken from them except after a due trial by competent authority . . . It is one thing to kill a soldier in battle; it is entirely different to kill those not fighting against us . . . The latter is murder, nothing more nor less.³⁶²

The pamphlet did not mention what consequences would be levied on a soldier who mistreated a surrendered enemy, but the use of the word “murder” indicated that American commanders did not want their men to break international law or behave like brutes. There was supposed to be a clear difference between combat and homicide.

While the atrocities committed by the liberators were without a doubt tragic, it is also important to point out that other tragedies went unnoticed. The execution of surrendered prisoners was common during the Second World War.³⁶³ When compared to the number of prisoners of war executed by German, Russian, and Japanese armies, Americans executed notably fewer. The Germans executed approximately 55% of all

³⁶² Ibid.

³⁶³ For further reading on prisoner executions, Russian treatment of POWs, and Western war crimes, see Peter Calvocoressi and Guy Wint, *Total War* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1973); French L. MacLean, *The Fifth Field The Story of the 96 American Soldiers Sentenced to Death and Executed in Europe and North Africa in World War II* (Atglen, PA: Schiffer Publishing, 2013); Richard Overy, *Russia's War* (London: Penguin Books, 1997).

Russian soldiers they captured.³⁶⁴ In the Pacific, approximately 33% of Americans held POW by the Japanese were executed, and the British suffered nearly 25% killed.³⁶⁵ These statistics only include the military figures and, by contrast, only 0.15% of German POWs held by the Americans were executed, most of which occurred after a trial.³⁶⁶ According to author and historian Stephen E. Ambrose, of the roughly 1,000 US combat veterans he interviewed, officers and enlisted men alike, only one admitted to shooting a prisoner.³⁶⁷ Similarly, Lieutenant Robert B. Sheeks, a language officer who organized surrender appeals, wrote about his dealings with prisoners, and defended even his toughest comrades. “In spite of tough talk,” he wrote, “a lot of soldiers and Marines were quite cooperative and even kindly toward prisoners, both civilian and military. When they saw the miserable condition . . . they tried to help them, gave them water, and bandaged them up. Most were kind guys, basically.”³⁶⁸ These statements make it clear that, contrary to what Holocaust deniers claimed, Sparks, Walsh, and their men were not intent on killing defenseless Germans.³⁶⁹

While the breakdown of leadership and the killings at Dachau were a blemish to the liberation, a truly remarkable fact was that despite such horrid discoveries, more

³⁶⁴ Niall Ferguson, “Prisoner Taking and Prisoner Killing in the Age of Total War,” *War in History* 11 (2004): 186.

³⁶⁵ Ibid, 188; Keith Lowe, *Savage Continent: Europe in the Aftermath of WWII*. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2013), 122.

³⁶⁶ Ibid.

³⁶⁷ James J. Weingartner, “Americans, Germans, and War Crimes: Converging Narratives from ‘the Good War,’” *Journal of American History* 94 (March, 2008), 68.

³⁶⁸ Robert B. Sheeks account in Rex Alan Smith and Gerald A. Meehl, eds. *Pacific War Stories: In the Words of Those Who Survived* (New York: Abbeville Press, 2011), 193.

³⁶⁹ Kershaw, *The Liberator*, 128, 148 309; Sparks, Buechner, *Sparks*, 102.

men did not physically break. The Americans who committed the offenses at Dachau were not criminals, bred to hate a specific group of people, but distraught human beings. To the discredit of the deniers writing for the *Zündelsite*, the actions at Dachau were not premeditated. Rather, the punishment administered toward the seventeen surrendered SS troopers emphasized that ethical men could be broken in an instant. American commanders understood this, and eventually developed procedures and training routines for soldiers. After the lessons learned during the Dachau incident, both Allied and captured Wehrmacht soldiers were shown photographs, films, testimonies, and stories from camps that had been uncovered. This was done to prepare men for the uncovering of future camps and expose them to the brutality of the Nazi regime, and to ensure such atrocities would never happen again.

Despite the overwhelming amount of evidence that refuted their claims, in the wake of Howard Buechner's erroneous 1986 narrative about Dachau's liberation, deniers intensified their efforts and misleading narratives. People casually browsing the internet still find their false information more accessible than the official testimonies and reports made by the U.S. Army. Given the prevalence of Holocaust denier narratives, Holocaust educators need to argue that while U.S. soldiers were not flawless, they were not on the same mission as the Nazis. The lack of attention from historical organizations is not simply a problem of misattributed credit. Since the official declassification of the 1987 report on Dachau's liberation the subject has received more attention than ever before. The topic is still rarely discussed, however, by mainstream sources of Holocaust information. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, which is arguably the greatest collective source for information on

the Holocaust, still provides almost no information on the executions of the SS troopers. A search for 'Dachau's liberation' on the USHMM's website provides dozens of articles and pages of documents regarding the prison, but only one article about the American units and no detailed information on the executions.³⁷⁰ The organization should highlight the Dachau liberation and put the executions into context. They need to discuss what led to the event, detail the Army's investigation of the officers and men, and emphasize that the GIs were deemed not mentally responsible for their actions. The USHMM needs to directly refute Holocaust deniers' accounts, and providing factual information on the liberation will debase their platforms.

When the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum was set to open in 1993, many military historians were distressed because there was almost nothing in the museum dedicated to the American, British, and Soviet soldiers who liberated the camps. In 1992, historian Edward Drea wrote an impassioned plea to have displays honor the liberators. He wrote, "The U.S. Army's role in the liberation of the Nazi concentration camps [was] one of the Army's brightest achievements during World War II," and the peacemakers deserved to be remembered just as much as the victims did.³⁷¹ The USHMM eventually agreed to include information about the American units, but the only exhibit they approved was a display of ten division flags, one for each division that liberated a concentration camp.³⁷² Attempts to include more

³⁷⁰ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Dachau," Holocaust Encyclopedia. <https://www.ushmm.org/search/results/?q=dachau>

³⁷¹ Edward J. Drea, "Recognizing the Liberators: U.S. Army Divisions Enter the Concentration Camps" *Army History* 24 (U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1992): 5.

³⁷² *Ibid.* 3.

American soldiers in museum displays evolved into a long and circuitous process, which implied that the liberating units' records had not been studied in depth, or used, since they were compiled in the late 1940s. The 20th Armored Division, which accompanied the 45th and 42nd Divisions into Dachau, was not even listed as a liberating force until historians exhumed and scrutinized after-action reports from the infantry divisions.³⁷³

Rather than ignore the executions of SS at Dachau, the USHMM should discredit deniers' claims about liberators, using both Colonel Charles Decker's 1945 conclusions and the 1987 report as evidence. Holocaust denial organizations have devoted hundreds of webpages to cast a negative light on the 42nd and 45th Divisions and the liberation.³⁷⁴ Major organizations might consider including more details about the ordeals American liberators endured; otherwise, the skewed stories of sites like *Zündelsite* will continue to have their selected facts dominate search engines. More attention could deny these phony historians their platform of legitimacy and would allow any cross-examiner the opportunity to debunk the condemnation of the American soldiers. Sincere organizations have the ultimate answer to the deniers: evidence. Failure to use this proof to refute deniers only empowers their phony platforms.

³⁷³ Ibid, 1.

³⁷⁴ Ernst Zündel, "Dachau Massacre," *Zündelsite*. <http://www.zundelsite.org/dachau-massacre.html>; Theodore O'Keefe, "The 'Liberation of the Camps': Facts vs. Lies," *Zündelsite*. http://www.zundelsite.org/archive/basic_articles/incorrect.008.html; N.A., "29 April 1945 – liberation day at Dachau," *Scrapbookpages*. <https://www.scrapbookpages.com/DachauScrapbook/DachauLiberation/LiberationDay.html>; N.A., "Execution of SS soldiers at Dachau," *Scrapbookpages*. <https://www.scrapbookpages.com/DachauScrapbook/DachauLiberation/SoldiersKilled.html>; Michael Mills, "Massacre of SS Guards at Dachau," *AxisHistory*. <https://axishistory.com/viewtopic.php?t=43919>; Charles Provan, "Massacre at Dachau and other Allied war crimes," *Committee for Open Debate on the Holocaust*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gPeeIxDnVEU>.

Organizations displaying legitimate Holocaust histories must tackle the threat presented by Holocaust deniers, whose objective is to undermine everything groups like the USHMM have worked to preserve. And in the case of Dachau's liberation, they have been remarkably successful in achieving this goal.

These men were some of the first Americans to experience the horrors of Nazi Germany's Final Solution. And unlike perpetrators of Nazi war crimes, liberators like John Lee, Felix Sparks, and others immediately felt remorse for their action. Memoirs of almost every Thunderbird expressed regret for what had happened. Deniers' allegations that American soldiers were proud murderers that premeditated the executions are untrue. The GIs' defenders understood that "amidst suffering, captivity, and degradation, officers and men of U.S. Army divisions brought hope, freedom, and dignity to the victims of the Holocaust."³⁷⁵ Thunderbird and Rainbow soldiers had to juxtapose the sight of death with the fit SS officers and soldiers, who seemed indifferent to the experience. "They're just pictures to you," John Lee said. "You've never walked up on something like that. It knocked you off your equilibrium. It's part of war, but nobody prepared us for it."³⁷⁶ The events that occurred at Dachau during the liberation deserve to be remembered as a lesson about humanity, in the sense of how premeditated evil could fester amongst a civilized people, and how morally strong men could succumb to their violent impulses. Never before had such an event taken place on such a large scale, and nobody knew how to deal with the trauma. The Army determined it

³⁷⁵ Drea, "Recognizing the Liberators," 5.

³⁷⁶ McManus, *Hell Before Their Very Eyes*, 104.

was better to focus on the real crime that it had unearthed: Nazi Germany's Final Solution.

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