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## Nazi War Crimes and Criminals

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BY COL. JAMES R. HOFFMAN\*

In 1916, after much detailed research, I wrote an article for an English class on "The Case Against Germany." One section was devoted to atrocities both against allied soldiers and against Belgian and French civilians. In keeping with most Americans, many of us only half-believed these accounts, or at least thought the stories to be exaggerated. As World War I became a dim memory and we began to bask in the false sunshine of pacifism, thinking more of making dollars than of insuring a permanent peace, we all considered the "case against Germany" as weaker and weaker, until finally Deutschland received a full pardon with no strings attached.

The rearmament of Germany, the Munich Pact, the invasion of Czechoslovakia, Poland, the low countries, France, are all history, yet many Americans were not convinced of the criminal tendencies of the Germans. Hitler's speech to his generals just before the Polish invasion revealed the crime plan, "the invasion and *extermination* of Poland begins Saturday morning," with orders "to kill without mercy all men, women and children of the Polish race or language," and the ultimate aim to massacre all civilization except the pure "Aryans" or Nazi. On December 17th of last year we who were on the Western Front of the European theatre came face to face with stern reality and "the case against Germany" became clearer and stronger, when we learned of the Malmedy murders. Almost a hundred helpless American prisoners of war lay dead on that Belgian snow-covered cross-roads, mowed down by the machine guns of Nazi panzer troops. Since then the evidence has been piling up until at last one of the blackest pages of all history lies open, revealing that Germany, supposedly a highly cultured nation, was in fact little better than a barbarous, uncivilized band of savages.

Immediately after V-E Day it was my good fortune to be assigned as leader of a War Crimes Investigating team under the Judge Advocate's Section of the War Department to inquire into Nazi war crimes. We investigated three principal types of atrocities, including crimes by German civilians against American and British flyers who had been forced down in enemy territory, crimes by military personnel and units against allied soldiers, and crimes by SS, Gestapo and like organizations against political prisoners and other civilians.

The theory has been advanced that most atrocities were committed by the fanatical SS and Gestapo, in spite of and without the approbation of the rank and file of German civil population, but we found that the

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German housewife and over-aged artisan were just as bloodthirsty as any elite guards and that when allied flyers were forced to bail out of their B-17, these civilians appeared eager to participate in the beating to death of the helpless airmen with a monkey wrench or fence post, pelting him with stones or running him through with a pitchfork, even after he had been disarmed and made a legal prisoner. Many readily admitted the deed and some even boasted of it.

Investigations revealed that in many instances the Germans showed themselves to be past masters in the cruel treatment of prisoners of war. Forced marches in freezing cold with little or no food, lack of medical care, overwork under the most dangerous conditions, torture and even murder, all in violation of the Geneva Convention, bring the Nazi into the class of the prehistoric caveman.

Much has been said in the public press and shown on the screen of Buchenwald, Belsen and Dachau. Our team had occasion to spend several weeks investigating one of the many concentration camps. We took the testimony of witnesses, secured the evidence and exhibits and prepared the case against members of the SS, Gestapo and Organization Todt who were in charge of the KZ and work *lagers* (camps) and labor *kommandos* (details) and responsible for the construction projects. Here we found starvation, beatings, murder, mass burials of political prisoners, slave laborers and so-called "voluntary workers" from almost every European country perpetrated by the SS, Wehrmacht, Gestapo, Organization Todt and civilians. One who has never been near a concentration camp cannot imagine the stench and smell of death, the lice and flea-infested, overcrowded huts, bodies piled by the thousands into mass graves, living skeletons brought about by ersatz coffee and "bunker" soup containing 700 calories, which will not sustain simple life, much less give the energy necessary to work ten to twelve hours per day at back-breaking toil under the constant threat of an SS whip or OT club. A man's life expectancy, if he entered the camp in good physical condition, was three months, and as the prisoners became too weak to work, they were gassed, left to starve or freeze, or shot to death. The lack of food, the beatings, the crowded, unsanitary conditions, the absence of medical care, the agonizing cement columns and rock quarries made life a living hell for these unfortunate people and reduced them from human beings to animals in their habits, thoughts and behavior.

Not only are the departments of Nazi government and those in authority responsible for these crimes, but also the German people must bear the everlasting stigma of their inhumanity to man. "The case against Germany" has been proven beyond a shadow of a doubt.