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The US Signal Corps Encounters Atrocities

Hollywood and the US government enjoyed a symbiotic relationship during World War II. The government needed trained film producers, directors, animators, and well-known actors to promote the war via recruiting, as in the documentary *Negro Soldier*, or advance the sales of war bonds to support the conflict with stars such as Bing Crosby and Dorothy Lamour. For combat films starring Hollywood icons that required military equipment and authentic logistics, film producers relied on the US Army and its vast arsenal of weaponry.¹ The Office of War Information (OWI) served as a link between the two institutions, providing a watchdog approach to all media so that news of the war effort could be carefully controlled. This was especially true in light of the entertainment industry whose cinematic goals of education, morale-boosting, and propaganda became a priority during World War II.

Established in 1860, the US Signal Corps had the responsibility of communications and technology during World War II, focusing on film and photography, besides other pioneering activities in radar development. Given the technological demands of the European and Pacific campaigns, the Signal Corps grew to approximately 350,000 men and women by the last year of the war. The US Signal Corps attracted key Hollywood directors who became vital to both the general war effort and more specifically to the preparation of visual evidence for the Nuremberg Trials. With backgrounds in Hollywood, George Stevens, Billy Wilder, John Ford, Frank Capra, and soon to become a filmmaker, Sam Fuller, lent their technical filming, editing, and general production skills to the war effort.

In 1934, John Ford was commissioned as a lieutenant commander in the Naval Reserves, and, just a few weeks prior to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, he announced that he trained some sixty technicians in case of a national emergency. He mentored many of them in filming techniques in the Twentieth Century Fox studios several nights a week. They would then be linked to the Field Photographic Branch of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), later founded on June 13, 1942. It would be the forerunner of the Central Intelligence

Agency (CIA). On September 17, 1941, Colonel William J. Donovan requested the Secretary of the Navy to promote Ford to the rank of commander, insisting that he play a major role in the visual coverage of the war even prior to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Seeing the importance of film for government purposes during the Depression with Pare Lorentz's documentary work on *The River* and *The Plow that Broke the Plains*, the various sectors of the government would come to use the skills of the Hollywood directors and trained cameramen and editors to provide intelligence for the OSS; train the military as with the SNAFU animated shorts; support the morale of both troops and civilians; as well as document historical events during and after the war, such as the Nuremberg Trials and the Japanese surrender. Working with his gifted cinematographer Gregg Toland (*The Grapes of Wrath*) and technical right-hand man Ray Kellogg (*That Justice Be Done*), Ford would be an integral part of documenting key moments in the war, notably with his films the *Battle of Midway* and *December 7*. These documentaries, along with adaptation of *The Grapes of Wrath* and his Western classic *Stagecoach*, made him a household name in Hollywood and in the war effort.

George Stevens came to the US Signal Corps following great success as a director in Hollywood, showcasing Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers in *Swing Time* (1936) and Cary Grant and Douglas Fairbanks, Jr. in *Gunga Din* (1939), among other feature films. Austrian-born Billy Wilder, primarily a writer up until World War II, had also directed *Bad Seed* (1934) and was catapulted to Hollywood importance with a film noir, *Double Indemnity* (1944). Frank Capra's "capracorn" or screwball comedies such as *It Happened One Night* (1934) and populist films like *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939) marked him as a prime recruit for the plan Army Chief of Staff General George Marshall had in mind—to create a documentary film series "Why We Fight"² immediately after the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor. Lastly, although not in the US Signal Corps, Sam Fuller, a freelance writer, stumbled into the filming of the camps on the orders of his commanding officer, Captain Kimble R. Richmond. Using a 16mm Bell & Howell camera his mother sent him, he filmed the array of corpses discovered the day after V-8 Day at Falkenau.³ His twenty-two-minute film documented the reverent burial of the bodies and the forced witnessing of the ritual by the townspeople. This coincidental film responsibility eventually led him into a long career in Hollywood, including the direction of a popular feature dealing with his unit, *The Big Red One* (1980).⁴

These filmmakers, notably Ford, Wilder, Stevens, and Fuller, often with their own 16mm cameras, documented their personal confrontation with evil and

death in filming the concentration camps in the spring of 1945.⁵ What they left was a lasting legacy of the horrors inflicted on vast amounts of diverse victims that will forever be embedded in our minds as a visual microcosm of the Holocaust. Their work, furthermore, served as a primary education of the public on the subject of Nazi war crimes. It would also be difficult for the prosecutors at the Nuremberg Tribunal *not* to have viewed their images and others filmed by the US Signal Corps that preceded movie screenings in news reports such as *Universal News* for April 26, 1945, just less than a few weeks after US troops began liberating Nazi concentration camps. The title reads “Nazi Murder Mills!” with the initial captions reading, “First actual newsreel pictures of atrocities in Nazi murder camps. Helpless prisoners tortured to death by a bestial enemy . . . HERE IS THE TRUTH.” Over images of emaciated US POWs, disfigured corpses, and torture instruments, the well-known, resonant voice of Ed Herlily bluntly tells audiences, “Americans can’t believe what they thought was impossible propaganda. Here is documentary evidence of sheer mass murder . . . murder that will blacken the name of Germany for the rest of recorded history.”⁶

Although the Western Allies knew since 1942 that atrocities were occurring throughout all of Europe, they had only a slight knowledge of the degree of horror that the victims of the Nazis experienced from reports from governments in exile. It would only become clearer when the Soviet Red Army liberated Majdanek and Sobibor in eastern Poland in the summer of 1944, and then Auschwitz in south-western Poland, in the vicinity of Krakow, in January 1945. However, when the US Army came upon the recently abandoned slave labor camp at Ohrdruf, near Gotha, Germany on April 4, 1945, the encounter with death became overwhelming. Ohrdruf, part of the Buchenwald camp network, was the first concentration camp liberated by the US Army, and the experience shocked and disturbed the hardened veterans of intense combat fighting following D-Day. Bruce Nikols, on patrol that day as a member of a platoon attached to the Headquarters Company of the 354th Infantry Regiment, of the 89th Infantry Division, 3rd Army, recounts his eye-opening experience:

As we stepped into the compound one was greeted by an overpowering odor of quick-lime, dirty clothing, feces, and urine. Laying in the center of the square were 60–70 dead prisoners clad in striped clothing and in disarray. They had reportedly been machine gunned the day before because they were too weak to march to another camp. The idea was for the SS and the prisoners to avoid the approaching U.S. Army and the Russians.⁷

Nikols proceeded to a shed near the “parade grounds.” He remembers this horrific tour: “Inside, were bodies stacked in alternate directions as one would stack cordwood, and each layer was covered with a sprinkling of quick-lime.”⁸ He concludes his report on Ohrdruf: “I recall becoming very upset when we got back to our quarters, but the whole experience was far beyond my understanding. I wrote a letter to my parents describing the experience which was read at a local gathering of business men. *It was widely disbelieved.*”⁹

A week later, on April 12, 1945, the day President Franklin Roosevelt passed away during his unprecedented fourth term, General Dwight D. Eisenhower arrived in Ordruh. Prior to noon Eisenhower visited the Merkers salt mine discovered to house the Nazi confiscated art collection and \$250 million in gold bars.¹⁰ Captain Alois Liethen, an interpreter in the XX Corp, G-2 Section of the US Third Army, one of the first American officers to encounter the tragedy of Ohrdruf several days earlier, accompanied Eisenhower, along with Generals Omar Bradley and George Patton on their visit the same day to Ohrdruf. The three generals toured the camp, both sickened by and enlightened about the dastardly and inhumane deeds of the Nazis. Eisenhower recorded his thoughts in a letter dated April 15 to General George Marshall:

On a recent tour of the forward areas of the First and Third Armies, I stopped momentarily at the salt mines to take a look at the German treasure. There is a lot of it. But the most interesting—although horrible—sight that I encountered during the trip was a visit to a German internment camp near Gotha. The things I saw beggar description. While I was touring the camp I encountered three men who had been inmates and by one ruse or another had made their escape. I interviewed them through an interpreter. The visual evidence and the verbal testimony of starvation, cruelty and bestiality were so overpowering as to leave me a bit sick. In one room, where they were piled up twenty or thirty naked men, killed by starvation, George Patton would not even enter. He said he would get sick if he did so. I made the visit deliberately, in order to be in position to give first-hand evidence of these things if ever, in the future, there develops the tendency to charge these allegations merely to “propaganda.”¹¹

Shocked by what he witnessed, General Patton, describing the tragic scene as “one of the most appalling sights that I have ever seen,” recorded in his diary:

In a shed . . . was a pile of about 40 completely naked human bodies in the last stages of emaciation. These bodies were lightly sprinkled with lime, not for the purposes of destroying them, but for the purpose of removing the stench. When

the shed was full—I presume its capacity to be about 200, the bodies were taken to a pit a mile from the camp where they were buried. The inmates claimed that 3,000 men, who had been either shot in the head or who had died of starvation, had been so buried since the 1st of January. When we began to approach with our troops, the Germans thought it expedient to remove the evidence of their crime. Therefore, they had some of the slaves exhume the bodies and place them on a mammoth griddle composed of 60-centimeter railway tracks laid on brick foundations. They poured pitch on the bodies and then built a fire of pinewood and coal under them. They were not very successful in their operations because there was a pile of human bones, skulls, charred torsos on or under the griddle which must have accounted for many hundreds.¹²

Already Eisenhower emphasized a notion that would play out in greater detail within several months—the horrible scene at Ohrdruf defies belief and might be considered a product of propaganda. This perspective paralleled the dismal reception of infantryman Bruce Nikols' letter to his parents describing the Ohrdruf horrors. Americans were far from convinced that these inhumane acts could have been practiced on innocent victims.

A few days later on April 19, Eisenhower wrote again to General Marshall. "I have visited one of these [camps] myself and whatever has been printed on them to date has been understatement."¹³ Eisenhower goes on to ask Marshall to have a dozen members of Congress and a dozen prominent editors to make a visit to this area. "I will arrange to have them conducted to one of these places where the evidence of bestiality and cruelty is so overpowering as to leave no doubt in their minds about the normal practices of the Germans in these camps."¹⁴ The not so subtle words of Eisenhower reinforced the idea that the American public would never comprehend nor believe the full extent of these atrocities. The US government officials and the media would thus have to play a part in communicating these scenes of evil to the American public. Eyewitness accounts and visual documentation would be the primary means of relating to the West the horrific evidence of the concentration camp.

When Eisenhower requested that George Stevens organize the Special Coverage Unit (SPECOU) of forty-five photographers and cameramen, called "Stevens Irregulars," to capture the D-Day landing in June 1944 and the North African campaign, the Hollywood director did not realize that beyond the images of combat he would soon be filming the most tragic images of man's inhumanity toward innocent human beings. Stevens' footage of Nazi atrocities such as the images filmed at Dachau with frozen corpses in railway cars shocked and angered the veteran troops and then the general public.¹⁵ Stevens' unit had

been given permission through SHAEF (Supreme Headquarters of the Allied Expeditionary Forces) to film anywhere and everywhere where they could document atrocities and without military impediments. These cameramen received precise instructions to take accurate footage and notes about any criminal activity by the enemy. Writers like Ivan Moffat, William Saroyan, and Irwin Shaw provided the details necessary to describe the location, the event, and the date.

The "Introduction" of the 1944 *Instruction Manual of the Field Photographic Branch* describes the rationale for filming any war crimes discovered by the Allied troops:

In the performance of normal duties, officers and men frequently encounter evidence of war crimes and atrocities that should be preserved for future consideration. Because human memory is faulty and because objects constituting physical evidence decompose, changes are lost, it is important that a contemporary record be made of the event in a form it will constitute an acceptable proof of the occurrence, identify the participants, and afford a method of locating principals and witnesses so far as may be possible at a future time.¹⁶

The manual further notes the procedures for documenting atrocities and alludes to the fact that the results of the field work must be acceptable in military tribunals or courts. By 1944, the end of the war was in sight, and the perpetrators of war must face justice. In the spring of 1945, the filming of the liberation of concentration camps would provide this concrete evidence.

On April 25, 1945, shortly after Eisenhower, Bradley, and Patton visited Ohrdruf, SHAEF issued a relevant memo signed by Colonel K.B. Lawton, to members of the US Signal Corps officers and SPECOU, regarding the filming of atrocities. The note requests that at the time of the liberation of the concentration camps, the Signal Corps cameramen should take immediate and complete coverage in still and motion pictures of the camps and the people therein. SHAEF further suggested the potential use of this footage. It would first be utilized as evidence for the Judge Advocate General War Crimes Commission. The resulting film could be shown to US troops, civilians in US theaters, and German civilians through the auspices of the Psychological Warfare Division. The Office of War Information could additionally release the footage for its own agenda. The memo further states that the filming is a number one priority and that the filming should be accomplished as soon as possible as a camp is liberated. These orders helped advance not only the plan for presentation of visual

Figure 2.1 A US Signal Corps cameraman, Joseph Wright of the 103rd Infantry Division, films evidence of Nazi atrocities in Kaufering IV (courtesy of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Photo Archive)

documentation in a criminal court but also the education of the German civilians in the post-war period.¹⁷

Following these requests, cameramen began filming during the liberation of each camp when possible, and every evening, a Master Caption Sheet provided a list of the atrocities, the scene of the criminal activity, participants, and other important details when available. Ivan Moffat's notes for May 2, 1945 read: "Master Caption Story: Bodies Lying by Railway Track at Dachau" and provide a summary of the film footage shot by SPECOU. In this segment, the Red Cross inspects the box cars with bodies partially frozen and covered by snow.¹⁸ Seeing the mounds of corpses at Dachau, one wonders how could one human being do this to another human being? How does one justify this mass murder? The film footage was shot by Stevens' crew in 35mm while he himself supplemented the gruesome images with his own 16mm camera with Kodachrome color film stock. Before Stevens recorded the stacks of bodies at Dachau, he had already filmed Operation Overlord on D-Day, June 6, 1944, and noted in his son's film

about the director's wartime filming, a captain quoting the king's speech from Shakespeare's *Henry V*:

We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;
For he to-day that sheds his blood with me
Shall be my brother.¹⁹

Stevens further filmed the liberation of Paris in August 1944, the crossing of the Rhine River, the Nordhausen camp of slave laborers and V-2 rockets, and the jubilant linking of Allied forces (American and Soviet) in Torgau at the Elbe River. One of Stevens' major objectives was to convince the Americans of the authenticity of the evidence gathered by his unit. Many did not believe the stories of mass killings of anti-Nazi Christians and Jews, a major concern for Jewish organizations such as the World Jewish Congress and the American Jewish Committee, who later met with Justice Jackson on June 12, 1945, about their long-time understanding of Jewish massacres.

As the US Signal Corps continued to film throughout Europe following the D-Day invasion in northern France and the landing in Sicily, "the soft underbelly of Europe," one unit with Stevens on May 3 filmed the door and sign over the showers, "*Brausebad*," as well as the piles of bodies, now bones and ashes, remaining in the ovens. Local citizens are photographed viewing the horrors of the camp. One GI leads them into the barracks laden with corpses, and with a note of sarcasm remarks to them, "Here is the Dachau Museum of Culture." A note of irony hovers over the bath area—"Cleanliness is a duty here, therefore do not to forget to wash hands." Ivan Moffat's Master Caption Story reads: "Gas Chamber and Crematory at Dachau Camps," which was filmed with nine rolls of "Agfa Supreme" film. Moffat's notes supplement the visual images, describing the population of Dachau—estimated at that time at 30,000—plagued with typhus. Some 450 cases of typhus daily are recorded.²⁰

One of the more symbolic events recording concentration camp activities just a week after the liberation of Dachau was the first Jewish religious service coming after years of religious persecution. Chaplain of the XVth US Army Corps, Captain David Max Eichhorn, prays for those lost in the concentration camps. On a windy day the international flags fill the air, as do the refrains from "God Bless America" sung by some liberated prisoners. American soldiers reverently stand nearby and observe the ceremonies, while Military Police watch vigilantly in case of disruption. Rabbi Eichhorn prays with the survivors:

In our holy Torah, we found these words:

“Proclaim freedom throughout the world to all the inhabitants thereof a day of celebration this day shall be for you, a day where every man should return to his family and to his rightful place in society.”

In the United States of America, in the city of Philadelphia, upon the exact spot where 169 years ago a group of brave Americans met and decided to fight for American independence, there stands a marker upon which is written these very same words:

“Proclaim freedom throughout the world to all the inhabitants thereof.”²¹

Rabbi Eichhorn’s prayerful message emanating from Philadelphia, “The Cradle of Liberty,” would have some resonance on this occasion of the liberation of the camps. He further acknowledges that he plays a dual role here at Dachau—as an American soldier and as an American rabbi who represents the Jewish community in America, emphasizing the notion of being free and peace-filled. Eichhorn said that Dachau was the “shame” of our civilization and that the criminals should be hunted down. He continues by acknowledging the plight of the survivors of the camps: “We know your tragedy; we know your sorrow; we know that upon you was centered the venomous hatred ...”²² He concludes the solemn ceremony with these words: “You shall go out with joy, and be led forth in peace.”²³ Rabbi Eichhorn went on to be a key consultant for the Army in the area of the Jewish military relations and was later well respected for his many books and pioneering work in interfaith marriage, a controversial subject.

Ivan Moffat’s May 6 US Signal Corps caption describes encounters with the victims of Nazi aggression: “Atrocities—First Hand Witnesses,” an important testimony to those who lived through the harrowing experiences at the Dachau concentration camp.²⁴ While his camera unit filmed the camp scenes, George Stevens interviewed the former prisoners with three translators. Using synch sound with 35mm film stock, Stevens heard personal testimonies of a Polish priest, a doctor, and a lawyer, as well as a Belgian Jew and a Czech Ph.D. among others. This recording of eyewitnesses parallels that of the oral accounts of the British who liberated the Bergen-Belsen camp a few weeks earlier. We will see shortly that the Soviets would be unable to capture the eyewitness accounts because the cameramen accompanying the Red Army lacked synch sound.

The US Signal Corps documented extensively the results of the Nazi atrocities, producing photos and films that were designed to document history as well as inform an incredulous world that lay unaware of the concentration camp

nightmare.²⁵ Bodies burned on railroad ties, pits with skeletons of human bodies, a mass of corpses, victims of Nazi machine guns prior to the arrival of the Allies—all of these visually reveal the Nazis' last minute efforts to obliterate traces of their crimes. The US Signal Corps photos and film footage, however, would reveal the discovery of Ohrdruf and similar camps and prove that this was not fiction. The British photographic units would be right behind them to reinforce this message.