

BROTHERS IN ARMS?  
AFRICAN AMERICAN AND JEWISH AMERICAN PRISONERS OF WAR IN WORLD  
WAR II EUROPE

by  
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To my parents, Benita and Peter Hentges  
And to Vera and Vivia

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Any errors are of course my own.

## ABSTRACT

Movies and television series such as *Stalag 17* (1953) and *Hogan's Heroes* (1965-1971) have shaped popular perception of World War II prisoner of war camps. Under this conception prisoner of war camps fell into two main categories: German run camps where mistreatment was rare and men were adequately housed, fed, and clothed, versus Japanese run camps where prisoners were abused, malnourished, and did not have proper living quarters or clothing. Following this trend, the few scholarly works on prisoners of war tend to focus on Japanese run camps or daring escape attempts in Europe.

This study analyses the treatment of African American and Jewish American prisoners of war held in World War II Europe on the part of fellow prisoners and German camp guards. Tracing their experiences with racism and anti-Semitism through the interwar years, basic training, and combat it demonstrates how minority prisoners based their responses to capture on their history with prejudice. Both groups recalled fear of being held as captives within a racialized society. Jewish Americans noted a significant increase in anti-Semitism from guards, but most fellow prisoners tried to protect them. African Americans remembered that little changed in their treatment from white prisoners, but German guards treated them as equals to other prisoners. These men then returned home to find that U.S. society was unreceptive to minority experiences that did not fit with the widespread conceptions of prison of war camps.

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## PRISONERS OF WAR

Daniel S. Abels	Jewish American, Dulag Luft
Anthony Acevedo	Mexican American, Stalag IX-B and Berga
Leo S. Bach	Jewish American, Stalag Luft I
Isham George Benton	African American, Stalag VII-A
Harold Brown	African American, Stalag VII-A
Aben Caplan	Jewish American, Stalag VII-A
Norman Fellman	Jewish American, Stalag IX-B and Berga
John Fellows	Stalag IX-B and Berga
Thurston Lenwood Gaines, Jr.	African American, Stalag VII-A
Alfred Goldstein	Jewish American, Stalag XIII-C
Alexander Jefferson	African American, Stalag Luft III
Seymour L. Lichtenfeld	Jewish American, multiple camps
Richard Loew	Jewish American, unknown camp
Howard Lowenberg	Jewish American, Stalag IX-B and Berga
Stanley Malamut	Jewish American, unknown camp
Bernie Melnick	Stalag IX-B and Berga
Leonard Meltzer	Jewish American, unknown camp
Peter Neft	Jewish American, Stalag Luft I
Benard Radar	Jewish American, unknown camp
William Shapiro	Jewish American, Stalag IX-B and Berga
Luther Smith	African American, Stalag XVIII
Rothacker Childs Smith	African American, unknown camp

Leon “Woodie” Spears	African American, unknown camp
Milton Stern	Jewish American, Gestapo Prisons and Stalag Luft I
Harry Weissman	Jewish American, unknown camp
David Westheimer	Jewish American, Stalag VII-A
Louis T. Wigdortz	Jewish American, Stalag Luft III

## ABBREVIATIONS

FEPC	Fair Employment Practices Committee
Gestapo	<i>Geheimstaatspolizei</i> (Nazi Secret State Police)
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
NARA	National Archives and Records Administration
LOC	Library of Congress
OKL/Luftwaffe	<i>Oberkommando der Luftwaffe</i> High Command of the German Air Force
OKW/Wehrmacht	<i>Oberkommando der Wehrmacht</i> Supreme High Command of the German Armed Forces
RG	Record Group
SS	<i>Schutzstaffel</i> (Nazi Protective Squad)
Stalag	<i>Mannschaftsstelllager</i> (German Prisoner of War Camps)
UCR	University of California Riverside
USHMM	United States Holocaust Memorial Museum
VHP	Veterans History Project, Library of Congress

## Introduction

*The barracks suggests the atmosphere of lives lived in suspension, of boredom, yet tenseness, of nerves on edge. These men are resigned, yet never hopeless.*

-Scene 1, *Stalag 17*

Sergeant Clarence Cook recalled that he “spent two and a half years in Stalag XVII... somewhere on the Danube.” Approximately 630 American airmen, all sergeants, lived in his barracks and the entire camp held about 40,000 men. Cook’s account provides details on black market trading between prisoners of war and German guards. The men in Stalag XVII were lucky, for the jovial guard, Sergeant Johann Sebastian Schulz, spoke some English and often shared small details with the prisoners. The barracks were crowded, but each prisoner had his own bunk and the area was kept clean. Although the food was not ideal, the prisoners did not show any signs of starvation. Prisoners could move around as they pleased during the day.<sup>1</sup>

The problem with this account is that it comes from the 1953 movie *Stalag 17*, starring William Holden as Sergeant J. J. Sefton and Gil Stratton as Cook. The real Stalag XVII was divided into two camps; Stalag XVII-A was in Kaisersteinbruch, Germany and Stalag XVII-B was in Krems-Greisendorf, Austria.<sup>2</sup> Camp conditions were typically crowded, and guards were not as friendly as Schulz. According to the “Prisoners of War Bulletin” issued by the Red Cross, Stalag XVII-B was “overcrowded... [with] some fleas and

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<sup>1</sup> Billy Wilder and Edwin Blum, *Stalag 17*, directed by Billy Wilder (Los Angeles, CA: Paramount Pictures, 1953). For epigraph see Donald Bevan and Edmund Trzcinski, *Stalag 17: A Comedy Melodrama in Three Acts* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, Inc., 1951), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Norman Gruenzner, *Postal History of American POWs: World War II, Korea, Vietnam* (State College, PA: American Philatelic Society, 1979), 25, 34-35; Isabelle Lynn, “German Camp Locations,” *Prisoners of War Bulletin* 2, no. 12 (December 1944): 5.

lice. Cleaning materials were insufficient and barracks pretty dirty... Baths about once a month.”<sup>3</sup>

Movies and television series such as *Stalag 17* and *Hogan's Heroes* (1965-1971) shaped popular perceptions of World War II prisoner of war camps, despite their inaccuracies. The myth of the bumbling German guard, ironically named Sergeant Schulz/Schultz in both *Stalag 17* and *Hogan's Heroes*, persists decades later.<sup>4</sup> Under this conceptualization prisoners of war camps for American soldiers fell into one of two major categories: those run by the Germans were relatively pleasant, while Japanese camps were brutal.<sup>5</sup> This dichotomy implies that Allied prisoners in Europe—at least those from western countries—only faced grim conditions when German military losses prevented the Nazi government from providing for prisoners of war. However, the widespread belief that German army run prisoner of war camps were at least no worse than living in a military barracks, existed even before the two Schultzes appeared on screen. Former prisoner of war Peter Neft recalled that when he returned to the States, many criticized his time as a prisoner of war. He stated, “People thought we had it too easy because we were in [a] prison camp, with all the rationing they had at home and all.”<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, scholarship on prisoners of war has done little to amend this myth.

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<sup>3</sup> “Reports from Camps in Germany,” *Prisoners of War Bulletin* 2, no. 9 (September 1944): 2; J. Townsend Russell, *Prisoner of War Bulletin* 2, no. 11 (November 1944): 2; “Reports on German Camps,” *Prisoner of War Bulletin* 2, no. 12 (December 1944): 4.

<sup>4</sup> While *Hogan's Heroes* offers a more ethnically diverse group of prisoners of war, it almost entirely overlooked the real hardships prisoners of war faced and did little to delve into the racial tensions in the U.S.

<sup>5</sup> For example, *A Bridge on the River Kwai* from 1957 also starring William Holden. *A Bridge on the River Kwai*, directed by David Lean (Columbia Pictures, 1957).

<sup>6</sup> Peter Neft, “Peter Neft,” in *American POWs of World War II: Forgotten Men Tell Their Stories*, edited by Tom Bird (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1992): 93.

World War II prisoners of war accounted for approximately 91 percent of all United States soldiers held captive in the twentieth century (including World War I) and the majority of these prisoners were held in the European Theater. Estimates are that 94,000 Americans were prisoners of war in Europe (predominantly held by Germany) and another 30,000 held by the Japanese. Despite this fact, the scholarship on their experiences is small and much of it details escape attempts (such as *The Great Escape* from Stalag Luft III) or the infamous conditions Americans faced in Japanese-run prisons where mortality rates reached about 40 percent.<sup>7</sup> Thus, scholars have overlooked the reality for most American World War II prisoners of war—regardless of race, ethnicity, or religion—because prisoners of war were the minority compared to the much larger number of U.S. servicemen who were never captured. Most scholars of military history and warfare focus on active military service or, to a lesser extent, the status of veterans.<sup>8</sup> This has at best left prisoners of war on the fringes of academic research, and when these prisoners are African American or Jewish American, the likelihood of their stories being told diminishes even further. Their narratives provide a microcosm of the intricacies of prisoner of war life, demonstrating how race and religion

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<sup>7</sup> The highest number of U.S. prisoners of war was during the Civil War when a combined estimate of 408,000 prisoners were held by both sides. Stuart I. Rochester and Frederick Kiley, *Honor Bound: American Prisoners of War in Southeast Asia, 1961-1973* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1998); Thomas Saylor, *Long Hard Road: American POWs during World War II* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press), vi-ix; Alan Marsh, “POWs in American History: A Synopsis,” Andersonville National Historic Site, U.S. National Park Service, 1998, [https://www.nps.gov/ande/learn/historyculture/pow\\_synopsis.html](https://www.nps.gov/ande/learn/historyculture/pow_synopsis.html) (accessed April 4, 2017).

<sup>8</sup> See Peter Schrijvers, *Those Who Hold Bastogne: The True Story of the Soldiers and Civilians Who Fought in the Biggest Battle of the Bulge* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014); Jonathan M. House, *A Military History of the Cold War, 1944-1962* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2012); Ian Kershaw, *To Hell and Back: Europe, 1914-1949* (New York: Viking, 2015); J. Todd Moye, *Freedom Flyers: The Tuskegee Airmen of World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); Stephen R. Ortiz, *Beyond the Bonus March and GI Bill: How Veteran Politics Shaped the New Deal Era* (New York: New York University Press, 2010); Stephen R. Ortiz, ed. *Veterans' Policies, Veterans' Politics: New Perspectives on Veterans in the Modern United States* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2012); Kathleen J. Frydl, *The G.I. Bill* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

shaped camp organization, the actions of German guards, and relationships with fellow inmates.

This work started with a desire to extend my master's thesis work, "Jewish Women in the Concentration Camps: Physical, Moral and Psychological Resistance," into the field of United States history. What began as an intention to write a similar examination of United States prisoners of war held in World War II Europe, focusing on their non-traditional forms of resistance against their Nazi captors, led me on an entirely different path. As I tentatively began exploring the subject for a research paper, I realized how little scholarship existed on Jewish American and African American prisoners of war (or indeed on any minorities).<sup>9</sup>

I decided to focus on Jewish Americans and African Americans, in part because their records are easier to locate than other minorities. At one point I had considered including Mexican Americans and Native Americans. However, racial groups listed on official military records included white, American Indian, Chinese, and "Negro." Mexican Americans were classified as either white or "others," and while a classification for American Indians existed, they too could be classified as "others." Thus, while there were Mexican American prisoners of war their records are exceedingly difficult to locate without already having a name. The same issue applies for Native Americans and other minorities.<sup>10</sup>

As I began to get into the sources, I quickly realized that my master's thesis had prepared me more for this dissertation topic than I could have ever imagined. Drawing on

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<sup>9</sup> Anna Marie Anderson, "Jewish Women in the Concentration Camps: Physical, Moral and Psychological Resistance" (Master's thesis, University of Houston, 2013).

<sup>10</sup> I do include the experience of Anthony Acevedo in Chapter 3. I also considered adding the experiences of a handful of Japanese Americans from the 442nd Regimental Combat Team captured by the Germans, but there is little information available and the case presents too small of a subset of prisoners for this work. See 100th Infantry Battalion Veterans, Education Center, "Prisoners of War," <http://www.100tbattalion.org/history/veterans/prisoners-of-war/> (accessed February 10, 2020).

my earlier research I noticed startling similarities in the ways concentrations camps (under the SS or Gestapo) and prisoner of war camps (under the German army) were run. While prisoner of war camps, at least for western prisoners, were not intended to outright murder or work to death their population (prisoners of war camps for Soviet troops being a notable exception), the basic design and hierarchy of the camps were similar. Kommandants at both prisoner of war and concentration camps had a surprising amount of autonomy in Nazi Germany. There were basic regulations they were expected to follow, but within the camp the Kommandant, for most purposes, had the final word. For example, prisoners ate similar food, but prisoners of war received larger portions. Although prisoners of war received a more nutritious—albeit not pleasant—diet, they both consisted of items such as turnip soup (except prisoners of war might expect an actual turnip in their serving), coarse bread, and ersatz coffee for example. However, prisoners of war were able to offset their rations with Red Cross packages and indeed often credited these as helping them maintain a better caloric intake. Likewise, the design of the camps was similar; I recognized the same style of wooden bunks in photographs and drawings of prisoner of war camps that were used in concentration camps. Prisoners of war received different treatment because the camps were built for different functions, one to hold prisoners temporarily and one to remove and exterminate those deemed undesirable. Yet, at times the prisoner of war camps witnessed Nazi race policies similar to concentration camps, such as when guards singled out Jewish Americans, moved them to segregated barracks, or worse. Thus, the broader Nazi racial hierarchy was reflected in both concentration camps and prisoner of war camps.

As I read the accounts of former prisoners of war, I realized that most of their stories had not been told. Some had self-published memoirs that were released by small presses or

more often typed up by the men (or their families) themselves. There were a few exceptions, such as Alexander Jefferson's *Red Tail Captured, Red Tail Free*, recently reprinted by Fordham University Press to also include a foreword for context.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, my purpose in this dissertation became twofold: to examine the experiences of racism and anti-Semitism these men faced both in the United States and under Nazi control, but to also tell their stories from their lives as civilians, enlistment, capture, and finally their return home. Thus, sections of this dissertation are notably more biographical in form in an attempt to tell their stories. With this biographical approach I have weaved the narratives of the prisoners of war to demonstrate how the various phases of enlistment, combat, capture, and final return home affected the individual soldier and what their experiences reveal about the minority prisoner of war experience.<sup>12</sup>

Several years ago, my advisor (Dr. Nancy Beck Young) gave me a comprehensive exam question that posited: Historians like to claim that war sped up social change on the home front. Using World War II, explain the historiographical assessment of whether the war resulted in a lessening of discrimination of race. In my answer, I argued that while historians like to make these claims, the historiography demonstrates a more complicated truth. The Double V campaign (the goal of African American leaders that involvement in

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<sup>11</sup> Alexander Jefferson, *Red Tail Captured, Red Tail Free: Memoirs of a Tuskegee Airman and POW*, Rev. ed. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005).

<sup>12</sup> Historian Alice Kessler-Harris writes, "My claim is grandiose: I think an individual life might help us to see not only into particular events but into the larger cultural and social and even political processes of a moment in time." Alice Kessler-Harris, "Why Biography?" *American Historical Review*, 114, no. 3 (June 2009): 626. My work has been informed by Deborah Dash Moore's *GI Jews* in which she used the accounts of fifteen servicemen to write a larger social history of Jewish Americans during World War II. She states, "Finally, I sought to write the individual into history. The ordinary ordeals of these fifteen men reflect important strands of experience among the more than half a million other Jews who entered the United States armed forces." Deborah Dash Moore, *GI Jews: How World War II Changed a Generation* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), x.

World War II would be reciprocated with civil rights at home) was not entirely successful, although it did result in Executive Order 8802 which at least brought a measure of equality to war industry employment. On the other hand, Executive Order 9066 allowed for Japanese American internment, a great injustice. The reality of social change, of changing levels of discrimination, is equally complicated when applied to American prisoners of war held in Europe during World War II. No two prisoner of war camps were run entirely the same; moreover, the number of prisoners, their ranks, ethnicities, religions, and nationalities, as well as guards, accommodations, locations, and other factors all varied widely. Yet, when these camps are compared (and the experiences of Jewish American and African American prisoners in the same camps are contrasted) it is clear there was a flip in racialized regulations, as carried out from the top down. That is, if one were to replace the United States federal government, state, and local authorities with the German high command, Kommandants, and camp guards, Jewish Americans and African Americans noted a change in their personal treatment, their status within the camp hierarchy as compared to their status in U.S. society or the U.S. military. Thus, by including both Jewish American and African Americans prisoners of war my work provides a new lens on the contrasting treatment they received at home in the United States, from the U.S. military, in captivity (from German guards and fellow prisoners), and upon their return home.

African Americans found that racism followed them into the military, overseas, and into the camps. However, as prisoners of war they experienced a shift in racial attitudes. They still faced racism from fellow prisoners of war (and SS troops when they came into contact) who at times demanded to be segregated from them, but the camp guards did not follow the mores of Jim Crow racism. In fact, German guards often treated African

American prisoners (especially airmen) equivalent to white prisoners of war.<sup>13</sup> Thus, the slow U.S. government response to anti-black racism lagged behind Nazi Germany's policies in regard to African Americans; indeed, they often faced less racism in prisoner of war camps than was the case at home in Jim Crow America. The irony, the hypocrisy, of fighting for democracy, yet being treated better by their captors was not lost on African American prisoners of war.<sup>14</sup> Conversely, Jewish Americans usually noted that fellow prisoners treated them as equals, but under Nazi guards they were met with egregious levels of anti-Semitism beyond what they had previously encountered within the United States. Examining this subgroup of prisoners of war provides a microscopic look into not only the prisoner of war experience, but also the political, social, and ideological practices of two countries—the United States and Germany—diametrically opposed in their political foundations. It highlights the toxicity of racism in both Germany and the United States before, during, and after World War II. The experience would forever shape these men and their families.

Our understandings of the way prisoner of war camps operated, and the experience of the men interned are imbricated with race and religion, a factor long overlooked in the historiography. Furthermore, the background of racism and anti-Semitism these men faced—personally and historically—formed their responses to imprisonment in a racialized hierarchy. This shared milieu informed their perceptions once they returned home, the ways they attempted to adapt back to civilian life. Historian Alan Marsh explains, “No one knows better what it is like to have that freedom suddenly snatched away than those individuals

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<sup>13</sup> See Jefferson, *Red Tail*, 59-61.

<sup>14</sup> See Thurston Gaines (AFC/2001/001/6800), DVD Oral History Interview, Veterans History Project Collection, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

who, in the process of serving their country, have found themselves prisoners of war. It is an experience neither asked for nor desired.”<sup>15</sup> This applied all the more to Jewish Americans and African Americans who had already experienced racism and anti-Semitism at home, only to have their freedoms taken away completely as prisoners of war.

### Scholarship

The story of African American and Jewish American prisoners of war fits into two much larger historiographies: one on war and the state and another on war and race. As such, my dissertation contributes to recent and classic works that examined the nature of the state in the 1940s and its dedication to civil rights. For example, historians long argued that the New Deal era was the height of liberalism in the United States. Within the last ten years, however, the argument has shifted greatly. Scholars proposed that economic and social reform peaked during World War II through an unprecedented government buildup that oversaw aspects such as war industry. The most recent scholarship argued that it was actually moderates in Congress who facilitated the passage of these liberal economic reforms. However, the historiography demonstrates that the strides the state made towards civil rights were often a result of pressure from the public and groups such as the NAACP. Key government figures did not enthusiastically support civil rights, but they made concessions to further other goals.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Marsh is the Cultural Resources Specialist for Andersonville National Historic Site. Marsh, “POWs.”

<sup>16</sup> Other important works on war and the state and race not discussed in detail here include Benjamin L. Alpers, *Dictators, Democracy, and American Public Culture: Envisioning the Totalitarian Enemy, 1920s-1950s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Christopher Capozzola, *Uncle Sam Wants You: World War I and the Making of the Modern American Citizen* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); David Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); Irving Bernstein, *Guns or Butter: The Presidency of Lyndon Johnson* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); William L. O’Neill, *Coming Apart: An Information History of the 1960s* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1971); Carl J. Bon Temp, *Americans at the Gate: The United States and Refugees during the Cold War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008); Mary L. Dudziak, *War Time: An Idea, Its History, and Its*

In *V Was for Victory: Politics and American Culture during World War II* (1976), John Blum analyzes a myriad of topics. He argues that civil rights were a far second to the war effort and the federal government supported it only so much as needed to garner support for the war. He describes Secretary of War Henry Stimson, “The Secretary of War particularly was annoyed by the ‘cherubs,’ Mrs. Roosevelt and her liberal friends, Vice President Henry Wallace, others here and there in Washington who thought they could reform society while the country was fighting a desperate battle... He had always had reservations about Asians and Jews and blacks.”<sup>17</sup> Although Blum does not directly address this fact, he argues that inconsistencies of war aims conflicted with rampant racial prejudices in the United States. Racism towards Jews, Japanese Americans, and African Americans came to the forefront during the war.<sup>18</sup> Blum explains, “Even during a war against Nazism, the democratic impulse did not dissolve traditional antipathies toward those whose race or religion or national origin marked them as outsiders.”<sup>19</sup> Despite fighting against two countries that upheld theories of racial superiority, the United States saw a resurgence of racism. The state did little to counter prejudice with President Roosevelt’s Executive Order

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*Consequences* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Jennifer D. Keene, *Doughboys, the Great War, and Remaking America* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2003); Ellen Schrecker, *Cold War Triumphalism: The Misuse of History after the Fall of Communism* (New York: New Press, 2004); Mary Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Merle E. Reed, *Seedtime for the Modern Civil Rights Movement: The President’s Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1941-1964* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991); Harvard Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks: The Emergence of Civil Rights As a National Issue: The Depression Decade* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981); Neil A. Wynn, *The Afro-American and the Second World War* (London: Elek, 1976).

<sup>17</sup> John Morton Blum, *V Was for Victory: Politics and American Culture during World War II* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, 1976), 11-12.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 45-52, 167-220.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 181.

9066 (which allowed for the internment of Japanese and Japanese Americans) and unwillingness to provide refuge for European Jews attempting to escape the Holocaust.

In *Warfare State: World War II Americans and the Age of Big Government* (2011), James Sparrow focuses on the expansion of the federal government during World War II. He contends that American citizens gained “a sense of entitlement of full citizenship” during the war.<sup>20</sup> Sparrow argues that it was this expectation of government intervention, especially in the right to work, that “legitimized the federal leviathan erected during the war.”<sup>21</sup> The process was mutually reinforcing, government expansion was accepted as long as it benefitted the majority of American citizens who likewise increasingly demanded the federal government do more to insure their rights in the workplace. He argues, “It was this idealized symbol of nationalistic self-sacrifice, the combat soldier, that provided the master key to wartime political culture.”<sup>22</sup> Indeed, civilians were equated to the armed forces, as they fought on the homefront to ensure supplies to the soldiers.<sup>23</sup> However, little similarity existed between civilians and prisoners of war, except perhaps for the sense of uncertainty as families waited to hear the fate of their loved ones and prisoners contemplated their own fates.

In *Why We Fight: Congress and the Politics of World War II* (2013), Nancy Beck Young argues for the importance of political moderates in the solidification of the New Deal. In so doing she bridges the historiography between war and the state and war and race.

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<sup>20</sup> James T. Sparrow, *Warfare State: World War II Americans and the Age of Big Government* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 4.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 4.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 72.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 160.

Young demonstrates that there were important differences between “economic liberals” who wanted to entrench New Deal policies and “social justice liberals” who worked towards equal rights.<sup>24</sup> Similar to Sparrow, she argues that the New Deal was reworked to enable a wartime economy, with the government maintaining the directive over economic issues. In the end, economics won out over social changes.<sup>25</sup> Young’s analysis of the failure of the United States to abandon immigration quotas to aid European Jews and the baseline passage of civil rights reforms supports Blum’s assertion that stated war aims belied growing racism and anti-Semitism in the United States.<sup>26</sup> Thus, while moderates retained important aspects of New Deal economic reform, they were unable to carry this over into social reforms. Tax dollars went to finance the war, rather than being diverted to aid refugees or provide adequate funding for the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC).<sup>27</sup>

In the historiography of war and race, two key topics are the United States response to the Holocaust and the civil rights of African Americans during World War II. Works on the Holocaust appeared shortly after World War II, but many of the interpretations were hampered by a lack of information due to classified documents and the fact that many survivors did not tell their stories until years later. Many of the earlier works excused the United States for its lack of aid to European Jews on the grounds that the government did not really know what was happening in Europe. As new information emerged or was made public, and it became clear that the federal government did know, the narrative shifted to

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<sup>24</sup> Nancy Beck Young, *Why We Fight: Congress and the Politics of World War II* (Lawrence: University of Kansas, 2013), 6-7.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 5, 11.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 163-164, 195-196.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 123-128.

blaming the United States for not intervening sooner. More recently historians conceded that there were multiple factors working in tandem that accounted for America's response.

In *American Refugee Policy and European Jewry, 1933-1945* (1987) Richard Breitman and Alan Kraut argue that the United States' inaction against the Holocaust was in direct opposition to the national values it upheld. They suggest that anti-Semitism was less the cause of inactivity than an adherence by Congress to immigration quotas at any cost. They further contend that the U.S. would have opposed immigration regardless of the national origin or religion of those seeking asylum.<sup>28</sup> However, Breitman and Kraut's assertions on this matter are largely unsupported, especially when compared to the aforementioned historiography of war and the state. While there were some civil rights gains made during World War II, social reform was clearly not a priority of the federal government during this time.

Likewise, Henry Feingold in *Bearing Witness: How America and Its Jews Responded to the Holocaust* (1995), insists that many historians overlooked or ignored the importance of the Great Depression, politics, public opinion, and political disunity that caused the lack of response to the Holocaust. He reiterated Breitman and Kraut's argument that anti-Semitism rather than general attitudes towards immigration shaped U.S. policy. However, he notes that whatever the reason for inaction, "none seems adequate to explain the stark silence while so many millions of lives were systematically taken."<sup>29</sup> Yet, all three historians overlook the level of anti-Semitism at work in the United States.

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<sup>28</sup> Richard Breitman and Alan M. Kraut, *American Refugee Policy and European Jewry, 1933-1945* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 1-2, 6-10.

<sup>29</sup> Henry L. Feingold, *Bearing Witness: How America and Its Jews Responded to the Holocaust* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1995), 6-7, 16, 68.

Deborah Dash Moore, in *GI Jews: How World War II Changed a Generation*, used fifteen select accounts of Jewish Americans to examine Jewish American military service during World War II. She traced their experiences from induction, to basic training, to combat, and to the return home. Moore argued, “Paradoxically, donning an American uniform made Jews both more American and more Jewish.”<sup>30</sup> Within the military Jewish Americans had to make additional adjustments compared to non-Jewish soldiers, such as eating non-kosher foods including ham. Others dealt with anti-Semitism and little support from fellow servicemen. For Jewish Americans, the liberation of concentration camps could be deeply personal. Yet, the revelation of the immense horrors of the Holocaust brought about a noted solidarity from other non-Jewish servicemen. Ultimately, Jewish American military service during World War II helped alter social perceptions of Jews, reducing anti-Semitism in the years immediately after the war.<sup>31</sup>

Another area concerning race and war is the civil rights of African Americans during World War II. My dissertation is situated within the larger historical debate concerning the Double V Campaign and its effects on the eventual desegregation of the military. Walter White in *A Rising Wind* (1945) found that while higher-ranking officers such as General Dwight D. Eisenhower ordered that soldiers be treated equally regardless of skin color, lower ranking officers often circumvented these orders to establish “off-limit” establishments and “out-of-bounds” communities.<sup>32</sup> The same segregation often existed in prisoner of war camps.

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<sup>30</sup> Moore, *GI Jews*, x.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, 54-57, 80-85, 242-244, 254-257.

<sup>32</sup> Walter White, *A Rising Wind* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran and Co., 1945), 17-18, 27, 35.

Walter White's book ushered in a myriad of works that examine African Americans involvement in World War II. Charles Francis's *The Tuskegee Airmen: The Story of the Negro in the U.S. Air Force* (1955), while based in part on personal interviews with Tuskegee pilots and government records, does not contain any information on their experiences as prisoners of war.<sup>33</sup> This is an unfortunate oversight as most African American prisoners of war were Tuskegee Airmen, for the simple reason that they were among the few black combat units.

Historical research into the lives of African American and Jewish American prisoners of war is relatively recent. Their experiences have been overlooked for a variety of reasons. These men were minorities both in the camps and in American society, a fact that caused them to be put into a precarious position. No major work details how African Americans were treated as compared to white prisoners of war. Even scholarship that describes the racism African Americans faced while serving in Europe gives little to no attention to prisoners of war. The same is true for Jewish American prisoners of war, with only three works, all within the last twenty years, addressing the issue.

Robert Kesting, an archivist at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, in "Forgotten Victims: Blacks in the Holocaust" (1992) concedes that "blacks were not considered an immediate threat like the Jews" mostly because very few persons of African descent lived in Germany (and within much of Europe in general). Thus, the Nazis did not call for the same racist policies enacted against Jews.<sup>34</sup> In a subsequent article, "Blacks

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<sup>33</sup> Charles E. Francis, *The Tuskegee Airmen: The Story of the Negro in the U.S. Air Force* (Boston: Bruce Humphries, 1955).

<sup>34</sup> Robert W. Kesting, "Forgotten Victims: Blacks in the Holocaust," *Journal of Negro History* 77, no. 1 (Winter 1992): 30.

Under the Swastika: A Research Note” (1998), he noted that there were thirty-one U.S. war crimes investigations into the treatment of African Americans. Often, nobody was convicted because the “perpetrators could not be positively identified” or “additional evidence” was needed, even when two SS officers admitted to the killings (in this case likely two French Africans).<sup>35</sup> Although Kesting does not explicitly state it, the connection between the war crimes investigations and the typical response to lynchings and other acts of violence against African Americans in the United States was notably similar. Kesting also states that the SS often followed a policy that “Negros were not to be taken prisoner” and while he admits that white prisoners of war were also killed, these instances did not have the “element of racism.”<sup>36</sup> His work demonstrates the complexities of capture that particularly affected African Americans and can be applied to Jewish Americans. Until captured and registered, both groups could fall victim to racist policies and perceptions more easily, a position made more precarious if they were captured by the SS or Gestapo (as opposed to regular German army troops).

Historian David Killingray’s chapter in *Prisoners of War and Their Captors in World War II* (1996) noted that among prisoners of African descent, which included British and French colonial soldiers as well as black soldiers from the United States, African American prisoners tended to receive the better treatment. However, among prisoners from the United States, African Americans still generally bore the brunt when rations were cut because of

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<sup>35</sup> Kesting, “Blacks in the Holocaust,” 31-32; Robert W. Kesting, “Blacks Under the Swastika: A Research Note,” *Journal for Negro History* 83, no. 1 (Winter 1998): 95.

<sup>36</sup> Kesting, “Blacks in the Holocaust,” 32, 34.

German military losses.<sup>37</sup> Killingray's argument established that their citizenship, rather than other factors, protected African Americans from the worst of Nazi racialized policies.

The scholarship concerning Jewish American prisoners is fraught with disagreements. Historians such as Simon MacKenzie argued in his article "The Treatment of Prisoners of War in World War II" (1994), that American Jews were singled out by German guards, "segregated and forced to wear the star of David but otherwise were usually treated no differently than their gentile compatriots."<sup>38</sup> There is little evidence that Jewish American prisoners of war wore the Star of David, at least not in the actual prisoner of war camps. Additionally, MacKenzie's sources are outdated and misleading as he ultimately cites Raul Hilberg's *The Destruction of the European Jews* (1979) for this assertion, which although a significant addition to the field, is now also outdated in many respects. For the faults of MacKenzie's article, he did make a seemingly logical point, that the International Committee of the Red Cross would have noticed if hundreds of Jewish Americans (or any prisoners among the Western Allies) went missing from prisoner of war camps.<sup>39</sup>

Recent works including Mitchell Bard's *Forgotten Victims: The Abandonment of Americans in Hitler's Camps* (1994) and Flint Whitlock's *Given Up for Dead: American GI's in the Nazi Concentration Camp at Berga* (2005), reveal that hundreds of Jewish American prisoners of war in fact did go missing as the German government's prisoner of war policy became increasingly more racialized and specifically targeted Jews. Their work

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<sup>37</sup> David Killingray, "African and African Americans in Enemy Hands," in *Prisoners of War and Their Captors in World War II*, edited by Bob Moore and Kent Fedorowich (Oxford: Berg, 1996), 186-198.

<sup>38</sup> S. P. MacKenzie, "The Treatment of Prisoners of War in World War II," *Journal of Modern History* 66, no. 3 (September 1994): 497.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, 504.

reveals that approximately 350 prisoners of war (about half of whom were Jewish Americans) were sent to a work Kommando by Berga (a sub-camp of Buchenwald) where on fifth of these prisoners died in the camp. The death rate at the Berga work Kommando was much higher than in any of the regular prisoner of war camps.<sup>40</sup> Contrary to earlier historiographies, Jewish Americans clearly faced a risk of being sent to a concentration camp and killed.

As the first major book published on the subject, Mitchell Bard's *Forgotten Victims: The Abandonment of Americans in Hitler's Camps* (1994) added significantly to the field. Bard repeatedly states that the U.S. government and military officers should have taken steps to protect Jewish American soldiers. He specifically points to the use of an "H" (for Hebrew) on dog tags to denote Jews (many of whom were not practicing), when the federal government already knew of the Holocaust and that Jewish Americans in Europe faced the threat of Nazi persecution.<sup>41</sup>

My dissertation adds to the historiography by examining the African American and Jewish American prisoner of war experience within the larger context of mid twentieth century U.S. society. Their stories provide further evidence that civil rights were not a primary concern of government officials during World War II. During the war the federal

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<sup>40</sup> Whitlock's title suggests that the Jewish prisoners of war were sent directly to Berga; however, they were in fact sent from Stalag IX-B to a work Kommando under Stalag IX-C. The prisoners of war were forced to work with inmates from Berga and housed in barracks directly across the road from the concentration camp. See Mitchell G. Bard, *Forgotten Victims: The Abandonment of Americans in Hitler's Camps* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994), 77; Flint Whitlock, *Given Up for Dead: American GI's in the Nazi Concentration Camp at Berga* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 129; also see Roger Cohen, *Soldiers and Slaves: American POWs Trapped by the Nazis' Final Gamble* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 3-8, 285-289; "Perpetuation of Testimony of Joseph C. Markowitz, Pfc.," September 6, 1945, Box 48, Dossier File Series, RG 153: Records of the Office of the Judge Advocate General (Army) 1792-2010, NARA, College Park, MD; "Situation Plan of the Town of Berga," Box 51, Dossier File Series, RG 153: Records of the Office of the Judge Advocate General (Army) 1792-2010, NARA, College Park, MD.

<sup>41</sup> Bard, *Abandonment of Americans*, 3-4, 14-16, 138, 141.

government would continue to allow (and even legitimize) segregation and anti-Semitism in the armed forces. It offers a comparative transnational view of how race was viewed in the United States and Germany, while delving into the importance of race and place. Overall racism in Germany was more deadly—at least in the twentieth century—compared to the United States. Yet, the United States had a long, sordid history of racism that manifested in hundreds of years of slavery for those of African ancestry and concerted efforts to remove Native Americans (and those of Mexican descent) from the American West.<sup>42</sup> Historian Ira Katznelson argued, “Although the United States entered the 1930s as the globe’s most established racialized order, the pathways from Nuremberg [Nazi race laws] and Jim Crow unfolded very differently, one culminating in mass genocide, the other, after much struggle, in civil-rights achievements.”<sup>43</sup> The duplicity of fighting for democracy, while subjected to racism and anti-Semitism at home, reveals the virulent prejudice faced by Jewish Americans and African Americans in the United States.

### A Note on Terminology

While researching, writing, and presenting portions of this dissertation at conferences I have been repeatedly reminded to carefully construct my comparison of African American and Jewish American experiences: one being focused on race or ethnicity and the other on religion. The historian must carefully delineate between modern awareness and beliefs held less than one hundred years ago when writing about such issues. To speak of Jews as a separate race in the modern era would rightfully be deemed as anti-Semitic, indeed the

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<sup>42</sup> Carroll P. Kakel, III, *The American West and the Nazi East: A Comparative and Interpretive Perspective* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 1-2, 15-16, 46-47. See also James Q. Whitman, *Hitler’s American Model: The United States and the Making of Nazi Race Law* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017); Stefan Kühl, *The Nazi Connection: Eugenics, American Racism, and German National Socialism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>43</sup> Ira Katznelson, “What America Taught the Nazis,” *The Atlantic* 320, no. 4 (November 2017): 44.

concept of race itself is problematic since it is a socially constructed idea. Yet, historically Jews have often been characterized as a separate race and not only during the pogroms of early twentieth century Eastern Europe or during the Holocaust.

Anti-Semitism stems back to the Middle Ages in Europe when Christians accused Jews for the death of Christ, rather than acknowledging that the Roman government ordered his death. Tied in with this mindset, other persistent anti-Semitic views of Jews also developed during the Middle Ages. Jews were widely associated with the devil and demons; depictions showed the devil and Jews alike as being “hook-nosed.” Jews were also associated with blood libel—ritual murders—the stories varied but included accusations that they used the blood of children in the baking of matzo. During the Black Death, Jews were routinely blamed for the plague with the allegation they had poisoned the wells in Europe. Many Jews were murdered as a result. Lastly, Jews were relegated to the professions they could hold during the Middle Ages in Europe, as a result many became traders and lenders (or early bankers), because the Christian church forbid the lending of money to other Christians or usury. Over the years usury would evolve into modern banking practices and anti-Semites would argue the Jews held world domination through control of the banking industry.<sup>44</sup>

In the nineteenth century anti-Semites turned to Social Darwinism to support their theories of the racial inferiority of Jews. Charles Darwin’s *Origin of the Species* (1859) and the subsequent publication of *Hereditary Genius* (1869) by Francis Dalton (Darwin’s cousin)

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<sup>44</sup> Anderson, “Jewish Women,” 8-11; Joshua Trachtenberg, *The Devil and the Jews: The Medieval Conception of the Jew and its Relation to Modern Antisemitism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1943), 12, 18, 26, 44-47, 9-98, 102-106, 124-139, 188; Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1979), 5, 7; United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Antisemitism,” *The Holocaust Encyclopedia*, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/antisemitism-1> (accessed April 2, 2020).

gave birth to the idea of eugenics.<sup>45</sup> Human eugenics, some argued, meant that “a Jew remained a Jew” regardless of whether they converted to Christianity, because Jewishness rested on racial attributes not religious differences.<sup>46</sup> The Nazi Nuremberg Race Laws of 1935 would be built upon these principles that the Jews constituted a sub race which would pollute the pure Aryan race if not eliminated. Under this concept, a person became a Jew if three or more grandparents were Jewish, conversion to another religion was inconsequential. Nazi anti-Semitism rested upon this concept of racial inferiority; race rather than religion became the focus in the Nazi racial hierarchy.<sup>47</sup>

The belief that Jews constitute a separate race was widely accepted in the United States, even when Jewish Americans were non-practicing, as was true for most of the western world. Eric Goldstein argued, “Far from playing the role of undifferentiated whites, Jews held an uncertain relationship to whiteness from the late nineteenth century until the end of World War II, a period when both Jews and non-Jews spoke of the ‘Jewish race’ and of ‘Hebrew blood.’ Although these racialized understandings of Jewishness have long been discredited among scientists and laypeople, they were very real to those who employed them

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<sup>45</sup> William I. Brustein, *Roots of Hate: Anti-Semitism in Europe before the Holocaust* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 97-98; Francis Galton, *Hereditary Genius: An Inquiry into its Laws and Consequences* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1914), 1.

<sup>46</sup> Hilberg, *Destruction*, 13.

<sup>47</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Nuremberg Race Laws,” The Holocaust Encyclopedia, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/nuremberg-laws> (accessed April 2, 2020). For a more complete discussion of anti-Semitism in Germany see Helmut Walser Smith, *The Butcher’s Tale: Murder and Anti-Semitism in a German Town* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2002); Donald L. Niewyk, *The Jews in Weimar Germany* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2001); Michael H. Kater, “Everyday Anti-Semitism in Prewar Nazi Germany: The Popular Bases,” *Yad Vashem Studies* XVI (1984): 129-159; Martin Gilbert, *The Jews in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Schocken Books, 2001); Amos Elon, *The Pity of It All: A History of the Jews in Germany, 1743-1933* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2002).

during these years.”<sup>48</sup> Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz further asserted, “Yet to say, simply, *Jews are not a race*, while accurate, overlooks the confusion, the waffling and uncertainty about Jewish racial identity, and the anxiety created by this uncertainty. Since race emerged as a construct in nineteenth-century biological science, there’s always been someone pitching the Jewish race... Jews have been so racialized that subtext overwhelms text: we have been racially hated *as if* we were a race.”<sup>49</sup> Thus, while dealing with historical circumstances one must recognize that our current scientific knowledge and understanding cannot be retroactively applied to history. That is, we cannot deny that African Americans were discriminated against because of long standing beliefs concerning race and Jewish Americans faced anti-Semitism not only due to religion but a notion that Jews also constituted a race set apart. Jewish American and African American prisoners of war had to navigate these boundaries not only within United States society, but also within the military (historically unwelcoming to minorities), and ultimately as prisoners in Nazi occupied Europe.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Eric L. Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 1.

<sup>49</sup> Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz, *The Colors of Jews: Racial Politics and Radical Diasporism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 27-28.

<sup>50</sup> William Brustein further suggested, “what made anti-Semitism different from other forms of xenophobia or dislike of minorities is that Jew hatred is more multifaceted than other kinds of prejudice... Popular anti-Semitism... incorporated religious, racial, economic, and political prejudice.” See Brustein, *Roots of Hate*, 44. Karen Brodtkin also addressed this issue and wrote, “Prevailing classification at a particular time have sometimes assigned us to the white race, and at other times have created an off-white race for Jews to inhabit. Those changes give us a kind of double vision that comes from racial middleness: and experience of marginality vis-à-vis whiteness, and an experience of whiteness and belonging vis-à-vis blackness.” See Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks: And What That Says about Race in America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 2-3. For further discussion on the concept of race in the United States see Natalia Molina, Daniel Martinez HoSang, and Ramón A. Gutiérrez, eds., *Relational Formations of Race: Theory, Method, and Practice* (Oakland, University of California Press, 2019); Natalia Molina, *How Race Is Made in America: Immigration, Citizenship, and the Historical Power of Racial Scripts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014); Natalia Molina, *Fit to be Citizens? Public Health and Race in Los Angeles, 1879-1939* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Elise Virginia Lemire, “*Miscegenation*”: *Making Race in America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002).

## Sources and Methodology

As I delved into the archives and other sources, I soon realized the source base itself posed two main problems: there is both a dearth and overabundance of sources on this topic. On one hand, there are hundreds of prisoner of war accounts available from the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) at College Park, MD and the Veterans History Project (VHP) from the Library of Congress (not to mention countless smaller archival holdings); however, determining which accounts are those of Jewish Americans or African Americans is a daunting process. Official documents usually do not list a nationality or religion (at least for interrogations) and the VHP only includes this information at the interviewee's discretion. Thus, it is often only possible to make these determinations by scanning the entire interviews, memoirs, and other records for a mention of race or religion.<sup>51</sup>

My process for determining which materials to use involved first looking at the memoirs and interviews available from the VHP. The interviews especially tended to be more open in questioning the ex-prisoners of war, which allowed for a fuller picture of their experiences. I then cross referenced their information with that of other prisoners mentioned (or even similar related circumstances) as well as checking it against interrogations from military intelligence and other official documents from NARA. The interrogations from NARA provided official records and were taken soon after the events, but that information usually followed at set of questions and as such did not offer a broader view of the prisoner's life. While useful to my research, this cross-listing process was overwhelming at best. No one master list exists for World War II prisoners of war and old military records are retained

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<sup>51</sup> It was also this last fact which helped me to reign in my research. At one point early on I considered also including Mexican Americans and other minorities in my analysis. However, I quickly realized that to do so would cause my dissertation to be too extensive and obtaining these records was more complicated.

in duplicate, triplicate, and even sextuplicate. I would be remiss in suggesting that this study covers the experiences of all Jewish American or African American prisoners of war; indeed, even in the available accounts their experiences varied widely. However, this sample does include prisoners of war from different backgrounds and rank, captured in various locations and years of the war, and held at a variety of camps.<sup>52</sup> On the other hand, the number of records concerning prisoner of war camps and prisoners in general is staggering, spanning materials from the American National Red Cross, the Army Judge Advocate General's office, Allied Operational and Occupation Headquarters, the Provost Marshal General Office, Headquarters of the European Theater of Operations, and Department of State to list but a few.<sup>53</sup> I made greatest use of JAG records as these contain not only the interrogations of

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<sup>52</sup> The most complete listings of prisoners of war are available from two NARA collections. The first, was compiled by NARA staff from punch cards kept on prisoners of war from the War Department, Veteran's Administration, and other agencies. All total, thirteen collections were combined and digitized; however, the finding aid notes that the files are still incomplete. An online search of the records limited to prisoners of war from the Army, Navy, and Marines held by Germany yields 93,925 records. The other contains the interrogations of former prisoners of war retained by the Judge Advocate General's staff for possible use for war crimes trials. The series consists of 180 boxes, per a conversation with archival staff at NARA these are alphabetical and contain both records of those held by the Japanese and Germans. See *World War II Prisoners of War, Data File, 12/17/1941-11/1/9/1946, Records of World War II Prisoners of War, 1942-1947, RG 389: Records of the Office of the Provost Marshal General, NARA, College Park, MD, <https://aad.archives.gov/aad/series-description.jsp?s=644>; Reports of Interviews with American Servicemen Who Were Prisoners of War, 1943-1947, RG 153: Records of the Office of the Judge Advocate General (Army) 1792-2010, NARA, College Park, MD. For a complete listing of the NARA holdings for World War II prisoners of war see Benjamin L. DeWhitt and Jennifer Davis Heaps, *Records Relating to Personal Participation in World War II: American Prisoners of War and Civilian Internees* (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1998). As addressed in Chapters 3 and 4 there are likewise no exact records of the number of Jewish American and African American prisoners of war. The National Jewish Welfare Board estimated the number of Jewish American prisoners of war, but I could find no similar estimates for African American prisoners of war.*

<sup>53</sup> The American Red Cross files primarily retain records of shipments of supplies to prisoner of war camps and camp inspection reports. Unfortunately, these records are not divided by theater of war. For example, I found records on Louis Zamperini (who's story was made into the 2014 film *Unbroken*) held by the Japanese with other reports on German run prisoner of war camps. Additionally, when I first visited NARA in 2015 the record collection had recently been relocated and many boxes were missing. The Provost Marshal General Office records also include files of the Red Cross, such as prisoner of war lists with rank, serial number, and camp information. The Allied Operational and Occupation Headquarters records includes information on prisoner of war camps. However, the documents provide more general information (number and nationality of prisoners and camp location) than personal details. See RG ANRC: Records of the American National Red Cross, 1881-2008, NARA, Washington, D.C.; RG389: Records of the Office of Provost Marshal General, NARA,

liberated prisoners of war (as evidence for future war crimes trials), but also records from war crimes trials.

### **Organization**

The following chapters trace the experiences of Jewish American and African American prisoners of war from their time as civilians, through their military service and time as prisoners, and finally to their return to the United States. Chapter 1 details the general racism and anti-Semitism faced by African Americans and Jewish Americans between the world wars. It begins with a review of topics including the race riots during the “Red Summer,” the rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan, and job discrimination. The chapter focus, however, is the experience of African Americans and Jewish Americans as they transitioned from civilians to servicemen and the prejudices faced especially from officers. Chapter 2 concerns the politics of capture, delving into the Geneva Convention, German policies regarding prisoners of war, their policies (often unwritten) regarding minorities and compares this with their treatment of non-United States prisoners, and the camp structure. This is followed with an explanation of the roles the International Committee of the Red Cross and Young Men’s Christian Association played regarding camp inspections and supplying prisoners with everything from rations to musical instruments. Lastly, a brief generalization of prisoner of war daily life offers a comparison with the experiences of minorities in the following two chapters. Chapters 3 and 4 focus on the Jewish American and African American prisoner of war experience, respectively, and are divided by camps. After multiple organizational attempts, including alphabetical, by date of capture, and severity of experiences, it was clear these did not lead to any sort of pattern. However, when organized

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Washington, D.C.; RG 331: Allied Operational and Occupation Headquarters, World War II, NARA, Washington, D.C.

by camp not only did the contrasting experiences of Jewish American and African Americans held at the same camps appear, but indeed their experiences could still largely be told in order of severity because what ultimately mattered was the camp. The camp was shaped by the Kommandant who held immediate control over the prisoners' daily lives. Finally, Chapter 5 explores their return home. It considers why their stories went unheard for so long; from ex-prisoners of war not feeling welcome to talk about their experiences, to suffering from what we would now call Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. In some cases, prisoners were required to sign "Security Certificates" where they agreed to not talk about their experiences. The war crimes trials following the war were a disappointment for many ex-prisoners and their families who hoped to see their captors brought to justice only to have them receive light or reduced sentences. Lastly, prisoners had to readjust to civilian life after their ordeals. Many of them found that while some progress had been made regarding prejudice in the United States, still much remained to be done. How we treat minorities reflects our true dedication to principles of equality and civil rights, to democracy. By examining the experiences of minority prisoners of war, we can determine where this determination fell short and the implication it had on their lives.

## Chapter One

### Life Before Captivity: Everyday Encounters with Racism and Anti-Semitism

*In the midst of all the fine talk about democracy and the rights of man, lynching proceeds without interference or punishment of lynchers in the nation which has undertaken to tell the rest of the world how to mind its morals.*

-*The Crisis*, 1941

### Introduction

What was the basis of Jewish American and African American responses to being captured? Like all prisoners of war, they based their expectations and behavior on two things: news reports and word of mouth. Newspapers contained a wealth of stories and letters about prisoners of war on both fronts of the war. The *Prisoners of War Bulletin*, published by the American National Red Cross, in particular provided detailed information on regulations, excerpts from letters, and even articles about conditions in specific camps. The *Prisoners of War Bulletin* was more popular among families of prisoners, which meant most servicemen would have never read it. General news and word of mouth then formed the basis of information for servicemen who found themselves prisoners. Yet, as minorities coming under the control of a Nazi government built upon the ideas of racial superiority, Jewish Americans and African Americans also reacted based on their personal—and even historic—exposure to racism and anti-Semitism. What prejudices had they experienced in their own lifetimes and what stories had they further heard from family and friends? This shared milieu of racism and anti-Semitism shaped their fears and immediate reactions to capture. If African Americans dealt with Jim Crow and *de facto* segregation in the States, how would they fare as prisoners of war under Nazism which did not even purport to be a

democracy that protected the civil rights of its citizens? If Jewish Americans had also been targets of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s, faced recurrent blame for economic hardships, and dealt with discriminatory hiring practices, how would Germany treat them? Reports of roundups of Jews and the concentration camps were readily available in American newspapers and Jewish societies disseminated further information obtained from family and friends still in Europe. This chapter will examine high-level political and economic prejudices that informed social *de jure* and *de facto* racism, anti-Semitism, and segregation. This demonstrates the experience of Jewish Americans and African Americans between the world wars and during their military induction. This survey allows for a fuller understanding of how minority prisoners of war reckoned with their capture based on their shared milieu.

This chapter delves into the anti-Semitism and racism faced by Jewish Americans and African Americans in the United States. It further explores the history of prejudice towards minorities in the military. Officers were resistant to Jewish servicemen, although prejudice was less overt. Yet, many Jewish servicemen—especially those from major metropolitan areas such as New York City—found themselves suddenly the single or among a handful of Jews in a unit. African Americans, especially from the North, had to deal with the stark realities of Jim Crow when completing basic training in the South. Moreover, the publication of *The Command of Negro Troops* by the War Department (1944) highlighted the complicated realities of a still segregated military that limited the positions African Americans could obtain. The chapter closes with a reflection of how this history shaped the lives of the prisoners of war before they ever left the United States. Upon capture Jewish Americans and African Americans fully expected to receive worse treatment from their Nazi captors than non-minority American prisoners of war.

### African Americans: Civilian Experiences with Racism

While World War II is remembered for the Double V campaign of “Democracy at Home and Abroad,” World War I was the first war of the twentieth century wherein African Americans sought to attain protection of their civil rights at home while fighting to protect democracy overseas. During World War I, 400,000 African Americans were drafted or enlisted. As historian Chad Williams argues, “For many African Americans, black servicemen stood as harbingers—torchbearers—of a new dawn of democratic freedom and opportunity reminiscent of Reconstruction following the Civil War. Conversely, for many white Americans, black soldiers represented a distinct threat to prevailing social hierarchies and white supremacist visions of American democracy.”<sup>1</sup> However, beginning with the Civil War, African Americans recognized that military service was inextricably linked to full citizenship. During World War I approximately 2.3 million African Americans registered for the draft, but under 370,000 were selected. This fact alone demonstrated the prevalent racism which, even before the Civil War, asserted that African Americans did not make good soldiers. During World War I, black servicemen were unable to join the Marines, were limited in the Navy, and faced staunch racial opposition from whites in the Army.<sup>2</sup> However, African Americans believed it was their duty as citizens—limited as their rights may have been—to serve their country; furthermore, they considered it an opportunity to alter

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<sup>1</sup> Chad L. Williams, *Torchbearers of Democracy: African American Soldiers in the World War I Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 3. See also Adriane Lentz-Smith, *Freedom Struggles: African Americans and World War I* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Williams, *Torchbearers of Democracy*, 3-7. See also William A. Taylor, *Military Service and American Democracy: From World War II to the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2016); Equal Justice Initiative, “Lynching in America: Targeting Black Veterans,” <https://eji.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/lynching-in-america-targeting-black-veterans-web.pdf> (accessed February 8, 2020), 8-9, 20-21, 24-25.

“conceptions of black masculinity.”<sup>3</sup> Black publications such as the *Crisis* and the *Chicago Defender* challenged discriminatory perceptions of African American soldiers and held out hope that successful service during the war would usher in an age of civil rights reform at home.<sup>4</sup>

Yet even before the war ended there was a pressure for a return to the status quo, especially in the case of African American officers in the military. One white officer, Colonel Hershel Tupes, writing from France in August 1918, bemoaned the actions of African American officers stating that “racial distinctions” needed to be upheld and the officers were “lacking in initiative.”<sup>5</sup> A response from Adjutant General W. P. Bennett—by order of General Pershing—accepted Colonel Tupes’s outlines for replacing African American officers with whites and for African Americans to be “transferred to *labor organization* or to replacement units.”<sup>6</sup> A similar letter from Colonel Allen J. Greer to Senator Kenneth McKeller (D-TN) alleged that the African American soldiers in the 92nd Division were guilty of multiple rapes while stationed in the United States and in Europe. He further purported that these instances were greatly reduced when white officers were in charge instead of African Americans.<sup>7</sup> W. E. B. DuBois wrote of the irony of African

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<sup>3</sup> Williams, *Torchbearers of Democracy*, 7. For discussion of African American masculinity see Steve Estes, *I Am a Man! Race, Manhood, and the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> Williams, *Torchbearers of Democracy*, 8.

<sup>5</sup> Reprint of letter from Colonel Herschel Tupes to the Commanding General Pershing, August 24, 1918, in *The Crisis* 18, no. 1 (May 1919): 18.

<sup>6</sup> Italics added. Reprint of letter from Adjunct General W. P. Bennet (under order of General Pershing) to Colonel Hershel Tupes, August 28, 1918, in *The Crisis* 18, no. 1 (May 1919): 18.

<sup>7</sup> Reprint of letter from Colonel Allen J. Greer to Senator Kenneth D. McKeller, December 6, 1918, in *The Crisis* 18, no. 1 (May 1919): 18.

Americans fighting for democracy abroad while not having their rights protected at home in the now famous “Returning Soldiers” in *The Crisis*. Therein he specifically mentioned lynching, disenfranchisement, and lack of educational opportunities for African Americans. DuBois called into account the continued problem of lynching while blacks were serving their country. He wrote, “Yet, for fifty years we have lynched two Negroes a week, and we have kept this up right through the war . . . The land that disfranchises its citizens and calls itself a democracy lies and knows it lies.”<sup>8</sup> Indeed, from 1917 to 1919, the number of lynchings would slightly more than double.<sup>9</sup> The end of World War I ushered in an increased number of race riots and lynching throughout the United States. Thirteen African American veterans were lynched after the war and wearing the uniform was often seen as “an act of defiance” against Jim Crow.<sup>10</sup>

During and in the immediate aftermath of World War I there was a white backlash against both the Great Migration and the limited advances (both social and economic) made by African Americans during the war years. During the Great Migration, approximately 6 million African Americans left the South, increasing the black population in cities such as

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<sup>8</sup> W. E. B. DuBois, “Returning Soldiers,” *The Crisis* 18, no. 1 (May 1919): 14. See also Harvard Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks: The Emergence of Civil Rights as a National Issue: The Depression Decade*, 30th Anniversary Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 16-17.

<sup>9</sup> Lentz-Smith, *Freedom Struggles*, 9. For a detailed account of the Antebellum to Reconstruction period history of lynching in the United States see Michael J. Pfeifer, *The Roots of Rough Justice: Origins of American Lynching* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011); Paula J. Giddings, *Ida: A Sword Among Lions: Ida B. Wells and the Campaign against Lynching* (New York: Amistad, 2009).

<sup>10</sup> Equal Justice Initiative, “Lynching in America,” 25-26, 28-31, 33. See also Vincent Mikkelson, “Coming from Battle to Face a War: The Lynching of Black Soldiers in the World War I Era,” (PhD diss., Florida State University, 2007); David A. Davis, “Not Only War Is Hell: World War I and African American Lynching Narratives,” *African American Review* 42, no. 3-4 (Fall-Winter 2008): 477-491; “Negro Soldier Hanged by Mob,” *Oklahoma City Times*, December 16, 1918, <https://gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc170955/m1/6/?q=negro%20soldier> (accessed February 8, 2020).

Chicago from just under 45,000 to over one million and leaving the ethnic makeup of urban cities forever changed.<sup>11</sup> Isabel Wilkerson writes, “Some 555,000 colored people left the South during the decade of the First World War—more than all the colored people who left in the five decades after the Emancipation Proclamation.”<sup>12</sup> The influx of African Americans would require white northerners to face their own prejudices.

The changing demographics and historically rooted racism erupted in racial violence during the “Red Summer” of 1919. There were over twenty race riots in major cities such as Washington, D.C., Chicago, Omaha, and Baltimore during the “Red Summer,” and in smaller towns such as Longview, Texas and Elaine, Arkansas.<sup>13</sup> However, race riots were not uncommon throughout the war and interwar years. Riots occurred in New York City (twice), East St. Louis, Illinois (an attack on African Americans working in war industry), and Chester, Pennsylvania with each involving at least two thousand persons according to news reports in 1917. Other areas included Philadelphia (1918) and Tulsa (1921).<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America’s Great Migration* (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), 8-11.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 161-162.

<sup>13</sup> See Stanley B. Norvell and William M. Tuttle, Jr. “Views of a Negro during ‘The Red Summer’ of 1919,” *The Journal of Negro History* 51, no. 3 (July 1966): 209-218; Cameron McWhirter, *Red Summer: The Summer of 1919 and the Awakening of Black America* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2012); Robert Whitaker, *On the Laps of Gods: The Red Summer of 1919 and the Struggle for Justice that Remade a Nation* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2009); Peter C. Baker, “The Tragic, Forgotten History of Black Military Veterans,” *The New Yorker*, November 27, 2016, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/the-tragic-forgotten-history-of-black-military-veterans> (accessed December 28, 2019); “Race Riots Renewed: Soldiers and Sailors Attack Negroes on Pennsylvania Ave.,” *The Washington Post*, July 21, 1919, 1; Associated Press, “Race Riots in Chicago: Negro Drowned; White Man Reported Dead; Many Hurt,” *The Washington Post*, July 28, 1919, 1; “Camp Meade Men Attack Baltimore Negro Section,” *The Washington Post*, October 3, 1919, 1; Associated Press, “Omaha Has Race Riot: Mob Fires Courthouse in Effort to Lynch Negro,” *The Washington Post*, September 29, 1919, 1; “Texas Troops at Race Riot Scene: Whites, 4 of Whom are Wounded, Burn 5 Negro Homes,” *The Washington Post*, July 12, 1919, 2; Associated Press, “9 Die in Race Riot: 2 Whites and 7 Negroes Killed in Clash in Elaine, AK,” *The Washington Post*, October 2, 1919, 2.

<sup>14</sup> A search of the term “race riot” from 1916-1922 returns from ProQuest Historical Newspapers nearly 300 results from the *Washington Post* alone. While not a newspaper of record during this period, the number of articles printed in the *Washington Post* on race riots attests to their prevalence in the news during this period. A

The Tulsa Race Riot, or Race Massacre, started after the arrest of Dick Rowland on the charge of assaulting a white woman. Believing that Rowland was likely to be lynched, African Americans from the historically black Greenwood District of Tulsa went to the courthouse to protect him. The response of white residents of Tulsa was a two-day riot, May 31-June 1, 1921, that entirely destroyed the African American community of Greenwood. During the riot, white residents looted and burned the homes and businesses and murdered African Americans (a white mob accidentally killed one white man). Eventually the governor had to call in the National Guard which helped to arrest about 6,000 African Americans and sixty-five whites. It is unknown how many people died during the riot with estimates up to 250 and in 2019 a mass grave was found that may contain more victims of the race riot.<sup>15</sup>

Postcard imagery captured the devastating results.

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few examples are the following: “Man Dies in New York Race Riot: Another’s Skull Fractured in Clash with Police Reserves,” *The Washington Post*, May 27, 1917, 1; “2,000 in New York Join in Race Riot: Colored Soldier’s Arrest Stirs Trouble at “San Juan,” *The Washington Post*, July 4, 1917, 1; “Race Riot at East St. Louis: Mob Attacks and Beats Colored Workers in Munitions Factories,” *The Washington Post*, May 29, 1917, 1; “Race Riot Starts Anew at Chester: Negro Beaten Insensible; Others Shot; Scores Arrested,” *The Washington Post*, July 28, 1917, 1; “Three Dead in Race Riots: More Than 60 Injured in Disturbances in Philadelphia,” *The Washington Post*, July 30, 1918, 2; “Three Slain in Kansas Race Riots; Citizens Battle in City Streets; Independence Calls for Troops,” *The Washington Post*, December 17, 1920, 1; “Negro Killed in Race Riot: Knives Are Freely Used in Fight at Culpepper,” *The Washington Post*, February 7, 1921, 3.

<sup>15</sup> The case against Dick Rowland was later dropped. Scott Ellsworth, *Death in a Promised Land: The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 45-70. See also Alfred L. Brophy, *Reconstructing the Dreamland: The Tulsa Riot of 1921 Race, Reparations, and Reconciliation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Vanessa Romo, “New Research Identifies Possible Mass Graves from 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre,” *NPR*, December 17, 2019 <https://www.npr.org/2019/12/17/789015343/new-research-identifies-possible-mass-graves-from1921-tulsa-race-massacre> (accessed February 8, 2020); “1921 Tulsa Race Riot,” Online Exhibit, Tulsa Historical Society and Museum, <https://tulahistory.org/learn/online-exhibits/the-tulsa-race-riot/> (accessed July 13, 2018). See also Allison Keyes, “A Long-Lost Manuscript Contains a Searing Eyewitness Account of the Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921,” *Smithsonian.com*, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/long-lost-manuscript-contains-searing-eyewitness-account-tulsa-race-massacre-1921-180959251/> (accessed July 13, 2018). For a first-hand account of the Tulsa Race Riot written ten years later see, B. C. Franklin, “The Tulsa Race Riot and Three of Its Victims,” August 22, 1931, National Museum of African American History and Culture, [https://nmaahc.si.edu/object/nmaahc\\_2015.176.1?destination=explore/collection/search%3Fpage%3D1%26edan\\_q%3D%252A%253A%252A%26edan\\_fq%255B0%255D%3Dplace%253A%2522Tulsa%2522%26edan\\_fq%255B1%255D%3Ddate%253A%25221920s%2522%26edan\\_local%3D1](https://nmaahc.si.edu/object/nmaahc_2015.176.1?destination=explore/collection/search%3Fpage%3D1%26edan_q%3D%252A%253A%252A%26edan_fq%255B0%255D%3Dplace%253A%2522Tulsa%2522%26edan_fq%255B1%255D%3Ddate%253A%25221920s%2522%26edan_local%3D1) (accessed July 13, 2018).



**Figure 1:** Postcard depicting the Greenwood District after the Tulsa Race Riot in 1921. “Ruins of the Tulsa Race Riot 6-1-21,” Photographic Postcard, Owned by Kavin Ross, 2011.175.12, Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, Washington, D.C.

Former president William Howard Taft responded to the riot and bemoaned the actions of whites in particular. He argued:

No matter whether it was a negro or a white man who began the initial fight, one can not [*sic*] escape the conclusion that the awful character of this cruel massacre was largely due to the outrageous malevolence and cruelty of the whites who took part in the conflict. This is clearly indicated by the number of the negro dead as compared with the dead whites, by the wholesale destruction and looting of the negro settlement and business quarter, by the fact that white men prevented the effort of the city fire department to put out the flames, and by the present suffering and homelessness of the thousands of negroes of Tulsa.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> William Howard Taft, “Taft Charges Riot at Tulsa Was Due Largely to Whites: Conclusion, He Asserts, Does Not Excuse Negro Papers’ Propaganda Inciting Readers to Use Force—Says Leaders of Both Races Can Avert Clashes,” *The Washington Post*, June 6, 1921, 1.

While Taft did not completely excuse the actions of African Americans, he pointed out what was true of the majority of race riots in the early twentieth century: whites wreaked havoc on African Americans and their communities, while rarely facing any legal repercussions for their actions. However, Taft's point of view was a rarity in the 1920s.

The 1920s saw organized reactions, including overt racist domestic terrorism and concerted African American civil rights campaigns. A period of rebirth for the Ku Klux Klan as it came to operate on a national scale, the Klan of the 1920s targeted a myriad of ethnic and religious minorities, including African Americans, Jews, and Catholics. It supported a nativist view of the new wave of immigrants that began coming to the United States at the turn of the century. The Ku Klux Klan was renewed under the leadership of William J. Simmons in 1915 but did not have much support until the 1920s when it capitalized on the Red Scare and opposition to changing societal norms. In 1922, Hiram Evans replaced Simmons as the Imperial Wizard.<sup>17</sup>

At the same time the Klan was expanding, the NAACP pushed for an anti-lynching bill within its larger goal of the protection of civil rights. Proposed by Representative Leonidas Dyer (R-MO) in April 1918, H.R. 11279 or better-known as the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill, sought to bring lynch mobs under federal jurisdiction and fine or imprison

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<sup>17</sup> See Linda Gordon, *The Second Coming of the KKK: The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s and the American Political Tradition* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2017); Nancy MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Joshua Rothman, "When Bigotry Paraded Through the Streets," *The Atlantic*, December 4, 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/12/second-klan/509468/> (accessed July 9, 2018). See also, David M. Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism: The History of the Ku Klux Klan* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987); Chester L. Quarles, *The Ku Klux Klan and Related American Racialist and Antisemitic Organizations* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 1999); Stewart E. Tolnay and E. M. Beck, *A Festival of Violence: An Analysis of Southern Lynchings, 1882-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995); Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F. D. R.* (New York: Vintage Books, 1960), 293-297; David M. Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 15.

government officials who freely turned over a person to a lynch mob. The Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill, however, remained “stuck in the Judiciary Committee.”<sup>18</sup> The bill was again brought to the forefront in January 1922, as H.R. 13, where it was vehemently rebuked by congressmen from both the South and North. Most infamous perhaps were the statements made by Representative Hatton Sumners (D-TX) in opposition to the bill wherein multiple times he equated passage of the bill to a lynch mob, stated it was against state’s rights, argued it would encourage rapists; meanwhile suggesting that there were no issues with race relations in the South.<sup>19</sup> On the subject of rape, Sumners went so far as to argue that the anti-lynching bill would reward the guilty and punish those who attempted to restore honor to the victim. He proposed:

Suppose this thing happens—and it can happen under this bill—suppose that a black man takes a little white child and drags her off into a seclusion where no voice can be heard and no hand can help, and rapes that child, and the father of that child and the brothers of the child come upon him and kill him, and the Federal Government takes them away in the face of public sentiment and places them in the Federal penitentiary, and then has a tax of \$10,000 levied against the county for the benefit of the rapist’s family, a part of which sum might go to buy that family an automobile to ride by the home of the innocent victim.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> “Anti-Lynching Legislation Renewed,” Black Americans in Congress 1870-2007, History, Art & Archives: U.S. House of Representative, Office of the Historian (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2008), <http://history.house.gov/Exhibitions-and-Publications/BAIC/Historical-Essays/Temporary-Farewell/Anti-Lynching-Legislation/> (accessed July 15, 2018). For more on the history of lynching in the United States see George C. Wright, *Racial Violence in Kentucky, 1865-1940: Lynchings, Mob Rule, and “Legal Lynchings”* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990); Amy Louise Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); William D. Carrigan, *The Making of a Lynching Culture: Violence and Vigilantism in Central Texas, 1836-1916* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004); Jacqueline Goldsby, *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); Michael J. Pfeifer, *Rough Justice: Lynching and American Society, 1874-1947* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004).

<sup>19</sup> Hatton Sumners, in U.S. House, *Congressional Record*, House, 67th Congress, 2nd Session, (January 26, 1922): 1774, 1775, 1782-1784, and 1786. See also “Anti-Lynching Legislation Renewed”; Ron C. Law, “Congressman Hatton W. Sumners of Dallas, Texas: His Life and Congressional Career, 1875-1937” (PhD diss., Texas Christian University, 1990).

<sup>20</sup> Hatton Sumners, *Congressional Record*, 1784.

Later in Sumners' argument he resurrected the old defenses for slavery to suggest that slavery was "a tragedy" and "a curse" for whites, but "a chance" for blacks to better themselves. He stated that African Americans "through the institution of slavery... got a species of coercion that enabled them in a few generations to break away from the habits of indolence that had grown upon them by reason of their centuries and centuries of tropical residence, and eventually it enabled their children to be sent to school under conditions of *civilization*."<sup>21</sup> The Anti-Lynching Bill managed to pass the House, despite the opposition of lawmakers such as Sumners.<sup>22</sup>

As the Anti-Lynching Bill lingered in the Senate without a vote, the debate continued outside of the Senate. W. E. B. DuBois argued "no nation can survive which . . . permits systematic and continued mob murder as a form of public debauchery. . . Either the United States can and will end lynching or lynching will end these United States."<sup>23</sup> *The Crisis* ran articles from NAACP statistics on lynching and discussed the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill throughout issues in 1922.<sup>24</sup> The NAACP published information posters on lynching with the headline "FOR THE GOOD OF America."<sup>25</sup> The poster combated the rape defense of lynching used by those such as Representative Sumners by drawing notice to the fact that

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<sup>21</sup> Italics added. Ibid, 1785.

<sup>22</sup> "Anti-Lynching Legislation Renewed." See also the full debate on the Anti-Lynching Bill from January 26, 1922 in U.S. House, *Congressional Record*, 67th Congress, 2nd Session, (January 26, 1922): 1773-1796.

<sup>23</sup> W. E. B. DuBois, "The Lynching Bill," *The Crisis* 23, no. 4 (February 1922):152.

<sup>24</sup> See *The Crisis* 23, no. 4 (February 1922):165-169; *The Crisis* 23, no. 5 (March 1922): 211-214; *The Crisis* 23, no. 6 (April 1922): 248; *The Crisis* 24, no. 3 (July 1922): 121-124; *The Crisis* 25, no. 1 (November 1922): 8, 23-26.

<sup>25</sup> NAACP, "FOR THE GOOD OF AMERICA," 1922, National Museum of African American History and Culture Collection, [https://nmaahc.si.edu/object/nmaahc\\_2011.57.9?destination=explore/collection/search%3Fedan\\_q%3Dlynch%2520poster%26edan\\_local%3D1%26op%3DSearch](https://nmaahc.si.edu/object/nmaahc_2011.57.9?destination=explore/collection/search%3Fedan_q%3Dlynch%2520poster%26edan_local%3D1%26op%3DSearch) (accessed July 15, 2018).

women had also been lynched. The NAACP posters placed the call to action on the reader, stating “TO MAINTAIN CIVILIZATION IN AMERICA AND FOR THE GOOD NAME OF THE NATION BEFORE THE WORLD YOU CANNOT ESCAPE YOUR RESPONSIBILITY.”<sup>26</sup> The NAACP also sought to gain public support with its display of a black flag with white letters reading “A MAN WAS LYNCHED YESTERDAY” outside its office on Fifth Avenue in New York City. The flag was used throughout the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>27</sup> The bill finally came to a vote in the Senate in November when the possibility of a filibuster resulted in the bill being voted down. Representative Dyer continued to introduce the bill during the 1920s, but each time without success. The anti-lynching bill was revived in the 1930s, relabeled as the Costigan-Wagner Bill, with the support of the NAACP and persons such as Eleanor Roosevelt. Mrs. Roosevelt even arranged a meeting between Walter White and President Roosevelt in 1934; however, FDR did little publicly to support the bill and it again failed to pass the Senate.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> NAACP, “FOR THE GOOD OF AMERICA.”

<sup>27</sup> See “Three snapshots of a banner that reads ‘A MAN WAS LYNCHED YESTERDAY’ flying outside of the NAACP New York City Headquarters,” Photograph, Roy Wilkins Collection, Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2004671393/> (accessed July 9, 2018); “A man was lynched yesterday,” Photograph, 1936, Visual Materials from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Records, Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2015647092/> (accessed July 9, 2018). The NAACP also published reports on lynching. See National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, *Thirty Years of Lynching in the United States, 1889-1918* (New York: National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, 1919); National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, *Twelfth Annual Report on the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People: For the Year 1921 A Summary of Work and Accounting* (New York: National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, 1922). Other organizations all sought to draw support to the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill by publishing short pamphlets. See “A Terrible Blot on American Civilization: 3424 Lynchings in 33 Years,” District of Columbia Anti-Lynching Committee North Eastern Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs Washington, D.C. 1922, Broadsides, Leaflets, and Pamphlets from America and Europe, Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/rbpe.20803600> (accessed July 9, 2018). See also “Mapping the Second Ku Klux Klan, 1915-1940,” Virginia Commonwealth University Libraries, <https://labs.library.vcu.edu/klan/learn> (accessed July 9, 2018).

<sup>28</sup> An anti-lynching bill finally passed the Senate on February 14, 2019 but has yet to pass the House and become law. See House, *Congressional Record*, 116th Congress, 1st Session, S. 488. Nancy Beck Young, *Why We Fight: Congress and the Politics of World War II* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2013), 166-173; “Anti-Lynching Legislation Renewed”; Paul M. Sparrow, “Eleanor Roosevelt’s Battle to End Lynching,”

Emboldened by lack of congressional condemnation, the Klan continued to grow. On August 8, 1925, 50,000 Klan members held a march down Pennsylvania Avenue. The Klan members of the 1920s generally made no semblance of hiding their identities. Government officials ran on Klan platforms from local to national positions. Most notable, governors from Indiana and Georgia, as well as two senators from Texas and Colorado were among those known Klan members elected.<sup>29</sup> Articles about the Klan regularly appeared in newspapers, ranging from concern over its growth to general accounts.<sup>30</sup> Estimates put the Klan's membership at three to five million in 1925; however, it slowly declined and fell out of power by the end of the decade. Yet, as historian Joshua Rothman noted, "Even without the Klan, the nation remained a place where prejudice against ethnic and religious minorities was widespread and where black Americans in particular suffered legalized discrimination and deadly violence."<sup>31</sup> Thus, even with the decline of the Klan, discrimination against African Americans did not abate in the 1930s.

The historiography demonstrates that while the state made strides towards civil rights, this was often the result of pressure from the public and groups such as the NAACP. Key government figures did not support civil rights, but rather made concessions to further their other political goals. During the Great Depression, minority groups were among some of the

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National Archives and Records Administration, February 12, 2016, <https://fdr.blogs.archives.gov/2016/02/12/eleanor-roosevelts-battle-to-end-lynching/> (accessed July 15, 2018).

<sup>29</sup> Rothman, "When Bigotry Paraded."

<sup>30</sup> For example, see "Brand Negro with Acid after Flogging Him: Masked Whites in Dallas Burn 'K. K. K.' on Bell Boy's Forehead," *The New York Times*, April 3, 1921, 13; "Ku Klux Klan Celebrates: Five Thousand Knights to Meet in Atlanta Today," *The New York Times*, May 5, 1921, 4; "Ku Klux Klan Has 50 Klans in Jersey: State Headquarters Located in Newark and the Organization is Growing, Says Head," *The New York Times*, August 30, 1921, 24.

<sup>31</sup> Rothman, "When Bigotry Paraded."

hardest hit. Often already in the lower economic rungs, because of the prevalence of racism in the workplace, sharecropping, school segregation, and other disadvantages, minorities were generally excluded—*de facto* if not intentionally—from early government programs meant to help the unemployed. Although later programs more specifically targeted minority groups, especially African Americans, they remained largely excluded from some of the major New Deal programs. Even the Works Progress Administration’s slave narratives employed mostly whites to interview ex-slaves.<sup>32</sup>

Some of the hardest hit by the Depression were African American sharecroppers, who essentially had two strikes against them being poor sharecroppers and black. In the 1930s, the majority of African Americans still lived in the rural South. Although sharecropping had never offered much more than a “subsistence living” the Great Depression brought cotton and other prices hurtling down. Harvard Sitkoff wrote, “Over two-thirds of the black farmers cultivating cotton in the early thirties received *no profits* from the crop, either breaking even or going deeper into debt.”<sup>33</sup> The Agricultural Adjustment Act, intended to aid landowning farmers, hurt sharecroppers even more. The AAA incentivized landowners not to work portions of their land in exchange for a subsidy; however, there was nothing in the AAA contracts that required these landlords to pass any money onto sharecroppers. Indeed, as David Kennedy found, “The planters pocketed 90 percent of the AAA benefit payments in

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<sup>32</sup> For a more extensive discussion of African Americans during the Great Depression see Sitkoff, *New Deal for Blacks*. On the issues of the WPA Slave Narratives being conducted by mostly whites in the South during Jim Crow see Rebecca Onion, “Is the Greatest Collection of Slave Narratives Tainted by Racism?” *Slate* (July 6, 2016), [http://www.slate.com/articles/news\\_and\\_politics/history/2016/07/can\\_wpa\\_slave\\_narratives\\_be\\_trusted\\_or\\_are\\_they\\_tainted\\_by\\_depression\\_era.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/history/2016/07/can_wpa_slave_narratives_be_trusted_or_are_they_tainted_by_depression_era.html) (accessed August 12, 2018).

<sup>33</sup> Italics added. Sitkoff, *New Deal for Blacks*, 27.

1933 and left their hapless croppers to shift for themselves.”<sup>34</sup> Sharecroppers were left with little recourse but to remain caught in a cycle of debt. Some African Americans, like their poor white counterparts, attempted to move to urban areas in hopes of better opportunities.

However, the employment in cities was little better for African Americans. Even jobs historically held by African Americans—domestic work—were overtaken by whites out of work. In cities such as Chicago and Pittsburg, African Americans made up less than 10 percent of the population, but suffered unemployment rates of 16 and about 40 percent, respectively.<sup>35</sup> Whites were loath to offer jobs to African Americans, especially when there was a supply of unemployed whites. As Sitkoff wrote, “Desperate whites in Atlanta organized the Black Shirts in 1930 around the slogan ‘No Jobs for Niggers Until Every White Man Has a Job!’ Similar organizations in other cities chanted: ‘Niggers, back to the cotton fields—city jobs are for white folks.’”<sup>36</sup> The reality was that with the Dust Bowl, AAA, and discriminatory sharecropping contracts, the old “cotton fields” failed to offer a livelihood for African Americans in the 1930s, although they had never offered much opportunity. The 1940s, however, would witness African Americans making greater strides towards equality.

World War II was a period of limited civil rights advances for African Americans. They served in segregated military units and continued to be discriminated against in war industries despite the creation of the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) in 1941. John Morton Blum argued that civil rights were a far second to the war effort—ironically

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<sup>34</sup> Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear*, 208-210.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, 87.

<sup>36</sup> Sitkoff, *New Deal for Blacks*, 27.

since its proposed purpose was to protect democracy—and advocated only so much as necessary to garner support for the war. The inconsistencies of the war aims conflicted with the rampant racial prejudices in the United States and this racism and anti-Semitism was brought to a forefront during the war. Blum wrote, “Even during a war against Nazism, the democratic impulse did not dissolve traditional antipathies toward those whose race or religion or national origin marked them as outsiders.”<sup>37</sup> Historian Nancy Beck Young further argued, “Lawmakers refused to enact new laws protecting the civil rights of African Americans, and the White House, which viewed civil rights claims as an impediment to the war effort, never pushed for reforms.”<sup>38</sup> Despite fighting against two countries that upheld theories of racial superiority and that used such to justify their expansionist policies, the United States saw a resurgence of racism. The government did little to dissuade this widespread social division.

The creation of the FEPC in June 1941 under Executive Order 8802 was an attempt by the Roosevelt administration to address the biased employment practices prevalent since the end of the Civil War. The FEPC was the fruition of the ardent work of civil rights organizations such as the NAACP and leaders such as A. Philip Randolph who refused to accept inaction by the federal government. Randolph’s work in particular drew the attention of the Roosevelt administration as he threatened a march on Washington of 100,000 persons. The country, which was content to allow a march of 50,000 Klan members down Pennsylvania Avenue in 1925, recognized that a march for civil rights in wartime industry and military service would be divisive. As Reed noted, “Having such a demonstration in the

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<sup>37</sup> John Morton Blum, *Was for Victory: Politics and American Culture during World War II* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Javanovich Publishers, 1976), 11-12, 181, 45-52, 167-220.

<sup>38</sup> Young, *Why We Fight*, 165.

nation's capital would be an embarrassment. Roosevelt also feared racial violence. Politically, the march would fracture the Democratic party, whose ranks included both protesting blacks and volatile southern segregationists.”<sup>39</sup> Merl Reed argued, “It was the most controversial federal agency in the nation during the war and perhaps in modern American history.”<sup>40</sup> In practice, the FEPC was to investigate acts of discrimination in any war industries or government related jobs. The committee featured a chairman and five members. The FEPC insured that government contracts contained an anti-discrimination requirement for hiring; however, these government contracts could not be canceled even if there were known cases of discrimination.<sup>41</sup> Yet, the FEPC was largely symbolic in nature. It held significantly less power than an act of Congress. Even in 1941 the war industry was massive, and perhaps the most severe punishment for discrimination—voiding a contract—was not feasible. The agency also had a limited budget—increased to \$500,000 in 1943—and never had more than 30-400 employees.<sup>42</sup> Along with limited white public support the hands of the FEPC were often tied when it came to addressing violations. John Blum wrote, “Indeed, the FEPC was able to resolve successfully only one-third of the 8,000 complaints it received, and only one-fifth of those that originated in the South. Of the committee's forty-five compliance orders, employers or unions defied thirty-five. Even so, antagonistic Southern congressmen succeeded in 1945 in halving the agency's budget and providing for

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<sup>39</sup> Merl E. Reed, *Seedtime for the Modern Civil Rights Movement: The President's Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1941-1946* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991), 13; Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear*, 766-770, 775.

<sup>40</sup> Reed, *Seedtime for Modern Civil Rights*, 1.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, 15, 22, 28-30.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, 26-28, 353; Young, *Why We Fight*, 117-118.

its dissolution within a year.”<sup>43</sup> Although the FEPC was an important step in the long Civil Rights Movement, many civil rights issues of the interwar years still remained. Roy Wilkins, editor for *The Crisis*, questioned the United States’ true commitment to democracy. He wrote, “In the midst of all the fine talk about democracy and the rights of man, lynching proceeds without interference or punishment of lynchers in the nation which has undertaken to tell the rest of the world how to mind its morals.”<sup>44</sup>

### **Jewish Americans: Civilian Experiences with Anti-Semitism**

Tracing the history of anti-Semitism in U.S. history is difficult as it was often less blatant compared to the long history of racial prejudice African Americans faced. Historically, during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries Jews were often seen as a distinct race. The level of anti-Semitism they faced varied, especially on paper. Jews in the United States faced frequent *de facto* segregation in the workplace, housing, and the military. Jewish Americans themselves often differentiated between the anti-Semitism Jews in Europe experienced compared to what they encountered in the United States. As Joseph Bendersky explained, “A substantial source of difficulty was the ambivalence surrounding the place of the Jewish American minority within the dominant Christian culture. Prejudice and discrimination coexisted with unprecedented opportunity and expansive legal rights.”<sup>45</sup>

Anti-Semitism in the interwar years was tied with fears of Bolshevism. Jewish Americans and recent Jewish immigrants became linked with the spread of communist ideas.

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<sup>43</sup> Blum, *I Was for Victory*, 214-215.

<sup>44</sup> Roy Wilkins, ed., “Wartime Lynchings,” *The Crisis* 48, no. 6 (June 1941): 183.

<sup>45</sup> Joseph W. Bendersky, “Dissension in the Face of the Holocaust: The 1941 American Debate over Antisemitism,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 24, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 88; Kirsten Fermaglich, “‘What’s Uncle Sam’s Last Name?’ Jews and Name Changing in New York City during the World War II Era,” *The Journal of American History* 102, no. 3 (December 2015): 723, 727.

Partly, this was because of the influx of Russian Jewish immigration in the early twentieth century. It was also a reaction to “the coming of age of the children of turn-of-the-century immigrants.”<sup>46</sup> For example, there was a distinct effort to keep these first-generation Jewish Americans out of higher education; Harvard, Yale, and Columbia were among the elite institutions that limited the number of Jewish students, but other universities followed suit. Not surprisingly, Jewish academics were also limited in the job market.<sup>47</sup> Outside of academia, want ads displayed the increasingly undisguised desire by employers to hire non-Jews. Leonard Dinnerstein wrote, “As more Jews sought white-collar jobs, newspaper advertisements indicating a preference for Christians proliferated.”<sup>48</sup> Housing advertisements also specified that Jewish applicants would not be accepted.<sup>49</sup> Like African Americans, Jewish Americans faced restrictions of their civil rights.

During the 1920s, the Ku Klux Klan targeted Jewish Americans (and Jewish immigrants) along with African Americans. They resurfaced the age-old conspiracy theories of Jews controlling the banks and added a host of other charges. Jews controlled Hollywood and were responsible for the New Woman of the 1920s. Although the Klan was also anti-Catholic, it considered Catholics to be an undesirable religious group, but Jews were referred to in racial terms rather than strictly religious.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> War Department, *Command of Negro Troops: War Department Pamphlet No. 20-6* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1944), 78-80.

<sup>47</sup> Leonard Dinnerstein, *Antisemitism in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 85-88; Gordon, *Second Coming*, 21.

<sup>48</sup> War Department, *Command of Negro Troops*, 88-90.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 93-94.

<sup>50</sup> Gordon, *Second Coming*, 49-54, 203; MacLean, *Behind the Mask*, 135.

The Great Depression was a period of increased anti-Semitism. Jews were accused of taking jobs and the historic theories of Jewish Americans controlling the United States government and economy resurfaced. Although Jewish Americans may have fared slightly better than African Americans, as Dinnerstein wrote, “in the 1930s a majority of American Jews probably lived close to what we now call ‘the poverty line,’ victims of both the depression and also a pervasive intolerance.”<sup>51</sup> Instead of countering the raging of Hitler, many Americans adopted his ideas, albeit not to the same extremes.<sup>52</sup>

The uptick in anti-Semitism continued throughout the war as many non-Jewish Americans blamed the Jews for the war, at least on the European front. For example, *TIME Magazine* condemned Charles Lindbergh in an article titled “Jew-Baiting” for stating that Jewish Americans were to be blamed if the United States entered the war. *TIME* further reported, “But Lindbergh did accuse the Jews of undue success in other fields: ‘Their greatest danger to this country lies in their large ownership and influence in our motion pictures, our press, our radio and our Government.’”<sup>53</sup> One survey in November 1942 among high school students, found that Jews (after African Americans) were voted the least preferred of roommate options. Poems and songs were adapted to contain anti-Semitic messages that Jewish Americans were not doing their fair share of the fighting, taking over businesses, and not rationing. It was only after the horrors of the Holocaust were made known that anti-Semitism markedly declined in the United States.<sup>54</sup> The interwar years had informed the

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<sup>51</sup> Dinnerstein, *Antisemitism in America*, 105-106.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*, 106-113.

<sup>53</sup> “Jew-Baiting,” *TIME Magazine* 38, no. 12 (September 22, 1941): 19; Dinnerstein, *Antisemitism in America*, 128-130.

<sup>54</sup> Dinnerstein, *Antisemitism in America*, 128-144, 150-151.

experiences of minorities such as Jewish Americans and African Americans. Now as they entered the service it would determine how they related to fellow soldiers in basic training, combat, and be the basis for their expectations as prisoners of war.

### **African Americans: Racism in the Military on the Homefront**

The *Command of Negro Troops*, published by the War Department in 1944 under the direction of the Advisory Committee on Negro Troop Policy (more commonly known as the McCloy Committee), was a pamphlet designed to instruct white officers on how to best lead African American men. It remains an important resource on how the War Department expected officers to treat African Americans and how they were to deal with segregation and discrimination. The document also provides insight to the segregation and discrimination African Americans were experiencing. Historian Morris MacGregor argued, “*Command of Negro Troops* was a landmark publication. Its frank statement of the Army’s racial problems... represented a major departure from previous practice and served as a model for later Army and Navy statements on race.”<sup>55</sup> The publication is an interesting combination of both racist ideas and comments (at least by the standards of today), while at the same time often repeating that it was the expressed failure of white officers which led to ineffective black units. The *Command of Negro Troops* often reminded officers that African American troops may need more training, but that this was the result of lack of education and work experience, through no fault of their own. It affirmed that African Americans were like everyone else, yet racially tinged ideas and word usage could be found throughout the pamphlet. For example, the introduction begins by stating that African Americans were no

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<sup>55</sup> Morris J. MacGregor, Jr. *Integration of the Armed Forces 1940-1945* (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History United States Army, 1981), 45. See also Jon E. Taylor, *Freedom to Serve: Truman, Civil Rights, and Executive Order 9981* (New York: Routledge 2013), 28-34.

different from whites and that they should serve on the same conditions as whites in the military. Yet, just below this assertion it reads:

The same methods of discipline, training, and leadership apply to Negro troops that have proved successful with any other troops. Nevertheless, the Negro in the Army has special problems. This is the result of the fact that the Negro group has had a history materially different from that of the majority in the Army. *Its* average schooling has been inferior; *its* work has been generally less skilled than that of the white man; and *its* role in the life of the Nation has been limited.<sup>56</sup>

Thus, the War Department acknowledged that African Americans had “inferior” education and job opportunities, while using the noun “its” instead of “his” or “their.” This word choice certainly was not lost on the reader, especially when it appeared immediately in the introduction.

However, the pamphlet in many respects displayed an increasing disapproval of segregation and discrimination as the reader continued, illustrating that both were commonplace. The War Department stated that many incoming African American troops were less educated than whites on average; yet, it also recognized that this was due to the lack of equal educational facilities and alluded to lack of access to higher education. It specifically noted the correlation between better education of African Americans in the military in World War II compared to World War I with the fact that there had been a significant population shift to the North.<sup>57</sup> According to the War Department, “Officers at all levels of command can reduce such waste [in personnel] by remembering that effective command cannot be based on racial theories. The Germans have a theory that they are a race of supermen born to conquer all peoples of inferior blood. This is nonsense, the like of

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<sup>56</sup> Italics added. War Department, *Command of Negro Troops*, 1.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 1-4.

which has no place in the Army of the United States—the Army of a Nation which has become great through the common effort of all peoples.”<sup>58</sup> Officers were further warned to avoid racist language or language that was belittling in any other way, racist jokes should be avoided, and entertainment should not be based on racial profiling.<sup>59</sup> Perhaps one of the most surprising phrases read, “The protesting Negro, on the other hand, knows from experience that separate facilities are rarely equal, and that too often racial segregation rests on a belief of racial inferiority.”<sup>60</sup> Yet, even this remarkably progressive phrase for the time period was followed by an explanation that military bases and units would remain segregated due to white preference and fears over racial agitation if the War Department attempted desegregation.<sup>61</sup> Thus, while the War Department acknowledged the scientifically unfounded attributes of racism, it remained guarded in its response to racism in the military and chose to follow social norms. The War Department disapproved of the racial hierarchy of Nazi Germany, but stopped short of calling for desegregation of the Armed Forces. The War Department did not see wartime as an ideal period to instigate radical social change.

The reader is left to wonder if the War Department had published such a pamphlet earlier in the war, would anything have changed? While there was certainly still a massive buildup in 1944, there was already a large influx of African Americans into the military before then. For example, many Tuskegee Airmen began training in 1943 and were already stationed in Italy by 1944. For African Americans serving who had already gone through

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 11-12.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 13.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 13-14.

basic training, the War Department's resolve to address at least some race issues, came too late.

Racism permeated the Armed Forces and it is unlikely a piece of literature such as the *Command of Negro Troops* alone could have fully addressed the issue. This is evident in the most startling account of racism towards African Americans in the military on the home front, the lynching of Private Felix Hall at Fort Benning, Georgia. Hall, from Alabama, joined the 24th Infantry Regiment in August 1940; less than a year later his body was found "strung up in a jackknife position in a shallow ravine. A quarter-inch noose, tethered to a sapling on the earthen bank above him, dug into the flesh of his neck. His feet, bound with baling wire, were attached by a second rope to three other saplings, and his hands were tied behind him."<sup>62</sup> His body was found on March 28, 1941, but Hall had last been seen six weeks earlier walking through a white section of the base after leaving work on February 11, 1941. Fort Benning officials tried to frame the death as a suicide, but their own autopsy ruled it as murder. Walter White of the NAACP took the case up, writing FDR and Secretary of War Henry Stimson, while garnering public support. The subsequent FBI investigation revealed that Hall had attempted to save himself by moving the dirt under his feet and that it was clearly not a suicide. Reports show that although Hall had family and friends on base, no one searched for him and rather he was eventually listed as AWOL. Two sergeants were listed as possible suspects, but never arrested. The FBI report was only recently released and still retains certain restricted information. While Hall is the only known African American

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<sup>62</sup> Alexa Mills, "A Lynching Kept Out of Sight," *The Washington Post*, September 2, 2016, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/sf/national/2016/09/02/the-story-of-the-only-known-lynching-on-a-u-s-military-base/?utm\\_term=.73101e75cb90](https://www.washingtonpost.com/sf/national/2016/09/02/the-story-of-the-only-known-lynching-on-a-u-s-military-base/?utm_term=.73101e75cb90) (accessed July 9, 2018).

lynched on a military base, his long-forgotten story serves as a reminder of the extreme prejudice that African Americans faced in the military.<sup>63</sup>

### **Jewish Americans: Anti-Semitism in the Military on the Homefront**

Whereas African Americans faced institutional racism in the military, the case of Jewish Americans is more complicated to discern. Jewish Americans were not placed into segregated units and no publications comparable to the War Department's *Command of Negro Troops* existed. Yet, the anti-Semitism Jewish Americans experienced in civilian life did not fade simply because they joined the military; indeed, the highest echelons of the military held perhaps some of the most ardent anti-Semites. Anti-Semitism was as inherent in the U.S. military in the early twentieth century as any European counterpart, albeit less transparent. As Joseph Bendersky argued, anti-Semitism in the United States was less overt and lacked the official government policy which supported it in European countries. Bendersky wrote, "Such distinctive features have made American anti-Semitism both insidious as a social force and problematic to study. This is particularly true regarding anti-Semitism within the institutions of government, where documenting prejudice and then demonstrating its effect on policy have proven exceptionally difficult."<sup>64</sup>

Although Jews were not segregated in the military as were African Americans, their advancement was unlikely. During the late 1910s, the Military Intelligence Division even established a specific file—File 99-75—to deal with issues related to *The Protocols of the*

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<sup>63</sup> Mills, "Lynching Out of Sight"; Felix Hall Collection, Civil Rights and Restorative Justice Project, School of Law, Northeastern University, <https://repository.library.northeastern.edu/collections/neu:cj82qc705> (accessed December 29, 2019); Wilkins, "Wartime Lynchings," 183.

<sup>64</sup> Joseph W. Bendersky, *The "Jewish Threat": Anti-Semitic Politics of the U.S. Army* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), xvi.

*Elders of Zion* and Zionism.<sup>65</sup> *The Protocols* was first published in a Russian newspaper in 1903 and purported a Jewish conspiracy for global domination. Revealed to be a forgery in 1921, the book still found its audience throughout the 1930s.<sup>66</sup> Anti-Semitism persisted in the military and while Jewish Americans noted that it lessened in combat, most indicated that they experienced more anti-Semitism from officers. However, Jewish Americans tended to have their concerns addressed more readily when a complaint was made, in comparison to racial minorities.<sup>67</sup> Bendersky suggested that more strides may have been taken to lessen or eradicate anti-Semitism in the military if soldiers had been informed earlier about concentration camps. Although certain information concerning the plight of Jews in Europe was available in civilian newspapers, military geared newspapers such as *Stars and Stripes* and *YANK* did not publish stories about the concentration camps until the last few months of the war.<sup>68</sup>

One need look no further for evidence that the so-called old guard harbored anti-Semitism, than to examine the statements made by General George S. Patton concerning Jewish survivors of the Holocaust. Patton placed at least partial blame on Jews for their conditions in the camps, stating, "My personal opinion is that no people could have sunk to the level of degradation these have reached in the short space of four years."<sup>69</sup> He further remarked, "[Earl] Harrison [U.S. member of the Inter-Government Committee on Refugees]

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<sup>65</sup> Fermaglich, "Jews and Name Changing," 719, 720, 722; Bendersky, "*Jewish Threat*," 62-67.

<sup>66</sup> Anderson, "Jewish Women," 12-13.

<sup>67</sup> Bendersky, "*Jewish Threat*," 299-300.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid*, 345-347.

<sup>69</sup> Patton diaries quoted in Bendersky, "*Jewish Threat*," 353-353.

and his ilk believe that the displaced person is a human being, which he is not, and this applies particularly to the Jews, who are *lower than animals*.”<sup>70</sup> Patton used other dehumanizing terms to refer to displaced persons, but was particularly critical of Jews.<sup>71</sup>

For some Jewish Americans, serving in the military was a new experience, inasmuch as they found themselves isolated, sometimes the only Jew in their unit. Those without traditionally Jewish names might avoid being singled out; however, with the “H” on their dog tags this was not always possible. Such was the case for Herbert Walters. His training sergeant required all men to provide their religion listed on their dog tags. Deborah Dash Moore wrote, “But when the sergeant called out for the Jews, no one stood up except Walters. Out of 150 guys, he ‘was the only Jew.’ Most of the others were southerners. They stared at him. No matter what he did, he remained a curiosity to them.”<sup>72</sup> Jews, especially from New York City, were unaccustomed to the blatant racism displayed on southern military bases. Some observed that in the South their whiteness outweighed their religion. Moore argued, “Segregation taught Jews forcibly that despite whatever animosity they might meet, they were still white . . . training in the south gave Jews ‘an education in bigotry,’ as one Brooklyn Jew put it.”<sup>73</sup> Some Jews were uncomfortable with having the “H” stamped on their dog tags as the term Hebrew was not a standard descriptor and for some seemed to conveyed “racial overtones.”<sup>74</sup> The practice singled them out among fellow soldiers and made it nearly impossible for them to hide their religion from potential Nazi captors.

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<sup>70</sup> Italics added. Patton quoted in Bendersky, “*Jewish Threat*,” 357.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, 352-358.

<sup>72</sup> Moore, *GI Jews*, 66.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, 71-72.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid, 73-74.

For most Jewish Americans their religion would have been unknown to their captors by simply not stamping a “H” on their dog tags or—to ensure proper burial as was the purpose—by utilizing a less obvious abbreviation system. As historian Kirsten Fermaglich noted in her extensive study on Jewish name changing, few to no Jewish surnames exist, save for those that are specifically Hebrew. The common “Jewish” surnames found in the United States and throughout Europe historically were predominantly European in origin and many times held by those who were not of the Jewish faith. Fermaglich wrote, “Jews did take on other names, and many of those names (frequently of German origin, such as Kaufman) could be held by either Jewish or non-Jewish individuals.”<sup>75</sup> She explains that certain names historically were relegated to Jews only, while this was no longer the case, over the years the assumption held that certain last names were Jewish whether entirely true or not.<sup>76</sup> Thus, many Jewish Americans captured by the enemy could have “passed” as being of German, Polish, or other European ancestry (as indeed the majority were) without having to reveal they were also Jews had their religion not been boldly emblazoned on their dog tags. Indeed, as with other religions, many Jews were non-practicing. Deborah Dash Moore wrote, “They were called ‘three-day-a-year’ Jews, only attending services on the mornings of the two days of Rosh Hashana and then ten days later for the fast day of Yom Kippur. Rabbis might preach the importance of going to synagogue, but most American Jews remained unmoved.”<sup>77</sup> For even “three-day-a-year” Jewish Americans this meant recording their

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<sup>75</sup> Fermaglich, “Jews and Name Changing,” 725. While Fermaglich’s study may appear limited as she only focused on New York City for her article, Moore noted “Close to half of American Jews, over two million, called New York City home.” See Moore, *GI Jews*, 11; Kirsten Fermaglich, *A Rosenberg by Any Other Name: A History of Jewish Name Changing in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2018).

<sup>76</sup> Fermaglich, “Jews and Name Changing,” 726.

<sup>77</sup> Moore, *GI Jews*, 14

religion as Hebrew. On paper, their situation was not unlike Catholics or Protestants who attended services at Christmas and Easter. Yet, as they entered the racialized hierarchy of Nazi Germany as prisoners of war, the designation would have real consequences not shared by Protestants or Catholics.

### **Conclusion**

If the aftermath of World War I saw African Americans lynched while still in uniform, the interwar years were hardly better. The 1920s witnessed the rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan on a national level, an unsuccessful anti-lynching campaign, and the failure of Congress to pass the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill. During the Great Depression, New Deal programs were in practice, if not in design, discriminatory towards minorities. At the start of World War II there were measured improvements such as the Fair Employment Practices Committee, which was seen as a symbolic first step in the Civil Rights Movement. However, due to lack of funding and manpower, the FEPC remained severely limited in execution throughout the war and its immediate impact was relatively minute. War industries could simply choose not to hire African Americans and other minorities rather than address their discriminatory practices in the workplace, since FEPC complaints could only be made by current employees rather than potential employees. During World War II African Americans were able to serve in the military and were drafted, but in measured numbers and served in segregated units and positions. Generally relegated to positions behind the front lines, where segregation could be enforced, they notably kept the front lines supplied through units such as the Red Ball Express.

Jewish Americans dealt with a more *de facto* segregation during the interwar years. Like African Americans, they were barred from many jobs which advertised positions for

whites and “Gentiles” only. Similarly, in the military anti-Semitism was less overt. Jewish American servicemen might find themselves the only Jew in their unit. They were not segregated as were African Americans, but they were also not fully accepted by officers and fellow enlisted men. It is unclear why the military chose to use “H” for Hebrew to stamp on their dog tags. Hebrew does not denote a religion and “J” for Jew or some other system that would not have been as obvious to the Nazis, would have made more sense. It was a process of othering, to which a conception of Jews as a race (rather than religious or ethnic group) was center.

African Americans and Jewish Americans based their expectations and behavior as prisoners of war on three things: First, any information they had on how the Germans treated prisoners of war to which they were unlikely to be privy; Second, information (largely available in the U.S. press) concerning the treatment of minorities in Germany or by the German government and military; Third, previous life experience both as civilians and in the military, prior to capture. Thus, African Americans expected to be mistreated upon capture and were often shocked when the *Luftwaffe* especially treated them as equals to white prisoners. Jewish Americans had divided expectations; some were deeply concerned they would be mistreated or even killed, while others had a measured amount of faith that their status as U.S. citizens would protect them. African Americans and Jewish Americans, like all prisoners of war, also put their faith in the Geneva Convention to protect their rights after capture. However, as they would find out, the enforcement of the Geneva Convention was tricky at best and the German High Command (unlike the United States) did not have a clear-cut policy for the treatment of its prisoners of war.

## Chapter Two

### **The Politics of Capture: “If It Weren’t for the International Red Cross I Don’t Know What We Would Do”**

*I am sorry to inform you of this but these people treat us far from the way their men are treated over there. We are very lucky to get a bath once every two months. Their best meal is sugar beets and soup. It’s a good thing our Red Cross takes good care of us. They give us plenty of warm clothing and food. I’d sure be glad to get back and live again.*

-Unknown prisoner of war, Stalag VII-A

### **Introduction**

What were the policies regarding the treatment of prisoners of war? Did the prisoners from various nationalities face different circumstances? How did atrocities occur despite the Geneva Convention? What was life like for the average American prisoner of war? These are the questions that must be addressed before the distinct cases of Jewish American and African American prisoners of war can be discussed. Jewish Americans and African Americans had to navigate the basic politics of capture that applied to all prisoners, while under the racialized Nazi hierarchy.

For the American prisoner of war in Europe life was dictated by the Geneva Convention and policies established by the *Oberkommando der Wehrmacht* (OKW), the Supreme High Command of the German Armed Forces. For the most part these regulations were compatible. The Geneva Convention stipulated that conditions for internees should be equivalent to those of enlisted men in the detaining country. OKW regulations were not clearly defined in a handbook (unlike the United States policy), but rather consisted of a series of memos continuously updated throughout the war and often applicable to a specific camp. The German prisoner of war system was complex—separate camps for enlisted,

officers, airmen, transition and interrogation, and work camps—comprising over 200 camps and approximately 8.5 million prisoners of war. This vast system, with no universal policy, meant that as the war progressed the policy of OKW orders deviated more frequently from the Geneva Convention's regulations. Non-U.S. prisoners of war experienced more rampant and severe violations of the Geneva Convention, especially in the case of Polish and Soviet prisoners of war.<sup>1</sup>

In conjunction with the Geneva Convention and the OKW, international aid societies such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) worked to ensure that the articles of the Geneva Convention were followed by detaining powers. The ICRC oversaw the inspection of camps and ensured the physical needs of prisoners were met. The YMCA, on the other hand, sought to maintain the mental health of prisoners caught in the monotony of life in captivity. As such, they provided books, musical instruments, and other forms of entertainment. Both organizations also assisted prisoners of war when the detaining power would not or could not meet the basic needs of its prisoners. For example, when food shortages in Germany led to reductions in ration allotments, the ICRC food parcels made up the difference. As one prisoner noted, "If it weren't for the international Red Cross I don't know what we would do."<sup>2</sup>

Germany's prisoner of war policy varied and was based on nationality and Nazi racial constructs. As Historian Andrew Hasselbring observes, "It mirrored ancient Rome's approach of treating POWs of nationalities with which it desired reconciliation or considered

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<sup>1</sup> Poland signed and ratified the Geneva Convention, but due to racialized policies in Germany these terms were violated. The USSR never signed the Geneva Convention, but earlier international laws regarding the rights of prisoners of war, such as the Hague Convention, still applied.

<sup>2</sup> Unknown prisoner of war in Stalag Luft VI, quoted in "Letters," *Prisoner of War Bulletin* 2, no. 7 (July 1944): 8.

civilized better than prisoners of war of nationalities it considered subhuman.”<sup>3</sup> According to the Nazi racial hierarchy Germans (Aryans) were on top as the “master race” or superior race. Slightly below the Aryans were individuals from Scandinavian countries. Next down in ranking on the Nazi hierarchy were the Latins—French, Spanish, and Italians—who were viewed as inferior, but not so inferior as to warrant mass extermination. British and Americans fell somewhere between the Scandinavian countries and the Latins. Towards the very bottom were the Slavs and Eastern Europeans, including the Russians. This explains why Soviet prisoners of war were treated so badly. That they had not signed the Geneva Convention was merely a convenient excuse. Even lower were of course the Jews—of any nationality—who were viewed as subhuman. Those of African ancestry did not fit easily into this hierarchy. There were very few persons of African descent in Germany, so although the idea was they were inferior, there was no preexisting set of prejudices wherein they fit into the racial hierarchy.<sup>4</sup> Thus, Germany treated Soviet and Polish prisoners of war much more harshly, while treating American and British prisoners in better accordance with the Geneva Convention. Generally, violations of the Geneva Convention happened most often towards the end of the war, at least in the case of American prisoners of war. The good intentions of the Geneva Convention and ICRC could only offer limited protection for those

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<sup>3</sup> Andrew S. Hasselbring, “American Prisoners of War in the Third Reich” (PhD diss., Temple University, 1990), 6.

<sup>4</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Nazi Racism,” *The Holocaust Encyclopedia*, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/nazi-racism?series=21810> (accessed April 2, 2020); United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Nuremberg Race Laws,” *The Holocaust Encyclopedia*, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/nuremberg-laws> (accessed April 2, 2020); United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “The Nuremberg Race Laws,” *The Holocaust Encyclopedia*, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/the-nuremberg-race-laws> (accessed April 2, 2020). See also Benjamin W. Goossen, “Measuring Mennonitism: Racial Categorization in Nazi Germany and Beyond,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 34 (2016): 225-246; Henry Friedlander, *The Origins of Nazi Genocide: From Euthanasia to the Final Solution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); Götz Aly, Peter Chroust, and Christian Pross, *Cleansing the Fatherland: Nazi Medicine and Racial Hygiene* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994); Jane Caplan, ed., *Nazi Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

under the control of a detaining power, as the regulations were difficult to enforce *during* a war and under conditions of active combat in the region.

### **Geneva Convention**

The Hague Convention of 1907 provided the first international agreement regarding the treatment of prisoners of war. Considered an international law, the Hague was deemed applicable to all countries whether they signed it or not. Among the most important aspects of the regulations were that prisoners of war “must be humanely treated.”<sup>5</sup> It further clarified, “prisoners of war shall be treated as regards board, lodging, and clothing on the same footing as the troops of the Government who captured them.”<sup>6</sup> It required the creation of organizations that could forward mail and other supplies to prisoners. Aid organizations had the right to inspect camps to insure compliance and provide necessary aid. Prisoners of war could practice their own religions and were to be paid for their labor.<sup>7</sup>

The experience of World War I made it clear the Hague needed updating. This resulted in the Geneva Convention of 1929, which outlined the terms of treatment and rights of prisoners of war. It reflected many of the earlier statutes of the Hague Convention. Article 2 stated, “They shall at all times be humanely treated and protected, particularly against acts of violence, from insults and from public curiosity. Measures of reprisal against them are

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<sup>5</sup> Annex Article 4, “(IV) Respecting the Laws and Customs of War on Land and Its Annex: Regulations Concerning the Laws and Customs of War on Land,” *The Hague Convention of 1907*. See also Nobuo Hayashi, *The Role and Importance of the Hague Conferences: A Historical Perspective* (Geneva: United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research, 2017).

<sup>6</sup> Annex Article 7, “(IV) Respecting the Laws and Customs of War on Land and Its Annex: Regulations Concerning the Laws and Customs of War on Land,” *The Hague Convention of 1907*.

<sup>7</sup> Annex Articles 6, 14-15, and 18, “(IV) Respecting the Laws and Customs of War on Land and Its Annex: Regulations Concerning the Laws and Customs of War on Land,” *The Hague Convention of 1907*.

forbidden.”<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, Article 4 stipulated that prisoners were to be treated equally, except in regard to “military rank, the state of physical or mental health, the professional abilities, or the sex of those who benefit from them.”<sup>9</sup> Prisoners were to be removed from the front lines, but could not be forced to march more than 20 kilometers a day unless exceptional circumstances (defined by the detaining power) required otherwise. Other articles of the Geneva Convention dictated that prisoners should have adequate facilities (accessible at any time) to maintain “the rules of hygiene,” have medical exams once a month, be able to practice their religious faith, and have intellectual and physical exercise.<sup>10</sup>

Housing conditions were to “be the same as for the depot troops of the detaining Power.”<sup>11</sup> They were to have regular showers, access to educational activities and sports, and any labor requirements were not to be excessive.<sup>12</sup> Food rations likewise were comparable to that of the detaining army. During World War II, these stipulations caused much debate and protest from United States prisoners of war, who expected their conditions to equal those of German prisoners of war held in the United States. The American National Red Cross attempted to assuage the concerns of prisoners’ family members, writing that the Germans (and Japanese) did not intentionally keep men in less than ideal conditions. Rather, they argued, “the U. S. Army enjoys a much higher standard of living than a soldier of

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<sup>8</sup> Article 2, “Convention on the Treatment of Prisoners of War,” *League of Nations Treaty Series* 118, no. 2734 (357).

<sup>9</sup> Article 4, “Convention on the Treatment of Prisoners of War,” *League of Nations Treaty Series* 118, no. 2734 (357).

<sup>10</sup> Articles 13, 15, 16, and 17, Convention on the Treatment of Prisoners of War,” *League of Nations Treaty Series* 118, no. 2734 (361-363).

<sup>11</sup> Article 10-11, “Convention on the Treatment of Prisoners of War,” *League of Nations Treaty Series* 118, no. 2734 (361).

<sup>12</sup> Article 10-11, “Convention on the Treatment of Prisoners of War,” 361.

corresponding rank in the German or Japanese army.”<sup>13</sup> According to Article 9, “Belligerents shall as far as possible avoid bringing together in the same camp prisoners of different races or nationalities.”<sup>14</sup> Under this stipulation the OKW could have separated African Americans and possibly Jewish Americans (by Nazi definition) from other prisoners. However, there was no explicit OKW policy to restrict either groups from being housed with other Americans. Indeed, in the case of African Americans segregation was typically carried out by fellow prisoners of war rather than the OKW or camp officials.

The detaining power could require prisoners of war to work, however non-commissioned officers could only be supervisors and officers could not be required to work, although both could request assignments. The work was to be within reason for each prisoner and was to conform to the working conditions of civilians in the area. Regardless, prisoners of war were to receive twenty-four hours off per week and prisoners of war could not be required to work in areas directly related to the war effort, especially in weapons manufacturing. Working conditions had to be safe and any work camps had to be under the supervision of a main prisoner of war camp. Prisoners received pay for any work not related to the upkeep of the camp, although no specific rate was mandated.<sup>15</sup> As the war progressed prisoners were expected to work increasingly longer hours and received less food. The Germans justified their actions by stating that German civilian workers did the same.

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<sup>13</sup> “Questions and Answers,” *Prisoner of War Bulletin* 2, no. 10 (October 1944): 11.

<sup>14</sup> Article 9, “Convention on the Treatment of Prisoners of War,” *League of Nations Treaty Series* 118, no. 2734 (359). See also Timothy L. Schroer, “The Emergence and Early Demise of Codified Racial Segregation of Prisoners of War under the Geneva Conventions of 1929 and 1949,” *Journal of the History of International Law* 15, no. 1 (2013): 53-76.

<sup>15</sup> Articles 27, 29, and 30-34, “Convention on the Treatment of Prisoners of War,” *League of Nations Treaty Series* 118, no. 2734 (367-371).

Finally, Article 78 concerned aid organizations and their ability to access the camps. It read, “Societies for the relief of prisoners of war... shall be permitted to distribute relief in the camps and at the halting places of repatriated prisoners.”<sup>16</sup> No organizations were specifically listed, but during World War II the ICRC and the YMCA fulfilled this role. Article 79 allowed the ICRC to suggest the formation of a separate organization that would collect prisoner of war information, such as camp conditions and locations, provided it did not conflict with the ICRC’s own activities.<sup>17</sup> Rather than a separate organization, the ICRC fulfilled this role during World War II.

### **Wehrmacht, Luftwaffe, Gestapo, and the SS**

Consideration of the four main groups by which prisoners of war might be captured is crucial to understanding the prisoner of war experience: the *Oberkommando der Wehrmacht*, the *Oberkommando der Luftwaffe*, the *Geheimstaatspolizei*, and the *Schutzstaffel*. The *Oberkommando der Wehrmacht* (OKW) was the Supreme High Command of the German Armed Forces. Commonly known as the Wehrmacht, the officers were mostly old elites who were racist, but less likely to be true Nazis. The Wehrmacht tended to follow the rules of warfare, although younger soldiers brought up under Nazi propaganda tended to support Nazi policies more readily. The Wehrmacht was not as ardently fanatic as the Gestapo or SS, but nonetheless was complicit in helping to carry out (either directly or through logistics and aid) the mass murder of Jews, political leaders, and others on the Eastern Front. The Wehrmacht

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<sup>16</sup> Article 78, “Convention on the Treatment of Prisoners of War,” *League of Nations Treaty Series* 118, no. 2734 (389).

<sup>17</sup> Article 88 reinforced that other articles should not conflict with the actions of the ICRC. See Article 79 and 88, “Convention on the Treatment of Prisoners of War,” *League of Nations Treaty Series* 118, no. 2734 (389, 393).

was culpable for the deaths of millions of Soviet prisoners of war, to whom they provided inadequate (or no) housing, food, and other supplies.<sup>18</sup>

The *Oberkommando der Luftwaffe* (OKL) was the German Air Force, and as such was more distanced from Nazi war crimes that occurred on the ground. It operated its own set of prisoner of war camps and was known to more closely follow the Geneva Convention. Luftwaffe policies towards prisoners of war were partly self-serving. Hermann Göring believed such treatment would be reciprocated to captured German airmen.<sup>19</sup>

The *Geheimstaatspolizei* or the Gestapo, was the Nazi Secret State Police, which was a national agency under the control of SS chief Heinrich Himmler beginning in 1936. The Gestapo was not a military unit; thus, it did not consider itself to be bound by the Geneva Convention. It generally targeted political dissidents, resisters, and those who violated other Nazi policies. The Gestapo was known for placing persons under *Schutzhaft* (protective custody), which unlike traditional practices, provided an excuse to hold persons without trial for an unspecified period of time. These persons could be held at Gestapo prisons. Because of the large number of persons arrested, such individuals more often ended up in concentration camps such as Dachau, or they were killed outright. The Gestapo worked within the concentration camps and members also were members of the *Einsatzgruppen*

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<sup>18</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “The German Military and the Holocaust,” The Holocaust Encyclopedia, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/the-german-military-and-the-holocaust> (accessed April 2, 2020).

<sup>19</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “The German Military and the Holocaust”; Oliver Clutton-Brock and Ray Crompton, *The Long Road: Trials and Tribulations of Airmen Prisoners from Bankau to Berlin, June 1944—May 1945* (London: Grub Street, 2013), 15-17; Arthur A. Durand, *Stalag Luft III: The Secret Story* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), 132-134.

(mobile killing units), responsible for killing millions of Jews on the Eastern Front. Gestapo leadership overlapped with the SS, such as in the case of Adolf Eichmann.<sup>20</sup>

Lastly, the *Schutzstaffel* or SS was the Nazi Protective Squad. Initially it served as a guard for Adolf Hitler and party leaders, but was greatly expanded. SS members were ardent supporters of Nazi ideology and ran the concentration camps and *Einsatzgruppen*; no rules applied to their actions. The SS planned and carried out the “Final Solution.” Under Himmler’s leadership, the Gestapo was formed. The SS included a military branch known as the Waffen-SS, which also participated in mass killings and served as guards at concentration camps. At its height the Waffen-SS included twenty divisions and around half a million men. As the war continued and the Wehrmacht had an increasing number of defeats, the Waffen-SS gained more authority and influence over the Wehrmacht.<sup>21</sup>

### ***Oberkommando der Wehrmacht***

The *Oberkommando der Wehrmacht* (OKW) had its own set of regulations regarding the treatment of prisoners of war. However, there was no universal handbook thus these regulations were in constant flux throughout the war. The OKW policy was rather composed a series of memos. At times one memo would be issued only to be rescinded by the next. At

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<sup>20</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Gestapo,” The Holocaust Encyclopedia, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/gestapo> (accessed April 2, 2020); United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Arrests Without Warrants or Judicial Review,” The Holocaust Encyclopedia, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/arrests-wihtout-warrant-or-judicial-review> (accessed April 2, 2020); United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “SS Police State,” The Holocaust Encyclopedia, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/ss-police-state> (accessed April 2, 2020).

<sup>21</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “SS Police State,” The Holocaust Encyclopedia, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/ss-police-state> (accessed April 2, 2020); United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “SS and Nazi Policy,” The Holocaust Encyclopedia, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/ss-and-nazi-policy?series=20849> (accessed April 2, 2020); United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Nazi Camp System,” The Holocaust Encyclopedia, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/nazi-camp-system?parent=en%2F11106> (accessed April 2, 2020); United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Waffen-SS,” The Holocaust Encyclopedia, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/waffen-ss?series=20849> (accessed April 2, 2020).

the start of the war the OKW regulations generally conformed to the Geneva Convention or were meant to provide a clear set of statutes for ambiguous articles that had been left open for interpretation by the detaining power. However, as the war progressed the OKW began to issue orders that pushed the limits of Geneva Convention or were outright violations.<sup>22</sup>

General OKW regulations covered everything from what items prisoners could have or receive in the mail to bulb wattage allowed in barracks. For example, while forty watts were allotted to a group of four officers or less, the same number of regular enlisted men received only twenty watts. Prisoners were not allowed to possess medical supplies, but they could be sent other gifts, which guards were discouraged from stealing. Camp commandants could stop mail delivery to prisoners being punished, although not indefinitely. Prisoners were to have civilian clothing and certain foodstuffs confiscated, instead these items were to be dealt out to the kitchens and hospitals.<sup>23</sup>

The most contested OKW regulations were those that dealt with food allotments, living conditions, and work. As of December 1941, food allotments were reduced by a third as the OKW assumed that ICRC food parcels could substitute this loss. However, as the United States had yet to enter the war, this policy was already normalized by the time any

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<sup>22</sup> Vasilis Vourkoutiotis wrote the most extensive book on U.S. and British prisoners of war to date. His work brought together sources from German, British, and U.S. archives as well as the International Committee of the Red Cross. As such, his seminal work is used at length in this chapter as it provides the most comprehensive information that is currently available. Vasilis Vourkoutiotis, *Prisoners of War and the German High Command: The British and American Experience* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 28-29. For a more complete list see Harry Spiller, ed., *Prisoners of Nazis: Accounts by American POWs in World War II* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 1998), 181-212; Vourkoutiotis, *Prisoners of War*; Alfons Waltzog, *Recht der Landkriegsführung: Die wichtigsten Abkommen des Landkriegsrechts* (Berlin: Verlag Franz Vahlen, 1942). For a comparison to U.S. run prisoner of war camps for Germans in the United States, see John Brown Mason, "German Prisoners of War in the United States," *The American Journal of International Law* 39, no. 2 (1945): 198-215.

<sup>23</sup> Spiller, *Prisoners of Nazis*, 184, 189, 193, 199, 206, 208. Vasilis Vourkoutiotis provides different numbers, although the regulations regarding lighting changed throughout the war. For example, lights were to be turned off at 22:30 in May 1942, but at 21:00 by September 1942. See Vourkoutiotis, *Prisoners of War*, 50-53.

American prisoners entered the camps. In theory, the supplies sent by the ICRC could easily replace a third of the previous OKW allotment; however, in practice many ICRC packages were delayed in delivery (whether intentional on the part of German officials or unavoidable) especially as the war progressed and Germany's infrastructure was increasingly bombed. Captain James Cobb, held at Oflag XIII-B, noted that prisoners were on a 1,300-calorie diet as of March 6, 1945 and another decrease in provisions was expected.<sup>24</sup> Prisoners of war who worked were generally to receive larger food allotments, which increased on par with the amount of work they performed. However, the food portions still remained under what German civilians in the same employ received, again with the assumption that ICRC or other food parcels would substitute what the OKW provided.<sup>25</sup>

Stipulations for living conditions varied, but ideally buildings were to be repurposed to house prisoners or barracks built. Tents could be used, but only temporarily. Each barrack was to only have twenty men and mattresses (or similar), bedding, food utensils, and items for maintaining personal and barrack hygiene.<sup>26</sup> As with food allotments, OKW regulations on living conditions generally followed the Geneva Convention, but as the war progressed received a wider interpretation on the part of the camp Kommandant. Lack of

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<sup>24</sup> James Cobb, "Diary of a Prisoner of War," *Checkerboard* 35, no. 5 (December 1982): 6; Vourkoutiotis, *Prisoners of War*, 55-58; Clifford G. Holderness and Jeffrey Pontiff, "Hierarchies and the Survival of Prisoners of War During World War II," *Management Science* 58, no. 10 (October 2012): 1873-1886.

<sup>25</sup> Cigarettes were a form of money within the prisoner of war camps. A British prisoner of war, R. A. Radford, recalled "an Exchange and Mart notice board in every bungalow" where items were listed like a classified ad for which prisoners could exchange cigarettes or other items. Prisoners at Offizierlager 64 supplemented their diets by starting a garden, receiving supplies from the Red Cross. See R.A. Radford, "The Economic Organization of a P.O.W. Camp," *Economica* 12, no. 48 (November 1945): 190-19; John L. Creech, "I Gardened for My Life," *Better Homes and Gardens* (October 1946): 150, 152; Vourkoutiotis, *Prisoners of War*, 55-58.

<sup>26</sup> Vourkoutiotis, *Prisoners of War*, 48-54, 61.

supplies due to wartime shortages and the movement of prisoners at times caused extreme overcrowding.

Work and working conditions were perhaps the most prone to violations of the Geneva Convention, because of wartime labor demands. Work Kommandos were to be under the supervision of a main camp, but the practicality of this depended on a number of factors, including distance and whether prisoners were working alone or with German civilians. The OKW determined in March 1941 that if noncommissioned officers volunteered to perform regular work (under the Geneva Convention they could only be supervisors) they could not later change their minds. On the other hand, as of April 1942 American and British commissioned officers were not to work under any conditions. This was in response to continued complaints among officers that their rights were being violated.<sup>27</sup> As of July 1944, prisoners of war and concentration camp inmates were not to work at the same factories, unless they were kept from working together.<sup>28</sup> Unsurprisingly, the OKW violated its own regulation as Jewish American prisoners of war worked alongside Berga concentration camp inmates from January to April 1945.

### **Minority Prisoners of War**

For African Americans and Jewish Americans, the Geneva Convention and OKW regulations regarding race and religion were critical. According to Article 9 of the Geneva Convention, “Belligerents shall as far as possible avoid bringing together in the same camp prisoners of different *races* or nationalities.”<sup>29</sup> Under this precept it was acceptable for the

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 112-113.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 116. For a more complete list of the OKW’s regulations for prisoner of war work see Vourkoutiotis, *Prisoners of War*, 109-133.

<sup>29</sup> Italics added. Article 9, “Convention on the Treatment of Prisoners of War,” 359.

Germans to separate African Americans and Jewish Americans (under the Nazi definition of race) from other American prisoners of war. According to historian Vasilis Vourkoutiotis, OKW policy suggested that “soldiers who shared barracks in their own armies were to share barracks as prisoners of war.”<sup>30</sup> Thus, under both the Geneva Convention and OKW regulations, African Americans should have been housed in separate barracks; yet, there appear to be no cases of this being enforced by German guards. Rather the only cases of segregation of African Americans was carried out by fellow American prisoners.<sup>31</sup> It is unclear if the Germans simply found it inconvenient to segregate African Americans because they were few in number in any given camp and it was even more of a nuisance to transfer all African Americans to one camp. The OKW did determine, however, that punishments should differ by race. Vourkoutiotis notes, “‘colored’ prisoners of war were to be considered for more lenient sentences than ‘white’ prisoners of war, due to their inherent racial weakness and inferiority.”<sup>32</sup>

The Germans were not as lenient toward Jewish American prisoners of war. The OKW issued a memo on March 11, 1924 that Jewish prisoners of war would not wear the Star of David (as required of concentration camp inmates), but they were to be segregated from other prisoners. The memo specifically referenced the Geneva Convention’s allowing segregation.<sup>33</sup> Vourkoutiotis relates the Germans argued that “as Jews formed a specific race... it was legally permissible to place them in separate camps, or use them in a

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<sup>30</sup> Vourkoutiotis, *Prisoners of War*, 49.

<sup>31</sup> This is discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.

<sup>32</sup> Vourkoutiotis, *Prisoners of War*, 89.

<sup>33</sup> Italics added. Ibid, 41, 49.

segregated work detachment.”<sup>34</sup> A June 1941 report read, “A transfer of the Jews to special camps is not intended; *they must, however, be separated from the other prisoners of war* and, in the case of enlisted men, must be assigned to work in closed groups outside the camp.”<sup>35</sup> However, given the United States had not entered the war yet this would apply to French and Polish prisoners of war among other nationalities. In March 1942, the OKW reaffirmed this policy towards Jewish prisoners of war and reinforced that with the exception of being held separately within the camps, Jews were not to be treated differently.<sup>36</sup> Despite a clear intention to segregate Jewish prisoners of war the OKW did not specifically restrict Jewish prisoners of war from holding religious services and did not segregate Jewish prisoners at every camp.<sup>37</sup>

### **German Policy Towards Non-U.S. Prisoners of War**

An analysis of German policy towards U.S. prisoners of war would be incomplete without briefly detailing how it differed compared to other countries, especially in regard to prisoners of war from Eastern Europe.<sup>38</sup> While nationality afforded at least a minute level of protection for U.S. minority prisoners, the Germans did not veil their hatred for minorities from Eastern European countries. Despite Poland being a signatory of the Geneva Convention, Germany justified violating the regulations by arguing that Poland did not exist

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 49.

<sup>35</sup> Spiller, *Prisoners of Nazis*, 183.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 186, 211.

<sup>37</sup> Vourkoutiotis, *Prisoners of War*, 65. See also Andre Vulliet, *Preliminary Report of the War Prisoners Aid Young Men's Christian Associations during World War II* (Geneva: International Committee of the Young Men's Christian Associations, 1946), 40.

<sup>38</sup> See Chapter 4 for information on the treatment of African colonial troops serving under Western European Allied powers.

as a state.<sup>39</sup> The OKW stated “While, until their release, they [Polish prisoners of war] do come under the 1929 convention relative to the treatment of prisoners of war, they are excluded from those provisions of the Convention *which would presuppose the existence of the Polish state* as a belligerent power, e.g. the provisions on the rights and obligations of the Protecting Power.”<sup>40</sup> Polish Jews from prisoner of war camps were specifically rounded up and “sent to ghettos for liquidation,” in violation of their rights as prisoners of war.<sup>41</sup> Some of the earliest violations of the Geneva Convention thus concerned Polish prisoners of war, including torture and the murder of prisoners without even a pretense that they were shot while trying to escape. In September 1939, Polish prisoners were crushed by tanks and in another case a prisoner’s “tongue, ears and nose were cut off” before he was killed.<sup>42</sup> In at least one case in Szczucin on September 12, 1939, the murder of Polish prisoners of war and Polish Jews went hand in hand. Historian Szymon Datner wrote, “A group of captured Jews were forced to dig two ditches. The Germans ordered them to throw the murdered soldiers into one, following which the Jews themselves were shot and thrown into the other ditch.”<sup>43</sup>

Unlike Poland, the Soviet Union did not sign the Geneva Convention and Germany used this to justify its mistreatment of Soviet prisoners of war.<sup>44</sup> This, however, still violated

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<sup>39</sup> Szymon Datner, *Crimes Against POWs: Responsibility of the Wehrmacht* (Warszawa, Poland: Zachodnia Agencja Prasowa, 1964), xvii-xviii; “Convention on the Treatment of Prisoners of War,” *League of Nations Treaty Series* 118, no. 2734 (353).

<sup>40</sup> Italics added. Quoted in Datner, *Crimes Against POWs*, xvii-xviii.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, xix.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 25-26. For additional examples see Datner, *Crimes against POWs*, 20-31, 99-107, 128-138.

<sup>44</sup> The Japanese signed the Geneva Convention, but never ratified it. They used this fact to justify their mistreatment of U.S. prisoners of war, similar to the German’s mistreatment of Soviet prisoners.

international agreements, including the Hague Convention of 1907, which protected the most basic rights of prisoners.<sup>45</sup> Between January to August 1942, the OKW issued at least two orders to brand Soviet prisoners. Both times the orders were quickly overturned so it is unlikely they were carried out, however as historian Szymon Datner noted, the proposed action was clearly similar to the tattooing of Jewish prisoners.<sup>46</sup> Describing the conditions of Soviet prisoners of war, Reichsminister Alfred Rosenberg wrote on February 28, 1942, “In many camps no efforts were made to provide accommodation for the prisoners. They were left in the open rain and snow. What is more, they were not even given tools to dig out caves.”<sup>47</sup> Although they were technically held in prisoner of war camps, as Datner noted the camps were more akin to concentration camps with the same intended results; furthermore, many Soviet prisoners of war were also sent to concentration camps for extermination. Reinhard Heydrich noted in November 1941, “The commandants of the concentration camps complain that 5-10 percent of the Soviet Russians destined for execution arrive dead or half-dead in the camps.”<sup>48</sup> By May 1944, nearly two million Soviet prisoners of war had died according to German sources. Reports compiled after the war ended put the estimates closer to three million, after only another year of the war.<sup>49</sup> The treatment of Eastern European

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<sup>45</sup> Datner writes, “On the other hand, the USSR had acceded to both the Hague Convention of 1907 and the ‘Red Cross’ Geneva Convention of 1929. . . . The Hague Convention of 1907 (in Article 23) prohibited the killing of war prisoners and ordered their humane treatment (Article 4, Paragraph 2).” Datner, *Crimes against POWs*, xix.

<sup>46</sup> Datner wrote, “As a general means of degrading Soviet POWs the Germans resorted to methods used with cattle.” Ibid, 92-95.

<sup>47</sup> Reichsminister Alfred Rosenberg quoted in Datner, *Crimes against POWs*, 218-219.

<sup>48</sup> Reinhard Heydrich quoted in Harold Marcuse, *Legacies of Dachau: The Uses and Abuses of a Concentration Camp, 1933-2001* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 45.

<sup>49</sup> Datner, *Crimes against POWs*, 225-227; Rafael A. Zagovec, “World War II – Eastern Front,” in Jonathan F. Vance, ed., *Encyclopedia of Prisoners of War and Internment*, 2nd ed. (Millerton, NY: Grey House Publishing, 2006), 458-461. For additional examples of mistreatment towards Soviet prisoners of war see Datner, *Crimes*

prisoners of war thus stood in stark contrast to how the Germans would treat most inmates from Western Europe and the United States.

### **Prisoner of War Estimates and Camp Organization**

Determining the number of prisoners of war held by Germany and the number of camps operated under German control is complicated, because of records destroyed during the war and intentionally by the Germans. Estimates on the number of prisoner of war camps operated under German control vary greatly from 56 to 248. There are a few reasons for these discrepancies: not all camps were open for the entirety of the war, camps were renumbered for various reasons, there was no standard practice as to whether to include only main camps or all sub camps, some lists included only camps directly controlled by the Germans while others included Italian (and other) camps if under German occupation, and finally many camps only held certain nationalities and therefore are not included in estimates.<sup>50</sup>

Likewise, determining the total number of prisoners of war presents its own set of obstacles. As Vourkoutiotis notes the numbers were staggering compared with other modern

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against POWs, 70-80, 92-95, 107-110, 216-228, 293-296, 355-359; Gerald H. Davis, "Prisoners of War in Twentieth-Century War Economies," *Journal of Contemporary History* 12, no. 4 (October 1977), 630.

<sup>50</sup> Based on available sources Vasilis Vourkoutiotis' estimate of 248 is the most accurate. See Vourkoutiotis, *Prisoners of War*, 31, n. 117; Norman Gruenzer, *Postal History of American POWs: World War II, Korea, Vietnam* (State College, PA: American Philatelic Society, 1979), 17-40; Daniel B. Drooz, *American Prisoners of War in German Death, Concentration, and Slave Labor Camps: Germany's Lethal Policy in the Second World War* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2004), 125-129; Spiller, *Prisoners of Nazis*, 1, 179; David A. Foy, *For You the War Is Over: American Prisoners of War in Nazi Germany* (New York: Stein and Day, 1984), 61-70; Ben Goldman, "German Treatment of American Prisoners of War in World War II" (PhD diss., Wayne University, 1949), 211-214. The American Red Cross provided a list and map of camps which held United States prisoners of war in issues of the *Prisoners of War Bulletin*. It listed 27 camps (August 1943), 28 camps (June 1944), and 56 camps (February 1945). See "Prisoner of War Camps in Europe," *Prisoner of War Bulletin* 1, no. 3 (August 1943): 6-7; "Prisoner of War and Civilian Internee Camps in Europe," *Prisoner of War Bulletin* 2, no. 6 (June 1944): 6-7; "Location of German Camps and Hospitals Where American Prisoners of War and Civilian Internees Are Held," *Prisoner of War Bulletin* 3, no. 2 (February 1945): 6-7.

wars. There were approximately eight to nine million Allied prisoners of war—six million alone were Soviet prisoners—but under five million German and Italian prisoners held by the Allies (although that number nearly doubled at the end of the war).<sup>51</sup> With a combined total of over sixteen million prisoners of war on both sides (and not even including prisoners in the Pacific) the numbers are absolutely staggering. In the case of Eastern European countries, especially the Soviet Union, this task is impossible as many records were lost to war or time, if the capture of prisoners was even recorded. However, even determining the number of prisoners of war from the United States can be complicated as there is no complete master list of prisoners of war. At best estimate, about 94,000 prisoners of war (not including civilians) from the United States were held by Germany.<sup>52</sup>

All prisoners of war camps fell under the control of the *Oberkommando der Wehrmacht* (OKW), the Supreme High Command of the Armed Forces. In the first few months of the war, prisoners were held together regardless of their rank or branch of service. Beginning in early 1940, the Luftwaffe established its own prisoner of war camps for airmen. These were technically under the OKW, but in practice the Luftwaffe operated their camps

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<sup>51</sup> Vasilis Vourkoutiotis, “World War II – Western Europe,” in Jonathan F. Vance, ed., *Encyclopedia of Prisoners of War and Internment*, 2nd ed. (Millerton, NY: Grey House Publishing, 2006), 470; Davis, “Twentieth-Century War Economies,” 624. For the U.S. policies towards prisoners of war see United States, War Department, *Rules of Land Warfare: War Department Field Manual FM 27-10* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1940); 16-46; United States, War Department, *Regulations Governing Prisoners of War* (Washington, D.C.: War Department, 1943).

<sup>52</sup> See World War II Prisoners of War Data File, 12/7/11941-11/19/1946, Records of World War II Prisoners of War, 1942-1947, RG 389: Records of the Office of the Provost Marshal General, NARA, College Park, MD. See also, Vourkoutiotis, *Prisoners of War*, 34-36, n. 212-213; Vourkoutiotis, “World War II – Western Europe,” 470-472; Robert C. Doyle, *Voices from Captivity: Interpreting the American POW Narrative* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994), 303-308; Foy, *For You the War is Over*, 12-13; Alan Marsh, “POWs in American History: A Synopsis,” Andersonville National Historic Site, last modified April 14, 2015, [https://www.nps.gov/ande/learn/historyculture/pow\\_synopsis.htm](https://www.nps.gov/ande/learn/historyculture/pow_synopsis.htm) (accessed March 26, 2018). There are literally hundreds of boxes housed at NARA alone that concern prisoners of war in World War II (including both the European and Pacific Theaters) held in twenty-six record groups. For a complete list, see Ben DeWhitt and Jennifer Davis Heaps, *Records Relating to Personal Participation in World War II: American Prisoners of War and Civilian Internees* (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1992).

with as much autonomy as possible.<sup>53</sup> The camps were designated first by the prisoners they held: Stalags (*Mannschaftsstelllager*) for non-commissioned officers and ranks below; Oflags (*Offizierslager*) for officers, which were uncommon; Dulags (*Durchgangslager*) transition camps where newly captured prisoners of war waited to be transferred to main camps or were held between camps; Stalag Luft (*Luftwaffe*) indicated a camp for airmen; and a single *Marlag* for Navy and Merchant Marine prisoners. There were also *Arbeitskommandos* (work Kommandos) which were work units that reported to a main prisoner of war camp. Prisoner of war camps were numbered according to the military district wherein they were located, with the exception of the camps run by the Luftwaffe, which were simply numbered successively. Despite these divisions, most camps held at least some assortment of ranks, military branches, and nationalities because of the challenges implicit in organizing such a large number of prisoners.<sup>54</sup>

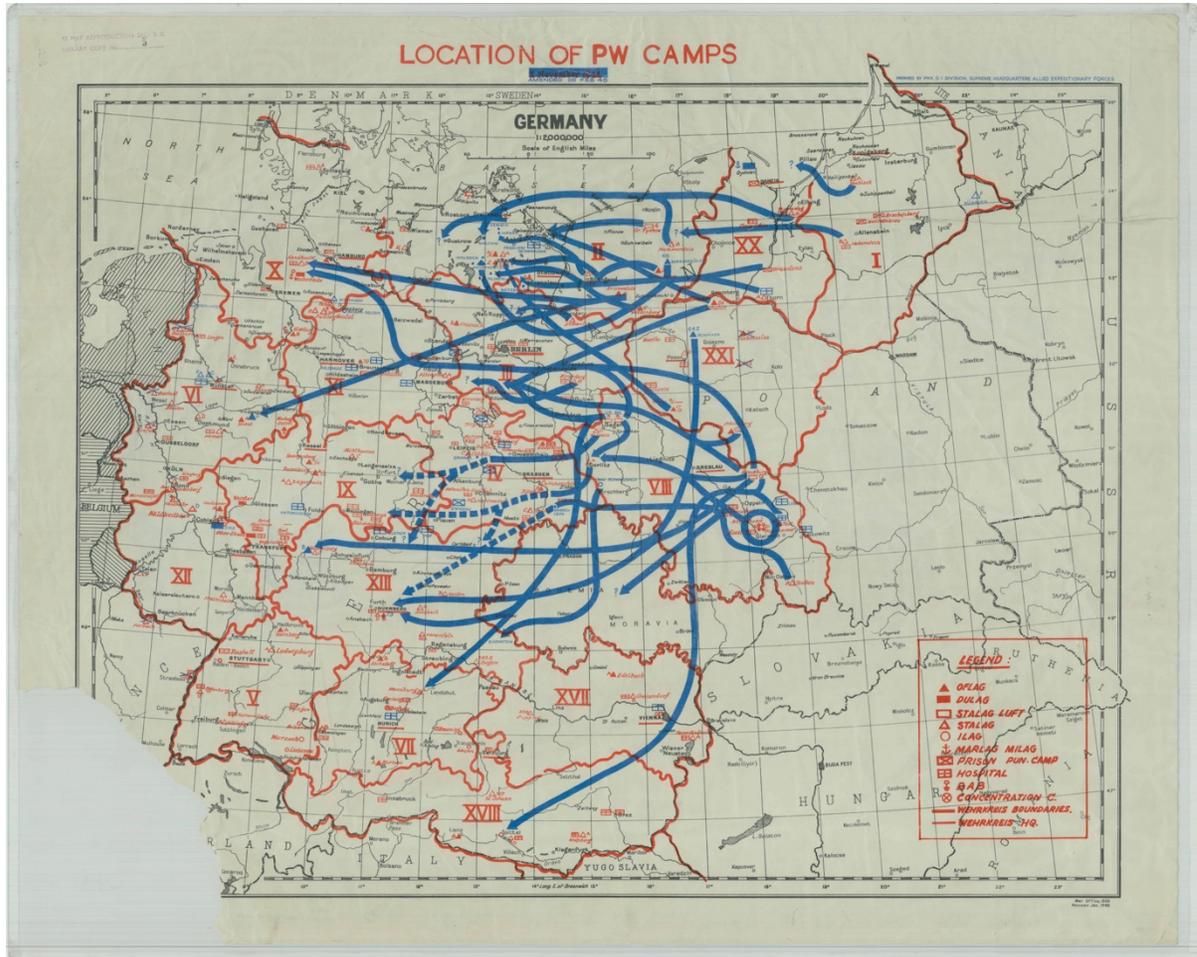
The hierarchy of command was complex and involved multiple agencies; however, the two most important elements for the daily life of prisoners of war was the OKW and the camp Kommandant. The Kommandant retained a certain amount of leeway or autonomy in carrying out orders and could (depending on the circumstance) decide to entirely or partially disregard an order. As one prisoner of war noted, “‘Alles hängt vom Kommandant ab,’ or ‘Everything depends upon the commandant.’”<sup>55</sup> The sheer number of prisoner of war camps

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<sup>53</sup> Clutton-Brock and Crompton, *The Long Road*, 15-17.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 15; Arieh J. Kochavi, *Confronting Captivity: Britain and the United States and Their POWs in Nazi Germany* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 10; Spiller, *Prisoners of Nazis*, 179-180; Vourkoutiotis, *Prisoners of War*, viii, x, 28-34; Drooz, *Germany's Lethal Policy*, i-iii, 125-129; Datner, *Crimes against POWs*, ix-xi.

<sup>55</sup> Captain John Vieter quoted in Foy, *For You the War Is Over*, 121. For a more complete description of the camp command hierarchy see Vourkoutiotis, *Prisoners of War*, ix, 29-31.



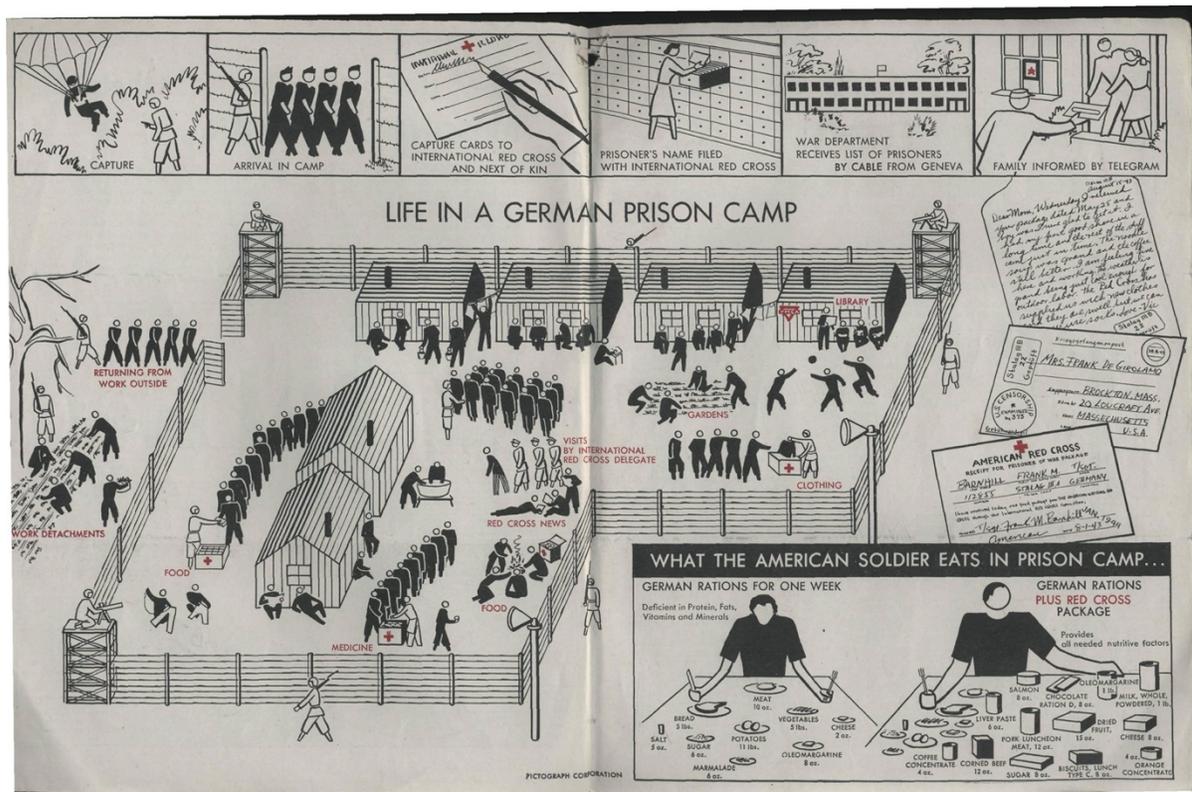
**Figure 2:** Map of Prisoner of War Camps in Germany, 2/26/1945, Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force, SHAEF Mission to France, Rearmament Division, RG 331: Records of Allied Operational and Occupation Headquarters, World War II, 1907-1966, NARA, College Park, MD.

meant that no two camps, and therefore no two experiences, would be the same; indeed, as will be discussed later the conditions could vary widely.<sup>56</sup>

There existed a complicated relationship between the OKW and the Luftwaffe which, under Hermann Göring's insistence, maintained control over captured airmen. The

<sup>56</sup> The same can be argued with concentration camps where camp *Kommandants* often held a surprising level of control over the day to day operations of the camps. In the case of concentration camps distance from the central power, Berlin, certainly played a part in this. However, for both concentration camps and prisoner of war camps the sheer number of main camps, sub camps, and work camps made it simply impossible for the German High Command to retain complete control and micro-manage the operation of every camp.

*Oberkommando der Luftwaffe* (OKL) technically had the same level of control over its prisoners as the OKW; yet, general orders from the OKW were followed by the OKL unless Göring determined such orders would negatively effect captured German airmen. Göring believed that airmen should be afforded better treatment, both out of respect for his fellow airmen and in an attempt to elicit favorable conditions for German airmen captured by the Allies.<sup>57</sup> This point would become an important factor for airmen, especially



**Figure 3:** “Life in a German Prison Camp,” *Prisoners of War Bulletin* 2, no. 2 (February 1944), 6-7.

the Tuskegee Airmen who were usually treated better in the Luftwaffe run prisoner of war camps, compared to regular Stalags.

<sup>57</sup> Durand, *Stalag Luft III*, 132-134.

Regardless of the OKW's intentions or the camp Kommandant, beginning in late 1944, obtaining enough food and other necessities became an increasing problem for all prisoners of war. Airmen in general continued to receive better treatment because they fell under the control of the Luftwaffe rather than the Wehrmacht.<sup>58</sup> While the number has varied greatly over the years, historians now agree that approximately 33,000 of prisoners of war (in both theaters of war) were airmen. Over 23,000 prisoners were captured during the Battle of the Bulge and sometimes thousands in a single day.<sup>59</sup> Coupled with the vast number of camps, this great influx of prisoners towards the end of the war also caused conditions to vary greatly between camps.

### **The International Committee of the Red Cross**

Articles 78, 79, and 88 of the Geneva Convention dictated the provisions under which the ICRC could operate concerning prisoners of war; however, the scope of actions under which the ICRC could actually operate depended upon the cooperation of the detaining power. In order to remain a neutral organization, the ICRC main office in Geneva attempted to hire only Swiss employees both for the main office and to serve as its representatives.<sup>60</sup> At its height in 1944, the ICRC employed 3,373 persons and conducted a total of 11,175 camp

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<sup>58</sup> Thomas Saylor, *Long Hard Road: American POWs during World War II* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2007), vii; Lewis H. Carlson, ed., *We Were Each Other's Prisoners: An Oral History of World War II American and German Prisoners of War* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), ix-x.

<sup>59</sup> Foy, *For You the War is Over*, 12-13; Carlson, *We Were Each Other's Prisoners*, xvii-xviii.

<sup>60</sup> International Committee of the Red Cross, *Report of the International Committee of the Red Cross on Its Activities during the Second World War (September 1, 1939 – June 30, 1947) Volume 1: General Activities* (Geneva: International Committee of the Red Cross, 1948), 45, 142. For a more extensive account of the ICRC and American Red Cross activities during World War II see Foster Rhea Dulles, *The American Red Cross: A History* (New York: Harper and Brother Publishers, 1950), 489-506; The American National Red Cross, *Annual Report: For the Year Ending June 30, 1945* (Washington, D.C.: The American National Red Cross, 1945); The American National Red Cross, *Annual Report: For the year ending June 30, 1946* (Washington, D.C.: The American National Red Cross, 1946); Max Huber, *Das Internationale Rote Kreuz* (Zürich: Max Niehans Verlag A.G., 1951).

visits.<sup>61</sup> The Central Prisoners of War Agency oversaw directly (among other things) the distribution of aid to prisoners of war and visits to camps.<sup>62</sup> While the Geneva Convention authorized aid organizations to carry out certain activities, as with the Geneva Convention as a whole, there was no means of real enforcement during wartime. As the ICRC reported, “The ICRC has no means of constraining a State to apply the Convention correctly, still less of imposing a penalty. The only sanctions which it could wield would be the withdrawal of the benefits of its welfare activities in behalf of PW who are nationalities of the recalcitrant State; such action . . . is utterly barred on the grounds of the very principles of the Red Cross.”<sup>63</sup> Thus, there was little action the ICRC could take when a detaining power refused to allow camp visits, such as when Germany would not permit ICRC representatives in concentration camps. However, the ICRC noted that in general detaining powers typically more or less followed the Geneva Convention at camps the ICRC was permitted to visit.<sup>64</sup> The only real way to enforce the Geneva Convention was mutuality; countries adhered to the convention to avoid mistreatment of their own prisoners of war.

Visiting prisoner of war camps enabled the ICRC to fulfill its other missions; it was during the camp visit that ICRC representatives determined what if any violations of the Geneva Convention were occurring and what type of aid prisoners needed. Although the visits were supervised by the detaining power, delegates could meet separately with the Man

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<sup>61</sup> This number of employees is for the ICRC only, not country specific branches; however, camp visits are total not just for German occupied territories. International Committee of the Red Cross, *Volume 1*, 63, 83.

<sup>62</sup> International Committee of the Red Cross, *Report of the International Committee of the Red Cross on Its Activities during the Second World War (September 1, 1939 – June 30, 1947) Volume 2: The Central Agency for Prisoners of War* (Geneva: International Committee of the Red Cross, 1948), 5-9.

<sup>63</sup> International Committee of the Red Cross, *Volume 1*, 223-224, 219.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid*, 222-230.

of Confidence (a representative chose by prisoners) and other prisoners. A standard camp report covered items such as living conditions, food supplies, hygiene, religious services, work, mail service, prisoner complaints, a meeting with the Man of Confidence, and a final note on the delegates overall impression of the camp. These reports were held by the ICRC and copies were sent to both the detaining power and country of the prisoners inspected.<sup>65</sup>

Given the vast number of prisoner of war camps and work Kommandos it was impossible for delegates to visit each and for most of the war the ICRC had no access to *Dulags* (transition camps) where prisoners of war were processed and interrogated.<sup>66</sup>

The ICRC provided parcels to prisoners of war; mainly these were foodstuffs but also included clothing and other necessities such as soap. In the case of prisoners of war held by the Germans, the ICRC food parcels quickly became a necessity for prisoners to maintain an adequate caloric consumption. The ICRC noted, “Often, that which in the minds of the authors of the Convention was to serve as occasional relief, or as a supplement to the regular diet, became for millions of PW the main and permanent part of the subsistence.”<sup>67</sup> As early as 1942 Germany began to reduce the rations for prisoners of war to below that provided to German civilians and ICRC attempts to address this matter were unsuccessful. As the war progressed, additional cuts were made to prisoner rations. The ICRC stated, “Thus, in February 1945, the basic ration had fallen to an average of 1,350 calories per head.”<sup>68</sup> Germany did, however, allow the ICRC to deliver more parcels to prisoners of war, but even

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 228-238.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 244-245.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, 221.

<sup>68</sup> Per the ICRC, a diet of “2,250 calories [was] required to maintain normal health.” Ibid, 335, 254-255.

this was not without issue. The crumbling German infrastructure alone caused difficulty in getting supplies to camps.<sup>69</sup> The American Red Cross provided a cookbook for prisoners of war based on items available from food parcels.<sup>70</sup> The ICRC also provided additional clothing for prisoners of war, but as with food distribution the German government limited the effectiveness of the ICRC. German camp policy allowed prisoners of war to receive new clothing, but they usually were required to exchange their existing clothing, resulting in them still only having one set of clothes (two sets of undergarments were allowed). Although the German authorities cited escape concerns, their main purpose was not to take limited available clothing from the German civilian population.<sup>71</sup> This policy caused severe clothing shortage issues for prisoners. One prisoner complained, “It’s been almost one year now that I’ve worn one pair of pants, one set of underwear, and a couple of pairs of socks. You can imagine my condition when I wash anything, and the state of my clothes just about now.”<sup>72</sup> The ICRC attempted to alleviate clothing shortages, but the bombing of infrastructure increasingly made these transports more difficult.

The ICRC also maintained general records on prisoners of war and their camp location; this in turn allowed them to share information with families and facilitate communication. Beginning in March 1940, the OKW allowed prisoners of war to send a card to both their next of kin and the ICRC upon being processed to a regular camp.

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<sup>69</sup> For 1943 the ICRC reported sending 3,885 tons of supplies and 7,371,120 food packages to Allied prisoners of war. See “How the Red Cross Helps Prisoners of War,” *Prisoners of War Bulletin* 2, no. 2 (February 1944): 5, 8. International Committee of the Red Cross, *Volume 1*, 254-255.

<sup>70</sup> American Red Cross, *Prisoner of War Cooking Guide: For Use with the American Red Cross Standard Food Package* (Washington, D.C.: American Red Cross, c. 1943).

<sup>71</sup> International Committee of the Red Cross, *Volume 1*, 258-260.

<sup>72</sup> Unknown prisoner of war from Stalag Luft III, in “Letters,” *Prisoner of War Bulletin* 2, no. 6 (June 1944): 8.

Towards the end of the war these cards often served as a better notification of capture than OKW records, which failed to keep up with the movement of prisoners. Prisoner information held by the ICRC was kept on punch cards to enable faster processing of inquiries.<sup>73</sup> This information allowed the ICRC to serve as a clearinghouse for letters to prisoners of war when their families were unable to send mail directly, either due to misunderstanding of OKW procedures or not knowing the camp in which a prisoner was held.<sup>74</sup> According to an ICRC report, “By the end of 1946, the Agency had thus received and forwarded nearly 20 million letters and cards.”<sup>75</sup>

While the YMCA would focus more on the mental health of prisoners of war, the ICRC did attend to issues of physical exercise. In some camps there was not enough room for prisoners to be allowed outside of barracks; so, the ICRC attempted to get walks outside of the camps approved in these instances.<sup>76</sup> The ICRC noted that especially among those prisoners not required or allowed to work, “too long a period of confinement was the cause, in some cases, of real mental and nervous maladies, as a result of ‘barbed-wire disease.’”<sup>77</sup> The ICRC worked in cooperation with the YMCA to make books available to prisoners of war, in some cases ensuring the delivery of books collected by the YMCA. The ICRC also maintained records pertaining to courses prisoners of war took so these could be accessed after the war.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> International Committee of the Red Cross, *Volume 2*, 25, 36,37, 264-265.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid*, 27, 45.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid*, 57, 264-265.

<sup>76</sup> International Committee of the Red Cross, *Volume 1*, 263-264.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid*, 264.

<sup>78</sup> See the YMCA section below for further explanation of this process. *Ibid*, 277-278.

For families in the United States desperate for information, the American National Red Cross published the *Prisoners of War Bulletin* which offered guidelines for sending letters and parcels to prisoners of war, information about conditions (usually with a positive slant), and at least a page of letters from prisoners in both theaters per issue. The *Prisoners of War Bulletin* was issued monthly from June 1943 to June 1945. This included a special extra edition in September 1944, which was a copy of the *Gefangenen Gazette*, a newspaper produced by American prisoners of war in Stalag Luft III that had about four editions per week.<sup>79</sup>

### **The Young Men's Christian Association**

Similar to the ICRC, the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) provided aid to prisoners of war under Article 78 of the Geneva Convention, but focused more on mental stimulation for prisoners. Although its actions were not as widely known as the ICRC, prior to World War II the YMCA had offered assistance in wartime as far back as the Franco-Prussian War. The YMCA organized a specific branch, the War Prisoners Aid, which operated out of Geneva like the ICRC, and served in thirty-three countries during World War II.<sup>80</sup> The ICRC and YMCA worked jointly to serve separate, yet homogeneous purposes with the ICRC being responsible for aspects directly related to ensuring adherence to the Geneva Convention, while the YMCA sought to aid "the millions behind barbed wire in keeping mentally and spiritually as fit as condition permitted."<sup>81</sup> Thus, the ICRC focused on

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<sup>79</sup> There were other camp newspapers produced by prisoners of war or the Germans. "*Gefangenen Gazette: Special Supplement to Prisoners of War Bulletin*," *Prisoner of War Bulletin* (September 1944).

<sup>80</sup> Vulliet, *Preliminary Report*, 9-11.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid*, 11-12; International Committee of the Red Cross, *Volume 1*, 40-41.

maintaining the physical health of the prisoner of war, while the YMCA focused on the intellectual health. They did so with programs to alleviate boredom.

Dubbed “visiting secretaries,” representatives of the YMCA went to prisoner of war camps to determine the needs at each location. The YMCA employed a maximum of 175 visiting secretaries who completed about 40,000 visits. These included both theaters of war and Allied countries such as the United States where they met with German prisoners of war. The length and information gained during these visits depended on the detaining power. For example, Andre Vulliet notes, “In Germany, he was generally—but not always—accompanied by a German officer. In China, the War Prisoners Aid representatives lived in PW camps for a month at a time.”<sup>82</sup> Some of the projects the YMCA helped supply included religious services, sports, music, education, arts, theatrical performances, and camp newspapers. The YMCA donated supplies for religious services and instructed chaplains how to conduct services for prisoners of faiths different from their own.<sup>83</sup>

Libraries greatly helped the YMCA in an attempt to stave off boredom. Outside of physical maltreatment monotony was one of the greatest concerns to the general wellbeing of the prisoner of war. Vulliet reports, “In six years, the Geneva office alone sent to prison camps in continental Europe more than 2,400,000 books in 23 languages.”<sup>84</sup> The number of books available in each camp varied, but the YMCA attempted to provide books in a variety of languages and topics to each camp. These included novels, textbooks for classes led by prisoners, non-fiction, and tradecraft. The YMCA also oversaw the printing of in-demand

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<sup>82</sup> Vulliet, *Preliminary Report*, 15-16.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid*, 16-17.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid*, 19.

books, which were not available otherwise. So extensive was the distribution of books, especially textbooks and tradecraft topics, that many camps were able to offer regular classes and even diplomas. The YMCA also provided sheet music and musical instruments, athletic equipment (perhaps surprisingly baseball and thus baseball bats were generally permitted despite the possibility of using such as weapons), and even stage equipment and costumes for theatrical productions put on by the prisoners.<sup>85</sup> Although tracking down where a prisoner of war was currently held technically fell under the purview of the ICRC, the YMCA occasionally assisted in this process. The YMCA assisted in about 35,000 instances.<sup>86</sup>

Vulliet's report provides several insights into the general condition of prisoners of war. He observes, "Besides, being used to a higher standard of living, the American prisoner probably asked for more and got more."<sup>87</sup> Indeed the number of supplies sent just to United States prisoners of war is staggering, for the year 1944 these included 15,184 pencils and 108,245 books.<sup>88</sup> At Stalag Luft III, "About sixty teachers were . . . lecturing . . . During the three years of its existence 7570 courses were given and 644 diplomas delivered."<sup>89</sup> The more popular courses included German, algebra, and advertising. After the war the YMCA

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid, 19-24, 26-35; David Shavit, "'The Greatest Morale Factor Next to the Red Army': Books and Libraries in American and British Prisoners of War Camps in Germany during World War II," *Libraries and Culture* 34, no. 2 (Spring 1999): 113-134.

<sup>86</sup> Vulliet writes, "Officially, the locating of prisoners and the forwarding of express messages from or to them was the function of the International Red Cross which did it on a grand scale through its tremendous file of more than 30 million individual cards kept up-to-date in Geneva. In the 35,000-odd cases where the Y.M.C.A. undertook to do it as an exception, War Prisoners Aid was able perhaps to inject a more personal touch into its handling of the case." Vulliet, *Preliminary Report*, 36.

<sup>87</sup> Vulliet relates the request of one particular camp that would have necessitated an expenditure of "nearly \$8,000 for every unit of 200 men." Ibid, 50.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid, 51-52. For a complete list of items sent through October 1944, see Vulliet, *Preliminary Report*, 91-98.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid, 24.

helped to facilitate turning these courses into actual credit at colleges in the United States or arranging for testing to prove proficiency.<sup>90</sup>

### **Life as a Prisoner of War**

The daily life of a prisoner of war varied dramatically by region and year. No two prisoner of war camps were same, and it is not possible to single out one general prisoner of war experience. Treatment of prisoners of war was relative; overall the Germans treated U.S. prisoners better than those held by the Japanese, but worse than German prisoners held by the United States.<sup>91</sup> The preceding analysis of the regulations and aid available to prisoners of war provides insight into the general conditions they faced. However, it obscures the fact that prisoners did retain limited control over their lives in the camps, especially their efforts to retain a sense of normalcy under anything but normal conditions.

While the courses and theatrical productions discussed above provided some entertainment and intellectual stimulation, prisoners also accomplished this through the publication of camp newspapers. Along with the *Gegangenen Gazette* other camps also had newspapers. In addition, the Germans published a newspaper *The Camp* from 1941-1945 for prisoners of war. Little remains other than copies of the newspaper itself. The newspaper fulfilled a propaganda aspect and most articles were written by Germans, not prisoners of war. However, the paper did offer intellectual stimulation with writing contests, German lessons, crossword puzzles, poems, short stories, and cartoons. The front page of each edition was generally devoted to military news, with a definite bias towards Nazi victories.

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid, 54-56. For a more extensive list of courses offered see Vulliet, *Preliminary Report*, 99-107.

<sup>91</sup> Spiller, *Prisoners of Nazis*, 1. For a comparison of U.S. run prisoner of war camps and how their treatment of Axis prisoners of war (especially Germans) compared, see Derek R. Mallett, *Hitler's Generals in America: Nazi POWs and Allied Military Intelligence* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2013) and Mason, "German Prisoners of War," 198-215.

*The Camp* also served to notify prisoners of letters that had been sent to the ICRC instead of a specific camp and allowed prisoners to attempt contact with men held at other camps (whether this latter action was well intended or a means to garner information about prisoners, or both, is unclear).<sup>92</sup> Similarly, the *O.K.* or *The Overseas Kid* was a product of German propaganda issued as a weekly newspaper to prisoners of war. This newspaper was highly propagandized and especially played upon racial prejudice towards African Americans and anti-Semitism.<sup>93</sup> While the *Prisoners of War Bulletin* published by the American National Red Cross provided information and sought to reassure family members in the United States, *The Camp* (with a healthy dose of propaganda) offered at least a token of the same for prisoners of war. It provided them a means to stay in contact with the world outside their camp, whether it was reading sports scores or information on activities in other prisoner of war camps.

### Conclusion

Whether Germany followed the Geneva Convention remains debatable to an extent, but in the last two years of the war violations multiplied. Camps run by the Luftwaffe were more likely to follow the Geneva Convention than the more numerous camps under the sole control of the Wehrmacht.<sup>94</sup> However, most of the discrepancy stems from when men were captured. As the war turned sour for Germany on the Western Front, specifically during the Battle of the Bulge, the conditions for prisoners of war deteriorated. One prisoner wrote, “I

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<sup>92</sup> *The Camp* was a weekly newspaper issued out of Berlin to prisoners of war from 1941-April 1944. Few copies remain, although the most complete collection (and perhaps the only) available in the U.S. is held on microfilm from the Leo Baeck Institute at the Center for Jewish History, New York City, NY.

<sup>93</sup> William L. Shirer, “What the German’s Told the Prisoners,” *Harper’s Magazine* 189, no. 1134 (November 1, 1944): 536-542.

<sup>94</sup> Dulles, *American Red Cross*, 497.

am sorry to inform you of this but these people treat us far from the way their men are treated over there... It's a good thing our Red Cross takes good care of us. They give us plenty of warm clothing and food. I'd sure be glad to get back and live again."<sup>95</sup> For Jewish Americans especially, the conditions tended to be worse because of the racialized policies of the Nazis. They were more likely to be mistreated and segregated from the other American prisoners of war.<sup>96</sup>

In his extensive research and analysis of the regulations relating to American and British prisoners of war held by Germany, Vasilis Vourkoutiotis concluded that overall conditions were not too unfavorable at least in comparison to prisoners from other countries.<sup>97</sup> While Polish and Soviet prisoners of war especially experienced horrific treatment and widespread murder at the hands of their Nazi captors, this does not excuse the mistreatment of American prisoners of war. Thousands of prisoners of war dealt with malnourishment and general maltreatment as their guards marched them away from the advancing Soviet troops. The prisoners of war served as bargaining chips of the last resort if needed. Although the German infrastructure and economy by that point was in near shambles, as the detaining power the Germans still retained responsibility for the wellbeing of their prisoners. Finally, the holding of Jewish prisoners of war both at concentration camps and in conditions similar too, if not within, these camps constituted a blatant violation

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<sup>95</sup> Unknown Prisoner of War in Stalag VII-A, "Letters," *Prisoners of War Bulletin* 2, no. 8 (August 1944): 9.

<sup>96</sup> Mitchell G. Bard, *Forgotten Victims: The Abandonment of Americans in Hitler's Camps* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994), xiii-xiv, 1-5; Dulles, *American Red Cross*, 496-497; Kochavi, *Confronting Captivity*, 2-4; Pieter Lagrou, "Overview," in *Prisoners of War, Prisoners of Peace: Captivity, Homecomings and Memory in World War II*, edited by Bob Moore and Barbara Hatley-Broad, (New York: Berg, 2005), 3-10; Foy, *For You the War Is Over*, 11-14.

<sup>97</sup> Vourkoutiotis, *Prisoners of War*, 201-202.

of the Geneva Convention that has been overlooked not only by the academic community, but denied by Congress as well.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Goldman, "German Treatment," 76-79. Senate report of May 15, 1945 read, "No prisoners of war are confined in any of these political prisoner camps, and there is no relationship whatever between a concentration camp for political prisoners and a camp for prisoners of war." Senate, *Congressional Record*, 79th Congress, 1st Session, 4576-4578.

### Chapter 3

#### **“You Know What is Done With Jews Here?”: The Jewish American Prisoner of War Experience**

*But when I told this man that I was a Jew, he said that he would not write it down because he had been a prisoner for five years and had seen too many Jews disappear. . . I told him that I had not come halfway around the world to lie about my religion; that was what the war was all about, and if I did what he asked and we won the war, I would still be the loser. He wrote it down and told me that he was sorry for me. . . A few weeks later we were liberated.*

-Leonard Winogrand

#### **Introduction**

Call it the romanticizing of war, naiveté, or the simple hope of a soldier going to war, but countless soldiers throughout history have displayed a frequent belief they will not be captured or killed at the hands of their enemy. Jewish Americans in World War II were no different and many barely questioned the “H” for Hebrew stamped on their dog tags nor did they contemplate what would happen should they be captured with their Jewish faith emblazoned for their Nazi captors to readily see. It was often only upon the immediate danger of capture that Jewish Americans began to fully realize what fate might await them in the confines of Nazi racialized social order.

Not every Jewish American prisoner of war faced explicit anti-Semitism or maltreatment at the hands of German guards or their fellow prisoners. However, if one examines the words and descriptions used by former Jewish prisoners of war, the commonality is fear. Jewish Americans stated that they feared capture (in situations where the possibility loomed closely) or upon capture realized their precarious position because of their religion and the “H” for Hebrew stamped on their dog tags. They feared mistreatment, even taking steps such as disposing of their dog tags, which any other prisoner would have

considered far worse as they could be accused of spying. For Jewish Americans, fear did not necessarily subside because there was no actual, immediate threat to their lives. A perceived threat remained and often lingered beyond their initial moment of capture. Already in enemy hands, Jewish Americans realized they had greater cause for concern under the control of a system that singled out Jews. They dealt with the same concerns faced by every prisoner and a heightened sense of anxiety knowing Nazi attitudes towards Jews. Based on their experiences with anti-Semitism in the United States and in the military, they also did not know if their fellow soldiers or airmen would support them during capture or turn a blind eye to Nazi policies.

At the start of World War II, Jewish Americans accounted for approximately 4,831,180 of the 131,669,275 inhabitants in the continental United States, or about 3.66 percent of the mainland U.S. population.<sup>1</sup> Of the 16,112,566 military personnel who served in World War II, 550,000 were Jewish Americans or 4.23 percent. The total number of U.S. prisoners of war was approximately 124,000 on all fronts or 0.76 percent of the total Armed Services. The number of Jewish American prisoners of war was about 4,550 or 3.66 percent of the total number of U.S. prisoners, but 0.82 percent of Jewish Americans serving were captured. Although Jewish Americans accounted for a small percentage of the total number of prisoners of war in comparison to their overall numbers in the military, their rate of capture was slightly above the overall average.<sup>2</sup> Ironically, the percentage of Jewish

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<sup>1</sup> United States Department of Commerce: Bureau of the Census, *Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940 Population Volume I: Number of Inhabitants* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1942), 6; H. S. Linfield, "The Jews of the United States Number and Distribution," in Harry Schneiderman, ed., *The American Jewish Year Book* 41, (1940): 182-183.

<sup>2</sup> "Casualties and Awards," September 1, 1945, Folder 1, Box 103, Bureau of War Records, National Jewish Welfare Board, American Jewish Historical Society, Center for Jewish History, New York City, NY; William J. Shapiro, "World War II: Statistics on Jewish American Soldiers," Jewish Virtual Library, <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/statistics-on-jewish-american-soldiers-in-world-war-ii> (accessed October 4,

American prisoners of war was reflective of their population in the United States, with both at 3.66 percent. These Jewish Americans (despite their U.S. citizenship) were explicitly in danger of falling prey to Nazi racialized policies. Although the Geneva Convention was supposed to protect all prisoners from mistreatment, as the accounts below reveal, the OKW and camp guards frequently disregarded these regulations to target Jews, including Jewish Americans. For Jewish prisoners of war, nationality mattered less than it did for other minority groups. While U.S. citizenship mattered for African Americans, Jews were at the very bottom of the Nazi racial hierarchy and nationality only afforded them a minute level of protection.

For prisoners of war, the process of capture and the camp in which they ultimately ended up were key factors in their treatment. A prisoner without his dog tags or an airman captured days after he was shot down could face accusations of being a spy. With no two camps being alike, their operation was largely under the purview of the Kommandant; while the OKW issued orders, it was the Kommandant who often had the final decision of whether those orders were carried out and to what extent. With race, religion, and nationality also as factors, African Americans might experience no segregation or discrimination from guards at the same camp where Jewish Americans were singled out or vice versa. Hence, it is best to compare the treatment of Jewish Americans and African Americans by the camps in which they were held, for this reveals the greatest discrepancies in treatment.

This chapter begins with an analysis of accounts where it is unknown where a prisoner of war was held or when they were frequently moved from camp to camp.. Next, the regular Stalags are examined, known for having a greater number of Geneva Convention

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2017); "America's Wars," U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, [https://www.va.gov/opa/publications/factsheets/fs\\_americas\\_wars.pdf](https://www.va.gov/opa/publications/factsheets/fs_americas_wars.pdf) (accessed October 4, 2017).

violations and greater discrepancy in treatment. Third, the Luftwaffe run prisoner of war camps, long considered the best, but even there prisoners could face segregation and mistreatment. Finally, Stalag IX-B and the removal of Jewish American prisoners of war to a work Kommando adjacent to Berga. Although the Luftwaffe camps and Stalag IX-B should be furthest in similarity, the chapter organization reveals a surprising fact, the level of mistreatment experienced by Jewish Americans overall increases with each account in the chapter. Thus, for Jewish Americans, the Luftwaffe run camps did not always afford an extra measure of protection so noted by non-minority prisoners of war.

This chapter and the following serve as a monograph on the minority experience in capture and also a set of quasi-biographies of the men whose stories were long forgotten by history. Many of their accounts never appeared in print, outside of their own diaries, letters, and memoirs; only a tiny fraction of their memoirs or interviews have appeared in academic works. While their narratives support a larger argument on the prevalence of racism and anti-Semitism both in the United States and Nazi controlled Europe during World War II, it is important that their stories—in their words—are not overlooked and lost to the larger narrative. For this reason, the chapter is divided by camp and also by separate accounts within each section to ensure that the individuality of their experiences is not forgotten, that the proverbial forest does not obscure the trees.

**\*\*\*\*Unidentified Camp\*\*\*\***

**Bernard Rader**

Some Jewish American prisoners of war escaped mistreatment by hiding their religion from their captors. Private Bernard Rader was captured along with several other members of his company during a patrol in October of 1944. Since Rader was wounded and

unable to do so himself, another soldier buried his dog tags to hide Rader's Jewish faith from the Germans. While this may have afforded him better treatment in the long run, Rader revealed that initially it caused problems. The German interrogator alluded that he could be a French spy and he was only able to prove he was an American through another member of the patrol. Rader recalled that he was vigilant to never give an indication that he was Jewish, including in his letters. He wrote, "In my letters home, I was careful to send my regard to Reverend (not Rabbi) Smith (not Cohen), at our church (not Synagogue) and pledge that I would attend every Sunday (not Saturday)."<sup>3</sup> After two days of interrogation, Rader was moved to a hospital in Lorient where he remained until he was exchanged in November.<sup>4</sup>

The fate of Jewish Americans thus depended partly on their own actions. Men such as Rader hid their religion to avoid mistreatment. This option was not without its perils as prisoners without dog tags could be considered spies, which might result in imprisonment in a Gestapo prison, concentration camp, or even execution. For prisoners with names considered to be traditionally Jewish getting rid of their dog tags had little benefit, unless they persuaded their German captors that they were not Jews. Those who chose to hide their identity had to remain vigilant lest the Germans discover their deception. This deception involved the prisoner, family members who wrote them letters and fellow prisoners of war.

### **Leonard Meltzer**

Leonard Meltzer, born August 21, 1922, served in the infantry and landed on Omaha Beach. Captured in late 1944 while taking shelter in a barn near Alsace Lorraine with six

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<sup>3</sup> Bernard I. Rader (AFC/2001/001/5428), Correspondence, Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

other Americans, Meltzer remembered, “Being Jewish, I knew I was in trouble. So, I took my dog tags, which had an ‘H’ on it, and buried them in the sand right there in the barn.” Although Meltzer did not face any discrimination as the Germans never knew he was Jewish, his account demonstrates how the experiences of prisoners of war varied greatly. He recalled, “I must say that even though combat was bad, but prison camp was unbearable. It was an experience I would never [wish] on anyone to go through. Because not only was it physically bad, but you see that the Germans, the[y] brainwash[ed us].”<sup>5</sup> He explained how the German guards would give the prisoners misinformation, such as stating that the Germans were winning the war or American cities had been bombed. Although many prisoners of war credited the Red Cross aid packages for providing food, Meltzer stated that he did not receive a single package during the approximately eight months he was a prisoner. The men in his barracks subsisted on about two slices of bread a day and a cup of soup. He weighed 102 pounds when liberated.<sup>6</sup>

While Meltzer avoided being singled out for his religion, his account is still important. The level of mistreatment he faced demonstrates how precarious it could be for minorities discriminated against by the German guards or other prisoners. Already at the limits of human endurance, the possibility of further maltreatment meant the difference between survival and death.<sup>7</sup> Also facing hunger and general mistreatment, Jewish prisoners

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<sup>5</sup> Leonard Meltzer Collection (AFC/2001/001/81355), Video Interview, Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>6</sup> Meltzer did not list his normal weight or exactly how much weight he lost while a prisoner of war. Meltzer, Video Interview, Veterans History Project.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

of war did not know how fellow prisoners would react, if anti-Semitism would be amplified based on deteriorating camp conditions.

### **Harry Weissman**

The SS captured airman Harry Weissman and fellow crew members on November 2, 1944 near Damme, Germany and took them to the SS headquarters at a farmhouse to be interrogated. Weissman was taken to another room for additional questioning. The other crew members testified to the War Crimes Branch that they believed Weissman was beaten before hearing the door open to the outside and a gunshot. Afterwards the other crew members were loaded on a truck and taken to a different location. One of his fellow crew members, Edgar Denton, testified, “We never saw Weissman again and he never turned up on any P.O.W. rosters. When we arrived in the United States, Weissman was still listed as missing in action.”<sup>8</sup> His transcript noted that Weissman was likely “singled out” because of his last name sounding Jewish.<sup>9</sup> The final war crimes investigation determined that Weissman was killed by the German guards. The notice read, “Lieutenant Weissman was interrogated by three Germans named Koenig, Pohlmann and Moebius and was shot by one of them . . . Koenig committed suicide; Pohlmann is believed dead; and the whereabouts of

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<sup>8</sup> Testimony of Edgar A. Denton, September 24, 1945, in “12-839,” Box 324, Case Files 1944-1949, RG 153: Records of the Office of the Judge Advocate General (Army) 1792-2010, NARA, College Park, MD; Testimony of John F. Ray, August 14, 1945, in “12-839,” Box 324, Case Files 1944-1949, RG 153: Records of the Office of the Judge Advocate General (Army) 1792-2010, NARA, College Park, MD; Billy R. Walker Memorandum, September 27, 1945, “12-839,” Box 324, Case Files 1944-1949, RG 153: Records of the Office of the Judge Advocate General (Army) 1792-2010, NARA, College Park, MD.

<sup>9</sup> The transcript reads, “possibly he was singled out because of the fact that he had a German name.” However, “German” was crossed out and replaced with a handwritten notation of “Jewish” instead. See Denton, Testimony, September 24, 1945, RG 153: Records of the Office of the Judge Advocate General (Army) 1792-2010.

Moebius is unknown.”<sup>10</sup> Thus, none of those responsible for Weissman’s death were brought to trial after the war.

Until they were registered prisoners of war, processed through the Dulag transition camps, and arrived at regular Stalags, minority prisoners faced heightened racism and anti-Semitism, and therefore mistreatment—in extreme cases such as Weissman’s execution—when captured by SS troops. Until prisoners were officially registered there was little bureaucratic protection to prevent them from being harmed or killed by the SS, Gestapo, or even the Wehrmacht. It was this time between surrender and placement in a permanent camp that was often the most dangerous for prisoners of war, a period where they could be left off the official record. To their home governments it would appear that these men were missing in action or killed in action, not abused or murdered by their captors. Unless witnesses survived, as in the case of Weissman, the truth might never be revealed. Regardless, there was generally too little information available for war crimes charges to be placed on those guilty of murder.

### **Richard Loew**

According to Richard Loew he was captured in late 1944. “At that time I was segregated with eighteen other Jewish men to a special work Komando [*sic*].”

Unfortunately, Loew’s letter did not provide any details as to who the other men were or in which Stalag they were initially held.<sup>11</sup> However, Loew’s account proves the norm rather

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<sup>10</sup> Letter from Colonel H. Young to Mr. Milton Weissman, February 12, 1946, “12-839,” Box 324, Case Files 1944-1949, RG 153: Records of the Office of the Judge Advocate General (Army) 1792-2010, NARA, College Park, MD; Denton, Testimony, September 24, 1945, RG 153: Records of the Office of the Judge Advocate General (Army) 1792-2010.

<sup>11</sup> Richard Loew to Tom Brokaw, March 30, 1999, in “Folder 3,” Box 82, Series 2: Veterans Mail, Tom Brokaw Collection, Institute on World War II and the Human Experience, Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL.

than the exception. As is often remarked, those men who have seen the worse of combat often have fewest stories they will tell; so, too are prisoners of war often unwilling or unable to tell more of their stories. Their interviews often focus on basic training, friends, family, life after the war, and even how they were captured, but offer little on the experience of being a prisoner of war. It is left to the researcher to piece their accounts together and present a fuller picture. Although Loew provided a very short description, it still demonstrates that Jewish Americans were segregated, which was a violation of the Geneva Convention.

### **Stanley Malamut**

Stanley Malamut lived in Pennsylvania where he enlisted in the Army Air Force in November 1942; he intended to be a pilot hoping to “drop as many bombs as possible on those sick and fanatical lunatics.”<sup>12</sup> Due to eyesight and educational restrictions, he ended up being a flight engineer. Malamut received initial training at Kessler Air Force Base in Mississippi but spent his weekend passes in New Orleans. His first time in New Orleans left a lasting impression, he wrote, “As I left the train I had to go to the lavatory. After I left the lavatory I got many stares from other passengers. I thought my fly was open. I looked back at the lavatory and noticed the sign ‘Colored.’ I will never forget that moment.”<sup>13</sup>

Malamut was stationed in Britain in December 1943. Attempting to complete the requisite twenty-five missions quickly, he requested more combat missions from the commanding officer. Malamut’s ambitions were quickly halted on his fourth combat flight when on December 30, 1943 the bomber was hit multiple times. While assisting the other

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<sup>12</sup> “A True World War II Prisoner of War Story,” Stanley Malamut Collection (AFC/2001/001/76409), Memoirs, Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., 2.

<sup>13</sup> “Prisoner of War Story,” Stanley Malamut Collection, Veterans History Project, 2.

crew members Malamut was shot, but still managed to parachute out of the plane.<sup>14</sup> A Frenchman and his wife came to Malamut's aid and provided first aid for his wound. A couple of Frenchmen took them to where two other crew members, Donald Stackhouse and James Houssong, were being hidden from the Germans. To evade the Germans, the three men then moved to a house in Belgium where over the following days they received false papers, civilian clothing, and medical care. As Houssong was not wounded he was later moved and eventually made it back to the United States.<sup>15</sup>

On February 25, 1944, the Germans captured Malamut and Stackhouse. Because of the civilian identification cards, the Germans initially considered them to be spies.<sup>16</sup> The two airmen were briefly questioned by a German officer, who made note of their dog tags. This caused Malamut "a feeling of severe paranoia" as he feared the repercussions of the "H" on his dog tags. Upon leaving the office, one of the guards "turned to Stackhouse, spit on him, and called him a 'Jude' [a Jew]."<sup>17</sup> Malamut surmised that the guard must have learned a Jew had been captured, but reasoned it was Stackhouse because of his black hair. Malamut wrote, "Fortunately with my blond hair and blue eyes I looked more Aryan than any of the German soldiers I met so far [...but] I was getting a good idea what serious encounters and problems were waiting for me and my life."<sup>18</sup> Three days after being captured Malamut was taken to the local Gestapo headquarters for further questioning. When the Gestapo major

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 5-6.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

inquired about the “H” on his dog tags, Malamut claimed that it was his blood type. While unlikely that a Gestapo major would not know the real purpose of the “H,” regardless Malamut was soon returned to the prison. Several days later he was sent to prisoner of war camp in Frankfort. Malamut would be transferred to several prisoner of war camps, including Stalag Luft VI and Stalag Luft IV. He was finally liberated by the British on May 2, 1945. For over fifty years Malamut refused to discuss the war or his experiences as a prisoner with his wife.<sup>19</sup>

#### **\*\*\*\*Multiple Camps\*\*\*\***

Although many prisoners of war remained at one permanent camp after passing through the Dulag, at least until Allied advancements prompted the Germans to relocate prisoners, it was not unusual for prisoners to move between camps. This happened more frequently for prisoners captured at the end of 1944 and after. Thus, these men were able to make firsthand comparisons between camps.

#### **Seymour L. Lichtenfeld**

Seymour L. Lichtenfeld grew up in Gary, Indiana, and joined the ROTC while in high school. He enlisted in April 1943, before technically graduating high school, as he was already 18 years old and wanted to have his choice of military branch rather than waiting to be drafted. Originally, he trained to be a paratrooper, then fighter pilot, and finally back to the infantry when D-Day planning demands necessitated more combat ready infantrymen.<sup>20</sup> Lichtenfeld stated that he experienced no real problems with anti-Semitism in the military,

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 7-9, 11-13, 18, 24.

<sup>20</sup> Seymour L. Lichtenfeld (AFC/2001/001/01145), “Kriegie 312330 A Prisoner’s Story: A Personal War History by Seymour L. Lichtenfeld,” Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., 1-6.

until he was stationed in Camp Shelby, Mississippi. He recalled, “My top sergeant was from a small town in northern Pennsylvania and made life miserable for men with name-calling and crappie jobs. He called me ‘kike,’ the hook, and other embarrassing names in and out of the ranks.”<sup>21</sup> Litchenfeld later transferred to a unit based out of Indianapolis that was getting ready to ship out. He did not state whether the anti-Semitism of his sergeant played a role in the decision he did not state. He thus ended up in the 106th 422nd Infantry Regiment. In October of 1944 the unit shipped out and by December 6, 1944 he was landing at La Havre, France. By December 10, he was stationed near St. Vith, Belgium and within days, on December 19, 1944, was captured when the 422nd and 423rd surrendered due to lack of supplies to continue fighting.<sup>22</sup> Thus, within about two weeks of arriving in France, Litchenfeld became a prisoner of war.

Knowing that they were about to be captured, a fellow soldier in Litchenfeld’s foxhole told him to get rid of his dog tags. He recounted, “My foxhole partner told me that I should get rid of my dog tags as they had an ‘H’ on them, indicating I was Hebrew. . . I removed both and ground them into the mud at the bottom of the foxhole.”<sup>23</sup> Despite this opportune advice, Litchenfeld admitted he could not remember the name of the man, although he never forgot his face. His “foxhole partner” was apparently taken elsewhere and Litchenfeld never saw him again.<sup>24</sup> Sent to Stalag IV-B around Christmas 1944, Litchenfeld was interrogated by a German officer fluent in English. The officer asked for his dog tags

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<sup>21</sup> Litchenfeld, “A Prisoner’s Story,” Veterans History Project, 7.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 7, 9-11, 15-16.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 16.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 19.

but made no issue when Litchenfeld claimed to have “lost them.” He assumed that the Germans never knew his religion; it was not until after liberation that Litchenfeld found his prisoner card and realized it was marked Jew.<sup>25</sup> Nazi intelligence was such that they knew Litchenfeld’s religion with information obtained from his name, rank, and serial number or simply presumed he was Jewish.

Litchenfeld was transferred to Stalag III-B near Furstenberg around January 1945, but would soon be transferred again because of Russian advancements. He recalled hearing the Russian prisoners of war being shot—of whom he estimated some 30,000 were held at the camp—as the other prisoners were marched out. By the middle of February, he was in Stalag III-A near Luckenwald, Germany. There he would remain until liberation, living in large tents as the camp was already overcrowded.<sup>26</sup>

At Stalag III-A, in early April 1945, the prisoners were assembled under the watchful eye of additional guards. The Kommandant demanded Jewish prisoners to come forward. The prisoners quietly agreed that no one should obey the order and when the order was relayed again, all the men came forward to the consternation of the guards. The men were kept out past dark and not fed; however, they received no other negative response. The moment of group solidarity likely saved the Jewish prisoners of war from being held in segregated barracks or worse. On April 22, the men were liberated by the Russians.<sup>27</sup> Several days later the prisoners raided the German offices and it was then that Litchenfeld found his records. He wrote, “I found my German prison record, which noted thereon that I

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 21-22.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 24-25, 27.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 29-30.

was Jewish. Why the Germans had never checked out the records on that fateful day I will never know.”<sup>28</sup> Although Litchenfeld narrowly avoided mistreatment as a Jewish American, he nevertheless survived a harsh imprisonment; upon liberation he had lost about 65 pounds. He finally arrived back in the United States on June 4, 1945.<sup>29</sup>

**\*\*\*\*Stalag VII-A\*\*\*\***

**Aben Caplan**

Captured at the end of January 1945, Aben Caplan kept a prisoner of war diary written as a letter to his wife and son. Caplan was a Jewish American who spoke some German and thus became an interpreter for the group with which he was captured. He considered disposing of his prayer book, but recognized that his dog tags and attached mezuzah would still identify him as being Jewish. Caplan stated, “Our group was extremely lucky to fall into a bunch that did not take our wrist watches or rings” and he was also able to keep other personal items.<sup>30</sup> He passed through several different towns on the way to a prisoner of war camp, including a factory building where the men were not provided blankets and the toilets quickly overflowed. About two weeks after being captured, Caplan “started the practice of saying prayers every Friday night which . . . [he] kept up continually ever since.”<sup>31</sup> Initially, the prisoners did not receive Red Cross parcels because they were not at a permanent camp; only after a visit by the Red Cross did they receive their first parcels, about

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 31.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 33, 35.

<sup>30</sup> Aben S. Caplan (AFC/2001/001/5190), Typed copy of original POW diary in letter form, Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., 1-3.

<sup>31</sup> Caplan, Diary, Veterans History Project, 4-6.

a month after being captured.<sup>32</sup> Generally prisoners of war did not receive Red Cross packages unless they were held at a permanent prisoner of war camp. The constant turnover of prisoners in these types of camps made it impractical and nearly impossible for the Red Cross to designate delivery of parcels to specific prisoners. On March 10, 1945, Caplan and the others finally reached Stalag VII-A, which was a large camp with its own Red Cross office. Although prisoners were to be separated by nationality, Caplan and those with him were put in barracks with British soldiers. Despite not being the highest-ranking officer, the men chose Caplan to be the leader of the barracks. He did not provide a specific reason but having served as translator for the other prisoners up to that point, it is likely they wanted him to hold this position. Being the barracks leader garnered him respect from the other prisoners and the guards also did not require him to join the work detail. However, Caplan and four others were soon transferred to another barracks.<sup>33</sup> Despite the fact his ability as a translator was useful to both fellow prisoners and the guards, it was not enough to prevent him from being singled out as a Jew.

Caplan wrote that sometime in mid-March 1945, the Jewish prisoners of war were segregated into a separate compound in the camp. There were no bunks, only mattresses on the floors. Although separated, these men were still able to hold religious services in the washroom.<sup>34</sup> Sometime in mid-April the Jewish prisoners were again moved, this time to a barracks with no washroom, no electricity, and seemingly no stove of any kind inside as the men cooked outside. Then the prisoners were relocated to yet another location to work on

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 8-9.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 11-12.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 12.

the railroad at Landshut. It was there that he and the other prisoners of war were liberated by the U.S. military at the end of April 1945.<sup>35</sup> Caplan's account portrays the actions against Jewish servicemen as more of an inconvenience than an immediate threat, at least in part because of how his internment progressed. He was captured late in the war and remained in transit during most of his time in captivity. Indeed, he was only at a permanent Stalag camp for about a month. The fact that he spoke German made him not only valuable to the other prisoners, but also to the guards since he could serve as a translator. Combined, these factors kept Caplan from experiencing harsher mistreatment because of his religion. However, the treatment Caplan and the other Jewish servicemen received at Stalag VII-A still violated the Geneva Convention as their housing did not meet minimum standards.

### **David Westheimer**

David Westheimer was a Jewish American who would later author works such as *Von Ryan's Express* (1964), a novel featuring a prisoner of war escape via a captured transport train in Italy. His novel would become more well known a year later when it was released as a movie starring Frank Sinatra.<sup>36</sup> Westheimer had experience as a prisoner of war, albeit devoid of the daring escape depicted in *Von Ryan's Express*. During World War II, he was an airman on a B-24 stationed out of North Africa. The crew was part of a bombing mission to Naples but was shot down on December 11, 1942 over the Mediterranean. Only part of the crew made it out of the plane when it crashed. They were quickly picked up by a couple of fishermen and an Italian military policeman. Westheimer wrote, "I wondered if the Italian

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 17-20.

<sup>36</sup> David Westheimer, *Von Ryan's Express* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, 1964); *Von Ryan's Express*, directed by Mark Robson (Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation, 1965).

attitude toward Jews was anything like the Germans'. We hadn't been briefed on that and I didn't think so but why take chances? My dogtags [*sic*] had 'H' stamped on them for 'Hebrew.' I surreptitiously took them off the chain around my neck and threw them into the fire."<sup>37</sup> When Italian guards inquired about his religion, Westheimer stated he was a "Freethinker," but feared the repercussions if they found out his religion.<sup>38</sup> He wrote, "What if they'd found the dogtags with 'H' on them I'd thrown in the fire at the carabinieri [military police] post south of Salerno? Maybe they were going to send me to Germany."<sup>39</sup> When asked outright if he was Jewish, Westheimer conceded, and the Italian soldier threatened to send him to Germany. Westheimer recalled, "Naturally my paranoia blossomed."<sup>40</sup> Thus, even under the Italians he feared reprisal for being Jewish and at least some Italian soldiers used this fear to threaten prisoners of war.

Eventually, Westheimer ended up under the Germans after they invaded Italy. Upon being transferred to Stalag VII-A he was warned by another prisoner to avoid discussing his religion even with newly arrived prisoners.<sup>41</sup> Westheimer stated, "At one time the Germans had harassed Jewish prisoners there by moving them into a separate barracks and letting them wonder why. They hadn't been harmed and were moved back to their regular barracks just

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<sup>37</sup> David Westheimer, *Sitting It Out: A World War II POW Memoir* (Houston: Rice University Press, 1992), 14, 1, 5-6.

<sup>38</sup> Westheimer, *Sitting It Out*, 33-34.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, 34.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>41</sup> Leonard Winogrand (held in multiple unlisted prisoner of war camps) likewise recalled being warned to not discuss his religion. Despite the warning of another prisoner who "said that he would not write it down because he had been a prisoner for five years and had seen too many Jews disappear," Winogrand refused. The camp was liberated soon after. Leonard Winogrand, "Double Jeopardy: What an American Army Officer, a Jew, Remembers of Prisoner Life in Germany," *American Jewish Archives* 28, no. 1 (April 1976): 17.

before a Protecting Power visit but [Bob] Wright thought I should play it safe.”<sup>42</sup> However, Westheimer argued that despite being generally aware of the Holocaust he believed his United States citizenship would protect him. He said, “But I figured I was an American, I was in an American camp, and we had lots of German prisoners. They weren’t going to do anything to anyone. I understand some enlisted men were mistreated for being Jewish, but that was rare.”<sup>43</sup> Yet, a Red Cross inspection report from January 27, 1945 revealed, “The British, American and French spokesmen are protesting against the fact that the Jewish prisoners of war of the Prisoner of War Camp have all been placed in groups... [A total of 296 men of British, American, and French nationality.] All the the [sic] British and Americans are now gathered together in the principal camps; they are treated exactly as are the other prisoners from every standpoint.”<sup>44</sup> Although the Jewish prisoners may not have been mistreated after their segregation, the very act of segregating prisoners in this manner was against the Geneva Convention. The Geneva Convention did allow segregation by race, but not religion. Although by Nazi definition Jews were a separate race, since the United States did not do the same, segregation was not allowed. Per the Geneva Convention, segregation in the prisoner of war camps followed the policies of the internee’s home country, not the detaining power. Additionally, Aben Caplan’s account proves that the segregated prisoners of war were treated differently—held in inferior barracks—despite what the Red Cross report suggested.

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<sup>42</sup> Westheimer, *Sitting It Out*, 287, 121.

<sup>43</sup> David Westheimer, Interview Transcript, February 18, 2000, Collection WWII-985, Reichelt Program for Oral History, copy provided to Institute on World War II and the Human Experience, Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL.

<sup>44</sup> International Committee of the Red Cross, January 27, 1945, in “Stalag VII-A,” Box 128, Subject Files, 1939-1955, RG 59: General Records of the Department of State, NARA, College Park, MD.

Westheimer's account demonstrates his conflicted viewpoint on how the Italians and Germans would treat Jewish American prisoners of war. While Westheimer argued that he was not worried, the fact that he got rid of his dog tags (with the potential for being labeled as a spy instead of prisoner of war) suggests that he was more concerned about being identified as a Jew than spy. His writings stressed the recurrent fear Jewish Americans faced upon capture. Even those who were not mistreated feared that their luck would run out.

**\*\*\*\*Stalag XIII-C\*\*\*\***

**Alfred Goldstein**

Alfred Goldstein landed in France around November 1944 and was captured in the Ardennes a mere month later on December 17, 1944. After a forced march and boxcar ride of ten days, he arrived at Stalag XIII-C. "Well I was very much afraid being a Jew. I didn't know what was going to happen to me. Aside from the physical discomfort which was significant you know I had this fear."<sup>45</sup> Goldstein's fears were not unfounded as later the German guards segregated Jewish and African American prisoners. He recalled:

One day the Germans said you know all Jews and Negroes step forward. Well I had planned not to admit that I was a Jew. I didn't step forward. But some people around me started to say ah you better get out there, you better get out there. And the Germans said if you come out you won't be punished but if you don't and we catch you you're going to be punished. I still was willing to take my chances, but the murmuring kept going on and on. I had no choice but to step forward. So, they put me into a separate barracks.<sup>46</sup>

Unlike Seymour Lichtenfeld's experience at Stalag III-A where fellow prisoners stood in solidarity when the guards attempted to single Jews out, Goldstein's account reveals that

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<sup>45</sup> Alfred Goldstein (AFC/2001/001/74539), DVD interview, Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>46</sup> Goldstein, DVD interview, Veterans History Project.

non-Jewish prisoners were not always supportive in hiding the identity of Jewish prisoners. These other prisoners may have been anti-Semitic themselves or possibly believed that encouraging Jewish prisoners to step forward would indeed spare them future punishment. The decision to disclose one's religion was not simply a personal decision. Jewish Americans had to weigh various factors, such as whether the Germans already knew who was Jewish based on dog tags, if fellow prisoners would support their decision to remain silent, and what future punishment might be inflicted if they were found out by the Germans.

While Jewish Americans had to make a difficult decision like Goldstein, African Americans were left with one choice: step forward. Goldstein continued, "I wound up in a barracks with a bunch of Jews and Negroes, as we called them in those days. And those poor black guys I was afraid enough. But they were so terrified because it was written on their face who they were."<sup>47</sup> Unfortunately, based on Goldstein's account it is unclear what happened to the African Americans who were segregated. Goldstein himself took advantage of the disorganized relocation, no guards recorded his name or stood close guard over the segregated barracks, and during the night he slipped back over to his original barracks. About a month later, Goldstein and approximately 160 other prisoners were chosen for a work Kommando. He did not personally recall mistreatment during this time.<sup>48</sup>

Goldstein's friend and fellow prisoner, Roger Foehringer, recalled things differently. He remembered Jewish Americans were singled out by the German guards at Stalag XIII-C and in the work Kommando. He recalled fellow prisoners discouraging Jewish American from coming forward when ordered by the Germans; those who did he "never saw...

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

again.”<sup>49</sup> According to Foehringer, a Jewish American, Howie Wolf, served as an interpreter between the prisoners and guards. Wolf knew Yiddish and could communicate enough with the German guards to explain work assignments. While the Germans could assume Wolf was Jewish based on his use of Yiddish, they may have overlooked because he served a purpose as an interpreter. As for Goldstein, Foehringer remembered that the Germans found out he was a Jew a few months after they had been assigned to the work Kommando. He wrote, “apparently some American soldier tipped the Germans off that Al was a Jew . . . . Al’s punishment for being a Jew was he went to work with the group but when he got to the warehouse they would put him down in the bottom of an elevator shaft and he couldn’t get out of that shaft until nightfall. His punishment was that he was not able to associate with anybody and had to stay in the elevator shaft.”<sup>50</sup> While Goldstein avoided being held in a segregated barracks, the Germans still found a method to segregate him within the work Kommando.

**\*\*\*\*Stalags Lüfte\*\*\*\***

**Daniel S. Abels**

Daniel Abels was an airman shot down near Emden, Germany on April 19, 1944. Picked up by local farmers, Abels and one other crew member were taken to the Bergermeister and turned over to the German military. Abels recalled, “He [the German officer] then came up to me, looked at my dog tags, and said, ‘*Ach Jude.*’ He took out his gun, and I thought he was going to shoot me, but he just whacked me alongside the head.”<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> “The adventures of Roger Foehringer,” *Checkerboard* 42, no. 2 (March 1989): 8.

<sup>50</sup> “Roger Foehringer,” 9, 8.

<sup>51</sup> Daniel S. Abels, “Daniel S. Abels,” in *We Were Each Other’s Prisoners: An Oral History of World War II American and German Prisoners of War*, edited by Lewis H. Carlson (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 46-47.

Abels was transferred to Dulag Luft (the transition Luft camp), where he recalled, “There wasn’t too much physical abuse, but they did threaten me. They’d ask, ‘You know what is done with Jews here?’”<sup>52</sup> From Dulag Luft, Abels was transferred to Stalag XVII-B, where the addition of a red “J” on his prisoner of war card caused great concern. A fellow prisoner cautioned that Abels would be shot if he escaped, whereas other prisoners would be returned to the camp.<sup>53</sup> Abels’s account confirms that Jewish Americans were threatened by German guards (including the Luftwaffe) because of their religion. Minorities faced additional distress as prisoners, knowing that Nazi ideology targeted those deemed as racially inferior.

### **Louis T. Wigdortz**

Louis T. Wigdortz kept a YMCA diary while he was a prisoner of war, dedicated to his son who was born the same day Wigdortz entered Stalag Luft III. The diary included details on rations, fellow prisoners, drawings, songs and poetry dictated by other prisoners, as well as his own musings. His writing reflected more of the hardships faced by a prisoner keen to return home, rather than any experiences specific to Jewish prisoners. The fact that few prisoner of war diaries remained intact would alone be reason enough to include Wigdortz’s diary. But it also stood out because of the precise lack of details regarding his faith, mistreatment, or anti-Semitism he faced while a prisoner of war that serves as a reminder of how varied prisoner of war camps truly were. Even among the Luftwaffe run camps, considered by prisoners and historians alike to be the best run camps, there were discrepancies of treatment, conditions, and administration. Wigdortz’s diary from Stalag

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<sup>52</sup> Abels, “Daniel S. Abels,” 48.

<sup>53</sup> Oddly, Abels was transferred from a Dulag Luft to a regular main Stalag. He offered no reason for this in his account and likely did not know himself why the German’s processed him this way. Ibid, 48-49.

Luft III provides a startling contrast to the accounts of Jewish Americans segregated from other prisoners at Stalag Luft I.<sup>54</sup>

Wigdortz's diary painted a picture of meager rations and monotony—of routine and food stuffs—within Stalag Luft III. He noted that American, Canadian, and British Red Cross rations were all similar and lacked variety. A can each of spam (or a “meat roll” for the British), margarine, powdered milk, jam, and sugar were the main staples. The German rations were not much different and reflect that the Germans expected Red Cross parcels to supplement the prisoner of war diet. Prisoners of war at Stalag Luft III received each week a loaf of bread, a pound of potatoes, three cups of soup, and three ounces of meat a week, among more general items such as sugar and oleo. According to Wigdortz, “we also received a portion of blood sausage with our weekly rations but we discovered it would make excellent fuel for our stove since it was not edible.”<sup>55</sup> Poems such as “My Day” reference standing roll call in the cold, eating the same “toast and marmalade” or “plain barley soup” every day, and prisoners’ “quarrels” resulting from restlessness.<sup>56</sup> In “Thanks For The Memory,” he recounted the work of removing stumps, and the anxious wait for liberation.<sup>57</sup> Wigdortz's diary was devoid of the worry of other Jewish Americans, such as those held at Stalag Luft I, recounted. Prisoner of war camps were in many ways their own separate entities. Orders were passed down from the German High Command, but removed from immediate oversight and given some leeway in their management of the camps,

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<sup>54</sup> Louis Wigdortz (A006.017.001), Y.M.C.A. “A Wartime Log,” Louis Wigdortz Collection, National Museum of American Jewish Military History, Washington, D.C.

<sup>55</sup> Wigdortz, “A Wartime Log,” Louis Wigdortz Collection.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

Kommandants possessed a degree of autonomy not expected from Nazi Germany. Thus, the fate of prisoners of war—especially minorities—often depended on which camp they happened to end up in and whether the Kommandant would follow the Geneva Convention as closely as possible or ignore the regulations entirely.

### Leo S. Bach

Leo S. Bach related that his family had not been practicing Jews, even for holidays, but rather “cultural Jews.”<sup>58</sup> Bach told the serviceman making dog tags that he “did not have a religion,” but the corporal insisted that one had to be listed for burial rights.<sup>59</sup> Bach replied that he was Jewish. Having joined the military in September 1940, he was stationed in Hawaii during the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Later he joined the Army Air Corps and trained as a bombardier with the 381st Bomb Group.<sup>60</sup> On April 11, 1944 the B-17 in which he was flying lost three engines and the crew had to bail out near Weißkollm, Germany. Two days later, on April 13, a German soldier who had been guarding some British prisoners nearby captured him.<sup>61</sup>

Bach was taken to Dulag Luft for extensive questioning, not only by the Luftwaffe but also the SS and Gestapo. It was here that the German interrogator noticed the “H” on Bach’s dog tags. Bach recalled, “The German’s lips twisted into a crooked sneer, ‘Jude!’ It dripped from his mouth like a snarl from a mad dog.”<sup>62</sup> Later he was interrogated by a

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<sup>58</sup> L. S. Bach, *Going Home: A POW’s Journey Back from Germany* (New York: iUniverse, Inc., 2005), 92.

<sup>59</sup> Bach, *Going Home*, 112.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*, 1, 22-28, 33, 58, 112.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid*, 80-83, 97, 102-103.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid*, 111, 106-107.

German who pretended to be from the Red Cross and asked Bach to reveal personal information under the guise that his family would be contacted. The interrogator threatened, “Come now, we know you are a Jew. We only want to make things easier for you. You know the military people have no use for Jews. If you cooperate with me I can make things easier for you.”<sup>63</sup> Despite his fears that he would be mistreated on this account, Bach was transferred to Stalag Luft I without further incident during interrogation. There he was initially held in the North Compound, Block 10.<sup>64</sup>

The situation became more intense for Jews early in 1945, when during roll call Hauptman Becker told all the prisoners to return to their barracks except for Jews. According to Bach, Colonel Henry Spicer ordered all prisoners to remain, stating “We are nineteen hundred of us Jews.”<sup>65</sup> The Germans responded by individually processing the prisoners and separating 200 Jews. These men were segregated to Block 11 where rumors spread among the prisoners. Bach wrote, “Word came to us that our worst fears were well founded. Someone, (I can’t remember who) heard about orders from the German High Command that all Jewish prisoners were to be executed.”<sup>66</sup> Bach believed the German colonel in charge of the camp segregated the Jews rather than carrying out this order, hesitant to murder prisoners with the Allies winning the war. The men in Block 11 expected to be taken away by their German guards at any time.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 115, 114.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 115-117, 131.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 154, 152-153.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 154-155.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, 156, 159-160.

For Bach, the process of being signaled out alone weighed heavily on him. He recalled, “When the Germans moved the Jewish guys into Block 11 that gnawed on my soul. More and more I became aware of the evils of anti-Semitism... It surely was too much for me. I reacted badly, becoming belligerent.”<sup>68</sup> Although Bach survived being segregated to Block 11 without further mistreatment from the German guards, he retained a heightened sense of fear over what the Germans would do to him.<sup>69</sup>

Stalag Luft I was abandoned by the German guards on April 30, 1945 and the Russians overtook the camp on May 1, 1945. By May 12, 1945, B-17s were flying into a nearby airstrip to take the take the prisoners to Barth, Germany and from there to Le Havre, France.<sup>70</sup> Although Bach survived the war physically unscathed, he nonetheless had emotional scars from his time as a prisoner of war. He wrote, “Time spent as a POW gave rise to an awful feeling of being invisible, and thus ignored. This is akin to being forgotten. It has taken me more than fifty years to come to terms with reality.”<sup>71</sup> While Luftwaffe-controlled camps generally followed the Geneva Convention more closely, Bach’s account makes clear this was not always the case. The segregation of Jewish prisoners at Stalag Luft I violated the Geneva Convention.

### **Peter Neft**

Jewish American pilot Peter Neft recalled being treated decently at first because he was an officer and pilot. He was given his own cell with a stove in the local jail where his

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 166.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, 166-168.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 173-175, 187, 193.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, ix-x.

plane went down, until the German guards requested that he allow two wounded men from his plane to take the cell. The guards even laughed when he tried to escape from the unlocked cell. On the way to the Dulag to be interrogated, he sat with a German captain who considered him more of an equal than the two German guards who were regular enlisted men.<sup>72</sup> On arriving at Stalag Luft I, the guards realized that Neft was Jewish, but allowed the prisoners to practice their faith and hold religious services. Neft remembered that he was “cocky” because he passed the rigorous selection process for pilots and was not afraid to openly practice his faith even in the prisoner of war camp. However, in January of 1945, when the guards demanded that all the Jewish prisoners move to separate barracks, Neft “really got scared.”<sup>73</sup> Aside from being segregated and enduring lack of food, which was a problem throughout the prisoner of war camps by that point in the war, Neft escaped any further mistreatment. Neft credits this to his rank as an officer, citing that many enlisted men did not fare as well.<sup>74</sup> Like the account of African American airmen, Neft’s narrative demonstrated that certain factors, including being an officer and an airman, could diminish the level of mistreatment experienced by prisoners of war. However, unlike some African Americans, Jewish Americans of the same rank and position could still face segregation.

### **Milton Stern**

Airman Milton Stern survived a drastically different experience after being shot down over Holland on March 8, 1944. Receiving help from locals, Stern reached Liege, Belgium, before being captured by the Gestapo on May 27, 1944. The Gestapo knew that Stern was a

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<sup>72</sup> Peter Neft, “Peter Neft,” in *American POWs of World War II: Forgotten Men Tell Their Stories*, edited by Tom Bird (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1992), 87-96.

<sup>73</sup> Neft, “Peter Neft,” 90-91.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid*, 91-93.

Jew, and he recounted, “the first thing I got was a beating by the Gestapo officer in charge. I was punched about the face and head and kicked in the stomach and buttocks. When he was through punching and kicking and shouting at me, I was allowed to get dressed.”<sup>75</sup> Stern was taken to the Gestapo headquarters where eight other Americans were being held prisoner, but none of them were Jewish. He remembered being “kept with my hands tightly manacled behind my back and chained to a radiator in the waiting room . . . for about 12 hours. During that time the Gestapo officer would often come up to me and pound me on the head and shoulders, pull my hair and say ‘This Jew is for me.’”<sup>76</sup> No doubt the Gestapo wanted to know who had been involved in hiding the Americans, but the non-Jewish American prisoners were allowed to sit on a bench.<sup>77</sup> As a Jewish American, captured by the Gestapo rather than the Wehrmacht, Stern was in a bad situation.

Stern was first held at St. Leonard’s Prison, and then moved to “the ‘Citadel,’” both Gestapo prisons. Stern recalled, “I was put in solitary confinement where I stayed for thirty days on bread and water. During the almost two months that I was in Gestapo prisons I slept on cold damp hard stone or marble floors.”<sup>78</sup> Although the Gestapo was harsh on prisoners, Stern received more punishment because he was Jewish. Unlike Peter Neft, the fact that Stern was an airman afforded him no respect or protection while under the control of the Gestapo. The Wehrmacht and Luftwaffe generally held airmen of any race or religion in

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<sup>75</sup> Milton W. Stern (AFC/2001/001/1348), Statement in Support of Disability Claim, Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.; Milton W. Stern, (AFC/2001/001/1348), “Kriegie Memoirs of 1944-1945,” Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>76</sup> Stern, Statement, Veterans History Project.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

esteem over other servicemen. However, with the Gestapo Stern's perceived Jewish race (by Nazi standards) overrode any other considerations.

In July 1944, Stern was sent to Stalag Luft I, where he was initially held with the other prisoners. They lived in 25 tents, as the barracks were already full. The men could hold religious services. After two months in the tents, the men were moved to barracks. On January 27, 1945, however, the guards moved most of the Jewish officers to a barrack at North Compound I.<sup>79</sup> Stern recalled that there were rumors the Jewish prisoners of war were going to be sent to a concentration camp. By February the Red Cross parcels halted and the men only had coffee and soup each day, in addition to a loaf of bread a week. He credits the swiftly advancing Russians for the guards never removing the Jews from the camp.<sup>80</sup> Stern's account reveals that even at prisoner of war camps for airmen conditions began to deteriorate towards the end of the war and any known Jewish prisoners were placed in additional danger of falling victim to the Final Solution. To the Gestapo Stern's position as an airman made no difference. The treatment he received while in the Gestapo prisons heightened his awareness of what segregation could signal.

**\*\*\*\*Stalag IX-B and Berga Work Kommando 625\*\*\*\***

For the Jewish American prisoners of war held at Stalag IX-B those fears were well founded. In January of 1945, 350 prisoners were rounded up and sent to Kommando 625 just outside Berga. The prisoners included Jewish Americans, those with "Jewish-sounding names," and "undesirables" including those labeled as troublemakers and other minorities. Although technically assigned to work Kommando 625 under Stalag IX-C, these prisoners of

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid; Stern, "Kriegie Memoirs," Veterans History Project.

<sup>80</sup> Stern, "Kriegie Memoirs," Veterans History Project; Stern, Statement, Veterans History Project.

war never personally passed through Stalag IX-C and were housed in barracks *directly* across the road from the Berga concentration camp (see Figures 4 and 5 below). Held at the Berga Kommando from January to April 1945, they worked in the mines alongside inmates from the concentration camp.<sup>81</sup> Examining several of their accounts, along with testimony from non-Jewish prisoners of war, demonstrates that these men came face to face with the horrors of the Holocaust.

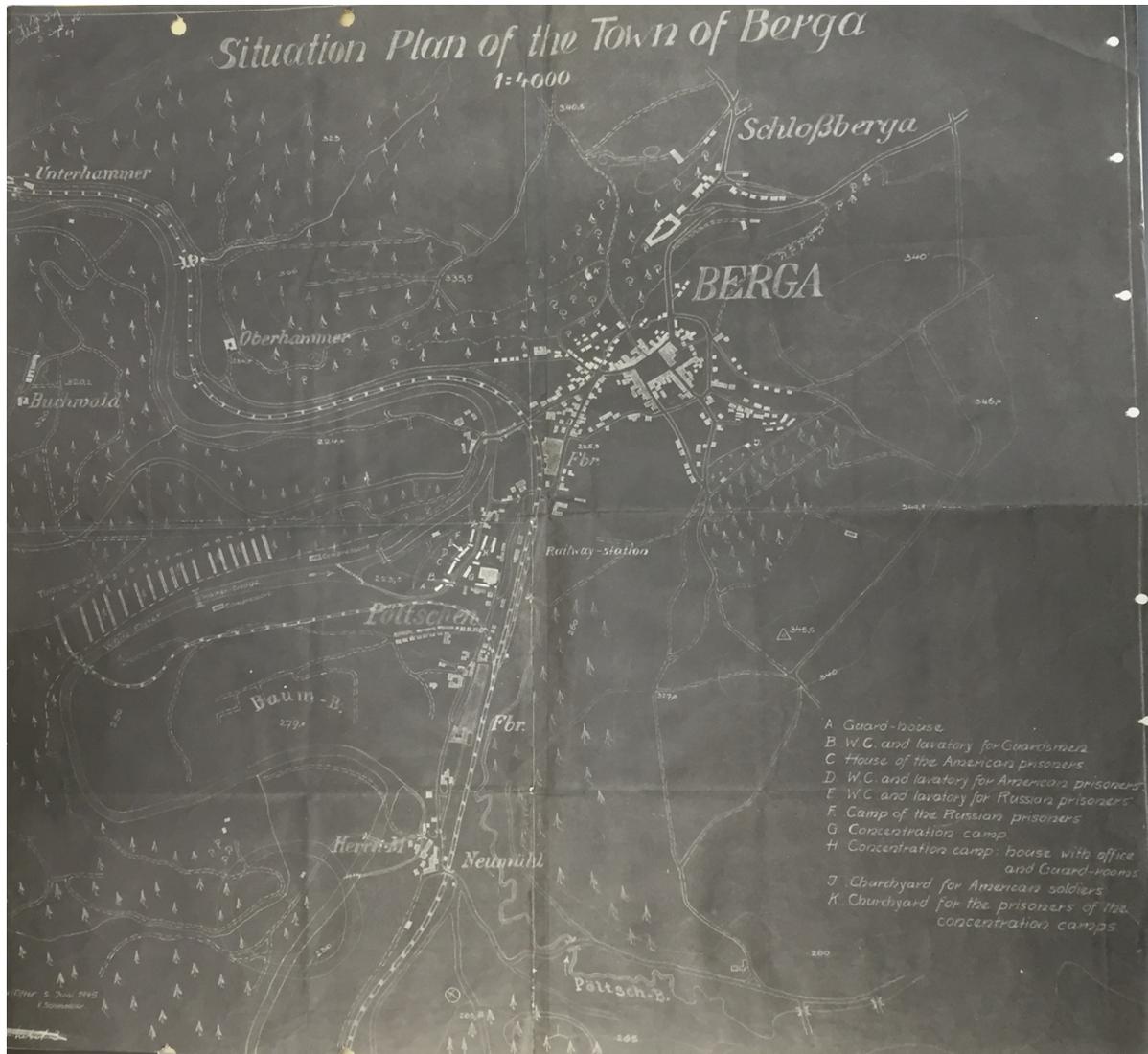
### **Howard Lowenberg**

Originally from Germany, Howard Lowenberg immigrated with his family to the United States when he was ten years old. Captured during the Battle of the Bulge, Lowenberg was first held at Stalag IX-B and later transferred to Stalag IV-B. Before being captured Lowenberg had given his field jacket to another serviceman and along with it his dog tags. The German officer recording the prisoners' information at Stalag IX-B inquired to Lowenberg's religion upon hearing his name. He recalled, "So ah this captain he say I'm gonna to mark you down as Catholic so you'll have a better chance of going back to the States."<sup>82</sup> Although Lowenberg's account is brief, it is also remarkable that a German officer concealed that Lowenberg was Jewish considering other Jewish Americans held at Stalag IX-B were first segregated and eventually sent to a work Kommando adjacent to Berga. With his records stating that Lowenberg was Catholic, he was transferred to a different camp, but never to the Berga work Kommando.

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<sup>81</sup> "Perpetuation of Testimony of Joseph C. Markowitz, Pfc.," September 6, 1945, Box 48, Dossier File Series, RG 153, NARA, College Park, MD; "Situation Plan of the Town of Berga," Box 51, Dossier File Series, RG 153, NARA, College Park, MD; Deborah Dash Moore, *GI Jews: How World War II Changed a Generation* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 184.

<sup>82</sup> Howard Lowenberg (AFC/2001/001/13755), Video Interview, Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.



**Figure 4:** Map demonstrating the separation of the prisoner of war work Kommando from the main camp of Berga, see buildings C and G respectively. Situation Plan of the Town of Berga, no date, "Berga C.C.," Box 51, Person and Places Case File (Dossier File), RG 153: Records of the Office of the Judge Advocate General (Army), 1792-2010, NARA, College Park, MD.

### Bernie Melnick

Initially held in Stalag IX-B, Bernie Melnick did not experience any discrimination from other prisoners on account of his religion. For all prisoners of war, regardless of race or religion the conditions at Stalag IX-B, also known as Bab Orb, were not favorable. Many



**Figure 5:** Enlargement of Figure 4. Building C is the prisoner of war barracks and building G across the road is the main Berga camp. Situation Plan of the Town of Berga, no date, “Berga C.C.,” Box 51, Person and Places Case File (Dossier File), RG 153: Records of the Office of the Judge Advocate General (Army), 1792-2010, NARA, College Park, MD.

prisoners had to sleep on the floor, lice were rampant, and the food was inferior; prisoners at Stalag IX-B already suffered a deteriorated state of health. In January of 1945 Melnick was moved to Berga work Kommando 625 with what he estimated to be about 150 other Jews and approximately 200 non-Jewish prisoners of war. Using tactics reminiscent of those in the Eastern European ghettos, the guards allowed the men to believe that Berga would be better than the prisoner of war camp. Melnick wrote, “I guess it was Hitler’s belief that out of every so many American prisoners of war, a certain number were Jews, something like 10 percent. So when our commandant decided to follow Hitler’s orders, he was responsible for

accounting for a specific number of Jews.”<sup>83</sup> According to Melnick, since the camp held about 3,500 prisoners, then 350 Jews had to be sent. Non-Jews were selected to meet the quota because they were seen as troublemakers or the guards thought they were Jewish for various reasons.<sup>84</sup> These men were held at Berga from January to April 1945, working in the mines at Berga. They were marched out to an unknown destination when U.S. troops began to advance. Melnick contended that the guards moved the prisoners only because they were afraid of attacks from the more frequent flights by American pilots overhead, rather than an attempt to save the remaining prisoners of war.<sup>85</sup>

### **Norman Fellman**

Norman Fellman, an American Jew, also ended up in Berga. He had been accepted into the Air Corps upon being drafted in 1944. He was supposed to be trained as a pilot, but manpower needs in Europe greatly reduced the number of available personnel to train all the men and Fellman, among others, was transferred back to the regular Army. He was captured while serving with the 45th Infantry Division in Alsace-Lorraine after his company was surrounded sometime in late December 1944 or early January 1945.<sup>86</sup> Upon arriving at Stalag IX-B, Fellman was registered as a Protestant by the American prisoner of war working as a clerk. After being in the camp for several weeks, the German commandant announced that Jews in the camp were to come forward. Although the other prisoners agreed to help

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<sup>83</sup> Bernie Melnick, “Bernie Melnick,” in *American POWs of World War II: Forgotten Men Tell Their Stories*, edited by Tom Bird (Westport, Ct: Praeger, 1992), 97-105.

<sup>84</sup> Melnick, “Bernie Melnick,” 97-105; Martin Jay Olsen, “Martin Jay Olsen,” in *American Ex-Prisoners of War of World War II*, vol. 1, edited by Jeffrey W. Peristere (Broadway, NY: Medallion Publishing, 2002), 141-144; Whitlock, *Given Up for Dead*, 125.

<sup>85</sup> Melnick, “Bernie Melnick,” 97-105.

<sup>86</sup> Whitlock, *Given Up for Dead*, 12.

him, Fellman decided to admit that he was Jewish. He feared the other prisoners would turn on him later if rations were reduced, having dealt with anti-Semitism before. His fears were not unfounded; another Jewish American, Joseph Mark, was threatened into giving up his bread lest another prisoner make his religion known to the Germans.<sup>87</sup> Along with about 350 other men, Fellman was sent to the Berga work camp. He recalled rampant lice and a bread diet sometimes supplemented by coffee or soup. The Jewish prisoners of war held at the Berga work Kommando worked at tunneling for planned underground factories. Fellman recalled that the men were beaten often “with a rubber hose or a rifle butt.”<sup>88</sup> By the time he was liberated, Fellman had lost almost 100 pounds.<sup>89</sup> Fellman’s account confirms that conditions at Berga were indeed vastly different from Stalag IX-B. Rations were inadequate, even for men not performing hard labor, and prisoners faced constant beatings.

### **William Shapiro**

William Shapiro’s description provides useful information on Stalag IX-B, where he noted that once Jewish servicemen were separated from the other prisoners, they were given the worst jobs, most notably cleaning out latrine ditches.<sup>90</sup> These men were also locked in their barracks for most of the day, unless they were sent out to perform work. Unlike the other prisoners of war, the Jewish servicemen could not play any sports; however, they did

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<sup>87</sup> Whitlock, *Given Up for Dead*, 91.

<sup>88</sup> Norman Fellman (AFC/2001/001/1604), Transcript (MV0001), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>89</sup> Fellman, Transcript, Veterans History Project.

<sup>90</sup> Cleaning out latrine ditches was also considered one of the worst jobs in concentration camps and reserved for those lowest in the camp hierarchy, namely Jews.

play games like craps in the barracks.<sup>91</sup> Even before being transferred to Berga, the Jewish inmates at Stalag IX-B received substandard treatment compared to the other prisoners who at least had access to fresh air and exercise.

Shapiro also gave a detailed account of the conditions at the Berga work Kommando. The men were housed in two barracks, each of which had a latrine with a sink and bucket for human waste. The bunks were three high and other than straw mattresses, no bedding was provided. In addition to the beatings Fellman recalled, Shapiro stated that the guards punished them by making them stand roll call for long periods of time. Most of the men worked in the tunnels clearing the way for underground factories Hitler planned to build. These prisoners of war (along with prisoners from the Berga concentration camp) worked for twelve hours every day of the week. Shapiro was chosen to work transporting food from the concentration camp and serving the men. For breakfast the men received ersatz coffee and an approximately one to one-and-a-half-inch slice of bread. At night, they obtained a thin soup of turnips, unidentifiable greens, or potatoes. Yet, he noted that however bad their position, those in the concentration camp across the road were treated even worse.<sup>92</sup> Shapiro's account demonstrates that whether Jewish or not, the status of being a prisoner of war provided a minimal amount of protection; however, horrible those conditions still may have been.

Shapiro recalled that a Red Cross agent visited the Berga work Kommando and spoke with him. According to Shapiro, the man did not seem to care about the treatment of the

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<sup>91</sup> William J. Shapiro, "Berga am Elster: A Medic Recalls the Horrors of Berga," Jewish Virtual Library, <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsourc/Holocaust/Shapiro.html> (accessed October 23, 2014).

<sup>92</sup> Shapiro, "Berga am Elster."

American prisoners of war and gave no indication that he would work to improve their conditions. The Red Cross, despite knowing that prisoners of war were held at Berga, never sent any parcels to them. Shapiro theorized that the man was a Nazi sympathizer, but the truth was complicated.<sup>93</sup> Knowing the war was ultimately lost after the Battle of the Bulge, the Nazis no longer responded to the actions of the Red Cross. Furthermore, the Red Cross itself could only do so much whether they were sympathetic to the plight of Jewish Americans at Berga or not. Behind enemy lines, the Red Cross could demand that the German government honor the Geneva Convention, but had no practical way of enforcing their demands.

### **John Fellows**

Melnick, Fellman, and Shapiro's accounts implies that the treatment of prisoners of war was random or religion played no real factor, since non-Jews were also sent to Berga. However, the account of a non-Jewish American prisoner at Berga reveals that German guards did distinguish between those who were Jewish and those who were not. John Fellows, a non-Jew sent to Berga, found that conditions at Berga were better than Stalag IX-B, even though the work was hard. His only major complaint was that the food allotment did not increase with the workload. Fellows contended that the Jews at Berga were treated no worse than he was, but he also admits that he rarely talked to other prisoners. By his own account, Fellows revealed that he did not work in the mines for long; rather he and a group of about five men were tasked with cutting down trees. The men in this work detail received more rations and in time the guards moved these men to a different barracks, removed from

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

the main Berga work Kommando.<sup>94</sup> Thus, even Jewish and non-Jewish servicemen sent to the same work camp, did not necessarily share the same experiences. The guards at Berga may have realized that Fellows was not Jewish and offered him a better position outside of the main camp.

### **Anthony Acevedo**

Anthony Acevedo was a medic in the 275th Infantry Regiment 70th Division captured during the Battle of the Bulge on January 6, 1945. His account may seem odd to include, he was neither Jewish American nor African American, yet his story demonstrates the fluidity of the prisoner of war experience in the Nazi racialized hierarchy. While no exact reason was given for sending Acevedo to Berga it would make sense that he was selected because he was Mexican American. Receiving a YMCA diary in a Red Cross package in March 1945, Acevedo kept a remarkably detailed account of the prisoners' last weeks in Berga and the forced march that followed. Taking a medic's point of view, his account focused on the rations, conditions, and health of the prisoners, recording the deaths from March to April 1945. In 2012, Acevedo wrote a memoir providing additional details about his experiences supplementing information in the YMCA diary.<sup>95</sup>

Acevedo recalled the Germans telling the prisoners that conditions at the Berga work Kommando would be an improvement over Stalag IX-B. "We had heard that their intent was to segregate American Jews from the other prisoners and that this new location would be a better place to stay. There would be more food, better living conditions and more freedom.

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<sup>94</sup> John Fellows, "John Fellows," in *American POWs of World War II: Forgotten Men Tell Their Stories*, edited by Tom Bird (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1992), 107-112.

<sup>95</sup> Anthony Acevedo, Y.M.C.A. "A Wartime Log," Anthony Acevedo Papers, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, D.C.

For some unexplained reason I was included among them.”<sup>96</sup> There the prisoners received about “100 grams of bread per week” and tea made of “dry weeds.”<sup>97</sup> Medical supplies were almost non-existent, mainly consisting of whatever the prisoners had brought with them from Stalag IX-B. When Red Cross parcels were distributed on March 28, 1945, ten men had to share each parcel. Acevedo estimated the number of American prisoners of war deaths in the camp to be about fifty to seventy men, fourteen to twenty percent of those sent to the Berga Kommando, all within a few months.<sup>98</sup> By April 19, 1945, he noted, “More of our men died, so fast that you couldn’t keep track of their numbers.”<sup>99</sup> The cause of deaths Acevedo recorded in his diary included pneumonia, diphtheria, dysentery, and malnutrition. Pneumonia and malnutrition were the most common causes of death in the camps and during the march. On April 6, 1945, the men were marched away from the Berga Kommando and finally liberated on April 23, 1945. By then Acevedo had lost 85 pounds. Only 170 of the approximately 350 men sent to Berga survived.<sup>100</sup>

An obituary for Anthony Acevedo in March 2018 in *The New York Times* provided more details about his time at the Berga work Kommando. The December before his death his son, Fernando Acevedo, found his father’s war records and subsequent military documents. Included in these was a psychiatric evaluation, which according to his son,

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<sup>96</sup> Anthony Acevedo, “Personal Account of An Undesirable,” Anthony Acevedo Papers, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, D.C.

<sup>97</sup> Acevedo, “Personal Account,” Anthony Acevedo Papers.

<sup>98</sup> Acevedo, “A Wartime Log,” Anthony Acevedo Papers; Acevedo, “Personal Account,” Anthony Acevedo Papers.

<sup>99</sup> Acevedo, “A Wartime Log,” Anthony Acevedo Papers.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid; Acevedo, “Personal Account,” Anthony Acevedo Papers.

revealed that, “After an initial interrogation at Berga, he was raped while other captors laughed at him.”<sup>101</sup> It is impossible to know how often such events happened. Although historians recorded cases of rape, Jewish women survivors often denied it happened. Historians argue that these women did so to keep their dignity.<sup>102</sup> Even rarer is the account of a man, Jewish or otherwise, recounting being raped as a prisoner. Acevedo’s account reveals this too was regrettably a reality for at least some men.



**Figure 6:** American prisoners of war who died on the forced march from Berga. Bodies of Ten American Prisoners of War, June 11, 1945, “Exhibits Folder 3,” Box 51, Person and Places Case File (Dossier File), RG 153: Records of the Office of the Judge Advocate General (Army), 1792-2010, NARA, College Park, MD.

### War Crimes Reports on Stalag IX-B and Berga

In addition to the detailed accounts provided above, numerous shorter records of atrocities can be found in the testimonies and reports compiled by the Army Judge Advocate General in preparation for war crimes trials. While these accounts do not provide as much

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<sup>101</sup> Richard Sandomir, “Anthony Acevedo, 93, Dies; Kept Diary in Nazi Camp,” *The New York Times* (National), March 18, 2018, 25.

<sup>102</sup> See Renate Bridenthal, Atina Grossman, and Marion Kaplan, eds., *When Biology Became Destiny: Women in Weimar and Nazi Germany* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1984); Jack C. Morrison, *Ravenbrück: Everyday Life in a Women’s Concentration Camp, 1939-45* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2000); Rochelle G. Saidel, *The Jewish Women of Ravensbrück Concentration Camp* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004).



**Figure 7:** Bunks for American prisoners of war at Berga work Kommando. Note similarity to conditions in concentration camps. View of Bunks, June 3, 1945, “Exhibits Folder 2,” Box 51, Person and Places Case File (Dossier File), RG 153: Records of the Office of the Judge Advocate General (Army), 1792-2010, NARA, College Park, MD.



**Figure 8:** Tunnels in which American prisoners of war and Berga inmates were forced to work. Exterior View of Tunnels, June 3, 1945, “Exhibits Folder 2,” Box 51, Person and Places Case File (Dossier File), RG 153: Records of the Office of the Judge Advocate General (Army), 1792-2010, NARA, College Park, MD.

detailed information they clearly demonstrate the widespread abuse against prisoners of war that the U.S. government did little to address until after the fact.

Few of the testimonies specific to Stalag IX-B noted the segregation and mistreatment of Jewish American prisoners of war, aside from those obtained by men sent to the Berga work Kommando. One notable exception was the testimony of Jack A. Sulser, held at Stalag IX-B from December 25, 1944 to January 25, 1945. His account is worth noting in full:

About one week after we arrived at IX B, American soldiers of the Jewish faith were separated from the rest of us. They were moved into separate barracks. From where we were, we could see that they were given the dirtiest details such as cleaning the outside latrines, things which we were never required to do. Our leaders protested to the Germans about this but they told us that they were doing it for our own good. The German authorities at the camp told our man of confidence that segregation of Jews was general policy throughout the German camps. About a week after the Jews were segregated, they were marched out of the camp. I do not know where they went to and I never heard anything about them again.<sup>103</sup>

Although brief, Sulser's testimony confirms important details concerning Jewish American prisoners of war at Stalag IX-B. Requiring Jewish American prisoners of war to clean latrines denotes their low status in the camps, as this was considered to be the most undesirable job that could be assigned. For example, at Ravensbrück Jewish women (the lowest in the camp hierarchy) were assigned latrine detail.<sup>104</sup>

The segregation and removal of Jewish Americans did not always loom large in these testimonies. Joseph Bernard Lovisa's testimony focused on camp conditions, Red Cross packages, and the murder of a German guard by two prisoners. In the middle of his testimony he briefly noted, "American Jewish prisoners were separated into one barrack and then were moved from our camp to an unknown location. We never heard what had

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<sup>103</sup> Testimony of Jack A. Sulser, July 23, 1945, in "BK 1, 100-425," Box 34, Persons and Places File (Dossier File) 1944-1949, RG 153: Records of the Judge Advocate General (Army) 1792-2010, NARA, College Park, MD.

<sup>104</sup> Anna Marie Anderson, "Jewish Women in the Concentration Camps: Physical, Moral, and Psychological Resistance" (Master's thesis, University of Houston, 2013), 52; Judith Buber Agassi, *The Jewish Women Prisoners of Ravensbrück: Who Were They?* (Oxford: Oneworld Publication, 2007), 50.

happened to them or if they were subsequently liberated.”<sup>105</sup> Other prisoners seemed unaware that Jewish Americans had been segregated or removed from Stalag IX-B. Melvin Alfred Eder, held at Stalag IX-B from December 25, 1944 to April 2, 1945, recalled he only knew about it because a neighbor told his father-in-law about the Berga work Kommando. However, Eder was unable to offer any firsthand account of the event.<sup>106</sup> A handful of other accounts briefly mentioned Jewish Americans being segregated at Stalag IX-B and sent to the Berga work Kommando. One former prisoner noted that Jews and “Others considered undesirable by Germans were segregated.”<sup>107</sup> Thus, when the Germans selected prisoners to be sent to Berga, Jews and “undesirable[s]” had already been separated from the other prisoners.

The testimonies of those held at the Berga work Kommando describe a brief, yet harrowing ordeal. The Germans sent some 350 prisoners from Stalag IX-B to Stalag IX-C, Kommando 625 located in Berga in late January or early February 1945 and they remained there until April 5, 1945.<sup>108</sup> The proximity of the American prisoner of war barracks to the

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<sup>105</sup> Testimony of Joseph Bernard Lovisa, May 31, 1945, in “BK 1, 100-425,” Box 34, Persons and Places File (Dossier File) 1944-1949, RG 153: Records of the Judge Advocate General (Army) 1792-2010, NARA, College Park, MD.

<sup>106</sup> Testimony of Melvin Alfred Eder, June 21, 1945, in “BK 1, 100-425,” Box 34, Persons and Places File (Dossier File) 1944-1949, RG 153: Records of the Judge Advocate General (Army) 1792-2010, NARA, College Park, MD.

<sup>107</sup> Testimony of William Woelfer, May 5, 1945, in “BK 2, 100-425,” Box 34, Persons and Places File (Dossier File) 1944-1949, RG 153: Records of the Judge Advocate General (Army) 1792-2010, NARA, College Park, MD; Segregation of American Prisoners of War, August 17, 1945, in “BK 2, 100-425,” Box 34, Persons and Places File (Dossier File) 1944-1949, RG 153: Records of the Judge Advocate General (Army) 1792-2010, NARA, College Park, MD; Extract from Testimony of Homer J. Neels, July 30, 1945, in “BK 2, 100-425,” Box 34, Persons and Places File (Dossier File) 1944-1949, RG 153: Records of the Judge Advocate General (Army) 1792-2010, NARA, College Park, MD; Extract from Testimony of Robert J. Fox, July 30, 1945, in “BK 2, 100-425,” Box 34, Persons and Places File (Dossier File) 1944-1949, RG 153: Records of the Judge Advocate General (Army) 1792-2010, NARA, College Park, MD.

<sup>108</sup> Accounts offer a variety of dates for departure from Stalag IX-B, between late January to early February 1945. See, Testimony of Irving Pastor, October 3, 1945, in “BK 1 (Folder 1) 100-486,” Box 48, Persons and Places File (Dossier File) 1944-1949, RG 153: Records of the Judge Advocate General (Army) 1792-2010,

main Berga concentration camp across the road meant that the Kommando in practice operated more akin to a concentration camp than prisoner of war camp. Unlike prisoner of war camps, the men at Berga could not send or receive mail.<sup>109</sup> Reports confirm that prisoners were housed in similar conditions to concentration camps.

Former prisoner Stephen Schweitzer recalled a single latrine for all 350 men and no access to fresh water for drinking or showers. Thus, disease spread among the men. “While at Berga, we worked in the mines in two shifts; one in the morning and one in the evening. The morning shift arose at 5 A.M., marched to the mines, and started work anywhere from 6:30 to 7 A.M. The evening shift started for the mines at 4:30 and started work at 6 P.M.”<sup>110</sup> He concluded, “The general living conditions were atrocious.... The barracks consisted of huts, measuring 20x20 feet. Sixty men were crowded into this space. It was so crowded that all the men in the hut couldn’t stand on the floor at the same time.”<sup>111</sup> The men had to take turns sleeping and standing. German guards provided no medical aid. According to Schweitzer, “While at Berga, we weren’t treated as prisoners of war. We received the exact treatment, and in some cases worse, as the political prisoners.”<sup>112</sup> Samuel Fahrer’s account

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NARA, College Park, MD; Testimony of Joseph C. Markowitz, September 6, 1945, in “BK 1 (Folder 2) 100-486,” Box 48, Persons and Places File (Dossier File) 1944-1949, RG 153: Records of the Judge Advocate General (Army) 1792-2010, NARA, College Park, MD.

<sup>109</sup> Statement of Stephen James Schweitzer, Robert E. Lemp [likely Lamb], Costa Katimaris, and Samuel Fahrer to Charles Vogel, April 24, 1946, in “BK 1 (Folder 1) 100-486,” Box 48, Persons and Places File (Dossier File) 1944-1949, RG 153: Records of the Judge Advocate General (Army) 1792-2010, NARA, College Park, MD.

<sup>110</sup> Testimony of Stephen J. Schweitzer, May 26, 1946, in “BK 1 (Folder 1) 100-486,” Box 48, Persons and Places File (Dossier File) 1944-1949, RG 153: Records of the Judge Advocate General (Army) 1792-2010, NARA, College Park, MD.

<sup>111</sup> Schweitzer, Testimony, May 26, 1946, RG 153: Records of the Judge Advocate General (Army) 1792-2010.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid. See also, Testimony of Edward C. Petty, July 4, 1945, in “BK 1 (Folder 1) 100-486,” Box 48, Persons and Places File (Dossier File) 1944-1949, RG 153: Records of the Judge Advocate General (Army) 1792-2010, NARA, College Park, MD; Testimony of Costa Katimaris, May 28, 1946, in “BK 1 (Folder 1) 100-486,” Box 48, Persons and Places File (Dossier File) 1944-1949, RG 153: Records of the Judge Advocate General (Army) 1792-2010, NARA, College Park, MD; Testimony of Robert E. Lamb, May 20, 1946, in “BK 1 (Folder 1) 100-

noted even at Berga Jewish Americans were “segregated” from the rest of the prisoners of war, although held within the same barracks.<sup>113</sup> Prisoners of war sent to Berga—in particular Jewish Americans—faced extreme conditions separated from the prisoner of war camp system that provided a level of protection from the worst depravations of the Nazi’s racialized policies.

### Conclusion

The accounts above demonstrate that there were degrees of mistreatment. Camps did not all operate the same. Overall Americans in German run prisoner of war camps never experienced the same level of brutality their fellow servicemen endured in Japanese run camps, certainly not the same death rate. Yet, the experiences of Jewish American prisoners of war reveal patterns of general mistreatment, abuse, malnutrition, and in extreme cases forced labor. Thus, the differences between Japanese and German operated camps were not as stark as many Americans believed at the time or even now.

Although the majority of Jewish American prisoners of war returned home, their experiences testify to the anti-Semitism and discrimination on the part of both their captors and the United States. The “H” for Hebrew stamped on their dog tags made Jewish Americans vulnerable upon being captured. They often had only a few minutes to make a decision on whether to discard their dog tags (and face accusations of being a spy) or hope

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486,” Box 48, Persons and Places File (Dossier File) 1944-1949, RG 153: Records of the Judge Advocate General (Army) 1792-2010, NARA, College Park, MD; Markowitz, Testimony, September 6, 1945, RG 153: Records of the Judge Advocate General (Army) 1792-2010; Arthur A. Boucher to Vogel and Vogel Counsellors at Law, June 15, 1946, , in “BK 2, 100-486,” Box 48, Persons and Places File (Dossier File) 1944-1949, RG 153: Records of the Judge Advocate General (Army) 1792-2010, NARA, College Park, MD.

<sup>113</sup> Testimony of Samuel Fahrer, May 23, 1946, in “BK 1 (Folder 1) 100-486,” Box 48, Persons and Places File (Dossier File) 1944-1949, RG 153: Records of the Judge Advocate General (Army) 1792-2010, NARA, College Park, MD.

their status as U.S. citizens would protect them. They based their decisions on prior experiences with anti-Semitism (as civilians and in the military) and their knowledge of how the Germans treated Jews. Men like Leonard Meltzer and Seymour Litchenfeld chose to hide their dog tags. Meltzer's case however clarifies that the German guards could figure out a prisoner of war was Jewish regardless. While they may have encountered anti-Semitism as civilians and in the military, many Jewish prisoners of war recalled a level of solidarity as prisoners. They remembered fellow prisoners coming to their aid, recording their religion as non-Jewish, and encouraging them to not step forward when the Kommandant demanded and stepping forward as a group with them. Such treatment by fellow American prisoners of war would be markedly absent from African American narratives. Yet, some Jewish Americans such as Alfred Goldstein and Joseph Mark still dealt with anti-Semitism from fellow prisoners of war.

## Chapter 4

### **“The Enemy Treated Me with Respect and Dignity”: The African American Prisoner of War Experience**

*All you got to do is keep your mouth shut and nobody will ever know you are Jewish . . . Look at me. I can't hide. They know who I am. And, of course we laughed over it, ha-ha-ha, you know, because it was meant to be a joke, but it was still fact.*

- Harold H. Brown, Stalag VII-A, 1944

### **Introduction**

“There are no atheists in foxholes” so the saying goes; so too racial prejudice is supposed to disappear in foxholes and in the trenches, but the same did not apply for prisoner of war camps. Although no longer in direct combat with the enemy, these men were literally in enemy territory. Beyond the front lines, one might assume that nationality and citizenship would outweigh racial prejudice, but this was not always the case. For African Americans, racism persisted and those who did make white “friends” in the camps were wont to note that their friendships did not survive the return trip home. Just over 900,000 African Americans served in World War II; however, unlike for Jewish Americans there are no estimates as to how many African Americans were prisoners of war.<sup>1</sup>

African Americans, like Jewish Americans, had immediate cause for concern upon capture, especially by SS troops. Although those of African descent were considered as “inferior” like Jews in the Nazi racial hierarchy, their numbers were so few in Germany and

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<sup>1</sup> No comprehensive list of prisoners of war exists; thus, it would be nearly impossible to provide an estimate without consulting hundreds of prisoners of war lists held in multiple archives. For information on the number of African American servicemen and an estimate of Tuskegee Airmen held as prisoners of war see “Research Starters: US Military by the Numbers,” The National World War II Museum, <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/students-teachers/student-resources/research-starters/research-starters-us-military-numbers> (accessed October 4, 2017); “Tuskegee Experience,” no date, in “176 B14 F4,” Box 14, Collection 176: Tuskegee Airmen Collection, Special Collections and University Archives, Tomás Rivera Library, University of California Riverside, Riverside, CA.

throughout Europe at the start of World War II that the Nazis did not develop a plan for annihilation on the level of the Final Solution. However, certain Nazi laws applied to those of African descent including the euthanasia laws. Military service in Nazi Germany was forbidden for Jews and those with “colored blood.”<sup>2</sup> After the war, there were several allegations that the SS specifically had given orders to kill rather than take captive black prisoners. However, none of these cases were brought to trial due to insufficient evidence. Even when members of the SS themselves gave testimony the cases did not go to trial. An SS division commander ordered on June 21, 1944 that “no Negro prisoners of war were to be taken alive.”<sup>3</sup> Similarly two SS guards reported that in early September 1944, they witnessed “Negro American soldiers being executed after they were ordered to dig their own graves.’ [...And orders had been issued that] ‘Negroes were not to be taken prisoner.’”<sup>4</sup> One directive, apparently regarding colonial African troops, was to “kill all colored prisoners on sight, because they stink.”<sup>5</sup> In total thirty-one war crimes investigations were opened into the treatment of African Americans, but rarely was anyone convicted due to insufficient evidence or inability to identify the perpetrators.<sup>6</sup> The similar lack of consequences in war crimes investigations and the typical response to lynching and other acts of violence against African Americans in the United States is notably similar.

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<sup>2</sup> Kesting, “Blacks Under the Swastika,” 87-89.

<sup>3</sup> Kesting, “Blacks in the Holocaust,” 31.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 32.

<sup>5</sup> Kesting, “Blacks Under the Swastika,” 95.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 95.

Until they were officially registered, African Americans, like Jewish Americans, faced additional threats of violence and even murder. This danger increased for those prisoners unlucky enough to be captured by the Gestapo or the SS. African Americans could be killed without the detaining power suffering any consequences. The victims would appear as missing in action or killed in action in records back home. These cases were similar to that of Jewish American Harry Weissman (discussed in the previous chapter) who was killed before reaching a main prisoner of war camp and never listed as captured.

This chapter begins with a comparison of how German prisoners of war in the United States were treated in contrast to African American servicemen in the States. This is followed with an examination of how colonial African prisoners of war were regarded by their German captors, demonstrating that nationality was vital in the treatment of those of African descent. Next, is an explanation of the danger unregistered African American prisoners of war encountered, especially when captured by the SS. The remainder of the chapter mirrors the outline of the previous in layout to facilitate a comparison of the treatment of Jewish Americans and African Americans where they were held at the same camps. Unlisted camps are followed by regular Stalags, and lastly a single record of an African American prisoner held at Stalag Luft III.<sup>7</sup>

### **African Americans and Axis Prisoners of War in the U.S.**

The case of German (and Italian) prisoners of war in the United States and their treatment, compared to African American servicemen stationed in the U.S. demonstrates how

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<sup>7</sup> I was only able to locate one surviving account of an African American held at a Luftwaffe camp which is surprising considering that most captured African Americans were airmen. However, despite being airmen most ended up in regular Stalags. Yet, their status as airmen still afforded them equality of treatment by their German guards. There seems to be no evidence that African American airmen were purposely not transferred to Luftwaffe controlled camps. Instead it may be a repercussion of the few available accounts of African American prisoners of war overall, wherein those held at Luftwaffe camps were never recorded or not preserved.

place shaped perception of race. There were routine reports of German prisoners of war in the U.S. being treated better than African American citizens (and servicemen) in their own country. German guards of African American prisoners of war in Europe often treated them equally, yet once in the United States German prisoner of war behavior was racist.

Letters and newspaper articles reveal that African Americans in the military were routinely treated as inferior to German prisoners of war held in the United States. Private Bert B. Babero wrote on February 13, 1944 from Camp Barkeley, Texas, that German prisoners were considered nearly equal to white soldiers, while African Americans faced blatant discrimination. He recalled, “It was to my amazement, a short time ago, when I had the opportunity of visiting the German concentration camp [prisoner of war camp] here at Barkeley to observe a sign in the latrine, actually segregating a section of the latrine for [the] Negro soldier, the other being used by the German prisoners and the white soldiers. Seeing this was honestly disheartening. It made me feel, here, the tyrant is actually placed over the liberator.”<sup>8</sup> Likewise, Samuel A. Conner stationed at Camp Crowder, Missouri, argued that African American soldiers had worse housing than the German prisoners.<sup>9</sup> Not limited to camps in the South, however, one white soldier bemoaned that Italian prisoners at a camp in Massachusetts were treated better than African Americans. He witnessed African Americans being removed from various service clubs by the military police. “Now I am not a Colored Soldiers as a matter of fact I am a white Officer but white or colored I am fighting this very same thing with the enemy so why should I put up with the same policies or adopt these

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<sup>8</sup> Private Bert B. Babero, “A Figure Head,” in *Taps for a Jim Crow Army: Letters from Black Soldiers in World War II*, ed. Phillip McGuire (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1993), 51.

<sup>9</sup> Samuel A. Conner, “Dock Stevedores and Construction Battalions,” in *Taps for a Jim Crow Army: Letters from Black Soldiers in World War II*, ed. Phillip McGuire (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1993), 75-76.

hated [sic].”<sup>10</sup> This officer clearly understood the hypocrisy between the stated war aims of the United States and the reality of race relations on the home front.<sup>11</sup> The discrimination of African Americans in the United States was so rampant that even prisoners of war were routinely treated better and shown more respect.

In Berlin, Maryland, in June 1945, two African American civilians, John Brown and Alan Hatton, were arrested after their “taunting” of German prisoners escalated. Brown hit one of the Germans prisoners of war and was subsequently shot by a guard. Brown and Hatton were charged with “assault and battery.”<sup>12</sup> News articles about the incident were more sympathetic to the German prisoners of war and the guard who shot Brown, rather than the African American civilian who was shot. There were no public demands for an explanation of how a minor fight turned into a shooting and arrest of two U.S. citizens.

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<sup>10</sup> A White Soldier, “Reflections of a White Soldier,” in *Taps for a Jim Crow Army: Letters from Black Soldiers in World War II*, ed. Phillip McGuire (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1993), 174-175. See also Private James Pritchett, “German POWs Have More Rights and Freedom,” in *Taps for a Jim Crow Army: Letters from Black Soldiers in World War II*, ed. Phillip McGuire (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1993), 23-24; John M. Walls, Jr., “Neurosis on the Rise,” in *Taps for a Jim Crow Army: Letters from Black Soldiers in World War II*, ed. Phillip McGuire (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1993), 92-97; Corporal Daniell E. Williams, “Negro Hating Cracker from Louisiana,” in *Taps for a Jim Crow Army: Letters from Black Soldiers in World War II*, ed. Phillip McGuire (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1993), 109-110; A Negro Solider, “Treated Worse than Japs,” in *Taps for a Jim Crow Army: Letters from Black Soldiers in World War II*, ed. Phillip McGuire (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1993), 217.

<sup>11</sup> *The Chicago Defender* frequently ran political cartoons that called into question the duplicity of U.S. war aims—embodied in President Roosevelt’s “Four Freedoms” Speech and the declaration of war on Germany—to the treatment of minorities in the United States. Two of the most glaring cartoons were the “Blind Leading The Blind” and “Ersatz Hate.” In the first cartoon, a personified United States leads Germany by the hand, both “men” wearing glasses labeled “Race Hate.” The second cartoon has a caricature of a U.S. officer painting a notice that “Negroes” may be discriminated against in occupied Germany. “Blind Leading The Blind,” *The Chicago Defender* June 16, 1945; “Ersatz Hate,” *The Chicago Defender* September 29, 1945. Also see “Now It’s For Export,” *The Chicago Defender*, January 2, 1943; “Who’s He Kidding?” *The Chicago Defender*, July 19, 1943; “For White Only?” *The Chicago Defender*, October 9, 1943; “Forgotten Man Of The Country,” *The Chicago Defender*, July 29, 1944.

<sup>12</sup> “PW Guard Shoots Negro on Shore: Wounded Man Said to Have Hit German Prisoner,” *The Baltimore Sun* June 10, 1945; “Negro Shot in Row With Berlin, Md., Nazi Prisoners,” *The Washington Post*, June 10, 1945.

A report from December 1944, described a riot that began after two African American soldiers were assaulted by Italian prisoners of war. There had been a history of resentment at the camp on the part of African American soldiers who were treated worse than the Italian prisoners. “The riot began, according to witnesses, when two Negro soldiers were badly beaten by the Italians and dumped near the barracks. Twenty-eight Negro soldiers received around 200 years in prison sentences for rioting.”<sup>13</sup> Yet, it appears that the Italian prisoners faced no repercussions for physically harming two U.S. military personnel members.

### **Colonial African Prisoners of War**

Germany held more colonial African prisoners than African Americans since colonial Africans served more frequently on the front lines. African colonial prisoners of war were often abused by their German captors.<sup>14</sup> There are many reports of German soldiers and the SS killing colonial Africans, although few war crimes investigations were carried through to trial. The SS killed one thousand Senegalese prisoners of war, used as “slave laborers,” “because ‘they were stealing potatoes from the field.’”<sup>15</sup> From 1940-1941, the German army used African French colonial prisoners of war as unpaid workers in Stalags in France and factories in Belgium. About half of these prisoners died from malnutrition and abuse.<sup>16</sup> Still

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<sup>13</sup> “Contend that Death of Italian War Prisoner Was Really Suicide: Convicted Men Were Given 200 Years In Prison: Victim Held Mortal Fear of Black Americans,” *Atlanta Daily World*, December 28, 1944.

<sup>14</sup> Approximately one million African colonials served during World War II, most with the French, Italian, or British militaries. Around 120,000 French Africans were prisoners of war. For further information see David Killingray, “African Voices from Two World Wars,” *Historical Research* 74, no. 186 (November 2001): 425-443; Paul Garson, *African Colonial Prisoners of the Germans: A Pictorial History of Captive Soldiers in the World Wars* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2016).

<sup>15</sup> Kesting, “Blacks in the Holocaust,” 31.

<sup>16</sup> Kesting, “Blacks Under the Swastika,” 95.

another report alleged that when African-French soldiers surrendered to an SS division all 212 were killed rather than being taken prisoners of war.<sup>17</sup> Nazi Germany applied racist policies more readily to colonial Africans than African Americans. Colonial Africans were typically captured in large groups, whereas African Americans were often alone or with only a handful of other African Americans. Citizenship also played a role. Consequences of mistreatment were potentially worse if it involved U.S. citizens, compared with colonial conscripts.

### **Unregistered African American Prisoners of War**

Some African Americans fell victim to the Nazi racist ideals and the virulent SS in the precarious time period between capture and registration. One testimony alleged that a Dr. Prima (thought to also be a member of the SS) murdered African American airmen shot down near Salzburg in February 1944. In Hungary in December 1944, SS troops beat two African American airmen to death and the same month Gestapo guards killed an African American pilot in a local jail; neither case was brought to trial. Similar to Jewish American Milton Stern who was captured by and held in Gestapo prisons, African American airman Darwin Nichols was held at the notorious Gestapo prison in Butzbach in 1945.<sup>18</sup>

Perhaps in the most striking case the SS captured and executed eleven African Americans from the 106th Division, 333rd Field Artillery Battalion near Wereth, Belgium on December 17, 1944.<sup>19</sup> Initially the so-called Wereth Eleven narrowly escaped the Germans and were briefly hidden by a Belgium family until the SS arrived in Wereth. The soldiers

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid; For additional accounts and information see Stefan Goodwin, *African in Europe: Volume Two: Interdependencies, Relocations, and Globalization* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2009), 211-260.

<sup>18</sup> Kesting, "Blacks in the Holocaust," 31-32; Kesting, "Blacks Under the Swastika," 95.

<sup>19</sup> Kesting, "Blacks in the Holocaust," 31.

decided to give themselves up rather than risking the lives of the family that had taken them in. They were forced to run ahead of an SS vehicle and taken outside the village. In February 1945, the villagers found their bodies in a ditch. The immediate investigation yielded little information and there was only a short one-page autopsy filed on their murders. The African American servicemen had been beaten, bayoneted, and then shot. The report found, ““The perpetrators were undoubtedly SS enlisted men, but available testimony is insufficient to establish definite unit identification.””<sup>20</sup> Their families were not informed of the murders, simply that they had died in combat.<sup>21</sup>

The preceding accounts are not unlike those of Jewish American Harry Weissman who was also killed by the SS before he could be taken to a prisoner of war camp. Both Jewish American and African American prisoners of war were in a more precarious position upon immediate capture, especially when taken prisoner by the Gestapo or SS, in comparison to white (non-Jewish) prisoners. Registration as a prisoner of war provided a level of security as the German government would have to explain why a prisoner had died or disappeared. Although this protection varied in effectiveness for Jewish Americans, most African Americans were safe from Nazi racial policies once in the camps. It was during this transition period to an actual prisoner of war camp, before any documentation was made, that African Americans were at their most vulnerable. However, in some cases African

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<sup>20</sup> Jim Michaels, “Emerging from History: Massacre of 11 Black Soldiers,” *USA Today*, November 8, 2013, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2013/11/07/wereth-black-soldiers-battle-of-bulge-army-world-war-ii-history/3465059/> (accessed July 29, 2014); Kesting, “Blacks in the Holocaust,” 31; Senate, *Congressional Record*, 104th Congress, 2nd Session, S1372-S1373.

<sup>21</sup> Michaels, “Emerging from History.” Also see House, *Congressional Record*, 114th Congress, 2nd Session, H4466; Senate, *Congressional Record*, 114th Congress, 2nd Session, S5886. There is minimal information in the recently released book *The Lost Eleven*; however, the account is from a non-academic press and it is difficult to verify information. See Denise George and Robert Child, *The Lost Eleven: The Forgotten Story of Black Americans Brutally Massacred in World War II* (New York: Caliber, 2017).

Americans continued to face danger from German guards, although these cases also tended to involve the SS executing prisoners in the camps.<sup>22</sup>

**\*\*\*\*Unlisted Camp\*\*\*\***

**Rothacker Childs Smith**

Rothacker Childs Smith, in the 92nd Infantry Division, was captured on December 27, 1944 in Sommocolonia, Italy.<sup>23</sup> Wounded in a shelling, Smith feared that he would be killed by the Germans upon capture. “I knew that I was going to die because it had been rumored that the Germans took no Black prisoners.”<sup>24</sup> However, a German medic gave him minimal treatment. After this, Smith and nine other prisoners were forced to walk about fifty miles over nearly three weeks to an Italian prisoner of war hospital. During this time, a German officer threatened Smith to keep pace with the rest of the men. He recalled being told, “If I couldn’t hold myself up they would shoot me and leave me alongside the road and then go on.”<sup>25</sup> While it was not uncommon for German soldiers to threaten violence towards anyone who might slow the pace during a march, as a minority Smith was already fearful of the Germans. Given African Americans’ experiences of racism in the United States and knowledge of Nazi racial ideology, the fear upon capture is a recurring theme. In addition to

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<sup>22</sup> There are several accounts of the murder of African American prisoners of war while being transferred to or in prisoner of war camps not discussed within this chapter in more detail. An African American was killed in Stalag II-C in August of 1942 and another SS guard killed an African American being taken to Stalag IV-B in December 1944. See Kesting, “Blacks in the Holocaust,” 32-33.

<sup>23</sup> The transcript appears to have the wrong spelling and reads “Somacollona.” For more information see Frank Viviano, “Almost-Forgotten Heroes: Italian Town Honors Black GIs Who Were Shunned by Their Own Country,” *SFGate*, July 13, 2000, <http://www.sfgate.com/news/article/Almost-Forgotten-Heroes-Italian-town-honors-3240059.php> (accessed December 4, 2017).

<sup>24</sup> Rothacker Childs Smith (AFC/2001/001/44158), Transcript, Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>25</sup> Smith, Transcript, Veterans History Project.

the regular concerns white (non-Jewish) prisoners of war had upon capture—food shortages, inferior housing, and lack of proper clothing—minorities worried that their German captors would mistreat or even murder them. African Americans, like Jewish Americans, faced increased anxiety as minority prisoners.

### **Leon “Woodie” Spears**

Captain Leon “Woodie” Spears volunteered for the military when he was eighteen and was sent to Tuskegee for training in 1942. He noted that upon graduation white pilots were sent directly overseas, but the Tuskegee Airmen had to do additional training because of prevalent racist ideas that African Americans could not learn as quickly as white airmen. Spears crash landed in Poland on March 24, 1945 after his plane was hit by flack. Knowing he would not be able to make the airbase in Italy, he tried to reach the Russian lines, but barely made it into Poland. A couple of Luftwaffe officers captured Spears and took him to a hospital after noticing his injured foot. Then, rather than taking him to a local jail as was common practice, they held him at their headquarters in Posen, Poland. Spears was only held as a prisoner of war by the Germans for five days before his German captors left him as they fled the advancing Soviet Army. Spears spent several months with Soviet troops and his experience is telling.<sup>26</sup>

Spears noted that the single guard posted at the door often not only left his post but gun as well, whereupon Spear’s curiosity got the better of him and he took the gun apart on the bed. “He [the guard] had a look of consternation when he first saw me, then came over

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<sup>26</sup> Golden Gate Wing Prop Talk, July 26, 2007, in “Spears, Leon ‘Woodie,’” Box 1, Collection 223: Tuskegee Airmen Biographical Information Collection, Special Collections and University Archives, Tomás Rivera Library, University of California Riverside, Riverside, CA; Leon “Woodie” Spears (AFC/2001/001/57365), Video Digital File, Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

and got on the bed with me and showed me how to do it—take it apart, put it back together.”<sup>27</sup> This contrasted sharply with Spears’s experience during training at Tuskegee where white instructors repeatedly berated and threatened him; one threatening to “beat flying into him.”<sup>28</sup> Other African Americans would also note the difference between their experiences in the United States and how the Germans treated African Americans. While they faced greater danger if captured by the rampantly racist Gestapo and SS, the Wehrmacht and Luftwaffe generally treated African Americans equally to white prisoners of war. The men remembered that in their stories even half a century after their capture.

The benign treatment Spears received can be attributed to an additional factor; the Germans stationed at Posen realized that they could no longer stem the Soviet advance. Rather than forcing Spears to evacuate with them, the commonplace practice for prisoners of war and concentration camp inmates, they were more concerned about making a good impression before leaving Spears to the Soviet troops.

Spears calls his treatment “royal,” he says, because the war was almost over and his German captors knew it. He believes they were aware of the atrocities at the concentration camps and elsewhere, [not an unfounded supposition as they were stationed in Poland where the major concentration camps were located] and wanted to make sure they did right by their prisoners. “All of them had little nametags and they’d shove their nametags in my face. And I knew what that was. If there was a war crimes tribunal or anything being held there, and I was going to be part of it, at least I could say, ‘Oh, Hans? Good guy, or he treated me famously. He was good to me.’”<sup>29</sup>

Spears stated that had he known the Germans were leaving (they left in the middle of the night) and how the Soviets would treat him, he would have stayed with the Germans instead.

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<sup>27</sup> Golden Gate Wing Prop Talk, July 26, 2007, Tuskegee Airmen Biographical Information Collection.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

During his three months with the Soviet soldiers Spears did not receive any medical treatment for his foot. When he arrived at the medical hospital in Italy doctors initially thought his leg would have to be amputated as his foot was black, but ultimately, they did not have to amputate his leg.<sup>30</sup>

#### **\*\*\*\*Stalag VII-A\*\*\*\***

Jewish Americans held at Stalag VII-A, like Aben Caplan, were segregated into separate barracks with inadequate facilities. According to David Westheimer, they were moved back into regular barracks before a scheduled inspection. However, segregation based on religion violated the Geneva Convention. As the narratives of African Americans held at the same camp reveal, while Jewish Americans were segregated, the German guards did not separate African Americans from white prisoners of war at Stalag VII-A.

#### **Isham George Benton**

Isham George Benton completed infantry basic training at Camp Wheeler, Georgia. He recalled that African Americans from the North especially had a hard time adjusting to life in the South. He suggested northern African Americans faced additional discrimination while stationed there, possibly because they were accustomed to being more relaxed around whites. Although Benton qualified for Officer Candidate School (OCS) and went before the board three times, he continued to be denied by the white, Southern officers until the quota was full. He joined the 92nd Infantry Division, 365th Infantry an all black unit stationed in Italy. On January 18, 1944, his mother's birthday, Benton was captured while on patrol with about thirty other soldiers. The patrol came under fire and he was unable to retreat with the

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid; Leon "Woodie" Spears (AFC/2001/001/57365), Video Digital File, Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

others as he was under cover with a wounded man known as “California.”<sup>31</sup> Benton recalled the Germans provided a stretcher for the wounded African American and although they did not have medics to treat him, they provided what medical care they could. Later that day Benton was sent to a local jail while the other wounded soldier was taken elsewhere for medical attention (he later died of his wounds).<sup>32</sup>

Benton’s account offers a comparison between his treatment from the German soldiers and local prison guards, as well as the disparity between his treatment as an African American compared to captured Italians. After a couple of days in the town jail, Benton was transferred to a barracks and then a school where he was held with Italian resistance fighters. While twenty-five of the Italians were taken away individually and beaten, Benton was never mistreated. He was moved several more times. Once he was picked up by an Italian Fascist officer and taken to his home. There the officer treated Benton as “a guest,” talked with him about Indiana (Benton’s home state), and took a photograph with him.<sup>33</sup>

Eventually Benton was sent by train from Northern Italy to Munich and ended up in Stalag VII-A. According to his account the camp held about 30,000 prisoners of war with “about thirty-two different nationalities. . . It was just like a United Nations of prisoners of war.”<sup>34</sup> He recalled of the German guards, “I was never really mistreated. I mean no

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<sup>31</sup> Isham George Benton (AFC/2001/001/28694), Audio Cassette (SR01 REF), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.; Isham George Benton (AFC/2001/001/09170), Audio Cassette (digitized interview November 15, 1993), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>32</sup> Benton, Audio Cassette, Veterans History Project; Benton, Audio Cassette (digitized interview November 15, 1993), Veterans History Project.

<sup>33</sup> Benton, Audio Cassette, Veterans History Project.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

Germans ever treated me harshly. They didn't even treat me with any disrespect . . . It was amazing."<sup>35</sup> He insisted that the Germans knew about the racism in the United States.

Benton repeatedly contrasted his treatment from the German guards to his experiences as an African American in the United States and remarked on his equality of treatment compared to other prisoners.

I've never been hit by a German person, soldier. I never been mistreated by 'em. So, a lot of things the Germans were surely guilty of and many people did get treated badly by them. But I know in my experience that I didn't have to cow down to anybody. I was never put in that position where I had to grovel or do anything like that. In fact, when I was being brought from place to place the German soldiers who would take me they would take me to this house or that house that they had commandeered and they'd introduce me to the people of the house *like I was one of them*.<sup>36</sup>

Benton's prisoner of war experience clearly left an impression on him especially concerning the disparity between the United States government fighting to protect democracy, while infringing on the civil rights of minorities on the home front.

Although Jewish Americans were segregated at Stalag VII-A, Benton explained that the German guards did not segregate African American prisoners of war. However, he did not fondly recall sharing the barracks with whites either. "All during this whole experience see I had very few blacks around me. So, I'd be stuck with a bunch of white folks you know. Southerners."<sup>37</sup> Although he did not specifically mention discrimination from his fellow prisoners of war who were white, clearly he was not welcomed by the other prisoners. "The enemy treated me with respect and dignity. Something that I had not received from

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<sup>35</sup> Benton, Audio Cassette (digitized interview November 15, 1993), Veterans History Project.

<sup>36</sup> Italics added. Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Benton, Audio Cassette, Veterans History Project; Benton, Audio Cassette (digitized interview November 15, 1993), Veterans History Project.

American white people in the United States all my life. And that's a heck of a thing to have to compare."<sup>38</sup> He later added, "It's a shame that I as an American soldier had to go through all the war and come up the first time to be treated with equality. And who is it that I am being treated with equality by? The German enemy."<sup>39</sup> He found the United States versus German treatment of African American servicemen to be a "paradox."<sup>40</sup> Benton was liberated around April 27, 1945.<sup>41</sup> All of the prisoners of war suffered from malnutrition, Benton weighed under 100 pounds by his release. Among the rest of the prisoners, a parcel intended for one prisoner of war had to suffice five men for a week.<sup>42</sup> Yet, years after his capture the disparity between his treatment in the United States and under the Germans remained a key feature in his accounts.

In contrast to Benton's experiences, there are two War Crimes reports of the murder of black prisoners of war by the SS in Stalag VII-A. The first was the case of a South African shot in March 1945, allegedly because "he was trying to escape" when in fact the prisoner was simply working.<sup>43</sup> In the second case in April 1945, an African American was shot for apparently no alleged reason. Neither case was brought to trial after the war.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Benton, Audio Cassette (digitized interview November 15, 1993), Veterans History Project.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Benton, Audio Cassette, Veterans History Project.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> Kesting, "Blacks in the Holocaust," 32.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.* There is also an account of the "Shooting of a Negro American POW, Moosburg, Germany, March 1945." This short notation does not clarify if this was a separate incident or actually referenced one of the other two cases. See "Killing of POW," no date, Box 1, War Crimes Committed Against Prisoners of War, RG 153: Records of the Office of the Judge Advocate General (Army) 1792-2010, National Archives, College Park, MD.

**Thurston Lenwood Gaines, Jr.**

Shot down on April 15, 1945, Thurston Lenwood Gaines, Jr. provided a detailed account of the discrepancy of treatment he received from German guards compared to white prisoners of war. Gaines knew a little German from college and used this to tell his captors that he was the only pilot in the plane when he crashed. He recalled, “that caused them great delight that that [*sic*] I would attempt to use the lan [*sic*] you know their language.”<sup>45</sup> The Germans held him overnight in a local jail, where the guard wanted the two rings that Gaines was wearing. When he refused, the guard backed down. Gaines himself credited his equality of treatment by his German guards to his capture late in the war, less than a month before VE Day. “I was not mistreated at all. For which I was very grateful. I attribute that probably to the fact that the war was winding down at the time.”<sup>46</sup> While Gaines and Benton assumed they received better treatment because the war was ending, the accounts of Jewish Americans in the previous chapter reveal that they often received worse treatment later in the war.

Held in a Mainz jail for several days Gaines was interrogated and kept in a cold cell. He was transferred to Stalag VII-A and held there for about a month until liberation, during which time Gains lost twenty pounds. Like many prisoners of war, he credited the Red Cross parcels as the “life thread” for survival.<sup>47</sup> The Germans gave the prisoners soup once a day which Gaines explained, “I think an apt description was it was dishwater in which they took a shaft of wheat swapped in through the the [*sic*] dishwater and called it soup.”<sup>48</sup> Rather than

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<sup>45</sup> Thurston Lenwood Gaines, Jr. (AFC/2001/001/70112), DVD (MV05 REF Part 2 of 2 of MV02), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>46</sup> Gaines, DVD, Veterans History Project.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

traditional bunks, the men in Gaines's barracks did not have any mattresses. The blankets were used as makeshift hammocks within the bunks; twelve men slept in about a sixty-square foot space with hammocks three high.<sup>49</sup>

While this may seem to contradict his assertion that he "was not mistreated at all" but behind his statement that he was not "mistreated" Gaines meant in comparison to the other prisoners of war.<sup>50</sup> Gaines suffered malnutrition and inferior living conditions the same as white prisoners. According to Gaines, racism temporarily ceased or eased in the camp. In his barracks, there were six prisoners of war from India, but no other African Americans and indeed few in the entire camp. He recalled:

I didn't experience what I felt was any overt racism at all during those times. However, when we got to the rehabilitation center . . . we were gathered at the Ritz Carlton Hotel in Atlantic City. And all of the guys whom I had gotten to know in that area of the prison camp only the guy who was my cell mate [in Mainz] who was a captain . . . he's the only one who recognized me by speaking to me. Which was alright in and of itself. So there were people who reverted to their lousy selves and that's what they wanted to do.<sup>51</sup>

While in the camp an equality of circumstances existed, but it did not outlive imprisonment. Other inmates found that even being imprisoned together did not lessen the racism of white prisoners of war. Whatever comradery might exist within the prisoner of war camp between African Americans and whites did not remain once they returned to the United States.

### **Harold Brown**

Originally from Minneapolis, Minnesota, Harold Brown recalled enlisting in the Army Air Corps and being sent to Biloxi, Mississippi. He recounted facing blatant

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

segregation for the first time while he completed training. An airman in the 332nd Fighter Group, he was shot down near Linz, Austria in December of 1944. Shortly after being captured, Brown was placed in a cell with several other airmen, including one who was Jewish. Brown tried to reassure the Jewish prisoner of war, “All you got to do is keep your mouth shut and nobody will ever know you are Jewish . . . Look at me. I can’t hide. They know what I am. And, of course we laughed over it, ha-ha-ha, you know, because it was meant to be a joke, but it was still a fact.”<sup>52</sup> Unbeknownst to Brown, the Jewish prisoner was more likely to face mistreatment, an indication of the reversal of racism that African Americans and Jewish Americans faced upon capture.

Despite his initial worries, Brown found that the German interrogator was “quite friendly.” Once transferred to Stalag VII-A he recalled no overt acts of racism on the part of the Germans or other prisoners of war.<sup>53</sup> However, Brown did note that food rations were limited as the Germans were losing the war; prisoners and even the German guards relied on the Red Cross parcels.<sup>54</sup>

**\*\*\*\*Stalag XVIII\*\*\*\***

**Luther Smith**

Tuskegee Airman Luther Smith recounted dealing with racism as both a civilian and upon entering the Army. He affirmed that airmen were “accepted . . . only on an equal-but-

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<sup>52</sup> Unfortunately, Brown’s account does not provide the name or details of what happened to the Jewish prisoner of war. Brown erroneously listed the prisoner of war camp as Stalag Luft VII-A; however, no such Stalag Luft existed. It was not uncommon for ex-prisoners of war to misidentify the camps in which they were held especially if they were held at multiple camps. Harold H. Brown (AFC/2001/001/76178), Transcript (MV0001), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>53</sup> Brown, Transcript, Veterans History Project.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

segregated basis.”<sup>55</sup> Smith broke his hip and right foot parachuting out of his plane in October of 1944. After being captured he was sent to a hospital for two weeks, then transferred to Stalag XVIII. While Smith asserted that he was treated decently because he was an officer, he also admitted that he was not given proper medical treatment for nearly a month after he arrived at Stalag XVIII. It was not until late November 1944 that Smith was transferred again, this time to a hospital in Austria. His account suggests that he was the only American prisoner of war at the hospital from December 1944 to April 1945. Surrounded by German speakers, including a South African who helped teach him German, Smith became a person of interest. He appears to have gained a measure of respect from the hospital staff for having learned German so quickly.<sup>56</sup> Knowing that the Russians were advancing, Smith requested to be sent back to Stalag XVIII in April. He was only back for a month when the prison was liberated in May 1945. Smith’s account of his liberation reveals how isolated he was compared to other prisoners of war, in that he inadvertently only spoke German to the doctor who treated him upon release. He weighed seventy pounds and spent about two years in hospitals recovering from his weight loss and complications from his broken hip.<sup>57</sup>

Although he does not specifically mention mistreatment, his severe weight loss, unlikely to have only occurred during his last month at Stalag XVIII, would suggest otherwise. However, he does not provide enough details to determine if this was due to general shortages or if as a prisoner of war, he received less compared to other patients at the Austrian hospital. What his account does confirm is that the Wehrmacht and German

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<sup>55</sup> Luther Smith, in *We Were There: Voices of African American Veterans, from World War II to the War in Iraq*, Yvonne Latty, ed. (New York: Harper Collins, 2004), 16.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, 17-19.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, 20-21.

citizens expressed less hostility towards African American prisoners of war than Jewish Americans.

**\*\*\*\*Stalag Luft III\*\*\*\***

**Alexander Jefferson**

In his autobiography, *Red Tail Captured, Red Tail Free*, Alexander Jefferson recalled, “I was treated better as a POW than I was back home.”<sup>58</sup> Jefferson was shot down over France on August 12, 1944. His first encounter with a German interrogator was a German officer who had been educated in the United States and spoke of attending African American jazz clubs. While being transferred to the Dulag Luft, Jefferson worried about what treatment he would receive from other Germans. He wrote, “Naturally, we were a little concerned. We had heard that the Germans considered blacks to be apes and all kinds of other stereotypes. We knew what they thought of the Jews . . . But our two regular army Wehrmacht guards saw us as officers, even celebrities, and treated us accordingly.”<sup>59</sup> Jefferson again attested that the Wehrmacht demonstrated more regard for African Americans’ accomplishments as airmen than they received from whites back home. At Dulag Luft, the interrogator attempted to persuade Jefferson that “Germany respected blacks.”<sup>60</sup>

Jefferson reached Stalag Luft III on August 26, 1944, where the existing prisoners oversaw the assignment of barracks. He recalled, “A dyed-in-the-wool cracker with the deepest Southern drawl imaginable walked up to me and said, ‘Ah think I’ll take this boy.’ I

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<sup>58</sup> Jefferson, *Red Tail Captured*, ix.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, 56, 62-63.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*, 65.

was naturally very apprehensive, thinking that I had not come all the way from the USA to be with a bunch of rednecks. I really wanted to reject what I was sure would simply result in discrimination and humiliation.”<sup>61</sup> It turned out that Jefferson was picked for his particular barracks specifically because he was black. Members of the barracks were planning to escape and assumed they could trust an African American not to be a German spy. The irony was not lost on Jefferson. “At home, black soldiers caught hell from SOBS like the guy who had selected me. Now, 5,000 miles from home, they can trust a black man because they are scared to death of a strange white face. Ain’t that a bitch!”<sup>62</sup> Despite being chosen for the barracks, he was not accorded much respect at first. The existing prisoners (many of whom were captured before the Tuskegee Airmen were stationed in Europe) had no experience flying with African Americans. However, as more bomber crews were shot down and entered the camp, the incoming prisoners of war praised the 332nd’s escort abilities.<sup>63</sup>

At the end of January 1944, the prisoners were transferred to Stalag VII-A ahead of the advancing Russians. The conditions there were considerably worse. Two tents held 250 men each and even when given the opportunity to move into the barracks, they quickly returned to the tents where there was less overcrowding and fewer pests.<sup>64</sup> On April 29, 1945, Stalag VII-A was liberated and Jefferson returned to the United States on June 7, 1945. He recalled, “But then, going down the gangplank, a short, smug, white buck private shouted, ‘Whites to the right, niggers to the left.’ It was very discouraging, upon returning to the

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 69-70.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 70.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 84-85.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 96, 111.

United States, to find racism, segregation, and other social ills alive and well. I knew then that I was back home.”<sup>65</sup> Jefferson had experienced more equality of treatment under Nazi imprisonment than he did the moment he stepped back onto American soil.

### **Conclusion**

Based on these accounts, African Americans faced a variety of experiences upon being captured. Some were segregated by fellow prisoners, but most German guards saw no threat from the relatively small number of African American prisoners of war. Therefore, they did not include African Americans in their racist policies. On the other hand, if captured by the SS, African Americans, like Jewish Americans, faced a greater danger of being mistreated or murdered before reaching a camp. Such was the case of the Wereth Eleven captured and executed by an SS unit in Belgium. Yet, with the occasional presence of the SS at prisoner of war camps, even being officially registered did not guarantee the safety of African Americans.

Although limited, African American prisoner of war accounts reveal the discrepancy they recognized between fighting for democracy and the deficiency of their own civil rights. Not only were they discriminated against within U.S. society, but also in the military while trying to serve their country. Even as prisoners of war, they continued to face racism while at times being segregated within the barracks by fellow white prisoners of war. Their accounts related fears of being a minority captured by the Nazis. Yet, their stories revealed that they experienced more discrimination from white fellow prisoners than from their German captors. African Americans noted the irony that the Nazis should treat them better than their own country and their own brothers in arms.

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 114, 117-118.

The records of African American prisoners of war are scarce and most did not share their experiences until later in life. These men did not share their stories sooner because the military experiences (indeed even the lives) of African Americans were not valued by mainstream American society when they returned home.<sup>66</sup> What remains is a story of African Americans who repeatedly related experiencing better treatment from their Nazi captors than from fellow prisoners, their time in the military, and American society in general. As Isham George Benton observed concerning his return to the United States, “By and large we were virtually ignored again.”<sup>67</sup> It is unsurprising then that few African Americans chose to share their stories after the war.

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<sup>66</sup> For example, the Sojourner Truth race riot in Detroit in 1943 and the Columbia, Tennessee race riot in 1946. See Dominic J. Capeci, Jr., *Race Relations in Wartime Detroit: The Sojourner Truth Housing Controversy of 1942* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984); Dominic J. Capeci, Jr. and Martha Wilkerson, “The Detroit Rioters of 1943: A Reinterpretation,” *Michigan Historical Review* 16, no. 1 (Spring 1990): 49-72; Dorothy Beeler, “Race Riot In Columbia, Tennessee February 25-27, 1946,” *Tennessee Historical Review* 39, no. 1 (Spring 1980): 49-61; Gail Williams O’Brien, *The Color of the Law: Race, Violence, and Justice in the Post-World War II South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

<sup>67</sup> Benton, Audio Cassette (digitized interview November 15, 1993), Veterans History Project.

## Chapter Five

### Return Home: “The Things I Saw There Were Visions from Hell”

*Lastly, I'd like to see a land where Negroes and whites are accepted on an equal plane in terms of their rights and privileges, where there is no discrimination between Christians and Jews, where no select group has the right to lord it over others because of any inherent birthright.*

-Cpl. Samuel Lerner, 1945

### Introduction

What welcome home did prisoners of war receive? If they expected ticker tape parades and enthusiastic crowds that met the first round of returning soldiers, they would have been disappointed. Prisoners of war (among others such as occupying forces) often had to wait to return to the United States; waiting until they were healthy enough, processed, and interrogated by military intelligence before being returned home. Leo Bach lamented, “I missed all the celebrations. I wanted to be fussed over.”<sup>1</sup> However, prisoners of war were not so much the returning victors, as a reminder of failure, those who had failed to win individual battles, had instead been captured, and perhaps thus lengthened the war. They found not a nation grateful for their sacrifice, but one that assumed theirs had been a relatively easy time in captivity, at least for those held in the European Theater. Many recounted that civilians and fellow soldiers alike believed they had been better off. Prisoners had lived away from the front lines, the fear of injury or death, and were surely provided meals just as good or better than rationing in the United States afforded.<sup>2</sup> This perception at

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<sup>1</sup> Bach, *Going Home*, 217.

<sup>2</sup> See Neft, “Peter Neft,” 93; Wayne Drash, Thelma Gutierrez, and Sara Weisfeldt, “WWII Vet Held in Nazi Slave Camp Breaks Silence: ‘Let it be Known,’” *CNN*, November 11, 2008, <https://www.cnn.com/2008/LIVING/11/11/acevedo.pow/index.html> (accessed December 11, 2018).

least applied to prisoners in Europe and was devoid of an adequate understanding of the unique dangers faced by prisoners of war, especially minorities.

Information available to the average citizen, generally in the form of newspapers and the Red Cross *Prisoner of War Bulletin*, lacked sufficient records of the mistreatment of prisoners of war in Europe. Each publication of the *Prisoner of War Bulletin* included snippets of letters from prisoners of war held in both Europe and the Pacific, but on the rare occasion these mentioned less than ideal conditions, the publishers assured readers things were not that bad. Historian Sarah Fishman wrote, “POW camps in Germany were not concentration camps; the German army neither worked to death nor systematically exterminated French POWs. However, in contrast to the media portrayal prevalent during the war in France, prison camps were hardly summer resorts or monastic retreats.”<sup>3</sup> While her work referenced French prisoners of war, the same statement applied to U.S. prisoners of war. In the United States, newspapers as well as novels and movies portrayed an inaccurate prisoner of war experience. A steadily held belief persisted (indeed until today) that work details, lack of food and medical supplies, inadequate living quarters, and the resulting high rates of illness and death only applied to prisoners in the Pacific Theater. The experience of their compatriots in Europe were somehow lessened, since overall they had significantly higher survival rates; the hardships they faced were miniscule in comparison. When contrasted to the appalling conditions prisoners endured in the Pacific and the reality of the concentration camps, the narratives of the European Theater prisoner of war camps were overlooked.

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<sup>3</sup> Sarah Fishman, *We Will Wait: Wives of French Prisoners of War, 1940-1945* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 151.

While the memoirs of soldiers became popular post World War II and the Greatest Generation was further popularized in movies such as *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), *Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949), *Twelve O'Clock High* (1949), *Three Came Home* (1950, a notable exception on civilian prisoners of the Japanese), *Halls of Montezuma* (1951), *Go For Broke!* (1951), and *From Here to Eternity* (1953), the prisoner of war experience was often overlooked. People did not want to hear about prisoners, perhaps with the exception of those held by the Japanese, such as *A Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957).<sup>4</sup> Much less did they want to hear about the minority experience, especially as race relations came to the forefront during the burgeoning Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s. Minority prisoners of war had faced racism and anti-Semitism in society and the military. They had become prisoners where they either experienced heightened discrimination from German guards or in the case of many African Americans were treated as equals to white (prisoners) for the first time in their lives. Now they had returned to face the same prejudices at home, even more marginalized as not only minorities, but ex-prisoners of war as well.

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<sup>4</sup> For a list of prisoner of war memoirs see Tamara Miner Haygood, Lindsay Liles, and William Newmiller, "POW Memoirs, WWII, Europe and North Africa" *War, Literature and the Arts*, June 2007, <http://wlajournal.com/moab/> (accessed October 8, 2014). On the correlation between Hollywood (and art more generally) and war time remembrance see M. Paul Holsinger, ed., *War and American Popular Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999), 223-335. Harold Russell who lost both hands in a stateside military training accident during World War II notably starred in *The Best Years of Our Lives*, directed by William Wyler (Samuel Goldwyn Company, 1946). *Twelve O'Clock High*, directed by Henry King (Twentieth Century Fox, 1949) was later turned into a television series with Frank Overton replacing Gregory Peck as Major Harvey Stovall, *12 O'Clock High*, Seasons 1-3 (Twentieth Century Fox, 1964-1967). A notable exception that tackled the issue of Anti-Semitism among returning soldiers (if not ex-prisoners of war) was Laura Z. Hobson's novel *Gentleman's Agreement*. The movie, starring Gregory Peck and John Garfield, which came out the same year drew attention to issues such as housing covenants and job discrimination that Garfield's character had to deal with upon his return to the States. See Laura Z. Hobson, *Gentleman's Agreement* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1947) and *Gentleman's Agreement*, directed by Elia Kazan (Twentieth Century Fox, 1947). See also, *Sands of Iwo Jima*, directed by Allan Dwan (Universal Studios, 1949); *Halls of Montezuma*, directed by Lewis Milestone (Twentieth Century Fox, 1951); *Three Came Home*, directed by Jean Negulesco (Twentieth Century Fox, 1950); *Go For Broke!* directed by Robert Pirosh (Metro Goldwyn Mayer, 1951); *From Here to Eternity*, directed by Fred Zinnemann (Columbia Pictures, 1953); *A Bridge on the River Kwai*, directed by David Lean (Columbia Pictures, 1957).

Nor were there large organizations or support groups that specifically aided minority prisoners of war. The Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) was a group for veterans, but not ex-prisoners of war specifically. The American Ex-Prisoners of War (AXPOW) evolved out of the Bataan Relief Organization established in 1942 by mothers of prisoners of war captured at Bataan. The organization came under the leadership of the ex-prisoners of war themselves (members of New Mexico's 200th Coast Artillery Regiment) in 1945 upon their return home and changed to the Bataan Veteran's Organization. The first national convention was held in 1948 and the organization expanded to a national group in 1949 as the American Ex-Prisoners of War. At that point membership was extended to include veterans from the European Theater.<sup>5</sup> However, few Jewish American or African American ex-prisoners of war mentioned joining the group or at least not until much later in life. Whether they encountered discrimination at local branches or given the social norms at the time assumed they would be unwelcomed remains unclear. Perhaps they simply were unaware of the group's activities. Smaller ex-prisoner of war groups (unrelated to AXPOW) developed, such as the Survivors of Berga, but these tended to be more specific groups and did not carry the weight of a national support organization. There was also little support for minority ex-prisoners of war within their own communities. Newspapers and publications such as *Ebony* had little information specific to veterans (with exceptions regarding the GI Bill), much less ex-prisoners of war.<sup>6</sup> Even at the Center for Jewish History there is little material available concerning ex-prisoners of war.

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<sup>5</sup> "A Brief History of the American Ex-Prisoners of War Organization," American Ex-Prisoners of War, <https://www.axpow.org/history2.html> (accessed April 20, 2020).

<sup>6</sup> A search of *Ebony* magazine for 1945-1950 yielded very few articles even on veterans. The only mention of prisoners of war did not refer to actual military prisoners of war, but conditions faced by cranberry pickers in the United States. Most of the articles focused on a post-war return to status quo: businesses, films, radio, and music. A Gallop Poll search using terms such as "prisoners of war," "veterans," "military," "army," and

Not surprisingly many minority ex-prisoners of war did not share their stories until years after the fact, often only attempting to publish their memoirs or leave some sort of records behind in the 1980s and especially 1990s with the fiftieth anniversary of World War II. Some did not speak of their experiences in an attempt to get on with their lives or lack of understanding in an era when Post Traumatic Stress Disorder was labeled as “battle fatigue” or “war neurosis” at best; at worst society viewed men in particular as weak for not moving on and forgetting the horrors of war.

### **“Damaged Goods”**

Peter Neft, a Jewish American held at a Stalag Luft I, recalled that when he returned to the States, many criticized his time as a prisoner of war. He asserted, “People thought we had it easy because we were in prison camp, with all the rationing they had at home and all.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, some former prisoners of war stopped talking about what they had been through because those at home were not sympathetic or perhaps wanted to forget any hardships associated with the war. Anthony Acevedo, a Mexican American held at Stalag IX-B and the Berga work Kommando, echoed these sentiments. When he returned, Acevedo’s father called him a “coward” for having been captured.<sup>8</sup> Leonard Meltzer, a Jewish American prisoner of war stated, “The American people had no idea what American POWs went through.”<sup>9</sup> Others, such as Bernie Melnick, a non-Jewish prisoner held at Berga, believed the United States government did not want Americans to know what happened. He reasoned that

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“soldier,” rendered either no results or nothing remotely relevant. Likewise, a ProQuest Historical Newspapers search for 1944-1950 regarding prisoners of war returned few results, especially regarding minorities.

<sup>7</sup> Neft, *American POWs*, 93.

<sup>8</sup> Drash, Gutierrez, and Weisfeldt, “WWII Vet Held.”

<sup>9</sup> Meltzer, Video Interview, Veterans History Project.

the government wanted the “Germans as political allies” and feared the backlash such a revelation may have caused during the start of the Cold War.<sup>10</sup> There is likely some truth to Melnick’s statement, however, for these ex-prisoners of war what mattered was they saw this as the truth. They believed they had been abandoned as prisoners of war and upon their return home felt that no one wanted to hear their stories, that they were to keep quiet. This became their truth and their reality wherein they tried to come to terms with their experiences as prisoners of war.

Men such as Norman Fellman (a Jewish American held at Stalag IX-B and the Berga work Kommando), not wanting to relive the horrors, refused to talk about their experiences. Fellman recalled that he only discussed his experiences as a prisoner of war once with his family upon his return and again with his wife before they married. He noted, “She had a right to know, because I felt like she was getting damaged goods.”<sup>11</sup> Otherwise, no one knew he had been a prisoner of war (few even knew he had been in the military) for fifty years. Fellman later admitted that his prolonged silence had many repercussions for his life and that of his family. He recalled, “It wasn’t until there was a reunion, 50-year reunion of guys, survivors from Berger [*sic*], the camp that I was in, and my wife urged me to go. I had seen a psychologist on my own, I had – I was angry, but I didn’t realize that I was angry... I never knew it.”<sup>12</sup> It was not until Fellman discussed his experiences with fellow survivors from the Berga work Kommando that he finally went to the VA hospital and eventually joined an ex-prisoner of war group. Being able to talk with others who shared similar

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<sup>10</sup> Melnick, “Bernie Melnick,” 97-105.

<sup>11</sup> Fellman, Transcript, Veterans History Project.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

experiences helped Fellman to release his anger. He affirmed, “When I was able to talk, was able to do this, this is cathartic for me.”<sup>13</sup> In the fifty plus years since Fellman was a prisoner of war, society changed. Society now encouraged those deemed “damaged goods” in the 1940s to share their experiences and realize they were not alone; and perhaps to realize they were never really damaged to begin with.

Stanley Malamut, a Jewish American, likewise talked very little with his wife, Maria Lipshutz, about his experiences as a prisoner of war. They had written a few letters during his time in a prisoner of war camp and while he awaited transport back to the United States. While in the hospital in Europe, he wrote that he found it mentally tiring to complete simple tasks such as writing letters back home. He expressed, “There were times when I wanted to write, but I was just to [*sic*] lazy to sit down and start the old wheels turning again... Physically, I feel very well, it’s just the mental condition. It reminds of a semi-inebriated feeling.”<sup>14</sup> Malamut was one of the few prisoners of war who recalled talking to a psychiatrist (for two weeks) about his captivity before being sent back to the States. Although he heeded the advice of doctors and took care of himself physically, he shared very little about his experiences upon returning home. Malamut did not talk with his wife in detail about his time as a prisoner until thirty-one years after he returned home.<sup>15</sup> He recalled Maria’s response, “She was shocked that I never mentioned them to her before. She told me she knew something was wrong with me due to my sleeping patterns, my nightmares, my

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Letter from Stanley Malamut to Marcia Lipschutz, May 19, 1945, Stanley Malamut Collection (AFC/2001/001/76409), Correspondence, Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>15</sup> “Prisoner of War Story,” Stanley Malamut Collection, Veterans History Project, 28-31.

yelling that would wake her up, and my sweating and tossing and turning in my sleep.”<sup>16</sup>

Upon his wife’s urging, Malamut began writing about his experiences and later finalized his thoughts into a memoir in 2006 after attending an event for World War II Jewish veterans.<sup>17</sup>

In the years since the return of prisoners of war such as Fellman and Malamut, society’s perception of what had been called “battle fatigue” or “war neurosis” had changed and become more understanding of what is now called Post Traumatic Stress Disorder or PTSD. In the past veterans suffering from PTSD were labeled as “cowards lacking moral fiber.”<sup>18</sup> Screening programs were instituted by the military during World War I and World War II (until 1944) to bar men from service who were deemed likely to crack under pressure during battle. During World War I “shell shock” began to receive more serious treatment attempts by military physicians and these treatments saw great success. War neurosis as it was termed during World War II had rates reported up to double those of World War I.<sup>19</sup> Psychiatrists Roy G. Grinker and John P. Spiegel proposed during World War II that society needed to adjust its view of mental health problems. They suggested, “it would seem to be a more rational question to ask why the soldier does not succumb to anxiety, rather than why he does.”<sup>20</sup> Studies note that psychiatric disorders were especially high among groups, such

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 31.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 31. For a more extensive account of PTSD among returning World War II veterans, as well as health and other issues, see Thomas Childers, *Soldier from the War Returning: The Greatest Generation’s Troubled Homecoming from World War II* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009).

<sup>18</sup> Hans Pols and Stephanie Oak, “War and Military Mental Health: The US Psychiatric Response in the 20th Century,” *American Journal of Public Health* 97, no. 12 (December 2007): 2133. See also Hans Pols, “War Neurosis, Adjustment Problems in Veterans, and an Ill Nation: The Disciplinary Project of American Psychiatry during and after World War II,” *Osiris* 22, no. 1 (2007): 72-92.

<sup>19</sup> Pols and Oak, “War and Military Mental Health,” 2133-2135.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 2135.

as African Americans, who experienced prolonged discrimination and segregation within the military. One such study argued, “These findings are further reinforced by recent research into the etiology of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which has deemphasized the role of the original traumatic event and had highlighted the importance of a variety of contextual factors, among them the perception of social support.”<sup>21</sup> This factor could prove especially important in the cases of minority prisoners of war who felt they had no support upon their return home. Mental health professionals focused on the role of the family, specifically the wife or mother, to help returning soldiers readjust.<sup>22</sup>

Subsequent studies have noted that prisoners of war are especially likely to have long term PTSD or PTSD which resurfaces later in life. The symptoms of PTSD, such as nightmares, flashbacks, and insomnia often present during retirement when family, work, and other distracting realities of life lessen. Patricia Sutker and Albert Allain of the Veterans Affairs Medical Center note that cases of PTSD can be prevalent in those who experienced extreme weight loss as prisoners of war. While prisoners of war held in Europe have lower cases of PTSD comparative to those held in the Pacific Theater, numbers are statistically significantly higher than veterans who experienced combat but were never captured. Although the social and medical perception of PTSD has changed dramatically since the 1940s, many veterans still find it difficult to talk about their symptoms and seek treatment.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 2136.

<sup>22</sup> Pols, “War Neurosis,” 84.

<sup>23</sup> Patricia B. Sutker and Albert N. Allain, Jr., “Assessment of PTSD and Other Mental Disorders in World War II and Korean Conflict POW Survivors and Combat Veterans,” *Psychological Assessment* 8, no. 1 (1996): 18-21; Jules Rosen, “The Persistence of Traumatic Memories in World War II Prisoners of War,” *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society* 57, no. 12 (December 2009): 2346-2347.

### Security Certificates

While struggling with memories of the war and their time in captivity, ex-prisoners of war also had to decipher the meaning of the “Security Certificate for Ex-Prisoners of war.” Written by the Military Intelligence Service, the certificates were presumably meant to keep ex-prisoners of war from sharing vital intelligence regarding escape or other aspects of their internment that could prove useful to the Japanese before the war’s end. Yet, the true purpose of these certificates, which had at least two formats, remains unclear due to limited sources. Historians have yet to reach a definitive answer, in part because it appears many ex-prisoners of war were not required to sign one or it may be the records of these certificates are unavailable.<sup>24</sup> Historian Daniel Drooz referred to the certificates as a “gag order” prohibiting not only ex-prisoners of war, but potentially even their families from discussing their time in captivity.<sup>25</sup> Thus, even if ex-prisoners of war wanted to discuss their experiences, because of the certificates many felt they could not share more than minor details.

The only known officially held security certificates are housed at the National Archives in a single box that contains over 700, labeled simply as “Certificates of Registration” with no explanation as to their function. There are two main formats, one provides a rather strong rebuke warning ex-prisoners of war not to discuss their experiences and another that is significantly shorter and likewise rather vague. The shorter certificate in part reads, “I certify that I have read and fully understand all the provisions of the Directive of the Secretary of War, in relating my experiences as a Prisoner of War, and will at ALL

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<sup>24</sup> Whitlock, *Given Up for Dead*, 196-201.

<sup>25</sup> Drooz, *Germany’s Lethal Policy*, 197-198.

TIMES hereafter comply fully therewith.”<sup>26</sup> The longer version specifically references the Military Intelligence Service as the author and read, “Some activities of American Prisoners of war within German prison camps must remain secret not only for the duration of the war against the present enemies of the United States but in peace-time as well.”<sup>27</sup> In later points the certificate referenced escape attempts and methods of resistance as the topics not to be discussed. All the certificates required name, signature, rank, ASN, unit, the date, and a witness signature. The shorter form notes the place the certificate was signed, but interestingly the longer form does not record this information.<sup>28</sup>

Norman Fellman signed the longer version and believed it signified the federal government did not want him to make his time in the Berga work Kommando known to the general public. He further interpreted the document as meant to keep him silent about all aspects of his imprisonment.<sup>29</sup> Anthony Acevedo also felt the military did not want to acknowledge that prisoners were held at Berga (even in an adjacent work camp) and wanted to silence them from sharing their experiences. He recalled that the military personnel at Camp Lucky Strike discounted his account of the Berga work camp, stated that he could be imprisoned for speaking about his time as a prisoner, and forced him to sign the Security Certificate. It is

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<sup>26</sup> “Certificates of Registration, 1945,” Box 5100, Certificates of Prisoners of War, 1945-1945, RG 498: Headquarters, European Theater of Operations, U.S. Army (World War II), NARA, College Park, MD.

<sup>27</sup> Norman Fellman (AFC/2001/001/1604), Security Certificate for Ex-Prisoners of War, Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress; Whitlock, *Given Up for Dead*, 197.

<sup>28</sup> I stumbled upon the box of these certificates largely by mistake at NARA. The box holds over 700 of the certificates. They are divided into groups labeled R-1 to R-7, but there is no discernable reason for this listing (certificates are alphabetical within these labels). I was unable to find the certificate for Fellman or for any other prisoner of war referenced in this dissertation. Given most of the forms were filled out with pencil, fading, and had poor penmanship which may have caused me to overlook a pertinent record. “Certificates of Registration, 1945,” RG 498: Headquarters, European Theater of Operations, U.S. Army (World War II).

<sup>29</sup> Fellman, Security Certificate, Veterans History Project; Whitlock, *Given Up for Dead*, 196; Cohen, *Soldiers and Slaves*, 227.

unclear; however, which certificate he was required to sign.<sup>30</sup> The certificates may have been well intentioned attempts to protect those still held as prisoners of war in the Pacific.

However, the way prisoners were forced to sign, and the lack of explanation provided by military intelligence as to the purpose of the certificates, caused some men to feel they were being silenced completely regarding their experiences. The military and federal government's efforts to conceal their time in captivity, whether real or not, became their truth and kept many ex-prisoners of war silent for years.

### **War Crimes Trial and Disappointment**

For those held at the Berga work Kommando, the certificates were not the only action by the U.S. military that suggested their experiences should be forgotten. After the war, the War Crimes Division investigated Hauptmann Erwin Metz and Sergeant Ludwig Merz and tried them for the mistreatment of prisoners of war held at the Berga work Kommando. Metz and Merz had overseen and participated in the abuses and slave labor of the prisoners of war. Despite their clear violations of the Geneva Convention the investigation and trial were fraught with issues. Many of the surviving men were unaware that a war crimes trial was taking place, only twelve testimonies were used in trial (although many more were available), and none of the survivors were brought to Germany to testify in person. Metz and Merz were originally sentenced to hanging, but their sentences were commuted and

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<sup>30</sup> Acevedo, "Personal Account," Anthony Acevedo Papers; Wayne Drash, "'You don't forget': Medic's Holocaust Diary Tells Story of Hell," *CNN*, October 28, 2010, <http://www.cnn.com/2010/LIVING/10/28/acevedo.holocaust.soldier/index.html> (accessed August 19, 2017).

R E S T R I C T E D  
C E R T I F I C A T E

I certify that I have read and fully understand all the provisions of the Directive of the Secretary of War, in relating my experiences as a Prisoner of War, and will at ALL TIMES hereafter comply fully therewith.

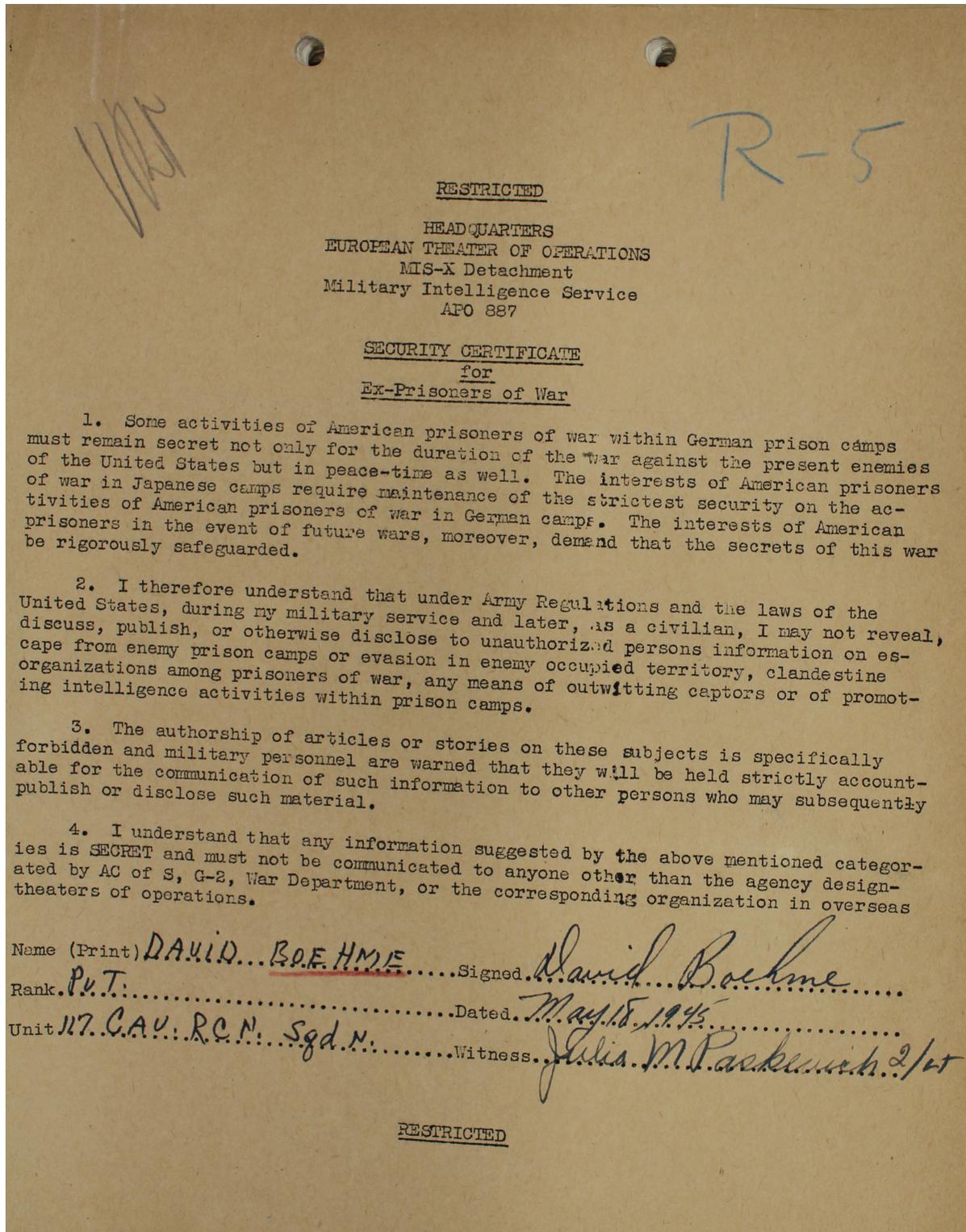
I understand that disclosure to unauthorized persons will make me liable to disciplinary action for failure to safeguard MILITARY INFORMATION.

I realize that it is my duty during my military service, and later as a civilian, to take all possible precautions to prevent disclosure, by word of mouth or otherwise, of military information of this nature.

Name (Print) John Brooks Signed John Brooks  
Rank Pvt. A.S.N. 42176337 Dated 4/28/45 Place PWX-1  
Unit Col 289th Inf. 75th Div Witness DPB

R E S T R I C T E D

**Figure 9:** The more common yet vague certificate signed by prisoners of war. Certificate, 1945, "Certificates of Registration, 1945," Box 5100, Certificates of Prisoners of War, 1945-1945, RG 498: Headquarters, European Theater of Operations, U.S. Army (World War II), NARA, College Park, MD.



**Figure 10:** Similar certificate to the one Norman Fellman signed. This version was more detailed concerning what information ex-prisoners could not share. "Security Certificate for Ex-Prisoners of War," "Certificates of Registration, 1945," Box 5100, Certificates of Prisoners of War, 1945-1945, RG 498: Headquarters, European Theater of Operations, U.S. Army (World War II), NARA, College Park, MD.

ultimately, they served six and five years respectively.<sup>31</sup> Several of the survivors and their families questioned the United States government's dedication to punishing Metz and Merz during and after the trials. They repeatedly sent letters to the Judge Advocate General's (JAG) office and even President Harry S. Truman. President Truman would never respond to their requests as all letters were forwarded to the JAG office.

Charles Vogel, a lawyer and uncle of Bernard Vogel who died at the Berga work Kommando, began writing the War Crimes Division in October of 1945 in an attempt to learn what the U.S. government was doing concerning mistreated prisoners of war. Bernard Vogel had died on April 9, 1945 from malnutrition while at the Berga work Kommando. His family received a telegram notifying them he had died as prisoner of war on June 15, 1945, a follow up letter dated the next day, and another in September of 1945; however, none of these provided much information concerning his death. On October 23, 1945, Charles Vogel wrote the first of many letters to JAG (among others) requesting more information and to know when those responsible would be charged. By this point, Vogel had already contacted survivors and learned some of what had happened at the Berga work Kommando and more directly to his nephew. He also questioned why there were no news stories about the incident.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> It is unclear why the JAG lawyers in charge of prosecuting Metz and Merz only used twelve of the testimonies when more were available. Whitlock, *Given Up for Dead*, 211-218; Katherine Duke, "'Our Fellows Deserve to Be Heard,'" *Amherst*, Fall 2009, <https://www.amherst.edu/aboutamherst/magazine/issues/2009fall/vogel/comment/9880> (accessed November 17, 2014). Regarding the politics surrounding the war crimes trials see, Graham B. Cox, *Seeking Justice for the Holocaust: Herbert C. Pell, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and the Limits of International Law* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2019).

<sup>32</sup> Letter from Major General J. A. Ulio to Mrs. Jean F. Vogel, June 16, 1948, Folder 2 (100-486), Box 48, Persons and Places Case File (Dossier File), 1944-1949, RG 153: Records of the Office of the Judge Advocate General (Army) 1792-2010, NARA, College Park, MD; Letter from Major General Edward F. Witsell to Mrs. Jean F. Vogel, September 11, 1945, Folder 2 (100-486), Box 48, Persons and Places Case File (Dossier File), 1944-1949, RG 153: Records of the Office of the Judge Advocate General (Army) 1792-2010, NARA, College Park, MD; Letter from Charles Vogel to Brigadier General John W. Wier, October 23, 1945, Folder 2 (100-

The immediate response to Vogel from Brigadier General John M. Weir (the JAG director of the War Crimes Office in the United States) was one of surprise. Indeed, the office had not even known that Bernard Vogel had been held or died at the Berga work Kommando. General Weir wrote:

It had not been previously reported to this office that your nephew, Pfc. Bernard J. Vogel, was one of the Americans in the underground factory group. Your letter indicates that you may be of assistance in the further development of the case. Will you please forward the names and addresses of the survivors of your nephew's group with whom you have communicated in order that this office may request their interrogation.<sup>33</sup>

Vogel responded enthusiastically, offering to come down from New York City to the JAG offices in Washington, D.C. General Weir realized all too late that Vogel had no intention of sitting idly by while JAG made a case for war crimes.<sup>34</sup>

In the ensuing exchange of letters, Vogel repeatedly tried to get General Weir to disclose what progress was being made on the case. He wanted more information on the case or to at least an acknowledgement that Metz and Merz *would* be tried for war crimes. By

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486), Box 48, Persons and Places Case File (Dossier File), 1944-1949, RG 153: Records of the Office of the Judge Advocate General (Army) 1792-2010, NARA, College Park, MD.

<sup>33</sup> Brigadier General John M. Weir to Charles Vogel, October 31, 1945, Folder 2 (100-486), Box 48, Persons and Places Case File (Dossier File), 1944-1949, RG 153: Records of the Office of the Judge Advocate General (Army) 1792-2010, NARA, College Park, MD.

<sup>34</sup> Charles Vogel to Brigadier General John M. Wier, November 6, 1945, Folder 1 (100-486), Box 48, Persons and Places Case File (Dossier File), 1944-1949, RG 153: Records of the Office of the Judge Advocate General (Army) 1792-2010, NARA, College Park, MD; Brigadier General John M. Wier to Charles Vogel, November 8, 1945, Folder 1 (100-486), Box 48, Persons and Places Case File (Dossier File), 1944-1949, RG 153: Records of the Office of the Judge Advocate General (Army) 1792-2010, NARA, College Park, MD; Brigadier General John M. Wier to Charles Vogel, November 13, 1945, Folder 1 (100-486), Box 48, Persons and Places Case File (Dossier File), 1944-1949, RG 153: Records of the Office of the Judge Advocate General (Army) 1792-2010, NARA, College Park, MD; Charles Vogel to Brigadier General John M. Wier, November 27, 1945, Folder 1 (100-486), Box 48, Persons and Places Case File (Dossier File), 1944-1949, RG 153: Records of the Office of the Judge Advocate General (Army) 1792-2010, NARA, College Park, MD; Major Clarence L. Yancey (JAGD) to Charles Vogel, December 4, 1945, Folder 1 (100-486), Box 48, Persons and Places Case File (Dossier File), 1944-1949, RG 153: Records of the Office of the Judge Advocate General (Army) 1792-2010, NARA, College Park, MD.

December of 1945, Vogel was informed that the office in Europe dealt directly with war crimes. Included was a puzzling statement, “It is doubtless true that many of the former prisoners of war made their statements to the Adjunct General’s Office, believing that these statements would be used in connection with the trial of war crimes. As a result, they failed to indicate their knowledge of the war crimes on the questionnaire which was furnished by the War Crimes Office.”<sup>35</sup> This statement suggests some testimonies were not properly noted as relating to war crimes. JAG officers would consistently try to get Vogel to stop investigating and to stop sending them inquiries. They also wanted him to send any information he had already obtained. In March 1946, Vogel updated the JAG office that he now had contact information for sixty men from the Berga work Kommando and in March he had written a questionnaire of his own and was sending it to survivors. In May, the military voiced concern that a civilian should have such detailed information regarding war crimes. Vogel was investigated by the Intelligence Division, they worried about the information he had already obtained while noting that he now had a list of ninety names.<sup>36</sup> In May 1946, Colonel David Marcus requested that Vogel “leave further action on this matter in the hands of... headquarters.”<sup>37</sup> The content and tone of the response letters from the JAG offices were

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<sup>35</sup> Major Clarence L. Yancey (JAGD) to Charles Vogel, December 4, 1945, RG 153: Records of the Office of the Judge Advocate General (Army) 1792-2010.

<sup>36</sup> Charles Vogel to Major Clarence L. Yancey, March 25, 1946, Folder 1 (100-486), Box 48, Persons and Places Case File (Dossier File), 1944-1949, RG 153: Records of the Office of the Judge Advocate General (Army) 1792-2010, NARA, College Park, MD; Charles Vogel to Major General O. P. Echols, April 27, 1946, Folder 1 (100-486), Box 48, Persons and Places Case File (Dossier File), 1944-1949, RG 153: Records of the Office of the Judge Advocate General (Army) 1792-2010, NARA, College Park, MD; Colonel S. V. Constant to Commanding General of the Army Service Forces, May 17, 1946, Folder 1 (100-486), Box 48, Persons and Places Case File (Dossier File), 1944-1949, RG 153: Records of the Office of the Judge Advocate General (Army) 1792-2010, NARA, College Park, MD.

<sup>37</sup> Colonel David Marcus to Charles Vogel, May 29, 1946, Folder 1 (100-486), Box 48, Persons and Places Case File (Dossier File), 1944-1949, RG 153: Records of the Office of the Judge Advocate General (Army) 1792-2010, NARA, College Park, MD.

clear, Vogel was a civilian meddling in military affairs and the Army considered the case closed as the trial was over. Vogel by this point was seen as a nuisance rather than a source of information. He was also a civilian who had gained access to classified information—per the “Security Certificates”—yet he refused to stop investigating.

As the years progressed, Vogel protested the sentences of Metz and Merz and the military’s concern turned to perceived annoyance. Among the last letters exchanged were those of December 1948 when Vogel sent a list of twenty-two questions concerning the war crimes trial, witnesses, depositions, records of the initial ruling, and the subsequent commuted sentences.<sup>38</sup> For example, he asked “Were any survivors of the 350 American prisoners of war who were held at Berga called as witnesses?”<sup>39</sup> They were not. He wrote, “Give me a copy of the list of 350 American who were sent to Berga from Bad Orb [Stalag IX-B]. This list was delivered by PFC Edmund Pfannenstiel to a Capt. Stafford in April 1945.”<sup>40</sup> Colonel Edward Young of the War Crimes Branch responded to Vogel, “the action of the Commanding General, European Command, in this and all other war crimes cases held in Germany by this government is *final and not subject to review*.”<sup>41</sup> Vogel was given a short, five-point response (not the twenty-two questions he requested) that provided few new details. A note on the copy of the letter simply read, “Writer requests answers to 22 listed

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<sup>38</sup> Charles Vogel to War Department Special Staff, December 8, 1948, Book 4 (100-486), Box 49, Persons and Places Case File (Dossier File), 1944-1949, RG 153: Records of the Office of the Judge Advocate General (Army) 1792-2010, NARA, College Park, MD.

<sup>39</sup> Charles Vogel to War Department Special Staff, December 8, 1948, RG 153: Records of the Office of the Judge Advocate General (Army) 1792-2010.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Italics added. Colonel Edward H. Young to Charles Vogel, December 23, 1948, Book 4 (100-486), Box 49, Persons and Places Case File (Dossier File), 1944-1949, RG 153: Records of the Office of the Judge Advocate General (Army) 1792-2010, NARA, College Park, MD.

questions, many of which require considerable research and relate to information which is not now available to the public.”<sup>42</sup> Vogel would not get the answers he wanted, neither would the survivors of the Berga work Kommando.

That same month, Norman Martin, the president of the Survivors of Berga group, wrote a letter to President Truman and enclosed a petition requesting that Metz and Merz be retried. His letter was forwarded to the War Crimes Division and in a series of letters into the following year, like Vogel, Martin was informed that nothing could be done barring new information that would not fall under double jeopardy. For the survivors of the Berga work Kommando, the war crimes trials failed to provide closure or any real sense of justice. Their voices were still silenced. The military had no intention of reopening a war crimes trial even as survivors noted that they held information never used by the prosecution during the original trials.<sup>43</sup> Despite the war crimes trials of Merz and Metz for the mistreatment of prisoners of war held at the Berga work Kommando, the U.S. military would not acknowledge that any prisoners of war in Europe were held in slave labor camps. It was not until June 6, 2009 that the military finally made a statement recognizing this fact after several

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<sup>42</sup> Colonel Edward H. Young to Charles Vogel, December 23, 1948, RG 153: Records of the Office of the Judge Advocate General (Army) 1792-2010.

<sup>43</sup> Norman Martin to President Harry S. Truman, December 31, 1948, Book 4 (100-486), Box 49, Persons and Places Case File (Dossier File), 1944-1949, RG 153: Records of the Office of the Judge Advocate General (Army) 1792-2010, NARA, College Park, MD; Colonel Edward H. Young to Norman Martin, January 14, 1949, Book 4 (100-486), Box 49, Persons and Places Case File (Dossier File), 1944-1949, RG 153: Records of the Office of the Judge Advocate General (Army) 1792-2010, NARA, College Park, MD; Norman Martin to Colonel Edward H. Young, February 28, 1949, Book 4 (100-486), Box 49, Persons and Places Case File (Dossier File), 1944-1949, RG 153: Records of the Office of the Judge Advocate General (Army) 1792-2010, NARA, College Park, MD; Colonel Edward H. Young to Norman Martin, March 9, 1949, Book 4 (100-486), Box 49, Persons and Places Case File (Dossier File), 1944-1949, RG 153: Records of the Office of the Judge Advocate General (Army) 1792-2010, NARA, College Park, MD; Norman Martin to War Crimes Division, May 6, 1949, Book 4 (100-486), Box 49, Persons and Places Case File (Dossier File), 1944-1949, RG 153: Records of the Office of the Judge Advocate General (Army) 1792-2010, NARA, College Park, MD.

news reports brought the story to light.<sup>44</sup> For those held at the Berga work Kommando, the acknowledgement was over sixty years too late; sixty years after their stories had largely been swept under the rug by the U.S. military and forgotten.

### **“Post-War America”**

The lack of public discussion regarding ex-prisoners of war was not the only disappointment these men would face, they also returned to a country that had changed very little regarding prejudice. A survey of servicemen in *YANK* magazine from May 1945 asked them, “What changes would you like to see made in post-war America?” Of the seven responses selected for publication, four dealt with the need to address racism or anti-Semitism. Sergeant Andrew G. Paschall called out the hypocrisy of fighting for democracy abroad while not securing it at home. He wrote, “The race problem is part of fascism, which would be as fatal to our country as to the other peoples who have worshipped it.”<sup>45</sup> Others drew attention to the service of African Americans or the need to end poll taxes.<sup>46</sup> Corporal Samuel Lerner argued that civil rights should be enforced for all members of society. He wrote, “Lastly, I’d like to see a land where Negroes and whites are accepted on an equal plane in terms of their rights and privileges, where there is no discrimination between Christians and Jews, where no select group has the right to lord it over others because of any

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<sup>44</sup> Duke, “Deserve to Be Heard.” See also Roger Cohen, “The Lost Soldiers of Stalag IX-B,” *New York Times*, February 27, 2005, <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/02/27/magazine/the-lost-soldiers-of-stalag-ixb.html> (accessed October 20, 2014).

<sup>45</sup> Sgt. Andrew G. Paschall, “A Problem To Be Solved,” in “The Soldier Speaks: What changes would you like to see made in post-war America?” *YANK* 3, no. 46 (May 4, 1945): 14.

<sup>46</sup> Sgt. Ralph J. Shaw, “Scholarships and TVA,” in “The Soldier Speaks: What changes would you like to see made in post-war America?” *YANK* 3, no. 46 (May 4, 1945): 14; Alva E. Zimmerman, “Rights and Benefits,” in “The Soldier Speaks: What changes would you like to see made in post-war America?” *YANK* 3, no. 46 (May 4, 1945): 14.

inherent birthright.”<sup>47</sup> Having returned from a world turned upside down, prisoners of war found the United States had yet to fully embrace its “defense of democracy” on the home front.

African Americans returned on the cusp of a burgeoning Civil Rights Movement, but the more immediate reality was an increase in lynchings, racial violence, and tensions that were reminiscent of the end of World War I. They had spent time in captivity under guards who often treated them no differently than their white compatriots. The Jim Crow South and *de facto* segregation of the North stood in stark contrast; the irony of equality under the Nazis left an indelible mark on many. In the United States, from June 1945 to December 1946 alone, approximately sixty African Americans were killed, including at least two servicemen.<sup>48</sup>

For Jewish Americans, the United States was less anti-Semitic, the horrors of the Holocaust having at least abated public opinion. To quote historian Leonard Dinnerstein, “A remarkable metamorphosis occurred in the United States in the two decades following the end of World War II. After more than half a century of increasing animosity toward the Jews, antisemitism in the United States suddenly began to decline.”<sup>49</sup> Hollywood films such as *The Gentleman’s Agreement* began to broach the subject of prejudice among the general

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<sup>47</sup> Samuel Lerner, “More Than Ice-Cream Dreams,” in “The Soldier Speaks: What changes would you like to see made in post-war America?” *YANK* 3, no. 46 (May 4, 1945): 14.

<sup>48</sup> For a more detailed account see Tameka Bradley Hobbs, *Democracy Abroad, Lynching at Home: Racial Violence in Florida* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2015), 189-211. See also Nancy Beck Young, *Why We Fight: Congress and the Politics of World War II* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2013); Hugh Davis Graham, *The Civil Rights Era: Origins and Development of National Policy, 1960-1972* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); James T. Patterson, *Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945-1974* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 380-406.

<sup>49</sup> Leonard Dinnerstein, *Antisemitism in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 150.

public. Yet, for the Jewish Americans who faced harsher conditions for their identity while prisoners of war, the military's and public's lack of recognition made their experience all the harder to bear (and kept them relatively silent on the matter). They also, like African Americans, had to deal with continued use of housing covenants and wanted ads that clearly listed who should *not* apply for jobs. While job discrimination in particular was slowly lessening, it would remain a prominent issue for years to come.<sup>50</sup> Some Jewish American ex-servicemen supported the Zionist movement, while others turned their attention towards civil rights for Jews (and African Americans).<sup>51</sup>

### Conclusion

Prisoners of war often returned to a quiet welcome home, the parades and large receptions at train and bus stations had already ended. Family, friends, and society had little understanding of the hardships they had endured. The public's perception of prisoner of war camps did not match the reality, especially for those held in Europe. Many men struggled with "war neurosis" and, as was typical of the time and even today, talked little of their experiences. As Louis Wigdortz wrote, "The things I saw there were visions from hell."<sup>52</sup> Survivors found it difficult to describe their experiences. Compounding this issue was the use of "Security Certificates" which required ex-prisoners of war to stay silent about their time in captivity. Minority prisoners, specifically those held at the Berga work Kommando, interpreted the certificates as an attempt to cover up their ordeals. The failure of the war crimes trials of Erwin Metz and Ludwig Merz to deliver justice for those who were

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 152-161.

<sup>51</sup> Deborah Dash Moore, *GI Jews: How World War II Changed a Generation* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2004), 251-260.

<sup>52</sup> Louis Wigdortz (A006.017.001), Y.M.C.A. "A Wartime Log," Louis Wigdortz Collection, National Museum of American Jewish Military History, Washington, D.C.

mistreated and died at the Berga work Kommando, cemented the belief that the U.S. military and federal government had forgotten them. Based on the lack of narratives, clearly African Americans also felt few cared to hear their stories. If they had dreams of any measure of equality upon return home, they were quickly dashed. Although the United States would see a lessening of anti-Semitism and the beginnings of the Civil Rights Movement, change would come all too slowly.

Jewish Americans and African Americans had to deal with prejudices as civilians and in the military, especially during basic training. They were captured by the enemy and thrust into a world where minorities faced a very real possibility of serious mistreatment and death. They returned home to deal with being a minority, ethnically or religiously, but also minorities as ex-prisoners of war. This made their transitions into civilian life all the more difficult. Their previous experiences with anti-Semitism and racism had taught them to be wary, watchful, and fearful of their German captors, more than non-minority prisoners. Their homecomings soon proved that everything, and nothing, had changed. The democracy they had fought for would be a long time coming. In the meantime, they remained silent.

**Conclusion****Why**

*I went off to war  
A smile to my face  
I came back from war  
A frown in its place*

*The things I did there  
I never can tell  
The things I saw there  
Were visions from hell*

*For what did I fight  
Do I really know  
If you never fight  
Then maybe I'll know*

-Louis Wigdortz, Wartime Log

I began this study, partially, with the desire to retain an aspect of European focus despite now majoring in United States history. I had no intention initially to embark on a transnational study through the eyes of minority prisoners of war. My first purpose was to look for instances of non-traditional resistance among prisoners of war. I had grown up on *Stalag 17*, *The Great Escape*, and virtually every other World War II centered movie from the 1940s-1960s. While I knew these movies held only a grain of truth, they had indelibly shaped my perception of history. The story of resistance, I realized, had already been told, albeit dramatized on the silver screen. What had been left out of the popular perception—and the scholarship—were the minority prisoners of war.<sup>1</sup>

As I progressed with the research, I realized obtaining information on prisoners of war in general was easy, there was an overabundance of material. For my selected groups, the same did not apply, kept so long in the shadows, their stories were now difficult to find.

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<sup>1</sup> For epigraph see Wigdortz, “A Wartime Log,” Louis Wigdortz Collection.

Most had not given an interview (excepting military intelligence interrogations) until much later in life. Very few had held onto wartime diaries or even letters, although some had written down their experiences soon after returning home. Regardless, most of these documents did not see the light of day for ten, twenty, and even fifty years. Upon the fiftieth anniversary of World War II there was a major uptick in interest in preserving the stories of World War II veterans in general. The Veterans History Project especially worked to obtain even short recollections as veterans flocked to Washington, D.C. for celebrations. The VHP also requested local veterans' groups and libraries to send their interviews to the Library of Congress. What I found as I delved into the research changed the course of this dissertation. I intended to tell the story of minority prisoners under the control of German guards, caught in a racialized hierarchy. The conduct of German guards was only part of the story, but the prisoners' experiences with prejudice before the war, in the military, from fellow inmates, and from society and their families upon return completed the picture. Only with a comparative approach, could the whole story be told.

This study demonstrated that Jewish American and African American prisoners of war responded to their internment based on past experiences with racism and anti-Semitism, both personal and historic. Whether they outright suffered mistreatment from their captors, these men entered their imprisonment worrying about how racism in Nazi Germany would shape their treatment. African Americans assumed they would be singled out and possibly killed. Some Jewish Americans threw away their dog tags, suddenly very aware of the "H" emblazoned upon them. Their histories continued to shape their perceptions; Isham George Benton noted that the Germans treated him better than whites in the United States.<sup>2</sup> Jewish

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<sup>2</sup> "The enemy treated me with respect and dignity. Something that I had not received from American white people in the United States all my life. And that's a heck of a thing to have to compare." Isham George Benton

Americans were often surprised or relieved when fellow prisoners took actions to protect them and conceal their religion. Yet, others thought it best to face the Germans outright; better to make the decision to step forward themselves than to be stabbed in the back when hunger led anti-Semitism to rear its ugly head again.<sup>3</sup> Throughout their time as prisoners of war, Jewish Americans and African Americans remained in a heightened state of anxiety on top of the concerns of housing, food, and treatment that all prisoners of war experienced.

This study began by detailing the racism and anti-Semitism prevalent from the end of World War I to the mid-1940s, noting how both personal and historical encounters with prejudices shaped the lives of the men discussed in this dissertation before they even entered the military. In the military, they found heightened levels of prejudice. The War Department attempted to improve relations with the *Command of Negro Troops* published in 1944, but the publication reinforced stereotypes just as much as it sought to repudiate them. Among officers especially, there was a prevalence of anti-Semitism and some Jewish soldiers questioned why an “H” for Hebrew needed to be stamped on their dog tags, especially when Hebrew did not denote a religion, but rather had ethnic connotations.

Once captured, the Geneva Convention was supposed to protect prisoners of war, but not every nation agreed on how to carry out the regulations. Nazi Germany, unlike the United States, had no set policy concerning prisoners of war. Prisoner of war camps fell under the *Oberkommando der Wehrmacht* but involved multiple agencies and the Luftwaffe which maintained a level of independence over its prisoners. Throughout the war changes to

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(AFC/2001/001/09170), Audio Cassette (digitized interview November 15, 1993), Veterans History Project Collection, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>3</sup> Joseph Mark had to give up his bread ration when a prisoner threatened to betray him to the Germans. See Flint Whitlock, *Given Up for Dead: American GI's in the Nazi Concentration Camp at Berga* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 91.

prisoner of war policy were issued via memos which could be contradictory or apply only to certain camps. The International Committee of the Red Cross was tasked with ascertaining if detaining powers followed the Geneva Convention, but the sheer number of camps to inspect was overwhelming. Moreover, the ICRC had no authority to reprimand any detaining power in violation, except for verbal and written reports. The ICRC did, however, send packages that supplemented the diets of thousands of prisoners of war and the Germans especially factored these into the daily rations available to prisoners. If the ICRC sought to keep prisoners nourished and physically healthy, the YMCA saw to their mental health by providing books, educational opportunities, and entertainment.

The treatment Jewish Americans and African Americans faced depended on who captured them (Wehrmacht, Gestapo, or SS) and the camp to which they were sent. It was a sliding scale of experiences. African Americans were in the most danger between the point of capture and being sent to a permanent camp; thereafter they faced prejudice from fellow prisoners and occasionally were segregated by the Germans, such as the case of Stalag XIII-C. Yet, once in a permanent camp most noted the stark contrasts between their treatment by German guards and the rampant racism in the United States. Meanwhile, Jewish Americans could be singled out throughout the process. Once at permanent camps conditions varied based on location. At Stalag VII-A, Jewish Americans were segregated, and their accommodations were inferior, at Stalag XIII-C Jewish Americans and African Americans were put in a segregated barracks together. Jewish prisoners of war at Stalag IX-B were sent to the Berga work Kommando.

Upon their release, these men found little interest in their stories and some were restricted from speaking of their experiences. They had been required to sign “Security

Certificates,” promising silence. They quietly battled with PTSD. For those held at the Berga work Kommando, the war crimes trials of Erwin Metz and Ludwig Merz were a disappointment. Although sentenced to death initially, their sentences were commuted to a handful of years in prison. The federal government and military’s lack of support for a retrial only reinforced their sense of exclusion. Despite numerous attempts to contact JAG offices and even President Truman, they received half measured responses which made it clear the War Crimes Branch had no intention of reinvestigating the abuse of prisoners of war.

What impact did their experiences have on ex-prisoners of war and their families? Recent human epigenetic studies suggest that parent trauma may result in long term health effects on children, specifically those born after the traumatic event. Human epigenetics studies the connection between DNA and environment. A 2018 study on Civil War Union prisoners of war (based on National Archives research) found, “Among children born after the war and surviving to age 45, the sons of no-exchange period ex-POWs were a statistically significant 1.11 more times likely to die compared with the sons of non-POWs and 1.09 times more likely to die compared with the sons of exchange-period ex-POWs, controlling for birth year and paternal enlistment characteristics.”<sup>4</sup> The researchers adjusted for factors such as socioeconomic factors of both parents, time of birth, maternal longevity, and other non-DNA factors such as childhood violence.<sup>5</sup> The researchers concluded that based on available evidence, “The sex-specific transmission we observe is consistent with an epigenetic effect in which transmission occurs on the Y chromosome.”<sup>6</sup> These findings applied only to sons of

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<sup>4</sup> Dora L. Costa, Noelle Yetter, and Heather DeSomer, “Intergenerational Transmission of Paternal Trauma among US Civil War ex-POWs,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 115, no. 44 (October 30, 2018): 11216-11217.

<sup>5</sup> Costa, Yetter, and DeSomer, “Intergenerational Transmission,” 11215-11217.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 11218.

fathers who experienced the worst periods in the Confederate controlled camps. For sons, it resulted in higher deaths rates specifically from cerebral hemorrhage and to a lesser degree cancer. Diet restrictions of one or both parents can statistically cause permanent changes to their children (such as affecting glucose levels) that leave them susceptible to health risks.<sup>7</sup> Currently no comparable study has been made on the children of World War II ex-prisoners of war because of “data limitations,” but the researchers suggest that even with better nutritional standards there may still be a similar correlation.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, the trauma experienced by the father may not only affect their children, but even multiple generations.<sup>9</sup>

When I first wrote and presented sections of my research, I suggested that Jewish Americans and African Americans would have similar stories of mistreatment by German guards. However, as I got deeper into the research, I found the reality was much more complicated. Jewish Americans recalled little anti-Semitism from fellow prisoners, but from German guards experienced varying levels of anti-Semitism. This manifested as threats, or segregation, or even removal to the Berga work Kommando. Meanwhile, most African Americans remembered that German guards treated them equal to other prisoners. Rather than the guards, it was their fellow American (white, non-Jewish) prisoners who demanded segregation within the barracks. With my newfound information, I presented variations of this work at several conferences in 2017-2018 where I received comments on how timely my

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 11217-11219.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 11216, 11219.

<sup>9</sup> Kate Baggaley, “Civil War Study Shows Father’s Stress Affects Son’s Lifespan,” *NBC News Science*, Nov. 9, 2018, <http://www.nbcnews.com/mach/science/civil-war-pow-study-finds-father-s-stress-can-alter-ncna934546>. Accessed December 14, 2019. See also, Sarah Fishman, *We Will Wait: Wives of French Prisoners of War, 1940-1945* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 152-153.

work had become. Although I started this work when President Barack Obama was in office, its end comes with Donald Trump's administration and a noted rise in ethnic tensions and anti-Semitism.<sup>10</sup> In the beginning I never intended to make an argument about race, anti-Semitism, or prejudice, at least not on the part of the United States. Chapter 5 was to be my ending high note, I would focus on desegregation of the armed forces. I completed a research trip devoted entirely to this chapter; plus, additional materials collected on other trips. But the story for these ex-prisoners of war did not end there; most were no longer in the military by the time it became desegregated. Although an important event, it did not directly affect the lives of these men. Instead, their return home, like everything else about their stories, was more complicated. The military had begun to change and society was slower to follow suit.

In the end, I have written a dissertation on prejudice and its repercussions. I have been told that I was "lucky" on the timing of my research. That given current events publishers will have a real interest in my topic *now* because the narrative speaks to the racism and anti-Semitism that persists in the United States even today. The men I have spent years of my life researching; however, were not lucky. They experienced war and internment, which even when they were not significantly mistreated, still altered their lives forever. The hypocrisy of fighting for democracy abroad, while not having their civil rights protected at

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<sup>10</sup> See Vanessa Williamson and Isabella Gelfand, "Trump and Racism: What Do the Data Say?" Brookings Institution, August 14, 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2019/08/14/trump-and-racism-what-do-the-data-say/> (accessed February 1, 2020); Griffin Edwards and Stephen Rushin, "The Effect of President Trump's Election on Hate Crimes," Social Science Research Network, January 14, 2018, [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=3102652](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3102652) (accessed February 1, 2020); Ian Lovett, "Rise in Anti-Semitic Incidents Goes Beyond Recent Violent Attacks," *The Wall Street Journal*, December 17, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/rise-in-anti-semitic-incidents-goes-beyond-recent-violent-attacks-11576611407> (accessed February 1, 2020); Adeel Hassan, "Hate-Crime Violence Hits 16-Year High, F.B.I. Reports," *The New York Times*, November 12, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/12/us/hate-crimes-fbi-report.html> (accessed February 1, 2020).

home was not lost on these men. The irony of writing about minority prisoners of war and their experiences with racism and anti-Semitism while it seems there is a new story about hate crimes or prejudice every week is not lost on me.

As prisoners of war, African Americans and Jewish Americans experienced a shift in racial and anti-Semitic attitudes. African Americans continued to confront racism from their fellow white prisoners and the SS, but Jim Crow racism was not practiced by the regular German guards. Jewish Americans, on the other hand, witnessed a lessening of blatant anti-Semitism from other inmates, but were subjected to egregious levels of hatred from guards. My dissertation addresses the literature gap that has at best left minority prisoners of war on the fringes of academic research, trivializing the hardships they faced. In addition to the misfortunes encountered by the average prisoner of war Jewish Americans and African Americans had to negotiate a situation where religion and race became paramount and a deciding factor in their fates.

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