



General Eisenhower wanted to be in some of the pictures his soldiers were taking in liberated concentration camps. Here, he is at Ohrdruf with other high-ranking U.S. Army officers. They are viewing bodies of prisoners on the 12th of April, 1945. Online via the U.S. National Archives.

General Eisenhower ordered film footage and still photographs to document Nazi atrocities which Allied forces were discovering as the war in Europe neared its end. Many of those films and photos are maintained at the U.S. National Archives.

One of the documentaries includes these words at the beginning:

This is an official documentary report compiled from United States Army Films made by military photographers serving with the Allied Armies as they advanced into Germany. The films were made pursuant to an order issued by General Dwight D. Eisenhower, Supreme Commander, Allied Expeditionary Forces, March 15, 1945.

Not for the faint-of-heart, the film is described by the National Archives and is also available for online viewing.

General Eisenhower issued his March order after the Soviet Army had liberated Auschwitz (at the end of January, 1945). Then Americans began their liberation of other Nazi concentration camps.

Ohrdruf was the first Nazi camp which American forces liberated. After visiting Ohrdruf, which was actually a sub-camp of Buchenwald, Eisenhower—the Supreme Allied Commander in Europe—was stunned and appalled at what he personally saw.

He cabled Generals Omar Bradley and George Patton on the 12th of April, 1945. Among other things, Eisenhower said:

...the most interesting—although horrible—sight that I encountered during the trip was a visit to a German internment camp near Gotha. The things I saw beggar description.

While I was touring the camp I encountered three men who had been inmates and by one ruse or another had made their escape. I interviewed them through an interpreter. The visual evidence and the verbal testimony of starvation, cruelty and bestiality were so overpowering as to leave me a bit sick.

In one room, where they were piled up twenty or thirty naked men, killed by starvation, George Patton would not even enter. He said that he would get sick if he did so.

I made the visit deliberately, in order to be in a position to give first-hand evidence of these things if ever, in the future, there develops a tendency to charge these allegations merely to "propaganda."

About a week later, Eisenhower cabled General Marshall (FDR's military advisor) asking for Congressmen and journalists to fly to Germany to see the camps. Among other things, Eisenhower said this to Marshall:

We continue to uncover German concentration camps for political prisoners in which conditions of indescribable horror prevail. I have visited one of these myself and I assure you that whatever has been printed on them to date has been understatement.

If you could see any advantage in asking about a dozen leaders of Congress and a dozen prominent editors to make a short visit to this theater in a couple of C-54's, I will arrange to have them conducted to one of these places where the evidence of bestiality and cruelty is so overpowering as to leave no doubt in their minds about the normal practices of the Germans in these camps.

I am hopeful that some British individuals in similar categories will visit the northern area to witness similar evidence of atrocity.

Despite the historical film footage, photographs, personal histories of concentration-camp survivors, confessions of defendants during war-crime trials and the description of findings penned by military members who liberated the Nazi-era camps, holocaust-deniers persist.

Among other things, they argue that ovens found at some of the camps were used for baking bread, not burning bodies. They claim that gassing cellars would not be located below ground since Zyklon-B (the chemical found at concentration camps) needs heat to become active. Deniers allege that, in any event, Zyklon B was used as a camp disinfectant, not as a gas-chamber ingredient.

And ... the list of Holocaust-denying claims goes on and on.

At the end of the day, one must weigh the available evidence to reach a conclusion which fits with the facts. And it was to that end Eisenhower ordered his men to document what they found.

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