After the Reich: The Brutal History of the Allied Occupation

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Part II

Treatment of the prisoners of war. In all, there were approximately eleven million German prisoners of war. One and a half million of these never returned home. MacDonogh expresses an appropriate outrage here: "To treat them with so little care that a million and a half died was scandalous."

The Red Cross had no role vis a vis those held by the Russians, since the Soviet Union had not signed the Geneva Convention. MacDonogh says the Russians made no distinction between German civilians and prisoners of war, although we know that a KGB report does sort them out for deaths and other purposes. At war’s end, they held approximately four to five million within Russia (and here, again, the KGB archives are worth consulting, as historian James Bacque has done; they show a figure of 2,389,560). Large numbers were held for over ten years, being sent back to Germany only after Konrad Adenauer’s visit to Moscow in 1956. Nevertheless, in 1979—34 years after the end of the war!—"there were believed to be 72,000 prisoners still alive in—chiefly Russian—custody." Some 90,000 German soldiers were captured at Stalingrad, but only 5,000 made it home.

The Americans made a distinction between the 4.2 million soldiers captured during the war, who were entitled to the shelter and subsistence called for by the Hague and Geneva Conventions, and the 3.4 million captured in the West at its end. MacDonogh says the latter were classified as “Surrendered Enemy Persons” (SEPs) or as “Disarmed Enemy Persons” (DEPs), and were denied the protections of the Conventions. He doesn’t give a total figure for those who died in American custody, saying “it is not clear how many German soldiers died of starvation.” He tells, however, of several situations: “The most notorious American POW camps were the so-called Rheinwiesenlager.” Here, the Americans allowed “anything up to 40,000 German soldiers to die from hunger and neglect in the muddy flats of the Rhine.” He says “any attempt to feed the prisoners by the German civilian population was punishable by death.” Although the Red Cross was empowered to inspect, “the barbed wire surrounding the SEPs and DEPs was impenetrable.” Elsewhere, at “the Pioneers’ Barracks in Worms… there were 30,000-40,000 prisoners sitting in the courtyard, jostling for space. With no protection from the rain they froze.” The prisoners were starved at Langwasser, and at a “notorious camp” at Zuffenhausen where “for months lunch was turnip soup, with half a potato for dinner.”

It would be a mistake to think that a world food shortage caused the United States to be unable to feed its prisoners. Bacque writes that “Captain Lee Berwick of the 424th Infantry who commanded the guard towers at Camp Bretzenheim… told me, ‘Food was piled up all round the camp fence.’ Prisoners there saw crates piled up ‘as high as bungalows.’”[10]

What MacDonogh tells us about Britain’s treatment of German POWs seems conflicting. It had 391,880 prisoners working in Britain in
1946, and a total of 600 camps there in 1948. He says "the regime was not so hard, and in terms of percentages the number of men who died in British custody is strikingly low compared to the other Allies." Elsewhere, however, he tells how "the British could evade [the Geneva Convention’s stipulation]… that they provide 2,000 to 3,000 calories a day," so that "for most of the time levels fell below 1,500 calories." The British had a camp in Belgium that "was meant to be particularly grueling." There, "conditions for the 130,000 prisoners were reported to be ‘not much better than Belsen’… When the camp was inspected in April 1947 there were found to be just four functioning lightbulbs…there was no fuel, no straw mattresses and no food apart from ‘water soup.’"

A Reuters report in December 2005 adds an important dimension: "Britain ran a secret prison in Germany for two years after the end of World War II where inmates including Nazi party members were tortured and starved to death, the Guardian says. Citing Foreign Office files that were opened after a request under the Freedom of Information Act, the newspaper says Britain had held men and woman [sic] at a prison in Bad Nenndorf until July 1947… ‘Threats to execute prisoners, or to arrest, torture and murder their wives and children were considered “perfectly proper” on the grounds that such threats were never carried out,’ the paper reports.”[11]

The French wanted German labor to help rebuild the country, and for this purpose the British and Americans transferred about a million German soldiers to them. MacDonogh says “their treatment was particularly brutal.” Not long after the war, according to the Red Cross, 200,000 of the prisoners were starving. We are told of a camp “in the Sarthe [where] prisoners had to survive on 900 calories a day.”

**The stripping of the German economy.** Allied leaders disagreed among themselves about the Morgenthau Plan to strip Germany bare of industrial assets and turn it into an agrarian country. The opposition of some and hesitation of others did not, however, prevent a de facto implementation of the plan. By the time the confiscation was ended, Germany was largely bereft of productive assets.

MacDonogh says that under the Russians “Berlin lost around 85 percent of its industrial capacity.” Every machine was taken from Vienna. The ships were taken from the Danube, and “one Soviet priority was the seizure of any important works of art found in the capital [Vienna]. This was a fully planned operation.” But “worse than the full-scale removal of the industrial base of the land was the abduction of men and women to develop industry in the Soviet Union.”

Under the Americans, the dismantling of industrial sites continued until General Lucius Clay stopped it a year after war’s end. Until Clay acted, Clause 6 of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Order 1067 embodied the Morgenthau Plan. MacDonogh says that where “American official theft was carried out on a massive scale” was in “seizing scientists and scientific equipment.”

The British took much for themselves and passed other industrial property on to “client states” such as Greece and Yugoslavia. The British royal family received Goering’s yacht, and the British zone of Germany was stripped of “plants that might later offer competition with British industries.” MacDonogh says “the British… had their own brand of organized theft in [something called] T-Force, which sought to glean any industrial wizardry….”

For their part, the French asserted “the right to plunder.” “The French… made no bones about pocketing a chlorine business in Rheinfelden, a viscose business in Rottweil, the Preussag mines or the chemicals groups Rhodia,”… and much more.

If the Plan had been fully implemented over a longer period of time, the effects would have been calamitous. Keeling, in Gruesome Harvest, says that by seeking “the permanent destruction of Germany’s industrial heartland” it would have had as an “ineluctable consequence… the death through starvation and disease of millions and tens of millions of Germans.”[12]

**The forced repatriation of Russians to Stalin.** MacDonogh’s book limits itself to the Allied occupation, but there are, of course, many other aspects of the aftermath of the war that deserve mention, although
here we will limit ourselves to just one of them. (MacDonogh does give some details about it.) It is the Allied repatriation of captured Russians to the Soviet Union. In _The Secret Betrayal_, Nikolai Tolstoy tells how between 1943 and 1947, a total of 2,272,000 Russians were returned. The Soviets harvested 2,946,000 more from the parts of Europe taken by the Red Army. Those sent to the Soviet Union by the Western democracies included thousands of people who were Tsarist emigres and had never lived under the Soviet regime. Tolstoy says that even though there were many who did want to return to Russia (while many others desperately did not, and were sent back, in effect, kicking and screaming), they were uniformly brutalized, executed, raped or made into slaves. Some of the repatriates were Russians who had volunteered to fight for Germany against the Soviet Union and who were led by General Vlasov. Some were Cossacks, many of whom were not even Soviet citizens. The violent repatriations began in August 1945. Tolstoy recounts how deception,ubbings, bayonets, and even threats from a flame-throwing tank were employed to force the removal.

**Victors’ justice.** When the war was over, there was a consensus among the Allies’ leaders that the top Nazis should be put to death. Some wanted immediate execution, others “a drumhead court martial.” There was an odd virtue in the insistence by the British on following “legal forms,” which is what was decided upon. The result was a series of trials with the trappings of normal judicial proceedings, but that were actually a travesty from the point of view of the “rule of law,” lacking both the spirit and particulars of “due process.” In two chapters, MacDonogh gives an account of the main Nuremberg trial and of the series of trials that continued for years afterwards. Among these, the Americans conducted several trials in Nuremberg after the main one; thousands of cases were brought before “denazification courts”; the German courts, after they were operational, continued the process; and of course we know of Israel’s trial and execution of Eichmann.

There are many reasons to call it “victors’ justice.” For it to have been otherwise, a truly impartial tribunal would have had to have been convened somewhere in the world (if such a thing had been possible in the aftermath of a world war), and war crimes committed by all sides prosecuted. But, of course, we know that such impartial justice was not in contemplation. In the Nuremberg indictment, the Nazis were charged with the mass killing of the Polish officer corps at the Katyn Forest, a charge that was discreetly (and with great intellectual and “judicial” dishonesty) overlooked in the final judgment after it became clear to all that the Soviet Union had done the killing. Another of the many possible examples would be that Nazi deportations were charged as both a war crime and a crime against humanity at Nuremberg. By contrast, no one was ever “brought to justice” for the Allies’ expulsion of the millions of Germans from their ancestral homes in central Europe.

**A source readers will find instructive.** Because of the credibility of its source, the account given by U.S. Air Force Major (retired) Arthur D. Jacobs in his book _The Prison Called Hohenasperg_ will be useful to readers as they absorb (and assess) the information contained in MacDonogh’s book and those of the other authors referred to here. It is valuable as a story both of American brutality and American compassion.

Jacobs spent 22 years in the Air Force, retiring in 1973, and then became a member of the faculty at Arizona State University for another twenty years. His book tells the following personal story: His German parents emigrated to the United States from Germany in 1928 and 1929. They had two sons born in Brooklyn (who were hence U.S. citizens), one of them Arthur Jacobs. The boys lived their early years in Brooklyn, attending elementary school. The family was taken and held for some time at Ellis Island near the end of the war, and was then interned for seven months at the Crystal City Internment Camp in Texas, where they were well treated. They were “voluntarily repatriated” to Germany (after being threatened with deportation) in October 1945, several months after Germany’s surrender.

When they arrived in Germany, Jacobs’ mother was sent to one camp, the father and two sons to another. The latter reached an internment camp in Hohenasperg after a 92-hour journey locked inside a boxcar in freezing weather with mostly women and children, fed only bread and water, and “without heat, without blankets, and without toilets, except for an open, stinking bucket.” Jacobs himself was twelve, and turned thirteen during his week at Hohenasperg before he was sent to
another camp at Ludwigsburg. At the Hohenasperg prison, he was placed under strict discipline as a prisoner, and guards threatened him repeatedly with hanging if he disobeyed.

The camp at Ludwigsburg was in effect a holding center pending release. It is informative that Jacobs tells us of the meager diet: “At breakfast we received one glass of ‘gray’ milk and one slice of black bread. There was no lunch meal.” At supper, “each person received one bowl of soup..., mostly water flavored by bouillon. There were no second helpings... I always had hunger pangs.” While he and his brother were at Ludwigsburg, they were forced to watch films of German death camps.

The mother, father and brothers were released from their respective camps in mid-March 1946, and went to live with Jacobs' grandparents in the British Zone. They weren't welcomed by Germans they met, because “we were four more mouths to feed.” Jacobs saw that “Germany was war-torn and starving.” He was befriended by an American soldier, who got him a job with Graves Registration. He lost his job when the soldier was transferred, and it became a struggle to “live through this starvation period—the winter of 1946-1947.” After much knocking about, he got another job with the American Army, this time in a motor pool. An American woman took an interest in him who knew of a ranch couple in southwest Kansas who would bring them to America to live with them. Accordingly, Jacobs and his brother left for the United States in October 1947. They had been in Germany for 21 months. It was eleven years before Jacobs saw his parents again. He went on, as we have said, to become a career officer in the U.S. Air Force. After obtaining his MBA at Arizona State University, he became an industrial engineer and later a member of the ASU faculty.

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