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The Worst War Crimes The U.S. Committed During World War II

By John Kuroski on November 21, 2016

From Operation Teardrop to the Biscari massacre, these are the atrocities that the U.S. would rather forget.



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One need only say the word “Nuremberg” and most anyone with a passing knowledge of history will immediately recall the few dozen Nazis who stood trial for some of the world’s worst war crimes ever in that German city soon after World War II.



the United States, during that war.

This is of course because perhaps the greatest spoil of war is that of writing its history. Sure, any war's victors get to set the terms of the surrender and the peace, but that's merely the stuff of the present and the near-future. The true reward for the winning side is getting to recast the past so as to reshape the future.



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So it is that the history books say comparatively little about the war crimes committed by the Allies during World War II. And while these crimes were certainly neither as widespread nor as appalling as those committed by the Nazis, many committed by the United States were utterly devastating indeed:

Mutilation In The Pacific



Arizona war worker writes her Navy boyfriend a thank-you note for the Jap skull he sent her

Ralph Crane, Time & Life Pictures/Getty Images via Wikimedia

Photo published in the May 22, 1944 issue of *LIFE* magazine, with the following caption: "When he said goodbye two years ago to Natalie Nickerson, 20, a war worker of Phoenix, Arizona, a big, handsome Navy lieutenant promised her a Jap. Last week, Natalie received a human skull, autographed by her lieutenant and 13 friends and inscribed: 'This is a good Jap—a dead one picked up on the New Guinea beach.' Natalie, surprised at the gift, named it Tojo. The armed forces disapprove strongly of this sort of thing."

In 1984, some four decades after the battles of World War II had torn the area apart, the Mariana Islands repatriated the remains of Japanese soldiers killed there during the war back to their homeland. Nearly 60 percent of those corpses were missing their skulls.

Throughout the United States' campaign in the Pacific, American soldiers indeed mutilated Japanese corpses and took trophies — not just skulls, but also teeth, ears, noses, even arms — so often that the Commander-in-Chief of the Pacific Fleet himself had to issue an official directive against it in September 1942.

And when that didn't take, the Joint Chiefs of Staff were forced to issue the same order again in January 1944.



determine precisely how many incidents of corpse mutilation and trophy taking occurred, historians generally agree that the problem was troublingly widespread.



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A skull fixed to a tree in Tarawa, December 1943.

According to James J. Weingartner's "Trophies of War," it is clear that the practice was not uncommon." Similarly, Niall Ferguson writes, in *The War of the World*, that "boiling the flesh off enemy [Japanese] skulls to make souvenirs was not an uncommon practice. Ears, bones and teeth were also collected."

And as Simon Harrison puts it in "Skull trophies of the Pacific War," "The collection of body parts on a scale large enough to concern the military authorities had started as soon as the first living or dead Japanese bodies were encountered."

In addition to the grim assessments of historians, we're left also with several equally grim anecdotes that suggest the appalling breadth of the problem. Indeed, the extent to which repugnant activities like corpse mutilation were able to sometimes poke their way into the mainstream back home suggests just how often they were going on down in the depths of the battlefield.



Congressman Francis E. Walter presented President Franklin Roosevelt with a letter opener made out of a Japanese soldier's arm bone. In response, Roosevelt reportedly said, "This is the sort of gift I like to get" and "There'll be plenty more such gifts."

Then there was the infamous photo published in *LIFE* magazine on May 22, 1944 (see above) depicting a young woman in Arizona gazing at the Japanese skull sent to her by her boyfriend serving in the Pacific.



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Clockwise from top left: U.S. soldier with the Japanese skull adopted as the "mascot" of Navy Motor Torpedo Boat 341 circa April 1944, U.S. soldiers boiling a Japanese skull for preservation purposes circa 1944, a Japanese soldier's severed head hangs from a tree in Burma circa 1945, a skull adorns a sign at Peleliu in October 1944.

Or consider that when famed pilot Charles Lindbergh (who wasn't allowed to enlist but did fly bombing missions as a civilian) passed through customs in Hawaii on his way home from the Pacific, the customs agent asked him if he was carrying any bones. When Lindbergh expressed shock at the question, the agent explained that the smuggling of Japanese bones had become so common that this question was now routine.

Elsewhere in his wartime journals, Lindbergh notes that Marines explained to him that it was common practice to remove ears, noses, and the like from Japanese corpses, and that killing Japanese stragglers for this purpose was "a sort of hobby."

Surely it's just this sort of conduct that induced Lindbergh, one of the great American heroes of the pre-war period, to render this damning summation on American atrocities committed against the Japanese in his journals:



its Buchenwalds and its Camp Doras, but in Russia, in the Pacific, in the riotings and lynchings at home, in the less-publicized uprisings in Central and South America, the cruelties of China, a few years ago in Spain, in pogroms of the past, the burning of witches in New England, tearing people apart on the English racks, burnings at the stake for the benefit of Christ and God. I look down at the pit of ashes....This, I realize, is not a thing confined to any nation or to any people. What the German has done to the Jew in Europe, we are doing to the Jap in the Pacific.

Mass Rape In Europe And Asia



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U.S. troops enter the Yasuura House in Yokosuka, Japan, one of many massive brothels set up by the Japanese government just after their surrender in hopes of curbing sexual assault against local women by Allied troops.

While history always remembers the amount of people killed and wounded during any war, even the amount of property damage caused, we tend to give relatively short shrift to the other tragic toll of war: rape.

So odious is the very notion that we tend to shut it out of our minds, but most historians agree that American soldiers raped tens of thousands of women across Europe and Asia throughout the war and its immediate aftermath.

Precise estimates are of course impossible to come by, however, J. Robert Lilly, in *Taken By Force*, estimates that American servicemen raped approximately 11,000 women in Germany in 1945 and 1946.



least looked the other way when rapes occurred, with at least one American commander, according to Carol Harrington's *Politicization of Sexual Violence*, stating that "copulation without conversation does not constitute fraternization."



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A U.S. Marine demolition crew destroys their target during the Battle of Okinawa in May 1945. Many now claim that U.S. forces raped thousands of local women during both the battle and the ensuing U.S. occupation of the island.

Many American attitudes were at least equally repugnant in the Pacific Theater as well. One estimate states that American troops raped 10,000 women on Okinawa alone (with three Marines even staying behind after fighting had stopped so that they could regularly raid villages and rape women). However, historians also universally agree that the vast majority of rapes went unreported, leaving the true total unknowable.

And the incidence of rape didn't even stop when the fighting did. After the Japanese surrendered in September 1945, U.S. troops stayed behind as an occupying force, and the rapes continued. Within just the first ten days in the Kanagawa prefecture alone, 1,336 rapes were reported, with many others likely unreported.

The problem quickly became so severe that the Japanese government established the Recreation and Amusement Association, a network of dozens of military brothels catering to Allied troops. These brothels employed tens of thousands of



dozens of men per day.

With these brothels in place, the number of rapes quickly plummeted. However, when VD rates rose, the government shut the brothels down in early 1946 and rape cases, according to John W. Dower's *Embracing Defeat*, instantly ballooned from about 40 per day to about 330 per day.



-/AFP/Getty Images

Crowds gather on Paris' Champs Elysees to celebrate the German surrender in May 1945. While the liberation of France over the preceding 11 months represented one of the Allies' greatest victories, scholars now say that U.S. soldiers committed thousands of rapes in France during the liberation.

Scarcely better were the conditions in an Allied nation that U.S. troops were in the process not of occupying or invading, but liberating: France. According to Mary Louise Roberts' *What Soldiers Do*, hundreds of French women reported being raped by American soldiers in places like Le Havre and Cherbourg during and soon after the country's liberation in 1944.

LIFE magazine even described France as "a tremendous brothel inhabited by 40 million hedonists," and the *Stars and Stripes* newspaper provided soldiers with a number of useful French phrases, including "You are very pretty" and "Are your parents at home?"

"Once aroused," Roberts writes in summation, "the GI libido proved difficult to contain."

The Concentration Camp Slaughter



ERIC SCHWAB/AFP/Getty Images

The body of a German soldier lies on the floor of the camp.

Today, after decades of analysis and dozens of books and films, most of us have some idea of just how brutal the carnage of the Holocaust could be. But the Allied troops who actually liberated those concentration camps in 1945 not only had no idea what they were in for, but also had to experience it all firsthand.

Thus, we can't even the imagine the shock and horror that American soldiers must have felt when liberating Dachau concentration camp on April 29, 1945. But does that mean that we can excuse the war crime that those soldiers committed later that day?



ERIC SCHWAB/AFP/Getty Images

U.S. soldiers observe a pile of prisoner's dead bodies in a train near Dachau soon after its liberation.

As the Americans approached Dachau, they discovered 39 railway boxcars filled with approximately 2,000 decaying corpses that had been brutally slaughtered by the Germans. Then, once the Americans entered the camp, the surrender itself was relatively quick and painless, but the discovery of those corpses had some Americans thinking about vengeance.

What happened next varies from account to account, but all agree that the Americans indeed took that vengeance.



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U.S. soldiers execute German troops during the liberation of Dachau on April 29, 1945.

According to Lt. Col. Felix L. Sparks and First LT. Howard Buechner, both commanding officers at the scene, American troops lined up somewhere between 12 and 16 German prisoners against a wall and summarily executed them with a machine gun.

Sparks furthermore states that the Americans executed approximately 30 Germans that day, while Buechner alleges that the Americans killed 520 Germans, including 346 in a mass execution. However, several writers have since come out against Buechner's claims.



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The truth about Buechner's claims, and about everything that happened that day, will likely never fully come to light. The Army's official investigative report on the matter and the Judge Advocate's office admit that many Germans were unlawfully executed on April 29 in violation of international law.

However, the courts-martial of both Sparks and Buechner were ultimately dismissed by General George S. Patton and the remaining witnesses were thus never cross-examined.

Operation Teardrop



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A life raft carries survivors from U-546 in the midst of a group of U.S. Navy destroyer escorts.

Many of Adolf Hitler's grand plans were so absurdly ambitious that one could simply disregard them without a second thought. But when Hitler threatened to attack New York *and* sent U-boats capable of carrying long-range rockets uncomfortably close to the East Coast, the U.S. military had to take him seriously.

Thus was born Operation Teardrop, the U.S. Navy's campaign to hunt down German boats in the North Atlantic. And while that campaign went largely according to plan — and international law — one incident got very much out of hand.



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Paul Just, commander of U-546, comes aboard USS Bogue soon after the sinking of his craft.

On April 24, 1945, the German U-boat U-546 sank the American USS *Frederick C. Davis*, killing 126 of its 192 crewmen, and causing several other American ships to give chase.

After about ten hours, the USS *Flaherty* sank U-546 and took its 32 survivors, including commander Paul Just, as prisoners aboard the USS *Bogue*.

Perhaps it was because U-546 had just killed 126 Americans, and almost certainly it was because the Americans were under extraordinary pressure to ferret out any German boats that posed a threat to the homeland, but the Americans did not treat their new prisoners at all as they should have.



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Of the 32 survivors, 25 were sent to prisoner of war camps — as they all should have been — while eight were pulled out for interrogation about threats to American soil.

Those eight men were repeatedly beaten, held in solitary confinement, subjected to exhaustive physical strain, and otherwise tortured over the course of two weeks, until the official acceptance of Germany's surrender on May 8.

Then, even after the war ended, the men were transferred to Fort Hunt, Virginia, where they were once again subjected to harsh treatment before finally being released on May 12.

The Biscari Massacre

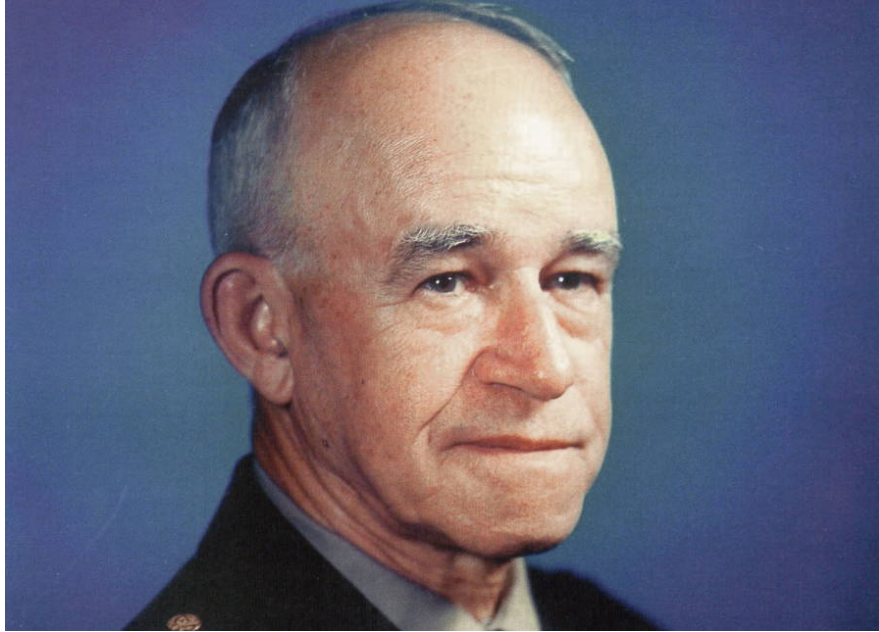


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The Allies land on the beaches of Sicily at the outset of their invasion on July 10, 1943. Four days later, U.S. troops carried out the two sets of killings now known as the Biscari massacre.

On July 10, 1943, nearly a year before D-Day, the Allies invaded Sicily, commanded in part by General Omar Bradley and General George S. Patton, in one of their first triumphant moves to take back Europe. Just four days later, however, American soldiers would commit one of the largest illegal massacres of the Allied side of the war.

In two separate incidents on July 14, American soldiers slaughtered a total of 73 prisoners of war (71 Italian and two German) in Santo Pietro. Collectively, these killings have become



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General Omar Bradley.

The first incident transpired shortly after 10 a.m. under the command of Sergeant Horace T. West. His men had stormed the airfield and taken more than 40 prisoners when he ordered that a few be sent to the regimental intelligence officer for questioning. The other prisoners weren't so lucky.

West marched them away from the road, lined them up, and borrowed a submachine gun from the First Sergeant. When the First Sergeant asked why West wanted the gun, he replied that he was going to "kill the sons of bitches," then added, "turn around if you don't want to see it."

West then shot all 37 men, most through the heart at close range. Investigators would later learn that, during the slaughter, he "stopped to reload, then walked among the men in their pooling blood and fired a single round into the hearts of those still moving."

A little later in the day, elsewhere in the same battle, Captain John T. Compton and his men took 36 prisoners following a firefight. What's still not clear even today is just how many of those men had been acting as snipers during that firefight. Some of the 36, in fact, were dressed in civilian clothing.

When the American interpreter asked the prisoners if they had been shooting, he got no response. But when Compton asked his lieutenant if these men had been shooting, the latter answered in



“Get them shot,” Compton then replied, adding that he “didn’t want a man left standing when the firing was done.” There indeed wouldn’t be.



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General George S. Patton.

Not long after, when General Omar Bradley informed commanding General George S. Patton of the massacres, Patton brushed him off, noting in his diary that:

I told Bradley that it was probably an exaggeration, but in any case to tell the Officer to certify that the dead men were snipers or had attempted to escape or something, as it would make a stink in the press and also would make the civilians mad. Anyhow, they are dead, so nothing can be done about it.

But when Bradley persisted, Patton gave in. And when the Inspector General concluded that the prisoners had been illegally slaughtered, Patton simply said, “Try the bastards.”

West was convicted and sentenced to life in prison, only to have his sentence remitted a year later, at which point he returned to active duty and finished out the war with an honorable discharge. Compton, on the other hand, was acquitted in his court-martial, while the Judge Advocate’s office later claimed that he had acted unlawfully.



investigations, both West and Compton named Patton as the man who had instructed everyone before the Sicilian invasion to take prisoners (in other words, not simply execute them) only under very limited circumstances.

The Inspector General's office then investigated and questioned Patton, one of the most powerful and beloved figures in the entire U.S. military, but ultimately cleared him of any wrongdoing.

The Bombing Of Dresden



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A pile of bodies, victims of the bombings, awaits cremation in February 1945.

For three days and nights starting on February 13, 1945, 1,249 American and British bombers dropped 3,900 tons (that's 30 times the weight of a blue whale) of explosives and incendiary devices on the German city of Dresden, killing an estimated 25,000 people.

It wasn't the deadliest bombing campaign of the war — nearly four times that many people died in a single U.S. raid on Tokyo a month later — but it was different. While the legality, and of course the morality, of the war's deadliest bombings (Tokyo, Hiroshima, Hamburg, Nagasaki) remain the subject of debate, Dresden is still unlike the others.



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A view of Dresden reduced to rubble taken from the top of the Rathaus (city hall).

The scholars who believe that the Dresden bombings constitute a war crime claim that the Allies knowingly chose a civilian target, applied unnecessary force to that target, needlessly pounded an enemy that was already on the ropes, purposefully ignored the few military and industrial targets that were actually in the city, and may have even conducted the entire operation at least in part to show their might to the Russian armies approaching the city from the east.

Historians have uncovered evidence that could indeed support all of these claims: A British Air Force memo issued to bombers on the first night of the raid claimed that the campaign would “show the Russians when they arrive what Bomber Command can do.”

Then there’s the fact that Dresden’s industrial targets largely on its northern outskirts were indeed relatively unscathed. As Alexander McKee writes in *Dresden 1945: The Devil’s Tinderbox*:



Y and Z, and to let the innocent reader assume that these targets were attacked, whereas in fact the bombing plan totally omitted them and thus, except for one or two mere accidents, they escaped...The bomber commanders were not really interested in any purely military or economic targets, which was just as well, for they knew very little about Dresden; the RAF even lacked proper maps of the city. What they were looking for was a big built up area which they could burn, and that Dresden possessed in full measure.”



AFP/Getty Images

People work to remove debris from Dresden's Muenzgasse Street in front of the ruins of the Frauenkirche (Church of Our Lady) in January 1952, a full seven years after the bombings.

Two official U.S. inquiries — one by the Army Chief of Staff and one by the U.S. Air Force Historical Division — analyzed all of this evidence and found that the bombings were justified. Some scholars, of course, outright dismiss these reports as the biased whitewashing of one of the bombing's very perpetrators.

But whatever historians and the U.S. government makes of it, the bombings were never able to officially be declared war crimes — but not necessarily because they didn't indeed fit the bill. International laws regarding aerial warfare were simply inadequate during World War II; the law had not caught up to the technology.

Had the necessary laws been written just a little bit sooner or had the bombings been carried out just a little bit later, the legal aftermath of this horrific event may very well have looked a



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