



## *Hell before Their Very Eyes: American Soldiers Liberate Concentration Camps in Germany, April 1945* by John C. McManus.

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Despite the outpouring of scholarship on the Holocaust, relatively little of it has concerned the role of American soldiers as liberators. Initially, Holocaust scholars focused on revealing the full extent of the perpetrators' crimes and tracing the development of an ideology of genocide in Germany. But for military historians, the liberations of concentration camps were minor operations compared with such Second World War campaigns as the invasions of North Africa and Italy, Operation Overlord, and the Battle of the Bulge.

In *Hell before Their Very Eyes*, prolific World War II historian John McManus (Missouri Univ. of Science and Technology) has produced an instructive and long overdue study of the tactical movements of the American units that liberated three camps (Ohrdruf, Buchenwald, and Dachau) and their reactions to what they found in them. Though he describes the freed prisoners and the operations of the SS concentration camp system, his narrative centers on the American liberators themselves. McManus has tapped a plethora of primary and secondary materials in the such repositories as the US National Archives, the Library of Congress, the Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, the US Military Institute, the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, and the Emory University Library. He also mines gold in published and unpublished unit histories and veterans' memoirs and oral histories.

McManus exposes the limitations of the previous standard work on his subject, Robert H. Abzug's *Inside the Vicious Heart*,<sup>1</sup> a book that typifies a genre of scholarship that finds fault with the response of American society to the Holocaust. Abzug stresses that the GIs who entered concentration camps generally expressed feelings of revulsion rather than empathy for the victims of Nazi Germany. But he relies, McManus points out, mainly on a handful of accounts by soldiers assigned to the camps *after* conditions had improved. By spotlighting the liberators and medical personnel who *first* freed and occupied the camps, he vividly evokes the attitudes of battle-hardened soldiers to the unspeakable conditions they witnessed. While some, McManus admits, were revolted by the sight of emaciated and filthy inmates, most were appalled and broken-hearted at their plight. Tragically, many of the GIs gave their personal rations to starving inmates, only to see them die before their eyes when their weakened alimentary systems could not digest the rich food.

The American liberators often had little sense of the extent of the Third Reich's genocidal policies. The ghastly sight of hundreds of gaunt corpses in railroad cars outside of Dachau enraged them. Most commanders and their men followed the laws of war and protected captured perpetrators and other Germans who surrendered at the camps. In several instances, however, GIs stood by as the liberated inmates killed German guards and kapos (prisoner functionaries).

McManus astutely analyzes several controversial actions at Dachau, notably the execution of some SS men by American soldiers commanded by Lt. William L. Walsh. While recognizing the stress Walsh was under after witnessing such staggering atrocities, he convicts him of failing to meet his du-

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1. Subtitle: *Americans and the Liberation of Nazi Concentration Camps* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 1985).

ty to treat captured POWs humanely. McManus carefully recounts the confrontation between Brig. Gen. Henning Linden of the 42nd Division and Lt. Col. Felix Sparks of the 45th over who bore the ultimate responsibility for violating regulations in the immediate aftermath of Dachau's liberation.

The book has some weaknesses. While McManus does clearly explain the internal organization of Buchenwald and the role of the Communists in seizing control of the camp even before American forces arrived, he overlooks the bitter divisions among prisoners at Dachau. Chaplain David Eichhorn, who conducted one of the first Jewish services there, described in his report to the Jewish Welfare Board the virulent anti-Semitism of many Polish inmates: threats of violence by liberated Poles forced the relocation of a service from the camp's principal square to the main laundry building on 5 May 1945. The next day, pressure from a Signal Corps film crew and the senior American commander in charge of the camp enabled Eichhorn to hold an open-air service protected by an American honor guard.<sup>2</sup>

McManus makes only passing reference to religion. The same can be said of Abzug's book. This despite the availability of good source material, beginning with the chaplains' official personnel files in the US National Archives in St. Louis and the records of the Jewish Welfare Board. A study of the effect of differing religious legacies of liberation on Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Jewish GIs remains a desideratum.<sup>3</sup>

Though McManus skillfully uses oral histories as a counterweight to other sources, he glosses over questions of memory, commemoration, and history. Granted, he is wise not to take sides in the debates between divisional veterans' organizations over which specific unit was the first to liberate any given camp. But these controversies had a bearing on the few efforts in the United States (apart from those of the Jewish community) to commemorate the Holocaust. Only in the 1970s did Americans begin to recognize that the Holocaust was a central event of the Second World War.<sup>4</sup> The US Holocaust Memorial Museum proposed by President Jimmy Carter in 1979 opened to the public in 1993. The national World War II memorial was not dedicated until the twenty-first century.

Identifying the reasons why American attitudes toward the Holocaust shifted is beyond the scope of this review. But one factor should not be underestimated—the trauma sustained by many liberators. McManus cites my interview with a Holocaust liberator, Jim Gentry, conducted in 2003 (176n8). In it, Gentry describes his reluctance to speak about his experiences as a young GI confronting a concentration camp. This gregarious educator and inveterate storyteller spoke out about his experiences as a liberator only when someone he had freed from a camp urged him to do so.

*Hell before Their Eyes* may encourage other scholars to examine additional aspects of liberation. For instance, McManus notes that the dead found at Dachau were not buried or cremated until legal investigative teams had documented them as evidence for war crime trials. Who made up these teams? How did they react to the horrors of Nazi atrocities? While there are excellent histories of the Nuremberg Trials, we know relatively little about the process of investigating and documenting Nazi war crimes. Primary sources are, however, available: for example, the personal papers of infantry officer Wilson D. Brooks,<sup>5</sup> who was detailed to investigate German war crimes. Among them are affida-

2. Oddly, McManus does not cite Greg Palmer and Mark S. Zaid, eds., *The GI's Rabbi: World War II Letters of David Max Eichhorn* (Lawrence: U Press of Kansas, 2004).

3. Alex Grobman, *Rekindling the Flame: American Jewish Chaplains and the Survivors of European Jewry, 1944–1948* (Detroit: Wayne State U Pr, 1993), documents the extensive efforts of Jewish chaplains, often aided by Jewish GIs, to save the remnants of European Jews as American forces drove the Germans out of North Africa, Italy, and France, and to aid displaced persons after the war.

4. See Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999).

5. Now in the Wilson D. Brooks Collection, Institute on World War II and the Human Experience, Florida State University.

vits and interviews, including one with an Auschwitz survivor. They make for harrowing reading. Brooks's son observed that his father never fully recovered from the trauma of his wartime service.

McManus finds much to praise in the conduct of the American GIs, many of them teenagers or in their early twenties, who fought to defeat Nazi tyranny. Concentration camp survivors never forgot what they owed these young men. As one of them, Stephen Ross, movingly put it,

You held in your arms our living skeletons, too weak to talk, to eat, or to live. You gave us our first bites of decent food. You provided medical help as best you could. You left your homes and families and at times you were also hungry, cold and disillusioned. We owe you all our gratitude, recognition and our acknowledgment. You looked rough and tough and yet you showed so much empathy. You fought bravely and defeated the most vicious and evil empire the world has ever known. (154)