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Anger at Nazi Atrocities Is Rising but U.S. Treats Prisoners Fairly

Rules of Geneva Convention Still Guiding Policy for Army in Handling German POW's

Not even the imminent prospect of Nazi surrender last week abated public fury on an issue burning deep in the hearts of every American family with a boy overseas. In dreadful counterpoint, each new tale of suffering told by Yank prisoners of war liberated in Germany evoked its opposite story of Nazi prisoners of war held in the United States:

- About the same time Signal Corps films arrived showing a young 192-pound Nebraskan reduced to 118 pounds in four months of a bread-and-potato-peeling-soup diet in the Nazi prison hospital at Heppenheim, Rep. Richard Harless of Arizona reported that at the Papago Park internment camp in his home state he had seen Nazis "fat as hogs."
- About the same time GI's released from Berga told of being forced to dig tunnels under the eyes of SS guards who beat them with rubber hose, 300 Nazi POW's sullenly refused to work in Southern Idaho pea fields. (Punishment: bread-and-water and sleeping outdoors.)
- About the same time liberated Americans of Stalag 344, Upper Silesia, told of a forced 1,000-mile hike through knee-deep snow, the Seventh Service Command admitted that officer POW's at Concordia, Kans., celebrated Hitler's birthday with Nazi speech and song. (Punishment: losing "all privileges previously accorded" plus KP duty.)
- About the same time Yanks liberated from Ziegenhain and Orb recalled a menu featuring dehydrated greens of "lawn-mower stuff—grass, pine needles, twigs, and underbrush"—the Second Service Command ordered a "tightened-up" POW diet including "only" these fresh meats: hearts, liver, and kidneys. (Concurrently, veterans at St. Elizabeth's Hospital, Washington, were on four meatless days a week and still are.)

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Anger at Nazi Atrocities

Tale of Two Countries: Still the stories came—and with them the bitter letters piled high on Congressional desks. On the hottest spot of its recent history, the War Department made haste to state its case through its highest POW authority, Maj. Gen. Archer L. Lerch, Provost Marshal General. His answer:

1—Until last December Swiss and International Red Cross reports showed general German compliance with Geneva Convention rules, but undoubtedly individual German commandants flouted them.

2—Recent abuses could be laid to Germany's internal crackup in the past four months.

3—Scrupulous American compliance had induced the surrender of thousands of Germans. In any case, Lerch believes that two wrongs don't make a right: "Atrocity stories ought not to stampede us into abandoning the American way of doing things."

On the particular point most interesting to the home front—the charge that Nazi POW's are being fed too well—Lerch's assistant, Brig. Gen. B. M. Bryan Jr., told a House Military Affairs Committee investigation that originally, when there had been "plenty of food," Nazi POW's were given the same diet as GI's in this country (steak, chicken, ham, etc.); that on July 1, 1944, a change in POW menus was authorized "in the interest of food conservation"; and that on Feb. 2 of this year a new directive ordered sugar and butter substitutes and no more than 4 ounces of meat daily. Because of discretion vested in each service command, "mistakes" had occurred, Bryan admitted. Nevertheless, he insisted: "We do not coddle prisoners of war, but we treat them firmly and fairly." (See page 60.)

The Nation's Temper: The inflamed national temper last week plainly promised that as long as one GI remained in Nazi hands (still held: an estimated 65,000) and as long as a Nazi POW remained here (now interned: 320,118), the problem would remain under strict scrutiny.

Meanwhile Congress awaited an eyewitness report on German-camp conditions from a dozen senators and representatives invited to inspect them (NEWSWEEK, April 30). And the State Department began its independent inquiry into

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atrocities against war prisoners by detailing two foreign-service officers to go abroad.

The War Department itself took further measures. An April 25 order banned the straight-arm Nazi salute, hitherto permitted because it had been German Army regulation. Lerch began arrangements to have POW's view atrocity films brought from the Reich. And sweetest of all to American ears, the Second Service Command announced that Yank soldiers liberated from German camps would be assigned to help operate Nazi POW compounds: "American officers and enlisted men who have experienced captivity and detention by the enemy are considered to be eminently qualified for these duties."

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