

DIE RHEINWIESENLAGER – THE CAMP OF THE RHINE MEADOWS

The International Law

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International Law

During the Den Haag peace conference at the beginning of the 20th century the so called civilized states agreed to submit to the International Law. The International Law should amongst other topics humanize warfare, i.e. eliminate brutality against the defenceless. On January 26th 1919 "The Haag War Regulation" is signed by all participating states amongst them the United States of America.

The Prisoners of War are part of The DEFENCELESS

The following statutes are established:

Paragraph 4

Prisoners of War are under the supervision of the enemy state and not of individuals or units who captured them. They should be treated humanly. All their personal belongings remain in their hands, with exception of arms, horses and documents of military matters.

Paragraph 6

The enemy state is allowed to use the POWs according to their ability as a labour force. Officers are excepted. The work should not be extraordinarily hard.

Paragraph 7

The enemy state has to take care about the livelihood of the POW. If respective communications concerning food, housing and clothing do not exist the POW should be treated at the same level as their own troops.

Paragraph 14

As soon as the hostilities begin an office of POW affairs has to be established by all the war faring parties.

Paragraph 20

After the peace treaties have been signed the immediate release of the POWs has to be secured.

On July 27th 1929 the Protective Regulations of the Geneva Convention for wounded soldiers were expected to include now also POWs. All accommodations should be equal to the standard of their troops. The Red Cross supervises. After the end of the hostilities the POWs should be released immediately. The Allies signed those regulations.

Break of the Law

1943 the Allies decided to treat the German POWs not as regular POWs but as punishable POWs/ Strafgefangene disregarding the International Law. The supreme commanders of the different forces were given a free hand in handling the German POW.

On March 10th 1945 Dwight D Eisenhower, the supreme commander of the US forces, received order not to release German prisoners captured on German territory but keep them in captivity as "Disarmed Enemy Forces" (DEF). These therefore were not protected by the International Law and left at the mercy of the victors.

Breaking the International Law at war constitutes according to the International Law as WARCRIME.

The Camps

After the crossing of the Rhine river in march 1945 Eisenhower was ordered to line up camps for German prisoners at the west banks of the river. Vast areas were confiscated and fenced in barbed wire. The daily increasing number of prisoners were herded in, wounded, amputees, women, children and old folks.

Rhine camps were set up at or near the following towns:

Alzey

Andernach

Bad Kreuznach

Biebelsheim

Bühl

Bretzenheim

Büderich

Büdesheim

Dietersheim

Dietz

Hechtsheim

Heidesheim

Ingelheim

Koblenz

Koblenz-Lützel

Ludwigshafen

Ludwigshafen-Rheingönheim

Mainz

Mainz-Kastel

Mainz-Zahlbach

Mannheim

Mannheim-Küferthal

Mannheim-Sandhofen

Mannheim-Schönau

Mannheim-Waldhof

Miesenheim

Plaids

Remagen

Rheinberg

Rheinheim

Schwarzenhorn

Siershan

Sinzig

Trier

Urmitz

Wickrathberg

Wintzenheim

On May 8th 1945, the end of the war, German soldiers, having surrendered at different fronts of the war theatre, were imprisoned, cramped into closed cattle wagons and lorries and then dumped like garbage across the barbed wire fences. At that time some of the prisoners were already dead. To those transports the German soldiers were added who had escaped the onrushing Russians hoping to be treated more humanly by the Allies. Also thrown into those camps were civilians, primarily party leaders, high government officials and industry captains, fallen under the so called "automatic arrest", an arrest without further legal process.

When the Allies advanced further East the Americans established about 200 more camps all over Germany and Austria.

After awhile most of the camps outside the Rhine river were eventually closed and the prisoners sent to the Rhine camps. One can assume that finally about 5 - 6 million Germans were kept at those camps.

Conditions at the Camps

Some might have heard about the conditions at those camps. Important facts should be repeated:

- No registration of the prisoners, neither on arrival nor at their stay.
- The camps are guarded all around, floodlight at night. Escapes are answered with execution.
- Sometimes guards fire into the masses of prisoners without any reason.
- The prisoners bivouac in spite of low temperatures, rain and snow without shelter on the bare ground which after awhile turns into a bottomless quagmire. They are not allowed to build shelters.
- Tents are not distributed even though German army depots as well as American ones are full of them.
- The prisoners dig holes in the ground to protect themselves against the icy cold. Yet again and again they are told not to do it and forced to fill the holes with dirt again.
- Bulldozers wheel through the Camp rolling over holes and vegetating soldiers.
- So there are no washing facilities. Beams are raised above deep pits, close to the fences.
- One can observe the outside natures nevertheless.
- When the camps opened there was neither food nor water available even though German and American army depots had plenty of it and the Rhine river carried high water.
- To empty the German depots their doors were opened for the public to plunder. Later on the prisoners receive from US stock egg powder, milk powder, cookies, chocolate bars and coffee powder but still no water. Hunger and severe intestinal diseases occur.
- The prisoners have no contact with the outside world. No mail reaches them. The public is threatened with death penalty if they try to supply the prisoners with food over the fence.
- The German authorities are urged to advise the public accordingly. If people still try it they are chased away or fired at with rifles.
- The Red Cross can not enter Germany. Eisenhower pushed the return of Swiss Red Cross trains loaded with food and supplies. Seriously ill or dying prisoners are hardly taken care of or not at all. German hospitals are not approached.
- Guards are partly recruited from released foreign workers. Former inmates of the German and Austria.
- From the army penitentiary Torgau, are employed as camp police. Mistreatments happen daily and are not stopped.

For additional detailed information about the Rheinwiesenslager we refer you to **James Barque's "Other Losses"**. Two of Barque's eye witness reports may illustrate the conditions at the Rheinwiesenslager:

An American's report:

"April 30th was a stormy day, rain, snow, snow rain intermingling and a bone chilling, cold wind blowing from the North across the flats of the Rhine valley towards the camp. A deeply terrifying fog appeared at the other side of the barbed wire fence: Closely pushed together to warm up each other, hundred thousands emaciated, apathetic, dirty, gaunt men with hollow eyes wearing dirty battle uniforms staying ankle deep in mud.

Here and there you could see dirty-white spots. When looking closer you could notice men wrapped up their heads or arms with bandages or men wearing merely their shirts. The German division commander said they did not eat for at least two days, and getting water caused a major problem even though the Rhine river only 200 meters away carried high water."

A prisoner's report:

"Some 100.000 German soldiers, sick people out of hospitals, women of the military support services and civilians were captured. A camp mate of the Rheinsberg camp was 80 years old, another one only nine. Permanent hunger and tormenting their tongues them, and they died of dysentery.

A cruel sky poured down, weak long, torrential rains. Amputees were sliding like amphibians through the quagmire, thoroughly wet and shivering. Day in day out, night for night without shelter, they camped hopelessly on the sands of Rheinsberg, finally falling asleep at the collapsing foxholes."

Another American report:

In late March or early April, 1945, I was sent to guard a POW camp near Andernach along the Rhine. I had four years of high school German, so I was able to talk to the prisoners, although this was forbidden. Gradually, however, I was used as an interpreter and asked to ferret out members of the S.S. (I found none.) In Andernach about 50,000 prisoners of all ages were held in an open field surrounded by barbed wire. The women were kept in a separate enclosure I did not see until later. The men I guarded had no shelter and no blankets; many had no coats. They slept in the mud, wet and cold, with inadequate slit trenches for excrement. It was a cold, wet spring and their misery from exposure alone was evident.

Even more shocking was to see the prisoners throwing grass and weeds into a tin can containing a thin soup. They told me they did this to help ease their hunger pains. Quickly, they grew emaciated. Dysentery raged, and soon they were sleeping in their own excrement, too weak and crowded to reach the slit trenches. Many were begging for food, sickening and dying before our eyes. We had ample food and supplies, but did nothing to help them, including no medical assistance.

Outraged, I protested to my officers and was met with hostility or bland indifference. When pressed, they explained they were under strict orders from "higher up." No officer would dare do this to 50,000 men if he felt that it was "out of line," leaving him open to charges. Realizing my protests were useless, I asked a friend working in the kitchen if he could slip me some extra food for the prisoners. He too said they were under strict orders to severely ration the prisoners' food and that these orders came from "higher up." But he said they had more food than they knew what to do with and would sneak some.

When I threw this food over the barbed wire to the prisoners, I was caught and threatened with imprisonment. I repeated the "offence," and one officer angrily threatened to shoot me. I assumed this was a bluff until I encountered a captain on a hill above the Rhine shooting down at a group of German civilian women with his .45 caliber pistol. When I asked, "Why?", he mumbled, "Target practice," and fired until his pistol was empty. I saw the women running for cover, but, at that distance, could not tell if any had been hit.

This is when I realized I was dealing with cold-blooded killers filled with moralistic hatred. They considered the Germans subhuman and worthy of extermination; another expression of the downward spiral of racism. Articles in the G.I. newspaper, Stars and Stripes, played up the German concentration camps, complete with photos of emaciated bodies; this amplified our self-righteous cruelty and made it easier to imitate behaviour we were supposed to oppose. Also, I think, soldiers not exposed to combat were trying to prove how tough they were by taking it out on the prisoners and civilians.

These prisoners, I found out, were mostly farmers and workingmen, as simple and ignorant as many of our own troops. As time went on, more of them lapsed into a zombie-like state of listlessness, while others tried to escape in a demerol or suicidal fashion, running through open fields in broad daylight towards the Rhine to quench their thirst. They were moved down. Some prisoners were as eager for cigarettes as for food, saying they took the edge off their hunger. Accordingly, enterprising G.I. "Yankee traders" were acquiring hordes of watches and rings in exchange for handfuls of cigarettes or less. When I began throwing cartons of cigarettes to the prisoners to ruin this trade, I was threatened by rank-and-file G.I.s too.

The only bright spot in this gloomy picture came one night when I was put on the "rank-and-file shift," from two to four A.M. Actually, there was a graveyard on the uphill side of this enclosure, not many yards away. My superiors had forgotten to give me a flashlight and I hadn't bothered to ask for one, disgusted as I was with the whole situation by that time. It was a fairly bright night and I soon became aware of a prisoner crawling under the wires towards the graveyard. We were supposed to shoot escapees on sight, so I started to get up from the ground to warn him to get back. Suddenly I noticed another prisoner crawling from the graveyard back to the enclosure. They were risking their lives to get to the graveyard for something; I had to investigate.

When I entered the gloom of this shrubby, tree-shaded cemetery, I felt completely vulnerable, but somehow curiously kept me moving. Despite my caution, I tripped over the legs of someone in a prone position. Whipping my rifle around while stumbling and trying to regain composure of mind and body, I soon was relieved I hadn't reflexively fired. The figure sat up. Gradually, I could see the beautiful but terror-stricken face of a woman with a picnic basket nearby. German civilians were not allowed to feed, nor even come near the prisoners, so I quickly assured her I approved of what she was doing, not to be afraid, and that I would leave the graveyard to get out of the way.

I did so immediately and sat down, leaning against a tree at the edge of the cemetery to be inconspicuous and not frighten the prisoners. I imagined then, and still do now, what it would be like to meet a beautiful woman with a picnic basket, under those conditions as a prisoner. I have never forgotten her face.

Eventually, more prisoners crawled back to the enclosure. I saw they were dragging food to their comrades and could only admire their courage and devotion.

On May 8, V.E. Day, I decided to celebrate with some prisoners I was guarding who were baking bread the other prisoners occasionally received. This group had all the bread they could eat, and shared the jovial mood generated by the end of the war. We all thought we were going home soon, a pathetic hope on their part. They were in what was to become the French zone, where I soon would witness the brutality of the French soldiers when we transferred our prisoners to them for their slave labour camps. On this day, however, we were happy.

As a gesture of friendliness, I emptied my rifle and stood it in the corner, even allowing them to play with it at their request! This thoroughly "broke the ice," and soon we were singing songs we taught each other or I had learned in high school German ("Du, du hegst mir im Herzen"). Out of gratitude, they baked me a special small loaf of sweet bread, the only possible present they had left to offer. I stuffed it in my "Eisenhower jacket" and snuck it back to my barracks, eating it when I had privacy. I have never tasted more delicious bread, nor felt a deeper sense of communion while eating it. I believe a cosmic sense of Christ (the Oneness of all Being) revealed its normally hidden presence to me on that occasion, influencing my later decision to major in philosophy and religion.

Shortly afterwards, some of our weak and sickly prisoners were marched off by French soldiers to their camp. They were riding on a truck behind this column. Temporarily, it slowed down and stopped back, perhaps because the driver was as shocked as I was. Whenever a German prisoner staggered or dropped back, he was hit on the head with a club until he died. The bodies were rolled to the side of the road to be picked up by another truck. For many, this quick death might have been preferable to slow starvation in our "killing fields."

When I finally saw the German women in a separate enclosure, I asked why we were holding them prisoner. I was told they were "camp followers," selected as breeding stock for the S.S. to create a super-race. I spoke to some and must say I never met a more spirited or attractive group of women. I certainly didn't think they deserved imprisonment.

I was used increasingly as an interpreter, and was able to prevent some particularly unfortunate arrests. One rather amusing incident involved an old farmer who was being dragged away by several M.P.s. I was told he had a "fancy Nazi medal," which they showed me. Fortunately, I had a chart identifying such medals. He'd been awarded it for having five children! Perhaps his wife was somewhat relieved to get him "off her back," but I didn't think one of our death camps was a fair punishment for his contribution to Germany. The M.P.s agreed and released him to continue his "dirty work."

Famine began to spread among the German civilians also. It was a common sight to see German women up to their elbows in our garbage cans looking for something edible -- that is, if they weren't chased away.

When I interviewed mayors of small towns and villages, I was told their supply of food had been taken away by "displaced persons" (foreigners who had worked in Germany), who packed the food on trucks and drove away. When I reported this, the response was a shrug. I never saw any Red Cross at the camp or helping civilians, although their coffee and doughnut stands were available every where else for us. In the meantime, the Germans had to rely on the sharing of hidden stores until the next harvest.

Hunger made German women more "available," but despite this, rape was prevalent and often accompanied by additional violence. In particular I remember an eighteen-year old woman who had the side of her face smashed with a rifle butt and was then raped by two G.I.s. Even the French complained that the rapes, looting and drunken destructiveness on the part of our troops was excessive. In Le Havre, we'd been given booklets warning us that the German soldiers had maintained a high standard of behaviour with French civilians who were peaceful, and that we should do the same. In this we failed miserably.

"So what?" some would say. "The enemy's atrocities were worse than ours." It is true that I experienced only the end of the war, when we were already the victors. The German opportunity for atrocities had faded; aim was at hand. But two wrongs don't make a right. Rather than copying our enemy's crimes, we should aim once and for all to break the cycle of hatred and vengeance that has plagued and distorted human history. This is why I am speaking out now, forty-five years after the crime. We can never prevent individual war crimes, but we can, if enough of us speak out, influence government policy. We can reject government propaganda that depicts our enemies as subhuman and encourages the kind of outrages I witnessed. We can protest the bombing of civilian targets, which still goes on today. And we can refuse ever to condone our government's murder of unarmed and defeated prisoners of war.

I realize it is difficult for the average citizen to admit witnessing a crime of this magnitude, especially if implicated himself. Even G.I.'s sympathetic to the victims were afraid to complain and get into trouble, they told me. And the danger has not ceased. Since I spoke out a few weeks ago, I have received threatening calls and had my mailbox smashed. But its been worth it. Writing about these atrocities has been a catharsis of feeling suppressed too long, a liberation, and perhaps will remind other witnesses that "the truth will set us free, have no fear." We may even learn a supreme lesson from all this: only love can conquer all.

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Those facts prove that the conditions at the Rheinwiesenslager were not, as so often stated, caused by the inability of the Americans to handle the masses of prisoners. On the contrary those conditions with all their consequences were **wanted**, as stated above. The responsibility for the treatment of the German POW rested with the commanders of the US Army in Europe subordinated to the political control of their government.

When the occupation zones were formed in July 1945, the Rheinwiesenslager were handed over to the British or French, depending on the geography. The British tried to improve the food supply for the prisoners. The French did nothing. They started transporting the still physically able as forced labour to France. Only few returned.

Dying

Soon after the Rheinwiesenslager were set up the conditions at the camp caused death. Bacque writes :
"From May 1st until June 15th 1945, the army doctors registered at the camps along the banks of the Rhine a terrible increase of the death rate - 80 times higher than they ever experienced. Efficient and conscientious they registered death causes: many died from diarrhoea, many from dysentery and typhoid fever, from tetanus and blood poisoning, numbers not heard of since the Middle Ages. Medical terminology could not describe the catastrophe the doctors were witnessing. Death caused by emaciation and exhaustion were registered - heart failure and pneumonia."

Every morning the dead are carried away and dumped into hidden mass graves.

An eyewitness writes:

"The corpses of the starved are daily transported with lorries outside the camp and than dumped into deep pits, five layers deep in a long row. After the pits were filled with the dug out soil the mass graves were flattened."

Then there are also the dead which submerged at the bottomless quagmires and latrines never being recovered.

From the camp Büderich:

"They guessed that about 230 corpses are buried each night. Nobody could excavate the dead, none of them has been registered. The Americans levelled the dead and pits with bulldozers."

Bacque says that about 800.000 and 1000.000 German prisoners died at the American and later on at the French prisoner- and labour camps, 3/4 of them, however, at American camps.

Bacque says:

"The number of the victims is doubtless higher than 800.000 and almost certain more than 900.000, very possible over 1.000.000. Army officers well aware of the situation caused their death. There was enough food and other supplies available to save the life of the prisoners. Relief organizations tried to help the prisoners at the American camps. The Army would not allow it. All that was shredded in secrecy at the time and covered up with lies... documents were destroyed, altered or kept as secret matters under lock and key. And this goes on up to our days."

The official US history reports only about 5000 dead at the Rhine Meadow Camps. Germany's official history books go along with that: Perhaps 10.000 dead in the Rheinwiesenslager, by no means more! That would mean that of the 5-6 million prisoners who were held at the Rhine Meadows Camp only 0.1 % of the imprisoned did not survive. A death rate of 0,1 %, however, is the death rate of people living under normal conditions. A death rate of 0,1 % is impossible regarding conditions in the Rheinwiesenslager.

The Red Cross says that in spite of all research about 1400.000 German soldiers having fought in the II World war are still missing.

http://www.stoip.de/DBStoip/DBMenue/Notes_Kreuz.htm

This missing million can't be caused by the Russians. In 1990 they have opened their archives to researchers and shown that they unexpectedly detailed have registered the prisoners' names having died in Russia. Only about 100.000 names of missing soldiers were found. The "Missing Million" is still present.

Bretzenheim

The figure of about 750.000 dead at the American Rhine Meadows Camps may be explained by the reports from the camp Bretzenheim near Bad Kreuznach:

"I was born at 1924 and as a member of the 3rd Parachute Division captured by Americans on April 20th 1945, nearly three weeks before the German capitulation in the Harz Mountains near Quedlinburg after a hasty retreat from France. A few days later we were transported on Belgian coal freight cars to Bretzenheim near Bad Kreuznach., 60 men in a car, standing shoulder on shoulder, no food, no water, no toilets. After 24 hours we were unloaded at an open field, nearly all the men had water in their legs because of the long standing. Hardly anyone could walk. The camp was a bare field fenced in with barbed wire, not a single tent, no buildings. We bivouaced body on body on the muddy ground, one wool blanket for three men. The latrine consisted of a pit of the size of about two rooms, no seating facilities. If you fell into the pit you drowned in the faeces. Cleaned water was not available. Every morning first aid attendants walked along the endless rows of laying men and kicked the ones who they thought they were dead. The first night about 180 dead were counted.

After a few days we received the first drinking water and "food", one wheat bread, a spoonfull of coffee powder, milk powder, egg powder and sugar for 50 prisoners. At that camp I stayed until June 12th 1945, when I was officially released."

<http://www.de-it-media.info/html/kriegsgefangenen.html>

From another prisoner this is reported:

"... in spite of being emaciated to a skeleton and in spite of starving with his burning eyes at the dark sky and trying to figure out when you will join your comrades who were collected every morning, then lined up at the edge of the road to be dumped at the "heroes cemetery..."

A former inmate of the camp writes:

"From April until July 1945, the people of Bretzenheim could have seen every morning the piles of up to 180 corpses at the gate and watched the loading of the deceased on lorries then speeding away to the "Galgenberg" (gallows mountain) near Kreuznach and the "Stromberg" (stream mountain).

That means that under American administration about 15.000 men died in the Camp Bretzenheim. With a camp capacity of 130.000 prisoners, reported by the author, a death rate of 11.15 % sounds correct. Add to this the innumerable emaciated prisoners who suffocated at the bottomless mud or fell into latrines from where there was no escaping.

"How many dyed already in this mud? And how many hunger starved men might this mud still engulf? The mud still gushes often with his terrible power over us, the totally weakened and defenceless during these May weeks when death harvested so mercilessly."

"Many or even most of the men were victims of the mud and the bottomless pitfalls of the latrines. When we used them after the long lasting rains like now, April early May, it degenerated to an ugly game of life and death. That fact should not be missed by any camp chronicler. At that time, primarily at night some could only arduously crawl along the road to the latrines and he never returned to the fox holes of his comrades because he fell into the indescribable abyss from where there is no return."

If you add to the dead at the gate of camp Bretzenheim the ones who perished during the first months in the mud and the latrines, you will reach after a cautious estimate a death rate of 15%. There is no reason to figure out a lower death rate for the other camps. Similar conditions existed there. If you accept a total camp population of 5 million in the American camps and a death rate of 15%, a total of 750.000 dead seems reasonable. Bacque arrives at the same figure.

The Dead

Where are the remains of the dead of the Rhine Meadow Camps? About 5000 dead were buried during that time at the cemeteries of the American camps. Just as many as the official historiography admits. The official authorities never felt responsible to look out for mass graves in the vicinity of the Rhine Meadows Camps or the dead at the camp sites. The dead who officially do not exist are not searched for.

The hands of the "Volksbund Für Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge" (Association for the care of German war cemeteries) are tied up. According to the War Graves Law of 1952 the association can only work on cases happening in foreign countries. At home they have to wait for an excavation order from their German authorities. Such an order will never be given.

Excavation at the Camp Bretzenheim

Only once an excavation had been undertaken. Otto Schmitt from Guldenthal near Bretzenheim, a member of the German Bundeswehr (army) started around 1970 on his own initiative to find out about the fate of the lost prisoners of the camp Bretzenheim. He started a private excavation.

After a short while, however, uninvited guests arrived at the area. A deputation of the Bad Kreuznach county delivered a letter informing that the area is from now on protected as an historical monument and that the office for Care of Monuments in Mainz does not permit an excavation. A penalty of 250.000 DM is set. Otto Schmitt had to leave and eventually to give up.

The camp area of Bretzenheim is declared as "cultural property" and any disturbance or excavation is strictly forbidden by German authorities!

Why is it that way ?

Why are the war crimes committed at the Rhine Meadow Camps still not atoned?

Why are our fathers and grandfathers still not recovered from the massgraves, the quagmire pits and the latrines at the Rhine river ?

Why do the defeated, the Germans, even after more than half a century not dare to touch their own dead?

Why do the defeated still accept that mourning for their dead is not allowed?

Why is it almost a crime to honour the dead at the Rhine Meadows ?

It is as if a curse hovers not only over the Dead Camps at the Rhine but over the whole country, where the dead cry in vain for the ones who still live.