German Atrocities Against Allied Prisoners of War in the First World War

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Most people know the First World War involved millions of young men dying at the front lines, families contributing on the home front and that it ended with a German surrender. What most don't know or even think about are the millions of men who were held prisoner during the war, especially in the central power of Germany. At the hands of the Germans, Allied prisoners of war faced brutal atrocities in the form of violence and inhumane conditions. Through the Germans ignoring the Hague Convention they signed just seven years before the war, which should have prevented the abuse of prisoners, to the inhumane treatment of Allies held in German prisoner of war camps, to the impact of the many months spent in captivity, Allied prisoners of war suffered greatly under the control of their German captors. This suffering is not well-known through-out history and must now be brought to light.

During the years leading up to the war, measures were taken to outline the laws of war in the event that a world war was to break out. One of these measures was the Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907. These conventions were to outline the laws of land warfare and to achieve agreement between the countries of the world, especially those in Europe, of how war should be fought.[1] During both conventions, the topic of prisoners of war and treatment of those prisoners was discussed thoroughly. In Article 4 of both the 1899 and 1907 conventions, it is outlined that captured prisoners are under the authority of the government that captured them, not the individuals or the army that took them captive, and that prisoners must be treated humanely under said government. [2] This showed that prisoners of war were not to suffer at the hands of those who captured them, but rather be under the command of the entire government. It also stated that those who signed the agreement would treat the prisoners of war humanely through-out their captivity. Article 6 and 7 of the conventions also stated that prisoners of war were to be held and treated in the same conditions that the army who has captured them is treated. [3] The articles stated that if the prisoners of war were put to work, they were to be paid for the level of work that they executed. The reasoning behind these articles being added to the convention was simple. They were to ensure that the prisoners of war, when captured by other powers, were to be treated in the same way that their own country would treat them. This also gave peace of mind to the soldiers who, if they were to be captured, would continue to be paid and would not suffer at the hands of their captors. All the world power which signed these articles in the Hague Convention agreed to adhere to these conditions and were to follow them in the event of a war breaking out. Germany was among the signers of the agreement.[4] They

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[1] *Encyclopedia of United States National Security, s.v. "Hague Convention (1907)", 2005,* http://library.mtroyal.ca:2964/view/nationalsecurity/n260.xml.

[2] James Scott, *The Hague Conventions and Declaration of 1899 and 1907.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1915), 108.

[3] "Laws of War: Laws and Customs of War on Land (Hague IV) October 18 1907, para. 15-16, Yale Law School, last modified 2008, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/hague04.asp.

[4] Scott, *The Hague Conventions and Declaration of 1899 and 1907,* 270.

agreed to not commit war crimes against prisoners of war and to ensure that they were treated fairly and humanely. Unknown at the time, Germany would disobey these rules once the Great War broke out.

During the beginning of the Great War, prisoners of war (POWs) were viewed in different ways by the various members of German society. German women greeted many of the first French POWs as they had those who were captured during the Franco-Prussian war by waving to them as they walked by and gave them flowers and chocolate.[5] The women did not view the men as a threat towards their nation but rather as almost visitors coming to appreciate the beauty of their land and, in times, saw them no differently than they saw their own country's soldiers. Upon receiving knowledge of the locals greeting the enemy warmly, the Prussian Ministry of War ordered all "shameful" behavior to be stopped at once and necessary steps taken to make sure it does not happen again. [6] The German civilians had not yet realized that the foreign soldiers they saw marching through the streets were in fact the enemy and were not simply visitors. But the Germans were prepared to do whatever it took to make sure their civilians treated the foreigners in the way they wanted them to: with disgust and anger. They wanted every German citizen to hate the enemy as much as they did. The German soldiers, however, already saw the alien soldiers differently.

As with many other aspects of the First World War, propaganda relating to prisoners of war played a key role in developing the German attitude towards them and in translating rumors towards the Allies of how their fellow soldiers were being treated in captivity. In propaganda released in Germany during November of 1914, it showed a French colonial troops (presumed to be a black soldier as they were common in the French army during the Great war) cutting off the head of a German prisoner. [7] The Germans circulated this pamphlet to the public which not only made the civilians angry about the way their men were being treated, but would have also caused soldiers in the German army to believe that their fellow soldiers who were captured were being treated this way. This likely gave them just cause to treat the Allies that they captured in the same way. On the Allied side, there was also propaganda circulating depicting what the Germans were doing to their soldiers. In a poster designed by David Wilson, a German nursing sister was depicted in front of a British soldier pouring water on the ground. The caption of the poster read "Wounded and a prisoner, our soldier cries for water. The German 'sister' pours it on the ground before his eyes. There is no woman in Britain who would do it. There is no woman in Britain who will forget it".[8] This poster outlined the type of propaganda that was in place in Britain at the time but through accounts of the soldiers (as outlined in later paragraphs), it is shown to be

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[5] Jeffrey Verhey, *Spirit of 1914: Militarism, Myth & Mobilization in Germany* (Port Chester: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 81.

[6] BHStA IV, M Kr 1630, K.m. Berlin, Nr 371/8.14, U3, Wild v. Hohenbirn ti M. des Innern, Fernhalten des Publikums von Kriegsgefangenen, 20.8.1914, quoted in Heather Jones, *Violence against Prisoners of War in the First World War: Britain, France and Germany, 1914-1920* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 51.

[7] Liste über Fälle, die sich auf planmässige Ermordung und Misshandlung einer grösseren Zahl von deutschen Kriegsgefangenen durch farbige Truppen beziehen (Berlin: Gedruckt in der Reichsdruckerei, 1919), p. 1. quoted in Pierre Purseigle. *Warfare and Belligerence : Perspectives in First World War Studies* (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2005), 148.

[8] "Red Cross or Iron Cross?", n.d, First World War Propaganda Posters, Imperial War Museum Poster Collection, Imperial War Museum, PST 2762.

true. Propaganda was used on both side but it was the German side that used it as fuel to not only make their civilians hate the enemy even more but to drive their army forward to kill and capture the enemy.

For Allied prisoners captured during the war, the most dangerous point for them was the time immediately after capture. The rumors of the Germans neglecting wounded prisoners and shooting them on the spot was proven to be true. The first POWs of the German campaign were the Belgians. During the invasion of Belgium, the Germans were met with Belgian soldiers whom they had not been expecting. Instead of humanely treating the Belgian soldiers that they captured, the German soldiers shot them. [9] This proved that it only took the Germans a few weeks of war for them to go back on their word and commit war crimes. The Belgians were not supposed to take up arms against the Germans as they were to remain a neutral country but the Germans had invaded them and they were only trying to protect their civilians. In some cases, the orders to kill enemy soldiers captured in battle was given by those in higher command. General Stenger of the sixth German army sent out an order to the 58th Infantry Brigade to kill all French soldiers that had been captured, including the wounded.[10] Stenger tried to defend himself in saying that the order was only given due to the wounded French firing on the Germans but the evidence was too substantial for much of a defense. It is thought that he sent that order down in order to keep on track with the Schlieffen Plan and taking prisoners alive would have brought the army even further behind schedule. Nonetheless, this order is an clear example of how Germans did not care about the lives of the enemy and were willing to go to extreme measures in order to keep with their war plan. They killed the scared and wounded without even attempting to keep with the peace convention they had signed just seven years earlier.

First-hand accounts from captured prisoners of war were essential to prove the legitimacy of the Allied accusations about the German atrocities. The diaries of captured Allies and the books written by returning prisoners of war have proven priceless in showing exactly what took place behind the enemy's lines. During the initial stages of captivity, the German army took every opportunity to be violent towards their prisoners. One Canadian soldiers remembers being beat by a German colonel and being told that the Canadians took no prisoners and that they kill the wounded Germans instead of helping them.[11] The German used these rumors to justify their acts of violence towards the captured prisoner whether it was true or not. This proves that the Germans did not even try to follow the regulations towards prisoners that they were suppose to but rather used unproven information about the allies to justify their actions. Another example of a first-hand account of German atrocity is that of Canadian Sergeant Arthur Gibbons who suffered horribly at the hands of the enemy. "The first thing that I recall after being wounded ... a German soldier standing over me with an upraised rifle and bayonet... I am firmly convinced that the German was about to plunge it into my body ... Shortly afterwards I was dragged about forty yards behind the German trenches and left lying helpless in the open

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[9] John Horne and Alan Kramer, *German Atrocities 1914: A History of Denial.* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 14.

[10] Horne and Kramer, *German Atrocities 1914,* 348-349.

[11] Interrogation report, Pte. F.J. Hamilton, 26th Battalion, Canadian War Records Office file, NAC, RG 9 III, vol. 4737, folder 152, file I, quoted in Desmond Morton, *Silent Battle: Canadian Prisoners of War in Germany 1914-1919,* (Toronto: Lester Publishing, 1992), 31.

field for four days".[12] The Germans left a bleeding wounded soldier that they had captured without any medical treatment or access to food or water for days before they finally attended to him. It was also not just the Canadians that were experiencing German brutality. One French soldier recalls his time in the hospital, having just been captured by the Germans and suffering from a serious leg wound: "... this is [the doctor's] answer [regarding my long wait for surgery]: 'Your doctors in France are amputating the limbs of our German soldiers just as they please... So we have orders to amputate without hesitation... We are not to try and save any'".[13] The Germans again used the rumors of Allies mistreating their soldiers as justification of their actions towards Allied prisoners. They unnecessarily chopped off the legs of wounded prisoners which is hard evidence that the Germans treated their prisoners inhumanely and did not even try to give them the best care possible. These first-hand accounts proves without a doubt that the German violence towards prisoners of war were very real and were experienced by Allied soldiers. The POWs of all Allied nationalities were suffering unnecessarily under the control of their German captors. For all the men that were captured, nothing could have prepared them for what was next: life in the camps.

The lives of prisoners of war in camps varied through-out the war but with many, brutal conditions and inhumane treatment was the norm. Many of the POW camps were located in key areas within Germany. These camps were used not only to supply slave labour to the factories but were also used as human shields to discourage Allied bombing.[14] The Germans were not just keeping the prisoners captive but were using the POWs to protect themselves and to further their war effort. The life of the prisoners within the camps was even worse than the fear of their own country dropping bombs on their heads. The interior of the camps were unsanitary, cold and often damp due to poor maintenance:

> We are housed in the boxes and in the lofts... the concrete is damp and consequently the straw has become damp and clammy also... Six men abreast in a space of about 10 ft. 6 in. means that they are packed in like sardines in a box, and no one can move. They are supplied with only one poor blanket each, and those who have none of their own are in a sad plight... [it] meant a shortened life and broken health. [15]

The prisoners were kept in horrible conditions and packed into such small areas they could not move. This would have led to the spread of disease much more easily and deteriorated the men's health. The Germans also did not prove proper food for the prisoners within the camps. Much of what the men were feed was of poor quality and it was all that they had to eat. A day's rations (in some camps) consisted of raw potatoes eaten plain, and bread that was mixed with sawdust.[16] For many of the prisoners, the shipment of care packages from

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[12] Sergeant Arthur Gibbons, *A Guest of the Kaiser*, (Toronto: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1919), 117.
[13] Charles Hennebois, *In German Hands: The Diary of a Severely Wounded Prisoner,* (London: William Heinemann, 1916), 84.
[14] Richard van Emden, *Prisoners of the Kaiser: The Last POWs of the Great War.* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword Books, 2000), 75, 78.
[15] London. *The Treatment of Prisoners of War in England and Germany During the First Eight Months of the War* (London: Harrison and Sons, 1915), 19.
[16] A.J. Evans, *The Escaping Club,* 3rd ed. (Edinburgh: Morrison and Gibb, 1922), 141.

home was the only thing that kept them going in the camps but even these the Germans controlled. When food supplies from the Germans were cut off, all the prisoners had to rely on was the food sent from home. But yet during Christmas, these deliveries were cut off and suspended for weeks in order for the German army to receive their care packages for Christmas.[17] Instead of offering to feed the prisoners that they knew were on the edge of starvation, the Germans let their prisoners to go on little to none food for weeks on end before the parcels from home were finally delivered to the camps. This shows that the Germans were heartless towards the prisoners and would rather the POWs starve than to go without their own care packages. Though German cruelties were proven in every camp, some were worse off than others.

The conditions and treatment of the POWs at the camps through-out Germany was awful for many of the prisoners. Considered the most brutal of camps in Germany, the prisoners incarcerated in Wittenberg faced numerous atrocities under the control of the German. From the very beginning of the camp opening, the structures were inadequate and the conditions the POWs lived in were extremely inhumane. Within the camp, the men were forced to live in wooden bungalows which were not properly heated, especially in the winter, and many of the prisoners were left with rags for clothing and nothing on their feet.[18] The Germans did not provide enough coal for the prisoners to heat their living spaces and confiscated their overcoats upon arrival, leaving them with nothing but their uniforms to wear in the bitter cold winter. If the men were captured without their boots, they were not given replacements. Upon arrival the usual protocol was to disinfect the prisoners and keep the various nationalities separated should disease be present in some. At Wittenberg, the Russian prisoners were not properly disinfected and quarantined, and this lead to a camp-wide break out of typhus fever in the winter of 1914.[19] It was the intention neglect of the Germans to proper disinfection rules that lead directly to hundreds of prisoners become ill and dying. At the height of the outbreak, the German medical staff not only did not treat the prisoners but they fled the camp until the outbreak was over in the summer of 1916.[20] The Germans did not even try to help the prisoners which they were obligated under law to do so but rather abandoned them to rot away with disease. This is a direct showing of how the Germans neglect their sworn duty to take care of the prisoners and instead turned their back on them. The rapid spread of the disease can also be directly linked to the lack of supplies given to the prisoners by their German captors. For most of the barracks, there was only one mattress for every three men and within the prison hospital, there were no mattresses for the sick to lay on.[21] This led the men to make the awful decision when one of the three got sick, to either take the man to the hospital on the infected mattress which would leave them with nothing to sleep on, or to leave it in their barrack where sleeping on it would put them at high risk of falling ill as well. Through-out the outbreak, the Germans did not offer to prove any more supplies for the prisoners and

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[17] Ibid, 142.
[18] Britain,*The Horrors of Wittenberg: Official Report to the British Government,* (London: C. Arthur Pearson, 1916), 7-8.
[19] James. W. Gerard, *My Four Years in Germany.* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap Publishers, 1917), 129.
[20] Britain, *The Horrors of Wittenberg,* 12-13.
[21] Daniel J. McCarthy, *The Prisoner of War in Germany: The Care and Treatment of the Prisoner of War with a History of the Development of the Principle of Neutral Inspection and Control.* (New York: Moffat, Yard and Company, 1918), 110-111.

left them with infected supplies that led to the rapid transmission of the disease. Wittenberg was also a prime example of the lack of food fed to the prisoners. The rations given out here were half a piece of small bread, half a cup of milk and soup that, when it arrived at the hospital where many of the sick were fighting for their life, was filled with dust and dirt from the courtyard.[22] These rations did not allow the sick men enough energy to fight their illness and left most starving and weak. The Germans did not provide humane conditions for these men and it further proves the brutalities they committed towards the prisoners over the course of the war. If the prisoners were not beaten down by illness, they were forced to work away their lives in the camps.

"The State may utilize the labor of prisoners of war according to their rank and aptitude, officers excepted. The tasks shall not be excessive and shall have no connection with the operations of the war".[23] The Hague Convention of 1907 stated that prisoners of war may work for the country that has taken them captive but it could not be any work that relates to the war effort. The jobs that the POWs in Germany were involved in varied based on their location but the commonality between them all was that the work was long, performed in brutal conditions and many times, the German guards beat their workers when they became weak. First-hand accounts from the men in the prisoner of war camps provides the most details as to the forced labour the POWs were required to perform. One of these such prisoners was Private Frank MacDonald of the First Canadian Mounted Rifles. He and the men that were imprisoned with him were forced to work in a steel factory where they endured hot, poisonous fumes and every second Sunday were forced to work twenty-four hours straight only taking breaks to eat.[24] The German were not only breaking the Hague Convention by forcing the prisoners to work in a steel factory that was supplying the war effort but also by forcing them to work excessively over the course of a day. Bill Easton of the Royal Army Medical Corps for the British Army was also a victim of forced labour in prisoners of war. He fell ill upon capture and was then forced to work building roads or wells to the point where he would collapse. "I used to collapse and of course if you collapsed they'd give you a thump and pull you to one side and throw water over you until you came round".[25] The Germans were forcing prisoners who were sick and injured to work until they could not even lift a shovel. They did not allow the prisoners to rest and forced them to continue even after they passed out from weakness. This proves that the Germans treated the prisoners inhumanely and with violence no matter what the situation was.

The officers that were taken as prisoner in the First World War were faced with much the same condition and treatment as their soldiers were. Though put into different camps and forts than the regular soldiers, they were treated much the same. The officers, like the regular soldiers, are given hardly any food by the Germans. What little food they are given, usually a weeks worth at a time, could only last any regular person about a day.[26] Though the officers were suppose to be treated better and often were of higher ranks in their armies than those who imprisoned them, they were treated as if they were criminals.

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[22] Ibid, 111-112.
[23] Scott, *The Hague Conventions and Declaration of 1899 and 1907,* 109.
[24] Frank Macdonald, *The Kaiser's Guest.* (New York: Country Life Press, 1918), 155.
[25] Emden, *Prisoners of the Kaiser,* 95.
[26] Svetlana Palmer and Sarah Wallis, *Intimate Voices from the First World War,* 1st ed. (Toronto: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003), 261.

The officers were forced to endure sub-par living conditions of which were not fit for any soldier let alone an officer. They were confined into rooms, eight at a time, in which should only have held six men at most, forced to sleep on rock-hard mattresses and even told they had to pay for the heating of their prison room. [27] This proves that the German did not even attempt to treat the officers any better than the other soldier and did not treat them as if they were regular human beings. They packed them into rooms like animals and forced to pay for a basic human need. Though officers were suppose to be treated better, they faced the same atrocities that the regular POWs did. The German did not change their treatment as the war was coming to a close.

All those captured as prisoners of war suffered greatly at the hands of the Germans but for many, they paid the ultimate price of war: with their death. The number of POWs that were held in prisoner camps in Germany is astonishing; the number of those that died is even more appalling. The Central Power of Germany captured prisoners of war from all Allied countries including Britain, France, Russia, Italy, Serbia and Romania. In total Germany captured 2,590,400 known prisoners of war, with the majority coming from Russia, Britain (including colonial powers) and France. This was over 25% more prisoner captured than what the Allies were able to capture.[28] The Germans were ruthless and wanted to take as many prisoners as possible. Approximately 90 000 of these men lost their lives at the hands of the Germans.[29] Though this does not seem like a big percentage (only about 3.5%), this is 90 000 men that did not have to die. These were men with families that expected them to come home and men who, if they really did have to die, should have died in the honor of battle. These men instead died of starvation, exposure, disease or had simply lost the will to live in horrible prisoner camps. As the war was approaching 1918, there was a spike in the death of prisoners of war. In just one camp alone, the death rate jumped from 23 dead in May of 1916 to 608 dead in December of 1918.[30] The war ended in November of 1918 but yet POWs were still dying of sickness as the Germans had neglected to provide the camps with even soap in order to help stop the spread of illness. This proves that even after the surrender of war, the Germans were still committing cruelty towards their POWs and they did not try to change it. With death rates still high and the war over, the POW's only hope was to be released back to their home country.

With the signing of the Armistice in late 1918, most of the POWs that had been incarcerated in Germany, many for several months or even years, were anxious to be released and returned home. This led to many of the prison camps revolting against their German guards in hopes that this would led to a hastened release. Instead of being release, the German guards resorted to deadly force to control the rioting; open firing into the crowds of prisoners and killing many.[31] Even though the war had ended, the Germans were still resorting to violence against the POWs. They had lost control of the camps and decided to kill the prisoners of war instead of giving them what they wanted. Once they were finally

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[27] London. *The Treatment of Prisoners of War,* 14.
[28] Niall Ferguson, *The Pity of War: Explaining World War I,* 2nd ed, (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 445.
[29] Alon Rachamimov, *POWs and the Great War: Captivity on the Eastern Front.* (New York: Berg Editorial Offices, 2002), 41.
[30] Jones, *Violence against Prisoners of War in the First World War,* 277-278.
[31] Gerd Hankel, *Die Leipziger Prozesse. Deutsche Kriegsverbrechen und ihre strafrechtliche Verfolgung nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg* (Hamburg, 2003), quoted in Jones, *Violence against Prisoners of War in the First World War,* 286.

released, the men were finally able to communicate with their families. The Germans had censored letters coming out of the camps and hospitals; these men were finally able to truly tell their families what had happened to them and the horrors that they had to endure.[32] The Germans had not only been violent towards the prisoners but had deprived them of communicating freely with their families and had only allowed little details about the men's lives in captivity to be told.

When many of the prisoners were returned to their home countries, they were appalled to see how their countries were treating the Germans. "These fellows were all fat and healthy looking... A few were doing a little work; some of them, nothing at all."[33] The Allies treated the German prisoners of war well as they had promised to do when the war broke out; this upset the returning Allied POWs. Not only had the Allied POWs suffered horribly at the hands of the Germans, they were forced to see German prisoners that had been treated like regular civilians upon their return home. This proves that the Allies did in fact adhere to the laws of war and treated the prisoners of war how they were suppose to; German cannot say the same. Once the war was over and the POWs were in the process of returning home, the Germans still committed atrocities towards the Allies and insult was added to injury when the Allies saw the German POWs did not suffer the same.

Possibly the worse legacy the Allied POWs received from spending months in prison was the psychological impact of being held captive. Among many of the prisoners that had been held in German POW camps during the first years of war, a new form of neurosis was beginning to show through. Daniel McCarthy, a POW camp inspector, observed in 1916 many of the men that had been recently captured at Verdun. "There they sat, woe personified, apparently looking through the barbed wire, but with that vacant look which could only mean a refusal to accept as real the things they saw and to look through and beyond it to what might have been.[34] These men were suffering from what was called "barbed wire disease" in which prisoners became depressed at the fact they were being held captive and would spend hours staring through the barbed wire at the world beyond. They only broke out of their trance once they were released. Upon their return home, many of the prisoners (seen mostly in French POWs) were viewed as cowards or as deserters by their home nations.[35] Many of the civilians believed these men had chosen to surrender instead of fight and during the time period, this was seen as cowardly. The Germans taking these men captive made their own home countries view them as criminals and as no better than the enemy. These men were heroes and being captured by the Germans deprived them of this title. For men of all Allied nations, the return home for those that had spent many months in captivity was a big life change. Much of the psychological impact unfortunately was not documented. Taking from those who were held captive in the Second World War, conclusions can be drawn. Many men faced a crisis after their return from German prisoner of war camps in WWII; whether it was suicidal thoughts, extreme stress or depression and

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[32] Carl Dennett, *Prisoners of the Great War: Authoritative Statement of Conditions in the Prison Camps of Germany.* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1919), 2-3.
[33] Macdonald, *The Kaiser's Guest,* 246.
[34] McCarthy, *The Prisoner of War in Germany,* 48.
[35] Reinhard Nachtigal. "The Repatriation and Reception of Returning Prisoners of War, 1918–22", *Immigrants & Minorities: Historical Studies in Ethnicity, Migration and Diaspora* 26 no.2 (2008): 176, doi: 10.1080/02619280802442662.

this affected their home lives substantially.[36] Though the men in the Great War did not face the exact same experiences that the Second World War men faced, their lives in captivity was brutal and they would have come home to deal with many of the same things their counterparts would have faced in the next war. The Germans caused these men to live with the memories of violence and brutality within the prisons for the rest of their lives.

The evidence is clear. The Allied prisoners of war suffered violence and atrocities at the hands of their German captors. It began in the instant that they were captured, continued to the camps and did not end even once the prisoners were returned home. They faced horrible camp conditions, brutality from German soldiers and, for many, lost their lives in preventable ways. Under the German control, Allied prisoners of war faced violence and cruelty that, for the most part, has been hidden from the world. For the sake of the prisoners, these cruelties had to be brought to light. The experiences of these men can never be forgotten.

[36] Ben Shepard, *A War of Nerves: Soldiers and Psychiatrists in the Twentieth Century.* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 322.

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