

Chapter 12 Additional Material

GIs Souvenir Hunting and Looting in Germany

The American soldier in the Second World War was an avid souvenir hunter on the battlefield. Soldiers stuffed their war trophies into sea bags alongside their uniforms, letters from home, and all other personal belongings. Some servicemen packed their bags so full of “liberated items” they had little room for other objects. When the first GIs left Europe for home, they steamed home with an impressive assortment of trophies. The 28th Infantry Division, one of the first units sent back to the U.S. after the war, brought home 20,000 weapons to their 5,000 men.

What did soldiers take as war trophies? Pistols knives, watches, flags, medals: all was fair game for GIs to take from their enemy counterparts. Souvenir hunters established a hierarchical list of German items that GIs wanted the most, and at the top was the vaunted Luger pistol. Primarily, there were four motivations for why GIs took objects from the battlefield. A soldier often took objects as keepsakes, as it was a good opportunity to impress his family and friends, or just a quiet reminder to himself of a formative period in his life. Once the entrepreneurial- minded soldier realized there was a market in selling pistols, knives, and flags to the non-combat troops in the rear, a new motivation for looting arose. During the harsh winter of 1944 and 1945, some soldiers took objects out of necessity. Shortages in supplies during the February and March offensives prompted GIs to take German equipment, as well as non-standard issues like field glasses, watches, and personal vehicles. Later on, once American soldiers witnessed the concentration and labor camps within Germany, GIs stole pictures of loved ones, wedding bands, and other personal items not for keepsakes, profit, or necessity, but rather revenge.

For the most part, the U.S. Army allowed their soldiers to collect souvenirs from the battlefield. Dwight Eisenhower’s command, the Supreme Headquarters, Allied Expedition Force (SHAEF), strictly prohibited the taking of civilian possessions, however. While SHAEF drew a discernible line between souvenir hunting and looting, GIs saw little difference between the two when they entered Germany in

spring 1945. Eisenhower's headquarters placed considerable importance on the prevention of soldiers taking items from Germany homes, worrying lawlessness could derail a successful occupation. The construction of anti-looting orders was a difficult proposition, but the implementation of these directives was an even more monumental undertaking.

To ensure American troops maintained discipline, SHAEF ordered officers to closely govern their soldiers' conduct and threatened harsh punishment for offenders as well as commanding officers. The threat, however, proved hollow, as the anti-looting orders were simply passed down through commands without any direction exactly how to stop such actions. More importantly, the officers who were in a position to actually stop GIs from stealing often had the same motivations to take objects as did their troops. In the end, American soldiers did not loot on the same scale as the Red Army. GIs, however, did garner a reputation for their lust for battlefield souvenirs, accounting for the large number of German military objects that are in the United States today.

Leadership and David Pergrin of the 291st Engineer Combat Battalion

Leadership has always been a highly valued trait among officers in the Engineer branch and every other branch of the U.S. Army. It is hard to define in theory and harder to teach in classrooms, yet leadership can be easily identified in real-world settings.

During the Battle of the Bulge, a U.S. Army lieutenant colonel named David Pergrin exhibited superb leadership during the Battle of the Bulge in December 1944. During a bitterly cold blizzard, he and his 291st Engineer Combat Battalion faced the *Waffen SS* unit led by Lieutenant Colonel Joachem Peiper. Some 5,000 soldiers in this elite armored unit spearheaded the German surprise attack on American forces in the Ardennes Forest on 16 December. The next couple of days were so devastating that many thousands of American soldiers fled the German onslaught in full retreat. They passed by Pergin's headquarters in the village of Malmedy with the enemy close behind nipping at their heels. Peiper's unit even executed several dozen American soldiers captured as prisoners of war in an atrocity known as the "Malmedy Massacre."



Bodies of American officers and soldiers slain by a *Waffen SS* unit after capture near Malmedy, Belgium.

Credit: Franklin D. Roosevelt Library (National Archives Identifier: 196544)

Pergin had a choice in this situation: he could join their retreat, or he could stand and fight. As someone imbued with great personal courage, Pergin decided to stay and direct his unit's countermobility operations against the Germans. Excerpts from the book, *The Damned Engineers*, demonstrated Pergin's leadership on the wintry evening of 17 December 1944.

Shortly after Colonel Pergin radioed for the Company A machine guns and gunners, a runner arrived at his [command post] with the news that the road patrol on the back road to Spa had met the advance elements of the Norwegian Battalion who said they had been sent by First Army to reinforce Malmedy. A colonel was with them, the runner said. The colonel wanted to know how he should come into Malmedy.

This was the best news Pergrin had had all day. Finally a little help was arriving. “Tell him to stay on that back road,” Pergrin told the runner. “Tell him the main road is under artillery fire. And bring the colonel to my [command post].”

At 10:00PM, Colonel H.D. Hansen. . . arrived at Pergrin's command post. Not much time was wasted on formalities. Pergrin and Hansen were of the same rank, both lieutenant colonels. They shook hands and sat down to look at the map and study a reinforced defense line. Colonel Hansen had noticed the felled trees at the abatis roadblock on the back road. “How many men do you have here?” he asked.

“Approximately a hundred and eighty,” Pergrin said.

Hansen stared at him, unbelievably. “One hundred and eighty! And you stayed here? My God, man, why didn't you run like hell?”

Pergrin did not really know. It was a little bit of several things, probably. Because everyone else got out, he got stubborn and would not. And then that little Battery got it in the neck, and the SS troops had brutally murdered them, and something in him just dug in his toes and he would not join the pell-mell retreat going on all around him. There was undoubtedly much anger. But there was moreover that iron sense of duty he so constantly preached to the 291st. And there was the good engineer's knowledge that he might at least delay the enemy for a while with his mines and demolitions. And of course, and not least, there was just plain guts.¹

The last paragraph was the most telling. Evidence of Pergrin's effective leadership can be found in his tenacity, duty, knowledge, and “just plain guts.” On the next day of 18 December, elements of the 291st

¹ Janice Holt Giles, *The Damned Engineers*, reprint and 2nd ed. (Ft. Belvoir, VA: USACE, 1985), 198-99.

and other Engineer units used their demolition skills to blow bridges as part of American countermobility operations. They stopped Peiper's advance once and for all several days later.

At the EOCS and in Europe in 1944 and at the Engineer School in 2016, instructors and commanders have stressed the need for effective leadership. They have constantly evaluated their students and subordinates on how well they deal with problems, inspire confidence in their own troops, set examples for courage under fire, learn to trust their troops, and made wise choices even under the direst of circumstances. The instructors and commanders have also tried to model these behaviors and traits for their subordinates. Clearly, David Pergrin was a good role model.

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International Military Tribunal (Nuremberg Trials)

Following the Second World War's devastation, most people dreamed of peace and rebuilding the fragments of life the conflict had destroyed. For the four major allied powers, France, Britain, the United States, and the Soviet Union, the war did not end with the cessation of hostilities.

Instead, in November 1945 the victorious Allied powers met at the International Military Tribunal (IMT) in Nuremberg, Germany, to prosecute 21 high ranking Nazi military, political, and economic

leaders for their roles in the war. The trial itself, and its outcome, would set the precedent for international criminal courts that put individuals on trial—an untried concept to that point.



The United States Chief Prosecutor, Robert Jackson, presents evidence to the court during the Nuremberg trials.

Credit: WWII Signal Corps Photograph Collection

The origins of the International Military Tribunal can be traced back well before the end of hostilities in 1945. A Soviet “Extraordinary State Commission” investigated German war crimes in Russia as early as 1942. Responding to the brutal tactics employed during Germany’s 1941 invasion, the USSR exhibited an early intention to punish summarily German prisoners as criminals. This search for justice had justification, since any possible chivalry observed during earlier wars was noticeably vacant from Germany’s wartime conduct on the Eastern Front.

Political ideology clashed on the battlefield as much as nationalistic motivations. Nazi directives to bring about the end of not only communism but also the Soviet population were interpreted by most Germans as license to commit atrocities. Indeed, much of the extermination of Jews and ethnic and racial minorities occurred in Soviet territory at the hands of the Nazis.

For the Western Allies, their reasoning for seeing a legitimate trial was perhaps less vengeful

than the Soviet Union. After Hitler's May 1st suicide in Berlin, Allied forces raced to prevent other high-ranking Nazi leaders from cheating them of retributive punishment. Reluctant to replay events which led to interwar German militarism, the Allies sought punishment of Nazi leaders but also hoped to ensure continued peace. Beginning on June 25, 1945, the four major allied powers convened an international conference at Church House in London. The American, British, French, and Soviet representatives spent weeks discussing important issues of policy and procedure and how the coming trials of German war criminals would be conducted. Though the Soviet Union had taken the first official steps that led the delegation to the conference, using force by numbers and self-proclaimed legitimacy, the United States quickly assumed the leadership position. Throughout the symposium, the United States propelled the discussions and employed more man-hours and resources than their counterparts combined.

Chief American representative, Mr. Justice Robert H. Jackson, Associate Justice of the Supreme Court, took a strong stance during the proceedings. Known for his oratorical skills and quick-fused temperament, Jackson attempted to persuade the conference's participants that the German defendants should be indicted for conspiracy to wage aggressive war. Resolving basic viewpoints was far easier said than done. The Anglo-American concept of prosecution based upon conspiracy had no legal equivalent in the Soviet Union. As talks continued, disagreements over theories continued to bog down negotiations. During early negotiations with Britain concerning the venue for the IMT, Jackson made it known he had no intention of allowing the trial to be held in any city in the Soviet zone of occupation for fear of undue Russian influence on the proceedings. While the Kremlin argued for Berlin—the major center of Soviet occupation—to be the location of the trial, the Americans proposed Nuremberg. Regardless of the extensive damage to the city incurred from Allied bombing and the destruction wrought during the liberation, Nuremberg still possessed a courthouse considered suitable. The Palace of Justice was not only one of the few remaining structures, but it also boasted a still in-tact jail on the premises with underground access to the courtroom, lessening the security risk of transporting the accused. Mostly, though, the Americans preferred the fact Nuremberg was in the U.S. zone and valued the symbolism of holding Nazism accountable in the same city where such fervent political rallies had traditionally been held.

On November 20, 1945, the International Military Tribunal officially opened. Prosecution for the USSR was led by General Roman Andreyevich Rudenko, former Procurator of Ukraine. For the British, Attorney General Sir Harley Shawcross acted as lead prosecutor. The French appointed

François de Menthon, who resigned before trial's end to seek a political career and was replaced by Auguste Champetier de Ribes. The chief American legal representative was Supreme Court Justice Robert H. Jackson, chosen by President Truman for his reputation as a formidable prosecutor. Each of the four nations also provided two judges, one main and one alternate.

It was decided during the official indictment that the case against the 21 Germans would be divided into four separate parts. Each country representing the prosecution was charged with presenting one aspect of the case. The Americans prepared the case against Nazi organizations, the British argument dealt with the crimes against peace, the French would present German war crimes in the West and the Soviet Union with war crimes in the East. The tribunal plodded on for over a year while each prosecution in turn painstakingly developed their case against the accused. On October 1, 1946, the Tribunal convened to hear the judges' final verdicts and sentencing. Three of the 21 defendants were outright acquitted: Hans Fritzsche, Franz von Papen, and Dr. Hjalmar Schlect. Seven Nazi leaders received prison sentences: Karl Dönitz, Walther Funk, Rudolf Hess, Konstantin von Neurath, Erich Raeder, Baldur von Schirach, and Albert Speer. Twelve were sentenced to death by hanging: Martin Borman, Hans Frank, Wilhelm Frick, Hermann Göring, Alfred Jodl, Ernst Kaltenbrunner, Wilhelm Keitel, Joachim von Ribbentrop, Alfred Rosenberg, Fritz Sauckel, Arthur Seyss-Inquart, and Julius Streicher. Göring, perhaps the man the victorious powers were most eager to see pay for his war crimes, escaped the hangman's noose the night before his planned execution by ingesting a cyanide capsule.

While the other Allied countries celebrated the rulings as a triumph of impartiality and justice, the Soviet Union was less celebratory. Large volumes detailing the evidence and trial notes from Nuremberg were released in 1946, but the Soviet government was the only participating country who refrained from publishing them. The disputes throughout the tribunal between the Western nations and the Soviet Union can be seen as one of the earliest conflicts of the Cold War. Consensus was difficult for the Allies to attain. Conflicting politics caused disagreements, and in some instances controversy. Matters of only tertiary importance had taken center stage throughout the entire process, threatening to derail the aligned nations' unity.

Additionally, the system of law each customarily used had forced incompatible notions of correct legal philosophy and jurisprudence. Despite the dysfunctional aspects of parts of the trial, Nuremberg encouraged the establishment of an international criminal court, helping to set the standard for follow-on trials of lesser German war criminals, as well as similar actions against Japanese war criminals with the International Military Tribunal for the Far East.

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