

## Liberation Photography

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The liberation photography of the Holocaust provides individuals an opportunity to see the horrors of the concentration camps for themselves. After viewing the Ohrdruf camp, General Dwight D. Eisenhower, Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces in Europe, quickly understood the need for photography and ordered every unit nearby that was not on the front lines to tour the camp. Enforcing his order, Eisenhower remarked, “we are told that the American soldier does not know what he is fighting for. Now, at least, he will know what he is fighting against” (“Ohrdruf forced labor camp”). Eisenhower felt it was not merely essential for his troops to see for themselves the conditions at Ohrdruf and other camps, but for the entire world to see it too. Not only was Eisenhower aware of how informative the photographs could be, but he understood that the images could provide evidence of what occurred in the camps within courtroom proceedings. Carol Zemel<sup>1</sup> is correct in considering “the ionic power of these photographs, their enduring forces as emblems that enable memory of the past” (Zemel 206).

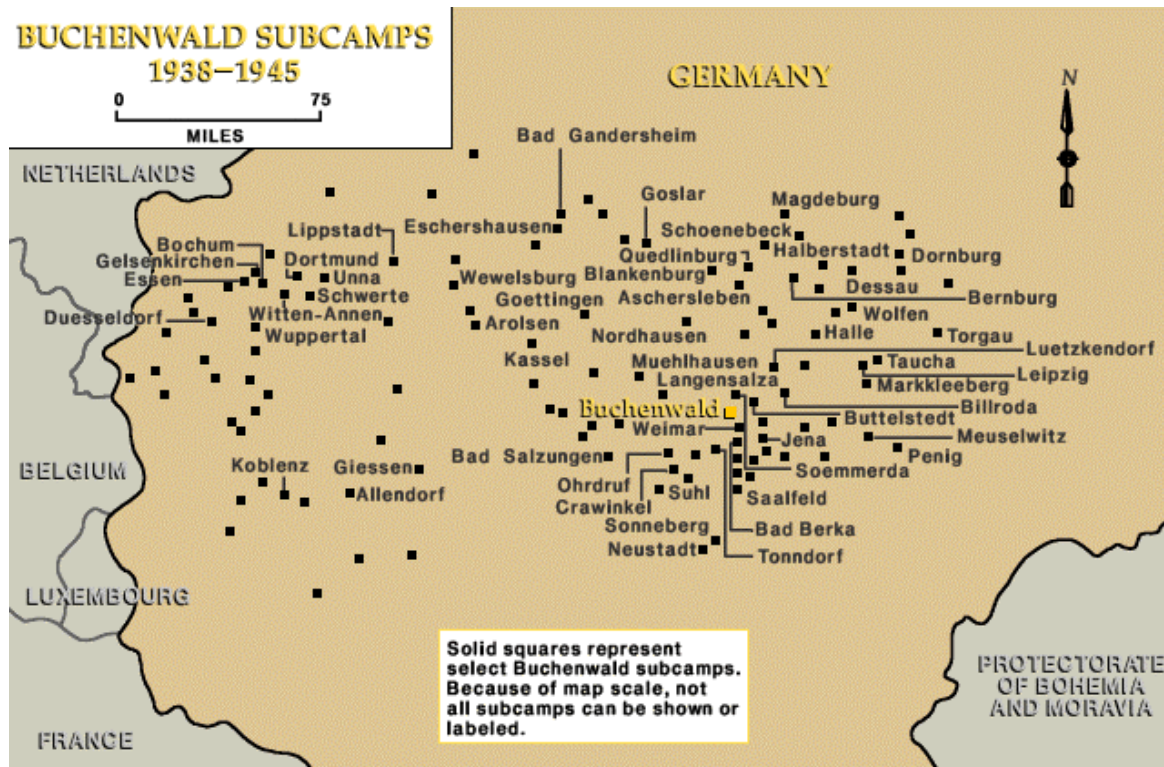
An example of liberation photography can be found in those images taken at the Ohrdruf camp. Actually one of many subcamps comprising the Buchenwald Concentration Camp outside of Weimar, Germany (from what Peterson<sup>2</sup> can determine),

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<sup>1</sup> Carol Zemel is a professor of modern and contemporary art history at York University. Prior to teaching at York, she taught at Concordia University, Temple University (Philadelphia), Dartmouth College and the State University of New York at Buffalo, where she chaired the Art History Department from 1997-2000. Her areas of research and publication include 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>-Century European art, the modern art market, feminism in the arts, Jewish visual culture and diaspora studies.

<sup>2</sup> Carol Peterson is the president of the Division Society of the 89<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division of WWII, a society of active veterans who take part in activities, reunion, and who went on a Tour of Remembrance. Carol Peterson and the website 89<sup>th</sup> Division of World War II is cited through out the paper, because of the credibility given to the source by the United States Holocaust Museum. The website is considered an online source on the Ohrdruf camp by the museum. As a whole, the website is dedicated to the society and focuses

Ohrdruf was formed with an initial population of 1,000 men drawn from the Buchenwald's own population in June of 1944 (Peterson).



Map of Ohrdruf and the other subcamps of Buchenwald within Germany (“Buchenwald Subcamps”).

Tunnels to be used by Adolph Hitler and others were carved into the nearby hills by the prisoners of Ohrdruf. A segment of the tunnel traveled to a “point eight miles away from the cap at a place that had been set aside to become an underground headquarters for Hitler and his government” (Peterson). An additional portion of the tunnels were designed to hold railroad tracks, allowing trains to carry Hitler and other

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on five topics: news and updates, combat history, Ohrdruf history, history and memories, and society activities. Peterson and Don Johnson, another society member, decided to research the camp to provide a report to their members in an effort to provide closure for its members, because when the members reached the Ohrdruf camp while on the Tour of Remembrance in Fall 1999 “no one in authority in the area was available to guide us or talk to us about the” camp (Peterson). The information included in the report is mainly from two visits to the United States Holocaust Museum and from several letters sent to Peterson from members of the society and others who were at the camp in 1945 (Peterson).

key members of the Reich from Berlin. A report<sup>3</sup> from Buchenwald indicated there was a total of 9,943 inmates at Ohrdruf, all of whom were condemned to construct the tunnels and underground facilities. Over 6,000 of those inmates were Jews and a portion was Yugoslav prisoners of war being held against the rules of international law (Peterson).

Nearly all prisoners of Ohrdruf were forced on a death march to Buchenwald, approximately 32 miles away, in early April of 1945. The intent of the march was for the SS and the prisoners to avoid the approaching U.S. and Russian army “Hitler didn’t want these starving people [inmates] to be turned loose to loot and kill” and the Nazis were “reluctant to leave prisoners to be liberated for fear that the Americans would release them to get vengeance on the German civilians” (“Ohrdruf forced labor camp”). Those too ill to march were killed by the SS, as were the hundreds of prisoners who collapsed along the way.

On April 4, 1945, Ohrdruf became the first concentration camp to be discovered in present-day Germany, liberated by the Fourth Armored Division of General Patton’s Third Army. The Division “unexpectedly came across the Ohrdruf camp” while “moving through the area in search of a secret Nazi communications center” (“Ohrdruf forced labor camp”). When the infantry came across the Ohrdruf camp, Bruce Nichols of the I & R Platoon<sup>4</sup> was on patrol:

It [Ohrdruf] was surrounded by a high barbed wire fence and had a wooden sign which read, ‘Arbeit Macht Frei.’ The swinging gate was open, and a young soldier, probably an SS guard, lay dead diagonally across the entrance. The camp was located in the forest and was surrounded by a thick grove of pine and other conifers. The inside of the camp was composed of a large 100 yards square central area which was surrounded by one story barracks painted green which appeared to house 60-100 inmates. (Nichols)

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<sup>3</sup> Reports were written by military personal to document what they had come across within the camps.

<sup>4</sup> The I & R platoon was attached to the Headquarters Company of 354th Infantry Regiment, of the 89th Infantry Divisions, 3rd Army U.S.A.

The Ohrdruf camp was similar to others in that it was concealed behind a thick blanket of forests, conveniently removed from the public eye.

Although the United States did eventually liberate the Ohrdruf camp and other concentration camps, the Allies did not begin the liberation until 1945. Rescue was neither a priority to the American government nor was it always clear to Allied policy makers how a large-scale rescue could happen (“The United States”). On August 1, 1942, Gerhart Riegner, a representative of the World Jewish Congress in Switzerland, received information indicating a Nazi plan to exterminate all Jews in Europe from a German. Initially, Riegner did not pass this information on because of the shocking and unbelievable nature of the report. Once satisfied with the reliability of the informant, although unable to confirm the news itself, Riegner requested that the American consulate in Geneva to cable the information to the American and other Allied governments, along with Rabbi Stephen Wise, president for the World Jewish Congress in New York (“Frequently Asked Questions”). At first, the American State Department asked that Rabbi Stephen Wise to refrain from announcing the report. In 1943, President Franklin D. Roosevelt was informed of information of mass murder from Jewish leaders in the Warsaw ghetto.

United States and British representatives met in Bermuda on April 19, 1943, to arrive at solutions to wartime refugee problems, yet no significant proposals were considered. To facilitate the rescue of imperiled refugees, Roosevelt established the War Refugee board in January 1944 (“The United States”).

By the spring of 1944, the Allies knew of the gassing at Auschwitz-Birkenau. During this time, Jewish leaders pleaded with the American government to bomb the gas

chambers and railways leading to the camp. As a result of the desire to maintain its existing policy of non-involvement, the United States bombed neither the gas chambers nor railroads used to transport prisoners, but industrial complexes instead. Even though Martha Gellhorn, a photojournalist during World War II, speaks specifically of Dachau, her words can be applied to the camps as a whole and sums up the late action extraordinarily well. She wrote, “we are not entirely guiltless, we the Allies, because it took us twelve years to open the gates of Dachau. We were blind and unbelieving and slow, and that we can never be again” (Gellhorn qtd. in Sorel 361).

By order of General Walker and General Middleton, everything within the Ohrdruf camp was to be left intact and as many soldiers as possible were to visit and view its horror (“Ohrdruf forced labor camp”). This ensured that a larger number of individuals were directly affected by the experience, thus bearing witness to what had occurred and gaining the ability to testify in court.

On April 12, 1956, General Eisenhower, General Omar Bradley, and General Patton were accompanied by Signal Corps photographers and Army sentries on a walking tour of Ohrdruf. The tour included a visit to the basement of the main building, rows of gallows where prisoners who had attempted to escape were hung “by a piano wire slung low enough so that the toes of the condemned brushed the floor, a way of extending the agony” (Eisenhower 762). Although dead victims were typically tossed to Buchenwald’s crematorium in a series of “death transports,” amidst the hysteria of panic and mass killing, there were 3,200 corpses piled in the surrounding fields of the Ohrdruf camp with the intent of burning the bodies in order to obliterate the evidence (Peterson). The attempt by the Germans to destroy the evidence of the bodies was unsuccessful, for not

only were the bodies documented, but the rest of the camp and its inmates were documented as well.

Initially, photographs of the concentration camps were taken by the Signal Corps as a form of documentation and later used as propaganda. These images of the Holocaust were thought to have validated the war against Germany more effectively than any other evidence. Despite the value the photographs presented in justifying the war effort and cost, a portion of United States Officials were reluctant to release the images because they feared that “they might be inappropriate for civilian sensibilities and then get in the way of plans to rebuild Germany as a potential ally against Soviet power in Europe” (Barnow 51). Generals such as Eisenhower and George Patton, disagreed and insisted the images be made public.

Eisenhower encouraged photographs of the concentration camps for two different reasons: to inform the average human being and to unearth solid evidence to construct a powerful legal indictment against the Nazis. Eisenhower viewed his visit to the Ohrdruf camp as an informative experience not only for himself, but an opportunity to inform others of the tragedy that encompasses the Holocaust, “the visit...focused western attention on Nazi atrocities as never before” (Eisenhower 762). Before the photographs, a majority of Americans were not adequately educated in the atrocities of war. In 1945, a Mass-Observation survey carried out at an exhibition of photographs organized by the Daily Express showed that “although some of those interviewed said they had known about the camps, either they had not visualized anything so bad or had considered previous reports and pictures exaggerated” (Struk 125).

Photography was advocated by Eisenhower, insisting such records speak to the

troops and the nation at large. At the Dachau camp, Lee Miller wrote that soldiers were encouraged to “sightsee”; photograph the camp and tell people back home. According to Jania Struk, many soldiers found it difficult to share the photographs with people back home because the images were “dismissed as fabrications or seemed too shocking to show” (Struk 131).

One of the soldiers who did display the photographs was Major Alfred Sundquist. On May 4, 1945, Maj. Sundquist was with the 18<sup>th</sup> airborne headquarters, under General Mathew Ridgeway, when the British and Americans captured Woebbelin, a sub-camp of Neuengamme. As a physician, he was told to write up a report on the camp and take whatever action was necessary. After writing the report, Alfred Sundquist returned to headquarters, where he recommended that the Allies move the Germans out of the apartment houses of the nearby town of Ludwigslust and move the survivors from the camp there to be fed. Even though the Allies decided to move the prisoners to the apartment building, twenty-five percent of the prisoners were unfortunately “lost” (Sundquist, “Oral History”).

Returning to Ludwigslust after leaving for a day, Sundquist found the 18<sup>th</sup> airborne<sup>5</sup> conducting a funeral for those prisoners who had perished:

Everyone in the town of Ludwigslust, and I imagine the town was about ten, twelve thousand people, and everyone there had to attend the funeral and then men had to dig the graves. There must have been about thirty forty graves and the graves were dug with such precision that you wouldn't find an inch difference in the measurements of the different graves. (Sundquist, “Oral History”)

Since Sundquist had traded his pistol for an “army” camera from the lieutenant colonel of the outfit he was able to take pictures of both the funeral and camp.

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<sup>5</sup> The 18<sup>th</sup> airborne is connected to the 82<sup>nd</sup> airborne division.



The German civilians from Ludwigslust pause for a moment of silence at the mass funeral on the palace grounds of the Archduke of Mecklenburg, where they have been forced by U.S. troops to bury the bodies of prisoners killed in the Woebbelin concentration camp (Sundquist, #09258).

Sundquist insisted that the photographs could, “show you what was at the camp better [than his description] and [a] picture will tell you more than a thousand words and these pictures do tell you a lot.” He describes how the images taken at the funeral were overwhelmingly able to speak; “I took photographs of that [the funeral] and I took photographs of the peoples’ faces so I could tell from their faces what their emotions were when they saw these things” (Sundquist, “Oral History”). Zemel advocates that pictures of such citizens “enact a double witnessing: the real spectacle is not the dead, but German citizens photographically designated guilty bystanders to Holocaust atrocity”

(Zemel 206).

In Kattago's "The 'Ethics of Seeing': Photographs of Germany at War's End," Dagmar Barnouw, a professor of German and Comparative Literature at the University of Southern California examines how "the images taken by Allied photographers, the denazification program, and the decisions to have German citizens bury concentration camp dead all were meant to make Germans see what happened during the Third Reich" (Kattago). Moreover, Kattago stresses that Barnouw, "demonstrates that the photographs were not only captured as evidence but also taken with the moral message of indignation and disbelief" (Kattago).

On April 19, 1945, Eisenhower requested that members of Congress and journalists view the liberated camps themselves in order to relay the truth back to the American people. Eisenhower's request was partially motivated by his conviction that "whatever has been printed on them [concentration camps] to date has been an understatement" ("Ohrdruf"). The Buchenwald and Dachau concentration camps became the focal points of the official tours. During a tour of Buchenwald, visitors "filed past 'neatly stacked piles of bodies' and a table was set up to exhibit 'picked' human remains used in medical experiments, shrunken human heads and tattooed human skin." At Dachau, a train of bodies remained "untouched for days while visitors inspected it." Photographs of the tours of the camps found within press reports, showed delegates "peering at human remains in the crematoria, staring at piles of emaciated dead bodies, pointing at 'autopsy tables', 'inspecting' the bunk beds on which the inmates slept, or filing past truckloads of tangled and emaciated bodies" (Struk 130). The intensity of these

tours is a testament to Generals Walker and Middleton, whose decision to leave everything intact contributed greatly to the annals of history.

In further reaction to Eisenhower's request, an American delegation visited Buchenwald and Dachau at the end of April 1945. The delegation included eighteen newspaper editors and publishers, one of whom was Joseph Pulitzer, editor of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. At first, Pulitzer was skeptical of the reports, but, "since my return to the United States, I have been asked by many people if the concentration camps were as bad as the newspapers have been saying. I can answer in one word: 'worse'" (Struk 131). In the case of Pulitzer, his tour of Buchenwald not only relieved him of his own skepticism, but allowed him to share with the American public the reality and authenticity of the camps.

While visiting Ohrdruf, Eisenhower wrote a letter to General George C. Marshall on April 15, 1945; "I made the visit deliberately, in order to be in a position to give first-hand evidence of these things if ever, in the future, there develops a tendency to charge these allegations merely to 'propaganda'" (Hobbs 223). Today the excerpt finds itself upon the north entrance of the U.S. Holocaust Museum. Eisenhower successfully planned ahead, for only a few years afterward, Paul Rassinier, a French resistance fighter imprisoned at Buchenwald, wrote the first Holocaust denial book, Debunking the Genocide Myth. Within his book, Rassinier refutes the claim by the French government at the 1946 Nuremberg trial that there were gas chambers in Buchenwald ("Ohrdruf forced labor camp").

Eisenhower's second reason for encouraging photographing the concentration camps – having solid evidence of what went on in the camps to be utilized in a court of

law against the Germans – was achieved during the Nuremberg trials. One such example was the use of photographs in a documentary film, admitted at the November 29, 1945 trial, directed by Hollywood filmmaker George Stevens, claiming the Germans “starved, clubbed, and burned to death more than 4,000 political prisoners over a period of eight months” at Ohrdruf-Nord (“Ohrdruf forced labor camp”).



Eisenhower and other high ranking U.S. Army officers while on the April 12th tour of the concentration camp (Newhouse).

The American Army Signal Corps took the majority of their photographs at Buchenwald, Nordhausen, Wöbbelin, Dachau, and Mauthausen. No later than late December 1943, the Signal Corps Photographic Center (SCPC) “purchased the old

Paramount studio on Long Island and by January employed 1258 staff and had branches in Detroit and Hollywood” (Struk). Leading newspapers, magazines, education establishments, Hollywood companies, picture and news agencies offered their help with the training programs. Furthermore, the American army opened a school in Paris where cameramen returning from the front could have “experts” critique their work (Struk 128). Each of the Signal Corps units was comprised of “twenty skilled photographers, thirty film cameramen, twenty darkroom technicians, two film recorders, and three maintenance men.” By 1944, the Army Pictorial Service (APS) had its own laboratories in Paris and London and eighteen smaller ones sprinkled about Britain, altogether employing hundreds (Struk 129).

In 1945 photographs taken by the Signal Army Corps could be in an American or British newspaper within twenty-four hours due to “jeep-airplane courier system.” This system meant the film was able to be taken by plane to the closest lab, processed within a few minutes, then radioed or flown to Paris or London or the USA on the APS’s regular air courier service. While Signal Corps photographers provided the majority of the prints, a portion was accredited to the photographers of Western Europe and American magazines, newspapers, and news agencies (Struk 128-129).

On June 30, 1945 “Lest We Forget,” a two week exhibition of camp photographs co-sponsored by the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* and the *Washington Evening Star* opened at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. (Struk 131). The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* recorded that despite being Washington’s hottest day of the year, the opening day attendance reached 5,229 and three weeks later had “broken all records” with 88,891.



Visitors view a photomural of survivors in their barracks in Buchenwald at the "Lest We Forget" exhibition at the Library of Congress (Photograph #10621).

The exhibit included “life-size” photomurals depicting the horrors of the Nazi concentration camps. Specifically, the photomurals chronicled Buchenwald, Nordhausen, Ohrdruf, Leipzig-Thekla, and Bergen-Belsen, and Nazi atrocities committed at Schwarzenfeld and Gardelegen. The exhibitors had clearly gone to great lengths in order to dramatize the horrors of the camps, but truth needs no dramatization. One of these examples is the enlarged photograph of an “emaciated man, naked except for a garment he is holding over his genitals” (Struk 132).

American and British reactions to the images varied. Some people indicated that

they were growing “weary” of the photographs, while others seemed perplexed and could not grasp the enormity of what they were seeing. Susan Sontag wrote of her impressionable experience as a young girl in 1945 upon finding photographs of Bergen-Belsen and Dachau in a bookstore: “Nothing I have seen – in photographs or in real life – ever cut me as sharply, deeply, instantaneously.” Although Sontag was greatly affected by the photographs, she questioned if there was any good in her viewing the photographs of suffering that she found hard to imagine, because Sontag says “you can photograph results of suffering, but never suffering itself.” In a Mass-Observation report, one patron said “...you keep looking at dead bodies heaped on top of each other – well, you just get used to it. Just as we’ve had to get used to the idea of death all through the war” (Struk 132-133).

On the other hand, Marianne Hirsch, Professor of French and Italian and department chair of the Comparative Literature Department at Dartmouth, suggests that while the endless repetition of the of the images may “seem problematic in the abstract, the postmemorial generation...has been able to make repetition not an instrument of fixity or paralysis or simple retraumatization (as it often is for survivors of trauma), but a mostly helpful vehicle of working through a traumatic past” (Hirsch 9). Carol Zemel believes the ionic power – enduring force as emblems that enable memory of the past – of holocaust photographs is derived from the content of the images, their repeated public display, and from the “pictorial modes” that reinforce viewer fascination with the horror they convey (Zemel 201). Both Hirsch and Zemel argue that repetition of images of the Holocaust do not hinder its effects but enhance them.

In conclusion, photographs allow a glimpse at the difficulty of understanding and

comprehending the Holocaust. Although it is hard to fully comprehend the Holocaust, images enable society and future generations to study and inform themselves about the Holocaust. As people learn about the Holocaust they are further able to analyze the event itself and its surrounding events through the photographs. Marianne Hirsch argues that the second generation's "memory consists not of events but representations, repetition does not have the effect of desensitizing" the generation to horror or shielding them to shock as the first generation might fear, but the "compulsive and traumatic repetition connects the second generation to the first" (Hirsch, 8). It may be impossible to grasp everything that embodies the Holocaust, yet by looking at images it is possible for individuals to bear witness to the event.

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