

DWIGHT D. EISENHOWER MEMORIAL COMMISSION

It's time to build a national memorial to Dwight D. Eisenhower.



Eisenhower Stories

The Death Camps

As Supreme Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Forces in World War II, General Eisenhower had been given information about the Nazi concentration camp system well before he led the invasion to liberate Western Europe (June, 1944). Reports on the massive genocide inflicted on Jews, Gypsies, political prisoners, homosexuals, dissidents, and other groups by the Schutzstaffel (SS) had been circulated among all the Allied leaders. Very few of the Allied commanders, however, had an accurate conception of what is now known to the world as the Holocaust until their troops began to encounter the death camps as they marched into Western Germany.

On April 4, 1945, elements of the United States Army's 89th Infantry Division and the 4th Armored Division captured the Ohrdruf concentration camp outside the town of Gotha in south central Germany. Although the Americans didn't know it at the time, Ohrdruf was one of several sub-camps serving the Buchenwald extermination camp, which was close to the city of Weimar several miles north of Gotha. Ohrdruf was a holding facility for over 11,000 prisoners on their way to the gas chambers and crematoria at Buchenwald. A few days before the Americans arrived to liberate Ohrdruf, the SS guards had assembled all of the inmates who could walk and marched them off to



Ike visits the concentration camp at Ohrdruf with Generals Bradley and Patton

Buchenwald. They left in the sub-camp more than a thousand bodies of prisoners who had died of bullet wounds, starvation, abuse, and disease. The scene was an indescribable horror even to the combat-hardened troops who captured the camp. Bodies were piled throughout the camp. There was evidence everywhere of systematic butchery. Many of

the mounds of dead bodies were still smoldering from failed attempts by the departing SS guards to burn them. The stench was horrible.

When General Eisenhower learned about the camp, he immediately arranged to meet Generals Bradley and Patton at Ohrdruf on the morning of April 12th. By that time, Buchenwald itself had been captured. Consequently, Ike decided to extend the group's visit to include a tour of the Buchenwald extermination camp the next day. Eisenhower also ordered every American soldier in the area who was not on the front lines to visit Ohrdruf and Buchenwald. He wanted them to see for themselves what they were fighting against.

During the camp inspections with his top commanders Eisenhower said that the atrocities were "beyond the American mind to comprehend." He ordered that every citizen of the town of Gotha personally tour the camp and, after having done so, the mayor and his wife went home and hanged themselves. Later on Ike wrote to Mamie, "I never dreamed that such cruelty, bestiality, and savagery could really exist in this world." He cabled General Marshall to suggest that he come to Germany and see these camps for himself. He encouraged Marshall to bring Congressmen and journalists with him. It would be many months before the world would know the full scope of the Holocaust — many months before they knew that the Nazi murder apparatus that was being discovered at Buchenwald and dozens of other death camps had slaughtered millions of innocent people.

General Eisenhower understood that many people would be unable to comprehend the full scope of this horror. He also understood that any human deeds that were so utterly evil might eventually be challenged or even denied as being literally unbelievable. For these reasons he ordered that all the civilian news media and military combat camera units be required to visit the camps and record their observations in print, pictures and film. As he explained to General Marshall, "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.'"

His prediction proved correct. When some groups, even today, attempt to deny that the Holocaust ever happened they must confront the massive official record, including both written evidence and thousands of pictures, that Eisenhower ordered to be assembled when he saw what the Nazis had done.

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