

Foreword

A hangman's workload is likely to increase in times of war. Violence is in the air, so to speak, which would tend to increase the homicide rate with subsequent executions, but that's not the only reason. There are crimes which simply cannot be committed in peacetime: the unlawful killing of a prisoner of war, for instance. There are laws against treason and treachery which will be rarely broken when the relations between neighbouring peoples are friendly and peaceful.

The Second World War provided all of these crimes, and in addition the Nazi ideology generated a system of wholesale murder which was never seen before, declaring groups of human beings as subhuman and worthless rubbish, among them the mentally defective, the Jews, the Gypsies.

Some of these acts had already been declared forbidden and criminal by international treaties or unwritten but established international legal standards before World War II. However there was no International Penal Code to go by, and no statute which established jurisdiction. The victorious nations of World War II saw themselves compelled to create the laws which should be applied and to apply them at the same time.

And so in due course the executioners began their work.

Some of them stood in a long tradition, and others were hired on the spot; some worked in public before hundreds of viewers, some in a secluded execution chamber. The crimes and the stories of judicial retribution are too manifold to be compressed into one volume.

Not only the Big Four held War Crimes Trials, jointly or individually. There were trials as well under Polish, Czech, and Hungarian jurisdiction. Canadian Military Courts, too, held a few trials in Aurich in 1946 for killing or intentionally wounding Canadian POWs, and sentenced four Germans to death who were executed by being shot. Death sentences of the French War Crimes Trials were executed by firing squad or guillotine. However they are not easily researchable due to most of their files still being closed.

Your authors therefore decided to restrict themselves to the part they know best: To the execution by hanging as carried out by British or American hangmen (leaving out seven German War Criminals shot at Werl by the British), and to the criminals who were, during or immediately after World War II, sentenced to suffer it for crimes which would not have been committed but for this war and/or the Nazi creed.

This excludes necessarily war crime trials (and their outcome) which were held under other jurisdictions. But it will provide information which is of special interest to British or American readers: How the Military Courts of their nations dealt with the task of re-establishing a sense of justice in the aftermath of a gory bloodshed, creating at the same time standards of international penal law which were to be of consequence for all generations to come.

The reader should keep in mind this self-imposed restriction. This book is not about "The War Crimes of World War II". If it were, it would have to include much, much more.

British historian Antony Beevor ("D-Day. The Battle for Normandy") quotes William E. Jones (4th US Infantry Division) as saying:

"(The Germans) were baffled and they were crazy. There were quite a few of them still in their foxholes. Then I saw quite a few of them shot right in the foxholes. We didn't take prisoners and there was nothing to do but kill them, and we did, and I had never shot one like that. Even our lieutenant did and some of the Non Coms" (i.e. non-commissioned officers). Normandy, 1944. A war crime committed by GIs.

It was not the only one. Book author Stephen Ambrose (“Citizen Soldiers”) relates:

“I’ve interviewed well over 1000 combat veterans. Only one of them said he shot a prisoner... Perhaps as many as one-third of the veterans... however, related incidents in which they saw other GIs shooting unarmed German prisoners who had their hands up.”

This is not quoted in order to claim what Deborah Lipstadt called “immoral equivalencies” between Axis/German war crimes and Allied war crimes. It is just to remind the reader that this book cannot paint the complete picture.

For instance, our chapter on US soldiers sentenced to death by Courts Martial includes several cases of rape. It would be a grave mistake to conclude from this small number of death sentences that rape was rare.

According to secret wartime files made public in the UK in April 2006, GIs committed more than 400 sexual offences, including 126 rapes in England, during 1942-45.

According to American historian J. Robert Lilly, there were around 3,500 rapes by American servicemen in France between June 1944 and the end of the war. Lots of these cases were not even prosecuted. Only a few cases came to trial, and fewer still, mostly black soldiers, were hanged.

Experience has shown that every soldier in every army is in grave danger of losing his inner moral compass once he has been engulfed by the hell of the battlefield for the first time. War is dehumanizing in every case. If on top of that, your government brainwashes you into believing that unbridled cruelty paired with unquestioning obedience is right, is even your duty – then you are as good as lost to humanity.

It is probably rare in the history of writing that two men jointly authored a book who never met or talked to each other - just by exchanging e-mails. But this is what happened - and it seems to have worked. Especially during the last days of working on this book, when we prepared the various tables for the appendix, our thoughts were often not only with the airmen who lost their lives through unlawful violence while being unarmed and helpless prisoners of war, but also with their next of kin. Many of them may, even today, be not aware of the precise circumstances in which their loved ones lost their lives. It is our wish that this book may be useful to them.

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