

Gardelegen Massacre

13 April 1945

On May 7th, 1945, Life Magazine published a series of photographs which showed the atrocities discovered by American troops as they fought their way across Germany during the last days of World War II. Included was the photo below, which shows the charred bodies of concentration camp prisoners who were burned to death inside a barn near the Medieval walled town of Gardelegen in eastern Germany on the night of April 13, 1945



Americans discover a barn where prisoners had been burned to death

American soldiers of the 102nd Infantry Division of the US Ninth Army were horrified when they saw the ghastly scene in the barn on the morning of April 15, 1945. A small pamphlet was produced by the 102nd Division which relates the story of the Gardelegen massacre, as told by the survivors. A copy of this pamphlet can be viewed at <http://www.scrapbookpages.com/Gardelegen/GardelegenCover.html>

The 102nd Division soldiers had arrived in Gardelegen on the evening of April 14th and had accepted the surrender of the Luftwaffe air base. The German troops were most anxious to surrender to the Americans, rather than to the Russians who were only a few miles away on the other side of the Elbe river.

The Gardelegen massacre was the cold-blooded murder of inmates that had been evacuated from the Dora-Mittelbau concentration camp and some of its sub-camps on April 3rd, 4th and 5th. Around 4,000 prisoners had been bound for the Bergen-Belsen, Sachsenhausen or Neuengamme concentration camps, but when the railroad tracks were bombed by American planes, they had been re-routed to Gardelegen, which was the site of a Cavalry Training School and a Parachutist Training School. The trains were forced to stop before reaching the town of Gardelegen and some of the escaped prisoners had terrorized the nearby villages, raping, looting and killing civilians.

On Friday, April 13th, approximately 1050 to 1100 of the concentration camp prisoners were herded inside a grain barn, piled knee-high with straw, which had been previously doused with gasoline. The barn was then deliberately set on fire by German SS and Luftwaffe soldiers and boys from the Hitler Jugend, according to the survivors. Prisoners who tried to escape from the fire were machine-gunned to death by the Germans guarding the barn, including teen-aged boys in the Hitler Jugend. A total of 1016 prisoners were burned to death or shot as they tried to escape from the unlocked barn. Around 100 of the prisoners survived, including several Russian Prisoners of War who greeted the American soldiers and led them to the scene of one of the most ignominious war crimes of World War II.

The German prisoners among the concentration camp inmates were promised freedom if they helped the SS in guarding their fellow prisoners. According to the pamphlet prepared by the 102nd Division, "At the last moment, after machine guns had been emplaced, the 300 guards were also forced into the building."

The day after the massacre, on Saturday April 14th, the Germans attempted to destroy the evidence by burying the bodies in mass graves, which they dug right in front of the barn. The photo below shows the bodies after they were exhumed.



Fully-clothed bodies were exhumed from mass grave near barn, shown on the right

The brochure put together by the 102nd Division contains the following information: *Local slave laborers were rounded up Saturday morning to dig great trenches around the barn, bury the remains, and otherwise clean up the evidence. Over 700 bodies were concealed before this work was interrupted by the surrender of the town.*

Since there was no slave labor camp at Gardelegen, it is not clear where the "slave laborers" came from and why they were put to work on hiding the evidence at the same time that the SS was attempting to kill all the prisoners.

When the 102nd Division arrived on Sunday morning, April 15th, General Frank A. Keating, immediately notified General Dwight D. Eisenhower, the Supreme Allied Commander, about the Gardelegen massacre.

Soon photographers and war correspondents converged on the barn to record and document the gruesome sight. For the Allies, this was a propaganda bonanza; stories of German war crimes were eagerly sought by General Eisenhower in order to distract the press from reporting on atrocities committed by the Russian troops and the deaths of innocent civilians in the destruction of German cities by Allied bombs. Even the town of Gardelegen was bombed on March 15, 1945 and a beautiful 750-year-old church was destroyed.

The two photographs below show some of the dead bodies of the prisoners. Their clothing did not burn, making it possible to identify them as political prisoners by the red triangles sewn to their uniforms. The prisoner badges also designated which country they were from and included

an identification number. Jewish prisoners wore a yellow triangle with a red triangle sewn over the top of it, forming a six-pointed Star of David.



Clothing on some of the burned bodies at Gardelegen was still intact



Bodies piled in front of barn door had bullet holes in their unburned clothing

The following quote about the Gardelegen massacre is from a book entitled "Backing Hitler" by Robert Gellately, published in 2001 by Oxford University Press:

We have already seen isolated examples where all or nearly all non-Jewish camp evacuees in a given march were murdered, but some of the worst cases happened during the evacuation of Mittelbau-Dora. According to Joachim Neander, the camp and its sub-camp system contained roughly 40,500 prisoners on the eve of the evacuation in April, of whom a minimum of 11,000 died or were murdered during the "death marches" to the north in the direction of Bergen-Belsen, to the south towards various camps, and to the northeast towards Sachsenhausen and Ravensbrück. Some of these latter columns soon found themselves surrounded on all sides by the rapidly advancing Americans in the area around Gardelegen, just to the north of Magdeburg, and many SS guards simply deserted.

Apparently hundreds of prisoners escaped, and rumors circulated locally that they were plundering and raping women. In response on 11 or 12 April, the Gauleiter as the Reich Defense Commissar, and thus the highest civil authority in the area, ordered Kreisleiter Gerhard Thiele to put down the troubles, and to gather all camp prisoners there in one place. Thiele was assisted by Wehrmacht units, the remaining SS, Hitler Youth, the Volkssturm, Landwacht, and others to capture the escaped prisoners, many of whom were shot on the spot. Apparently the SS, Party, and Wehrmacht agreed among themselves that all prisoners would be killed before the Americans arrived, which they expected in a matter of hours. The prisoners were assembled and guarded by about 30 air force paratroopers, the same number of SS, but they were assisted by others, including 20 or so German "green" or criminal prisoners, who volunteered to do so.

These guards then forced all prisoners into a barn of the Remount School in Gardelegen (carrying in those too sick to make it on their own) and set the whole thing on fire. Anyone who tried to escape or rushed the door was met with a hail of bullets, and the shooting kept up half the night. The fire was still burning next day when the 102nd Infantry Division of the United States Army arrived. Altogether they found just over 1,000 bodies; half as many again were found in other places in the area. The perpetrators went well beyond the SS, and included what Neander calls a "representative sample" of the male population of the area. His research shows that "the great majority of the victims wore red badges, and so were political prisoners."

The barn into which the prisoners were herded was a grain storage building on the Isenschnibbe estate, which was not part of the Remount School in Gardelegen, as Gellately claims. It was a barn owned by a Gardelegen farmer, and it was located in an open field about 5 kilometers from the center of the town. The prisoners were taken to this barn from a large building at the Remount School where they had at first been imprisoned in the horse stalls there during the 11th and 12th of April.

In this version of the story, there are 20 or so German "green" or criminal prisoners, wearing green badges, who volunteered to help. According to the story told by the survivors to the 102nd Division soldiers, there were 300 German prisoners who were recruited to help.



Photo shows American troops at the Gardelegen barn after it burned

The following account of the discovery of the Gardelegen massacre was written by Lt. Jim Hansen, F Company, 405th Regiment, 102nd Division, US 9th Army:

The time was about April 12th or 13th, 1945. We were in a more or less mop up operation, or so we thought. All organized resistance had ceased to exist, and small pockets of resistance were all we were hitting. The area we were in was pretty much all woodlands. Nothing seemed organized.

We eased very slowly forward, drawing only sporadic fire. Sometimes we could cover 3-400 yards without drawing any fire. My lead men spotted something and waved frantically for me to come forward. As I joined them, they pointed out something that looked like a zebra lying on the ground. We eased slowly forward until we identified the object as a human. We closed in and it was a man in prison uniform. If you could call it a man. Most pitiful sight I have ever seen. We finally established that he was French. He said he and some others had escaped from a large group guarded by SS troops. Being softhearted as most Americans are, our first thought was to

give him food and water. I took my canteen and held his head up and let some water drip into his mouth. One of my men opened a K ration and shaved some of the chocolate bar into his mouth. Then he crushed the cracker and fed him that. Probably within five minutes time the man was dead.

We moved on and ran into more of these escaped prisoners. They had gone as far as they could. As we came up to them they would hold their hand up, so I knew then they knew we were Americans. Again we started with the water and food routine. Again we got the same results. My medic came running up and after tending to one of my men that was wounded, he hollered at everyone to stop feeding the escaped prisoners. He said "You will kill them." This much we had just found out.

It was hard to ignore them, but we could do nothing for them, so we moved on. The firing started again, and when we returned the fire some Germans came running to us with the white flag of surrender. They were so old they probably could only point the gun and not aim it. Another bunch gave up and surrendered. These were in the fourteen and fifteen year old class. Most of them were crying. They told us the SS troops had told them that if they surrendered the Americans would kill them anyway so they were to fight to the last man. It was sad to see someone so young in that uniform. But they could kill you just as dead as a grown person. These were all air-force people and we found out all the city garrison were air-force.

Pocket resistance had ceased so we were moving right along. We spotted a large column of black smoke to our front. We thought they had fired a gasoline and oil storage area. Our line of advance was right in line with the smoke. As we drew closer we saw a long building and the smoke was coming out of it. Now our conclusion was that the building had been set on fire by artillery fire. We were going to by-pass the building and proceed to an airport supposedly in the vicinity. Then the awful odor hit us.

I passed on one side of the building and saw a large trench. Upon investigation, I saw bodies lying at the bottom. I heard shouts from the other side of the building and went there. The horrid scene unfolded in front of us. We saw heads and hands sticking out from under the doors. It looked like they had dug that far out with their bare hands.

The discovery was reported to company headquarters and on up the chain of commands. S-2 and G-2 Officers gathered at the scene. Some more survivors that had escaped showed up and were being questioned by the officers. Two German officials, a man and a woman, were brought to the scene and were being questioned. One of the prisoners seized one of the officer's pistol and shot the German man. His prison mates grabbed the German and dragged him to the corner of the building where some gasoline cans sat, poured gasoline on him and set him afire. This happened so fast I guess everyone froze.

The town officials were rounded up, taken to the scene, and all doors were opened. Three on each side. The officials were made to clear a path from one door across to the other door. This was probably my most sickening experience. After the three lanes were cleared we went back into town and brought everyone that could walk to the scene. They were made to walk thru the lanes to view the atrocity. Those that fainted were carried thru by those that didn't.

Higher officials now took over the scene and we continued on with the war.

Thru the years, I have often wondered how so many people could be brain-washed by so few degenerates.

Contrary to this description of the barn, there were only two doors on each side of the barn.

The photograph below shows one of the prisoners who had tried to tunnel under one of the doors with his bare hands. One can see through the open door to the opposite side of the barn where German civilians are being forced to remove the bodies for burial.



In the background, Gardelegen citizens dig bodies out of mass grave behind the barn

The following quote is from Dan Johnson, an American soldier in the 102nd Infantry Division: *The ten-man combat team which I was a part of was directly involved in a place called Gardelegen. 1016 Jewish prisoners were being burned alive there in a barn on the edge of town by the SS troops who held the town. My buddy, Bob Zech, who spoke fluent German, perpetrated a ruse on the SS officer in charge by threatening a tank attack if he and the other SS troopers who had fallen into the trap did not surrender within the next twenty minutes or so. The SS*

bought it and surrendered. They had intended to kill us, which would have been easy and to their advantage because they wanted to cover what was going on at the edge of town at the time.

An American lieutenant had just been captured by chance as he and his driver had wandered into the town from the other direction. They just wouldn't have surrendered to a private without the presence of an American officer. After the SS Colonel surrendered, the barn where these political prisoners were being roasted to death was discovered at the edge of town. The smoke was still rising when I walked in. Curiously, the arm of one of the victims was burned badly and smelled like roast turkey to me. The Division Commander, General Keating, ordered the towns people to construct a cemetery and memorial as an attempt to honor the victims. A small brochure describing this event was printed and distributed to members of the 102nd Infantry Division. I still have mine after 52 years.









[Source: <http://www.scrapbookpages.com/Gardelegen/Massacre.html> Mar 2013 ++]