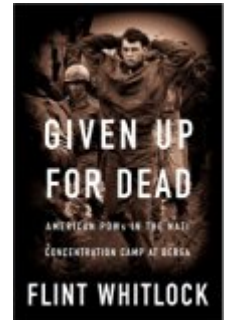


Flint Whitlock. *Given Up for Dead: American GIs in the Nazi Concentration Camp at Berga.* New York: Westview Press, 2005. xvi + 283 pp. \$26.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8133-4288-7.



Reviewed by Joseph Robert White

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The author of *Soldiers on Skis: A Pictorial Memoir of the 10th Mountain Division* (1992), *The Rock of Anzio: From Sicily to Dachau: A History of the 45th Infantry Division* (1998), *Fighting First: The Untold Story of the Big Red One on D-Day* (2005) and *Distant Bugles, Distant Drums: The Union Response to the Confederate Invasion of New Mexico* (2006), Whitlock provides a fine account of the Battle of the Bulge and experiences of the POWs. Relying on oral testimony by Berga veterans, augmented by documentation from the U.S. Army's Dachau Trials, he tells the prisoners' stories from their moment of induction into the U.S. military through liberation and repatriation. Numerous photographs and maps lend immediacy to the text. The author took many of these photos while visiting Berga and related sites in 2004.

Admittedly, Anglo-American POWs in the European theater have recently become the subject of a great deal of solid scholarship. While the resulting picture is mixed, the most recent studies tend to suggest that Anglo-American POWs were treated at least acceptably.[1] An important exception to this generalization that such studies large-

ly ignore, however, is the sub-camp for U.S. POWs at Berga an der Elster, officially called Arbeitsskommando 625.[2] Berga was the deadliest work detachment for American captives in Germany. 73 men who participated, or 21 percent of the detachment, perished in two months. 80 of the 350 POWs were Jews. Although this camp has been discussed in Mitchell Bard's book about Americans as Holocaust victims and is the subject of a PBS documentary by the late Charles Guggenheim, only in 2005 did two book-length accounts about it appear. The first, by *New York Times* reporter Roger Cohen, integrates Berga into the history of the Holocaust. This volume, which sets the prisoners' experience in military context, is the second.[3]

In this work, Whitlock provides a case study in the breakdown of the Geneva Convention of 1929 that integrates the POWs' training and combat experiences into the narrative, a factor often overlooked in POW studies. The American GIs deployed at Berga were mostly green troops captured during the Battle of the Bulge in December 1944 and January 1945. A sizable number be-

longed to the Army Specialized Training Program (ASTP), which prepared college students to become commissioned officers. When mounting casualties led to the ASTP's discontinuation in 1944, its members were sent to Europe as enlisted men. Following capture at the Bulge, prisoners were transported under difficult winter conditions to possibly the worst main camp for U.S. POWs, Stalag IX-B Bad Orb, near Frankfurt am Main. On January 18, 1945, Bad Orb's commandant, Oberst Karl-Heinz Sieber, ordered the segregation of American Jewish POWs from non-Jews.[4] After a brief protest and the beating of the U.S. Man of Confidence (*Vertrauensmann*, or MOC), Sergeant Johann "Hans" Kasten, the new POWs complied with the order. Except for those who hid their identity, most Jews were placed in a separate compound surrounded by a barbed-wire fence. On February 8, 350 POWs, the segregated Jews, captives with Jewish-sounding names and "trouble-makers" including Kasten were dispatched by rail to Berga an der Elster near Dresden. Arriving on February 12, 1945, they were housed in a new camp south of the Steinberg mine. Code-named "Schwalbe V," the Steinberg mine was part of Edmund Geilenberg's emergency oil program, established on May 30, 1944, to transfer synthetic oil production underground. Schwalbe V was run by the state-directed oil consortium, Brabag. Its construction manager, SS-Untersturmführer Willy Hack, was responsible for forced-labor deployment. Hack personally selected the U.S. POWs to augment his Buchenwald labor force.

In alternating shifts, Buchenwald detainees and GIs blasted and hacked out the Steinberg's seventeen tunnels. While so doing, they inhaled thick particulates, which left most with lung ailments, and drew abuse from civilian foremen and the SS. Inside the camp, the Americans endured constant mistreatment, especially by their second Kommandoführer, Erwin Metz. A fifty-two-year-old member of the Landesschutz with a lackluster civilian career behind him, Metz enjoyed his newfound power. Among other things, he forced seri-

ously ill prisoners to return to the mine and killed escapee Morton Goldstein. As an example to the POWs, he had Goldstein's body placed in the compound for several days.

Within a month's time, the GIs physically resembled the Hungarian Jews held at the Buchenwald sub-camp. Unlike other camps holding Anglo-American POWs, Arbeitskommando 625 drew rations from the Berga concentration camp, not the rations for bivouacked German soldiers to which they were entitled under the Geneva Convention. Every day medics walked under guard to the camp, where they filled pails with watery soup. The POWs never received clothing or footwear. Disbursed by Stalag IX C Bad Sulza, on the initiative of medics who accompanied Berga's ill prisoners to that camp, Red Cross parcels arrived in late March 1945, but Metz announced their distribution would follow only after all the haggard POWs cleaned themselves up, an impossible demand under the circumstances. The POWs received only a portion of the parcels; Metz doled out the remainder to his guards. Starving, exhausted and distressed, many GIs succumbed to the conditions. On April 3, 1945, the Germans abandoned the camp and marched the POWs to the south. Many more succumbed during the evacuation, especially under Metz's command. Prisoners able to walk pulled a cart laden with the weak. In one instance, a GI on the bottom of the pile suffocated beneath his comrades. Metz's desertion and the life-saving intervention by a Bavarian mayor, which resulted in the hospitalization of the seriously ill, prevented additional deaths. On April 23, the emaciated and bedraggled survivors met U.S. forces at Rötze, northeast of Regensburg.

At Dachau, the U.S. Army tried Metz and his immediate superior, Hauptmann Ludwig Merz, for war crimes. On appeal, their death sentences were overturned and they remained in a U.S. prison for war criminals at Landsberg am Lech for only a few years. During the trial, U.S. prosecu-

tors failed to summon Berga veterans to testify, although they received the unsolicited assistance of New York attorney Charles Vogel, the uncle of deceased POW Bernard Vogel, who could have facilitated their doing so. For his involvement in the brutal treatment of the Buchenwald detainees, Hack was condemned to death by the East Germans. Although the judgment acknowledged the forced labor of U.S. POWs, the court did not try Hack in connection with their deaths or mistreatment.[5]

Despite the positive qualities of this work, a number of its aspects are problematic. One problem is the integration of this case into previous research on the racial components of the POW experience. Whitlock views Berga as an atypical experience for U.S. POWs in Nazi Germany. In this regard, although he does not cite more recent studies, his interpretation is supported by David A. Foy's older account.[6] In contrast to Cohen, who claims that "racial" segregation was Wehrmacht policy, Whitlock considers it to be uncertain whether Sieber received orders to segregate the Jewish POWs or took the initiative on his own. In answering this question, a broader comparative approach based upon more recent scholarship would have served the author well. Testimonies from other Stalags and work detachments document German attempts to isolate Jews from non-Jews, and, in other cases, Africans from white POWs, in accordance with Nazi "racial" hierarchy. [7] In some instances, this tactic worked, but attempts were usually foiled by the timely objection by a Senior Allied Officer or an MOC. The incident at Bad Orb, however, demonstrated that when the Germans resorted to force, even a strong-willed MOC like Kasten had little choice but to give way.

Second, some aspects of Whitlock's picture of the Berga work detachment are contradictory. For example, the book's subtitle misleadingly asserts that the POWs were held in a concentration camp, but elsewhere he acknowledges that a difference, however tenuous given the flouting of the Geneva

Convention, persisted between the treatment of U.S. POWs and Buchenwald prisoners. For example, during the evacuation, Berga POWs saw the bodies of camp inmates along the side of the road with bullets in the back of their necks. It dawned on the Americans that, as horribly as they were treated, their guards had not committed similar deeds. In a similarly confusing moment of the book, readers will note that Whitlock's interpretation is open to alternative explanations. For example, although he depicts Metz's shooting of Goldstein as an attempt to foil an escape by shooting the victim in the back (p. 147), Cohen cites the testimony of U.S. medic Tony Acevedo, who observed the condition of Goldstein's body, to argue that the shooting was premeditated.[8]

Finally, although the author received assistance from local authorities in Berga, he did not integrate German secondary sources into his account. In contrast with Cohen, who sets Berga in the context of recent Holocaust historiography, Whitlock largely ignores the issue of whether the mistreatment of these POWs crossed the line from war crimes to crimes against humanity. Specifically, to what extent did antisemitism in the Wehrmacht or among the *Landesschützen* play a role in the POWs' ordeal? The neglect of such questions diminishes the value of this particular case study.

From Whitlock's account taken together with others, however, it is possible to piece together Berga's historical context. The deterioration of Germany's war economy in 1944-45 contributed to the deadly conditions that the GIs faced. In itself, the "Schwalbe" project was an attempt to circumvent the Allied bombing of German oil targets. Willy Hack's assignment to erect Schwalbe V fell administratively under Hans Kammler's Office Group C in the SS Business Administration Main Office (SS-WVHA). As Michael Thad Allen has shown, Kammler garnered a gruesome reputation for achieving technical output, such as the Mittelwerk's production of the V-2 rockets by Dora

camp inmates, regardless of the cost to human life.[9] The Berga project thus fell into Kammler's orbit, with catastrophic results for the Buchenwald prisoners and the U.S. POWs. The air campaign also fatally disrupted Germany's transportation network, an element that compounded Berga's food shortages. Additionally, the timing and location of the work detachment played a role in the hostility and harassment the GIs endured. The destruction of Dresden took place on February 13, 1945, only one day after the Americans' arrival. The GIs felt the ground shake from the explosions. Guarded by *Landesschützen*, not professionals or long-serving draftees, they became convenient targets for their overseers' frustration over the impending military defeat.

Notes

[1]. In *Prisoners of War and the German High Command: The British and American Experience* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2003), which is based on International Red Cross and Protecting Power reports and the Wehrmacht's POW affairs collection at the Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv Freiburg, Vasilis Vourkoutiotis has demonstrated that the Wehrmacht generally followed the 1929 Geneva Convention in respect to British and U.S. POWs. From a different vantage point, in *Confronting Captivity: Britain and the United States and Their POWs in Nazi Germany* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), Arieh J. Kochavi arrives at largely the same conclusion by exploring indirect Allied negotiations with Germany concerning Allied POWs. Unlike Vourkoutiotis, Kochavi takes into account the Nazi "racial" hierarchy as a factor in the treatment of Anglo-American POWs, noting that the favored place of most as "Aryans" spared them the abuse meted out to Soviets and Poles. Against these generally positive accounts of Wehrmacht behavior, amateur historians John Nichol and Tony Rennell recount the evacuations of Anglo-American POWs from the eastern parts of the Reich in 1944-45 in *The Last Escape: The Untold Story of Allied Prisoners of*

War in Europe, 1944-45 (New York: Viking, 2003). The Wehrmacht's enforcement of the Geneva Convention toward Anglo-American POWs, they argue, wavered during its flight from the Red Army, as captives were forced onto vicious evacuation marches. S.P. Mackenzie, in *The Colditz Myth: British and Commonwealth POWs in Nazi Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), demonstrates that Stalags, Oflags and work detachments were not places for schoolboy games, as many memoirs and films about the semi-mythic Oflag IV C at Colditz represent, but places of physical hardship and psychological trauma. As Mackenzie shows, when flooded with British POWs as in France in 1940 and in Greece in 1941, or when operational conditions were unfavorable, as during the 1944-45 evacuations, the German military ignored the basic needs of the POWs in favor of military necessity.

[2]. Kochavi, *Confronting Captivity*, p. 211, includes a single photograph of an evacuated Berga POW, but otherwise ignores this episode.

[3]. Mitchell Bard, *Forgotten Victims: The Abandonment of Americans in Hitler's Camps* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), pp. 73-90, 103; Charles Guggenheim, *Berga: Soldiers of Another War* (PBS, 2002); Roger Cohen, *Soldiers and Slaves: American POWs Trapped by the Nazis' Final Gamble* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005).

[4]. Whitlock does not provide Sieber's full name, but it can be found in Cohen, *Soldiers and Slaves*, p. 70.

[5]. On Hack, see Lfd. Nr. 1236 in *DDR-Justiz und NS-Verbrechen. Sammlung ostdeutscher Strafurteile wegen nationalsozialistischer Tötungsverbrechen*, 8 vols. (Munich: K.G. Saur Verlag, 2004), V: pp. 451-475, here p. 472.

[6]. David A. Foy, *For You the War is Over: American Prisoners of War in Nazi Germany* (New York: Stein and Day, 1984).

[7]. For Cohen's argument about Wehrmacht policy, see *Soldiers and Slaves*, pp. 71-72, 274;

some examples of segregation along "racial" lines are described in my "'Even in Auschwitz ... Humanity Could Prevail': British POWs and Jewish Concentration-Camp Inmates at IG Auschwitz, 1943-1945," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 15 (2001): pp. 266-295; Mackenzie, *The Colditz Myth*, p. 282; and David Killingray, "Africans and African Americans in Enemy Hands," in *Prisoners of War and Their Captors in World War II*, ed. Bob Moore and Kent Fedorowich (Oxford: Berg, 1996), pp. 181-204.

[8]. For example, the "Schwalbe" project is covered in Wolfgang Birkenfeld, *Der synthetische Treibstoff, 1933-1945. Ein Beitrag zur national-sozialistischen Wirtschafts- und Rüstungspolitik* (Göttingen: Musterschmidt Verlag, 1964), pp. 202-203; on the Goldstein killing, Cohen, *Soldiers and Slaves*, pp. 150-151.

[9]. Michael Thad Allen, *The Business of Genocide: The SS, Slave Labor, and the Concentration Camps* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), pp. 223-224, 227.

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