

H-Net Reviews

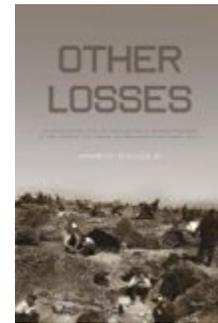
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

James Bacque. *Other Losses: An Investigation into the Mass Deaths of German Prisoners at the Hands of the French and Americans after World War II*. Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2011. lxxviii + 322 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-88922-665-4.

Reviewed by Terry Shoptaugh (Minnesota State University Moorhead)

Published on H-War (February, 2012)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey



Eisenhower and the German POW Controversy: Another Salvo

This third edition of James Bacque's *Other Losses* is essentially the original 1989 book, with some additional material grafted on in a new introduction. Those who have studied the history of post-World War II occupation of Germany will already be familiar with Bacque's argument—that U.S. Army soldiers and French forces deliberately starved and abused countless numbers of German military prisoners following the Second World War, and that the responsibility for the American mistreatments “rest[s] primarily on [General Dwight] Eisenhower” and some of his closest postwar command staff (p. 171).[1] Bacque's findings stirred great controversy when his book appeared, and this new edition will do little to put the debate to rest.

Bacque notes that the only changes he has made are correcting “some few small errors and infelicities” to the original text, while the new material he has added are items he has discovered “supporting and confirming its original findings” (pp. xxii, xxiii). In fact, most of the new material does not bear on the original questions he raised but instead consists of information that he found in documents he researched in the Soviet Archives. In sum, the Soviet archival material reveals that German soldiers suffered greatly in Joseph Stalin's prisoner of war camps. These Soviet reports, supplemented by personal testimonies from German veterans who survived, make it clear that the camps were indeed horrid variants of the gulag. The Soviet documents do not, however, produce a causal link between the Soviets and the charges that

Bacque has stated previously about the American mistreatment of prisoners.

The remainder of the new material is primarily information he received in letters from and interviews with former American soldiers, concerning abuses they witnessed in the postwar American camps. Taken together the new information adds additional weight to one of Bacque's major themes in *Other Losses*, and in his other study, *Crimes and Mercies: The Fate of German Civilians under Allied Occupation, 1944-1950* (1997): that some troops from the Allied powers did take brutal revenge against Germans at the end of the conflict. Even Bacque's harshest critics have agreed with his findings on this subject; German soldiers and civilians were subjected to very harsh treatment by soldiers of the occupying powers. Prisoners were beaten and neglected, an indeterminate number were killed by angry guards. Food supplies and medical care were inadequate in numbers of camps, Red Cross aid was frequently directed to civilians rather than the German soldiers, and American soldiers were often indifferent to the sufferings of the Germans. Some Allied powers' newspapers published revelations of the worst situations, but the abuses continued into 1946 for certain and beyond that in some camps. Bacque can be credited for shining a light on this most unsavory aspect of the occupation; as one lay reader commented after reading the book, the evidence showed that “the U.S. military can also be cruel and kill people.”[2]

But were these outrages the result of the chaotic conditions following the war, or were they part of deliberate policy orchestrated by General Eisenhower, as Bacque alleges? And if deliberate then where did the policy originate? This recent edition adds little new to this part of the controversy. The new testimony added by former soldiers speaks to individual incidents they witnessed or to protests that they made and believed went unheeded. The result is simply too spotty to demonstrate a concerted effort directed at the top by Eisenhower's command.

Reviewers of the first edition of *Other Losses*, even those who accepted Bacque's conclusions about camp abuses and mismanagement, seriously questioned his charge that Eisenhower, while in command of the American occupation forces, directed on his own volition a deliberate campaign of revenge against the German Army. They doubted his contention that Eisenhower nursed a personal abiding hatred of the Germans, or that he dared to ignore orders from President Harry S. Truman and his military superiors, and not only continued to orchestrate atrocities but also persuaded all of those who had to know the details to keep quiet and hide the evidence. Subsequent biographies of Eisenhower and books on the occupation have dismissed these charges as unsupported by any cohesive body of evidence.[3]

Bacque claims that Eisenhower's brutality resulted in the deaths of five hundred thousand German soldiers at least, and as many as eight hundred thousand deaths. His critics, led by the now-deceased Stephen Ambrose, gathered at a conference in 1991 to challenge Bacque's methodology and tabulations. Their findings were published that same year, with German historian Rudiger Overmans making a well-documented case that Bacque's tabulations were exaggerated and contorted. Looking at the almost impenetrable explanation of estimates that Bacque makes in the first appendix to his book, it is clear that Overmans has the most believable argument. In all, nine scholars who contributed to this conference delivered a hefty judgment that Bacque had made charges that the evidence does not sustain.

Bacque has clearly been deeply stung by these criticisms of his book, in particular with Ambrose's characterization of it as "worse than worthless." [4] Reading the introduction and the appendices, it is difficult not to believe that the primary reason for this new edition is the author's determination to have a final word against those he sees as his detractors. Bacque devotes almost half of his new introduction to accusing them of "intense hostility, vituperations, errors, misrepresentations, obfusca-

tions and even lies" (p. xxiii). While much of his subsequent remarks repeat what he had written previously in his tenth appendix to the second edition, he devotes his sharpest barbs to those he calls "court historians" who are perpetuating a cover-up to protect Eisenhower, the U.S. Army, the U.S. government, France, and even Germany's government, unfairly tarring him and his research. Those who enjoy a good brouhaha may enjoy this, but since the basic text of the book remains the same as that of the 1989 publication, none of this sheds any substantial, additional light on the historical events in question.[5]

What then should military historians make of this new edition? First, there is very little in the new edition that adds to the argument made in the previous editions. The material on the Soviet treatment of German prisoners is interesting, but does not change anything in the ongoing controversy. Second, each scholar and any general reader with a strong interest in the American role in the postwar occupation of Germany should read the book very carefully. The sections concerning the charges that Eisenhower directed a conspiratorial campaign of mass murder exceed the evidence Bacque offers and the rhetoric extends to sensationalism. But there are also sections concerning mismanagement in the camps and acts of abuse by some guards that are backed by very compelling evidence. In this area, Bacque has influenced reinterpretations of this era. Like other books, the strengths of this one can be used with care while the weaknesses can be ignored.

Finally, the personal invective, on both sides, adds nothing to the main issue under examination—namely, what can historians learn from the Allied occupation of Germany? The challenge of "nation building" is again a prime subject in relation to military history, and we can profit from additional works comparing the post-World War II era to more recent events. Historian David Stafford suggested, in his 1990 review of the original edition of Bacque's book, that fresh eyes poring over the documentation could clear away some of the "dense thickets" of emotion that clouded the "disturbing questions that should not be pushed aside or forgotten" about the occupation of the Axis powers after 1945.[6] A balanced work that accomplishes the result that Stafford longed to see would be more than welcome.

Notes

[1]. Bacque's findings about French abuses can be found throughout the book, with a summary on pages 172-174 in this new edition. I refrain from commenting on his conclusions, which single out Charles de Gaulle

and to a lesser extent “all of French society” for allowing these abuses to continue (p. 173). I abstain from commenting as well on Bacque’s belief that postwar German governments have cooperated with Western nations in suppressing information and encouraging “a cult of national guilt that is almost like a religion within the German people” (pp. xxiii-xxiv). These subjects go beyond American military conduct and are properly the purview of specialists in French and German history.

[2]. Kevin M. Quigg, “Starvation and Death in American and French POW Camps,” review of *Other Losses*, by James Bacque, August 5, 2004, http://www.amazon.com/Other-Losses-Investigation-Prisoners-Americans/product-reviews/0889226652/ref=cm_cr_dp_hist_3?~ie=UTF8&showViewpoints=0&filterBy=addThreeStar. For a good example of how Bacque’s book has changed the historiography of postwar occupation, see Giles MacDonogh, *After the Reich: The Brutal History of the Allied Occupation* (New York: Basic Books, 2009).

[3]. See the following reviews and commentaries for a detailed overview of the first edition debate: David Stafford, review of *Other Losses*, by James Bacque, *Canadian Historical Review* 71 (September 1990): 408; Stephen Ambrose, “Ike and the Disappearing Atrocities,” review of *Other Losses*, by James Bacque, *New York Times Book*

Review, February 24, 1991; Gunter Bischof and Stephen Ambrose, eds., *Eisenhower and the German POWs* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), especially the essays by Bischof, Rudiger Overmans, and Ambrose; S. P. MacKenzie, “Essay and Reflection, on the *Other Losses* Debate,” *International History Review* 14 (1992): 717-731; and Joan Beaumont, “Eisenhower and the German POWs: Facts against Falsehood,” review of *Other Losses*, by James Bacque, *Journal of Modern History* 67 (1995): 976-978. Bacque replied to these reviews in several letters, including “Did the Allies Starve Millions of Germans?” *Toronto Globe and Mail*, September 20, 1997.

[4]. Ambrose, “Ike and the Disappearing Atrocities.”

[5]. Bacque is now in his eighties. His pique is even more pointed in a Web post dated April 5, 2008, “Why is Wikipedia Censoring Me?” http://www.serendipity.li/hr/bacque_on_wikipedia.htm. In this essay, he complains that Wikipedia unfairly refuses to let him add to its entry about his work, and includes a statement “that the Ambrose it cites as an authority admitted that he had plagiarized several other authors.” As the old saying goes, when you want to beat the dog, any muddy stick will do.

[6]. Stafford, review of *Other Losses*, 408.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

Citation: Terry Shoptaugh. Review of Bacque, James, *Other Losses: An Investigation into the Mass Deaths of German Prisoners at the Hands of the French and Americans after World War II*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. February, 2012.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=34874>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.