

Week Three— Concentration Camp Liberations: Collecting the Evidence.

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In July 1944, the Soviets discovered and liberated the death camp of [Majdanek](#). The Soviet rapid advance after the destruction of the Wehrmacht's Army Group Center caught German authorities by surprise, so they were unable to erase the evidence of the gas chambers and crematorium.

During the rest of the summer, the Soviets overran the Sobibor, Belzec, and Treblinka death camps, but the Germans had dismantled these in 1943 after killing the Jewish inmates, thus leaving little apparent evidence. In January 1945, the Soviets liberated [Auschwitz](#), discovering tens of thousands of personal effects from Jewish victims, including hair, in the abandoned warehouses. Except for a few thousand emaciated prisoners, the magnitude of the mass incarceration and extermination of the Jews was not immediately evident because the Germans had evacuated the vast majority of Jews through death marches to the West.



In the spring of 1945, the Western Allies were shocked by the discovery of labor camps and survivors of death marches in western Germany, Czechoslovakia, and Austria. Due to the collapsing military front, German guards and authorities abandoned the camps, leaving behind

tens of thousands emaciated, diseased, and dying prisoners and bodies in the open and in mass graves. Upon hearing accounts of camp liberations, senior allied generals, including General Dwight D. Eisenhower, visited the camps. Eisenhower ordered a formal and meticulous documentation of evidence, to include film footage and pictures, stating later, “The things I saw beggar description . . . The visual evidence and the verbal testimony of starvation, cruelty and bestiality were so overpowering . . . 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 to propaganda.” The film footage of the [Flossenbuerg](#), [Dachau](#), [Mauthausen](#),



[Buchenwald](#), [Bergen-Belsen](#), and [Ohrdruf](#) labor camps, to name just a few, is testament of the unspeakable horrors the allies discovered. Eisenhower was right; without the film footage, Holocaust deniers would have dismissed the spoken accounts as Allied propaganda.

This collected evidence together with captured documents allowed the International Military Tribunal prosecute the principal Third Reich authorities as well as hundreds of concentration camp guards and officials. Collecting the evidence for the war crime trials was a daunting task because the allies needed to prosecute the criminals with dispatch while witnesses were available and memories fresh. Moreover, it was essential that the world take note of a new international order in the wake of the most devastating war in human history and the articulated condemnation not only of war crimes, but also crimes against humanity.



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