

## Atrocities during World War II

**Purpose:** To expose students to the truth of the utter brutality of atrocities during wartime and discuss/analyze the possible reasons that seemingly “civilized” nations produce individuals capable of horrific deeds. Students have spent considerable time in earlier grades addressing the tragedy of the Holocaust and will now see that this war had brutality beyond this experience. This lesson is a part of a two-week unit covering the Second World War.

**Grade level:** 10th grade United States History but also appropriate in Global History.

**Topic:** Comparing Japanese Imperial Army atrocities with other WWII atrocities.

**Time:** To be completed in one to two 47 minute periods.

**Materials:** Additional readings addressing Japanese and German atrocities (attached).  
Selections from: Crimes of Obedience: Toward a Social Psychology of Authority and Responsibility by Herbert C Kelman  
Flyboys by James Bradford

**Skills:** Students acquire basis knowledge and are placed in a position of critical analysis of actions by so-called civilized nations.

### **Procedures:**

Class is divided roughly in half with one group given copies of attached readings regarding Japanese atrocities and half given readings regarding German atrocities as homework from the previous class. Students will share some of the details of their readings. Subsequent student-led discussion will focus on answering the following prompts:

- Is there an explanation for actions by combatants?
- What leads modern states to be involved in these activities? (Share insights from Flyboys and Crimes of Obedience)
- What was unique about Germany and Japan during this period that could help explain the atrocities (focus on totalitarian state, philosophies of each leadership structure)?
- Do you believe that all humans are capable of this type of action?

**Evaluation/Assessment** Students will write a one page response to the following prompt: “Could this type of behavior happen again in modern warfare?”

**Relationship to standards** US History curriculum regarding WW II/Holocaust/Atrocities

# Allied POWs in German Camps

With the fall of Poland, thousands of POWs were taken by the German Army, and millions more before the war was over. The question of what to do with those POWs would lead to some of the worst atrocities of the war.

Large numbers of Allied POWs were taken as the Nazis stormed across Europe. Hundreds of thousands of French soldiers were taken to Germany and put into forced labor camps. By 1945 the majority of forced laborers in Germany were French. Two hundred thousand British and Dominion troops were captured in France, Greece, Crete and North Africa. Thousands of Americans were shot down over Germany or taken in combat in Italy. They were all sent to camps in Germany.

When Germany invaded the Soviet Union, the huge encirclements of 1941 swallowed whole Russian army groups. Some five million Soviets went into captivity, including large numbers of Russian women. Only one out five would come home again.

Unlike the indigenous civilian populations that were sent to concentration camps, the POWs were held separately in different camps unless they were found guilty of some war crime and were sent to a death camp. For the Western POWs, that meant they had a better chance at survival than either the concentration camp prisoners or their comrades in Japanese hands. Around 17% of Western Allied soldiers died while in German detention; Allied soldiers in Japanese hands had less than a 50% chance of survival.

Different branches of the German armed forces ran different camps. The RAF and USAAF fliers shot down over Germany were taken to camps run by the *Luftwaffe* after interrogation. Ground troops were taken to camps run by the Wehrmacht.

As the war progressed against Germany, Hitler issued a series of orders that led to many massacres of western Allied troops. The Commando Order, issued after Dieppe on October 18, 1942, called Commandos "bandits" and that they should be shot on sight. This led to the execution of Americans dropped into Czechoslovakia by parachute, Canadians killed by the 2<sup>nd</sup> SS *Panzer* Division in Normandy in June 1944, and Norwegians attempting to land by boat. The total number of Allied soldiers killed by the Germans will never be known.

POWs were entitled to escape under international law, but the Germans shot any escapees under the *Kugel Erlass* (bullet decree) which provided for the immediate execution of any flyers found on the ground. Hitler called the Allied air forces "terror flyers" and Nazi party members lynched many. 50 RAF airmen who escaped from Silesia in 1944 and quickly recaptured were machine-gunned. Their names were posted as a warning to others.

The recidivist escapees, including famous POWs like Randolph Churchill, were taken to Colditz castle. The camp at Colditz, in Saxony, saw many of the most outrageous escape schemes, including manufacturing German uniforms, tunneling, and dropping out of the windows to 100 feet below. The castle was floodlit every night, despite the blackout. When the camp was liberated in 1945 the POWs were building a glider in the chapel roof.

Even though Germany signed the Geneva Convention for the humane treatment of prisoners, the Nazi ideology of racial purity and the thirst for vengeance led to millions of POWs dying in forced labor or shot by German ground forces. France, Russia, Britain and the United States tried the commanders who ordered these deaths in courts set up after the war.

Source: <http://www.worldwar2database.com/html/alliedpoweto.htm>

### **BANDE (Christmas Eve, 1944)**

On September 5, 1944, a unit of Belgian marquis attacked a German unit, killing three soldiers. Two days later the American troops arrived in the area and the Germans retreated. Three months later, during the *Ardennes Offensive*, the village of *Bande* was retaken. On Christmas Eve, a unit of the German SD (Sicherheitsdienst) set about arresting all men in the village. They were questioned about the events of September 5, then lined up in front of the local cafe. One by one, they were led to an open door and as they entered a shot rang out. An SD man, positioned just inside the door, fired point blank into the victims neck, and with a kick sent the body hurtling into the open cellar. After twenty had been killed this way, it was the turn of 21 year old *Leon Praile* who decided to make a run for it. With bullets flying around him, he escaped into the woods. Meantime the executions continued until all 34 men had been killed. On January 10, 1945, the village of *Bande* was liberated by British troops and the massacre was discovered. A Belgian War Crimes Court was set up in December 1944. One man, a German speaking Swiss national by the name of Ernst Haldiman, was identified as being a member of the execution squad. He had joined the SS in France on November 15, 1942 and in 1944 his unit was integrated with other SD units, into No. 8 SS Commando for Special Duties. Haldiman was picked up in Switzerland after the war and brought to trial before a Swiss Army Court. On April 28, 1948, he was sentenced to twenty years in prison. He was released on parole on

June 27, 1960, the only member of the SS Commando unit that has been brought to trial.

## THE MALMÉDY MASSACRE (December 17, 1944)

During the **Ardennes Offensive** (*Battle of the Bulge*) the Combat Group of the 1st SS Panzer Division, led by SS Major Joachim Peiper, was approaching the crossroads at Baugnes near the town of *Malmédy*. There they encountered a company of US troops (Battery B of the 285th Field Artillery Observation Battalion) from the US 7th Armoured Division. Realizing that the odds were hopeless, the company's commander, **Lt. Virgil Lary**, decided to surrender. After being searched by the SS, the prisoners were marched into a field adjacent to the Cafe Bodarwé. The SS troops moved on except for two Mark IV tanks Nos. 731 and 732, left behind to guard the GIs. A couple of GIs tried to flee to the nearest woods and an order was given to fire. SS Private Georg Fleps of tank 731 drew his pistol and fired at Lary's driver who fell dead in the snow. The machine guns of both tanks then opened fire on the prisoners. Many of the GIs took to their heels and headed for the woods. Incredibly, 43 GIs survived, but 84 of their comrades lay dead in the field, being slowly covered with a blanket of snow. No attempt was made to recover the bodies until the area was retaken by the 30th Infantry Division on January 14, 1945, when men from the 291st Engineers used metal detectors to locate the bodies buried in the snow. *(The US troops in the area were issued with an order that for the next week no SS prisoners were to be taken)* At the end of the war, Peiper, and 73 other suspects (arrested for other atrocities committed during the offensive) were brought to trial. When the trial ended on July 16, 1946, forty three of the defendants were sentenced to death, twenty two to life imprisonment, two to twenty years, one for fifteen years and five to ten years. Peiper and Fleps were among those sentenced to death, but after a series of reviews the sentences were reduced to terms in prison. On December 22, 1956, SS Sturmbannführer Peiper was released. He settled in the small village of *Traves* in northern France in 1972 and four years later, on the eve of Bastille Day, he was murdered and his house burned down by a French communist group. His charred body was recovered from the ruins and transferred to the family grave in *Schondorf*, near Landsberg in Bavaria. Most of the remains of the murdered GIs were eventually shipped back to the US for private burial but twenty-one still lie buried in the American Military Cemetery at Henri-Chappelle, about forty kilometers north of Malmédy.

## ORADOUR-SUR-GLANE (Central France, June 10, 1944)

On their 450 mile drive from the south of France to the Normandy invasion area, the 2nd SS Panzer Division 'Das Reich' (15,000 men aboard 1,400 vehicles, including 209 tanks) under the command of SS General Lammerding, arrived at Limoges, a town famous for its porcelain. In the small town of St. Junien (30 kilometres from Limoges) the '**Der Führer Regiment**' was regrouping. Following many encounters with the local maquis in which two German soldiers were killed, a unit of the regiment arrived at ORADOUR (believed to be a hotbed of maquis activity) in a convoy of trucks and half-trucks. At about 2 PM on this Saturday afternoon the 120 man SS unit surrounded the village ordering all inhabitants to parade in the market place for an identity check. Women and children were separated from the menfolk and herded into the local church. The men were herded in groups into six carefully chosen local garages and

barns and shot. Their bodies were then covered with straw and set on fire. The 452 women and children in the church were then suffocated by smoke grenades lobbed in through the windows and sharpnel grenades that were thrown down the nave while machine-guns raked the interior. The church was then set on fire.

Incredibly, one woman, [Mme Marguerite Rouffanche](#), escaped by jumping through a window, she was the only witness to the carnage in the church. (Mme Rouffanche died, aged 91, in March, 1988) Unspeakable atrocities were committed throughout the village, but some men managed to escape. The commanding officer of the 1st Battalion of the SS Regiment at ORADOUR was thirty-two year old SS Sturmbannführer Adolf Diekmann, a survivor of the Russian Front. He was later killed in the Normandy battle area on June 30 when hit in the head by shrapnel. Many members of the "Das Reich" reacted with surprising venom against the officer who ordered the massacre and a court martial was established but Diekmann died before the trial took place. The world heard of this massacre eight years later when some of those responsible were brought to trial. In 1953, a French Military Court at Bordeaux, established that 642 people (245 women, 207 children and 190 men) had perished. Twenty-one other members of his company (including fourteen Frenchmen from Alsace-Lorraine who had been conscripted into the SS) were sentenced to death but later their sentences were commuted to terms of imprisonment. All were released by 1959. SS General Lammerding died peacefully at his home at Bad Toltz in Germany on January 13, 1971, of cancer. A close friend of Diekmann was Major Helmut Kampfe, commanding officer of the 3rd Battalion of the Der Führer Regiment. He was kidnapped and executed by the FTP (Communists) the day before the massacre. His kidnapping was not the only reason for the events at Oradour. Gold, looted by the Nazis, and then stolen by the Maquis, was rumoured to be hidden in the village, why else the indiscriminate destruction?

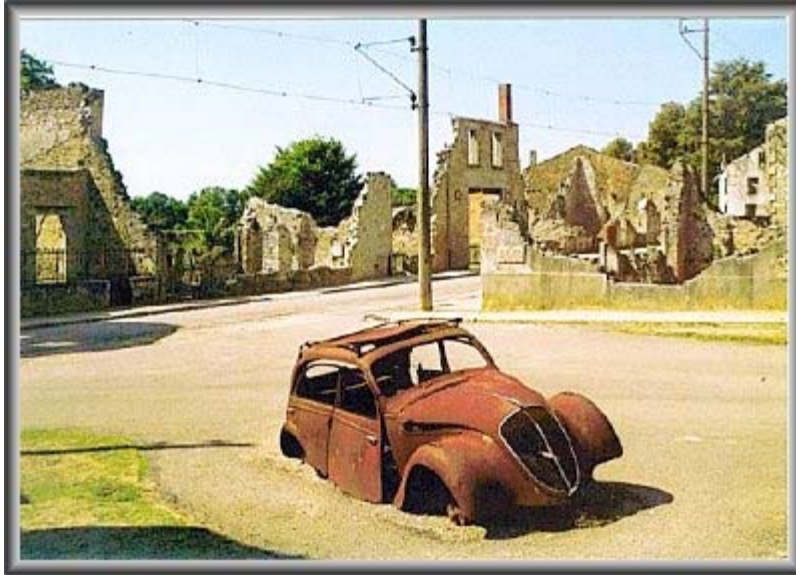
*Today, the village of Oradour-sur-Glane stands in ruins, just as the SS left it.*



*Aerial view of Oradour-sur-Glane*



*Oradour-sur-Glane's complete destruction is clearly visible, even from this distance*



*The burned-out hulk of the local doctor's car still sits where it was parked on June 10, 1944, in the centre of Oradour-sur-Glane*

Source: <http://members.iinet.net.au/~gduncan/massacres.html>

## Japanese Atrocities during World War II

**China**: Historians estimate between 20 and 30 million Chinese deaths at the hands of the Imperial Japanese Army [Infoplease.com, Rummel]

### **Rape of Nanking**

Following the withdrawal of Chinese forces from the capital, Japanese forces begin a six week long campaign of execution, rape and torture. Virtually all girls and women between 10 and 70 are raped and most immediately murdered. Many women become "comfort women" for the Japanese army. Chinese soldiers are beheaded, shot or used for bayonet practice. Between 200,000 and 350,000 Chinese are murdered.

[Yin and Young, Rape of Nanking; Chang, Rape of Nanking; various]

### **Northeast China**

After the U.S. bombing of Tokyo in April 1942, the Japanese army removes all Chinese civilians within flight range of Japan. Horrible atrocities are committed as entire villages are exterminated as soldiers rape and murder across the entire region.

[Bradley, Flyboys]

## Biological experiments

### **China**

It is believed that Japan attacked 11 Chinese cities with anthrax and other agents. In 1940, a plague epidemic in China and Manchuria followed reported overflights by Japanese planes dropping plague-infected fleas. Japanese troops also dropped cholera and typhoid cultures in wells and ponds. In all, tens of thousands, and perhaps as many 200,000, Chinese died of bubonic plague, cholera, anthrax and other diseases. [Various]

**Prisoners of War** 1 in 25 POWs held by Germany died in WWII. 1 in 3 held in Japan died.

### **Unit 731**

Allied prisoners of war were used as subjects for medical experiments in which they were exposed to biological agents and dissected.

[Wu, Tien-wei. "A Preliminary Review of Japanese Biological Warfare and Unit 731 in the United States;" Bradley, Flyboys]

### **Bataan Death March**

Approximately 70,000 U.S. and Filipino prisoners are marched more than 60 miles with little food or water. Prisoners of war were beaten randomly and denied food and water for several days. Those who fell behind were executed through various means: shot, beheaded or bayoneted. 5,000 to 11,000 died.

Tokyo Military Tribunal – Class A War Criminals on trial



On December 14, 1944, Japanese soldiers forced 150 American [prisoners of war](#) at a compound on Palawan into an air-raid shelter. Then they doused them with gasoline and threw in a match.

#### **A Survivor's Story**

A few of the Americans, a very few, survived. Army PFC Eugene Nielson was one of the survivors. He later described the atrocity to U.S. intelligence officers:

The trench smelled very strongly of gas. There was an explosion and flames shot throughout the place. Some of the guys were moaning. I realized this was it -- either I had to break for it or die. Luckily I was in the trench closest to the fence. So I jumped and dove through the barbed wire. I fell over the cliff and somehow grabbed hold of a small tree... There were Japanese soldiers down on the beach. I buried myself in a pile of garbage and coconut husks. I kept working my way under until I got fairly covered up... The Japanese were bayoneting [prisoners on the beach]. They shot or stabbed twelve Americans and then dug a shallow grave in the sand and threw them in.

Nielson hid in the garbage until the Japanese left. He then made a break for it but the Japanese saw him and started firing. He jumped into the sea and was shot several times. Miraculously, he lived and managed to escape -- swimming for nine hours and eventually finding his way through the Philippine jungle to American guerrilla forces.