



# Berga

Soldiers of Another War

Stories of Berga What Would You Do? Timeline & Maps Berga and Beyond War Crimes

Intro Prisoners of War Civilian Prisoners

## Civilian Prisoners

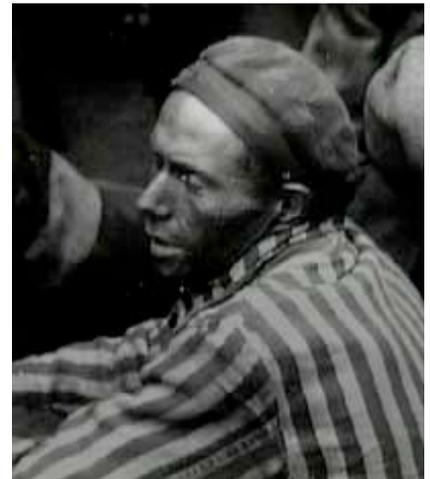
Intro The Civilian Camp System Extermination Camps Labor Camps Transit Camps The Berga Camp

### THE BERGA CAMP



A group of concentration camp prisoners await liberation by Allied troops.

On February 13, 1945, 350 American prisoners of war arrived at a concentration camp located outside the town of Berga (population 7,000) on the banks of the Elster River. Four camps were located here: three P.O.W. camps associated with Stalag IX-C (Bad Sulza) and comprised of soldiers of various nationalities, and one civilian camp, a satellite of Buchenwald. The civilian camp held 1,800 political prisoners who had arrived in November of 1944 and who were forced to dig in tunnels to create an underground armament factory.



The American prisoners of war slept in uninsulated wooden barracks with bars on the windows, two to a bed in four-tiered, lice-infested bunks. Given no additional garments, the soldiers had only the clothes they were wearing at the time of their capture and the heat of a single stove to keep from freezing overnight. Their food consisted of ersatz tea (little more than hot brown water), turnip beet-top soup, bread made from sawdust, margarine, and an occasional piece of sausage-type meat. This was the same food regimen given to the political prisoners.

The treatment of these American P.O.W.s was comparable to that of civilian concentration camp inmates.

As was the case for other Nazi concentration camp inmates, work details determined survival rates. Close to 70 of the 350 American P.O.W.s were assigned to work as carpenters, locksmiths, electricians, or medics, or on cleaning, burial, or food detail. The rest of them were sent to work in the mines, digging tunnels for the armaments factory. By the end of their time at Berga, the miners were working 12 hours a day, seven days a week. They worked without masks, overcoats, or protective footwear, and were beaten when their work did not seem satisfactory to their supervisors.

One foreman beat prisoners with a rubber hose, acquiring the nickname "Rubber-Hose Charlie." In April of 1945, inmates of Berga were sent on what quickly became a death march. The sick, nearly starved prisoners were forced to walk miles each day in the opposite direction of the quickly approaching Allied armies. Thousands died along these marches, which took place across German-occupied Europe from 1944-45 as SS authorities tried to prevent their mistreated prisoners from falling into Allied hands.

In these ways, the treatment of these American P.O.W.s was

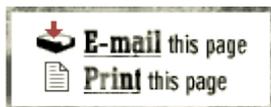
Political prisoners in the trademark striped, pajama-style camp uniform, often the only clothes the inmates were allowed to keep.

comparable to that of the civilian concentration camp inmates. The G.I.s were consistently denied the rights afforded them by the Geneva Convention. Most of the American soldiers' Red Cross aid packages were withheld. When one medic suggested that certain soldiers needed to be hospitalized, he was sent to work in the mines. Almost all of the G.I.s suffered from diarrhea or dysentery. Two American P.O.W.s were shot dead while "trying to escape," as their Nazi supervisors claimed.

Yet these American prisoners endured this life for less than three months, compared to the years many civilian prisoners spent in the camps. While a handful of G.I.s were forced to work the night shift several times, the civilian workers usually worked at night, when temperatures could dip as low as 20 to 30 degrees below zero. One American P.O.W. attested that whenever a civilian laborer collapsed, he was shot.

The American prisoners did receive a few of their Red Cross packages, and 25 soldiers were ultimately sent to the hospital. The prisoners at Buchenwald, meanwhile, had no such safety nets. Hundreds of deaths were inflicted by medical experiments in which inmates were involuntarily exposed to viruses and contagious diseases. Some prisoners were subjected to a procedure that purported to "cure" homosexuals. (At other camps, prisoners were exposed to freezing temperatures, chemical weapons, low air pressure, and sterilization.) Those who were too sick or weak to work were either sent to extermination facilities at Bernburg or Sonnenstein or killed by a lethal injection administered by the camp doctor. All in all, some 56,000 people were murdered in the Buchenwald camp system.

-- John Uhl



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