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Smokescreen to hide truth

When Toronto author Jim Bacque departed from his usual role of novelist a couple of years ago, and ventured into the minefield of historical research, he managed to cause sensation, fury and controversy.

Some of his admirers at the time have since turned against him. Some even seem to have joined a movement whose sole purpose is to discredit him, his findings, his conclusions.

Bacque wrote the book *Other Losses* (Stoddart) which claims that upward of a million German prisoners in the Second World War were systematically and deliberately allowed to die of starvation, disease, exposure *after* the war ended in Europe.

He claimed it was a policy essentially devised by the Supreme Allied Commander, Gen. Dwight Eisenhower who, he says, despised Germans and wanted as many as possible dead. The Americans (but not the British or Canadians) reclassified surrendering German soldiers as Disarmed Enemy Forces (DEF) rather than as Prisoners of War (PoW), thereby getting around Geneva Convention standards of treatment.

The present hullabaloo now focuses on whether Eisenhower was the architect of the policy.

When published in Britain and Germany, Bacque's book caused predictable controversy, and it's likely to be the same when it comes out next month in the U.S. Because it slams Ike, there was difficulty finding a publisher.

Somewhere along the line, CBC's *Fifth Estate* contracted Bacque to do a documentary on his book. Reports are that it has changed direction, and plans to refute the Bacque findings in its program, which is supposed to be aired next Tuesday.

What seems to have become the central issue of the controversy is whether or not Eisenhower so hated Germans that he devised the policy to kill them by neglect.

When I first wrote about the topic in the *Financial Post*, I got a lot of letters from Germans who had survived the policy, and also from former British servicemen (including doctors) who remembered the appalling condition of these prisoners.

To me, whether or not Eisenhower was the main villain is almost irrelevant. The fact is *it happened*, and no amount of coverup, denial, explanation, rationalization can change the reality that our side committed a terrible atrocity.

Terrible photographs show thousands of German soldiers in barbed wire pens without food, water, shelter. Some who tried

to escape were shot. Rations were below subsistence level.

To dismiss the reality by saying unpleasant things happen in war, is not good enough. This was *after* the war.

The Red Cross wasn't allowed to visit these German prisoners. Commissions of inquiry were rejected. The French newspaper *Figaro* reported prisoners like skeletons, death by starvation, men weighing 80 pounds. American officers submitted similar reports of appalling conditions — and were told to mind their own business.

It strikes me that there's a smokescreen under way to focus criticism on Bacque's analysis of Eisenhower, and to ignore the irrefutable evidence of an Allied atrocity.

The fact is, until Bacque no other historian dug into this dark secret of the war.

I have no views on the culpability of Eisenhower. But Bacque has impressive documentation of Ike's dislike of Germans ("the German is a beast," he wrote his wife, Mamie. In another letter he added a footnote: "It's a pity we couldn't have killed more.") Unless these and other references are fabrications, Eisenhower doesn't look very good.

My view is that Ike was not a fighting soldier. He was an administrator. He had a rear echelon attitude toward the enemy — not the front line soldier's, which is more generous, less vindictive. And we aren't talking about Nazis, war criminals or the SS — but the Wehrmacht, ordinary soldiers.

Generals Patton and Bradley, on the other hand, treated prisoners differently when the shooting stopped. They rolled tanks over their weapons, then turned Germans loose to find their own way back home. Hard, but not as brutal as starvation and exposure in a couple of hundred open-air camps whose purpose seems to have been to kill as many German prisoners as possible by neglect.

PETER

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