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## Review of "Hanged in Medicine Hat: Murders in a Nazi Prisoner-of-War Camp, and the Disturbing True Story of Canada's Last Mass Execution" by Nathan M. Greenfield

Andrew Theobald

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Nathan M. Greenfield. *Hanged in Medicine Hat: Murders in a Nazi Prisoner-of-War Camp, and the Disturbing True Story of Canada's Last Mass Execution*. Toronto: Sutherland House, 2022. Pp. 247.

*Hanged in Medicine Hat* reveals the compelling stories of two murders inside Camp 132, which incarcerated German prisoners of war between 1943 and 1946. In both killings, that of Soldat August Plaszek in July 1943 and that of Unteroffizier Karl Lehmann in September 1944, groups of German prisoners of war murdered their comrades for supposed lack of fealty to the Nazi cause. The murders were investigated by the RCMP and, in 1946, tried in Alberta's civilian criminal justice system. Ultimately, five men were executed for their crimes; the four men found guilty of killing Lehmann were hanged along with a child murderer in the Lethbridge Gaol in the early morning hours of 18 December 1946, the last mass execution in Canadian history. While fleshing out the details of these murders and, especially, the subsequent trials, the book's central thesis is that the accused should not have been tried in the civilian justice system, but, since they were serving German military personnel, by Canadian military tribunals.

Greenfield, an experienced historian who has written widely on Canadian prisoners of war in enemy hands,<sup>1</sup> here turns his attention to German prisoners in Canadian custody. The work expands the scope of Canadian prisoner of war camp historical writing, a genre long reliant on David J. Carter's general work, first published in 1980,<sup>2</sup>

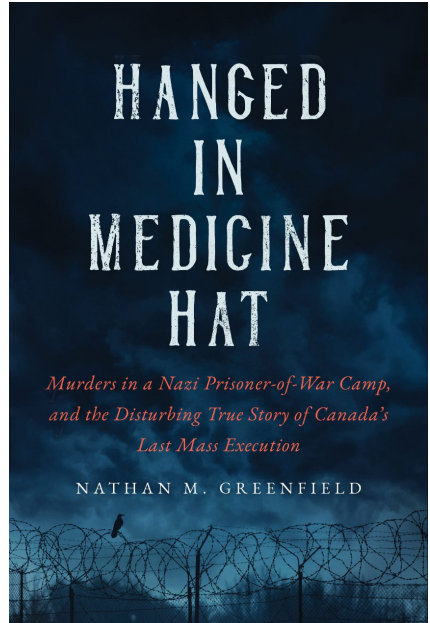
<sup>1</sup> See Nathan M. Greenfield, *The Damned: The Canadians at the Battle of Hong Kong and the POW Experience, 1941-45* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 2010); *The Forgotten: Canadian POWs, Escapers and Evaders in Europe, 1939-45* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 2013); and *The Reckoning: Canadian Prisoners of War in the Great War* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> David J. Carter, *POW – Behind Canadian Barbed Wire: Alien, Refugee and Prisoner of War Camps in Canada, 1914-1946* (Elkwater, AB: Eagle Butte Press, [1980] 1998). See also *The Last Hangman*, directed by Carla Olson (Vancouver: Tuesday Film Company, 2018).

while also being informed by recent scholarship.<sup>3</sup> There is some local colour of interest to Hatters, but *Hanged in Medicine Hat* focuses primarily on courtroom action and will best be enjoyed by readers who appreciate true crime and legal history.

Medicine Hat's Camp 132 and its sister compound, Camp 133 in nearby Lethbridge, were the largest in the country. Camp 132 received its first prisoners of war in May 1943, and incarcerated an incredible 12,500 men at its peak capacity. As the narrative emphasises, many were devoted Nazis from the Afrika Korps who believed that Germany would eventually emerge victorious.

Readers unfamiliar with the workings of prisoner of war camps will be shocked by the amount of power possessed by the prisoners, who essentially ran Camp 132, even dispensing their own warped form of justice via a "Gestapo." As per the 1929 Geneva Convention on Prisoners of War, which Canada scrupulously adhered to, the German prisoners provided their own internal leadership, wore their military uniforms, including decorations, used the "Heil" greeting, and employed the Nazi salute. As the book states, "allowing the soldiers [prisoners of war] to largely control the world within the wire was considered a price worth paying to help keep order" (p. 50). This is certainly correct, but the real motivation behind this was reciprocity, with Canadian prisoner of war policy wholly driven by the fact that there were, until late 1944,



<sup>3</sup> For example: Patrick Brode, *Casual Slaughters and Accidental Judgments: Canadian War Crimes Prosecutions, 1944-1948* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997); Chris Madsen, *Another Kind of Justice: Canadian Military Law from Confederation to Somalia* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1999); Martin F. Auger, *Prisoners of the Home Front: German POWs and 'Enemy Aliens' in Southern Quebec, 1940-46* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2005); Ernest Robert Zimmerman, *The Little Third Reich on Lake Superior: A History of Canadian Internment Camp R* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2015); and Franz-Karl Stanzel, "German Prisoners of War in Canada, 1940-1946: An Autobiography-Based Essay," *Canadian Military History* 27, 2 (2018).

many more Canadians in German captivity than vice versa. In light of the work's vivid evidence of the brutality of Camp 132's "Gestapo," it is truly remarkable that only two murders occurred.

While the Canadian authorities ostensibly made provisions for separating prisoners with divergent opinions about Nazism, in practice they lacked the time, staff or inclination to do much unless something drastic took place.

The two men who were killed were conspicuous outsiders rather than master agitators, victims of the committed fascists they had the misfortune to be locked up with. The first, Soldat August Plaszek, was a 40-year-old veteran of the French Foreign Legion, one of many forcibly integrated into the ranks of the 361st Infantry Regiment after the Fall of France. The camp's "Gestapo" took a dim view of German nationals who had served in the *Légion étrangère*, leading Plaszek to be premeditatedly lynched by a mob who, on 22 July 1943, brutally beat him into unconsciousness with a large rock, and then hanged him for allegedly betraying the Third Reich. The RCMP immediately began investigating Plaszek's killing, but made little headway. In the meantime, the shifting tide of the war only fueled the devotion of Camp 132's Nazis. Indeed, the news of the failed 20 July 1944 attempt to murder Hitler, communicated to the prisoners via clandestine radios, precipitated a vicious internal crackdown that led directly to the September 1944 murder of Unteroffizier Karl Lehmann, a portly 38-year-old Luftwaffe interpreter fluent in English, French and Italian. The second killing sought to expressly demonstrate the camp leadership's unwavering devotion to Nazism in the face of an influx of far less fanatical prisoners captured by the Allies during the Normandy Campaign.

It took Nazi Germany's unconditional surrender in May 1945 for the RCMP to finally break each of the murder cases, and the trials of the accused began in Alberta Provincial Court in 1946. Feldwebel Werner Schwalb was found guilty of Plaszek's murder—he was the only prisoner the authorities could construct a strong case against—and executed at Lethbridge Provincial Gaol on 27 June 1946. His last words were recorded as: "My Führer, I follow thee" (p. 150). Subsequently, Obergefreiter Bruno Perzenowski, Hauptfeldwebel Heinrich Busch, Feldwebel Wilhelm Müller, and Unteroffizier Walter Wolf were found guilty of murdering Lehmann and hanged in December 1946. Strikingly, these men all came from Wehrmacht and Luftwaffe units (three of the four accused in the Lehmann case

were Luftwaffe airmen who had been shot down over Britain in 1941), emphasising the fanaticism present even in so-called “regular” German military units.

*Hanged in Medicine Hat* is strongest on the courtroom drama, as the detailed narrative seeks to buttress the central argument that trials before civilian rather than military courts represented a miscarriage of justice. The reader should expect some déjà vu as the work recounts the individual trials and appeals in chronological order, but the logistics and unique features of the court cases are fascinating and the reader can well imagine the narrative as a frothy TV special.

So, did the Canadian authorities violate the Geneva Convention by trying the prisoners in civilian court rather than before juries of their peers? The crux of this claim is that only military personnel truly understand the requirement to follow orders, which, according to the work, is precisely what the killers were doing when they murdered their comrades in Camp 132. The lawyers for the accused argued the same point, and though the phrase goes unmentioned, the devout Nazis among the German prisoners of war considered themselves bound by *Führerprinzip*, which placed Hitler’s word above all - ergo his command to eliminate “traitors” after the von Stauffenberg plot constituted a military order. Yet even if one supports this argument, the narrative ought to have more closely tested the allegations against the victims. Plaszek, for one, was hardly the subject of any semblance of due process. Likewise, the narrative gives us little sense of whether or not Lehmann was really a “Communist,” as alleged by his killers, the mere rumour that he might have been making it permissible to hang him. Whatever the international legal ramifications of trying these crimes in Alberta’s civilian court system, unquestionably a welcome improvement on the arbitrary and perverse “justice” of the camp’s “Gestapo,” the ethical consequences of ignoring them outright are as stark as can be.

It is certainly telling that, despite long and careful police investigations, the Canadian authorities did not attempt to prosecute the accused until 1946, in the wake of both Nazi Germany’s unconditional surrender and the repatriation of all Canadian prisoners of war. It must also be emphasised that there was no contemporary equivalent to *Führerprinzip* in Canadian law, military or civilian, and there’s no way to know if a tribunal of Canadian soldiers would have rendered more lenient verdicts against German military personnel supposedly following orders; essentially, each reader’s feelings about

the book's jurisdictional argument may well mirror one's personal opinion on capital punishment.

More importantly still, the work would have benefited from a better balance between the specific trials and wider context. The author combed through the trial transcripts, the prisoners' personal correspondence and the Canadian archival records, but the story still swirls around jailhouse rumour and innuendo. The jurisdictional issue is important, but what about the wider relevance of these events, even to other Canadian prisoner of war camps? After all, the only camp in which German prisoners murdered their comrades was Medicine Hat – why might this be? What was unique about Camp 132? While these murders starkly underline the drawbacks of Canadian policy, do they also tell us something notable about devotion to Nazism among prisoners of war? The Canadian authorities might well have erred in trying the Camp 132 murders in civilian courts, but let us not lose sight of why they happened in the first place.

ANDREW THEOBALD, *INDEPENDENT RESEARCHER*