Early Representations of Concentration Camps in Golden Age Comic Books: Graphic Narratives, American Society, and the Holocaust

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INTRODUCTION

The Golden Age of American comic books, lasting roughly from 1938 until 1955, is not only notable for the emergence of superheroes, but also for its confrontation with the USA's ideological enemies. As the Nazis rose to power in Germany and the extent of their terror became known, they frequently appeared in comic books in the later 1930s. By the 1940s German concentration camps found their way into comic books as well: there are more than three dozen Golden Age comic books from between 1940 and 1955 that explicitly depict concentration camps. Although the visual language of some covers of superhero comics, the largest genre at the time, hints at German atrocities committed in concentration camps, however, the camps themselves play a role in only a few stories.

Camp depictions can be found mostly in horror, war, and adventure stories, genres that were on the rise in the early 1950s. Whereas 1955's masterpiece "Master Race" by Al Feldstein and Bernard "Bernie" Krigstein is most commonly referred to as the first US comic depicting Nazi atrocities, it will be the most recent of the works examined in this article. Apart from a few isolated publications that attempt an overview,[1] the depiction of concentration camps in early comic books has mainly been discussed in internet forums or blogs. One outstanding exception is the second chapter of *Comics, the Holocaust and Hiroshima*, published in 2015 by comics scholars Jane L. Chapman, Dan Ellin and Adam Sherif, in which they show how persecution and genocide are dealt with in a sample of wartime Quality Comics publications.[2]

In the following, I will provide an overview of the early stage of concentration camp depictions in comic books, placing them in their historical context, and discussing the key motifs. I will show to what extent the comic book representations of Nazi atrocities and concentration camps correspond with the

[1] Weiner and Fallwell 2011, 465; Palandt 2015.

[2] Chapman et al. 2015, 13–28.

United States' perception of and reaction to what was later to become known as the Holocaust. Furthermore, I will show to what degree the comic books reflect what was known and published in the United States about the extermination of European Jewry at the time. Beforehand, I will make some remarks on the historical context and the terminology used in this article.

CONTEXT REMARKS AND DEFINITIONS

The term "concentration camp" often serves as an umbrella term. However, the Nazi regime had different kinds of camps that could fulfill different functions. The Germans had been using concentration camps as an instrument of terror in the six years before they started the Second World War. The camps were a very effective instrument for the oppression and killing of political opponents and others who did not fit into their concept of the so-called *Volksgemeinschaft*. Among the victims of Nazi oppression and extermination were Jews, Sinti and Roma, homosexuals, political and religious opponents, mentally and physically disabled people, prisoners of war, people of color, and so-called *Asoziale* (anti-socials) – as well as those whom the Nazis had assigned to one of these categories. The various groups of people who were imprisoned did not all receive the same treatment during their internment.

The war eventually created a frame in which a radicalization of already established practices and plans could be expanded and which led to the systematic extermination of European Jewry.[3] This extermination was carried out mainly in the occupied parts of Eastern Europe, where several extermination camps had been established, beginning in 1941. Other camps functioned as forced labor camps, though their main purpose remained the eventual extermination of the prisoners. The interrelationship between the war and the extermination of

[3] The process that led to the Holocaust is, of course, complex and heavily disputed among researchers, as can for instance be seen in the debates between the so called Structuralists and Intentionalists.

European Jewry is not limited to simple co-occurrence, and it becomes even more obvious with a closer look at the perpetrators. Not only the SS, but also various units and personnel of the German military and police took part in the extermination and fought in the war.

When seriously dealing with what is most commonly referred to as the "Holocaust" or "Shoah,"[4] the singularity and the exterminationist dimension of the Nazi's Jewish genocide need to be taken into account, which is why I distinguish it analytically from other German atrocities.

CONCENTRATION CAMP DEPICTIONS UNTIL 1946

After the Nazis came to power in Germany in 1933, they immediately started oppressing political and social enemies, for example in the early concentration camps. As the international media reported on the events in Germany, Nazi politics were reflected in popular culture more and more. By this time, the comic book format was already established in the US, and in the late 1930s, "American comics were full of anti-Nazi imagery, from humor comics to the newly established superhero genre."[5] After the Germans invaded Poland, Nazi villains appeared in increasing numbers in comic stories, many of which feature German dictator Adolf Hitler.[6] Some of the most famous comic book covers of the 1940s show superheroes fighting the Nazis. The cover of *Marvel Mystery Comics #4* (February 1940)[7] shows the Sub-Mariner attacking a German U-boat and the

[4] These terms have been critically discussed since their first appearances. An exemplary critique can be found in Giorgio Agamben's book Remnants of Auschwitz, pp. 28–31. Historian Leon A. Jick offers an overview of the establishment of the term Holocaust in his article "The Holocaust: Its Use and Abuse within the American Public," pp. 301–309.

[5] Murray 2010, 436.

[6] Tillmann Courth, a publicist and specialist in 1950s horror comics, is an expert in depictions of Adolf Hitler in comics. A small selection is presented at: http://www.comicoskop.com/aufmacher/aufmacher-juni-2015-hitler-in-us-comic-books/.

[7] Schomburg 1940.

cover of *Daredevil Comics #1* (July 1941)[8] shows Hitler himself being attacked. Perhaps the best-known example is the first issue of *Captain America* (March 1941)[9] where the protagonist punches Hitler in the jaw. War-related covers, including those portraying concentration camps, were used to "promote sales in a war-conscious market and to communicate a number of war-related messages."[10]

One Superman story even caught the attention of the Nazis in 1940. In the two-page story "How Superman Would End the War" (February 27, 1940),[11] that appeared in *Look* magazine, Superman fights against German troops. He finally takes Hitler and Stalin to a meeting of the League of Nations, where both are pronounced "guilty of modern history's greatest crime – unprovoked aggression against defenseless countries." The April 1940 issue of the SS magazine *Das Schwarze Korps (The Black Corps)* responded with an article that defamed Jerry Siegel, one of Superman's Jewish creators, with vulgar anti-Semitism.[12] Superman kept on fighting on the home front and many comics themselves became part of US war machinery, for instance by promoting war bonds.[13] But the social climate during wartime was very complex. Whereas many people supported the still widespread American isolationism, others saw the necessity of joining the war to fight the Germans and liberate Europe side by side with the British. Furthermore, American historian Francis MacDonnell emphasizes that during wartime many Americans feared that Nazi agents, the so-called Fifth Column, could secretly

[8] Biro and Wood 1941.

[9] Kirby 1941.

[10] Chapman, Hoyles et al. 2015, 111.

[11] Siegel and Shuster 1940.

[12] An English translation of the article can be found at: http://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/superman.htm.

[13] Lund 2016, 117f.

infiltrate and undermine the country, a widespread idea that was also transported into contemporary comic books.[14]

There are hundreds of Golden Age comics that feature Nazis and other members of the Axis, who had become "the main topic of all action-oriented comics."[15] After Pearl Harbor and the mutual declarations of war of the US and Germany in December 1941, the media and comics alike perpetuated the tendency to defame German and Japanese soldiers and civilians.[16] Superhero comics were established as a means of propaganda by depicting contemporary enemies and thereby reflecting reality.[17] Comics, of course, were not the only medium to make the war a topic. They referred to sources of inspiration like "Hollywood films, advertisements, propaganda posters, and political cartoons, all of which employed similar rhetorical strategies and comparable imagery in representing the Nazis."[18] The impact of comics' propagandistic tone on the morale of US soldiers should not be underestimated. One quarter of the magazines shipped to US troops overseas were comic books.[19] According to comic researcher Andreas Knigge, forty-four percent of the 12 million US soldiers read comic books regularly. Another twenty percent read them occasionally.[20]

[14] MacDonnell 1995, 5; Lund 2016, 111ff.

[15] Gabilliet 2010, 22.

[16] Wright 2003, 40ff.; Yanes 2009, 59ff.

[17] Sistig 2002, 18.

[18] Murray 2010, 437.

[19] Chapman, Hoyles et al. 2015, 4.

[20] Knigge 1996, 127.

Whereas comics demonizing and/or mocking Nazis are almost uncountable, concentration camps are rarely mentioned in comic strips[21] and comic books of the early 1940s. There were early mentions, but no visualizations, of camps in several comics. The five-page story "The Defeat of Radolf" (June 1940)[22] is one of the first to depict a concentration camp. The protagonist Neon frees a concentration camp named Rachaw in the country of Dunland, and defeats the dictator Radolf. The names and the imagery make clear that the story is referring to Germany, or *Deutschland* in German, Dachau concentration camp, and the dictator Adolf Hitler. The fact that the US was not yet at war with Germany can be considered a reason for the usage of fictive names in this story.

The rescue of camp prisoners, introduced in "The Defeat of Radolf," is a key motif of the early stories dealing with concentration camps. In an untitled ten-page story that was published in *Blue Ribbon Comics #14* (July 1941),[23] several months before Germany and Italy were officially at war with the US, the superhero Mr. Justice rescues one man and three women from three different camps. Other stories that feature the rescue motif are an untitled The Destroyer story (October 1941);[24] "London" (August 1941);[25] "Death Patrol" (December 1941);[26] "Espionage" (November 1942);[27] an untitled Ghost Story (October 1942);[28] an untitled Wonder

[21] Bernhard Schaffer gives examples of concentration camp depictions in US newspaper strips (Schaffer 1994, 89–91). Further, the Vic Jordan strip featured a story referring to a concentration camp: http://allthingsger.blogspot.de/2014/01/no-laughing-matter.html.

[22] Maroy and Blum. 1940.

[23] Blair and Cooper 1941.

[24] Lee and Binder 1941.

[25] Robinson 1941.

[26] Berg 1941.

[27] Blum, Binder, and Kotzky 1942.

[28] Berg 1942.

Woman story (February–March 1943);[29] an untitled Black Terror story (February 1943);[30] an untitled The Unknown story (March 1943);[31] and "The Heart of the Patriot" (February 1944).[32]

Figure 1. One of the earliest comic book portrayals of a Nazi concentration camp. Davis, Bob, "The Man of Hate," Your Guide Publications, 1941. © public domain.

The already mentioned comic book *Daredevil Comics #1* (July 1941) contains a two-page text story named "Man of Hate" alongside a seven-page graphic biography of German dictator Adolf Hitler, titled "The Man of Hate."[33] Three panels on the third page of the comic story refer to the Nazis' oppression of the intelligentsia and of political opponents. Concentration camps are mentioned in two panels. The concentration camp depiction is remarkable, because it contains

[29] Marston and Peter 1943.

[30] Hughes and Wexler 1943.

[31] Gabriele 1943.

[32] Camy 1944.

[33] Davis 1941.

smoke coming out of the chimneys of a house flying a swastika flag (fig. 1). If the author R. B. S. David did not mean to represent a kitchen or an industrial building, this can be considered a first anticipation of the burning of dead bodies in concentration camp crematoria. Even though killings are not mentioned explicitly, the caption of the following panel says that "the brutality of these camps is unique in all history."

In 1942, several stories were published which featured Nazi atrocities or referred to, but did not depict, Nazi concentration camps, such as "The Amazing Adventures of the Three Shadows" (November 1942),[34] about a Czech, a Pole, and an Austrian who escape from a concentration camp, or "Merchant of Hate" (November 1942),[35] which deals with the destruction of the town of Lidice by the Germans as revenge for the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich. In late 1942 members of the Justice Society fed starving concentration camp prisoners in one of their adventures.[36] In 1943 the aforementioned story in *Wonder Woman* #3 appeared and the superhero The Unknown visited "the notorious Nazi concentration camp at Dachau," in order to rescue a French prisoner in *National Comics* #30 (March 1943). Nazi atrocities are not shown explicitly in this story, but the camp is called a "horror camp." The camp is made of bricks, resembling a medieval castle. This comic stands out because of its depiction of cattle cars transporting prisoners to the Dachau camp, which shows that by 1943, at the latest, the deportation of Nazi victims had found its way into comics. A short time after D-Day, the three-page story "Photo Fighter" appeared in *True Comics* #37 (July 1944).[37] The comic portrayed American war photographer Thérèse Bonney and showed her visiting a concentration camp. In the educational comic

[34] Koda 1942.

[35] Burlockoff 1942.

[36] Fox and Sherman 1942.

[37] Unknown author 1944a.

"There Are No Master Races!" (September–October 1944),[38] German anti-Semitism was dealt with in a simplistic way over two panels, but Nazi atrocities were not mentioned.

During the war, there were not only comic book stories dealing with the camps, but several covers on which concentration camps were represented but then did not appear in the actual stories. The cover of *Mystic Comics* #10 (August 1942)[39] shows The Destroyer fighting men of the German *Sturmabteilung* (Stormtroopers), and a sign on a wall reads: "Concentration Camp No. 5." As on the cover of *Mystic Comics* #6 (October 1941),[40] the camp features thick walls, reminiscent of castles or fortresses. The cover of *Real Life Comics* #3 (March 1942)[41] features a small depiction of a concentration camp, next to an angry looking Adolf Hitler, firing a gun and holding a skull. Probably one of the most famous and most explicit examples of a depiction of Nazi atrocities on a comic cover during the war is issue #46 of *Captain America* (April 1945).[42] On it, you can see German soldiers in the process of putting a man into the oven of a crematorium. The feet of the next victim on a stretcher following the first, and the bones lying around the room, evoke the impression that corpses are being cremated here continuously. The man is marked with a red tag around his neck, as are several men and women who are waiting in line in the background. Although the tags could be read as signaling their Jewishness, their identity is not made explicit on the cover.

[38] Unknown author 1944b.

[39] Gabriele 1942.

[40] Schomburg 1941.

[41] Unknown author 1942.

[42] Schomburg 1945.

One explicit reference to the Jewish identity of Nazi victims can be found in "Lest We Forget," a two-page text story[43] illustrated with two pictures, that appeared in November 1945 in *Real Life Comics* #26.[44] Speaking about the time of his military service in Germany, the narrator refers to sights that "are not fit for human eyes," in which "Jews and other non-Aryans" were the victims.

Since wartime depictions of Nazi atrocities were not limited to the United States, it might be noteworthy that there are examples from Europe in which the Jewish identity of victims plays at least a small role. The first one, "Mickey au camp de Gurs" (Mickey in the Gurs Camp) (1942) by Horst Rosenthal, shows Disney's famous character Mickey Mouse in the Gurs internment camp. It reflects the personal experience of Rosenthal, an imprisoned Jew, but without foregrounding his ancestry. Rosenthal's work was discovered decades after he was killed in Auschwitz. The second is the fable-like story "La bête est morte!" (The Beast is Dead) (1944/1945), by Victor Dancette, Jacques Zimmermann, and Edmond François Calvo, and published by Editions G.P, which shows the shooting and deportation of French Jews in two pictures.[45] These two remarkable examples stand in contrast to wartime comics in the US. The victims in US comics were – if their identities were revealed at all – political opponents, part of the intelligentsia or the resistance. For example, in "The Defeat of Radolf" the focus is on victims who were "some of the greatest minds" and "men of genius." If the victim's nationalities are mentioned, they are German or French.

Given that countless comics were released between 1939 and 1945, appearances of concentration camps are remarkably rare. By the end of the war, the first phase of superhero comics waned, as other genres ruled the comics market. Superheroes did not continue to fly to concentration camps and rescue people, as Wonder

[43] Text stories had been a common feature of Golden Age comic books in order to take advantage of magazine postal rates. Artists often wrote these stories under a pseudonym.

[44] Alexander 1945.

[45] On Rosenthal's work see Rosenberg 2002; on Calvo's work see Sistig 2002, 64–67 and Ribbens 2010, 18–26.

Woman, Mr. Justice, or The Unknown had done. After the liberation of several camps had started to make the magnitude of Nazi atrocities known, two references to extermination camps occurred: the cover of *Captain America* #46 and the text story "Lest We Forget," which can be read as immediate reactions to the liberation of concentration camps by Allied troops. Only a few months after the end of the war, the eighteen-page story "The Golem" (July–September 1946)[46] offers the first known visual depiction of Jewish victims of the Nazis in Golden Age comic books. The action-driven story is set in 1944, during a Nazi raid in the Ghetto of Prague. The creators Joe Kubert and Bob Bernstein focus on hatred and violence against Jews from the very beginning of the story. In the third panel a German officer commands: "Enter every house. And **Kill Every Jew** you find!" and the first caption on the second page reads: "The Nazis were bent on wholesale extermination…" Some Jews are eventually rescued by an American whose plane has crashed in the Ghetto. Most of the following story is a narrated flashback about Rabbi Loew and the Golem he allegedly created in the Prague of the 16th century in order to fight anti-Semitism. In the end, the story of the Golem and the Allied struggle against the Germans are paralleled. The story is entirely devoted to the fate of European Jewry, without referring to concentration camps.

As noted, the camps' inmates in most comics before 1946 were predominantly political opponents and resistance members, and the camps themselves were depicted more or less like POW camps or prisons.[47] Wartime comics were hardly able to even fathom what really happened inside the camps. I have presented a few notable examples, in which the depicted architecture bears a certain similarity to Gothic castles or US prisons of the era. Although few camps actually had similar appearances,[48] this tells us how little the artists knew about the

[46] Kubert and Bernstein 1946.

[47] Klaus Nordling's "Shot & Shell" (December 1941) from *Military Comics #5* is a revealing example, with uniformed Allied inmates behind barbed wire.

[48] Mauthausen for example, or the so called *kleine Festung* (little fortress) in Theresienstadt.

camps and how they functioned. Regarding the depiction of Germans during wartime, "much of the imagery, especially in Timely comics, was drawn from horror films. For some reason Nazi strongholds were invariably gothic castles, and they employed medieval torture methods on helpless victims."[49] This imagery would play a more prominent role in a new genre in the postwar years.

HORROR COMICS

It would be several years after the end of the war until comics attended to Nazi atrocities again. In the early 1950s horror comics made their depictions of torture methods more explicit than they had been in the war years, due to the inner logic of the horror genre and the available information and rumors about Nazi atrocities that had spread since the liberation of the camps. The artists added phantasmagorical elements like zombies or walking skeletons to their stories. Many of the examined horror comics include items made of human skin. Lampshades are depicted most often, but gloves and boots appear as well. Ralf Palandt, an expert on the depiction of Nazism in comics, has argued that those depictions most likely refer to media reports about Ilse Koch, who was married to the commandant of Buchenwald concentration camp. Many people believed, and still believe, that she had lampshades of camp prisoner's skin made for her amusement. There have been several charges against her, which have attracted much attention in US media.[50] The depiction of items made of human skin fulfilled one of horror comics' major objectives: it shocked and thrilled readers, as did the references to Nazi atrocities in general, and this helped to make the comic books financially successful.

Against the backdrop of media reports, Nazi atrocities were exploited to make the thrills appear as if they were based on historical fact. The stories about

[49] Murray 2010, 438.

[50] Palandt 2015.

concentration camps appeared amidst fantastic horror stories and largely shared their lurid narrative style and frequent depictions of the undead. In many stories, undead concentration camp prisoners haunt and torture former tormentors or their family members. The motif of revenge taken by prisoner's revenants can be found in "The Torture Room" (June 1951);[51] "The Devil's Due" (December 1951);[52] "A Gravedigger's Terror" (December 1952);[53] "Corpses of the Jury" (January 1953);[54] "The Tattooed Heart!" (March 1953);[55] "The Butcher of Wulfhausen" (July 1953);[56] "Out of the Grave" (September 1953);[57] "The Torture Master" (November 1953);[58] "The Dead Remember" (January 1954);[59] "Terror of the Stolen Legs" (June 1954);[60] and "The Living Dead" (October 1954).[61] The depicted Germans appear as cruel torturers or mad scientists; ideological motivation is disguised in most stories. The perpetrators are frequently described as monsters, sadists, torture masters or devils. Several panels in "The Face of Terror," from *Weird Chills #2* (September 1954),[62] a series that was well-known for its vulgar imagery, depict the torture of naked concentration camp prisoners.

[51] Rico 1951.

[52] Unknown author 1951.

[53] Unknown author 1952.

[54] Unknown author 1953a.

[55] Unknown author 1953b.

[56] Kweskin 1953a.

[57] Roche 1953.

[58] Heath 1953.

[59] Blummer 1954.

[60] Altman 1954.

[61] D'Agostino 1954.

[62] Unknown author 1954.

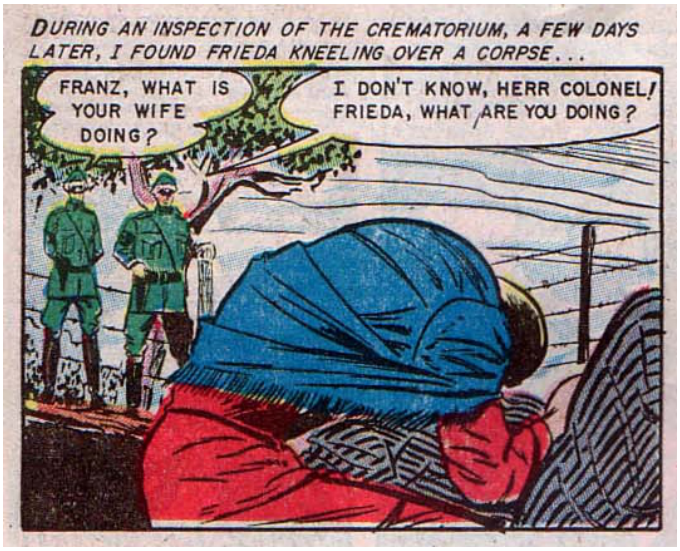

Figure 2. Nazi vampire Frieda sucking the blood of a concentration camp prisoner. Unknown author, "A Gravedigger's Terror," Story Comics, 1952. © public domain.

Horror comics rarely mention victims' identities. Whenever identity is made explicit, the victims are part of some resistance against the Germans. Most women in the horror stories are either portrayed as sadistic instigators or objects of the desires of male protagonists. In "A Gravedigger's Terror," a woman becomes a guard at a concentration camp. The story reveals the true cause of her cruelty: it is not her political beliefs but the fact that she is a vampire, longing for prisoners' blood (fig. 2).[63] "Corpses of the Jury" portrays a nameless woman who refuses to flirt with a Nazi commandant and is murdered. Her ghost takes revenge and orders other ghosts to skin the commandant alive.[64]

These stories can be read as examples of the dialectical relationship which many horror comics offer. The comics use Nazi crimes as a reference that guarantees authenticity, because of its historicity and at the same time they offer a reading that mystifies the Holocaust and places it in the phantasmagorical sphere. Apart from the depiction of sexually explicit content, horror comics partly anticipated

[63] Unknown author 1952.

[64] Unknown author. 1953b.

what is nowadays known as the exploitation of National Socialism, or Nazisploitation.[65] Since the 1960s Nazisploitation has spread more and more throughout several media like film, comics and, most recently, computer games.[66]

ADVENTURE AND WAR COMICS

Figure 3. The first depiction of a gas chamber in comic book history. Napoli, Vince, "Escape from Maidenek," Youthful Magazines, 1952. © public domain.

In contrast to horror comics, adventure and war comics dealing with Nazi atrocities did not use phantasmagorical elements. The first known example of an adventure story that includes Nazi atrocities is "Escape from Maidenek" (April

[65] The combination of Nazi exploitation and sexually explicit content in comics grew more frequent in the 1970s. As with Nazi exploitation films, most early comics of this type, like *HESSA*, originated in Italy.

[66] Whereas most research on Nazisploitation focuses on film, Craig This has examined the revival of Nazisploitation in superhero comics after 9/11 (This 2012).

1952)[67] by Vince Napoli, in which Eli Panyck, a fictive Polish political prisoner, manages to escape Maidanek extermination camp.[68] The caption in the first panel after the splash speaks of "living corpses." Similar to the visual depiction of Nazi victims in horror comics, this can be read as an analogy to the trope of the "Muselmann," a term that was used in many survivors' testimonies to refer to camp inmates who were on the brink of death.[69] The story's realistic drawing style, its pale colors, and its use of shadows create a very intense reading experience. After turning the second page the reader is confronted with the inside view of a gas chamber, where corpses are scattered across the floor (fig. 3). The third page is dominated by depictions of corpses and a German guard. Against the backdrop of these more serious, historically contextualized panels, the end of the story, in which the protagonist escapes by crawling underneath an electric fence, appears implausible.

But the inclusion of scenes depicting the transportation and burial of dead extermination camp prisoners by other prisoners in a comic as early as 1952 makes "Escape from Maidenek" a remarkable work. It is perhaps the first comic to depict the interior of a gas chamber and the work of the *Sonderkommando* (Special Detachment) – prisoners who were forced to assist in the extermination of other prisoners. The story provides the reader with a brief picture of the workings of an extermination camp, but it ignores the important historical reality that a *Sonderkommando* usually consisted of Jewish prisoners.

The war story "Desert Fox!" (November–December 1951)[70] by Harvey Kurtzman and Wallace Wood is about Erwin Rommel, one of Germany best-known officers.

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[67] Napoli 1952.

[68] The spelling Majdanek is more frequent. Because Majdanek belonged to the city of Lublin, the camp's official name was K.L. (*Konzentrationslager*) Lublin.

[69] Sofsky 1993, 229ff.

[70] Kurtzman and Wood 1953.

In the first five pages, Rommel's military operations in Africa are shown and the story "keeps switching between scenes of his military prowess and scenes of Nazi atrocities."[71] Then, abruptly, the last panel on the fifth page shows the piled-up corpses of German concentration camp inmates. This starts a series of eleven panels confronting the reader with depictions of Nazi victims, accompanied by captions that further underscore Nazi brutality. The portrayed victims are said to be of various backgrounds: there is a partisan, a POW, an intellectual, among others. The third panel's caption exclaims, "Look! A Jew! This man was put on a methodical program of **starvation!**" The picture shows a naked, haggard corpse with an open mouth amidst other corpses. Another panel presents another Jewish victim who "was used in a scientific experiment and **frozen to death!**"

There are only two other known war comics of the early 1950s that deal with German concentration camps in detail. The first one is "City of Slaves" (February 1953),[72] which appeared in *Battlefield* #8. Comic artist and war veteran Sam Kweskin drew the story and it is very likely that he scripted it himself, or at least contributed to the writing process. The intense splash panel depicts three prisoners standing behind barbed wire. The comic is told from the perspective of a Frenchman named Allan, who is surprised by the German assault on France in May 1940 and brought to Dachau concentration camp for unknown reasons. The third panel on the third page shows the interior of a boxcar on the way to the Dachau camp (fig. 4). The desperation of the men and women is portrayed with an intensification of the already prominent use of shadows and black ink. Upon Allan's arrival at the camp there is black smoke in the sky, billowing from a chimney inside the camp. Kweskin has a prisoner refer to the pressure chamber experiments that were carried out at the camp. The comic references images that became well-known after the camp's liberation, in which corpses are piled inside boxcars. In contrast to the imagery, Allan draws hope from his thoughts of a

[71] Bacon 2010, 98.

[72] Kweskin 1953b.

vengeance that will make the Germans "choke on the world they are trying to swallow." The mood eventually changes when Allied bombers break through the clouds of smoke and the camp the prisoners start an uprising, before uniting with American liberators.[73] The final panel shows a prisoner, presumably Allan, in the striped prisoner's outfit. He is kneeling on the floor, in the center of a spotlight. Looking to the sky he says, "Thank the Lord! It is over now! The living must avenge the dead! It is for us to make a new world where the dignity of man is upheld!"

Figure 4. The deportation to the concentration camp in Dachau. Kweskin, Sam, "City of Slaves," Marvel Comics, 2011 (1953). © Marvel Comics.

[73] Kweskin provides us with his own more dramatic and action-driven version of the liberation, in which the prisoners play an active role, and which differs from the historic events (Marcuse 2001, 50f.).

Here, Kweskin's version of revenge apparently differs from the revenge-driven zombies that dominate the depiction of concentration camps in horror stories.[74] Comics historian Michael Vassallo, who was a friend of Kweskin, states that the subject matter of "City of Slaves" was "very personal to Kweskin, who had Polish Jewish ancestry on his mother's side and had served in WWII with the 83rd Chemical Mortar Battalion."[75] Kweskin's unit was involved in the liberation of Dachau.[76] Although it deviates from the chronology of and events surrounding the camp's liberation, "City of Slaves" reflects the experiences of Kweskin and his comrades during the last days of the Second World War, which makes his work dealing with Nazi atrocities even more noteworthy. Nevertheless, in "City of Slaves," Kweskin tells the story of a Frenchman who is brought to a German concentration camp – despite his own Jewish ancestry and his firsthand knowledge about Dachau concentration camp and the Jewish catastrophe.

The next relevant story is "Atrocity Story," which appeared in *Battlefield #2* (June 1952).[77] The story was written by Hank Chapman and penciled by Paul Reinman. Chapman was a former sergeant in the Second World War. The Dutch comic historian and expert on Hank Chapman's work, Ger Apeldoorn, claims that "he was not a liberal, he had lived through a war and knew how necessary it could be. But he also knew how terrible it could be and by showing that he may have made the most anti-war and off-putting comics of this time."[78] Reinman was a German Jew who became involved with the comic industry shortly after he had escaped to the US in 1934. According to the Israeli journalist Gideon Remez, Reinman had

[74] This contrasts with "The Butcher of Wulfhausen," in which Kweskin himself adopts the idea of revenge which dominates the aforementioned stories and which can be read as a typical example of anticommunist instrumentalization of the Holocaust, through the equalization of National Socialism and communism.

[75] Vassallo 2013.

[76] Email from Michael Vassallo to the author, February 2, 2016.

[77] Chapman and Reinman 1952.

[78] Apeldoorn 2015.

worked as a designer and painter in Germany, and some of his drawings had been related to Jewish culture.[79] His relationship to his Jewish ancestry is reflected in "An Army is Born" (February 1953),[80] a six-page story about a battle fought in the First Israeli–Arab War.

With "Atrocity Story" Reinman and Chapman created an intense comic featuring a playful use of perspective and a newsreel style that abstains from a conventional plot or conventional narration. The exposition of different crimes is accompanied only by brief captions. Suggestive questions and an overwhelmingly explicit depiction of cruelty add to the propagandistic style of the comic. It reports on alleged atrocities of North Koreans during the Korean War, starting with a splash page showing dead US soldiers. On the fourth page the narrator asks the reader to imagine what would have happened if the atrocities had taken place in the United States. The next two pages show Nazi atrocities, their impact on the victims, the hanging of German perpetrators in Nuremberg, and public perception of Nazi atrocities in the US. The final page deals with the Korean War again and closes with an open question about how to end it. German atrocities are framed by those attributed to the North Koreans and the captions conflate both, offering a visualization of the idea of totalitarianism. Similar to "The Butcher of Wulfhausen" by Sam Kweskin, "Atrocity Story" is a prime example of disparaging communism by comparing it to Nazism.

Kweskin and Reinman, both of Jewish ancestry, instrumentalized the portrayal of concentration camps in the context of the Cold War.[81] Their stories appeared in a time when the widespread anti-Semitism in US society often associated Jews with

[79] Remez 2012.

[80] Reinman 1952.

[81] Among the countless scholarly works about comics and the Cold War, the anthology York and York 2012 offers a good overview of the variety of topics depicted.

communism.[82] By speaking out actively against communism in the post-war era, many Jews tried to avoid being targeted with anti-Semitism and to prove that they conformed to the prevailing political beliefs. Similar to what historian Peter Novick writes about Jewish Americans in the early Cold War, a motivation for Jewish artists to introduce totalitarianism into comics could have been the "fear of seeming to confirm a less ancient but potentially more threatening stereotype."[83]

THE GOLDEN AGE ENDS – "MASTER RACE"

Figure 5. One of the few references to Jewish victims in Golden Age comic books. Krigstein, Bernard, "Master Race," EC Comics, 1955. © William M. Gaines, Agent, Inc.

[82] Dinnerstein 1994, 118f.

[83] Novick 1999, 92

The last Golden Age comic story that features and visualizes Jewish victims is "Master Race."[84] It appeared in the first issue of *Impact* magazine (April 1955). It was written by Al Feldstein, a leading figure in Entertaining Comics (EC), and drawn by Bernard Krigstein. Krigstein demanded twelve pages, unusual for the time, but in the end was permitted to draw eight.[85] The story is about Carl Reissmann, who is haunted by memories of his past in Nazi Germany. He runs into a man on the subway. It is left unclear who is the victim and who is the perpetrator for several pages. A three-page flashback refers to the history of the Third Reich, presenting concentration camps as well as a lampshade made of human skin. Eventually, on the second to last page, Reissmann's identity as the former commandant of Belsen concentration camp is revealed. The story does not disclose whether the man he sees is really his victim or if the encounter only occurs in his imagination. Driven by anxiety and haunted by his perceived former victim, Reissmann falls in front of a train and dies.

"Master Race" refers to trauma and offers more depth than the superhero comics or the revenge-driven horror comics. German comic historian Martin Frenzel emphasizes that the train as a symbol for the Holocaust plays an important role throughout the story.[86] Although it is often misread as referring to the Holocaust, "Master Race" explicitly refers to the Jewishness of Nazi victims in only one panel, where shop windows are smashed and a man marked with a Star of David is beaten by Germans in Nazi uniforms (fig. 5). This panel is situated next to the burning of books and the oppression of other Nazi victims, who are referred to as the protagonist's countrymen. The flashbacks of "Master Race" depict a large variety of Nazi atrocities without singling out any particular group of victims.

[84] Feldstein and Krigstein 1955.

[85] Sadowski 2002, 177ff.

[86] Frenzel 2011, 273.

Nevertheless, the story is the best-known early thematization of Nazi atrocities in comics.[87]

The first wave of comics depicting concentration camps and the Holocaust abated around the time when Bernie Krigstein's ground-breaking story was published. By the second half of 1954 comic publishers formed the Comics Magazine Association of America (CMAA). This led to a "set of regulatory guidelines primarily concerned with sex, violence and language drawn up by publishers and enforced by the 'code authority,' a euphemism for the censor employed by the publishers."[88] Effects of the so-called "Comics Code" made it impossible for crime and horror comics to continue with their use of language and explicit expressions of violence. Since camps were previously depicted primarily in horror comics, the number of such appearances decreased accordingly.[89]

GOLDEN AGE COMICS AND THE HOLOCAUST

In the documentary *Comic Book Heroes Unmasked*, Will Eisner claims retrospectively that comic book artists remained silent about the Holocaust, because they felt that the "audience wouldn't be interested in that, they wouldn't understand it."[90] In the foreword to his fictional Holocaust memoir *Yossel: April 19,1943* Joe Kubert writes that during wartime he considered the stories about the events in Europe to be "[h]orrible fairy tales," which he only believed after the

[87] Krigstein's work is seen as a masterpiece in comic book history because of its style rather than its content. John Benson, David Kasakove, and Art Spiegelman, creator of *Maus*, offer a detailed analysis in *Squa Tront #6* in 1975. Most works on the Holocaust in sequential art refer to "Master Race" in some way. The story has even found its way into other media, like Howard Jacobson's 2008 novel *Kalooki Nights*.

[88] Nyberg 1998, I.

[89] Palandt 2015.

[90] Quoted after Yanes 2009, 62.

war.[91] Considering this retrospective statement, it is remarkable that Kubert drew "The Golem" in 1946, as an immediate reaction to the Jewish catastrophe. Unfortunately, there are no statements known in which Golden Age artists explicitly talk about their motivations for employing concentration camps in their stories. In fact, little is known about most of these Golden Age artists in general. At a 1972 EC fan convention publisher Bill Gaines and Al Feldstein, who was responsible for the story of "Master Race," were asked about the sources for their ideas. Feldstein replied that he and Gaines published "what we called 'preachy' stories – our own term for a story that had some sort of a plea to improve our social standards."[92]

Ralf Palandt considers "Master Race" one of those "preachy stories" that were supposed to be more than mere entertainment.[93] Referring to the Jewish heritage of Feldstein, Gaines, and Krigstein, writer and poet Martin Jukovsky writes in his foreword to a 1988 reprint of "Master Race," that "American Jews were most conscious of what the Nazis had done, and it is perhaps no coincidence that the artist, editor, and publisher involved in 'Master Race' were all Jews."[94] Indeed, it appears to be the case that Jewish comic artists were more likely to know about the annihilation of Jews in Europe.[95] However, "Master Race" cannot be considered a story dedicated to the fate of European Jewry, since the Jewish dimension of the atrocities is only mentioned in passing, occupying at most only one panel. This corresponds with Novick's claim that "there was nothing about

[91] Kubert and Carlsson 2011.

[92] Benson 1978, 22.

[93] Palandt 2015.

[94] Jukovsky 1988.

[95] Although individual knowledge and concern cannot be retraced, there were a variety of avenues by which Jewish Americans might have acquired special knowledge of the events in Europe. Some lost family members and friends during the catastrophe. News and rumors spread among colleagues, friends and family members. Since 1942, the American Jewish press was full of reports about the fate of European Jewry and parts of the heterogeneous Jewish communities in the United States tried to raise awareness of the fate of Jews in Europe (Wyman 2007, 24).

the reporting on the liberation of the camps that treated Jews as more than *among* the victims of the Nazis; nothing that suggested the camps were emblematic of anything other than Nazi barbarism in general."[96] The text story "Lest We Forget" and the comic "Desert Fox" both function in a similar way, as Jews are said and shown to be among the victims, but are not pointed out prominently. "The Golem" by Bernstein and Kubert is an outstanding exception, as the fate of Jews is the center of the story. All of the other Golden Age comic books, some of whose artists were also Jewish, were completely silent about the Jewish catastrophe. Referring to the depiction of Nazi victims in Paul Reinman's "Atrocity Story," Israeli journalist Gideon Remez states that "the Jewish identity of most victims is never mentioned."[97] His observation is also true for the other early stories to depict concentration camps, aside from the aforementioned exceptions.

Additionally, hardly any of the depicted camps are extermination camps. In "Escape from Maidenek," where an extermination camp is shown, the Jewish dimension does not play any role whatsoever. Auschwitz, the camp that has become synonymous with the Holocaust,[98] is not even mentioned in early concentration camp portrayals in comics. Not surprisingly, the camps mentioned are mostly camps that were liberated by the British or US armies. Before 1955, Bergen-Belsen, Dachau, and Mauthausen are the places that are mentioned most often in the comics.

To explain the United States comics artists' silence about the Holocaust, it is necessary to look at the society in which the comics were written and released. Scholarly research has pointed out that comics can be considered authentic

[96] Novick 1999, 65.

[97] Remez 2012.

[98] Caplan and Wachsmann, 2.

sources that both reflect and influence societies.[99] The presented comics emerged from a social climate in which "the Nazi concentration camp was the most common symbol of the enemy regime, and its archetypal inmate was usually represented as a political oppositionist or member of the resistance."[100] Reports about Nazi atrocities in the 1930s mainly focused on the imprisonment of political enemies in German concentration camps. Little was known about the extermination of European Jewry until late 1942, by which time the so-called *Endlösung* ("final solution") was in full effect. And although more and more information was available after the end of 1942, "in all media and in almost all public pronouncements, there was throughout the war not much awareness of the special fate of the Jews of Europe."[101] Historian David S. Wyman states that "the very popular *March of Time* news series did not touch the extermination issue, nor did the official U.S. War films in the *Why We Fight* series."[102] Film historian Ilan Avisar has shown in his book *Screening the Holocaust* that Hollywood almost completely ignored the Jewish catastrophe, with only rare exceptions.[103] "In the Hollywood version of the camps, which perhaps reached more Americans than any other, it was the dissident or *résistant* who was the exemplary victim."[104] This was the case, for example, in the popular film *The Seventh Cross* (1944), based on the novel of the same name by Anna Seghers.[105]

[99] E.g. Palandt 2015; Gundermann 2007, 88; Chapman, Hoyles et al. 2015, 1ff.

[100] Novick 1999, 26.

[101] Novick 1999, 28.

[102] Wyman 2007, 322.

[103] Avisar 1988, 96f.

[104] Novick 1999, 27.

[105] William Sharp, born Leon Schleifer, of German Jewish ancestry, illustrated text excerpts from the novel in 30 episodes (advertised as "pictorial version") which first appeared in US newspapers in 1942.

Novick states that "little was known with any certainty, and the fragmentary reports reaching the West were often contradictory."[106] And yet, as Deborah Lipstadt convincingly argues in the introduction to her detailed study of how the American press dealt with information about Nazi atrocities, "there was practically no aspect of the Nazi horrors which was not publicly known in some detail long before the camps were opened in 1945."[107] However, many could not or did not want to believe. The reports reminded them of World War I propaganda or they could just not imagine the extermination of a whole people.[108]

But even after the war, when the evidence of extermination could not be denied, the Jewish identity of Nazi victims was rarely mentioned in media and popular culture and it "was congruent with the wartime framing of Nazi atrocities as having been directed, in the main, at political opponents of the Third Reich."[109] Additionally, thriving anti-Semitism was another reason that made huge parts of US society and popular culture ignore the Jewish dimension of Nazi atrocities before and after the war.[110] In response, many Jews remained silent, choosing to highlight their identities as Americans (Ne'eman Arad 2000, 12).[111] In her book *The Americanization of the Holocaust*, historian Hilene Flanzbaum describes the situation in the 1950s as a "culture that prized consensus and assimilation, and whose Jews were notably silent about the genocide in Europe."[112] Consistently,

[106] Novick 1999, 22.

[107] Lipstadt 1986.

[108] Wyman 2007, 27.

[109] Novick 1999, 64. Although books like *After the Holocaust: Challenging the Myth of Silence*, edited by David Cesarani and Eric J. Sundquist, present valuable studies which show the vast variety of early Jewish responses to the Holocaust, the visibility of these cultural products and the focus on Jews as victims outside the Jewish communities were very limited.

[110] Hake 2012, 39; Dinnerstein 1982, 5ff.

[111] Ne'eman Arad 2000, 12.

[112] Flanzbaum 1999, 11.

Jewish and non-Jewish Golden Age comic artists alike were largely silent about the Jewish dimension of Nazi atrocities, the Holocaust.

This silence would last for several years, until in the 1960s and 1970s the Jewish identity of Nazi victims was mentioned intermittently in comic books, reflecting a parallel change of attitude in US society as a whole.[113] Only after Art Spiegelman's in many ways groundbreaking comic *Maus* did the Jewish victims of German atrocities began to appear more frequently in comic books.

CONCLUSION

Concentration camps were first depicted in US comic books in 1940. Only a few stories, as well as comic book covers, depicted concentration camps during wartime, and these representations paralleled contemporary media reports on German atrocities. The stories had a propagandistic tone, decrying Nazism frequently and directly. The camps' portrayal as prisons or castles is an indication of the rudimentary information available to the artists at the time. Protagonists of wartime superhero comics would fly to Germany and rescue prisoners from the camps, but the comics rarely mentioned or showed German atrocities explicitly. In 1945, the year the war ended and reports grew more frequent, extermination camps were referred to on one cover and in one two-page text story. One year later, "The Golem" appeared, which is the only story of the era exclusively dedicated to the fate of European Jewry. The comics of the late 1940s were silent about Nazi atrocities. Only in the early 1950s did horror comics begin to refer to concentration camps, adding phantasmagorical elements like zombies or vampires to the stories. Nevertheless, many artists and writers used and exploited German atrocities in order to thrill their readers and to sell their comics. In many of the horror comics, revenge is a key motif: zombie versions of concentration camp inmates haunt and kill their former tormentors. Besides the horror comics,

[113] Rosenfeld 2011, 77.

there were a few war and adventure comics that depicted concentration camps during the 1950s. Some artists used the reference to concentration camps as a means of propaganda against communism. Further, the stories "Desert Fox" and "Master Race" present Jews as being among a large variety of Nazi victims in a total of three panels. The victims in all of the other stories are, if their identity is revealed at all, political prisoners, members of the resistance or the intelligentsia. The image of concentration camps of the early 1930s, when reports had first spread around the world, still dominated the understanding of Nazi atrocities in comics of the 1940s and 1950s. Extermination camps are rarely mentioned.

Although more than thirty Golden Age comic books featured concentration camps, either on their covers or in a story, there are only three known comic book stories depicting Jews as victims of the Nazis. This trend corresponds with the way in which large parts of US society and media dealt with the extermination of European Jewry. During wartime, as well as into the 1950s, comic books were far from the only medium to refer to German concentration camps but, like the other media, comics generally ignored the Jewish dimension of Nazi politics. The reasons were various and complex. For instance, no political or social advantages were seen in drawing attention to the fate of the Jews, and there were fears that doing so might even provoke increased anti-Semitism. Many people did not believe the news and rumors about the Jewish catastrophe. Besides, for Jews and non-Jews alike, "the murder of European Jewry, insofar as it was understood or acknowledged, was just one among the countless dimensions of a conflict that was consuming the lives of tens of millions around the globe."[114]

The tendency to ignore or downplay the extermination of European Jewry in comics corresponds to tendencies present in the society at large. Golden Age comic book stories were a reflection of the dominant contemporary understanding of Nazi concentration camps and victims in US society, and thus

[114] Novick, 29.

remained almost silent about the Holocaust. Although there were occasionally comics that depicted and referred to German atrocities after the establishment of the "Comics Code," the mid-1950s marked a clear turning point. It would take decades before the depiction of concentration camps and the Holocaust could become more frequent and established.

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