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The War Crimes Investigator

Assignment

The city of Lübeck on the Baltic Sea, north-west Germany, was effectively cut off from the remainder of the Reich when the first reconnaissance troops of the British forces reached the city on the evening of 3 May 1945. For the Gauleiter of Hamburg, Karl Kaufmann, this was the signal to announce the capitulation of the city over the radio; shortly afterwards Hitler’s successor and head of state, Karl Dönitz, decided to discontinue further fighting in the north. In England, Alexander followed the events on the BBC. On the evening of Friday, 4 May, at around 8.30 p.m., he could hardly believe what he heard on the radio, and immediately wrote to his wife: ‘The news is grand. I just heard the news of the surrender of Northwest Germany and Denmark and Holland to General Montgomery’s Army Group. VE day can’t be far off. Admissions have fallen off.’ Yet while the people of Denmark, and indeed elsewhere, went on to the streets to celebrate, Alexander was continuing his research on combat personnel.

Three days later, on Monday, 7 May, reports of Germany’s unconditional surrender were coming over the air force teletype. Work became increasingly impossible for Alexander. Air force crews were setting off 500-pound bombs as firecrackers on fields around the air base while free beer and Scotch were handed out to all officers and enlisted men. The time for collecting research data on flight fatigue was clearly over. Back in America, Alexander’s wife was equally overwhelmed about the news, telling him that it was ‘incredibly wonderful that [the] people of Europe [were] now at peace and that the war is really really over and that countless lives are to be saved and countless people do not have to be hurt. I am very happy tonight and more tomorrow.’ Phyllis wanted to visit a church and thank God for having made this day possible and for all the people who brought it about, including her husband. Coincidentally, Alexander had leave commencing the very moment that the war was over. On 8 May, at 5.30 a.m., he arrived in London, just in time for the VE day celebrations. After more
than two weeks of silence, on 22 May, he described to Phyllis how he had felt: ‘What a day it was! It was like a fourth of July celebration in Squantum, multiplied a thousandfold. I was among the crowd before Buckingham Palace at 11 p.m., staying til 12 ... I stayed in London three days, then went off on my leave to Torquay. When I returned I found most interesting and exciting orders, and I am on my way to carry them out.’

Alexander’s carefully worded notion of the ‘most interesting and exciting orders’ marked the beginning of his war crimes investigations which for the next two months would bring him into contact with almost all of Germany’s leading research institutions and scientific experts. Originally the assignment was scheduled to last no longer than ten to fourteen days. The aim was first and foremost to make a comprehensive assessment of German military neuropsychiatry by interviewing individual researchers, by investigating their methods and techniques, and by assessing (and confiscating) their research data. In short, to evaluate the quality of German medical science, and exploit the results for the Allied military machinery.

In contrast to the efficient exploitation of German science in the operation code-named ‘Paperclip’, planned with military precision and staffed with almost 3000 ‘T-Force-experts’, Allied war crimes investigations were lacking a co-ordinated approach, staff and direction. The investigative machinery was haphazardly organised, fraught with inter-Allied jealousies, and lacklustre political support from many of the national governments. But agents of task force organisations such as the Field Information Agency, Technical (FIAT) or the Combined Intelligence Objectives Sub-Committee (CIOS) which had been established to assess and exploit advances in German science and technology, frequently came across war crimes which lay outside the purview of the original brief. Alexander’s order was likewise limited to the evaluation and exploitation of scientific data and equipment. The chaotic conditions on the ground nonetheless provided considerable independence.

Much has been written on the shortcomings of Allied war crimes investigations, bad preparation and communication, and subsequent results in the denazification programme, including the Nuremberg trials. Underlying such arguments are sometimes counterfactual claims as to what Allied politicians and those in authority should have done, or what they could have done better. Little work, however, has been undertaken on the men on the ground, the ‘foot soldiers’, and their methods of improvisation and informal means of communication. Rather than blocking the investigations, the uncoordinated policy decisions seemed to have produced a ‘controlled vacuum’ which skilled and energetic investigators could fill with their own initiatives and ideas. Far from fulfilling their duty aimlessly in the unstable and constantly changing political situation, investigators like Alexander often showed a large degree of flexibility and ability to improvise. Their