

Pillaged Skulls and Looted Gear: U.S. Trophy Hunting during the Second World War

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Introduction

The collection of items from defeated enemies to keep as war prizes is not a new concept in the United States. From the Civil War to current conflicts in the Middle East, soldiers have acquired various military and civilian goods to keep as prizes of war. (1) During WWII this trophy hunting evolved into the taking of human body parts as forms of trophies. As this only occurred in the Pacific Theater, it can be said that race played a key role in allowing this hunting to occur. The strong belief that the white Anglo-Saxon people of the United States were superior to those deemed "other" played a pivotal role in the treatment of Japanese forces in the Pacific Theater.

Race and Public Opinion

Racism in the United States towards people of Asian descent did not begin with the Japanese, but with large scale attempts to discriminate against those of Chinese ancestry. (2) Though this racism was evident against those of Asian descent, there was no comparative towards those of Western-European descent. With this in mind, it is evident that even before WWII, many Americans held a deep-seated racist ideology towards Asians, and this allowed for the barbaric treatment of the Japanese during the war.

Anti-Asian Sentiment in the United States

The pre-existing Anti-Asian sentiment in the U.S culminated in a development of Anti-Japanese, racially derived, propaganda that dehumanized the Japanese in a way that was not seen when compared to the Germans. As a result, the American soldiers fighting in the Pacific found it appropriate to name the Japanese "Japes," a combination of "Jap" and "ape." (3) The general public was also exposed to this dehumanized propaganda, and as a result, they developed a similar view towards the Japanese. This allowed for the government to pass Executive Order 9066, which allowed for the internment of the Japanese people in the United States. (4)

Public Opinion of Germans

Where public opinion towards the Japanese was largely negative, the public opinion towards the Germans never reached that same level. This can be attributed to the fact that a large majority of the American population was of either German ancestry or European ancestry. (5) As a result, the American population did not see the Germans as others, and instead targeted their resentment towards the Nazis and not the average German. (6) With this distinction in mind, the American people sought material trophies in the European Theater, as opposed to the human body part trophies they sought in the Pacific Theater.



Looting: the Pacific Theater

Warfare in the Pacific Theater

The unrestricted nature of the war in the Pacific is exemplified by the brutal acts which took place at the hands of the Japanese and the Americans. These atrocities were not largely reported in American media as to not dispel the "good guy" ideology Americans held towards themselves.

Beginning the brutality

In the Pacific theater, the GIs, in addition to field gear, would collect "gold teeth, ears, bones, scalps, and skulls" from the dead Japanese soldiers. (7) Numerous accounts of this brutality were recorded in memoirs by soldiers fighting in the Pacific Theater. One Marine, Eugene Sledge, recounts the gruesome act of teeth removal in his memoir when he stated "the Japanese was kicking his feet and thrashing about, the knife point glanced off the tooth and sank deeply into the victim's mouth." (8) The efforts soldiers demonstrated in order to obtain teeth was a precursor to their later efforts in obtaining skulls.

Japanese Trophy skulls

There is extensive evidence that, throughout the course of the Second World War, United States soldiers not only decapitated Japanese dead, but also either boiled or left the head sitting out for ants to clean in order to keep the skull as a trophy. (9)



Often evidence of these barbaric acts were not reported in American media, but photographs of the skulls existed in private collections. Not to say that these skulls did not find their way into main stream media, but rather, it was in a small amount. One such instance was the famous *Life Magazine* photograph that depicted a woman writing a thank you to her boyfriend for a skull he sent home to her. (10)

Some of the photographs in private collections depicted the humorous nature in which soldiers viewed these skulls. This light-hearted approach towards the skulls of the Japanese soldiers highlights the opinion that the Japanese were sub-human and their dead did not deserve the proper treatment that was afforded to other nations dead during the war.



The taking of skulls was not a small level operation, but rather large numbers of skulls were taken as forms of trophies throughout the war. Even with the threat of punishment for engaging in these barbaric acts, they continued to occur throughout the course of the war. (11)

Looting: the European Theater

Background on Looting in Europe

Though there is little-to-no evidence of the taking of skulls in the European Theater, the United States soldiers fighting there did take part in wide-scale looting of the enemy's belongings. Famed war correspondent Ernie Pyle humorously exemplifies this in stating that "Germans fight for glory, their cities and their homes, and the Americans fight for souvenirs." (12)

Looting on the Battlefield

A vast number of soldiers brought back trophies of war and would later tell of their items in memoirs of their experiences. One such case was Pfc. Michael Bilder, an infantryman in Patton's 3rd army, who took pictures with his captured loot after he returned home from the war. (13) Numerous other soldiers would do the same upon their return home because they saw their loot as something to be proud of obtaining.



Even during the war, soldiers would take time to have a picture taken with one of the more sought after items: a Nazi flag. With this item being easily accessible due to their vast number, many soldiers were able to take a flag home as a trophy. (14)

Looting of the Civilian's Homes

While in the Pacific Theater soldiers looted body parts instead of field gear, soldiers in the European theater looted the civilian population's belongings. This can be attributed to the officers setting an example of household looting during the war. Since officers were placed in nicer homes while in Europe, they had access to higher quality items. Couple this with the fact that they could send mail home uncensored, they were able to send home countless civilian items home during the war. (15) Enlisted soldiers would often have to settle for items stored in the cellars of houses. However, in some cases this resulted in the acquisition of priceless art stored there to protect it from the allied bombings of cities. (16) Though the GIs in Europe looted civilian property, they did not stoop to the barbaric levels of the human body part looting that was found in the Pacific.



Lasting Effect and Conclusions



In the aftermath of World War II, soldiers brought home the numerous souvenirs that they acquired throughout their time in the service. Since then, these items have found homes in private collections, museums, research departments, and have in some cases found their way home to their original owners.

Looted Items Today

UC Berkeley houses several Japanese skulls for research purposes. However, there is much scrutiny over this collection as some argue that it is a violation of the Geneva Convention. (17) Many other museums house looted artifacts from the war, most notably the National WWII Museum. (18)



In Conclusion

The racism directed towards people of Asiatic descent allowed American soldiers to justify taking their human remains as trophies. Whereas in the European Theater they targeted only material goods while looting. While whether or not these institutions can ethically keep these items is debatable, there can be no argument that wartime looting will be a continued discussion for years to come.

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