



## “Indescribable Horror”: When Eisenhower Witnessed the Holocaust

*How do we learn about current events?*

*How do we serve as responsible witnesses to history?*

*How do we document the truth for posterity?*

These are questions many of us grapple with throughout our life as major political, social, and economic events occur across the globe. As we consider these questions for ourselves, we can learn from the actions of individuals who came before us.

### BACKGROUND:

American soldiers were unprepared for what they discovered in the [Ohrdruf concentration camp](#) in Germany in April 1945: piles of bodies, walking skeletons on the verge of death and other unspeakable horrors. This shocking discovery prompted Supreme Allied Commander Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower to visit and bear witness to the atrocities himself. He was deeply affected by what he saw — and even then, he anticipated a future when these crimes might be denied.

In this activity, students will learn about Eisenhower’s efforts to document the Holocaust in 1945 and explore the stories of individuals eventually interred at Arlington National Cemetery who bore witness to the atrocities inflicted by the Nazis. Then, students will reflect on lessons they can learn from this history.

### PART I: INTRODUCTORY DISCUSSION

Today we are going to talk about how we share and document current events. Let’s start with some quick brainstorming questions on this topic.

- How do you learn about current events?
  - *Answers may include social media, news on TV, online articles, videos*



- Another part of learning about current events is the trustworthiness of the source. How do you determine who and what to trust?
  - *Answers may include first-hand accounts, videos, photographs, personal relationship and trust with source, well-known reliable news sources*

Let's go back into history to consider World War II. In the 1940s, the internet and smart phones did not exist, and very few people owned televisions.

- How do you think Americans back home learned what was happening during the war?
  - *Answers may include newspaper articles, radio announcements, news stories at the movies, letters from family members serving abroad*
- What about servicemembers themselves? How do you think they learned about the war outside of their specific assignments?
  - *Answers may include from other servicemembers, from commanders, newspaper articles*
  - Often, servicemembers were less informed about the war than their family members back home because they did not get the same news coverage that the American public on the home front received. They were focused on the war activities directly in front of them.

We're now going to watch a webinar about how American military leaders, particularly General Dwight D. Eisenhower, learned first-hand about the Holocaust and their efforts to document it for the public and for history.

## **PART 2: WEBINAR**

As a class, watch the 2025 webinar ["Indescribable Horror": When Eisenhower Witnessed the Holocaust](#), featuring Arlington National Cemetery Senior Historian Dr. Allison Finkelstein. This webinar was conducted in 2025 in honor of the 80<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the liberation of Ohrdruf concentration camp in Germany in 1945. It is 41 minutes and 20 seconds long. If you do not have time to watch the entire webinar, watch the noted sections below. The total length of the eight sections is 24 minutes and 51 seconds.



#	Topic	Start and End Time	Length
1	2025: 80 <sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the End of World War II	40:20 — 41:19	1:00
2	Introduction	00:00 — 02:40	2:40
3	Ohrdruf Liberation and Albin Irzyk	05:00 — 09:25	4:25
4	U.S. Generals Tour Ohrdruf	14:44 — 22:40	7:56
5	Townspeople and U.S. Troops Witness Camp Atrocities	22:40 — 24:22	1:42
6	Eisenhower’s Cable to Marshall	24:22 — 26:06	1:44
7	Creating the Historical Record	31:35 — 34:38	3:03
8	Eisenhower and the World War II Unknown Soldier	36:05 — 38:26	2:21

### **PART 3: CLOSING DISCUSSION**

- Why does it matter that Eisenhower insisted that servicemembers, Congressional leaders, and news reporters witness the evidence of the Holocaust?
- What can we learn from Eisenhower’s response to seeing the atrocities committed at Ohrdruf and other concentration camps?
- Do you agree with Eisenhower that he and other American political and news leaders had an obligation to witness, share, and document the camps?
- What is our obligation to witness, document, and remember what is currently happening in the world?

### **PART 4: LESSON EXTENSIONS**

1. Documenting Ohrdruf
  - a. Explore photographs in the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum’s collection related to the [liberation and documentation of Ohrdruf](#). A selection of these photographs was included in the webinar.
2. Documenting Dachau



- a. On April 29, 1945, American forces liberated Dachau concentration camp. Learn more about [Dachau](#).
  - b. Read Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Marguerite Higgins' [coverage of the liberation](#). Higgins is buried at Arlington National Cemetery in Section 2, Grave 4705-B with her second husband, Lt. Gen. William Evens Hall, U.S. Air Force.
  - c. Explore photographs in the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection related to the [liberation and documentation of Dachau](#).
3. Read selections of the [Congressional report](#) on the atrocities and conditions of concentration camps.
- a. This report is the result of General Eisenhower's request to General Marshall to send a delegation of congressional leaders and news editors to view and document the liberated camps.
  - b. Representative Eduoard Izac co-authored this report. Izac is buried at Arlington National Cemetery in Section 3, Grave 4222-16.
4. Lesson Plan: [Firsthand History](#)
- a. Students will analyze the purpose of primary sources before being introduced to Eddie Willner, a survivor of the Holocaust who is buried at Arlington National Cemetery.
  - b. They will then listen to a portion of an oral history interview he gave to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM). While listening, students will answer questions about the interview and the importance of primary sources.

## **PART 5: INDIVIDUALS FEATURED**

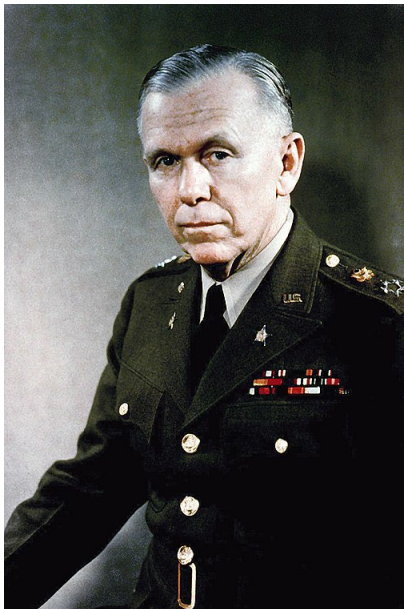
<p><b>General Dwight D. Eisenhower</b></p>	<p>Dwight D. Eisenhower was the 34<sup>th</sup> president of the United States. Eisenhower graduated from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point in 1915 and entered the U.S. Army. During World War II, Eisenhower planned and oversaw multiple crucial military campaigns, including the Allied invasions of North Africa and Sicily and the D-Day invasion of Normandy, France, in 1944. In December 1944,</p>
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President Franklin Roosevelt named Eisenhower the Supreme Allied Commander in Europe. The following year, the Army promoted him to General of the Army, making him one of just nine individuals to ever hold a [five-star rank](#). After the war, he served as the military governor of the American-occupied zone of Germany and as the first supreme commander of NATO. In 1952, Eisenhower successfully ran for president; he served two consecutive terms in the Executive Office.

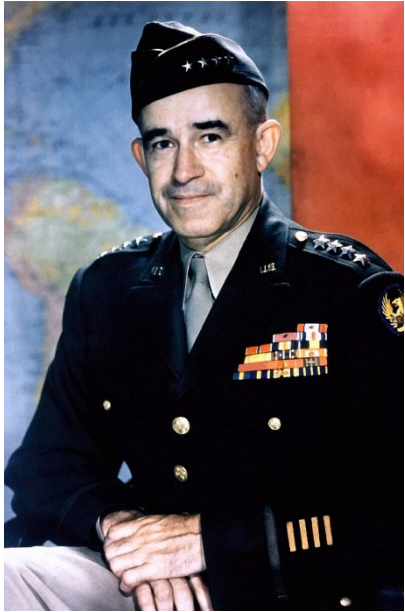
Eisenhower is not buried at Arlington National Cemetery. He is buried at the Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library, Museum and Boyhood Home in Abilene, Kansas.

**General George C. Marshall**



One of the most distinguished military, diplomatic and political leaders of the 20th century, General George C. Marshall served as chief of staff of the U.S. Army during World War II (1939-1945). He directed the largest expansion of the Army in U.S. history, from fewer than 200,000 men before the war to more than eight million, with an unmatched arsenal of modern weapons and equipment. He also played a key role in shaping American military strategy, advocating for an invasion of Nazi-occupied France via the English Channel. On December 16, 1944, Marshall was promoted to General of the Army (five stars), the nation's highest rank. After the war, President Harry Truman appointed him to serve as secretary of state (1947-1949) and later as secretary of defense (1950-1951); he is the only person to have held both positions. Marshall's diplomatic career was as historically significant as his military one. Most notably, he conceived an ambitious, highly successful program for the postwar economic recovery of Western



	<p>Europe — known as the "Marshall Plan" — for which he received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1953.</p> <p>Marshall is buried at Arlington National Cemetery in Section 7, Grave 8198.</p>
<p><b>General Omar Bradley</b></p> 	<p>The last general to attain five-star rank, Gen. Omar Bradley was promoted to General of the Army on Sept. 22, 1950. A West Point graduate, he began World War II with no combat experience; during World War I, he had been assigned to guard copper mines in Montana. By the end of the war, however, Gen. Bradley commanded 43 divisions and 1.3 million men, the largest body of soldiers (at the time) to serve under a U.S. field commander. As senior commander of American ground forces during the 1944 invasion of France, Bradley played a leading role in the Allied victory in Europe. Appointed as Chief of Staff of the Army in 1948, he was the first chairman of the newly-created Joint Chiefs of Staff, serving in that position from 1949 to 1953. In that capacity, he oversaw U.S. strategy in the Korean War and the early Cold War. Nicknamed "the GI's General," Bradley was known for his modesty and his concern for his troops.</p> <p>Bradley is buried at Arlington National Cemetery in Section 30, Grave 428-I-2.</p>
<p><b>Brigadier General Albin Irzyk</b></p>	<p>Albin Irzyk (IRR-zick) was among the Americans service members who liberated Ohrdruf concentration camp. He was born Salem, Massachusetts to Catholic Polish immigrants in 1917. In 1940, he joined the U.S. Army and he served until his retirement in 1971. During World War II, Irzyk participated in the Battle of the Bulge and commanded the battalion that discovered and liberated Ohrdruf. Throughout this life, Irzyk</p>



presented lectures on the Holocaust to share what he saw.

Irzyk is buried at Arlington National Cemetery in Section 60, Grave 11739.

**Lieutenant Commander  
Edouard Izac**




Edouard Victor Michel Izac was the youngest son of Balthazar Izac, an immigrant from the Alsace-Lorraine region of France, and Mathilda Geuth, a first generation German-American.

Izac joined the U.S. Navy after graduating from the U.S. Naval Academy in 1915. During World War I, he was assigned to the troop transport USS Lincoln. In May 1918, as the Lincoln crossed the Atlantic Ocean, a German U-90 submarine torpedoed the ship, and Izac was captured as a prisoner of war.

While being transported aboard the U-90 to a prison in Germany, Izac, who could understand German, listened to the conversations of the submarine's crew. He secretly gathered crucial information on German submarine operations, and he was determined to escape and to share what he had learned with Allied military authorities. On his second escape attempt, he succeeded and escaped to Switzerland. Izac was awarded the Medal of Honor for his bravery. He retired from the Navy in May 1921 due to injuries from his time as a POW.

After his retirement, Izac moved to California and became a journalist. In November 1936, he was



	<p>elected to the U.S. House of Representatives. During his ten years in Congress, he served on the House Naval Affairs Committee and on the U.S. delegation that inspected the concentration camps Dachau, Buchenwald and Dora after they were liberated in 1945. He also co-authored the Congressional report on German concentration camps.</p> <p>Izac is buried at Arlington National Cemetery in Section 3, Grave 4222-16.</p>
<p><b>Marguerite Higgins</b></p> 	<p>Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Marguerite Higgins covered World War II, the Korean War and the Vietnam War. Born to expatriates in Hong Kong, Higgins graduated from the University of California, Berkeley and then received a master's degree in journalism from Columbia University. From 1942 to 1963, she was an international correspondent for the New York Herald Tribune, interviewing numerous world leaders. She received an award for her coverage of the liberation of the Dachau concentration camp in 1945. Higgins was one of the first reporters in Korea after hostilities broke out in 1950, and the only woman reporter on the front lines. She received the Pulitzer for international reporting in 1951. She also wrote a syndicated column for Newsday and several books. While in Vietnam in 1965, Higgins contracted a parasitic disease and died on January 3, 1966, at age 45.</p> <p>Higgins is buried at Arlington National Cemetery in Section 2, Grave 4705-B with her second husband, Lt. Gen. William Evens Hall, U.S. Air Force.</p>



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