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 booted or left the head sitting out for ants to clean in order to keep the skull as a trophy. (9)

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 during the war. The taking of skulls was not a small 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 his memoir 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 Biller, 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 owning.

The GIs in Europe were allowed to justify taking their human remains as trophies. Whereas in the European Theater, the United States soldiers fighting in the Pacific Theater 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)

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 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.

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 memento of their time in Europe. (10)

In Conclusion

The racism directed towards people of Asian 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.