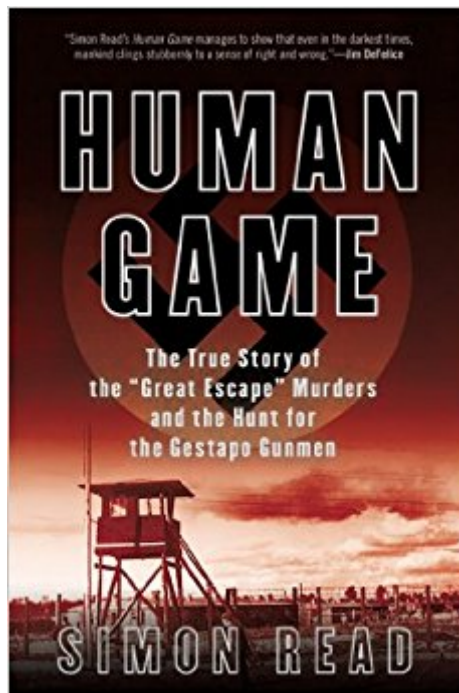




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Human Game: The True Story Of The 'Great Escape' Murders And The Hunt For The Gestapo Gunmen



Synopsis

In March and April of 1944, Gestapo gunmen killed fifty POWs—a brutal act in defiance of international law and the Geneva Conventions. This is the true story of the men who hunted them down. The mass breakout of seventy-six Allied airmen from the infamous Stalag Luft III became one of the greatest tales of World War II, immortalized in the film *The Great Escape*. But where Hollywood's depiction fades to black, another incredible story begins . . . Not long after the escape, fifty of the recaptured airmen were taken to killing fields throughout Germany and shot on the direct orders of Hitler. When the nature of these killings came to light, Churchill's government swore to pursue justice at any cost. A revolving team of military police, led by squadron leader Francis P. McKenna, was dispatched to pick up a trail long gone cold. Amid the chaos of postwar Germany, divided between American, British, French, and Russian occupiers, McKenna led a three-year manhunt that brought twenty-one Gestapo killers to justice. In *Human Game*, Simon Read delivers a clear-eyed and meticulously researched account of this often overlooked saga of hard-won justice. INCLUDES PHOTOS

Book Information

Paperback: 352 pages

Publisher: Dutton Caliber; Reprint edition (October 1, 2013)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0425253708

ISBN-13: 978-0425253700

Product Dimensions: 5.9 x 0.9 x 9 inches

Shipping Weight: 9.9 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.4 out of 5 stars 62 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #652,552 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #54 in [Books > History >](#)

[Military > Prisoners of War](#) #1965 in [Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Politics &](#)

[Government > International & World Politics > European](#) #2130 in [Books > History > Europe > Germany](#)

Customer Reviews

“In the summer of 1945, British investigator Francis McKenna and his team began a trek across post-war Europe to pursue the men who murdered British POWs in cold blood following the famous Great Escape from Stalag Luft III in March 1944. Simon Read details the hunt in a book that is one part detective story and one part morality play, striking themes that will resonate in the

present day. Remarkably, many of the Germans who witnessed or were tangentially involved in the atrocity retained an active sense of guilt and helped the investigators, even when it put them at risk for retribution from both sides. Simon Read has done an impressive job stitching together a highly readable and informative story from various sources, and making it live again. — Jim DeFelice, bestselling author of *Rangers at Dieppe*, *Omar Bradley: General at War*, and *American Sniper* — “A gut-wrenching account of World War II’s Great Escape and its brutal aftermath. Simon Read’s riveting tale of the Royal Air Force’s manhunt for the Gestapo perpetrators of the cold-blooded murder of fifty unarmed Allied escapees will touch your soul and increase your admiration for the Greatest Generation. Whether justice ultimately triumphed over evil can be found in Read’s engrossing narrative.” — Colonel Cole C. Kingseed, USA (Ret.), New York Times bestselling coauthor of *Beyond Band of Brothers* “Fast-paced, clearly written account of how justice was served in a difficult wartime case” — Kirkus

Simon Read was an award-winning journalist before he became a nonfiction author. Read graduated from California State University, Northridge, and he resides in California with his wife and son.

In the early to mid-1970s American Midwest, there was a certain type of motion picture that was bound to appeal to young males such as myself: the Big War Movie. Just like my friends, I never missed the chance to see TV replays of *Kelly’s Heroes*, *The Dirty Dozen*, *The Longest Day*, *The Guns of Navarone* or -- perhaps the greatest of them all -- *The Great Escape*. So fascinated was I by the World War II story of the escape of seventy-six Allied prisoners of war from a German camp, I also read Paul Brickhill’s classic book with the same title. I recall it was the first time I ever experienced the disappointment of seeing some of what made a book so great lost in the translation to the big screen (key point: Steve McQueen’s ultra-hip Cooler Kid character was totally fabricated; there were no American airmen in the North Compound at Stalag Luft III where the tunnels were dug). The movie had big name stars like McQueen, stirring music, epic visuals, and memorable set pieces (such as the Fourth of July celebration that ends in tragedy, yet another complete fabrication), but after reading the book for me it lacked...something. Perhaps it was the grittiness and black humor of camp life as described by Brickhill, the amazing scope of the camp escape committee’s efforts -- hundreds of false documents, maps, compasses and sets of civilian clothes were created by men barely surviving on watery soup and ersatz coffee -- or the ultimate triumph

when three, just three, of the escapees make it to freedom while fifty were summarily executed. When I saw the full title of Simon Read's *Human Game: The True Story of the "Great Escape" Murders and the Hunt for the Gestapo Gunmen*, there was no question I would read the book. Frankly, it came as somewhat of a surprise to me that after the war the British government sanctioned an investigation and pursuit of the men behind the executions; it makes sense but for whatever reason it never occurred to me. *Human Game* tells the often amazing story of an investigation that ended with seventy-two Germans on trial for the murders; twenty-one were executed for their roles. It is an amazing achievement given the circumstances. The crime scenes were unknown, so there was no physical evidence beyond the fifty urns of ashes that had been returned to Stalag Luft III. Large areas of Germany were in ruins from fighting or devastating bombing raids, records had been systematically destroyed, masses of people were displaced, many of the dead were not identified in the final hectic days of the Nazi regime, and many of the suspects -- knowing they would be asked to pay for their crimes -- had melted away by grabbing the identity papers from a nearby corpse or giving a false name to the occupation authorities with the explanation that all their belongings had been destroyed. Making matters harder even than that, the prison camp and the sites for more than half the murders were in the Soviet-controlled zone of occupation, and the alliance between the West and the Soviet Union was quickly hardening into the Cold War. There would be little to no cooperation for the investigators from the Soviets, who had captured some of the key figures in the executions. Still, the British team persevered through hard work and determination, pouring through records, following up on leads, interviewing potential witnesses and cross-checking stories, until ultimately the final minutes of the fifty murdered airmen -- including who was present -- were revealed. One of the interesting features of the book is how the author includes witness statements that contradict as the suspected killers sought to downplay their roles. It demonstrates just how difficult the task was for the investigators, who had no way of knowing how much truth was in any suspect's story. Another interesting section that is certainly relevant in today's world deals with the treatment of Germans suspected of war crimes at the London Cage. Located in three buildings in Kensington Palace Gardens, the Cage was the site of interrogations that included many types of torture including beatings, electrical shock, humiliation, and sleep deprivation. The British were able to keep the Red Cross away from the Cage, and during the trials of the Stalag Luft III killers the commanding officer of the facility is quoted lying under oath about his methods. All in all I highly recommend *Human Game* to anyone interested in the rest of the story of the Great Escape, as well as those interested in true-crime investigations or getting a look at post-war Europe.

Author Simon Read has written an interesting account of British captives who engineered an escape from their Stalag Luft III prison camp and then executed a few at a time by the Germans when captured shortly after. The prisoners didn't know they were to be executed when "taken for a ride" and then were to relieve themselves off the roadway prior to receiving a bullet in the back or in the back of the head. Those involved in the execution claimed they were only following orders and if they didn't do as told they or their family members would pay the price. One executioner, Johannes Post, went out and dined over a fine meal after doing his dark deed. Another part of the book details the efforts to track down those responsible for these cold-blooded murders. The book is 330 pages long but the potential purchaser should be aware the text itself is only 235 pages. The rest is made up of source notes, an index, bibliography, and two appendixes.

Most accounts of the "Great Escape" focus intensely on the drama (and occasional comedy) of the planning, preparation, and actual escape from Luft Stalag III, as well as the atrocious German murder of 50 re-captured escapees, leaving the pursuit of the war criminals as a footnote or epilogue. "Human Game" is different: this is the gripping detective story of how British war crimes investigators tracked down the killers from their various hideouts across Europe, developed their leads, brought them to justice, and rendered what Anthony Eden called "exemplary judgment" against them. It contains a great deal of information about the investigators and their quarry, how the killings were done (not like the movies at all), and how the killers were captured. The story is told extremely well, with energy and power, filling in the gaps, and writing a comprehensive coda to one of the greatest stories of the "war-within-a-war" that was the Prisoner-of-War experience of World War II. Highly recommended.

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