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Kurt Meyer and Canadian Memory Villain and Monster, Hero and Victim or worse – a German?

Peter Kikkert

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Villain and Monster, Hero and Victim or worse – a German?

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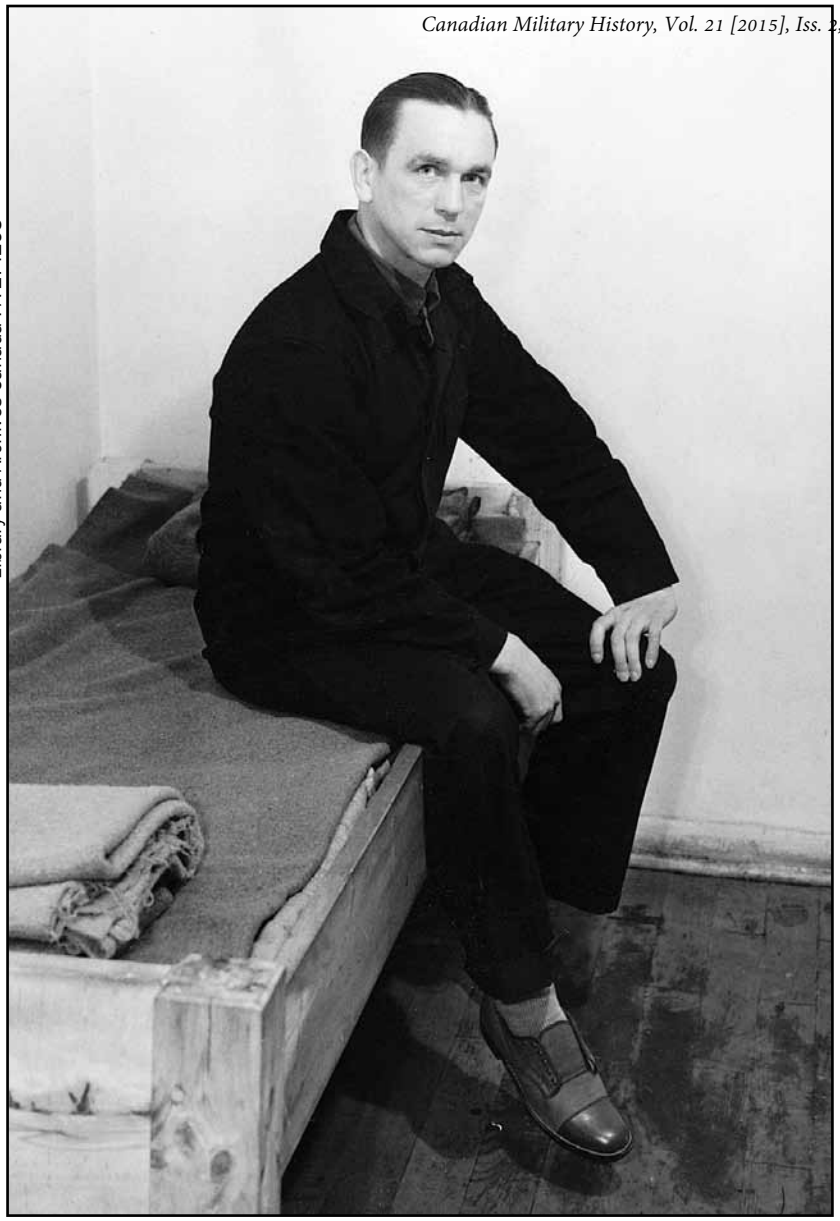
Abstract: The brutal executions of Canadian prisoners of war in Normandy revealed during the war crimes trial of SS Brigadeführer Kurt Meyer in December 1945 elicited an incredibly strong emotional and moral response from Canadians. This article evaluates the public response to the Meyer affair between his trial, his early release from prison and his death in 1961. As the years passed and the world changed, Canadians never forgot about Meyer. Most hated Meyer and saw him as the physical manifestation of the evils of Nazism, but some Canadians defended the general. They argued that his trial was unjust and that Canadians were guilty of the same crimes. The Cold War brought former enemies together and gave new value to the military skills of old Nazis like Meyer. The response to Kurt Meyer remained strong and divided until his death and provides a window through which Canadian perspectives on the world, the war, justice and Germany can be seen.

On 8 June 1944 troops from the 12th SS Hitlerjugend Panzer Division herded seven Canadian soldiers into the ancient Norman courtyard of the Abbaye d'Ardenne and searched them for important documents and rations. Shortly afterwards a tall, blond officer approached the prisoners and started to interrogate them, hoping one would divulge more than the standard name, rank, and serial number.[1] The Canadians refused to answer his questions. The frustrated officer started to taunt the soldiers, sneering at them as he told the group the terrible fate about to befall them. These seven men, prisoners moved far from the heat of battle, would be murdered by their SS captors in contravention of all the rules of war. Told their fate, the young Canadians shook hands with one another, some with tears streaming down their faces, and said their goodbyes.[2] One by one they were led to a small garden and shot in the back of the head, their bodies left in a bloody heap. Witnesses would later describe the soldiers walking to their deaths with their heads held high, in one last act of resolute courage.

On 7 September 1954 a very different scene developed as SS Brigadeführer Kurt Meyer, recently released from a West German prison, travelled back to his home town of Niederkruchten. A crowd of over 5,000 Waffen SS veterans and other sympathizers greeted Meyer, lining the main street to form a triumphant laneway complete with burning torches.[3] The man held responsible for the deaths of the seven murdered Canadians and others like them received a hero's welcome. Although originally sentenced to death by a Canadian military tribunal, Meyer served only nine years in prison. Within a year the old hero of the Third Reich was selling beer to Canadian servicemen stationed in West Germany.

The brutal executions of Canadians that came to light during Kurt Meyer's war crimes trial in December 1945 filled the Canadian public and press with an outrage that remained extremely powerful years afterwards. B.S Macdonald, the prosecuting lawyer in the trial, stated that, "Probably no single event in World War II aroused more widespread and continued interest in Canada than the trial and subsequent treatment of SS Major-General Kurt Meyer."[4] Newspaper stories and editorials, *Maclean's* articles, and personal correspondence all dealt extensively with Meyer's trial, the commutation of his sentence a month later, his 1951 transfer from a Canadian prison to a German one, his release in 1954, and his life as a beer salesman to the Canadian NATO force in Germany.

An examination of the editorials, stories, and private letters written on Meyer provides an important look into public opinion. The fact that the government received enough correspondence on Meyer in 1946 to warrant the creation of 12 standard reply letters to answer various objections to his commutation speaks strongly to the importance of the man to many Canadians.[5] Contemporary newspapers assist the historian in understanding



Library and Archives Canada PA 174293

Kurt Meyer in his cell during his war crimes trial. Aurich, Germany, December 1945.

public perceptions about Meyer because they both reflected and shaped Canadian opinion on the man. Letters to newspapers also provide an important source with which to gauge the feelings of the public.[6] Finally, newspapers present regional perspectives, allowing the historian to see where an event had the most impact. Perhaps one of the most noticeable elements of the Meyer affair, however, is the uniformity of the press responses, both negative and positive, towards the Nazi throughout the country, despite different geographic locations and political leanings.

Although a number of authors have investigated the Kurt Meyer trial and its aftermath, few have written on the response of the press and public to the whole affair. In the 1950s the participants in the trial began to release books and memoirs containing their versions of events, which provided different perspectives on the role the press and public played. In *The Trail of Kurt Meyer*, B.S. Macdonald argued that Canadians were united against the commutation of Meyer's sentence, believing him guilty of war crimes.[7] Kurt Meyer published his memoirs, *Grenadiers*, in 1956 and used Canadian newspaper and magazine articles that supported him to plead his innocence and describe the injustice of his trial.[8] Meyer argued that as time went on and the wounds of war began to heal, many Canadians began to view him as a victim, rather than a perpetrator of murder. In his memoirs, *My Life*, Chris Vokes, the man who commuted Meyer's sentence, also used the press coverage of the trial to defend his decision to commute the death sentence. Vokes argued that Canadians reacted negatively because "most of the crap coming out of the trial from the media had Meyer condemned even before the trial was over."[9]

In their recent works on the Meyer trial, historians Patrick Brode and Howard Margolian both used a small sampling of private correspondence and editorials from the period to claim that Canadians were incensed by the commutation, transfer, and early release of Kurt Meyer. In an historiographical analysis of all the published literature, Whitney Lackenbauer argued that "a critical assessment of the mass of correspondence and newspaper editorials" is still needed.[10] Karen Priestman attempted to meet this challenge in her 2003 MA thesis, and concluded that by the 1950s Meyer had been "forgiven and forgotten" by Canadians.[11] Still, the thesis, like the Brode and Margolian books, made limited use of private correspondence and drew on relatively small samples of newspapers. To argue that Canadians were universally outraged by Meyer or that they eventually forgave him simplifies a complex and intense public reaction.

This article re-evaluates the public response to the Meyer affair. His trial elicited a very strong emotional and moral response from the Canadian press and public. By 1945, Canadians understood that they would play no role in the Nuremburg Trials and the prosecution of the major war criminals. Thus, Meyer

became the manifestation of the evil that Canada had been fighting for six years and his cold and unfeeling face became a symbol of Nazi Germany. His opponents invoked the memory of the murdered soldiers, defended the process by which he had been brought to justice and the fairness of his trial, and warned of the dangers of releasing Meyer back to Germany.

In editorials, news stories, and personal letters about Kurt Meyer spanning the years 1945 to 1961, however, some Canadians defended him. Meyer's supporters argued that his trial violated the core principles of justice for the sake of vengeance and claimed that Canadian soldiers were guilty of the same crimes as Meyer's men. Others, mostly high ranking veterans, were inclined to view Meyer's actions in Normandy as the work of a military genius and refused to hold him responsible for the atrocities committed by his troops. Finally, a number of Canadians argued that Meyer should be released as the threat of communism grew and West Germany became an ally. In the end, the response to Kurt Meyer remained strong and divided throughout the entire affair and provides a window on Canadian perspectives on the world, the war, justice and Germany.

Canada's First War Crimes Trial

As an officer in the elite Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler, Kurt Meyer distinguished himself in combat during the first three years of the war, particularly in the German invasion of the Soviet Union. He quickly rose through the ranks and became well known in Germany for his acts of bravery.[12] On 7 June 1944 Meyer was in command of the 25th SS Panzer Grenadier Regiment of the 12th SS, which opposed the 3rd Canadian Infantry Division's advance inland from Juno Beach after the D-Day landings. In the ensuing days the men of the 12th SS murdered more than 150 Canadians soldiers. Troops directly under Meyer's command were held accountable for killing 55 prisoners on 7 and 8 June, including 18 executed at the regiment's headquarters in the Abbaye d'Ardenne. These murders occurred within 150 metres of Meyer's command post, which he occupied during the killings and from which he easily could have heard the executions.[13] A witness later testified that he heard Meyer order his young soldiers to take no more prisoners during the battle.[14] The evidence indicated that if Meyer had not directly ordered the murders, he had surely known about them and did nothing to stop them.

In December 1945 Canada's first war crimes trial began. On 27 December Meyer was sentenced to death for his role in the murders, only to have his sentence commuted to life imprisonment days later by Major-General Chris Vokes, the senior Canadian officer in Germany. Within months, Meyer was imprisoned in New Brunswick's Dorchester Penitentiary where it seemed he would quietly live out his days.

1946: A Near Unanimous Response

While the press remained relatively quiet during the months leading up to the trial, once the proceedings commenced Meyer became front page news. War correspondents from the Canadian Press and individual newspapers provided Canadians with every detail of the trial, including the arguments of both the prosecution and the defence. The newspapers often presented the gruesome stories of the murdered Canadian prisoners on the front page in emotionally charged articles.[15] Ralph Allen, the correspondent for the *Globe and Mail*, opened one article with the declaration: "A story of sadism and mental torture that sounded like an oriental horror tale entered the records today."[16] Still there was initially little reaction to the proceedings in editorials or letters.

Astonishingly, only the editorialist for the *London Free Press* commented upon Meyer's death sentence in the days following its announcement. He too had noticed the lack of editorial response, the result, he suggested, of the outcome being a foregone conclusion.[17] The editor, nevertheless, argued that Meyer's conviction represented an important victory for justice. Noting that perpetrators of war crimes received much harsher penalties in the aftermath of the latest war than they had in the First World War, he

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Kurt Meyer (centre, no hat, back to camera) stands in the courtroom before the Canadian judges (l.-r.): Brigadier J.A. Roberts; Brigadier H.A. Sparling; Lieutenant-Colonel W.B. Bredin (judge advocate); Major-General Harry W. Foster (president); Brigadier Ian S. Johnston; and Brigadier Henry P. Bell-Irving.

Where to Find It

The Globe and Mail

Fair, Cold

102nd Year. No. 29,952. Metropolitan Edition ★ TORONTO, THURSDAY, DECEMBER 13, 1945. 3 Cents Per Copy 28 PAGES

125 Canadians Murdered By Germans in Normandy

Evidence on Slave Labor

No Christmas Cooking If Aussie Strike Still On

25 Are Homeless When Fire Razes 5 Quebec Homes

Post-Invasion Prisoners Were Shot by Soldiers of Meyer's SS Division

concluded: "It is a step forward when German generals learn that crime does not pay."[18] Later, on 11 January 1946, an editorialist with the *Winnipeg Free Press* wrote an article on the trials of Nazi war criminals, arguing that every guilty verdict was a vindication of the "decencies by which men have lived."[19] The editorialist believed the trials of men like Meyer proved that that code by which men had lived for ages had been tested, yet emerged triumphant.

Despite the muted response to Meyer's conviction, Canadians overwhelmingly and vocally opposed the subsequent commutation of the death sentence. This intense response and the resulting pressure on the government became an important story in many newspapers.[20] Editorialists argued the commutation of Meyer's sentence was a betrayal of Canada's war dead.[21] A letter in the *Toronto Telegram* stated that, "Our boys were innocent. This man should be made to suffer in the same way he made them suffer."[22] In the *Winnipeg Free Press* one man wrote, "One can now visualize Meyer's supercilious grin, but there are no smiles on the faces of the 48 families in Canada bereft of their loved ones."[23]

Many declared that this was a miscarriage of justice that undermined the integrity of a perfectly fair trial.[24] Several newspapers claimed that Canada lost its only chance to show the German people the strength and retributive powers of Canadian law and provide a warning for all those who would dare harm Canadian prisoners of war in the future.[25] Both the *St. Catharines Standard* and the *Toronto Star* warned that the decision set a dangerous pattern for future trials of German war criminals and threatened all of the sentences achieved at the larger and more important Nuremburg Trials.[26] In a particularly scathing letter addressed to defence minister Douglas Abbott, one veteran, R. Martineau, argued that the failure to execute Meyer, a "Nazi gangster by profession," would lead to a breakdown in society when culprits realized that even the most atrocious crimes would not be punished.[27]

The *Toronto Star* published the statements of Rabbi A.C. Feinburg who declared that the war against fascism was not over and that Nazis such as Meyer must be dealt with severely.[28] A number of editorials and letters expressed the sentiment that all Nazis were butchers and murderers who deserved to die, especially Meyer. The *Globe and Mail* argued that

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TORONTO DAILY STAR

THE WEATHER

54TH YEAR TORONTO, TUESDAY, DECEMBER 11, 1945—38 PAGES 3c PER COPY, 18c PER WEEK

SAW NAZIS MURDER CANADIANS

CIVILIAN SAW CANADIAN SHOT, 'HANDS IN AIR'

Also Testifies at Trial of Nazi General That He Was Standing at Window When Wounded Canadian Bayonetted

HOME AND SPORT EDITION

MASK CAN'T STOP GAS NAZIS SAVED

FORM BRITISH VIGILANTES FOR 'BLITZ' ON CRIME

Scotland Yard Calls for Help—Vigilantes to Check Wave of Violence—10,000 Deserters Loose in Britain

this "beast did not know the meaning of sympathy, let alone how to act as a human being."[29] Articles frequently mentioned Meyer's support of the Nazi ideology and wrongly claimed that he served as a member of Hitler's bodyguard.

Despite the weight of opinion against commutation, there were a few who spoke out in support of the former general. Three army officers wrote to the *Maple Leaf*, the newspaper of the Canadian Army, stating that they did not approve of the strict standard to which Meyer was held as a commander. "Are we such little angels with respect to the charges that this man was condemned to death?" they asked.[30] The *Windsor Star* also contended that Vokes commuted the sentence because he realized that Canada's generals were likely guilty of the same crimes as Meyer, and thought, "There but for the grace of God go I."[31] Most of the press and public, however, seemed to agree with General Harry Foster, the chairman of the tribunal that convicted Meyer. In a declaration that appeared on the front page of most newspapers, Foster claimed that he never ordered his men to execute captured Germans and criticized Meyer for not doing more to protect Canadian prisoners.[32] Though Foster's assertion silenced critics for a time, in later years the debate over whether or not Canadians committed the same crimes as Meyer would reappear.

Other Meyer defenders suggested that his trial and sentence were unfair. The *Maple Leaf* argued that Meyer's conviction was excessively harsh and that life imprisonment would be a fair sentence.[33] While not contending that Meyer might be innocent, the *Globe and Mail* urged that if there was some doubt as to Meyer's guilt, there should be a new trial.[34] The *Hamilton Spectator* went so far as to claim that Kurt Meyer was a victim of petty "victor's justice" and that the trial had been bungled.[35] A retired lieutenant-colonel, Philip Passey, wrote to Stuart Garson, the minister of justice, pointing out that the tribunal responsible for passing judgement on Meyer was composed of officers who had recently fought against the general and who were likely motivated by envy, malice, or vengeance. He went on to state that, "The whole procedure smacks of Judaic vengeance – an eye for an eye."[36] Already in 1946, when hatred of the Nazis and Kurt Meyer reached its peak, some Canadians supported the former general.

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Kurt Meyer is led to his cell in handcuffs, Aurich, Germany, October 1945.

After Meyer's imprisonment in the Dorchester Penitentiary, the press and public gave little attention to the man and seemed willing to let him drift into obscurity. At times, however, his name did appear in the news. In 1947, for instance, newspapers reported that Meyer was working in the penitentiary library.[37] The *Ottawa Journal* reacted angrily against this press release. "Let the man be forgotten," said the editor; there should be "no more stories, a convict should have no publicity. Part of the punishment is his disappearance from the eyes of man; he is a number not a name."[38]

The Fight to Free Meyer

In 1949 the press began receiving reports that an anonymous group, possibly of senior military men, had hired several prominent lawyers to launch an appeal for Meyer.[39] Meanwhile, in Moncton a German building contractor, Fritz Lichtenberg, started to vocally promote Meyer's innocence and encouraged reporters to comment on the injustice of the general's conviction.[40]

In February 1950, Ralph Allen published an article in *Maclean's* entitled, "Was Kurt Meyer Guilty?" Allen, who apparently forgot about his description of the murder of the Canadian solders at Meyer's headquarters as an "oriental horror tale," argued that the trial violated some of the "most precious principles of Canadian law" and was really a weakly hidden attempt at "conqueror's justice."[41] He also sought to personalize Meyer and claimed that upon hearing his sentence, "[Meyer's] eyes were alternately hard and caressing, as they sought the eyes of the woman [his wife] in the 10th row."[42] Allen insisted that the prosecution had been allowed to use faulty and hearsay evidence, documents with unverified authenticity and key witnesses whose testimony proved biased and contradictory. "While men live by laws," Allen concluded, "they cannot live freely and without fear unless all men are equal before these laws."[43] Brode has argued that Allen's article lacked substance and objectivity,

provided limited evidence, and showed ignorance of the process in courts martial.[44] By 1950, however, *Maclean's* had an average circulation of 404,000.[45] Thus, regardless of their shortcomings, Allen's arguments were widely broadcast and would often be used by Meyer's supporters in the coming years.

Few editorialists commented on Allen's article, but *Maclean's* did publish a number of letters to the editor in the following weeks. P.M. Wass of Newport Station, Nova Scotia, stated that "strutting Nazi hybrid Meyer condemned himself by word and action…Hitler's gangsters derided and savaged our precepts, they broke every law governing human rights; they fattened their egos on mass murder. No legal quibbles ever bothered them."[46] Another letter used the Meyer affair to argue that the threat of nuclear war made all of humanity guilty of the same atrocities the Nazis committed: "Is it any worse to club a helpless prisoner to death than to blow a defenceless woman to pieces?"[47] The Cold War was starting to shape opinion on the Meyer Affair.

Cold War Considerations

As the Cold War heated up and the threat of a Soviet attack increased, the West began to view the rearmament of West Germany as a necessity for the defence of Europe. The Germans would, however, exact a price for their allegiance. By 1951 Meyer was the only Nazi war criminal imprisoned outside Germany and the Germans wanted him released or transferred to one of their own prisons.[48] Thus, on 19 October 1951, in an attempt to facilitate relations with West Germany, the Canadian government transferred Kurt Meyer to the military prison at Werl, Germany.

There was an intense, protracted, and divided reaction. In January 1951, the rumour that Meyer's petition for clemency might be approved began to circulate in the press and would do so sporadically for the entire year. The belief that Meyer would soon be released intensified with his transfer to Germany in October. In late November the journalist Douglas How reported on his visit to the prisoner's hometown in Germany, where he found Meyer at home with his family. Meyer had been granted a week's leave, a standard practice in German prisons.[49] In an interview with How, the former general stated that "nationalism is dead" and claimed, "I would become a soldier again only as a member of a European Army, not as a member of a German army alone."[50] How's report became front page news in Canada.

As the Cold War intensified, and Canada fought in Korea and stationed troops in West Germany, some Canadians began to look at Meyer in a new light. The *Globe and Mail* felt that Meyer should be given a new trial because the Germans, with whom Canada was attempting to establish good relations, had to be shown that "justice is our only guide."[51] The *British Columbian*, advocating a practical view on Meyer, thought that the former general would be an asset to a rearmed Germany, although his crimes would not be forgiven or forgotten.[52] The *Hush Free Press*, a nationally circulated supermarket tabloid, argued that in supporting German rearmament Canada had done a "right about face" towards its old enemies. If Canada could ally itself with Germany, why not give clemency to Meyer for a "new and worse enemy has arisen against Germany…Former foes are needed on the side of righteousness to fight against him."[53] Reverend H.E.D. Ashford mentioned Meyer several times from his pulpit in Charlottetown and on one occasion told his congregation that Meyer should lead a new German army fighting under the flag of an international force.[54]


Where to Find It

The Globe and Mail

Morning Rain
High Here 35

108th Year. No. 31,810. Final Edition TORONTO, MONDAY, NOVEMBER 26, 1951. 5 Cents Per Copy 32 PAGES

NORTH KOREA

SOUTH

Serving Life Term

Reporter Goes to Visit Wife
Finds Kurt Meyer at Home

Other Canadians rallied to support the former general. In a letter to the defence minister, Brooke Claxton, veteran Alden Nolan asked the government to release Kurt Meyer from his "pitiful confinement" for he is a "good soldier" and a "noble gentleman,"[55] a sentiment widely expressed by Meyer's supporters.[56] Others continued to argue that

Canadians committed the same crimes as Meyer in the war. In a letter to the *Ottawa Citizen*, J. Koop called the whole Meyer affair a "double standard of morality" for "any former serviceman who has seen action in Europe can tell of instances where groups of German POW's were machine gunned or blown to bits by hand grenades."[57] A number of editorialists went slightly further, claiming that all who engage in war are guilty of murder[58] and reminded Canadians that the Allies had dropped the atomic bombs in Japan, a crime far worse than the one Meyer committed.[59] As irrational as these arguments were, they represented a current of thought in Canada.

Following the lead of Ralph Allen, a number of Canadians believed that Meyer should be released because of the injustice of his trial. The *Globe and Mail*, which in 1946 had been one of the newspapers calling loudest for Meyer's blood, ran a number of editorials exploring the inadequacies of the general's trial. The first, entitled, "Procedure Unusual in Meyer Trial," argued that much of the evidence used against the general had been hearsay and inadmissible in an English Court of Law. The editorialist thought Meyer should be given a chance to win his freedom before the Supreme Court, but acknowledged that this would not happen for it would repudiate before the whole world the rules by which Canada judged its war criminals.[60] Another editorial, "No Time to Lose," claimed that haste, strong passions, and the confusion of war, may have resulted in a faulty verdict in the Meyer case.[61] This writer also wanted to give Meyer the opportunity to plead his case before the Supreme Court.

Despite the growth in support for Meyer, for the majority of Canadians the prospect of releasing the convicted war criminal seemed a terrible mistake. Many editorialists and letter writers tied the release of Meyer in with the dangers of rearming Germany: stirring up the latent militaristic aggression that existed in all Germans with the real possibility they would foment another war.[62] The *Toronto Star* supported French efforts to keep all of their war criminals behind bars and adamantly opposed the rearmament of Germany. The editorial stated that the French "know full well that when you give a German a gun he immediately starts walking toward the French border."[63] Both the B'nai B'rith Hillel Foundation and the Canadian Jewish Congress sent strongly worded letters of protest to Lester B. Pearson, the secretary of state for external affairs, urging the government not to release Meyer and enflame the Nazi spirit that lingered in many Germans.[64]

As in 1946, Canadians appealed to the memory of the soldiers Meyer's men murdered in Normandy in their arguments that the man should be kept safely behind bars. Allan Chun, the president of the Norman Bethune Club in Winnipeg, wrote to Stuart Garson saying that Meyer's release was a "profound insult to the memories of those Canadian lads whose lives he so ruthlessly took."[65] His release would insult the Canadian soldiers who had risked their lives in the war and violated the principles that so many had died to protect.[66] A.G Munich, president of the Quebec Legion and the Hong Kong Veteran's Association, argued that any reduction of Meyer's sentence would show the world that the Canadian government did not consider the shooting of its soldiers after surrender a serious crime.[67] In a letter to the *Globe and Mail*, Mary Logan stated that Meyer's release would anger all servicemen and that "our Minister of Justice, also, Minister of Defence, should keep in mind we may all need our boy's help again."[68]

A large portion of the Canadians who wrote about Meyer, privately and publicly, highlighted his past as an ardent Nazi to discredit any attempt to secure his release. James McDonald, president of Local 4481 of the United Mill Workers of America, stated "we do not wish to be associated or accused of being associated with Nazism in any form."[69] The Canadian Congress of Women believed Meyer to be a fanatically devoted Nazi and could not fathom why NATO wished to associate itself with such a detestable criminal.[70] Others felt that to release Meyer would demonstrate that the evils of the Nazis had been forgotten altogether.[71] The Regina Labour Council begged the government to "refuse the pardon in the name of the victims of Nazism and guarantee that the monster Kurt Meyer will never again commit crimes against humanity."[72]

A large number of those who responded negatively to the transfer of Meyer and the rumours of his imminent release argued that such a move would be detrimental to justice. These people felt that Meyer had received a fair trial, had been allowed an excellent legal defence, was fairly convicted and his original sentence of execution should have been carried out.[73] The *Ottawa Citizen* wrote that "Whoever put the bandage over the eyes of the statue of justice – Boy, was he right! Justice is sure blind."[74] Justice demanded that Meyer be imprisoned for life.

In a pamphlet widely circulated in British Columbia and entitled "Wanted for Murder," Ray Gardner, a prominent Vancouver newspaper man and free-lance writer, drew together all of the arguments against Meyer's release: a secret plot had been hatched to give war criminals like Meyer leadership roles in a rearmed Germany. Gardner called Meyer the most "depraved scum the world has ever known" and claimed he will be a "future Hitler."[75] Gardner supported Meyer's original sentence and believed that the Nazi's guilt had been proven beyond a doubt. He

argued that the push to free Meyer came from the Canadian officer caste, whose morals and values had been put aside in the atmosphere of the Cold War.[76]

1954: A Divided Response

The debate over German rearmament and the attempt by the West Germans to have Meyer released dragged on from 1951 to 1954. In mid-1952 Kurt Meyer appeared on a list of war criminals that the German government wanted released. In September 1953 a clemency board suggested that Meyer's sentence be reduced and the request was approved by the Canadian cabinet in January. The former general gained his freedom on 7 September 1954, a decade after his capture by Allied forces. As historian Lisa Goodyear concluded: "Canada was not willing to strain its relationship with West Germany to keep Meyer in prison for a few more years."[77] The man condemned to die in 1946 was released after serving only nine years. The response of the public and press to Meyer's release in 1954 was far more divided than it had been in response to earlier developments. The January announcement by the government that Meyer would be released that September became front page news and Canadians soon voiced their opinions on the matter and sent petitions to the Canadian government asking that Meyer not be released.[78] On 9 September the *Sudbury Star* wrote, "Had the horror of the murdered men's blood become so unrealistic that Canadian officials could decide to reduce the life sentence."[79] Many lower ranking veterans declared their anger that the government had so easily forgiven the murder of Canadian soldiers because Meyer might serve a useful purpose in the new Wehrmacht.[80] The *Victoria Colonist* warned Meyer never to return to Canada as long as people lived who remembered the terrible crimes he had committed against Canadian troops.[81] A cartoon in the *Calgary Herald* showed a warden, who represented the government, push 18 murdered soldiers out of the way as a goose stepping Kurt Meyer left his cell.[82] Although nine years had passed since the end of the war, the memory of Canada's murdered soldiers remained strong.

Various Canadians formed their opinion about Meyer on the basis of anti-German prejudice and fears about rearming West Germany. The *Windsor Star* commented that it had taken only nine years of peace for Canada to lose its determination to "teach war-making Germany that acts of savagery would demand their full measure of atonement."[83] A number of individuals and organizations expressed the belief that rearming Germany and releasing men like Meyer would automatically bring another war.[84] When Canadians heard about the warm homecoming Meyer received, the anxiety over the impact the former SS general would have on the "aggressive" German spirit grew. Many maintained that the Germans had not changed whatsoever after two world wars and the revelations of the atrocities the Nazi regime committed.[85] The *Winnipeg Free Press* wrote that the release of Meyer and other war criminals meant that "German militarists will once again be able to exercise their special talents, the mass murder of men, women, and children."[86] Other Canadians compared the weakness shown by their government in releasing Meyer with the policy of appeasement adopted by the West prior to the war. The *London Free Press* believed such weakness would come to haunt the world for "Germans respect power more than they admire mercy."[87]

Where to Find It

The Globe and Mail

Sunny, Warmer
High Here 75

111th Year. No. 32,676. Final Edition TORONTO, SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 4, 1954. 5 Cents Per Copy 34 PAGES

Originally Sentenced to Death

Free Kurt Meyer Tuesday From Werl Jail in Germany

Reds Shell Chiang Isles For 5 Hours

By SPENCER MOOSA

Dulles in Philippines For Asia Conference

By TILLMAN DURDIN
New York Times Service

Unwanted Fires

Familiar Face?

Nazi Guilty In Slaying Of Canadians

By HARVEY HICKEY

A number of Canadian newspapers once again attempted to prove Meyer's guilt of war crimes and defended the conduct of his trial. The *Montreal Gazette* stated that "If Canadian blood is not on his hands, he was standing near enough to what happened that some of it spattered upon him. The stain of it should not now be politely ignored."[88] Colonel John Wise, executive of the BC Veterans Association, called the release of Meyer, "a betrayal of the principles of justice which protects Canadians."[89] The *Montreal Star* declared that the ideals of the trial and the desires of the Canadian people were lost "in some curious emergence of a professional spirit, a kinship between officer corps, between men who, as professionals in war, do not like the development of a trend which means that orders given in the heat of battle can be held against them."[90] The idea that the Canadian military had somehow sabotaged all efforts to give Meyer a proper punishment remained a popular conspiracy theory in 1954.

Although the majority of Canadians continued to view Meyer as nothing more than a detestable Nazi, his supporters also grew in number. The *Toronto Star* conducted an interview with H.P. Bell-Irving, a brigadier on the tribunal that judged Meyer, who described the general as "a very brave man" and a "great leader" who deserved his release.[91] In an interview with the *Sarnia Canadian Observer*, a former colonel stated plainly that he did "not think that a brigadier should be held responsible for the actions of every man in his brigade."[92] The *Corner Brook Western Star* argued that neither side emerged blameless from the struggle and Meyer could not be blamed for the terrible things that happen in war.[93] The *Quebec Chronicle Telegraph* took the argument further, claiming that if Meyer is guilty, so are all Canadians. All Canadians were "accessories after the fact" because they assisted in supplying the weapons which killed in the war.[94] Like Meyer, Canadians were indirectly responsible for murder. Similar sentiments were expressed throughout Canada.

Once again, many argued that the general's original sentence had been unjust. The *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix* believed that the Meyer case had always been unfairly tainted by Canadian nationalism and claimed that the general had been a victim of vengeful justice.[95] Several newspapers conceded that the trial of Kurt Meyer had been influenced by the impassioned fervour of post-war Canada.[96] *Maclean's* published a very condemnatory article about the way the Canadian government handled the Meyer case. According to *Maclean's*, an innocent man had been imprisoned for nine years after being convicted in an unfair trial. The article concluded by stating that the

© Bettmann/CORBIS

Happy Frau Meyer has a bouquet of carnations ready for her husband, former SS Major-General Kurt Meyer, Canada's last remaining major war criminal who was released from Werl war crimes prison. Meyer, originally sentenced to death for the killings of Canadian prisoners of war, was released ten years after he fell into Allied hands. 7 September 1954.

treatment of Meyer "had weakened the cause of the whole free world."[97] Many believed that with the release of Kurt Meyer, justice had finally been achieved.

In 1954 the realities of the Cold War again influenced the way Canadians thought about the whole affair. Even B.S. Macdonald concluded his book on Meyer's trial by stating, "If Meyer could serve a useful purpose in the West German army, which might result in the saving of lives of Canadian youth in another conflict, his release would be justified."[98] Gerald Waring, an editor with the *Montreal Herald*, claimed that Meyer would assist West Germany in becoming a leading contributor in the defence of Western Europe.[99] The *Port Arthur News Chronicle* sympathized with Canadians who were angered with the release of Meyer, but believed that his release served an important purpose in international politics.[100] Even elements of the Legion, which had always condemned Meyer, began to believe that his release would be justified if he fulfilled a useful purpose on behalf of the Western powers.[101]

Of Blood and Beer

After Meyer's release he became a leading member of the Waffen SS Veterans Association and was employed as a beer salesman. He never rejoined the German military because of the large number of high ranking German officers with clean war time records that sought positions. He remained unrepentant for the crimes of his men and worked to vindicate the name of the Waffen SS. Several Canadian newspapers attacked Meyer's involvement with the SS association.[102] The *Halifax Mail Star* worried that Meyer would stir up old hatreds amongst these veterans and create trouble.[103] The *Montreal Gazette* commented on the fearful and far-fetched notion held by many Canadians that Meyer almost had Germany in his Nazi clutches.[104] Meyer's job as a salesman selling beer to the Canadian troops in West Germany became the most newsworthy aspect of his new life.[105] The *Fredericton Gleaner* found it shameful that Canadian officers had sat down for a drink with Meyer, although the author hoped that perhaps they did not know what the man had done. However, the paper noted "they know now and perhaps some of them detect a taste of blood in their glasses."[106] The popular reporter, Gordon Sinclair, wrote a piece for the *Liberty Magazine* begging the Canadian public to stop "tar and feathering" an innocent man and allow him to live his days out peacefully, selling his beer, as he should have been doing since 1945.[107] While Canadian interest in Meyer started to wane by the late 1950s, they still remembered the man and his crimes and wrote about them until his death in 1961.[108]

* * * * *

Between 1946 and the late 1950s, Canadians responded to the Kurt Meyer affair with an intensity and frequency that highlights the importance of this man in postwar Canada. He aroused a multitude of emotions in Canadians. While most hated him, others respected and admired the former general. Those who condemned him remembered the soldiers his men murdered, saw Meyer as a brutal Nazi and an embodiment of Germans' innate aggressiveness and propensity for violence. He was a symbol of all the hurt and pain caused by the Third Reich and Canadians wanted vengeance on the man.

As time went on, however, support for Meyer expanded exponentially. By 1950 Canadians had known five years of peace and as memories about the horrors and hatreds of the war started to subside it became easier to forgive Meyer. Distance also allowed certain Canadians to argue that their soldiers committed the same crimes as Meyer's men in the Second World War, an argument that would have been tantamount to sacrilege in 1946. In addition, Meyer's most loyal supporters organized into a group which encouraged Canadians to protest the imprisonment of the "great" general. This call spurred men like Ralph Allen, the prominent writer, and H.E.D. Ashford, the well known minister, to speak out against the "injustices" done to Meyer. Their arguments soon caught on amongst many Canadians, especially higher ranking veterans who still carried clout in Canadian society. In the 1950's, arguments that Meyer's trial was unjust and that he was a decent man abounded and Meyer gained more and more supporters.

As the Cold War developed, Canadians began to look at Meyer in a new light. Although the government never admitted to the public that it transferred and released Meyer to foster better relations with the Germans, Canadians still knew. Almost every person that responded to the Meyer affair in the 1950s understood that the release of the former general would help achieve the political goal of drawing the West Germans into the Western alliance. Some lashed out against this reality and argued that the release of Meyer to a rearmed Germany would spell disaster. Others wholeheartedly supported the release of the man whom they believed could lead the West to victory against the communists. As Howard Margolian explained, for these Canadians "the war began to recede from public memory and the new threat of Soviet expansionism superseded fears of a Nazi revival."[109] The Cold War had a dramatic effect on how Canadians understood the Meyer affair.

Canadians never forgot about Kurt Meyer. Even as years passed

and the world changed, he survived in the public memory. Many hated Meyer for the terrible crimes his men committed against Canadian soldiers and for his dark past as a Nazi. They always remembered the blood that stained Meyer's hands and wanted his full punishment to be carried out. The war was a deeply emotional wound for many and it pulsed again whenever news of Meyer came into the press. While these people represented a majority in Canada, there were some, from all walks of life, who supported the man. As old enemies became friends and the war faded into history, Meyer was transformed from a Nazi criminal to a symbol of the fighting prowess that would enable the West to stop the Soviets. In the end, the response to Kurt Meyer remained strong and divided throughout the entire affair and highlighted Canadian perspectives on the world, the war, justice and Germany. While the Canadian government thought of him as little more than a pawn in the world of international politics, Canadians truly cared about the man's fate.

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Peter Kikkert is a PhD candidate in the Department of History, Western University. His research interests include the history of the Old Commonwealth countries and the United States in the Polar Regions, Canadian-American relations during the Early Cold War, and the role war criminals, like Kurt Meyer, have played in international relations.