



Memory & Action

The Ritchie Boys: America's Secret Weapon Against the Nazis



United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

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4 min read · Sep 3, 2021





Otto Perl, who was dismissed from the Austrian Army in 1938 because he was Jewish, later immigrated to America. This photo shows his US Army unit at Camp Ritchie, Maryland, circa 1945. — US Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Otto Perl

As the United States fought the Nazis across Europe during World War II, it was bolstered by a small, specialized team whose role wasn't revealed to the public for many decades. It included thousands of young men who had recently fled Nazi persecution in Germany and Austria for the United States, only to return as American soldiers fighting the Nazis during the war. They were the Ritchie Boys — a once-secret US military intelligence unit that was instrumental to the Allies' victory.

“They knew what life was like under the Nazis, and they wanted to defeat them,” said Dr. David Frey, a professor of history at the United States Military

Academy at West Point.

Despite strict quotas on US immigration in the 1930s and '40s, tens of thousands of European Jews managed to escape to America with sponsorship from US-based relatives and organizations like the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS). Due to financial and legal constraints, some Jewish families were only able to send one person.

Hear what Ambassador Richard Schifter said about becoming a Ritchie Boy:



Escaping the Nazis, Returning to Europe to Fight: A Jewish Imm
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Similarly to Richard Schifter (above), Guy Stern was the only one in his family to make it out of the German Reich to the United States. He arrived in 1937 with help from an aunt and uncle in Missouri. He was just 15 years old.

“I couldn’t know at that point that I would never see my siblings or my parents again,” said Stern.

After the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 a few years later, Stern attempted to enlist in the US military, but was rejected for having been born outside the country. However, the US Armed Forces soon recognized that refugees like Stern offered crucial knowledge of European languages and cultures that could enhance intelligence efforts on the front. So, in 1942, Stern and thousands of other recent European immigrants were recruited and sent to Camp Ritchie in northern Maryland for training on military intelligence and psychological warfare.

In stark contrast to the violence some of these recruits had experienced at the hands of the Nazis, they were trained to interrogate without using force or even touching their subjects. Their techniques included gaining prisoners' confidence through common interests and experiences and using their deep knowledge of the German military to glean more. Their rigorous eight-week training at Camp Ritchie involved practicing their skills with US soldiers acting as Nazi soldiers and German civilians within life-sized replicas of German villages.

After their training, these servicemen, now known as "Ritchie Boys," were divided into teams and dispersed in different army units. Many of them landed on the beaches of Normandy soon after D-Day in June of 1944. From that point on, Ritchie Boys were involved in every major battle in Europe, gathering intelligence as the Allied forces moved across the continent. Along the way, they interrogated thousands of Nazi war criminals and civilians to both discover and affect their tactics and plans. In some cases, they persuaded German soldiers to surrender without a fight.

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The Ritchie Boys helped liberate Paris from Nazi occupation and later crossed into Germany, where the war eventually ended and they witnessed the horrors of Nazi concentration camps. A report by the US Army found that nearly 60 percent of the actionable intelligence gathered in Europe during the war came from Ritchie Boys.

More than 19,000 men from 70 countries were trained at Camp Ritchie. More than 2,800 were refugees from Nazi persecution. About 140 of these men lost their lives during the war, and many of those who survived remained translators and interrogators after World War II — some during the Nuremberg Trials of Nazi war criminals. All were sworn to secrecy about the details of their service for decades afterward.

Recently declassified documents have shed new light on the Ritchie Boys' many contributions. In August of 2021, US Senate Resolution 349 officially recognized the bravery of these troops who served in language and intelligence roles in every unit of the armed forces during World War II.

“These soldiers’ military intelligence skills were a critical asset to the Allied forces and saved countless lives. We must ensure that the courage and sacrifice of the Ritchie Boys is recognized and never forgotten,” said US Senator Chris Van Hollen.

Members of the unit were awarded numerous Silver Star and Bronze Star medals and at least five Legion of Honor medals, among others. About 200 of the Ritchie Boys who served in World War II are still alive as of August 2021.

Guy Stern, nearing age 100, earned a Bronze Star medal for his US military service and later became a professor of German language and literature. His parents, brother, and sister were among the six million Jews killed by the Nazis.

“We were fighting an American war, and we were also fighting an intensely personal war. We were in it with every fiber of our being. We worked harder than anyone could have driven us This was our war,” said Stern.

Learn more about individual Ritchie Boys on the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum’s website:

[Richard Schifter](#)

[Joseph Eaton](#)

[Stephan Lewy](#)

Sources:

[Facebook Live video: “The New Americans: Immigrants Who Served”](#)

[Oral history interview with Guy Stern](#)

[US Senate Press Release: Risch, Crapo, Senate Colleagues Honor the Service of World War II Ritchie Boys](#)

[Full text of US Senate Resolution 349](#)

[Transcript of May 9, 2021 episode of 60 Minutes: “Ritchie Boys: The secret U.S. unit bolstered by German-born Jews that helped the Allies beat Hitler”](#)

Editor’s note: This story has been updated to clarify the Ritchie Boys’ position relative to the front.

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Published in Memory & Action

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Responses (2)



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What are your thoughts?



Elizabeth Kaldeck Smith

Sep 12, 2021



The information here is so well-presented. It is wonderful that the bravery of the Ritchie Boys is recognized in US Senate Resolution 349.



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William R Snow
Apr 1

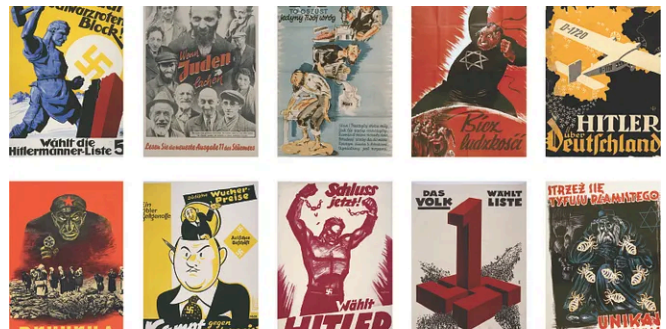
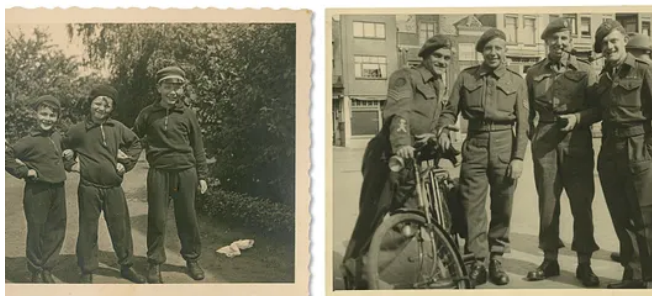


I am grateful for having worked with Henry Kolm who came from Austria and fled with his brother to Sweden and then to the US. He interrogated Von Braun after the war and inspired him about Space. Henry and O'Neill whom I worked with were the... [more](#)



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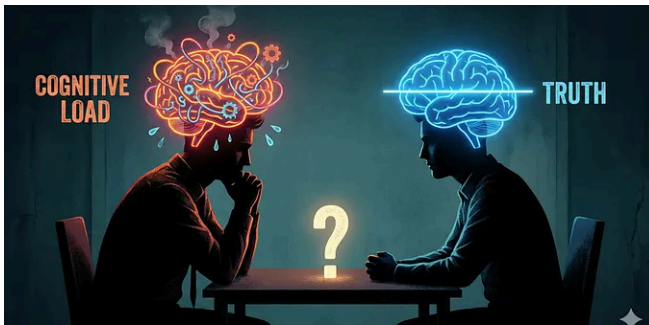
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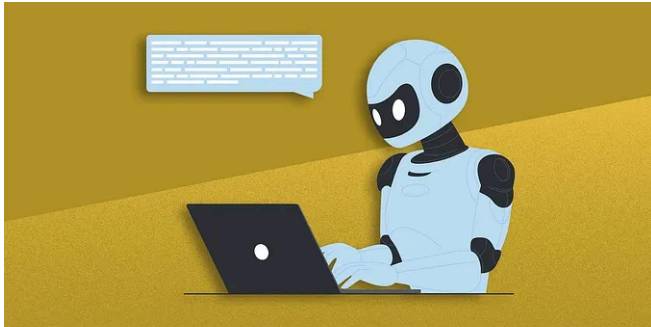


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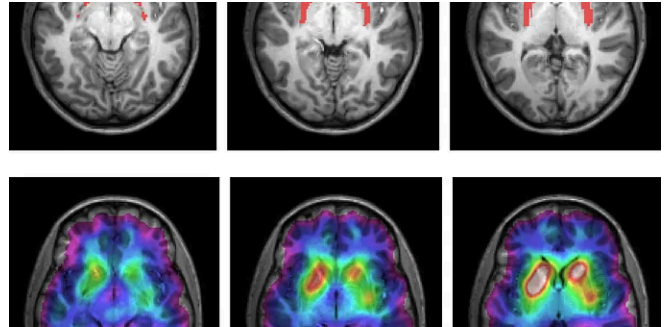
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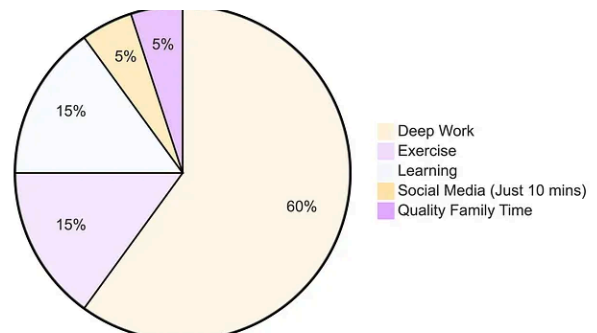


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