

In 1944 it became known to the Free French Partisan fighting forces that the Germans had executed 80 partisans and planned soon to execute more. The Partisans thus decided they would shoot 80 German prisoners who had recently surrendered to them. At this point the Red Cross intervened, won a postponement of the executions, and sought an agreement from the Germans to treat captured partisans as prisoners of war, who may not be shot. The Partisans waited 6 days and the Germans did not reply. The Partisans then shot 80 German prisoners. After these shootings the Nazis executed no more Partisans.

Was the shooting of morally justifiable? the 80 German prisoners by the If so, why? If not, why not? Partisans

MODERATOR'S ANSWER: The shooting of the German prisoners by the partisans was not morally justified. The Partisans' anger, bitterness, and concern about future German actions was fully understandable and justified. Such, however, did not justify the killing of innocent soldiers who had not committed war crimes. If, indeed, the shooting of the eighty German prisoners persuaded the Nazis not to kill any more Partisan prisoners, this was a good result, but it still does not justify the killing of innocent persons. The German soldiers executed by the Partisans were not responsible for the decisions of the German military command to take the lives of the Partisans they had captured. The retaliatory action of the Partisans appears no different, morally speaking, from what would be the case if law enforcement authorities dealt with a ruthless hostage taker, who had killed several hostages to show he means business, by seizing individuals close to the hostage taker – e.g. his wife or children – and retaliating in kind.

Case from the February 26, 1998 Intercollegiate Ethics Bowl. Copyright Robert Ladenson, Center for the Study of Ethics at the Illinois Institute of Technology, 1998.