

Slave Labor in Nazi Concentration Camps

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Introduction

500 foreign female concentration camp prisoners, political, and criminal. Adjacent barracks camp, 11 guards, 17,000 m barbed wire, 380 Volts, tripwire. . . . The German foremen should be replaced by prisoners because the inmate overseers take a tougher line. Work performance is highly satisfactory. Productivity is higher than with the same number of German workers because work hours are longer and absenteeism is lower. . . . The gentlemen are of the opinion that the conditions sound harsher than they actually are.¹

Hamburg, summer 1944. The armaments industry in the northern German port city had just recovered from the devastating air raids of Operation Gomorrah and was gearing up to boost Germany's production of military hardware one last time. In order to achieve the targeted increase in production, the Germans planned to use thousands of concentration camp prisoners, whose transfer from Auschwitz to Hamburg had been approved. This prompted Rudolf Blohm and high-ranking employees at his huge shipyards to consult with the production managers at the Drägerwerke, a top gas mask manufacturer in the Third Reich, on their experience with using concentration camp prisoners. During a tour of the subcamp on the premises of the Drägerwerke, the industrialists had positive things to say about the work performed by the inmates. Aside from the ostensibly reassuring comment that "the conditions sound harsher than they actually are," the visit revealed that the confrontation between the entrepreneurs and the SS on the one side and the concentration camp forced laborers on the other was a matter of life and death for the detainees. The fence surrounding the camp had a lethal level of voltage. All means available were used to prevent escapes; the only alternatives for the prisoners were to work or die.

Whether these prisoners even had this choice—or whether it was in fact a case of to work *and* die—is a question that historians have grappled with right from the start. Already during the first postwar trials, Allied prosecutors made reference to the contemporary Nazi principle of "extermination through labor" to convince the tribunals of the unique criminal character of the concentration camp system. Although there is widespread agreement among researchers today that German industrialists were not primarily motivated by a desire to save concentration camp

¹ Report by an employee of Blohm & Voss concerning the tour of the Drägerwerke on August 29, 1944, in: StaHH, 621-1 Blohm & Voss 23, Vol. 17. In the margin of the document are handwritten comments by shipyard owner Rudolf Blohm that indicate that he was present during the visit.

inmates, other aspects of this issue remain hotly debated. Was the principle of “extermination through labor” characteristic of all uses of inmate labor, or did the individual situations of the detainees vary according to random and local factors? Were the motives of the SS and the entrepreneurs diametrically opposed or were there common interests? Are their motives accurately described by the parameters of extermination and labor?

This book examines the use of concentration camp inmates in the German war economy. Their use will first be explored for the entire concentration camp system, thus paving the way for an in-depth study based on the subcamp system of the Neuengamme concentration camp, which was located in the city of Hamburg. Leading industries, government agencies, and individuals were instrumental in establishing the subcamp system. What role did they play in establishing, maintaining, and closing the subcamps of the Neuengamme concentration camp? What concrete interests did each group have? How was it possible to reconcile the use of inmates with the group’s individual traditions and customs?

By the end of the war, there were 85 subcamps associated with the Neuengamme complex, which had been established primarily for key military-industrial projects. Neuengamme played a key role in early attempts to use prisoner labor for the armaments industry. Indeed, it was one of the first concentration camps to dispatch mobile construction brigades to clear rubble, rescue survivors, and engage in salvage operations in large German cities devastated by Allied bombing raids.

In 1944, an increasing number of German companies and government agencies became interested in using concentration camp inmate labor as the retreat of the Wehrmacht from the occupied territories resulted in a dwindling supply of civilian forced laborers. From the main camp in Neuengamme, there soon existed a network of subcamps that extended across nearly all of northern Germany. The main camp became a center for the selection and transport of prisoners who were fit to work, and it became a camp for the sick and the dying who were ravaged by the harsh labor conditions in the camps. Of the 50,000 inmates who were detained in the Neuengamme complex² in 1944, roughly 40,000 of them—including 13,000 female inmates—were housed in the subcamps and used as forced laborers.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE FACTORS RELATED TO THE LIVING AND WORKING CONDITIONS IN THE SUBCAMPS

One of the focal points of the present work is the question of the concrete and diverse living and working conditions of prisoners in the subcamps. After making an initial comparison of the individual subcamps based on their mortality rates, it immediately became clear that there existed significant differences. Whereas hardly

² The term complex will be used in this text to designate the combination of the main camp and the subcamps.

anyone died at the Lütjenburg subcamp, where the inmates worked in the highly specialized production of gyrocompasses for V2 rockets, hundreds of inmates perished within an extremely short period of time digging antitank ditches in Husum on the German North Sea coast.³

A systematic comparison of the different subcamps revealed the factors that determined the conditions of life in the camps and were a matter of life and death for the detainees. Directly comparing mortality rates in the subcamps is a highly important means of evaluation for my study as this data provides the best gauge for assessing the inmates' chances of survival in the subcamps. The original goal was to develop a typology of the various subcamps. However, the resulting analysis revealed that it was not possible to classify the subcamps into a limited number of categories due to a wide range of factors that influenced conditions in a variety of ways. Instead, the factors that affect life and survival are analyzed and weighed up in a systematic comparison.

Such a comparison runs the risk of rating the inmates' ordeals on a scale of suffering, while making light of the experiences of prisoners in comparatively better subcamps.⁴ This should be avoided at all costs. Suffering is always subjective, and it is not up to this study to assess the extent of the personal suffering of each individual subcamp prisoner. The comparative analysis conducted here aims to assess each inmate's chances of survival in each individual subcamp and explores the reasons behind the differences in the mortality rates. This analysis is largely supported by many survivors' accounts, which are characterized by a very precise view of the specific differences between the individual camps. By contrast, other former inmates generally relate their experiences in different camps as equally gruesome. Both points of view are legitimate. The differences examined in the present study are of a relatively minor nature. There were only very few subcamps in which inmates were so adequately nourished, for example, that at the end of the war they could have eaten a normal meal without becoming severely ill or dying.

My initial hypothesis for this comparison was that the type of work that the prisoners performed had a decisive impact on their chances of survival. This was in line with the research conducted by Florian Freund and Bertrand Perz, who were able to demonstrate for the Mauthausen subcamp system that camps with inmates working in industrial production had an annual mortality rate of approximately 5 percent, while the mortality rate in construction camps was around 30 percent.⁵ It turns out, however, that such a clear-cut difference between construction and production camps did not exist for the Neuengamme subcamps. This led to the development of a more detailed breakdown of the types of work performed. Moreover, the comparative research conducted to date does not take into account the fact that the mortality rates in the women's subcamps were considerably lower than in the men's subcamps.

All of this prompted the creation of an analytical framework that encompasses numerous factors (the inmates' gender, the size of the subcamp, the priority of the

³ Benz/Distel (eds), *Ort*, Vol. 5, pp. 477–80; Bästlein, *KZ Husum*.

⁴ Reemtsma, *Vertrauen*, p. 341. ⁵ Freund, "Mauthausen," p. 272; Perz, "Arbeitseinsatz."

work performed, the perpetrators' actions, the individual composition of the guard details, etc.), which are weighted to determine the prisoners' chances of survival.

PERPETRATORS AND ACTS OF VIOLENCE

One of the main goals of my work is to take a closer look at the various perpetrators and their actions. I examined the perpetrators in the camps as well as the industrialists and bureaucrats who planned the utilization of labor. In the process, a connection was made between each individual field of work, biographical backgrounds, and concrete practices. In addition, my methodology relies on praxeological approaches to describe the perpetrators' behavior.⁶

The first studies of the concentration camp SS tended to describe the perpetrators as a barbaric horde, constantly capable of engaging in acts of wanton brutality.⁷ Wolfgang Sofsky, however, emphasizes that the majority of the SS men in the camps exercised violence in a routine manner, which triggered hardly any strong emotions among the guards, nor was it sadistic in nature.⁸ Likewise, when differentiating between various types of perpetrators, Gerhard Paul and Klaus-Michael Mallmann place great importance on the question of the perpetrators' motives.⁹ The motivation of the perpetrators is undoubtedly a key aspect of perpetrator research. Within the scope of this study, however, another area of focus has been selected. The point of departure here is the question of which individuals in which positions were likely to engage in which actions. For instance, the behavior of an SS officer occasionally changed decisively when he was promoted from the position of roll call leader to camp commander.

The SS was an all-male military organization that saw itself as a racial and ideological elite. Right from the founding of the organization in 1925, the history of the SS was closely associated with the glorification and use of violence. With the formation of the SS Death's Head Units (*SS-Totenkopfverbände*), which were established in 1934 specifically to guard the concentration camps, these tendencies were intensified and perpetuated by a highly organized military training in carrying out acts of violence. The Dachau system, introduced in 1934 by the first inspector of the concentration camps, Theodor Eicke, was widely adopted for the training of camp guards and served as a guideline of sorts until the end of the war. This training relied on a dual approach: squad leaders used drills in brutality to break the wills of the SS men, while the recruits were taught right from the start to beat and torture concentration camp inmates.

The men trained in Eicke's "school of violence" remained in leading positions at most concentration camps until the end of the war. Max Pauly, the commandant of

⁶ Bourdieu, *Outline*, pp. 72–158; Bourdieu, *Practical Reason*; Bourdieu, *Logic of Practice*; Lüdtke (ed.), *History of Everyday Life*; Bonnell/Hunt (eds), *Beyond the Cultural Turn*; Spiegel (ed.), *Practicing History*; Reichardt, "Praxeologische Geschichtswissenschaft"; Reichardt, "Praxeologie."

⁷ Kogon, *SS-Staat*, pp. 352–5.

⁸ Sofsky, *Order*, pp. 97–116.

⁹ Paul/Mallmann, "Sozialisation."

Neuengamme, was a so-called “old fighter” (*Alter Kämpfer*)¹⁰ and had already been assigned to the concentration camp for quite some time. A number of the department heads under Pauly in the main camp also had many years of socialization within the concentration camp system.

This certainly could not be said of all the subcamp commanders, though. Many of them had not become part of the concentration camp system until after the war began. At the majority of the Neuengamme subcamps, only a small number of long-serving and experienced SS men were deployed in late 1944. The majority of the guards in the subcamps were no longer SS men from the German Reich. Starting in 1941, these guards were increasingly supplemented or replaced by ethnic German SS men, so-called *Volksdeutsche*, who were primarily drafted from Southeastern Europe. By 1944, even this supplementary source of manpower was no longer sufficient, and the majority of camp guards were now Wehrmacht soldiers, members of the *Volkssturm*,¹¹ customs agents, police officers, and railroad men—along with female overseers in the women’s camps.

The constantly changing composition of the guard staff is essential to the analysis of the situation in the camps. How did the newly arriving groups react to the brutality of the SS guards? Did a camaraderie of violence predominate, or was there an overriding sense that things should be done “by the book”?

One of the chief aims of my study is to analyze and describe the possible courses of action available to the SS and the other guards—and to some extent to the inmates. The concept of “possible courses of action” (*Handlungsoptionen*) implies, however, that the acting individual has a certain degree of freedom of choice. In principle, I assume that this freedom was available to the SS and other guards at the concentration camps, whereas it was of an extremely limited nature for the prisoners.¹²

Spatially speaking, concentration camps were highly limited areas, and there was a high degree of mutual social control. Nevertheless, there were cases in which guards used their positions to the benefit of inmates. It is important to keep in mind that in most cases concentration camp guards were not actually compelled to use excessive force, but merely generally allowed to do so. There were very few situations—for example, when prisoners escaped—in which guards could expect to be punished if they refrained from violence.

Although the main focus of the analysis is on direct physical violence, it would be inappropriate here to reduce the concept of violence to physical violence, as is generally accepted in Germany in accordance with the theories of the late sociologist Heinrich Popitz. Popitz defined violence as follows: “Violence is an action of power leading to intentional physical injury of others.”¹³ However, in addition to being beaten, kicked, hung, etc., prisoners in the concentration camps were subject

¹⁰ *Alter Kämpfer* = a member of the Nazi “old guard,” i.e. an individual who joined the NSDAP before Hitler seized power in 1933.

¹¹ *Volkssturm* = a German national militia formed during the final months of the war.

¹² For further reading on the term *Handlungsoption*, see: Lüdtke, “Fehlgreifen.”

¹³ Popitz, *Phänomene*, p. 73; Sofsky, *Traktat*; Trotha, *Soziologie*; Nedelmann, “Gewaltsoziologie.” The study of violence still varies markedly from country to country, leading to considerable barriers

to other types of violence.¹⁴ The high mortality rates in the camps cannot be explained without introducing a more comprehensive definition of violence, which addresses the structural nature of a system that provides inadequate food, clothing, and shelter.

The nutritional situation is one example of a type of violence in the camps. The severe hunger experienced in many subcamps did not reach its culmination until foodstuffs were stolen by the SS and prisoner functionaries. At the same time, the systematic starvation of prisoners was the calculated result of the meager rations approved by the Reich Ministry of Food and Agriculture. The majority of the inmates in the subcamps died of hunger and disease. Nonetheless, the constant threat of violence was necessary to prevent inmates from escaping or acquiring food. The phenomenon of starvation in concentration camps shows that it is inappropriate to limit the definition of violence in accordance with Popitz's theories. Instead, it is necessary to examine more closely the connections between direct physical violence and structural violence.¹⁵

INMATE SOCIETY, SURVIVAL TECHNIQUES, AND ORAL HISTORY

Prisoners in the subcamps of the Neuengamme concentration camp were forced to endure scarcity and subjugation. The SS denied the prisoners sufficient access to vital essentials, above all food. They then used the severely weakened inmates for slave labor, which led to further exhaustion and debilitation. The will to survive prompted the prisoners to develop survival strategies and techniques.¹⁶ Generally speaking, the greater the deprivations and the more debilitating the slave labor, the greater the decline in the inmates' chances of survival. Furthermore, it can be assumed that the poorer the conditions in a subcamp, the more fiercely inmates fought for food and clothing to survive. This book examines their living conditions and survival strategies, both from a structural and an individual perspective.

Over the years, researchers have made several attempts to identify approaches that enhanced the inmates' likelihood of surviving. The most impressive effort to date was made by Terrence Des Pres, who describes a type of individual called the "successful survivor," i.e. someone who left behind all traditional moral values and

among the perceptions of Anglo-American, French, and German researchers. Similar approaches are taken by: Collins, *Violence*; Bourke, *Intimate History*; Wieviorka, *Violence*.

¹⁴ For examples of what the Popitz-oriented school of thought defines as violent actions, see: Trotha, *Soziologie*, p. 26. For sound arguments against an overly restrictive definition of physical violence, see: Scheper-Hughes/Bourgeois, "Making Sense."

¹⁵ There is, however, legitimate criticism of Johan Galtung's definition of structural violence, which is as follows: "Violence is present when human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realizations are below their potential realizations" (Galtung, "Violence," p. 168). This definition is too broad. Nevertheless, Galtung's stance that refusing to meet essential needs can constitute an act of violence is accurate and helpful to an analysis of the concentration camps.

¹⁶ For a similar analysis, see: Botz, "Binnenstrukturen."

was able to adapt to the world of the concentration camp.¹⁷ In the present work, however, the assumption is that there was no *single* approach that worked, but rather a wide range of survival strategies, whose chances of success largely depended on the conditions in each individual subcamp.

Eyewitness accounts and interviews are a key source of information for this research. In the archives of the Neuengamme Concentration Camp Memorial alone there are nearly 1,000 interviews and testimonies that deal with life in one or several of the subcamps. These are unique sources. When it comes to issues that also involve social relationships and emotions, it is essential to take into consideration the subjective nature of such experiences. Only by examining the first-hand accounts of survivors is it possible to shed light on the processes of adapting to an inhuman world and the survival strategies developed there.¹⁸ In that sense, oral histories are more than just an additional source; they make it possible to ask further questions and provide appropriate answers.¹⁹

Since the days of the initial oral history projects, the methodological debate has deepened considerably. Nevertheless, many key issues have by no means been clarified. It is of particular importance to note that the range of available source materials for research in the field of concentration camps is not representative. Only the survivors were able to tell their stories.²⁰ Furthermore, the reporting individuals write or speak in the knowledge of how the story will end. The surviving inmates are fully aware of the dimension of the mass murder, and they speak from the perspective of survival.²¹

On a general level, there is the issue of the reality reference of interviews and testimonies. Today, most researchers agree that these oral histories do not offer a historical portrayal of events, which, it should be noted, no other source can provide either. It is imperative for the survivors of the camps, but also for all other contemporary witnesses, to give meaning to their own real-life experiences and construct their memories accordingly. What's more, recent research shows that human memory does not function as a storage device, but rather that memories are generated in an ongoing creative process.²²

Ulrike Jureit in particular has indicated that she is rather skeptical of the reality reference of accounts by contemporary witnesses.²³ In recent years, a number of empirical studies of the history of concentration camps have concurred with her views. For instance, Jens-Christian Wagner and Hans Ellger argue that it is only marginally possible or useful to verify the testimonies by survivors due to the constructive character of their statements.²⁴ By contrast, Christopher Browning and Hermann Kaienburg contend that a verification of statements is possible based on source comparisons.²⁵ What is surprising about these studies, though, is that

¹⁷ Des Pres, *The Survivor*. ¹⁸ Pollak, *Grenzen*, p. 106.

¹⁹ Niethammer, *Fragen*; Perks/Thomson (eds), *Oral History*.

²⁰ Pollak, *Grenzen*, p. 107; White, "Marking absences."

²¹ Young, *Beschreiben des Holocausts*, p. 58.

²² Jureit, *Konstruktion*, p. 6; Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, chapter 2.

²³ Jureit, *Erinnerungsmuster*. ²⁴ Wagner, *Produktion*, p. 33; Ellger, *Zwangsarbeit*, p. 23.

²⁵ Browning, *Collected Memories*; Kaienburg, *Vernichtung*, p. 21.

only minor differences can be found in the way researchers deal with accounts by contemporary witnesses. Even Wagner and Ellger use quotations from such accounts as if they actually could represent the past.

The present study takes a pragmatic approach that deals productively with the issue of a reality reference. The personal accounts are viewed both as individual constructions by the survivors—in which real-life experiences are processed—and as proof of the actual events that transpired in the camps. The key issue of the concrete events that occurred in the camps will be discussed from diverse perspectives that are not rated in advance on a scale of reality references. A critical historical description, which takes seriously the views of the victims and endeavors to report on the conditions in the camps and the crimes that were committed there, must also rely upon testimonies and interviews as a source. Indeed—and this is one of the goals of my research—that is the only way that an integrated history of the subcamps can be written in line with the work of Saul Friedländer.²⁶

In view of this, an attempt will be made to portray the accounts in their real-life dimension while demonstrating the constructive processes of memory. Consequently, I interpret four accounts by survivors in Chapter 6 in a comprehensive manner and examine these oral histories within the overall context of their life stories. The primary objective here is to use real-life perspectives to lend greater depth and breadth to the systematic and structural analysis of the subcamps.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE STUDY

Chapter 1 provides background information on the establishment of the subcamps throughout the entire concentration camp system. First, it focuses on the similarities and differences between the diverse concentration camp systems. Second, it analyzes the close connection between the development of the concentration camp system and the course taken by the war. Chapter 2 traces the negotiations between the various groups of actors who were responsible for establishing the subcamps of the Neuengamme concentration camp in northern Germany. Chapter 3 outlines the structural conditions that basically applied to all subcamps, with only minor exceptions.

Chapters 4 through 6 constitute the heart of the work. Chapter 4 systematically compares conditions in the various subcamps of the Neuengamme concentration camp. The mortality rates in each of the camps serve as the main benchmark here. Chapter 5 examines the prisoner populations in the subcamps and the collective and individual survival strategies of the detainees. The first section of the chapter analyzes the conditions in the subcamps. Subsequently, a total of four accounts and interviews with survivors are analyzed. These oral histories provide individual narratives of life in one of the subcamps. In Chapter 6 the focus is on acts of violence and perpetrators. The first section describes and systematically analyzes the

²⁶ Friedländer, "Integrierte Geschichte."

acts of violence committed in the subcamps, while the second section illustrates the different groups of perpetrators based on their areas of responsibility and the diverse factors that led them to become concentration camp guards. Chapter 7 examines the behavior of the local German population that came into contact with the prisoners in the subcamps. Chapter 8 describes the evacuation of the Neuengamme concentration camp and its subcamps.

The present book is based on two German publications. Chapter 1 is an excerpt from a study of the subcamp system,²⁷ while the remaining chapters are from the published version of my dissertation.²⁸ All chapters have been abridged for this publication. Likewise, all chapters were updated in accordance with the latest findings in the literature.

²⁷ Buggeln, *System*.

²⁸ Buggeln, *Arbeit und Gewalt*.

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