

## The Satellite Camps of the Neuengamme Concentration Camp – an Overview

The Neuengamme concentration camp was much more than just the main camp that was built in 1938 about twenty-five kilometers southeast of the city center in the rural outskirts of Hamburg. More than 80 satellite camps were part of the Neuengamme camp system. These camps were founded during the second half of the war when SS extended the concentration camp system with economic considerations in mind.

As early as April 1942, a few hundred prisoners from Neuengamme were taken to the concentration camp Arbeitsdorf, created close to the premises of Volkswagenwerk Corporation. The camp was practically independent, although in the beginning it was still answerable to the commander of Neuengamme, Martin Weiß. The first satellite camps located directly at private companies were founded in August 1942 at the Phrix works in the town of Wittenberge — the very first labor camp at a non-governmental business ever — and in October 1942 at the Reichswerke Hermann Göring in the town of Salzgitter-Drütte. At around the same time, 1,000 prisoners from Neuengamme were brought to Bremen and Osnabrück for the purpose of doing clearing work after air raids. In the following years squads of prisoners from Neuengamme were employed in a number of northern Germany cities (Hamburg, Kiel, Wilhelmshaven), on factory premises, or after massive raids on railroad installations (Soest/Bad Sassendorf, Uelzen). These prisoners cleared away debris, blasted ruins that were in danger of collapsing, and recovered and interred corpses of victims; some special squads were also ordered to blast blind shells.

During the second half of 1943, a further two satellite camps were added: one at Accumulatorenfabrik Hanover-Stöcken corporation and one in Bremen-Farge, where the prisoners helped to build the submarine shelter Valentin. Slowly, the number of prisoners in satellite camps approached the number of prisoners in the main camp: in August 1943, prisoners in the main camp numbered around 5,500 and in the satellite camps around 4,000.


Ten thousands of people from all countries occupied by Germany were deported to Neuengamme by the Secret State Police, the Security Service, and SS in the course of the war. The reason for their imprisonment was usually resistance against the German occupying forces or rebellion against the forced labor system. Some prisoners were victims of sheer despotism: a few thousand Polish

men and women taken prisoner after the Warsaw Uprising are one example, another is the 600 men from the Dutch commonality of Putten who were deported to the Neuengamme concentration camp in October 1944 as retaliation for an nearby assault.

The rate at which the camp grew increased over the years and it multiplied again in the last year of the war. Between May 1944 and the end of the war, approximately 40,000 people, mostly from other concentration camps, were deported to Neuengamme and distributed from there to the auxiliaries. The percentage of Germans among the prisoners dropped below 10%. The prisoners from the Soviet Union alone numbered 34,350, they thus made up more than a third of the registered prisoners (34.1%), the next largest national groups were the Polish who numbered 16,900 (16.7%) and the French who numbered 11,500 (11.4%). They were followed by the Dutch (6,950 / 6.9%), the Belgium and Danish (4,800 each / 4.8%) and members of 19 other national groups.



Most of the satellite camps were created in the last year of the war, when an ever-increasing number of prisoners were forced to do slave labor mostly for the armament industry. Particular amassments of satellite camps could be found in the areas of industrial concentration in Hamburg (Blohm&Voss, Deutsche Werft, Drägerwerke, Hanseatische Kettenwerke and others), Bremen (Borgward, Deschimag, Krupp-Norddeutsche Hütte and others), Hanover (Brinker Eisenwerke, Continental, Hanomag, and others), and Braunschweig-Salzgitter (Büssing, Reichswerke Hermann-Göring, Volkswagen, and others). The prisoners were usually employed to build new production facilities and to clear up debris after air raids; those who worked in the actual production of arms formed a small percentage. The function of other satellite camps was to aid the move of armament industries to underground production facilities (Beendorf, Hanover-Ahlem, Lengerich, and Porta-Westfalica), to build emergency housing units (Bremen-Obernheide, Hamburg-Poppenbüttel), or to build fortifications - e.g. the project Friesenwall, which included building anti tank trenches along the North Sea to ward off an allied invasion (Meppen-Versen, Dalum, Aurich-Engerhufe, Husum-Schwesing, and Ladelund).

Quite a few of the satellite camps that were created during the last year of the war were intended for Jewish prisoners only. Beginning in the summer of 1944, when the supply situation for the army grew increasingly bad, SS had Jewish prisoners mainly from Auschwitz deported for forced labor. Among them were approximately 3,000 Polish, Czech, and Hungarian Jewish women.



The prisoner population of the Neuengamme concentration camp was not made up exclusively of men. Although around 90% of all registered prisoners were indeed men, approximately 13,500 women also wore a Neuengamme batch. The main camp itself remained a site of incarceration of men, but 23 of the satellite camps were designated women's camps — ten of them within the city limits of Hamburg. The women were taken to the satellite camps directly, whereas the men were usually brought to the main camp first and then distributed to the satellite camps. Without exception, the designated women satellite camps of Neuengamme were created during the last year of the war.

The importance of the satellite camps is further highlighted by the fact that toward the ends of the war three times more prisoners were in satellite camps than in the main camp: According to the quarterly report of the SS garrison doctor of 29 March 1945, at that time 39,880 prisoners, among them 12,073 women, were forced to perform slave labor for the armament industry. At the same time there were 14,000 prisoners in the completely overcrowded main camp.



The living and working conditions in the Neuengamme concentration camp were deadly. Thin clothing, insufficient food and medical care, catastrophic sanitary conditions topped by the SS guards' harassment and abuse caused the death of many prisoners. Even though the conditions in the different satellite camps differed depending on the assigned work, the overall mortality was growing quickly. During the last weeks and days of the war when the camps were emptied out as the allied troops approached, 15,000 prisoners died. They died shortly before their liberation when they were forced to march on foot for days on end or were transported in extremely overcrowded freight trains; they died when they found themselves in the collection camps and ,convalescent camps' of Bergen-Belsen, Sandbostel, and Wöbbelin, and finally after the air raid on the overcrowded ships Cap Arcona and Thielbek. Of the 106,000 prisoners (5,000 were never registered as prisoners) of the Neuengamme concentration camp an estimated 55,000, more than half, died.

Twenty years went by before the international memorial was erected in Neuengamme in 1965. Thirty-six years went by before the inauguration of the Document Center displaying information on the history of the concentration camp and an exhibition telling the story of the crimes committed by SS. Around the same time, in the early eighties, there was a broad movement to investigate the history of the satellite camps. Seminal work was done on forced prisoner




labor and the armament industry in the satellite camps in Hanover (Herbert Obenaus et al), on the employment of prisoners in the Göring Works in Salzgitter (Gerd Wysocki), and on forced labor for the Volkswagen Corporation (Klaus-Jörg Siegfried). A large number of works on the satellite camps followed, most of which were written by interested individuals and groups, usually outside the established research institutions. Often some brochure telling the story of a forgotten camp „right in our backyards“, distributed by a group of high-school students, instigated the creation of a memorial marker or an information panel on the grounds of the former camp. In many cases there was resistance to be overcome and long struggles to be had with local town authorities. However, this drew an increased public attention to the sites of the camps that had been banned from the communities' consciousness for years and decades.

These partly very intense struggles of the eighties that accompanied the activities on the part of youth organizations, associations of victims, church parishes and labor union groups, to foster creating memorials are themselves already history. The present volume is an inventory of the memorials for Neuengamme and its satellite camps and it shows that today the crimes of the Nazi regime are commemorated on very many of those sites.

A survey of the information collected for this book proves that the number of memorial sites increased considerably: Whereas the first three postwar decades until the end of the seventies saw the dedication of 39 commemorative markers and memorials (14 of them in the German Democratic Republic), the two decades between 1980 and 1999 saw the inauguration of another 66 memorials sites on the grounds of former satellite camps.

Many of the sites of former satellite camps also offer other means to learn about history. There are 17 places with their own little documentation center or at least their own permanent exhibition as part of a local museum. They are usually located at the site of a large satellite camp or of large-scale massacres towards the end of the war. Note that 13 of these were created only after 1980. The documentation centers were often founded by a citizens' initiative group and have grown to be active centers in their respective regions.

Permanent exhibitions on the history of satellite camps of Neuengamme exist in Beendorf, Hamburg-Fuhlsbüttel, Hamburg-Sasel, Hanover-Ahlem, Husum-Schwesing, Ladelund, Papenburg (dedicated to Dalum, Meppen, and Versen), Salzgitter-Drütte, and Wilhelmshaven. The thousands of victims of emptying



out the camps at the end of the war are commemorated at the memorial centers of the reception camps Sandbostel and Wöbbelin and in Gardelegen (massacre of 13 April 1945 in the field barn Isenschnibbe). The story of the murder of 20 Jewish children and Soviet POW who were subjected to medical experiments in the Neuengamme concentration camp is told at the Bullenhuser Damm School in Hamburg; the sinking of the prisoner ships Cap Arcona and Thielbeck on 3 May 1945 is commemorated in the exhibitions in Grevesmühlen, Neustadt in Holstein, and on the island Poel.

If you consider on whose initiative all of the above mentioned memorial sites and museum like documentation centers were created, the following picture emerges: On the territory of former West Germany, there are 37 cases in which the municipalities, counties or federal states gave the impulse, and 53 cases - as far as is known - in which the impulse came from private persons. In eleven cases private initiative groups or private people financed the memorials completely, whereas in 42 cases - regularly only after quite a lot of strenuous coaxing - public funding was granted. The cases distribute evenly among the Amicale Internationale de Neuengamme, the Organization of Victims of the Nazi Regime/Association of Antifascists (VVN/BdA) and other organizations of prosecuted, party organizations, religious groups, groups of students and local historical societies.

Although the last few years have seen quite a number of dedications of new monuments in particular in connection to the 50th anniversary of liberation, there are still 28 former satellite camps, whose existence is not marked by any sign. In fact these 28 are not necessarily very small or camps of marginal importance. Thus is the case of the satellite camp Wittenberge/Elbe, which existed for a long three years and which had 500 prisoners who worked as forced laborers in the cellulose production of the Phrix corporation. However, Wittenberge/Elbe is the only case of an unmarked satellite camp on the territory of former East Germany. On the other hand, in Bremen you would look in vain for a sign at the Borgwardwerke (1,000 prisoners) and at Deschimag (582 prisoners). In Hamburg nothing betrays the existence of the large camp on Spaldingstraße with 2,000 prisoners who were employed in clearing work and corps recovery after the air raids in the summer of 1943. No signs point to the existence of satellite camps at the traditional shipyards Blohm&Voss (572 prisoners) and Howaldt (230 prisoners) in Hamburg. People in the communality of Porta Westfalica apparently do not see fit to memorialize the two camps that



existed there: A II/Barkhausen (983 prisoners) and Lerbeck (569 prisoners). In Hanover, where a number of impressive memorials exist for some of the satellite camps, nothing gives away the sites of the satellite camps at the tire manufacturer Continental (1,000 prisoners) and at the metal works in Brink (500 prisoners).

Although at some of the sites some work remains to be done — and I do hope that this book will be an incentive to change the situation in these places — it has the past is understood as a duty and an opportunity. May this book help to anchor the sites of memory more deeply in the public consciousness so that the memorials and mute witnesses keep carrying the memories even when the survivors of the Nazi barbarism will not be able to raise their voices themselves any more.

Memorial Museum of the Neuengamme Concentration Camp  
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