

The Prison Ships on the Baltic Sea



The burning wreck of the "Cap Arcona" on 3 Mai 1945.

Because he had no more "reception camps" for the prisoners from the main camp at his disposal, the Hamburg NSDAP *Gauleiter* (regional party leader), Karl Kaufmann, requisitioned ships berthed in Lübeck. More than 9,000 prisoners were then taken to Lübeck and put on board these ships. The prisoners were crammed into the holds, where they suffered from hunger, thirst, and disease. Many of them died.

On 3 May 1945, during a British aerial attack intended to stop German forces from retreating across the Baltic Sea, the ships "Cap Arcona" and "Thielbek", which were lying at anchor just off the coast at Neustadt were bombed and set on fire. Almost 7,000 prisoners drowned, were burned alive, or shot dead while trying to save themselves. Only 450 prisoners survived.

There was no water, no toilets, everything was completely filthy.
Freek Lode, former prisoner from the Netherlands, undated statement.
After the end of this operation, the ship will probably have to be disinfected.
John Jacobsen, captain of the "Thielbek", in a letter to the ship-owning company on 23 April 1945.

[...] and then the people arrived. We knew of the existence of concentration camps in Germany – I'd say almost everybody knew of them. And we also knew they weren't rest homes. But we didn't know what those people looked like. It was shocking for us.

[...] there were people there who were literally just skin and bones.

Walter Felgner, second mate of the "Thielbek" in an interview on 21 January 1983.

We heard several planes, and immediately the first bomb fell onto our ship. [...] There was an indescribable panic in the water next to the ship. [...] People were scuffling and scrambling for any piece of wood or other floating object within their reach.

Heinrich Mehringer, former prisoner from Germany, undated statement.

It was only weeks later that numerous bodies were washed ashore on the beaches at Scharbeutz and Haffkrug. On some days, there seemed to be dozens of them.

Helmut Karcher, who had witnessed the tragedy of the ships carrying concentration camp prisoners as a nine-year-old boy, in a letter from 16 February 1980.