The light metal foundry erected by Arbeitsdorf prisoners, nd

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The Arbeitsdorf (labor village) camp was one of the very first concentration camps created in affiliation with the German armaments industry. It was located on the premises of the Volkswagen corporation's main factory in the Lower Saxon city of Wolfsburg, which, at that time, principally consisted of huts and barracks. The city carried the awkward name Stadt-des-Kraft-durch-Freude-Wagens bei Fallersleben, since the Volkswagen automobile was being marketed by, and was named after, the Nazi Party organization for mass leisure program Kraft durch Freude (Strength through Joy KdF). Arbeitsdorf was, technically, an independent camp under the SS-Business Administration Main Office (WVHA), but it never became a fully operational main camp. From its creation on April 8, 1942, until its closure late that same year, it maintained close connections to—if not semidependency upon—the Neuen-gamme main camp in Hamburg, from which it received the majority of its prisoners, SS guards, and managerial personnel, including its camp commandants, Martin Weiss (initially) and Wilhelm Schiltl (from September 1, 1942).

Following the frustration of Germany's attempt to achieve a rapid victory over the Soviet Union and the German declaration of war upon the United States, Nazi armaments, economic, and labor policies were submitted to major scrutiny. Early in 1942, Albert Speer was appointed minister of armaments after the deceased Fritz Todt, and Fritz Sauckel, as Generalbevollmächtigter für den Arbeitseinsatz, was made responsible for relieving the Reich's serious manpower deficit by way of recruiting—by various degrees of force—foreign labor from the territories occupied by Germany. In this new situation, the SS expanded its activities into the armaments sector and, according to some scholars such as Hans Mommsen, aimed at building an outright economic empire. In postwar statements that were part of his Nuremberg Tribunal defense efforts, Speer—diminishing his responsibility for the Nazi forced and slave labor programs—vastly exaggerated the role and aggressiveness of the SS. Recent research does not support Speer's contention but instead stresses the reactive and defensive nature of the SS venture into armaments and the priority of Heinrich Himmler's civilian postwar goals. The SS began leasing slave laborers to German industry in order to keep control over the concentration camp system and to stock up capacities for its grand settlement drive in Eastern Europe. Ideas for expanding the SS economic activities had already surfaced in 1940, and plans of opening concentration camps for Jewish slave laborers were close to becoming a reality in early 1941 in the Stadt-des-KdF-Wagens and other major industrial sites but were wrecked by Hitler, who forbade all import of Jewish labor into the Old Reich. The initiatives were, however, primarily on the side of private and state-run enterprises and corresponded to no long-term economic planning or strategy on behalf of the SS.

The decision to establish a concentration camp at the Volkswagenwerk main factory was taken at a meeting that brought together Volkswagen chief executive Ferdinand Porsche, Reichsführer-SS Himmler, and Hitler on January 11, 1942. Porsche, the leading personality in the Volkswagen triumvirate, belonged to the Führer's inner circle and had staged cooperation projects with Himmler and the SS on a number of occasions since the early days of his developing the “People's Car.” Thus, at the Volkswagenwerk, special SS units performed the factory police duties. Porsche, an Oberführer of the Allgemeine (General) SS since early 1942, was always short of labor for the expansion of the company that he—in spite of its being owned by the Nazi labor organization Deutsche Arbeitsfront (German Labor Front)—treated as his own private property. It seems that Porsche, possessing inside information about the approaching change in labor policy, rushed to approach Himmler in order to gain privileged access to the new pool of manpower that was about to be opened: the concentration camp inmates. The company wished to resume the construction of a light alloy foundry that had been halted in the summer of 1940 because it lacked military relevance. To Himmler, Porsche's initiative provided an opportunity to test a model for SS cooperation with industry.

The order (Führerweisung) he arranged for Hitler to issue did, however, go too far, as it provided for the foundry to be constructed and run by concentration camp prisoners (Haftlinge) under SS responsibility. Thus, Arbeitsdorf would gain permanency, and the SS would take control of a major armaments enterprise with an expanding production of motor vehicles, airplane parts, and small arms. The Arbeitsdorf camp would have been the first concentration camp to be opened at an existing industrial facility outside the concentration camps, but its establishment was delayed by a typhus epidemic in Neuen-gamme, which caused the main camp to be placed under quarantine and took a heavy toll among the prisoners who had been selected for Arbeitsdorf. Only after the quarantine was lifted on March 31 could the prisoners and replacements leave for Fallersleben. By this time, negotiations had proceeded between Volkswagen, the WVHA, and Speer's Ministry of Armaments, which was not keen on the SS/Volkswagen cooperation. A narrower commission was agreed upon: the SS would provide the manpower for completing the construction of the foundry, but the purpose of the facility would be reviewed once again by military authorities in the meantime. By September 1942, Speer had strengthened his foothold in the Nazi regime so much that he could make the Führer concede in halting anew the Volkswagen foundry project, once again because of its alleged lack of military relevance. The construction of the huge melting and foundry complex, supervised by the leader of the SS department for engineering, SS-Oberführer Hans
Kammler, and company engineers, was completed on time by mid-September, but the plan for equipping it was shelved until further notice. The majority of the prisoners were transferred to Sachsenhausen and Buchenwald by early October, with only a small labor detachment remaining to clean and clear the site. By late 1942, the Arbeitsdorf concentration camp was closed, and the remaining prisoners and SS were transferred to other camps.

After inspection of the building site and future camp location on January 30, 1942, Kammler—whose hope of including the camp in a new system of SS-Baubrigaden (construction brigades) under his command was frustrated—estimated the number of prisoners needed at 800, but the fact that more than 150 SS-Totenkopf guards seem to have been assigned to the camp by mid-April indicates that the envisioned prisoner strength would be 1,500 or more. The number of prisoners probably never exceeded 500, but quantitative information on this camp is scarce, and witness testimony extremely contradictory. A first transport of 100 to 150 prisoners arrived from Neuengamme on April 8, 1942, followed by a larger transport from Sachsenhausen. The prisoners had been trained in construction work on the SS brickyard building sites of these camps. Many nationalities were represented, including a number of Soviet prisoners of war (POWs). The proportion of German political prisoners who would be available as Kapo and work foremen (Vorarbeiter) was rather high, just in case the prisoner population was enlarged. Among the political prisoners were a small number of Jews. Information found in some literature indicating that a large number of Arbeitsdorf prisoners were Sinti and Roma (“Gypsies”) is not confirmed.

Arbeitsdorf did not resemble the typical main camp, nor the decentralized subcamps that grew so numerous during the later years of the war. Its prisoners were accommodated in a row of concrete air-raid shelters on the lower level of the unfinished foundry building. Seven standard huts were raised to accommodate the SS guards and offices as well as offices of the civilian companies involved in the construction project; a small number of skilled and “prominent” inmates were also placed in these huts and allowed the “privilege” of access to daylight and fresh air. The security was atypical, as there were no watch towers or barbed-wire fences; the area was surrounded by a chain link fence typical for building sites but guarded by a string of SS guards armed with submachine guns and patrolled by SS dog patrols. Since the concentration camp area was identical with the building site, and was located inside the larger factory compound, a prisoner who attempted to flee from the camp would have to escape the SS factory police who frequently patrolled the outer compound and cross the barbed-wire fence surrounding it. No prisoner is actually known to have attempted to escape.

Slave labor was the sole purpose of the Arbeitsdorf camp. The work involved heavy construction: the laying of concrete floors and roofs, masonry, plumbing, glazing, and so on. A large number of the prisoners were assigned to pushing trolleys with liquid concrete from a centralized cement mixing station; others functioned as Träger, carriers of iron profiles and other heavy materials. Work was conducted under the surveillance of the SS and civilian construction management that represented the German private companies Wiemer und Trachte (Berlin, main contractor), Philip Holzmann (Hannover), Christian Salzmann (Leipzig), and Arbeitsgemeinschaft der Baugewerbe/Bauinnung Osnabrück. Civilian foremen and technicians from these companies were in command of the various groups of prisoners and provided them with instruction, but there were normally no civilian workers at the building site, so it can be considered a model concentration camp enterprise (KZ-Betrieb) and obviously was viewed as such by leading SS personalities such as Oswald Pohl.

In the interest of the swift and orderly completion of the project, prisoners’ provisions were substantially better than in most concentration camps. Three daily meals were served: breakfast consisted of bread, marmalade, cottage cheese, and ersatz coffee; the noon meal was distributed at the work site and consisted of good and plentiful hot stews, low in fat but rich in protein; and bread, cheese, and cold meat or a hot meal of surplus food from the Volkswagen factory lunch rooms were served in the air-raid shelters after work. Food distribution was, however, neither even nor just, for extra rations were used as rewards primarily to the privileged prisoners who performed Kapo and Vorarbeiter jobs or who operated valuable machinery. The majority of the carriers and other prisoners with heavy duties were rarely given extra rations. All testimony underlines, however, the high quality of the food that was delivered by the Volkswagenwerk factory kitchen and the model hygienic conditions. Prisoners who were weak and skinny after the Neuengamme typhus epidemic were even able to regain weight and strength in spite of performing hard work at the building site. For the same reason, morbidity was low, and the medical orderlies who were in charge of the small infirmary (Revier), under the surveillance of camp doctor SS-Obersturmbannführer Vetter, mostly were occupied with treating victims of the work accidents that frequently occurred. No deaths were registered at Arbeitsdorf, but survivors’ testimonies indicate that some prisoners were transferred to other main camps in order to receive punishment or because they were too weak to go on working.

Clearly, Volkswagen and the subcontracting companies had a common interest in facilitating the project by providing tolerable living and working conditions for the inmates, while the SS wanted this camp to give private companies a taste of exploiting concentration camp slave labor, so that they would enter into similar arrangements in the future. This explains why the prisoners were given new prison uniforms, including underwear, and used leather shoes, instead of wooden clogs, and why clean clothing was handed out twice a week. Considering the large number of inspection visits by SS, political, and business leaders, the inmates had to present themselves as efficient workers; cleanliness clearly constituted an important part of this image.

Even if the productive exploitation of the prisoners was now the centerpiece in Arbeitsdorf and future “industrial"
concentration camps, the established, notorious SS regime of terror, which envisioned work as a form of punishment aiming at breaking the opponents of the Nazi Party, was only slightly modified. Arbeitsdorf prisoners worked from 6 A.M. to 6 P.M. with a 30-minute meal break as their only rest period, and they had to perform their work at a speedy pace; there was no walking, only “Running, always running” (“Laufschnitt, immer Laufschnitt”).\(^1\) Civilian foremen, Kapos, and SS overseers would incite them with a flow of curses and insults. There was, however, little beating and brutality on the work site, and according to survivors’ testimony, the prisoner-functionaries (\textit{Funktionshaftlinge})—mostly political prisoners with a labor movement background—generally administered their difficult task with decency, avoiding excess violence and encouraging prisoner solidarity and mutual help. The Porsche hagiography, however, ascribes the low level of violence to an intervention by the leading executive, forbidding public punishments on the work site, but the evidence—recollections of an SS physician who was facing a war crimes sentence—is doubtful. Instead of immediate punishment, the SS men who were in charge of the individual work details reported prisoners whom they suspected of sabotage or slowing down work, as well as anyone they disliked for some reason, to be punished after the end of the working day. One air-raid shelter was fitted with a flogging bench (\textit{Prügelhocke}) and various other instruments of torture—as well as with a miniscule prisoners’ canteen (\textit{Häftlingskantine}) where prisoners who were allowed to receive money from family outside the camp, or who were awarded bonus vouchers, could buy conserves from a vegetable farm on the Volkswagenwerk premises. For reasons of discretion, punishments were carried out in this air-raid shelter, not in front of civilian personnel and passersby. Apart from floggings, the hideous torture of binding a prisoner’s arms behind him and hanging him by his wrists from the ceiling (\textit{Pfahlhängen}) was used to enforce discipline and work eagerness. From what company personnel could see, the camp presented the impression of a quasi-militarily organized work site, where the prisoners (allegedly criminals and Jews) had to work hard but where just treatment would prevail. This was also the picture presented to them in a briefing by camp commandant Weiss on the day the first prisoners arrived.

Unseen by anyone, prisoners spent their off-duty hours in the air-raid shelters, which were rarely inspected by the SS. The low, narrow bunkers were crowded and lacked proper ventilation. Furniture was restricted to two-tier bunk beds with straw mattresses, plank tables, and benches, but at least the prisoners were left largely to themselves. They could visit other bunkers, discuss or engage in barter and black market-eering, even listen to Nazi radio since the so-called People’s Radios (\textit{Völksempfänger}) that were part of the original air-raid shelter equipment had not been disconnected. Sleeping was the preferred activity, however, as the work was extremely exhausting. Extra work occurred on Sundays because building materials arriving by rail had to be speedily unloaded that same day. This assignment was voluntary and was rewarded with extra rations, but prisoners who did not volunteer frequently and willingly enough were punished corporally or by being deprived of a meal or an entire day’s rations.

The SS’s interest in developing Arbeitsdorf into a model for the exploitation of concentration camp labor in industrial enterprises was reflected in the choice of the Neuengamme camp commandant to command Arbeitsdorf simultaneously. SS-Hauptsturmführer Martin Gottfried Weiss had a long career at Dachau behind him, ending as adjutant before he was appointed the first camp commandant of Neuengamme in 1940, when this camp gained the status of a main camp. Weiss was an electronics engineer by profession and combined a strong devotion to Nazi ideology with a “technocratic” approach to prisoner treatment. This balance allowed economic goals to exist alongside the more purely destructive practices that had dominated within the camp system. Weiss spoke the language of business decision-makers at the same time as being popular among the SS rank and file. He did not perform acts of cruelty himself but instigated his men to maintain the system of terror, thus consciously using terror, together with minor improvements and petty material incentives, to “motivate” prisoners. As reward for demonstrating that concentration camp labor could be productive, he was promoted to camp commandant of Dachau on September 1, 1942. SS-Hauptsturmführer Wilhelm Schitli, who had been Schutzhaftlagerführer in Neuengamme and Weiss’s second in command in Arbeitsdorf, succeeded him as the second and last commandant of the camp.

The Arbeitsdorf concentration camp was a main camp and was probably intended to be expanded well above the level attained; however, it never did obtain the full structure of a main camp during its short existence. Its main historical significance is that it tested a new form of SS cooperation with German industry—which proved successful. Even if the organizational model of Arbeitsdorf remained unique, it provided the SS with experience in dealing with slave labor in a modern profit-oriented production process and thus paved the way for the subcamp system that was to expand vastly during the last two years of World War II. The tolerable prisoners’ conditions as compared to other concentration camps must be ascribed to its intended function as a “model camp,” meant to impress industrial decision-makers, as well as to the acts of solidarity by its prisoner “self-administration.”

**Sources** The Arbeitsdorf camp is referred to in numerous works on the Nazi concentration camp system and on automotive history. This essay is based primarily on the author’s research for the book by Hans Mommsen et al., \textit{Das Volkswagenwerk und seine Arbeiter im Dritten Reich} (Düsseldorf, 1996), pp. 766–799; see the detailed source references in this work. See also Lutz Budrass and Manfred Grieger, “Die Moral der Effizienz: Die Beschäftigung von KZ-Häftlingen am Beispiel des Volkswagenwerks und der Henschel Flugzeug-Werke,” \textit{JHWg} 34 (1993): 89–136; Klaus-Jörg Siegfried, \textit{Das Leben der Zwangsarbeiter im Volkswagenwerk 1939–1945} (Frankfurt am Main, 1988); Jan-Erik Schulte, \textit{Zwangarbeit und Vernichtung: Das Wirtschaftsimperium der SS} (Paderborn, 2001), p. 211; Karin Orth, \textit{Das System der nationalsozialistischen Konzentra-
tionsdager (Düsseldorf, 1999), p. 169; and Michael Thad Allen; The Business of Genocide: The SS, Slave Labor, and the Concentration Camps (Chapel Hill, 2002), pp. 167, 207. Preliminary data on Arbeitsdorf may be found in Das nationalsozialistische Lagersystem (CCP), ed. Martin Weinmann, with Anne Kaiser and Ursula Krause-Schmitt, prepared originally by ITS (1949–1951; repr., with new intro. matter, Frankfurt am Main: Zweitausendeins, 1990); and Gudrun Schwarz, Die nationalsozialistischen Lager (Frankfurt am Main, 1990).

Key documents about the Arbeitsdorf camp have been published by the city archivist of Wolfsburg, Germany: Klaus-Jörg Siegfried, Rüstungsproduktion und Zwangsarbeit im Volkswagenwerk 1939–1945 (Frankfurt am Main, 1987), pp. 56, 152. The ASt-WOB and VWA hold original documents and copies from AG-NG, NHStA-H, BA-B, BA-K, ZdL (now BA-L), and other archives. This material includes survivors’ and eyewitness records. Some Arbeitsdorf SS functionaries faced postwar trials for atrocities committed in other camps, such as camp commandant Martin Weiss in the Dachau main trial (available at NARA), but only scanty information can be gained from these trial records about the Arbeitsdorf camp.

NOTE
