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Megargee, Geoffrey P.

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HERZOGENBUSCH

Post-liberation view of the moat, fence, and guard towers at Herzogenbusch concentration camp, September 1944 to 1945.
USHMM WS #44178, COURTESY OF NARA
In the summer of 1942, only a few weeks after the first deportation train had left the Jewish transit camp (Judendurchgangslager) at Westerbork for Auschwitz on June 15, Höherer-SS und Polizeiführer (HSSPF) Hanns Albin Rauter, in consultation with Reichskommissar Arthur Seyss-Inquart, decided to start construction of a new camp called Herzogenbusch (‘s-Hertogenbosch). Because of its proximity to the municipality of Vught, the Dutch called it Vught.

The most probable reasons for this decision have to be found in Rauter’s concerns about the tempo and effectiveness of the deportation of the Jews from Westerbork—in principle, about 120,000 people eventually were deported—and the obvious malfunctioning of the already existing camp at Amersfoort, which proved to be too small and which had a notorious reputation for its harsh regime.

In the beginning of December 1942, Rauter’s superior, Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler, following Rauter’s regular updates, ordered that Herzogenbusch had to be considered an “official” concentration camp, in other words, a camp under direct supervision of the Berlin offices of the SS Business Administration Main Office (WVHA). He did not want it to be a police transit or extended police camp (Polizeiliches Durchgangslager or Erweiterter Polizeilager) like Amersfoort, or a Judendurchgangslager like Westerbork. To that end, Himmler charged WVHA head Oswald Pohl to have talks with Rauter, which would take place in the same month.1 For the time being (and until May 1944), Rauter did not obtain the final responsibility over the camp—by definition in the hands of the WVHA—but was responsible for its supervision (Dienstaufsicht). This made him responsible for the daily routine of the camp.

The camp itself, formally set up on January 5, 1943,2 started to function on January 13, 1943, with the arrival of about 250 male prisoners (including Jews) from the Amersfoort
camp. A second transport—some 2,000 prisoners from Amersfoort—arrived three days later. The same day, about 450 Jews arrived from Amsterdam (mainly “armament Jews,” or Rüstungsjuden).

Their former guards, all members of the Wachbattalion Nordwest, accompanied the Amersfoort prisoners. Most of the prisoners were in terrible shape. The prisoners’ first task was to build the barracks, which was, given the shape they were in, a very strenuous job. Moreover, hardly any facilities were provided in the beginning. The food provided was poor, and drinkable water was rare. It is not surprising at all that by April 1943 over 200 prisoners had perished. In the end, the camp took up 300,000 square meters (359,000 square yards) and consisted of 36 barracks for living, sleeping, and working. The complete construction of the site was financed from confiscated Jewish capital. The camp had a crematorium but not a gas chamber.

Herzogenbusch became known as one of the few concentration camps located outside the Reich territory (Reichsgebiet). Apart from the control issue, this status had some other implications. The camp was made up of several largely independent sections for different kinds of prisoners: the “protective custody” camp (Schutzhaftlager, including the women’s concentration camp, or Frauenkonzentrationslager); the Judenverdachtsgalager; the students’ camp (Studentenlager); the hostage camp (Geisellag); a Polizeiliches Durchgangslager; and a Security Service camp (Sicherheitsdienst-Lager, or SD-Lager). Most of these sections did not exist through the full period when Herzogenbusch was active. Actually, some of them operated only for a couple of months. In these six sections, an estimated 30,000 people were imprisoned.

The main camp, the Schutzhaftlager, was in operation throughout Herzogenbusch’s existence. About 12,000 people (11,000 men and 1,000 women) were quartered in this camp for periods ranging from less than a month to more than a year. In principle, Schutzhaft (protective custody in order to protect state security) could be imposed on all kinds of prisoners: Jews (i.e., those who violated one of the anti-Jewish measures; the so-called Jews qualified for punishment, or straffällige Juden); political prisoners; Jehovah’s Witnesses; “antisocials” (black marketeers, thieves, and others arrested for economic reasons); and criminals (some of them Kapos, coming from Germany). In the Schutzhaftlager, people imprisoned for purely political reasons made up only a minority.

About 1,350 male prisoners came from abroad, mostly from Belgium and, to a lesser extent, from France. From May 1943 on, women were imprisoned in a separate barracks, called the Frauenkonzentrationslager.

About 60 percent of the prisoners were released; the rest were transported to different concentration camps in Germany. Worth mentioning are the transport of about 90 prisoners, including some very well known resistance fighters, to the concentration camp Natzweiler at the beginning of July 1943 and the transport of about 800 prisoners to Dachau in May 1944.

The Judendurchgangslager opened on January 16, 1943. In the camouflaged language of the Germans it was at that time “appropriately” called the Jewish collection camp (Judenaufnahmefanglager), suggesting the possibility of a longer stay than in Westerbork, as a Judendurchgangslager. About two months afterward, however, it was renamed according to its basic function. The first group of prisoners sent to the Judendurchgangslager was about 450 Jews from Amsterdam. Because their work (with diamonds and textiles) was important for German interests, they believed themselves protected against deportation and thus remained under the illusion that they would stay in the camp. In April and May, thousands more people would arrive, mostly Dutch provincial Jews, or medien. In May 1943, the prisoner population reached its maximum of 9,000 people.

Like the other prisoners, the Jews were put to work in different internal and external detachments (Innen- und Ausenkommandos). However, apart from the usual harassment, working conditions for them were much harsher. This explains why they tried to get assigned to the Philips-Kommando, where life remained relatively acceptable because of the protection of the Philips company management. Even more important, they hoped that this protection would safeguard them against deportation. It did not stop them from being transported, but actually did protect them during their deportation to Auschwitz. After their registration there, almost all the prisoners of this so-called Philips-Transport were transferred to the Gross-Rosen Aussenkommando Langenzenn, where they had to work in a Deutsche Telefunken factory. About one-third of the Philips-Transport prisoners survived.

In all, about 12,000 people—men, women, and children—were imprisoned in Herzogenbusch, all of whom were eventually deported to Sobibór and Auschwitz. Usually, the transports to Poland went through Westerbork. By the beginning of October 1943, this was the fate of more than 10,000 people. Two transports, on November 15, 1943, and June 3, 1944, went straight to Auschwitz. After the last, the above-mentioned Philips-Transport, the camp was closed.
The Studentenlager existed only in February and March 1943. It came into being because of the attempts by the resistance on the lives of high-placed Dutch Nazis. Investigations of the German police indicated that students and people from better-off circles took part in these actions. In reprisal, about 600 students and 1,200 sons of upper-class families (Plutokraten-Söhnen) were arrested at the beginning of February and transferred to Herzogenbusch. After a couple of weeks, almost all of them were released. A small group of students, however, were transported to Germany for forced labor.

In February 1943, the Geisellager was set up. It remained active until the larger camp was dissolved. A few hundred hostages were locked up, generally for not longer than a couple of months. Two groups existed: people imprisoned in reprisal for certain actions of the resistance (Strafgeiseln) and family members of resistance fighters or other people wanted by the German police (Sippengeiseln). The second group did not enter the camp before October 1943. The women and children stayed in the Frauenkonzentrationslager.

In August 1943, as a result of deportations from the Juden- durchgangslager, space became vacant for a new camp: the Polizeiliches Durchgangslager, which thus mirrored the original function of the Amersfoort camp. The immediate cause for this change was the massive overflow of prisoners under investigation (Untersuchungshäftlinge), whose number was far too large to be put up in the prisons of the German police. In total, about 2,000 men and 300 women were imprisoned in this camp.

A special group of Untersuchungshäftlinge consisted of about 1,500 men who, at the time, were imprisoned in the major political prison in the Netherlands, the “Oranjehotel” in Scheveningen. This group was transported to Herzogenbusch in June 1944, because of the Allied invasion in Normandy, and was placed in a special camp, the SD-Lager. Most of the prisoners were considered to be important enough for the Germans that they were put in the so-called Bunker, the camp prison. People from this group of prisoners were executed in August and September 1944.

Like all the other concentration camps, Herzogenbusch is to be considered as a camp complex, that is, a main camp (Hauptlager) with internal sections and several external detachments or subcamps, some of them located in the immediate vicinity of the main camp, others at a distance of over 96 kilometers (60 miles). In general, it can be stated that because of the food supply and working conditions, life in the Hauptlager was less difficult than in the subcamps. On the other hand, escape from these subcamps appeared to be easier than from the main camp.

Four different kinds of detachments or subcamps can be distinguished:

1. Detachments where prisoners constructed and repaired airfields (Arnhem, Eindhoven, Gilze-Rijen [aka Breda], Leeuwarden, and Venlo);
2. Detachments where prisoners worked on coastal defenses (Moerdijk and Roosendaal);
3. Detachments where prisoners performed administrative work on behalf of the Befehlshaber der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD (‘s-Gravenhage, Haaren, and St. Michielsgestel);
4. One detachment where prisoners were deployed for industrial labor (Herzogenbusch).

The camp leadership and part of the guard staff were recruited from people who had already worked in other camps, notably at Sachsenhausen and Mauthausen. German camp inmates were transferred with them, in order to be prominently placed as Kapos in the prisoner hierarchy.

The first camp commandant was SS-Hauptsturmführer Karl Walter Chmielewski, who previously served in Sachsenhausen. Although his conspicuously rude behavior initially did not seem to have raised Rauter’s objections, he was sacked in October 1943 because of misconduct (and even sentenced by an SS court in Berlin to 15 years’ imprisonment).

His replacement was SS-Hauptsturmführer Adam Grünewald, who worked previously in Dachau and Sachsenhausen. Under his regime, a punishment company (Strafkompanie) was set up; partly because of this, the practice of beating up prisoners increased. Although the sources do not indicate tensions between Grünewald and Rauter, the second commandant was arrested, together with his adjutant, in January 1944, because of his responsibility for the so-called Bunker tragedy (Bunker drama). This incident took place on the night of January 15–16, 1944. A German female prisoner betrayed some of her fellow prisoners, as a result of which she was punished by some of them. Interrogated by the commandant, no one reported who was responsible for this. Consequently, 74 women were collectively punished by putting them in one cell in the bunker for 14 hours; 10 women did not survive. Grünewald was arrested and sentenced by an SS court in the Netherlands to three and a half years’ imprisonment.

The dismissal of two camp commandants, a responsibility usually reserved for the WVHA, led to a conflict between Pohl and Rauter. Pohl was clearly disappointed with, in his eyes, the lack of appropriate action taken by his Berlin superiors. Pohl thereby requested Himmler to take Herzogenbusch away from the WVHA and to charge Rauter with final responsibility for the camp. Rauter refused, claiming that the staff at his disposal was inadequate for this transfer.

Grünewald’s successor was SS-Sturmbannführer Hans Hüttig, whose formative career experience came in Natzweiler. He appears not to have come into conflict with Rauter. Although certainly not as tough as his predecessors, Hüttig was said to have exerted power from behind his desk. Among other things, he was responsible for the massive shootings of prisoners in August and September 1944 and for the evacuation transports afterward.

Because of the advance of the Allied forces through France and Belgium, the prisoners of the Schutzhäftlager, the Polizeiliches Durchgangslager, the SD-Lager, and the Frauenkonzentrationslager were transported, on September 5 and 6,
1944, to camps in Germany. About 2,900 men went to Sachsenhausen, while about 650 women were sent to Ravensbrück. The remaining prisoners, all hostages, were set free or transferred to the Amersfoort camp. The Herzogenbusch camp in fact ceased to exist. Afterward, the Wehrmacht took over the facility and used it as a prisoner-of-war (POW) camp before handing it over to the Dutch Red Cross. The camp premises were liberated on October 26, 1944.

In the late 1960s, a survey, by no means representative, was conducted of the inhabitants of the municipality of Vught, aged around 65 years, concerning their state of knowledge of the neighboring camp. People had to answer questions about its function, the number and types of prisoners, personal contacts with the guards or prisoners, and so on. The general conclusion of the survey was that the local population had a basic knowledge of the camp and that the people of Vught were apparently involved in the fate of the prisoners. People claimed to have supplied illegal food and smuggled in notes.

Two women stood out in the neighborhood for their efforts to get to know the names of the prisoners, in order to pass this information to the prisoners’ family members. In this way they clearly facilitated the sending of food parcels, which were of course of great help and comfort for the prisoners. From May 1943 on, the supply of food parcels was taken over by the Dutch Red Cross.

Two of the three commandants were tried after the war, but not by Dutch courts. In 1961, a German court sentenced Chmielewski to life imprisonment. A French court gave Hüttig the same punishment, but he was released in 1956. Grünewald was never tried; he died in combat in 1945 in Hungary.

Herzogenbusch was a transit camp; people were not supposed to stay in it for a long time. For Jews in particular, but also for political prisoners, the regime intended to send them to other destinations.

Imprisonment in Herzogenbusch distinguished itself not only in quantitative but also in qualitative terms. It is important to note that Herzogenbusch was deliberately designed by the Reich Security Main Office (RSHA) as a Level (Stufe) I and II camp, in terms of the severity of its regime. This level implied, among other things, that the non-Jewish prisoners were permitted (censored) correspondence and the receipt of food parcels.

For political reasons—the Dutch had to be won over in the battle of the Germanic peoples—it was of great importance to Himmler and Rauter to make Herzogenbusch a “perfect” camp. Amersfoort got an extremely negative reputation, and so on. The general conclusion of the survey was that the local population had a basic knowledge of the camp and that the people of Vught were apparently involved in the fate of the prisoners. People claimed to have supplied illegal food and smuggled in notes.

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Rauter was very keen on maintaining this so-called high-level quality and is said to have inspected the site three or four times. The treatment of the prisoners would be, as Rauter put it in his trial after the war, “severe, but fair” (streng, aber gerecht).

On a theoretical level, Rauter’s last statement can be qualified as highly contradictory. Nevertheless, some examples illustrate what he tried to bring forward in his defense. Hygienic conditions were poor, most notably in the Judendurchgangslager, suggesting that the physical condition of these prisoners was not a matter of concern for the camp leadership. Nevertheless, a fairly well equipped hospital, run by imprisoned doctors, functioned from July 1943 on. The quality of this hospital was incomparably better than the ones in other concentration camps.

Moreover, the regime in Herzogenbusch obviously did not show itself as cruel as was the case elsewhere. To some extent, the camp leadership kept the violent behavior of the Kapos in check and did not punish escapees who were caught afterward with hanging. About 8,000 people, more than a quarter of the total number of prisoners, were released.

However, these examples are not convincing enough for the acceptance of Rauter’s statement. Although it can well be argued that the Herzogenbusch regime did not match the level of cruelty of the other concentration camps, this does not take away from the camp’s notorious record, notably during the first half-year of its existence. A substantial food shortage, the prisoners’ poor condition, hard working conditions, and systematic battering of a certain group of Jewish inmates caused the death of 400 prisoners. At some points, the camp showed an even more deadly face. For example, in September and October 1943, 27 Belgian resistance fighters, sentenced to death in Belgium, were hanged outside the camp, and in the last two months of its existence, about 450 political prisoners were shot.

**SOURCES**

It was not before 1978 that scholarly attention was publicly paid to the camp. At that time, Louis de Jong, the former NIOD director who published a 14-volume series about the general history of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in World War II, devoted one of his volumes completely to the Nazi prisons and camps. In this publication some 70 pages are dedicated to Herzogenbusch. See his *Het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden in de Tweede Wereldoorlog*, vol. 8 (‘s-Gravenhage, 1978). After the publication of de Jong, it took another decade before Coenraad Studt Dreher, a former NIOD staff member, published a general article, “Deutsche Konzentrationslager in den Niederlanden: Amersfoort, Westerbork, Herzogenbusch,” *DaHe* 5 (1989):141–173, the first publication not in the Dutch language. Later he enlarged this article into “Das Konzentrationslager Herzogenbusch—Ein ‘Musterbetrieb der SS’” in *Die nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslager—Entwicklung und Struktur*, ed. Ulrich Herbert, Karin Orth, and Christoph Dieckmann (Göttingen, 1998), 1: 327–348. Apart from these general publications, the last decade has witnessed books published with attention to special features of the camp: Example, on the Jewish child prisoners, Janneke de Moëi, *Joodse kinderen in het kamp Vught* (Vught, 1999); on the Bunker drama, Hans Olink, *Vrouwen van Vught: Een nacht in een concentratiekamp* (Amsterdam, 1995); and on the Philips-Kommando, PW. Klein and Justus van de Kamp, *Het...

Because Herzogenbusch was not liberated by Allied forces—it was evacuated before their arrival—its prisoners were not in the position to get hold of camp records and take them home. On the contrary, testimonies clearly indicate that members of the guard force started to destroy the archives shortly before the final evacuation of the prisoners. Fortunately, not everything went into the flames. Immediately after the liberation in May 1945, RIOD (later NIOD) was founded and started to collect documents about the occupation, among them of course documents concerning the different camps in the Netherlands. Until the present day, the NIOD collection of Herzogenbusch documents, although fragmentary, is to be considered the main source for serious research into the history of the camp complex. Through the decades, the original collection has been enriched with various reports of former prisoners and other documents. As far as the archival situation is concerned, a serious drawback is the fact that none of the three camp commandants was tried in the Netherlands. Consequently, their penal records are absent. Grünnewald died in action. Chmielewski and Hüttig were tried outside the Netherlands. The only penal records are available for minor perpetrators. They are found in the NAN. The only penal record of a leading personality is Rauter’s trial. Because of the trial’s importance, its complete text was published in 1952. Portions of Rauter’s correspondence with Himmler and Pohl are to be found in the collection of the former BDC (later BA-DH) and published by former NIOD staff member N.K.C.A.

Notes

1. Himmler’s order has not been preserved but is referred to in a letter from Pohl to Himmler on December 17, 1942, BDC H540: 3654, copied at NIOD.
2. RSHA Circular, January 18, 1943, NIOD [C61.01], Collection 250g.
3. On February 16, 1944, Himmler endorsed Pohl’s request and transferred Herzogenbusch from Pohl’s responsibility to Rauter’s. Pohl is referring to this decision in a letter to Rauter, March 29, 1944 (BDC H540: 3649, copied at NIOD), in which he suggests to hand over the camp to Rauter from May 1, 1944.
4. Doc.I, 1380-b, 14, NIOD.
**AMERSFOORT**

This subcamp, located in the former Police Transit Camp Amersfoort (Polizeiliches Durchgangslager Amersfoort, or PDA), existed only for a very short time, from May to July 1943. Its beginning implied the reopening of the PDA, which had been closed since January 1943. About 70 prisoners from the Jewish transit camp (Judendurchgangslager) and about 600 prisoners from the Durchgangslager Westerbork were put to work here. On behalf of the Luftwaffe, which had an air base close to the PDA, they had to work on the expansion of the shooting range. After about four weeks, the prisoners were sent back to their original camps, and other, non-Jewish, prisoners entered the camp.

**SOURCES**
Research to date has revealed no substantial sources that are specific to this subcamp.

Hans de Vries

**ARNHEIM**

Arnheim (Arnhem) was in operation as a subcamp from July to August 1943 and from January to September 1944.

In the first period of this Kommando, Jewish prisoners had to expand rifle ranges for Waffen-SS troops, who were quartered in the neighborhood and who supervised these works. The prisoners stayed in the Coehoornkazerne, a former barracks of the Dutch army.

In the second period, approximately 30 prisoners stayed in the Saxen Weimarkazerne (also a former barracks of the Dutch army). They had to do various works in order to expand the Luftwaffe air base Deelen. A Luftwaffe construction unit (Bauleitung) supervised these works.

**SOURCES**
Research to date has revealed no substantial sources that are specific to this subcamp.

Hans de Vries

**EINDHOVEN**

In the Eindhoven subcamp, which existed from September 1943 to June 1944, prisoners were put to work for the construction of a new Luftwaffe air base, called Welschap. They worked under the supervision of a Luftwaffe construction unit (Bauleitung).

**SOURCES**
Research to date has revealed no substantial sources that are specific to this subcamp.

Hans de Vries

**GILZE-RIJEN [AKA BREDA]**

Also called Aussenkommando Breda, this subcamp, which existed from August 1943 to May 1944, worked at the expansion of a Luftwaffe air base. From October 1943 it consisted almost exclusively of black marketeers. Partly because the prisoners were guarded by a Luftwaffe construction unit (Bauleitung)—a guard unit that was considered far less tough than the SS—more than 25 percent of the total number of escapes from the Herzogenbusch concentration camp (22 out of 81) took place in this subcamp.

**SOURCES**
Research to date has revealed no substantial sources that are specific to this subcamp.

Hans de Vries

**HAAREN**

In Haaren, prisoners were put up in the prison of the German police and in a hostage camp (Geisellager), which was located in the former seminary, between January 1943 and September 1944. Prisoners had to execute various administrative tasks on behalf of the German police system.

**SOURCES**
Research to date has revealed no substantial sources that are specific to this subcamp.

Hans de Vries

**HERZOGENBUSCH (CONTINENTAL GUMMIWERKE AG)**

This subcamp, which existed from December 1943 to September 1944, was unique in two ways: It was the only one consisting of female prisoners, and it was the only Herzogenbusch subcamp in which prisoners had to do industrial labor. It was located in a factory of the German-owned Continental Gummiwerke, where prisoners had to manufacture gas masks.

**SOURCES**
Research to date has revealed no substantial sources that are specific to this subcamp.

Hans de Vries

**LEEWARDEN**

The Leeuwarden subcamp, which existed only from February to March 1944, was unique in the sense that its population did
not consist of Dutch prisoners but of German Kapos who had been convicted of misbehavior in the main camp. They were quartered in a Dutch prison in the city of Leeuwarden, which is located some 250 kilometers (155 miles) from Herzogenbusch. Under the supervision of a Luftwaffe construction unit (Bauleitung), a group of about 40 people had to dismantle unexploded bombs at the local Luftwaffe air base. After a couple of weeks, they were sent back to the main camp.

**SOURCES** Research to date has revealed no substantial sources that are specific to this subcamp.

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**MOERDIJK**

Moerdijk is the name of a village and an area located between the rivers in the southwestern part of the Netherlands. As such, it was of the utmost strategic significance. The defense of this area would enable the Germans to repel an Allied attack from the south on the city of Rotterdam (with its important port) and the center of the country.

Among the Herzogenbusch external detachments, the one in Moerdijk, which existed from March 1943 to February 1944, was the largest. Initially, some 500 male prisoners from the Jewish transit camp (Juden Durchgangslager) were selected and transported to barracks that originally belonged to the Dutch river police and were located a couple of kilometers (about a mile and a half) from the village. Together with some non-Jewish prisoners and under supervision of an Organisation Todt (OT) construction unit (Bauleitung), they mostly had to dig antitank ditches on different, sometimes coastal, locations. These and other defenses were carried out by a Dutch contractor.

At the same time, other Jewish prisoners formed a clothing detachment (Bekleidungskommando) for making clothes for SS members who made up the staff and guard of Moerdijk.

In October 1944, all the Jewish prisoners were brought back to the main camp, from which they were deported to Auschwitz on November 15, 1944. These prisoners were replaced by non-Jewish prisoners, mostly people arrested for helping Jews. In the end, the Moerdijk camp is said to have had about 1,000 prisoners.

**SOURCES** Research to date has revealed no substantial sources that are specific to this subcamp.

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**ROOSENDAAL**

The Roosendaal subcamp, located not far from the Belgian border, existed only for a very short time, from February to April 1944. The prisoners, all male Jews, stayed in an agricultural college. Under supervision of an Organisation Todt (OT) construction unit (Bauleitung), they had to work on various kinds of defenses, the construction of which a Dutch contractor carried out. These defenses were part of the Atlantic Wall.

**SOURCES** Research to date has revealed no substantial sources that are specific to this subcamp.

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**’S-GRAVENHAGE**

A very small subcamp existed at ’s-Gravenhage from September 1943 to July 1944. Prisoners were deployed for various administrative tasks on behalf of the German police system.

**SOURCES** Research to date has revealed no substantial sources that are specific to this subcamp.

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**ST. MICHELSGESTEL**

As in the external detachment at Haaren, prisoners in St. Michielsgestel had to execute various administrative tasks on behalf of the German police system. They were quartered in a hostage camp (Geisellager), which was located in the former youth seminary. This camp existed from January 1943 to September 1944.

**SOURCES** Research to date has revealed no substantial sources that are specific to this subcamp.

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**VENLO**

In the Venlo subcamp, the prisoners (including, for a short period, Jews) had to perform various tasks for the preparation of a new Luftwaffe air base. They stayed in a hangar and worked under the supervision of a Luftwaffe construction unit (Bauleitung). The camp existed from September 1943 to September 1944.

**SOURCES** Research to date has revealed no substantial sources that are specific to this subcamp.