The main entrance to the SS camp at Neuengamme, 1941–1942.
USHMM WS #55243, COURTESY OF AG-NG
The Neuengamme concentration camp was established in 1938 as a Sachsenhausen subcamp. In the spring of 1940, it became an independent concentration camp, the central concentration camp for northwest Germany. By 1945, around 104,000 people were held in the main camp and its more than 75 subcamps, including 13,500 women. The Gestapo also brought around 2,000 additional prisoners to Neuengamme to be executed.

The Neuengamme site was chosen, as with Buchenwald, Mauthausen, Flossenbürg, and other concentration camps, because it was connected to the economic interests of the SS: the prisoners were to work in a brickworks where clinker would be produced for the transformation of the Hansestadt Hamburg. On August 31, 1938, the SS acquired for the Deutsche Erd- und Steinwerke GmbH (German Earth and Stone Works, DES) an unused brickworks with 50 hectares (123.6 acres) of land in the Hamburg suburb of Neuengamme on the Dove Elbe, a dead-end branch of the Elbe River, no longer used by ships. The first 100 prisoners from the Sachsenhausen concentration camp arrived there on December 12, 1938, via Berlin, to work in the factory and to expand it. A decision to establish a larger concentration camp had not been made at this time. Critical for the decision to establish a concentration camp was a visit by Heinrich Himmler to Hamburg in January 1940. The Reichsführer-SS was looking for new places to accommodate concentration camp prisoners as a result of the large number of people arrested after the outbreak of war. He appointed SS-Sturmbannführer Walter Eisfeld as commandant, who in February began to expand the camp.

At the end of 1940 and the beginning of 1941, there were just about 3,000 prisoners; in 1941–1942, 4,500 to 4,800; in August 1943, around 10,000; and in April 1945, 53,000 to 54,000, of whom 12,000 were women (including subcamps). At the end, there were 13,000 to 14,000 people in the hopelessly overcrowded main camp and around 40,000 in the subcamps.

The prisoners were guarded by SS-Totenkopf (Death's Head) units. The Neuengamme concentration camp was classified in Camp Category II (Lagerstufe II) in 1940. As a practical matter, this distinction had little significance. The camp held all three categories of concentration camp prisoners.

The composition of the prisoners reflected, albeit belatedly, the course of the war. Until 1940, mostly German prisoners were brought to Neuengamme from other concentration camps, including a large number sent as punishment detachments. In the following years, Neuengamme held mostly people from the occupied countries. From March 1941, Poles and, from 1942–1943, Soviet prisoners formed the largest group in Neuengamme. Many of the detainees were foreign laborers and prisoners of war (POWs) from different camps in northern Germany who, having either breached the work rules or after trying to escape, were sent to the concentration camp. Other than for prisoners sent directly to the camp by the Gestapo, most of the prisoners came from other concentration camps. Just from Auschwitz, Neuengamme received more than 10,000 prisoners in 1943–1944. Judicial authorities also transferred many prison inmates to the concentration camp.

Initially, there were only a few hundred Jews in Neuengamme. It was only with the numerous transports of Jewish prisoners from the east in April 1944 that thousands of Jews, the majority of whom were women, arrived in Neuengamme and its subcamps. It is estimated that there were around 13,000 Jewish prisoners in the Neuengamme concentration camp.

As resistance increased in the occupied western and northern European countries, large transports of prisoners arrived from these countries in 1944, especially from France and Denmark. The mass arrests in the occupied countries, often at random, during the German retreat showed that the SS leadership had identified a method to recruit forced labor. In the last weeks of the war, thousands of Danish and Norwegian prisoners were transported to Neuengamme. The Swedish Red Cross successfully negotiated with Himmler for Scandinavian prisoners from all camps and prisons in Germany to be brought to Neuengamme. From there they would be evacuated as the front got closer.

Until February 1940, the conditions in the camp were more bearable than later: there was enough to eat and scarcely any serious mistreatment. This changed dramatically when Commandant Eisfeld took over at the beginning of 1940 and transformed Neuengamme into an independent concentration camp. His successors Martin Weiss (April 1940 to August...
1942) and Max Pauly (September 1942 until the end of the war) made sure that violence, hunger, cold, sickness, and death ruled the lives of the prisoners.

Beatings and arbitrary punishments accompanied the prisoners from early morning until late evening. Countless commands, regulations, and prohibitions gave the SS overseers and the prisoner-functionaries (above all, the camp elder, block elders, and Kapos) the opportunity to mete out punishment as they wished, to beat and kill the prisoners, without the need to justify their acts. Official punishments such as standing to attention for several hours at the camp entrance, arrest, beatings, hanging from posts, and transferal to punishment companies were handed out less frequently but were especially feared.

During the war, hunger was the worst scourge of the prisoners. In 1940–1941 the food supply was better than in the other concentration camps; obviously, the authorities felt that all the prisoners' strength was needed to erect the camp. In 1941 the portions declined; they no longer were sufficient to maintain the prisoners' strength. Rations were reduced in April 1942, and the number of emaciated prisoners increased dramatically. In the autumn of 1942 the death rate jumped dramatically. In the winter of 1942–1943, it reached at times more than 10 percent of the inmates per month. In the following winters, it was lower as a result of measures introduced by the SS-Business Administration Main Office (WVHA), in particular, permission granted to receive packages, the increased allocation of extra rations for heavy labor, and hygienic and medical improvements. However, in 1944–1945, the food supplies in the main camp and in most of the subcamps were further reduced. Even tradesmen, armaments workers, and other skilled workers were living mostly on the bare minimum to survive. Most of the other prisoners died as a result of hunger and its effects, as they did not have the chance to "organize" other food supplies, that is, to steal.

During the first three years, the prisoners wore striped concentration camp uniforms that scarcely gave protection against the cold and the wet. In 1943–1944, there were improvements for some prisoners, especially for important laborers. Used civilian clothes, owned by murdered Jews and from concentration camp prisoners in Eastern European countries, were distributed, first in the main camp and later in many subcamps.

The camp was heavily overcrowded. From 1944 on, often 2 prisoners had to share a bed; later it was 3. In the blocks where the new prisoners were held, the camp leadership sometimes crowded 800 to 1,000 prisoners into 400 square meters (478.4 square yards).

The hygienic conditions were terrible. When the camp was established in 1940–1941, the prisoners, who wore wooden shoes, often sank knee deep into the mud in the swampy ground during the rain. Dirt and dampness were carried into the barracks. Water could only be obtained from hand-operated pumps located close to the latrines. The conditions improved in the summer of 1941 when the sewage system was built, and the roll-call square was covered with concrete. However, as the number of inmates increased markedly, there were soon, once again, catastrophic hygienic conditions. One of the biggest problems was washing clothes. The prisoners often got very dirty when working. During the day they were not allowed to go to the toilet, so that their trousers were smeared with urine and excrement. It was practically impossible to wash clothes. Many prisoners stank of urine and fecal matter; there was an unbearable smell in the barracks.

The majority of the prisoners suffered from illnesses and injuries. Simple colds often developed into high fever and lung inflammations. Common were diarrhea, hypothermia, and stomach and intestinal problems caused by the poor quality of the water and the eating of rotten food, scraps, and grass. Many prisoners suffered from circulatory problems and dropsy (Wassersucht). Tuberculosis, an exception in 1940, took hold in 1941 as the prisoners weakened. In the winter, the prisoners often suffered from chillblains, and their limbs froze. Vermin spread due to the poor hygiene. At the end of 1941, a louse-borne typhus epidemic broke out, and the camp had to be put under quarantine. Work accidents and mistreatments resulted in wounds that did not heal, and sometimes there were severe injuries. Medical care was a farce. The operating theater was relatively well equipped and was often shown to visitors. But as everything else was missing, the efforts by many prisoners in the infirmary to help their comrades as best they could were useless. New sick barracks were established between November 1943 and the summer of 1944 so that there was enough room for the sick. At the end of July 1944 the commandant ordered the evacuation of two infirmaries, despite the increased numbers reporting sick, so as to make room for prominent prisoners from France. At the same time, he had a new crematorium built.

Until 1943, the long-term ill and weakened prisoners were regularly transported away by the SS to Dachau and in 1944–1945 above all to Lublin-Majdanek and Bergen-Belsen. A medical commission visited Neuengamme in April 1942 to select weakened prisoners and to a lesser extent handicapped
prisoners, Jews, and other “useless eaters,” as part of Aktion 14f13. A few weeks later, the chosen prisoners were sent to Bernburg an der Saale to be gassed.

At the beginning of 1942, weakened prisoners in Neuengamme began to be murdered by injection, at first in a separate area of the camp for Soviet POWs but soon even in the main infirmary. This murderous campaign generated such fear in the prisoners that often the seriously ill would not dare go to the infirmary. The killing stopped in the summer of 1943.

From the autumn of 1944 on, the Neuengamme main camp developed into a sort of death camp. In 1944, a large number of subcamps were established. As the economic enterprises attached to the subcamps did not want the sick and weakened prisoners, the SS returned them to the main camp and replaced them with new prisoners who were capable of working. At the end of 1944 and the beginning of 1945, the majority of prisoners in Neuengamme were incapable of working: they were left to themselves in appalling hygienic conditions in the so-called Schönungsblocks (convalescent blocks) with reduced rations. In the last months of the war, the death rate (including the subcamps) was around 5 percent.

Beginning in 1942, in the main camp the prisoners were used for different medical experiments including trials with medicines to combat louse-borne typhus and with water poisoned with gas. The SS doctor Kurt Heissmeyer conducted experiments with tuberculosis bacteria on 20 Jewish children brought to Neuengamme from Auschwitz. To hide the traces of this crime, members of the SS murdered the children in April 1945 at the Bullenhuser Damm School in Hamburg.

Between 1940 and 1942, most of the prisoners were used in excavation work for the camp, for the clinker factory, for deepening the Dove Elbe (“Kommando Elbe”), and for transport work. The work was in the open air. Later the majority of the inmates worked on construction sites around the camp. Mistreatment and arbitrary treatment made life hell. Prisoners worked regardless of the weather so that the concentration camp prisoners often wore wet clothes the whole day. Those who could not keep up with the pace of the work were tortured and beaten. Just about every day when returning to work, those who had collapsed were put on carts that were pulled into the camp. The sick, weak, and dead were put aside at the roll-call square until the evening roll call was complete.

Around 10 to 20 percent of the inmates worked in the prison camp or the SS camp or did administrative duties with the construction companies and the old clinker factory. Here the conditions were better. The erection of the new industries and of the industrial administration of the construction management resulted in an increase in the number of prisoners in the main camp who worked on production or other areas with bearable conditions. By the end of 1944, the number of such people in the main camp was around 25 percent.

Until 1942, except for Kommando Elbe, few prisoners worked outside the camp territory. At times the work detachments were assigned to tradesmen and salesmen located close by, who supplied the concentration camp, including the Ohde Bakery, the ironmonger Glunz, and the timber merchant Behr. From time to time the prisoners were assigned to rural work.

The SS was ruthless in dealing with the slightest sign of help or resistance. The SS built a network of spies to uncover resistance in the camp. It used national and political tensions to stir up the prisoners against each other. Although each prisoner was fighting for his survival, there were many attempts to work together to improve conditions. Friends grouped together, as did other small groups to support each other. Groups of the same nationality, based on the same language and culture, developed a broad consciousness of what they had in common, which in turn led to the will to assert themselves. Language differences were a great barrier to understanding the other groups; it was always difficult to
maintain connections across national barriers. It was mostly
the Communist prisoners who spoke of attempts to make
contact across international barriers. Jehovah’s Witnesses
showed strong solidarity based upon religious motives.

Chances to escape the terror by flight were small. It was
almost impossible to escape the main camp. No known escape
attempt was successful before April 1945.

It was in the infirmaries that the prisoners organized as-
sistance and solidarity despite the terror. In the main camp
the infirmary Kapo, Mathias Mai, would step in to protect
prisoners from seizure by the SS. In 1942, several prisoners
who worked as orderlies in the infirmary refused to partici-
pate in killing prisoners with injections. Sometimes an en-
dangered prisoner would exchange his number with a prisoner
who had just died to give the impression that he was no longer
alive.

There were prisoner-functionaries who did office work
and who were prepared to help their comrades in need by
sending them to the better work detachments. Worthy of
mention are Arbeitsdienstkapo Albin Lüdke and Belgian pris-
soner André Mandrycx. On the other hand, the camp elder
Jakob Fetz followed the orders of the SS and personally par-
ticipated in hangings.

Neuengamme prisoners remember the assistance given to
Soviet prisoners in the autumn of 1941. When these com-
pletely weakened prisoners arrived in the camp and were fed
worse than the other prisoners and treated more inhumanely
than the normal concentration camp inmates, there was a
broad attempt to help, which involved collecting bread.

It was possible on a few work sites in the main camp and
the subcamps to commit acts of sabotage. No real damage was
done; the acts were more symbolic. If there were gaps in the
controls, work slowed down, machines were incorrectly set,
supplies disappeared, and there were other disturbances.
Skilled tradesmen sometimes took on prisoners without the
necessary skills to protect them from certain overseers. In the
repair shops, the prisoners sometimes illegally listened to for-
eign radio broadcasts.

From the beginning of 1945 on, as the front approached,
more and more of the Neuengamme subcamps were dissolved.
At the end of March 1945, the main camp, which held 14,000
inmates, was in such a catastrophic state that the SS shunted
the prisoners off to other camps, especially to Bergen-Belsen,
Sandbostel bei Bremervörde, and Wöbbelin bei Ludwigslust.
There the accommodation and food supplies were inadequate,
so that thousands died within a few days from hunger, cold,
filth, and disease.

The final command to evacuate the main camp was given
on April 19. Most of the prisoners were taken by rail or by
foot to the Lübecker Bucht, where they were put on ships no
longer capable of maneuvering. More than 7,000 concentra-
tion camp prisoners drowned in the Baltic as a result of an
attack by British aircraft on May 3, 1945.

It is difficult to determine the number of prisoners who
survived the liberation of the Neuengamme concentration
camp, as during the years an unknown number of prisoners
were transported to other camps. Some were completely ema-
ciated; it can be assumed that there was a high death rate
among these prisoners. It is likely that around 44,000 to
55,000 of those held in Neuengamme and its subcamps did
not survive.

About 120 SS members of the Neuengamme concentra-
tion camp and its subcamps were tried between 1946 and
1948 in the main proceedings and more than 20 subsidiary
proceedings before British military courts. The main trial,
from March 18 to May 3, 1946, in the Hamburg Curio-Haus
(located at Rothenbaumchaussee) resulted in death sentences
for the commandant Max Pauly, the camp leader Anton Thu-
mann, two SS doctors, and seven other SS members. They
were executed in October 1946 in the Hameln Prison. In later
proceedings there were approximately another 15 death sen-
tences that were carried out. Other perpetrators, including
the former commandant Weiss, gave evidence against the SS
in other concentration camps. Most of those convicted waited
for a few years in prison and were pardoned at the beginning
or the middle of the 1950s.¹

Many of those less involved, who were, for example, in the
concentration camp administration or the guard force, had to
answer before denazification courts in the British occupation
zone. In the main, the courts were lenient. Only a few of the accused were sentenced to prison.²

The state prosecutors attached to the German district courts focused from 1946 on the criminal acts committed in the Neuengamme concentration camp and its subcamps. There were a considerable number of investigations, but the number of convictions was small. For example, by the end of the 1980s, there were more than 80 investigations in Hamburg, but only seven were charged; there has been no conviction since 1953.³ Many perpetrators escaped punishment by living under assumed names or overseas. Others were safe because the judicial authorities did not commence investigations. According to the Zentrale Stelle zur Aufklärung von NS-Verbrechen in Ludwigsburg, the number of investigations began to increase in 1958, but most proceedings went nowhere because the evidence for individual crimes was often not supported by sufficient witness statements. Witnesses living overseas were rarely questioned. The accused were also helped by the fact that at the end of the war the majority of files were destroyed to wipe out the traces of the crimes. From the middle of the 1960s, all crimes, except murder, were subject to the statute of limitations. This had the result that the proceedings were stopped against two SS block leaders accused of aggravated mistreatment in the Neuengamme concentration camp.⁴ The commander of the Hamburg-Eidelstedt women's subcamp was acquitted by a Hamburg court in 1982 even though he had been convicted in connection with the death of a newborn child; his acts were not treated as murder.⁵ Altogether only a small proportion of the more than 4,000 SS in the Neuengamme concentration camp were the subject of investigations. Less than half of those mainly responsible, for example, detachment and block leaders and the commanding officers, were tried.


The most important archival collections are to be found in AG-NG. The British Neuengamme cases are found in PRO, WO 235. One published memoir of this camp is Marcel Prenant, Toute une vie à gauche (Paris, 1980); there are many others.

**NOTES**

1. The trial files are held in the PRO (WO 235), in particular: Neuengamme Concentration Camp Case and 9 succeeding trials.
2. The files are held today in BA-BL, Bestand Z 42.
3. Aufstellung der Sta. bei dem LG Hamburg v. 3.9.86 (AG-NG).