WEWELSBURG

The wooden gate tower at Wewelsburg concentration camp, 1941.
USHMM WS #62780, COURTESY OF AKM/WN
On September 1, 1941, the Wewelsburg subcamp was renamed the “Wewelsburg concentration camp” (KL Wewelsburg). With 480 prisoners it was the smallest autonomous main camp within Germany. Prior to this, the camp in the village of Wewelsburg, about 20 kilometers (12.4 miles) to the southwest of Paderborn, Westphalia, was a Sachsenhausen subcamp, financed by the Association for the Promotion and Maintenance of German Cultural Memorials e.V. (Gesellschaft zur Förderung und Pflege deutscher Kulturerinnerungen e.V.). Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler founded the association in 1936. He used it as the developer for his building project “Wewelsburg.” As a registered association, the company—unlike the SS, which was not a legal entity—could acquire donations and credit. The Wewelsburg Renaissance castle had been built by the Paderborn prince-bishops (Fürstbischof) at the beginning of the seventeenth century. In 1934, the Büren Council leased the castle to the association. Himmler planned to establish a Reich Leadership School (Reichsführerschule) there, the SS-Schule Haus Wewelsburg. It would later become a large ideological-religious center for the SS.

For the necessary renovations and expansion of the castle, Himmler initially used the Reich Labor Service (RAD). When these workers were transferred to build the Westwall and the project was facing a shortage of labor, Himmler, as did other SS economic enterprises, considered the use of concentration camp prisoners for his private construction project. By using concentration camp labor, he was able to continue the building project, regularly obtaining exemptions from the general building prohibition for his private building project, which was not vital for the war effort. A detachment of “preventive custody” prisoners (Befristeter Vorbeugehaftlinge, BV) was sent to Wewelsburg in May 1939. Following two escape attempts, which caused much public attention, and resulted in the deaths of the escapees, the detachment was replaced in February 1940 by Jehovah’s Witnesses. In the summer of 1940, the prisoners constructed a protective custody camp on the outskirts of Wewelsburg, on the boundary with Niederhagen. Other categories of prisoners were sent to Wewelsburg from the autumn of 1940, and the number of prisoners steadily increased to 470. On January 7, 1941, the work detachment was confirmed as a Sachsenhausen subcamp. The transformation of the subcamp into an autonomous main camp did not occur because of the increasing size of the camp but for economic reasons. The sale of the Wewelsburg subcamp to the state relieved the “Gesellschaft” from the financial pressure that it was under. Initially there was some uncertainty, but on October 15, 1941, the name “Niederhagen concentration camp” was finally decided upon.

The Reichsführer-SS probably chose the name Niederhagen to disguise the concentration camp and to hide the connection between the concentration camp and his construction project at Wewelsburg.

The protective custody camp initially consisted of 4 barracks; the number subsequently increased to 16. The barracks were in two rows. Next to the prison camp there was an industrial quarter with workshops and garages and opposite was an SS camp and building yard. The prisoners were given new prisoner numbers when the camp became autonomous. There were German prisoners, Jehovah’s Witnesses, BV prisoners, political and so-called asocial prisoners, Sinti and Roma (Gypsies), homosexuals, and Jews; and from 1941 there were more and more foreign prisoners including prisoners from Poland, the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, France, the Netherlands, and Belgium. The prisoners were sent to the camp either individually or in groups from other concentration camps, especially Buchenwald and Sachsenhausen, or directly
from Gestapo offices, especially those in the Ruhr but also Paderborn and Osnabrück. These prisoners were mostly Polish and Ukrainian forced laborers who had been arrested by the Gestapo. Many of the Soviet prisoners arrived at Wewelsburg as prisoners of war (POWs) or in transit transports.

As the Jehovah’s Witnesses were the only prisoner group during the initial phase, they, unlike in other camps, took over in Wewelsburg the positions for prisoner self-administration: Willi Wilke was camp elder (Lagerältester); Wettin Müller was camp scribe (Lagerschreiber). The block elders (Blockältester) were Jehovah’s Witnesses, German political, asocials, and BV prisoners. The Kapos and foremen were mostly BV prisoners and asocials. BV functionaries wore a green triangle and excelled in their brutality and unscrupulousness at Wewelsburg—for example, in the prisoner infirmary (block 11) and the punishment detachment, Forest Settlement (Waldsiedlung). Jehovah’s Witnesses played an important role in the camp and tried to remain true to their beliefs. They smuggled bibles and other religious works into the camp and conducted secret bible studies. Their solidarity and common, strong belief gave them the strength to survive the extreme camp conditions in Wewelsburg.

During 1942, there were on average 1,000 prisoners in the camp. In 1943, the number increased to around 1,500 prisoners. In the period up to August 1941, 48 prisoners died. When the camp became autonomous and new prisoner groups were admitted into the camp, the numbers rapidly increased: by the end of 1941, another 80 prisoners had died; in 1942, 868 died; and to April 1943, when the main camp was dissolved, 287 prisoners died. The reason for the increase in the death rate was in part due to the physically weak condition of the prisoners, especially the Soviet prisoners, who were sent to Wewelsburg from June 1942, and in part due to the extremely poor living and work conditions in the camp. Some 1,285 of the approximate 3,900 prisoners who arrived in the camp between 1939 and 1945 died, of whom 734 were of Soviet origin. It is likely that only a few Jewish prisoners were sent to Wewelsburg—20 death certificates suggest a Jewish background. In the summer of 1942, a crematorium was established in the camp because of the high death rate. Until October 1942, the corpses were taken to the crematorium in Dortmund and Bielefeld-Brackwede. It is thought that initially in Wewelsburg there were transportable crematoria ovens. They were reintroduced at the beginning of 1943. While constructing the crematorium, the SS established in the camp a Registry Office (Standesamt), which from January 1, 1943, kept a register of deaths. As an autonomous concentration camp from April 1942 to March 1943, the Niederhagen concentration camp also functioned as the execution site for the Gestapo Westfalen/Lippe office. It can be proved that 56 people were murdered, of whom 42 were hanged and 14 Soviet POWs were shot at the nearby shooting range. The hangings took place in a walled-in arrest bunker. The victims included female Soviet forced laborers as well as two boys, a 14-year-old Pole and a 15-year-old German Jew.

In 1940, Reinhard Heydrich had introduced for the Reich Security Main Office (RSHA) an official categorization of the camps. Niederhagen was a category 1 camp for “less serious protective custody prisoners capable of rehabilitation, special cases, and individual arrest.” However, the conditions on the ground did not correspond in any way with this official description. The living and work conditions in Wewelsburg were brutal. Many prisoners died because of the heavy work. A detachment was occupied with the renovation and extension of the Wewelsburg north tower, which was to be the ideological center of the facility. When excavating the “vault,” which was planned for honoring the dead, the prisoners had to excavate more than 4 meters (13 feet) of rock with inadequate tools. The work in the constant cold and damp vault meant that the prisoners had to use the maximum physical exertion. Nevertheless, the work detachments in the north tower were regarded as relatively safe work sites by the prisoners, where they were largely protected from mistreatment by the SS. It was different in the three quarries (in the castle, at the railway station, and in the village of Ahden, several kilometers away), building roads, renovating the Marx manor, and constructing the SS settlement Waldsiedlung: there were deaths in these detachments almost every day, with the dead being brought back to the camp. Other work detachments constructed a villa for the architect Hermann Bartels or worked on the north terrace of the SS guard building in front of the castle. The concentration camp prisoners worked in the SS gardens and began excavation work for commercial buildings in the SS camp. They were exploited until they were totally exhausted. The principle “Destruction through Work” (Vernichtung durch Arbeit) accurately describes the working conditions for the work detachments in Wewelsburg. The SS treated qualified skilled tradesmen and workmen with more consideration because they could not be replaced so easily. They worked relatively securely in expanding the north tower and in a number of workshops. There were other tasks to be done in the camp’s industrial sector, including the camp-owned laundry, tailor’s shop, SS garages, and kitchens, or in constructing the camp.
The infirmary was located in Barracks 15. Conditions there were catastrophic. There were no medicines or instruments. Block 11 was an additional infirmary. Its cellar was used as a storage room for corpses until they were taken to the crematorium. Once inside the infirmary the ill prisoners were at the mercy of the SS and some orderlies who mistreated the prisoners. Survivors have stated that the sick were murdered either by injections or by having cold showers. However, there were no medical experiments in Wewelsburg.

On the other hand, Niederhagen was one of the camps from which the death transports for the concentration camp “euthanasia” policy, code-named “Aktion 14f13” (Operation 14f13), departed. In a letter dated December 10, 1941, the Inspectorate of Concentration Camps (IKL) mentions Niederhagen and other camps as those that will be inspected in the following year by the doctors’ commission to select prisoners. The attached sample questionnaire contained the details of a Wewelsburg prisoner. It is not known how many Wewelsburg prisoners were victims of the Aktion 14f13. Those prisoners who remained in Wewelsburg knew the purpose of the selections because the personal items of the dead prisoners were returned to Niederhagen.

An Obersturmbannführer of the Waffen-SS Reserve, Adolf Haas was in command of the protective custody camp in Wewelsburg from June 17, 1940. Once the camp was declared a subcamp in January 1941, he reorganized the camp administration along the lines of the organizational structure required by the IKL, that is, along the lines of the Dachau concentration camp. The camp administration was divided into five areas. Satter was the camp commandant’s adjutant (Department I). SS-Sturmscharführer Friedrich Schultes was in charge of the Political Department (Department II). Wolfgang Pfaul, Haas’s predecessor as detachment leader, became leader of the protective custody camp (Department III) and Haas’s replacement when he was absent. To 1942, the Labor Service Leader (Arbeitsdienstführer) was Ludwig Rehn. He was then transferred to Neuengamme and Sachsenhausen. The first administration leader for Department IV was Hermann Michl. The camp doctor at Niederhagen (Department V) was SS-Untersturmführer Dr. Franz Metzger. He was transferred in December 1942 to the SS-Panzergrenadierdivision “Totenkopf” (Death’s Head) The concentration camp personnel included not only the command office but the guards. The SS guards in Wewelsburg were taken from the SS-Death’s Heads Units stationed locally. They were organized into guards’ units. Gustav Strese was in command of the First SS-Totenkopf-Sturmbann Niederhagen-Wewelsburg.

According to the prisoners, Adolf Haas was unpredictable and ruthless. The master baker joined the Nazi Party in 1931 and the SS a year later. He was in command of the SS region (Oberabschnitt) Rhein-Westfalen and in 1935 was promoted to SS-Sturmbannführer. However, a service opinion dated October 4, 1937, excluded him from any further promotion because of his poor writing skills. He undertook a course in Sachsenhausen before he took command in Wewelsburg. After the dissolution of the Niederhagen concentration camp, Haas, with some of the Wewelsburg concentration camp personnel, was appointed camp commandant at the newly created camp at Bergen-Belsen. He has not been heard of since the end of the war.

After the German defeat at Stalingrad, the architect Bartels could not prevent the stopping of the construction work. A decree dated January 13, 1943, ordered the cessation of all “non-vital war construction work.” In the middle of March 1943, an expert committee appointed by Oswald Pohl appeared at Wewelsburg, to examine whether the protective custody camp and the industrial section could be expanded into an armaments factory. The SS-Business Administration Main Office (WVHA) was considering giving the camp a new use for armaments production. These considerations were part of the overall program to replace the labor shortage in the armaments industry with concentration camp prisoners. However, the armaments industry did not want the Niederhagen concentration camp. Even before the committee had completed its investigations, it was recalled. The decision to dissolve the camp remained. A circular decree dated March 23, 1943, ordered the end of all admissions to the Niederhagen concentration camp. In a surviving express letter dated April 5, 1943, the Niederhagen concentration camp office demanded that the State Police Office (Stapoleitstelle) Düsseldorf not admit any more prisoners to Niederhagen, although a transport from Paderborn on May 7 would be accepted. The large majority of the prisoners were sent in the months of April and May to Buchenwald, Ravensbrück, Dachau, and Bergen-Belsen. The official date for the dissolution of the Niederhagen concentration camp was April 30, 1943. At this point, there were around 150 to 200 prisoners in the camp, mostly Jehovah’s Witnesses. On May 7, the camp commandant Haas accompanied a prisoner transport with some of the guards to Bergen-Belsen. A small detachment of 49 German prisoners remained. They were now under the control of the Buchenwald concentration camp. In the period that followed, the number of prisoners was reduced to 42, of whom 40 were Jehovah’s Witnesses. The other 2 were political prisoners. The camp Registry Office was closed. The last entry in the register of deaths is for April 12, 1943. After that no more deaths were recorded. The remaining prisoners were given Buchenwald prisoner numbers and were accommodated in a workshop barracks in the industrial quarter.

The empty protective custody camp was used from the autumn of 1943 as a resettlement camp by the SS-Main Office Ethnic German Liaison Office (Stabshauptamt Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle, VOMI) for so-called ethnic Germans. At the end of 1944, one of the barracks in the camp was occupied by a Gestapo office from Gelsenkirchen whose own office had been bombed. In the autumn of 1943, an army physical training camp (Wehrertüchtigungslager) was established in the former SS camp. The number of SS guards was reduced at first to 12 and in November 1944 to 5. The detachment leadership reported to the Buchenwald concentration camp. Until the end of 1943, SS-Unterscharführer Otto Jacob was leader. He was followed in 1944 by SS-Sturmmann
The SS no longer saw the need to maintain total control. The prisoners could move relatively freely around the industrial quarter and parts of the village. They worked under better conditions, particularly in the gardens, and did small jobs at the castle and in the village. In 1944, the Jehovah’s Witnesses began to operate an illegal press to print their literature. It was distributed throughout all of northern Germany with the help of Jehovah’s Witnesses who were still free. This conspiratorial underground work continued until American soldiers liberated the work detachment. U.S. troops entered Wewelsburg at around 7:00 A.M. on April 2, 1945. They were surprised to find a concentration camp. Himmler’s strategy to camouflage his SS construction project at Wewelsburg was a failure. Two days before the Americans arrived, Himmler ordered an SS detachment to blow up Wewelsburg. While the castle was completely burned out, the outer walls and the north tower remained.

Two postwar trials dealt with the crimes committed at the Niederhagen concentration camp. The first trial took place in 1952 by jury at a Paderborn court. A former “asocial” Kapo was charged with “crimes against humanity” and sentenced to four years’ imprisonment. The State Prosecutor successfully appealed, and the charge was amended to “injury causing death.” In April 1954, the sentence was increased to five years and eight months. The second Wewelsburg trial took place in 1970–1971. Five years of investigations preceded the trial. The trial was prepared by the Senior State Prosecutor in Cologne in conjunction with the Auschwitz Trial, which was prepared by the Zentralstelle in Nordrhein-Westfalen, who was charged with handling National Socialist crimes in concentration camps. Two former SS noncommissioned officers and two former Kapos (a political prisoner and an asocial prisoner) were charged with murder and suspected murder; all other charges lapsed because of the statute of limitations. It could not be proven that the accused had personally committed murder, and they were acquitted. Nevertheless, the court in its judgment made their moral guilt clear.12

SOURCES The first groundbreaking research on the history of the Niederhagen concentration camp was done by Paderborn University professor Karl Hüser at the end of the 1970s, at the request of the Documentary and Memorial Center in KM-WN, which was founded in 1982. He published his results in 1982 in an exhibition catalog, Wewelsburg 1933–1945: Kult- und Terrorstätte der SS. Eine Dokumentation (Paderborn: Bonifatius, 1982). The second edition was published in 1987. Another work is Kirsten John’s monograph “Mein Vater wird gesucht...” Häftlinge des Konzentrationslagers in Wewelsburg, 4th ed. (Essen: Klartext, 2001). The focus here is on the prisoner groups and includes some prisoner biographies. The brochure by Wulf E. Brebeck and Karl Hüser, Wewelsburg 1933–1945: Das Konzentrationslager, 3rd expanded ed. (Münster: Landeshildstelle, 1998), provides an overview. An expanded English translation has appeared as Wewelsburg 1933–1945: A Cult and Terror Centre of the SS (Münster: Landeshildstelle, 2000).

With a few exceptions, the original Niederhagen concentration camp files have been lost. It is therefore necessary to rely on files in other archives (e.g., the BA-B; BA-Bl., which includes the former BDC; ITS) and memorials (AG-S; APMM). There is no prisoner card index; as a result, the names, for example, and the exact number of prisoners cannot be determined. However, they can be reconstructed in part from using prisoner lists in other camps. Some finds in Russian archives (e.g., RGVA) provide further leads that have not yet been researched. It is oral history sources and trial files—especially the second Wewelsburg Trial (available at NWHStA-(D) ZA-K) and a few chronicles (Pfarrechonkii Wewelsburg, in KPAW; Gemeindechonkii Wewelsburg, 1814–1947, in Standesamt Bürs)—that document the life of the prisoners in the Niederhagen concentration camp. In the collection at the AKM-WN are oral and written reports by survivors as well as recorded conversations with former Niederhagen prisoners (on audio and videotape).

Kirsten John-Stucke
trans. Stephen Pallavicini

NOTES
7. Musterbogen, in APMM.
8. Personalakte Haas, in BA-Bl.
10. Schnellbrief, April 5, 1943, ibid.