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Agency and Administration

The Role of Municipal Administration in the Establishment of the Concentration Camps Oranienburg, Bad Sulza, Sachsenhausen and Buchenwald 1933-1938

Introduction

Historiography almost unanimously agrees on the proactive role German municipalities had in collaborating with National Socialist persecution 1933 to 1945. Several studies have successively and inexorably revealed the extent of freedom that municipal public servants enjoyed for their own maneuvers. They did not merely function as some puppets of bureaucracy or replaceable producers of files and memos. In particular, Wolf Gruner¹ argued that there was a lot of scope of action for city and municipal administrations, as the lowermost authorities, regarding the realization of National Socialist policy on the local level in addition to championing their own political and economic interests. Nevertheless, the municipalities' role in establishing the concentration camps has often escaped attention. The image of the camps as 'places of terror'² still prevails. It understands the camps as places that were completely secluded from the outside world and thus beyond reach of the administrative bodies bound to the "normative state"³—places exclusively established by party branches, namely the SS and the SA, and often rejected by the local population.

Since the administrative development of the National Socialist concentration camps was not centrally controlled until the establishment of the Inspectorate of Concentration Camps (IKL) in the summer of 1934, but varied greatly from region to region and from municipality to

¹ Wolf Gruner, *Die Kommunen im Nationalsozialismus*, in: Sven Reichardt and Wolfgang Seibel (eds.), *Der prekäre Staat*, Frankfurt/Main 2011, p. 204.

² See f.e. Wolfgang Benz and Barbara Distel (eds.), *Der Ort des Terrors*, 9 volumes, Munich 2005-09.

³ See Ernst Fraenkel, *The Dual State. A contribution to the Theory of Dictatorship*, New York 1969.

municipality, it makes sense to look at the agency of municipal or local administrations surrounding the early camps on the organizational and administrative development of the places of repression.

The thesis compares the infrastructural and administrative development of a sample of four camps. In order to create a temporally and spatially constitutive level of comparison, the study is limited to the concentration camps Oranienburg in Prussia and Bad Sulza in the Weimar Land in Thuringia, as well as the concentration camps Sachsenhausen and Buchenwald, which were later established in the immediate vicinity. On a synchronic level, differences, and similarities in the development of the "early" camps and the concentration camps established after the establishment of the Inspectorate of Concentration Camps in 1934 will be elaborated. On a diachronic level, regional and local similarities, and differences with regard to the establishment and "normative" integration of the concentration camps in Prussia and Thuringia, or in the city of Oranienburg and in Weimarer Land, will be examined.

This article focuses on the interrelationship between the states, municipalities and party organizations in the establishment of the concentration camps Oranienburg and Sachsenhausen in Prussia and the concentration camps Bad Sulza and Buchenwald in Thuringia. I will examine the decision-making processes and impulses in a special focus on the agency of the communal and regional administration. How have institutions of the "established administration" such as state governments, municipalities and city councils influenced this development?

As an example, the organization of forced labor of the concentration camp prisoners will be examined with regard to the "early" concentration camps of Oranienburg and Bad Sulza.

Subsequently, the "integration" of the Sachsenhausen and Buchenwald camps into the official environment, i.e. the established administration, will be explained using the example of the respective registry offices or the administration of the death of concentration camp prisoners.

Oranienburg and Bad Sulza

On 30 January 1933, after the Nazis came to power neither a concrete plan for the establishment of concentration camps nor the idea of their unified administration existed. In many cases, the founding impulses for these camps came from more or less spontaneous initiatives of the SA and

SS. The duration of the existence of the places of repression depended on the successful institutionalization, in particular the typification and standardization of the administration of the camps and financial guarantees. Already in the consolidation phase of the so called “early” concentration camps, the initiatives of the local and regional administrative bodies in this regard were decisive.

In the center on Oranienburg in the Prussian Province of Brandenburg on 21 March 1933 members of the local *SA-Sturmbann 208* locked forty Communists and Social Democrats from the surrounding areas in a makeshift facility, an abandoned factory building: one of the first concentration camps of the new regime was thus opened. Equipping the concentration camp and persecuting political enemies were substantially supported by Mayor Dr Walther Heinn, who had been in office from the end of March to November 1933.⁴ In an act of unbureaucratic assistance, the *SA-Standarte 208* was granted a loan for the purchase of plank beds for the prisoners. With the help of the mayor, urgently needed office furniture for the concentration camp’s administration had been made available for free. Similarly, the guards were armed with seized firearms from the evidence vault of the local police. In addition, construction and extension of the concentration camp was substantially financed by founded with the help of Oranienburg’s municipal government and, still in a quite unbureaucratic way, granted by the local savings bank. In a joint venture of the SA administration and the town of Oranienburg, the concentration camp was taken over by the federal state of Prussia. On May 16, 1933, it was officially recognised as “government camp”, and from August 1, 1933, it was under the charge of the police headquarters in Potsdam.

In virtually each of the “early concentration camps,” the prisoners were forced to work by means of harassment and terror and salary was paid only in the rarest cases. Although the prisoners’ work was not always publicly visible, work as an “educational means” had a crucial role for legitimising the new detention centres in public discourse. In the everyday life of the concentration camp, this “educational work” took the form of humiliation and punishment. Jewish inmates in particular were forced to perform mostly meaningless tasks and physically hard labour,

⁴ See Frédéric Bonnesoeur, *Im guten Einvernehmen. Die Stadt Oranienburg und die Konzentrationslager Oranienburg und Sachsenhausen 1933-1945*, Berlin 2018, pp. 29-31

like carrying bricks all day from one end of the court to another or clean toilets with their hands.⁵ Like in the penal institutions, however, the work deployment of prisoners outside the camps was, at this moment, still exceptional.

Once again, it was the Oranienburg city administration that broke new ground and took the initiative. The administration saw great potential in the labour force of the concentration camp prisoners to implement long-planned construction projects without burdening its own budget. After consulting with the Niederbarnim district government, the public architect (*Stadtbaumeister*) Paul Hobeck set up a four-page “employment creation scheme” (*Arbeitsbeschaffungsprogramm*) for the deployment of the camp’s prisoners for public works on behalf of the town of Oranienburg and some neighbouring communities with the execution date of 24 May 1933.⁶ With a start date from 10 August 1933, the construction department had composed some guidelines for the work deployment of camp prisoners, after consulting with the concentration camp. In the contract the concentration camp administration agreed to provide the guards and “to take care of the discipline and an adequate work output”⁷ in the workplaces. Employees of the construction department were supposed to oversee the completion of the work. The daily minimum working time had to amount to a full eight hours and, by the end of the day, needed to be established in written form by the municipal construction supervisor, as well as by the SA guard. The town refused any responsibility for the prisoners in case of accident or illness.⁸

Thus, prisoner labor for communal purposes was established as early as the summer of 1933. Besides the humiliating work in the camp area itself, and work for local enterprises and individuals, the concentration camp prisoners were compelled to perform at least 14,800 working days only the town of Oranienburg between June 1933 and July 1934 when the camp was closed.

While the Oranienburg camp was set up by a regional party branch and only subsequently recognized by the state, in the Free State of Thuringia the initiative for the first concentration camps came from a state authority, the Thuringian Ministry of the Interior.

At the instigation of the Thuringian Minister of the Interior Fritz Wächtler, the Bad Sulza concentration camp was opened on 2 November 1933 in a vacant hotel in the town of Bad Sulza,

⁵ See f.e. Julia Pietsch, Stigmatisierung von Juden in frühen Konzentrationslagern. Die Häftlinge der ‚Judenkompanie‘ des Konzentrationslagers Oranienburg 1933/34, in: Marco Brenneisen et al. (ed.), Stigmatisierung, Marginalisierung, Verfolgung, Berlin 2015, pp. 99-120.

⁶ Stadtarchiv Oranienburg, Pr. Br. Rep. 8 1212/2 pp. 1-4.

⁷ See letter from the Oranienburg construction department (*Stadtbauamt*) to the concentration camp in: Stadtarchiv Oranienburg, Pr. Br. Rep. 8, 322/2, p. 7.

⁸ Ibid.

25 km from the state capital Weimar, with the first protective custody prisoners being admitted. The hotel and grounds had previously been acquired by the ministry from the owners, the "Thuringian State Bank", the "Saline Neusulza GmbH" and the municipality of Bad Sulza as early as the beginning of October 1933.⁹

The "camp commandant's office" was composed of members of the state police; police chief constable Carl Haubenreißer was appointed as "commandant". The guards, however, consisted mainly of SA members (and later also members of the general SS) from the immediate vicinity - many came directly from Bad Sulza - who were given the status of auxiliary police officers. A caretaker (*Hausmeister*) named Möller was responsible for the technical operation of the building, and Kuczpiol, a cook from Bad Sulza, was responsible for the preparation of meals.

Just as in the Oranienburg concentration camp, though probably not until January 1934, the inmates of Bad Sulza were also used for forced labour for the municipality.

The "employment of prisoners" was arranged according to the instructions of the Ministry of the Interior, which laid down the following guidelines:

"The prisoners of the concentration camp are to be made available for employment to the town council in Bad Sulza, insofar as they are suitable for this purpose according to their physical condition. The concentration camp must ensure that the prisoners are adequately guarded. The arrival and departure of the prisoners shall take place in closed formation. The method of work and working hours shall be specially agreed upon with the town council."¹⁰

In the course of forced labor, the prisoners had to keep the town's paths in order, pave roads or work in the local salt works. About half of the prisoners had to work in the quarry of the town of Bad Sulza in the Lanitztal. According to former prisoner Heinrich Adam, the prisoners often had to walk 2-3 km through the village to the quarry, where they had to carry out the heaviest quarrying work in all weathers.¹¹

Until its closure on 15 July 1937, about 850 prisoners were interned in the Bad Sulza concentration camp; no deaths are known. Already on 9 July, the last prisoners of the camp had been deported to the Lichtenburg concentration camp and the furniture had been transported to the concentration camp on the Ettersberg in Weimar, which had opened shortly before and was later to be named „Buchenwald“.

⁹ See Udo Wohlfeld/Falk Brukhardt, *Das Netz. Die Konzentrationslager in Thüringen 1933-1937*, Weimar 2000, pp. 107-110.

¹⁰ See letter from the Thuringian Ministry of Interior to the Bad Sulza Concentration Camp, 29 Jan. 1934, Stadtarchiv Bad Sulza, reprinted in: Wohlfeld/Brukhardt, *Das Netz*, p. 132.

¹¹ See interview Heinrich Adam with Beate Peters, January 1985, Buchenwaldarchiv.

Sachsenhausen und Buchenwald

The establishment of the Inspectorate of Concentration Camps (*Inspektion der Konzentrationslager*, IKL) in 1934 and the reorganization of the concentration camp system under SS leadership had a significant impact on the establishment of the two concentration camps Sachsenhausen in 1936 and Buchenwald in 1937. The initiative for their establishment was closely linked to the beginning of war preparations. Referring to the threat in an imagined “case of attack,” the construction of “modern” concentration camps was planned. The new camps were to become the backbone of a centralized police apparatus, headed since June 1936 by Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler in his capacity as chief of the German police.

For the construction of a first new camp, the Oranienburg site seemed particularly attractive due to its proximity to the Reich capital Berlin and its excellent transport links. Moreover, as early as 1935, the local baroque castle had been given to the SS Guards of the “Brandenburg” division for use free of charge by the city.

For the construction of the concentration camp, the responsible Prussian forestry office rented an 80-hectare forest area to the SS for a very small fee. Under the supervision of the forestry office, concentration camp prisoners, who were brought in several transports from the Esterwegen concentration camp to the outskirts of Oranienburg, then had to begin logging work in July 1936.¹² The construction of the camp also went hand in hand with the expansion of the SS location: In the neighboring municipality Sachsenhausen (which gave the camp its name), mayor Wilhelm Patzer released parcels of land so that housing could be built for SS officers and their families. To carry out the road and construction work the commune now increasingly required the use of concentration camp prisoners.¹³

In the case of the later Buchenwald camp, the decisive initiative for finding a suitable location came from the head of the police department in the Thuringian Ministry of the Interior, Hellmuth Gommlich. With the help of a hastily procured expert opinion from the *State Geological Survey*, Gommlich secured the new camp location on the Ettersberg in Weimar and was thus able to guarantee the construction of the new concentration camp in Thuringia.

¹² See f.e. Hermann Kaienburg, *Das Konzentrationslager Sachsenhausen 1936-1945. Zentrallager des KZ-Systems*, Berlin 2021, p. 71-73.

¹³ See letter from mayor Wilhelm Patzer from 10 May 1938, Stadtarchiv Oranienburg, Rep. 9/022, p. 166-167.

On 15 July 1937, the first 149 prisoners from the Sachsenhausen concentration camp arrived at Ettersberg to carry out the initial construction work.¹⁴

However, the SS failed in hermetically separating the new Buchenwald and Sachsenhausen concentration camps from the "normative state" environment. For the efficient administration of the concentration camp operations, the SS members of the new camp administrations also remained dependent on good contacts with the local authorities and institutions.

The municipal administrations were involved in the rapid construction and expansion of both camps insofar as the responsible building authorities quickly approved the construction plans and the supply of building materials was ensured through the mediation of local companies.

When the Buchenwald concentration camp was put into operation, the city of Weimar also resorted to the labour of concentration camp prisoners for municipal construction and transport work.

Apart from their interest in the labor force of the prisoners, Weimar and Oranienburg also had an official control function over the concentration camps. Many municipal authorities were now confronted with a number of additional tasks. For the registry offices, the increase in population due to the SS members who had moved in and the registration of deaths in the concentration camps meant a work overload, to which those responsible in Oranienburg and Weimar reacted very differently:

The Oranienburg city inspector Otto Griep, who was in charge of the registry office, conscientiously fulfilled the additional duties. He tried to deal with the excessive demands through official channels: He repeatedly turned to his superior, the mayor Oskar Fuchs, to organize additional funds for his colleague Paul Kempfer.

Pointing to the considerably increased workload, he tried to achieve his own promotion to city chief inspector, but to no avail.¹⁵ Nevertheless, Griep ensured the efficient administration of the deaths in the concentration camp. Without further on-site checks or otherwise questioning the causes of death of the prisoners, he signed the death certificates of those who died in the camp.¹⁶

¹⁴ See f.e. Jens Schley, Nachbar Buchenwald. Die Stadt Weimar und ihr Konzentrationslager 1937-1945, Köln/Weimar/Wien 1999, p. 22-36.

¹⁵ Letter Otto Griep to mayor Oskar Fuchs from 19 December 1938, in: Stadtarchiv Oranienburg, Rep. 8, Nr. 181, p. 122.

¹⁶ See the Death book entries about deceased prisoners of the Sachsenhausen concentration camp from the Oranienburg registry office June 1938 - January 1939, in: ITS Digital Archive, Arolsen Archives, 1.1.38.1/10010439.

The local registrar Heinrich Fleischhauer¹⁷ was responsible for registering deaths in the Buchenwald concentration camp after it was incorporated into the Weimar registry office district in November 1937. As early as the end of July 1937, the dead of the concentration camp were cremated in the crematorium of the city of Weimar.

In the spring and summer of 1938, their number rose sharply because of the catastrophic sanitary conditions, the SS terror in the course of the *Aktion Arbeitsscheu Reich* (“work-shy Reich”) and the so called *Juni Aktion*. Those who died in Buchenwald now made up the majority of all cremations in the city.¹⁸

From May 1938 at the latest, a new form¹⁹ was used in the Weimar cemetery administration, which was largely designed by Fleischhauer. The form combined five administrative processes on two pages and thus considerably simplified the administrative process for the cremation of prisoners from the camp in the local crematorium. Formally, these processes were subject to the legal provisions of the German Reich and were to be handled in accordance with the ‘Cremation Act’ of 15 May 1934. This bill stipulated that only the relatives of the deceased were allowed to decide on this procedure. However, all documented initial applications in the files of the cemetery administration show the name of the camp commandant Karl Otto Koch. What is more, the SS doctor at the concentration camp (instead of a public health officer) certified that no “non-natural” cause of death had occurred and the bodies were thus released for cremation. The registrar made the entries in the death register even before the legally required issuance of the criminal police certificates, which had to rule out the possibility of death caused by a criminal act. In order to at least maintain the appearance of legality, the registrar subsequently post-dated the certificates by hand. “In this way, the authorities became accomplices of the SS in an illegal act, since § 2 of the cremation law unambiguously stated that the method of burial had to be *‘according to the will of the deceased’*.”²⁰

In most cases, the relatives of the deceased were informed after the cremation. All that was left to them was to ask for the transfer of the remains. The files of the Weimar cemetery administration contain a large number of letters from the wives of the deceased. Still under the impression of the

¹⁷ See personal file Heinrich Fleischhauer, in: Stadtarchiv Weimar, 1, 11-66-25.

¹⁸ In July 1938 the number of deaths almost sextupled compared to the previous month; see Jens Riederer, *Das städtische Krematorium im Dienste der Lager-SS von 1937 bis 1940*, in: Verein Grüne Wahlverwandtschaften (ed.), *„... dem Gottesacker ein freundliches gartenähnliches Ansehen“*. *Zum 200jährigen Bestehen des Hauptfriedhofes Weimar*, Weimar 2018, p. 59-90, 62.

¹⁹ For the form sheet see f.e. the death certificate of Siegfried Victor, who died 20 May 1938 in the Buchenwald concentration camp, Stadtarchiv Weimar, 12, 6-66-78, folder 1.

²⁰ Annegret Schüle, *Industrie und Holocaust. Topf und Söhne – Die Ofenbauer von Auschwitz*, Göttingen 2011, p. 86.

recently received terrible news of death, they were trying to comply with the bureaucratic requirements, organize the sending of the urns and the burial of their spouses. They were required, however, to provide a certificate from the cemetery administration of their respective hometown that an empty burial site was available and pay a fee of 3 Reichsmark. Sometimes the hometown communities were unable to offer a grave. In those cases, larger Jewish communities in the neighborhood provided burial sites and ensured a 'proper burial'.²¹

The "Weimar procedure" increasingly allowed the SS guards to be lulled into a sense of security from possible prosecution about the crimes committed against prisoners. At the same time, the relatives of the deceased were prevented from burying them according to their will. This practice, established in Weimar, was later applied in other concentration camps as well. From 1940, the Inspectorate of Concentration Camps had almost identical forms printed, which were then used primarily in the camp's own SS special registry offices (*Sonderstandesämter*) and crematoria, which were established later.²²

While Otto Griep in Oranienburg relied on existing administrative procedures, especially through his superior mayor Oskar Fuchs, and used them to effectively meet the new requirements, Fleischhauer in Weimar took the initiative himself and developed his own "solutions", which in the end were to have devastating effects on the living conditions of the prisoners and even served as a model for other concentration camps.

Conclusion

After the National Socialist takeover, there was neither a concrete plan for the establishment of concentration camps nor an idea of a unified administration. The duration of their existence was often dependent on the institutionalization of the camps.

Especially in the consolidation phase of the two "early" concentration camps in Prussia and Thuringia, the initiatives of the local and regional administrative bodies in this regard were of decisive importance. Only the granting of loans and the provision of material assets by the city administration made it possible to realize the plans for the construction and expansion of the

²¹ See, for example, several letters written between 1938 and 1940 by the cemetery commission of the Jewish community of Berlin to the cemetery office of the city of Weimar, in: Stadtarchiv Weimar, 12, 6-66-78, folder 1.

²² The form was used in the Sachsenhausen concentration camp, among others, see: ITS Digital Archive, Arolsen Archives, 1.1.38.0/0003/82150904, p. 95.

Oranienburg camp and thus create the preconditions for its institutionalization and subordination to the Potsdam police headquarters in mid-May 1933. The “employment creation scheme” (*Arbeitsbeschaffungsprogramm*) for the concentration camp” developed by the municipal building department enabled the city to implement long-planned building projects using the forced labour of concentration camp prisoners without burdening its own budget.

As a camp established by the state of Thuringia and administered by the police, the Bad Sulza concentration camp was already “institutionalized” with its founding phase and was more reminiscent of a penal prison in terms of its structure and internal organization. The use of prisoners for forced labor was considered a necessity and an “educational” measure by the Thuringian Ministry of the Interior and organized by the Bad Sulza municipal administration. As in Oranienburg, the prisoners of the Thuringian concentration camp were mainly used for communal work.

The founding of the Inspectorate of Concentration Camps in 1934 and the reorganisation of the concentration camp system under SS leadership had a considerable impact on the establishment of the two concentration camps Sachsenhausen and Buchenwald in 1936 and 1937. Their founding initiative was closely linked to the preparations for war that had already begun in 1936. In the case of Thuringia, Theodor Eicke, as head of the IKL, was not interested in expanding Bad Sulza.

Referring to the threat in the event of a potential attack, the construction of a new “modern” concentration camp was planned. The concept of such a camp had already been implemented as a model in the summer of 1936 with the construction of the Sachsenhausen concentration camp and was also realized on the Ettersberg in Weimar a year later.

However, the hermetic demarcation of the new concentration camps from the “normative state” environment, which the IKL was striving for, did not succeed. For the efficient administration of concentration camp operations, the SS also remained dependent on good contacts with local authorities and institutions. The case of the registry offices clearly illustrates the leeway the administrative officials in Weimar and Oranienburg had in carrying out their “services” and which they used in different ways. Ultimately, it was the initiative of the local registrars that established an official practice of efficiently administering the deaths of prisoners in the camps and decisively supported the establishment of the camps' own special registry offices. They were involved in the practice of falsifying places of death, causes of death and days of death, which were intended to conceal the crimes committed in the concentration camp and legitimized them qua their office. In both cases the local officials played a decisive role in gradually establishing the concentration camps as total institutions – whether through Otto Griep's adherence to official channels,

(anticipatory) obedience and discipline, or through Heinrich Fleischhauer's individual high-handedness and personal initiative. In this way, both helped to translate Nazi ideology into functioning administrative practice.