

Camps “on the Move”. Aspects of Analysing the Evacuation and Liquidation Process of Sachsenhausen Concentration Camp Complex 1945

Paper from the Workshop of the Fondation pour la Mémoire de la Shoah Paris held online on January 6, 2022¹

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Shortly before Soviet and Polish units reached Oranienburg on April 20, 1945, the headquarter of the concentration camp system called *Amtsgruppe D*² was evacuated. In spite of the dramatic events at the end of World War II in Europe, the SS started the final liquidation of its Sachsenhausen concentration camp complex—whose main camp was also located in Oranienburg—on the same and the following day. Retreating from one of the main SS bases, the armed members of this SS/police³ site as well their accomplices did not consider leaving the camp inmates behind. Instead of handing them over to delegates of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), who were already on site, mostly weak or ill captives had to leave the main camp as well as the remaining satellite camps together with the fleeing camp SS/police. Depending on the movement of the Allies and following the retreat paths of the Wehrmacht and SS/police headquarters, guards forced more than 30 000 camp prisoners from Sachsenhausen on long marches towards the Northwest. Some inmates were also marched south towards Theresienstadt. The camp SS/police left behind only female inmates and children seen as “*marsch-unfähig*” (“unable to march”) in the concentration camps main site in Oranienburg. These final deportations on foot lasted from April 22 until May 6, 1945. Captives were murdered en route by the guards or perished due to exhaustion or lack of food supply when the entire camp complex Sachsenhausen was on the move. To express their

¹ I would like to thank the Fondation pour la Mémoire de la Shoah for funding my research project as well as for organizing the excellent workshop on January 6–7, 2022.

² Since 1942, the former *Inspektion der Konzentrationslager* (headquarter of the SS concentration camp system) had been integrated in the *SS-Wirtschaftsverwaltungshauptamt* (SS main economic administration office) as *Amtsgruppe D*. Unlike other administrative groups of the main economic administration office headed by Oswald Pohl, it was located in Oranienburg and not in Berlin.

³ I choose this notation to refer to the interlinking of the German police with the SS. The organizational fusion process the *SS-Reichsführung* aimed for was officially confirmed and concluded with Himmler's appointment as head of the German police in 1937. In relation to the concentration camp system managed by the SS, the notation also highlights that there were members of the *Sicherheitspolizei* (security police) working at the so-called political departments of the camp headquarters who did not necessarily hold SS membership.

experiences, former Sachsenhausen inmates subsequently used the terms “march of misery” or “death march” in their testimonies.

The evacuation of Sachsenhausen concentration camp complex was preceded by a process of liquidation that lasted several months. Having started in January 1945, it related to developments on the German-Soviet front, which was shifting to the Berlin-Brandenburg region at the time: With the support of major Polish forces, the Red Army had started another major offensive against the German forces on 12 January 1945. As the last natural barrier on the way to Berlin, one major objective of this offensive was to reach the Oder River. From there, the Soviet attack on the German capital was to follow. At the time, the SS registered more than 52 500 male and 13 000 female inmates—non-Jewish and Jewish—for its Sachsenhausen concentration camp.⁴ The main camp of this SS complex was located north of and close to the outskirts of Berlin.

Since 1944, most of the prisoners registered in Sachsenhausen had been used for forced labour at different places in the Berlin-Brandenburg region. They were exploited in the German armament industry or were forced into construction commandos to build replacement departments for SS/police or Wehrmacht offices in the surrounding areas of Berlin. Close to the Oder River in Lieberose, the SS exploited mostly Jewish men at the construction site of the military training area “Kurmark”. Moreover, male inmates were forced into so-called clean-up commandos and used for bomb disposal, the retrieval of corpses, and removing of rubble in Berlin and other cities focused by the allied bomb commands. Therefore, the Sachsenhausen concentration camp complex included a large number of satellite camps and labour commands. The SS/police felt particularly threatened by the approaching Soviet front in the eastern part of Brandenburg, where the subcamps were located close to the Oder River. In the beginning of January 1945, the *Amtsgruppe D* had already ordered to plan the evacuation and liquidation of Sachsenhausen—one of its biggest and remaining concentration camp complexes located in the *Altreich*⁵.

On January 27, 1945, Soviet troops began to invade the Brandenburg region. Due to the disastrous German war situation, the commandant's staff of Sachsenhausen concentration camp intensified work on evacuation plans. On January 31, Soviet units reached

⁴ See Federal Archive Berlin (BArch), NS 3/439 fol. 1/2.

⁵ German territory within its borders of 1937.

the middle section of the Oder and set across the river for the first time. Standing on the west bank of the river, they were only approximately 60 kilometres away from Berlin (linear distance). As a result, the distance to Oranienburg no longer measured 100 kilometres (linear distance). The same evening, an evacuation alert was issued for the entire Sachsenhausen concentration camp complex, issuing the camp SS/police to withdraw their staff and remove all prisoners from war-threatened areas. The liquidation process of Sachsenhausen concentration camp complex started: The satellite camps near the Oder River were closed and prisoners were returned to the main camp. There the mass murder of prisoners with military or police expertise began. Inmates known for their political opposition were also shot by the camp SS/police. In the beginning of February 1945, however, the Eastern Front came to a standstill in the marshy area of the Oder. The German mobilisation for the front, as well as the activation of "last reserves" of the Luftwaffe to attack the Soviet shock troops from the air, and in particular the beginning thaw, had moved Stalin to stop the Red Army military units there. On February 2, the evacuation alert for Sachsenhausen was withdrawn.

The ensuing position battles between German and Soviet forces along the river line lasted the entire months of February and March 1945. The SS/Police command staff in Oranienburg used this time to further prepare for the evacuation and liquidation of Sachsenhausen camp complex as well as for the *Amtsgruppe D*. During this period, files, valuables, and objects deemed to be of relevance for the SS camp system were evacuated southwards to Dachau and Mauthausen. Documents were burnt. Mainly ill inmates but also political opponents were deported to Bergen-Belsen, Buchenwald and Mauthausen or were murdered by the camp SS/police on site by bullets, injections, or in the gas chamber of Sachsenhausen. Afterwards, the gas chamber was dismantled. Further satellite camps were closed and inmates were transferred back to the main camp, resulting in catastrophic overcrowding and the spreading of epidemics. The supply situation, which had already been characterised by shortages, became existentially dangerous for the inmates. Thousands of inmates perished or were murdered during this period.

On April 16, 1945, Soviet forces launched its next and last major offensive. When the Red Army approached the outskirts of Berlin on April 20, regional and local SS/Police leaders initiated the final evacuation and liquidation of the entire Sachsenhausen concentration camp complex. While about 3 000 sick prisoners remained in the main camp, more than 33 000 inmates were forced to leave the camp site(s). The guards drove the prisoners onto side roads

in a northwesterly, some also in southern direction. Long and heavily guarded columns of prisoners followed the retreat routes of the SS/police. For them, the evacuation measure meant renewed displacement through violent deportations on foot. Because they could no longer continue walking, according to today's estimates more than 1 000 inmates had been murdered *en route* or perished during the night camps due to exhaustion and lack of supply.⁶

Research Program

In my PhD project, I analyse the forced evacuation of the Sachsenhausen concentration camp complex, which ended with the liberation of the inmates—the majority of whom were located along the routes of the death marches and not inside the camp itself.⁷ I understand the practices of liquidation as well as of evacuation as National Socialist practices of violence, which only ended with the appearance of the Allies and their liberation of the inmates. As outlined above, the liquidation of the Sachsenhausen concentration camp complex in 1945 was not a singular event but a violent process, which can be divided into different stages:

1. January 1945: Preparation of evacuation plans by regional and local SS/police leaders
2. January 31-February 2: First evacuation alert, liquidation of first satellite camps and mass shooting of inmates perceived as “dangerous”
3. February – March: Preparatory time for evacuation and liquidation; period of intense (re-)deportation and mass murder of inmates perceived as “*marsch-unfähig*” (“unable to march”), document destruction, dismantling of the gas chamber
4. April 20 – May 6: Second evacuation alert, liquidation and death marches.

These stages were related to the events of the war in the Berlin-Brandenburg region. Using a micro-historical approach, I try to explore the concepts and dynamics that formed the basis of this final and extremely violent period between January and May 1945. By doing so, my research demonstrates that the procedure was based on and related not only to the events

⁶ See memorial homepage <https://www.below-sbg.de/en/history/april-1945-death-march-and-forest-camp/> (April 2022).

⁷ The title of my dissertation is "War, Movement and Extreme Violence in the Berlin-Brandenburg Area: The Evacuation and Liquidation of the Sachsenhausen Concentration Camp Complex in 1945". The thesis will be submitted to the Institute of Historical Studies at Humboldt University Berlin.

themselves but also to military concepts of warfare. The Reichswehr/Wehrmacht developed these concepts in the 1930s. Facing the defeat, the SS/police radicalised them in 1944/45.

Due to the rapid advance of the Red Army and their invasion into the so-called *Altreich* in January 1945, the *Amtsgruppe D* faced a crisis of its own making. As the remaining territory of the German Reich was shrinking constantly, leading SS members of the concentration camp system as well as the head of the Gestapo in Berlin, Heinrich Müller, had to deal with the large number of concentration camp inmates—seen as “internal enemy” by the SS/police—located in and around Berlin. The main directive, as given by Hitler, was that under no circumstances camp inmates should fall into the hand of the enemy. Yet, by the time the Soviet army had approached the River Oder, the enemy of war was targeting the German capital. Instead of leaving the inmates, most of whom were seriously ill, behind in the camps, the SS/police reacted as they had done during their withdrawals from occupied territories: with further deportations and mass murder. To get to the core of the specific dynamics of violence, which, apart from “violence”, characterised the liquidation process in Sachsenhausen in 1945, I use the analytical categories “space,” “mobilization,” and a wide range of sources to analyse how SS/police members but also civilians reacted when the evacuation process started and thousands of inmates were deported within *Rumpfdeutschland* (a viable rump Germany) as the last remaining territory.

Methodology

In the course of the spatial turn, historical research has maintained that “space” or spatiality always requires human attributions of meaning.⁸ In accordance with a relational understanding of “space,” movements—of bodies or objects—which constitute specific spatialities have come into focus and can be historicised. With regard to an analysis of dynamics of violence, it is useful to ask not only about the actors and practices but also about specific spatial configurations and to what extent they influence the occurrence and

⁸ See Tobias Riedl: Mode oder Methode? Der spatial turn im Spannungsfeld einer zeitgemäßen Geschichtswissenschaft, in: Wolfgang Wüst, Michael Müller (eds.): Reichskreise und Regionen im frühmodernen Europa – Horizonte und Grenzen im spatial turn, Frankfurt a. M. 2011, pp. 25–37; Riccardo Bavaj: Was bringt der „spatial turn“ der Regionalgeschichte? Ein Beitrag zur Methodendiskussion, in: Westfälische Forschungen 56 (2006), pp. 457–484.

continuation of violence.⁹ This becomes particularly obvious in concentration camps but also in war zones like the German-Soviet front 1941–45 or its rear areas, where the German *Einsatzgruppen* operated. Furthermore, Holocaust research has paid particular attention to the specific socio-spatial configuration of “borderlands” in recent years.¹⁰

Framed within the intersection of Holocaust/genocide studies and military history, the interdependencies between war zones, their rear areas, and camp zones are a crucial aspect of my study. In addition, the eastern areas of Brandenburg were German-Polish border territory until 1939. From January 1945 on, the Soviet front moved increasingly into this region. In regard to the Sachsenhausen concentration camp complex located there, the main question of my research is: Facing the Eastern Front and its rear area in “their” territory, how did regional party, SS and police members react to the war events, which were increasingly shifting towards Berlin? How did the camp SS/police, the camp guards, and their “volunteers” put the order to evacuate Sachsenhausen concentration camp complex issued by these authorities into practise? Did the liquidation and evacuation process provide the prisoners with scope for action? If so, who was able to make use of them? By questioning the composition, historical sense, and knowledge systems of the perpetrators in 1945 and by examining the transfer from prior National Socialist contexts and “spaces of violence,”¹¹ I draw attention to the destructive and processual abandonment of and retreat from the SS/police base in Oranienburg. By conceptualizing the crimes in connection with the retreat of German forces—later termed *Endphaseverbrechen*¹²— as spatial strategies of the SS/police for the arrival of the Allies in the so-called *Altreich*—a situation deemed inconceivable by the perpetrators—I examine the transformation of the NSDAP-administered *Gau Brandenburg* into a war zone. In addition, I analyse the transformation of Sachsenhausen concentration camp into a camp in motion.

⁹ See e.g. Tim Cole: *Holocaust Landscapes*, London 2016.

¹⁰ See Gaëlle Fisher, Caroline Mezger (eds.): *The Holocaust in the Borderlands. Interethnic Relations and the Dynamics of Violence in Occupied Eastern Europe*, Göttingen 2019.

¹¹ The term “Gewaltraum” (space of violence) was introduced into scholarly literature in the 1990s and goes back to Wolfgang Sofsky. Wolfgang Sofsky: *Traktat über die Gewalt*, Frankfurt am Main 1996, pp. 178–180. For the analytical concept of “Gewaltraum” see paper in: Jörg Baberowski, Gabriele Metzler (eds.): *Gewalträume. Soziale Ordnungen im Ausnahmezustand*, Frankfurt am Main 2012.

¹² See Sven Keller: *Volksgemeinschaft am Ende. Gesellschaft und Gewalt 1944/45*, München 2013; Cord Arendes, Edgar Wolfrum, Jörg Zedler (eds.): *Terror nach Innen. Verbrechen am Ende des Zweiten Weltkrieges*, Göttingen 2006.

In my micro-historical analysis of the interdependencies between actor, space, time and violence regarding the historical event of the Sachsenhausen evacuation, I combine action-theoretical approaches with spatial theory, as well as communication-theoretical approaches. This provides the necessary context for analysing the spatial strategies of the SS/police, as well as the German authorities at the moment of military withdrawal from the last remaining territories. In regard to those persecuted, the (forced) use and appropriation of spaces can be considered a specific practice. In addition to this, the deportees produced their own real and imagined spaces,¹³ often interpreting spatial behaviour as a strategy.¹⁴ However, survival was not the result of strategic planning but rather of many (fortunate) coincidences. Likewise, the production of physical, social, and imagined counter-spaces or spaces of refuge cannot be fully subsumed under the category of strategic behaviour. When analysing the spatial strategies of the perpetrators it is crucial not to reproduce their self-image and intentions without scrutiny. Furthermore, spatial practices of members of the non-Jewish majority societies also need to be examined. As survivor testimonies demonstrate, plans can never be converted exactly into a (material) reality as originally envisaged by the SS/police.

Sources

For my research approach, extensive source work was essential. Official documents such as orders and directives given by central and regional SS/police as well as NS party or Wehrmacht leaders and members dealing with the deportations resulting from the evacuations form one basis of my analysis. I include not only contemporary SS/police documents but also those of the *Gauleitungen* (regional administration) in Berlin and Brandenburg as well as sources from the Wehrmacht's inventory such as (regional) mobilisation plans and war diaries. The reconstruction of the last period of Sachsenhausen concentration camp's history requires the perspective of the deported and remembering the assassinated. By adopting Saul Friedlander's concept of an "integrated history,"¹⁵ I analyse a broad variety of testimonies of

¹³ See Alexandra Natoli: Bodily Matters: Remembering the Auschwitz-Birkenau Latrines, in: Janine Fubel, Alexandra Klei, Annika Wienert (eds.): »Körper« und »Raum« im Kontext der Holocaust- und Genozidforschung, *Zeitschrift für Genozidforschung* 1(2021), pp. 203–221.

¹⁴ On the concept of spatial strategy cf. Bernd Belina: Raumstrategie, in: Arne Winkelmann, York Förster (eds.): *Gewahrsam. Räume der Überwachung*, Heidelberg 2007, pp. 106–110.

¹⁵ Saul Friedländer: *Den Holocaust beschreiben. Auf dem Weg zu einer integrierten Geschichte*, Göttingen 2007.

survivors, as well as diaries written during the death marches. Considering that the majority of inmates who were deported to Oranienburg and interned at the Sachsenhausen concentration camp complex in 1944/45 came from occupied European territories (most of them from South-/East Europe), I pay particular attention to the testimonies of non-German survivors. Notably, due to the evacuation of the camps located “in the east” in 1944/45, a larger number of female inmates reached Sachsenhausen—previously functioning as a men’s camp—as well as Jewish inmates. Thus, by adding testimonies authored by Jewish and female survivors, as well as Roma deportees, my study intends to represent the heterogeneity of inmates. With particular emphasis on the earlier testimonies, which were recorded in the second half of the 1940s and the 1950s, I also include reports authored by German inmates. As primary German inmates had the opportunity to hold important positions inside the camps administrative structure as so-called *Kapos* or *Funktionshäftlinge*, who were used as guards for the camps “on the move,” and with an awareness of what Primo Levi termed as “gray zone,”¹⁶ testimonies of these group offer particular insights into the organisation of the camp and its liquidation.

To complement the base data of my analysis, I utilise around 600 SS personnel records, post-1945 police files, and documents from legal investigations, as well as photographic material of crime scenes, aerial views taken by the Allies, and cartographical material of front lines and battlefields. The visual material will be questioned with particular regards to representations of actors, spaces of violence, as well as organizational and time processes. The broad source material for the Oranienburg SS/police complex as well as for the Berlin-Brandenburg war zone and its rear area makes it possible to combine a research perspective at the interface of recent military history and Holocaust research, allowing me to examine the concentration camp evacuations as crime scenes located in German wartime society. An investigation of the violent practises during the camp evacuations in 1945, and its ordering and performing actors, is still a desideratum. In previous research on the death marches, questions which address the compositions of transports columns and composition of the guarding remains yet to be researched. Moreover, none of the existing studies engage with the question of (dis-)continuities related to a gendered segregation of the camps “on the move.”

¹⁶ Martina Mengoni: The gray zone: Power and privilege in Primo Levi, 2012, online: <https://auschwitz.be/images/inedits/mengoni.pdf> (April 2022).

Outlook

The aim of my research is to present a comprehensive study regarding the planning, execution and numerous actors involved in this final phase of the Sachsenhausen camp complex's history. In detail, I trace the steps of the tens of thousands of inmates, who were registered in Sachsenhausen but located in the Berlin-Brandenburg region. Moreover, I follow their re-deportations into the main camp, as well as to the territories of Mecklenburg, Saxony and Bohemia. The primary aim of my study is to outline the inherent power relations within this mass deportation movement from a historical and actor-centred perspective. I seek to raise questions about the responsibility of those involved, the methods of guarding as well as the possibilities of action within the context of situationally-spatial conditions. My study deals explicitly with perpetration and spatial as well as structural modifications involved in the process of forced concentration camp liquidation. Within the framework of micro-analysis, I will outline, the (dis-)continuities and dynamics of violence against camp inmates, as well as the structure and interrelations of guarding a camp "on the move". Furthermore, I will investigate the often violent encounters of the inmates with local residents, as well as the process of liberation by the allied forces. Conclusively, I argue that the evacuation and liquidation procedures as organized by the SS can be understood as a violent response to the frontline events, which enforced a transformation of power structures in Germany in 1945.

April, 2022

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