

## Werner von Braun, the V-2 Rocket, and the Dark Beginnings of the Race to the Moon



The US Army Center of Military History's White Sands Missile Range Museum holds one of the most complete, original V-2 rockets in the world today. Developed by the German rocket team led by Wernher von Braun and General Walter Dornberger, the V-2 was one of Hitler's "Vengeance" weapons but came into use too late in the war to be of any significance. Considered one of the world's first modern "terror" weapons, it was basically aimed at a target - such as a city like London or Antwerp - and fired. Unlike the V-1 "Buzz Bomb" which was much slower and quite audible during its approach, and which could be knocked out of the air with relative ease, the V-2 was supersonic – many victims never heard it coming. There was a tremendous explosion and half a city block was devastated.

The War Department of the United States wanted the V-2. Under General Holger Toftoy, chief of Army Ordnance Technical Intelligence, teams were assigned to Europe to seek out and evaluate captured enemy ordnance, weapons, and equipment, Special Mission V-2 was set up, commanded by Major William Bromley, to search for and acquire V-2 rockets, rocket engineers, and documents. Major James Hamill was given the responsibility to ship the material from Nordhausen to Antwerp - the 144th Motor Vehicle Assembly Company providing transportation - and from there to New Orleans and on to White Sands Proving Ground – a new test facility being developed in the southern New Mexico desert.

White Sands Proving Ground was "born" with its first flag-raising on July 9, 1945 – exactly one week before the detonation of the atomic bomb at Trinity Site – on lands that also later became part of the test range. Colonel Harold Turner commanded the new installation and, on 1 August 1945, C Battery of the 69th Anti-Aircraft Artillery Gun Battalion arrived at White Sands. Their mission was to prepare the installation to test the missile technology captured from Germany. They were called "broomstick scientists." On 4 June 1947 the unit was re-designated the 1st Guided Missile Battalion, one indication that in military language the term "rocket" was giving way to "guided missile." On 31 May 1948, the 1st Guided Missile Battalion was inactivated and replaced by the 1st Ordnance Guided Missile Support Battalion and the 9393d Technical Support Unit to provide training and support for later V-2 and other rocket



launches - the 1st Ordnance Guided Missile Support Battalion was inactivated in the mid-1950s.

But the 3<sup>rd</sup> Armored Division soldiers of Task Force Welborn and Task Force Lovejoy who entered the Nordhausen area in April 1945, followed soon by the 104<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Divisions, had no idea of the importance of what they were encountering or the odd-looking rockets in the mine tunnels – they just knew that something terrible had happened there.

### **Wernher von Braun and the Beginning**



Wernher von Braun grew up in a Prussian Junkers family, the son of a civil servant. As such, he was afforded a certain privilege that many of his later colleagues didn't have. As a young man, this privilege may have been part of what led him to be welcomed into the VfR – the Verein für Raumschiffahrt, or Society for Space Flight. Both

Rudolph Nebel and Hermann Oberth, founding members of the VfR and important leaders in early German rocket development, remembered Von Braun as rather “clumsy,” rather than as the “wunderkind” that many historians and others later called him. He brought a sense of respectability and prestige to the project, however, as well as – possibly – some needed funding which always seemed to be in short supply. In addition, his father was the Minister of Agriculture under both the Franz von Papen and Kurt von Schleicher chancellorships.

During 1931 and early 1932, Von Braun took a “sojourn” in Greece before returning to Berlin, where Arthur Nebel and Klaus Riedel had prepared to fire the new “Mirak” rocket at the ordnance proving ground at Kummersdorf. Though the test was unsuccessful, more support was given by the army for continued research. By the mid-1930's, Von Braun had risen to a leadership position in the group, which was now receiving better funding from the



German army, and building larger, more powerful rockets at the airfields of Kummersdorf, outside Berlin. In 1934, he received his PhD in Physics from Friedrich Wilhelm University (now Humboldt University) in Berlin. Not known to be a particularly brilliant scientist or engineer, he was the perfect administrator for the burgeoning rocket program. His ability to understand the various technical difficulties his colleagues encountered, as well as his personality and demeanor, were quickly noticed by the leadership of the German army and the SS. Facing the need to develop much larger rocket motors, in December 1934, Arthur Rudolph was recruited to join the team and by early 1935 progress was being made relatively quickly. In April, a meeting consisting of Generals Karl Becker, Alfred Kesselring, and Wolfram Freiherr von Richthofen, with

Colonel Walter Dornberger and Von Braun attending, set the wheels turning for the development of a large rocket test facility on the North Sea – Peenemunde.

## Peenemunde



In 1936, General Dornberger took over as chief of the rocket program for the army, with the sole purpose of the work at the new location on the North Sea being weapon development. Klaus Riedel designed larger, more powerful rocket engines, and Arthur Rudolph built them. The new Aggregat 3 (A-3) rocket incorporated gyroscopes for steering, with Johannes Maria Roykow, of the Kreiselgerate gyroscope equipment company, providing the first gyros for the 22 foot long A-3. Rudolf Hermann was brought in for wind tunnel development, and Walter Thiel, a chemical engineer, came aboard for research into combustion and rocket motor design. On 1 May 1937, Dr.

Wernher von Braun officially joined the Nazi party and was given party member number 5,738,692. (He would spend almost the rest of his life insisting that he was “never a Nazi.”) In November 1937, before numerous dignitaries, three A-3’s were fired at the Greifswalder Oie test stand. All three failed. The Aggregat 4 (A-4) was a larger rocket which came to incorporate numerous ideas developed during testing, but the group moved on to the larger Aggregat 5 (A-5), which flew successfully in October 1939. By this point there was no doubt about the work being done for weapon development – Germany had invaded Poland the previous month, and more scientists and engineers, such as mathematician Paul Schroder, were brought in for guidance and control work. Schroder would be the only “Peenemunder” to later publicly attack and criticize Von Braun.

## Von Braun and the SS

*In April and May of 1940, Von Braun was urged to join the Schutzstaffel (SS) by a Colonel of the SS on Usedom – the island on which Peenemunde was located. More than likely, this was at the insistence of Reichsfuhrer-SS Heinrich Himmler who was, even at this early date, looking to consolidate power as much as possible and “ease” programs away from the army. Dornberger realized it would be detrimental to the rocket program to refuse, so Von Braun joined at the rank of Lieutenant. Two quick promotions, in late 1941 and, again, late 1942 made him a Major (Sturmbannführer) in the SS because of Himmler’s appreciation of the work being done at Peenemunde. SS troops at Peenemunde attended monthly meetings, with Von Braun attending about 50% of such meetings – always in uniform. During a June 1943 visit by Himmler, Dornberger ordered Von Braun to wear the uniform, and – though not seen clearly – a photo taken at this time is the only one extant showing Von Braun in his black SS uniform.*



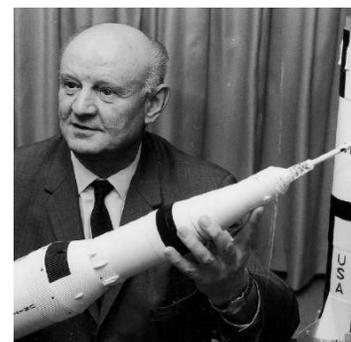
Work continued at Kummersdorf while facilities were being constructed and expanded at Peenemunde and by late 1939 the entire rocket program was moved north. The need



to finalize a fully developed, deployable weapon drove research to the A-4 rocket in 1940 and 1941. Test after test failed, engineers developed modifications, and more testing was accomplished. On October 3, 1942, the first successful launch of the A-4 rocket, also known as the V-2, took place at Peenemunde, with research,

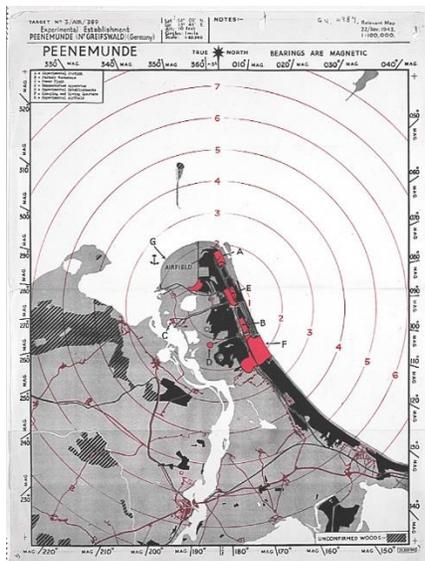
development and testing taking on a fever pitch. Due to war constraints labor was increasingly difficult to come by, with Germany now fully embroiled with its occupation of Western Europe while conducting an aggressive war against the Soviet Union. By 1942, Minister of Armaments and Munitions Albert Speer convinced Hitler to place the use of slave labor in armaments and material factories under his jurisdiction, due to a number of reasons. One of these being that the tools and machines needed for labor were not available in the concentration camps themselves, therefore the “workers” needed to be moved to camps built in concert with factories – “it would have been difficult to utilize the prisoners on any large scale for war production since [Speer] would not allocate to Himmler the machine tools and other necessary equipment.” (Speer, meetings with Hitler on 20, 21, 22 September 1942). Speer agreed that the industries using this labor would pay the SS since Himmler was no longer in direct control of production, and Speer would ensure the SS received the arms and equipment it needed. One of the first locations this occurred at was Peenemunde. In late 1942 a “non-SS contingent” of several thousand Polish and Soviet laborers arrived in Peenemunde to build electrical power stations, missile production facilities, and the liquid-oxygen plant.

In April 1943 Arthur Rudolph, who was now chief engineer of Peenemunde’s production plants, “enthusiastically” embraced an idea from Speer to use SS camp prisoners as slave labor. Rudolph had visited the Heinkel aircraft plant in Oranienberg-Berlin to see how the SS was providing labor from the Sachsenhausen concentration camp. He approved of what he saw and quickly agreed to the same for Peenemunde. In addition to the research and development location at Peenemunde, missile production plants in Friedrichshafen and near Vienna, Austria also made use of SS labor. (In 1985, Rudolf would write that he learned “to my horror” that slave labor would be used at Dora-Mittelbau.) Buchenwald later supplied French and German laborers and, in July, several hundred Frenchmen arrived by train, joining 400 Belgians, Russian, Dutch, French and German prisoners at an SS-guarded facility. Though the decision to use slave labor was not made by Von Braun, he was certainly not unaware of it, as he later claimed. Workers at Peenemunde were treated much better than in many of the camps.



Thought they worked very long hours in difficult conditions, they were fed enough to provide sustenance. Survivor Alex Baum was a young man in the French resistance when he was captured and sent to Buchenwald. Not long after, he was part of several hundred sent to Peenemunde; “We had to work very, very hard, constant running, schnell, schnell, but we had soup and we had a decent facility where we could sleep ... we worked 12 hours a day and then 12 hours rest, seven days a week.” That would soon change for all laborers involved in rocket production.

The years 1941 and 1942 saw British intelligence gain more insight into what the Germans were doing on the island of Usedom due to a very aggressive intelligence campaign aimed at German technology. Information had made its way to Poland, from Polish partisans who received information from those slave laborers in Peenemunde. In addition, certain officers captured in the North Africa campaign talked about the development of a large rocket in the north of Germany - POW Lieutenant-General Wilhelm Ritter von Thoma was eavesdropped on while in captivity, discussing the rocket and expressing his surprise to another POW, General Ludwig Crüwell, that London was not devastated yet by the new weapon. By July, mission and targeting plans for Operation Hydra had been developed and the night of 17-18 August 1943 saw the Royal Air Force send waves of bombers over Peenemunde – some 600 bombers dropped approximately three million pounds of explosive and incendiary bombs - the bombing strike killed 735 people, almost all were slave laborers.



Targeting map for Peenemunde. Targets shown are

- A: Experimental station
- B: Factory workshops
- C: Power plant
- D: Unidentified machinery
- E: Experimental establishments
- F: Sleeping and living quarters
- G: Airfield

## Nordhausen and the Dora-Mittelbau Complex



Aerial view of the city of Nordhausen. The Boelke Kaserne is at center right.

The Thuringian town of Nordhausen lies some 267 kilometers southwest of Berlin – 557 from Peenemunde. Its population during 1944-45 was approximately 43,000 people, and to the northwest of the town rose the Kohnstein – a low mountain in which an anhydrite mine had been dug. In 1935, Wirtschaftliche Forschungsgesellschaft (WIFO), or Economic Research Company, first examined the mine as a fuel dump – completing it as such in 1936 to create a large reserve of petroleum. Consequently, many of the mine tunnels were enlarged and galleries extended. On August 26, Speer, Dornberger, SS General Hans Kammler, Gerhard Dagenkolb (head of Special Committee A-4) and Karl Otto Saur (Speer's Deputy) met to discuss the need for a more secure location for V-2 war production and the decision was made to relocate to the Kohnstein. By 1943, the location was examined again – this time for its potential as a rocket and aircraft factory, primarily for the A-4 rocket. Speer's Armaments Ministry took over the facility, with the Mittelwerk Corporation leasing it from WIFO and, by fall, work began on converting the tunnels as needed for rocket production. The concentration camp of Buchenwald was close by and could provide the initial construction and mining labor. SS General Hans



Kammler, Chief of SS Construction, created a system of labor camps known together as the Dora-Mittelbau complex, which would eventually number some 40 locations. At the end of August over 200 prisoners arrived from Buchenwald, with Kammler shipping in over a thousand more on September 2. Soon, hundreds a day were arriving and going underground, many to never see the outside again. Until the spring of 1944, almost all prison labor lived underground. Galleries and tunnels were set aside for sleeping quarters, with straw spread on the cold stone floor provided. The tunnels were damp and cold, with the temperature remaining just below 60 degrees F, with inadequate food, water, and toilet facilities. In addition, many of the prisoners who arrived during the period were already malnourished and sick – the Mittelwerk had the highest mortality rate of all concentration camps during this time. Werner von Braun visited the site in August, September, and again in October. French resistance leader Jean Michel was arrested and sent to the camp; he began work in mid-October and later described his first day:

*The first day is terrifying. The Kapos [prisoner bosses] and SS drive us on at an infernal speed, shouting and raining blows down on us, threatening us with execution; the demons! The noise bores into the brain and shears the nerves. The demented rhythm lasts for fifteen hours. Arriving at the dormitory ... we do not even try to reach the bunks. Drunk with exhaustion, we collapse onto the rocks, onto the ground. Behind, the Kapos press us on. Those behind trample over their comrades. Soon, over a thousand despairing men, at the limit of their existence and racked with thirst, lie there hoping for sleep which never comes; for the shouts of the guards, the noise of the machines, the explosions and the ringing of the [locomotive] bell reach them even there.*



In late fall, Dora-Mittelbau also became its own camp, not a subsidiary of Buchenwald. As winter approached, the men had been able to build rudimentary bunks stacked 4 high for sleeping but continued working in the cold, damp tunnels. Before the year ended, almost 12,000 of them died – their bodies sent back to Buchenwald for cremation. Dora later received its own ovens but could not keep up, and the very sick and dying were shipped off to Bergen-Belsen or Majdanek death camp for killing and cremation. During this first fall, medical supervisor for the Ministry of Armaments, Doctor A. Poschmann, visited the site. Later, at the Nuremberg War Crimes Trials, he recalled:

*The men “worked a minimum of 72 hours a week, they were fed 1,100 calories per day. Lung and heart disease were epidemic because of the dampness and intense air pressure. Deaths averaged 160 a day. When a deputation of*

*prisoners petitioned for improved conditions, SS Brigadefuhrer Hans Kammler responded by turning machine guns on them, killing 80.”*

Throughout the first few months of 1944, transports of slave laborers continued to arrive, while those too sick to work were evacuated to Majdanek. Early January saw 1000 prisoners sent away, the following month another thousand followed, with yet another thousand sent to Bergen-Belsen at the end of March. Through all of this, German civilian employees continued to arrive, as well, to work alongside the prisoners. One German worker recalled being give specific instructions that they were not to abuse them “too much.” However, by June 1944, many of the civilian employees were punishing the prisoners – rather than filing reports with the managers and SS, as required – and in some cases beating them for “sport.” Wherever civilian employees managed prisoners this became common. Dora’s camp doctor reported that an increasing number of prisoners were being sent to the hospital due to abuse by their civilian bosses and counterparts, and approached Georg Rickhey, the Mittelwerk’s general director. Rickhey and the SS warned Rudolph and other personnel that they were in charge of production only – the SS had sole responsibility for punishment. Albin Sawatzki, chief of production planning in Nordhausen and Rudolph’s boss, was “feared in the tunnels for personally beating and kicking prisoners he considered lazy.”



Beginning 1 April, the Zigeunerfamilienlager, or Gypsy Family Camp, at Auschwitz-Birkenau was being dismantled. Unlike normal procedure at Auschwitz, families stayed together and many Roma and Sinti – men, women and children - were sent to Nordhausen. These transports continued until August, when the remaining Auschwitz survivors were gassed. By June, an increasing number of Jews were also being sent to Nordhausen – a population that would increase greatly in 1945.

With production at Nordhausen slowly taking shape, research continued at Peenemunde and at a new research center at Blizna, Poland called the “Heidelager.” The reliability of the A-4 was far below expectations, with tail explosions and premature fuel cutoff at launch a major issue. Also, up to 70 percent of rockets were breaking up prior to impacting in the target areas. As these issues were addressed and repairs made, these required modifications were send to the staffs at Nordhausen to be properly made to the blueprints and added to the assembly lines. By late summer of 1944, combat rocket units were being deployed to Belgium and Holland - the rockets needed to work successfully; in September they were first fired at London. Such were the technical modifications that by wars end, some 65,000 changes had been made to the A-4 blueprints. This also resulted in the fabrication of a tremendous amount of poor

quality parts and material. These poor quality materials, combined with poor workmanship, were often seen as sabotage attempts by the SS and members of the staff who inspected the rockets as they came off the assembly line. From August 1943 to March 1945, some 350 workers were hanged at Nordhausen – 200 for sabotage.

### Arthur Rudolph

The rockets were quite vulnerable to sabotage during production. All it took was a screw left loose, a bad weld, an incomplete circuit connection – prisoners even urinated on electrical components – and a rocket would fail. Rudolph, being in charge of the physical production of the rockets under Sawatzki, received all reports of potential sabotage. In November, 1944, Dieter Grau was sent from Peenemunde to the Mittelwerk to investigate why the rockets kept failing and found numerous instances of sabotage – which led to his filing a report. As was normal procedure, the report was submitted to Rudolph, who signed all such reports before turning them over to the SS. On 4 November, Rudolph received directions to stop all production work and have his department chiefs and SS gather the prisoners in the main assembly tunnel – Hall 2. Twelve men, their hands tied behind their backs and pieces of timber tied in the mouths, had ropes placed around their necks before being slowly hoisted into the air by the overhead cranes as they were strangled to death. Rudolph made his way to the hall, noticing that at least one of the men appeared to still be alive, and later informed Hans Friedrich, a civilian manager, that the men would hang for the next twelve hours, so two shifts of prisoners could see them and be warned. Rudolf was one of the 130 engineers brought to the US under Operation Paperclip, working at White Sands Proving Ground. He later moved to Redstone Arsenal, Alabama and worked for the army on the Pershing missile program before joining his colleagues at NASA and becoming the Project Director for the Saturn V rocket program. Retired and living in California in 1984, his past eventually caught up with him and he was forced to leave the US to avoid a war crimes trial.



Diagram of the underground working at Nordhausen, courtesy of V2Rocket.com



Hall 41, showing the large test benches for completed V-2's. The overhead cranes were used for executions.



Combustion Chamber Storage



Photo by Walter Frentz, 1944.

*Toward September 10, 1944, I was sent via "Transport Train" towards the Dutch border. We crossed Cologne (Köln), went down the Rhine towards Koblenz. The Allies are progressing so fast that we could not leave the wagons and the train was forced to return to Buchenwald. The Germans only took food for the one way trip so, on the way back we traveled three days without anything to eat.*

*Two days later I got really depressed when I learned that I'm leaving For the Camp of Dora (Nordhausen) to work in the underground Factory of the 'Mittelbau where we built the V1 and V2 rockets. Only dead comes back from Dora in Wagons and trucks to be burned in the crematorium of Buchenwald.*

*From September 15, 1944, to the beginning of April, 1945, I was in the most cruel hell. Twelve hours per day or night (eighteen hours when we rotate team) we must carry on our back extremely heavy equipment in and out of the tunnel With almost nothing in our stomach, under the rain, snow, mud, in extremely cold weather, clothed in a poor outfit, wood clogs with fabric on top which get hooked in everything and under the beatings of the "55" and "Kapos" (Often ex criminals just out of jail).*

*I touch the bottom of misery and mental distress. Although, I had a strong constitution from a very athletic life, my health declined rapidly. I was admitted at the "Revier" (nursery) toward March 15th 1945 for complication to a wound received in the temple by a kapos. From then on, my health became worse with numerous diseases one after the other: Pleuresie, Lymphangite, dysentrie, etc... (I don't know the English translation of those diseases).*

*Survivor Michel Depierre, France*

By the end of 1944, with the development of the above ground Dora camp, the completion of building and mining in the tunnels, and the increase of actual rocket production, the death rate at Nordhausen had decreased dramatically. However, due to the execution of General Friedrich Fromm after the failed July assassination plot, Himmler and the SS now had complete and total control over V-2 rocket production – Dornberger and his rocket development group now reported directly to the Reichsfuherer SS.



By December 1944, with Soviet armies nearing, the labor and death camps at Auschwitz began to be emptied. Many thousands were forced to trudge through terrible weather in forced marches that killed thousands, while other Auschwitz prisoners, as well as those from Gross-Rosen, were transported by rail to Nordhausen. This exacerbated what was already becoming a dire situation, due to increased allied bombing of rail lines, cities, and factories.

With the Soviet push into Silesia, much of the ability to feed and supply themselves – not to mention prisoners – had been destroyed. Many of the prisoners arrived from Auschwitz sick, and sickness and disease quickly spread throughout the camps. With the increase in the population, the execution of prisoners rose dramatically, with 30 – 50 per day being hanged throughout February and March. With the Auschwitz evacuees came many of the SS guards and staff, as well as Auschwitz I camp Commander Richard Baer, who took command of the Dora camp from Otto Forchner. Through March, approximately 16,000 arrived, including women and children, and approximately 6000 died while 1700 V-2's were built. By now the entire camp complex had increased its prisoner population from approximately 26,000 to over 40,000.

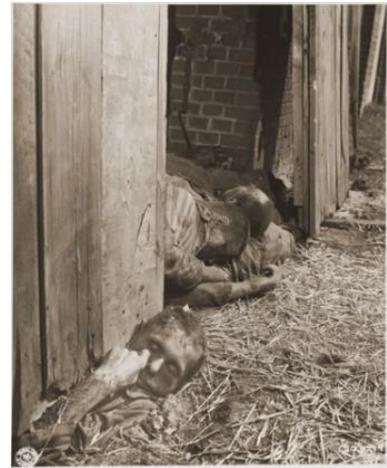


The end of March saw the total collapse of the Western front, with the allies crossing the Rhine in large numbers. The last V-2's were fired at London and Antwerp at the end of the month, then Kammler's combat rocket troops began to pull back from their firing positions, became infantrymen, moved east toward Berlin. During this withdrawal, Kammler's troops encountered a group of slave laborers from the occupied eastern territories who had been released or escaped and were trying to find a safe location. Kammler ordered his troops to fire on them, killing over two hundred. By April 1, the Peenemunders in the Nordhausen area were told to prepare for evacuation to Bavaria, specifically Oberammergau and its environs.



On 3 and 4 April, two waves of bombers from the British Bomber Command's Numbers 1 and 8 Groups hit Nordhausen, killing approximately 8800 people; not including some 1500 prisoners still alive then at Boelcke Kaserne who also died. The rocket engineers finally departed from their temporary headquarters at nearby Bleicherode by train on 6 April. Due to an automobile crash which seriously damaged his arm and prevented his immediate departure, Von Braun did not finally drive away until 9 April, only 2 days before the Americans arrived.

By then, as the Americans approached Nordhausen, most of the camps had been evacuated by rail to Bergen-Belsen, Sachsenhausen, and Ravensbruck – approximately 25,000 to 30,000 were moved in this manner. In most of the smaller sub-camps the prisoners were forced to flee on foot, with the SS shooting any too sick to keep up. The roads were soon littered with the dead and dying from these forced marches. In the worse single atrocity of these last, hellish, days of evacuation, a group of approximately 1000 were force-marched toward the northeast, eventually mixing with prisoners from the Neuengamme concentration camp. At the small village of Gardelegen, they were locked in a barn which was then set aflame – with those attempting to escape shot. All that remained in Nordhausen were about 660 sick and dying prisoners at Dora, and just over 400 at Boelcke Kaserne, a former Luftwaffe base prior to the creation of the camp complex in Nordhausen. A complex of walled, stone barracks, it was taken over by the SS in mid-February as the increase in the arrival of Jewish prisoners from Gross-Rosen and later Auschwitz overwhelmed camp facilities. With the arrival of another 3500 from Gross-Rosen, many too weak from starvation and disease to work, the decision was made to use Boelcke Kaserne as a "hospital," and it became a place to house the very ill – with no water, food, or sanitation – until they died. By this time, the ability to transport the dead and dying to other camps for execution and cremation no longer existed. Boelcke Kaserne solved, temporarily, the problem of what to do with the dead.





Members of the U.S. Army 329th Medical Battalion at Boelcke Kaserne



A survivor at Boelcke Kaserne

On 11 April, advance parties of the US 3rd Armored Division entered Nordhausen with little opposition. They found hundreds of dying prisoners lying amongst more than a thousand corpses, including many children and babies at Boelcke Kaserne. Some had been dead before the air raid; others were killed during the raid, or by neglect afterwards. The American soldiers were outraged; one wrote, "No written word can properly convey the atmosphere of such a charnel house, the unbearable stench of decomposing bodies, the sight of live human beings... lying cheek by jowl with the ten-day dead..." A 15 April report describes the camp as "the most horrifying example of Nazi terrorism imaginable". The 3rd Armored Division continued eastward and was replaced on the morning of 12 April by the 104th Infantry Division.





Survivors from the Boelcke Kaserne with an officer of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Armored Division

Corporal Fred Bohm, of the 829<sup>th</sup> Combat Engineers, 104<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, recalled that his fellow soldiers "...had no particular feelings for fighting the Germans ... and it did not sink in, what this was all about, until we got to Nordhausen." He continued, "I think they felt all of a sudden that the war had a meaningful purpose, that there was almost a reason for being over there."

*"On April 11, 1945, the 104th overran the Dora-Nordhausen Concentration Camp. The countless dead were still lying about and the few survivors were barely alive. I made the burghers of Nordhausen bury the dead, while they objected that such a request was clearly 'inhumane.' Although the survivors had not eaten for a long time their first request was not for food but for Jewish religious items, and for our troops to get in touch with their relatives in the United States or somewhere in the world."*

*W. Gunther Plaut. 104th Chaplain, who had fled Nazi persecution in 1935*



On 15 April, the 238<sup>th</sup> Engineer Combat Battalion (ECB), 104<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, entered the area with orders to repair roads and bridges; many of the men immediately noticed a “peculiar odor” in the air. They soon came across a small sub-camp of approximately 4 – 5 barracks buildings which contained the bodies of 1000 Messerschmitt factory workers. Lieutenant Ernest James, Company A, 238<sup>th</sup> ECB, described the same “terrible stench” at the railyards, where residents were seen breaking

into all of the railcars in the yard – except one. This car was alone on a siding and dripped a dark fluid through the floor, onto the ground. “Upon breaking one of the doors open, we saw a gruesome sight, it was full of dead bodies ... jammed in the car with no room to spare.”

The people of Nordhausen were forced from their homes and businesses to help dig trenches and mass graves for the dead, then pick up and carry the bodies for burial, a process that lasted until 16 April. All of this was documented through video and still photography by the allies, much in the same way as was done at Bergen-Belsen, then distributed worldwide.



French survivor Michel Depierre, again:

*When I finally regained consciousness I saw the town of Nordhausen burning about 7 km away. It was only when I came back to France that I learned that the "SS" put thousand of prisoners (Deportees) incapable of working in their barracks. The allies thought they were bombing a military installation. Around 1500 prisoners (Deportees) were killed. On the 7th or 8th of April, the "SS" abandoned Dora except for a few dying prisoners (Deportees) like me. The camp is evacuated. We stayed a few days in this "no man's land".*

*On April 11, 1945, The American Army investigated the tunnel and the Camp of Dora. Shocked, they discovered about a hundred men dying in the Revier (nursery). The first military man that I saw was a Canadian Captain who spoke French. They distributed some food. It was so good, since we were dying of hunger for the last nine months. Only skin was left on our bones. April 19th, 1945, we had gained a little more strength so they walked us to the airfield of Nordhausen. There Dakotas (Airplanes) brought supplies to the Front. American military set up tents. There is on tables some beautiful white bread, but nobody to care for us. Maybe to avoid diseases? But also because of the war they didn't have time for us. They let us sleep outside, fortunately, it didn't rain. I lay down on the workshop of a demolished building. On April 20th, 1945, a Dakota took us from Nordhausen to "Le Bourget" Airport near Paris, where Parisian people discover what deportation is.*

## Conclusion

Out of approximately 60,000 inmates who passed through the camp system in Nordhausen, roughly 20,000 – or one-third – died there. Some of the rocket team did, indeed, make their way south, with SS guards slowly disappearing along the way. Von Braun and his small group found a rather comfortable hotel to stay in until such time they could surrender. Dieter Huzel and Bernhard Tessman joined the group after locating a suitable location to hide the blueprints and other documentation relating to rocket development. The majority of the group had remained in Thuringia, however, and



US Army Ordnance teams located them and brought them into custody. On 2 May, Magnus von Braun approached an anti-tank platoon of the 44<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, where he convinced the Americans of their importance before being escorted to Reutten and an army counter-intelligence group. Given passes, the younger Von Braun returned for the

rest and brought them all in. Wernher von Braun was flown to the United States, eventually to Ft. Bliss in El Paso, Texas, as part of Operation Paperclip – the program which brought 130 of the German rocket team to the United States and their “new” lives and work at White Sands Proving Ground, New Mexico, and later Redstone Arsenal, Alabama. Only one of the group – Arthur Rudolph – would ever be held in any way accountable for what had happened in Peenemunde and Nordhausen. Wernher von Braun would become an American hero – the face of space exploration and, with the help of Walt Disney, a television personality. SS General Hans Kammler simply vanished, never to be seen again.

In 1947, the Dora trials were held at the former Dachau Concentration Camp near Munich. Nineteen defendants included mainly SS personnel, but three kapos, and one civilian - George Rickhey - head of the Mittelwerk Corporation, were also on trial. All were accused of neglecting, torturing or killing prisoners, with some accused of specific offenses that occurred during the evacuations and forced marches. Of the nineteen defendants, only SS Obersturmführer Hans Moeser, convicted for murders in reference to the hangings in the camp and killings on the death marches, was executed. Seven received life imprisonment, and seven received prison sentences of from 5 to 25 years. Four of the men, including Rickhey, were acquitted. No others were ever charged for crimes at Nordhausen.





Vans Maienschein, a witness for the prosecution, identifies Dr. Heinrich Schmidt as the camp physician who failed to provide medical care to inmates, causing their deaths. Schmidt was acquitted, but was indicted again in 1975 for his involvement in war crimes at the Majdanek death camp. Accused of at least 8 murders, as well as making selections for the gas chamber, the evidence failed to convict and he was again acquitted. He died in Celle, Germany in 2000

## Sources

### Websites:

<https://archives.library.illinois.edu/blog/remembering-dora-mittelbau/>

[https://avalon.law.yale.edu/imt/chap\\_10.asp](https://avalon.law.yale.edu/imt/chap_10.asp)

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mittelbau-Dora\\_concentration\\_camp](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mittelbau-Dora_concentration_camp)

<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/dora-mittelbau-overview>

<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/mittelbau-main-camp-in-depth>

<https://portal.ehri-project.eu/institutions/de-002638>

<https://www.buchenwald.de/29/>

<http://www.v2rocket.com/>

<https://nmajmh.org/>

<https://witness.digitalscholarship.emory.edu/items/show/33>

<https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/gis-remember-w-gunther-plaut-nordhausen>

Books and Articles:

Biddle, Wayne. Dark Side of the Moon; Wernher von Braun, the Third Reich, and the Space Race, W.W. Norton and Company, 2009.

Bryson, Shareen Blair. "Reliving the Nightmare." *Archaeology* 55, no. 3 (2002): 63-67.

De Maeseneer, Guido. Peenemunde: The Extraordinary Story of Hitler's Secret Weapons V-1 and V-2, AJ Publishing Company, 2001.

Dixon, Thomas F. "SOLVING THE V-2 MYSTERY IN 1944." *The Air Power Historian* 10, no. 2 (1963): 46-49.

Dornberger, Walter. V-2, The Viking Press, 1954.

Dungan, T.D. V-2: A Combat History of the First Ballistic Missile, Westholme Publishing, 2005.

Dunn, M. D. (Ed.). Remember.org - The Holocaust History - A People's and Survivors' History.

Ford, Brian. German Secret Weapons; Blueprint for Mars, Ballantine Books, 1969.

James, Ernest C. "Liberation of the Nordhausen Concentration Camp, World War II." *The Military Engineer* 82, no. 538 (1990): 59-61.

Neufeld, Michael J. "Wernher Von Braun, the SS, and Concentration Camp Labor: Questions of Moral, Political, and Criminal Responsibility." *German Studies Review* 25, no. 1 (2002): 57-78.

Neufeld, Michael J. The Rocket and the Reich; Peenemunde and the Coming of the Ballistic Missile Era, The Free Press, 1995.

Neufeld, Michael J. Von Braun: Dreamer of Space, Engineer of War, Alfred A. Knopf, 2007

Ordway, Frederick I, III, and Mitchell R. Sharpe. The Rocket Team, Thomas Y. Crowell, Publishers, 1979.

Piszkiewicz, Dennis. The Nazi Rocketeers; Dreams of Space and Crimes of War, Stackpole Books, 1995.

Powell-Willhite, Irene E. The Voice of Dr. Wernher von Braun; An Anthology, Apogee Books, 2007.

Story, William C. "Third World Traps and Pitfalls: Ballistic Missiles, Cruise Missiles, and Land-Based Airpower." Report. Air University Press, 1995. 5-17

Ward, Bob. Dr. Space; The Life of Wernher von Braun, Naval Institute Press, 2005.

Zaloga, Steven J. V-2 Ballistic Missile, 1942 – 1952, Osprey Publishing, 2003.