

## Trail of history at the memorial site Mühlberg/Elbe

The information trail developed under the responsibility of the office "Culture and more", Berlin, and the communication agency Hinz & Kunst, Braunschweig, was implemented by the municipality Bad Liebenwerda in 2011 on the site of the former prisoner-of-war camp Mühlberg/Elbe. The fundamental idea for this information trail and first drafts came from the association *Initiativgruppe Lager Mühlberg e.V.* Most of the funding for this project was provided by the government of the state Brandenburg.

Inscribed steles present the historical background of each of the two camps, Stalag IVB and Soviet special camp No. 1, and the commemorative history of this site deemed non-existent during the GDR era. Three further steles are located at the entrance of the cemetery of Neuburxdorf.

Visitors are recommended to take along an information booklet before starting down on the information trail.



The first steles are found on the main street of the camp right behind the former camp gate.

## Permanent exhibition in the Mühlberg/Elbe museum

The city museum of Mühlberg/Elbe located on the site of a former priory-monastery from the 16th century has been there since 1926. A new permanent exhibition highlights the history of the town. Particular attention is given to the Reformation period, e.g. the Battle of Mühlberg in 1547, which was a decisive event during the struggles of the Reformists (Schmalkaldic League) against the Catholics who fought on the side of Emperor Charles V. The defeat of the supporters of the Reformation movement became known throughout Europe at the time.



Another focus of the exhibition is the synergistic relationship between the settlement and the river. Mühlberg's history is closely intertwined with that of the Elbe river. Trade routes along the river, shipping tolls, fishery but also recurring floods have shaped and still shape the town. Mühlberg, finally, became tragically famous for the camp site located not far from the town.

The three rooms on the first floor of the museum first draw attention to the prisoner-of-war camp in Mühlberg (1939–1945) and then to the Special camp No. 1 of the Soviet NKVD (1945–1948). In this camp, real and supposed adversaries of the Soviet occupiers, and also real and supposed supporters of the NS regime were confined and imprisoned arbitrarily, i. e. without legal determination of guilt or innocence. Exhibits include individual objects from the camp, photographs – which naturally were taken after 1989 – and reminiscences of contemporary witnesses. Finally, there is an audio-visual room where photographs taken in the prisoner-of-war camp and film clips of interviews with survivors of the special camp are shown. These interviews, in particular, give insights into the sorrowful fate of the imprisoned.

These chapters in the history of Mühlberg, namely that of the two camps, were edited to a great part by the association *Initiativgruppe Lager Mühlberg e.V.*

Re-opened in autumn 2014

Museum Mühlberg  
Klosterstr. 9  
04931 Mühlberg/Elbe  
Tel. +49(0)35342/83700  
E-Mail: [museum-muehlberg1547@lkee.de](mailto:museum-muehlberg1547@lkee.de)  
Web: [www.museumsverbund-lkee.de](http://www.museumsverbund-lkee.de)

## Who looks after the former camp site and memorials?

- The municipality Bad Liebenwerda, to which also the district of Neuburxdorf belongs, in cooperation with
- The municipality of Mühlberg/Elbe, the *Initiativgruppe Lager Mühlberg e.V.* and many volunteers.

## Office of the *Initiativgruppe Lager Mühlberg e.V.*

Schulplatz 4 · 04931 Mühlberg/Elbe  
Tel. +49(0)35342/87487, E-mail [Lager-Muehlberg@t-online.de](mailto:Lager-Muehlberg@t-online.de)  
**Bank account for donations:** Sparkasse Elbe/Elster  
IBAN: DE78 1805 1000 3560 1509 21, BIC: WELADED1EES  
**Opening hours:** Tuesday and Thursday 9.00 a.m. – 1.00 p.m.

## History

- 1990, after the first free local elections in the former GDR, foundation of the work group "Lager Mühlberg" by pastor Matthias Taatz together with other citizens of the town of Mühlberg and the municipality Neuburxdorf.
- September 1, 1990, first large official meeting of former inmates of the special camp and the relatives of those who died in the camp with a wreath-laying ceremony near the mass graves.
- January 11, 1991, foundation of the registered association "Initiativgruppe Lager Mühlberg e.V." under the direction of Gottfried Becker; later, opening of an office in Mühlberg/Elbe with a temporarily staffed employee under a government employment scheme (ABM). Since 1995, this employee has worked for the *Initiativgruppe Lager Mühlberg e.V.* on a permanent basis.
- First Chairman of the registered association: Gottfried Becker. Current elected board members: Chair: Matthias Taatz, Vice Chair Jürgen Stoffel, Treasurer Barbara Hartmann, Secretary Heike Leonhardt.
- Establishment of an "extended board for special tasks".
- Drafting of an Articles of Association that sets forth all functions of the association.
- Publications: Newsletters of the *Initiativgruppe Lager Mühlberg*, currently released twice a year.

## Financing

- Supported by private donations and public funds, primarily from the
- Federal Foundation for the Study of the Communist Dictatorship in Eastern Germany
  - Commissioner of the Land of Brandenburg for the Study of the Repercussions of the Communist Dictatorship
  - Administrative district Elbe/Elster and
  - Municipalities Bad Liebenwerda and Mühlberg/Elbe

## Aims and objectives

- To shed light on the fates of all detainees, survivors and those who lost their lives in the NKVD camp, and to list their names.
- To commemorate the dead from both camps.
- To communicate with the relatives of the deceased from both camps and with the foreign groups of ex-prisoners of war, e. g. in Great Britain, the Netherlands and Russia.
- To inform, in particular young people, about the history of both camps, which was kept in the dark in the former SOZ/GDR (SBZ/DDR), especially with regard to the special camp.
- In this sense, to be a remembrance and warning to the living.

## Projects and Initiatives

- Annual meeting of commemoration and admonishing usually in early September with national and international guests
- Voluntary work on the camp area and at mass grave sites of the NKVD camp
- Information events and book readings, e.g. in schools, museums, libraries
- Cooperation with schools from the Elbe-Elster-District and beyond the region
- Project offer in connection with a transportable exhibition on the topic „Camp of two dictatorships“ for working with children and teachers under the guidance of a history teacher with specialisation on memorial sites  
Thursday 9.00 a.m. – 2.00 p.m.  
Contact: Dr. Claudia Franke Philipp-Melanchthon-Gymnasium, Anhalter Str. 10, 04916 Herzberg, Telefon (work): +49 3535 - 6064, E-Mail: [c.franke@gymnasium-herzberg.de](mailto:c.franke@gymnasium-herzberg.de)
- Guided tours on the camp and the memorial sites on the information trail
- Collection and archiving of mementos and texts from survivors and relatives of both camps
- Cooperation with the local museum "Mühlberg 1547"

## The COMITAS GENTIUM medal awarded by the contact group of ex-prisoners of war from the Netherlands is a special recognition of the work and efforts of the *Initiativgruppe Lager Mühlberg e.V.*

*In presenting this Prisoner of War Medal we hope to express our gratitude for intending in this way to keep interest in the history of the camp Mühlberg/Elbe alive and to forward it into here and now and into the future and to carry it further.*

*For this we offer our sincere thanks!*

(Source: from original letter „Contactgroep Ex-Krijgsgevangenen“ drs. Jaap P. van der Meer)



## These guests also attended the remembrance and commemoration meetings in Mühlberg/Elbe:



Prof. Dr. Dagmar Schipanski  
President of the Thuringia State Parliament

Excerpt from the speech given by D. Schipanski on Sept. 8, 2001

It is not easy for following generations to understand the suffering of those before them. Reminders of the thousands of unnecessary deaths in the special camps of the Soviet occupation forces are hardly heard among all the news of catastrophes overwhelming us everyday through the media. For this very reason, in remembrance of the deceased, we must not ease up on our efforts to recall all of what occurred in earlier times. Let us give the anonymous dead a name and a face. This remembrance is about an active encounter with the most dreadful years in the recent history of the German people. It is about the tyranny of the National Socialist regime, about war and million-fold deaths. Furthermore, it is about hopes that perished under a new form of inhuman dictatorship, in all its manifestations, emerging under the Soviet occupying forces. This engagement is of undiminished relevance to the concern of the present and future of Germans. [...]

We need to learn more about the nature of camps like this one, about its inmates, about the camp's system, about the starving and the acceptance of the deaths. We need to understand the meaning of existence and survival in a legal vacuum, which cost many years of the lives of thousands of innocent people and left survivors with the most traumatic experience in their lives and one they would never forget.



Dr. h. c. Joachim Gauck  
Chairman of the Association "Against Oblivion – For Democracy"

Excerpt from the speech given by J. Gauck on Sept. 4, 2004

It is about understanding that the freedom we have finally arrived at is always something under threat and never to be taken for granted. This is what these memorials bear witness to. Another aspect is that we, as individuals, can each do something to defend freedom, meaning not the freedom to do what one wants or freedom from something – which is how young people see it or people who have just won freedom – no, grownup people should understand freedom as a responsibility. Let us thus understand our remembrance and the erection of memorials and commemoration sites in this sense! [...]

My joy would be even greater, if we could agree together to live this freedom of which I have spoken and which the imprisoned here grievously had to do without, as citizens who are capable of accepting their own responsibility. This way the past and the future can come together in a fruitful manner, to shape what is humane, something we need in our times as in all other times.



Prof. Dr. Johanna Wanka  
Minister of Science, Research Education and Cultural Affairs of Lower Saxony

Excerpt from the speech given by J. Wanka on Sept. 9, 2009

I am deeply moved that you time and again return to this place where you suffered so much. You go through this, so that we and the next generation do not forget how much suffering originated here. Note that Mühlberg was one of the large special camps in the Soviet occupation zone. Those who were held here until 1948, under conditions that are unimaginable today, had been arrested without judicial warrant and detained without trial to be kept "in total isolation". The many victims of hunger, cold and disease were buried in mass graves at the edge of the camp grounds. Neither the German authorities nor the relatives received a death notice. It is so very important to be able to bring up these atrocities after the decades of silence that accompanied this camp. First the silence on part of the Soviets that the relatives faced; there was hardly any information regarding the fate of the victims. Then there was the enforced silence of the detained themselves. In these camps, which included former concentration camps such as Buchenwald, Sachsenhausen, and here in Mühlberg, they were completely isolated from the outside world. Under deplorable hygienic conditions, completely lacking care and forced into inactivity, they spent their lives in a vegetative state.

## Where can I find more information?

### Literature

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Die Beauftragte des Landes Brandenburg zur Aufarbeitung der Folgen der kommunistischen Diktatur

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## Prisoner of war camp Stalag IV B 1939 to 1945 Soviet NKVD Special camp No. 1 1945 to 1948





## What sort of camp? – What kind of war and post-war graves?

### The first camp, 1939–1945

About five kilometres northeast of Mühlberg/Elbe near the railway station Neuburxdorf and on the open fields of Neuburxdorf and Altenau as found today, a main camp for prisoners of war of the German armed forces, called M.-Stalag IVB, was built at the beginning of the Second World War in 1939 on an about 30 hectare large compound.

The first inmates were Polish prisoners of war. Later came Belgians, Frenchmen, North Africans, Serbs, Britons and others, who belonged to the Commonwealth, and Dutchmen. Members of the Red Army arrived after 1941, Italians and Danes after 1943, and US-Americans as well, after the invasion of the allies, so that the camp became a multinational camp.

It was run according to the directives of the Geneva Convention of 1929 and was subject to regular inspection by the International Committee of the Red Cross right to the end so that also aid packages reached the camp. A group of prisoners of war, however, was excluded from such inspections and aid, namely members of the Red Army. On the one hand, upon order of the German government under Hitler, they suffered harsher living conditions than the other prisoners of war and, on the other, were not protected by the Geneva Convention, since the USSR had not signed it. Moreover, Stalin regarded the prisoners of war as traitors to their country so that most of the Soviet prisoners of war did not wish their government to be informed of their capture. They were thus outlawed in two respects.

The occupancy rate of the camp fluctuated constantly, since most of the prisoners of war were put into labour battalions and therefore relocated to branch camps, e.g. to Zeithain (Stalag 304, later IVH). Stalag IVB was thus a transit and registration camp, through which hundreds of thousands of prisoners were sent in the course of the six years of war. Those unable to work stayed in the camp. Base hospitals were set-up outside the camps.

According to the statistics, more than 25,052 prisoners of war were in the camp on January 1, 1945 (last cut-off date), thus more than double as many as originally planned.

On 23 April 1945, the Red Army took over the camp Stalag IVB Mühlberg/Elbe. However the camp was not closed, but served initially as a transit camp for liberated soldiers from the western occupation zones who in Torgau were exchanged against prisoners of war from the Western allies, for so-called Eastern workers (Ostarbeiter) and for members of the "Russian Liberation Army" under General Vlasov (executed in the USSR in 1946). These people awaited an uncertain fate when returning to the USSR, mostly another ordeal of suffering. There they were seen as traitors to their country and have been discriminated until today.

### The second camp, 1945–1948

The opening of the Special camp No. 1 of the NKVD (NKVD = Narodnyi Kommissariat Vnutrennykh Del - People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs, later renamed to MVD = Ministerstwo Vnutrennykh Del - Ministry of Internal Affairs) was arranged for end of August/beginning of September 1945.

#### Who were the new inmates?

Even before the end of World War II top secret commands by Stalin and Beria (1899–1953, People's Commissioner for Internal Affairs and head of the secret service) existed regarding the treatment of the civilian population in the territories and states occupied by the Red Army. The decisions of the Potsdam Agreement of the Allies, i. e. of the USA, USSR, Great Britain (conference from 17.7.–2.8.1945), were also the basis for the waves of arrests at the end of the war in defeated Germany. Stalin, however, took advantage of the interpretable wording of the decisions, to issue further secret commands regarding the arrest practices in the Soviet zone of occupation. Thus, due to Stalin's commands, the clause in the Potsdam Agreement "... and any other persons, dangerous to the occupation or its objectives shall be arrested and interned" (Kongress-Verlag GmbH (ed.): Potsdamer Abkommen und andere Dokumente, Berlin 1951 (Potsdam Agreement and other documents, Berlin 1951), p. 18) resulted in the majority of the 21,800 prisoners who passed through the NKVD Special camp No. 1, Mühlberg/Elbe during its three years of existence not being Offenders in the sense meant by the occupying powers. They were rather Lesser Offenders, Followers or Exonerated Persons including former officers, members of the German territorial army (Volkssturm), persons suspected of having been members of the Nazi werewolf movement (mostly adolescents), factory owners, landowners,



Winter in the camp (reproduction of a drawing by Walter Reiche, prisoner in the NKVD Special camp Mühlberg/Elbe)

middle-class liberals – all arrested without a warrant and detained without a trial, with no possibility to defend themselves or to be defended by a lawyer, without determination of guilt or innocence, without a judgement and without a time limit.

The way in which people were arrested in the Soviet occupation zone was marked by an almost unbounded arbitrariness and differed fundamentally from how it was done in the western occupation zones.

Arrests by the Americans and the British took place legally. Their 14 point programme added the clearer wording: "... until new instructions regarding their treatment are received", – Stalin's command 0016 however "in no way used a juridical form of reasoning" (see Ralf Possekel: Stalins Pragmatismus, in: P. Reif-Spirek/B. Ritscher (ed.): Speziallager in der SBZ, Berlin 1999, p. 154). The purpose of the arrests in the Soviet occupation zone was not so much for denazification howsoever understood, but above all served to isolate real and supposed adversaries of the new social order. The aim was under the pretext of an "anti-fascist democratic upheaval to enforce the radical change in state and society more effectively and to break down any resistance against it." (Preface by Hermann Weber for: Achim Kilian: Einzuweisen zur völligen Isolierung, Leipzig 2. edition 1993, p. 9).

Less than 150 of the 21,000 prisoners of camp Mühlberg were transferred for a supposed conviction before the Soviet military tribunal (SMT), though even these convictions were not at all conducted under conditions that comply with constitutional law. At no time were there convicted persons at the NKVD camp Mühlberg.

No sort of reparation policy was ever the "intention" of imprisonment and isolation of the victims so as to have them help in the reconstruction of the nations and areas ravaged by the war. This thought came up only later, when prisoners fit for work were selected and brought into the USSR. The majority of prisoners in the camp, however, were forced to live in utter idleness. IDLENESS was everywhere: there was no contact to the outside world, no information whatsoever, not even about the reason and probable length of detainment, no work, except that which was necessary to maintain the camp. Isolation was complete. Not a single person succeeded in escaping from the camp.

In 1946, more than 2000 prisoners were brought into the USSR and treated as prisoners of war. Another 900, who were able to work, mostly young inmates, were deported to the Soviet Union on 8 February 1947 where they mainly worked in the coal mines in the Siberian region and later partly also at other work locations. Those who survived these transports later also had the status of prisoners of war. The last of them were released in 1955.

In 1948, more than 6700 prisoners in the camp had died. 3611 were transported for a further two years to the NKVD Special camp No. 2, Buchenwald, the remaining 7000 were released.

## War and post-war graves – where were they, where are they?

### Cemetery Neuburxdorf

During the Second World War, the prisoners of war who died at the Stalag IVB were buried with military honours, there were yet only a few Soviet prisoners among them. Most of these prisoners were buried in mass graves, though from 1942 onwards not in Neuburxdorf but in the camp Zeithain. The total number of deceased prisoners of war at the camp Stalag IVB can therefore only be postulated to be around 3000.

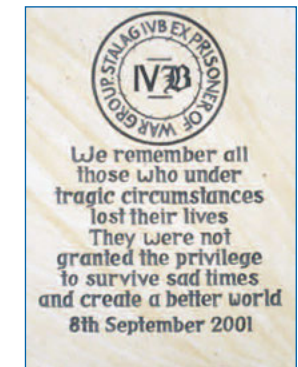
The mortal remains of the prisoners of war buried at Neuburxdorf were exhumed after 1945, hence in the newly arisen Soviet occupation zone, and transferred to their home countries. The mortal remains of the Soviet prisoners were also exhumed and buried at the town of Elsterwerda.

The area of the cemetery with all these graves gradually evolved into a memorial site, the earliest of which dates back to the years 1941–1943. French prisoners of war decided, upon encouragement by Armand Lamothe, to erect a memorial for their deceased comrades and in remembrance of the time of their war captivity. Both the responsible

#### Cenotaph in the cemetery at Neuburxdorf



French and German military authorities approved of this project and the monument was consecrated on 5 November 1944. Since the end of the war, May 1945, it has been regarded as a cenotaph dedicated to all the prisoners of war who died at the camp Stalag IVB. Further commemorative cenotaphs have been added, for example the one depicted below.



### Mass burial ground at the former camp

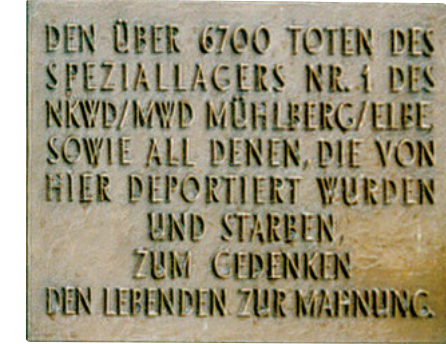
None of the over 6700 dead from the NKVD Special camp No. 1 Mühlberg/Elbe were buried in individual graves. All were thrown at night into mass graves outside of the former camp, one on top of the other. There was no ceremony, the relatives were never informed. When the camp was closed in 1948, some survivors out of pity broke their vows of silence and informed the relatives, who were then themselves bound to silence. Individual survivors also notified different organisations in Federal Germany, e.g. the German Red Cross, of death cases. Official death notices were also received by the German Red Cross only after 1989/90 and 1993, when Moscow's archives were partly opened.

Relatives of the dead, to whom a death notice had leaked through after the camp was closed, occasionally laid flowers and wreaths at the respective sites. Any such activities were immediately suppressed by the authorities of the GDR. The area was supposed to be used for agriculture, the farmers, however, upon finding mortal remains in the soil refused to continue work.

The site was then reforested and the compound overgrew gradually.



Crosses for the deceased, set up after 1989/90



After 1989/90 relatives of the dead began to set up crosses and commemorative tomb stones. Funded by the state of Brandenburg, by the foundation for reappraisal of SED dictatorship (Stiftung zur Aufarbeitung der SED-Diktatur), and by donations made since 1992, a memorial place for all the dead from



Central memorial, 1992–2004

the special camp came into being, which between 2004 and 2008 was redesigned. During the excavation work one of the mass graves was discovered. The mortal remains of the dead were buried worthily on 11 August 2004 following Christian customs. The new high cross was consecrated



Ceremonial burial of the 24 dead found in a mass grave

on 4 September 2004 during the XIV commemorative and remembrance meeting. The inauguration of the name bearers followed at the XVIII commemorative and remembrance meeting on September 6, 2008.



The high cross and name bearers

## Where do I find camp site and memorials?



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