

The Resistance fight inside of camps and prisons – the example CC Buchenwald

I would like to present in my lesson a specific subject of the resistance history what is not as well-known as other parts of the antifascist fight – the resistance inside the Nazi camps and prisons.

You know the function of the fascist terror camps. All so-called “Volksfeinde” of the German society – political enemies, social not accepted groups, racial segregated people, especially Jewish – have been deported beginning in the year 1933 by the terror-regime in such camps. But to put somebody in jail or camp, it could not directly change the opinion of the political enemies. And in consequence most of these prisoners were the basis for an antifascist resistance front also in camps and prisons.

But the way to fight was very different. We need to face the specific and the situation of this place to understand what resistance means in such a situation. I want to express this by the example of the CC Buchenwald. You can find such examples in other prisons and also in extermination camps. Famous are the structures of resistance fight in Sachsenhausen and Mauthausen, we know also the history of the uprising of groups of prisoners in the extermination camps Belzec near by Lublin and in October 1943 in Sobibor in the south of Poland.

For me, CC Buchenwald is a most impressive example because of the result of this fight, the self-liberation at the end. And what I'm talking about is not only coming from historical documents, books and written reports, but also from several time-witnesses I've met in the past, former prisoners of CC Buchenwald itself. They reported about their experiences.

I will start with some facts about the CC Buchenwald. The camp has been erected in Summer 1937 with a capacity of about 4000 inmates. First German political and “green triangle” - prisoners (co-called “criminals”) have been here. In November 1938 more than 10.000 Jewish prisoners were locked up for a short time after the pogrom (“Kristallnacht”). In total more than 250.000 prisoners have been in Buchenwald and its 125 sub-camps in Saxony, Thuringia, Hesse and in the western part of German Reich. At the end about 60.000 men and women, who have been especially imprisoned in the sub-camps, were killed by the fascist regime in this context.

What could “resistance fight” mean in a Concentration camp?

First of all it means for any person not to resign and to stay in line, second to secure its own life and third to show solidarity to save the life of others. This means f.e. to give a piece of bread to someone who is starving, this means to help someone to get an easier place to work because of its weakness.

Both aspects were helping to survive – and this was a contradiction to the ideas of the fascist regime which intended to kill political enemies and other prisoners also by work, by starving, by mistreatment.

To organize such help was possible when prisoners themselves came in positions for handling and organizing the work and the functions of the camps.

This was possible because of the way the SS organized the camps. The SS only wanted to control. Prisoners as "Kapos" et.al. had to handle the whole practical work in the camp. If these "Kapos" were "willing tools" of the SS, it had been very problematic for the other prisoners, but if these "Kapos" became aware of their position to help, it was a possibility to survive for all. And working as prisoner in the so-called camp-statistic made it possible to change deportation lists, to bring somebody in another work-commando or labor squad, or to help someone to hide inside of the camp.

This was one reason why in CC Buchenwald the prisoner-groups of the "red triangle" and the "green triangle" settled a very intensive conflict to occupy such "Kapo"-positions. The intention of the political prisoners was not to be privileged, but to use these positions to help all prisoners of the camp to survive.

Such resistance cannot be done by individuals but only by organized groups. So one need to build clandestine groups inside of the camp and jail. And the communist prisoners, they had been the majority of the "red triangle" inmates, have had the best conditions to build such clandestine networks.

The SS and the Gestapo knew of cause that most of the prisoners are political enemies of the "Third Reich", but they expected that – to be in prison – it will stop the possibility and the intention to resist against the fascist regime for the majority of the prisoners. Because they could not be sure about it, the SS and the Gestapo organized also inside the camps a network of spy's to find those who continued to resist.

So the antifascists need to secure themselves and their clandestine structure to work. The political prisoners created an illegal network of former members of the communist party and other socialist groups. To join this network you must have been a trusted one. So you need a testimony of you political experience and your resistance fight outside of the camp. Only those who were proofed as serious had been integrated.

And the clandestine group fought against spy's and other doubtful candidates. If anybody stole bread from comrades, betrayed an other prisoner to the SS et. al. - the network tried to isolate these inmates and to protect the other comrades.

Of cause, the work of this group could not be public. But everybody felt that there existed such structure. How the other prisoners accepted this situation, you can imagine by the following example:

When a prisoner wanted to inform this network about an important fact, he looked for a comrade with a red triangle, who had been in a function of the camp. He could not be sure if this guy is a member of the network, but he could be sure that this guy will give the information to the next station – so it will come at the end to the clandestine network.

Because everybody knew this way, it worked. In that way the clandestine group have been informed about the homicide of Ernst Thälmann, the political leader of the communist party of Germany, in August 1944 by the SS inside of the crematory of Buchenwald.

A great challenge came to the German antifascists after the beginning of World War II. Still in 1938 a bigger group of foreign prisoners of Czechoslovakia has been deported to Buchenwald. With the aggression against Poland in October 1939 the first Polish deported arrived in Buchenwald. The SS intended to kill them because of the living-conditions in the camp. The inmates had to stay in separated tents on bare ground – and this in time of autumn and cold weather – and they got nothing to eat in the first days.

In that moment the German prisoners showed real solidarity. Although they got themselves only small portions of bread and other goods, they throw parts of it over the fence to the Polish comrades. The SS was very angry about this sign of solidarity and punished the whole camp by cutting the portions of bread for the next days. But this action documented the power of solidarity, when there exists in the background such a clandestine network.

In the next month's more and more prisoners from several countries which had been occupied by German Wehrmacht came to Buchenwald. So the members of the clandestine political network decided to get in contact to these groups of foreign prisoners. This was the beginning of a living internationalism in Buchenwald.

The German political prisoners need to solve two problems:

1. They need someone who was able to speak the language of the foreigners.

The SS didn't react on this problem, because the SS gave its directives only in German language and if anybody didn't understand, he would be punished.

But the political prisoners tried to find contact to the foreigners on eye-level. So they wanted to speak in their language. And those who were able to speak the foreign language must also be political serious.

2. The political prisoners must proof to the foreigners that these Germans are others than the Germans they experienced in advance.

The prisoners from other countries have been deported not only from political reasons but also as POW or as slave workers. Nobody knew what their political opinion and political experiences have been. Could one trust them, are they serious?

Because of the internationalist tradition of the communist movement the first contacts developed to former communist representatives. They themselves tried to find comrades for a national resistance network inside each national group of prisoners.

After a period this work to get in contact to foreign prisoners was successful. Inside of the CC Buchenwald an international clandestine committee (ILK) was created by the political prisoners.

All national groups, which represented a bigger number of prisoners of the camp, send delegates to the leading body. From the German side came Walter Bartel, Ernst Busse and Harry Kuhn, the Soviet prisoners send Nikolai Simakow, the French Marcel Paul, the Belgium Henri Glineur, the Yugoslavian Rudi Supek, the Netherlands Jan Haken and others.

In this structure one discussed the military and political situation and the consequences for the inmates. Also conflicts and problems of the national groups were discussed and one looked for solutions facing the reality that the SS dominated the every-day's life.

This co-operation inside the international clandestine committee have had as one positive result that – although since 1942 more than 80 per cent of the prisoners were foreigners – in all the time no problems between the national groups inside the camp came on the floor.

This co-operation reached such a level that the antifascists created also an international military organization (IMO). Led by the German communist Otto Roth the antifascists started to organize weapons for the prisoners. And there have been three ways to get these: The first way was to steal guns and knives from the SS. This was not as problematic as it might be, because no SS-man would acknowledge that his weapon could have been stolen

by a prisoner. So he told that he lost it during a mission outside in the field and then he got a new one.

The second way was to smuggle carbines or parts of it from the gun-factory Gustoff-Werke inside the camp. This was much more risky because the SS frisked prisoners by the entry of the camp. If the SS found such gun or parts of it, this would be like a "sentence of death" for the prisoner.

The third way to get weapons was to build it with simple resources, f.e. bottles with flammable liquid, self created knives from metal sticks et.al. The Soviet prisoners have had very good experiences for that way. Those weapons were especially useful for self defense. The task of this military organization (IMO) was not only to organize such weapons, but also to instruct persons how to use these weapons.

And inside the leading body of the IMO the comrades made strategic plans how to react, when the time of self-defense will come. Especially in the final phase of the CC Buchenwald, the IMO prepared military activities against destroying of the camp and killing the prisoners by SS and Wehrmacht.

When the military front came nearer and nearer to Buchenwald, the SS tried to evacuate the camp and to send the prisoners on "death-marches". In this moment the main task of the clandestine network were to save as much prisoners as they could. Although the network doesn't work in public, it was able to obstruct building deportation groups.

When the SS wanted to build a transport with Jewish prisoners the antifascists gave the orientation to all Jewish prisoners to detach the "yellow triangle" - so the SS could not select these prisoners and send them to death-march.

Finally the power of the clandestine organization had been proofed in the last days of the camp, when the organization decided to hide and to protect a group of 46 prisoners, the SS named as the leading group of the clandestine network. Although the Nazis looked very intensive for these persons, they could not find anybody and no spy was willing to help the SS in that moment.

In this situation, when the American troops were nearby the camp and most of the SS-guard left the Ettersberg, the military forces of the prisoners were able to organize a self-liberation of the camp. On April 11, at about 3 pm the groups of the IMO used their weapons and took over the camp Buchenwald. So they liberated and saved about 21.000 inmates, under them more than 900 children and young boys. The military groups captured about 200 guards, SS-men and other representatives of the fascist terror regime and they protected the camp. Two days later, on April 13, an American military commander took over the liberated camp.

The common experience of resistance-fight inside the camp were focused in the "Oath of Buchenwald" which all liberated prisoners took on April 19, 1945 at the last "liberation appeal". There the former prisoners promised:

"Our cause is just - Victory shall be ours!

We performed in many languages the same hard, merciless, so many sacrifices life and this fight is not over yet. Still blow Hitler flags! Still living the murderers of our comrades! Even our sadistic tormentors roam free!

We therefore swear the whole world on this appeal court, in this place of fascist terror:

We will finish our fight only when the last culprit stands before the judges of the peoples!

The destruction of Nazism with its roots is our slogan. Building up a new world of peace and freedom is our goal."

This “Oath of Buchenwald” is still actual and it is the common legacy of all antifascists in various countries until today. And to remember this legacy underline the value of our commemorative work for the today's generations. It is not only a historical perspective, but it is a promise for a better future for all.

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