



WER IST WALTER?

International Perspectives on
Resistance in Europe during
World War II

Edited by

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Resistance Told by Resisters: The Digitised Collection of Reports of Former Prisoners of Buchenwald Concentration Camp

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Resistance in concentration camps is a topic so well-researched that it may seem to be even whimsical to try to add another position to the bibliography. For example, the best catalogue available, that of the Topography of Terror Foundation (*Stiftung Topographie des Terrors*) in Berlin, returns as many as 271 entries on a search for the keywords *Widerstand+Konzentrationslager* (Resistance+Concentration Camp).¹ However, in recent years, memorial institutions have started to digitise their holdings, giving researchers exciting new possibilities for research.

This article will use a small part of one of the digitised collections of the Buchenwald memorial, applying a qualitative method to find out how the term resistance was used by former inmates of the camp. It will then discuss its findings, which were made possible through digitisation in the context of the research about resistance in Buchenwald concentration camp.

The Buchenwald Memorial has taken a leading role in responding to the challenges of the digital revolution, going as far as discussing digitisation in its mission statement: “[...] digitalization has radically altered the way in which knowledge is acquired and opinions are formed. This also requires new educational approaches and formats.”² For comparison, many other memorial institutions in Germany either do not publish mission statements or do not mention digitisation.³ This is no coincidence, as the digital

1 See: <https://vzlbs2.gbv.de/DB=48.1/SET=1/TTL=4/CMD?ACT=SRCHA&IKT=1016&SRT=YOP&TRM=widerstand+konzentrationslager>. All quoted internet sources were last accessed on 14 April 2024.

2 Jens-Christian Wagner, “Foundation Mission Statement”, *Buchenwald and Mittelbau-Dora Memorials Foundation*, <https://www.stiftung-gedenkstaetten.de/en/ueber-uns/leitbild>.

3 See e.g. “Stiftungszweck, Gesetz & Satzung”, *Stiftung Bayerische Gedenkstätten*, <https://www.stiftung-bayerische-gedenkstaetten.de/die-stiftung/gesetz-satzung>. The author of this text was part of a subproject of the digitisation project at the Buchenwald Memorial in the years 2022-2023.

transformation at the Buchenwald Memorial started very early. Already in 1994, a database project was initiated to create a memorial book and an inventory of archeological findings. The program used to build the database was developed in-house.⁴

The latest digitisation project at the Buchenwald Memorial started in autumn 2021. The project's blog states that the project's aim is to provide access to sources of the history of the concentration camp and its aftermath and to make them more usable.⁵ The further development of databases, the usage of archival standards and linkage with other sources available online are named as further goals of the undertaking.

The collection of reports of survivors

The first body of source material processed by the Buchenwald Memorial's digitisation team was the collection of reports of survivors. This collection consists of 1.146 reports, which add up to 19.456 pages with an average of 14,44 pages per report. Most reports, however, have a lower quantity of pages. 139 reports have only one page, while 30 reports comprise over 100 pages. The maximum number of pages per report is 521.⁶ Some authors wrote several reports so the number of reports is larger than the number of authors. The reports are usually typewritten statements of survivors about their time in Buchenwald concentration camp and the story of their persecution before that, but they also contain other material such as original letters that were written during imprisonment, lists of prisoners, certificates, photos and maps. The reports were not necessarily memories written down especially for the purpose of archiving. Some had already been published elsewhere, mostly in newspapers or magazines, as can be seen for example by the archived report of Domenico Ciufoli,⁷ which is a translation of a piece published in the Italian magazine *Verita*. Also, female survivor Anna Walzewa's report had been published in Moscow's *Literaturnaja Gazeta* in

4 Harry Stein and Jens Vehlhaber, "Datenbankprojekt in der Gedenkstätte Buchenwald zur Geschichte des Konzentrationslagers Buchenwald 1937-1945", *Gedenkstättenrundbrief* 87 (1999): 29-36.

5 See Markus Wegewitz, "Start des Digitalisierungsprojekts", SGBMDigital, 12 October 2021, <https://sgbmdigital.hypotheses.org/page/2>.

6 Report of Nathan Garfinkel, Buchenwald Archives K 31/1086.

7 Buchenwald Archives K 31/58.

1960, before it was sent to Buchenwald Memorial's Archive.⁸ After scanning, the reports were transformed into searchable PDFs and indexed, thus creating a large database with thousands of entries, which allow for inter-textual searches.

The base materials for this database are the reports, which have been collected since the 1950s. This means that the first stage of this process took place in a period when there was not yet an archive as a separate entity within the National Memorial Site Buchenwald (*Nationale Mahn- und Gedenkstätte Buchenwald*). An archive was established only in 1971, 12 years after the memorial was founded.⁹ The prisoners' reports collection is a quite peculiar subset of the Buchenwald Archives' holdings, as the reports were collected for a publication project.

The publication was meant to be a collective work of members of the resistance movement in Buchenwald. The goal was to publish documentation about the camp that would highlight the "lives and fight of the antifascist resistance fighters".¹⁰ A publishing committee was established, composed of former prisoners from Belgium, the Netherlands, Poland, Czechoslovakia, France and the German Democratic Republic (GDR). That the members (and the countries they represented) were not coincidentally chosen can be derived from the fact that the inaugural conference of the publishing project was opened with a speech by Ludwig Einicke (1904-1975), who was also a former Buchenwald prisoner. More importantly, in this context, Einicke was the director of the Institute for Marxism-Leninism at the Central Committee of the GDR's ruling party, the SED (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*), from 1953 to 1962.¹¹ All the attendees were more or less orthodox communists. In his speech, Einicke stressed that the publication should "significantly contribute to the fight against the re-awakening of fascism and against the renewed use of former SS-leaders in West Germany".¹²

8 Buchenwald Archives K 31/12.

9 Sabine Stein, "Das Buchenwaldarchiv: Eine archivische Sammlung in der neu geschaffenen selbständigen Stiftung Gedenkstätten Buchenwald und Mittelbau-Dora", *AsKI Kulturberichte*, no. 1 (2003), <https://www.aski.org/das-buchenwaldarchiv-eine-archivische-sammlung-in-der-neu-geschaffenen-selbstaendigen-stiftung-gedenkstaetten-buchenwald-und-mittelbau-dora.html>.

10 Philipp Neumann-Thein, *Parteidisziplin und Eigenwilligkeit: Das Internationale Komitee Buchenwald-Dora und Kommandos* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2014), 226.

11 See the respective entry in the *Wer war wer in der DDR?* online dictionary: "Einicke, Ludwig" *Bundesstiftung Aufarbeitung*, <https://www.bundesstiftung-aufarbeitung.de/de/recherche/kataloge-datenbanken/biographische-datenbanken/ludwig-einicke>.

12 Neumann-Thein, *Parteidisziplin*, 227.

This was completely in line with the purpose of sites like Buchenwald in GDR memory culture.

The GDR created memorial sites “of the heroic communist resistance against the ‘Third Reich’, a red Olympus”.¹³ At the inauguration of the Buchenwald National Memorial in 1958, then Prime Minister Otto Grotewohl spoke of the heroism of the European resistance fighters. “A militant identification”¹⁴ with the German and European resistance movements took place.

When the publication project started, not much material on which to base it was available. Even though the first reports about concentration camps had already been published in the 1930s by escapees or people released from internment, they had not reached many readers. This is astonishing when one looks at the prominence of Buchenwald in worldwide memorial culture today.¹⁵

The publication project took many turns. Initially planned for the opening of the National Memorial in 1958, it became a focal point for political struggles between the committee of former prisoners and the GDR’s leadership.¹⁶ It was published in January 1960 under the title *Buchenwald – Mahnung und Verpflichtung. Berichte und Dokumente* (Buchenwald – Reminder and Obligation. Reports and Documents), gathering around dozens of reports collected so far or extracts of them, which were mixed with documents produced by the SS and from trials and investigations. There was also a separate part with photos of the former camp and its prisoners.¹⁷ Reports continued to be sent to the Buchenwald Memorial long after this project was finished.

13 Edgar Wolfrum, *Geschichte als Waffe. Vom Kaiserreich bis zur Wiedervereinigung* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 3rd ed., 2007), 110.

14 Jeffrey Herf, *Divided Memory: The Nazi Past in the Two Germanys* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999) 177.

15 For reference, see e.g. Michael Löffelsender, *Das KZ Buchenwald 1937-1945* (Erfurt: Landeszentrale f. polit. Bild. Thüringen, 2020).

16 Neumann-Thein, *Parteidisziplin*, 251.

17 Fédération Internationale des Résistants, des Victimes et des Prisonniers du Fascisme, Internationales Buchenwald-Komitee and Komitee der Antifaschistischen Widerstandskämpfer in der DDR, eds., *Buchenwald – Mahnung und Verpflichtung. Dokumente und Berichte* (Berlin: Kongress-Verlag, 1960). Another edition was printed in 1961 which included supplements and corrections by former prisoners.

A very short history of Buchenwald

Buchenwald was a concentration camp built on a hill near Weimar in 1937. It was the second large concentration camp to be erected in Nazi Germany in the mid-1930s, after Sachsenhausen in 1936, and after the first wave of imprisonment in concentration camps, which had already started in 1933 and included Dachau. Altogether, until its liberation on 11 April 1945, the SS brought up to 278.000 prisoners into the camp, killing around 56.000. Around 21.000 prisoners were left in the camp and its substructures when the U.S. Army liberated the camp in April 1945.

Today, the camp is also known because of its many prominent prisoners. To name just a few, the former inmates Imre Kertész and Jorge Semprun would later become Nobel Prize winners for literature. Stéphane Hessel, a member of the French Resistance was brought to Buchenwald in 1944. He survived, made a career as a diplomat and was adopted by the anti-globalist left, when his essay *Indignez vous!* became a world-wide bestseller in 2010.¹⁸ Elie Wiesel, another survivor of Buchenwald, was a very important figure in establishing Holocaust memory worldwide. Most prisoners, however, are unknown and forgotten, but their names can be researched, using the Buchenwald memorial site's website¹⁹ and Arolsen Archives' extensive collections, which can be searched online.²⁰ A few prisoners rose to prominence only very late in their lives and in horrific circumstances. One example is Buchenwald survivor Boris Romantschenko, who became known only in 2022. He had survived many concentration camps, among them Buchenwald, just to be killed in March 2022 when his home in Kharkiv, Ukraine, was hit during a Russian rocket attack.²¹

Buchenwald was a place of internment for people from all over Europe. It served different functions within the concentration camp system.

18 Stéphane Hessel, *Indignez-vous!* (Montpellier: Indigène, 2010). The booklet was published in English as *Time for Outrage!* (London: Charles Glass Books, 2011).

19 See: "Die Toten: 1937-1945", *Konzentrationslager Buchenwald*, <https://totenbuch.buchenwald.de/names/list>.

20 The Arolsen Archives, formerly known as the International Tracing Service, keep records about camps and their inmates and make them searchable online. See: <https://collections.arolsen-archives.org/de/search?s=Buchenwald>.

21 "Ukrainian Holocaust survivor Boris Romantschenko (96) killed in Russian shelling of Kharkiv", *International Auschwitz Committee*, 22 March 2022, <https://www.auschwitz.info/en/press/press-informations/press-information-single/lesen/ukrainian-holocaust-survivor-boris-romantschenko-96-killed-in-russian-shelling-of-kharkiv-2589.html>.

Starting with mostly political enemies of the Nazis in 1938, it became a place where so-called evacuation transports from camps in occupied Eastern Europe arrived starting in 1944, bringing tens of thousands of Jewish prisoners to Buchenwald. By then, many of the prisoners were kept in one of Buchenwald's many sub-camps, such as Ohrdruf.

Although unrelated to the topic of this article, it is important to state that the prisoners of the Soviet Special Camp in Buchenwald were not that prominent, and their stories could be told only after the end of the GDR in 1989. For five years, from 1945 to 1950, Soviet occupation forces locked away around 28.000 Germans in an internment camp established on the premises of the former concentration camp. Many of the prisoners of the Soviets had been low-level members of the Nazi Party and many were completely innocent victims of Stalinist policies.²²

The reports about resistance in Buchenwald

The first book about Buchenwald as a concentration camp was published in Amsterdam in 1944, before liberation, when Dutch historian Peter Geyl (1887-1966) published a poetry collection titled *Het wachtwoord: Sonnetten* (The password: Sonnets). Geyl was brought to Buchenwald as a hostage in 1940 and released in 1943. The term resistance is mentioned only once in his poems and refers to the crackdown on resistance in Amsterdam within the framework of a fictitious dialogue between the lyrical self and a “tyrant”.²³ Another early publication about Buchenwald from 1945 was written by five former communist prisoners from Czechoslovakia.²⁴ An analysis of the content reveals that resistance is not a very prominent motif. It is mentioned only once properly and appears more as a possibility than a fact. The collective author writes: “The situation in the camp was so critical that we expected to be shot at any moment. As police,²⁵ we were divided into several groups and given the task of constantly monitoring the activities of the

22 Julia Landau and Enrico Heitzer, eds., *Zwischen Entnazifizierung und Besatzungspolitik: Die sowjetischen Speziallager 1945-1950 im Kontext* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2021).

23 Pieter Geyl, *Het wachtwoord: Sonnetten* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 1944), no page numbers.

24 Vladimír Baudyš et al., *Vzpomínky z koncentráků* (Úpice: Svaz osvobozených politických vězňů, 1945).

25 It is not clear what the authors meant by this expression. They probably coined a term to describe the task they had been given.

SS so that we could prepare for resistance in good time.”²⁶ Such examples, which depict the fact that resistance in the camp was not a topic in these early testimonies, can be quoted from nearly all the early publications.

However, when the Buchenwald collective prepared itself for the publication of reports, it was most certainly unaware of most of the hitherto published Holocaust and camp literature,²⁷ as there was so little of it and because it was published mostly in small or obscure publishing houses. As the authors of a research project about this phenomenon postulate, “these early texts have been forgotten and pushed out of the collective and cultural memory.”²⁸ So, the publishing committee soon realised that there was an important problem: a lack of sources. As a remedy, they reached out to former prisoners, asking them to submit reports about different aspects of Buchenwald’s history and that of its sub-camps, based on their own experiences. The committee collected the reports that their comrades submitted.

One of the methods of making the facts about the concentration camp better-known was organising the former prisoners. This effort is described in more recent research as organised remembrance (*organisierte Erinnerung*).²⁹ It stands in contrast to Aleida Assmann’s concept of cultural memory (*kulturelles Gedächtnis*),³⁰ which has been heavily criticised in recent years because it is based on rather stable identities (of persons and nations alike), which are less important in a world characterised by migration and hybrid identities.

Indeed, organised memory it was. The key player in the process of getting the memories written and organised was the Buchenwald Committee (*Buchenwald-Komitee*), which had assembled former prisoners of Buchenwald since its foundation in 1956. It was the successor to organisations of kapos or prisoners’ functionaries who had been assigned by the SS with

26 Baudyš et al., *Vzpomínky z koncentrákú*, 86-87.

27 For a discussion of this term, see “Begriffsdefinition Holocaust- und Lagerliteratur”, *Arbeitsstelle Holocaustliteratur*, https://www.fruehe-texte-holocaustliteratur.de/wiki/Begriffsdefinition_Holocaust-_und_Lagerliteratur.

28 See: “Frühe Texte der Holocaust- und Lagerliteratur 1933 bis 1949”, *Arbeitsstelle Holocaustliteratur*, https://www.fruehe-texte-holocaustliteratur.de/wiki/Fr%C3%BChe_Texte_der_Holocaust-_und_Lagerliteratur_1933_bis_1949. A critical discussion whether they had ever been part of the “collective and cultural memory” would be necessary.

29 Philipp Neumann-Thein et al., *Organisiertes Gedächtnis: Kollektive Aktivitäten von Überlebenden der nationalsozialistischen Verbrechen* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2022).

30 Aleida Assmann, *Erinnerungsräume: Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses* (München: C.H. Beck, 1999).

different supervision and administration tasks within the camp, and not just in name. As Neumann-Thein states, communists were the leading force among the kapos in the Buchenwald camp. By 1943, they had assumed almost all the powerful positions in the hierarchy that the SS had established among the prisoners. All three “camp elders” (*Lagerälteste*), most “block elders” (*Blockälteste*) and the decisive kapo posts in the infirmary, work statistics department and other key bureaucratic posts that allowed for acts of resistance were held by communists. Around a quarter of the prisoners who were active members of the former Communist Party of Germany (*Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands* – KPD) had held higher positions in the party’s rank before they were deported to the camp.³¹ This paper cannot give a detailed insight into the many issues that came with the power-sharing system established by the SS. It became a topic of a heated debate among historians and former prisoners of the camp after the end of the GDR, which also meant an end of the former communist prisoners’ monopoly on interpretation of Buchenwald’s history.³² The debate was initiated by a book about the “red kapos”, which held the communist functionary prisoners accountable for many wrongdoings.³³ The allegation that hit hardest was that the communist elite sometimes sacrificed non-communist prisoners to protect themselves and their network from the SS’s wrath. Also, party purges were the order of the day even amid the camp realities. This created a “political survivor’s guilt” (*politische Überlebensschuld*), a term coined by Lutz Niethammer and Harry Stein, authors of the aforementioned book about the kapos. As they convincingly argue, this guilt was compensated by the creation of the narration of self-liberation, a narration based on the outright lie that the camp would have been liberated by armed prisoners rather than the U.S. Army in April 1945. In reality, an armed uprising, which was suggested by several prisoners, was prevented by German communist prisoners because they knew a lot about asymmetric power metrics between SS and prisoners.

Given the above-mentioned circumstances of how the sources were collected, it may come as no surprise that the topic of resistance and (self-)liberation is very much present in the reports. It mainly referred to activities of

31 Neumann-Thein, *Parteidisziplin*, 35.

32 For a critical review of the debate see e.g. Mark Homann, *Jenseits des Mythos: die Geschichte(n) des Buchenwald-Außenkommandos Wernigerode und seiner “roten Kapos”* (Berlin: Metropol, 2020).

33 Lutz Niethammer et al., eds., *Der “gesäuberte” Antifaschismus. Die SED und die roten Kapos von Buchenwald* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1994).

the International Camp Committee (*Internationales Lagerkomitee*), which was created in 1943 by German communists along with political detainees from other countries. In his report, Walter Eberhardt, a former prisoner, explained the phenomenon of resistance as one that was organised from the top down “because the camp committee created national groups in illegal committees and the KPD had the leadership so we had a strong resistance movement on the agenda.”³⁴ Teofil Witek, a Polish former prisoner, stated what the goal of the resistance movement in the camp was about. He claimed that it would be wrong to limit the resistance movement in Buchenwald to a self-help action, for its goal was “a life-and-death fight to the death against the hated fascist system.”³⁵ For many who filed reports, the alleged act of self-liberation was “the crowning of the longstanding work of the resistance movement”³⁶ In an interesting semantic twist, Witek acknowledged the presence of U.S. troops, something that other former prisoners’ reports tended to avoid. According to him, just after the “revolt”, through which he described “self-liberation” happening, American troops came close. He then stated that “Buchenwald is an example for the relentless and consequent [...] fight against fascism” and closed his report by claiming that Buchenwald “is an example and an incentive for all comrades who continue to fight against the resurgence of American-style fascism in the capitalist countries.”³⁷ The myth of self-liberation is repeated in nearly every report examined. Some authors ascribe additional meanings to it, as does for example Walter Eberhardt. He states that 21.000 “Kameraden”, meaning comrades, “raised the call ‘Free’, as soon as the ‘self-liberation’ had begun.”³⁸ Other survivors tried to stick to the ideological paradigm by demeaning

34 Walter Eberhardt, “Tag der Befreiung 1945 der Widerstandskämpfer von Buchenwald”, Buchenwald Archive, K 31/70. Eberhardt, born 24 November 1905, died 10 May 1973. He was in Buchenwald from 10 November 1938, and was a kapo from October 1943. This data was collected from Arolsen Archives, DocID: 5806683 (WALTER EBERHARDT), retrieved from <https://collections.arolsen-archives.org/de/document/5806683>.

35 Teofil Witek, “Die Widerstandsbewegung in Buchenwald”, Buchenwald Archives K 31/415, Page 10. Witek, born 25 July 1913, died 13 March 1965. He was imprisoned in Auschwitz from 1 October 1941, and in Buchenwald from 12 March 1943. This data was collected from Arolsen Archives, DocID: 7428600 (TEOFIL WITEK), retrieved from <https://collections.arolsen-archives.org/de/document/7428600>.

36 *Ibid.*, 12.

37 *Ibid.*

38 Walter Eberhardt, “Tag der Befreiung 1945 der Widerstandskämpfer von Buchenwald”, Buchenwald Archive, K 31/70.

the liberators, as did Richard Thiede.³⁹ He recalls a successful escape after which he was greeted “damn little cordially” by Americans who even put him into a camp for Germans, from which he escaped again.⁴⁰ Some former prisoners seem to have even been aware of the fact that they were repeating the same narrative: Franz Eichhorn wrote in 1974 that “these records prove once again that every political prisoner used his position for the good of the camp, even if he sometimes risked his head and neck”.⁴¹

Concluding remarks

Only a small fraction of the potential that digitisation has to offer for the researcher could be used in this article. For example, due to the article’s scope, methods of machine reading large quantities of scanned material and semantically analysing it were not applied here. However, just the mere fact that survivors’ reports have been transformed into searchable PDFs already made the research for this text significantly easier. A rather vast body of material could be studied in a small part of the time that would have been necessary if one would have had to sift through the paper originals or the scans usually provided by archives. There remains space for improvement, though. The reports are not available online, and neither is the database consisting of the key words extracted from them. Being able to use the material freely online clearly has such great advantages that it outweighs any data or privacy protection regulations that might be applicable. Since the Arolsen Archives have made their materials available (see above), nearly all possible information about the former prisoners is out there anyway. It remains to be seen if the thus far rather strict imposition of privacy laws in German memorial sites can hold out much longer against the digital storm.

39 Richard Thiede was born in Leipzig on 6 February 1906 to a family of railway workers. He was brought to Buchenwald in November 1943 and transferred to the subcamp in Kassel.

40 Richard Thiede, “Betrifft: Schreiben vom 19.11.74”, Buchenwald Archive, K 31/328, 7.

41 Franz Eichhorn, “Bericht zum Thema: Antifaschistischer Widerstandskampf im ehemaligen KZ Buchenwald”, Buchenwald Archives K 31/332, 9. Eichhorn, born 3 April 1906, died 11 August 1993. He was imprisoned at Buchenwald from 18 January 1938, and was kapo of the camp’s barber shop. See: “Franz Eichhorn (Widerstandskämpfer)”, Wikimedia Foundation, last modified 28 September 2023, [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Franz_Eichhorn_\(Widerstandsk%C3%A4mpfer\)](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Franz_Eichhorn_(Widerstandsk%C3%A4mpfer)).

WER IST WALTER?

Resistance against Nazism, fascism, occupation and collaboration occurred throughout Europe during World War II. But how much do we know about this history in other European countries? Gathering 32 contributions and case studies on the history of this resistance, as well as on its transmission after 1945, especially in museums, the present book is an invitation to look at resistance in Europe in an interdisciplinary, international, transnational and comparative perspective. It is the result of the international research project “Wer ist Walter? Resistance against Nazism in Europe” which gathered historians, curators and other researchers mainly from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, France and Germany.



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