

When Fascination Obscures Fate

Narratives of Technology vs. Forced Labor at the Bunker “Valentin”

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Abstract • The Bunker “Valentin” in Farge, a suburb of Bremen, is one of the biggest relics of armament projects in the Second World War. Although it was built by up to 10,000 forced laborers under brutal conditions leading to a death toll of up to 1,600, it was primarily remembered as a technological masterpiece. This article describes the history of the bunker and how its remembrance changed over time. It assesses the formation of competing narratives of war technology and forced labor and explores the meaning of the material remains of the Second World War for the culture of remembrance of German war crimes at and after the end of the age of eyewitnesses.

Keywords • Dönitz, forced labor, National Socialism, Second World War, Speer, submarine

On 20 June 1981, a local Bremen radio station aired the feature “Nobody Leaves the Camp Alive” by journalist Christian Siegel and his former intern Rainer Habel.¹ It described the history of the submarine plant “Valentin” Bunker in Bremen-Farge, especially the suffering of the thousands of forced laborers who were forced to work on the construction site. This story, like many aspects of the National Socialist period, had been successfully concealed and suppressed by the city. Its rediscovery was pure coincidence. Rainer Habel’s father had been a member of a submarine crew during the war. Therefore, he was interested in a critical reappraisal of the submarine war. During his time as an intern at Radio Bremen in 1976, he worked on a program about Bremen’s north, which also mentioned the “Valentin” Bunker. Habel was able to convince the station to produce a feature about it.²

For the first time since the late 1940s, the Bunker “Valentin” was not just treated as a technological masterpiece but was put into the context of forced labor during the “total war.” The feature marks the beginning of a wave of research about the history of the Bunker and the thousands of forced laborers who had to build it. It was also the beginning of a public debate about what to do with the structure and, ultimately, the initial impulse for the Valentin Bunker Memorial, which was finally established



thirty-four years later in November 2015. Its presentation and narratives reflect the feature and the ensuing public debate, on the one hand, and administrative requirements for federal financial support, on the other.

Both aspects defined the Bunker “Valentin” as a memorial, not a museum of technology. It was commissioned with the goal of examining the significance of the site in light of its historical (Nazi-era) context and the system of forced labor, not in order to focus mainly on technological aspects. Although this decision went unchallenged and was supported by activists, scholars, and local and federal political representatives, its implementation still presented a significant challenge. The perception of the Bunker as a technological masterpiece and a high-tech submarine factory had been dominant for about forty years, while the fate of the up to ten thousand forced laborers had been nearly forgotten.

This article gives a short overview of the history of the Bunker “Valentin” and the disputes leading up to the establishment of the memorial site. By employing the method of forensic pedagogy, the second part of the article will problematize the exhibitions, strategies, and tools implemented in order to tackle the ambiguous aspects of the fascination for military technologies during and after the war.

A Brief History of the Bunker “Valentin”

In March 1943, construction of the Bunker “Valentin” started in the fields of Bremen-Rekum at the banks of the river Weser, about thirty-five kilometers from the center of Bremen.³ The project had been initiated by Grand Admiral Karl Dönitz, commander in chief of the German navy, as a reaction to the course of the submarine war in the Atlantic. Although from a German perspective, this war had been quite successful for some years, the situation was changing. The Allies had enhanced their detection systems, and British intelligence had cracked the infamous Enigma Machine and thus the German encryption codes. After that, German radio traffic became an “open book.” Every piece of communication between the German Naval High Command and the so-called wolf packs was intercepted, and as a result, became easy targets for the Allied navies, and it became easy for the Allied convoys to escape. Moreover, Allied air forces were now able to cover even parts of the Atlantic where the convoys had been on their own before. Forty-three German submarines were destroyed in May 1943 alone. Dönitz had to accept that the Allied naval forces were superior to his submarine fleet. He had to give the order to stop the battle in the Atlantic temporarily.⁴

In order to regain the offensive, Dönitz had to find a way to compensate all the deficits of the German submarine fleet. One decision was to order the construction of a new, technically advanced submarine, the

so-called Type XXI. Dönitz needed these vessels as quickly as possible and in huge numbers. Building them in the traditional way on slipways in open shipyards was not practical. Construction took too long, and the shipyards were under constant attack. The answer to these two challenges was a project that had already started in Bremen-Farge at the end of 1942.⁵ The Bunker "Valentin" was originally intended as a plant to produce Type VII submarines. Now the plans were adapted to the production of the Type XXI and the final assembly of the segments under a bomb-proof roof.⁶ One submarine was to leave the bunker every fifty-six hours. The size of the Bunker "Valentin" (419 meters long, up to 95 meters wide, and 35 meters high, with walls up to 4.5 meters thick and a roof that was originally planned to be 7 meters thick to make it bombproof) was determined by the needs of this production method. It became the most important project of the German navy, monitored by Dönitz and Albert Speer as "Reich Minister for Armaments and War Production" and head of the Organisation Todt (OT). It had top priority for getting building materials, machines, money, and a workforce.⁷ This workforce consisted of 8,000 forced laborers from all over Europe and North Africa and included prisoners of war, prisoners of a "labor correction camp" of the local Gestapo, civilian forced laborers and up to 2,500 prisoners of a satellite camp of the Hamburg-Neuengamme concentration camp.

Construction went on until the end of March 1945, when the Royal Air Force, in a single attack, destroyed the roof on the western side, where it was only three and a half meters thick. Another attack by the US Air Force a few days later destroyed most of the surrounding construction site. All work stopped before a single submarine could be passed down on the assembly line.

Only a few days later, the evacuation⁸ of the construction site and the camps started. The satellite concentration camp in Bremen-Farge became a transit camp for prisoners of satellite camps in Meppen, Wilhelmshaven, and Bremen. About five thousand went through Farge in about seven days. Hundreds of corpses were left in the area during the evacuation process. Most prisoners of war (POWs) were deported to a camp near the town of Westertimke in Lower Saxony. Most of the civilian forced laborers were left alone in their barracks. When the XXX Corps of the British Army finally reached the Bunker "Valentin" and the surrounding camps, most of which had been abandoned, there was nearly nothing left to liberate. All they could do was occupy one of the most important construction sites of the German navy, if not of all the German armed forces in the final years of the war.

Forgetting and Rediscovering

From the moment the British troops arrived in the area, the site and its history increasingly fell into oblivion or at least began to appear less significant in comparison to extermination and concentration camps. The appearance of Bremen-Farge was nothing like the terrifying scenes other British troops had witnessed during the liberation of Bergen-Belsen or the Sandbostel POW and concentration camp in the weeks prior. In Farge, there were no corpses, no starving prisoners, and no survivors who would talk about what had happened there.⁹ Only a massive concrete hull seemed to be left, surrounded by railroad tracks, cranes, concrete factories, conveyors, and quay facilities.

Instead of prisoners, the Allied experts found only Erich Lackner, a civil engineer and head of the construction office, who had seen no reason to leave the construction site after the prisoners, SS, and Wehrmacht had gone. Lackner immediately started to translate the construction drawings into English so that the new authorities could use them. Together with his employer, Arnold Agatz, owner of the planning office Agatz & Bock, he showed a US commission for disarmament around. Both Lackner and Agatz were thrilled by the fascination expressed by the commission.¹⁰ Agatz not only explained the construction but also immediately presented his ideas about the future use of “his” bunker as a storage facility for the US Army, with a price offer included.

Agatz’s offer was never considered. The Allied plan was to destroy the Bunker. This was eventually dropped because its demolition would have damaged the village and a nearby power plant. From 1949 onward, other possibilities were discussed. These included the use of the site as a storage facility for different goods (like the national grain reserve or herrings) or as a hull for atomic reactors. Another proposal was to flood the area and let the bunker sink into the mud so that “the memories on the horrors of war would not be revoked again and again.”¹¹ In 1966, the site was finally occupied by the German navy, turned into a storage facility, renamed, fenced off, protected by armed guards, and later even erased from city maps and aerial photographs. The camps were destroyed or reused for different purposes over the years. Huge parts of the former site were then used as military training grounds.¹² Even the dead were transferred. In 1948, the human remains of 594 victims were exhumed and buried in the Osterholz cemetery, thirty kilometers from Farge.¹³ In this process, all ties between the Bunker “Valentin” and the fate of former prisoners were extinguished.¹⁴

Fascination: Narratives of Technology

Without the obvious connection to the crimes of forced labor, the Bunker was expected to become the “eighth wonder of the world on the banks of the River Weser.”¹⁵ Its heritage was regarded as having only technological significance, with two main focuses (the construction itself and the Type XXI submarine).

In this narrative, the Bunker was seen as an example of the technological capabilities of German engineers, especially in the last two years of the war. The fact that the Bunker was built in only twenty-two months under the given circumstances was seen as a masterful feat of engineering. This view started contemporaneously with the building process and was created by engineers who were initially responsible for the project, Arnold Agatz, Erich Lackner, and Hans Joachim Steig.

Steig, the head of the OT construction management and also a construction engineer, commissioned a local photographer to create a documentation of the construction site in the summer of 1944.¹⁶ The photographer took nearly 1,000 photographs and shot 110 minutes of film, partly in an expensive color format. Both reflect the technical perspective on the construction. The photographs, which were marked “top secret,” were made in order to document the work process. They show the parts of the events the OT was interested in, such as OT officials and engineers conducting a technical symphony of cranes, trains, and people, displaying absolute power over everything happening on the site. The film works the same way and shows modern cranes, highly effective mixing plants, and concrete transported by pipes into reusable steel concrete formworks on wheels. Workers are only visible as small parts of this huge machinery, not as individuals.

These images survived, showing a construction site and working conditions that appeared hard but not cruel. The photos reflected the situation in mid-1944. The weather was warm, and most concentration camp inmates had just arrived in Farge in relatively good physical condition. The pictures do not show violence, the real working conditions, or the condition of the prisoners a few months later. The few photos of the concentration camp were staged and show clean barracks, a proper sickbay, and inmates in good shape.¹⁷ The main shelter for the prisoners, which would have shown the real conditions in the camp, was a former underground concrete oil storage. This space was twenty-five square meters and seven meters high, contained bunkbeds for up to two thousand prisoners and was wet, loud, and cold. None of this was shown on these photographs. The war crimes and crimes against humanity happened off camera and did not find their way into the visual memory of the Bunker “Valentin”.



Figure 1. A staged scene in the sick bay of the satellite camp. Photo: J. Seubert, July 1944. (© Landeszentrale für politische Bildung Bremen/Denkort Bunker Valentin)

Agatz and Lackner adopted and continued to propagate this “clean” view of the construction site. They were the most important construction engineers for the project. Agatz had founded the Agatz & Bock construction office in 1936, which planned and built bunkers mainly in occupied France on behalf of the German navy. Agatz made Lackner, his thirty-two year-old student, head of the construction office in Farge. In the radio feature mentioned at the beginning of this article, Agatz stated that “as far as I know, the conditions were the same for all.”¹⁸ Instead of reflecting on the use of forced labor, he concentrated on the technical narrative by describing the advanced construction method and the machines and the timetable, and he even boasted that “from an engineering point of view, incredible work was done.”¹⁹

Lackner left out that he was responsible not only for the construction plans but also for the coordination of the different companies. He definitely knew what was happening on “his” construction site. However, he used a common collective defense strategy by presenting himself as a small cog in a huge machine, only responsible for a small part of a bigger picture and only carrying out orders. It worked. Lackner was never charged with anything connected to his time in Farge, and he never showed any regret until he died in 1991. To the contrary, he built a

career on his experience in Farge. Lackner established a successful construction company that still exists, specializing in construction works close to water. He also became a professor for hydraulic engineering at the Technical University of Hannover. Together with his former mentor, Arnold Agatz, he wrote an article about building a concrete submarine factory at the river Weser in 1976, where he reused his plans and calculations from the 1940s.²⁰ That article was received as a milestone in the field, and Lackner until this day is known as one of the most important construction engineers in his field worldwide.

The second technology-focused narrative was connected to submarines in general and the Battle of the Atlantic in particular. Submarines have always stimulated people's fantasies, as they seem to touch the substance of human existence. They stand for technological innovation and the capability of mankind to conquer the third dimension—the depths of the ocean. This conquest presupposes fellowship, perseverance, willingness to make sacrifices, and heroism. Nevertheless, it is also connected to a primal fear of being lost in this third dimension, of drowning and being forgotten or being attacked by an invisible enemy out of the depths. Both aspects were and are highly relatable for many people.²¹

This is why submarines and their crews played such a huge part in German war propaganda right from the start. The crews were celebrated after their return; the commanders became celebrities. Films like *U-Boote Westwärts* (*U-Boats Westward*) from 1941 helped foster the myth of the submarine fleet.²² The Battle of the Atlantic was much more vivid than the course of the war on land. Ships and dead enemy sailors could be counted, and submarine commanders were turned into heroes for the public. The German navy was presented as a global force that caused harm to its enemies all over the world.

Even the years of failure, beginning in spring 1943, did not seriously impair the aura of the submarines and their crews. To the contrary, they fitted perfectly into the narrative of perseverance and the hope for new weapons that could change the course of the war.²³ Their heroic purpose was to buy time until new weapons were developed. The V-1 buzz bomb, V-2 rocket, Messerschmitt 262 jet plane, and Type XXI submarine were presented as those new weapons. Karl Dönitz himself created the legend that the German navy would have changed the outcome of the war if Hitler had paid attention to the needs of the submarine earlier and if Hermann Göring's air force had been more successful in defending the shipyards.²⁴

After the war, the reports and biographies of former submarine sailors and commanders turned the submarine fleet into victims. The crews were described as brave soldiers who had done their duty. Their only mistake had been their naïve loyalty to a criminal regime, which misused them for its dark course.²⁵

The submarine narrative was revived unintentionally by the film *Das Boot* (1981), based on the novel of Lothar Günther Buchheim about the enemy voyages of the submarine U96, published in 1973. Buchheim, a former member of a propaganda company, had turned into a fierce critic of the submarine war, which he called (given the age of the sailors, between sixteen and twenty-two) a “children’s crusade” on a lost course.²⁶ The reception of the film was different. It did not break the popular fascination with submarines but evoked several themes associated with the nature of human existence. The fate of the crew spoke to viewers who identified with the characters and the horror they had to endure.²⁷ The reasons for the war and the fact that the submarines played a part in the killing of millions did not change that. As Ulrike Koldau writes, even pacifists succumb to this ambivalence.²⁸

Remembering Forced Labor and the Camp System

In the 1960s, initial efforts were made to commemorate the forced laborers and the camps. In 1961, the committee of former Neuengamme prisoners started investigations about the camps in Bremen and the whereabouts of perpetrators like camp guards and capos.²⁹ The investigations led to nothing. No official side would start further investigations, so the efforts of the former prisoners became a dead end. In the same year, a local resident of Bremen-Blumenthal filed a complaint concerning murder in the camps in Farge. A. Roodvoets, the brother of the murdered prisoner Theo Roodvoets, also filed a complaint, in this case against camp commander Karl Walhorn. The first prosecutor, Dr. Siegfried Höffler, a former member of the NSDAP and the SA, dismissed both cases. He treated the death in the camps as consequence of malnutrition and therefore as a natural cause of death, and death by shooting during attempted escape as a legal act that is not punishable by law.³⁰ Neither case nor the corresponding investigations ever became public.

Five years later, in 1966, the local history society published a remarkable article about the labor correction camp of the local Gestapo in its monthly brochure. Published two years before the protests of 1968 by members of a local club committed foremost to the preservation of traditions like handcrafts and old costumes, it clearly describes the camps and the crimes. The article was intended to be a warning. As author Heinrich Garrn wrote, its purpose was to “remember the times of darkness and be a reminder. It has to be on the record, what had happened in Farge, so that a repetition is avoided by us and by our assistants.”³¹ Knowledge about the camps was still present after all, but only a few would talk about it.

None of these events had any impact on the public perception of the Bunker “Valentin” in the early years. It needed a new generation



Figure 2. Inauguration of the memorial in 1983 with the local activist Gerd Meyer (second from the left) and, with glasses and a pale jacket, Rainer Habel (tenth from the left). (© Heimatverein Farge-Rekum)

of historian activists, and the history workshops (*Geschichtswerkstätten*), which were part of new social movements, to break up the silence about the Nazi regime and the thousands of camps that were all over the country. It also needed the radio feature “Nobody Leaves the Camps Alive,” inspired by this new movement.³² It was the start not only of a new approach to the history of Bunker “Valentin” but also of the exploration of the role of Bremen and its economy in the Nazi era.

Unlike many other cities, the Bremen government supported this social movement from the beginning.³³ The city had been traditionally ruled by the Social Democratic Party (SPD) since the end of the war. The first generation of postwar senators had often been opponents of the Nazi regime and antifascism was part of the party’s self-conception. In the 1980s, most of the activists were still social democrats or at least close to them. Rainer Habel, the coauthor of the radio feature and later founder of the memorial initiative Flowers for Farge, was even in the public service as a personal assistant to the senator for public health at the time. Motivated by his research for the radio feature, Habel was the first to establish contact with former French prisoners. Together, they planned a worthy memorial at the Bunker. With the support of the city administration,

the *Amicale Internationale de Neuengamme* and local activists, a monument was designed and erected in September 1983. Speeches were given by the mayor of Bremen at that time, Hans Koschnik, the chairwomen of “Amicale” René Aubry, and the former prisoner André Migdal; eighty other former prisoners were also present.³⁴

The situation at the Bunker “Valentin” in the 1980s differed from that of most other former camp sites in Western Germany, where similar initiatives often still faced opposition by local and federal administrations and large parts of the public.³⁵ An exception is the Sandbostel Camp Memorial, located about fifty kilometers from Farge in a conservative, rural region. Early research by two local teachers also began around 1980. Their effort to create a memorial site at one of the biggest former POW camps and short-time concentration camps faced heavy resistance from local officials and most residents.³⁶ It took twenty-five years to establish the Sandbostel Camp Memorial foundation and another eight years for a professional redesign of the site.³⁷ However, in this case, the reason was political resistance and not the fact that the site had not been available.

Over the following years, interest in the history of the Bunker “Valentin” grew. In 1986, the International Peace School of North-Bremen (*Internationale Friedensschule Bremen-Nord*) organized a memorial march along the route of the death marches under the patronage of the senator for social services. In 1988, the television documentary *The Bunker* by Thomas Mitscherlich was broadcast.³⁸ For the first time on television, former prisoners talked about their experience on the construction site and in the camps of Bremen-Farge. In 1995, the first autobiographical texts of three prisoners were published.³⁹ and in 1996, another book came out, containing the research Mitscherlich’s film was based on.⁴⁰

Even the army opened up.⁴¹ Representatives of the Bundeswehr were present during the inauguration of the memorial. However, the former prisoners (who were official guests of the Bremen Senate) were not allowed to access the site of the bunker on that day without stating reasons. Eyewitnesses even reported that uniformed guards with dogs patrolled the fence during the ceremony.⁴² Starting in 1986, the army allowed guided tours on the site but only for citizens from NATO states, not from Warsaw Pact countries. Former prisoners from the USSR or Poland, who had been the biggest group, were therefore not allowed to visit.

This changed only after 1989. In the 1990s, the Bunker “Valentin”—still a restricted military area—became a location for book readings and concerts with thematic links to local history.⁴³ The most important event for the public rediscovery of the Bunker was a production by the Bremen Theater, in which director Hans Kresnick used the site as the stage for his version of Karl Krauss’ *The Last Days of Mankind*. The production became a huge success and was for many Bremen citizens their first encounter with the Bunker “Valentin”. In 1999, residents of Farge-Rekum founded the

association *Geschichtslehrpfad Lagerstraße*, which established information points on the former campground and organized tours of the Bunker.

In 2004, the German Ministry of Defense announced the end of the use of the site for navy storage on 31 December 2010, which finally opened a window for the establishment of a memorial site. In 2000, the Bremen Center for Political Education, together with activists, had already arranged a conference and developed ideas for the future use of the Bunker and the camp site. Historians, architects, and educators made first proposals that led to an exhibition, which was cofounded by the German Federal Government and opened in 2007 in the Bremen town hall.⁴⁴ In 2008, the city parliament of Bremen formally decided to establish a memorial site after the navy left the Bunker. The parliament then commissioned the Center for Political Education to develop an educational and constructional concept based on federal requirements for memorial sites.

The Bunker “Valentin” as a Memorial Site

Three aspects framed the concept for the memorial site published in May 2009.⁴⁵ Firstly, it was understood as a direct continuation of the efforts begun in 1981. Secondly, it had to comply with federal memorial site regulations. Thirdly, it reflected a change of educational paradigms after the end of the “era of eyewitnesses.” The first and second aspect determined the narrative that contextualized the Bunker “Valentin” as, first and foremost, a site of forced labor during the Nazi period, not of technological innovation.

The federal memorial site concept, furthermore, set the norm for the quality of systems and educational tools used in order to transport this narrative. The concept therefore reflected changes in memory culture after German reunification.⁴⁶ After substantive debates, the final draft of the concept was officially passed by the German Bundestag in 1999.⁴⁷ This opened up two major sources of funding; namely, institutional funding on a yearly basis by the federal government (also allotted to memorial sites like Neuengamme, Buchenwald, Dachau, and Sachsenhausen) and project-based funding reserved for smaller sites. The latter provided 50 percent of the costs of certain projects but no permanent support. Financial support was only granted when exhibitions were to concentrate on critical education regarding the Nazi past.

This normative determination reflected German memory culture and its evolution from an opposition project to a reason of state.⁴⁸ Critics, however, were warning (correctly) that remembrance was not to become a mere tool for the legitimization of the German state, since this would have replicated German Democratic Republic propaganda strategy, only from a different ideological perspective.⁴⁹ This discussion was also

reflected in the concept of the Bunker “Valentin”; the approach did not justify a certain order of state or seek to educate via normative claims (both would have constituted cases of messages from the present dumped on the past and therefore would have amounted to a misuse of the site as well as a disregard of the victims).⁵⁰ Instead, all research and conceptional work was intended to create the prerequisites for an understanding of the political, economic, and social processes that made a project like Bunker “Valentin” possible and to help visitors draw their own conclusions about the past and present.

The third aspect concerned the handling of material remains, which are becoming more and more important given the end of the “era of eyewitnesses” and the transition of remembrance of the Nazi era from communicative to cultural memory. Material remains are “pantries of remains of past events.”⁵¹ They cannot compensate for the loss of eyewitnesses. Nevertheless, they can help to establish an alternative connection between the past and present. But the remains do not speak for themselves; they have to be explained and contextualized.⁵²

The basic approach at the Bunker “Valentin” memorial is the concept of “forensic pedagogy” established by Matthias Heyl, head of educational services at the Ravensbrück concentration camp memorial.⁵³ Heyl developed this concept in order to explain the role of historic sites and material remains. The latter, however, do not speak for themselves and have no mystic or engraved aura. They need to be contextualized via documents, testimonies, or photos in order to be understood. If treated this way, the material remains proof of the existence of the former camps, prisons, killing fields, or, in this case, sites of forced labor and the crimes committed at these sites.

Following this idea, the Bunker “Valentin” and related material remains are now treated as historical evidence, explained and contextualized by a walkway with twenty-six information points, an additional audio guide and an exhibition that provides computers and screens for digital research. Previous knowledge about the general history of the Nazi era is helpful but not required. Guided tours and seminars are offered as additional layers of information. The walkway leads around and through the Bunker. Each information point provides a bilingual information board, a map to locate the spot in the context of the site and a historical photograph, placed in the angle from which it was originally taken. The points of information do not follow the timeline, but the material remains or identified sites of historical events provide information to deconstruct the technical narrative or to uncover the fate of former prisoners. The goal is not to explain every detail of the history but to encourage people to take interest in and examine it more deeply on the basis of additional information gained from the exhibition or via secondary literature and online research.

Deconstructing Fascination

The most important information point for the deconstruction of the fascination with technology is located next to a crater of about seven meters in diameter inside the Bunker. An information panel provides a quote from a diary entry by Joseph Goebbels, which he had written after a visit to the construction site in November 1944. The quote illustrates the delusion on the German side. Goebbels writes that construction “has progressed so much that British-American air raids can no longer cause serious damage to the construction project.”⁵⁴ Obviously, the crater proves otherwise. The audio guide then explains the circumstances of the attack, based on a British navy intelligence file containing the results of close monitoring of the construction site since spring 1943.⁵⁵ The file clearly proves that the Allies could have destroyed the construction site on day one. They did not because it was not necessary as long as the work had not been finished and no submarine had been built. The project only tied down massive resources, including materials, machines, and, most importantly, workers. Only when the Germans were about to complete the roof did the Allied air forces destroy the site relatively easily.

This contextual information then leads directly to the failure of the whole project and to the hybris and detachment from reality of Dönitz, Speer, Lackner, and others. It therefore presents a different narrative than that of great technological achievements and the allegedly game-changing submarines. Now the Bunker stands for the vulnerability of a nation engaged in a war that did not go as planned and which, from late 1942 onward, was no longer about rational actions or goals. Adolf Hitler, Joseph Goebbels, and Heinrich Himmler had turned the war into an eschatological battle for ultimate domination that could only have one winner.⁵⁶ That is what “total war” really meant, as Magnus Brechtken has described,⁵⁷ and that is what the Bunker “Valentin” now stands for.

Additional information on a research screen opens up a new perspective on Dönitz and Albert Speer. Both were responsible for the project “Valentin”. Both managed to escape the gallows in Nuremberg by denying their guilt and presenting themselves as underlings without knowledge of any crime. The inside exhibition gives evidence that Dönitz was a convinced Nazi and that he had, without hesitation, sacrificed the lives of up to thirty thousand of his sailors to support the ideas of Arian superiority, antisemitism, and racism. It also talks about Albert Speer and his role in creating the “armaments wonder” and thus increasing the perseverance of the Germans until the very last days of the war⁵⁸ as well as his responsibility for the system of forced labor and the expansion of the Auschwitz concentration camp.⁵⁹

Uncovering Fate

The first information point on the work and living conditions of the prisoners is located in the former canteen ground. The building itself is lost, but photographs from 1944 offer visuals. The textboard gives information about food supply, daily rations for prisoners, and the consequences of hard work in combination with malnutrition. The audio guide then provides testimonies about the starvation of the prisoners. A digital copy of a nutrition report, issued by the Hamburg Eppendorf University Hospital, confirms the horrible conditions of the prisoners from the German perspective. It also refutes Erich Lackner's statement, previously quoted, that conditions had been the same for all workers, whether prisoners or free workers. Again, the inside exhibition provides additional information, for example, on the biographies of the two physicians responsible for the nutrition report.

Other spots provide information about the prisoners, their work structure, and the consequences of sabotage. Where possible, these signs are connected with material remains along the walkway, for example, the fundamentals of a concrete mixer. The mixers were the place of one of the most brutal commandos on the site. Photographs show visual contexts. The testimony of Raymond Portefaix describes the work process, especially the weight of the cement sacks the prisoners had to fill into the machines by hand.⁶⁰ The material remains of the mixers and the testimony allow narratives of modern and high-tech construction methods to collide with the barbarism that characterized the work process.⁶¹ Another research terminal provides biographies that demonstrate the heterogeneity of the prisoners, describe aspects of forced labor at the Bunker "Valentin" and other sites, and illustrate different reasons for prosecution by the institutions involved in the system of forced labor. They also highlight the racism that defined that system and describe the time after the liberation of those who survived.

The few remains of the camps are not part of the current circuit. The former camp site is still a military training ground with very limited access. This will only change once the Bundeswehr leaves the area. This has been announced, but a date has not been set. Therefore, the history of the local camps is on display in the inside exhibition and at a digital projection table. These displays further contextualize the Bunker complex "Valentin". The six camps represent the different ways prisoners were treated within the racist system of forced labor. "Camp Heidkamp I+II" stands for the use of so-called civilian workers from Western and Eastern Europe and how they were treated according to racist rules. It also stands for the fate of Italian soldiers, who were allies at first but then (after the overthrow of the fascist regime under Benito Mussolini in July 1943)



Figure 3. Archaeological excavations at the former concrete mixers, March 2014. (© Landeszentrale für politische Bildung/Denkort Bunker Valentin)

became the regime's worst enemy and were treated even worse than POWs from the Red Army.⁶²

The "labor correction camp" is an example of the intense involvement of regular German companies in the system of forced labor. This camp was one of the first of its kind in Germany. It was set up on behalf of the Bremen Chamber of Commerce to punish foreign and German workers in cases of alleged misbehavior. Decisions regarding whom to punish were made by special assigned staff members of the companies, not by the Gestapo (which only carried out what the private company had ordered and ran the camp).⁶³ The subcamp of the Neuengamme concentration camp is representative for the establishment of subcamps all over the occupied territory and for the involvement of the SS in the whole system.⁶⁴ A camp for Soviet POWs and a company camp run by a construction company complete the kaleidoscope of the camp system.

The second area that is not included in the circuit but on display in the exhibition is the village around the construction site. German society had enabled and tolerated the camps and the system of forced labor and profited from them. Farge-Rekum was no exception. The connection between the camps and the surrounding population were neglected for a

long time, not only at places like “Valentin” but also at memorial sites and in public memory as well. This aspect is drawing more and more interest and is vital for the impact of educational work on memorial sites in general. The focus thereby is on the scope of action, not of the victims or the perpetrators but of the people in between; in this case, the inhabitants of Farge, who saw what was happening in the small town and who could not cross the main road in the morning and the evening hours, when the prisoners were marched from the railway station to the construction site and back.

Some members of the local population tried to help prisoners by giving them water or potatoes in unobserved moments. Some of them were connected to the construction site or the camps and delivered materials, food, or coal. Others transported corpses or rented rooms to officers or German workers. Still others were contract physicians who had access to the sickbay and saw the consequences of the living and working conditions. Many of them got paid for their services. All of them were part of a society that not only enabled the construction of the Bunker “Valentin” but also agreed with the ideology of National Socialism, profited from it, or at least tolerated its mechanisms of exclusion, with only a few exceptions.⁶⁵ Only the understanding of the underlying motives and processes makes it possible to evaluate present political developments, especially the appeal of new rightwing ideologies and the sense of identity they offer.

Conclusion

The material remains of the Nazi era are becoming more important as personal encounters with survivors become less and less possible. This loss of eyewitnesses cannot be compensated completely. Nevertheless, material remains can build a bridge between the past and present and thereby partly moderate the impact of the loss of eyewitnesses.

These bridges are not obvious. Methods like forensic pedagogy help to explore what is on the other side. In case of the Bunker “Valentin”, this exploration leads to a multidimensional story about the history of forced labor during the so-called Third Reich. This story includes the scope of the actions of German engineers, officers, guards, workers, and locals; the connection between a small district of a small city in northern Germany and the fate of nearly eight thousand forced laborers. Its focus is on the crimes committed, while the technological details are just a side story. The exhibition is based on historical facts, not on emotions, and describes the processes whereby the extraordinary became the new normal and people not only got used to columns of forced laborers and concentration camp inmates marching through their neighborhood but also benefited from the whole system. Putting everything in the context

of Nazi ideology and the system of forced labor creates a counternarrative to the narratives of technology that seemed to determine the Bunker's past after the war.

Places such as the Historical Technical Museum (HTM) in Peenemünde or the U-Boot Museum Wilhelm Bauer show that this approach is not the only way to deal with the link between technological developments during the Second World War and the processes that made them possible. The HTM, for example, is similar to the Bunker "Valentin" in some respects.⁶⁶ Once a huge structure, the former power plant dominates the site today. The army testing facility (*Heeresversuchsanstalt*) was the place where Wernher von Braun and his team developed the V-2 rocket, another still vivid technological myth. For a long time, it had been remembered by certain interest groups as the cradle of spaceflight, not a place of forced labor. Yet at the time, the site was surrounded by concentration camps whose remains are difficult to find today.⁶⁷

However, the HTM was not established by political activists on a mission to uncover Nazi crimes. Its first exhibition was created by former officers of the National People's Army (Nationale Volksarmee, NVA) who had been stationed on the island of Usedom until 1989 and who were primarily interested in the history of the V-2 rocket (see Daniel Brandau's contribution to this special issue). This exhibition was quite successful in the early years. The curators' rather uncritical celebration of "spaceflight first" and their inherent admiration for Wernher von Braun led to a broader discussion about the narratives of Peenemünde. Although the current exhibition reflects this ambivalence in the phrase, "the two sites of the parable," the topic of spaceflight still outshines the exhibit's "dark side." Furthermore, the HTM is run as a commercial museum, dependent on ticket sales. Critics have complained about the missing links between rocket production and the terror regime of the Nazis and criticized the fact that forced labor and the camp system were not the museums' main focus.⁶⁸ The upcoming new exhibition will be a chance to rebalance the now more or less competing narratives.

The U-Boot Museum Wilhelm Bauer in the city of Bremerhaven, also a privately-run institution, displays the last existing Type XXI submarine. The museum's inside exhibition is dedicated mostly to the technological details of the vessel and provides nearly no context of the submarine war and its consequences. It misses the opportunity to put technological innovations into context. This context should be obligatory at all "places of progress" from the Second World War, since they reach audiences that might not show up at "traditional" memorial sites. However, this normative decision depends on the past and present basic conditions of any historical site.

Furthermore, every educational approach at any site should concentrate on the connection between the general past and the individual

present of the recipients. Places like the Bunker “Valentin”, concentration camp memorials, or former Gestapo headquarters do not automatically exhibit that kind of connection to the lives of today’s visitors, whatever their age or background. Yet the visitors all experience processes that then lead to these places. Educational work in schools, especially at memorial sites, has to somehow sensitize all visitors for these processes, which include obvious and structural racism and antisemitism, mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, and economical mechanisms behind the exploitation of certain groups. Even forced labor is not only a historical phenomenon.

Furthermore, educational goals must focus not just on learners’ ability to mourn the victims and to condemn the perpetrators but must allow learners to encounter the mechanisms that made them. It should be impossible to visit a site like Bunker “Valentin” without reflecting on the connection between the history of the site and its meaning for the present. In case of the Bunker, as an example of a system of forced labor, this could lead to a critical perspective on the global economy based on different forms of exploitation of workers or resources as a requirement for the wealth of the Global North. It could also lead to a critical perspective on the still unchallenged role of work in defining the value of a person in society. These two aspects are just examples of possible connections between past and present that can be discovered via a critical appreciation of the past that can help to create a critical understanding of the present.

Sites like the Bunker “Valentin” cannot and should not exclude themselves from this process. Their story is connected to all these aspects, albeit maybe not as obviously as other former concentration camps. In our daily experience, visitors do not seem to reject this approach. Rather, six years after the opening of the Bunker “Valentin” as a memorial, the effect seems to be quite the opposite. More and more visitors appreciate the presentation of long-obscured histories rather than the obvious technological aspects. To quote a visitor,

this is a monument to the thousands of slave laborers who built this immense structure under appalling conditions. It’s a cold place, in every sense of the word. There is a very poignant picture of a slogan painted on a wall of the building by the German navy shortly after the end of WWII: “No more war.” Amen to that.⁶⁹

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Notes

1. Christian Siegel and Rainer Habel, "Keiner verlässt lebend das Lager," Radio Bremen, 20 June 1981.
2. Marc Buggeln, *Bunker 'Valentin': Marinerüstung, Zwangsarbeit, Erinnerung* (Bremen: Temmen, 2016), 189.
3. On the history of the Valentin Bunker, see *ibid.* "Valentin": Buggeln, Bunker "Valentin".
4. Dieter Hartwig, *Großadmiral Karl Dönitz: Legende und Wirklichkeit* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2010), 101–104.
5. Buggeln, *Bunker 'Valentin'*, 24 f.
6. *Ibid.*, 28.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Officially, this process was called "evacuation." Detlef Garbe has pointed out that the term does not describe what these marches really were. Today it is common to use the term "death marches," which was coined by surviving prisoners. Detlef Garbe, "Die Räumung der Konzentrationslager in Norddeutschland und die deutsche Gesellschaft bei Kriegsende," in *Das KZ Neuengamme und seine Außenlager*, ed. KZ-Gedenkstätte Neuengamme, 111–135, 112.
9. Buggeln, *Bunker 'Valentin'*, 164.
10. *Ibid.*, 166.
11. Staatsarchiv Bremen (StaHB), 4,29/1-963, letter from the local administration of Blumenthal to the Senator for Building in Bremen, 8 June 1949.
12. Buggeln, *Bunker 'Valentin'*, 177–179, 175.
13. *Ibid.*, 179.
14. Habbo Knoch, "Transitstationen der Gewalt, Bunker und Baracken als Räume absoluter Verfügbarkeit," in *Bunker: Kriegsort, Zuflucht, Erinnerungsraum*, ed. Inge Marszolek and Marc Buggeln (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2008), 309–324, 314.
15. Bremer Nachrichten news broadcast, 22 March 1952.
16. Marc Buggeln, *Arbeit und Gewalt: Das Außenlagersystem des KZ Neuengamme* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2009), 172–176.
17. *Ibid.*, 177–179.
18. Siegel and Habel, "Keiner verlässt" (my translation).
19. André Migdal, speech, 17 September 1983, *Mitteilungen der Pressestelle des Senats der Freien Hansestadt Bremen* (1983).
20. Arnold Agatz and Erich Lackner, *Erfahrungen mit Grundbauwerken* (Berlin: Springer, 1977); the last known edition was published 2014.
21. Linda M. Koldau, *Mythos U-Boot* (Stuttgart: C. H. Beck, 2010), 75.
22. *Ibid.*, 38–41.
23. *Ibid.*, 45.
24. Hartwig, *Dönitz*, 107–108.
25. Koldau, *Mythos U-Boot*, 87.
26. *Ibid.*, 89.
27. *Ibid.*, 76.
28. *Ibid.*, 75.

29. Arolsen Archives (AA), 1.1.30.0. No. 82133640-42, Udo Meinecke Report on Neuengamme labor battalions Bremen-Blumenthal and Bremen-Farge, AA, 1.1.30.0. No. 82133602, Information about external battalions of Neuengamme Concentrations Camps in Bremen.
30. Bremen Public Prosecutor's Office to Franz Giese, StA HB, 4,89/3 Nr. 820, 9 July 1962; Bremen Public Prosecutor's Office to A.A.C. Roodvoets, StA HB, 4,89/3 Nr. 820, Bl.17, 9 July 1962.
31. Heinrich Garrn, "Arbeitserziehungs- und Konzentrationslager Farge," in *Heimat- und Vereinsblatt Farge-Rekum* (February 1966), 3–5.
32. Buggeln, *Bunker 'Valentin'*, 189.
33. *Ibid.*, 188–192.
34. *Ibid.*, 191 f.
35. Cornelia Siebeck, "Unterwegs verloren? NS-Gedenkstätten und 'kritisches Geschichtsbewusstsein'," in *Gedenkstättenrundbrief* 177 (2015): 5–10.
36. Werner Borgsen and Klaus Volland, *Stalag X B Sandbostel. Zur Geschichte eines Kriegsgefangenen- und KZ-Auffanglagers in Norddeutschland 1939–1945* (Bremen: Temmen, 1991).
37. Andreas Ehresmann, "Die Neugestaltung der Dokumentations- und Gedenkstätte Lager Sandbostel," in *Gedenkstättenrundbrief* 143 (2008): 14–24.
38. The film, which was produced by N3, first broadcast on 16 December 1988.
39. Raymond Portefaix, André Migdal and Klaas Touber, *Hortensien in Farge: Überleben im Bunker 'Valentin'* (Bremen: Donat, 1995).
40. Barbara Johr and Hartmut Roder, *Der Bunker: Ein Beispiel nationalsozialistischen Wahns: Bremen-Farge 1943–1945* (Bremen: Temmen, 1996).
41. Buggeln, *Bunker 'Valentin'*, 192 f.
42. Archiv Denkort Bunker Valentin, Interview Gerd Meyer, Friedensschule Bremen Nord, 14 April 2015.
43. Buggeln, *Bunker 'Valentin'*, 194.
44. Landeszentrale für politische Bildung Bremen, *Gedächtnisort ehemaliger U-Boot-Bunker 'Valentin' in Bremen-Farge* (Bremen: Landeszentrale, 2002).
45. Christel Trouvé, Marcus Meyer and Mirko Wetzels, "Zweiter Entwurf der Gedenkstättenkonzeption für den Denkort Bunker Valentin," Bremen, 2009, accessed 15 April 2021, www.denkort-bunker-valentin.de/fileadmin/Lernen_Lehren/Texte_und_Karten/Konzeption_Bunker_Valentin.pdf.
46. See Sylvie Le Grand, "Die Verwaltung der Gedenkstätten in den Neuen Bundesländern seit der Vereinigung. Bewährungsprobe für den deutschen Förderalismus?" in *Gedenkstättenrundbrief* 114 (2003), 3–13; Siegfried Vergin, "Wende durch die 'Wende': Der lange kurze Weg zur Gedenkstättenkonzeption des Bundes," in *Gedenkstättenrundbrief* 100 (2001), 91–100.
47. The controversial debate concerning the conception is addressed by the Arbeitsgemeinschaft der KZ-Gedenkstätten in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, in "Stellungnahme zur Fortschreibung der Gedenkstättenkonzeption durch den Beauftragten für Kultur und Medien vom 22. Juni 2007," in *Gedenkstättenrundbrief* 139 (2007): 32–37.
48. Jörg Skriebeleit, "Neue Unübersichtlichkeit: Gedenkstätten und historische Orte im aktuellen erinnerungspolitischen Diskurs," in *Gedenkstättenrundbrief* 103 (2001): 3–10.

49. Volkard Knigge, "Abschied von der Erinnerung: Zum Notwendigen Wandel der Arbeit in den KZ-Gedenkstätten in Deutschland," in *Gedenkstättenrundbrief* 100 (2001): 136–143.
50. Ibid., 137 f.
51. Detlef Hoffmann, ed., *Das Gedächtnis der Dinge. KZ-Relikte und KZ-Denkmäler 1945–1955* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 1998), 6.
52. Ibid., 13.
53. Matthias Heyl, 'Forensische Bildung' am historischen Tat- und Bildungsort: Ein Plädoyer gegen das Erspüren von Geschichte," in *Elemente einer zeitgemäßen politischen Bildung—Festschrift für Prof. Hanns-Fred Rathenow zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Bernd Overwien and Christian Geißler (Münster: LIT, 2010).
54. Elke Fröhlich, ed., *Josef Goebbels Tagebücher, Vol. 14, Oktober–Dezember 1944* (Munich: Saur, 2008), 276 f.
55. UK National Archives Kew, AIR 34/682, Interpretation Report No. AS 116: Construction at Reikum, near Vegesack.
56. Magnus Brechtken, *Albert Speer: Eine deutsche Karriere* (Munich: Siedler, 2017), 173; Hartwig, *Dönitz*, 113.
57. Brechtken, *Speer*, 178 f.
58. Brechtken, *Speer*, 181 f., 206.
59. Ibid., 169–173.
60. Raymond Portefaix, "Vernichtung durch Arbeit: Das Außenkommando Bremen-Farge," in *Hortensien in Farge*, ed. Portefaix, Migdal and Touber, 21–116.
61. Detlev Garbe, "Modernität und Barbarei—Marinerüstung und Zwangsarbeit. Zur Profilierung des 'DenkOrtes' U-Boot-Bunker Bremen-Farge in der deutschen Gedenkstätten-topographie," in *Gedenkstättenrundbrief* 148 (2008): 3–14.
62. Buggeln, *Bunker 'Valentin'*, 149–153
63. Ibid., 108–142.
64. Marc Buggeln, *Slave Labor in Nazi Concentration Camps* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 83–139.
65. Jens Christian Wagner, "Geschichte statt Erinnerung: Plädoyer für eine historisch fundierte und politisch wache Gedenkstättenarbeit, Vortrag bei der Wittheit zu Bremen," 12 January 2021, accessed 15 April 2021, wittheit.de/Geschichte-statt-Erinnerung.-plaedoyer-fuer-eine-historisch-fundierte-und-politisch-wache-gedenkstaettenarbeit.html.
66. Similarities between Peenemünde and Bremen-Farge are covered by Marcus Meyer in "Denkort Bunker Valentin—Pädagogische Überlegungen zum zweitgrößten U-Boot-Bunker Europas," in *NS-Großanlagen und Tourismus: Chancen und Grenzen der Vermarktung von Orten des Nationalsozialismus*, ed. Historisch-technisches Museum Peenemünde (Berlin: Links, 2016), 84–91.
67. Rainer Eisfeld addresses the history of Peenemünde in *Mondsüchtig: Wernher von Braun und die Geburt der Raumfahrt aus dem Geist der Barbarei* (Springe: Zu Klampen, 2012).
68. "Peenemünder Manifest 2013: Für einen verantwortungsvollen Umgang mit den ehemaligen Peenemünder Versuchsanstalten des nationalsozialistischen Regimes," accessed 14 April 2014, www.peenemuender-erklaerung.eu (web-page no longer available).

69. Comment on [tripadvisor.de](https://www.tripadvisor.de/Attraction_Review-g187325-d4830737-Reviews-or10-U_Boot_Bunker_Valentin-Bremen.html#REVIEWS), December 2018, accessed 5 April 2021, www.tripadvisor.de/Attraction_Review-g187325-d4830737-Reviews-or10-U_Boot_Bunker_Valentin-Bremen.html#REVIEWS. The slogan was actually written by local activists in the early 1980s. Navy representatives tried to cover it with paint shortly afterward.