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In early May 1945, the Allied Military Government in the city of Hannover discovered a mass grave in the Seelhorst municipal cemetery containing the bodies of 154 Russian prisoners of war and slave labourers. They had been murdered by the local

Gestapo on April 6 – four days before the Allied capture of the city. Under American Army supervision the townspeople of Hannover were forced to watch as Nazi Party members exhumed the bodies prior to their reburial in a new cemetery.

On April 10, 1945, the city of Hannover in north-western Germany was captured by the US 84th Infantry Division. Hannover was located in the British Zone of Occupation as planned prior to invasion, and therefore on April 14 a British Military Government unit — MG Detachment No. 229 under Major G. H. Lamb — assumed administration of the city, albeit temporarily under American command. The city still fell within the theatre of operations of the US Ninth Army and American troops of the XIII Corps were tasked with policing the city, guarding important sites, processing displaced persons and generally maintaining law and order. On April 26-27, the US 35th Division arrived in Hannover from the Elbe sector and took over these duties from the corps units.

A few days later, the MG Detachment was informed about the existence of a mass grave of victims of a massacre at the Stadtfriedhof Seelhorst, the municipal cemetery in the south-eastern quarter of the city. According to the informant, a survivor of the massacre named Pjotr Palnikov, the grave contained some 250 people, mostly Russian prisoners of war, who had been murdered by the Gestapo some three weeks earlier, on April 8.

The information about the murder and the mass grave was accurate but the details of the event were a little different from those reported by Palnikov. Firstly, the massacre had taken place not on April 8 but on April 6; secondly, the group that had been murdered on that day had numbered not 250 but 154; and thirdly, although the victims were indeed all Russians, not all of them were prisoners of war, i.e. captured members of the Soviet Red Army; among them were many Russian civilians who had been rounded up and deported to Germany for slave labour.

Most of the victims had originally been inmates of a so-called Arbeits-Erziehungslager (Labour Correctional Camp, AEL) at the town of Lahde near Minden, 60 kilometres west of Hannover.

MASSACRE AT HANNOVER

By Karel Margry

Arbeits-Erziehungs-Lager were a special kind of camp of which there existed many all over Germany. They had been set up by a Himmler decree of May 28, 1941 as places where labourers who had deserted their workplace or broken some other work regulation were locked up for 're-education', usually being released after a certain period of time. However, as Nazi Germany conquered half of Europe and began the recruitment of foreign workers, followed by the mass introduction of foreign forced labourers, to man the German war industry, the AEL quickly began to fill up with thousands of foreigners of all nationalities, both male and female. The inmates were still required to work but under a much-harsher regime. As the war progressed, the conditions in many of the AEL began to equate those of proper concentration camps, being cruel and deadly.

On April 1, 1945, as the Allied Armies surged eastwards from the Rhine, the AEL at Lahde was evacuated to Hannover, the 800 inmates being incarcerated in the Polizei-Ersatz-Gefängnis (Police Substitute Prison), which was housed in the former Jewish Horticultural School at No. 10 Heisterberg-Allee in the north-western district of Ahlem. This complex had previously — from autumn 1941 to January 1944 — served as the central collecting point for Jews from the Hannover area, some 20,000 having passed through it on their way to the extermination camps in the East. In October 1943, their headquarters on Schläger-Strasse having been destroyed by Allied bombing, the Hannover Gestapo had moved its two departments for supervising forced-labourers (one for Western Europeans and Poles, the other for Russians) to the complex, setting up their office in the director's house. Following that,

in July 1944, with most of the Hannover Jews having now been processed, the main building was turned into a Gestapo prison. The first large group of inmates were German political prisoners, arrested after the July 20



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The Allied authorities had been informed of the massacre by the only survivor, a young Russian POW named Pjotr Palnikov. Here he stands and watches as the corpses are being dug up.



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Covered in white sheets and put on trucks, the 154 bodies are transported in slow procession through the streets of Hannover to their new burial place in the centre of the city.



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The photograph was taken on the Hildesheimer Strasse, the main road into the city from the south-west, at its junction with Geibel-Strasse.

plot against Hitler, but by 1945 some 90 per cent of the inmates were foreign slave labourers, both male and female, and former prisoners of war, mostly Russians and Poles. A reign of terror characterised the prison, torture and hangings being a regular occurrence.

On April 6, with Allied capture of the city only four days away, the chief of the Hannover Gestapo, SS-Obersturmbannführer Johannes Rentsch, selected 155 of the prison

inmates for execution. The order had come from the Reichssicherheitshauptamt (Reich Security Main Office) instructing all Gestapo offices that all inmates with a pending death sentence were to be executed. In effect, it was a final fanatical effort to kill as many of the Eastern 'sub-humans' as possible before the demise of the Third Reich. Ninety-nine of the 155 came from the group that had just arrived from the AEL Lahde, the other 56 had been held in the Gestapo prison longer.

Rentsch charged SS-Obersturmführer Heinrich Joost, the chief of the Ostarbeiter-Referat (Department for supervising Eastern Workers, i.e. Russian slave labourers), with carrying out the executions but he managed to excuse himself. In his place, one of his subordinates, Reinhold Plünnecke, took over the task. The mass execution was carried out in the grounds of the Seelhorst Cemetery on Gartenburg-Strasse. Guarded by Gestapo personnel and Ukrainian auxiliaries the column of prisoners was marched through the city to the cemetery. Twenty-five of the victims, including a woman, were forced to dig the grave pit. Next, the prisoners were brought forward to the pit, first in groups of four, then of 25, and shot through the head. Only one of the unfortunates managed to escape death: Pjotr Palnikov killed a guard with a shovel and escaped into the woods, where he heard the shooting as the Germans massacred his comrades in cold blood. The bodies were then hastily covered with earth.

When informed by Palnikov of the massacre that had taken place, the British and American authorities decided to make the exhumation and reburial of the victims a public event. This was in accordance with regulations issued by Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force after the discovery of other atrocity sites such as Gardelegen (see *After the Battle* No. 111) and Buchenwald (see *The Nazi Death Camps Then and Now*). On April 30, a poster appeared on the

city notice boards with the following decree in both English and German:

'On Wednesday 2 May 1945 at 0900 hours the exhumation of the 250 Russian prisoners of war, who were murdered by the SS on 8 April 1945, will take place at the Seelhorst Churchyard. Thereafter the victims will be given solemn burial in single graves. The population of Hannover with the exception of those employed on essential Military Government work is ordered to be present at Seelhorst Churchyard at 0900 hours precisely. By order of Military Government.'

A group of well-known Nazi Party members were ordered to participate in exhuming the bodies, the Americans standing by to supervise as they dug up the victims and, with bare hands, wrapped them in clean white sheets. Several of the dead were recognised by friends and relatives who were still in the area and had come to witness the ceremony. In all, six persons — one woman and five men, all Russians — could be identified. The white-shrouded bodies were then put on 15 trucks, which proceeded in slow procession through the streets of Hannover to the banks of the Masch-See, a large lake near the city centre close to the Town Hall, where they were to be re-interred in a cemetery of honour.

In addition to the 154 Russians murdered on April 6, the Americans discovered several other mass graves in the Seelhorst Cemetery, containing another 232 victims of Nazi brutality — inmates of one of the over 500 forced-labour camps or of the seven satellite camps of Neuengamme concentration camp that had existed in Hannover during the war. These victims came from countries all over Europe: France, Belgium, Holland, Italy, Greece, Yugoslavia, Hungary, Poland, Latvia and the Soviet Union. They too were exhumed, transferred to the cemetery on the Masch-See and re-buried there on May 2 and 3. Thus the total number of graves in the new cemetery reached 386.



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A stele in the Seelhorst municipal cemetery today marks the site of the original mass grave.

Right: The new cemetery was on the northern bank of the Masch-See, the large lake on the edge of the city centre. This location had been expressly chosen by the Allies so that Hannover would never forget the heinous crime committed within its city limits. Here, supervised by troops of the US 35th Division, the townspeople assemble around the freshly dug graves just before the start of the burial services. In the foreground are the few friends and relatives of the murdered Russian prisoners. The large monumental building in the background is the Neue Rathaus, Hannover's city hall.



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On October 16, 1945, a memorial was unveiled in the burial ground. Designed by the Russian sculptor Mykola Muchin-Koloda, it featured a Soviet red star, a half-relief of a mourning soldier, and an inscription: 'In eternal memory of citizens of the USSR and other countries, victims of Nazi brutality foully murdered at Hannover on 8 April 1945.'

In post-war years the monument became the target of politically-inspired vandalism. For example, in February 1947 the front relief was damaged with blows from a hammer which occurred again in 1952. As a result, discussions were held as to whether the cemetery should not be changed or moved elsewhere. In the atmosphere of the Cold War, dissatisfaction seemed to be specifically aimed at the Red Star on the monument and, in an effort to appease public opinion, this was removed by the city authorities, never to be reinstated. Still the acts of vandalism continued, the monument being covered with red paint in 1980 and there were even two attempts to destroy it with explosives in 1979 and 1987.

Over the years the cemetery fell into neglect and it was not until the 1970s that public interest was regenerated, the youth association of the local branch of the IG Metall union of steel workers assuming responsibility for maintaining the cemetery in 1979. Today the cemetery on Arthur-Menge-Ufer is properly kept up by a coalition of schools and civic societies, with new information panels telling the full story of what happened in 1945.

Of those responsible for the April 6 massacre, only a few were brought to account after the war. Gestapo Chief Johannes Rentsch went into hiding and was never caught, an East-German military court in Dresden ultimately pronouncing him dead in 1969. Heinrich Joost was tried before a British Military Tribunal in 1948 and a German civilian court in 1950 and received a total of three years, of which he served 22 months. Reinhold Plünnecke appeared with two other accused before a British Military



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Built in 1901-13, it stands in the large Masch-Park, fronted by a small lake. Because of trees and hedges that have grown up in the cemetery, Karel had to take his comparison from a little closer in.

Court in Braunschweig in 1946. All three received a death sentence but, whereas the other two were executed in 1947, his sen-

tence was later commuted to life imprisonment, then to 15 years, with him later being given amnesty in 1954.



STADTARCHIV HANNOVER

Left: Five months later, on October 16, 1945, a memorial to the victims was dedicated in the cemetery. Hannover lay in the British Occupation Zone but, since the victims were all



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Russians, a Soviet delegation had been invited to attend the ceremony. Right: The memorial still stands, albeit without the Red Star that was removed by the city authorities in 1952.



ZUR EWIGEN
ERINNERUNG AN DIE
ANGEHÖRIGEN DER U.S.S.R.
U. ANDERER NATIONEN
OPFER
DER NAZI BRUTALITÄT
GRAUSAM GEMORDET
ZU HANNOVER
AM 8. APRIL 1945



ВЕЧНАЯ ПАМЯТЬ
ГРАЖДАН
С.С.С.Р. И ДРУГИХ СТРАН
ЗВЕРСКИ ЗАМУЧЕННЫМ
НАЦИСТСКИМ ИЗВЕРГАМ
В ГОРОДЕ ГАННОВЕР
8. АПРЕЛЯ 1945

IN ETERNAL MEMORY
OF CITIZENS OF THE U.S.S.R.
AND OTHER COUNTRIES
VICTIMS OF NAZI BRUTALITY
FOULY MURDERED
AT HANNOVER ON 8 APRIL 1945

A MÉMOIRE ÉTERNELLE
DES CITOYENS DE L'U.R.S.S.
ET DES AUTRES PAYS
VICTIMES
DE LA BRUTALITÉ DES NAZIS
ASSASSINÉS CRUELLEMENT
À HANNOVER LE 8 AVRIL 1945

