

From the Construction site “Bunker Valentin” in Bremen-Farge to today’s memorial and information centre “Denkort Bunker Valentin”

Terms marked in green are explained in the glossary.

I. Introduction

“When I came to Bremen-Farge in January of 1943, there was an enormous construction pit there. The water was being continuously pumped into the river Weser. We had to haul huge pillars into the pit on our backs and ram them into the ground. That was the hardest job, carrying the pillars. After the steel skeleton was complete, we filled the walls with concrete. (...).”

Nikolaj Grigorevic Zhuk, Ukraine, former **concentration camp** prisoner

“Suddenly, the monster looms on the north side, its foundations more than 30 metres high and five football fields long. A shiver involuntarily runs down our spines (...). We can sense that the monster is as terrifying as the gullet of a wild beast. We are here in the hundreds, ready to be devoured by it, by the rain, by the cold (...). We have no difficulty imagining this mass of concrete and iron to be our grave.”

Pierre Saufrignon, France, former concentration camp prisoner

By the banks of the River Weser, around 35 kilometres from Bremen city centre but close to the Bremer Vulkan shipyards in the Vegesack neighbourhood, in 1943 the German Navy wanted to build a vast, bomb-proof U-boat shipyard, where the new Type XXI submarines could be assembled. The development of this submarine was the consequence of the increasing losses the German U-boat fleet was suffering in the Atlantic. Type XXI was developed to eliminate the tactical deficits of earlier German submarines and to bolster the German Navy’s contribution to Germany’s ultimate victory, as aggressively announced by Grand Admiral Karl Dönitz. Because the air force controlled no longer the German airspace at that time, the production of the new submarines had to be protected from **Allied** bombs. The Navy needed a building that would both withstand any bombing and allow for mass production of submarines. Dönitz and Albert Speer, who, as Reich Minister for Armaments and Munitions, was in charge of the construction process itself, were hoping to use the submarines to disrupt the **Allies’** supply lines across the Atlantic. The construction of the bunker was therefore given absolute priority, and the construction site was favoured over others when it came to supplying it with construction materials, machinery and especially with labour.

“As an engineer, I have to say that the biggest task for me was the coordination of all the work, not just the construction works, but also all the outfitting and installation works. There must have been ongoing negotiations with around 50 companies, installation companies (...). And it was an exceptionally positive collaboration of all those involved.”

Prof. Dr Erich Lackner, engineer in charge of the construction site

II. Thousands of slave workers

“You need to consider that the whole of the Europe we occupied back then was represented on this building site. You could say, as far as I can see, that 90 percent of the forced labourers were of different origin and only a minority of them were German, as those who were fit for war were gone. Were drafted. Or no longer there.”

Erich Metz, former civilian German worker on the construction site

From the summer of 1943 on, in the process of the development of the construction, around 8,000 people were forced to work on the site in Bremen-Farge every day. The workforce was made up of concentration camp prisoners, POWs, civilian forced workers from German-occupied Europe and inmates of a so-called “corrective labour camp” operated by the Bremen Gestapo. The prisoners, who came from all over Europe, were housed in a number of camps located to the north-east of the construction site. Among these camps was the Bremen-Farge satellite camp, the third-largest satellite camp of the Neuengamme concentration camp. Some 1500 of the 2000 inmates had to sleep in one of the navy’s underground fuel tanks, a windowless bunker some 15 metres across and 7 metres high.

“Terrible wasn’t the lack of food, terrible wasn’t having to work, terrible wasn’t getting up early. Terrible was the extent of the unnecessary suffering! Suffering which murdered the feeling that you were human. That is the cruellest, most monstrous thing about it!”

Raymond Portefaix, France, former concentration camp prisoner

In the biggest camp complex, camp Heidcamp (about 8km distance from the construction site), run by the so-called Organisation Todt, in 1944 there were around 6000 forced labourers living in barracks. Among the imprisoned persons were “Eastern workers” and “Italian Military Internees”.

III. Not one submarine was ever constructed

“You have to talk about it. So many people and so much material destroyed for nothing. Nobody needed all of it. Thousands of people perished, thousands of tonnes of cement, iron, were put in the sand for nothing, you can’t make anything out of it in that moment. Nothing. That is one of the paradoxes of war.”

Stanislaw Masny, Poland, former civilian forced worker

In late March 1945, two Allied bombing raids damaged the bunker’s shell and destroyed the construction site around it. In early April, construction had to be abandoned. At that point, the bunker was almost 80% finished. The site was “evacuated”. On 10 and 11 April 1945, two **death marches** (the Nazis called it “evacuation”) left the Farge satellite camp, one to the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, the other to the Neuengamme camp and one to Lübeck Bay. The other camps at the site were “evacuated” as well.

Up to the “evacuation”, around 1,600 prisoners had lost their lives to hunger, disease, the murderous working conditions or maltreatment at the hands of their guards. In early May 1945, British troops occupied North Bremen and the bunker construction site. After liberating Bergen-Belsen and other camps, the British expected to encounter emaciated prisoners and piles of dead bodies at Bremen-Farge, but instead they found two almost empty camps and a monstrous, abandoned construction site. The connection between the construction of the bunker and **slave labour** was not immediately apparent – even not to the British liberators, as they did not learn about the Valentin bunker from former prisoners, but from the two German engineers in charge, Erich Lackner and Arnold Agatz. The two engineers praised their building as a technical masterwork and contributed significantly to the decision to leave the bunker standing instead of blowing it up or piling rubble from bombed-out Bremen over it to create an artificial hill.

IV. Military use of the bunker from 1960–2010

“Eighth wonder of the modern world by the banks of the River Weser”

Weser Kurier, newspaper, 13 October 1955

Soon after the war, the site, which could have become a memorial, became an architectural spectacle. From 1960, the West German Navy established the Navy Materials Depot in the building. When the Cold War was wearing on, the bunker itself was erased from maps in order to keep its location secret. For decades, there was no commemoration of the slave labour programme and the victims of the bunker’s construction.

Only in the early 1980s the Valentin bunker slowly re-entered public consciousness. In September 1983, as a result of this process, a monument was officially unveiled outside of the bunker. The ceremony was attended by several former slave labourers and many representatives of Bremen civil society.

Until late 2010, however, the site could not be turned into a memorial and information centre because it was still being used as a depot by the German armed forces. The Navy did not leave the bunker until 31 December 2010. The building was then passed to the Institute for Federal Real Estate (BlmA) which currently rents out a section of the bunker and the ground floor of the former Bundeswehr staff building to the Bremen State Centre for Civic Education. Finally, after almost 70 years, a part of the bunker is now used as a memorial and information centre.

Most survivors who were fighting for this have passed away before finally in November 2015 the opening of the memorial and information centre “Denkort Bunker Valentin” was celebrated.

V. Today

„Every time I come here, of course, I think of my grandfather Marius. Even though I did not know him personally, I was able to build a cognitive and emotional connection with him, who fell victim to this place, here at the memorial and documentation site“

Marc Hivernat, France, grandson of Marius Hivernat, a victim of the Farge concentration camp

Just as the memories of the families affected by Second World War are touching their grandchildren and great-grandchildren, the memories at today's “Bunker Valentin” are also evolving. The “Denkort Bunker Valentin” achieves new insights by the ongoing work and the networking with international archives. In many encounters and exchanges with visitors new perspectives have been developed.

Today in Bremen-Farge, on a regular basis, the “Denkort Bunker Valentin” receives visitors who themselves have experienced war, flight and expulsion. Where and how are people forced to work and deprived of freedom today? How is exclusion and discrimination carried out in our societies today? In the daily educational seminars, long-term youth projects and international exchanges at the “Denkort Bunker Valentin” we can all learn by listening to each other.