

## Study of Deaths by Suicide in the Soviet Special Camp Number 7 (Sachsenhausen), 1945–1950

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**Abstract** After World War II, Sachsenhausen Nazi concentration camp (Oranienburg) was administered until the spring of 1950 by Soviet occupation forces (Special Camp Number 7) and used mainly for political prisoners. Our study analyzes suicides in this camp during the Soviet period. Data was collected from the archives of Sachsenhausen Memorial, Special Camp Collection. Original documents containing certificates or autopsy reports of prisoners who committing suicide were reviewed. In this period, authorities registered 17 suicides. The age of suicides was between 19 and 64 years. The most frequent cause of imprisonment was *Blockleiter* (Kapo in Nazi period,  $n = 4$ ), *Mitarbeiter Gestapo* (member of the Gestapo,  $n = 3$ ) and *Wehrmacht* (military,  $n = 3$ ). Hanging was the most frequent method of suicide. The average time spent in the camp until suicide was 715 days. The number of recorded suicides under Soviet control is considerably lower (calculated rate 2.8/10,000 per year) than under Nazi control (calculated rate 11/10,000 per year). This could be due to comparably more favorable conditions for prisoners and the abolishment of the death penalty during this period. Possible motives for suicides include feelings of guilt for crimes committed, fear of punishment and a misguided understanding of honor on the eve of criminal trials.

**Keywords** Suicide · Soviet Special Camps · Nazi Germany · Concentration camp · Sachsenhausen

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## Introduction

Nazi concentration camps were liberated by allied troops in 1945. Some camps were used provisionally as prisons by allies to incarcerate SS (*Schutzstaffel*) or Gestapo members [1] or used as displaced persons camp [2]. In Soviet occupied territories, most of the concentration camps continued to be used as prisons. In May 1945 the Soviet secret service, the NKVD (*Naródnij komissariat vnútrennij del*), began the construction of 10 special camps [3]. The camps created in Soviet occupied territories did not have the same function as in the Nazi period: they were neither labor nor extermination camps. Nevertheless, living conditions were harsh and inmates were completely isolated from the outside world [4]. Nazi functionaries, political prisoners and inmates sentenced by Soviet Military Tribunal were held in the camps.

Special Camp Number 7 was first created near Werneuchen, just outside Berlin, but it was moved in August 1945 to the site of National Socialist concentration camp of Sachsenhausen, with 150 prisoners. In 1948, the Soviets released 5,000 civilian prisoners and after that, some of the internment camps were closed and Sachsenhausen became the largest camp and was renamed Special Camp Number 1. The camp had a capacity for 12,000 prisoners, but during 1946, up to 16,000 prisoners were crowded in the camp. About 60,000 people, mostly Germans, were interned over five years. The larger group was the *Spetzcontingent* of around 30,000 civilians, who the Soviet secret police, the NKVD, interned without a trial. The second largest group, around 16,000 people, consisted on those sentenced by the Soviet Military Tribunals. In addition to a small group of foreign citizens, the camp kept around 7300 Russian exiles and Soviet citizens and 6500 officers of the Wehrmacht [5].

Some of the prisoners were real or perceived opponents of the Soviet system, many of whom had already been persecuted by the Nazi regime. Some prisoners were celebrities, politicians or artist who had worked on propaganda or the politics for the Nazi regime. The NKVD predominantly arrested lower and middle-ranking Nazi functionaries, above all those responsible for blocks and cell units. The list also records a smaller number of SS, SD (*Sicherheitsdienst des Reichsführers SS*) and Gestapo staff, concentration camp guards and officials of ministries and other authorities. Guards from Ravensbrück concentration camps, the first director of the Gestapo's Special Commission in Sachsenhausen. Also imprisoned was Hans Heinze, professor of medicine and director of the Brandenburg-Görden Psychiatric Institute between 1938 and 1945, who was directly involved in the planning and carving of the euthanasia of children [5].

Soviet special camps differed from the camps in the Soviet Union and were not labor camps; in fact, prisoners suffered mainly due to the lack of activities. However, in these camps there were hunger and cold, most of the barracks were overfilled, and insufficient hygiene, sanitation and nutrition lead to illness and epidemics. At least 12,000 peoples died of malnutrition and disease in Special Camp Number 1/7 [6]. But, at the same time, hunger, malnutrition and disease were also major problems in the immediate post-war era in general [7]. The camp was not closed until March 1950, when the majority of prisoners were sent to East German prisons and other inmates were released [8].

Suicides in people exposed to hard circumstances, including imprisonment [9, 10] deportation [11], exclusion and torture [12, 13], have been reported, showing a higher rate in these groups. Suicide rates tend to decline during wars and they increase in other types of crises. For some authors, the most likely explanation is the accompanying increase in social integration in nations during times of war [14]. Suicide in Soviet gulags [15], Nazi

concentration camps [16, 17], ghettos or transit camps before extermination, as Theresienstadt concentration camp [18, 19], has also been studied. The incidence of suicide in Nazi concentration camps is 10–30 times higher than for the general public [20], and was also much higher than in the Soviet special camps, possibly because the living conditions of the prisoners were also much harder (slave labor, medical experiments, etc.). By contrast, the incidence of suicide in the ghettos was lower (exhaustion and apathy of inhabitants) [19, 20], while available data on the Soviet gulags are scarce and contradictory [15, 21].

Documents regarding the Soviet period have been partially declassified recently and were consulted in the archives of Sachsenhausen concentration camp (Special Soviet Camp Number 7/Number 1). This contribution constitutes the first study of suicides committed in the biggest Soviet Special Camp in Germany.

## Methods

Since the fall of the USSR, the Soviet archives have been accessible to researchers, although some of the documents remain classified and are not at disposal. Material from the archives of the Special Soviet camp in Sachsenhausen, where documents concerning persons imprisoned from 1945 to 1950 are conserved, was reviewed. This material is available in the archives of Sachsenhausen memorial in microfilm format. As the documents are in Russian, the help of the Soviet Special Camp archivist was enlisted to search and utilize the documents. Documents were searched for the term “suicide” and the cases described below were found. After that, information about each prisoner was consulted in the data base, including registration number, date of birth, nationality, date of death and cause of imprisonment. Archives containing data related to suicide and conditions in Soviet Special Camp were reviewed, including testimonies and trials. A variable number of information related this prisoner is indicated in the database and these documents.

The major methodological challenge of this approach is that it is based on death certificates from the Soviet Special Camp. This means that only cases and causes of death which were filed as suicides by Soviet authorities are included in the analysis. We cannot assess if all incidents of suicide were recorded, and if all documents and microfilms are declassified. It is likely that “passive suicides” (see below) are not included in official Soviet statistics.

A second challenge occurs when we try to understand what the rate of suicides in prisoners of Soviet Special Camp Number 7/Number 1 mean. Data on suicides in other Soviet Special Camps in Germany cannot be found in the literature. Data on suicide rates in Soviet Gulags is widely conflicting. At the same time, there is data available on suicides in Nazi Sachsenhausen Concentration Camp. Even though living conditions were much worse and conduct with prisoners much more bestial, we have compared rates of suicide between the Nazi concentration camp and the Soviet Special Camp at Sachsenhausen. We hold that the marked difference in the rates can to a large extent be explained by this difference in camp administration (see below).

## Results

Seventeen suicides in the Soviet Special Camp were recorded between 1945 and 1950 (Table 1) based on 15 documents and 2 testimonies. In seven cases, the method of suicide was hanging; in the other cases except one case of exsanguination, no method is registered.

**Table 1** Data on suicides reported in Soviet Special camp 7/1 (1945–1950)

Name	Year of birth	Age	Nationality	Charge leading to imprisonment	Date of imprisonment	Date of suicide	Method of suicide	Document number <sup>a</sup>
CH	1893	56	German	Gestapo member	13/09/1949	22/07/1949	Hanging	447/85
DD	1893	52	ND	ND	ND	12/06/1945	ND	349/6
KG	1915	33	German	Denounced by communists	19/09/1945	21/07/1948	ND	429/144
RG	1898	49	ND	Kapo in Nazi period	16/07/1946	18/11/1947	Hanging	450/184
FK	ND	ND	German	Illegal possession of arms	28/08/1947	01/12/1948	Hanging	449/135
EK	1896	51	German	Nazi administrator	05/10/1945	10/03/1947	ND	404/146
RL	1921	26	ND	Crossing borders	ND	28/01/1947	ND	405/10
KL	1902	44	ND	Gestapo member	28/08/1945	08/12/1946	ND	377/195
AM	1901	47	German	Gestapo member	02/01/1946	23/05/1949	Hanging	447/36
KP	1915	32	German	Battalion 9	ND	06/03/1947	Hanging	389/166
EO	1908	39	German	Battalion 9	ND	15/03/1947	ND	375/410
HO	1930	19	German	Espionage	06/02/1948	12/06/1949	Exsanguination	399/10
RS	1886	53	ND	Wehrmacht member	29/01/1946	06/09/1949	Hanging	240/37
KT	1896	50	ND	Kapo in Nazi period	15/08/1945	15/05/1946	Hanging	377/138
FW	1896	49	German	Kapo in Nazi period	12/08/1945	16/11/1945	ND	349/139
EW	1904	42	German	Kapo in Nazi period	28/07/1945	16/08/1946	ND	377/172
GW	1925	22	ND	American agent	28/05/1946	17/12/1947	ND	404/324

<sup>a</sup> Archive Sachsenhausen, Special Camp Collection

ND no data

Causes of imprisonment among suicides are representative for camp inmates. They included Nazi functionaries, members of Gestapo, *Kapos* from the Nazi Sachsenhausen concentration camp (KZ) and people charged with resisting the Soviet occupational forces. Other charges that led to imprisonment include illegal possession of arms, crossing the demarcation line and espionage. Two of the inmates who committed suicide were members of infamous Reserve Police Battalion 9. The battalion actively took part in mass murders in Poland during the war (see below).

The average age of the men who committed suicide was 41.5 years (range 19–56 years). Time from imprisonment to suicide is quite variable: from 3 months to 4 years (average time: 714.84 days or just under two years). The two members of Battalion 9 committed suicide during a trial against them in March 1947.

## Discussion

The Soviet secret police, the NKVD, arrested German civilians and sent them to special camps without trial. Most of them were lower and middle-ranking Nazi functionaries, above all those responsible for block and cell units. Some of the suicides found were committed by these prisoners. According to Morsch and Reich [5], the admission lists recorded a smaller number of members of SS, SD and Gestapo members. We found a relatively high number of them (four) among those who committed suicide in the camp.

Two of the inmates from our sample were members of Police Battalion 9. It consisted mostly of police reservist and was created in Berlin in 1939 [22]. In June 1941 it was posted to the Soviet Union and between June and December 1941 took part in the shooting of tens of thousands of civilians, most of them Jews and people with disabilities, in the Soviet Union, to a large extent in Lithuania [23]. In May 1945, members of the battalion were captured in Norway and interned later in the British Zone of Occupation. The list of names of 247 policemen was given to the Soviet military government for use as basis for extradition requests and the majority of the Battalion members were imprisoned in Sachsenhausen in January 1947. Trials were held there between January and August 1947. From this it becomes clear that the two members committed suicide during the trials. Hundred seventy men were sentenced to 10–25 years of imprisonment. All of them admitted to having murdered Jews and people with disabilities in the Soviet trials. It is important to note that the death penalty was abolished in the Soviet Union in May 1947 (and by extension the Soviet Occupied Zone of Germany), i.e. while this trial was commencing. Nine suicides in Special Camp Number 7, including those of the two former members of Reserve Police Battalion 9, were committed before this abolition. Between 1967 and 1968 members of the Reserve Police Battalion were tried for mass murders in Latvia by a German court in Cologne. Wilhelm Adelt and Alfred Becu were found guilty in charges complicity in murder and were sentenced to prison terms of 18 months and three years, respectively [24, 25].

Suicides under extraordinary or extreme conditions, such as prisons, war or concentration camps, have been studied previously. Rates of suicides in prisons in Austria and Switzerland are reported to be between 1.4 and 14 times higher than in the general population [26]. More detailed numbers for Germany between 2003 and 2010 suggest that suicide rates for men are about three times higher if they are serving a prison sentence [27]. The studies agree that suicidality is significantly higher for inmates very early during incarceration.

Particularly, the topic of suicides in the Nazi concentration camps has been discussed, but more widely in memoirs than in the medical or historical literature [14, 28]. Some authors have reported suicides in Auschwitz KZ based on psychiatric interviews with 69 former prisoners [29]. They described suicide as more frequent in those inmates who suffered the cruelest abuse, those suffering from infectious diseases, those forced to participate in medical experiments, during period of mass extermination and generally in autumn and winter. Other authors have estimated that suicides amounted to 25,000–100,000 per year [30] based on testimonies. Other authors have described three forms of suicide in the concentration camps [20]: incidental, mass and epidemic, and concluded that data on suicides during the Holocaust need to be analyzed in their fullness. For Theresienstadt KZ, data from archival sources is available [18]: until 1943, 285 people had committed suicide by poisoning (barbital, Veronal<sup>®</sup>), 65 by cutting their veins, 45 by jumping to their deaths from windows and 35 by hanging (total number of 430). This would suggest an extremely high incidence of suicide, even higher than in Vienna at the same time and 10–30 times higher than rates to be expected under ordinary circumstances [31]. Lester summaries manuscripts about suicide in concentration camps and divide them in those in which the authors argue that suicide was rare. In these cases some reasons are argued: the inmates were in a state of shock at the conditions in the camp, they had a hope far an end to the imprisonment, in the camps they had less social isolation or the effort to survive gave the inmates other things to think about or they had fear of repression among other inmates if they committed suicide. On the other hand he mentions other authors who support that suicide was common [14].

For Berlin, it has been pointed out that suicides of Jewish citizens were significantly more common than for the general public and their timing was often closely associated with anti-Semitic measures or persecution [14, 31]. Comprehensive data is not available, but for 1942, those persecuted after being classified as Jewish according to Nazi race laws where 26 times more likely to commit suicide (rate: 1480/100,000, with only 60,000 people classified as Jewish left in Berlin at that point) than the general public. If there is a high rate of suicide among Jews during the Holocaust, the rate is a product of the Holocaust and not inherent to Jews as a group [14]. Timing of suicides for that year was highly correlated with forced transportation from Berlin to ghettos and camps in Eastern Europe [32].

Suicidality in ghettos has been described for Lodtz: some authors calculated a suicide rate of 85 per 100,000 for the year of 1942 [33]. The methods of suicide in Lodtz Guetto were recorded: jumping from windows represented 38 %, poisoning 27 % and hanging 17 % [14]. Other authors report just a few cases per thousand each year. They explain the relatively low number of suicides by the exhaustion and apathy of inhabitants or because the strong will to survive, as well as a strong will to resist the occupiers [19].

Suicides in Soviet gulag camps, too, has been studied [21]. Unlike in gulags, no forced labor was performed by inmates in Soviet Special Camps in Germany. We can calculate the mortality rate among prisoners in Special Camp Number 7 as 20 % (12,000 prisoners died of a total number of 60,000) which is much higher than mortality in Soviet gulag camps and labor colonies in the same years (5.95 % in 1945 and 0.95 % in 1950), although mortality in previous years was much higher (24.9 % in 1942, according to Krysinska and Lester [21]). It has to be taken into account that infectious disease, malnutrition and hunger were general challenges faced by Germans and other Europeans in the immediate post-war era. There are no official statistics available regarding the number of prisoners who attempted or completed suicide in gulags and some claim that suicide and mental illness were very rare [32–35], while others give numerous accounts of suicide [15].

To our knowledge, this is the first study regarding suicide in a Special Soviet Camp. Based on archival documents, suicides were less common than we might have expected (average rate: 28/100,000 per year for the period from 1945 to 1950), i.e. about the same as for men in the general population [36]. This is unexpected, because suicide rates in prisons are generally reported to be higher than in the general population. This fact can be explained by at least two reasons: first, it is likely that not all suicides were reported as such by camp authorities. Second, it is likely that only active suicides were reported as such, but passive suicides were not. Auto-destructive behaviors such as self-mutilation in gulag camps or prisoners who let themselves die have been widely reported. Self-mutilation was in many cases an attempt to save one's life by escaping slave labor by going to the hospital or even released as an invalid [15]. The description of dying prisoners is widespread in Nazi concentration camps and Soviet gulags. Group of dying prisoners suffering from infectious diseases, starvation and vitamin deficiency were called *Muselmann* (pl. *Muselmänner*) in Nazi concentration camps [28, 37] or *dokbodyagi* among gulag inmates [38]. Some authors have described this behavior as a form of passive suicide [28]. While some asses that these prisoners showed some defensive reactions when they were sent to die or their extreme apathy could have prevented suicide, we hypothesize that this form of passive suicide can explains the low rates of suicide. In this regard, as Lester notes [16], possibly the prevalence of affective disorders among prisoners of Nazi KZ was very high. This would also be common in the Soviet camps. Indeed, it is reported that people with a major depressive disorder don't have the motivation and energy required to commit suicide. This could also explain the low rates of suicide in the concentration camps [16].

In addition to this, finding the tools and opportunities to actively commit suicide in the Special Camp might not have been easy. If we assume that a suicidal person looks for an isolate place or tries to procure poison or a blade, he would have found all of this hard in the camp. This might explain why most commonly reported method was hanging.

A high number of suicides, committed by general population, Nazi leaders and lower officials, occurred in Germany around the total German surrender 1945. During this time propaganda exhorting to self-sacrifice to the population were quite direct and carrying cyanide capsules was quite common in the months around the end of the war. Suicide levels reached their maximum in Berlin in April 1945 when no fewer than 3881 people killed themselves, including some Jews who had survived during these years [39].

The number of detainees who killed themselves is impossible to establish [3]. Nor it is possible to determine the motives for such suicides. Suicide committed by Nazi leaders allowed them to retain a sense of honor, as it placed them in a control of the decision of when and how to die. Other possible motives for suicide should not be underestimated, such as the fear of the Allies revenge [39]. Suicide of defeated military leaders has been widely described and is not uncommon in Chinese or Japanese culture, where is considered an appropriated way for a respectable person to negate humiliation [14]. Some Nazi leaders may have been driven by resignation or fear of punishment; another possible factor were feelings of guilt for crimes committed. These can be the reasons for suicides committed by high ranking Gestapo or Battalion 9 members. Some authors reported suicidal impulses in the Nazi leaders [40], explaining that suicidal impulses were a result of the capture, trial and impending sentence [41], or alternatively the Nazi regime's brutality led to homicidal impulses turning into self-destructive behavior under the conditions of captivity. However, prolonged time of imprisonment before the suicides (almost two years on average) suggests that this motivation was not the most common.

The number of reported suicides in the Sachsenhausen camp under Soviet rule was not significantly higher than in the general population, and much lower than the number

reported for the camp under Nazi rule. We calculated this rate average 2.8/10,000 per year for the time period from 1945 to 1950 in Soviet Special Camp against 11/10,000 per year for the Nazi concentration camp. This could be due to less atrocious conditions for prisoners, even when during the five years, 12,000 prisoners died of disease, hunger and malnutrition. Among the possible motivations for committing suicide, we can mentioned feelings of guilt for crimes committed, fear of punishment and misguided understanding of honor on the eve of criminal trials.

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### Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare no potential conflict of interest for the current study.

**Ethical approval** This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

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