

A Disaster in Lübeck Bay: An Analysis of the  
Tragic Sinking of the *Cap Arcona*,

3 May 1945

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## Abstract

This dissertation aims to contextualise the history of the *Cap Arcona*, providing not only the first detailed reconstruction of the events which led to the incarceration of concentration camp prisoners on the ship, but also exploring British motives for its bombing. It argues, firstly, that the imprisonment of the former camp inmates on the *Cap Arcona* was not undertaken with a particular plan in mind, but in desperate reaction to a chain of circumstances: the rapid advance of the Allies, the hurried evacuation of Neuengamme as well as conflicts between Party, civilian and military offices created a problematic situation to which the ships at harbour in Lübeck Bay appeared to offer an interim solution. Secondly, it argues that the bombing of the ship by the British also resulted from a chain of circumstances, albeit a very different one. Concerned lest the Russians advance too far, the British pushed their forces north rapidly in the early part of 1945, hoping to get to the North Sea as fast as possible. In their rush, the British became increasingly careless and, in the case of the *Cap Arcona*, over-hastiness, poor communications and neglect of proper reconnaissance led to a disastrous error of judgement. By interweaving and chronologically juxtaposing the German and British sides of the story, the dissertation seeks to show how the war's approaching end impacted on policies, thinking and practices which, while of course very different in the German and British cases, made possible the catastrophe in Lübeck Bay.

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## Abbreviations

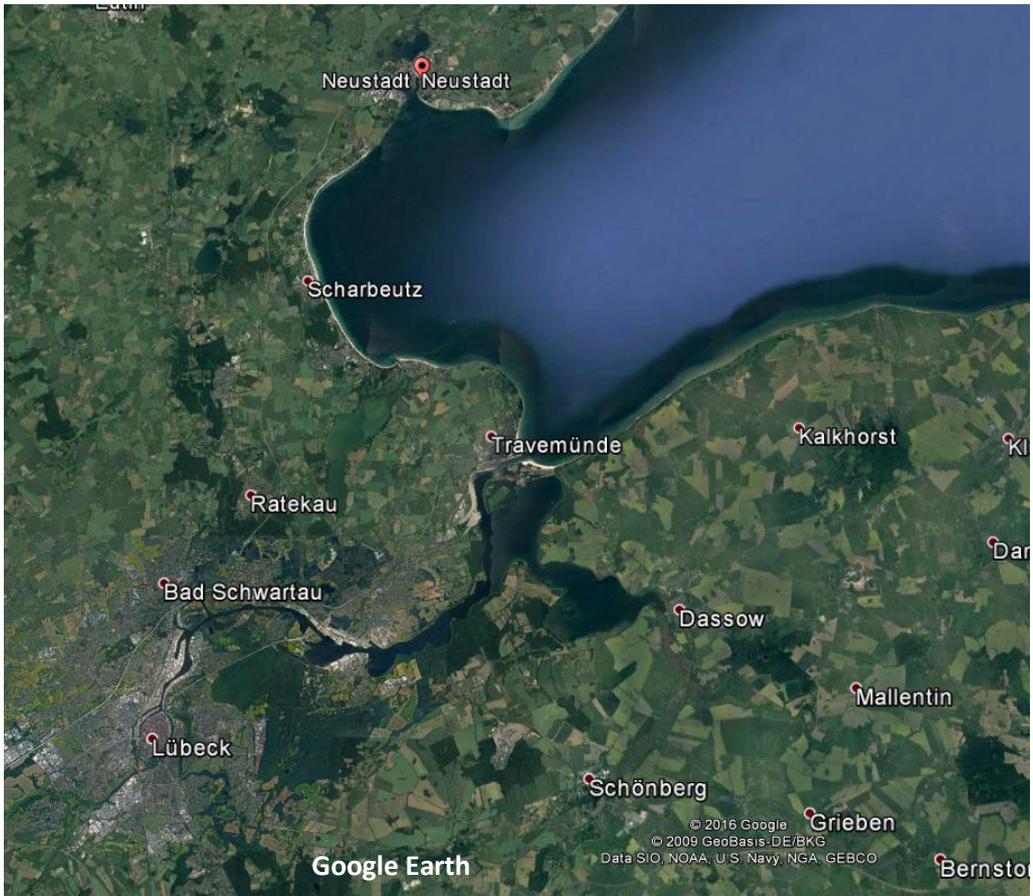
AIR	Air Record Files
ANCXF	Allied Naval Commander of Expeditionary Force
BAB	Bundesarchiv Berlin
BAOR	British Army of the Rhine
CAB	Cabinet Papers
CAMN	<i>Cap Arcona</i> Museum, Neustadt in Holstein
CIU	Central Interpretation Unit
CROWCASS	Central Registry of War Criminals and Security Suspects
C-in-C	Commander in Chief
DPs	Displaced Persons
FO	Foreign Office Files
GAULEITER	Regional Political Official
GeNA	<i>Gedenkstätte</i> KZ Neuengamme
HMSO	His Majesty's Stationary Office
HSSPF	<i>Höhere SS- und Polizeiführer</i> , Senior SS and Police Chief
ICRC	International Committee Red Cross

IMT	International Military Tribunal
ITS	International Tracing Service
IWM	Imperial War Museum
JAG	Judge Advocate General
KZ	<i>Konzentrationslager</i> , Concentration Camp
LHCMA	Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, King's College London
MAF	Militärarchiv Freiburg
MT	Motor Transport
NSDAP	<i>Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei</i>
OAN	Open Access Archives, Neuengamme
POW	Prisoner of War
PR	Photographic Reconnaissance
PREM	Records of the Prime Minister's Office
RAF	Royal Air Force
<i>REIKOSEE</i>	Reich Commissioner for Sea Shipping
RP	Rocket Projectile
RVKK's	Reich Defence Commissioner
SHAEF	Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force
SS	<i>Schutzstaffel</i> , Protection Squadron

SRC	Swedish Red Cross
STAHH	State Archives, Hamburg
TAF	Tactical Air Force
TNA	The National Archives
USAAF	United States American Air Force
VfZ	<i>Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte</i>
WO	War Office Files
WCT	War Crimes Team
WVHA	SS Main Economic and Administrative Office
YVA	Yad Vashem Archives, Jerusalem



**Baltic Region, North Germany**



**District of Schleswig-Holstein**

# Chapter One

## ***The Cap Arcona: Historical Myth and Theory***

On the afternoon of 3 May 1945, a squadron of RAF Typhoons began a descent to attack Axis shipping in Neustadt Bay. Anchored in the Bay was the *Cap Arcona*, laden with over five thousand concentration camp prisoners who had been evacuated to the coast as no suitable alternative could be found. At around 3pm, Typhoons from Second Tactical Air Force attacked the *Cap Arcona*. The result left the *Cap Arcona*'s crew and prisoners struggling for survival in the icy Baltic waters. Yet some seventy years after the tragic sinking there still remain key and crucial questions that have yet to be explored.

### **Overview**

The sinking of the *Cap Arcona* is often portrayed in terms of culpability.<sup>1</sup> Any discussion focusing on the attack has largely been concerned with the need to assign responsibility to either German Commanders or British military HQ. As a consequence, historians have thus far under- appreciated the topic of the sinking in terms of its wider context. Some fundamental questions, therefore, remain unanswered. What was the purpose of using the *Cap Arcona*? Did British forces have information regarding the

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<sup>1</sup> For an overview, see Wilhelm Lange, *Dokumentation: Cap Arcona, Das Tragische Ende der KZ-Häftlings-Flotte am 3. Mai 1945* (Struve's Buchdruckerei und Verlag: Eutin Germany, 2005); Roy C. Nesbit, *Failed to Return: Mysteries of the Air 1939-1945* (Patrick Stephens Limited: Wellingborough, 1988).

placement of prisoners on board the *Cap Arcona* prior to an aerial attack? Why did British forces press hard to Lübeck in April 1945? What were the driving factors behind such a move? Why did the British attack shipping in May 1945? Why did the British push hard to the Baltic coast in April 1945?

This thesis will open out the perspective beyond merely the sinking of the *Cap Arcona* and examine more closely this broader contextualisation, moving away from the moralising discussions, and focus instead on longer-term factors which help to explain the *Cap Arcona* tragedy within a wider framework. For the British side the *Cap Arcona* tragedy will be used to expand our knowledge and understanding of British military strategy in the final months of the war, including aerial strategies. In terms of the German narrative, by analysing the *Cap Arcona* in the wider context, our understanding of the evacuation processes from German camps yields new results. One useful aspect to consider is the method used to evacuate the camp. At a time when almost every aspect of German society was impacted by chaos, the transportation method of evacuating Neuengamme is largely unique when compared to other camps in this final period. The use of rail trucks, at a time when most camps either evacuated by foot, or were liberated, allows for further exploration as to the motives of the SS, as well as other local state functionaries and civilian administrators.

By 3 May German forces were staging a last-ditched attempt at resisting the Allied advance. Sensing the end, British forces became more hastened in their approach to warfare. There were elements within Second Tactical Air Force that felt that Nazi forces

were staging a last-ditched attempt to flee to Norway. In direct response to this perceived threat, the number and focus of air assaults against shipping rose in the final days of the war. Throughout April and into May 1945, aerial attacks by British forces increased ten-fold as resistance in the air was often absent. The German Luftwaffe was unable to stage any substantial resistance particularly due to a lack of fuel supplies.

With the war nearing an end, both British and German forces were impeded by the overriding military situation. For Britain, there developed an overwhelming feeling amongst military personnel that Nazi Germany would be forced in full capitulation. However the belief within Germany was that a partial surrender could still be negotiated on the Western Front. This led to an overall situation that was often marked by chaos. By chaos, this thesis refers to a situation that embodied confusion and disorder in all realms of society. The term ‘chaos’ often relates to a series of conditions that form together to create total imbalance and disintegration.<sup>2</sup> Whereby the social stability of normal society breaks down, this often leads to a situation that created a rift within everyday society. As Blatman notes, the lack of a guarantee of social continuity by the political rulers developed a situation where the wider populace has a total loss of confidence in the existing regime.<sup>3</sup> But as German and British forces entered the final weeks of the war, much of their judgment was further influenced by the term “fog of

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<sup>2</sup> See Daniel Blatman, *The Death Marches: The Final Phase of Nazi Genocide* (Harvard University Press: London, 2011), p. 408.

<sup>3</sup> Blatman, *The Death Marches*, pp. 408 – 411.

war”.<sup>4</sup> During the final months of conflict armed forces were confronted with difficulties in determining situational awareness. Therefore the term “fog of war” is used to define a lack of uncertainty in both British and German military operations. This uncertainty was a culmination of communication breakdown, twined with a series of operational orders that were often out-dated, and led to further military confusion. This led to a potential situation of ‘operational blindness’ whereby military actions, by either British or German forces, were conducted in a scenario that they were ill-prepared and uncertain for. Intelligence is often used to prevent a so-called fog of war incident occurring during combat; however judgement can become impaired if there is a breakdown in communication.

Unfortunately, the lack of scrutiny in the immediate postwar investigations has given rise to significant media attention. This attention, by and large, criticised the British pilots who had been engaged in the attack.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, because there was limited information available regarding the attack, this left considerable scope for media researchers to interpret the available information as best they could. As a direct

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<sup>4</sup> For a discussion on the term “fog of war” please see Simon Godfrey, *British Army Communications in the Second World War: Lifting the Fog of Battle* (Bloomsbury Academic: London, 2014), pp. 181 – 212; Monica Duffy Toft and Talbot Imlay, “Strategic and Military Planning under the Fog of Peace” in Talbot C. Imlay & Monica Duffy Toft (eds) *The Fog of Peace and War Planning: Military and Strategic Planning under Uncertainty* (Routledge: Oxon, 2006), pp. 1 – 10; Hew Strachan, “Strategy and the limitation of war” in Patrick Cronin (ed.), *The Impenetrable Fog of War: Reflections on Modern Warfare and Strategic Surprise* (Praeger: Westport, 2008), pp. 67 – 84.

<sup>5</sup> See “The Sinking of the *Cap Arcona*”, <https://www.feldgrau.com/WW2-Germany-Cap-Arcona-Cruise-Liner-Sinking> [Accessed 17 May 2017, 15:36pm].

consequence of this interpretation, much of our current understanding of the sinking, as a singular event, has been distorted.

## Secondary Literature

The press continues, around the anniversary of 3 May, to re-ignite the tragic story of the sinking of the *Cap Arcona*, often in sensationalist headlines. The tragedy of this event has often attracted numerous media articles that have been widely publicised. The rise of media attention began in the 1980s. Prior to this there had been very few accounts published outlining or even acknowledging the attack.<sup>6</sup> During the 1980s the West German magazine *Stern* published a series of articles condemning the role the British played in the attack. It had claimed that some of the pilots were aware of secret intelligence days prior to an aerial assault regarding the prison fleet fleeing to Norway.<sup>7</sup> *Stern* further claimed that British intelligence did not seek clarity on the issue.<sup>8</sup> In a direct response, a number of former airmen used the UK print media in an attempt to rebuff the allegations. Within the newspaper article it stated that “the ship bore no markings to show that it carried civilians, and he [Lawrence Stark] had been briefed that it was being used by Nazi leaders and troops seeking to continue the war from

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<sup>6</sup> See various early works, Joachim Wölfer, *Cap Arcona: Biographie eines Schiffes: Geschichte einer Reederei* (Koehlers: Hamburg, 1977); Otto von Mielke, *Fahrt ins Verderben: Schnelldampfer Cap Arcona* (Moewig: Munich, 1953).

<sup>7</sup> See Günther Schwarberg, *Angriffsziel Cap Arcona*, (Steidl: Göttingen, 1998). See also “*Stern Magazine*, *Cap Arcona*”, 3 March – 7 April 1983 (Vol. 10-15). The article proves unreliable on a number of key instances. One example is on the details of which RAF squadrons attacked the *Cap Arcona*.

<sup>8</sup> See Schwarberg, *Angriffsziel Cap Arcona*, pp. 39-51.

Norway”.<sup>9</sup> But this readily accessible form of media only further fuelled the confusion surrounding the subsequent attack on the *Cap Arcona*. In dividing opinion over the role of British airmen, media articles enable us to critically evaluate the different viewpoints of other significant nationalities. For instance there have been a variety of headlines which have headlined the sinking as a “British error” or “pilots tricked”.<sup>10</sup> Both headlines arguably only sought to attract a wider audience in a blatant attempt to shock their readership by over-estimating the number of deaths. The difficulty is that controversial events are often mis-represented in the print media, who by their very nature, seek to shock their readership. One case in point is an article published in the British newspaper, *The Independent*. The article suggested that over 10,000 prisoners perished at the hands of the Allies.<sup>11</sup> This greatly exaggerates the number who died and over-embellishes the British attack. Reliance on this type of readily accessible medium has led many amateurs to form a historical narrative that is simply inaccurate. A quick survey of the internet will produce headlines such as “the friendly fires of hell”,<sup>12</sup> “the

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<sup>9</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, “British pilot saw Prison Ship survivors shot”, 13 March 1983, p.2. The *Daily Telegraph*’s defence correspondent Richard Greenfield interviewed former pilot Lawrence Stark who provided the above quotation. See also David Stafford, *Endgame 1945: Victory, Retribution, Liberation* (Thistle Publishing: London, 2015), p. 245.

<sup>10</sup> See various media publications, e.g. *The Independent*, Max Arthur, “RAF Pilots tricked into killing 10,000 camp survivors at the end of the war”, 16 October 2000; *Daily Telegraph*, 06 March 1983, *Daily Telegraph* 10 March 1983; *Daily Telegraph* 13 March 1983.

<sup>11</sup> *The Independent*, Max Arthur, “RAF Pilots tricked into killing 10,000 camp survivors at the end of the war”, 16 October 2000. See also, *Vintage News*, 20 January 2016, “WWII: For nearly 39 years, parts of skeletons were being washed ashore”, Accessed 18 February 2016, <https://www.thevintagenews.com/2016/01/20/wwii-nearly-39-years-parts-skeletons-washed-ashore-ss-cap-Arcona-carrying-around-5500-concentration-camp-inmates/>; *Die Spiegel*, “Versetzung der *Cap Arcona*: Schwimmendes Konzentrationslager”, 30 April 2015.

<sup>12</sup> *Jerusalem Post*, 18 April 2007.

strange sinking of the Nazi Titanic”<sup>13</sup> or “British error killed WW2 camp inmates”.<sup>14</sup>

This type of readily accessible medium has been accepted by the wider public as historical fact, rather than a true reflection of the historical narrative.

The focus on the sinking is, generally then, a focus on the topic of responsibility. In attempting to apportion blame, previous narratives often attribute this blame on the British who attacked the ships.<sup>15</sup> Investigative research by German author’s continued throughout the 1980s. The British attack has been the subject of numerous general histories and journalistic interpretations, which largely examine the attack based on survivor and eye-witness accounts. The focus continued to be on the British attack, and their actions in the immediate aftermath.<sup>16</sup> Schön’s reconstructive work on the *Cap Arcona* asserted that the British could not be acquitted for their actions.<sup>17</sup> Schön suggested that “the attack on the *Cap Arcona* was a senseless bombing raid resulting in the death of 8,000 inmates”.<sup>18</sup> One possible argument for his stance was how he viewed the wider military situation. On 3 May partial surrender negotiations between Allied Commanders and Admiral Dönitz had begun. Under this potential agreement, the *Cap*

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<sup>13</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 5 March 2012.

<sup>14</sup> *Shanghai Star (China)*, 7 March 2000.

<sup>15</sup> See various secondary accounts, Schwarberg, *Angriffsziel Cap Arcona*; Lange, *Dokumentation: Cap Arcona*; Nesbit, *Failed to Return*; Bogdan Suchowiak, *Mai 1945: Die Tragödie der Häftlinge von Neuengamme* (Rowohlt: Hamburg, 1985).

<sup>16</sup> See Heinz Schön, *Die Cap Arcona Katastrophe: Eine Dokumentation nach Augenzeugen-Berichten* (MotorBuch Verlag: Munich, 1989).

<sup>17</sup> Schön, *Die Cap Arcona Katastrophe*, pp. 320-322.

<sup>18</sup> Schön, *Die Cap Arcona Katastrophe*, pp. 320-322.

*Arcona*, military and civilian personnel, as well as the prisoners would have surrendered without a fight in Neustadt bay.<sup>19</sup> But his stance is based on the assumption that German forces were willing to sign surrender, and that all forces would surrender without a fight. Within the climate of war, Second Tactical Air Force (TAF) continued to attack Axis shipping in a belief that these ships were heading to Norway.

Nevertheless neither Schön nor Schwarberg have written comprehensively about the wider circumstances that culminated in the sinking of the *Cap Arcona*. Besides, when they refer to British aerial actions in their research, this is largely from a German perspective.<sup>20</sup> Therefore their assessment of the role of the British must be handled with care. It is a lack of scrutiny of available source material, as well as other wider social factors that limit the importance of their work. British aerial actions cannot simply be judged in the final weeks of the war. Aerial strategy was part of a broader purpose that encompassed the Western Allies' overall military and strategic goal.

More recent publications have added very little to our understanding the tragic event. Watson, whose account was published in 2016, continued to acknowledge the lack of scholarly attention, but offered nothing new.<sup>21</sup> He concluded that “ultimate

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<sup>19</sup> Schön, *Die Cap Arcona Katastrophe*, pp. 320-322.

<sup>20</sup> Schön, *Die Cap Arcona Katastrophe*, pp. 308-322.

<sup>21</sup> See Robert P. Watson, *Nazi Titanic* (Da Capo Press: Massachusetts, 2016). See also, Stefan Ineichen, *Cap Arcona 1927-1945: Märchenschiff und Massengrab* (Limmat Verlag: Zurich, 2015); Pierre Vallaud and Mathilde Aycard, *Le Dernier Camp de la Mort: La tragedie du Cap Arcona: 3 Mai 1945* (Editions Tallandier: Paris, 2017); S.P. Geertsema, *De ramp in de Lübecker Bocht: Nederlanders bij het einde van Neuengamme* (Uitgeverij Boom: Meppel, 2011).

responsibility is with the Nazis”.<sup>22</sup> In response to attributing blame Watson suggests that the final acts of barbarism by German forces on those who survived the sinking shows clearly that the Nazi guards and SS troops were determined, until the very end, to kill the prisoners. In discussing his findings, Watson felt that “many of the Nazis at the Baltic coast devoted the last actions of their lives not to repentance and humanity [...] but to killing those who survived the sinking of the ships”.<sup>23</sup> Based largely on documents gathered by the late Günther Schwarberg, Watson’s research is hindered by an over-reliance on the earlier work of Schwarberg, whom by his profession was a journalist and prone to eccentric claims. Thereafter Watson limits his research focus by excluding valuable AIR records available in the National Archives (TNA).

The topic of responsibility continues to demonstrate that there remains clear divisions among those few works that have attempted to research the sinking of the *Cap Arcona*. By April 1945, the area in and around Schleswig-Holstein was a mass of people, ships, armed forces and refugees from the East attempting to flee Soviet forces.<sup>24</sup> This made the area incredibly difficult to survey. In discussing his theory of a trap, Lange establishes that ultimately the German forces hid the prisoners on board the *Cap Arcona* in an attempt to hide the atrocities of the camp.<sup>25</sup> He further argues that the driving force

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<sup>22</sup> Watson, *Nazi Titanic*, p. 252.

<sup>23</sup> Watson, *Nazi Titanic*, p. 252.

<sup>24</sup> See Lange, *Dokumentation: Cap Arcona*, p. 236.

<sup>25</sup> Lange, *Dokumentation: Cap Arcona*, pp. 227-236. In summarising his trap theory, Lange suggests that Nazi elite simply used the *Cap Arcona* to hide the prisoners from Neuengamme and other such camps.

behind such a move was the need to surrender the city of Hamburg. British forces had issued an ultimatum that unless the city was surrendered, it would be attacked using the full force of Bomber Command.<sup>26</sup> So in attempting to place the sinking within the broader context, Lange was able to present an important argument. Namely those German commanders were intent on hiding the atrocities of the camp system in the final weeks of the war. While Lange is able to show some important merits to utilising this wider perspective, the narrow focus of his time frame, as well as his lack of focus on the camp structure and political relationship with the city of Hamburg, limit strongly his conclusions. To develop our existing knowledge, a much broader overview of the final months of the Second World War are needed, if we can fully appreciate the impact of the longer-term factors that played a pivotal role. For instance, the relationship between the local civilian administration in Hamburg and the Neuengamme camp is key if we are to better understanding why the prisoners were evacuated and placed on the *Cap Arcona*.

At this stage of the war any long term planning simply did not exist. Local civilian administrators and party members planned, or at least attempted to, for the immediate future. Once the prisoners were loaded aboard the vessels no further action was taken.<sup>27</sup>

However, the placement of prisoners on the *Cap Arcona* was not as final as Lange

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<sup>26</sup> See Albert Speer, *Inside the Third Reich* (Phoenix: London, 1995), p. 555.

<sup>27</sup> See various secondary accounts, Detlef Garbe, “Wiederentdeckte Geschichte: Gedenken an Todesmärsche, Auffanglager, *Cap Arcona* und andere Stätten der Erinnerung an das Ende des KZ Neuengamme im Westen Deutschlands”, in Detlef Garbe and Carmen Lange (eds.), *Häftlinge zwischen Vernichtung und Befreiung: Die Auflösung des KZ Neuengamme und seiner Außenlager durch die SS im Frühjahr 1945* (Edition Temmen: Bremen, 2005); Detlef Garbe, *Neuengamme im System der Konzentrationslager: Studien zur Ereignis- und Rezeptionsgeschichte* (Metropol Verlag, Berlin, 2015).

suggests. The decision-process, as well as the transfer process, highlights that in actual fact the ship can be seen as an extension of the physical camp structure. Even to the end, the SS continued to retain control and influence over the prisoners once on the ship. Therefore Lange misinterprets this transfer process as simply a way to hide the prisoners.

## **The role of the British**

Where we have existing representations and discussions surrounding the sinking of the *Cap Arcona* they often focus on the topic of responsibility. This largely fails to take into account important research areas that broaden our understanding of the intricate processes that led to the sinking. This singular tragic event allows us to draw more widely on a number of key areas in the final months of the Second World War. One such example is the direction of British military strategy. In attempting to address why British forces attacked shipping, including the *Cap Arcona*, we need to better understand what British military priorities were and therefore what their strategic aims were. In focusing on how aerial strategy evolved in the closing stages of the war, we can determine whether or not the normal protocols and procedures were followed correctly. Moreover, a closer analysis of squadron operational records can give us a better understanding of the precise aerial brief.

A common theme in *Cap Arcona* literature is on the topic of whether or not British forces – RAF or Army – had prior knowledge of the prisoners being placed on board the vessel. Nesbit suggested that “it is quite apparent that RAF intelligence had no

knowledge of the presence of prisoners in ships in Lübeck”.<sup>28</sup> However Nesbit did note that,

The men of the RAF, intelligence officers, aircrews as well as those in higher command, believed that some of the surviving German forces and their political masters intended to escape to Norway and to continue the fight from the mountains.<sup>29</sup>

The justification, therefore for the British to attack Neustadt, appears to be founded in this notion that the prison fleet was attempting to flee to Norway. One drawback to Nesbit’s research is the mis-interpretation of archive sources. For instance he suggested that “there are no records of how the victims in the two barges met their fate”.<sup>30</sup> Yet a closer search of the archives shows that these victims were from the barges that had previously attempted to transfer their prisoners onto the *Cap Arcona*. Once the barges drifted ashore, the local police descended on the beach and killed those too sick or weak to move.<sup>31</sup> The relevance of this provides a further dimension to the final days of the war being seen as overly chaotic and indeed, highlights the problems of central and local communication issues. While one administrative body remained in charge of the loading and prisoner transfer, it seemed quite apparent that this information was not made readily available to other military units in Neustadt. But, if this information was readily available to senior military staff, then this poses a fundamental issue. Should the

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<sup>28</sup> Nesbit, *Failed to Return*, p. 172.

<sup>29</sup> Roy Nesbit, “*Cap Arcona: Atrocity or Accident*”, *Aeroplane Monthly*, June 1984, p. 289.

<sup>30</sup> Nesbit, *Failed to Return*, p. 178. See also Watson, *Nazi Titanic*, p. 245. Watson notes that it was all elements within Britain’s military services that had no existing knowledge of the prisoners being placed on the vessels in Neustadt Bay. Although he describes in some detail the problems associated with air reconnaissance, the bulk of his argument centres on the “fog of war” discussion.

<sup>31</sup> See for instance Watson, *The Nazi Titanic*, pp. 214-215.

evacuation period continue to be categorised as an extension of Nazi genocidal policy, or should it be deemed a separate act of barbarism?<sup>32</sup>

Intelligence and prior information remain an important focal area for any wider discussion on the sinking of the *Cap Arcona*. Existing research often notes that the Swedish Red Cross representative, Dr. Hans Arnoldsson, had provided the British with information regarding the situation in Neustadt Bay.<sup>33</sup> The basis of this information was that a significant number of camp prisoners had been placed onto passenger liners docked in Neustadt. This information was passed to British forces on the morning of 3 May. Later that same day British officers returned to Arnoldsson and after speaking with him further promised to act at once on the information.<sup>34</sup> In terms of their actions, on this particular occasion British forces acted in an expedient manner. But there were other opportunities for the British to halt an attack on Neustadt.

The most relevant piece of evidence was handed to the liberating British forces at Lübeck on 2 May 1945. The ICRC delegate, Paul de Blonay, informed the liberating commander that there were concentration camp prisoners housed on ships in Neustadt bay.<sup>35</sup> This information was passed to the relevant department. Yet by some oversight

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<sup>32</sup> For a discussion see Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (Abacus: London, 1997).

<sup>33</sup> See Hans Arnoldsson, *Natt och Dimma* (Bonnier: Stockholm, 1945).

<sup>34</sup> See Wilhelm Lange, *Cap Arcona: A Summary of the Cap Arcona disaster in the bay of Neustadt on 3 May 1945*, [http://media.offenes-archiv.de/caparcona\\_summary.pdf](http://media.offenes-archiv.de/caparcona_summary.pdf)

<sup>35</sup> See Wilhelm Lange, *Dokumentation: Cap Arcona*; C. Lotz, "Der Untergang des Häftlingsschiffes *Cap Arcona* am 3. Mai 1945: Ein Überblick über Ereignis, Erinnerungskulturen und Forschungskontroversen", in Bill Niven (ed.), *Die Wilhelm Gustloff*:

was never processed. Therefore certain areas of Britain's intelligence department had prior knowledge of the situation that faced British forces in Neustadt Bay. Yet as this wider social breakdown took hold of all aspects of Britain's military campaign, the broader policy took sole priority.

One area of concern was what the British thought that they actually knew. Many surveys of the tragic sinking propose that British intelligence suggested that the ships docked in Neustadt were preparing to take SS and high-ranking German officials to Norway, in a last-ditched attempt to continue the fight. Lange states that "late in the afternoon of 2 May 1945, British air reconnaissance spotted two military convoys with at least six destroyers, some U-boats, escorts and large transport ships. They had just left Neustadt in Holstein".<sup>36</sup> Based on aerial reconnaissance results, Second TAF delayed proposed aerial flights until the following day. As for what German departments knew of the transfer process in Neustadt Bay, this was primarily held at a local level. Extensive discussions and negotiations existed between Gauleiter Kaufmann, the *Reikosee*, and the Merchant Navy in relation to the release of the *Cap Arcona* from the German Navy. These discussions continued until the end of April 1945.

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*Geschichte und Erinnerung eines Untergangs* (Mitteldeutscher Verlag: Halle, 2011), pp. 120-142.

<sup>36</sup> Lange, *Cap Arcona*, p. 5. [http://media.offenes-archiv.de/caparcona\\_summary.pdf](http://media.offenes-archiv.de/caparcona_summary.pdf)

While existing research has pointed to the need to look at the sinking in terms of a wider context, often these surveys misjudge its relevance. In his study on the *Cap Arcona*, Lange notes that the main problem for researchers lay in the lack of crucial source critique.<sup>37</sup> In acknowledging a potential issue with archival material Lange attempted to reconstruct key elements of the tragic sinking on the 3 May. By looking more closely at the relationship between the camp at Neuengamme and aid agencies, his research developed a clearer understanding of the involvement of the SRC and the prisoners in the camp.<sup>38</sup> Although Bernadotte did not directly assist those placed on the *Cap Arcona*, he did assist a small party of prisoners on a subsequent death march. Moreover his role and work with the camp commandant, as well as his discussions with Himmler demonstrate clearly that delicate state of central command in the closing stages of the campaign. Himmler appeared willing to surrender Scandinavian nationals, but only if Bernadotte would act as an intermediary to the West.<sup>39</sup> But while Lange draws on the broader context, he misjudges the relevance to the *Cap Arcona* tragedy. The fundamental importance of this negotiation allows us to understand the wider military strategy and its impact on British aerial policy. Furthermore, in analysing the rescue operation by the SRC, we can better understand the way in which Second TAF were operating in the closing stages of the war.

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<sup>37</sup> Lange, *Dokumentation: Cap Arcona*, pp. 13-14.

<sup>38</sup> Lange, *Dokumentation: Cap Arcona*, pp. 24-27.

<sup>39</sup> See Peter Longerich, *Heinrich Himmler* (OUP: Oxford, 2011).

## Nazi State and Structure

In attempting to develop our understanding of the intricate details that led to the tragedy on 3 May, it is important to draw on the situation that had evolved in the concluding weeks of the war. During these final months, historians largely suggest that “German society was unravelling as people across the country madly scrambled to save what they could and cling to life”.<sup>40</sup> On the home front German society was struggling as promises of a people’s community had long since faded. As everyday society unravelled the remaining Reich administration stepped up its terror apparatus in a mis-guided attempt to re-gain control.<sup>41</sup> But overall control of Hitler’s Third Reich was fading. Central communication began to falter, and those orders that were issued by the Reich centre were often outdated or muddled. But the collapse was much more than a breakdown of communication from central office. As Blatman notes,

the collapse of the apparatus of the state, because of the defeats on the front, the advances of the enemy armies, and the chaos that was spreading everywhere that made it possible for radical elements in the party, SS, and Gestapo to seize control of the disintegrating apparatus of government and exploit it to mobilize the masses for this struggle.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Buggeln, *Slave Labor*, p. 265. See also Eric Johnson, *Nazi Terror: The Gestapo, Jews and Ordinary Germans* (Basic Books: London, 2000); Robert Gellately, *Backing Hitler: Consent and Coercion in Nazi Germany* (OUP: London, 2002); Detlev Peukert, *Inside Nazi Germany: Conformity, Opposition, and Racism in Everyday Life* (Yale University Press: London, 1989); Frank McDonough, *Opposition and Resistance in Nazi Germany* (CUP: Cambridge, 2010).

<sup>41</sup> See Nikolaus Wachsmann, *KL: A history of the Nazi Concentration Camps* (Little Brown: London, 2016), p. 576. He suggests that it would be a mistake to think that the Camp SS was finished. Although its grip was slipping fast, it had not yet lost complete control. And the size of its terror apparatus was still formidable.

<sup>42</sup> Daniel Blatman, “On the Traces of the Death Marches: The Historiographical Challenge”, in Jean-Luc Blondel, Susanne Urban and Sebastian Schoenemann (eds.), *Freilegungen: Auf den Spuren der Todesmärsche* (Wallstein Verlag: Göttingen, 2012), p. 100.

Blatman suggests that the situation within the Third Reich was being seized by extreme party elements. But in the case of the final evacuation transports Himmler's often confused and indecisive orders demonstrate clearly that the SS commander was more willing to use the prisoners as political pawns rather than continue with their extermination.<sup>43</sup> So much so, that the British and Canadian armies liberated the camp at Bergen-Belsen with some 50,000 inmates still within the compound.

Generally historian's assessment of the final months of the war often point vividly to a State apparatus that was in turmoil. From January 1945 through to capitulation in May 1945 communication, along with central leadership became disjointed and fragmented. Kershaw notes that

As Nazi rule disintegrated ever more rapidly and fragmentation took the place of any semblance of centralised governance, the regime increasingly ran amok.<sup>44</sup>

Centralised command became increasingly difficult as Soviet forces began their assault on Berlin. But fundamentally, Nazi state apparatus did not totally disintegrate. In a vain attempt to grasp control of the impending situation "police, SS and regional and local party officials took matters into their own hands".<sup>45</sup> Therefore it would be unwise to suggest that state apparatus descended into total chaos. In fact, the state, even in this final period, remained highly resilient to an impending defeat. In defining the Nazi state in the final months of the war, it evolved into an intricate, complex system whose

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<sup>43</sup> For an in-depth survey see Peter Longerich, *Heinrich Himmler* (OUP: Oxford, 2012).

<sup>44</sup> Kershaw, *The End* (Allen Lane: London, 2011), pp. 295-96. See also Stephen G. Fritz, *Endkampf: Soldiers, Civilians and the Death of the Third Reich* (University Press of Kentucky: Lexington, 2011), pp. 115-158.

<sup>45</sup> Kershaw, *The End*, p. 296.

behaviour was often unpredictable. At times, therefore, its actions appeared random and uncoordinated.

During the latter stages of the war, “Germany became a crumbling state of shortages, its urban landscapes dominated by piles of rubble, a country that continued to shed its blood in a hopeless quest for survival, under the direction of a frantic leadership that was totally cut off from reality”.<sup>46</sup> But in defining chaos, this thesis will challenge existing beliefs that Nazi society, as well as state apparatus, was in turmoil. It will argue that as local state agencies evolved, their ability to function independently of central government demonstrated the extreme resilience of parts of a system which, overall, was in decline. Paradoxically, however, this ability to function at the same time exacerbated the chaotic conditions. Operating in an environment where central command was almost non-existent led to a situation where the ability to communicate widely with other local departments failed. This blinkered relationship remains important as each department, although able to operate independently, was unable to function within an integrated system. Therefore, the political and social structure of Nazi Germany in the final months of the war functioned in an ad hoc manner. This means that those territories that were cut off from the Reich centre were not necessarily without structure or guidance. The example of Hamburg will show that while communication with Berlin was almost non-existent, local civilian administrators were able to provide a certain degree of stability in the closing stages of the war. What

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<sup>46</sup> Blatman, “On the Traces of the Death Marches” in Blondel, Urban and Schönemann (eds.), *Freilegungen*, p. 99; See also Marc Buggeln, “The Death Marches: The Final Phase of Nazi Genocide Review” *German History* 30: 1 (2012), pp. 156-157; Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (Holmes & Meier Inc: New Jersey, 1986).

emerged was a series of local civilian administrators who guided political policy in the closing months of the war.

## **Camp evacuations 1944 – 45**

The placement of prisoners on the *Cap Arcona* has largely been seen by some as a continuation of the death march policy.<sup>47</sup> As camps were evacuated in line with Himmler's final order on 14 April 1945, the German countryside became amass with camp prisoners. These marching convoys were seen endlessly marching towards a destination further behind Axis lines. Through using the *Cap Arcona* sinking, we can better understand how and why the prisoners were placed on the ship. In doing so this further develops our existing knowledge of the death march practices in the closing stages of the war.

Through autumn 1944 it was increasingly common for state functioning to be developed more locally. In turn, this localised structure and policy-making further fuelled the uncertainty amongst soldiers, civilians and refugees. But by February 1945 the emergence of one localised power house suggests that chaos was not total. Amidst this situation, whereby many state departments struggled to function coherently, the example of Hamburg highlights that this was not the case. The relationship between state agencies and the Party, as well as SS officials, was important in guiding Hamburg

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<sup>47</sup> For instance, see Blatman, *The Death Marches*, pp. 155-165; Joachim Neander, "Vernichtung durch Evakuierung? Die Praxis der Auflösung der Lager – Fakten, Legenden und Mythen" in Garbe and Lange (eds.), *Häftlinge zwischen Vernichtung und Befreiung*, pp. 45-62; Detlef Garbe, *Neuengamme im System der Konzentrationslager: Studien zur Ereignis- und Rezeptionsgeschichte* (Metropol: Berlin, 2015), pp. 158-188.

in the final weeks of the war.<sup>48</sup> One useful example was the relationship between Gauleiter Karl Kaufmann and other political Reich institutions. Gauleiter Kaufmann, a long-standing party member, and a ruthless businessman, ensured that local businesses, as well as administrative functions continued operating. In operating away from the reach of central office, the process to ready Neuengamme camp for evacuation shows that communication lines functioned locally. Previously, Kershaw has suggested that “where communications still functioned, they brought an unceasing flood of new decrees and directives from Bormann”.<sup>49</sup> But locally, regional representatives ensured that their responsibilities were undiminished. It is precisely these aspects of chaos – communication, personal motives and agendas – that allow a more thorough overview of the *Cap Arcona* tragedy.

Militarily, German commanders “ultimately, by April 1945 [...] just did not know what to do with the hundreds of thousands of prisoners still in its domain. In the gathering chaos of the last weeks, the death marches reflected the futile flailing of a regime on the verge of its own destruction but retaining its murderous capacity to the very end”.<sup>50</sup> The decision process to evacuate the camp system often caused administrative chaos. From the Reich Centre communication was not forthcoming. As Kershaw argues, “only unclear or confused guidelines, though leaving much scope for initiative, came from

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<sup>48</sup> See John A. S. Grenville, *The Jews and Germans of Hamburg: The Destruction of a Civilization 1790-1945* (Routledge: London, 2011), pp. 250-263.

<sup>49</sup> Kershaw, *The End*, p. 317.

<sup>50</sup> Kershaw, *The End*, p. 331. See also Richard Bessel, *Germany 1945: from War to Peace* (Simon & Schuster: London, 2010).

Himmler and the now faltering concentration camp central administration”.<sup>51</sup> In reality “the collapsing communication network also contributed to the undermining of central control”.<sup>52</sup> Central government no longer functioned effectively. What emerged was a series of localised central functionaries who governed the remaining territories. Hamburg is a significant example of how this decentralised command structure continued to function amidst total chaos.

The evacuation of Neuengamme in April 1945 is an area which the tragedy of the *Cap Arcona* can broaden our understanding of the intricate policy-making in the final weeks of the war. This thesis will explore why it became necessary to evacuate the camp at Neuengamme during a time when the area under German control diminished. Why, unlike other similar sized camps, had Neuengamme successfully evacuated all inmates? What was special about the situation in Neuengamme? Neuengamme had long been seen as a business enterprise by the local Gauleiter Karl Kaufmann, and the SS elite in Hamburg. This unique relationship between Gauleiter Kaufmann and his business association within Hamburg that provides the primary motive to evacuate the camp.

The sinking of the *Cap Arcona* has been seen as simply part of a final act of the final solution because of the suggestion that the evacuation from Neuengamme camp was

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<sup>51</sup> See Kershaw, *The End: Hitler's Germany 1944-1945*, p. 331; Michael Jones, *After Hitler: The Last days of the Second World War in Europe* (John Murray: London, 2015), p. 71; Richard Evans, *The Third Reich at War: How the Nazis led Germany from Conquest to Disaster* (Penguin: London, 2009).

<sup>52</sup> Kershaw, *The End: Hitler's Germany 1944-1945*, p. 317. See also Keith Lowe, *Savage Continent: Europe in the Aftermath of World War II* (Penguin: London, 2013).

part of the death marches.<sup>53</sup> A leading scholar on the death marches has argued that this final phase witnessed these marches as the sole extermination technique.<sup>54</sup> In attempting to broaden our understanding of the death march process as a whole, Blatman has to pick through a numerous examples of evacuation marches. Therefore, his approach and discussion, which views the death marches as not merely continuing the process of antisemitism, but rather a continuation of impulsive genocide on the masses, does not work entirely on a camp by camp basis.<sup>55</sup> The drawback on attempting to provide a generalised method for viewing the death march process is that his conclusions are too broad. For instance, out of some forty transports that departed Neuengamme camp, only three ended in a massacre.<sup>56</sup> Blatman's approach breaks down when applied locally to case-specific examples. Generalising the approach of the Nazi hierarchy at a time when many elements of the regime functioned in an ad hoc nature weakens his central argument. In response to Blatman's model, Goldhagen notes that "authority was fracturing increasingly within Germany, and central control of the marches was conspicuously lacking; thus, it is no surprise that the Germans guarding the marches conducted them in varying manners".<sup>57</sup> He largely noted that while central authority

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<sup>53</sup> See for instance, Buggeln, *Slave Labor*, pp. 266-275; Watson, *The Nazi Titanic*, pp. 87-98.

<sup>54</sup> Daniel Blatman, *The Death Marches: The final phase of Nazi Genocide* (Harvard University Press: Massachusetts, 2011), p. 9; Daniel Blatman, "The Death Marches, January – March 1945: Who was Responsible for What?" *Yad Vashem Studies* 28 (2000), pp. 155-202.

<sup>55</sup> For a discussion see Daniel Blatman, "The Death Marches: The Final Phase of Nazi Genocide", reviewed by Roger Moorhouse in *History Today* 6:10 (2011).

<sup>56</sup> Buggeln, *Slave Labor*, p. 276.

<sup>57</sup> Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, p. 364. See also Livia Rothkirchen, "The Final Solution in its Last Stages" *Yad Vashem Studies* 8 (1970), pp. 7-29; Shmuel Krakowski, "The Death Marches in the Period of the Evacuation of the Camps", in Michael R. Marrus (ed.), *The Nazi Holocaust: Historical Articles on the Destruction of European Jews*, Band 9 (Westport:

was unreliable, those guarding the marches and undertaking the responsibility of the prisoners during these marches had significant scope to interpret their orders. In many cases once these columns departed the camp, communication with higher officials was not always possible. This scope and interpretation of orders is largely where confusion arose. By March 1945, the area under direct German command continued to diminish. This meant that any short-term planning for a potential evacuation destination was difficult. In terms of this final evacuation phase any potential evacuation site was often impractical as Allied forces were continually over-running German held territory.

There remains a stark divide in historiography over the extent to which the camp system continued to function. Greiser argues that the concentration camp system, by and large, continued to function in the last months of the war.<sup>58</sup> The camp system, although deadly, did concede to some categories of prisoners. Scandinavian nationals were released through special measures with the SRC, while small parties of Jewish prisoners were released in last-minute humanitarian efforts. But for Wachsmann his study on the camp system notes that “there was nothing stable about the KL system in the spring 1945”.<sup>59</sup> Transports that departed the main camp often used the marches to continue the killing phase of the camp. The majority of evacuations in the final phase were undertaken on foot. At Neuengamme the method was different. A clear and decisive destination, coupled with a determination by local administrators meant that this

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London, 1989), pp. 476-490. See also Yehuda Bauer, “The Death Marches, January – May 1945”, in Marrus (ed.), *The Nazi Holocaust*, pp. 491-511.

<sup>58</sup> See Katrin Greiser, *Die Todesmärsche von Buchenwald: Räumung, Befreiung und Spuren der Erinnerung* (Wallstein Verlag: Göttingen, 2008), p. 215.

<sup>59</sup> Wachsmann, *KL*, p. 577.

evacuation from the Neuengamme shows that there was still some coherence within the camp system. Moreover this example shows clearly that the camp system at Neuengamme was able to continue to function amidst this chaos; communication within a local framework still functioned. This begs the question as to *why* the Hamburg administration continued to function in the face of overwhelming defeat.

There remains much debate in existing historiography regarding this the final months of the war and whether this period transcends into chaos. One example from Neuengamme camp highlights this point. Buggeln suggests that that out of some forty transports that left the camp, only three ended in a massacre.<sup>60</sup> As British forces entered the camp compound on 4 May, the camp was found empty, and important documents had been destroyed.<sup>61</sup> This thesis will argue that previous attempts to create a general model to explain the death march period wrongly identifies this final phase as essentially a killing stage amidst chaos and confusion. The current periodisation model of the death marches

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<sup>60</sup> Buggeln, *Slave Labor*, p. 276.

<sup>61</sup> See historical accounts on Neuengamme, e.g.: Detlef Garbe, “Die Räumung der Konzentrationslager in Norddeutschland und die deutsche Gesellschaft bei Kriegsende”, in Oliver von Wrochem and Lars Jockheck (eds.), *Das KZ Neuengamme und seine Außenlager: Geschichte, Nachgeschichte, Erinnerung, Bildung* (Metropol Verlag: Berlin, 2010), pp. 111-135; Herbert Obenaus, “Die Außenkommandos des Konzentrationslagers Neuengamme in Hannover”, in Hermann Kaienburg (ed.), *Konzentrationslager und deutsche Wirtschaft 1939-1945* (Leske & Budrich: Opladen, 1996), pp. 221-226; Wolfgang Benz and Barbara Distel (eds.), *Ort des Terrors 5. Hinzert, Auschwitz, Neuengamme: Geschichte der Nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslager* (C.H.Beck: Munich, 2007); Gesa Anne Trojan, *Das Lager im Dorf lassen: Das KZ Neuengamme in der lokalen Erinnerung* (Dölling und Galitz Verlag: Hamburg, 2014); Marc Buggeln, *Arbeit und Gewalt: Das Außenlagersystem des KZ-Neuengamme* (Wallstein Verlag GmbH: Göttingen 2009); Hermann Kaienburg, *Vernichtung durch Arbeit: Der Fall Neuengamme: die Wirtschaftsbestrebungen der SS und ihre Auswirkungen auf die Existenzbedingungen der KZ-Gefangenen* (J.H.W.Dietz: Bonn, 1991); Ulrich Bauche and Heinz Brudigam (eds.), *Arbeit und Vernichtung, Das Konzentrationslager Neuengamme 1938-1945* (VSA Hamburg: Hamburg, 1986).

does remain useful; however the evacuation of Neuengamme does not fit this model. One of the key focus areas remains the method used for the evacuations. Generally Blatman focuses on marches by foot, but Neuengamme was largely evacuated through the use of rail trucks. At a time when many elements of the Third Reich were crumbling, the Hamburg administration was able to ensure the camp was evacuated in a timely manner.<sup>62</sup>

## Primary Source Material

A small collection of primary sources provide information about the sinking of the *Cap Arcona* and the role of the Hamburg administration in the final weeks of the war. There is much less surviving evidence from senior SS and Party figures than there is survivor testimony. There are a number of survivor testimonies, trial transcripts and official publications that help to guide an interpretation of the British attack on 3 May. The most valuable collection of papers is from the War Office files in the National Archives.<sup>63</sup> This is a series of files collated by Number Two War Crimes investigation team (WCIT). They had been charged with the task of gathering evidence to trial the perpetrators at Neuengamme camp. Within this collection of files, there are interrogation reports as well as statements of evidence from key figures in the sinking of the *Cap Arcona*. Unfortunately, there are no surviving narrative sources written by the

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<sup>62</sup> For a discussion on the position of Gauleiter, see Michael D. Miller and Andreas Schulz, *Gauleiter: The Regional leaders of the Nazi Party and their Deputies, 1925 – 1945* (R. James Bender Publishing: San Jose, 2012); Karl Höffkes, *Hitlers politische Generale: Die Gauleiter des Dritten Reiches, ein biographisches Nachschlagewerk* (Garbert-Verlag: Tübingen, 1986); Grenville, *The Jews and Germans of Hamburg*.

<sup>63</sup> See TNA WO 235/162-169: *Proceedings of Curio Haus trials, Hamburg*, March 1946.

pilots who attacked the *Cap Arcona*. This collection of evidence within the official files has since been destroyed.<sup>64</sup>

In the late 1980s Lange noted that many previous publications were mono-causal and focused disappointingly on guilt.<sup>65</sup> The problem for many was a lack of source material and source criticism. Basing his work largely on survivor testimony, Lange was able to begin an analysis that looked at some longer term factors. The bulk of his source material was collated from official documentation and interview transcripts which are now held in the town archives in Neustadt in Holstein. In his account, Lange asserts that the gaps in his research were “filled in by those who had been still living or had been there”.<sup>66</sup> In dealing with the event some forty years after the attack, and with many survivors living through the Cold War, thoughts and opinions on the British attack were often found dealing with the topic of responsibility. This thesis will carefully utilise survivor testimony that was written shortly after the sinking. Although it will consider opinions of survivors in the late 1980s,<sup>67</sup> the material will need to be further

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<sup>64</sup> There is some debate regarding a section within the Till Report. A collection of statements by RAF pilots is listed as a deposition number. Alas this collection of papers, however valuable, is no longer held in archival repositories. We can only speculate that it has since been destroyed as part of the transfer process of paper records to a new location.

<sup>65</sup> See Lange, *Dokumentation: Cap Arcona*, p. 13.

<sup>66</sup> Lange, *Dokumentation: Cap Arcona*, pp. 17-18.

<sup>67</sup> On the nature of survivor testimony, see Zöe Waxman, “Testimony and Representation”, in Dan Stone (ed.), *The Historiography of the Holocaust* (Palgrave Macmillan: London, 2004), pp. 487-507. Reference cited on pp. 499-500; David Carr, “Narrative and the real world on argument for continuity” *History and Theory* Vol.25, (1986), pp. 117-131. Reference cited on pp. 117-118; Marc Silberman, “After-words: Lessons in Memory and Politics”, in Marc Silberman and Florence Vatan (eds.), *Memory and Postwar Memorials: Confronting the Violence of the Past* (Palgrave Macmillan: London, 2015); Lawrence Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (State University of New York Press: Albany, 1982); Tony

corroborated with other primary material. By utilising the method of source criticism, this thesis will corroborate and interrogate primary material. It will be necessary to establish its providence and set this in the broader context of when the source was produced, and attempt to establish any bias. Through the use of valuable AIR records, including operations records, squadron reports and depositions, we can carefully reconstruct why Second TAF attacked shipping in May 1945. As original pilot testimony remains elusive within the archive surroundings, the use of alternative methods and material to reconstruct the build-up to the sinking is important. One alternative source of material is the use of AIR records which provide summary overviews of each day's event. Further, this type of "official British" record also allows for the longer term factors to be considered in the build-up to the attack. There are some drawbacks in this approach. Pilot testimonies and personal narratives do exist. However they exist for squadrons that did not attack the *Cap Arcona* but other ships located in Neustadt Bay. In terms of their viability, these records will be cross-examined with official narratives to validate their accounts. Acknowledging that the attacks on 3 May were part of a wider transport strategy, no specific squadron was assigned to a specific ship. This means that the available pilot testimony is a valuable resource and is readily transferable for any discussion on the sinking of the *Cap Arcona*. A further hindrance is the lack of official documentation compiled by British military forces in the post-war period. The British narrative must be reconstructed using piecemeal evidence. This is achievable, however, through the use of a wider survey of archives, diver reports as well

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Kushner, *Memory Perceived: Recalling the Holocaust* (Praeger Publishers: Westport, 2002); Richard McNally, *Remembering Trauma* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge MA, 2003); Brian Schiff, "Telling it in Time: Interpreting Consistency and Change in the Life Stories of Holocaust Survivors" *International Journal of Aging and Human Development*, 60:3, (2005), pp. 189-212.

as sound interviews and personal correspondence with surviving pilots will all be utilised.

The only British investigative report was finalised in March 1946. Known as the Till Report it remains instrumental in any discussion on the sinking of the *Cap Arcona*. Although the report examined the circumstances that led to the sinking, Till's conclusions demonstrate a lack of appetite from British commanders to fully investigate this attack.<sup>68</sup> Throughout his report, Major Till acknowledges a number of issues which centre on adequate resources. In fact there are a number of incidents to which Till highlights where investigative staff are removed for other duties. These duties largely focused on crimes committed on British POW's. What we can infer from this is that the focus of British investigations was primarily on those crimes committed by Nazi Germany. This report further highlights a link that exists between the wider issues and the British attack. Throughout the report there is a common theme that Till was forced

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<sup>68</sup> See TNA WO 309/1592, *The Till Report*, March 1946; For a discussion on War Crime Trials, see M. Bryant, "Die US-Amerikanischen Militärgerichtsprozesse gegen SS-Personal, Ärzte und Kapos des KZ Dachau 1945-48", in Ludwig Eiber and Robert Sigel (eds.), *Dachauer Prozesse: NS-Verbrechen vor Amerikanische Militärgerichten in Dachau 1945-1948. Verfahren, Ergebnisse, Nachwirkungen* (Wallstein Verlag: Göttingen, 2007), pp. 109-25; Alyn Bessmann and Marc Buggeln, "Befehlsgeber und Direkttäter vor dem Militärgericht. Die Britische Strafverfolgung der Verbrechen im KZ Neuengamme und seinen Außenlagern", in *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft*, Heft 6, (2005), pp. 522-542; Reimer Möller, "Ermittler von KZ-Gewaltverbrechen und Angehörige der Militärgerichte in der Britischen Besatzungszone 1945 bis 1949", in Herbert Diercks (ed.), *Zwischenräume Displaced Persons, Internierte und Flüchtlinge in ehemaligen Konzentrationslagern Beiträge zur Geschichte der Nationalsozialistischen Verfolgung in Norddeutschland*, Heft 12, (2010), pp. 140-159; Pricilla Dale Jones, "British Policy Towards German Crimes Against German Jews, 1939-1945" *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* 36 (1991), pp. 339-66; Simona Tobia, "Questioning the Nazis: Languages and effectiveness in British War Crime Investigations and trials in Germany, 1945-48" *Journal of War and Culture Studies*, 3: 1, (2010), pp. 123-136; Claire L. Sharman, *War Crimes Trials between Occupation and Integration: The Prosecution of Nazi War Criminals in the British Zone of Germany*, (D. Phil Thesis, University of Southampton, 2007).

to rush his report. There were a number of instances where his investigations were suspended while members of his team were allocated elsewhere. In general British investigators prioritised crimes against British nationals, and those in favour of processing Nazi war criminals. This unfortunately led to a swift and indecisive report. This thesis will utilise this report in the reconstruction of political discussions between the different German leaders.

The important discovery of diving reports provides a clear insight into why attention was paid to survey sunken vessels in 1946.<sup>69</sup> The reports further add a crucial dimension to the reconstruction of the British motives for the attack. Although the reports are incomplete, nevertheless they prove a useful tool to analyse how and why the British attacked these vessels in the final days of the war. All these sources have been collated and analysed to broaden our understanding of the particular circumstances that led to the sinking of the *Cap Arcona* on 3 May. While there are gaps with the primary material, it is important to employ the methods of critical source analysis in dealing with existing material. One important area has been the branching out and attempting to source material from a much wider archive base. This will enable this thesis to corroborate existing sources with new findings, as well as drawing on new historical theories.

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<sup>69</sup> See International Tracing Service (hereafter ITS) CI 45b Ordner296:1398: *KL Neuengamme, Report from the Principle Diver*, July-Aug 1946.

## Structure

This thesis concentrates on the broader theme of chaos and its impact on crucial aspects of the *Cap Arcona* tragedy. In expanding the historical survey, this study will examine the period of January to May 1945. By examining the sinking in this wider context it will examine the principle impact of chaos on key elements of the *Cap Arcona* tragedy. This will be explored in five thematic chapters. Such an approach provides a clear analysis of the key features of British military policy as well as the core motives of German SS and Party officials. The effect of the central theme of chaos on the build-up to the sinking had a massive impact on the decision making process as well as the requirement to utilise shipping. This thesis offers a new broader perspective on the tragic sinking of the *Cap Arcona* on 3 May 1945.

This study begins with a closer examination of the evacuation planning process surrounding Neuengamme camp. It will argue that until now our understanding of this process has often been categorised as chaotic and ad hoc. Using Neuengamme camp it will demonstrate that amidst this chaos, the planning process was developed and strategically executed prior to the Allied capture of the camp. By analysing this broader circumstance, it can demonstrate how the *Cap Arcona* was ordered to Neustadt to serve as a prison ship.

Chapter Three will build on the previous research and look at the actual evacuations to Lübeck Bay. But the process that took place eventually evolved into chaos and disorder

once the transports arrived at Lübeck Vorwerk harbour. The method of evacuation is analysed in more detail. In providing this analysis, it provides a useful context for the reasons why the camp was evacuated at Neuengamme. Moreover it will show that communication between local institutions, the merchant navy, Hamburg-Süd and other state departments reinforced this chaotic state. This chapter will look more closely at the transfer of prisoners to the ships at anchor in Neustadt and further analyse resistance to this planned transfer.

Chapter Four will analyse more closely Britain's wider military and strategic policy in 1945. It will argue that as a result of the wider military situation, British aerial policy became rushed in an attempt to push northwards. In doing so, this Thesis will provide an analysis of Foreign policy as a result of Yalta in February 1945. The question of what happened to aerial operations as a result of this strategic change will also be explored. During the final months Second TAF were continually stretched in their area of operations, and although there was limited aerial resistance, communication between Second TAF HQ and squadron groups remained problematic. The chapter then examines more closely the activities of individual squadron groups to determine what squadrons were actually attacking.

Intelligence and information played a pivotal role in the history of the *Cap Arcona*, and therefore Chapter Five will examine numerous sources by external agencies. In doing so it will demonstrate that a number of opportunities were handed to the British prior to the aerial bombardment on 3 May. While acknowledging that information did exist, it is

necessary to evaluate exactly what these external agencies knew and analyse its relevance for the prisoners on the *Cap Arcona*. But the dissemination of this information will also play an important role. As military policy had drastically altered in response to a Soviet threat, air operations in the remaining territories became ever fiercer. This led to a number of friendly-fire incidents against Red Cross convoys. Assessing these incidents, Chapter Five will argue that the normal protocols and procedures that had featured in the processing of information fell to the wayside. In turn this will show the impact of these chaotic and frantic situations on British policy.

Chapter Six will draw on existing scholarship and carefully piece together the events that culminated in the sinking on 3 May 1945. This chapter will argue that the sinking of the *Cap Arcona* was the result of a unique series of circumstances that culminated in the final days of the war. While previous chapters focus on the long-term factors, this chapter will draw on the short-term issues. This thesis explores the reasons behind the German surrender of Hamburg and its impact on the prisoners held on the *Cap Arcona*. It then examines the changes to Second TAF aerial policy in the first days of May, with a specific focus on targets. A reconstruction of the British attack will follow, and seek to analyse what the pilots knew prior to take-off. This thesis argues that the sinking of the *Cap Arcona* was not the responsibility of either British or German forces; rather the attack on the 3 May was the result of a series of errors of communication on both sides severely impacted by chaotic circumstances in the final weeks. In many respects, the broader context demonstrates that as the military situation culminated over the bay of Lübeck, this series of circumstances led to the tragic sinking of the *Cap Arcona*.

## Chapter Two

### April 1945: Camp Evacuation Structure and Process

By January 1945, according to Nazi records, some 714,000 prisoners were languishing in the concentration camp network.<sup>70</sup> This number included prisoners from nearly all European nations who had been persecuted for reasons ranging from political affiliation to religion, and sexuality to race. As the regime collapsed and German forces retreated on all fronts, the question of evacuating the concentration camp system presented an increasing problem. This chapter will discuss in greater detail the evacuation planning process from Neuengamme camp. At a time when other camps had been unable to evacuate their prison labour force, Neuengamme camp was able to implement an orderly evacuation. This is surprising since many elements of the Third Reich were crumbling under intense military pressure from Allied forces, as well as having no centralised command.<sup>71</sup> This chapter will argue that Neuengamme camp was remarkably different to other camps because of its close links between civilian administrators, SS and local business leaders. In order to understand why this was so important there are a number of factors to consider.

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<sup>70</sup> Daniel Blatman, “The Death Marches and the final phase of Nazi Genocide”, in Jane Caplan and Nikolaus Wachsmann (eds.), *Concentration Camps in Nazi Germany: The New Histories* (Routledge: London, 2010), p. 167.

<sup>71</sup> See various secondary accounts, Ian Kershaw, *The End: Hitler’s Germany, 1944-1945* (Allen Lane: London, 2010); Antony Beevor, *The Second World War* (W&N: London, 2012); Max Hastings, *All Hell Let Loose: The World at War 1939-1945* (Harper Press: London, 2011); Richard Overy, *The Third Reich: A Chronicle* (Quercus: London, 2011); William L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* (Arrow: London, 1991).

A closer analysis of Neuengamme camp and its position within the SS camp system are vital to understanding how and why the local civilian administration was heavily engaged within the camp. While the camp commandant was responsible for delegating the selection of each prisoner transport on behalf of the SS Main Economic and Administration Office (WVHA), many of the business contracts were put forward on behalf of local business leaders through the Hamburg administration. From late 1944 onwards there was a tussle over who had responsibility for arranging the evacuation process, and therefore it is important to establish exactly who was ultimately, responsible for guiding this process. In terms of the *Cap Arcona*, this issue of purpose has yet to be explored fully. In defining who was responsible for the process and planning of the evacuation, we can further explore the purpose of utilising the *Cap Arcona* as well as defining personal motives.

Finally this chapter will examine more closely the impact of the evacuation order Fall-A, and discuss how, ultimately the *Cap Arcona* was chosen as a viable solution for the evacuation of Neuengamme camp. Why was Gauleiter Kaufmann seeking a solution to the evacuation issue? What were the driving factors behind this? Did the local SS have any short term or long term aims for the evacuees? How did the relationship between Gauleiter and HSSPF (Höheren SS-und Polizeiführer) function in terms of the evacuation process?

## Neuengamme camp and the City of Hamburg

In attempting to understand the unique situation that existed between Hamburg and the camp constructed at Neuengamme, it is necessary to examine why the camp was built.

In addition, it will be important to discuss why the camp operated differently to other SS- camps. To grasp why the camp needed to be evacuated to the Baltic coast, we must first examine the unique relationship between the party administration, SS and business leaders. In focusing on the development and importance of this close co-operation this chapter will show that in the chaotic final months of the war, these relationships drove the evacuation process from Neuengamme camp.

Nazi camps were often designed to exploit a much-needed labour resource as the war intensified. The camp at Neuengamme became an integral part of the expansive camp system. One area which requires particular examination is the involvement of the local party administration in the early months of the camp's operation. In an account published shortly after the war, Möller described the Hamburg Gauleiter as "the good Gauleiter".<sup>72</sup> The frequent misreading of the role of the Gauleiter in Hamburg has meant that very little has been researched regarding his authority and role within Hamburg. In his study on Gauleiter Kaufmann, Bajohr argued that his anti-Jewish policies during the rise of Nazism show the Gauleiter as a ruthless businessman.<sup>73</sup> His role and close

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<sup>72</sup> See Kurt Möller, *Das Letzte Kapitel* (Hoffmann and Campe: Hamburg, 1947); D.Tilgner, "Karl Kaufmann", in Daniel Tilgner and Franklin Kopitzsch (eds.), *Hamburg Lexikon* (Ellert & Rickter Verlag: Hamburg, 2005), pp. 384-385.

<sup>73</sup> For instance see, Frank Bajohr and Dieter Pohl (eds.), *Massenmord und Schlechtes Gewissen: Die deutsche Bevölkerung, die NS-Führung und der Holocaust* (Fischer Taschenbuch: Frankfurt am Main, 2008); Frank Bajohr, *Arisierung in Hamburg: Die Verdrängung der Jüdischen Unternehmen 1933-1945* (Christians Verlag: Hamburg, 2003).

business interests within Hamburg further prove his extensive involvement in the development and evolution of the camp at Neuengamme. In addition the speed at which Neuengamme expanded further highlights how prosperous this business link between civil administration and business leaders was. It is precisely this close working relationship that led to the subsequent placement of prisoners on the *Cap Arcona*.

Neuengamme concentration camp was situated 20km south of Hamburg. While it started life as a satellite camp to the larger establishment of Sachsenhausen in 1938, on the outbreak of war it was expanded to a full independent camp.<sup>74</sup> The camp boundaries were drastically changed and expanded beyond its pre-1939 area. From 4 June 1940, the camp was accommodating some 2,000 prisoners.<sup>75</sup> The SS were keen to branch into businesses in the city of Hamburg and surrounding areas. As the war continued, the demand for slave labour rose dramatically. In particular, the armaments and war production businesses expanded exponentially. This led to extensive negotiations between the city of Hamburg and the WVHA. In turn, it was agreed mutually that the

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<sup>74</sup> Wolfgang Sofsky, *The Order of Terror: The Concentration Camp*, Translated by William Templer (Princeton University Press: New Jersey, 1997), p. 36. See also, TNA WO 235/162, The Neuengamme Trial: Hamburg Curio-Haus - *Introduction by Major Stewart*, 18 March 1946, p. 7. See also Detlef Garbe, *Neuengamme im System der Konzentrationslager: Studien zur Ereignisse- und Rezeptionsgeschichte* (Metropol Verlag: Berlin, 2015); Amicale de Neuengamme, *Neuengamme, camp de concentration Nazi 1938-1945* (Tiresias: Paris, 2010); Christopher Dillon, *Dachau and the SS: A Schooling in Violence* (OUP: Oxford, 2015); Nikolaus Wachsmann, *KL: A History of the Nazi Concentration Camps* (Little, Brown: 2015); Karin Orth, *Das System der Nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslager: Eine Politische Organisationsgeschichte* (Hamburger Edition: Hamburg, 1999); Eugen Kogon, *Der SS-Staat: Der System der deutschen Konzentrationslager* (Heyne Verlag: Munich, 1988).

<sup>75</sup> TNA WO 235/162: Hamburg Curio Haus Trial - *Opening statement*, p. 10. See also, TNA WO 309/870, "A Report", 10 Nov 1945.

civilian administration would offer building and development contracts and projects to the camp, in turn for cheap and freely available labour for local businesses.

At its peak, Neuengamme was responsible for around eighty-six subsidiary camps, most of which were engaged in armaments production or construction works.<sup>76</sup> Furthermore a decree from the Ministry of Armaments in 1942 led to an increase in the demand for slave labour to be supplied by concentration camps. The expansion of Neuengamme during the war demonstrates that the relationship between the city and SS administration functioned well. In comparison, the SS run camp at Sachsenhausen showed that the SS had more flexibility over a number of key factors.<sup>77</sup> Firstly, the choice in industry, as well as prisoner tasks, was down to the camp administration. This led to a number of SS-run workshops as well as small companies situated close to the site utilising prison labour. In the case of Neuengamme, the SS were largely handed appropriate contracts from the city administration, rather than being able to seek direct business links with business owners. Secondly, the SS administration in Sachsenhausen was able to benefit financially from the exploitation of slave labour.<sup>78</sup> In continuing to

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<sup>76</sup> Website: “Neuengamme Concentration Camp”, <https://www.kz-gedenkstaette-Neuengamme.de/index.php?id=985>, [Accessed 6 March 2014, 14:13]; Also see Hermann Kaienburg, *Vernichtung durch Arbeit: Der Fall Neuengamme; die Wirtschaftsbestrebungen der SS und ihre Auswirkungen auf die Existenzbedingungen der KZ-Gefangenen* (J.H.W.Dietz: Bonn, 1990); Hermann Kaienburg, *Nationalsozialistische Konzentrationslager 1933-1945: Die Veränderung der Existenzbedingungen* (Metropol Verlag: Berlin, 2010).

<sup>77</sup> For a brief history see “Museum and Memorial Sachsenhausen”, <http://www.stiftung-bg.de/gums/en/>, [Accessed on 16 November 2016].

<sup>78</sup> See Todd Huebner, “Sachsenhausen Main Camp: Ghettos in German-Occupied Eastern Europe”, in Geoffrey P.Megaree (ed.), *The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Encyclopaedia of Camps and Ghettos, 1933-1945*, Volume 1 part B (Indiana University Press: Indiana, 2009), pp. 1255-1262.

hire out prisoners, the SS administration attempted to meet a growing demand. The camp at Neuengamme, however, functioned differently. In most camps, the SS received significant financial reward and benefit from developing extensive business contracts. But with the development of the camp at Neuengamme, there was significantly less scope to seek business opportunities independently. The Hamburg civilian administration decided which contracts and which businesses would utilise slave labour. For example, owing to a lack of production at the shipyards, sub-camps were built and prisoners were employed to drive up the U-boat production after numerous bombing raids.<sup>79</sup> But what remained unique was the relationship between the SS body and the civilian administration in Hamburg.

The construction of the camp at Neuengamme was an important asset, not only for the SS, but for the local civilian administration. Buggeln notes that “Gauleiter Karl Kaufmann was presumably behind the initiative to establish the camp”.<sup>80</sup> Having finally secured the development of an independent concentration camp, Gauleiter Kaufmann had met longstanding demands from the Hamburg police authorities for a concentration camp.<sup>81</sup> But Kaufmann was also an ambitious man. After extensive negotiations with

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<sup>79</sup> See Hermann Kaienburg, “Neuengamme Main Camp”, in Geoffrey P. Megaree (ed.), *The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Encyclopaedia of Camps and Ghettos, 1933-1945 Volume 1 part B* (Indiana University Press: Indiana, 2009), pp. 1073-1078.

<sup>80</sup> Marc Buggeln, “Building to Death: Prisoner Forced Labour in the German War Economy: The Neuengamme Sub-camps, 1942-1945”, *European History Quarterly* 39:4 (2009), pp. 606-632. Reference cited on p. 613.

<sup>81</sup> See Buggeln, “Building to Death”, p. 613; See also Marc Buggeln and Michael Wildt, *Arbeit im Nationalsozialismus: Ein Buchprojekt im Open Peer Review* (De Gruyter: Oldenbourg, 2014); Ronald Rogowski, “The Gauleiter and the Social Origins of Fascism” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* Vol.19 (1977), pp. 399-430.

Speer, Kaufmann wished to make Hamburg the leading port of Nazi Germany.<sup>82</sup>

Arguably, this demonstrates above all else that Kaufmann was determined that the city of Hamburg would thrive both during and after the war. In all other matters, his concern was for the business community and his personal gains.

Neuengamme's position within the wider camp system and its relationship with the state apparatus allowed both parties to benefit from the association. In terms of its function, the camp became an important labour reserve for key industrial war productions. Largely the SS-run camps were designed to turn camps into a well-organised and functional reservoir of labour for the armaments industry.<sup>83</sup> Although historians suggest that this did in fact fail, the construction and expansion of Neuengamme would suggest otherwise.<sup>84</sup> Prisoners were engaged in sub-camps associated with Neuengamme camp which extended from the Channel Islands to North-Sea fortifications and shipbuilding yards. This therefore suggests that the link between camp and business had been extremely successful at Neuengamme. The growth and breadth of tasks, as well as business interests clearly point to the effectiveness of close links with the city administration. The crucial location of the camp in North Germany meant that it became an important source of labour supply for the German Navy, who

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<sup>82</sup> Buggeln, "Building to Death", pp. 613-14.

<sup>83</sup> For instance see Orth, "The Concentration Camp Personnel", in Caplan and Wachsmann (eds.), *Concentration Camps in Nazi Germany*, p. 53.

<sup>84</sup> For instance see Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (Abacus: London, 1997); Buggeln, "Building to Death", pp. 606-632; Orth, *Das System der Nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslager*; Alex Hinton, "Why did the Nazis Kill? Anthropology, Genocide and the Goldhagen Controversy" in *Anthropology Today* 14:5 (Oct 1998), pp. 6-15.

engaged prisoners in the building of submarine pens *Valentin* and *Hornisse*.<sup>85</sup> Moreover slave labour supply for the armaments industry in and around Hamburg remained important. Labour supply for *Hermann Goering Reichswerke, Draht- und Metallwarenfabrik Salzwedel GmbH*, and other large manufacturers continued throughout the war.

While large extermination camps such as Auschwitz-Birkenau, Chelmno and Treblinka began to systematically exterminate European Jewry, camps such as Neuengamme were designed to provide slave labour for German industry. Orth notes that “the twin demands of genocide and forced labour [...] brought functional changes to the concentration camp system in the second half of the war”.<sup>86</sup> Although wholesale change did affect the wider camp system, Neuengamme remained relatively unchanged. As the demand for slave labour intensified Neuengamme did not expand as rapidly as other camps. Business communities and other large entrepreneurs were often unwilling to use or be associated with slave labour. Change was only forthcoming when a chronic labour shortage in key industries could no longer be filled by civilian labour. With this change in labour requirements the satellite camp system expanded exponentially. At the start of 1944 there were approximately four satellite camps. By the end of the year that number had risen to approximately seventy satellite camps.<sup>87</sup> The close connection between the camp and the sub-camp system and its association with local businesses remain an

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<sup>85</sup> Buggeln, *Slave Labor*, pp. 117-119.

<sup>86</sup> Karin Orth, “The Concentration Camp Personnel” in Jane Caplan and Nikolaus Wachsmann (eds.), *Concentration Camps in Nazi Germany: The New Histories* (Routledge: London, 2010), p. 52.

<sup>87</sup> Buggeln, “Building to Death”, p. 614.

influential factor for the history of the *Cap Arcona*. One useful measure was prisoner survival rates. This was used to rank prisoners in terms of their potential productivity and usefulness within the SS camp model. During the evacuation period in April 1945, the transfer of this hierarchical model to the *Cap Arcona* demonstrated that the SS still hoped to retain some viable use for the evacuees.

Survival rates and the prisoner hierarchy remains a useful tool in examining labour requirements and a potential use of the *Cap Arcona*. Orth argues that “the chances of survival were closely linked to the type of forced labour and the individual’s status in the racist prisoner hierarchy”.<sup>88</sup> The SS prisoner hierarchy, as noted by Orth, has been identified in terms of its racist structure in how it categorised its total prisoner population. The SS based the model on themselves being seen as top of the hierarchy. The further away an individual was categorised, the lower they ranked within the camp society. Sofsky notes that “the further a category was from the SS... the greater was the pressure for annihilation to which it was subjected”.<sup>89</sup> Based on this model of camp social structure, the type of work which was almost certain to result in death was given to those prisoners who were socially considered at the bottom of the SS model. For example, figure one highlights an overview of this model. Prisoners of Russian nationality, or Jewish faith often found themselves tasked with the hard, gruelling manual labour tasks, rather than skilled factory work. Moreover, even if they were skilled in a specific trade the SS ignored this because of their social status within the

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<sup>88</sup> Karin Orth, *Das System der Nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslager: Eine Politische Organisationsgeschichte* (Hamburger Edition: Hamburg, 1999), pp. 239-241.

<sup>89</sup> Sofsky, *The Order of Terror*, p. 118.

hierarchy model. In terms of productivity within the camp surroundings, productivity was measured either in business output, or death. For certain business contracts, output was measured by supply and demand. Where the SS set tasks, such as digging anti-tank ditches, the type of work was well-known to result in death and therefore often assigned to Russian prisoners.

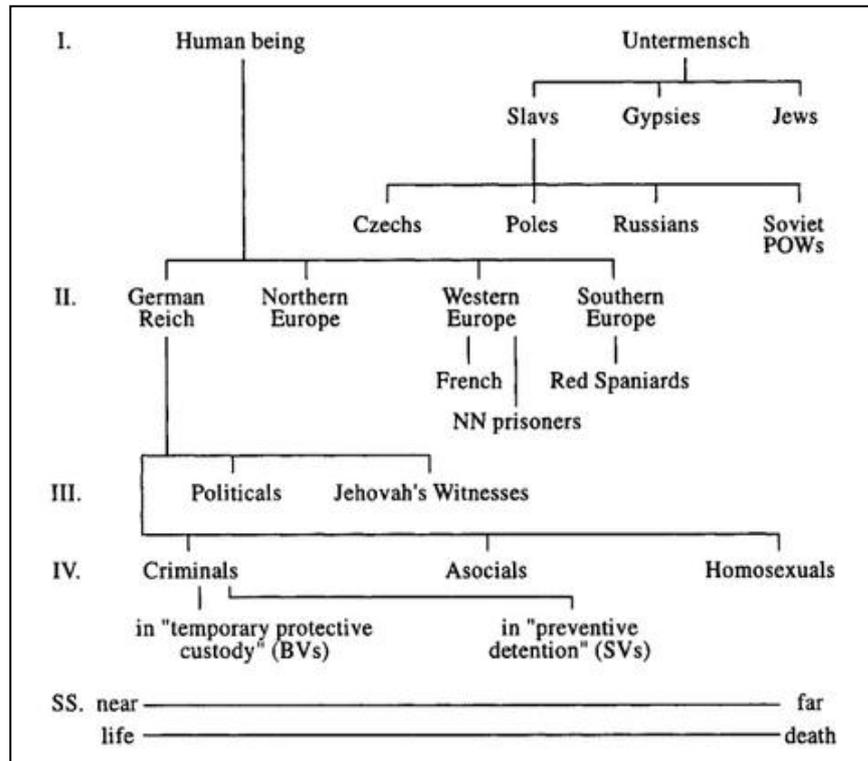


Figure One: Model of SS camp racial model.<sup>90</sup>

From a closer inspection of prisoners' skills and nationality, it remains clear that these two factors played an important role in terms of a prisoner's ability to survive the work camps. Orth therefore identifies two pre-requisites for determining a prisoner's chance of survival. While this was applicable during the war, its application during the evacuation of the camp seemed pointless. During the evacuation process the type of

<sup>90</sup> Sofsky, *The Order of Terror*, p. 120.

work was relatively unimportant, and therefore it was a prisoner's status within the SS hierarchy that became the defining feature. The two pre-requisites outlined by Orth are not applicable throughout. We can therefore infer that the SS prisoner hierarchy was the preferred method of categorisation for prisoners rather than by skill or labour abilities. Moreover this system was readily and easily transferable aboard the *Cap Arcona*. The continued segregation based on this model suggests that the SS still hoped that the prisoners could be utilised further.

Sofsky notes that "the society of the concentration camp was a system of glaring differences and extreme inequality".<sup>91</sup> His representation of camp structure and the social injustices that faced the prison inmates demonstrates clearly that the SS regime encouraged inequality amongst its prison workforce. In fact this development of a social hierarchy within the camp compounds is a useful framework within which to discuss the aims and behaviours of the governance of the camp. Neuengamme camp was never designated to hold one category of prisoner. The diverse collection of different nationalities, as well as religion, show that the camp was often more diverse than other sized camps. Sofsky further argues that the prison structure within the camp was largely geared towards those criminal and political prisoners from within the Reich as well as outer territories.<sup>92</sup> Furthermore based on his model it was clear that both the type of work a prisoner was expected to undertake and their alleged crime could then determine the length of time a prisoner would be expected to survive.<sup>93</sup> Nowhere is this more

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<sup>91</sup> Sofsky, *The Order of Terror*, p. 118.

<sup>92</sup> Sofsky, *The Order of Terror*, p. 119.

<sup>93</sup> Sofsky, *The Order of Terror*, p. 120.

evident than in the construction of the Dove-Elbe canal. Those prisoners deemed essential to the brick-works production were left in their current role, while prisoners deemed expendable to the SS- business interests were forced to work in horrific conditions.<sup>94</sup>

Once on board the *Cap Arcona* the SS continued to privilege one set of prisoners over another through the continued implementation of the camp hierarchy. This continued use of the SS hierarchy raises a number of issues. Firstly, the extension of the physical properties of the camp to the *Cap Arcona* suggests a force of habit which was often typical Nazi elitism. This extension also shows a level of detailed planning in application. It certainly was not simply a case of loading prisoners anywhere on the *Cap Arcona*, but in clearly defined levels on the vessel. Secondly, the transfer to the *Cap Arcona* clearly shows that there was now no long-term planning. The continued barbaric treatment and dwindling conditions further highlight that the SS system was in turmoil. A lack of basic provisions, as well as water, show clearly that the *Cap Arcona* was destined to be a grave for the majority of prisoners. The structure and hierarchy that existed supported those of Western nationality; where as those of Russian or even Jewish religion had limited chances below the decks of the *Cap Arcona*. This suggested that the *Cap Arcona* served as a mere extension of the physical camp structure. As with some sub-camps, the placement of prisoners in certain areas of the ship could only achieve one thing: namely the extinction of life. One useful example was the sub-camp at Husum. The purpose of this sub-camp was designed to force prisoners to dig anti-

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<sup>94</sup> See “Neuengamme Concentration Camp”, <https://www.kz-gedenkstaette-Neuengamme.de/index.php?id=985>, [Accessed 6 March 2014, 14:13].

tank ditches. Because of the location the prisoners had to march around 10 to 15 kilometres before starting work. The nature of work involved in digging anti-tank ditches was heavily labour intensive. Therefore those prisoners who were assigned to this type of work were not readily expected to survive any length of time. In fact, they were marched some significant distance to the site prior to undertaking any work. As a result, many were exhausted which ultimately resulted in high mortality rates. Marching the prisoners the considerable distance each and every day only served to weaken them so that they would be less likely to survive the slave labour. Moreover, much of the work required was done during late autumn and early winter. Buggeln notes that on November 25, 1944 “there were 734 sick prisoners in the camp, which amounted to more than 50 percent of the detainees who were still alive”.<sup>95</sup> Therefore in similar comparison to life on board the *Cap Arcona*, SS methods of detention and killing remain the same as the life in the sub-camp at Husum. Those prisoners within the SS hierarchy who were seen as the lowest in the structure were considered expendable. Consequently the type of work was therefore often labour intensive, and resulted often in death. Furthermore this group of prisoners were placed into the hold of the *Cap Arcona*, often without sufficient light, air and water supplies. We can therefore infer that this was done with the sole purpose of extinguish life.

Although the camp at Husum only functioned for a short period of time, we can draw important conclusions from this. Firstly, the type of work combined with the conditions would arguably suggest that the prisoners were deliberately worked to death. That being the case, the type of work expected of this labour force and the harsh conditions, had no

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<sup>95</sup> Buggeln, *Slave Labor*, p. 103.

other purpose than ending life. The structure and organisation from the main camp at Neuengamme to the location of work demonstrated the administration's determination to develop and sacrifice working parties. It also demonstrates that even before the evacuation order was given, there was a unique structure organising and implementing certain marches. In the case of the sub-camp at Husum brutal working conditions and corrupt practices became the norm.<sup>96</sup> However in practical terms the organisation and negotiations between the administration and the German Navy highlights the close connections the camp fostered with external agencies. The subsequent expansion of the sub-camp network within Neuengamme shows a distinctive situation. Those prisoners, who were deemed useful to the Reich, were seen in terms of business exploitation, while those prisoners without any useful skill were expendable. This meant that in the case of Husum, high mortality rates were largely amongst unskilled labourers, while such figures were not seen in key armaments industries. This example shows that the SS prisoner hierarchy was readily transferable to not only the *Cap Arcona*, but also to different satellite camps. Furthermore, the SS continued to hold some control over the day-to-day running of the camp. The example of Husum shows clearly that the camp was designed to extinguish life in a short period of time. But in terms of this SS hierarchy being transferred to the *Cap Arcona*, the prisoner hierarchy clearly highlights that the Nazi regime was attempting to find some normal function amidst a difficult situation. There was no real purpose to continued segregation based on the SS racial model other than a twisted form of ideological disillusionment whereby the SS elements attempted to maintain a power structure despite collapse elsewhere.

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<sup>96</sup> Buggeln, *Slave Labor*, p. 103.

Conditions within the camp structure demonstrate and provide key insights into the treatment of prisoners by the localised command structure. By focusing on these conditions, historians can ascertain crucial information that provides an insight into the overall intentions of the local command structure. This localised chain of command is key to understanding the processes that led to the use and implementation of the *Cap Arcona* as a temporary camp. Within this broader framework, the general situation was often ad hoc and frantic. But this example highlights that local rationality and local policy making was still effective. Within this local rationality the approach of Gauleiter Kaufmann still shows that policy was blinkered. For instance, prisoners' treatment within the sub-camp system demonstrates a number of important factors. Firstly, while certain types of industrial output deemed that there was a constant and regular flow of prisoners, there were those types of work which were short-lived and potentially deadly. In the case of Husum, the camp was largely designed as a knee-jerk reaction to the threat of an Allied invasion. In comparison, the sub-camps associated with the shipyard at Blohm & Voss were an important industrial output and therefore while prisoner conditions were still below an acceptable standard, the need to continue a vital war production meant that mortality rates remained comparatively low.<sup>97</sup> Therefore while German industry had a potential output for slave labour vital to the war effort, these categories of prisoners had a greater chance of survival. But once this hierarchy reverted back to the SS ethnic segregation, it became more dependent on ethnicity than skill.

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<sup>97</sup> Buggeln, *Slave Labor*, "Appendix 5". The mortality rates in the Blohm & Voss camp between November 1944 and March 1945 was around 2.9% of the total prison workforce.

In terms of Neuengamme's labour output Buggeln notes that "an evaluation of prisoner file cards [...] revealed that of the 27,735 prisoners who have a Neuengamme prisoner number, 22,823 (82.3%) are listed as unskilled labourers (no useful skill) and 2,355 (8.5%) have no profession, meaning that only 2,557 prisoners (9.2%) are recorded as having a specific occupation".<sup>98</sup> This relatively small number of skilled workers meant that any death of a skilled worker would have a direct impact on a company's output. The expansion of sub-camps attached to Neuengamme highlight the successful relationship between the city and key businesses. This relationship between the camp and business industrialists remains important for any discussion on the sinking of the *Cap Arcona*. In other similar-sized camp evacuations the majority of prisoners were forcibly marched to a destination unknown. This resulted in incalculable deaths. But Neuengamme was markedly different because of the close connection between Hamburg and the camp. The extensive use of slave labour from Neuengamme within a variety of industrial outputs placed increasing pressure to find a permanent solution to the evacuation question. Once business leaders no longer required slave labour in April 1945, the former SS camp hierarchy was implemented. The transfer and continuation of this social structure on board the *Cap Arcona* shows that the SS still retained some control over the evacuation process. While the SS supported the evacuation from Neuengamme, the drive behind ensuring it was undertaken smoothly was a result of the pressure from the civilian administration in Hamburg. Thereafter the drive to plan the evacuation was largely driven by Gauleiter Kaufmann; the transfer of an internal camp hierarchy demonstrates clearly that the SS still played an important role in the transfer of prisoners to the *Cap Arcona*. However it is difficult to explain why it remained

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<sup>98</sup> Buggeln, *Slave Labor*, p. 92-93.

important to continue this segregation. One possible motive is that the SS wished, at some point, to continue the use of slave labour for future tasks. But once the prisoners are placed on the *Cap Arcona* it was difficult to see any other viable use other than their continued detention. The evacuation to the *Cap Arcona* shows that Nazi policy, in this instance, had regressed back into a form of ghettoisation through the use of prison ships.

Neuengamme's position within the wider camp system and its relationship with the state apparatus allowed both parties to benefit from the association. In terms of its function, the camp became an important labour reserve for key industrial war productions. Largely the SS-run camps were designed to turn camps into a well-organised and functional reservoir of labour for the armaments industry.<sup>99</sup> Although historians suggest that this did in fact fail, the construction and expansion of Neuengamme would suggest otherwise.<sup>100</sup> Prisoners were engaged in sub-camps associated with Neuengamme camp which extended from the Channel Islands to North-Sea fortifications and shipbuilding yards. This therefore suggests that the link between camp and business had been extremely successful at Neuengamme. The growth and breadth of tasks, as well as business interests clearly point to the effectiveness of close links with the city administration. The crucial location of the camp in North Germany meant that it became an important source of labour supply for the German Navy, who

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<sup>99</sup> For instance see Orth, "The Concentration Camp Personnel", in Caplan and Wachsmann (eds.), *Concentration Camps in Nazi Germany*, p. 53.

<sup>100</sup> For instance see Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (Abacus: London, 1997); Buggeln, "Building to Death", pp. 606-632; Orth, *Das System der Nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslager*; Alex Hinton, "Why did the Nazis Kill? Anthropology, Genocide and the Goldhagen Controversy" in *Anthropology Today* 14:5 (Oct 1998), pp. 6-15.

engaged prisoners in the building of submarine pens *Valentin* and *Hornisse*.<sup>101</sup> Moreover slave labour supply for the armaments industry in and around Hamburg remained important. Labour supply for *Hermann Goering Reichswerke, Draht- und Metallwarenfabrik Salzwedel GmbH*, and other large manufacturers continued throughout the war.

## **Political Interest**

This section will analyse more closely the impact of a breakdown of central communications. In relation to the *Cap Arcona*, this breakdown of communication ultimately gave rise to a strong local command administration in Hamburg. This section will seek to argue that during these final months, orders from the Reich centre were often indecisive and unclear. This meant that local state organizations had increasing scope to interpret orders as they saw fit. In the case of Neuengamme and the city of Hamburg, the local Gauleiter and Police Chief were, for both personal and professional reasons, determined to evacuate the camp. What was unique about this situation? How did the *Cap Arcona* come to be utilised as a floating concentration camp?

In the midst of the final months of the war, Blatman suggests that within all elements of German society that “the orderly continuity that enabled social stability and a reasonable prospect for the future was breaking down. Its collapse led to disrupted communications and even disconnection between those who gave the orders and those

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<sup>101</sup> Buggeln, *Slave Labor*, pp. 117-119.

who executed them”.<sup>102</sup> Confidence in the regime’s ability to lead and stave off defeat was very low; the civilian population felt that the regime was to blame for all the catastrophes that had now befallen the country.<sup>103</sup> Throughout the final weeks and months of the war the German state continued in a vain attempt to reverse military fortunes on both fronts. In doing so, central government and guidance became increasingly confused and unclear. This often meant that orders received in areas such as Hamburg were often out-dated or impossible to follow. The ability of the Reich Centre to coherently filter information to the remaining German-held territories was increasingly difficult. Baranowski suggests that “the bureaucratic structures and procedures of the Nazi concentration camp system functioned to the bitter end. Although the lines of authority and the issuance of orders did become confused before and during the evacuations, Himmler continued to exercise his authority from the top”.<sup>104</sup> But in the case of Hamburg we witness a growth in localised pockets of governance, almost devoid of contact with the Reich centre. For the prisoners held at Neuengamme, this meant that by 1945 their fate was in the hands of the local SS and civilian bureaucracy.

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<sup>102</sup> Blatman, *The Death Marches*, p. 408-409.

<sup>103</sup> See Daniel Blatman, “On the Traces of the Death Marches: The Historiographical Challenge”, in Jean-Luc Blondel, Susanne Urban and Sebastian Schönemann (eds.), *Freilegungen: Auf den Spuren der Todesmärsche* (Wallstein Verlag: Göttingen, 2012), p. 99. See also Kershaw, *The End*.

<sup>104</sup> Katrin Greiser, *Die Todesmarsche von Buchenwald: Raumdung, Befreiung und Erinnerungen*, Book Review by Shelley Baranowski, *Central European History* 43:3 (2010), p. 544-556. Reference cited on p. 545.

Developments on both fronts continued to push the German army back. On 17 June 1944 the Nazi High Command began to discuss potential problems associated with the concentration camp network. Himmler, as a result of an impending threat concerning camp security, issued a directive which was considered unique of its kind. This order provides the initial driving force behind the planning process to evacuate the camp at Neuengamme, and other camps, and subsequently to utilise the *Cap Arcona*. Formally issued by Richard Glücks, head of Amtsgruppe D, the directive “was addressed mainly to the supreme SS and Police commanders, the HSSPF in various districts of the Reich and the occupied territories”.<sup>105</sup> This group of senior SS leaders were an elite group of men who had been entrusted by Himmler to implement tasks of a sensitive and difficult nature. The problem is that there was considerable confusion surrounding the directive. Known as “security of concentration camps in case A” (also known in German as *Sicherung der Konzentrationslager Fall-A*), it stated that:

Camp commandants continue [to be] responsible to the WVHA for all general administrative matters except during alert periods (Fall-A), when the HSSPF assumes complete control of Concentration camps in his military district (Wehrkreis) and the camp commandants become members of his staff. The HSSPF is, henceforth, responsible for the military security of all concentration camps and work camps in his districts with the exception of special purpose camps and political sections.<sup>106</sup>

In general there was a clear structure within the various SS departments which determined who took charge in the event of a security issue. The problem is, what could actually be defined as an alert period? The result of this confused order meant that many

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<sup>105</sup> Blatman, *Death Marches*, p. 51.

<sup>106</sup> International Military Tribunal (Hereafter IMT) PS-3638: Himmler to Senior SS Officers, 21 June 1944. Also see TNA WO 309/408: *Copy of order extracted from the C.I. Monitor of 13.1.45, Directive “D” by RFSS (36643-1(r)), 17 June 44.*

HSSPF were instructed to use their initiative to interpret the orders as they saw fit. For the camp at Neuengamme this in turn meant that Bassewitz-Behr should have taken charge of the evacuation planning process. In reality the process was heavily guided by the local Gauleiter Karl Kaufmann. The problem is how best we might understand this order in light of a perceived threat by German commanders. During the trial at the International Military Tribunal (IMT) of Oswald Pohl, Gerhard Maurer argued in defence of Pohl regarding the directive from Himmler:

I remember that in the middle of 1944 Himmler issued an order to the Higher SS and Police leaders according to which, in the case of "A" the concentration camps and work camps located in the district of command, were automatically subordinated to them. Upon receipt of this order the Higher SS and Police Leaders had to get in touch immediately with camp commanders to prepare for taking charge of the camps in the Fall-A case.<sup>107</sup>

While the basis of both versions of Himmler's directive remains the same, Maurer placed a greater emphasis of the camp commandant's automatically becoming subordinate to the HSSPF. What still existed was the lack of a clear and specific set of guidelines on what exactly Fall-A was defined as. The guidance provided no real definition as to what an exceptional case was. In fact, when the decision was left for local commanders to interpret, an exceptional case could easily be defined as an uprising or large-scale revolt within a town or city, or more seriously could be described as an attack on the state itself. Attempts on Hitler's life is one plausible example of what could have been deemed an exceptional case and warranted the implementation of order Fall-A. One clear and concise example for the implementation of this order was the Allied landings on the Normandy beaches in June 1944. This knee-jerk reaction to a

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<sup>107</sup> IMT Pohl Trial, *Deposition of Gerhard Mauser*, Exhibit no. 15, 3 July 1947.

significant threat demonstrates the severity with which this order was subsequently implemented. However, amidst the fighting, communications as well as Germany's ability to hold the Allied advance at bay meant that orders from the Reich centre became tangled in the maelstrom that had begun to grip German forces. The impact of order Fall-A further shows the impact of chaos within central authority in the final months of the war. Furthermore, this left significant scope and interpretation of central orders which gave rise to local decision-making policy.

This order remained unaltered for the remainder of the German campaign. In terms of its impact on the camp at Neuengamme, responsibility to apply the command fell to the local HSSPF Graf Henning von Bassewitz-Behr. There is, however, confusion who ultimately was responsible for planning the evacuation of Neuengamme. Appointed to the position of HSSPF on 16 February 1943, Neuengamme camp fell under his jurisdiction and therefore he was responsible, in a security capacity, of overseeing the camp. In a discussion with his superiors shortly after his appointment to the post in Hamburg, Bassewitz outlined his duties as:

- (a) Chief of the Allgemeine SS of the Oberabschnitt Nordsee;
- (b) Representative of the "Reichkommissar für die Festigung Deutschen Volksturm im Osten", that is to say [responsible for] the welfare of those prisoners who had been transferred from the East into the Reich as of German blood, with a view to being given German Nationality later;
- (c) The care of, supply and welfare of the families of the members of the SS and police, killed or wounded in action;
- (d) Liaison between party state administration, armed forces, commerce and trade, and the RFSS;
- (e) Organisation of the Werwolves in collaboration with the four Gauleiter's of my command. A complete organisation has not yet been achieved as, in my view,

too many different organisations were engaged in the matter, and in particular I lost together with Gauleiter Kaufmann of Hamburg.<sup>108</sup>

The role of the senior police chief had over the course of the war developed into a position that encompassed many responsibilities covering an array of political and social areas. One of his many duties was to attend meetings with the various bodies of the armed forces, political elite, business leaders and state administrators. In this liaison role Bassewitz-Behr was potentially an influential and important figure in deciding the fate of the prisoners of Neuengamme. The link between the HSSPF's orders and those outlined by order Fall-A dictated that under certain circumstances that Neuengamme camp became his responsibility. During July 1944, Bassewitz-Behr received a promotion to General of the Waffen-SS and Police, which entitled him to convene the necessary military courts, where he saw fit.<sup>109</sup> This enabled the local police chief to tighten his grip on military and police concerns within his district. Yet the governing boundaries were continually changing as the situation – particularly on the eastern front – deteriorated.

To understand Bassewitz-Behr's role in the evacuation process, we must first examine his role in Neuengamme concentration camp. Bassewitz-Behr was on good duty terms with the camp commandant Max Pauly.<sup>110</sup> This relationship, for the most part,

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<sup>108</sup> TNA WO 309/408: *Commission Belgè des Crimes de Guerre*, p. 2.

<sup>109</sup> Open Access Archives Neuengamme (Hereafter OAN) *Bassewitz-Behr*, compiled from the Bundesarchiv Berlin, pp. 3-4.

<sup>110</sup> TNA WO 309/408: *Commission Belgè des Crimes de Guerre*, 17 Feb 1946. See also TNA WO235/163: *Statement by Bassewitz-Behr*, "Hamburg Curio Haus trial".

functioned to provide local businesses with slave labour from Neuengamme. But within the camp, conditions declined as the war progressed. A decline in food rations increased the camp's mortality rate. When questioned about the function of the camp, Bassewitz-Behr suggested that conditions "were good enough that if you wanted to holiday there, it would have been possible".<sup>111</sup> As industry continued to demand labour for the war economy, nationality had little influence in securing additional rations as it had in the camp. Instead, skilled inmates, those most highly valued by industrials, were the group that often secured additional food items. One prisoner recalled that

We received daily for breakfast; ½ litre of a very thin soup or coffee and 125 grams of bread with it; at midday 1 to 1½ litres of water with some cooked swedes, white cabbage, or sometimes potatoes without meat; and in the evening 250 grams of bread, 15 to 20 grams margarine with 20 to 25 grams sausage or cheese, or curds.<sup>112</sup>

By official standards this was significantly less than had been officially allocated by central office. Hunger often determined the prisoners' every thought and action.<sup>113</sup> A standard breakfast ration would normally consist of approximately 280 grams of bread. Therefore Bassewitz-Behr's comments can be dismissed as it was highly improbable that Neuengamme would have been a holiday destination for many Germans. These comments were made to the Allied War Crimes investigators, which would suggest

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<sup>111</sup> TNA WO 309/408: *Commission Belgè des Crimes de Guerre*.

<sup>112</sup> TNA WO 309/870: *Deposition of Herbert Schemmel, taken by Captain Anton Walter Freud*, No. 2 War crimes investigation team at Hamburg, 20 December 1945, pp. 6-7.

<sup>113</sup> See Karin Schawe (ed.), *The Neuengamme Concentration Camp Memorial – A guide to the Site's History and the Memorial* (Neuengamme Concentration Camp Memorial: Hamburg, 2010), pp. 36-37.

Bassewitz-Behr was attempting to downplay the overall conditions within the camp, as well as its overall function.

Food became a key factor which would ultimately decide the fate of individual prisoners. The rations received in the camp, albeit insufficient, still enabled prisoners for a period of time to undertake work. Yet “the SS had dwindling supplies of food and clothing for the prisoners, however did little to alleviate these deficiencies and, starting in the fall of 1944, started to blame the prisoners for the situation”.<sup>114</sup> Once the inmates left the camp, however, to be evacuated to Lübeck, it became increasingly unlikely that food items or water stocks would be provided at the same level.<sup>115</sup> At a conference held in Hamburg shortly after the implementation of Fall-A, the relationship between the camp commandant and his superiors deteriorated as conflict arose through a series of localised orders.

As German forces came ever closer to a final capitulation, in-house fighting became more common. The position of the Gauleiter ran in direct opposition to the authority of the HSSPF. Nowhere is this more evident than in the case of Hamburg and the camp at Neuengamme. As Bassewitz-Behr and Kaufmann tussled for power, relations between

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<sup>114</sup> Buggeln, *Slave Labor*, p. 59.

<sup>115</sup> For a discussion as to the conditions on board the ship's, see Benjamin Jacobs and Eugen Pool, *The One-Hundred Year Secret: Britain's Hidden World War II Massacre* (The Lyons Press: Guilford, 2004); Wilhelm Lange, *Dokumentation: Cap Arcona, Das Tragische Ende der KZ-Häftlings-Flötte am 3. Mai 1945* (Struve's Buchdruckerei und Verlag: Eutin Germany, 2005).

the HSSPF and commandant also became fraught. As part of the directive issued under Fall-A, commandants became subordinate to the local HSSPF. As Pauly later revealed:

The Senior SS and Police officer then told me that I had to obey my orders, failing which I would be put on trial before the SS and Police court for disobeying orders, and I received a notification from him that I would be put on trial.<sup>116</sup>

Within Pauly's comments he outlined the need to obey his orders. His orders were to follow through the task of making necessary assessments on the logistics of planning the evacuation of Neuengamme. The most notable deterioration was the fragile relationship between the civilian party officials and the local SS. Kaufmann was appointed to the position of Gauleiter in 1929. From this moment he became a strong political force within the city of Hamburg and its surrounding area.<sup>117</sup> By 1933 he was further appointed Reich Governor (Reichsstatthalter) for Hamburg and on the outbreak of war on September 1939, Reich Defence Commissar for the Hamburg area. At his hands Jewish homes and business owners drastically suffered.<sup>118</sup> In 1943 Kaufmann was appointed to the position of Reich Commissar for shipping. This position enabled him to exercise governance over Nazi maritime shipping operations. Therefore he could

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<sup>116</sup> See for instances, TNA WO 309/408: *Translation of the Deposition on Oath of Max Pauly*, 11 April 1946, p. 1; TNA 235/163: *Interrogation of Max Pauly*, p. 46; TNA WO 311/440: *Deposition of Max Pauly*, 30 March 1946.

<sup>117</sup> For an overview of Karl Kaufmann see <http://media.offenes-archiv.de/karlkaufmann.pdf>, [Accessed 15 November 2013].

<sup>118</sup> Frank Bajohr, *'Aryanisation' in Hamburg: The Economic Exclusion of Jews and the Confiscation of their Property in Nazi Germany*, Translated by George Wilkes, (Berghahn Books: Oxford, 2002); See also Frank Bajohr, *The Beneficiaries of Aryanization: Hamburg as a Case Study*, Yad Vashem Online, [http://www.yadvashem.org/download/about\\_holocaust/studies/bajohr\\_full.pdf](http://www.yadvashem.org/download/about_holocaust/studies/bajohr_full.pdf), [Accessed 16 November 2013].

command the use of ships as a means for the continuation of camp prisoners from Neuengamme.

Within the city of Hamburg, Kaufmann had sought to look after the elite and old party comrades during the recovery of the city from 1943. During his formal statement in the postwar investigations, Kaufmann argued that,

As Reich Commissar for shipping, I directed the operations of German merchant ships, with the exception of oil-tankers and passenger ships which were subordinated to the German Navy.<sup>119</sup>

This gave him authority to liaise freely with the German Navy to requisition passenger liners. The release of the *Cap Arcona* was the result of extensive negotiations between Kaufmann and the Navy, with the set purpose of detaining concentration camp prisoners on board. Although passenger liners were not within his domain, the condition of the *Cap Arcona* meant that the German Navy had released the vessel from operational duty back to the vessels owners.

It was only a matter of time before conflict arose between the party apparatus and the SS machine. The Gauleiter was, in theory, an extended voice of the party, while the HSSPF was charged with all military concerns in their district. In practice, the Gauleiter

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<sup>119</sup> TNA WO 309/408: *Deposition on Oath by Kaufmann, Karl Otto, Kurt*, 12 March 1945. For the original German, See “Als Gauleiter war ich zuständig für sämtliche Angelegenheiten der Partei, mit Ausnahme der SS die ausschliesslich dem HSSPF unterstand, als Reichsstatthalter war ich Chef der – kommunalen und staatlichen – Zivilverwaltung Hamburg, als Reichskommissar der Seeschifffahrt leitete ich den Einsatz der deutschen Handelsschiffe mit Ausnahme der Fahrgastschiffe und Tanker, die der Kriegsmarine unterstanden”.

was considered a form of political ruler who was subordinate to Martin Bormann – who would become Reich Governor – and from whom they received instructions. His powers specifically enabled him to:

command respect of the police [which] was restricted to the sphere of work of the Hamburg police president; that is to say the uniformed police, the ARP police and administrative police in Hamburg.<sup>120</sup>

In support of his position a Führer decree in the autumn of 1944 re-appointed the Gauleiter as a Reich Defence Commissioner (also known as Reichsverteidigungskommissar, RVKK's). So in matters of civil defence and administration, Kaufmann had the authority to rely on the support of the Hamburg police administration as well as influence over their role in matters of civil defence. During the bombing of Hamburg in 1943, for example, labour was drafted from the main camp at Neuengamme at his insistence to assist in the clearing of the city. This criss-crossing of administration further exacerbated confusion in the final weeks of the war. Within such an anarchic setting it became increasingly evident that localised policy-making was becoming more prevalent.

Establishing the extent of Gauleiter Kaufmann's power allows us to provide a clear overview of how he guided and planned the evacuation process. As Allied forces continued to press hard towards Schleswig Holstein, Kaufmann's appointment as Reich Defence Commissioner became important. This, more than other position gifted the

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<sup>120</sup> TNA WO 309/408: *Deposition of Karl Kaufmann*, 12 March 1946. For the original German, see "Meine Befehlsgewalt auf dem Gebiet der Polizei beschränkte sich auf das Sachgebiet des Polizeipräsidenten Hamburg, d.h. die Ordnungs-, Luftschutz-, und Verwaltungspolizei Hamburgs".

Gauleiter similar levels of authority as the local HSSPF. During his postwar trial, Bassewitz-Behr stated that he was under the impression that he was in fact subordinate to the command of those appointed to that position.<sup>121</sup> Yet it seems unlikely that a senior member of the SS would willingly accepted being subordinated to a civil authority or any military governance outside the boundaries of the SS establishment. Birn recently argued that “the Gauleiter wanted to break the monopoly of the SS and police”.<sup>122</sup> In terms of the political rivalry that existed, Kaufmann’s position as Gauleiter of Hamburg meant that his authority was almost autonomous by late 1944. In fact during a personal discussion with Himmler, Kaufmann was informed that Bassewitz-Behr was to be removed from his post as HSSPF in district ten.<sup>123</sup> The reason for this was vague, but Bassewitz-Behr believed that it was because his sister had married the chief of the Swedish General staff and he had not informed his superiors of this change.<sup>124</sup> Although trivial, it highlights the precarious nature of the hierarchy within the Third Reich and demonstrates the insecurities of its leading commanders. Furthermore, Bassewitz-Behr had a relatively unblemished record and only after the intercession by Kaufmann did Himmler relent and allow Bassewitz-Behr to remain in office. Although they were bitter rivals, Kaufmann’s intercession allowed the Gauleiter a chance to have a further control over his SS counterpart. Furthermore with the SS position in Hamburg not as prominent as other areas of the Reich, Gauleiter Kaufmann

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<sup>121</sup> TNA WO 309/408: *Deposition of Karl Kaufmann*, 12 March 1946.

<sup>122</sup> Ruth Bettina Birn, *Die Höheren SS- und Polizeiführer: Himmlers Vertreter im Reich und in den Besetzten Gebieten* (Droste Verlag: Düsseldorf, 1991), pp. 310-311.

<sup>123</sup> TNA WO 309/408: *Deposition of Georg-Henning Graf von Bassewitz-Behr*, No. 67, 20 April 1946, p. 5.

<sup>124</sup> TNA WO 309/408: *Deposition of Georg-Henning Graf von Bassewitz-Behr*, p. 5.

was further able to exert his influence over the local SS police chief. This skirmish between the different elements of the party only sought to highlight the personal power struggles which were prevalent between the two offices.

### **Decision-making process**

In analysing a series of key meetings between Kaufmann and Bassewitz-Behr it is possible to determine how the evacuation planning process evolved. During the spring of 1944 initial conferences were held to determine, in the event of a need to evacuate the camp at Neuengamme, the feasibility of undertaking the task in hand. As Buggeln notes “a proposal by the Wehrmacht led to a meeting between representatives of the military, Gauleiters, and police officials to discuss the development of a contingency plan in the event that the enemy would make an incursion into the area of the North Sea coast”.<sup>125</sup> During this meeting, the plan was based on evacuating camps close to the fighting front to the south and southeast. Although never implemented, this shows a determination to ensure that the large prisoner network was not to be surrendered at any cost.

As Allied forces pressed into German Reich territory, the matter concerning security within the Reich became more critical. It was decided that the local HSSPF would take charge of all matters concerning the evacuation of concentration camps within their

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<sup>125</sup> Buggeln, *Slave Labor*, p. 262. Also See Tino Jacobs, “Die Räumung des Stammlagers: Hintergründe und Verantwortung”, in Detlef Garbe and Carmen Lange (eds.), *Häftlinge zwischen Vernichtung und Befreiung: Die Auflösung des KZ Neuengamme und seiner Außenlager durch die SS im Frühjahr 1945* (Edition Temmen: Bremen, 2005), pp. 169-174. Reference cited on p. 169.

district. But there still remained an issue as to what the definition of an alert period could be. This left scope for localised decision-making and meant that the local HSSPF could decide upon the level of action required to mediate the apparent threat. Guidance on this issue was not to be found in the confused and countermanding order(s), which had originated from Himmler. However, the gap left for interpretation led to disastrous and often deadly decisions being implemented. This would eventually lead to the unnecessary death of tens of thousands of inmates along painstaking death marches.<sup>126</sup>

Buggeln notes that by “mid-January, the *Reichsgruppe Industrie* had informed Hamburg’s leading business officials of their intention to revamp the composition of the workforce”.<sup>127</sup> Although Kaufmann had significant interests within certain businesses, many leaders began to pressure the Gauleiter to take back camp prisoners. At a national level, the Reich Group Industry (*Reichsgruppe Industrie*) noted,

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<sup>126</sup> See various: Goldhagen, *Hitler’s willing Executioners*; Shmuel Krakowski, “The Death Marches in the Period of the Evacuation of the Camps”, in Michael R. Marrus (ed.), *The Nazi Holocaust: Part 9, The End of the Holocaust* (K G Sauer Verlag: Munich, 1989), pp. 476-490; Daniel Blatman, “Die Todesmärsche – Entscheidungsträger, Mörder and Opfer”, in Ulrich Herbert, Karin Orth, Christoph Dieckmann (eds.), *Die nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslager – Entwicklung und Struktur*, Band II (Wallstein Verlag: Göttingen, 1998), pp.1063-1092; Daniel Blatman, “The Death Marches (January – May 1945):Who was responsible for what?”, *Vad Vashem Studies XXVII*, (2000), pp. 155-201; Livia Rothkirchen, “The Final Solution in Its Last Stages”, in Marrus (ed.), *The Nazi Holocaust*, pp. 332-355; Katharina Hertz-Eichenrode (ed.), *Ein KZ wird geräumt: Häftlinge zwischen Vernichtung und Befreiung. Die Auflösung des KZ Neuengamme und seiner Außenlager durch die SS im Frühjahr 1945*, Band 1 (Edition Temmen: Bremen, 2000).

<sup>127</sup> See Buggeln, *Slave Labor*, p. 263. See also Neil Gregor, “Big Business and the Blitzkriegswirtschaft: Daimler-Benz AG and the Mobilisation of the German War Economy 1939-1942” *Journal of Contemporary History* 6:2 (1997), pp. 193-208.

The companies must be granted the right to return the concentration camp inmates, Jews, and prisoners of war to the appropriate authorities.<sup>128</sup>

Although early evacuations did not commence until late March, the process to determine how best the evacuation process should commence was shaped by this order. Many local businesses felt by February that the war would soon be over. Some were concerned that if concentration camp prisoners remained in the work place this would pose a significant security threat. More importantly, many business leaders feared that should the Allies arrive, they would be seen as slaveholders rather than business leaders. In reality, most were simply trying to wash away any trace of their involvement with camp labour. At a meeting in the Hamburg Chamber of Commerce in mid-February the General Commissioner Otto Wolff, Gauleiter Kaufmann and other representatives of the business met to discuss the issue of camp labour. After a lengthy and difficult discussion, the Chamber announced that “dismissed concentration camp inmates will, if possible, be returned to their main camp until further notice”.<sup>129</sup> As Greiser notes

In contrast to the protagonists of the concentration camp system, local powerful officials and decision-makers in armaments industries that used camp prisoners showed themselves to be considerably more farsighted and capable of adapting to the situation at the end of the war. None of them considered encumbering themselves with the prisoners’ presence longer than what was necessary, and they ensured their removal at an early stage.<sup>130</sup>

Civil administrators, too, wanted the removal the evidence of prisoners being associated with industry and slave labour. It was increasingly likely that should these prisoners be

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<sup>128</sup> Bundesarchiv Berlin (Hereafter BAB), R121/339, *Agenda for a meeting of the Reichsgruppe Industrie*, 8 February 1945.

<sup>129</sup> Buggeln, *Slave Labor*, p. 264.

<sup>130</sup> Greiser, *Todesmärsche*, p. 160.

liberated evidence would emerge to suggest this link between Kaufmann and the camp at Neuengamme. The *Cap Arcona* was, therefore, seen as an interim solution to the issue of removing any association between business and slave labour. As for the SS elite the re-location of Neuengamme inmates on board the *Cap Arcona* allowed the SS to retain control over camp prisoners. Coupled with this notion was an inherent belief that the military situation was only a temporary setback.<sup>131</sup> Therefore, the *Cap Arcona* was seen as a continuation, albeit an adaptation, of SS camp policy.

By now the territorial area that remained in the hands of Germany was shrinking at an alarming rate. The camp compound at Neuengamme had, for a lengthy period, been in receipt of large numbers of evacuees from camps largely located in the East. Once business leaders in the city began to implement and act on the announcement from the Chamber of Commerce, prisoner numbers within the main camp swelled enormously. In July 1944 it was estimated that the main camp held approximately 9,800 prisoners. By March 1945 the number had grown to 12,525 inmates excluding those still held within the sub-camp system.<sup>132</sup> This number continued to grow as Neuengamme became a central evacuation destination for other camps already under threat of Allied liberation.

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<sup>131</sup> The SS in other camps simply marched the a large percentage of prisoners to their death. If an evacuation was not possible, as in the example of Bergen-Belsen, the prisoners were left within the compound to perish. In the instance of Neuengamme camp there is indeed a certain level of attention, firstly to ensure the camp was evacuated, but secondly, to ensure that the SS retained control over the prisoners. Had there been no planning, the prisoners would have simply been placed on the ship. However, care is taken to ensure that they were segregated according to life within the SS camp model.

<sup>132</sup> See 2006 deaths register of the population of the main camp at Neuengamme, KZ-Gedenkstaette Neuengamme, <http://www.kz-gedenkstaette-neuengamme.de/en/history/death-register/deaths-1940-1945/wielechowski/>, [Accessed 15 November 2016].

With agreement now reached amongst the business representation and city administration, Kaufmann progressed his plans to ensure that camp inmates were removed from Hamburg's industrial centre. As the Allied advance continued it became necessary to instruct the local HSSPF to plan for the full-scale evacuation of Neuengamme should the need arise. According to Jacobs, "Bassewitz-Behr disapproved of Kaufmann's plans and felt that the prisoners should be handed over to the Allied forces".<sup>133</sup> One possible motive for this suggestion was that military logistics of ensuring that the camp at Neuengamme was evacuated was, at first assessment, almost impossible. Although the evacuation of Neuengamme main camp began around 16 April, it is clear from eye-witness reports that the *Cap Arcona* as well as other vessels had arrived in Neustadt bay on 14 April.<sup>134</sup> The *Cap Arcona* arrived in Neustadt after a series of mechanical failures, and therefore the German Navy were in the process of returning the vessel to its owners. As Watson notes the "*Cap Arcona* was returned to its owners Hamburg-Süd as the company was eager to save the big ocean liner for their postwar business plans".<sup>135</sup> Therefore we can surmise that the vessel was chartered by the office of the Reich commissioner for sea shipping prior to its arrival on 14 April. It means that the process of deciding the fate of the prisoners had to have been decided prior to the embarkation of the *Cap Arcona* from Gotenhafen. Therefore, it would be a reasonable assumption that the process of arranging the evacuation process was completed by the end of March 1945.

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<sup>133</sup> See Tino Jacobs, *Himmlers Mann in Hamburg: Georg Henning Graf von Bassewitz-Behr als Höherer SS- und Polizeiführer im Wehrkreis X 1933-1945* (Ergebnisse Verlag: Hamburg, 2001), p. 115. See also Jacobs, "Die Räumung des Stammlagers", pp. 171-172.

<sup>134</sup> For instance, see TNA WO 309/408: *Deposition of Heinrich Bertram*.

<sup>135</sup> Watson, *Nazi Titanic*, p. 117.

During March evacuation plans were prepared in line with instructions from the local Gauleiter. Kaufmann left responsibility of finding a suitable solution to the evacuation problem to Bassewitz-Behr. During his postwar interrogation by British war crimes investigation team, Bassewitz-Behr stated that “the Führer has made [him] personally responsible for ensuring that no prisoners fall into enemy hands alive”.<sup>136</sup> He remembered that he received this order sometime in March 1945. As the enemy forces crossed the River Elbe, Bassewitz-Behr felt duty bound to protect the inhabitants of the city of Hamburg. It was at this point; he claimed later, that he tasked the camp commandant Max Pauly with finding and locating an emergency camp, presumably in the district of Schleswig-Holstein or Mecklenburg.<sup>137</sup> By then Neuengamme had an estimated 13,500 prisoners in the main camp, and some 25,000 men and 10,300 women in its sub-camp network.<sup>138</sup> This made it increasingly difficult to find a suitable emergency camp in an area constantly being squeezed by the advancing forces. During his last meeting with Himmler, Bassewitz-Behr failed to discuss the evacuation of Neuengamme or the logistical problems he now faced. However, shortly before leaving his office, Bassewitz-Behr he asked Himmler exactly what he should do with the large number of prisoners under his jurisdiction. Himmler’s reply was vague: “do what you

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<sup>136</sup> TNA WO 309/408: *Interrogation of Bassewitz-Behr*, 12 February 1946, p. 2. For the original German, see “Die Führer macht sie Persönlich dafür verantwortlich dass kein KZ-Häftling lebend in die Hand des Feindes Fällt”.

<sup>137</sup> TNA WO 309/408: *Commission Belgè des Crimes de Guerre*, 17 Feb 1946.

<sup>138</sup> TNA WO 309/1592: *Introduction to report by Major Noel Till*, p. 10; TNA WO 235/162: *Major Stewart’s opening remarks* - where he suggests the figure at around 50,000, p. 10; TNA WO 309/870: *Neuengamme – A Report, 10 Nov 1945*. The figure stands at 13,500 in the main camp, p. 1.

think is right”.<sup>139</sup> By this stage Bassewitz-Behr was solely responsible for his own actions.

By this late stage of the war the logistics and scope to evacuate a camp the size of Neuengamme was a significant task. At a time when many vital war resources were being used to prolong the military campaign, it was increasingly likely that to requisition resources like rail trucks and other vital military resources, that close co-operation between other Reich institutions was necessary. In his position as Gauleiter, Kaufmann had the contacts as well as the political influence to organise the use of such resources. The population within the camp was largely starved and exhausted. Initial evacuations were designated for Bergen-Belsen.<sup>140</sup> While sub-camps were ordered to evacuate, Bassewitz-Behr did not broach the subject of the main camp until March 1945 when, in meeting with Kaufmann, concerns were raised on the issue of the overcrowding of the camp.<sup>141</sup> However there remained some confusion as to which political body was in overall charge of the evacuation of Neuengamme. Bassewitz-Behr later argued that “if my office intervened in some cases where transport of inmates or the procurement of emergency camps was concerned, this was done for the following reasons:-

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<sup>139</sup> TNA 309/408: *Interrogation of Bassewitz-Behr*, p. 2. For original German see “Tun Sie was Sie für richtig halten”.

<sup>140</sup> Herbert Obenaus, “Die Räumung der Hannoverschen Konzentrationslager im April 1945”, in Christoph Gutman, Rainer Fröbe, Claus Füllberg-Stolberg, Rolf Keller, Herbert Obenaus and Hans Hermann Schröder (eds.), *Konzentrationslager in Hannover: KZ-Arbeit und Rüstungsindustrie in der Spätphase des Weltkrieges* (Verlag August Lase: Hildsheim, 1985), pp. 497-502.

<sup>141</sup> TNA WO 309/408: *Deposition of Kaufmann*, 12 March 1946, p. 1.

- 1) To assist the camp commandant in the execution of the orders given by the Reichs Defence Commissioner (*Reichsverteidigungskommissar*).
- 2) To promote the smooth running of the evacuation for reasons of police security of the districts”<sup>142</sup>.

By early April it was clear that the evacuation process was in place should the necessary instructions be issued. Kaufmann had ultimately decided, in the face of increasing pressure from Hamburg business representatives, that the camp at Neuengamme, as well as its vast sub-camp network must be evacuated. Evidence of the prison camp should be eradicated and any trace of the city’s involvement should be hidden. This remained one of the crucial factors in ensuring the evacuation process was well-thought out and well organised. In highlighting the fractious relationship between the SS and state representatives, a number of points can be made. Firstly, in the case of Neuengamme, Bassewitz-Behr was never able to cement his personal authority. The political offices held by Gauleiter Kaufmann make it very difficult for the SS to influence policy at this late stage of the war. In terms of their relationship Bassewitz-Behr remained a senior military officer within the SS and worked productively under Kaufmann at times. Moreover, through a series of political meetings, evidence indicates that Kaufmann was responsible for the camp evacuation solution and drive to ensure it took place. Increasingly, had Bassewitz-Behr been responsible he would have had limited, if any, success in acquiring ships. Therefore the evacuations would have had even fewer options as the territory under German control rapidly diminished. Moreover the relationship between Kaufmann and Hamburg’s elite pressured the Gauleiter into finding the solution which utilised the *Cap Arcona*.

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<sup>142</sup> TNA WO 309/408: *Commission Belgè des Crimes de Guerre*, 17 Feb 1946.

## Conclusion

In the midst of the chaos that came to typify the final months of the war, the evacuation process from Neuengamme was not a death march, but the result of the determination of the civilian administration to clear the area of slave labour. The process from Neuengamme was heavily influenced by Gauleiter Kaufmann, which in itself underscores the fact that this evacuation was different to that of other camps in March 1945. Guided by Kaufmann, arguably there was a clear and decisive plan. The purpose of this plan was to remove the prisoners from the immediate area in and around Hamburg. In transferring the SS social hierarchy to the *Cap Arcona* we can infer that the SS attempted to continue to find some twisted normality in the closing stages of the war. Although there was a central order which originated from Himmler, the planning process was well underway prior to the re-release of his command. In fact the *Cap Arcona* was docked in Neustadt on 16 April, a mere two days after Himmler's final command concerning the concentration camps. Furthermore at a time when many functions and state departments found it increasingly difficult to operate, the political structure in Hamburg ensured, at all costs, that a suitable solution to the question of evacuation was found. This led to Gauleiter Kaufmann, in his authority as Reich's commissioner for Sea Shipping, requisitioning the passenger liner *Cap Arcona*. However the transferal of the prisoner hierarchy during the evacuation transports and aboard the *Cap Arcona* show clearly that the SS still retained some hold over organisation. But this only happened once the camp was evacuated. The impact of chaos on the broader theme of planning an evacuation clearly identifies a series of localised policy makers, who wished to ensure that evidence of their involvement in the camp at Neuengamme was hidden.

## Chapter Three

### Evacuation to Lübeck Bay, April 1945

The evacuation from Neuengamme to Lübeck Bay towards the end of April provides another insight into the purpose of utilising the *Cap Arcona*. The last chapter looked at the planning process to evacuate Neuengamme camp. This chapter will seek to discuss the evacuation towards Lübeck Bay and set this in the broader context of chaos.

Although the necessary processes had been outlined to ready Neuengamme for evacuation, its final execution and transfer of prisoners from the camp to Lübeck cannot be seen as complying with the current death march model for camp evacuations in the final weeks of the war. Unlike camps at Bergen-Belsen and Sachsenhausen, the administration at Neuengamme had decided to requisition rail trucks. The method alone differentiates this evacuation from other camps. Blatman concluded that,

The killings of concentration camp prisoners in the last phase of the war occurred amid a situation in which confusion and disorder were rife and supervisory apparatuses and chains of command were disintegrating in all spheres of life in Germany.<sup>143</sup>

Noting that the final weeks and months of the war were marked by this social breakdown of order, Blatman's suggestion that all aspects of supervisory apparatus were disintegrating warrants further investigation. In the case of Hamburg, this chapter will argue that while the transfer process of moving the prisoners from Lübeck to the

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<sup>143</sup> Daniel Blatman, *The Death Marches: The Final Phase of Nazi Genocide* (Harvard University Press: Massachusetts, 2011), p. 408.

*Cap Arcona* subsequently evolved into chaos, this was not because central authority was disintegrating. Instead the civilian administration in Hamburg simply wanted the camp closed and the surrounding area cleared of prisoners. In attempting to deal with the impending situation, this can be labelled as management by crisis.

In defining the term 'management by crisis', communication became central to the success of this evacuation. However, once the prisoners arrived at Lübeck harbour, it became clear that communication, both locally and centrally, had broken down. This was because of a number of factors. At a time when resources within Germany were stretched, and communication faltered, the use of rail trucks to evacuate prisoners shows a level of organisation that was often non-existent in the final stages of the war.

However, in doing so, the local administration had failed to account for the arrival of vast numbers of refugees from the East, who in their attempt to flee the Soviet army crowded the small area of Neustadt. What was the impact of this on the transports at Lübeck? What was the Gauleiter's response to the problem? Moreover, the transfer process from Lübeck to the ships came under increasing resistance from a number of military and civilian personnel. This failure to communicate with different Reich institutions had an important impact on the prisoners in Lübeck. Why had the German Merchant Navy not been instructed on the use for the *Cap Arcona*; why was Gauleiter Kaufmann less concerned with civil resistance at Lübeck?

The evacuation to Lübeck was well-organised. However, once the transports arrived at Lübeck, the civilian administration was less concerned with the prisoners' transfer to

the *Cap Arcona*. In terms of the SS, its close involvement with the evacuation meant that the camp properties and prisoner segregation continued throughout. The SS was, therefore, determined to ensure that once the prisoners were placed on the *Cap Arcona* that there was a transfer of camp life on board the vessel. Although the SS were able to restore some resemblance of control on the *Cap Arcona*, the situation remained chaotic because communication between the different institutions left the ship critically short of basic provisions.

## **Evacuation Overview, April 1945**

By April 1945, the military situation in Germany was one of British forces continuing to press hard against the retreating German forces in North Germany. In the East, Soviet forces continued their encirclement of the Reich centre. Those camps still operating in the final weeks of the war were forced by SS leaders to evacuate remaining prisoners beyond the reach of the Allies. This final phase of evacuations has been considered the most deadly by recent historians.<sup>144</sup> Kershaw argues that “the death marches were completely pointless, except as a means of inflicting still further enormous suffering on those designated by the regime’s internal enemies”.<sup>145</sup> Many evacuation transports in this final stage largely had no direct command, nor any direct destination. Often

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<sup>144</sup> See Martin C. Winter, “Evacuating the Camps: The Last Collective Crime of Nazi Society”, *Dapim: Studies on the Holocaust* 29:3 (2015), pp. 138-153; Blatman, *The Death Marches*, p. 60; See also Marc Buggeln, “Building to Death: Prisoner Forced Labour in the German War Economy: The Neuengamme Sub-camps, 1942-1945”, *European History Quarterly* 39:4 (2009), pp. 606-632; Nikolaus Wachsmann, *KL: A History of the Nazi Concentration Camps* (Little, Brown: London, 2015); Martin C. Winter and Katrin Greiser, “Untersuchungen zu den Todesmärschen seit 1945”, in Blondel, Urban and Schönemann (eds.), *Freilegungen* pp. 73-84.

<sup>145</sup> Kershaw, *The End*, p. 331.

transports were unable to reach their destination, leaving local commanders to find an alternative. The result was continued suffering and prisoners killed without a thought.<sup>146</sup> One clear distinction between evacuation transports from other camps, compared with those from Neuengamme was method. It will argue that once the order to evacuate the camp had been given, the process became confused and disorderly as transports arrived at Lübeck. A lack of close cooperation and communication between other Reich institutions ultimately caused the frantic scenes on the Vorwerk harbour. Although the SS were able to restore some aspect of control by implementing a hierarchy on the *Cap Arcona*, the lack of basic provisions, as well as in-house fighting continued to lead to a situation that remained disorganised and typical of Third Reich leadership in the closing stages of the war.

As the evacuation transports departed Neuengamme, more generally “the spatial dimension of the murders changed, as did the circumstances and the reasons for their liquidation”.<sup>147</sup> In his survey of the German evacuation process in the final months of the war, Wachsmann argues that,

With the German transport system torn apart, trains constantly stopped or changed direction. Journeys that should have lasted a day took weeks, and the longer they lasted, the more prisoners died.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> See for example Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (Penguin: London, 2001).

<sup>147</sup> Blatman, *The Death Marches*, p. 411.

<sup>148</sup> Wachsmann, *KL*, p. 582. See also Katrin Greiser, *Die Todesmärsche von Buchenwald: Räumung, Befreiung und Spuren der Erinnerung* (Wallstein Verlag GmbH: Göttingen, 2008).

In analysing the method of the final camp evacuations Wachsmann reaches a generalised conclusion. But in outlining his periodisation of the death march phase, Goldhagen concludes that “the death marches of the third period, whatever their many commonalities, composed a chaotic phenomenon, with sometimes significant variations in their character”.<sup>149</sup> Goldhagen suggests that there was indeed a common theme for camp evacuations in his three-phased model. But in addition historians have argued that “telecommunications [had] virtually collapsed, rendering centralised control impossible”,<sup>150</sup> and therefore relevant orders and clear guidance were not always available.

The evacuation from Neuengamme highlights that it was neither chaotic, nor was it indeed similar to other such camps. Other camps in April 1945, that were evacuated, included Flossenbürg and Sachsenhausen. Generally, prisoners were grouped together to form columns that were often marched out of the camp at the last minute. Many SS commanders reacted in desperation to the speed of the Allied advance. Other examples include Dachau concentration camp. When the US Army arrived at Dachau camp on 29 April, they liberated approximately 32,000 prisoners.<sup>151</sup> Only days prior to the arrival of American forces, Dachau and its sub-camps had 67,665 prisoners registered. Over half

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<sup>149</sup> Daniel Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (Abacus: London, 1997), p. 364.

<sup>150</sup> Alfred C. Mierzejewski, *The Collapse of the German War Economy, 1944-1945* (University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill, 1988), p. 183.

<sup>151</sup> See for a brief overview, <https://www.ushmm.org/learn/timeline-of-events/1942-1945/liberation-of-dachau>, [Accessed 29 May 2017].

that number was held in the main compound.<sup>152</sup> The stark differences between the two camps were the involvement of the civilian administration.

Generally, historians view the final evacuation period as a knee-jerk reaction to the Allied advance. The remaining camps were subsequently evacuated

because approaching enemy armies threatened to overrun the institutions housing Jews and other prisoners. The Germans found themselves in the position of either having to move the prisoners or risk losing them.<sup>153</sup>

There is some disagreement as to whether the camp system in April 1945 was in total collapse, or whether it remained highly resilient to the social and economic pressures as a result of the faltering military campaign.<sup>154</sup> In analysing the final evacuation period it does indeed suggest that the camp system was in meltdown. In one example the camp near Celle, Bergen-Belsen, was liberated by British troops on 15 April 1945 with an estimated 60,000 prisoners still within the compound.<sup>155</sup> The remaining concentration camps had effectively become dumping grounds for any and every evacuation transport that could not reach its target destination. By mid-April the feasibility of evacuating

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<sup>152</sup> See for a brief overview, <https://www.ushmm.org/learn/timeline-of-events/1942-1945/liberation-of-dachau>, [Accessed 29 May 2017].

<sup>153</sup> Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, pp. 328-329.

<sup>154</sup> For a discussion, see Greiser, *Todesmärsche*; Wachsmann, *KL*; David Cesarani, *Final Solution: The Fate of the Jews 1933-1949* (MacMillan: London, 2016); Saul Friedlander, *Nazi Germany and the Jews: The Years of Extermination 1939-1945* (W&N: London, 2008); Peter Hayes, *Why? Explaining the Holocaust* (W&N: London, 2017); Andrew T. Williams, *A Passing Fury: Searching for Justice at the End of World War II* (Vintage: London, 2017); Dan Stone, *Concentration Camps: A Short History* (OUP: London, 2017); Laurence Rees, *The Holocaust: A New History* (Viking: London, 2017).

<sup>155</sup> Ben Shephard, *After Daybreak: The Liberation of Belsen, 1945* (Pimlico: London, 2006).

such vast numbers of prisoners to another secure location remained challenging. Hence as Allied troops pressed into the heartland of Nazi Germany during 1945, it was likely that the administration no longer feared the loss of the prisoners. The driving factor, in relative terms, was a need to hide any evidence of the atrocities that had been committed within the compound. Moreover, as the Reich suffered further military defeats, the requirement of slave labour within the armaments industry or indeed any military institution diminished.<sup>156</sup> But while there remained a direct order to ensure that the camps were evacuated, there was no clear guidance from central government as to how this could be achieved. Blatman suggests that “during the evacuation of the camps, inmates were ruthlessly pursued and murdered by civilians who had never before lent a hand to the Nazi genocide”.<sup>157</sup> Set within this context, Nazi Germany had increased its terror apparatus on the home front in a desperate hope of maintaining order and social control.<sup>158</sup> Many villages and towns came face to face with the horrors of the camp system for the first time. The response from residents was often mixed.<sup>159</sup> Some

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<sup>156</sup> For instance see, Marc Buggeln, *Arbeit & Gewalt: Das Außenlagersystem des KZ Neuengamme* (Wallstein Verlag GmbH: Göttingen, 2009); Wachsmann, *KL*.

<sup>157</sup> Daniel Blatman, “On the Trace of the Death Marches: The Historiographical Challenge”, in Jean-Luc Blondel, Susanne Urban and Sebastian Schönemann (eds.), *Freilegungen: Auf den Spuren der Todesmärsche* (Wallstein Verlag: Göttingen, 2012), pp. 85-107. Reference cited on p. 105. See also, Martin Clemens Winter and Katrin Greiser, “Untersuchungen zu den Todesmärschen seit 1945”, in Blondel, Urban and Schönemann (eds.), *Freilegungen*, pp. 73-84.

<sup>158</sup> See Eric Johnson, *Nazi Terror: The Gestapo, Jews and Ordinary Germans* (Basic Books: London, 2000); Robert Gellately, *Backing Hitler: Consent and Coercion in Nazi Germany* (OUP: London, 2002); Timothy Mason, *Nazism, Fascism and Working Class* (CUP: Cambridge, 1996).

<sup>159</sup> See Katrin Greiser, *Die Todesmärsche von Buchenwald: Räumung, Befreiung und Spuren der Erinnerung* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2008), pp. 452-454; Sven Keller, *Volksgemeinschaft am Ende: Gesellschaft und Gewalt 1944-45* (Oldenbourg: Munich, 2013), p. 422.

residents participated in the continual mistreatment of prisoners, while others attempted to offer some relief by providing food.

The first camps to be evacuated were those in the occupied territories. The planning process was poor. The camps were evacuated largely as a reaction to the Allied landing in Normandy and the Russian Offensive in the East.<sup>160</sup> For example, in the summer of 1944 Majdanek became the first camp under threat of liberation by the Red Army.

Throughout the first weeks of April transports left daily with many unclear as to their final destination.<sup>161</sup> To make matters worse the increase in traffic flow from the East made evacuations more difficult and more time consuming.<sup>162</sup> The local command was frequently unclear on the transports' destinations, with some heading to Natzweiler-Struthof, Groß-Rosen and a large proportion was eventually sent to Auschwitz. This variety of destinations is seen by Blatman as "changing needs within the labour system".<sup>163</sup> This close link between camps and industry guided the principle as to where prisoners should be evacuated.

During the second wave of evacuations in January 1945, Himmler issued an order stating that "not a single healthy prisoner was to be left behind in the camps under his

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<sup>160</sup> See various Antony Beevor, *The Second World War*, (W&N: London, 2012); Max Hastings, *Armageddon: The Battle for Germany 1944-45*, (Pan: London, 2015); Ian Kershaw, *To Hell and Back: Europe, 1914-1949*, (Penguin: London, 2016).

<sup>161</sup> Blatman, *Death Marches*, p. 57.

<sup>162</sup> Blatman, *Death Marches*, pp. 73-125.

<sup>163</sup> Blatman, *Death Marches*, p. 58.

jurisdiction”.<sup>164</sup> This order created confusion amid almost total chaos. The Red Army’s big push meant that evacuations of large camps such as Auschwitz and Groß-Rosen were hurried through before plans had been finalised. The result was a domino effect on the remaining evacuations. By March and April 1945 the system had generally all but disintegrated. In the case of Neuengamme, the order and planning stage to evacuate the camp was not undertaken until March 1945. By this stage of the war, territory under Nazi command was rapidly dwindling. Large parts of central Western and Eastern Germany were no longer under the jurisdiction of the Reich, although there remained pockets of resistance towards the south. Occupied Denmark as well as the north area of Germany, including Kiel, Bremen and Hamburg, provided a brief option for potential evacuation sites and destinations.

Largely by April 1945 it became increasingly difficult for commandants to evacuate camps. Moreover, many camps that had crematoria had destroyed these in an attempt to remove evidence of the crimes that had been committed earlier in the war. The camp at Sachsenhausen provides an important example. The main camp was liberated by the Red Army on 22 April 1945. Around 3,000 prisoners were found languishing within the camp grounds.<sup>165</sup> Only a few days prior to the arrival of the Red Army, SS camp guards

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<sup>164</sup> Yad Vashem Archives (Hereafter YVA) Box 224, NA-Proc-E: *Pohl Trial minute* - “Testimony of Advocate Kurt-Schmidt-Klevenow who worked at WVHA”, p. 2057.

<sup>165</sup> Todd Huebner, “Sachsenhausen Main Camp”, in Geoffrey P. Megargee (ed.), *The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Encyclopaedia of Camps and Ghettos, 1933-1945* (Indiana University Press: Indiana, 2009), pp. 1259-1260.

began the forced evacuation on foot of 33,000 prisoners.<sup>166</sup> The destination was northwest. In departing the main camp the various groups that were marched out became increasingly disorganised as Allied troops drew closer. This ad hoc evacuation led to groups disintegrating which in turn created more opportunities for prisoners to flee into open countryside. Guard columns on these types of marches were usually overseen by junior commanders. Unable to communicate with their superiors, and acknowledging that the war was close to the end, many guards fled during the night. Killing within these final transports was not always undertaken by the guards.

As British forces became increasingly desperate to reach the Baltic coast, local commanders within the district of Hamburg had been drawing up plans for the evacuation of the main camp at Neuengamme. The expansive network of sub-camps at Neuengamme meant that evacuations and closures of these camps began in late March 1944. At this time there were approximately some 57 subsidiary camps operating with around 40,000 prisoners.<sup>167</sup> The furthest camps located in the West were closed rapidly, a mere few days prior to the advance of the Allied troops. It was not a knee-jerk reaction to evacuate all the sub-camps back to the main camp. The closure process, coupled with the Allied advance into Germany, showed that the SS still wished to retain some possible future use of slave labour. Those camps closest to the fighting front were closed and the prisoners were either deployed to other work camps or returned to the

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<sup>166</sup> For a brief discussion on the evacuation of Sachsenhausen see, <https://www.ushmm.org/learn/timeline-of-events/1942-1945/evacuation-of-prisoners-from-sachsenhausen>, [Accessed 14 December 2016: 18:19pm].

<sup>167</sup> Buggeln, *Slave Labor*, p. 266.

main camp. Had the SS wished to abandon all potential use of slave labour then the closure of satellite camps would have been wholesale. In practice the SS continued to utilise those camps which remained viable until such time as the Allied threat forced the camps' closure. One useful example was the camp located in Porta Westfalica. This particular camp was relocated to camps close to Salzgitter and Braunschweig. This indicated that the SS wished to ensure that any potential business output and investment was still undertaken.

As the Allied threat to the satellite camps at Neuengamme increased, the decision was made to evacuate the prisoners towards the camp at Bergen-Belsen. Buggeln argued that “between April 6 and April 8 nearly one-third of all Neuengamme prisoners were probably in transit”.<sup>168</sup> The bulk of these transports related to the large numbers of prisoners housed within the satellite camp complex. By April 1945, the main camp – like the other remaining camps – was severely overcrowded. According to the 2006 death register, the camp had around 12,525 inmates housed within the main compound.<sup>169</sup> This figure represented around one-third of the total camp-complex population.

There were however extreme cases of marches by foot. One important example was the sub-camp situated at Blankenburg-Harz. At the beginning of April the satellite camp

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<sup>168</sup> Buggeln, *Slave Labor*, p. 266.

<sup>169</sup> KZ-Gedenkstätte Neuengamme (hereafter GeNA): 2006 Death Register <http://www.kz-gedenkstaette-neuengamme.de/history/death-register/deaths-1940-1945/?L=1>, [Accessed 14 November 2016].

housed approximately 400 prisoners. The proposed destination was unknown, although the convoy was headed north to Schleswig-Holstein. The prisoners were marched through Magdeburg which meant that the total distance on foot was approximately 357 kilometres.<sup>170</sup> The subsequent death march highlighted the lack of clear co-ordination by local commanders. Once the convoy departed the camp compound, communication with other Reich bodies was absent. The convoy departed the following day. As a result of such a poor diet many of the prisoners suffered with diarrhoea.<sup>171</sup> Unable to continue on the march most were shot where they stopped. A survivor of the march later recalled:

After being shot the prisoners' numbers were written down but were destroyed later. They were left where they were shot, and the march went on.<sup>172</sup>

During the march prisoner nationality often failed to protect individual groups, as it had done within the physical camp structure. In the case of the march from Blankenburg-Harz, the callous behaviour exhibited by the guards took place largely without any direct orders from above. The brutality exhibited by the guard personnel highlights the impact of a lack of clear direction. Young guard personnel, often without military experience, were the root cause of the violence. Buggeln notes that death caused during these death marches exhibited “many years of socialisation in violence”.<sup>173</sup>

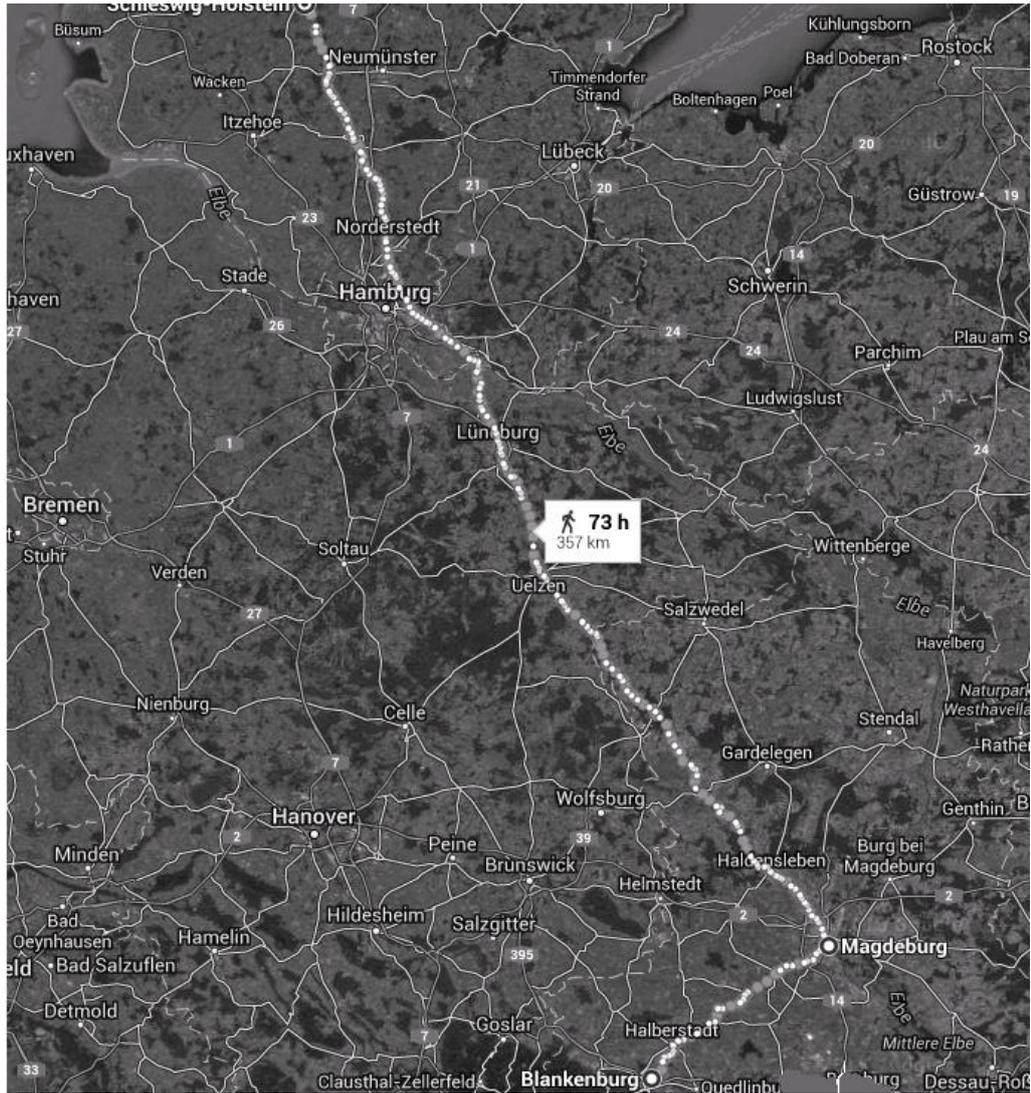
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<sup>170</sup> TNA WO 309/1788: *The suffering of 400 Concentration Camp prisoners on their March from Blankenburg/ Harz to Schleswig/Holstein*, Author Unknown.

<sup>171</sup> TNA WO 309/1788: *The suffering of 400 Concentration Camp prisoners*.

<sup>172</sup> TNA WO 309/1788: *The suffering of 400 Concentration Camp prisoners*.

<sup>173</sup> Buggeln, *Slave Labor*, p. 268.



Map One: Route from Blankenburg via Magdeburg to Schleswig-Holstein by Foot.

Map One indicates an approximate route forced upon the inmates of Blankenburg-Harz. During the evacuation the logical choice of route would have been via Brunswick, as this as the most direct route. At a time when many observers acknowledged that the war would soon be over, the prolonged agony and suffering of inmates was void of any logic or meaning. This example shows a very typical evacuation in the final weeks of the war. Often the destination was unknown, or beyond the realistic reach of the SS guard column. What remains different to the Neuengamme camp complex is the lack of detailed planning. Even the evacuation of the satellite camps was generally conducted in

a timely manner. The example of Neuengamme camp therefore shows that the SS still held some short-term aim for the continued use of prison labour.

The study of Blankenburg-Harz highlights a number of common themes in the final evacuation period. Firstly, a lack of co-ordinated plans left considerable scope for the guard columns to interpret their orders as best they could. Secondly, there was often no long-term planning, and prison columns were often marched through German countryside on an endless goal of nothing more than extinguishing life. In many instances guard columns in April 1945 simply fled. In stark contrast, the main camp at Neuengamme continues to provide clear planning which implies that the civilian administration, rather than the SS, had a further use of the inmates from Neuengamme.

In terms of Neuengamme the evacuation was markedly different because of the relationship between Kaufmann, the SS and business leaders. The use of passenger liners to continue the detention of camp prisoners shows a clear divide in priorities.

Lange notes that

[Kaufmann] requisitioned the ships as he wished to surrender Hamburg without any fighting and wanted to avoid any inconvenient inquiries. That is why he did not want to have any concentration camp prisoners in Hamburg.<sup>174</sup>

Once the evacuation transports reached Lübeck, Kaufmann's drive and motivation to follow through on their placement on board the vessels stopped. However in the case of

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<sup>174</sup> Lange, *Cap Arcona Summary*, p. 4.

Blankenburg-Harz, the clear lack of planning coupled with the Allied advance meant the SS guard column simply turned to murdering the prisoners. Up to this point there have been examples of evacuation transports that, in this final period, highlight the often volatile and chaotic situation the guard columns faced once they had departed from their starting destination. This often ended in a significant loss of life.

As evacuations departed Neuengamme, a survivor, Paul Weissmann described his experiences on the evacuation:

On 20 April, the prisoners had to stand on the parade ground. As guards began counting, we were forced into wagons, around 80 prisoners in each. The trains left immediately...we arrived around noon in Lübeck...from our train there was around 50 prisoners who had died during the transport. They were removed and buried in a grave next to the track embankment.<sup>175</sup>

Survivor accounts like that of Paul Weissmann describe the poor conditions inmates faced on a regular basis. At a time when “the transportation system was in a shambles and telecommunications were in hopeless disarray”,<sup>176</sup> the guard detachments were instructed to make careful notes of the number of inmates that boarded the rail trucks.

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<sup>175</sup> BAB BY 5/V 279/ 7A: *Report on the evacuation of Neuengamme Camp and the sinking of the “Cap Arcona” and “Thielbeck” on 3.5.1945 in Neustadt*, Paul Weissmann, 04.05.1946, p. 1. For original German see, “Am 20. April mussten die Häftlinge auf dem Appellplatz antreten. Es wurden Trupps von jeweils 100 abgezählt, zur Bahn gebracht und in Waggons, jeweils zu 80 in einem, verladen. Die Zusammengestellten Züge fahren sofort ab. Gegen Abend wurden die noch im Revier verbliebenen Kranken bis auf etwa 50 Sterbende, und das Revierpersonal verladen. Mit diesem Transport ging auch ich ab. Der Zug fuhr kurz vor Mitternacht ab, erreichte in den frühen Morgenstunden Hamburg und traf um die Mittagszeit in Lübeck ein”.

<sup>176</sup> Alfred C. Mierzejewski, *The Collapse of the German War Economy 1944-45* (University North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill, 2007), p. 184.

During the short rail journey north to Lübeck there were a number of inmates that died as a result of the conditions in the cramped wagons. However, while the guard detachment continued to move the remaining inmates, care was taken to bury those who had died. In burying the bodies there remains a level of care and attention that had not been obvious during evacuations from other similar camps. For instance, during the evacuation from Buchenwald both the method and level of attention differed drastically. As US forces approached the camp, SS personnel began to evacuate around 28,000 prisoners housed in the main camp.<sup>177</sup> Conditions on these marches were appalling. Historians estimate that approximately one third of the evacuees died en-route or shortly after they arrived at their destination.<sup>178</sup> Many of the prisoners that had been forced on the evacuation were largely Soviet POWs and Jews.<sup>179</sup> Unlike the careful and precise evacuation from Neuengamme camp, during the marches from Buchenwald the guard detail shot and killed those who staggered or fell. Their bodies were left where they were killed.<sup>180</sup> Another key example is the camp at Bergen-Belsen. Unlike other camps – which were evacuated in direct response to the Allied approach – Belsen began a long

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<sup>177</sup> See for instance, “Buchenwald”, <https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005198>, [Accessed 16 March 2017].

<sup>178</sup> See for instance, Flint Whitlock, *Buchenwald: Hell on a hilltop, Murder, Torture & Medical Experiments in the Nazis’ worst concentration camp* (Cable Publishing: London, 2014); Evelyn Zegenhagen, “Buchenwald Main Camp” in Geoffrey P. Megargee (ed.), *The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Encyclopaedia of Camps and Ghettos, 1933-1945* (Indiana University Press: Indiana, 2009), pp. 290-295.

<sup>179</sup> Zegenhagen, “Buchenwald Main Camp”, *The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Encyclopaedia of Camps and Ghettos*, p. 293.

<sup>180</sup> See “Buchenwald”, <https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005198>, [Accessed 16 March 2017].

drawn out process of evacuating prisoners.<sup>181</sup> Moreover, while the camp continued to evacuate transports to other camps, the camp itself became a central receipt camp for other evacuation transports. The SS program began in the spring of 1944 with the evacuation of sick inmates from the Mittelbau concentration camp complex. By April 1945 the camp was severely overcrowded. In a desperate attempt to remove the thousands of dead, the SS charged those still capable of walking to remove the corpses to a mass grave site.<sup>182</sup> Three train evacuations left prior to the liberation of the main camp in April 1945. Approximately 8,000 Jews, between 6 April and 11, were crammed on trucks. One of the trains reached Theresienstadt, while the other two were liberated by US troops near Magdeburg and Soviet troops near Tröbitz after roaming the countryside.<sup>183</sup> The majority who died during these evacuation transports were left on the countryside or within the rail trucks. Compared to other similar evacuation methods and evacuation dates in 1945, the organisation from Neuengamme appears on the surface comparatively well organised.

The camp system and structure at Neuengamme relied heavily on the support of camp elders to assist in the evacuation process. In the move to Lübeck Bay, we witness the camp's external properties moved and extended to passenger liners. As the first evacuation transports arrived at the Vorwerk harbour, the *Cap Arcona*, *Deutschland* and

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<sup>181</sup> For instance see, Joanne Reilly, *Belsen: The Liberation of a Concentration Camp* (Routledge: London, 1998).

<sup>182</sup> Zegenhagen, "Buchenwald Main Camp", in Megargee (ed.), *The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Encyclopaedia of Camps and Ghettos*, p. 293.

<sup>183</sup> See various, Suzanne Bardgett and David Cesarani (eds.), *Belsen 1945: New Historical Perspectives* (Valentine Mitchell: 2006); Joanne Reilly, David Cesarani, Tony Kushner and Colin Richmond (eds.), *Belsen in History and Memory* (Cass: London, 1997).

*Thielbek* were all docked in Neustadt Bay. At this stage of the transfer process, the owners of the *Cap Arcona*, Hamburg Süd, remained unaware of the full intention of the Reich commission for sea shipping, Gauleiter Kaufmann. Although the vessel had previously been requisitioned by the German Navy, owing to mechanical defects, the *Cap Arcona* was to be released back to Hamburg-Süd before the intervention of Gauleiter Kaufmann. Once the vessel was no longer under the military jurisdiction of the German Navy, Gauleiter Kaufmann was able in his role as the *Reikosee* to requisition the further use of the *Cap Arcona*.

This level of diligent administration and planning ensured that the camp and its associated sub-camps were ready for evacuation months before any imminent threat. It was this organisation to plan the evacuation that delivered a smooth transfer to Lübeck. The example of the death march from Blankenburg-Harz illustrates clearly the difficulties associated with an SS driven evacuation. The number of deaths, coupled with the method and disorganisation show that the only concern was to remove the prisoners from the advancing Allied forces. There existed no short term plan for these inmates, other than their eventual death. This example further highlights that the evacuations were commenced solely in the face of Allied forces. In addition, as shown above, SS officers were without clear guidance, which led to a rise in the number of deaths. In comparison, the evacuation from Neuengamme suggests that there was a clear aim and direction, although not solely driven by the SS. By this late stage it was increasingly difficult for the SS to simply murder all inmates in Neuengamme. Resources were a challenge, but also the civilian administration was the driving force behind the direction the evacuation should take. Although not in direct control of the

evacuation, the transferring of a structure on board the ships was a way in which the SS retained some control. As the German military campaign continued to suffer defeats on all fronts, it became increasingly unlikely that the SS had any long-term plans for the prisoners held on the *Cap Arcona*. By this late stage, the only plausible suggestion was that the SS which to retain some resemblance of normality from camp life by continuing the detention of prisoners on the vessels in Lübeck.

Evacuation transports began departing the main camp between 19 and 20 April. This group of prisoners consisted solely of those of Scandinavian nationality who had been released to the Swedish Red Cross.<sup>184</sup> The remainder of the camp prisoners were to be loaded onto cattle trucks and transported to Lübeck. Over the course of four days, 22-26 April, some 6000 prisoners made the short trip.<sup>185</sup> The final evacuation transport left on 29 April for Flensburg via Hamburg. This last convoy consisted mainly of accounts staff and camp elders who had been held back to destroy administration records. During the final days, the camp crematoria were pulled down, evidence of atrocities was cleared and other parts of the camp were burned and destroyed. All evidence of any camp atrocity committed in Neuengamme was cleaned and covered up.<sup>186</sup> There is, however, some confusion as to the ultimate aim of the Hamburg administration. During this final period the administration surrendered a significant number of prisoners, while going to extreme lengths to evacuate the remainder. Extensive negotiations took place

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<sup>184</sup> TNA WO 309/1592: *Major Till's remarks*, p. 10.

<sup>185</sup> BAB BY 5/V 279/ 7A: *Paul Weissmann Report on the evacuation of Neuengamme Camp*.

<sup>186</sup> TNA WO 309/870: *Deposition of Herbert Schemmel*. See also Nikolaus Wachsmann, *KL: A History of the Nazi Concentration Camps* (Little, Brown: London, 2015), p. 577.

between the SS and SRC, and Neuengamme benefited from a range of extensive inputs from different administrative bodies.<sup>187</sup>

## **Lübeck Harbour**

Although the evacuation plan, on paper, had been well-thought through, the transfer process from the harbour to the ship evolved into chaos. The initial execution of the evacuation process from Neuengamme began in a controlled manner, once at Lübeck harbour the process developed into chaos. As the numbers of prisoners began to increase rapidly, it became crucial for those organising the logistics to move the prisoners onto the vessels docked at Neustadt. This section will argue that a lack of communication and co-ordination between key Reich departments allowed the evacuation transports to evolve into chaos at Lübeck. Moreover basic planning and assessment of prisoner numbers led to severe overcrowding. Not only did the local administration fail to assess the true scale of this transfer process, negotiations were still on-going with the *Cap Arcona*'s owners Hamburg-Süd vis-à-vis the proposed leasing of the vessel. In addition to the discussions with Hamburg-Süd, communication between the Merchant Navy, German Navy and the office of the *Reikosee* was non-existent. This led to frantic and often chaotic scenes at the quay side as well as on board the vessels. Weismann remembered that,

Immediately after the arrival of the train, the transfer [to the ships] began. Prisoners mounted the ship and were forced through hatches into the holds of the ship. On both ships, these rooms consisted of two rooms. The overcrowding was

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<sup>187</sup> For a brief overview, see TNA WO 309/408: *Deposition of Count Folke Bernadotte*, 6 July 1946, p. 1.

such that no one had room to stretch out. The conditions in the lower hold were particularly catastrophic.<sup>188</sup>

As more prisoners were forced from the quay side to the two vessels docked at the harbour, any further planning once these prisoners were placed on ships was largely sporadic. In turn, this meant that large numbers of prisoners were held longer on the harbour side than had been planned. Weismann identifies that segregation of prisoner nationalities still played an integral part of prisoner daily life.

One possible reason was the subsequent breakdown of communication. But while civil administrators and other Reich institutions functioned jointly to achieve a successful evacuation, once transports arrived at Lübeck, the situation descends into chaotic circumstances because of a lack of clear communication. The most crucial element throughout was to remove the prisoners from Neuengamme and Hamburg. Once the transports arrived at Lübeck, the primary motive for Kaufmann had been achieved.

Although Kaufmann had been responsible for requisitioning ships for the purpose of

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<sup>188</sup> BAB BY 5/V 279/ 7A: *Paul Weissmann Report on the evacuation of Neuengamme Camp*, p. 1-2. For original German, “Sofort nach Ankunft des Zuges wurde mit dem Umladen begonnen. Die Häftlinge bestiegen das zunächstliegende Schiff und wurden durch die Luken in die Laderäume hinabgestossen. In beiden Schiffen lagen diese Räume jeweils zu zweien übereinander. In den oberen hielten sich jene Häftlinge, die sich durch ihre etwas bessere körperliche Verfassung und ihre Kleidung eine gewisse Geltung zu verschaffen wussten. Die Überfüllung war derart, dass niemand über so viel Platz verfügte, um sich hinlegen oder gar ausstrecken zu können. Besonders Nachts gab es Hunderte Häftlinge, die über den Körpern der anderen umherirrten und von einer Stelle zur anderen getrieben wurden ohne auch nur den Raum zu finden, im Stehen zu ruhen. Man lag auf den nackten Planken. Besonders katastrophal waren die Zustände in den unteren Laderäumen. Man sah von obenher nur eine undefinierbare Masse übereinanderliegenden Menschenkörpern. Sie hatten nicht einmal die Kraft und die Möglichkeit zur Befriedigung ihrer körperlichen Bedürfnisse die aufgestellten Unratkübel aufzusuchen”.

placing prisoners on board, his interest began to wane once the prisoners arrived at Lübeck. The prisoners no longer occupied any physical space in the city of Hamburg. And it remains clear, particularly during the early transports that their transfer to the ships seemed a mere formality. This evolved into a disorderly situation because Gauleiter Kaufmann was less concerned with the prisoners once the transports cleared Hamburg. In examining why there was a breakdown in communication, what will now follow is a reconstruction of a series of communications between the SS, civilian administration, Merchant Navy and the German Navy. I will argue that the plans for the evacuation from Neuengamme were a closely guarded secret, and the use of the vessels in Neustadt Bay was not known to other departments engaged in the evacuation process.

In light of the enemy advance an estimated 10,000 prisoners had been forced to the small Baltic port of Neustadt. The civilian administration in Hamburg as well the local SS had planned to house these prisoners on board three main ships. The *Thielbek* accommodated some 2,800 prisoners, while the *Athen* was to hold some 2,000 prisoners. The remainder were planned to be placed aboard the *Cap Arcona*.<sup>189</sup> But by 26 April it had become clear that these plans had not been communicated effectively to other departments. As transports were brought to the *Cap Arcona*, it quickly became apparent that the volume of prisoners was too great for the few vessels that had been requisitioned. Bassewitz-Behr and Kaufmann received daily reports on the overcrowding and deteriorating sanitary conditions. As this presented a real problem to

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<sup>189</sup> TNA WO 311/440: *Report on the evacuation of Neuengamme Camp: Deposition of Max Pauly*, 30 March 1946; See also Detlef Garbe, "Das KZ-Neuengamme", in Karin Orth and Ulrike Jureit (eds.), *Überlebensgeschichte: Gespräche mit Überlebenden des KZ-Neuengamme* (Dölling und Galitz: Hamburg, 1994), pp. 33-34.

the plans of detaining prisoners on board ships, Walter von Lewinski was charged by Heinrich Horn SS to act as a consultant in Neustadt for maritime affairs. Due to the task ahead Lewinski decided to work with Captain Kahrt who was the liaising Maritime officer in Lübeck. In deciding the numbers destined for each vessel, Kahrt argued that “there should be about eight thousand concentration camp inmates, loaded by the SS on the steamer *Cap Arcona*, who was lying in the Bay of Lübeck”.<sup>190</sup> The problem was that the plans and intentions of the Gauleiter had not been communicated effectively to the crewmen of the Merchant Navy. This led to a refusal to accept any prisoners. The *Cap Arcona*’s Captain, Heinrich Bertram refused to take this number on board. In fact the first refusal had come from his first officer, Jeske, while Bertram was away seeing his wife in Neustadt.<sup>191</sup>

The transfer process, on paper, was simple. Prisoners would be loaded on the *Athen*, and then taken out to the *Cap Arcona*. The *Athen*, under the command of Captain Nobmann, had been informed of the situation by the naval authority. The ship was simply being used as a shuttle to transfer the prisoners. On two occasions the *Athen* was forced back to port with its cargo as a result of Bertram’s refusal. Major Christoph-Heinz Gehrig had been placed in charge of managing the shipment of these prisoners onto suitable

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<sup>190</sup> TNA WO 309/408: *Deposition of Walter von Lewinski*, 13 April 1946. For original German, “Am Morgens des 24. April 1945 meldete ich mich bei dem Seeschiffahrtsbevollmächtigten Lübeck, Kapitän Kahrt, von dem ich die folgenden Einzelheiten erfuhr:- Es sollten ungefähr achttausend Konzentrationslagerhäftlinge durch die SS auf den Dampfer *Cap Arcona* , der in der Bucht von Lübeck lag, verladen werden. Der Kapitän des Schiffes, Kapt. Bertram, weigere sich jedoch die Häftlinge, zumal in dieser Zahl an Bord zu nehmen. Ein Pendelverkehr mit den Schiffen *Athen* (Kapt. Nobmann), *Elmenhorst* (Kapt. Krueger), und *Thielbeck* (Kapt. Jacobsen) sei zwischen Lübeck und der *Cap Arcona* eingerichtet, um die aus Neuengamme ankommenden Menschen an Bord zu bringen”.

<sup>191</sup> TNA WO 309/873: *Deposition on Oath of Thuro Dommengeset, 2nd Officer Cap Arcona*.

vessels. Having recently been promoted to the rank of *Hauptsturmführer*, he had been charged with the destruction of administrative records in the main camp. His task was to organise the loading of prisoners onto the ships docked in Neustadt. The first time was during dusk on 23 April when the refusal was given due to lack of sufficient light. Again in the morning, the *Athen* set steam and tried to moor next to the *Cap Arcona*. This time the refusal was given for several reasons. On board, Otto Thummel toured the ship. It became immediately apparent that the ship could not take 8000 prisoners. Thummel noted that “they found the ship completely inappropriate. Accommodation in the small cabins was too cramped, and there were not sufficient food or water facilities to cope with the demand”.<sup>192</sup> More importantly, the structure on board the vessel clearly indicates that the purpose of the vessel was to serve as an extension of the concentration camp.

That the merchant crew continued to refuse further access to the *Cap Arcona* presented the administration staff with a number of complications. Firstly, prisoner numbers on the quayside at Lübeck continued to swell. This meant that further provisions, housing and some food stores were required. But the situation also meant that although the evacuation from Neuengamme had been successful, there were still prisoners visibly

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<sup>192</sup> TNA WO 309/408: *Deposition of Otto Thummel, Report on the ship, Cap Arcona, 23 May 1946*. For original German, “Nachmittags, also 23. April, kam der Befehl, dass die Athen in die Neustadter Bucht auslaufen sollte, um dort auf die *Cap Arcona* überzuladen. Durch Blinkfunk wurde die Verbindung zwischen den beiden Schiffen aufgenommen, Die *Cap Arcona* verweigerte wegen das Eintreten der Dunkelheit ein Längsseitgehen und die Übernahme der Häftlinge überhaupt, da keine diesbezüglichen Befehle vorlägen. Am nächsten Morgen gingen Hauptmann Wahl und ich an Bord der *Cap Arcona*, um mündlich zu verhandeln. Kapitän Bertram war nicht anwesend, nur der Erste Offizier Jeske. Wir besichtigten das Schiff und stellten fest, dass es völlig ungeeignet sei: In der Unterbringung in den kleinen Kabinen, Wegen ungenügender Kochmöglichkeiten (für 6500 Häftlinge), Überwachung und Versteckmöglichkeiten”.

near or close to industrial businesses. The fear was that businesses would be linked to slave labour after the war.<sup>193</sup> This increased pressure on the civilian administration in Hamburg naturally led to a swift resolution. After the final refusal by the merchant crew, the situation was untenable. To overcome the issue, SS staff led by Gehrig was told to use force to ensure that the inmates were successfully transferred onto the *Cap Arcona*.<sup>194</sup>

In its operation days the *Cap Arcona* was built and designed to hold around 2,000 people including its crew.<sup>195</sup> With this in mind, Lewinski argued that “in his view, too many prisoners were aboard the *Cap Arcona*, and for sanitary reasons not more than 4,500 people were to be allowed on the ship”.<sup>196</sup> Because of problems surrounding the housing of prisoners in Lübeck, a meeting was arranged for the evening of 25 April 1945. The purpose was to discuss how best to overcome the problems that had become apparent in Neustadt. At this meeting Horn, the commandant Pauly, von Lewinski, Rickert and an SS Doctor from Neuengamme Max Specht were present. Having digested the report by Lewinski on the prevailing sanitary conditions and complaints

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<sup>193</sup> See for instance, John Grenville, *The Jews and Germans of Hamburg: The Destruction of a Civilization 1790-1945* (Routledge: London, 2011), pp. 258-263; Buggeln, *Slave Labor*, p. 264. The intention to remove the prisoners was to enable Gauleiter Kaufmann to surrender the city to Allied forces.

<sup>194</sup> See TNA WO 309/408: *Deposition of Heinrich Horn*, 23 May 1946.

<sup>195</sup> See various, Lange, *Dokumentation: Cap Arcona*; Schön, *Die Cap Arcona Katatrophe*.

<sup>196</sup> TNA WO 309/408: *Deposition of Heinrich Horn*, 23 May 1946. For original German, “Ein paar Tage später sagten mir meine Sekretärinnen, Lewinski habe ihnen gesagt, dass seiner Ansicht nach viel zu viele Häftlinge an Bord der *Cap Arcona* wären und dass aus sanitären Gründen nicht mehr als 4500 Leute auf dem Schiff sein durften”.

from the ships captains, they agreed to send Max Specht to investigate the claims further and report back. As a temporary measure, until further assessments were done, all parties agreed to place no more than 4,500 prisoners on the *Cap Arcona*.<sup>197</sup> The importance of the captain's continued refusal showed that communication, as well as poor planning, led to the chaotic scenes in Lübeck. The breakdown and eventual failure of the planning and execution of Gauleiter Kaufmann's evacuation plan was the result of a lack of clear communication. Once Hamburg and the immediate area was clear from any involvement with slave labour, the Gauleiter was less concerned about the actual loading process in Lübeck Bay.

On 26 April, Specht accompanied Lewinski to Lübeck as instructed at the night's previous meeting. On arrival in Lübeck, and subsequently on the ships *Thielbek* and *Elmenhorst*, initial conditions were confirmed. Over the course of the following days, Specht inspected all aspects of the complaints. Alongside his visit, Otto Thummel, who was part of Pauly's staff at Neuengamme camp noted that,

In regards to the accommodation on the *Cap Arcona*, the following should be noted: The Russian and Polish prisoners were housed in the hold of the ship, the French, Belgian and Dutch prisoners in the decks from B to G, along with some German prisoners. There had to be separation between East and West because of many instances of theft, violence and stealing of food.<sup>198</sup>

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<sup>197</sup> See various collections of Depositions, TNA WO 309/408: *Deposition of Heinrich Horn*, 23 May 1946; TNA WO 309/408: *Deposition of Max Specht*, 23 May 1946. Also see TNA WO 309/873: *Deposition of Heinrich Bertram*.

<sup>198</sup> TNA WO 309/408: *Deposition on Otto Thummel*, 23 May 1946. For original German, "Über die Unterbringung auf der *Cap Arcona* ist folgendes zu bemerken: Die russischen und polnischen Häftlinge wurden in den Bananenraum untergebracht, die französischen, holländischen und belgischen Häftlinge in den Decks von B bis G, ebenfalls die deutschen Häftlinge. Es musste eine Trennung zwischen Ost- und West eintreten, da es wegen der vielen Diebstähle und gewaltsamen Wegnahme von Lebensmitteln zu Unruhen gekommen war. Die

Thummel identified in his statement the ongoing segregation of certain nationalities and type of prisoners. Furthermore he recognised that the purpose of the *Cap Arcona* was seen as an extension of the physical camp structure. The continued segregation of prisoners on different decks, as well as the continued maltreatment of Russian and Jewish prisoners highlights this. For instance, a Soviet prisoner of war was ranked just above his Jewish inmate, while a Western prisoner – French, Belgian, and Dutch – would occupy the higher decks of the vessel.<sup>199</sup>

The issues of communication appear to centre round Gauleiter Kaufmann. In his position as Gauleiter of Hamburg, as well as his position as Reich Commissioner for Sea Shipping, Kaufmann led the decision-making process which monitored the evacuation from Neuengamme. It was therefore his offices that were responsible for ensuring that other relevant departments were made aware of the short-term plan and most notably the housing of prisoners on board requisitioned passenger liners in Neustadt. Prior to embarkation from Gotenhafen, many of the ship's crew had been granted leave, while most of the life-saving equipment had been removed. The

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Kabinen wurden - j- nach Grösse – mit sechs bis zwölf Mann belegt. Das Krankenrevier wurde in dem ganzen Deck eingerichtet, indem sich bereits das Hospital des Schiffes mit Operationszimmer etc befand. Für die Schwerkranken standen die Kojen der normalen Schiffsbesatzung in nicht genügender Anzahl zur Verfügung. Zwei bis drei Häftlings-Ärzt standen zur Verfügung und etwa acht bis zehn Mann im Lager ausgebildetes Hilfspersonal. Ein Truppenarzt für die Häftlinge wie auch für die Wachmannschaften war – trotz täglicher Anforderung – nicht erschienen. Lediglich der Hauptsturmführer Dr. Trbzinski kam erst am 2, Mai, ging flüchtig durch das Schiff, war mit der Unterbringung zufrieden und versprach die dauernd angeforderten Medikamente und Verbandstoffe sofort zu besorgen“.

<sup>199</sup> See Sofsky, *The Order of Terror*, pp. 117 – 129.

remaining crew were under the impression the ship was going to be laid up.<sup>200</sup> On the evening of 21 April Lieselotte Wiese, secretary to the Reich Commissar for shipping received an important telephone call. She revealed in her deposition that:

during the night, as far as I can remember, the Navy told me - although the conversation was interrupted several times – that the ship stands at our disposal, but that the Navy do not take responsibility for the crew, food, water or bunkering of the vessel.<sup>201</sup>

The *Cap Arcona* docked in Neustadt on 16 April.<sup>202</sup> Wiese reveals that it took a further five days before the release of the vessel had been guaranteed by the German Navy. Moreover, by this stage of the evacuation process it was only the Gauleiter and SS who were in a position of knowing what was happening. Although the German Navy had released the ship, its involvement in the transfer process was limited. But the merchant crew, as well as the ships owners (Hamburg-Süd) had not entered into any part of the decision-making process. Ultimately the initial transfer of prisoners was done without the authority of the owners. This is relevant because it shows that the continuation of planning and organisation once the *Cap Arcona* arrived in Neustadt had either stalled or the Gauleiter and SS merely hoped that there would be no complications with the transfer.

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<sup>200</sup> See for instance, TNA WO 309/873: *Deposition of Heinrich Bertram*, 3 July 1945; TNA WO 309/873: *Deposition of Thuro Dommenges, 2<sup>nd</sup> Officer Cap Arcona*, 5 July 1945.

<sup>201</sup> TNA WO 309/408: *Deposition on Oath of Lieselotte Wiese*, 21 May 1946. For original German, “Im Laufe der Nacht teilte mir die Kriegsmarine soweit ich mich erinnern kann – das Gespräch wurde mehrfach unterbrochen – mit, dass das Schiff zu unserer Verfügung stände, dass die Kriegsmarine aber keine Verantwortung für die Bemannung, Verpflegung, Wasser und Bebunkerung des Schiffes übernehme”.

<sup>202</sup> See Lange, *Dokumentation: Cap Arcona; Watson, Nazi Titanic*.

Bertram arrived in Neustadt on the morning of 22 April where he was made aware that the *Cap Arcona* was no longer under the authority of the German Navy. The ships company, Hamburg-Süd, had been in direct conversation with the office of the *Reikosee* and more specifically Horn. There does appear to be some confusion between the two offices. While the Navy released the *Cap Arcona* on the evening of 21 April, it was not until 24-25 April that the ship's company were fully aware. A telegram from John Eggert to Bertram stated:

*Reikosee* informs that acceptance of prisoners due to suggestion of Admiral Engelhardt. You are to communicate with and to carry out the orders of Engelhardt.<sup>203</sup>

But if the ship had been released by the German Navy, it was no longer the responsibility of Admiral Engelhardt to govern the use of the *Cap Arcona*. Engelhardt revealed that he received a telephone conversation from someone in the office of the shipping ministry:

on behalf of Gauleiter Kaufmann, he requested the Marine (Navy) to load the '*Cap Arcona*' with 2200 concentration camp prisoners. He gave as a reason that in Lübeck area there was no other possibility of accommodation. I refused with the following words: 'The Navy does not deal with such matters'. I will place the ship, at your disposal... I think that it was before 13 April 1945.<sup>204</sup>

Engelhardt disclosed a number of important points. The number of prisoners expected to be loaded onto the vessel totalled 2,200. Kaufmann had calculated that this would be a sufficient number to house on the *Cap Arcona*. However this clearly highlights that Kaufmann had failed to fully grasp the scale of the situation. During the planning stages

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<sup>203</sup> TNA WO 309/408: *Deposition of John Eggert*, 11 April 1946.

<sup>204</sup> TNA WO 309/408: *Translation of Deposition of Konrad Engelhardt*, 12 March 1947.

he had been unable to calculate the number of prisoners that would be part of the transfer process. This lack of efficient planning and scope by the Gauleiter suggests that there were a number of factors that Kaufmann had to make a final decision on. Firstly, we can infer that this situation continued to be the best way the Hamburg Gauleiter could manage the increasing pressure from business industrialists. Namely that once the transports left Hamburg, they deemed this to be a satisfactory solution. Furthermore evidence suggests that once the transports departed the camp, Kaufmann's personal interest in the problems that arose at Lübeck can be considered less enthusiastic to engage and solve the on-going crisis.

Kaufmann ignored his own estimates and opted to cram the *Cap Arcona* with over twice the number of prisoners as previously estimated. His primary concern was his determination that the prisoners were hidden from view, particularly as British forces were close to the surrounding area. Secondly, the decision process to use the *Cap Arcona* to detain prisoners further highlights the spontaneous nature of the Hamburg administration. The decision to utilise shipping was made by the end of March 1945, only two weeks prior to the first embarkation from Neuengamme. Therefore the continued planning to ensure a smooth transition from the harbour to the *Cap Arcona* was further delayed because Gauleiter Kaufmann had failed to communicate his plans to the Merchant Navy.

One important aspect of the *Cap Arcona* was the overall condition of the ship. Conditions on board the *Cap Arcona*, as well as the way prisoners were continually

treated, help provide indicators as to the overall purpose of the vessel. As numbers increased in Lübeck, the SS became determined that all the prisoners would be held on ships. A survivor, Sam Pivnik suggested that

This [*Arcona*] was a floating hell and there was nowhere to go in the congested space. The dead, we discovered, had already been thrown overboard, to float like human debris in the black waters of the Bay of Lübeck.<sup>205</sup>

In relatively cramped conditions it was difficult, almost impossible for the small number of merchant crew on board to improve the conditions on board. Kaufmann argued that the Red Cross (SRC) would take over the *Cap Arcona* and the prisoners on board.<sup>206</sup> In reality the dwindling conditions, combined with a lack of basic provisions largely suggested that the placement of prisoners on the *Cap Arcona* had not been undertaken with humanitarian aims in mind. Moreover, the likelihood that such prisoner numbers would be handed over directly to the Red Cross was also unlikely given the location of the vessels, and wider military situation. As the number of deaths increased provisions were made to stop the bodies being thrown overboard. The shuttle boat *Alma* was used to ferry the dead from the *Cap Arcona* where mass graves had been dug on the shoreline of Neustadt.<sup>207</sup> It was no longer the case that deaths occurred occasionally. It became common place for significant numbers of prisoners to perish before the boat returned. Although the placement of prisoners on board the *Cap Arcona* was seen by many

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<sup>205</sup> Sam Pivnik, *Survivor: Auschwitz, the Death March and my fight for freedom* (Hodder & Stoughton: London, 2010), p. 213.

<sup>206</sup> See TNA WO 309/408: *Translation of Deposition on Oath by Karl Kaufmann*, 12 March 1945, p. 2.

<sup>207</sup> See Lange, *Dokumentation: Cap Arcona*, pp. 227-237. See also Wilhelm Lange, *Cap Arcona: Summary of the Cap Arcona disaster in the bay of Neustadt on 3<sup>rd</sup> May 1945* (Wilhelm Lange: Neustadt in Holstein, 1996), p. 3.

popular historians as a knee-jerk reaction to the Allied advance,<sup>208</sup> the process of placing inmates on board was the direct result of extensive negotiations driven largely by the city administration of Hamburg.

As for the provision of basic rations, Rudi Goguel painted a bleak and shocking description of the horrific conditions which faced the prisoners. He describes how his captors, the SS and ship's crew continued to eat food, withholding much needed supplies from the prisoners who were dying from hunger and thirst.<sup>209</sup> Philip Jackson was an American citizen working as an interpreter before his capture. He argued that "the food was very irregular. Sometimes we got nothing; sometimes one-seventh or one-eighth of a loaf of bread with some soup".<sup>210</sup> Because of dwindling supplies aboard the *Cap Arcona*, many of the already meagre inmates' rations were cut further. In some instance – as noted by Jackson – they simply did not receive anything. Paul Weissmann recalls that "the food was during these few days a little piece of thick bread and a quarter to half-a-litre of vegetable water that was too salty, and as a rule inedible".<sup>211</sup>

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<sup>208</sup> Watson, *Nazi Titanic*, pp. 79-98.

<sup>209</sup> See Rudi Goguel, *Cap Arcona: Report über den Untergang der Häftlingsflotte in der Lübecker Bucht am 3. Mai 1945* (Röderberg-Verlag: Frankfurt, 1982), pp. 51-53. For original German, "Wie dem auch sei: Die Morgen beginnt wie die vorhergehenden mit den üblichen Routine-Angelegenheiten: es wird Appell abgehalten, oder – genauer gesagt – die Farce eines Appells; die im Laufe der Nacht angefallenen und auf Deck aufgestapelten Leichen werden über Bord geworfen; die Häftlingsärzte kümmern sich um die sterbenden Kameraden; Wachmannschaften und Schiffsbesatzungen fassen Essen, während die Gefangenen weiterhin dem Hunger und – noch schlimmer – dem Durst ausgeliefert sind. Die illegale Häftlingsleitung berät die neue Situation, und Kuriere eilen durch das Schiff, um die neuesten Meldungen und Informationen weiterzugeben".

<sup>210</sup> TNA WO 309/863: *Record of Evidence of Philip Jackson, Exhibit No.1*, p. 29.

<sup>211</sup> BAB BY 5/V 279/ 7A: *Report on the evacuation of Neuengamme Camp and the sinking of the "Cap Arcona" and "Thielbeck" on 3.5.1945 in Neustadt*, Paul Weissmann, taken on

Unlike within the physical camp surroundings, there was no opportunity for the prisoners to wash or obtain any form of medical assistance.<sup>212</sup> This in turn led to an outbreak of typhoid fever which took its toll on the already weak prisoners. Long term planning no longer existed. As evacuation transports departed Neuengamme camp the continued involvement of the civilian administration became less significant as the SS became more heavily involved. Therefore we can infer that the primary aim of the civilian administration was simply to clear Hamburg and immediate areas of any evidence of slave labour. Furthermore with a rapid decline in conditions the purpose of the *Cap Arcona* continued to be seen as prison ship, opposed to a temporary holding vessel awaiting the Red Cross.

Another survivor, Benjamin Jacobs was held in the lower decks of the ship with his brother Josek. He noted that “in the darkness and confinement of a crowded storeroom below [the] waterline in a rusting hulk”,<sup>213</sup> many prisoners concluded that they would be held on board until such time as German forces had a definitive plan. This temporary measure was arguably effective, although further planning once the prisoners were placed on the *Cap Arcona* was simply absent. The area under German control was rapidly shrinking. Lange notes that “the Soviet prisoners were squeezed into one room

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04.05.1946. For original German, “Die Verpflegung bestand während dieser Tage aus einem kaum fingerdicken Stück Brot und einem ¼ - ½ liter Gemüsewasser, das in der Regel so versalzen war, dass es ungeniessbar war”.

<sup>212</sup> For example see BAB BY 5/V 279/ 7A: *Report on the evacuation of Neuengamme Camp*. For original German, “Irgendeine ärztliche Betreuung wurde nicht durchgeführt. Eine Waschgelegenheit bestand nicht. Nur hin und wieder wurden einzelnen Häftlingen gestattet, and Deck zu kommen und für wenige Minuten frische Luft zu schöpfen”.

<sup>213</sup> Lange, *Dokumentation: Cap Arcona*, p. 87.

on the *Cap Arcona* without light or fresh air”.<sup>214</sup> Their treatment within the holds of the ship was brutal, and the opportunity to be released for air and light was minimal. One survivor suggested that the situation on the higher decks “was like something out of an old painting of hell because the porthole windows had been painted over and only a grey dim light filtered through onto the huddled passengers”.<sup>215</sup>

The overall operational effectiveness of the *Cap Arcona* has been the subject of much speculation. It was clear that during the evacuations from East Prussia the *Cap Arcona* damaged her propellers and subsequently developed a boiler defect. This meant that the vessel could no longer undertake any lengthy sea voyage, nor could the ship retain large quantities of fuel. The conditions of her boilers meant that the ship could only hold a small amount of the overall quantity of fuel needed to fill the tanks.<sup>216</sup> On the morning of 3 May, the oil tanker *Forbach* was instructed to load both the *Cap Arcona* and *Deutschland* with fuel. For the *Deutschland* this seemed an even stranger move, as the ship was in the process of being re-fitted as a hospital ship.<sup>217</sup> Of more interest is the evidence that Max Pauly gave during his post-war deposition. He claimed that the Navy

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<sup>214</sup> Lange, *Summary of the Cap Arcona disaster in the bay of Neustadt on 3<sup>rd</sup> May 1945*, p. 4.

<sup>215</sup> Pivnik, *Survivor*, p. 214.

<sup>216</sup> For a discussion as to the activities of the *Forbach* see, TNA ADM 281/1: *A report on the effectiveness of Allied anti-ship weapons against shipping operating in the Baltic under German Control during 1944-1945*.

<sup>217</sup> For instance see BAB BY 5/V 279/ 7A: *Bericht des Kapitäns Steincke von der Deutschland*, 19 December 1945. Steincke argues that “Das Schiff war „Lazarettsschiff“ und hatte 200 Mann an Bord, Besatzung und Sanitätspersonal. Weder Häftlinge noch verwundete Soldaten oder Flüchtlinge waren an Bord”.

simply would not release fuel for either the *Cap Arcona* or *Deutschland*.<sup>218</sup> Furthermore he suggested that “fuel had to be got against direct orders of the Navy. Water had to be fetched from Neustadt and rations from different food depots”.<sup>219</sup>

While the *Cap Arcona* was anchored in Neustadt, there were a number of concerns raised by the ship’s captains. The main concern was the display of a Red Cross flag or insignia to represent those held on board the ship. However the problem was that there were SS and Wehrmacht troops on board. Under the Geneva Convention flying a Red Cross flag whilst military personnel were on board was forbidden.<sup>220</sup> Although it was seemingly unlikely that any members of the SS would obey and conform to the requirements of the Geneva Convention, we can infer that in all likelihood the Red Cross flag was never considered by the SS. Had this been the case, the inclusion of basic rations and supplies would also have been made available to the prisoners.

Gauleiter Kaufmann alleges that:

I then told Bassewitz-Behr [around mid-April], and I am certain that Horn was present, to make all the detailed transport arrangements with the Swedish Red Cross: that is to say, ports of embarkation, names of the ships, route, Red Cross flags etc.<sup>221</sup>

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<sup>218</sup> TNA WO 309/408: *Deposition of Max Pauly point 19*, 30 March 1946.

<sup>219</sup> TNA WO 309/408: *Deposition of Max Pauly point 19*, 30 March 1946, point 22

<sup>220</sup> For a discussion see, <http://www.icrc.org/eng/war-and-law/treaties-customary-law/geneva-conventions/index.jsp>, (Accessed 27 June 2014, 20:29). See also TNA WO 309/873: *Deposition of Captain Heinrich Bertram*.

<sup>221</sup> TNA WO 309/408: *Translation of Deposition on Oath by Karl Kaufmann*, 12 March 1945, p. 2.

During his interrogation Kaufmann continued to allege that he had tasked Bassewitz-Behr to make arrangements with the Red Cross bodies, but depositions taken from Bernadotte state categorically that the office of the Swedish Red Cross had not been approached by either Kaufmann or Bassewitz-Behr with regard to the prison ships in Neustadt Bay. Additionally, Pauly alleges that “as for the marking of the ships with the Red Cross, I remember, that this, as well as notification of place etc. to the Swedish Red Cross, was suggested by Gauleiter Kaufmann”.<sup>222</sup> But in voluntary depositions, the SRC representative Folke Bernadotte stated clearly that

the mission was never approached by Gauleiter Kaufmann, HSSPF Bassewitz-Behr or Max Pauly concerning the evacuation of further nationals.<sup>223</sup>

Therefore any claims by the SS or Civilian administration regarding the fate of the prisoners and their supposed transfer to the SRC are strongly disputed.

Watson recently argued that the “ship’s engines were barely functioning, the crew was at inadequate strength for an ocean voyage, and fuel, food and supplies were scarce”.<sup>224</sup> The *Cap Arcona* was released by the Navy as the ship’s operational capacity no longer allowed it to be used for evacuations from the East. Moreover the ship was technically and mechanically unfit for active service, and the ability of the ship to undertake an arduous voyage to Norway or Sweden was highly limited. While the *Cap Arcona* remained under the office of the *Reikosee*, its owners Hamburg-Süd were still under the

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<sup>222</sup> TNA WO 309/408: *Deposition of Max Pauly*, 30 March 1946, point 23.

<sup>223</sup> TNA WO 309/408: *Deposition of Folke Bernadotte*, 6 July 1946, p. 1.

<sup>224</sup> Watson, *Nazi Titanic*, p. 133.

impression that the ship was commanded by the German Navy. On 23 April the deputy chairman of the board of directors for the ship's company spoke with Bertram to offer assistance regarding the transfer of prisoners. Bertram had informed the owners that the number of prisoners was too many and that it was quite impossible to accommodate all safely on board.<sup>225</sup> Lange describes the ship's captains as "making clever arrangements [...] in keeping the number of prisoners comparatively low on board their ships".<sup>226</sup> In doing so he argues that there was an element of care and consideration for the prisoner's well-being. Furthermore Bertram noted that "any responsible seaman knows that the risk at sea to take on human beings without absolute necessity during wartime is dangerous enough, especially such masses".<sup>227</sup> This statement suggests there was a perceived need to ensure the safety of the crew, rather than the safety of the prisoners and therefore Bertram's refusal was not on humanitarian grounds.

The debate over whether Captain Bertram should continue to exercise his right to refuse the prisoners carried over into the morning of 24 April. In light of Bertram's stance the *Reikosee* gave Georg Dittmer – a board member of Hamburg Süd – instructions to force Bertram to accept the prisoners.<sup>228</sup> The directors were not informed of this change until sometime around 24/25 April by Captain Bertram, who had spoken with Engelhardt regarding the transfer of prisoners to the *Cap Arcona*. Dittmer "received the information

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<sup>225</sup> TNA WO 309/873: *Deposition of Heinrich Bertram, Captain Cap Arcona*.

<sup>226</sup> Lange, *Cap Arcona Summary*, p. 6. [http://media.offenes-archiv.de/Cap Arcona\\_summary.pdf](http://media.offenes-archiv.de/Cap_Arcona_summary.pdf), [Accessed 17 July 2016].

<sup>227</sup> Watson, *Nazi Titanic*, p. 148. See also Jacobs, *The Dentist of Auschwitz*, p. 192.

<sup>228</sup> TNA WO 309/408: *Deposition on Oath of Georg Dittmer*, 11 April 1946.

by telephone from Captain Bertram that Admiral Engelhardt would have nothing to do with the taking over of the prisoners, and that the *Cap Arcona* had been transferred to the Reich Commissar for Shipping”.<sup>229</sup> The impact of this refusal increased the growing problems on the quayside. During the evacuation, plans had not been made regarding the provision of additional stores and supplies for prisoners on the quayside. It had been anticipated that the transfer of prisoners to the *Cap Arcona* would be a swift procedure. A delay in this transfer evolved into desperate scenes of hungry prisoners in squalid conditions. This continued delay further shows that only the requisitioning of rail trucks and the prisoners re-location from Neuengamme to the harbour at Lübeck had been well planned. The delay further added to the confusion whilst conditions rapidly declined. Primary responsibility for this delay can be attributed to Gauleiter Kaufmann, who had failed to fully appreciate the scale of the process and the logistics involved in the transfer of inmates from Neuengamme. We can therefore surmise that although the idea to evacuate the prisoners onto ships was deemed the most practical solution, the impact of the wider military situation placed pressure on Gauleiter Kaufmann to fully assess and grasp the magnitude of the scale of the task he faced. Furthermore once the evacuation process began, any further planning simply sought to manage the situation in Lübeck, rather than provide the adequate support needed on the quayside.

Finally on April 25, Captain Gehrig along with Kurt Rickert SS and other officers went aboard the *Cap Arcona*. This time Bertram accepted a reduction in prisoner numbers,

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<sup>229</sup> TNA WO 309/408: *Deposition on Oath of Georg Dittmer*, 11 April 1946.

from 8,000 to around 4,500.<sup>230</sup> On the threat of a summary execution Bertram relented and the prisoners were loaded onto the ship. As a precaution, the water supply to the crew and inmates was shut off twice a day for one hour at a time in a vain attempt to make supplies last. On Friday 27 April and into the following morning, Lewinski came aboard the *Cap Arcona* to monitor the deterioration of the supplies. The lack of food and water, coupled with severe overcrowding, meant that the situation on board the *Cap Arcona* was desperate. Lewinski and Gehrig made the decision to travel to Hamburg with the aim of speaking directly with Kaufmann regarding these issues. A meeting was held on 29 April. Bertram felt at this point it was his duty to relate to Kaufmann the problem surrounding his standing order.<sup>231</sup> During this meeting at the *Reikosee*'s office they were met by General Abraham and camp commandant Max Pauly. While other officers were also present, Bertram remembers that he was informed by Pauly himself that "we all have a load off our minds because Count Bernadotte from Sweden has just made a declaration that he is ready to fetch the concentration ships and take them to Sweden or Denmark".<sup>232</sup> This information had not been passed on to Kaufmann, nor

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<sup>230</sup> TNA WO 309/408: *Deposition on Oath of Kurt Adolf Klebeck*, 17 May 1946. Original German, "Etwa am 25 April nahm mich Gehrig nach Neustadt mit. Gehrig hatte von Pauly ein Schreiben bekommen, in dem stand, dass wenn sich Kapt. Bertram der *Cap Arcona* trotz eines beigefügten Schreibens seiner Reederei weigere die Häftlinge an Bord zu nehmen, er zu verhaften sei. Wie mir Gehrig sagte gab Bertram darauf seinen Widerstand auf".

<sup>231</sup> TNA WO 309/873: *Deposition of Bertram*, p. 11. Bertram stated that his standing order was to scuttle the ship or destroy it if there was any danger of it falling into enemy hands.

<sup>232</sup> TNA WO 309/873: *Deposition of Bertram*, p. 11. See also TNA WO 309/408: *Deposition of Walter Von Lewinski*, 13 April 1946. From original German, "Kurz vor dem Eingang zur Riechstatthalter kamen uns einige Herren entgegen, unter ihnen Pauly und ein Herr in Zivil, der sich als Generalmajor Abraham vorstellte. Anscheinend waren sie über unser Vorhaben bereits unterrichtet, da sie uns etwa mit den Worten begrüßten, es wende sich nun alles zum Besten, Himmler habe mit Bernadotte in Lübeck verhandelt und vereinbart, dass sämtliche Häftlinge durch Schwedische Rote Kreuz Schiffe abgeholt wurden, damit wären wir aller weiterer Sorge enthoben".

made available to senior SS staff. During the planning stages the primary goal was simply to remove evidence of the close business-camp relationship. The *Cap Arcona* was in no viable position to make the arduous journey, certainly without adequate supplies and crew. Furthermore SRC and ICRC representatives remained in Lübeck carrying out further Red Cross duties. At no time were these men approached by Gauleiter Kaufmann or Bassewitz-Behr. The Red Cross ships docked in Lübeck, *Lillie Matthiessen* and *Magdalena*, sailed from Lübeck with an agreement having accepted some 250 sick prisoners from the ship *Athen*.<sup>233</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The transfer process of loading the prisoners onto the ships at Lübeck and the subsequent delays was arguably the direct responsibility of the Hamburg civilian administration. In attempting to understand why the transfer process broke down, personal motives within the Hamburg civilian administration play an important role. Gauleiter Kaufmann's primary aim was to clear the immediate area in and around Hamburg of any association with slave labour supplied from Neuengamme camp. To that end, the Gauleiter achieved this aim. In defining this process as 'management by crisis', this term is applied to suggest that while the civilian administration had seen some success in the initial evacuation phase, the lack of further planning or communication with other Reich institutions suggests that the process was at times ad hoc. Once the transports arrived in Lübeck, the situation rapidly deteriorated. Communication and further planning remained crucial. Kaufmann's inability to liaise further with the German Navy and Merchant Navy further argues that his primary

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<sup>233</sup> See for instance, Lange, *Cap Arcona: Summary of the Cap Arcona disaster in the bay of Neustadt on 3<sup>rd</sup> May 1945*, pp. 4-5.

concern was simply to re-locate the prisoner's away from Hamburg. Moreover his complacency in assuming that the transfer process would take place was misguided. A lack of clear communication and coordination between other Reich bodies, including the Merchant Navy, further demonstrate Gauleiter Kaufmann's level of complacency. The *Cap Arcona* had been chosen because the vessel had recently been released by the German Navy and therefore was considered no longer fit for service. Moreover, the use of the *Cap Arcona* during the East Prussian evacuation had indicated that a significant number of inmates could be held on board. With this in mind, the use of the ship to hold inmates presented an opportunity. This much is seen by the initial plans to force near 9,000 prisoners on board. The evacuation to Lübeck was the result of two key factors. The first was the Allied advance to the north. This led to increasing pressure on the Nazi camp system. But more crucially the area available to evacuate such numbers simply no longer existed.

## Chapter Four

### British Military Policy in 1945 <sup>234</sup>

This chapter will argue that as a result of discussions at Yalta, British military policy became geared towards halting the Soviet advance westwards. Previous research into the sinking of the *Cap Arcona* has largely failed to address why British forces pressed hard to Lübeck. In doing so this chapter will begin by investigating further the impact of the Yalta conference on deciding and steering British strategic policy. The results of the Yalta conference demonstrated to the Western Allies that Berlin should no longer be consider the primary military target. British commanders therefore opted to press towards Denmark and the North Baltic. It was this change of direction that arguably had a direct impact on the attack of ships on 3 May. Once the wider policy has been outlined, its application will be used more locally, and highlight the impact this strategic policy had on Second Tactical Air Force. To understand why Second Tactical Air Force launched a final aerial attack on 3 May 1945, we must first examine why British military policy became hurried in the final weeks of the campaign. Through a combination of the broader political stance and local military policy, the change in operational direction had dire consequences for Britain's military strategy in the closing stages of the war. Finally, this chapter will apply this broader theme more locally and examine the wider impact of this strategic change of direction on the air operations of

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<sup>234</sup> Some earlier ideas for this chapter were published in a conference paper, Daniel Long, "A Controversial History? An analysis of British Attitudes and Responsibility in the Bombing of the *Cap Arcona*, 3 May 1945", *Emergence* Vol.7 (2015), pp. 28-37.

Second TAF. What was the impact on communication? What were the primary targets in April 1945? How did this further the wider military aim?

Throughout 1945, crucial decisions were made regarding British military policy, particularly in the wake of the conference held at Yalta in February. In the West, Kershaw argues, “the Wehrmacht [...] was by now in a truly desolate situation”.<sup>235</sup> This, however, did not mean that Allied armies encountered limited resistance. Hastings suggests that “the American and British armies were advancing against only spasmodic resistance, suffering few casualties, knowing that their task was all but complete”.<sup>236</sup> Yet the area in and around Hamburg was heavily supported by both Wehrmacht units and numerous SS divisions. With the area under Nazi control ever-shrinking, the district of Schleswig-Holstein became an important battle area, with many high-ranking officials fleeing to the relative safety of the North. Kershaw further suggests that “the British and Canadians made slower progress against the still relatively strong forces of Blaskowitz’s Army Group H”.<sup>237</sup> This progress was made more difficult as the Wehrmacht held important North Sea ports with links to Denmark and Norway. In reality, British forces often encountered intense pockets of fierce resistance and this was met with swift attack, usually by Allied aircrews. In terms of Britain’s strategy, Kershaw notes that,

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<sup>235</sup> Ian Kershaw, *The End: Hitler’s Germany 1944-45* (Allen Lane: London, 2011), p. 300.

<sup>236</sup> Max Hastings, *Armageddon: The Battle for Germany 1944-45* (Pan: London, 2015), p. 513.

<sup>237</sup> Kershaw, *The End*, p. 297.

On 15 April the Western Allies had laid down their immediate future objectives: in the north, press on to Lübeck, consolidate positions on the Elbe in central Germany, and in the south, advance to the Danube and into Austria.<sup>238</sup>

In attempting to define why Britain made such military decisions, it is necessary to analyse the impact of the conference held at Yalta in February 1945.

### **Overview of Military Policy**

After political discussions by Allied powers, potential military zones of occupation had, in part, been agreed at Yalta. Churchill felt that the Western powers should guide military policy towards taking Berlin.<sup>239</sup> This was not to happen. For his part, Eisenhower noted that Berlin fell into the Soviet zone of occupation and that this was naturally less of a military advantage than deploying forces elsewhere.<sup>240</sup> The result of this discussion highlighted that Britain, although an influential figure in the campaign, had less of an impact at Yalta. From this point alone, it is evident that Churchill felt side-lined. Britain's Foreign Policy therefore turned away from focusing on the Reich Centre towards halting the Soviet advance further east.

The Yalta conference in February 1945 was a valuable turning point for Britain's wider strategic policy. Agreements reached here had a direct impact on military policy in May

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<sup>238</sup> Kershaw, *The End*, p. 300.

<sup>239</sup> See Geoffrey Best, *Churchill and War* (Hambledon Continuum: London, 2006); Geoffrey Best, *Churchill: A Study in Greatness* (Penguin: London, 2002), pp. 213-242.

<sup>240</sup> Best, *Churchill and War*, pp. 160-161. See also Winston Churchill, *The Second World War: Triumph and Tragedy Vol. 6* (Penguin Classics: London, 2005), pp. 440-446.

1945. These decisions ultimately contributed to the sinking of the *Cap Arcona*. What was the outcome of the discussion over Military strategy and direction for British policy? As Allied troops crossed over the banks of the Rhine political leaders began to consider how best to bring the war to a swift end. Aside from the negotiations, it became evident that Churchill and Roosevelt were highly sceptical of the Soviet premier's future objectives. This heavily guided the Western Allies' policy in planning and co-ordinating future attacks. As the Soviet forces pressed ever more fiercely in the East, Britain became increasingly concerned that Soviet troops would advance into Denmark. In order to stem the advance into Denmark, British policy was altered to push hard and fast along the Baltic coast, and in doing so stop a Soviet incursion into the West. The planned capture of German ports at Kiel, Hamburg, Travemünde and Lübeck meant that Britain would be in a strong position to open up a sea-routed supply chain in the immediate aftermath, and have the ability to spare Denmark the pains of Soviet occupation.

As the big three Allied powers met at Yalta in February 1945, German military forces were largely entrenched within their own borders. While the focus was primarily on deciding post-war boundaries, Churchill attempted to press the Soviet Premier on free elections within Central Europe and Poland.<sup>241</sup> In attempting to guide policy, Britain and Churchill were almost side-lined by US-Soviet discussions.<sup>242</sup> During this discussion it was apparent to the Western Allies that Berlin was no longer a strategic or

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<sup>241</sup> Best, *Churchill and War*, pp. 139 – 147.

<sup>242</sup> Best, *Churchill and War*, p. 144. At this time the United States were seeking Soviet support for the Pacific War in Japan.

viable military objective. The Soviet advances towards the Oder meant that their forces were closer to Berlin than their Western counterparts. As the conference concluded, it emerged that the West had to re-evaluate their campaign. While the postwar boundaries have been outlined, the Anglo-Soviet relationship began to show signs of strain and tension. American forces had been determined to reach Berlin. With this no longer strategically viable, both Britain and American forces had to seek an alternative military goal. This change in policy not only fuelled a mistrust of Stalin, but resulted in further strains between Churchill and Roosevelt. In re-shaping British strategy it was decided to press an assault northwards towards the Baltic region. To outline the extent of the impact of the talks had at Yalta, the following is a re-construction of key meetings between Churchill, Roosevelt and Truman. After extensive negotiations at Yalta in February 1945 Western Allied opinion continued to develop policy to stem the tide of the Soviet advance into the West. For the public on-lookers, the conference at Yalta was largely deemed to be successful with the three Allied powers having negotiated terms for post-war Germany. In the background perception amongst ground troops and pilots was that “there was almost [a] total distrust of Stalin and his evil regime”.<sup>243</sup>

Britain’s aerial policy in the final months of the war was largely a by-product of its foreign policy aims. By April 1945 Allied forces were on the brink of success. As forces reached the Elbe, British troops paused before launching their next assault. Many commentators have suggested that in the closing weeks of the Second World War,

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<sup>243</sup> David Ince, *Brotherhood of the Skies: Wartime Experiences of a Gunner Officer and Typhoon Pilot* (Grub Street: London, 2010), p. 134.

British forces became increasingly hard pressed to reach the Baltic coast.<sup>244</sup> This section will look more closely at Britain's foreign policy and assess whether external factors such as a mistrust of their Allies necessitated their approach.

After extensive discussions at Yalta, America felt that any further advance on Berlin was impulsive.<sup>245</sup> In a secret telegram issued by the British Prime Minister Winston Churchill to his then Foreign Secretary Sir Anthony Eden, Churchill stressed his worry regarding the war situation. He emphasised that:

It is thought most important that Montgomery should take Lübeck as soon as possible, and he has an additional American Army Corps to strengthen his movements if he requires it.<sup>246</sup>

From his communication, it became evident that Churchill had realised the importance of saving Denmark from Soviet occupation. Furthermore, by halting the continued advance of Soviet forces into the North East, British interests in the Ruhr area could be further safeguarded. If Britain and her Allies could stop Soviet forces pushing into Denmark this would naturally allow for the Danish Monarchy to be restored, and while Churchill was concerned directly with the immediate future of the war, his thoughts also

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<sup>244</sup> See S.M.Plokhly, *Yalta: The Price of Peace* (Viking: London, 2011); Kershaw, *The End*; Michael Dobbs, *Six Months in 1945: FDR, Stalin, Churchill and Truman – from World War to Cold War* (Arrow: Farnham, 2013); Richard Bessel, *Germany 1945: From War to Peace* (Simon & Schuster: London, 2010); Anne Deighton, *Britain, the German Problem and the Origins of the Cold War in Europe: A Study of the Council of Foreign Ministers 1945-47* (PhD Thesis, University of Reading, 1987).

<sup>245</sup> See Dobbs, *Six Months in 1945: FDR, Stalin, Churchill and Truman – from World War to Cold War*.

<sup>246</sup> TNA FO 954/32D/815: *Private office papers of Sir Anthony Eden, Earl of Avon, Secretary of State for Foreign affairs, serial no. T.519/5*, 18 April 1945, p. 815.

turned to what was to happen after the war. Churchill's views became more apparent during a meeting with Eden, when he stressed "our arrival at Lübeck before our Russian friends from Stettin would save a lot of argument later on".<sup>247</sup> Moreover Churchill felt quite adamantly that "there is no reason why the Russians should occupy Denmark",<sup>248</sup> and therefore his concerns over the need to save Denmark were quite plain. During this series of telegrams, it became obvious that Britain and her attitude towards Russian forces were less than amicable. By April 1945, the Allied powers had begun to plan and draw up postwar zones of occupation.

Churchill's feelings towards the Soviet premier are clearly highlighted throughout his communications with foreign office staff. For instance in a previous telegram, the British Foreign Office had written to Washington to discuss how best to operate joint zones of occupation. It is clear that the British, along with their American counterparts also had a high level of mistrust for the French. The Foreign Office argued that:

Political influences might easily affect the administration of the French zone. I understand that General Eisenhower is telegraphing to the United States Chief of Staff on this subject. I am sure you should support him.<sup>249</sup>

What the Foreign Office suggested was that a fragmented French state only wished to achieve its own aims rather than liaise and negotiate with the Allied powers. The French design of occupational zones meant that it would unite the France of General de Gaulle

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<sup>247</sup> TNA FO 954/32D/815: *Private office papers of Sir Anthony Eden*, p. 815.

<sup>248</sup> TNA FO 954/32D/815: *Private office papers of Sir Anthony Eden*, p. 815.

<sup>249</sup> TNA FO 954/32D/813: *Telegram from Foreign Office to Washington, No.3859*, 19 April 1945.

with Russia and divide the British and American forces.<sup>250</sup> By April 1945 the Allied nations were heavily engaged in discussions which would decide the political situation and the fate of postwar Germany. More importantly, these events impacted directly on post-war life. Tensions between the Allied powers continued to escalate in the final weeks of the campaign. This tension would later evolve into early Cold War conflicts. This series of political negotiations led to a military strategy which impacted directly on the *Cap Arcona*. The policy that followed led to the normal aerial procedures being side-lined in place of this wider military strategy.

Although Churchill had emphasised that Allied troops must take Lübeck, his aims stretched far wider. In fact, if British forces could take Lübeck prior to the arrival of Soviet forces, Churchill believed that Allied troops could thereafter “push on to Linz to meet the Russians there”.<sup>251</sup> Therefore for the course of the rest of the war and its aftermath, Lübeck was pivotal for the British and Churchill’s plans. Crossing the Elbe to the Baltic coast, Allied forces were to encounter mixed resistance. The decision to march North East was taken on 18-19 April. By this stage, the *Cap Arcona* was docked safely in Neustadt awaiting her final orders.

The impact of this decision to press hard to Lübeck at a time when there was limited strength or organisation within the German rank and file, suggested that Allied plans were to totally crush Hitler’s Third Reich. In fact this directive – as will be discussed in

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<sup>250</sup> TNA FO 954/32D/813: *Telegram from Foreign Office to Washington, No.3859.*

<sup>251</sup> TNA FO 954/32D/815: *18 April 1945*, p. 816.

Chapter Six – had dire consequences for the KZ inmates in Neustadt. While Britain’s Foreign policy showed direct signs of growing tensions with their Soviet ally, Germany’s ability to continue effective communication with remaining military units was almost non-existent. This communication blackout only further exacerbated the chaos that had gripped Nazi Germany. For Himmler, the issuing of directives seemed an almost fruitless task.<sup>252</sup> As Kershaw noted:

In March, as part of his attempt to reach some arrangement with the Allies, Himmler had ordered that Jews should be treated like other prisoners, informing camp commandants that they were no longer to be killed.<sup>253</sup>

The direct impact of this order was two-fold. Firstly for those prisoners still languishing in the remaining camps this order had a big impact on their future. The commitment to suspend the killing of Jews was a major concession. Secondly, his small offer of concession was met with a unanimous vote to reject this proposal. Bernadotte who had been engaged on Red Cross activities relating to Neuengamme was heavily involved acting as an intermediary between the West and Himmler. Considering the lengthy discussions between Victor Mallet, Bernadotte and Himmler, Mallet concluded that,

Himmler hoped to continue resistance on the Eastern front at least for a time which Bernadotte told him was scarcely possible in practice and not acceptable to the Allies. Himmler mentioned for instance that he hoped that the Western Allies rather than the Russians would be first to enter Mecklenberg in order to save the civilian population.<sup>254</sup>

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<sup>252</sup> See for instances, Peter Longerich, *Heinrich Himmler* (OUP: Oxford, 2012).

<sup>253</sup> Kershaw, *The End*, p. 330.

<sup>254</sup> TNA PREM 3/197/6: *From Stockholm to Foreign Office sent by Sir V.Mallet no.711*, 25 April 1945, p. 1.

The terms proposed by Himmler were rejected almost immediately. Himmler's attempt to continue the fight in the East while offer surrender in the West highlighted that Himmler was all too aware of the Western allies' mistrust of the Soviet premier.<sup>255</sup> If anything, Allied resolve strengthened in the face of adversity. So much so, Allied commanders were determined to see a capitulation on all fronts. Moreover Germany was in no position to demand terms for the surrender of German forces. In light of the offer, Churchill was quick to write to Truman. He felt that:

There can be no question, as far as His Majesty's Government are concerned, of anything less than unconditional surrender simultaneously to the three major powers. We consider that Himmler should be told that German forces either as individuals, or in units, should everywhere surrender themselves to Allied troops or representatives on the spot.<sup>256</sup>

Feeling within the War Cabinet and the stern wording of this document clearly indicated a stronger determination to defeat Hitler and his Third Reich than to turn against Soviet forces. Communications such as this were important in determining the overall Allied policy. This single event helped to cement a strong and united front, but as discussed earlier, the Western Allies had emphasised an urgent need to reach Lübeck before the Russians could occupy Denmark. In response to the partial surrender, Marshal Stalin wrote to Churchill outlining that:

I consider your proposal to present to Himmler a demand for unconditional surrender on all fronts, including the Soviet front, the only correct one.<sup>257</sup>

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<sup>255</sup> For a discussion as to the Allied resolve please see, TNA PREM 3/197/6: *Annex 11 Prime Minister to President Truman*, 25 April 1945.

<sup>256</sup> TNA PREM 3/197/6: *W.M. (45) 52<sup>nd</sup> Conclusions*, 25 April 1945 4.30pm.

<sup>257</sup> TNA PREM 3/197/6: *Telegram from premier J.V.Stalin to Mr Prime Minister W. Churchill*, T.646/5, 25 April 1945.

Secretly the British moved forward at an ever-increasing pace, and by enjoying relative air superiority, were able to direct attacks and movements largely at ground targets and military installations.

## **Strategic Aerial Policy**

As British forces continued to press into Germany, aerial policy evolved to meet the growing demand of its service. Through the final months of the conflict Allied aircrews were able to benefit from a lack of Axis resistance in the air. This has been attributed to a lack of trained axis pilots combined with chronic fuel shortages for aircraft. This meant that German aerial resistance was limited to the protection of major cities and important military installations.<sup>258</sup> This section will look to provide an overview of how Britain's aerial policy evolved in the final months of the war. In doing so, it will focus on the impact of the constant change of location for squadrons and its effects on communication. Moreover, in providing a survey of the type of mission that squadrons were engaged on, target selection becomes a core focal point. By analysing the type of mission and target selection, we can better understand the focus of British aerial strategy in the closing stages of the conflict. Finally, in analysing the type of target selection we can better understand how this had a direct impact on the target selection on 3 May 1945. In considering the attack on ships in Neustadt bay it is necessary to discuss whether the normal protocols of disseminating intelligence continued to function as the pace of battle increased.

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<sup>258</sup> See Richard Overy, *The Bombing War: Europe 1939-1945* (Penguin: London, 2014); Denis Richards and Hilary Saunders, *The Royal Air Force: The Fight is Won, Vol. 3* (HMSO: London, 1993).

Historians have concluded that in the final months of the war Britain's aerial achievements were largely successful.<sup>259</sup> Overy, for instance, has argued that "the Western Allies happily embraced air power as one of the most important instruments for achieving power".<sup>260</sup> This was further aided by the fact that, by 1945, the German Luftwaffe was no longer able to mount any successful form of attack or defence. While Britain embraced and heavily engaged in the use of aerial warfare, its purpose and application has caused much controversy. This section will not engage in a lengthy discussion of the practices or legality of Bomber Command operations, rather it will provide a more focused exploration of the air operations of Second Tactical Air Force.

By May 1945 Second TAF were leading the final aerial assaults over North Germany. Sir Arthur Coningham was responsible for the co-ordination of strategic air operations in the final months. His actions in guiding aerial policy stemmed from his extensive experience during the North Africa campaign. Furthermore he has been extremely successful in making sure that Second TAF was constantly keeping up the pressure on the dissipating German forces. He was appointed C-in-C of Second TAF on 21 January 1944, succeeding Air Marshal Sir John d'Albiar. Coningham had played a strategic role in organising a decisive and important series of attacks in North Africa during 1941-42.

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<sup>259</sup> See Peter Gray, *The Leadership, Direction and Legitimacy of the RAF Bomber Offensive from Inception to 1945* (Bloomsbury Academic: London, 2014), p. 1; See also Tami Davis Biddle, *Rhetoric and Reality in Air Warfare: The Evolution of British and American Ideas about Strategic Bombing* (Princeton University Press: New Jersey, 2009); John Buckley, *Air Power in the Age of Total War* (Indiana University Press: 1999); Overy, *The Bombing War*; A.C.Grayling, *Among the Dead Cities: Is the Targeting of Civilians in War ever justified?* (Bloomsbury Publishing: London, 2007); Jorg Friedrich, *The First: The Bombing of Germany 1940-1945* (Columbia University Press: New York, 2008); Ian Gooderson, *Air Power at the Battlefield: Allied Close Air Support in Europe 1943-1945* (Routledge: London, 1998).

<sup>260</sup> Richard Overy, *The Air War 1939-1945* (Brassey's US: Nebraska, 2005), p. 83.

By late 1942, the overall command structure of Air forces in North West Africa were to be re-shuffled. This meant that Coningham was to take charge of the Northwest African Tactical Air Force.<sup>261</sup> His role and influence throughout the North African campaign was to prepare him for his role in the final months of the war.

The overall military situation for both air and ground operations by April 1945 was one of chaos and fierce pockets of fighting in the remaining German-held territory.<sup>262</sup> In dealing with squadron operational targets, often commanders looked for aircrews to support the ground advance northwards. This was not the sole purpose of Second TAF, but one largely that showed close co-operation with the Army. On a day-to-day basis, operational commanders were tasked with choosing and outlining primary target objectives to aircrews. However, in particular circumstances, operational commanders could and, often did, use their initiative in electing to strike at second-choice targets that offered themselves unexpectedly.<sup>263</sup> Furthermore, during the final months of aerial engagement “innumerable targets were attacked without any request being made”.<sup>264</sup> In terms of outlining a viable military target, this was often the result of the experience of the pilot concerned. Largely Second TAF operations during April were largely focused

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<sup>261</sup> Richards and Saunders, *Royal Air Force 1939-1945, vol.2*, p. 260.

<sup>262</sup> See various Overy, *The Bombing War*; Richard Bessel, *Germany 1945: From War to Peace*, (Simon & Schuster UK: London, 2010); Giles Macdonogh, *After the Reich: from the Liberation of Vienna to the Berlin Airlift*, (John Murray: London, 2008); Nicholas Stargardt, *The German War: A Nation under Arms, 1939-1945* (Vintage: London, 2016).

<sup>263</sup> Cap Arcona Museum (hereafter CAMN): *Alternative targets brief*, p. 1.

<sup>264</sup> CAMN: *Alternative targets brief*, p. 1.

on any form of motorised transport.<sup>265</sup> The number of barges or shipping vessel's that were attacked or destroyed remained relatively low. One possible reason was that during April 1945, Group operations were largely supporting ground operations. In fact, shipping did not even feature as a secondary target option to any great extent.

Lange summarises Britain's military aim as "to completely defeat German forces militarily".<sup>266</sup> Commenting on the RAF attack on the *Cap Arcona*, he viewed the tragic sinking as reflecting the brutalisation of war practices during the final months of conflict.<sup>267</sup> In the official records an alternative targets brief made it quite clear that "where there was a great array of targets, pilots of ground-attack aircraft would be expected to strike a target, return to base, refuel and re-arm, and get airborne again as quickly as possible – often without any necessity for briefing".<sup>268</sup> This type of official policy highlights that aerial policy was becoming fast-paced in the closing stages of the war. With this outline of what was expected of Second TAF, the scope and interpretation of whether a target was viable, or should be viable, was left to those pilots engaged in the attack. There are a number of factors to consider. Firstly, in terms of the attack on 3 May, the district of Schleswig-Holstein was packed with German civilians, refugees and military personnel. This had been the case since early March and these

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<sup>265</sup> See TNA AIR 37/876: *Report by Air Marshal Sir A. Coningham on 2TAF operations*.

<sup>266</sup> Wilhelm Lange, "Ein unbekanntes Kapitel der *Cap Arcona* Tragödie", *Jahrbuch für Heimatkunde*, 54 (2011), p. 185. For original German, "Neben dem vorrangigen Kriegsziel einer vollständigen militärischen Zerschlagung Deutschlands sollte die Befreiung von DPs (Displaced Persons) eine weitere zentrale Rolle spielen".

<sup>267</sup> Lange, *Dokumentation: Cap Arcona*, pp. 102-103.

<sup>268</sup> CAMN: *Alternative targets brief*, pp. 1-2.

numbers had increased by the end of April. This meant that any proposed attack on a specified area, in line with aerial policy, needed to be properly surveyed to gain a clear understanding of the situation on the ground. The second point relates to the location of Britain's airfields. As the advance moved further into Germany, captured airfields allowed squadrons to be housed closer to the fighting front. This therefore allowed squadrons to be deployed more quickly, to land and take off and to be airborne again in a short space of time.<sup>269</sup> One drawback to this strategic approach was the dissemination of information. With the potential speed that a squadron could be airborne, it was not always possible to brief the pilots on military changes. This slowing down of information led to a situation whereby the wider strategic policy outweighed the need for processing information. In turn, this collapse of communication added to the existing issue of chaos on Britain's strategic policy.

The impact of the Allied advance North led to a series of concentration camp closures in the remaining German territories. The subsequent evacuation transports, too, were often caught in the attack. One notable example was outlined by the Israeli scholar Daniel Blatman. In describing a train convoy from Wilhelmshaven on route to Bergen-Belsen, he noted that while the prisoners remained locked in cattle trucks at Luneburg Rail station, it was subsequently attacked as part of an Allied bombing raid.<sup>270</sup> The Allies aerial policy was primarily designed to destroy enemy communication systems. But secondary targets, often transportation infrastructure, were targets that Allied aircrews

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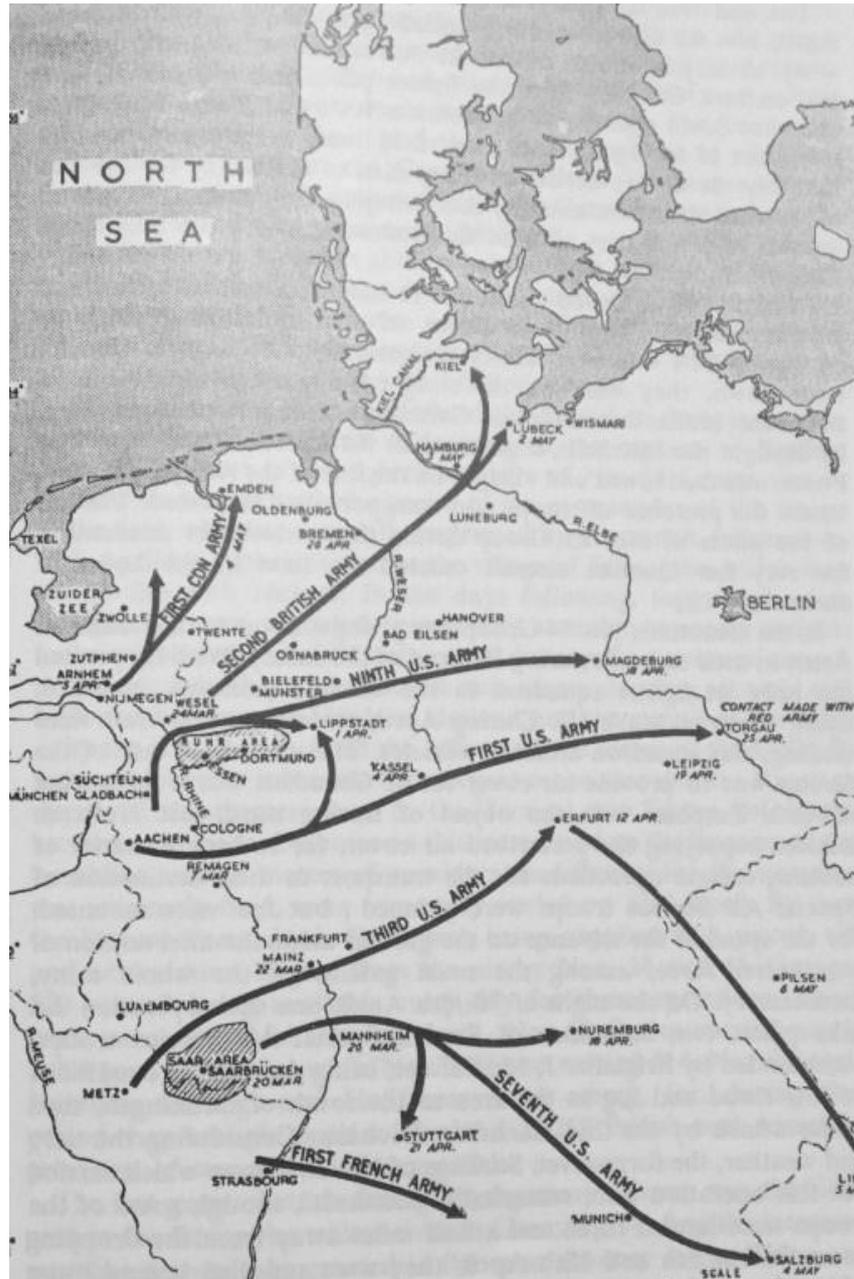
<sup>269</sup> TNA AIR 37/876: *Report by Air Marshal Sir A. Coningham on 2TAF operations*, point 302.

<sup>270</sup> For a descriptive analysis see Blatman, *The Death Marches*, p. 158; See also Buggeln, *Slave Labor*, p. 274.

attacked with full vigour. In this example the attack proved costly. The second important factor for Allied forces was the Nazi camp system. As ground troops continued to press into German territory, British troops came face to face with the horrors of the camps. In confronting the horrors found within the camp complex or evacuation transports, these images strengthened the Allies resolve to seek an end to the ongoing conflict.<sup>271</sup>

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<sup>271</sup> See various Antony Beevor, *The Second World War*, (W&N: London, 2014); Wachsmann, *KL*.



Map of Allied advance into Germany, January – May 1945.<sup>272</sup>

Military policy continued to be driven by the wider policy of reaching Lübeck. Lange notes that Allied reconnaissance efforts to ensure a rapid advance of its forces to Lübeck

<sup>272</sup> See Richards and Saunders, *Royal Air Force 1939-1945 Vol 3*, p. 289; Alan J. Levine, *The Strategic Bombing of Germany 1940-1945* (Greenwood Publishing: Santa Barbara, 1992).

Bay in April 1945 were undertaken to reduce and limit its losses.<sup>273</sup> But the push northwards was in response to the rapid Soviet advance East. In a determined stance to halt the Soviet drive into Denmark, British forces continued to press hard and fast to the Baltic coast. In doing so the impact and processing of information was severely impaired. A fast-paced attack could not wait endlessly for reconnaissance to filter through to the squadrons involved. In an interview Typhoon pilot David Ince DFC was asked about how, as a pilot, they were able to distinguish between military and civilian targets from the air. In his analysis, he suggested that:

Obviously there were mistakes. But in general, if the intelligence information was giving us an accurate target, then the target was attacked with considerable accuracy. All right, there must have been bombs going wide [...] and civilians killed.<sup>274</sup>

Acknowledging that mistakes did happen, Ince outlines that often during aerial engagement policy to attack these targets was often rushed. Therefore this wider strategic policy of reaching the Baltic coast directly impacted on Second TAF ability to co-ordinate and operate effectively. However, during aerial engagement it became increasingly difficult to target accurately. Aircraft speed as well as weather was an important factor to consider. Moreover, there were numerous reports made by neutral powers and humanitarian workers that stated that they often came under attack from friendly fire.<sup>275</sup> As the war reached its climax in the final weeks, friendly-fire incidents

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<sup>273</sup> Lange, “Ein Unbekannte”, p. 185. For original German see, “Alliierte Bemühungen um Feindaufklärung zur Sicherstellung eines verlustarmen schnellen Vorrückens eigener Kräfte und die Vermeidung von Kollateralschäden beim Vorstoß zur Lübecker Bucht im April/ Mai 1945”.

<sup>274</sup> IWM Sound Archives 8651/2/1: *Interview Transcript of David Henry Gason Ince*, p. 8.

<sup>275</sup> See for instance Sune Persson, *Escape from the Third Reich: Folke Bernadotte and the White Buses* (Frontline Books: London, 2009); Sune Persson, “Folke Bernadotte and the White

became all too common.<sup>276</sup> This suggests that Britain's aerial policy became increasingly reckless and disorganised.

With the drive northwards, squadron locations were constantly changing. The pace of Second Army was blistering. Their advance from the Rhine to the river Elbe, a distance of two hundred miles, was accomplished in just over four weeks.<sup>277</sup> But this raised important administrative problems. The use of additional supplies and resources, as well as additional fuel reserves show that Allied forces were still in a position to plan and organise effective strategic operations. Its impact on Second TAF meant that there was often a reliance on finding German airfields intact. That way the additional supply of scarce resources, such as fuel, could be utilised to load Second TAF planes. But the constant movement and re-location of squadrons presented its own problems. This move meant that basic supplies, such as fuel, ammunition and food provisions, were not often forthcoming, and communication was often intermittent.

In response to this pressure assistance was provided by no.38 and 46 Group under the guidance of Cator. This was designed to support Second TAF as they moved northwards. During the month of April those squadrons that were active in this operation were able to fly in 1318.7 tons of petrol for Second TAF operations, in

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Buses", in David Cesarani and Paul A. Levine (eds.), *Bystanders to the Holocaust: A Re-evaluation* (Frank Cass Publishers: London, 2002), pp. 237-268.

<sup>276</sup> This issue is discussed in greater detail in Chapter Five.

<sup>277</sup> TNA AIR 41/68: *The Liberation of NW Europe: Vol V from the Rhine to the Baltic*, October 1944-May 1945, p. 242.

addition to other commitments for supplying Twenty-First Army Group.<sup>278</sup> This measure demonstrates the commitment of Allied forces to continue their advance north. In response to this pressure, German forces were forced to evacuate camps that were close to the frontline. Often this process was chaotic and without clear direction.<sup>279</sup> During this operation both 83 and 84 Group continued to push northwards. Second TAF HQ remained based in Süchtlen until the end of the conflict. This meant that careful planning and co-ordinating of aerial attacks, as well as ground support operations, were dealt with centrally from HQ. Evidence indicates clearly that communication between central HQ and other aerial departments operating on German territory was not always available.<sup>280</sup>

During April Second TAF were temporarily fighting a war on two fronts. With German forces cut off in Denmark and British forces moving rapidly northwards to prevent a Soviet advance further East, squadron movements continued at a brisk pace,

No.83 Group headquarters left Mettingen for Wunstorf just west of Hannover. It remained there for the following week while the assault on Bremen took place and then moved forward to Bispingen, east of Soltau, in company with Main Headquarters, Second Army.<sup>281</sup>

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<sup>278</sup> TNA AIR 41/68: *Air Staff S.H.A.E.F fwd Cator ORB app. 2 May 1945*, p. 242.

<sup>279</sup> See Blatman, *The Death Marches*, pp. 126-161.

<sup>280</sup> See for instance Sune Persson, *Escape from the Third Reich* (Frontline Books: London, 2009).

<sup>281</sup> TNA AIR 41/68: *Second TAF File orders of Battle May 1944-June 1945*.

In support of this move, aerial engagements were often sporadic. For instance, David Ince stated that,

We scoured the roads with a renewed sense of urgency, evading the occasional bursts of flak, hitting and burning the lorries and half-tracks as they tried to move from cover to cover under the trees.<sup>282</sup>

Tasked on a general roaming mission, Ince gives a useful insight into the attitudes amongst the pilots, namely that they were determined to attack German forces at every opportunity. Furthermore his statement became typical of typhoon pilots in the final weeks of the war. Often intelligence results were not always processed in a timely manner and aerial attacks, such as Ince describes, were the result of search and destroy policies. Additionally within Ince's statement there appeared a steadfast resolve from the pilots to continually harass and attack the enemy.

Movements for April were fast-paced and while there were various pockets of resistance, Air groups were largely able to launch operations with nearly no German fighter resistance. The advance of 83 Group during the month of April highlights the key operational targets of the Group. Coningham noted that 83 Group "carried out a rail interdiction programme which proceeded to isolate Hamburg and Bremen".<sup>283</sup>

Furthermore, "successful attacks were made against enemy airfields which were showing signs of congestion".<sup>284</sup> If airfields were congested, actual movements of

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<sup>282</sup> Ince, *Brotherhood of the Skies*, pp. 133-34.

<sup>283</sup> TNA AIR 37/876: *Report by Air Marshal Sir Arthur Coningham on Operations carried out by Second Tactical Air Force from D-Day 6 June to VE Day 9 May 1945*, point 283.

<sup>284</sup> TNA AIR 37/876: *Report by Air Marshal Sir Arthur Coningham*, point 283.

enemy aircraft remained at a minimum and this was largely attributed to the overall lack of fuel available in the North-West corridor.<sup>285</sup> As for the German Army, it had become clear that as Allied forces continued to press on towards the district of Schleswig-Holstein, it had split its ground forces into two main defences. The first was found in the south, with the area surrounding *Berchtesgaden*, while the second main pocket of resistance was with the remaining commanders gathering in Schleswig-Holstein.<sup>286</sup> As significant numbers of German forces gathered in Schleswig-Holstein, Allied policy-making became hurried.

Increasingly as many commanders felt that the war would soon be concluded, these normal protocols, namely the gathering and interpretation of intelligence, did not necessarily play a significant role in guiding policy. Once Allied forces had reached the banks of the River Elbe, German forces were unable to retreat in an orderly fashion. The evacuation of military headquarters, as well as airfields often proved extremely difficult. Allied forces, throughout April, remained relentless in their attack and drive into North-West Germany. But in doing so, this led to often chaotic and infrequent communications, as a result of the constant re-location of squadrons to airfields closer to the fighting front. During April, it remains clear that some intelligence was filtered through to the squadrons that were actively engaged in a variety of planned missions. In terms of the impact for the *Cap Arcona*, shipping during the month of April was unlikely to feature as a priority target. Until Allied forces were close to the coast, the

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<sup>285</sup> For instance see TNA AIR 37/876: *Sir Arthur Coningham's review of April 1945's operations*.

<sup>286</sup> TNA AIR 37/876: *Report by Air Marshal Sir Arthur Coningham*, point 284.

greater importance was with land-based attacks. Moreover the number of available targets, as well as those that posed a threat to the Allied advance was given priority.

A closer analysis of Second TAF operations were primarily against land-based targets, rather than shipping. The operation report for 84 Group during April further underlines the Allied commitment to continually drive to the North-West Coast. Coningham suggested,

84 Group was able to devote almost its entire resources to the destruction of transportation, close support, flying bomb and rocket installation targets and surface vessels and submarines which were still attempting to interfere with our Antwerp sea lane from bases in Western Holland.<sup>287</sup>

Dedicating 84 Group to armed reconnaissance work shows the mind set of Allied forces. This form of aerial engagement was designed to allow squadrons to seek the opportunity to attack a set of targets should the chance present itself. The unique situation, whereby pilots have a certain level of freedom to choose ‘targets of opportunity’ gave considerable scope and an element of power to those squadrons engaged on these aerial operations. Largely armed reconnaissance work was undertaken without a specified target in mind. This meant that pilots engaged in this type of mission were often operating without clear and decisive orders. Instead there was a general brief issued identifying what targets pilots should be looking for..

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<sup>287</sup> TNA AIR 37/876: *Report by Air Marshal Sir Arthur Coningham*, point 286.

Shortly after the liberation of Holland, Allied forces wasted no opportunity to open a sea-routed supply chain. This provided an alternative line of support as opposed to a permanent land-based route. In terms of ground support, while 84 Group continued to attack transportation, 83 Group were tasked with clearing military installations prior to the advance of Twenty-First Army Group. With movements interlinked, this manoeuvre would allow ground forces to capture key German cities such as Hamburg and Lübeck. While it remained important to press forward to the coast, Coningham argued that once the task had been achieved, “the Army would make no advances across the frontier into Denmark until further orders”.<sup>288</sup>

While the overriding military objective was to reach Lübeck with haste, Second TAF continued to provide aerial surveys of German ports, as well as ground installations. For instance Second TAF records indicated that,

It became necessary to keep a close watch on the Ports in the Heligoland Bight and Western Baltic in order to have early information of any large-scale evacuation of enemy material and personnel to the Northward.<sup>289</sup>

The Naval liaison section of Second TAF were therefore responsible for gathering intelligence, processing the information and accountable for any potential aerial attacks on shipping within their jurisdiction. As part of their observations, 34 Wing were assigned to monitor and survey shipping. Throughout April 34 Wing “were asked to increase the intensity of their recce in these areas, especially at last light and to pass any

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<sup>288</sup> TNA AIR 37/876: *Report by Air Marshal Sir Arthur Coningham*, point 295. See also Saunders and Richards, *Royal Air Force 1939-1945*, Vol. 3, pp. 287-294.

<sup>289</sup> TNA AIR 24/1499: *Headquarters Second TAF Naval Liaison Section*, April-May 1945, p. 1.

intelligence as speedily as possible to the Naval Liaison Officer”.<sup>290</sup> In practice, the process of passing this intelligence to those capable of interpreting the information was hindered in the final weeks with the continual movement of operational locations. This delay in transmitting the latest intelligence to the squadrons engaged on roaming missions had consequences for that series of operations.

In general aerial roaming missions were wide-ranging but also face paced in the final weeks. General roaming missions, which formed the core basis of many aerial missions, were targeting transportation and ground installations. One example was the summary of 84 Group for April. Coningham noted that,

84 Group was able to assist 83 Group in the Schleswig area, where such of the German Air Force which was liable to interfere with the British Zone of operations was now concentrated.<sup>291</sup>

In his notes, Coningham describes a situation that 84 Group were simply attacking anything that moved. Although the military campaign was reaching its climax, this level of destruction was largely through a number of armed reconnaissance operations, which left considerable scope for interpretation.

On 22 April, the commander in charge of Twenty-First Army Group convened to change the direction of both land and air attacks against enemy forces. Originally 83 Group were ordered to provide armed reconnaissance support to Second Army, who

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<sup>290</sup> TNA AIR 24/1499: *Headquarters Second TAF Naval Liaison Section*, April-May 1945, p. 1.

<sup>291</sup> TNA AIR 37/876: *Advance of 84 Group across the Rhine*, April 1945, point 286.

were advancing towards Lübeck. In addition, the First Canadian Army would continue their right hook westwards support by 84 Group.<sup>292</sup> In a communication from Second TAF HQ, this indicated that on 22 April that “there had been clear indications that there were two main areas of resistance; Schleswig-Holstein and the low country between the mouths of the rivers Elbe and Weser”.<sup>293</sup> Intelligence surveys had indicated two main areas of direct military concern. As aerial policy continued to evolve 83 Group was now ordered to occupy airfields as far forwards as possible so that the Axis of their operations should be northwards to maintain air supremacy over the entire Danish peninsula.<sup>294</sup> Furthermore, 83 Group would now also be entrusted with monitoring the coast of that peninsula for Axis forces fleeing from the British zone of occupation. But with this change of policy 83 Group resources, in particular its intelligence resources were spread more thinly over a larger area.

Aerial surveys of Axis shipping noted in the intelligence results of a number of ships that were port bound. While many larger vessels, like the *Cap Arcona*, had been used in the evacuation of East Prussia, Germany was simply running out of ports and harbours to dock their remaining tonnage. This meant that the number of vessels docked within the perimeter of German ports was significant although many were unlikely to be further utilised. German commanders continued in a vain attempt to repeatedly change

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<sup>292</sup> TNA AIR 37/876: *Deployment of Second Tactical Air Force prior to the surrender*, point 302.

<sup>293</sup> TNA AIR 37/876: *Deployment of Second Tactical Air Force prior to the surrender*, point 302.

<sup>294</sup> TNA AIR 37/876: *Deployment of Second Tactical Air Force prior to the surrender*, point 302.

the use of these vessels. But even towards the end of April 1945, this movement of shipping in Axis ports remains of little consequence to Allied commanders. During April, the number of ships docked in and around Lübeck continued to rise as German commanders attempted to dock their vessels in home ports. For the British, this continual growth in port activity does not appear to have caused concern. We can therefore presume that throughout April, the wider military strategy of reaching Lübeck in the North greatly outweighed the potential threat of a sea-based evacuation by German forces. Therefore, shipping attacks by Allied aircrews throughout March and April 1945 remain relatively low in comparison to ground attacks. In terms of the sinking of the *Cap Arcona* this points to a number of factors. As British military policy presses to Lübeck, armed reconnaissance missions formed the primary basis of military strategy. The threat or perceived threat from shipping was almost non-existent. The focus on military and aerial strategy was in support of the ground advance north. It would therefore be a fair assumption that German commanders did not see the placement of prisoners on the *Cap Arcona* in April 1945 to be subject to a significant threat from aerial attack.

Allied air activity records for April 1945 provide a useful insight into the areas of primary engagement for Second TAF.

<b>Type of Attack</b>	<b>Destroyed</b>	<b>Damaged</b>
<b>Enemy Aircraft in the Air</b>	199	80
<b>Enemy Aircraft on the Ground</b>	97	210
<b>Motor Transport Vehicles</b>	1618	6387
<b>Armoured fighting Vehicles</b>	22	63
<b>Locomotives</b>	119	900
<b>Goods Trucks</b>	657	2934
<b>Ships</b>	4	61
<b>Barges</b>	12	149
<b>Total</b>	2728	10784

Table One: Summary of Second TAF Operations for the Month, April 1945.<sup>295</sup>

The statistics from Table One highlight a number of important and useful insights. Firstly, we can conclude that Second TAF operations were largely formed of armed reconnaissance work” changed to “The majority of operations undertaken by Second TAF consisted mainly of armed reconnaissance missions with a focus on motor transport. This is unsurprising as the potential availability of this type of target to attack would be high as the enemy continued to flee northwards. The focus on transportation, excluding shipping, also highlights that British policy was to attack anything that moved. Therefore, the Allied mind set was one of determination to destroy German forces. Secondly, while German forces were attempting to harbour their remaining tonnage, the number of ships and barges attacked remained comparatively low compared to other ground targets. Intelligence summaries, as well as interpreters based

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<sup>295</sup> TNA AIR 37/876: *Summary of Second TAF Operations for the Month, April 1945.*

at Second TAF HQ evidently felt that the potential threat from the ships docked in the remaining northern ports was comparatively low. Even at this late stage of the drive northwards, accurate and reliable information remained difficult. A number of factors, such as the speed of the advance, coupled with an increasing number of different military departments, further fuelled this issue.

## **Squadron Operations April 1945**

This section will look more closely at aerial policy in April 1945. In doing so it will then apply this policy to Second TAF, and examine the impact of this change on squadron operations. In his research Lange identified that as British forces pushed forward there were coordination problems between the Allied Expeditionary Force (AEF) and Allied air crews.<sup>296</sup> This final section will seek to evaluate the impact of poor communication on air operations. The purpose of analysing squadron reports is to identify what Second TAF deemed a viable target and how decisions were made. This type of resource is invaluable as we attempt to reconstruct Britain's aerial actions in April 1945. Previous works largely suggests that attack on ships were part of a wider military strategy. At the beginning of May aerial policy became heavily focused on shipping strikes. Therefore, it is important to understand how aerial policy evolved in the closing stages of the war. Although there were sporadic shipping strikes, general guidelines will show that squadrons were to only engage shipping as an alternative target should the primary target be unavailable.

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<sup>296</sup> Lange, *Dokumenten: Cap Arcona*, p. 232. For original German "Abstimmungsschwierigkeiten zwischen der "Allied Expeditionary Air Force" sind eine weitere denkbare Ursache".

The area to the North had a variety of important production lines as well as key military installations. In his memoirs, Coningham noted,

The significant feature of the operations of the Second Tactical Air Force during the enemy's retreat from the Rhine was the emphasis which could be placed upon attacking ground targets. The disorganisation of the German Air force in the area was almost complete. Apart from the tactical area of 83 Group in Schleswig Holstein, the enemy made very few appearances in the air over the British area either by day or by night.<sup>297</sup>

The focus turned away from ground installations and other land-based military vehicles as British forces became concerned with the area around Neustadt. The small town of Neustadt was home to a U-boat training school, and since this remained a highly valued military target, shortly the area in and around Neustadt would become a target. In turn this meant that other shipping vessels, including the *Cap Arcona* would be caught in the subsequent military efforts to alleviate this perceived threat.

During April the number of reconnaissance missions rose dramatically. As the area under surveillance increased, this remained crucial for prompt and accurate intelligence. Operation intelligence collated the post raid outline which stated that:

Shipyards at Hamburg and Kiel were subjected to heavy attacks both by Bomber Command and USSTAF. In an attack by 304 aircraft on the Blohm and Voss yards by Bomber Command on 8/9 April very great physical damage was sustained. It was the largest submarine building yard in Germany and all the eight floating docks were severely damaged, thus requiring the outfitting of submarines elsewhere.<sup>298</sup>

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<sup>297</sup> TNA AIR 37/876: *Summary of Second TAF Operations*, point 313.

<sup>298</sup> TNA AIR 41/56: *The RAF in the Bombing Offensive against Germany: The Final Phase*, April 1945, p. 239.

The report indicates a series of important factors. The attack on Hamburg's dock installations was by no means random, but part of a series of co-ordinated attacks on Germany's infrastructure. It further notes that submarines were being serviced and repaired on site and therefore this shows the level of detailed intelligence that Second TAF were able to gather. The damage report indicates no Allied losses which alone are surprising given the strength of Axis units in and around Hamburg in April 1945. One of the drawbacks from this range of attack, particularly as the conflict was drawing to a close, was that dock installations provided a useful means of supply and immediate access to a military area. Their complete destruction would weaken the Allies attempt to re-build and re-supply in the immediate post-war years. However intelligence summaries suggest that:

In consequence of a naval appreciation, U-Boat production was included on priority list, to prevent an otherwise inevitable U-Boat attack on a large scale in March 1945. E boat bases also needed constant watching and attacking periodically. Finally, there was the potential menace of the few remaining big ships of the fleet.<sup>299</sup>

Coningham's statement in relation to naval transportation notes that U-boats and other military vessels were added as a priority to attack. It further highlights that from March 1945 there were few larger military vessels remaining in the German fleet. Therefore, other than co-ordinated attacks on U-boat production, attacks on shipping remained comparatively low. The continued monitoring of shipping movements as well as infrequent operations attempted to reduce any potential threat posed from naval ports.

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<sup>299</sup> TNA AIR 20/1593: *Operations of 2<sup>nd</sup> TAF, Reports compiled by Air Marshal Sir Arthur Coningham*, point 42, p. 9.

Turning to ground targets, the enemy were retreating at such a pace that it became impossible to sabotage any equipment that remained. Air records for instance indicate that,

On the 13<sup>th</sup> April he [Nazi Germany] was observed to be burning his aircraft at Luneburg airfield. Lack of fuel and the speed of our advance was making it impossible for him to evacuate his crowded airfields before they were overrun. The disorganised nature of his retreat was clearly shown by the number of aircraft and the amount of serviceable equipment, which was found intact on the airfields, which we captured.<sup>300</sup>

The fast-paced movement of Second TAF required aircrews to capture airfields intact. This supported the continued drive northwards and allowed Second TAF to continue the support for ground movements.

In closer inspection of operational summaries for the month of April, there are clear contrasts among aerial operations. For 83 Group, Table Two shows a mixed picture of the military situation in April. Evidence within the table suggests that the Group were not overly active in the use of photoreconnaissance. Although this type of intelligence had grown throughout the course of the war, its limited use through 83 Group suggests that the wing was provided intelligence elsewhere. Richards and Saunders concluded that the swift advance of Second TAF was largely “helped by the tactical reconnaissance flights of No 39 Wing”.<sup>301</sup>

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<sup>300</sup> TNA AIR 37/876: *Summary of Second TAF Operations*, point 285.

<sup>301</sup> Richards and Saunders, *Royal Air Force: The Fight is Won*, p. 288.

<b>83rd Group</b>					
	Spitfire	Typhoon	Tempest	Met./3.	Total
Fighter Cover/ Escort & Patrol	4500	16	502	16	5034
Photo Recon.	197				197
Weather Recon.	19		4		23
<b>Armed Recon.</b>	<b>3153</b>	<b>1350</b>	<b>940</b>		<b>5443</b>
Arty. Spotting	5				5
Tactical Recon.	769				769
Close Support Calls	60	2288	27		2375
Nickelling		7			7
Contact Recon.	80				80
<b>Total</b>	<b>8783</b>	<b>3661</b>	<b>1473</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>13943</b>

Table Two: Summary of target strikes by 83<sup>rd</sup> Group, April 1945.<sup>302</sup>

Table Two gives further insight into the wider military policy, namely that of fast-paced movements and continuous aerial engagement. The total number of armed reconnaissance operations above all other potential areas of attack highlight that the Allied thought process was continually to attack German ground forces and transportation.

Table Three provides a closer analysis of 84 Group who were attached to Second TAF. During the month of April the group was formed of a range of aircraft. In both tables the use of the Typhoon aircraft was mainly for close support calls. As Allied forces crossed the Rhine, Thomas argues that “attacks were also made against the remaining Luftwaffe airfields, where a considerable number of aircraft were claimed destroyed”.<sup>303</sup>

<sup>302</sup> TNA AIR 24/1499: *Summary of target strikes by 83 Group, April 1945.*

<sup>303</sup> Thomas, *Typhoon Wings of 2<sup>nd</sup> TAF 1943-1945*, p. 85.

<b>84 Group</b>						
	Spitfire	Typhoon	Tempest	Mustang	Met./3.	Total
Fighter Cover/ Escort & Patrol	547		133		24	704
Photo Recon.	181	22	103			306
Weather Recon.	52	26	16	2		96
<b>Armed Recon.</b>	<b>3461</b>	<b>976</b>	<b>865</b>		<b>92</b>	<b>5394</b>
Arty. Spotting						
Tactical Recon.	436	5		272		713
Close Support Calls	1300	1505	2			2807
Nickelling		5				5
Contact Recon.						
<b>Total</b>	<b>5977</b>	<b>2539</b>	<b>1119</b>	<b>274</b>	<b>116</b>	<b>10025</b>

Table Three: Summary of target strikes by 84<sup>th</sup> Group, April 1945.<sup>304</sup>

As with 83 Group, Table Three also highlights that armed reconnaissance operations formed the primary target base for operations. Both operational Groups were tasked to survey a wider area and seek targets of opportunity, namely anything German that posed a potential military threat.

A closer inspection of individual squadron operational records does indicate that locally pilots did have the opportunity to seek and destroy shipping. For instance 263 squadron, under the charge of Martin Rumbolds, was regularly engaged with his squadron attacking barges or ships. On 1<sup>st</sup> April “the aircraft went on an armed reconnaissance of Enschede-Almelo-Coevarden, [where] five barges south of Lingen were attacked and one was damaged”.<sup>305</sup> More importantly the two days, 17 and 18 April represented a real high for 263 Squadron. Reports which provide a summary of missions flown indicate that:

<sup>304</sup> TNA AIR 24/1499: *Summary of target strikes by 84 Group, April 1945.*

<sup>305</sup> TNA AIR 27/1548/75: *No. 263 Squadron, April 1945.*

This operation was against shipping Texel-Berkam. Three barges were attacked with R/P off Terschelling. One was damaged and a possible direct hit with R/P on another. Five more barges and a hospital ship were seen at U6639 but not attacked. A convoy of nine vessels south of Borkum (Q3350) was sighted.<sup>306</sup>

Operations did not end there. Rumbolds continued to keep his squadron engaged in continuous air activity, so much so that the daily logs for 17 and 18 April required one full page. On 18 April orders were given to attacking shipping. The log notes that

the operation was against ships in area Q.14 Approx. 16 ships heading north were found at Q.2852 in three lines. The two rearmost stragglers [were] attacked with R/P. One of Approx. 3000 tons coaster type received direct hits and was still giving off greyish white smoke after attack. The other ship of 2-3000 tons also had direct hits and was seen to be listing and black smoke coming from it. It is claimed as seriously damaged and possibly sinking.<sup>307</sup>

When shipping was attacked, the use of rocket projectiles (RP's) was not a normal choice. In a report produced shortly after the war, British divers undertook lengthy studies to investigate the effectiveness of certain weapon types against shipping. In the initial report, the primary use of the 60lb HE RP was "not primarily an anti-ship weapon, the 60lb explosive heads were used by Second TAF against shipping just before V.E.Day".<sup>308</sup> Although there is limited evidence, this suggests that with the drive northwards, ammunition and supplies were not always available. Moreover it appeared that in order to keep squadrons actively engaged, commanders were willing to utilise different weapon types.

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<sup>306</sup> TNA AIR 27/1548/75: *No. 263 Squadron*, April 1945.

<sup>307</sup> TNA AIR 27/1548/75: *No. 263 Squadron*, 18 April 1945.

<sup>308</sup> TNA ADM 213/917: *Survey of damaged shipping in North Germany and Denmark*, pp. 4-5.

The report does show that clear observations were being made by the pilots engaged on these missions. The location and direction of the vessels was clearly marked as well as their classification and damage. Locally, the process of disseminating information appears straightforward. Furthermore the number of resources used not only show a firm commitment to attack potential shipping targets, but also to survey the area after an attack to note and report the damage. In his report, Ince felt strongly that,

In the event the major effort was to be eastwards against the surviving enemy forces- supported by their remaining elements of aircraft and flak. Challenging enough in itself and unpredictable to a degree.<sup>309</sup>

For the Typhoon pilot, no indication was given that the priority for British personnel was to attack and destroy enemy shipping. Thomas suggests in the final months of the war that “harbours and waterways were targeted too, as some German elements strove to escape across the Baltic Norway”.<sup>310</sup> While the vessels were docked in the northern ports of Germany, there remains no evidence to suggest that these vessels were readying to flee to Norway. Thomas’ statement fails to account that as the area of battle continued to decline, the number of available ports for German vessels to dock was limited. With this in mind, it would not be unreasonable to suggest that the crews of these ships simply made for their nearest German home port.

There appeared an overwhelming sense amongst the pilots to continue to destroy the enemy at all costs. As part of the alternative targets brief, the document suggested that

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<sup>309</sup> Ince, *Brotherhood of the Skies*, p. 133.

<sup>310</sup> Chris Thomas, *Typhoon Wings of 2nd TAF 1943* (Osprey: Oxford, 2010), p. 85.

Innumerable targets were attacked without any request being made. On those, and similar ‘targets of opportunity’, briefings simply could not be given in advance: and that situation intensified as the target area continued to shrink.<sup>311</sup>

From the report it becomes clearer that as the end of the conflict was in sight, many air operations and roaming orders were left to the pilots concerned. The pace of battle and engagement dictated that aircrews were expected to use their experiences to determine what should be engaged. Moreover pilots no longer sought a request to attack a target, rather using their initiative to engage the enemy. The report continued stating that

Eventually, there was hardly time to consider or even worry whether the best type of armament was being used – or even if it was available.<sup>312</sup>

The tone of the statement implies that air commanders no longer carefully selected targets, nor did they ensure that each plane was suitably equipped for the mission. This further indicates that while squadrons were still able to mount an attack, supplies as well as accurate information was not always provided.

<b>198 Squadron</b>		
<b>Target Type</b>	<b>Damaged</b>	<b>Destroyed</b>
MT	9	30
Houses	23	14
Railway		
Trucks	8	30
Locomotives	4	-
Tanks	3	-
Ships	6	-
Barges	5	-
Tugs	2	-

Table Four: Summary of Target Types by 198 Squadron, April 1945.<sup>313</sup>

<sup>311</sup> CAMN: *MOD-AHB Alternative Target Brief*, p. 1.

<sup>312</sup> CAMN: *MOD-AHB Alternative Target Brief*, p. 1.

In examining one squadron that played an integral part of the final operations in the closing weeks, 198 Squadron demonstrate that the target types were varied. Compiled by Squadron Leader Durrant he notes that “the squadron had a very successful month [as] many varied targets [were] being attacked”.<sup>314</sup> Clearly the squadron records indicate that the bulk of operations were not flown against shipping. Aerial strategy was clearly designed and engineered towards the wider military strategy, namely the advance northwards to Lübeck. In terms of strategy the impact of this drive to the Baltic coast and drastic change in operational policy had dire consequences for the evacuees from Neuengamme.

## **Conclusion**

In applying the wider military strategy more centrally to Britain’s aerial strategy, it becomes clear that certain aerial procedures that had been at the forefront of British planning fell to the wayside in the final months of the war. In identifying policy that was designed to halt the Soviet advance further West, aerial policy was designed to achieve this. Largely Second TAF during March and April were engaged in armed reconnaissance work. Outlining a policy of identifying targets of opportunity, this often gave considerable scope to the pilots engaged in the attack. Squadrons were tasked with surveying a wide area and expected to attack anything of military threat. Often aircrews found that there was limited, if any, resistance from German defences. In line with regular aerial reconnaissance and intelligence summaries, the level of accurate detail

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<sup>313</sup> TNA AIR 27/1170/52: *Record of 198 Squadron events*, April 1945.

<sup>314</sup> TNA AIR 27/1170/52: *Summary of Report of Squadron events*, April 1945.

and intricate note taking of movements within the enemy camp demonstrates that Britain devoted substantial resources to gathering information. However, as the conflict entered the final stages, the wider strategic aim of halting the Soviet advance into Denmark meant that the speed of the Allied advance influenced operations.

Once the wider strategy is applied more locally to those squadrons engaged in North Germany there is clear evidence of its impact on aerial operations. One area of importance is the type of target chosen for attack. What appears to happen between March and May is that the normal protocols for choosing a target are partially side-lined. This gave the pilots a greater sense of freedom and as many records have indicated, there were numerous civilian casualties. As disorganisation began to impact - because of the push north - Allied aircrews became determined, and at times careless in their approach. In many instances, the removal of authority or permission to attack meant that innocent civilians were often caught in the battle area. Overy summarised that “the mobile population was more exposed to risk, particularly once Allied aircraft began routine strafing of vehicles and trains, and evacuees found themselves in areas thought to be safe [...] but now subject to random attack”.<sup>315</sup> In terms of the sinking of the *Cap Arcona*, the impact of this strategic development highlights that even during April 1945; the potential risk of attack had greatly increased.

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<sup>315</sup> Overy, *The Bombing War*, p. 477.

## Chapter Five

### What the British knew <sup>316</sup>

This chapter focuses on a major aspect of the *Cap Arcona* tragedy, namely the question of the dissemination of intelligence. Previous attempts to address this topic have often drawn mixed conclusions.<sup>317</sup> Existing historiography has previously outlined a series of piecemeal evidence relating to potential sources of intelligence relating to the *Cap Arcona* tragedy. As yet, there has been no clear analysis of the relevance of this information, nor the impact of wider strategy on the dissemination of this information. As the need to reach the Baltic coast before our Russian allies took priority over British strategy, the timely dissemination of intelligence suffered as a result of the broader strategy. This chapter will begin by looking at British policy towards intelligence and argue that for most of the war there was a great deal of investment in and attention to intelligence. But as British forces continued to press into North Germany during March, this attention to intelligence suddenly changes.

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<sup>316</sup> Some ideas have been presented and published in the University of Southampton's Postgraduate Journal *Emergence*. See Daniel Long, "A Controversial History? An analysis of British Attitudes and Responsibility in the Bombing of the *Cap Arcona*, 3 May 1945", *Emergence* Vol.7 (2015), pp. 28-37.

<sup>317</sup> See various sources Wilhelm Lange, *Dokumentation: Cap Arcona, Das Tragische Ende der KZ-Häftlings-Flötte am 3. Mai 1945* (Struve's Buchdruckerei und Verlag: Eutin Germany, 2005); Robert Watson, *Nazi Titanic: The Incredible Untold Story of a Doomed Ship in World War II* (Da Capo Press: Massachusetts, 2016); Rudi Goguel, *Cap Arcona: Report über den Untergang der Häftlings-flötte in der Lübecker Bucht am 3 Mai 1945* (Röderberg-Verlag: Frankfurt am Main, 1972).

Once the broader policy on intelligence has been discussed, this will be applied more locally to a series of case studies. In doing so it will argue that Allied behaviour towards the dissemination of intelligence became clouded by the broader strategic policy to reach the Baltic coast.

## **British Policy 1945**

Throughout 1945 British military policy in the air underwent a shift in primary objectives. Overy notes that “the criticisms of bombing from politicians and soldiers became more widespread as the gulf between the exaggerated claims of the air forces and the reality of bomber operations became more obvious”.<sup>318</sup> As successive aerial campaigns have bombarded Germany cities, critics such as Portal, continued to condemn the strategic policy of Bomber Harris and his strategy of destroying German moral. This criticism led to a divide in the decision and nature of British aerial policy in the closing months of the campaign. One particular area of focus was Britain’s attention to intelligence. Cox argues that “intelligence is a jig-saw, and the ability to cross-check and reinforce information from one source with intelligence from another was a vital part of the process”.<sup>319</sup> In attempting to piece this together, Cox points to the overwhelming need to corroborate and confirm important intelligence findings. One drawback with corroborating and interpreting the intelligence was time. If intelligence

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<sup>318</sup> Richard Overy, *The Air War 1939-1945* (Brassey’s US: Nebraska, 2005), p. 115.

<sup>319</sup> Sebastian Cox, “The Organisation and Sources of R.A.F. Intelligence”, paper presented to the Air Intelligence Symposium, *Royal Air Force History Society*, Bracknell, 22<sup>nd</sup> March 1996, p. 12. <http://www.rafmuseum.org.uk/documents/Research/RAF-Historical-Society-Journals/Bracknell-No-7-Air-Intelligence.pdf>.

did not reach the right individual or department in time it was considered useless.<sup>320</sup> But with significant resources at their disposal, Britain had a wealth of opportunity to continually survey the remaining German ports, as well as other military targets. In most discussions on the sinking of the *Cap Arcona*, commentators often note that examples of the situation in Neustadt had been presented to British forces.<sup>321</sup> In doing so, this section will begin by analysing the wider processes and methods of Britain's intelligence sources. It will examine more closely the role of intelligence services and discuss whether the broader military aim hindered the dissemination of information.

While much has been written as to the role of Bomber Command, there are fewer studies that focus on the aerial activities of Second Tactical Air Force (TAF).<sup>322</sup> The role of Second TAF and their use of photographic reconnaissance to supplement and support their ability to gather intelligence were paramount to their role in the closing stages of the war. As Lange has identified,

During the war the Allies possessed three crucial opportunities to raise awareness as to the basis for aerial planning and intelligence. First, espionage by resistance fighters and spies, secondly, analysis and decoding of radio messages, and thirdly, aerial reconnaissance.<sup>323</sup>

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<sup>320</sup> Cox, "The Organisation and Sources of R.A.F. Intelligence", p. 12.

<sup>321</sup> See various *Cap Arcona* literatures, Lange, *Dokumentation: Cap Arcona*; Watson, *Nazi Titanic*; Goguel, *Cap Arcona*.

<sup>322</sup> See John Terraine, *The Right of the Line: The Role of the RAF in World War Two* (Pen & Sword military: London, 2010); Chris Thomas, *Typhoon Wings of 2<sup>nd</sup> TAF 1939-1945* (Osprey Publishing: London, 2010).

<sup>323</sup> Lange, *Dokumentation: Cap Arcona*, pp. 228-229.

In terms of evaluating the impact of aerial reconnaissance, the most crucial factor was locational knowledge by RAF personnel. For those more experienced pilots, intelligence gathering was markedly easier than for an inexperienced pilot. One important area where locational knowledge was crucial was in the detection of smaller concentration or work camps. As Price notes, “it was as good as hopeless for the Allied military intelligence to detect the whereabouts of the concentration camp prisoners in detail”.<sup>324</sup> This meant that although technological advances supported gathering potential intelligence, what was lacking was the necessary skills and knowledge of how best to decipher the information. While there were significant improvements in the development of technology to source potential intelligence, one drawback remained the ability of intelligence staff to decipher the information. One crucial link was experience and geographical knowledge of the area that was under surveillance. Without this prior knowledge, the timely dissemination of this type of information was often hindered by in-experienced staff.

An area of importance in the advance of British intelligence was the development and implementation of photographic reconnaissance (PR). After the outbreak of war in 1939, PR was still in its infancy.<sup>325</sup> As the war progressed scientific improvements were forthcoming. Policy therefore developed to support the further and future use of PR. Price claimed that towards “the end of World War II in Europe, the Royal Air Force and USAAF reconnaissance units were well-equipped and highly efficient collectors of

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<sup>324</sup> Lange, *Dokumentation: Cap Arcona*, p. 228. For original German “Damit war es für die alliierte militärische Aufklärung so gut wie aussichtslos, den Verbleib der KZ-Häftlinge im einzelnen zu erfassen”.

<sup>325</sup> See Overy, *The Air War*, p. 200.

intelligence”.<sup>326</sup> But while potential intelligence could be sourced, it was the interpretation and dissemination that provided the crucial link in making sure the information gathered was of strategic value.

By February 1945 Germany’s ability to sustain any long-term or effective resistance was almost non-existent.<sup>327</sup> British aerial policy up to February had largely been targeted to destroy morale on the enemy’s home front.<sup>328</sup> However, almost one month later Churchill took the decision to shift British policy. In a memo to his Chief of Staff Committee he stated:

It seems to me that the moment has come when the question of bombing of German cities simply for the sake of increasing the terror, though under other pretexts, should be reviewed.<sup>329</sup>

In an attempt to distance himself from the media coverage of the bombing of Dresden, Churchill signalled that Britain’s aerial campaign should no longer target non-military installations. As Watson notes, “Churchill also shifted primary responsibility for targeting along Germany’s northern and coastal airspace from Bomber Command to

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<sup>326</sup> Alfred Price, *Targeting the Reich: Allied Photographic Reconnaissance over Europe 1944-1945* (Greenhill Books: London, 2006), p. 24.

<sup>327</sup> See various Watson, *The Nazi Titanic*, pp. 82-84; Richard Bessel, *Germany 1945: From War to Peace* (Simon & Schuster: London, 2010); David Stafford, *Endgame 1945: Victory, Retribution, Liberation* (Thistle Publishing: London, 2015), pp. 349-367.

<sup>328</sup> See Richard Overy, *The Bombing War: Europe 1939-1945* (Allen Lane: London, 2013).

<sup>329</sup> Winston Churchill, *Memo to His Chiefs of Staff Committee*, 28 March 1945 [www.winstonchurchill.org, accessed 22 July 2016].

Fighter Command”.<sup>330</sup> In practical terms Fighter Command also lacked the extensive aerial reconnaissance capabilities that Bomber Command had develop through the course of the war. Although Fighter Command did not unknowingly attack a concentration camp, there is evidence that Red Cross convoys were strafed. The issue of the fog of war and the Allied mind set will be discussed later. This change in policy and tactical operations would directly impact upon the *Cap Arcona*. By altering existing operational practice, coupled with the lack of reconnaissance capabilities, this ultimately led to the attack on Neustadt Bay on 3 May.

While intelligence was continually sourced, the availability of this information was often hindered by the time in which it would take to process this information. The intelligence could only be seen as useful if its potential and impact on military strategy could be pieced together. Ehlers argues that “the vital attribute air intelligence brought to bear was an ability to make reasoned and accurate judgments about airpower’s effectiveness in hampering the German war effort”.<sup>331</sup> But aerial intelligence could only make accurate judgements depending on the skill of those who were attempting to decipher its information. Although extremely valuable, the use of intelligence in concluding the impact of bombing German war industry was difficult. In some instances, German war production was moved underground, and therefore the use of bombing had a limited effect.<sup>332</sup> Moreover aerial intelligence that examined military

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<sup>330</sup> Watson, *The Nazi Titanic*, p. 83.

<sup>331</sup> Robert S. Ehlers Jr., *Targeting the Third Reich: Air Intelligence and the Allied Bombing Campaigns* (University Press of Kansas: Lawrence, 2009).

<sup>332</sup> See Overy, *The Bombing War*, pp. 463-465.

sites and installations relied heavily on interpretation and information from those on the frontline. As the war effort continued to gather pace, the accuracy and timely dissemination of this information was critical to its usefulness.

As the movement of military groups were constant, this relocation of key tactical units further exacerbated the difficulties over communication. For instance, Second TAF AIR records stated,

During the month of April, Headquarters, 84 Group moved once and Headquarters, 83 Group moved twice, all the moves being across territory where the provision of landline communication was extremely difficult and even when established, the long distances involved resulted in the circuits being very unreliable for some time.<sup>333</sup>

The constant re-location of group headquarters was arguably detrimental to sustaining a reliable communication network between HQ and squadron locations. Moreover with increasing pressure on squadrons to be operational once re-located, often supplies lines, as well as communication lines, were unreliable. The impact of the wider strategy on intelligence therefore led to a number of instances whereby aircrews undertook air combat without sufficient intelligence.

From a humble beginning in early 1940 with one dedicated photoreconnaissance Spitfire and the Aircraft Operating Company, the RAF's photoreconnaissance squadrons and the Allied Central Interpretation Unit had by 1943 become capable

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<sup>333</sup> TNA AIR 24/1499: *Mobile Signals Units Type "W": Operations Record Book, Headquarters 2<sup>nd</sup> T.A.F Signals Branch Süchtlen, April 1945.*

intelligence providers. They were part of a much larger, highly integrated, and exceptionally capable collection of agencies [...] which together made up a mature and crucial interagency structure.<sup>334</sup> In terms of photographic reconnaissance, this was often flown at a high-level altitude in an attempt to broaden the area surveyed. By this late stage of the war the altitude was approximately 40,000ft.<sup>335</sup> One important topic related to the pilot's ability and experience. This was crucial in order to ensure that the correct surveillance area was covered at the correct height. In his discussion on aerial intelligence, Overy argues that by 1944-45

[The] more important the intelligence thus acquired was interpreted and disseminated through higher echelon intelligence agencies, which were in turn integrated into the wider intelligence system.<sup>336</sup>

The impact of this type of resource remains important for the discussion on the *Cap Arcona* tragedy. By this stage of the aerial campaign the gathering of intelligence became paramount. The use of photographic reconnaissance, with particular focus on North German ports, as well as significant military installations remained the focus for most aircrews. Second TAF utilised 34 Wing for photographic reconnaissance. The Air support signals unit was responsible for organising tactical reconnaissance missions. Any requests for photographic reconnaissance needed to be made the previous day. This

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<sup>334</sup> Ehlers, *Targeting the Third Reich*, p. 340.

<sup>335</sup> See RAF MOD UK Proceedings of the Royal Air Force Historical Society Issue 10, [http://www.raf.mod.uk/rafcms/mediafiles/EE8F228F\\_5056\\_A318\\_A82D0AD8309AF21E.pdf](http://www.raf.mod.uk/rafcms/mediafiles/EE8F228F_5056_A318_A82D0AD8309AF21E.pdf) [Accessed 02 November 2016, 16:41].

<sup>336</sup> Overy, *The Air War*, p. 200; See also Constance Babington-Smith, *Evidence in Camera: The Story of Photographic Intelligence in the Second World War* (The History Press: London, 2014), pp. 167-98; Francis Harry Hinsley, *Hitler's Strategy* (Ishi Press: New York, 2011), pp. 223-240; Richard J. Evans, *The Third Reich at War: How the Nazis led Germany from Conquest to Disaster* (Penguin: London, 2009), ch.5.

was designed to allow forward planning by British ground forces. During an aerial survey, the pilot provided verbal information throughout the mission. Once landed, the photographic film was taken away to be developed, while the pilot provided a report. The Air liaison section officer was then responsible for communicating between the RAF tactical groups and Second TAF HQ. By late 1944 attacks on transportation targets accelerated as a direct result of the use of photographic reconnaissance results.<sup>337</sup> This did not necessarily lead to a positive outcome. Although Overy suggests that the importance of the intelligence ultimately depended on the level of expediency assigned to the information, processing this intelligence was still reliant on time. In building on earlier discussions the impact of timely dissemination in the final weeks of the war was also hindered by other factors. Any delay in the relay of intelligence could invalidate its relevance. But as British forces pressed to Lübeck a chaotic situation has evolved and its impact on intelligence cannot be underestimated. The impact of failing to disseminate information in a prompt manner meant many key decisions were made without all the facts having been taken into account. In turn this lack of communication led to an increasing number of friendly-fire incidents.

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<sup>337</sup> Ehlers, *Targeting the Third Reich*, p. 324

## Sources of Intelligence: “The White Buses”

Existing historiography often identifies several independent strands of intelligence that existed prior to the attack on the *Cap Arcona* on 3 May.<sup>338</sup> Although these strands of intelligence have been identified, their relevance, timing and provenance were not always fully explored. One such example was the white bus rescue operation. What will follow is a closer analysis of this operation set within the broader context, namely the chaotic final weeks of the Second World War. It will argue that this example gives us an insight into Allied behaviour in the closing stages as well as highlighting the impact of the fog of war of British military operations.<sup>339</sup>

In attempting to identify possible intelligence sources, Lange notes that “the German collapse, and the problems caused by refugees and troops fleeing, made it impossible for British aerial reconnaissance to identify camp evacuation transports or potential destinations”.<sup>340</sup> But as British forces pressed northwards, were they actively seeking camp evacuation transports, or were these identified by chance? One aspect that

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<sup>338</sup> See Lange, *Dokumentation: Cap Arcona*; Watson, *Nazi Titanic*; Wilhelm Lange, “Neueste Erkenntnisse zur Bombardierung der KZ-Schiffe in der Neustädter Bucht am 3. Mai 1945: Vorgeschichte, Verlauf und Verantwortlichkeiten” in Detlef Garbe and Carmen Lange (eds.), *Häftlinge zwischen Vernichtung und Befreiung: die Auflösung des KZ Neuengamme und seiner Aussenlager durch die SS im Frühjahr 1945* (Edition Temmen: Bremen, 2005), pp. 217-229.

<sup>339</sup> For a discussion on the Fog of War see Simon Godfrey, *British Army Communications in the Second World War: Lifting the Fog of Battle* (Bloomsbury Academic: London, 2015), pp. 181-212. See also Robert C. Ehrhart, “The European Theater of Operations, 1943-1945” in John F. Kreis (ed.), *Piercing the Fog: Intelligence and Army Air Forces operations in World War II* (Air Force History and Museums Program: Washington, 1996), pp. 171-246.

<sup>340</sup> Lange, *Dokumentation: Cap Arcona*, p. 103. For original German, “Der deutsche Zusammenbruch und das allgegenwärtige Chaos durch die von der Front zurückflutenden Menschenmassen ermöglichten es der britischen Luftaufklärung kaum, korrekte Aussagen hinsichtlich von KL-Evakuierungs-transporten zu treffen”.

hindered reconnaissance was the movement of refugees. The movement of civilians, troops and a large number of refugees exacerbated the reconnaissance operation as they fled the onslaught and reprisals from the advancing Soviet forces.

The case study of Folke Bernadotte and the white bus rescue mission is a useful example to highlight the problems with aerial reconnaissance and the dissemination of intelligence. Humanitarian and rescue missions to save prisoners incarcerated within the German camp system, where by 1945, becoming more frequent. The example of the Scandinavian rescue operation is unique because of the scale and logistics needed for the operation to succeed. Research into the sinking of the *Cap Arcona* often references the negotiations that took place between the Swedish Red Cross (SRC) and Heinrich Himmler SS.<sup>341</sup> Bernadotte negotiated closely with the Allied High Command during his extensive talks with Himmler. Much of their discussion was centred on the rescue operation for Scandinavian nationals from Neuengamme. The tangible link between Bernadotte and Himmler largely focuses on his working knowledge of the camp at Neuengamme. But in discussing intelligence issues for British forces, Bernadotte's work is often side-lined. Throughout the duration of the rescue operation from Neuengamme a small number of Red Cross convoy's fell victim to aerial attacks by Allied forces. Therefore was intelligence from external agencies considered valuable? If so, why was this not disseminated in a sufficient time frame?

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<sup>341</sup> See various Wilhelm Lange, "Ein Unbekanntes Kapitel der *Cap-Arcona*-Tragödie" *Jahrbuch für Heimatkunde* 54 (2011), pp. 185-195; Peter Longerich, *Heinrich Himmler* (OUP: London, 2012), pp. 726-729.

The Swedish Red Cross rescue operation began in Neuengamme at a time when the remainder of the camp was being readied for evacuation. By January 1945, Allied advances on both fronts triggered a second wave of evacuations. As camps in German occupied territories moved their prison labour force closer to the Reich centre, the attitude of the German guards and SS functionaries towards the prisoners continued to enforce unnecessary suffering and misery in the overwhelming face of defeat. At this stage of the war, Swedish ministers began to investigate the possibility of securing the release of Scandinavian nationals held in German camps. The majority of the planning was undertaken by the Norwegian Government in London. Folke Bernadotte was appointed to head the possible operation. In order for the mission to work, Bernadotte was determined to set up a meeting with Himmler to discuss the possibility of the humanitarian mission.<sup>342</sup> Through a combination of various intermediaries, he was able to finally meet Himmler on 19 February. These negotiations took place without the consent or knowledge of Hitler. Bernadotte noted in his diary that “Himmler declared his unswerving loyalty. But his freedom of action was restricted”.<sup>343</sup> Bernadotte wished, at all costs, his mission to be kept secret after the recent dealings between Himmler and the Jews of Theresienstadt.

Bernadotte had hoped to reach an agreement to consolidate Danish and Norwegian nationals in a collection camp prior to embarkation to Sweden. The agreement was reached shortly after Bernadotte’s departure. The focus was on the collection of

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<sup>342</sup> Folke Bernadotte, *Instead of Arms* (Hodder and Stoughton: London, 1949).

<sup>343</sup> Folke Bernadotte, *Last days of the Reich: The Diary of Count Folke Bernadotte, October 1944-May 1945* (Frontline Books: Barnsley, 2009), p. 63.

Scandinavian nationals within the main camp at Neuengamme. Although this concession had been reached, the Red Cross body was charged with supplying their own fleet of trucks and fuel. As Cesarani noted,

[Bernadotte] assembled a fleet of thirty-six white painted buses, a dozen trucks, and a supply vehicle to cross to Denmark and thence drive to the Neuengamme Camp.<sup>344</sup>

The mission departed on the 8 March. One of the most crucial factors was the possibility of attack by Allied planes. Prior to embarkation, Persson notes that,

The Swedish Foreign Office promised as far as possible to supply the Allies with information concerning the various routes the vehicles would be plying and timetables for the transportation through Germany.<sup>345</sup>

The role of Bernadotte and his mission during this operation was, in essence to provide relief and support to Scandinavian nationals. At various stages throughout his mission, the Red Cross were in a position to relay their movements to the British Authorities, as well as credible information regarding his discussions with Himmler. This was done in an attempt to prevent any friendly fire attacks on relief transports. Therefore, in providing a detailed timetable of their movements, it was hoped that this information would filter down to the squadrons in the area this mission was engaged.

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<sup>344</sup> David Cesarani, *Final Solution: The Fate of the Jews 1933-1949* (Macmillan: London, 2016), p. 760. See also Sune Persson, *Escape from the Third Reich: Folke Bernadotte and the White Buses* (Frontline Books: Barnsley, 2009).

<sup>345</sup> Persson, *Escape from the Third Reich*, p. 94.

The chaotic situation that came to typify the final weeks of the war meant that “the Swedish foreign office promised as far as possible to supply the Allied nations with a list of the various routes the vehicles would be plying”.<sup>346</sup> Furthermore the air attacks – largely conducted by the RAF – were in support of the advancing land forces. By the end of April the bridge heads on the river Elbe were being threatened by Allied forces and by attempting to scale back air activity, could allow for enemy resistance to strengthen key strategic locations. The British response was clear:

After discussion with 21 Army Group consider restriction proposed by you would prejudice speedy capture of Lübeck and establishment of Eastern Flank of Wismar-Schwerin line.<sup>347</sup>

Regardless - in some cases – of the cost to neutral or friendly bystanders the overriding need to arrive at Lübeck was the main, if not the sole priority.

Although the bombing of towns and cities was largely co-ordinated within a wider military framework, there were times when judgements were not wholly accurate. But this did not reduce the threat of attack. And by March 1945 territory under German control continued to shrink which in turn meant that the risk of aerial attack was greatly enhanced. As Persson argues,

The main threat to the white buses now came from the low flying Allied aircraft, *Tieffliegar*, which, unhindered, strafed all German roads. And they, especially

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<sup>346</sup> Persson, *Escape from the Third Reich*, p. 94.

<sup>347</sup> Jacobs and Pool, *The 100-year Secret*, p. 77.

the British pilots, no longer respected the white buses with their Red Crosses and Swedish flags.<sup>348</sup>

In essence, Persson suggests that the British pilots were deliberately attacking Red Cross convoys, although estimates of the numbers killed were small at around twenty five. What this highlights is that Allied pilots mistrusted the use of Red Cross trucks as genuine humanitarian convoys. Although the Swedish ministry had provided adequate intelligence to the British government, this instance shows the impact of the fog of war. Moreover Persson seems to be suggesting within his argument that British policy was to shoot at Red Cross vehicles.

In attempting to seek answers for attacks on Red Cross convoys, one Squadron leader questioned the legality of the convoys. He argued that “the Germans being very crafty would sometimes decorate Lorries with Red Crosses and it was always a tossup whether it was a genuine Red Cross vehicle or not”.<sup>349</sup> The problem with his testimony is that there is no other evidence to support the Germans use of false Red Cross trucks. If this was the case the view from a pilot’s cockpit would be extremely limited and would require further intelligence to verify whether the convoy was in fact genuine. Again the dissemination of intelligence and communication to the pilots and squadrons actively engaged in the military zone of conflict was not forthcoming.

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<sup>348</sup> Sune Persson, “Folke Bernadotte and the White Buses”, *The Journal of Holocaust Education* Vol.9 No.2 (2000), p. 261.

<sup>349</sup> IWM Interview 16598: *Squadron Leader Harry Glendinning Pattison*, Reel 2 [08:52-09:05], 26 March 1996.

As British forces continued to press hard to the Rhine, the Red Cross mission was under direct threat of aerial attacks on former German roads. In his diary, Bernadotte noted that

The Allied authorities had announced in Stockholm that because of the intensification of the air war, immunity for the Swedish Red Cross vehicles could not be guaranteed.<sup>350</sup>

Bernadotte was therefore suggesting that the relative protection that had existed over Red Cross transports could no longer be guaranteed within the existing climate. To distinguish a Red Cross vehicle in the moment of battle was arguably made more difficult as the conflict gathered pace. But in removing a guaranteed protection for humanitarian workers at a time when British forces were advancing at a rapid pace placed the aid workers at significant risk. Secondly, as Britain's air war intensified, it reduced the level of resistance from German aircraft almost to none. In reality, Overy recently argued that

By spring 1945, no part of the contracting German empire remained untouched. Bombing by day and by night did not affect every area simultaneously and many towns were bombed just once.<sup>351</sup>

SHAEF command sent an important signal to Second TAF headquarters which suggested a restriction of fighter activity on vehicle and pedestrian attacks. This was issued in response to a previous allegation by the Swedish Red Cross. Part of the signal indicated grave concern:

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<sup>350</sup> TNA AIR 24/1498: *Air Operations of Second Tactical Airforce*, 1 May 1945, p. 44; See also Bernadotte, *Last Days*, p. 85.

<sup>351</sup> Overy, *The Bombing War*, p. 468.

Air attacks by fighter aircraft against Red Cross trucks, POWs and refugees of various nationalities including Swedish, Danish and Norwegian personnel have increased to the point that it endangers the good reputation of the Allied Air Force and has resulted in the cancellation of all distribution by the Red Cross.<sup>352</sup>

More importantly it had been previously suggested that Red Cross activities be restricted to either ports or areas which were outside the main fighting zones. Due to the narrow zone of battle, it remained ever difficult to limit the scope of activities planned by Second TAF. In turn the white bus rescue mission had to be re-routed to avoid a significant threat of Allied aerial attack. As Allied plans to increase aerial activity over North Germany were developed, the potential threat to life also rose dramatically. But with as the speed of operations also increased, so too did the German plans to evacuate the camps. This meant that there were many more potential casualties outside the camps in the final weeks. In turn the dissemination of aerial reconnaissance to those at the frontline was often slow and lacked the necessary detail that had been at the forefront of Britain's aerial campaign. One important example was an attack on a freight depot at Celle. The building was used by German forces to house a group of prisoners. By this late stage of the war, German commanders knew only too well that this type of structure was deemed by British and American forces as a legitimate military target, and would likely be attacked.

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<sup>352</sup> TNA AIR 41/68: *Operations Record Book, 2<sup>nd</sup> TAF*, 1 May 1945, p. 44. See also Benjamin Jacobs and Eugene Pool, *The 100 year Secret: Britain's Hidden World War II Massacre* (The Lyons Press: Guilford, 2004).

On the evening of 8 April, a U.S. attack on the freight depot at Celle partially destroyed a long train, which had arrived with almost 3,500 prisoners from Neuengamme and Buchenwald; several hundred were killed, many more badly wounded.

Although the attack took place at night, there was no attempt by German forces to paint the train, nor make provisions for the prisoners in the event of an air raid. German officials were aware of the threat from the air, and this event shows that the transport was left to the chances of whether the Allied planes would attack a crucial military installation. The example of Britain's engagement with the Red Cross demonstrates that even when intelligence was made available, there were often occasions of friendly-fire. We can further surmise that Allied behaviour was being driven by the broader military strategy to reach the Baltic coast and halt a Soviet advance further West. In addition, the normal protocols and procedures that provided clear guidance on strategic policy fell to the wayside.

As Swedish Red Cross co-workers finally gained access to Neuengamme on 29 March, the squalid conditions became apparent. Ingrid Lomfors writes: "from these quarters a group of creatures who scarcely seemed human was swept, pushed and led. Emaciated to a point that would not be regarded as possible [...] these poor people stumbled and crept into our buses".<sup>353</sup> The Scandinavian part of the camp had been cleaned to portray a better standard of living conditions. Although exact figures are difficult to find, some

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<sup>353</sup> Ingrid Lomfors, "Blind Spot: Remembrance and forgetfulness regarding the Swedish Red Cross Relief Operation in Nazi Germany in 1945" in Oliver von Wrochem and Lars Jockheck (eds.), *Skandinavien im Zweiten Weltkrieg und die Rettungsaktion Weiße Büsse: Ereignisse und Erinnerung*, (Metropol: Berlin, 2012), p. 156. See also Sune Persson, *Escape from the Third Reich: the harrowing true story of the largest rescue effort insider Nazi Germany*, translated by Graham Long (Skyhorse Publishing: Barnsley, 2009).

estimate that between March and May 1945 nearly 16,100 inmates perished either in the camp or during the evacuation of the camp.<sup>354</sup> This meant Red Cross workers were exposed to the full extent of the conditions that were present in the camp system. During Red Cross operations in the camp evacuation routes and transport details were continually reported to the British. Through his deposition in July 1946, Bernadotte stated that he could only arrange additional transports once he had received authority from the Allies.<sup>355</sup> Therefore this example shows that British authorities were well-informed of SRC operations in North Germany. Bernadotte continued to relay clear information to the necessary authorities regarding his mission. As the number of transports increased, so too did the timeframe of operations. The extensive involvement of Bernadotte in the final weeks of war at Neuengamme provided a useful and much needed insight into what the British knew, or were made aware of, regarding the camp at Neuengamme and its movement of prisoners. But it further highlights a number of failings in the timely processing of information.

During Bernadotte's operation in Neuengamme, the main camp was continually in receipt of prisoner transports as surrounding camps closer to the fighting front were rapidly closed. This continual movement of prisoners further signifies the problems that faced British reconnaissance groups. By providing a survey of similar camps in this final phase of evacuations it is clear that Neuengamme remains a unique case. Other

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<sup>354</sup> See various, KZ-Gedenkstaette website, "Death", <http://www.kz-gedenkstaette-neuengamme.de/index.php?id=990>, (accessed 19 May 2014); Herbert Obenaus, "Die Räumung der Hannoverschen Konzentrationslager im April 1945", in Christoph Gutman, Rainer Fröbe, Claus Füllberg-Stolberg, Rolf Keller, Herbert Obenaus and Hans Hermann Schröder (eds.) *Konzentrationslager in Hannover: KZ-Arbeit und Rüstungsindustrie in der Spätphase des Weltkrieges* (Verlag August Lase: Hildsheim, 1985), pp. 497-502.

<sup>355</sup> TNA WO 309/408: *Deposition of Count Folke Bernadotte* 6 July 1946, p. 1.

camps were liberated by Allied forces with significant numbers of prisoners still within the camp grounds. For instance Sachsenhausen was liberated on 22 April where Allied forces found around 3,000 inmates inside the grounds.<sup>356</sup> Buchenwald, after extensive evacuations was liberated by American forces on 11 April where they found an estimated 21,000 prisoners still in the camp.<sup>357</sup> All existing documentation had been destroyed and prior to the Allied liberation, the number of inmates in the main camp had been drastically reduced through a number of death marches. As part of the arrangement, Red Cross vehicles collected foreign nationals from all over Northern Germany. Again this movement of vehicles at a time when the Allied air campaign had dramatically increased meant that the Red Cross were constantly informing the British of the transport routes to and from Neuengamme. Increasingly, the movement of Red Cross workers and their vehicles against the number of friendly fire incidents suggests, at times, Britain was able to prevent some attacks.

During the white bus operation, Bernadotte provided humanitarian relief to other Western nationals that were on a death march. The extensive negotiation process between Bernadotte and Himmler provide us with some clear examples of what information had been passed to British forces. This information is further supplemented by other sources which were available to intelligence agencies. One such instance was a

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<sup>356</sup> “Memorial and Museum Sachsenhausen” <http://www.stiftung-bg.de/gums/en/> [Accessed on 02 March 2016].

<sup>357</sup> “Holocaust Encyclopaedia – Buchenwald”, <https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005198> [Accessed on 02 March 2016].

small evacuation transport led by Scharführer-SS Max Schmidt. A survivor, Benjamin Jacobs noted that on 28 April

a long black limousine was the first glimpse we had of the Swedish mission [...] out of the limousine stepped three men, wearing pressed Khaki uniforms [...] one carried an elegant baton under his arm. I assume – but don't know for sure – that he was Count Bernadotte.<sup>358</sup>

Schmidt, isolated from any source of direct command had decided to march the prisoners to his family's farm in Neu Glassau in the district of Schleswig-Holstein. Bernadotte's mission offered humanitarian support to a significant number of prisoners. We can presume that after extensive negotiations with the West during his time at Neuengamme, Bernadotte had felt that it was now within his ability to assist other Western nationals. The destination of the truck was Neustadt Bay. However the trucks were not destined for the *Cap Arcona*, but for one of two Red Cross ships that were in the bay near Lübeck. Bernadotte had received assurances from his representatives near Flensburg that he had two boats made available to carry non-Scandinavian prisoners to Sweden.<sup>359</sup> The first vessel, the *Lillie Matthiessen* had previously been chartered to ship 350,000 litres of fuel to the port of Lübeck, plus other stores and 6,000 gift parcels for prisoners at the German Camps.<sup>360</sup> The second vessel was the *Magdalena*. But in making the necessary arrangements for this rescue mission, Bernadotte needed

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<sup>358</sup> Jacobs and Pool, *The 100-Year Secret*, p. 73.

<sup>359</sup> TNA WO 309/408: *Bernadotte Deposition*, point 2.

<sup>360</sup> Persson, *Escape from the Third Reich*, p. 85. See also Sune Persson, "Folke Bernadotte and the White Buses" in David Cesarani and Paul Levine (eds.) *Bystanders to the Holocaust: Re-evaluation* (Routledge: London, 2002), pp. 237-268.

permission from Allied HQ prior to movement.<sup>361</sup> The movement of any Red Cross transport was now greatly at risk from Allied air strikes as the area under German control diminished.

## Local Information Sources

As prison transports embarked at the Vorwerk harbour in Lübeck, there were other members of neutral countries that provided support. In the port a member of Bernadotte's mission, Dr Hans Arnoldsson, was actively engaged in humanitarian arrangements. The prisoners had arrived to Lübeck either by goods trains, or had been forced to march from their respective camp.<sup>362</sup> As the prisoners were gathered near the grain silos of the Vorwerk Harbour they were to be ferried onto ships in Neustadt Bay. By this stage the vast majority of prisoners were sick, mal-nourished or too weak to offer any significant level of resistance towards their captors.

While he was engaged in Lübeck he was ultimately entrusted with arranging safe passage for some 300 female inmates from Ravensbrück concentration camp to the Red

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<sup>361</sup> See for instances, TNA WO 309/408: *Deposition of Count Folke Bernadotte* 6 July 1946, p. 1.

<sup>362</sup> See various accounts, Lange, *Cap Arcona*; Wilhelm Lange, *Cap Arcona: Summary of the Cap Arcona disaster in the bay of Neustadt on 3<sup>rd</sup> May, 1945*, (Stadtarchiv Neustadt: Neustadt, 1995); W.Lange, "Neueste Erkenntnisse zur Bombardierung der KZ-Schiffe in der Neustädter Bucht am 3.Mai 1945: Vorgeschichte, Verlauf und Verantwortlichkeiten", in Detlef Garbe and Carmen Lange (eds.), *Häftlinge zwischen Vernichtung und Befreiung: Die Auflösung des KZ Neuengamme und seiner Aussenlager durch die SS im Frühjahr 1945*, (Edition Temmen: Bremen, 2005), pp. 217-229.

Cross ship's *Lillie Matthiessen* and *Magdalena*.<sup>363</sup> He was assisted in his activities by Bjorn Heger, a Norwegian who had arranged for the prisoners held in Schmidt's barn to be collected. The problem that faced these men was the lack of space available to transport the prisoners. Docked also in Lübeck around this time was the ship *Athen*. After Captain Bertram – *Cap Arcona* – had refused to exceed numbers of four thousand five hundred prisoners, those remaining were ferried back to the shore by the crew of the *Athen*.<sup>364</sup> Originally functioning as a freighter ship, the ship was damaged during operation during sometime in 1943; the vessel was re-built and eventually served its remaining months primarily as a prison ship.<sup>365</sup> As the *Athen* was docked alongside the harbour in Lübeck, Arnoldsson negotiated with an SS-Hauptsturmführer who was responsible for the *Athen*, to secure the release of an estimated 2-300 prisoners who were suffering the most.<sup>366</sup> The problem was what to do with the remaining prisoners aboard the *Athen*. It was evident from Arnoldsson that the ships at his disposal were insufficient and therefore an alternative solution had to be found.

By 30 April Allied forces were close to capturing Lübeck. The town of Elmenhorst and surrounding areas had been taken by the swift advance of the British 11 Armoured

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<sup>363</sup> GeNA, *Letter from Swedish Red Cross Gunner Nyby to Dirk Martin*, 29 January 1990, p. 1.

<sup>364</sup> For a discussion as to the activity of the ship *Athen*, see Lange, *Cap Arcona*; See also TNA ADM 213/917: *Survey of damaged shipping in Northern Germany and Denmark*, 1947.

<sup>365</sup> The *Athen* was first seen as half a vessel at Rotterdam prior to October 1943. During that month this half was dry docked and a new fore port was constructed. The new vessel was re-launched on 6.8.44. See TNA ADM 213/917: *Survey of damaged shipping in Northern Germany and Denmark*, 1947.

<sup>366</sup> See various, Lange, *Cap Arcona*, p. 4; Hans Arnoldsson, *Natt och Dimma*, (Bonnier: Stockholm, 1945).

division. The overall situation meant that within forty-eight hours (at most) the city of Lübeck would be surrounded.<sup>367</sup> The only viable and practical solution, as Arnoldsson suggested, was to hand the remaining prisoners over to the British forces. Furthermore Arnoldsson instructed the commanding officer that he was to await the arrival of the British and to leave the surrender of these people to him.<sup>368</sup> At this point, Arnoldsson becomes an influential and important figure for the prisoners already on board the *Cap Arcona*. As he returned to the position where the *Athen* was docked on the 2 May, he learnt that the *Athen* had sailed to Neustadt Bay. It was at this moment Arnoldsson learnt from a German officer of the concentration camp inmates on board the *Cap Arcona*. His plan of action was to inform the British authorities of this situation developing over Neustadt bay on their arrival.

On the morning of 3 May, Dr Arnoldsson told British headquarters of the concentration camp prisoners on board the ships in Neustadt Bay. From Arnoldsson's published work, we can surmise that he informed the British commander liberating Neustadt on the morning of 3 May by communicating a similar message to that of de Blonay. The liberating commander was Major General Roberts.<sup>369</sup> Given the over-riding military situation and the potential threat posed to the prisoners, Arnoldsson was determined to seek further counsel.<sup>370</sup> This information was taken seriously by the British, who on the

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<sup>367</sup> TNA WO 171/4184: *11<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division diary*, May 1945.

<sup>368</sup> Lange, *Cap Arcona Summary*, p. 4.

<sup>369</sup> Arnoldsson, *Natt och Dimma*, pp.160 – 161.

<sup>370</sup> See various, Arnoldsson, *Natt och Dimma*; Lange, *Cap Arcona Summary*, p. 5. See also Wilhelm Lange, *Cap Arcona*, p. 232. For original German see, "Als Vertreter der Folke Bernadotte-Expedition Kümmerte sich Dr. Arnoldsson um die KZ-Häftlinge im Hafen Lübecks

afternoon of 3 May sent two officers to the office of the Swedish Red Cross to ask Dr. Arnoldsson for further details on the information he had passed on to the British.<sup>371</sup> The problem was that any action was too late. Although this information had been made readily available to British forces, their ability to communicate effectively with Red Cross departments was slow and clumsy.<sup>372</sup> Information relevant to prevent significant loss of life should have been passed on sooner. This particular example clearly shows that when in receipt of important information, the channels of dissemination were slow. While British authorities were sent back to request further information, there were other methods of intelligence gathering that the Allies could have utilised to clarify the situation. Instead by returning to question Arnoldsson on the information he had provided the British, the delay in acting on this credible intelligence led to the attack on the *Cap Arcona*.

During the war British intelligence considered information via the Red Cross to be extremely reliable. But as combat became more intense and the Allies' advance

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und sprach mit einem SS-Hauptsturmführer, der die Befehlsgewalt auf der >>Athen<< mit ihren 2200 Gefangenen hatte. Dr. Arnoldsson bot ihm an, einige hundert der bedürftigsten KZ-Häftlinge mit den Rote-Kreuz-Schiffen >>Lillie Matthiessen<< und >>Magdalena<< nach Schweden bringen zu lassen”.

Lange continues his summary as to Arnoldsson's activities in Lübeck, „Die von Dr. Arnoldsson am Morgens des 3.Mai 1945 abgegebene Erklärung fuhrte erst am Nachmittag dazu, dass zwei britische offiziere im Büro des Schwedischen Roten Kreuzes in Lübeck erschienen, um Dr. Arnoldsson nach allen Details zu den Schiffen zu befragen. Nachdem Sie seinen bericht gehört hatten, versprachen sie, sofort zu handeln. Leider war es zu diesem Zeitpunkt bereits zu spät, um die militärische operation der Briten in der Neustädter Bucht abzuwenden“, p. 234.

<sup>371</sup> See for instance Arnoldsson, *Natt och Dimma*; Lange, *Cap Arcona*, p. 6. Lange provides a general overview of the events that took place on the final days of the conflict.

<sup>372</sup> See Jean-Claude Favez, *The Red Cross and the Holocaust* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2000).

quickened, evidence suggests that the processing and disseminating of information was greatly hindered by the speed of their advance. Further information regarding the prisoners on board the *Cap Arcona* existed. The relationship, communication and coordination between the various Red Cross institutions throughout the war were often fragmented. The ICRC often attempted to deal with the terms of the Geneva Convention 1929. Other national Red Cross institutions, like the SRC, operated independently of the ICRC. In the case of Neuengamme, the SRC were primarily concerned with the rescue of Scandinavian nationals. While the Swedish Red Cross conducted extensive operations throughout Northern Germany, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) were also extensively involved in operations in North Germany. The port of Lübeck was the centre of the ICRC's northern supply operations.<sup>373</sup> An important drawback that hindered the ICRC's involvement throughout the war was the organisation's overall weakness.<sup>374</sup> By April the port of Lübeck was becoming an important military target for Allied air crews. The continuation of humanitarian support at a time when there was a lack of communication between neutral observers and British forces posed a problem. A Swiss delegate, Paul de Blonay was operating and guiding ICRC operations. During the final days of April, de Blonay was conducting his duties in the Harbour with regards to shipments of Red Cross parcels. In his postwar deposition he stated:

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<sup>373</sup> Unpublished PhD Thesis, James Crossland, *The British Government and the International Committee of the Red Cross Relations, 1939-1945* (Murdoch University: February 2010), p. 254.

<sup>374</sup> See Favez, *The Red Cross and the Holocaust*; Crossland, *ICRC and Britain*, p. 282. See also James Crossland, *Britain and the International Committee of the Red Cross, 1939-1945* (Palgrave Macmillan: London, 2014).

I noticed a ship ss. *Thielbek* at the place where I was accustomed to unload Red Cross petrol supplies. Whilst I was walking past this ship, a box of matches dropped beside me. I could not find who had thrown it. This box contained a letter in German signed by a Pole telling me about the state of some deportees – about 7000 – in the three ships ss. *Thielbeck*, ss. *Athen* and ss. *Cap Arcona*.<sup>375</sup>

What de Blonay discovered was information regarding the developing situation in Neustadt Bay. Furthermore, the information stated clearly the number of prisoners and ships which were undefended in the bay of Neustadt. With this information, de Blonay, a neutral spectator, now sought some form of clarification on the situation. The following day he was engaged in a meeting with SS Brigadeführer and General Major Schröder. Schröder's function in Lübeck was senator and general of the police in Lübeck, and therefore he would likely be answering any questions that de Blonay had regarding the prisoners on board the three ships. During the meeting de Blonay "offered food for the prisoners on board the ships' which would have made the situation on board the ships slightly better".<sup>376</sup> German commanders reacted angrily to the offer. Schröder seemed to be angry that a neutral spectator had discovered the prisoners on board the ships.<sup>377</sup> Schroder also rejected the application for the ICRC to support the prisoners through food parcels.

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<sup>375</sup> TNA WO 309/873: "Neuengamme Concentration Camp, Germany: General correspondence" - *Deposition of Swiss Delegate, Paul de Blonay exhibit no.42*, 7 September 1945, p. 1.

<sup>376</sup> TNA WO 309/873: *Paul de Blonay exhibit no.42*, 7 September 1945, p. 1. See also Marc Buggeln, *Slave labour in Nazi Concentration Camps* (OUP: Oxford, 2015).

<sup>377</sup> TNA WO 309/873: *Paul de Blonay exhibit no.42*, 7 September 1945, p. 1. See also Crossland, *Britain and the International Committee of the Red Cross*.

In amongst the confusion and chaotic scenes, emphasis was placed upon local commanders to ensure, to the best of their abilities, that orders were followed through.<sup>378</sup> In fact Wachsmann poignantly argues that “the transports were dominated by camp SS men, after all, who were already accustomed to murdering prisoners if escaping or for losing their strength”.<sup>379</sup> This meant that any attempt to help by neutral spectators would be refused. On 29 and 30 April, de Blonay was once again active at the harbour front in Lübeck. This time he was more persistent with Schröder. During this discussion he requested for the foreigners or non-Germans on board these ships to be released into his trust, but Schröder refused to comply.<sup>380</sup> Much needed resources for the war effort were diverted to the continued detention and imprisonment of prisoners. Gauleiter Kaufmann who liaised with HSSPF Bassewitz-Behr remained ever obstinate to ensure that the remaining prisoners from Neuengamme camp were neither liberated nor released. On the following day, after de Blonay’s unsuccessful conversations with Schröder, he met with a fellow colleague, Dr. Arnoldsson. His colleague had rather more to discuss with de Blonay. In actual fact he had “received permission to take about 300 prisoners as International Red Cross cargoes to Sweden on two ships which had just loaded Red Cross parcels in Lübeck and which had already about 500 women prisoners from Ravensbrück”.<sup>381</sup>

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<sup>378</sup> For instance Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (Penguin: London, 2001); Raul Hilberg, *Perpetrators Victims Bystanders: The Jewish Catastrophe 1933-45* (Harper Perennial: London, 1992); Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (Holmes & Meier Inc: New Jersey, 1986).

<sup>379</sup> Wachsmann, *KL*, p. 577.

<sup>380</sup> TNA WO 309/873: *Deposition of Swiss Delegate, Paul de Blonay exhibit no.42*, 7 September 1945, p. 1

<sup>381</sup> For an in depth discussions of this conversation see, TNA WO 309/873: *Deposition of De Blonay*, 7 September 1945.

In terms of information and its relevance to the *Cap Arcona*, de Blonay's information was passed directly to the liberating British forces of Lübeck on 2 May. As British forces took control of the town, de Blonay requested a meeting with the liberating commander. The most likely format of this information would have been verbally communicated between de Blonay and Major General Roberts. From his statement below it is clear that Major General Roberts phoned the message through to central headquarters for further analysis. A Brigadier, Major General Roberts of 11 Armoured Division met with de Blonay around 15:00 hours on 2 May. De Blonay states that:

I told him about the three ships in Neustadt Bay and that I was certain that these ships had been put there in order to be sunk. I told him there were 7000 to 8000 prisoners on board. In my presence he spoke on the phone in his armoured car. I did not hear what he said but I am sure he passed my message on to higher authority.<sup>382</sup>

The crucial case-studies of Red Cross activities demonstrate that external agencies had successfully gained useful and credible intelligence. In particular, at a localised level the works of Arnoldsson and De Blonay provide solid evidence that the information regarding the prisoners did exist and in both cases this was passed clearly to the British authorities. But more importantly the discussions and evidence of the meetings between Bernadotte and Himmler provide a crucial assessment of just how complicated and difficult the political situation had become in Nazi Germany. These discussions show clearly that there was never any real intention to surrender the remaining camps. We can therefore infer that Himmler only wished to stall and delay the Allied advance into North Germany. What this meant for Neuengamme was that the evacuation moved

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<sup>382</sup> TNA WO 309/873: *Deposition of De Blonay*, 7 September 1945. See also IWM Misc 94 (1424): Neustadt, F.G.Parson *Letter to the Daily Telegraph*, 18 March 1982.

forward, and because no concession was reached, the prisoners were placed on board the *Cap Arcona*. In broader terms the impact of chaos and its impact on British military strategy are clear. With an increase in the number of friendly-fire related incidents in North Germany, it remains clear that the broader strategic policy was having a negative impact on the normal protocols of military combat. Moreover, with valuable intelligence being passed to British authorities, it highlighted the processing of this information was often slow.

Often, the information that de Blonay passed to the British liberating forces is quoted in general historiography on the *Cap Arcona*.<sup>383</sup> But set within this context of chaos, the relevance of his information is crucial in highlighting the failings of Britain's intelligence sector. While in receipt of key and crucial information there were increasing concerns that Britain did not have sufficient resources to deal with the scope and breadth of information.

### **British sources of intelligence**

There has over recent years been a debate as to whether British forces were in receipt of intelligence that depicted the situation in Neustadt prior to any air attack.<sup>384</sup> Any attempt to analyse potential sources of British intelligence have suffered from a lack of

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<sup>383</sup> See various secondary work Lange, *Dokumentation: Cap Arcona*; Watson, *Nazi Titanic*.

<sup>384</sup> See Roy C. Nesbit, *Failed to Return: Mysteries of the Air 1939-45* (Patrick Stephens Ltd: Wellingborough, 1989); Lange, *Dokumentation: Cap Arcona*.

surviving archival material. But careful analysis of official British records can help us to piece together a picture of events. While the reconstruction is largely based on “official sources”, this information will be cross-referenced with witness testimony and other primary sources. While British records appear incomplete, primary source material from archives in Germany, and other institutions have been used to further support the claims highlighted in the official British report. In the case of the *Cap Arcona*, in the immediate aftermath of the war British forces were initially keen to analyse the key facts that led to the disaster in Neustadt.<sup>385</sup> It should be made clear that the focus of the report was on the wider discussions relating to Neuengamme camp, with a sub-section focusing on the disaster in Neustadt. The report was focused not solely on the disaster in Neustadt, but also on the wider investigations of the operations in Neuengamme camp. Understandably, British investigators were less concerned with the actions of the RAF, and more concerned with potential German war crimes. Within the report, it does highlight that prior to an aerial assault over Neustadt that British intelligence was not as efficient as it had previously been throughout the war.

In terms of the *Cap Arcona*, there were two prime opportunities handed to the British, prior to an aerial attack, to prevent the attack on the vessels in Neustadt. Major Till was a civilian solicitor who joined Number two war crimes investigation team. He was tasked with investigating the disaster at Neustadt bay, as a sub section of his overall report. Quoted in almost every detailed account on the *Cap Arcona*, Major Till noted that:

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<sup>385</sup> See TNA WO 309/1592: *Major Till Report* - “Introduction”, March 1946.

the intelligence officer with 83<sup>rd</sup> Group RAF has admitted on two occasions – first to Lt. H.F. Ansell of this team and on a second occasion to the investigating officer when he was accompanied by Lt. H.F. Ansell – that a message was received on 2<sup>nd</sup> May 1945 that these ships were loaded with KZ prisoners but that, although there was ample time to warn the pilots of the planes who attacked those ships on the following day, by some oversight the message was never passed on.<sup>386</sup>

While Till acknowledges within the report that information had existed prior to 3 May, this shows that there were continual failings in Britain's ability to process adequately and disseminate information. Moreover, Till's wording highlights this breakdown of communication as a mere oversight.<sup>387</sup> The report and its tentative conclusions tend to suggest that British forces were protecting their own reputation. Although certain agencies had been made aware of the impending situation, British investigators fail to reflect on the severity of this miscommunication. Furthermore why does Till – as thorough as the rest of the report is - fail to name the intelligence officer? While we might speculate about the identity of this officer, what is far more intriguing is that Till notes that the intelligence officers' confession was documented. Till's report suggests that the officer had provided a statement during his interview.<sup>388</sup> The problem for historians is that since the release of records from 1972, there appear to be gaps in the records Till used to collate his report. In fact a collection of *reports by RAF* and the statement provided by this intelligence officer have not been located in any archives either in the UK or abroad. The implication that this collection of documents has since been removed from public consultation add weight to the growing collection of conspiracy theories. This would naturally suggest that there was information contained

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<sup>386</sup> TNA WO 309/1592: *Major Till report section B*, p. 14.

<sup>387</sup> TNA WO 309/1592: *Major Till report section B*, p. 14.

<sup>388</sup> TNA WO 309/1592: *Major Till report section B*, pp. 14-15.

in these reports which the British HQ did not wish to be made public. The stance of the British report can clearly be seen in the tone and comments made by Till. He states,

In view of the grievance which was found to be held by some of the survivors of this disaster at the bombing of these ships by Allied planes, it is strongly urged that an official enquiry be held by the responsible authorities into this failure to pass [on] vital information.<sup>389</sup>

The report acknowledged the problems associated with such an attack, and the growing concern of the survivors at the lack of study into the operation. Seventy years have passed since the attack and sinking on the vessel, yet no further report has ever been conducted. The recommendations made by Major Till were ignored. In light of the allegations that intelligence did exist and that British authorities were in possession of key facts, it is difficult to comprehend why the British military or British government failed to follow through on an official and thorough investigation.

The Till report remains, even today, the only British investigation that looked into the *Cap Arcona* tragedy. In highlighting a number of flaws, Till points to a problem with intelligence. Although there was relevant information concerning the fate of the prisoners, this is labelled as an oversight because it was not passed on. But this was much more than an oversight. We can infer that throughout the final months of the war, the processing and dissemination of intelligence was greatly hindered by the speed of the Allied advance. Subsequently the build-up to the attack on 3 May was the culmination of a series of missed opportunities by British forces to halt any attack. More importantly Till further suggests that while British intelligence officers had credible

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<sup>389</sup> TNA WO 309/1592: *Major Till report section B*, p. 15.

intelligence, there was a delay in transmitting this information to those concerned. However, it became increasingly likely that because of the military situation, intelligence officers simply did not know how best to interpret this intelligence. The delay and confusion surrounding this information failed to halt the impending attack. The problems with the wider social breakdown of communication are evident when analysing the dissemination of information. The wider military and political aim to reach Lübeck created an environment that was marked by chaos.

## **Conclusion**

During the war, intelligence formed a core component of British military strategy. With technological developments and high levels of investment, aerial intelligence was used heavily in military operations in the latter half of the war. But during 1945, broader military strategy has been shown to directly impact on Britain's ability to gather, interpret and disseminate information. One clear example of this breakdown was the white bus operation. Throughout the war information passed from the Red Cross agencies to Allied intelligence was considered extremely valuable and often taken seriously. But during the SRC operation in March 1945, this processing of valuable intelligence was considered less important in terms of Britain's broader policy. Allied air attacks appeared more sporadic and less co-ordinated. With aerial policy focusing on armed reconnaissance, this led to a situation that poses significant threat to the Red Cross operation. Numerous attacks on marked convoys suggested that Allied behaviour was less caring. Although there was a suggestion that German forces were taking advantage of Red Cross convoys, and therefore pilots were often unsure as to who was actually in the convoy, the Allied mind set evolved into one that was determined to

attack German forces. In reaction to the knowledge that genuine Red Cross vehicles had been attacked, many of the pilots concluded on the basis that the fog of war was the reason for these attacks. This further highlights that Second TAF was uncertain as to the overall military situation, and less caring of the end result.

## Chapter Six

### The Bombing of the *Cap Arcona*, 3 May 1945

This chapter will attempt to focus on the final short-term factors that ultimately led to the tragic sinking of the *Cap Arcona*. This unique set of circumstances that culminated in the final days of the war can only be understood by interweaving both German and British narratives. In order to understand why the *Cap Arcona* was attacked we must consider two important factors. Firstly, we must understand the political governance of Hamburg in the final days of the war. In doing so, we must consider the administrative functions of the Party apparatus and the factors behind Hamburg surrendering; and why the Gauleiter was determined not to fight. But British aerial strategy played a pivotal role in the surrender of Hamburg, and it is important to understand why aerial policy changed drastically in the closing weeks of the war. Was there a genuine fear of troops fleeing to Norway? Did weather play an important part in the processing of intelligence? In placing the sinking into this context of chaos, not only does this broaden our scope of the wider issues, it also highlights the sinking was a culmination of a series of unfortunate events that were not necessarily inter-linked.

With any historical discussion into this tragic event, the main emphasis of research appears to focus on the topic of responsibility. But in attempting to proportion blame, the historical narrative detracts from other key areas, such as attempting to understand why the prisoners were on the ship. One recent example was written by the American

scholar Robert Watson. In concluding his research into the tragic sinking, Watson summarised that “ultimate responsibility is with the Nazis”.<sup>390</sup> In a similar stance to earlier historical narratives, he followed a similar line of enquiry to that Wilhelm Lange. Lange’s reconstruction set the sinking against a narrowing context. Lange however argued that:

The main responsibility for one of the worst maritime disasters in history is to all appearances on the German side having laid a trap for the Allies. On the other hand, there were serious errors in the transmission of information regarding the situation within the British services.<sup>391</sup>

One weakness in his argument is that this conclusion is based largely on a limited analysis of the available primary source material. Therefore there are claims that are unsubstantiated. For example his suggestion that German forces knew in April 1945 that Second TAF would attack Neustadt Bay in May 1945 was unlikely. It therefore seems highly improbable that the prisoners were intentionally placed on the *Cap Arcona* fully expecting an Allied attack.

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<sup>390</sup> Robert Watson, *Nazi Titanic: The Incredible Untold Story of a Doomed Ship in World War II*, (Da Capo Press: Massachuttus, 2016), p. 252.

<sup>391</sup> Lange, *Dokumentation: Cap Arcona*, p. 236. For original German, “Die hauptverantwortlichkeit für eine der schwersten Schiffskatastrophen der Geschichte liegt allem Anschein nach auf deutscher Seite, die den Alliierten eine hinterhältige Falle gestellt hatte. Andererseits unterliefen den britischen Dienststellen schwerwiegende Fehler bei der Weiterleitung von Informationen des Schweizer Roten Kreuzes über die Existenz und die Gefährdung der Häftlinge auf der KZ-Flötte. So konnte der Tatbeitrag einzelner Personen bis heute nie vor Gericht abschließend geklärt werden”.

## How Hamburg was governed in April and May 1945

As British forces began to surround Hamburg, Allied forces issued the city with an ultimatum, namely that the city would be bombed into submission should Kaufmann not surrender.<sup>392</sup> The threat of renewed and intense aerial bombardment played a significant role in how the Hamburg administration attempted to deal with the final weeks of the war. Moreover, Gauleiter Kaufmann had guided the city through reconstruction after the firestorm raids in 1943, and would be all too keen to avoid a repeat. Also this pressure on the civilian administration arguably further drove the evacuations from Neuengamme camp. Grenville argued that “during the last few weeks of the Nazi Reich the Hamburg administration lived in a world of unreality”.<sup>393</sup> His suggestion that the local party apparatus were attempting to function in a utopian ideal further highlights that the civilian administration, in particular Gauleiter Kaufmann, were able to operate independently of the Reich centre.

Throughout April Allied air crews continued almost unopposed to strike at German industrial targets. However, as Allied commanders felt that the war would soon be over, they wished to speed up Germany’s capitulation. One could argue that the city of Hamburg had become Kaufmann’s life. He was respected amongst the business and industrial leaders as well as those within the party. It is therefore unsurprising that Kaufmann wished to save the city from further aerial bombardment after the horror of

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<sup>392</sup> See TNA AIR 37/366: *No. 83 Group Intelligence Summaries*; TNA AIR 16/1029: *No. 83 Group Intelligence summaries*. See also Appendix Two.

<sup>393</sup> John Grenville, *The Jews and Germans of Hamburg: The Destruction of a Civilization 1790-1945* (Routledge: London, 2011), p. 259.

the firestorm raids in July 1943. In his memoir's armaments minister Albert Speer noted:

The Commandant of the city had received order's to fight for Hamburg, he told me. But the British had issued an ultimatum that if Hamburg were not surrendered; they would order the heaviest bombing the city had ever received.<sup>394</sup>

The impact of this ultimatum can be seen as two-fold. Firstly many politicians and local industrialists could recall the devastation inflicted in the 1943 fire storm raids.<sup>395</sup> This memory alone would ensure that some industrialists would wish to avoid a complete destruction of their business assets. Secondly, Kaufmann played an active and decisive role in restoring balance to the city in the aftermath of the bombing. His drive to avoid a repeat action would strike at the very core of his determination to prevent a further bombardment.

During a meeting between Gauleiter and armaments minister, Speer noted that "Kaufmann told me, that if necessary he would mobilize the masses to active resistance against the defenders of the city".<sup>396</sup> The general feeling was that a lack of credence was now being given to the promises of the Nazi concept of *Volksgemeinschaft* and in turn

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<sup>394</sup> Albert Speer, *Inside the Third Reich: The Classic Account of Nazi Germany by Hitler's Armaments Minister* (W&N: London, 2009), p. 658. See also TNA AIR 37/366: No. 83 Group Intelligence Summaries; TNA AIR 16/1029: No. 83 Group Intelligence summaries.

<sup>395</sup> For a quick summary see Martin Middlebrook, *The Battle of Hamburg: The Firestorm Raid* (Cassell Military Paperbacks: London, 2000).

<sup>396</sup> Speer, *Inside the Third Reich*, p. 658.

this led to open criticism of NSDAP policies.<sup>397</sup> Although Kaufmann was arguably a staunch Nazi, after a meeting with Hitler in early April, he concluded that “his leader had now lost all touch with reality”.<sup>398</sup> This breakdown of trust, as well as defiance against the wishes of Hitler demonstrated decisively that central government was now almost non-existent. In economic terms, Kaufmann largely directed business and industry growth within the city. By 1945 this influence over political, social and economic control evolved into local governance as central command continued to falter.

One aspect that requires a brief discussion was how Kaufmann evolved the planning process to meet the pressure he faced. Although one important factor for the surrender relates heavily to industrial pressure, Kaufmann was further driven by the thought of post-war Hamburg. In outlining his case for surrender, Kaufmann felt that he had to consider the impact on post-war industry, but after the war Germany would need to be fed. This meant that any severe attack on Hamburg’s dock installations would dramatically hinder the city’s ability to feed its population.<sup>399</sup> As Kaufmann came under intense pressure to save the city from aerial bombardment it became paramount to surrender the city without any indication of businesses using forced labour within their industries. Furthermore should prison labour be liberated within the boundaries of Hamburg, the stark harsh conditions these prisoners were in would be all too clear. During a meeting in the Hamburg Chamber of Commerce Kaufmann met with local business leaders. The conclusion of this meeting led to Kaufmann issuing Bassewitz-

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<sup>397</sup> Marc Buggeln, *Slave Labour in Nazi Concentration Camp*, (OUP: London, 2014), p. 265.

<sup>398</sup> Middlebrook, *The Battle for Hamburg*, p. 364.

<sup>399</sup> TNA AIR 37/366: No. 83 Group Intelligence summary no.318.

Behr with clear instructions to evacuate the camp at Neuengamme.<sup>400</sup> By late April British forces had begun an assault on the Harburg area.



Map One: Outline of Harburg Area

As the outer limits became under intense fighting, Kaufmann remained within the city boundaries determined to ward off any attempt at large-scale resistance. Furthermore Kaufmann surrounded “himself at all times with a bodyguard of armed students”.<sup>401</sup> This further highlighted the rather fanatical and fragile structure of the political system in April 1945. The younger generation widely prepared to fight on, while the older, war wary generate was longing for surrender.

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<sup>400</sup> See for instance TNA WO 309/408: *Deposition of Karl Otto Kaufmann*; Manfred Asendorf, “Karl Kaufmann und Hamburgs langer eg zur Kapitulation” in Detlef Garbe (ed.) *Kriegsende und Befreiung: Beiträge zur Geschichte der nationalsozialistischen Verfolgung in Norddeutschland* (Ed.Temmen: Bremen, 1995), pp. 12-23.

<sup>401</sup> Middlebrook, *The Battle of Hamburg*, p. 364. See also Keith Lowe, *Inferno: The Devastation of Hamburg 1943* (Viking: London, 2007).

Communication remained an important factor in the fate of the city. By this late stage of the campaign, direct, succinct communication from the Reich Chancellery was non-existent. In turn any orders from the Reich Chancellery were almost ignored. In a deposition sworn before Major Lewinski, Bassewitz-Behr later claimed that

At the risk of death I participated in discussions about not defending Hamburg. These discussions some of which were in my house, were in secret between the Gauleiter Kaufmann and the military authorities.<sup>402</sup>

This series of secret meetings further demonstrate the social breakdown of order within the remaining territories of Nazi Germany. Although Kaufmann had made his intentions clear, the continued need to meet in secret shows that not all groups within Hamburg agreed on the direction the city should take. Himmler's wishes that Hamburg should fight on had only briefly been considered by Kaufmann. Moreover with a series of political appointments gained by Kaufmann, there was limited if any possibility that the SS could stage some form of challenge to his demands.<sup>403</sup>

On 3 May British forces accepted the surrender of Hamburg. This however did not halt any planned air strikes in the surrounding area, nor did it prevent British ground troops pressing eastwards towards Wismar. The ability of German commanders to ward off

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<sup>402</sup> TNA WO 309/408: *Deposition on oath of Graf Bassewitz-Behr*, p. 4.

<sup>403</sup> On Nazi terror changes see, Eric A. Johnson, *Nazi Terror: The Gestapo, Jews and Ordinary Germans* (Basic Books: New York, 2000); Nikolaus Wachsmann, *KL: A history of the Nazi Concentration Camps* (Little Brown: London, 2015); Frank McDonough, *The Gestapo: The Myth and Reality of Hitler's Secret Police* (Coronet: London, 2015); Tim Mason, *Social Policy in the Third Reich: The Working Class and the National Community* (Berg Publishers: Oxford, 1993).

capitulation had rested solely on the strength and loyalty of local commanders.<sup>404</sup> In reality the mounting of any long term sustainable defence rested on the loyalty and strength of the local fighting units. Jones argued that as Allied troops entered Hamburg they witnessed “Wehrmacht troops – fully armed – yet looking scared and wanting to surrender’ began to submit to the West.<sup>405</sup> But Allied forces were all too aware that SS and Wehrmacht troops were still fleeing towards the Baltic coast and the remaining ports. As a result of a growing trend in port activity, Allied command turned their attention away from land-based assaults and increased attacks against shipping.

## **Second Tactical Air Force Operations May 1945**

While research debated the callous and needless attacks on Dresden and the stance of Bomber Harris, operations by Second TAF, Coastal Command and Fighter Command have largely remained forgotten. This section will now analyse the actions of Second TAF during the beginning of May 1945. It will seek to argue that previous scholarship has largely failed to address crucial questions regarding the actions of this group.<sup>406</sup> For instance many commentators suggest poor weather hindered and suspended reconnaissance flights. However this section will explore wide-ranging source material and demonstrate this was not the case. Second TAF operations in the previous months

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<sup>404</sup> See Blatman, *Death Marches*, pp. 126-154.

<sup>405</sup> Michael Jones, *After Hitler: The Last Days of the Second World War in Europe* (John Murray: London, 2015), p. 71.

<sup>406</sup> See various *Cap Arcona* accounts, Lange, *Dokumentation: Cap Arcona*; Nesbit, *Failed to Return*; Christian Lotz, “Der Untergang des Häftlingsschiffes *Cap Arcona* am 3. Mai 1945: Ein Überblick über Ereignis, Erinnerungskulturen und Forschungskontroversen” in Bill Niven (ed.) *Die Wilhelm Gustloff: Geschichte und Erinnerung eines Untergangs* (Mitteldeutscher Verlag GmbH: Halle, 2011), pp. 120-142.

were crucial for the support of ground forces. On the outbreak of war RAF wings had been hesitant about the use of photographic reconnaissance as a further option to gather credible intelligence. But by 1945, Command HQ had come to understand the benefits of the use of photographic intelligence.<sup>407</sup> In turn the wider policy of using this type of intelligence gathering led to a dramatic increase in the number of planes equipped for photo reconnaissance. Babington-Smith suggested that,

Both the armies and the Tactical Air Forces that fought their way across Europe were equipped for photographic reconnaissance on a prodigious scale. Each day that weather permitted, these ‘private fleets’ of aircraft sped back and forth taking photographs.<sup>408</sup>

The use of photographic reconnaissance, particularly in the final weeks of the war, is an important short-term factor. While there was a dramatic increase in the reliance of this type of intelligence, the final weeks of the war witness a slow-down in the use and processing of this type of intelligence. While different squadrons were able to utilise photographic reconnaissance, its use and implementation in the final weeks was left to the individual Wings. Research into the immediate build-up to the sinking of the *Cap Arcona* has largely concluded that air operations between 1 May and 4 May were severely hindered by poor weather.<sup>409</sup> As squadrons had relocated to airfields closer to

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<sup>407</sup> See Michael Howard, *Strategic Deception in the Second World War* (Pimlico: London, 1992); Frank H.Hinsley, *British Intelligence in the Second World War, vol.1-5* (Stationary Office Books: London, 1979); Taylor Downing, *Spies in the Sky: The Secret Battle for Aerial Intelligence during World War II* (Abacus: London, 2012).

<sup>408</sup> Constance Babington-Smith, *Evidence in Camera: The Story of Photographic Intelligence in World War II* (The History Press: London, 2004), p. 247.

<sup>409</sup> See various, Wilhelm Lange, “Neueste Erkenntnisse zur Bombardierung der KZ Schiffe in der Neustädter Bucht am 3. Mai 1945: Vorgeschichte, Verlauf und Verantwortlichkeiten“ in Detlef Garbe (ed.), *Häftlinge zwischen Vernichtung und Befreiung: Die Auflösung des KZ Neuengamme und seiner Außenlager durch die SS im Frühjahr 1945* (Bremen: 2005), pp. 217-

the fighting front, they were increasingly hindered by fog and mist rolling in from the North Sea. But what was the operational effectiveness of Second TAF? Second TAF was formed through the combination of a number of RAF groups. 83 Group was heavily involved in attacking the *Cap Arcona* on 3 May. A closer examination of intelligence summaries for early May suggests that the weather was not a problem for some squadron groups.

Operating from airfields near Hüstadt (Bochum), Ahlhorn B111 and Plantlünne B 103, the intelligence report stated that “apart from sweeps over airfields on 1 May, no. 83 group made a big attack on transport escaping from the Russian front, and 343 vehicles were claimed to have been destroyed and 594 damaged”.<sup>410</sup> Intelligence for such an attack was the product of an aerial survey which provided an overview of the military strength and capacity prior to an attack being ordered. Webster and Frankland argued that,

All strategy depends on whether it is operationally possible. If it is seen that the operations in use are not effective for their purpose the decision has to be made whether to proceed with the strategy and find new and more successful operational methods or change the strategy to conform to what is operationally possible.<sup>411</sup>

In terms of aerial policy it still remained unclear as to who ultimately made the decision as to the operational effectiveness of a chosen strategy. As British forces approached the final days of conflict, the overall level of enemy resistance became sporadic and

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232; Stefan Ineichen, *Cap Arcona 1927-1945* (Limmat Verlag: Zurich, 2015); Günther Schwarberg, *Angriffsziel Cap Arcona* (Steidl: Göttingen, 1998).

<sup>410</sup> TNA AIR 41/68: *Second T.A.F. Daily Log Sheet No. 3177*, p. 243.

<sup>411</sup> Noble Frankland and Charles Webster, *Strategic Air Offensive against Germany 1939-1945*, Vol. 3 Victory (Naval & Military Press Ltd: Uckfield, 2006), p. 296.

therefore it became difficult to plan against an ever-evolving strategy. Because squadrons were located in different areas of North Germany, it was increasingly difficult to find a general overview of how the weather hindered operations. For those squadrons located further inland, operations weren't hampered as much as those closer to the coastal areas. Therefore what will follow is a short survey of the various squadrons actively engaged on 3 May.

There were instances when squadrons were not grounded because of poor weather. Squadron leader Martin Rumbolds of no. 263 was based at an airfield near Ahlhorn B.111. This was directly to the east of Hüstadt where some aerial flights were still able to engage the enemy. Writing in his log book, Rumbolds notes

the weather continues too poor for operations and most of the day is spent in making ourselves comfortable in the new quarters. News comes through that Hitler is dead resulting in such celebration.<sup>412</sup>

Although 263 squadron were not engaged in aerial activity on 1 May, the weather was not the only factor that hindered the squadrons operations. It remains clear in Rumbolds statement that his squadron had only recently re-located to Ahlhorn and therefore provisions and operational functionality were still on-going. Furthermore squadrons were re-located more frequently in the hope that aerial support would be more constant.

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<sup>412</sup> TNA AIR 27/1548/76: *No.263 Squadron Operational Record Book, J.S.Rumbolds*, 1 May 1945. See also See TNA AIR 27/1169/53: *197 Squadron Operations Record Book*, May 1945; TNA AIR 27/1170/54: *Operations of 198 Squadron*, May 1945. Squadron Leader N. Durrant DFC reports that the weather remained bad and thus the squadron was unable to undertake any flying. To occupy their time, the pilots went off to the officer's shop.

On 1 May no. 184 Squadron was led by Squadron Leader W Smith DFC, who had commanded since November 1944. The squadron had the honour of being the first RAF squadron to be based operationally on German soil. The typhoons, which now formed the basis of the squadron, had been re-fitted to accommodate 60lb rockets. This type of rocket, it must be noted, was not specifically designed to target shipping, or to be strategically used against shipping. Its main use was for attacks against ground installations and ground targets such as rail interdictions, motor transports and armed vehicles. This sudden change highlights the impact of short-term operational factors on Second TAF ability to operate efficiently. The change of ammunition, we can surmise, indicates that the speed of the advance led to shortages of basic provisions. The use of this type of ammunition had not been tested, nor designed for use on shipping. Writing in his log on the evening of 1 May, Smith noted that:

[The] weather was clamped at first light and remained so until lunchtime. The C.C. led the first show and attacked the village of *Tramm* and *Wellersen*. These were suspected gun positions holding up our forward troops. Fires were started and the army enjoyed our efforts immensely... Claims were 18 destroyed and 30 damaged for M.T.<sup>413</sup>

Smith's report demonstrates that at the first possible chance of any aerial action his squadron was airborne.

In the final days of the war, Second TAF became increasingly responsible for monitoring the operational activity of the ports of Lübeck, Kiel and Travemünde. By this stage planned aerial operations were largely subjected to the over-riding military requirements. Intelligence summaries compiled from aerial reconnaissance by various

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<sup>413</sup> TNA AIR 27/1138: *No. 184 Squadron operations records*, 1 May 1945.

groups attached to Second TAF, indicated quite strongly that there was a dramatic increase in port activity. As all remaining German tonnage was being utilised in transporting refugees, civilians and troops from the East to relative safety in the West.<sup>414</sup> A summary report from Second TAF revealed that:

ships of all kinds were pressed into service by the enemy and large convoys began to assemble in the expansive bays of Lübeck and Kiel. It appeared that they were preparing to make a dash to Norway from where perhaps they might continue the struggle.<sup>415</sup>

Throughout any discussion on the *Cap Arcona*, justification for a British aerial attack on Neustadt was the result of this rumour that these ships were preparing to flee to Norway. Thomas argued that an assumption was made by RAF HQ that the vessels were transporting “German leaders and SS troops’ intent on carrying on the war”.<sup>416</sup> Aerial strikes in the final days of the war were largely guided by this principle. But what discussions have failed to take into account was that the number of ports still in German control was diminishing. It is therefore a reasonable assumption that as the military campaign was nearing the end, Germany would secure their remaining shipping tonnage either in home ports, or neutral ports. This would lead to a dramatic rise in the number of vessels entering, or docked in the Northern ports.

The monitoring of shipping and port activity had throughout the war been a core component of the reconnaissance wing. Lange argued that “aerial reconnaissance results

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<sup>414</sup> TNA WO 309/408: *Deposition of Konter-Admiral Engelhardt*, 12 March 1947.

<sup>415</sup> TNA AIR 41/68: *Second TAF Daily Log sheets No. 3181-3186*, p. 243.

<sup>416</sup> Thomas, *Typhoon Wings*, p. 86; See also TNA AIR 24/1500: *Air Staff Signals from HQ Unit Admin*, 1-3 May 1945.

for the RAF remained incomplete due to bad weather by the end of April and into the beginning of May”.<sup>417</sup> This was not the case. Throughout April the intelligence section of the RAF invested significant resources to monitoring port movements in Northern Germany. Interpretation report no. 7461 was produced on 10 April 1945. Largely focusing on what the British perceived to be Eastern Germany, ports included Travemünde, Lübeck and Kiel. In Lübeck, for instance the summary of shipping activity is well documented. The report stated:

There has been an increase in naval shipping, while the number of U-boats probably remains approximately the same as on 23.3.45. There have been some movements and turnover in merchant shipping since last full cover.<sup>418</sup>

By April 1945 it became increasingly common for German shipping to be constantly moving between the remaining ports of operation. This was largely due to the evacuations from East Prussia. It was not merely a case of a quick fly-by, but each port was carefully surveyed and a careful note of the various categories of shipping was noted. For instance in Lübeck the report notes the following:

There has been considerable activity both amongst the naval and merchant shipping. All U-Boats (except 3) and other naval craft have departed; there has been a marked change round in other shipping...At Lübeck the only U-boat is

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<sup>417</sup> See Lange, *Dokumentation: Cap Arcona*, p. 228. For original German “Die Luftaufklärungsergebnisse der RAF blieben zudem aufgrund einer Schlechtwetterlage um den Zeitraum Ende April, Anfang Mai unvollkommen. Trotzdem konnten Fakten ermittelt werden, die als Grundlage für die Einsatzplanung vom 1. Bis 4 Mai 1945 dienen”.

<sup>418</sup> TNA AIR 29/403: *Allied Central Interpretation Unit (CIU), Interpretation Report no. 7461*, pp. 3-4.

the 150' inactive one lying at her usual berth in the Vorwerk Basin. This is a decrease of 6 x 250' P.F and 1 x 500 tons at Flenderwerke since 14.4.45.<sup>419</sup>

The report is quite clear. Allied air crews had noted that much of the naval craft had since departed Lübeck. The accuracy of such reports testifies to the resources given to track movement within Axis ports. It was not simply a case that once a vessel left a port of operation it was forgotten. Allied reconnaissance planes were able to track the movements of various classes of ships. In a shipping summary dated 4 May 1945 it concluded:

<b>Shipping Summary (Undamaged)</b>	<b>Amount/ Type</b>
<b>Naval</b>	Nil
<b>U-Boats</b>	1 x 500' U-boat (Inactive)
<b>Non-Naval</b>	M/V 345' M.366 M/V 350' P.FP.C M/V 300' Standard HANSA type 7 M/Vs 250/300' 3 M/Vs 200/250' 1 Sailing vessel 200/250' 1 Coaster 1 Sailing Vessel 200/250' 1 hulk 200 4 Coasters 150/200 4 Floating cranes 2 armed tugs Barges, small craft

Table One: Shipping Summary of Undamaged vessels, Lübeck Bay, 4 May 1945<sup>420</sup>

<sup>419</sup> TNA AIR 29/409: *Allied Central Interpretation Unit (CIU), Interpretation Report no.7554*, pp. 7-9.

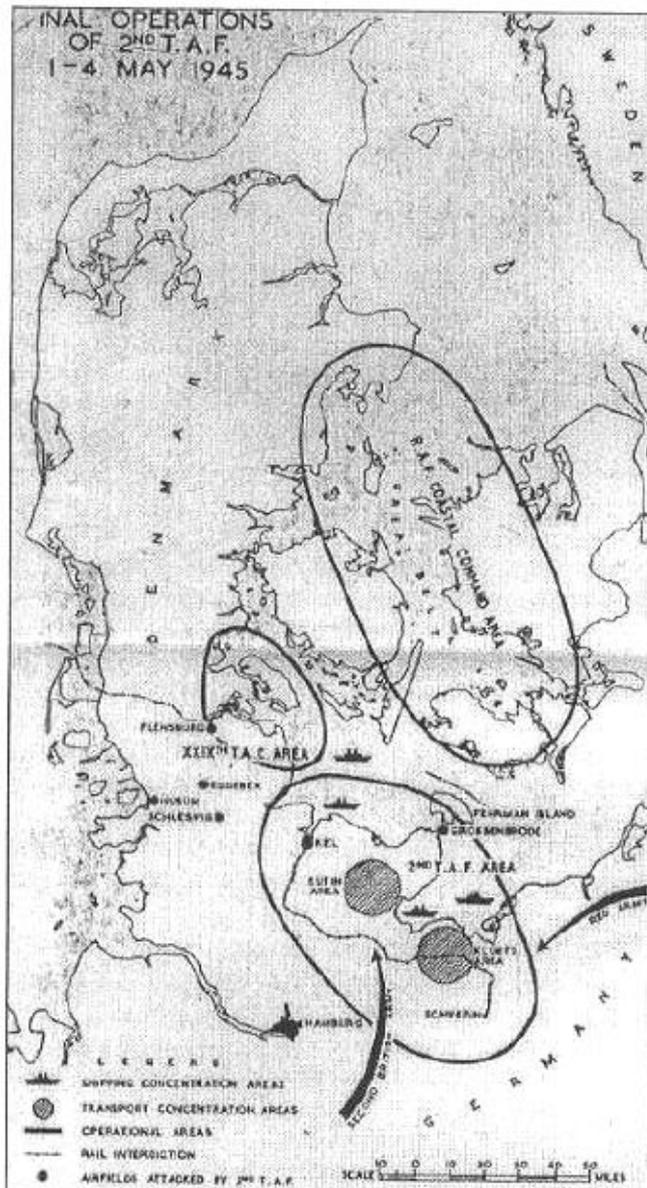
<sup>420</sup> See TNA AIR 29/409: *Allied Central Interpretation Unit*, pp. 7-8

Table One shows the extent to which the Allied crews documented the different types of shipping. The table summarises a number of undamaged vessels that had been observed up to 4 May. The table further highlights that due care and attention had been taken to document clearly the type and class of vessel. After the attack on 3 May it shows that the bulk of remaining vessels were non naval, and therefore the attack had targeted specific naval vessels. The second crucial point regarding the report is that the Central Interpretation Unit (CIU) regularly undertook in-depth surveys of the certain ports. There is no mention at any point of the weather causing problems for the surveys. In fact future reports compiled by the CIU seem to provide a general trend that German Naval forces were far from being disorganised.

In fact operations and port movements continued. A report on Lübeck, no. 7526, 25 April 1945 suggested that “one M/V 250’ approx. is a new arrival alongside the small M/V on north bank, but apart from this there has been no change in shipping present since the last cover of this section”.<sup>421</sup> While the evidence presented has focused on Lübeck, this remains important for understanding British logic to focus their attention towards shipping in the early days of May.

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<sup>421</sup> TNA AIR 29/408: *Interpretation report, no. 7526.*



Map Two: Final Air Operations 1-4 May 1945.<sup>422</sup>

The operational chart shows the breakdown of working areas for each section of the RAF. Coastal Command was responsible for the area located towards Norway and the Flensburg channel. In its weekly resume presented to Churchill's war cabinet, it stated that "few mines have been swept".<sup>423</sup> This meant that many crucial and important

<sup>422</sup> TNA AIR 41/68: *Map of Final Air Operations*, 1-4 May 1945.

<sup>423</sup> TNA CAB 66/65/61: *Weekly Resumé of the Naval, Military and Air Situation (no.298)*, 10-17 May 1945, p. 5.

shipping routes remained too treacherous to risk. A significant problem was that “further out to sea Bomber Command had laid mines in the Kattegat and Oslo Fjord a week before the end of April”.<sup>424</sup> In terms of a potential evacuation to Norway, heavy mining by British forces should have lessened the fear that this was possible. Nonetheless, Second TAF still felt that an evacuation to Norway was feasible.

Air operations became more frequent in the final days of the war. They remained heavily guided by a series of operational day orders. These give a useful insight into the Allies’ stance on deciding the focus of their air operations. Up to the end of April, these orders were designed to support the military drive northwards. In doing so, much of their target base was military installations and vehicles. For instance, order 69 stated,

No. 83 Group are to note that operations South and East of the line Hamburg – exclusive of Bremen – along the coast to Poel Island are to be confined to defensive fighter patrols and immediate support.<sup>425</sup>

This order was issued by Second TAF to all groups within its domain. The order remained inclusive of operations up to, and including 2 May. The report made clear that any air engagement would be confined to either defensive or immediate ground support roles. More importantly it did not sanction any random attacks or missions that simply stumbled on to any enemy position.

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<sup>424</sup> TNA AIR 41/68: *Second TAF Daily Log sheets No. 3181-3186*, pp. 243-44.

<sup>425</sup> TNA AIR 24/1518: *Message from Main HQ Second Tactical Air Force*, 2 May 1945.

By this stage of the conflict, British forces continued to press hard to bring about an end to the conflict. But in doing so clear guidance and communication became ad hoc and infrequent. This meant that up-to-date intelligence was not necessarily sourced prior to a military encounter. This led to a situation whereby a number of operational squadrons were airborne without the latest series of day orders. The impact of pressing hard to the Baltic coast meant that some communications went unanswered. Furthermore Second TAF HQ believed quite strongly that orders could, and were being intercepted by German intelligence systems. In response to this threat, orders were heavily encrypted and thus it took longer to decrypt and interpret the information.<sup>426</sup> As aerial policy turned away from land-based targets, this was not simply because of a misguided fear that SS troops were fleeing to Norway, but because German ports were seen as a hive of activity. Up to, and including 2 May, aerial orders noted that operations were targeting anything which challenged the British advance.

On the evening of 2 May, there was an important change of direction in an amendment issued that evening by the duty wing commander. This informed squadrons to cease attacks on trains and railway trucks.<sup>427</sup> In attempting to understand the purpose of Allied aerial policy in the final week of the war, the strategic move away from land-based targets, as well as transportation system's would suggest that Allied forces were making adequate preparations to run the postwar German economy. Once German forces surrendered, the big question was how would society still be able to function? The rail

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<sup>426</sup> See for example S.P.Geertsema, *De Ramp in de Lübecker Bocht: Nederlanders op het einde van Neuengamme* (Boom: Meppel, 2011), Ch. 9.

<sup>427</sup> See Geertsema, *De Ramp in de Lübecker Bocht: Nederlanders op het einde van Neuengamme*, pp. 179-181.

infrastructure was paramount to the movement of Allied supplies, food supplies and much quicker than relying on road transport. In the course of 2 May and into 3 May day orders were amended twice.

Photographic reconnaissance had indicated “large-scale enemy shipping movement away from Schleswig-Holstein ports”, though it was less precise as to the nature of this shipping”.<sup>428</sup> The report set out the intention to “destroy enemy transportation on land and sea, and harass the enemy”.<sup>429</sup> The initial orders were issued by Duty Wing Commander Christmas, but subsequently amended in line with intelligence. In this example, evidence suggested that Second TAFs’ ability to process intelligence in an efficient time frame was still possible. Furthermore the chain of information and its dissemination also remain clear. But by 3 May, this attention to detail and ability to distribute relevant information fails.

The photographic aerial survey suggested that “it was apparent that a large-scale evacuation was being attempted”,<sup>430</sup> Though Coningham noted that “the enemy appeared to be silently waiting for the end”.<sup>431</sup> This change of tactical decision came not from Second TAF but from the Allied Naval Commander of the Expeditionary Force

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<sup>428</sup> TNA AIR 24/1518: *Message from Main HQ Second Tactical Air Force Order no.72*, 3 May 1945.

<sup>429</sup> TNA AIR 24/1518: *Order no. 72*, 3 May 1945.

<sup>430</sup> See TNA AIR 24/1499: *Summary of Events 3 May 1945*.

<sup>431</sup> See TNA AIR 37/876: *Second TAF Report by Air Marshal Sir Arthur Coningham on Operations*, 3 May 1945.

(ANCXF).<sup>432</sup> Although permission had been obtained for a large-scale attack, the report made two things clear. Firstly Red Cross vessels operating in the area were to not to be attacked and could be easily identified as the ships would be illuminated.<sup>433</sup> More importantly only ships seen departing away from the ports should be attacked.<sup>434</sup> Thus, this raises further doubt as to why stationary ships in Neustadt Bay were attacked on 3 May.

Day order 71 had made it clear that only vessels that were seen travelling away from a port or harbour should be seen as a potential target.<sup>435</sup> This order therefore almost guaranteed protection to those ships that were docked in the remaining German ports. Furthermore the order stated that clear should also be taken as Red Cross vessels were docked close by or in amongst German tonnage. The second day order (order72) removed this immunity from air attack for those vessels that were at harbour. The ships that were docked in Neustadt, including the *Cap Arcona* were therefore seen as a viable military target. Moreover the speed at which the order had been amended highlighted that Allied forces felt that German forces would attempt to flee to Norway.

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<sup>432</sup> TNA AIR 24/1499: *Summary of Events 3 May 1945*.

<sup>433</sup> TNA AIR 24/1518: *Order no. 72*, 3 May 1945.

<sup>434</sup> TNA AIR 24/1518: *Order no. 71*, 3 May 1945.

<sup>435</sup> See Geertsema, *De Ramp in de Lübecker Bucht*, pp. 179-181.

## British Attack, 3 May 1945

British air operations reached a climax on 3 May as German forces in the West had all but surrendered.<sup>436</sup> With the surrender of Hamburg, the long term policy of reaching the Baltic coast was almost complete. The immediate priority for the Allies was to decipher why German forces had gathered a significant number of ships in the Northern ports. Lange noted that on 2 May “British aerial reconnaissance in the late afternoon had seen two outgoing military convoys with at least six destroyers, some submarines, escort boats and large troop transports leaving Neustadt in Holstein”.<sup>437</sup> In his analysis Lange suggests that the British attack was based on this piece of reconnaissance gathered the previous day. However the on-going military situation, combined with a breakdown of communication, meant that a judgment call was made based on this single piece of intelligence. In reconstructing key elements of the attack, this section will argue that instead of an isolated attack, the bombing of the *Cap Arcona* was part of a much wider, systematic attack on German shipping.

In order to understand the subsequent attack on the *Cap Arcona*, it is necessary to reconstruct part of the events on the morning of 3 May. This will demonstrate that the processing of valuable intelligence was slow, and that aircrews were all too keen to

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<sup>436</sup> For the military situation see Ian Kershaw, *The End* (Allen Lane: London, 2011).

<sup>437</sup> Lange, *Dokumentation: Cap Arcona*, p. 233. For original German, “Gleichfalls am 2. Mai 1945 entdeckte die britische Luftaufklärung am späten Nachmittag zwei von Neustadt in Holstein abgehende militärische Geleitzüge mit mindestens sechs Zerstörern, einigen Unterseebooten, Begleitbooten und großen Truppentransportern, von denen einer beschossen werden konnte”.

attack Nazi Germany one last time. As the conflict reached its penultimate climax, Coningham notes in this report that,

during this week wintry weather seriously interfered with air operations. Showers of sleet and rain blowing from the North Sea kept No. 84 Group grounded for two days. No 83 Group, with its bases further inland, was more fortunate but operations were often restricted by poor visibility.<sup>438</sup>

Coningham therefore notes that the weather only hindered a small number of squadron locations. The CIU and other squadrons attached to Second TAF were still able to operate throughout April and the early May. Furthermore, operations for 83 Group maintained a minimal presence in the skies over North-West Germany. But when the weather did final break on 3 May, air operations proceeded at a fast pace. The stage was set, and air intelligence records indicate that:

no quarter was given or asked for in the air today – it would indeed have been difficult to arrange – and operations proceeded at full blast. Attacks on motor transport in the Schleswig area began soon after 0600 hours and continued all day, but in mid-morning all aircraft carrying bombs or R.P. were diverted to deal solely with the large concentrations of shipping making their way from Lübeck, Kiel and Schleswig in the general direction of Norway.<sup>439</sup>

The intelligence summary notes clearly that air operations were to proceed unhindered against all sea-based transportation in the Schleswig area. With almost no resistance in the air, the skies over Germany provided the opportunity to continually attack ships harboured in North Germany. One short-term factor that did impact on air operations in May was the sudden down-grading of port surveys. Previously, photographic

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<sup>438</sup> TNA AIR 41/68: *Second TAF Operations Record Book, May 1945*, p. 131.

<sup>439</sup> TNA AIR 16/1029: *No 83 Group intelligence Summary No.318 up to 2359 hours 3<sup>rd</sup> May*, p. 1.

reconnaissance had been used extensively to document and track ships moving between ports, or for the period they had been docked. By early May, this requirement had been significantly downgraded, and therefore the threat to shipping dramatically increased as intelligence was not as detailed. A reconnaissance brief indicated that,

By May 2 or 3, 1945, apart from the need to keep track of German naval movements, there was very little requirement for information about traffic movements in the ports. Indeed, the acquisition of Intelligence about enemy merchant shipping was accomplished faster by oral reports from pilots who were then shuttling between their bases and the targets in the various harbours.<sup>440</sup>

The impact of downgrading certain types of intelligence had serious implications for the vessels in Neustadt. However the use of oral reports via the pilots was not as reliable as it might have seemed. While the more experienced pilots such as Johnny Baldwin or Derek Stevenson might have had the knowledge to indicate what they believe would be the enemy's intentions, the majority of pilots would report simply what they witnessed.

On 1 May 83 Group undertook around 13 successful reconnaissance operations. The group reported that "the general trend of activity was defensive over roads and airfields with some attempt at offensive action against the Elbe bridges and bridgehead".<sup>441</sup>

There was no mention of any detailed information regarding the growing situation of Axis port movements or attempts by the Germans to flee to Norway. However the intelligence summaries provide a different picture:

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<sup>440</sup> CAMN: *Photographic Reconnaissance (PR) Western Baltic*. See also Richard Overy, *The Air War 1939-1945* (Potomac Books inc: Washington, 2005), pp. 185-196.

<sup>441</sup> TNA AIR 25/698: *Operation Records for 83<sup>rd</sup> Group RAF*, May 1945.

On the water, the opinions of the various ships' captains seemed divided between forcing on, as they did yesterday, on a Northerly course, and seeking the shelter provided by neutrality, shore-based batteries, and the limited range of the Group's aircraft. Most of the serviceable shipping had already left Kiel, but seven destroyers were sighted at the mouth of the Elbe...and several U-boats in the canals that connect Schleswig with the sea.<sup>442</sup>

The record indicates that German shipping was mainly headed on a northerly course.

One possible destination could have been Norway, although the likelihood of navigating the Flensburg Chanel after heavy mining was almost impossible.

The first squadron to begin the assault on shipping in Neustadt bay was No.263 squadron under the command of Martin Rumbolds. Their instructions were to attack a large gathering of shipping in the Bay of Neustadt. Air records indicated that

the weather is still poor but eight aircraft take off at 1135 hours to attack shipping in Lübeck Bay. The operation was abortive due to weather.<sup>443</sup>

Their target was the recently converted hospital ship, the *Deutschland*. From their base in Ahlhorn, Rumbolds had spent part of the morning briefing his men. Schwarberg suggested in his account that 263 Squadron had "already received a confidential report that the Nazi leaders wanted to set off to Norway".<sup>444</sup> In fact there was no conclusive suggestion either way that these ships were or were not intending to flee to Norway and

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<sup>442</sup> TNA AIR 16/1029: *No.83 Group Intelligence Summaries no.192-320*, Up to 4 May 1945.

<sup>443</sup> TNA AIR 27/1548/76: *No 263 Squadron Operations Records*, 3 May 1945.

<sup>444</sup> Günther Schwarberg, *Angriffsziel Cap Arcona* (Steidl: Göttingen, 1998), p. 13. For original German, "Rumbold erinnert sich: Wir hatten schon Tage vorher einen Geheimbericht erhalten, daß die Nazi-Führer sich nach Norwegen absetzen wollen".

therefore this remained nothing more than a rumour. Although the pilot's viewpoint was rather obscured and limited, there still remains doubt as to why the pilots reported an observation that neither vessel had steam up nor therefore the vessels were not in a position to move. It later emerged that one pilot, Lawrence Stark 609 wing, reported to Command HQ that

I attacked a small motor vessel sailing out of Lübeck that morning and then observed three large ships at anchor in the Bay. They did not have steam up, so as the war was ending and there was a shipping shortage, I suggested to intelligence that they should be left alone.<sup>445</sup>

As the planes returned to refuel information was passed on to the squadron command. Prior to any future attack, pilots needed to be briefed on what could be expected during the operation. There appeared on this occasion to be little if any communication which had been passed to continually update the pilots who were undertaking operations.

<b>263 Squadron</b>	<b>Take Off</b>	<b>Landing</b>
Sqn Ldr M.T.Rumbold	11:35	12:55
Flight Lieutenant E.A.Tennant	11:35	12:55
F.O. M.S.M Hamilton	11:35	12:55
F.O A Proctor	11:35	12:55
F.O J.J. Morgan	11:35	12:55
W.O. L Saunders	11:35	12:55
W.O L. J. Miller	11:35	12:55
W.O D. Coles	11:35	12:55

Table Two: List of pilots from No.263 Squadron who underwent the first attack in Neustadt Bay

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<sup>445</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, "British Pilot saw Prison ship survivors shot", 13 March 1983, p. 2.

The first attack on the *Deutschland* took place between 1202 and 1208 hours.

Intelligence considered the *Deutschland* a viable target and as weather conditions permitted operations to proceed, the pilots used rocket projectiles (R.P.) to form the basis of their attack.<sup>446</sup> Owing to crucial ammunition shortages the Typhoons were only fitted with four R.P.s. Two out of the four rockets failed to explode and the crew of the ship were able to put these overboard, while the remaining two caused some damage internally.<sup>447</sup>

A subsequent damage report stated that,

the superstructure was also damaged by cannon fire. No leaking was caused by these four hits. The fires, which were extinguished with water and carbon dioxide, were confined to wooden panels, furnishing and other inflammable material in the accommodation decks.<sup>448</sup>

As a direct result of the air strike, Captain Steincke began to implement measures to ensure the safe evacuation of the *Deutschland*. The few nurses and naval surgeons who were aboard abandoned ship.<sup>449</sup> Prior to the attack an order had been received by

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<sup>446</sup> In his research Wilhelm Lange stated that on the evening of 2 May ‘another ship heavily protected by warships was sighted off the coast of the island of Fehmarn. Because it was not possible to immediately attack the convoys, the British decided to postpone any operation in the Baltic until the next day’. See Wilhelm Lange, *Cap Arcona: Summary of the Cap Arcona disaster in the bay of Neustadt on 3 May 1945*, (Stadt Neustadt in Holstein, 1996), p. 5.

<sup>447</sup> TNA ADM 213/917: *A survey of damaged shipping in North Germany and Denmark, Report on the first attack on the Deutschland*.

<sup>448</sup> TNA ADM 213/917: *Report on the first attack on the Deutschland*.

<sup>449</sup> TNA ADM 213/917: *Report on the first attack on the Deutschland*.

Steinke that his ship was in the process of being converted to a hospital ship.<sup>450</sup>

Unfortunately shortages of basic equipment meant that there was no paint to illuminate the ship in the correct colours with only the funnels painted white and only one of these was marked with a Red Cross.<sup>451</sup> From the cockpit the pilots view of these markings would not have been clear enough to prevent the attack. Furthermore the pressure of the over-riding military situation placed unnecessary pressure on these pilots.

The second attack on shipping in Neustadt Bay was to be carried out by the fighter ace, Group Captain Jonny Baldwin who led 198 Squadron. Prior to take-off, 198 Squadron were briefed simply that there was a large gathering of ships in the bay of Neustadt. This information had been collated by a reconnaissance wing earlier that day. The lack of detail in the intelligence briefed out to the squadrons further suggests that the Allies were impeded by this urge to reach the Baltic coast. There is no mention or indication of what threat the ships in Neustadt posed to military operations, nor was there any sign that these ships had steam up. The squadron took off around 1400 hours, with around nine typhoons airborne and armed for the attack. At this time Captain Bertram was in his cabin attending to a conference with Gehrig and other officers. At around 1500 hours the assault on the ships began. Five of the Typhoons began their assault on the *Cap Arcona* while the remaining four planes targeted the motor vessel *Thielbek*. Flying

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<sup>450</sup> TNA ADM 213/917: *Report on the first attack on the Deutschland*. See also Nesbit, *Failed to Return*, p. 174.

<sup>451</sup> TNA AIR 15/474: *Survey of damaged shipping in North Germany and Denmark*. See also Steincke's personal report, BAB BY 5/V 279/ 7A: *Bericht des Kapitäns Steincke von der Deutschland*, 19 December 1945.

in low, Baldwin unleashed his 60lb rockets and began fire his cannon into the structure of the ship. A prisoner on board the ship recalled that

the storeroom rocked back and forth. Clearly, something on the ship had exploded. I struggled to my feet...hands grabbed at coats and arms. People lost their balance or got shoved, and fell back down... There was a second explosion, then a third right after it, somewhere above us... Everyone was screaming – prayers, curses; - the terror was beyond belief.<sup>452</sup>

In the midst of the attack Bertram took cover in his cabin. Once the first wave of the attack had passed he made his way hastily to the top deck. The situation though was desperate. A survivor of the *Cap Arcona* Sam Pivnik recalled that

people were running in all directions over the deck and thick grey-smoke was belching from the area below. Somebody shouted that we were sinking, and I spun round to scramble in the open hatch and grab Peter's hands. But they weren't there... Peter had gone, carried away in the headlong panic below decks as men desperately looked for a way out.<sup>453</sup>

As Bertram and his crew frantically tried to use the remainder of the fire-fighting equipment that was left intact, it soon became evident that their attempts were in vain. Owing to the damage caused by the rocket projectiles and cannon strafing, the majority of the equipment had been engulfed by fire. Bertram himself stated that “I tried to extinguish the fire with my crew but it was found that all pipes and hoses for the fire extinguishing apparatus were already destroyed, or out or broken”.<sup>454</sup> The first rocket had struck between the funnels on A-Deck level, which resulted in the superstructure being penetrated. The rocket had subsequently burst in the accommodation area and

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<sup>452</sup> Jacobs, *The 100-Year Secret*, pp. 101-103.

<sup>453</sup> Pivnik, *Survivor*, p. 217.

<sup>454</sup> TNA WO 309/873: *Deposition of Heinrich Bertram*, exhibit no.25.

caught fire almost instantly.<sup>455</sup> Jacobs remembers that “in minutes the entire upper third of the *Cap Arcona* was in flames...smoke spiralled up in a huge, twisted column, soon visible for miles”.<sup>456</sup>

Shortly after 198 squadron had taken off from Plantlünne, No.193 Squadron under the command of Squadron Leader D.M. Taylor, left Ahlhorn under the same mission objectives. Airborne at 14.45 hours, they began their assault on the already damaged *Cap Arcona* and *Thielbek*. Pilot David Ince was flying with 193 Squadron during this attack. He recalled that

we carried out dive-bombing attacks on each occasion and with varying success. But certainly we left, from the three shipping strikes, a total I think of three ships on fire, damaged or listing and obviously of no further use for [these] alleged German northbound convoys.<sup>457</sup>

During the second attack Bertram with his crew tried frantically to release the few remaining life-boats into the Baltic. As a result of the damage sustained by the attacks, fire had spread to the few lifeboats and davits required to lower the boats. From the

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<sup>455</sup> See various, TNA AIR 15/474: *Survey of damaged shipping in North Germany and Denmark*; GeNA: *Dokumente Über den Untergang der Häftlings-flötte in der Lübecker Bucht am 3. Mai 1945 von Rudi Goguel*, pp. 3-4. Also see for an opinion on the initial attack CAMN: “Rudi Goguel”, *Untergang der Häftlings-flötte in der Lübecker Bucht*, (Aus Horizont NR.19, (1974). He states that “An jenem 3. Mai warteten die Gefangenen stündlich auf ihre Befreiung, als gegen 15 Uhr die Katatrophe über sie hereinbrach. Wer nicht im Bombenhagel der britischen Flugzeuge oder in den Flammen der brennenden Schiffe umkam, wurde ein Opfer der Bordwaffen”.

<sup>456</sup> Jacobs and Poole, *The 100-year Secret*, p. 102.

<sup>457</sup> IWM 8651/2/1: *David Henry Gason Ince Sound recording Interview*, p. 12; See also David Ince DFC, *Brotherhood of the Skies: Wartime experiences of a Gunner Officer and Typhoon Pilot* (Grub Street: London, 2010).

perspective of the crew and that of the prisoners trapped on board the ship, the situation was almost hopeless. Unlike the *Deutschland*, the *Cap Arcona* had remained painted her war-time naval grey and thus there was nothing to distinguish her as either a prison or hospital ship. More importantly the vessel did even resemble its former grand passenger ship view. This meant that from a pilots view in the cockpit, the *Cap Arcona* was a legitimate military target. Bertram, along with a few members of his crew, tried tirelessly to signal the Allied planes. Survivor reports suggest that the captain sent a man to the stern of the ship to hoist a white flag, while Bertram took his own bed sheet and hoisted this on the signal mast.<sup>458</sup> This, however, was a vain attempt to halt the attack.

David Ince has suggested that the attacks carried out on 3 May “were not typical of Second TAF leadership”.<sup>459</sup> Generally Second TAF leadership would only not overstretch resources. Many groups were operating at maximum distance at a time when fuel was in short supply.<sup>460</sup> His opinion provides a rather entrenched view of the actions of Second TAF. If the attack was not typical, this suggests that normal procedures had been side-lined in favour of attacking these ships. With this in mind it highlights clearly

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<sup>458</sup> See TNA WO 309/873: *Deposition of Heinrich Bertram*, exhibit no.25. Bertram further states that the bed sheet that he hoisted was about two metres by one metre twenty. Also see CAMN AZ.730-04/0: *Cap Arcona: Das Massengrab in der Neustadter Bucht von Professor D. Dr. Redecker*. For original German, “Ungefähr gleichzeitig mit dem Eintreffen der ersten englischen Panzerspitzen erschienen über der Neustadter Bucht ungefähr 8 englische Jagdbomber und unbewaffnet, vollgepfropft mit armen bedauernswerten Häftlingen, zeigten die weisse Flagge zum Zeichen der Übergabe”.

<sup>459</sup> Recent email correspondence from David Ince DFC. See Appendix One. 22 July 2015. For an overview see Ince, *Brotherhood of the Skies*, pp. 139-148.

<sup>460</sup> Ince, *Brotherhood of the Skies*, pp. 139-148.

the impact of the short-term factors that impacted British aerial policy in the final days of the conflict. A number of possible motives for this approach were that these ships were fleeing to Norway, or the chronic shortage of correct ammunition. This suggests that the Allies were determined to bring Germany into complete submission. This decision was made at the cost of many innocent lives. Furthermore Ince suggests that even before 3 May, with the war nearly won, Command HQ began to look beyond the battlefield to all matters Russian.<sup>461</sup>

Throughout the British attack many prisoners attempted to flee the burning wreckage. Jackson noted that,

most of the people on the *Cap Arcona* were burned or drowned. I saw the deck black with people who did not jump, and I saw also some people swimming. There was naturally no question of lowering the boats as the ship was blazing in such a way.<sup>462</sup>

Those who managed to break free from the lower decks scrambled through the burning decks to reach the top deck, where many took the chance to go over-board. The British attack however did not end there. At this juncture, the *Cap Arcona* was listing after two attacks. The *Thielbek* which was situated around 700 metres away, when it too attacked by the Typhoons of 198 Squadron. *Thielbek* was struck just below the water line by the 60lb R.Ps attached to the wings of the Typhoons. Unable to save or delay the sinking of

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<sup>461</sup> Recent email correspondence from David Ince DFC. See Appendix One. 22 July 2015.

<sup>462</sup> TNA WO 309/863: *Deposition of Philip Jackson, Exhibit no.1*, pp. 30-32. See also Hal Vaughan, *Doctor to the Resistance: The Heroic True story of an American Surgeon and his family in occupied Paris*, (Brassey's US: Nebraska, 2004).

the ship, Captain Jacobsen gave the order to abandon ship.<sup>463</sup> As later established by the British, the *Thielbek* sunk as a result of underwater hull damage, resulting in a complete submergence of the ship in around forty-five minutes.<sup>464</sup>

While the view from the cockpit was rather limited, there were a number of occasions where pilots noted that neither vessel had steam up or was in a position to move. This testimony shows that the pilots were able to make critical observations during their attack over Neustadt. But while the information was made available to the intelligence section of Command HQ, attacks over Neustadt continued. In the *Sunday Telegraph* it emerged that one pilot, Lawrence Stark, 609 wing, reported to Command HQ that

I attacked a small motor vessel sailing out of Lübeck that morning and then observed three large ships at anchor in the Bay. They did not have steam up, so as the war was ending and there was a shipping shortage, I suggested to Intelligence that they should be left alone.<sup>465</sup>

As the planes returned to refuel, information was passed on to the squadron command.

There appeared on this occasion to be little, if any, communication passing between the

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<sup>463</sup> For instance see an interview of the *Thielbek*'s Second officer, GeNA: *Sammlung Günther Schwarberg Cap Arcona* 1.24.1, *Interview mit Walter Felgner Brunsbuettel, am 3. Mai 1945*, p. 13. For original German, "Wir hatten nur drei direkte Raketentreffer, die "Thielbek", die das Schiff zum Sinken brachten. Die anderen zerstörten alles an Deck. Sie haben ja nicht nur mit Raketen geschossen".

<sup>464</sup> TNA ADM 213/917: *A survey of damaged shipping in North Germany and Denmark, ship Thielbek*.

<sup>465</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, "British Pilot saw Prison ship survivors shot", 13 March 1983, p. 2.

pilots. During the attack, there remains some debate as to whether the vessels hoisted a form of white flag.<sup>466</sup>

The Squadron flew over the bay at around 10,000 feet on a mission to form a second wave of attacks on the *Deutschland*. As the first planes went in for the attack, the rockets plunged through the foredeck, resulting in an explosion that punctured the hull on the waterline.<sup>467</sup> Steincke and the remaining crew began using the water pumps in a vain attempt to keep the ship afloat but as it was under attack, this was impossible. As No.263 squadron concluded their attack, No.197 emerged from the skies and continued the bombardment. This time, they were heavily armed with bombs. The summary for 197 Squadron states:

Shipping strikes in Lübeck Bay. All the bombs were dropped on a motor vessel of 15/20 000 tons at 0.0208. The ship was already burning as a result of attacks by 263 Squadron and we scored two direct hits. Now left burning in five place and alter seen capsized and burning.<sup>468</sup>

As the strikes continued, the frantic situation in the Baltic waters became a battleground for survival. Pivnik recalled:

as I reached it my frozen hands grabbed someone else's and another half-dead prisoner got there just as I did. We probably both had the same idea, to forget all thoughts of humanity and kick the other bastard away. Other men in the water

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<sup>466</sup> See Watson, *The Nazi Titanic*.

<sup>467</sup> Jacobs and Poole, *The 100-year secret*, p. 105. See also the damaged report, TNA ADM 213/917: *A survey of damaged shipping in North Germany and Denmark, ship Deutschland*; TNA AIR 27/1548/76: *No.263 Squadron Records of Events*, 3 May 1945.

<sup>468</sup> TNA AIR 27/1169/54: *Summary of 197 Squadron, May 1945*.

around us were doing just that, fighting and screaming at each other in a desperate quest for survival.<sup>469</sup>

Any sort of mutual moral support among the prisoners had vanished. The attacks from the planes above continued for some time longer, the main targets were the already burning ships. In the water some fishing boats were trying to pick up German guards and merchant crew. However these boats refused to take in survivors. In fact “now and again there were bursts of pistol and machine-gun fire as those in the boats scattered prisoners trying to board them”.<sup>470</sup> The brutality of their captors continued even until the last.

The final attack took place around 1800 hours by 193 and 197 Squadrons. By this stage the *Cap Arcona*, *Thielbek* (sunk) and *Deutschland* were already past saving, many of the boats that were in fact launched to rescue German naval and SS personnel were able to rescue around 16 surviving members of a crew of around 80 from the *Cap Arcona*. Meanwhile, during the attack British ground forces were advancing steadily on Neustadt. No. 6 Commando, along with 11 Armoured Division, had reached the bank of the town from which they could clearly see the drama in the bay unfolding. The Naval Liaison Officer to 8 Corps, who was accompanying these troops, arrived at the naval barracks at Neustadt at 1600 hours and issued an order that no craft of any sort was to

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<sup>469</sup> Pivnik, *Survivor*, p. 219. See also for relevant survivor reports, GeNA: *Übersetzung aus dem Französischen: Das Drama von Lübeck am Tage des 3. Mai 1945 and Bord der “Cap Arcona”*, Jean Langlet; GeNA: *Jerzy Jaroch, Erinnerungen eines Schiffbrüchigen der “Cap Arcona”* (01311), pp. 4-6; See TNA WO 309/863: *Deposition of Julius Schaetzle*, Exhibit No. 3. Schaetzle alleges that shots were fired from the rescue ships to survivors in the water.

<sup>470</sup> Pivnik, *Survivor*, p. 219.

leave the harbour.<sup>471</sup> From the position now held by the tanks, they were able to shoot across the naval marine barracks into the port/ harbour of Neustadt. From their vantage point, they could see the ship *Athen* was docked in the naval port. It was believed, quite wrongly, that the prisoners themselves may have set fire to the ship. As the marine barracks was surrounded by light flak positions, the position of the *Athen* was at the heart of the fighting zone. As British tanks looked to remove any form of defence, particularly in the area around the barracks, at some stage the *Athen* was struck by what was believed to be a 17-pounder shell.<sup>472</sup> During the attack however, the crew and SS guards had vanished, leaving their prisoners locked below deck. As a result of the attack, the prisoners forced their way through the hatches and clambered for freedom.<sup>473</sup> Although there was no evidence of an aerial attack, the superstructure had been completely gutted by fire.<sup>474</sup>

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<sup>471</sup> TNA WO 309/1592: *Major Noel Till Report, Part B*, p. 14. See also IWM Misc 94 (1424): *Neustadt, C.O's Summary of 3-4 May 1945 Lt-Gen E.H.Barker, Comd 8 Corps*, pp. 1-3.

<sup>472</sup> TNA ADM 213/917: *A survey of damaged shipping in North Germany and Denmark, ship Athen*. See also, IWM 8386/3/2: *John Stewart McKerchar FCA ATII*, Sound Department, pp. 18-21.

<sup>473</sup> See IWM P474: *Witness statement of Mikelis Mezmalietis*, (April 1983).

<sup>474</sup> See ADM 213/917: *A survey of damaged shipping in North Germany and Denmark, ship Athen*; Lange, *Cap Arcona*, pp. 95-96. He argues that "Die am Marinekai liegende "Athen" began – verursacht durch die Artilleriegranaten mit ihrer Spreng-Brand-Wirkung – langsam in einer Schiffssektion zu schwelen. Da Flakmunition an Bord war, ließen die Briten das Schiff vorsorglich aus dem Hafen schleppen". However the Till report, TNA WO 309/1592, argued that "During the night, prisoners set fire to this ship although some prisoners were still on board. A rescue party endeavoured to save all these prisoners, and when it was thought that all prisoners had been removed the ship was towed out of the harbour to prevent it setting the jetty alight", pp. 14-15.

Around 1800 hours, long after the attack on the ships had finished, there was a furious explosion on the *Cap Arcona*. The survey report conducted by the dive-team during their post-war examination of the vessel claims that “it was believed that the 100 tons of fuel oil which was aboard might have exploded and caused her to capsize”.<sup>475</sup> The most probable cause for the *Cap Arcona* to capsize appears to have been fuel combustion, although the dive-team was unable to state this with absolute certainty. The ship subsequently began to keel to her portside, where the ship laid partly submerged and burning out. As for those few prisoners still struggling in the icy waters, the British did not rescind the command to send vessels out from the barracks until 1800 hours. It was during the evening that British investigators state they were first made aware that prisoners were on the ships. However, there were numerous examples prior to the attack whereby British forces and intelligence agencies had been alerted to the possibility, but chose to launch an attack instead.<sup>476</sup>

While interviews with the pilots who attacked the *Cap Arcona* are not available,<sup>477</sup> there are others who flew the same mission and attacked the *Deutschland* who re-call the

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<sup>475</sup> See ADM 213/917: *A survey of damaged shipping in North Germany and Denmark, ship Athen*; See also ITS CI 45b Ordner296:1398: *KL Neuengamme, Report from the Principle Diver*, July-Aug 1946.

<sup>476</sup> See TNA WO 309/1592: *Till Report*, p. 14.

<sup>477</sup> Pilot interviews do not appear to be available from those pilots who were directly responsible for attacking the *Cap Arcona*. I can surmise from information located in the “Till Report” that certain records had been obtained by investigators, but have since either been destroyed or are lost in the National Archives. The attack on Neustadt bay was part of a broader attack on the remaining German tonnage. With this in mind those pilots who attacked the *Deutschland*, *Thielbek* and *Athen* provided relevant and useful information regarding the operation. Prior to the operation on 3 May, the mission was a general operation and not targeted against a specific ship. This is why any pilot testimony from 3 May operations remains useful.

incidents. For instance Derek Stevenson who flew with 184 squadron later suggested that “the following three days were to prove to be the most extraordinary in the history of No 184 squadron, no less than 130 sorties being flown in a period of just over 60 hours”.<sup>478</sup> Although 184 squadron were not directly responsible for attacking the *Cap Arcona* they were part of the overall attack on Neustadt Bay. From their operational statistics alone it would appear that these ships were still considered a potential military threat, although none of the vessels showed signs of movement. As a matter of policy, the area of attack and surrounding coastal areas were to be turned into an inferno of burning ships, and wreckage of military units. Derek Stevenson wrote some years later that he had been aware of a report of some large ships in the Bay of Neustadt.<sup>479</sup> He claimed that the intelligence officer stated that “it’s a bit unusual. We’ve just had a report of some large ships in Lübeck bay ... they’re supposed to be carrying SS... to fight on in Norway”.<sup>480</sup> Stevenson further recalled his conversation with the intelligence officer of 184, who said: “I’m sorry, chaps. I really don’t have any more information. The ships are there, that’s all we know”.<sup>481</sup> Similarly flight Lieutenant David Ince who flew with 193 squadron, 146 wings later wrote after the war that “the shipping strikes went ahead as a result of delays in transmitting the latest intelligence to Air headquarters and the Nazis did nothing to discourage them”.<sup>482</sup> It is important to look at

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<sup>478</sup> Derek Leyland Stevenson, *Six Crashes Later: The Story of a Fighter Pilot*, (The Erskine Press: London, 2005), p. 213.

<sup>479</sup> Stevenson, *Six Crashes Later*, p. 214.

<sup>480</sup> Stevenson, *Six Crashes Later*, p. 214.

<sup>481</sup> Stevenson, *Six Crashes Later*, p. 215.

<sup>482</sup> David Ince, *Combat and Competition* (Newton Publishers: Swindon, 1992), p. 252.

these two pilots and their memories for one simple reason. They were involved in the briefing prior to the take-off and involved in the subsequent attacks on the ships in Neustadt Bay. Therefore although they were not directly engaged in attacking the *Cap Arcona*, they were engaged in aerial duties over Neustadt. Their testimonies provide another dimension in an attempt to piece together the frantic days of the Second World War.

Air records for May demonstrate a clear understanding that shipping was an important agenda. Table Three demonstrates that from 2-4 May some 19 ships were completely destroyed and 171 were damaged. When this figure is set against the number of sorties flown, it is a reasonable strike rate. Barges were also listed in the final report.

More interestingly though is the figure for the loss of pilots. For 3 May out of 895 sorties flown, 83 Group intelligence reported that only 7 pilots were lost. This demonstrates that the level of resistance within the bay and the surrounding areas was almost non-existent. Not only was shipping a target, but in the morning of 3 May, other targets such as rail cuts, MET's and buildings also bore a percentage of the Allied attack. While the level of resistance remained low, if non-existent at times, this did not prompt Allied forces to put a halt to their plans or operations. Furthermore, what this table evidently demonstrates is a firm commitment from 83 Group to continually fuel and re-load these planes to continue their air attack on a given target. The use of some 5000 rocket projectiles is an impressive number, as each Typhoon could only amass around four RP's per flight. As David Ince later wrote "The RP-equipped Typhoons were reduced from carrying eight rockets to four plus two forty-five gallon drop

tanks”.<sup>483</sup> This meant that there were in fact no less than 480 flights were made by the Hawker Typhoon on 3 May.

Date	Sorties	Bombs 500lb	R.E. 60lb	Ships		Barges		Losses	
				Destroyed	Damaged	Destroyed	Damaged	A/C	Pilots
1	576	48	824					4	4
2	815	180	1391	1	8			4	4
3	895	193	1920	12	97	1	4	9	7
4	546	202	903	6	66	4	2	2	1
5	50								
<b>Total:</b>	<b>2882</b>	<b>623</b>	<b>5038</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>171</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>16</b>

Table Three: Abbreviated table of Air targets for the first days of May 1945, 83 Group Intelligence.<sup>484</sup>

However the statistics provided by Second TAF in Sir Arthur Coningham’s notes give an entirely more positive picture. Table four suggests that Second TAF on 3 May alone destroyed or damaged some 160 cargo ships of various sizes.

Cargo Ships (All Sizes)	160
U-Boats	9
E/R Boats	4
Smaller Craft	8

Table Four: A summary of damaged vessels provided by Second TAF for 3 May 1945.<sup>485</sup>

From the tables it is evident that the number of attacks directed towards shipping rose drastically in the first days of May. These suggest that with the remaining occupied

<sup>483</sup> Ince, *Brotherhood of the Skies*, p. 213.

<sup>484</sup> IWM 83/15/4: *Private Papers of Squadron Leader RT Wilkins*, Summary of Activity, May 1945.

<sup>485</sup> TNA AIR 37/876: *Report by Air Marshall Sir Arthur Coningham on Operations carried out by Second TAF*, May 1945, Point 322.

territory for German forces rapidly dwindling, the target changed from land, to the remaining Baltic ports.

## **Conclusion**

History remembers the sinking of the *Cap Arcona* as a tragic event and British misadventure. The incident that took place on 3 May 1945 was the culmination of a series of events that reached a crescendo on that afternoon. The interweaving of British and German narratives demonstrates the impact of this wider notion of chaos on both elements military forces. Although credible intelligence had existed in various forms prior to the launch of an attack, the wider military situation led to British forces pressing ahead before this information had been processed. Furthermore the impact of chaos on British strategy becomes apparent.

During the build-up to the attack on the *Cap Arcona* it is clear that the leadership of Second TAF felt strongly that an evacuation to Norway by German forces was likely. This policy was based upon a rumour that troops would flee to Norway. British forces never considered the possibility that German ships were simply trying to return to a home port before the final capitulation. This sudden change in targets, from land-based to shipping, highlights that the belief of this threat was significant. However, the number of reconnaissance missions, coupled with the close monitoring of shipping by Allied CIU, clearly documented that there was no intention of an evacuation to Norway. What this further highlighted was an inherent breakdown of communication between different departments, as well as a failure to disseminate this information in a timely manner.

German forces were in a desperate and unmanageable situation, while British pilots were also hindered by the impact of chaos on communication. Furthermore, British forces exploited the lack of resistance and pressed hard towards the Baltic coast. The subsequent attack on the *Cap Arcona* shows a number of failings in British aerial intelligence. The continued mis-communication of information to the pilots, coupled with ammunition shortages shows clearly that the attack on the 3 May was hindered by a breakdown of communication. In addition, a change in ammunition type for the Typhoons of Second TAF demonstrates that British aerial strategy was determined to destroy shipping at all costs.

# Conclusion

The tragic sinking of the *Cap Arcona* on 3 May was arguably the by-product of a series of broader circumstances that culminated in the final days of the Second World War. By the end of April 1945 the overall military situation was one of a chaotic environment for both German and Allied forces. The expansion of Allied air operations in the district of Schleswig-Holstein throughout April increased exponentially as British forces continued to press hard to the Baltic coast. The situation was transformed, however, by pockets of fierce resistance in the surrounding areas of Hamburg. Thereafter, communication between Allied departments began to fail as the broader military policy became the overriding objective. This led to a situation whereby many elements of Britain's military forces entered into combat without up-to-date intelligence or clear orders.

The theme of chaos remains an important historical tool which we can use to better understand the wider implications of the final months of the war that led to the tragedy in Neustadt. This concept, whereby the social stability of everyday society breaks down, enables us to understand the set of unique circumstances that evolved in 1945. One such area was the way Allied forces conducted their military strategy in the final weeks of the war. The overarching demand for British forces to reach the Baltic coast led to a situation where the normal protocols were side-lined for the broader strategic policy. British military policy became heavily guided and influenced by the wider political position, namely a growing distrust of Stalin. By February 1945 British military strategy was no longer effective. The resurgence of the Soviet advance from the East meant that

the West's strategy of targeting Berlin was no longer viable. But this meant that the West had no secondary military objective. The conclusions of Yalta further highlight a sudden change of direction. American forces were thus diverted to technological installations in the South, while British and Canadian forces pressed north to the Baltic coast. This change of strategy was a significant turning point. British forces pressed hard throughout March and into April towards Lübeck with the aim of halting the Soviet advance into Denmark. As policy was focused on reaching the Baltic coast, communication and the processing of intelligence were severely hindered. Although not directly chaotic, the broader military strategy had an impact on the breakdown of communication. One important aspect was the relationship between Britain and neutral Red Cross agencies. As these humanitarian agencies became more active within conflict zone in the final weeks of the war, their information and working relationship with the advancing Allied forces was paramount to the safety of their operations. As we have seen, the British were handed three important opportunities to prevent the attack on the *Cap Arcona* by the SRC and ICRC. Furthermore the lack of importance placed on this information by the different bodies within the British armed forces demonstrated clearly that the wider military policy outweighed the normal protocols for processing intelligence in a timely manner.

As a historical concept 'chaos' demonstrates the significant implications of the overall military policy on strategic operations in the closing months of the war. Britain was arguably side-lined at Yalta, as well as Berlin no longer a viable target. The realisation of a Soviet threat became all too apparent. In turn the overriding need to reach the Baltic coast and halt a Soviet advance West led to panic within the senior leadership. The

emergence of early Cold War tensions and an ‘operational blindness’ that overtook many strategic policies, emphasises that the final months of the war were chaotic for Allied commanders. While there is evidence that focused on friendly-fire incidents in this final period, further research on incidents and figures throughout the war would be beneficial to determine the full impact policy had on military operations. This would enable us to potentially evaluate not only the impact of this political change on military strategy, but also explore issues of communication and its dissemination during operations.

The reconstruction of British aerial policy in the final weeks of the Second World War provides an insight into the overall mind set of British commanders. In terms of the tragic event that happened on 3 May, this broader approach to aerial strategy clearly shows that the policies and procedures that had guided air policy became hampered in the closing stages. Much of the aerial strategy throughout April 1945 was directed as armed reconnaissance, and this in turn gave a level of freedom to the pilots engaged in this campaign. This type of roaming mission was not always against a specified target, but part of a wider project to attack a host of German military installations and armed divisions. However intelligence and its timely dissemination to the frontline squadrons were not always present. In turn this led to a rise in the number of friendly-fire incidents. This situation was further exacerbated, particularly on 3 May, when rumours continued to circulate that the ships in Neustadt were fleeing to Norway. The constant changing of operational day orders, combined with a lack of crucial intelligence led to the pilots engaging in the attack on the *Cap Arcona* resulting in the death of some 8,000 prisoners.

In the final months of the conflict the Nazi concentration system evacuated prisoners away from the immediate fighting front. The process, until February 1945, was to retain a much needed labour reserve in a desperate hope to increase war production. A large number of camp prisoners were forcibly marched towards other camps of operation to continue work in key industries. But after February 1945 the area available to continue this process of evacuation was simply not available. Increased aerial attacks, entwined with military defeats on both fronts left the Reich centre with a difficult choice.

Surrender the prisoners or continue, in a vain hope, to continue their imprisonment.

From March 1945 as the remaining concentration camps were under threat of being liberated, subsequent death marches departed camps in a vain attempt to avoid the advancing Allied forces. However, during these marches countless prisoners were killed needlessly as local, junior commanders were without contact with their superiors.

Without regular contact with senior officers, often those supervising the marches took matters in their own hands. This scenario became common-place in final months of the conflict with the exception of the camp at Neuengamme.

As evacuation orders were passed through the Reich centre, the interpretation of these orders for the camp at Neuengamme became the responsibility of Bassewitz-Behr and Gauleiter Kaufmann. The planning process to evacuate the camp at Neuengamme was markedly different from other similar sized camps in the final evacuation period. As local Gauleiter's and SS officials panicked, many of the remaining camps were evacuated during a last-ditched attempt to avoid Allied troops. But this scenario further led to chaotic scenes, not least for those forced along the march. Communication was paramount, and in the closing stages of the war, camp commandants, as well as junior

officials had no clear idea of the destination of each march column. But the camp at Neuengamme was markedly different to those remaining camps in April 1945. While Bergen-Belsen was liberated with significant numbers of prisoners still within the compound on 15 April, the civilian and SS administration ensured, at all costs, the prisoners were evacuated in a timely response to Lübeck bay. Furthermore, the destination, method and location of the transports was clear and orderly. This marked a noticeable contrast to other transports in this period. Neuengamme was therefore different for a number of reasons. The first was a series of personal motives. Kaufmann had increasing business interests with local industrialists within Hamburg and his association with slave labour was arguably his motive for ensuring the camp was evacuated. The second was the overriding military situation. As British forces pressed towards Hamburg, the territory obtainable to evacuate the prisoners of Neuengamme was simply available. Therefore through his civilian administrative positions Kaufmann was the driving force behind the evacuation and continued detention of prisoners on the *Cap Arcona*.

The method used to analyse the evacuation process from Neuengamme highlights that our current understanding of the final tri-model phase needs review. While the consensus amongst historians suggests that in the final months of the war the evacuations had no other purpose than the killing of innocent victims, Neuengamme was markedly different. To appreciate the intricate and complex breakdown of the Nazi camp system, local studies of individual camp closures are required. In analysing in greater detail the method used for each camp closure, as well as looking more locally at the political bureaucracy of each camp would yield promising and exciting results.

The subsequent use and implementation of the *Cap Arcona* to continue the detention of camp prisoners was solely driven by personal motives. Throughout the war the close business connection between Neuengamme camp and industrial sites in Hamburg had grown in strength. The local Gauleiter of Hamburg, Karl Kaufmann had been pivotal in developing Neuengamme, as well as utilising a vast supply of slave labour for local industry. As a result this close business connection between the civilian administration in Hamburg and local industry had allowed industry to thrive throughout the war. But as Allied forces pressed towards Hamburg in March 1945, local business leaders placed increasing pressure on Gauleiter Kaufmann to disassociate Hamburg businesses from the camp at Neuengamme. As pressure continued to mount on Gauleiter Kaufmann, the need to find a workable solution to the evacuation issue was imperative. For local businesses, the need to remove any association with slave labour and its use within wartime industry was crucial. Many industrialists feared reprisals and lengthy questioning should Allied forces find evidence of their use and association with slave labour. Thereafter the *Cap Arcona* and other ships was a logical choice by the Hamburg Gauleiter to relieve the pressure he faced.

By the end of April the number of prisoners arriving at Lübeck reached dangerous levels. With civilian refugees, as well as Nazi officials and troops arriving in Neustadt to avoid the Soviet forces, the Baltic coast was heavily congested. The lack of further planning by the civilian administration suggests that once the prisoners had departed Neuengamme, they were no longer concerned. The loading and temporary use of the *Cap Arcona* provides us with a number of valid points. With the SS still largely in command of the loading of the prisoners, the continuation of the SS-camp hierarchy

demonstrates that they wished to retain some form of social control and order. Therefore the placement and purpose of the *Cap Arcona* can be seen as a physical extension of the camp structure. Furthermore the use of the *Cap Arcona* clearly demonstrated that any long-term planning by either the SS or the civilian administration in Hamburg was non-existent. Gauleiter Kaufmann had assisted and guided the evacuation of Neuengamme camp largely for a number of personal motives. Close business links coupled with increasing pressure to save Hamburg from a repeat of the firestorm raids of February 1943 drove the Gauleiter to ensure the city was free of any slave labour.

The final months of the war were often frantic and fast-paced. This evolved into a situation whereby many military elements were affected by chaos. The term 'chaos' has been applied throughout to define an over-riding situation whereby the broader political strategy for both British and German forces clouded local judgement and policy-making. The local civilian administration in Hamburg was arguably fearful that evidence of their association with slave labour would be found. This drove the evacuation process at a time when the feasibility of such a task was almost impossible. But what we learn is that while the Reich centre is faltering, the local administration appears to find stability within this chaos and organise the evacuation of Neuengamme camp. There is still much to understand about the role of Gauleiter Kaufmann and his governance of Hamburg. As arguably one of the most powerful Gauleiter's, our knowledge and appreciation of his political strength and loyalty to Hamburg warrant further investigation. Although Bajohr suggests the Gauleiter was a ruthless

businessman,<sup>486</sup> he remained a staunch Nazi and many of his business associations and political positions could be explored further.

The events that led to the tragic sinking of the *Cap Arcona* on 3 May and the tragic loss of life merits further study. Within Major Till's closing statement he acknowledged that his report into the sinking of the *Cap Arcona* had been rushed in favour of other alleged war crimes.<sup>487</sup> The lack of investigation and acknowledgement in the immediate postwar gave rise to a significant number of conspiracy theories. But the *Cap Arcona* sinking is much more than a singular tragic event. Its sinking demonstrates the importance and impact of Britain's wider military strategy in the closing months of the war. In rushing towards the Baltic coast, evidence clearly suggests that the normal protocols and procedures for any military engagement were side-lined. On the other hand, in viewing the transfer process onto the *Cap Arcona* in this broader context, our understanding of the intricate debate regarding the purpose of utilising the *Cap Arcona* shows the importance of local policy making. Moreover, personal motives between the local Gauleiter and business industrialists were arguably the driving force behind ensuring the camp at Neuengamme was completely evacuated. The broader theme of chaos not only allows us to expand our knowledge on British military strategy, but also enhances our knowledge on the debate surrounding the term death marches, and the final period of camp evacuations.

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<sup>486</sup> See Bajohr, *Aryanisation in Hamburg*.

<sup>487</sup> See TNA WO 309:1592, *Major Till Report*.

## **Previously Published Work**

Conference paper submitted for publication in the University of Southampton's Postgraduate Journal *Emergence*. The paper contains ideas that were subsequently developed in Chapter's Four and Five.

See Daniel Long, "A Controversial History? An Analysis of British Attitudes and Responsibility in the Bombing of the *Cap Arcona*, 3 May 1945", *Emergence* vol.7 (2015), pp. 28-37.

### **Introduction**

The history of the sinking of the *Cap Arcona* is a fascinating but relatively unknown topic in Third Reich and British history. The relationship between the British pilots and the sinking of the *Arcona* is a subject which has had much speculation, but no real academic analysis of existing archival material has successfully undertaken. The bombing and subsequent sinking of the *Cap Arcona* on 3 May 1945 remains a topic which has evaded a detailed scholarly analysis of existing archival research. Laden with over five thousand prisoners from Neuengamme Camp - who had been evacuated to the coast as no "suitable" alternative, could be found - were subsequently attacked by RAF Typhoons. RAF involvement in the sinking of the *Cap Arcona* is portrayed in a distorted light, with some archival sources suggesting that British forces were aware, prior to take off, of the situation that had developed in Neustadt Bay. I present a new approach in an attempt to better understand the issue of British responsibility in the sinking of the *Cap Arcona*. This article will explore the wider issue of why British forces became desperate to reach the Baltic coast and in turn argue that this desperation side-lined the normal protocols for examining intelligence. Furthermore, the issue of prior intelligence will be explored further in a hope to determine whether British forces

knew of the situation in Neustadt prior to an aerial assault on 3 May.<sup>488</sup> The British actions need to be fully investigated in order to develop a clearer understanding as to the overall tragedy.

## Decision-Process

As the war raged on it became apparent to some groups of Germans that by January 1945 the Nazis had effectively lost the war.<sup>489</sup> For the British, along with their American counterparts a major topic of agenda was how best to manage and divide captured territory. In a secret telegram from Winston Churchill to his then Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs Sir Anthony Eden, Churchill wrote “it is thought most important that Montgomery should take Lübeck as soon as possible, and he has an additional American Army Corps to strengthen his movements if he requires it”.<sup>490</sup> Churchill stressed the importance for the Western Allies to reach the Baltic coast with full haste. Reasons for this can be seen in two important stages. Firstly sovereignty of Denmark and secondly to attempt to halt the further advance West of Soviet forces. Within the telegram, Churchill expressed that “our arrival at Lübeck before our Russian

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<sup>488</sup> For instance see Wilhelm Lange, *Cap Arcona: Dokumentation Das Tragische Ende der KZ-Häftlings-Flötte am 3. Mai 1945* (Struve’s Buchdruckerei und Verlag: Eutin Germany, 2005); Wilhelm Lange, “Ein unbekanntes Kapitel der Cap-Arcona-Tragödie”, in *Jahrbuch für Heimatkunde*, 54 (2011): 185-195; Günther Schwarberg, *Angriffsziel Cap Arcona* (Steidl: Göttingen, 1998); Heinz Schön, *Die Cap Arcona-Katastrophe: Eine Dokumentation nach Augenzeugen-Berichten* (Motorbuch Verlag: Berlin, 1989); Bogdan Suchowiak, *Mai 1945: Die Tragödie der Häftlinge von Neuengamme* (Rowohlt Verlag: Hamburg, 1985). The only British publication was written by Roy Nesbit, *Failed to Return: Mysteries of the Air 1939-1945* (Patrick Stephens Limited: Wellingborough, 1988).

<sup>489</sup> Ian Kershaw, *The End: Hitler’s Germany 1944-45* (Allen Lane: London, 2011). See also Richard Bessel, *Germany 1945: From War to Peace* (Simon & Schuster: London, 2010).

<sup>490</sup> The National Archives Kew (Hence after TNA) FO 954/32D: Private Office Papers of Sir Anthony Eden Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, *Telegram from Prime Minister for Anthony Eden*, 18 April 1945: p. 1.

friends from Stettin would save a lot of argument later on”.<sup>491</sup> The importance of Denmark was clear to the British. As a country to be released from its occupants the Danish sovereignty could be restored and an attempt to return the country to its pre-war governance could be achieved. Under a Soviet occupation, it was likely the regime would inflict greater misery on a country already suffering from wartime occupation. Furthermore with the capture of a Baltic port Allied forces would be a step closer to organising a sea-routed supply line. Strategically Lübeck provided an encirclement of the North West and allowed Allied forces to push on into Hamburg and further East. This meant a great deal of thought and resources were given to capture Lübeck. With Allied advances causing panic in Nazi movements along the Northern coast, it became increasingly difficult to guarantee the safe passage of convoys from Germany to neutral countries. Allied forces were deeply concerned of a possible escape route to Norway. This myth that SS and *Wehrmacht* troops were fleeing to Norway seems highly unlikely at a time when panic and confusion had outweighed any form of logical strategy.<sup>492</sup> For instance a British Pilot David Ince later wrote “everything pointed to a final Nazi retreat into a Northern Redoubt, fortress Norway, using all the shipping available”.<sup>493</sup> However it seemed highly unlikely, and as many AIR records in the National Archives suggest, in the final months, the German Luftwaffe in particular had abandoned airfields with planes intact.<sup>494</sup> They had been unable to form any such defence largely due to the lack

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<sup>491</sup> TNA FO 954/32D, Papers of Anthony Eden, pp. 1-2.

<sup>492</sup> See Benjamin Jacobs & Eugene Pool, *The 100-Year Secret: Britain's Hidden World War II Massacre* (The Lyons Press: Guilford, 2004); Daniel Blatman, “The Death Marches and the Final Phase of Nazi Genocide” in Jane Caplan and Nikolaus Wachsmann (eds.), *Concentration Camps in Nazi Germany: The New Histories* (Routledge: London, 2009).

<sup>493</sup> David Ince, *Combat and Competition*, (Newton Publishers: Swindon, 1992), pp. 251-52. Also see Imperial War Museum interview (Here after IWM): *David Henry Gason Ince*, Catalogue No. 8651, (IWM: Conrad Wood), Reel 1 and 2.

<sup>494</sup> TNA AIR 37/876: 2<sup>nd</sup> *Tactical Air force: Report by Air Marshal Sir Arthur Coningham on Operations from D-Day to VE-Day*, point, 285.

of fuel. Sir Arthur Coningham notes that “the panic and destruction which was caused to the enemy turned the retreat into a rout”,<sup>495</sup> thus arguing that logic and organisation was no longer present amongst the German ranks.

Large gatherings of shipping in key German northern ports regularly featured in Air reconnaissance news. For instance “during April, Bomber Command attacked Kiel several times capsizing the *Admiral Scheer* and damaging the *Emden* by near misses”.<sup>496</sup> Shipping became increasingly an important topic of agenda for chiefs of staff. Continuous anti-shipping and anti-submarine patrols were being flown in spite of adverse weather.<sup>497</sup> Logic to utilise an air strike, rather than a sea-borne assault was clear. The area, largely across from the Fehmarn Island towards the Danish peninsula was heavily mined. This presented a problem for Allied forces and therefore directed towards an airborne assault as a quicker and less expensive form of attack. More importantly ground forces at present were encountering pockets of fierce resistance, and their assault to the coast was proving difficult. As highlighted in a weekly resume few mines had been swept and this meant that many shipping supply routes remained treacherous and too dangerous to risk valuable destroyers.<sup>498</sup> A table (figure 1) is a review of Bomber Command in 1945. From this table, although a total of 11,140 tonnages of bombs were used on naval targets in the final five months, this actually only represents a mere 6.1 percent of the overall tonnage dropped.

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<sup>495</sup> TNA AIR 37/876: point 314.

<sup>496</sup> TNA AIR 20/1593: *Operations of 2<sup>nd</sup> T.A.F: June 6 1944 – May 9 1945, Report by Air Marshal Sir Arthur Coningham and review of S.H.A.E.F. report on air operations in Europe Oct. 1944 – May 1945*, Section on Ports, Piece No.47.

<sup>497</sup> TNA AIR 20/1593: point 49.

<sup>498</sup> TNA CAB 66/65/61: *War Cabinet: Weekly Resume (No.298) of the Naval, Military and Air Situation*, (17<sup>th</sup> May 1945), p. 268.

<b>Category</b>	<b>January</b>	<b>February</b>	<b>March</b>	<b>April</b>	<b>May</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
<b>Cities</b>	11931	21888	30278	2322	63	66482	36.6%
<b>Troops and Defences</b>	2072	3756	8042	12056	155	26081	14.4%
<b>Transportation</b>	8459	5505	6229	7909	-	28102	15.4%
<b>Naval Targets</b>	129	561	3924	6526	-	11140	6.1%
<b>Oil</b>	9028	14109	18936	5437	-	47510	26.2%
<b>G.A.F</b>	-	-	5	596	36	637	0.4%
<b>Specific Industries</b>	1221	-	11	4	-	1236	0.7%
<b>Miscellaneous</b>	83	70	212	104	83	552	0.2%
<b>Totals</b>	<b>32923</b>	<b>45889</b>	<b>67637</b>	<b>34954</b>	<b>337</b>	<b>181740</b>	

Figure One: Review of Bomber Command Targets for 1945.<sup>499</sup>

In comparison the records for 2 TAF indicate a different depiction of the events in the final months. During April 1945 4 ships were destroyed with 61 damaged, along with 12 barges destroyed and 149 damaged.

<b>Type</b>	<b>Destroyed</b>	<b>Damaged</b>
Enemy Aircraft in the Air	199	80
Enemy Aircraft on the Ground	97	210
Motor Transport vehicles	1618	6387
Armoured fighting vehicles	22	63
Locomotives	119	900
Goods Trucks	657	2934
Ships	4	61
Barges	12	149

Figure Two: 2TAF targets for April 1945.<sup>500</sup>

<sup>499</sup> See table in Charles Webster and Noble Frankland, *The Strategic Air Offensive against Germany 1939-1945*, vol 3 (Naval & Military Press: Uckfield, 2006), p. 198.

In actual fact, ground installations, rather than naval vessels became the main target. When we look at the records for May there is a drastic change of direction. During the first few days alone some 160 Cargo ships, 9 U-Boats, 4 E/R Boats and 8 smaller craft were either damaged or destroyed.<sup>501</sup> This dramatic increase suggests that the Western Allies did in fact fear an evacuation from the Northern ports, which results in largely sporadic shipping strikes. In fact no less than 130 sorties were flown in a period of just over 60 hours by 184 squadron alone.<sup>502</sup> These figures present a solid foundation that Allied command were keen to eliminate any possible escape route to the North. The need to continually fuel and load planes to continue these shipping strikes highlight a firm commitment by RAF HQ. Combined with a fear of retreat across the Baltic and the only way to really attack Nazi forces over long ranges, air attack was used in a hope to bring the war to a swift and decisive end. There is limited, if any, credible intelligence to suggest that the Nazis final plan was to evacuate to Norway, and therefore this means that the British and USAAF became careless in planning and co-ordinating their strategic attacks. The use of photo reconnaissance had always played a useful role in gaining intelligence as to troop and ship movements. But as the theatre of war came to a final chaotic end, the evidence suggests that the RAF became increasingly reckless and failed to ascertain the proper intelligence required before take-off.

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<sup>500</sup> See table TNA AIR 37/876: *2<sup>nd</sup> Tactical Air force*, Claims of 2<sup>nd</sup> Tactical Air Force during the month of April 1945.

<sup>501</sup> TNA AIR 37/876: Table of Claims of 2<sup>nd</sup> Tactical Air Force during the first days of May 1945.

<sup>502</sup> Derek Leyland Stevenson, *Six Crashes Later: The Story of a fighter pilot* (The Erskine Press: London, 2005), p. 213.

## Prior Information

Amongst academics and amateurs alike there has always been a shroud of uncertainty in the history of the *Cap Arcona* of whether the British had any prior information regarding the prisoners being present on the ship. Major Till was a civilian solicitor who joined Number two war crimes investigation team. He was tasked with investigating the disaster at Neustadt bay. Quoted in nearly every detailed account on the *Cap Arcona*, Major Till noted that:

The intelligence officer with 83<sup>rd</sup> Group RAF has admitted on two occasions – first to Lt. H.F. Ansell of this team and on a second occasion to the investigating officer when he was accompanied by Lt. H.F. Ansell – that a message was received on 2<sup>nd</sup> May 1945 that these ships were loaded with KZ prisoners but that, although there was ample time to warn the pilots of the planes who attacked those ships on the following day, by some oversight the message was never passed on.<sup>503</sup>

What remains is why this information, as crucial as it was, did not get passed on to the pilots concerned. Also why did RAF intelligence not seek confirmation of the situation? Besides which why does Major Till fail to name the intelligence officer? While we can speculate about the identity of this officer, what is far more intriguing is that Till notes that this confession was documented. He suggested that “from the statement volunteered by the RAF intelligence officer”,<sup>504</sup> that at some point this statement existed in paper form. I have scoured archives in the UK and abroad and am certain that if it did exist it has since been removed from public consultation. Further as a section of indexes are listed within his report, no.72 is entitled Reports by RAF, and like the statement, are also not present in the archives. This would naturally suggest that there was information

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<sup>503</sup> TNA WO 309/1592, *Major Till report section B*, p. 14.

<sup>504</sup> TNA WO 309/1592, p. 15.

contained in these reports which the British HQ did not wish to be made public. There have over the years been several FOI requests which have yielded little or no results on this aspect. However all is not lost. There are other pieces of evidence which can be collated to form an answer.

The Swiss delegate in Lübeck, Paul de Blonay was interviewed shortly after the end of the war. In his deposition he claimed that:

In April 1945 I was at the harbour of Lübeck seeing about some shipments of Red Cross Parcels and I noticed a ship ss.*Thielbeck* at the place where I was accustomed to unload Red Cross petrol supplies. Whilst I was walking past this ship, a box of matches dropped beside me. I could not find who had thrown it. This box contained a letter...telling me about the state of some deportees – about 7,000 – in the three ships ss. *Thielbeck*, ss. *Athen* and ss. *Cap Arcona*.<sup>505</sup>

With this information in the hands of a neutral spectator, de Blonay documents that on the 2 May he passed this information to the Brigadier who captured Lübeck – Major General “Pip” Roberts 11<sup>th</sup> Armoured division – who is known to have communicated this message on. However, we are not aware of who this was directly communicated to or which department. What is also of interest is what happens to de Blonay after he passed this message on. It seems by all accounts that he merely continued his ICRC duties in Lübeck rather than follow through on the information he had been presented.

Derek Stevenson who flew with 184 squadron later suggested that “the following three days were to prove to be the most extraordinary in the history of No 184 squadron, no

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<sup>505</sup> TNA WO 309/873: *Deposition of Paul de Blonay*, exhibit no.42, p. 119.

less than 130 sorties being flown in a period of just over 60 hours”.<sup>506</sup> Furthermore the area of attack and surrounding coastal areas were to be turned into an inferno of burning ships, and wreckage of military units. While reports suggest that there was a large gathering of ships in the bays, the image remained unclear as to really who or what the ships were in fact doing. Stevenson wrote some years later that he had been aware of a report of some large ships in the Bay of Neustadt.<sup>507</sup> He claimed that the intelligence officer stated that “it’s a bit unusual. We’ve just had a report of some large ships in Lübeck bay ... they’re supposed to be carrying SS... to fight on in Norway”.<sup>508</sup> Stevenson further recalled his conversation with the intelligence officer. He was informed that “I’m sorry, chaps. I really don’t have any more information. The ships are there, that’s all we know”.<sup>509</sup> This again supports suggestions that the British disregarded the normal protocols to gain further reconnaissance before ordering a raid to take place.

Similarly flight Lieutenant David Ince later wrote after the war that “the shipping strikes went ahead as a result of delays in transmitting the latest intelligence to Air headquarters and the Nazis did nothing to discourage them”.<sup>510</sup> Evidence therefore suggested that sections of the British authorities were clearly aware of the situation in the Bay of Lübeck, but for reasons unknown there was a clear delay in forwarding this information to the pilots concerned. What failed also to help the British was the lack of attention paid to air reconnaissance. Although the British reconnaissance branch relied heavily on good weather prior to any take-off, their intelligence was “supplemented by various other sources, including POW interrogation, agents’ report, reports from our

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<sup>506</sup> Stevenson, *Six Crashes Later*, p.213.

<sup>507</sup> Stevenson, *Six Crashes Later*, p. 214.

<sup>508</sup> Stevenson, *Six Crashes Later*, p. 214.

<sup>509</sup> Stevenson, *Six Crashes Later*, p. 215.

<sup>510</sup> Ince, *Combat and Competition*, p. 252.

attaches in neutral countries, the German press and so on".<sup>511</sup> The biggest problem facing the British in the early days of May 1945 was that poor weather meant that many necessary reconnaissance flights were grounded. For instance 184 squadron reported poor weather till lunchtime hindered reconnaissance flights, while squadron leader Rumbolds also felt that the weather was severely hindering operations.<sup>512</sup> I believe that there appeared to be a strong urge to pull the final curtain on the Second World War, and that the British forces who were involved in the final days were tired of the constant fight. However while poor weather hindered the ability of a squadron to function to its full capabilities, it fails to acknowledge whether intelligence was sort from other means available.

Further evidence of some prior information can be found in various statements given by Dr. Arnoldsson. He received an anonymous letter regarding the seriousness of the situation in Neustadt, and the prisoners aboard the ships.<sup>513</sup> Dr Arnoldsson negotiated with an SS-Hauptsturmführer on the keel side of Lubeck. He had been made aware of the situation aboard the *Athen*, which was being utilised to ferry prisoners to the *Cap Arcona*. At this time the *Athen* was holding some 2,200 prisoners. Although Dr. Arnoldsson was unable to offer all those prisoners sanctuary via the Red Cross ships, he did offer to take between 250 and 300 inmates. These prisoners were placed aboard the *Lillie Matthiessen* and *Magdalena*. Arnoldsson advised the SS-Hauptsturmführer that they should wait for the arrival of the British forces and hand the prisoners over without

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<sup>511</sup> Sebastian Cox, "The sources and organisation of RAF intelligence and its influence on operations", in Horst Boog (ed.), *The Conduct of the Air War in the Second World War: An International Comparison studies in military history* (Berg: Oxford, 1992), p. 555.

<sup>512</sup> TNA AIR 27/1548/76: *Squadron Number 263 Records of Events*, 01 May 1945 – 31 May 1945.

<sup>513</sup> Gedenkstaette Neuengamme Archives (Hereafter GeNA) Ceges-Somas: *Letter from Swedish Red Cross to Gunnar Nyby*, 29 Jan 1990.

fighting. However on the 2 May he returned to the berth of the *Athen* only to find it had been sent to Neustadt. It was at this late stage he learned from a German officer of the presence of Neuengamme prisoners aboard the *Cap Arcona*. But amongst the confusion this could be the message received by 83<sup>rd</sup> Group RAF intelligence, and subsequently mis-interpreted by the RAF.<sup>514</sup> Whatever the results of these communications, the *Cap Arcona*, the ss. *Thielbek* and ss. *Deutschland* were attacked leaving their crew and captives struggling for survival in the icy Baltic waters.

### **Conclusion**

The *Cap Arcona* tragedy remains a topic in Third Reich & British history which still remains a narrative of facts rather than an analysis of facts. British foreign policy was designed to stop the advance West of Soviet forces. Unfortunately this led to a strategy of desperation which meant that careful planning and analysis of credible intelligence were side-lined. Although German forces were in a state of chaos and confusion, neutral spectators had successfully gained valuable intelligence as to the situation looming in Neustadt. Having made this available to British HQ, the processing of this information was slow. As a result this mis-communication assisted in the death of some 5,000 KZ inmates aboard the *Cap Arcona*. Therefore Britain's responsibility in the *Cap Arcona* tragedy cannot be ignored, nor can all the blame be attributed to the German elite. This led to a careless British attack which disregarded important and credible intelligence in the face of a swift and decisive end to the Second World War.

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<sup>514</sup> IMW Misc 94 (1424): *Neustadt: FG Parson's letter to the daily Telegraph*, 18 March 1982.

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## Appendix One

### **Email Correspondence between Daniel Long and David Ince DFC**

**Sat 18/07/2015, 18:49**

Dear Daniel

What follows is something which I wrote in 1983. It carries its own explanation as to why I wrote it and was eventually published in my first autobiography "Combat and Competition" which is now out of print.

In the spring of that year *STERN* magazine published six articles about the sinking of prison ships by RAF fighter bombers during the final days of the war. The implication conveyed to *STERN*'s mass circulation readership was of a cock up, followed by a hush up, as if we were totally to blame. But there was no explanation as to why the wretched inmates of Neuengamme concentration camp near Hamburg had been put on board the *Cap Arcona* in the first place - nor, as was alleged, why those who managed to escape and get ashore were shot out of hand by the German troops.

The first indication here was a piece in the *Daily Telegraph* one Saturday which described the *STERN* article and questioned its conclusions. Having been personally involved, I was incensed at what had been published in Germany and determined to try and set the record straight. My friend Derek Wood was, inter alia, Air Correspondent of the *Sunday Telegraph* at the time. So I gave him a ring and he wrote a pretty forthright column about it, which appeared the next day.

The articles, and the reader's letters which followed, must have been acutely embarrassing to many a decent German. Of course there had been a mistake by the RAF. For the very understandable reason that everything pointed to a final Nazi retreat into a Northern Redoubt, Fortress Norway, using all the shipping available.

The fact that the *Cap Arcona* and two other prison ships were carrying some 9,400 prisoners on Himmler's express instructions was part of a vain attempt to destroy the evidence of mass murders by the Nazi regime.

Those letters, from eyewitnesses among the few survivors and British forces on the ground, told a heart rending story. The German troops, mostly SS, had carried out Himmler's vile policy to the bitter end, butchering as many of the survivor's as possible. Two large barges, quite independent of the prison ships which had been attacked by the Typhoons, had arrived from Stutthof concentration camp on the Baltic coast near Konigsberg. They were found beached at Travemunde. The ladders had been removed, and the occupant's machine gunned at close range. Many of the children had been clubbed to death.

Shortly after seeing these appalling sights, Mills-Roberts the Brigadier commanding 1 Commando was faced with accepting Field Marshal Erhard Milch's surrender. The latter was unwise enough to do so with the words 'Heil Hitler' and proffered his baton which the brigadier promptly broke over his head.

In the end it was quite clear that the atrocity was German. The shipping strikes went ahead as result of delays in transmitting the latest intelligence to Air Headquarters and the Nazis did nothing to discourage them, The question remains as to why *STERN* saw fit to publish the story and there have been suggestions of Israeli involvement following Mrs Thatcher's refusal to accept a former leader of the Irgun terrorist organisation as Israeli Ambassador in London.

Daniel, I hope this helps. Am looking for old press cuttings. But no joy so far.

Best regards

David

**Wed 22/07/2015, 15:58**

*Dear Daniel*

*Something else which may help.*

The squadrons of 84 Group 2nd TAF provided the ground attack capability for 2nd Canadian Army and those of 83 Group did so for 1st British Army.

It was a very clear division of responsibility. And a rule which to my knowledge was only significantly broken on three occasions. The first two - at Mortain during the battle of Normandy - and in the Ardennes at the end of 1944 - were clearly in response to very dangerous developing operational situations.

The third, comprising the Baltic shipping strikes of 3rd and 4th May 1945 was a different matter entirely. That these required the daily forward positioning of squadrons to Hustedt produced an immediate and major short term demand for RAF Servicing Commandos. Despite these moves our operational sorties were right on the limit for range - with everyone really tight for fuel.

It was not typical of 2TAF Leadership!

To make sense of such demands on the squadrons, with a war nearly won, we have to look beyond the battlefield.

And we can say this. From then on, if not before, all matters Russian were handled with utter distrust - foreshadowing the cold war to come.

*See 'Brotherhood of the Skies' chapter thirteen. It stands out a mile*

*Best regards David*

## **Appendix Two**

### Appendix "A" to Intelligence Summary No 318

#### The Surrender of Hamburg

The following is an extract from 7<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division Intelligence summary No 201 dated 30 April 1945.

This morning we sent back the civilian owner of the Phoenix Rubber Works with a letter to Generalmajor Wölz in Hamburg. This was said that after a meeting of the Hamburg Chamber of Commerce, which was attended by the Gauleiter, he was sent purely in order to tell us that all the inhabitants of Hamburg desired to surrender.

Our letter ran as follows;-

To Major General Wölz,

Kommandant Hamburg.

Herr General;

1. The Reichsführer SS has already made an offer of unconditional surrender to the Western powers. This offer was made through Count Bernadotte in Stockholm.
2. Before attacking Bremen we demanded the surrender of the city. As this offer was refused, we had no alternative but to attack with artillery and air support. Bremen fell in 24 hours, but not without much unnecessary bloodshed.
3. In the name of Humanity, Herr General, we demand the surrender of Hamburg. For you as a soldier there can be no dishonour in following the example of famous German Generals such as General d Pz Tr Josef Harps, GOC 5 Pz Army, Genlt Fritz Bayerlein, GOC LIII Corps and many others who have surrendered themselves and their commands. From the political point of view, there can surely be no reflection on you if you allow yourself to follow the example of the Reichsführer SS.
4. We therefore ask you, Herr General, to send into our lines an officer empowered to negotiate the surrender. Our forward troops have bene warned to expect his arrival and not to shoot at him. He will be treated according to the Geneva Convention, and returned after the parley to his own lines.
5. The population of Hamburg will not easily forget its first large-scale raid by over 1,000 bombers. We now dispose of a bomber force 5-10 times greater numerically, and operating from nearby airfields. After the war, the German people must be fed; the more Hamburg's dock installations are damaged, the greater are the chances of famine in Germany.

6. If this offer is refused, we shall have no alternative but to attack Hamburg with all the forces at our disposal.

(Source; 30 Corps Int Summary No 619)

Source: TNA AIR 37/366: *No 83 Group (124 and 129 Wings): Intelligence Summaries*, April 1945.

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