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The Death Toll at the Buna/Monowitz Concentration Camp¹

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1 This article is identical to the chapter "Casualty Figures" (pp. 28–35) in: Florian Schmaltz: "The Buna/Monowitz Concentration Camp." Fritz Bauer Institut / Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main: Norbert Wollheim Memorial, 2010, http://www.wollheim-memorial.de/files/1057/original/pdf_Florian_Schmaltz_The_BunaMonowitz_Concentration_Camp.pdf.

Estimates of the number of deaths at I.G. Auschwitz vary considerably. A principal reason for this divergence is the systematic destruction of files that was carried out shortly before the war ended. Systematically and on a large scale, both the SS and employees of I.G. Farbenindustrie destroyed secret documents in the final months of the war in an effort to conceal the crimes committed in Auschwitz and impede the Allies' investigation and prosecution of the offenders.² Historical reconstruction of the number of deaths is complicated, because the prisoner card index and the "death books" of the Buna/Monowitz concentration camp survived only in fragmentary form. In the research literature, therefore, information on the number of prisoners murdered at the Buna/Monowitz concentration camp is based mostly on estimates made by former inmates. These estimates range from a minimum of 23,000 to a maximum of 40,000 dead.³ The

2 On the dispute between employees of I.G. Farbenindustrie and the American investigators concerning the destruction of I.G. Auschwitz files by I.G. Farben employee Wolfgang Alt after the war ended, see the bulky bundle of papers in: Document No. 330, Official Court File, Vol. 49, pp. 1440–1520. Archiv des Fritz Bauer Instituts, Nürnberger Nachfolgeprozess Fall VI, reel 109, Official Court File, Vol. 49, pp. 154–235.

3 The figure of 120,000 dead given by Gustav Herzog, the former head of the office that kept the prisoner card files, seems greatly exaggerated, cf. Gustav Herzog, affidavit, October 21, 1947, NI-12069. Archiv des Fritz Bauer Instituts, Nürnberger Nachfolgeprozess Fall VI, PDB 79 (g), pp. 44–53. Under examination in the I.G. Farben Trial at Nuremberg, Herzog amended the figure to 60,000 prisoners who passed through the Buna/Monowitz concentration camp. He corrected himself, saying that the figure of 120,000 prisoners referred to the total number of all prisoners in the Auschwitz concentration and extermination camp, cf. Gustav Herzog, hearing of witness, November 12, 1947. Archiv des Fritz Bauer Instituts, Nürnberger Nachfolgeprozess Fall VI, Protocol of the Main Trial (= Prot.) (e), reel 005, Vol. 11, pp. 3621–3639, here p. 3624, and, respectively, Prot. (g), reel 050, Vol. 11a, pp. 3643–3661, here p. 3646. Herzog's figure of 60,000 for the number of prisoners who passed through the Buna/Monowitz concentration camp also seems too high. According to Ervin Schulhof, a former clerk in the Work Deployment Department, between October 1942 and January 1945 around 35,000 passed through the Buna/Monowitz concentration camp, cf. Ervin Schulhof, affidavit, June 21, 1947, NI-7967. Archiv des Fritz Bauer Instituts, Nürnberger Nachfolgeprozess Fall VI, PDB 74 (g), pp. 128–133, here p. 130. The former prisoner-physician Stefan Budziaszek (Stefan Buthner) puts the number of dead at 23,000, cf. Stefan Budziaszek, affidavit, October 27, 1947, NI-12070. Archiv des Fritz Bauer Instituts, Nürnberger Nachfolgeprozess Fall VI, PDB 79 (g), pp. 54–64, here p. 61. Moses Zlotolow, on the basis of unspecified reports, speaks of approximately 40,000 dead, cf. Moses Zlotolow, affidavit, September 2, 1947, NI-11081. Archiv des Fritz Bauer Instituts, Nürnberger Nachfolgeprozess Fall VI, PDB 75 (g), pp. 204–205. Peter Hayes: *Industry and Ideology: IG Farben in the Nazi Era. New Edition*. (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge UP, 2001), p. 359, bases his figure of around 23,000 dead on the estimates of Schulhof and Budziaszek. Raul Hilberg, also with reference to Schulhof, accepts that 35,000 prisoners passed through the Buna/Monowitz concentration camp, of whom at least 25,000 died, cf. Raul Hilberg: *Die Vernichtung der europäischen Juden* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1990), p. 994. Karl Heinz Roth, taking the available sources as a basis, proceeds on the assumption that "around 30,000" prisoners were murdered, cf. Karl Heinz Roth: "I.G. Auschwitz. Normalität oder Anomalie eines kapitalistischen Entwicklungssprungs?" In: *Deutsche Wirtschaft. Zwangsarbeit von KZ-Häftlingen für Industrie und Behörden. Symposium ,Wirtschaft und Konzentrationslager'*. Hamburger Stiftung zur Förderung von Wissenschaft und Kultur, ed. (Hamburg: VSA, 1991), pp. 79–95, here p. 87. With reference to I.G. Auschwitz

Polish historian Piotr Setkiewicz, however, using surviving original sources as a basis, thinks a death toll of at least 10,000 is plausible.⁴

On the other hand, Bernd C. Wagner, in his study on the history of the Buna/Monowitz concentration camp, states that a death toll of "30,000 prisoners in all who died as a direct result of work for the IG is not too high," and of these victims, "around 25,000 men lost their lives while working in the Buna plants, in the Monowitz camp, in the prisoner infirmary, or as a result of selections."⁵ Here he relies, on the one hand, on the statements of the former prisoners Schulhof (25,000)⁶ and Buthner (23,000)⁷. Former inmate Ludwig Hess, who was present during the questioning of the previous plant manager of I.G. Auschwitz, Walther Dürrfeld, testified that the statistics kept in the camp office included "about 30,000 people" and that "20,000 people were used up," for a final tally of 10,000 to 11,000 prisoners.⁸ Dr. Horst Fischer, the SS physician responsible for the Buna/Monowitz concentration camp, estimated 20 years after the events that during his time at Buna/Monowitz alone, from spring 1943 to fall 1944, 10,000

and the associated coal mines, Bernd C. Wagner also finds the figure of "a total of 30,000 prisoners who died as a direct result of working for the IG not overstated." (Bernd C. Wagner: *IG Auschwitz. Zwangsarbeit und Vernichtung von Häftlingen des Lagers Monowitz 1941–1945* (Munich: Saur, 2000), p. 282).

- 4 Piotr Setkiewicz: *Zdziejów obozów IG Farben Werk Auschwitz 1941–1945* (Oświęcim: Państwowe Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau, 2006), pp. 156–158, p. 163. For her help with translation from Polish, I am grateful to Anna Słobodzianek. See also: Piotr Setkiewicz: "Mortality among the Prisoners in Auschwitz III-Monowitz." In: *Pro Memoria. Information Bulletin* 26 (2007), pp. 61–66.
- 5 Wagner: *IG Auschwitz*, pp. 280–282.
- 6 Ervin Schulhof, affidavit, June 21, 1947, NI-7967. Archiv des Fritz Bauer Instituts, Nürnberger Nachfolgeprozess Fall VI, PDB 74 (g), pp. 128–133, here p. 130.
- 7 Stefan Budziaszek, affidavit, October 27, 1947, NI-12070. Archiv des Fritz Bauer Instituts, Nürnberger Nachfolgeprozess Fall VI, PDB 79 (g), pp. 54–64, here p. 61.
- 8 Wagner erroneously attributes this statement by Ludwig Hess to the former plant manager of I.G. Auschwitz, Walther Dürrfeld, when he claims that "in statements by former employees of IG Auschwitz, there is mention of similar figures" (Wagner: *IG Auschwitz*, p. 281, fn. 360). The transcripts of the examination, however, make it clear that it was not Dürrfeld but Hess who asked questions of his own in the interrogation and commented on Dürrfeld's statements, mentioning the estimate of 20,000 dead. Cf. Interrogation No. 743. Examination of Dr. Walther Dürrfeld by Mr. Benvenuto von Halle, in the presence of attorney Moses L. Kove (Economies Section Sprecher Trial Team) and Ludwig Hess (former inmate of Monowitz) and stenographer Lotte Kluge on February 24, 1947, NI-11046, pp. 1–74, here p. 65. Archiv der Stiftung für Sozialgeschichte Bremen, Nürnberger Dokumente, NI-Serie. This also applies to another statement cited by Wagner, that of Christian Schneider, a former I.G. Farben board member. The figure of 30,000 dead mentioned in the examination comes from Benvenuto von Halle, the American interrogator, not from Schneider, who comments when confronted with this. See Interrogation No. 888c. Examination of Christian Schneider on March 27, 1947, by Arthur T. Cooper and Benvenuto von Halle, April 17, 1947, NI-11686, pp. 1–117, here p. 93. Archiv der Stiftung für Sozialgeschichte Bremen, Nürnberger Dokumente, NI-Serie.

prisoners died in the camp.⁹ The estimates of the surviving prisoners, according to Wagner, were “also supported by comparison with the available information on the life expectancy and selections of prisoners in Monowitz.” For 1943, he proceeds on the assumption “of an average of 3,000 prisoner laborers, for 1944, 7,000.” After “deduction of citizens of the German Reich and other non-Jewish prisoners, who had considerably better living conditions, and of the prisoner functionaries as well,” he estimates that “around 80 percent, that is, 2,400 and 5,600 respectively, belong to the category of ‘ordinary’ prisoners,” who were “exposed to the most intense pressure of the extermination machinery.” From the fact that the testimonies of former witnesses unanimously “assumed an average life expectancy of three to four months,” Wagner concludes that “the number of ‘ordinary’ prisoners was ‘winnowed’ roughly three times per year by means of death or selection.” This, he says, results “in a figure of 7,200 for 1943 and 16,800 for 1944, that is, altogether 24,000” prisoners who died at the construction site of I.G. Auschwitz, which conforms “with surprising accuracy to the information given in the witness reports.”¹⁰

Furthermore, he says, these data also are in agreement with the contemporary sources on the number of prisoners selected by SS doctors to be sent from the Buna/Monowitz prisoner infirmary to Birkenau for extermination or, in the initial phase, to the main camp. The surviving transfer lists of the Buna/Monowitz concentration camp for the period from November 1, 1942, to October 1944 contain a total of 7,293¹¹ names or numbers of prisoners who were transferred to Birkenau or, in the initial phase, to the Auschwitz main camp. Wagner rightly emphasizes that the transfer lists do not include the camp selections, which in his estimate “also must have claimed the lives of several thousand prisoners.”¹² Further, “the persons who died or were killed directly on the plant grounds also” must be added on; in the concentration camp’s book of deaths, they are to be

9 Rogatory commission hearing of Horst Fischer, StA Frankfurt am Main, 4 Js 798/64 (preliminary investigation of Ontl et al.), p. 1425. Archiv des Fritz Bauer Instituts.

10 Wagner: *IG Auschwitz*, p. 281.

11 Wagner gives the figure of 7,295, which deviates slightly from the source cited by him, probably because of a typing error. There, Herbert Ungar’s estimate of 7,293 transfers appears, cf. Herbert Ungar, affidavit, May 19, 1948, NI-15299 and NI-14997. Archiv des Fritz Bauer Instituts, Nürnberger Nachfolgeprozess Fall VI, Prosecution Exhibit 2262, reel 035, pp. 1–318.

12 Wagner: *IG Auschwitz*, p. 282, fn. 362; cf. NI-14997. Archiv des Fritz Bauer Instituts, Nürnberger Nachfolgeprozess Fall VI, Prosecution Exhibit 2262, reel 035, pp. 5–318.

estimated at "1,647, at least."¹³ Wagner views the "assumption of a figure of around 23,000 to 25,000 dead" in the Buna/Monowitz concentration camp as being confirmed by the surviving sources. Still to be added to this are the prisoners who died in the coal pits of I.G. Auschwitz at subcamps, whom Wagner estimates at "several thousand additional prisoners." Therefore a death toll of "30,000 prisoners in all who died as a direct result of work for the IG," according to Wagner, is "not too high an estimate."¹⁴

The Polish historian Piotr Setkiewicz puts the number of prisoners employed at I.G. Auschwitz during the entire construction phase at 20,000 men in total, markedly lower than the estimates long accepted by historical research.¹⁵ Opposed to that, however, is the statement of former prisoner Ervin Schulhof, whose task it was in the camp to administer the prisoner card index. According to his information, recorded in an affidavit after the liberation, the total number of Buna/Monowitz prisoner files maintained by him in the camp's office was around 35,000.¹⁶ In keeping with the lower overall number of prisoners in the Buna/Monowitz concentration camp, Setkiewicz also puts the number of dead at a minimum of 10,000 prisoners, substantially lower than assumed by the previous research. In his calculations, Setkiewicz relies solely on surviving sources, rather than on statements by survivors.¹⁷ A central source for his line of reasoning is a curve and bar chart that contains figures for the Buna/Monowitz prisoner population for the period from November 1, 1942, to December 31, 1944. The document, found in a latrine on the camp grounds in 1947, after the war was over, uses variable scaling to record the size of the camp population, the number of prisoners away from work because of sickness, the number of prisoners treated in the prisoner infirmary on an out-patient basis, the number of transfers from the Buna/Monowitz concentration camp to the main camp or to Birkenau,

13 Wagner: *IG Auschwitz*, p. 281, fn. 363. In this regard, see the book of deaths kept by the Buna/Monowitz prisoner infirmary from November 16, 1942, to January 15, 1945, Archiwum Państwowe Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau, D-AuIII-5/4, excerpts in: NI-15295. Archiv der Stiftung für Sozialgeschichte Bremen, Nürnberger Dokumente, NI-Serie.

14 Wagner: *IG Auschwitz*, pp. 281–282. The prisoners in the Buna external detachment, who also were exploited for I.G. Auschwitz, are not taken into consideration in Wagner's calculation.

15 Setkiewicz: *Zdziejów obozów*, p. 167.

16 Ervin Schulhof, affidavit, June 21, 1947, NI-7967. Archiv des Fritz Bauer Instituts, Nürnberger Nachfolgeprozess Fall VI, PDB 74 (g), pp. 128–133, here p. 130.

and the number of dead recorded in the camp and in the prisoner infirmary.¹⁸ Robert Waitz, a former prisoner-physician in the Buna/Monowitz concentration camp, who was associated with the medical school of the Université Strasbourg before and after his imprisonment, stated in 1976 that the graph had been prepared by two political prisoners, Felix Rausch and Stefan Heymann, in the office of the sick bay in the Buna/Monowitz concentration camp.¹⁹ The place of its discovery and the information provided by Waitz suggest that the source was a chart put together by prisoners as an act of resistance, to document the number of dead and thus the dimensions of the crimes perpetrated in the Buna/Monowitz concentration camp.

According to Setkiewicz's calculations, some 7,200 to 7,300 prisoners were transferred from Buna/Monowitz to Auschwitz-Birkenau and to the Auschwitz main camp, of whom at most 20 percent survived.²⁰ An additional 1,670 dead, as Setkiewicz emphasizes, are documented by the book of deaths for the Buna/Monowitz concentration camp.²¹ He gives an estimate of 800 to 1,000 dead for prisoners who were selected in places other than the prisoner infirmary and killed. In addition, there were at least three large selections in early and late January 1943 and at the end of September 1944, whose death tolls Setkiewicz calculates on the basis of the graph from the prisoner infirmary. Accordingly, an initial large selection of 1,200 prisoners took place on January 3 or 4, 1943; around 200 of them were from the prisoner infirmary. In a second selection on January 31 or February 1, 1943, 1,000 more prisoners, including around 150 from the prisoner infirmary, were seized and transferred to Auschwitz-Birkenau to be gassed. The third selection took place on September 25 or 26, 1944, and at

17 Setkiewicz: *Zdziejów obozów*, p. 156, p. 163, and Setkiewicz: "Mortality among the Prisoners."

18 Graph of the prisoner strength of the Buna auxiliary camp for the period from October 1 to December 31, 1942, Archiwum Państwowe Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau, D-Au III-3a (Monowitz).

19 Robert Waitz: "Le graphique de l'infirmerie du camp de Buna-Monowitz (Auschwitz III)." In: Benoist Ady-Brille / Pierre Paraf, eds.: *Les techniciens de la mort* (Paris: Fédération Nationale des Déportés et Internés Résistants et Patriotes, 1976), pp. 222–225.

20 Setkiewicz: *Zdziejów obozów*, p. 156 and p. 163. Thus Setkiewicz revises downward by several hundred the estimates of about 8,000 transfers given by former prisoner Antoni Makowski, cf. Antoni Makowski: "Organisation, Entwicklung und Tätigkeit des Häftlings-Krankenbaus in Monowitz (KL Auschwitz III)." In: *Hefte von Auschwitz* 15 (1975), pp. 113–181.

21 Setkiewicz: *Zdziejów obozów*, p. 153.

this time around 600 prisoners, including 214 from the prisoner infirmary, were selected.²²

The estimates of 25,000 to 30,000 dead in the Buna/Monowitz concentration camp, recorded after the war in the affidavits of surviving prisoner functionaries, and the data from the surviving residual sources remain contradictory. However, the precisely documented chart kept over an extended period of time by Felix Rausch and Stefan Heymann, recording the prisoner strength, transfers, and deaths in the camp, speaks in favor of the lower estimates made by Setkiewicz, who assumes a death toll of at least 10,000 for the Buna/Monowitz concentration camp. These secretly recorded statistics, however, document only the selections conducted by the SS in the prisoner infirmary. They did not include selections conducted in the camp in places other than the prisoner infirmary, which remain an instability factor because they are only incompletely documented in other sources that have survived. For these reasons, the number calculated by Setkiewicz—10,000 deaths at the Buna/Monowitz concentration camp—is to be regarded as absolutely the lowest minimum estimate. More research, using all available sources, is required in order to gain a more precise picture of the death tolls at the Buna/Monowitz concentration camp and at the three subcamps with the coal pits belonging to the I.G. Farben concern (Fürstengrube, Janinagrube, and Günthergrube), which were part of the Auschwitz III subcamp system.

At the I.G. Auschwitz plant construction site, many prisoners died in accidents at work, often caused by lack of occupational safety measures. The most common causes of death, however, were physical emaciation due to the boundless exploitation of the workforce, chronic hunger, and untreated illnesses. When their performance declined or they became unable to work because of prolonged illness or disability, the prisoners—at the instigation of I.G. Farben employees—were transferred to Birkenau in regularly held selections; the vast majority were gassed there. The selections took place at the camp gate when the prisoners marched out in the morning, in the prisoner infirmary, and in the roll-call square, the *Appellplatz*.²³ According to a former prisoner-physician, among the participants in the selections at the camp gate were “always several civilians who be-

22 Setkiewicz: *Zdziejów obozów*, p. 158.

23 Wagner: *IG Auschwitz*, p. 173 and p. 282.

longed to the I.G. Farben task force,²⁴ in addition to the camp commandant, the head of the protective custody camp, and the SS official responsible for the allocation of labor, and the SS camp doctor. This practice was sanctioned by SS-Obersturmbannführer Gerhard Maurer, head of Amtsgruppe D II (labor allocation) of the SS Economic and Administrative Main Office (SS-Wirtschafts- und Verwaltungshauptamt, WVHA), who had traveled to Auschwitz for negotiations regarding an increase in the deployment of prisoner labor, on February 10, 1943. Maurer assured the I.G. plant management that “all the weak prisoners can be shunted out of the way,” so that “almost full efficiency, in comparison with a German unskilled laborer, can be arrived at.”²⁵ The selections in the prisoner infirmary were directly linked to the number of workers sick and absent from work in the Buna/Monowitz concentration camp. As Dr. Friedrich Entress, an SS physician, stated: “The number of patient blocks available in Monowitz proportional to the occupancy of the entire Monowitz concentration camp meant in practical terms that no more than 5 percent of the prisoners could be admitted to the infirmary. Tables were kept to record the number of men out sick. Whenever that number exceeded the 5 percent mentioned, the camp doctor had to conduct selections.”²⁶ The average length of survival of the prisoners was three to four months in Monowitz.²⁷ At the coal pits that were operated by the I.G. Farben affiliated company Fürstengrube GmbH in the subcamps of Fürstengrube²⁸ and Janinagrube,²⁹ the concentration camp inmates had to do slave labor under even more extreme conditions, and there they survived, on average, only four to six

24 Rudolf Vitek, affidavit, March 3, 1947, NI-4830. Archiv des Fritz Bauer Instituts, Nürnberger Nachfolgeprozess Fall VI, PDB 75 (g), pp. 61–69, here p. 67.

25 I.G. Auschwitz, Wochenbericht Nr. 90/91 für die Zeit vom 8.2 bis 21.2.1943, gez. Faust, NI-14546, p. 1. Archiv der Stiftung für Sozialgeschichte Bremen, Nürnberger Dokumente, NI-Serie.

26 Friedrich Entress, affidavit, April 14, 1947, NI-6190. Archiv des Fritz Bauer Instituts, Nürnberger Nachfolgeprozess Fall VI, PDB 75 (g), pp. 39–57, here p. 59.

27 Cf. the statement of Berthold Epstein, who was deployed as a male nurse in the prisoner infirmary at Buna/Monowitz: Berthold Epstein, affidavit, March 3, 1947, NI-5847. Archiv des Fritz Bauer Instituts, Nürnberger Nachfolgeprozess Fall VI, PDB 75 (g), pp. 193–197, here p. 195; also Rudolf Vitek, affidavit, March 3, 1947, NI-4830. Archiv des Fritz Bauer Instituts, Nürnberger Nachfolgeprozess Fall VI, PDB 75 (g), pp. 61–69, here p. 66.

28 Tadeusz Iwaszko: “Das Nebenlager ‚Fürstengrube‘.” In: *Hefte von Auschwitz* 16 (1978), pp. 5–92, and Andrea Rudorff: “Fürstengrube.” In: Wolfgang Benz / Barbara Distel, eds.: *Der Ort des Terrors. Geschichte der nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslager. Bd. 5. Hinzer, Auschwitz, Neuengamme* (Munich: Beck, 2007), pp. 221–225.

29 Emeryka Iwaszko: “Das Nebenlager ‚Janinagrube‘.” In: *Hefte von Auschwitz* 10 (1967), pp. 41–65, and Andrea Rudorff: “Janinagrube.” In: Benz / Distel, eds.: *Der Ort des Terrors*, pp. 256–260.

weeks.³⁰ At Günthergrube alone, which also belonged to Fürstengrube GmbH, the mortality rate was somewhat lower, because the food supply and hygienic conditions were less abysmal.³¹

(Translated from German by Kathleen Luft)

30 According to the prisoner-physician deployed at the Janinagrube concentration camp: Erich Orlik, affidavit, June 18, 1947, NI-12385. Archiv des Fritz Bauer Instituts, Nürnberger Nachfolgeprozess Fall VI, PDB 75 N (g), pp. 18–24, here p. 20.

31 Tadeusz Iwaszko: "Das Nebenlager ‚Günthergrube‘." In: *Hefte von Auschwitz* 12 (1970), pp. 113–144, and Andrea Rudorff: "Günthergrube." In: Benz / Distel, eds.: *Der Ort des Terrors*, pp. 243–247.