«Festung Norwegen» and the slave labourers from the East

Introduction

Between 1941 and 1945, 100,000 Soviet prisoners of war were sent to Norway. More than 90,000 of these Soviet prisoners were soldiers from the Red Army. Nearly 7000 of the prisoners were civilian Soviet forced labourers, or so-called 'Ostarbeiter'. The prisoners were mainly used in the building of railroads, Highway 50, runways, and fortresses along the coastline. "Festung Norwegen" were built with a large number of bunkers and gun emplacements. The purpose was to prevent an Allied invasion. Severe labour shortages were probably the reason why Soviet prisoners of war were sent to Norway soon after the German attack on the Soviet Union in June 1941. The shortage of labour in Norway created problems for the implementation of the Germans' projects in the country they were occupying.

The German administration in Norway was occasionally met with strong opposition from Norwegian workers who refused to work for the enemy. This caused serious economic consequences for German plans. The need for labour was acute because of German projects. A lot of Danish construction workers were imported by the Organisation Todt (OT) during the summer of 1941, to start on massive building projects in Trondheim. The campaigns in the Balkans and the Soviet Union enabled the German authorities to deploy many new forced labourers for the Wehrmacht's extensive building plans in Norway. Most of the Soviet prisoners of war, about two thirds, were sent to the Northern part of Norway. There is some uncertainty regarding the number of Soviet prisoners who died in Norway during 1941-1945, but the number is probably about 13,700.

On 25 November 1942 Josef Terboven, the *Reichskommissar* in Norway, published a special order regarding the working conditions of the Eastern labourers in Norway. According to this order there were to be special conditions for the employment of these labourers. They were subject exclusively to German law. Their working conditions were to accord with German provisions, and above all the '*Verordnung über die Einsatzbedingungen der Ostarbeiter in Norwegen*' laid down by Terboven.³ The working conditions described in this order convey an impression of a carefully regulated use of the forced labourers, but for those who ended up in Norway their time there was marked by uncertainty. Much depended upon the attitude of the camp guards towards the labourers.

This article gives an overview on the building of the "Festung Norwegen" with focus on the number of Soviet prisoners of war used as labour force under Organisation Todt and Wehrmacht. Main questions are how the work was organized, the development of projects

related to infrastructure in Norway and how the prisoners was treated. The article focus on treatment, food rations and health conditions of the prisoners of war related to the German withdrawal from Northern-Norway 1944. A special focus is given on the fortifications in Northern-Norway to illustrate the treatment of the prisoners of war in this area. Sources used in this article are reports from Organisation Todt and Wehrmacht situated in the National archive Riksarkivet in Oslo. Other material is reports on organization of the prison camps, building projects and on war crimes in Norway from the Public record office in London and Bundesarchiv in Koblenz.

Organisation Todt in Norway, Einsatzgruppe Wiking

Organisation Todt (OT) was a paramilitary organization that carried out war-related building projects in the occupied countries in Europe. Einsatzgruppe Wiking administrated the activity of OT in Norway and Denmark. This department was established in summer 1942 and the main office was situated in Oslo. The head of the office was Einsatzgruppenleiter Willi Henne and he administrated the activity in both countries. Henne received orders from General Falkenhorst from Wehrmacht regarding military issues. Two deputies sorted directly under Henne. These two were engineer Max Erich Feuchtinger and chief inspector Janssen. The Soviet POWs alone made up about half of Einsatzgruppe Wiking's work force. From autumn 1942 around 50,000 Soviet prisoners of war were brought from Germany to Norway to work for Einsatzgruppe Wiking. The first foreign groups to arrive for Einsatzgrupe Wiking were neither prisoners of war nor of Soviet origin. During the summer of 1942 about 2,000 Yugoslav prisoners and 2,000 German prisoners were provided. About a thousand Polish prisoners of war who came to Norway in 1942 were also employed to work for Einsatzgruppe Wiking. The treatment of them was significantly better than that of other prisoner categories, and in contrast to these slave workers, the Poles received payment.

The office of Einsatzgruppe Wiking in Oslo was divided into several departments, each responsible for the various tasks. The two major construction projects in Norway had their own departments: Abteilung Nordlandsbahn (railroad) and Abteilung Festungsbau (the Atlantic wall). In July 1944, OT-Einsatz Finland was subordinated to Einsatzgruppe Wiking.⁵

«Festung Norwegen»

The military installations in Festung Norwegen were mainly built along the coast of Norway, and included about 310 coastal batteries, gigantic submarine pens cast in concrete in Trondheim and Bergen, as well as extensive building of other infrastructure. This included

more than 20 air fields, building of roads and railroads, 20 new power stations, an extensive net of telephone and telegraph cables, and a great number of barracks, bridges and port installations.

General Field Marshal Keitel agreed in December 1941 on the guidelines for the work on the coastal defense and the final goal of a "New Westwall". He pointed out that Norway was of very high importance regarding the development of the coastal defense. The work was supposed to be distributed between OT and OKH (High command of the German army), and the workforce would be imposed on Reichsminister Fritz Todt. OKH, by Wehrwirtschaftsund Rüstungsamt within OKW (High command of the Wehrmacht), was responsible for the providing of equipment and resources. 6 In January 1942, OT was ordered to build fortifications along the entire Atlantic coast. Because of fear of an attack by the Allied forces, Hitler sent large airforce, navy and army forces to Norway. The development of a large number of military facilities, primarily coastal bunkers and airports, was accelerated because of this fear of invasion. This was why, General List was sent to Norway few days after February 15, 1942, to investigate whether the German "protection" was sufficient in case of an invasion. List was concerned with an enhancement of the coastal artillery and the constructions of fortifications. He believed these should be built along the coast, but also inside the country along the main roads from the coast. The construction of fortifications required large labor resources and the workforce was represented by several nationalities.⁷

Wehrmachtbefehlshaber Norway, represented by Colonel Lieutenant Deyhle, gave a status report to General List on March 14, 1942. Here was an overview of the workforce that was set for the construction of fortifications. The strength included 5 German building troops and Luftwaffe was in charge of their own workforce. It was also announced that 2/3 of the Soviet prisoners of war would be used in the area of AOK (Armee-Oberkommando) Norwegen and 1/3 in the area of AOK Lapland. In addition to this, 3 Polish construction battalions, 4000 Norwegian skilled workers and another 6000 Norwegians were to be employed within the building of fortifications. Finally, a group of 12,000 skilled workers belonging to OT were mentioned. This last group was partly foreign, such as non-Norwegian labor, which was set for OKW's disposition.⁸

On May 13, 1942, Hitler gave the order to Albert Speer on Wehrmacht's construction work in Norway. With this "Befehl" Hitler would give OT responsibility for the construction of Nordlandsbanen ("Arctic Railway"), Highway 50 and various fortifications. Hitler emphasized General Lists observations during Norway's visit, when he commissioned Albert Speer to build fortifications in Norway. According to the OT figures, 12,611 prisoners of war,

6,419 Norwegians, 4,097 Germans and 2,086 civilians were employed in the work of the Atlantic wall (Festungs- und Stellungsbau) in June 1944. ¹⁰ In the so-called "Arbeitseinsatz Programm", the OT in mid-February 1943 gave an overview of how many prisoners of war it needed this year. At the construction of fortifications in Alta, Narvik, Mo i Rana, Trondheim, Bergen and Kristiansand there was a need for 6,500 men. ¹¹

Work battalions

The Kriegsgefangenen Arbeitsbataillone were distributed in different places in Norway, and the prisoners of war in these battalions worked on the two projects Nordlandsbanen (Railroad) and the Atlantic Wall. The prisoners in the various work battalions were divided into companies and then distributed on smaller camps near the workplaces. ¹² The German report of Deutscher Oberbefehlshaber Norwegen in the autumn of 1945 indicates which work battalions were in operation at the end of the war. ¹³ The battalions are presented below.

Table 1: Arbeitsbataillone 8.5.1945

Bataillon No.	Location	Numbers of prisoners of war
		wai
180	Strinda	2895
182	Fauske	1089
183	Storvollen	2522
184	Tømmernes	2758
185	Fauske	2550
186	Beisfjord	2832
187	Mo i Rana	2437
188	Drammen	3610
190	Brenne	3446
202	Sørelva	2302
203	Megarden	2412
204	Kvesmenes	1862
205	Engan	2890
206	Trondheim	unknown

Source: DOBN, 8.5.1945

Battalions No. 180, 186, 188, 204 and 206 sorted directly under the Kriegsgefangenenbezirks commander in Norway. The Sonderstab in Mo i Rana was responsible for the

Kriegsgefangenen-Arbeitsbataillone no. 182, 183, 184, 185, 187, 190, 202, 203 and 205. ¹⁴ The activities of Sonderstab O are described below. The work tasks the prisoners of war had in the Stalags and the work battalions in Norway are described in the report of Deutsche Verwaltung Alliierter Kgf., Beschäftigung der Kriegsgefangene in Norway from September 1945. Labor Battalion No. 182, 183, 184, 185, 187, 190, 202 and 203 was involved in the construction of the "Arctic railway" Nordlandsbanen. Battalions no. 180, 186, 188, 204 and 206 worked on fortifications, road construction, forestry, loading and other tasks. Some record of how much work was done by each work battalion is not available. ¹⁵ The German report states that nine work battalions were classified under Sonderstab O. Major Leiv Kreyberg states, however, that Sonderstab O was responsible for 12 work battalions. ¹⁶ The explanation for this is likely that the three Bau-und Pioneer battalions, 1, 28 and 41, listed under Sonderstab O has been characterized as work battalions.

The German report from 1945 provides a detailed description of the distribution and effort of the prisoners of war in the three Stalag (Stammlager/ main prisoner of war camp) 303, 330 and 380, but there is no information about the distribution of prisoners of war within each work battalion. For the work battalions, the number of prisoners of war is stated and not the distribution in smaller units within each battalion, as was the case for the various Stalag. Each work battalion was led by a staff with the following division: camp officer, intelligence officer, officer responsible for the prisoners' work effort, interpreter, public officials, managers of each company and the officers responsible for the individual company and their work efforts. 17 Special difficulties due to major distances in northern Norway and Finland meant that battalion commanders were given more responsibility for the treatment of Soviet prisoners of war by making decisions that should actually be taken by a superior. In addition, the strong emphasis on projects associated with the infrastructure made it necessary to constantly create new prison camps. 18 This gave the individual commander more freedom of action. The leader of the OKW, Wilhelm Keitel ordered the commanders to shoot prisoners of war on 9.7.1942 if necessary. This could be if the prisoner tried to escape from the camps. The total number of prisoners of war shot by each individual battalion is not possible to clarify.

Building and pioneer battalions

In the German report from 1945, information was given on the number of prisoners of war, former campsite placement, new placement of the camp for these building and pioneer battalions. For the last three battalions, the number of non-commissioned officers and

guardship is also recorded. The table below shows the geographical location of these battalions.

Table 2: Bau-und Pionerbataillone, stand: 8.5.1945

Construction and engineer	1	2	28	41	427	428	429
Batallion No.							
Number of POW's	539	475	750	1151	690	699	900
Earlier location	Stamsund	Finneid	Rognan	Kjemåga			
New location	Straumen	Fauske	Langånes	Lønsdal	Terningmoen	Rislamoen	Kvesmenes
Number of guards					165	114	230
Number of other personel					48	48	19

Source: DOBN, Verwaltung alliierter KGF, 8.5.1945

As the table shows, battalion no. 3 is not included in the overview of May 8, 1945.¹⁹ However, this battalion is listed in the material "Bestand an Kriegsgefangenen" in the period 1941-1944. A total of 1656 prisoners of war were registered in Battalions no. 1, 2 and 3 on September 1st, 1942.²⁰ The latest information about battalion no. 3 was given on December 1, 1944. According to this information, 3,228 Soviet and 1,593 Polish prisoners of war were in battalions nos. 1, 2, 3, 28, 41 and 30 (Polish prisoners of war).²¹ All building and pioneer battalions sorted directly under the Kriegsgefangenen bezirkskommandant. However, after the Germans left Finland in the fall of 1944, responsibility for building and pioneer battalions no. 1, 28 and 41 was transferred to Sonderstab O in Mo i Rana.

Building and Pioneer Battalion no. 2, 28 and 41 were employed in the work of the Nordlandsbanen. The other battalions were used for the construction of fortresses and road construction in Lyngen. Battalion nr.1 worked on the construction of fortifications at Lyngen sea front and the battalions 427, 428 and 429 worked on fortifications and roads in Lyngen landfront. In each building and pioneer battalion there was a camp commander. The officer staff of these battalions included a Colonel Lieutenant, a major and five captains. Furthermore, there was an adjutant, an official for special service, companion leaders with deputies and supply officers in each battalion. In addition to these battalions, Kriegsgefangenen-Bau und Arbeits-Bt. no. 30 was also sent from Lübeck via Hamburg and to Norway (Vanse / Lista / Råde). This battalion consisted mainly of Polish prisoners of war, but as long as it was placed in Germany it was probably with both Soviet and Polish prisoners. 23

The consequence of the German Gebirgs-AOK 20 withdrawal from Finland and into northern Norway in 1944 was that there were two German armies in Norway. The result of this was that within the prison camp system there were two chiefs for the prisoners of war.

OKH/Genst.d.H (High command of the German Army) gave the following regulation for Gebirgs-AOK 20 already on January 11, 1944, on the organization of the Prisoner of War prison. It should: 1) relieve the Kriegsgefangenen Bezirkskommandant.Q (Lapland), 2) reinforce O.Qu.-Abt. (Geb.) AOK 20 with a chief in charge of the prisoners of war system, 3) set the maximum number of officers and officials at Stalag 309 and 322 to 10 or possibly 6.²⁴ Colonel Buchweiser from OKH / PA was appointed "Beauftragter für das Kriegsgefangenenwesen "in Finland on 1st March 1944.25 Buchweiser relieved with this "Kriegsgefangenen Bezirkskommandant Q", which was dissolved on 29 February.²⁶ Responsibly, Buchweiser was equated with the Bezirkskommandant in Norway, which at this time was Reibnitz. As Beauftragter (Commissioner) for the Prisoners of War, Buchweiser was a counselor for AOK in cases involving prisoners of war and Hiwis (Hilfswillige/volunteers among prisoners). In addition, he was Fachvorgesetzter (responsible for the prisoners' duties) in Stalag 309 (Salla) and Stalag 322 (Kirkenes). 27 According to Buchweiser's service instructions, his main tasks were: (a) not allowing increased resources for warfare to result in reduced effort of the prisoners of war; (b) prevent escape attempts among prisoners of war; (c) provide for the security of guardianship. Buchweiser was also the chief of Sonderstab O, Mo i Rana.

The various Stalags in Norway served both as depots and workplaces for Soviet prisoners of war. Sick prisoners could also be placed here. The Stalag was responsible for the administrative part and had no authority to issue orders for the prisoners of war. They were responsible for controls regarding the prisoners of war. OT was responsible for the utilization of the labor of the prisoners assigned to their projects and accommodation of prisoners who sorted under the labor battalions. Wehrmacht, by the Stalag, was responsible for guarding and disciplin, rations and clothing, medical assistance and legal matters. It was consequently Wehrmacht who had the formal overall responsibility for the Soviet prisoners of war. As regards to the relationship between Stalag (Wehrmacht) and the Workbattalion (Organisation Todt), OT was to some extent its own autonomous power block, but was dependent on Wehrmacht in terms of security and camp equipment. The Stalag system was central to the allocation and oversight of the guards. The individual commander in the prison camps was responsible for how the orders from OKW were followed, and his decisions therefore had a decisive impact on the camp conditions and living conditions for the prisoners of war. A special feature of the prison system in Norway was the strong emphasis on infrastructure projects, which made it necessary to still establish new camps. The fact that the army's Bezirkskommandant did not succeed in carrying out the task as a coordinating institution

between the three defense branches created a difficult situation for the Stalag. Their role was to be an overall and coordinating function of the prison system, but the result was that they ended up serving the army and the relationship with Luftwaffe, Marine and OT was characterized by unclear boundaries.

Treatment and food rations

The former Soviet prisoner Anatoloj Sadyrev was in the prison camp at Fjell fortifications (Batterie Fjell) outside Bergen. He says that the work was inhuman and in addition they were given food in a bad way. The guards put leftovers on the fortifications for the prisoners to throw themselves over them. This gave the fascists entertainment, they laughed and sometimes they accidentally shot one of the prisoners. ²⁸ The prisoners were mainly from the Soviet Union, sent from the eastern front. These were kept locked in a special camp, and all contact with the prisoners was strictly forbidden for the civilian population. Nevertheless, there are many stories about civilians who helped the "Russians" with food. It is unclear how many prisoners who were staying here. Between 1,500 and 2,000 prisoners may have been in the camp.

The withdrawal of 20. Gebirgsarmee from Finland via northern Norway and on to southern Norway in October 1944 resulted in changes in the placement of Soviet prisoners of war during the relocation. Around 8-9 thousand Soviet prisoners of war were forced, under General Jodl's leadership, to march about 30 km a day. ²⁹ In Skibotn in Northern Norway, Soviet prisoners of war were set to build fortifications, but due to inadequate nursing and consequently impaired health conditions, fewer were able to work. The state of the war prisoners was particularly bad from December 1944, the divisional doctor of the 6. Gebirgs Division (Brunner) reported. The reports also showed that in February 1945, 20% of the prisoners were too ill for working, in March the proportion rose to 30% and by April half of the prisoners of war were unable to work. ³⁰ The reason for the poor health of the prisoners was that the food rations had been reduced.

General Jodl at Armee Abteilung Narvik and a military doctor indicated that the German soldiers received rations of about 3,166 calories per day. These rations were sometimes reduced, but they were never lower than 2,750 calories. The prisoners of war who worked under the same conditions as Jodl's soldiers received rations of just 1,650 calories per day in November 1944. In December, their ration was increased to 2,350 calories. Then the rations were reduced to only 1,330 calories in April 1945. During the period from January to April, 300 prisoners of war died in the Skibotn area. In April 1945, General Jodl announced

that hundreds of prisoners of war would not survive on the low food rations. He then ordered that the rations for prisoners of war who were unable to work should be cut down, and the surplus should be given to those who could still work. Jodl defended his actions after the war and claimed that the reduction of Soviet prisoners' rations was ordered from Oslo. Further he pointed out that the measure was necessary because of the catastrophic German food situation. Increasing deaths among the prisoners Jodl described as undesirable, but the most important thing was that he needed sufficient manpower to establish the German position in the Skibotn area. According to the orders from Oslo, the position should be completed on the first of May, but due to the miserable health situation of the Soviet prisoners of war, it had to be postponed for three months.³² Given the need for labor, Jodl's order was not a logical solution since it resulted in fewer workers and postponements. However, since sick prisoners could not contribute anything, the solution was logical after German priorities. And the availability of labor in the form of new groups of prisoners of war gave Jodl the opportunity to ignore the deaths.

Building of fortifications in Northern Norway

To illustrate some of the brutal treatment of the prisoners of war in Northern-Norway this article will focus on three fortifications situated in Northern-Norway. This is Spåkenes coastal fortress and Trondenes fortress in Troms, and Batterie Dietl at the island Engeløy in Nordland.

Spåkenes coastal fortress

The work to build the bunkers there began in 1941. The majority of the building work was carried out by Soviet prisoners of war, but German prisoners (deserters and others) were also sent to work on the bunkers. Some 200–300 local Norwegians, participated in the work. The prisoners were often put to work carrying sandbags shipped from Skjervøy to the building site from the port. Most prisoners of war held in the prison camp at Spåkenes were Soviet, Yugoslavian, and Polish. The road to the local cemetery ran through the prison camp, and villagers were able to witness the conditions at the camp first hand. Local residents occasionally attempted to help the prisoners by smuggling in food. A torture chamber and gallows were built near the camp. Presumably, 15 prisoners were executed either by shooting or by hanging.

Trondenes fortress

In 1942, work began on the construction of Trondenes fortress (Battery Trondenes, with 40,6 cm guns as Battery Dietl) and its gigantic Adolf Gun, which was intended to secure the northern sea approach to Narvik. The heavy labour was done by captured Soviet soldiers, in complete contravention of international law. Primitive wood huts were built for these prisoners in 1943, and they were put to work under the most horrendous conditions. Konstantin Seredintsev came to Trondenes in February 1943, and died three months later of poor general health and circulation failure, undoubtedly as a result of the hard labour and lack of food. However, his diary was found after the war, and his descriptions of the conditions are one of the most important sources of information, helping us to understand what happened in the prison camp on Trondenes. At the sight of the dirty, cold and cramped huts, he writes 'now it is clear to me that we have been brought here to die'. Just outside the graveyard wall, north of Trondenes Church, is a monument to those who died. A classic Soviet monument built of red stone commemorates the 800 men who lost their lives.

Batterie Dietl at Engeløy

Construction started on Batterie Dietl in the summer of 1942. By August 1943 two of the guns were operational, and in January 1944 the third and final gun was in place. However, building work continued at the battery right until the end of the war. Before the war, the island of Engeløya, where the battery is sited, was a remote community with neither electricity nor a road network, and so quays and roads to the coastal fort had to be built to enable the transport and handling of the heavy guns. The civilian population of Bø, the village close to the battery, was forcefully evacuated with only three days' notice in the summer of 1943. 1700 prisoners of war from the Soviet Union and several hundred forced labourers from Norway and other European countries were set to work to build Batterie Dietl. The mortality rate among the Soviet prisoners was extremely high, with more than 500 deaths, most during the first winter. Gradual improvements in the food and medical care did, however, radically reduce mortality levels. Some Norwegians also took paid employment at Batterie Dietl. Prisoners at Batterie Dietl was registrated under both work battalions no. 182 and 186.

Conclusion

"Festung Norwegen" required a high number of workers. Different categories of workers were attached to this building activity. The largest group was the Soviet prisoners of war. There were also a large number of Norwegian skilled workers employed within the building of the fortifications. The administration of the building activity and responsibility for the

prisoners and workers was given to Organisation Todt and Wehrmacht. Wehrmacht had the formal overall responsibility for the Soviet prisoners of war. The relationship between Stalag (Wehrmacht) and the Workbattalion (Organisation Todt) was organized the way that OT to some extent was its own autonomous power block, but they were dependent on Wehrmacht in terms of security and camp equipment. The prisoners of war system with the Stalags in a coordinating role towards Organisation Todt resulted in a system with unclear boundaries.

The high death rates at the largest fortifications sites in Norway gives us an indication on the heavy labour performed by the prisoners of war. Many prisoners died of disease, mistreatment and exhaustion. Some were also shot to death during attempted escape. The high death rate indicates also the high pressure on the labour force, building the fortifications was very dangerous and very exhausting work. OT was also very busy completing the projects and this increased the death rate. The prisoners were regarded as work animals who could only expect fair and humane treatment if they followed German orders. The large number of prisoners sent to Norway gave the Germans a very high availability of labor with new groups of prisoner and they could therefore ignore the high death rate in the camps. The efforts of the prisoners of war contributed greatly to the development of the Norwegian infrastructure, and thus in the long term helped to modernize Norway. After the liberated Soviet prisoners had left Norway, they soon dropped out of our national war history. The focus shifted from the memory of the fate of the prisoners of war on Norwegian soil during the war years to thoughts about their fate after they had returned home. The Soviet prisoners of war were no longer considered victims of the Nazis, but victims of Stalinism.

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- ³⁰ PRO, War Crimes in Norway, War Crimes Investigation Branch, Norway 32 Eaton Square, London, S.W.1. 21st March 1946: 52.
- ³¹ PRO, War Crimes in Norway, War Crimes Investigation Branch, Norway 32 Eaton Square, London, S.W.1. 21st March 1946: 51.
- ³² PRO, WO 331/24, Record of the conference between the commander of Armee-Abteilung Narvik, General Jodl, and the Allied Zone Commander, Brigadier Saunders. 21. Juni 1945.
- ³³ Hellesnes 1950, pp. 211-212.
- ³⁴ Soleim 2009, p. 3.
- 35 http://www.hamsuns-rike.no/?id=722540610&News=47

¹⁸ RH/20/20/224, Oberkommando der 20.Gebirgs-Armee, O.Qu./Qu.2, Nr.564/42 g., Behandlung sowj. Kriegsgefangener, 9.7.42.