



An early view of the crematorium (before the inner courtyard was fenced in). The dissection room of the pathology department was located in the annex on the left.

Photo: Buchenwald Concentration Camp Records Office, October 1942 / Musée de la Résistance et de la Déportation, Besançon



Door to the crematorium courtyard. The crematorium was surrounded by a wooden palisade, April 1945  
Private archive of Heinz Stüber, Reutlingen



Human remains in one of the crematory ovens, 16 April 1945  
Photo: Margaret Bourke-White / Time & Life Pictures



## CREMATORIUM

### Building

With its high chimney, the crematorium towered over everything else in the area. More than the chimney, however, it was the smoke that remained in the inmates' memories. Until 1940, the SS had dead inmates cremated in the municipal crematorium of Weimar. It was only in the months following the outbreak of war – when hundreds of inmates died every week – that the SS had the first crematory ovens set up in the camp. These mobile ovens had actually been designed for burning cattle cadavers in the context of pasture farming. They were placed at the SS's disposal by the Topf & Sons company based in nearby Erfurt. This company went on to develop special ovens for the requirements of the SS; by mid 1940 construction work on the first permanent crematorium building had been completed. During the mass executions of Soviet prisoners of war in the autumn of 1941, this facility likewise no longer sufficed to meet the demand, and it was expanded, a cellar being dug out be-

neath it, and – in 1942 – equipped with ovens constructed according to new Top & Sons designs. Now several corpses could be burned simultaneously without interruption between loads. Ten ovens of the same type were later installed in Auschwitz-Birkenau. From as early as 1943, the SS had a large proportion of the ashes dumped like refuse in the Saale River or the vicinity of the camp. In February 1945, they could no longer obtain fuel for the operation of the crematorium, and as a result the corpses piled up and the number of rats increased dramatically. With Himmler's permission, corpses were buried from mid March onward in mass graves on the south slope of Ettersberg Mountain.

► [www.topfundsoehne.de](http://www.topfundsoehne.de)

### The Replica of the “Facility for Shooting in the Back of the Neck”

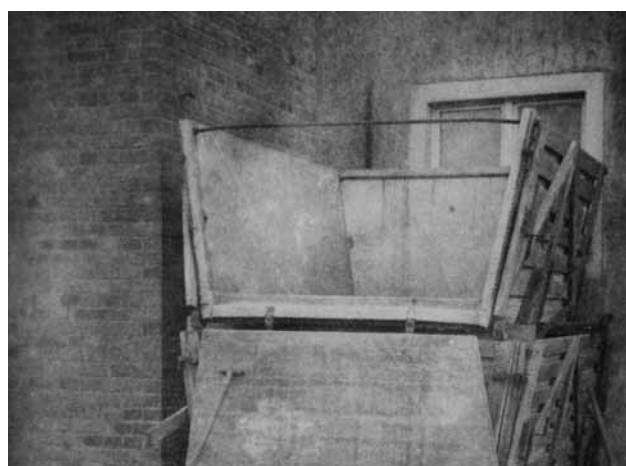
The flat-roofed crematorium annex was originally a latrine. In the 1960s, the so-called “facility for shooting in the back of the neck” was reconstructed by a former inmate and installed here. The actual site of the executions carried out with this facility was a former stone stable outside the camp downhill from the SS caserns. There the SS systematically murdered Soviet prisoners of war by shooting them in the back of the neck. The crime was carried out in compliance with the Commissar Order (Kommissarbefehl) issued by the supreme commander of the Wehrmacht. SS security service detachments rounded up officers, political commissars, intellectuals and Jews in the prisoner-of-war camps, and special SS detachments – in Buchenwald Detachment 99 – carried out the executions in the respective concentration camp. The shooting facility consisted of a series of rooms designed to make the unsuspecting POWs think it was a station for medical examinations. The interior of the stable had been altered in such a way that the executioner and his victim did not encounter one another. The prisoner was ordered to go and stand in front of a yardstick of the type mounted on the wall in every doctor's office. This yardstick was constructed with a slit, through which an SS man standing in a small adjacent chamber then shot the victim in the back of the neck. The shots were drowned out with loud marching music. The transport of the corpses to the crematorium was carried out in zinc-lined



The stable in which the facility for execution by shooting was located, April 1945  
Private archive of Heinz Stüber, Reutlingen



Yardstick in the reconstructed facility for execution by shooting  
Photo: Peter Hansen / Buchenwald Memorial Collection



The prisoners of war who had been murdered in the stable by shooting in the neck were transported to the crematorium in zinc-lined corpse containers such as those seen here, April 1945. Stadtarchiv Reutlingen, photo collection



Camp survivors explaining the strangling method in the execution cellar of the crematorium, 18 April 1945  
National Archives, Washington



Dissection room of the pathology department in the crematorium annex. The photo is in an album Camp Commander Hermann Pister had compiled in late 1943.

Photo: Buchenwald Concentration Camp Records Office, 1942/43 / Musée de la Résistance et de la Déportation, Besançon



Pathology department office with specimens. The photo is in an album Camp Commander Hermann Pister had compiled in late 1943. Photo: Buchenwald Concentration Camp Records Office, 1942/43 / Musée de la Résistance et de la Déportation, Besançon

receptacles. According to statements made by the SS head of crematoriums, as many as 400 were brought for cremation every night.

More than 8,000 Soviet prisoners of war were murdered in this manner.

### Execution Cellar

Behind the crematorium is a courtyard surrounded by a wooden palisade. The SS did not want to be disturbed as they carried out their killings and handled the corpses. A gallows was located here for a long time. The stairs lead downward into the former mortuary cellar. Here the SS strangled more than 1,000 persons on wall hooks. Most of them were forced labourers arrested by the Gestapo and brought to Buchenwald from Weimar Prison for killing.

### Pathology Department

Today the crematorium is entered by way of the pathology department courtyard likewise enclosed by a wooden palisade. It was here that the corpses were collected. In two dissection rooms, inmates were forced to remove everything of value from the corpses, which were considered Reich property: gold fillings were broken out of their jaws for the Reich treasury, anatomical specimens taken for universities. One Buchenwald specialty was the production of macabre articles which the SS men gave one another as gifts: human skin, preferably tattooed, was cut from the corpses, tanned and employed to make items of everyday use. Photos of U.S. Army soldiers showing lampshades and shrunken heads to the citizens of Weimar on 16 April 1945 as evidence of the crimes committed in Buchenwald went around the world.

### A Place of Commemoration

Ernst Thälmann, the last chairman of the German Communist party in the Weimar Republic, was murdered in the back courtyard of the crematorium in August 1944. It was for this reason that, unlike the crematoria in other concentration camp memorials in Germany (Bergen-Belsen, Neuengamme, Ellrich) – where they disappeared as unwelcome scenes of crime – the facility in Buchenwald was left standing in the GDR after 1950 as place of commemoration. The commemorative plaque dedicated to Thälmann in 1954 – the first such plaque to be dedicated in the memorial – is still on view in the back courtyard. Today the former camp crematorium is a central site for the mourning and commemoration of all who died and were murdered. Since there are no graves for the 56,000 victims of Buchenwald, the crematorium now serves as their funerary monument. Here their descendants and other visitors lay wreaths, flowers and stones in their honour. At the same time, the cremation ovens continue to be the most visible and most indisputable evidence of the industrial and eliminatory character of the National Socialist crimes.



American soldiers in front of a trailer loaded with corpses in the inner courtyard of the crematorium, 18 April 1945  
National Archives, Washington



"Thälmann Pioneers" in the back courtyard of the crematorium on the anniversary of the death of Ernst Thälmann, 18 August 1957  
Photo: Ernst Schäfer / Buchenwald Memorial Collection



The crematory ovens in the Buchenwald crematorium  
Photo: Naomi Tereza Salmon / Buchenwald Memorial Collection