

German city plans to accommodate refugees in former concentration camp

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The German city of Schwerte in the Ruhr region announced early last week that it plans to accommodate around 20 refugees in a former SS barracks on one of the sites of the World War II Buchenwald concentration camp.

During the Nazi dictatorship, the German state rail company's largest repair yard was located on the outskirts of Schwerte. The concentration camp was directly connected to it. Forced labourers from Poland and Eastern Europe were herded into the barracks, with at times more than 700 crammed into small spaces. Their labour was exploited by the rail company to carry out repairs.

In total, there were 136 separate camps that were part of the Buchenwald concentration camp at the end of the Second World War. The forced labourers confined there were used mainly for work in the munitions industry. It is exactly 70 years since the camp at Schwerte was shut down in January 1945. Since 1990, a memorial and plaque on site commemorate the fate of the forced labourers.

Schwerte's decision provoked wide-ranging criticism. The head of the council of refugees for North Rhine-Westphalia, Birgit Naujocks, stated she found the plan dubious and repulsive. It recalled "horrible memories and gruesome images." At the same time, she expressed appreciation for the need in some places to find emergency solutions for the accommodation of refugees. But she couldn't understand why the city didn't put up temporary cabins.

The head of the Buchenwald at Weimar memorial, Rikola-Gunnar Lüttgenau, told MDR Thuringen radio that it was a bad solution. Sending refugees to industrial areas with such an historical burden was incompatible with the values of a caring and welcoming culture.

Even North Rhine-Westphalia's state president, Hannelora Kraft (Social Democrats, SPD), and Minister

for Work, Integration and Social Affairs Guntram Schneider (SPD) appealed to the city of Schwerte to abandon its plan. But they were more concerned with the media uproar abroad rather than with the refugees. "We can't afford headlines like this," Schneider commented.

In spite of a broad range of criticism and protest, Schwerte intends to stick to its plan. At a press conference on January 16, Schwerte mayor Heinrich Böckelühr (Christian Democrats, CDU) railed against "outside advisers." The city council, including the fractions of the SPD, CDU and Greens, with the sole exception of the Left Party fraction, is firmly behind the proposal. There was simply no other space available, and it was the "quickest and most cost-effective solution."

As further justification, it was explained that the examination of air reconnaissance pictures confirmed that the buildings to be used were only established in the 1950s, meaning that the original SS barracks were not involved. In addition, refugees from the Balkans had already been housed on the grounds of the former concentration camp in the 1990s, and for a time there was also a Waldorf kindergarten and artist's studio.

The honorary spokesman of the asylum-seekers' working group in Schwerte, Hans-Bernd Marks, supported the city's decision. "We have no problem with it," he told the *Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*, justifying this by saying that the available refugee homes were overburdened and a temporary solution was welcome. He then added, "Where do we begin and where do we stop, if we cleared every building Nazis were in?"

The plan to house refugees, who have just escaped life-threatening conditions in wars, civil wars and persecution in countries like Syria, Iraq, Ukraine or African countries, on the grounds of a former concentration camp, is cynical and abhorrent. It shows that the ruling elite will shrink from nothing in their assault on the working class, the most vulnerable section of which is immigrants.

The action in Schwerte is symptomatic of the brutal and inhumane refugee policy of the German government and local authorities, the main goal of which is deterrence.

Only last September, it was revealed that refugees housed at facilities in North Rhine-Westphalia had been humiliated and abused by security personnel. Videos from the Burbach camp showed how a refugee was compelled under threats from a security guard to lie on a damaged and dirty mattress, and how a guard pressed his boot into the neck of a tied-up refugee lying on the ground.

Despite promises to improve conditions at refugee homes, nothing has changed. If anything, the situation for refugees has gotten worse.

On January 12, WDR television showed a documentary, titled “Welcome: How Germany is overwhelmed by the flood of refugees” by Florian Bauer and Naima el Moussaoui, as part of its “*die story* (the story)” series. The title was somewhat misleading, because the programme made clear that the issue was not that the authorities were overburdened, but rather that there was a systematic policy against refugees.

Letters from municipalities and from the district government of Arnsberg to North Rhine-Westphalia’s interior minister, Ralf Jäger, were repeatedly cited in the film referring to the lack of places and facilities for the accommodation of refugees, as well as the completely unsustainable situation in refugee camps packed full. Some of the letters were five years old, but nothing has happened.

The film began with scenes from the processing centre in Dortmund, where refugees from Syria, Iraq, Ukraine, and East and West Africa arrive every day. These are all countries where the German government is helping stoke the crises that drive thousands of people to flee.

Since the institution only has 350 beds, they attempt to send the vast majority of refugees who arrive to other accommodation on the same day. Giving the refugees social care is impossible, as a social worker explained to the film team. They can only be processed.

The next stop in the film is a refugee home in the Rheindahlen district of Mönchengladbach. The dilapidated wooden barracks on a former NATO base are referred to by the refugees living there simply as “the camp”. Three to five people have to live in an area of 15 square metres. Everything is falling apart, from the cooking plates in the rooms to the hallways and the sanitary facilities. One hundred sixty people have to share 12 filthy, stinking toilets and showers. The Mönchengladbach city authorities apparently have no

money for renovations.

A refugee from Nigeria, whose sister was murdered by Boko Haram and who had completed a daring and perilous journey, showed the film team his room that he shared with three other refugees. “I am now where I wanted to go, but it isn’t like I imagined it would be”, he commented. “It is inhumane.”

According to the film team, numerous accommodation centres for refugees in Germany are just as bad. A further example from Cologne features a scene where the social department is planning to house 200 refugees in an empty hall in a disused market in an industrial zone. Toilets and showers will be located in cabins outside the hall.

The film also shows the mistreatment of a Yezidi family by the German authorities. Every time they have an appointment with the foreign office, they are woken without warning early in the morning. The authorities repeatedly threaten them with deportation.

Several months ago, the persecution of the Yezidis in Iraq served as the pretext for the German government to supply the Kurdish Peshmerga with weapons and to send soldiers to northern Iraq to train them.

Half of the refugees who come to Germany languish in dormitory accommodation for years. In North Rhine-Westphalia and other states, there are no standards for their accommodation. Their terrible treatment is not linked to the overburdening of the authorities, but rather is deliberately aimed at serving as a deterrent to others.



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