

A hidden City of Gloom and Ghosts

Most of us, when references are made to Hitler, the dictator, probably visualize him in a Berlin context; as the conquering warlord, taking the salute on Berlin's 'Via Triumphalis', the East-West Axis; as the Head of State receiving foreign dignitaries in his sumptuous New Reichs Chancellery or we see him presiding over the Olympic Games as the benevolent father figure. Or perhaps what leaps first to mind is the sinister despot managing his crumbling realm from the depths of the Führerbunker, commanding phantom legions, existing only as pins on a map.



Photo: Parade down the East-West Axis on April 20, 1939, in honor of Hitler's fiftieth birthday, the grand stand erected just on the western side of the Charlottenburger Tor.

In fact, apart from 1945, Hitler spent very little time in Berlin¹ during the war, preferring to stay at the Berghof, his mountain resort in Obersalzberg, or at his various FHQs² spread across territories under German supremacy.

**“Hitler himself, wherever he went,
first of all issued orders for the building of bunkers
for his personal protection.”**

The bunker compound near Rastenburg in former East Prussia, dubbed 'Wolfsschanze' and commonly referred to as the Wolfs Lair³ in western historians' phraseology, served as Hitler's forward headquarter during the period he was running the Russian campaign. The warlord spent more than two full years of the Second World War there and left reluctantly, only when the approach of the Red Army made it foolhardy to prolong the stay.

Being just one of several⁴ such FHQs, the Lair has nonetheless attained recognition and fame beyond all the others as the scene for the most elaborate attempt on the Führers life, when Colonel von Stauffenberg, on July 20, 1944, tried to blow up the Moloch and his henchmen.⁵



Photo: Remnants of the reinforced conference hut where the attempt took place. In the foreground a plaque commemorating colonel Stauffenberg

Area and construction

During the time of planning and construction of the Wolfsschanze, East Prussia was the easternmost part of the Nazi realm, strategically situated a mere 80 kilometers from the Russian border. The site lay in very rural surroundings in the woodland of the Masurian Lakes.

Wolfsschanze was built before the war with Soviet Russia. As the facility lay almost within spitting distance of the soon-to-be adversary - the construction site was i.e. clearly visible from the air on the regular Berlin-Moscow route - the building project was baptized 'Chemische Werke Askania' [Chemical Works Askania] to provide the necessary smokescreen. Construction started in 1940; was expanded and reinforced in 1942-43 and again in summer and autumn of 1944, adding a bunker for Hermann Göring and strengthening key personnel bunkers. Hitler's personal bunker i.e. had layer upon layer of 'roof' added to it until it reached a thickness of 11-14 meters [data vary].

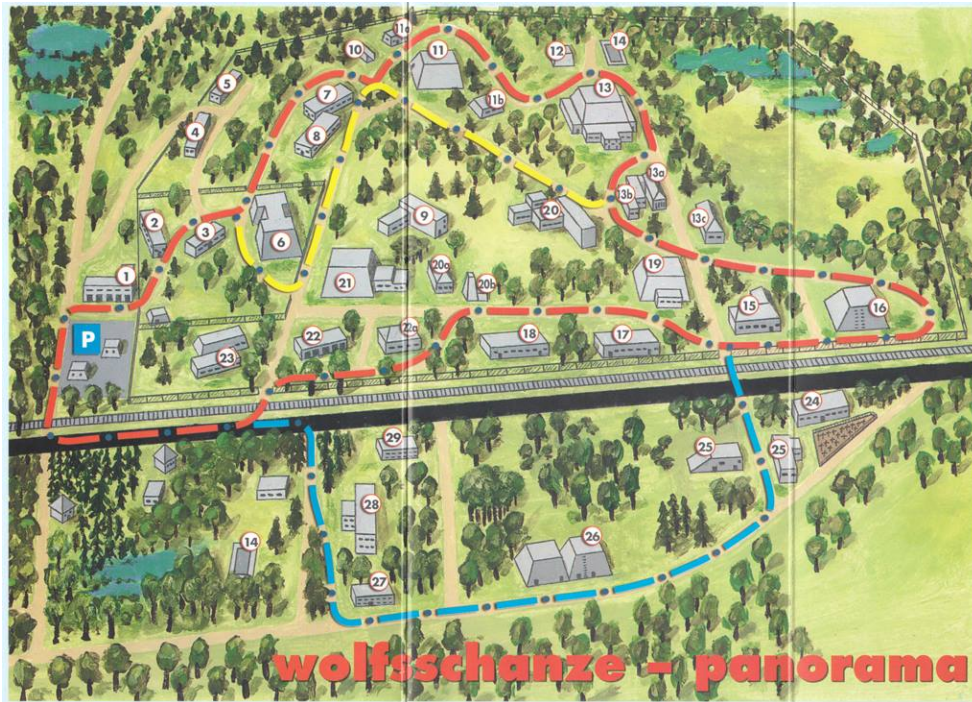
A few facts:

The construction of Wolfsschanze was consuming in both materials and manpower:

- ▶ **173.260 ton of concrete was poured.**
- ▶ **Organization Todt and subcontractors used 1.700.000 working days on the site.**

[However, these figures are dwarfed compared to 'Anlage Riese' in Silesia, which consumed twice the amount of both manpower and material. Said facility was never finished.]

The camp ground was comparable in size to a country village of the day, sporting its own railroad station and even an airfield a few kilometers away; a central heating/power plant; water supply and drainage; a post office; a hospital; a cinema; a barber shop; two 'Kasinos' [German military parlance for a mess hall], along with a sauna, an exercise area and accommodation for visitors.



A map of the Wolfsschanze. Hitler's bunker is number 13. Number 3 is the barrack where Stauffenberg detonated the bomb on July 20, 1944. For reasons of clarity, camouflage is omitted. Source: Official tourist brochure.

Camouflage was elaborate state-of-the-art, with vegetation planted on huts and bunkers; walkways and roads concealed with netting and the straight lines of the barbed wire fences broken up here and there with artificial trees. Watchtowers were made up to look like pine trees. All completed, the almost four square kilometers encampment was now very hard to detect from the air.⁶

**“In these military surroundings
he was in his element”**

The FHQ was protected by two battalions of crack FBB⁷ troops and strong anti-aircraft positions; the soggy area to the east was bad country for tanks should the worst happen. The sparse population in the surrounding area was mainly of ethnic German origin, reducing both the number of 'tongues' available to enemy intelligence and limiting the risk of guerrilla activity.

The marshy conditions were however also ideal for all kinds of bothersome insects; guards on duty had to wear mosquito nets and gloves not to be eaten alive and the summers were hot and with a humidity that really got to you.

A lush and diverse wildlife contributed to the excitement when rabbits, foxes or other animals set off one of the thousands of land mines distributed along the some 10 kilometer barbed wire fences⁸ and in the woods.



The famous photo where Hitler is greeting General Bodenschanz at Wolfsschanze while Stauffenberg is standing to attention. Of special interest are the umbrella-shaped artificial 'trees', forming part of the camouflage.

Hitler and his retinue occupied the facility just two days after the launch of Operation Barbarossa, the assault on Russia on June 22, 1941. The Spartan, military style accommodations was an unpleasant surprise for some of the civil staff, i.e. Hitler's secretaries. Christa Schröder, one of Hitler's 'old hands', had some qualms about her new working environment. In a letter of June 28, 1941, to a friend, she offers this description;

"...the bunkers are dispersed through the woods, divided up into work sections ... our dormitory bunker is the size of a railway compartment and has light-colored wood paneling. There is a discreet washbasin, above it a mirror, a small Siemens radio with a wide choice of stations. The bunker even has electric heating, not yet connected up, eye-catching wall lamps and a narrow hard mattress filled with eel-grass ... the noise from the fan in the bunker disturbed us and the draught passed continuously over our

heads, which I always hate especially because of the rheumatic pains I have so often..."

According to Christa, the Führer himself wasn't all that enthusiastic either:

"Hitler himself used to say they'd chosen him the cheapest, most marshy, mosquito-ridden and climatically unpleasant place possible ... in summer, I had to agree that my boss had a point, because myriads of mosquitoes plagued us, sucking our blood. The air was heavy and humid and sometimes quite difficult to breathe."



Photo: Christa at her typewriter at the Wolfsschanze

Some eighteen months later, a young woman from Munich, Gertraud Humps, came to work for the Führer at Wolfsschanze. Her first impressions of the area were not all that positive either:

"I wasn't entirely happy with my new quarters. I'm someone who likes light and fresh air, and I just can't stand the atmosphere of a bunker. I was working in a room with small windows during the day, but I had to sleep in an uninviting, windowless little cell ... air came through a ventilator in the ceiling. If you closed it, you felt you were stifling, if you opened it the air wheezed noisily as it came into the little room and you might have been sitting in an aeroplane."

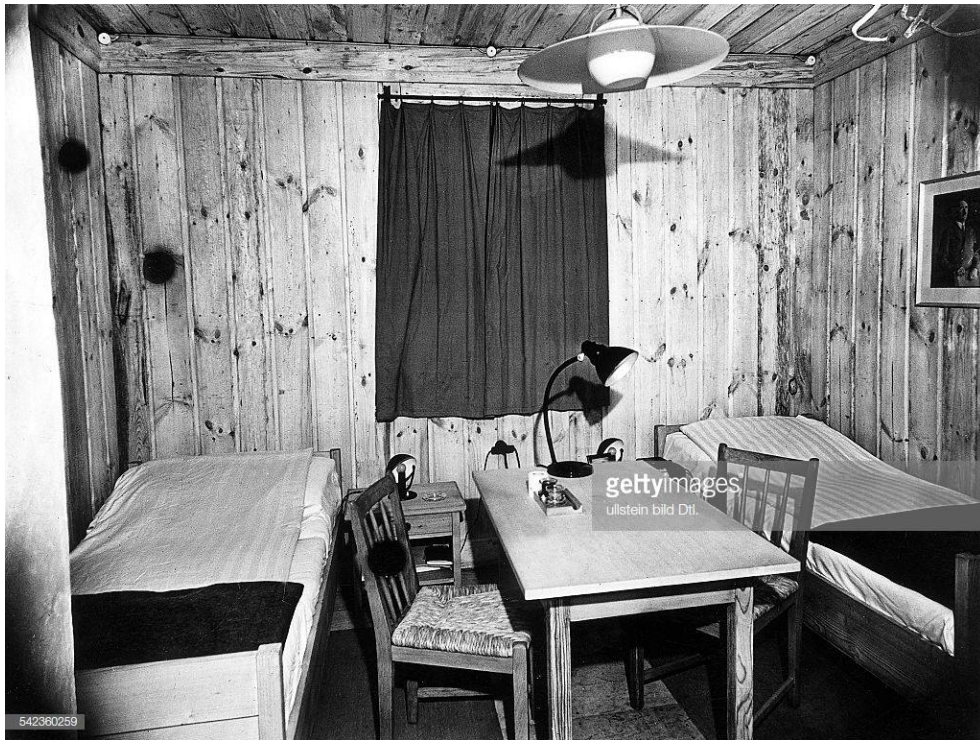


Photo: Interior from one of the barracks, von Below refers to. Photo: Getty Images.

Traudl Humps, however, quickly adjusted to the surroundings, helped by her love for outdoor activities (and, possibly, her love for Hans Junge⁹, one of Hitler's valets).

"I got used to this strange new world relatively quickly. Nature, the forest and the landscape quickly won me over to my new workplace. There were no fixed working hours here, no office atmosphere, I could go for long walks and enjoy being out in the woods. I didn't miss the big city for a moment."

As time went by, conditions the compound gradually improved. In 1942 Nicolaus von Below wrote in his diary:

"On 1 November we had a very pleasant surprise on our return to Wolfsschanze. All concrete bunkers had been fitted with large wooden barracks annexes which made the place much more habitable."

Facts:

In 1944, Wolfsschanze had more than 2000 occupants, comprising:

- ▶ More that 300 officers, ranging from Field Marshals and Generals to Adjutants
- ▶ More than 1200 troops from the Führer Begleits Batallion [FBB]
- ▶ More than 150 troops of the Reichs Sicherheits Dienst [RSD]
- ▶ More than 300 administrative personnel; drivers; telephone operators; secretaries; mechanics; electricians; medical staff; barbers; service personnel etc

Source: Official Tourist Guide

Daily life

Access security was tight; three cordons protected the Führer and special passes were needed¹⁰ for each. The passwords were changed daily. Initially, officers were not required to relinquish their sidearm in the presence of the Führer and briefcases were not yet examined, but all that changed after the Stauffenberg attempt.

"Soon afterward [July 20] the main bunker, whose rebuilding had caused Hitler to be in my barracks on the fateful day of July 20, was completed. If ever a building can be considered the symbol of a situation, this bunker was it. From the outside it looked like an ancient Egyptian tomb. It was actually nothing but a great windowless block of concrete, without direct ventilation, in cross section a building whose masses of concrete far exceeded the useable cubic feet of space. It seemed as if the concrete walls sixteen and a half feet thick that surrounded Hitler separated him from the outside world in a figurative as well as a literal sense, and locked him up inside his decisions."

[Albert Speer]

A typical day in Hitler's life here would see him rise late in the morning; taking a simple breakfast, usually a glass of milk and some fruit, and chairing a conference at noon, lasting approximately 90 minutes.

Lunch would be served at 14:00 hours and afterwards Hitler would confer over matters that were not strictly military issues, i.e. production figures. At 17:00 hours there would be a tea-break and cake served followed by yet another briefing an hour later.



Photo: Hitler's personal bunker at Wolfsschanze an early morning in April 2014. It may not look all that much, but remember that all above the yellow sign is ... roof. Allegedly some eleven meters of it. Editor's collection.

Dinner was served at 19:30 and – much to the vexation of his entourage – the Führer would then ‘entertain’ them with long monologues over all and sundry issues, often stretching into the wee hours.

“We eat, we drink, we sleep,
now and then we type a bit...”

For the subordinate inhabitants of the FHQ, secretaries and guardsmen, life was quiet, bordering on boring with routines that pivoted around the Führers special work pattern. In the evenings, films might be shown in the cinema and there would be chit-chat in the mess hall, but unless you were a lover of nature or a passionate reader, there was little to do in your time off.



Photo: Rochus kicking back with friends at the ‘beach’ of one of the many lakes. From his memoir.

Rochus Misch, Hitler's would-be telephone operator in the Führerbunker but at that time just another trooper in the FBK¹¹, describe long hours of

relative inactivity where the primary leisure activity was card-playing, but he too was infatuated by the scenery of the nature and the opportunities to go swimming in the nearby Masurian Lakes.

If life in Rastenburg was monotonous for the lower echelons, then several momentous military decisions were taken around the map table in Hitler's conference room (before Stauffenberg blew it to smithereens); the catastrophe at Stalingrad – a blow to the fighting spirit of the Wehrmacht, and the battle at Kursk that cost Germany more than 100.000 casualties and the loss of thousands of tanks, assault guns and aircraft, just to mention a couple.

As Hitler spent a good part of the war here, many officers who had distinguished themselves in battle or were to be promoted journeyed to Rastenburg to receive their Iron Crosses, Wound Badges and Marshal Batons along with promotions and new assignments.



Photo: Sepp Dietrich has just received his Knights Cross at Wolfsschanze, probably March 14, 1943. It looks to me as Fegelein in the white uniform, though I cannot really figure out why he would be dressed as a waiter

It was also here in Wolfsschanze that Albert Speer, following the death of Fritz Todt¹², was appointed Minister of War Productions; a fact that in itself probably prolonged the war with several months if not years, and – as mentioned above – it was here Hitler came closest to death before he, some ten months later, resolved to put a bullet in his own head.

**“It is my duty to remain here.
It keeps the people calm”**

While daily life for the minions in their secluded environment went on uneventful things were going increasingly awry for the once invincible Wehrmacht. In 1944, the Red Army had gained the initiative and, contrary to Hitler's exhausted forces, it enjoyed an endless supply of fresh troops and

matériel, enabling them to push their adversary back; first meter by meter, then kilometer by kilometer. Christa Schröder noted in her diary;

"Towards the end of 1944 the stay at FHQ Wolfsschanze became increasingly anxious. Every day enemy aircraft overflew the HQ. Hitler expected a surprise air raid any moment and warned people to use the air raid bunkers. He did not want to hear talk of transferring the HQ to Berlin although he was being urged to do so from all sides. He explained; 'It is my duty to remain here. It keeps the people calm. My soldiers will also never permit the frontline to be pulled back to the Führers HQ. And so long they know I am holding out here, they will be all the more determined in their struggle to stabilize the front.' All the same the HQ was removed to Berlin at the end of November 1944 as the front edged back ever closer."

Also Hitler's personal pilot, Hans Baur, had his problems with the advance of the Russians. His concern was primarily the safety of the nearby airfield and the planes placed there;

"Russian planes were more and more frequent visitors now, and I began to wonder how long it would be before they attacked our airfield. I had already taken precautions; most of my machines had been dispersed to various airfields in the neighborhood, and I had sent away the greater part of my equipment and materiel, including our spare engines, to safety. As a matter of fact, the expected attack never took place."

Eventually, just four months to the date¹³ after the miscarried assassination attempt in July 1944, and following the successful Russian expulsion of the Wehrmacht's Army Group Center from the Byelorussian area into Poland in the wake of Operation Bagration, the Red Army, thrusting north during the Baltic Offensive, had reached the borders of East Prussia. The situation at the Wolfsschanze thus became untenable and on November 20 Hitler boarded his private train¹⁴ and departed for the final time. At that point in time, the Soviet advance had reached Angerburg (today Węgorzewo), only 15 kilometers away from the FHQ as the crow flies. Von Below wrote;

"When Jodl suggested that FHQ be transferred to Berlin so as to be nearer the Ardennes¹⁵, Hitler said he would never leave East Prussia. The war was lost. He said this several times. But Bormann succeeded in convincing him. In the afternoon of 20 November Hitler boarded his special train and left Wolfsschanze for ever."

Demolition

Two days later, realizing he would never return, Hitler gave the order to destroy the complex. Demolition did, however, not take place until ten days after the start of the Red Army's Vistula-Oder Offensive, the onslaught that would eventually culminate in the Battle for Berlin. In the dark hours of January 24/25, 1945, an estimated eight to ten tons of explosives *per bunker* rendered the eastern headquarter useless to the enemy, albeit most of the buildings, due to their immense size and reinforced structures, were only partially damaged.

On January 27¹⁶, the advancing Red Army walked into what was left of the Wolfsschanze without having to fire a single shot. They swept the area for anything useful and later handed the facility over to the Polish army who

began to clear the more than 50.000 land mines and booby traps, saturating the area. This work was not completed until ten years later.¹⁷

‘A sinister concrete city of gloom and ghosts’ – even today.

Following the clear-up, the site, having lost all meaningful purpose, was left alone; a decaying, sinister concrete city of gloom and ghosts, deep in the woods of an area that had then become part of Poland, and for many years it attracted little attention, hidden behind the Iron Curtain.



Photo: The map of Wolfsschanze with some of the most important bunkers and the path marked.
Authors collection

The Wolf's Lair has gradually been developed into a tourist attraction since the Fall of Communism in the early 1990s. Visitors can make day trips from Warsaw or Gdańsk. Hotels and restaurants have grown up near the site. Plans to restore the area, including the installation of historical exhibits have periodically been proposed, but when I was there in 2014 everything was still pretty rural and the creepy magic of the place still believable.

When you visit Wolfsschanze, you can get accommodation in a hut that allegedly once housed the SS Begleitkompanie; Spartan, but contributing to the feel of authenticity. I rose at 5 a.m. one morning and took a solo stroll along the paths where Stauffenberg had walked seventy years before.

A somewhat eerie, but very worthwhile experience indeed!

Literature

Baur, Hans; **‘I was Hitler’s pilot’**, © 1958, Frederick Müller
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Short, Neil; **'The Führer's Headquarters'**. © 2010, Osprey Books

Speer, Albert; **'Inside the Third Reich'**, © 1995, Orion Books

After the Battle Magazine, No 19; 'Hitler's Headquarters'

Czeslaw Puciato; 'Wolfsschanze Tourist Guide'

Notes

¹ In fact Hitler never really liked Berlin. The frugal, young man who spent time at the Army Hospital at Pasewalk in 1918 saw the big city as a place of sin, extravagance and degradation [not too much off the mark at the time] and that view probably contributed to his desire for rejuvenating the metropolis into 'Germania'

² FHQ = FührerHauptQuartier – Leaders Headquarter

³ Strictly spoken, a 'Schanze' is more accurately translated as a redoubt or small fort. One can thus argue that 'Fort Wolf' would be a better name. However, a 'lair' being the hideout for a wild beast it has far more sinister connotations.

⁴ At least seven; Felsenest, Wolfsschlucht, Tannenberg, Frühlingsturm, Wolfsschlucht 2, Adlerhorst and the special train; Führersonderzug.

⁵ Read about Stauffenbergs failed attempt here: <https://bit.ly/3PYA7i1>

⁶ "Once I read in some tourist guide that the camouflaged nets were changed according to season of the year. I clearly state that they were only green and never changed" [Wilhelma Gerke, FBB Guardsman]

⁷ FBB – Führer Begleits Brigade; Wehrmacht, not to be confused with the SS Führer Begleits Kommando - FBK

⁸ In some historians accounts, the wire was electrified. This, however, has never been established as a fact.

⁹ In June 1943 Traudl married Hans and thus became Ms Traudl Junge. The marriage was to be short-lived and childless though; Hans Junge was killed in France in August 1944.

¹⁰ According to Rochus Misch, he and his fellow FBK guards were issued a special 'Open Sesame' pass that granted unimpeded access to all areas.

¹¹ FührerBegleitsKompanie, the praetorians protecting Hitler. The FBK – and Misch – would stay with Hitler to the very end in the Berlin Führerbunker.

¹² Fritz Todt died in a plane crash in the wee hours of February 8, 1942, and was succeeded by Albert Speer [who was scheduled to be in the same plane, but cancelled just hours before take off] just hours later. The circumstances have never been fully clarified.

¹³ By one of history's amusing little twists, November 20 also marks the start of the 1945 Nuremberg against the major war criminals.

¹⁴ Initially dubbed 'America', Hitler's private train 'Brandenburg' also served as a [mobile] headquarter, furnished with conference room, dining salon, sleeping cabins for his entourage, state-of-the-art communication; powered by two locomotives and protected by FLAK gun carriages.

¹⁵ The proximity of the Red Army undoubtedly played a role in Hitler's farewell, but other reasons were at play too. Firstly, the Ardennes Offensive was just weeks away, and he wanted to be close to the western front as it developed. And another, more mundane circumstance played in too; on November 21 he was scheduled to undergo a minor surgical; removal of a polyp on his vocal cord at a Berlin hospital.

¹⁶ On the very same day, farther south in Poland, the concentration camp Auschwitz was liberated by the Red Army.

¹⁷ Apparently local residents then salvaged tiles, door fixtures, plumbing, cabling and all and sundry that could be used in rebuilding their own homes.