

Norwegian camps: Beisfjord near Narvik, 1942-1945

Yugoslav prisoners and Soviet prisoners of war

Author: Michael Stokke, researcher at the Narvik War and Peace Centre

Beisfjord is a small village situated 12 kilometres south-east of Narvik. Less than a hundred inhabitants lived there during the war. In June 1942, the SS set up a prison camp in the centre of Beisfjord to house 900 Yugoslavian prisoners. An additional camp was built to house the camp guards. In October 1942, the inmates were moved out and the Wehrmacht took over the camp, after which Soviet prisoners of war began arriving, and the camp was used to hold them until peace came in May 1945. The number of Soviet prisoners rose from 600 in 1943 to more than 1,500 by the end of 1944.

The Yugoslav prisoners

On 24 June 1942, the Kerkplein sailed into the port of Narvik. A total of 900 prisoners were disembarked on Fagernes quay. They set out on the 10-kilometre-long march to Beisfjord, where a newly built prison camp awaited them. Prisoners who collapsed from exhaustion along the way were beaten with truncheons or stabbed with bayonets by the guards. Five prisoners were beaten to death on the march, and one of them – Vidoje Vajovic from Serbia – was shot and killed. He was ill, and was shot as his brother Milosav attempted to protect him from the guards. Norwegian guards also patrolled alongside the marching prisoners and beat them. Thus, the nightmare for the Yugoslavs began.

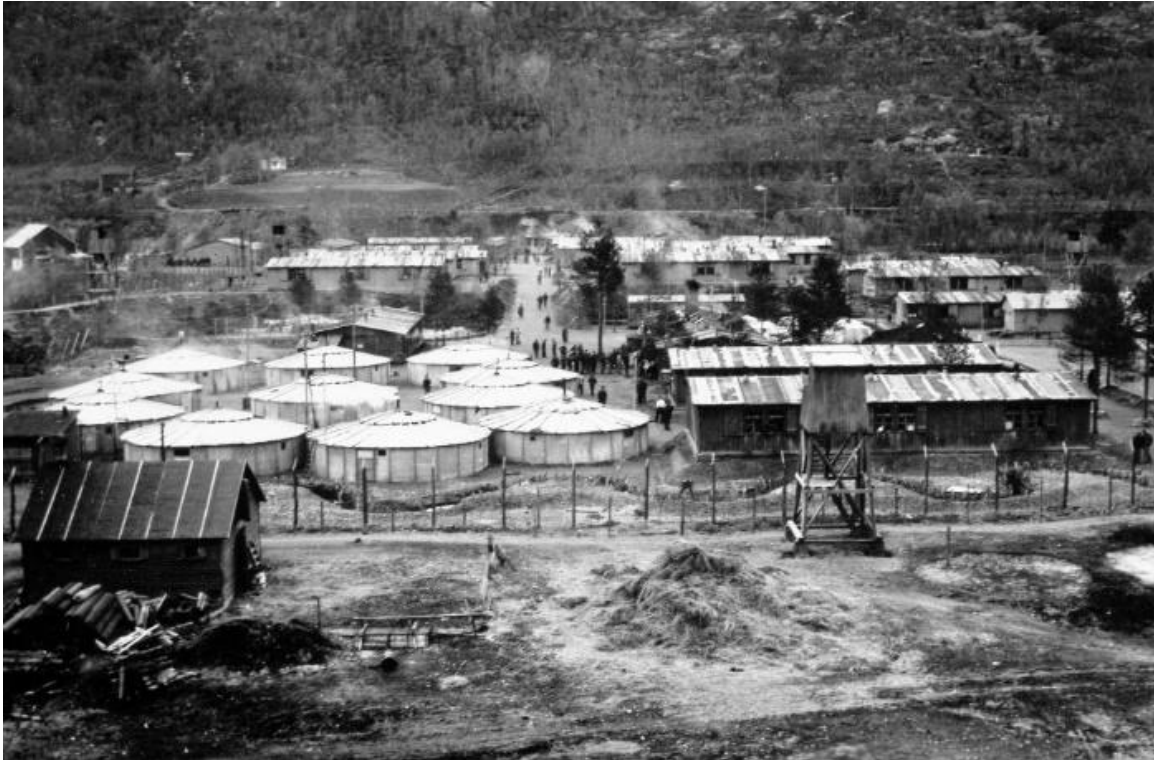
A total of 4049 Yugoslavs were imprisoned in Norway from June 1942 until the war ended. During that time, approximately 2,400 of these men either died from disease and malnutrition or were killed. The Yugoslav prisoners who came to Norway had been captured as partisans or sympathisers during the fighting in Yugoslavia, and were due to be executed. Instead the SS sent them to Norway to work in 25 camps in Trøndelag, Nordland and Finnmark. The largest number of prisoners died in the Beisfjord camp: 748 of 900 prisoners died in the space of four months. The treatment the prisoners received in the five SS-run camps was particularly brutal during the first nine months of operation, between June 1942 and March 1943. When the Wehrmacht took over the prison camps and the Yugoslavs were officially classified as prisoners of war, conditions improved markedly.



Picture: Adil Grebo from Sarajevo. He was one of the leaders of the prisoners' illegal organisation in the camp, became ill, and was shot during the evening of 17th of July 1942. Photo from Ljubo Mladenovic's collection.

A month after he arrived in Narvik, Milosav Vajovic was also shot dead. Like most of their fellow inmates, the brothers had been arrested as partisans. During the fighting in Yugoslavia they had taken to the forest, acquired weapons from Tito's liberation army and fought against the German occupying force and its collaborators, the Chetniks. In early 1942 the Nazis launched a large-scale raid and captured many thousands of partisans. Rather than treating them as prisoners of war, the Nazis treated them as criminals who deserved the death penalty for attacking the Wehrmacht. Many were sent to Jasenovac concentration camp in Croatia or to other camps in Serbia. But because Josef Terboven, Reichskommissar for Norway, wanted to gain control of the Wehrmacht's labour projects, he ordered several thousand prisoners to be sent to Norway. The first 2,600 prisoners arrived in June 1942, after a two-month journey through Europe.

The prisoners who came to Beisfjord prison camp were split up and housed in seven barracks that had been built on a large area of grassland in the centre of the small village. The camp also had separate barracks for washing facilities, a kitchen and latrines.



Picture: Beisfjord prison camp in June 1945. Photo from Museum Nord, Ofoten museum.

The barracks for the camp leadership and guards were situated in an adjacent camp. The SS managed the camp. Terboven and Wilhelm Rediess, the SS and Police Leader, summoned SS officers from concentration camps in Germany to manage the prison camps holding Yugoslavs in Norway. Between 50 and 60 officers were deployed to the leadership in Oslo and to four prison camps in Nordland and Karasjok in Finnmark.

The senior commander for the Beisfjord camp was Obersturmführer Wilhelm Goecke. Franz de Martin and Otto Seifert were his seconds-in-command. The 150 or so German guards belonged to the Ordnungspolizei, and were under the command of the SS. Around 50 Norwegian members of the Hirdvaktbataljonen (Guard Battalion of the Hird), later known as the SS-Vaktbataljon (SS guard battalion), also served as guards. These Norwegians volunteered for service in return for lucrative financial compensation. These two groups of guards proved useful to the SS leadership as tools of oppression and mistreatment of prisoners. The guards were given a free rein to beat prisoners.

The brutality of camp life soon affected the prisoners' health. Initially they worked in and around the camp, and were not allowed to enter their barracks between 5 o'clock in the morning and 8 o'clock in the evening. They had to work half-naked, even in the rain and cold. The officers and guards walked around the camp ordering the

prisoners to do things such as run around the camp compound or push a wheelbarrow loaded with fellow inmates. Those who were unable to comply were beaten. Combined with inadequate food rations, this kind of treatment led to growing numbers of prisoners' falling ill and being admitted to the infirmary. The daily food ration consisted of only 250 grams of bread, some margarine, and a thin vegetable soup. This diet took its toll on prisoners who were assigned to duties such as stone-breaking or similarly hard labour. Documents kept by the German SS leadership show how the number of sick prisoners rose dramatically:

5 July 1942: 87 sick / 800 healthy

10 July 1942: 175 sick / 710 healthy

14 July 1942: 205 sick / 677 healthy

16 July 1942: 260 sick / 618 healthy

17 July 1942: 310 sick / 566 healthy

The number of sick prisoners more than tripled in the space of 12 days. During that period, 21 prisoners were either beaten to death or died of other causes. Reidar Bergfall was 17 years old and living near Fagernes quay at the time. He saw a young prisoner die with his own eyes. The prisoners were working on the quay when Stojan Todoric, a fourteen-year-old Croatian boy, suddenly collapsed and died.

The sick prisoners were placed in barracks with no beds or mattresses, so they had to lie on the floor. There was not enough medicine to go around. Most of them were also suffering from exhaustion, and needed food and rest, but were given neither special diets nor extra food rations.

On 12th of July 1942 some German officers arrived to inspect the camp, accompanied by two doctors, one German and one Norwegian. During the interrogations carried out by the British War Crimes Commission in the autumn of 1945, the Norwegian doctor gave the following statement:

All the prisoners had lice, and were indescribably emaciated. Most of them wore clothes that were dirty and torn, and they had no shoes. They had sores and blisters all over their bodies due to poor diet and hygiene. The sick prisoners were packed into the barracks like sardines. They lay on the bare floor and received no medical care. There was medicine available, but it was forbidden to use it on the Serbs. Each morning there were between 15 and 20 new cases of isolation, and each morning around the same number of inmates died. Their bodies were removed and thrown into mass graves. These people had worked under absolutely indescribable conditions.

The SS officers' suspicion of typhus was confirmed by this doctor. Typhoid fever must be diagnosed by taking blood or stool samples. The symptoms of typhoid fever are lethargy, diarrhoea and spots all over the body. The physical symptoms the prisoners presented with matched this diagnosis, yet neither the Norwegian nor the German doctor took blood samples. The Norwegian doctor picked out 85 prisoners suspected of having typhus. He did not examine them thoroughly, apparently, but

simply singled out prisoners from a distance if they looked weak. They were sent directly to the infirmary.

The consequences for the sick prisoners who were wrongly diagnosed with typhus were appalling. Reichskommissar Terboven visited the camp on 15 July, at which time the camp was divided in two by a barbed-wire fence. The German doctor who also came gathered the sick in two barracks. Thereafter, work commenced on digging large ditches on the outside of the barbed-wire fence. On the evening of 17th of July, 588 healthy prisoners were marched out of the prison camp and taken to Bjørnfjell to be quarantined, leaving 287 prisoners behind in the infirmary barracks.

Machine guns were mounted on a barracks roof and a watchtower, and the sick prisoners were marched in groups of 20 to the ditches that had been dug on the other side of the barbed-wire fence. Then the shooting began. Some prisoners barricaded themselves in one of the infirmary barracks and refused to leave, so the SS set fire to the building, burning it to the ground with the sick prisoners still inside.

On the early morning of 18th of July 1942, 287 Yugoslav prisoners are shot or burned to death by SS. It is the largest massacre of prisoners in Norway during WWII.



Picture: Three barracks are burning on early morning of 18th of July 1942. Photo from the Narvik War and Peace Centre.

Similar executions of Yugoslavs were regularly carried out in the Norwegian camps in the nine months between June 1942 and March 1943. Twenty-seven prisoners were shot dead at Ulven, near Bergen, and 26 were shot dead in Tromsø relating to the arrival of a ship. In both cases, the prisoners had been told that the sick were being taken to hospital. Sick prisoners were removed from the camps in groups of 10 to 50, and shot dead. In this way, the SS cleared out the infirmary barracks. It was only when the Wehrmacht took over control of the camp in March 1943 that the sick prisoners – numbering over 500 in total – were sent to the German field hospitals in Trøndelag and Lillehammer. Many of these men survived.

Further suffering lay in store for the 588 prisoners who were sent to Bjørnfjell for quarantine. No barracks had been built at the camp where they were supposed to stay. The only buildings that had been built were the guards' barracks. For two weeks, the prisoners were kept on the mountainside, with only moss to lie on. They then had to build the camp themselves. Disease began to spread. After closely inspecting the prisoners, the SS shot and killed the sick ones on the spot. On 22 July, two days after their arrival, all the prisoners were ordered to run around the camp six times. Those prisoners who were unable to do so were shot dead. Ten prisoners who did not manage to obey the order were lined up further down by a lake and shot, in a grave that would soon be filled with dead prisoners. Such runs were arranged repeatedly, resulting in more deaths every time. The prisoners were supposed to build a road leading to the border, but to begin with no tools were provided and no preparations had been made. Many prisoners were so weak that they died while working, and were buried along the roadside.

The prisoners kept their spirits up by singing songs from different parts of Yugoslavia. One of the songs had been written in Kordun in 1941, when many died during the Ustasha offensive. Many of the prisoners knew the song, and adapted the lyrics as follows:

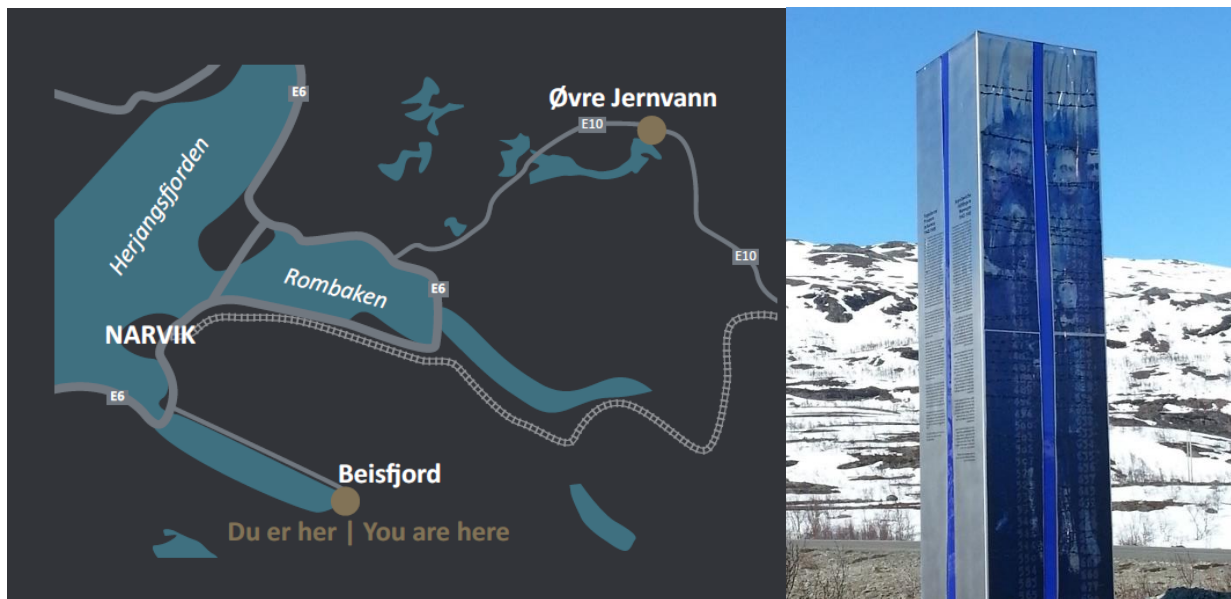
Na Bjørnfjellet grob do groba, trazi majka sina svoga.

Nasla ga je, na grob klekla i ovako sinu rekla.

(On Bjørnfjellet, from grave to grave, a mother looks for her son.

She finds him, kneels at his grave and whispers these words).

After five weeks in the mountains, 242 prisoners had died. A further 43 prisoners were so sick that they were shot dead on the march back to Beisfjord. A total of 346 prisoners made it back to Beisfjord on 25 August. When they arrived, they saw that three barracks were gone, and gradually realised what had happened to their sick comrades. The survivors described how a long silence followed.



Map of the Beisfjord prison camp and Øvre Jernvann areas, photo of information monument. The monument and some remains of the camp can be seen there today. Map/photo from the Narvik War and Peace Centre.

Camp life continued as before. The prisoners were driven hard by the guards and officers, and the death toll increased. On 1st of October a group of prisoners was sent to the Korgen camp to build a mountain road over Korgfjellet. The last remaining prisoners left the camp on 25 October, by which time 748 of the 900 prisoners that had arrived in June were dead. The sufferings continued in Korgen, and a further 50 prisoners from the Beisfjord camp died.

The Yugoslav prisoners were transferred to the Wehrmacht in March 1943 and were treated as prisoners of war. Accordingly, the treatment they received improved, and in the spring of 1944 they began receiving packages from the Red Cross and letters from home. Conditions for the Yugoslav prisoners were now better than for the Soviet prisoners of war. During the final two years of the war, an estimated 500 Yugoslav prisoners of war died, as opposed to an estimated 2,100 during the first nine months at the hands of the SS.

In 1953 the remains of almost all the Yugoslavs killed in captivity in Norway during the occupation were laid to rest in two grave sites. Those who died in Northern Norway were gathered in Botn in Nordland. On 22 June 2011, the remains of the barracks, the barbed wire, the pathway, the site where the mass grave lay and the area surrounding the prison camp at Øvre Jernvann in Bjørnfjell were declared a cultural heritage site by the Directorate for Cultural Heritage. The Narvik War and Peace Centre raised an information monument along the main road below the camp.



Picture: From the exhumation in August 1945 by Øvre Jernvann. Photo from Bjørn Winsnes.

Seven of the 20 or so SS officers who had worked in the Beisfjord and Øvre Jernvann camps were arrested and sent to Belgrade in the spring of 1946. All of them were given the death penalty. Norwegian guards who had committed murder or mistreated prisoners were also arrested after the war and sentenced.

A monument erected in 1949 to commemorate the Yugoslavs still stands there today.



Picture: From Beisfjord, 1949. Photo from Museum Nord, Ofoten museum.

The Soviet prisoners of war

By the time the Soviet prisoners of war arrived at the camp in late October 1942, construction work was completed. The prisoners worked in Fagernes and other sites around Narvik. The work entailed building a defence installation and bunkers as well as other transport and supply infrastructure. By October 1944, the number of prisoners is estimated to have been between 600 and 900, at which point groups of prisoners from Finland began arriving at the camp, and in May 1945 the prisoners numbered 1,583. By this stage the barracks were overcrowded.

Fjodor Ivanovitsj Goma gave his account of his arrival at the camp in 1943:

The barracks we lived in each held between 30 and 50 people. We slept on straw mattresses and had to wash ourselves in troughs. We built garages at Ankenes, among other things. We built the garage floor and roof, and could see across the fjord and the road. The Germans lived in barracks close by. We carried large boxes to the camp, which was really heavy work. The Germans beat us continually with their truncheons. The food consisted of soup from the Germans' kitchen. The Norwegians weren't even allowed to talk to us, but they took advantage of every opportunity to help us with food and other things when we worked together.

Israel Levitan, another prisoner in the camp, recounted how they had no winter clothes, and had to wear the summer uniforms they were wearing when they were captured. They were given wooden clogs to wear on their feet. This was what they had to wear while working in a quarry.

In the autumn of 1944, Beisfjord became the main camp for Stalag 330, which covered the northern part of Nordland and Sør-Troms. The term stalag was used for prisoner-of-war camps, and is a contraction of Stammanschafts-lager, which meant that the camp was for enlisted ranks. The main camp was usually responsible for administrating all the prisoner-of-war camps in the area, as well as for receiving sick prisoners from other camps and occasionally serving as a penal camp. A small penal camp was set up behind the main camp at Beisfjord, and held around 60 prisoners in 1944.

Because of the large number of sick prisoners that were sent from camps from Sørfold to Sør-Troms, the death rate at the Beisfjord camp was high. The prisoners who died were buried right beside the camp, in graves marked with the prisoners' numbers. When the authorities moved all the dead to a common grave at Tjøtta in 1951, the remains of 305 bodies were recovered. The prisoners themselves raised a memorial monument in June 1945.



Picture: June 1945, four former prisoners in front of the newly built memorial monument in Beisfjord. Photo from T. Furunes.

Sources:

Mladjenovic, Ljubo. *Beisfjordtragedien*. Oslo 1988

Documents from the British War Crimes Commission at the Military Archive, Belgrade, Serbia. Translated and copied by the Narvik War and Peace Centre.

News from the Soviet Union, 22nd of January 1947.

Photographs courtesy of the Narvik War and Peace Centre and Bjørn Winsnes.

If you need more information, please contact Michael Stokke, researcher at the Narvik War and Peace Centre: ms@narviksenteret.no