

Concentration Camps in Germany 1933–1945

The first concentration camps were set up soon after Adolf Hitler's rise to power in Germany in 1933. Their aim was to isolate, ruthlessly exploit, and exterminate those whom the Nazis regarded as enemies of the German state and nation. The camps were set up on the basis of the Decree of the Reich President for the Protection of the People and State of February 28, 1933. Detainment in concentration camps was administered without a court sentence and for an unspecified period of time. The camps were set up in conveniently located places - for example, in the vicinity of major production plants or quarries, where the prisoners were to perform slave labor.

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During the initial period of the camps' functioning, work was treated as a re-education measure, while during 1940–1945 it became a means to kill prisoners. Hungry and sick, they were forced to work beyond human capability every day regardless of the weather and they had to endure shouting, beatings, and being kicked. There were no draft animals in the camps, so the prisoners performed all of the most strenuous work, including pulling carts. They were punished for even the most minor offences. Lashing — one of the most common punishments — was administered on a special table to which a prisoner was tied. The least severe punishments were: 25 lashes (it was common for prisoners to die having received more strokes) and suspension by twisted arms from hooks screwed to the ceiling. Another punishment involved detention in a bunker and hunger death (Dachau, Auschwitz). Hunger was one of the prisoners' major worries. Some suffered from hunger edema, while others were horribly skinny. Malnutrition caused various diseases. Prisoners suffered from enormous festering ulcers and skin, along with intestinal and stomach diseases. In most camps the Germans conducted pseudo-medical experiments. For example, at the so-called experimental stations in Dachau the German physicians carried out pseudo-scientific experiments on healthy prisoners. They infected them with malaria, phlegm, hepatitis, and TB. They also carried out experiments in hyperbaric chambers for aviation purposes and froze prisoners. When the temperature was way below zero a few naked prisoners were tied to a wooden stretcher to be left outside for many hours (usually at night) until they lost consciousness. Then the Germans analyzed

samples of their blood and urine. They sometimes tried to bring them back to life, and they succeeded on a few occasions. Other experiments involved starving prisoners for two weeks while forcing them to drink salty seawater. To this day we see the horrifying photos taken after the experiments in the hyperbaric chambers to capture the reaction of men subjected to radical changes of pressure. Ravensbrück's female prisoners, mostly young Poles, were subjected to pseudo-medical experiments which involved removal of parts of their leg bones.

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Concentration camps were managed by various SS bodies from 1933 to 1945. At the start they were controlled by the Concentration Camps Inspectorate (Inspektion der Konzentrationslager) and SS-Totenkopfverbände or special units of SS guards, both headed by Theodor Eicke. Changes in the SS structure after the outbreak of war affected the camp system. First, the camps were put under political supervision by the Reich Security Main Office (Reichssicherheitshauptamt, RSHA, established in late September 1939), then the leading role was played by the SS Economic-Administration Main Office (SS-Wirtschafts- und Verwaltungshauptamt, SS-WVHA, created in March 1942). The Concentration Camps Inspectorate was merged with the SS-WVHA as "Amt D" while camps high leadership and guard staff remained part of the RSHA.

Each concentration camp had a square for roll calls that went on for hours. It was the place from where the work columns went to work, where the punishment of lashing was administered, and where the prisoners were selected for the "invalids' transports." In the camps the Germans also shot or hanged prisoners sentenced to death.

In principle, prisoners were just worthless numbers. Deprived of their names and personal effects, they were given numbers and camp outfits instead and they had to endure inhuman treatment.

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After 1939 the German concentration camps were also a place for the extermination and genocide of children. In some camps there were special sections for minors. Many children had died before their transport reached the camp and a number of them died in gas chambers or were murdered with phenol injections. Newborns in the camps were either born there or had arrived with their parents.

The first concentration camp in Germany was set up on March 22, 1933 in Dachau near Munich in Bavaria by order of Heinrich Himmler. SS-men were trained there to work in the camps set up in Germany and then also in the German-occupied European countries (among them were Adolf Eichmann and Rudolf Höss).” Regulations introduced in this camp by its commandant Theodor Eicke were later adopted in other camps. Soon Eicke, as Concentration Camps Inspector, formed special camp guards and administration units: the notorious SS-Totenkopfverbände (Death’s Head Units). In 1939 he reorganized the whole German concentration camps system and declared Dachau a model camp.

The Nazis intentionally built this camp on swampy terrain with an unhealthy wet mountain climate, especially troublesome in fall and winter, when the prisoners had to stand for hours on the roll-call square. The first Dachau prisoners were political opponents of the Nazis (for example, communists), Jews, homosexuals, Jehovah witnesses, and criminals. After 1939 there was an inflow of prisoners from all of the German-occupied countries. It was also the center for extermination of the clergy, including the Polish clergy, whom the Germans treated with particular cruelty (1,780 out of 2,720 Catholic priests were Polish, while 858 died). The first mass transports of Poles to Dachau arrived in the spring of 1940. About 40,000 out of ca. 250,000 prisoners of the camp during 1933–1945 were Polish, while over 10,000 of them lost their lives. It is estimated that during 1933–1945 about 150,000 prisoners were murdered or died in Dachau. The camp was also a site of pseudo-medical experiments and the execution of death sentences by shooting or hanging. The camp operated until the liberation on April 29, 1945.

Soon other concentration camps modeled after KC Dachau were created in Germany. Following the Third Reich’s expansion, prisoners began to arrive from the European countries conquered by the German armed forces.. The Buchenwald camp located near Weimar in Thuringia, which functioned from July 1937 until April 13, 1945, was one such new camp. Its prisoners were German communists, social democrats, Jews, members of religious minorities (e.g., Jehovah witnesses), and criminals. After 1939 the camp received transports of Poles, Czechs, Slovaks, Austrians, and inhabitants of other conquered countries (including Gypsies), and later Soviet POWs. The prisoners were forced to perform backbreaking work digging tunnels for underground arms factories. The camp was a site of pseudo-medical experiments. Accessories made of human skin were made there by SS functionaries. The total number of Buchenwald prisoners was 240,000. The Sachsenhausen camp located about 30km from Berlin functioned from 1936 until April 22, 1945. It was meant for German opponents of Nazism. The prisoners were used mostly for the production of clinker bricks’. Some Sachsenhausen prisoners underwent criminal pseudo-medical experiments. In 1942 the

Germans built a gas chamber, crematoriums, and an execution site. April 1945 brought the evacuation of the camp, i.e., the so called "Death March." The total number of prisoners amounted to 200,000.

Neuengamme (1938–May 5, 1945) located 20km from the center of Hamburg was initially a subcamp of Sachsenhausen. It was a site of pseudo-medical experiments involving infection of prisoners (including children) with TB bacillus. The prisoners came from the conquered European countries. They worked in the brickyard and developed the industrial plants located nearby. The number of prisoners amounted to 115,000 (including 13,000 women and children). The Oranienburg camp functioned during 1933–1934 in the center of the town of Oranienburg located about 30km north of Berlin. Prisoners: Third Reich opponents (for example, communists), Berlin intelligentsia, and Jews and Poles domiciled in Germany. In 1935 it became the seat of the central SS Concentration Camp Inspectorate. Most prisoners of Esterwegen in Lower Saxony (1933–1945) were members of Western European resistance movements.

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Flossenbürg (1938–April 1945) was located on the border between Lower and Upper Bavaria near a quarry. The first prisoners were German communists, opponents of the Third Reich, and criminals. After 1939 the camp received transports of Poles and citizens of the conquered European countries. The number of prisoners amounted to 150,000. Ravensbrück (1939–the end of the war), the camp for female prisoners, was located near the town of Fürstenberg in Brandenburg/Mecklenburg Lake District. The female prisoners, mainly young Poles, were subject to pseudo-medical experiments. The number of women detained in the camp totaled 135,000.

Mauthausen-Gusen (1938–the end of the war) set up in northern Austria near the town of Mauthausen, one of the worst camps of the Third Reich, dubbed "Hell on the Danube" by its prisoners, who worked in quarries. Initially, the prisoners came from Austria, while after 1939 the camp received transports of primarily Polish political prisoners. The number of prisoners amounted to 210,000–250,000.

Hartheim near Linz (1938–1944), euthanasia center and a site of immediate extermination. The camp's gas chambers were initially used to murder invalids and mentally-ill Germans, including children. During 1940–1943 about 30,000 people deemed "worthless" by the Nazi regime and so-called "invalids" of various nationalities died there.

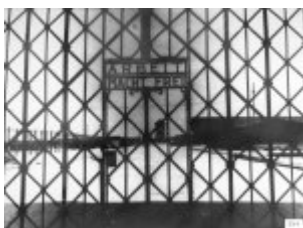
Concentration camps set up in Germany after the outbreak of the war:

Mittelbau-Dora, in Kohstein in the Harz Mountains in Saxony, 3km from Nordhausen. It was the major arms production plant in Germany. Initially, it was a Buchenwald subcamp. It became an independent camp on October 1, 1944. Its prisoners worked in drifts and tunnels in inhuman conditions. They produced V-1 flying bombs and V-2 rockets used to bombard England.

After the invasion of Poland, the Germans began to set up (Konzentrationslager) - Concentration camps were established in the Third Reich beginning 1933 as detention centers for "enemies of the Reich" arrested on a mass scale.

Set up at the end of 1943 near Hannover, Bergen-Belsen was initially meant for Soviet POWs. Even though its prisoners did not work — aside from the works performed in the camp — the camp was dubbed a "Death Factory." During the first weeks of 1945 it became the target base for many evacuated concentration camps. The British liberated the camp on April 15, 1945. There number of prisoners amounted to 90,000. Bergen-Belsen powstał niedaleko Hanoweru pod koniec 1943 r. After the invasion of Poland, the Germans began to set up concentration camps in Poland modeled on the camps in the Third Reich, which had been functioning for several years. Simultaneously, they began to deport some prisoners from Poland to the camps in Germany.

Anna Jagodzińska



[The KL Dachau entrance gate with the words "Arbeit macht frei" \(work sets you free\). \(IPN\)](#) [The KL Dachau entrance gate with the words "Arbeit macht frei" \(work sets you free\). \(IPN\)](#)



[KL Dachau: general view of the prisoner barracks, high-voltage barbed-wire fence electrified at all times, KL Dachau prisoners next to the barracks. /April 1945/. \(IPN\)](#) [KL Dachau: general view of the prisoner barracks, high-voltage barbed-wire fence electrified at all times, KL Dachau prisoners next to the barracks. /April 1945/. \(IPN\)](#)



[Corpses of murdered prisoners in KL Dachau. / after the liberation of the camp in April 1945 / \(IPN\) Corpses of murdered prisoners in KL Dachau. / after the liberation of the camp in April 1945 / \(IPN\)](#)



[KL Dachau after liberation: Prisoners' corpses photographed by Americans after the liberation of the camp. \(IPN\) KL Dachau after liberation: Prisoners' corpses photographed by Americans after the liberation of the camp. \(IPN\)](#)



[Dachau — suspension by the arms, one of the most cruel punishments used in Dachau. /KL Dachau prisoner Father Władysław Sarnik's drawing from the camp 1940–1945 \(Maria Sarnik's private collection\) Dachau — suspension by the arms, one of the most cruel punishments used in Dachau. /KL Dachau prisoner Father Władysław Sarnik's drawing from the camp 1940–1945 \(Maria Sarnik's private collection\)](#)



[SS-Reichsführer visiting KL Dachau. \(IPN\) SS-Reichsführer visiting KL Dachau. \(IPN\)](#)



[Dead prisoners in a mass grave — after the liberation. \(IPN\) Dead prisoners in a mass grave — after the liberation. \(IPN\)](#)



[Third Reich slaves. \(IPN\) Third Reich slaves. \(IPN\)](#)



[KC Buchenwald — camp "bedroom" \(IPN\) KC Buchenwald — camp "bedroom" \(IPN\)](#)



[Female prisoners in the camp \(IPN\)](#) [Female prisoners in the camp \(IPN\)](#)



[Prisoners on the roll-call square. \(IPN\)](#) [Prisoners on the roll-call square. \(IPN\)](#)

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