

Concentration Camps

(in German, *Konzentrationslager*), camps where the Nazis imprisoned their opponents without trial. Although the term "concentration camp" is often used as a term for all Nazi camps, there were in fact several types of camps in the Nazi system, of which concentration camp was just one. Other types include labor and hard labor camps, extermination camps, transit camps, and prisoner of war camps. As time went on the distinction between concentration camps and labor camps became blurred, since hard labor was performed in the concentration camps. The concentration camp network assumed an important role within the Nazi regime, which evolved over time.

Chronologically, the use of concentration camps can be divided into three distinct periods, from 1933 to 1936; 1936 to 1942; and 1942 to 1944--1945. The first period corresponds to the Nazis' rise to and consolidation of power. During this time, concentration camps were established for the detention of political opponents of the Nazi Party. Soon after Hitler came to power in January 1933, the Nazis began arresting political adversaries and placing them in camps. By the end of July some 27,000 people had been taken into what the Nazis called "protective custody." In Prussia alone, there were 20 camps for these prisoners. Beginning in the fall of 1933, the Nazis began detaining other people besides political prisoners, including persons whom the Nazis considered to be "asocial elements," such as beggars and tramps, and chronic criminals.

In July 1934 SS chief Heinrich Himmler named Theodor Eicke (who was serving at the time as commandant at the Dachau concentration camp) the Inspector of Concentration Camps and SS Guard Units. These guard units, which became known as death's head units, did the brutal work of guarding the concentration camps. In his new post, Eicke was in charge of the concentration camp prisoners' routine and punishments. During this phase the main goal of the camp system was to break the opposition to the Nazi regime.

In the second period (1936--1942), almost all of the concentration camps established during the first period were shut down, except Dachau, and newer, larger camps were built to accommodate the growing number of

prisoners. These included Sachsenhausen, Buchenwald, Mauthausen, Flossenburg, Ravensbrueck, Auschwitz, Majdanek, Natzweiler, Neuengamme, and Stutthof. During this period, in the middle of which World War II broke out, the Nazis also established labor, hard labor and "reeducation" camps. From 1937 onward many companies used German Jews, then Austrian Jews and then Jews from throughout Nazi territory for forced labor, housing them in camp-like conditions or in camps themselves. From the summer of 1938, Jews were imprisoned in the camps simply for being Jews, especially after *Kristallnacht*, when 36,000 were detained. Throughout this period, the number of prisoners detained in concentration camps rose constantly. When the war began, some 25,000 were housed in the camps; by the end of 1941 some 60,000 prisoners were included in the concentration camp system. That number rose even higher after Germany invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941; tens of thousands of Soviet prisoners of war were imprisoned in Nazi concentration camps. Many were soon murdered.

In late 1941 and early 1942, after the Nazis decided upon an official policy of extermination with regards to European Jewry, they set up extermination camps at Chelmno, Treblinka, Sobibor, and Belzec. Majdanek and Auschwitz, originally built as concentration camps, were expanded to serve as extermination centers, as well. Birkenau, or Auschwitz II, was the extermination center while the rest of Auschwitz and its sub-camps functioned as forced labor camps. In Majdanek, prisoners who were not murdered immediately were part of the concentration camp population.

During the third period, beginning in February 1942, concentration camp prisoners were officially exploited as laborers forced to work in the German armaments industry, manufacturing weapons and other essential items for the German war economy. Previously, forced labor had often been used as a punishment. At this point, the SS created a special Economic-Administrative Main Office (*Wirtschafts-Verwaltungshauptamt*, WVHA) to oversee the use of concentration camp prisoners as manpower for both government-owned and private companies. The WVHA even built many sub-camps next to industrial factories to house the prisoner-laborers.

The level of the living conditions in the Nazi concentration camps varied from period to period and from camp to camp. From 1933 to 1936, the work, food, and housing were bearable, and most prisoners were only detained for about a year. During the second period and the start of the third period, many prisoners died in the camps as a result of brutal treatment, harsh working conditions, malnutrition, and overcrowding. In 1943 the living conditions improved slightly as the Nazis wanted the prisoners to work for the armaments industry in a productive manner.

Concentration camp prisoners did not have much personal choice; the SS told them exactly what to do throughout the day. If a prisoner did not follow an order, he would be severely punished, whether by whipping, solitary confinement, losing his food rations, etc. The prisoners were classified according to their country of origin and according to the reason they were interned. Some prisoners were given supervisory or administrative positions, such as room, block, and camp "elders," or as *kapos* (work foremen). In general, German prisoners were given the top positions, and thus received the most privileges. In the Auschwitz camp complex, Polish prisoners were accorded this higher status. Jews and Soviets were on the very bottom of the prisoner totem pole. The Jews were treated much worse than any other prisoner group, and after the war broke out, Jewish prisoners had very poor prospects for survival. By October 1942 the WVHA ordered the removal of Jews from all concentration camps inside the Reich. The Jewish prisoners were deported to Auschwitz or Majdanek, in Poland, where most were exterminated.

By the fall of 1944 the Germans were clearly losing the war. The Allies were approaching from all directions. The Nazis gradually closed the concentration camps outside of the Reich and sent their prisoners on insufferable death marches towards camps that were still in operation in Germany and Austria.