CONCENTRATION CAMPS

The term *concentration camp* refers to a camp in which people are detained or confined, usually under harsh conditions and without regard to legal norms of arrest and imprisonment that are acceptable in a constitutional democracy. In Nazi Germany between 1933 and 1945, concentration camps (Konzentrationslager; KL or KZ) were an integral feature of the regime.

The first concentration camps in Germany were established soon after Hitler's appointment as chancellor in January 1933. In the weeks after the Nazis came to power, The SA (Sturmabteilungen; commonly known as Storm Troopers), the [SS](http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007393) (*Schutzstaffel*; Protection Squadrons—the elite guard of the Nazi party), the police, and local civilian authorities organized numerous detention camps to incarcerate real and perceived political opponents of Nazi policy.

German authorities established camps all over Germany on an ad hoc basis to handle the masses of people arrested as alleged subversives. The SS established larger camps in Oranienburg, north of Berlin; Esterwegen, near Hamburg; [Dachau](http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005214), northwest of Munich; and Lichtenburg, in Saxony. In Berlin itself, the Columbia Haus facility held prisoners under investigation by the Gestapo (the German secret state police) until 1936.

After the SS gained its independence from the SA in July 1934, in the wake of the Röhm purge, Hitler authorized the Reich SS leader, Heinrich Himmler, to centralize the administration of the concentration camps and formalize them into a system. Himmler chose SS Lieutenant General Theodor Eicke for this task. Eicke had been the commandant of the SS concentration camp at Dachau since June 1933. Himmler appointed him Inspector of Concentration Camps, a new section of the SS subordinate to the SS Main Office.

After December 1934, the SS became the only agency authorized to establish and manage facilities that were formally called concentration camps, though local civilian authorities continued to establish and manage forced-labor camps and detention camps throughout Germany. In 1937, only four concentration camps were left: [Dachau](http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005214), near Munich; [Sachsenhausen](http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005538) near Berlin; [Buchenwald](http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005198) near Weimar; and Lichtenburg near Merseburg in Saxony for female prisoners.

Already as commandant of Dachau in 1933, Eicke developed an organization and procedures to administer and guard a concentration camp. He issued regulations both for the duties of the perimeter guards and for treatment of the prisoners. The organization, structure, and practice developed at Dachau in 1933-1934 became the model for the Nazi concentration camp system as it expanded. Among Eicke's early trainees at Dachau was Rudolf Höss, who later commanded the [Auschwitz](http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005189) concentration camp.

Special “political units on alert” (*Politische Bereitschaften*), originally guarded the SS concentration camps. They were renamed “SS Guard Units” (*SS-Wachverbände*)in 1935 and “SS Death's-Head Units” (*SS-Totenkopfverbände*) in April 1936. One SS Death's-Head Unit was assigned to each concentration camp. After 1936, the camp administration, including the commandant, was also a part of the SS Death's-Head Unit. Although *all* SS units wore the Death's-Head symbol (skull and crossbones) on their caps, only the SS Death's-Head Units were authorized to wear the Death's Head Symbol on their lapels. After the creation of the “SS Death's-Head Division” of the Waffen SS in 1940, whose officers had been recruited from concentration camp service, members of this division also wore the Death's-Head symbol on their lapel.

The SS Death's-Head Unit at each camp was divided into two groups. The first was the camp staff, which encompassed: 1) the commandant and his personal staff; 2) a Security Police officer and an assistant to maintain and update prisoner records; 3) the commandant of the so-called protective detention camp (*Schutzhaftlagerführer*)which housed the prisoners, and his staff (including the labor allocation officer, the roll call officer, and the Blockführer, who were responsible for the individual prisoner barracks); 4) an administrative staff responsible for the fiscal and supply administration of the camp; and 5) an infirmary run by an SS physician, who was assisted by one or two SS sanitation officers and/or medical orderlies. The second group constituted the guard detachment (*SS-Wachbataillion*), which prior to 1939 was at battalion strength.

After 1938, authority to incarcerate persons in a concentration camp formallly rested exclusively with the German Security Police (made up of the Gestapo and the Criminal Police), which held this exclusive authority de facto since 1936. The “legal” instrument of incarceration was either the “protective detention” (*Schutzhaft*) order (which the Gestapo could issue for persons considered a political danger after 1933) and the “preventative detention” (Vorbeugungshaft) order, which the Criminal Police could issue after December 1937 for persons considered to be habitual and professional criminals, or to be engaging in what the regime defined as “asocial” behavior. Neither order was subject to judicial review, or any review by any German agency outside of the German Security Police.

The model thus established by Eicke in the mid-1930s characterized the concentration camp system until the collapse of the Nazi regime in the spring of 1945. The daily routine at Dachau, the methods of punishment, and the duties of the SS staff and guards became the norm, with some variation, at all German concentration camps.

The years 1939–1942 saw a marked expansion in the concentration camp system. In 1938, SS authorities had begun to exploit the labor of concentration camp prisoners for economic profit. In September 1939, the war provided a convenient excuse to ban releases from the camps, thus providing the SS with a readily available labor force.

SS authorities established new camps in the vicinity of factories (for example, the brickworks at [Neuengamme](http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005539), 1940) or sites for the extraction of raw materials (such as the stone quarry at [Mauthausen](http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005196), 1938). The goods extracted or produced by prisoner labor were sold to the German Reich through SS-owned firms such as the German Earth and Stone Works.

As Germany conquered much of Europe in the years 1939–1941, the SS established a number of new concentration camps to incarcerate increased numbers of political prisoners, resistance groups, and groups deemed racially inferior, such as Jews and Roma (Gypsies). Among these new camps were: Gusen (1939), Neuengamme (1940), [Gross-Rosen](http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005454) (1940), [Auschwitz](http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005189) (1940), [Natzweiler](http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007260) (1940) [Stutthof](http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005197) (1942), and [Majdanek](http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005190) (February 1943). Stutthof had been a Gestapo Labor Education camp from 1939 to 1942.

After the beginning of the war, the concentration camps also became sites for the mass murder of small targeted groups deemed dangerous for political or racial reasons by the Nazi authorities. For example, several hundred Dutch Jews were rounded up in retaliation for a Dutch transit strike in protest of Nazi persecution of Jews in the Netherlands in the winter of 1941. They were sent to Mauthausen in February 1941 where within a few days, the SS staff had killed all of them. Thousands of "security suspects" released from German prisons in the autumn of 1942 were sent to concentration camps and literally worked to death under a program called "Annihilation through Work" (*Vernichtung durch Arbeit*). Finally, captured members of national resistance movements were sent to concentration camps to be murdered upon arrival.

During this period, the German authorities constructed gas chambers for use to kill people at several of the concentration camps. Gas chambers were constructed at Mauthausen, [Sachsenhausen](http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005538), Auschwitz I, and other camps. A gas chamber was constructed later at Dachau, but it was never used.

After the December 1941 defeat of the German army in its attempt to take Moscow and the entry of the United States into World War II on December 11, the German authorities understood that Germany would have to fight a long war. Responding to increasingly acute labor shortages and the need to produce armaments, machinery, airplanes, and ships to replace German losses, the SS established more SS-owned firms. It also signed contracts with state and private firms to produce goods and provide labor for the German armaments and related industries. A famous example of cooperation between the SS and private industry was the I.G. Farben company's establishment of a synthetic rubber plant in 1942 at [Auschwitz III](http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005189) (Monowitz).

**SERVING THE GERMAN WAR EFFORT**    The incarceration of increasing numbers of people in the concentration camps assured at least the quantity of the labor supply even as the brutality of the regimen inside the camps depleted the number of available laborers. The SS used gas chambers and other means to "weed out" prisoners who were no longer able to work.

During 1942–1944, hundreds of subcamps were established for each concentration camp. Subcamps were located in or near factories or sites for the extraction of raw materials. For example, Wiener Neudorf, a subcamp of Mauthausen established in 1943, was located near an airplane factory on the east side of Vienna, Austria; Sosnowitz was established in the vicinity of a coal mine as a subcamp of Auschwitz III/Monowitz; prisoners incarcerated at [Dora-Mittelbau](http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005322) worked under brutal conditions in underground factories for the production of rockets. Central SS authorities tried to induce camp commandants to focus their efforts on keeping the prisoners alive, if only to serve the German war effort. However, few of the commandants took these instructions seriously and none were concerned about changing the murderous culture of the camps.

**EVACUATIONS AND MEDICAL EXPERIMENTS**    During the last year of the war, as the Germans retreated into the Reich itself, the concentration camp population (Jewish and non-Jewish) suffered catastrophic losses due to starvation, exposure, disease, and mistreatment. In addition, the SS [evacuated](http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005162) concentration camp prisoners as the front approached because the Nazis did not want the prisoners to be liberated. Under SS guard, prisoners had to march on foot during brutal winter weather without adequate food, shelter, or clothing. SS guards had orders to shoot those who could not keep up. Other prisoners were evacuated by open freight car in the dead of winter.

During this period, the concentration camps were also sites of hideous and perverted medical experiments conducted on prisoners against their will and often with lethal results. For example, in Dachau, German scientists experimented on prisoners to determine the length of time German air force personnel might survive under reduced air pressure or in frozen water. In [Sachsenhausen](http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005538), various experiments were conducted on prisoners to find vaccines for lethal contagious diseases. At Auschwitz III, the SS doctor Josef Mengele conducted experiments on twins to seek ways of increasing the German population by breeding families that would produce twins. These experiments were criminal and murderous; they were also based for the most part on bogus science and racist fantasy.

**LIBERATION**    In 1944–1945, the Allied armies [liberated](http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005131) the concentration camps. Tragically, deaths in the camps continued for several weeks after liberation. Some prisoners had already become too weak to survive.

According to SS reports, there were more than 700,000 prisoners left in the camps in January 1945. It has been estimated that nearly half of the total number of concentration camp deaths between 1933 and 1945 occurred during the last year of the war.

From: <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005263>, <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005474> and <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005475>