

The Nazi Concentration Camp System

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Top Photo: "Selection" of Hungarian Jews on the ramp at Auschwitz-II-Birkenau in German-occupied Poland, May/June 1944, during the final phase of the Holocaust. Jews were sent either to work or to the gas chamber. Yad Vashem.

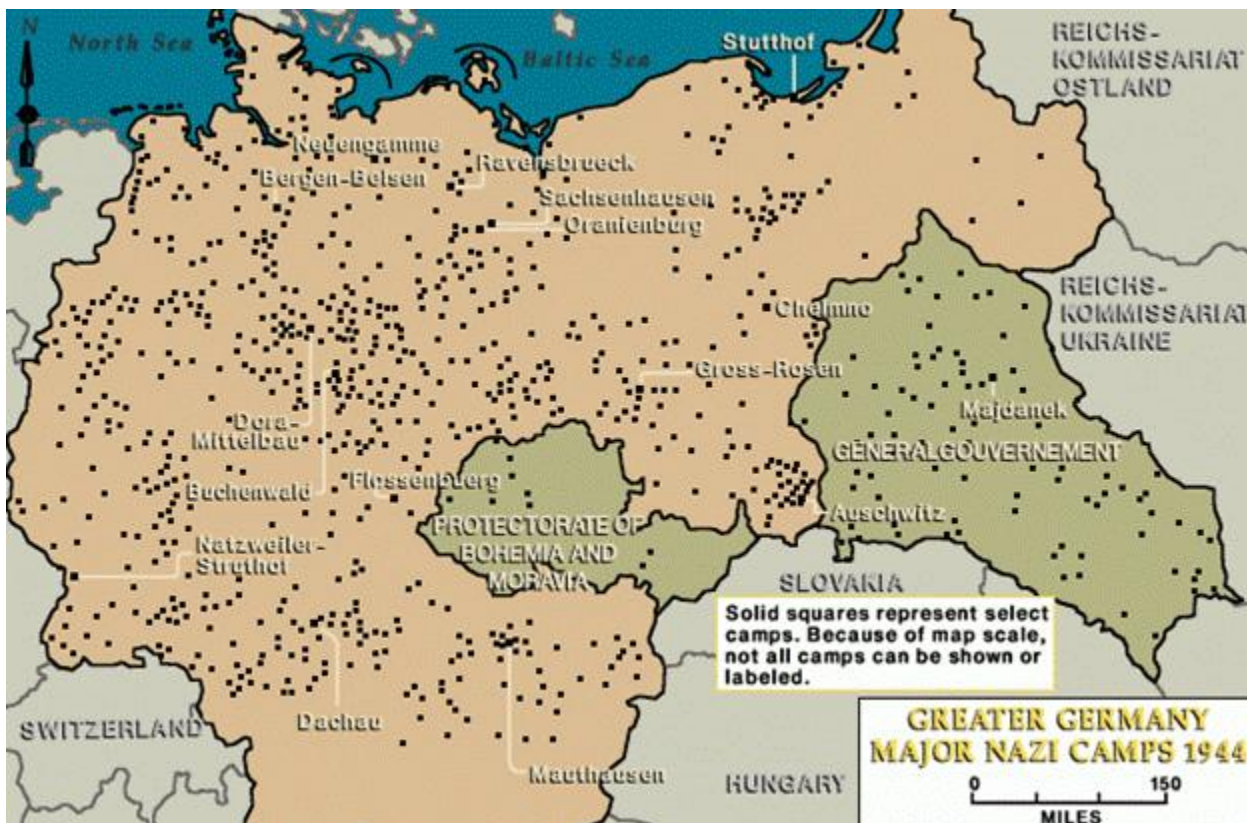
The Nazi system of camps has become a symbol for oppression, violence, and dehumanization. Images of barbed wire, striped prisoner uniforms, and gas chambers are embedded in our collective memory of World War II and the Holocaust. Yet, as survivors tell us, the measures of dehumanization carried out at Nazi camps is one of their most powerful features. Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi famously referred to the "Gray Zone" existing in the *Lager* (camp). Here, prewar morality was turned upside down, and those who were unable or unwilling to adapt—to cheat, steal,

collaborate—perished first. Those who survived had to adapt to a world where, by Nazi design, they were forced to become complicit in their own repression. As Levi wrote, “This institution represented an attempt to shift onto others—specifically the victims—the burn of guilt, so that they were deprived of even the solace of innocence.”¹

The latest research suggests the Nazis created at least 44,000 camps, including ghettos and other sites of incarceration, between 1933 and 1945.² Though frequently lumped under the broad descriptive umbrella of “concentration camps,” a closer study shows the various camps served many different functions within the Nazi system—from imprisoning “enemies of the state” to serving as way stations in larger deportation schemes to murdering people in gas chambers.³ The common thread linking the camps is their collective existence as the massive, interconnected state apparatus of violence, terror, and destruction.

CONCENTRATION CAMPS

The first Nazi camps were created to hold those deemed as “enemies” or “subversives.” Initially, the population of these concentration camps were not usually Jews, but Communists, socialists, Roma and Sinti, Jehovah’s witnesses, gay men, and “asocial” elements (alcoholics, criminals, people with mental disabilities, the poor). Such camps differed from normal prisons because of the harsh conditions and operated “without regard to legal norms of arrest and imprisonment that are acceptable in a constitutional democracy.”⁴



Some camps within the Nazi concentration camp system. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

The *first concentration camp was Dachau*, and the first prisoners—members of the Communist and Social Democrat political parties—arrived in March 1933. Although not a new phenomenon to human history, much of the tone of what came to define Nazi concentration camps emerged early on at Dachau. Theodor Eicke, Dachau's first commandant, created a rigid code of treatment for prisoners that allowed German guards to physically and mentally abuse prisoners, force them into hard labor, suspend their access to even basic necessities, give them solitary confinement and limited rations, torture them, and even later, kill them.⁵ By June 1933, Eicke was promoted to "Inspector of Concentration Camps," which gave him authority over how all other camps would run in the Third Reich. Other well-known concentration camps that emerged during this initial period included Sachsenhausen and Buchenwald, followed later by Flossenbürg, Mauthausen, and the all-women's camp at Ravensbrück.⁶

In addition to the lack of due process or semblance of a trial that preceded incarceration, all safeguards, checks, and balances regarding "civil and humane" prisoner treatment vanished inside the gates. Essentially, the concentration camp became a space disconnected from the outside world, within which "justice" was meted out at the whims of the commandant, or much more often, individual camp guards.

Concentration camps soon expanded to include many Jews among their incarcerated populations, especially after the *Kristallnacht pogrom in November 1938*. As both the number of people and camps increased, so did the variety of ways in which camps were used.

FORCED LABOR CAMPS

Individual camps rarely fit a distinctive categorization, but many concentration camps included elements of forced labor. Early examples of forced labor often evolved out of regularly administered punishment, and while some saw the potential in exploiting the captive human labor to support the military and German companies, a recurring trend was to create pointless, humiliating, or even intentionally fatal work assignments for camp prisoners. It was only in the gear up to war, and then especially after the onset of war in 1939, that Nazi leaders realized the need to exploit concentration camp labor to benefit the war effort and make up for the labor shortage left by soldiers at the front.⁷

Building out from existing concentration camps, one common practice was the development of satellite camps. Auschwitz, for example, had more than 40 subcamps—some with as few as 10 prisoners (Altdorf), others with as many as 10,000 or more (Monowitz)—and nearly all were used for forced labor. Major companies like IG Farben and Siemens utilized the slave labor at Auschwitz and its subcamps.⁸ Many other companies took advantage of slave labor elsewhere, including: BMW (Dachau, Buchenwald, Natzweiler-Struthof, and others), Daimler-Benz (Shirmeck), IBM (many), Krupp (Gross-Rosen, Flossenbürg, Mittelbau-Dora), Shell (Neuengamme), Zeiss-Ikon (Flossenbürg), Bayer (Mauthausen), and Volkswagen (Neuengamme).⁹ Many of these camps had the "*Arbeit Macht Frei*" ("Work Makes You Free") sign over the entrance gate—a dark connection to the fact work would kill (and thus "free") most who entered.

The biggest beneficiary of forced labor camps was the Nazi government itself since many were used to produce war material. In addition to uniforms, oil, arms, and explosives, laborers produced aircraft, bombs, rockets, and other critical weapons systems. Mittelbau-Dora is perhaps the most

notorious example of the depraved conditions forced labor camps created for prisoners. From 1943 to 1944, the Germans used underground factories at the camp to manufacture V-2 missiles and other experimental weapons. According to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Prisoners were kept mostly underground, deprived of daylight and fresh air, and enclosed in unstable tunnels. The mortality rate was higher than at most other concentration camps. Prisoners too weak or ill to work were sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau or Mauthausen to be killed."¹⁰ Historians estimate that of the 60,000 people who passed through the camp as inmates, roughly 20,000 died in these terrible conditions.¹¹ Gross-Rosen is another infamous example of Nazi forced labor. To service a massive quarry on the site, some 125,000 prisoners passed through Gross-Rosen, of which nearly 40,000 perished, many through brutal physical labor cutting and hauling granite for the SS German Earth and Stone Works.¹²



Gross-Rosen Concentration Camp. Jacob Flaws

DEATH CAMPS

In the Nazi camp system, no camps have commanded great historical attention than the so-called *Vernichtungslager* (extermination camps). Of the thousands of Nazi camps, only six were extermination, or death camps: Auschwitz, Chelmno, Majdanek, Belżec, Sobibór, and Treblinka. At these six camps alone, the Nazis murdered over 3 million people, primarily through gassing. Yet even these camps can be classified further. For instance, Majdanek and Auschwitz both had large numbers of forced labor and/or concentration camps either on site or as satellites; the number of survivors of

these camps is large in comparison to other death camps. Thus, they have often been referred to as “hybrid” concentration-death camps because of their dual purposes in the Nazi system. Chel̓mno is a unique case in that it certainly was a death camp, but before 1942, it was an “experimental” death camp, where the Nazis tried out various versions of mass murder—first with gas vans before switching to static chambers.¹³

Hence, when speaking of death camps, the Nazis had three camps designed solely for that purpose—Beł̓zec, Sobibór, and Treblinka. Here, there were no ramp-side selections where “young, healthy” workers, mostly men, were saved from immediate mass murder in order to work for Germany. Instead, everyone who arrived went straight to their deaths in the gas chambers. The only exception was a small group (around 600 to 1,000 at each camp, mainly males) whose only right to live was to make sure the camps operated. A subgroup, often called the *Sonderkommando* (special command), ran the machinery of the gas chambers and disposed of the dead. Even they were “liquidated and rotated” every few weeks, however, and a new set of temporary workers replaced them.



Nazi death and hybrid concentration-death camps in Poland. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Beł̓zec, Sobibór, and Treblinka are often called the *Aktion Reinhard* (Operation Reinhard) camps because they were all built after the [Wannsee Conference of January 20, 1942](#), where the decision to switch from mass shootings to gas chambers was implemented. Reinhard Heydrich, an SS officer instrumental in organizing this so-called “Final Solution” to the Jewish question, was assassinated in Prague by Czech partisans in June 1942. In his “honor,” the other SS functionaries building the death camps named the entire mass murder program for him. At Beł̓zec, Sobibór, and Treblinka, approximately 1.7 million people, mainly Jews, were murdered in the span of just 18 months. Over

half of this number perished at Treblinka alone, a horrific statistic that has often led to it being classified as the deadliest space of the Third Reich.^{[14](#)}

Two of the three Reinhard camps—Treblinka and Sobibór—[saw revolts in 1943](#) when Jewish workers fought back, destroyed portions of the camps, and escaped into the nearby woods. Approximately 150 people survived these revolts until the end of the war, and their stories have become critical to our understanding of how these camps worked. By contrast, at Bełżec, where there was no revolt, there are only two known survivors, out of a death toll as high as half a million Jews.^{[15](#)}

(Optional Video: The Treblinka Uprising: Resistance & Remembrance 80 Years Later on YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ESKSFhYsaBw&t=240s>)

'HYBRID CAMPS'

Many camps in the Nazi system served dual purposes or transformed over the course of the war. However, there are two camps that truly stand apart for their size and lethality.

Majdanek was one of the first major camps to be captured by the advancing Red Army in July 1944. Built in 1941 to house Soviet prisoners of war, it quickly grew in size thanks to its location in Lublin, Poland, and later accommodated tens of thousands of forced laborers and political prisoners. Increasingly many Jews were sent to Majdanek, and while some were forced to work, others were murdered. In fact, the camp had three operational gas chambers, and by 1943, the Nazis were using the cyanide-based pesticide Zyklon B to murder Jews. On November 3, 1943, Nazi camp leaders at Majdanek shot 18,000 Jews in what became known as *Aktion Erntefest* (Operation Harvest Festival).^{[16](#)} Estimates of the dead at Majdanek range widely, but most recent estimates place the number between 95,000 and 130,000 in the entire Majdanek system of subcamps, with the most occurring at the main camp.

The other camp was Auschwitz. Established in 1940, it served initially as a concentration and forced labor camp. It rapidly expanded in size as major companies like IG Farben moved crucial war industries into the area to take advantage of slave labor. In all, there were 44 subcamps of Auschwitz. Yet, Auschwitz II at Birkenau became the focal point in early 1942 as an extermination camp for Jews. Though some were selected and moved into other work areas of the Auschwitz subcamps, most of the Jews arriving in Birkenau were murdered by gas. In fact, as Operation Reinhard slowed down, the Nazis built four brand-new and specially designed crematoria in Birkenau. Notably, this was the location of the mass murder of over 400,000 Hungarian Jews in 1944.^{[17](#)} In many respects, by this point, Auschwitz had become the center of mass killing in the Holocaust while also functioning as a major source of forced labor needed for war industries.

Like at Sobibór and Treblinka, [prisoners at Auschwitz also revolted](#). On October 7, 1944, Jewish *Sonderkommando* blew up one of the crematoria and killed or wounded several SS members. Though nearly all who participated in the uprising were killed during or immediately after it ended, the revolt stands as a testament of courage in the face of annihilation.

After Majdanek had fallen completely intact to the Soviets in 1944, the Nazis began dismantling Auschwitz—the progress is especially evident in aerial photographs of Birkenau. Yet, [*on January 27, 1945, the Red Army liberated the camp*](#), which had not been totally destroyed. The thousands of prisoners who were liberated alongside the local witnesses told of the horrors of Auschwitz—of the 1.3 million people sent there, 1.1 million perished.

OTHER CAMPS

Of course, the Nazis had many other camps, including transit camps like Drancy in Paris, where tens of thousands of Jews were held before being transported to Auschwitz (some have called it the “antechamber of Auschwitz”).^{[18](#)} Another infamous camp was Theresienstadt (sometimes called Terezín), a transit camp of Auschwitz in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia (modern-day Czech Republic). Here, Nazi leaders staged events for the International Red Cross to highlight how well Jewish prisoners were treated. These were merely propaganda events, however, and once the outsiders left, the inmates were usually sent to Auschwitz.

The Nazis also had resettlement or reeducation camps, like Rajhenburg Castle in Brestanica, Slovenia, and Marianum in Germany. These were sites where “*Volksdeutsche*” (ethnic Germans) brought in from the East were held before being racially classified, “re-Germanized,” and resettled in newly acquired territory in the East.^{[19](#)}

Truly, anything could become a camp, and in fact, the Nazis often established temporary or long-standing holding sites throughout occupied Europe. It is impossible to know exactly how many of these makeshift camps they created.

LEGACY OF NAZI CAMPS

While individual camps varied quite a bit, the unifying feature was their collective assault on the humanity of those forced into them. With that, we return to Primo Levi, who wrote many volumes on his experiences in Nazi camps, but always struggled with what his survival meant. Upon learning of Levi’s death in 1987, which the coroner later ruled a suicide, fellow Auschwitz survivor Elie Wiesel commented, “Primo Levi died at Auschwitz forty years later.”^{[20](#)} Hauntingly poignant, Wiesel’s statement echoed something Levi had written in his book, *The Truce*. There Levi recounts a recurring dream where he is sitting with friends or family in a comfortable, tranquil environment when everything suddenly gives way:

"Now everything has changed into chaos; I am alone in the center of a grey and turbid nothing, and now, I know what this thing means, and I also know that I have always known it; I am in the Lager once more, and nothing is true outside the Lager. All the rest was a brief pause, a deception of the senses, a dream; my family, nature in flower, my home. Now this inner dream, this dream of peace, is over, and in the outer dream, which continues, gelid, a well-known voice resounds: a single word, not imperious, but brief and subdued. It is the dawn command of Auschwitz, a foreign word, feared and expected: get up, 'Wstawach'."^{[21](#)}

In many ways, the *Lager* created an unmistakable divide in the lives of all those who passed through—one that separated the before and the after. The violence of these experiences never went away for them, and that is a testament to the horrors of totalitarian states.

Footnotes

- ¹ Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. by Raymond Rosenthal (London: Michael Joseph, 1988), 37.
- ² United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM), "Nazi Camps," Holocaust Encyclopedia, accessed Jan. 26, 2025, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/nazi-camps>.
- ³ For a more comprehensive analysis of Nazi camps, see Nikolaus Wachsmann, *KL: A History of the Nazi Concentration Camps* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015).
- ⁴ USHMM, "Nazi Camps."
- ⁵ Jason Dawsey, "Dachau, the 'Model' Concentration Camp, 1933-39," The National World War II Museum, July 11, 2022, <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/dachau-model-concentration-camp-1933-39>.
- ⁶ USHMM, "Concentration Camps, 1933-39," Holocaust Encyclopedia, accessed Jan. 26, 2025, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/concentration-camps-1933-39>.
- ⁷ USHMM, "Forced Labor: An Overview," Holocaust Encyclopedia, accessed Jan. 26, 2025, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/forced-labor-an-overview>.
- ⁸ Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, "Auschwitz sub-camps," accessed Jan. 26, 2025, <https://www.auschwitz.org/en/history/auschwitz-sub-camps/>.
- ⁹ American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise, "Concentration Camps: List of Major Companies Involved in the Concentration Camps, Jewish Virtual Library," accessed Jan. 26, 2025, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/list-of-major-companies-involved-in-the-concentration-camps>.
- ¹⁰ USHMM, "Dora-Mittelbau: Overview," Holocaust Encyclopedia, accessed Jan. 26, 2025, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/dora-mittelbau-overview>.
- ¹¹ KZ-Gedenkstätte Mittelbau-Dora, "Bilanz Des Schreckens," accessed Jan. 26, 2025, <https://www.dora.de/geschichte/chronologie/konzentrationslager/bilanz>.
- ¹² Yad Vashem, "Gross-Rosen," Shoah Resource Center, accessed Jan. 26, 2025, https://www.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%206320.pdf.
- ¹³ Patrick Montague, *Chełmno and the Holocaust: The History of Hitler's First Death Camp* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012).
- ¹⁴ Jacob Flaws, *Spaces of Treblinka: Retracing a Death Camp* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2024).
- ¹⁵ Yitzhak Arad, *Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka: The Operation Reinhard Camps* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 363.
- ¹⁶ USHMM, "Lublin/Majdanek Concentration Camp: Areas of Research," Holocaust Encyclopedia, accessed February 2, 2025, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/lublin-majdanek-concentration-camp-conditions>.
- ¹⁷ USHMM, "Auschwitz," Holocaust Encyclopedia, accessed February 2, 2025, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/auschwitz>.
- ¹⁸ European Holocaust Research Infrastructure (EHRI), "The Transportation of the Jews from the Nazi Transit Camps Drancy (France) and Malines (Belgium)," accessed Feb. 3, 2025, <https://training.ehri-project.eu/deportation-jews-nazi-transit-camps-drancy-france-and-malines-belgium>.
- ¹⁹ Jacob Flaws, "Settlers of the Reich: The Germans of Hitler's Frontier," in *The Eastern Front: War, Myth, and Memory*, ed. Yan Mann and Olga Kucherenko (London: Routledge, 2025), 144-176.
- ²⁰ Diego Gambetta, "Primo Levi's Last Moments," *Boston Review*, June 1, 1999, <https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/diego-gambetta-primo-levi-last-moments/>.
- ²¹ Primo Levi, *The Truce: A Survivor's Journey Home from Auschwitz*, trans. by Stuart Woolf (London: The Folio Society, 2002), 239.

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