

CONCENTRATION CAMPS



Top photo: SA members guarding inmates who are standing in line in the camp in Oranienburg, Germany, 1933. Yad Vashem Photo Archive (4613/38)

Middle photo: Inmates at a roll-call, Dachau, Germany, 1938. Yad Vashem Photo Archive (3E01)

Bottom photo: A group of prisoners at a roll-call, Dachau, Germany, 1938. Bundesarchiv, Bild 152-21-06/ Friedrich Franz Bauer/CC-BY-SA

The first concentration camps were established in Nazi Germany immediately after Hitler came to power in 1933 and operated as instruments of terror, control and punishment. They were meant to silence any opposition to the Nazis and to scare the people of Germany into obeying and supporting the Nazi regime. The Nazis arrested perceived opponents—at first, mostly Communists and Social Democrats. Later, people defined by the Nazis as “asocial elements”—including the homeless, beggars, Sinti-Roma, and hardened criminals—were also imprisoned in the camps.

People could be incarcerated not because of anything they had done, but because of the suspicion that they might do something opposed to the Nazi regime. Prisoners lacked personal freedoms and the ability to make decisions. The SS maintained strict control over all aspects of their life. A prisoner who did not follow an order would be severely punished by whipping, solitary confinement, lost food rations and other forms of punishment.

Beginning in the summer of 1938, many Jews were imprisoned in these camps simply for being Jews, especially after the Kristallnacht Pogrom when 36,000 Jews were locked up. Around this time, the camps became increasingly brutal. In addition to serving as prisons, they became sites where execution sentences were carried out. This opened the way for killings that also took place without a trial or any legal process.

After WWII began, the Nazi camp system branched out to many kinds of camps. People the Nazis wanted to punish, including Jews, local resistance activists, and civilians, were incarcerated and generally exploited as forced laborers. The cruel system, lack of sufficient food, general conditions in the camps, brutal forced labor, and episodes of outright murder all led to a high death rate in most of the camps.

The concentration camp system was not established as part of the “Final Solution.” However, as the policy of murder took hold, the concentration camps played a role in it. From late 1941 onward, a number of camps were designated or newly constructed as “extermination” camps, meaning they became sites of systematic mass murder.