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DACHAU

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Established in March 1933, the Dachau concentration camp was the first regular concentration camp established by the National Socialist (Nazi) government. Heinrich Himmler, in his capacity as police president of Munich, officially described the camp as "the first concentration camp for political prisoners." It was located on the grounds of an abandoned munitions factory near the northeastern part of the town of Dachau, about 10 miles northwest of Munich in southern Germany.



View of barracks and the ammunition factory in one of the first photos of Dachau concentration camp. Dachau, Germany, March or April 1933.

— National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Md.

During the first year, the camp held about 4,800 prisoners. Initially the internees consisted primarily of German Communists, Social Democrats, trade unionists, and other political opponents of the Nazi regime. Over time, other groups were also interned at Dachau, such as [Jehovah's Witnesses](#), [Roma](#) (Gypsies), [homosexuals](#), as well as "asocials" and repeat criminal offenders. During the early years relatively few Jews were interned in Dachau and then usually because they belonged to one of the above groups or had completed prison sentences after being convicted for violating the Nuremberg Laws of 1935.

In early 1937, the SS, using prisoner labor, initiated construction of a large complex of buildings on the grounds of the original camp. Prisoners were forced to do this work, starting with the destruction of the old munitions factory, under terrible conditions. The construction was officially completed in mid-August 1938 and the camp remained essentially unchanged until 1945. Dachau thus remained in operation for the entire period of the Third Reich.

The number of Jewish prisoners at Dachau rose with the increased persecution of Jews and on November 10-11, 1938, in the aftermath of [Kristallnacht](#), more than 10,000 Jewish men were interned there. (Most of men in this group were released after incarceration of a few weeks to a few months, many after proving they had made arrangements to emigrate from Germany.)

The Dachau camp was a training center for SS concentration camp guards, and the camp's organization and routine became the model for all Nazi concentration camps. The camp was divided into two sections—the camp area and the crematoria area. The camp area consisted of 32 barracks, including one for clergy imprisoned for opposing the Nazi regime and one reserved for medical experiments. The camp administration was located in the gatehouse at the main entrance. The camp area had a group of support buildings, containing the kitchen, laundry, showers, and workshops, as well as a prison block (Bunker). The courtyard between the prison and the central kitchen was used for the summary execution of prisoners. An electrified barbed-wire fence, a ditch, and a wall with seven guard towers surrounded the camp.

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In 1942, the crematorium area was constructed next to the main camp. It included the old crematorium and the new crematorium (Barrack X) with a gas chamber. There is no credible evidence that the gas chamber in Barrack X was used to murder human beings. Instead, prisoners underwent "selection"; those who were judged too sick or weak to continue working were sent to the Hartheim "euthanasia" killing center near Linz, Austria. Several thousand Dachau prisoners were murdered at Hartheim. Further, the SS used the firing range and the gallows in the crematoria area as killing sites for prisoners.

In Dachau, as in other Nazi camps, German physicians performed [medical experiments on prisoners](#), including high-altitude experiments using a decompression chamber, malaria and tuberculosis experiments, hypothermia experiments, and experiments testing new medications. Prisoners were also forced to test methods of making seawater potable and of halting excessive bleeding. Hundreds of prisoners died or were permanently disabled as a result of these experiments.

Dachau prisoners were used as [forced laborers](#). At first, they were employed in the operation of the camp, in various construction projects, and in small handicraft industries established in the camp. Prisoners built roads, worked in gravel pits, and drained marshes. During the war, forced labor utilizing concentration camp prisoners became increasingly important to German armaments production.

DACHAU SUBCAMPS

In the summer and fall of 1944, to increase war production, satellite camps under the administration of Dachau were established near armaments factories throughout southern Germany. Dachau alone had more than 30 large subcamps in which over 30,000 prisoners worked almost exclusively on armaments. Thousands of prisoners were worked to death.

THE LIBERATION OF DACHAU

As Allied forces advanced toward Germany, the Germans began to move prisoners from concentration camps near the front to prevent the liberation of large numbers of prisoners. Transports from the evacuated camps arrived continuously at Dachau, resulting in a dramatic deterioration of conditions. After days of travel, with little or no food or water, the prisoners arrived weak and exhausted, often near death. Typhus epidemics became a serious problem due to overcrowding, poor sanitary conditions, insufficient provisions, and the weakened state of the prisoners.

On April 26, 1945, as American forces approached, there were 67,665 registered prisoners in Dachau and its subcamps; more than half of this number were in the main camp. Of these, 43,350 were categorized as political prisoners, while 22,100 were Jews, with the remainder falling into various other categories. Starting that day, the Germans forced more than 7,000 prisoners, mostly Jews, on a [death march](#) from Dachau to Tegernsee far to the south. During the death march, the Germans shot anyone who could no longer continue; many also died of hunger, cold, or exhaustion. On April 29, 1945, American forces [liberated](#) Dachau. As they neared the camp, they found more than 30 railroad cars filled with bodies brought to Dachau, all in an advanced state of decomposition. In early May 1945, American forces liberated the prisoners who had been sent on the death march.

The number of prisoners incarcerated in Dachau between 1933 and 1945 exceeded 188,000. The number of prisoners who died in the camp and the subcamps between January 1940 and May 1945 was at least 28,000, to which must be added those who perished there between 1933 and the end of 1939, as well as an uncounted number of unregistered prisoners. It is unlikely that the total number of victims who died in Dachau will ever be known.

Further Reading

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