

Buchenwald concentration camp

[Watchtower](#) at the memorial site Buchenwald, in 1983

Buchenwald concentration camp was a [Nazi concentration camp](#) during [World War II](#). In [German](#), the camp was called *Konzentrationslager (KZ) Buchenwald*. It was built in [Germany](#) in 1937, and stayed open until 1945. Buchenwald was one of the first and largest [labor camps](#) built in [Germany](#).

The [Nazis](#) sent people from all over [Europe](#) and the [Soviet Union](#) to Buchenwald. There, they were [prisoners](#) and did [forced labor](#) in [weapons factories](#).^[1]

After the [Allies](#) won World War II, the Soviet Union took over Buchenwald and some other parts of Germany. From 1945 to 1950, they used Buchenwald as an [internment camp](#). They called it NKVD Special Camp Number 2. (The [NKVD](#) was the Soviet police organization that ran the camp.) On January 6, 1950, the Soviets handed over Buchenwald to the [East German](#) Ministry of Internal Affairs.

Today, what is left of Buchenwald is a [memorial](#). There is also a [museum](#) there.^[2]

History

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The Nazis built Buchenwald on the *Ettersberg* (Etter Mountain), near [Weimar](#), Germany, in July of 1937. They named the camp *Buchenwald*, which means "[beech forest](#)" in English.^[3] On the camp's main gate, they wrote *Jedem das Seine* ("Each to their own").

Between April 1938 and April 1945, about 238,380 people were sent to Buchenwald. These prisoners included people from many different countries. They also included many Allied [prisoners of war](#) (POWs). Over 56,000 prisoners died at Buchenwald.^[4]

People

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Camp commandants

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Karl-Otto Koch (1 August 1937-July 1941)

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[Ilse Koch](#) after capture (1945)

Buchenwald's first commandant (camp leader) was [Karl-Otto Koch](#). He ran the camp from 1937 to July 1941. His second wife, [Ilse Koch](#), became well known as *Die Hexe von Buchenwald* ("the witch of Buchenwald") for the terrible ways she treated the prisoners. Koch made the prisoners build a [zoo](#) at Buchenwald, with a [bear](#) pit (*Bärenzwinger*).^[5]

Eventually, Koch was put in prison at Buchenwald himself. At first, two Nazi officials named Prince Waldeck and Dr. Morgen accused Koch of encouraging [murder](#). Later, Koch was also charged with [corruption](#), [embezzlement](#), [black market](#) dealings, and using the camp's workers to meet his own needs.^[6] Other camp officials were also charged, including Ilse Koch.

Karl Koch was [tried](#) and [sentenced to death](#). He was [executed](#) by a [firing squad](#) on April 5, 1945. This was just one week before American [soldiers](#) arrived and took over Buchenwald.^[7]

After the war, Ilse Koch was [sentenced](#) to four years in jail. At first, her sentence was cut down to two years and she was set free. However, after this, she was arrested again and sentenced to life in prison by the new German government. She [killed herself](#) in jail in September 1967.^[6]

Hermann Pister (1942-1945)

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Buchenwald's second commandant was [Hermann Pister](#). He controlled the camp from 1942 to 1945, when it was taken over by American soldiers.

After the war, Pister was tried in the [Nuremberg Trials](#), and was sentenced to death. However, in September 1948, before he could be executed, Pister died of a [heart](#) problem.^[6]

Types of prisoners

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Prisoners at Dachau had to wear [colored badges](#) showing what group they belonged to

The Nazis sent prisoners from all over Europe and the Soviet Union to Buchenwald. These included:

- [Jews](#)
- [Polish people](#)

- [Slavic people](#)
- People with [mental illnesses](#), [intellectual disabilities](#), and physical [disabilities](#)
- People who practiced [religions](#) that the Nazis did not like, such as [Jehovah's Witnesses](#)
- Political prisoners (people from different [political parties](#), or people who had different [political](#) beliefs than the Nazis, like [socialists](#) and [communists](#))
- [Romani](#) and [Sinti](#) people
- [Freemasons](#)
- [Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender](#) (LGBT) people
- Prisoners of war (especially Soviet POWs)
- Criminals

Women in Buchenwald

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Five disabled Jewish prisoners photographed for [propaganda](#) purposes

Somewhere between 500 and 1,000 women prisoners were kept at Buchenwald. First, in 1941, twenty female political prisoners were brought to Buchenwald from [Ravensbrück concentration camp](#). They were forced to work as sex slaves in the camp's [brothel](#).

However, most of the female prisoners were sent to Buchenwald in 1944 and 1945 from other concentration camps. They were sent mainly from [Auschwitz](#), Ravensbrück, and [Bergen Belsen](#). Later, all the women prisoners were sent to Buchenwald's many female satellite camps (smaller camps around Buchenwald).

Ilse Koch was the head supervisor (*Oberaufseherin*) of 22 other female guards and hundreds of women prisoners in the main camp. More than 530 other female guards worked in Buchenwald's many other, smaller camps ("subcamps"). Only 22 women served or trained in the main Buchenwald camp, compared to over 15,500 men. ^[8]

Allied airmen

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When the Nazis captured soldiers from Western Allied countries, they almost always sent them to prisoner of war camps, not concentration camps. However, they did keep a group of 168 airmen (flyers) at Buchenwald for two months. ^[9] These men were from the United States, the United Kingdom, [Canada](#), [Australia](#), [New Zealand](#), and [Jamaica](#). They got to Buchenwald on August 20, 1944. ^{[10][11]}

These airmen's planes had crashed in [France](#), which Nazi Germany controlled. The airmen were sent to Buchenwald, not a POW camp, because the Nazis said they were [spies](#) and "[terror](#) bombers."

After the war, one airman remembered arriving at Buchenwald:

As we got close to the camp and saw what was inside... a terrible, terrible fear and horror entered our hearts. We thought, what is this? Where are we going? Why are we here? And as you got closer to the camp and started to enter [it] and saw these human skeletons walking around—old men, young men, boys, just skin and bone, we thought, what are we getting into?

— Canadian airman Ed Carter ^[12]

The airmen were treated and abused in the same way as the other prisoners at Buchenwald. Two airmen died there. Then, in October 1944, the airmen were sent to Stalag Luft III, a regular POW camp. ^[13] The airmen who were accused of being "terror bombers" were going to be executed at Buchenwald after October 24. They were saved by officers of the [Luftwaffe](#) (the German [air force](#)), who visited Buchenwald. When they got back to Berlin, these officers made sure the airmen were sent to a regular POW camp, and not executed. ^[11]

Death toll at Buchenwald

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[Starving](#) prisoners are liberated on April 16, 1945

Causes of death

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The Nazis' goal for camps like Buchenwald was *Vernichtung durch Arbeit* ("extermination through labor"). This meant that prisoners were being sent to Buchenwald to be worked to death.

Because of the terrible living conditions in the camp, [illness](#) was very common and spread quickly. Prisoners were also [starving](#). Because of this combination of illness and starvation, many prisoners were actually "worked to death" as the Nazis had planned. However, many other inmates died from executions, [experiments](#) by Nazi doctors, and other causes.

Prisoners from Buchenwald waiting to be executed in the forest near the camp, April 26, 1942

Summary [executions](#) of Soviet POWs (executions without a [trial](#)) were also done at Buchenwald. In 1941 and 1942, at least 1,000 men were chosen to

be killed and were sent to Buchenwald, where they were immediately shot in the back of the head.

Nazi doctors also did [experiments](#) on prisoners at Buchenwald. For example, in 1942 and 1943, they used 729 prisoners to test a [vaccine](#) for [typhus](#). This meant the prisoners were given the vaccine, and then given typhus on purpose. 154 of these prisoners died.^[14] In another experiment, Nazi doctors wanted to see how much of a certain [poison](#) was needed to kill a person. They gave four Russian POWs the poison. When the POWs did not die, they were "[strangled](#) in the [crematorium](#)" and then "dissected" (cut apart to study their bodies).^[14] Doctors also [burned](#) other prisoners very badly with [white phosphorus](#) to test whether a medicine would help similar [wounds](#) caused by [bombs](#).^[14] After the war ended, at the [Nuremberg Trials](#), one of these doctors defended himself by saying that while he was a doctor, he was also a "legally appointed executioner" (meaning the law allowed him to kill people).^[14]

Number of deaths

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Buchenwald's crematorium

The SS left behind records of how many prisoners came to the camp and how many left. They recorded how many prisoners were let go, sent to another camp, or died. These records say that 33,462 prisoners died at Buchenwald. However, these records may not be completely true. For example, before 1944, when the SS killed prisoners, they often wrote down that the prisoners were "transferred to the [Gestapo](#)," not that they were killed. Also, starting in 1941, many Soviet POWs were executed in [mass killings](#). These POWs would be killed as soon as they got to the camp, and were never added to the camp's records. This means they were not listed among the 33,462 dead.^[4]

One former Buchenwald prisoner, Armin Walter, counted the number of people who were killed by being shot in the back of the head. Walter's job at Buchenwald was to set up and care for a radio system at the place where people were executed. He counted the number of people who were killed and hid the information. He says that 8,483 Soviet prisoners of war were shot and killed.^[4]

When all these deaths are added up, the total number of people who died at Buchenwald is about 56,545.^[15] This number includes:

- Deaths according to SS records: 33,462^[16]
- Executions by shooting: 8,483
- Executions by [hanging](#): 1,100 ([estimate](#))
- Deaths during evacuation transports (moving prisoners to other camps by train or [forced marches](#)): 13,500 (estimate)^[4]

This total of 56,545 deaths means that 24% of the prisoners who were sent to Buchenwald died.^[4]

Liberation

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US Senator [Alben W. Barkley](#) (D-Kentucky) looks on after Buchenwald's liberation. Barkley later became [Vice President of the United States](#) under [Harry S. Truman](#)

On April 4, 1945, United States soldiers took over [Ohrdruf](#), one of Buchenwald's smaller camps. Ohrdruf was the first Nazi camp liberated (taken over and freed) by U.S. soldiers.^[17]

Two days later, the Nazis started trying to evacuate (move everybody out of) Buchenwald. They made thousands of prisoners go on forced marches toward other camps that the Americans had not yet reached.^[8]

A Polish [engineer](#) named Gwidon Damazyn, who had been a prisoner since March 1941, had set up a secret [short-wave radio](#). On April 8 at noon, Damazyn and Russian prisoner Konstantin Ivanovich Leonov sent a message in [Morse code](#) to the [Allies](#). The message had been written by the leaders of the prisoners' underground resistance movement (a group of prisoners who tried to fight the Nazis in secret). It said:

To the Allies. To the army of [General Patton](#). This is the Buchenwald concentration camp. [SOS](#). We request help. They want to evacuate us. The SS wants to destroy us.

The text was repeated several times in English, German, and [Russian](#). Damazyn sent the English and German messages, and Leonov sent the Russian version. Three minutes after Damazyn sent the last message, the headquarters of the [Third United States Army](#) answered:

KZ Bu. Hold out. Rushing to your aid. Staff of Third Army.

Damazyn [fainted](#) after getting the message.^[18]

After learning this news, [Communist](#) inmates attacked the camp's [watchtowers](#) and killed the guards who were still at the camp. They used guns they had been collecting since 1942 (one [machine gun](#) and 91 [rifles](#)).^[19]

United States soldiers arrived at Buchenwald on April 11, 1945 at 3:15 P.M. (The clock at the entrance gate is now permanently set to this time). The soldiers were given a hero's welcome.^[20]

Later that day, United States soldiers took over Langenstein, one of Buchenwald's smaller camps. There, they freed over 21,000 prisoners.^[20] They also ordered the [mayor](#) of Langenstein to send food and water to the camp, and rushed in medical supplies from an American field hospital.^[21]

Buchenwald, 1945. [Elie Wiesel](#) is in the second row from the bottom, seventh from the left.

On Thursday, April 12, 1945, some [journalists](#) arrived at Buchenwald. The journalists included [Edward R. Murrow](#), whose [radio report about seeing Buchenwald Archived](#) 2016-01-24 at the [Wayback Machine](#) was broadcast on [CBS](#) and became one of his most famous:

I asked to see one of the [barracks](#). It happened to be occupied by [Czechoslovaks](#). When I entered, men crowded around, tried to lift me to their shoulders. They were too weak. Many of them could not get out of bed. I was told that this building had once stabled 80 horses. There were 1,200 men in it, five to a bunk. The stink was beyond all description.

They called the doctor. We inspected his records. There were only names in the little black book, nothing more. Nothing about who these men were, what they had done, or hoped. Behind the names of those who had died, there was a cross. I counted them. They totalled 242. 242 out of 1,200, in one month.

As we walked out into the courtyard, a man fell dead. Two others, they must have been over 60, were crawling toward the [latrine](#). I saw it, but will not describe it.

— Part of [Edward R. Murrow's Buchenwald report](#). April 15, 1945.

Soviet Special Camp Number 2

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Between 1945 and February 10, 1950, the camp was run by the Soviet Union. They used it as a prison camp called Special Camp Number 2.^[22]

The Soviet Union held 28,455 prisoners, including 1,000 women, at Special Camp Number 2.^[23] Soviet records say that 7,113 of these prisoners died.^[23] They were buried in mass graves in the woods around the camp. Their families were not told they had died.

Prisoners at Special Camp Number 2 included:^{[24][25]}

- People accused of being against [Stalinism](#)
- People accused of being members of the [Nazi Party](#)

- People who had done nothing wrong, but were confused with other people who had
- People who were [arrested](#) by the Soviets without committing any real crimes ([arbitrary](#) arrests)

The NKVD (the Soviet police organization that ran the camp) would not let the prisoners talk to anyone outside the camp.^[24] The NKVD also did not try to figure out whether the prisoners were [guilty](#).^[25]

On January 6, 1950, the Soviet Minister of Internal Affairs, Sergei Nikiforovich Kruglov, decided that the East German Ministry of Internal Affairs would take over all of the NKVD special camps, including the one at Buchenwald.^[22]

Buchenwald is destroyed

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Buchenwald monument

In October 1950, Buchenwald was destroyed. The main gate, the [crematorium](#), the hospital block, and two guard towers were left standing. All prisoner barracks and other buildings were torn down. Many of them have been rebuilt.

Just days after the camp was liberated in 1945, freed prisoners built a [monument](#) to honor the people who died at Buchenwald. It was made of wood and was meant to be [temporary](#). Eventually it was replaced by a monument made of [stainless steel](#). The surface of this monument is kept at 37 °C (99 °F), the [temperature](#) of human [skin](#), all year round.^{[26][27]}

A second monument was also built in 1958, near where prisoners had been buried together in mass graves.

Books about Buchenwald

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Some people who survived being imprisoned at Buchenwald have written about what happened to them. These people include:

- Jorge Semprún, *Quel beau dimanche!* ("What a Beautiful Sunday!")
- Ernst Wiechert, *Der Totenwald* ("Forest of the Dead")
- Léon Delarbre (who wrote and also drew scenes of what life was like in Buchenwald)^[28]
- Edmond Vandievoet, *I Escaped from a Nazi Death Camp* (Vandievoet was one of the few prisoners who escaped from Buchenwald)
- [Elie Wiesel](#), *La Nuit* (Night)^[29]

Visit from President Obama and Chancellor Merkel

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On June 5, 2009, [U.S. President Barack Obama](#) and [German Chancellor Angela Merkel](#) visited Buchenwald. Elie Wiesel and Bertrand Herz, two survivors of Buchenwald, went with them.^{[30][31]} During the visit, President Obama said at as a child, he had heard stories about Buchenwald from his great-uncle, who was part of the [89th Infantry Division](#). This Division was the first group of American soldiers to reach the Ohrdruf forced labor camp, one of Buchenwald's smaller camps.^[30]

Photos of Buchenwald

[[change](#) | [change source](#)]

- [Camp gate](#)

Camp gate

- [Main camp area](#)

Main camp area

- [Crematorium](#)

Crematorium

- [Inside the crematorium](#)

Inside the crematorium

- [The "Corpse Cellar"](#)

The "Corpse Cellar"

- [Russian graveyard](#)

Russian graveyard

- [Cells](#)

Cells

- [Memorial](#)

Memorial

Related pages

[[change](#) | [change source](#)]

- [Nazi concentration camps](#)
- [The Holocaust](#)
- [World War II](#)

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