

Dachau concentration camp (/ˈdaːxau/; [3] German: *Konzentrationslager (KZ) Dachau*, IPA: [ˈdaxau]) was the first of the Nazi concentration camps opened in 1933, intended to hold political prisoners. It is located on the grounds of an abandoned munitions factory northeast of the medieval town of Dachau, about 16 km (10 mi) northwest of Munich in the state of Bavaria, in southern Germany.^[4] Opened by Heinrich Himmler, its purpose was enlarged to include forced labor, and eventually, the imprisonment of Jews, German and Austrian criminals, and eventually foreign nationals from countries that Germany occupied or invaded. The Dachau camp system grew to include nearly 100 sub-camps, which were mostly work camps or *Arbeitskommandos*, and were located throughout southern Germany and Austria.^[5] The camps were liberated by U.S. forces on 29 April 1945.

Prisoners lived in constant fear of brutal treatment and terror detention including standing cells, floggings, the so-called tree or pole hanging, and standing at attention for extremely long periods.^[6] There were 32,000 documented deaths at the camp, and thousands that are undocumented.^[7]

Approximately 10,000 of the 30,000 prisoners were sick at the time of liberation.^{[8][9]}

In the postwar years the Dachau facility served to hold SS soldiers awaiting trial. After 1948, it held ethnic Germans who had been expelled from eastern Europe and were awaiting resettlement, and also was used for a time as a United States military base during the occupation. It was finally closed in 1960.

There are several religious memorials within the Memorial Site,^[10] which is open to the public.^[11]



Dachau served as a prototype and model for the other German concentration camps that followed. Almost every community in Germany had members taken away to these camps. Newspapers continually reported "the removal of the enemies of the Reich to concentration camps." As early as 1935, a jingle went around: "*Lieber Herr Gott, mach mich stumm, Das ich nicht nach Dachau komm*" ("Dear God, make me silent, That I may not come to Dachau").^[12]



Aerial photo of the Dachau complex with the actual concentration camp on the left

The camp's layout and building plans were developed by Commandant Theodor Eicke and were applied to all later camps. He had a separate secure camp near the command center, which

consisted of living quarters, administration, and army camps. Eicke became the chief inspector for all concentration camps, responsible for organizing others according to his model.^[13]

The Dachau complex included the prisoners' camp, which occupied approximately 5 acres, and the much larger area of SS training school including barracks, factories, plus other facilities of around 20 acres.^[14]

The entrance gate used by prisoners carries the phrase "Arbeit macht frei" (lit. "Work makes free", or "Work makes [one] free"; contextual English translation: "Work shall set you free"). This phrase was also used in Theresienstadt, near Prague, and Auschwitz I.



The camp commander gives a speech to prisoners about to be released as part of a pardoning action near Christmas 1933.

Dachau was the concentration camp that was in operation the longest from March 1933 to April 1945, nearly all twelve years of the Nazi regime. Dachau's close proximity to Munich, where Hitler came to power and where the Nazi Party had its official headquarters, made Dachau a convenient location. From 1933 to 1938, the prisoners were mainly German nationals detained for political reasons. After the *Reichspogromnacht* or *Kristallnacht*, 30,000 male Jewish citizens were deported to concentration camps. More than 10,000 of them were interned in Dachau alone. As the German military occupied other European states, citizens from across Europe were sent to concentration camps. Subsequently, the camp was used for prisoners of all sorts, from every nation occupied by the forces of the Third Reich.^{[15]:137}

In the postwar years, the camp continued in use. From 1945 through 1948, the camp was used by the Allies as a prison for SS officers awaiting trial. After 1948, when hundreds of thousands of ethnic Germans were expelled from eastern Europe, it held Germans from Czechoslovakia until they could be resettled. It also served as a military base for the United States, which maintained forces in the country. It was closed in 1960. At the insistence of survivors, various memorials have been constructed and installed here.^{[15]:138}



Two Dachau crematoriums

Demographic statistics vary but they are in the same general range. History will likely never know how many people were interned or died there, due to periods of disruption. One source gives a general estimate of over 200,000 prisoners from more than 30 countries for the Third Reich's years, of whom two-thirds were political prisoners, including many Catholic priests, and nearly one-third were Jews. 25,613 prisoners are believed to have died in the camp and almost another 10,000 in its subcamps,^[16] primarily from disease, malnutrition and suicide. In late 1944, a typhus epidemic occurred in the camp caused by poor sanitation and overcrowding, which caused more than 15,000 deaths.^[17] It was followed by an evacuation, in which large numbers of the prisoners died. Toward the end of the war, death marches to and from the camp caused the deaths of numerous unrecorded prisoners. After liberation, prisoners weakened beyond recovery by the starvation conditions continued to die.^[18] Two thousand cases of "the dread black typhus" had already been identified by 3 May, and the U.S. Seventh Army was "working day and night to alleviate the appalling conditions at the camp".^[19] Prisoners with typhus, a louse-borne disease with an incubation period from 12 to 18 days, were treated by the 116th Evacuation Hospital, while the 127th would be the general hospital for the other illnesses. There were 227 documented deaths among the 2,252 patients cared for by the 127th.^[18]



Survivors of KZ Dachau demonstrate the operation of the crematorium by pushing a corpse into one of the ovens.^[20]

Over the 12 years of use as a concentration camp, the Dachau administration recorded the intake of 206,206 prisoners and deaths of 31,951. Crematoria were constructed to dispose of the deceased. Visitors may now walk through the buildings and view the ovens used to cremate bodies, which hid the evidence of many deaths. It is claimed that in 1942, more than 3,166 prisoners in weakened condition were transported to Hartheim Castle near Linz, and were executed by poison gas because they were deemed unfit.^{[15]:137[21]}



The gas chamber



Inside a prison cell

Between January and April 1945 11,560 detainees died at KZ Dachau according to a U.S. Army report of 1945,^[22] though the Dachau administration registered 12,596 deaths from typhus at the camp over the same period.^[17]

Dachau was the third concentration camp to be liberated by British or American Allied forces.^[23]

History

Establishment

After the takeover of Bavaria on 9 March 1933, Heinrich Himmler, then Chief of Police in Munich, began to speak with the administration of an unused gunpowder and munitions factory. He toured the site to see if it could be used for quartering protective-custody prisoners. The Concentration Camp at Dachau was opened 22 March 1933, with the arrival of about 200 prisoners from Stadelheim Prison in Munich and the Landsberg fortress (where Hitler had written *Mein Kampf* during his imprisonment).^[24] Himmler announced in the *Münchener Neuesten Nachrichten* newspaper that the camp could hold up to 5,000 people, and described it as "the first concentration camp for political prisoners" to be used to restore calm to Germany.^[25] It became the first regular concentration camp established by the coalition government of the National

Socialist German Worker's Party (Nazi Party) and the German National People's Party (dissolved on 6 July 1933).

Jehovah's Witnesses, homosexuals, and emigrants were sent to Dachau after the 1935 passage of the Nuremberg Laws which institutionalized racial discrimination.^[26] In early 1937, the SS, using prisoner labor, initiated construction of a large complex capable of holding 6,000 prisoners. The construction was officially completed in mid-August 1938.^[13] More political opponents, and over 11,000 German and Austrian Jews were sent to the camp after the annexation of Austria and the Sudetenland in 1938. Sinti and Roma in the hundreds were sent to the camp in 1939, and over 13,000 prisoners were sent to the camp from Poland in 1940.^{[26][27]}



Heinrich Himmler (front right, beside prisoner) inspecting Dachau Concentration Camp on 8 May 1936.

Forced labor

hazardly a number of prisoners and executing them on the spot.¹

CONCENTRATION CAMPS

Furthermore Polish citizens of the occupied regions have been deported and incarcerated by tens of thousands in concentration and internment camps. Among camps the reputation of which will remain fearsome even in the annals of German bestiality are those of Oswiecim (Auschwitz), Oranienberg, Mauthausen and Dachau.²

As regards food in the camps no account is taken of the most elementary requirements, nor of the work the prisoners are made to do. In certain camps, Mauthausen for instance, the prisoners worked in stone quarries for fifteen hours without a break. The brutality that reigns in the camps is no whit less than in the prisons. "Gymnastic" exercises, the invariable rule in concentration camps, are carried to the point of exhaustion, till the prisoners have no strength left. They not infrequently drop unconscious during the exercises. The daily roll call of the prisoners is held in the open air, cold or bad weather notwithstanding.³

Prisoners in the camps are ill-treated and humiliated at every turn. They are forced to pick up mud and excrements, and to clean the latrines with their bare hands.⁴ The guards amuse themselves by making the prisoners take part in atrocious "games"; they are made to run for hours in a circle beneath the lashes of the guards' whips; another "game" is to make them rub the floor with their noses till their faces are bleeding; or they are ordered to run at full

¹ See Appendix 135, page 306.

² See Appendix 151, at top, page 222.

³ See Appendix 156 at top, page 222.

⁴ See Appendix 156, page 222.

German concentration camps: Auschwitz, Oranienburg, Mauthausen and Dachau in "The Polish White Book", New York (1941).

The prisoners of Dachau concentration camp originally were to serve as forced labor for a munition factory, and to expand the camp. It was used as a training center for the SS-*Totenkopfverbände* guards and was a model for other concentration camps.^[28] The camp was about 300 m × 600 m (1,000 ft × 2,000 ft) in rectangular shape. The prisoners' entrance was secured by an iron gate with the motto "Arbeit macht frei" ("Work will make you free"). This reflected Nazi propaganda, which trivialized concentration camps as labor and re-education camps, when in fact forced labor was used as a method of torture and murder.^[29]

As of 1938, the procedure for new arrivals occurred at the *Schubraum*, where prisoners were to hand over their clothing and possessions.^{[30]:61} One former Luxembourgian prisoner, Albert Theis, reflected about the room, "There we were stripped of all our clothes. Everything had to be handed over: money, rings, watches. One was now stark naked".^[31]

The camp included an administration building that contained offices for the Gestapo trial commissioner, SS authorities, the camp leader and his deputies. These administration offices consisted of large storage rooms for the personal belongings of prisoners, the bunker, roll-call square where guards would also inflict punishment on prisoners (especially those who tried to escape), the canteen where prisoners served SS men with cigarettes and food, the museum containing plaster images of prisoners who suffered from bodily defects, the camp office, the library, the barracks, and the infirmary, which was staffed by prisoners who had previously held occupations such as physicians or army surgeons.^[32]

Operation Barbarossa

Over 4,000 Soviet prisoners of war were murdered by the Dachau commandant's guard at the SS shooting range located two kilometers from the main camp in the years 1942/1943.^{[33][34][35]} These murders were a clear violation of the provisions laid down in the Geneva Convention for prisoners of war. The SS used the cynical term "special treatment" for these criminal executions. The first executions of the Soviet prisoners of war at the Hebertshausen shooting range took place on 25 November 1941.^[36]

After 1942, the number of prisoners regularly held at the camp continued to exceed 12,000.^[37] Dachau originally held Communists, leading Socialists and other "enemies of the state" in 1933, but over time the Nazis began to send German Jews to the camp. In the early years of imprisonment, Jews were offered permission to emigrate overseas if they "voluntarily" gave their property to enhance Hitler's public treasury.^[37] Once Austria was annexed and Czechoslovakia was defeated, the citizens of both countries became the next prisoners at Dachau. In 1940, Dachau became filled with Polish prisoners, who constituted the majority of the prisoner population until Dachau was officially liberated.^[38]



The gate at the Jourhaus building through which the prisoner's camp was entered contains the slogan, *Arbeit macht frei*, or 'Work Sets You Free.'

The prisoner enclosure at the camp was heavily guarded to ensure that no prisoners escaped. A 3-metre-wide (10 ft) no-man's land was the first marker of confinement for prisoners; an area which upon entry would elicit lethal gunfire from guard towers. Guards are known to have tossed inmates' caps into this area, resulting in the death of the prisoners when they attempted to retrieve the caps. Despondent prisoners committed suicide by entering the zone. A four-foot-deep and eight-foot-broad (1.2 × 2.4 m) creek, connected with the river Amper, lay on the west side between the "neutral-zone" and the electrically charged, and barbed wire fence which surrounded the entire prisoner enclosure.^[39]

In August 1944 a women's camp opened inside Dachau. In the last months of the war, the conditions at Dachau deteriorated. As Allied forces advanced toward Germany, the Germans began to move prisoners from concentration camps near the front to more centrally located camps. They hoped to prevent the liberation of large numbers of prisoners. Transports from the evacuated camps arrived continuously at Dachau. 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 as a result of overcrowding, poor sanitary conditions, insufficient provisions, and the weakened state of the prisoners.^[citation needed]

Owing to repeated transports from the front, the camp was constantly overcrowded and the hygiene conditions were beneath human dignity. Starting from the end of 1944 up to the day of liberation, 15,000 people died, about half of all the prisoners held at KZ Dachau. Five hundred Soviet POWs were executed by firing squad. The first shipment of women came from Auschwitz-Birkenau.^[40]

Final days

As late as 19 April 1945, prisoners were sent to KZ Dachau; on that date a freight train from Buchenwald with nearly 4,500 was diverted to Nämmering. SS troops and police confiscated food and water, which local townspeople tried to give to the prisoners. Nearly three hundred dead bodies were ordered removed from the train and carried to a ravine over 400 metres (.25 mi) away. The 524 prisoners who had been forced to carry the dead to this site were then shot by the guards, and buried along with those who had died on the train. Nearly 800 bodies went into this mass grave.



"Grave of many thousand unknown."

The train continued on to KZ Dachau.^[41]

During April 1945 as U.S. troops drove deeper into Bavaria, the commander of KZ Dachau suggested to Gestapo Chief Heinrich Himmler that the camp be turned over to the Allies. Himmler, in signed correspondence, prohibited such a move, adding that "No prisoners shall be allowed to fall into the hands of the enemy alive."^[42]

On 24 April 1945, just days before the U.S. troops arrived at the camp, the commandant and a strong guard forced between 6,000 and 7,000 surviving inmates – on a death march from Dachau south to Eurasburg, then eastwards towards the Tegernsee; liberated two days after Hitler's death by a *Nisei*-ethnicity U.S. Army artillery battalion.^[43] Any prisoners who could not keep up on the six-day march were shot. Many others died of exhaustion, hunger and exposure.^[44] Months later a mass grave containing 1,071 prisoners was found along the route.^{[45][46]}

Though at the time of liberation the death rate had peaked at 200 per day, after the liberation by U.S. forces the rate eventually fell to between 50 and 80 deaths per day. In addition to the direct abuse of the SS and the harsh conditions, people died from typhus epidemics and starvation. The number of inmates had peaked in 1944 with transports from evacuated camps in the east (such as Auschwitz), and the resulting overcrowding led to an increase in the death rate.^[47]

Main camp

Purpose

Roll-call of Jewish prisoners (wearing Star of David badges), 20 July 1938

Dachau was opened in March 1933.^[4] The press statement given at the opening stated:

On Wednesday the first concentration camp is to be opened in Dachau with an accommodation for 5000 people. 'All Communists and—where necessary—Reichsbanner and Social Democratic functionaries who endanger state security are to be concentrated here, as in the long run it is not possible to keep individual functionaries in the state prisons without overburdening these prisons, and on the other hand these people cannot be released because attempts have shown that they persist in their efforts to agitate and organize as soon as they are released.'^[48]

Between the years 1933 and 1945, more than 3.5 million Germans were imprisoned in such concentration camps or prison for political reasons.^{[49][50][51]} Approximately 77,000 Germans were killed for one or another form of resistance by Special Courts, courts-martial, and the civil justice system. Many of these Germans had served in government, the military, or in civil positions, which were considered to enable them to engage in subversion and conspiracy against the Nazis.^[52]