

**WHY IT MATTERS**

Buchenwald Barracks, Post Liberation (1945)
Captured by U.S. troops, this image shows wooden sleeping quarters emptied of their occupants; evidence of overcrowding and inhuman conditions.

The Nazi concentration camps stand as the most brutal reminder of what happens when incarceration is removed from legal oversight and turned into a system of mass extermination. These were not correctional institutions; they were machines of racial terror and political cleansing, architected to erase life. Their layout, labor infrastructure, and mechanized killing procedures left behind more than ruins; they redefined what imprisonment could become under totalitarian rule and forced the world to reconsider the ethics of confinement itself.

Shortly after Adolf Hitler rose to power in 1933, the Nazi regime began building a carceral system meant to suppress dissent and purify society. Dachau, the first camp, opened just weeks into Hitler's rule and was used to detain political opponents; by 1938, the system expanded to include Jews, Roma, homosexuals, the disabled, Soviet prisoners of war, and anyone deemed an enemy of the Nazi state. These were not prisons with sentences or trials, but spaces of unending degradation.

