During the early years of World War II, the Nazi concentration camp system underwent a rapid and extensive expansion under the authority of the Inspectorate of Concentration Camps (IKL). Beginning in late 1939, the SS leadership established five major new camps—Auschwitz, Neuengamme, Natzweiler, Gross-Rosen, and Majdanek—while also maintaining a handful of smaller or more specialized sites. Over the course of roughly three years, the prisoner population quadrupled, rising from around 21,000 people in August 1939 to between 70,000 and 80,000 by the spring of 1942. This escalation stemmed partly from the Nazis' increasingly aggressive policies of arresting those they deemed potential enemies: political dissidents, members of the clergy, Jewish people who had been temporarily released, and, above all, residents of conquered nations.

At the same time, SS guard units and command structures were also reorganized and expanded. Initially, the so-called SS "Death's Head" Regiments served almost exclusively as concentration camp guards, but Heinrich Himmler transformed them into militarized units—later folded into what became the SS-Totenkopf Division. After the start of the Polish campaign, many of these regiments deployed to fight, so the task of guarding prisoners at home fell to other police units. Despite these shifts, the IKL remained directly responsible to Himmler, though it was subsequently shuffled under different SS main offices for administrative reasons.

Conditions for prisoners deteriorated significantly once the war began. Food rations declined, work requirements escalated, and medical treatment was almost nonexistent. Malnutrition, rampant disease, and brutal working conditions led to a sharp increase in the death rate, especially during winter months. Although these harsh conditions affected all prisoners, certain groups—particularly those classified as Slavic or Jewish—were subjected to even more extreme abuse and were forced to do the hardest labor.

In addition, the Nazis initiated specific killing actions inside or alongside the concentration camp system. From the spring of 1941, a so-called "euthanasia" committee selected sick or weakened prisoners for murder at killing centers such as Bernburg and Hartheim. Parallel to this, large numbers of Soviet prisoners of war were transferred from the Wehrmacht to SS custody and confined in camp areas where they starved or died of disease; a subset of these POWs was deliberately executed based on Nazi ideological policies against "political commissars."

Beginning in 1942, the SS also came to view the camps as a potential source of labor. Cooperation with private firms like IG Farben and Steyr-Daimler-Puch led to limited early "pilot" programs that used forced inmate labor on construction projects. Over time, these arrangements laid the groundwork for a broader alignment of concentration camps with German war production. Even so, the general plight of prisoners did not improve, since the SS had access to an ever-growing pool of forced laborers and could replace those who died with new arrivals. This dynamic of combining genocidal persecution with forced labor would shape the system until the war's end.