

Dachau

Dachau was the first Nazi concentration camp, located in the small German town of Dachau, about 10 miles northwest of Munich. The camp was established in March 1933 and liberated in April 1945. Altogether, more than 200,000 prisoners passed through the camp, and over 30,000 “officially” died there, although the more accurate figure is certainly much higher.

The original purpose of the camp was to silence any opponents of the Nazis; it was also meant to scare the people of Germany into obeying and supporting the Nazi regime. The commandant of Dachau, Theodor Eicke, ran the camp according to a strict system of rules and regulations. He was aided by a staff that consisted of members of the SS's “Death’s Head Units,” known for their brutality. When he was later made inspector general for all concentration camps, Eicke enforced the same regulations in the operation of other camps. In that way, Dachau was an effective training ground and prototype for the Nazis' cruel agenda.

Dachau began operation in March 1933, soon after Hitler’s rise to power in Germany. The first prisoners interned at the camp were known political enemies of the Nazi regime—mostly Communists and Social Democrats. According to the Nazis, they had been taken into “protective custody.” These political prisoners, who had arrived first and maintained intimate knowledge of the camp, held most of the important positions in the prisoners' internal government, set up by the SS. From 1935 onwards, people who had been condemned in court were immediately sent to a concentration camp such as Dachau. The first Jews brought to the camp were also political enemies of the Reich. However, they received worse treatment than the other inmates.

Other groups were soon imprisoned including Gypsies who, like the Jews, were considered to be an inferior race; homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses, who refused to serve in the army, clergymen who protested Nazi methods of controlling the churches and many others who had criticized the Nazis.

Increasingly, more Jews were brought to Dachau as the Nazis' systematic persecution of Jews gained momentum. After the *Kristallnacht* pogrom of November 9–10, 1938, over 10,000 German Jews were imprisoned. In 1942, when the "final solution" was implemented, Jews were sent from Dachau and other camps within the Reich to extermination camps in Poland.

Several thousand Austrians were brought to Dachau during the summer of 1939. This signalled the beginning of transports that would continue to arrive throughout the war from each country, following German occupation. The Austrian prisoners included Jews, resistance fighters, clergymen, and others who would not cooperate with the Nazi authorities.

Dachau was surrounded by an electrified fence and a large ditch filled with water. Upon arrival at the camp, prisoners lost all rights and their possessions were taken away. Their hair was shaven and they were dressed in striped prison uniforms. Each prisoner was given an identification number and a coloured triangle, which signified their prisoner category (Jew, Gypsy, homosexual, etc.). Under the constant threat of cruel treatment by the prison guards, working conditions were extremely harsh. Furthermore, malnutrition was prevalent, as minimal food was distributed.

The Nazis took merciless advantage of the cheap labour provided by the prisoners, forcing them to build roads, work in quarries, and drain marshes. As the war continued, weapons production became increasingly important to the Nazis. Consequently, thousands of Jewish prisoners from Hungary, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and the Soviet Union were brought to Dachau to work on armaments. Thirty-six large camps were added at Dachau in order to house 37,000 prisoners working at its arms factories. Private firms could also hire slave labourers from Dachau. The firms paid the SS directly and the labourers saw none of their wages. Prisoners would work until they became too sick to continue, at which point healthier inmates would replace them.

Medical experiments were performed at Dachau, using the prisoners as human guinea pigs. Dr Sigmund Rascher, an SS physician, conducted "decompression"

and "high-altitude" experiments, while Professor Dr Claus Schilling, a well-known tropical medicine researcher, ran a malaria experiment station at the camp. He infected some 1,100 inmates with malaria, in hopes of finding an immunization against the disease. Additionally, other pseudo-medical experiments were performed on Dachau prisoners: inflammations and poisoned states were induced in prisoners to test reactions of different medicines, whilst others were cut to test anti-bleeding medications. Experiments were also performed to see if seawater could be made drinkable. Additionally, a tuberculosis experiment station was set up on site.

During the final months before Dachau was liberated, the prisoners lived under even worse conditions than before. Thousands of prisoners were brought from other camps that had been evacuated with the knowledge that the Allies were quickly advancing. Barracks built to house 200 prisoners were jammed with more than 1,600. A typhus epidemic swept through Dachau, killing 100–200 prisoners a day. Inmates formed an underground committee to help their fellow prisoners survive and resist SS plans to liquidate the camp. On April 26, 1945 the SS force-marched 7,000 prisoners south. Those who fell behind were shot, and many died from hunger, exhaustion, or cold. The marchers who survived were liberated by American troops at the beginning of May—after the SS guards had disappeared.

The Seventh Army of the United States armed forces liberated Dachau on April 29, 1945. More than 60,000 prisoners occupied the camp, coming from more than 30 countries. By this stage, there was only a small minority of Germans and about 30 per cent of the inmates were Jewish.

After the war, 40 members of Dachau's SS staff were caught. An American court put them on trial at the camp between November 15 and December 14, 1945. Of the 40 tried, 36 were sentenced to death.