

Dachau,

One of the first Nazi concentration camps, located in the small town of Dachau, about 10 miles (15 km) northwest of Munich. Dachau was chosen because it was the site of an empty ammunitions factory from World War I, which provided the needed space. The opening of the camp, with a capacity for 5,000 prisoners, was announced by Heinrich Himmler at a press conference held on March 20, 1933.

The first group of so-called protective-custody prisoners, consisting mainly of Communists and Social Democrats, was brought to Dachau on March 22, 1933. They were guarded by Bavarian state police until the camp was taken over by the SS on April 11.

On becoming commandant of the camp in June 1933, Theodor Eicke set up a scheme of organization with detailed regulations for camp life. Later, when Eicke was appointed inspector general for all concentration camps, these regulations were used, with local variations, elsewhere. With Dachau as his model, he developed an institution that was intended, by its very existence, to spread fear among the populace, an effective tool to silence every opponent of the regime. Dachau became a useful training ground for the SS. There, its members first learned to see those with different convictions as inferior and to deal with them accordingly, not hesitating to kill when the occasion arose. In later years, the members of the SS Totenkopfverbände (Death's-Head Units) were able, without a thought, to annihilate many hundreds of thousands of people in gas vans and gas chambers. The transformation of the terror system of National Socialism into bloody reality began in the Dachau concentration camp. Besides the guards and SS camp personnel, large numbers of SS military units were trained and instructed there.

When the camp opened, only known political opponents of the Nazis were interned. Communists, Social Democrats, and a few monarchists, who had passionately opposed one another (as well as the Nazis) before 1933, now

found themselves together behind barbed wire. From about 1935, it was usual for all persons who had been condemned in a court of law to be taken automatically to a concentration camp after they had served their prison sentences. The first Jewish prisoners came as known political opponents of the Nazis. At Dachau, as elsewhere, they received even worse treatment than the other prisoners. Gradually, more and more groups were interned: Jehovah's Witnesses, who resisted the draft; Gypsies, who, like the Jews, were classified as racially inferior; clergymen who resisted the Nazi coercion of the churches; homosexuals; and many who had been denounced for making critical remarks of various kinds.

The number of Jewish prisoners increased with the systematizing of the persecution of the Jews. After Kristallnacht (November 9-10, 1938), more than ten thousand Jewish citizens from all over Germany were interned in Dachau. Those who could prove their intention to leave Germany were released, and indeed most of them were released within a few months of detention. When systematic extermination of the Jews began in 1942, the Jewish prisoners were transported from Dachau and the other camps within the German Reich to the mass extermination camps in occupied Poland. When, during the summer and fall of 1944, additional subsidiary camps were installed near armament factories to increase production there, thousands of Jewish prisoners, mostly from Hungary but also from Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania, and the USSR, were brought to the Dachau subsidiary camps. At the liberation of Dachau and its subsidiary camps in April 1945, about 30 percent of the total number of inmates were Jewish.

During its twelve-year existence, Dachau was always a "political camp": the political prisoners, who had been there first and knew the conditions best, held most of the key positions in the so-called prisoners' internal government, which had been instituted by the SS. Since this body organized the daily life in the camp, it could prevent criminal prisoners from reaching positions that would give them power over the others - power that criminal prisoners in other camps often misused for their own advantage. In 1937 and 1938, a new camp

was built by the prisoners alongside the old buildings of the munitions factory: thirty-two barracks; the camp entrance building, containing the offices of the SS administration; the Wirtschaftsgebäude ("farm buildings," containing the kitchen, workshops and showers); and a camp prison. The camp was enclosed by a water-filled ditch, fortified by an electrified barbed-wire fence, and surrounded by a wall with seven guard towers.

During the summer of 1938, several thousand Austrian prisoners were brought to Dachau. Their arrival marked the beginning of the deportations that would reflect the course of the war: transports were sent to Dachau from each country as it was invaded by the German army. Prisoners included resistance fighters, Jews, clergymen, and others who refused to collaborate with the occupation. At the liberation, inmates from more than thirty countries were found in Dachau, with Germans forming only a minority.

All prisoners underwent the same fate when they entered the camp. They left all legal status behind, their remaining possessions were confiscated, their hair was shaved off, and they were dressed in striped fatigues. They were allocated a number as well as a colored triangle indicating the category of prisoner to which they belonged. The daily routine was filled with work, hunger, exhaustion, and fear of the brutality of the sadistic SS guards. The value of the cheap labor that the prisoners provided (the only cost involved was that of their miserable food rations) was quickly recognized and ruthlessly exploited.

At first, besides being employed in camp management and maintenance, the Dachau inmates worked in handicraft industries set up within the camp itself, as well as in so-called branch detachments outside the camp. They built roads, worked in gravel pits, and drained marshes, rehabilitating them as arable land. Initially, production in the camps was directly under the control of the individual camp commandant. But as the camps continued to grow, the range of production expanded, and the SS industries that were served by the camp labor were centralized under their main office in Berlin. In the first winter

of the war, 1939-1940, the Dachau camp was used to set up the SS Totenkopf Division. During this time the prisoners were sent to the camps at Buchenwald, Flossenburg, and Mauthausen, where they had to work in quarries under the harshest conditions without any safety precautions whatever.

In the course of the war, the work force of the concentration camps became increasingly important for the German armaments industry. The network of camps, which gradually extended over the whole of central Europe, took on gigantic proportions. Dachau alone had, besides numerous smaller camps, thirty- six large subsidiary camps in which up to thirty-seven thousand prisoners worked almost exclusively on armaments. Private firms had the opportunity to hire slave laborers from the camps. For the prisoners, who worked under SS guard, they paid a daily rate to the SS Wirtschafts-Verwaltungshauptamt (Economic-Administrative Main Office; WVHA). The prisoners, however, received nothing. Those who fell ill were sent back to the main camp; this usually meant death. The firms received new, healthier laborers until these too could no longer meet the demands of their employers.

In Dachau there was no mass extermination program with poison gas. But out of the total number of 206,206 prisoners registered there were 31,591 registered deaths, most of them during the war. However, the total number of deaths in Dachau, including the victims of individual and mass executions and the final death marches, will never be known.

In Dachau, as in other Nazi camps, medical experiments were performed on helpless inmates. Himmler provided the opportunity for SS physicians to use prisoners as guinea pigs. Dr. Sigmund Rascher played a key role in the "decompression" or "high-altitude" experiments. The alleged purpose was to examine the effect of a sudden loss of pressure or lack of oxygen, such as that experienced by army pilots whose planes were destroyed and who had to make parachute jumps at great heights. From mid-March to mid-May 1942, about 200 inmates were used for these experiments; according to the

eyewitness testimony of the prisoners' nurse, Walter Neff, out of this number at least 70 or 80 died. Rascher was also responsible for the series of "freezing experiments," which were carried out from the middle of August to October 1942. Their ostensible object was to determine how pilots shot down at sea who suffered from freezing could be quickly and effectively helped. The air force expressed its readiness to conduct these experiments under the direction of Dr. Ernst Holzlohner, who worked with a Dr. Finke and Dr. Rascher in Dachau. Holzlohner and Finke broke off their work after October 1942, and Rascher continued alone until March 1943. According to the testimony of witnesses, from a total of 360 to 400 prisoners used in these experiments, 80 to 90 died.

Professor Dr. Claus Schilling, a well-known researcher in tropical medicine, opened a malaria experimental station in the Dachau camp. He hoped to discover possible methods of immunization against malaria, and for this purpose had about 1,100 inmates infected with the disease. The exact number of fatalities from these experiments cannot be determined, since the survivors returned to their previous work in the camp after the disease had subsided and many, physically weakened, then fell victim to other illnesses.

Besides these, a variety of other medical experiments were performed on Dachau prisoners. There was a tuberculosis experimental station; sepsis and phlegmon (purulent inflammation) were artificially induced in a group of prisoners to test and compare the effects of biochemical and allopathic remedies. In addition, there were attempts to make seawater drinkable and experiments with medications to stop bleeding.

The systematic killing within the concentration camp of people who were sick and incapable of work began after the official termination of the Euthanasia Program on September 1, 1941. In the summer of 1941, the camp physician at Dachau was commanded to register those prisoners who were sick or unable to work. Some weeks later, a medical commission from Berlin arrived to pass judgment, and during the winter of 1941-1942 "invalid transports"

departed from Dachau in quick succession to the Hartheim castle, near Linz, which had served as an asylum for the insane before the war. There, 3,166 inmates from Dachau were gassed. In 1942 a gas chamber was built in Dachau, but it was not put into use. It was located within the camp's second crematorium, erected when the first crematorium, with only one incinerator, proved inadequate.

From 1934, when the leaders of the SA (Sturmabteilung; Storm Troopers) and opponents of National Socialism were murdered, Dachau was also used as an execution site. In addition, mass shootings of Soviet prisoners of war took place there from October 1941 to April 1942, on an SS shooting range located outside the camp grounds. The exact number of these victims cannot be determined, since they were not listed in camp files. Later, Soviet prisoners of war were incorporated instead into the powerful forced-labor system and set to work for the armaments industry. Executions thereafter were carried out individually until the end of the war.

During the last months before the liberation, the prisoners at Dachau had to live under extremely inhuman conditions, which even they would not have been able to imagine. The gigantic transports continually arriving from other Nazi camps evacuated in the face of the advancing Allies brought human beings who were, for the most part, reduced to skeletons and exhausted to the point of death. During this period up to 1,600 prisoners were crowded into barracks intended for 200. In early 1945, over 100 inmates daily, and for a time over 200, fell victim to the typhus epidemic that had been raging in many of the camps since December 1944. An underground camp committee was organized to try to ensure the survival of the prisoners and, if necessary, to organize resistance to SS plans of action.

On April 26, 1945, there were 67,665 registered prisoners in Dachau, among them 22,100 Jews; on this day more than 7,000 of them were forced, under SS guard, to march south. During the march anyone who could continue no longer was shot, and many others died from hunger, cold, or exhaustion. At

the beginning of May, American troops overtook the remnants of those columns on the march; the SS guards had disappeared shortly before. After the war, it was revealed that plans had existed to kill all the inmates by bombs and poison.

On April 29, 1945, the camp was liberated by the Seventh Army of the United States armed forces. Forty former members of the camp's SS staff were tried by an American court at Dachau between November 15 and December 14, 1945. Of the forty accused, thirty-six were sentenced to death.