

Ravensbrueck

Concentration camp in eastern Germany, located near the town of Ravensbrueck. The only major women's camp established by the Nazis, Ravensbrueck was opened in May 1939. In all, some 132,000 women from all over Europe passed through the camp, including Poles, Germans, Russians, Ukrainians, Jews, French, Gypsies, and others. Of that number, 92,000 perished.

Ravensbrueck was staffed both by SS men, who served as guards and administrators, and by 150 women, who served as supervisors. These female supervisors were either SS volunteers or women who had taken the job for the good pay and work conditions. Ravensbrueck also housed a training camp for female SS guards. About 3,500 women trained there, and went on to serve either at Ravensbrueck or at other concentration camps.

The first group of prisoners arrived at Ravensbrueck on May 18, 1939; the group consisted of nearly 900 women who had previously been imprisoned at the Nazi concentration camp at Lichtenburg. At the end of 1939, 2,000 women were interned at Ravensbrueck; in late 1942 there were about 10,800. By 1944 Ravensbrueck had 34 satellite camps, many of which were located nowhere near Ravensbrueck itself; some were situated as far as Bavaria and the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. During that year there were 26,700 prisoners living at the Ravensbrueck main camp, while another 70,000 prisoners were brought to the camp and parceled out among the satellite camps. Several thousand girls were housed in a detention camp for minors located near the main camp.

The main camp at Ravensbrueck and most of its satellite camps were attached to military factories where the prisoners were made to do forced labor. Many of the prisoners manufactured Nazi uniforms. The working conditions at Ravensbrueck were brutal: the women worked 12 hours a day and were subjected to outdoor roll calls in any kind of weather. In addition, they were given meager food rations. The Jewish prisoners were made to do the hardest labor and were treated with intense cruelty.

While the great majority of prisoners at Ravensbrueck were women, there were also some men detained there. In April 1941 a camp for men was built near the Ravensbrueck main camp. Officially, this camp was a satellite of Sachsenhausen. In its four years of existence, about 20,000 men passed through, including more than 3,000 Jews.

In the summer of 1942 the Nazis began conducting pseudo-scientific medical experiments at Ravensbrueck. In one experiment, 74 Polish women were used as human guinea pigs in a test to check the effectiveness of a sulfa drug called sulfonamide in treating infected and swollen wounds and bone transplants. In another experiment, carried out by the SS doctor, Professor Carl Clauberg, 35 women, mostly Gypsies, were brutally sterilized.

During its first years of operation, prisoners at Ravensbrueck were exterminated by being shot in the back of the neck. By 1942 the prisoners selected for destruction were either sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau or to Euthanasia Program killing centers. Later, prisoners were killed by poisonous injection at Ravensbrueck itself, and their bodies were cremated at a crematorium nearby. However, when the killings at Ravensbrueck increased, it became inconvenient to transfer the corpses to a different location. Thus, the Nazis built a crematorium at Ravensbrueck in April 1943. In early 1945 they also constructed gas chambers there, and by late April of that year, some 2,300 prisoners had been gassed to death.

The Germans began evacuating Ravensbrueck in March 1945; thousands of starving prisoners were sent on death marches to other camps in Germany. In early April 500 prisoners were handed over to the Red Cross, while 2,500 German prisoners were released. Ravensbrueck was liberated by the Soviet army on April 29--30; only 3,500 prisoners remained in the camp.