

Sachsenhausen

German concentration camp located in Oranienburg, 20 miles north of Berlin. Sachsenhausen was built in July 1936 by groups of prisoners who had previously been interned at other German camps. Sachsenhausen was established more than three years before World War II broke out, but in fact, according to SS chief Heinrich Himmler, it was built with war and a large number of prisoners in mind. Over the almost nine years of the camp's existence, all sorts of inmates were imprisoned there, including political prisoners, common criminals, Gypsies, Jehovah's Witnesses who refused to support the German war effort, homosexuals, and Jews. The different groups of prisoners were made to wear differently colored badges for easy identification of their status. Jews wore yellow stars, while homosexuals wore pink triangles (see also Badge, Jewish). Jews lived in separate barracks from the rest of the inmates, and were treated worse than the rest, as well. Prominent prisoners such as the anti-Nazi German Protestant pastor Martin Niemoller were also housed separately.

In November 1938, after the *Kristallnacht* pogrom, 1,800 Jews were brought to Sachsenhausen; 450 of them were murdered soon thereafter. During 1940 some 26,000 mainly Polish prisoners arrived in the camp. Most were soon transferred to other camps. During the summer of 1941 the Nazis set up a system at Sachsenhausen for mass extermination by shooting; over the next few months, 13,000--18,000 Soviet prisoners of war were shot to death. In 1943 the Nazis installed a gas chamber, which was only used on certain occasions. One of these special occasions was in February 1945 when the SS gassed thousands of sick and weak prisoners right before they began evacuating the camp.

Sachsenhausen had 61 satellite camps which functioned as forced labor camps. The prisoners were made to work long hours for private German companies that paid the prisoners' salaries directly to the SS. One of the biggest work projects at Sachsenhausen---and probably one of the most brutal places to work in the entire camp complex---was a brick factory located near the camp. About 2,000 prisoners worked on the project every day, and

by April 1941 the Germans built a special satellite camp for them. Those prisoners assigned to work there had a very short life expectancy. After 1943 most of the prisoners worked in armaments factories where they produced engines for planes, tanks, and other vehicles. In 1944 the brickyard was converted into a grenade factory.

Throughout the war, conditions at Sachsenhausen deteriorated. Originally, the camp had been built to hold 10,000 prisoners, but by April 1945 it housed over 50,000. In addition, the SS performed horrible pseudo-scientific medical experiments on Gypsy, Jewish, and homosexual prisoners. Dr. Werner Fischer conducted experiments in which he tried to prove that Gypsy blood was different from "Aryan" blood. For other experiments, Jews and Gypsies were murdered so that their skeletons and organs could be sent to German universities for research purposes.

It is estimated that some 200,000 prisoners passed through Sachsenhausen and that 30,000 perished there. That number does not include the Soviet prisoners of war who were exterminated immediately upon arrival at the camp, as they were never even registered on the camp's lists. The number also does not account for those prisoners who died on the way to the camp, while being transferred elsewhere, or during the camp's evacuation.

In February 1945 Red Cross representatives arrived at Sachsenhausen and offered to take control of the camp. However, the Nazis refused, and instead sent most of the camp's prisoners on a death march through Germany. Many died along the way. Sachsenhausen was liberated by Soviet troops on April 27, 1945. They found only 3,000 prisoners who had been too ill to leave on the death march.