

Concentration Camps



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Camps were an essential part of the Nazis' systematic oppression and mass murder of Jews, political adversaries, and others considered socially and racially undesirable. There were concentration camps, forced labor camps, extermination or death camps, transit camps, and prisoner-of-war camps. The living conditions of all camps were brutal.

Dachau, one of the first Nazi concentration camps, opened in March 1933, and at first interned only known political opponents of the Nazis: Communists, Social Democrats, and others who had been condemned in a court of law. Gradually, a more diverse group was imprisoned, including Jews, Jehovah's Witnesses, Gypsies, dissenting clergy, as well as others who were denounced for making critical remarks about the Nazis.

Six death or extermination camps were constructed in Poland. These so-called death factories were Auschwitz-Birkenau, Treblinka, Belzec, Sobibór, Lublin (also called Majdanek), and Chelmno. The primary purpose of these camps was the methodical killing of millions of innocent people. The first, Chelmno, began operating in late 1941. The others began their operations in 1942.

In the beginning of the systematic mass murder of Jews, Nazis used mobile killing squads called *Einsatzgruppen*. The *Einsatzgruppen* consisted of four units of between 500 and 900 men each which followed the invading German troops into the Soviet Union. By the time Himmler ordered a halt to the shooting in the fall of 1942, they had murdered approximately 1,500,000 Jews. The death camps proved to be a better, faster, less personal method for killing Jews, one that would spare the shooters, not the victims, emotional anguish.

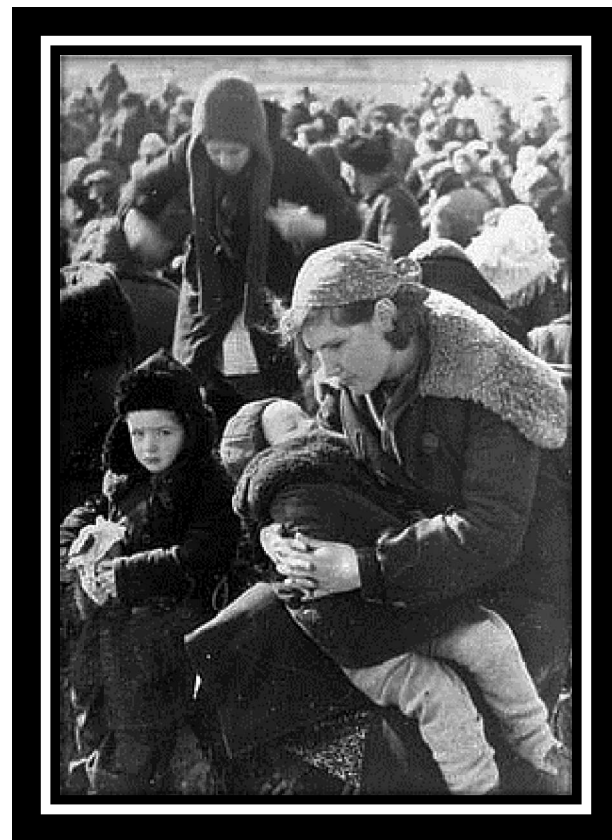




View of the ravine at Babi Yar circa 1944. On September 29-30, 1941, more than 33,000 Jewish residents of Kiev were marched to this site and systematically gunned down over the edge of the ravine by members of the *Sonderkommando 4a* of *Einstazgruppen C*. Thousands of Gypsies and Soviet POWs were also executed at this site between 1941 and 1943.

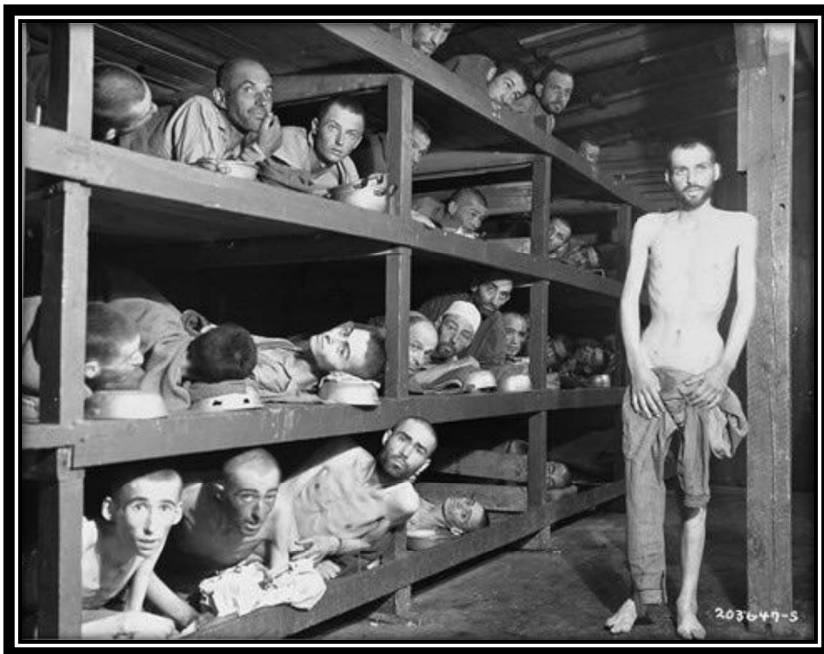
A young mother and her two children sit among a large group of Jews from Lubny who have been assembled for mass execution.

October 16, 1941.



Concentration Camps

In January 1942, SS official Reinhard Heydrich held a meeting of Nazi government officials to present the Final Solution. At this meeting, known as the Wannsee Conference, the Nazi officials agreed to SS plans for the transport and destruction of all 11 million Jews of Europe. The Nazis would use the latest in twentieth century technology, cost efficient engineering and mass production techniques for the sole purpose of killing off the following racial groups: Jews, Russian prisoners of war, and Gypsies (Sinti-Roma). Their long-range plans, unrealized, included targeting some 30 million Slavs for death.



Starting early in 1942, the Jewish genocide (sometimes called the Judeocide) went into full operation. Auschwitz 2 (Birkenau), Treblinka, Belzec, and Sobibór began operations as death camps. There was no selection process; Jews were destroyed upon arrival.

Ultimately, the Nazis were responsible for the deaths of some 2.7 million Jews in the death camps. These murders were done secretly under the ruse of resettlement. The Germans hid their true plans from citizens and inhabitants of the ghettos by claiming that Jews were being resettled in the East. They went so far as to charge Jews for a one-way train fare and often, just prior to their murder, had the unknowing victims send reassuring postcards back to the ghettos. Thus did millions of Jews go unwittingly to their deaths with little or no resistance.

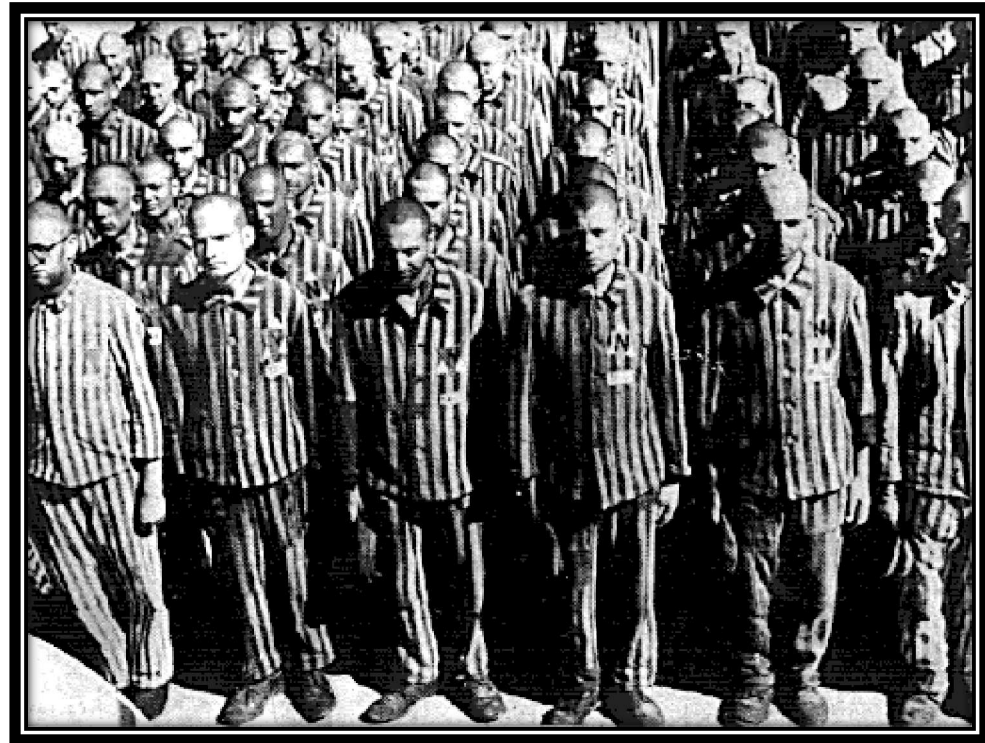
The total figure for the Jewish genocide, including shootings and the camps, was between 5.2 and 5.8 million, roughly half of Europe's Jewish population, the highest percentage of loss of any people in the war. About 5 million other victims perished at the hands of Nazi Germany.



Registration of prisoners upon arrival at Buchenwald concentration camp.



Still in their civilian clothes, newly arrived prisoners, among whom is a clergyman, stand at roll call in Buchenwald concentration camp.

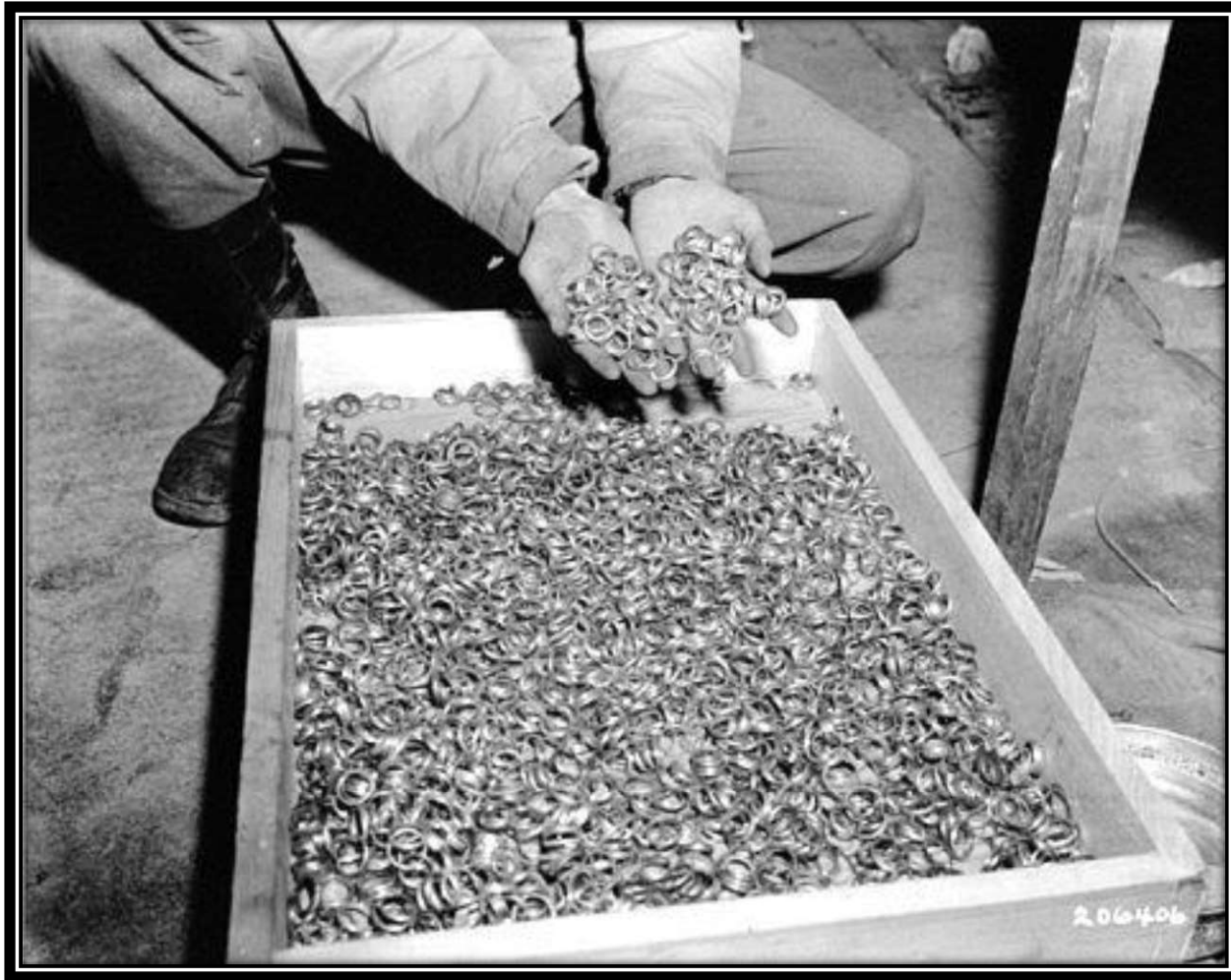


Jews from Amsterdam and Rotterdam in the Netherlands stand for roll call in the Buchenwald concentration camp soon after their arrival on February 28, 1941.



Bones of anti-Nazi German women are visible in the crematoria in the concentration camp at Weimar, Germany. April 14, 1945.

I am clear about the fact that annihilation camps were used for murder. What I did was aiding in murder. If I should be sentenced, I would consider that correct. Murder is murder. In weighing the guilt, one should not in my opinion consider the specific function in the camp. Wherever we were posted there: we were all equally guilty. The camp functioned in a chain of functions. If only one element in that chain is missing, the entire enterprise comes to a stop.



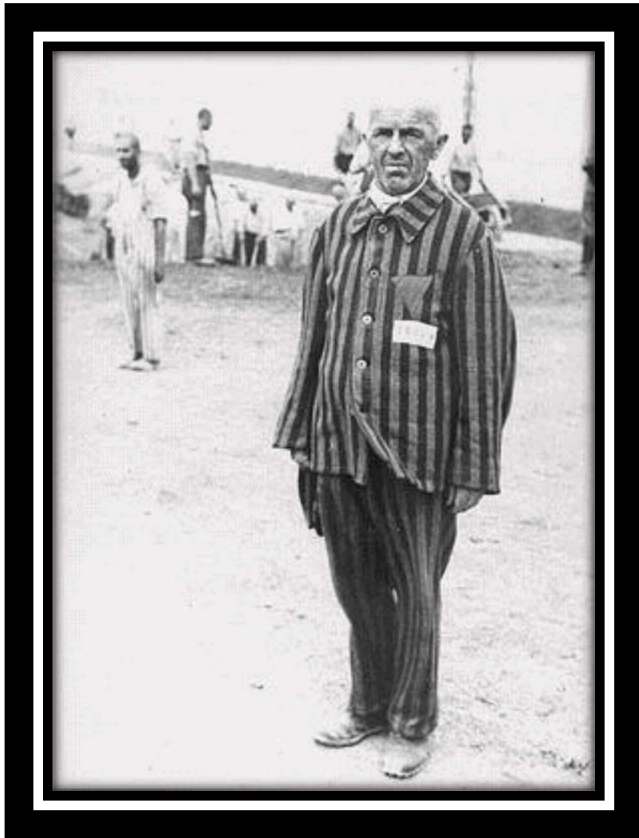
A crate full of rings confiscated from prisoners in Buchenwald and found by American troops in a cave adjoining Buchenwald.



In 1933-34, this was the view of the moat and barbwire secured concentration camp in Dachau, Germany, in Upper Bavaria. The buildings are the barracks where the inmates slept.

So then we had to march in rows of five, which became the daily norm, and we walked through the night, and we heard music, and we heard all kinds of miserable noises. When it was almost light, we came to the sauna. We came to big low buildings and whoever was left was numbered. I was number two, I can show you. O.K. and they kept telling us how lucky we were that we might be able to live because we have a number.

--Anita Mayer



A prisoner in Dachau forced to stand without moving for hours as a punishment.



The death train in Dachau, April 30, 1945.