

Prisons, ghettos, camps: Jews in captivity under the Third Reich

Dr Nikolaus Wachsmann

Birkbeck College, University of London

Millions of men, women and children were imprisoned under the Third Reich, held in a vast network of camps, ghettos and prisons, which spread all across the Nazi-controlled territory. The sheer extent of this landscape of terror is overwhelming: a recent survey distinguished between no less than 17 different types of Nazi camps, with well over 10,000 individual places of confinement, which varied greatly in terms of function, organisation and size.^[1] But, despite all their differences, many of these places had one thing in common: they held Jews, who almost invariably faced the most draconian treatment of all those inside.

Jews were targeted from the start of the Nazi dictatorship in 1933. In pre-war Nazi Germany, thousands of German Jews were taken to regular prisons, run by the legal authorities. Many of these prisoners were victims of a long catalogue of new anti-Semitic legislation, enforced by the German judiciary: some, for example, had been sentenced for intimate relations with non-Jews, others for resisting attempts by the Nazi state to steal their property. Inside the prisons, Jews were discriminated against in different ways, though at this early stage physical assaults were not yet common. But many Jewish prisoners could not escape the violence: from the late 1930s, a growing number of them were not released from regular prisons after they had served their sentences; instead, they were taken to **SS concentration camps**.^[2]

The first concentration camps – dozens of hastily established makeshift sites – were set up in 1933, not to terrorise Jews, but to break the political resistance. Many tens of thousands of suspected opponents, above all German Communists, were temporarily taken to camps. There were relatively few German Jews among them, and they had generally been arrested not as ‘racial aliens’ but as political enemies of the regime. But once inside the concentration camps, they were treated more harshly than almost all others: singled out for the most degrading punishment, the hardest labour and the most violent abuse.^[3]

Following the Nazi establishment of power, the concentration camp system changed substantially. Initially, prisoner numbers dropped sharply, and almost all the early camps were closed down. But the camps did not disappear. The remaining ones were coordinated in the hands of the SS, and terror now became more systematic. In the second half of the 1930s, new SS camps were set up, and the number of prisoners inside increased again, as the police authorities targeted more and more ‘social outsiders’, including German Jews. By September 1939, there were more than 20,000 prisoners in the concentration camps, with an estimated one in seven of them Jews. In the previous year, Jews had briefly made up the majority of inmates: during the **pogrom of 9/10 November 1938**, police orders went out for the mass arrest of male Jews, and over the coming days, an estimated 30,000 were taken to the

camps. Forced into overcrowded provisional tents and barracks, they became victims of extreme violence, reaching levels previously unknown inside the camps. By the end of 1938, many hundreds of them were dead. However, murder was not yet the norm. Most of the arrested Jews were released again after several weeks of torture inside; until the war, the great majority of prisoners survived the Nazi camps.[\[4\]](#)

The Second World War saw a quantum leap in the terror against Jews. It hit millions all over Nazi-controlled Europe and became ever more violent and murderous. Step by step, the Nazi plans for a 'final solution' radicalised, culminating in the Holocaust. All this was accompanied by dramatic changes to the practices of confinement. More and more Jews were locked up, facing deprivation, violence and death.

Among the new places of imprisonment were ghettos, designated areas in cities and towns where Jews were forced to live, separated from the rest of the population. Some Jews in these ghettos had previously lived locally; others came from far away, victims of Nazi policies of mass expulsion and deportation. Local Jewish Councils were forced to participate in the administration of the ghettos, which were usually sealed off from the outside world, sooner or later, for example by barbed wire or brick walls. But ghettoization followed no master plan. As the historian Christopher Browning has put it, ghettos were set up 'at different times in different ways for different reasons on the initiative of local authorities'. Some were established as early as 1939, others several years later; some held more than 100,000 captives, others only a few thousand; some lasted for years, others only for a few weeks.[\[5\]](#)

The first ghettos were set up in Poland, following the German invasion in 1939. Among the hundreds of ghettos established under the Nazis, the largest one was in Warsaw, sealed in November 1940 and soon holding some 445,000 inhabitants (March 1941). Polish ghettos like Warsaw were not established in order to murder the inhabitants. Nonetheless, the conditions created by the German authorities – marked by colossal overcrowding, forced labour and catastrophic shortages of food and other essentials – led to mass starvation, disease and death. Following the escalation of the Nazi racial war in 1941, ghettos were also established on former Soviet territory, where they held Jews who had survived the mass murders during the Nazi invasion. Ghettos were set up elsewhere, too, such as in the Nazi satellite states of Romania and Hungary, and in the Czech territory attached to the Third Reich, where the town of Terezín (Theresienstadt) became a ghetto for Czech Jews and others, including elderly and 'privileged' German Jews (such as some army veterans). Terezín differed in some ways from the ghettos in Poland, but the conditions were equally hellish: in 1942, more than 15,000 Jews died here.[\[6\]](#)

During the early years of the Second World War, Jews held in ghettos vastly outnumbered those inside SS concentration camps. Until 1942, Jews made up only a rather small proportion of the prisoner population in these camps, which rose to 70,000-80,000 (spring 1942), with Germans increasingly

outnumbered by foreign inmates. The prisoners faced a much worse fate than camp inmates before the war: conditions took a sharp turn for the worse and murder became common, especially for Jewish prisoners. Some Jews were also targeted in the first systematic extermination programme in the camps (ostensibly directed at ill and weak inmates) in 1941 and early 1942. This proved to be only the prelude to genocide.^[7]

Once Nazi policy aimed at the systematic extermination of European Jews, men, women and children were deported from the ghettos in successive waves in 1942/43 – despite some desperate attempts at resistance. Some skilled workers (at times with their families) were temporarily exempted, sometimes staying behind in ghettos now re-designated as ‘work ghettos’; but these eventually disappeared, too. Of all the larger ghettos in eastern Europe, **Lodz** was the last to be wiped out, in the summer of 1944. Many captives from the Polish ghettos were murdered in death camps (**Treblinka**, **Sobibor**, **Belzec** and **Chelmno**) separate from the concentration camp system; these death camps held hardly any inmates: almost all were murdered on arrival. Other captives were deported from ghettos to concentration camps such as **Auschwitz** (see below) or to **forced labour camps**. First set up in Poland after the German invasion, such labour camps for Jews started to grow in 1942/43 as the ghettos disappeared; here, Jews were literally worked to death – it is likely that well over 200,000 died in the forced labour camps in the General Government alone. However, in the later stages of the war these camps also started to disappear. Some became part of the concentration camp system, others were dissolved, with inmates massacred on the spot or deported elsewhere.^[8]

The SS concentration camp system played an increasingly central role in the Holocaust, with Auschwitz in east-upper Silesia moving to the centre of Nazi extermination policy. Auschwitz had initially been established in 1940 as a camp for Polish political prisoners, but this soon changed: between 1942 and 1944, more than one million Jews were deported there. Most arrived from Hungary and Poland, with further transports coming from other parts of Europe, often from police and transit camps such as **Drancy** (France) or **Westerbork** (Netherlands). Auschwitz was simultaneously a concentration camp – where prisoners (including non-Jewish inmates) were subjected to extreme violence and brutal forced labour – and an extermination camp. This dual function made Auschwitz unusual among SS camps (the smaller **Majdanek** camp operated in a similar way). But this did not alter the fate of Jews deported to Auschwitz: almost all were killed. Most were murdered on arrival, taken to the gas chambers at **Birkenau** following ‘selections’ by the SS; the others became victims of ‘annihilation through labour’: few Jews survived the murderous work for more than a few months.^[9]

The concentration camp system continued to expand, even as the Third Reich was starting to collapse. Prisoner numbers peaked just months before the end of the war, with more than 700,000 inside (January 1945) – including around 200,000 Jews, according to some estimates. Many of them did not live to the end of the war, as the camp system was transformed one last time. In 1944, the German war economy was facing serious labour shortages; at the same

time, the Red Army moved closer and closer to the camps in eastern Europe. At this point, the German authorities decided to reverse an earlier policy (implemented in autumn 1942) that no Jews should be held in concentration camps inside the borders of the German Reich. Soon, many tens of thousands of Jewish prisoners were deported to camps inside Germany. This process became increasingly chaotic and murderous, as the front line moved closer and closer. Vast numbers of prisoners were forced on **death marches** towards camps not yet occupied by the Allies. During the **evacuations between winter 1944 and spring 1945**, some 200,000-350,000 camp inmates died, many of them Jews. The situation in the remaining camps was catastrophic. Tens of thousands of Jews were worked to death in the last months of Hitler's rule, often in one of hundreds of satellite camps which had sprung up since 1943/44. Many other Jewish prisoners were left to die of starvation, exhaustion and disease: in **March 1945**, more than 18,000 prisoners – largely Jews – died in the **Bergen-Belsen** concentration camp alone. One of them was **Anne Frank**, whose diary (written in hiding in Amsterdam between 1942 and 1944) has become one of the most well-known testaments to the evils of Nazism.[\[10\]](#)

Further reading:

M. Broszat, 'The Concentration Camps 1933-45', in H. Krausnick et al. (eds.),

Anatomy of the SS State (London, 1968)

C. Browning, Nazi Policy, Jewish Workers, German Killers (Cambridge, 2000)

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S. Steinbacher, Auschwitz (London, 2005)

N. Wachsmann, Hitler's Prisons (New Haven, 2004)

[\[1\]](#) G. Schwarz, Die nationalsozialistischen Lager (Frankfurt a.M., 1996).

[\[2\]](#) N. Wachsmann, Hitler's Prisons (New Haven, 2004).

[\[3\]](#) W. Benz, B. Distel (eds.), Geschichte der Konzentrationslager, vols. 1-3 (Berlin, 2001-3).

[\[4\]](#) K. Drobisch, G. Wieland, System der NS-Konzentrationslager 1933-1939 (Berlin, 1993); J. Tuchel, Konzentrationslager (Boppard a.R., 1991); F. Pingel, Häftlinge unter SS-Herrschaft (Hamburg, 1978); K. Orth, Das System der nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslager (Hamburg, 1999).

[\[5\]](#) C. Browning, 'Nazi Ghettoization Policy in Poland: 1939-41', Central European History 19 (1986), quote on p. 345. More generally, G. Corni, Hitler's Ghettos (London, 2002).

[6] I. Gutman (eds.), Enzyklopädie des Holocaust (Munich, 1995); Corni, Ghettos. Almost 17,000 survivors were liberated in Terezín in May 1945.

[7] Orth, System.

[8] D. Pohl, 'Die großen Zwangsarbeitslager der SS- und Polizeiführer für Juden im Generalgouvernement 1942-1945', in U. Herbert et al. (eds.), Die nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslager (Göttingen, 1998), vol. 1, pp. 415-38; R. Hilberg, Die Vernichtung der europäischen Juden (Frankfurt a.M., 1990), vol. 2; E. Kogon et al. (eds.), Nationalsozialistische Massentötungen durch Giftgas (Frankfurt a.M., 1983).

[9] S. Steinbacher, Auschwitz (London, 2005); F. Piper, Mass Murder. Auschwitz 1940-1945 (Oświęcim, 2000); Orth, System; Hilberg, Vernichtung.

[10] D. Blatman, 'Die Todesmärsche – Entscheidungsträger, Mörder und Opfer', in Herbert et al (eds.), Konzentrationslager, vol. 2, pp. 1063-1092; E. Kolb, Bergen-Belsen (Hanover, 1962); Orth, System.