

## The Concentration Camps and the Death Camps By Walter S. Zapotoczny

Concentration camps and death camps were an essential part of the Nazi regime of oppression. The regime imprisoned in such camps political adversaries and persons considered socially or racially undesirable. Forced labor performed by the prisoners became a central element of the imprisonment. During World War II the concentration camps also played a part in the Nazi fight against the resistance movements, and some camps (such as Auschwitz and Majdanek) were centers for the systematic extermination of Jews, Gypsies, Soviet Prisoners of War (POWs) and other groups in the *Reich* and occupied territories. The history of the concentration camps can be divided into three periods: (1) 1933 to 1936, (2) 1936 to 1942 and (3) 1942 to 1945.

In the 1933 to 1936 period, the concentration camps were used primarily for incarcerating internal political adversaries from the left and liberal circles, as well as members of the proscribed German labor movement organizations. In the spring of 1934 these camps were put under the authority of Heinrich Himmler, who was also in charge of the political police in the various states of the Reich. On July 4, 1934, Himmler appointed Theodore Eicke, the commandant of the Dachau concentration camp, as *Inspekteur der Konzentrationslager und SS - Wachverbände* (Inspector of Concentration Camps and SS Guard Units). These guard units became known as *SS Totenkopfverbände* (Death's Head Units). Eicke's system of punishment and brutal organization of the daily order was accepted, with variations, in all of the concentration camps, and in the course of time many of his subordinates occupied key positions in the camps. From the organizational aspect, the inspectorate of concentration camps came under the SS Main Office. A total of about six thousand prisoners were held in these camps. Beginning in the autumn of 1933, persons other than "political" prisoners were also placed in concentration camps. They included tramps and beggars, who, in the Nazi jargon, were dubbed "asocial elements", as well as the *Berufsverbrecher* (habitual criminals), persons with several previous criminal convictions. At a certain stage, a discussion was held in the Nazi hierarchy on whether the camp system should be continued, in light of the consolidation of the regime. Hitler decided the argument by supporting those who favored the continuation of the camps.

The war preparations and the war itself led to an expansion of the concentration camp system. Except for Dachau, the camps established in the initial period were dissolved or put to other use, and new and larger concentration camps were set up in their places: Sachsenhausen (1936), Buchenwald (1937), Mauthausen and Flossenbürg (1938), Ravensbrück, the concentration camp for women (1939), Auschwitz (1940), and Natzweiler (1941). In June 1940 Neuengamme, which until then had been a Sachsenhausen satellite camp, became an independent camp, and in May of 1941 Gross-Rosen also became independent. In February 1942, Stutthof, which had been under the authority of the police and SS chief in Danzig, became a regular concentration camp. Dachau camp's capacity was enlarged to accommodate six thousand prisoners. Late in 1941, Chelmno began operating as an extermination camp, and in the spring of 1942 the extermination camps of Treblinka, Sobibor, and Belzec were established as part of Aktion Reinhard. Auschwitz - Birkenau (Auschwitz II) and Majdanek, which were existing concentration camps, had extermination centers established within them as well. These sites became the main places in which the Jews of Europe were killed. The SS sought to exploit the concentration camp prisoners for military and civil construction projects, and thereby to reinforce its own standing. Camps that were established in 1937 and later had a quarry or brickyard near them, where the prisoners were put to work. The SS also set up its own factories for this purpose. Beginning in the summer of 1938, and reaching a peak in the wake of the Kristallnacht pogrom, Jews were interned in the camps solely because they were Jews. The rise in the number of nonpolitical prisoners, together with the general intensification of persecution during the period of war preparations, led to a constant increase in the number of concentration camp prisoners during the second period. When the war broke out, there were about 25,000 prisoners in the camps; thereafter, there was a steep rise in their number, far exceeding the camps' capacity, as a result of which congestion took on catastrophic proportions. At the end of 1941 the concentration camps contained some 60,000 prisoners. In the wake of the *Anschluss* in March 1938, prisoners from Austria, and later from the annexed areas of Czechoslovakia, were sent to the concentration camps. Prisoners from all the occupied countries followed, although the great majority was from Poland. These were primarily political and Jewish prisoners. With the expansion of the war into the Soviet Union, Russian POWs swelled the concentration camp population. Most of them were soon killed in the *Kommissarbefehl*

(Commissar Order) extermination operations, for which special installations were put up where the prisoners were shot to death.

In the period of 1942 to 1945, concentration camp prisoners were systematically drafted for work in the armaments industry. Previously, forced labor in the concentration camps had been a method of punishment and persecution intended to humiliate the prisoners and lead to their deaths through overwork. Now, through an arrangement made by the SS with Minister of Armaments Albert Speer, concentration camp prisoners were to be put at the disposal of state - owned and private companies that were in need of manpower for arms production. The newly created *SS Wirtschafts - Verwaltungshauptamt* (Economic - Administrative Main Office; WVHA), especially in 1943 and 1944, established a large number of satellite camps in the vicinity of industrial plants, which were put under the control of the existing main camps. In the meantime, the Auschwitz and Majdanek camps were integrated, in 1942, into the systematic extermination of Jews. The SS oversaw the installation of gas chambers there, and most of the Jews deported to these camps were killed on arrival, especially children, women, the old, and the weak. Entire communities of Jews were brought to Auschwitz from the Netherlands in 1942 and 1944, from Greece in 1943, and from Hungary, Poland, Germany, France, Belgium, and other countries in 1944. In Auschwitz the Jews were sent to the new section, Birkenau, which originally had been planned to house Soviet POWs. A large area there was used for female prisoners. Only a few of the other concentration camps had gas chambers installed in them. These were used for a limited time only and on a much smaller scale than in Auschwitz and Majdanek.

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