Between 1933 and 1945, Nazi Germany established about 20,000 camps to imprison its many millions of victims. These camps were used for a range of purposes including forced-labor camps, transit camps which served as temporary way stations, and extermination camps built primarily or exclusively for mass murder. From its rise to power in 1933, the Nazi regime built a series of detention facilities to imprison and eliminate so-called "enemies of the state." Most prisoners in the early concentration camps were German Communists, Socialists, Social Democrats, Roma (Gypsies), Jehovah's Witnesses, homosexuals, and persons accused of "asocial" or socially deviant behavior. These facilities were called "concentration camps" because those imprisoned there were physically "concentrated" in one location.

After Germany's annexation of Austria in March 1938, the Nazis arrested German and Austrian Jews and imprisoned them in the Dachau, Buchenwald, and Sachsenhausen concentration camps, all located in Germany. After the violent Kristallnacht ("Night of Broken Glass") pogroms in November 1938, the Nazis conducted mass arrests of adult male Jews and incarcerated them in camps for brief periods.
FORCED-LABOR AND PRISONER-OF-WAR CAMPS  Following the German invasion of Poland in September 1939, the Nazis opened forced-labor camps where thousands of prisoners died from exhaustion, starvation, and exposure. SS units guarded the camps. During World War II, the Nazi camp system expanded rapidly. In some camps, Nazi doctors performed medical experiments on prisoners.

Following the June 1941 German invasion of the Soviet Union, the Nazis increased the number of prisoner-of-war (POW) camps. Some new camps were built at existing concentration camp complexes (such as Auschwitz) in occupied Poland. The camp at Lublin, later known as Majdanek, was established in the autumn of 1941 as a POW camp and became a concentration camp in 1943. Thousands of Soviet POWs were shot or gassed there.

KILLING CENTERS  To facilitate the "Final Solution" (the genocide or mass destruction of the Jews), the Nazis established killing centers in Poland, the country with the largest Jewish population. The killing centers were designed for efficient mass murder. Chelmno, the first killing center, opened in December 1941. Jews and Roma were gassed in mobile gas vans there. In 1942, the Nazis opened the Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka killing centers to systematically murder the Jews of the Generalgouvernement (the territory in the interior of occupied Poland).

The Nazis constructed gas chambers (rooms that filled with poison gas to kill those inside) to increase killing efficiency and to make the process more impersonal for the perpetrators. At the Auschwitz camp complex, the Birkenau killing center had four gas chambers. During the height of deportations to the camp, up to 6,000 Jews were gassed there each day.

Jews in Nazi-occupied lands often were first deported to transit camps such as Westerbork in the Netherlands, or Drancy in France, en route to the killing centers in occupied Poland. The transit camps were usually the last stop before deportation to an extermination camp.

Millions of people were imprisoned and abused in the various types of Nazi camps. Under SS management, the Germans and their collaborators murdered more than three million Jews in the killing centers alone. Only a small fraction of those imprisoned in Nazi camps survived.

BUCHENWALD

Together with its many satellite camps, Buchenwald was one of the largest concentration camps established within the old German borders of 1937. The camp was constructed in 1937 in a wooded area on the northern slopes of the Ettersberg, about five miles northwest of Weimar in east-central Germany. Before the Nazi takeover of power, Weimar was best known as the home of leading literary figure Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, a product of German liberal tradition in the
eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and as the birthplace of German constitutional democracy in 1919, the Weimar Republic. During the Nazi regime, "Weimar" became associated with the Buchenwald concentration camp.

SS authorities opened Buchenwald for male prisoners in July 1937. Women were not part of the Buchenwald camp system until late 1943 or early 1944. Prisoners were confined in the northern part of the camp in an area known as the main camp, while SS guard barracks and the camp administration compound were located in the southern part. An electrified barbed-wire fence, watchtowers, and a chain of sentries outfitted with automatic machine guns, surrounded the main camp. The detention area, also known as the Bunker, was located at the entrance to the main camp. The SS often shot prisoners in the stables and hanged other prisoners in the crematorium area.

Most of the early inmates at Buchenwald were political prisoners. However, in 1938, in the aftermath of Kristallnacht, German SS and police sent almost 10,000 Jews to Buchenwald where the camp authorities subjected them to extraordinarily cruel treatment upon arrival. 255 of them died as a result of their initial mistreatment at the camp.

Jews and political prisoners were not the only groups within the Buchenwald prisoner population, although the “politics,” given their long-term presence at the site, played an important role in the camp’s prisoner infrastructure. The SS also interned recidivist criminals, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Roma and Sinti (Gypsies), and German military deserters at Buchenwald. Buchenwald was one of the only concentration camps that held so-called “work-shy” individuals, persons whom the regime incarcerated as “asocials” because they could not, or would not, find gainful employment. In the camp's later stages, the SS also incarcerated prisoners-of-war of various nations (including the United States), resistance fighters, prominent former government officials of German-occupied countries, and foreign forced laborers.

Beginning in 1941, a number of physicians and scientists carried out a varied program of medical experimentation on prisoners at Buchenwald in special barracks in the northern part of the main camp. Medical experiments aimed at testing the efficacy of vaccines and treatments against contagious diseases such as typhus, typhoid, cholera, and diphtheria resulted in hundreds of deaths. In 1944, Danish physician Dr. Carl Vaerner began a series of experiments that he claimed would "cure" homosexual inmates through hormonal transplants.

Also in 1944, camp officials established a "special compound" for prominent German political prisoners near the camp administration building in Buchenwald. In August 1944, the SS staff murdered Ernst Thälmann, chairman of the Communist Party of Germany before Hitler’s rise to power in 1933, in Buchenwald after holding him there for several years.
**Buchenwald: Forced Labor and Subcamps** During World War II, the Buchenwald camp system became an important source of forced labor. The prisoner population expanded rapidly, reaching 112,000 by February 1945. The camp authorities deployed Buchenwald prisoners in the German Equipment Works (Deutsche-Ausrüstungs-Werke; DAW), an enterprise owned and operated by the SS; in camp workshops; and in the camp’s stone quarry. In February 1942, the Gustloff firm established a subcamp of Buchenwald to support its armaments works, and in March 1943 opened a large munitions plant adjacent to the camp. A rail siding completed in 1943 connected the camp with the freight yards in Weimar, facilitating the shipment of war supplies.

Buchenwald administered at least 88 subcamps located across Germany, from Düsseldorf in the Rhineland to the border with the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia in the east. SS authorities and firm executives (both state-owned and private) deployed prisoners in the satellite camps, mostly in armaments factories, in stone quarries, and on construction projects. Periodically, the SS staff conducted selections throughout the Buchenwald camp system and dispatched those too weak or disabled to work to so-called euthanasia facilities such as Bernburg, where euthanasia operatives gasse them as part of Operation 14f13, the extension of euthanasia killing operations to ill and exhausted concentration camp prisoners. SS physicians or orderlies killed, by phenol injection, other prisoners unable to work.

**AUSCHWITZ**

On April 27, 1940, Heinrich Himmler ordered the construction of a new camp near Oswiecim, Poland (about 37 miles or 60 km west of Krakow). The Auschwitz Concentration Camp ("Auschwitz" is the German spelling of "Oswiecim") quickly became the largest Nazi concentration and death camp. By the time of its liberation, Auschwitz had grown to include three large camps and 45 sub-camps.

Auschwitz I (or "the Main Camp") was the original camp. This camp housed prisoners, was the location of medical experiments, and the site of Block 11 (a place of severe torture) and the Black Wall (a place of execution). At the entrance of Auschwitz I stood the infamous sign that stated "Arbeit Macht Frei" ("work makes one free"). Auschwitz I also housed the Nazi staff that ran the entire camp complex.

Auschwitz II (or "Birkenau") was completed in early 1942. Birkenau was built approximately 1.9 miles (3 km) away from Auschwitz I and was the real killing center of the Auschwitz death camp. It was in Birkenau where the dreaded selections were carried out on the ramp and where the sophisticated and camouflaged gas chambers laid in waiting. Birkenau, much larger than Auschwitz I, housed the most prisoners and included areas for women and Gypsies.

Auschwitz III (or "Buna-Monowitz") was built last as "housing" for the forced laborers at the Buna synthetic rubber factory in Monowitz. The 45 other sub-camps also housed prisoners that were used for forced labor.

**Arrival and Selection**
Jews, Gypsies (Roma), homosexuals, criminals, and prisoners of war were gathered, stuffed into cattle cars on trains, and sent to Auschwitz. When the trains stopped at Auschwitz II: Birkenau, the newly arrived were told to leave all their belongings on board and were then forced to disembark from the train and gather upon the railway platform, known as "the ramp."

Families, who had disembarked together, were quickly and brutally split up as an SS officer, usually a Nazi doctor, ordered each individual into one of two lines. Most women, children, older men, and those that looked unfit or unhealthy were sent to the left; while most young men and others that looked strong enough to do hard labor were sent to the right. Unbeknownst to the people in the two lines, the left line meant immediate death at the gas chambers and the right meant that they would become a prisoner of the camp. (Most of the prisoners would later die from starvation, exposure, forced labor, and/or torture.)

Once the selections had been concluded, a select group of Auschwitz prisoners (part of "Kanada") gathered up all the belongings that had been left on the train and sorted them into huge piles, which were then stored in warehouses. These items (including clothing, eye glasses, medicine, shoes, books, pictures, jewelry, and prayer shawls) would periodically be bundled and shipped back to Germany.

**Gas Chambers and Crematoria at Auschwitz**

The people who were sent to the left, which was the majority of those who arrived at Auschwitz, were never told that they had been chosen for death. The entire mass murder system depended on keeping this secret from its victims. If the victims had known they were headed to their death, they would most definitely have fought back.

But they didn't know, so the victims latched onto the hope that the Nazis wanted them to believe. Having been told that they were going to be sent to work, the masses of victims believed it when they were told they first needed to be disinfected and have showers.

The victims were ushered into an ante-room, where they were told to remove all their clothing. Completely naked, these men, women, and children were then ushered into a large room that looked like a big shower room (there were even fake shower heads on the walls). When the doors shut, a Nazi would pour Zyklon-B pellets into an opening (in the roof or through a window) which would turn into poison gas once it contacted air.

The gas killed quickly, but it was not instantaneous. Victims, finally realizing that this was not a shower room, clambered over each other, trying to find a pocket of breathable air. Others would claw at the doors until their fingers bled.

Once everyone in the room was dead, special prisoners assigned this horrible task (Sonderkommandos) would air out the room and then remove the bodies. The bodies would be searched for gold and then placed into the crematoria.

Although Auschwitz I did have a gas chamber, the majority of the mass murdering occurred in Auschwitz II: Birkenau's four main gas chambers, each of which had its own crematorium. Each of these gas chambers could murder about 6,000 people a day.

**Life in the Auschwitz Concentration Camp**
Those that had been sent to the right during the selection process on the ramp went through a dehumanizing process that turned them into camp prisoners. All of their clothes and any remaining personal belongings were taken from them and their hair was shorn completely off. They were given striped prison outfits and a pair of shoes, all of which were usually the wrong size. They were then registered, had their arms tattooed with a number, and transferred to one of Auschwitz’s camps for forced labor. The new arrivals were then thrown into the cruel, hard, unfair, horrific world of camp life. Within their first week at Auschwitz, most new prisoners had discovered the fate of their loved ones that had been sent to the left. Some of the new prisoners never recovered from this news.

In the barracks, prisoners slept cramped together with three prisoners per wooden bunk. Toilets in the barracks consisted of a bucket, which had usually overflowed by morning. In the morning, all prisoners would be assembled outside for roll call (Appell). Standing outside for hours at roll call, whether in intense heat or below freezing temperatures, was itself a torture.

After roll call, the prisoners would be marched to the place where they were to work for the day. While some prisoners worked inside factories, others worked outside doing hard labor. After hours of hard work, the prisoners would be marched back to camp for another roll call.

Food was scarce and usually consisted of a bowl of soup and some bread. The limited amount of food and extremely hard labor was intentionally meant to work and starve the prisoners to death.