

CONCENTRATION CAMP

The term “concentration camp” refers to a camp where people are detained and incarcerated without trial or access to any legal avenues. Concentration camps were established across Europe — with the first camp opening just two months after the Nazis took power in 1933 — and continued throughout the Second World War. Initially, inmates of Nazi concentration camps were political opponents of the Nazi regime, such as Communists and trade unionists. However, the camps would eventually imprison Jews, Roma (Gypsies), Jehovah’s Witnesses, Catholic priests, homosexuals, criminals and Soviet prisoners of war. Jews and Roma were selected for total extermination, and consequently received the worst treatment.

Living conditions were harsh for concentration camp inmates and included such hardships as starvation, infectious diseases, brutality and random executions. As part of the daily routine, prisoners were forced to attend outdoor roll calls that could last for hours, regardless of the weather. Concentration camps were also the sites of medical experiments, carried out on prisoners against their will.

Concentration camps came to serve as holding centers for masses of forced labourers. These prisoners could be forced to work for SS-commissioned construction projects as well as private companies. Camp guards conducted routine selections that removed weaker prisoners by way of execution. Eventually, several camps, such as Auschwitz-Birkenau and Majdanek, served as both concentration and extermination camps, where German authorities had prisoners build gas chambers and crematoria to accelerate the extermination process.

Throughout the war, it is estimated that approximately 500,000 people died as a result of the harsh conditions in concentration camps, although the number may be as high as 750,000.