

AUSCHWITZ EXTERMINATION CAMP

1941–1945

In 1933 Nazi Germany opened Dachau, its first concentration camp, to hold political prisoners and those considered unfit for the new Germany. The Nazi policy of extermination of the Jewish people became known as the 'Final Solution' (1941–1945). Many existing camps were modified to include some extermination facilities, but six camps were specifically built to carry out the systematic mass murder of Jews, Roma/Sinti, and homosexuals, with the vast majority being Europe's Jews. Four of the six camps, Chelmno, Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka, were only killing and cremation centers whereas Majdanek and Auschwitz also held prisoners for slave labour, the Auschwitz complex being the largest of all.



Auschwitz I was located in and around the Polish town of Oświęcim, near the large city of Krakow. On April 27, 1940 Himmler, the leader of the Nazi SS (Schutzstaffel = elite Protection Squad) ordered the camp to be built to house mainly Polish political prisoners for slave labour. As the Nazi 'Final Solution' was implemented, Auschwitz was identified as an ideal location for an extermination facility for two reasons: it was near the center of all German-occupied countries on the European continent and was close to a string of rail lines to transport to and from the network of Nazi camps.

The main camp right in Oświęcim, known as Auschwitz I, had a single gas chamber and crematorium, and contained just over 18,000 prisoners, mainly Soviet soldiers and Jewish men. The gate at Auschwitz I has the infamous "Arbeit Macht Frei" ("Work Shall Set You Free") sign above the entrance gate. At Auschwitz I medical experiments were conducted on prisoners by doctors such as Dr. Josef Mengele. Soviet prisoners were used in experiments using hydrogen cyanide gas for execution. Prisoners were executed by firing squad in an enclosed courtyard at an execution wall, and those who could work were used

for slave labour. Construction on Auschwitz II, known as Auschwitz-Birkenau, started in late 1941 and became the largest and most well-known of all the Nazi camps. Auschwitz-Birkenau had four large gas chambers and crematoria, each of which could kill up to **6,000 people per day**. A train track led right into the camp through the large gate, where prisoners, mainly Jews, arrived in cattle cars. In Auschwitz-Birkenau another medical facility was used for experimentation on prisoners. Of the 1.3 million prisoners deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau, over 1.1 million perished. 9 out of every 10 people who were killed at Auschwitz-Birkenau were Jewish, totaling nearly 1 million Jewish victims. In late 1942, Auschwitz III, a slave camp, known as Buna-Monowitz, was established, as well as 45 smaller sub-camps around the region for various types of slave labour.

At Auschwitz-Birkenau, transport of the prisoners was centralized around the facility with trainloads of prisoners arriving regularly and peaking with 424,000 Jews from Hungary in 1944. After several days locked inside the cattle cars without food, water or toilets, the Jews were unloaded. The prisoners filed down and Nazi officials, often doctors including Mengele, selected who to send to the right or to the left. Families were separated, never to see one another again. The old, the young (even babies), the sick, and most women were sent to the left, and then directly to the gas chambers to be killed and cremated. Those sent to the right were sent to have all their hair shaved; a number was tattooed on their arm, and they were given a blue and white striped prisoners uniform (with a yellow star, if they were Jewish). These prisoners were then used for slave labour.

In January 1945 as the Soviet armies moved closer to liberating the Auschwitz complex, the Nazis began to shut down the operation. They sent the healthiest 56,000 prisoners on a long march to various other camps in the middle of winter, wearing little clothing or shoes. Then they blew up the gas chambers and crematoria of Auschwitz-Birkenau. Approximately 7,000 prisoners who were too sick to leave, were left behind to be liberated by the Soviets on Jan. 27, 1945.

Auschwitz continues to be identified as the most recognizable symbol and place of genocide in the world, and as such has become an important museum, memorial, and education centre. The memories of the victims, the crimes committed in the camp, and relics (including victims' personal items, their hair, and luggage) are all preserved for public education. The evidence against the Nazi dictatorship serves as a warning that everyone must stand up and not be a bystander when others face intolerance, prejudice, and hatred.