Concentration Camps Essay, Research Paper

Concentration Camps

A concentration camp is where prisoners of war, enemy aliens, and political prisoners are detained and confined, typically under harsh conditions, or place or situation characterized by extremely harsh conditions. The first concentration camps were established in 1933 for confinement of opponents of the Nazi Party. The supposed opposition soon included all Jews, Gypsies, and certain other groups. By 1939 there were six camps: Dachau, Sachsenhausen, Buchenwald, Mauthausen, Flossenburg, and Ravensbruck.

Auschwitz

Auschwitz, or Auschwitz-Birkenau, is the best-known of all Nazi death camps, though Auschwitz was just one of six extermination camps. It was also a labor concentration camp, extracting prisoners’ value from them, in the form of hard labor, for weeks or months. Auschwitz was the end of the line for millions of Jews, gypsies, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and other innocents. Some spend almost two years in this most infamous of concentration camps. The average prisoner only survived eight weeks in Auschwitz. Some learned the ins and outs of survival in Auschwitz. Auschwitz was the largest concentration and extermination camp constructed in the Third Reich. Located 37 miles west of Krakow, Poland, Auschwitz was home to both the greatest number of forced laborers and deaths.

The history of the camp began on April 27, 1940 when Heinrich Himmler, the head of the SS and Gestapo, ordered the construction of the camp in north-east Silesia, a region captured by the Nazis in September 1939. The camp was built by three-hundred Jewish prisoners from the local town of Oswiecim and its surrounding area. In June of 1940 the camp opened for Polish political prisoners. By 1941 there were about 11,000 prisoners, most of whom were Polish. From May 1940 to the end of 1943, Rudolf Hess was head commander of Auschwitz. Under his leadership, Auschwitz quickly became known as the harshest prison camp in the Nazi regime. Polish prisoners were forced to stand at attention for roll call for hours on end naked in the cold, snowy tundra of Polish winter. Following its first year of existence, Heinrich Himmler visited Auschwitz and told Hess that its labor resource was to be expanded to 100,000 prisoners, making it one of the largest of the concentration camps. In order to accommodate this many people, a second, much larger, section of Auschwitz (Auschwitz II) would have to be constructed.

Auschwitz II was built just ection two miles west of Auschwitz I and would be called Birkenau. Prisoners were packed so tightly into the railroad cars that they couldn’t even squat to sit, much less lie down to sleep. They rode for two days with no food, no water, no toilet facilities–with only dirty straw on the floor. They finally arrived at their destination, glad to finally be breathing fresh air when the cattle car doors were pulled open. Instead they are greeted with shouts of anger, with guns and bayonets pointed at them, and with guards holding back police dogs ready to tear them apart. A stench fills the air. They are at Birkenau, the second part of the Auschwitz complex, called by some “the mother of all concentration camps. The manpower to build the camp came from 200,000 Russian prisoners of war who were forced to march from Russia to a camp at Lamsdord without any food. During these early days the Russians received more abuse than the Polish prisoners because they were more feared for their military might. They were looked upon by Hess as expendable labor due to their inferior abilities and physical weakness. Of the 12,000 prisoners who were sent to Birkenau in 1941, only 150 survived to the following summer. Some prisoners were assigned to the most gruesome task — that of the Sonderkommando. These prisoners were forced to work in the crematoria, burning the Jews who had just been gassed. All prisoners who were selected for forced labor were tattooed with numbers on their left arms. Any slip, outburst, or failure to comply with the guards resulted in immediate death. Because executions by gunfire were inefficient, expensive, and potentially identifiable, intoxication by poison gas–a method used by the Germans to kill over 50,000 mental patients since 1939–was agreed on as the method of choice. Zyclon was originally brought to Auschwitz as a disinfectant and vermin killer. On September 3, 1941, Fritzsch experimented with Zyclon B. on 600 Russian prisoners of war and 250 tubercular patients. He was amazed at the number of people who could be killed at once. On October 15, 1941, a plan for the future camp of Birkenau, designed by one of the prisoners, was approved. The layout was meant to house 100,000 prisoners. Before construction began, however, the SS instructed that Birkenau should be built for double that amount. The first transports of Jews into the camp began on March 26, 1942 with the arrival of 999 Slovakian women. Since the crematoriums had not yet been built, women were housed in a newly established women’s section in Auschwitz I, placed to work, and beaten daily at roll call. By the end of March there were 6,000 women prisoners in Auschwitz I. A third section of the camp, called Auschwitz III or Buna-Monowitz, was established to provide forced labor for the German industries that had plants at Auschwitz. The victims who were lucky enough to escape the fate of the gas chambers were taken to the “quarantine” where they were taken to a bath or “sauna”. Their clothing was taken, hair shaven, and they were given striped prisoner garb. Most people only survived a few weeks in the quarantine and a few months in the labor camp itself. Every morning these prisoners had to endure roll call whereby they would stand for hours at attention outdoors in the cold, wind, and rain or snow. Anyone who fell was gassed. By the time the Auschwitz was destroyed and liberated in the summer of 1944 , over 1.5 million Jews and 4 million people in total were murdered at Auschwitz. Hess was arrested and tried at Nuremberg where he was convicted and summarily hanged in 1947.

This is a version of the now famous story of the Polish dancer named Horowitz, who bravely attacks an SS guard named Schillinger while he is trying to force her to undress in the gas chamber, disguised as a shower. She kills Schillinger with his own gun and wounds another guard before she is machine-gunned to her own death. Roza Robota, who is hanged with three other women for her role in the Birkenau Sonderkommando Uprising, just weeks before all three Auschwitz camps are evacuated.

A list of some of the first camps and facts concerning them are shown on the following pages. Many of these camps would later become death camps (Dachau, Buchenwald most notably).

Buchenwald:

Created on July 15, 1937. First Commandant: Karl Koch. 86,000 inmates at its peak. 240,000 people passed through its camps and sub-camps. Separate camps for Poles, children, Gypsies, etc. Used for mass murder of Soviet POW’s. Total death estimate: 50,000-60,000.

Dachau:

Created on February 22, 1933. First commandant: Theodore Eicke. 160,000 inmates at peak. Contained gas chamber and crematoria. Total death estimate: 32,000.

Flossenberg:

Created on May 3, 1928. First commandant: Jacob Weiseborn. 180,000 inmates at peak. Contained political prisoners, criminals, Soviet POW’s, Jews. Mass murder by phenol injections. Industrial enterprises included armaments and aircraft factories. Total death estimate: 10,000.

Mauthausen:

Created on August 8, 1938. First commandant: Albert Sauer. 120,000 inmates at peak. 200,000 passed through camp in its lifetime. Was officially called a “Strafalger,” or punishment camp. Center of Mass Murder operations with gas chambers built in nearby Hartheim castle. Forced labor in SS Stone Works and Messerschmidt aircraft factory. 120,000 people killed.

Ravensbruck:

Created on May 15, 1939. First Commandant: Max Koegel. 70,000 inmates at peak. 107,000 inmates passed through. Used for killing sick prisoners and for medical experiments on Jewish women, especially sterilization. Forced labor for Siemens corporation.

Sachsenhausen:

Created on April 23, 1936. First Commandant: Herman Baranowski. 35,000 inmates at peak. 135,000 people passed through camp. Separate sub-camps for Jews, political prisoners, homosexuals, draft evaders, etc. Contained gas chamber and crematorium. Used for mass murder of 11,000 Soviet POW’s. Forced labor for Heinkel aircraft works. 30-35,000 total deaths.

Crematorium II:

Functioned as a homicidal gas chamber and incineration installation from 15th March 1943, before its officially coming into service on March 31st, to November 27th, 1944, annihilating a total of approximately 400,000 people. Most of them Jewish women, children and old men.

Crematorium III:

Was used in similar fashion from June 25th 1943 to November 27th ,1944, killing about 350,000 victims

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BY: La-Keisha Long