EDITOR’S INTRODUCTION
TO THE SERIES AND VOLUME I

Shortly after coming to power in 1933, the Nazis began to set up a series of concentration camps across Germany. These were mostly local initiatives: facilities that the SA, SS, and police established on an ad hoc basis, where they would detain and abuse real and imagined enemies of the regime. By the end of the year, there were over 100 of these early camps in operation.

The founding of those early camps marked the beginning of a process that produced perhaps the most pervasive collection of detention sites that any society has ever created. Eventually the early concentration camps would give way to a centralized system under the SS that, by the end of World War II, would number over 1,000 camps, including some of the most notorious, such as Auschwitz, Bergen-Belsen, Buchenwald, and Dachau; at their peak, these camps held over 700,000 prisoners. In addition, over the course of their 12 years in power, the Nazis would establish a bewildering array of other persecution sites: killing centers, ghettos, forced labor camps, prisoner-of-war (POW) camps, resettlement camps, “euthanasia” centers, brothels, and prisons, among others. Not just the SS, but also the military, private industry, and several governmental and quasi-governmental agencies would run their own camp systems. Germany’s allies, satellites, and collaborationist states, from France to Romania and Norway to Italy, would add still more.

The millions of prisoners in this vast universe of camps and ghettos mirrored the variety of the sites that held them. They came from every country over which the Nazis and their allies held power. They wound up in the camps for any number of reasons; the Nazis persecuted many different groups, from a variety of motivations and to differing degrees. The Jews, of course, were the Nazis’ special target from the start, and eventually they would almost all be slated for industrialized mass murder. Roma and Sinti (Gypsies), homosexuals, resistance fighters, common criminals, Communists, and others also entered the system, for reasons of politics, or “race,” or because the Germans needed their labor, or for any of several other reasons; all they had in common, really, was that they were there against their will, to their detriment, and for the benefit of the perpetrators. Their fates also varied, usually according to their status in the eyes of the authorities. For example, the majority of Soviet POWs died in German hands, from a combination of outright murder, starvation, exhaustion, exposure, and disease, because the Germans saw them as politically and militarily dangerous and racially inferior. At the other end of the spectrum, many Western POWs (with the exception of some Jewish POWs whom the Nazis singled out for abuse) survived in relatively good condition; their
time in the camps was not easy, by any stretch of the imagination, but it was usually not fatal. In between those extremes there existed just about every kind of treatment imaginable. The prisoners’ fates depended upon the reason for their incarceration, the kind of work they had to perform, and opportunities to obtain extra food, among other factors. The various categories of facilities differed from one another, as one might expect, but even within categories there were often marked differences from one site to another, depending upon the working environment, available accommodations, and the attitude of the camp staff.

At the same time, there were certain elements that most sites had in common. Most prisoners, for example, had to perform some sort of work. Work was a central element in the Nazis’ camp regimen. For those few prisoners whom the regime was interested in rehabilitating, work was the stated means to their rehabilitation, especially early on—although in reality, and especially later in the history of the camps, many prisoners had to perform work whose only purpose was to humiliate, debase, or even kill. Millions of other prisoners had to work simply because the Germans needed the work to be done; by the end of the war, a huge proportion of German war industry, including facilities that produced aircraft, ballistic missiles, and other advanced weaponry, depended upon foreign or prisoner labor. Ghetto labor combined these elements, and sometimes provided the inmates’ only hope that they might be spared, for the sake of their work.

Living conditions also reflected certain similarities from one camp or ghetto to another. Most prisoners existed within a system that was militaristic—in the most petty, cruel sense—with roll calls, uniforms of one kind or another, and a strict hierarchy within both the guard and prisoner populations. Discipline was harsh, often arbitrary, and sometimes fatal. In the ghettos there was less structure, and the inhabitants had more leeway to establish their own communal support institutions, but the conditions were as bad or worse than in the camps. Food in camps and ghettos was usually inadequate in both quantity and quality, as was health care. At all times the prisoners were aware that their status did not approach that of the “master race,” and that their lives were subject to the whims of their tormentors. The inmates’ responses to these conditions usually fell within a predictable pattern. Some few became collaborators; a mass in the middle usually just tried to get by; and others resisted, through sabotage, underground agitation, escape attempts, or even revolt.

Most people are familiar with these different aspects of the Nazi camps and ghettos, if only generally, from the popular media. Until now, however, anyone who wanted to find out more about the individual sites often faced a truly daunting task. The sources are scattered, fragmentary, and usually in foreign languages. Even specialists are frequently familiar with only their particular parts of the greater whole; most of those with whom we consulted were surprised just by the scale of the system. When work began on this project, the staff expected to find between 5,000 and 7,000 sites. Even basic research, however, yielded a growing number, until today the count stands at roughly 20,000 camps and ghettos that existed between 1933 and 1945; the ex-
act number is unknowable. Few people have the
time or the expertise to learn about these places
from the original sources, and there has been no
single reference work to which they could turn.
Moreover, the physical evidence is disappearing. At
most of these sites there are no museums, memori-
als, or any sign at all of what occurred there. The
danger exists that, as the survivors fade from the
scene, so too will any knowledge of the places where
they suffered. For these reasons the Center for Ad-
vanced Holocaust Studies in the United States Ho-
locaust Memorial Museum took on the task of
preparing an encyclopedia about this central ele-
ment of the Nazi regime.

The primary purpose of the encyclopedia is to
explore the universe of camps and ghettos, with an
eye toward providing basic information on as many
individual sites as possible. Naturally it will not cover
everything. In the case of such categories as POW
camps and brothels, for example, records for many
sites simply do not exist. In other cases, such as pris-
onss, there were so many sites that we had to limit our
coverage for reasons of space, and there are a few
categories, such as resettlement camps for ethnic
Germans, that we have excluded entirely, because
they do not fit within the exploitive or eliminationist
goals of the broader Nazi camp and ghetto universe.
Where practical, however, the coverage is complete,
and the addition of extensive introductory essays also
helps to fill in any gaps. In addition, source sections
and citations provide a guide to finding additional
material.

In designing the encyclopedia as a whole, we de-
cided to organize the volumes according to the struc-
ture of the camp and ghetto universe itself, inasmuch
as there was such a structure. In other words, we
grouped the sites according to their function or sub-
ordination within the Nazi regime. Thus there will be,
following this first volume, a volume on German-
run ghettos; another on camps under the military;
one on camps and ghettos run by Germany’s allies,
satellites, and collaborationist states; another on
ghettos under the SS-Reich Security Main Office
(Reichssicherheitshauptamt, RSHA); one on forced
labor sites under other governmental authorities and
private firms; and a volume to cover various sites that
do not fit in the other categories. In this way the
work offers the reader some understanding of the
system as a whole, rather than just the individual
parts.

Similarly, we have organized the individual vol-
umes so that the reader can see how the perpetrators
administered the sites in each category. This first
volume, for example, covers two groups of camps,
primarily: first, the early camps that Nazi authorities
and police set up on an ad hoc basis in the first year of
Hitler’s rule, and second, the concentration camps
and their constellations of subcamps that operated
under the control of the SS-Business Administration
Main Office (Wirtschaftsverwaltungshauptamt,
WVHA). Overview essays by Joseph Robert White
and Karin Orth open those two main sections; they
describe the rise of the early camps and the evolution
of the WVHA system, respectively. Within the first
section, the camp entries then follow in simple al-
phabetical order. The second section contains one
further subdivision: after the introduction, subsec-
tions follow for each of the main concentration
camps, within each of which there are essays on that
camp's subcamps, in alphabetical order; often there is
also an introductory essay on the subcamps as a
group. As applied to the series as a whole, this struc-
ture, in combination with introductory essays that
describe the history and common characteristics of
the various categories of camps, provides the reader
with an understanding of the system that the indi-
vidual essays cannot provide alone.

Questions of scope, completeness, and accuracy
come to the fore in a project such as this one. To be-
gin with, the editorial team had to decide what sites
would qualify for inclusion, and that decision was, by
necessity, a somewhat subjective one. There existed, for example, a great many work details, which the Germans usually referred to as *Aussenkommandos* (external detachments), to which prisoners were marched each day, returning at night to their barracks. For the purposes of this encyclopedia, we did not count those sites as camps; we listed only those places where the prisoners were housed. Likewise, we did not include sites that contained fewer than a minimum number of people (usually 10) or that existed for less than a minimum amount of time (usually two weeks)—although we did make exceptions for a few sites when we judged them to be of particular interest for one reason or another. In any case, most camps contained at least several hundred people and existed for months, if not years.

The amount of source material varies enormously from one site to another. For some sites there is far more information than the authors could fit within the limited space available to them. In such cases we asked them to answer as many of our research questions as possible; we preferred brief answers to all the questions, rather than more expansive answers to only a few (for the questions themselves, please refer to the “Reader’s Guide to Using This Encyclopedia”). In this connection, readers will no doubt notice the brevity of the entries on well-known camps such as Auschwitz and Dachau. Scholars have written volumes about these and many of the other main concentration camps, and we know that our entries do not begin to reflect the sum of knowledge on their subjects. Much the same is true of many lesser-known camps as well. Our entries should serve as an introduction and summary on such camps, while the source sections will provide guidance for those who want to learn more.

For many other sites, there is hardly any information available, at least that scholars have found so far. Some of the entries answer only a few of the questions we posed—and often incompletely. Often we were unable to find an outside scholar to write about a particular camp; in those instances, we relied on our very capable research assistants to write entries in-house, using mostly secondary sources. Thus, although we have done our best to be comprehensive, the reader cannot regard this encyclopedia as the final word; instead, it mirrors the state of research at the time when the entries were written. We hope that future scholars will be able to unearth new sources and expand upon our work.

The quantity and quality of the source material is an especially important issue in connection with the question of perspective: that of the perpetrators versus that of the victims. Much of what we know about the camps comes from perpetrator records, which means that we can answer some questions about the camps better than others. The danger in this circumstance is that—aside from what the reader can deduce from general administrative reports—the victims’ voices can be lost. This work benefits, however, from the fact that many authors were able to find valuable victims’ accounts in postwar trial testimony and memoirs and to incorporate those accounts in the entries. That material expands our understanding by giving us a view of life under Nazi persecution that is more balanced and intimate—and often heartrending.

As far as accuracy is concerned, one can fairly say that any historical work is going to contain some errors, and that is even more true of a work of this sort, given its scope. Records and accounts are scarce and often contradictory, even in connection with the most seemingly straightforward of matters, such as a camp’s opening and closing dates. We have striven, however, to find authors who are experts on the places about which they are writing—people who have access to primary sources and the most recent literature, and who know how to use the sources judiciously. Many of them live in the towns where the camps existed, or work at the associated memorial sites and museums. We are in the authors’ debt for the mass of material they gathered and presented with such skill; responsibility for any remaining flaws rests with us.

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