The Dachau camp gate with the slogan, “Work Will Make You Free.” 1939-1942.
COURTESY OF AG-D, DAA 12.479/F-893
DACHAU MAIN CAMP

Dachau was the only concentration camp that existed for the full 12 years of the National Socialist dictatorship. During this period the number and composition of the prisoners changed fundamentally, as did the living conditions and chances for survival.

On January 30, 1933, Adolf Hitler and his followers assumed power in Germany. Soon thereafter, at a press conference on March 20, Heinrich Himmler, then the Munich police president, announced the establishment of a concentration camp at Dachau.¹ The camp, which was located in an empty munitions factory from World War I and which had a capacity of 5,000 prisoners, initially was to serve as a holding center for political opponents of the regime.

The first 100 “protective custody” prisoners, who arrived on March 22, were Communists. The first Jewish prisoners were also arrested as political prisoners. Initially, the prisoners were guarded by the Bavarian State Police. When the SS took over the camp on April 11, 1933, there began a campaign of despotism and terror from which the prisoners had no protection. The SS guards’ hatred was directed in particular against Jewish prisoners. By the end of May, 12 prisoners had been either tortured to death or driven to commit suicide.

In June 1933, Himmler, now Reichsführer-SS, named SS-Oberführer Theodor Eicke as commandant of Dachau. Eicke instituted an organizational scheme that included detailed regulations that were later adopted in all other concentration camps. His “Disciplinary and Punishment Orders for the Prison Camp” regulated methods of torture to be used as punishment, including methods of execution.² Under Eicke’s leadership, Dachau became a “School of Violence” and a model for concentration camps established afterward. Numerous groups of visitors were shown a staged demonstration of the supposed reeducation of political prisoners. In the first few years numerous reports about the camp appeared in the now-nazified German press. Even international delegations were fooled by the façade. Lastly, Eicke divided the camp administration into the commandant’s headquarters, the commandant’s adjutant, an SS guard detachment, the protective custody camp, the medical department, and the political department, as well as an administration unit for the commercial facilities.

In May 1934, Eicke began directing the creation of the Inspectorate of Concentration Camps Reichsführer-SS (IKL RFSS), of which he became chief in 1939. Altogether there were seven commandants of Dachau: Hilmar Wäckerle (commandant April–June 1933), born 1899, killed in action in July 1941 near Lemberg; Eicke (June 1933–July 1934), born 1892, died February 1943 in an aircraft crash; Heinrich Deubel (December 1934–March 1936), born 1890, died 1962; Hans Loritz (April 1936–July 1939), born 1895, committed suicide in January 1946; Alex Piorkowski (February 1940–September 1942), born 1904, sentenced to death by a U.S. military court, 1947, executed in Landsberg in 1948; Martin Weiss (September 1942–November 1943), born 1905, sentenced to death by a U.S. military court in 1945, executed in Landsberg in 1946; Eduard Weiter (November 1943–April 1945), born 1889, committed suicide in May 1945.

The first prisoners in Dachau established their accommodations in single-story stone barracks, along with their supply facilities and a so-called Bunker, the camp prison, in which the SS guards tortured individual prisoners to death or drove them to commit suicide. Workshops were established in the empty factory buildings, in which the prisoners increasingly worked as required by the SS. The SS originally intended that the prisoners would cultivate the surrounding moors, but the plan only reached partial fruition. In some work detachments, such as the feared gravel pit, the prisoners—above all the Jews—were worked to death or shot “while trying to escape.” The lives of the prisoners were regulated by a strict military code. The SS guarded the camp and the work detachments, while the prisoners organized the supplies for the camp, the daily life in the camp with its roll calls, meals, and even the work. Gradually a hierarchy developed in the prison population, which became increasingly important among the various national groups over the course of the war. The SS took pains to ensure that prisoner-functionaries operated as spies and became the instruments of their crimes. Political prisoners in Dachau held the most important positions during the 12 years of the camp’s existence. Overwhelmingly, they tried to stand by their fellow prisoners against the SS.

After the political prisoners, Jehovah’s Witnesses arrived in Dachau at the end of 1933. They were followed during the 1930s by the so-called work-shy (Arbeitscheu); criminals who had served their prison terms; “Gypsies”; homosexuals; and others who for various reasons did not fit into the National Socialist community. From 1937 on, the prisoners wore striped prisoner clothing to which a prison number was affixed, as well as a marker, the so-called triangle, whose color identified the category to which the prisoner belonged. Jews were marked with the yellow star.

In 1937 to 1938 the prisoners constructed a completely new camp, whose 250 × 600-meter (820 × 1969-feet) layout included, in part, the old camp. Thirty of the 34 wooden barracks were used to hold the prisoners. They were called blocks and were divided into four sections, each of which held 52 men. A supply building was constructed, as well as a new camp prison with 134 single cells and an entrance building whose gate bore the inscription “Work Will Make You Free.” Seven watchtowers outfitted with machine guns, a tall wall topped with electrified barbed wire, as well as the so-called barrier, a strip of grass on which the prisoners were forbidden to tread on pain of death, were supposed to make escape impossible.
Once construction on the new camp was completed, the prisoners were compelled to prepare a plot of land to the east of the wall for the planting of an herb garden. This area was ready in 1939 and was incorporated into the SS-German Experimental Institute for Nutrition and Provision, Ltd. (Deutsche Versuchsanstalt für Ernährung und Verpflegung GmbH).

Following the annexation of Austria in the spring of 1938, the first non-German prisoners arrived in Dachau, the Austrian prisoners. In addition to Jews, there were numerous prominent politicians of various political persuasions. Then, after the Kristallnacht pogrom on November 9–10, 1938, more than 11,000 Jewish men from Germany and Austria were taken to Dachau. Most of them were released after a few weeks, on the condition that they leave Germany, and after their possessions had been seized. Until 1938, the number of prisoners fluctuated between 2,000 and 2,500 annually. Following the arrival of the Austrians in 1938, the number jumped to 6,000, and after the arrival of the Kristallnacht Jews on December 1, 1938, the number jumped to 14,232. By the beginning of World War II, about 500 prisoners had lost their lives in Dachau.

At the end of September 1939, the camp was cleared until February 1940 for the training of the SS-Totenkopf-Unit (Death’s Head Front Division), and the prisoners were transferred to the camps at Mauthausen, Flossenbürg, and Buchenwald. With this came the end of the camp’s pre-war history as an instrument of Nazi terror, used at first exclusively against German political opponents, then against all who “did not fit in.” The prisoners were subjected to arbitrary handling by their guards, but as yet there had been no mass murders, no epidemics to which thousands fell victim, and no deaths by starvation. The majority of the prisoners could still hope that they would leave the camp alive.

With the beginning of the war, the exploitation of concentration camp prisoner labor assumed greater significance. The SS established its own commercial enterprises in Dachau, later known as the Deutsche Ausrichtungsarbeiter (German Equipment Works, DAW). The herb gardens were expanded. Many prisoners died during this expansionary phase. The prisoners’ rations deteriorated dramatically during 1941 and 1942, and the death rate increased rapidly. The first epidemics
broke out, with tuberculosis becoming the most common illness. At the same time, the number of punishment reports increased, as did corporal punishment, and the so-called post (Pfähle) or tree hangings. Both torture methods could result in permanent injuries or could lead to the death of the prisoner.

The composition of the prisoner population changed continually during the war. From March 1940 to the end of the year, 13,377 Poles were forcibly taken to Dachau. They remained the largest national group until liberation. Also, among the clergy who arrived in Dachau from all the other concentration camps, the Poles were the majority. The first Soviet prisoners, mostly young men who had volunteered for work in Germany, arrived in the autumn of 1941. They remained the second largest national group until 1943. In addition, from August 1941 to the middle of June 1942, 4,000 Soviet prisoners of war (POWs), who had been selected from various POW camps, were shot in Dachau.

As for the nations of Western Europe overrun by Germany, initially only individual prisoners or small groups were sent to Dachau. In 1942, Yugoslav partisans began to arrive. They, like the veterans of the Spanish Civil War, were highly regarded by their fellow prisoners because of their solidarity and their courageous attitude in the camp. The number of Jews in Dachau was relatively small, with the exception of the large influx of Jews following Kristallnacht. In November 1941, the order was given that all Jewish prisoners in camps in the “Old Reich” were to be deported to Auschwitz. Only from the spring of 1944 on were Jewish prisoners again sent in large numbers to the subcamps.

From the spring of 1941 on, prisoners in concentration camps were included in the so-called euthanasia program, which had been aimed primarily at murdering the mentally ill and handicapped. In September 1941, a medical team from Aktion 14f13—the code name for the program as it applied to camp prisoners—selected Dachau inmates who were incapable of working. In January 1942, they were taken in a so-called invalid transport to Hartheim Castle in Austria, where they were immediately gassed. During the course of that year, 2,524 Dachau prisoners were gassed in Hartheim. In addition, from the autumn of 1942 on, sick prisoners who did not recover within three months were murdered in the camp by SS doctors or criminal prisoner-functionaries, using lethal injections.

Medical care for the prisoners in Dachau was completely inadequate. The SS doctors had no interest in healing the sick, who therefore avoided the infirmary for as long as possible. From 1941 on, moreover, they had to fear that they could be the subject of gruesome medical experiments there. In the spring of 1942, Luftwaffe physician Dr. Sigmund Rascher received permission from Heinrich Himmler to investigate, using prisoners, the stresses that Luftwaffe pilots were exposed to during plane crashes or parachute jumps. Of the nearly 200 prisoners placed in a pressurized chamber, in which they were exposed to sudden and painful drops in air pressure, at least 70 to 80 people lost their lives. From the middle of August until October 1942, experiments were carried out in cooperation with the Luftwaffe entailing immersion in freezing water, in an effort to find out if pilots who ditched could be saved. Dr. Rascher directed the experiments, with the support of Himmler, until May 1943. According to eyewitness statements, between 80 and 90 people died out of 360 to 400 prisoners used for the experiments. From February 1942 to March 1945, Professor Dr. Claus Schilling, the renowned researcher of tropical diseases, infected approximately 1,100 prisoners with malaria. It is not possible to determine the number of victims of these experiments as the test victims were released back into the camp after the experiments. In addition, primarily Sinti and Roma (Gypsies) were the subject of experiments in the conversion of seawater to drinking water, as well as in the effectiveness of a blood coagulation agent. Some prisoners were artificially subjected to septicemia and phlegmonone so that the effect of various treatments could be tested on them.

During the war, the infirmary, which the SS avoided for fear of infection, developed into the most important center for international solidarity and clandestine support for ill and endangered prisoners, next to the work detachments in the record office and the work allocation office. Open resistance was impossible under the conditions in the concentration camp. The secret distribution of news about the course of the war strengthened the prisoners’ resolve, as did music, literature, or the arts, but those were only available to a limited circle of inmates.

As the number of dead climbed ever higher, a crematorium with one oven was constructed next to the prison camp in the summer of 1940. From May 1941 on, prisoner deaths were recorded in the camp’s own death register. Construction of a new crematorium with four ovens and a gas chamber began in the spring of 1942. From the spring of 1943 on, the dead were cremated in the new facility. The gas chamber was not used for mass killings, but there are statements to the effect that Dr. Rascher, in connection with his human experiments, also conducted “test gassings” there. The secluded area of the crematorium was, moreover, used as an execution site, especially in the last years of the war.

The last phase at Dachau, from 1943 to 1945, witnessed a dramatic increase in prisoner numbers as well as the establishment of around 170 subcamps and work detachments in which the prisoners were used as forced laborers, mostly for the German armaments industry.

In March 1942, the IKL became part of the recently created SS-Business Administration Main Office (WVHA), which attempted to improve the prisoners’ living conditions, in order to reduce the death rate and so obtain more labor. Improvements, such as additional food, reached only a limited number of prisoners, however.

The expansion of the Dachau camp complex in 1943 began with the establishment of subcamps at large production sites. The SS hired out the prisoners to Messerschmitt, Dornier, and Bayerische Motoren Werke (BMW). Sick and weakened prisoners were sent back to the main camp.
The majority of the Dachau subcamps were established, however, during the course of 1944 and the beginning of 1945. The largest project was the relocation of fighter-plane production into camouflaged underground factories in order to protect the industry from bombing raids. In early 1944, the authorities planned the creation of a new “Jägerstab” (Fighter Staff) administrative complex, including representatives from the armaments industry, the SS, and the Armaments Ministry for the Dachau Region, to be housed in three underground bunkers located in Landsberg am Lech and in Mühldorf am Inn. Some 11 camps were located near Landsberg and 4 camps near Mühldorf, to which around 39,000 prisoners, almost exclusively Jews, were brought. Their living and working conditions were by far the worst in comparison to the other subcamps. One estimate claims that half of these prisoners lost their lives in the 10 months they were there. Also, in both Landsberg and Kaufering, there were women’s camps in which primarily Hungarian Jewish women were held.

According to a secret report written by Polish camp recorder Jan Domagała, 78,635 prisoners were registered in 1944, that is, 38 percent of the total of 206,206 who entered the camp between 1933 and 1944. The majority of transports, each with several thousand prisoners from Eastern and Western Europe, arrived in the early summer of 1944. Poles, Hungarian Jews, French resistance fighters (many of these were “Night-and-Fog” [Nacht-und-Nebel] prisoners), Soviet forced laborers, and Italian POWs formed the largest national groups. By the spring of 1945, there were prisoners in Dachau from 37 countries, several of which were represented by only 1 prisoner.

During the last months before liberation, the camp was catastrophically overcrowded, due to the constantly arriving transports from other camps that were evacuated ahead of advancing Allied troops. The food supply and hygienic conditions continually worsened. There were no medicines. In November 1944, a typhus epidemic broke out in which 3,000 prisoners died in January 1945 alone and which cost the lives of about 15,000 prisoners altogether before liberation.

In the last days of April, on Himmler’s orders, the evacuation of the main camp and the subcamps began. On April 26, 1945, 2,000 Jewish prisoners left the main camp by train, and 6,887 prisoners were forced to march in a southerly direction. Any prisoner who could not continue was shot. Not until the first days of May were the last survivors of the march overtaken by American troops, after the guards had fled. A group of 137 prominent hostages, including Leon Blum, the former French president, and Franz von Schuschnigg, the former Austrian chancellor, was also transported in a southerly direction. They were handed over to the Allies in the Tirol on May 4 in good condition. In Dachau itself the SS personnel fled the camp on April 27 and 28. On April 28, a group of 20 to 30 citizens from Dachau, together with a few prisoners who had fled from the camp, attempted to occupy Dachau’s city hall. A retreating SS unit shot 6 of the “insurgents,” among whom were 3 of the prisoners. The liberators from the 42nd and 45th Infantry Divisions of the U.S. Seventh Army entered Dachau on April 29, where they stumbled across a transport of several thousand corpses before they reached the approximately 32,000 survivors. Several thousand dead lay on the camp grounds. More than 2,000 prisoners died in May 1945. By 2002, the Red Cross International Tracing Service (ITS) put the number of deaths at the Dachau concentration camp at 32,099, but that number should be increased to over 40,000, as the deaths of prisoners brought to Dachau for execution were never registered, and the deaths in the subcamps and during the evacuation have never been precisely determined.

In July 1945, after the last survivors had left the Dachau concentration camp, the American military authorities established an internment camp there for those suspected of involvement in war crimes and crimes against humanity. The first large military trial began on November 15, 1945, against 40 men accused of committing crimes in the Dachau concentration camp. This trial would be a model for subsequent trials: 36 of the accused were sentenced to death; 28 of them were executed in Landsberg. Further trials followed up until 1948, dealing with crimes committed in Dachau and its subcamps but also in the camps at Mauthausen, Flossenbürg, Mittelbau, and Buchenwald. SS crimes against Allied soldiers were also dealt with. Altogether there were 489 trials in Dachau, with 1,672 accused. There were 462 death sentences, but not all were implemented. There were 256 acquittals. During the course of the 1950s those sentenced to long terms of imprisonment either had their sentences reduced or were released.

**SOURCES** The first monograph on the Dachau concentration camp was published in 1968 under the auspices of the Comité International de Dachau, by Paul Berben, Dachau 1933–1945 (Brussels, 1968). Günther Kimmelt, state prosecutor at ZdL, as part of the project “Bavaria during the Nazi Era” for IfZ, wrote a short historical outline of the camp titled “Das Konzentrationslager Dachau,” in Bayern in der NS-Zeit, ed. Martin Broszat (Munich, 1979), 2: 349–413. Robert Sigel investigated the Dachau military trials in Im Interesse der
Gerechtigkeit. Die Dachauer Kriegsverbrecherprozesse 1945–1948 (Frankfurt am Main, 1992). Beginning in 1985, the Comité International de Dachau, under the direction of Wolfgang Benz and Barbara Distel, has published the scholarly annual DaHe. Each publication places emphasis on a particular theme of concentration camp history. The 20 volumes that have appeared to date contain numerous memoirs and studies on the history of the camp. In 2001, American historian Harold Marcuse published his book Legacies of Dachau: The Uses and Abuses of a Concentration Camp (Cambridge), which puts the history of the area after 1945 into the overall context of the history of the concentration camp. In 2002, the Comité International de Dachau published a new monograph on the Dachau concentration camp by Czech historian and survivor of the camp Stanislav Záměník, Das war Dachau (Luxembourg, 2002); English and French translations followed in 2003. The majority of the approximately 850 publications on the history of the Dachau concentration camp in the Memorial’s library are survivors’ memoirs in various languages.

Some of the Dachau concentration camp’s original files, such as the Political Department files, were destroyed by the SS before the camp was liberated. The largest collection of files is held at Bad Arolsen, under the control of ITS; these files have only recently become available. Other original documents are to be found in the archive at YVA, IS-O, USHMM, and NARA (documents that were collected for the U.S. military trials in 1945–1948). The most important collection of documents for the history of the subcamps is the ZdL investigations files of BA-L. The SS personnel files are located in BA-DH. The establishment of an archive at the Dachau Concentration Camp Memorial began in 1964. The collection of original documents is not extensive and derives mostly from private donations to the memorial. During the years, copies of all the important collections from other archives have been made. This includes an alphabetical list of the Dachau concentration camp prisoners compiled from the prisoners’ card index seized immediately after liberation. It contains about 180,000 names with date entries. It also is based on the Dachau entry books. There is in addition a press archive as well as a collection of tape and video interviews with survivors. There is also a collection of artwork.

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NOTES
1. MNN, March 21, 1933.
2. IMT Nuremberg, Doc. 775-PS.
4. Letter from RSHA, November 5, 1941, IMT Nuremberg, Doc. NO-2522.
6. List of Experimental Persons, Malaria Station at Dachau Concentration Camp, ITS, Arolsen, AG-D, Nr. 5703.
7. Witness Statement Dr. Frantisek Blaha, May 3, 1945, to the Investigating Officer Colonel David Chavez Jr., StA-N, Rept. 502-IVPS.
11. According to investigations by Stanislav Zamecnik, the dead number at least 42,359.