German civilians lead an oxcart carrying bodies for burial through the Flossenbürg gate, May 3, 1945. Note the sign at left that reads, "Work Will Make You Free."
USHMM WS # 77027, COURTESY OF NARA
The Flossenbürg concentration camp was founded in the spring of 1938, outside the small town of Flossenbürg, Germany, near Weiden in the Upper Palatinate, along the hilly border with Czechoslovakia, in order to confine “asocial” and “work-shy” elements of German society. Seven years later, it comprised a sprawling collection of subcamps, overflowing with prisoners from all over Europe. It originated with the idea of quarrying granite for civilian building projects; at the end, the work concentrated primarily on military production.

It began as a camp for male prisoners; it ended with a population nearly one-third female. But throughout this protracted, fitful metamorphosis, human suffering remained the one horrifying given at Flossenbürg.

On March 24, 1938, a commission led by high-ranking SS officers examined the proposed site and found it suitable, based on its potential for producing granite. The establishment of the camp was part of a new strategy by Heinrich Himmler to exploit prisoner labor for profit by supplying building materials for the Nazi regime’s construction projects. It thus coincided closely with the founding by the SS of the German Earth and Stone Works Ltd. (DESt), the siting of the new Mauthausen concentration camp by stone quarries near Linz, and the establishment of brickworks at Sachsenhausen and Buchenwald. It also coincided with an expansion of the camp system’s population through new arrests, which were calculated to provide the necessary workforce. Regulations encouraging the detention of common criminals and persons deemed “asocial” facilitated the new policy.

The first 100 prisoners arrived at Flossenbürg from Dachau on May 3, 1938. Further transports followed from Dachau, Buchenwald, and Sachsenhausen, bringing the camp population to approximately 1,500 by year’s end. These initial inmates were drawn primarily from the ranks of the criminals, as well as asocials and a few homosexuals. The camp held no political prisoners at all for the first 17 months of its existence, during which time the criminals, or “greens” (named for the color of the badge they wore), firmly established themselves in the prisoner administration of the camp. By the outbreak of the war in 1939, the total prisoner population had increased only slightly, to about 1,600.
The first political prisoners, about 1,000 in number, arrived at the end of September 1939, when Dachau was temporarily cleared out to train what would become the first unit of the Waffen-SS. Although the survivors returned to Dachau in March 1940, other political prisoners replaced them almost immediately, including a number of Czechs, the camp’s first foreign prisoners (apart from Austrians). In the course of 1941, however, the influx of perhaps 1,500 Poles established that nationality as the largest contingent of non-Germans at Flossenbürg. By the end of the year, the camp held approximately 3,150 civilian prisoners of all kinds. In addition, there were approximately 1,750 Soviet prisoners of war (POWs) remaining from a group of about 2,000 the Germans had crowded into a separate compound within the camp, under particularly primitive conditions, in October. Thus, by the end of 1941, Flossenbürg had a total prisoner population of approximately 4,900.1

Polish prisoners continued to arrive in quantity during 1942, joined by a significant number of Soviet civilian workers who had run afoul of the Nazi authorities after arriving in the Reich to perform forced labor. Soviet political prisoners also began to appear. Nevertheless, with deaths and transfers, the total number of civilian prisoners rose only moderately in 1942, ending the year a little above 3,500. This number included a few hundred prisoners at Flossenbürg’s first subcamps but not the surviving Soviet POWs, whose numbers are not known.

Beginning in 1943 and continuing into 1944, hundreds of prisoners arrived at Flossenbürg from Western Europe, primarily France, under the so-called Night-and-Fog Decree. Since the flow of new prisoners from Eastern Europe also continued unabated, it was probably in 1943 that German prisoners at the camp entered into the minority, despite the arrival of more criminals, now transferred directly from conventional German prisons and penitentiaries by agreement with the Ministry of Justice. By mid-July 1943, the Flossenbürg main camp held some 3,950 prisoners, including 10 women at the newly opened camp brothel, while eight subcamps held more than 800 prisoners.2

Over the next 18 months, Flossenbürg underwent staggering growth, above all in the subcamps, whose numbers multiplied to more than 90 in 1944 and whose geographic extent was unusually wide, stretching across Bavaria, Bohemia, and Saxony into Thuringia and Brandenburg-Prussia. On September 1, 1944, Flossenbürg acquired administrative control of 5 Ravensbrück subcamps and their female prisoners (having already controlled their labor deployment before that, in one case since early 1943). A number of new subcamps for women were established in the coming months. By the beginning of 1945, the total number of prisoners in the Flossenbürg system exceeded 40,000, including more than 11,000 women.3 By early March, as the evacuations of other camps swelled the population further, the total peaked at nearly 53,000, of whom more than 13,000 were women.4 At this time, the main camp was overflowing with almost 14,500 prisoners.5

For most of its history, Flossenbürg had few or no Jewish prisoners. Although a small number of Jews had been present from at least mid-1940 (receiving particularly brutal attention from the guards), the last 12 were deported to Auschwitz on October 19, 1942. Up to that time, some 78 Jewish prisoners had died in the camp.6 Beginning in August 1944, however, overwhelming numbers of Polish and Hungarian Jews began to arrive. Ultimately, out of a total of 89,964 prisoners recorded entering the Flossenbürg system during its history, some 22,930 were Jewish.7

The original site selection in 1938 greatly aggravated several of Flossenbürg’s perennial problems, one of which was severe overcrowding. Wedged between steep hillsides at the upper end of a valley, Flossenbürg had almost no room for expansion. Construction of the main camp, intended for 1,500 prisoners, had begun immediately upon the arrival of the first prisoners, with the erection of a barbed-wire perimeter. The prisoners then had to terrace the sharply rising valley floor to accommodate the camp headquarters, barracks for themselves, and housing for the SS guards. With the completion of these initial structures in early 1939, construction continued on guard towers and an internal camp jail, as well as infrastructure projects such as washing facilities, an electrical transformer station, and a sewer system. In 1940, excavations into the hillside began, creating new terraces for the construction of additional prisoner barracks in 1941. None of this work would prove even remotely adequate to house the accelerating influx of human beings. Forcing the prisoners to work (and thus also to sleep) in shifts, an innovation eventually undertaken to increase productivity, only partially alleviated the lack of bunk space.

The camp’s unfortunate location posed other difficulties. The high elevation impeded the water supply, while the terrace design complicated the functioning of the sewage system. Both problems were greatly exacerbated by overcrowding. Perhaps the most terrible consequence of the site, however, was the weather, which is unusually cold and wet in that corner of Germany. The prisoners, ill-clad and underfed, suffered grievously. Indeed, the effects of the foul weather were considerable even upon the camp buildings, and in winter the roofs needed to be cleaned almost daily to prevent them from collapsing under the weight of the accumulated snow.

During Flossenbürg’s first months, prisoner labor was inevitably applied almost entirely to the construction of the camp, but work for DESt began in the stone quarry soon thereafter. By June 1939, the ratio of prisoners employed in the quarry to those in construction was recorded at 646:863.8 By November, however, this ratio had shifted to 1,297:945.9 During 1940, with the initial construction largely completed, labor deployment became somewhat more diversified. The quarry consumed about half of all prisoner man-hours; construction and, in particular, terracing, about a quarter. The remainder was divided among various workshops.
and a multiplicity of routine tasks, from keeping the camp clean to peeling potatoes. The total value of the prisoner labor for the year was calculated at nearly 367,000 Reichsmark (RM), or almost $147,000 at the prevailing, fixed rate of exchange.\textsuperscript{13}

By mid-1943, the quarry still occupied approximately half the prisoner population of the main camp. About 1 prisoner in 6 worked for the camp administration in one capacity or another, and 1 in 13 at the behest of the camp construction office. The next largest employer was a weaving shop owned by the SS-Business Administration Main Office (WVHA). One prisoner in 14 worked in a new Messerschmitt detail, code-named “Detachment 2004,” begun that February to produce parts for Me 109 fighter planes.\textsuperscript{14}

Aircraft manufacture, however, soon came to dominate labor deployment at Flossenbürg. In August 1943, Allied bombing seriously damaged Messerschmitt’s main factory at Regensburg, prompting the company to move production more heavily into the concentration camps. The number of prisoners working for Messerschmitt at the main camp thus increased steadily from about 230 in July to about 800 in August, 1,900 in January 1944, and 2,200 in March.\textsuperscript{15} By late October, armaments production throughout the system occupied over 5,700 prisoners.\textsuperscript{16} At the same time, the quarry work for DESt declined both in relative and absolute terms.

The prisoner-functionaries profoundly affected life at Flossenbürg—and rarely for the better. Although ultimately only about 1 Flossenbürg prisoner out of 20 wore the green triangle, the original preponderance of criminals resulted in an especially corrupt and abusive prisoner hierarchy that endured long after the “greens” became a tiny minority within the total population. Willi Rettenmeier, a criminal from Stuttgart, held the position of camp elder from the beginning until June 1941, when it passed to a criminal named Kliefoth, who remained until the end of 1942. The camp command then tried out two German political prisoners in succession, Karl Mayer and Karl Mathoi, both of whom struggled to contain the power of the criminal functionaries beneath them, apparently with little success. In March 1944, the commandant returned the position of camp elder to criminal hands in the person of Anton Uhl, who remained in place until liberation, when the other prisoners lynched him.

A distinguishing feature of the “green” hierarchy in the camp was its sexual exploitation of lower-ranking prisoners.
Coerced homosexual relationships and outright rape were thus common. Indeed, the camp command eventually felt compelled to segregate the camp’s underage boys in a barracks of their own, in an attempt—as ironic as it was unsuccessful—to protect them from sexual predation.

The SS hierarchy at Flossenbürg was thoroughly corrupt and brutal. After the first camp commandant, Jakob Weiseborn, protégé of the notoriously venal Karl Koch at Buchenwald, was found dead in January 1939, camp rumor leapt to the unsubstantiated conclusion that he had committed suicide to avoid scandal. His successor Karl Künstler was frequently drunk and delegated responsibility heavily to ruthless subordinates until his removal in August 1942. After a two-month interregnum, Künstler was replaced by Egon Zill, a cipher who remained in power only until April 1943. For the last two years of the war, Flossenbürg was run by Max Koegel, a vicious martinet with none of the managerial skill needed to handle the rapid expansion of the camp that occurred during his tenure. All these men had long, if speckled, careers behind them in concentration camp service, but Flossenbürg uniformly terminated their ascent. Weiseborn died; Künstler and Zill became supply officers with SS combat units; and Koegel hanged himself shortly after being taken into custody by the Americans in 1946.

The SS guards assigned to Flossenbürg were similar to those serving elsewhere in the concentration camp system. The original Reich Germans were strongly reinforced in 1942 and 1943 by ethnic German recruits from Eastern Europe, and the guard force soon aged dramatically as the young and fit were increasingly transferred away to combat units and replaced with older, less healthy men. The total number of guards grew as Flossenbürg expanded. At the end of 1943, the camp’s headquarters staff and the SS-Death’s Head Battalion together numbered some 450 men, including 140 foreign auxiliaries, mostly Ukrainian, who had arrived from the SS-Training Camp Trawniki in early October. This number increased more than sixfold in the course of 1944, in part as hundreds of members of the Wehrmacht were assigned SS ranks and given guard duties. At the beginning of 1945, the number of guards in the Flossenbürg system had thus swollen to over 3,000, including more than 500 women. By March, the total reached approximately 4,500.

The ways in which prisoners at Flossenbürg were tormented and killed were also virtually indistinguishable from the means routinely employed elsewhere in the camp system. Prisoners were beaten, kicked, and stomped upon (particularly by the Kapos, who were issued rubber truncheons), ridiculed and humiliated, forced to perform exhausting exercises, hung up by their wrists with their arms behind their backs, and doused with cold water during freezing weather, to mention only a few of the most common abuses. They were shot “while attempting to escape,” shot by firing squads, hanged, beaten to death, drowned, strangled, and given lethal injections. Beginning in 1941, large numbers of extralegal “executions” took place at Flossenbürg, usually by shooting, with Poles and Soviet POWs constituting the chief victims. On March 29, 1945, 13 Allied POWs were hanged, including 1 American, and on April 9, 7 prominent German resistance figures followed, including former Abwehr (military counterintelligence) chief Wilhelm Canaris and pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Given the appalling conditions and inadequate food at Flossenbürg, the largest numbers of prisoners succumbed to disease and malnutrition. A dysentery epidemic brought the whole camp to a standstill for the entire month of January 1940, and typhus swept through the overcrowded barracks in September 1944 and again in January 1945. Mortality was especially high during the last chaotic months before liberation, as the entire system began to break down. In the month ending on March 15, 1942, 117 civilian prisoners and 27 Soviet POWs died at Flossenbürg; during the 30 days of March 1945 for which statistics are available, 1,367 prisoners died at the main camp alone (excluding executions).

The evacuation of Flossenbürg started on April 15, 1945, and proceeded sporadically until April 20, both by train and on foot, in the direction of Dachau. Of the approximately 9,300 registered prisoners still alive at the main camp (plus another 7,000 just arrived from Buchenwald), only about 1,500, mostly the very sick, were left behind to be liberated by the U.S. Army on April 23. Fewer than 3,000 of the evacuees ever arrived at Dachau, where they joined perhaps another 3,800 evacuated from Flossenbürg subcamps. Many prisoners died on the brutal march or were killed. Others escaped in the confusion, found themselves free when their guards deserted, or were liberated by advancing troops.

After the war, the Americans tabulated over 21,000 deaths among prisoners registered in the Flossenbürg system; the full total (including prisoners brought to the camp specifically to be killed and thus not registered) was probably around...
30,000, perhaps three-quarters of which occurred in the last nine months before liberation. The American compilation indicates that 3,515 of the dead were Jews.21

**SOURCES** Unfortunately, the SS was able to destroy many of the camp's important records before liberation. Nevertheless, a considerable amount of archival material is available. The most significant collection is “NS4 Fl” at the BA-BL. Although extremely diverse, the material mostly pertains to the camp construction directorate (Baulauftrag). The ITS in Arolsen, Germany, holds extensive documentation concerning the prisoners, while further important information about the prisoners, compiled by the Americans after the war, can be found at NARA in College Park, Maryland, in microfilm collection T-580, Rolls 69–70, Ordner 332. Various original Flossenbürg documents were microfilmed as NARA, T-580, Rolls 68–69, Ordner 329, and T-1021, Roll 1, Frames 350–549. Finally, the Památník Ter-ezín in the Czech Republic has a small collection of documents from Flossenbürg.

Materials from the most important postwar trial, against Friedrich Becker et al., are available on microfilm as NARA, M-1204. In addition to the trial transcript, this collection contains investigative records and trial exhibits. For information regarding the various German trials, see C.F. Rüter and D.W. de Milde, comps., Die westdeutschen Strafverfahren wegen nationalsozialistischer Tötungsverbrechen 1945–1997 (Amsterdam, 1998).


**NOTES**


2. NARA, Record Group 238, Nuremberg Document R-129.


6. NARA, microfilm collection T-580, Roll 68, Ordner 329, list of camps with numbers of guards and prisoners as of January 1 and 15, 1945, n.d.

7. NARA, microfilm collection T-1021, Roll 1, Frames 376–381.

8. Ibid., Frames 372–375.


18. NARA, microfilm collection T-580, Roll 68, Ordner 329, list of camps with numbers of guards and prisoners as of January 1 and 15, 1945, n.d.