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With the construction of additional barracks in 1939, Sachsenhausen attained a design capacity of approximately 10,000 prisoners. The war, however, soon led to renewed overcrowding. More than 2,500 Polish prisoners arrived during the first six months of the conflict, as did some 1,200 Czech students following anti-German demonstrations in Prague in November 1939. By mid-February 1940, the total number of prisoners had reached nearly 11,900, while Sachsenhausen’s first two subcamps, at Wewelsburg and Berlin-Lichterfelde, held over 300 more. In May 1940, another 1,200 Polish prisoners arrived from the Pawiak Prison in Warsaw. Soviet prisoners of war (POWs) began to arrive in August 1941, only to be shot by the thousands. As of early December, some 1,500 remained alive. Not counting the POWs, the number of prisoners at the main camp had fallen to about 8,000 by that time, while the population of the subcamps, which now numbered eight, had risen to around 2,350. The wartime internationalization of the camp continued apace, with Poles reaching 30 percent of the civilian prisoners, and Czechs, 12 percent.

Together with its subcamps, Sachsenhausen began 1943 with more than 16,500 prisoners and ended the year with more than 28,000. At the conclusion of the year, 35 percent were designated as “protective custody” detainees, now a thoroughly heterogeneous, multinational category. Counted separately, Soviet civilian prisoners constituted nearly as large a group, at 32 percent (with the surviving 761 Soviet POWs another 3 percent). Polish prisoners, also counted separately, formed another significant block at 20 percent. The next largest group, amounting to 6 percent, comprised the common criminals in “preventive detention” (as distinct from an additional 1 percent who were actual convicts from the German penitentiary system being held in “security custody”). Asocials constituted another 3 percent; Jehovah’s Witnesses, less than 1 percent. Other categories of prisoners were present at Sachsenhausen only in small numbers at this time.

The year 1944 saw explosive growth in the number of subcamps throughout the concentration camp system, and Sachsenhausen was no exception. Most of its new subcamps were located either in Berlin or within the province of Brandenburg. Some of them, including several taken over from Ravensbrück late in the year, held female prisoners. The main camp, however, remained restricted to men, with the exception of the handful of inmates at the camp brothel, opened in mid-1943. Effective January 1, 1945, Sachsenhausen expanded further by taking over responsibility from Mittelbau for the SS-Baubrigaden (Construction Brigades), a group of mobile subcamps assigned to repair bomb damage. As of that date, the entire Sachsenhausen system encompassed nearly 61,000 prisoners, including over 13,200 women. Two weeks later, the total had risen to more than 66,000. In the final months of the war, this number would swell further, with the evacuation of camps closer to the front.
At Sachsenhausen, as at other Nazi camps, Jewish prisoners were singled out for harsh treatment. Their numbers, however, fluctuated considerably over time. On January 3, 1937, there were only 21 Jewish prisoners at Sachsenhausen. The number remained small until the campaign against the work-shy in June 1938 brought over 800 Jews to the camp. Of these, 457 remained by the time Kristallnacht flooded the camp with Jewish prisoners in November, creating nightmarish conditions. Releases began almost immediately in exchange for commitments to emigrate. As of December 31, 1938, Sachsenhausen had 1,345 Jews, some 16 percent of the camp's total population: 958 were classified as protective custody prisoners, 386 as asocials, and 1 as a homosexual. By February 18, 1940, the number had dropped to 1,218; by December 5, 1941, to 559. In October 1942, most of the remaining Jewish prisoners were sent to Auschwitz, after Heinrich Himmler ordered the expulsion of Jews from the concentration camps within Germany's prewar borders. Sachsenhausen retained only a few with specialized skills needed either for the se-
cret Operation Bernhard, which counterfeited foreign banknotes, or for the so-called clock detail, which processed watches stolen from the Jews murdered at Auschwitz. The number of these prisoners grew gradually from 45 at the end of January 1943 to 159 at the end of December. There was no large-scale return of Jews to Sachsenhausen until the second half of 1944, when labor shortages forced Himmler to bring thousands of mostly Hungarian and Polish Jews to concentration camps in Germany. Additional Jewish prisoners arrived as a result of camp evacuations.

Sachsenhausen maintained special facilities to segregate politically prominent prisoners, such as the former Austrian chancellor Kurt von Schuschnigg and the anti-Nazi pastor Martin Niemöller. Many of those seized in connection with the attempt on Hitler’s life on July 20, 1944, also passed through Sachsenhausen. Politically significant POWs were held there as well, including Joseph Stalin’s eldest son, who was killed by a guard in April 1943.

Early in Sachsenhausen’s existence, the focus of prisoner work assignments was the construction of the camp and other facilities in the immediate vicinity, such as the large industrial and construction yards nearby. By the beginning of 1938, roughly half the prisoners were assigned inside the camp and roughly half in 47 work details outside. In the late summer of 1938, after the SS founded the German Earth and Stone Works, Ltd. (DESt) as a moneymaking enterprise, the prisoners began construction of what was intended to be the largest brickworks in the world, the Klinkerwerk in nearby Lehnitz. Some 1,500 prisoners marched to and from the site each day until 1941, when the camp administration decided to house the prisoners there and turn the Klinkerwerk into a subcamp.

The war inevitably brought about changes in the work done by concentration camp prisoners. In March 1942, plans were made to increase the use of the camps for armaments production, and 6,000 Sachsenhausen prisoners were designated for that work initially. By the end of the year, the camp was heavily involved in war production, manufacturing everything from fighter planes to gas masks. The prisoners at the Klinkerwerk, for example, began to produce shells instead of bricks, while an unfinished stone-processing plant was converted into a facility for recycling military wreckage. The push for increased production continued, feeding the proliferation of subcamps in 1944, as the SS increasingly hired out the prisoners to private firms.

When there was work to be done in the concentration camps, the SS generally had the prisoners do it. This principle extended to much of the organizational work within the camp, which fell largely to privileged prisoners, who carried out such important functions as determining work assignments. They were also in a favorable position to monitor the activities of the headquarters staff and in some cases to obstruct the implementation of harmful policies. At the head of the prisoner self-administration was the camp elder (Lagerältester), who answered directly to the SS officer in
charge of the protective custody camp. This difficult and dangerous post often changed hands, as different groups of prisoners schemed to obtain it for themselves. The political prisoner Harry Naujoks, who was camp elder from April 1939 to October 1942, is generally regarded, at least among his fellow political prisoners, as having acted with integrity and courage. Some other camp elders had less honorable records, particularly those selected from among the criminals and asocials.

Sachsenhausen had six commandants in less than nine years. The first was Karl Koch, who established the camp and then left in July 1937 to make his reputation at Buchenwald. The incompetent Hans Helwig became Sachsenhausen’s second commandant, serving for one year before entering a forced retirement. The hard-driving Hermann Baranowski succeeded him, running the camp with a heavy hand from July 1938 until his death in February 1940. Taking Baranowski’s place was the hapless Walter Eisfeld, who immediately fumbled a visit by Himmler, and was removed in March. His replacement, Hans Loritz, came to grief in the great concentration camp corruption scandal of 1942, which brought down the commandants of Dachau, Lublin-Majdanek, Gross-Rosen, and Flossenbürg as well. Anton Kaindl, a grimly efficient administrator, took charge thereafter, shaking up the camp headquarters staff upon his arrival in August 1942 and remaining firmly in power until the end.

Sachsenhausen’s earliest guards were members of the Death’s Head guard unit SS-Ostfriesland, who accompanied the first prisoners from Esterwegen. When Esterwegen closed in September 1936, the rest of that camp’s guards came to Sachsenhausen as well, followed by guards from SS-Brandenburg after the closure of Columbia-Haus in November. In September 1937, the existing SS-Death’s Head Units were consolidated, organized by camp, and renamed, with the one at Sachsenhausen becoming the SS-Totenkopfstandarte II “Brandenburg.” The autumn of 1939 saw a tremendous turnover in personnel, as SS reservists were called up to release active-duty guards for service in the nascent SS-Death’s Head Division. The guard unit was renamed the SS-Totenkopfsturmbann Sachsenhausen in about September 1940, then renamed again the SS-Totenkopfchwad-bataillon Sachsenhausen in January 1943.

Gustav Wegner commanded the guard force from December 1940 until April 1945. He rebuilt the unit from the ground up, paying special attention to the military and ideological training of new recruits. By November 1941, there were 9 companies of guards, numbering over 1,400 men. By December 1944, there were 13 companies, with nearly 2,700 guards, while the camp headquarters staff numbered another 277. As of January 1, 1945, the total number of SS guard personnel assigned to Sachsenhausen was 3,356, including 351 female guards at the subcamps for women prisoners.

The SS-Death’s Head guards at Sachsenhausen were little different from those at other concentration camps. The war quickly mingled the prewar cadres, who had specifically volunteered for service as camp guards, with Waffen-SS personnel of every kind. Hundreds of ethnic Germans from Eastern Europe received their initial Waffen-SS training at Sachsenhausen in 1942 and 1943; others arrived already trained from different camps or from combat units. In November and December 1943, several hundred mostly Ukrainian guards came to Sachsenhausen from the Trawniki training camp near Lublin, Poland, after the WVHA took control of it and began to siphon off its personnel for use in the Reich. Sachsenhausen acted as the hub in a distribution system that fed these men to camps throughout the WVHA system. In 1944, large numbers of Wehrmacht soldiers were absorbed into the Waffen-SS and assigned to guard duty at Sachsenhausen, as at other camps. Finally, in early 1945, many middle-aged men from around Berlin were called up for guard service at Sachsenhausen.

Prisoners at Sachsenhausen were tormented and killed in many different ways. A gallows in the roll-call area was used for hangings. Shootings were more common and often took place in a special pit in the industrial yard. This shooting pit was next to the so-called Station Z, a killing facility built in 1942 to replace a wooden structure used during the shooting of Soviet POWs the previous year. Station Z held a gas chamber (built in 1943), the camp crematorium, and a room where prisoners who believed they were having their height measured were shot in the nape of the neck through a hole in the wall. Although Kaindl later testified that he ordered the gas chamber built because other killing methods were insufficient, it does not appear to have seen heavy use. Random killings, meanwhile, could take place virtually anywhere in the camp, and no prisoner was ever safe. Sachsenhausen also provided unwilling subjects for often fatal medical experiments.

Nazi concentration camps were noted for their sadistic punishments. In addition to standard techniques such as
whipping or close confinement, Sachsenhausen had specializations of its own, most notably the “Saxon salute” (Sachsengruss), in which prisoners had to squat over a bayonet for hours with their arms outstretched. Sachsenhausen also had a special punishment detail. Initially assigned to the Klinkerwerk, its luckless prisoners later tested artificial shoe leather on grueling forced marches around a special track, an ordeal few survived.

Disease, malnutrition, and exhaustion claimed the majority of lives lost at Sachsenhausen. As bad as conditions were, however, they did not become so dire as at many other camps until late in the war. Thus, the death rate for Sachsenhausen was 0.7 percent in August 1943, compared to 2.1 percent for the concentration camp system as a whole during that month. Sachsenhausen officially recorded 6,356 deaths from January 1, 1940, to June 30, 1942. Another 3,807 deaths were recorded during 1943. It was during the chaotic last months of the war, for which few statistics survive, that the death rate spiraled upward, while the final evacuation cost thousands of lives as well. When the Red Army arrived at the main camp on April 22, 1945, only about 3,000 incapacitated prisoners remained there. The rest were marching to the northwest, where those who survived were gradually liberated over the next two weeks.

It is impossible to determine the total number of dead for Sachsenhausen, but the figure of at least 100,000 reached by a Soviet Military Tribunal in 1947, and subsequently accepted by many, appears high. A more plausible estimate would be somewhere between 40,000 and 50,000.


A relatively large number of records from Sachsenhausen survived the war. Most were captured by the Red Army and are now held by the RGVA in fond 1367, a collection that has been selectively microfilmed by the USHMMA. A portion of the guards’ personnel records passed from Moscow to the East German security services and now reposes at the BA-DH. Records of the guard unit’s 7th Company fell into American hands. Some now reside at BA-BL, as collection “NS4 Sa,” and are also available from NARA, as microfilm collection T580, roll 321, Ordnr 88. The 7th Company’s personnel records, however, went to the BDC (now incorporated into the BA), where they were irretrievably broken up and cataloged by personal name. Some archival materials, mostly copies, are available at the Sachsenhausen Memorial in Oranienburg. Records from postwar Soviet trials of former Sachsenhausen personnel are held at the CAFSSRF, where they remain inaccessible to the general public, although copies of some materials are held by USHMMA. For information regarding West German trials, see C.F. Rüter and D.W. de Milde, comps., *Die westdeutschen Strafverfahren wegen nationalsozialistischer Tötungsverbrechen 1945–1997* (Amsterdam: APA—Holland University Press and K.G. Saur, 1998). The 573-page verdict in the case against Gustav Sorge and Wilhelm Schubert (Landgericht Bonn 8 Ks 1/58) provides detailed information about the camp. Survivor accounts include: Arnold Weiss-Rüthel, *Nacht und Nebel: Ein Sachsenhausenbuch* (Berlin: VVN-Verlag, 1949); Harry Naujoks, *Mein Leben im KZ Sachsenhausen 1936–1942: Erinnerungen des ehemaligen Lagerältesten* (Cologne: Röderberg, 1987); Albert Christel, *Apokalypse unserer Tage: Erinnerungen an das KZ Sachsenhausen* (Frankfurt am Main: Materials, 1987); Jan Religa, *Wipomnienia o Sachsenhausen* (Warsaw: Spółdzielcze, 1990). The Sachsenhausen Memorial has published a CD-ROM featuring six hours of interviews with 20 survivors under the title *Geeng das Vergessen: Häftlingsalltag im KZ Sachsenhausen 1936–1945*, 2nd rev. ed. (Munich: United Soft Media, 2004).

**NOTES**

1. RGVA, fond 1367, opis’ 1, delo 17, fol. 362.
2. Ibid., delo 19, fol. 2.
3. Ibid., delo 20, fols. 279–398.
4. Ibid., fols. 134, 137. Records for the key period of November 11 to 20, 1938, are missing, making it impossible to determine either the full number of newly arrived Jews or the peak total the camp attained during that period.
5. Ibid., fol. 1.
6. Ibid., delo 4, fol. 6.
7. Ibid., delo 227, fol. 2.
8. AG-S, R 214/M58, prisoner strength figures for 1943, n.d.
9. Ibid., prisoner strength figures for 1943, by category, n.d.
10. NARA, T-580, roll 68, Ordnr 329, list of camps with numbers of guards and prisoners as of January 1 and 15, 1945, n.d. These figures are unlikely to include the newly acquired SS-Baubrigaden, which were slow to report to their new command.
11. RGVA, fond 1367, opis’ 1, delo 17, fol. 362.
12. Ibid., delo 20, fols. 279–398.
13. Ibid., fols. 1–137. See note 4.
14. Ibid., delo 4, fol. 6; delo 227, fol. 2.
15. AG-S, R 214/M58, prisoner strength figures for 1943, by category, n.d.
16. RGVA, fond 1367, opis’ 1, delo 19, fol. 2.
18. Ibid., delo 60, fol. 8.
20. NARA, RG 238, Nuremberg Document 1469-PS.

21. Cited in the judgment against Gustav Sorge and Wilhelm Schubert (LG Bonn 8 Ks 1/58), p. 84. This figure excludes the unregistered slaughter of some 12,000 to 18,000 Soviet POWs in 1941.
22. AG-S, R 214/M58, prisoner strength figures for 1943, n.d.