



Stutthof, Nazi German concentration camp. Photo: AIPN

ARTYKUŁ

German camps on Polish lands between 1939-1945

HISTORICAL ERA

(1939-1945) II wojna światowa

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The article below is an introduction to the functioning of German camps between 1939-1945 at the Polish territories in their current borders.

During the German occupation, Polish citizens were subjected to the extermination policy of the Third Reich which goal was to biologically annihilate the entire nation and completely eradicate its culture. The criminal

operations on Polish citizens began in September 1939, conducted by the troops of Wehrmacht, SS, *Einsatzgruppen*, Gestapo and *Volksdeutscher Selbstschutz*. Since that time, until almost the very end of the war in 1945, mass murders were committed in German concentration and death camps as well as in other places of forced detention like penitentiaries; jails; labour, POW, intern and forced relocation camps; and also ghettos created for the Jewish population. All these places built in occupied Poland - camps, temporary camps, ghettos and labour facilities of various kinds were meant for physical eradication of prisoners for economical purposes of the Third Reich. Polish citizens were also held in various camps in the Third Reich and in other occupied European countries.

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The model of a concentration camp prepared in the Third Reich between 1933-1937 with precisely determined internal organisation structure of the SS crews, rules of treatment and punishment of prisoners was systematically introduced at the territory of occupied Poland in camps established there.

Stutthof

Stutthof went down in history as the Nazi German concentration camp, founded from the initiative of Gauleiter Albert Forster. The first transport of around 135-150 Polish citizens of the Free City of Gdańsk, arrested on September 1st 1939, was taken to the Stutthof 2 camp on September 2nd. At first, the camp was called by the Germans a temporary camp for civilian prisoners Stutthof (*Zivilgefangenenlager Stutthof*). More camps of that type were established at the occupied Polish lands since September 1939, but only some of them were expanded and survived until the end of the German occupation. Despite the fact, that from the very beginning the Stutthof camp met the Nazi requirements to be a fully-fledged concentration camp, it officially became one only after Heinrich Himmler visited it on November 23rd 1941 and gave it its official status on January 7th 1942. The evacuation of the KL Stutthof camp was planned for January 25th 1945. It is estimated that around 65 thousand prisoners died in the camp as a result of German actions both in the main camp and its subcamps and labour commandos as well as at all evacuation land and sea routes in 1945.



Loading of prisoners from the Tarnów jail to passenger cars at the Tarnów railway station (one of the first transports to depart to KL Auschwitz), 1940 Photo: AIPN

KL Auschwitz

The first concentration camp created at the territory of German occupied Poland was established in May 1940 at the suburbs of Oświęcim. The direct reason behind the creation of KL Auschwitz was the constantly growing number of arrested Poles and overcrowded jails. The first transport of Poles suspected mainly of being part of the underground resistance reached KL Auschwitz on June 14th 1940 from the jail in Tarnów. Since 1942, the camp was one of the main facilities of "*Endlösung der Judenfrage*" ("*the final solution to the Jewish question*"), where Jews brought in from all over Europe were murdered with the Cyclone B gas. In 1944, when the camp's criminal activities were at its peak, the camp consisted of three parts: Auschwitz I created in 1940; **Auschwitz II-Birkenau and Auschwitz III created in 1941. Between 1942-1944, the KL Auschwitz had over 40 subcamps where the prisoners were forced to work for the German factories and farms.** The Auschwitz camp became the symbol of terror, genocide and Shoah for the entire world. It is estimated that more than 1.1 million people lost their lives there and among them: 1 million Jews; between 70 and 75 thousand Poles; 21 thousand Romanians and Sinties; 15 thousand Soviet POWs and between 10 and 15 thousand prisoners of other nationalities.



**Women and children upon
arriving to a ramp in Brzezinka,
May 1944 Photo: AIPN**

KL Lublin-Majdanek

In July 1941, on the order of Heinrich Himmler another concentration camp was created – KL Lublin, often called Majdanek for being situated near that district. Majdanek functioned since October 1941 until July 1944. The camp was intended for 25-30 thousand prisoners who were to become a free working force for the realisation of the plans of the expansion of the Third Reich. Constructed since the autumn of 1941, the camp was at first called *Kriegsgefangenenlager der Waffen SS Lublin* (POW camp) and was renamed in February 1943 as *Konzentrationslager Lublin* (concentration camp). This camp was also an essential part of the “final solution to the Jewish question”. Majdanek had several subcamps: at the former Plage & Laśkiewicz airplane factories and airport as well as at the Lipowa Street and also in Budzyń, Radom, Bliżyn and Warsaw. Prisoners were from almost 30 countries. Polish citizens were in the majority, then the Soviets and Czechoslovakians. Among the estimated 150 thousand prisoners who were kept in Majdanek, according to the latest research, more than 80 thousand people perished. Among those, Jews were killed the most (around 60 thousand people), then Poles, Belarussians, Ukrainians and Russians. The tragic story of the Lublin concentration camp ended on July 22nd 1944, when it was eradicated.



**Major German concentration and
death camps within the so-called
Greater Germany in 1941-1944**

Gross-Rosen

The Gross-Rosen camp was created in August 1940 as a facility of the KL Sachsenhausen. Its prisoners were forced to work at a local granite quarry. The first transport arrived there on August 2nd 1940. On May 1st 1941, the *Arbeitslager Gross-Rosen* gained the status of a separate concentration camp. Due to its working conditions it is considered one of the harshest concentration camps. The biggest expansion of the camp came

in the year 1944. Around 100 additional facilities were established mainly in the region of Lower Silesia, Sudety mountains and Lubuska Land. It is estimated that nearly 125 thousand prisoners came through the camp and its subcamps. The majority of the prisoners were Jews from different European countries, Poles and citizens of the USSR. According to the latest findings, around 40 thousand people lost their lives in KL Gross-Rosen.



The pile of prisoners' shoes next to a barrack after the liberation of the Gross-Rosen camp Photo: AIPN

Death camp in Treblinka

In the first half of 1942, the Germans built the death camp in Treblinka (*SS-Sonderkommando Treblinka*) near the already existing labour camp Treblinka I. The camp was created as part of the "Operation Reinhard" which goal was to exterminate the Jewish population. The first transport arrived at the camp on July 23rd 1942 and consisted mainly of Jews deported from the Warsaw ghetto. The following transports consisted of the Jewish population from the occupied territories of Poland and also Czechoslovakia, Greece, Yugoslavia, France and USSR. The prisoners were killed with exhaust gases in a gas chamber built in the camp. More than 800 thousand people were murdered in the camp and their bodies were burned on specially constructed grates to hide the gruesome crime. After the prisoners organised a mutiny on August 2nd 1943, the camp was systematically eradicated until November 1943 when all of the camp's infrastructure was tore down and the campsite ploughed.



Exhumations at the Treblinka

campsite. Scattered bones.

November 7th 1945 Photo: AIPN

In the territories of occupied Poland, a few million people lost their lives due to direct or indirect extermination from the German hands in concentration and labour camps. Prisoners were subjected to various forms of direct extermination: gas chambers, firing squads and other forms of murder, executions on the orders of drumhead court-martials (*Polizeistandgericht*), beating, mauling by guard dogs and other types of harassment.

In the summer of 1943, on the order of Heinrich Himmler, the *Konzentrationslager Warschau* (KL Warschau) was established on the ruins of the demolished Warsaw ghetto. The camp functioned as a facility of the KL Majdanek until August 5th 1944 when it was liberated by the soldiers of the Home Army Battalion "Zośka". According to various estimations, more than 7 thousand people were held there, mainly Jews from different parts of Europe e.g. Poland, Greece and Hungary. Only around 300 prisoners lived to see the liberation.

The Nazi German labour and concentration camp Plaszow was one of the three concentration camps created by the Third Reich at the territory of General Governance. It was built by the Germans in October 1942 in Cracow, at the two, no longer existent today, Jewish cemeteries at the Wola Duchacka district. At first, it functioned as a labour camp (*Zwangsarbeitslager*) for several thousand Jewish prisoners moved from the Cracow ghetto eradicated in March of 1943. In January 1944, the Płaszów labour camp was transformed into a concentration camp (*Konzentrationslager Plaszow bei Krakau - KL Plaszow*) where mainly Jews were held. Based on scientific historical research, it is estimated that throughout the entire time of the functioning of the camp 30 thousand people were kept there and 5 thousand were murdered. In August 1944, the eradication of the KL Plaszow camp began, and on January 14th 1945 began the "march of death" of the last group of nearly

600 prisoners.



A group of small, Jewish children walking in pairs at one of Łódź's streets during a deportation to a death camp in Chełmno by the Ner river in the summer of 1942

Photo: AIPN

In the territories of occupied Poland, a few million people lost their lives due to direct or indirect extermination from the German hands in concentration and labour camps. Prisoners were subjected to various forms of direct extermination: gas chambers, firing squads and other forms of murder, executions on the orders of drumhead court-martials (*Polizeistandgericht*), beating, mauling by guard dogs and other types of harassment. The indirect forms of extermination, due to which prisoners died inside the camps, were: bad living and sanitary conditions, hard slavery work, inappropriate clothing and feeding, illnesses and epidemics, pseudo-medical experiments and work accidents. The exterminating actions aimed at realising the genocide program of Polish citizens in Nazi German concentration camps were recognised as crimes against world peace, war crimes and crimes against humanity by the International Military Tribunal in Nuremberg in 1946.

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