THE CAMP SYSTEM:
A Primary Source Supplement Based on Documents from the International Tracing Service
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Thanks are due to the International Tracing Service, Bad Arolsen, for providing high-resolution scans of the original documents for publication.

The editorial team is also grateful for the support and expertise of Dr. Krista Hegburg and Dr. Jake Newsome.

Cover photo: Double row of electrified barbed wire fences at Auschwitz. An electrified barbed wire perimeter was a common feature in many Nazi camps. At Auschwitz, such fences were also used to segregate inmate populations and to separate the camp complex's numerous subdivisions, which included three large main camps and more than 40 smaller subcamps. Like many sites throughout the Nazi camp network, Auschwitz was simultaneously a detention center and a forced labor camp; it also operated as a killing center. First established at pre-existing Polish army barracks in spring 1940, the Stammlager (main camp, or Auschwitz I) was continuously expanded by the exploitation of inmates' forced labor. Approximately 1.3 million people of all ethnicities, nationalities, and religions were deported to Auschwitz from across Nazi-occupied Europe, and nearly 1 million Jews were killed there. Able-bodied inmates were selected from arriving transports by SS doctors, while those deemed incapable of performing hard labor were sent directly to the gas chambers. Like most other camps throughout Nazi-occupied Europe, civilian companies like I.G. Farben were heavily involved in the operation of the industrial labor camps at Auschwitz, such as the synthetic rubber factory at Auschwitz-Monowitz (Auschwitz III). Over a million people were murdered at Auschwitz in the few years of its operation. The camp complex was liberated on January 27, 1945 by Soviet forces driving westward into Germany.

Photo credit: Wiener Library.
AERIAL PHOTOGRAPH OF THE AUSCHWITZ CAMP COMPLEX TAKEN IN SPRING OR SUMMER 1944. This image of just a portion of the facilities of Auschwitz-Monowitz, one of the three main camps in the Auschwitz network, reveals the extensiveness of the larger camp complex. Allied reconnaissance aircraft under the command of the United States Army Air Force (USAAF) flew several missions over Auschwitz between April 1944 and January 1945 in order to plan bombing raids and assess their effectiveness. Decades after the war, these photographs ignited a controversial debate concerning whether or not the Allies could and should have attempted to destroy or impede the machinery of mass destruction by aerial bombardment of the killing centers or of the railway lines used to transport people to them. As hundreds of thousands of Hungarian Jews were deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau in the summer and fall of 1944, Jewish organizations and the War Refugee Board forwarded to the United States War Department several requests to bomb Auschwitz, which had come into the bombing range of USAAF in July. Although bombing raids on the industrial facilities of Auschwitz-Monowitz (above) were conducted, USAAF made no attempt to obstruct the industrialized mass murder taking place in the camp network. The War Department cited several reasons for this decision, including the alleged diversion of necessary forces and the inherent danger to the inmate population.

Photo credit: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration.
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WHAT IS THE INTERNATIONAL TRACING SERVICE (ITS)?

The Allied powers established the International Tracing Service (ITS) after World War II to help reunite families separated during the war and to trace missing family members. Millions of pages of captured documentation have been repurposed for tracing, and the ITS has continued to grow as new records, both originals and copies, have been deposited there. For decades, the ITS strove not only to clarify the fates of victims of the Nazis but also to provide survivors and victims’ families with the documentation necessary for indemnification claims. In November 2007, the archive was made accessible to scholars and other researchers, and both tracing and scholarly research continues today onsite at the ITS in Bad Arolsen, Germany, as well as at digital copyholders around the world. The ITS Digital Archive is currently available in Bad Arolsen, Brussels, Jerusalem, London, Luxembourg, Paris, Warsaw, and Washington, DC.

USING THE ITS ARCHIVE TO RESEARCH THE CAMP SYSTEM

Much of the ITS holdings relating to the concentration camp system comprise materials collected by the Allied liberating forces as they came across the administrative files of Nazi camps and other offices at the end of World War II. This section of the archive is in certain ways quite comprehensive for concentration camps in Germany and Austria in particular, but it is by no means complete. The ITS archive does not hold all documentation for any particular camp and certainly does not hold records from every camp. Items it does contain include: lists that illuminate labor assignments and production statistics; lists of camp populations and their changes due to arrivals, transfers to other camps, deaths, and other factors; camp prisoner registration records; camp infirmary records; and unclaimed prisoner effects. The ITS indexed such items relating to individuals for tracing purposes, rendering them digitally searchable by name and birthdate only.

The Allies also found and collected camp correspondence and reports, which until recently were organized simply as Sachdokumente (miscellaneous historical documents) in the ITS collections. The ITS placed millions of these pages in folders specific to the relevant camps but with no further indexing or arrangement. For decades, the Sachdokumente remained unavailable to researchers for any kind of systematic work, but digitization has opened new potential for research beyond the collections’ original intended tracing function. A keyword search now reads scans of the documents’ digitized text, associated archival descriptions, and metadata to facilitate the perusal within these “miscellaneous” folders.

The Camp System demonstrates how the ITS Digital Archive acts with the characteristics of both a digital and a typical historical archive simultaneously. Different approaches ranging from modern electronic searches to a traditional file-by-file, page-by-page examination can benefit research on a specific topic or location. Utilizing a keyword search to locate an archival subsection relating to a camp can help to identify files and documents that are then best approached by surveying the results as one would in a paper archive.

Identifying relevant prisoner registration cards (such as those included as Document 3 in this supplement) requires a more traditional archival approach of sifting through material that was arranged with the purpose of tracing in mind. To find specific kinds of prisoners (other than those imprisoned for reasons of religion, which is often indexed), one must manually search each file to locate the desired records. Correspondence and reports related to a specific concentration camp, such as Document 1, can be found among the “miscellaneous historical documents” with a combination of a digital keyword search (in this example, “regulations”) followed by an examination of each identified match. In this case, this combined approach yielded the discovery of a complete set of regulations for the Buchenwald Schreibstube (camp registration office) written in 1941. A simple digital keyword search for the term Selbstmord (suicide), a commonly listed cause of death in concentration camps (accurate or not) would produce Document 6 among a list of matches. These examples pertain to the identification of records highlighted within this supplement, but other search techniques exist to find other subject-specific documents related to topics other than the camp system.

With the regular and rapid advance of technology, accessibility of the materials held within the ITS Digital Archive also improves. This will continue, but the nature of the collection is such that approaching it as one might in both a digital and traditional archive will be helpful. Keeping an open mind and using creative methods — rather than relying on digital methods alone — always benefits research conducted in the ITS archive.
Shortly after coming to power in 1933, the Nazis began to set up a series of concentration camps across Germany. These were mostly local sites that the SA (Sturmabteilung), SS (Schutzstaffel), and police established on an ad-hoc basis, where they detained and abused real and imagined enemies of the regime. By the end of the year there were over one hundred such camps.

The founding of those early camps marked the beginning of what became 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 nearly 1,000 camps, including some of the most notorious, such as Auschwitz, Majdanek, Bergen-Belsen, Buchenwald, and Dachau. In addition, over the course of their twelve years in power, the Nazis would establish a bewildering array of other sites. These included the killing centers Chelmno, Treblinka, Sobibór, and Bełżec. Before them came nearly one hundred “euthanasia” centers, where the Germans gassed people with disabilities and congenital diseases, as well as some concentration camp prisoners. Prisoner-of-war (POW) camps proliferated after 1939, and POWs were put to work in every conceivable capacity. More than 30,000 camps for foreign forced laborers existed, in addition to 2,400 special forced labor camps for Jews. The German army also ran so-called field bordellos, in which women were forced into sexual slavery. Some concentration and forced labor camps had similar facilities. There were over one hundred hospital wards for foreign women who had become pregnant while serving as forced laborers: their babies were either aborted or, if born there, were usually killed after birth. There were camps for Poles whom the Germans wanted to move off their land; camps for children who acted out in school; ghettos to hold Jews; disciplinary camps for German soldiers; police detention and transit camps; “Germanization” camps for kidnapped Polish children; ordinary prisons...the list goes on and on. Not only the SS, but also the armed forces, private industry, and many governmental and quasi-governmental agencies ran their own camp systems. Germany’s allies, satellites, and collaborationist states, from France to Romania and Norway to Italy, added still more. In all, a conservative estimate of the number of camps, ghettos, and other such facilities, one that posits a minimum size and time in existence for each site and that does not count many “benign” sites, far exceeds 45,000 in total.\(^1\)

For a totalitarian regime, and particularly for the Nazis, the camp model offered an irresistible opportunity to dominate the population in the name of the governing ideology. With such places, various authorities could not only detain and punish criminals, but control, indoctrinate, and deter political enemies, physically eliminate people whom they considered racial or political threats, shape society, create an enormous pool of labor to support the German war economy, and proclaim their own bureaucratic importance and loyalty. Camps and other detention sites were central to Nazism.\(^2\)

Within this massive system, an individual prisoner’s fate depended upon overlapping factors. First was his or her individual circumstances: race,
nationality, age, skills, and the reason that was given/created for incarceration. The kind of camp, and even the particular camp, to which he or she had been assigned, and the work to be done there, also affected one’s experience and mortality. As conditions in the camps changed over time, the time that the prisoner arrived and was incarcerated in a particular place affected his or her fate.

The prisoners’ backgrounds mirrored the variety of the sites. They came from every country over which the Nazis and their allies held power, and 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 their primary target. The Nazis saw them as a special kind of “racial threat”, a parasitic people who had to be dealt with for the good of humanity; after a point in late 1941, this involved physical annihilation. The Germans and their allies concentrated many of the Jews in ghettos and in concentration and forced labor camps, and finally murdered them in a mass, industrialized process unparalleled in history. Roman and Sinti were also considered racially “undesirable” by the Nazis, who incarcerated them in camps and ghettos and ultimately targeted them for systematic mass murder. Homosexuals, people with disabilities, and those deemed “Asocial” were also incarcerated simply because of who they were, and many died. Others wound up in camps because of what they did, or were suspected of doing: this included common criminals, political opponents, resistance fighters, rule-breakers, and enemy soldiers. Millions more entered the system simply because the Germans needed them to work, or because they lived on land that the “master race” wanted for itself. All that the many kinds of prisoners actually had in common was that they were held against their will, to their detriment, and for the benefit of the perpetrators.

The Nazi concepts of race were a key component in shaping a prisoner’s experience. Nazism posited a racial hierarchy, with the Germans (so-called Aryans) at the top. According to the social Darwinist thinking at the core of Nazism, the races were engaged in a life-or-death struggle, and the better races could only guarantee their survival at the expense of the others. Anything that a supposedly superior race did to an inferior one in an effort to survive was justified. Those considered to be so-called Aryans fared best in the camps, as did those closest to “Aryan” in the Nazis’ worldview, such as ordinary German criminals, American or British POWs, or French or Dutch laborers. The worst off, besides Jews, were those of Slavic descent (Slavs) and other so-called Untermenschen (sub-humans). Nationality could help or hinder. Poles and Russians were both regarded as Slavs, for example, but the Germans considered Russians a more dangerous influence because they hailed from the Communist USSR. Nearly 60 percent of Soviet prisoners of war died in German hands, from a combination of outright murder, starvation, exhaustion, exposure and disease, whereas non-Jewish Poles fared much better: between two and four percent of them died.¹

³ Note that the Germans murdered about 2.65 million Jews in the gas chambers, out of the overall total of roughly 6 million killed. Others died from shooting, starvation, disease, and abuse.

⁴ Rüdiger Overmans provides information on the fates of prisoners of war from the various countries that fought against Germany in "German Policy on Prisoners of War, 1939 to 1945," in Germany and the Second World War, vol. IX/2 (Oxford University Press, 2014).
A prisoner's individual circumstances determined, to a large extent, the camp or camps (most went to more than one) to which he or she was sent. The nature of a particular camp, in turn, could mean a better existence, a worse one — or none at all. The range of possible experiences was remarkably wide, and differences existed not only between types of camp but often between camps of the same type. Being sent to the worst of the POW camps, for example, could be a far harsher fate than being sent to some of the concentration camps.

In most camps, the prisoners' lives centered on work, which was a central element in the Nazis' camp regimen. For those few prisoners the regime sought to rehabilitate, work was the stated means to that end, especially early on — although in reality, many prisoners had to perform work intended only to humiliate, debase, or even kill. Millions of others 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, as well as ordinary businesses, farms, and government institutions, depended upon forced or prisoner labor.\(^5\) By late 1944, one could hardly turn a corner in Germany without running into someone the Nazis were holding against her or his will.

Working conditions varied with the workplaces. If a prisoner had a particular skill — as did chemists, electricians, machinists, typists, or those with needed language skills — or was lucky enough to have been trained in simple assembly work, he or she might get an assignment that avoided the worst hazards, even as a concentration camp prisoner. Other prisoners were put to work on farms or in small businesses, where life could be bearable. But many others (especially those in concentration or penal camps) often had to do heavy manual labor or other dangerous work that could lead to death in short order, either through accident or incapacity; the Germans often killed concentration camp prisoners who became too weak to work.

Likewise, other aspects of prisoners’ lives varied from camp to camp. Many camps imposed a militaristic system in the most petty and cruel sense, which included roll calls, uniforms of one kind or another, and a strict hierarchy within both the guard and prisoner populations. Discipline was usually harsh, often arbitrary, and sometimes fatal. Especially late in the war, food was often 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.

The universe of camps, ghettos, and other sites of detention, persecution, forced labor, and murder touched every corner of society in Germany, in states aligned with Germany, and in the occupied territories. Knowing about that universe tells us a great deal about the Nazi system and its victims.

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\(^5\) *Hitler’s Foreign Workers: Enforced Foreign Labor in Germany Under the Third Reich*, by Ulrich Herbert (translated by William Templer; Cambridge University Press, 1997, based upon a 1985 original) provides a good, if somewhat dated, overview. More recent work, such as that by Mark Spoerer, is only available in German.
LIST OF SYMBOLS USED TO IDENTIFY INMATES

This reference sheet was originally created for the use of the Schreibstube (registration office) at Buchenwald in 1941. Revealing the hierarchical categorizations of Nazi racial thinking as well as the euphemisms commonly given to justify the persecution of different groups, this list provided camp authorities with many possible ways to classify and label inmates. Such markings, usually consisting of inverted triangles colored to identify the reasons given for an individual’s incarceration, were used on camp documents and sewn onto prisoners’ camp uniforms. Categorizations were often merged by combining symbols. For example, a Jew arrested for political reasons might be made to wear a red triangle superimposed on a yellow one. For non-German nationals, a letter denoting their country of origin was placed within the triangle, such as a “P” for Polish prisoners. The classifications inmates received could greatly affect their chances of survival. Hierarchical symbols of categorization such as these were imposed on camp inmates throughout Nazi-occupied Europe.
LIST OF SYMBOLS USED TO IDENTIFY INMATES

TRANSLATION

Prisoner Markings

- Political Prisoner
- Pole
- Political
- Career Criminal
- Pole
- Career Criminal
- Emigrant
- Czech
- Political
- Homosexual
- "K"-Prisoner ("K" stood for Krieg (war) profiteering; usually black-market or hoarding activities)
- Jehovah’s Witness
- Dutchman
- Work-shy
- Unfit for military service Action 1.9.1939
- Unfit for military service Action 1.9.1939
- Political recidivist
- Basic Race defiler (non-Jewish German)
LIST OF SYMBOLS USED TO IDENTIFY INMATES

SUGGESTED APPROACHES TO THIS DOCUMENT

QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION:

• Consider some of the ways Nazi authorities classified, divided, and segregated camp inmates. Are any of the specified inmate groups surprising? Do any conflict with your understanding of Nazi ideology?

• Why do you think that one third of this list of symbols was used to designate different Jewish inmates? Why might Jews have been subject to more exacting differentiation than other prisoners?

• What reasons did Nazi law provide for incarcerating individuals who received these specific prisoner designations? Why might these classifications have been separated from other categories, and what could this reveal about Nazi ideology?

• Roma and Sinti prisoners, commonly referred to disparagingly as “Zigeuner” (“Gypsies”), are not identified by a specific symbol on this list. What might this suggest about this particular category of prisoner? What might it suggest about Nazi policies regarding Roma and Sinti when this list of possible prisoner identification symbols was created?

• What effects might classification as a member of a certain group have on an individual’s experience as a camp inmate? How might a particular classification affect a person’s chances of survival?

FURTHER RESEARCH TOPICS RELATED TO THIS DOCUMENT:

• Nazi social and racial ideologies

• The Buchenwald camp system

• Experiences of inmates within the Nazi camp system

• The methods of division and segregation used to splinter and divide inmate populations

• The longer history of using badges to identify Jews
IDENTIFICATION BADGES WORN BY CAMP INMATES AND FORCED LABORERS.

The different symbols used by Nazi authorities to identify camp inmates and forced laborers as members of specific groups were stamped onto identification cards and made into badges sewn prominently onto inmates' clothing. Visible signs of classification within the camp hierarchy divided inmates from one another and made their “crimes” easily recognizable by Nazi personnel. Triangles of varying colors often signified such classifications, and two badges could be combined if a prisoner met more than one qualification for incarceration. For example, a simple purple triangle indicated a person had been imprisoned simply for being a Jehovah’s Witness, while camp authorities identified Polish inmates arrested for political reasons with a red triangle assigned to political prisoners marked specially with a “P” that denoted the individual’s Polish nationality. Foreign forced laborers euphemistically called Ostarbeiter (literally, “eastern workers”) wore rectangular badges with the abbreviation “OST.” Ostarbeiter were often recruited under coercive conditions from the occupied territories of the Soviet Union and transported into the Reich for forced labor, and these badges made them instantly recognizable to the German civilian population among whom they worked.

Image credits (clockwise from left): Purple triangle prisoner badges worn by Jehovah’s Witnesses Albert Jahndorf (prisoner number 46436, imprisoned in Sachsenhausen) and Luise Jahndorf (prisoner number 189, imprisoned in Ravensbrück), United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Annemarie & Waltraud Kueessel; “OST” badge worn by Ostarbeiterin Anna Kopilex, 1.2.9.5/10821618/ITS Digital Archive; red triangle badge with “F” worn by Polish political prisoner Jadwiga Dzido in the Ravensbrück concentration camp, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Anna Hassa Jarosky and Peter Hassa.
The following letter by Josef Kreuzer is one of many similar such responses found in the ITS archive. Survivors who wrote to ITS in the years after the war to substantiate their persecution often received questionnaires asking for further information in order to establish documentation of their incarceration and to create a record of the Nazi camp system. As such, these constitute an early form of Holocaust survivor testimony and often reveal information about less-known sites of Nazi persecution. Kreuzer’s letter and the hand-drawn map he attached describe details of the Gross-Rosen subcamp of Friedland, where the Germans made inmates work for civilian armaments companies. Gross-Rosen became the center of a sprawling complex of nearly a hundred subcamps like Friedland. Kreuzer and approximately 300 other Polish Jews had been transferred from the Łódź ghetto to Auschwitz before being sent to open the subcamp at Friedland in September 1944. The camp was liberated in May 1945.

9) Das Lager wurde nicht arbeitet.
10) Das Lager wurde am 9 Mai um 11 Uhr Mittag von den Russen betreten.

11) Das Lager gehörte zu Konzentrationslager Gross-Rosen.

Sollten Sie noch Auskunft von mir benötigen, stehe ich immer gerne zur Verfügung.

Mit freundlichen Grüßen

[Signature]

Doro fl. Markt 98
Unf. Markt 99.

2. Herschelzon Ignatz Lagerälteste I

3. Goldner

4. Lurischlizki

5. Eder Leou

6. Rubiniower David

7. Gorn Berek

8. Goldein Josef

9. Gorn Abram

10. Melkowitzer Sine

11. Melkowitzer Abram

12. Elreziski Henryk

13. Inzuhomm Abram

14. Fajwell

15. Berezonowicz 8 Brüder

16. Libidzik Leaks

17. Libidzik Abram

18. Rubnovitz Tadenz

19. Raizelmann Paul
Postwar testimony, Friedland subcamp of Gross-Rosen, 1.1.0.7/87764660/ITS Digital Archive.
Dorfen Markt, April 10, [1950]

-To
International Tracing
Service
2 May 1950
Headquarters H.

Reference number: 42

Subject: Information about Camp Friedland

Of your 12 questions on April 4, I can share the following:

1) Camp Friedland is 15 kilometers from the city of Waldenburg, some 70 or 90 kilometers west of Breslau. Friedland is a small village with around 4 to 5 thousand residents. A map of camp Friedland is attached for your information.

2) The camp is secured by two electrified barbed wire fences and four watchtowers guarded by the SS, about 35 people.

3) The inmates worked partly for the company VDM (Vereinte Deutsche Metalwerke [sic; United German Metal Works]), partly at the Schubert Segewerke [sic; sawmills], and in tunnel construction. I personally worked at VDM, where we manufactured plane propellers.

4) I wore a camp uniform.

5) The total population of the camp was about 500 men.

6) I have attached the names of those I was imprisoned with who are still living and that I can remember.

7) There were no female prisoners to be found [in this camp].
8) When we were brought to the camp, there was no one there, it was September 9. We left the camp on May 9.
9) The camp was not evacuated.
10) The camp was liberated by the Russians on May 9 at 11:00 am.
11) The camp was attached to the Gross-Rosen concentration camp.
12) Our 300 men opened the camp, and then 150 men, Hungarians, Greeks, and Czechs were sent to us. Then another 50 Czech Jews were sent to us. In January 1945, 200 nearly half dead prisoners arrived in our camp. Almost all of the 200 died of exhaustion within a week. The above-mentioned were evacuated prisoners from other camps who had passed through Friedland.

If you should need further information, I am always available.

Sincerely,
Josef Kreuzer
Dorfen-Markt Obb.
Unt. Markt 99.

Friedland
Names of surviving inmates that I can remember from Camp Friedland.

Herschkorn Ignatz  Senior camp prisoner I
Goldner                “                    “ II
Lubochinski            Senior block prisoner
Lerer Leon             Barber
Rubinowicz Dawid
Stern Berek            Senior block prisoner
Goldstein Josef       Head cook
Stern Abram          Senior block prisoner
Jakubowicz Sina
Jakubowicz Abram
Dziganski Henryk
Grynbaum Abram
    “                    “ Fajwel
Hershkowicz 2 brothers
Libicki Mietek
Libicki Abram
Lubka Felek and brother
Rubinowicz Tadeusz
Rajchman Jakob
POSTWAR TESTIMONY ABOUT THE GROSS-ROSEN SUBCAMP AT FRIEDLAND
TRANSLATION pg. 4