

# Auschwitz: Genesis of Death Camps

After the start of [World War II](#), [Adolf Hitler](#) (1889-1945), the chancellor of Germany from 1933 to 1945, implemented a policy that came to be known as the “Final Solution.” Hitler was determined not just to isolate Jews in Germany and countries annexed by the Nazis, subjecting them to dehumanizing regulations and random acts of violence. Instead, he became convinced that his “Jewish problem” would be solved only with the elimination of every Jew in his domain, along with artists, educators, Romas, communists, homosexuals, the mentally and physically handicapped and others deemed unfit for survival in Nazi Germany.






# Auschwitz: The Largest of the Death Camps

Auschwitz, the largest and arguably the most notorious of all the Nazi death camps, opened in the spring of 1940. Its first commandant was Rudolf Höss (1900-47), who previously had helped run the Sachsenhausen concentration camp in Oranienburg, Germany. Auschwitz was located on a former military base outside Oswiecim, a town in southern Poland situated near Krakow, one of the country's largest cities. During the camp's construction, nearby factories were appropriated and all those living in the area were forcibly ejected from their homes, which were bulldozed by the Nazis.

Auschwitz originally was conceived as a concentration camp, to be used as a detention center for the many Polish citizens arrested after Germany annexed the country in 1939. These detainees

the country in 1939. These detainees included anti-Nazi activists, politicians, resistance members and luminaries from the cultural and scientific communities. Once Hitler's Final Solution became official Nazi policy, however, Auschwitz was deemed an ideal death camp locale. For one thing, it was situated near the center of all German-occupied countries on the European continent. For another, it was in close proximity to the string of rail lines used to transport detainees to the network of Nazi camps.

However, not all those arriving at Auschwitz were immediately exterminated. Those deemed fit to work were employed as slave labor in the production of munitions, synthetic rubber and other products considered essential to Germany's efforts in World War II.

# Life and Death in Auschwitz

By mid-1942, the majority of those being sent by the Nazis to Auschwitz were Jews. Upon arriving at the camp, detainees were examined by Nazi doctors. Those detainees considered unfit for work, including young children, the elderly, pregnant women and the infirm, were immediately ordered to take showers. However, the bathhouses to which they marched were disguised gas chambers. Once inside, the prisoners were exposed to Zyklon-B poison gas. Individuals marked as unfit for work were never officially registered as Auschwitz inmates. For this reason, it is impossible to calculate the number of lives lost in the camp.

For those prisoners who initially escaped the gas chambers, an undetermined number died from overwork, disease, insufficient nutrition or the daily struggle for survival in brutal living conditions. Arbitrary executions, torture and retribution happened daily in front of the other prisoners.

Some Auschwitz prisoners were subjected to inhumane medical experimentation. The chief perpetrator of this barbaric research was [Josef Mengele](#) (1911-79), a German physician who began working at Auschwitz in 1943. Mengele, who came to be known as the “Angel of Death,” performed a range of experiments on detainees. For example, in an effort to study eye color, he injected serum into the eyeballs of dozens of children, causing them excruciating pain. He also injected chloroform into the hearts of twins to determine if both siblings would die at the same time and in the same manner.

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