

Life for Incarcerated Women in Concentration Camps  
During the Holocaust

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SET SAIL: Holocaust in History and Memory

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Concentration camps were extrajudicial prison systems established by the Nazi party during World War II, they were active from 1933 to 1945 when the camps were finally liberated by Allied soldiers<sup>1</sup>. In the early years, concentration camps were detention camps meant to hold opponents of the Nazis (POWs, political prisoners, etc), though as early as 1934 there are records of forced prison labor<sup>2</sup>. By late 1939, many of the camps were forced labor camps where the prisoners would construct, maintain, and craft items (such as rubber, armaments, etc) to aid the deteriorating German war effort<sup>3</sup>. These camps dehumanized, exploited, tortured, and often killed their inmates with the sole purpose of continuing the annihilation of anyone who was not deemed a member of the Aryan race, or the “master race” as the Nazis would refer to it<sup>4</sup>. The Nazis incarcerated people based on their religious and political affiliation, disability, race, sexuality, and ethnicity, but they particularly targeted Jewish people<sup>5</sup>. The Nazi government utilized things like the Nuremberg laws to prosecute and alienate Jewish people and other groups<sup>6</sup>. By the end of WWII, there were 40,000 camps, ranging from the Soviet Union all the way to North Africa<sup>7</sup>. This paper will be focusing on the experiences of incarcerated women in concentration camps. These women faced sexual and physical violence, abortion, suicide, horrific medical experiments, humiliation, persecution, strenuous labor, death, and the loss of loved ones on a daily basis.

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<sup>1</sup> “Concentration Camps, 1933–1939,” Holocaust Encyclopedia, n.d., <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/concentration-camps-1933-39?parent=en/6650>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Mędykowski, Witold Wojciech. “Forced Labor in the Labor Camps.” In *Macht Arbeit Frei?: German Economic Policy and Forced Labor of Jews in the General Government, 1939-1943*, 134–80. Academic Studies Press, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv75d8v5.8>.

<sup>4</sup> “Third Reich | Facts & History,” Encyclopedia Britannica, July 20, 1998, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Third-Reich/The-totalitarian-police-state>.

<sup>5</sup> “Concentration Camps, 1933–1939.”

<sup>6</sup> “The Nuremberg Race Laws,” Holocaust Encyclopedia, n.d., <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/the-nuremberg-race-laws>.

<sup>7</sup> “Daily Life in the Concentration Camps — United States Holocaust Memorial Museum,” n.d., <https://www.ushmm.org/collections/bibliography/daily-life-in-the-concentration-camps>.

While conditions in the ghettos (sectors of cities where Jewish people were forced to live, the conditions were notoriously brutal and disgusting<sup>8</sup>. The Nazis deported many Jewish people from the ghettos to concentration camps<sup>9</sup>) and camps were horrendous for both men and women, women had a unique experience because of their gender<sup>10</sup>. Pregnant women and mothers of infants and toddlers were often labeled by the SS (short for “Schutzstaffel”, originally they were Adolf Hitler’s bodyguards—they became a militant quasi-police force for the Nazi party led by the infamous Heinrich Himmler from 1929-1945.<sup>11</sup>) as “incapable of work.”<sup>12</sup>. They were among the first groups to be sent to the gas chambers upon arrival at the camps<sup>13</sup>. Some women attempted to conceal their pregnancies, but this was tricky for many reasons. If they were found to be pregnant by camp officials they were more often than not sent to be experimented on by camp “doctors”, forced to abort the pregnancy, or killed immediately<sup>14 15</sup>. The incarcerated women who did survive their initial entrance into the camps were forced into manual labor, just like the men. Many prisoners worked in factories in and around the camps, or in the camps themselves, crafting armaments, building airplanes, constructing barracks, and any number of other duties ordered by camp officials all to aid the Nazi war effort<sup>16 17</sup>. Most were given work based on skills coming into the camps, like if they spoke another language or knew a useful

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<sup>8</sup> “Daily Life in the Ghettos – The Holocaust Explained: Designed for Schools,” n.d., <https://www.theholocaustexplained.org/the-camps/ghettos-an-overview/daily-life-in-the-ghettos/>.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> “Women during the Holocaust,” Holocaust Encyclopedia, n.d., <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/women-during-the-holocaust>.

<sup>11</sup> History.com Editors, “The SS,” HISTORY, October 21, 2021, <https://www.history.com/topics/world-war-ii/ss>.

<sup>12</sup> “Women during the Holocaust.”

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Geoffrey P. Megargee, ed., “RAVENSBRÜCK MAIN CAMP,” in The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos, 1933-1945, Volume I (Indiana University Press, 2009), 1187–91, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt16gz17.39>.

<sup>16</sup> “Women during the Holocaust.”

<sup>17</sup> “Concentration Camps, 1933–1939.”

skill<sup>18</sup>. There were no labor laws protecting laborers, and many died because of the grueling conditions and work, while also malnourished, cold, and sickly<sup>19</sup>. “The Final Solution”<sup>20</sup> sought to exterminate all Jewish people, the SS carried out this ideology and task (especially towards the end of WWII) by killing as many Jewish people as they could. They kept the ones that were deemed able to work until they could work no longer. Women struggled not only with the conditions and work in concentration and labor camps, but them being female came with other dangers.

Daily life was not easy for a woman in the camps, apart from the labor they faced sexual violence by the SS and were forced to participate in experiments done by Nazi doctors<sup>21</sup>. Despite it being illegal for Germans to have relations with Jewish people<sup>22</sup>, sexual violence done onto women by SS was rampant in camps, though it had to be done with some discretion. “Sexual violence was common in the Nazi genocide, although all forms of it were considered grave crimes, both in civilian and military jurisdiction.”<sup>23</sup> Racial defilement was considered a huge offense in Nazi Germany because it was seen as preventing the continuation of the Aryan race, “race experts” would determine if a child who’s parent was a German man and mother a Jewish woman could be “Germanized”<sup>24</sup>. In most of the rape cases that resulted in pregnancies, the women were forced to get abortions, sent to nursing facilities with conditions so horrible it would guarantee the child’s death, or the women were sent away with no medical supplies or

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<sup>18</sup> Mędykowski, Witold Wojciech, “Forced Labor in the Labor Camps.”

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> “Third Reich | Facts & History.”

<sup>21</sup> “Women during the Holocaust.”

<sup>22</sup> “Third Reich | Facts & History.”

<sup>23</sup> Karpiński, Franziska, and Elysia Ruvinsky. “Sexual Violence in the Nazi Genocide: Gender, Law, and Ideology.” In *Genocide*, edited by Uğur Ümit Üngör, 149–74. 159. Amsterdam University Press, 2016. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1d8hb37.10>.

<sup>24</sup> “Women during the Holocaust.”

sustenance<sup>25</sup>. While sexual misconduct was prohibited between Jewish and non-Jewish peoples, many women in the camps felt it necessary to do in order to survive the threats of the guards. There were approximately 500 brothels for soldiers, ran by the German army, in which women were forced to work—some were in the camps<sup>26</sup>. “From the middle of 1941, the SS began establishing brothels in several of the men’s camps. The women prisoners who had to work there came mostly from Ravensbrück; they were either forced to work there or persuaded to “volunteer” by false promises of subsequent release.”<sup>27</sup>

While most camps were co-ed, some camps incarcerated only women. Located in northern Germany, Ravensbrück was the largest women-only concentration camp (apart from the women’s sector at Auschwitz II- Birkenau) during the Holocaust—it was established in 1939 and liberated in 1945 by the Soviet army<sup>28</sup>. The SS and prison guards were all women as well, it became a place to train female SS officers<sup>29</sup>. At another camp called Bergen-Belsen, camp officials established a women's camp in 1944<sup>30</sup>. The SS transferred thousands of Jewish female prisoners from Ravensbrück and Auschwitz to Bergen-Belsen during the last year of WWII<sup>31</sup>. In 1943, the surrounding subcamps of Ravensbrück condensed, making it the epicenter for transport, housing, and labor<sup>32</sup>. The conditions in Ravensbrück were horrible, this lead to widespread illness throughout the camp among the incarcerated women<sup>33</sup>. In the infirmary, Nazi physicians and medical researchers used the sick women as subjects for sterilization experiments

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Geoffrey P. Megargee, ed., “RAVENSBRÜCK MAIN CAMP.” 1189.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. 1188.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> “Women during the Holocaust.”

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Geoffrey P. Megargee, ed., “RAVENSBRÜCK MAIN CAMP.” 1189.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

and other kinds of depraved experimentation. Ravensbrück was not the only place where women were experimented on—in Auschwitz, Josef Mengele (“Angel of Death”) was infamous for his genetic experimentation on twins<sup>34</sup>. “With the increasing number of prisoners after 1943, the conditions in the women’s camp deteriorated... there were no blankets for the 3,000 women that occupied the tent, and only a thin layer of straw covered the floor, so the death rate was higher than average.”<sup>35</sup>. Supplies ran thin as more and more prisoners arrived at Ravensbrück. Eventually illness, cold temperatures, starvation, murder, and overall poor health took the lives of up to 26,000 incarcerated women—granting it the nickname “women’s hell”<sup>36</sup>.

All hope was not lost in the camps, despite the conditions and survival rate. To help each other survive, women started informal “mutual assistance” groups, they shared information, food, and clothes<sup>37</sup>. Other women could survive after SS camp authorities positioned them in clothing repair, cooking, laundry, house cleaning detachments, etc—very domestic gender-normative duties<sup>38</sup>. There were some cases of resistance within the camps, most notably in Auschwitz I, where five Jewish women working at the Vistula-Union-Metal Works detachment—Ala Gertner, Regina Safirsztajn (aka Safir), Ester Wajcblum, Roza Robota, and one unidentified woman (maybe Fejga Segal)—supplied gunpowder that members of the Jewish Sonderkommando (Special Detachment) at Auschwitz-Birkenau used to explode a gas chamber and kill some SS men during the uprising in late 1944<sup>39</sup>.

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<sup>34</sup> “Nazi Medical Experiments,” Holocaust Encyclopedia, n.d., <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/nazi-medical-experiments>.

<sup>35</sup> Geoffrey P. Megargee, ed., “RAVENSBRÜCK MAIN CAMP.” 1189.

<sup>36</sup> Geoffrey P. Megargee, ed., “RAVENSBRÜCK MAIN CAMP.” 1188.

<sup>37</sup> “Women during the Holocaust.”

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

What psychological framework was necessary for the Nazis to commit such atrocities to incarcerated women? Firstly, toxic masculinity that was widespread during wartime, along with feminizing women. “Sexual violence is a result of militarized, hetero-nationalist hegemonic masculinity and acts as an expression of supreme dominance.”<sup>40</sup> Women in the camps were seen as nothing but domestic creatures that German soldiers and SS officials could project their racial hatred onto through sexual violence and mental torment. Secondly, the power dynamic between the Nazis and incarcerated women led to a misuse of power and the overall victimization of women in the camps. Soldiers were more inclined to take advantage of their power due to the racial defilement laws and the lack of consequences that came with committing these gruesome acts, such as little to no prison time.<sup>41</sup> Systemic antisemitism as well as overall sexism and misogyny led to the mistreatment of women by the SS and German army. To add insult to injury, during the liberation of the camps in 1945, there were numerous accounts of Soviet soldiers sexually assaulting survivors<sup>42</sup>. The Soviet army was notorious for raping women at the end of the war, it is estimated that they raped 2 million women<sup>43</sup> and American troops supposedly raped within the thousands. Many of the women who were raped died from wounds or sexually transmitted infections/diseases, committed suicide, or were killed shortly after being assaulted<sup>44</sup>. Accounts of what happened in the camps and after the war are told by the few survivors brave enough to speak about their experiences<sup>45</sup>.

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<sup>40</sup> Karpiński, Franziska, and Elysia Ruvinsky, “Sexual Violence in the Nazi Genocide: Gender, Law, and Ideology.”

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Peter Preskar, “The Horrific Mass Rape of German Women at the End of World War II | Lessons from History,” Medium, January 6, 2022, <https://medium.com/lessons-from-history/rape-of-german-women-470918f997d3>.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> “Women during the Holocaust.”

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