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## How the Nazi Concentration Camps Worked

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[Two new histories show how the Nazi concentration camps worked.](#)

One night in the autumn of 1944, two Frenchwomen—Loulou Le Porz, a doctor, and Violette Lecoq, a nurse—watched as a truck drove in through the main gates of Ravensbrück, the Nazi concentration camp for women. “There was a lorry,” Le Porz recalled, “that suddenly arrives and it turns around and reverses towards us. And it lifts up and it tips out a whole pile of corpses.” These were the bodies of Ravensbrück inmates who had died doing slave labor in the many satellite camps, and they were now being returned for cremation. Talking, decades later, to the historian and journalist Sarah Helm, whose new book, “Ravensbrück: Life and Death in Hitler’s Concentration Camp for Women” (Doubleday), recounts the stories of dozens of the camp’s inmates, Le Porz says that her reaction was simple disbelief. The sight of a truck full of dead bodies was so outrageous, so out of scale with ordinary experience, that “if we recount that one day, we said to each other, nobody would believe us.” The only way to make the scene credible would be to record it: “If one day someone makes a film they must film this scene. This night. This moment.”

Le Porz’s remark was prophetic. The true extent of Nazi barbarity became known to the world in part through the documentary films made by Allied forces after the liberation of other German camps. There have been many atrocities committed before and since, yet to this day, thanks to those images, the Nazi concentration camp stands as the ultimate symbol of evil. The very names of the camps—Dachau, Bergen-Belsen, Buchenwald, Auschwitz—have the sound of a malevolent incantation. They have ceased to be ordinary place names—*Buchenwald*, after all, means simply “beech wood”—and become portals to a terrible other dimension.

To write the history of such an institution, as Nikolaus Wachsmann sets out to do in another new book, “KL: A History of the Nazi Concentration Camps” (Farrar, Straus & Giroux), might seem impossible, like writing the history of Hell. And, certainly, both his book and Helm’s are full of the kind of details that ordinarily appear only in Dantesque visions. Helm devotes a chapter to Ravensbrück’s *Kinderzimmer*, or “children’s room,” where inmates who came to the camp pregnant were forced to abandon their babies; the newborns were left to die of starvation or be eaten alive by rats. Wachsmann quotes a prisoner at Dachau who saw a transport of men afflicted by dysentery arrive at the camp: “We saw dozens . . . with excrement running out of their trousers. Their hands, too, were full of excrement and they screamed and rubbed their dirty hands across their faces.”

These sights, like the truck full of bodies, are not beyond belief—we know that they were true—but they are, in some sense, beyond imagination. It is very hard, maybe impossible, to imagine being one of those men, still less one of those infants. And such sights raise the question of why, exactly, we read about the camps. If it is merely to revel in the grotesque, then learning about this evil is itself a species of evil, a further exploitation of the dead. If it is to exercise sympathy

or pay a debt to memory, then it quickly becomes clear that the exercise is hopeless, the debt overwhelming: there is no way to feel as much, remember as much, imagine as much as the dead justly demand. What remains as a justification is the future: the determination never again to allow something like the Nazi camps to exist.

And for that purpose it is necessary not to think of the camps simply as a hellscape. Reading Wachsmann's deeply researched, groundbreaking history of the entire camp system makes clear that Dachau and Buchenwald were the products of institutional and ideological forces that we can understand, perhaps all too well. Indeed, it's possible to think of the camps as what happens when you cross three disciplinary institutions that all societies possess—the prison, the army, and the factory. Over the several phases of their existence, the Nazi camps took on the aspects of all of these, so that prisoners were treated simultaneously as inmates to be corrected, enemies to be combatted, and workers to be exploited. When these forms of dehumanization were combined, and amplified to the maximum by ideology and war, the result was the *Konzentrationslager*, or K.L.

Though we tend to think of Hitler's Germany as a highly regimented dictatorship, in practice Nazi rule was chaotic and improvisatory. Rival power bases in the Party and the German state competed to carry out what they believed to be Hitler's wishes. This system of "working towards the Fuhrer," as it was called by Hitler's biographer Ian Kershaw, was clearly in evidence when it came to the concentration camps. The K.L. system, during its twelve years of existence, included twenty-seven main camps and more than a thousand subcamps. At its peak, in early 1945, it housed more than seven hundred thousand inmates. In addition to being a major penal and economic institution, it was a central symbol of Hitler's rule. Yet Hitler plays almost no role in Wachsmann's book, and Wachsmann writes that Hitler was never seen to visit a camp. It was Heinrich Himmler, the head of the S.S., who was in charge of the camp system, and its growth was due in part to his ambition to make the S.S. the most powerful force in Germany.

Long before the Nazis took power, concentration camps had featured in their imagination. Wachsmann finds Hitler threatening to put Jews in camps as early as 1921. But there were no detailed plans for building such camps when Hitler was named Chancellor of Germany, in January, 1933. A few weeks later, on February 27th, he seized on the burning of the Reichstag—by Communists, he alleged—to launch a full-scale crackdown on his political opponents. The next day, he implemented a decree, "For the Protection of People and State," that authorized the government to place just about anyone in "protective custody," a euphemism for indefinite detention. (Euphemism, too, was to be a durable feature of the K.L. universe: the killing of prisoners was referred to as *Sonderbehandlung*, "special treatment.")

During the next two months, some fifty thousand people were arrested on this basis, in what turned into a "frenzy" of political purges and score-settling. In the legal murk of the early Nazi regime, it was unclear who had the power to make such arrests, and so it was claimed by everyone: national, state, and local officials, police and civilians, Party leaders. "Everybody is arresting everybody," a Nazi official complained in the summer of 1933. "Everybody threatens everybody with Dachau." As this suggests, it was already clear that the most notorious and frightening destination for political detainees was the concentration camp built by Himmler at Dachau, in Bavaria. The prisoners were originally housed in an old munitions factory, but soon

Himmler constructed a “model camp,” the architecture and organization of which provided the pattern for most of the later K.L. The camp was guarded not by police but by members of the S.S.—a Nazi Party entity rather than a state force.

These guards were the core of what became, a few years later, the much feared Death’s-Head S.S. The name, along with the skull-and-crossbones insignia, was meant to reinforce the idea that the men who bore it were not mere prison guards but front-line soldiers in the Nazi war against enemies of the people. Himmler declared, “No other service is more devastating and strenuous for the troops than just that of guarding villains and criminals.” The ideology of combat had been part of the DNA of Nazism from its origin, as a movement of First World War veterans, through the years of street battles against Communists, which established the Party’s reputation for violence. Now, in the years before actual war came, the K.L. was imagined as the site of virtual combat—against Communists, criminals, dissidents, homosexuals, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Jews, all forces working to undermine the German nation.

The metaphor of war encouraged the inhumanity of the S.S. officers, which they called toughness; licensed physical violence against prisoners; and accounted for the military discipline that made everyday life in the K.L. unbearable. Particularly hated was the roll call, or *Appell*, which forced inmates to wake before dawn and stand outside, in all weather, to be counted and recounted. The process could go on for hours, Wachsmann writes, during which the S.S. guards were constantly on the move, punishing “infractions such as poor posture and dirty shoes.”

The K.L. was defined from the beginning by its legal ambiguity. The camps were outside ordinary law, answerable not to judges and courts but to the S.S. and Himmler. At the same time, they were governed by an extensive set of regulations, which covered everything from their layout (including decorative flower beds) to the whipping of prisoners, which in theory had to be approved on a case-by-case basis by Himmler personally. Yet these regulations were often ignored by the camp S.S.—physical violence, for instance, was endemic, and the idea that a guard would have to ask permission before beating or even killing a prisoner was laughable. Strangely, however, it was possible, in the prewar years, at least, for a guard to be prosecuted for such a killing. In 1937, Paul Zeidler was among a group of guards who strangled a prisoner who had been a prominent churchman and judge; when the case attracted publicity, the S.S. allowed Zeidler to be charged and convicted. (He was sentenced to a year in jail.)

In “Ravensbrück,” Helm gives a further example of the erratic way the Nazis treated their own regulations, even late in the war. In 1943, Himmler agreed to allow the Red Cross to deliver food parcels to some prisoners in the camps. To send a parcel, however, the Red Cross had to mark it with the name, number, and camp location of the recipient; requests for these details were always refused, so that there was no way to get desperately needed supplies into the camps. Yet when Wanda Hjort, a young Norwegian woman living in Germany, got hold of some prisoners’ names and numbers—thanks to inmates who smuggled the information to her when she visited the camp at Sachsenhausen—she was able to pass them on to the Norwegian Red Cross, whose packages were duly delivered. This game of hide-and-seek with the rules, this combination of hyper-regimentation and anarchy, is what makes Kafka’s “The Trial” seem to foretell the Nazi regime.

Even the distinction between guard and prisoner could become blurred. From early on, the S.S. delegated much of the day-to-day control of camp life to chosen prisoners known as Kapos. This system spared the S.S. the need to interact too closely with prisoners, whom they regarded as bearers of filth and disease, and also helped to divide the inmate population against itself. Helm shows that, in Ravensbrück, where the term “Blockova” was used, rather than Kapo, power struggles took place among prisoner factions over who would occupy the Blockova position in each barrack. Political prisoners favored fellow-activists over criminals and “asocials”—a category that included the homeless, the mentally ill, and prostitutes—whom they regarded as practically subhuman. In some cases, Kapos became almost as privileged, as violent, and as hated as the S.S. officers. In Ravensbrück, the most feared Blockova was the Swiss ex-spy Carmen Mory, who was known as the Black Angel. She was in charge of the infirmary, where, Helm writes, she “would lash out at the sick with the whip or her fists.” After the war, she was one of the defendants tried for crimes at Ravensbrück, along with S.S. leaders and doctors. Mory was sentenced to death but managed to commit suicide first.

At the bottom of the K.L. hierarchy, even below the criminals, were the Jews. Today, the words “concentration camp” immediately summon up the idea of the Holocaust, the genocide of European Jews by the Nazis; and we tend to think of the camps as the primary sites of that genocide. In fact, as Wachsmann writes, as late as 1942 “Jews made up fewer than five thousand of the eighty thousand KL inmates.” There had been a temporary spike in the Jewish inmate population in November, 1938, after Kristallnacht, when the Nazis rounded up tens of thousands of Jewish men. But, for most of the camps’ first decade, Jewish prisoners had usually been sent there not for their religion, per se, but for specific offenses, such as political dissent or illicit sexual relations with an Aryan. Once there, however, they found themselves subject to special torments, ranging from running a gantlet of truncheons to heavy labor, like rock-breaking. As the chief enemies in the Nazi imagination, Jews were also the natural targets for spontaneous S.S. violence—blows, kicks, attacks by savage dogs.

The systematic extermination of Jews, however, took place largely outside the concentration camps. The death camps, in which more than one and a half million Jews were gassed—at Belzec, Sobibór, and Treblinka—were never officially part of the K.L. system. They had almost no inmates, since the Jews sent there seldom lived longer than a few hours. By contrast, Auschwitz, whose name has become practically a synonym for the Holocaust, was an official K.L., set up in June, 1940, to house Polish prisoners. The first people to be gassed there, in September, 1941, were invalids and Soviet prisoners of war. It became the central site for the deportation and murder of European Jews in 1943, after other camps closed. The vast majority of Jews brought to Auschwitz never experienced the camp as prisoners; more than eight hundred thousand of them were gassed upon arrival, in the vast extension of the original camp known as Birkenau. Only those picked as capable of slave labor lived long enough to see Auschwitz from the inside.

Many of the horrors associated with Auschwitz—gas chambers, medical experiments, working prisoners to death—had been pioneered in earlier concentration camps. In the late thirties, driven largely by Himmler’s ambition to make the S.S. an independent economic and military power within the state, the K.L. began a transformation from a site of punishment to a site of production. The two missions were connected: the “work-shy” and other unproductive elements

were seen as “useless mouths,” and forced labor was a way of making them contribute to the community. Oswald Pohl, the S.S. bureaucrat in charge of economic affairs, had gained control of the camps by 1938, and began a series of grandiose building projects. The most ambitious was the construction of a brick factory near Sachsenhausen, which was intended to produce a hundred and fifty million bricks a year, using cutting-edge equipment and camp labor.

The failure of the factory, as Wachsmann describes it, was indicative of the incompetence of the S.S. and the inconsistency of its vision for the camps. To turn prisoners into effective laborers would have required giving them adequate food and rest, not to mention training and equipment. It would have meant treating them like employees rather than like enemies. But the ideological momentum of the camps made this inconceivable. Labor was seen as a punishment and a weapon, which meant that it had to be extorted under the worst possible circumstances. Prisoners were made to build the factory in the depths of winter, with no coats or gloves, and no tools. “Inmates carried piles of sand in their uniforms,” Wachsmann writes, while others “moved large mounds of earth on rickety wooden stretchers or shifted sacks of cement on their shoulders.” Four hundred and twenty-nine prisoners died and countless more were injured, yet in the end not a single brick was produced.

This debacle did not discourage Himmler and Pohl. On the contrary, with the coming of war, in 1939, S.S. ambitions for the camps grew rapidly, along with their prisoner population. On the eve of the war, the entire K.L. system contained only about twenty-one thousand prisoners; three years later, the number had grown to a hundred and ten thousand, and by January, 1945, it was more than seven hundred thousand. New camps were built to accommodate the influx of prisoners from conquered countries and then the tens of thousands of Red Army soldiers taken prisoner in the first months after Operation Barbarossa, the German invasion of the U.S.S.R.

The enormous expansion of the camps resulted in an exponential increase in the misery of the prisoners. Food rations, always meagre, were cut to less than minimal: a bowl of rutabaga soup and some ersatz bread would have to sustain a prisoner doing heavy labor. The result was desperate black marketing and theft. Wachsmann writes, “In Sachsenhausen, a young French prisoner was battered to death in 1941 by an SS block leader for taking two carrots from a sheep pen.” Starvation was endemic and rendered prisoners easy prey for typhus and dysentery. At the same time, the need to keep control of so many prisoners made the S.S. even more brutal, and sadistic new punishments were invented. The “standing commando” forced prisoners to stand absolutely still for eight hours at a time; any movement or noise was punished by beatings. The murder of prisoners by guards, formerly an exceptional event in the camps, now became unremarkable.

But individual deaths, by sickness or violence, were not enough to keep the number of prisoners within manageable limits. Accordingly, in early 1941 Himmler decided to begin the mass murder of prisoners in gas chambers, building on a program that the Nazis had developed earlier for euthanizing the disabled. Here, again, the camps’ sinister combination of bureaucratic rationalism and anarchic violence was on display. During the following months, teams of S.S. doctors visited the major camps in turn, inspecting prisoners in order to select the “infirm” for gassing. Everything was done with an appearance of medical rigor. The doctors filled out a form for each inmate, with headings for “Diagnosis” and “Incurable Physical Ailments.” But it was all

mere theatre. Helm's description of the visit of Dr. Friedrich Mennecke to Ravensbrück, in November, 1941, shows that inspections of prisoners—whom he referred to in letters home as “forms” or “portions”—were cursory at best, with the victims parading naked in front of the doctors at a distance of twenty feet. (Jewish prisoners were automatically “selected,” without an examination.) In one letter, Mennecke brags of having disposed of fifty-six “forms” before noon. Those selected were taken to an undisclosed location for gassing; their fate became clear to the remaining Ravensbrück prisoners when the dead women's clothes and personal effects arrived back at the camp by truck.

Under this extermination program, known to S.S. bureaucrats by the code Action 14f13, some sixty-five hundred prisoners were killed in the course of a year. By early 1942, it had become obsolete, as the scale of death in the camps increased. Now the killing of weak and sick prisoners was carried out by guards or camp doctors, sometimes in gas chambers built on site. Those who were still able to work were increasingly auctioned off to private industry for use as slave labor, in the many subcamps that began to spring up around the main K.L. At Ravensbrück, the Siemens corporation established a factory where six hundred women worked twelve-hour shifts building electrical components. The work was brutally demanding, especially for women who were sick, starved, and exhausted. Helm writes that “Siemens women suffered severely from boils, swollen legs, diarrhea and TB,” and also from an epidemic of nervous twitching. When a worker reached the end of her usefulness, she was sent back to the camp, most likely to be killed. It was in this phase of the camp's life that sights like the one Loulou Le Porz saw at Ravensbrück—a truck full of prisoners' corpses—became commonplace.

By the end of the war, the number of people who had died in the concentration camps, from all causes—starvation, sickness, exhaustion, beating, shooting, gassing—was more than eight hundred thousand. The figure does not include the hundreds of thousands of Jews gassed on arrival at Auschwitz. If the K.L. were indeed a battlefield, as the Death's-Head S.S. liked to believe, the deaths, in the course of twelve years, roughly equalled the casualties sustained by the Axis during the Battle of Stalingrad, among the deadliest actual engagements of the war. But in the camps the Nazis fought against helpless enemies. Considered as prisons, too, the K.L. were paradoxical: it was impossible to correct or rehabilitate people whose very nature, according to Nazi propaganda, was criminal or sick. And as economic institutions they were utterly counterproductive, wasting huge numbers of lives even as the need for workers in Germany became more and more acute.

The concentration camps make sense only if they are understood as products not of reason but of ideology, which is to say, of fantasy. Nazism taught the Germans to see themselves as a beleaguered nation, constantly set upon by enemies external and internal. Metaphors of infection and disease, of betrayal and stabs in the back, were central to Nazi discourse. The concentration camp became the place where those metaphorical evils could be rendered concrete and visible. Here, behind barbed wire, were the traitors, Bolsheviks, parasites, and Jews who were intent on destroying the Fatherland.

And if existence was a struggle, a war, then it made no sense to show mercy to the enemy. Like many Nazi institutions, the K.L. embodied conflicting impulses: to reform the criminal, to extort labor from the unproductive, to quarantine the contagious. But most fundamental was the

impulse to dehumanize the enemy, which ended up confounding and overriding all the others. Once a prisoner ceased to be human, he could be brutalized, enslaved, experimented on, or gassed at will, because he was no longer a being with a soul or a self but a biological machine. The *Muselmänner*, the living dead of the camps, stripped of any capacity to think or feel, were the true product of the K.L., the ultimate expression of the Nazi world view.

The impulse to separate some groups of people from the category of the human is, however, a universal one. The enemies we kill in war, the convicted prisoners we lock up for life, even the distant workers who manufacture our clothes and toys—how could any society function if the full humanity of all these were taken into account? In a decent society, there are laws to resist such dehumanization, and institutional and moral forces to protest it. When guards at Rikers Island beat a prisoner to death, or when workers in China making iPhones begin to commit suicide out of despair, we regard these as intolerable evils that must be cured. It is when a society decides that some people deserve to be treated this way—that it is not just inevitable but right to deprive whole categories of people of their humanity—that a crime on the scale of the K.L. becomes a possibility. It is a crime that has been repeated too many times, in too many places, for us to dismiss it with the simple promise of never again. ♦

**The Nazis tried to destroy their death camps so that there would be no evidence of their atrocities. Fifty years later, Auschwitz and the terrible relics it holds are disintegrating, and historians and survivors are now faced with unprecedented questions about how to preserve the memory of the Holocaust.**