

Buchenwald Concentration Camp

WWII



Buchenwald memorial

In 1937, the Nazis constructed Buchenwald concentration camp, near Weimar, Germany. Embedded in the camp's main entrance gate is the slogan *Jedem das Seine* (literally "to each his own", but figuratively "everyone gets what he deserves"). The camp was operational until its liberation in 1945. Between 1945 and 1950, it was used by the Soviet Union as an NKVD special camp for Germans. On January 6, 1950, the Soviets handed over Buchenwald to the East German Ministry of Internal Affairs. The camp was to be named K.L. Ettersberg, but this was changed to Buchenwald ("beech forest"), since Ettersberg carried too many associations with Goethe, who strolled through the woods (his lover Charlotte von Stein lived there) and supposedly wrote his "Wanderer's Nightsong", or, alternately, the Walpurgisnacht passages of his *Faust* under the oak tree which remained in the center of the camp after the forest was cleared for its construction: this tree is the famous Goethe Oak. Quickly the fate of the oak became associated with the fate of Germany: if the one was to fall, so was the other.

Between April 1938 and April 1945, some 238,380 people of various nationalities including 350 Western Allied POWs were incarcerated in Buchenwald. One estimate places the number of deaths at 56,000. During an American bombing raid on August 24, 1944 that was directed at a nearby armaments factory, several bombs, including incendiaries, also fell on the camp, resulting in heavy casualties amongst the prisoners (2,000 prisoners wounded & 388 killed by the raid).

Buchenwald's first commandant was Karl-Otto Koch, who ran the camp from 1937 to July 1941. His second wife, Ilse Koch, became notorious as 'the witch of Buchenwald' for her cruelty and brutality. Koch had a zoo built by the prisoners in the camp, with a bear pit facing the, the assembly square where prisoner "roll-calls" were conducted. Koch himself was eventually imprisoned at the camp by the Nazi authorities for incitement to murder. The charges were lodged by Prince Waldeck and Dr. Morgen, to which were later

added charges of corruption, embezzlement, black market dealings, and exploitation of the camp workers for personal gain. Other camp officials were charged, including Ilse Koch. The trial resulted in Karl Koch being sentenced to death for disgracing both himself and the SS; he was executed by firing squad on April 5, 1945, one week before American troops arrived. Ilse Koch was sentenced to a term of four years' imprisonment after the war. Her sentence was reduced to two years and she was set free. She was subsequently arrested again and sentenced to life imprisonment by the post-war German authorities; she committed suicide in a Bavarian prison cell in September 1967. The second commandant of the camp was Hermann Pister (1942–1945). He was tried in 1947 (Dachau Trials) and sentenced to death, but died in September 1948 of a heart condition before the sentence could be carried out.



Karl-Otto Koch

The number of women held in Buchenwald was somewhere between 500 and 1,000. The first female inmates were twenty political prisoners who were accompanied by a female SS guard; these women were brought from Ravensbrück in 1941 and forced into sexual slavery at the camp's brothel. The SS later fired the SS woman on duty in the brothel for corruption, her position was taken over by 'brothel mothers' as ordered by SS chief Heinrich Himmler. The majority of women prisoners arrived in 1944 and 1945 from other camps. Only one barrack was set aside for them; this was overseen by the female block leader Franziska Hoengesberg, who came from Essen when it was evacuated. All the women prisoners were later shipped out to one of Buchenwald's many female satellite camps. No female guards were permanently stationed at Buchenwald. When the camp was evacuated, the SS sent the male prisoners to other camps, and the five-hundred remaining women were taken by train and on foot to the Theresienstadt concentration camp and ghetto in the protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. Many died sometime between April and May 1945. Because the female prisoner population at Buchenwald was comparatively small, the SS only trained female overseers at the camp and assigned them to one of the female subcamps. Ilse Koch served as head supervisor of 22 other female guards and hundreds of women prisoners in the main camp. More than 530 women served as guards in the vast Buchenwald system of subcamps and external commands across Germany. Only 22 women served/trained in Buchenwald, compared to over 15,500 men.

Although it was highly unusual for German authorities to send Western Allied POWs to concentration camps, Buchenwald held a group of 168 aviators for two months starting on August 20, 1944. All these airmen were in aircraft that had crashed in occupied France. Two explanations are given for them being sent to a concentration camp: first, that they had managed to make contact with the French Resistance, some were disguised as civilians, and they were carrying false papers when caught; they were therefore categorized by the Germans as spies, which meant their rights under the Geneva Convention were not

respected. The second explanation is that they had been categorized as 'terror aviators'. The aviators were initially held in Gestapo prisons and headquarters in France. In April or August 1944, they and other Gestapo prisoners were packed into boxcars and sent to Buchenwald. The journey took five days, during which they received very little food or water. Canadian airman Ed Carter-Edward's recalled their arrival at Buchenwald:

“ As we got close to the camp and saw what was inside... a terrible, terrible fear and horror entered our hearts. We thought, what is this? Where are we going? Why are we here? And as you got closer to the camp and started to enter [it] and saw these human skeletons walking around—old men, young men, boys, just skin and bone, we thought, what are we getting into?”

They were subjected to the same treatment and abuse as other Buchenwald prisoners until October 1944, when a change in policy saw the aviators dispatched to Stalag Luft III, a regular POW camp; nevertheless, two airmen died at Buchenwald. Those classed as terror aviators had been scheduled for execution after October 24. Their rescue was effected by Luftwaffe officers who visited Buchenwald and, on their return to Berlin, demanded the airmen's release.

Buchenwald was also the main imprisonment for a number of Norwegian university students from 1943 until the end of the war. The students, being Norwegian, got better treatment than most, but had to resist Nazi schooling for months. They became remembered for resisting forced labor in a minefield, as the Nazis wished to use them as cannon fodder. An incident connected to this is remembered as the 'Strike at Burkheim'. The Norwegian students in Buchenwald lived in a warmer, stone-construction house and had their own clothes.

A primary cause of death was illness due to harsh camp conditions, with starvation—and its consequent illnesses—prevalent. Malnourished and suffering from disease, many were literally worked to death under the SS 'extermination through labor' policy, as inmates only had the choice between slave labor or inevitable execution. Many inmates died as a result of human experimentation or fell victim to arbitrary acts perpetrated by the SS guards. Other prisoners were simply murdered, primarily by shooting and hanging. Walter Gerhard Martin Sommer was an SS Hauptscharführer who served as a guard at the concentration camps of Dachau and Buchenwald. Known as the "Hangman of Buchenwald", he was considered a depraved sadist who reportedly ordered Otto Neururer and Mathias Spannlang, two Austrian priests, to be crucified upside-down. Sommer was especially infamous for hanging prisoners from trees with their wrists behind their backs in the "singing forest", so named because of the screams which emanated from this wooded area.

Summary executions of Soviet POWs were also carried out. At least 1,000 men were selected in 1941 and 1942 by a task force of three Dresden Gestapo officers and sent to the camp for immediate liquidation by a gunshot to the back of the neck, the infamous Genickschuss. The camp was also a site of large-scale trials for vaccines against epidemic typhus in 1942 and 1943. In all 729 inmates were used as test subjects, of whom 154 died. Other 'experimentation' occurred at Buchenwald on a smaller scale. One such experiment aimed at determining the precise fatal dose of a poison of the alkaloid group; according to the testimony of one doctor, four Russian POWs were administered the poison, and when it proved not to be fatal they were strangled in the crematorium and subsequently dissected. Among various other experiments

was one which, in order to test the effectiveness of a balm for wounds from incendiary bombs, involved inflicting "very severe" white phosphorus burns on inmates. When challenged at trial over the nature of this testing, and particularly over the fact that the testing was designed in some cases to cause death and only to measure the time which elapsed until death was caused, one Nazi doctor's defense was that, although a doctor, he was a 'legally appointed executioner'.



Bones of anti-Nazi German women still are in the Buchenwald crematoriums 04/14/1945

The SS left behind accounts of the number of prisoners and people coming to and leaving the camp, categorizing those leaving them by release, transfer, or death. These accounts are one of the sources of estimates for the number of deaths in Buchenwald. According to SS documents, 33,462 died. These documents were not, however, necessarily accurate: Among those executed before 1944, many were listed as 'transferred to the Gestapo'. Furthermore, from 1941, Soviet POWs were executed in mass killings. Arriving prisoners selected for execution were not entered into the camp register and therefore were not among the 33,462 dead listed. One former Buchenwald prisoner, Armin Walter, calculated the number of executions by the number of shootings in the back of the head. His job at Buchenwald was to set up and care for a radio installation at the facility where people were executed; he counted the numbers, which arrived by telex, and hid the information. He says that 8,483 Soviet prisoners of war were shot in this manner. According to the same source, the total number of deaths at Buchenwald is estimated at 56,545. This total corresponds to a death rate of 24 percent, assuming that the number of persons passing through the camp according to documents left by the SS, 240,000 prisoners, is accurate. This number is the sum of:

- Deaths according to material left behind by the SS: 33,462
- Executions by shooting: 8,483
- Executions by hanging (estimate): 1,100
- Deaths during evacuation transports: 13,500



Polish prisoners from Buchenwald awaiting execution in the forest near the camp, April 26, 1942

On April 4, 1945, the US 89th Infantry Division overran Ohrdruf, a subcamp of Buchenwald. It was the first Nazi camp liberated by U.S. troops. This resulted in Buchenwald being partially evacuated by the Germans two days later. In the days before the arrival of the American army, thousands of the prisoners were forced to join the evacuation marches. Thanks in large part to the efforts of Polish engineer Gwidon Damazyn, an inmate since March 1941, a secret short-wave transmitter and small generator were built and hidden in the prisoners' movie room. On April 8 at noon, Damazyn and Russian prisoner Konstantin Ivanovich Leonov sent the Morse code message prepared by leaders of the prisoners' underground resistance :

“ To the Allies. To the army of General Patton. This is the Buchenwald concentration camp. SOS. We request help. They want to evacuate us. The SS wants to destroy us.” The text was repeated several times in English, German, and Russian.. Three minutes after the last transmission was sent the headquarters of the US Third Army responded:

“ KZ Bu. Hold out. Rushing to your aid. Staff of Third Army. ”

After this news had been received, Communist inmates stormed the watchtowers and killed the remaining guards, using arms they had been collecting since 1942 (one machine gun and 91 rifles). A detachment of troops of the U.S. 9th Armored Inf Bn, from the 6th Armored Div, part of the U.S. Third Army, and under the command of Captain Frederic Keffer, arrived at Buchenwald on April 11, 1945 at 3:15 P.M., (now the permanent time of the clock at the entrance gate). The soldiers were given a hero's welcome, with the emaciated survivors finding the strength to toss some liberators into the air in celebration.

Later in the day, elements of the US 83rd Infantry Division overran Langenstein, one of a number of smaller camps comprising the Buchenwald complex. There, the division liberated over 21,000 prisoners, ordered the mayor of Langenstein to send food and water to the camp, and hurried medical supplies forward from the 20th Field Hospital.

Third Army Headquarters sent elements of the 80th Infantry Division to take control of the camp on the morning of April 12, 1945. Several journalists arrived on the same day, perhaps with the 80th, including Edward R. Murrow, whose radio report of his arrival and reception was broadcast on CBS April 15, 1945 and became one of his most famous:

“ I asked to see one of the barracks. It happened to be occupied by Czechoslovaks. When I entered, men crowded around, tried to lift me to their shoulders. They were too weak. Many of them could not get out of bed. I was told that this building had once stabled 80 horses. There were 1,200 men in it, five to a bunk. The stink was beyond all description.

They called the doctor. We inspected his records. There were only names in the little black book, nothing more. Nothing about who these men were, what they had done, or hoped. Behind the names of those who had died, there was a cross. I counted them. They totaled 242. 242 out of 1,200, in one month.

As we walked out into the courtyard, a man fell dead. Two others, they must have been over 60, were crawling toward the latrine. I saw it, but will not describe it.”

After liberation, between 1945 and February 10, 1950, the camp was administered by the Soviet Union and served as Special Camp No. 2 of the NKVD. It was part of a ‘special camps’ network operating since 1945, formally integrated into the Gulag in 1948. Between August 1945 and the dissolution on March 1, 1950, 28,455 prisoners, including 1,000 women, were held by the Soviet Union at Buchenwald. A total of 7,113 people died in Special Camp Number 2, according to the Soviet records. They were buried in mass graves in the woods surrounding the camp. Their relatives did not receive any notification of their deaths. Prisoners comprised alleged opponents of Stalinism, and alleged members of the Nazi party or Nazi organization, others were imprisoned due to identity confusion and arbitrary arrests. The NKVD would not allow any contact of prisoners with the outside world and did not attempt to determine the guilt of any individual prisoner. On January 6, 1950, Soviet Minister of Internal Affairs Kruglov ordered all special camps, including Buchenwald, to be handed over to the East German Ministry of Internal Affairs.

In October 1950, it was decreed that the camp would be demolished. The main gate, the crematorium, the hospital block, and two guard towers were spared. All prisoner barracks and other buildings were razed. Foundations of some still exist and many others have been rebuilt. According to the Buchenwald Memorial website, "the combination of obliteration and preservation was dictated by a specific concept for interpreting the history of Buchenwald Concentration Camp." The first monument to victims was erected days after the initial liberation. Intended to be completely temporary, it was built by prisoners and made of wood. A second monument to commemorate the dead was erected in 1958 by the GDR near the mass graves. Inside the camp, there is a living monument in the place of the first monument that is kept at skin temperature all year round. Today the remains of Buchenwald serves as a memorial and permanent

exhibition and museum administrated by Buchenwald and Mittelbau-Dora Memorials Foundation, which also administrates the camp memorial.

On June 5, 2009, U.S. President Barack Obama and German Chancellor Angela Merkel visited Buchenwald after a tour of Dresden Castle and Church of Our Lady. During the visit they were accompanied by Elie Wiesel and Bertrand Herz, both survivors of the camp. Dr. Volkhard Knigge, the director of the Buchenwald and Mittelbau-Dora Memorials Foundation and honorary professor of University of Jena[citation needed], guided the four guests through the remainder of the site of the camp. During the visit Elie Wiesel, who together with Bertrand Herz were sent to the Little camp as 16-year old boys, said, "if these trees could talk." His statement marked the irony about the beauty of the landscape and the horrors that took place within the camp. President Obama mentioned during his visit that he had heard stories as a child from his great uncle, who was part of the 89th Infantry Division, the first Americans to reach the camp at Ohrdruf, one of Buchenwald's satellites.



General Dwight Eisenhower and other high ranking U.S. Army officers view the bodies of prisoners, April 12, 1945



US Senator Alben W. Barkley (D-KY) looks on after Buchenwald's liberation. Barkley later became Vice President of the United States under Harry S. Truman



Buchenwald inmates 1945.



German civilians are forced by American troops to bear witness to Nazi atrocities at Buchenwald concentration camp, mere miles from their own homes, April 1945.



Buchenwald watchtower at the memorial site 1983 & the Camp Gate today set at the April 11, 1945 3:15 time of liberation

[Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buchenwald_concentration_camp April 2015 ++]