



## What was it like in concentration camps?

by Leonardo Deng

Concentration camps were used before WWII and had been for quite a while. One of the first times was in the Boer War between the UK and the Boers, descendants of the first Dutch colonists. This war was fought in present-day South Africa, which was, at the time, composed of Dutch and British colonies. After the war was over, the victorious British built concentration camps, which were intended to be shelters for refugees that had to be relocated since they had lost their homes. But since the two sides had used the scorched earth tactic (which burns everything to prevent the enemy from getting resources) most people had no choice but to move to the camps. The British had also forced most of the Boer men away to the UK's other colonies, which included many countries in Africa, the Caribbean, the Middle East, and the Indian Subcontinent. Since women and children had to stay in South Africa, they usually starved to death or died of the disease in the camps.

During the build-up to WWII, Nazi Germany invaded many countries, such as Czechoslovakia and Austria. When they passed through those countries, they did not want any opposition. Thus, most communists, socialists, romas, and homosexuals from the countries Germany invaded were taken to concentration camps. But, one group took up most of the camps, and it wasn't POWs or political enemies. It was the Jews. The Nazis considered the Jews "inferior," and blamed them for everything bad that happened to Germany, from the Treaty of Versailles that ended World War I, to the Great Depression, in which millions of people throughout the world lost their jobs, including in Germany. The Nazis planned to wipe out Jews from Europe, then the world. Adolf Hitler, leader of the Nazis, said that *"The Jews are undoubtedly a race, but they are not human."* Most of the pre-war Jews lived in Poland, but many also lived in the USSR, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, the Baltic Countries (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania), Austria, and even Germany itself. Most of these were invaded by Germany, so most European Jews were brought to concentration camps. The Nazis constructed many concentration camps throughout their European territory during the war. One of the first concentration camps in Nazi-occupied land was Dachau, which was north of Munich in Bavaria. At first, it was supposed to hold political opponents of the Nazis, like socialists and communists, but during the war, it also held Jews, Poles, Prisoners of War, and Catholic Priests. The camp was actually a prototype camp, to show what future camps would look like. Of course, it functioned like any other camp. The camp functioned the longest out of all of the constructed camps, from just after the Nazis took power in March of 1933 until liberation in April of 1945.



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According to official records, 32,000 people died there, but there are so many deaths that were not counted, so the real number could be thousands of deaths higher. There were similar scenes in the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp in Poland, Bergen-Belson, and Buchenwald. Eventually, during Hitler's "Final Solution," in which most European Jews were brought on "death trains" to death camps, where many were killed in gas chambers.

The Germans were not the only ones who had concentration camps. After the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Guam, and the Philippines, America was at war with the Axis Powers. At the time, most Japanese Americans were living on the west coast, especially in California. In FDR's Executive Order 9066, which meant that all Japanese Americans had to leave the states of Alaska, California, and parts of Oregon, Washington, and Arizona, except ones in the camps there. To locate them, the government used census data from 1940, even though that was illegal. Officially, they were supposed to leave the Pacific coast because the government was afraid that they might be spies. However, many historians agree that the internment camps were, at least in part, influenced by racism. At the time, there was large-scale discrimination against Asian Americans, just like African Americans. In fact, many Korean and Chinese Americans had to wear pins that said, "I am [Korean/Chinese]." However, this statement is probably false because of at least two ways. After a little research, I concluded that less than 15,000 people from European countries in the Axis Powers (Italy, Germany, Romania, Bulgaria) were imprisoned, in comparison to approximately 110,000 Japanese people. That meant that the European descendants running the United States did not want to "hurt" the Europeans, who were almost always Christian, as opposed to Japan being Buddhist, Shintoist, and Confucianist, with only a tiny fraction of people being Christian. Also, I found out that there is no evidence that there were any spies with Japanese ancestry. In fact, 10 people were convicted of spying for Japan, but none were of Japanese ancestry.

Although not exactly concentration camps, the Empire of Japan (Japan from 1868-1947) did use POWs for tasks that were similar to the ones in Germany. One of the most grueling tasks that many POWs endured was building a railway between Burma (now Myanmar) and Thailand (formerly called Siam). The official name was the Burma Railway, but it was also known by the names of the Siam-Burma Railway, the Thai-Burma Railway, and the Death Railway. It covered 258 miles (415 km), from Bangkok to Rangoon. An estimated 180,000 civilians from Indochina were recruited or impressed to work. An extra 20,000 were from the rest of Asia, but more than 60,000 were Allied POWs. They worked in terrible conditions and were treated like slaves. One of the most notorious POW camps was Changi, in Singapore. At first, the inmates were treated with little interference from the Japanese. However, as time



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passed, the Japanese became more and more brutal. Later on, new inmates had a choice to make: work or starve. The POWs had to dig tunnels and foxholes so that the Japanese had a place to go if the Allied Forces invaded. Eventually, the camp was liberated in 1945, and the inmates were released.

So why were some countries leaving their inmates and POWs alone while others tortured them? Well, many countries, like the USA and the UK, had signed the Geneva Conventions, so their POWs would not be treated badly. Others, like the USSR and Japan, didn't, so their POWs were generally treated badly.

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