



Holocaust Atrocities

NAZI DEATH CAMPS

Don Nardo



About the Author

In addition to his award-winning books about the ancient world, historian Don Nardo has written extensively about World War II, including studies of the Pacific campaigns against Japan, the rise and fall of Nazi Germany, and a well-reviewed biography of Adolf Hitler. Nardo, who also composes and arranges orchestral music, lives with his wife, Christine, in Massachusetts.

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Printed in the United States

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ReferencePoint Press, Inc.
PO Box 27779
San Diego, CA 92198
www.ReferencePointPress.com

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Names: Nardo, Don, 1947- author.
Title: Holocaust atrocities : Nazi death camps / by Don Nardo.
Description: San Diego, CA : ReferencePoint Press, 2025. | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2024001265 (print) | LCCN 2024001266 (ebook) | ISBN 9781678208004 (library binding) | ISBN 9781678208011 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: Nazi concentration camps--Europe--Juvenile literature. | Holocaust, Jewish (1939-1945)--Juvenile literature.
Classification: LCC D805.A2 N37 2025 (print) | LCC D805.A2 (ebook) | DDC 365/.450943--dc23/eng/20240122
LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2024001265>
LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2024001266>

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Downfall of the Camps and Liberation

In April 1945, with Hitler's Third Reich in a state of collapse and chaos, American and other Allied forces swept into Germany and Poland, liberating concentration and death camps as they went. The sights that greeted the liberators were the same in all of the camps—grim, stomach-churning, heartrending testaments to the shocking inhumanity of the Nazi regime.

American soldier Leon Bass later recalled what he saw on entering the camp at Buchenwald, near the German city of Weimar. “When I walked through that gate,” he said in a later interview,

I saw in front of me what I call the walking dead. I saw human beings [who] had been beaten, had been starved. . . . They'd been denied everything, everything that would make anyone's life livable. They were standing in front of me and they were skin and bone. They had skeletal faces with deep-set eyes. . . . They were standing there, and they were holding on to one another just to keep from falling.³⁸

As he continued to tour the camp along with the other Americans, Bass was struck by the sores on the bodies of virtually all the inmates. One of the medics in his unit told

him these were clear signs of extreme malnutrition. Clearly, the prisoners had been starved nearly to death. Bass noticed that the scabs from the sores had caused one inmate's fingers to permanently stick together, robbing him of the use of his hand. "Oh, my God," Bass later exclaimed, "I'd seen nothing like this in all my life." It was simply "beyond anything in my experience."³⁹

Bass's descriptions, given in interviews in the decades after the war, were corroborated by the thousands of other soldiers who liberated the Nazi camps and by the journalists who accompanied them. The leader of the American and European Allied forces and future US president, Dwight D. Eisenhower, himself toured one of Buchenwald's sub-camps. In a postwar interview, he said,

"I have never at any other time experienced an equal sense of shock."⁴⁰

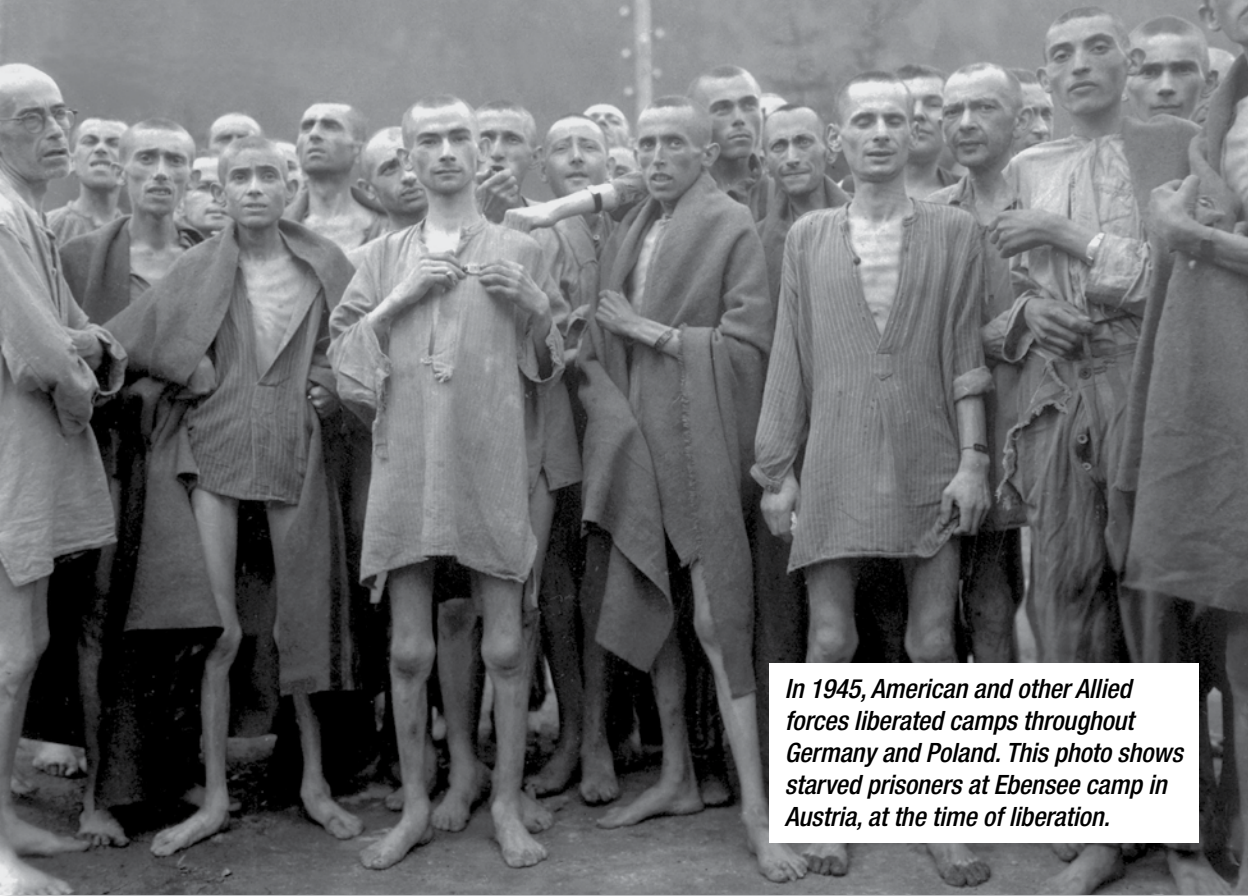
—US general Dwight D. Eisenhower after touring a Nazi camp

I have never felt able to describe my emotional reactions when I first came face to face with indisputable evidence of Nazi brutality and ruthless disregard of every shred of decency. . . . I have never at any other time experienced an equal sense of shock. I visited every nook and cranny of the camp because I felt it my duty to be [able] to testify at firsthand about these things in case there ever grew up at home the belief [that] the stories of Nazi brutality were just propaganda.⁴⁰

Accompanying Eisenhower were other US generals, including George S. Patton. Widely known for his courage and toughness, Patton fought to keep himself from vomiting. Shocked to his core, he later called it "one of the most appalling sights that I have ever seen."⁴¹

Orders to Dismantle the Camps

Allied Soviet soldiers saw similar gruesome sights when they reached Poland, except at two of the death camps, Treblinka and Sobibor. By the time the Soviets reached the sites of these camps,



In 1945, American and other Allied forces liberated camps throughout Germany and Poland. This photo shows starved prisoners at Ebensee camp in Austria, at the time of liberation.

both were mostly gone, having been largely dismantled in the preceding few months. Hoping to prevent evidence of their mass murders from reaching the world, the Nazis began demolishing several of the death camps once defeat appeared imminent.

That demolition process was partially successful because nearly all of the murdered inmates had been buried or burned to ashes. As a result, for several decades the principal evidence of the mass murders that occurred at Treblinka was derived from two sources: the testimony of Jewish survivors and the admissions of some of the Nazi SS officers who had run the camp. In 2012, however, modern forensic experts discovered some previously hidden mass graves at the site that show conclusively that it was an extermination camp.

Nazi efforts to dismantle Auschwitz, the largest of the death camps, began in November 1944—about six months before Germany's declared defeat. The breakdown of the camp proceeded

Reams of Evidence

When Dwight D. Eisenhower compiled his eyewitness testimony of the Nazi camps, he correctly foresaw a sad future development. It was that some misguided individuals might claim that the Nazis' mass murders had never occurred. Often called "Holocaust denial," that idea ignores the fact that the Nazis' atrocities are among the most thoroughly documented events of modern history. In addition to the eyewitness reports of tens of thousands of surviving Jews, Poles, Gypsies, Russians, and many other victims, the reams of evidence include the physical remains of gas chambers and crematoria; thousands of photos and films taken by the Nazis themselves; and the testimony of many German soldiers, SS officers, and Nazi leaders who later admitted their roles in the slaughter. One of the most damning of such admissions was that of Auschwitz's commander, Rudolf Höss, who after the war said, "I was responsible for carrying out part of the cruel plans of the Third Reich for human destruction. . . . May the Lord God forgive one day what I have done. . . . May the facts which are now coming out about [those] horrible crimes . . . make the repetition of such cruel acts impossible for all time."

Quoted in John J. Hughes, "A Mass Murderer Repents: The Case of Rudolf Höss, Commandant of Auschwitz," Seton Hall University, March 25, 1998. www.shu.edu.

slowly, however, and it was not until January 1945 that a demolition crew blew up two of the camp's five crematoria. Hoping to erase as much evidence of war crimes as possible, groups of SS men burned camp documents in big bonfires. They also set fire to the enormous complex of structures in which they had stored the luggage and other property they had earlier plundered from the doomed inmates. While this was happening, Himmler ordered the destruction of all the remaining gas chambers and crematoria in the death camps.

One problem remained, however. Namely, what should be done with prisoners who had not yet been exterminated? The solution adopted by Himmler and other leading Nazis was to march the inmates westward and place them in some of the concentration camps in Germany. Himmler curtly warned the commanders of the death camps in Poland, "The Führer [Hitler] holds you per-

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