



HOLOCAUST ENCYCLOPEDIA

DEATH MARCHES

A massive Soviet 1944 summer offensive in eastern Belarus annihilated German Army Group Center and permitted Soviet forces to overrun the first of the major Nazi concentration camps, Lublin/Majdanek. Shortly after that offensive, SS chief (Reichsfuehrer SS) Heinrich Himmler ordered that prisoners in all concentration camps and subcamps be evacuated toward the interior of the Reich. Due to the rapid Soviet advance, the SS had not had time to complete the evacuation of Majdanek. Soviet and western media widely publicized SS atrocities at the camp, using both footage of the camp at liberation and interviews with some of the surviving prisoners. **The evacuations of the concentration camps had three purposes:**

- (1) SS authorities did not want prisoners to fall into enemy hands alive to tell their stories to Allied and Soviet liberators
- (2) the SS thought they needed prisoners to maintain production of armaments wherever possible
- (3) some SS leaders, including Himmler, believed irrationally that they could use Jewish concentration camp prisoners as hostages to bargain for a separate peace in the west that would guarantee the survival of the Nazi regime.

In the summer and early autumn months of 1944, most of the evacuations were carried out by train or, in the case of German positions cut off in the Baltic States, by ship. As winter approached, however, and the Allies reached the German borders and assumed full control of German skies, SS authorities increasingly evacuated concentration camp prisoners from both east and west on foot.

By January 1945, the Third Reich stood on the verge of military defeat. Most of German East Prussia was already under Soviet occupation. Soviet forces besieged Warsaw, Poland, and Budapest, Hungary, as they prepared to push German forces back toward the interior of the Reich. After the failure of the surprise German Ardennes offensive in December 1944, Anglo-American forces in the west were ready to invade Germany.

The SS guards had strict orders to kill prisoners who could no longer walk or travel. As evacuations depended increasingly on forced marches and travel by open rail car or small craft in the Baltic Sea in the brutal winter of 1944-1945, the number who died of exhaustion and exposure along the routes increased dramatically. This encouraged an understandable perception among the prisoners that the Germans intended them all to die on the march. The term *death march* was probably coined by concentration camp prisoners.

During these death marches, the SS guards brutally mistreated the prisoners. Following their explicit orders, they shot hundreds of prisoners who collapsed or could not keep pace



A view of the death march from Dachau passing through villages in the direction of Wolfratshausen. German civilians secretly photographed several death marches from the Dachau concentration camp as the prisoners moved slowly through the Bavarian towns of Gruenwald, Wolfratshausen, and Herbertshausen. Few civilians gave aid to the prisoners on the death marches. Germany, April 1945.

— *KZ Gedenkstaette Dachau*



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on the march, or who could no longer disembark from the trains or ships. Thousands of prisoners died of exposure, starvation, and exhaustion. Forced marches were especially common in late 1944 and 1945, as the SS evacuated prisoners to camps deeper within Germany. Major evacuation operations moved prisoners out of Auschwitz, Stutthof, and Gross-Rosen westward to Buchenwald, Flossenbürg, Dachau, and Sachsenhausen in winter 1944-1945; from Buchenwald and Flossenbürg to Dachau and Mauthausen in spring 1945; and from Sachsenhausen and Neuengamme northwards to the Baltic Sea in the last weeks of the war.

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As Allied forces advanced into the heart of Germany they liberated hundreds of thousands of concentration camp prisoners. This included thousands of prisoners whom Allied and Soviet troops liberated while they marched on the forced evacuations. On April 25, 1945, Soviet forces met US forces at Torgau, on the Elbe River in central Germany. The German armed forces surrendered unconditionally in the west on May 7 and in the east on May 9, 1945. May 8, 1945, was proclaimed Victory in Europe Day (V-E Day).

To almost the last day of the war, German authorities marched prisoners to various locations in the Reich. As late as May 1, 1945, prisoners who had been evacuated from Neuengamme to the North Sea coastline were loaded onto ships; hundreds of them died when the British bombed the ships a few days later, thinking that they carried German military personnel.

Further Reading

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DEATH MARCHES

Near the end of the war, when Germany's military force was collapsing, the Allied armies closed in on the Nazi concentration camps. The Soviets approached from the east, and the British, French, and Americans from the west. The Germans began frantically to move the prisoners out of the camps near the front and take them to be used as forced laborers in camps inside Germany. Prisoners were first taken by train and then by foot on "death marches," as they became known.

Prisoners were forced to march long distances in bitter cold, with little or no food, water, or rest. Those who could not keep up were shot. The largest death marches took place in the winter of 1944-1945, when the Soviet army began its liberation of Poland. Nine days before the Soviets arrived at Auschwitz, the Germans marched tens of thousands of prisoners out of the camp toward Wodzislaw, a town thirty-five miles away, where they were put on freight trains to other camps. About one in four died on the way.

The Nazis often killed large groups of prisoners before, during, or after marches. During one march, 7,000 Jewish prisoners, 6,000 of them women, were moved from camps in the Danzig region bordered on the north by the Baltic Sea. On the ten-day march, 700 were murdered. Those still alive when the marchers reached the shores of the sea were driven into the water and shot.

Key Dates

JANUARY 18, 1945

DEATH MARCHES FROM THE AUSCHWITZ CAMP SYSTEM BEGIN

The SS begins evacuating Auschwitz and its satellite camps. Nearly 60,000 prisoners are forced on death marches from the Auschwitz camp system. Thousands are killed in the days before the death march. Tens of thousands of prisoners, mostly Jews, are forced to march to the city of Wodzislaw in the western part of Upper Silesia. SS guards shoot anyone who falls behind or cannot continue. More than 15,000 die during the death marches from Auschwitz. In Wodzislaw, the prisoners are put on unheated freight trains and deported to concentration camps in Germany, particularly to Flossenbuerg, Sachsenhausen, Gross-Rosen, Buchenwald, Dachau, and Mauthausen. On January 27, 1945, the Soviet army enters Auschwitz and liberates the few remaining prisoners.

JANUARY 25, 1945

THE EVACUATION AND DEATH MARCH FROM STUTTHOF CONCENTRATION CAMP

The evacuation of nearly 50,000 prisoners, the overwhelming majority of them Jews, begins from the Stutthof camp system in northern Poland. About 5,000 prisoners from Stutthof subcamps are marched to the Baltic Sea coast, forced into the water, and machine gunned. Other prisoners are put on a death march to Lauenburg in eastern Germany, where they are cut off by advancing Soviet forces. The Germans force the prisoners back to Stutthof. Marching in severe winter conditions and treated brutally by SS guards, thousands die during the death march. In late April 1945, the remaining prisoners are removed from Stutthof by sea, since Stutthof is completely encircled by Soviet forces. Again, hundreds of prisoners are forced into the sea and shot. Over 25,000 prisoners, one



Prisoners head south on a death march from the Dachau concentration camp. Gruenwald, Germany, April 29, 1945.

— KZ Gedenkstaette Dachau

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