General Dwight D. Eisenhower and General Troy Middleton, commanding general of the XVIII Corps, Third US Army, tour the newly liberated Ohrdruf concentration camp. Ohrdruf, Germany, April 12, 1945.

— National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Md.

As Allied troops moved across Europe in a series of offensives against Nazi Germany, they began to encounter tens of thousands of concentration camp prisoners. Many of these prisoners had survived forced marches into the interior of Germany from camps in occupied Poland. These prisoners were suffering from starvation and disease.

Soviet forces were the first to approach a major Nazi camp, reaching Majdanek near Lublin, Poland, in July 1944. Surprised by the rapid Soviet advance, the Germans attempted to hide the evidence of mass murder by demolishing the camp. Camp staff set fire to the large crematorium used to burn bodies of murdered prisoners, but in the hasty evacuation the gas chambers were left standing. In the summer of 1944, the Soviets also overran the sites of the Belzec, Sobibor.
and Treblinka killing centers. The Germans had dismantled these camps in 1943, after most of the Jews of Poland had already been killed.

The Soviets liberated Auschwitz, the largest killing center and concentration camp, in January 1945. The Nazis had forced the majority of Auschwitz prisoners to march westward (in what would become known as "death marches"), and Soviet soldiers found only several thousand emaciated prisoners alive when they entered the camp. There was abundant evidence of mass murder in Auschwitz. The retreating Germans had destroyed most of the warehouses in the camp, but in the remaining ones the Soviets found personal belongings of the victims. They discovered, for example, hundreds of thousands of men's suits, more than 800,000 women's outfits, and more than 14,000 pounds of human hair.

In the following months, the Soviets liberated additional camps in the Baltic states and in Poland. Shortly before Germany's surrender, Soviet forces liberated the Stutthof, Sachsenhausen, and Ravensbrueck concentration camps.

US forces liberated the Buchenwald concentration camp near Weimar, Germany, on April 11, 1945, a few days after the Nazis began evacuating the camp. On the day of liberation, an underground prisoner resistance organization seized control of Buchenwald to prevent atrocities by the retreating camp guards. American forces liberated more than 20,000 prisoners at Buchenwald. They also liberated Dora-Mittelbau, Flossenbürg, Dachau, and Mauthausen.

British forces liberated concentration camps in northern Germany, including Neuengamme and Bergen-Belsen. They entered the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, near Celle, in mid-April 1945. Some 60,000 prisoners, most in critical condition because of a typhus epidemic, were found alive. More than 10,000 of them died from the effects of malnutrition or disease within a few weeks of liberation.

Liberators confronted unspeakable conditions in the Nazi camps, where piles of corpses lay unburied. Only after the liberation of these camps was the full scope of Nazi horrors exposed to the world. The small percentage of inmates who survived resembled skeletons because of the demands of forced labor and the lack of food, compounded by months and years of maltreatment. Many were so weak that they could hardly move. Disease remained an ever-present danger, and many of the camps had to be burned down to prevent the spread of epidemics. Survivors of the camps faced a long and difficult road to recovery.

Resources


**Liberation of Nazi Camps — Oral History**

**Gerda Weissmann Klein**

**Born:** 1924, Bielsko, Poland

Describes liberation in Czechoslovakia by U.S. soldier [Interview: 1990]

**Background:** In 1939, Gerda's brother was deported for forced labor. In June 1942, Gerda's family was deported from the Bielsko ghetto. While her parents were transported to Auschwitz, Gerda was sent to the Gross-Rosen camp system, where for the remainder of the war she performed forced labor in textile factories. Gerda was liberated after a death march, wearing the ski boots her father insisted would help her to survive.

**Gerda Weissmann Klein’s story of liberation:** All of a sudden I saw (pause) a strange car coming down the hill, no longer green, not bearing the swastika, but a white star. It was sort of a mud-splattered vehicle but I've never seen a star brighter in my life. And two men sort of jumped out, came running toward us and one came toward where I stood. He was wearing battle gear. I have to think...you know. His helmet was this mesh over that and he was wearing dark glasses and he spoke to me in German. And he said, "Does anybody here speak German or English?" and I said, "I speak German." And I felt that I had to tell him we are Jewish and I didn't know if he would know what the star means or anything, but you know, and I uh looked at him, I was a little afraid to tell him that but I said to him, "We are Jewish, you know." He didn't answer me for quite a while. And then his own voice sort of betrayed his own emotion and he said, "So am I." I would say it was the greatest hour of my life. And then he asked an incredible question. He said, "May I see the other ladies?" You know, what...what we have been addressed for six years and then to hear this man. He looked to me like a young god. I have to tell you I weighed 68 pounds. My hair was white. And you can imagine, I hadn't had a bath in years. And this creature asked for "the other ladies." And I told him that most of the girls were inside, you know. They were too ill to walk, and he said, "Won't you come with me?" And I said, "Sure." But I didn't know what he meant. He held the door open for me and let me precede him and in that gesture restored me to humanity. And that young American of the day is my husband.
ACTIVITY

1. Read the secondary source on the *Liberation of Nazi Camps* and the primary source *Liberation of Nazi Camps — Oral History* (from [http://www.ushmm.org](http://www.ushmm.org)).
2. While you are reading highlight any information that you think is important.
3. Answer the following questions using complete sentences on a separate sheet of paper:

   **Liberation of Nazi Camps Questions**
   
   I. What had many of the liberated prisoners survived and suffered from?
   II. Who were the first allied forces to liberate the prisoners?
   III. How did the Nazi German forces respond to the rapid allied surprise liberations?
   IV. What was the largest Nazi killing center?
   V. What types of personal items were found in the camps?
   VI. Which concentration camps did the United State forces liberate?
   VII. Which concentration camps did the British forces liberate?

   **Liberation of Nazi Camps — Oral History Questions**
   
   I. Summarize the background of the person interviewed.
   II. What surprised you most about their story?
   III. If you were in their situation what would you have done next?
   IV. Is there anything else you want to know about their story?