Mention the word Nazi and you’ll get several different responses. You’ll hear fear, hate, discrimination, anti-Semitism, murder, and probably most common, evil. Many of the classifications, even those held by those that have never had a history lesson about the Nazis, are correct. To understand where these classifications come from, and to learn about what actually happened, lets go back to 1933 to the rise of the Third Reich.

On January 30th, 1933, Adolph Hitler, a name that is now synonymous with pure evil, was appointed Chancellor of Germany. Within a month’s time, and immediately following a mysterious fire at the Reichstag (the Parliament building), the government issued a decree completely suspending civil rights for its citizens and enacting a state of emergency that allowed the government to act without Parliament.

Hitler quickly began moving the country’s policies to be in-line with the Nazi ideals. The Nazis took over the economy, education, law, and culture – including religion. When Paul Von Hindenburg (the President) died in August 1934, Hitler, *Der Führer* (the head of the Nazi party),assumed the role of President, but kept the role of Chancellor, essentially crowning himself dictator and granting him unlimited power.

The German Secret Police, called the *Gestapo*, and the “elite guard” of the Nazi state, Heinrich Himmler’s *Schutz-Staffel* (the SS), held the population in the grip of complete fear. Any criticism of the Nazi government, or the leaders in it, was suppressed. Hate, discrimination, and anti-Semitism, were unleashed upon the region.

It was in March of 1933 that the first “Concentration Camp” opened. Dachau was established by Heinrich Himmler as a camp for political prisoners. It operated with prisoners being told the false pretense that “*Arbeit macht frei*” – Work will set you free. The camp didn’t hold only political prisoners for very long. The Nazis began filling the camp with Communists, Democrats, trade unionists, religious groups like the Jehovah’s Witnesses, other “asocials” including Gypsies and homosexuals, and even regular criminals. Later, following *Kristallnacht*, the night of broken glass (which happened November 9th and 10th, 1938), the camp was filled with 10,000 Jews in addition to the others already occupying the camp. Dachau had grown so much, that in early 1937, the SS used the prisoner labor to construct new barracks that filled the area; they built roads, dug pits (some of which were their own graves), drained marshes, and built stockpiles of armaments for the German army.

In many ways, Dachau was the model camp for the Nazis. And as more camps were built, Dachau led the way in fierceness and efficiency.

When the Nazis started World War II in September, 1939, accommodating for the country’s now divided attentions, the policies, especially those surrounding racial inferiority, became much more aggressive. Jews, and other racially alienated groups, were excluded entirely from the German economy, expelled in mass numbers, or sent to camps as prisoners (including not only men, but women and children as well).

Following the *Kristallnacht* pogroms, or riots, approximately 30,000 Jewish males were arrested and sent to concentration camps like Dachau, Buchenwald, Sachesenhausen (and others), solely for the reason that they were Jewish. Jews were segregated from the rest of the population, even marked with an armband or a patch, labeling them as “Juden” – Jews. Entire families of Jews were herded into ghettos – taken from their homes and forced to leave all of their belongings behind. The living conditions were horrendous… large numbers of people were forced into very small areas, and little to no food was provided. For instance, the Warsaw ghetto documented more than 400,000 Jews residing in an area approximately 1.3 square miles, in nearly complete desolation. Of course, the ghettos were enclosed, no one was allowed to leave, and the walls protected with lethal force by the SS. More than 1000 such ghettos were established in Nazi controlled areas.

This intensification of their Aryanization policies ultimately led to the “*Endlösung der Judenfrage”* (the final answer to the Jewish question) or more commonly called, the “Final Solution,” which was the mass genocide of the Jewish people. The ghettos overflowed, and without a long-term solution to keep the Jews segregated, Hitler decided to kill them all. The concentration camps became murder factories. Some of the most notorious camps were Auschwitz, Birkenau, Buchenwald, Treblinka, Chelmn, Lublin, and of course, Dachau, though there were more than 20,000 concentration camps spread throughout Europe. Jewish men, women, children, soldiers, prisoners, and anyone that disagreed with the Nazi agenda were sent to die. Many would die working to death in the work camps, and millions were executed by the Nazis in gas-chambers, or shot and left to die in mass-graves. Birkenau, at its peak, was gassing up to 6,000 Jews each day. Many were cremated, their ashes either discarded or delivered with malice to the surviving family of the cremated person (along with identifying information such as a wedding ring, gold teeth, etc.).

This terrible time of segregation, hatred, and dehumanization of the Jews and many other groups has come to be known as the Holocaust. By the time the Nazis were defeated and the camps liberated, more than 12 million people had been killed by the Nazis. The largest group was the European Jews, who lost 6 million of their lives, around 3/4ths of the European Jews that were alive before the beginning of the Third Reich.