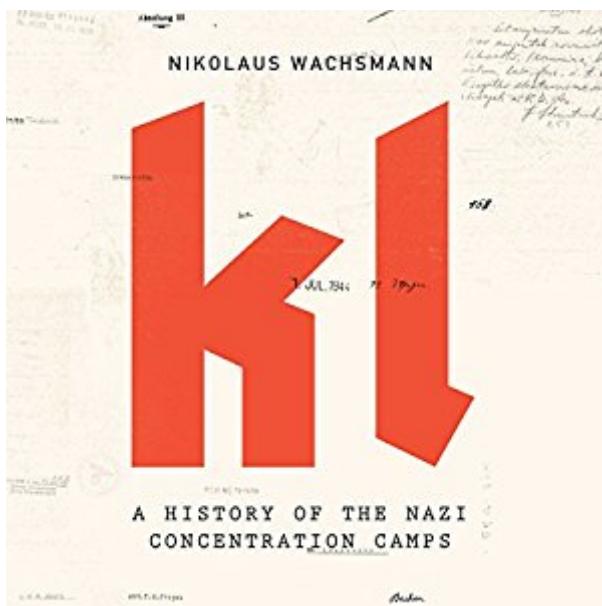


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# KL: A History Of The Nazi Concentration Camps



## Synopsis

In *KL*, Wachsmann fills this glaring gap in our understanding. He not only synthesizes a new generation of scholarly work, much of it untranslated and unknown outside of Germany, but also presents startling revelations, based on many years of archival research, about the functioning and scope of the camp system. Examining, close up, life and death inside the camps, and adopting a wider lens to show how the camp system was shaped by changing political, legal, social, economic, and military forces, Wachsmann produces a unified picture of the Nazi regime and its camps that we have never seen before. A boldly ambitious work of deep importance, *KL* is destined to be a classic in the history of the 20th century. Many books have explored the general history of the Holocaust and the Nazis, or anatomized individual concentration camps. But there has, surprisingly, never been a comprehensive history of the camps that integrates the stories of both the broad development of the system and daily life in the camps. In *KL* (the widely used acronym for *konzentrationslager*, German for concentration camps), Wachsmann offers an unprecedented account of the development of the camps, similar in scope and approach to Anne Applebaum's best-selling and award-winning *Gulag: A History* (2003). We will publish on the 70th anniversary of the liberation of most of the camps in April 1945. Wachsmann is the first to synthesize a new generation of original scholarship on the camps, much of it only available in German and little-known in the English-speaking world. And he has unearthed a wide range of new documents, offering startling new revelations about the history of the camps.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This book is unlikely to be surpassed. It documents for the first time the complete and comprehensive history of the Nazi concentration and extermination camp system from 1933-1945. In the process it clears up some misunderstood beliefs and showcases how the Nazi march toward the Holocaust was based on a continuum rather than an overnight momentous decision. Wachsmann demonstrates how the first concentration camps - ramshackle holding cells really - were set up in 1933 after Hitler came to power. The purpose of these camps was to intimidate and silence all kinds of opponents, from vagabonds and Communists to drunks and Jews. Targeting only Jews was not the purpose of these camps. The camps subsided for a few years after 1933 but were rekindled in the late 30s after Hitler, Himmler and others set their plan for a 'Master Order' based on race in effect. Jews, gypsies and homosexuals started to be specifically targeted after 1938, although even then until 1941 or so the main plan was intimidation, financial extortion and forced migration. It was only in 1942 that the plan turned toward extermination; the Wannsee conference was an important touchstone (although again not the most important or the only one). But even here, the methods for extermination were based on older ones. Killing by gas was a legacy of the horrific T-4 euthanasia program of the 30s. Wachsmann also reminds us that the Holocaust did not suddenly start with the gas chambers but was initiated by the SS Einsatzgruppen killing squads in the Ukraine and the Soviet Union. Also, the first casualties of many of the camps were not Jews but Soviet POWs. Another book that details this background very well is Richard Rhodes's "Masters of Death". The book also demolishes some myths. One myth of course is the belief that the Holocaust somehow sprang fully from someone's head or signature or from a single conference in 1942. As the book demonstrates, this is not true and the whole program grew out of an escalation of historical acts from the 1930s onwards, sometimes through accidents and fits and starts. The other myth the book addresses is of Auschwitz somehow being the most gruesome emblematic symbol of the Holocaust. As terrible as Auschwitz was, the book makes it clear that unlike Auschwitz, four other camps (Treblinka, Sobibor, Belzec and Chelmno) were dedicated exclusively to extermination. Auschwitz was also a labor camp; this fact was valuable because it allowed many survivors to escape and tell their stories. However an unintended side effect of their unforgettable testimony is the belief that Auschwitz stood for everything the Holocaust stood for. As the book documents in great detail, reality was more complicated. Wachsmann talks about all of this as well as the mind numbing bureaucracy that permeates even an unimaginable atrocity like the Holocaust at great length. Yet the prose in this 800 page volume is remarkably readable, partly because somehow Wachsmann still finds space to focus on individual personalities, from the infamous to the mundane. He never lets us forget that the Holocaust was perpetrated by many ordinary people, from high Nazi

officials to lowly camp personnel and random citizens of occupied territories, and this remains perhaps the most disturbing fact of all. This is quite definitely the most panoramic, nuanced and authoritative view published until now, not just of the camps per se but of their historical evolution. Painful and gut-wrenching to read in many places, but a necessary and very valuable contribution even to the mountain of literature that exists about the Third Reich.

Very well written, and, this is important, well translated. Many books I've read that have been translated from German to English do not flow very well, but this one has been translated masterfully. This is a very in depth and in your face account of the KL system. So be forewarned it is not for the faint of heart. The brutality of the KL system is presented very matter-of-factly, so be prepared.

It is a very in-depth treatment of German concentrations camps in Europe during WWII. The research is exhaustive. The organization of the book is clear, but since it is not chronological it is difficult at times to keep track of developments. You need to be interested in the topic. It is a fairly large book and requires a lot of concentration. However, at the end you will know all there is to know about the topic.

As its title suggests, the book chronicles the formation, expansion, and entrenchment of the Nazi concentration camps (known as the Konzentrationslager, KL), from its haphazard beginnings in 1933 to its ignominious end in 1945. As Wachsmann reveals, the KL played a central, if not pivotal, role in the consolidation of the 'Thousand-Year Reich' following the Nazi seizure of power in 1933. From the beginning, a growing number of citizens found themselves incarcerated in the newly formed camps on virtue of their political orientation (mainly Communists) and their race, ethnicity, and religion (Jews, among others the Nazis deemed 'inferior') -- and these numbers would continue to expand from hundreds to tens of thousands, and more so during the Second World War. Interestingly, at least in the beginning, the KL was by no means guaranteed to become a permanent fixture of the Nazi regime; the legal judicial authorities increasingly lambasted the KL not least because they had the potential to tarnish Germany's international image. Were it not for Hitler's decisive intervention, the KL would have faded away sometimes in the mid- to late 1930s. This was not to happen, of course, and under the supervision of the ever-ambitious Himmler and other officials such as Theodor Eicke (who headed Dachau, the first concentration camp set up under the Nazis, and who would reorganize the KL system on a large scale), the KL would play an

increasingly lethal role in the Nazi machine of repression. (According to the author, the lethality of the KL was such to an extent that its prisoners were more likely to perish there -- especially during the war -- than their Soviet counterparts in the Gulag). I found this to be a very fascinating, if distressing, subject, and I believe that readers will come away from this book with an increased understanding, if not appreciation, of a relatively little-explored topic in the history of Nazi Germany.

This was honestly not an easy book to read. This isn't because of any dense scholarly language but the content. This is probably the most complete history of concentration camps ever written. It is hard to imagine how this could have happened but it did and it is important to come to grips with this reality. This book helps one to do that and I strongly recommend this book to get a full grasp of what happened.

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