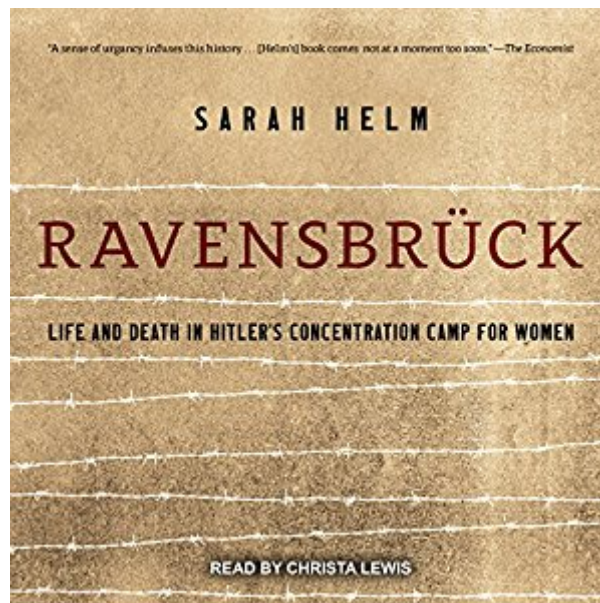




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Ravensbruck: Life And Death In Hitler's Concentration Camp For Women



Synopsis

On a sunny morning in May 1939, a phalanx of 867 women - housewives, doctors, opera singers, politicians, prostitutes - was marched through the woods 50 miles north of Berlin, driven on past a shining lake, then herded in through giant gates. Whipping and kicking them were scores of German women guards. Their destination was Ravensbrück, a concentration camp designed specifically for women by Heinrich Himmler, prime architect of the Holocaust. By the end of the war 130,000 women from more than 20 different European countries had been imprisoned there; among the prominent names were Genevieve de Gaulle, General de Gaulle's niece, and Gemma La Guardia Gluck, sister of the wartime mayor of New York. Only a small number of these women were Jewish; Ravensbrück was largely a place for the Nazis to eliminate other inferior beings - social outcasts, Gypsies, political enemies, foreign resisters, the sick, the disabled, and the "mad". Over six years the prisoners endured beatings, torture, slave labor, starvation, and random execution. In the final months of the war, Ravensbrück became an extermination camp. Estimates of the final death toll by April 1945 have ranged from 30,000 to 90,000.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

While some readers criticize the length and detail of *Ravensbrück*, I really appreciate how comprehensive it is. While following the timeline of Ravensbrück from its foundation in 1939 through its many stages during the war years, we get to know about the officers and guards running it, the different populations of women incarcerated there, the introduction of slave labor, medical experiments, the transports for killing, and efforts to get the word out and

organize rescue missions. In telling the complicated story of the camp, we get to learn about dozens of memorable women prisoners: how they coped and survived; how they helped each other; how they died or what happened to survivors after the war. Helm also discusses why the camp at Ravensbruck has been overlooked by scholars. This book helps to redress that lack of attention. I also recommend Helm's *A Life in Secrets: Vera Atkins and the Missing Agents of WWII*. It is also quite detailed, yet through dozens of personal stories it conveys the drama and sacrifice and bravery of those who opposed the Nazis in the second world war. Both are rewarding reads.

This is a horrific tale so make sure you're prepared. Since there is very little physical documentary evidence left from the camp the story has to be told by patching together memories and small bits of information from many sources. As a consequence the book seems quite choppy at first. By midpoint you start to see the big picture and the characters (prisoners and guards) start to develop. Obviously a lot of research and effort went into it. This may be the single best description, from beginning to end, of a single concentration camp that has ever been written. What is also interesting is that it was a women's camp. I highly recommend this book either for knowledge about the Third Reich or even Women's Studies. You won't soon forget this one.

Helm does an amazing job researching and interviewing these incredibly brave and courageous women and those behind the intense inhumanity they suffered. I knew of the camp and much of the history but not the personal stories behind them. She did not overwhelm readers with mind numbing statistics as Martin Gilbert's *Holocaust* did time and again. I regret the picture painted of the French Resistors shipped from Birkenau, with only a couple of exceptions. Perhaps Helm should have read "Auschwitz and After" by Charlotte Delbo. Not one mention of the woman who refused to allow the world to forget the horror of Auschwitz. A book so descriptive and done so beautifully with words that leave no room for misinterpretation. She also speaks of near misses of death in Ravensbruck after her transfer there in 1944. I deeply regret Delbo was completely left out of this book. In ending many scholars of the Holocaust and Nazi Germany do indeed refer to Ravensbruck as an extermination camp and in my opinion justly so. Congratulations to Sarah Helm. With one noted exception she did a wonderful job and wrote an incredible book. Charlotte Delbo deserved better.

This book was an outstanding read and very insightful into the Nazi mindset as well as a microcosm of what a world can become under certain conditions. Whether it's the concept of "group think"

under Nazi influence or "group think" under the survivors' needs, the psychological horror is gathered masterfully. Helm takes us into the all women's camp at Ravensbruck, designed by Himmler who was Hitler's main man in determining exactly what to do about all these people.....he wanted gone. The atrocities, courage, belief in the human spirit and the absolute will to survive deter Himmler's initiatives. Though initially a slave labor camp, it later became part of the overall extermination project as the war closed in around the Nazi's. Some readers become confused as the story does bounce a bit back to when each ethnic group was brought in but by the accounts of the Nazi's by 1944, there were 22 ethnic groups in the camps. What the average reader doesn't understand is how the cultural differences and interplay are absolutely necessary to the explanation of how this camp operated. Too many people out here complain of a disjointed story but they don't understand they each new emerging or engaged group impacted the camp as a whole. I absolutely recommend this book for anyone who wants to understand Nazi history. Yes, there were Jewish people who were murdered but this book goes further to show just how many people were murdered and not all Jewish. Eye opening, horrific, disgusting, heartbreaking and soul surviving, this book delivers!

Heartbreaking but one of those books I just couldn't put down. It's over 700 pages, so you won't read it in one or two sittings, but then, with the subject matter, you won't want to. Ravensbruck was a "forgotten" death camp - for women (which may explain why so many people didn't want to know). As always when reading about WW II Nazi evils, you can't wrap your head around how people could become the sub-human monsters so many became. There were good Germans. Many towns near the so-called hospices where the first murders took place (physically and mentally ill) did indeed protest and bishops protested from the pulpits. Hitler's response was to back off until the concentration camps were equipped with furnaces - a more efficient way of handling the problem of feeding those who couldn't work for the Reich. The camps were soon available away from towns where German citizens had less chance of discovering the horrors within. I found myself looking up many of the people in the book to see how they ended. But it was years before the world was ready to believe the unbelievable stories coming from survivors from Ravensbruck and other camps. If you are a collector of WW II, Nazi-era books, you'll want this excellent addition in your collection.

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