

Prisoner categories and their abbreviations

The Nazis assigned prisoners to different categories in the concentration camps. In the early days of the camps, the prisoners in each group could be identified by variously colored stripes and dots on their clothing, or by different uniforms. From 1937/1938, the camp administrations used standardized colored triangles that prisoners were forced to sew in visible places on their jackets and trousers. Colored triangles can also be found in the administrative documents of the concentration camps. The longer the concentration camps existed, the more prisoner categories were created.

In general, a distinction was made in the concentration camps between **protective custody** (*Schutzhaft*) and **preventive detention** (*Vorbeugehaft*) – two deceptively harmless-sounding terms. Which category was used depended on the authority that made the arrests. From February 1933, the Gestapo arrested individuals whom the Nazis believed could endanger the “people and state,” according to the title of the Reichstag Fire Decree. They sent them to concentration camps as “protective custody” prisoners. Most of them were political prisoners, homosexuals, Jews and Jehovah’s Witnesses. They could be held indefinitely without trial.

On the other hand, people who were arrested by the Kripo (police criminal investigation department) as “criminals” or “anti-social elements” on account of supposed or actual socially deviant behavior were categorized as “preventive detention” prisoners. Many imprisoned Sinti and Roma people were also categorized in this way by the Nazis. This sentence was passed on social outsiders as well as people who had just been released from prison, even though they had already served their time. One of the first preventive detention decrees against so-called career criminals was passed in November 1933. Standardized regulations for “police preventive detention” applicable throughout the Reich were issued in December 1937.

In the documents held in the Arolsen Archives, abbreviations are often used for the prisoner categories. These are the most common ones in alphabetical order:

“Anti-social elements”

Triangle color: black

Possible abbreviations: Aso/ASO, ASR (from *Aktion “Arbeitsscheu Reich”* – the “Reich work-shirker” campaign), AZ, and AZR (for *Arbeitszwang, Arbeitszwang Reich* – “compulsory work,” “Reich compulsory work”), P.V.H (for *polizeiliche Vorbeugehaft* – “police preventive detention”), PH (for *Polizeihhaft* – “police detention”) and VH (for *Vorbeugehaft* – „preventive detention“)

Homeless people, beggars, petty criminals, alcoholics and people without steady work did not fit with the Nazis' image of the "people's community." They were categorized as "anti-social elements" and sent to concentration camps for re-education (to use the official Nazi term). Lesbian women and sex workers could also fall into this category. From 1938, the "Reich work-shirker" campaign and other measures resulted in large numbers of social outsiders being arrested in waves. In some cases, people were sent directly to concentration camps as preventive detention prisoners immediately after being released from jail, even though they had already served their time. Survivors who were imprisoned as "anti-social elements" in the concentration camps were not recognized as victims of National Socialism until 2020.

"Career criminals"

Triangle color: green

Possible abbreviations: *BV/B.V.* (for *Berufsverbrecher* – "career criminal") and *P.V.H* (for *polizeiliche Vorbeugehaft* – "police preventive detention") or *PH* (for *Polizeihhaft* – "police detention")

Under the pretext of fighting criminality, the Nazis employed extreme measures early on against people who were known to have broken the law multiple times or who were suspected of leading a criminal lifestyle. No provisions were made for such people to return to society. Instead, they were to be imprisoned as a preventive measure and had to remain in custody even after having served their time. The severity of the crime was not the determining factor here; even multiple minor offenses could result in imprisonment in a concentration camp. In many cases, suspicion or rumor alone was enough for someone to be imprisoned. The group of prisoners with green triangles was correspondingly diverse. There were murderers and rapists among them, but most of them were pimps, burglars or swindlers. Even women who had had an abortion, people who had committed crimes of desperation and people who had been convicted of homosexuality multiple times were considered "career criminals." Prisoners who were categorized in this group were not recognized as victims of National Socialism until 2020.

Homosexual prisoners

Triangle color: pink

Possible abbreviations: *§ 175* or *§ 175er* (for Paragraph 175), *Homo*

According to Paragraphs 175 and 175a of the German Criminal Code, sexual relations between men were prohibited in Germany. The Nazis severely persecuted homosexuals and imprisoned many men in concentration camps. Since the stricter laws imposed by the Nazis remained in force in the Federal Republic of Germany and homosexual relations between adult men could be punished with imprisonment even until the late 1960's, many men refused to talk about their concentration camp experiences. It was not until the 1980's that the stories of their persecution by the Nazis began to be told and commemorated.

Lesbian women did not fall under Paragraph § 175. But they too were sometimes persecuted by the National Socialists. In concentration camps, instead of the pink triangle, they were given the black triangle for prisoners who were supposed to be “anti-social elements”.

Jehovah's Witnesses ("Bible Students")

Triangle color: purple

Possible abbreviations: *Bifo* (for *Bibelforscher* – “Bible Students”) or *IBV* (for *Internationale Bibelforschervereinigung* – “International Bible Students’ Association”)

The Nazi regime opposed “Bible Students” – now known as Jehovah’s Witnesses – on religious grounds. Because of their faith, members of this group refused to give the Nazi salute, serve in the military or join Nazi organizations. They were imprisoned in concentration camps on account of this. Although they could have renounced their faith in the camps in order to be released, many of them remained true to their beliefs.

Political prisoners

Triangle color: red

Possible abbreviations: *Pol.* or *Sch* (for *Schutzhaft* – “protective custody”), sometimes combined to *Sch.pol*

Immediately after taking power, the Nazis began to persecute their political opponents. They arrested communists, socialists, social democrats, trade unionists, and other opponents of the regime, and sent them to the early concentration camps. While most of these prisoners were released again after a short while, several thousand men and women were permanently held in concentration camps as political prisoners. The courts also passed prison sentences on tens of thousands of other opponents of the regime in the first years of the Nazi dictatorship. After they had served their time, the Gestapo immediately placed many of them in protective custody. But even a careless comment or the suspicion that someone was politically opposed to the Nazis was enough for people to be held indefinitely as protective custody prisoners. After the start of World War II, the Nazis additionally arrested many people for supposed or actual resistance in the countries occupied by Germany. Almost all non-German prisoners in the concentration camps were forced to wear a red triangle.

Sinti and Roma (“Gypsies”)

Triangle color: brown

Possible abbreviations: *Zig.* or *Z.* (for *Zigeuner* – “Gypsy”)

The Nazis fell back on centuries-old prejudices against the Sinti and Roma people and used them to exclude these minorities. Before the war, most Sinti and Roma people were persecuted as “anti-social elements,” which is why the abbreviation *Z. Aso* (*Zigeuner Asozial* – “Gypsy anti-social element”) is often found on their prisoner documents. Later on they were more severely persecuted for supposedly “racial” reasons: they were forcibly sterilized, placed in “preventive detention” by the criminal investigation police, deported to ghettos in the east and sent to concentration and extermination camps, where they were murdered. In the concentration camps they initially wore the black triangle of “anti-social elements,” but later on they were assigned a brown triangle to identify them as a separate group. It was not until 1982 that the Federal Republic of Germany officially recognized the hundreds of thousands of murdered Sinti and Roma people as victims of Nazi persecution. Many Sinti and Roma people never received any compensation for their persecution.

Jews and people who were defined as such by the Nazis formed a clearly identifiable group in the concentration camps. They did not have their “own” prisoner category, however, but were always officially assigned to one of the above-mentioned categories. In the concentration camps they were forced to wear a yellow triangle underneath the inverted colored triangle denoting their prisoner category, which made the symbol look like a Star of David. In camp administrative documents, a *J* or *Jd* for *Jude* (“Jew”) was usually appended to the prisoner category. While Jewish men and women were usually imprisoned as political opponents or supposed “anti-social elements” in the first years of the Nazi dictatorship, this changed with the pogroms of November 1938, in the wake of which tens of thousands of men were imprisoned for the first time solely because the Nazis defined them as Jews.

Other typical abbreviations for prisoner groups found in the documents in the Arolsen Archives include:

- *AE, AEL* or *EH* for ***Arbeitserziehungshäftlinge*** (“labor re-education prisoners”)
- *ZA* for ***Zivilarbeiter*** (“civilian laborers”) – meaning Central and Eastern European forced laborers who had been imprisoned in a concentration camp on account of prohibited interaction with Germans, accusations of sabotage, supposed “idleness” during work, absence from the workplace or other offenses against the special regulations applicable to them
- *Em* or *E* for ***Emigranten*** (“emigrants”) – meaning German citizens who had initially left the country after 1933 but then returned and were thus suspected of espionage
- *Pf.* for Protestant ***Pfarrer*** (“pastors”) and Catholic ***Priester*** (“priests”)
- *Rsp.* for ***Rotspanier*** (“Red Spaniards”) – meaning republican fighters in the Spanish Civil War who had left Spain after the defeat and been arrested, usually in France after the German occupation
- *J.Ra.* for ***„jüdische Rassenschänder“*** (“Jewish race defiler”) – meaning Jewish men and women (according to Nazi laws) who had had sexual relations with someone who was not Jewish

- *Kg.*, *Kgf.* or *KgF* for foreign ***Kriegsgefangene*** (“prisoners of war”)
- *SV* or *PSV* for “***Sicherungsverwahrte***” (“preventive detention prisoners”) – meaning prison inmates in the “career criminals” category who were transferred to concentration camps from 1942 on Himmler’s orders to perform the heaviest forced labor. Thousands of these prisoners did not survive the concentration camps.

If you are looking for an abbreviation that is not explained here, it is worth checking the USHMM Glossary. This can be found in the Supplementary Material section of the e-Guide or at <https://secure.ushmm.org/individual-research/Glossary.pdf>.