

FORCED LABOR AND "FOREIGN WORKERS" IN THE THIRD REICH

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USAWC CLASS OF 2009

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REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGEForm Approved
OMB No. 0704-0188

Public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing this collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden to Department of Defense, Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports (0704-0188), 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington, VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to any penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number. **PLEASE DO NOT RETURN YOUR FORM TO THE ABOVE ADDRESS.**

1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY) 18-03-2009		2. REPORT TYPE Strategy Research Project		3. DATES COVERED (From - To)	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Forced Labor and "Foreign Workers" in the Third Reich				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S) Colonel Wolfgang G.A. Richter, International Fellow - Germany				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Dr. Robert C. Nation Department of National Security and Strategy				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING / MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) U.S. Army War College 122 Forbes Avenue Carlisle, PA 17013				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Distribution A: Unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES Only a work of the United States Government is not subject to copyright. Based upon the nature of a particular student-author's employment, a paper may not be a work of the United States Government and may, in fact, be protected by copyright.					
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15. SUBJECT TERMS Slave Labor Program, Forced Labor, Prisoner of War, Nazi Regime, Nazi Ideology, Germany, War Economy, Treatment, Working and Living Conditions, Contact to German Population					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT UNCLASSIFIED	b. ABSTRACT UNCLASSIFIED	c. THIS PAGE UNCLASSIFIED			19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER (include area code)
			UNLIMITED	28	

USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

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by

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ABSTRACT

AUTHOR: Colonel Wolfgang G.A. Richter
TITLE: Forced Labor and "Foreign Workers" in the Third Reich
FORMAT: Strategy Research Project
DATE: 18 March 2009 WORD COUNT: 5,407 PAGES: 28
KEY TERMS: Slave Labor Program, Forced Labor, Prisoner of War, Nazi Regime, Nazi Ideology, Germany, War Economy, Treatment, Working and Living Conditions, Contact to German Population.
CLASSIFICATION: Unclassified

The introduction of a foreign labor force was a central strategic economic and military factor for Hitler's Nazi regime. By late autumn of 1941, if not before, the entire German war economy had become heavily and irreversibly dependent on foreign labor. There is no evidence of a masterplan for a comprehensive foreign labor program in Germany before World War II. The employment of foreign workers was rather an emergency solution to the manpower shortage during the war; this solution then developed from voluntary foreign labor to forced labor.

Although the Nazi regime relaxed some regulations towards the end of the war, it never abandoned its ideological racism. The treatment of forced laborers by various Nazi agencies, as well as by employers was based on the regime's racist ideology and was passively accepted by the civilian population. The German population's attitude was indeed characterized by their indifference towards the fate of forced laborers and their tacit acceptance of the inequality prevailing in the country. Consequently, the German population became a reticent enabler of the Third Reich's racist ideology. This

passive acceptance of the regime's racism is one big factor in the success of its program of forced labor.

FORCED LABOR AND “FOREIGN WORKERS” IN THE THIRD REICH

The Nazi regime in Germany presided over one of the darkest episodes of German history which culminated in World War II. This total war had a huge impact on the daily lives of civilians all over Europe. Modern weaponry destructed the infrastructure, killed and injured hundreds of thousands of civilians, and devastated living conditions. Additionally, all economically useful resources were drained from the occupied countries, as well as from the German hinterland.

The German industrial base was highly dependent on four factors:

- Access to raw material and other critical resources
- Availability of sufficient manufacturing capacities
- Functional infrastructure and transportation capacities
- Availability of a large labor force

Only a well-coordinated and fine-tuned interaction among these four factors kept the German war economy running at a high level. The introduction of a foreign labor force thus became a central strategic economic factor. During the final years of war, the German arms industry would have failed without its foreign work force.¹ “In August 1944, there were 7,615,970 foreign workers officially registered on the employment rolls in the territory of the ‘Greater German Reich’; 1.9 million of them were prisoners of war, 5.7 million civilian workers. ... By the late autumn of 1941, if not before, the entire German war economy had become heavily and irreversibly dependent on foreign labor.”²

After the 1930s Great Depression, Nazi Germany started to build up a very capable and highly developed industry that was already preparing for a war to gain European supremacy. Especially in the then hi-tech fields, like aeronautics, chemicals, and tool-making, well-educated civil engineers and a creative, active and highly skilled labor force supported this industrial enterprise.

The high demand for soldiers, which by 1944 had drawn 13 million from the German work force, resulted in a corresponding demand for replacements in the work force. The relative low number of female workers who entered German industry from 1939 to 1944, between 14.1 and 14.9 million, never approached the Allied powers' employment of women.³ Nazi ideology looked askance at the employment of German women in traditional men's jobs.

Scope of this Paper

This SRP reviews relevant literature⁴ to analyze certain aspects of forced labor during the Third Reich. It focuses on Germany's strategic requirement to employ foreign workers in order to continue with the war. It discusses some ideological aspects of the Nazi regime which laid the foundation for the different categories of workers and describes their working and living conditions. It assumes that the treatment of foreign workers by official and unofficial authorities and agencies of the Third Reich, as well as by employers and the general civilian population, may reveal the regime's aims and offers insight into National Socialist Germany's economy. This SRP finally focuses on Third Reich's civilians' response to the regime's increasing dependence on forced labor.

The number of foreign laborers rose significantly shortly after the outbreak of World War II. Thus the percentage of workers from European countries occupied by the

German Reich was disproportionately high. However, this SRP focuses only on laborers who worked in the Greater German Reich between 1939 and 1945 and who came from countries occupied by German troops during the war. Moreover, this SRP does not cover those persons who were detained in concentration camps and forced to work. It is, however, interesting to note that despite an urgent need for labor, the Nazis continued to exterminate able-bodied individuals.

The sources cited in this paper approach this issue of forced labor in different ways. This SRP thus offers various perspectives on the issue.

- Hans Pfahmann's relatively uncritical description and analysis of the respective records of the official party and government agencies conveys the impression that the employment of foreign workers was conducted on a legal basis. He ascribes subsequent abuses of foreign workers as simply a result of wartime exigencies.
- In contrast, Joachim Lehmann analyzes the issue in the tradition of Marxist historiography. He claims that the suppression and exploitation of entire masses of people had been planned from the beginning and that it corresponded to the "ideal of German monopolies". He views the policies of enslavement and extermination as a logical continuation of the policy of Prussian German governments in the decades before World War I.⁵
- Ulrich Herbert argues that Germany's employment of foreign workers – which had not been planned before the war – developed from foreign labor to forced labor and that the German population played a significant role in this development.

- In contrast, Anton Grossmann cites the examples of Soviet and Polish workers, whom the National Socialist regime regarded as no more than expendable factors of production. He contends that the civilian population defied the regime's efforts of total regimentation regarding the treatment of foreign workers.⁶

According to Mark Spoerer, forced labor has two main characteristics: first, workers are bound by a lawful, indissoluble contract for an unforeseeable period of time; and second, workers have practically no way to influence working conditions. German workers in the Third Reich were subject to first conditions, but not to the second.⁷ The German terms for "foreign worker" (*Fremdarbeiter*) and "forced labor" (*Zwangsarbeiter*) are used differently in the literature. However, because of fluid boundaries and the assumption of different concepts of "coercion", this SRP uses the term "forced laborer" for all those who came from an occupied country and who were employed as workers in the geographical area of the "Greater German Reich".

Conditions and Development of the Employment of Forced Laborers in the German Economy

The great demand for workers in the German economy at the beginning of the war in 1939 required the National Socialist regime to take quick measures in order to solve this problem. The employment of forced laborers as a main objective of the war of "German monopoly capital"⁸, as assumed by Eichholz⁹ and then adopted by Lehmann¹⁰, would have required the existence of a plan developed long before the war. Actually, the Nazi regime did not want to employ foreigners within Germany for ideological reasons. The regime feared political infiltration. Foreign workers violated the Nazi "blood

and soil” theory and the Nazis were wary of the “racial dangers” posed by permanent foreign ethnicities in Third Reich territory.

As a matter of fact, plans for the employment of prisoners of war, particularly in agriculture, were made before World War II. They were based on the experiences of World War I. However, there is no evidence of preparations for employment of forced laborers before the war. In fact, Nazi leaders considered significant measures regarding the employment of foreigners only shortly before the beginning of the war. These measures came too late to be effectively implemented.¹¹

	A	B	C	D
1		Numbers 1.1.1945	total Numbers 1939-1945	out of which had civilian status
2	Poland	34,691	300,000	205,000
3	Belgium	57,392	65,000	0
4	France	637,564	1,285,000	220,000
5	UK	101,564	105,000	0
6	Serbia	100,830	110,000	0
7	Soviet Union	972,388	1,950,000	couple of thousands
8	Italy	32,945	495,000	460,000
9	Others	253,241	275,000	0
10	Sum	2,190,615	4,585,000	885,000

Table 1. Prisoners of War employed as part of the forced laborers 1939-1945¹²

Therefore, much of the Nazi program was improvised. But in time it became comprehensive. The long, brutal, and costly war obviously created unexpected demands. “The German foreign labor program during World War II was an emergency solution to the manpower shortage. A thorough search of documents after the war uncovered no masterplan for a comprehensive foreign labor program.”¹³

After the war began, however, Nazi Germany quickly established an organization, whose mission was to satisfy the demand for labor in selected branches of the German economy, such as agriculture, and not only with prisoners of war. German

leaders concluded that there would be no quick end of the war and, therefore no quick return of German soldiers. To sustain the German economy, German leaders agreed that the nation must employ forced laborers. Thereafter, industrial leaders demanded increased employment of forced laborers; they sought to exploit this opportunity to use cheap labor. In effect, their economic interests prevailed over the Nazi party's ideological principles. Forced laborers then became a cornerstone of German industry. Germany's war economy would certainly have lost considerable production without forced laborers. In fact, Germany had no alternative other than an early surrender. Forced labor became an important factor in Germany's ability to continue the war.

	Civilian German Workforce			Foreign Workers incl. POW	German Military			Sum of available Human Resource
	Male	Female	Sum		Drafted	Losses	Active	
1939	24.5	14.6	39.1	0.3	1.4	-	1.4	39.4
1940	20.4	14.4	34.8	1.2	5.7	0.1	5.6	36.0
1941	19	14.1	33.1	3.0	7.4	0.2	7.2	36.1
1942	16.9	14.4	31.3	4.2	9.4	0.8	8.6	35.5
1943	15.5	14.8	30.3	6.3	11.2	1.7	9.5	36.6
1944	14.2	14.8	29.0	7.1	12.4	3.3	9.1	36.1
(Sep)1944	13.5	14.9	28.4	7.5	13.0	3.9	9.1	35.9

Table 2. German Human Resources 1939-1944¹⁴

We can properly conclude then, that the employment of foreign forced laborers in Germany was neither a pre-planned program of the Nazi party nor a declared aim of the German industrialists. It had not been prepared long beforehand. It rather seemed to be a process, which arose from the demand for labor to achieve the war objectives. Mutual acceptance between the political leadership and the party leadership, on one hand, and the industrial economy, on the other hand, made forced labor - a form of "slavery" - an integral part of the Third Reich.

Nazi Ideology and Treatment of Forced Laborers

The National Socialist racist ideology and the Nazi Germans' claim to superiority arose as an "expression of a cracker-barrel-philosophy [*Stammtischphilosophie*]. In its details, this approach was characterized by conceit, prejudice and imperialist interest and declared to be the political guideline, ..." ¹⁵ The Nazi claim of Germans' racial superiority had clear consequences for the work life of forced laborers and for German workers. The "regime of forced labor" should be seen neither solely as the creation of the "German industrial monopolies" ¹⁶ nor as a phenomenon of the political system. The ideological concerns which the Nazi regime had at the beginning of the war regarding the employment of forced laborers were wiped away by terror and discrimination after a short time. Further, any improvement of the workers living conditions through the primacy of performance, as demanded by the economy, was staunchly resisted by the Reich Security Main Office (*RSHA*). However, there is no single, direct cause for the extreme abuses that these forced laborers endured. The meticulous national differentiation of forced laborers caused total confusion. Although it was not accepted in all of its aspects by the German population, it led to the development of a great number of differences, which ranged from the type of work to be performed, to the payment the workers received, and to their treatment by the German population. These differences were increasingly blurred as the war went on, but they never disappeared entirely.

The changes in regulations regarding the treatment of the workers from Eastern Europe (*Ostarbeiter*) and the modified official opinion regarding this issue by the end of the war did not signify an abandonment of basic racial considerations. The small doctrinal change after Stalingrad from an ideologically driven Soviet "*Untermenschen*" designation of Ukrainian, Russian, and Belarusian "employees" was based on a

pragmatic approach to gain European solidarity for the regime against the “Bolshevistic hordes.”¹⁷

The treatment of forced laborers simply developed over time. Due to the difficult economic situation in Germany after World War I and as a result of the Great Depression, employment of foreign workers was limited, which fueled the racial ambitions of the Nazi regime. At the beginning of World War II, the Blitzkrieg-strategy seemed to offer the possibility of a rapid victory. At this stage, racial considerations played a major role and set the foundation for “official” inhuman treatment of forced laborers. As the war entered a second phase and the economic situation demanded a larger and more efficient labor force, economic considerations became more important than ideological ones. However, we can discern no consistent evolution of policy regarding the employment of forced laborers throughout the entire period. Rather, we discern a policy that was flexibly adapted to the respective requirements and that tended to disregard “racial issues” because of economic necessities.

Treatment of Different Nationalities

At the beginning of the war the Nazi regime established a system of forced labor, which included voluntary foreign workers from allied or friendly nations, prisoners of war, inmates of concentration camps, and laborers from occupied nations. However, the treatment of workers was even more complex and included different regulations for workers from Western European countries, Southern and Southeastern European countries, Czechs and Slovaks, as well as workers from Poland and the Soviet Union. Eastern forced laborers (*Ostarbeiter*) were discriminated against and harassed by compulsion to openly wear distinguishing emblems marking them as Polish or Russian.

They were also forbidden to use public transport; to visit cinemas, theaters, restaurants, or even religious services. They were not allowed to leave their workplace without permission. They were subject to a curfew after work and were restricted in their social contacts.¹⁸ With regard to payment, Polish and Russian forced laborers had to pay an additional 15 percent of their income as a social security contribution (*Sozialausgleichs-abgabe*). As a result, their wages were significantly less than those of other foreigners or Germans. Additionally, they had to pay for food and lodging.¹⁹

	A	B	C	D
1		Numbers 30.9.1944	out of which female	total Numbers 1939-1945
2	Baltic States	44,799	36.50%	75,000
3	Belgium	199,437	14.70%	375,000
4	Bulgaria	16,257	12.60%	30,000
5	Denmark	15,970	23.70%	80,000
6	France	646,421	6,6%	1,050,000
7	Greece	15,658	20.00%	35,000
8	Italy	287,347	7.80%	960,000
9	Croatia	60,153	28.40%	100,000
10	Netherlands	254,544	8.20%	475,000
11	Poland	1,375,817	34.40%	1,600,000
12	Switzerland	17,014	30.40%	30,000
13	Serbia	37,607	22.40%	100,000
14	Slovakia	37,550	44.50%	100,000
15	Soviet Union	2,461,163	49.30%	2,775,000
16	scechia	276,340	16.10%	355,000
17	Hungary	24,263	29.10%	45,000
18	Others	206,633	31.50%	250,000
19	Sum Foreigner	5,976,673(<i>sic</i>)	16.50%	8,435,000

Table 3. Foreign Laborers in Germany 1939-1945²⁰

In 1942 the situation for foreign laborers from Western or friendly countries was “quite similar to German workers.” Nonetheless, they were forced to stay in Germany, and subjected to constant discrimination and threat of punishment. Forced laborers from Eastern Europe and those from Italy (since summer 1943), on the other hand, suffered

in every regard – from poor diets, low wages, inadequate lodging and clothing, deficient medical care, and other plights.²¹

In general, workers' living and working conditions differed greatly, depending on their nationality and qualifications, political considerations, status as POW or civilian laborer. Also, industries or even different companies in the same industry discriminated between workers and treated them differently. Workers in urban centers encountered different treatment than workers in rural areas. However, seeking to enhance the quality of produced goods, employers and government agencies tried to improve the living and working conditions for all forced laborers. On the other hand, the realities of the war worsened conditions for everyone, not least because of the Allied bombing raids. As a result of these raids, working and living conditions for all residents aggravated, no matter what their nationality.²²

Treatment of Forced Laborers in the Workplace

Specific Characteristics of the Agricultural Workplace. Before 1939, Polish seasonal workers had to be treated well to assure their voluntary return the next year. Based on this history and personal experience of the farmers, it was more difficult to treat forced laborers badly in the field of agriculture as part of the Nazi machinery. Moreover, forced labor in an agricultural environment continued to be of different quality than forced labor in industry and manufacturing trade, based on a variety of factors.

Agrarian work is not like factory work. For one thing, it is more difficult to monitor and control workers in an agricultural field than those on a factory assembly line. Also, the concept of "lodging in camps" as a reinforcing factor of control and terror could rarely be copied to the agrarian sector. Further, peasant employers were unwilling to

provide Nazi supervision of their field hands.²³ Despite all this, the regulations regarding the treatment of forced laborers put considerable restrictions on their lives and work. Even if these regulations were not rigorously applied, this created an atmosphere of arbitrariness. Despite isolated cases of religious solidarity and the fact that differences between conservative peasants and National Socialist proletarian workers sometimes had positive effects, overall the German rural population, too, was a rather passive participant in German domestic policy. But some fanatic Nazi officials enforced the regime's racist policies in all their vigor in the agricultural domain.²⁴

Specific Characteristics of the Industrial Workplace. While forced laborers were originally intended to be employed predominantly in the field of agriculture, they soon were also employed to an increasing extent in the field of industry, particularly in armament factories. Since reprisals and punishment had shown only little effect on the workers, the companies then sought to improve the living conditions of forced laborers in order to satisfy their own rising demand for labor and to increase the quantity of work and – what was even more important – to enhance the workers' performance. According to Herbert, the industrial companies found themselves in a conflict of interests with ideologically motivated circles, which practiced the “Lesser Human Being” (*Untermensch*) philosophy. This meant that warehousemen, foremen, and factory/plant security units were mostly recruited among reliable party members.²⁵ The factory camps, which served not only to house forced laborers in a kind of “prison” but also allowed for their permanent supervision, complemented the system of suppression and exploitation practiced at the workplace by means of arbitrary and inhuman treatment.

Thus, in many aspects a discrepancy developed between the improved productivity and increasing integration of forced laborers into the production process on the one hand, and the strict, rigorous regimentation and mistreatments of workers, on the other. However, a factory manager had room to maneuver. It was his responsibility to decide on the standard for clothing and to request allocations from the appropriate authorities. Since employers had to pay for assigned forced laborers, they could negotiate with the camp authorities to improve the food situation as well as the hygienic and medical situations, due to the requirement for better working performances.

According to Herbert, another factor is important: Given the ideological “relationship of dominance” between German superiors and forced laborers, the Nazi regime tried to not only prevent solidarity between German workers and forced laborers but also to integrate the German workers as enactors of imperialistic and racist policy in its machinery of power. A continuation of the ideological war and the practical realization of the principle of the master race took place particularly in the mining industry, where physical violence had a long tradition and where brutality seemed to be common practice.²⁶ The same is true to some extent for the agricultural sector: the German farmer who had beaten up his German farmhand did the same with Poles.²⁷ Thus, in certain situations Nazi ideology simply “legitimized” traditional mistreatments of workers.

It seems that the German population tolerated the “superiority of the Germans” and accepted the abuses of forced laborers and the “privileges” they gained from this situation.

The Working Conditions of Forced Laborers

Work Supervision. Assuming that the productivity of German workers and foreign laborers was different for various reasons, the Nazis established a control system. This included not only clearly measurable output but also integrated the German workers into a system of operational control. For instance, the Germans' wages often depended directly on the performance of forced laborers, or Germans were assigned the function of foremen, whose authority also applied to situations beyond the workplace.²⁸ Besides doing their own work, German workers thus became controlling agents for the output of their companies and at the same time an executive instrument of the Nazi system. Consequently, an atmosphere developed which gave forced laborers the impression of being permanently observed and controlled. Moreover, reactions to a bad performance were generally characterized by terroristic beatings, slow starvation, and other brutal measures.

Payment. Different salaries of forced workers depended on their nationality. Workers were thus compensated on as much on the basis of nationality as on the basis of productivity. For instance, Eastern workers received a net salary that did not provide more than pocket money. Consequently, in this aspect, too, unequal treatment was practiced. The employment of forced workers was attractive for the companies not only because of low wage costs but also because it allowed exploitation that went much further and affected, for example, working hours and social security benefits.

Apart from low wages, the exploitation of forced laborers at the workplace had consequences for their quality of life. They often were confined to workers camp sites, which exposed them to more reprisals, corruption, and arbitrary treatment by their watchdogs.

However, Grossmann observes that in some areas, forced laborers were hardly worse off than Germans in comparable positions with regard to their remuneration.²⁹ In general, particularly in industrial and urban centers, payment of wages became more and more limited. Thus remuneration in kind, particularly the granting of food as a bonus, was needed by forced laborers in order to survive. In this regard forced laborers were practically reduced to slaves. Actually, the term “slave worker” (*Sklavenarbeiter*) is used in the literature extensively.³⁰ According to Eichholz, there was another issue – taxes – that weighed heavily, particularly on forced laborers from Poland and the Soviet Union.³¹ Apart from the deliberate unequal treatment of Germans and forced laborers, another rationale, although secondary at first sight, seems to be quite plausible. Heavily taxed and underpaid forced laborers were, in fact underwriting the costs of Hitler’s war. An increased labor efficiency of forced laborers would probably have been possible by giving them a performance-oriented payment, but this would have meant a partial equality of Germans and forced laborers, which was in total contradiction with the Nazi regime’s fundamental ideology.

System of Punishment. In the Third Reich, all “work-related offenses” were dealt with according to a complex official system of punishment. According to Herbert, this system was divided into different levels, which ranged from “in-plant penalties” to the death penalty by order of court martial.³² In addition to these official measures, the “unofficial system of punishment” was also instrumental, particularly as factory security forces used ‘raiding squads’ to spread fear and uncertainty. These “means of punishment” were designed to perfect the system of repression against forced laborers

and further, to show that any attempt of forced laborers to revolt would be punished quickly and severely.

The companies' strategy was to keep the punishment of forced laborers in their own hands and thus away from official authorities. In the final analysis they made themselves stooges for the Nazi terror machinery and became accomplices who incurred a considerable part of responsibility for the inhuman treatment of forced laborers.

The Private Life of Forced Laborers

The relationship between labor efficiency and the living and working conditions of forced laborers was emphasized only very late by the regime and upon the insistence of the commercial enterprises. Fundamental differences are evident in the treatment of forced laborers in different areas of the economy and in the groups of forced laborers according to their nationality. There were also regional differences in the treatment of forced laborers.

Accommodation. While forced laborers employed in agriculture generally lived at their employer's farms, forced laborers of industrial companies were usually accommodated in private lodgings and increasingly in camps, where prisoners of war and Russian workers lived right from the beginning. At the beginning of the war, special housing for foreign workers was not deemed necessary, since the stay of foreigners was seen as a temporary issue. With the increasing requirement to accommodate a large number of foreign workers over a longer period, housing became more important. By the end of 1942, the number of workers from foreign countries had doubled within one year, almost two-thirds of them arriving from Eastern Europe. Accommodating so

many people was too much for the authorities, so the burden fell on the Russian workers themselves. However, the camps were established, according to Grossmann, primarily because of the security concerns of the Secret State Police (*Gestapo*), who perceived dangers mainly for National Socialist morale posed by female foreigners who were living alone.³³ As forced laborers were herded into camps and with the resulting militarization of camp life, the regime not only sought to separate forced laborers from the civilian population but also to increase their observation and control. Forced laborers were then under permanent pressure even outside their workplace.

According to Herbert, military and civilian commandants of the camps created conditions that were largely based on fear, corruption and repression. They actually invited commandants to abuse their powers.³⁴ Moreover, this led to an arbitrary system so that repressions could take place without repercussion.

By the end of the war, official authorities called for general improvements for forced laborers - specifically for the living conditions of Eastern workers, for example by moderating or removing individual restrictions. However, their calls did not account for the real situation at that time. Constant air raids on industrial and urban centers and industrial zones made an improvement of the living conditions almost impossible. Accommodations for both Germans and forced laborers became a critical challenge due to the destruction caused by constant bombing. However, forced laborers had no relatives, friends, or neighbors who could help. They relied on the basic accommodation provided by their employers, the German government, or other organizations.

Moreover, as indicated by Herbert, the treatment of forced laborers at the lowest level gathered a momentum of its own in view of the imminent defeat and was characterized by the Germans giving free reign to their anger and bitterness.³⁵ Also, we must suspect that the harsh and brutal conditions during the “accommodation in camps” were partly the result of the initiatives of some overeager commandants. The main reason for bad treatment, however, seems to be the Nazis’ “racist ideological” claim to power. The Nazis wanted to use foreign laborers to demonstrate “superiority” of the German people. This onerous effect was not entirely different from the Nazi will to exterminate others.

Meeting Basic Needs. There was hardly any lack of food in the agricultural environment and for Western workers. But Eastern workers employed in industry did not receive sufficient food; on the contrary, their food rations were even reduced as the war went on. To see these actions merely as a result of “the greed of capital for profit”, as stated by Eichholz, would probably be too simple.³⁶ According to Herbert, the treatment of Eastern workers, who not only received insufficient food and medical care but who also even had to pay for their own clothing, was not an organizational problem. Rather, it was a political decision. Even so, the Nazis’ consideration for public opinion among the German population was of utmost importance.³⁷ According to Grossmann, medical treatment was only given in cases of contagious diseases in order to protect the German population and in order to separate and send back sick workers who were unfit to work.³⁸

Moreover, leisure time was regimented. Many activities, particularly for workers from Russia and Poland, such as visits to restaurants, theaters, and churches were

completely prohibited or at least severely restricted.³⁹ Grossmann informs us that the “care” for foreign workers was intended to apply to all aspects of their lives. It too served the purpose of surveillance and control.⁴⁰ On one hand, this attitude can be explained by certain “security concerns”, but on the other also by the demand of the “lower German classes” to not allow foreigners things that even Germans themselves were hardly able to obtain. Altogether, the satisfactions of basic needs – at least in the case of Eastern workers – were provided to merely serve the purpose of restoring their working capacity. After the commercial enterprises had recognized that without better provision of food and care, they could not expect any increase in the performance and efficiency at the workplace, they began to provide additional food on their own initiative. Then, contrary to the regulations, they also created better conditions. An official decree followed shortly directing improvements in the living conditions of Eastern workers. This decree, which strong supporters of the Nazi regime partially approved of for economic reasons, met with strong objections.⁴¹ The rather strong racist lobby within the Nazi regime and particularly in the Reich Security Main Office (*RSHA*), opposed any improvements. Further, incapacity, corruption, and profiteering at the lowest level in the camps prevented many improvements from benefitting those who needed them.

Contacts Outside the Workplace between Germans and Forced Laborers

When considering the private relationships among the German population and forced laborers, it was generally forbidden for Germans to have contact with foreigners. So a system of repression evolved; its effects should not be underestimated. Even insignificant offences such as “friendly contact” could result in imprisonment of German citizens. However, this ban was not totally enforceable particularly in the countryside.

Nazi officials could not maintain reliable oversight upon “all” aspects of life. But considering the legal requirements, it is difficult to agree with Grossmann, who concludes that there was a certain integration of the foreigners into everyday German life due to the development of a particular “social environment” among foreign workers in some major cities.⁴²

Similar to prohibited contacts with prisoners of war, which were subject to punishment,⁴³ there also was established a ban on contacts with forced laborers of any kind outside the work environment. According to Herbert, the introduction of discriminatory regulations for Polish forced laborers was not so much to serve police or security-related purposes, rather it was a racist policy.⁴⁴ The Germans’ treatment of Poles simply continued Germany’s military conquest of Poland. “When not remaining true to one’s principals and having to let Poles get in for economic reasons, at least it had to be allowed to mistreat them.”⁴⁵ Based on these discriminatory regulations, changes of denunciation of the Poles became very common. They were usually characterized by base motives or aimed at denouncing unpopular neighbors and colleagues.

In many areas, attitudes towards forced laborers changed because personal experiences often did not corroborate images promulgated by the propaganda machinery. For instance, the German population was astonished by the religiosity, educational level, family orientation, and particularly the efficiency of Eastern workers. According to Herbert, this recognition led to a higher esteem of Russian forced laborers in the eyes of many Germans.⁴⁶ When existing regulations were violated and the violations were reported, an exemplary punishment was imposed, even if these

discriminatory policies had been long since become outdated in practice and officials at least tacitly tolerated their violation.

However, the system proved uncompromising in cases of sexual relationships between forced laborers and Germans, because these relationships shook the racial ideology to its very foundations. This type of violation was punished with measures ranging from denunciations reminiscent of the Middle Ages to severe sentences and lynching.

Facing their own social difficulties and the demolition of German infrastructure by air raids, difficulties in providing for basic needs, the reports of loved ones killed in action, and an increasing uncertainty about the future, the German population did not acknowledge the even more difficult situation of forced laborers. Though it is obviously difficult to generalize too broadly, we can only conclude, that wartime Germans had little interest in the fate of forced laborers. They tacitly accepted the regime's racism and the ensuing discrimination in everyday life.

Summary of the Findings and Interpretation with a View to the Topic

First, the employment of Polish workers in German agriculture, the origins of German employment of foreign labor, from which basically all classes in Germany benefited, can be regarded squarely in the tradition of German imperialism prior to World War II.

Second, the employment of forced laborers with the objective of enslaving them was not intended from the beginning; it was not a part of Germany's prewar planning.

Third, only in response to the insistence of Industrial and agricultural circles, was the employment of forced laborers intensified in order to meet the wartime economic requirements of the National Socialist regime.

Fourth, ideologically motivated leaders of the Nazi regime added regulations regarding treatment of foreign workers immediately after the first employment of forced laborers. However, after some time, these regulations conflicted with the priorities of large-scale industrial groups, which only were interested in the workers' efficiency, although they had initially participated in the inhuman treatment and the resulting debilitation of forced laborers and even partially enforced the aggressive regulations. Although the Nazi regime relaxed some regulations towards the end of the war, it never abandoned its racial ideological policies, only pushed them into the background for some time for wartime economic considerations. Therefore, the regime's basic view regarding the treatment of forced laborers should be assessed over time: It developed from an attitude based on exploitation and extermination that assumed a post-war order for Europe under German rule; in response to the economic requirements of the war, forced laborers were treated somewhat better, but the racist policies persisted.

Fifth, treatment of forced laborers and their living and working conditions differed considerably, depending on nationality, qualifications, and status (POW or forced/voluntary civilian laborer). Regional aspects, branch of industry, location of workplace and living accommodations, as well as individual treatment by employers and supervising staff, added to the differences in treatment of forced laborers.

Sixth, the acceptance of the German population – which directly witnessed the employment of forced laborers – had considerable influence on the execution of the

established system. The German population's attitude was characterized by its relative indifference towards the fate of forced laborers and its tacit acceptance of the inequality prevailing in the country. Consequently, the German population became a factor, which although passive, enabled the whole spectrum of Third Reich racism to pervade everyday German life.

Endnotes

¹ Andreas Heusler, *Ausländereinsatz – Zwangsarbeit für die Münchner Kriegswirtschaft 1939-1945* (München: Heinrich Hugendubel Verlag, 1996), 9.

² Ulrich Herbert, *Fremdarbeiter – Politik und Praxis des "Ausländer-Einsatzes" in der Kriegswirtschaft des Dritten Reiches* (Bonn: Verlag J. H. W. Dietz Nachfolger, 1985), 1.

³ Wolfgang Schneider, *Frauen unterm Hakenkreuz* (Hamburg: n.p., 2001), 158, quoted in Kurt Bauer, *Nationalsozialismus* (Wien, Köln, Weimar: Böhlau Verlag, 2008), 401.

⁴ The works cited deal partially or comprehensively with the topic of "foreign workers" and forced labor in Germany during the Third Reich and were used to work on the given topic.

⁵ Joachim Lehmann, "Ausländerbeschäftigung und Fremdarbeiterpolitik im faschistischen Deutschland," in *Auswanderer, Wanderarbeiter, Gastarbeiter*, ed. Klaus J. Bade (Ostfildern: Scripta Mercaturae Verlag, 1984), 581-583.

⁶ Anton Grossmann, "Polen und Sowjetrussen als Arbeiter in Bayern 1939 – 1945," *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* 24 (1984): 395.

⁷ Mark Spoerer, *Zwangsarbeit unter dem Hakenkreuz* (Stuttgart, München: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 2001), 15.

⁸ "State monopoly capitalism" is a Marxist theory that explains an environment where the state and monopoly industry work closely together to protect the business. In the context of the German Third Reich, Marxist authors tried to prove that WW II was a result of the German industrial monopolies aiming for industrial/economical control over Europe.

⁹ Dietrich Eichholz, *Geschichte der Deutschen Kriegswirtschaft – 1939-1945* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1969), 88.

¹⁰ Lehmann, "Ausländerbeschäftigung und Fremdarbeiterpolitik," 581.

¹¹ Herbert, "Fremdarbeiter," 37-38.

¹² Spoerer, "Zwangsarbeit unter dem Hakenkreuz," 221.

¹³ Edward L. Homze, *Foreign Labor in NAZI Germany* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967), 13.

¹⁴ Hans Pfahmann, "Fremdarbeiter und Kriegsgefangene in der deutschen Kriegswirtschaft 1939 – 1945," *Beiträge zur Wehrforschung*, 16/17 (1968): 228.

¹⁵ Herbert, "Fremdarbeiter," 53.

¹⁶ Eichholz, "Geschichte der Deutschen Kriegswirtschaft," 287. In this context Eichholz claims that the inhuman exploitation and the "monopolies" profits resulting from it were desired and established by those very "monopolies" and that they were not the result of any pressure to employ foreign laborers, as has been claimed by them in their defense.

¹⁷ Spoerer, "Zwangsarbeit unter dem Hakenkreuz," 127.

¹⁸ Eichholz, "Geschichte der Deutschen Kriegswirtschaft," 98-99.

¹⁹ Cornelia Rauh-Kühne, "Hitlers Hehler? Unternehmerprofite und Zwangsarbeiterlöhne," *Historische Zeitschrift*, 275/1 (2002): 17, 33.

²⁰ Spoerer, "Zwangsarbeit unter dem Hakenkreuz," 222.

²¹ Herbert, "Fremdarbeiter," 354.

²² Herbert, "Fremdarbeiter," 285-288.

²³ Grossmann, "Polen und Sowjetrussen," 395.

²⁴ Anton Grossmann, *Fremd und Zwangsarbeiter*. Providing several examples, Grossmann describes in his work the extreme measures taken by individual officials in Bavaria.

²⁵ Herbert, "Fremdarbeiter," 196.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 143.

²⁷ Grossmann, "Fremd und Zwangsarbeiter," 585.

²⁸ Herbert, "Fremdarbeiter," 276.

²⁹ Grossmann, "Fremd und Zwangsarbeiter," 585.

³⁰ Most authors, like Herbert, Lehmann, and Bauer, use the term "Sklavenarbeiter" with regard to specific conditions. However, this term needs differentiation. Spoerer states: "In English literature inmates of Concentration Camps (KZ) as well as the Jewish forced laborers are also labeled as slave workers. ... Slave holders in recent history, ... , had an interest to maintain the working capacity of their slaves. This cannot be confirmed with regard to the relationship between SS and KZ inmates. Spoerer, "Zwangsarbeit unter dem Hakenkreuz," 17.

³¹ Eichholz, "Geschichte der Deutschen Kriegswirtschaft," 217.

³² Herbert, "Fremdarbeiter," 214.

³³ Grossmann, "*Fremd und Zwangsarbeiter*," 596.

³⁴ Herbert, "*Fremdarbeiter*," 204.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 292.

³⁶ Eichholz, "*Geschichte der Deutschen Kriegswirtschaft*," 212

³⁷ Herbert, "*Fremdarbeiter*," 204.

³⁸ Grossmann, "*Fremd und Zwangsarbeiter*," 608.

³⁹ Herbert, "*Fremdarbeiter*," 73 and 108 and Grossmann, "*Polen und Sowjetrussen*," 391

⁴⁰ Grossmann, "*Polen und Sowjetrussen*," 390.

⁴¹ Herbert, "*Fremdarbeiter*," 231.

⁴² Grossmann, "*Polen und Sowjetrussen*," 387.

⁴³ Pfahmann, "*Fremdarbeiter und Kriegsgefangene*," 190.

⁴⁴ Herbert, "*Fremdarbeiter*," 74.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 279.