

# ARBEITSEINSATZ

*The following has been taken, with permission, from **Arbeit, Volkstum, Weltanschauung** by Prof. Dr. Ulrich Herbert of Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg, Germany, foremost authority on the forced-labor deployment program of nazi-Germany during the second world war.*

*Translation by Alexander van Gorp.*

# The *Ausländer-Einsatz* in the German war economy, 1939-1945

by

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The national-socialist *Ausländer-Einsatz* (deployment of foreigners) between 1939 and 1945 represents the largest mass utilization of foreign forced labor in history since the end of forcedry during the 19th century. Reports show that in August 1944, 7.8 million foreign workers and prisoners of war were involved in the *Arbeitseinsatz* (labor deployment) in the *Großdeutschen Reich* (Great German Reich) and, in addition to these, approximately 500,000 mostly foreign concentration camp inmates. As a result, some 30 percent of the white-color workers and laborers of the Reich's entire economy were foreigners who had been brought into the Reich as part of the *Arbeitseinsatz*, mostly by force. At the same time the *Ausländer-Einsatz* had neither been planned nor prepared for by the national-socialist leadership prior to the beginning of the war.

Shortly before the start of the war a memorandum of the office for Economic and Armaments Affairs of the German armed forces indicated that three major bottlenecks existed in the economic armament preparation for war: foreign exchange, specific raw materials and labor. For foreign exchange and raw materials a solution was available. After the blitzkrieg concept, the Reich's resources would be supplemented from the supplies of the defeated nations. This concept had already proven itself in the case of Austria and Czechoslovakia and would be confirmed during the period 1939 to 1941. The problem of utilization of the labor force was more problematic since in this case, apart from economic considerations, security-police related and above all philosophical factors played a role. There was a shortage of approximately 1.2 million workers in the *Großdeutschen Reich* and a further increase of this requirement after the start of the war was to be expected.

Two possibilities presented themselves for consideration: on the one hand the use of German women in major proportions, as had taken place during the first world war; on the other the importation of large numbers of workers from the occupied countries. Both however met with disapproval from the regime's leaders. The utilization of German women had led to considerable

internal political destabilization and dissatisfaction. In addition, this policy would have presented a sensitive violation of the national-socialist concepts with respect to women and socio-political philosophy. To bring millions of foreign workers, especially Poles, to be employed in the Reich would seriously conflict with the ethnological principles of national-socialism, according to which the mass employment of "aliens" in the Reich would also have threatened the *Blutreinheit* (blood purity) of the German nation.

The decision was not made until after the start of the war. It appeared that the lesser of two evils would be the *Ausländereinsatz*, as compared with the draft of German women since it was believed that with this choice it would be easier to punitively limit the expected dangers.

Very soon the approximately 300,000 Polish prisoners of war were put to work, primarily in the agricultural sector. At the same time a massive campaign was started to recruit Polish workers, following the long-standing tradition of employment of Polish farm workers in Germany, which soon developed into ever more aggressive recruitment practices resulting in literal manhunts in the so-called *Generalgouvernement* (Government-general) by which workers were apprehended by means of age-based drafts, collective repression, roundups and the surrounding of theaters, schools or churches. In this way more than one million Polish workers had been brought to the Reich by May 1940.

Nevertheless, the regime's leadership considered the so-called *Poleneinsatz* (deployment of Poles) a violation of the "racial" principles of national-socialism. The resulting "*volkspolitische Gefahren*" (ethno-political dangers), to quote Himmler in February 1940, were to be counteracted with corresponding measures. To this end an elaborate system of repressive regulations was developed with respect to Poles. They had to live in barrack camps which in practice soon proved to be unenforceable in the countryside; they received less wages, were not allowed to use public facilities (from trains to public swimming pools), were not allowed to attend German church services; they had to work longer hours than Germans and were obliged to wear a patch, the *Polen-P*, which was to be attached to their clothing. Contact with Germans outside the workplace was prohibited, sexual relations with German women was punished with the public execution of the participating Pole. To "protect German blood" it was also decreed that at least half of the recruited Polish civilian workers had to be women.

For the German authorities the *Poleneinsatz* experiment was a complete success. Within a short time they succeeded in bringing a large number of Polish workers to Germany against their will, as well as introducing in the German Reich a hierarchical two-class society based on "racial" criteria.

Already in May 1940 it was impossible to predict however that even the recruitment of Poles would not be able to satisfy the labor needs of the German industry. Thus more than 1 million French prisoners of war were brought to the Reich during and immediately after the *Frankreichfeldzug* (Battle of France.) Over and above this, an accelerated labor recruitment was

started in neighboring countries located in the area to the west and north. Special regulations pertaining to treatment, wages, accommodations, etc., were issued for these groups also, although clearly more favorable than those for the Poles. As a result a multi-level system of national hierarchy came into existence, a ladder on which those who had already been named "*Gastarbeitnehmer*" ("guest employees") from allied Italy, together with workers from north and western Europe were placed at the top and Poles at the bottom.

By far the vast majority of foreign civilian workers and prisoners of war from the blitzkrieg phase until the summer of 1941 were put to work in the agricultural sector. Up to this point foreigners did not play a significant role with the industrial enterprises. It was much more important for industry to have its German workers return from military service soon after the conclusion of the blitzkrieg. At the same time the ideological reservations against an expansion of the *Ausländereinsatz* was so great with the party and authorities that it was decided to freeze the number of foreigners at the level of the spring of 1941, just 3 million. This concept lasted so long as the strategy of shorter, more extensive battles did not have to change to a protracted war of attrition.

Since the fall of 1941 however, a totally new situation came into existence. Before Moscow the German armies had experienced their first setback. There could no longer be talk of a blitzkrieg. More than before, German armament industries had to adjust to a longer lasting war of attrition and increase their capacities. Also, the return of soldiers could not be counted on; on the contrary, a massive draft now covered the workers of the armament businesses which had until then been protected. The now initiated increased efforts for workers from the west-European countries were no longer sufficient to eliminate the deficiencies. Only the inset of workers from the Soviet Union could achieve a further workable solution.

However, the *Arbeitseinsatz* of soviet prisoners of war or civilian workers was explicitly rejected before the start of the war. The party leadership, State security headquarters and SS did not only declare themselves against the use of Russians in Germany out of "racial" and security considerations. To a much greater extent the certainty of victory was so overwhelming in the shared opinion of the regime's leadership and commerce during the preparation for war, that from the beginning the inset of Russians was considered unnecessary so that, apart from the use of Poles, in this case the ideological principles of the regime won out. In addition, the German population had strong reservations about a *Russeneinsatz* (deployment of Russians) which were further accentuated by newsreels of the war in Russia, as reported by the SD: "Serious questions have been raised what to do with these 'animals' in the future. Many citizens have suggested that they should be completely eradicated. A certain fear is shown that, together with acts of violence by escaped prisoners of war these characters could come to the Reich in larger numbers and even be used as workers."

The results of this major agreement between population and leadership over the rejection of the *Russeneinsatz* were horrendous. Because there appeared to be no need for their commercial use in the Reich's war industry, millions of soviet prisoners of war were left to fate in mass camps in

the *Ostfront* (eastern front) hinterland. More than half of the 3.3 million soviet prisoners of war who had fallen in German hands by the end of 1941, starved, froze to death, died of exhaustion or were killed. By the end of the war, of the approximately 5.6 million soviet prisoners of war in German custody, 3.5 million had perished.

However, when in late summer of 1941 and again to a greater extent in the fall of that year the military and war-related economic position of Germany changed, new economic pressure arose to also employ soviet prisoners, as expressed in orders in November. This time the initiative came from industry, especially from the mining sector where labor shortages had already reached menacing proportions.

The overwhelming majority of soviet prisoners were no longer available for the *Arbeitseinsatz*, however. By March 1942, of the more than 3 million prisoners only 160,000 had come to the Reich for the *Arbeitseinsatz*. Once again it was therefore necessary to switch to the recruitment of civilian soviet workers. How to procure such large numbers of workers in as short a span of time as possible became the most urgent question and primary task of the in March newly appointed *Generalbevollmächtigten für den Arbeitseinsatz* (authority in charge of the *Arbeitseinsatz*), Sauckel, who discharged his job with equal measures of efficiency and brutality. In barely two and a half years labor procurement staff of the army and employment offices deported 2.5 civilians from the Soviet Union to the Reich - 20,000 per week.

As with the development at the beginning of the *Poleneinsatz* this, by war production motivated contravention of the ideological principles of national-socialism, was compensated for by a system of comprehensive repression and discrimination of soviet civilian workers, which in thoroughness far surpassed the regulations applicable to Poles. When the progression of the war made the employment of Russians in the Reich indispensable, to paraphrase the logic of the authorities, one had to at least treat them badly.

In the meantime a virtual camp cosmos had been created within the Reich; foreign-workers camps could be found on every corner of the large cities. Approximately 500 such camps existed in Berlin alone. In total there may have been more than 20,000 camps in the Reich and about 500,000 Germans were directly involved in various functions of the organization of the *Ausländer-Einsatz* from camp commander to "foreign-labor commissioner" of a factory. Living conditions were differentiated by means of a strict, national hierarchy which was regulated into the smallest details. Although workers from occupied western territories and the so-called friendly nations had to live in camps, but received about the same wages and food rations as the Germans in comparable positions and identical working conditions applied, workers from the east, especially Russians, were decidedly worse off. Rations for soviet civilian workers, officially called *Ostarbeiter* (East workers), were so minimal that they were already completely undernourished and unfit for work a mere few weeks after arrival.

Already in early summer of 1942 many businesses reported that the *Russeneinsatz* was

completely uneconomical, because an effective utilization not only required better provisions and sufficient rest periods, but also training of forced laborers as needed for the job. With French prisoners of war such measures had led to work performance which nearly equaled that of German workers after a relatively short time. The situation for soviet forced laborers obviously differed considerably from firm to firm and camp to camp. In the agricultural sector they usually fared much better than in industry and there too the differences in treatment and food were remarkable, especially since the end of 1942. This then indicates the degree of latitude individual companies had with respect to their actions and judgment. It is certainly out of the question that the poor work and living conditions must be blamed exclusively on binding regulations of the authorities.

Nevertheless, effective improvements in living conditions for *Ostarbeiter* were not realized until after the defeat at Stalingrad in early 1943. An extensive campaign for performance improvement was begun, together with the coupling of food rations to labor performance, as well as extensive training measures. Thus it was indeed possible to considerably increase work performance. Work competence inevitably had to have an effect on the relationship between German and foreign workers. Already everything was being done by way of appropriate directions to officials to continue the preferential position of German workers vis-à-vis foreigners, especially Russians, in every area. In principle Germans were in a superior position with respect to the *Ostarbeitern*; in many companies German workers who had to train *Ostarbeiter* even functioned as deputy police.

To illustrate by way of example the actual situation of forced laborers from the Soviet Union in Germany, here is an extract from an account of the summer of 1943 by a Berlin ministerial official, who made the following observations, after a visit to several *Ostarbeiter* camps.

"Despite the officially allowed *Ostarbeiter* rations it has been determined beyond a doubt that the food situation in the camps looks like this: in the morning half a liter of turnip soup; at noon, at the plant, one liter of turnip soup; in the evening one liter of turnip soup. At the same time the *Ostarbeiter* receives 300 gr. of bread daily. In addition weekly: 50-75 gr. of margarine, 25 gr. of meat or meat products which, depending on the fancy of the camp commander is either distributed or withheld. Large quantities of food are shunted. The worst scourge in the camps however is tuberculosis which also seriously spreads among minors. In the framework of sanitary and health conditions in which the *Ostarbeiter* find themselves, it must be emphasized that German and Russian physicians of the company health insurance plan are forbidden to give any medical supplies to *Ostarbeiter*. The tuberculosis patients are not even placed in isolation. By means of beatings the sick are forced to go to work, because camp officials question the competence of the attending physicians. It is beyond my knowledge for what reasons the German authorities have 'imported' a large number of children from the eastern regions to Germany. It has nevertheless been established that numerous children between the ages of 4 - 15 years are in the camps and that they have neither parents nor other relatives in Germany. Most of the children are ill and receive as their only nourishment the same thin turnip soup as all the older *Ostarbeiter*."

In the meantime the *Ausländereinsatz* was part of the realities of war in Germany and in light of

their own problems, the fate of foreign workers was of very little interest to most Germans. In the summer of 1944, 7.8 million foreign workers could be found in positions throughout the Reich: 5.7 civilian workers and barely 2 million prisoners of war. Of these, 2.8 million came from the Soviet Union, 1.7 million from Poland, 1.3 million from France. Altogether people from 20 European countries were put to work in the Reich by this time. More than half of the Polish and Soviet civilian workers were women, on average less than 20 years of age. The average forced laborer in Germany in 1943 was an 18-year old schoolgirl from Kiev. Of all employed persons in the Reich 26.5% were therefore foreigners; in agriculture 46%, in industry just 40%, in the specialized armament industry approximately 50%, in certain firms with a large proportion of unskilled workers as high as 80 to 90%.

The employment of foreign forced-laborers was not limited exclusively to large-scale enterprises but covered, with the exclusion of management, the entire economy, from the small farm to the smithy with six workers, to railways and the large armament industries but also the many private households who wanted to employ one of the 200,000 much desired Russian maids at low cost.

Since the beginning of 1944 it was clear that even these truly considerable numbers no longer sufficed, especially not for the Reich's large armament projects, the more so because, as a result of the military developments especially in the Soviet Union, labor recruitment diminished and increasing labor shortages could no longer be satisfied. Thus interest turned more and more to the only organization which still had a considerable potential of labor at its disposal: the SS and the concentration camps under its command. During the early years of the war the employment of concentration camp inmates had not been of any importance for the war economy. It is true that since 1938 SS controlled enterprises had existed, especially quarries, brickworks and repair shops, and almost all prisoners were required to perform forced labor in one way or another. However, the nature of labor as punishment, "reform" or "vengeance" was maintained with respect to the bottom group of the Nazis' political and "racist" hierarchy and assumed already before 1939 and after that more intensely, the form of annihilation. It was not until the spring of 1942 that the SS began to deploy prisoners more extensively for armament purposes. The level of concentration camp productivity remained infinitely small with productivity at 17% in comparison with the rest of the economy. During deliberations among the various interest groups inside the SS the idea of punishment and annihilation won out over the one of labor and production, especially since, as a result of the mass deportation of Soviet laborers to Germany, there had not been any economic pressure for the employment of concentration camp inmates.

It was not until late autumn 1942 that, on the suggestion of the Reich's minister of Armament Affairs and Munitions, Albert Speer, a new system was introduced. At the request of companies, concentration camp inmates in groups of 500 prisoners each were made available on loan and for a fee to private enterprises and were housed in *KZ-Außenlagern* (subsidiary concentration camps), built expressly for this purpose, in the respective cities. This system developed very slowly, however. Industry's opposition to direct influence of the SS was relatively strong, the more so because the influx of mainly Soviet forced laborers had reached a high point. Add to this that among the SS leadership the economic aim of the "punishment" and annihilation of inmates

had not clearly been explained. In the summer of 1943 some 100,000 of the 160,000 registered concentration camp prisoners were deployed outside the camps but even before the spring of 1944 the Armament ministry assumed a mere 32,000 concentration camp inmates were actually deployed in the private armament industries of the Reich.

With respect to Jews on the other hand, there had not been a policy of systematic *Arbeitseinsatz* until 1944; on the contrary. Despite the serious objections and protests of several officials and enterprises, Jews had been removed from positions which were of great importance to the armament economy, both in the Reich as well as in the occupied territories, and sent to death camps. Apart from some exceptions, the best known of which is the construction of *IG-Farben-Werke Auswitz* by which some 25,000 inmates perished, after the deportation there had not been a long-term deployment of Jews in the armament industry. Since the end of 1941 the political goal of the national-socialist leadership vis-à-vis the European Jews was annihilation, not *Arbeitseinsatz*. On the basis of their "racial" traits Jews were seen as the worst enemy of national-socialist Germany, even Europe, whose destruction represented one of primary goals of the war. In the opinion of the national-socialist regime's leadership, the destruction of Judaism was fundamental to the achievement of the other goals of the war, such as the establishment of a German-dominated Europe built on principles of populism. In contrast, the short-term - and "race-politically" dangerous - use of Jews as workers was a minor factor.

Only since the beginning of 1944, when the main political goal of national-socialism with respect to the Jews, namely their destruction, had almost been reached, did the situation change as a result of the dramatically increased labor shortage and Jewish prisoners were now also deployed within the Reich as laborers in SS-owned enterprises, in the transfer of plants underground and in private concerns, especially large industries. Already in August 1943 the top echelon of the regime made the decision to carry out the manufacture of the A4 rocket, one of the so-called V-weapons, with the use of concentration camp inmates in underground production facilities. This project which, because of time limitations had been given priority, had a terrible effect on the deployed concentration camp prisoners. Especially during the initial phase in the fall and winter of 1943-'44, the number of dead was immense. The easy replacement of prisoners with relatively simple but heavy work, high time pressure, insufficient nourishment and the worst possible living conditions, were cause of the high death rate which only started to decline when the residential camps had been completed and production had picked up. Until that time however the prisoners were finished within a few weeks after their arrival.

Projects of this nature for which tens, even hundreds of thousands of workers were used in three shifts, could only be carried out with the use of concentration camp prisoners since only the SS had labor reserves of such magnitude. But even these no longer sufficed to satisfy the demands so that in the spring of 1944 also the *Arbeisteinsatz* of Jews came up for discussion. Until that time the utilization of Jews within the Reich had been explicitly prohibited, after all it was considered to be the achievement of the Reich-security headquarters of the SS to have made the Reich *judenfrei* (free of Jews.) All this changed however. Obviously in response to a request from the *Organisation Todt* (Todt Organization) which had especially been deployed in military

construction projects, Hitler determined in April 1944 that, for the purpose of underground plant transfer and large bunker construction the estimated 100,000 required men were to be raised in Hungary through of the preparation of appropriate contingents of Jews.

The number of labor detachments of *KZ-Außenlager* quickly grew to some 1600 after the spring of 1944, the list of German enterprises which employed concentration camp prisoners became longer and ultimately was comprised of hundreds of renowned companies.

By the end of 1944 the total number of concentration camp prisoners - Jewish and non-Jewish - had reached approximately 600,000, of which 480,000 were reported to be "able-bodied." Of these, according to estimates of the Economic Affairs and Management headquarters of the SS, 140,000 were deployed in underground plant transfer, some 130,000 in building projects of the *Organisation Todt* and approximately 230,000 in private industry.

The work and living conditions of concentration camp inmates differed considerably from firm to firm and depended on the nature of the operation, the individual position in the race-hierarchy of the SS and, not least, the attitude of company management such as the camp commander, guard, foreman and supervisor. Above all, Jewish prisoners who were separated into special groups, suffered of exceptionally bad conditions. Overall one can safely assume that those who were employed in armament production companies had more chances of survival than prisoners who were deployed in large-scale building projects operated by SS-owned enterprises, particularly in underground plant transfer as well as in the building of caverns and tunnels to underground plants. With the building projects and the so-called *Höhlenprojekt*, time was of the greatest essence and conditions for the prisoners correspondingly inhumane. The completely insufficient nourishment, the unhealthy accommodations in the caverns, the murderous pace of work and above all the never ending influx of new prisoners in the often overcrowded camps intensified accordingly. As in the concentration camps themselves, by the end of 1944 a virtual hell existed in the building project camps with death rates of such proportions that the survival time for the average prisoner was not more than a few months. A person's human value was measured by what his physical condition could deliver for a few weeks. Under these conditions labor and the annihilation of hundreds of thousands of people were synonymous.

Looking at the historical significance of the *Ausländer-Einsatz* in its totality, it becomes clear that the German war economy depended on forced labor exclusively from the beginning of 1942 at the latest. Without forced laborers it would not have been possible to achieve the required production levels in agriculture since 1940 and not since the end of 1941 for the armament industry. Only through the *Ausländer-Einsatz* was it possible to maintain the food situation for the German population until the end of 1944 at the highest level of all European powers involved in the war. Not least however did the forced laborers contribute to the thrust in gigantic growth and modernization which the German economy experienced during the years of the war and armament boom which represented one of the foundations of the so rapidly upward development after 1948.

At the same time the treatment of forced laborers was not only determined by economic factors but throughout also by philosophical ones. The nature and manner of treatment was based on these; the more the Reich's military situation improved, the more severe the discriminating regulations which governed treatment according to race-related guidelines. Only to the extent that an increase in productivity was called for, such as under the pressure for military achievements, did improvements come about.

In all of this, what was expected to become a reality for all of Europe after a victorious conclusion of the war, was the establishment of a race-based hierarchical national-socialist society in Europe. In this the German population would play a special role. Because the forced employment of millions of foreign workers and, in the later phase of the war also of concentration camp inmates, did not occur in isolated camps beyond the observation limits of German people, but literally on their own doorsteps. That the national-socialist *Ausländereinsatz* in reality can be considered a success for the rulers, is above all a result of the fact that a considerable portion of Germans accepted their expected role. To be sure only few had anything to do with the mistreatment of forced laborers but equally few took on their cause. For most the foreigners were simply there and part of every day life during war such as food ration cards or air raid shelters and the discrimination of Russians and Poles was as much a given as their own privileged position. It was precisely this which made it possible for racism to function, namely that it became a daily habit, something of everyday life, without the necessity for any one individual to participate in some form of discrimination or oppression.

Most of the foreign forced laborers who had been classified as "displaced persons" by the end of the war, returned immediately to their own countries. For the civilian forced laborers and prisoners of war from the Soviet Union who were forcibly repatriated, the suffering was not at an end after May 1945. After their repatriation they were collectively suspected of collaboration by the Stalinist authorities, experienced fierce repression and not few of them were once again locked up in "Gulag" camps.