

Who were the forced laborers? – A brief presentation of the individual groups

During the Second World War, the Germans coerced millions of people into performing forced labor. Around 13 million people from at least 21 countries were deported to the German Reich as forced laborers or were forced to work there. Millions more were coerced into performing forced labor in the occupied territories. Often – as with the e-Guide – the subject of forced labor focuses on the civilian laborers who were forced to work in German industries and other institutions. But there were three other groups who performed forced labor in the German Reich: the inmates of concentration camps, labor re-education camps, and prisons, foreign prisoners of war, and so-called *Arbeitsjuden* (Jewish workers). All four groups are described briefly below.

Definition of forced labor

Forced labor is defined as unpaid or inadequately paid work performed against a person's will, under duress and threat of punishment. During the Second World War, forced labor in the territories occupied and controlled by the Germans fell into this category. In the occupied territory of the Soviet Union alone, this is likely to have affected more than 22 million people.

Civilian forced laborers

The largest group of forced laborers were the millions of civilian laborers from various European countries. In the early war years, some were still volunteering, as the German employment offices and recruitment commissions promised them better living and working conditions than in their native countries. When the number of people volunteering dwindled, the German occupiers turned to coercive measures, and began deporting people to the German Reich to work.

Most of the civilian forced laborers came from Poland and the Soviet Union. In August 1944 alone, there were 2.1 million Soviet and 1.6 million Polish civilian laborers in the German Reich. The majority were young people, more than half of them women, who were forced to work in agriculture, in industry, in municipal services, for the church, or in private households. Officially, their employment relationship was specifically regulated: Employers notified their needs to the German employment offices, which in turn assigned positions to the civilian forced laborers. Civilian laborers were required to register with local authorities, and they paid into unemployment, health, and invalidity insurance schemes. In practice, however, their situation depended heavily on their nationality, their employers, and the type of forced labor they were required to perform.

Inmates of concentration camps, labor re-education camps, and prisons

When the shortage of manpower in the German Reich became so great in 1942 that it threatened to jeopardize the future course of the war, concentration camp prisoners were also increasingly conscripted to work in the wartime economy. Forced labor in the concentration camps had previously been mainly about torturing and punishing prisoners, but now their labor was exploited for economic gain. Companies paid a daily rate to the camp administrations, and later to the Reich Ministry of Finance; the prisoners, with a few exceptions, received no payment for their work. Initially, the camp commandants allocated prisoners to work assignments; later, the SS Chief Economic and Administration Office (WVHA), which was responsible for managing the concentration camps, and from September 1944, the Reich Ministry of Armaments and War Production “lent out” prisoners in large groups. Forced labor was usually carried out in sub-camps that had been set up near companies, production facilities, or building sites, for example. The conditions in which around 700,000 concentration camp prisoners were forced to work and live were in most cases atrocious. Prisoners who were considered “unfit for work” were sent back to the main camps and replaced by new ones. Tens of thousands of prisoners died as a result of the often atrocious living and working conditions imposed on forced laborers.

The labor re-education camps (*Arbeitserziehungslager*, AEL) operated by the Gestapo from 1939 onwards were affiliated to private and public companies and were set up to punish people who violated rules within a work context. Initially the inmates were Germans, but later, most of those held there were foreign civilian laborers. Perceived “idling in the workplace” or “breach of contract” could be reasons for imprisonment in these camps. Around half a million people were exploited during their time in the labor re-education camps, a period of usually three to eight weeks. The working and living conditions there were often atrocious, and many prisoners died.

As well as forced labor in the concentration camps and labor re-education camps, forced labor also existed in prisons and penitentiaries. From May 1944 onwards, around 200,000 prisoners were forced to work in the armaments industry. Some of this work was carried out within the confines of the prisons, but in some cases the workplaces were outside the prisons. The conditions in which the prisoners had to live and work were often grueling in the last few years of the war.

Prisoners of war

The Geneva Conventions, which also applied in Nazi Germany, generally allow non-officer prisoners of war to be forced to work. However, rules apply, namely that prisoners of war are not allowed to work in the armaments industry, or in dangerous locations, and that they have to be paid if they work for private companies. However, when employment offices “rented out” prisoners of war for forced labor, usually in labor details, the Germans only followed these rules for specific groups of prisoners. Soviet prisoners of war and, from September 1943 onwards, Italian prisoners of war, so-called Italian military internees (IMI), suffered particularly inhumane treatment. Many of the almost two million prisoners of war who were coerced into forced labor in 1944 alone did not survive.

Prisoners of war could be assigned the status of civilian forced laborers – sometimes against their will. Many expected their situation to improve because, unlike before, they now received a low wage, and could move around more freely than prisoners of war were able to. But at the same time, they lost the protection of the Geneva Conventions, and could be more easily used for forced labor by the German labor administration.

“Arbeitsjuden” (Jewish workers)

From as early as 1938, forced labor also included the so-called segregated labor deployment (*geschlossener Arbeitseinsatz*) of German Jews, or those who were considered as such under National Socialist laws. They were forced to work in the German Reich before being deported to the ghettos, extermination camps, and concentration camps. Large numbers of Jews, most of whom were Polish, were forced to work in special forced labor camps in eastern areas of the Reich, particularly in Upper Silesia. The total number of Jewish forced laborers in the German Reich outside the concentration camps is estimated at around 110,000. However, a very large number of Jews from many European countries were also coerced into forced labor, both for state agencies and for numerous private German companies, in the ghettos in the occupied and annexed territories.

Bibliography:

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