

Forced foreign labour in the Nazi war economy

The Nazi regime recruited enormous numbers of foreign workers – mainly by force – to replace the 11 million German workers conscripted for military service. The occupation of Poland, Germany's traditional labour reserve, was partly motivated by the need for labour. Labour recruitment offices were set up within weeks of the invasion, and the police and army rounded up thousands of young men and women (Dohse, 1981: 121). Forcible recruitment took place in all the countries invaded by Germany, while some voluntary labour was obtained from Italy, Croatia, Spain and other 'friendly or neutral countries'. By the end of the war, there were 7.5 million foreign workers in the Reich, of whom 1.8 million were prisoners of war. It is estimated that a quarter of industrial production was carried out by foreign workers in 1944 (Pfahmann, 1968: 232). The Nazi war machine would have collapsed far earlier without foreign labour.

The basic principle for treating foreign workers declared by Sauckel, the Plenipotentiary for Labour, was that: 'All the men must be fed, sheltered and treated in such a way as to exploit them to the highest possible extent at the lowest conceivable degree of expenditure' (Homze, 1967: 113). This meant housing workers in barracks under military control, the lowest possible wages (or none at all), appalling social and health conditions, and complete deprivation of civil rights. Poles and Russians were compelled, like the Jews, to wear special badges showing their origin. Many foreign workers died through harsh treatment and cruel punishments. These were systematic; in a speech to employers, Sauckel emphasized the need for strict discipline: 'I don't care about them [the foreign workers] one bit. If they commit the most minor offence at work, report them to the police at once, hang them, shoot them. I don't care. If they are dangerous, they must be liquidated' (Dohse, 1981: 127).

The Nazis took exploitation of rightless migrants to an extreme which can only be compared with slavery, yet its legal core – the sharp division between the status of national and foreigner – was to be found in both earlier and later foreign labour systems.