

Forced Labor

Work performed under coercion for the Nazi regime by Jews and others. It included work done within the Reich by laborers brought from German-occupied territories or from Germany's satellite countries. In German, these laborers were called *Fremdarbeiter*, meaning "foreign workers."

The first forced laborers brought to Germany were 100,000 Austrians, who arrived after the *Anschluss*—the annexing of Austria by Germany in March 1938. By August 1, 1939, another 70,000 forced laborers had been brought from the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia.

One month later, World War II broke out. Germany began using prisoners of war as forced laborers, which was illegal according to international law. During the fall of 1939, 340,000 Polish prisoners of war were put to work. In the spring of 1940 the Germans created a work draft in the *Generalgouvernement*, and by August 1942 they decreed that forced laborers were to be taken from all occupied countries and prisoner of war camps. In the Western European countries controlled by Germany, the local administration would sometimes cooperate with the Germans in their drafting of forced laborers, in exchange for the freedom of some of their prisoners of war, or at least a change in their status from prisoners of war to foreign workers.

In September 1944, 5.5 million foreign workers and two million prisoners of war were working in Germany; 38 percent of those were Soviet and 20 percent were Polish. By the end of that year, another 1.5 million forced laborers had been recruited.

Nazi leaders held various opinions about forced laborers. Albert Speer, who was appointed the Minister of Armaments and War Production in February 1942, and Fritz Sauckel, who was appointed Chief Plenipotentiary for the Labor Effort in March 1942, understood that in order to keep up recruitment and productivity, they would have to provide better work conditions. However, in most cases it was the *Gestapo* and German Security Police who were in charge of the supervision of the workers, and they were not concerned with productivity. Thus, they treated the foreign workers brutally.

Eastern European forced laborers were treated much worse than those from Western Europe. Germans who had sexual relations with those workers were punished with the death penalty for race defilement. Although Western European workers had better living and working conditions, they also complained that they were treated like slaves.

By the middle of the war, Germany had severe labor shortages, leading Nazi leaders to begin hunting seriously for workers. However, their cruel treatment of the forced laborers, poor working conditions, and the obviousness of Germany's imminent defeat led to a rise in organized resistance. Ironically, during the last year of the war, as Germany's territory shrank and many of its factories were destroyed by Allied bombing raids, labor quotas were largely filled.

Beginning with the annexation of Austria, Jews were taken by the Nazi authorities for forced labor. After the invasion of Poland, Jews were first taken for tasks such as clearing rubble, and soon afterward were sent to forced labor camps. From the moment the Nazis began using Jews for forced labor, they were treated terribly. Throughout the period of the Holocaust, the performance of forced labor by Jews in the ghettos and camps was a dominant feature of their experience. In most cases the authorities had no regard for the lives of their Jewish laborers, and many were worked to their deaths intentionally. In a few instances, however, especially later in the war, some Jewish forced laborers were treated somewhat better.