

Forced Laborers in Wartime Germany (1939–45)

Abstract

This film begins with scenes of the return of forced laborers to their home countries at war's end. As the narrator explains, the German war economy and the country's food supply would not have held out until May 1945 had it not been for the labor of millions of non-Germans. A small number volunteered, thanks to propaganda like the short clip embedded in this film, extolling the benefits of work and life in Germany. But the vast majority was forcibly brought to Germany from the occupied territories. Conditions varied greatly depending on the employer, location, and the ethnic background of the forced laborer, with Poles and Russians treated worse than western Europeans. Concentration camp inmates, including Jews and other so-called enemies, were in many cases also forced to perform work for German companies, and these men and women received no pay and barely enough food to keep them alive. Many were worked to death.

Source

/Summer 1945: Huge masses of foreigners are waiting everywhere in defeated and destroyed Germany to be transported back home. Italians, French and Belgians; Dutch, Danes and Norwegians; Czechs, Slovaks, Hungarians and Serbs; the members of Western nations are allowed to return home first.

/But they represent only the smaller share of the seven and a half million foreigners in the Reich who had worked in agriculture, trade and industry. Russians, Poles, Ukrainians: the Eastern workers had provided the bulk of this army of millions of laborers.

/A few hundred thousand of the foreign workers had come voluntarily, the others, the mass, had been recruited under duress, forcibly deported to Germany or taken from the prisoner-of-war camps to work in the armaments industry. In 1944, every fourth tank, truck or grenade launcher, every fourth projectile for the German Wehrmacht had been manufactured by a foreigner.

/*Za granica*: "Beyond the Border," a German film in Polish that recruited workers for Germany. Such advertising initially had some success, given the miserable living conditions in occupied Poland. Several tens of thousands of Poles went to Germany voluntarily. Not everything in this film is just staged: especially in the beginning, working and living conditions in Germany in some factories were quite similar to those shown here, even though the propaganda is exaggerating. But for most of the forced laborers in industry, including the Poles, the reality looks different: Things are usually better in smaller factories than in large ones. Eastern Europeans are treated worse than Western or Southern Europeans, but conditions are catastrophic for the lowest group of forced laborers: the concentration camp inmates.

/These foreign workers had to work under harsh, in many cases miserable conditions. Their employment in the armaments industry was often in blatant violation of international law.

Source: Histoclips, Studio HH / NDR

Recommended Citation: Forced Laborers in Wartime Germany (1939–45), published in: German History in Documents and Images,
<<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/nazi-germany-1933-1945/ghdi:video-5018>> [March 20, 2025].