

Martin Bormann's Circular of May 5, 1943, with a Memorandum on the Treatment of Foreign Laborers (April 15, 1943)

Abstract

The situation on the Eastern Front worsened after the defeat of the German army near Stalingrad. As a result, Goebbels decided at the beginning of 1943 that his propaganda needed a change of course—in the future, it would emphasize that all of the countries of Europe had a common stake in the struggle against Bolshevism. With this move, he hoped not only to influence the nations that had remained neutral thus far, but also to create the basis for rapprochement with the Western Allies and to win the loyalty of all foreign workers in the Reich. Therefore, in a directive dated February 15, 1943, Goebbels put forth new guidelines for the treatment of European peoples. The practical application of these guidelines vis-à-vis foreign workers was discussed a month later at a meeting between members of the Ministry of Propaganda and the Reich Security Main Office [*Reichssicherheitshauptamt* or RSHA]. Goebbels's call for the equitable treatment of workers from Eastern and Western Europe met with particular resistance from the RSHA, since up to this point the RSHA had pursued a policy of discrimination that based itself on the so-called Eastern Workers' Decree and targeted Polish and Russian forced laborers above all. The RSHA thus regarded Goebbels's directive as an infringement upon its authority. In the end, the ministries agreed upon the guidelines laid down in the following "memorandum." The guidelines did, in fact, call for a fundamentally equitable treatment of Eastern and Western European workers, but they did so without necessitating a change in the security policies of the RSHA. And while in theory, military objectives now took precedence over ideology, little had changed in practice when it came to the racial hierarchy within work camps, which were increasingly controlled by local representatives of the regime.

Source

National Socialist German Workers' Party
Party Chancellery

The Head of the Party Chancellery
Führer's Headquarters, May 5, 1943

Circular No. 70/43

Subject: Memorandum concerning the general principles governing the treatment of foreign workers employed in the Reich.

The Reich Propaganda Ministry and the Reich Security Main Office have issued a joint memorandum on the treatment of foreign workers employed in the Reich.

Please use the enclosed copy to educate party members and German compatriots about the need to take *a firm but just approach* to the treatment of foreign workers.

This memorandum is not to be made public.

Signed: M. Bormann

Distribution:

Reichsleiter
Gauleiter
Verbandsführer
Kreisleiter
Ortsgruppenleiter

Memorandum: Concerning the General Principles Governing the Treatment of Foreign Workers Employed in the Reich [April 15, 1943]

The Reich's struggle against the destructive forces of Bolshevism is increasingly becoming a European affair. For the first time in the history of this continent, *the outlines of a European solidarity* are beginning to emerge, albeit only in small measure in some countries. One practical result of this [emerging European solidarity] can be seen in the fact that millions of foreign workers, from almost all the countries of the European continent, are employed in the Reich. This group includes a large number of members of defeated enemy forces. This fact imposes upon the German people special obligations; these derive primarily from the following principles:

1. The Reich's security is the first priority. The Reichsführer SS and his offices determine the security measures necessary for the protection of the Reich and the German people.
2. Of course, treating foreign workers in a manner that is humane, but production-enhancing, and granting them concessions can easily lead to the blurring of the clear line between foreign workers and German compatriots. German compatriots are to be urged to consider it a national duty to maintain the *necessary distance between themselves and the foreign peoples*. German compatriots must be aware that disregarding the principles of National Socialist racial theory will result in the most severe punishment. Knowing that it is either a matter of victory or Bolshevist chaos, every German must be compelled to draw the necessary conclusions when interacting with foreign workers.

Everything must be subordinated to the goal of winning this war. Thus, foreign workers employed in the Reich are to be treated in such a way *that their reliability is maintained and encouraged, that effects negative for the Reich in their respective home countries are minimized, and that their full manpower is preserved for the German war economy over the long term—ideally their performance will even be increased*. The following points are to be considered crucial in achieving this goal:

1. Everyone, even the most primitive human being, has a keen sense of justice. Thus, any incident of unjust treatment will necessarily have devastating effects. Accordingly, injustices, insults, chicanery, mistreatment, etc. must be avoided. Corporeal punishment is prohibited. Foreign workers are to be duly informed when severe measures are taken against insubordinate and seditious elements.
2. It is impossible to win someone over to a new idea while insulting his inner sense of worth at the same time. One cannot expect the highest level of performance from people who are called beasts, barbarians, and subhuman. Instead, positive qualities such as the will to fight Bolshevism, the desire to safeguard one's own existence and that of one's country, commitment, and willingness to work are to be encouraged and promoted.
3. Moreover, everything must be done to encourage the necessary cooperation of the European peoples in the fight against Bolshevism. Words alone won't convince the foreign worker that he and his people will also benefit from a German victory. *The precondition for this is proper treatment*.

Based on these criteria, the plenipotentiary for labor management, who is in charge of the deployment and working conditions of foreign laborers, and the other offices involved have issued the necessary directives for the deployment of foreign workers in the German Reich. Among these directives, the following must be given particular emphasis:

a) If possible, each foreign worker will be used for that job *in which he can deliver the highest performance on the basis of his training and prior experience.*

b) Camps will be the standard accommodation for foreign workers. Ideally, accommodations must be equipped with all the necessities as regards orderliness, cleanliness, and hygiene. Prison-like bars and barbed wire are prohibited. Great importance is placed on accommodating male and female foreign workers in a manner that corresponds with their national customs, to such extent as permitted by the circumstances of the war. The foreigners are to be housed with other members of their ethnic group, insofar as this is possible. The cooperation of foreign workers in camp administration and the maintenance of order is ensured. For all camps, there are camp rules that specifically define the duties and rights of camp and workshop leaders.

c) When recruited, foreign workers are required to bring clothing and shoes with them to Germany. When this is not possible, or when it becomes necessary to replace worn-out clothing, they will be provided with clothing and shoes—taking into account the limitations of wartime—to guarantee that they will be protected against weather exposure to the extent necessary to maintain their health.

d) Foreign workers receive the food rations determined by the Reich Minister for Nutrition and Agriculture; these are based on the provisions for German workers in comparable jobs. If possible, ethnic foods will be considered. It will be ensured that foreign laborers will actually be given provisions in the rations allotted to them. Fraud, exorbitant prices, etc., by oversight offices and executive organs will be persecuted as though the crime had been committed against Germans.

e) All foreign workers have the right to effective health services. The directives on preventing epidemics and infectious diseases are applied without restriction. Medical aid is provided by camp, ward, or public-hospital physicians, depending on local circumstances. The number of beds required for stationary care in the sick ward or the public hospital is to be maintained in the appropriate manner. Nurses and, under certain circumstances, physicians and assistants of the patient's own ethnicity are to be consulted if possible. Delivery facilities for pregnant female laborers are to be provided, as well as breast-feeding and childcare facilities to the extent required. Childcare is to be provided by female members of the mother's own ethnic group. Pregnant workers will only be transferred back to their home countries in exceptional cases and on their own request.

f) Entertainment is the most important element in preserving foreign workers' ability and motivation to work. Events, leisure activities, sports, etc., are to be organized primarily in the camps by the camp staff. In addition, special artistic and folkloric ensembles representing various nationalities will be employed for further entertainment. If possible, *Heimat* films will be screened as well. Moreover, each camp shall have access to books, magazines, and newspapers in the appropriate foreign languages. Language classes shall facilitate communication in the workplace. Specialized dictionaries for all the nations are being edited and published.

Furthermore, Eastern European workers also have the opportunity to go out on their day off at the very least.

g) All foreign workers are granted religious counseling if they require it. At this point, only counseling by laymen is allowed for nationals from the occupied Eastern territories. *Counseling by Russian and Ukrainian emigrants is prohibited.*

In case of death, foreigners are buried in public cemeteries.

h) Political persuasion is primarily supposed to mobilize forces against Bolshevism and is to be conducted accordingly.

Since they have been issued as directives by the responsible agencies, the principles laid out above are binding on all organizations, offices, and individuals. All offices charged with the deployment and supervision of foreign laborers, especially workshop and camp leaders, are responsible for implementing and complying with these principles in practice. They must be aware that violations of the abovementioned principles harm the German wartime economy, and thus indirectly the front, and for that reason they must be prosecuted not only as apolitical crimes (i.e., assault, fraud, exorbitant pricing), but under certain circumstances even as aiding the enemy. Not only the perpetrators themselves, but also the heads of the responsible offices can also be held accountable. Furthermore, insufficient instruction or supervision of subordinate offices can lead to prosecution under employment law.

All existing orders and directives for the treatment of foreign workers will be reviewed by the responsible offices to determine whether they comply with the abovementioned principles. Should this not be the case, they will be changed immediately and brought into line.

Berlin, April 15, 1943

Source: Rundschreiben Bormanns vom 5. Mai 1943 mit Merkblatt über die allgemeinen Grundsätze für die Behandlung der im Reich tätigen ausländischen Arbeitskräfte (Beweisstück GB-538), in *Der Prozess gegen die Hauptkriegsverbrecher vor dem Internationalen Militärgerichtshof. Nürnberg 14. November 1945 – 1. Oktober 1946*. Volume XXV, Amtlicher Text – Deutsche Ausgabe, Urkunden und anderes Beweismaterial. Nuremberg 1947. Reprint: Munich, Delphin Verlag, 1989, Document 205-PS, pp. 298–301.

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