

# Forced Labor of Soviet Prisoners of War during the Second World War

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Prisoners of war and forced laborers of all origins constituted an indispensable workforce for the German war economy during the Second World War. Their share of the total number of workers in Germany rose steadily from 1941 onwards, from around nine percent to at least 20 percent in 1944. According to other estimates, foreigners made up as much as 26 percent of Germany's total labor force in September 1944. The vast majority were involuntary workers. In total, it is estimated that some 13.5 million people were shunted into forced labor for Germany between 1939 and 1945 – foreign civilian workers, prisoners of war, but also German prisoners. In September 1944, German authorities counted nearly six million civilian foreign workers and employees, over a third of them – 2.4 million – persons from Eastern Europe, so-called *Ostarbeiter*. Statistics from January 1945 document nearly 2.2 million prisoner-of-war workers in the German war economy. The 978,000 Soviet prisoners accounted for almost half of this contingent.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Hein Klemann and Sergei Kudryashov, *Occupied Economies: An Economic History of Nazi-Occupied Europe, 1939–1945* (London, 2012); Mark Spoerer and Jochen Fleischhacker, "Forced Laborers in Nazi Germany: Categories, Numbers, and survivors," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 33 (2002): 169–204; Mark Spoerer, "NS-Zwangsarbeiter im Deutschen Reich: Eine Statistik vom 30. September 1944 nach Arbeitsamtbezirken," *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 49 (2001): 665–684.

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**2** Rolf Keller, *Sowjetische Kriegsgefangene im Deutschen Reich 1941/42: Behandlung und Arbeitseinsatz zwischen Vernichtungspolitik und kriegswirtschaftlichen Zwängen* (Göttingen, 2011). See also *Sowjetische Kriegsgefangene im Arbeitseinsatz. 1941-1945: Dokumente zu den Lebens- und Arbeitsbedingungen in Norddeutschland*, ed. Rolf Keller and Silke Petry (Göttingen, 2013).

**3** Joachim Gauck, "Was spurlos verwehen, das rufen wir in unserem Gedächtnis," speech delivered May 6, 2015, in *"Wir vergessen nicht": Reden zum Gedenken an die Opfer des Nationalsozialismus und des Zweiten Weltkrieges in Bergen-Belsen, Berlin, Dresden, Lebus, Schloss Holte-Stukenbrock 2015* (Berlin, 2015): 34–42, here 34, 42.

**4** Winfried Dolderer, "Späte Entschädigung," *Das Parlament* 65 (2015), 7; Andreas Hilger, "Schwieriges Gedenken: Sowjetische Kriegsgefangene im Erinnerungshaushalt der Bundesrepublik Deutschland nach 1989," in *Leerstelle(n)? Der deutsche Vernichtungskrieg 1941–1944 und die Vergegenwärtigung in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland nach 1989*, ed. Alexandra Klei and Katrin Stoll (Berlin 2019), 117–136.

Soviet prisoners of war were present not only in numerous industries and companies throughout Germany and in the occupied territories of Poland and the USSR, but also throughout Europe, from occupied Norway to the Atlantic Wall. Nevertheless German research and memory culture have devoted little attention to the dimensions and circumstances of their labor deployment. Significantly, the most important German study on this subject, which only deals with the territory of the Reich, was not published until 2011, more than 65 years after the end of the war.<sup>2</sup> These deficits in research corresponded to a generally very limited interest in the overall fate of Soviet prisoners in German hands. As late as 2015, then-German President Joachim Gauck spoke of this mass crime as largely hidden within a German "memory shadow."<sup>3</sup> It was only in that same year that the German Bundestag made ten million euros available for so-called recognition payments (*Anerkennungsleistungen*) to former Soviet prisoners of war.<sup>4</sup> Shortly before, at the beginning of the new millennium, this large group had been explicitly excluded from payments from the compensation fund set up by the German government and industry. "Being a prisoner of war," Article 11 of the July 2000 law establishing the Foundation Remembrance, Responsibility, Future succinctly stated, "does not establish eligibility for benefits."<sup>5</sup> Only prisoners of war who had been "imprisoned" in concentration camps could hope for compensation at that time.<sup>6</sup>

**5** See "Gesetz zur Errichtung einer Stiftung Erinnerung, Verantwortung und Zukunft," *Stiftung EVZ*, <https://www.stiftung-evz.de/stiftung/gesetz-der-stiftung-evz.html> (accessed September 21, 2023); Henning Borggräfe, *Zwangsarbeiterentschädigung: Vom Streit um "vergessene*

*Opfer" zur Selbstaussöhnung der Deutschen* (Göttingen, 2014); *Die Entschädigung von NS-Zwangsarbeit am Anfang des 21. Jahrhunderts: Die Stiftung "Erinnerung, Verantwortung und Zukunft" und ihre Partnerorganisationen*, ed. Constantin Goschler, 4 vols. (Göttingen, 2012).

**6** Answer of the German Federal Government to "Kleine Anfrage" (Parliamentary Question) of "Die Linke" Party, August 21, 2006, Bundestagsdrucksache 16/2423.

## I. Research Gaps

In this first section of this article we will focus on the forced-labor deployment of Soviet prisoners of war. The research gaps here are substantial. The quantity and quality of the share of forced labor of Soviet prisoners of war in Germany's wartime economic efforts as a whole must be determined much more precisely than has been done so far. The figures mentioned at the beginning of this article already demonstrate the considerable magnitude and thus the relevance of forced labor to Germany's war economy. The challenge is to break down the sweeping data into industrial sectors, agriculture, and military installations and units to put into perspective the concrete importance of POW labor for the central sectors of armaments, food, and the Wehrmacht apparatus at and behind the front.<sup>7</sup>

At the same time, it remains to be comprehensively clarified to what extent the everyday working conditions of prisoners in individual industries or corresponding camp locations differed over the years and thus left prisoners with different chances of survival from the outset. Of particular interest here may be the question of whether industries and camps that were considered particularly significant to the war and war economy placed prisoners in a better or worse position. Here managerial accounts and practices as well as ideological approaches to the new labor force must be analyzed down to the lowest organizational level. Entrepreneurs, farmers, and the lower military ranks had room to maneuver which they could use to the benefit or disadvantage of the prisoners. At these levels, it is also possible to reconstruct economically-based categorizations of the captured workers – for example, by occupational group, but also by health status – and to examine the relationship between such categorizations and basic treatment. Conversely, achievement of economic goals also depended on the fundamental willingness of the prisoners to cooperate, their will to resist, and whether or not the production results of individual firms met the government's

<sup>7</sup> Matthias Puchta's dissertation at the University of Heidelberg on Soviet prisoners of war in the German-occupied territories of the RSFSR will describe, among other things, the central importance of POW labor for Wehrmacht supply centers.

**8** See *Rotarmisten in deutscher Hand: Dokumente zu Gefangenschaft, Repatriierung und Rehabilitierung sowjetischer Soldaten des Zweiten Weltkrieges*, ed. Andreas Hilger, Rüdiger Overmans, and Pavel Polian (Paderborn, 2012), chapters 2.1, 2.6 and 2.7.

requirements. These complex overall constellations helped determine working conditions and the success and failure of labor operations on the ground, notwithstanding the exhortations of political and military leaders.

It also remains to be clarified how the actual or planned use of Soviet POW labor was incorporated into the implementation of the policy of extermination – or, at the other extreme, the use of coerced labor for Nazi prestige projects. In the fall of 1941, for example, some 25,000 prisoners of war were assigned to the construction of concentration camps. However, within a few weeks, these prisoners were deliberately and purposefully destroyed by being worked to death. Nevertheless, as late as 1942 there were plans for POW camps housing as many as 100,000 prisoners who would have been specifically assigned to SS projects. At the same time, an unknown number of Soviet POWs were diverted toward initiatives such as the so-called “new construction of Munich” or, in October 1941, to work on prominent jobs in Berlin.<sup>8</sup>

It follows from these considerations that a precise reconstruction of the numerous work sites and labor assignments with their concrete conditions is necessary to grasp the labor deployment of Soviet prisoners of war in its contemporary relevance and visibility at all levels of the economy, military, and society. This comprehensive approach will allow new insights into camp societies and the worlds of experience of the prisoners themselves. The imposed differentiations from the world of work could structure camp society and establish hierarchies. Prisoners were able to pursue individual survival strategies in the face of different working conditions in different economic sectors, or on the basis of their own abilities, and, if necessary, to influence the working environment itself with their activities. These desirable insights into politics, the military, and the economy, which are only sketched here, have yet to be worked out for the years from 1942 onward and especially for occupied areas in the East and West. With respect to prisoners’ experiences, there are significant gaps

for virtually the entire period and all regions. In addition, this research may also yield further insights into the fate of female prisoners of war, about which far too little is known; many of them were apparently forcibly transferred to so-called civilian employment as “Eastern workers.”<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> A dissertation by Luisa Eckert on the German treatment of female Soviet prisoners of war is being written at the HSU Hamburg.

With regard to the decision-making processes and decisions at the highest German levels, we still lack detailed and comprehensive analyses of the extent of competition for prisoner-of-war labor between the front and the homeland, between the Wehrmacht and the economy, and between individual branches of industry and business. These collisions and their outcomes also had important implications for the ever-changing power positions of competing players in the overall National Socialist structure. It can be assumed that the prospects of victory or defeat intensified such conflicts, but this has not been empirically researched either for specific settings or for overall policy.

## II. German Prisoner of War Policy

Other basic features of German policy regarding the use of Soviet prisoners of war for labor, however, have been quite well researched. This research has revealed the ambivalence of a policy that generally – most explicitly only after the failure of the Blitzkrieg strategy – attached great importance to the forced labor of Soviet prisoners as a means to bring about victory, while nevertheless remaining substantially shaped by the ideological premises and objectives of the war of extermination.

According to labor office data, in the summer of 1941 some 2.6 million positions in the German war economy were unfilled. It thus became a self-evident expectation among business enterprises and associations that the prisoners the war against the USSR produced would become available to fill job vacancies, especially in labor-intensive positions. The Wehrmacht was also interested in the labor of prisoners to

**10** Klemann and Kudryashov, *Occupied Economies*, 138.

**11** OKW order (*Befehl*) of Oct. 31, 1941, in *Rotarmisten*, ed. Hilger, Overmans, and Polian, 430–431.

**12** OKW order (*Befehl*) of Nov. 4, 1941, in *Rotarmisten*, ed. Hilger, Overmans, and Polian, 432–434.

relieve German soldiers or, depending on the situation at the front, to free them for actual military tasks.<sup>10</sup>

Against this general background, the coal mining, armaments, and agricultural sectors calculated as early as July 1941 that they wanted to use 500,000 Soviet prisoners of war in the Reich more or less immediately. Hitler, however, was not prepared to tolerate more than 120,000 Soviet prisoners within the Reich's borders. After months of back and forth, at the end of October 1941, Hitler finally bowed to the realization that the "shortage of manpower was developing into an increasingly dangerous obstacle to the future German war and armaments economy." Moreover, in view of the situation at the front, the hoped-for "relief through soldiers being granted extended work leave [*Freistellungen*] from the Wehrmacht" was out of the question. Hitler now ordered "that the manpower of the Russian prisoners of war is also to be exploited . . . through their large-scale use for the needs of the war economy."<sup>11</sup>

On November 4, 1941, the German high command (*Oberkommando der Wehrmacht* or OKW) laid down the basic objectives and conditions for the large-scale use of the labor of Soviet prisoners that would guide German policy in the future.<sup>12</sup> In essence, from this point on, the aim was to use as many Soviet prisoners as possible, especially for heavy and mass work, and to use skilled laborers as effectively as possible in accordance with their training.

These objectives motivated the so-called "Aufpäppelung" (pampering) campaigns from the winter of 1941/42 onward, by which exhausted prisoners were to be made fit for work again by temporarily receiving additional or better rations and better general care. The same objectives led to repeated inspections of prison camps everywhere by special commissions of the state labor offices, who sought prisoners who were fit for work and/or had previous specialized training. Short-term "Aufpäppelung" and the rapid exploitation of prisoners went hand in hand. In mid-July 1942, for example, a commission from the Vienna-Lower Danube Regional Labor Office

traveled to East Prussia “to recruit prisoners of war for use” in its own district. According to its report, the commission concentrated on “combing out” those camps “that, on the one hand, by their size, and on the other hand, by the high level of *Aufpäppler* [prisoners who had supposedly been pampered], gave a certain guarantee from the outset that the . . . task would be fulfilled.”<sup>13</sup> In view of the increasing demand for manpower inside and outside the Reich for industry and the Wehrmacht, the Wehrmacht and the National Socialist security services began, from 1942/1943 onward, to elevate the capture of as many enemies as possible to an operational objective in their war planning. “The purpose of the ‘Citadel’ attack,” the Army High Command (*Oberkommando des Heeres*, OKH) stated in April 1943, “is, in addition to the destruction of enemy formations and war material and a shortening of the front, to gain prisoners of war and civilian manpower for the employment of labor important to the war effort.”<sup>14</sup>

From November 1941 onward, military authorities sought to ensure the distribution of the prison labor force took into account and balanced the respective needs of the Wehrmacht, agriculture, and industry – with a focus on armaments, coal and infrastructure. At the same time, racial ideological hierarchies were to be observed in deployment and treatment. The absolute priority of taking care of the needs of Germans – soldiers and civilians – was never in question in this approach. For the treatment of the forced laborers who were prisoners of war, the guidelines meant that, regardless of work requirements, *Soviet* prisoners were worse off than prisoners from other countries in matters of rations, medical care, (minimal) compensation (in cash or kind) pay and general treatment. It was not until the spring of 1945 that, at least on paper, the rations of Soviet prisoners were brought up to the level of those of other prisoners of war. Even if the agencies involved were able or willing to implement this improvement in practice, the change no longer had any substantial effect. Even in the event of (Allied) air raids, priority was given to the protection of non-Soviet workers. In principle, Soviet prisoners continued

<sup>13</sup> Report of the Representative of the President of the Vienna-Lower Danube Regional Labor Office, July 16, 1942, in *Rotarmisten*, ed. Hilger, Overmans, and Polian, 474–478.

<sup>14</sup> Befehl OKH, April 15, 1943, and Order of the Chief of the Gang Combat Units, Sep. 1, 1943, both in *Rotarmisten*, ed. Hilger, Overmans, and Polian, 291–292, 294–295.

**15** Andreas Hilger and Oskars Gruzinš: "Intimacy, 'Treason,' and 'Ideological Transgression': POWs and Women on the Eastern Front of the Second World War," in *Prisoners of War and Local Women in Europe and the United States, 1914–1956: Consorting with the Enemy*, ed. Matthias Reiss and Brian K. Feltman (Cham, 2022), 190–229.

**16** Telex from the General of Pioneers and Fortresses at the OKH, Oct. 29, 1941, and draft note on the meeting with Reichsmarschall Göring on November 7, 1941, dated Nov. 11, 1941, both in *Rotarmisten*, ed. Hilger, Overmans, and Polian, 429, 436–440.

**17** Johannes Hürter, *Hitlers Heerführer: Die deutschen Oberbefehlshaber im Krieg gegen die Sowjetunion 1941/42* (Munich, 2007); Dieter Pohl, *Die Herrschaft der Wehrmacht. Deutsche Militärbesatzung und einheimische Bevölkerung in der Sowjetunion 1941–1944* (Munich, 2008); Tanja Penter, *Kohle für Stalin und Hitler: Arbeiten und Leben im Donbass 1929 bis 1953* (Essen, 2010).

to be regarded as posing a special danger that could only be dealt with by particularly strict measures. This included, for example, work in "work gangs" under particularly strict guard, deliberately harsh reprisals against escape attempts, and also the constant readiness to "weed out" and kill prisoners who were unwilling or unable to work. The extraordinarily harsh persecution of Soviet prisoners' private relationships with Germans was the final element in this set of policies.<sup>15</sup>

The vast majority of employers in the Wehrmacht, industry and agriculture were apparently fine with the politically motivated downgrading of living and labor conditions for the Soviet contingents. This was exemplified by the fact that the Wehrmacht summarily assigned Soviet prisoners of war to clear mines, and by no means only trained specialists.<sup>16</sup> Excessively long workdays in industry and agriculture alike demonstrated that little thought was given to whether the work and working conditions were tolerable for the individual prisoners. On the whole, when it came to deployments in the Wehrmacht, in coal mining, or in individual factories, the living and working conditions of Soviet prisoners of war bear more similarity to "slave labor" than to the labor deployments of prisoners protected under international law.<sup>17</sup>

Ultimately, the German actors in charge of labor deployment tried to resolve the contradictions of such a policy – which on the one hand ordered the widespread use of prisoners for labor and on the other hand remained bound to the logics of a war of extermination – by mercilessly exploiting the prisoners, with disastrous results. Even after the great mass deaths of 1941/42, the mortality rate among Soviet prisoners was many times higher than that of Western prisoners until the end of the war.

### **III. The Research and Database Project "Soviet and German Prisoners of War and Internees"**

The project "Soviet and German Prisoners of War and Internees," initiated in 2016, contributes to filling the gaps in



research mentioned above. It is funded by the Foreign Office of the Federal Republic of Germany and in some respects continues earlier work by the Saxon Memorials Foundation (Stiftung Sächsische Gedenkstätten). The host institution (*Träger*) for the overall project is the German War Graves Commission (Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge e.V.).

The project aims to clarify individual fates and to make the corresponding documents and data accessible to relatives, researchers, and memorial work. Within the framework of this project, the German Historical Institute in Moscow (DHIM) organized the research for documents on Soviet prisoners of war in post-Soviet, German, and other international archives until 2022/2023. Since then, the Max Weber Network Eastern Europe & EurAsia has organized this research. The fates of Soviet POWs can only be clarified through international cooperation. Project work has taken place in Russia, Latvia, Estonia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Germany, Serbia, France, Georgia, and Switzerland. After the Russian attack on Ukraine in February 2022, the project suspended all collaborations in Russia.<sup>18</sup> Work outside Russia (and outside Belarus) continues. In Germany, the results of the research on Soviet prisoners of war – digitized files and personal data – are being incorporated into the “Memorial Archives” research platform operated by the Flossenbürg concentration camp memorial on behalf of the German Federal Archives.<sup>19</sup>

The project’s approach focuses on the hitherto nameless Soviet soldiers and commanding officers who were taken captive by the German army. The project provides fragmentary documentary evidence for the reconstruction of hundreds of thousands of biographies, from a person’s capture to labor deployment, resistance, collaboration, death, repatriation, “filtration,” Soviet postwar trials, amnesties, and rehabilitations. By combining biographical data from various archives, it is possible to more precisely chronicle the experiences of Soviet prisoners of war in various industries, camps, and regions. The integrated access also allows us to trace the

**18** A brief history of the project is outlined in Andreas Hilger, *Russisch-deutsche Beziehungen seit den 1990er-Jahren - Kultur und Wissenschaft* (Paderborn, 2023), 17–27.

**19** <https://memorial-archives.international>

20 Penter, Kohle, 313–326.

21 Marina M. Panikar, *Sovetskie voennoplennye v Norvegii v gody Vtoroj mirovoj vojny* (Arkhangelsk, 2010); Marianne Neerland Soleim, *Sovjetiske krigsfanger i Norge, 1941–1945: Antall, organisering og reparering* (Oslo, 2009).

history of social and ethnic collectives in the labor commandos as well as prisoners' survival strategies.

As mentioned above, when the German Bundestag passed legislation authorizing the so-called recognition payments (*Anerkennungszahlung*) in May 2015, an estimated 2,000 to 4,000 former Soviet prisoners of war were still alive. In the current discussion about remembering the crimes of World War II without contemporary witnesses, it becomes clear that access to history through individual fates remains important. Sources about individuals are in great demand in educational work and for exhibition projects.

#### **IV. Work Assignment, Forced Mobility, and the International Dimension of the Project**

The labor deployment of Soviet POWs resulted in very high forced mobility. Soviet POWs passed through numerous stations of the far-flung German camp network. After their capture, Soviet military personnel were taken to assembly points at the front and then sent to the so-called “Dulags” (short for *Durchgangslager*), transit camps in the rear army areas. After forced marches and train rides, often lasting for days, which many did not survive, they reached the “Stalags” (short for *Stamm lager*), the main camps for enlisted men, or the “Oflags” (short for *Offizierslager*), the camps for officers.

Soviet prisoners of war were transported for forced labor not only to Germany, but across occupied Europe. We still know very little about prisoner transports within occupied portions of the Soviet Union, and forced labor there has barely been researched.<sup>20</sup> Large contingents of Soviet prisoners were taken to Poland, France, and Norway, as well as to countries allied with Germany, such as Hungary and Romania.<sup>21</sup> When the Allies agreed to repatriate their citizens quickly at the Yalta Conference in February 1945, over five million Soviet citizens were located outside the Soviet Union as a result of

2<sup>e</sup> DIVISION MAROCAINE  
 ETAT-MAJOR - 2<sup>e</sup> BUREAU *2000*  
 COMPTE RENDU D'INTERROGATOIRE DE P.G.

NO	NOM ET PRENOMS	NE LE	GRADE	UNITE	OBSERVATIONS
I311	WENDELE Karl	9.9.09	<del>XXXXXXXXXX</del> Pl. Bon 715		(1 <sup>o</sup> Cie)
I312	KUNAU Ederhard	18.7.25		9/15	
I313	ZSCHEYE Werner	26.9.21			
I314	STRELOVNIK Josef	6.3.18		3/100 G.J.R.	
I315	KORUS Hubert	9.7.11		FLAKAET 945	Polonais désert.
I316	HOFFPNER Gunter			1/Pl 356 D.I.	
I317	GHERMANN Friedrich	14.11.16	s/Off.	5/12 Starn Rgt.	
I318	BALVN Heret	28.12.22		5/12 Starn Rgt.	
I319	ZETTLHOKER Johann	29.8.25		" " "	
I320	CORNELIUS Johann	6.12.24		" " "	
I321	GRWGOR Manfred	7.1.25		" " "	
<b>23 JUN 1944</b>					
I322	FLIEGGER Sebastien	20.8.13		8/71 - 356 D.I.	
I323	MEYER Helmut	16.7.21		7/12 Starn Rgt.	
I324	JOHN Alex	2.12.25		8/71	Polonais
I325	RILL Adolf	3.7.09		8/71	"
I326	KOWALZYK Felix	29.5.13		8/71	Polonais
I327	BUNK Kasimir	21.5.23		8/71	
I328	HEK Brinec			12 Para.	
I329	MEYER Hans			12 Para	
I330	SEREDA Philippe	25.10.1892			
I331	LEWANDOWSKI Yvan	27.1.1920		Organ. Todt	Russe
I332	CHANGPRVICH Wladislaw	4.4.1924		" "	"
I333	SZYSZKA Tadens	4.6.22		" "	Polonais
I334	HAFPA Yvan			" "	Russe
<b>24 JUN 1944</b>					
I335	RAPANO Michel			" "	Russe
I336	RIMENIOFF Wassilief			" "	"
I337	CHALAGHAIEFF Paul			" "	"
I338	TIOCKINE Feodor			" "	"
I339	CIGNANI Miche			" "	"
I340	OLIMOWE Jakob			" "	"
I341	PTUSCHKOW Georges			" "	"
I342	TALLNIKOW Nikoloi			" "	"
I343	BELEKOW Eugen			" "	"

P.C., le 24 JUN 1944

*27 JUN 1944*  
 2-  
 74643

**Figure 1.** Soviet prisoners of war as forced laborers in the Organisation Todt. List of the intelligence section of the 2<sup>e</sup> division marocaine. Source: Historical Service of the French Ministry of Defense (SHD) <sup>23</sup> / Service historique de la Défense, Vincennes, GR 10 P 37.

the war. Among the repatriated, according to current Russian figures, were 1.8 million former prisoners of war who were located across almost all European countries as well as in the United States. <sup>22</sup>

This situation is reflected in archival records in all these countries. As already mentioned, first project results are available, among others, from Russia, from Baltic and Central Asian states, from Western and Southeastern Europe, from Georgia and, thanks to a preceding project, from Ukraine and Belarus. The extension of the current work to further countries, namely to archives of Ukraine, but also to Moldova, is currently being planned.

<sup>22</sup> Repatriacija sovetkich graždan s okkupirovannoj territorii Germanii, 1944–1952, ed. Ol'ga V. Lavinskaya and Vladimir V. Zacharov, vol. 1, 1944–1946 (Moskva, 2019), 29; Sheila Fitzpatrick, "The Motherland Calls: 'Soft Repatriation' of Soviet Citizens from Europe, 1945–1953," *Journal of Modern History* 90 (2018): 323–350.

<sup>23</sup> The documents in the French archives were reviewed by Dr. Daniel Bißmann as part of the project.

**Personalkarte I: Personelle Angaben**

Verpflichtung der Wehrmacht Nr. 39222

Kriegsgefangenen-Stammlager: Stalag X D (310) Post: Stalag X D (310)

Name: DUBININ Staatsangehörigkeit: Russe

Vorname: WASILIJ Dienstgrad: Soldat

Geburtsort und -ort: 25.11.1908 d. Tajdaxowo gau Tula Truppenteil: 250 I.R. Komp. ufo.: \_\_\_\_\_

Religion: g.o. Stellung: Böcker Berufs-Ort: \_\_\_\_\_


Vorname des Vaters: Iwan Matrikel Nr. (Stammrolle des Heimatstaates): \_\_\_\_\_

Familienname der Mutter: Kondratjew Gefangennahme (Ort und Datum): 16.11.41 St. Medwed

Ob gesund, krank, verwundet eingeliefert: gesund

**Das Kriegsgefangenen**

**Bild**

	Größe: <u>178</u>	Haarfarbe: <u>schwarz</u>	Nähere Personalbeschreibung:
			Besondere Kennzeichen: <u>Augenfarbe - schwarz</u>
	Fingerabdruck des rechten Ringfingers		Name und Adresse der zu benachrichtigsten Person in der Heimat des Heimatlandes:
			<u>Dubinin Tatjana</u>
			<u>St. Moskwa, str. St. Bosman-</u>
			<u>naja 38/g, zw. 11.</u>

General

Verpflichtung der Wehrmacht Nr. 39222

Kriegsgefangenen-Stammlager: Stalag X D (310) Post: Stalag X D (310)

**Figure 2.** Personalkarte I (Registration card), recto, for Soviet Prisoner of War Vasilij Dubinin. Source: Russian State Military Archive Moscow (RGVA) f. 517, op. 1, d. 47019, l. 106.

## V. Sources on the Forced Labor of Soviet Prisoners of War

The 1929 Geneva Convention on the Treatment of Prisoners of War, which Germany had signed, obliged all signatory powers to register prisoners and to establish an official information center. The German Reich refused to treat Soviet prisoners of war according to the principles of the Geneva Convention. Registration by the Wehrmacht bureaucracy deviated from that approach to a certain degree. In 1939, the Wehrmacht set up an Information Center (Wehrmachtsaufsuchtsstelle, WAST) in Berlin, with a Department VIII for “Foreign Prisoners,” where all information on Soviet prisoners of war in German custody was collected. But, again



Nr. 39222  
 Reger: S.D./BIO

Datum	Grund der Verletzung	Stellungs

Erfolge während der Befreiungszeit gegen:

Todes		Erfolge		Krankheit		Erfolge	
am	gegen	am	gegen	von	bis	von	bis
am 12.7.41	gegen 1.0.45	am	gegen				
	am 20.9.43	am	gegen				
	am 21.8.43	am	gegen				
	gegen Paraty	am	gegen				

Datum	Grund der Verletzung	Stellungs	Datum	Grund der Verletzung	Stellungs
1.12.41		Stalag X. B.			
2.2.42		Stalag I. B.			
16.10.44	R.A. W. Nieier r. ort	Stalag 321 VI K			

16.10.44 R.A. W. Nieier r. ort Stalag 321 VI K

Kommandos		
Datum	Art des Kommandos	Stichtag
7.11.41	Assevalberg A.W. 199	
26.11.41	Stalag I. B.	
2.2.42	Stalag I. B.	
22.2.42	Hauting-Wandsleben D.F.K. 7.173 XB	
4.8.42	Lager X B Sandbostel	
11.8.42	Lager X B Sandbostel	
12.11.42	Höb-Wandsbeck 7173	
20.12.42	Höb-Wandsbeck 7173	30.9.43 1441
26.1.44	Glinickstadt	1258
16.10.44	Höb-Wandsbeck 1943	

GX 88865



**Figure 3.** Personalkarte I, verso, for Vasilij Dubinin. Source: Russian State Military Archive Moscow (RGVA) f. 517, op. 1, d. 47019, l. 106.

in violation of the Geneva Convention, the WAsT never provided any information about prisoners to the USSR.<sup>24</sup> The “Personalkarte I” (registration card) filed for each prisoner of war formed the basis for planning the labor deployment of the Soviet prisoners of war. The registration of the prisoners in the camps – mostly in the Stalags and Oflags – provided the German authorities with an overview of the number and location of the prisoners, their occupation, gender, ethnicity, state of health, and other criteria that were important for the organization of work detachments.

For example, the registration card for Vasilij Dubinin, now at the Russian State Military Archives in Moscow (RGVA), shows that this soldier, born in 1908, was taken prisoner on August

<sup>24</sup> Rolf Keller and Reinhard Otto, “Das Massensterben der sowjetischen Kriegsgefangenen und die Wehrmachtsbürokratie: Unterlagen zur Registrierung der sowjetischen Kriegsgefangenen 1941–1945 in deutschen und russischen Institutionen,” *Militär-geschichtliche Mitteilungen* 57 (1998): 149–180, here 154.

25 <https://gedenkstaettenfoerderung.stiftung-ng.de/de/forschung-dokumentation/wehrmacht-kriegsgefangene/kriegsgefangenenlager/storage/x-d-310-wietzendorf/> (accessed Nov. 12, 2020). Information provided by the Lower Saxony Memorials Foundation, which works with the project as a cooperation partner.

26 Keller and Petry, *Sowjetische Kriegsgefangene*, 17.

16, 1941 in Medved' near Novgorod. He was registered in the fall of 1941 in Stalag XD (310), in the Wietzendorf camp. Wietzendorf in the Lüneburg Heath was one of the so-called Russian camps, intended exclusively for Soviet prisoners of war. Built in the summer of 1941 on a military training area, the Wehrmacht provided hardly any permanent housing. In the winter of 1941/42, prisoners had to seek shelter from cold, wind, and snow in earth caves and self-built hovels. By March 1942, more than 14,000 Soviet prisoners of war had already died in Wietzendorf from malnutrition and the other unbearable conditions of their captivity.<sup>25</sup>

Prisoners were registered in the camps and given a number according to the order of their arrival. Vasilij Dubinin was given prisoner number 39,222. From this it can be concluded that in the first months of the war, by the fall of 1941, around 40,000 Soviet prisoners of war had already been transported to Wietzendorf for forced labor, despite the lack of accommodation and supply facilities.

Rolf Keller and Silke Petry have shown that for the Wietzendorf camp alone, more than 200 external labor detachments (*Arbeitskommandos*) were established in the region ("Wehrkreis X").<sup>26</sup> The placement of POWs at companies and farms was handled by the existing civilian labor offices (*Arbeitsämter*). However, the Wehrmacht remained responsible for the POWs and recorded their labor assignments on the registration cards and other personal documents. The recording of the labor detachments in these documents gives us precise information about the dimensions and the differentiation of the labor deployment as well as mortality rates. References to thousands of labor detachments in German villages and towns in the records also underscore the pervasive presence of Soviet POWs in the everyday life of local communities.

The registration cards, when compared with other documents, also allow statements to be made about the prisoners' survival strategies. The occupation of the prisoners was

entered on the registration cards. According to the entry, Vasilij Dubinin was a baker. The indication of occupations such as baker or farmer was likely to increase the chances of survival, since it could facilitate access to food. Initial sampling of the project inventories gives rise to the hypothesis that the occupational designation farmer is found for an improbably high number of Soviet prisoners of war. It is true that the Red Army was still to a considerable extent a peasant army during World War II, despite the forced industrialization in the Soviet Union of the 1930s. However, occupational information (as well as a number of other details) must always be read in the context of the prisoners' options for action, as they were often based on self-reporting during registration due to the lack of documents.

We still have hardly any information on which criteria determined whether a prisoner of war would receive a labor assignment near the front or be transported to Germany or other countries for forced labor there. The previously mentioned OKW order of November 4, 1941, stipulated that skilled workers should be transported to Germany as a matter of priority.<sup>27</sup> Representatives of German industry were not very satisfied with the implementation of this order. In August 1942, Siemens complained that technical criteria were not being taken into account: "The German military administration provided the Russian prisoners of war for the work assignment only roughly sorted, i.e., the examination extended essentially to their physical condition." Regardless, Siemens noted "severe manifestations of malnutrition and physical deterioration" among members of "the Russian Wehrmacht [sic!]." Siemens classified half of the assigned Soviet prisoners of war as unfit for work and was unwilling to employ them. Five percent of those who "successfully" passed muster died in their first days at Siemens. Siemens asked the Wehrmacht offices to spare "German industry considerable time in mustering and training" by preselecting them before they were transported to Germany.<sup>28</sup>

**27** Befehl OKW, Nov. 4, 1941, in *Rotarmisten*, ed. Hilger, Overmans, and Polian, 432–434.

**28** CAMO f. 500, op. 12453, d. 131, l. 2–3, 7, 34, <https://wwii.germandocsinrussia.org/de/nodes/3927-akte-131-vierteljahresbericht-ber-den-arbeitseinsatz-der-sowjetischen-kriegsgefangenen-im-kleinbauwerk-der-siemens-schuckertwerke-a-g-in-berlin-siemensstadt-vom-29-august-1942#page/1/mode/grid/zoom/1> (accessed Nov. 12, 2020).

**29** Pavel Polian, "Soviet-Jewish Prisoners of War in German Captivity," *Kritika* 6 (2005): 763–787; Tanja Penter and Dmytro Titarenko, *Opyt nacistskoj okkupacii v Donbasse: Svidetel'stvujut očevidy* (Donetsk, 2013), 90–108. Jews were categorized as a nationality in the Soviet Union.

**30** Latvian National Archives (=LNA), LVA 1821. f., 1 apr., 102. l.; LNA LVVA 816. f., 3 apr., 116. l.

**31** Bundesarchiv (=BArch) ZA 11, BArch ZA 12. These are British and US personnel files on former Soviet prisoners of war who were in the service of the Wehrmacht and became British or US prisoners of war. The files were handed over to the Deutsche Dienststelle and digitized as part of the project.

Other categories noted on the registration cards, such as "nationality," point to a complex web of factors in the selection of POWs for work commands, auxiliary services, and special assignments. Although German documents such as the Siemens report cited above refer to "Russian prisoners of war," the responsible German authorities well understood that the Soviet Union was a multiethnic state. German ideas of how to use this fact for Germany's war aims were by no means uniform and changed in the course of the war. In this regard, German policy was largely guided by the list of nationalities created and subsequently expanded in the Soviet Union as part of the *korenizacija* policy of the 1920s. On the registration cards, entries for "nationality" never say "Soviet" but rather "Uzbek," "Ukrainian," "Russian," "Mordovian," and so on. According to the principle of „divide and conquer," the Germans purposely fostered ethnic divisions and conflicts in the POW camps. In the process, the Soviet hierarchization of nationalities, as it had been established under Stalinism and especially during World War II, underwent a reordering. After the Jews, the Russians were at the bottom of the scale. Soviet Germans, Balts, Ukrainians, and, later, Caucasians had better chances of survival.<sup>29</sup>

How this policy was reflected in the use of labor is one of the major research desiderata. A systematic evaluation of the project's holdings is still pending. Documents from Riga indicate that Latvian farms, for example, were predominantly staffed by Russian and Ukrainian prisoners of war, while Latvian prisoners of war were partially released from captivity.<sup>30</sup>

Several hundred thousand Soviet prisoners of war who ranked relatively high in the camp hierarchy were released from captivity. For many, this did not mean freedom, but was tied to the obligation to work for the Wehrmacht or the police service, for example, as "auxiliary volunteers." This suggests that the complex topic of collaboration also requires a discussion of the boundaries between forced labor and voluntary work.<sup>31</sup>



In Germany, the factory owners who selected forced laborers from the ranks of Soviet prisoners of war and put them to work in their factories included emigrants from pre-revolutionary Russia and the early Soviet Union, most of whom had left their homeland in the wake of the Russian Revolution. Here, too, ethnic criteria helped determine the selection.<sup>32</sup> German occupation and prisoner-of-war policies, closely intertwined with Soviet nationality policies, thus contributed significantly to a reshaping and strengthening of national identities in the Soviet Union and the territories annexed by the USSR in 1939.

The most extensive holdings of personal documents on Soviet prisoners of war are in the archives of Russia and other successor states of the Soviet Union. In case of death, the registration cards that accompanied the prisoners on their way through the Stalags were sent to the WAST. The camp administrations were required to report deaths and all changes such as additions, transfers, and hospital stays to the WAST in Berlin. In 1943, due to the bombing of Berlin, part of the WAST's records were moved to Meiningen (Thuringia) to the Drachenberg Barracks. After the liberation of Meiningen, American troops took over the WAST and handed over the records on Soviet prisoners of war to the Red Army.<sup>33</sup> A large part of the files handed over to the Soviet Union in 1945 is now in the Central Archives of the Russian Ministry of Defense (CAMO) in Podol'sk. With respect to Soviet prisoners, the CAMO holds mainly personal documents of Soviet prisoners of war who died in German custody. While these registration cards were indexed in the CAMO as part of the aforementioned predecessor project, the project now records the corresponding documents in the Federal Archives. Digitized copies of these were handed over to the Russian cooperation partners for the OBD Memorial database of the Russian Ministry of Defense until February 2022. Transfers to other successor states of the Soviet Union are being sought.

The WAST's successor agency, the Deutsche Dienststelle für die Benachrichtigung der nächsten Angehörigen der Gefallenen

<sup>32</sup> Sebastian Cwiklinski, *Volgatars in World War II Germany: German Ostpolitik and Tatar Nationalism* (Berlin, 2002), 49.

<sup>33</sup> Keller and Otto, "Massensterben," 158.

**34** Our thanks for the documentation go to Anette Meiburg, Director of the German Federal Archives, Department of Personal Information, and her team.

**35** Artem V. Latyšev, "Sistema proverki voennosluzhaščich Krasnoj Armii, ver-nuvšichsja iz plena i okruženijsa. 1941–1945 rr." (Ph.D. diss., Lomonosov Moscow State University, 2016), <http://www.hist.msu.ru/Science/Disser/Latyshhev.pdf>.

**36** NKVD and NKGB orders of June 16, 1945, in *Rotarmisten*, ed. Hilger, Overmans, and Polian, 799–802.

**37** Ukaz Prezidenta RSFSR ot 24.08.1991g. No. 82. Ob archivach Komiteta gosudarstvennoj bezopasnosti SSSR <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/142> (accessed Nov. 12, 2020).

der ehemaligen deutschen Wehrmacht (German Service for Notification of Next of Kin of the Fallen of the Former German Wehrmacht) transferred additional documents to the Soviet Union between 1946 and 1948 and in 1990.<sup>34</sup> Some of the documents remained in Germany and were transferred to the Federal Archives in 2019.

The documents of surviving prisoners of war took a different route. Wehrmacht documents were a central part of the so-called "filtration" process. Soviet soldiers and especially officers who had survived German captivity were collectively accused of treason in the Soviet Union. The groundwork for vetting former prisoners of war was laid immediately after the German attack on the USSR and steadily expanded as the Red Army advanced.<sup>35</sup> In view of the large numbers involved, initial plans to subject prisoners deported to Germany and other European countries for forced labor to intelligence checks at the sites of their liberation were not feasible. The majority of the checks were carried out by the local NKVD and NKGB bodies in repatriation camps on Soviet territory and at the places of residence of the repatriated prisoners, where the filtration files and their corresponding personnel cards are also located today.<sup>36</sup> Thus, local and regional archives in all successor states of the Soviet Union are of central importance, with often difficult access conditions. In Russia, for example, a decree issued by President Boris Yeltsin in August 1991 ordered the transfer of these files from the KGB archives to the state civil archives of the regions and of Moscow and Leningrad.<sup>37</sup> The order was only partially implemented and was invalidated in 1999. Thus, in Russia, the civil regional archives, information centers of the Ministry of Interior, FSB archives, and RGVA, among others, were of central importance for person-related research on the repatriated POWs, which took place until 2022.

The filtration files reveal very strong differences across regions in the processes followed. Statements on the forced labor of Soviet prisoners of war are found primarily in questionnaires, autobiographies, witness statements, and inter-

Опер-уполномоченному  
 Особого отдела  
 от Кошкина  
 Александра Михайловича  
 заявление.  
 Я, Кошкин Александр Михайлович  
 находясь вместе с Маслобоевым  
 Иваном Васильевичем в рабочей ко-  
 манде на медно-рудной шахте в г.  
 Айслебене с 7 января 1945 г. до  
 освобождения американцами.  
 Маслобов Иван Васильевич в не-  
 мецкой армии не служил, а также  
 и в РОА. В полиции тоже не рабо-  
 тал.

Подпись: Кошкин (Кошкин)  
 23/VIII-45 г.  
 Присяжка: Зверев

**Figure 4.** Extract from the filtration file of repatriated prisoner of war Ivan Masloboev, testimony. Latvian National Archives, LNA LVA 1821. f., 1 apr., 36357. l., 7. lp.

rogation protocols. For example, in his interrogation by the NKVD in August 1945, Ivan Masloboev, a Russian born in Latvia, party member, and commander of the Red Army, answered the question where he had been during the war as follows: “In the camp of the town of Eisleben (Germany) I worked as an unskilled laborer in the copper ore mine until the liberation.”<sup>38</sup>

This work deployment was confirmed by several witnesses:

Statement. I, Koškin Aleksandr Michailovič, together with Masloboev Ivan Vasilevič was in the labor detachment in the copper ore mine in the town of Eisleben from January 7, 1943 until the liberation by the Americans. Masloboev Ivan Vasilevič did not serve in the German army, nor in the ROA [i.e. the

**38** “В лагере города Айслебен (Германия) работал в медно-рудной шахте чернорабочим до освобождения”. LNA LVA 1821. f., 1 apr., 36357. l., 5. lp.

<sup>39</sup> <https://german-docsinrussia.org/de/nodes/1-russisch-deutsches-projekt-zur-digitalisierung-deutscher-dokumente-in-den-archiven-der-russischen-f-deration> (accessed Nov. 12, 2020).

<sup>40</sup> Walter Sperling, "Überlieferung und Nutzung deutscher Beuteakten des Zweiten Weltkrieg in sowjetischen und russischen Archiven," <https://www.dhi-moskau.org/de/institut/team/wissenschaft/dr-walter-sperling.html> (accessed 12.11.2020).

Russian Liberation Army, a collaborationist formation, primarily composed of Russians, that fought under German command]. He also did not work in the police.

Filtration files are to be read primarily as sources from the Stalinist rather than National Socialist regime. Nevertheless, a source-critical evaluation in combination with other documents allows for substantial conclusions on various aspects of forced labor of Soviet prisoners of war, such as locations and chances of survival, formation of collectives, etc.

The work of the "Soviet and German Prisoners of War and Internees" project also benefits from another earlier major project of the German Historical Institute in Moscow which digitized and made available online German files taken to the USSR in the course of World War II as so-called "captured records" (*Beuteakten*) and still held in various Russian archives, including CAMO. These documents provide insights into all decision-making levels of the Wehrmacht and into the organization of labor deployment.<sup>39</sup> A research project is underway analyzing the transmission and use of these files from which new insights into the forced labor of Soviet prisoners of war may emerge.<sup>40</sup> In this way, the various approaches link biographical with structural questions of labor deployment and provide information about the use of archival records. Moreover, on this basis, biographical and structural approaches to the history of the labor deployment of Soviet prisoners of war can be productively combined in order to finally bring this deployment out of the German — and pan-European — "memory shadow."

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