

REVIEWS

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FORCED LABOUR OF POLISH AND SOVIET CHILDREN UNDER NAZI OCCUPATION DISCUSSION BY PROF. JOHANNES-DIETER STEINERT AND PROF. BEATA HALICKA, 1 DECEMBER 2022

Abstract: The following conversation is an abridged transcript of a discussion that Prof. Dr. Beata Halicka (UAM) held with Prof. Dr. Johannes-Dieter Steinert of the University of Wolverhampton in the UK. It took place on December 1, 2022 and was the opening event of a conference entitled *Little Workers: Child Labor in socio-cultural and economic perspectives throughout history*. The conference was organized by the Department of Economic History, the Department of Eastern European History and the Research Unit of Cultural History and was held at the Faculty of History of Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. Johannes-Dieter Steinert is a prominent specialist in the field of child forced labourers in National Socialist Germany and German occupied Eastern Europe. His books on the subject have been published in English, German and Polish.

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Beata Halicka: Prof. Steinert, you were the first to point out in a comprehensive way that a large part of the 13 million *forced labourers* in National Socialist Germany and the over 20 million forced labourers in the German-occupied territories were children and very young people. In your book published in German in 2013 and recently translated into Polish (Steinert, 2021), you focused on both the deportation and forced labour of children.

You also described in detail aspects of everyday life before the deportations, the immensity of terror that the Germans used in relation to the civilian population, the policy of ruthless exploitation not only of the resources of the occupied countries but also of the people as a workforce. How did you become interested in this topic?

Johannes-Dieter Steinert: My interest was triggered about fifteen years ago when I was engaged in a research project on “British humanitarian assistance during and after the Second World War” (Steinert, 2007). British help was provided, especially, for forced labourers liberated in Germany and for survivors of the Holocaust. Most of these Displaced Persons were accommodated by the Allies in Displaced Person camps with the aim of a speedy repatriation to their countries of origin.

As expected, repatriation made good progress in 1945, but, after some months, groups of unaccompanied children became visible in the camps, who had not been recognized by Allied personnel before, as it seemed to them that they belonged to families.

When I read the contemporary reports, I first thought that these children might have been orphans who were initially deported to Germany together with their families or at least together with a family member, but then I questioned this assumption due to the huge number of children. Although there can be no doubt that some children became orphans during their stay in Germany, a more obvious explanation was that most of them were not children of forced labourers deported to Germany, but children who had been deported as forced labourers to Germany. From then on, I wanted to know more about child forced labourers, who had so far been widely neglected in international research.

From the very beginning, it was my aim to not only focus on the victims and their experience but to also place my research within the broad and crucial context of the political and ideological imperatives of the National Socialist perpetrators. Two areas of research have been of particular interest when researching Polish and Soviet child forced labourers: first, the participation of German military and civil institutions in deportations and in employing forced labourers as well as the various interdependencies between child forced labour, deportation practices and Germanisation policies, particularly in occupied Poland. Secondly, the experience of deportation and forced labour as constructed and narrated in former child forced labourers’ testimonies.

Due to a lack of contemporary statistics on child forced labourers, it is most difficult to give any exact numbers. However, based on post-war repatriation figures, it can be estimated that at least 1 million forced labourers under the age of eighteen years were deported from German-occupied areas of the Soviet Union, mainly from Ukraine and Belarus to Germany, as well as at least 500,000 from Poland. Polish and Soviet child forced labourers worked in all branches of industry, in agriculture and as domestics in German households. The Wehrmacht and SS deployed children to construction work on fortifications, bridges, roads and airfields.

B.H.: Your second book on this topic was *Holocaust und Zwangsarbeit: Erinnerungen jüdischer Kinder 1938–1945*, published 2018 (Steinert, 2018). Your current research project is: *Sinti and Roma child forced labourers in National Socialist Germany and German-occupied Eastern Europe*. Why did you decide to describe each group of children separately?

J.-D.S.: I, initially, wanted to write a single book covering different groups of child forced labourers. However, in light of the data collected, I realized quickly that this would not do justice to both the topic and child forced labourers.

In this context, it is important to notice, that the overwhelming majority of child forced labourers originated from four nationalities or ethnic groups: They were Polish, Soviet, Jewish as well as Sinti and Roma children. These groups were at the bottom of the National Socialist racist hierarchy. In other words, apart from a few exemptions, only children from these four groups were forced to work for the Germans, either in Germany or in German-occupied territories. Moreover, forced labourers from these four groups – children and adults alike – had to endure the worst working and living conditions as well as the worst deportation practices.

Nevertheless, there were different German policies towards each of these groups. One of the main differences between Jewish and Sinti/Roma child forced labourers on the one hand and Polish and Soviet children on the other is that already at a very early stage of the war hundreds of thousands of Polish and Soviet children were deported as forced labourers to Germany, while the others had to work for the Germans in the occupied areas. In Germany, Polish forced labourers were treated slightly better than Soviet forced labourers.

B.H.: In your first book, you stated that children remember differently than adults. You also mentioned that traditional Nazi sources are full of bias and ideology. The analysis of autobiographical testimonies opens historical perspectives to which traditional sources do not provide access. Could you say more about the challenges in access to the traditional sources as well as the testimonies? What would be your advice for participants of our conference, on how to work critically with those two types of sources?

J.-D.S.: As psychologist Andrea Reiter noted, "Children experienced the camps not only in a different way, they also remember them differently" (Reiter, 1999: 216–217). Barbara Bauer and Waltraud Strickhausen made a similar argument:

Children experience differently, they do not have an interpretation system to classify their experience; they are still developing it. They keep in their memory what has impressed, astonished, delighted and worried them in a different way. They memorize cruel scenes more sustainably than adults (Reiter, 1999: 215).

Without going into details, it is safe to say that these statements could be verified when analysing testimonies. Additionally, I realized that the same applied to the experience of friendliness and camaraderie. Many testimonies of former child forced labourers contain, at least, one story about friendly persons they met while working in Germany, including overseers, foremen, elderly people, workers in a factory, even friendly SS men and women in a camp.

But there are also gaps in memory caused by trauma, which are quite common in children's testimonies. Historian Joanna Michlic spoke in this context about a "lack of precise references to time, space and social actors" (Michlic, 2008: 15–16).

We also should be aware that the experience of a ten-year-old boy differs from the experience of a sixteen-year-old girl – and so do their testimonies. But again, this is rather an opportunity for a better understanding than a burden for analysis. And finally, neither Polish nor Soviet child forced labourers were homogeneous groups, but groups that differed internally, in terms of ethnicity, age, social background, education, and personality, to name just a few.

What the children had in common was, among others, traumatization, the loss of or separation from their parents, their home, their freedom, their education, their chances in life, and their future.

Some words about contemporary German sources: Well-known is the lack of contemporary German sources. There were orders given by Berlin already in 1943 to destroy official documents. Additionally, there was enormous damage due to military action, Allied bombing, and post-war losses. In the documents available, German civil and military authorities did not reflect a lot about child forced labourers. The Germans were interested in able-bodied male and female labourers, fit to work.

Apart from the lack of contemporary sources, it is questionable if and to what degree we can trust them. Do we really trust German documents, which tell us that foreign workers in Germany were volunteers, and that they were well treated, well accommodated, and well fed? Do we trust German documents telling us about food provided during deportation and in the camps?

Some years ago, I had a lively discussion with a senior Polish archivist. His position: You can only use a testimony if you have at least one accompanying document that confirms the content of the testimony. My position: I only trust a contemporary German document if I have a testimony that confirms the content of the document.

Ideally, contemporary documents and testimonies complement each other, and this method allows us to research areas of history that will remain undiscovered if we use documents or testimonies only. Therefore, I have examined a wide range of official documents from German, Polish, Ukrainian, Belorussian, American, and Israeli archives as well as hundreds of published and unpublished testimonies. However, for which purpose do we use testimonies? To establish so-called hard facts about an event or to understand how somebody remembers and narrates an event?

B.H.: Let's talk about the term *forced labourers*. In the 1980s, the German historian Ulrich Herbert titled his book *Fremdarbeiter* [Foreign worker] and called the *forced labourers* as *Fremdarbeiter* or *Zivilarbeiter* (civil worker), which are euphemisms. Using those terms was a common practice during the Nazi era and had continued many years after the war. First, as the discussion about compensation began in the late 1990s, arguments emerge that this phenomenon should be referred to as *forced labour*. In 2008, Alexander von Plato and his collaborators, who had studied thousands of testimonies using oral history, went even further and titled their book, *Hitlers Sklaven* [The Slaves of Hitler]. Some historians in Poland also tend to use this term. What is your opinion about the last term?

J.-D.S.: First, we should note that the term slave labour was used during the war by the Western Allies, who, beginning in 1944, applied it to civilians deported to Germany for work from all parts of occupied Europe. In this general sense, the term equally applied to Jewish and non-Jewish labour. A little later, the term slave labour was also used by the Nuremberg International Tribunal, despite the fact that the term forced labour was internationally recognized since 1930.

The narrowing of the term slave labour to the forced labour of Jewish concentration camp prisoners emerged from the 1950s onward in the context of compensation claims against German firms, before it was later expanded during the forced labour compensation debate to include inmates of concentration camps, ghettos, or comparable places of detention.

In this context, it should also be noted that quite a few survivors reject the term slave labour as humiliating.

In my own work, I had initially intended to use both terms – forced labour and slave labour (the latter in the context of concentration camp prisoners). However, this proved impractical when writing the manuscript, because quite often the terminology would have had to be changed within a paragraph.

To avoid the problem, I have used only the term forced labour as defined by the International Labour Organization in its Forced and Compulsory Labour Convention, 1930: “The term forced or compulsory labour shall mean all work or service which is exacted from any person under the menace of any penalty and for which the said person has not offered himself voluntarily.” This definition allows a historical analysis of forced labour in both Germany and in German-occupied areas, whereas deportation is not a necessary condition for forced labour. Furthermore, while the 1930 Convention does not ban all forms of forced and compulsory labour, Article 11(1) clearly states that “only adult able-bodied males who are of an apparent age of not less than 18 and not more than 45 years may be called upon for forced or compulsory labour”. Constituent elements of forced labour were the threat of punishment and compulsion.

B.H.: Most Polish readers interested in the history of WWII have a general knowledge about the fate of Polish forced labourers. What is much less known are the circumstances of German occupation in Soviet Union. It is important to remember that both totalitarian regimes were based on forced labour. Already before the German attack or in the regions that were not occupied by Germans, Soviet children and youth were subjected

to forced labour, for example in collective farms. In 1942, it became even compulsory for twelve to sixteen-year-olds. Did you observe differences in the way German occupiers treated child forced labourers in the territories of today's Belarus and Ukraine? What about testimonies of people from Belarus and Ukraine, who, for many decades, could not speak about their fate of being forced labourer in the Soviet Union?

J.-D.S.: In many countries children started to work directly after finishing school, at the age of fourteen years. However, the employment of minors was usually regulated by special youth protection laws. What happened in Germany was to abolish these regulations for foreign child labourers. While German children were still protected, Polish and Soviet children were not. The question about child labour in the Soviet Union can be asked in a more general way: "Can work under war-time conditions in non-occupied areas be regarded as forced labour?" To answer this question, one should look very carefully into the details of a specific situation.

The conditions under which children grew up before the war is essential when analysing their testimonies, including family background, education, economic status of the family, to name just a few.

My own academic background is migration studies. And when focussing on child forced labour, I followed the general structure of such studies: the conditions in the country of origin, the events and developments that led to migration, the farewell, the journey, the arrival and admission, living and working conditions, return to the homeland, further migration. This background helped to structure my research on child forced labourers. Additionally, it was different from what most historians interested in forced labour focussed on in their studies: the work and the conditions in Germany only.

The testimonies of children forced to work in the occupied areas were in many respects very similar to those for children deported to Germany. Although most of the children could stay in their towns and villages or nearby, and although a number could even sleep at home, it is obvious that these children remember forced labour as a turning point in their biographies too. All were forcibly withdrawn from school; and some had to work for the ethnic German settlers, who had taken over their parents' farms.

Older children learned that working for a German employer at home protected them from being deported to Germany. Such jobs were arranged by parents, friends and neighbours, sometimes with the help of bribes. Nearly all of these children recalled the permanent fear of being deported

to Germany eventually. Just like the deported minors, child forced labourers in the occupied areas had to endure mistreatment by their German employers. Some remembered that they resigned themselves to their fate because they feared being sent to a forced labour camp or to Germany.

While children deported to Germany were homesick and worried about their loved ones at home, those who stayed at home had to endure the effects of German occupation policies and often found themselves in the roles of adults having to care for their families. In interviews, many complained that until now neither the German nor the Polish governments have acknowledged them officially as forced labourers and have treated them in the same way as their deported fellow contemporaries.

The research on how children remembered liberation made further differences between their testimonies and those of adults obvious. Most of the Soviet children recalled their liberation by the Red Army in a cheerful and enthusiastic way. They could not wait to go home. In contrast to the repatriation of Soviet citizens which was organised via so-called filtration camps, Polish forced labourers had a much shorter journey home, and many of them left Germany and Austria without any assistance. While enforced repatriation of Soviet-displaced persons had been agreed upon at Yalta, a high percentage of Polish-displaced persons were reluctant to go back to Poland, which was now under Soviet control.

Differences between both groups of forced labourers continued after the war. While in Poland, forced labour was an important topic in both politics and public discourse, in the Soviet Union there were years of silence. Here, former forced labourers did not talk openly about their experiences in Germany until 1990. Forced labour was regarded as a stain on one's biography. The fact that millions of Soviet citizens had worked in Germany did not fit into the official Soviet war history that celebrated mass heroism and patriotism.

Augustina, born in 1927, for example, had been arrested by the Gestapo because she had helped a Soviet prisoner of war to escape. She was not hanged, but was imprisoned temporarily in one of the notorious so-called labour education camps (*Arbeitserziehungslager*). When liberated by the Red Army, she was eighteen years old, so that Soviet repatriation officers, who did not believe her story because she was not sentenced to death by the Gestapo, did not treat her as a child. She had to endure insults and abuses when staying in a Soviet repatriation camp in Brandenburg, where she was called a traitor and a whore. Finally, in October 1945, she was allowed to return home, where her father greeted her with the question

in his eyes why she had not stayed in the West, while the NKWD, over many years, suspected her of having been a spy for the Germans. When planning marriage to a Red Army officer, the NKWD warned her fiancé not to spoil his career. They did get married, moved to the Caucasus, returned to Charkow in 1962; but it was only after the end of the Soviet Union that Augustina told her sons about her time as a child forced labourer in Germany.

B.H.: For your book about Jewish child forced labourers you received the Yad Vashem International Book Prize for Holocaust Research in 2020 and with this prize an international recognition. How was your first book, about Polish and Soviet child forced labourers, received in Germany in 2013–2014? How, in your opinion, was the general knowledge about the circumstances of Nazi occupation of East-Central Europe at that time, and how is it today? Do you see an increase of interest in this topic in recent years?

J.-D.S.: These are interesting questions. When the book on Polish and Soviet children was published, there was a wave of book reviews in Germany and there was interest even in journals where you would not expect any interest in such topics. When the book on Jewish children was published, there were fewer book reviews in Germany but more reviews abroad.

Does that say anything about the general interest in Germany and the general knowledge about forced labour and German occupation policies in Eastern Europe? I think it does not. I also doubt that there is much interest outside the academic world and in a few areas of politics. However, I left Germany in 1999 and since then I have lived and worked in England, watching Germany from a distance only. Therefore, I hope, I am wrong.

Thank you for the interesting discussion.

Johannes-Dieter Steinert is a Professor of Modern European History and Migration Studies at the University of Wolverhampton in the United Kingdom. He received his PhD from the University of Düsseldorf and his habilitation from the University of Osnabrück in Germany. His book *Deportation und Zwangsarbeit. Polnische und sowjetische Kinder im nationalsozialistischen Deutschland und im besetzten Osteuropa 1939–1945* (Essen 2013) has been translated into Polish and published in 2021. He was a Senior Fellow at the Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies in 2015 and received the Yad Vashem International Book Prize for Holocaust Research 2020 for his book *Holocaust und Zwangsarbeit: Erinnerungen jüdischer Kinder 1938–1945* (Essen 2018). Together with Katarzyna Person he has published a study on *Przemysłowa Concentration Camp: The camp, the children, the trials* (London 2023). His current research project is about Sinti and Roma child forced labourers in National Socialist Germany and German occupied Eastern Europe.

Beata Halicka is a Professor of contemporary history at the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. She lectured at the European University Viadrina in Frankfurt (Oder) between 2006 and 2014 and was a visiting professor at the universities in Calgary (2014), Chicago (2015), El Paso (2016) and Phoenix (USA) in 2023. For her work on *Polish Wild West: Forced Migration and Cultural Appropriation in the Polish-German Borderlands, 1945–1948* she received the Identities Prize 2016 for the best historical book in Poland. More on: www.beatahalicka.pl/home/

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