CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In August 1944, there were 7,615,070 foreign workers\(^1\) officially registered on the employment rolls in the territory of the “Greater German Reich”; 1.9 million of them were prisoners of war, 5.7 million civilian workers. They included 250,000 Belgians, 1.3 million French, 590,000 Italians, 1.7 million Poles and 2.8 million Soviet citizens. More than half of the Polish and Soviet civilian workers were female, their average age around 20. Almost 50 percent of all those employed in German agriculture were foreigners; in the metal, chemical, construction and mining industries, foreign nationals accounted for approximately one-third of all employees, while in munitions factories they constituted up to 50 percent of the work force.

Without its roughly two million foreign workers, German agriculture would have found itself at a dead end as early as the end of 1940, unable to maintain the necessary levels of food production. By the late autumn of 1941, if not before, the entire German war economy had become heavily and irreversibly dependent on foreign labor.\(^2\)

This confronted the National Socialist regime with formidable problems. On the one hand, the increased demands of the war economy had made it absolutely imperative to employ foreign workers in massive numbers; on the other, the National Socialists had fundamental political and ideological misgivings about the policy of *Ausländerreinigung*. Those reservations were compounded by apprehensions among the security authorities about the potentially negative political impact these foreigners could have on the German population – and, even more worrying ideologically, the threat of “biological-racial” contamination. For these reasons, the topic of *Fremdarbeiter* (foreign laborers) remained one of the most hotly debated issues in domestic policy in Nazi Germany after 1939, not only in internal leadership circles, but – as documented by the reports of the secret service – in the broader population as well.

In the postwar trials at Nuremberg, the crimes associated with the exploitation of foreign labor in the Third Reich were central to charges against leading politicians and industrialists. In the main trials, the principal indictment against Sauckel and Speer was “employment of slave laborers”; in the later trials, key rep-
representatives of Flick, Krupp and IG-Farben were tried and convicted on similar grounds. Despite its obvious salience, this topic has never been the focus of serious public discussion and debate in the Federal Republic. Moreover, apart from the investigation by Pfahlmann, there has been no comprehensive study in West German historiography of the foreign deployees in the Nazi war economy. The most important general works on National Socialism are silent on the problem of foreign laborers, or give it marginal mention at best.

Yet memories of Ausländerleinsatz certainly linger on in the consciousness of most Germans over the age of 50. Without exception, any young or adult German living in Germany during the war necessarily had some contact with foreign workers and prisoners of war. In Essen, for example, there were some 300 camps for foreign laborers within the city limits in 1943; except for a very few suburbs, every neighborhood in town contained such a camp. In factories and on farms throughout the Reich, Germans and foreigners worked together, side by side, year after year.

Yet in the recollections of older Germans, such foreign workers appear to be something obvious, connected not with war, National Socialism or Nazi war crimes, but with things “private and personal” – experiences that seem to have no direct connection with the war or Nazism. Moreover, the fact that large numbers of foreigners were deployed as laborers in wartime Germany is not viewed as a circumstance specific to National Socialism. In West German public discourse and consciousness, the utilization of foreign laborers and POWs in Germany during World War II was not seen as something historically out of the ordinary, something that made history.

This popular attitude toward Ausländerleinsatz has its definite parallels in professional historiography, although initial research on this topic seems to have taken a wholly different direction. The most extensive literature on the subject stems from the Nazi period itself, even at the time, the employment of such sizeable numbers of foreigners inside Germany was perceived by the regime to be a major challenge that necessitated social research. From 1939 onward, there was a burgeoning body of specialized literature devoted to the ever more complicated legal intricacies bound up with new ordinances in the field of labor law and social policy, while leading officials in the Labor Ministry and the offices of the GBA (General Plenipotentiary for Labor) felt it was incumbent on them to demonstrate, in a state of essays and articles, that the rapidly changing legal regulations were indeed consistent and logical. However, the utility of the academic literature produced during this period – no fewer than 14 dissertations on the topic were completed between 1939 and 1944 – remains, with a few notable exceptions, quite limited. It mostly deals with secondary aspects, and has little to offer even in empirical terms, particularly since it did not explore the political and social realities of foreigner deployment. Rather, it was justificatory, aimed to underscore the various “successes” of long-term planning on social policy under National
Socialism, to celebrate the alleged achievements of fascist social engineering. Especially from 1942 onward, publications on the topic of “foreigners” tended to project an almost idyllic picture. Continuity was foregrounded: the employment of foreign nationals during the war was presented as a clear continuation of traditions of foreign labor in Germany before 1933, especially in rural areas, the main concern being the various regulatory mechanisms in the area of social policy. The contention was that although difficulties had arisen due to the exigencies of war, the deployment of foreign labor had largely proved to be a boon and an economic success. Moreover, in political terms, it was argued that Ausländer einsetz provided a kind of preview of coming attractions in the field of international labor, a glimpse of the postwar economic future, anticipating an “inter-European exchange of workers” within a united Europe under National Socialism after a final German victory.

The treatment of the topic at the Nuremberg trials was diametrically opposed to this. Already during the war, the American secret service and international workers’ organizations had devoted some attention to the problem of foreign labor in Nazi Germany, not only on the assumption that these policies would confront the Allied occupation authorities with an intractable knot of social and political problems after the war, but also on ideological grounds: foreign “slave labor” was seen as the clearest evidence of practical cooperation and basic agreement between the Nazi leadership, big industry and the overwhelming majority of the German population. Consequently, it was one of the principal charges in the main Nuremberg trial, and particularly in the later trials of leading industrialists. The International Military Tribunal proceeded on the premise that National Socialist foreigner policy had been founded on a “program of slave labor,” which had “required the deportation of more than five million persons for purposes of forced labor, many of whom had to endure terrible cruelty and suffering.” This thesis was underpinned by a wealth of documents and affidavits which, then as now, comprise the basis of source materials for any scholarly treatment of the topic. Such charges were central to the trials of leading representatives of the firms Flick, IG-Farben and Krupp, who were tried and convicted largely on the grounds of involvement in the employment and mistreatment of “slave laborers” – after accusations of participation in a “conspiracy against peace” had been dropped.

Important as the complex of “forced labor” was in legal respects for the Allied tribunals, it had little effect on the way in which the broader German public related to the trials. In the postwar period, crimes against foreign workers and POWs, and the more general question of foreign labor deployment in the Third Reich, gradually came to be overshadowed by the reports on the mass murders in Auschwitz, Maidanek, Treblinka and the other concentration and death camps, especially since the judgment at Nuremberg had made no clear distinction between the utilization of concentration camp inmates and “forced laborers.”
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However, Germans who had worked side by side in the factories with French laborers and “Eastern workers” (Dietarbeiter) were unable to see any real connection between that period in their own working lives and the emerging reports on concentration camps and mass murder, between their own personal wartime work experience and media reports on the Nazi policy of extermination. This was one of the key factors behind the deepening separation between private experience and public discussion of the history of the Third Reich, a trend that strengthened in subsequent years.  

At the time, professional historians in West Germany did not regard Nazi Ausländereneinsatz as a relevant research topic. Moreover, in the 1950s and 1960s, various authors with close ties to industry attempted to refute the charge against German industrialists at the Nuremberg trials, that they had been implicated in the use of forced labor.  

They argued that German industry had been under heavy external pressure from the Nazi government, and that it therefore bore no direct responsibility for policy in general, or for the maltreatment of workers in particular: “German industry could not be held responsible either legally or politically for the measures underlying unjust acts in connection with the labor deployment of non-voluntary workers.” Or, in another formulation, German entrepreneurs had “during the war, acted in accordance with the laws, ordinances and official directives of their country with regard to the employment of foreign workers,” and “these laws could certainly not be characterized as ‘criminal.’” To bolster this apologetic argumentation, authors cited the numerous decrees and ordinances issued by the National Socialist labor authorities, contending that this legislation was a continuation of previous government labor and social policy, with no evident criminal intent. On the other hand, that very same corpus of legislation was invoked to underscore the supposed “powerlessness” of the industrialists vis-à-vis the National Socialist state.

In addition to such publications attempting to justify the actions of German industrialists, a new direction in the literature on foreign workers in the Third Reich emerged in the 1950s and 1960s: rooted in the tradition of internal studies published during the war, it dealt with Ausländereneinsatz essentially as a socio-technical problem. Several dissertations completed in the 1950s described foreign labor in the Third Reich as one variant of European policy on foreign labor, quite divorced from “political” questions and from the social reality of foreign labor deployment under the Nazi regime. They stressed that although there had been certain excesses due to the exigencies of war, the program had largely proved successful for all involved.

Well into the 1970s, the dominant tendency in West German historiography was to neglect the problem of foreign workers under Nazism. One notable exception was the work of Martin Broszat: his 1961 study on National Socialist policy toward Poland included a detailed examination of the coerced conscription and forced deportation of Polish workers from the Generalgouvernement to Germany.
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Scholarship across the border presented a different picture: *Ausländerersatz* became one of the preferred research topics among historians in the German Democratic Republic from the late 1950s. While West German historians categorized Nazi policy toward foreigners as basically value-neutral and generally acceptable in terms of overall social policy, GDR historians turned out a spate of monographs and documentary publications, muster ing impressive evidence for the forced deportation, neglect and maltreatment of foreign workers, especially from Poland and the Soviet Union, and the various crimes committed against them. However, the findings in these early studies were often accommodated to conform with core theses of Marxism-Leninism, such as the leading role of German big business in the crimes of the Third Reich, the continuity of imperialist policy in imperial Germany, the Weimar Republic and the Federal Republic, and the solidarity of the international working class.

Accordingly, these studies laid direct responsibility for both the conception and the implementation of foreign worker deployment at the door of big business, viewing the importance of the organs of the state and party as secondary. National Socialist foreign-worker policy was seen as exceptionally barbaric, but nonetheless a variant of an overall policy on foreign labor that was no different in principle from earlier periods of German history.

In this first phase of GDR research on foreign labor under National Socialism, the question of relations between German and foreign workers was ultimately answered by reference to the resistance movement: namely, the bonds of cooperation between German and foreign anti-fascists. Researchers contended that the anti-fascist resistance struggle had been widespread, and had proved successful wherever it had been based on international organization, under the leadership of the Communists.

Starting in the early 1970s, various more differentiated approaches crystallized in the GDR, especially associated with the research team based at Rostock University, as reflected in their standard work *Deutschland im zweiten Weltkrieg*. Fresh perspectives developed on attitudes toward foreign workers among the German population of the Third Reich, especially German workers. There was greater emphasis on the fact that most Germans were to a substantial degree politically integrated into the National Socialist system, and that there was a high level of popular consensus with the National Socialists’ war policy – and with their policy on foreign laborers.

By contrast, the only comprehensive study of foreign labor under National Socialism by a Western historian was not written by a German, but by an American, Edward L. Hone. Moreover, Hone’s study was little known in the Federal Republic, and was not even published there in translation. Based largely on USSBS studies, the Nuremberg documents and source materials from several ministries, Hone’s study emphasized the contradictions between Nazi ideology and foreign labor deployment, highlighted differences in the treatment
of various national groups, and underscored the role of the German population as an active factor in National Socialist foreign-labor policy. Along with studies by Eichholtz, his analysis undoubtedly remains the best and most exacting of investigations on this topic to date. In many respects, Homze’s work appears to have come too early for the dominant trends in West German research. It was not until the 1970s that historians in the Federal Republic began to grapple more intensively with problems in the social history of the war years. Perhaps that is one reason why Homze’s ground-breaking study was paid so little scholarly attention in the Federal Republic.

The point of departure for more intensive scrutiny of socio-historical aspects of the war in Germany, linking up with work in the US by Kaldor and Klein within the context of the USSSBS, were the contradictions between the German potential for arms manufacture and actual output, focusing in particular on the question of untapped labor resources in Germany and the limited mobilization of the German economy before 1942/43. The fact that only relatively few German women were employed in industry was attributed basically to ideological reservations among the National Socialist leadership. There have been a number of historical studies on approaches to labor conscription for German women, and women in the wartime work force more generally. Alan S. Milward, in particular, broached the question of foreign workers and prisoners of war in the context of the debate on the potential of German production. While the initial emphasis was on aspects of social and economic history, the political dimension increasingly emerged as a significant factor: what views were represented by what factions within the Nazi leadership, and when? In this connection, clear contradictions were evident between ideological maxims and economic constraints.

In his magisterial study on the fate of Soviet POWs, Christian Streit revealed the continuing deficiencies of Western historiography in treating the topic of “foreign laborers.” While there were already thousands of studies on individual aspects of the Third Reich, it was his dissertation which proved that more than three million Soviet prisoners of war had perished in German captivity – not murdered by SS Einsatzgruppen or on the orders of the RSHA, but while under the direct responsibility of the Wehrmacht. Streit also demonstrated that those POWs who survived had been deployed as laborers in German firms, working and living under conditions that were frequently nothing short of appalling. However, Streit’s investigation also stressed the close links between Ausländereinsatz and the policy of mass annihilation. For example, the mass extermination facilities in Auschwitz were initially tested on Soviet POWs – before the exigencies of the labor situation made their deployment necessary and the Wannsee conference had reached its fateful decision on the “Final Solution to the Jewish Problem.” All the complicated questions of the technicalities of National Socialist rule surface here: what were the contradictions and clashes that shaped decision-making processes, what factions and individuals were involved? These
aspects are also of fundamental importance for the analysis of National Socialist tyranny with regard to Hitler’s specific role, the anarchy of authority and concepts such as “cumulative radicalization” and “polycracry.”

Since the emergence of these studies, the social history of the Second World War has at last become a serious research focus in Germany, devoting increasing attention to questions centering on the attitudes prevalent among the German population, especially the workers. It is now evident that the oppositional stance among German workers noted in the prewar period had weakened significantly after 1939, in the wake of heightened pressure at work and state terror. That opposition had also been eroded by comparatively high levels of social benefits, an efficient system of food provision and the upsurge in consensual support – and even enthusiasm – for the Nazi regime following the blitzkrieg victories. Yet as military defeats mounted, workers did not revert to their previous antagonism but withdrew into a kind of passive acceptance, concentrating on their personal fate. Against this background, there is now a need for a more detailed analysis of relations between the German population and foreign workers, especially in order to test theses regarding “the stabilization of the social situation at the expense of a subproletariat of foreign workers” (and to the benefit of the German work force), and the scholarly assumption “that shifting the potential for conflict abroad ... also served to secure a high degree of loyalty toward the regime among the workers.”

In addition to questions of economic and social policy, interest in the history of foreign workers in the Third Reich has also grown in proportion to the current problems arising from the employment of foreign workers in the Federal Republic. In the main, this has involved increased scrutiny of legal aspects; more explosive issues, especially the attitudes of Germans toward foreign “guest workers,” have received comparatively little serious attention as yet.

Majer’s work in particular serves to demonstrate just how readily German judicial and administrative authorities accepted and implemented special legal regulations, initially applied to German Jews and then to foreigners in the Reich, culminating in a totalizing dynamic directed against all “outsiders” and “aliens” (Gemeinschaftseinsatz). Moreover, there was a pronounced East–West gradation in the approach to foreign workers. Majer indicates how “increasingly, the principle of special legislation was separated from its racist core, and became the general legal and administrative principle of National Socialism.” Her study also reveals the broad latitude enjoyed by the various individual administrative offices and authorities in this connection, and the fact that measures of “folk-biological” and racial discrimination were “railroaded through” by the political leadership “without regard for ‘objective’ or economic considerations.” A key question worth examining here is the precise extent to which social and criminal legislation on foreigners was actually implemented in the practice of Ausländerinvasion.

Schminck-Gustavus was the first to shed light on this problem. He investigated the regulations and decrees on Poles, particularly with regard to the exhaustive
regimentation of their life in the work place and private sphere, and described how the German population became extensively implicated in the implementation of official policy toward foreign laborers in the Third Reich. For example, even combined, the bureaucracies of the SS, Gestapo and the authorities for foreign labor deployment were unable effectively to implement the package of special laws and decrees known as the Polenerlassen (“decrees on Poles”). Simple citizens also had to be drawn into the net; through their everyday behavior and responses, they become active assistants of the National Socialist bureaucracy. Thus, the postal clerk who refused any application for a radio permit from a person wearing a “P” (“Pole”) badge; the bouncer at a dance hall who turned away “P” badge wearers when there was a “German” dance; the swimming-pool attendant, pub owner, hairdresser and park guard, were all performing the important state function of keeping out the Poles. The same could be said of the priest who cooperated in excluding fellow Catholics from religious services because they were Polish; and of the cemetery director and gravedigger who denied the deceased (if they were Polish) a final resting place among German Volksgenossen.\footnote{41}

There is also a substantial literature on the situation in countries occupied by or allied with Nazi Germany which deals with the problem of foreign labor from various perspectives.\footnote{42} Of particular interest is the work of Evrard, Jackel and Milward on France, Sijes and Hirschfeld on Holland and Schausberger on the situation in Austria. A voluminous Polish literature exists on the topic, represented here only by a few papers and monographs by the leading Polish researcher on foreign labor, Czesław Łuczak; relevant studies from Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Italy and other countries have not been included in the scope of the present work.\footnote{43} There is a notable lack of large-scale studies from the (former) Soviet Union, the country that was hardest hit by National Socialist foreign labor policy. The reason for this comparative dearth of research is closely bound up with a chapter in postwar Soviet history: the obscurity clouding the fate of Soviet prisoners of war and foreign workers after their “repatriation” to the Soviet Union. Indeed, Brodski’s studies of the resistance struggle of Soviet laborers in Nazi Germany often read like an ongoing attempt to rehabilitate the image of Soviet depletees and POWs conscripted for labor in the Reich.\footnote{44}

From this brief sketch of the history of research on foreign labor in the Third Reich, four areas emerge that deserve detailed scrutiny: the prehistory, genesis and planning of the foreign labor deployment; political decision-making; the working and living conditions of foreign workers; and the complex relations between Germans and foreigners. These four foci are explored in the present study.

There is a particular need to investigate the prototypes for National Socialist Ausländerensatz and its prehistory in order to examine the controversial problem of “continuity” in more concrete and precise terms. Yet my specific concern here is not to establish whether there was “continuity” or “rupture.” The approach I adopt is more differentiated, focusing on areas in which traditions continued,
were modified or broken off. A related question is: what new departures can be identified that are specifically National Socialist? From that vantage point it is possible to develop an exact analysis of the planning of foreign worker deployment and those – particularly those in industry – who played a key part in it.

As for decision-making, the pivotal question involves the nature of the various political factions, and the contradictory interests within the dominant groups in connection with foreigner policy during the war. However, the existing literature on foreign labor and other socio-historical dimensions of National Socialism makes it clear that no study of decision-making at the highest levels will show conclusively whether or not those top-level decisions were actually implemented, as they passed down via the various intermediary authorities to individual firms. It is necessary to track the processes of implementation through the regime, thus establishing a link between the analysis of political and social history.

There is little accurate knowledge available on the living and working conditions of foreigners in Germany. While Nazi policies of terror and repression against foreigners have been carefully researched, it has been virtually impossible to determine the exact relation between the terror and the everyday existence of a foreign worker in Germany at the time. So many things remain unexplained: the work and actual job performance of the foreigners, the situation in the camps, differences between the various groups of foreigners, food provision, leisure activities and inter-worker contacts; the special situation of foreign women, the effect of the large percentage of females among Ostarbeiter, and the various forms of opposition, resistance and collaboration. A structural approach, such as that developed by Honne and Seeber, is less relevant here, since it would mean neglecting the dynamics of military, political and social developments within National Socialism; after all, small, short steps and constant improvisation were one of the distinguishing and abiding features of National Socialist policy. It will thus be necessary to examine the various developmental shifts and phases during the war in their internal dynamism, and to integrate structural ideas into an underlying chronological principle.

The fourth area involves relations between Germans and foreigners, especially those Germans who were not employed as plant guards or by the Gestapo, but had regular contact with foreign workers in their everyday lives at work, in the street, in camps, air-raid shelters – or even in the resistance movement. The focus here is on the work place, where the relationships between foreigners and Germans were forged, and where it would be shown whether German workers actually accepted the Nazi image of themselves as “Europe’s foremen,” or whether the tradition of proletarian internationalism remained a more potent factor. It should also be possible in this context to make certain observations about the long-term effects of National Socialist Ausländerinsatz on the social structure of German society, – in particularly with respect to social mobility and changes in mentality among the German working class.
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The aim of the present study is to develop an interpretation of the history of foreign workers in Germany between 1939 and 1945, which, proceeding from regional studies, takes into account the political decisions of the various administrative levels as well as the practice of employing foreign labor, attempting to highlight the linkages and contradictions between the two areas. It concentrates on the employment of foreigners in industry, especially the armaments branch, while the situation in the agrarian sector is treated in detail only down to 1940, since agriculture has already been exhaustively covered in works by Seeber, Łuczak and other Polish historians.

There is a serious lack of relevant regional monographs, which are vital for the extended investigation of this topic. In particular, we need in-depth studies of individual villages and small towns. Specific analyses of individual industries are also needed, such as chemicals or construction, where a large number of foreigners were employed, also detailed studies of the large-scale projects for constructing aircraft factories during the final two years of the war. Here, however, there is a serious lack of reliable evidence, excepting the personnel file cards of foreign workers. Though these are often available in large numbers, it is evident that they can provide very little in the way of solid usable data. What we really need are official and business files: the records of reports and correspondence of individual plants, government offices and police stations, as intact as possible.

Finally, we must pay far more attention to the actual experiences of the workers themselves. The present study attempts to remedy this deficiency in the existing literature by assessing the reports of the ABPS, the government censorship offices for letters sent abroad, though the conclusions reached are little more than tentative. Likewise, the collections of memoirs in Polish by former forced laborers are only of limited value, since written reports, due to their brevity, tend to place excessive emphasis on extreme situations, while providing much less information about everyday life. In order to make headway here, we need a large-scale oral history project, carried out within an international cooperative research framework, to elicit longer autobiographical interviews in various countries from former prisoners of war and foreign laborers who worked in Germany during the war. My own fledgling attempts in this direction have proved encouraging, especially since such interviews yielded information on a host of things that were largely beyond the control and supervision of the authorities — such as the complex web of relations among foreigners and between foreigners and Germans, elements of resistance and often ingenious forms of opposition, and memories of the actual working and living conditions of the workers themselves. The source materials often contain highly contradictory statements about such everyday conditions and their elusive texture.

Since this study was first published in German (1985), research on all these questions has expanded both in breadth and intensity in Germany and many other European countries, stimulated in part by the lively political discussion on the